

SAXBY SMART

PRIVATE DETECTIVE



THE CURSE OF THE ANCIENT MASK
and other case files

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CASE FILE ONE:

THE CURSE OF THE
ANCIENT MASK

CHAPTER ONE

MY NAME IS SAXBY SMART, and I'm a private detective. I go to St Egbert's School, my office is in the garden shed, and these are my case files. Unlike some detectives, I don't have a sidekick, so that part I'm leaving up to you – pay attention, I'll ask questions.

My full name is Saxby Doyle Christie Chandler Ellin Allan Smart. Yes, believe it or not, I'm named after all my dad's favourite crime writers. The Allan is from Edgar Allan Poe. I mean, even my dad wouldn't call his kid Poe Smart! Mind you, he called me Saxby Smart . . . (Saxby isn't a crime writer, by the way, Saxby is apparently a ye olde English name, originally pillaged from the Vikings.)

Dad is a great fan of crime fiction, and ever since I could read I've worked my way through his library of great detective stories. He has an impressive collection. It was all

those stories that made me want to be a detective in the first place. I loved them just as much as he does. Which, I guess, is another reason I'm beginning my case files here: to show you that I can be just as good a sleuth as Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple.

You might think my dad was a detective himself, but actually he's a bus driver. Not that there's anything wrong with being a bus driver. In fact, he loves being a bus driver. And I love him being a bus driver, because it means all the local bus drivers know me, and that's very useful when you're a schoolboy detective trying to get around town following clues.

What I mean is that he only *reads* detective stories. I live them.

My mum? She programs computer games for a living. She works from home and spends all day in her office, which is the cupboard under the stairs. And that's all there is to say, really.

I only mention my parents at all to let you know that I've got some. They play no part in any of my great cases, and won't be appearing much in these pages.

This is the story of my first really interesting case. Up to that point, I'd dealt with quite easy stuff: *The Adventure of the Misplaced Action Figure*, or *The Case of the Eaten Biscuits* are examples from my files which come to mind. But *The Curse of the Ancient Mask* was something altogether more

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puzzling. What made it interesting was that I wrapped up the whole case using only a plastic bucket full of water.

It started one very hot Saturday, and I was in my Crime Headquarters. I call it my Crime HQ, but really it's a shed. In the garden of my house. It's a small garden, and a small shed, and I have to share this shed with the lawnmower and assorted other gardening-type things. I have an old desk in there, and a cabinet full of case notes and papers. Most importantly of all, I have my Thinking Chair. It's a battered old leather armchair, which used to be red but which has worn into a sort of off-brown. I sit in it, and I put my feet up on the desk, and I gaze out of the shed's perspex window at the sky, and I think. Every detective should have a Thinking Chair. I'm sure Philip Marlowe would have had things tied up in the space of a short story if only he'd had a Thinking Chair.

Anyway, on that particular very hot Saturday, I was rearranging some of my notes when there was a knock at the shed door. The painted wooden notice on the door, the one which says *Saxby Smart – Private Detective: KEEP OUT*, fell off with a clatter. I keep nailing it up, but I'm no good at that sort of thing, so it keeps falling off again.

The door was opened by a girl from my class at school, Jasmine Winchester. She was red and flustered from a long walk, and she wafted herself cool with her hands while she knocked some of the grassy mud off her shoes.

'Hi, Saxby. Sorry, this dropped off your door,' she said,

picking up the notice.

Jasmine is a very tall girl, the sort who overtakes everyone else in height at about the age of three and never lets the rest of us catch up. I'm pretty average-looking myself – average height, average fair hair, average spectacles – but Jasmine is one of those people you can always pick out of a crowd. Mostly because she's poking up out of the top of it.

'I know walking along by the riverbank looks like a shortcut,' I said, 'but it's quicker to get here if you stick to the path across the park.'

She stopped wafting and stared at me. 'How on earth did you know I'd walked along by the river?'

She looked impressed when I told her. It was a simple deduction: there was grassy mud on her shoes, she'd obviously walked some distance – because she was hot – and on a hot day, you'd only pick up mud where the ground was still damp.

'How can I help you?' I asked. I offered her my chair, and I perched on the desk (I told you there's not enough room in that shed . . .).

'Well,' she said, taking a deep breath, 'I can see why everyone at school says you're a good detective . . .'

'True.'

' . . . so I need your help to solve a mystery. My dad is cursed.'

CHAPTER TWO

'MY DAD IS AN ENGINEER at Microspek Electronics,' she began. 'He's worked there for years. He's head of their laboratory, and he helps develop new ideas. He's normally a pretty laid back, easy-going, jokey sort of dad. But recently he's become very nervous.'

'Nervous?' I said. 'What of?'

'I know this sounds silly, but he thinks he's under some sort of bad luck curse, put on him by this antique mask he bought on a business trip a few months ago.'

'You're right, it does sound silly.'

'Yeah. But he's convinced. Ever since this mask came into the house, things have been going wrong for him at work. He's been getting into trouble with his boss.'

'Why?'

'His new ideas keep being stolen. Something must be

going on at his lab. He'd worked out a brilliant way of running MP3 players from your TV remote, and then a rival company, PosiSpark Inc, suddenly came up with the same thing. He'd also made a toaster which never burns bread, even if you forget it's on, and PosiSpark got hold of that idea too!

'So there must be a spy for PosiSpark working undercover at the Microspek lab.'

'That's exactly what my dad's boss thinks. He reckons that the spy is my dad!'

'And he's not? Sorry, I have to ask,' I told her.

'No,' said Jasmine. 'Definitely not. Dad's horrified at what's going on. And so is everyone at the lab. Every last one of them has volunteered to have lie detector tests, their emails and phone records checked, even their dustbins searched! Dad's assistants are loyal to him. There's no sign whatsoever of a spy. Dad's boss still thinks Dad is the only one who could be passing such complete information to PosiSpark, and he's just waiting to find some proof! Then Dad will be fired!'

'Hmm. No wonder your dad's feeling jumpy,' I said. I would have sat back in my Thinking Chair at this point, but Jasmine was sitting on it. So I sat back on the desk and looked thoughtful instead. 'This mask. Where did he get it?'

'In Tokyo. It's an old Japanese samurai mask. He found it in a little antique shop while he was on a business trip. He buys stuff like that whenever he travels. He's not an antiques

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expert or anything, he just likes collecting souvenirs. The man in the shop told him there was a curse on it, but of course he thought that was nonsense. At the time. In fact, he found it amusing and pretended to scare us all!

‘But if your dad now thinks the curse is real, why doesn’t he just get rid of it?’

‘Ah!’ said Jasmine, holding up a finger like an exclamation mark. ‘That’s the sneaky bit. There’s Japanese writing on the back of the mask. The man in the shop translated it for him. It says that the curse remains even if you throw the mask away! The only way to lift it off yourself is to give it to another person.’

‘And since your dad believes in the curse,’ I said, ‘he doesn’t want to pass it on.’

‘Exactly. He says he couldn’t deliberately give someone an ancient curse!’

A possibility was coming to mind. The mask turns up, information begins to leak from the lab, PosiSpark snatch all the new ideas . . .

‘Where exactly is the mask kept?’ I asked. ‘At his lab?’

‘You’re thinking of bugs, right?’ said Jasmine. ‘Secret agent-type cameras and such?’

‘The possibility came to mind.’

‘The mask is at home, in Dad’s study. He works from home sometimes. The mask is nowhere near the laboratory. In any case, the lab’s been scanned for bugs, listening

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devices, hidden cameras, you name it. There's nothing. Dad's examined the mask, and searched every inch of our whole house. He's come up with precisely zero. He's convinced it's the curse.'

'Well, it's a strange sort of curse that brings such specific bad luck,' I said. 'Must be a very intelligent and technologically-minded curse.'

'The thing is,' said Jasmine, 'there is a leak of information. My dad will get fired. Him buying that mask could just be a complete coincidence, but one way or the other, this needs to be sorted out.'

'And it will be,' I said. 'Saxby Smart is on the case!'

A Page From My Notebook

Fact: PosiSpark are getting hold of Jasmine's dad's ideas.

Fact: His laboratory is not bugged and his assistants have been completely checked.

Fact: He bought the mask in Tokyo, and now it's sitting in his study. His bad luck began when he bought the mask.

Question: How are PosiSpark getting the info?

Question: Is someone lying? Is someone covering something up? Or is everyone exactly as they appear to be?

Question: Is Jasmine right? Is the mask's arrival just a coincidence? After all, her dad simply picked it up in an antique shop. What link to his laboratory could there possibly be? Unless . . . it really IS cursed . . .

CHAPTER THREE

I HAD TO ADMIT, I wasn't feeling as confident as I sounded. Here was a genuine, serious mystery and, at first sight, a pretty baffling one. I had absolutely no firm clues, ideas or theories!

My first move might have been to check out the lab. But I decided it wasn't necessary. If all those security measures hadn't found the leak, then logically the leak was probably coming from somewhere else. Besides, I somehow doubted they'd let kids into that lab!

So I went to Jasmine's house. Or rather, I got Jasmine to invite me to her house after school. Every day.

Naturally, Jasmine's parents had no idea that Saxby Smart, schoolboy detective, was on the case. They assumed Jasmine had got a new best friend. Or else that I just kept following her home and had nowhere else to go after half past three in the afternoon.

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As I mentioned, Jasmine was very tall, and the Winchesters, when they were all together, were like a small herd of giraffes. Jasmine's mum was exactly like Jasmine, but even taller. Her dad was so long and thin he was like one of those distorting mirrors come to life.

Their house was quite posh. My house has a flat roof and is shaped like a shoe box sat on one end. The Winchesters' house is all chimney stacks, and old-fashioned windows and interesting little bits of architecture.

'Nice to meet you, Saxby,' said Mrs Winchester. 'Excuse me, I'm just finishing something in the garden.' She lolloped away down the hall on those giraffey legs of hers. I thought she'd be in the garden pruning roses or something, but then loud clanks, bangs and sawing noises suddenly started up outside.

'She's working on a motorbike,' explained Jasmine.

'Oh!' I said. 'I wondered why she was covered in oil.'

'Yup. It's not violent gardening, it's bike maintenance,' said Jasmine, smiling. 'All the local bikers come to her to get their machines fixed. She can strip the engine of a Jujitsu T60 in twenty minutes.'

'Very impressive,' I agreed quietly, nodding wisely.

Jasmine showed me around the house. Nothing in particular caught my eye, clue-wise, but because Jasmine had said that her dad worked from home sometimes, a couple of questions occurred to me.

'You haven't had a break-in or anything recently?' I asked.

'No,' said Jasmine. 'Mum put a high-tech alarm system in a couple of years ago.'

'And have there been any workmen visiting? No, I guess your mum does all that too?'

'Right.'

Another possibility had occurred to me, but Jasmine's answers had ruled it out. It had crossed my mind that someone from PosiSpark had managed to sneak into the house, but that now seemed unlikely.

The last stop on the tour was Mr Winchester's study. I stepped in carefully, making sure I didn't disturb so much as a paper clip. It was a small room, with stripy wallpaper and a plain, brownish carpet. It contained:

- One large bookcase, overflowing with books.
 - One set of shelves, displaying Mr Winchester's collection of knick-knacks from around the world (more on these in a minute!).
 - One small desk, with drawers.
 - One small table, holding: one coffee maker, one set of five mugs, one stack of filter papers resting on top of the coffee maker.
 - One comfy office chair, behind the desk.
 - Four more chairs, stacked.
- Something bothered me.

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'Does your dad drink a lot of coffee?' I asked.

'I don't think so,' said Jasmine, puzzled. 'Why?'

'And when he works from home, he works alone?'

'Well, yes, that's why he's got this study,' said Jasmine.

'Nobody ever comes in here, apart from him, of course.'

Suddenly, looking at the contents of the room, I made a very important discovery. From the items in the study, I could tell that Jasmine was wrong.

There was evidence here that Mr Winchester used this room as more than a private study. Not all the time, but now and again. Can you work out what he used it for?



Mr Winchester held meetings in this study. There's a coffee maker (odd in a study, for someone who doesn't drink it much), a set of mugs and extra chairs. Why would he keep these things in there unless they were used? Not used every day, because he probably wouldn't have left papers stacked on top of the coffee maker if it was used all the time, would he? And the chairs wouldn't be stacked, either.

'Your dad holds meetings in here,' I said. 'People come here regularly.'

'I never knew that,' said Jasmine. 'When does this happen?'

'During the school day, I presume,' I said. 'This makes a big difference. This establishes a link between people outside this house, and *that!*'

I pointed to the shelves above the desk. The antique mask sat among Mr Winchester's collection of items gathered on his travels.

There was a little model of the Eiffel Tower, a snow globe from New York, and a small brass plate with a curly pattern stamped into it. ('Indian?' I asked. 'Yes,' said Jasmine, 'he got it in Delhi.')

The mask was propped between a carved figurine of an Ancient Egyptian god and an old china dolphin holding up a little sign which said *Souvenir of Bournemouth*.

Jasmine took the mask down from the shelf, and we took it into the living room to get a better look at it. She was

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allowed to handle the collection, she explained, as long as she was careful.

The mask was rather beautiful. I turned it over in my hands – it was very heavy. It was carved from a single piece of wood, with holes for the eyes and a kind of grille effect over the mouth. The front was painted to give it a fierce-looking face, and painted on to the back, in red, were several vertical lines of oriental writing.

‘That’s the inscription that sets out the curse,’ said Jasmine. ‘I expect a brilliant detective like you can read exactly what it says.’

I blushed. ‘Umm . . . actually, no. Not a word. But I know someone who’ll be able to translate it.’

I plucked my phone from my pocket, took a few pictures of the mask – front, back, side view and so on – and sent them to my friend Izzy.

‘Aarrghhhhh!’

That was the wailing sound made by Jasmine’s dad, when he walked into the living room and spotted the mask. His face went almost the same shade of grey as the smart suit he was wearing, and his tie seemed to wriggle about with shock. He picked the mask up with the very edges of the fingernails of his thumbs and forefingers, and held it out at arm’s length as if it was a bomb.

‘Let’s put it back, shall we?’ he said, shuddering. ‘We don’t want to upset it!’

'Oh, Daaaad!' cried Jasmine.

Mr Winchester wasn't listening. He was busy dabbing the sweat off his forehead with the end of his tie. 'The curse is bad enough as it is. We mustn't do anything to make it worse!'

'Mr Winchester?' I said politely. He paused in the doorway, in mid-step.

'Yes?' he said quietly, as if a raised voice might make the mask explode.

'How often do you hold meetings in your study?'

'Oh, about once a month,' whispered Jasmine's dad. He turned to tiptoe away, then suddenly stopped and looked at me. 'How do you know about my meetings?'

I felt like saying 'I know eeeverything', all boggle-eyed, and waving my arms about spookily. But it would only have frightened him.

'I would guess you hold these meetings with a few people from your laboratory? From Microspek Electronics?' I asked.

'Yes,' said Mr Winchester. 'But that's a secret! I mean, what we talk about is a secret. It's not a secret that we have meetings. Excuse me, I've got a lot on my mind at the moment.'

He hurried away to put the mask back in its place.

'Does all of this tell you anything else?' said Jasmine. 'Apart from the fact that my dad's normal intelligence

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seems to have been drained away since this curse business started.'

'It's too early to say,' I admitted.

Over the next few afternoons, I made careful notes about whatever I saw at the Winchesters' house. A lot of it turned out to be irrelevant to the case, so I won't write it all down here. But I filled several pages with information about Mr Winchester's movements between the hours of teatime and seven p.m., about Mrs Winchester's motorcycle repair activities, and about the workings of the Jujitsu T60 she was fixing that week.

I lurked in a few too many dark corners, I'm afraid. More than once, I made Mr Winchester jump out of his skin and scream when he caught sight of me lurking. But once I'd explained, using my pre-prepared cover story ('Jasmine and I are playing Hide and Seek, and I'm hiding'), and once he'd calmed down, he was OK about it.

Soon, I'd got as much information as I could from Jasmine's house. It was time to investigate further!