

The Owl of St. Bartholomew's Tower

Sherlock Holmes: The Animal Cases. Volume 2

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Foreword

There are certain cases in the career of Sherlock Holmes that are remembered for their crimes, their villains, or the dangers they presented. Others are remembered for entirely different reasons.

The four adventures collected in this volume belong to that second category.

Although each mystery contains its own puzzle, none begins with a murder, a stolen fortune, or a threat to the security of the Empire. Instead, they begin with something far more ordinary: a raven, a pigeon, a canary, and a group of frightened horses.

Yet readers familiar with Holmes will know that no mystery is ever truly ordinary. Beneath these seemingly simple events lie hidden motives, forgotten histories, human misunderstandings, and the curious ways in which people and animals influence one another.

These stories come from a quieter period in Holmes's career. They are tales in which observation often proves more valuable than confrontation, where patience matters more than pursuit, and where the solution frequently lies not in the darker corners of human nature but in the subtle connections between instinct and intention.

Animals occupied a curious place in the Victorian world. They lived beside people in city streets and country villages alike. They carried messages, guarded homes, provided companionship, and often witnessed far more of human behavior than anyone realized. Holmes understood this better than most. He recognized that an animal's actions are seldom random. A frightened horse, a missing pigeon, an agitated canary, or a gathering of ravens may reveal truths that human witnesses overlook.

In *The Ravens of Whitechapel*, Holmes investigates a series of unsettling events in London's East End, where superstition threatens to obscure the truth.

In *The Pigeons of Fleet Street*, the disappearance of messenger pigeons leads Holmes into a mystery hidden high above the rooftops of London.

In *The Canary in Baker Street*, a small yellow bird becomes the unexpected key to a story of loss, memory, and enduring hope.

And in *The Street the Horses Feared*, Holmes confronts a puzzle in which the instincts of animals point toward a danger that human eyes have failed to recognise.

Together these four adventures form the first volume of *The Animal Cases*, a collection dedicated to those investigations in which the natural world plays as important a role as the people who inhabit it.

I have always been particularly fond of these quieter tales. They reveal a side of Holmes that is sometimes overshadowed by his more famous exploits. Here we see not only the master detective, but also the careful observer of nature, the student of behavior, and the man who understood that the boundary between human and animal experience is often far smaller than we imagine.

I hope you enjoy these cases as much as I have enjoyed bringing them together in this volume.

Alistair Croft

The Owl of St. Bartholomew's Tower

It was one of those quiet mornings in Baker Street when even London itself seemed to have decided to take a brief respite from its customary restlessness.

The sunlight streamed through the window and cast bright patches across the carpet and the familiar furnishings. Outside, one could hear the distant rumble of wheels upon cobblestones, yet the traffic was sparse, and even the cries of the street vendors sounded more subdued than usual.

I sat in my armchair with the morning newspaper spread open before me. After several days devoid of interesting developments, I had resigned myself to reading of politics, commerce, and the usual petty crimes with which the newspapers filled their columns. None of it was of a nature likely to attract Sherlock Holmes's attention.

My friend sat by the window, his long, slender figure half concealed by the curtain. He had taken possession of the chair he preferred whenever he wished to observe the life of the street below. A thin ribbon of blue smoke rose from his pipe and slowly dissolved in the sunlight.

For some time neither of us spoke.

At length I laid the newspaper aside.

"It must be four or five days since we last had a client," I remarked.

Holmes removed the pipe from his mouth without turning.

"Five days, Watson."

"I am beginning to suspect that London's criminals have become law-abiding."

"That would be a grave misfortune for a number of professions," he replied dryly.

I smiled.

"And particularly for your own."

"On the contrary. I should gladly exchange half my cases for one truly interesting one."

Silence once more settled over the room.

At that moment there came a knock at the door, and a moment later Mrs. Hudson put her head inside.

"If you are not engaged, Mr. Holmes, there is a gentleman here who wishes to speak with you."

Holmes now turned fully around.

"Show him in, Mrs. Hudson."

She withdrew, and a few seconds later our visitor entered the sitting-room.

The Vicar from Marshfield

At first glance he appeared to be one of those men commonly encountered in the English countryside. He was about sixty years of age, of average height, and well kept without being prosperous. His black clerical coat was neat, though plainly worn by many years of service. His face was open and kindly, and his gray hair had been carefully brushed.

What chiefly attracted my attention, however, was a certain air of uncertainty. He stood for a moment by the door as though he had not yet decided whether his business was truly worthy of Sherlock Holmes's attention.

Holmes rose and gestured toward a chair.

"Pray be seated, sir."

The visitor thanked him and took his place.

"My name is Arthur Bellamy," said he. "I am the vicar of St. Bartholomew's Church in the village of Marshfield."

He hesitated for a moment and cast an almost apologetic glance toward us.

"I must confess, Mr. Holmes, that I am not entirely certain I ought to have come at all."

I caught a quick gleam in Holmes's eyes. When a client began in precisely that fashion, it was often a sign that something unusual was to follow.

The vicar sat for a moment with his hands folded across his knees, as though searching for the proper way to begin.

"I think I ought to warn you at once, Mr. Holmes," said he. "I am perfectly aware that you ordinarily concern yourself with matters far more serious than the one I bring before you."

Holmes leaned back in his chair.

"Seriousness is a highly relative concept, sir," he observed. "Pray continue."

The Owl in the Bell Tower

The vicar nodded gratefully.

"There is, in fact, no crime involved—at least not at first sight."

He cast a brief glance in my direction.

"No one has been robbed. No one has disappeared. And so far as I am aware, no murder has been committed."

I must admit that my interest began to decline somewhat at this point. Over the years I had seen a great many visitors begin their accounts with similar assurances, and in most instances the matter proved to be of such a character that it could scarcely be expected to occupy Sherlock Holmes for more than a few minutes.

Holmes, however, did not appear the least impatient.

"Then what is the problem?" he asked.

The vicar drew a deep breath.

"The problem is an owl."

I believe my surprise must have been plainly visible upon my face. An owl. Of all the things I had expected to hear that morning, this was certainly not among them. I cast a quick glance toward Holmes.

To my astonishment, he had removed the pipe from his mouth and set it down upon the table beside his chair. It was one of those small signs which I had learned to recognize over the years. When Holmes laid aside his pipe during a client's explanation, it was seldom because he had lost interest.

"An owl?" said he calmly.

"Yes."

The vicar appeared almost embarrassed to utter the words aloud.

"I know how strange it sounds."

"By all means, continue," said Holmes.

The vicar nodded.

"For generations owls have lived in the church tower. Not the same owl, naturally, but there has almost always been one there. Over time a number of stories have grown up around it."

"Stories?" Holmes inquired.

"Old village legends," replied the vicar. "Some say that the owl guards the secrets of the church. Others believe it foretells misfortune. Most of us naturally smile at such notions, but the stories persist."

I observed that Holmes was now sitting perfectly still. His long fingers were pressed together before him, and his gaze rested steadily upon our visitor.

The vicar hesitated.

"Ordinarily I should never have dreamed of traveling all the way to Baker Street because of an old village tale."

He cleared his throat.

"But during the past few months something has occurred that has made the matter more difficult to ignore."

Holmes leaned forward ever so slightly.

"Indeed?"

"The owl has become aggressive."

The vicar looked down at his folded hands for a moment.

"The curious thing is," he continued, "that the owl has always been an exceedingly shy creature."

He looked up at us.

"Most of the villagers have scarcely seen it at all. By day it remains concealed in the tower, and only at dusk or late in the evening does it show itself. One sees it gliding over the fields in search of prey, and then it is gone again."

"That sounds like perfectly normal behavior," Holmes observed.

"It was," replied the vicar. "For many years."

He paused briefly.

"But during the past few months something has changed."

I noticed that his voice had now acquired a seriousness that had previously been absent.

"In what way?" asked Holmes.

"As I have said, it has become aggressive—and remarkably bold."

Holmes said nothing.

The vicar continued.

"At first we paid little attention to it. A few villagers reported hearing it screech unusually loudly in the evenings. Later people began saying that it flew much closer to human beings than it ever had before."

He shook his head slightly.

"Several people claimed that it all but swept over their heads."

He made a motion through the air with one hand.

"Not once, but several times. As though it deliberately wished to drive them away."

I was obliged to admit that the account sounded unusual.

The vicar continued.

"One of the local farmers told me that he was returning home from the inn one evening when he heard wings beating immediately behind him. When he turned, the owl came directly toward him. Not high overhead, but so close that he instinctively threw himself aside."

"Was he intoxicated?" Holmes asked.

A faint smile crossed the vicar's face.

"We naturally considered that possibility."

"And?"

"Two days later another man told precisely the same story."

Holmes nodded thoughtfully.

"And since then?"

"Several more incidents."

"And yourself?" Holmes asked.

The vicar hesitated.

"Yes."

He smiled rather sheepishly.

"I must confess that I have experienced it as well."

Holmes raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Tell me."

"Twice while returning from visits to parishioners who were ill. And once while locking the church in the evening."

He slowly shook his head at the memory.

"It came out of the darkness without warning. So close that I could hear every movement of its wings. I scarcely saw it before it vanished again."

"And you were startled?"

"Indeed, I was," the vicar admitted with a small smile. "Far more than I care to acknowledge."

There was a brief silence.

I noticed that Holmes no longer sat at ease in his chair. He had set his pipe entirely aside and was listening with that concentration which invariably signaled that something had captured his interest.

Elias Crow

The vicar fell silent for a moment, and I gained the impression that we were now approaching the true reason for his visit.

"There is, however, one person," he said at last, "who concerns me more than all the others."

Holmes inclined his head slightly.

"Yes?"

"Elias Crow."

The name was spoken with unmistakable warmth, and it became immediately clear to me that the vicar held the man in high regard.

"Who is he?" Holmes asked.

"He is the church sexton, now retired. Indeed, he served as sexton long before I ever came to Marshfield."

The vicar smiled faintly.

"I doubt there are many people in the village who can remember a time when Elias was not working at the church."

"So, he has been there a long while."

"Virtually his entire life."

The vicar leaned back slightly in his chair.

"He has tended the churchyard, the graves, the paths, and the grounds surrounding the church for several decades. Many of the older headstones remain in such good condition today because Elias cared for them as though they belonged to his own family."

I observed that the vicar spoke of the man with genuine respect.

"He is not the sort who draws attention to himself," he continued. "Quite the contrary. If someone needs help, Elias appears. If an elderly widow requires assistance with a fence or a gate, he helps her. If a headstone has been toppled by a storm, he sets it upright again."

The vicar shook his head slightly.

"It is simply difficult to find anyone who has a bad word to say about Elias Crow."

"And yet he is the one who concerns you?" Holmes asked.

"Yes."

The vicar's face grew serious.

"For some reason, the owl appears to have singled him out."

A brief silence fell over the room.

"In what way?" Holmes inquired.

"It goes after him far more often than anyone else."

The vicar hesitated.

"I am, of course, well aware that there may be an entirely natural explanation."

Holmes raised a hand slightly.

"What explanation?"

"Elias spends more time around the church than most people. Even after his retirement, he comes to the churchyard almost every day. He knows the place better than anyone."

"That is a reasonable explanation," said Holmes.

"Yes," the vicar admitted. "And it is the explanation I should most like to believe."

He paused for a moment.

"I have personally seen Elias several times with scratches upon his face."

"Scratches?"

"Yes. On his cheek. Near his ear. Small marks, as though something had struck him."

He reflected briefly.

"And some weeks ago he had a tear in his hat. Quite a noticeable tear."

Holmes said nothing.

"When I ask him about such things," the vicar continued, "he dismisses them. He claims he has been clumsy. Or that he walked into a branch. Or something of that sort."

"And you do not believe him?"

The vicar smiled faintly.

"I believe he is attempting to avoid attention."

He looked down at his hands.

"But the village notices such things."

A moment later he raised his eyes again.

"And once people begin talking, it is difficult to stop them."

I could hear the concern in his voice. It was evident that the owl itself was not what troubled him most.

For a moment he sat in silence, as though considering how much he ought to reveal.

"It is not merely the attacks themselves, of course," he said at last.

Holmes remained silent and waited.

"The rumors have begun to grow."

He sighed softly.

"And as I am sure you know, Mr. Holmes, rumors have a tendency to acquire a life of their own."

"Particularly in small communities," Holmes observed.

"Precisely."

The vicar nodded.

"At first there were only a few remarks. People wondered why the owl appeared to target Elias. But gradually the stories became more serious."

He glanced briefly at the floor.

"I have heard people say that the owl is punishing him."

I could not help raising my eyebrows.

"Punishing him?"

"Yes."

The vicar smiled apologetically.

"It sounds foolish when one says it aloud. Yet such notions arise surprisingly quickly once people begin searching for explanations."

"And what is he supposed to be punished for?" Holmes asked.

The vicar gave a slight shrug.

"That varies. Some say he must have done something connected with the church. Others believe he knows secrets that ought to have remained in the past."

I noticed that Holmes still sat with his hands folded before him, his gaze fixed steadily upon the vicar.

"And you do not believe any of that yourself?" he asked.

"No."

The answer came without hesitation.

"Not for a moment."

The vicar leaned forward.

"I do not believe in omens. I do not believe in curses. And I most certainly do not believe that an owl has been sent to punish an elderly sexton."

He paused briefly.

"And yet I am concerned."

"Because of the sexton?" I asked.

"Yes. Because of Elias."

He looked at us gravely.

"And because of the village."

There was a sincerity in his voice that impressed me.

"You see," he continued, "Marshfield has always been a peaceful place. People have known one another all their lives. They help one another. They trust one another."

He slowly shook his head.

"But I believe I sense a change."

The vicar searched for the proper words.

"As though the old stories are gradually beginning to exert more influence than they ought."

He looked toward the window, where the morning sunlight still lay across Baker Street.

"I fear that people are beginning to place more faith in old legends than in common sense."

His words lingered in the silence.

I must confess that by this point I understood his concern far better than I had at the beginning of our conversation. It still seemed difficult to imagine that an owl could become the source of serious trouble in a village. Yet I had learned over the years that fear seldom needs to be logical in order to be dangerous.

A quick glance toward Holmes showed me that he, too, had seized upon precisely that detail. He wore the particular expression I knew so well—the look that came over him whenever certain facts began to separate themselves from the rest.

He leaned forward slightly.

"How old is Elias Crow?"

The vicar considered.

"I should estimate about eighty. Perhaps a few years more. No one seems entirely certain of his exact age."

Holmes nodded.

"And how long have these attacks been occurring?"

"Approximately four months."

"No longer than that?"

"No. At least not to my knowledge."

Holmes pressed his fingertips together.

"Can you recall the first incident?"

The vicar reflected.

"It must have been late spring. I remember several people beginning to speak of it at roughly the same time."

"And before that, the owl had never displayed similar behavior?"

"Not that I can recall."

Holmes nodded again. His next question followed almost immediately.

"Has anyone else in the village suffered injuries?"

"Injuries?"

"Scratches. Claw marks. Torn clothing."

The vicar considered the matter.

"No."

He shook his head.

"Not like Elias."

Holmes's gaze sharpened slightly.

"Is that important?" the vicar asked.

"I do not yet know," Holmes replied.

He picked up his pipe once more.

"But I have always found it interesting when an animal appears to display a strong preference for one particular human being."

He looked from the vicar to me.

"Such preferences usually have a cause."

And as he spoke those words, I had the distinct impression that his interest in the matter was considerably greater than I could ever have expected when the good vicar had first uttered the word owl.

The vicar rose shortly thereafter and thanked us once again for our time.

It was evident that he already felt somewhat relieved. If nothing else, he had been given an opportunity to share his concerns with someone outside the village, and that alone appeared to have brought him a measure of comfort.

Holmes accompanied him courteously to the door, and a few moments later we heard the front door close below.

Silence settled over the sitting-room.

I adjusted myself more comfortably in my armchair and studied my friend.

He stood by the window with his hands clasped behind his back, looking down at the street. The usual stream of carriages, tradesmen, and passersby continued outside, yet Holmes scarcely seemed aware of any of it.

His thoughts were clearly elsewhere.

"Well," said I at last, "what do you make of it?"

Holmes did not answer immediately.

I had rather expected him to dismiss the entire affair as another example of village superstition and rural boredom.

Instead, he appeared remarkably thoughtful.

"I believe," said Holmes slowly, "that if this bird truly pursues the old sexton more frequently than anyone else, then there exists a connection between them."

"A connection?"

"Yes."

A faint smile touched his lips.

"And connections are far more interesting than legends."

Silence returned once more.

"Then we are going to Marshfield?" I asked.

Holmes at last placed the pipe between his teeth.

"Yes, Watson."

A glimmer of anticipation appeared in his eyes.

"I believe the good vicar has brought us a far more interesting case than he himself realizes."

Holmes resumed his place by the window. I watched him standing there with his hands behind his back as he observed the busy street below. Carriages rolled past, messengers hurried along the pavements, and London's endless tide of humanity continued its course without the slightest concern for owls, villages, or ancient legends.

After a brief silence he said:

"We leave for Marshfield tomorrow."

I looked up in surprise.

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"You truly mean to pursue the matter?"

Holmes turned halfway toward me.

"Naturally."

I could not help smiling.

"An hour ago, I should have expected you to dismiss the entire affair as the anxieties of a country clergyman troubled by an unusually lively bird."

A faint smile crossed his face.

"I may have expected as much of myself."

The Journey

The following morning Holmes and I left London by an early train bound for that part of the country in which the village of Marshfield lay. The journey passed without incident, and as we left behind the crowded districts of the capital, the view beyond the window became steadily greener and more open.

Holmes spent the greater part of the journey with a newspaper, which he appeared to read with close attention, though after many years of acquaintance I knew well that his thoughts might often be far removed from the place where his eyes happened to rest. For my own part, I found greater pleasure in watching the countryside as it slowly slipped past outside.

By midday we reached the small station nearest to Marshfield. A horse-drawn carriage was waiting for us there, and once our modest luggage had been placed at the rear of the vehicle, we continued the final stage of our journey along a narrow country road.

It was a peaceful and most English landscape that spread itself around us. Fields rolled gently across the ground, and ancient stone walls marked the divisions between the holdings like gray lines through the green. Here

and there stood isolated farms surrounded by small groves, whose trees moved faintly in the mild breeze. There was a stillness about the place which stood in sharp contrast to London's perpetual noise and motion.

I was just enjoying this quiet when I caught sight of something in the distance. Above the village, which could as yet only be glimpsed between the trees, a tall church tower rose against the sky. Even at that distance it appeared remarkable. It was considerably higher than one would ordinarily expect in a village of Marshfield's size, and it dominated the landscape in a manner that immediately drew the eye.

Our driver noticed that I was looking in the same direction as himself. He raised his whip and pointed toward the tower.

"There you have it, gentlemen."

"The church?" I asked.

"Aye, the church."

A curious smile passed over his face.

"And the famous owl."

I cast a quick glance at Holmes.

My friend had lifted his eyes from his newspaper.

"The famous owl?" I repeated.

"Aye," said the driver with a little grin. "I take it you have heard of it, since you are on your way to Marshfield."

There was something in his tone which told me that the story was well known far beyond the village itself.

Holmes, however, said nothing. He merely regarded the distant bell tower with his customary calm expression.

The carriage continued its steady progress along the country road, while the church tower slowly grew before us, and I began to experience that sensation which so often heralded the beginning of a new adventure. It still seemed difficult to believe that an old owl could be the cause of so much attention. Yet after so many years in the company of Sherlock Holmes, I had learned never to underestimate those mysteries which at first sight appear the most improbable.

When at last the carriage rolled into Marshfield, the village proved to be almost exactly as the vicar had described it. The houses were gathered

about the square and the church, while the larger farms lay scattered along the outskirts of the settlement. Above everything rose the tall bell tower, the natural center of the village.

The vicar came forward to meet us with a warm smile, and I thought I could see at once the relief that passed over his face when he found that we had truly come.

"Mr. Holmes. Dr. Watson. Welcome to Marshfield."

He shook our hands heartily.

"I am more grateful than I can say that you found reason to come."

Holmes returned the greeting courteously.

"We found the matter interesting enough to examine more closely."

The vicar smiled.

"That is more than most men would have done."

The vicarage lay only a few steps from the church, behind a low stone wall. It was an old but well-kept house, with climbing roses along the walls and a small garden behind it. There was a peacefulness about the place which immediately made a pleasant impression upon me.

Inside, the vicar showed us the rooms he had placed at our disposal during our stay. They were modest but comfortable, and the window of my room looked out upon the churchyard, where old headstones stood among well-tended shrubs and trees.

"I hope you will make yourselves quite at home," said he. "My wife has put on tea. Perhaps you would like to rest a little after your journey?"

But Holmes shook his head.

"Thank you, but I should prefer to begin at once."

The vicar looked slightly surprised.

"Already?"

"Yes."

Holmes took up his hat.

"Before I examine the church more closely, I should like to speak with as many people as possible."

"About the owl?"

"About the owl. About the village. About its inhabitants. About everything that is not written in the parish registers."

The vicar nodded thoughtfully. He did not appear entirely convinced, but like so many before him, he had already understood that Sherlock Holmes seldom followed the paths others expected.

"As you wish."

A few minutes later we were outside once more.

The Sexton

Although Holmes had spoken of meeting the villagers, our first stop was nevertheless the church. The old building rose impressively before us, and at close range the bell tower appeared even taller than it had from a distance.

By the side door of the church stood a strongly built man repairing a gate.

The vicar raised his hand.

"Ah, there we have just the right person to begin with."

The man straightened up and wiped his hands upon his apron.

"This is our sexton, Samuel Briggs."

The sexton greeted us pleasantly, though without ceremony.

He had an open face and the practical bearing one often finds in men who prefer to solve problems with their hands rather than with lengthy explanations.

"So you have come on account of the owl?" he said almost at once.

There was already a smile in his voice.

"That is correct," Holmes replied.

Briggs shook his head.

"Then you must forgive me, gentlemen, but I think you are wasting your time."

He laughed.

"A bird is a bird."

"You do not believe the stories, then?" Holmes asked.

"The stories?" repeated the sexton.

He gave a hearty laugh.

"No, certainly not."

He looked up toward the tower.

"That bird does what birds have always done. It flies. It hunts. It frightens people when they fail to watch where they are going."

"But the stories must have begun somewhere."

At this Briggs shrugged.

"If you ask me, it all began with old Elias."

Holmes cast a quick glance at him.

Briggs leaned against the gate.

"If anyone knew every stone in this church, it was Elias."

"And the owls?" Holmes asked.

"He knew them too."

The sexton laughed again.

"Though he seems to have some quarrel with the one that lives there now."

Then he shook his head in amusement.

"And if you ask me, there is certainly nothing wrong with his imagination."

"In what way do you mean?"

"That half the village stories about the owl probably came from him."

He pointed toward the tower.

"When the children asked what lived up there, Elias always had an answer ready. And each time it sounded a little more exciting than the last."

I observed that Holmes was listening with greater attention than the sexton's easy tone perhaps seemed to warrant.

The Shopkeeper

After our conversation with the sexton, we continued through the village. Marshfield was not large, and before long we found ourselves in front of the shop by the square. It was one of those establishments which appear to contain a little of everything, from nails and tools to tea, flour, and household goods.

A small bell rang as we entered.

Behind the counter stood a round, kindly man with red cheeks, who at once recognized the vicar and welcomed us.

"So, you have visitors from London, Vicar?" said he cheerfully.

"I have."

The vicar introduced us, and when the shopkeeper heard the reason for our visit, his face lit up.

"Ah, the owl!"

He said it with the same pleasure with which another man might speak of an old friend.

"Then you have come to the right place to ask."

Holmes smiled politely.

"I hope so."

The shopkeeper leaned forward across the counter.

"I can remember the stories from my own childhood."

He laughed to himself.

"We were convinced that all manner of strange creatures lived up in that bell tower."

"And who told the stories?" Holmes asked.

The shopkeeper looked almost surprised by the question.

"Elias Crow, naturally."

Holmes said nothing, but I noticed that the name had appeared once more.

The shopkeeper continued.

"If there was a story about the owl, Elias knew it. And if there was not, he could probably invent one."

Both the vicar and the shopkeeper laughed.

"So you do not believe them yourself?" Holmes asked.

The shopkeeper hesitated.

"No."

Then he smiled.

"Not exactly."

The shopkeeper scratched the back of his neck thoughtfully.

"I am a practical man, Mr. Holmes. I believe in accounts, prices, and deliveries. Not in omens."

For a moment he looked through the shop window toward the church tower.

"But when you have heard those stories all your life, they settle somewhere inside you."

"Even in a practical man?" I asked.

"Especially in a practical man."

He laughed again.

"It is easy enough to be brave in broad daylight. But when you are walking home alone after dark, and you suddenly hear wings beating over your head..."

He shrugged.

"...you think of the old stories all the same."

"Even though you do not believe them?" Holmes asked.

"Yes."

The shopkeeper nodded and then pointed toward the door.

"If, on some dark evening, you feel a shadow pass silently over you, I promise you that you too will think of the old owl."

Talk in the Inn Parlour

From the shop we continued to the village inn, where we found the landlord and a handful of the older men of the village gathered about a long table. The air was thick with pipe smoke and the pleasant warmth from the hearth, and once the reason for our visit to Marshfield became known, it soon appeared that none of those present lacked a story about the owl.

An elderly man with a white beard declared with great conviction that the owl had foretold the fire at the Miller family's barn many years before. According to him, its hooting had been heard throughout the night, and two days later the barn was in flames. This was at once met with loud laughter from the far end of the table, where another man maintained that the owl hooted almost every night, and that one might just as well give it credit for a good harvest and fine weather.

The discussion quickly grew lively. One of the men remembered the story of the young laborer who had drowned in the fire pond, and he was quite certain that the owl had been heard the evening before. Another told of a funeral, before which the bird was said to have cried out through

the darkness all night long. Each story was met with nods, protests, and laughter, yet it struck me that the laughter was not always wholly convincing. Several of the men mocked the superstition, but none seemed entirely willing to dismiss the tales altogether.

While the conversation flowed back and forth, Holmes sat silent and listened. Only when the stories had ebbed for a moment did he ask the question which was gradually becoming his favorite.

"And who first told the story?"

A brief silence fell around the table. The men looked at one another, as though the answer were so obvious that no one had previously thought to ask the question. At last the landlord shrugged.

"If you ask me, it was Elias Crow."

Several of the others immediately nodded in agreement. One of the men raised his mug and remarked that if one wished to hear a story about the owl, Elias was always the man to seek out. Another added, with a grin, that the old sexton had probably invented half of them himself. There was fresh laughter, but behind the jest there lay a remarkable unanimity.

The Doctor's Explanation

From the inn the vicar led us farther through the village to the doctor's house, which stood a little back from the road behind a small front garden. It was a neat and orderly home, and the same might be said of its owner. Dr. Pembroke was a man in his late fifties, with an alert eye and a calm manner which at once gave the impression of sound judgment.

He received us kindly, and when the vicar explained the purpose of our visit, he smiled in a way which made it perfectly plain that he regarded the matter with more skepticism than most of the villagers.

"I am probably the wrong man to ask about omens and curses," said he, as he poured tea for us. "As a doctor, one tends to look for more earthly explanations."

Holmes nodded encouragingly.

"And what is your explanation?"

The doctor leaned back in his chair and folded his hands across his stomach.

"That human beings possess a remarkable ability to remember the events which suit their stories and forget all the others."

He smiled.

"If the owl is heard on a night before some misfortune occurs, everyone remembers it. If it is heard on a hundred other nights and nothing whatever happens, that is forgotten."

"A very human trait," Holmes observed.

"Yes," said the doctor. "It is the same mechanism that leads people to believe in omens, lucky numbers, and all manner of other oddities."

I could see that Holmes agreed with the observation. Indeed, it seemed to me for a moment that the conversation was drawing to its natural close. But just as the doctor rose to set the teapot back upon the table, he appeared to recall something.

"That being said," he continued, "there is one thing I would not dismiss."

Holmes looked up.

"What is that?"

"Elias Crow's injuries."

The doctor sat down again.

"I have treated him several times during the past few months."

It was the first time we had heard this from a person with professional knowledge, and I noticed at once how Holmes's attention sharpened.

"What kind of injuries?" he asked.

"Scratches, chiefly. Small cuts about the face and around the ears. A few marks upon the neck. Abrasions. And on one occasion he had some quite distinct claw marks."

"Claw marks?" Holmes repeated.

The doctor nodded.

"Not serious, but clear enough."

He hesitated for a moment.

"I cannot, of course, prove that they came from an owl."

"But?"

"But they correspond quite well with an attack by a large bird."

There was silence in the room. The doctor seemed to understand the significance of his own words.

"I know it sounds strange," said he. "But whatever the cause may be, that part of the matter is not something the old man is inventing."

Holmes nodded slowly.

"That is useful to know."

Back at the Vicarage

When we returned to the vicarage later that afternoon, the vicar was waiting for us in the sitting-room. The sun had sunk lower in the sky, and through the windows a warm light fell across the old furniture and the book-filled shelves along the walls.

The vicar's wife had provided fresh tea, and after the many conversations of the day, it was pleasant to sink into a chair and gather one's impressions.

The vicar looked inquiringly at Holmes.

"Well, Mr. Holmes, what do you make of the village?"

Holmes smiled faintly.

"That it is remarkably consistent with itself."

"In what way?"

"Everyone appears to know the stories of the owl."

"Yes."

"And nearly all the stories lead back to the same man."

The vicar nodded slowly.

"Elias Crow."

"Precisely."

Holmes leaned back and let his gaze drift toward the window.

"The sexton mentioned him. The shopkeeper mentioned him. The men at the inn mentioned him. Even stories which appear to contradict one another often have the same origin."

"That is my impression as well," said the vicar.

For a moment he seemed thoughtful.

"Elias has lived here all his life. He has known several generations of the village children. If anyone could plant a story in Marshfield, it was he."

There was a short silence.

Then the vicar placed both hands around his teacup.

"I do not know how much people have said to you."

His voice had grown more serious.

"But some of the things now being said are not pleasant."

Holmes looked up.

"What do you mean?"

The vicar hesitated.

"As I believe I hinted earlier, there are people beginning to say that there may be a reason why the owl goes after Elias in particular."

He shook his head slightly, as though he himself found the notion unreasonable.

"Some say the bird is trying to punish him. And a few have begun to speak of omens. Of signs. Of the need to keep an eye upon him."

He sighed.

"It sounds foolish in daylight. But rumors have a logic of their own."

For a moment he merely looked down into his teacup.

"That is precisely why I have become concerned."

Holmes regarded him attentively.

"For Elias?"

"Yes."

The vicar nodded.

"When fear and old stories begin to work together, even sensible people can come to believe strange things."

Silence settled over the room.

Holmes seemed to have reached a similar conclusion.

"Then we must hope," said he calmly, "that there is an explanation before the village finds its own."

The vicar looked at him.

Holmes let his gaze rest for a moment upon the bell tower outside.

"There is always an explanation."

He paused briefly.

"The question is merely whether it is the one people imagine."

Elias Crow

Late that afternoon the vicar led us to the part of the village nearest the churchyard. There, behind a low stone wall and surrounded by a modest garden, stood Elias Crow's little house.

It was neither neglected nor poor, but rather one of those homes which bear the mark of many years of thrift and order. The path was neatly raked, the hedge trimmed, and by the door stood a pair of flower-pots which were plainly tended with care.

The vicar knocked, and shortly afterward the door was opened by an elderly man.

I immediately formed a favorable impression of him. He was considerably older than the vicar, with gray hair, a slightly bent back, and the worn hands that so often come from a long working life in the open air. His face was furrowed by age and weather, but his eyes were clear and kindly.

When the vicar explained who we were, he smiled at once.

"So you have come all the way from London to investigate our old owl?"

There was a gleam of humor in his voice.

"It seems almost too great an honor."

We were invited inside, and before long we were seated about a small table in the parlor. The conversation quickly turned, quite naturally, to the owl and the stories surrounding it.

To my surprise, Elias himself laughed heartily at several of the tales.

"I must confess," said he with a crooked smile, "that I bear some of the blame myself."

"The blame?" asked Holmes.

"For the stories."

He leaned back in his chair.

"When a man works at a church all his life, he is asked many things. Children wish to know what is hidden up in the tower. Grown folk wish to hear old legends. And if one tells a story once, it is told ten times over."

He laughed softly.

"I have no doubt helped a few of them along over the years."

"Then you do not deny that many of the stories came from you?"

"On the contrary."

His eyes twinkled.

"I should be a poor storyteller if I did."

The atmosphere was warm and easy, yet Holmes watched him with that particular attention which I knew so well. I saw his gaze pass over the old man's face. A small mark was visible near one ear.

A little later Holmes also noticed a hat hanging from a peg by the door. It had been repaired in several places, and along one side one could still make out an older tear in the felt.

"Your hat appears to have had a rather eventful life," Holmes observed.

Elias laughed.

"Yes, it has probably had a harder life than its owner."

He said it lightly, but I noticed that he did not explain how the damage had occurred.

The conversation continued for some time, and I must admit that it became increasingly difficult for me to imagine this kindly old man as the center of all the rumors we had heard throughout the day.

When at last we took our leave and made our way back toward the vicarage, dusk had begun to settle over Marshfield. The village lay quiet around us. Only a few lights had begun to appear behind the windows, and above the rooftops the bell tower rose as a dark silhouette against the deep blue evening sky.

We walked for some distance without speaking. After a few minutes I broke the silence.

"Do you really believe the owl has singled him out?"

Holmes cast a brief glance toward the tower.

"No, Watson."

"No?"

"I rather think we should ask ourselves why Elias Crow so often finds himself where the owl does not wish visitors."

I looked at him in surprise.

But before I could reply, something occurred up by the tower. From one of the dark openings high under the roof a shape glided soundlessly into the air. For a moment we could see the broad wings against the last remnant of evening light. Then the bird turned away and vanished silently over the fields. Holmes followed it with his eyes, and as the dark shadow drifted farther and farther into the deepening dusk, I had the distinct impression that we had yet seen only the beginning of Marshfield's mystery.

The Warning at the Church

The following morning we gathered about the breakfast table at the vicarage. Sunlight streamed through the windows, and the vicar's wife had provided a generous breakfast which stood in marked contrast to the modest size of the little village.

The vicar appeared in far better spirits than on the previous day, and at first the conversation turned upon quite ordinary subjects. It was only when the last cup of coffee had been poured that Holmes laid aside his napkin and announced what he had in mind.

"I should like to examine the bell tower."

The vicar looked up.

"The tower itself?"

"Yes."

For a brief moment the vicar appeared somewhat doubtful.

"You are, of course, most welcome, Mr. Holmes. The church is at your disposal."

He smiled faintly.

"But I ought to warn you that you will find little there beyond dust, old beams, and an occupant who, by all accounts, is not especially hospitable."

"It is precisely the occupant who interests me," said Holmes.

The vicar laughed.

"Then I hope you have a better method of conversing with owls than I possess."

Shortly afterward we left the vicarage and crossed to the church. The morning was clear and cool, and the churchyard lay silent around us. Only a few birds could be heard among the trees.

We had just reached the church door when a familiar figure came walking up the path.

It was Elias Crow.

He raised his hand in greeting when he saw us.

"Good morning, gentlemen."

"Good morning, Elias."

The old sexton seemed, as usual, friendly and at ease. But when the vicar mentioned that Holmes wished to examine the bell tower, his expression altered slightly. Not much. But enough for me to notice it.

"The bell tower?" he repeated.

"Yes," Holmes replied.

Elias looked up at the high building.

"Then you must not say that I did not warn you."

There was no humor in his voice this time. I observed that he seemed more concerned than superstitious. It was as though his warning arose not from old legends, but from something far more concrete.

Holmes appeared to notice the same thing.

"You seem very certain that we shall not be welcome up there."

A faint smile returned to Elias's face.

"I have tried it myself."

"Then you still come often to the church?"

"Yes, naturally."

He gestured about him.

"I live almost next door to it."

Then he extended a hand toward the churchyard.

"Part of my family lies out there."

For a moment his voice softened.

"And besides, I still have my habits."

"Habits?" asked Holmes.

"Yes."

Elias smiled.

"I must keep an eye on whether the vicar is doing his work properly."

The vicar laughed.

"He does, in fact."

"And someone must discuss the state of the world with you and the sexton."

There was another laugh.

"The truth is," Elias continued, "that I have worked here for most of my life. When a man has done that long enough, it feels strange suddenly to stop coming."

Holmes nodded.

"I can understand that."

He let his gaze drift up toward the tower.

"Have you been up in the bell tower recently?"

The question was asked so naturally that I should hardly have attached any significance to it myself. But I noticed at once that Elias hesitated.

"Only briefly," said he.

He gave a slight shrug.

"What should I have to do up there?"

There was nothing plainly suspicious in the answer. And yet I had the familiar feeling that Holmes had noticed something. Perhaps it was not the words themselves, but the manner in which they were spoken.

Elias then lifted his hat politely.

"Well, gentlemen. I wish you good luck."

His gaze passed briefly up toward the bell tower.

"You may need it."

With those words he continued down the path toward the village. We stood watching him for a moment. Then Holmes turned toward the church door.

"Shall we?" said he.

And a few moments later we began the ascent toward the place where Marshfield's most famous resident had its home.

The Bell Tower

A few minutes later we stood before the heavy oak door which led into the bell tower. The sexton produced a large key and worked for a moment at the old lock before the door at last yielded with a long creak from its hinges. A cool, dusty current of air flowed out to meet us from the darkness within.

"There is your way," said the sexton with a crooked smile. "If you still wish to continue."

"We do," Holmes replied without hesitation.

We stepped into the tower, where a narrow stone stair wound upward through the masonry. After only a few steps I became aware of the great age of the place. The stones were worn down by centuries of use, and in several places, one could clearly see the hollows left by generations of feet. The air was dry and dusty. Small pieces of plaster and wood-dust lay along the walls, and above our heads old beams crossed one another in a complicated network which bore plain signs of the slow work of woodworm.

Along the wall the bell ropes hung down through the tower. They disappeared upward into the darkness above us and continued down through a hole in the floor to the church below. As we climbed higher, the sounds of the village gradually faded. Voices disappeared, and even the sound of the wind seemed to die away. In their place other sounds began to make themselves heard. At first, I thought it was merely the timber settling, but by degrees I could distinguish scraping noises, occasional wingbeats, and some strange, hoarse little cries that seemed to come from somewhere high above us.

I must confess that I did not feel entirely at ease. There was something about the old tower, the shifting shadows, and the unknown sounds which made the place less welcoming than I had imagined. Holmes, on the other hand, seemed more interested with every step we took. Several times he paused briefly to examine the masonry or cast a glance up toward the dark beams.

At a landing roughly halfway up the tower, the sexton suddenly stopped. He looked up the remaining stairs and then shook his head.

"I do not usually go any farther than this."

The vicar followed his gaze and smiled a little uncertainly.

"I must admit that I do not often visit the upper levels either."

There was something in the way they said it which led me to believe that both men were quite content to let us proceed alone.

"We shall remain here," said the vicar. "You will find your way back, I trust."

"We shall," Holmes replied.

As we continued upward, the vicar called after us:

"Mind your heads!"

Shortly afterward both he and the sexton had vanished from sight below, and we were alone in the upper part of the tower.

When my eyes had first grown accustomed to the dim light, it was not the owls that most attracted my attention, but the church bell.

It hung like some enormous bronze creature in the middle of the tower's upper chamber. Only at close range did I realize how colossal it truly was. The heavy beams above our heads supported not only the roof, but also the great bell frame which for centuries had borne the weight of the church's largest and most important bell.

While I was still looking at it, Holmes suddenly pointed upward.

"Look there."

I followed his gaze.

High among the roof beams, above the bell itself, lay a large nest built of branches, twigs, and dried grass. It had been placed where it was almost concealed by the structure, and without Holmes's attention I should probably never have noticed it.

Below it lay scattered feathers and the remains of prey among beams and dust.

From where we stood, we could not see down into the nest itself, but we could plainly hear the sounds that came from it. Small, hoarse cries sounded at intervals, and now that we knew what to listen for, they were impossible to overlook.

On the edge of the nest sat the two adult birds.

Their wings were half spread, and whenever we moved, a sharp hiss came from them.

"Young ones," said Holmes.

"Yes."

He nodded calmly.

"That explains a great deal."

I must admit that I began to see the matter in a new light. The conduct of the two birds now seemed far less mysterious to me than it had the day before. We had invaded their home, approached their nest and their offspring, and they were reacting precisely as any responsible parent would do.

"Their behavior is entirely natural," Holmes continued. "Indeed, it would be more remarkable if they did not defend the nest."

I remained for another moment watching the birds. They kept their eyes upon us without ceasing, and although they no longer attacked, their intention was not to be misunderstood.

Meanwhile Holmes had already become interested in something quite different. He had turned his back upon the nest and was moving slowly through the tower chamber. At first I did not understand what he was seeking. Dust lay everywhere. The dust of decades. To this were added traces of the birds' occupation: feathers, small bones, and dried material from the nest. The whole place bore the appearance of having been deserted by human beings for a very long time. Yet Holmes stopped several times and bent down.

"Interesting."

I went over to him.

"Have you found something?"

The Old Coin

He pointed toward the floor. At first, I saw nothing. But when I knelt beside him, I discovered what had caught his attention.

The dust was not uniform. In some places it lay thick and undisturbed, but through the chamber one could make out a series of narrower areas

where the layer was less deep. They formed almost a kind of path between certain points in the room.

I followed the marks with my eyes.

"It looks as though someone has walked here."

"Not merely once," said Holmes.

He pointed farther on.

"Observe the pattern."

Now I could see it myself. The same areas appeared to have been trodden again and again over a considerable period.

"What do you suppose it means?" I asked.

Holmes let his gaze travel through the chamber.

"That someone has had a purpose in coming up here."

As he spoke, he suddenly crouched near a group of beams by the outer wall. Something had caught his eye. He took out his pocketknife and began carefully to work the point between the floorboards.

"Holmes?"

"One moment."

He worked with great concentration. After a few seconds he succeeded in catching hold of a small round object which had lodged on its edge between the boards. Carefully he levered it free. A moment later it lay in his hand.

It was a coin. It was so covered with dirt and dark accretions that its original surface could scarcely be seen. Holmes turned it between his fingers.

"It has lain here a long while."

He took out his handkerchief and began cautiously to rub the surface clean. Then he dampened one corner of the cloth and continued the work. Slowly the metal began to appear. A faint gleam caught the light from the tower opening.

I leaned forward.

"Is it gold?"

"It is too early to say."

Holmes considered the coin for another moment.

"But it is certainly not of recent date."

He slipped it calmly into his pocket. Then he cast one last glance around the chamber, up toward the nest and across the strange tracks in the dust.

"I think we have seen enough for today."

I was not inclined to disagree.

A few minutes later we began our descent, while the two adult owls continued to keep watch over their nest high among the old beams. Behind us there came another hoarse cry from the young, and when we reached the lower stairs, I could not help thinking that the birds had perhaps just given us the first real clue in the whole affair.

When at last we reached the lower stairs again, we found the vicar and the sexton precisely where we had left them. Both looked up with a certain expectation as we appeared through the low opening.

"Well?" asked the vicar. "Was it the terrible guardian of the church's secrets that you found up there?"

There was a smile in his voice.

Holmes brushed a little dust from his sleeve and replied with his usual dry expression:

"No. But we found a pair of very dutiful parents."

The sexton at once broke into laughter.

"That sounds less dramatic at once."

"And considerably more probable," added the vicar.

The tension which had surrounded the entire ascent seemed suddenly to ease. I myself had to admit that it was pleasant to replace the village's omens and curses with something as earthly as a pair of birds defending their young.

We left the church and began to walk back across the churchyard. The sun was already sinking behind the fields, and golden light lay among the headstones and the old trees.

For some distance we walked in silence. I was the first to break it.

"Well, then, the matter is more or less explained."

Holmes, who walked with his hands behind his back, slowly shook his head.

"No, Watson."

"No?"

"The owls explain the attacks."

He cast a glance back toward the tower.

"But not everything."

I looked at him inquiringly.

"They are defending their nest. There is nothing strange in that."

"Precisely."

"And Elias Crow is often about the church."

"He is."

"Then what is missing?"

Holmes did not answer at once.

He continued for several steps among the headstones while evening slowly settled over Marshfield.

When we reached the churchyard gate, I paused for a moment and looked back toward the bell tower. Against the reddish sky it stood as a dark silhouette. Just then one of the owls glided soundlessly out through one of the openings high beneath the roof. It hovered for a moment almost without a wingbeat, before vanishing out over the fields. I followed it with my eyes.

Beside me Holmes stood silent. He too was watching the tower. Then he said quietly:

"I do not believe, Watson, that the owl guards any secrets."

A short pause followed.

The evening wind stirred the upper branches of the trees in the churchyard, while the last rays of sunlight faded from the stones around us.

"But" Holmes continued at last, "I am beginning to believe that someone else does."

He said no more.

And as we continued toward the vicarage through the falling dusk, I could not help thinking of the old sexton, of the strange tracks in the dust, and of the solitary coin which now lay in Holmes's pocket.

The Story of The Old Coins

That same evening Holmes and I chose to take our dinner at the village inn. After the day's investigations, it seemed a natural place in which to gather further impressions, and I must admit that the cozy atmosphere of the low building had made a favorable impression upon me during our first visit.

The taproom was small and warm. Dark oak beams crossed the ceiling above us, and in the fireplace a cheerful fire cast a soft glow upon the walls. There were only a few guests that evening. Two elderly men sat at a table near the window, speaking in low voices, while a farmer farther down the room slowly enjoyed his mug of ale.

Holmes and I sat at a table near the hearth, discussing the day's events in the bell tower.

"So, you still believe the young birds explain the attacks?" I asked.

"Yes," Holmes replied. "Most of them, at any rate."

"And the tracks in the dust?"

"The birds do not explain those."

He said no more, but I could see that his thoughts still circled about the strange impressions we had seen up in the tower.

At that moment the landlord approached our table with a friendly smile.

"I hope the meal has been to your liking, gentlemen."

"Excellent," I assured him.

He glanced about the nearly empty inn and then rested one hand upon the back of a vacant chair.

"If you do not object, I should be interested to hear what you make of our village."

"It would be a pleasure," said Holmes.

A moment later the landlord had seated himself. He was plainly a man who enjoyed company and conversation, and it was not long before the subject turned to the church, the owl, and Elias Crow.

"You have surely heard most of the stories already," said he with a grin.

"A number of them," Holmes admitted.

"Marshfield has always been full of strange tales."

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

He leaned a little forward.

"For example, there is the story of the coins."

Holmes at once raised his eyes.

"The coins?"

"The old coins."

"I am not sure I know that story."

The landlord looked surprised.

"Then you have not yet spoken to the right people."

He smiled.

"Old gold coins."

I must admit that at this point I attached no great importance to the matter. Villages were full of stories of hidden treasure and ancient finds. But Holmes had plainly caught at something.

"What sort of coins?" he asked.

The landlord shrugged.

"That is the odd part of it. They appear from time to time. Not many. One here and one there."

He considered.

"The shopkeeper owns one. I know at least two other people in the district who have one as well."

"And where do they come from?"

"No one knows."

The landlord suddenly rose.

"Wait a moment."

He disappeared into a back room and returned shortly afterward with a small wooden box.

"Here."

He opened the lid.

Inside lay a single coin. Even in the subdued light from the fire, I could see that it was old. Very old.

"Is that one of them?" Holmes asked.

"Yes."

The landlord took it up and handed it across the table.

"I do not really know how I came by it. One day I simply discovered that it was lying among the other coins in my till."

He laughed.

"I could, of course, have sold it. There is gold in it, after all. But I kept it, mostly because it seemed old and unusual to me."

Holmes took the coin between his fingers. I saw at once the familiar expression come over his face. He examined it with a thoroughness which would have seemed comic had I not seen him do the same with far smaller objects over the years. He studied the stamping, turned it over, let it rest in his palm as though judging its weight, and then held it up toward the light from the hearth.

"Are the other coins of the same type?" he asked.

"So people say."

"They resemble one another, then?"

"So far as I know, yes. Almost identical."

Holmes nodded slowly.

"When did the first one appear?"

The landlord shook his head.

"That I do not know."

"And how often are they found?"

"Very rarely."

"One at a time?"

"Always."

The landlord thought for a moment.

"I have never heard of anyone finding several at once."

Holmes asked a few more questions, but it soon became apparent that the landlord's knowledge was limited. He knew the stories, but not their origin. When at last he excused himself and returned to his other guests, I sat for a moment watching him go.

"I do not quite understand," said I. "What have old gold coins to do with an aggressive owl?"

Holmes did not answer at once. Instead, he put his hand into his pocket and drew out the coin he had found up in the bell tower earlier

that day. He placed it beside the landlord's coin upon the table. Even in the flickering light the resemblance could be seen.

I looked in surprise from one to the other. Holmes regarded them both for a moment.

"Probably nothing," said he.

But his tone told me that he did not entirely believe the words himself. He picked up the two coins again.

"And yet it is rarely accidental, Watson, when old things keep appearing."

He returned his own coin to his pocket.

Someone in the Dark

Later that evening, when Holmes and I left the inn, darkness had settled fully over Marshfield. The warm atmosphere of the low taproom, with its fire and subdued conversations, was quickly replaced by the cool night air drifting in from the fields around the village. I turned up my collar as we made our way through the nearly deserted streets toward the vicarage.

We had spoken little since our conversation with the landlord. Holmes seemed absorbed in his own thoughts, and I knew from experience that it was wisest not to disturb him when he was in that state of mind. My own thoughts still circled about the old coins, which seemed to me to have a most uncertain connection with the matter of the owl.

We had just reached the churchyard wall when a sharp cry suddenly rang through the night. I stopped and looked up. High above us a dark bird circled the bell tower. Its characteristic cry cut through the silence, and a moment later a second shape showed itself against the sky. The two birds were flying restlessly about the tower in a manner that immediately struck me as different from what we had seen earlier that day.

Holmes had noticed it as well. He quickly placed a hand upon my arm and signaled for silence.

"Look up there."

I followed his gaze toward the upper part of the tower. At first I could see nothing, but after a few seconds I noticed a faint light high behind one of the openings. It was not strong, but it was distinct enough to be

seen against the darkness. The light moved. The opening was alternately illuminated and obscured, as though someone were walking about up there with a lantern.

"There is someone in the tower," I whispered.

Holmes made no reply. He had already moved away from the road and in among some trees at the edge of the churchyard. I followed, and together we approached the church cautiously, keeping to the shadows. Above us the owls continued to circle. Several times their cries sounded again, and I could not help thinking of the two birds we had seen defending their nest earlier that day. Whoever was up there now must be close to their young.

The flickering light continued for several minutes. Now and then one could make out a shadow moving across the opening, but the distance made it impossible to distinguish any further detail. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the light vanished. The tower lay dark once more.

Holmes made no movement to go nearer. On the contrary, he seemed to become even more attentive.

"We wait," said he quietly.

So, we stood there. I do not know precisely how long. Perhaps ten minutes. Perhaps a little more. Time felt longer in the darkness beneath the trees, while the owls continued their uneasy circling over the tower. At last, the silence was broken by a new sound. The heavy tower door was opened. We could now make out a figure stepping onto the path in front of the church. The person turned and stood for a moment by the door. Even at that distance we could hear the metallic sound of a key in the lock.

"He is locking it behind him," I whispered.

The figure then began to walk through the darkness. At first, I thought the person was on his way toward the vicarage. The direction seemed to point that way, and I even had time to imagine that the vicar might have had some innocent errand in the tower. But after a few minutes the figure altered course and continued instead along the churchyard wall.

Holmes moved after him at once. We followed at a distance without losing sight of the figure. It was still too dark for us to recognize his face,

but the person moved with the assurance that comes only from knowing the ground thoroughly. When at last he reached a small house at the edge of the churchyard and disappeared inside, I no longer needed to ask who lived there. It was Elias Crow's house.

We stood for a moment in the darkness, looking at the closed door. Far above us, from the bell tower, came another cry from one of the owls.

"It must almost certainly have been Elias," said I.

Holmes kept his eyes fixed upon the house.

"Yes," he replied thoughtfully. "At any rate, that is the conclusion which someone evidently wishes us to draw."

That remark remained with me all the way back to the vicarage.

At the Breakfast Table

The following morning Holmes was unusually silent at breakfast. He appeared only half interested in his food, and it was not until the vicar poured another cup of coffee that he laid down his knife and fork and announced that he wished to make a further examination of the bell tower.

The vicar looked at him in surprise.

"Have you not already seen what there is to see up there?"

"On the contrary," Holmes replied. "I believe we have only begun."

He then told him of the light we had observed the previous evening and of the figure that had left the tower after dark. The vicar listened attentively, though he could of course offer no explanation.

"So you believe someone was up there?"

"It is possible," said Holmes. "And if that is so, any traces will be easier to find now than a week hence."

The vicar at once gave him permission to continue the investigation, though he made it equally clear that he preferred to remain on the ground this time.

The Secret in the Bell Tower

Shortly afterward, therefore, Holmes and I once more found ourselves upon the old stone stair that wound up through the bell tower.

Even before we reached the upper chamber, it became evident that the owls remembered us. The strange sounds which the day before had greeted us only near the top began much earlier now. Wingbeats echoed between the walls, and several times the hoarse cries sounded so close that the echo seemed to come from every side at once. When we reached the final steps, one of the adult birds swept past us with such speed that I instinctively ducked my head.

I began in earnest to understand how Elias Crow might have come home with scratches and bruises.

When we stepped into the bell chamber, the birds' resistance became still more vigorous. Both adult owls now circled about us with loud protests, and more than once I had to raise my umbrella like a shield between myself and the powerful wings. I remember one passage in particular, when one of the birds struck the cloth of the umbrella with such force that for a moment, I felt less like a doctor than an infantryman under fire. Holmes, by contrast, appeared wholly unaffected by the commotion.

While I occupied myself with the aerial defense, as he later called it, he began methodically to examine the tower chamber once more. His attention quickly centered upon the areas where we had noticed the strange tracks in the dust the previous day. Slowly he moved through the room, sometimes kneeling, sometimes standing quite still for several seconds at a time while he studied the masonry. Suddenly he stopped.

I had just fended off another too-near sweep of wings and therefore did not at first see what had captured his attention. On the floor close to the outer wall lay a small heap of pale plaster. To me it looked merely like one more of the many remnants that time had left in the old tower, but Holmes regarded it with an interest that at once stirred my curiosity.

"Do you see the difference, Watson?"

I was obliged to admit that I did not.

"This plaster is newer than the rest."

Now that he pointed it out, I began to see what he meant. The pale material looked fresher and cleaner than the dust that covered the remainder of the chamber. Holmes then followed the wall upward with his

eyes. In several places small threads of dust clung to the cobwebs between the stones, as though something had recently disturbed them. Slowly he continued his examination upward toward the roof structure, until he stopped beneath a group of large stones set high among the beams.

At first glance they looked no different from the others. But as I studied them, I began to have the sense that something was not quite right. A few of the stones appeared very slightly displaced in relation to the rest of the wall.

Holmes drew an old wooden crate beneath the place.

"Interesting," he murmured.

"Another clue?"

"Yes."

He pointed to the surface of the crate. The natural layer of dust had been worn away precisely where a person would place his feet in order to stand upon it.

"I am hardly the first to have used it for this purpose."

A moment later he was standing upon the crate and carefully examining the stones. At first nothing happened. Then one of them yielded very slightly.

I saw Holmes pause. Then he slowly drew the stone free. Behind it opened a dark cavity. I must admit that I was entirely speechless. Even if I had spent the rest of my life in that tower, I doubt whether I should ever have discovered the hiding place.

The Lost Treasure

Holmes carefully thrust his hand into the darkness. A moment later he drew it out again. In his palm lay several old gold coins. They gleamed faintly in the light and bore a striking resemblance to the coin we had seen at the landlord's the previous evening.

But it was only when Holmes had turned the wooden crate on its side and raised the lamp toward the cavity that the full extent of the discovery became clear to us. Behind the wall lay not merely a few coins. There were dozens. Among them one could see the remains of small leather pouches, rusted fittings, and other objects which time had almost

dissolved. Farther in lay the outline of something larger: the remains of a small chest, its wood long since in the process of decay.

Around us the owls continued their excited cries, but for the first time I scarcely seemed to hear them. I stood only gazing into the hidden chamber. Suddenly several of the village stories appeared to acquire meaning. Yet at the same time, the discovery raised far more questions than it answered.

Holmes let the light of the lamp rest for a final moment upon the old coins before he slowly stepped down again.

"Now we know what lies in the tower, Watson."

I nodded.

"Yes."

Holmes looked once more into the dark cavity.

"The next question is far more difficult."

"What question?"

His gaze passed from the treasure to the dusty floorboards and then upward toward the nest among the beams.

"Who knew of it before us?"

The descent from the tower was considerably quicker than the ascent. Not because the owls had become any more hospitable, but because Holmes had now found what he was seeking.

When we reached the landing where the vicar and the sexton were waiting, both men rose at once.

"Well?" asked the vicar. "Did you find anything?"

I saw a brief glance pass between Holmes and me.

"Yes," said Holmes.

There was something in his tone which made the vicar understand at once that the answer was more serious than he had expected. The sexton looked curiously from one to the other.

"What did you find?"

Holmes looked first at the vicar.

"I believe we should speak alone for a moment."

Shortly afterward we stood outside the church, where the sexton had discreetly withdrawn. The vicar regarded us with growing uneasiness.

"You are almost making me nervous, Mr. Holmes."

"That is not my intention."

Holmes took out one of the gold coins and let it rest in his palm.

The vicar stared at it.

"A coin?"

"A gold coin."

Holmes then told him briefly of the hidden cavity in the wall, the displaced stones, and the collection of coins that still lay concealed high up in the bell tower. I do not believe I had ever seen Vicar Bellamy so speechless.

He looked first at the coin, then up toward the tower, and then back at Holmes.

"You mean..." he began.

"Yes."

"There is a treasure up there?"

"There are at least the remains of one."

The vicar slowly removed his spectacles and rubbed his eyes.

"It is quite unbelievable."

For a moment he merely stood and stared toward the bell tower, as though he were seeing it for the first time.

"And it has lain there all this time?"

"So, it appears."

The vicar gave a low whistle.

"My good Lord."

Holmes allowed him a moment to absorb the news before he continued.

"There is, however, one thing I must ask of you."

The vicar looked up.

"What is that?"

"That you tell absolutely no one."

"No one?"

Holmes's voice was calm, but firm.

"Not the sexton. Not the parish council. Not your wife."

The vicar raised his eyebrows.

"Not even my wife?"

"Especially not your wife."

I noticed the faintest smile on the vicar's face.

Holmes returned the coin to his pocket.

"We do not yet know who knows of the treasure. We do not know who visited the tower at night. And we do not know why coins have appeared around the village over the years."

The vicar nodded slowly. He had plainly begun to understand.

"If the news gets out..."

"...then we risk warning that person," Holmes finished.

For a moment there was silence between us.

At last, the vicar extended his hand.

"You have my word."

Holmes accepted the handshake.

"That is all I require."

When shortly afterward we walked back toward the vicarage, I could not help turning several times to look back at the old bell tower. It looked exactly as it had the day before. The same old stones. And yet the building now seemed transformed. For we knew that behind its walls lay a secret that had survived generations of vicars, sextons, and villagers.

The Parish Records

The morning after the discovery in the bell tower was gray and still. A fine mist lay over the fields around Marshfield, and even the bell tower seemed less dominant than usual, as though the weather had subdued both the village and its old legends.

After breakfast Holmes had asked the vicar for access to the church's old papers and records. The request seemed almost to apologize for itself before it had been fully made, and the vicar smiled rather ruefully as he led us up a narrow stair to the attic above the vicarage.

"I am afraid you will be disappointed, Mr. Holmes," said he. "Most of the material consists of baptismal registers, land transfers, accounts, and that sort of thing. Village life is seldom as exciting as people imagine."

Holmes answered only with a nod.

The attic proved to contain a small archive room, where dusty boxes and registers were stacked along the walls. The air had that peculiar smell of old paper, leather, and dry wood which is found only in places where documents have been permitted to rest undisturbed for generations.

I remember that it struck me that, in a sense, we were standing within the village's memory. Here lay the traces of people long dead. Baptisms, marriages, deaths, transactions, quarrels, and reconciliations. Small fragments of lives which survived only because someone had written them down.

While Holmes at once set about examining the material with his customary thoroughness, I found myself more interested in the little histories that emerged along the way. The vicar knew many of them and willingly elaborated whenever a name or an event caught his attention.

We read, among other things, of a fire that had nearly destroyed the church more than a century earlier. Another register mentioned a vicar who was said to have disappeared during a journey and never been found again. In several places there were descriptions of old quarrels between families whose descendants now lived peacefully side by side, no longer knowing the cause of the enmity.

These tales interested me far more than the dry accounts, but Holmes appeared to listen with only half an ear. From time to time, he asked a question or requested a particular register, but it was clear that he was searching for something quite definite.

An Old Robbery

Time passed. The rain began softly to drum upon the roof. I had just begun to doubt whether the investigation would lead to anything when Holmes suddenly stopped. He was bent over a large register with yellowed pages, and for the first time that morning I saw the familiar concentration appear upon his face.

"Hm."

It was not much, but I knew the sound.

"Have you found something?" I asked.

Holmes did not answer at once. Instead, he turned back several pages and read one passage again.

"Vicar," said he then. "Do you know the name Nathaniel Harrow?"

The vicar frowned.

"Harrow?"

He considered.

"No. Not immediately."

Holmes pushed the register toward us.

"That is hardly surprising. He died about a hundred years ago."

I leaned forward. The document described a man named Nathaniel Harrow, a merchant, moneylender, and owner of several trading vessels, who by all accounts had been among the richest men in the district in his day.

But it was not his wealth that had secured him a place in the church archives. It was what had happened to it. Holmes had already found several documents concerning the same matter, and he now laid them side by side upon the table. Slowly the picture began to form.

Approximately a century earlier, Harrow had been the victim of an extensive robbery. A considerable portion of his fortune had disappeared. In the papers it was referred to as his gold reserve, and the amount had evidently been large enough to attract attention far beyond Marshfield. The more we read, the more remarkable the story became. Witnesses had been questioned. Suspects had been arrested, and several farms had been searched. To all appearances the investigation had continued for several years.

"It must have been a sensation at the time," said I.

"It was," Holmes replied without lifting his eyes.

He turned another page.

"Listen to this."

He read aloud a passage describing how the authorities had repeatedly attempted to locate the missing fortune, without result. No one could explain where the gold had gone. No one was convicted. And most important of all: the money was never found.

Silence fell in the small archive room.

I looked over at Holmes. He sat with his eyes fixed upon the documents before him. Slowly he took one of the old gold coins from his pocket and let it rest between his fingers. This was not merely a collection of old coins. It might very well be the remnant of a robbery that had remained unsolved for an entire century.

At last Holmes turned to the vicar.

"Had you known of this matter before we found it?"

The vicar picked up the register and leafed thoughtfully through the pages.

"Only very slightly."

He slowly shook his head.

"I vaguely remember my grandfather once telling me of a great robbery when I was a boy. But it was already an old story then."

He smiled a little.

"A hundred years is a long time, after all."

His gaze moved down over the names in the documents.

"Those involved have long since died. Their children as well."

He set the register down.

"But you are right in one respect. It must have been a very dramatic affair in its day."

"So, it appears," said Holmes.

"What actually surprises me," the vicar continued, "is how thoroughly the matter was pursued. One often imagines that the legal system was simpler then."

He pointed to the many reports.

"But here one can see interviews, inquiries, and trials extending over several years."

"Yes," said Holmes quietly. "They searched for a very long time."

He sat again for a moment in silence, letting his fingers move along the edge of the old coin that lay before him upon the table.

"Perhaps," said he thoughtfully, "they merely searched in the wrong place."

The vicar looked at him inquiringly.

Holmes leaned back.

"We now know that old gold coins have appeared in Marshfield over many years."

"That is true."

"And we know that we have just found a collection of old gold coins hidden in the bell tower."

The vicar nodded slowly.

"Yes."

"Do you know whether anyone has previously connected the two facts?"

The vicar considered.

"No."

He shook his head.

"Never."

A faint smile appeared.

"To be honest, I do not believe anyone in the village ever thought so far."

He pointed to the coin.

"Most probably regarded them simply as curious finds."

"Interesting."

The vicar leaned forward.

"Do you really believe there can be a connection?"

Holmes did not answer immediately. Instead, he raised the coin and regarded it in the light from the attic window. Then he placed it upon the document before him.

"We have a hidden treasure of old gold coins in the bell tower."

Then he placed his hand upon another of the old case papers.

"And we have a village in which precisely the same type of coin has appeared singly over many years."

His gaze moved from me to the vicar.

"It would be a remarkable coincidence if the three things had nothing to do with one another."

I was obliged to admit that the logic was difficult to resist. And while the rain continued its soft drumming upon the roof, the old story of

Nathaniel Harrow's vanished fortune suddenly began to feel far less remote than before.

The Secret of Elias Crow

That same evening Holmes and I once more visited Elias Crow's little house by the churchyard. The sun was sinking behind the fields, and the last golden light lay across the headstones and the old walls of the church. I had expected Holmes to be grave, perhaps even accusatory, but to my surprise he seemed unusually relaxed. He walked with his hands behind his back and spoke of the weather for most of the way, as though we were on our way to an ordinary friendly call.

When Elias opened the door, however, something curious occurred. The old man looked first at Holmes. Then at me. And then he knew. I cannot explain how I saw it, but there could be no doubt. Neither of us had spoken a word, and yet he seemed at once to understand why we had come. For a moment he stood in the doorway. Then he silently stepped aside.

"Come in."

We followed him into the little parlor where we had visited him before. The evening light fell through the window, and for a while none of us spoke. Only when we had seated ourselves did Holmes put his hand into his pocket and lay a single gold coin upon the table between us.

The light caught the metal. Elias stared at the coin. Slowly he leaned back in his chair. He did not attempt to explain himself. He did not attempt to deny anything. Instead, he gave the faintest nod, like a man who, after many years of silence, has at last met the moment he has long known would come. Nearly half a minute passed before he spoke.

"So you found it."

Holmes nodded.

The old man closed his eyes for a moment. To my surprise, he did not seem crushed. On the contrary, he seemed relieved. When he opened his eyes again, the first thing he said was:

"I did not steal it."

Holmes's reply came calmly and without the slightest hesitation.

"I am aware of that."

Elias looked up quickly.

"You know that?"

"Yes."

Holmes leaned forward slightly.

"We found the account of the robbery in the old church archives. It took place almost a hundred years ago. The men who committed the crime have been dead for many years."

I saw the tension leave the old man's face. It was clear that this, more than anything else, had troubled him.

"Thank you," said he quietly.

Then he fell silent again. Holmes did not interrupt. He knew that the rest must come of its own accord. And so it did.

"I found it by accident," said Elias after a time.

His gaze still rested upon the coin on the table.

"It must be more than thirty years ago."

He smiled faintly at the memory.

"I was working at the church then. I did a little of everything. Tended the churchyard, repaired fences, cut the grass, helped the sexton, and took care of the small things no one else thought about."

He paused briefly.

"One day I was working up in the bell tower."

I could almost see the scene as he described it.

"There were some stones that seemed loose. I thought they might need securing. When I examined them more closely, one of them gave way."

His voice grew lower.

"And behind it I found the cavity."

He slowly shook his head.

"At first I did not believe it."

His eyes sought ours.

"There was a chest in there. Or the remains of one. And the coins."

A faint smile appeared.

"I believe I sat staring at them for nearly an hour."

He told us how he had said nothing to anyone. Not to the vicar. Not to the village. Not even to his own wife. In the beginning he had merely visited the hiding place from time to time in order to assure himself that it truly existed.

"It sounds foolish now," said he. "But sometimes I went up there only to look at it."

He shrugged.

"It was like knowing that there existed a secret in the world known only to me."

Then his face grew serious.

"Then my wife fell ill."

The room became still.

"The money did not suffice. My pay at the church was modest in those days. We managed, but only just."

He looked again at the coin.

"So, I took one."

His voice was almost a whisper.

"Only one."

He told us how he had convinced himself that no one owned the money any longer. That no one was searching for it. That no one would miss a single coin after so many years.

"And nothing happened."

There was no self-pity in his voice.

"Then it became easier."

He sat for a long while without looking at us.

"Not many. Not often."

His eyes flickered briefly.

"But nevertheless."

Some years passed without his taking anything. In other years he took a single coin, or two. When times were difficult, he took a little more.

"I never became rich."

He smiled wearily.

"Nor was that ever the intention."

Then he suddenly laughed softly.

"But I kept poverty at bay."

For the first time that evening warmth returned to his face.

"Do you remember the story of the horses in the neighboring town?"

I looked at Holmes at once.

It was precisely the story the landlord had mentioned.

"That was me," said Elias.

Now he smiled almost openly.

"I had dreamed of those horses for years."

He shook his head.

"Ordinarily I could never have afforded them."

He leaned back.

"That was how some of the coins came into circulation."

The evening light had almost vanished now, and in the little parlor the old man sat quietly for a moment, like one who had borne a secret alone for many years and had at last been permitted to lay it down.

Silence followed Elias Crow's long account. The lamp on the table cast its warm light across the walls, while the evening darkness slowly gathered outside the windows. The old man sat with his hands folded before him and looked at the coin that still lay upon the table between us. It seemed to me that in the space of a few hours he had grown noticeably older. Perhaps it was not the years, but rather the relief of at last setting down a secret which he had carried alone through so much of his life.

Holmes had listened without a single interruption. He remained silent for a long while before asking his next question.

"And the stories about the owl?"

Elias raised his eyes and smiled faintly.

"Yes, I suppose I must take my share of the responsibility for those as well."

He leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling for a moment, as though searching for the proper words.

"Many of the stories began with me. Not because I wished to deceive anyone, but because I discovered that they had a useful effect. People kept away from the tower. Once a man had heard a few stories about

the church's secrets and the owl that guarded them, there were not many who cared to go up there alone."

He shrugged with an almost apologetic smile.

"And the fewer people who went up there, the safer I felt."

I could not help asking the question which Holmes seemed deliberately to leave unspoken.

"But why did you not stop at some point? Why did you not turn over the treasure?"

Elias looked at me for a long while before answering.

"I truly do not know."

He said it so honestly that it was impossible not to believe him.

"In the beginning it was only a secret. Later it became my secret. And after many years..." He hesitated. "...after many years it became, in a strange way, my treasure as well."

His gaze drifted toward the window.

"I know how that sounds. But time does strange things to men. When one has lived with something long enough, one begins to regard it as a part of oneself."

He then told us of the many years during which he had been able to visit the hiding place without difficulty. There had always been owls in the tower, he explained, but none of them had shown the slightest interest in him. He could go up and down as he wished, take a single coin now and again, and leave the rest where it lay. So it had been for decades.

"But then the new owl came," said he with a crooked smile.

I immediately remembered the large bird we ourselves had met among the beams.

"And soon afterward it found itself a mate. Before I knew it, there was a nest up there. Then came the young, and suddenly the tower was no longer mine."

He touched the mark near his ear.

"At first I thought little of it. But each time I went up there, the birds grew more aggressive. In the end I could scarcely approach the nest without being attacked."

A gleam of humor appeared in his face.

"I suppose it was their way of telling me that I was no longer welcome."

Holmes still sat silent. He seemed to be weighing every word the old man had spoken. Only after some time did he lean back and say:

"So the owl never guarded the treasure."

Elias laughed quietly.

"No."

He shook his head.

"It only guarded its young."

There was something so simple and self-evident in that explanation that all three of us remained seated for a moment without saying more. The stories which had surrounded the tower for generations had grown out of human imagination. The birds had merely done what birds always do.

Shortly afterward we took our leave. Elias accompanied us to the door, and when Holmes and I stepped out into the cool evening air, darkness had almost entirely fallen. We walked slowly through the village, speaking little. The bell tower rose above the rooftops like a dark shadow against the night sky, and somewhere up there the owls were probably still beside their nest.

Only when we reached the churchyard wall did I break the silence.

"What do we do now?"

Holmes did not answer at once. He stopped for a moment and let his gaze rest upon the upper openings of the tower, where we had earlier seen the birds come and go.

"It is not a simple question, Watson."

I understood what he meant. Elias Crow was not the robber. That crime lay a century in the past. But neither was he innocent. He had taken from the treasure for many years, hidden the truth, and allowed the legends to grow around him.

Holmes continued a few more steps before he spoke again.

"The curious thing about this case is that the treasure was never the true secret."

I looked at him inquiringly.

He cast another glance toward the tower.

"Some secrets are not preserved by stones, Watson."

He paused.

"They are preserved by men."

The rest of the way back to the vicarage we walked in silence, while the bell tower slowly disappeared behind us in the darkness.

The Explanation

The following day Holmes asked the vicar to gather some of the central figures of the village at the vicarage. The vicar did so with great care. By the time afternoon came, the large sitting-room was filled with people who had all, in one way or another, been part of the affair. The vicar and his wife received the guests, and the latter had provided coffee, tea, and an impressive selection of homemade cakes, which quickly helped to create a far more informal atmosphere than one ordinarily associates with the solving of a mystery.

Present, of course, were the vicar himself, the sexton, the shopkeeper, the landlord, and the village doctor. Several of the older inhabitants of Marshfield had also found their way to the vicarage, while Elias Crow sat somewhat apart near one of the windows. Holmes and I were the last to arrive, and when the coffee had been poured and the first murmur of conversation had died away, Holmes slowly rose from his chair.

The room soon fell silent.

"When your vicar, Mr. Bellamy, came to me in Baker Street," said he, "the matter was presented as a story about an owl."

A few of the villagers smiled.

"An owl which was said to foretell misfortune, to guard the secrets of the church, and perhaps even to punish those who had done wrong."

There were one or two subdued chuckles around the table.

"I must confess that I do not, as a rule, take any great interest in omens, curses, or superstition."

Now even the vicar smiled.

"But one detail caught my attention."

Holmes let his gaze move around the room.

"Why Elias Crow?"

Several people instinctively turned toward the old sexton.

"If the owl had simply been aggressive, it would have attacked many people. If it had merely been defending its territory, the attacks would have been more random. Yet again and again I heard the same story. It was Elias who had the scratches. Elias who bore the marks. Elias whose hats were torn."

The village doctor nodded.

"That is correct."

Holmes continued.

"When Watson and I visited the bell tower, we soon found the explanation for the first part of the mystery."

He now told them of the two adult owls, the nest high among the beams, and the many young birds which we had heard but could scarcely see. Several of those present listened with great interest, and some exchanged surprised glances.

"The birds were not aggressive out of malice," Holmes explained. "They were merely doing what any parent would do. They were defending their offspring."

"That sounds almost reasonable," observed the landlord.

"It is reasonable," said Holmes.

There were several nods around the table.

"So, the owl was never a curse?" asked one of the older men.

"No," Holmes replied. "It was merely an owl."

Laughter briefly spread through the room, and the atmosphere became noticeably lighter. But Holmes did not allow the pause to last long.

"That, however, explained only half the matter."

His voice grew serious again.

"For even if the birds were defending their nest, one question remained."

He turned slightly toward Elias.

"Why did Elias Crow have to come so close to it again and again?"

Now the room became still. The old sexton sat without raising his eyes. Holmes continued calmly.

"That question led me back to the bell tower. It led me to the strange tracks in the dust, to the nocturnal visits to the tower, and to the disturbance which Watson and I observed from the churchyard."

I noticed how several of those present now leaned forward in their chairs. The shopkeeper had entirely forgotten his coffee. The sexton sat with his arms folded, staring intently at Holmes. One by one, every eye in the room began to turn toward Elias Crow.

The old man still said nothing. He sat quietly with his hands folded before him, like a man who already knew the rest of the story. Holmes allowed the silence to rest over the gathering for a moment.

"It was only when we discovered why Elias visited the tower that we began to understand what the owl had truly revealed."

And with those words the whole room became so still that one could hear the clock ticking on the wall behind the vicar's chair.

Holmes let the silence linger for a moment before he continued. He described our second visit to the bell tower and told how the agitated birds had once again tried to drive us away from their nest. Several of those present smiled at the thought that the feared guardian of the church's secrets had in reality been nothing more sinister than a pair of very dutiful parents. Holmes went on to describe the tracks in the dust, the fresh plaster by the wall, and the loose stones which had finally attracted his attention.

"Behind those stones," said he calmly, "we found a cavity."

At the same time, he put his hand into his pocket and laid one of the gold coins upon the table before him. A murmur at once passed through the room. I noticed several of the older men leaning forward in their chairs, while the shopkeeper stared at the coin with the expression of a man who had seen an old ghost.

"Why..." said he, fumbling quickly in his pocket. A moment later he produced his own coin and laid it beside Holmes's. "It is the same."

The two coins now lay side by side upon the table, and the resemblance was so plain that no one could doubt it.

"Those are the old coins!" cried the landlord.

"Indeed, they are," said one of the older men.

Even the vicar leaned forward and examined them in astonishment.

Holmes allowed them a moment to study the discovery before continuing. He told them of the cavity, the remnants of the old leather pouches, the rusted fittings, and the almost decayed chest which still lay hidden behind the masonry.

"To all appearances," said he, "it has lain there for nearly a hundred years."

Silence fell once more. This time it was heavier. Not because anyone was afraid, but because everyone was beginning to understand what the discovery meant.

When Holmes then turned to Elias Crow, he did so without the slightest hint of accusation. Indeed, I believe most of those in the room had already understood that he did not regard the old sexton as a criminal. He looked at him with the calm interest one shows a man whose story has not yet been fully told.

"Mr. Crow," said he simply.

That was enough. Elias nodded slowly and rose. I remember the moment distinctly. Not one person in the room interrupted him. Not one voice was heard. All waited.

"It is true," said he. "I found the treasure."

His voice was calm, almost relieved.

He then told his story. Of the work in the bell tower many years before. Of the loose stones and the moment when he had looked into the cavity and seen the coins glimmering in the darkness. He spoke of his wife, of her illness, and of the narrow circumstances that had shaped their lives. Of the first coin he had taken. Only one. Only because he believed that no one owned the money any longer, and because need had proved stronger than conscience.

As he spoke, one could feel that many of those present were listening not merely to an explanation, but to an entire life. He described how the years had passed. How the first coin had made the next easier. Not many at a time, he emphasized, and never enough to make him wealthy. Only enough to keep poverty from the door.

When he came to the story of the horses in the neighboring town, a few smiles even spread around the table.

"Yes," said he with a small laugh. "That story was true enough."

Several nodded. They plainly remembered it. And when at last he came to the stories of the owl, he lowered his eyes a little.

"I suppose it was I who gave many of them life."

He explained how he had never wished to deceive anyone for amusement, but how he had quickly discovered that the stories served a purpose. The more people spoke of the church's secrets and of the owl that guarded them, the less inclined they were to climb the tower.

"And that suited me well enough," said he with weary honesty.

When at last he sat down again, silence returned to the room. But this time it was a different silence. It was not the silence that follows a revelation. It was the silence that follows understanding. The coffee on the table had gone cold. The clock on the wall continued its steady ticking. No one seemed in any hurry to speak.

I looked around the gathering. The sexton stared down at the tabletop with a thoughtful expression. The village doctor sat with his fingers folded before him. The shopkeeper still rested his hand upon his old coin. The vicar sat silent, looking across at Elias. And in the midst of them sat the old sexton himself. Not as a man who had just been exposed, but as a man who had at last told the truth. It seemed to me in that moment that the decision no longer belonged to Sherlock Holmes.

It belonged to the village.

The Judgment of Marshfield

For some time after Elias Crow's confession no one spoke. The silence in the room was not hostile, but reflective. It was clear that most of those present were trying to reconcile the man they had known for many years with the secret that had just been revealed.

At last, it was the sexton who rose. He stood for a moment with his hands behind his back and looked across at Elias.

"I do not quite know what to think," said he honestly. "On the one hand, you ought to have told someone. I think we may all agree on that."

Several nodded.

"But on the other hand, it was not you who stole the money."

He shrugged.

"You found it."

Then he sat down again.

Shortly afterward the shopkeeper rose.

"I must admit that much makes sense now."

He smiled crookedly.

"The old coins, the stories, all the rumors."

He looked toward Elias.

"It was wrong to take from the treasure. You know that better than anyone, I am sure."

Elias nodded silently.

"But if you had truly wished to enrich yourself, you could have done so many years ago."

The shopkeeper gestured around the room.

"We all know you. You never became rich. You never bought great lands. You never built yourself a mansion."

There was subdued laughter.

"Quite the contrary."

He sat down again.

The landlord was next.

"I have known Elias longer than I care to admit."

This brought a few more smiles.

"And I find it hard to see him as a criminal."

He considered.

"A man with a bad secret, perhaps. But not a criminal."

Now several of the older villagers began to add their voices. One of them, a former farmer with a voice like old leather, struck his hand upon the table.

"We did not pay him much, either."

There were murmurs of agreement.

"That is true."

"He worked at the church almost all his life."

"And without complaint."

Another shook his head.

"That does not make it right."

"No," answered the first. "But neither does it make it altogether wrong."

The discussion continued for some time. No one attempted to excuse what Elias had done. Elias least of all. Yet at the same time there was no one who could bring himself to regard him as an ordinary thief. Gradually a common opinion began to take shape.

At last, the vicar looked around the room.

"Are we agreed on one thing?"

All turned toward him.

"That no one wishes to report Elias Crow."

There were sounds of agreement around the table. The vicar nodded.

"And that the remaining treasure should be recorded and handed over to the proper authorities."

"A museum would be appropriate," said the village doctor.

"Yes."

"That would be right."

"Then the story can be properly told as well."

Several nodded.

The Truth About the Owl

When the decision seemed to have been made, the shopkeeper leaned back and smiled.

"And the owl may keep the tower, then."

The laughter that followed was the first wholly untroubled laughter of the afternoon. Even Elias smiled.

Holmes, who had until then remained silent, now slowly rose.

"It seems to me," said he, "that most of us were mistaken about the owl."

He let his gaze pass through the room.

"But only in part."

Several looked at him inquiringly.

"It did not guard any treasure."

He paused briefly.

"But it did guard its nest."

Smiles spread once more around the table.

"And precisely because it did so, it prevented continued access to the bell tower. It revealed the nocturnal visits. It drew our attention to Elias Crow. And in that way it led us to a secret which had been hidden for nearly a hundred years."

Holmes cast a final glance toward the old sexton.

"So perhaps the old village legend was not entirely wrong."

Outside the windows one could see the bell tower rising above the village. And high among the old beams two owls were probably still tending their young, entirely unaware that they had just uncovered a century-old secret.

The Departure

The following day Holmes and I left Marshfield.

It was late in the afternoon when the carriage rolled away from the vicarage and set its course through the village toward the station. The summer day was drawing to a close, and dusk was slowly gathering over the fields. The last people still stood outside their houses, and several of them raised a hand in farewell as we passed.

Neither of us spoke much at first.

There was that particular calm over the village which often follows after an old matter has been concluded, and I believe that both Holmes and I enjoyed the silence that comes when there are no longer questions demanding answers.

When we reached the last stretch of the main street, I turned in my seat. The church was still visible behind us. The old bell tower rose dark against the reddish sky, where the sun was just disappearing behind the distant hills. For a moment the tower seemed almost larger than before, as though it had gained a new significance after all that we had learned.

Just then a dark shape glided soundlessly from one of the openings high beneath the roof.

The owl.

It flew over the churchyard and continued out across the fields with the same calm certainty that its predecessors had probably shown for generations.

I followed it with my eyes until it almost vanished in the dusk.

"I doubt the village will ever stop telling stories about it," said I.

Holmes smiled.

"The old guard had no treasure, Watson."

He too looked up toward the bird.

"Only her young."

The carriage continued down the country road. Slowly the church grew smaller. The bell tower sank behind the trees and at last disappeared altogether. Only the red evening sky remained above the fields.

I leaned back and let my thoughts wander, while the rhythmic sound of the wheels carried us toward the station and onward to London. Somewhere behind us, two owls were probably now sitting beside their nest among the old beams, entirely unaware that they had uncovered a secret which human beings had preserved for nearly a century.

And so ended the curious affair of the owl in Marshfield's bell tower—a story which began in superstition and ended in truth, yet which, to my mind, showed that the two sometimes live far nearer to one another than we human beings care to admit.

The Ambitious Rooster

The case of the missing prize rooster came to us in the early days of May, at a time when London had already begun to feel the first touch of summer. The chestnut trees were in bloom along several of the city's broad avenues, and through the open windows of Baker Street one could hear the sounds of the growing traffic mingling with the birdsong from the small gardens behind the row of houses. For most people it was a pleasant season, but for Sherlock Holmes the preceding days had been marked by a restlessness which I had learned to recognize as a sure sign of insufficient intellectual occupation.

Two minor family matters had been resolved with unusual speed, and my friend had now reached that stage of boredom at which he either began playing his violin by the open windows or devoted himself to chemical experiments of a sort that Mrs. Hudson regarded with a mixture of distrust and resignation. When she knocked upon the sitting-room door that morning and announced that a gentleman wished to consult Holmes, I therefore immediately noticed the small spark of interest that appeared in his eyes.

The Gentleman of Surrey

The visitor introduced himself as Mr. Percival Fairchild. He was a man of approximately sixty years of age, yet he carried himself with such erectness and vigor that one might easily have judged him younger at first glance. He was tall and sparely built, with silver-gray hair, a carefully groomed mustache, and a bearing that plainly revealed a man who had spent many years being listened to. His clothing was country attire with-

out being rustic; the dark tweed jacket fitted him impeccably, his boots were of excellent quality and freshly polished, and as he settled into the chair opposite Holmes, I noticed a discreet but expensive watch peeking from beneath his shirt cuff.

There was, in short, nothing about him that resembled the sort of farmer one commonly encounters on the English roads. On the contrary, he struck me as a man who had spent most of his life among offices, boardrooms, or public institutions. Whether he had been an industrialist, a banker, or a civil servant I could not determine, but I felt certain that for many years he had borne responsibility for both money and men

This assumption soon proved not entirely incorrect. During the first few minutes of our conversation, he explained that he had spent most of his adult life in London, where he had built a substantial career before retiring some years earlier. Following his retirement, he had acquired a small property in Surrey, which he modestly described as a hobby farm. It quickly became apparent to Holmes and myself, however, that the description scarcely did the place justice. What may have begun as an occupation to fill the quieter years after a busy professional life had gradually developed into something far more extensive.

His true passion was the breeding of prize poultry.

There was nothing comic in the manner in which he spoke those words. On the contrary, he discussed the subject with the same seriousness and commitment another man might have devoted to politics, art, or science. As he described his birds, I noticed more than once the particular expression of pride that came over his face. It seemed to me that his chickens were not merely animals but the result of years of deliberate effort, careful study, and personal ambition.

It was therefore not difficult to understand why his present problem occupied him so deeply.

Prince Regent

Fairchild leaned slightly forward in his chair, and it seemed to me that his entire demeanor changed as the conversation turned to the bird that

had brought him to Baker Street. Until then he had spoken with the calm self-possession one expects from a well-educated and prosperous gentleman, but now a warmth entered his voice that revealed the matter touched him far more deeply than he had thus far allowed.

"I have bred many birds over the years, Mr. Holmes," he said. "Some good, some less so. But this one..."

He hesitated for a moment, as though searching for the proper word.

"This one is my finest fellow."

I immediately noticed that he did not speak of the rooster as an animal. On the contrary, he referred to him almost as though he were a person. Several times he employed expressions that one would more readily use for a trusted employee or an old friend than for a bird in a poultry yard.

He explained that this particular rooster, who bore the dignified name Prince Regent, had distinguished himself from the beginning in a manner unlike anything he had previously encountered. The bird was unusually attentive to his surroundings. Nothing seemed to escape his notice. He was not intimidated by commotion or by strangers but always maintained an almost remarkable composure. He was confident without being reckless, fearless without being ruthless, and possessed, in Fairchild's opinion, a dignity seldom found among animals.

"One can rely upon him," said Fairchild with a seriousness that made me momentarily forget we were discussing a rooster. "He is not one of those creatures that shrink from difficulties or seek to hide from them. He stands by what he is. He knows what he is and conducts himself accordingly."

As he spoke, I gradually realized that the qualities he emphasized were not merely those he admired in his bird. They were qualities he admired in people. Perhaps even in himself. Confidence, discipline, dignity, loyalty, and courage appeared again and again in different forms, each accompanied by a slight nod, as though he were affirming a truth that stood beyond all disputes.

Gradually the conversation turned to the circumstance that made the bird's disappearance particularly serious. In only a few weeks' time, one of the year's great national poultry exhibitions was to be held, where

breeders from across the country would gather to display their finest stock. Fairchild had entered several birds, including hens and a few other roosters, but it quickly became clear that all of them stood in the shadow of Prince Regent.

"He has reached precisely the right moment," he explained. "The right age, the right size, the right development. Everything has come together exactly as one could wish. If you will permit me to say so, Dr. Watson, a breeder experiences only a handful of occasions in his lifetime when he finds himself in possession of an animal for which everything seems to have fallen perfectly into place."

For a moment his gaze grew distant.

"I had great expectations of him. Greater than of any bird I have ever owned."

Then his expression darkened somewhat, and the pride that had thus far colored his voice gave way to something more somber.

"And that is why it is so incomprehensible, gentlemen. Two days ago, he disappeared."

He allowed the words to hang in the air for a moment.

"He simply vanished. Not a trace. Not a sound. No explanation. He is gone."

For the first time since his arrival, I saw something resembling genuine distress in his eyes. It was not merely the disappointment of a lost prize or the financial value the bird undoubtedly represented, but the far more personal pain of losing something that had, over the years, become part of his life's work.

More Than a Bird Show

As he spoke of the exhibition, his voice gradually grew lighter, and for a time the earlier sorrow was replaced by the enthusiasm which every passionate man feels when describing the world in which his deepest interests find expression.

"You must not imagine, Dr. Watson, that such gatherings are merely about the birds," he said with a slight smile. "Naturally, it is the animals that are judged, and rightly so. The judges assess their size, carriage,

plumage, health, and all the other qualities which distinguish a truly exceptional specimen. But it would be quite wrong to suggest that this is the whole story."

He adjusted a cufflink lightly and leaned back in his chair.

"A prize is also a recognition of the breeder. Every single bird represents years of work. Breeding, selection, study, and careful attention. When a bird wins, it is not the bird alone that is honored. It is also the man who has shaped its line through successive generations."

A gleam appeared in his eyes.

"One naturally displays one's hens and roosters. But one also displays a little of oneself."

He seemed entirely unaware of the small vanity contained in the remark, but I noticed Holmes cast a quick glance in his direction.

"It is a very particular society," Fairchild continued. "Men and women who have devoted decades to their work. One meets old acquaintances, compares results, discusses strains and bloodlines, and takes pleasure in the progress achieved by others. There is competition, of course, but it is competition among people who understand one another."

He paused for a moment before adding:

"And I shall not conceal the fact that I had looked forward to this year's exhibition more than any before it. Prince Regent is the finest animal I have ever owned. Had everything proceeded as expected, he would have been the centerpiece of my collection."

For a moment it seemed to me that he himself could scarcely determine whether he mourned the loss of his rooster or the loss of the triumph he had imagined experiencing through him. Perhaps the two had become so closely intertwined in his mind that one could no longer be separated from the other.

Until now Holmes had listened with scarcely an interruption. He sat back in his chair with his fingertips pressed together before him, while his eyes rested upon our visitor with the particular attentiveness which I knew signified that every word was being registered and weighed. When Fairchild had finished his account of Prince Regent and the forthcoming exhibition, Holmes leaned forward slightly.

The Missing Hen

"Tell me precisely when you last saw the bird."

Fairchild reflected for a moment.

"Two days ago. Early in the morning. I always make a round of the property before breakfast, and I saw him then. There was nothing unusual in his behavior."

"And when was his absence discovered?"

"At midday. I had returned to the house for luncheon when one of my men came to inform me that Prince Regent could not be found."

Holmes nodded.

"So, you saw him in the morning, and a few hours later he was gone."

"Precisely."

"From which enclosure?"

Fairchild described the location, and Holmes proceeded to ask several additional questions concerning the poultry yard, the means of access, and the individuals who regularly worked upon the property. Only when he appeared satisfied with the answers did he come to the question which would later prove far more significant than any of us then suspected.

"Was he the only bird that disappeared?"

Fairchild frowned slightly.

"No. There was also a hen."

"What sort of hen?"

"A white hen."

He gave a slight shrug.

"But she is of no importance."

"Of no importance?" Holmes repeated.

"She was not intended for exhibition. She had no particular value. Merely one of the hens."

I noticed that Holmes did not comment upon the answer but merely nodded slowly, as though setting the information aside among the many other details already occupying his mind.

"Do you yourself have any suspicion as to what may have happened?" he asked after a moment.

Fairchild's face immediately assumed a more serious expression.

"There are several possibilities."

He adjusted his sleeve slightly before continuing.

"As I have already mentioned, there has been considerable interest in this particular bird. Not merely in the breed itself, but in my birds generally and Prince Regent in particular."

He allowed himself a modest smile.

"I have received several offers over the past few months. And not insignificant ones."

He spoke the words with a restraint that, in my opinion, emphasized rather than concealed his pride.

"You must understand, Dr. Watson, that this hobby is far from inexpensive. One invests considerable sums over the years. It is therefore always gratifying to discover that others appreciate the results."

There was something in his tone that led me to suspect that Prince Regent's value might be considerably greater than he wished to admit openly.

"So, you suspect theft?" asked Holmes.

"It is certainly a possibility."

He hesitated.

"But there is another."

For the first time since the beginning of the interview, I sensed genuine agitation in him.

"There exists a certain circle, Mr. Holmes. A circle with which I neither sympathize nor wish to associate."

"Cockfighting?" Holmes suggested calmly.

"Precisely."

Fairchild's voice sharpened.

"I know that people from that world have made inquiries regarding my birds. Not directly, of course, but rumors travel quickly among people who share common interests."

"And you fear?"

"That someone has acquired the foolish notion that a prize-winning rooster must automatically be an excellent fighting bird."

He shook his head firmly.

"It is a misconception. A complete misconception. But that does not mean others may not believe it."

As he spoke, I noticed that Holmes' attention was not directed solely toward the words themselves. He was observing the man. He noted the manner in which Fairchild straightened his back whenever he spoke of his bird, the unconscious way he adjusted his cuffs, and the slight elevation of his chin whenever the conversation turned to Prince Regent's qualities.

These were precisely the sort of small details that Holmes often found more revealing than the answers he received to his questions. At that stage, I had no notion of what it was he had observed, but I could see from his expression that something about our visitor had awakened his particular interest.

At last Fairchild leaned forward with a seriousness that showed he had now reached the true purpose of his visit.

"I naturally hope, Mr. Holmes, that the matter interests you sufficiently for you to undertake it. I will not pretend that it means little to me. The exhibition takes place in only a few weeks, and if Prince Regent is to be found, it must be done quickly. This is not a case that can tolerate lengthy delays."

Holmes nodded calmly.

"You shall have a prompt answer, Mr. Fairchild."

There was something in the manner in which the words were spoken that immediately reassured our visitor. He rose, took up his hat, and thanked us with the same courtesy that had characterized his entire manner. A moment later we heard his firm footsteps upon the stairs.

Shortly thereafter, subdued voices sounded from the landing outside.

Mrs. Hudson was just making her way upstairs with a tray, and Fairchild greeted her with an elegance that would not have been out of place in a diplomat attending a court reception. As he passed her, he inclined his head slightly and offered a compliment, the precise wording of which I did not catch, though it evidently made an impression. When the street door closed behind him, Mrs. Hudson entered the sitting

room wearing a smile that suggested she had not found the encounter disagreeable.

"A most well-mannered gentleman, Mr. Holmes," she remarked.

"Undoubtedly," said Holmes.

Mrs. Hudson left us once more, and silence settled briefly over the room. Holmes stood before the fireplace with his hands behind his back, gazing thoughtfully into the dying embers.

"Remarkable," he said.

"Indeed," I replied. "A valuable bird, an approaching exhibition, possible rivals, illegal gambling. There appears to be no shortage of possibilities."

Holmes slowly shook his head.

"I was not speaking of the case."

"No?"

"I was speaking of the resemblance."

I looked at him questioningly.

Holmes rose and walked to the window, where he stood for a moment observing the traffic below in Baker Street.

"Did you not notice it, Watson?"

"What resemblance?"

He turned halfway toward me.

"The lifted chin. The measured stride. The insistence upon dignity. The absolute certainty that all eyes ought naturally to rest upon him."

I could not help smiling.

At last I understood.

Holmes continued with a dry seriousness that only made the remark more amusing.

"His rooster, according to his own description, is intelligent, fearless, territorial, proud, highly conscious of status, intolerant of rivals, and quite incapable of entering a room unnoticed."

I laughed aloud.

"You make them sound remarkably alike."

"My dear Watson," said Holmes, producing his pipe, "I strongly suspect that Mr. Fairchild has spent years breeding precisely those qualities he most admires in himself."

He lit the pipe and settled back into his chair.

For a moment we both sat in silence.

"And what do you make of the disappearance?" I asked.

"At present?" said Holmes.

He drew slowly upon the pipe.

"Very little."

There followed a brief pause.

"Though I confess that I am rather intrigued by the missing hen."

I looked at him in surprise.

"The hen?"

"Yes."

"Surely the rooster is the important creature."

A faint smile crossed his face.

"Precisely, Watson."

He set the pipe aside and folded his hands before him.

"That is exactly what everyone appears to think."

At Fairchild Farm

The following morning Holmes and I traveled to Surrey in order to conduct our first investigation at the farm itself. The weather was mild and clear, and as the train worked its way through the outskirts of London and onward into the open countryside, my thoughts returned again and again to the case that Mr. Fairchild had presented to us the previous day. Holmes, by contrast, seemed remarkably little inclined to discuss it. He sat with his hands folded over his walking stick, gazing through the carriage window while I outlined the theories that appeared most plausible to me.

To my mind, theft remained the obvious explanation. We were dealing with a valuable animal whose reputation extended well beyond the local district, and which was due to appear at one of the year's largest exhibitions only a few weeks later. Fairchild himself had spoken of substantial

purchase offers and of individuals who had shown an unusual interest in this particular bird. If anyone wished to steal a prize rooster, it was difficult for me to imagine a more obvious target than Prince Regent.

Holmes contented himself with emitting an occasional low murmur which neither confirmed nor contradicted my conclusions. Only after I had developed a lengthy theory involving organized thieves specializing in valuable breeding stock did he turn partially toward me with a faint smile.

"You have already constructed both the crime and the criminal, Watson."

"You do not think it likely?"

"I merely think that we have not yet seen the place."

That was all I could extract from him.

From the station we continued by cab along a series of narrow country roads until Fairchild Farm finally came into view. At first sight, I was struck by how completely the place appeared to reflect its owner. The property was neither large nor impressive in the conventional sense. There were no grand avenues, stately buildings, or extensive fields. Yet everything possessed such order and care that it immediately made an impression. The fences had been freshly painted, the paths meticulously maintained, the hedges trimmed with almost military precision, and even the smallest gates were fitted with gleaming hinges and brass handles that were clearly polished on a regular basis. The poultry houses stood in neat rows, carefully numbered and maintained, and everywhere there prevailed that sort of discipline which arises only when a man with strong opinions about order is permitted to govern a place long enough.

Holmes allowed his gaze to sweep across the yard.

"A place in which even the weeds appear to have been instructed regarding proper conduct," he remarked dryly.

I had scarcely finished smiling at the observation when Fairchild himself emerged from the house to greet us. He appeared genuinely relieved by our arrival and immediately led us away from the yard without the usual preliminary courtesies.

"I am glad you were able to come so quickly, Mr. Holmes," he said. "Something has happened since our meeting in Baker Street. One of my men has made a discovery."

He led us along a narrow farm lane running beside the edge of the property. After several minutes' walk, he stopped at a spot where the grass grew thick along the wheel ruts. A paper bag lay upon the ground with a stone placed on top to prevent the wind from carrying it away.

Fairchild bent down and carefully lifted the bag.

"This was found here yesterday evening."

The Blood-Stained Feather

Inside the bag lay a large tail feather. Even to my untrained eye it was unusually beautiful. Along one side of the shaft were several dark-red stains, and a little earth had caught among the delicate vanes.

Holmes picked up the feather with the same care a surgeon might have applied to a delicate instrument. He held it up to the light, examined the shaft, turned it slowly between his fingers, and studied both the bloodstains and the small injuries near the root.

"Could it have come from your rooster?"

"Without the slightest doubt," replied Fairchild.

"Could it have been naturally shed?"

"Absolutely not."

Holmes let his finger glide along the shaft.

"Then you believe it was torn out?"

"That would be my judgment."

To me, this seemed almost to settle the matter. A valuable rooster had disappeared. Shortly afterward, a bloodstained feather had been found. What could be more natural than to assume that the bird had been stolen or involved in some violent struggle? But Holmes showed no sign of sharing my satisfaction. On the contrary, he began asking a series of questions that struck me as surprisingly practical.

He wished to know precisely where the feather had been found, who had found it, how long it had lain there, what the weather had been like during the preceding days, and whether anyone had touched it before

it was placed in the bag. When Fairchild had answered these questions, Holmes slowly began to examine the area around the spot where it had been discovered.

The farm lane was narrow and uneven. There was a little mud in the wheel ruts and tall grass along the edges, but otherwise nothing remarkable. Holmes moved back and forth across the area with his head bent, while his sharp eyes searched the ground.

I did my best to assist him but was forced at last to admit that I could see nothing whatever.

After several minutes of silent investigation, Holmes straightened himself.

"Curious."

"Because the tracks have disappeared?" I suggested.

He shook his head.

"No, Watson. Because there do not appear ever to have been any."

The answer confused me more than it enlightened me, but before I could inquire further, my attention was drawn to the dog that had followed us since our arrival. It was an elderly sheepdog with an intelligent face and a calm, watchful bearing. It kept constantly near Fairchild, but without appearing nervous or excited.

Holmes had evidently noticed the same thing.

"Is he a good watchdog?"

"Very," replied Fairchild. "He always keeps an eye on the birds. He drives foxes away, and he reacts at once to strangers."

Holmes glanced at the dog, which at that moment stood regarding us with perfect calm.

"And yet he shows no interest in this place."

Fairchild looked surprised.

"No. I had not actually thought of that."

"Curious," said Holmes thoughtfully. "He behaves as though nothing remarkable had ever happened here."

As he spoke, he once more allowed his gaze to travel over the farm lane, the surrounding vegetation, and the peacefully waiting dog. There was nothing in his face to reveal what thoughts occupied him, but I

had known my friend long enough to understand that he had already observed something the rest of us had not yet seen.

We then turned back along the farm lane toward the yard, while Holmes continued to let his eyes move searchingly over the surroundings. Fairchild walked beside us with his hands behind his back, plainly occupied with his own thoughts, and more than once he seemed on the point of saying something, only to change his mind. Not until we had nearly reached the first outbuildings did he stop abruptly.

"There may be one other possibility which I did not mention in Baker Street."

Holmes turned toward him.

"Yes?"

"I do not know whether it is of any significance, but some traveling tradesmen came by a few days ago."

"Tradesmen?"

"Yes. The sort of people who go about the countryside selling kitchenware. Pots, pans, knives, and such things."

He gave a slight shrug.

"I had no interest in their goods."

"But others on the farm perhaps had?"

"My man went over and spoke with them. My wife may possibly have gone to look at their wares as well. I do not really know. I paid little attention to it."

He paused for a moment.

"But I did notice one thing. They seemed dissatisfied when they left. As though they had expected to do better business."

To me, the theory immediately seemed somewhat far-fetched. I found it difficult to imagine a group of traveling sellers who, after an unsuccessful day of trade, would decide to carry off a prize rooster either in revenge or as compensation. Nevertheless, Holmes listened attentively.

"And by which road did they leave the farm?" he asked.

Fairchild pointed without hesitation down the farm lane.

"That way."

It was precisely the same direction in which the feather had been found.

Holmes let his gaze follow the outstretched arm and looked for a moment down the road.

"Indeed."

He said no more.

I had long since learned that this single word could cover anything from the greatest interest to the deepest skepticism, and in this instance, I had the impression that it was the latter. He noted the information with his usual thoroughness, but there was nothing in his face or posture to suggest that the theory had made any particular impression upon him.

Fairchild, however, seemed relieved to have mentioned it.

"It is probably nothing," he said. "But one begins to consider every possibility."

"That is quite natural," Holmes replied kindly.

We continued toward the farm, and while Fairchild spoke further of the traveling sellers, I noticed that Holmes once again cast a glance back toward the peaceful farm lane. It seemed to me that his thoughts still dwelt less upon the possible thieves than upon the strange absence of tracks we had just observed. If a stranger had truly carried off the valuable bird, it seemed odd that neither the earth, the dog, nor the surroundings appeared to have noticed it.

When we reached the area around the poultry houses, I had the definite impression that Holmes was still working with an idea that had not yet fully formed. He said little, but his eyes moved constantly between the various enclosures, the birds, and the small details of the place. Fairchild, who plainly expected a more direct examination of tracks or gates, followed him with growing puzzlement, which soon became outright astonishment.

The Experiment with the Mirror

"Mr. Fairchild," said Holmes suddenly, "would you be so kind as to fetch me a mirror?"

"A mirror?" repeated our host.

"Yes."

I must admit that I was as surprised as Fairchild. There was nothing in the development of the case thus far which, in my opinion, pointed in the direction of mirrors. Fairchild seemed to share my doubt, but after a brief hesitation he disappeared into one of the buildings and returned shortly afterward with a medium-sized mirror, which had probably belonged in a guest room or hallway.

Holmes accepted it without further explanation.

"Now I should like to see the bird that most closely resembles the missing rooster."

Fairchild considered for a moment and led us to one of the enclosures. There he selected an imposing buff Orpington rooster with golden-brown plumage and a powerful build, which immediately distinguished him from the other birds.

"This one comes closest," he said. "The same breed, the same bloodline, and many of the same qualities."

He cast a glance at the bird.

"But you must understand, Mr. Holmes, that Prince Regent is in a class of his own. This bird is good, but he will never reach that level."

Holmes merely nodded and requested that the rooster be placed in one of the larger runs together with several of the hens. When this had been done, he positioned the mirror so that the bird suddenly caught sight of his own reflection.

The reaction came at once.

The rooster froze for a brief second, after which his whole body seemed to explode into activity. His wings spread. His neck stretched forward. His feathers rose, and with a sharp crow he advanced threateningly toward the rival on the other side of the glass. Several times he sprang forward with powerful beats of his wings and struck against the mirror, as though determined to drive the intruder away.

Fairchild observed the scene with a satisfied nod.

"Precisely as expected."

To him, the experiment already seemed concluded.

But Holmes continued to observe.

Nearly a minute passed in which the rooster ceaselessly challenged his silent opponent. Then his behavior gradually began to change. He stopped. His head moved from side to side as he studied the reflection. Then something happened which I had not expected.

Instead of attacking once more, the bird turned away. He walked calmly back to the group of hens. There he placed himself between them and the mirror. Not by chance, but quite deliberately.

Each time one of the hens moved farther forward toward the mirror, the rooster followed and once again took up his position between them and the supposed rival. He still kept an eye upon the reflection, but his attention now seemed directed at least as much toward the hens as toward the intruding rooster.

Holmes watched this development with great interest. I must confess that the meaning of the whole experiment still escaped me.

"I do not quite understand," I said. "What exactly are you trying to prove?"

Holmes continued to look at the bird for a moment before he answered.

"I wished to discover whether we were dealing with a fighter."

He paused.

"Or a guardian."

He would say no more.

Shortly afterward we left the enclosure and continued along the path between the poultry houses. Fairchild was still plainly uncertain what the experiment had proved, and I was little wiser. Only after we had put several hundred yards between ourselves and the run did I turn to Holmes.

"And which was he?"

Holmes stopped and cast a glance back.

The rooster still stood among the hens. The sunlight fell upon his golden plumage as he slowly patrolled along the fence with a dignity that strikingly recalled his owner.

"At present, Watson," said Holmes slowly, "I suspect that distinction may prove rather important."

That was all I got from him that day.

The investigation was by then drawing to its close. Fairchild had shown us around the various poultry houses, explained breeding lines, bloodlines, and the many details which, in his opinion, separated an ordinary bird from a truly outstanding representative of the breed. Although the subject had at first seemed to me somewhat narrow, I was gradually forced to admit that the man's enthusiasm was contagious. Even Holmes had listened more attentively than I would have expected, though I knew that his interest, as usual, was directed less toward the birds than toward their owner.

We had just returned to the yard when Holmes suddenly stopped and turned to Fairchild.

"These cockfights, Mr. Fairchild. Where exactly do they take place?"

The question seemed to surprise our host. His face at once assumed a somewhat uncomfortable expression, and for the first time during our visit he appeared less certain of himself.

"I must emphasize, Mr. Holmes, that I have never been there myself."

"Naturally."

"I know only the rumors."

He hesitated for a moment.

"And if I am to be quite honest, I am fairly certain that I also know some of the men who take part. But it is not something one speaks of openly."

Holmes nodded encouragingly.

"Yet you know where it happens?"

"Yes. Or at least where it usually happens."

He lowered his voice a little, as though the subject itself were improper.

"As I have been told, the fights are usually held on Friday evenings. That circle keeps to the outermost edge of London."

He took out a small notebook and wrote down an address, which he handed to Holmes.

"There."

Then he quickly added, "Not that I approve of it in any way. Quite the contrary. It is a barbarous amusement with which I have no wish to be associated."

"I do not doubt it," said Holmes.

Fairchild nodded, satisfied.

"But as I have already mentioned, someone might very easily have formed the mistaken idea that a bird such as Prince Regent would be suited to that sort of thing."

Holmes slipped the note into his pocket.

"And if your bird were present?"

Fairchild's discomfort vanished at once.

A trace of pride returned to his face.

"Then you would know him immediately."

"Indeed?"

"Without the slightest doubt."

He smiled almost paternally.

"He is larger than most. Better proportioned than any of them. And I should think that at least half the men present would already know his name."

"Prince Regent appears to enjoy a considerable reputation."

Fairchild unconsciously straightened his jacket.

"A reputation entirely deserved."

There was something in the manner in which the words were spoken that made me think of a general speaking of a decorated officer, or perhaps rather of a father speaking of a son whose success he considered his own.

Shortly afterward we took our leave. Fairchild accompanied us to the carriage and stood in the yard as we drove away. When I turned back, I saw him still standing there with his hands behind his back and his gaze fixed upon the poultry houses, as though he hoped the missing bird might suddenly appear among them.

During the first part of our return journey Holmes said very little. He sat silently on the seat opposite me, watching the landscape pass outside the window. I had long since grown accustomed to these periods

of silence, which often signaled that his thoughts were moving far more swiftly than he wished to let me know. For my own part, I was still inclined to believe that we were dealing with a simple theft, perhaps committed by people connected with the circle Fairchild so plainly despised. Yet whenever I tried to turn the conversation in that direction, Holmes contented himself with brief replies or a thoughtful nod.

It seemed to me that his thoughts were revolving around something quite different.

What that was, I had as yet no idea.

The Friday Night Arena

The following Friday Holmes and I set out for the address Fairchild had given us. As we moved farther and farther away from London's more prosperous quarters, the city gradually changed its character. The broad streets and well-kept facades gave way to narrower roads, factory buildings, and rows of dark workers' dwellings whose bricks, through decades of smoke and soot, had taken on almost the same color as the sky above them. The weather did nothing to soften the impression. A low gray covering of cloud hung over the city, and the damp air carried the smell of coal, oil, and iron.

I sat watching the surroundings through the carriage window while my thoughts once again circled Fairchild's missing rooster. It still seemed likely to me that this evening we would either find some concrete trace or perhaps even Prince Regent himself. If the bird had truly been carried off by people connected with the cockfights, this had to be the most obvious place to begin.

Holmes, however, did not appear to share my expectation. He sat silently beside me with his hands folded over his walking stick, only occasionally allowing his gaze to pass over the buildings we went by. What he was thinking I could not determine, but his silence suggested that his mind was still occupied with questions not yet ready to be spoken aloud.

At last, the carriage stopped near an old warehouse of dark brick that stood close by a railway line. A freight train passed in the distance just then, leaving a deep rumble in the air. The building seemed anonymous

and inconspicuous, but in front of it stood several horse-drawn carts, a few cabs, and a couple of rough work wagons, all of which made it plain that the place was far from deserted. Men arrived singly or in small groups and disappeared through a side door without attracting any particular attention. There were no signs. No shouting. No visible activity that might reveal the building's purpose to a casual passerby.

Holmes allowed his gaze to move over the scene.

"Discretion appears to be one of their virtues," he remarked.

We got down and approached the discreet entrance. A man came out just as we reached the door, and without noticing us continued down the street with his hands in his pockets. Then we stepped inside.

I do not know precisely what I had expected to find. Perhaps a dark cellar, some accidental back room, or a hidden refuge for half-criminal types. The sight that met us was therefore surprising.

The room was large and unexpectedly well organized. There were some thirty men inside, and although the atmosphere was rough, a certain order prevailed. Several groups stood around tables and beer crates where money, notes, and beer bottles lay side by side. Cigar smoke drifted along the roof beams, and the constant murmur of conversation filled the room with a low hum. Along the walls stood rows of cages, in which the true principals of the evening were waiting.

The roosters were already excited.

Some crowed in shrill voices. Others threw themselves against the bars or pecked furiously at their neighbors in the adjoining cages. Their feathers glinted in the scant light, and the agitation that seemed to course through them was almost physically perceptible.

I found myself wondering how such aggressiveness was produced in the birds. Whether it was natural, or whether the men around us had, by particular methods, taught them to live in a permanent state of anger.

In the middle of the room lay the fighting pit.

It consisted of a circle of crates stacked to roughly a yard in height. The arena itself measured scarcely more than five yards across. The sight surprised me. I had imagined something far larger. Yet the longer I regarded the construction, the more sense it made. The surroundings were not

meant to impress. All attention was to be fixed upon the two birds that would in turn be released inside.

Our arrival did not go unnoticed. Several heads turned. A couple of conversations died in the middle of a sentence. The natural suspicion of strangers was plain enough.

After a moment, a heavily built man detached himself from the group near the arena and came toward us. His face was broad, his hands large, and the way the other men instinctively made room around him made it clear that he was a person of authority.

He stopped a few paces from us and regarded us with cool eyes.

"Looking for something?"

Holmes did not allow the slightest hesitation to show.

"Not particularly," he said with a slight smile. "We've heard about the sport and thought it might be worth seeing for ourselves."

The man said nothing.

"Perhaps even placing a wager or two."

The last seemed to make the difference.

The suspicion did not entirely disappear, but it was replaced by something more practical.

"First time?"

"Indeed."

The man nodded.

"Well, you're welcome enough."

He then began to explain how the betting worked. It was not a formal system, but rather a series of agreements among the men present, organized around each fight. Sums were called out, accepted or rejected, and within a few minutes everyone seemed to know precisely who had wagered on what.

As he continued speaking about the rules and the structure of the fights, I noticed that the atmosphere around us gradually changed. We were no longer the object of the same suspicious attention. Several of the men returned to their own conversations, and soon we were merely two more faces among the many waiting for the evening's first fight.

Holmes and I found a place behind a pair of men who were seated upon overturned crates close to the edge of the fighting pit. From there we had a clear view of the arena, while at the same time remaining relatively unnoticed ourselves. The atmosphere around us had grown more concentrated. Conversations still continued, but now with that peculiar, subdued intensity which comes over an audience shortly before a performance begins.

Too Proud for the Pit

After a few minutes' waiting, the evening's first fight was announced. Two men stepped forward from opposite ends of the room, each with a rooster tucked under his arm. Even before the birds reached the pit, one could feel their agitation. They stretched their necks toward each other, beat their wings, and gave out short, aggressive sounds, while their owners held them fast with practiced hands.

When they reached the arena, the birds were almost thrown down upon the floor opposite one another.

What happened next took me by surprise.

I had, of course, expected violence, but not with the immediacy and intensity that now unfolded before my eyes. At first the roosters moved for a brief moment around one another, almost like two boxers measuring distance and assessing an opponent. Their heads bobbed back and forth. Their bodies tensed. Then the situation exploded.

Both birds sprang forward at once.

Wings beat through the air. Beaks struck. Spurs tore. Several times they rose nearly a yard from the ground in a confusion of feathers and fury, before landing again and immediately hurling themselves anew into the fight.

Around us the noise rose at once. Men shouted. Some cheered. Others offered advice to the birds as though the creatures could understand every word. Money changed hands, while fresh wagers were made in the very midst of the fight.

I myself was forced to admit that the sight made me uneasy. There was something almost tragic in seeing animals driven into a conflict from

which they plainly could neither withdraw nor escape except through the defeat of one of them.

Holmes, however, seemed only slightly occupied with the fight itself. While my attention was drawn toward the chaotic movements within the arena, I noticed that his gaze rarely rested upon the birds for more than a few seconds at a time. Instead, he studied the audience.

His eyes moved from group to group. He listened, observed, and judged. From time to time he allowed his gaze to travel toward the rows of cages along the walls, as though he expected to catch sight of something in particular. But each time he gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head.

I began to examine the birds more closely myself. None of them greatly resembled the description Fairchild had given us of Prince Regent. Most were smaller and more sinewy in build. Several had a bearing entirely different from that of the heavy and majestic buff Orpington roosters we had seen at the farm. Where Fairchild's birds had radiated calm, dignity, and almost aristocratic self-possession, these creatures seemed nervous, restless, and constantly on edge.

I also noticed that Holmes several times allowed his eyes to rest upon the fighting birds with an expression of growing thoughtfulness. If Prince Regent had truly ended up here, he seemed to be asking himself, why would anyone have chosen him at all? The more I looked at the birds around us, the more reasonable the question appeared. The buff Orpington breed was famous for many things: its size, its appearance, its steady temperament. But none of these seemed to me especially suited to the brutal sport we were now witnessing.

The fight before us continued with undiminished violence, but Holmes already seemed to have reached a preliminary conclusion. He found no trace of Prince Regent. No one whispered his name. No one spoke of a new and unusual bird. None of the cages contained anything that even remotely resembled the famous rooster from Surrey.

And while the crowd shouted around us, and another shower of feathers rose from the arena, I had the distinct impression that Holmes was slowly losing interest in the entire theory of the cockfights.

Holmes had noticed an elderly man standing only a few paces from us. He differed from most of the others present by his composure. Where the others shouted, gesticulated, and discussed wagers, he contented himself with watching the fights with an almost professional attention. His hands were thrust deep into the pockets of a worn coat, and his gaze rarely left the arena.

Holmes gradually moved closer, as though by mere chance.

"Do you happen to know a breeder named Fairchild?" he asked after some time.

The man turned his head slightly and looked at him.

Then he smiled.

"Everyone knows Fairchild."

There was neither warmth nor hostility in his voice. Merely a statement of fact.

"Does he ever bring birds here?" Holmes continued.

The man gave a short laugh.

"Good God, no."

Holmes pretended to be surprised by the answer.

"Indeed?"

"Not in this life."

"And why not?"

The elderly man allowed his gaze to rest upon the arena for a moment, where two new birds were just being set down opposite one another.

"Too proud a bird for the pit."

Holmes' eyes glimmered faintly.

"Indeed?"

"Fairchild's birds are handsome enough. Well kept. Fine feathers. Fine pedigrees."

He gave a slight shrug.

"Aristocrats."

The word was spoken without contempt, but not without irony.

"But they are not fighting birds."

He pointed toward the arena.

"Those birds fight for ribbons."

Then he moved his hand toward the two birds that had just hurled themselves at each other in a cloud of feathers.

"These fight because they cannot help themselves."

The sentence seemed to interest Holmes far more than it ought to have done.

He was silent for a moment while he watched the fight.

"And how, then, does one produce such birds?" he asked.

"They are not produced."

"No?"

"One finds them."

The man nodded toward the cages along the wall.

"You begin with many. Then you sort."

He now explained, with the patience of a man who knew his subject, how the most aggressive birds were selected. Some showed early signs of fighting spirit. Others were discarded. Over months and years, the best were isolated from other birds, provoked, tested, and selected again and again.

"It takes a long time."

"So, it is not merely a matter of size or strength?"

"Quite the contrary."

The man shook his head.

"The difficult thing is not finding the strong ones."

He looked back toward the arena.

"The difficult thing is finding those that never give up."

Holmes listened with an attention I had long since learned to recognize. When he received information of significance, his face often became more expressionless rather than less. Only I, who had known him for so many years, could detect the small sharpening of the eye which told me that a piece of the puzzle had just fallen into place.

Another fight was completed. Another round of wagers was settled. No one mentioned Prince Regent. No one whispered of a new bird from Surrey. No one seemed to know of an unusually large buff Orpington.

At last Holmes leaned discreetly toward me.

"We can go."

I stared at him.

“Already?”

“Yes.”

“But we have scarcely begun.”

He rose.

“There is nothing more to learn here.”

I followed him toward the exit with the feeling that we were leaving the place just as it had become interesting. Only when we stood once more in the cool evening air, and the sound of the trains from the railway mingled with the distant rumble of the city, did I ask the question that had been pressing upon me for the last half hour.

“So, Fairchild’s rooster has never been here?”

Holmes pulled on his gloves before answering.

“No.”

“You seem very sure.”

“I am.”

We began to walk down the street.

After a few steps he continued.

“The interesting question, Watson, is not whether Prince Regent has been here.”

“No?”

“The interesting question is why so many people who actually know the bird seem equally certain that he has not.”

He said no more.

But as we continued through the dark industrial city, I had the growing impression that our visit that evening had not carried us farther from the solution.

Little Duke

The following day Holmes and I returned to Fairchild Farm. This time we had given no notice of our arrival, and as we drove into the yard, we were met by the elderly farmhand whom I had seen the day before. He recognized us at once and politely removed his cap.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," he said. "Mr. Fairchild won't be back until five."

He drew out his pocket watch and glanced at it.

"There's still a couple of hours to go."

To my surprise, Holmes seemed almost pleased by this information.

"Excellent," he said. "Perhaps you can help us instead."

The farmhand looked at him questioningly.

"Tell me something about Prince Regent."

The old man stared at him for a moment, after which a broad smile slowly spread across his weather-beaten face.

"Ah."

He laughed softly.

"You mean Little Duke."

Holmes lifted an eyebrow slightly.

"Little Duke?"

"That's what we call him."

The farmhand laughed again.

"Been calling him that for years."

"Why?"

The man cast a glance toward the house.

"Because he behaves exactly like the owner."

I could not help smiling. It was now the third time within a few days that this comparison had arisen, and each time it seemed to come quite naturally from people who knew both the man and the bird.

"Same walk. Same pride. Same certainty that the whole world ought to make room for him."

Holmes nodded, as though he had merely received confirmation of something he already knew.

Shortly afterward, the farmhand led us to the areas where Prince Regent was normally kept. He showed us the coop, the larger run, and the surrounding enclosures, while Holmes put his questions with an almost casual curiosity.

"Was he always confined?"

"Lord, no."

The farmhand shook his head.

"Every day he got his exercise."

He pointed toward a larger enclosure.

"He'd be taken out there for a few hours."

Holmes studied the area.

"And did he ever escape?"

Another smile appeared on the old man's face.

"More often than Mr. Fairchild would have liked to know."

"Indeed?"

"Oh yes."

He lowered his voice slightly.

"We usually managed to catch him before the master found out."

Holmes looked at him attentively.

"So, he was something of an adventurer."

"That would be one way of putting it."

"Who normally looked after him?"

"Jim."

"Could we speak with him?"

"Of course."

The old man departed in the direction of the cattle sheds, and several minutes later returned with a young fellow of about twenty. Jim had broad shoulders and rough working hands, yet there was something cautious about him, as though he never felt entirely at ease in the company of strangers.

Holmes greeted him kindly and began asking about his daily duties.

It quickly became apparent that Jim had borne the primary responsibility for Prince Regent. Each morning the rooster was moved from his coop into the run, where he could roam freely, and later in the day he was brought back again.

"That was your routine every day?"

"Yes, sir."

"And was it always easy?"

Jim gave a nervous laugh.

"No, sir."

His eyes drifted toward the empty enclosure.

"Little Duke had very strong opinions about his own freedom."

It was obvious that the phrase had been used many times before.

"Strong opinions?" repeated Holmes.

"He wasn't particularly fond of fences."

The young man smiled faintly at the memory.

I noticed that Holmes was now approaching the subject with an almost imperceptible caution.

"The day he disappeared," he said, "was that one of the days he enjoyed his freedom?"

The smile vanished from Jim's face at once.

He looked down.

For a moment he did not answer. I noticed how his hands uneasily found one another in front of him. Holmes regarded him calmly.

"You are afraid Mr. Fairchild will blame you."

Jim raised his eyes.

He said nothing. But after a moment he nodded.

"He's spent years on those birds."

"Yes."

"More years than I can count."

Holmes' voice remained gentle.

"But Prince Regent escaped."

The young man swallowed.

Then he nodded again.

"Only for a few minutes, sir."

"On the day he vanished?"

Jim hesitated once more. This time longer.

Then the answer came.

"Yes, sir."

The words were spoken almost inaudibly.

I saw at once that Holmes had found precisely the information he had been seeking. He did not alter his expression. He merely continued in the same calm tone.

"And then?"

Jim drew a deep breath, like a man who had at last resolved to tell the truth.

“And then he was gone.”

Following a Habit

“And where did he go?” asked Holmes.

Jim hesitated for a moment, as though still considering how much he ought to reveal. At last he pointed toward the farthest end of the property.

“Toward the orchard, sir.”

“The orchard?”

“Yes. He was very fond of going there.”

Holmes nodded slowly.

“Alone?”

The question came so quickly that the young man had no time to conceal his reaction. His gaze flickered for an instant.

“No, sir.”

Holmes continued to look at him calmly.

“The white hen?”

Jim nodded.

“Yes, sir.”

I must confess that the information struck me as curious, but not necessarily important. The hen had from the beginning seemed little more than a footnote to the case, an incidental loss beside the far more significant disappearance of Prince Regent. Yet I immediately sensed that the answer had confirmed something for Holmes. Not because he said anything, but because a sudden purposefulness came over his movements such as I had seldom seen. It was that particular calm which settled upon him whenever a theory ceased to be a theory and began to approach a conclusion.

Without further explanation, he began moving through the area surrounding the run. Jim and the old farmhand followed behind, while I walked beside Holmes, attempting to understand what it was he had perceived.

We crossed a stretch of uneven grass and continued between rows of fruit trees whose branches were already heavy with the new growth of spring. Here and there fallen twigs lay scattered beneath the trees, and the air carried the faint scent of earth and blossoms. Holmes moved forward slowly, his eyes fixed upon the ground.

Suddenly he stopped and bent down to pick something up.

A feather.

It lay half concealed among the blades of grass.

Holmes held it up to the light.

"Jim?"

The young man stepped closer.

For a moment he needed only to look at it.

"That could be his, sir."

"Could be?"

Jim carefully took the feather between his fingers.

"Very likely is, sir."

Holmes nodded and continued onward.

This time even I began to notice the signs he was following. Here and there a few grains of corn lay scattered in the grass. Not many. Merely enough to suggest a direction. Between the trees there were also small patches where the grass had been lightly pressed down. Not the clear tracks a man might have left behind, but rather the sort of discreet signs left by animals when they travel the same route more than once.

Slowly these small signs led us through the orchard. I was beginning to understand that Holmes was not searching for evidence of a crime. He was following a habit.

Ahead of us stood a small machinery shed situated some distance from the other buildings. It was old and somewhat isolated, surrounded by tall grass and almost hidden behind a cluster of low bushes.

The trail led directly toward it.

"You believe he went this way?" I asked.

Holmes paused for a moment without taking his eyes from the shed.

"More than that, Watson."

He pointed toward the faint signs in the grass.

"I think he intended to."

There was something in the way he said it that made me realize we were far closer to the solution than I yet suspected.

At that very moment we heard the sound of wheels upon gravel from the direction of the yard.

Jim stiffened almost immediately.

"Mr. Fairchild," he said quietly.

We all turned. Through the trees we could see a carriage drawing up in front of the house. A moment later Fairchild stepped down. Even at that distance I could see his surprise when he caught sight of us. He had plainly not expected to find either Holmes or myself upon his property, and still less to discover us standing at the farthest edge of the orchard.

Holmes raised a hand.

"Mr. Fairchild!" he called. "Perhaps you would care to join us?"

Fairchild hesitated for a moment and then set off directly toward us. The nearer he came, the more perplexed he appeared.

"Mr. Holmes," he began, "I had no idea—"

"You arrive at a most opportune moment," Holmes replied.

By the time Fairchild reached us, we were all gathered before the little machinery shed. The old farmhand stood with his cap in his hand. Jim still looked slightly nervous. Holmes stood before the door with his hand upon the latch, while Fairchild looked alternately at us and at the building without the slightest understanding of the connection between them.

"Mr. Holmes," he said at last, "what is going on?"

"I believe we are about to find out."

With those words Holmes opened the door.

The Guardian of the Nest

A remarkable silence fell.

Even now I remember the moment with unusual clarity. The small shed was filled with old agricultural machinery, tools, and crates, yet none of these things drew our attention. In one corner, half concealed behind an old harrow, lay the white hen.

She was sitting upon a nest.

Beneath her, eggs were plainly visible.

And above her, perched upon the crossbeam of an old machine, stood Prince Regent.

He stood perfectly still.

Extremely alert.

Like a soldier standing watch.

For a moment no one spoke. Then Jim gave a laugh of relief.

"Well, I'll be damned."

Fairchild stared at the bird with an expression which I can describe only as a mixture of astonishment and indignation. It seemed almost to offend him that the entire mystery had unfolded only a few hundred yards from his own house.

Holmes took a few steps toward the nest, which apparently was more than Prince Regent intended to tolerate.

The great rooster immediately sprang down from his perch.

His wings beat violently through the air.

His claws stretched forward.

And with a fury that would have done credit to any of the fighting birds from the previous evening, he hurled himself at the nearest intruder.

I must confess that I retreated with considerable speed.

Jim burst into loud laughter.

Even the old farmhand laughed openly.

And to my surprise, so did Fairchild.

Indeed, he appeared almost proud.

Prince Regent continued to patrol between the nest and ourselves, uttering short, threatening sounds and keeping a vigilant eye upon every movement within the shed.

Holmes calmly brushed a little dust from his sleeve.

"Well, Watson?"

I looked from the rooster to the hen and back again.

"So, he is not a fighting bird after all."

"No."

Holmes regarded the bird with evident satisfaction.

"He is a guardian."

Prince Regent once again positioned himself before the nest. Behind him the white hen remained undisturbed upon the eggs. In front of him stood the rest of us. There was no doubt which side he had chosen.

I could not help smiling.

"So, the creature abandoned ambition after all."

Holmes slowly shook his head.

"On the contrary, Watson."

His eyes still rested upon the rooster.

"He pursued it."

Then he turned toward me.

"He did not flee his destiny."

A faint smile appeared upon his face.

"He fulfilled it."

At that moment even I began to understand the irony that had been hidden within the entire affair. While Fairchild had imagined triumphs, prizes, and exhibitions, Prince Regent had been pursuing an altogether different goal. He had not fled from his nature.

He had followed it.

Fairchild was the first to recover his voice.

His gaze moved from the rooster to the hen, from the hen to the nest, and from the nest back to the rooster. It was plain that he was still struggling to reconcile the sight before him with the theories of theft, rivals, and illegal cockfighting that had occupied his mind over the previous days.

"Good heavens," he exclaimed at last. "How in the world could he hide here?"

He looked around the little shed as though the building itself had somehow insulted him.

"All this time. Right under our noses."

His eyes settled upon the farmhand. Then upon Jim. The old man looked down at the floor with an almost guilty expression, while Jim

suddenly found his boots extraordinarily interesting. Fairchild's eyes narrowed.

"Jim."

The young man looked up.

"Sir?"

"I am quite certain you knew more than you told us."

Jim cleared his throat.

"Well..."

"Why did you not say something?"

"Because I wasn't certain, sir."

"Not certain?"

"Not at first."

Fairchild appeared ready to continue, but his attention was once more drawn to Prince Regent.

The rooster had positioned himself between us and the nest with the same unshakable determination as before. Whenever anyone moved so much as an inch, he turned his head and followed the movement with sharp dark eyes. Behind him the white hen remained motionless upon the eggs.

Slowly something in Fairchild's expression began to change.

The irritation faded.

For a moment he stood silently watching the bird.

Then the familiar little smile returned to the corners of his mouth.

"Well," he said at last.

He cleared his throat.

"There is still time before the exhibition."

Jim released a sigh of relief.

The farmhand chuckled softly.

Even Holmes allowed himself a smile.

"Indeed."

Once more he looked at Prince Regent, who continued to guard his nest with a vigilance that no judge at any exhibition could possibly have overlooked.

"Your bird appears to possess rather strong views concerning succession, Mr. Fairchild."

Another laugh escaped the farmhand.

But Fairchild did not laugh.

Not this time.

Instead, he continued to watch the bird.

It seemed to me that for the first time he was seeing something other than a prizewinner. Perhaps he no longer saw a valuable breeding rooster, an exhibition bird, or a future trophy. Perhaps he saw a creature that had made a choice of its own. A creature that had abandoned the destiny others had planned for it in favor of another that it itself considered more important.

And as Prince Regent continued his watch before the nest, it suddenly struck me that the resemblance between the bird and its owner was far greater than even Holmes had suggested.

Both were proud and stubborn.

Both possessed strong opinions concerning their own importance.

And both appeared to regard the future as something that ought to be shaped according to their own principles.

That, perhaps, was why Fairchild's anger vanished so quickly. For although he would scarcely have admitted it, he could hardly fail to recognize a little of himself in the golden bird that now stood before him as guardian of his small family.

During the journey home I sat for a long time in silence, watching the landscape pass beyond the windows of our cab. The spring sun had begun its descent toward the horizon, and the fields around us lay bathed in that gentle light which only the late afternoon can produce.

The case was solved.

There had never been a thief.

No rival breeder.

No brutal cockfighter who had carried off the famous bird.

The entire mystery had unfolded only a few hundred yards from Fairchild's own house, and yet I could not help feeling that the affair had concerned something more than a missing rooster.

Human beings often attempt to shape animals according to their own ideals. We select certain qualities, strengthen them through generations, and take pleasure when they become evident. Loyalty, courage, strength, intelligence, and dignity are virtues we admire in ourselves, and so we learn to admire them in animals as well. Yet it sometimes seems to me that animals reveal those same qualities in a form far more honest than the one to which we ourselves can aspire.

While I sat occupied by these thoughts, I noticed that Holmes was watching the passing countryside with his customary thoughtful expression. He had said very little since we left the farm. Only as we drew near to London did he finally break the silence.

"Curious thing, Watson."

"Yes?"

He continued to gaze out of the window.

"Men breed animals for qualities they admire."

A long pause followed.

I almost thought he had finished when at last he continued.

"And then seem surprised when the creatures make use of them."

He said no more.

But as the cab continued toward Baker Street, and the first shadows of evening began to gather over the roads, I found myself thinking of Prince Regent, who had abandoned the possibility of triumph at an exhibition in order to guard a nest in a forgotten machinery shed.

And I was forced to admit that if there existed any ambition within the proud bird, it was perhaps simpler and more natural than any of the plans men had made for him.

The Cat at Number Twelve

It was a dark and rainy October morning, one of those days when London seemed to sag beneath the weight of the sky itself. The rain came in heavy bursts that beat against the windows of Baker Street and ran down the panes in little streams, while the wind would now and then drive a fresh wave of water across the fronts of the houses opposite. Even the usual traffic below appeared subdued. A few hansom cabs struggled through the gleaming streets, and the handful of pedestrians who ventured outdoors hurried along with bowed heads and their coat collars turned up about their ears.

Inside our comfortable sitting-room at 221B, the contrast could not have been greater. The fire crackled cheerfully in the grate, and the warm glow of the lamp fell across the books, chemical bottles, and countless objects that had accumulated over the years around my remarkable friend. Holmes lounged in his armchair with the newspaper spread before him. Upon the table beside him stood a chemical apparatus that had plainly been abandoned in the middle of an experiment, and from the stained test tubes I could see that he had interrupted his work only with reluctance. There was, however, something in his posture that betrayed a restlessness I knew all too well.

When Holmes had a case upon his hands, he could work for days at a time with scarcely a thought for food or sleep. But when London, for a period, failed to provide crimes or mysteries worthy of his abilities, he was apt to sink into a state of dissatisfied boredom. That morning he

had already read the newspaper from beginning to end and had several times cast a glance out of the window, as though he hoped that some interesting criminal might materialize upon the pavement below.

"There is remarkably little imagination among London's criminals these days, Watson," he remarked suddenly, allowing the newspaper to sink into his lap. "Either they have become more foolish, or the police have become more fortunate. I am not yet certain which possibility is the more alarming."

I was about to reply when the sound of footsteps came from the stairs. Holmes instantly raised his head. I noticed the familiar transformation that came over him; the listless boredom vanished, replaced by the keen alertness that made him the man he was.

A moment later the door opened and Mrs. Hudson appeared.

"A gentleman wishes to see you, Mr. Holmes."

"Show him in, Mrs. Hudson."

The Black Cat

The visitor entered carrying a dark umbrella in one hand and a leather document case beneath his arm. He was a man in his middle forties, tall and well kept, with slicked-back hair and a face that immediately suggested orderliness and self-control. His clothing was of excellent quality, yet without the slightest hint of ostentation. Everything about him seemed sober, respectable, and carefully measured.

I had scarcely formed this impression before Holmes spoke.

"You are a solicitor, I see. You most likely represent a wealthy client, and you have come directly from the city."

The gentleman stopped in mid-motion and looked from Holmes to me in astonishment.

"That is perfectly correct," he said. "But I cannot imagine how you could possibly know it."

Holmes motioned him toward a chair.

"Your document case is of a type favored by members of the legal profession. The ink upon your right forefinger is newer than that upon your left hand, suggesting office work early this morning. Your boots

bear traces of mud from the streets between the City and Baker Street, and your cuffs are of a quality rarely seen upon men representing lesser clients. Your profession therefore seemed fairly obvious to me."

The visitor laughed shortly and shook his head.

"I ought to have been prepared for that sort of thing. My name is Cartwright. I am a solicitor, and I represent the estate of Mrs. Lavinia Blackwood."

The name meant nothing to me, and from Holmes's expression I could detect no sign of recognition.

Mr. Cartwright settled the case upon his knees and continued.

"Mrs. Blackwood lived in Number Twelve for many years. In certain parts of London, she was a rather well-known figure. Some would have called her a wise woman. Others would no doubt have preferred the term fortune teller. She read tarot cards, advised clients, and received visitors from virtually every level of society."

I noticed an almost imperceptible smile touch one corner of Holmes's mouth at the mention of tarot cards, but he said nothing. He merely leaned back slightly in his chair and pressed his fingertips together while the rain continued to drum against the windows and the curious story of Mrs. Lavinia Blackwood began to unfold before us.

Mr. Cartwright paused for a moment, as though gathering his thoughts, while the rain continued its monotonous tapping upon the glass. There was something about his manner that suggested a man accustomed to dealing with facts and documents rather than rumors and human emotions, and it seemed to me that he was almost embarrassed by the errand that had brought him to Baker Street.

"Mrs. Blackwood died several months ago," he continued. "At the time, her death was regarded as entirely natural. She was no longer young, and there were no circumstances that gave rise to suspicion. She suffered from a heart condition that was believed to have caused her death. To the best of my knowledge, no further investigation was therefore conducted."

Holmes nodded without interrupting.

"The difficulties began only later," the solicitor went on. "As representative of the estate, I had expected a relatively uncomplicated matter. The house was to be assessed, the estate settled, and the property sold. Number Twelve stands in a neighborhood where such a house would ordinarily not remain on the market for very long. Everything ought to have been concluded long ago."

He shook his head slightly.

"Instead, events have developed in precisely the opposite direction. The heirs have become increasingly divided. They suspect one another. They dispute one another's claims. Every decision is met with objections, and several of them now refuse outright to cooperate with the others."

Holmes raised his eyebrows slightly.

"That does not immediately strike me as an unusual phenomenon, Mr. Cartwright."

The solicitor looked surprised.

"Indeed?"

"Quite the contrary," said Holmes dryly. "In my experience, it is far more remarkable when people pass peacefully through the settlement of an estate than when they do not. Particularly when something of value is involved."

A faint smile crossed my face, for during the years of our association I had seen enough of Holmes's cases to know how little faith he placed in human selflessness.

"Then you do not regard such conflicts as suspicious?"

"Not in themselves," Holmes replied. "Money, property, and family ties make a highly explosive combination. Many families who have lived in harmony for decades manage to become enemies within a matter of weeks once a will is opened."

Cartwright folded his hands over the document case.

"Ordinarily I would be inclined to agree with you. But in this instance the disputes do not appear to concern money alone."

It was the first time during the interview that I noticed genuine interest awoken in Holmes. He leaned forward ever so slightly.

"And what do they concern?"

The solicitor hesitated.

"That is precisely what I have found difficult to understand. Several of those involved seem less concerned with what they might gain from the estate than with what may still be inside the house."

"Something specific?" asked Holmes.

"Not that I am aware of."

"Documents?"

"Possibly."

"Valuables?"

"That has been suggested."

Holmes studied him carefully.

"But you do not believe that explanation yourself."

Cartwright sighed.

"No. If you ask me, it seems rather as though several of them are afraid that something may be found."

For the first time since the solicitor had entered our sitting-room, I saw a glimpse of the old fire in Holmes's eyes. It was not much, merely a brief sharpening of his gaze, but I knew the sign too well to miss it. Something in this apparently ordinary estate matter had at last captured his attention.

"That," he said slowly, "is immediately more interesting, Mr. Cartwright."

Mr. Cartwright hesitated for a moment, and I had the impression that the part of the story he was now about to relate was the part he himself found most difficult to take seriously. He was plainly a man who placed his trust in contracts, ledgers, and legal language, not in the sort of tales that so often arise around lonely old houses and deceased eccentrics.

"I must confess, Mr. Holmes," he said at length, "that I do not care for stories that border upon the supernatural. As a solicitor, I have learned over the years that there is usually a perfectly earthly explanation for most things. Yet in this matter there is something that appears to have affected a surprisingly large number of people."

Holmes raised his eyes slightly.

"In what way?"

"It concerns not only the family," Cartwright continued. "It concerns the neighbors as well. Indeed, I must say that the entire neighborhood seems gradually to have fallen under a rather peculiar spell."

"Ah?" said Holmes with calm interest. "That does indeed sound interesting."

The solicitor shook his head.

"Perhaps more strange than interesting."

He paused for a moment, as though considering how best to phrase what followed.

"Mrs. Blackwood owned a black cat."

At these words I could not fail to notice a fleeting gleam in Holmes's eyes, though he remained silent.

"After her death, the cat disappeared," Cartwright continued. "At first this attracted little attention. People naturally assumed that it had found somewhere else to live. But several weeks later it suddenly began appearing again."

The rain beat heavily against the windows behind him as he spoke, and somehow the sound seemed remarkably well suited to the story.

"It was seen in an upstairs window. A few days later it was perched upon the wall behind the house. Then it disappeared once more. Since then the pattern has continued. It appears, vanishes, and appears again. Several neighbors have seen it. Some have seen it in the windows. Another saw it in the garden or in the trees around the property. Yet no one seems to know where it actually stays."

"An unusually independent cat," remarked Holmes.

"Yes," said Cartwright. "But that is not the strangest part. The strangest part is that nobody knows who is caring for it."

He leaned slightly forward.

"The animal does not resemble a stray. Quite the opposite. Those who have seen it up close describe it as healthy, well-fed, and in excellent condition. And frankly, that strikes me as peculiar. Its owner is dead. The house stands empty. No one admits to feeding it. Yet it appears to thrive."

I felt my own interest begin to awaken. The story undoubtedly contained a touch of the fantastic, yet for that very reason it was difficult to ignore.

"And that has given rise to rumors?" I asked.

Cartwright gave me a look that suggested the rumors were far worse than he cared to repeat.

"Yes, Dr. Watson. More than I care to mention. Some of the neighbors claim that the cat is an omen of misfortune. Others believe that it appears around certain individuals. And there are even people who sincerely believe that Mrs. Blackwood's spirit somehow lives on within the animal."

He spoke the last words with obvious embarrassment.

I glanced at Holmes, expecting one of his usual sardonic remarks concerning human credulity. Yet to my surprise he seemed not in the least occupied with the story of the cat itself. His thoughts appeared to be moving in an entirely different direction.

"You do not, of course, believe such explanations yourself?" he asked.

"Certainly not."

"Good."

Holmes sank back a little in his chair and brought his fingertips together.

"Then it is not the cat that interests me either."

"Not?" I exclaimed.

"No, Watson."

He turned toward me with that calm expression I knew so well.

"A black cat is merely a black cat. But when an entire neighborhood begins to attribute supernatural qualities to it, the matter at once becomes more interesting."

"Because they are mistaken?"

"Because people seldom react so strongly without cause."

He looked again at Cartwright.

"The interesting thing is not the animal. The interesting thing is why so many people feel the need to believe the story."

The solicitor nodded slowly.

"That is precisely the feeling I have had myself."

Holmes's gaze sharpened a little.

"Tell me, Mr. Cartwright. Among those most concerned with the cat, are there any who also had particular connections with Mrs. Blackwood?"

It was the first time during the entire conversation that I had the distinct impression that Holmes was beginning to perceive the outlines of a pattern still invisible to the rest of us. The cat did not interest him. The fear of the cat did.

Mr. Cartwright sat for a moment in silence; his hands folded about the document case on his lap. It seemed to me that he was struggling with a certain reluctance to continue, as though he had now reached a part of the story that made him more uneasy.

"There is one more thing," he said at last. "Something rather more personal. I am not certain that it has any bearing upon the matter, but under the circumstances I feel obliged to mention it."

Holmes nodded encouragingly.

"Many years ago, my wife visited Mrs. Blackwood together with a friend. My wife is by nature more curious than I am. She visited her only that once, and at her friend's request."

He paused a moment while he searched for the proper words.

"Mrs. Blackwood gave her friend a prediction. I cannot quote it exactly, but it was something to this effect: 'Before seven winters have passed, your path will end by the water.'"

At that moment the rain seemed to beat harder against the windows, and I must admit that the story made a stronger impression upon me than I was immediately willing to acknowledge.

"And what happened then?" I asked.

Cartwright's expression darkened.

"Five years later, the friend drowned during a boating excursion on the Thames."

A short silence fell over the room. I felt myself that unpleasant chill which such coincidences can produce, even in men who otherwise consider themselves rational.

"That must have made an impression upon you," I said.

"It did."

"And upon your wife?"

"Even more so. She mentioned it several times over the years."

I turned to Holmes.

"Do you truly believe that such things can be mere coincidences?"

Holmes had listened without interrupting, but now he shook his head slowly.

"Yes, Watson. I do."

His voice was calm, almost gentle.

"Human beings have a remarkable ability to remember the few occasions upon which a prediction appears to have come true, and an even greater ability to forget the many occasions upon which it did not. In addition, most prophecies are phrased in such a way that they may be applied to a great number of future events."

He turned toward Cartwright.

"Your path will end by the water' is an excellent example. In a country such as England, such a phrase could be connected with anything from a holiday by the sea to a ferry crossing, a fishing trip, or an accident upon a river."

Cartwright nodded slowly.

"That is more or less how I have tried to regard it myself."

"And quite sensibly," said Holmes.

I could see that the solicitor appeared relieved by the words. He had plainly not come to Baker Street in order to have old superstitions confirmed, but rather to be freed from them.

All the same, I noticed that Holmes continued to regard him with a certain interest.

"Your story interests me for another reason, however, Mr. Cartwright."

The solicitor raised his head.

"Another reason?"

"Yes."

Now it was not only Cartwright, but I myself, who became curious.

"And what reason is that?"

Holmes leaned back in his chair and let his gaze wander toward the rain-streaked windows.

"The interesting thing is not the cat. Nor is it the prophecies. And it is certainly not spirits."

An almost imperceptible smile appeared at the corner of his mouth.

"The interesting thing is that several people apparently fear something."

Cartwright looked at him questioningly.

"Fear what?"

"That I do not yet know."

Holmes rose and walked slowly to the window.

"But we have a house that should have been sold long ago. We have heirs who refuse to cooperate. We have rumors that are growing stronger instead of weaker. And we have a black cat that, in one way or another, has become the center of everyone's attention."

He stood for a moment looking out at the gray October rain.

"It seems likely to me that someone has an interest in keeping these stories alive."

Cartwright sat perfectly still.

"Then you do not believe in the supernatural?"

Holmes turned around.

"When an empty house creates so much unrest, Mr. Cartwright, it is seldom due to ghosts."

His eyes took on the sharp expression I always associated with the beginning of a new case.

"It is usually due to people."

It was at that moment that I knew the matter had caught him. The restlessness that had marked him all morning had vanished. In its place stood the investigating and watchful Holmes before us, the man who could resist neither a mystery nor a human secret.

Shortly afterward, Cartwright rose. The necessary arrangements were made, and when he had taken his leave and disappeared down the stairs, silence once more settled over the room. The rain continued unabated

outside, and for a time I merely sat looking into the fire in the grate while I considered the strange story we had just heard.

At last, I could not help returning to the point that had made the strongest impression upon me.

"It is strange all the same, Holmes," I said. "That prediction concerning Mrs. Cartwright's friend. You must admit that it fits uncomfortably well."

Holmes stood by the window with his hands behind his back, looking out upon the rain-wet street.

For a moment he did not answer.

Then he said quietly:

"I am not interested in the dead woman's prophecies, Watson."

He turned his head slightly.

"I am interested in her cat."

And so the affair of the cat in Number Twelve began.

The House of Mrs. Blackwood

The following morning Holmes and I made our way to Number Twelve. The rain had ceased during the night, but the sky still hung low and gray over London, and the air carried that damp chill which so often follows several days of uninterrupted rain. The streets still gleamed with water, and the roofs around us seemed to bear the same mournful color as the sky above them. Number Twelve stood in a row of adjoining town houses which, from a distance, appeared much alike; yet the nearer we came, the more clearly it seemed to me that this particular house stood apart from its neighbors. It was neither larger nor more dilapidated than the others, but there was nevertheless something dark and enclosed about it, as though over the years it had gathered the stories and secrets entrusted to its deceased owner.

Before the door stood Mr. Cartwright, the keys in his hand. He greeted us pleasantly, and I thought I could detect a measure of relief in him at the sight of Holmes. As he found the proper key and unlocked the door, I noticed a small detail which at the time seemed of little importance, but which later returned to my thoughts. Several times his gaze slipped

upward toward one of the upstairs windows. It happened so quickly that a less attentive observer might not have noticed it, but after many years in Holmes's company I had learned to observe such small signs of unease. It was not curiosity that made him look up there. It was rather the expectation of seeing something — or perhaps the fear of it.

When the door at last opened, the stagnant air of the house met us like a breath from the past. Cartwright handed the keys to Holmes and excused himself, saying that he had business in the City which required his presence. The explanation was reasonable enough, but I could not rid myself of the impression that his haste had another cause. He did not appear merely busy; he appeared uneasy. After he had taken his leave and gone a few steps down the pavement, he stopped once more and cast a glance up at the house. Again, it was the same upstairs window that drew his attention. Holmes plainly noticed it as well, but he said nothing, and it was only much later that I understood how often his silence was a sign of deeper interest than any remark.

We stepped inside and closed the door behind us. The house was silent in that peculiar way which only empty houses can be. Not merely the absence of voices, but the absence of life. The air carried a faint smell of dust, old books, and dried flowers, and everywhere time seemed to have stopped. The furniture stood where it had always stood. The curtains still hung at the windows. Books lay open upon tables, as though their owner had merely left the room for a moment and was expected back at any time.

I could not help letting my gaze wander about the large parlor, where the greater part of Mrs. Blackwood's occupation had plainly taken place. There were numerous objects which had no doubt contributed to her reputation among those who had sought her out over the years. Upon an ornamented stand stood a large rose-colored crystal ball, which caught the weak daylight and sent dull reflections across the room. Around it lay smaller stones, amulets, and curious objects whose meaning I could not guess. Upon a dark round table stood another glass sphere surrounded by tall candlesticks, and along the walls hung heavy curtains which dimmed the light and gave the entire room an almost theatrical character.

In several places stood dishes containing half-burned candles, and upon the floor lay oriental rugs in dark colors, worn by many years of use. Upon shelves and tables lay books on astrology, omens, dream interpretation, and other subjects which I would ordinarily have dismissed as superstition, but which in these surroundings seemed to belong there naturally.

I found myself imagining the many people who must have sat in those chairs over the years. Some had surely come out of curiosity, others out of desperation. Some may have sought entertainment, while others sought hope. And in the midst of it all Mrs. Lavinia Blackwood had sat reading their cards, listening to their anxieties, and building the reputation which, even after her death, still seemed to influence those around her.

Holmes, on the other hand, showed no interest in crystal balls or amulets. While I allowed myself to be absorbed by the atmosphere of the house, he moved silently through the rooms with the methodical thoroughness I knew so well. His attention fixed itself upon entirely different matters: the layers of dust upon the furniture, the wear marks near the doors, the locks upon the windows, and the condition of the floors. Several times he bent down to examine details that I had scarcely noticed, and after some time spent in silent inspection, he straightened and cast a glance about the room.

"There are no signs of forced entry," he said at last. "No sign that anyone has searched the house since her death. No broken locks, no damaged cupboards, and no traces of vandalism."

His gaze moved over the many strange objects.

"If anyone is looking for something in here, Watson, then at least they have not yet done so."

His words gave me the feeling that we were only at the beginning of the matter. The house did indeed seem empty, but beneath the still surface I already sensed those hidden currents which Holmes so often managed to detect long before the rest of us.

Having completed our examination of the parlor, we continued into a smaller room farther within the house. It was partially secluded from the other rooms and possessed a far more intimate character than the

large sitting-room we had just left behind. In the center stood a round table surrounded by four chairs, and at first glance it seemed likely to me that this had been the place where Mrs. Blackwood received those who sought her counsel.

The room bore every sign of frequent use. The tabletop was worn in places where hands must have rested through the years, and dark hangings covered the walls, muting the light and lending the surroundings an almost ceremonial atmosphere. Several decks of tarot cards lay scattered across the table. Some had been gathered into neat piles, while others remained spread open, as though their owner had been engaged in a reading that, for some reason, had never been completed.

While Holmes continued his customary examination of doors, windows, and furniture, my own attention was drawn to the cards. I held no real belief in such things, yet I must confess that the surroundings exerted their influence. Something of the house's former owner still seemed to linger within the room, and it was difficult not to imagine the many visitors who must have sat here over the years seeking answers to questions that no one else could answer.

I bent over the table and allowed my gaze to travel across the cards that had been laid out. The final card in the sequence lay face upward. When I saw the image upon it, I could not help uttering a small exclamation.

"Holmes."

He turned halfway toward me.

"Yes?"

"The last card."

He cast a brief glance toward the table.

"Well?"

"It depicts a black cat."

For a moment he regarded the card, after which the corners of his mouth lifted slightly.

"I doubt that the murderer, assuming there is one, consulted the cards, Watson."

His tone was so dry that I immediately felt somewhat foolish. Naturally there was no reason to attach significance to a random tarot card,

and yet I could not entirely shake the peculiar atmosphere the house seemed to radiate. Perhaps it was the many stories we had already heard. Perhaps it was the weather outside or the strange silence that filled the rooms. Whatever the reason, I was beginning to understand how people of a more imaginative disposition might come to see connections where none existed.

I had just straightened when a sound suddenly broke the silence. It was not loud. Rather, it was a dull thump, as though something had struck a floorboard above us. Holmes and I both stopped instantly. The sound had come from somewhere higher in the house. Instinctively I glanced upward.

Holmes said nothing. He merely set the cards aside and moved with calm steps into the hallway and toward the staircase. I followed closely behind, and when we reached the lower portion of the stairs, I saw what had produced the noise.

A black cat sat upon the top step.

It regarded us in complete silence.

After all the stories we had heard, I had almost expected something unusual, but there was nothing remarkable about the animal. It was simply a cat. An ordinary black house cat with glossy fur and calm eyes. For a moment it sat motionless, observing us with that dignified indifference which cats so often reserve for mankind.

Then it rose.

Without haste and without any sign of fear, it turned and disappeared farther up the staircase. I hurried after it, while Holmes followed at a considerably more measured pace.

Upstairs, our search led us through several rooms that had clearly not been used for some time. There was an old bedroom where the furniture stood covered with white sheets. There was a smaller guest room where dust lay thick upon the dressers and windowsills. At last, we reached a large storeroom which seemed to contain the accumulated possessions of decades. Boxes were stacked along the walls. Old chairs and tables had been pushed together. There were piles of clothing, paintings leaning

against the walls, and crates of books whose contents had long since been forgotten.

But the cat had vanished.

We searched the rooms one by one without success. Several times I thought I caught sight of movement among the furniture, only to discover that it was merely a shadow or a piece of cloth hanging from a hook. At one point we heard a brief meow from somewhere within the house. The sound seemed so close that I was convinced we would find the animal within seconds, yet when we hastened in that direction there was nothing to be seen. I gradually found the situation irritating.

"It must be somewhere nearby," I said.

Holmes stood for a moment, allowing his gaze to travel over the multitude of objects in the storeroom. Then he shrugged.

"With so many hiding places, Watson, even a less intelligent animal could evade us for hours."

He gestured toward the stacked boxes and the dark corners between the furniture.

"We are standing in a paradise for any cat."

I was forced to admit that he was right. Even so, I could not rid myself of the feeling that the creature had somehow led us upstairs deliberately, as though it had wished to show itself only to disappear again. It was, of course, a foolish thought, and I said nothing of it. Yet as we continued our search through the dusty rooms, I began for the first time to understand why the black cat had come to occupy such a prominent place in the neighborhood's many stories.

After some further fruitless searching, we were finally forced to abandon the attempt to find the cat. Holmes did not seem particularly surprised by the outcome, but I confess that I felt a measure of disappointment. We had now spent several hours in the house without coming significantly closer to an explanation for the many stories that surrounded it. The cat had revealed itself to us, certainly, but only long enough to remind us of its existence before disappearing once more among the house's numerous hiding places.

The Neighbor's Story

When at last we left Number Twelve and stepped out onto the street, the gray sky still hung heavily over the neighborhood. The air was damp, and occasional drops continued to fall from gutters and cornices after the night's rain. I glanced back at the house and could not help feeling that we were leaving it almost as mysterious as we had found it.

Holmes, on the other hand, did not seem dissatisfied. He walked silently at my side with his hands in his coat pockets and that distant, thoughtful expression which often told me that his mind was working far more rapidly than his surroundings revealed.

"I must confess, Holmes," I said, "that it seems to me we have learned remarkably little."

"Have we?" he replied without looking at me.

"We have seen an empty house, some tarot cards, and a cat that does not wish to be found."

A faint smile appeared at the corner of his mouth, but before he could answer, our attention was caught by an elderly man standing by the gate of the neighboring house. He had plainly noticed our movements throughout the morning and was now observing us with the open curiosity that often characterizes people who have lived in the same place for many years and consequently feel a certain ownership of the local stories.

When Holmes politely greeted him, it quickly became apparent that the man knew both the house and its late owner quite well.

"You are investigating the matter of the cat, I suppose?" he said almost immediately.

"We are at least attempting to understand it," Holmes replied.

The old man nodded gravely.

"It never leaves the area."

"Are you certain of that?"

"As certain as one can be about anything involving a cat. I see it almost every day."

He pointed toward Number Twelve.

"Sometimes it sits in one of the windows in the evening. Other times you see it in the garden or upon the wall behind the house. But it always stays around here."

I noticed that he lowered his voice slightly.

"And I can tell you that many people do not care for it."

"Because of the stories?" I asked.

"Yes."

He glanced briefly toward the house.

"You know how people are. First, they hear that old Mrs. Blackwood has died. Then the cat begins appearing. Before long, people are telling one another the most extraordinary tales."

His tone suggested that he himself placed little faith in the rumors, though he was plainly familiar with every one of them.

"Some say it foretells misfortune. Others say it follows certain people. There are even those who claim it keeps watch over the house."

"And what do you think?" asked Holmes.

The old man shrugged.

"I think it is a cat."

The answer appeared to amuse Holmes.

"A sensible attitude."

"But there is one thing I do know."

The man pointed toward the rear of the house.

"It still goes in and out. There is a cat flap in the back door. It has been there for years."

I looked questioningly at Holmes.

"So, the cat still has access to the house?"

"Naturally. No one has closed the flap. No one has removed it. Why should they?"

He looked once more toward Number Twelve.

"If you ask me, it uses the house just as it always has."

I noticed that Holmes became slightly more attentive at this information.

"So, you have actually seen it pass through the flap?"

The old man hesitated briefly.

"Not directly, no. But that must be how it gets in and out."

Holmes nodded pleasantly, as though the question had been asked from mere casual interest.

"Naturally."

The conversation continued for another few minutes, but my thoughts were already occupied by the black cat and the empty house. If the neighbor was correct, there was nothing particularly mysterious about its presence. It was merely using the same entrance it had always possessed. Yet there was something in Holmes's expression that told me this apparently simple explanation did not entirely satisfy him.

When at last we continued down the street, he cast one final glance back at the house.

"Interesting," he said quietly.

"The cat flap?" I asked.

"Yes, Watson."

"Because it explains how the cat gets inside?"

"Possibly."

He was silent for a moment.

"But I generally prefer explanations founded upon observation rather than assumption."

And with those words he continued through the damp afternoon while Number Twelve slowly disappeared behind us, dark and silent among the neighboring houses.

The Estate Papers

The following morning, I accompanied Holmes to Mr. Cartwright's office in the city. The district already bore the marks of the usual activity that characterizes the financial heart of London, and the stream of clerks, messengers, and businessmen stood in sharp contrast to the quiet, almost dreamlike atmosphere that had surrounded Number Twelve the previous day. Cartwright's office occupied part of an older building with dark paneling and narrow corridors, and when we were shown inside, we found him surrounded by the tools of his natural world. Shelves filled with bound ledgers and registers covered the walls from floor to ceiling,

while stacks of documents lay upon desks and side tables, seeming to grow out of one another like geological strata.

He greeted us warmly and rose at once from behind his desk.

"I hope you have made progress, Mr. Holmes," he said. "Have you already discovered anything new about the cat?"

Holmes accepted the chair that was offered to him and placed his hat upon the table.

"Not yet."

Cartwright nodded with slight disappointment.

"I had almost hoped—"

"Experience has taught me, however," Holmes continued calmly, "that cats rarely commit murder."

The remark drew a smile from the solicitor, and even I could not help laughing.

"No," admitted Cartwright. "That would indeed be unusual."

"Which is why I do not intend to begin with the cat."

He leaned forward.

"I should like to see the will, the estate papers, all objections filed against the estate, the correspondence following Mrs. Blackwood's death, and the names of any persons who have made financial claims."

Cartwright blinked in surprise.

"I had imagined that you would investigate the house."

"We have done so."

"And the cat."

"We have done that as well."

The solicitor appeared somewhat puzzled.

"Then why the papers?"

Holmes folded his hands before him.

"Because cases of this sort usually concern animals less than they concern people."

"And people?"

"Have a tendency to possess motives."

The answer appeared to satisfy Cartwright, who rose and began gathering the requested documents. Shortly afterward Holmes sat at a large

table with the papers spread before him, and I once again had an opportunity to observe his peculiar method of work. He read with a speed that could still astonish me after all the years of our acquaintance. Documents were opened, skimmed, and set aside. Letters were sorted into piles. Some papers caused him to pause briefly, while others were dismissed after only a few seconds. Slowly, names and connections began to take shape upon his notes.

The Five Names

The first name that plainly caught his interest was Edward Blackwood.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"The nephew of the deceased."

Holmes held up a document.

"According to these papers, he has filed a formal objection to the estate."

"On what grounds?"

"He claims that a more recent will once existed."

"And did it not?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Holmes allowed the paper to fall back onto the table. He added the name to his notes and reached for the next document. This one concerned a certain Mrs. Winthrop, a wealthy widow who, according to the papers, had filed a claim for a considerable sum of money. She maintained that Mrs. Blackwood had borrowed money from her over the years and had never fully repaid it.

"Can she prove it?" I asked.

Holmes examined the accompanying documents.

"Only partially."

"So, her claim is uncertain?"

"Very."

He added her name to the list as well.

Next came another bundle of papers, consisting chiefly of letters, all signed by the same individual.

"Mr. Finch," Holmes read aloud.

Cartwright nodded.

"A businessman."

The letters had been written after Mrs. Blackwood's death and were remarkable for their persistence. Repeatedly Finch requested access to the deceased woman's private papers. He wished to examine correspondence, notes, and diaries, and appeared far more interested in these matters than in the financial condition of the estate itself.

"That strikes me as peculiar," I said.

"Yes."

"Why should he be interested in such things?"

Holmes allowed one of the letters to slide back onto the pile.

"That, Watson, is precisely the question we ought to put to him."

The next name upon the list was Clara Evans, the former maidservant. Here the papers revealed a smaller, though not insignificant, dispute between the family and the former employee. The heirs claimed that various objects were missing from the house and that Clara refused to surrender them. Clara, for her part, maintained that the items had been given to her by Mrs. Blackwood herself long before the death.

"Can anyone prove anything?" I asked.

"No."

"Then it is one person's word against another's."

"Precisely."

Holmes noted another name.

At last, he came to a person we already knew.

"Arthur Bell."

I recognized the name at once.

"The neighbor."

"Exactly."

Holmes read on.

Over the years Bell and Mrs. Blackwood had had several financial conflicts. There was mention of loans, repayments, minor disputes, and various disagreements concerning money. None of it pointed immediately toward a crime, but the documents painted a picture of a relationship that had been far from cordial.

"That at least explains why he seemed nervous," I remarked.

Holmes set the papers aside.

"Yes."

"Do you think he is hiding something?"

For a moment Holmes looked out of the window toward the busy street beyond.

"I am becoming convinced that they are all hiding something."

He looked down at the list of five names.

Edward Blackwood.

Mrs. Winthrop.

Mr. Finch.

Clara Evans.

Arthur Bell.

The names now lay before us like pieces of a puzzle whose pattern was still concealed.

"The interesting thing, Watson," said Holmes after a short pause, "is not that these people had conflicts with Mrs. Blackwood."

"No?"

"The interesting thing is that they all seem to fear her. Even after her death."

Holmes slowly gathered the documents into a pile and leaned back in his chair. I could see that the pieces had already begun to fall into place in his mind, though the pattern remained hidden from me.

"It appears to me, Watson," he said after a brief silence, "that Mrs. Lavinia Blackwood possessed a most unusual quality."

"What quality?"

A faint smile appeared at the corner of his mouth.

"She knew too much about other people."

The words caused even Cartwright to look up.

Holmes continued.

"We have a woman who, for many years, made her living by listening to people's anxieties, secrets, and fears. People came to her voluntarily. They told her things they might never have told their families or their

closest friends. If only a fraction of what she heard was true, she must have possessed a very considerable knowledge of those around her."

"Then you think that is why they fear her?" I asked.

"Not her, Watson."

He lifted one of the papers.

"They fear what she may have left behind."

Silence once more fell over the office. Even Cartwright seemed to consider this possibility.

At last Holmes rose.

"Mr. Cartwright, I shall ask you for a favor."

"Of course."

"I wish to speak with these people."

He pushed the list across the table.

"Edward Blackwood. Mrs. Winthrop. Mr. Finch. Clara Evans. And Arthur Bell."

Cartwright looked down at the names.

"All of them?"

"Yes."

The solicitor nodded.

"I shall do my best."

Holmes picked up his hat from the table.

As we were making our way toward the door, Cartwright turned to him once more.

"Do you think one of them is hiding something that might point toward murder?"

Holmes paused for a moment. An almost imperceptible smile appeared upon his face.

"They are probably all hiding something."

"And what of the truth?"

Holmes opened the door.

"I am quite certain, Mr. Cartwright, that at least one of them does not wish it to come to light."

With these words we left the office and stepped out into the busy street, while Holmes had already disappeared into his own thoughts. I

knew from experience that when he reached this point in a case, his mind often worked several steps ahead of everyone else. But I also knew that he had not yet found the solution. He had merely identified that with which every good investigation must begin. Not the person who spoke the most, but the person who had the most to lose.

The Cat Flap

The following morning Holmes and I returned to Number Twelve. Mr. Cartwright had left us a key, so that we could now move freely through the house without waiting upon his assistance, and it seemed to me that Holmes already had a far more definite plan for this visit than he had had during our first examination. His interest no longer centered upon Mrs. Blackwood's curious collection of crystals, tarot cards, and occult objects. Now it concerned the cat.

We saw it as soon as we approached the house. It sat in one of the upstairs windows, observing the street below with that calm self-possession which only cats appear to possess. Its black fur stood in sharp contrast to the pale sky behind it, and its form was so distinct that it almost seemed part of the house itself.

"There it is again," I said.

Holmes stopped for a moment upon the pavement. The cat sat quite still and looked directly down at us. There was nothing timid or nervous about it. On the contrary, it appeared remarkably at ease. More important still, it in no way resembled an animal forced to fend for itself. Its coat was glossy, its movements composed, and its whole appearance suggested regular care and ample food.

"It certainly does not look hungry," I remarked.

"No," said Holmes quietly.

He said no more.

By the time we reached the door and produced the key, the cat had already disappeared. The window stood empty, as though it had never been there. We entered the house, and to my surprise Holmes did not make for the stairs or for the rooms where we had previously seen the

animal. Instead, he moved purposefully through the house and toward the back door.

"You are interested in the cat flap," I said.

"Very."

It was situated at the bottom of the door exactly as the neighbor had described. At first glance it appeared entirely ordinary, but the nearer we came, the more doubtful the whole explanation seemed to me. Holmes bent down and examined the flap closely. A moment later he frowned.

"Interesting."

I knelt beside him. The metal fittings of the flap were covered with rust. The wood around it had been softened by age and damp, and along the edges lay a thin layer of dust that had plainly gathered over a considerable time. Holmes tried to push the flap open. It scarcely moved. He applied more force, but the result was almost the same.

"You try, Watson."

I made the attempt. The flap yielded a little, but only with considerable resistance. When I rose again, Holmes slowly shook his head.

"If two grown men can scarcely move it, the cat cannot either."

"Then the neighbor was mistaken?"

"Either that."

He cast another glance at the rusty flap.

"Or he told us only part of the truth."

The remark made a stronger impression upon me than I was immediately inclined to admit. For the first time I began to suspect that the story of the cat might be more complicated than it had appeared.

Holmes then continued his investigation with the thoroughness that always characterized him. He examined the windows one by one. He inspected the cellar, tested locks, shutters, and ventilation openings. He studied the chimney, the back door, and the narrow passages around the house. More than once I had to admit that he directed his attention toward possibilities that would never have occurred to me.

Yet each time he reached the same conclusion: there was no obvious means of access. No opening that the cat could use regularly. The longer the investigation continued, the more puzzled I became.

"It is possible," I suggested at last, "that it stays with one of the neighbors and merely visits the house from time to time."

Holmes did not answer at once. He stood at a window looking out over the small back garden.

"Possibly."

His tone told me at once, however, that he did not find the theory convincing.

"But you do not believe it."

"No."

He turned toward me.

"In my opinion, we are left with two possibilities."

"And what are they?"

"Either there is an entrance we have not yet found."

He paused briefly.

"Or the cat actually lives inside the house."

I looked at him in surprise.

"Exclusively inside the house?"

"That would explain a great deal."

"But not how it survives."

"Exactly."

Holmes folded his hands behind his back and took a few steps through the room.

"Both possibilities require further investigation."

"And where do we begin?"

A faint smile appeared on his face.

"At the place to which the cat itself led us last time."

He cast a glance upward.

"We must go up to the attic again."

The Hidden Passage

I followed his gaze toward the floor above, where the dusty storerooms and their many hidden corners awaited us. Of all the rooms in the house, it was there that the cat had shown itself and vanished again. And as we began to move toward the stairs, I could not rid myself of the feeling

that this time we were closer to something concrete than ever before. Holmes had already removed one explanation. The cat did not use the cat flap. Therefore, the truth must lie somewhere else in the house. And if I had learned anything during my years with Sherlock Holmes, it was that whenever one possibility was closed, the true solution became a little easier to see.

We reached the large attic storeroom once more, and while at first glance I seemed to see precisely the same chaos as the day before, Holmes appeared far less interested in the room's contents than in its construction. Where my eye was caught by the old furniture, the rolled carpets, and the dusty boxes that seemed to have been gathered over a lifetime, his attention moved along the walls, across the floorboards, and up toward the sloping surfaces of the roof. Several times he stopped to study small details to which I would scarcely have attached importance, and gradually it became clear to me that he was searching for something quite definite.

"This room is smaller than it ought to be," he remarked suddenly.

I looked at him in confusion.

"Smaller?"

"Externally, the house occupies more space than these walls account for."

It was one of those remarks which at first seemed incomprehensible to me, but which later proved to be of decisive importance. Holmes moved farther in among the stacked boxes and old cabinets until he reached the rear of the room. There the space was so cramped that one almost had to press forward between the pieces of furniture. I was just about to follow him when he stopped.

"Ah."

That small exclamation immediately caused me to look more closely. Behind a stack of boxes and an old wardrobe I now perceived something that I was certain we had both overlooked during our first visit. A narrow door was concealed in the paneling. It was not fully closed, but stood only slightly ajar, so little that it could easily have been mistaken for a shadow between the boards.

Holmes bent down and examined the hinges with the care he usually reserved for more obvious clues.

“Interesting,” he said. “Look here, Watson.”

Along the metal the dust lay unevenly. In several places it had plainly been disturbed, as though the door had been opened quite recently.

“It is being used.”

“By whom?”

“That is precisely what we must discover.”

He pushed the door open carefully, and behind it there appeared a space neither of us had expected to find. It was not a room in the ordinary sense, but rather a long and narrow passage that ran between the wall of the house and the neighboring building. The light from a small attic window at the far end fell dimly through the dust and revealed an area that had plainly been forgotten by most people for years. Yet it was at once clear that someone still used it.

My eye fell first upon the two bowls standing on the floor near the wall. One contained remnants of cat food, while in the other the surface of water gleamed. Not old green rainwater or accidental damp, but fresh water. Beside them lay a pair of blankets that had plainly been used as bedding, and farther along stood a litter box, much cleaner than one would expect in an abandoned attic space.

I looked at Holmes.

“The cat is being fed.”

He walked slowly farther into the passage while his eyes moved from one trace to another. He stopped at the window and cast a glance out toward the roof of the neighboring house.

“We now know that the cat is not surviving by its own efforts. It is not living on rats or chance scraps. Someone has provided for it. Someone comes here regularly.”

I let my gaze wander through the hidden space and felt that peculiar excitement which always arises when a case suddenly passes from theories to tangible facts.

“But why?” I asked. “Why would anyone keep the cat hidden?”

Holmes did not answer immediately. He stood for a moment at the window, studying the neighboring house as though he were trying to see through the bricks.

"I do not yet know Watson," he said at last. "But of one thing I am certain."

"What is that?"

He turned slowly toward me.

"The cat is not the only living creature that uses this room."

Holmes carefully closed the door to the hidden attic space behind him, and without saying much began to descend the stairs. I had known him long enough to understand that his silence did not arise from uncertainty, but rather from the fact that a number of new thoughts had just begun to take shape in his mind. The discovery of the hidden room had altered the case considerably. For the first time we possessed something more tangible than rumors, prophecies, and old family quarrels. The cat was not being kept alive by accident. A human being had cared for it over a considerable period, and that human being must almost certainly be one of the persons already circling the mystery.

When we reached the hall, Holmes locked the door behind us and, without further explanation, went directly across the street toward the neighboring house. I did not need to ask his intention. The hidden attic space led toward Arthur Bell's property, and the connection was too obvious to ignore.

Arthur Bell's Secret

Bell opened the door himself in answer to our knock. He seemed genuinely surprised to see us again so soon after our first meeting, but he quickly recovered his usual friendliness.

"Mr. Holmes. Dr. Watson. Have you already made progress?"

"I hope so," said Holmes, with his customary polite smile. "We were very grateful for the information you gave us last time, Mr. Bell. There are merely one or two additional questions we should like to ask."

Bell hesitated almost imperceptibly, but then stepped aside and invited us in. As we were shown into the sitting-room, I could not help noticing

that he appeared less at ease than during our first encounter. It was not open nervousness. On the contrary, he did his best to appear calm. Yet there was a tension about him that I had not observed before. Several times his gaze slipped toward Holmes, as though he were trying to judge how much we already knew.

Holmes, however, allowed the conversation to begin in the most innocent fashion. He asked about the neighborhood, about the house next door, and about Mrs. Blackwood. Bell answered readily and repeated, in broad terms, the same account he had given us before. He had known her for many years. She had been an eccentric woman, but not necessarily a bad neighbor. The cat still appeared about the house. No one really knew where it lived.

"And you still have no idea how it finds food?" Holmes asked.

Bell shook his head.

"No. It has puzzled me as much as anyone else."

"Interesting."

A brief silence followed.

"You also mentioned the cat flap."

Bell nodded.

"Yes. That must be the explanation. The cat has always been able to come and go that way."

Holmes leaned forward slightly.

"Unfortunately, not."

Bell looked at him.

"No?"

"The cat flap does not function."

For the first time I saw genuine uncertainty appear upon the older man's face.

"It is rusted shut. We examined it this morning."

Bell hesitated.

"It may have worked previously."

"Possibly."

Holmes's voice remained friendly.

"Perhaps you remember incorrectly."

"Yes... that may naturally be the case."

Bell attempted a smile, but it seemed strained.

Holmes allowed the silence to linger for a moment.

Then he said calmly:

"It seems to me far more interesting, Mr. Bell, that someone has been placing fresh food and water in the hidden attic passage between your house and Number Twelve."

I have seldom seen a man's face change so quickly. The color vanished almost instantly from Bell's cheeks. His hands, which until then had rested quietly upon the arms of his chair, tightened visibly. For a moment he seemed about to say something, but no words came. The silence in the room suddenly became very noticeable.

"I do not know what you—"

He broke off. The attempt at denial died almost before it had begun. Slowly he sank back into his chair. When he finally spoke again, his voice sounded considerably older than before.

"I did not kill her."

I immediately grasped the significance of the words.

Not: I do not know what you are talking about.

Not: That is not true.

But: "I did not kill her."

I glanced quickly at Holmes. He had, of course, noticed precisely the same thing.

Bell sat with lowered eyes for several seconds before continuing.

"I have been feeding the cat."

The words came out almost with relief.

"I have done so ever since her death."

Now the confession seemed to continue of its own accord. He told us how he had placed food and water in the attic passage. How he had laid out blankets. How he had provided the litter box and kept the place clean. He no longer spoke like a man trying to conceal something, but like a man who had finally grown tired of carrying a secret alone.

"I did not know what else to do," he said.

Holmes listened without interrupting.

Bell rubbed a weary hand across his face.

"You must understand that I knew her for many years."

He cast a glance toward the window.

"We lived next door to one another longer than I can almost remember."

A faint smile appeared briefly.

"And we did not always get along particularly well."

Gradually the story began to take shape. There had been loans between them. Small financial arrangements. Repayments that had never come. Disagreements over money. Not great scandals, but enough to create bitterness.

"I did not always behave properly," he admitted.

"In what way?" Holmes asked.

Bell shrugged.

"In the way people do when they think they can get away with it."

There was more behind the words than he wished to say directly.

"And you still fear that these matters may come to light?"

Bell nodded slowly.

"Yes."

He sat silent for a moment.

"I still fear that she left something behind."

Holmes's gaze sharpened slightly.

"Something?"

Bell looked up at him.

Something in his face told me that we were now approaching the true source of his fear.

"Something that could reveal the truth."

Bell remained silent for a long time after his confession. He seemed like a man who had carried a burden for months and who suddenly no longer possessed the strength to hold it up. His gaze rested upon the floor before him while his hands slowly came together, and when he finally began to speak again, his voice sounded almost ashamed.

"It began with the last conversation I had with her."

Holmes said nothing, but I immediately saw his attention sharpen.

"It was shortly before her death. I no longer remember what we were arguing about. There had been so many small conflicts over the years that they almost blended together. But I remember her final words."

He slowly raised his head.

"When the cat dies, the truth must be allowed to speak."

He repeated the sentence with a precision that told me he had recited it to himself countless times ever since.

A brief silence fell over the room.

Once again, I felt that peculiar unease which seemed to accompany every mention of Mrs. Blackwood. The words themselves were not threatening. They were, in fact, strangely subdued. And yet there was something about them that made an impression. Perhaps because they had been spoken by a woman to whom so many people attributed almost supernatural abilities. Perhaps because they were now being repeated by a man who had plainly lived in fear of them.

"I did not know what she meant," Bell continued. "I still do not. But I became convinced that it concerned me."

"Concerned you?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I feared that she had left something behind. A letter. A document. An account of the things that had passed between us over the years."

His expression darkened.

"I had not treated her properly on every occasion. I am willing to admit that. And I was afraid that she had written it all down."

He drew a deep breath.

"And if she had, it would naturally have harmed me."

Now the picture slowly began to take shape.

"So, you believed that the truth would come out when the cat died?" I said.

"Yes."

He spoke the word without hesitation.

"It was foolish, I know. But the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became. She had said it so firmly. As though she already knew what was going to happen."

He smiled briefly and sadly.

"And then I made a decision."

I did not need to ask what decision.

"I would keep the cat alive."

Bell looked almost embarrassed by the admission.

"As long as the cat lived, her words could not come true. If the prophecy was tied to the animal, then I had to make certain that the animal never lacked for anything."

He looked at Holmes.

"It sounds ridiculous when one says it aloud."

Holmes shrugged slightly.

"It sounds human."

Bell smiled sincerely for the first time.

"Yes. Perhaps."

I must confess that I was almost speechless. The thought that this otherwise sensible man had spent months buying food, carrying water up to the attic, and caring for a cat out of fear of an old woman's cryptic remark struck me as both absurd and strangely touching.

"Did you truly believe it?" I asked.

Bell looked at me with an expression that held both weariness and resignation.

"After so many years with Mrs. Blackwood as a neighbor, one learned not to ignore her words."

Shortly afterward we took our leave.

Bell accompanied us to the door, and when we stepped out into the street, the afternoon was already beginning to give way to evening. The low clouds still hung over the neighborhood, and Number Twelve seemed darker and more silent than ever.

We walked several paces in silence.

"Do you believe him?" I asked at last.

"Yes," Holmes answered without hesitation.

I looked at him in surprise.

"Then Bell is innocent?"

"Not necessarily innocent."

Holmes thrust his hands into the pockets of his coat.

"But not guilty of murder."

I waited for an explanation.

"In my opinion, Mr. Bell is concealing an old shame," Holmes continued. "Perhaps several. But I see nothing to suggest that he committed a crime against Mrs. Blackwood."

He paused for a moment and glanced back toward the house. The dark upstairs window almost seemed to stare back at us.

"The interesting thing is something entirely different, Watson."

Holmes remained standing for a moment with his eyes fixed upon Number Twelve.

"That he is clearly not the only person who fears the dead woman's secrets."

And as we continued down the street, it gradually dawned upon me that the black cat had perhaps never been the center of the case at all. It had merely been the key that opened the door to the many secrets which continued to live on after Mrs. Lavinia Blackwood's death.

Later that same evening, as Holmes and I sat before the fire in Baker Street, it proved impossible to turn our thoughts away from Arthur Bell and the curious confession we had just heard. Outside, the rain had begun again. It beat against the windows with the same persistent rhythm that had accompanied the case from the beginning, and in the warm glow of the hearth, Number Twelve and its secrets seemed almost to have followed us into the sitting-room.

For a long time I sat watching the flames while Bell's words returned to me again and again. There was something about the old man's fear that had made a greater impression upon me than I was immediately willing to admit. He had not feared a criminal. He had not feared the police. He had feared the words of a dead woman.

"It is a curious case, Holmes," I said at last. "The more I think about it, the stranger it seems. Bell's fear, Mrs. Blackwood's final words, and the whole way in which the cat appears to stand at the center of it all."

Holmes sat reclining in his armchair with his pipe between his fingers. Bluish smoke drifted slowly toward the ceiling while he listened.

"It is almost," I continued, "as though the entire neighborhood has come to believe that the animal carries some secret."

A faint smile appeared behind the pipe.

"I doubt that the truth resides within the cat, Watson."

"No?"

"But I am beginning to think that it may reside upon the cat."

I looked up in surprise.

"Do I understand you correctly?"

Holmes set aside his pipe and leaned forward slightly.

"If Mrs. Blackwood truly wished to conceal something, then an animal would be a remarkably sensible place in which to do so. No one would think to examine it closely."

"Then you believe she deliberately used the cat?"

"At the very least, I am beginning to consider the possibility."

He fell silent for a moment.

"And there is only one way to settle the question."

He rose to his feet.

"We must catch the cat."

"Immediately?"

Holmes nodded.

"We have spent sufficient time on rumors, omens, and prophecies. It is time we returned to facts."

The Collar

The following morning, we returned once again to Number Twelve. The sky remained gray, and the damp air lay heavy over the neighborhood, but this time I felt that we were approaching a decisive point in the case. We now had access to the house whenever we wished, and Holmes entered it with that purposeful calm which always told me he had a definite theory he wished to test.

To my surprise, the cat appeared almost at once. It was sitting upon a chest of drawers in the sitting-room, where it had apparently made itself comfortable. Its green eyes followed us attentively as we entered, but it made no attempt to flee. I must confess that I had expected another long

pursuit through the house. After all the stories we had heard, and after its previous appearances upon staircases and in attics, I had imagined something far more dramatic.

But the cat evidently had other plans. When I approached cautiously, it merely remained where it was and watched me. I held out my hand, and to my surprise it allowed itself to be lifted without the least objection.

"Well, well," I murmured.

The animal did not protest in the slightest. On the contrary, it seemed perfectly content with the situation. It even began to purr.

"After all this commotion," I said, "I had expected a more challenging opponent."

"It would be unreasonable to demand of a cat that it live up to its own reputation," Holmes remarked.

We sat down in the parlor. The cat sprang onto my lap with the natural ease of an animal that had known me for years. I began almost unconsciously to stroke it, and within a few minutes it had curled itself up and found a position that plainly suited its taste. Its purring filled the room with a peaceful sound that stood in strange contrast to the dark stories surrounding it.

"It appears to me, Watson," said Holmes dryly, "that you have won its confidence."

"It appears to me rather that it has adopted me."

Holmes smiled faintly and stepped closer.

While I continued to hold the cat, he began his examination. He inspected its fur, its claws, and its teeth with the same thoroughness he would have brought to any other clue. Everything seemed to confirm our earlier conclusion. The animal was healthy, well cared for, and in excellent condition.

It was only when his gaze fell upon the collar that something changed. It was an entirely ordinary leather collar, worn by age and use, but without any special distinguishing mark. Holmes loosened it carefully. He examined the buckle and the stitching with great attention. A moment later his movement stiffened almost imperceptibly.

"Interesting."

I straightened.

“What is it?”

Holmes did not answer at once.

Instead, he went to the window and held the collar up against the gray daylight. Now I could see it too. On the inside of the leather there was something that at first looked like random marks, but upon closer inspection proved to be letters. Very small letters. Almost hidden by wear and age.

“What does it say?” I asked.

Holmes read slowly.

“The truth is in the red box.”

I stared at the collar.

“The truth is in the red box,” I repeated.

The red box. The words seemed at once simple and mysterious.

Holmes studied the small inscription once more before laying the collar carefully upon the table.

“Mrs. Blackwood,” he said thoughtfully, “was plainly a far more practical woman than her reputation suggested.”

The collar lay between us on the table as the first truly tangible clue in the entire case. Beside it the black cat continued to sleep, wholly indifferent to the unrest it had created among the living. Its purring still sounded faintly in the silence, while the rain beat against the windows, and I could not free myself from the feeling that we had just opened the door to the true mystery.

The following morning, I awoke with a far greater sense of expectation than I would ordinarily have admitted. The discovery of the hidden message in the cat’s collar had changed the entire case. For the first time since Mr. Cartwright had entered our sitting-room in Baker Street, we possessed something resembling a genuine clue. Not rumors, not fear, and not old superstitious tales, but a concrete message left by Mrs. Blackwood herself.

When I entered the breakfast-room, I found Holmes at the table with the newspaper spread before him. He had already eaten and now sat

with his coffee cup in his hand, reading through the day's news with that absent expression which told me his thoughts were elsewhere entirely.

"We should return to Number Twelve at once," I said almost before I had sat down. "If the red box is in the house, we must search every inch of it from cellar to attic."

Holmes lowered the newspaper slightly.

"That would be the natural reaction."

"And the wrong one?"

"Not necessarily wrong. Merely inefficient."

I poured myself some coffee.

"You do not think the box is there?"

"On the contrary. I think it may very well be in the house."

"Then why not?"

Holmes folded the newspaper.

"We have already searched the house several times. If Mrs. Blackwood wished to hide something, she would hardly choose a place that two determined men could find in a single morning."

He rose and began to walk slowly back and forth before the fireplace.

"No, Watson. If we wish to find the red box, we should first find a person who knew the house better than we do."

I needed only a moment to understand where his thoughts were leading.

"Clara Evans."

"Precisely."

Holmes stopped.

"The former maidservant worked for Mrs. Blackwood for many years. She knew the house. She knew its routines. Most important of all, she most likely knew the places where her employer kept things not intended for foreign eyes."

He smiled faintly.

"In addition, we shall have the opportunity to observe Miss Evans a little more closely."

Clara Evans

Through Mr. Cartwright, a meeting was arranged for that same afternoon, and once again we found ourselves in Number Twelve. The house seemed less gloomy now than it had during our first visit. Perhaps it was because we had gradually come to know its secrets better. Perhaps it was because the black cat no longer appeared to me an almost supernatural being, but merely an ordinary cat with a most extraordinary role in the case.

Clara Evans arrived precisely at the appointed time. My first impression of her agreed poorly with the suspicions that several of the heirs had directed against her. She was modestly dressed, neither young nor old, and her face had the calm, industrious character one often finds in those who have spent the greater part of their lives in the service of others. There was nothing secretive or calculating about her. On the contrary, she seemed almost a little nervous at the thought of meeting Sherlock Holmes.

We had scarcely exchanged the first courtesies when something interesting occurred. From somewhere farther within the house came a familiar meow. A moment later the black cat appeared. But whereas it had always moved before us with a certain dignity and reserve, its behavior changed at once at the sight of Clara Evans. It crossed the floor directly toward her, wound itself about her legs, and began to purr so loudly that the sound could be heard throughout the room.

Clara's face lit up.

"Well, there you are."

She bent down and lifted the animal without the slightest difficulty. The cat did not object. On the contrary, it immediately settled itself in her arms with the familiarity one sees only toward people well known to it. I noticed how its behavior changed. It did not merely seem safe. It seemed at home.

"It plainly remembers you," I said.

"I cared for it almost as much as Mrs. Blackwood did," Clara answered with a little smile. "She used to say that the cat was the only creature in the house that never contradicted her."

For the first time since we had met her, she laughed softly.

Holmes had said very little since her arrival, but I could see that he was observing both her and the cat with great interest. The animal had just given us something that none of the many documents and rumors had been able to provide. It had given Clara Evans credibility. For a cat does not lie. And this one behaved like an animal that had found an old friend.

When Clara had seated herself in the old parlor with the cat resting safely in her arms, the conversation naturally turned to her former employer. It quickly became clear to me that her relationship with Mrs. Blackwood had been more complex than the heirs' brief and suspicious descriptions had suggested. She did not speak of her with the blind devotion that a loyal servant may sometimes show toward a deceased master or mistress, but neither did she speak with bitterness. Rather, there was in her voice a certain respect, mingled with the reserved understanding that can arise only from many years of daily nearness.

"Many people found her strange," said Clara, stroking the cat's back. "And I suppose she was. She did not do much to appear ordinary."

"Did you believe in her powers?" I asked.

Clara smiled faintly.

"Not in the way people talked about them. I did not believe she could see into the future, as some claimed. But she saw a great deal. More than most. She noticed small things, and people told her things they would probably have been wiser to keep to themselves."

Holmes, who stood by the fireplace and had listened without interrupting, nodded almost imperceptibly. It was plain that Clara's words agreed well with the idea he had already formed of Mrs. Blackwood's true talent.

"And she hid things?" he asked.

Clara hesitated, but only for a moment.

"Yes. She had several places in the house. Little hiding places. Some she used for money when she did not want to leave it lying about. Others for letters or private papers."

"Were you familiar with these places?"

"With some of them. Not all."

She looked down at the cat.

"I cleaned here for many years, Mr. Holmes. In time one learns a house, even the places where one is not asked to look."

Holmes drew out the collar, which he had kept carefully since the day before.

"Miss Evans," he said, "do the words 'a red box' mean anything to you?"

Her reaction was interesting. Clara was plainly surprised but not frightened. She stared at him for a moment, as though the words had awakened a memory buried beneath many others.

"A red box," she repeated slowly.

"Yes."

"There was indeed a red box."

I immediately felt that familiar tension which always arose when a case suddenly moved from hints to something tangible.

"Do you know where it is?" I asked.

"I know where she used to hide the things she did not want left in plain sight."

The Red Box

She rose and carefully set the cat down upon the floor. The animal followed us with its eyes for a moment but made no move to leave the room as Clara led us out of the parlor and up the stairs. I had expected her to take us toward the attic or perhaps down to the cellar, but instead she went directly to Mrs. Blackwood's bedroom.

It was a room we had already visited, but one we had not examined with the same thoroughness as the more obvious places in the house. Along one wall stood an old wardrobe, heavy and dark, with carved panels and mirror glass that had lost something of its clarity over the years. Clara laid her hand upon one side of the wardrobe and explained that Mrs. Blackwood had once asked her to help move it during a thorough cleaning. It was then that she had first seen the hidden recess behind it.

With Holmes's help, the wardrobe was drawn a little way out from the wall. The movement sent dust into the air, and for a moment it danced in the weak light from the window. Behind the wardrobe, just as Clara

had said, there appeared a narrow hollow in the wall, placed so discreetly that one would scarcely have found it without prior knowledge.

Inside the recess stood a small red box. It was covered with dust but otherwise appeared untouched. The color had darkened with age, yet it was still plainly red, and the simple lock at the front had been neither forced nor damaged. When Holmes drew it out, I felt an almost physical tension in the room. After everything we had heard of the cat, the collar, and Mrs. Blackwood's final words, we now stood at last before the very object the dead woman herself had indicated.

Holmes placed the box upon a small table by the window and opened it with a careful hand. Inside lay several documents, arranged far more neatly than I had expected. On top was a letter. The paper was old but well preserved, and when Holmes unfolded it, I could tell at once from his face that its contents were grave.

He read it first to himself and then handed it to me. It was a hateful letter. Not merely angry but steeped in bitterness and threat. The sender accused Mrs. Blackwood of having ruined his life, of knowing things she had no right to know, and of using her knowledge as a weapon. Several times the writer demanded her silence, and toward the end the tone became so threatening that even a less imaginative reader could scarcely mistake its meaning.

"This is not a letter written in anger alone," I said quietly. "It was written by someone who hated her."

"Yes," Holmes replied. "And someone who feared her."

Beside the letter lay a single cuff link. Holmes picked it up between his fingers and held it to the light. It was valuable; that was clear at once. Yet it was not merely its value that made it remarkable. It bore a distinctive pattern, finely worked and hardly likely to have been mass-produced. A man who wore such a cuff link would probably own a pair, and he would notice if one were missing.

Holmes examined it for a long time, first with the naked eye and then with his lens. Clara stood silent beside us, and even the cat, which had now come up the stairs and seated itself in the doorway, seemed to watch the scene with a curious calm.

"This," said Holmes at last, "is not merely a keepsake. It is evidence."

I looked from the letter to the cuff link and back again. And it now seemed to me that Mrs. Lavinia Blackwood had not merely feared her fate. She had prepared for it.

The Threatening Note

As Holmes continued through the contents of the red box, I at first believed that we had found everything of significance. The letter and the solitary cuff link were in themselves sufficiently interesting to occupy the attention of any investigator, and I had already begun to consider what connection might exist between the two. It was therefore almost by chance that Holmes discovered the final document, which lay hidden beneath the other papers.

It was merely a single folded sheet, smaller than the others and without any outward mark. When Holmes unfolded it, Clara Evans instinctively leaned forward, and even before she had read the words, she nodded firmly.

"That is her handwriting," she said. "I am certain of it."

Holmes cast a quick glance at her and then began to read.

"I found this after our quarrel."

The sentence stood alone at the top of the page and was followed by a brief note concerning the cuff link that lay in the box. At the bottom was another line, written in the same firm hand:

"If harm should come to me, the writer of this letter must answer for it."

There was nothing more. For that very reason, the note made a strong impression upon me. Mrs. Blackwood had plainly not written it as a personal remembrance or as some casual memorandum to herself. On the contrary, it seemed like a message intended for whoever might one day open the box. She wanted the letter and the cuff link to be viewed together. She wanted someone to understand the connection between them.

I read the note once more while Holmes sat with the cuff link between his fingers. The small article of jewelry suddenly seemed far more impor-

tant than before. The letter was, of course, interesting, but a letter might be written anonymously. A cuff link, on the other hand, belonged to a particular person. Somewhere there was almost certainly a man who had once owned a pair of precisely this kind.

"It is strange," I said. "First, we were looking for a secret. Now we are looking for the owner of a cuff link."

Holmes smiled faintly without raising his eyes.

"That is often how an investigation develops, Watson. First one searches for a mystery. Then for a man."

He rose and walked slowly to the window with the letter in his hand. The gray daylight fell across the paper as he once more let his eyes travel over the angry lines. I could not help studying his face. The letter had plainly made an impression upon him, not because of the strength of its threats, but because it revealed something about the relationship between the sender and Mrs. Blackwood.

"Do you think," I asked after a while, "that she knew she would be murdered?"

Holmes remained standing for a moment without answering.

"No," he said at last. "I do not think so."

He turned slowly toward me.

"But I do think she knew that someone wished her silent."

There was something in the way he said it that made me think of Arthur Bell and of all the other people we had thus far encountered. Each of them seemed to carry a particular unease whenever Mrs. Blackwood's name was mentioned, as though the dead woman still possessed some form of power over them.

Holmes looked down at the letter again.

"And I think," he continued, "that she was wise enough to understand that fear can be a stronger weapon than certainty."

"You mean?"

"That she left these things deliberately."

He laid the letter beside the cuff link upon the table.

"She could not know what would happen. But she could ensure that the person who wrote this letter never felt entirely safe."

The thought struck me as at once simple and deeply characteristic of Mrs. Blackwood. The more we learned of her, the less she resembled the mysterious fortune teller the neighborhood had created in its imagination, and the more she resembled a person with an unusual understanding of human weakness.

Holmes now drew out the list of names from the estate papers and placed it beside the letter, the note, and the cuff link. I watched as his gaze moved from one name to another while he slowly began comparing the old information with the new discoveries.

To me it still seemed a collection of loose pieces. But I had seen that expression on Holmes's face many times before. It was the look he wore when a pattern had begun to take shape somewhere behind the facts that still appeared accidental to everyone else.

And as the rain again began to beat against the windows of Number Twelve, I had the strong feeling that we were at last drawing near to the person whom Mrs. Blackwood had attempted to point out from beyond the grave.

The Nephew and the Widow

The following afternoon Holmes and I returned to Number Twelve. The weather had not improved since our first visit. A low gray sky hung over the rows of houses, and the damp autumn light seemed scarcely able to penetrate between the buildings. The house appeared as quiet and deserted as before, and when we unlocked the door and entered the parlor, I was once again struck by the peculiar sensation of a home in which time had stopped without warning. Nothing had been moved. Nothing seemed to have changed. Even the dust lay in the same places as upon our last visit.

The black cat had taken up its place upon the windowsill. It lay curled against the glass with its tail drawn close to its body. At the sound of the door, it briefly lifted its head, cast a lazy glance in our direction, and then settled itself again. The animal seemed by now to have accepted our presence as a natural part of the house's existence.

Holmes took his seat at the table without saying much, while I sat opposite him. We had not waited long before the sound of a knock at the front door echoed through the house. I went out and opened it.

The man standing outside was about forty years of age. He was dressed in a manner that at once suggested respectability and a degree of financial security. His dark coat was of good quality, and everything about his appearance was neat and orderly. Yet there was something about him that made a less pleasant impression. Perhaps it was his restless gaze, or the way his eyes moved constantly from one object to another, as though he could never quite find repose.

"Mr. Edward Blackwood?" I asked.

"Yes."

I showed him in.

The moment he crossed the threshold; he let his gaze move about the room. There was not much grief or nostalgia in his face. On the contrary, it seemed almost as though the house made him uncomfortable.

"I have never cared for this place," he said before either of us had time to ask a question.

He looked around once more.

"In my opinion, it cannot be sold quickly enough."

I remember that the remark surprised me. Most people, even after many years of distance from a family member, would have shown some feeling upon returning to the home of the deceased. But Edward Blackwood seemed rather relieved at the thought that the house would soon disappear from the family history.

Holmes regarded him for a moment from his chair.

"You were Mrs. Blackwood's nephew?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps you can tell us something about her."

Edward laughed shortly.

It was not a cheerful laugh, but rather the dry sound one gives when a question has no simple answer.

"That depends upon which version you want."

Holmes raised an eyebrow.

"Version?"

"Yes. There were always several of them."

He shrugged.

"But one thing I can say, at least. She was intelligent. Very intelligent."

He leaned back a little in his chair.

"In fact, so intelligent that, in my opinion, she spent most of her life manipulating other people."

A short silence followed.

"In what way?" Holmes asked.

"By knowing things about them. By making them tell more than they had intended. By making them believe she knew even more."

He cast a glance toward the many objects in the room.

"That was, I suppose, her whole business."

Holmes nodded slowly, as though he were merely registering one more fact among many.

"And her finances?"

For the first time since his arrival, Edward seemed genuinely engaged.

"Ah, now you touch upon something interesting."

He leaned forward.

"Most people thought she was a poor old fortune teller. That was the image she liked to create. A lonely woman living off tarot cards and foolish predictions."

He shook his head.

"But she certainly was not."

"No?" said Holmes.

"On the contrary. She had considerable means."

I could see that the subject occupied him far more than any memories of his aunt.

"I can assure you that she was capable of far more than the art of reading tarot cards. She was remarkably skilled at gathering money."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Because over the years I saw several examples of it."

He now spoke with greater certainty.

"There were investments. There was cash. There were people who apparently owed her favors. And then there were her own hints."

"Hints?"

"Yes."

A small smile appeared.

"She enjoyed allowing people to understand that she was richer than they believed. Not directly. Never directly. But in such a way that after a conversation one was left with the feeling that she knew more, owned more, and controlled more than anyone had imagined."

He cast another glance around the room.

"Mrs. Blackwood was very fond of secrets, Mr. Holmes."

Holmes folded his hands before him.

"I am beginning to receive that impression."

Edward leaned back in his chair and let his gaze wander about the room once more, as though the house itself awakened memories he would rather have avoided.

"Most people thought she was a lonely old woman," he said. "But I do not believe anyone truly understood how much she enjoyed exercising influence over other people."

Holmes said nothing, but his attention did not diminish.

"It was especially the will," Edward continued. "She used it as a weapon. I do not doubt that it amused her."

"In what way?" asked Holmes.

Edward laughed shortly.

"She talked of it all the time. If one pleased her, she might let one understand that one stood very favorably in the will. If one angered her, one was immediately threatened with being removed from it. She kept people dangling for years in that manner."

He shook his head.

"That will was almost a curse."

A brief silence followed before Holmes spoke again.

"And how did you stand with her, Mr. Blackwood?"

For the first time, Edward seemed slightly hesitant. Not because the question surprised him, but rather because he wished to frame the answer with care.

"I actually believe I stood rather well toward the end," he said at last. "We had renewed contact during the past year. Not that we ever became particularly close, but we had some tolerable conversations, and I certainly had the impression that she regarded me more favorably than she had done before."

He shrugged lightly.

"That is why I am convinced it was reflected in the will."

"Then you believe you have a financial interest in the missing document?" Holmes asked.

"Naturally."

The answer came so quickly and without hesitation that even I was somewhat surprised.

It struck me throughout the entire conversation that Edward Blackwood almost never spoke of his aunt as a human being. He told no family stories. He mentioned no shared memories. There was no hint of grief or affection in his voice. Whenever the conversation approached her person, it quickly turned back toward money, property, or the will.

I leaned forward slightly.

"Did you have a close relationship with your aunt?"

"No," he answered instantly.

There was not the slightest hesitation.

"It would be very wrong to claim that."

He said it without bitterness and almost without feeling of any kind. It seemed to me as though the question were entirely indifferent to him.

Holmes allowed another moment to pass before he closed his notebook.

"I believe that will be all, Mr. Blackwood. Thank you for coming."

Edward rose. He seemed relieved that the meeting was over. But when he reached the door, he stopped and turned back.

"If you find the will," he said, "I shall naturally be informed?"

Holmes looked at him calmly.

"If we find it, Mr. Cartwright will receive the necessary information."

For a moment it appeared as though the answer did not satisfy Edward in the least. He quickly concealed it behind a courteous nod, wished us a good afternoon, and left the house.

The sound of the front door died away through the silent building. I watched him through the window until he disappeared down the street.

"He seems to me considerably more interested in the will than in his aunt," I remarked.

Holmes nodded and followed the black cat with his gaze, where it still lay motionless upon the windowsill.

After Edward Blackwood's departure, Holmes remained seated in silence for a moment, his gaze directed toward the window where the black cat still lay curled up in the gray afternoon light. I took out my notes and turned several pages.

"The next on the list is Mrs. Winthrop," I said. "A wealthy widow. According to Cartwright, she has filed a claim against the estate for a considerable sum of money. She maintains that she lent the money to Mrs. Blackwood many years ago, but the documentation is exceedingly poor."

Holmes nodded slowly.

"Yes, Watson. A debt without papers is always interesting."

I was just about to ask what he meant by that when there came a knock at the door. This time it was Holmes himself who rose to answer it. A moment later our visitor entered the parlor.

She was a woman of about sixty years of age, perhaps a little older. Everything about her suggested wealth and respectability. Her hat was discreet, yet of exquisite quality. Her gloves fitted perfectly. Her jewelry was sparse, but plainly expensive. She seemed like a person who had spent her entire life among people who never needed to concern themselves with money.

As she entered the room, her gaze drifted slowly about her surroundings.

"So," she said. "This is what it looked like."

The remark was delivered without the slightest trace of warmth or nostalgia. On the contrary, she seemed almost uncomfortable to find herself there.

"It has been a long time since I was last here," she continued. "Several years, in fact. I visited Mrs. Blackwood once or twice in those days."

She seated herself carefully.

"It was really not until I read of her death that I remembered the loan."

She shrugged lightly.

"What is due is due."

Holmes took a seat opposite her.

"Then let us speak of the loan, Mrs. Winthrop. How did it come about?"

For the first time she appeared slightly uncertain.

"It was many years ago."

"Naturally."

"I do not recall all the details."

She hesitated briefly.

"I had visited her a few times. Once or twice. I sought her assistance."

"And afterward?"

"Well, afterward she asked for mine."

She smiled faintly.

"And I suppose I developed a certain sympathy for her."

I noticed Holmes's gaze sharpen slightly.

"Did you know her well?"

"No."

The answer came quickly.

"I would not claim that."

"And yet you lent a considerable sum of money to a woman you scarcely knew."

Now she became mildly irritated.

"I could afford it."

"That is not quite the same thing."

She adjusted her gloves.

"I did not think very much about it at the time."

"You must have liked her."

Mrs. Winthrop once again allowed her gaze to wander around the house. Several seconds passed before she answered.

"No."

The answer seemed to surprise even herself.

"No, not really."

She shook her head lightly.

"She was not my sort of person."

A brief silence followed.

"Perhaps it was foolish to lend her the money."

It seemed to me that she herself was dissatisfied with the explanation. Holmes allowed her to sit with that feeling for a moment.

"And yet you visited her."

"Yes."

"For what reason?"

Now she became genuinely cautious.

"It was for personal reasons."

"Can you be a little more specific?"

"No."

Holmes nodded.

"Did she succeed in helping you?"

She thought for a long time.

"No."

A faint smile appeared for a moment.

"Perhaps almost the opposite."

I remember clearly that the remark fixed itself in my thoughts. There was something in the way she said it that led me to believe that her connection with Mrs. Blackwood had been far more personal than financial. She certainly did not seem like a woman who had sought out a stranger for financial advice. On the contrary, I gained the impression that she had sought something entirely different. Perhaps a prediction. Perhaps an answer to something that troubled her. And perhaps she had received an answer she did not care for.

Holmes returned to practical matters.

"Do you possess any form of documentation?"

She shook her head.

"None."

"Only your word?"

"Yes."

Holmes leaned back.

"Did you ever attempt to recover the money earlier?"

"No."

She hesitated.

"I never made any serious attempt."

To me, the story was becoming more and more improbable. A large loan. No papers. No demands for several years. No genuine efforts to recover the money.

When Holmes finally closed his notebook, she seemed almost relieved.

"I seek only what is rightfully mine," she said as she rose. "Neither more nor less."

Shortly afterward we escorted her to the door. When the sound of her footsteps had faded down the street, I turned toward Holmes.

"That was a most peculiar conversation."

He did not answer immediately.

"There was no evidence," I continued. "No clear recollections. The entire story seems inconsistent."

Holmes stood silently for a moment with his gaze fixed upon the window.

"I am quite certain that a debt exists."

I looked at him in surprise.

"Then you believe her?"

"Yes."

He nodded slowly.

"But I have greater doubts about who owed whom."

Mr. Finch

Holmes remained standing by the window with his hands clasped behind his back. The black cat had left the windowsill and had now settled

into one of the armchairs, where it lay curled up like a dark shadow against the faded upholstery.

I used the pause to organize my notes and could not help noticing how efficiently Cartwright had arranged the day's meetings. Within only a few hours we had spoken with both Edward Blackwood and Mrs. Winthrop, and yet another visitor awaited us.

"Cartwright has been remarkably efficient," I remarked. "The house is gradually turning into an actual interrogation room."

Holmes turned halfway toward me.

"It is often more practical to bring people to the mystery than to carry the mystery around to the people."

I turned another page in my notes.

"The next must be Mr. Finch."

Holmes nodded.

"Yes."

A small smile appeared at one corner of his mouth.

"That man interests me more than most."

I opened the page containing Cartwright's information.

"Businessman," I read. "He wrote repeatedly to Cartwright after the death. He requested access to Mrs. Blackwood's private papers, correspondence, diaries, and personal documents."

"That seems odd."

"Yes," said Holmes.

He picked up his pipe.

"People who seek access to private papers are seldom looking for literature."

I was just about to ask what he meant when there came a knock at the door. This time the visitor entered almost before the invitation had been completed.

Mr. Finch was about fifty years of age, perhaps slightly younger. His clothes were of good quality, yet there was something about the overall effect that seemed somewhat excessive. Several rings adorned his hands. His cologne was stronger than could reasonably be called discreet, and his attire was a shade more conspicuous than it truly needed to be.

He gave the impression of a man who wished to appear a successful businessman, though both his taste and his manners suggested that his road to respectability had not been entirely straightforward.

He sat down quickly without waiting for further instruction.

"I hope we may quickly clear up the misunderstanding that has brought my name into this matter."

I immediately noticed the confident tone. He appeared prepared. Almost as though he had already rehearsed the conversation in his mind.

Holmes seated himself calmly opposite him.

"I undertook a little preliminary work before our meeting, Mr. Finch."

Finch smiled.

"That sounds sensible."

"I reviewed, among other things, the police reports in which your name appears."

The disappearance of the smile was instantaneous.

Holmes produced a single sheet of paper.

"Forgery."

A second sheet.

"Receiving stolen property."

A third.

"Several charges of fraud."

He gathered the papers together.

"And a conviction for fraud three years ago."

Finch attempted to laugh.

"Those are old stories."

"Possibly," said Holmes dryly. "But if they are trifles, one must say that they have accumulated into a rather substantial quantity."

I could see the man's confidence beginning to falter. He adjusted his cuffs, shifted in his chair, and for the first time avoided direct eye contact. It was obvious that this opening had not been part of his preparations. But Holmes did not allow him time to dwell upon his discomfort.

"So, you knew Mrs. Blackwood."

"Yes."

"Was there some form of financial arrangement between you?"

Finch hesitated.

"I suppose one could call it that."

"In what way?"

He shrugged slightly.

"I saw business potential. She had a name. A clientele. People came to her with their problems."

"And your idea?"

"To expand the business."

He seemed relieved to move onto more familiar ground.

"Tarot cards. Amulets. Spiritual objects. That sort of thing."

"And she accepted?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I do not know."

He shrugged again.

"She did not seem interested."

The explanation struck me as strange. If the meeting had truly been so brief and insignificant, why did his name appear so frequently in Cartwright's papers? Holmes seemed to be thinking the same thing. He now produced several of the letters.

"If the meeting was of no significance, why did you write repeatedly to Cartwright after her death?"

Finch immediately appeared less comfortable.

"I thought she might have mentioned me in her papers."

"And you wished to verify that?"

"Yes."

"For what reason?"

"I merely wished to ensure that matters were represented correctly."

Holmes allowed the answer to hang in the air for a moment.

"How many times did you actually meet?"

"Once."

The answer came quickly.

"Exactly once?"

"Yes."

For the first time during the conversation, I saw something that resembled concern in his eyes. To his obvious surprise, Holmes closed his notebook.

"I believe that will be all, Mr. Finch."

The man blinked. For a moment he seemed uncertain whether he had heard correctly. Then he rose almost too quickly, seized his hat, and thanked us with a politeness that felt somewhat forced. Shortly afterward the door closed behind him.

I looked at Holmes.

"That man had certainly not been entirely honest."

Holmes stood at the window watching the retreating figure.

"No."

"He knew more than he said."

"Yes."

He turned slowly around.

"And more importantly."

"What?"

"He knows that it can be dangerous to say too much."

With that, he once again took out the cuff link and allowed it to rest in the palm of his hand while his gaze moved from it to the names in our notes.

I noticed something that struck me as remarkable. Holmes seemed less interested in the missing will and far more interested in the letter from the red box. And from experience I knew that whenever Sherlock Holmes began shifting his attention from the visible mystery to a seemingly lesser clue, it was rarely without reason.

"If there is anyone who comes close to being a common swindler," I said, turning toward Holmes, "it must be Mr. Finch."

I thought of the police reports, the fraud cases, and the whole appearance of the man. Even without knowledge of his past, I should hardly have felt at ease entrusting him with my savings.

Holmes made no comment upon the remark. He had already found Cartwright's correspondence and now sat bent over the papers. For a moment he leafed through them in silence.

"There is something else that interests me more," he said.

I was just about to ask what, when he continued.

"According to Cartwright, Finch repeatedly requested access to the house."

"Yes."

"And not merely to the house."

He pointed to one of the letters.

"To the correspondence. To the diaries. To the personal documents."

I considered this for a moment.

"That seems rather extreme for a man who had been here only once."

"Precisely."

Holmes nodded slowly.

"Perhaps he was looking for something."

There was a brief silence.

Then Holmes closed the papers.

"I believe we shall have need of Miss Evans again."

Mrs. Blackwood's Notebook

The following morning, we returned once more to Number Twelve.

By now the house had begun to feel less like a mystery and more like a place of work. We had spent so many hours within its walls that even the peculiar atmosphere which had impressed me during our first visits was beginning to lose some of its force. Shortly after our arrival, there came a knock at the door.

It was Clara Evans. She seemed far more at ease than during our earlier meetings. Her uncertainty had almost vanished, and it seemed to me that she had by now developed a considerable trust in Holmes.

The black cat appeared almost immediately, as though it had heard her footsteps already out upon the pavement. It went straight to her and rubbed itself against her legs.

"Good day to you as well," said Clara with a smile, bending down to scratch it behind the ear.

Holmes received her.

"You must not think, Miss Evans, that you are in any way under suspicion."

She laughed softly.

"I had not imagined so."

"Good."

Holmes showed her into the parlor.

"You have already been of invaluable assistance to us, and we hope that you may be able to help us once more."

"I shall do my best."

Holmes sat down.

"Did Mrs. Blackwood ever keep a calendar or notebook of her appointments?"

I expected the question to require some thought. But Clara answered almost at once.

"If it is still there, I know exactly where it is."

I must admit that this surprised me.

"Truly?"

She nodded.

"Yes."

Without further explanation, she rose and walked through the house.

Holmes and I followed.

To my surprise she went neither toward the attic nor toward the bedroom, where so many of Mrs. Blackwood's secrets had already been found. Instead, she led us into the kitchen. She stopped before a perfectly ordinary cupboard. Inside lay tablecloths, napkins, and various household articles. Clara removed the upper linens. Then she reached far in behind them. A moment later she drew out a worn black notebook and held it up.

"I believe this is what you are looking for."

Holmes smiled sincerely.

"Miss Evans," he said, "you have once again been of invaluable help to us."

She seemed genuinely pleased by the praise.

"I knew her habits better than most."

Holmes took the notebook and leafed briefly through it.

"This looks promising."

Shortly afterward Clara took her leave. When we accompanied her to the door, the cat went with her the whole way. It stopped only at the threshold and watched her as she moved down the street.

"It plainly cares for her," I remarked.

"The feeling appears to be mutual," said Holmes.

When the door had closed, we returned to the parlor. Holmes laid the notebook on the table between us. It was thicker than I had expected, and the pages were closely written.

"Now," he said, opening it, "let us see what Mrs. Blackwood found worth remembering."

I drew my chair closer while Holmes began to turn through the first pages, and I had a distinct feeling that the little black book would soon prove far more valuable than either the will or most of the house's other secrets.

The book proved to be precisely the sort of document one might have expected of Mrs. Blackwood. It was neither a diary in the proper sense nor an ordinary calendar, but a curious mixture of both. Appointments, names, addresses, and brief memoranda stood crowded together, and as Holmes turned the pages, I gained the clear impression that the deceased woman had kept a far more systematic account of people than of events.

For some time he said nothing. Only the sound of the turning pages broke the silence. I had just begun to study some of the nearest notes when Holmes suddenly uttered a single word.

"One."

He continued to leaf through the book.

A few pages farther on, it came again.

"Two."

This time I looked up.

Holmes, however, did not appear to notice my surprise. His eyes moved rapidly over the pages while his fingers continued their steady work.

"Three."

Then another page.

"Four."

By now my curiosity had quite overcome my patience, but before I could ask, he continued.

"Five."

A faint smile began to appear about his mouth.

"Six."

At last, he half closed the book, turned it toward me, and let one finger rest upon a series of notes.

"Mr. Finch appears to have been more modest than I expected."

I leaned forward and looked down at the pages. The same name occurred again and again throughout the book.

Mr. Finch. Sometimes there was a week between the appointments. At other times a fortnight. But always he returned. Not as a chance visitor, but as a person who, over a considerable period, had maintained a regular connection with the owner of the house.

"So, he lied," I said.

"Yes," Holmes replied calmly.

He took back the book and turned forward a few more pages.

"And not merely a little."

There was something almost satisfied in his tone, as though a piece of the puzzle had at last fallen into place.

"At least eight meetings in this book alone," he continued. "And probably more outside the period visible here."

I looked at the notes once more.

"Then surely we ought to confront him with it."

Holmes closed the book slowly and remained seated for a moment with his hand resting upon the cover. By now I knew that expression well. It was not hesitation, but that particular form of concentration which came upon him when several clues had begun to move toward one another.

"Not today," he said at last.

"Why not?"

He rose and walked to the window.

"Because we have already obtained more from the man than he intended to give us."

Outside, the rain had begun again, and through the glass I could see the shining cobblestones of the narrow street. Holmes stood silent for a moment with the notebook beneath his arm before he continued.

"All the impressions of the day must be allowed to settle, Watson. One often learns more from a man's lie when one does not immediately reveal that one has seen through it."

I followed his gaze out toward the street and thought over the conversations of the day. We now knew that Finch had lied. He had concealed the extent of his relationship with Mrs. Blackwood and had attempted to present himself as a chance acquaintance, although her own notes told a very different story. Yet the more I considered the matter, the less the question became whether he was hiding something. That was by now plain enough. The truly interesting question was why he had found it necessary.

The following morning breakfast was nearly over when I noticed how differently Holmes and I had spent the last few hours. I sat, as usual, with the newspaper and let my eyes pass over the events of the day. There were the customary political disputes in Parliament, a minor case concerning a missing tourist in Kent, and an advertisement for a new theatrical production which, judging by the description, seemed quite promising. None of it, however, awakened Holmes's interest.

Ever since breakfast had been placed upon the table, he had kept Mrs. Blackwood's notebook before him. Page after page passed through his hands while, with that peculiar concentration I knew so well, he examined its contents. Several times I had seen him return to earlier pages in order to check a date or compare one remark with another. When at last I looked up from the newspaper, I realized that he had been working over the book for more than an hour with scarcely any interruption.

After a time of silence, a thought occurred to me.

"How far back does it actually go?"

Holmes stopped in the middle of a movement and looked up.

"That is, in fact, a good question, Watson."

He immediately began to check the dates more systematically. I could follow his gaze as it moved through the pages.

"Three years."

He leafed onward.

"No."

A few more pages.

"Four."

Several more leaves.

"Perhaps five."

This surprised me. I had imagined an ordinary appointment book, not a document that covered so long a period of Mrs. Blackwood's life.

Holmes continued his examination. After some time he said, almost casually:

"It would be interesting to see whether Mrs. Winthrop appears here."

I laid the newspaper aside completely now.

"Do you think she does?"

"It would surprise me if she did not."

Then followed another long period of silence.

Only the sound of the turned pages could be heard in the room.

I attempted to resume my reading of the newspaper, but my attention was drawn again and again toward Holmes. As time passed, he seemed less occupied with individual names and more interested in the connections between them.

Then suddenly there came a small, satisfied exclamation.

"Aha."

He straightened in his chair. A finger rested upon a particular page. A moment later he leafed onward.

"Hm."

Then another page.

"Yes."

His eyes were moving more quickly now.

For the first time that morning, it seemed as though something had begun to fall into place.

I put the newspaper aside entirely.

"Well?"

Holmes slowly closed the book and let his hand rest upon the cover.

"Watson, there is something that does not fit."

He was silent for a moment.

"Or else it fits with perfect precision."

I must have looked rather confused, for a faint smile appeared about his mouth.

"I believe we must speak with Mr. Finch again."

"Because of the calendar?"

"Yes. And because of something else."

He picked up the notebook.

"There is, in any case, no doubt that he knows more than he has been willing to tell us."

An Unprofitable Partnership

Without further explanation Holmes went at once to the writing desk. A letter was written with characteristic speed and precision. It was addressed to Cartwright and contained a request for a new meeting with Mr. Finch that very day, as soon as it could be arranged. When he had finished, he read the letter briefly through.

"Mr. Finch is unlikely to find the time convenient."

"That seems likely."

"Therefore, I have added," Holmes continued, folding the letter, "that the meeting will probably serve his own interests."

I could not help laughing.

"That was diplomatically phrased."

"Yes."

Holmes rang for the Baker Street page and sent the letter off.

The morning then passed quietly. Holmes returned several times to the notebook and made various comparisons between names and dates, but he shared few of his thoughts with me. It was not until a little after noon that Cartwright's reply arrived.

Holmes read the letter through and then handed it to me.

"The meeting is arranged for four o'clock."

I skimmed the lines.

Cartwright added that Mr. Finch had had several other obligations that afternoon and had not at first shown any enthusiasm at the prospect of another meeting. After some persuasion, however, he had rearranged his appointments and agreed.

When I laid the letter aside, Holmes looked at me.

"So, he is coming."

"Yes."

"That surprises you?"

"A little."

Holmes shook his head.

"No, quite the contrary."

He closed the notebook and set it aside.

"Men like Mr. Finch are often willing to run considerable risks."

"But?"

"They rarely care for surprises."

After that he fell silent once more, and I had the distinct feeling that the meeting at four o'clock would bring us considerably nearer the truth that Mrs. Blackwood had taken such pains to conceal.

The weather proved surprisingly mild. After several days of gray skies and rain, a pleasant afternoon light now lay over the small adjoining houses, and even Number Twelve seemed for a while to have lost something of its usual gloom. Holmes and I arrived well before the appointed meeting, and while he at once unlocked the door and went inside with Mrs. Blackwood's notebook beneath his arm, I remained for a moment in the garden. The air was mild, and an almost deceptive peace rested over the place. Had I not known the history of the house, I should hardly have believed that it contained so many secrets.

When I entered the parlor a little later, I found Holmes seated at the table with the notebook before him. He had already resumed his studies but was interrupted by a familiar figure. The black cat appeared almost instantly. As though it had heard our voices through the house, it sprang onto the sofa and settled itself without hesitation upon my lap. I could not help smiling. After all the rumors it had created, and all the people

it had frightened, it behaved in truth like one of the most good-natured animals I had ever encountered. I scratched it behind the ears, and at once it began to purr with a contentment that filled the quiet room. Holmes observed us for a moment over the edge of his notebook.

"It appears to me, Watson, that you possess an attraction for animals which I had not previously observed."

I laughed.

"Perhaps the cat has good judgment."

Holmes gave first me and then the cat a look which plainly showed that he found the theory doubtful.

"That conclusion would require a good deal of further documentation before I could accept it."

I leaned back in the chair and let my hand rest upon the cat's back.

"But what is your plan when Finch arrives?"

Holmes closed the notebook and left his hand resting upon it.

"It worked tolerably well last time to take the initiative."

He tapped the cover lightly.

"I see no reason to alter a method that has already proved effective."

There came a knock at the door almost as if on command. I rose to open it, but Holmes was already on his way. A few moments later Mr. Finch entered the parlor, and the difference from our first meeting was striking. The confidence he had previously worn like a shield was gone. There was no smiling remark, no attempt to steer the conversation, no artificial joviality. He greeted us briefly, sat down, and waited.

Holmes allowed him to sit for a moment without saying anything. Then he opened the notebook and turned several pages until he found the place he wanted.

"At our first meeting, Mr. Finch," he said calmly, "you told us that you had met Mrs. Blackwood once."

Finch did not reply.

"Perhaps twice."

Still silence.

Holmes turned the book so that it lay open between them.

"We have found at least twelve appointments between you and Mrs. Blackwood."

I saw Finch's gaze fall to the pages. He still said nothing, but his face revealed that he understood the significance of the discovery.

"That places you in a most unfortunate light in connection with this murder case," Holmes continued.

"Murder case?" Finch exclaimed suddenly.

The surprise seemed genuine.

Holmes studied him closely.

"Were you not aware of it?"

"I thought she died naturally."

"Perhaps."

Holmes said it in a manner that neither confirmed nor denied anything.

"But between ourselves, you are not in a very good position."

He pointed to the notebook.

"You lied about your connection with her."

Then he looked directly at the man.

"You have several convictions behind you."

A brief pause.

"And you have shown considerably greater interest in her papers than you previously wished to admit."

I saw something change in Finch. It was not fear alone. It was the particular resignation that comes over men when they realize that their story can no longer be maintained. He sank a little in his chair and stared down at the table. So much time passed that I thought he would deny everything once more. Then he sighed heavily.

"I had better tell you a little more."

"That would probably be wise," said Holmes.

"For your own sake."

Finch nodded slowly. When he began to speak again, the confident businessman had vanished. Now he sounded rather like a man trying to limit the damage.

"We met by chance at first," he said. "But it did not take long before we both saw the possibilities."

Holmes let him continue.

"Mrs. Blackwood knew many people. She had a way of making them tell her things. Not because she threatened them. They told her willingly."

A bitter smile passed across his face.

"People told her things they should never have told anyone."

"And you were good at making money from that knowledge?" Holmes asked.

Finch drew a slow breath.

"Yes."

There was no longer any point in concealing it.

"Are we speaking of blackmail?" Holmes continued.

Finch shrugged.

"One might call it that."

I felt my own revulsion growing, but Holmes remained unmoved.

"So, Mrs. Blackwood supplied the information, and you collected the money."

"Yes."

Finch looked from one of us to the other.

"But I did not commit murder."

His voice now sounded almost desperate.

"I have done many other things in my life. More than enough. But not that."

Holmes slowly closed the notebook.

"There are many names in this book."

He let his fingers rest upon the cover.

"But one interests me more than most."

Finch looked at him expectantly.

"Mrs. Winthrop."

For a moment his memory worked. Then he nodded.

"Yes. I remember her."

"She was blackmailed?"

A brief smile appeared.

"That was, in fact, one of the better transactions."

I must confess that I found it difficult to conceal my disgust. Holmes continued, unaffected.

"Do you remember what Mrs. Blackwood had discovered?"

Finch shook his head.

"Not precisely. It is not even certain she told me."

He thought for a moment.

"But when I consider the size of the payments, it must have been serious."

"You later quarreled with Mrs. Blackwood."

A nod.

"Over money."

Another nod.

"She wanted a larger share."

Now Finch laughed shortly, but the laughter held no pleasure.

"Yes. She became greedy."

Silence fell in the room.

Finch looked first at Holmes and then at me.

"I admit a great deal," he said at last. "More than I intended. But I am no murderer."

Holmes did not answer. He merely sat watching the man with his customary calm gaze.

As the silence spread through the room, I sat considering what had just been revealed to us. Until now I had regarded Mrs. Blackwood as an eccentric woman who lived upon human superstition. Now an entirely different picture was beginning to form. She had not merely collected secrets; she had made a business of them. She had listened to people's confidential admissions, preserved their weaknesses in her memory, and turned them into money. And all at once nearly every person connected with the case seemed to have acquired a new motive. If Mrs. Blackwood had spent years blackmailing people with their own secrets, how many might not have wished her silent?

Mrs. Winthrop's Confession

The following day Holmes and I were once again in Number Twelve. By now the house had become almost as familiar to us as the rooms in Baker Street, yet that afternoon a different atmosphere rested over the place. Perhaps it was due to the objects now gathered upon the table before us. Mrs. Blackwood's notebook lay open beside the letter from the red box. A little apart from them lay the costly cuff link, whose significance had slowly begun to emerge from the darkness. Separately they were merely objects. Together they seemed to point toward something far greater.

Several times during the morning I had studied Holmes. He seemed unusually certain of himself. Not elated, as when he stood before a particularly elegant deduction, but rather like a man who had already found his way through a labyrinth and now merely waited for the others to reach the exit.

"Do you truly believe she will come?" I asked at last.

Holmes let his gaze rest upon the notebook.

"Yes."

A brief silence followed.

"People who have lived with fear long enough often grow tired of it."

I considered the answer while silence settled once more over the house. Outside, the afternoon had begun to slope toward evening. Sunlight fell obliquely through the windows and cast long shadows across the floor. The black cat lay nearby as usual, wholly unconcerned by the events that seemed to be unfolding around it.

It was some way into the afternoon before there came a knock at the door. I went out to open it. Mrs. Winthrop stood upon the step. At the first glance I could see the difference.

The elegant, controlled woman we had previously met had almost vanished. She was still carefully dressed, but something in her bearing had changed. Her face appeared paler. Her hands were restless. When she greeted me, her voice was no longer steady, but slightly halting, as though every word required an effort.

She followed me into the parlor.

Holmes did not rise.

He merely waited until she had seated herself.

Then he opened the notebook before him.

"Do you know the name Mr. Finch, Mrs. Winthrop?"

She thought for a moment.

"No."

Holmes nodded.

"It is possible you never learned his name."

She looked at him questioningly.

"But I can tell you that he worked with Mrs. Blackwood."

For the first time she raised her head.

"Mr. Finch has told us about the little business they conducted together."

Holmes's voice remained calm.

"A business based upon blackmailing people who had confided in Mrs. Blackwood."

Silence fell.

I saw the color leave her face.

It was as though the words had removed the last possibility of denial.

"The loan you mentioned during our first meeting, Mrs. Winthrop."

..

She closed her eyes.

"Yes."

Her voice was almost inaudible.

"It was a large sum."

"A very large sum."

She nodded.

"Yes."

"Not merely a small detail, as you described it then."

She shook her head faintly.

Holmes leaned forward slightly.

"In fact, the largest sum Mrs. Blackwood and Mr. Finch ever obtained from a client."

There followed a silence that seemed to last far longer than the few seconds it truly occupied.

When Holmes had placed the cuff link upon the table between them, something in Mrs. Winthrop seemed to give way. She stared for a long time at the small object without moving, and I did not need Holmes's special abilities to see that she recognized it immediately. The color almost entirely vanished from her face, and when at last she spoke, her voice was so low that I scarcely caught the words.

"Yes," she said. "It belonged to my husband."

Holmes leaned back in his chair. He had obtained what he wanted and now allowed the silence to do the rest of the work.

"Perhaps you had better tell the rest yourself."

For a moment I did not think she would answer. She sat motionless, her gaze fixed upon the cuff link, as though it represented a life she had long tried to keep at a distance. But slowly the words began to come. First hesitantly, then with greater coherence, as though after many years of silence she had finally abandoned the attempt to hide the truth.

She told us that she had gone to Mrs. Blackwood four or five years earlier. Not to obtain a prediction, as so many others had done, but because she found herself in a situation in which she no longer knew whom she could trust. Shortly before, she had discovered that her husband had been unfaithful to her for many years, and that he had also abused her trust in other matters. The fortune which society associated with the Winthrop family had in truth come chiefly from her own inheritance, and gradually she had come to understand how systematically he had exploited both her money and her loyalty.

"I wanted revenge," she said without circumlocution.

There was no drama in the words. On the contrary, they were spoken with a weariness that made a greater impression upon me than any outburst of feeling could have done.

She went on to tell how Mrs. Blackwood had listened to her grievances with a patience and understanding she had found nowhere else. At a later visit the old woman had asked her to bring an object that had belonged

to her husband, and Mrs. Winthrop had therefore brought the cuff link that now lay before us on the table.

"That one," she said, pointing to it. "That was the one I gave her."

Mrs. Blackwood had explained that the object could be used in a ritual. She had spoken of forces, of retribution, and of justice that sooner or later would come. Whether she herself believed in such things, Mrs. Winthrop no longer knew. Perhaps she did not. Perhaps she had merely understood what her visitor wished to hear. But at the time, the words had worked more powerfully upon the injured wife than either of them could have imagined.

"It was as though she gave me permission to hate him," she said after a pause.

I still remember the way in which she uttered the sentence. There was no anger left in it. Only the recognition of how far a human being may drive herself when bitterness is allowed to grow unchecked.

She told us that the visits continued for some time. Each conversation made her decision easier, until at last it no longer seemed to her like a decision at all, but like something inevitable. When she reached that point in her account, a heavy silence once more fell over the room. Holmes sat perfectly still and allowed her to arrive by herself at the point toward which she had been moving all along.

At last, I could not help asking.

"Did you kill him?"

She closed her eyes for a moment.

Then she nodded.

There was no attempt at excuse. No justification. No effort to shift the blame onto others.

Only a single nod.

Holmes regarded her for a long time before he spoke.

"And Mrs. Blackwood knew it."

This time the answer came without hesitation.

"Yes."

When she raised her eyes, it was as though a burden she had carried for many years had at last been set down.

"She did."

Mrs. Winthrop remained silent for a long time after her confession. She had told the essential part, and yet it was clear that there was still a portion of the story she had not yet spoken aloud. Her hands rested uneasily in her lap, and when she finally continued, her voice sounded more weary than before, as though the last of her strength was now being used to complete an account she had carried alone for many years.

"But it did not end there," she said. "Soon afterward the demands for money began."

Holmes said nothing and allowed her to continue.

"At first, it was a smaller sum. Then a larger one. Later another. Each time I was told that silence had its price."

She laughed briefly, but without the least trace of joy.

"And the price kept rising."

She looked down at her hands.

"At last, the sums were so great that I nearly had to sell my house in order to pay them. It went on for years."

I remember that at this point Holmes leaned ever so slightly forward in his chair.

"Was that when you made your decision?"

The question hung in the air.

Mrs. Winthrop did not answer at once. She sat for a long time with her gaze fixed upon the floor, as though she were once again reliving the afternoon that had changed everything. When she finally spoke, her voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

"Yes."

Another brief silence followed.

"I decided to go to her."

At that very moment the black cat sprang down from my lap. It stretched lazily, crossed the room, and seated itself by the window. For a moment it looked out into the garden with the complete calm that only animals seem to possess. The contrast between its peaceful behavior and the dark story we were hearing was almost uncanny.

Mrs. Winthrop followed it with her eyes for a moment before continuing.

"I came to the house late one afternoon. She was not inclined to let me in, but at last I managed to persuade her."

She drew a deep breath.

"I demanded an explanation. I wanted to know why she continued. Why she could not let it end."

As she spoke, I could almost see the scene before me: the same room, the same furniture, the same heavy air, inhabited now by two women who had both lived by fear in their different ways.

"The anger I had built up against her came out. We quarreled. Not merely loudly. Violently."

She paused.

"We were almost fighting."

Holmes now stood by the fireplace with his hands behind his back.

"What happened then?"

"Suddenly she collapsed."

Mrs. Winthrop closed her eyes for a brief moment.

"From one instant to the next."

I felt the silence in the room grow heavier.

"At first, I thought it was another of her tricks. One of the many performances she had used over the years."

She looked up.

"But then she began to speak."

"What did she say?" Holmes asked.

"I went over to her. She was lying on the floor, trying to whisper something."

Mrs. Winthrop swallowed.

"I bent down."

For a moment it almost seemed as though she could still hear the words.

"She said, 'My medicine. My medicine.'"

She pointed toward a table at the far end of the room.

"There was a blue box there. A small pill bottle."

Her voice became lower still.

"She told me to give it to her."

Neither of us interrupted.

"I did not know that she suffered from any serious illness. But I could see that something was wrong."

Holmes's voice was calm.

"And that was when you made your decision."

This time the answer came more quickly.

"Yes."

She raised her head and looked directly at him.

"I simply stood and watched her."

She drew a slow breath.

"I made certain not to leave traces behind. I straightened the things we had knocked over during the quarrel. I did everything I could to make it look ordinary."

She looked down again.

"And then I left."

There was silence.

Only the clock upon the mantelpiece could be heard.

"I did not know exactly what would happen," she continued. "Whether she would merely become ill. Whether she would recover. Or whether it was worse."

She shook her head slowly.

"But of course I kept myself informed."

A sorrowful smile appeared for a moment.

"And shortly afterward it became clear that she was dead."

Holmes nodded slowly. There was no triumph in his face. No satisfaction at having solved the case. Only the sober acknowledgment that the truth now lay fully exposed.

"I am afraid," he said quietly, "that you must come with us, Mrs. Winthrop."

She nodded without protest.

Calmly she rose and put on her coat. Holmes gathered the letter, the notebook, and the cuff link, while I found my hat. The black cat had

not moved from the window. It still sat looking out into the garden, as though human tragedies belonged to a world it neither knew nor cared to know.

A moment later we left the house together.

The cab was already waiting outside.

Our destination was Scotland Yard, where Lestrade would have the opportunity to hear Mrs. Winthrop's explanation once more. And as the cab began to move through the streets of London, I could not help thinking of the dead woman whom so many had feared. Not because she could see the future, but because she had understood a far more ordinary and far more dangerous truth: that people often fear their own secrets more than any curse.

The Truth Upon the Cat

Several days later we gathered once more in the parlor of Number Twelve. It was late afternoon, and the golden light of the sinking sun fell obliquely through the windows and laid long shadows across the floor. The house seemed less gloomy now, as though the truth that had so long lain hidden within its walls had already taken some of the darkness with it.

Most of the principal figures in the matter were present. Mr. Cartwright sat near the table with his papers before him. Arthur Bell had taken a place somewhat apart and still appeared affected by the events that had brought his own role in the case to light. Clara Evans sat quietly beside him, while Edward Blackwood shifted restlessly in his chair and plainly found it difficult to conceal his impatience.

The black cat, by contrast, seemed wholly indifferent to it all. It lay curled in an armchair near the fireplace and slept with the deep calm that only animals possess. I could not help noting the irony of the situation. This peaceful creature had been the center of all the rumors, all the fear, and the whole chain of events that had brought us here. Men and women had seen omens and curses in it. Some had feared it; others had tried to protect it. The cat itself had merely lived its life.

Two people were absent. I glanced around the room.

"Where are Mrs. Winthrop and Mr. Finch?"

Cartwright folded his hands.

"Both are now in the custody of the authorities. Their statements are being examined and compared with the other information."

Then Holmes turned to me.

"I believe Watson is the right person to tell the story."

I freely admit that I was somewhat surprised, but Holmes merely leaned back and lit his pipe. It was plain that he wished the case to be retold from the beginning, just as it had unfolded before us.

I therefore began with Mr. Cartwright's first visit to Baker Street and described how he had told us of the black cat that continued to appear around the house long after its owner's death. I spoke of the neighbors' growing fear, of the stories that had spread through the district, and of how some people had become convinced that Mrs. Blackwood's spirit still lived on in the animal. As I spoke, I saw Arthur Bell lower his gaze.

I continued with our first visit to the house, with the strange atmosphere, the empty rooms, and the black cat that always seemed to remain just beyond reach. I described the old cat flap which, upon closer inspection, proved to be rusted shut and useless, and how that small detail had been the first sign that something was amiss.

Bell shifted uneasily in his chair.

Then I told them about the attic space and the hidden passage between the two houses. About the food bowls, the water, and the traces which revealed that someone had kept the cat alive for a long time.

Now Bell's face flushed. I described his confession and his fear of the words Mrs. Blackwood had spoken shortly before her death.

"When the cat dies, the truth must be allowed to speak."

Those words had pursued him for months. He had not cared for the cat out of love or pity, but out of fear of what he believed would be revealed when its life one day came to an end.

From there, the account led naturally to the collar. I told them of the hidden message Holmes had found on the inside.

"The truth is in the red box."

Clara Evans smiled faintly when I mentioned her role in the search that followed. Without her help we would likely have spent many days finding the hidden space behind the wardrobe in the bedroom. It was there that the red box had been concealed. And it was there that we had found the threatening letter, the cuff link, and Mrs. Blackwood's own notes.

I picked up the paper from the table and read aloud: "If harm should come to me, the writer of this letter must answer for it."

Silence fell in the room. When I had finished, Holmes rose. The black cat opened one eye, considered him for a moment, and then, apparently deciding that the matter did not concern it, closed it again. Holmes went to the fireplace and let his gaze pass over those assembled.

"Most people," he began, "believed that Mrs. Blackwood was feared because of her supernatural powers."

He slowly shook his head.

"That was not the case."

His voice was calm.

"She was feared because she knew the truth about people."

No one interrupted.

Holmes then explained how Mrs. Blackwood, over the years, had built a network of confidences. People came to her with their anxieties, their fears, their guilt, and their secrets. They believed they were speaking to a fortune teller. In reality, they were speaking to a woman who listened exceedingly well.

"And when Mr. Finch entered the picture," Holmes continued, "she discovered that secrets could be converted into money."

Edward Blackwood looked genuinely shocked. Cartwright closed his eyes for a moment. Holmes then described the connection to Mrs. Winthrop. How her anger toward her husband had been nourished through her conversations with Mrs. Blackwood. How the cuff link had been handed over as part of a supposed ritual. How her husband's later death had given Mrs. Blackwood a weapon that could be used for blackmail. The sums grew. The demands increased as the years passed.

And at last Mrs. Winthrop reached the conviction that so long as Mrs. Blackwood lived, her own fear would never end.

A heavy silence fell over the room. Holmes went to the armchair and briefly stroked the black cat's back.

"The most remarkable thing about the whole matter," he said, "may not be the blackmail or the murder."

Now everyone looked at him.

"It is Mrs. Blackwood's foresight."

He turned toward the group.

"She did not know who might one day choose to harm her. She did not know when. But she knew that she had made enemies."

He pointed toward the collar lying on the table.

"That is why she wrote the message. That is why she left the red box. That is why she gathered evidence."

Holmes looked over at Arthur Bell.

"You misunderstood her words, Mr. Bell."

Bell slowly raised his head. A faint smile appeared on Holmes's face.

"The truth was not inside the cat."

He let his hand rest for a moment upon its back.

"It was upon the cat."

Some time passed before the company began to break up. Edward Blackwood rose first. Then Clara Evans. Bell followed after her. At last only Cartwright, Holmes, the cat, and I remained in the now silent house.

I looked at Holmes.

"Then she was never truly a fortune teller?"

He went to the window and looked out upon the street.

"That depends upon the definition, Watson."

I waited.

"She could not see the future."

He was silent for a moment.

"But she understood people."

His gaze fell upon the black cat.

"And that is often nearly the same thing."

The sun was going down now. The last light streamed in through the window and turned the room golden. The black cat sprang up onto the windowsill and seated itself with its face toward the street. I stood for a moment watching it. It no longer looked like an omen or a ghost. It did not look like a curse, nor even like a mystery. It was simply a black cat. A faithful creature which, without understanding it, had carried its owner's last secret through months of fear, rumor, and superstition, until someone at last had been willing to listen.

And so ended the affair of *The Cat at Number Twelve*.

The Dog Who Visited the Grave

I remember distinctly the morning on which the affair of the old borzoi from Ashcombe Hall began, not because its opening was particularly dramatic, but precisely because it was so peaceful. There are certain mornings in Baker Street that carry a peculiar atmosphere, an almost imperceptible expectancy, which seems to warn that the ordinary routine of the day will soon be interrupted by something unusual. Such a morning this was.

Summer was early in its coming. The sun had already risen high enough to send its first warm rays through the windows of our sitting room, and the gray London air had taken on that clear and pleasant character which so rarely showed itself above the city. Down below in Baker Street sounded the familiar mingling of wheels on cobblestones, horses' hooves, the cries of tradesmen, and the distant, persistent rumble that seemed to rise from the endless machinery of all London.

I was seated at the breakfast table with a stack of notes from an earlier case spread out before me. It was my firm intention to bring some measure of order to my records before new events once again cast us into another adventure, but experience had taught me that such intentions seldom survived for long in the company of Sherlock Holmes.

Holmes himself was lounging in his armchair by the window with a newspaper folded open before him. Any stranger would have assumed that he was occupied with the news of the day, but I knew him far too well to be deceived by such appearances. The paper served rather as a

convenient excuse to sit and observe the life outside. From time to time, he lowered it a few inches and let his gaze drift down over the pavement, where he studied the passersby with far greater interest than any editorial could have aroused in him.

An unusual quiet reigned in the room. Even Holmes seemed relaxed, and I had just reached the pleasant conviction that the day would pass without interruption when I heard the familiar footsteps upon the stairs. A moment later the door opened, and Mrs. Hudson entered.

A Family from Sussex

"There are some visitors who wish to speak with you, Mr. Holmes," she said.

I barely noticed the words, but Holmes at once lowered the newspaper and looked up with a faint smile.

"Ah, a family, Watson."

I stared at him.

"A family?"

"Undoubtedly."

"But how in the world can you know that?"

He merely raised one finger.

"The footsteps."

Before I could ask for a fuller explanation, several sets of steps could be heard distinctly upon the landing. Not merely the tread of one person, but four different ones. Holmes's smile broadened slightly.

"Your timing is usually better than your questions, my dear Watson."

At that same instant there came a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Holmes.

The door opened, and our visitors entered. In front came a gentleman of about sixty, tall and upright in spite of his age, with the calm and self-possessed bearing found only in people who have been accustomed all their lives to being listened to. Behind him followed a lady of dignified manners and a face that still retained traces of former beauty. After them came a younger man, probably in his thirties, and beside him a younger woman.

My first impression was one of wealth. Not the conspicuous or demonstrative wealth one so often encounters among newly rich industrialists, but the far more discreet kind that accompanies old families and possessions held through generations. Their clothes were exquisite without being showy. Everything seemed chosen with care, but without any need to impress. Even their movements betrayed a confidence and naturalness that arise only in people who have never had to consider their position in society.

While I was forming these general impressions, Holmes had already completed his own far more thorough examination. Naturally he said nothing, but I saw his eyes move from one to the other. He observed the thin layer of mud along the edges of the elder gentleman's shoes. He registered a few strands of straw that had caught on the sleeve of the younger man's coat. He noted the pale dog hairs on the lady's gloves and the faint smell of stable and fresh country air that had entered the room with them.

By the time they had taken their seats, I already knew that Holmes had reached his conclusion. These people had not merely come from the country. They had come from a large country house. Perhaps even from an estate. And when I saw the first discreet glance that the older gentleman exchanged with his wife before he began to speak, I had the sensation which had so often heralded the beginning of a new and peculiar case. Something had brought them all the way to Baker Street, and however unlikely it might prove to be, it had clearly troubled them enough to seek out Sherlock Holmes.

The older gentleman waited until all had found their places before leaning slightly forward in his chair and clasping his hands before him.

"My name is Ashcombe," he said. "I am the owner of Ashcombe Hall in Sussex."

Holmes nodded politely.

"And this is my wife, my son, and my daughter-in-law."

Introductions were exchanged, after which a brief silence fell. It seemed to me that Mr. Ashcombe was searching for the right words. At last, he smiled with a trace of apology.

"I must confess, Mr. Holmes, that I almost feel we are wasting your time."

Holmes raised his eyebrows.

"Indeed?"

"Yes. One usually hears your name mentioned in connection with murders, thefts, blackmail, and such serious matters. Compared with those, our problem may seem rather modest."

Holmes laid aside the newspaper and folded his hands over his knee.

"My experience, Mr. Ashcombe, is that the size of a mystery can seldom be judged by its outward appearance."

The older gentleman seemed to find some comfort in this answer.

"I hope you are right."

He hesitated a moment.

Arthur

"It concerns our dog."

I saw something like relief in the younger woman's face, as though she had feared her father-in-law would phrase the matter in a way that made it sound ridiculous.

"Not just any dog," continued Mr. Ashcombe. "His name is Arthur, and he has been part of the family for many years now."

A warm smile passed over his face.

"Not only my own family, but my father's as well. Arthur served him faithfully for several years, and when my father died, he remained with us as the most natural thing in the world. I almost believe that some of the older servants on the estate would find it difficult to imagine the place without him."

For the first time Holmes leaned slightly forward.

"A dog of what breed?"

It was the son who answered.

"A borzoi."

"Ah."

Holmes nodded slowly, as though he were now forming a clearer picture.

"And you say there have never been any problems with him?"

"Not the slightest," replied the son. "Quite the contrary. Arthur is probably the most predictable creature on the entire estate."

A subdued laugh went around the company.

"He is loyal, calm, and unusually good-natured. He has his fixed routines and has had them for as long as anyone can remember. In the morning he makes his usual rounds among the buildings. In the afternoon he is generally to be found on the lawn before the house or near the stables. And in the evening..." He smiled. "In the evening, without exception, he lies before the fireplace in the library."

"In precisely the same spot every time," added Mrs. Ashcombe.

"So precisely," continued the son, "that the servants often use him as a sort of clock. If Arthur has settled before the fireplace, everyone knows that the day is drawing to its close."

Holmes listened attentively while the man continued.

"He is loved by everyone on the place. Even the youngest stable lads, who have known him only a few years, regard him almost as part of the furniture. One could hardly wish for a more contented dog."

"A dog who seems entirely satisfied with life," remarked Holmes.

"Exactly," said the son. "And that is why the whole thing seems so strange."

At these words I noticed that Holmes's gaze sharpened slightly. Until now he had been listening to the description of an old and well-adjusted dog, but we were now clearly approaching the circumstance that had brought the family all the way to Baker Street. I also saw that Holmes had not yet asked a single unnecessary question. He allowed them to tell the story at their own pace, which was always a sign that he had already found something of interest in the information they had given him.

Holmes had listened without interrupting, but now he placed his fingertips together and regarded his visitors for a moment with that calm, attentive gaze I knew so well.

"You have described the dog very fully, Mr. Ashcombe," he said. "But you have not yet told me what the problem actually is."

The elderly landowner nodded slowly.

"No. You are quite right, of course."

He leaned back and exchanged a brief glance with his son.

"The truth is that the whole matter has been going on longer than we first realized. But since Arthur always returned, we did not take very much notice of it. It was only a few months ago that we truly began to wonder."

"In what way?" asked Holmes.

"One day he was simply gone."

Holmes said nothing, and Mr. Ashcombe continued.

"This time he was away longer than usual."

"Considerably longer," put in the son.

"Yes," his father nodded. "So naturally we began to search for him."

I could vividly picture the scene: the great estate, its many buildings, stables, barns, gardens, and fields, where a dog could disappear from sight without difficulty.

"The servants searched everywhere," continued Mr. Ashcombe. "In the stables, around the lake, in the little wood to the south, and along the farm lanes. But he was simply nowhere to be found."

"And how long was he gone?" asked Holmes.

"Several hours."

"We actually began to fear that something had happened to him," said Mrs. Ashcombe.

"But then he came back."

"By himself?"

"Yes. Calmly and quite undisturbed."

The younger woman smiled faintly.

"As though nothing had happened."

For a moment there was silence.

"And this repeated itself?" asked Holmes.

"Yes," replied the son. "Some weeks later exactly the same thing happened."

"But this time we had a clue."

Mr. Ashcombe folded his hands.

The Churchyard

"An acquaintance from the village told us that he had seen Arthur in the churchyard."

I must admit that this aroused my interest. Even Holmes seemed a little more attentive.

"In the churchyard?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"Was he alone?"

"As far as we know."

"And what was he doing?"

"Our acquaintance did not know. He had merely noticed that the dog was there."

Mr. Ashcombe continued:

"Naturally, that made us curious. So, a few days later we went to see the gravedigger."

"And what did he tell you?"

"Something quite unexpected."

The landowner shook his head slowly, as though he had not yet grown used to the thought.

"He told us that, in his opinion, Arthur was a familiar visitor to the churchyard."

I looked at Holmes. He sat quite still. Only his eyes betrayed that the story had now caught his attention.

"A familiar visitor?" he said.

"Yes. The gravedigger did not think it was the first time he had seen him. Quite the contrary."

"And what else?"

"That he always came to the same place."

Mr. Ashcombe hesitated for a moment.

"There was said to be a particular grave."

I noticed that Holmes did not immediately ask another question. He allowed the words to settle.

"Precisely."

The younger man leaned forward.

"That was when we began to wonder whether there might be something behind it all."

"Something?" asked Holmes.

"Yes. A connection, perhaps. Some person Arthur had known. Something from the past."

He shrugged.

"For we could find no other explanation."

"And since then?" asked Holmes.

"The same thing has happened again and again."

Mr. Ashcombe looked gravely at him.

"Every single time, he is found in the same place."

A brief silence fell in the room. From the street below came once more the distant rumble of traffic, and for a moment it seemed almost as though all of London had vanished while we sat contemplating this strange little puzzle.

It was only an old dog, a village churchyard, and a grave. And yet I already had the familiar feeling that the matter contained more than its modest exterior suggested. Holmes still sat in silence, but I could see that he was thinking the same.

I must confess that my own thoughts immediately began to move in a very definite direction. The story of a dog who week after week sought out the same grave seemed strange to me, but not inexplicable. On the contrary, the explanation seemed almost obvious, and when a short pause arose in the conversation, I took the opportunity to offer it.

"Could it be a question of the dog's former owner?" I asked. "That the person buried there once had some special bond with the animal?"

My words were met by a series of puzzled looks. Mr. Ashcombe looked at his wife, who in turn looked at her son, and for a moment they all seemed to search for an answer that might have made the matter far simpler.

"No," said the landowner at last. "That cannot be."

His son nodded.

"Arthur has never had any other owner."

"He has belonged to the family all his life," continued Mrs. Ashcombe. "In fact, since he was a puppy."

"My father acquired him," said the younger man. "I can scarcely remember the estate without him."

This seemed at once to rule out my theory, but I was not yet ready to abandon it entirely.

"Perhaps a former handler?" I suggested. "A stable master or a servant who had a particular attachment to him?"

Again, heads were shaken.

"We have considered the same thing," said Mr. Ashcombe. "But none of the names fit."

"And none of the people who were close to the dog are buried in that part of the churchyard," added his wife.

"Have you a family burial plot?" I asked.

This time it was Mrs. Ashcombe who answered. She had said very little until then, but her voice was calm and controlled.

"Yes, of course. The family has a plot nearer the church."

"And the dog has never been seen there?"

"Not once."

She shook her head slowly.

"That is precisely why we find it so strange."

While this exchange was taking place, Holmes had scarcely uttered a word. He sat as usual in his armchair with his fingertips joined before him. From time to time, he closed his eyes slightly, as though listening to something much farther away than the conversation in the room. I had seen him assume this posture many times before and knew from experience that it was during just such moments that his mind was working most intensely. To an inexperienced observer he might have appeared distracted or even drowsy, but I knew better. Every piece of information was being registered and set into place in that extraordinary system of connections by which his brain seemed to operate.

Suddenly he opened his eyes.

"How old is the dog, precisely?"

The question came so unexpectedly that Mr. Ashcombe had to think.

"We do not know with absolute certainty. But at least thirteen. Probably a little more."

Holmes nodded.

"How far is it from the estate to the churchyard?"

"About three kilometers."

"And does he visit the place at random times?"

The younger man shook his head.

"That is one of the strange things. We have gradually noticed that it happens with great regularity."

"Yes. Almost weekly."

Holmes raised his eyes.

"On the same day?"

"Yes."

"And at about the same time?"

"As far as we can judge, yes."

For a moment Holmes let his gaze rest on the carpet before him.

"When you find the dog at the grave, how does he react when you fetch him?"

Another brief silence followed.

"We do not, in fact, fetch him," said Mr. Ashcombe.

"Do I understand you correctly?"

"Yes. We have never fetched him."

"He goes home by himself."

It was the first time during the entire visit that I saw anything resembling a reaction from Holmes. It was so slight that no one else would have noticed it, but I knew him too well to overlook it. His eyes grew a little sharper, and I had the definite impression that this particular fact had some significance for him.

He asked no further questions, however. Instead, he sank back once more in his chair while his visitors continued their explanation. To them his silence must surely have seemed puzzling, but I knew that the answers had made an impression on him. What thoughts they had set in motion I could not guess, but I was certain that they had already brought him

some distance nearer to the solution that still lay hidden from the rest of us.

"One more thing," I said after a moment's reflection. "Are you certain that it is really the same grave every time?"

Mr. Ashcombe nodded without hesitation.

"We are."

"At any rate, the gravedigger has no doubt about it," added his son. "After we first spoke to him about the matter, he began paying closer attention to Arthur, and according to him there is no variation whatsoever. The dog goes to precisely the same spot every single time."

"The same gravestone?" asked Holmes.

"Yes."

"And the name?"

The family exchanged yet another glance.

"Well, you must forgive us," said Mr. Ashcombe with a faint smile. "I have not actually taken note of it."

"Nor have I," said his wife.

"I cannot remember it either," the son admitted. "But I do know that it is not a name that means anything to us."

"It is not a relative," continued Mrs. Ashcombe. "Nor an acquaintance, nor anyone who, so far as we know, had any connection with the estate."

For a brief moment silence settled over the room. I noticed that Holmes's gaze rested upon the family as though he were weighing their words. There was nothing in their manner to suggest that they were withholding information. On the contrary, they appeared genuinely perplexed by their own story.

At length Mr. Ashcombe leaned forward slightly.

"That is why we hope you will help us, Mr. Holmes."

Holmes raised his eyes.

"In what way?"

"By coming to Ashcombe Hall."

The older gentleman hesitated for a moment before continuing.

"It is possible that there is nothing more behind it. It is possible that this is merely an old dog with a peculiar habit."

He slowly shook his head.

"But I must admit that we no longer believe that."

"You fear something?"

"Nothing specific."

He glanced briefly at his wife.

"But one cannot help wondering whether Arthur is perhaps pointing to something that we ourselves have overlooked. Something from the past. Something that no one knows any longer."

For the first time since the family's arrival, Holmes appeared to reach a decision.

"I think," he said calmly, "that a visit to Ashcombe Hall would be advisable."

The relief among our guests was unmistakable.

The necessary arrangements were made, and shortly thereafter the family took their leave. I watched them disappear down the stairs, and only when the front door closed below did I turn back to Holmes.

"I must admit," I said, "that I believe I understand the dog."

"Indeed, Watson?"

"Yes. Not all the details, naturally. But the principle of it."

Holmes said nothing.

"It must be a matter of grief."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Grief?"

"Yes. Some person to whom the dog was attached. A former owner, a friend, or perhaps someone with whom he shared a special bond. The dog is simply mourning."

Without replying, Holmes rose and crossed to the window. With his hands clasped behind his back, he stood gazing down upon Baker Street, where the traffic had grown denser and the life of the morning unfolded among cabs, tradesmen, and passersby.

"That is certainly possible, Watson," he said after a time.

"Then you agree?"

“Possibly.”

There was something in his tone that told me he was far from convinced. He continued to look out of the window.

“But there is another matter which strikes me as considerably more interesting.”

“And what is that?”

“That everyone speaks of the same grave.”

I stared at him.

“What else would they speak of?”

Holmes smiled faintly.

“Precisely.”

He turned around.

The familiar gleam had returned to his eyes.

“Let us go into the country tomorrow, Watson.”

And with those words ended our first encounter with the mystery of the old borzoi of Ashcombe Hall—a mystery which at the time struck me as both modest and peculiar, but which was soon to lead us far deeper into the past than either of us could possibly have imagined.

The following day Holmes and I left London on one of the early trains and set out for Sussex, where Ashcombe Hall was situated. I have often remarked how quickly the English countryside changes its character once one is only a few hours removed from the capital. The dense rows of houses and factory chimneys gradually gave way to open fields, small villages, and the gentle hills that seem to roll across southern England with a tranquility standing in sharp contrast to London’s perpetual restlessness.

The district through which we traveled, however, possessed a character entirely its own. There was an age-old quality to the landscape which one does not find everywhere. Here and there old manor houses and country estates could be seen lying among the trees as though they had grown rooted into the soil over centuries. Yet what especially caught my eye were the countless stone walls that crossed the fields like gray lines through the countryside. They ran beside roads, meadows, and small groves, and seemed to have been built stone by stone by generations of

men whose names had long since been forgotten. Many of them must have been several hundred years old, and yet they still stood as faithful markers of ancient boundaries and property lines.

Between them rose great oak trees over the landscape with the dignity possessed only by very old trees. In many places they formed little cathedrals of branches and leaves above the roads, and their trunks were so massive that they seemed to belong to a more distant age.

Holmes spent most of the journey in silence. He sat by the window observing the countryside with that distant expression which always told me that his mind continued to work upon a case even when he appeared to be doing nothing at all. I knew him too well to disturb such moments, and so I allowed my own thoughts to revolve around the old borzoi and the curious ritual that had brought us upon this journey.

Ashcombe Hall

After a further drive from the station in a horse-drawn carriage that had been sent to meet us, we turned at last into the long avenue leading to Ashcombe Hall, and it was there that I gained my first impression of the place. The estate revealed itself gradually among the trees. At first one glimpsed only the roofs through the foliage, then the pale stone walls, and finally the entire building stood before us.

It was a beautiful place, though not in the manner that immediately impresses a visitor. There was nothing ostentatious or demonstrative about Ashcombe Hall. On the contrary, it seemed a place that had evolved slowly over generations. The buildings bore the marks of different periods, each generation having added a little to what it had inherited. The result was not perfect symmetry, but something far more appealing: the feeling of a living home that had been at the center of the same family's life for many years.

We drove into the courtyard, part of which remained covered in gravel while other sections had been paved with stone. The sound of the wheels changed as we passed from one surface to another. Hardly had the carriage come to a halt before the front door opened and Mr. Ashcombe himself emerged to greet us.

He welcomed us with a warmth that seemed entirely genuine. He had already made a favorable impression upon me during our first meeting in Baker Street, but here upon his own estate he appeared even more natural. The aristocratic dignity was still present, yet it was now accompanied by a practical earthiness which I had not previously noticed. He was dressed in a manner befitting his station, but without any excessive elegance, and there was something about him that suggested he was not a man who merely issued orders. One could easily imagine him moving among fields, stables, and workers with the same ease that he displayed in his own drawing rooms.

As he led us across the courtyard, he spoke of the property with that quiet pride which people feel only for something they regard as an inheritance rather than a possession.

"Much of what you see here was built during my father's time," he said, gesturing toward some of the longer buildings. "He expanded the operation considerably and had several additional wings constructed. It was also he who began some of the larger improvements to the land."

I noticed that Holmes's gaze continually moved from one building to another. He scarcely seemed to look at what Mr. Ashcombe pointed out, and yet I had the distinct impression that nothing escaped his attention. As so often before, he listened less to the words than to the man who spoke them.

As we approached the main house, Mr. Ashcombe explained how the family was arranged upon the estate.

"My wife and I live in the main wing," he said. "My son and his wife occupy the eastern wing. And my mother lives over there."

He pointed toward a smaller but exceptionally well-kept house some distance from the main building.

"It was originally the dower house."

He smiled.

"So, it suited the dowager perfectly."

His tone was affectionate rather than humorous.

"When my father died nearly ten years ago, I inherited the estate and my mother moved there. In fact, that is how it has been done for several

generations. My father succeeded his father, and his father succeeded his. In that way the family remains in place without any great upheavals."

For a moment he paused and looked toward the smaller house.

"Notice the flowers around it."

Even from a distance one could see the colorful beds surrounding the place.

"That is my mother's work. She has always had a particular fondness for flowers."

There was something in the way he said it that told me the old lady still played an important role upon the estate, even though formal authority had long since passed to the next generation. And as we continued toward the main entrance, I began to understand why Ashcombe Hall had struck me as so harmonious at first sight. It was not merely an old estate. It was a place where the past still lived side by side with the present, and where the generations seemed connected by more than simply name and inheritance.

Shortly after our arrival, we were shown into one of the large sitting rooms, where afternoon coffee was already being served. It quickly became apparent that this was not merely a casual gathering but an established tradition at Ashcombe Hall. Whatever duties the day might have brought, the family assembled each afternoon around the coffee table, and within a few minutes I understood that this custom was regarded with the seriousness and respect that only old family traditions ever attain.

It was upon this occasion that we first had the opportunity of making the acquaintance of the Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe. She was an elderly lady whose face bore all the marks of advancing years without having surrendered any of the dignity that had evidently characterized her throughout her life. Her hair had turned entirely silver, and her movements were slower than those of the others, yet there remained a remarkable firmness in her bearing. Although she was now, in a formal sense, a guest in her son's house, one never received the impression that her importance upon the estate had diminished. On the contrary, her presence seemed to form a kind of quiet center around which the rest

of the family revolved. She spoke little, but when she did, the others listened. It was not the result of any visible authority, but rather of the natural respect that decades of experience and a lifelong attachment to the place had inspired.

The atmosphere around the table was, on the whole, both hospitable and familial. Coffee was served from an old silver service, while plates of homemade cakes and pastries passed from hand to hand. The conversation moved effortlessly between small happenings upon the estate, news from the village, and practical matters concerning the management of the property. Nothing appeared strained. Indeed, at first glance the family seemed unusually harmonious.

As so often before, however, my first impressions were accompanied by more cautious observations. Old families possess a number of unwritten rules of which an outsider becomes aware only gradually. One notices them not through what is said, but through what remains unsaid. As the conversation continued, it became increasingly clear to me that everyone at the table understood those rules perfectly well. Everyone knew who naturally led the discussion. Everyone knew when a subject ought to be abandoned. And everyone knew instinctively which areas of the past were not to be touched without good reason.

My own attention, however, was soon captured by the room itself. Along the walls hung a series of large oil paintings which made it almost impossible to forget that one was in a house with a long history behind it. Generation after generation of the Ashcombe family seemed to gaze down upon us from their frames. There were men in riding coats, officers, and landowners with grave expressions and erect postures. Between them hung portraits of women in dark silk gowns whose calm eyes still appeared to contain the dignity that had once shaped their lives.

There is something peculiar about such old portraits. If one remains in their company long enough, one begins almost to imagine that they still watch over the lives and conversations of their descendants, as though they retained a place among the living.

Mr. Ashcombe noticed my interest and rose several times to point out various figures upon the walls. He did so with a pride entirely free from vanity, and therefore all the more appealing.

"That is my great-grandfather," he said, indicating a broad-shouldered gentleman with impressive side-whiskers. "He was responsible for laying out the southern park."

A little later he pointed to an elderly lady with sharply defined features.

"And that is my great-great-grandmother. The family always said that she managed both the house and her husband with the same firm hand."

Laughter followed this remark.

As time passed, more portraits were introduced. Grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and former masters of Ashcombe Hall passed before us in story after story like figures from another age. Some had led adventurous lives; others had spent their entire existence upon the estate. What united them all was that they seemed as much a part of the house's identity as its walls, its ancient oaks, and the old stone boundaries beyond its grounds.

While I listened to these accounts, I noticed that Holmes took only a limited interest in the stories themselves. His gaze moved from portrait to portrait, certainly, but far more often it rested upon the living members of the family. He seemed less concerned with the past itself than with the way in which it still survived within them. It was a distinction few would have noticed, but one I had learned to recognize after many years of acquaintance. Holmes was seldom interested in history for its own sake. He was interested in the traces it left behind in people.

As the coffee was poured for a second time, the conversation gradually drifted away from family history and turned toward the subject which had, in the end, made Ashcombe Hall what it was: agriculture. It was clear that this remained the heart of the estate, despite the changing times, and Mr. Ashcombe spoke of its development with that particular mixture of respect for the past and understanding of the present which often distinguishes good stewards of old properties.

"My father already belonged to a different world from the one we live in now," he said, leaning back in his chair. "When he was a young man,

almost all work was done with horses. Fields were ploughed in precisely the same manner as they had been in his father's and grandfather's day. Many of the methods we now regard as old-fashioned were then simply the way an estate was run."

He smiled at the thought.

"The first machines began to appear during his later years, certainly, but I do not think he ever learned to like them."

The younger Ashcombe laughed.

"That is a very polite way of putting it."

"Yes," his father admitted. "The truth is that he could not abide them."

Laughter circled the table.

"If he could see the place today," continued the squire, "he would scarcely recognize it. Most things are done by machinery now. It is faster, cheaper, and far more efficient. We still keep horses, naturally, but they remain chiefly out of affection for tradition. Very few of them perform any real work any longer."

I enjoyed these stories. There is something fascinating in hearing people describe changes that have taken place within their own lifetimes. One gains a sense of history's slow movement—a thing rarely perceived by those living in the midst of it.

Holmes had listened attentively, but I noticed that his interest was gradually moving in another direction. When a brief pause arose in the conversation, he turned toward the Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe.

"How do you remember those years yourself, Mrs. Ashcombe?" he asked. "The years before your son inherited the estate."

The question was asked so naturally that no one could possibly have found it remarkable, and yet I immediately sensed a change around the table. The conversation faded. Cups were set down. Even the younger generation appeared instinctively to await her answer.

The old lady sat silent for a moment. She had just lifted her coffee cup but allowed it to remain before her. Then she smiled politely.

"Yes," she said. "It was certainly a different time."

She paused again.

It was not an uncomfortable silence, but it lasted just long enough for everyone to become aware of it.

"Things were done very differently then."

She said no more.

Mr. Ashcombe seemed to sense the slight tension that had settled over the gathering and immediately sought to lighten the mood.

"Yes, I daresay it was not altogether easy being the mistress of a large estate in those days."

A faint smile crossed the old lady's face.

"No," she said. "It certainly was not."

She looked down into the cup before her.

"It was hard work for all of us."

Her voice remained calm, yet it had acquired a reflective quality.

"We had servants, of course."

She paused.

"But that brought its own challenges."

Another brief silence followed.

"And its consequences."

No one spoke.

It was not that the words themselves were particularly remarkable. They could easily have been interpreted as nothing more than an ordinary reflection upon life on a large estate. Yet I immediately felt that something had changed within the room. Nothing visible. Nothing dramatic. The conversation resumed shortly afterward, and the others returned to discussing practical matters concerning the property. Nevertheless, those few words lingered in the air in a manner that could not be explained by their meaning alone.

It brought its own consequences.

I could not have said why, but they sounded less like an ordinary remark and more like the echo of a story that no one told anymore—a story that still existed somewhere beneath the surface, despite the decades that had passed since its beginning.

I glanced toward Holmes.

He had not spoken a word.

Yet I saw the familiar gleam in his eyes. It was the same look I had witnessed countless times before, whenever a single apparently innocent remark suddenly found its place among a series of other observations. Whether he had already drawn any conclusions, I naturally could not tell. But I was certain of one thing.

He had noticed the pause.

And he had noticed the words.

It was only at this point that my attention truly settled upon the dog himself. While the conversation had wandered between past and present, agriculture and family history, old memories and newer concerns, its central figure had lain so quietly that he had almost merged with his surroundings. Now, as a brief pause settled over the table, I allowed my gaze to drift toward the fireplace and finally took proper notice of him.

Arthur lay exactly where the family had described. Upon a thick rug before the open hearth, where the last embers still cast a warm glow through the room. Even in old age he was an impressive borzoi. His long, elegant body and narrow head retained the distinctive characteristics that had made the breed famous among the aristocracy of Europe. Yet time had left its unmistakable mark. The fur around his muzzle had turned almost silver-white, and his once-proud frame had acquired that certain heaviness seen only in elderly animals.

And yet there was nothing diminished about him.

On the contrary, a sense of calm dignity rested upon him that made him seem a natural part of the house itself.

As I watched him, it suddenly struck me that there was a curious resemblance between the dog and the Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe. Not in appearance, of course, but in the atmosphere they both conveyed. They seemed to belong to the same era. Both were survivors of an earlier generation. Both had watched people come and go around them. And both carried within them a history older than that of the younger members of the family.

Arthur lay perfectly still. His eyes were closed, and his breathing was so calm that one might easily have believed him asleep. Had I not known the purpose of our visit, it would never have occurred to me that this

peaceful creature could be the center of any mystery whatsoever. He seemed, rather, the most contented being upon the entire estate.

It was Mr. Ashcombe who eventually returned the conversation to practical matters.

"If you wish," he said, looking toward Holmes, "we may follow Arthur to the churchyard tomorrow."

Holmes raised his eyes.

"You expect him to go?"

"Yes. If he follows his usual pattern, it will happen tomorrow morning."

"Then we should be very pleased to observe it."

Nods passed around the table. Only the Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe remained completely motionless. Her face revealed nothing, and her gaze still rested upon the coffee cup before her.

"Good," said the squire. "Then you may see a little of the estate in the meantime."

He turned to his son.

"Edward, would you show our guests around?"

The younger man immediately agreed. Chairs were pushed back, and the gathering slowly began to disperse. Conversation resumed its lighter tone as the family departed in small groups.

I remained standing for a moment by the fireplace.

Something about the dog continued to hold my attention.

As though he sensed my gaze, Arthur slowly opened his eyes and looked directly at me.

There was nothing nervous or troubled in his expression. Nor was there any sadness, as I might perhaps have expected after the story we had heard. On the contrary, his gaze was curiously calm. It almost seemed to me that he was waiting for something.

Or perhaps for someone.

The thought came so suddenly that I nearly laughed at myself. It was, of course, merely my imagination carrying the family's tale a step further. And yet the impression lingered as I turned away.

At the far end of the room Holmes still stood alone.

The rest of the family had already begun to leave, but he had not followed them. Instead, he remained before the oldest portraits upon the wall, studying them with an attention that struck me as almost excessive. His gaze moved slowly from one face to the next. Not like a man admiring paintings, but like a man searching for something.

What that something might be, I had no idea.

Yet when Holmes finally turned and joined us, I had the distinct impression that his thoughts were already moving along paths still hidden from me. And as we followed Edward Ashcombe out into the courtyard to begin our tour of the estate, my eyes were drawn once more toward the old dog beside the fire.

Arthur had closed his eyes again.

He lay precisely as before.

Calm and patient.

Like a creature that had been waiting a very long time and did not mind waiting a little longer.

That evening Holmes and I were shown to a pair of guest rooms on the first floor overlooking the courtyard and the broad fields stretching behind Ashcombe Hall. The sun was already sinking toward the horizon when I first stood at the window and surveyed the landscape. The long shadows of the ancient oaks lay across the fields, and in the distance the gray stone walls traced their familiar patterns through the countryside. A profound peace rested over the place, one that felt almost unfamiliar after so many years in London, and for the first time I understood why generation after generation of the Ashcombe family had found it difficult to imagine a life anywhere else.

At dinner the conversation naturally returned to Arthur and his peculiar habit. Although the family had lived with the phenomenon for quite some time, I could still detect the same bewilderment that had driven them to seek out Baker Street.

"Of course, we tried to stop him at first," said Mr. Ashcombe, laying down his knife. "One naturally becomes concerned when an old dog disappears for several hours."

"Which proved entirely useless," his wife added with a smile.

"If we shut him in, he simply became restless. He paced about, whined at the doors, and could not settle himself."

"So, in the end we gave up," said Edward. "It seemed almost crueler to prevent him from going than to let him go."

Holmes had listened in silence, but now he raised his eyes.

"You say this happens every week?"

"Yes."

"On a particular day?"

"Always."

"And which day is that?"

"Tuesday," Edward replied without hesitation.

"You could set your watch by him."

"Indeed?"

"Half past eight in the morning precisely."

"Not a quarter past?"

"No."

"Not nine o'clock?"

"No."

"Exactly half past eight."

Holmes leaned back in his chair.

"Interesting."

It was all he said, yet I knew him well enough to recognize that he had taken careful note of the information.

Later that evening we retired to our rooms. I slept unusually well that night. There is a peculiar sensation in spending the night in the countryside after a long stay in London. One only realizes how accustomed one has become to the city's constant background noise when it suddenly disappears. No wheels rattling over cobblestones. No cries from the street. No distant rumble carrying through the night. Only the wind around the house and the occasional sound of a tree settling in the darkness.

Tuesday Morning

When I awoke the following morning, I felt more rested than I had in

weeks. Even the bed seemed to belong to an earlier age. The blankets were heavier than those we used in Baker Street, and I could not help wondering whether this too was a tradition that had survived several generations of the Ashcombe family.

The breakfast table was already laid when I came downstairs. Sunlight streamed through the windows and fell across the silverware and coffee service. Everything proceeded with a calm, almost ritual regularity. The servants moved silently through the room. One scarcely noticed them. They seemed to appear precisely when something was needed and vanish again before one had time to turn one's attention toward them.

Arthur lay, as usual, upon his rug before the fireplace. He appeared to be sleeping, and only the gentle rise and fall of his chest revealed that he was sufficiently awake to remain aware of his surroundings.

I turned toward the family.

"How old is he, exactly?"

"That is difficult to say with certainty," replied Mr. Ashcombe.

He glanced toward his mother.

The Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe nodded slowly.

"Fifteen."

"Fifteen?"

"At least fifteen."

I must have looked surprised, for the squire smiled.

"Yes, that is a respectable age for a borzoi."

"Isn't that unusually old?"

"Yes."

He glanced toward the dog.

"Most of them reach thirteen or fourteen years."

"But Arthur has had a good life," said Edward.

"A very comfortable old age," added his wife.

"Yes," laughed Mr. Ashcombe. "Surrounded by servants."

He looked around the table.

"And I am not speaking only of the hired ones."

Laughter followed.

"He is spoiled."

"He certainly is," said Mrs. Ashcombe.

"And then, of course, he gets his weekly exercise."

The squire regarded the dog for a moment.

"Perhaps his visits to the churchyard are the secret to his long life."

The atmosphere lightened. Even the Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe smiled faintly.

Holmes, however, said nothing. He merely sat watching Arthur.

Time passed while the conversation drifted to other subjects. I paid no attention to the clock. Indeed, it was not the clock but the dog that first drew my attention to the hour.

Arthur slowly raised his head.

The movement was so subtle that only Holmes appeared to notice it immediately. A moment later the dog rose to his feet. He did so slowly, with the stiffness that accompanies old age. He stretched for a long time, very much like an elderly man rising after a night spent in a chair. Then he walked toward the door and briefly sniffed at it. He turned around, took a few steps, and sniffed again.

Mr. Ashcombe produced his pocket watch.

"There we have it."

He snapped open the cover.

"Half past eight."

He smiled at Holmes.

"As reliable as the clock itself."

Holmes rose.

"Then I think we had better make ourselves ready."

There was nothing dramatic about the departure. No commands. No encouragement. No attempt to guide the dog in any particular direction.

Arthur simply walked through the door and crossed the courtyard with the same calm certainty, as though carrying out a task that had been repeated a thousand times before. The carriage was brought around, and shortly afterward Holmes, Mr. Ashcombe, Edward, and I were seated inside. Arthur had already begun his journey.

I had perhaps expected him to run, but he did not. He trotted at a steady and measured pace, like an old soldier upon a familiar march. The

carriage easily overtook him and continued toward the village, yet the dog scarcely seemed to notice it. He followed his route with a confidence that was almost mechanical. There was no hesitation and no deviation. He paid no attention to birds, hares, or any other creatures. He did not stop to investigate ditches or hedgerows. His gaze remained fixed ahead, as though he knew every step of the road.

As though his destination were waiting for him.

The carriage reached the churchyard several minutes before Arthur, which afforded us an unexpected opportunity to observe the final stage of his journey. We descended beside the low stone wall surrounding the grounds while the coachman held the horses, and I took the opportunity to let my eyes wander over the place.

It was precisely the sort of village churchyard one finds throughout the English countryside, carrying its history with quiet dignity. The old church rose above the graves with its gray stone walls and square tower, whose clock had doubtless measured the passing years for generations of villagers. Around it stood gravestones leaning at gentle angles, as though decades of rain and frost had gradually drawn them away from their original positions. Yews, ivy, and the various shrubs and plants that seem inseparable from churchyards grew among them. Here and there blooming roses stood beside more recent graves, while elsewhere the stones were almost entirely swallowed by moss and greenery.

A particular stillness rested over the place. Not the empty silence of deserted places, but the subdued peace that arises where generations of men and women have gathered their dead.

We had not been waiting long before Edward pointed toward the road.

"There he comes."

Arthur approached at his customary, unhurried trot. At a distance he appeared almost younger than he did close at hand. There was still something elegant in his movements, though age had taken its share of his strength.

Holmes watched him closely.

"Observe, Watson."

I followed his gaze.

A little farther north there was a gap in the churchyard wall. It was not an official entrance, but it was more than large enough for a dog to pass through without difficulty. It would have saved Arthur a considerable detour. Yet he ignored it entirely. Instead, he continued along the wall until he reached the churchyard's main gate.

"Interesting," murmured Holmes.

Arthur passed through the gate with the same natural ease as any visitor might have done. He followed the main path through the churchyard, turned right at a crossing between the graves, and later turned left. Not once did he hesitate. There was no searching in his movements. No uncertainty. He seemed to know the route perfectly.

"You, see?" said Mr. Ashcombe quietly beside me. "He does this every single time."

The longer we watched him, the more I was forced to agree. Arthur was not moving like an animal searching for something.

He was moving like an animal that already knew exactly where he was going.

At last, he reached a particular grave plot. He stopped, briefly sniffed the ground around him, and stood there for a moment. Then he slowly lowered himself onto the grass and settled comfortably.

Mr. Ashcombe pointed.

"Exactly there."

His voice was lower than necessary.

"Exactly there every single time."

We moved closer.

The Old Merchant

I must confess that I had expected something quite different. After all the stories surrounding the mysterious grave, I had unconsciously imagined a monument of some significance. Perhaps an old family plot, or an imposing headstone hinting at some dramatic history. The reality proved far more modest.

The grave was small and well kept, yet entirely without grandeur. The headstone was of the sort one might find in countless churchyards. It

was neither particularly old nor especially remarkable. It clearly belonged neither to a nobleman nor, it seemed, to any substantial landowner. Rather, it appeared to be the resting place of a respectable member of the village middle class. Holmes bent down and read the inscription.

"Samuel Pritchard. 1842-1888."

He straightened again.

"Samuel Pritchard?" I repeated.

Edward nodded.

"That is the name the gravedigger gave us."

"And who was he?"

"Apparently the village shopkeeper. He ran the general store here many years ago."

"He must have been the dog's former owner."

The conclusion seemed so obvious that I almost expected Holmes to confirm it.

Instead, Mr. Ashcombe shook his head.

"No."

"As we told you in Baker Street, Arthur has belonged to the family all his life. Since he was a puppy."

"And Samuel Pritchard?"

"So far as we know, he never had any connection with the dog."

Edward shrugged.

"I doubt Arthur even knew him."

My theory collapsed as quickly as it had formed. I turned toward Holmes, expecting him to offer another explanation. To my surprise, however, the name seemed to hold almost no interest for him. He cast a brief glance at the stone, then immediately directed his attention elsewhere. First to the dog. Then to the ground surrounding the grave. After that to the nearby paths and neighboring plots. Even the vegetation appeared to attract his notice.

And while Arthur lay perfectly motionless beside us, his head resting between his forepaws, Holmes slowly began to circle the grave, as though the true mystery did not lie in the name engraved upon the stone but in the earth upon which it stood.

We remained beside the grave longer than I had expected. Arthur, however, did nothing that brought us any closer to an explanation. He simply lay upon the grass with his head between his forepaws and his eyes half closed, like a dog that had found exactly the place where it wished to be. If there was a secret in his behavior, he gave no sign of it. It therefore took me somewhat by surprise when, after roughly a quarter of an hour, he suddenly rose.

There was no obvious reason for the movement. He had been lying completely still. Then he merely lifted his head, slowly gained his feet, and stretched himself thoroughly, so that his aged joints seemed almost audibly to creak. For a moment he stood surveying his surroundings before turning toward the path.

Mr. Ashcombe smiled.

"Now he goes home again."

His tone revealed the familiarity of a man who had witnessed the same scene repeated countless times.

"Exactly like that every time," said Edward. "He stays about the same length of time and then heads back."

Arthur had already begun his return journey. He set off at the same calm trot that had brought him to the churchyard, without so much as a final glance toward the grave.

The squire turned toward us.

"Shall we follow him?"

"By all means," I replied.

But Holmes did not move. He was still gazing at the place where the dog had lain.

"Mr. Holmes?"

He looked up.

"I think I shall remain a little longer."

The squire appeared surprised.

"In the churchyard?"

"Yes."

Holmes smiled politely.

"If you do not mind."

“Of course not.”

“I would prefer to walk back to the Hall later. It is only a couple of miles.”

There was something in his tone that I immediately recognized. It was the particular manner in which Holmes spoke when he wished to be alone with his thoughts. I had witnessed it countless times over the years. He had noticed something. Perhaps only a small irregularity. Perhaps merely an impression that had not yet found its proper place. But enough to make him desire solitude. I therefore offered no objection. Shortly afterward the carriage moved away once more, and I saw Holmes standing among the graves as the distance between us slowly increased.

When we had disappeared down the road, the churchyard was once again surrendered to its own silence. Holmes later told me how he spent the following hour. After our departure, he remained standing for a considerable time without moving. Birds sang in the trees around the church, and the wind stirred the dark yew branches ever so slightly. There was nothing dramatic about the place. On the contrary, a peace rested over the churchyard that seemed almost timeless.

At last, he began to walk. First, he followed the path Arthur had chosen. He moved slowly through the churchyard and out through the gate. Then he continued some distance along the road before turning back and retracing the final part of the dog's route. He measured distances with his eyes and studied the surroundings with the same methodical attention that other men might devote to a map.

It was during this examination that he once again noticed the opening in the stone wall. A little farther north there was a break in the low churchyard wall. Not a proper entrance, but more than large enough for a dog to pass through without difficulty. To a human being it would scarcely have mattered, but for a dog the matter was quite different. If Arthur merely wished to reach the spot as quickly as possible, this opening would have been the natural route. It would have saved both time and distance. Yet he consistently chose the main gate. Holmes later admitted that the observation had made him smile.

"Perhaps," he had thought, "it is due to his social standing within the family."

It was, of course, a joke, but as was often the case with Holmes, the joke contained a grain of seriousness. For the dog did not behave like an animal merely seeking a place. He behaved like an animal following a specific routine.

After making another circuit of the area, Holmes returned to the grave. Here a second detail began to occupy his thoughts. He positioned himself precisely where Arthur had been lying. Now it became clear that the dog had not been lying beside the headstone. In fact, he had not even been particularly close to it. There were roughly six feet between the stone and the place where Arthur had rested. Nor was the position directly in front of the monument. It lay slightly behind and off to one side.

If a dog were seeking out a particular grave, one would naturally expect it to go to the headstone itself. To sniff it, touch it, or otherwise show some interest in it. Arthur had done none of these things. He had lain on the spot itself. Not by the stone. As though the stone itself were entirely irrelevant.

This thought occupied Holmes so completely that he was still studying the area when he noticed a figure entering through the churchyard gate. The man pushed a wheelbarrow before him, several gardening tools lying across it. He was in his forties, broad-shouldered, and possessed the weathered appearance that comes from years of outdoor labor. Upon spotting Holmes, he raised a hand in greeting.

"Good morning."

The man smiled pleasantly.

"You must be one of the guests from Ashcombe Hall."

"I am."

"Then I suppose you've come to see the old dog."

Holmes's interest was immediately aroused.

"You know him?"

"Everyone around here knows him by now."

The man set down his wheelbarrow.

"I'm the gravedigger."

Holmes had always possessed a remarkable ability to make people talk. It was not merely a matter of the questions he asked, but of the way in which he asked them. He rarely appeared to be interrogating anyone. On the contrary, he made people feel that they were simply taking part in an agreeable conversation. It was no different with the gravedigger.

As the man resumed his work among the graves, Holmes fell naturally into conversation with him. At first, they spoke of the church itself, its age, and the various clergymen who had served the parish over the years. Then the discussion turned to the churchyard, and the gravedigger spoke freely. He explained that he had not been employed as gravedigger for very long, but that he had lived in the village all his life.

"So, I have known the churchyard longer than I have worked in it," he said with a smile.

He adjusted a plant and surveyed his work with satisfaction.

"It's a small community, after all. Everyone knows everyone else. Or knew them."

He gestured lightly toward the graves around him.

"Every family has its place. Some of them have had the same plot for generations."

Holmes nodded.

"That must give one a particular relationship with history."

"Yes, I suppose it does."

The gravedigger straightened.

"You come to know the families. Not only the living, but the dead as well."

The conversation then drifted toward Ashcombe Hall.

As Holmes had anticipated, the gravedigger knew the estate perfectly well.

"Everyone knows Ashcombe Hall."

A faint smile touched his voice.

"And everyone knows the stories about it."

"The stories?" asked Holmes.

"Yes."

The gravedigger laughed.

"In a small place like this, the rumors never really disappear."

He shook his head.

"They simply grow older."

Holmes regarded him with interest.

"What sort of rumors do you mean?"

The gravedigger shrugged.

"The usual sort."

He laughed again.

"There are always little scandals, secrets, and stories attached to an estate."

He reflected for a moment.

"I think it is really the common people's way of responding to differences in class."

Holmes raised an eyebrow.

"How so?"

"Well, when your own family has worked for the same family generation after generation, perhaps you also feel a need to tell stories about them."

He smiled apologetically.

"There is no doubt that most of them are probably invented."

The conversation might have ended there, but Holmes now changed the subject with an apparent casualness that I later learned to distrust.

"Where is the Ashcombe family plot?"

The gravedigger pointed at once.

"Come with me."

The Family Plot

The gravedigger set down his tools, and together they made their way across the churchyard. After a few minutes they reached another section of the grounds situated closer to the church itself. Even without explanation, the difference was immediately apparent. Holmes had often told me that death rarely erased the distinctions of social position, and here was yet another example. The oldest and most prominent graves

occupied the ground nearest the church, toward the east, exactly as centuries of tradition had prescribed.

The Ashcombe family plot occupied a considerable area. Several generations of stones stood gathered around a larger central monument. Everything was meticulously maintained. The grass was neatly cut. The borders carefully tended. Even the oldest inscriptions remained perfectly legible.

"Most of them are here," said the gravedigger.

"Several generations."

Holmes walked slowly among the stones. Some were very old, while others were comparatively recent.

His gaze settled upon a large monument whose polished surface was only half covered with lettering. At the top, in large brass letters, was engraved:

Anthony Ashcombe

Beneath the name appeared the inscription:

Squire of Ashcombe Hall

Holmes studied the stone for a moment. The gravedigger noticed his interest.

"He died nearly ten years ago."

Holmes nodded.

There was no need to ask further questions. Both men were thinking of the Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe.

And both could see the same thing.

The remaining half of the stone was blank.

Space had been left.

Holmes allowed his gaze to wander onward. Close beside it lay another stone. It was smaller, yet considerably newer than the oldest monuments surrounding it. Here too the lettering was executed in brass. Holmes read the name.

Victor Ashcombe

He turned to the gravedigger.

"Who was Victor Ashcombe?"

The man looked surprised.

"Victor?"

He stepped closer.

"Yes."

For a moment he examined the stone.

Then he slowly shook his head.

"I must admit, I do not know."

"No?"

"No."

He seemed almost embarrassed.

"That was before my time."

He shrugged.

"But he was clearly a member of the family."

For another moment Holmes allowed his eyes to rest upon the name. Then he looked up toward the church tower.

For the first time that morning, he felt that two different stories lay before him. One concerned an old dog that visited a grave. The other concerned a family whose past perhaps contained more than its members cared to discuss. And as had so often happened before, Holmes had begun to suspect that the two stories were, in reality, one and the same.

The gravedigger remained standing for a moment, contemplating the large stone with its empty space awaiting a future inscription. There was nothing morbid in his expression. On the contrary, he spoke of the matter with the natural ease often found in those who spend their days among graves.

"It is a strange thing to think about," he said. "But the Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe will probably not be the next one to come here."

Holmes looked at him questioningly.

The gravedigger smiled.

"The dog."

He pointed toward the far end of the churchyard where Arthur usually lay.

"It will probably be Arthur first."

Holmes let his eyes rest upon the vacant portion of the monument.

"That is certainly possible."

"And I daresay he has earned it."

The gravedigger chuckled softly.

"There is no one who visits this churchyard more faithfully than he does."

Holmes turned toward him.

"You have noticed him for a long time?"

"Of course."

"For that long?"

"Yes, certainly in recent years."

The gravedigger reflected for a moment.

"Every Tuesday morning."

He shook his head faintly.

"Week after week."

Holmes's expression sharpened slightly.

"Samuel Pritchard's grave."

"Exactly."

The gravedigger glanced toward the Ashcombe family plot surrounding them.

"That is really the strangest part of it all."

He gestured broadly.

"One would think that if a dog from Ashcombe Hall had some special connection to anyone buried here, it would be one of these."

He indicated the many Ashcombe names around them.

"But no."

His smile broadened slightly.

"He chooses Samuel Pritchard."

Holmes nodded slowly. His gaze moved from the well-kept family graves to the distant section of the churchyard where Arthur had lain.

The gravedigger gathered up his tools and resumed his work, while Holmes remained standing for a few moments longer.

When he later recounted the conversation to me, he mentioned that it was the gravedigger's final remark that had made the deepest impression upon him. Not because it provided an answer, but because it gave voice to the question that had been hidden beneath the entire case.

If Arthur was truly seeking a person, why was he not seeking the family?

Why a forgotten shopkeeper?

And why did the headstone itself seem so entirely irrelevant to him?

Those questions remained unanswered. Yet as Holmes slowly turned away from the Ashcombe family plot, he was more convinced than ever that the solution did not lie in the name Samuel Pritchard.

It lay somewhere else in the churchyard.

Perhaps in a place that no one thought about anymore.

When Holmes returned to Ashcombe Hall at midday, he found the entire family gathered around the luncheon table. I had already related as much of the morning's events as I myself had witnessed, but since I had returned to the Hall with the carriage while Holmes remained behind in the churchyard, it was naturally his own observations that everyone was eager to hear.

Hardly had we taken our seats before Mr. Ashcombe turned toward him with the expectant curiosity that had hovered just beneath the surface throughout our stay.

"Well, Mr. Holmes," he said, "have you become any wiser?"

I must confess that I leaned forward slightly myself. I was every bit as interested in the answer as the rest of the company.

Holmes took his time pouring himself a glass of water before looking up.

"Yes and no."

The reply produced a faint smile among the younger generation and an expression of mild resignation from the squire.

"That sounds very much like you, Mr. Holmes."

"It is also the most accurate answer I can presently give you."

He set down his cutlery.

"I have observed several interesting circumstances. There are aspects of the case that strike me as unusual. And there are certain irregularities that I find noteworthy."

"Irregularities?" asked Edward.

"Yes."

"What sort of irregularities?"

Holmes shook his head gently.

"It is still too early to say."

A brief silence followed.

Mr. Ashcombe looked both relieved and disappointed at the same time. Relieved because Holmes had clearly found something that interested him. Disappointed because he was not yet prepared to share it. His wife seemed to perceive the same thing.

"We must give Mr. Holmes the time he requires."

She smiled kindly toward the detective.

"We have lived with this mystery for months. Surely we can wait another day or two."

"That is very generous of you," said Holmes.

I could not help noticing that we had reached a stage of the investigation with which I was thoroughly familiar. Holmes had caught the scent of something. Precisely what it was, I could not yet determine. But he had seen enough to know that the matter was not what it first appeared to be. At the same time, he still lacked enough pieces to complete the picture. At such moments he often became quieter than usual, and his answers acquired a caution that few people understood.

After some further conversation, he announced that he wished to return to the churchyard that very afternoon.

"Watson and I would like to pay the place another visit."

"Of course," said Mr. Ashcombe. "I should like to accompany you, but unfortunately I have several meetings with my tenants today."

He shrugged.

"Such is the life of a landowner. Even when one has servants, there is still a little work to be done."

The remark produced laughter around the table.

"I shall arrange a carriage," said Edward at once. "And naturally the coachman will be at your disposal."

Holmes thanked him, and shortly after luncheon we found ourselves once again upon the road leading toward the village.

The afternoon had grown warmer, and the sunlight slanted through the ancient oaks lining the road. The coachman sat silently upon the box while the wheels rolled steadily over the gravel. Holmes had been unusually quiet since we left the Hall, and at last I could no longer restrain my curiosity.

"What is it that troubles you, Holmes?"

He sat gazing out across the countryside and did not answer immediately.

"Troubles is perhaps not the correct word."

"Then what is it?"

For a moment he watched the stone walls passing by before speaking.

"It is not what is in the churchyard, Watson."

He slowly turned his head toward me.

"It may be what is no longer in the churchyard."

I confess that these words brought me no closer to understanding.

"I am afraid you have lost me entirely."

A faint smile crossed his face.

"That does not surprise me."

"Would you care to explain?"

"Not yet."

He turned back toward the window.

"First I should like to determine whether my suspicions are worth pursuing at all."

That was all I could extract from him. The remainder of the journey passed in silence while I vainly attempted to make sense of his cryptic remark.

What could be missing from a churchyard?

A person?

A grave?

A headstone?

The more I considered the question, the less I understood.

Yet one thing had become clear to me. Holmes was no longer occupied with Samuel Pritchard. The old shopkeeper had become a distraction.

The real mystery lay elsewhere.

And Holmes had already turned his attention toward it.

The Map of the Churchyard

As soon as we arrived at the churchyard, Holmes seemed to set every other plan aside. He stepped down from the carriage with a purposefulness that told me his thoughts were already several steps ahead of my own, and without so much as a glance toward Samuel Pritchard's grave, he went directly toward the gravedigger, whom we found weeding along the church wall on the southern side of the building.

The man noticed us and rose with a friendly nod.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Holmes."

Holmes briefly introduced me, and then, without any unnecessary preamble, came to the point.

"There is something that occurred to me after our earlier conversation."

"Yes?"

"Are there maps of the churchyard?"

The gravedigger looked a little surprised.

"Yes, of course."

He wiped his hands on his trousers.

"There are maps."

"May we see them?"

"Certainly."

He led us around behind the church, where a small shed stood half hidden behind some bushes. The building was old and crooked and had clearly served the same purpose for many years. When the door was opened, a heavy smell of damp earth, old wood, and rusted iron met us. I was at once reminded of the many small tool sheds one finds beside English churchyards. Along the walls stood spades, rakes, and hoes in

orderly rows. Watering cans and wheelbarrow wheels occupied one end of the room, while the shelves were filled with pots, string, and various implements whose purpose I could not immediately guess.

Up beneath the ceiling, a couple of cords had been stretched between the beams. Upon them lay several rolled papers and maps.

"They must be up here somewhere."

The gravedigger fetched an old stepladder and climbed it with the ease of long practice. After a little searching, he drew one of the rolls free and came down again. He cleared space upon a worktable where soil and cut plant stems had been left, brushed away the worst of it with his hand, and then unrolled the map.

"Here."

We bent over it.

The map showed the churchyard in outline, with paths, grave plots, and various numbers. It had been made with a care that immediately awakened Holmes's interest.

"It is important to know who lies where," the gravedigger explained.

Holmes nodded without raising his eyes.

His finger followed the main entrance, moved up through the system of paths, and quickly found the area where Samuel Pritchard's grave lay. Everything appeared, at first glance, perfectly normal. After a few moments of silence, he looked up.

"How old is this map?"

The gravedigger considered.

"Five years, perhaps. Or six."

He shrugged.

"Not more than seven, at any rate."

"Are there older maps?"

"One would think so."

The man scratched the back of his head.

"But I do not actually know where."

Holmes said nothing.

The gravedigger therefore began rummaging among the remaining rolls. Several were taken down and examined. Some showed sections of

the churchyard. Others were planting plans or maintenance records. But none of them was significantly older than the map already before us. At last he shook his head apologetically.

"No, unfortunately."

Holmes folded his hands behind his back.

"Who was gravedigger before you?"

The question produced a noticeable reaction.

The gravedigger hesitated.

"Oh dear."

He suddenly looked less comfortable.

"There we may be getting into one of the village stories."

Holmes raised an eyebrow.

The gravedigger appeared to consider how much he ought to say.

"There was a gravedigger here for many years. Almost a lifetime, you might say."

"And?"

"Well..."

He shrugged.

"I would rather not meddle in old affairs."

"Naturally."

"But he was dismissed from the position."

Holmes's gaze sharpened.

"For what reason?"

"I do not know for certain."

The man lowered his voice a little.

"But rumor said the Ashcombe family had a hand in it."

Now my own interest was also awakened.

He quickly shook his head.

"It is only rumor."

He smiled crookedly.

"The old gravedigger and the old squire were said not to have been the best of friends."

For a moment there was silence.

Then Holmes asked:

"Does he still live in the village?"

"Yes."

The gravedigger went to the door and pointed outside. Behind the church one could see the beginning of a narrow lane that disappeared between low stone houses.

"Over there."

His finger followed the row of buildings.

"The last house on the left."

Holmes looked in that direction.

"And his name?"

"Ebenezer Pike."

The gravedigger gave a faint laugh.

"Old Ebenezer Pike, most people call him."

He hesitated.

"If anyone knows anything about the churchyard from that time, it is him."

"But?"

"I would not expect a warm welcome."

"No?"

"He is not the friendliest of men."

The gravedigger looked almost apologetic.

"Least of all toward those of us who work here."

"Because of his dismissal?"

"One must suppose so."

He shrugged.

"He does not even greet me."

Holmes nodded slowly.

"That is useful information."

"Only do not say that I sent you. If you do, he will likely shut the door before you have time to say good afternoon."

This brought a faint smile to Holmes's face. He thanked the gravedigger for his assistance, and a few minutes later we stood once more outside in the sunlight. Holmes merely tucked his stick beneath his arm and

began walking toward the narrow lane behind the church. I hurried after him.

Holmes looked ahead toward the low houses.

"If there is anyone in this village who remembers the churchyard before it became what it is today, it is most likely Ebenezer Pike."

"And if he does not wish to speak with us?"

A faint smile appeared on Holmes's face.

"Then we must hope, Watson, that he wishes to speak more than he wishes to remain silent."

And with those words we continued down the narrow lane toward the last house on the left, where the retired gravedigger—and perhaps an important fragment of Ashcombe Hall's past—was waiting for us.

Old Ebenezer Pike

The house that ended the narrow lane on the left made no attempt to beautify the village. On the contrary, it seemed a place that time had forgotten. The low walls had once been whitewashed, but now the lime hung in peeling flakes that exposed the dark stone beneath. Several of the windowpanes were cracked or replaced by uneven pieces of glass, and in places they had been patched with materials so haphazard that it was difficult to tell what had originally been there. The thatched roof was even more sorrowful. Large sections had sagged, and it required no expert in building to see that it ought to have been replaced many years before.

The strangest thing, however, was that this decaying dwelling stood in the midst of a garden that told a very different story. Behind the crooked fence, flowers grew in orderly beds. The paths had been swept. The weeds had been removed with care. Beneath an old apple tree stood a small bench, worn by wind and weather, certainly, but plainly in use. The contrast between house and garden was so striking that even I noticed it.

"Interesting," remarked Holmes.

"That the house is falling apart while the garden is tended?" I asked.

"Precisely."

He said no more, but I observed the small gleam in his eyes which told me that this detail, too, had been registered.

We went up the narrow path and knocked at the door. There was no answer. Holmes waited a moment and knocked again, this time with considerably more force. Still nothing happened, and I was just about to suggest that perhaps we had come in vain when a hoarse voice sounded from somewhere behind the house.

"If you mean to break the door down, you'll pay for a new one yourself!"

Holmes smiled.

"There he is."

We went around the house and found the back garden hidden behind some tall currant bushes and an old pear tree. There a man was working, bent over a flower bed. He straightened slowly when he saw us, and I must admit that his age surprised me. I had imagined a retired gravedigger in his sixties, or perhaps his seventies. This man must have been considerably older. His face was furrowed like old leather, and his back had lost some of its former straightness, yet there was still a remarkable strength in his movements.

I would have guessed him to be at least eighty.

"Mr. Ebenezer Pike?" asked Holmes.

The man gave a curt nod.

He emerged from among the bushes with a slow but determined gait. His clothes were worn and earth-stained, but clean. His eyes were clear and alert, and although his expression could be called neither friendly nor welcoming, neither was it openly hostile. He seemed rather a man who, over many years, had grown accustomed to managing without company.

"That depends who's asking."

"My name is Sherlock Holmes."

"That means nothing to me."

"And this is Dr. Watson."

"That means even less."

I could not help smiling.

Holmes, on the contrary, appeared to find the answer satisfactory.

"We come from the churchyard."

At these words the old man's expression changed almost imperceptibly.

"Then you have come to the wrong gravedigger."

"I do not think so."

Pike regarded him suspiciously.

Holmes continued in his usual calm voice.

"We are looking for some old maps of the churchyard. We were told that you worked there for many years, and that if anyone knew its history, it would be you."

The old man did not answer at once.

He removed his gloves and laid them upon the bench.

"And why do they interest you?"

"Because churchyards have a way of changing."

Pike snorted.

"Everything changes."

"But graves usually remain where they are."

"Not always."

The answer came so quickly that even Holmes raised his eyebrows slightly. The old man seemed immediately to regret having said it. He turned away and looked down at his flowers.

"It was not my intention to speak of the churchyard."

"Of course not," said Holmes.

A short silence followed. Pike cast a glance at us.

"Who sent you?"

His eyes narrowed.

"Was it the new gravedigger?"

"No."

"The parson?"

"No."

"An Ashcombe?"

For the first time I heard a sharpness in his voice.

"No," Holmes replied calmly.

The old man studied him for a long time. Then something curious happened. His suspicion did not disappear, but it was replaced by something else. Something resembling curiosity.

"So, you have come entirely on your own."

"Yes."

Pike nodded slowly.

"It has been a long time since anyone did that."

He lowered himself heavily onto the bench.

"Then it must be because you are looking for something."

Holmes smiled faintly.

"That is precisely why we are here."

The old gravedigger looked at him for some time.

Then he patted the place beside him.

"Then you had better sit down, Mr. Holmes."

He turned his gaze toward the house.

"For if it is the churchyard you wish to discuss, this will not be a short conversation."

And in that moment I knew we had at last found the man who possessed that part of the story which no one else any longer knew.

The old man remained seated for a moment without speaking. He watched Holmes with an expression that suggested he was trying to decide how much he ought to tell. Then he nodded slowly toward the house.

"I have what you came for."

Holmes said nothing.

"It is inside."

Pike leaned back upon the bench.

"The old maps."

He gave a slight shrug.

"They concern no one else anymore. I had to take something with me."

I saw a brief glance pass between Holmes and the old gravedigger. For the first time, Pike himself had raised the subject, and Holmes allowed him to do so at his own pace.

"So not everyone wanted you at the churchyard any longer?" he asked carefully.

Pike slowly shook his head.

"No."

A pause followed.

"There were several reasons."

"And the official explanation?"

The old man laughed softly.

It was not a cheerful laugh, but rather the sound of an old memory still capable of stirring irritation.

"The official explanation."

He seemed almost to taste the words.

"I had worked in that churchyard for a lifetime."

He looked down at his hands.

"I had buried people, tended their graves, and helped their families long before many of those who complained had even been born."

Holmes nodded.

"And?"

"And I did people certain favors."

His eyes sought Holmes's.

"There were some who took offense at that."

"Payment?" asked Holmes.

Pike nodded.

"Naturally."

There was no shame in his voice.

"That was how things were then."

He made a gesture with one hand.

"The wages were not great. If a family wanted a little extra care for a grave, a quicker arrangement, or some service outside the ordinary, they might add a few coins."

A crooked smile crossed his face.

Holmes regarded him calmly.

"And that was used against you."

"Yes."

The smile vanished again.

"It was."

He looked away toward the church tower, which could be glimpsed over the rooftops.

"There were, of course, some who suddenly became very moral."

"The Ashcombe family?"

This time Pike did not hesitate.

"Yes."

His voice grew harder.

"They were the worst."

I noticed that Holmes gave no visible reaction, but he listened with an intensity I knew well.

"The old squire?" he asked.

"Yes."

Pike leaned forward.

"He already had a grudge against me."

"Why?"

The old man was silent for a moment.

When he answered, his voice was lower.

"Because I had seen too much."

A silence fell among us. I immediately felt that the conversation had changed in character. Until now we had spoken of churchyards, maps, and an old dismissal. Now we had come closer to something else. Something more personal.

"What had you seen?" asked Holmes.

Pike looked at him for a long time.

"I saw what went on."

"At the estate?"

"Yes."

He nodded.

"And I was not the only one."

Holmes let him continue.

"The old Ashcombe was one thing."

Pike almost spat the words.

"But his brother William was worse."

I noticed the name at once.

"William Ashcombe?" asked Holmes.

"Yes."

Pike stared into the air as though he saw a distant past before him.

"Those two were cut from the same timber."

He fell silent again.

Holmes did not interrupt him. It was one of his great strengths as an examiner that when a man stood upon the threshold of a memory, he allowed silence to do its work. And so silence settled between us. Only the wind stirred the branches above the garden. Pike sat with his gaze fixed upon some faraway point, and I had the strong impression that we had reached the true beginning of the story.

Not the story of Arthur.

Not the story of Samuel Pritchard.

But the story that had lain buried beneath both for more than forty years.

The old gravedigger sat silently for a moment after mentioning William Ashcombe. It seemed to me that the name had opened a door to a series of recollections he usually preferred to keep shut. When at last he spoke again, it was with a weariness in his voice that was not caused by age alone.

"The problem is my age, Mr. Holmes."

He smiled crookedly.

"My age and my memory."

His gaze drifted across the garden, where the afternoon sun lay warm upon the flower beds.

"I have lived too long."

There was neither self-pity nor bitterness in the words. They were spoken as a simple fact.

"I have witnessed and remembered things that should, by rights, have been forgotten long ago. That is how it usually goes. One generation replaces the next, people die, and the stories vanish with them."

He slowly shook his head.

"But that was not how it happened."

Holmes said nothing.

"And William Ashcombe?" he asked after a brief pause.

The old man snorted.

"William."

He leaned back upon the bench.

"He was a drunkard."

There was silence for a moment.

"And a gambler."

His voice hardened.

"I doubt the family would have survived his excesses if his brother had not existed."

"Anthony?"

"Yes."

Pike nodded.

"The old squire had to buy his way out of the trouble William created again and again."

He looked up at Holmes.

"Have you ever visited a debtors' prison, Mr. Holmes?"

"Not as a guest."

This brought a short laugh from the old man.

"No, I thought not."

He pointed with a bony finger.

"But William Ashcombe came close to ending up in one more than once."

"And his brother paid?"

"Always."

Pike sighed.

"That was how it was with such families. Scandals were not to become public."

Holmes watched him attentively.

"But William died."

"Yes."

The old man's face grew serious again.

"They fished him out of the London docks."

I felt the conversation change once more.

"An accident?" asked Holmes.

"That was what they said."

Pike lifted his shoulders again.

"And perhaps it was true."

He smiled without humor.

"He was found in one of those places where a man should hardly be if he wishes to be thought law-abiding."

"Was it long ago?"

"A very long time ago."

He considered.

"Thirty years."

Then he shook his head.

"Perhaps more."

Holmes sat for a moment without speaking.

"I noticed his name in the family plot."

Pike nodded. A strange pride came over his face.

"I dug the hole."

He looked toward the church.

"I remember the day clearly."

"So, he was buried with the family."

"Yes."

The old man laughed quietly.

"He even got brass letters on his stone."

He slowly shook his head.

"But proud of him they were not."

There was silence. Only a bird sang somewhere nearby. At last Pike continued more softly.

"And then there was the dowager."

For the first time since we had arrived, his voice seemed to lose its sharpness.

"Mrs. Ashcombe."

He looked down at his hands.

"That woman has had much to endure."

Holmes listened attentively.

"Because of William?"

"Because of both of them."

Pike looked up.

"Anthony was the responsible one. William was the irresponsible one."

He smiled wearily.

"But they were still brothers."

His gaze darkened.

"And she stood between them."

He was silent for a moment.

"I have seen her humiliated again and again."

There was no anger in his voice now. Only pity.

"And yet she stayed."

Holmes nodded slowly.

Pike looked at him.

"You understand more than you let on."

Holmes did not answer. He merely sat with his hands folded and allowed the old man to continue at his own pace. By then I had acquired that familiar sensation which so often came over me during Holmes's investigations. We seemed, on the surface, to have strayed far from our original question. The old borzoi, Samuel Pritchard's grave, and the strange weekly visits appeared almost forgotten.

And yet I knew from experience that Holmes seldom strayed from a trail.

And the longer we spoke with old Ebenezer Pike, the more convinced I became that we were approaching the past to which Arthur, in his own silent way, had been trying to lead us back.

"And the son?" asked Holmes after a brief pause. "The present squire?"

Pike slowly shook his head.

"I do not really know him."

He leaned back on the bench and narrowed his eyes against the afternoon sun.

"Not properly, at any rate."

"You knew him as a child?"

"Yes, as a lad."

A faint smile appeared beneath the gray stubble.

"And back then he made the same mischief as every other boy, I suppose."

He shrugged.

"Time changes people."

For a moment his gaze grew distant.

"But memories remain."

There was something reflective in the way he said it, as though he were thinking not only of the Ashcombe family but of his own life. Holmes allowed him to rest in that thought for a moment before asking his next question.

"And the dog?"

Pike looked up.

"The dog?"

"Arthur."

The old man blinked a few times.

"The old squire's dog?"

"Yes."

To my surprise, he laughed.

"Is he still alive?"

"He is."

He shook his head in genuine astonishment.

"Then he must be almost as old as I am."

This time he laughed louder.

"Yes, the two of us have something in common."

He looked out across the garden.

"We have both witnessed a thing or two."

For the first time, his face seemed almost gentle.

"But it was the maps you came for."

He struck his hands against his knees and rose with slow effort.

"Wait here."

We watched him go into the house. The door closed behind him, and during the next few minutes we heard the sounds of cupboards being opened, drawers pulled out, and objects moved aside.

"He knows exactly where they are," I remarked.

"Yes," said Holmes.

"But he does not wish to give that impression."

Five minutes later Pike reappeared. He carried a large roll of paper under his arm.

"Here."

He laid it upon the garden table.

"The old map."

We helped him unroll it. The paper had yellowed with age, and in places damp and time had left their traces, but the map remained surprisingly well preserved. Holmes immediately bent over it. Pike pointed with a bony finger.

"Here is the Ashcombe family plot."

Holmes nodded. But I could see that his attention had already wandered elsewhere. His finger moved toward the farthest corner of the churchyard. The corner where Arthur usually lay.

"There."

He looked up.

"It is different."

Pike came to stand beside him.

"Yes."

"There have been changes."

"What changes?"

The old gravedigger nodded slowly.

"The great storm."

He looked as though he were reliving the sight.

"Yes, it must have been among the last years I worked there."

"The storm?"

"It brought down some of the largest trees in the churchyard."

He pointed toward the area Holmes had selected.

"Up there."

"By Samuel Pritchard's grave?"

"Yes."

Pike let his finger move across the map.

"The old oaks had enormous roots."

His hands described their size in the air.

"When they fell, they tore up the ground like a carpet."

He looked at us.

"The whole area was destroyed."

I could hear in his voice that he still remembered the sight.

"Several burial plots were torn up."

"Completely?"

"Yes."

He nodded.

"You could see remains of coffins and foundation stones everywhere."

There was silence for a moment.

"So, you had to restore the area?"

"As best we could."

Pike shrugged.

"But it was never quite the same."

Holmes looked down at the map.

"Things were moved."

"Yes."

A crooked smile appeared.

"A great many things were moved."

He lowered his voice slightly.

"And at the same time, certain people suddenly obtained better positions than others."

Pike snorted.

"There were people who, in some opinions, had been lying rather too finely."

"And others who ought to lie better?"

"Exactly."

He laughed softly.

"One might say that death suddenly became more flexible."

His hands illustrated how burial places had been shifted about.

"There was exchanging."

"Adjusting."

"Rearranging."

He smiled.

"And naturally it gave rise to various services."

Holmes met his gaze.

"One cannot make bread out of stone."

For the first time Pike laughed sincerely.

"No."

His eyes gleamed.

"One certainly cannot."

Holmes slipped a hand into his pocket and discreetly placed a silver coin upon the table.

Pike looked at it for a moment. Then he nodded approvingly.

"You understand old customs, Mr. Holmes."

He took the coin and slipped it into his pocket with the same naturalness as though he had received payment forty years earlier. The map was carefully rolled up again.

"If you should need it another time," he said, "you know where it is."

He rose. There was nothing impolite in the movement, yet it was clear that the visit was drawing to a close. The old man had said what he wished to say. Perhaps even a little more.

Holmes understood the hint immediately. He thanked him for his help, and I did the same. Pike did not accompany us to the gate. He remained standing by the garden table with the map beneath his arm and watched us as we made our way back through the little garden.

It was only when we had reached the street again that Holmes spoke.

"Now at least we know one thing."

"And what is that?"

He cast a glance back toward the house.

"That Arthur is almost certainly not lying by Samuel Pritchard's grave."

I stopped.

"What do you mean?"

Holmes began walking again.

"I mean, Watson, that if the graves were moved after the storm, the headstone may tell one story."

He smiled faintly.

"While the earth tells quite another."

And with those words he continued down the street toward the churchyard, while I hurried after him, more confused than ever, yet with the growing sense that the solution was now nearer than it had been at any time since our arrival at Ashcombe Hall.

After our visit to old Ebenezer Pike, Holmes did not at once return to Ashcombe Hall. To my surprise, he turned back instead toward the churchyard. I did not need to ask why. It was clear that the information we had just received had set new thoughts in motion within him, and I knew from experience that Holmes often wished to see a place again when some new fact had altered his understanding of it.

The afternoon sun now stood lower in the sky, and the churchyard lay almost deserted. Only a few birds moved among the gravestones, while the wind stirred the dark branches of the yews ever so slightly. We followed the main path toward the farthest corner of the churchyard, where Arthur usually lay each Tuesday morning.

Holmes walked slowly.

Several times he stopped and let his gaze move over the area. I had the impression that he still saw the old map before him, as though comparing it with the reality that lay around us. But the task was not a simple one. The storm, the later rearrangements, and the many years that had passed since then had erased almost every trace.

Had one not known the history, one would never have imagined that the place had once looked different.

Several times Holmes stood precisely where Arthur usually lay. He turned in various directions, measured distances with his eyes, and compared them with the image he had formed from the map.

"It is difficult," he murmured, more to himself than to me.

"What is difficult?" I asked.

"To determine exactly where."

He said no more.

At that moment I noticed that the present gravedigger was making his way toward us. He had evidently seen us from a distance and approached with that mixture of curiosity and helpfulness which we had already come to know.

"Good afternoon again."

"Good afternoon," replied Holmes.

The gravedigger glanced around the area.

"So you did visit old Ebenezer Pike."

"We did."

The man smiled.

"And did you get anything out of him?"

Holmes answered the question with one of his characteristic half smiles.

"Interesting."

The gravedigger laughed.

"Could he help with the maps?"

"He was most helpful."

Holmes carefully refrained from saying more. The gravedigger seemed to understand the implication.

"Well, that is good."

For a moment they stood in silence.

Then Holmes changed the subject with an apparent casualness.

"The old stories in the village."

The gravedigger looked at him questioningly.

"The stories?"

"Yes."

Holmes allowed his gaze to drift across the graves.

"The rumors."

The man gave a small shrug.

"One never knows what is true and what is not."

"Naturally."

"Most of them grow larger each time they are told."

Holmes nodded understandingly.

"But what stories have there been about the Ashcombe family?"

At this question the gravedigger became noticeably more cautious. He looked down at his rake.

"As I said, they are only rumors."

"Naturally."

"And I should not like to be the one to bring old quarrels back to life."

"That is quite understandable."

Holmes's tone was so friendly that it was almost reassuring.

"But for that very reason old rumors are often interesting."

The gravedigger smiled reluctantly.

"You may be right about that."

He hesitated for a moment.

"There was the matter of the maidservant."

Holmes said nothing.

The gravedigger shrugged.

"One cannot live in a village all one's life without hearing such things."

He lowered his voice slightly.

"Not everyone is equally fond of the Ashcombe family."

"No?"

"So, some stories continue to live."

Holmes watched him attentively.

"And this story?"

"It concerned a young maidservant at the Hall."

He glanced around as though to assure himself that no one was listening.

"She was said to have had a child."

"And the child's father?"

The gravedigger hesitated.

"He was never named."

"But people had their suspicions."

"Yes."

The man nodded.

"I think everyone believed they knew who it was."

"But no one said it aloud."

"Exactly."

Holmes allowed a moment to pass.

"The old Ashcombe?"

The gravedigger looked surprised.

"That is what the story says, at any rate."

"And what became of her?"

"Well."

He shrugged.

"The story goes that she had the child."

He hesitated.

"And that both she and the child died some months later."

"How?"

"There was an epidemic."

He looked down.

"The child was not even a year old, I believe."

There was silence among the graves.

"But as I said," he added quickly, "that is how the story is told. I cannot confirm any of it myself."

"Of course not."

Holmes nodded.

"Such stories often arise in small communities."

"Yes."

The gravedigger seemed relieved by this explanation.

"And especially where the differences between people are great."

"Precisely."

Holmes thanked him for his help, and after a few more polite remarks the gravedigger returned to his work. We stood alone for a moment.

Then Holmes turned toward the gate. Without a word, we began to walk back toward Ashcombe Hall.

I waited until the churchyard lay behind us before I spoke.

"So, you believe the story?"

Holmes walked several steps without answering.

"I seldom believe rumors, Watson."

"But?"

A faint smile appeared.

"I am very interested in how they begin."

He looked back toward the churchyard.

"And even more in why they survive."

He said no more. But as we followed the road back toward the estate, I could not rid myself of the feeling that the old maidservant, of whom no one any longer spoke openly, was slowly emerging from the shadows of the past. And somewhere behind us, among the moved headstones and the forgotten graves, Arthur still seemed to be pointing in her direction.

Around the Table

At dinner that evening, the conversation returned, as one might have expected, quickly to our investigations. The family had shown admirable patience throughout the day, but curiosity lay plainly beneath the polite surface, and hardly had the first dishes been removed before Mr. Ashcombe looked across the table at Holmes.

"You have been industrious today, Mr. Holmes. Did you gain anything from your inquiries?"

Holmes laid down his knife and fork and calmly wiped his mouth before replying.

"Among other things, we had a very interesting visit with an old man in the village."

Holmes let his eyes move around the table.

"Old Ebenezer Pike."

Something happened the moment the name was mentioned. The Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe, who until then had sat quite still and taken only a modest part in the conversation, raised her head. The movement

was slight, but distinct. Her eyes immediately sought Holmes, and for the first time since our arrival, she seemed fully attentive to every word that was being said.

The squire scarcely noticed it.

"That old blockhead," he said with a short smile. "I doubt he belongs among the most reliable men in the village."

"No?" said Holmes.

His tone was neither challenging nor agreeing. He simply let the question remain in the air.

Mr. Ashcombe gave a slight shrug.

"It may sound odd, but though he never had much power over the living, it is said that his influence over the dead was considerably greater."

A faint laugh went around the table.

"He ruled the churchyard almost like a little kingdom for many years."

"That was my impression as well," remarked Holmes.

"And what could he tell you?" asked Edward with interest.

Holmes had plainly noticed the same thing that I had. The Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe had not lowered her gaze. She still sat with her hands folded before her, listening with an attention that contrasted with her usual reserve.

"He was quite discreet," replied Holmes. "As though he understood very well that words acquire their own weight in a small community."

The squire nodded.

"I can well imagine it."

"But I found the meeting interesting."

Holmes paused briefly.

"It is always valuable to speak with a person who has witnessed the past, however reliable that witness may later prove to be."

For a moment there was silence. Mr. Ashcombe seemed to take the remark as a general reflection and merely nodded thoughtfully. But I noticed that the dowager's eyes still rested upon Holmes. There was something searching in them, almost as though she were trying to determine how much the old gravedigger had actually told him.

If Holmes noticed it, he did not show it. He quite naturally turned the conversation to other subjects, and shortly thereafter the company was once more discussing the harvest, the fields, and the new machines that had slowly changed the management of the estate.

But while the others talked, I continued to think of the brief reaction that the name Ebenezer Pike had provoked. It was the first time I had seen the Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe lose even a fraction of her customary self-control. And although no one at the table commented upon it, I had the sense that Holmes had registered it as clearly as I had.

Later that evening, after the ladies had withdrawn and the remaining members of the party had gathered in the smoking room, I found myself seated in a deep armchair with a cup of coffee while Holmes and Mr. Ashcombe talked together by the fire. The room was warm and comfortable. The flames cast a soft glow over the dark wood paneling, and through the tall windows one could see the night resting over the courtyard. The atmosphere was far more relaxed than it had been at dinner, and perhaps for that reason, after a period of ordinary conversation, the talk took a more personal turn.

Mr. Ashcombe sat for a moment in silence with his glass in his hand before looking over at Holmes.

"So, you have heard, I suppose, about my uncle William."

It was phrased less as a question than as a statement.

Holmes nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes. He was mentioned."

He paused briefly.

"I also noticed his stone in the family plot."

The squire let his gaze rest in the flames.

"I did not wish to bring him up at dinner."

"For your mother's sake?"

"Yes."

He nodded.

"It is an old story, but some sorrows do not diminish with the years."

For a moment there was silence.

"One might say that he was the black sheep of the family."

Holmes said nothing. He merely leaned slightly forward and waited.

"He was originally meant to share responsibility for the estate with my father."

The squire smiled faintly.

"But he had no interest in fields, livestock, or management."

His gaze grew distant.

"It was the streets of London that interested him. Especially those quarters of which respectable families prefer not to speak."

I noticed how his voice changed. There was no anger in it. Only that particular weariness which accompanies old family griefs.

"He was my mother's great anxiety."

He glanced briefly at Holmes.

"When he stayed here at the Hall, he could often be charming and amusing. I remember him rather well from my childhood."

He smiled at the recollection.

"But he never stayed long. He came and went."

He looked back into the fire.

"Often after quarrels."

"With your father?"

"Yes."

Another pause followed.

"And you already know how it ended."

Holmes nodded.

"He was found drowned."

"Possibly an accident."

The squire shrugged.

"Possibly something else."

"Suicide?"

"It was mentioned."

He did not sound convinced.

"But no one knew for certain."

He looked at us.

"It happened near the London docks. In one of those places where a gentleman rarely has any sensible business."

I noticed that Holmes asked no further questions about the death itself. He seemed, rather, to be interested in the family's relation to it.

"It was many years ago," continued Mr. Ashcombe. "But my mother was never quite the same afterward."

His voice sank lower.

"First, she lost her brother-in-law. Later her husband."

He slowly shook his head.

"It has been a hard life in more ways than one."

Holmes sat silent for a moment. Then he asked a question that made the squire raise his eyebrows.

"Do you attach any significance to your uncle's history in connection with Arthur's movements?"

The surprise in his face appeared genuine.

"William?"

He shook his head firmly.

"I cannot see any connection whatever."

"Why not?"

"Because William died long before Arthur was born."

He smiled.

"There must be at least fifteen years between the two events."

Holmes nodded.

"Naturally."

And yet it seemed to me that he had expected no other answer.

The conversation then drifted into more general topics. They spoke of the village, of the old families, and of the curious way in which rumors arise and live on through generations. Mr. Ashcombe related several amusing stories of local quarrels which, in his opinion, were chiefly the result of boredom and long winters, and gradually the atmosphere became lighter again.

As the evening drew toward its close, we rose and wished him good night. Shortly afterward Holmes and I found ourselves on the broad staircase leading to the guest rooms. I waited until we were alone.

"Do you think William Ashcombe has any importance to the case?"

Holmes paused for a moment before the door to his room.

"I do not yet know, Watson."

"But you asked."

"Yes."

He laid his hand upon the door handle.

"Sometimes it is not the answers that interest me."

"But?"

A faint smile appeared on his face.

"The manner in which people answer."

He said no more. A moment later the door closed behind him, and I was left alone in the corridor with the growing sense that we were approaching a point at which several separate threads of the story would soon begin to meet.

Forgotten Graves

The following morning Holmes and I paid a visit to the rectory. The building stood a few hundred yards from the church and was of the sort one finds everywhere in the English countryside: solid, modest, and surrounded by a well-kept garden that plainly benefited from a clergyman's more regular way of life than that enjoyed by many of his parishioners. We were received by the rector himself, a man of about forty with an open face and a kindly manner. He had served in the parish for only a few years, a fact he mentioned almost apologetically as soon as Holmes explained the purpose of our visit.

"I am afraid I can hardly be of much assistance," he said with a smile. "If what you are investigating lies forty years in the past, then most of it took place long before my time."

"That does not matter," Holmes replied reassuringly. "It is not memory we are seeking, Rector."

The clergyman looked visibly relieved.

"That is good. In that part of the matter, I should be a very poor witness indeed. But naturally I shall assist you in any way I can."

He smiled again.

"In fact, you come quite conveniently. I am in the midst of preparing Sunday's sermon, and the text has proved considerably more difficult than expected. A little diversion can do no harm."

When Holmes asked whether we might see the parish registers, he nodded at once and led us into his study. The room was smaller than I had imagined but filled with books. The shelves sagged beneath the weight of theological works, old records, and leather-bound registers. A fine layer of dust lay upon the upper shelves, and in the air hung that particular smell of old paper, ink, and leather which is found only in archives and libraries.

The rector went directly to a bookcase and drew out several heavy volumes.

"You said about forty years ago?"

"Approximately."

He considered.

"If we take five years before and five years after, then it must be this period."

He placed one of the books upon the table with a heavy thud.

"It is not a large parish, after all. There are only a limited number of baptisms, marriages, and burials."

We seated ourselves around the table.

"Are we looking for something in particular?" asked the rector.

"Yes."

Holmes opened the book.

"A burial."

The rector nodded.

"That should be possible."

"Possibly a burial that someone wished to attract as little attention as possible."

This clearly stirred his interest.

"But which may nevertheless have been recorded?"

"Precisely."

"Yes," said the rector slowly. "That does make it interesting."

Then the painstaking work began.

For more than an hour we sat bent over the old pages. I helped turn the leaves and compare dates, while the rector brought out the relevant periods. Holmes proceeded from the information we had received from both the present gravedigger and old Ebenezer Pike, and we examined baptismal records, deaths, and burials alike. The work was slow, but far from impossible. The parish could hardly have numbered more than a thousand souls, and the records were therefore reasonably manageable.

Several times we came across names or events that seemed interesting at first glance, only to prove upon closer examination to be of no consequence. One family with an unusually large number of deaths in a short span of time. A number of children born without a father named. An epidemic that, over the course of several months, had taken the lives of several villagers. But nothing seemed to fit the story we were seeking.

Then suddenly Holmes stopped. His finger rested upon a particular line. He leaned forward. The rector did the same. I followed their gaze.

The entry was almost hidden among the others, not because it had been placed out of sight, but because it was so unusually brief.

It read:

Mary Collins.

Maidservant at Ashcombe Hall.

And immediately below:

Thomas.

That was all. Beside both names stood the same date of burial. Otherwise, there were no explanations or remarks. No information concerning the child's father.

Holmes pointed to the page.

"Do you see it?"

The rector nodded.

"It is unusual."

"Yes."

Holmes let his finger move over the empty spaces.

"The most remarkable thing is not what is written."

The rector studied the page again.

"You are right."

"There should be considerably more."

Holmes took out his notebook and wrote down the names.

Mary Collins.

Thomas.

Then he closed the book.

"I believe we have seen what we came for."

The rector looked up in surprise.

Holmes rose.

"I should like to visit the churchyard."

To my surprise, the rector brightened.

"I should be very pleased to accompany you."

Shortly afterward we passed through the churchyard gate. This time our search had a far more precise object. We went directly toward the area where Arthur usually lay. Samuel Pritchard's grave still stood in its place, exactly as we had seen it on the preceding days, but it now interested us only to a limited degree. We were looking for something quite different. We were looking for Mary Collins. And for Thomas.

Grave after grave was examined. Name after name was read. We went methodically through the surrounding rows, but without result. Nowhere did we find the names the parish register had revealed. At last, even I began to lose patience.

"Perhaps the grave simply no longer exists."

Holmes shook his head.

"It exists."

"Where?"

"That is precisely the question."

He looked around.

"But perhaps we are searching in the wrong place."

Then he turned away from the rows of graves and began instead to examine the outer edges of the churchyard. I understood at once why. He was thinking of Pike. Of the storm and the fallen oaks.

Slowly we followed him along the wall. Behind some bushes and near an old tool shed lay an area to which I had previously paid no attention. There a number of old gravestones had been stacked against the wall.

Some were almost hidden beneath moss. Others had sunk halfway into the earth. A few were so worn by weather that they resembled ordinary stones.

The rector looked surprised.

"I have never really noticed those."

He examined them more closely.

"They must be remains from abandoned graves."

Holmes did not answer. He had already gone down on one knee before the nearest stone. With his handkerchief he removed soil and moss. Then he scraped carefully with the heel of his boot. Slowly letters began to emerge. He moved on to the next. And the next. I now began to understand what he was seeking.

These stones were likely the remnants of graves that had never been restored after the storm. The graves of the poor. The graves of the forgotten. Burial places no one had any longer claimed. Places that had quietly been swallowed up by time, while other, more important names had taken the ground.

And while the afternoon sun fell slantwise across the churchyard wall, Holmes worked his way methodically through the abandoned stones, convinced that the answer to Arthur's strange behavior did not lie among the well-kept graves, but among those that had nearly been erased from history.

After a long period of work, Holmes suddenly stopped. He did not say a word but remained on his knees before the old stone he had just drawn out from the pile along the wall. With his handkerchief he continued methodically to clear away soil and moss, while the rector and I watched him in silence. Slowly letters began to appear upon the weathered surface of the stone. At first one could make out only the first letters, then a name.

Mary.

Holmes continued with the same patience until the entire inscription could at last be read.

Mary Collins.

Beneath it, almost hidden by a stubborn layer of moss and decades of decay, another name emerged.

Thomas.

I stared at the stone. It bore every sign of having been removed from its original place and later set aside among the forgotten remnants of the churchyard's past. There it had stood for years, overlooked and almost effaced by the passage of time. Holmes rose slowly and let his gaze wander across the area. He measured with his eyes the distance between the stone and the place where Arthur usually lay. There were no more than four or five yards between them.

For the first time I felt that I began to glimpse the connection.

Holmes stood silent for another moment, his eyes moving between the old stone and the place where the dog had lain week after week upon the earth. Then he nodded almost imperceptibly to himself.

"It appears to me, Watson," he said quietly, "that the dog has been far more faithful to history than the people have been."

The Final Piece

At this point I was convinced that the mystery had, in essence, been solved. We had found the name of the maidservant. We had found the child. We had found the traces of the grave that had most likely been displaced by time and by names of greater importance. Therefore, when we left the outer edge of the churchyard and the old stones by the wall, I expected Holmes to set a direct course for Ashcombe Hall and gather the family.

To my surprise, he did nothing of the sort.

"We still lack something," he said.

He brushed a little earth from his hands.

"One final piece of information."

"From whom?"

Holmes smiled.

"A very old witness."

And with that he turned toward the narrow lane behind the church.

A few minutes later we were once more standing before the house at the end of the lane. This time we did not need to knock. Old Ebenezer Pike was already seated upon the bench in his garden, as though he had expected our return. The sun stood lower now, and its light fell through the branches of the old apple tree while he sat with his hands folded over his stick.

When he caught sight of us, a faint smile appeared upon his weathered face.

"I thought you would come again."

Holmes stopped before him.

"Indeed?"

The old man nodded.

"You still need to hear a voice from the past."

Holmes returned the smile.

"Yes."

This time he did not sit down.

"But now it concerns less the matter of graves and people."

Pike raised his eyebrows.

"Oh?"

"And more the matter of dogs."

For a moment the old man was silent.

Then he said:

"Arthur."

Holmes nodded.

"Arthur."

A short silence followed. I had the impression that both men now knew exactly what the other was thinking.

"You need not tell me every truth, Mr. Pike," said Holmes calmly. "I need only have one confirmed."

The old gravedigger looked at him for a long time. Then he slowly nodded.

"Ask."

Holmes folded his hands behind his back.

"Did the old squire regularly visit a particular grave?"

Pike did not answer at once. His gaze drifted away from the garden and toward some place only he could see. It seemed to me that his thoughts were traveling decades backward through time.

"Yes."

His voice was very low.

"Every week."

The old man looked up.

"The same one."

"And Arthur was with him?"

A faint smile appeared.

"Always."

I noticed how Holmes's face remained entirely motionless.

"The northern corner of the churchyard?"

Pike nodded.

"Yes."

There was silence again. The wind moved the branches above us. Holmes looked at the old man.

"It may have been that knowledge which cost you your position."

For the first time Pike seemed genuinely surprised. Then he smiled. An old, tired smile.

"Perhaps."

He shrugged.

"Perhaps not."

His gaze grew distant again.

"But there were some things one was not supposed to know too much about in those days."

Holmes nodded. It was as though both men understood that the rest was unnecessary. Holmes took out a silver coin and placed it upon the garden table. Pike looked down at it. Then he nodded in acknowledgment.

"Thank you."

"No," said Holmes. "It is we who must thank you."

The old man picked up the coin and let it vanish into his pocket with the same naturalness as the day before.

Then he leaned back upon the bench. The conversation was over. Holmes turned, and I followed him out through the garden. Neither of us spoke until we had gone some way down the street.

Behind us, old Ebenezer Pike still sat upon his bench beneath the apple tree, like a man who had outlived both the people and the secrets he had known. It was only when the church tower once again came into view above the rooftops that I broke the silence.

"Well?"

Holmes looked toward the road that led back to Ashcombe Hall.

"Well, what, Watson?"

"Was that the final piece?"

For a moment he looked almost satisfied.

"Yes."

"So now you know why Arthur goes to the churchyard?"

"Yes."

"And who Mary Collins was?"

"Yes."

I waited.

"Will you tell me, then?"

Holmes smiled.

"Not yet."

He looked up toward the distant silhouette of Ashcombe Hall.

"The family deserves to hear the story first."

And with those words he quickened his pace slightly as we continued back toward the estate, where the past at last waited to be told.

On the road back to Ashcombe Hall, Holmes walked with his hands clasped behind his back and at a pace somewhat quicker than usual. I had seen it many times before. It was not the restless stride that accompanied an unsolved problem, but the calm, purposeful movement of a man who had found the answer he sought. Shortly afterward we entered the avenue, and Ashcombe Hall lay plainly before us. The old buildings rose above the trees, and smoke drifted peacefully from the chimneys. Seen from a distance, the place appeared entirely untouched by the secrets that had survived generations of men and women.

Holmes regarded it for a long time.

"Watson. Would you be so kind as to ask the family to assemble after dinner?"

"Of course."

He nodded with satisfaction.

"I believe the time has come to tell the story."

A thoughtful expression passed over his face. After that he said no more.

The Story Revealed

After dinner, the entire family assembled in the great drawing room. Coffee was served, and the servants withdrew discreetly while dusk slowly settled outside. The curtains had not yet been drawn, and the last remnants of daylight mingled with the lamplight and the flames from the fireplace. An atmosphere of expectation filled the room, and no one made any attempt to conceal it. Everyone knew that Holmes had found something. The only question was what.

I noticed the Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe in particular. She sat, as usual, upright and dignified in her chair, but she seemed quieter than on the previous days. Her hands lay folded in her lap, and several times her gaze appeared to vanish into thoughts to which none of the rest of us had access.

Holmes allowed the silence to gather for a moment before he rose. He took his place by the fireplace with his back to the flames and let his gaze move over those assembled.

"The pieces have fallen into place," he began calmly, "in a manner which almost surprised even me."

No one spoke.

"I can reassure you all at once that there is no crime involved."

I immediately noticed the relief that spread through the room. It was not dramatic, but it was unmistakable. Shoulders lowered. Glances met. Perhaps several of them had feared something worse. But Holmes continued almost immediately.

"There is, rather, a secret."

His voice remained calm.

"A secret which has survived the people who created it."

The silence returned.

"My investigation began in the churchyard. It soon seemed to me that something was not right. The dog did indeed visit the same place every week, but not necessarily the grave everyone believed. That led me to the old maps of the churchyard, to the placement of the gravestones, and to the memories of both the present gravedigger and his predecessor."

He paused briefly.

"Slowly, a story began to take shape."

His gaze drifted toward the old family portraits upon the walls.

"A story that began more than forty years ago."

He considered.

"Yes, perhaps closer to fifty."

No one interrupted him.

"On this estate there once worked a young maidservant named Mary Collins."

At the name I saw the Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe lower her eyes. It was a small movement. But Holmes registered it. Nevertheless, he continued without any change in his voice.

"Mary Collins bore a child outside marriage."

This time the silence deepened further. I could hear the clock ticking upon the mantel.

"When Watson and I examined the parish registers with the rector, we found the entry. It was remarkable chiefly for containing almost no information."

He looked around at the family.

"The child's father was not named."

No one spoke. Then the dowager's voice was heard. It was so low that we all involuntarily turned toward her.

"It was many years ago."

She swallowed once.

"You must understand..."

For the first time she seemed to struggle with the words.

"Things were different then."

Holmes nodded respectfully.

"Yes."

There was no condemnation in his reply. Only understanding. He continued.

"Mary Collins died during the epidemic that struck the district at that time."

The dowager closed her eyes for a moment.

"And tragically, the child died as well."

Holmes looked down at his notes.

"So close together that they were both buried on the same day."

He raised his eyes again.

"In the churchyard. In the northeastern corner."

His voice softened.

"A modest grave. A simple stone. No family plot. No grandeur. No attention."

The dowager sat quite still.

"I remember her well."

She now spoke without looking at any of us.

"It was dreadful."

A tremor entered her voice.

"So many died in those years."

She fell silent again. Holmes allowed her the silence. Then he continued.

"But the years passed."

He turned toward the squire.

"And then came the storm."

Recognition appeared at once in the faces of several members of the family.

"The storm that brought down the trees," said Holmes, "and destroyed a large part of the churchyard."

"Yes," said Mr. Ashcombe. "I remember it clearly."

"During the restoration, the graves were moved."

Holmes allowed the words to settle.

"Several headstones came to stand in different places than before."

He looked toward the son.

"And therefore, the churchyard as it appears today is not identical with the churchyard that existed before the storm."

Edward leaned forward. Understanding was slowly beginning to dawn.

"So..."

He looked from Holmes to his father.

"So, the grave where Arthur lies..."

He stopped.

"You cannot mean..."

Holmes nodded.

"Yes."

"It is not Samuel Pritchard's grave he visits."

Around the room I saw surprise spread from face to face. Yet at the same time I could sense that Holmes had not yet reached the most important part of his explanation. It seemed to me that only now had he arrived at the point where the true heart of the story began. Holmes let his gaze move around among those gathered before he continued.

"Mary Collins's gravestone still exists."

Several looked up in surprise.

"It was not destroyed. It was merely removed."

He placed his hands behind his back.

"Watson and I found it among a number of other old stones along the outer wall of the churchyard. Stones from graves that over the years had been abandoned, forgotten, or moved. But although the stone was moved, the ground itself was not. By means of the old maps I was able to establish the original position of the grave."

He looked toward the squire.

"And that is precisely where Arthur lies."

There was silence.

"Not by the headstone. Not by Samuel Pritchard's grave."

Holmes slowly shook his head.

"But on the spot where Mary Collins and her child were originally buried."

Edward Ashcombe leaned forward.

"But why?"

The question came almost spontaneously.

"If it truly is her grave, why does he go there? He never knew her."

He shook his head.

"That was long before his time."

"Yes," said Holmes.

"Why does he go there?" continued Edward. "He cannot know the story."

"No."

Holmes's voice grew softer.

"He cannot."

There was something almost melancholy in his tone now.

"And here the explanation perhaps becomes more delicate."

He turned toward the Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe. She had already taken out her handkerchief. It was as though she knew what was now to be said. Holmes met her gaze.

"Your late husband visited this grave throughout his life."

The dowager closed her eyes. For a long moment she said nothing. Then she slowly nodded.

"Yes."

The word was scarcely audible. She raised the handkerchief to her eyes.

"I knew there was something."

Her voice faltered for a moment.

"He was never quite the same afterward."

No one interrupted her. Even the fire in the grate seemed to crackle more softly. Holmes continued in the same calm voice.

"Every Tuesday he left the estate and walked to the churchyard."

His gaze rested for a moment upon Arthur, who lay before the fireplace.

"In the last many years of his life, Arthur accompanied him."

He paused briefly.

"He was young then."

He looked around at the family.

"Week after week."

His voice was almost narrative now.

"The same road. The same hour. The same route."

The squire's wife looked thoughtfully at the dog.

"So Arthur visits the grave."

Holmes slowly shook his head.

"No."

Several looked up in surprise.

Arthur's Journey

"Arthur does not visit the grave."

He did not point to the dog, but his eyes sought him.

"Arthur follows his old route."

There was silence.

"He follows his old master."

No one spoke.

"He does exactly what he has done all his life."

Holmes's gaze now rested upon the old borzoi.

"He merely waits for a man who no longer comes."

His voice became almost inaudible.

"And so he must make the journey alone."

No one moved. No one wished to break the silence.

I looked at Arthur. The old dog lay peacefully before the fire, entirely unaware of the attention he had drawn. He was not asleep. His eyes were half open, and he seemed merely to be enjoying the warmth of the flames.

At last the squire slowly nodded.

"Then we understand."

His voice was subdued.

Beside him his wife nodded as well.

"Yes."

He looked toward his mother.

"It is a sorrowful story."

For a moment he hesitated.

"And surely not an easy one to relive."

The dowager did not answer. Her hand still rested upon the handkerchief. But she nodded very faintly. Nothing more was needed.

Later that same evening the family took leave of us. There were no great outbursts of feeling. No dramatic revelations. Only an old secret that had at last been allowed to step into the light.

As we sat in the carriage on the way to the station, I turned and looked back toward Ashcombe Hall. Night had settled over the estate. Only a single window remained lit. It was in the little dower house. The Dowager Mrs. Ashcombe's window. I followed the light with my eyes until it disappeared behind the trees.

"You are thinking of the dog, Watson," said Holmes suddenly.

"Yes."

He nodded. For a moment he sat in silence.

"Most people would say that Arthur sought the dead."

I looked at him questioningly.

"But he did not."

The carriage rolled onward through the darkness.

"He never searched for the dead."

Holmes looked out through the window.

"He searched for the living man who once walked at his side."

And while the rhythmic sound of the wheels mingled with the stillness of the night, I thought that perhaps there is no greater loyalty than that which endures long after its purpose has vanished. Arthur had not understood the secret, the shame, or the sorrow. He had simply remembered a Tuesday walk with his master. And through all those years, that had been enough to keep the past alive.

Epilogue

In the weeks that followed, the case of Arthur and Ashcombe Hall gradually receded into the background, as so many of Holmes's less celebrated investigations tended to do. It produced no newspaper headlines. No criminal was led away in handcuffs. No sensation was discussed in

London's clubs or reported in the great daily papers. And yet I must confess that my thoughts returned more than once to the old borzoi and the quiet churchyard in the village.

Perhaps it was because the case had, in its own modest way, opened a window onto something that Holmes often pointed out but which was seldom mentioned in the famous criminal investigations. Namely, how powerfully the past can continue to shape human lives long after the people who created it are gone.

Several weeks after our return, Holmes received a letter bearing the seal of Ashcombe Hall. I remember that he read it through in silence at the breakfast table before, with a faint smile, handing it across to me.

"You may find this of interest, Watson."

The letter was written by Mr. Ashcombe. He began by thanking Holmes for our visit. Not merely because the mystery surrounding Arthur had at last been explained, but because we had shed light upon a part of the family's history that had nearly been lost. He wrote that it was hardly the portion of the family's past one would choose to highlight in genealogies or recount proudly to visitors, but that it was nevertheless part of the truth. And, as he expressed it, the truth was often more important than pride.

He went on to explain that, after many conversations, the family had reached two decisions.

The first concerned Arthur.

The old dog continued to grow restless every Tuesday morning. Just as before, he rose at the same hour and made for the door with the same quiet determination. The family had therefore decided that no one would any longer attempt to prevent him from following his old habit. On the contrary, a member of the family would accompany him.

"Every Tuesday," wrote Mr. Ashcombe, "for as long as Arthur wishes to make the journey, and for as long as he remains with us."

He added that it seemed to them a modest effort compared with the loyalty the dog had shown throughout an entire lifetime.

When I reached that sentence, I laid the letter aside for a moment. I remember that Holmes sat with his eyes closed in his armchair, as though he already knew the remainder of its contents.

"A sensible decision," he remarked without opening his eyes.

And for once I could not have agreed more.

The second decision concerned Mary Collins and her son Thomas.

The old grave had been traced. The stone, which for years had stood forgotten among other discarded headstones along the churchyard wall, had been recovered and cleaned. Moss and earth had been removed, and the nearly erased lettering had been restored so that the names could once again be read.

Mr. Ashcombe wrote that the family had discussed the matter at length. They had considered returning the stone to its original position, but after the destruction caused by the storm and the many alterations to the churchyard, no one could any longer identify the precise location with certainty. Moreover, others now rested there.

Instead, the family had reached a different decision.

The stone was to be placed beside the family plot itself. There, where generations of the Ashcombe family already rested.

The explanation occupied only a few lines.

"They may have been forgotten by history, but they were never without connection to the family."

I read the sentence several times.

When I reached the end of the letter, I lowered the paper and looked across at Holmes. He sat, as usual, in his armchair with his pipe between his fingers. Bluish smoke drifted slowly toward the ceiling while he stared into the flames with that distant expression which so often followed the conclusion of a case.

"It seems to me, Holmes," I said, "that it is a perfectly reasonable decision."

He nodded.

"Good for the family."

A faint smile appeared upon his face.

"No, Watson."

"Good for the dog."

He said nothing more.

When I look back upon this case today, it seems to me that it taught me something which neither parish records, gravestones, nor old rumors could have taught me alone.

People often spend much of their lives trying to conceal their mistakes, their sorrows, and their shame. Sometimes they almost succeed. The years pass. Witnesses die. Documents disappear. Stories become rumors, and rumors become silence.

But in this case, it was not the parish records that preserved the truth. It was not the old gravestones. It was not even the people who still remembered.

It was an old dog.

A dog who, week after week, continued along the same path his master had once taught him.

When I think of Arthur, I still see him upon his Tuesday walk. The old borzoi moves calmly through the village, past the church and up the path into the churchyard. He follows the familiar route without hesitation, just as he has done countless times before, until he reaches the place where his master once used to stop.

Not because the dog remembers the past as human beings do.

But because he never learned how to forget.

And perhaps that is precisely why a dog's loyalty so often outlives human secrets.

The Scented Honey

It was one of those days which might easily have passed unnoticed, had it not been for the state of my friend's mind.

A quiet morning lay over Baker Street, where a thin grey haze rested like a veil upon the rooftops of London. The traffic outside moved in its familiar rhythm, steady and unremarkable, and there was about it all that peculiar sense of order which I have often associated with the city on such occasions.

I was seated, as was my habit, by the window with a cup of tea that still retained its warmth. Opposite me, at the table, sat Holmes, absorbed in the morning papers — a sight so familiar that it scarcely merited remark.

Yet there was something about him that morning which arrested my attention.

It was not agitation, nor anything so overt, but rather a subtle restlessness, revealed in small, repeated motions. He lit his pipe, drew upon it once or twice, and set it aside with no apparent interest. Moments later, he took it up again, as though he had forgotten his own action, and repeated the gesture with almost mechanical precision.

The Morning Papers

The newspaper, which seldom failed to command his full concentration, appeared equally unable to hold him. He read a passage, paused abruptly, allowed his gaze to return over the column, and then moved on to another article, from which he presently emitted a short exclamation of suppressed irritation.

It was this quiet dissatisfaction which stirred my curiosity. For when Holmes grew impatient with the trivial, it was often because his mind sought something which it could not find.

I set down my cup and regarded him for a moment in silence before speaking.

"Has anything of interest occurred, Holmes?" I asked, as lightly as I could. "You appear unusually preoccupied this morning."

He did not reply at once, but lowered the paper slightly, as though the question must first find its place among his thoughts. Then he gave a short, almost dismissive sigh and folded the paper with a certain impatience.

"Preoccupied?" he repeated. "On the contrary, Watson — I find myself compelled to attend to matters which scarcely deserve the effort."

He tapped the paper lightly.

"Explanations which explain nothing. Alarm over the condition of the countryside, failing yields, disturbances in agricultural production — and each article more confident than the last."

"I should have thought such matters of some importance," I ventured.

"Of the greatest importance," he replied sharply. "Which is precisely why they are treated with such lamentable carelessness."

He leaned back slightly.

"Causes are assigned where none have been established, and the true conditions are entirely overlooked. Industrial change, Watson — it alters not only the city, but the land which surrounds it. Yet it is all presented as isolated incidents, as though nature herself had taken to caprice."

He shook his head faintly.

"It is not ignorance that troubles me most," he added after a pause. "That may be remedied. It is the confidence with which one is mistaken."

I could not help but smile slightly.

"So, you believe the newspapers are mistaken?"

"They do more than that," he replied dryly. "They teach others to do the same. And once an erroneous explanation has taken root, it becomes far more difficult to eradicate than the problem itself."

His gaze drifted toward the window, where the grey light still lay evenly across the street.

"People observe something they do not understand," he continued more calmly, "and instead of examining it, they seize upon the first explanation that appears convenient."

He turned slightly toward me again.

"It is a habit, Watson, which rarely leads to anything but misunderstanding."

Our conversation was interrupted by a gentle knock at the door, whereupon Mrs. Hudson entered with a fresh tray of tea. Her presence, as always, brought with it a quiet sense of order that stood in mild contrast to Holmes's recent dissatisfaction.

"Your tea, gentlemen," she said kindly, setting the tray down with her usual care.

"Thank you, Mrs. Hudson," I replied, rising slightly, while Holmes acknowledged her with a brief inclination of the head, though without entirely relinquishing his thoughts.

She poured the tea and adjusted the cups with a practiced hand before withdrawing once more with a polite nod.

For a moment, silence settled over the room, broken only by the soft clink of porcelain as I reached for my cup. Holmes did the same, yet left his untouched before him, his gaze briefly following the door as it closed behind her.

"It is precisely there that it begins," he said suddenly, taking up the newspaper once more. "These explanations make their way from the columns into the common mind. What begins as a loose conjecture soon becomes an accepted truth."

He tapped the paper lightly.

"And once it has taken hold, every observation is bent to fit it. One no longer sees what is—but what one has been told ought to be seen."

The Beekeeper

I had scarcely time to respond before the knock came again, this time somewhat more firmly.

"Come in," said Holmes shortly.

Mrs. Hudson entered once more, now with a more formal expression.

"I beg your pardon for the interruption, Mr. Holmes," she said, "but there is a gentleman who wishes to speak with you. He says it concerns a matter of some urgency."

Holmes laid aside the paper with a movement that betrayed immediate interest.

"Then we must not keep him waiting," he replied calmly. "Be so good as to show him in, Mrs. Hudson."

She nodded and withdrew, and in the brief moment that followed I could not fail to observe the change in my friend. His earlier irritation had not vanished, but had assumed a more focused form, as though it had at last found a suitable object.

"Another example, Watson," he remarked quietly, adjusting himself in his chair. "Let us see whether, in this instance, it is reality—or the explanation—which has erred."

The door opened once more.

Mrs. Hudson stepped aside to admit the visitor.

The man who entered bore at once the mark of belonging to a world far removed from the ordered confines of Baker Street. His clothing was serviceable rather than refined—a heavy coat that had weathered its share of wind and rain, and boots still bearing traces of earth not yet wholly relinquished. There was a certain weight about him, not merely in appearance, but in the manner in which he moved, like a man more accustomed to open fields than to enclosed rooms.

He paused briefly near the door, as though collecting himself, before advancing a step further.

Even before he spoke, I found myself drawing certain conclusions. His hands, which he clasped together for a moment, were rough and darkened by labour—but not in the manner of a tradesman of the city. There was a uniformity to the wear, as though it arose from repeated, steady work rather than from tools or machinery.

I also became aware of a faint yet distinct scent accompanying him into the room. It was not unpleasant—on the contrary, there was something

warm and almost sweet about it. A trace of smoke, mingled with wax, and something which I soon recognised as honey.

I cast a discreet glance toward Holmes, hoping to judge whether my observations were wholly misplaced, but he appeared not yet to have fixed upon anything in particular. He had risen, as courtesy required, and now regarded the man with his usual composed attention.

"You wished to consult me," said Holmes kindly, indicating a chair.

"Yes, sir," the man replied, taking his seat somewhat heavily, as though burdened by more than his own weight. "My name is Carter. I am a beekeeper... and I fear that someone has been interfering with my hives."

I could not help but straighten slightly in my chair. My earlier deductions appeared confirmed, and I confess to a moment's quiet satisfaction at having reached the correct conclusion before the matter had even been laid out.

Holmes inclined his head slowly.

"That is a serious assertion, Mr. Carter," he said calmly. "Pray be so good as to explain."

Mr. Carter drew a deep breath, like a man who had long carried a concern and now at last found occasion to express it.

"It began some weeks ago," he said. "At first, I thought little of it. Honey may vary from season to season. But this—" he shook his head—"this is something else entirely."

Holmes leaned slightly forward, without interrupting.

"The taste is wrong," Carter continued. "Not bad, you understand—but unfamiliar. As though it does not belong. And the consistency..." He searched for the words. "It does not behave as it should. It sets differently. Crystallites too quickly in some places, not at all in others. And the color—" he lifted his hand in a gesture of resignation—"it is darker. Heavier to look at."

I noticed how Holmes's gaze shifted briefly—not toward the man, but inward, as though he were already assembling these details.

"And you believe this to be the result of outside interference?" he asked quietly.

"I have no doubt of it," Carter replied with a firmness that left little room for contradiction. "There are people nearby who do not look kindly upon my enterprise. One in particular." He hesitated for a moment, then continued: "Another beekeeper. We have had our disagreements over who holds the right to keep bees there. My claim is inherited from my great-grandfather, who was the first beekeeper in the area. I am the fourth generation, and this has never been questioned by the other neighbors, but he has rejected my claim and demanded visible proof. I have none, as my great-grandfather's house can no longer be located. It has most likely been lost over the course of the many years."

Holmes listened, yet still said nothing.

"He has land adjoining mine," Carter went on. "And I have seen signs... small things, perhaps, but enough to raise suspicion. There are areas where the vegetation appears altered. I am convinced he has sprayed something—or poured something out—that is affecting my bees."

He leaned forward.

"I do not want conjecture, Mr. Holmes. I want proof."

There was a brief silence.

"Have you brought anything to illustrate the difference?" Holmes asked at last.

Carter nodded quickly and bent to retrieve a small bag he had brought with him. With care, he produced two small jars and set them upon the table between us.

"Here," he said. "The one on the left is as it should be. And the one on the right..." He left the sentence unfinished.

I leaned forward to examine them. Even without close inspection, the difference was evident. One was lighter, almost golden in clarity, while the other bore a darker hue and appeared denser, as though concealing something within its depth.

Holmes extended his hand but did not yet touch them. His gaze moved from one to the other, and I observed how his earlier irritation had now entirely vanished, replaced by a quiet, concentrated attention.

"And this occurs in all your hives?" he asked, without looking up.

"No..." Carter replied, with slight hesitation. "Not all."

Holmes's hand paused.

"Only some of them," Carter added. "That is what makes it so strange."

Holmes lifted his gaze and regarded him calmly.

"Strange," he repeated softly.

I could not at that moment determine whether he found the matter more or less mysterious by this information—but I noted that he allowed his hand to rest upon the table, as though some important element had just fallen into place.

The Honey Samples

Holmes drew the two jars toward him and opened one with an unhurried movement. Holding it up to the light, he turned it slightly between his fingers, studying its color as though even the smallest nuance held significance. Then he raised it to his nose and inhaled briefly, before taking the smallest trace upon his fingertip and tasting it.

He said nothing.

Instead, he reached for the second jar and repeated the process, pausing slightly longer, as though the difference required closer consideration. I observed how his gaze lingered upon the surface, where the beginnings of crystallization could be discerned, and how he allowed his finger to follow the texture before tasting once more.

"When did this begin?" he asked quietly, still without looking up.

"As I said, a few weeks ago," Carter replied. "It came on gradually, but now there can be no doubt."

Holmes inclined his head slightly.

"And the bees themselves," he continued, "have you observed any change in their behaviour? Are they more agitated? Aggressive, perhaps?"

Carter shook his head.

"No, not in that way. But... some of them behave differently. They do not fly quite as they used to. I cannot explain it, but one notices such things when one has worked with them long enough."

Holmes replaced the lids and set the jars aside. For a moment he remained silent, and the stillness in the room took on a different character—not merely a pause, but a sign that his thoughts were now moving with purpose.

I had seen this many times before.

The earlier restlessness had vanished. In its place was a complete stillness, as though the world around him had momentarily receded while he arranged the impressions before him.

“It is curious,” I said.

Holmes looked up, and there was now a clarity in his eyes which had not been present earlier that morning. “No, Watson,” he replied calmly. “It is not.”

He turned to Carter. “If you are agreeable, it will be necessary that we examine your hives in person.”

Carter straightened at once. “Of course. When may you come?”

Holmes glanced briefly toward the window. “This afternoon,” he said. “There is no reason to delay.”

The Journey to Hampstead

We left Baker Street shortly after midday and drove northward in one of the cabs Holmes preferred when a case required more quiet than haste. The weather had altered little since the morning; the grey sky still lay evenly over the city, yet without oppression, as though it merely softened the light rather than diminishing it.

The traffic remained dense in the first streets, and we passed through the familiar stream of carriages and pedestrians, the rhythm of which I had long since come to know. The sound of wheels upon the cobbles, mingled with brief exchanges between drivers and passersby, formed a background that was, in its uniformity, almost soothing.

As we drew farther from the centre, however, this current began to loosen. The distance between the carriages increased, and the tightly packed rows of houses gradually gave way to lower buildings, small front gardens, and open stretches where the eye might rest more freely. It was

no abrupt transition, but rather a gradual yielding, as though the city itself were relinquishing its hold and surrendering us to another pace.

Even the air seemed to change, though I could not have said precisely how. It was clearer, perhaps—or merely less burdened by the inevitable influence of close habitation. Here and there, trees appeared along the road, and occasional glimpses of green broke the otherwise regular aspect of the town.

I glanced at Holmes.

He sat beside me, leaning back, his hands loosely folded in his lap. His eyes were neither closed nor directed at any particular object. It was not the gaze he employed when observing with his customary acuity; rather, it seemed he had already turned inward, as though the impressions we had gathered were being silently arranged and weighed.

I had often seen him in such a state, and I knew it was seldom wise to interrupt it. Though he appeared not to notice the passing scene, I was convinced that he was at that moment more deeply engaged with the matter than at any earlier point that day.

I leaned back and allowed the carriage to bear us onward in silence, while the city slowly receded behind us.

After a drive of nearly an hour, we reached the more open country about Hampstead. Here the landscape spread in a quiet irregularity, where small fields and gardens lay side by side, divided by low hedges and narrow paths that seldom bore signs of traffic. It was not the countryside in its full extent, but rather a threshold where the city might still be glimpsed in the distance, without asserting itself.

I observed that in several places along the road there stood beehives—some singly, others gathered in small groups—as though the area had quietly developed its own modest circle of apiarists. The hum of the bees was not intrusive but lingered as a faint and steady undertone in the air, perceptible only when one paused to attend to it.

The carriage turned onto a narrower track and soon came to a halt before a simple gate, which appeared to mark the boundary of more private ground. Carter stood waiting there and stepped forward as we

alighted, his face bearing the same anxious expression we had seen in Baker Street.

"Welcome, gentlemen," he said, almost before we had taken in our surroundings. "We must go on foot from here. It is not far."

I turned to the driver.

"Be so good as to wait for us," I said. "We shall not be long."

He nodded, drew his rug more closely about him, and settled himself as we followed Carter to the gate.

He opened it with a quick movement, as though even that small delay tried his patience, and led us through. I noticed how he set off at once, without looking back, clearly intent upon bringing us to the place where his suspicions, as he believed, would be confirmed.

"It is here," he said over his shoulder. "I shall show you everything. You will see at once that something is not as it ought to be."

Holmes made no reply, but followed calmly, his pace just perceptibly slower than Carter's, as though he already preferred to let the surroundings speak before any explanation was offered.

Among the Hives

Even before we reached the hives, we were met by the sound.

It came toward us as a dense and continuous hum, filling the air without menace. On the contrary, there was something regular, almost soothing in it—a uniform motion repeating without interruption. As we approached, the sound grew stronger, and I could not refrain from pausing a moment to take in the impression.

For though the number of bees was considerable, there was nothing in their movement that suggested disorder.

They flew in every direction, and yet each seemed to know its place within the whole. There was an order to their motion not easily explained, yet unmistakably present. Every movement appeared purposeful, every return assured, as though an unseen system governed the whole.

"As you can see," Carter began quickly, stepping forward, "this is where the trouble must lie. I am convinced it has something to do with

the land over there—" he gestured toward a nearby field—"my neighbor has—"

Holmes raised a hand—not dismissively, but with a quiet authority that brought Carter to a halt.

"One moment, Mr. Carter," he said gently. "Pray allow me a little time to observe."

There was nothing unkind in his tone, and yet it admitted no continuation.

Carter withdrew slightly, though not without reluctance.

Holmes stepped to the nearest hive and stood a moment, following the bees' movement—not the individual insect, but the direction, the current in which they departed.

He moved to the next.

Here he paused only briefly, yet I observed that his gaze fixed more quickly upon something definite. He adjusted his position slightly and followed their flight again—this time along a somewhat different line.

"A difference already?" I asked quietly.

"Yes," said he. "A simple one."

He moved on.

At the third hive he remained longer.

"This one?" he asked, without turning.

"Yes," said Carter quickly. "One of the worst."

Holmes inclined his head. "We shall not follow all of them," he said quietly. "Only some."

Following the Bees

We set out across the field, halting frequently to look upward and regain the direction, which revealed itself only in fleeting glimpses.

"It is over there," said Carter, pointing toward his neighbor's land. "It corresponds exactly."

"We are still following the bees," Holmes replied.

For a short distance, the course appeared to support Carter's view.

Then Holmes stopped. His gaze lifted, and I saw him slowly alter direction. "No..."

We turned.

"That cannot be right," said Carter. "There is nothing that way."

"It is not a question of meaning," said Holmes. "Only of direction."

The trees closed about us, and the light dimmed. Where before we had glimpsed the bees, we were now compelled to listen.

Only when we stood perfectly still did the hum emerge—faint, yet unmistakable above us.

Holmes paused, listened, and adjusted our course.

We went on.

"There is nothing here," Carter said. "Bees do not behave so."

Holmes made no reply.

The hum grew stronger.

The Forgotten Orchard

Suddenly, the trees opened. Light flooded in, and before us lay a clearing—containing the remains of an old building and an abandoned orchard.

Pear trees stood heavy with fruit. Many lay upon the ground, split and already decaying. The bees were everywhere. They gathered in great numbers about the fruit, where the juices had pooled. The air was thick with a sweet, faintly fermented scent.

"There we have it," said Holmes.

He stooped and touched one of the fallen pears. "Your bees have not been interfered with," he said. "They have found something better."

His gaze moved across the trees. "Overripe fruit. A high concentration of sugar. Readily accessible."

Carter frowned. "But the honey—"

"Is different," said Holmes. "Not inferior."

He straightened. "Some colonies have discovered the source. Others have not. Hence the variation."

"Then there is no interference?"

"None," said Holmes calmly.

The Lost Homestead

Holmes approached the ruin. He moved around to the far side and came to a halt by what remained of a section of wall that might once have marked the entrance to the house. His gaze traveled upward along one side, searching, deliberate.

Between small patches of growth and crumbled remnants of brick, his eye caught upon a stone that was markedly darker and nearly intact. Holmes brushed it lightly and blew away the dust and sand from its surface, revealing that what had first appeared to be an unusual stone was in fact a rusted metal plate.

Holmes produced his knife and began to scrape at the plate, thereby uncovering shallow indentations that gradually took the form of letters.

Carter and I had drawn nearer in order to examine the ruin more closely.

"Your great-grandfather, Mr. Carter—did he bear the name Edward Ellington?" Holmes asked without lifting his gaze from the metal plate.

"That I can readily confirm," Carter replied, with a certain astonishment.

"In that case, Mr. Carter, I consider it likely that your bees have led you to the proof of your rightful claim," Holmes continued. "The bees have chosen what is most accessible and most advantageous to themselves. In this instance, they have discovered something which others, too, ought to have known."

Carter nodded slowly, as though the realization had yet to settle fully within him.

The Way Home

We sat in silence in the cab on our way back toward the city. A bee suddenly circled within the carriage. Holmes leaned forward and opened the window. After a moment, it found its way out on its own.

"It seemed to have lost its way," I remarked.

"On the contrary," said Holmes calmly.

He glanced briefly out toward the street.

"The direction does not change, Watson—only our understanding of it."

He paused briefly, then continued:

“It is the same fateful error—to take a position before one has observed.”

I said nothing. The cab continued its steady course through the city.

Epilogue

Thank you for spending your time with Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Watson, and the remarkable creatures whose paths crossed theirs in these pages.

The cases gathered in this volume represent only a small part of a much larger collection of adventures. While many readers know Holmes through stories of murder, international intrigue, and master criminals, I have always been fascinated by the quieter mysteries—those in which the behavior of animals illuminates the mysteries of human nature.

The world of *The Animal Cases* continues in Volume 2, which includes:

The Ambitious Rooster
The Dog Who Visited the Grave
The Owl of St. Bartholomew's Tower
The Cat at Number Twelve
The Scented Honey

These stories take Holmes and Watson from village churchyards and forgotten graves to ancient towers, country farms, and curious households, exploring the many ways in which loyalty, instinct, memory, and human emotion become intertwined with the lives of animals.

Beyond *The Animal Cases*, the Holmes universe also continues in *The Secret Letters*, a series of full-length novels that follows Holmes through larger and more dangerous investigations spanning Victorian Britain and beyond. These novels combine mystery, historical atmosphere, adven-

ture, and long-form character development while remaining faithful to the spirit of the original stories.

Whether you have followed Holmes for many years or have only recently discovered these adventures, I am grateful that you chose to share this journey.

There are always more mysteries waiting beyond the next street, behind the next door, or hidden within the next seemingly insignificant clue.

And as Holmes himself might remind us, the smallest detail is often the one that matters most.

Until our next case,

Alistair Croft