

THE FUTURE ENGINE by Byron Tetrick

Although my reputation as the chronicler of Sherlock Holmes's many adventures has brought me my own modest amount of fame, it has also carried a burdensome responsibility that becomes no less tedious with the passage of time. I speak not of the task of recording the minutiae of details in conversation and locale, the descriptive exposition, or of the underlying motivations of the crimes. No, if Sherlock Holmes has taught me anything, it is an appreciation of the trifles that make up the nature of our lives.

Nor do I complain of the dangers that perpetually seem to stalk Sherlock and me, sometimes one step ahead or one behind, but all too often joining us in a military lockstep waiting for us to make a miscalculation. Actually, I relish that part—God forbid my dear wife should hear me say this. My fellow veterans of the Afghan War and those who have waged the farflung battles of our expanding British Empire know of what I speak.

It is not even seeing the pale underbelly of the human race laid bare to me as, time after time, Sherlock Holmes has exposed the cruelty and greed that precipitates so many of the crimes he has investigated. As a doctor, I well know that the human condition contains good and evil, that the living body sustains the miracle and wonder of life even while cancers gnaw from within.

No, my readers, the burden—and my agony—lies in the fact that I have not been completely forthright. Astute readers may recall that many years passed between the occurrence and the publication of the case of the Speckled Band—a delay necessitated by a promise of secrecy. Often I have made reference to other cases that, for one reason or another, were locked away. But always—call it a gentleman's agreement—there was the understanding that eventually, as the circumstances warranted, all would be told. In fact, Sherlock Holmes has for some time, while not outright asking me to do

so, made it known that he desired that I faithfully record our adventures. Certainly he did not invite me along to draw upon my powers of deductive reasoning!

But here I sit, pen in hand, knowing that what I am going to write will never be seen by those who have so faithfully followed our adventures; that a case so startling and momentous in its consequences, and one in which, but for the skills of Sherlock Holmes, the future of the English people would have been disastrously affected, will be put away, and known but by the few of us who participated.

Two seemingly unconnected conversations, coincidentally occurring on the eve of the beginning of the case, set the pattern that would later bear great influence on what was to follow. I had stopped at Baker Street to pick up Sherlock Holmes for dinner at Simpson's, where Major-general Harold Thompson, who had been my commanding officer in Afghanistan, would be joining us. My wife had been feeling poorly as of late and was visiting family at the shore, leaving me to my practice by day and frequent dinners with my old friend at night. In his sitting room, Holmes had been in a rather foul mood and had not bothered to offer me a usual whiskey and soda. I shook off the chilly October drizzle from my topcoat, warming myself by the fire while I waited for him to dress himself in like manner for the relatively long ride to the Strand.

"Watson," said he, as we sat back in the cab of the landau, "I have long believed that Victorian England represents the culmination in achievement of the human race. As a people, we have tamed the continents, established good order under British laws, and begun the industrialization of the world. It would seem that all the pieces are in place, and we need only complete the proper organizing—which is what we English do best, I might add—and the British Empire should be on the cusp of a golden age."

"I quite agree," I said, and tried to add a comment myself, but it fell on deaf ears as Holmes excitedly continued.

'Then what is happening to our economy? I spent a good part of the afternoon with my banker, and all of my investments

have declined, in some instances, drastically so.” And now, the cause of his ill humor immediately became evident as Holmes began a discourse on the pitiful state of the British economy: a deep depression in agricultural prices; trade associations cornering markets and manipulating prices; shortages of resources as pricing was assumed more and more by administrators and not the free market. Holmes had seemed to acquire more knowledge of economics in one afternoon than in all his previous years, for I have never known him to show much interest in money.

“It is almost as if some malefactor is trying to ruin me financially,” he said, finally coming to a close.

I laughed. “Come, come, Holmes, you can’t be serious. Manipulating markets of the empire just to ruin you? You give your enemies too much credit. My own small portfolio isn’t doing that well either.”

“Have all of your investments declined?”

“Of course not, not all,” I answered.

“Mine have.”

Simpson’s-in-the Strand has long been a favorite of ours, and the evening soon changed moods as quickly and graciously as a forgiving wife. Holmes and General Thompson hit it off quite well, finding innumerable common interests, not the least of which was swordsmanship. Holmes seemed to have forgotten about his finances. Dinner was a superb mixed grill of wild game, served with rice from the Far East, and more than a couple of bottles of Tokay.

After dinner, sitting at a heavily carved table with comfortable leather chairs, the general laughed heartily at a witty comment of Holmes’s and then said, “Before we go any further, Mr. Holmes, please dispense with calling me General. I think we know each other well enough by now. Call me Harry.”

“General,” said Holmes, “I appreciate the offer. I find it not surprising that you would make it, having long since deduced your character. However, I honor your rank and your service too greatly.”

This brought even greater laughter from General Thompson.

“Deduced that, did you! I had quite forgotten that you are a detective by trade. What else have you deduced about me?”

A small smile crept across Holmes’s face. The battlefield was the general’s forte ... we had just entered Holmes’s.

“Oh, a few things. You arrived here in London by horseback only a few hours ago ... perhaps from your family’s estate, which is north of Manchester, say either Leeds or Bradford. You come from quite a large family—very wealthy I might add—of which you are the second-eldest son. You have been wounded at least twice in battle, although your pronounced limp is not a battle wound, but an injury you acquired in the Afghan War, nonetheless. You are a modest man for one of such heroic deeds, and you are much loved by your men—”

“Enough!” he cried. “It is all true, though I can’t speak for my men. I’d accuse Watson of priming you, but he knows naught of my personal life. Explain your magic, lest I go mad.”

“Elementary, sir, and quite simple.” Here, Holmes paused while he lit his pipe and took several deep draws. “That you only just arrived is evident by your boots, which are still soiled, though the staff of the Langham Hotel is surely mortified that it escaped their immediate attention. There is horsehair on both insteps.” Holmes leaned closer to the general’s boots. “A fine Arabian, I see. Your accent puts you from Manchester, but it is the mud on your boots that pinpoints the area as either Leeds or Bradford. That you come from wealth is evident by the cut of your uniform. Her Majesty pays her general officers well, but not enough that they can afford the finest cloth and Savile Row tailors. Firstborn sons usually assume the family business, leaving ambitious brothers to seek success and honor in the military. Watching you eat, I could see the influence of a large family. Even in a well-mannered one such as yours, one must not let his attention wander lest all the food be taken, eh?” laughed Holmes.

“Your right shoulder has limited movement indicating either a deep bullet wound or a poorly healed saber cut. The black mark on your cheek is powder from a pistol that was fired point-blank into your face, but misfired. Your limp is almost a hobble,

unique to those who are missing both toes. The odds of losing both in battle seem remote, thus frostbite. And where but the mountain passes of Afghanistan has the British army seen service in that type of extreme cold? Your wounds indicate that you are an officer who leads by example, fighting alongside your men.

“You wear but two medals on your chest, while yon colonel sitting three tables over is bedecked with ribbons enough to tie back the hair of all the ladies at the Lyceum. One is the Victoria Cross—England’s highest honor. The other appears to be a unit badge, probably the unit you are currently commanding. Finally, you reddened and stopped me when I started talking of your modesty and the love of your men. Of all my assertions, that is the one I am most certain of.”

A moment of embarrassed silence passed. I have always enjoyed Holmes’s theatrical displays of deduction, but this was tops. I greatly admired both of my companions, and to see them doing so splendidly together was an unexpected pleasure. General Thompson pulled out a silver case and offered us Havanas which, of course, required several minutes of sniffing, snipping, and long savoring puffs.

Finally, the general chuckled, “Have you thought of entering military service, Holmes? Intelligence could use a man with your intellect and powers of observation.”

Holmes smiled. “You do me an honor, General, but I have my hands quite full battling rogues and scallywags here in London. Besides, my habits don’t exactly lend themselves to military life; do they, Watson?” Holmes looked over at me and winked.

I nodded, and laughed politely. “No, Holmes. I can’t envision you following a military routine.”

The general’s tone turned serious as the conversation evolved into a discussion of science and the startling advancements in explosives and other weapons of war. General Thompson was privy to the latest developments; and, without divulging any secrets, he described future battlefields wrought with petrol-engined carts carrying cannons, while overhead, men in flying machines dropped explosives on the soldiers

below.

"My greatest fear," said he, "is that an enemy might develop a weapon so advanced that we would be powerless to defend against it. Warfare is such a delicate balance." Holmes had gone back to his pipe as he thoughtfully sat back and listened to the general. "You paint a vivid but bleak picture, General. A sufficiently advanced weapon in the hands of an evil genius would enable him to rule the world, would it not?"

The general nodded. "Precisely."

On that note, the hour being late, we shook hands and said our farewells. A pleasant evening, albeit troubling at its finish, but well spent, nonetheless.

Holmes suggested that I spend the night in my old room, which I gratefully accepted, sleeping late into the morning. I awoke to find Holmes dressed, smoking his morning pipe, and the remains of his breakfast congealing at the side table. He seemed chipper considering his economic plight.

"Ah, Watson. There you are. Mrs. Hudson will bring your breakfast shortly. Make haste!" He handed me an embossed vellum business card. "This arrived earlier. I have a client." That explained it. Nothing lifts Sherlock Holmes's spirits like a new case!

Holmes paced the floor, looking out the windows often as I finished breakfast. "This must be he. A fine carriage and a well-dressed gentleman stepping out," he said, returning to his humidor and repacking his pipe.

Moments later, Mrs. Hudson led the gentleman into the sitting room.

"I am Henry Babbage. You received my message, I presume," he said looking first at me and then Holmes.

Holmes ended the confusion by stepping forward and introducing himself and then me. Taking Mr. Babbage's coat and scarf, he offered coffee, and we took seats near the fire in deference to our visitor, who appeared quite chilled. He was a portly man with graying sidewhiskers that framed a fleshy face. As Holmes had already noted, he was impeccably dressed in a fine suit, set off with silk cravat and a large diamond stickpin.

"You read my note, then?" began Mr. Babbage.

"Most assuredly," responded Holmes. "You have suffered a theft and wish me to retrieve the article. No doubt you have already informed the police, and achieving no results, you have come to me."

"That's correct. Actually, two items were stolen. Where shall I start?"

Holmes arose and poured more coffee. "At the beginning, please."

"You might recognize my name, or at least my father's—Charles ... Charles Babbage."

"Why, of course!" I interjected. "He founded the Royal Astronomical Society. I have a fondness, a hobby if you will, for astronomy."

"Yes, that was he. My father was somewhat of an eccentric and an inventor. He spent most of his life and a goodly amount of the family's fortune on the development of a machine that would be able to make mathematical calculations at an extremely rapid rate. His initial attempt was partially funded by the Exchequer and was called a Difference Engine. Its original intent was to make error-free navigational tables, but my father kept redesigning it in an attempt to create a mighty engine capable of freeing mankind from the drudgery of solving mathematical equations.

"He was never able to perfect the Difference Engine and began work on an even more complex mathematical machine which he called the Analytical Engine. It contained two main parts. One part was to store all the mathematical variables of the problem and the results of the operation. The other, which my father called 'the mill,' the guts of the machine, was to process the quantities as they were fed into it, where they would again be sent back to storage or printed for use."

"And it was this Analytical Engine that was stolen?" asked Holmes, reaching for his pipe and packing it with tobacco.

"Yes. Over a year ago. It was taken from the warehouse where it had been in storage since my father's death over twenty years ago. It disappeared overnight."

Holmes walked over to the fire and retrieved an ember, placing it in his pipe, and remained standing while he sucked noisily to ignite the tobacco. "I assume that this Analytical Engine was never perfected?"

"No. Although my father even designed his own tools in an attempt to achieve the precision needed for all the thousands of machined parts, he was never able to complete his machine."

"Why do you want it back?" asked Holmes. "It is still of some value?"

Our visitor stood and walked over to one of the large windows and stared off into the morning fog as if pondering a weighty decision. He turned back toward us and began speaking emotionally. "My father was thought a fool. The scientific community called his Difference Engine, 'Babbage's Folly.'

"Mr. Holmes, my father was a genius! I studied his notes, which led me to other files that he had secreted away. Once perfected, his Analytical Engine would be capable of astounding—nay magical—feats. With it, one would be able to predict the outcome in advance of any series of events. One could define any problem using mathematical equations and feed it into the milling unit in order to find possible solutions. Do you see the potential? The power it could give you? You could predict the future ... or even more significantly, you could change the future!"

"A Future Engine," said Holmes quietly, abstractly, obviously deep in thought.

"Exactly!" cried Babbage.

"Impossible!" I scoffed.

Both men turned and faced me. I hadn't realized that I had spoken out loud.

"Impossible, Watson?" said Holmes, frowning at me. "Let me ask you this. If the wind is from the north, in what direction will you find the fallen leaf?"

I laughed. "To the south, of course."

"And if halfway down, a gust blows suddenly from the east?"

"Why, then, it would land to the southwest. I see where you're going Holmes," I said, smiling. "But what about all the

leaves in swirling winds?”

“If this Future Engine can make thousands upon thousands of calculations as our esteemed guest claims, then it could tell you where each and every one would alight, including which side was turned up,” said he, returning my smile.

At this, I confess he made me doubt my initial scorn for this incredible tale. “Mr. Babbage, if I might ask, what type of mathematics is used in these calculations?”

“Not at all, Dr. Watson. It is based on the Binomial Theorem.”

If Sherlock Holmes had been shot with a pistol, he could not have reacted more violently. His pipe dropped from his hands, spilling its contents on the carpet. His face, which is pale to begin with, went bloodless, and I thought he might faint. Instead, he kicked his pipe across the room, stamped out the smoldering ashes, and began to mutter in ever-increasing volume, “What a fool I’ve been. What a fool. I knew that my investments had been manipulated, and instead I blamed myself.”

I had risen from my chair, and I grabbed his arm. “What is it, Holmes? What’s wrong?”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong. It’s Professor Moriarty. It is he behind this theft. It is he who is trying to ruin me financially. And unless we stop him, it is he who will rule the world with the Future Engine!”

“Who is Professor Moriarty?” questioned Babbage, looking confused, and not a little taken aback by Holmes’s display of anger.

“He is the Napoleon of crime. A nefarious blackguard who controls much of what is evil in this great city. He is genius, gone awry. And ... he is a former mathematics professor who as a young man wrote a treatise on the Binomial Theorem!”

Holmes walked over and picked up his pipe, examined it minutely, and then, as if realizing that only a clear head and cool logic would prevail, he relit his pipe and calmly began to question Babbage.

“You mentioned that two items were taken.”

“Yes. Four months ago to this very day, all my father’s

personal files and scientific papers also disappeared.”

“From your home or the warehouse?”

“From my home.”

“Had you made any progress yourself on the Future Engine?”

“Some. It could tabulate to six decimal places, and I was able to compute the first thirty-two multiples of pi, but then the gears kept sticking and I could not fix it. I had not worked on it for more than a year.”

“Who knew of your progress?”

“Several people. I was quite excited at first and spoke openly about it at the Royal Astronomical Society.” “Ah-h-h ... including to a tall, thin, bald-headed man with sunken eyes and a beak-like nose.”

“Why, yes. He seemed quite interested ... and very knowledgeable.”

“You, sir, have met the vilest criminal on the planet,” said Holmes, placing his hand on Babbage’s shoulder. “Come. Take me to the scene of the thefts. Time is of the essence.”

Babbage hesitated. “It has been a year, and Scotland Yard did inspect the warehouse and my home quite thoroughly.”

Holmes shook his head. “And what did they find?”

“Well ... nothing.”

Holmes and I exchanged glances ... and a smile. “Quite so,” said he, reaching for his coat. “Let’s be off.”

The warehouse was nestled among several well-located buildings and factories in the industrial section away from the Thames. The Future Engine—the new name seemed to have stuck, for even Babbage called it that now—had been located on the upper floor centered in a large, high-ceilinged hall that surprisingly was heated to a comfortable temperature. Babbage explained that this was necessary to prevent moisture from causing the many gears to stick. The room contained very little else: a drafting board, some file cabinets, a desk placed over by one of the large, well-caulked windows, and several bins full of assorted cogs and gears. The outline of the machine was clearly delineated by the shading of the wood and the residual oils accumulated over twenty years of storage.

"It was quite large, I see," noted Holmes.

"You can see what a puzzle this was to the police. It weighed more than a ton. It took my father a week to dismantle, transport, and reassemble it twenty years ago. This floor has a separate entrance and stairway from the bottom floor, which was chained and locked, and had not been tampered with."

Holmes brought out his magnifying lens and examined the area. Then he inspected the door and lock.

"May we examine the lower floor?" he asked.

"Of course," replied Babbage and led us off, explaining as we departed that the building was owned by his family, but as their fortunes declined, they had been forced to lease the space below.

The lower level was a beehive of activity. It was leased by an importer-exporter whom Babbage trusted completely, the merchant having been a tenant for a decade.

"As you can see," commented Babbage, "this place is very busy, with no chance the theft could have occurred by day. At night, my warehouse, as well as the neighboring factories, is patrolled by a security service with bonded guards. Not an hour goes by without a check."

It did not take Holmes long before he was satisfied. Stopping at a pub, Holmes expounded. "Well, we know who, what, when, and how. The question before us now is, where—"

"Excuse me, sir," interjected Babbage. "Did you say we know, how? I'm at a loss ..."

Holmes smiled. "Sometimes I despair of the police work done by Scotland Yard. Even when they find a clue, they never place it in the context of the situation. For instance, the assumption was made that one day the machine was there, the next day it was gone. Thus it had to have disappeared that night."

"Correct," nodded Babbage.

"No. Incorrect. There were no fresh scratches—even allowing for a year's passage—near the machine's location. Yet there were several gouges in the wood that had the appearance of being twenty years old that surely dated from its original move. The Future Engine was not moved overnight; it was moved over

many nights. Each evening, one of the common laborers below would conceal himself in one of the many nooks-and-crannies, climb up through the central-heating vent—I observed the coal room and furnace were on the bottom floor, and being the summer months, not in use—and thereupon, under dim candlelight, proceed to dismantle small, interior portions of the machine. He would then return before sunrise to the floor below, hide his booty, and then mingle with his coworkers as work began that morning.”

“I visited the warehouse often. I saw nothing amiss,” said Babbage, obviously puzzled.

“But you had ceased experimentation, had you not?” “Yes, for quite some time,” he replied.

“What you saw was the shell of your machine ... more so every day. Until finally, it was an easy matter to dismantle the remaining structure. Most of the mass was in the gears and entrails of the machine. The thieves had only to evade the watchman once on his rounds, place the frame on a dogcart, and be off. I inspected the lock on the lower floor, and it had been picked before.”

“I must say, Holmes, I am impressed,” said Babbage, lifting his glass in a salute.

A search of Babbage’s home revealed nothing further, or at least nothing that Holmes shared with us. We left Babbage at his house with arrangements to meet in two days, Holmes confident that by then he would have more information, perhaps even the location of the Future Engine. On the ride back to Baker Street, I asked him how he could be so certain.

“What do we know about the Future Engine, Watson?”

“It’s large, heavy, complicated, and ... apparently, now that Moriarty has tinkered with it, capable of predicting the future, or perhaps determining the future,” I replied.

“Oh, we know much more,” said he. “It must be kept as dry as possible—no easy task in London. Thus it is probably in a warehouse much like Babbage’s. We know it is here in London because Moriarty must have quick access to the financial markets and news centers to properly and timely direct his

infernal machine. We can gather that he had need of advanced machining in order to correct the original deficiencies of its gears. Lastly, because it is potentially the most valuable—and dangerous—machine in the world, it is well guarded, perhaps so much so that that in itself will draw our attention to it.”

Though I had my practice to attend to, I offered to aid Holmes in his efforts. He assigned me a reconnoiter of the machining and tooling shops, cautioning me to be careful. We departed, agreeing to meet in two days. I doubted whether Sherlock Holmes would sleep.

Henry Babbage was already present in Holmes’s sitting room when I arrived two days hence, at precisely seven p.m. Holmes directed me to fix myself a whisky and soda. He appeared to be quite pleased with himself; so I assumed he had made good progress, which I had not, and which I reported to him after taking a long, hard swallow of my drink.

“No matter, Watson,” he said, waving with his hand as if my considerable efforts had been of no consequence. “I followed a different track to the same station. It’s not like Moriarty to use legitimate tradesmen in the first place. I checked in with our friends at the Yard and found out which forgers had been released from Newgate or Dartmoor prison in the last year. One in particular, Willie Stokes, had been released, found employment at a tooling shop, and later disappeared with several hundred pounds worth of equipment. It took no great effort to find him.”

“He led you to my machine, then?” asked Babbage.

“No ...” replied Holmes. “But he got me in the right area. I checked with some of the leasing agencies, but could not come up with any likely locations. Then I realized that with an undertaking of this import, and considering his considerable ill-gotten wealth, Moriarty would buy his own building, the better to control access. A quick check of records located several possibilities which, at least in a very cursory manner, I inspected from inside a hansom.”

Holmes retrieved his cherrywood from the rack on the sidetable and carefully went through his routine of lighting up,

while we waited in suspense.

"I have found it," he said, without further delay. "It is located north of the Broad Street and Liverpool Street Stations, near Tillrey. It is a small, secluded warehouse abutting a rail line with only one street dead-ending into it. A telegraph line runs into the upper level, and guards—rather I should say, thugs—patrol diligently outside."

"And the plan, Holmes?" I asked, anxious to start the chase.

"Tomorrow at midday, Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard will gather his forces at the Broad Street Station." Turning to Babbage, he added, "By this time tomorrow, sir, you should see the return of your property." Turning back to me, he added with a smile, "And Moriarty will be behind bars."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Babbage, rising from his chair and going for his coat. "You will contact me when it is over, then?"

"Most assuredly," replied Holmes. Holmes and I completed our plans over a simple meal, and soon after, I excused myself.

As I put on my hat to leave, Holmes admonished me, "Your service revolver, Watson. Don't forget to bring your revolver."

The forces were assembled. Lestrade seemed as anxious as Holmes to capture Moriarty, for he, too, knew of the web of crime that centered about this evil genius. Lestrade deployed a group of officers along the rail line to approach the warehouse from the rear, while we joined the main force in the attack from the front. I doubted anyone could get through the net, so tightly was it woven with uniformed policemen.

As we raced up the street in Lestrade's police wagon, I heard Holmes utter a curse, and following his gaze, I saw that the warehouse appeared abandoned. Holmes leaped from the wagon and dashed into the building, heedless of being at the forefront, determined to find Moriarty. I raced after him, my pistol at the ready.

I found Holmes on the upper level, standing next to a rectangular-shaped, oily outline where once the Future Engine sat. Rough, fresh scratches trailed across the room to where a hoist swung slowly in the breeze from an open loft.

"Once again, I misjudged my adversary," said he, solemnly.

“You may return with Lestrade. I’m going to look for clues. But do come tonight, Watson. We must make plans.”

I expected a dejected Sherlock Holmes when I arrived that evening. Instead, I found him buoyant and energetic. I questioned his lighthearted mood.

“This afternoon was only a setback, not a defeat,” he remarked. “Once in a while I need that to keep me sharp. It seemed so easy to locate the warehouse that I didn’t complete the logical process of defining all the possibilities.”

“What did you omit, old chap, that you had not already considered?”

“Why, the most elemental thing, Watson. The Future Engine! Moriarty knew in advance that I would locate the warehouse. He knew to the day, if not the hour, when I would put the puzzle together, and he planned accordingly. That was why the hoist was in position; he knows me too well. No doubt he expends much of the Future Engine’s calculating capabilities for the sole purpose of defeating me— his greatest threat.”

I threw up my hands in frustration. “We’re helpless. If he can predict our every move, how can we hope—”

“By doing the unexpected,” interjected Holmes. “By moving fast and instinctively, instead of slow and deliberately.”

From below came the sound of high voices, laughter, shouts, the clatter of dozens of footsteps on the stairs. Above it all we could hear the cries of Mrs. Hudson.

“Hark!” yelled Holmes, a smile on his face. “The sound of random variables.”

Tumbling into the room came the most bedraggled, motley, filthy, boisterous, uncouth collection of street urchins either side of the Thames—the Baker Street Irregulars!

They lined themselves up in some primordial pecking order through a series of shoves, curses and grunts. They all doffed their caps and stood at what one might call “attention,” other than the fact that one lad scratched his rump, another his privates, and they all craned their necks, rotating ‘round the room to see what to their eyes must seem a wizard’s den.

The tallest lad stepped forward. “ ‘Ere we be, Mr. ‘Olmes; ‘Ow

may we be of service?"

"Gather around boys. I have a job for you," said Holmes, motioning them to the small table where a large tray of crumpets and biscuits lay invitingly.

I may have blinked twice. The food disappeared.

Holmes proceeded to describe the Future Engine, going into great detail about its size, weight, and structure.

"I'm not going to tell you where to look; that's entirely up to you," said he. "I am going to caution you though, it will be guarded by dangerous men. So be careful. And come immediately back to me once you find something. Immediately!"

Holmes looked at the leader. "Line your boys ... er, men up."

"Atten-shun!" His yell was followed by another shoving match, though it appeared to align the boys in the same order as before.

Going down the row, Holmes placed a half-guinea in each hand. To the last, a ragamuffin no older than seven, he placed an extra shilling, whispering, "Buy yourself a warm coat, boy. Will you do that?" A nod and a smile.

"A fiver for the one who finds it. Now scat!"

Quickly, but oh so noisily, the Baker Street Irregulars ran out of the room and disappeared into the streets of London.

I stayed but a short while longer. Holmes outlined his new plan and assigned me a few tasks, but he seemed to have his most faith in the boys, explaining that Moriarty was at his most vulnerable now, what with his hurried escape last night.

The next few days were quite busy, not only with my practice, but also in the service of Sherlock Holmes as we continued our search for the Future Engine. Our nights had gotten progressively later, and I had taken up temporary quarters in my old room.

On the fifth evening following our unsuccessful raid on the warehouse, Tom, the young leader of the Baker Street Irregulars, came bursting through the door of the apartment. "Bobby's dead!" he cried.

"Hold on, lad," said Holmes, leading him to a chair and giving

him a cup of hot tea. "Now, tell us what happened." " 'Is throat was cut through like a slaughtered 'og, 'e was; like a bloody 'og. Then tossed in the Thames."

Poor Tom looked more like the boy he was than the leader of a gang. His eyes were red, and he struggled to show no tears.

"I'm sorry, Tom," said Holmes, placing a hand on his shoulder. "We'll catch them and see them hanged. Young Bobby must have stumbled onto the Future Engine. Had he reported anything?"

" 'E was assigned the warehouses and buildings south of the river, and at our last meeting 'e said 'e 'ad worked 'is way from the Wapping Wharf to almost Waterloo Bridge." "Then it's off to Dockland and Waterloo Bridge," said Holmes, rising from his chair. "It must be near."

"What of Lestrade and the police," I interjected.

"No time, Watson. Remember, we must act quickly now." Walking briskly to his desk, he scribbled a note and handed it to Tom. "Tom, you deliver this to Scotland Yard and then gather the Irregulars and meet us at Waterloo Bridge. I expect to have another errand for you."

As the lad rushed off, Holmes turned to me and said vehemently, "A deed most foul, Watson. A cowardly crime that shall not go unpunished. I now make a vow: I shall not rest until that blight on the earth, that child killer, Moriarty, has been removed from the realm of the living and dispatched to the everlasting torments of hell!"

Angrily, his hands shaking, he inspected the chambers of his pistol which he then placed in his coat.

"Let us see if I can honor my vow this very night, Watson!"

He

Holmes had the hansom drop us across the river several streets from the bridge, and under cover of darkness and a developing shroud of fog, we began our search. It seemed an impossible task as we entered an area of darkened warehouses, slop shops, and boarding houses. The only lights—there were no gaslights—came from the numerous taverns and pubs.

Holmes, too, must have realized how difficult our chore, for

he said, "I think we shall have to flush our prey, Watson."

We reached a broad street lined with warehouses just off the south bank, which during daylight was probably packed with carts and drays, but now loomed ominous and foreboding. On the corner we stopped outside a bawdyhouse and tavern from which curses, shouts, laughter and song spilled forth like an opera house gone mad.

"Make a noisy entry, Watson, and offer a sovereign to anyone having information on the death of the young lad. I'll back you up just outside. If someone leaves, stay long enough not to arouse suspicion. If he lies in ambush, I'll crack his head and we'll squeeze the information from him."

Holmes took off his scarf and, taking his knife from his coat, he cut it in strips. "If the rogue bolts for help or to report, I'll follow and leave you a trail."

I hesitated, but Holmes urged me on. I feared not so much entering the tavern—I put a hand in my coat and felt the reassuring metal of my pistol—as I did leaving Holmes alone to trail a possible confederate to the lair of Professor Moriarty.

Entering the tavern, my heart pounding, I wasted no time. "Barkeep! A pint for my dry throat," I yelled out to a room suddenly gone quiet. Looking slowly around the room, I added, "And a sovereign to the man brave enough to tell me of the child murdered on the dock last night."

The only response was a curse here and there and a noticeable movement away from me as I strode to the scarred, wooden bar and tossed coins down for my ale. I drank from my glass and turned to face the scowls and enmity of a roomful of the lowest sort: pickpockets, cracksmen, counterfeiterers, lifters and palmers, and, no doubt, murderers. I had no success in an attempt to engage the innkeeper in conversation, nor with any of the ruffians who stood alongside me at the bar.

At least ten or fifteen minutes passed while I took small sips—wanting to keep a clear head—and watched for anyone to exit, but I noticed nothing. Finally, I barked another offer loud enough to be heard above the din, with the same results. Holmes had not told me how much time to allot, so I took it

upon my own that enough time had passed and that it would be best to try another tavern. With a backward glance as I departed, I walked out to the street expecting to find Holmes.

He was gone!

I was frantic with worry, thinking the worst thoughts, when I came upon a strip of scarf, and then a short distance farther, another ribbon showing me the direction to travel.

How long had he been gone? I had no way of knowing, not having seen a soul depart. I had to assume it could have been a full fifteen minutes, and I cursed myself for staying so long. I started running down the street in the direction Holmes had indicated, desperately looking for another strip of cloth ... and a fragment of hope!

Whether it was luck or Holmes's skillful placement of the markings, I was somehow able to follow the trail. Every time I began to doubt my route and consider backtracking, I'd espy a glimmer of cloth and continue my course. The trail led downriver, drawing ever closer to the wharfs, until at last I reached a building whose very foundation descended to the banks, with a pier extending out over the water. Circling to one side of the age-darkened, stone foundation, I found a flight of stairs descending to a door set ajar ... and the last marker: To the body of a bound and gagged seaman was a dainty bow tied securely in his matted, bloody hair.

Stepping past the limp body, I entered and found a staircase leading to the floors above, coming across another similarly bound wharf-rat at the next level. Each level had one lit gaslight turned to its lowest intensity, casting long shadows but little light. On this floor, level with the dock, securely wrapped in oiled canvas and set on wooden skids was a large object. A knife had been run down one side of the canvas, dropping a flap that exposed a machine of great complexity ... the Future Engine!

Suddenly, from above, came shouts and scuffling noises, followed by a gunshot, then another. I raced for the next flight of stairs and had just reached the top of the landing when a bullet tore through the planking next to my head. Another bullet plucked at my coat, and I retreated to the shadows of the stairs

and readied my own pistol. Though my breath came in loud, jagged gasps, I could hear the sound of running footsteps above me and the crash of breaking glass, followed by silence. Peering around the stairwell, I dimly saw where the dockside window had been crashed through, and I started for it.

I heard running from the stairs above and turned back in time to see a bloody apparition bound into the room and rush at me with deadly speed. I raised my gun to fire, and only a sudden flicker of the gaslight saved me from killing my dearest friend. It was Sherlock Holmes.

“Out of my way!” he screamed. Rushing to the window, he emptied his revolver into the night. As I, too, reached the window, I saw the stern of a modern steam launch disappear into the low-flying fog of the river. Professor Moriarty had escaped.

“The blood from my own body betrayed me, Watson. I had him, but my hands could not hold tight. He slipped from my grasp, and now he has slipped away.”

I looked at Holmes. A flow of blood ran down his right arm which hung limply at his side. His face, though streaked and smeared, appeared not to be noticeably marked, apparently bloodied only from the copious fluid that imbrued his arm and hands.

“See here, Holmes!” I said, alarmed. “We must stop the bleeding.”

While Holmes submitted to my ministrations, he told me how he had disabled the guards, discovered the machine tarped and ready for shipping to the continent, and found Moriarty alone on the third floor, deep in concentration, the papers of the Future Engine spread out before him on his desk.

“I could have shot him in the back, and it would have been over. The evil in the world will always have that advantage over us, Watson. I couldn’t do it. After disarming him, I led him toward the stairs, when he caught me by surprise with a shiv he had hidden in his boot, slicing my arm open and causing me to drop my gun. We struggled and I had the best of him, until he slipped out of my blood-slicked hands and reached my pistol,

which had been kicked near the stairs. I only had time to reach the safety of his desk before he fired. I shot back with a pistol I had taken from one of his disabled guards. Then he ran, and you know the rest."

"Come," I said. "Let us get you to my consulting room. I've stanchied the bleeding, but you'll be needing stitches."

"No. We still have important work to do, my friend," he said, leading me up the stairs to the desk of Professor Moriarty. He gathered the papers, and we then descended two floors to the Future Engine. Holmes directed me to turn up the gaslight while he uncovered the machine and began to remove several large sections of the frame and commenced to extract gears, wires, sprockets, and various cams from the inside of the machine. Several times he would refer to the diagrams and sketches on the papers, returning to the machine and pulling out another odd assortment of gadgets.

Reattaching the framework and filling a piece of canvas with the parts from the inner workings of the Future Engine, he turned to me and said, "One find task, Watson."

The gaslights on Waterloo Bridge made shimmering lampshades of the river fog, and though muted, they brought a welcome glow to our environs compared to the alleys and streets of the wharf. The Baker Street Irregulars were as true as the Queen's most disciplined regiments, appearing suddenly around us as if formed by the fog.

Holmes greeted the boys and complimented them on their grand work. "You young lads did something I could not," he admitted.

The entire ragtag group of urchins stood taller and prouder, puffing out their little chests. Opening the canvas sack, he motioned the boys closer. "Each of you take as many of these gears and assorted pieces of metal as you can hold and toss them into the Thames." To each boy he handed a shilling as they filled their pockets. As they ran off, he yelled after them, "Mind you, scatter about and don't throw the pieces all in the same area!"

We walked slowly to the center of the bridge to await the

arrival of the police. Holmes pulled out his pipe and thoughtfully smoked in silence as we both looked down at the black, oily river.

Finally I spoke. "What will you tell Babbage?"

Holmes replied, "The truth, of course. I removed only the parts that Moriarty had added. Babbage will get his machine back. As to the papers ..." He withdrew the sheaf from his coat, and taking the first page, he ripped it in half and let it fall like a leaf—though no machine now would ever predict its path. "The papers ... were lost in the struggle.

"Like all of us who live in this glorious age of science and discovery, I have always thought that science should be free of religion ... politics ... of any restraints. Now I no longer think that." He began to tear sheet after sheet, and we watched them flutter to the water below. "General Thompson's fears are justified. Science is outracing our ability to manage the consequences. The Future Engine in Moriarty's hands—perhaps in anyone's—is a weapon of destruction ... a weapon that doesn't destroy buildings or maim, but surely one that would destroy what makes us human."

Echoing now from either side of the Thames, we could hear laughter and cries as the Baker Street Irregulars made a game of skipping the fragments of the Future Engine into the Thames. A smile came to Holmes's face. "Those boys are the future," said he, throwing the last paper from the bridge. "Let us do our part to rid England of crime, Watson, and let the future take care of itself."

Weeks later, we had just returned to Baker Street from a pleasant evening's dinner at the Cafe Royal and were discussing the ramifications of our last case. My wife was still visiting family in the South, and Holmes and I had settled into a routine much like the days when I was still a bachelor. Our conversation had—as had the case itself—taken on a disturbing aspect. Holmes—with good reason—feared that the Future Engine could yet be replicated and was more determined than ever to put an end to Moriarty. He lit his clay pipe. Drawing deeply, he puffed perfect circles in rapid succession and then watched as each

ringlet lingered, and then faded into the smoky haze that now encircled him.

“You intend to write this one up, then, Watson?” he said, as he steeped his fingers in his usual manner.

“Not against your wishes. But yes, I do. Although I think it best that this case be locked away,” I said, referring to the tin dispatch box I kept in the underground vaults of Cox & Co. in Charing Cross.

“I agree. Let us say, perhaps a hundred years.”

At first I thought it a joke, though I should have known better. But looking at his thin, angled face, made even more gaunt by the events of our latest emprise, I heard the emotion behind his flat voice and saw the truth in his statement.

“And what of my readers?”

“Ah-h-h-h,” sighed Sherlock Holmes. “They’ll just have to wait.”