

ADVENTURE 10 ❖ THE NAVAL TREATY, PART 1

❖ *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* ❖

The July which immediately succeeded my marriage was made memorable by three cases of interest, in which I had the privilege of being associated with Sherlock Holmes and of studying his methods. I find them recorded in my notes under the headings of “The Adventure of the Second Stain,” “The Adventure of the Naval Treaty,” and “The Adventure of the Tired Captain.” The first of these, however, deals with interest of such importance and implicates so many of the first families in the kingdom that for many years it will be impossible to make it public. No case, however, in which Holmes was engaged has ever illustrated the value of his analytical methods so clearly or has impressed those who were associated with him so deeply. I still retain an almost verbatim report of the interview in which he demonstrated the true facts of the case to Monsieur Dubugue of the Paris police, and Fritz von Waldbaum, the well-known specialist of Dantzic, both of whom had wasted their energies upon what proved to be side-issues. The new century will have come, however, before the story can be safely told. Meanwhile I pass on to the second on my list, which promised also at one time to be of national importance, and was marked by several incidents which give it a quite unique character.

During my school-days I had been intimately associated with a lad named Percy Phelps, who was of much the same age as myself, though he was two classes ahead of me. He was a very brilliant boy, and carried away every prize which the school had to offer, finished his exploits by winning a scholarship which sent him on to continue his triumphant career at Cambridge. He was, I remember, extremely well connected, and even when we were all little boys together we knew that his mother’s brother was Lord Holdhurst, the great conservative politician. This gaudy relationship did him little good at school. On the contrary, it seemed rather a piquant thing to us to chevy him about the playground and hit him over the shins with a wicket. But it was another thing when he came out into the world. I heard vaguely that his abilities and the influences which he commanded had won him a good position at the Foreign Office, and then he passed completely out of my mind until the following letter recalled his existence:

Briarbrae, Woking.

My dear Watson,—I have no doubt that you can remember “Tadpole” Phelps, who was in the fifth form when you were in the third. It is possible even that you may have heard that through my uncle’s influence I obtained a good appointment at the Foreign Office, and that I was in a situation of trust and honor until a horrible misfortune came suddenly to blast my career.

There is no use writing of the details of that dreadful event. In the event of your acceding to my request it is probable that I shall have to narrate them to you. I have only just recovered from nine weeks of brain-fever, and am still exceedingly weak. Do you think that you could bring your friend Mr. Holmes down to see me? I should like to have his opinion of the case, though the authorities assure me that nothing more can be done. Do try to bring him down, and as soon as possible. Every minute seems an hour while I live in this state of horrible suspense. Assure him that if I have not asked his advice sooner it was not because I did not appreciate his talents, but because I have been off my head ever since the blow fell. Now I am clear again, though I dare not think of it too much for fear of a relapse. I am still so weak that I have to write, as you see, by dictating. Do try to bring him.

Your old school-fellow,

Percy Phelps.

There was something that touched me as I read this letter, something pitiable in the reiterated appeals to bring Holmes. So moved was I that even had it been a difficult matter I should have tried it, but of course I knew well that Holmes loved his art, so that he was ever as ready to bring his aid as his client could be to receive it. My wife agreed with me that not a moment should be lost in laying the matter before him, and so within an hour of breakfast-time I found myself back once more in the old rooms in Baker Street.

Holmes was seated at his side-table clad in his dressing-gown, and working hard over a chemical investigation. A large curved retort was boiling furiously in the bluish flame of a Bunsen burner, and the distilled drops were condensing into a two-litre measure. My friend hardly glanced up as I entered, and I, seeing that his investigation must be of importance, seated myself in an arm-chair and waited. He dipped into this bottle or that, drawing out a few drops of each with his glass pipette, and finally brought a test-tube containing a solution over to the table. In his right hand he held a slip of litmus-paper.

“You come at a crisis, Watson,” said he. “If this paper remains blue, all is well. If it turns red, it means a man’s life.” He dipped it into the test-tube and it flushed at once into a dull, dirty crimson. “Hum! I thought as much!” he cried. “I will be at your service in an instant, Watson. You will find tobacco in the Persian slipper.” He turned to his desk and scribbled off several telegrams, which were handed over to the page-boy. Then he threw himself down into the chair opposite, and drew up his knees until his fingers clasped round his long, thin shins.

“A very commonplace little murder,” said he. “You’ve got something better, I fancy. You are the stormy petrel of crime, Watson. What is it?”

I handed him the letter, which he read with the most concentrated attention.

“It does not tell us very much, does it?” he remarked, as he handed it back to me.

“Hardly anything.”

“And yet the writing is of interest.”

“But the writing is not his own.”

“Precisely. It is a woman’s.”

“A man’s surely,” I cried.

“No, a woman’s, and a woman of rare character. You see, at the commencement of an investigation it is something to know that your client is in close contact with some one who, for good or evil, has an exceptional nature. My interest is already awakened in the case. If you are ready we will start at once for Woking, and see this diplomatist who is in such evil case, and the lady to whom he dictates his letters.”

We were fortunate enough to catch an early train at Waterloo, and in a little under an hour we found ourselves among the fir-woods and the heather of Woking. Briarbrae proved to be a large detached house standing in extensive grounds within a few minutes’ walk of the station. On sending in our cards we were shown into an elegantly appointed drawing-room, where we were joined in a few minutes by a rather stout man who received us with much hospitality. His age may have been nearer forty than thirty, but his cheeks were so ruddy and his eyes so merry that he still conveyed the impression of a plump and mischievous boy.

“I am so glad that you have come,” said he, shaking our hands with effusion. “Percy has been inquiring for you all morning. Ah, poor old chap, he clings to any straw! His father and his mother asked me to see you, for the mere mention of the subject is very painful to them.”

“We have had no details yet,” observed Holmes. “I perceive that you are not yourself a member of the family.”

Our acquaintance looked surprised, and then, glancing down, he began to laugh.

“Of course you saw the J H monogram on my locket,” said he. “For a moment I thought you had done something clever. Joseph Harrison is my name, and as Percy is to marry my sister Annie I shall at least be a relation by marriage. You will find my sister in his room, for she has nursed him hand-and-foot this two months back. Perhaps we’d better go in at once, for I know how impatient he is.”

The chamber in which we were shown was on the same floor as the drawing-room. It was furnished partly as a sitting and partly as a bedroom, with flowers arranged daintily in every nook and corner. A young man, very pale and worn, was lying upon a sofa near the open window, through which came the rich scent of the garden and the balmy summer air. A woman was sitting beside him, who rose as we entered.

“Shall I leave, Percy?” she asked.

He clutched her hand to detain her. “How are you, Watson?” said he, cordially. “I should never have known you under that moustache, and I dare say you would not be prepared to swear to me. This I presume is your celebrated friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes?”

I introduced him in a few words, and we both sat down. The stout young man had left us, but his sister still remained with her hand in that of the invalid. She was a striking-looking woman, a little short and thick for symmetry, but with a beautiful olive complexion, large, dark, Italian eyes, and a wealth of deep black hair. Her rich tints made the white face of her companion the more worn and haggard by the contrast.

“I won’t waste your time,” said he, raising himself upon the sofa. “I’ll plunge into the matter without further preamble. I was a happy and successful man, Mr. Holmes, and on the eve of being married, when a sudden and dreadful misfortune wrecked all my prospects in life.

“I was, as Watson may have told you, in the Foreign Office, and through the influences of my uncle, Lord Holdhurst, I rose rapidly to a responsible position. When my uncle became foreign minister in this administration he gave me several missions of trust, and as I always brought them to a successful conclusion, he came at last to have the utmost confidence in my ability and tact.

“Nearly ten weeks ago—to be more accurate, on the 23d of May—he called me into his private room, and, after complimenting me on the good work which I had done, he informed me that he had a new commission of trust for me to execute.

“‘This,’ said he, taking a gray roll of paper from his bureau, ‘is the original of that secret treaty between England and Italy of which, I regret to say, some rumors have already got into the public press. It is of enormous importance that nothing further should leak out. The French or the Russian embassy would pay an immense sum to learn the contents of these papers. They should not leave my bureau were it not that it is absolutely necessary to have them copied. You have a desk in your office?’”

“‘Yes, sir.’”

“‘Then take the treaty and lock it up there. I shall give directions that you may remain behind when the others go, so that you may copy it at your leisure without fear of being overlooked. When you have finished, relock both the original and the draft in the desk, and hand them over to me personally to-morrow morning.’”

“I took the papers and—”

“Excuse me an instant,” said Holmes. “Were you alone during this conversation?”

“Absolutely.”

“In a large room?”

“Thirty feet each way.”

“In the centre?”

“Yes, about it.”

“And speaking low?”

“My uncle’s voice is always remarkably low. I hardly spoke at all.”

“Thank you,” said Holmes, shutting his eyes; “pray go on.”

“I did exactly what he indicated, and waited until the other clerks had departed. One of them in my room, Charles Gorot, had some arrears of work to make up, so I left him there and went out to dine. When I returned he was gone. I was anxious to hurry my work, for I knew that Joseph—the Mr. Harrison whom you saw just now—was in town, and that he would travel down to Woking by the eleven-o’clock train, and I wanted if possible to catch it.

“When I came to examine the treaty I saw at once that it was of such importance that my uncle had been guilty of no exaggeration in what he had said. Without going into details, I may say that it defined the position of Great Britain towards the Triple Alliance, and fore-shadowed the policy which this country would pursue in the event of the French fleet gaining a complete ascendancy over that of Italy in the Mediterranean. The questions treated in it were purely naval. At the end were the signatures of the high dignitaries who had signed it. I glanced my eyes over it, and then settled down to my task of copying.

“It was a long document, written in the French language, and containing twenty-six separate articles. I copied as quickly as I could, but at nine o’clock I had only done nine articles, and it seemed hopeless for me to attempt to catch my train. I was feeling drowsy and stupid, partly from my dinner and also from the effects of a long day’s work. A cup of coffee would clear my brain. A commissionnaire remains all night in a little lodge at the foot of the stairs, and is in the habit of making coffee at his spirit-lamp for any of the officials who may be working over time. I rang the bell, therefore, to summon him.

“To my surprise, it was a woman who answered the summons, a large, coarse-faced, elderly woman, in an apron. She explained that she was the commissionnaire’s wife, who did the charing, and I gave her the order for the coffee.

“I wrote two more articles and then, feeling more drowsy than ever, I rose and walked up and down the room to stretch my legs. My coffee had not yet come, and I wondered what the cause of the delay could be. Opening the door, I started down the corridor to find out. There was a straight passage, dimly lighted, which led from the room in which I had been working, and was the only exit from it. It ended in a curving staircase, with the commissionnaire’s lodge in the passage at the bottom. Half way down this staircase is a small landing, with another passage running into it at right angles. This second one leads by means of a second small stair to a side door, used by servants, and also as a short cut by clerks when coming from Charles Street. Here is a rough chart of the place.”

“Thank you. I think that I quite follow you,” said Sherlock Holmes.

“It is of the utmost importance that you should notice this point. I went down the stairs and into the hall, where I found the commissionnaire fast asleep in his box, with the kettle boiling furiously upon the spirit-lamp. I took off the kettle and blew out the lamp, for the water was spurting over the floor. Then I put out my hand and was about to shake the man, who was still sleeping soundly, when a bell over his head rang loudly, and he woke with a start.

“‘Mr. Phelps, sir!’ said he, looking at me in bewilderment.

“‘I came down to see if my coffee was ready.’

“‘I was boiling the kettle when I fell asleep, sir.’ He looked at me and then up at the still quivering bell with an ever-growing astonishment upon his face.

“‘If you was here, sir, then who rang the bell?’ he asked.

“‘The bell!’ I cried. ‘What bell is it?’

“‘It’s the bell of the room you were working in.’

“A cold hand seemed to close round my heart. Some one, then, was in that room where my precious treaty lay upon the table. I ran frantically up the stair and along the passage. There was no one in the corridors, Mr. Holmes. There was no one in the room. All was exactly as I left it, save only that the papers which had been committed to my care had been taken from the desk on which they lay. The copy was there, and the original was gone.”

Holmes sat up in his chair and rubbed his hands. I could see that the problem was entirely to his heart. “Pray, what did you do then?” he murmured.

“I recognized in an instant that the thief must have come up the stairs from the side door. Of course I must have met him if he had come the other way.”

“You were satisfied that he could not have been concealed in the room all the time, or in the corridor which you have just described as dimly lighted?”

“It is absolutely impossible. A rat could not conceal himself either in the room or the corridor. There is no cover at all.”

“Thank you. Pray proceed.”

“The commissionaire, seeing by my pale face that something was to be feared, had followed me upstairs. Now we both rushed along the corridor and down the steep steps which led to Charles Street. The door at the bottom was closed, but unlocked. We flung it open and rushed out. I can distinctly remember that as we did so there came three chimes from a neighboring clock. It was quarter to ten.”

“That is of enormous importance,” said Holmes, making a note upon his shirt-cuff.

“The night was very dark, and a thin, warm rain was falling. There was no one in Charles Street, but a great traffic was going on, as usual, in Whitehall, at the extremity. We rushed along the pavement, bare-headed as we were, and at the far corner we found a policeman standing.

“‘A robbery has been committed,’ I gasped. ‘A document of immense value has been stolen from the Foreign Office. Has any one passed this way?’

“‘I have been standing here for a quarter of an hour, sir,’ said he; ‘only one person has passed during that time—a woman, tall and elderly, with a Paisley shawl.’

“‘Ah, that is only my wife,’ cried the commissionaire; ‘has no one else passed?’

“‘No one.’

“‘Then it must be the other way that the thief took,’ cried the fellow, tugging at my sleeve.

“‘But I was not satisfied, and the attempts which he made to draw me away increased my suspicions.

“‘Which way did the woman go?’ I cried.

“‘I don’t know, sir. I noticed her pass, but I had no special reason for watching her. She seemed to be in a hurry.’

“‘How long ago was it?’

“Oh, not very many minutes.’

“Within the last five?’

“Well, it could not be more than five.’

“You’re only wasting your time, sir, and every minute now is of importance,’ cried the commissionnaire; ‘take my word for it that my old woman has nothing to do with it, and come down to the other end of the street. Well, if you won’t, I will.’ And with that he rushed off in the other direction.

“But I was after him in an instant and caught him by the sleeve.

“Where do you live?’ said I.

“16 Ivy Lane, Brixton,’ he answered. ‘But don’t let yourself be drawn away upon a false scent, Mr. Phelps. Come to the other end of the street and let us see if we can hear of anything.’

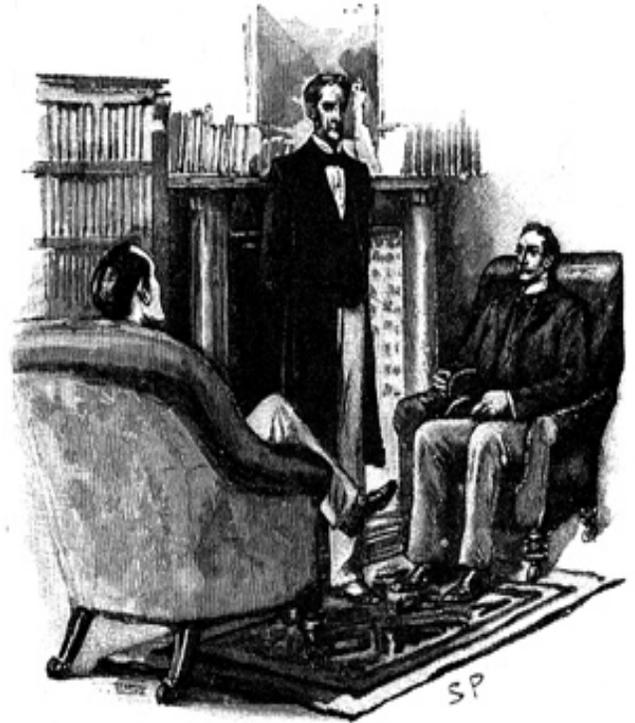
“Nothing was to be lost by following his advice. With the policeman we both hurried down, but only to find the street full of traffic, many people coming and going, but all only too eager to get to a place of safety upon so wet a night. There was no loungee who could tell us who had passed.

“Then we returned to the office, and searched the stairs and the passage without result. The corridor which led to the room was laid down with a kind of creamy linoleum which shows an impression very easily. We examined it very carefully, but found no outline of any footmark.”

“Had it been raining all evening?”

“Since about seven.”

“How is it, then, that the woman who came into the room about nine left no traces with her muddy boots?”



“I am glad you raised the point. It occurred to me at the time. The charwomen are in the habit of taking off their boots at the commissionnaire’s office, and putting on list slippers.”

“That is very clear. There were no marks, then, though the night was a wet one? The chain of events is certainly one of extraordinary interest. What did you do next?”

“We examined the room also. There is no possibility of a secret door, and the windows are quite thirty feet from the ground. Both of them were fastened on the inside. The carpet prevents any possibility of a trap-door, and the ceiling is of the ordinary whitewashed kind. I will pledge my life that whoever stole my papers could only have come through the door.”

“How about the fireplace?”

“They use none. There is a stove. The bell-rope hangs from the wire just to the right of my desk. Whoever rang it must have come right up to the desk to do it. But why should any criminal wish to ring the bell? It is a most insoluble mystery.”

“Certainly the incident was unusual. What were your next steps? You examined the room, I presume, to see if the intruder had left any traces—any cigar-end or dropped glove or hairpin or other trifle?”

“There was nothing of the sort.”

“No smell?”

“Well, we never thought of that.”

“Ah, a scent of tobacco would have been worth a great deal to us in such an investigation.”

“I never smoke myself, so I think I should have observed it if there had been any smell of tobacco. There was absolutely no clue of any kind. The only tangible fact was that the commissionnaire’s wife—Mrs. Tangey was the name—had hurried out of the place. He could give no explanation save that it was about the time when the woman always went home. The policeman and I agreed that our best plan would be to seize the woman before she could get rid of the papers, presuming that she had them.

“The alarm had reached Scotland Yard by this time, and Mr. Forbes, the detective, came round at once and took up the case with a great deal of energy. We hired a hansom, and in half an hour we were at the address which had been given to us. A young woman opened the door, who proved to be Mrs. Tangey’s eldest daughter. Her mother had not come back yet, and we were shown into the front room to wait.

“About ten minutes later a knock came at the door, and here we made the one serious mistake for which I blame myself. Instead of opening the door ourselves, we allowed the girl to do so. We heard her say, ‘Mother, there are two men in the house waiting to see you,’ and an instant afterwards we heard the patter of feet rushing down the passage. Forbes flung open the door, and we both ran into the back room or kitchen, but the woman had got there before us. She stared at us with defiant eyes, and then, suddenly recognizing me, an expression of absolute astonishment came over her face.

“‘Why, if it isn’t Mr. Phelps, of the office!’ she cried.

“‘Come, come, who did you think we were when you ran away from us?’ asked my companion.

“‘I thought you were the brokers,’ said she, ‘we have had some trouble with a tradesman.’

“‘That’s not quite good enough,’ answered Forbes. ‘We have reason to believe that you have taken a paper of importance from the Foreign Office, and that you ran in here to dispose of it. You must come back with us to Scotland Yard to be searched.’

“It was in vain that she protested and resisted. A four-wheeler was brought, and we all three drove back in it. We had first made an examination of the kitchen, and especially of the kitchen fire, to see whether she might have made away with the papers during the instant that she was alone. There were no signs, however, of any ashes or scraps. When we reached Scotland Yard she was handed over at once to the female searcher. I waited in an agony of suspense until she came back with her report. There were no signs of the papers.

“Then for the first time the horror of my situation came in its full force. Hitherto I had been acting, and action had numbed thought. I had been so confident of regaining the treaty at once that I had not dared to think of what would be the consequence if I failed to do so. But now there was nothing more to be done, and I had leisure to realize my position. It was horrible. Watson there would tell you that I was a nervous, sensitive boy at school. It is my nature. I thought of my uncle and of his colleagues in the Cabinet, of the shame which I had brought upon him, upon myself, upon every one connected with me. What though I was the victim of an extraordinary accident? No allowance

is made for accidents where diplomatic interests are at stake. I was ruined, shamefully, hopelessly ruined. I don't know what I did. I fancy I must have made a scene. I have a dim recollection of a group of officials who crowded round me, endeavoring to soothe me. One of them drove down with me to Waterloo, and saw me into the Woking train. I believe that he would have come all the way had it not been that Dr. Ferrier, who lives near me, was going down by that very train. The doctor most kindly took charge of me, and it was well he did so, for I had a fit in the station, and before we reached home I was practically a raving maniac.

“You can imagine the state of things here when they were roused from their beds by the doctor's ringing and found me in this condition. Poor Annie here and my mother were broken-hearted. Dr. Ferrier had just heard enough from the detective at the station to be able to give an idea of what had happened, and his story did not mend matters. It was evident to all that I was in for a long illness, so Joseph was bundled out of this cheery bedroom, and it was turned into a sick-room for me. Here I have lain, Mr. Holmes, for over nine weeks, unconscious, and raving with brain-fever. If it had not been for Miss Harrison here and for the doctor's care I should not be speaking to you now. She has nursed me by day and a hired nurse has looked after me by night, for in my mad fits I was capable of anything. Slowly my reason has cleared, but it is only during the last three days that my memory has quite returned. Sometimes I wish that it never had. The first thing that I did was to wire to Mr. Forbes, who had the case in hand. He came out, and assures me that, though everything has been done, no trace of a clue has been discovered. The commissionaire and his wife have been examined in every way without any light being thrown upon the matter. The suspicions of the police then rested upon young Gorot, who, as you may remember, stayed over time in the office that night. His remaining behind and his French name were really the only two points which could suggest suspicion; but, as a matter of fact, I did not begin work until he had gone, and his people are of Huguenot extraction, but as English in sympathy and tradition as you and I are. Nothing was found to implicate him in any way, and there the matter dropped. I turn to you, Mr. Holmes, as absolutely my last hope. If you fail me, then my honor as well as my position are forever forfeited.”

The invalid sank back upon his cushions, tired out by this long recital, while his nurse poured him out a glass of some stimulating medicine. Holmes sat silently, with his head thrown back and his eyes closed, in an attitude which might seem listless to a stranger, but which I knew betokened the most intense self-absorption.

“Your statement has been so explicit,” said he at last, “that you have really left me very few questions to ask. There is one of the very utmost importance, however. Did you tell any one that you had this special task to perform?”

“No one.”

“Not Miss Harrison here, for example?”

“No. I had not been back to Woking between getting the order and executing the commission.”

“And none of your people had by chance been to see you?”

“None.”

“Did any of them know their way about in the office?”

“Oh, yes, all of them had been shown over it.”

“Still, of course, if you said nothing to any one about the treaty these inquiries are irrelevant.”

“I said nothing.”

“Do you know anything of the commissionaire?”

“Nothing except that he is an old soldier.”

“What regiment?”

“Oh, I have heard—Coldstream Guards.”

“Thank you. I have no doubt I can get details from Forbes. The authorities are excellent at amassing facts, though they do not always use them to advantage. What a lovely thing a rose is!”

He walked past the couch to the open window, and held up the drooping stalk of a moss-rose, looking down at the dainty blend of crimson and green. It was a new phase of his character to me, for I had never before seen him show any keen interest in natural objects.

“There is nothing in which deduction is so necessary as in religion,” said he, leaning with his back against the shutters. “It can be built up as an exact science by the reasoner. Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers. All other things, our powers our desires, our food, are all really necessary for our existence in the first instance. But this rose is an extra.

Its smell and its color are an embellishment of life, not a condition of it. It is only goodness which gives extras, and so I say again that we have much to hope from the flowers.”

Percy Phelps and his nurse looked at Holmes during this demonstration with surprise and a good deal of disappointment written upon their faces. He had fallen into a reverie, with the moss-rose between his fingers. It had lasted some minutes before the young lady broke in upon it.

“Do you see any prospect of solving this mystery, Mr. Holmes?” she asked, with a touch of asperity in her voice.

“Oh, the mystery!” he answered, coming back with a start to the realities of life. “Well, it would be absurd to deny that the case is a very abstruse and complicated one, but I can promise you that I will look into the matter and let you know any points which may strike me.”

“Do you see any clue?”

“You have furnished me with seven, but, of course, I must test them before I can pronounce upon their value.”

“You suspect some one?”

“I suspect myself.”

“What!”

“Of coming to conclusions too rapidly.”

“Then go to London and test your conclusions.”

“Your advice is very excellent, Miss Harrison,” said Holmes, rising. “I think, Watson, we cannot do better. Do not allow yourself to indulge in false hopes, Mr. Phelps. The affair is a very tangled one.”

“I shall be in a fever until I see you again,” cried the diplomatist.

“Well, I’ll come out by the same train to-morrow, though it’s more than likely that my report will be a negative one.”

“God bless you for promising to come,” cried our client. “It gives me fresh life to know that something is being done. By the way, I have had a letter from Lord Holdhurst.”

“Ha! What did he say?”

“He was cold, but not harsh. I dare say my severe illness prevented him from being that. He repeated that the matter was of the utmost importance, and added that no steps would be taken about my future—by which he means, of course, my dismissal—until my health was restored and I had an opportunity of repairing my misfortune.”

“Well, that was reasonable and considerate,” said Holmes. “Come, Watson, for we have a good day’s work before us in town.”

Mr. Joseph Harrison drove us down to the station, and we were soon whirling up in a Portsmouth train. Holmes was sunk in profound thought, and hardly opened his mouth until we had passed Clapham Junction.

“It’s a very cheery thing to come into London by any of these lines which run high, and allow you to look down upon the houses like this.”

I thought he was joking, for the view was sordid enough, but he soon explained himself.

“Look at those big, isolated clumps of building rising up above the slates, like brick islands in a lead-colored sea.”

“The board-schools.”

“Light-houses, my boy! Beacons of the future! Capsules with hundreds of bright little seeds in each, out of which will spring the wise, better England of the future. I suppose that man Phelps does not drink?”

“I should not think so.”

“Nor should I, but we are bound to take every possibility into account. The poor devil has certainly got himself into very deep water, and it’s a question whether we shall ever be able to get him ashore. What did you think of Miss Harrison?”

“A girl of strong character.”

“Yes, but she is a good sort, or I am mistaken. She and her brother are the only children of an iron-master somewhere up Northumberland way. He got engaged to her when traveling last winter, and she came down to be introduced to his people, with her brother as escort. Then came the smash, and she stayed on to nurse her lover, while brother Joseph, finding himself pretty snug, stayed on too. I’ve been making a few independent inquiries, you see. But to-day must be a day of inquiries.”

“My practice—” I began.

“Oh, if you find your own cases more interesting than mine—” said Holmes, with some asperity.

“I was going to say that my practice could get along very well for a day or two, since it is the slackest time in the year.”

“Excellent,” said he, recovering his good-humor. “Then we’ll look into this matter together. I think that we should begin by seeing Forbes. He can probably tell us all the details we want until we know from what side the case is to be approached.”

“You said you had a clue?”

“Well, we have several, but we can only test their value by further inquiry. The most difficult crime to track is the one which is purposeless. Now this is not purposeless. Who is it who profits by it? There is the French ambassador, there is the Russian, there is whoever might sell it to either of these, and there is Lord Holdhurst.”

“Lord Holdhurst!”

“Well, it is just conceivable that a statesman might find himself in a position where he was not sorry to have such a document accidentally destroyed.”

“Not a statesman with the honorable record of Lord Holdhurst?”

“It is a possibility and we cannot afford to disregard it. We shall see the noble lord to-day and find out if he can tell us anything. Meanwhile I have already set inquiries on foot.”

“Already?”

“Yes, I sent wires from Woking station to every evening paper in London. This advertisement will appear in each of them.”

He handed over a sheet torn from a note-book. On it was scribbled in pencil: “L10 reward. The number of the cab which dropped a fare at or about the door of the Foreign Office in Charles Street at quarter to ten in the evening of May 23d. Apply 221 B, Baker Street.”

“You are confident that the thief came in a cab?”

“If not, there is no harm done. But if Mr. Phelps is correct in stating that there is no hiding-place either in the room or the corridors, then the person must have come from outside. If he came from outside on so wet a night, and yet left no trace of damp upon the linoleum, which was examined within a few minutes of his passing, then it is exceeding probable that he came in a cab. Yes, I think that we may safely deduce a cab.”

“It sounds plausible.”

“That is one of the clues of which I spoke. It may lead us to something. And then, of course, there is the bell—which is the most distinctive feature of the case. Why should the bell ring? Was it the thief who did it out of bravado? Or was it some one who was with the thief who did it in order to prevent the crime? Or was it an accident? Or was it—?” He sank back into the state of intense and silent thought from which he had emerged; but it seemed to me, accustomed as I was to his every mood, that some new possibility had dawned suddenly upon him.