



A Strange Encounter

Adapted from the story by Alan Robbins

“Professor Nano!” you say, handshake first, eyebrows high with hope. “Allow me to introduce myself.”

“Don’t say a word!” Nano snaps, “let me tell you who you are.”

Nano is floating like cigar smoke above his projection box but thanks to the science of artificial touch, he easily handshakes you into submission. Releasing your hand, Nano gives you a long overview from head to toe with squinty virtual eyes.

“We have never met before this very moment...is that correct?”

“Yes,” you answer, feeling rather uneasy under his piercing probe.

“And yet by simple deduction, I can tell that you had eggs for breakfast this morning, that your initials are HN, that you came here in great haste to discuss a matter of the utmost gravity. And that you are new to this city and left-handed!” You are amazed. Astounded. Nano has not gotten a single thing right!

“Am I correct?” he asks with a wily smirk.

“Sort of. I mean, I did eat breakfast this morning but it wasn’t eggs.”

“No eggs? Then how do you explain the yellowish stain on your blouse?”

“That’s not a stain. It’s part of the design. See? There’s a matching one on the other side. I guess your programmers are still having trouble with pattern recognition.”

“Well then Hilbert...” he says, taking a bold stab at your first name. But you quickly correct his mistake and tell him your real name.

“Then why in heaven’s name do your shoes carry the initials HN on the front?” he asks.

“Oh! I’m afraid you’re reading them upside down. The letters are NH. It’s the monogram of the famous shoe designer... Nemian Hands.”

“I see,” Nano says, somberly. There’s a slight shimmy in his image but that, you figure, could be due to a random gust of air.

“But I did just move into the upstairs apartment!” you say kindly. “Only it wasn’t from another city.”

“And this matter of utmost urgency that impelled you to summon me like a genie?” Nano asks.

“Sorry, I was just tinkering with the box. I didn’t realize I would activate the program. I mean summon you,” you say, pointing to the black case with your left hand.

“Left-handed?” Nano asks sadly, already knowing the answer.

“Nope,” you say. A glum silence prevails as Nano stands stiffly and translucently in the center of the room, waiting for you to continue.

“It says in the instructions that you are a kind of detective,” you offer.

“Virtual detective...the world’s first,” Nano announces proudly.

“So that’s why you were trying to guess who I was.”

“Bah! That was just a silly game to test your mettle,” he says. “Luckily, mettle isn’t my quarry.”

“That’s very lucky indeed.”

“A silly game for mere sherlocks. I find logic and reason intensely boring. If you need that kind of deduction, I believe the company makes a Poirot-to-Go. Check the catalog.”

“Well then how do you detect?”

“With a far more interesting instrument...the flash of understanding, the creative hoopededoo.”

“The hoop-de-huh?”

“Intuition!” he says, tapping his skull and releasing tiny specks of digital bits into the image. But he can see from your squashed eyes and buck teeth that you still don’t get it.

“I am an expert in the obvious.”

“Aha!”

“Precisely. I am summoned on cases when reason has fallen flat as a pancake. They call me in when the police are stymied because they are at the end of their rational ropes.”

“What kind of cases?”

“Murder, codebreaking, theft, all sorts of things. Anything that doesn’t rely on rigid logic or seasoned reason.”

“What then?”

“A shot of lunacy, a quirk in the old noodle, the revelation of the obvious!”

Another tap on the head, more virtual dandruff.

“I call them braintwiddlers,” Nano continues. “They’re puzzles all right. But not of the ‘if three men drank three beers in three days’ variety. These are tests of how sharp you are, not how smart.”

“I see,” you say. “Can you tell me about them?”

“Certainly, my young friend. Let’s make a game of it and see if you can outwit the old professor. How about this...I’ll describe the case and you try to solve it.”

“I’m not too good at puzzles.”

“Even better! Try to use your imagination instead. Trust your wits.”

“I’m not sure my wits are up to snuff.”

“Rubbish. Even a halfwit has half a wit. Let’s start with an easy one first,” Nano says and gives the appearance of rummaging his brain for a sample.

Being only a computer projection, there is, of course, no rummaging and no brain. But the programmers have thought of everything to give Nano the impression of reality. Right down to the curl at the ends of the lips which even you can see is the kind of sly smirk designed to fool an innocent dolt like yourself.