The Curious Incident

(with apologies to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.)

Tutor: I’ve been thinking.

*Student: Oh? What about?*

English sayings.

*And?*

I was thinking how nice they can be.

*English sayings?*

Yes.

*How do you mean?*

Sayings everybody knows.

*Like?*

Well, like “the curious incident of the dog in the night time”.

*What?*

The curious incident of the dog in the night time.

*The curious incident of the dog in the night time?*

You must have heard that one.

*Well, I think so.*

I like it very much.

*Mmmm.*

It has a nice ring to it.

*Where’s it from?*

It’s from a Sherlock Holmes story.

*One of his murder stories?*

Well, sort of.

*How do you mean “sort of”?*

Well it wasn’t really a murder.

*Not really a murder?*

It was a killing, but not a murder.

*A killing but not a murder?*

Exactly.

*How does that work?*

Shall I tell you the story?

*Go on, then.*

It starts with a body, of course.

*And some clues.*

A body on Dartmoor early one morning.

*So they call the great detective*

Yes, they do.

*Sherlock Holmes.*

All the way from London.

*He’ll solve the mystery.*

Of course he will.

*He’ll solve it.*

The police thought it was murder.

*I suppose they did.*

Well, everyone did.

*Of course they did.*

To begin with.

*Of course they did.*

The police even thought they had the man who did it.

*But he hadn’t?*

No. He hadn’t.

*Who had been killed?*

A bloke called John Straker.

*And who was he?*

He trained racehorses on Dartmoor.

*OK.*

His body was found close to the stables.

*Where the racehorses were kept?*

Yes.

*How had he been killed?*

By a blow to the head.

*One blow?*

Yes.

*A horse was missing from his stables, too, wasn’t it?*

Their very best horse.

*Mmmm…*

A big horse called Silver Blaze.

*He was about to run in a big race.*

Yes. A very big race.

*He was expected to win, too.*

He was the favourite.

*Favourite to win.*

There was a lot of money at stake.

*The body was found early in the morning, wasn’t it?*

It was.

*Out on the moor.*

He’d been killed during the night.

*And there was no trace of the killer?*

Nobody else seemed to have been there.

*Apart from the horse.*

Yes. Apart from the horse.

*Although there were some clues.*

Yes. A candle.

*Mmmmmm…*

And a knife.

*A knife!*

A very peculiar knife.

*How do you mean “peculiar”?*

It had a very short blade.

*Oh?*

A very fine blade.

*Oh?*

More like a medical knife.

*Not an ordinary penknife?*

No.

*Not the sort a bloke who worked with horses would carry?*

No.

*Very peculiar! Anything else?*

Sherlock Holmes found a burnt out match in the mud.

*And a candle?*

Yes.

*What about footprints?*

Well, that’s a very funny thing.

*Oh?*

There were only prints of Straker’s boots.

*Nobody else’s footprints at all?*

Just Straker’s boots and the prints of a horse’s hooves.

*Where did they lead?*

To another stables nearby.

*So Sherlock Holmes found out where Silver Blaze was?*

Yes.

*In that other stables?*

And he made sure Silver Blaze was safe there.

*He went on to solve the case, didn’t he?*

Oh yes. Sherlock Holmes found out who killed John Straker.

*How did he do that?*

Well, he began to suspect that Straker had been up to no good.

*Straker? Up to no good? How come?*

Well, that knife for one thing.

*It was a very peculiar knife for a horse trainer to carry.*

It was no good for most jobs round a stable.

*So Sherlock Holmes suspected he was trying to harm Silver Blaze?*

To nobble his own horse!

*Nobble his own horse?*

Yes.

*But why would he nobble his own horse, before a big race?*

Because Silver Blaze was favourite to win it.

*Wait a bit.*

Mmmm?

*I’m beginning to see how this works.*

Well, if you knew that the favourite wouldn’t win.

*Because you’d nobbled it.*

Yes, because you’d nobbled it.

*You could back another horse. And get very good odds.*

Yes. And if that horse won…

*You would make a lot of money.*

Exactly.

*And Sherlock Holmes suspected Straker of doing that?*

Yes.

*Nobbling his own horse.*

And betting against it.

*But why would he do that?*

Well, it seems Straker was in big trouble.

*Money trouble?*

He needed a lot of money, in a hurry.

*So he was going to nobble his own horse, then bet against it?*

Exactly.

*How does Sherlock Holmes solve the case?*

Well, there is one very important clue.

Mmmm…

It’s the curious incident of the dog in the night time.

*The curious incident of the dog in the night time?*

Yes.

*How does that come in?*

Well, you know Sherlock Holmes always works with Dr Watson.

*Yes. Dr Watson writes the story of each case down.*

Exactly.

*Dr Watson always knows all the clues, but he still never gets it.*

No. But then neither do we.

*We?*

The readers of the story!

*Oh. No, we don’t.*

And neither do the police.

*No.*

Nobody does.

*No.*

Not like Sherlock Holmes.

*So how does that saying come in?*

The curious incident of the dog in the night time?

*Yes. Who says it? And why?*

Well, Silver Blaze was taken out of his stable at night time.

*Yes.*

And several people lived round the yard.

*Really?*

Mr and Mrs Straker’s house was by the yard.

*Of course it was.*

And a couple of lads slept over the stables.

*Right. And so?*

Well, Silver Blaze was taken out at night, but nobody heard anything.

*Oh.*

Not even the dog.

*Mmmm…*

It never barked, anyway.

*No.*

Sherlock Holmes told Dr Watson to note that very carefully.

*Told him to note “the curious incident of the dog in the night time”.*

Yes. Said it was really important.

*I still don’t get it, though.*

Dr Watson didn’t either.

*Probably not.*

He said “But Holmes, the dog did nothing in the night time!”

*And what did Sherlock Holmes say?*

He said “That was the curious incident!”

*Wait! I get it now!*

Do you?

*If a stranger had come onto the yard the dog would have barked.*

People would have woken up.

*They would.*

But it didn’t bark!

*So it was not a stranger who had taken Silver Blaze out that night.*

No. It was someone the dog knew well.

*Straker!*

Clever!

*What did Straker want to do to Silver Blaze?*

He wanted to nick his Achilles tendon.

*What’s that?*

It’s the tendon just above your heel. At the back.

*I can feel it. It’s a big one.*

And a horse has an Achilles tendon too.

*I suppose so.*

And if you nick it very slightly, it will make a horse go lame.

*You could turn a winner into a loser.*

Exactly.

*You’d have to get it just right.*

Yes.

*You can’t cut too deep.*

No. Or the horse will be obviously lame.

*Too lame to run at all.*

You have to cut just enough.

*Just enough to make the horse go lame during the race.*

Sound enough to run.

*But going lame during the race.*

*Tricky!*

And wicked.

*That’s why Straker had such a peculiar knife.*

Yes.

*You couldn’t do it with a penknife.*

No.

*And Silver Blaze kicked out?*

Yes.

*He must have been scared.*

And he was a racehorse, of course.

*A kick from a horse like that is dangerous.*

Silver Blaze was probably scared.

*Out on the moor in the dark.*

And he lashed out.

*Probably when Straker lit that candle.*

Probably.

*You can see how it happened.*

And Straker was bent down, right behind him.

*A dangerous place to be.*

Exactly!

*It was Silver Blaze’s hoof that did it.*

That was why there were no footprints other than Straker’s.

*Because there was nobody there except him.*

And Silver Blaze, of course.

*And there wasn’t a murder at all.*

No.

*Nobody killed John Straker.*

It was Silver Blaze all along.

*It was a sort of accident, really.*

Yes. A sort of accident.

*What happened next?*

Mmmm?

*Did Silver Blaze win the big race?*

He did.

*How did that come about?*

Sherlock Holmes made sure he got to the track.

*And he won the big race.*

Of course!

*Sherlock Holmes is amazing.*

Yes.

*Always gets his man.*

Yes. He always gets his man.

*Or, in this case, his horse!*