

The Adventure of the Field Theorems

by Vonda N. McIntyre

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Holmes laughed like a Bedlam escapee.

Considerably startled by his outburst, I lowered my Times, where I had been engrossed in an article about a new geometrical pattern discovered in the fields of Surrey. I had not yet decided whether to bring it to Holmes's attention.

"What amuses you so, Holmes?"

No interesting case had challenged Holmes of late, and I wondered, fearfully, if boredom had led him to take up, once again, the habit of cocaine.

Holmes's laughter died, and an expression of thoughtful distress replaced the levity. His eyes revealed none of the languorous excitement of the drug.

"I am amused by the delusions of our species, Watson," Holmes said. "Amusing on the surface, but, on reflection, distressing."

I waited for his explanation.

"Can you not discern the reason for my amusement, Watson-- and my distress? I should think it perfectly obvious."

I considered. Should he encounter an article written particularly for its humorous content, he would pass straight over it, finding it as useless to him as the orbits of the planets. The description of some brutal crime surely would not amuse him. A trace of Moriarty would raise him to anger or plunge him into despair.

"Ah," I said, certain I had divined the truth. "You have read an account of a crime, I beg your pardon, the *resolution* of a crime, and you have seen the failings in the analysis. But," I pointed out, somewhat disturbed by my friend's indifference to the deeper ramifications, "that would indicate the arrest of an innocent victim, Holmes. Surely you should have some other reaction than laughter."

"Surely I should," Holmes said, "if that were the explanation. It is not." He shook the paper. "Here is a comment by Conan Doyle on Houdini's recent performance."

"Quite impressive it was, too," I said. "Thrilling, I would say. Did Sir Arthur find the performance compelling?"

"Conan Doyle," Holmes said with saturnine animosity, "attributes Houdini's achievements to," Holmes sneered, "mediumistic powers."

"His achievements do strain credulity," I said mildly.

"Pah!" Holmes said. "That is the *point*, Watson, the entire and complete *point*! Would you pay good money to see him *fail* to escape from a sealed coffin?"

"I suppose that I would not," I admitted.

"Were Houdini to tell you his methods, you would reply, 'But that is so simple! Anyone could achieve the same effect-- using your methods!'"

As Holmes often heard the same remark after explaining his methods, I began to understand his outburst.

"I would say nothing of the sort," I said. "I should say, instead, that he had brought the technique of

stage magicianship to as near an exact science as it ever will be brought in this world."

Holmes recognized my comment with a brief smile, for I had often said as much to him about his practice of detection.

"But it is true, Watson," Holmes said, serious once more. "Anyone *could* achieve the same effect-- were they willing to dedicate their lives to developing the methods, to studying the methods, to perfecting the methods! *Then* it is 'so simple.'"

When Holmes deigned to lead an amazed observer through his deductive reasoning, the observer's reaction was invariably the same: His methods were "perfectly obvious"; anyone, including the observer, could duplicate them with ease.

"Conan Doyle claims friendship with Houdini," Holmes said in disgust, "and yet he insults his friend. He dismisses Houdini's hard work and ingenuity. Despite Houdini's denials, Conan Doyle attributes Houdini's success to the supernatural. As if Houdini himself had very little to do with it! What a great fool, this Conan Doyle."

"Easy on," I said. "Sir Arthur is an intelligent man, a brave man. An inspired man! His imagination is every bit as exalted as that of Wells! His Professor Challenger stories compare favorably to *War of the Worlds*-- "

"I never read fiction," Holmes said. "A failing for which you berate me continually. If I did read fiction, I would not doubly waste my time with the scientific romances you find so compelling. Nor am I interested in the mad fantasies of a spiritualist." Holmes scowled through a dense cloud of pipe smoke. "The man photographs fairies in his garden."

"You are too much the materialist, Holmes," I said. "With my own eyes I saw amazing things, unbelievable things, in Afghanistan -- "

"Ancient sleight of hand. Snake charming. The rope trick!" He laughed again, though without the hysterical overtones of his previous outburst. "Ah, Watson, I envy you your innocence."

I was about to object to his implications when he stayed my comment by holding up one hand.

"Mrs. Hudson is here-- "

"-- with our tea," I said. "Hardly deserves the word 'deduction,' as her footsteps are plainly audible, and it is, after all, tea-time-- "

"-- to announce a client."

Mrs. Hudson, our landlady, knocked and opened the door. "Gentleman to see you, Mr. Holmes," she said. "Shall I set an extra cup?"

The figure of a man loomed behind her in the shadows.

"Thank you, Mrs. Hudson," Holmes said. "That would be most kind."

Mrs. Hudson placed a calling card on the tray by the doorway. Holmes rose to his feet, but did not trouble to read the card. As our visitor entered I rose as well, and made to greet him, but Holmes spoke first.

"I observe, Dr. Conan Doyle," Holmes said coolly, "that you were called abruptly into the fields, and have spent the morning investigating the mystery of the damaged crops. Investigating without success, I might add. Has a new field theorem appeared?"

Conan Doyle laughed heartily, his voice booming from his powerful chest.

"So you've introduced me already, John!" he said to me. "You were looking out the window when my carriage arrived, I've no doubt." He smiled at Holmes. "Not such a clever deduction, Mr. Holmes." He wrinkled his noble brow and said to me, "But how did you know I've just come to town, and how did you know of my involvement with the field theorems?"

"I'm afraid I had no idea you were our visitor, Sir Arthur," I said. "I did not even know we had a visitor until Holmes surmised your approach."

Sir Arthur chuckled. "I understand," he said. "Bad manners, revealing the tricks of the trade. Even those as simple as prior knowledge."

Holmes concealed his annoyance; I doubt anyone who knew him less well than I would have noticed it. He gazed steadily at Sir Arthur. We seldom had visitors taller than Holmes, but Sir Arthur Conan Doyle exceeds six feet by four inches. Unlike my friend Holmes, who remained slender, indeed gaunt,

even during his occasional periods of slothful depression, Sir Arthur dominated the room with his hearty presence.

"How *did* you know about our visitor, Holmes?" I asked, trying to salvage the introductions.

"I heard Sir Arthur's carriage arrive," he said dismissively, "as you would have done had you been paying attention."

Though somewhat put off by his attitude, I continued. "And Sir Arthur's outing? His identity?"

"My face is hardly unknown," Sir Arthur said. "Why, my likeness was in the Times only last week, accompanying a review-- "

"I never read the literary section of the Times," Holmes said. "As Watson will attest." He pointed the stem of his pipe at Sir Arthur's pants cuffs. "You are a fastidious man, Sir Arthur. You dress well, and carefully. Your shave this morning was leisurely and complete. Your moustache is freshly trimmed. Had you planned your excursion, you would surely have worn suitable clothing. Therefore, your presence was required on short notice. You have wiped the mud of the fields from your boots, but you have left a smear on the polish. You have confronted a puzzle that has distracted you from your customary appearance, which I can easily see-- anyone could easily see!-- is impeccable. As to the nature of the puzzle, unripe seed-heads of *Triticum aestivum* have attached themselves to your trouser cuffs. I am in no doubt that you investigated the vandalism plaguing fields in Surrey."

"Amazing," Conan Doyle whispered, his ruddy face paling. "Absolutely amazing."

I could see that Holmes was both pleased by Conan Doyle's reaction, and surprised that Sir Arthur did not laugh again and announce that his methods were simplicity itself.

Holmes finished his recitation. "That you have failed to solve the mystery is self-evident-- else why come to me?"

Sir Arthur staggered. Leaping forward to support him, I helped him to a chair. I was astonished to perceive any weakness in a man of his constitution. He was quite in shock. Fortunately, Mrs. Hudson chose that moment to arrive with the tea. A good hot cup, fortified with brandy from the sideboard, revived Sir Arthur considerably.

"I do apologize," he said. "I've spent the morning in the presence of strangeness beyond any I've ever before witnessed. As you divined, Mr. Holmes, the experience has distracted me. To perceive your supernatural talents so soon thereafter-- !"

He took a deep draught of his tea. I refilled his cup, including rather more brandy. Sir Arthur sipped his tea, and let warm, pungent steam rise around his face. His color improved.

"Supernatural?" Holmes mused. "Well-honed, certainly. Extraordinary, even. But not in the least supernatural."

Sir Arthur replied. "If John did not tell you who I am, and you did not recognize my face, then you could only have discovered my name by-- reading my mind!"

"I read your name," Holmes said dryly, "from the head of your walking stick, where it is quite clearly engraved."

* * *

Since the end of spring, the newspapers had been full of articles about mysterious damage to growing crops. Wheat stalks were crushed in great circles intersected by lines and angles, as if a cyclone had touched down to give mere humans a lesson in celestial geometry. Though the phenomena were often accompanied by strange lights in the sky, the weather was invariably fair. If the lights were lightning, it was lightning unaccompanied by thunder! No wind or rain occurred to cause any damage, much less damage in perfect geometrical form.

Many suggestions had been put forth as to the cause of the unexplained diagrams, from hailstorms to electromagnetic disturbances, but blame had not yet been fixed. The patterns were the mystery of the year; the press, in a misinterpretation of modern physics in general and the theory of Maxwell in particular, had taken to calling the devices "field theorems."

Holmes had clipped and filed the articles, and painstakingly redrawn the figures. He suspected that if

the patterns were the consequence of a natural force, some common element could be derived from a comparison of the designs.

One morning, I had come into the sitting room to find him surrounded by crumpled paper. The acrid bite of smoke thickened the air, and the Persian slipper in which Holmes kept his shag lay overturned on the mantel among the last few scattered shreds of tobacco.

"I have it, Watson!" Holmes had waved a drawing, annotated in his hand. "I believe this to be the basic pattern, from which all other field theorems are derived!"

His brother, Mycroft, speedily dismantled his proof, and took him to task for failing to complete several lemmas associated with the problem. Holmes, chagrined to have made such an elementary (to Holmes), and uncharacteristic, mistake, appeared to lose interest in the field theorems. But it was clear from his comments to Sir Arthur that they had never completely vanished from his attention.

* * *

After packing quickly, Holmes and I accompanied Sir Arthur to the station, where we boarded the train to Undershaw, his estate in Hindhead, Surrey.

"Tell me, Sir Arthur," Holmes said, as our train moved swiftly across the green and gold late-summer countryside, "how came you to be involved in this investigation?"

I wondered if Holmes were put out. The mystery had begun in early summer. Here it was nearly harvest time before anyone called for the world's only consulting detective.

"It is my tenants who have been most troubled by the phenomenon," said Sir Arthur, recovered from his earlier shock. "Fascinating as the field theorems may be, they do damage the crops. And I feel responsible for what has happened. I cannot have my tenants lose their livelihoods because of my actions."

"So you feel the vandalism is directed at you," said I. Sir Arthur had involved himself in several criminal cases, generally on the side of a suspect he felt to be innocent. His efforts differed from those of Holmes in that Holmes never ended his cases with ill-advised legal wrangles. No doubt one of Sir Arthur's less grateful supplicants was venting his rage against some imagined slight.

"Vandalism?" Sir Arthur said. "No, this is far more important, more complex, than vandalism. It's obvious that someone is trying to contact me from the other side."

"The other side?" I asked. "Of Surrey? Surely it would be easier to use the post."

Sir Arthur leaned toward me, serious and intense. "Not the other side of the country. The other side of... life and death."

Holmes barked with laughter. I sighed quietly. Intelligent and accomplished as my friend is, he occasionally overlooks proprieties. Holmes will always choose truth over politeness.

"You believe," Holmes said to Sir Arthur, "that a seance brought about these field theorems? The crushed crops are the country equivalent of ectoplasm and levitating silver trumpets?"

The scorn in Holmes's voice was plain, but Sir Arthur replied calmly. He has, of course, faced disbelief innumerable times since his conversion to spiritualism.

"Exactly so," he said, his eyes shining with hope. "Our loved ones on the other side desire to communicate with us. What better way to attract our attention than to offer us knowledge beyond our reach? Knowledge that cannot be confined within an ordinary seance cabinet? We might commune with the genius of Newton!"

"I did not realize," Holmes said, "that your family has a connection to that of Sir Isaac Newton."

"I did not intend to claim such a connection," Sir Arthur said, drawing himself stiffly upright. Holmes could make light of his spiritual beliefs, of his perceptions, but an insult to the familial dignity fell beyond the pale.

"Of course not!" I said hurriedly. "No one could imagine that you did."

I hoped that, for once, Holmes would not comment on the contradiction inherent in my statement.

Holmes gazed with hooded eyes at Sir Arthur, and held his silence.

"It's well known that entities from diverse places and times-- not only relatives-- communicate from the

other side," I said. "How extraordinary it would be, were Isaac Newton to return, after nearly two centuries of pure thought!"

"Extraordinary," Holmes muttered, "would hardly be the word for it." He fastened his gaze upon Sir Arthur. "Dr. Conan Doyle," he said, "if you believe spirits are the cause of this odd phenomenon-- why did you engage me to investigate?"

"Because, Mr. Holmes, if *you* cannot lay the cause to any worldly agent, then the only possible explanation is a spiritual one. 'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth!' You will help me prove my case."

"I see," Holmes said. "You have engaged me to eliminate causes more impossible than the visitations of spirits. You have engaged me... to fail."

"I would not have put it so," Sir Arthur said.

The trip continued in rather strained silence. Sir Arthur fell into a restless doze. Holmes stared at the passing landscape, his long limbs taut with unspent energy. After an eternity, we reached the Hindhead station. I roused Sir Arthur, who awoke with a great gasp of breath.

"Ma'am!" he cried, then came to himself and apologized most sincerely. "I was dreaming," he said. "My dear, late mother came to me. She encourages us to proceed!"

Holmes made no reply.

Sir Arthur's carriage, drawn by a pair of fine bays, awaited us.

"The automobile can't be started, sir," the driver said. "We've sent to London for the mechanic."

"Very well, James," Sir Arthur said. He shook his head as we climbed into the carriage. "The motor was quite astonishingly reliable when first I bought it. But recently it has broken down more often than it has run."

The comment drew Holmes's attention. "When, exactly, did it begin to fail?"

"Eight weeks past," Sir Arthur said.

"At the same time the field theorems began to appear," Holmes said thoughtfully.

Sir Arthur chuckled. "Why, Mr. Holmes, surely you don't believe the spirits would try to communicate by breaking my autocar!"

"No, Sir Arthur, you are quite correct. I do not believe the spirits would try to communicate by breaking your autocar."

"Merely a coincidence."

"I do not believe in coincidences."

Holmes was anxious to inspect the field theorems as soon as we arrived at Undershaw, but by then it was full dark. Sir Arthur showed the strain of a long and taxing day. He promised that we should leap out of bed before dawn and be at his tenant's field as the first rays of the morning sun touched the dewdrops of night.

And so we did; and so we were.

The descriptions and newspaper engravings of the field theorems did not do justice to the magnitude of the patterns. We stood on a hillside above the field to gain an overview of the damage. Three wide paths, perfectly circular and perfectly concentric, cut through the waving stalks of grain. A tangent, two radii, and a chord decorated the circles. I had to admit that the pattern resembled nothing so much as the proof of some otherworldly geometric proposition.

"The theorems appear only in wheat fields," Sir Arthur said. "Only in our most important crop. Never in fields of oats, nor in Indian corn."

Holmes made an inarticulate sound of acknowledgment.

We descended the hill, and Holmes entered the field.

Sir Arthur looked after him. "John," he said to me, "will your friend admit it, if he can find no natural explanation?"

"His allegiance is to the truth, Sir Arthur," I said. "He does not enjoy failure-- but he would fail before he would propose a solution for which there were no proof."

"Then I have nothing to worry about." He smiled a bluff English smile.

Holmes strode into the swath of flattened green wheat, quartering the scene, inspecting both upright

and crushed stalks, searching the hedgerows. He muttered to himself, laughed and snarled; the sound crossed the field like a voice passing over the sea. He measured the path, the width of the stalks left standing, and the angles between the lines and curves.

The sun crept into the clear sky; the day promised heat.

"Can you feel it?" Sir Arthur said softly. "The residual power of the forces that worked here?" He stretched out his hands, as if to touch an invisible wall before him.

And indeed, I felt something, though whether it was energy spilled by unimaginable beings, or the Earth's quiet potential on a summer's day, I could not tell.

While Sir Arthur and I waited for Holmes to finish his search, a rough-shod man of middle years approached.

"Good morning, Robert," Conan Doyle said.

"Morning, Sir Arthur," Robert replied.

"Watson, this is one of my tenants, Robert Holder."

Robert's work clothes were shabby and stained with sweat. I thought he might have taken more care with his appearance, when he came to speak to his landlord.

To Robert, Sir Arthur said, "Mr. Holmes and Dr. Watson have come to help us with our mystery."

"Mr. Holmes?" Robert exclaimed.

He glanced out into the field, where Holmes continued to pace and stoop and murmur.

"And you're Dr. Watson?" Robert's voice rose with the shock of finding himself in the presence of celebrity. "Why, it's a pleasure to meet you, sir," he said to me. "My whole family, we read your recountings in the evenings. The children learned their letters, sitting in my lap to listen to your tales."

"Er... thank you," I said, somewhat nonplussed. Though he was well-spoken for a farmer, I would not have marked him as a great reader; and, more, I consider the perils encountered by Holmes to be far too vivid for impressionable young children. However, it was not my place to correct Robert's treatment of his offspring, particularly in front of his landlord.

"Have you found the villains?" Robert asked. "The villains who have crushed my best wheat field!"

Holmes strode across the field and rejoined us, a frown furrowing his brow. He appeared not even to notice the presence of Sir Arthur's tenant.

"Useless," Holmes said. "Perfectly useless! Here, the artist stood to sketch the scene." He flung his hand toward a spot where gray dust covered the scuffed ground. "And there! A photographer, with his camera and flash powder. Fully six reporters and as many policemen trampled whatever evidence might have been left." He did not pause to explain how he could tell the difference between the footprints of reporters and those of policemen. "And, no doubt, when the sightseers arrive by the next train-- "

"I can easily warn them off," Sir Arthur said.

"To what purpose? The evidence is destroyed. No! I could conjecture, but conjecture is only half the task. Proof, now-- that's a different story."

He glared out into the field as if it had deliberately invited careless visitors to blur the story written there.

"If only," Holmes said softly, "the scene were fresh."

He turned abruptly toward Robert. He had taken the measure of the man without appearing to observe him.

"You saw the lights," Holmes said. "Describe them to me."

"Are you Mr. Holmes?"

I blushed to admit, even to myself, that the rough farmer had a better grasp of common manners than did my friend.

"Of course I am. The *lights*."

"The night was calm. A bit of fog, but no rain, no storms. I heard a strange noise. Like a musical instrument, but playing no melody I ever heard. And eerie.... It put the chills up my back. Made the baby cry. I went outdoors-- "

"You were not frightened?"

"I was. Who would not be frightened? The Folk have fled London, but they still live in the countryside,

in our hearts."

"You are a scholar and a folklorist," Holmes said without expression.

"I know the stories my family tells. Old stories. The Folk-- "

"The faerie folk!" Sir Arthur said. "I've photographed them, they *do* exist."

"The Folk," Robert said, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with Sir Arthur. "The ones who lived in this land before us."

"The lights, man!" Holmes said impatiently.

"At first I saw only a glow against the fog. Then-- a ring of lights, not like candles, flickering, but steady like the gaslights of the city. All different colors. Very beautiful."

"Foxfire," Holmes said.

"No, sir. Foxfire, you see it in the marsh. Not the field. It's a soft light, not a bright one. These lights, they were bright. The circle spun, and I thought-- "

He hesitated.

"Go on, man!"

"You'll think I'm mad."

"If I do, I shall keep it to myself."

Robert hesitated. "I thought I saw... a huge solid object, floating in the sky like a boat in the water."

"A flying steamship?" I said.

"An aeroplane," said Sir Arthur. "Though I would have thought we'd hear of a pilot in the area."

"More like a coracle," Robert said. "Round, and solid."

"Did you hear its motor?" Holmes asked. "A droning, perhaps, or a sound like the autocar?"

"Only the music," said Robert.

"I've never known an apparition to make a sound like a motorcar," Sir Arthur said.

"What happened then?" said Holmes. "Where did it go, what did it do?"

"It rose, and I saw above it the stars, and Mars bright and red in the midst of them." Robert hesitated, considered, continued. "Then the lights brightened even more, and it vanished in a burst of flame. I felt the fire, smelled the brimstone-- At first I thought I was blinded!"

"And then?" Holmes said.

"My sight returned, and the fog closed around me."

"What have you left out?" Holmes asked sternly. "What happened afterward?"

Robert hesitated, reluctance and distress in every line of his expression.

"The truth, man," Holmes said.

"Not afterward. Before. *Before* the coracle disappeared. I thought I saw... a flash of light, another flash."

"From the coracle?"

"From the sky. Like a signal! White light, white, not red, from... from Mars!" He drew in a deep breath. "Then the coracle replied, and vanished."

I managed to repress my exclamation of surprise and wonder. Holmes arched one eyebrow thoughtfully. Sir Arthur stroked his mustache.

"Thank you for your help, Robert," Sir Arthur said, as if Robert had said nothing out of the ordinary. "And your good observation."

"Sir Arthur," Robert said, "may I have your permission to salvage what I can from the field? The grain can't be threshed, but I could at least cut the stalks for hay."

"By no means!" Sir Arthur roared in alarm.

Robert stepped back, surprised and frightened.

"No, no," Sir Arthur said, calming himself with visible effort.

"Sir-- !"

I was astonished by the tone of protest in which Robert addressed the landowner.

"It's imperative that no one enter the field!" Sir Arthur said. "The pattern mustn't be disturbed till we understand its meaning."

"Very well, Sir Arthur," Robert said reluctantly.

"And set little Robbie and his brothers to keeping the sightseers out of the patterns. They may walk around the edge, but under no circumstances may they proceed inside."

"But, Sir Arthur, this field, every year, has paid your rent. This field keeps the roof over my family's head! Sir Arthur, the crop prices have been low going on two years-- "

I did not blame him for his distress, and he was fortunate that Sir Arthur is a humane and decent gentleman.

"You'll not worry about the rent," Sir Arthur said. "I relieve you of the obligation for this year."

On Robert's open face, gratitude and obligation warred.

"I cannot accept that offer, Sir Arthur," he said, "generous though it is, and grateful though I am to you for making it. You and I, we have an agreement. I cannot take charity."

Sir Arthur frowned, that his tenant would not accept such a simple solution to the difficulty.

"We'll discuss this another time," Sir Arthur said. "For the moment, keep the sightseers out of the field." His tone brooked no disagreement.

Robert touched the bill of his ragged cap in acquiescence.

We returned to Sir Arthur's mansion, where his gracious wife Jean, Lady Conan Doyle, presided over a fine, if long-delayed, breakfast. After our excursion, I was famished, but Holmes merely picked at his food. This meant the mystery aroused him. As long as it kept his interest, he would hold himself free of the embrace of cocaine.

For the rest of the day, we accompanied Sir Arthur to other fields where theorems had mysteriously appeared over the past few weeks. They were all, according to Holmes, sadly trampled.

We spoke to tenants who had also seen lights in the sky, but the apparitions frightened the observers; each gave a different description, none as coherent as Robert's. I could not imagine what they had actually seen.

My mind kept returning to Robert's description. Cogent though it had been, something about it nagged at my memory. I put my unease down to the mystery of the phenomenon. And to my wonder. Holmes's skepticism notwithstanding, it would be quite marvelous if we were visited by beings from another world, whether physical or spiritual. Naturally one would prefer friendly beings like those Sir Arthur described, over the invading forces of Mr. Wells's scientific romances.

Holmes dutifully explored each damaged field, and listened to the descriptions of flashing lights in the sky. But as he was presented with nothing but old and damaged evidence, his inspections became more and more desultory as the afternoon wore on, his attention more and more distracted and impatient. He also grew more and more irritated at Sir Arthur's ruminations on spiritualism, and nothing I could do or say could divert the conversation. Like any true believer, Sir Arthur was relentless in his proselytizing.

Toward the end of the afternoon, as I began to hope for tea, we rested beneath an ancient oak near a patterned field.

"Look," Sir Arthur said, "at how the grain has been flattened without breaking. The stalks in the pattern are as green as the undisturbed growth. Don't you think it odd?"

"Quite odd," I agreed.

"Not odd at all," Holmes said.

He leapt from the carriage, snatched a handful of the crop from the edge of the field, and returned with a clump of unbroken stems still sprouting from their original earth. He held the roots in one hand and smashed the other against the stems, bending them at a right angle to their original position. Clods of dirt flew from his hand in reaction to the force of his blow.

But the stems did not break.

"*Triticum aestivum* at this stage of growth is exceedingly tough," Holmes said. "Exceedingly difficult to break."

Holmes pulled out one stem by its roots and handed it to me, then another for Sir Arthur. I tried to break my stem, and indeed it took considerable force even to put a kink in the fibrous growth. Sir Arthur bent his stem, folding it repeatedly back and forth.

"The field theorems would be more impressive," Holmes said, "if the crops *were* broken."

"But, Mr. Holmes," said Sir Arthur, "the forces we are dealing with are mighty. A stem I cannot break

would be like a fragile dry twig, to them. Do you not think it amazing that they can temper themselves to gentleness?"

Holmes stared at him in disbelief. "Sir Arthur! First you are impressed with a feat that appears to be difficult, then, when the action proves simple, you claim yourself impressed because it is simple! Your logic eludes me."

In Holmes's powerful hands, several stalks ripped apart.

We returned to Undershaw. We drank Earl Grey from delicate porcelain cups, surrounded by heavy, disagreeable silence. Lady Conan Doyle and I tried in vain to lighten the conversation. When Sir Arthur announced a seance to be held that very evening, Holmes's mood did not improve.

A loud knock on the door, followed by shouting, broke the tension. Sir Arthur rose to attend to the commotion.

"One of your tenants to see you, Sir Arthur," the butler said.

Robert had followed the butler from the front door; to my astonishment he crossed the threshold of the sitting room. Then he remembered his place and snatched his battered cap from his head.

"There's been another field done!" he exclaimed. "Little Robbie just discovered it, coming home to get his brothers some bread and cheese!"

Holmes leapt to his feet, his gray mood vanishing in an instant. Sir Arthur called for his autocar and we hurried off to see the new phenomenon.

The automobile, newly repaired, motored smoothly until we turned down the final road to the new field theorem. Suddenly it died. Robert stepped down from the running board to crank it, but none of his efforts revived it.

Sir Arthur revealed a knowledge of colorful oaths in several languages.

"Bushman," Holmes muttered after a particularly exotic phrase.

I reflected that Sir Arthur must have acquired this unusual facility during his service in the Boer War.

We walked the last half-mile to the field. The afternoon's heat lingered even in the shade of the hedgerows. Birds chirped and rustled the branches.

"Well, Robert," I said, "you'll have the chance to observe Mr. Holmes in action, and he can hear your story in your own words instead of mine. Holmes, Robert is a great enthusiast of your stories."

"I am flattered," Holmes said, "though of course the credit goes entirely to you, Watson, and to your craft."

We had no more opportunity to chat, for we reached the newly patterned field. Robert's children--including Little Robbie, who was considerably taller and larger than his father-- had arrived before us, despite our use of the motorcar. They stood in order of descending height on the bottom rail of the fence, exclaiming over the pattern crushed into the grain.

Sir Arthur made as if to plunge into the very center of the new theorem, but Holmes clasped him by the shoulder.

"Stay back!" Holmes cried. "Robert! To the lane! Keep away the spectators!"

"Very well, Mr. Holmes." Robert and his children tramped away down the path.

I marveled at the efficiency of the country grapevine, to give everyone such quick notice of the new field theorem.

Holmes plunged past Sir Arthur. But instead of forging into the field, he climbed the fence and balanced atop the highest rail to gaze across the waving grain. He traced with his eyes the valleys and gulches etched into the surface. Only after some minutes, and a complete circumnavigation of the field, did he venture into the field theorem itself.

Sir Arthur observed Holmes's method.

"You see, John?" Sir Arthur said. "Even your Mr. Holmes acknowledges the power-- the danger-- present here."

"Sir Arthur," I said in the mildest tone possible, "why should danger result, if the communication is from those who loved you, in another life?"

"Why..." he said, momentarily awkward, "John, you'll understand after the seance tonight. The other side is... different."

Robert ran down the path, panting.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Holmes, Sir Arthur," he said. "We kept them away as long as we could. Constable Brown ordered us to stand aside."

"More devotion to duty than to sense," Sir Arthur muttered. He sighed. "I'm sure you did your best," said he to Robert.

A group of curious people, led by Constable Brown and minimally constrained by Robert's children, approached between the hedgerows. Holmes was right: Someone, somehow, had alerted the public. Sightseers who had come to see the other field theorem now found themselves doubly fortunate.

The constable entered the field just as Holmes left it. The sightseers crowded up to the fence to view the new theorem.

Holmes rejoined Sir Arthur and myself.

"I have seen what I needed," Holmes said. "It's of no matter to me if the tourists trample the fields."

"But we must survey the theorem!" Sir Arthur said. "We still do not know its meaning!" He ordered Robert to do his best to prevent the sightseers from marring the designs.

"If we depart now," Holmes said, "before the constable realizes he is baffled by the phenomenon, we will be spared interrogation."

Dinner being far preferable to interrogation, we took Holmes's advice. I noticed, to my amusement, that Robert's children had lined the spectators up. Some visitors even offered the boys tips, or perhaps entry fees. At least the family would not count its day an utter loss.

A photographer lowered his heavy camera from his shoulder. He set it up on its tripod and disappeared beneath the black shadow-cloth to focus the lenses. He exposed a plate, setting off a great explosion of flash powder. Smoke billowed up, bitter and sulfurous.

The journalists began to question Constable Brown, who puffed himself up with importance and replied to their questions. We hurried away, before the journalists should recognize Sir Arthur-- or Holmes-- and further delay us.

"If the motor starts," Sir Arthur said, "we will be in time for the seance."

For a moment I wondered if Holmes would turn *volte face*, return to the field, and submit to questioning by Constable Brown *and* the journalists, in preference to submitting to the seance.

To our surprise, the motorcar started without hesitation. As Sir Arthur drove down the lane, Holmes puzzled over something in his hands.

"What is that, Holmes?"

"Just a bit of wood, a stake," Holmes said, putting it in his pocket. "I found it in the field."

As he was not inclined to discuss it further, we both fell silent. I wondered if we had to contend with-- besides the field theorems, the ghostly lights, and the seance-- with wooden stakes and vampires.

"Tell me, Sir Arthur," Holmes said over the rhythmic cough of the motor, "are any of your spirits known to live on Mars?"

"Mars?" Sir Arthur exclaimed. "Mars! I don't believe I've ever heard one mention it. But I don't believe I've ever heard one asked." He turned to Holmes, his eyes bright with anticipation. "We shall ask, this very evening! Why, that would explain Professor Schiaparelli's 'canali,' would it not?"

"Perhaps," Holmes said. "Though I fail to understand what use channels would be-- to dead people."

Darkness gathered as we motored down the rough lane. Sir Arthur turned on the headlamps of the autocar, and the beams pierced the dimness, casting eerie shadows and picking out the twisted branches of trees. The wind in our face was cool and pleasant, if tinged somewhat by the scent of petrol.

The engine of the autocar died, and with it the light from the headlamps.

Sir Arthur uttered another of his exotic curses.

"I suppose it will be of no use," he said, "but would one of you gentlemen kindly try the crank?"

Holmes-- knowing of my shoulder, shattered by a Jezail bullet in Afghanistan and never quite right since-- leapt from the passenger seat and strode to the front of the automobile. He cranked it several times, to no avail. Without a word, he unstrapped the engine cover and opened it.

"It's too dark, Mr. Holmes," Sir Arthur said. "We'll have to walk home from here."

"Perhaps not, Sir Arthur," said I. "Holmes's vision is acute." I climbed down, as well, to see if I could

be of any assistance. I wished the automobile carried a kerosene lamp, though I suppose I would have had to hold it too far away from the engine, and the petrol tank, for it to be of much use.

"Can you see the difficulty, Holmes?" I asked.

His long fingers probed among the machined parts of the engine.

"Difficulty, Watson?" he said. "There is no difficulty here. Only enterprising cleverness."

The automobile rocked, and I assumed Sir Arthur was getting down to join us and try to help with the repairs.

"Cleverness?" said I. "Surely you can't mean-- Ah!" Light flickered across his hawkish face, and for a moment I thought he had repaired the engine and the headlamps. Then I thought that Sir Arthur must have an innovative automobile, in which the headlamps gained their power from an independent battery rather than from the workings of the motor.

But then, I thought, they would surely not have failed at the same moment as the motor.

And finally I realized that the headlamps were dark, the engine still, and the lights on Holmes's face emanated from a separate source entirely.

I raised my eyes in the direction of the flickering lights. An eerie radiance lit the forest beyond the road. As I watched, it descended slowly beneath the tops of the trees.

"Sir Arthur!" I cried.

His silhouette moved quickly toward the mysterious lights.

Holmes and I ran after him. I felt a shiver, whether of fear or of unearthly chill, I could not have said.

Suddenly a great flash of light engulfed us, and a great shock of sound. Dazzled, I stumbled and fell, crying, "Sir Arthur!" I thought I heard one of Sir Arthur's exotic oaths, this time in the voice of Sherlock Holmes.

I came to myself, my sight flickering with brilliant black and white afterimages. When my vision cleared, I found myself staring straight up into the night. Among the constellations, Mars burned red in the darkness. I shivered in sudden dread. I sat up, groaning.

Holmes was instantly at my side.

"Stay quiet, Watson," he said. "You'll soon be right. No injuries, I fancy."

"And you, Holmes? And Sir Arthur?"

"My sight has recovered, but Sir Arthur does not answer my hallo."

"What happened, Holmes? What was that explosion?"

"It was... what Robert called a flying coracle," Holmes said. "But it has vanished, and with it Dr. Conan Doyle."

"We must return to Undershaw! Call out a search party!"

"No!" Holmes exclaimed. "He has been spirited away, and we have no hope of finding the location unless I can inspect the site of his disappearance. *Before* searchers trample it."

"But Lady Conan Doyle!" I said. "She'll be frantic!"

"If we return now," Holmes said, "we can only tell her Sir Arthur is lost."

"Kidnapped!" I only wished I knew who-- or what-- had done the kidnapping.

"Perhaps, though I doubt he believes so."

"He could be killed--!"

"He is safe, I warrant," Holmes said.

"How can you be sure?"

"Because," Holmes said, "no one would benefit from his death." He settled into the seat of the autocar. "If we wait till dawn, we may retrieve him and return him safely to the bosom of his family. Before they have any more concern than a few hours of wondering where we have got to."

"Very well, Holmes," I said doubtfully, "but the responsibility for Sir Arthur's safety lies on your shoulders."

"I accept it," Holmes said solemnly. Suddenly, he brightened somewhat. "I fear we shall miss the seance."

I confess that I dozed, in the darkest hours of the night, cold and uncomfortable and cramped in the seat of the disabled motorcar. My last sight, before I slept, was the scarlet glow of Mars sinking beneath

the tops of the trees. I dreamed of a race of beings so powerful that the canals they built could be seen from another planet.

When I woke, shivering, tiny dewdrops covered my tweeds. The silence of night gave way to the bright songs of dawn. The scent of wet grass and sulfur wafted into my nostrils. I tried to remember a particular point of my dream.

Holmes shook me.

"I'm awake, Holmes!" I said. The snatch of memory vanished without a trace. "Have you found Sir Arthur?"

"Not yet," he said. "Hold this, while I crank the motor."

He handed me a bit of metal-- two strips sintered together to form one curved piece.

"What about Sir Arthur?" I asked. "What about your search?"

"My search is finished," Holmes said. "I found, overhead, a few singed tree-leaves. At my feet, a dusty spot on the ground. Marks pressed into the soil, forming the corners of a parallelogram-- " He snorted. "Not even a square! Far less elegant than the field theorems. Savory food for speculation."

"But no trace of Sir Arthur?"

"Many traces, but... I think we will not find his hiding place."

I glanced up into the sky, but the stars had faded and no trace of light remained.

Holmes fell silent. He would say no more until he was ready. I feared he had failed-- Holmes, failed!-- and Sir Arthur lay dead in some kidnapper's lair, on or off our world.

The autocar started without hesitation. I had never driven a motorcar-- it is folly to own one in the city, where a hansom is to be had for a handwave, a shout, and a few shillings. But I had observed Sir Arthur carefully. Soon we were moving down the road, and I fancy the ruts, rather than my driving, caused what jolts we felt.

"And what is this, Holmes?" I asked, giving him his bit of metal. He snatched it and pointed straight ahead. I quickly corrected the autocar's direction, for in my brief moment of inattention it had wandered toward the hedgerow.

"The bit of metal, Holmes?"

"It is," he said, "a bit of metal."

"What does it mean?" I said irritably. "Where did you find it?"

"I found it in the motor," he said, and placed it in his pocket. "And may I compliment you on your expert driving. I had no idea you numbered automobile racing among your talents."

I took his rather unsubtle hint and slowed the vehicle. Hedgerows grew close on either side; it would not be pleasant to round a turn and come upon a horse and carriage.

"I dreamed of Mars, Holmes," I said.

"Pah!" he said. "Mars!"

"Quite a wonderful dream!" I continued undaunted. "We had learned to communicate with the Martians. We could converse, with signals of light, as quickly and as easily as if we were using a telegraph. But of course that would be impossible."

"How, impossible?" Holmes asked. "Always assuming there *were* Martians with whom to converse."

"Light cannot travel so quickly between the worlds," I said.

"Light transmission is instantaneous," Holmes said in a dismissive tone.

"On the contrary," I said. "As you would know if you paid the least attention to astronomy or physics. The Michelson-Morley experiment proved light has a finite speed, and furthermore that its speed remains constant-- but that is beside the point!"

"What *is* the point, pray tell?" Holmes asked. "You were, I believe, telegraphing back and forth with Martians."

"The point is that I could *not* converse instantaneously with Martians-- "

"I do see a certain difficulty in stringing the wires," Holmes said dryly.

-- because it would take several minutes-- I would have to do the arithmetic, but at least ten-- for my hallo!" to reach Mars, and another length of time for their 'Good day to you' to return."

"Perhaps you should use the post," Holmes said.

"And that is what troubled me about Robert's description!" I exclaimed.

"Something troubled you?" Holmes said. "You have not mentioned it before."

"I could not think what it was. But of course! He thought he saw a signal from Mars, to the coracle, at the instant after its disappearance. This is impossible, you see, Holmes, because a message would take so long to reach us. He must have been mistaken in what he saw."

Holmes rode beside me in silence for some moments, then let his breath out in a long sigh.

"As usual, Watson, you shame me," he said. "You have provided the clue to the whole mystery, and now all is clear."

"I do?" I said. "I have? It is?" I turned to him. "But what about Sir Arthur? How can the mystery be solved if we have lost Sir Arthur? Surely we cannot return to Undershaw without him!"

"Stop!" Holmes cried.

Fearing Holmes had spied a sheep in the road while my attention was otherwise occupied, I engaged the brake abruptly. The autocar lurched to a halt, and Holmes used the momentum to leap from the seat to the roadway.

Sir Arthur sat upon a stone on the verge of the track.

"Good morning, Dr. Conan Doyle," Holmes said. "I trust your adventure has left you none the worse for wear?"

Sir Arthur gazed up with a beatific expression, his eyes wide and glassy.

"I have seen things, Mr. Holmes," he said. "Amazing things..."

Holmes helped him to the automobile and into the passenger seat. As Sir Arthur settled himself, Holmes plucked a bit of material from Sir Arthur's shoe.

"What have you found, Holmes?" I asked.

"Nothing remarkable," replied Holmes. "A shred of dusty silk, I believe." He folded the fabric carefully, placed it into his pocket, and vaulted into the autocar.

Sir Arthur made no objection to my driving us back to Undershaw. It was as if he had visited a different world, and still lived in it in his mind. He refused to speak of it until we returned to his home, and his worried wife.

A paragon of womanhood, Lady Conan Doyle accepted Sir Arthur's assurances that he was unharmed. She led us to the morning room and settled us all in deep chairs of maroon velvet.

Sir Arthur commenced his story.

"It was amazing," Sir Arthur said. "Absolutely amazing. I saw the lights, and it was as if I were mesmerized. I felt drawn to them. I hurried through the woods. I saw the ring of illumination, just as Robert described it. Brighter than anything we can manufacture, I'd warrant-- never mind that it floated in the sky! I saw the coracle. A flying vehicle, turning slowly above me, and windows-- and faces! Faces peering down at me."

Holmes shifted and frowned, but said nothing.

"Then I saw a flash of light-- "

"We saw it, too," said I. "We feared you'd been injured."

"Far from it!" Conan Doyle said. "Uplifted, rather! Enlightened! I swooned with the shock, and when I awoke-- I was inside the coracle!"

"How did you know where you were?" Holmes demanded. "Could you see out the windows? Were you high above the ground?"

"I was in a round room, the size of the coracle, and I could feel the wafting of the winds-- "

It occurred to me that the previous night had been nearly windless. But perhaps the flying coracle had risen higher and the wind aloft had freshened.

"What of the portholes?" Holmes asked.

"There were no portholes," Sir Arthur said, still speaking in a dreamy voice. "The walls were smooth black, like satin. The portholes had closed over, without leaving a trace!"

"Sir Arthur-- " Holmes protested.

"Hush, Mr. Holmes, please," Lady Conan Doyle said, leaning forward, her face alight with concentration. "Let my husband finish his story."

"I was not at all frightened, strangely content, and immobile," Sir Arthur said. "Then... the *people* came in and spoke to me. They looked like-- like nothing on this Earth! They were very pale, and their eyes were huge and bright, shining with otherworldly intelligence. They told me-- they told me, without speaking, they spoke in my mind, without moving their lips!"

"Ah," Holmes murmured, "so at least they had lips."

"Shh!" Lady Conan Doyle said, dispensing with courtesy.

"What did they tell you, Sir Arthur?" I asked.

"They wished to examine me, to determine if their people and ours are compatible, to determine if we can live together in peace."

"Live together!" I ejaculated.

"Yes. They did examine me-- I cannot describe the process in polite company, except to say that it was... quite thorough. Strangely enough, I felt no fear, and very little discomfort, even when they used the needles."

"Ah, yes," Holmes murmured. "The needles."

"Who were these people?" I asked, amazed. "Where are they from?"

"They are," Sir Arthur said softly, "from Mars."

I felt dazed, not only because of my exhaustion. Lady Conan Doyle made a sound of wonder, and Holmes-- Holmes growled low in his throat.

"From Mars?" he said dryly. "Not from the spirit realm?"

Sir Arthur drew himself up, bristling at the implied insult.

"I'll not have it said I cannot admit I was wrong! The new evidence is overwhelming!"

Before Holmes could reply, Sir Arthur's butler appeared in the doorway.

"Sir Arthur," he said.

"Tell Robert," Holmes said without explanation, "that we have no need to examine any new field theorems. Tell him he may notify the constabulary, the journalists, and the king if he wishes."

The butler hesitated.

"And tell him," Holmes added, "that he may charge what he likes to guide them."

The butler bowed and disappeared.

"They'll trample the theorem!" Sir Arthur objected, rising from his chair. "We won't know-- "

"But you already know, Sir Arthur," Holmes said. "The creators of the field theorem have spoken to you."

Sir Arthur relaxed. "That is true," he said. He smiled. "To think that I've been singled out this way-- to introduce them to the world!" He leaned forward, spreading his hands in entreaty. "They're nothing like the Martians of Mr. Wells," he said. "Not evil, not invaders. They wish only to be our friends. There's no need for panic."

"We're hardly in danger of panic," Holmes said. "I have done as you asked. I have solved your mystery." He nodded to me. "Thanks to my friend Dr. Watson."

"There is no mystery, Mr. Holmes," Sir Arthur said.

Holmes drew from his pocket the wooden stake, the metal spring, and the scrap of black silk. He placed them on the table before us. Dust drifted from the silk, emitting a burned, metallic scent and marring the polished table with a film of gray.

"You are correct. There is, indeed, no mystery." He picked up the stake, and I noticed that a few green stalks remained wrapped tightly around it. "I found this in the center of the new field theorem, the one that so conveniently appeared after I expressed a desire to see a fresh one. Unfortunately, its creators were unduly hurried, and could not work with their usual care. They left the center marker, to which they tied a rope, to use as a compass to form their circles."

Holmes moved his long forefinger around the stake, showing how a loop of rope had scuffed the corners of the wood, how the circular motion had pulled crop stalks into a tight coil.

"But that isn't what happened," Sir Arthur said. "The Martians explained all. They were trying to communicate with me, but the theorems are beyond our mental reach. So they risked everything to speak to me directly."

Holmes picked up the spring.

"Metal expands when it heats," he said. "This was cunningly placed so its expansion disarranged a connection in your motor. Whenever the temperature rose, the motor would stop. Naturally, you drove rapidly when you went to investigate each new field theorem. Of course your motorcar would overheat-- and, consequently, misbehave-- under those circumstances."

"The Martians disrupted the electrical flux of my motorcar-- it's an inevitable result of the energy field that supports their coracle. It can fly through space, Mr. Holmes, from Mars to Earth and back again!"

Holmes sighed, and picked up the bit of black silk.

"This is all that is left of the flying coracle," he said. "The hot-air balloon, rather. Candles at its base heated the air, kept the balloon aloft, and produced the lights."

"The lights were too bright for candles, Mr. Holmes," Sir Arthur said.

Holmes continued undaunted. "Add to the balloon a handful of flash powder." He shook the bit of black silk. Gray dust floated from it, and a faint scent of sulfur wafted into the air. "It ignites, you are dazzled. The silk ignites! The candles, the balloon, the straw framework-- all destroyed! Leaving nothing but dust... a dust of magnesium oxide." He stroked his fingertip through the gray powder.

"It did not burn me," Sir Arthur pointed out.

"It was not meant to burn you. It was meant to amaze you. Your abductors are neither malicious nor stupid." Holmes brushed the dust from his hands. "We were meant to imagine a craft that could fall from the sky, balance on its legs, and depart again, powered on flame, like a Chinese rocket! But it left the tracks of four legs, awkwardly spaced. I found this suspicious. Three legs, spaced regularly, would lead to more stability."

"Very inventive, Mr. Holmes, but you fail to explain how the Martians transported me to their coracle, how the portholes sealed without a trace, how they spoke to me in my mind."

"Sir Arthur," Holmes said, "are you familiar with the effects of cocaine?"

"In theory, of course," said Sir Arthur. "I'm a medical doctor, after all."

"Personally familiar," Holmes said.

"I've never had occasion to use it myself, nor to prescribe it," Sir Arthur said. "So, no, I am not *personally* familiar with the effects of cocaine."

"I am," Holmes said quietly. "And you show every sign of having recently succumbed to its influence. Your eyes are glassy. Your imagination is heightened-- "

"Are you saying," Sir Arthur said with disbelief, "that the Martians drugged me with cocaine?"

"There are no Martians!" Holmes said, raising his voice for the first time. "There are hoaxers, who created a clever illusion, dazzled you, drugged you, and took you to a hiding place-- a raft, no doubt, that would mimic the motions of a boat floating in the air. They disguised themselves, spoke from behind masks-- or behind a curtain!-- taking advantage of your distracted consciousness. You saw the needle yourself, the second needle that drugged you again, so they could place you where you would be safe, and soon found!"

Sir Arthur gazed at Holmes for a long moment, then chuckled softly.

"I understand," he said softly. "I do understand."

"You understand that you have been tricked?" Holmes asked.

"I understand all. You need say no more. Some day, in the future, when you're persuaded of my complete goodwill, we'll have occasion to speak again."

Sir Arthur rose, crossed the room, and opened his desk. He drew out a sheet of paper, returned, and presented the paper to Holmes.

"This is a letter of credit," he said, "in payment for your services. It's sufficient, I hope?"

Holmes barely glanced at the paper. "More than sufficient," he said. "Most generous, I would say, from a client who believes I have been made a fool of by Martians."

"Not at all, Mr. Holmes. I understand your reasoning. You are very subtle, sir, I admire you."

"Then you accept-- "

"I accept your explanation as proof of my hypothesis," Sir Arthur said. "And I admire you beyond words." He smiled. "And now, we are all very tired. I must rest, and then-- to work! To introduce the

world to the wonders approaching us. I've taken the liberty of hiring a private train to return you to London. A token of my esteem."

Speechless, Holmes rose.

"Your luggage is in the autocar. James will drive you to the station. The autocar will not misbehave, because our visitors have gone home for the moment. But-- they will return!"

Sir Arthur and Lady Conan Doyle accompanied us to the drive, so graciously that I hardly felt we were being shown the door. I climbed into the motorcar, but Sir Arthur held Holmes back for a moment, speaking to him in a low voice, shaking his hand.

Holmes joined me, nonplussed, and James drove us away. The motorcar ran flawlessly. As we passed a field that yesterday had been a smooth swath of grain, but today was marked by a field theorem more complex than any before, we saw Robert and Little Robbie directing spectators around the crushed patterns in the field. They both had taken more care with their appearance than the previous day, and wore clothes without holes or patches.

His expression hidden in the shade of his new cap, Robert turned to watch us pass.

"Holmes--" I said.

Holmes gently silenced me with a gesture. He raised one hand in farewell to the farmer. Robert saluted him. A small smile played around Holmes's lips.

As soon as we were alone in the private train car, Holmes flung himself into a luxurious leather armchair and began to laugh. He laughed so hard, and so long, that I feared he was a candidate for Bedlam.

"Holmes!" I cried. "Get hold of yourself, man!" I poured him a glass of brandy-- Napoleon, I noticed in passing.

His laughter faded slowly to an occasional chuckle, and he wiped tears from his eyes.

"That's better," I said. "What is so infernally funny?"

"Human beings," Holmes said. "Human beings, Watson, are an endless source of amusement."

"I do not like leaving Sir Arthur with a misapprehension of events. Perhaps we should return-- seek out the raft on which he was held captive."

"It has, no doubt, been sunk in the deepest part of the lake. We would never find it... unless we could engage the services of Mr. Verne's Captain Nemo."

"I'm astonished that you've read *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*," I said.

"I have not. But you did, and you described it to me quite fully." He sipped the brandy, and glanced at the glowing amber liquid in appreciation. "Hmm. The last good year."

I poured cognac for myself, warmed the balloon glass between my hands, and savored the sweet, intoxicating bite of its vapors. It was far too early in the day for spirits, but this one time I excused myself.

"When we return to Baker Street," said Holmes, "I might perhaps borrow your copy of *War of the Worlds*, if you would be so kind as to lend it to me."

"I will," I said, "if you promise not to rip out its pages for your files. Bertie inscribed it to me personally."

"I will guard its integrity with my life."

I snorted. The train jerked, wheels squealing against the tracks, and gathered speed.

"What about Sir Arthur?" I asked, refusing to be put off again. "He believes he's been visited by Martians!"

"Watson, old friend, Sir Arthur is a willing participant in the hoax."

"You mean-- he engineered it himself? Then why engage your services?"

"An innocent, unconscious participant. He *wants* to believe. He has exchanged Occam's razor for Occam's kaleidoscope, complicating simple facts into explanations of impossible complexity. But he believes they are true, just as he believes spirits visit him, and Houdini possesses mediumistic powers, and I..." He started to chuckle again.

"I don't understand the *purpose* of this hoax!" I said, hoping to distract him before he erupted into another bout of hysteria. "Nor who perpetrated it!"

"It is a difficult question. I despaired of solving it. I wondered if Sir Arthur wished to pit his intellect against mine. If the journalists and photographers conspired to create a story. If Constable Brown wished to draw more resources to his district-- and found he enjoyed the limelight!"

"Which of them was it, Holmes? Wait! It was the photographer-- only he has access to flash powder!"

"And an intimate knowledge of Surrey fields? No. The flash powder is easily purchased-- or purloined. It was no one you mention."

"Then who?"

"Who benefits?"

I considered. If Sir Arthur wrote of the events, he might make a tidy sum from a book and lecture tour. But Holmes had already stated that Sir Arthur was innocent. Still, what benefited Sir Arthur would benefit his whole family...

"Not Lady Conan Doyle!" I exclaimed, aghast.

"Certainly not," Holmes said.

"The butler? The driver? He would know how to sabotage the car-- "

"Robert Holder, Watson!" Holmes cried. "Robert Holder! Perhaps-- indeed, certainly-- with help from James and the butler and other tenants in the neighborhood. But Robert was the mastermind, for all his rough appearance. A veritable Houdini of the countryside!" Holmes considered. "Indeed, he used some of my own techniques. And he almost defeated me!"

"He risked all by challenging you!"

"I was unforeseen-- surely he intended Sir Arthur to conduct the investigation. When you and I arrived, Robert must have realized he would stand or fall by his boldness. He offered Sir Arthur a compelling reason to dismiss my solution-- and me. Sir Arthur accepted the offering. How could he resist?"

Holmes gazed out the window of the train for a moment. Unmarred fields rippled past, like miniature green seas.

"If not for Robert's misapprehension about the velocity of light," Holmes said, "a misapprehension that I shared, I would have known *what* happened, and I would have known *how*-- but I never would have been certain *who*."

"You sound curiously sympathetic, Holmes," I said with disapproval.

"Indeed I am, Watson. Robert is clearly an honorable man."

"Honorable!"

"He refused Sir Arthur's offer to relieve him of the year's rent. He has no wish to steal."

"Only to lie."

"Like Houdini. Like any entertainer, any storyteller. Shakespeare lied. You have lied yourself, my friend, in your descriptions of our adventures."

"I have disguised individuals," I said, taking offense. "I have, yes, perhaps, dissembled occasionally..." I hesitated, and then I nodded. "Very well. I have lied."

"Life is hard for people who work the land. You and I are prosperous, now, but remember what it was like when we were younger, scraping along from season to season, with never a new shirt or a pair of boots that did not let in the rain. Imagine seeing no better prospects. For the rest of your life."

I suddenly remembered father and sons, and their new clothes.

"Who can blame them for creating a diversion, a mystery to attract sightseers, people of leisure with money to spare. People," Holmes added, "with a blind eye to turn to the evidence lying plain before them."

"What of your commitment to the truth, Holmes?" I asked with some asperity.

"I know the truth," he said. "You know it. Sir Arthur knows it, but rejects it. I have kept the solution to other mysteries confidential; it is part of my duty. How is this different?"

I suddenly understood. Holmes's sympathy was not so much directed toward the hoaxers as away from the curiosity seekers who were willing, indeed eager, to be fooled.

"Very well, Holmes," I said. "I am content, if you are."

We rode in silence for some miles, lulled by the rocking of the train, enjoying Sir Arthur's excellent cognac and the peaceful English countryside. I wondered what the world would be like if beings from another planet *did* visit us.

"Holmes," I said.

"Yes, Watson?"

"Why was Sir Arthur so willing to pay you, when he did not believe your solution? What did he say to you, just as we left?"

"He said, 'I understand why you are such an extraordinary person. Like Houdini, you have good reason to hide your abilities, your true nature. I understand why Sherlock Holmes cannot be the one to reveal the truth about our visitors. I will do it, and you may trust me to keep *your* secret.' "

"*Your* secret?"

"Yes, Watson." Holmes smiled. "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle believes I am a Martian."

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