

A Case for Mr Mao

by Huskyteer

Paddy dashed through the streets of London's Siamtown, the tails of his jacket flying out behind him. His flame-red fur stood out among the wheaten coats and seal points of the Siamese, and they turned to watch him as he passed.

His flight was interrupted by an ample belly in a blue waistcoat. Paddy had run full tilt into it, and the impact sent him backwards onto his tailbone. Rubbing his pink nose where a brass button had met it, Paddy scrambled to his feet, only to find his collar firmly grasped by the waistcoat-wearer.

"What's all this, then? Pinched something, have we? What's your name, nipper?"

The stout mackerel tabby wore the uniform of the new police officers, the peelers (so nicknamed because of their propensity to unsheathe their claws at the slightest provocation). Paddy drew himself up with dignity, and addressed himself exclusively to the lattermost of the interrogatory tricolon.

"Patrick Pawze, Esquire, at your service," he boasted. "Special assistant to the celebrated Siamese detective and philosopher, Mr Mao! And I'm in a hurry," he added. "I've got an important message."

"Special assistant? A little shrimp like you? Get away!"

Taking the officer at his word, Paddy wriggled himself through half a turn, slipping his arms from his jacket sleeves, and pelted off bare-chested into the maze of streets, past kittens playing and mothers hanging out their washing. At last he burst

through the door of Mr Mao's antique shop, springing up to park his hindquarters on the countertop.

"The hasty cheetah leaves his spots behind, Paddy-si," said the Siamese behind the counter. "Write that one down."

Paddy obediently made a note in the book he kept for the great detective's aphorisms. As he did so, he studied the face of his friend and mentor. The sharp, angular muzzle, so different from his own snub-nosed mug, the almond-shaped eyes coloured like a piece of blue glass Paddy had once found, and the large triangles of his ears, gave the older cat an air of infinite wisdom and curiosity.

As soon as he had finished scribbling, Paddy launched into his tale. Mr Mao removed his gold-rimmed spectacles and polished them on his tail as he listened.

"I was ratting down at the docks and I overheard two of the navvies talking," Paddy said. "One of them said it smelled fishy to him, and the other said it looked like a case for Mr Mao. Definitely a case for Mr Mao, says the first one, so I come out to reassure them that help was at paw, like you always say to do, and they threw an orange at me. Not a nice juicy one, neither - hardly a suck on it. And I ran straight here to tell you."

"I see. And your jacket?"

"I bumped into a peeler and he grabbed me and I ran away," Paddy confessed.

"One should not get on the wrong side of the law, Paddy-si."

Paddy nodded seriously. "He only caught me because I got on his tummy side. I'd have got away if I'd bumped into his..."

“That will do, Patrick-si. Let us find you another jacket, and then we shall look into this case of yours.”

When they set out for the docks, Paddy was wearing a coat in green silk a shade paler than his eyes, with buttons of a substance Mr Mao said was jade. The sleeves were too long and it smelled musty from long storage in the attic of the antique shop, but he strutted proudly in it with his tail sticking up. Mr Mao made long strides beside him, clad in the red velvet cloak he always chose when conducting an investigation. The gold ring on his tail, held secure by that appendage’s natural bend or kink, glittered.

“Do you think it’s murder?” Paddy asked as they walked. His fur stood on end with a delicious thrill. “In my picture paper this week there was a story where a champion ratter was poisoned in the middle of a contest and nobody knew how. It turned out the killer had swopped in a venomous shrew from Cuba!”

“Let us wait and see, Paddy. Detective work is founded not on conjectures, but on deductions. Write that one down.”

Paddy led his chief to the wharf where he had overheard the two navvies. They were still there: two black cats, one with a streak of white down his muzzle and throat, currently deep in conversation with a peeler. Recognising the tabby obstruction from earlier, Paddy shrank back behind Mr Mao’s cloak.

“I’ll send my best men out to comb the streets,” the peeler was saying. “I had a lead earlier, and I let it slip through my fingers, blast it!”

Paddy’s mentor stepped boldly forward.

“Mr Mao at your service,” he said, with a bow. “I understand you have a case for me?”

“Blimey, that was fast!” exclaimed the navvy with the touch of white.

“I have my sources.”

“We’ve got a case for you all right. The officer and I were just discussing how to find you - the label got wet and the address has run. Here.” He heaved a wooden box up in his brawny arms, and set it down at the detective’s feet.

Mr Mao gave a slow, satisfied nod.

“It is indeed a case for me. A case of dried sprats, if my nose does not deceive, from my honoured auntie back in Phuket. I have been expecting its arrival.” He prised off the lid and drew out a spicy-smelling package. “Won’t you join me in a snack?”

Paddy helped himself. “I still wish it was murder by shrew, sir,” he said, with his mouth full.

Mr Mao shook his head. “Such youthful hotheadedness! When you attain my age, Paddy-si, you will realise that a Phuket sprat is better than a shrew-fed cat.”

“Shall I write that one down, sir?”

“Better not, Paddy-si. Better not.”