



A Mystery - Part II

(continued from last week ...)

Dave has been studying the print by the window, and has suddenly called to Inspector Lestrade, "Come and look, Inspector."

"What have you found?" asked the policeman as he walked over to the window. "Good God, look at that! The print has been completely transformed!"

"It certainly has, and all because of the light. There's no particular trick to it; simply we need to look at woodblock prints under the same sort of conditions that they were originally created in. No overhead lighting, just simple and natural illumination," Dave explained as he held the sheet close to his face for inspection.

A few feet behind him, one of the printers stirred uneasily in his chair, clearly somewhat perturbed by the way that the investigation was heading. Lestrade walked over and snapped at him, "Something bothering you, O-san?"

"You've got to let us go; there's nothing to be learned from looking at that woodblock print. Work like that could have been done by any of the three of us; we're the best printers in town!" The other two nodded and murmured in agreement.

Lestrade turned to Dave in frustration, "Well, are they right? Just what *are* you going to be able to learn from that print?"

Dave didn't respond; he seemed not to hear. His nose was close to the sheet, which he turned this way and that under the light. "It is indeed very well made. The registration is perfect, and the impression of the colours is deep and fine. It's quite a lot better than much of the work that has been issued by this company in recent years. The manager would have been proud to see it!"

Lestrade commented astringently, "Given that it was the last thing that he ever saw, I suppose there is a fair bit of irony there. But enough of this. Please, can you learn anything from it?"

Dave looked to be a bit disappointed, "Inspector, I'm sorry, but given how much is riding on this analysis, I must hesitate to say anything unless I am absolutely certain ... But wait, what's this!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Look! Here on the back side of the sheet!"

Lestrade strode over to look at where Dave was pointing. It was the corner of the sheet on the reverse side. "I don't understand; I see nothing there. This is the blank back side of the sheet."

Yet again, one of the three men shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Dave turned away from the window and faced the three men, "I am sorry, but my conscience leaves me no choice. Although all three of you have been of help to me in my career, I must now use some of that knowl-

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edge in the course of justice." He spoke to Legrade, "Inspector, I can now indeed tell you who printed this sheet."

The room was suddenly and totally silent, but at the moment he began to speak, "I am sorry S-san ..." the man in question leapt from his seat and charged towards Dave. He was quickly tackled and restrained by the policemen, but began shouting, "That damn manager! He just made our life unbearable, I tell you! Day after day, nothing but complaining about our work. He deserved everything he got!" He continued to shout and struggle as the officers bundled him out of the room.

"All right," Lestrade said, "you are going to have to explain this to us. What did you find that told you which one of those men printed this sheet?"

Dave gestured to the very corner of the back side of the sheet. "Look down here. This is the place where the sheet was placed into the registration marks carved on each block. All printers have to make sure that the paper is held firmly in place before beginning to rub with the baren, but we have different ways to do that. M-san here, having learned his craft in the Takagi workshop, uses the ball of his thumb. That leaves no specific trace on the paper. O-san also uses a similar method. But our friend S-san, having learned his craft in the Yokoi workshop in the postwar period, was trained to use the edge of his thumbnail to pin the paper in place. You can see the result - this little diagonal mark on the paper."

Lestrade leaned closely to the sheet. "You mean that little mark can tell you who printed this sheet?"

"Well, not *who* printed it, but certainly which *workshop* they were trained in. I myself do it this way, having learned from S-san himself. Out of these three men, only one of them would have done it this way.

"You see Inspector, it's all about the light. A woodblock print will keep all its secrets safe from anyone who looks at it under general room illumination, or in a frame. But under soft and natural light, everything will be revealed ... to one who is willing to understand!"