

## THE HOLBORN TOY SHOP

Dr. John Watson

The weather had been unusually fine that July in 1887. Temperatures during the daylight hours hovered constantly near seventy degrees, dropping off to a comfortable sixty or so at night which guaranteed most pleasant slumber.

The sunshine was warm and invigorating with just enough in the way of clouds to make the sky look attractive. I took advantage of those sparkling days by spending as much time as possible out-of-doors. I even managed to extract Holmes from our rooms on no less than two occasions. We spent one afternoon on Shooters Hill which allows a spectacular and charming view of the richly-wooded plains of Kent. On another day we took the train to Sydenham and spent several tiring but fascinating hours exploring some of the courts of the Crystal Palace. Much to my surprise, Holmes, whose interests usually run on rather narrow paths, seemed pleasurablely absorbed in everything we saw - so much so that when we emerged from the building into the gardens I was forced to seek out one of the numerous seats which offer grateful repose after the fatigue of a walk through the Palace. In total though, it was a pleasant trip and fitted well in to the mood of those lazy days.

I have set the scene as it was because it serves as a contrast to the sad and terrifying adventure that swirled around us during this idyllic weather. It is ironic that fate can caress you with one hand and thrust a dagger in to your side with the other.

The story begins about two days after our journey to the Crystal Palace. It was late morning and our windows were wide open in an attempt to gather in any stray breeze that might wander up Baker Street. Holmes was engrossed in the construction of a fractional distillation device of his own design that was a marvel of glass tubing, all twisted and curled in on itself. The only sound in the room aside from the clock was the throaty hissing of the glass-heating torch that Holmes deftly maneuvered with his long thin fingers to weld and shape his transparent creation. I had been reading the Daily Telegraph since breakfast. Although I had an errand to run, I did not feel overly energetic and so found it easy to sink deeper into my chair and read more of the paper than normal.

A while later I was startled out of my pleasant pastime by a commotion in the lower hallway. Most of the noise was created by the loud protestations of Mrs. Hudson who, seconds later, was standing hands on hips in our doorway - her face flushed and short of breath.

“Mr. Holmes, I’ve been most tolerant of two gentlemen with irregular habits and unusual visitors but you must see what awaits you at the front door. It’s that Wiggins lad. Him I can tolerate now and then but he has four horribly dirty boys that he wants to bring in with him. Won’t you please speak to him?”

“Calm yourself dear lady,” said Holmes, rising from his workbench. “I shall come down and have a look.”

My chair was still quite comfortable so I remained sitting while Holmes accompanied our landlady to the front door. The poor dear can never quite bring herself to deny Holmes anything regardless of the provocation. I heard a faint murmur of voices followed shortly by the sound of footsteps on the stairs. The door opened and Holmes entered with young Wiggins in tow but there was no sign of the four urchins that had so upset Mrs. Hudson.

Holmes closed the door and said, "Well Watson, Mr. Wiggins has turned things around on us. Instead of assisting us on one of our problems, he wishes us to assist him on one of his. He brought along some of his friends to corroborate his story, but in deference to Mrs. Hudson we shall have to do without them or have our little discussion outside on the pavement.

"Under the circumstances," said I, still in my chair, "I suggest we obtain our information exclusively from Wiggins."

"Then let us proceed," said Holmes while waiving the youngster to a chair across from the sofa.

The lad was at first glance a pitiful sight. All got up in ragged shirt and trousers with a length of twine in service as a belt. He seemed a tangle of scrawny knees and elbows in constant motion, but a closer look revealed a small body trimmed and fit for survival in our special wilderness. His dark eyes flashed bright and alert as he sat like a cocked crossbow - quiet but ready for anything that might come his way. We (Holmes and I) knew that he and his army of street Arabs were the survivors of their particular world and as such they were the best of the lot.

As Wiggins gradually began to look about the room, I could see that he was marshalling his thoughts to begin his story and after a minute or two of internal conversation, he began.

"Some of me pals is missin' Mr. Holmes. A lot more than the usual that comes and goes. It's the boys and the girls too but not them that's over nine or ten years old."

"When did you first notice that this was happening?" asked Holmes, leaning forward from his relaxed position on the sofa.

"Hard to tell, Mr. Holmes, Sir. Could be its been happening for half a year or better."

"Have you any idea of what may have happened to them?"

"Can't rightly say sir. Could be the old woman what carries around the dolls is mixed in it."

"Well, you just tell us what you know," said Holmes, while reaching in the coal scuttle for a cigar. "Dr. Watson and I will see if we can make some sense of it."

"Me and me pals, we knows our way along the river. We knows the folks pretty good too - them that lives and works there. The young ones, them without folks, move about a lot but the grown-ups get fixed in one spot so's you'd notice when one goes away or another moves in. You can see that it ain't so easy to keep tabs on me pals.

Now the old bird with the dolls showed up sometime last winter. She come round the docks all done up in black shawls and a pile of raggedy clothes. All bent over she was and under all that cloth we never saw more than her hands and her nose. Wherever she went she always carried two dolls in a big wicker basket. One dolly were a pretty little thing with a frilly white dress and golden curls. The other were a toy soldier all dressed and painted real grand like a palace guard. She never said naught to me or them that goes around with me but we seen her now and then talking to the wee ones. She never touched ‘em or gave ‘em a thing that we know of but now we fink that them she talked to are them that has disappeared. So what we did was to go lookin’ for her.”

“When was this?” asked Holmes.

“About six days past, Sir.”

“And did you find her?”

“Uh, yes Sir, that’s what we do the best is find things. It took some time but we found her down on Norfolk Street near the Waterloo Bridge. Once we had the eye on her, we stayed out of sight and followed for a time. The old girl strolled around like a blinkin tourist she did, pokin’ at things wif her walkin’ stick. Near the Temple Gardens she found a young lad diggin’ on the bank. She talked wif him a while - showed him the dolls and all, but never givin’ him a thing. It wern’t long before she leaves him and heads on towards the Blackfriars Bridge. The lad leaves his diggin’ and goes up Essex Street wif us taggin’ along straight-a-way. Still keepin’ to the shadows we follows him over to Fetter Lane and on North to where it ends at the Holborn Viaduct. Barnard’s Inn is there near the corner. Well, the boy we was followin’ came to that corner and turned west. About a minute later we reached that spot and the lad had gone. Vanished for sure and good he was – and we had a good look too.

Wern’t nothin’ to do but go find the old woman and try our luck again, but she’s up and gone too. Not the least sign of her these six days past. That’s the whole of it Mr. Holmes, can you help?”

“Believe me my young friend,” said Holmes, a cold glint showing behind his eyes, “I will do my utmost to solve this mystery you have brought us, for I have a feeling you have discovered something terrible and criminal.”

Holmes stood up and began to pace the carpet, his head bowed, deep in thought. This went on for three or four minutes while I tried to make some sense of what I had just heard. Holmes meanwhile had gone over to the window where he pulled aside the curtain and gazed down at the street. I could tell that he was not really looking at anything outside. It was movement for the sake of movement. The clock on the mantle ticked about twenty times before he turned and said; “here’s the plan for now. Wiggins, you and your lads keep looking for the woman. Widen your search area and report to me daily. Here is some money for your expenses and now off you go.”

Holmes saw Wiggins out the door, then reached for his coat and cane.

“I don’t like this business Watson, I don’t like it one bit. I have no theories, just a bad feeling. Are you up to a visit over Holborn way?”

“Of course Holmes,” I said while rising from the chair, my errand forgotten, “I’m ready this instant.”

“Capital, we have no time to lose. Here’s your walking stick.”

Out on the street I quickly whistled up a hansom and off we went clopping briskly through the moderate traffic of that bright, pleasant day. A goodly number of pedestrians were out and about, taking advantage of the sunshine. The women were a delight to look at in their bright costumes. Many shops stood with their doors open and merchandise moved out onto the sidewalk.

Normally I take a keen interest in observing the street life of London on such a day, but I could not help thinking of the strange story told to us by Wiggins. Of course the disappearance of those children is serious business, but can we be sure that any did in fact disappear, and if they did, was the cause of their vanishing something sinister? I could not quite understand why Holmes seemed so alarmed, but I have learned to trust his judgment in these matters. The distance from Baker Street to the Holborn Viaduct is not great so I was spared a long session with my fruitless thoughts. Holmes spent the entire trip with his chin resting on his vest, eyes closed in silent consultation with himself. We stepped down from the Hansom at the corner of Fetter Lane and the Holborn Viaduct. When the cab had departed, Holmes walked a short distance west on the latter street, then stopped at the curb and began to look all around. In addition to Barnard’s, there were two other inns in the immediate vicinity. Across the street I saw Furnival’s and further on down on our side a weathered sign of red, gold and brown heralded the presence of the Staple inn. The other buildings were an odd assortment of shops and small businesses - nothing out of the ordinary that I could see.

After his inspection, Holmes pointed across the street with his cane and said to me, “Look at that building to the left of Furnival’s Inn and tell me what you see.”

“Hmm, It is a rather ordinary brick structure of four stories. All of the upper story windows are boarded over which would indicate that those floors are at most, used for storage. I see by the sign that the street level houses the Holborn Toy Shop, which indeed looks to be much the same as many other shops I have seen about town - single door in the centre, two display windows on either side filled to overflow with goods, a common lot.

“But what about the chimney?” asked Holmes when he saw that I had finished.

I looked to the rear of the building and saw a rather large stack that rose twenty feet or more above the roof. A good deal of thin shimmering smoke rolled out of the top which told of a large fire somewhere below.

“By Jove Holmes, I see what you mean. No one needs a fire for warmth on a day such as this and there is no machinery to run if the building is as empty as it appears to be.”

“Quite so my friend, “said Holmes, “I would appreciate it if you would present yourself to whoever is managing the shop as a loving uncle in search of a doll for your niece. I will accompany you merely as your companion.”

With that we walked across the roadway and entered the establishment which proved to be very well stocked with a wide assortment of dolls, hobby horses, music boxes, wooly animals, castles of molded cardboard, sailing ships, lead soldiers, kites, battledores, shuttlecocks, hoops and tops. Two women customers were towards the back being waited on by a short, heavy woman with a wild burst of black wiry hair shot with grey. I saw the red, chunky face of a peasant farmwoman but her speech placed her as a member of the lower classes of the city. As she spoke with much animation and exaggerated gesturing of arm and hand, my eye was drawn unwillingly to her mouth that displayed a full set of yellowish teeth save for one middle incisor, the lack of which was not only emphasized visually, but by the lisp that it's absence caused. Immediately I began to play my part in our little charade by closely examining the large display of dolls. Holmes all the while stood nearby looking slightly bored and totally disinterested in the shop and it's contents. Much of the time he spent gazing out of the front windows but occasionally he would glance casually at this or that item around the shop. The selection of dolls was quite varied though sloppily displayed. They had them in wood, wax, rag, leather and china. There were even a few painted Dutch. On one shelf I saw six toy soldiers dressed as palace guards. I knew Holmes would spot them so I passed them by without a flicker of interest. Small cards here and there indicated the country of origin of the various dolls and other items for sale. A larger sign fixed to the wall proclaimed to all that without exception, all merchandise in the shop was imported.

After a few minutes it became obvious to the clerk that her two women customers were intent on doing some serious and lengthy shopping so she excused herself momentarily and went to a small door at the rear of the shop which she opened a bit and said in a loud voice, “Customers up front lovey - need a bit of help.”

As she returned to her customers a swarthy, poorly shaven man with a large paunch covered by not overly clean linen stepped out to service us.

“Good day to you gents.” He said through teeth that were even more disreputable than the woman's. His attempt at congeniality was rendered worthless by the sly, crafty eyes that peered at us from his meaty face. Remnants of dark hair hung down over his forehead, adding to his unkempt appearance.

Had I been a legitimate customer, I would have declined to purchase anything from a person like that, but such was not my mission so I asked him to show me a doll suitable for a female child of eight years.

“This 'eres a pippin beauty guvnor,” he said while holding up for my inspection a small doll in an elaborate formal gown that was indeed quite charming and reasonably well made. “Please any little lass she will and only half a crown - a right swell bargain for a quality piece.”

I didn't want to rush things so I allowed him to show me three more dolls before I made my selection, which proved to be the first one I had looked at. During the entire transaction Holmes was leaning against one of the three pillars that ran through the centre of the store and gave support to the floors above. His eyes were half closed and the look of boredom on his face was even more apparent than before. While my purchase was being wrapped I attempted some casual conversation with my strange salesman by asking if the toy business was at all brisk during the summer months. He replied that it was fairly slow and that he and the misses, indicating the stout woman with a nod of his head, were all that were necessary to run the shop. During the Christmas holidays, he added, he employed two additional clerks and a stock boy.

"Then you are the owner of this fine shop." I said while paying the bill.

"Right you are sir. Waldo Hare is the name. Me and Olive, that's my misses, we run the place, and a pleasurable time we have of it bringin' happiness to so many young-uns."

I said good day and started for the door. Holmes turned and followed with an audible sigh of relief. Outside we flagged a hansom and made our way back toward Baker Street.

"I say Holmes, are any little girls of eight years numbered among your acquaintances? I doubt very much if this doll will find a place among the accessories in our rooms."

"I can only suggest," said Holmes, "that you ask Mrs. Hudson. She is likely to know of a worthy recipient. Possibly her daughter has her own little girl by now."

After riding a few more minutes in silence, Holmes lit up a short dark cigar and said. "Tell me Watson, what were your impressions of the Holborn Toy Shop?"

"In a nutshell," I replied, "the shop struck me as being quite legitimate and the proprietors as being quite unsavory. Other than that I came away with nothing in the way of useful information. Now suppose you tell me what I missed."

Holmes smiled slightly and said, "Your presumption shows great faith dear boy, but you are correct, I did gather some interesting information. You will recall the sign on the wall that stated that the merchandise was, without exception, imported. That being the case I was surprised to see one of the dolls from India, in a sealed glass box, holding a miniature spray of willow herb. That particular plant does not grow in India. Nor does it grow anywhere other than in Middlesex. It is one of those peculiar varieties of vegetation that for some unknown reason can flourish only in one location.

The next items of interest were the cuffs of Mr. Hare's trousers. They contained several fragments of freshly shaved wood. I also detected the faint odor of turpentine in the air. While you were paying for the doll I leaned up against a rather stout pillar, which as you may know is an excellent conduit for sound and vibration. I was able to press my ear to that pillar for a moment and heard a thumping and felt the vibration of machinery. At this point" Holmes continued. "There are several Probabilities. I think something is being manufactured in that building - possibly the very merchandise on display. But why the secrecy, and more importantly, is there a connection to the missing children?"

As Holmes was talking, we arrived at 221B Baker Street. I retired to my chair with a cup of tea and my pipe while Holmes fetched his oily clay off the mantle and fished a coal from the fireplace to ignite the remnants of tobacco that were in the pipe from the last smoking. When it was properly fired up he flopped on the sofa and began those mental processes that so often produced amazing results. The noon hour had passed and I was giving some thought to inquiring of Mrs. Hudson as to the possibility of a light lunch, but this warm weather did not serve to stimulate the appetite so the decision was made to wait and have a good evening meal. I picked up a magazine and began to read an article on fashionable foxhunting and was sound asleep before I had finished the first page. Some time later I was awakened by Holmes voice. I glanced at the clock and saw that it was close on to 3 p.m.

“I’m sorry Holmes,” I said while stretching my legs, “I didn’t catch what you just said.”

“I said that I have decided to move as quickly as possible. A direct approach may well yield satisfactory results. It is a bit risky but time is not our ally. “I plan on paying a nocturnal visit to the Toy Shop so as to determine the true contents and purpose of that building. I hope I can count on your assistance in this matter.”

“Of course you can Holmes, although I must say I still can’t fathom your urgent concern.”

“I have no immediate answer for you Watson. There are very few facts on hand but my apprehensive feelings grow stronger by the hour. Possibly it is some subtle workings of my subconscious mind and its substantial reservoir of criminal data. At any rate I feel that any delay in this investigation is intolerable. As it is, we cannot move for about nine hours, therefore I recommend another little nap and a late supper for the two of us.”

At times like this, waiting can become most unbearable. The hands of the clock freeze in time and the mind casts about desperately for any diversion. I knew Holmes was as restless as me for he went from violin to sofa to files to chemical bench with no visible accomplishment at any stop. Our supper was no more than a welcome diversion. At about eleven o’clock Holmes began to apply saddle soap to his hunting crop so I took my old service revolver from the desk drawer and gave it a good wiping. When my pistol was clean, loaded and tucked away in my jacket pocket, I went and sat by the window looking out on the dark city, drumming my fingers on the windowsill, trying not to think at all.

The clock, so long the enemy, finally struck the midnight hour and released us from our torment.

“Wear anything but your white scarf,” Said Holmes while buttoning his pea jacket, “We must do our best to blend with the shadows.”

I put a small pocket lantern in my jacket and buttoned up on our way out the door. We boarded one of the numerous cabs that prowl the late night streets of this great metropolis and moved off in the clear evening air. The traffic we met on the thoroughfare was mostly the late theatre people and a scattering of commercial vehicles. Now and then our driver would cause the cab to

swerve violently as he maneuvered around the staggering form of a nocturnal reveler. Our cab left us at a street corner about a block short of our destination and quickly disappeared into the gloom. A moderate fog had begun to move in and the sound of the horse's hooves could be heard after we had lost sight of our conveyance.

"Well Watson," Said Holmes. "the weather has taken a turn that will favor our activities. We had better make what plans we can before we enter the building. The front door is secured by a large but simple spring lock. There are no dead bolts or other locking devices, so I see no reason to use any other entrance. First we will check the exterior, then once inside we will have to be guided by our senses. There is just the one door leading to the rear so it must be our first objective. Keep your revolver handy and be ready for anything. Whether or not Mr. and Mrs. Hare live in the building is another question that wants an answer."

We walked in silence down the empty street and turned into a narrow alley that lead us to the rear of the building where we found a small loading dock and one large, sturdy door set flush with the wall. The other side of the building was featureless except for a single window and the ground was overgrown with weeds so we returned by way of the alley to the front.

Not the slightest noise or glimmer of light could be discerned through the windows as Holmes turned his attention to the lock. In seconds the door was open and we stepped inside. While Holmes closed the door I strained to hear any sound that might betray the presence of life elsewhere in the structure, but I could hear nothing except my own shallow breathing. Had I only my ears to depend on I would have considered myself alone in the universe.

A slight touch at my sleeve told me that Holmes was making his way to the rear of the shop. I followed his dim shadow, testing each board before applying my full weight. As luck would have it, we made that long journey with only the faintest of protestations from the lumber under-foot.

At the rear door we paused for a full minute and were again greeted by a profound silence. Holmes then, ever so slowly, turned the knob and opened the door. The small room we entered was quite as dark as the store but in the faint light we could make out a desk, a workbench and some shelving. On the wall to our left was the single window that provided such illumination as we had. At the rear I saw a large, light coloured door that was closed and bared, but nearby on the right wall was a smaller door that stood open. As we moved closer to the open door, Holmes stood aside and gestured to me to have a look. Straight ahead I could see nothing but my eyes were drawn downward by a wavering glimmer of light. It barely illuminated steps leading down to a hazy, undefined gloom.

Holmes leaned close and whispered, "I had thought to look at the upper floors first but perhaps we should investigate the source of that light in the basement."

I nodded my assent and we proceeded down the heavy wooden stairway. At the bottom we found ourselves in a small, walled in chamber - damp and utterly dismal. The earthen floor oozed water at each step and the ancient stonewalls glistened with slime. A large box stood on end in one corner and to our left a low, wide doorway led into another chamber from which the wavering light emanated.

With great caution we entered the brighter chamber. It consisted of four solid stone walls, save for the doorway, a small wooden table on which guttered a single candle and in one corner a few long, slender blocks of stone about the size of door lintels. They looked to be left over from the construction of the building. After a quick glance, Holmes swiftly stepped over to the candle ax and snuffed it out.

“A trap Watson,” he hissed.

As I reached for my revolver, the silence was shattered by the crash of metal on metal followed by the raspy sound of a key turning in a rusty lock. I could hear the clatter as an invisible hand removed the key.

Using my hands as a guide, I moved tight to the wall near the door feeling quite helpless all the while, but determined to gather what information I could by listening. Some slight metallic scrapings could be heard and after a minute or two I was startled again by a loud hammering in the doorway. After several blows, the hammering stopped and silence again descended in that inky blackness. I had no idea where Holmes was in the room or what he might be doing. I strained my hearing to pick up any hint of activity, but nothing more happened.

When the senses are deprived of stimulation for any period it becomes difficult to estimate the passage of time. It might have been three minutes or thirty that I stood frozen against that damp wall. The wheezing, breathy explosion of someone trying to suppress laughter, at last, dispelled the silence. On the next breath the wheezing turned into a loud, ugly chuckling that I recognized as coming from the throat of Waldo Hare. The chuckling grew in volume to become a clamorous guffaw that seemed quite bizarre in that pitch-black cellar.

When the laughter finally subsided, along with several loud sighs, Mr. Hare began to speak in a gloating voice. “Ah – Mr. Sherlock Holmes is it? And Doctor Watson - no doubt. Welcome gents to my humble dwelling.”

“My congratulations Mr. Hare.” said Holmes from somewhere nearby, “This is a neat trap you’ve set and we seem to have walked into it right on schedule.”

It was obvious to me that Holmes was using flattery on our captor to obtain more information about our predicament.

“Well yer smart enough to see I’ve the upper hand all right.”

“I must say,” said Holmes, “that I am quite surprised and baffled. However did you get on to us so fast?”

“Twas the two lady customers in the shop today.” Hare growled, “You gents played yer parts right proper, but just as you left one of em told the misses that the tall gentleman was none other than the famous Sherlock Holmes - said she saw you once at a concert.”

The bait had worked and Hare, proud of his accomplishment, continued to talk.

“Ordinary I wouldn’t bother over much by a visit from such a great man as yourself, but last week my misses, sharp as a tack she is, took notice of a bunch of boys followin’ one of our recruits so she follows them till she saw they had no luck, but we decided to pull in our horns for a while as it were to see which way the wind was a-blowin’.

All was quiet for a few days, but then today who should pop up at my doorstep but the famous detective his own self. Now I can add two and two as well as the next man so I figured I'd have another visit. Maybe not tonight but soon, so I stretched my net and here we are."

"Admirable Mr. Hare," said Holmes, "I realize now that we are dealing with a much more clever man than I had supposed. Since you hold all the cards, the next move is up to you. Will you tell us of your plans?"

"Why certainly," cried Hare in a jovial voice, "since there's no escape for you, I'll take pleasure in telling you about the little surprise I've cooked up for you. I hope you don't mind talking in the dark. I'd strike a light but I'm sure there's a gun or two in there and it wouldn't do for me to stop a bullet just yet. Anyhow, there'll soon be plenty of light down here."

A sinister snickering that raised the hair on my neck followed this last statement.

"The room you're in," Hare continued, "has only the one exit and that is now closed by an iron barred door. I've put a copper peg in the keyhole so you might find it a bit more difficult to open than the front door of the shop. I'll be going upstairs now. The misses and me is all packed up and we'll be out of town before dawn."

"Ah yes. One last bit of news for you to chew on. Up in the back room there's a large box full of wood shavings. On top of the pile sits a short bit of candle. On my way out I'll set it alight. I figure that inside of fifteen minutes the wick will burn down to the shavings and after that there should be all the merry light you'll ever want to see. You've cost me my business gents and now you pay the price. I'm thinkin' no trace of you will ever be found. Neat and tidy - that's old Waldo. The details of my business... the reason for your snoopin' will have to remain a mystery I'm afraid. Of course you still have a few minutes to figure it out. And now gents, I bid you a good night..."

I could hear his footsteps going up the stairs and then the sound of the door closing.

The match that Holmes struck to light the candle was so brilliant that it momentarily hurt my eyes that had become accustomed to the dark.

"Watson, we have about ten minutes to escape from this room. Hold the candle high and follow close behind."

We circled the room as Holmes swiftly inspected the four walls. He then stood on the table and examined the ceiling, which in all, including the walls, took less than two minutes.

"It has to be the door," said Holmes, "the walls and the ceiling are solid and offer no hope."

Holmes reached out, took the candle from my hand and turned his attention to the door. It was an old but very sturdy iron fabrication. Eight vertical bars welded to a heavy banded edge with one horizontal bar in the middle that gave added support to the lock housing. The whole was set in a metal frame with large hinge pins riveted

in place. The locking bolt was rather large and sunk securely into the frame. A strong shake resulted in only a slight movement. The thing was solid.

“Holmes,” I said, “it would take a small army with a battering ram to swing that door open.”

Swinging the door open is not the problem my friend,” said Holmes, who had stepped back to consider the matter. “We must move the door only one inch.”

“What earthly good would it do for us to move it only one inch?” I exclaimed.

“That inch,” he replied, “is the first inch. If we can move the door outward just one inch, that movement will either rip out or shatter the lock. Once we accomplish that little task, a gentle push will open it wide and we may leave.”

This all seemed to me an exercise in logic rather than a practical plan for escape. Whether it is one inch or a mile, we had not the means to attack the door.

“Let us see what we have at our disposal,” said Holmes, “your pistol is useless against such a large lock and there is no one about who would respond to the sound of a shot. We have in the room only a small table and those lintel blocks in the corner. I estimate that one of those stones might weigh about one hundred pounds so we may as well do the obvious and use one as a battering ram.”

We picked up one of the blocks between the two of us and cradled in our arms, swung it repeatedly against the lock to no avail. After a time Holmes said, “Give it up Watson. “We do not have the weight or momentum to break through.”

“We’re running out of time Holmes. I’d rather keep bashing away than do nothing.”

“Give me a few moments to think,” said Holmes, “there must be another way.” I stood quietly as he paced back and forth, pinching his chin with thumb and forefinger.

“Ah!” He stopped short and said, “I recall reading somewhere once that with a proper lever and a place to stand, one could move the world - or words to that effect. What we have here is a problem of leverage. We must apply the proper force to the door and here,” he said, pointing to the pile of stones, “is the material we need to assemble the device – observe Watson.”

Holmes then picked up one end of one of the stones and dragged it to the wall opposite the door. He shoved it up against the wall so that it was pointing precisely toward the side of the door with the lock. He then dragged over a second stone and butted it up against the first. It looked as though he was making a row of these stones across the room. I joined him in his efforts and moments later a third and a fourth stone were added to the line which now extended more than half way across the room. The fifth stone was positioned firmly against the door, directly under the lock and in line with the other stones. This left a gap in the line of about four feet. When we pushed, the sixth stone in the space it completed the row save for a gap of about two inches.

“I need another five or six inches of stone,” said Holmes, “see if you can find a fragment of that thickness.” I went to the pile of stone and quickly located a small slab of the required size.

As I carried it over to the door, Holmes said, “Now Watson, I’ll lift up the end of the last stone that we placed in line and pull it toward the door far enough for you to insert your small stone into the line.”

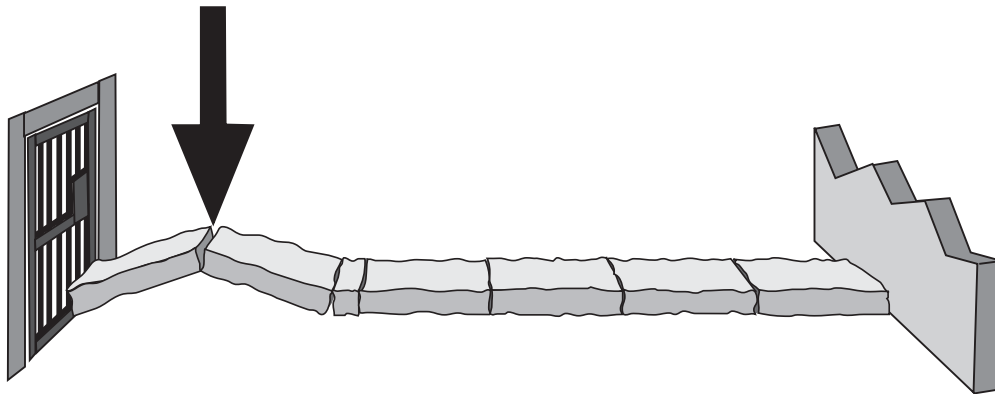
When this was done he shoved his stone back against the smaller stone and laid down his end.

“Notice Watson, that the end of the stone I was holding no longer reaches the floor. It is resting on the end of the stone we placed against the door and overlaps it by about two inches. Now I’ll pick up my end once more. You move around and pick up the end of the long stone touching it. That’s it, get them even. We’ll lower both ends together to the point at which they touch. There, that’s got it.

“We now have a triangle, or arch if you will. There are about four or five inches of space between that point at which the stones join and the floor. If my engineering is correct, any downward pressure exerted on the peak of the arch will be converted to an outward thrust at the base, much exceeding the original force. And as the arch approaches the floor the pressure of the outward thrust will greatly increase. The outward movement is not nearly as much as the downward movement, but I would remind you that we need only one inch.”

Holmes then stepped up onto the arch and jumped up and down. A loud creaking from the door was the only tangible result.

“You had best join me up here Watson, this operation wants more weight.”



*(At this point, for purposes of clarity, I will insert a diagram of what I have just described.)*

I carefully joined Holmes in precarious balance on the arch and, bracing each other, we jumped up and came down hard. There was a loud cracking noise and the arch under our feet collapsed to the floor, causing us to lose our balance momentarily. When I recovered, I looked at the door and saw it standing open. The force of our jump had sheared the bolt to give us our inch and then some. Holmes grabbed the candle and together we hurried through the doorway, past the box that apparently was the hiding place used by Mr. Hare, up the stairs and into the small room where we saw that Waldo had indeed kept his promise. What I had originally thought to be a desk was a large wooden box set flush to the wall and filled to overflow with loose wood shavings, on top of which sat the guttering stump of a candle. Holmes reached out and pinched the wick, thus terminating the threat to our lives.

“It was a close one,” said Holmes while removing a bit of wax from” his thumb and forefinger, “Another sixty seconds and this room would be ablaze. I wonder,” He asked, almost to himself, “if someday my features will be so well known that I will constantly have to go about in disguise? However, I think it safe to assume that the Waldo Hare’s have fled the premises, which means we have no further need of silence or darkness.”

While saying this, Holmes began a swift, methodical search of the room. I managed to locate a Bulls eye lantern that gave us more than enough light.

After circling the room once, Holmes said, “Nothing revealing here, let’s see what lies beyond the white door.”

That door led us into a quite large area at the extreme end of the building. While Holmes trotted around, seeing those things that are invisible to others, I had ample time to look around and inventory the room. It was very utilitarian. Rough wood planking on the floor and unpainted brick walls. All partially hidden by piles of miscellaneous packing crates. A single cot and washbasin were placed behind a short partition. Apparently one or the other of our quarry had occasion to spend the night on the premises. An enclosed stairway led up one wall to the floor above. Near the rear wall a large belt for driving machinery came up through the floor and vanished through the ceiling. A heavy trap door, near to where I was standing, opened I was sure to a boiler room and coal bunkers below. Holmes descended to that dark, now silent place but was back in less than a minute.

“Apparently,” said Holmes, who stood looking at the floor near the large rear door that stood open to the night, “our quarry had a wagon and team in harness waiting just inside this door. The tracks make it a fair sized commercial vehicle, and if these scuff marks on either side of the door frame tell the truth, it is painted a bright yellow, has a wide bed and of course is well scratched on the sides.”

“Ah-ha,” He exclaimed as he moved to the wall to the right of the door.

The object of his attention was a rude bulletin board. However, the only articles on its surface were a few pins jammed into the wood here and there.

“See here Watson, hold the light close.”

I moved the lantern to a more favorable position near where his finger was pointing. I saw only a small scrap of yellow paper, not much larger than a postage stamp, impaled by a small pin. It was obviously the remnants of a larger piece that had been torn off. Near one edge I could make out the printed letters KI which seemed to be the first two letters of a larger word.

“I don’t know how this bit of paper can help you,” I said, “there is simply not enough of the original to make any sense of it.”

“Quite the contrary,” replied Holmes, “this fragment tells me that Mr. Hare has had at least one freight transaction with the railroad. This rough yellow paper - notice how abrasive the surface feels - is used exclusively for waybills on the railroads. As you know, I have a habit of observing and remembering things of that sort. “We can assume that this remaining portion came from the top of the bill. The name of the

issuing station is printed in that area. On the right edge of this scrap you see the letters KI that may well be the first part of the name we seek. By the process of elimination we can determine that this bill came from King's Cross Station since no other terminal in or around London begins with these two letters. King's Cross is the terminus of the Great Northern Railway. This waybill probably came from the Goods Depot, which is just north of the Passenger Station off York Road.

You will recall that Mr. Hare told us that he would be out of town before dawn. There is a chance that they may depart from this same station."

Standing back from the board, Holmes said, "Now we, must have a look at the upper floors.

"Look here." He exclaimed as he picked up a small bottle from the floor and held it to his nose. "Laudanum Watson. Another little puzzle."

When we reached the top of the enclosed stairway, my lantern illuminated a large workshop. The entire floor, without partitions, was occupied by a multitude of machinery for the working of wood and fabric. Many bins and racks were filled with the unassembled pieces of dolls and other toys. It was clear that Holmes was correct when he theorized that the contents of the shop below were manufactured here. Cutting tables, sewing machines, dye cutters, painting and assembly benches took up the third floor space.

"These two floors," said Holmes, "together comprise a complete toy factory. I fear I know what we shall find on the top floor - come along Watson."

The door that opened onto the fourth floor was secured on the outside by a stout wooden crossbar. Holmes threw it aside and pushed the door open. Inside a half dozen candles scattered about the room illuminated a scene that is forever imprinted in my memory. Save for one partition, which we found contained a crude kitchen; three long rows of bunks filled the large room. A few small benches and rickety chairs made up the rest of the furniture. The air was close, heavy and smelled of many unwashed bodies. Pressed against the far wall, clutching each other for mutual support, stood a trembling group of about forty young children, their eyes wide with terror.

"Slaves Watson." said Holmes, his voice thick with emotion. "These poor creatures have been trapped in this place and imprisoned on these upper floors for the profit of Waldo Hare. "

"And that hellish fiend," I cried, "would have them burn with the building."

"Yes, the man is a brute. There is no telling how many horrors he has visited on these poor waifs... but we must get busy my friend. Mr. Hare's hours are numbered, for we shall not rest until that monster is brought to justice."

We crossed the room and did our best to calm the children. When they were somewhat assured and relaxed, we learned that they were without exception lured to that place by the old woman with the promise of a free doll in return for running errands. Although the children had difficulty in estimating the passage of time, we were able to estimate that the operation had started about six months earlier. One of

the older boys provided us with one other bit of puzzling information. He told us that a total of about sixty other children had come here in the usual manner, but had soon been taken away in groups of ten with no clue as to their destination.

On hearing this, Holmes turned to me and said, "I'll wager that Mr. Hare has another operation of some sort going on. I'll further wager that he and his wife have fled to that location. We must assume the worst Watson. It is entirely possible that he, not knowing whether or not we have contacted the police, plans to cover his tracks completely by eliminating the other group of sixty youngsters.

"Children," said Holmes to our new charges, "you have been cruelly used, but that is all in the past. From this day you will be properly taken care of – I shall personally see to it. It is necessary that Dr. Watson and I be off on our business, so I will leave you in the care of the oldest boy here. In a short while your friend Wiggins will come here to take care of you. As soon as possible Dr. Watson and I will return."

By this time the children's terror had turned to the excitement of anticipated pleasures so we were able to leave them in high spirits. On our way out, we closed the rear door then hurried to the street where we had the good fortune to be picked up by a Patent Safety cab.

In less than five minutes our driver, on the promise of a sizable tip, deposited us at the main entrance of the large brick and timber structure of the King's Cross Station Goods Depot. The structure was built in a large U shape with a great court in the centre. Even at that early hour the place was fairly active with freight of a wide variety being moved according to some mysterious master plan, under a multitude of gas lamps hanging from an overhead grid of metal piping. I must say that I thought that the thread we were following was rather slender, but I could see no other route.

In front of the depot manager's office Holmes stopped, turned to me and said, "I doubt very much that anyone here is in the pay of Mr. Hare, however, it has been my experience that these people are loath to answer a direct question regarding a particular customer. We must approach the subject in a round about manner so follow my lead and we'll see what develops."

A clerk in a rather threadbare white shirt ushered us into the office of Mr. Charles Brown, the night manager. Mr. Brown, a small, spare man with alert, dark eyes and quick, bird like movements invited us to sit in two captains chairs placed squarely in front of his solid oak desk. Holmes the actor then transformed in to a typical London merchant.

"Mr. Brown, I'll come right to the point. My partner and I," He nodded in my direction." are importers of a fine line of tableware from the orient. We are very busy setting up our business and that accounts for the early hour. Our new office and warehouse is located just off St. George Street, convenient to the London Docks. From this central location we will be sending bulk shipments to various locations throughout the country. The tableware is quite fragile and is therefore carefully packed on specially constructed wagons, sprung to protect the load. Now, we prefer to ship by rail, but it would be necessary to ship the entire wagon - with the team if possible. Can you do it?"

“It’s a special situation,” said Mr. Brown, “but I know we can accommodate you to most locations. It will require a separate goods wagon which of course will be an added expense.”

“You sound rather positive,” said Holmes, “but you can understand that we are quite anxious to be absolutely certain that it can be done.”

“As it happens,” said Mr. Brown, “we have a customer, a toy merchant, that has done just what you wish to do - his very night in fact. I recall that he has moved a wagon and team several times in the last few months.”

“But was it a short haul?” Holmes asked.

“By no means sir. It went all the way to Llangollen, a small Welch mining village, out a bit from Liverpool.”

“Excellent,” said Holmes while rising from his chair, “I’m confident that we can do business. My warehouse manager will be around in a day or two to make specific arrangements.”

We shook hands, said our goodbyes and were soon out on the street looking for a cab.

“Holmes,” I asked, “However did you know that Waldo Hare shipped his entire wagon on the train?”

It was merely an assumption based on what we know. Mr. Hare shipped a group of children to some unknown destination. It is obvious that he had to keep the children confined and well hidden, not only to prevent their escape but also to prevent others from seeing them. And you will agree that it would be best to keep the children in the same closed wagon for the entire trip. By the way, I’m sure the bottle of laudanum was used on the young travelers. I based on my conversation with Mr. Brown on that information with, as you could see, quite satisfactory results. I will admit that if Mr. Hare had not used this method of transportation and if that fragment of a waybill had been for a shipment of goods, we would be in a good deal of trouble. But we work with what information we have, and in this instance Dame Fortune has smiled upon us.”

While Holmes was saying this, a hansom had pulled up and as I reached for the door strap Holmes put out a restraining hand.

“Watson, I think it is time to bring Scotland Yard into this affair. Because of the press of time I’ll ask you to locate Wiggins or one of his lieutenants and instruct him to go and care for the children until we return. In the meantime, I will go to the Yard and see who is on duty. As soon as you finish, meet us at the King’s Cross passenger Terminal.”

“Fine,” I said, “off you go now - I see another cab coming down the street.”

Holmes climbed aboard his cab and it swiftly disappeared in the direction of the river. I waived down my cab and about twenty minutes later was clapping slowly down a street likely to yield one of Wiggins’ street Arabs. It took another ten minutes but I finally found young Robinson prowling the pre-dawn Boulevard. I gave him the

necessary instructions and a five-pound note with which to purchase food for the children at the toyshop.

I arrived back at King's Cross at first light and went directly to the ticket office where I found Holmes at a window purchasing our passage. With him I saw Inspector Lestrade and two rather formidable looking officers in uniform. I recognized Constable Cook and the other was introduced to me as Constable Freeman. Service to Liverpool is quite frequent from King's Cross, so it was only a matter of minutes before we were settled in a private compartment of a day coach whose iron wheels made a loud clattering over the points as we moved out of the station.

"Watson," Holmes said while lighting his pipe, "I've given the Inspector a complete run-down on the events of the past twenty four hours and he agrees that we must make haste to track down our quarry."

"Right you are Holmes," said Lestrade, then to me, "Watson, in all my years with the Yard I've seen a bit of everything. Dragged bodies from the Thames, dealt with every sort of thief, murderer and swindler. You put a name to it and I can tell you a tale, but I've never heard of a more cruel and inhuman case than this. It makes me sick in my stomach when I think of what may happen if we are too late in apprehending this fiend and his woman."

The conversation ran along those lines for a while. Holmes, ever alert and sleepless while working a case, was conversing steadily with the members of the force. But the loss of a night's rest caught up to me. My eyelids became heavy and soon my mind focused on the clack of wheels on the rails. The conversation became an unintelligible buzz and in moments I was fast asleep.

I was awakened by my companions as the train slowed to a squeaking, hissing stop at the station in Liverpool. We transferred to the branch line serving Llangollen and I again slept for the balance of that journey.

As the small train began to slow at the outskirts of the town, I awoke quite refreshed. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and looked out of the grimy window at the dreary scene. My watch showed the hour at just past three in the afternoon. A light drizzle had begun to fall just out of Liverpool - the kind of rain whose end can never be predicted. The clouds melted together to form a dirty grey canopy over the lines of brick houses that moved slowly past my window. The back yards, which faced the tracks, were walled in with the same brick used for the construction of the houses. An attempt at privacy had created dreadful little prison cells for the poor anonymous souls that populated that place.

The station at Llangollen proved to be no more cheerful than what we had seen so far. A porter in black and gold directed us to the office of the local constabulary, a few doors down from the station. There we met Inspector MacNaughton, a large, comfortable man of about fifty years who was in the process of winding up his daily duties and no doubt looking forward to a glass of stout at the local pub followed by a pleasant supper at home. His mood changed abruptly as our impressive entourage swept into his place of business. Lestrade presented his credentials and introduced us all around. He quickly displayed the warrants and outlined our mission. Much to our

satisfaction, Inspector MacNaughton immediately identified Waldo and Olive. He further informed us that they had an interest in an old coal mine located on a large tract of private property a few miles from town.

“I might add,” said MacNaughton, warming to his subject, “That the mine proper is operated by Waldo Hare’s brother Joseph who stays on the property continually except for when he comes to town for supplies, and that he does about once a month. I know a steady run of coal comes out of the place, but more can’t say because the property is posted and visitors have never been welcome. There has been some speculation about the mine because we’ve never seen a worker since the place started up half a year ago, but things stayed proper quiet so the talk died away. The folk around here are very strong on live and let live I’ll tell you.”

While finishing his tale, Inspector MacNaughton wrote a note to his evening constable, selected a side arm and two lanterns from a battered wall locker, then led us to a nearby livery where we packed ourselves into an old and rather poorly sprung four wheeler with a warped rear rim that created a constant, irritating sway for the entire trip. The countryside was quite bleak but I know of no view that is pleasing to the eye during an afternoon rain such as the one that swirled around our carriage as it bumped up the un-named country lanes. Now and then hedgerows rose higher than the carriage windows where the roadbed had eroded over the years to form a trench that threatened to engulf us at every dip and curve. I remarked to inspector MacNaughton that I thought it strange that anyone could operate a coal mine, apparently with slave labor, and not be found out.

“It may come as a surprise,” said the Inspector, “to a Londoner like yourself Dr. Watson, but as I’ve said before, people in these parts, as a rule, have a pretty hard go of it and have neither the energy or interest to do much snooping beyond a little talk of an evening. Life in the mines is terrible difficult. Even the paid workers ain’t much better off than slaves. A week’s work barely buys the bread and bacon to keep ‘em going. I dunno,” he mused, more to himself than to me, “at times I wonder how a soul has the courage to go on livin’ a life of such misery.”

Our carriage lurched to a stop before a heavy wooden gate, flanked by wire fencing that ran off into the haze on either side. Constable Freeman jumped out, threw it open and leaped back aboard as we moved through. The hedges were left behind and the deep road became more of a surface track which allowed a better view over the treeless, rolling land that lay in front of us. In less than five minutes a rather large, but low hill showed us it’s outline. I judged the distance to be about half a mile down the track we were following. The road itself seemed to lead to a ragged, dark area at the hills base. As we drew near we could make out the mine entrance above a large slag pile. The whole scene was ugly and desolate.

The last stretch of road took us through a piece of low ground which effectively hid the mine entrance from view until we swung around the base of the slag pile and up a sharp incline to a large level area in front of the black hole which suddenly loomed large and threatening. I believe I have said before that I am not given to moods and fancies, but I found myself imagining some large and vile monster slithering around in the blackness just beyond my vision. I literally shook my head to rid myself of

those foolish thoughts. To my left I saw two small buildings that were nothing more than an animal shelter and a shack that proved to be the living quarters for Joseph Hare. Supplies for the mine were kept in a lean-to in back of the animal shelter. At least three horses were in the rough structure and off to one side were two wagons, one of which was painted a bright yellow. Narrow gauge railroad tracks ran in from the Northeast and terminated at a high bank where a wooden ramp had been built for dumping coal. Due to my heightened awareness, this whole visual inspection occurred within the first five seconds after we had reached the top of the incline. On the sixth second, Inspector MacNaughton cried out and pointed toward the mouth of the tunnel where we saw three figures bending over something on the ground.

“Quickly Inspector” shouted Holmes to MacNaughton, “fire your pistol at that box on the ground in front of them --- quickly man.”

The Inspector raised his large hand, fairly engulfing his bulky revolver which barked three times in rapid succession. As I watched, the three figures jumped back, ran into the mouth of the tunnel and vanished from sight. While all this was happening, our carriage had covered half the distance to the mine entrance. In a few more seconds our driver reigned up and we all climbed down to examine the dark object on the ground.

“It’s as I thought,” exclaimed Holmes, “this device is a magneto used to detonate explosives. See here - they had just finished attaching these wires that lead into the mine. Without your shots Inspector, they would have pushed this plunger and sealed the mine entrance. Our speculations as to their intentions toward the remaining children seem to have been accurate. We must now enter the mine in search of our Quarry. I must remind you gentlemen that we are at great disadvantage in that the mine is unknown to us whereas the three rats are cornered in their own nest. I suggest Lestrade, that you post constable Freeman here to guard the entrance. Once inside we had better remain together in loose file. It is quite likely we will be subject to ambush and in that event we will most assuredly need our collective support.”

Lestrade did as Holmes had suggested with a few hurried instructions while we checked our firearms. From a nearby pile of lumber, Holmes picked up a long thin pole and with a twist of wire, fixed a lantern to one end.

“Inspector MacNaughton”, said Holmes, “I think it wise that we not light the other lantern. Keep it in reserve. I will lead the way with this lantern held well out in front like so.”

Holmes demonstrated by picking up the pole and swinging the lantern a good eight feet from where he stood.

“I hope,” he said, “that if we are ambushed, they will shoot at the light, expecting a body to be directly behind it. If it should happen in that fashion, watch for the flash of their weapons and shoot accordingly.”

With that he turned and we followed in single file. I was directly behind Holmes; Lestrade was at my back, then Cook and MacNaughton.

If I were counting our paces on my fingers, I would not have used them all before that hellish pit engulfed us in its absolute blackness. The daylight fled from us as though repulsed from that evil place. My revolver held in my hand mere inches from my face was invisible. The only illumination was the feeble glow of Holmes' lantern bobbing steadily in the dank, musty air. The rough black walls returned little of the light cast upon them and ahead a nothingness so intense as to play tricks with the eyes. I found that if I tried to penetrate it by straining my sight, little whorls and streaks of pseudo light would invade my eyeballs. Eventually I discovered that it was best to constantly shift my eyes within the limited area covered by the lantern.

The floor, though relatively flat, was strewn with a large amount of odd sized pieces of coal that crunched underfoot as we descended. The slope was pronounced though not difficult. I soon lost all track of time and distance. The tunnel turned slightly every so often but no side passages appeared and the roof remained high enough to allow us to walk upright. I am not ashamed to admit that I became alarmed at the thought of the distance we had penetrated the earth, but still the shaft led on. The only sound to reach my ears was the soft crunch of coal nuggets underfoot. An occasional rattle told of a larger chunk kicked by our blind feet. Without warning we suddenly found ourselves standing in a large, circular chamber. The dark walls of the tunnel swept out and away so subtly that for a few moments we did not notice their absence. We all stopped, still in line, while Holmes swung the lantern in a wide arc. Aside from our entranceway, there were four other exits spaced around the other half of the large shell in which we stood. Holmes set down the lamp and walked to each in turn and struck a pose that told me he was listening intently for any sound that might betray the presence of life. He apparently had no good results for he retrieved the lantern and carried it with him to examine the floor of each tunnel in turn. As soon as he completed his inspection of the fourth and last entrance, he returned to the second and beckoned us to follow along. I could not guess at what he had seen as the floors at the four entrances looked to be identical. Our new route was much more difficult than the one we had just traversed. The low roof made walking upright an impossibility and more than once we were forced to crawl as we penetrated ever deeper into the earth. The new tunnel began to open on large, empty rooms dug out of the coal vein on either side. The workers would burrow in to the coal until a wall of rock was reached, clearing out a room about twenty feet-square. When all of the material had been removed, they would move down the main tunnel and start a new room, leaving a wall of coal about six feet thick to provide support for the roof. We did encounter one side passage that looked to be of natural origin. It is uncommon but not unheard of for a mining operation to uncover caves deep in the earth. We passed it by and continued on the main route. All that time we heard no sound other than that of our own making. Again the walls widened abruptly. This time in to a natural, high vaulted tunnel of sorts that curved off to the right for some unknown distance. A multitude of shelves and ledges were scattered randomly on both sidewalls and many large, broken stones dotted the floor. I thought to myself that if we were to be ambushed, this would be the place. Glancing at my companions, I could tell by their crouching outlines that they shared my thoughts. The rocky walls were of a sandy colour which reflected more of our lantern light. It was that extra light that allowed me to see, though faintly, my companions, which I must say was another disadvantage. I would rather have remained invisible.

We paused there for several moments, but nothing happened. The place was an absolute tomb. Holmes motioned us to spread out more then continued his advance. We had gone about fifty paces when he stopped and pointed ahead and slightly to the left where a natural looking embankment ran part way up the wall at a rather sharp angle. The light was extremely feeble but I could make out what looked to be steps cut in the bank which led up to a very wide hole in the wall. We approached with the utmost caution until we were quite near the bottom of the crudely carved steps. Holmes motioned for us to wait in place while he had a look at what lay up top.

His foot had just rested on the fourth of the dozen or so steps when an overwhelming explosion seemed to rupture the very fabric of the cavern. It proved to be nothing more than a pistol shot, but after so long in silence, and considering the echo in such a place, the sound was magnified many times in our minds. A second bullet buried itself in the rubble near my feet; I was able to see the flash that came from a ledge on the opposite wall. As I was reacting to that second bullet, by crouching to make myself a smaller target, a bright streak flashed over my head toward the source of the shots. Holmes had thrown the lantern at our attackers.

“Quickly,” he shouted as the lantern arced through the air, “up here - follow me.” As I turned to the steps the lantern smashed on the far wall, it’s kerosene splashing over a wide area and burned violently. In the weird, leaping light we scrambled up those steps and fairly dove into the chamber beyond. The kerosene was being quickly consumed but in the dying light we could see that we were in a natural little grotto about twenty feet wide and twice that in depth. The grotto mouth was as wide as the chamber and about seven feet high in the centre. The ceiling, as it progressed in to the room, curved up to about twice the height of the door and was festooned with a multitude of stalactites of all sizes. Most of the stalagmites had been cleaned from the floor but here and there a thick stump or pillar offered a degree of shelter from the bullets that we expected at any moment. Although we were the only occupants at that time, it was rather easy to see that this was the sleeping place for the workers in this mine. Much straw and a few pitifully rude sticks of furniture were strewn about the floor. Filth was everywhere and the stench that assailed our nostrils was almost beyond bearing. I heard one of our number gagging, but could not tell who because the kerosene burning on the far wall was consumed and with a final flicker of blue light we were again in total darkness.

Inspector MacNaughton still had a good lamp, which for the present we dared not use. Our only option was to remain behind the convenient stalagmites and wait for our enemies to attack, hoping that by returning fire at their gun flashes, we might have the good fortune to find our targets. I would say that about five minutes passed before anything happened. At first we heard some muffled scrapings and the clatter of a loose rock which seemed to be well to the right of the opening to our chamber. This was followed almost immediately by the long shriek and groan of metal rubbing on metal ending with a very heavy metallic crash. Our ears were so tortured that I almost missed the much quieter sound of a key working a lock. Suddenly it dawned on me.

“Holmes,” I cried, “Am I right?” Has that devil got us locked in again?”

Holmes voice came softly out of the dark. "I'm afraid so old man. Both times we have had to stalk our quarry in it's own lair which put us at a decided disadvantage."

"Gentlemen," whispered Lestrade from somewhere to my left, "I'd like a look at what imprisons us. Shade your eyes from the side and look toward the entrance."

We did so and Lestrade fired his pistol to the front. The brief flash showed a solid iron gate covering the entire mouth of the chamber. There were two main horizontal beams and one long rod at an angle for support. The upright bars were small and close together. Each one cut top and bottom to fit the contours of the entrance.

As though a nightmare was repeating itself, we then had to listen to the insane bellowing laughter of Waldo Hare.

"Mister Holmes – I was near to bein' speechless when I saw twas you and the good Doctor on that wagon. I can't guess what miracle you performed to get out of my first little trap, but no matter. Now that you're locked in with the kiddies, me and me loved ones will step outside and finish our business."

"What kiddies?" muttered Constable Cook.

"Shhh!" Holmes hissed before the constable could say more.

Waldo continued; "There's four of ye in there now.

Seein' as how I saw five of ye on the wagon, I'll wager there's a man at our front door. Well, three to one is good odds any day and he has the light to his back."

"Come on now Waldo," This from a voice I had not heard before which had to be that of brother Joseph, "that's yer trouble. Ye always have to gloat when ye have a winning hand and its forever gettin' ye in the soup."

"My good brother is correct," Waldo responded, "We must get topside and finish our task with the magneto box. There are four cases of dynamite in the main shaft that need exploding."

"Waldo," this time it was Olive speaking, "Yer brothers right. Come along this minute or we leave you with your friends."

"Coming dearie;" said Waldo with a chuckle. From further off he called back. "Good luck on yer second miracle Mr. Holmes. But don't you worry if you can't get out. No one is likely to trouble you where you are.... ever."

Again we had to listen to his repulsive laughter, though this time diffused and distant.

Inspector MacNaughton lit his lantern and walked to the gate to look into the main passage. "All clear," he said, "thought maybe one of them had stayed behind."

Meanwhile Holmes was busy examining the gate. Inspector MacNaughton saw this and followed along with the light. On the right there were two massive hinges imbedded firmly in the stone. Twenty feet to the left was a solid box lock welded to the gate with a foot long striker plate spiked to the wall. The lock itself was backed on our side by a square yard of heavy mesh welded to the bars leaving no way for us to reach the front of the lock, where the single keyhole was located.

“Well old man,” I said, walking up to Holmes who, with Lestrade, was examining the mesh, “if you do have one more miracle in your pocket, now is the time to pull it out.”

I made that attempt at being light-hearted because I felt that in this desperate situation Holmes did not need despairing men at his elbow. I must say here and now that I was with a group of sturdy fellows in that awful place. Holmes walked the length of the gate, returned to the centre and said, “This gate is twenty feet long and very heavy. It has no support along the entire length, so if I take hold of one of these bars and push and pull like so - see how it bounces in and out due to its own momentum and weight. Even after I release it, it continues to oscillate for a time. If these oscillations become violent enough, the gate will crack or the pins will pull out of one wall or the other. It is also possible that when the gate becomes bowed enough at the end of one of its swings, the bend may be enough to pull the bolt from the plate.

“I see what you are driving at,” said MacNaughton, “but I don’t believe we can move our arms that far and that fast.”

“We don’t remain at the centre,” Holmes explained, “Here is the plan: The five of us will start the gate bouncing here in the middle. Once we have it moving fairly rapidly, Watson and I will work our way toward the lock side while the rest of you work your way toward the hinge. It will take a great effort and we must not let up the push and pull for an instant. Even as you move outward from bar to bar, never miss a beat. Would someone place the lamp in a safe place? Now - are we ready?”

We all lined up, shoulder to shoulder and took a firm grip on the bars.

“Remember,” said Holmes, “the gate has its own rate of vibration, we must work with it and simply add to it. Here we go now.”

It began very easily. I could feel the natural swing in and out. After a dozen strokes it was traveling a foot or more in the middle.

“Start to separate now.” Holmes shouted, “It will become progressively more difficult, but do not let up.”

Hand over hand we worked our way outward from the middle. By the time we covered half the distance to the lock, the centre section was swooshing back and forth something over two feet. Holmes was correct. At every step it became more difficult to add to the momentum. My breath was coming fast and the muscles in my arms began to ache. I cursed myself for not removing my jacket as sweat ran down my brow and stung my eyes. Four more steps. The centre travel was now close to three feet. The whole gate was groaning and creaking while the lock and hinges were rattling like dozens of giant sabers. Two more steps. I knew that I was fast approaching the limit of my physical endurance. We were very near the edge of the gate.

“Get ready,” Holmes shouted over the boiler room noise we were creating, “as hard as you can—NOW!”

I focused my mind on the iron bars I was holding and thought of Waldo Hare. I expended every last ounce of strength on a final pushing and pulling on that hated gate. My companions must have done the same, for on about the fourth all-out push,

the striker plate ripped from the wall and the gate tore out of our hands, still vibrating crazily, and swung in a wide arc to crash against the wall.

Drained as we were, it was a minute or two before anyone spoke.

“Good thing it broke loose just then,” said Constable Cook, “That last push before she broke was about all I had left in me.”

Lestrade, still puffing a bit, replied, “Yes it was a close one.” And to me, “Should be worthy of a page or two in your diary, eh Doctor?”

“More like several Inspector. Providing of course that we survive the remainder of our ordeal.”

“I’m afraid,” said Holmes while wiping his hands on his jacket, “we can allow ourselves no more rest. We are in a race for our lives. Our three beauties are walking to the entrance with a five-minute lead so we must run. When we get to the main tunnel, look for the wires leading to the explosives. If we can cut them we’ll be saved. Once we deal with the Hare’s, we can search for the children who must be, contrary to what Mr. Hare believes, hiding elsewhere in the mine. Now Inspector MacNaughton, if you will hand me...”

Holmes stopped talking for a new sound had entered our small world. A high, thin, constant tone swirled faintly around us, seeming to come from all directions at once. Holmes took the lantern from MacNaughton and we began our return journey as swiftly as possible. All the while we moved the high-pitched tone grew slowly stronger.

“What on earth can it be?” asked Lestrade. But no one had an answer.

Shortly thereafter we heard what might have been a shout but we could not be sure. After passing several of the “rooms” where the coal had been removed, we came to a slight bend in the tunnel where the natural cave had been uncovered. It ran off to our left at a slight incline as we approached it at a dogtrot. Holmes pulled up short at the cave mouth. The shrill tone was much louder and definitely coming from that unlikely place.

“It’s the children,” said Holmes, “Listen...”

He was right, It was the combined voices of all those little ones singing over and over, “yi-yi-yi-yi-yi.” with so many of them singing, the sound blended into one continuous tone that sent shivers down my spine.

Then more shouting, faint but distinct. “Watch him Olive,” It was Waldo Hare, “the little rat has a pick.” “You fool,” screamed Olive, “only the one gun and you dropped it when they jumped us.”

“Be silent Olive,” This time it was Joseph, “We all thought they was locked up with the others save your breath to stay alive.”

“Incredible.” I gasped, “Those poor things have turned on there tormentors.”

“AHHH! My arm,” cried Olive, “that devil sliced me arm with a shovel blade. Get back or I’ll kill the lot of you.”

All during that exchange the hypnotic high tone vibrated inside my skull and raised the hair on my neck.

“We had better see if we can rescue the Hares,” Holmes said. “I have a feeling that the children will not be satisfied with mere injury. We all murmured our agreement and entered the natural cave, still surrounded by that unearthly sound. We had not gone far before the shouting began again.

“Here they come again.” It was Joseph, I believe, “run for it!”

“Don’t leave me behind,” Screeched Olive.

“Stop,” bellowed Waldo, “don’t run, face ‘em side by side and walk backwards. Here, link arms – that’s it. Hold that stick up. Keep movin’. Those little...wha... Help me.” Then the three of them began a very long but rapidly receding scream that I shall remember should I live past the century mark. I was as certain as though I had been an eyewitness to the event that they had stepped backwards over an abyss of enormous depth. It must have been a stupendous pit because the screams did not end abruptly. They just faded away as though the victims had exhausted their breath and the earth had swallowed them before they could renew their cries. The children had stopped their singing and the sudden silence was almost disorienting. But after a brief pause we hurried on. Soon we came upon the young people, sitting in the dark in one large group, their mining tools lay discarded and forgotten at their sides. Many vacant eyes turned toward us with little outward reaction. Their poor starved bodies were spent physically and their minds exhausted emotionally. Whether we were friend or foe, they could no longer react.

We walked through that pitiful group and beyond to where we found the awful hole that claimed the lives of Waldo, Olive and Joseph. Ample evidence of their backward steps could be seen in the thick dust up to the very edge where they had struggled to no avail to recover their balance. Holmes cast the beam of light into that well of darkness but it could not begin to penetrate its depth.

“Couldn’t wish that on anybody,” muttered Constable Cook, “but I’ve never met a trio more deserving of a trip down to hell.”

Nothing more was said. We gathered together the children who were docile as lambs, verified that we had them all, then slowly made our way back to the mine proper and from there to the surface in about thirty minutes. Daylight, such as it was, was beginning to fail when we at last reached the mouth of the mine, but never since then has an expanse of sky looked as glorious to me. My companions felt the same and said as much.

Constable Freeman who had kept his lonely vigil all this while was vastly relieved to see us return, although he was sensitive enough to temporarily keep his questions to himself.

A singular thing happened after we had made our exit and headed toward the four-wheeler. As we were passing the magneto box which sat there armed and ready, Holmes, who as a rule was as sure footed as a cat, stepped on a round stone which caused his left leg to fly out from under him and he went down, landing full on the plunger of the box. The charges must have been set deep in the shaft for the explosion

was quite muffled. The ground underfoot trembled and a deep rumbling could be heard which told of massive cave-ins. Minutes later a large gout of dirty smoke billowed from the entrance and hung uncertainly in the air.

“My apologies to you all.” said Holmes, who had quickly picked himself up, “Very clumsy of me indeed.” The other members of our party looked at him slightly askance but no one said a word. Cook and Freeman took the four-wheeler and headed for town with instructions to return with food, blankets and sufficient transport to carry the lot of us back to town.

An hour or so later we all were loaded into five wagons to begin our journey back to Langollen. The children were in four large open bed wagons, wrapped in blankets and happily munching on a cold mutton and hard bread. It was quite dark when we pulled away from that place but I had no desire to look back.

Constable MacNaughton took us to the local pub to toast our good fortune and bid us good bye with the camaraderie of men who have seen each other through a mortal danger, then packed us and the children aboard the first available train. Our return to London was quite uneventful. Although the night was long, our spirits were high and we found ourselves back in our rooms in Baker Street at first light. The children were in the competent hands of Scotland Yard, the adventure was over and we could relax.

I was so exhausted that I went directly to bed and slept through the day. I awoke in the early evening fairly well starved. Holmes was gone off somewhere so, owing myself a good meal, I took a hansom to the Three Nuns Tavern, at Billingsgate Fish Market and stuffed myself with seafood. My arms and shoulders were still quite sore and I was still very tired so, with my hunger satisfied I returned to my blessed bed and slept soundly through the night. I awoke quite early and was busy devouring a wealthy mans breakfast when my friend walked in the front door.

“You surprise me old boy,” I said through a bite of toast, “I had assumed that you were still fast asleep but here you come from out of doors. Have you had your breakfast?”

“I will join you for a cup of coffee thanks.” This he said while walking to the mantle whereupon he extracted a huge star sapphire ring from the sliding panel on the molding. “Do you recognize this?” he asked while holding it up for my inspection.

“Oh, yes. I believe it was given to you in gratitude for services rendered to an unnamed member of the royal family.”

“Right you are Watson, and for all the time it has been in my possession it has lain hidden in the mantle for I have had no use for such a bauble until now.”

“Whats that?” I asked, “you say you have a use for it?”

“Yes - by way of explanation should tell you that I have been busy since our return, attempting to locate a suitable home for the children we took from the toy shop and the mine. There are so many of them that it proved to be quite a task, but I am happy to report that I was up to the challenge.”

Holmes sat down at the table and poured coffee.

“I have placed the lot of them with the Reverend Thomas Guthrie at his school in Edinburgh. This little jewel here has, as is the case with most gems of great value, had a rather grim history as it passed from one hand to another. It is about to change hands again, but this time for the good. I am turning it over to Reverend Guthrie who will in turn sell it and use the proceeds for the operation of the school. Assurances have been made that the sale will bring in more than enough to care for those waifs until they are old enough to make their own way.”

“What a magnificent gesture,” I cried, “I cannot tell you how delighted I am.”

“Watson, we can’t cure all the ills of this world, but I feel a responsibility and I am thankful that I am in position to solve at least one problem.”

Holmes finished his coffee and made ready to leave. “Before you go,” I said, “there are a couple of points regarding our adventure that want a bit of illumination. You recall that on our way in to the mine, when we reached the first large chamber, you somehow managed to select the proper route by examining the floor. What was it that you saw?”

“Coal dust,” Holmes replied, “the air of a working mine is full of the stuff and it settles on everything much as common house dust settles on furniture. The tunnel I chose was the only one that did not have a fairly thick coat of undisturbed dust on the floor.”

“Quite so,” I said, “now - one last item concerning your fall which caused the explosion which sealed the mine. No one questioned you about it yet you are not given to clumsiness.”

“Ah yes, my little accident. You must admit dear boy that it did solve a few problems. No one had to risk further investigation around that pit that claimed the lives of the Hare tribe. More importantly, the children were spared detention in Llangollen while the official machinery made its exhaustive investigation. I imagine that some of the children would have been taken back into the mine for some reason or another. It is much better that they are far away from that place - forever. They have many scars to heal and a lengthy investigation would only slow the process.

Your implied question is; did I fall on that magneto box on purpose? For the present at least I will reserve my answer. If no, it makes no difference, but if yes, - well, let it rest on my conscience.”

As Holmes reached for the doorknob I said, “As you wish, but I must say that if I had done the deed on purpose it would rest so lightly on my conscience that I would hardly feel its weight.”

My friend smiled and said, “It’s a very nice day out, you should go for a walk in the park. I must be off now, I’m a bit late for my meeting with Reverend Guthrie.”

As he went down the stairs I could hear him whistling softly. Something from Chopin I believe.