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The 4

Sherlocks

The Case of the
Smiling Skull



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Els

4

Sherlocks

Jesús Cortés

Illustrations by Oriol Malet

The Case of the Smiling Skull

Translated by Andrew McDougall



Gomo

Wen



Fran

Mati



These are the four Sherlocks


Four inseparable friends who share a love for detective stories. They are no strangers to the art of deduction thanks to the teachings of their inspiration, the incomparable Sherlock Holmes. Crimes, enigmas and inexplicable mysteries are living on borrowed time when Fran, Gomo, Mati and Wen get to work.

FRAN. He's shrewd and thinks carefully. He is considered the calmest member of the group, although he can get worked up when he thinks it's necessary. Like the others, he is an expert in the art of hunting hidden clues. However, he is aware of his limitations. He has more skill when it comes to reasoning than running.

That's why I'll never be an athlete.

MATI. She's the most determined and cannot stand unfairness. Like Fran, she knows she'll never be an athlete, but she likes sports and always takes any chance she can to do some exercise.

But just for fun.



GOMO. He's the biggest of the group and sometimes doesn't know his own strength. When he gets bored, he picks his nose. Fran says he's looking for green diamonds in his nasal mines. However, when there's a case on the go, Gomo never gets bored.

Just try me.

WEN. She has the vision of a lynx and clues tremble when her eyes pass over them. She loves playing and considers Mati her twin sister. Her brain works like clockwork.

If you come with us, we'll have fun.

An illustration featuring a large black number '1' on the left. To its right is a red running track with white lane markings. Three stylized human figures in blue, green, and orange are running on the track. Below the track is a black banner with the text 'Voluntary trial' in white. The background has some green and blue brushstrokes.

1 Voluntary trial

It was Monday and at Ausiàs March school our week began with bad news. Ferran, the PE teacher, had a surprise in store for us, one that we didn't know if we'd make it out alive from.

The surprise was quite the challenge.

'Voluntary trial!' announced Ferran in the gym at the end of the class. 'Next Monday we'll go to the sports centre. Anyone who wants to do the trial will have a chance to raise their grade. The trial will be athletics: a one-hundred metre sprint. Every individual will get their own score.'

He held up the stopwatch so we could all see before continuing.

'The following Monday, we'll do it again. Anyone



who beats their score by two seconds will get a boost to their exam mark. You can train all week.'

Most of our classmates whooped enthusiastically as if they had just won a hover scooter. I almost cried out as well, but because I suddenly found myself crushed.





Voluntary trial



Everyone started to talk about it straight away.

‘Two seconds,’ murmured Wen shaking her head. ‘That’s not much.’

‘It’s not much?’ I exclaimed, horrified. ‘Two seconds is an eternity! It’s crazy.’

‘But Fran, we’ll have a week to improve our first time,’ said Mati while Gomo picked his nose in search of green meatballs. Gomo and his gummy bears, as Mati and Wen say now. (Luckily Gomo doesn’t eat them.)

Gomo, Mati and Wen are my best friends. In Sant Telm, our town, we are known for our love of the Sherlock Holmes detective stories. That’s why they call us *The Sherlocks*. We have even solved some cases using the deductive methods of our favourite investigator.

Gomo and I looked at each other. As far as the athletics trial is concerned, our minds were made up. So were Mati and Wen’s. But they were smiling. We, on the other hand...

‘What’s wrong?’ Wen asked us. ‘You don’t want to do it, do you?’

Yup, that’s it.





‘But the trial is voluntary. You two can do it,’ suggested Gomo.

Mati and Wen looked at each other, pretending to be disappointed.

‘Scaredy cats,’ they said.

Gomo looked at me. To be honest, we couldn’t imagine them training on the track and us just watching like a couple of fools. I’m sure even Watson would have a go at the trial. Watson is our pug. The first dog in history with four owners. This week it’s Gomo’s turn to have him.

‘Alright, we’ll do it. We’re not scaredy cats,’ I said.

‘It’s not such a big deal,’ Gomo conceded. ‘The worst that can happen is we don’t beat our first score by two seconds.’

Then, boom! I had an idea:

‘Although...I’m thinking that if we just jog in the first trial and then sprint in the second one, we’d almost definitely get those two seconds.’

‘That sounds like cheating,’ said Mati.

Gomo gives me a nudge with his elbow to remind me that cheating isn’t the way we do things.





Voluntary trial

To sum up, Gomo and I were going to take part in a voluntary trial that we didn't want to do. Although it's not that surprising. We were used to doing things we didn't want to. Luckily there were other things we did like doing. You win some, lose some. One thing we liked was meeting up in the library after school. The Monday that Ferran chose to announce the voluntary trial we were there as usual.

However, that Monday turned out to be different to the others because, without even imagining it, our time in the library was to be changed by one of the other things we liked doing. Exactly: solving a case, a case which walked calmly through the library door and had the misfortune of approaching us, the Sherlocks. The sucker who brought it our way would surely, if they knew who we were, not have approached us. But they did. And they put their foot in it.

2 An unexpected case

We always spend ages in the library, reading stories or finishing work if we didn't have time in class. Carlota, the librarian, never says anything to us. Nor do we give her a reason to.

We had finished our homework and, as we always did before going home, we were reading some Sherlock Holmes stories we had on the go. But that Monday, we had just started when a carefree voice called out to us.



‘Hey, buddies, I’m looking for a book. Can you help me find it?’

Buddies? What was this guy playing at? He spoke with an air of excessive confidence, as if he’d known us our whole lives. He was as thin as the skin of an onion. His hair was greasy. He had a friendly smile. But he was faking it. Mati would have said it was a super fake smile from an untrustworthy chancer. He was wearing old jeans, a creased jacket and a yellow t-shirt with a worn neckline. The shoes he wore were as well-used as the rest. In one ear he had an earring, like a pirate. With a scarf on his head and a patch over one eye, he’d have only needed a parrot on his shoulder to look more like a pirate. In other words, he didn’t look great.

‘What book?’ Gomo asked him.

‘*The...*’ the guy hesitated.

From a pocket he took out a rumpled



piece of paper. Straight away we noticed what was on one side of it. It was a drawing. A drawing of a smiling skull. All skulls with the mouth closed clearly look like they're smiling.

Piece of paper with the face of a skull

'*The Black Cor... Corsair* by Emilio Sangari,' replied the stranger after reading what was written on the other side of the paper.

What a coincidence! A book about pirates!

The aisle of children's literature was to our left. Gomo pointed it out.

'It's over there. And it's *Salgari*,' he said.

'Salgari?' repeated Morgan, looking at the piece of paper. 'It must be written wrong. Huh!'

In pirate films there is almost always someone called Morgan. This arrogant fellow with the earring reminds me of them, so I decided to give him that name.

Morgan didn't even say thanks. With his hands behind his back he began to look amongst the shelves searching for the letter S. When he found it (it took him an age), he froze like a statue. All the calmness

he had displayed before suddenly vanished. He began to look. He found *The Black Corsair*. Nervously, he began to flick through it in a hurry. One page, then another, and another. He looked at them from top to bottom, as if inspecting them. And with every one he passed he looked more agitated. But he kept examining pages without stopping.

Morgan frantically leafing through a book

‘Either Morgan is an expert at speed reading or he’s looking for something he can’t find,’ I whispered.

‘Why are you calling him Morgan?’ Wen asked me.

I had to explain it to her; the whole thing about films and pirates’ names.

Morgan took more books from the shelf. He leafed through all of them. He was angry. Clearly he was looking for something and not finding it. Nevertheless, he repeated the operation with *The Black Corsair*, perhaps to double check that what he was looking for wasn’t there. Then, muttering, he left the books out of order and stormed off, fuming.

When he went out the door, we hurried into the aisle and took a look at the books he’d moved around.

All of them were by Salgari. *The Corsairs of the Bermudas*, *The Lion of Damascus*, *Sandokan* and, of course, *The Black Corsair*, the newest of all of them. The reference label on its spine was still shiny. On the others it looked jaded.



Gomo picked it up. He took a look at it. Nothing stood out to him.

‘Well, Morgan certainly seemed to be looking for something in here,’ he said.

‘Something that isn’t there anymore...or that never was,’ suggested Mati. ‘But what could it be about?’

Meh! We didn't think any more of it. It wasn't any of our business. We liked mysteries, but we didn't see any there. Maybe Morgan had lost a scrap of paper inside the book. But we all lose things.

We put the books back on the shelf in the right order and went back to our reading.

And the next day we went back to school. And the library. And our reading. And we had just started our stories, just like twenty-four hours previously, when another voice caught our attention and set off all our alarm bells.

'Hey, guys, I'm looking for a book, *The Black Corsair* by Emilio Salgari. Do you know where I can find it?'

We were stunned. Before us stood a tall, thin man. He dressed better than Morgan. But he didn't smile like Morgan. In fact, he didn't smile at all. He didn't seem the least bit bothered about pretending. His head looked like a snooker ball and he looked at us with raised eyebrows. He took a sweet from his pocket, let and the wrapper fall to the floor and popped it into his mouth.



Gomo stretched out his arm.

‘In that aisle there,’ he said.

The man went to the aisle. He looked for the book. He found it. He leafed through it calmly. He spent a good while turning pages. When he finished, he threw it back onto the shelf. From a pocket he took out a scrap of paper. To us it looked like the same one we had seen in Morgan’s hands, the one with the drawing of a skull. After looking at the piece of paper for a few moments, he turned around and headed for the exit. On the way he chucked the paper into the recycling.

We exchanged glances. There was no need for us to say anything. We closed our books.

‘I’ve got it,’ said Gomo, putting our books back on the shelf.

Mati, Wen and I threw our rucksacks onto our backs and set off after the stranger. From the steps to the street we saw him standing next to a coffee van which was parked nearby. He was talking on the phone. We stopped on the steps. Gomo arrived moments later.

‘He’s over there, talking on the phone,’ Wen told him.

‘And there’s no one in his car. He’s on his own,’ I added.

How puzzling! Two strangers asking for the same book in the library, and looking for something they didn’t find, surely the same thing.

‘Hey, Sherlockies! How’s it going?’ it was the Fleas, the official pranksters of Sant Telm. They crossed over from the other side of the street. Only they called us the *Sherlockies*. The Fleas were five harmless rascals who could often be found racing supermarket trollies or hiding in cardboard boxes with holes in them, just to stick out their arms and scare people. Although it may seem hard to comprehend, in one of our cases we needed their help. And they helped us. We had a debt with them.

‘What are you looking at?’ asked one of them who found everything *cool*. ‘Oh, the bald dude, cool.’

I don’t know why, but whenever I saw the Fleas I always felt like combing my hair.

‘What a sick car,’ said another.

The bald guy took another sweet from his pocket.

‘Seems like he really likes those sweets,’ muttered Gomo.

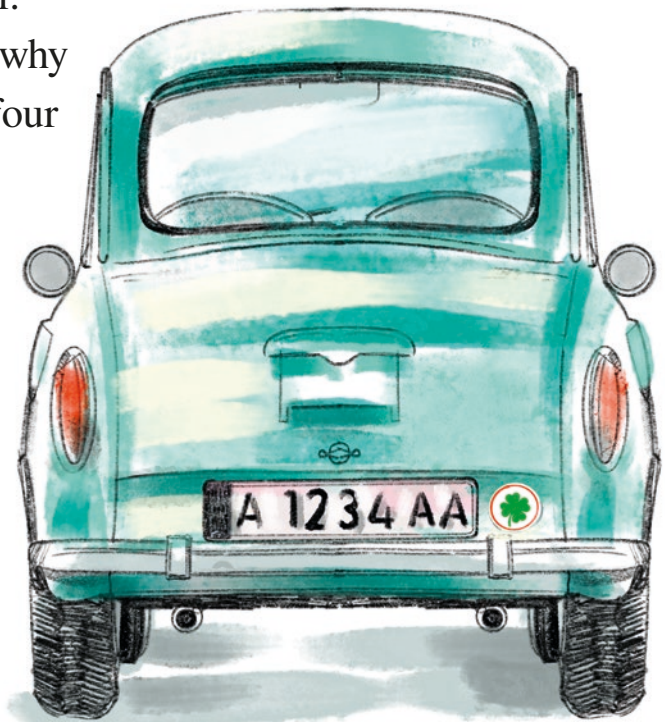
‘His car is cool, latest model too,’ said the cool Flea. ‘But that sticker on it is lame. A flower? So embarrassing.’

Next to the rear license plate, we could see a four-leaf clover.

‘That’s not a flower, the sticker is a four-leaf clover,’ said Mati.

‘Four? And why does it have four leaves?’ asked the cool Flea.

‘Well, because it does,’ replied Mati.



‘They say clovers with four leaves bring good luck.’

‘Then I say it has five. Wanna bet?’

Mati let out a laugh.

‘I don’t bet, Fleabag,’ she replied.

‘Then five it is,’ the cool Flea insisted.

‘Well, I see four as well,’ said another of them.

‘I’ll bet whatever you want. Some Boomers?’

‘The bubble gum? Sure!’

‘Then let’s go check!’

‘Okay let’s go.’

Too late. The bald guy had got into his car. The engine started. He was already on his way.

‘Hurry up!’



The Fleas ran off. In a few seconds they were out of sight. The car had disappeared. So had the Fleas. It wasn't hard to imagine that Morgan and the bald guy were up to something which had caused their visit to the library.

Wen broke the silence.

'The one who came today threw the scrap of paper into the recycling. Maybe we can find something out.'

Without a word, Gomo took the piece of paper from his pocket. He had already fetched it from the recycling bin.

'Nice one, Gomo!' exclaimed Mati.

Gomo unfolded it. It was a handwritten note. On one side could be read: *sant telm library the black corsair emilio sangari cemetery*

'It's badly written, no capital letters,' commented Wen.

'Whoever wrote it might not even know what that means,' I said.

'That's why Morgan was asking for *Sangari*,' deduced Mati.

On the other side there was the face of the smiling skull which we had already seen, a skull with perfect teeth that looked at us from the sockets of its hollow eyes.

‘Can anyone make any sense of it?’ asked Gomo.

‘Maybe tomorrow someone else will come asking for *The Black Corsair* as well and give us another clue,’ said Mati.

It was a possibility. So, the next day we went back to the library and waited impatiently for someone else to come along interested in Salgari’s Corsair book. However, I can tell you now that our hopes gradually evaporated. No one turned up at the library asking about Salgari. And neither had one done so in the morning. We asked Carlota. So, we had nothing.

‘But the case seems curious,’ said Wen. ‘Shall we investigate it?’

‘By ourselves?’ asked Gomo. ‘It doesn’t seem like the other cases we’ve solved.’

‘That’s true. Besides, no one has asked for our help or anything,’ I added.

Mati raised a finger to her chin.



‘And where would we start? We barely have any clues.’

‘We’ll look for more,’ replied Wen. ‘Maybe the Fleas could give us one. They did run after the bald man’s car.’

We looked at each other. The case had fallen into our laps. It was an unexpected one. And we didn’t have much to go on. Or did we? We had the smiling skull. Really, it all started with that.



Els **4** Sherlock's

Jesús Cortés Illustrations by Oriol Malet

The Case of the Smiling Skull

The 4 Sherlock's, Fran, Gomo, Mati and Wen, never miss a chance to solve a mystery or play some sport to stay fit. In their latest case, a library book and a drawing of a skull are the first clues of a new investigation. Meanwhile, accompanied by Watson, they strive to overcome an athletics challenge.

Do you want to be a young Sherlock too?

Jesús Cortés (Torrent, 1962) is a writer, mainly of children's literature, and has adapted numerous classics of world literature for younger readers, such as *The Odyssey* and *Dracula*. He has been awarded various prizes.



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