

*Inspector Beard - Volume One:
The Case of the Missing Beard*

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TERRY RUFFHEAD

- Chapter One -
Inspector Beard

I arrived at the office to find Inspector Beard, founder and head of the Bearded Crimes Division of the London Metropolitan Police Force, huddled over his workbench conducting a complex looking experiment.

"Maybe it's time to buy a new alarm clock," he said, without looking up, as I closed the door behind myself.

"What?" I exclaimed. "How could you possibly know that, I'm bang on time!"

"Your beard tells me all I need to know about you, McTashy."

"I know your beard reading skills are the greatest possessed by any man in London, but how could my beard possibly tell you I need a new alarm clock?"

"You shall be frustrated when I enlighten you, Constable, it is perfectly obvious."

Now it is true that during my tenure as his assistant the Inspector had surprised me on many occasions by informing me of things I thought no other man knew about merely by glancing at my beard, but on this occasion I couldn't begin to fathom how he had made the connection. "Please, sir, put me out of my misery and astound me yet again," I pleaded.

He turned away from his workbench to face me, "Well, there are crumbs secreted in your moustache, most likely from a hurried breakfast, that you haven't had time to notice. Normally your wife would pick up on these before you left for work so you evidently rushed out of the house this morning. Also your beard is usually impeccably trimmed, one of the finest I have ever seen, yet today there are at least 5 hairs that are slightly longer than the rest. All signs point to a broken alarm clock and an impromptu lie-in followed by a mad rush to make it to work on time."

"Genius!" I cried. "You never cease to amaze me, sir. And thank you for the compliment."

"You are more than welcome, your immense, golden, Celtic wonder warms my days even in the deepest of winters. Now simmer down, McTashy, I need your help with this experiment."

Inspector Beard considered himself one of the eminent pogonologists in the world and regularly conducted tests to push the boundaries of what his own beard can accomplish.

"Here, take this," Beard handed me a revolver. "It struck me as highly likely that my beard is not only a tool for me to mentally connect with other beards but is also bulletproof and I shall need your cool hand to fire the testing shot for me."

"You want me to shoot your face?" I asked, worried.

"No!" he roared. "You fool, I would surely die if you shot me in the face. I need you to shoot me in the beard. If my wild prediction is correct it shall deflect the bullet harmlessly away from me."

"If you insist, sir," I said as I took aim.

There was a loud bang and I thought for a moment the gun had gone off accidentally but then I realised the sound had come from the door being flung open suddenly.

"Beard!" shouted the Superintendent from the doorway. "Stop playing around and get in my office, you're needed promptly."

"Yes sir, right away," responded Beard. "Come on McTashy, it sounds as though all is not well for one of our bearded brothers."

We hurried to the office of the Superintendent to find him accompanied by Commissioner Varvatos. The Commissioner was a short fellow of Greek descent who was defined by mighty sideburns and a habit of perpetually smoking cigars. He was a rich, important man and rarely involved himself in

the trivial matter of a specific case, it was far more likely to find him in a smoky gentleman's club in Westminster drinking with the capital's movers and shakers, his tippable of choice, ouzo, betraying his heritage.

"Ah Commissioner, to what do we owe the pleasure of your surprise visit?" remarked Beard as we entered the office.

"Tell me Beard, what do you know of a Sir Joshua Noble-Buttingford?" responded the Commissioner.

"Well sir, as you and our accompanying colleagues may well know I compete in the annual Beard of the Year competition, which I have had the great honour of winning for the past 14 years. Sir Joshua was my fiercest competitor and runner-up for the last 8 years. Is something wrong with him sir?"

The Commissioner took a deep breath and paused to ramp up the tension. "Last night someone broke into Sir Joshua's house and stole his beard."

"Dear god, what kind of madman would be so inhumane!" I exclaimed.

"We don't know Constable, but what we do know is that the consequences could be huge," stated the Superintendent. "The Beard of the Year awards take place next week which leaves Sir Joshua nowhere near enough time to grow a replacement and could lead to his ruin, both socially and financially. He has fought a long and expensive campaign to supplant our own Inspector Beard for the first time and should he not be able to compete he will lose all of his donations and the respect of the bearded community."

"Yes, Sir Joshua is close to the edge and he is a personal friend of mine which therefore leaves me most upset," said the Commissioner, who had not taken his eyes away from Beard since we entered the room. "It seems you would be one of the biggest benefactors with his withdrawal from the competition, would you not, Beard?"

"Now wait a second sir!" I cried. "What exactly are you suggesting here?"

"No one is suggesting anything Constable," interjected the Superintendent.

"It is alright, sir, the Commissioner is correct," said Beard. "I would be surprised if there was anyone in the entire kingdom that would benefit from Sir Joshua's freshly shaven face more than myself. As the Superintendent stated he has fought a long and expensive campaign and I have not, police work engages the majority of my time and attention. There are whispers that 14 consecutive years is enough for any man to be crowned Beard of the Year and that it is time for a change. All signs were pointing to a victory for Sir Joshua, now I am surely the frontrunner again."

"So you were involved?" asked the Commissioner.

"No sir, I said I would be surprised if anyone else would benefit more than myself, but surprised I shall undoubtedly be as I had no involvement whatsoever. I will not deny I would relish the opportunity to make it a round 15 victories but I would have accepted the decision of the judges whatever it may have been, all who know me are aware of my keen sense of fair play. Evidently someone else wishes Sir Joshua to be unable to compete and I must now endeavour to find out who that is."

"Surely you can't allow him to be the lead investigator on this case, his personal connection makes it too risky," the Commissioner said to the Superintendent.

"What would you have me do, Commissioner? He is the best facial hair detective we have and the only policeman I have heard of to have the ability to psychically connect with other beards. I trust him completely if he says he is not involved. Get to work Beard."

After we had exited the room we could hear the Commissioner and the Superintendent arguing. The Commissioner was obviously not going to accept the word of Beard without a struggle, not that this appeared to affect Beard in the slightest.

“Come now McTashy, fetch the equipment, we must pay my old adversary a visit.”

“Are you sure that is the best way to move forwards, sir?” I enquired. “I would have thought that you would be the last person Sir Joshua would want to see at this moment in time.”

“True, McTashy, true. But I have little choice, we cannot begin to construct a case without first interviewing the victim and investigating the scene of the crime. Now hurry along, this is shaping up to be one of the most interesting cases we have worked on since the Mystery of the Guatemalan Goatee.”

- Chapter Two -
Sir Joshua

We pulled into the estate of Sir Joshua Noble-Buttingford shortly before noon. I had been taught that you can tell a lot about a man from the house he lives in and this glorious Edwardian mansion set in the leafy Hertfordshire countryside, 2 miles from St. Albans, told me that Sir Joshua was extremely rich. Upon our arrival at the house we were greeted by the butler and shown into the sitting room where we found Sir Joshua sat by a large fireplace. He was a healthy man in his late fifties who, when faced with impending hair loss around 15 years earlier, began to cultivate a spectacular beard, indeed if it were not for my good friend Beard he would surely have multiple Beard of the Year titles to his name by now. His head hair reminded me, in a way, of the water cycle; the fluffy clouds around his ears and sideburns flowing like rivers into the ocean of a massive grey beard, although as we approached him I began to see the ferocity of the crime that had been committed against him. Gone were the rivers and the ocean, replaced by freshly shaven, glowing skin that had not seen the light of day for over a decade.

“Ah, Beard,” muttered Sir Joshua as we got closer, “I wondered if you would dare show your face here.”

“It appears you are the one showing more face than me,” retorted the Inspector.

Sir Joshua was incensed by this comment from Beard and leapt out of his chair, shaking a finger accusingly in our direction.

“You scoundrel, how dare you make light of my misfortune! I know you're involved in this somehow... I'll... I'll...”

“Now look here,” interrupted Beard sharply, “I may not have had time to run my own campaign for this year's Bearded award but that doesn't mean I haven't noticed yours. Some of your statements were most unjust and as I did not have the opportunity to parry any of your attacks on my beard in public I thought it only fair that I should deliver one small blow myself now.”

“Hmmpf,” Sir Joshua did not seem to have expected Beard to have turned the tables so quickly and could only respond with a vague noise.

“But I promise you this, Sir Joshua,” continued Beard, “the only part I shall play in this crime will be in the solving of it.”

As the two men stood staring at each other a door flung open and a dog came bounding across the room towards us, barking madly. A maid came hurrying through the same door moments after and grabbed hold of the dog's collar.

“I'm so sorry sir,” she gabbled, “he j-just broke off his chain and...”

“Don't worry about it,” Sir Joshua cut in, “just get him shut away while our guests are on the premises.”

Sir Joshua looked shaken up by the event and turned towards us.

“Gentlemen, my apologies. Not only for the dog, he doesn't like strangers, but also for my conduct earlier. I should not have accused you of working for the forces of evil, it was just my anger overwhelming me momentarily. I would be most grateful for your investigative expertise and will assist you in whatever way I can.”

“That is quite alright sir,” I said, “we understand that you are going through a period of shock and mourning, your behaviour is quite justifiable.”

“Quite,” murmured Beard, “if it were physically possible for someone to shave off my beard and they then did shave it off... I would be destroyed.”

This was quite impossible, razors recoil in fear at the sight of the Inspector's seemingly

indestructible beard as many a blade has been shattered attempting to remove a hair or two, but the thought of this still seemed to affect my friend and he had to shake himself out of it.

“Anyway, we should proceed to the scene of the crime but before that I just want to ask a few questions to confirm the events of last night. First, your statement you gave last night says that your wife was first to notice the missing beard and her scream woke you and alerted you to the crime?”

“Yes that is correct, I did not wake once during the night. I wish I had so that Mary did not have to confront such an aberration with her waking gaze. God bless her, she has almost recovered from the initial shock but I'm not convinced she will ever make a full recovery.”

“And the windows were shut and door locked the entire night?”

“Yes, yes, I've already told the other officers this information, it's all in my statement. Of course, as I told them, I do not know if the window was shut the entire time as the lock is broken but it was shut when I went to bed and shut when I woke.”

“Is the dog kept in the house at night?”

“No he has a kennel outside and is free to wander the grounds.”

“And finally, is there anyone who would have a reason to engage in this nocturnal bearded butchery?”

“There can be no sound reason in existence to excuse this behaviour.”

“I'm sure the Inspector wasn't insinuating that this crime is excusable sir,” I said, trying to defuse another potential flare up between the former rivals.

“I know what he meant, and no, apart from a fellow competitor for the Beard of the Year award wanting to increase their chances of winning I can think of no reason why anyone would want to torture me so.”

“What about your colleagues, both present and former, surely you must have made a few enemies during your ambassadorial years?”

“I conducted myself with the utmost decorum at all times when representing Her Majesty's government abroad and nowadays my only role is on the Board of Directors at London Zoo, surrounded by other semi-retired, former political heavyweights. We spend our time together working through a good few bottles of scotch before trying to agree on how much to bid for an Indian Elephant. No, I have made no enemies that I know of throughout my professional life.”

“That is enough, I need to hear no more,” said Beard. “Thank you for your cooperation Sir Joshua, now would you kindly show us to the room in which the crime occurred.”

Sir Joshua showed us upstairs to the master bedroom and waited outside the door whilst we went in for our examination. In fitting with the grandiose nature of the rest of the house this room was expansive and luxurious. A large 4-poster bed with hand-woven curtains of an oriental design, no doubt acquired during Sir Joshua's work as Ambassador to Japan, was the commanding presence in the room but my focus instead was drawn to the windows. There were two of them in the room, both around 6 feet tall and 3 feet wide, of which it would be the most logical place for an intruder to attempt entry during the night. Beard, meanwhile, seemed more interested in the bed and pulled back the curtains to observe the sheets and pillows.

“Look at this, McTashy,” he said, beckoning me over.

“Shaved beard hairs!” I gasped. “All around the pillow on Sir Joshua's side of the bed. The hue of these trimmings appear to match his known beard colour as well.”

I looked at Beard and saw he was crouched down, deep in thought. This meant only one thing; his method of deduction was based around his ability to enter a meditative state by scratching his beard and he was engrossed in this state now. He was able to establish a psychic bridge between

his beard and others, on a living beard still attached to a man's face this was simple and instantaneous but with dead trimmings it was trickier and so as I knew he would be locked in this procedure for a short while I decided to do some further detective work on my own.

I checked the interior of the bedroom windows for signs of forced entry and, finding none, I decided to head to the garden. I walked around the outside of the house until I was underneath the master bedroom. I proceeded to check the flowerbeds and to confirm my initial suspicions I found indents in the earth. I called the groundskeeper to fetch the longest ladder he has and sure enough it slotted perfectly into the indents, reaching up just far enough to allow someone access to the right hand bedroom window.

At this moment Beard came striding out of the house and towards me.

“Look at this sir!” I exclaimed, desperate to prove my investigatorial mettle. “This ladder...”

“Not now, McTashy,” interjected Beard, “we must return to London to the office as soon as possible, I shall explain on the journey.”

He looked more worried than I had seen him in a long time.

“Something strange has occurred, my friend, I do not fully understand what yet but this whole situation is beginning to concern me.”

- Chapter Three -
A Trip to the Zoo

We boarded the next train bound for London and settled into the emptiest carriage we could find, occupied only by a scruffy-looking man curled up asleep by the window.

“So, McTashy,” said Beard softly, speaking in a low voice so as not to disturb our companion, “care to share your thoughts on the case now we have spoken to the victim and examined the scene of the crime?”

“I’m sure you are far ahead of me in your deductions sir.”

“Nevertheless, I would appreciate your input. Besides you had far more opportunity than I to study the bedroom and gardens.”

“If you insist sir.”

“I do, please start at the beginning.”

“Very well. Sir Joshua went to bed as usual last night, with the windows shut and the bedroom door locked. We know from his statement and further comments that it is not possible to lock the windows and I believe this was the point of entry for the perpetrator. There are indents in the ground underneath one of the windows and there is a ladder kept in an unlocked shed that fits perfectly with the indents and that would elevate someone to the exact height needed to enter through a window. Upon entry into the room the assailant proceeded to shave Sir Joshua, leaving without cleaning up the majority of the waste.”

“I assume from your deductions that you wish to accuse someone familiar with the Noble-Buttingford household; someone who would not aggravate the dog, that knows which room Sir Joshua sleeps in, that the windows to this room cannot be locked and that there is a ladder nearby that would suit the job of entering one of the windows.”

“Well yes, when you put it like that, I suppose I do. I admit I am currently clueless to whom though.”

“Any thoughts on a motive?”

“The timing of the crime suggests a relation with the imminent Beard of the Year awards, it is too much of a coincidence to be entirely separate. Perhaps one of Sir Joshua’s relatives or close acquaintances has money riding on an outcome that does not see him crowned as victor.”

Beard paused momentarily to let my musings sink in. “As usual McTashy you excel at seeing the obvious but I must inform you that on this occasion, whilst we are on the same path, we are heading in opposite directions with our deliberations.”

“Then you have solved the case already, sir?”

“No, not entirely, I have obtained the necessary pieces and now I need to arrange them to make them fit. Our visit to Sir Joshua’s residence yielded some surprising results.”

“Are these surprising results linked to our hurried retreat?”

The sleeping man emitted a noise which made Beard halt our conversation suddenly. He looked at the man suspiciously until he started snoring, upon which he turned back to me.

“Yes, they are. But let us not talk any further of the case until we reach the office, I have some thinking to do.”

And with that comment Beard huddled into the corner of the seat and did not proffer another word for the remainder of our journey.

When we alighted at Kings Cross, at precisely 2 p.m., I presumed we would be heading back to the office as previously agreed but suddenly Beard slumped against a pillar, overcome with a sickness.

"I am feeling rather queer, McTashy," he said, weakly, "I think it may be best if I retire back to my lodgings for a brief nap.

"Is everything all right, sir?" I enquired.

"Yes, yes, I shall be fine. Although there was one errand I would have liked to run before returning to Scotland Yard..."

"No problem, sir, delegate your errand to me and I will ensure it is done as soon as possible."

"Thank you McTashy, I shall always remember fondly the day you were assigned to the Bearded Crimes Division, you far exceed your duties as my assistant."

I was humbled by the Inspector's words. "Thank you sir, it is an honour to work with you and your beard. Now what is it you would have me do for you?"

"London Zoo is not far from here. I would like you to head to their offices to obtain a copy of the list of their board members and senior staff."

"So you do not consider Sir Joshua to be telling the entire truth about his relationship with his colleagues. I shall have it done immediately, sir."

"Oh and while you're there, McTashy, have a poke around for anything that seems out the ordinary would you?"

"Of course sir!" I said, eager to have the chance to impress my friend.

After our exchange Beard stumbled towards a row of cabs. Ever the gentleman, even in ill health, he generously let a woman with child take the first and clambered into the next. I watched him disappear from sight before obtaining my own cab and heading towards Regents Park and the world famous Zoological Society of London.

My police credentials allowed me easy access into the Zoo and I was shown by a receptionist to the main offices. The staff are a hard-working bunch here and I was nearly cleaned out by a tall, bearded chap carrying a bucket, full of chopped-up fruit, who appeared to be only focused on the task at hand. As I neatly sidestepped him I was struck by an overwhelming sense of familiarity before the penny finally dropped; the man had a beard almost identical in appearance to my good friend Beard's. In fact, had it not been for the bright blonde colouration, giving the impression of Scandinavian genealogy, I would have thought the man a dead ringer for the Inspector.

I was shown through a door into a busy office, inhabited by five women. Four of them were young and demure, barely making eye contact with me as I walked in, but the fifth was much older and seemed in command of the room. She was a plump woman, probably not unattractive in her day but now trying to counter the signs of ageing with copious amounts of make-up, and she occupied a large chair in the centre of the room as the others swarmed around her like worker bees to the queen.

"The Police Constable here would like some information from your department, Mrs Somerleyton."

"Thank you, I shall see to it that he does not leave dissatisfied," replied the queen bee to the receptionist. Then to me, "What can I do for you, sir?"

"Good afternoon, madam," I purred, in the most respectable voice I could muster, "I wonder if I could trouble you for a copy of the list of the board of directors and senior staff for this establishment."

As I had hoped, my good manners resonated with the woman and she turned to one of the younger girls. "Rosemary! Make a copy of the list that the Constable requires, and be quick about it!"

The women turned back to me with a sickly smile upon her face. She had obviously trained

her workers well as the girl now known to me as Rosemary hurriedly set about her task. It took about five minutes for her to produce the copy, during which time I had to deflect a few awkward questions from the queen bee about my romantic availability. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable in her presence and was eager to depart so snatched up the list when handed to me.

“Thank you for your help, ladies,” I said, taking the piece of paper from Rosemary and folding it into my pocket as I walked towards the door. In my eagerness to get away from the woman I nearly forgot Beard's request to dig for anything suspicious and so I span on the spot just short of the door. “Sorry to bother you again, but before I leave I have one further enquiry; can anyone recall anything particularly unusual happening with regards to Sir Joshua Noble-Buttingford over the previous week or so?”

“What, you mean like the argument with that fellow two days ago?” offered one of the currently unnamed worker bees.

“Do not speak out of turn, Alice Tanner!” snapped Mrs Somerleyton suddenly, “I'm sure the Constable doesn't wish to hear the nonsense rumours spread by a young lady caught frequenting a public house past midnight with a certain Mr Lewis Whiltby! Can you imagine the like, Constable?”

“Yes indeed, we officers of the law would *never* be found frequenting public houses at ungodly hours,” I winked at Alice, to which she blushed and gave a shy smile. “But this argument does sound potentially relevant to my investigation, could you provide me with the non-nonsense version of events please?”

“Very well,” Mrs Somerleyton replied. “Sir Joshua liked to hang around this office whenever he was visiting the establishment, I've no idea why, he seemed to like to check and double-check the paperwork regularly.” The sight of the four young ladies before me posited an alternative explanation to Sir Joshua's interest in the office but I let the woman continue. “Two days ago he was going through last years accounts for the third time with Audrey there,” she motioned to the pretty redhead in the corner of the room, “when all of a sudden one of the other members of the Board burst in and began a blazing row with Sir Joshua. We hurried out of the room to give them some privacy but I could still hear some of it from the other side of the door; they were talking about sums of money and I could hear the Beard of the Year awards mentioned a few times, but before I could make sense of any of it they came storming out of the room and headed off in opposite directions.”

“This other man, do you know his name?”

“Oh yes, it was Sir Anthony Bushmead, a cousin of Sir Joshua's in fact. Apparently no one has seen hide nor hair of him since the row, presumably hiding his face in shame.”

“Your information has been most beneficial, ladies, I shall not forget your assistance.”

With that I quickly made my way out of the zoo and headed back to the office armed with what I believed to be the key elements to cracking the case.

- Chapter Four -
Troubling Allegations

I hurriedly returned to Scotland Yard as fast as I could, urging the cab driver to take every short-cut that he knew of. Before I could enter the door to the Bearded Crimes Division I was summoned by the Superintendent into his office.

“Beard not with you?” said the Superintendent, as I took a seat.

“No sir, he sent me to obtain some information from the offices of London Zoo, regarding the Sir Joshua case. We parted company just after 2 p.m.”

“Well I have to inform you that Commissioner Varvatos had a phone call from a very angry Sir Joshua just a short while ago, convinced that Beard must somehow be involved in the matter of his stolen beard and so he ordered, against my wishes I hasten to add, a search of the Inspector's locker and personal effects. Sir Joshua is travelling down to file an official complaint, he should be arriving shortly.”

“What a devil! What legal footing did he have to do such a thing?”

“Not a very sound one, which may have been problematic had his search yielded no results, but unfortunately for the Inspector some very damning evidence was found.”

“What on earth are you talking about sir, I thought we had discounted Beard's involvement from the earliest opportunity?”

“Maybe we were too hasty with that. During the search of the Inspector's locker, a shaving kit was found, tucked out of sight hidden behind some books.”

“That is not as strange as you may think sir. Although Beard does not shave himself, due to his beard's ability to maintain a perfect length on it's own, he is an expert in all matters bearded and therefore it makes absolute sense for him to own a shaving kit for research purposes.”

“You speak the truth, but what you do not know is that this shaving kit had been recently used and was covered in hairs that matched those found at the crime scene at Sir Joshua's house.”

I was dumbfounded by these allegations against my friend. “No, it cannot be... there must be another explanation.”

“If there is or there isn't we need to bring the Inspector in for questioning, he has now jumped back to suspect number one. We have crushing evidence and a motive, you cannot deny that, Constable, even if he is your friend. Did anything happen while your were at Sir Joshua's house that could have incensed him so?”

“Well there did have a couple of minor verbal jousts, nothing got out of hand though.”

“You were with them both the entire time?”

“Well, not exactly. Whilst Beard was in the bedroom examining the crime scene I went outside to investigate the exterior of the premises.”

“Could anything have happened during that time?”

“Now you mention it, Beard did come out of the house in a blind rush, we couldn't get away quick enough.”

“Hmm... it is not looking good for our bearded Inspector. Go back to your office and await further instructions, no doubt we will require your assistance to try and locate Beard.”

I was beginning to fear for the future of the Bearded Crimes Division should this be made public, the man in charge committing such a heinous crime would cause a massive scandal. My train of thought was broken as I entered the office to see Beard standing by his desk reading some paperwork. “Beard!” I oxymoronically exclaimed in a whisper, as I shut the door behind me. “What

are you doing here, you're a wanted man.”

“What better place is there to hide than the place you would have been had you not been hiding?”

I couldn't find a flaw in the Inspector's statement so I pressed him on the matter at hand. “They say it was you that stole the beard from the face of Sir Joshua...”

“A mistaken assumption,” cut across Beard.

“Yes I know, sir,” I continued, “I think I have found the culprit, but I wanted to discuss it with you before handing the information over to the Superintendent. I believe it was a cousin of Sir Joshua's, Sir Anthony Bushmead, who also happens to be on the Board of Directors at London Zoo. Two days ago he was overheard arguing with Sir Joshua over the matter of money and the Beard of the Year awards, he must have placed a large wager on yourself and then been dismayed as his own cousin launched a gargantuan effort to win the award for himself. He has not been seen since the argument, undoubtedly keeping himself away from suspicion, and he also fits the profile because as he is a family member he would be familiar with the residence of Sir Joshua and presumably the hound as well.”

“Well done, McTashy, you have certainly been busy with your investigations. Although once again I am afraid it is my duty to inform you that you have been dancing around the facts, rather than making them sing for you.”

“You do not think Sir Anthony is guilty, sir? But then why has he fled?”

“Sir Anthony is staying with an aunt in Solihull, he found out that Sir Joshua was using the Zoological Society's funds to pay for his campaign to become Beard of the Year and has retreated away from the area until the whole thing is done and dusted. He didn't want to be involved in any way yet he couldn't bring himself to dish his cousin up to the authorities.”

“Well if he is innocent then who do you propose the culprit was?”

Beard paused for a moment, seemingly to gather his thoughts. “Tell me McTashy, what do you know of the *emperor tamarin*?”

“Well when I was a child my father conducted a large amount of business in Peru and our family relocated there for a period. Many nights were spent sleepless due to the calling of the tamarins that occupied the trees near our house.”

“So you are familiar with the two subspecies?”

“Of course, how could I forget,” I said impatiently, not sure of how this line of questioning was related to our case, “there are the *black-chinned* and *bearded* varieties. Tell me, sir, is your interest in bearded issues spreading to the animal kingdom?”

“What if I was to tell you instead that at London Zoo there is currently what appears to be a *black-chinned emperor tamarin* on display that is really a *bearded emperor tamarin* that has had its beard shaved off.”

“With greatest respect I would suggest that you should get your eyes checked sir, or maybe your head if you believe that monkeys are in the habit of shaving.”

“The greatest mistake you can make, McTashy, is to disbelieve your senses for no good reason.”

“So you have told me, many times sir,” I sighed, then realising what my friend had been saying. “Anyway when did you get the chance to inspect the Zoo, sir? You retired ill back to your lodgings when we returned from St. Albans and it was I who sniffed around the premises to seek out any clues regarding Sir Joshua's missing beard.”

“My illness was merely a ruse to send you off on your own, and thanks to the distraction of your highly conspicuous fact finding mission I was given the opportunity to slip unnoticed into the staff changing rooms and disguise myself as an employee of the zoo. I have recently evolved the

ability to change the colour of my beard for a short period, an ability that will no doubt come in use when operating undercover, and I saw this as the perfect litmus test for it. I couldn't resist the opportunity to stroll past a man who would, under normal conditions, recognise my beard from a mile away and to pass unnoticed proved the test to be an unqualified success."

"Wait a minute," I said, as realisation began to dawn on me, "you were the keeper I bumped into in the corridor outside the main office. I knew there was something familiar about the fellow!"

"Once again you provide aid to me in my quest to conquer the secret powers held by my beard, albeit unknowingly this time."

"So anyway, enough about your infiltration, what relation to our case have these barbershop frequenting monkeys got?"

A hubbub was brewing outside of our office.

"You are about to have all your questions answered, McTashy, and perhaps a few more posed. I believe that is the sound of the Superintendent, Commissioner Varvatos and a third gentleman approaching."

"But surely you must escape quick!" I whispered, hurriedly. "Everyone has placed you as the number one suspect."

"I am well aware of that, McTashy, and yet I must remain. In fact, it was I that summoned them all here."

Before I could question Beard's motives, the door burst open and in marched Commissioner Varvatos, followed by the Superintendent and the promised 'third man' who was revealed to be Sir Joshua himself.

"There he is, arrest him at once!" shouted the Commissioner.

"Ah gentlemen," welcomed Beard, "you are just in time. I am just about to solve the mystery of the whereabouts of Sir Joshua Noble-Buttingford for McTashy here, and I would be most grateful if you were all to share in the revelations."

"This is surely madness, I am right here!" bellowed Sir Joshua. "Can he not see me?"

"Oh I can see you fine, sir, but we both know that you are not Sir Joshua."

Everyone in the room, myself included, let out a gasp. No one could quite believe the accusation that Beard had just uttered.

"Yes it is madness all right, please, Commissioner, take him away before he offends me any more."

"Don't worry, I have the means to prove my statement," said Beard, pulling out what appeared to be a tube of rolled paper. "Here is Exhibit A, a piece of promotional material from last year's run of King Lear at the Royal Court Theatre on Sloane Square."

Beard unrolled the tube of paper revealing it to be a poster, as he said, advertising a performance of the Bard's great tragedy, King Lear. My attention was drawn to the portrait of the star performer that dominated the page. It was certainly a picture of the beardless Sir Joshua, but the caption read 'Starring Stanley Remmington as the Mad King!' Another gasp was emitted by those present.

"That's just my stage name, I cannot act under my true identity as it would be frowned upon," gabbled the man I had previously thought to be Sir Joshua.

"Pish and tosh! That poster is from a year ago, we all know Sir Joshua still had his beard then," Beard jumped in. "Just admit it, you are really the actor Stanley Remmington."

The man broke down in tears, "It is true!"

"Now tell me where Sir Joshua is, I know he is in London."

I did not know from where Beard had obtained his knowledge of Sir Joshua's presence in our city, but I did not have the opportunity to question him as he was in full interrogation mode with

the man now revealed to be Stanley Remmington.

“He is staying in Apartment 19b at Appledore Towers in Hampstead,” sobbed Stanley, confirming Beard's theory.

“Can someone explain what the devil is going on,” pleaded the Superintendent.

“Of course, sir,” said Beard calmly, “this man is an imposter and if you would all like to follow me we shall go and find the real Sir Joshua and put an end to this mess.”

*- Chapter Five -
The Battle of the Beards*

The Superintendent, Commissioner Varvatos and myself followed Beard across town, like a flock of sheep to his shepherd. Our mission was shrouded in mystery as Beard refused to answer any of our questions, apart from our destination and who we expected to find there we were all clueless. The cab we were journeying in pulled up at an address on Downshire Hill, Hampstead. A large, red-brick house set back from the road, Appledore Towers had impressive wrought iron gates to separate its inhabitants from the great unwashed. It was deep into the evening by the time we arrived, the natural luminosity of the Sun failing fast, long overtaken by the artificial light of the street-lamps. We had the housekeeper let us through and into the main building whereupon we made our way up two flights of stairs to the 2nd floor and rooms 11-20. The apartments were of a decent size and quality, a perfect acquisition for a wealthy fellow, with a main residence in the countryside, who finds himself doing business in capital on regular occasions. We found 19b and started to discuss our method of entry into the room, trying not to alert anyone inside to our presence, but before we could agree on anything Beard took it upon himself to shoulder-barge the door down and clamber through the wreckage.

After a brief moment to digest what we had just witnessed we followed him through and were confronted by a shocking sight. A half-naked man had jumped out of bed, dressed only in his undergarments and as he turned to face us we could all see, as clear as day, that it was a fully-bearded Sir Joshua! He was with a companion, who remained in the bed and I recognised her immediately as the pretty, young redhead from the offices of London Zoo.

“Audrey!” I cried.

Beard turned to look at me, raising an eyebrow. “My, my, we are full of surprises today, aren't we McTashy.”

Sir Joshua used this brief lapse in Beard's attention to leap suddenly for the dressing table, where he pulled a revolver from the drawer. He raised it up in one hand, everybody ducking to avoid the inevitable bullet, but instead he fired at the window, smashing the glass and sending shards flying in all directions, jumping through himself afterwards. I presumed he had leapt to his death but Beard approached the window. “A fire-escape! Quick, McTashy, hurry downstairs and try and cut off his exit from the alleyway,” said Beard, clambering through the window in pursuit of the fleeing Sir Joshua.

I raced back out of the building, followed by my colleagues, and rushed around the corner into the dark alleyway to find Sir Joshua cornered by Beard, the pair illuminated by the light from one of the ground floor windows, and still in possession of his firearm. “Stay back,” he warned Beard, beginning to sound like a madman. “I'll fire, don't doubt it, I've nothing to lose now.”

“You still have your life,” responded Beard, in a calm and measured voice, “and should you attempt to assault me I cannot guarantee that you will remain alive for long.”

“You're threatening me! Ha!” laughed Sir Joshua, manically. “It is I who has the gun remember.”

“I am not threatening you, I am merely stating the facts,” said Beard, taking a step towards the trapped felon.

“I told you to stay back!” Sir Joshua warned again. “I mean it!”

Beard, disregarding the cautions, took another step towards Sir Joshua who, overpowered by his desperation, raised the gun and fired it point blank at the Inspector. Without being aware of it, a great cry of defiance was emitted from my lungs and I rushed over to my friend. As I approached,

rather than being toppled by the shot, Beard stood perfectly still and watched as Sir Joshua slumped to the floor.

“It appears my theory from this morning was correct after all, although perhaps in future I should consider your safety more when you are assisting my with my experiments,” said Beard, to me.

“The bulletproof beard!” I cried, overcome with relief. “The shot has rebounded straight back at him.”

The Superintendent and Commissioner came hurrying over, now the danger was gone.

“Don't worry gentlemen,” Beard announced to them, “he will be quite all right, it appears he took it in the shoulder.”

“I do not think I have ever been so confused by a case in my entire life,” said the Superintendent, shaking his head in disbelief. “It seems you are the only person in command of all of the facts, Beard, please shed some light on this business for me.”

“Very well, I will disclose to you the warped plan of Sir Joshua. As we have discussed before, Sir Joshua Noble-Buttingford was my chief rival over the past decade for the annual Beard of the Year award. Although it had become increasingly obvious over the last few weeks that he would finally best me at this year's edition, this proved to not be enough for him and so he hatched a plot that would see me disqualified, discredited and locked up, paving the way for a potential dominance of the award in the years to come. First he hired an actor that looked vaguely like himself to play his beardless double, you see an absolute likeness was not needed as Sir Joshua had been permanently adorned by a beard for so long that everyone had forgotten what he looked like without one. All he needed to do now was switch places in the night with the actor, our friend Stanley, using a ladder up against the bedroom window, and when he was found in bed the next day surrounded by shaved beard-hair everybody naturally believed he was the now beardless Sir Joshua, apart from the dog of course, who could smell that this man wasn't his master and barked furiously at him whenever he was given the opportunity.”

“But where did the shaved beard-hair come from if not from Sir Joshua or Stanley?” queried the Superintendent.

“Do not worry, I will be covering all the oddities surrounding this case. The beard-hair that you enquired about was provided by an animal kept at London Zoo, that was shaved by Sir Joshua on one of his many visits.”

“The *emperor bearded tamarin*!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, McTashy, the very same. If you observe an animal on display at the Zoo, that is presumed to be a *black-chinned emperor tamarin*, over the coming weeks you will no doubt be witness to the regrowth of its beard, possibly the finest that the animal kingdom has to offer. I could tell from my examination of the crime scene that the beard-hair was not from a man which caused me great alarm and I whisked McTashy away and back to London as fast as possible to continue our investigation.”

“One thing I don't understand is how you knew that the real Sir Joshua was in London, when no one else was even aware that there was a real and a fake one,” said Commissioner Varvatos.

“Quite simple, sir, we shared a train carriage on our journey back to London,” said Beard, matter-of-factly. “I am sure McTashy here will recall the gentleman in our compartment who was curled up asleep by the window? It seems that Sir Joshua, who had stayed locally after making the switch the previous night, could not resist the opportunity to try and ascertain what information we had gleaned from our inspection of his property so he positioned himself in the only empty compartment to try and eavesdrop on our conversation. I realised too late that we were being spied on and accidentally informed him that I was well on the way to uncovering his ruse. After we parted

ways on arrival at Kings Cross he must have headed straight into the lions den at Scotland Yard to hide his shaving kit in my locker, a move intended to speed up the process of making the suspicion fall on myself.”

At this point we were joined by a number of other Police Officers, probably summoned by members of the public hearing gunshots, who proceeded to take the unconscious Sir Joshua away for medical treatment under the direction of the Superintendent.

Commissioner Varvatos turned to face Beard and myself. “Well Inspector it seems as though I owe you an apology.”

“Not at all, sir,” replied Beard. “Sir Joshua spun an intricate web of lies and deceit and I had to be at my very sharpest to find my way through, fortunately for myself I have a beard capable of extraordinary feats, which proved to be the difference yet again.”

“Well I for one am pleased that you choose to use your bearded powers for good,” said Commissioner Varvatos, shaking Beard's hand. “Now I must go and pay a visit to my friends on the judging panel for the Beard of the Year awards, I think they will be most interested to hear about today's events.”

As the other officers now had the situation under control, Beard and myself returned to the office to file our paperwork before retiring home for what remained of the evening.

“Say, Beard,” I proposed, as we each sat behind our desks, “we have had some rather amazing exploits of late, do you think that one day someone might unearth our incident reports and decide to dramatise them, perhaps publish them as a series of adventure stories?”

“Perhaps, McTashy, perhaps,” mused Beard, stroking his beard. “It would have to be someone obsessed by bearded matters as much as we are and I'm not sure that someone so fanatical will come along for a while yet. I agree, though, that our recent cases have been filled with lashings of intrigue and excitement, although for some reason I have the strange feeling that the most exhilarating ones are just around the corner...”