

HOUSE OF GROM

THE BEAST OF BORNEO

PART ONE

THE MASTER DETECTIVE

MEETS

THE JUNGLE LORD

JAMES L. RICHARDSON

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CHAPTER 1

When people learn my name, or even the name I was born with, they assume a great deal about me. The truth is, until I met my first Westerner, I knew no other life and thought my existence very normal. A loving mother, plentiful food, a wondrous, verdant garden to roam, and challenges to overcome. It never occurred to me that other children lived other lives, for I had never known another child. At least, not one like me.

The first human I ever spoke with was a singular man whose name evokes a similar response when it comes up in conversation. Once spoken aloud, the assumptions are automatic, everyone certain they know at least the broad strokes of his life and exploits. While some of what is said of my friend is actually true, in many ways, the truth of his existence is much more impressive than even the wildest claims suggest.

As I grow into my comfortable middle age, I see fewer and fewer of my own adventures in my future and find myself dwelling on not only my own past but that of my friends and acquaintances. To that end, I have read all that has been written about my friend, Sherlock Holmes. The books written by his associate, Dr. John Watson and other tomes, penned by chroniclers further removed from his life that tell tales of mystery, adventure and triumph. None reveal his greatest secret and indeed, Dr. Watson went to great, and somewhat dishonest, lengths to maintain the fiction to his and Holmes' graves.

It is August 12, 1940. The world is well and truly at war and my friend, Sherlock Holmes has been dead a year. He specifically asked me to wait that full year before writing this portion of my memoir, as his work had on occasion forced him to die, only to return once the freedom of death allowed him to bring a particularly difficult problem to a satisfactory conclusion.

Alas, in that year I have not received the hoped for missive that would inform me that my friend was still alive, still out in the wilds of the criminal underworld, working against those who would exploit and harm the innocent.

Sherlock Holmes, the first and greatest consulting detective must finally and

sadly be presumed dead. Woe betide a world that could use his genius now, more than ever. Decades of such work on my own part have given me to understand that there is something dark afoot in our world, darker even than the scourge of the Third Reich and its mad quest for power.

At my age, I now serve most often as a consultant myself, though I cannot claim the deductive powers of my late friend. My expertise is of a more visceral, physical sort, having learned my craft among the trees, glades and river courses of what the West terms “Deepest, Darkest Africa,” but which I recall as bright and beautiful in a way no other place could ever be.

Of my friend, Sherlock Holmes, if I am to reveal his greatest secret, I suppose I must begin as he would have asked me to. At the beginning.

CHAPTER 2

Somewhere in Africa. 1900.

I say 'somewhere' because in all honesty, that's how I thought of home. Just *home*, not a country, not even a continent. I had learned from the few books I found in the ruins of my parents' home in the jungle, taught myself to understand the symbols, thanks to some children's books that had survived the worst of the fire and the jungle's damp rot. From there, I moved on to a dictionary and the other books that remained in readable condition. None of them taught me to understand my place in the world or gave me any sense of the vastness of this planet we call home.

I had seen men before. They would come with their weapons and kill many animals from a great distance, without eating their kills. I did not understand them and my mother had taught me to fear them and avoid them at all costs. While I was still curious, I was also a dutiful son, and I obeyed.

Until one day, I could not.

The men had come in trucks to a place where such men often came. A few tents went up, and they did all the strange things I had seen before. Lighting little sticks afire and sucking in the smoke, sitting at small tables and pushing strangely marked leaves around at one another, only to quarrel loudly about whatever ritual that signified. One man was unlike the rest. He did not suck on little sticks. No one quarrelled with him.

His face was wrapped in something I did not understand at the time, having no word for 'bandages' in my limited vocabulary. From my distant vantage point, seeing him so swathed in strange wrappings, I guessed he might have been badly burned or cut and that the wrappings were something like the sticky mud my mother would pack over my hurts when I was a small boy.

That the others deferred to him was obvious. He was the alpha. That much I understood easily.

I told myself I only watched these men the way I watched all the men who

came to my home, to be sure they were not hunting where my family gathered. That was a lie I told myself to assuage the guilt I felt for my disobedience. I was watching these men because they were different from the hunters who had come before them. They took game and hunted for food, but that was not their purpose. These men were not here to hunt. They were simply waiting. My imagination was inflamed by their stillness. What could such men want, here?

They sat and sucked their smoke and pushed their leaves for three days. I watched from closer and closer vantage points each day. These men did not seem to care that they made so much noise or that they left so much scent in the air that the jungle was clear of all but insect life for a great swath around their camp. Empty except for one pair of eyes. Mine.

At last, on the fourth day, something changed. First a truck driven by a new man arrived, causing much bustle and excitement. The men left their tables and strange smelling-drink to gather at the rear of the truck and unload its cargo. The boxes carried no scent, and I was unable to see what was within, but whatever they contained was heavy. Each crate took two strong men to move and even then they struggled with the weight.

The man in the wrappings did not help unload the truck. He stood by his tent, watching, or at least looking in that direction. He never removed the strangely dark lenses of his spectacles. I knew what spectacles were, having seen a picture of them in one of my treasured books, but I was puzzled as to why the glass would be so dark. This man's stillness and the precise way he moved reminded me of Sheeta, the great leopard, stalking with each paw placed in exactly the right spot, every movement deliberate and considered.

When the heavy boxes had been carried into the camp, the last thing unloaded from the stinking, belching truck was not a crate or bundle, but a man trussed as though he had been caught in a great net, his hands bound behind him and his feet roped together. The men tossed him from the truck to others waiting below and I could see they believed him unconscious by the casual, laughing way they handled his bound form.

Even from my perch far outside the camp, I could see that this man was wide

awake, assessing both the men and his situation. Where the wrapped man might be Sheeta, this man, despite being trussed and surrounded by enemies, was not in the least afraid. He possessed the confidence and radiated the coiled strength of Numa, the great lion, surrounded by a pack of Dango, the hyena, yet never truly at bay, even if they believed him their prey.

The man in the wrappings followed the two men carrying the bound man into his tent. As he dropped the flap behind him, he paused and stepped back out into the night air. Through his strangely dark lenses, I could not see his eyes, but he swung his head toward where I crouched, my scent downwind, concealed by the night and dense foliage. He stared into the darkness for a long moment, then turned and pulled back the flap of his tent, to vanish within.

Not Sheeta. Histah, the great, crushing snake.

CHAPTER 3

At this time I was still very young. I had no notion of exactly how old I was and I recall feeling much more mature and wise than I had any right to, but I would guess I was somewhere between fifteen and eighteen years old then. Young enough to still need a parent, but old enough to be foolish enough to believe I did not.

My mother would have warned against what I did next, I am sure. Kala was ever wary of men, western men particularly. They frightened her, though our language was not complex enough to allow me to understand the root of her fear. I know now just how right Kala was to fear men, but in my youth, I saw only how much more the men who visited our jungle resembled my form than my mother's or the rest of my family.

Until this moment, I had assumed that all such beings were of a single, unified tribe. Seeing the man trussed like a trapped game animal, I suddenly understood that among men, there were divisions, much like the divisions among the predators of my home. No Numa in his maned glory would suffer a pack of Dango to roam freely within his territory. So it must be among men.

In my jungle, I would not take sides in such conflicts unless it threatened my own family directly, but something in the bearing of the man who had been hauled into the tent, bound hand and foot, had stirred a sympathy in me usually reserved only for family. I saw in him a fierce, kindred spirit and decided in that moment to come to his aid.

Without intending to, I had chosen a side in a conflict I had no way of understanding.

The question before me was how to help the man in the tent. I knew that men such as these possessed weapons that could kill at a great distance, though I was not clear on how they worked. I had seen them kill Bara, the deer, and Horta, the boar, without knife or spear, simply by pointing their sticks at them and making a great noise. I resolved not to let them point those sticks at me and decided it

would be best to make my rescue attempt after dark.

I had never deliberately attacked another human and other than wrestling with my family in play and fighting with the inhabitants of the jungle to defend that family, I had never fought anyone or anything in this fashion. I had killed, of course, for food and survival, but something held me back from killing these men. I knew that I could, but it felt somehow wrong to take the initiative and kill them without provocation. If it came to a choice between my life and theirs, that would change.

My recollection of the night is clear, though I may be misremembering some details with how quickly it all unfolded. There was a careful, downwind approach, as if I were hunting Bara or Horta myself. I had my spear and my knife. The spear I had fashioned myself, the knife a blade found in the ruins of my parents' home. I had knapped the flint spearhead to a razor's edge and I always kept the knife well honed, for I had not the claws of Numa or Sabor with which to defend myself. I had only my wits and my weapons, pale though they were compared to those carried by the men in the camp.

In the light of a half moon, a man stood watch, one of the loud sticks slung over his shoulder. Though he was meant to be on guard, his attention constantly wandered back to the roaring fire at the centre of the camp, rather than remaining fixed on the jungle, where the danger might lurk.

Though I had resolved not to kill unless necessary, I did not hesitate to act. The imprisoned man was obviously in great danger and I had no way of knowing what they were doing to him or whether they might kill him at any moment. A blow from the butt of my spear butt to the base of the sentry's neck was enough to fell him like a great tree. I caught him and lowered him to the ground, so the noise would attract no attention.

If there was any doubt of about these men intending to kill or if the reader might be inclined to consider my actions overly harsh, it must be understood that my life in the jungle had taught me to know the mind of my quarry and the minds of those predators that might bring harm to me and mine. These men would bring harm wherever they went, without doubt.

Fortunately for the man bound in the tent, they were certain of the superiority of their weapons and abilities, never imagining that anything more dangerous than Sabor or Sheeta might be stalking them. Three more of the perimeter guards took the butt end of my spear in the dim moonlight before an alarm was finally raised, when one of the unconscious sentries was discovered by his fellows.

I was one against many.

From my parents' books I had salvaged some material beyond that which taught me writing. There were manuals that explained how to move in a fight, illustrated with page after page of little figures performing intricate movements. As a child I had been captivated by the drawings of adults who bore my shape and not that of my family. I had learned every motion, every nuance I could glean from the manuals, practising alone in the jungle, for these movements were meant to attack and defend against other men, not Sheeta the leopard, Numa the lion or Bolgani the great ape. Tonight, I intended to put those lessons to the test.

Watching these men over the previous days, I had noted that they were very dependent upon their equipment. Every box and bale was carefully stored, their weapons meticulously cleaned and their equipment checked often. That was a weakness I did not share. Life in my jungle required only two things: keen senses and sharp reflexes. A spear or a knife might be lost or broken. Depending on such things rather than on one's own skills the path to ruin.

As the alarm was raised, I sprang into the middle of the camp, where the great fire roared to keep the night at bay. It was the work of only a few heartbeats to fling burning embers into tents, crates and even one of their foul-smelling trucks. The resulting panic at the loss of their gear reminded me of Bara the deer, running from a nearby lightning strike into the jaws of a waiting pack of Horta the hyena.

Suddenly faced with threats both from without and within, these men rushed to save what they valued most, rather than face their foe, as I had hoped they would. The central tent where the bound man was held suddenly lit up from within, a fire blazing brightly enough to meet whatever had roused the camp. The

man in the strange wrappings whipped aside the canvas flap and stormed into the chaos, his booming voice shouting orders.

I slunk back into the shadows thrown by the huge central blaze and crept around the back of the tent. From there, I could still hear the man in the strange wrappings bellowing orders, though I did not understand his speech. My knife parted the canvas before me with ease, the point slipping through the tough material with a soft hiss.

I stepped through the opening I had made and found myself face to face with the bound man. He was tied to a chair, his head cocked in surprise at seeing me enter the tent from the rear. On either side of him, their backs to me, stood a man, larger than I, both facing the tent flap, apparently awaiting the return of their leader.

I placed a hand over my mouth, hoping to make the stranger understand that he must remain quiet. We shared no language and, in truth, I had only learned to read my parents' native tongue. Without another human with whom to practise, my only spoken language was that of the great ape, Mangani. There was little chance that this man could understand me in any way but through gestures, so I employed them as best I could.

To my astonishment, the man neither cried out nor made any sound, whatsoever.

His lips thinned and his eyes narrowed, as though he were assessing me as a threat. I had felt my own eyes make such a gesture as I watched to see whether Numa would catch my scent and turn to hunt me or ignore me and go on with his day.

His lips turned up ever so slightly in a tight, but amused smile.

CHAPTER 4

I had left my long, awkward spear on the other side of the canvas, uncertain how much room to manoeuvre I would be afforded within. My nature rebelled at being inside such a structure, so small and confining for one used to the canopy of the jungle and the open savanna beyond. Seeing that I had two more foes to dispatch, I did not waste time contemplating my surroundings further.

A flick of my wrist sent my knife across the tiny room, the hilt striking the larger of the two men on the back of his massive skull. He was built like a Bolgani the great ape, and presented the greater danger. When the crack of my knife hitting his skull felled him, his companion, a slightly smaller man with greasy, stinking hair and a gap in his teeth turned and stared at me in shock. A moment later he tore out through the tent flap, shouting something I did not understand.

The larger man had fallen to his knees, clutching the back of his great head. A quick leap across the room, ducking my head to avoid the low canvas above me, brought my foot down upon his shoulder with all my weight, and he slumped forward, his face slamming wetly into the dirt floor, where he lay still.

There was little time now. The fleeing, shouting man would bring other men back, men with the barking sticks. I retrieved my knife and moved back to meet the eyes of the man bound to the chair. Very carefully, but very quickly, in the dirt between us, I sketched one of the symbols I had learned from the books found in the ruins of my parents' house in the jungle.

Friend.

I had no way to know whether this man, this Tarmangani taken prisoner by his Tarmangani fellows, would understand the symbol, but it was all I could think to try.

His eyes widened, then narrowed at the crudely drawn symbol, his brow furrowing as though he were trying to remember a long-forgotten path through the jungle. Finally he looked up and met my eyes.

He nodded once and that was enough. I struck out with my knife to slice him free of the chair, as quickly as I could. Wisely, he sat perfectly still until I had finished. My knife was sharp and in my haste, it would have been easy to cut him by mistake had he flinched as I worked.

The tent flap whipped aside and both of us gaped as something.. someone impossible strode through the gap.

The man in the strange wrappings entered, but not all of him. His head, still wrapped in strips of cloth, floated above his waist, the space in between was the right size for his torso and arms, but there was absolutely nothing to be seen. Through that void, I could clearly see the canvas of the tent flap falling behind him. His gloved hands each held a weapon: a knife in his right hand and one of the smaller barking sticks in his left. His gloved hands were obviously still under his control, but his arms and the body to which they were attached were entirely *invisible*.

It took my mind a moment to adjust to this strange, disjointed apparition, but the man I had just freed did not hesitate even that long. He snapped out the remnant of the stout rope that had bound him, and the heavy knotted end caught the man's left hand, knocking the barking stick loose to clatter into a dark corner of the tent. Without missing a step, the wrapped man dropped the point of his upturned knife, and with a fluid motion swung it at me.

I stepped back to avoid the strike, only to find that he had intentionally baited me into it and his left hand was already swinging into my midsection. Fighting an opponent without arms or a body to track was an entirely new experience for me and I was slow to adjust. My opponent was as quick to strike as Histah the snake, and not being able to see him move into striking position was proving a great disadvantage.

My companion was not still. He dove into the corner where the barking stick had fallen, tossing aside clothing and furniture in a mad scramble to lay hands on the weapon. Though I did not know how it worked, I knew it would be a decisive advantage. My task now was to keep this strange floating head and hands at bay long enough for him to secure it.

And to stay alive.

The blade of the knife again whistled past me, the tip scoring a narrow line of blood across my chest as I backpedalled yet again. This tent was too confining and the light too uncertain to allow me room to manoeuvre and fight this foe properly. I let the man herd me back and back again, turning each time, until his back was to the opening I had sliced in the canvas to make my entry. In the loudest voice I could muster, I roared my cry for the assistance of my jungle brethren, ducked my head, and drove my shoulder toward where the man's belly should have been.

To my great relief, I did not pass through him, but instead collided with a solid, meaty torso exactly where I had anticipated it should be. I could feel his arms flailing as I lifted him from his feet and threw us both through the rip in the tent to emerge in the open, clean air of the clearing beyond. Though the light was low, with only a half moon glowing above us, it was steady and familiar, unlike the flickering light of the tent and its guttering lamps.

Without the strange softening of sounds, flickering light, and overwhelming mix of scents within the tent, I was once again able to use all my senses properly. I could smell this man's oddly sharp sweat, tinged not with fear but with rage. I could hear the rustle of the clothing he still wore as he struggled free and kicked away from me. His boots stank of ash and blood, likely from the night's butchery of the Bara they had taken for their meal.

In the clean, honest light of the moon, I realized that though I could not see his arms and chest, I could see the dust clinging to his sweat soaked shoulders and back. It would have to be enough.

A rumble in the distance told me I had only to hold this strange half-man off for a few more moments. My own knife flashed upward and I crouched in anticipation. Tarzan is no toothless cub to be taken without a fight. Even at this young age, I had often battled creatures at least as formidable as this strange Tarmangani with the hidden face.

Now that I could properly see, hear and smell the battle, I went on the attack. This man had spoken not a word, but his actions marked him as a destroyer. To

take one's own kind prisoner and bind them as he had was the most evil thing I could imagine doing to another. Freedom was a right, not something to be taken by another.

The why of it did not cross my mind as I circled my foe, each step carefully testing my footing on the cool earth beneath my bare feet. I lunged in, jinking left then slashing with my knife, in a backhanded strike from the right, but my quarry was ready for such a manoeuvre. To avoid it, he had to leap backward, his trousers catching on a toppled metal stand and ripping open one leg. It was hard to tell what lay beneath the tear in the cloth in the dim light. All I could see was a patch of darkness within. The expected flash of white Tarmangani skin did not present itself, and I imagined the flesh beneath the cloth must be as transparent as the man's torso and arms.

Looking down, the man suddenly erupted in laughter. It was a disturbing sound, not the joyous cackling sometimes heard in the trees as Manu the monkey played its tricks or the deep rumbling chuckle of Bolgani the great ape. This was something altogether wrong. Like something he could not control tearing free from within.

Looking up, he kicked out hard and though he was several paces beyond my reach, his boot was not. It flew free of his foot and slammed into my chest, only to be followed an instant later by the other, which clipped me on the forehead. Neither blow was particularly painful, but the assault was unexpected and slowed me enough to give him time to unfasten his ripped trousers and let them fall to the ground.

Freed of the last of his clothing, all that remained was a floating pair of gloves, one holding a bloody knife, along with the wrapped head and dark lenses over his eyes. These he tossed aside and, still laughing, began unwinding the wrappings.

I should have expected the empty space within, but I was held in rapt attention, a mouse before the swaying of Histah just before a strike, as he unwound the cloth and revealed that *nothing* within. His gloves he kept on. I believe now that being invisible was almost as disorienting to him as it was to me,

and the gloves gave him a reference point for his blows that he needed more than the stealth of total invisibility.

In the dim light of the half moon, it was all too easy to lose track of those floating gloves as the now wholly invisible man finally brought his laughter under control and advanced on me. The knife flashed in the moonlight, but the man was upwind, and his bare feet crunched loudly in the dirt. He was not so imperceptible as he believed. I had fought battles in the blackness of caves, against beasts that would gnaw this man's invisible bones without a thought. It was time he learned just whose jungle he had invaded.

There was nothing to aim my kick at. I leapt, pushing off a stack of crates to gain extra height, so I could drive my foot through the empty space where his chest should have been. But a man who is invisible, one who knows how to fight, can twist and wrench himself out of the way of such a strike. My foot met only empty air, though I could hear his breathing and smell his breath in front of me, telling me he had managed a step back just before I landed. I chose to let my momentum fold around my middle. Itucked and rolled as I landed, bowling his legs out from under him.

Only an impression in the dirt told me where he had fallen, but the dust and the sound of feet and hands scrambling told me he was still in the fight. I believe that in that moment, he realized that I used not only my eyes but all my senses far more naturally than so-called 'civilized' men did. He made an effort to control his breathing, and his next movements were much quieter and more deliberate. The attack he launched was furious and almost impossible to defend against.

With no warning, I felt a shoulder slam into my midsection and an instant later I was fighting for my life, my knife lost when I crashed against some crates, his bloody blade floating menacingly above me. The strength of the man was incredible, like wrestling a full grown Bolgani the great ape, but one who wielded a blade as skillfully as his great paws and sharp teeth.

Beneath me, the ground shook.

My foe, too intently focused on our struggle, did not look up, but I knew my friends had arrived and that the next moments would not unfold as this invisible

man thought they would.

A small, furry ball of fury vaulted above me, delivered by a friend.

A handful of the smaller forest elephants stormed through the camp, upending anything that was not still ablaze from my earlier efforts. Men screamed and fired loud noises from their sticks, but my elephant brethren are not so easy to frighten or kill as Bara the deer. The trumpeting cries of the matriarch led the charge, and she brought fierce little Nikima, my closest companion, to my aid. The little Manu landed atop the invisible man, though how he knew where to land I do not know. Manu, the monkey had keener senses even than I did in those days, at the height of my youth.

Nikima loves two things most of all: fruit and his friends. I have seen him cower from Usha the wind, but if a friend is in danger, my Manu companion is as fierce as Sheeta the leopard. The small brown-and-white Manu clawed and bit relentlessly at the man he rode and clambered atop. The invisible man flailed and eventually succeeded in dislodging Nikima, flinging him away, but my nimble little friend caught a broken piece of wood between his paws and swung up onto the wreckage of a nearby tent, no worse for wear.

He chattered angrily at the empty space he had just been fighting with.

All around us, the camp was a flaming ruin. Tantor had thundered through and given me the distraction I needed. From the corner of my eye, I saw the man I had freed disentangling himself from what was left of the large central tent. Part of it was ablaze as well, but he looked well enough to manage on his own. I threw myself at the foot-shaped depressions in the ground where the man ought to have been standing, but there was nothing there.

Men were running for the trucks, scrambling into and onto them as the men within brought them roaring and belching to life. The man I had freed padded over and gave me a curt nod. We looked around us for any threat, but there was none. All the men were in flight. From one of the trucks, that maniacal laugh faded into the distance along with the noise of the engines.

I turned to my new friend and, pointing at my chest, I said, "Me." Meeting my eyes, he nodded his understanding, so I added, "Tarzan." I then gestured at the

empty wreckage of the camp and added, “You, safe.”

Though I did not understand his words, he straightened his rumpled jacket, tugging it down smooth and then tapping his own chest and saying, “Sherlock Holmes.” He cleared his throat and in very precise tones added, “I have been looking for you, Viscount Greystoke, Huishi Zijue.”

Tarzan & Sherlock Holmes

Will Return

The Beast of Borneo

Part 2

Coming Soon