

# NIKKI'S GLASS

a holiday story for the people I care about  
(and for those *they* care about, too.)

by  
Bo Wilson

copyright 2015 by the author.  
All rights reserved.

Once there was a Bank.

It was called Abbey National Bank, and it was located in London, which is a large place in an even larger place called England. The Abbey National Bank, London, and England, are all quite real and are reasonably well-known.

Once there was a man.

He was called Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. He invented detective stories about another man called Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes was not real, but he was and is extremely well-known (as is Sir Arthur.)

Once there was a woman.

She was called Nikki Capar, and she lived with her cat. Nikki and the cat were both real. Neither was very well-known to anyone.

Here is how the bank, the men, and the woman came to know of one another.

Nikki Capar, needing a job rather badly, applied one day to the Abbey National, thinking that perhaps a large bank might need a hardworking person possessing the skills for office work. She was interviewed by a very pleasant gentleman who then told her that she was hired. This was a very pleasant and welcome surprise, but there was a much greater surprise to come: Nikki Capar was told that she would work for the Abbey National in a very special capacity. She was hired on as personal secretary to Sherlock Holmes.

The hiring of a real woman as personal secretary to an invented man is unusual but, as Nikki quickly learned, there were very good reasons for it happening. The Abbey National was located at 221 Baker Street, which was the same address Sir Arthur had chosen years earlier for the location of his invented Holmes. (It is important to note that Sir Arthur was not to blame for this; the address did not exist until long after he'd written his stories.) This accident of overlapping location was the first factor in the creation of Nikki's job.

The second factor had less to do with maps and more to do with people, for although Holmes was not real, he was so very well-known that many people BELIEVED him to be real. A startling number of these persons wrote letters to Holmes, believing that their accolades and questions would be read by the great detective himself, as long as they were sent along with adequate postage to 221-B Baker Street.

Banks are not generally known for their generosity of spirit, and most would have viewed this chain of coincidence as nothing more than a nuisance, consigning all such correspondence to the dustbin on a daily basis. The Abbey National, however, was managed by good-hearted people, who believed in washing daily, speaking politely, and answering any and all correspondence that came their way. It was decided that the only proper course of action was to take on a secretary to answer the letters in a prompt and polite fashion.

This function had been admirably fulfilled by another woman for many years, but she had decided to retire, and Chance showed its hand when Nikki happened in for her interview the very next day. Thus was the slightly-bewildered Nikki ushered into a small office exactly large enough for herself, one desk, one typewriter, one teapot, and one very large canvas bag of letters awaiting reply.

By the end of that first day, Nikki knew that there could be no better job in all the world.

You see, Nikki led a lonely life, and had little in the way of company. She had cared for her ailing mother for years; when her mother had finally passed away, Nikki found herself a woman of advancing years, receding hair, and no known prospects. Her only companionship came from her cat and from the extensive library of mystery novels she and her mother had enjoyed over the years. Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot, Lord Peter Wimsey and, yes, Sherlock Holmes, were Nikki's best and only companions, and she thrilled to their sharp minds and their keen powers of observation. She enjoyed pitting her mind against theirs, noting clues and discounting the obvious red herrings and racing them to their conclusions, sometimes with the satisfied murmur "Just as I suspected," and other times with the even more satisfied cry of delight "How splendid!"

She hadn't suspected, when she saw the posting in the corner of the Abbey National's window ("Secretarial position, courtesy, intelligence, and discretion required") that she would be answering mail intended for one of her heroes. Upon being hired, she asked whether she was intended to answer as if she were Holmes, or whether it was to be acknowledged that she was answering on his behalf. Her employer responded that this was entirely up to her, provided she brought no adverse attention to the Abbey.

In the early days, Nikki answered as if she were indeed Holmes' humble secretary: "Mr. Holmes has asked me to let you know how appreciative he is of your vigorous support, and hopes that he will continue to enjoy your every confidence" and "Mr. Holmes thanks you for your invitation, and regrets that he will be in Venice on the date in question" and "Mr. Holmes does not do endorsements, but appreciates your enthusiasm. I am attaching the cheque you offered as retainer, and wish you all the best in finding the proper spokesperson."

But the overwhelming number of letters were actually little mysteries all their own, the authors hoping that the great Holmes might help them locate their ring, or guide them to the missing money, or prove the infidelity. When reading such a letter, Nikki found herself quite helpless to resist the urge to solve the puzzle.

Her solutions themselves caused no difficulty, for they were almost always accurate; she was exceedingly clever when it came to these questions, and when she offered an answer, it was invariably correct. Occasionally she would identify certain details that were lacking, and request further information; this, also, was not problematic in and of itself.

The problem-- which at first didn't seem like any sort of problem at all-- was that she presented these solutions as the result of an entirely imaginary dialogue between detective and secretary, from which she would include quotes she attributed to the great Holmes himself. These began small enough, really as more references than quotes, such as "Mr. Holmes suggests you make a careful check of your laundry hamper" or "My employer recommends a return visit to your aunt's home, and a quick glance behind the loveseat."

But like all things planted in fertile soil, these notions grew. Soon, there were lengthy quotes being attributed to Holmes' own voice. The first of these read "Please tell Mrs. Frampton that while there are as many types of clay in Britain as there are colors in a rainbow, the clay which marked her carpet could only have come from the local quarry, and thus only from the boots of her groundskeeper at some point between the rains of September ninth and fourteenth." Nikki felt a little breathless when she realized what she had done, but it seemed quite right to her, and after a moment's consideration she posted the letter.

Of course, from here it was only a short distance to entire letters from Holmes himself, in his own hand.

Since all the inquiries believed Holmes to be real, and since the post of secretary had been created to help preserve this harmless fantasy, it seemed of little risk to create letters that purported to be "from" the non-existent detective. The problem was that, as clever as she might have been, Nikki began to encounter questions she couldn't answer and mysteries she couldn't solve. This wasn't so much because of any lack of cleverness on her part. It was because Sir Arthur had never imagined a problem for Holmes without first knowing the answer. The real problems life offers us don't tend to be so tidily constructed.

This left Nikki with two problems: She didn't want to let down the poor people who wrote asking for help, and she didn't want to feel like a failure at the first thing she had ever really enjoyed. But more and more, one or both of these outcomes seemed inevitable, as the pile she had put under an index card marked "Insoluble" grew and grew. One evening a few days before Christmas, she had to begin a second stack under the "Insoluble" card, and she felt as if she might weep.

"Isn't there anything that would help me to help these people?" she whispered to her office. Its silence, once so comforting, now felt like a rebuke, and she wept awhile longer.

\*\*\*\*\*

Once there was a Saint.

He was called the Saint of All Making. The Saint was both well known and entirely real, although seeing him was rare and locating him was altogether impossible, for he lived in the center of many layers of magic and secrets at the very tip-top of the world.

Once there was a maker.

The maker was called Blaine, and he, also, was real, though quite a bit less well-known than the Saint. He was, however, the Saint's reliable right hand, and the chief of the many thousands of makers who lived in the Saint's realm, and so he enjoyed a certain quiet reputation among his peers, which was all most of us ever care about.

Once there was a chest.

The chest was real, but you'll have to take my word for that. It held some of the most powerful magical items in the entire universe, and it was kept in the Saint's chambers, well hidden from any who might wish to know more about its contents. It held countless wonders: Two of the seeds from a certain apple that had caused rather a lot of trouble in a certain garden; a small phial of the ashes from the library of Alexandria; one of the two keys Ben Franklin had attached to his famous kite; a bit of silk stained with Cleopatra's tears, and on and on. When the Saint felt that a particularly special gift needed to be made for someone, he would sometimes use a bit of something from this chest-- the very chest sat open before him as Blaine entered his chambers.

Blaine stopped short. He had seen the chest a few times but he knew those times to be extraordinary and rare, usually preceded by lengthy deliberations and careful decisions. He was, to be frank, somewhat peeved to enter and find it open like some novel the Saint had put aside before napping. Nevertheless, peeved or not, he knew his place, and stood ready to help. "Pardon my interruption, Sir, are we contemplating a special gift?"

The Saint grinned at Blaine over the chest's lid, for he knew every twitch and flicker of his most trusted friend's face. "I hope you don't feel left out, Blaine, I was only considering things, but I'd very much appreciate your point of view on the question of Nikki Capar."

Blaine would not allow himself to seem mollified by the Saint's words, and instead placed his full attention on the question at hand. "Capar, Nikki, single, one cat, employed to pretend she's Sherlock Holmes' secretary, I don't believe we've received any correspondence but I'd be happy to go back and--"

The Saint waved to silence him. "No, she's not written. There was a quiet and fairly pitiful cry from her this afternoon, and it made its way into my ear, as such things do. She's done quite a bit of good, isn't that so?"

Blaine had all such ledgers committed to memory, and nodded briskly. "Yes sir, she's made over two thousand people happy this year, she's brought extreme bliss to three hundred forty six, and she's provided tangible assistance to over a thousand who might otherwise have moved toward despair. She's quite remarkable actually."

The Saint nodded. "Just as I believed. But she's stuck, and I'd like to help her."

Blaine's eyebrows went up the slightest fraction. "Aren't I correct sir, that's she's stuck as a result of getting herself a bit above her station? Pretending to be someone she's not, someone who never truly was?"

The Saint regarded his chief maker. "She's stuck because she's allowed a fantasy to grow beyond her capacities, and it has entered the realm where doubt and fear make themselves felt. I know a bit about that, being someone who is, himself, sometimes doubted and thought to be imaginary."

Blaine stood fast. "I'd become quickly stuck, sir, if I pretended to be you, but this wouldn't make me deserving of any particular dispensation."

The Saint laughed at this, the famous rolling laugh for which he is best loved, the rolling caramel-and-cedar-smoke chuckle that envelops all listeners in its warmth and leaves them feeling embraced by the season itself. "I'd like to watch that, Blaine. I'd buy tickets to every performance of that show."

Blaine frowned. "Deflection is unworthy of you, sir, and we face a real question of merit. There's no doubt that you know best, but I wonder whether you've considered--"

The Saint held up a large hand. "I've considered this, my friend: The nature of her work means that if we help her, we also help all the people who benefit from her work. Our gift, like all the best gifts, will give itself over and over, for years to come, provided we craft it properly, and it is this question with which I need your expertise."

Blaine's ears reddened just a bit at the tips, both at the gentle rebuke and at the lavish praise. He bowed his head and said "It is my constant wish to serve you to the utmost of my capacities, Sir. What are you considering for Miss Capar?"

The Saint gestured for Blaine to come around and view the chest. They contemplated the amazements arrayed before them, pondering the needs of this particular circumstance. After a time the Saint said "I was thinking about using a bit of the Da Vinci glass. Just a sliver."

Blaine nodded. "Melt it in with something else, maybe a bit of the Magyar Mirror?"

The Saint nodded excitedly. As vast as his powers and as sweeping as his responsibilities, it was this that pleased him the most, the simple act of working with a good friend and puzzling out the best answer to a difficult question. "A lens!" he exclaimed. "A magnifying lens, the classic thing for a detective, mount it in a bit of Ahab's brass and use a piece of Tyresius' walking stick for the handle, that's a glass that will see straight through the to the heart of any written riddle!" He was rubbing his hands together excitedly, but he noticed Blaine frowning, and paused, exasperated. "What's wrong now, what great error in judgment has your aging master committed this time?"

Blaine would not be baited into defending himself, and he spoke very mildly. "I'm sure you've considered everything, sir, and it's not my place to--"

The Saint rolled his great eyes. "Don't require my asking twice, Maker, tell me what I've missed."

Blaine paused, checking his notion before voicing it. "The gift resulting from such materials would be wonderfully powerful and would indeed reveal the answer to any question."

The Saint shrugged. "Where, then, does it fall short?"

"Magic." said Blaine softly. "It relies upon magic. This Holmes fellow is popular because all of his stories are stories of intelligence and logic. He stands as the crowning emblem of rational thought, and I worry that if we give Miss Capar the advantage of magic...."

"The answers won't come from her own mind. She'll begin to feel like a fraud," finished the Saint heavily.

"Which she is, of course," added Blaine brightly.

The Saint's eyes cut darkly toward the Chief Maker. "Frauds have only themselves in mind. She has only the needs of others in mind, and we want her to continue happily along that road."

Blaine nodded obediently and then said "There might yet be a way to achieve what we seek without going too far."

The Saint leaned forward, and listened, and then began to chuckle, and then roared his pleasure in a world-shaking laugh, and clapped Blaine on the back heartily (because it was the sort of gesture than made Blaine wince, and the Saint liked doing such things) and then the two of them got to work.

\*\*\*\*\*

On Christmas Day, Nikki went to church and then, having nothing else to do, she walked through gentle snows, swirling through air filled with pealing bells and the smells of roasting turkey, ending up at the empty Abbey National building, slipping quickly into its cold stone interior. Her steps echoed as she walked quickly to the waiting warmth of her office. Her hope was that perhaps the quiet of the holiday would allow her to see more deeply into the riddles of some of the most vexing letters, and that it mightn't be too much to ask of the day that she solve at least a few of them.

After tea had been made and galoshes set aside, it took only a few minutes to discover that the silence had its own, expectant weight and that it somehow made things worse than ever, each mystery seeming even more opaque and impenetrable than before. She regarded the stacks of unanswered letters and felt something very like despair, and that was when her eye fell upon the box.

It was a simple but beautiful thing, sleek and small, crafted from cherry wood that had been oiled and polished into a dark brilliance. When she opened it, she registered its green velvet interior, and a small white card which read “To help you find your way” and then a small capital “S” at the bottom.

Beneath the card was the most beautiful magnifying glass she’d ever seen.

Its beauty was not related to shiny brilliance or elaborate filigree; rather, like all the very best tools, its beauty lay in a sense of weight and elegance and a simplicity of design that took its work as seriously as any craftsman should.

“To help me find my way,” she breathed, and she carefully, almost fearfully, lifted it from its box, and felt its perfect heft as it found a home in her hand. She turned and took the another letter off the nearest stack, which happened to be one of the stacks under the “insoluble” card.

The letter concerned the rare first edition of a prized book that had gone missing. The writer of the letter had gone on holiday, leaving his younger sister to mind his house for a fortnight, and it was shortly after his return that he realized the book was missing, for it had always occupied a special place next to his reading chair and was no longer there. His sister had wept when asked if she knew anything about the book, stricken that such a catastrophe could occur while the house was under her care. The letter writer was at pains to make sure that Mr. Holmes knew that his sister could not have been responsible. The girl was not only beloved by him, but extremely reliable in all things, and had performed quite a lengthy to-do list while he had been away, leaving his house in the most excellently managed shape for his return.

Nikki, now reacquainted with the letter, held the glass to her eye.

It magnified beautifully, but it also did something else that was very strange. Certain words and phrases, when viewed through the lens, caught her eye for no reason that she could understand. Were they perhaps magnified a fraction more than the other words? Did the lens throw a certain light upon them? It seemed to happen in two particular places. The first was “I am a bibliophile, and my local library’s favorite patron.” The second was “performed quite a lengthy to-do list.”

Nikki stared into space for several seconds and then began to smile. Of course. How ridiculously obvious it was!

She set the glass carefully into its box and took up pen a paper, writing with a barely contained excitement: “Sir, I have read your letter and wonder whether the chores on your sister’s to-do list might have included a trip to the library, in which case I feel certain I know exactly where your book has ended up....”

Nikki smiled, and read, and smiled, and wrote, and the beautiful glass quickly became a natural extension of herself, and in years to come it would be known as “Miss Nikki’s Glass.”

\*\*\*\*\*

At the top of the world, Blaine and the Saint regarded one another over mugs of steaming cider, the big day having been met with fullest success and the two friends enjoying the peace and quiet before the Saint’s annual month-long slumber.

“We have indications that the magnifying glass we made for Miss Capar is performing well,” ventured Blaine.

The Saint nodded. “As, I am sure, is Miss Capar herself.”

Blaine lifted an eyebrow. “Sir?”

“The glass is nothing without the purity of intent of its owner. If she sought to profit from it, it would show her nothing. But she seeks only to help others. She seeks only to feel useful, and that is why the glass behaves as it does.”

Blaine pondered this for a moment, thinking that it was a truth all creatures, this need to feel useful, and that however dark and difficult the world might seem, being useful was always the solution to the mystery. He lifted his mug toward his master. “Merry Christmas, Sir.”

The Saint’s eyes twinkled. “Merry Christmas, Blaine.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Afterword:

Portions of this story are historically and factually accurate.

The other bits are merely true.

Merry Christmas