

The Adventure of the Gaelic Giant*

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In the annals of his cases, few matters have remained a mystery, once my friend Sherlock Holmes applied his considerable intellect to them, except for the matter of the “Gaelic Giant,” as the newspaper referred to it. Unlike some of the cases that I have refrained from offering to my readers, this matter incriminates no one, except, perhaps, me, and it references no known criminal act. Yet, for Holmes and I, this case stands as a milestone in our friendship and a lasting mystery, which I, for one, am content to never solve.

As I’ve attested before, the year 1895 found my friend Sherlock Holmes in remarkably good form. Taking such cases as he desired, accepting miniscule fees with as gracious an air as generous ones, Holmes lived and breathed his work. The growth of his fame, something that he always regretted, for it made too well known his countenance, guaranteed him a steady flow of clients. However, the sixth of December of that year found us tucked up in our Baker Street rooms, curiously alone, for the day abroad came wet and raw. A bitter east wind blew, and we knew that any, save the most desperate of the City’s denizens, would stay within doors, until the skies dried.

I, myself, sat before the fire, lost in a brown study, trying to keep pace with one of Mr. Dickens’ novels, now printed in one volume. I had read it serialized long ago but in seemingly another life, my life with Mary. We had often spent long, dark evenings taking turns reading from a Dickens, Collins, or Braddon novel, forming something of our own theatre company in our drawing rooms, delighting in capturing the flavor of scenes and characters, delighting in the simple pleasure of married life. However, I had lost her to disease a year and more ago, and for reasons which I could not fathom, as Christmas approached, I experienced again the grief of her absence as keenly in that moment as I did when she died.

Holmes’ unexpected return from Reichenbach Falls had saved me from the worst of the doldrums at the time. In our tracking and capture of the dreaded Colonel and his lethal air rifle, I found myself back into my old life. Having sold my practice for a handsome price, I found that I could retire on the proceeds and dedicate my remaining active years to aiding Holmes and cataloguing his adventures. His seeming miraculous return, the comfort of our old bachelor life together, and the excitement of ensuing cases had drawn me away from the loss of Mary. Despite the excitement of life with Holmes, I had missed her everyday since she died. I would gladly have traded all of the late night chases and hair breadth brushes with death for those days when she walked by my side. Even the days that we spent at the clinic in Switzerland six months before her death were preferable. On that raw December morning, with no activity beckoning, I sat with a cold pipe in one hand and a forgotten novel in the other. I would have traded my comfortable bachelor life for a return to that sense of hopeful anticipation, tinged with dread, that so marked those days when Mary and I discovered that her case was hopeless.

Thinking of myself in that moment, I saw a wretched, broken shell of a man. I contemplated returning to my medical practice as a way of changing my state, even if I just returned as an assistant to Verner, who had bought me out. I’d rather aid him in building the practice and his good fortune than to dwindle into regretful old age, a fate which loomed like a foreboding shadow over my future. The cold gray of the day outside the window looked like a portent of such a fate, beckoning to me from the cold, damp

* Based on characters created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

streets. Perhaps, as I reconsidered, I should pack up my things and leave England, seek a sunnier clime that would free me from the cold drizzle of grief stricken memory.

“You could, Watson,” Holmes called to me from the deal table, a test tube in his hand emitting a thin thread of vapor over its lip, “come with me to the Amalfi Coast to look into a shipping concern for the Italian Port Authority, for, though Verner would be glad of your help, I’m certain that he would insist on having you back as an equal partner in the profits.”

“What, Holmes?” I blustered, “I should—Blast it, sir. What is it? Does some trace of ash on my waistcoat or mud on my shoe indicate that I have been down in Paddington, looking into the windows of my old practice? Confound it man! You test my patience!” I cried at his impertinent capacity to somehow look into my soul. I had thought that I masked my depression, as becomes a man—especially an old soldier.

He laughed and sat the tube back into a rack with others holding various red and green liquids cooling in them. Picking up his old briar and the Persian slipper which held his shag, he came and dropped into the chair opposite mine. Stretching out his long legs toward the fire, he let his laughter run out before he turned to me and said,

“No, no, old friend. I had your own report to the effect that not two weeks ago you dropped in on dear cousin Verner and found your old practice nearly double in size. I have seen you looking at your medical bag with longing since then. You know my methods, or ought to by now, having explained them away to your readers. How do you think I came to my conclusions?”

“Oh, Holmes,” I offered, mollified by the fact of his having studied my mood as any good friend might, “I have rather given up on the how, for I so delight in your revelations. Treat me again, old fellow.” I sought a return to good humor, although Holmes uncanny abilities always shock and amaze me, especially when I am the object of his insights.

He bowed his head, lit his pipe, sending up a small blue and brown cloud from the exotic blend of perique and latakia that Bradley blended for him, sending the still smoking match in a languid arch into the coal fire on the hearth. He looked at me and stated,

“I see a man, an active reader and thinker, sitting with his pipe unlit and one of his favorite novels lying unread in his hand. I know of no errand that should occupy his mind on such a gloomy day as this. I detect sadness in his expression, the telltale presence of bittersweet memory. With the season of hope and light so soon to be upon us, I reason that such a man will think of work as a healing balm to such sadness. And so, I predict that you think of your trade, and where else might you practice it than with the man to whom you entrusted your old practice.

“Add to the mix of conjectures the manner in which the cold rain beats upon our windows, and I read in a shift of your eyes toward the window, a desire to escape the coming holiday with all of its inducements to memory—as well as the raw Northern winter—to some more sunny, hopeful clime.”

“So,” I ventured, trying to take the matter away from my own gloomy disposition, “Are you, then, soon to be bound to the Amalfi Coast yourself?”

“Um, I could, should the need arise, and could if the venture be used to improve my good friend’s spirits,” he offered, “But I have one or two other local enquiries on

hand with which to follow up. I can, as easily, with a cablegram or two, trust to the Italian authorities to clear up the matter.”

“I had no idea that you had any pressing cases on at the present,” I said. I had noted that Holmes had been out at odd hours and for many days had not returned home until late in the evening, but that could be said for any odd week, in my experience of Holmes work. Plus, I knew that many people consulted him on things that he thought of as trifles, solved in less time than it took to hear of the case. He might do any number of these in a single day without bringing any to my attention.

“Yes, I can usually count on four or five mundane little puzzles with which to occupy my mind each week, thankfully,” he said, “for you know how I abhor stagnation.

Take this case, for example,” Holmes said, folding The Times into a long column and proffering the paper to me. “I’m considering giving it my attention.” I scanned the brief article.

PC Entwistle claims to have witnessed once again the presence of the outlandish Gaelic Giant that haunts London’s poorer quarters. Said the constable, “I saw him right enough, [as I was] finishing my rounds, just this night past. Tall he was, some seven or eight foot high, if I’m any judge, striding through the Houndsditch Mews down toward the docks. He turned a corner and when I followed him up, I found that he had disappeared like snuff.”

The mews children of the East End have begun to look forward to these visits, and claim that the figure is none other than Father Christmas making his rounds, though they are at a loss to explain why that figure should make such an early appearance! They do claim, however, that he gives them candy that improves their well being, and they look forward to his return. While this reporter has not seen him, and has been unable to procure a sample of the magical candy, he can bear witness to the size of the boot marks that are left in the passing of this carnival figure. The stride length, from one boot print to another, augurs the presence of the tallest—or at least the longest legged—man to which this reporter has ever borne witness.

Those who claim to have seen him, including the aforementioned constable, attest that the figure is clad in a cloak of bright green, worked throughout with brocades of knot work, not unlike that found in many a cross or standing stone on the rough northern, Scots or Irish landscapes. The Times offers a Five Guinea Reward for proof of the red haired giant’s existence and offers that creature himself a Ten Guinea fee to submit to an interview.

I had read the work aloud, while Holmes listened to the account, a bemused smile on his lips. He smoked in silence and leveled a keen, grey eyed glance at me. “Well, my friend, what do you make of that?”

I was surprised to find Holmes interested in such a trifling, superstitious business and lost not a moment in telling him so.

“I cannot see much importance in such a thing, unless PC Entwistle should be remonstrated for drinking while on the job. I should think that you would put such dubious sightings in the same category as Spring heel Jack or the Loch Ness Monster. Plus, if there is such a long legged fellow dressed up like an Irish actor, I cannot see that he has done anything criminal. At best—or worst, it’s some mountebank, hawking a penny dreadful that will appear one day soon. The next thing you’ll tell me, you’ll be interested in those fire breathers- salamanders, they call them, that or, or sapient pigs.”

Holmes threw his head back and laughed long and hard. I, who did not share in the jest, took up my cold pipe and plied a match to it to cover my irritation at his giving way to whimsy at this late stage in his career. Quick as he was to dispel the superstitions in the Baskerville Case, I took it as a personal affront that he began to court them in the guise of Scotch or Irish street players. Having taken me from sullen depression to righteous indignation, his laughter wound down a while, causing me to get up in frustration and stalk to the window.

“Oh, Watson, forgive me,” he cried, “I should be a better friend than to laugh at your discomfiture, but surely you realize that my interest in esoterica would draw me to such a case, if only with mild curiosity? The unexplained, Watson, always draws my attention and interest, just as yours is drawn by the pathology of a disease. My fascination draws me to stories of humanity and the myriad ways in which the human spirit is expressed.”

“But are you not a man of science?” I responded, unable to maintain much anger at my friend.

“Yes, that I am,” he replied, “and science—which you know, Watson, means a body of knowledge—requires that we keep an open mind until we have all the evidence.”

“Do you mean that you actually wish to investigate this, this, pantomime giant? Who is your client, then? On behalf of whom do you act?”

“On your behalf, Doctor,” I heard his voice call from across the room. He had vacated his chair and gone first to his room, then mine. He came back with his own Inverness Cape and my great coat. He laid mine across the back of the sofa, wrapped one wool scarf around his neck and tossed another to me.

“You might wish to change your shoes, Doctor, in preparation for an afternoon spent in foul weather. I’ve taken the liberty of asking Mrs. Hudson to have young Billy impress the seams of your old brogans with petroleum jelly to keep the water out.”

Unable to resist the appeal of some excitement, even in such foul weather, I went to my rooms, found the shoes, shiny with waterproofing, and came back to the sitting room in time to see Holmes heading out the door, heavy stick in hand. I followed him, of course, half displeased with myself for even thinking of such an errand on such a day but unable to resist the excitement of any case—so long as it dispelled the gloom in my spirits.

Within a quarter hour’s ride in a hansom cab, Holmes and I found ourselves deep in the mews of an east end rookery, a veritable hive of impoverished human creatures, whose lives of cold misery were lived within sight of the greatest civilization in the free world. Indeed, it has been said that a scant fifty yards from the brightest shops in Piccadilly the dark lives of the poor, in constant struggle with disease and crime, ebb and

flow like a noisome tide. A scant distance from opulence, absolute squalor holds sway. As Holmes and I entered the narrow dripping alleyway, away from the traffic of the thoroughfare behind us, an eerie quiet descended upon us. We had entered a veritable warren of small passages, threading back into dark loathsome corners, where frightened faces, children and adults alike, stared at us through grime-covered windows, within candle lit rooms where the dark never really goes away.

“‘The poor ye shall have with you always’ He said,” Holmes intoned, “But in my mind, it serves as a warning and an opportunity, rather than a statement of status quo.”

“Yes,” I agreed in quiet tones. Holmes strode further into the narrow alley, past doors that stood closed to us, closed to hope and light as well. He looked from one doorway to another, his eager glance searching the shadowed archways and alcoves for the lowest figures in the mews, those who could not even claim a home within the darkest and meanest of doors. He soon found what he was looking for: a child, who looked in body no more than five or six years yet with a facial expression that had known enough want and hopeless despair to prove surfeit for some three score years.

“Hullo, my hearty,” Holmes said, pressing a coin into the small, blackened hand. The coin made it into some safe inner pocket with such alacrity as to astound me. “Tell my lad, are you a sweeper?”

“Would be, sir, ‘cept me broom gets pinched, along of me ‘abein’ so small and spare,” came a voice too low to be that of a child of five or six. I saw, then, that the child, though tiny, was more like twelve or thirteen years. His hands and the wrists, soon revealed by the too short sleeves of his filthy coat, were maturing in their own way.

“I bet that you can still work your fists well,” Holmes said, drawing a plucky smile from the shadowed face.

“That I can, sir. If I gets me share o’ the grub. I’m right strong for my size. Some day, I might be as good as you, sir.”

“That, I’d back with a bet some day,” Holmes said, pumping another penny into the child’s hands, as though he were feeding a small bird. “So you know me then?”

“You bet I do,” the urchin replied, his excitement causing a congested cough to rise in his throat, “You’re the toff—beggin yer pard’n sir—what fought the Black Mick and took ‘is tittle from the wharf.”

“Yes. You were there, eh?” Holmes said, drawing a nod and a gap toothed grin from the boy. “I bet you see most that goes on around here. I bet you saw him, then, too, from your spot here, that tall fellow that comes through the streets?”

“Yes, sir,” the husky voice said around a cough. “I’d’ve not bet that I’d live so long, sir, to actually see ‘m, Father Christmas, I mean. As tall as’n’ouse, sir, and wide as a stove. Just laughs as he goes. Five strides’ll take ‘im clear down the way, sir. But it’s three times ‘ee’s been by here, and I feel so much better, so much better now that I tink I might make it to Spring, if the grub holds out.”

“You feel better for his having been here, you say?” I asked, unable to keep my curiosity at bay, “How is that, son?” I noted that he looked at Holmes to see if I could be trusted. Holmes nodded to the boy, who said to me in a whisper,

“Tis the candy he gives me,” the boy replied, pulling an inch or so of what looked like a peppermint treat from the pocket of his coat. “It’s the third one I got from ‘im, sir. And I look for’ard to another, sir, if I’m spared to it. I don’t know when I’ve felt so full o vigor, sir.”

“Might I look at your treat, son?” I asked. He eyed me with great suspicion, clearly worried that I’d take it from him. At a nod from Holmes, he complied, his eyes watching my face and hands like a hungry dog watches the food go from a full plate into his master’s mouth. I studied the small treat, seeing that the red portion ran through the center of the stick. I sniffed it, but could detect nothing other than the foul odors of the mews. Red and white with a dirty, handled end, it looked to be a normal treat, such as would find its way into a child’s stocking on Christmas night. A memory of Mary bringing such things to the children of the servants we employed, as well as the neighbor children, threatened to take me back into my gloomy preoccupations. I rallied, though, at a gentle cough from Holmes, looking to see the steady hand of the urchin, politely seeking his candy back. I smiled, said thank you to the boy and stood. Holmes took his fountain pen from his inner breast pocket, took out one of his cards and scribbled something on its back. He proffered this to the boy, saying,

“If you’ll take this to the proprietor of 313 Jermyn Street,” he said in a low voice, “you’ll have a new broom, and with luck, maybe somewhere to keep it.” The boy tucked it away in another pocket, after making sure that his precious, magical treat was stowed away. “And if you should receive more of those treats, make sure you keep them and use them.”

“Yes sir. That I will, thank you sir,” the boy replied, before settling himself back into his nest of rags, out of the damp and the wind. Holmes called out to him to keep his guard up, and we walked away. More curious eyes studied us as we walked to the darkening end of the lane. Most eyes turned away from us, receding further back into the darkness of hidden lives.

“Well, Watson,” Holmes asked, “What do you make of the lad’s magical candy cane?”

“I wish I could have kept it and studied it at greater length,” I said, “Except that doing so would have deprived an already impoverished creature from something by which he clearly sets a great store. What could it be? A mild narcotic? Surely we have heard that even the poorest people of London find ready access to such things? Perhaps it is only the power of suggestion that gives the boy hope that he will survive.”

“Could be, Watson, could be,” my friend said, “for such a thing has been known before. But do you still doubt his story of the giant?”

“I can’t say that I’ve ever doubted that they’ve seen something, but it was no more than a tall man, I’ll be bound.”

“Yes, a tall man, bearing magical, life giving sweet meats,” Holmes said, casting a wry smile in my direction. We walked on then, emerging into a busier thoroughfare and finding a police constable standing on the corner. Holmes strode up to him, enquired if he was, indeed, PC Entwistle, and finding that he was, had him regale us with his tale of the giant. I noted with some chagrin that Entwistle wore a temperance pledge pin of the followers of John Wesley. Asked if he thought that the identity of the giant fellow could be fixed on Father Christmas, the PC replied,

“Well, sir, I can’t be certain of what ‘ee rightly was, an’ I’m ‘eld to a covenant that will admit no truck with fairy or Elvin creatures, as I allus heard him –Father Christmas—called. Yet, if ‘ee bears the name o’ Christ and comes in ‘Is name to relieve the poor and the sufferin,’ I reckon that ‘ee could be a fine Methodist, sir.”

“Do no harm, Do good, and Attend to the Ordinances of God, eh Constable,” Holmes replied with a smile.

“Why, yes sir!” Entwistle cried enthusiastically, a wide smile spreading across his homely face “I ‘ad no idea you were a Wesleyan, sir.”

“I’m pleased to support any such wonderful philosophies, constable, that will lead to the betterment of the populace,” Holmes explained.

With that, we took our leave of the constable and searched for a cab. Holmes treated me to dinner at Marcini’s and had the hansom drop me at Baker Street. “I’ve an enquiry to make regarding that shipping concern,” he explained, letting me out of the cab and climbing back in.

“Not in the matter of that wharf title, I hope?” I called out in jest.

Leaning out the cab window to tell an address to the cabbie, Holmes, holding his already drenched wool cap to his head, called back, “Not tonight, my friend, and not for a while yet,” he cried in an earnest reply to my jest. So, musing on the many facets of my friend, I returned to our rooms to spend a quiet evening.

My thoughts, though, often strayed to the poor urchin in that darkened doorway, and I felt strangely moved to action. I set aside my novel and composed a letter to Verner in my old practice, as well as to Jackson, who had often helped me when my own practice had gotten busy. I instructed them to make the matter known to as many medical men as they could, telling them that I intended to start my own efforts to relieve the suffering of the poor. I requested their help with supplies and manpower in treating some of the poorer residents of the City, in view of the coming of winter and the Christmas holidays.

As the season of light beckoned in the coming days, I found myself caught up in the mission work. Verner, I found, was ahead of me in this and glad to have the occasion to offer me an introduction to his friends in Knight and Woods’ “City Mission,” which had a history since the ‘50s of offering help to the poor. Having found such noble efforts already working, I joined them and spent a great deal of the next several weeks in the company of London’s poorer population. Although I have continued to do so since the day that Holmes took me down to those Mews in my brown study, I poured my efforts into my work in that season with as much energy as I had done anything since.

Time spent in those efforts showed me a never-ending stream of disease and injury that plagued the poorer parts of our population. I learned in my zeal that many, many men of my profession dedicated themselves—most year ‘round—to the relief of the unfortunate. I soon myself part of a community that regularly offered our services to the poor, and yet there were always so many that their plight never seemed to near an end. In that particular season, though, I worked at the problem with an energy that otherwise would have only fueled my depression and grief at Mary’s loss. As a consequence, I began to gather again my good humor, despite the size of the need my friends and I treated.

Time spent with Holmes occurred at the breakfast table, for the most part, along with one or two dinners along the way. His enquiries into any number of cases, which he claimed were of such a perfunctory nature as to be utterly uninteresting to any reader, kept him away often until late at night. He would show for early breakfasts with me, which was far out of his normal sleeping habits, which ran to the mid morning, if left unchecked. And I noted that his appearances at early breakfast came with a vigorous

appetite, such as I had never seen in him. I noted that his color was high, flushed cheeks and neck. I worried, from time to time, that a fever gripped him. His appetite, which was typically as good as any man's and now much better argued that he was in the peak of health and vitality. The gusto with which he consumed his eggs, toast, and rashers at breakfast spoke volumes about his vitality, so I let the matter rest and tended to my own affairs.

I must admit to suffering a few moments of pique when I sought to interest him in the mission work in which I had found such delight. He would listen and smile, offer me congratulations on my returning good spirits. He refused any such invitation to join me.

"I'm sorry, old fellow," he would say in good humored refusal, "but I am much too busy these days—and nights—to lend you my aid at present. Perhaps I can do so after the first of the year, preferably in mid January, when my docket will contain fewer pressing matters."

"Have you a singularly pressing case in which you need my aid?" I asked, curious about the matter that occupied his time.

"No, no, no, Watson," he replied waving away my help, "These are perfunctory matters I deal with, often chemical in nature. I have spent many a night of late working in the University laboratories, through the kind graces of our old friend Stamford. Many of my tasks are as simple as errands, having to be at certain places at specific times, which often seem to yield no clear results. I would not dream of pulling you away from your present duties on such trifling concerns as occupy my hours of late."

"I think, my friend," I replied, "that coming to the City Mission would do you good, put you in mind of the Christmas spirit."

"I dare say it would, Watson, but I simply cannot manage it at present."

The matter ended often on just such a tone, one bordering on irritability, so I let it drop.

Often, as Christmas Day approached, I would see articles referring to the appearance of Father Christmas again, and indeed, many of the patients I would see at the City Mission or whatever church that would serve as a temporary surgery, would speak of having seen him for themselves. We seemed to be living in a time when science and magic, when hope and legend, walked London's meanest streets, working hand in hand for the good of those who could not look after themselves. I woke each day with a sense of looking forward to the company of physicians, nurses, and patients who worked to improve the common weal. And through it all, the giant figure of Father Christmas stalked on his impossibly long legs.

Having read four or five articles in three weeks, on Christmas Eve morning at breakfast, I sought out Holmes's opinion on the matter, and asked him if he were any nearer to solving this case for me.

"Enquiries are on going," he responded from behind his third cup of Mrs. Hudson's dark, buttery tea, "And I suspect that the matter will be resolved one way or another by the sixth of January." He laughed at his jest.

"I cannot find much humor in this fellow's presence, as beneficent as it appears to be, and the circumstances of his appearance continue unabated. I'm beginning to think that the fellow must be real," I averred. "The patients at the City Mission, the poor devils, are looking at him as a savior of sorts. They claim that his treats sustain them, like, well, like manna from heaven."

“And have you been able to obtain any samples of this ‘magical’ concoction?” Holmes asked.

“No, dash it. This fellow chooses his recipients with some care, say our patients, and those treats go chiefly to the youngest, most pitiful street children, those who rarely come to the mission,” I replied. “Yet all applaud his efforts, even the street toughs I’m likely to treat after their dust-ups outside the Penny Gaffs.”

“Yes, I suspect that those children tend to shy away from Missions, where they might be taken into official protection. Many of them cherish their freedom, I hear, from workhouses and orphanages. They would rather take their chances on the streets than to submit themselves to the sort of help that our government might offer them. They are like feral cats, Watson. They may look like other children, but that is where the similarity ends. Try to catch them, and you’ve got a spitting mad handful of trouble.”

“No doubt that is why I rarely see them at the Mission, except when they are at death’s door, often too far gone from injury or disease to be saved,” I said. “There ought to be something that can be done about them, but I still wonder at the appearance of this giant fellow.”

“Our own Father Christmas?” Holmes replied as he buttered more toast. “Perhaps we will need to accept him as real, since no one wishes to stop him in his work and he will not come forward of his own accord.”

“What do you mean?” I asked with some heat, “That we should accept that some fairy creature stalks the streets of our modern metropolis, sprinkling magic on the lives of the poor street urchins? I can’t believe it, Holmes. I must not believe it.”

“Well, Watson, as I’ve said before, if you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Perhaps if my investigative efforts are not sufficient for your needs, you will look for an occasion to conduct your own. At present, I must hustle along.” And so saying, he drained his tea, pushed back his plate and headed towards the door. He stopped at the open door as he wound a scarf round his throat, “Oh, and A Merry Christmas to you, Watson!”

He was gone down the steps by the time I was able to register my outrage. The front hall door slammed as I said, “Confound it, man!”

It did not take me long to regain my good humor, for that day and the next, Christmas Day, brought a fresh fall of snow, which lent an enchanted air to the streets and houses. Children played in it, patrons of the shops along the streets, strolled with majestic strides through it. It glazed with sparkling white the drab roofs of the houses and business in the dear old City. It admitted the possibility that some measure of enchantment might, indeed, walk abroad. The grace of the fresh snow seemed to promise it. I found myself smiling often, at the thought that Father Christmas walked abroad, striding through the snow in his great boots, bringing magic to the smallest, least hopeful residents of London. The thought brought me some comfort as I worked on behalf of the Mission. Yet as the days of Christmas came and went, I myself, craved some sense of magic from Christmas to ease my grief in Mary’s loss, which returned to fill all my quiet moments. I, however, received nothing.

I think that the presence of so many caring family members and friends of the sick whom I attended enforced rather than relieved my grief. I had agreed to make my rounds during the evening hours at the Tottenham-Court Road mission. It was New Year’s Eve. The twelve days of Christmas were at their riotous mid point. Many revelers were

already abroad on the streets, crying their “Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!” over and over, quite convincing me that they earnestly desired it. My cab jostled through the revelers coming from the Tottenham-Court Market. The mission housing nearby had been, at one time, a dancing school, so the wide wood floors, lined now with surplus army cots held five or six unfortunates, taken with influenza. Their families and well wishers sat on the benches where once dancers had received their instructions, carrying on Christmas salutations with various patients. I made my rounds, seeing the improving health of my charges, yet taking little joy from it.

In cases where the infection might not spread, families gathered ‘round the sick beds, and in every laugh, every overheard voice offering quiet solicitation and love, I heard echoes of my Mary’s sweet words to me. The very thought of Merry Christmas rankled in me by the end of my shift. I did not begrudge my charges the love and support of their friends and families, but my heart stood bereft of hope and alone, utterly alone. Oh, I knew that Holmes and Mrs. Hudson would greet me as family when I returned to my lodgings—if they were present, but I stood on the edge of the abyss that had once been my life. I had danced carelessly upon its edge for over a year. At that moment, I stood gaping down to its immensity, feeling it draw me in. My Mary was gone, and so Christmas, too, was lost to me. The holiday last year had passed by so quickly immediately after her death, that I had not even realized it. The numbness of my first grief protected me, I supposed. The next year, Christmas 1895, showed me what I had lost and the true emptiness of my carefree, bachelor existence, acting as “Boswell” to the world’s most famous consulting detective.

Having finished my rounds, dispensed the nighttime medicinal draughts, I hailed a cab and stepped inside.

“Baker Street, please, number 2—“ I stopped in mid thought. My mind raced with desperation. I could not simply retire to a quiet fire and the garlanded mantelpiece of our sitting rooms. I could not return to that shadow of a life. Bitterly, I thought that Holmes would not be there, in all probability. Mrs. Hudson would have left a cold dinner for me on the sideboard and the fire would be laid. But no one would be there. I knew that for my own peace of mind, I must give in to the mad thought that had stayed just back of my waking world. I knew that I must find Father Christmas. All of this occurred to me in a flash.

“Make that destination, the Houndsditch Mews, cabby!” I said, staring back at his wide, questioning glance.

“Medical emergency, sir?” came his muffled reply.

“Yes,” I replied, “and I’ll give you a sovereign for Christmas if you get me there within the half hour!”

“Werry good, sir,” came his hasty reply, and we set off in a mad clatter of hooves and wheels on cobble stones of Oxford Street. Shouts of fruit sellers, smells of roasted potatoes and chestnuts from street vendors, shouts of revelers leaving a Penny Dreadful passed in the rush of that mad dash. I held on, as much to blind hope, as to the sides of the hansom cab as we dashed along London’s flaring streets. I knew that my actions lacked reason, and that few would recognize my face, flushed as it was with excitement. My pulses pounded as the bitter air and snow flew against me. My shoulder ached with the cold, the persistent reminder of that Jezail bullet that nearly took my life decades ago at the battle of Maiwand in Afghanistan. As I held onto the sides of the cab, the ache of

my shoulder spread into my back. I thought bitterly that if I had died from that chance wound, I would be beyond the torment of any losses, freed of the persistent aches, yet that thought only fueled my reckless dash.

As the cab passed into the relative quiet of Holborn and on towards Cheapside, the echoes of its rattling wheels grew more pronounced. At length, the cabby left Bishopsgate Road and halted his panting old cob at the entry to the Houndsditch Mews, its narrow lanes too narrow to allow him to turn about. Crying my thanks to him, I instructed him not to wait and tossed him more than treble the fair and a sovereign to boot. In a reckless dash, I ran down the nearest street, recognizing it by the second hand goods merchant on the near corner. Holmes had brought me here on the track of the Gaelic Giant, and I felt that this place would be the point at which I would be most likely to find him again. I slipped on the icy cobbles in the shadows of the dark buildings that loomed over the streets, like grim sentinels that guarded and shrouded the rough lives within them.

As the noise of the cab grew distant, the quietness of the streets closed round me. I caught furtive movement here and there, dark figures slipping around corners, back into alleys, as I searched for the one in which Holmes and I had talked to the child. And, as though in answer to an incantation, the little fellow appeared at the head of an alley, his face bright with expectation. Indeed, he looked the picture of health, apart from the fact that he was clad in filthy, ragged garments. Even in the dark, I could see by the flare of the gas lamp on the opposite corner that his eyes were bright and his color was good. In one grubby hand, too, he held what looked to be a fresh peppermint treat. He looked as though he had just gotten it. My knees grew weak, which I put down to excitement.

I called to him, "My fine fellow! Wait, dear boy!" desperately searching my memory for some hint at a name that Holmes might have used for the boy. But the mere sight of a man running down the street must have triggered his instinct to flight, for he turned on his tiny feet and whisked back into the mouth of the alley from which he had come. Even as I called to him, I knew that I wasted my breath. Urchins of his type learn to fly from authority, and in my great coat and bowler, medical bag in hand, I recognized that my demeanor spelled out "policeman" to him. Nonetheless, I followed him, for he had obviously come from the presence of the Irish giant whom I hoped to find, though I had not allowed myself to consider why I did so.

Sliding into the mouth of the alley, I saw no trace of the boy. My heart leapt, though, for down the alley in the deepening gloom, where one tiny lane of this warren crossed the alley, framed for a brief instant by what little light of London's sky that filtered into the alley, a figure born of fantasy strode across the alley, taking it in one step. Though the dark of the lane soon engulfed him, I knew that I had spotted my quarry. His enormous size and garish costume identified him for me. The green of his long, flowing coat, darker than in my imagination, made me think of the tales of Sherwood Forest. The swinging sleeve was wound by barbaric knot-work, swirling down its length. White fur showed at the collar and cuffs, and the light shown on his flying, red mane and beard, streaked with white. Children followed at his heels, laughing and calling.

"You there, Fa—" my voice faltered as my throat constricted. "Father Christmas," I forced out. "Hold, sir! I, I beg you!"

But in the next instance, two thugs set upon me. I just caught glimpses of their shadowy shapes rushing at me from dark doorways on either side of the alley. One threw

a vicious a shoulder block into my mid section, while the other pulled at my coat collar to wrench it off. The second, seeing my medical bag, switched his focus to it and let go my coat, which saved me. I'm sure that their combined weight would have been enough to force me to the ground. Holding my ground, I turned the bag in my hand out of the path of his grasp, and in doing so succeeded in turning the first attacker around me. I managed to shove at the fellow who made a grab for my medical kit, knocking him into the body and legs of his fellow. They both fell, and I sped away as quickly as I could in the direction that the giant had gone, though I grew dizzy with the effort.

Believing that the two ruffians followed me still, I sped on, gaining the entrance to the tiny lane as the giant turned off of it, going deeper into the labyrinth of the Houndsditch Mews. I knew that I had little chance, alone and at night, of finding my way through to a main thoroughfare and to help, yet my compulsion to find the giant pushed me. My dizziness came in sickening waves, but I pushed on. As I ran, I sought to disguise my medical bag, for its contents alone would be worth my murder to many of the people who surrounded me. Yet as I pelted along, sliding on patches of ice from downspouts and slop pails, the only people I saw emerging from the lane were tiny, most as small or smaller than Holmes' little friend whom I had followed. It looked as though every tiny waif from Spitalfields, Shoreditch, and Whitechapel had crowded into that narrow passage. They scurried out of my path, squealing with delight at the treats that the figure in front of me had cast to them by the hands full. Where they stooped to grasp at more of the treasures, they got beneath my feet and tangled between my legs, virtually stopping my progress. Yet I heard, yards behind me, my two attackers, bent still on tracking me down, muttering curses at the tiny creatures who impeded their progress as well. I risked a quick turn in their direction, fancying that I could see the light play upon the blades of their drawn stilettos. My back ached as I ran, and I wondered if that first attacker had done me some injury which I had yet to discover.

I could not count the number of children who surrounded me, for I tried to make my way through them gently, wishing to avoid harming them at all. Yet I saw that he had already drawn near the end of the lane. I might well lose him, I thought, if I did nothing to escape the gentle trap that encumbered me. I reached into my trouser pocket grabbing all of the loose change I had accumulated. I try to keep a good handful of pennies and shillings, in my pockets, to give to my patients and their younger relations. I tossed these back over my shoulder as quickly as I could unload them from my pockets. I must have exerted quite an effort of the first cast, for I heard the metallic tinkle of coins on the brick wall behind me and a man's pained voice utter an oath and a complaint that one of them struck him in the eye. Immediately, the crowd of children moved to the coins bouncing on the dark, slushy cobbles, freeing me for my pursuit.

My two shadow men left behind, I took off once again after the retreating figure of Father Christmas, seeing the width of his enormous shoulders, seeming to brush either wall of the lane we were in. Fewer children were near me, but a regular crowd of them followed the garish figure. At one point, I saw him stop and look back in my direction as he reached into one huge pocket inside his coat. He seemed to see me hurrying along, and I hoped that he would turn and wait for me. Still many yards away, as I called to him and approached him, I hoped he would stay and speak to me. I longed to stop my pursuit, for I grew tired and my aches spread to my legs.

As for the giant, bending at the waist, he cast all of his treasure on the doorstep, where greedy hands scooped and grabbed. He strode on, increasing the length of his stride and ducking down another lane that led back to the better lights of a main thoroughfare. The children claimed the treasures and scampered away in all directions they could run, dodging around me in their retreat from the scene. I passed through them as quickly as I could and coming to the doorstep where he had dropped his sweet treasures, I saw a portion of one of the candy canes, one missed by the children, and scooped it up. I jammed it into my coat pocket and resumed my search. When I made the last turn I had seen him take, I had no sight of him. He had eluded me.

Doing my best to practice the methods of following footprints that I learned from Holmes, keeping the length of the stride in mind and looking for any sudden depressions made by a man's weight on the snow, I pressed on in my hunt, not allowing myself to consider its madness, giving no mind to the shivers that wracked my body. Yet in the narrow lanes of those dark passages, the snow had become more of a frozen, dirty crust or else had been turned into filthy puddles in the middle of the lane, thawed by the noxious vapors from the sewers. The marks of his boots were few and hard to read. I hoped that the man's great weight would make tracking him easier. In the dark, though, I lost track of him as we approached what I thought must be the lights of Whitechapel, which has, at best, an evil name. Yet in the light of a gas lamp from the street, I saw what I looked for: a fresh, wet boot print, half again the size of a normal man's, darkening a step that led to stairs to an upper flat. The narrow opening would hardly admit a man of Father Christmas's great height, but bent double he could have made it. The sound of singing and a pump organ filtered down to the street, so despite my aching legs, I charged up the steps and through the open the door from which the music flowed. I sprang through the aperture and was practically knocked down by the hand that thrust a small, brown hymnal under my nose as I entered.

As I stood panting in the gaslight at the back of the room, I saw that I had forced my way into a Wesleyan hymn sing, where sacred holiday songs rose and mingled, lifted from the mouths of shopkeepers and nearby residents who chose a different way of expressing themselves on the New Year's Eve. One or two of the men were taller than average, but no one in the room came near the height of the man for whom I hunted. The tallest figures in the room were the moderator, who stood atop a small wooden platform at the front of the room, and an elderly, white-haired clergyman, his Church of England collar hidden by his turned up coat collar.

A quick study of the people in the room left me feeling foolish, as well as rather too warm. How would I explain to them that I burst into their midst looking for Father Christmas? I considered that they would be right in thinking me mad. As I stood there blinking in the brightness of that stuffy room, I thanked Providence for leading me into such a gathering of forgiving, patient souls, who simply smiled and nodded at my breathless inspection of their ranks. One or two of them turned concerned eyes on me as though my very appearance worried them, so as soon as I could, I exited the room and, once outside, made my way to the main thoroughfare, which I found to be Aldgate High Street, somewhere I could seek relief in the press of revelers that passed on the sidewalks, from one pub to another.

My weakness had grown rather pronounced, and I had trouble concentrating. What I could think on, left me troubled, for images of Mary and our own few

Christmases, far too few, flooded my thoughts. How finding the Gaelic Giant—Father Christmas—could help me, I could not say, but the thought of seeking him pushed from my thoughts the tortured remembrances of the love that I had lost

As I passed through the merry crowds, I asked a police constable if he had seen any outlandish, Father Christmas-like figures passing, and he fixed me with a flat stare and leaned closer to smell my breath before he answered me.

“I ‘spect you refer, sir, to PC Entwistle’s report of some weeks ago, which, sir, I can in no way corred—corrbob—“

“Corroborate?” I volunteered, earning his grateful smile.

“Yessir. Corroborate. For, I have had no such sightings in Whitechapel, sir” he added, seeming surer that inebriation had not caused my query. He still studied my face and asked if I felt well. I confided to him that I did not, that I felt miserable, cold and wretched, in fact. I considered confiding in him that I was in earnest about finding the Gaelic giant, as the papers had called him. I considered calling upon the copper’s familiarity with Holmes to justify my presence there, for I knew that most of the London constabulary had a high opinion of my friend’s abilities. Yet I refrained, thinking that to do so would be unmanly on my part. The act of drawing someone into my madness would evince a desperate need to find something that my rational thoughts told me wasn’t there. Giving in to desperation is a sign of hysteria, which I vowed to control, despite my pulses, which still pounded in my ears.

I took my leave of the constable with a faint “Merry Christmas, Happy New Year,” which he returned in sober good will and an admonition to get to a good, dry spot by a fire. I let my feet wander, though, as I left his side, toward the brighter lights and more raucous sounds of revelry, yet my frame of mind could draw no joy from the revels. I grew more depressed as the crowds around me grew more joyous. I marveled at my impulsive dash into a dangerous part of the city, exposing myself, alone, to the dangers of London’s darker areas in pursuit of something that I didn’t believe in but desperately needed. I found that, even in the coldness of my thoughts that I could not separate my actual sight of the figure I had seen in the dangerous labyrinth behind me from the fantasies I had entertained since youth about Father Christmas. Clearly I hoped to gain something from him, something that I needed. Did I wish him to unite me with my Mary? I shuddered at the revelation in that thought. I stood on the edge of losing my ability to reason. My aimless feet wandered far down Cornhill Street into Cheapside, into the heart of the Old City. Though likely just an hour or so, the welter of faces and voices made it feel like forever. I ignored all of them, the shouts of those who wished me good cheer, mixed with the solicitations of prostitutes and their ponces.

Finding my way to quieter streets, with the dome of St. Paul’s ahead of me familiar images of home and hearth confronted me and threw me once again onto the shoals of bittersweet memories of my home life with Mary. I saw glimpses of families within warm, light homes, with family and friends in quiet celebration of the mid point of the Yuletide Season. Flashes of smiling faces, embracing figures, forced my thoughts back to the home I had lost, the life I had with Mary not two years ago. The cold wind biting my cheeks, at the very least, provided a cover for the tears that welled up in my eyes. But shivers wracked me again and again and my body ached beyond enduring. I coughed as I went, a deep, wracking spasm that left me weak. My head pounded, and I grew dizzy enough to stumble like a drunken man upon the front steps of a well lit

mansion. In that instant, I recognized my plight. Influenza had me in its grasp. Clearly, my aches and chills came from the fever that tormented my body.

Panic seized me as I recognized that I had a desperate need to get within doors, yet I could not risk spreading the disease to anyone, so I turned from the homes and stumbled away from them, staying well into the middle of the cobbled lane, desperate to find a hansom cab. I hurried back to the sound of revelry, intent on a fast retreat to home, to Baker Street. As I went, I passed one house, certain that my Mary stared out at me from the window overlooking the street. I wept afresh at her loss and the thought that I was losing my mind.

A hansom cab deposited several young gentlemen outside a garishly lit residence at the end of Wood Street, and in a dash that tore at the muscles of my legs, I raced for the cab. I fell, though, sprawling headlong into slushy puddle, my head thumping hard on the cobbles. The icy water seeped into my clothes, and the part of my mind that could recall any medical training told me that this would be the death of me. I sought to rise, but I shivered so that I could not gain control of my muscles. I managed to lunge far enough forward so that my face, at least, would be out of the water. The cab seemed to be turning in order to leave. I sought to shout, but a coughing fit took me again, leaving me gasping for air, and I sagged back to the cobbles.

I don't know how long I lay there, but I passed into delirium as shivers wracked my aching body, my mind wandering in and out of horrid fantasies of children swarming over everything, houses, street lamps, and hansom cabs. All the children, clad in tatters and rags, bore in filthy hands long candy canes. They pushed and tugged. They struck our faces with their candy canes. They kept me from clasping Mary's hand, for she called to me to join her, and I strove to do so, to return to her side, even in death. We were swept apart time and again as the children mounted like a crawling tide in my delirium. Their merry cries became deafening and their faces shown so bright that they pained my eyes. Shouting at Mary to reach for me as the press of tiny hands brought her near, the dream faded, from me. Strong hands lifted me from the street. Someone picked me up, carrying me as though I was no more than a child. The air around me took on a fresh tang, as of approaching snow, mingled with a scent of pine and wood smoke. I opened my eyes and saw that someone held me high off of the street, cradled in long powerful arms. My head rested against a broad shoulder, clad in dark green. Above me, poorly lit by the house lights, a noble face glowed. A snowy beard, streaked with red, strong Nordic features, and bushy eyebrows loomed above me. He turned his eyes upon me and grinned wide. His eyes, pale icy blue glowed lighter even than his face. I stared and sought to smile, to call him by name, for I had found Father Christmas at last, and he might yet take me to be with Mary. His face, however, faded as my sight failed. I remember wanting to ask if I could have a treat, but darkness took me. Wind blew around, as I recall, as though I moved at great speed, but I saw no more and in seconds lost all sense of consciousness..

When I next attained awareness, it was through a cough which shook me from head to foot. For a brief second I opened my eyes, and I saw that I was in my own bed, and though I ached still and seemed to have lost all strength in my limbs, I no longer shivered, and the bed clothes felt snug and comforting. Closing my eyes again, I heard two voices near me. At the foot of the bed, Holmes stood in his familiar mouse-colored

dressing gown, and with him, my old friend Jackson, just putting his stethoscope back into his kit. I had yet to do as much as stir.

“Well, the fever has broken,” Jackson claimed, “which is the best thing we can hope for. And I cannot help but think that the worst is behind him now.”

“That is encouraging news, doctor,” Holmes said. “I shudder to think that he was so far gone, so wet and cold. Poor man was nearly done in.”

“Yes,” Jackson sighed, “I’ve seen many men in my field work themselves to the point of exhaustion, only to succumb to the very disease they were treating. Watson has pushed himself exceedingly hard this Christmas season, but I cannot, for the life of me, fathom what drove him out into the east end on New Year’s Eve.”

“I fancy that I’m to blame there, doctor,” Holmes said quietly.

“Oh? Was he acting on your behalf in the matter of some case, then?”

“Yes, more or less,” Holmes explained, “For it was a matter in which I hoped to involve him to his benefit. I must say that I thought it working in a most grand fashion, too.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Holmes,” Jackson said, expressing my curiosity as well, “But I do not understand what you are saying.”

“Yes.” Holmes replied, “I’m afraid that I must be vague in this manner, but I can say that I sought to use the newspaper reports of the Gaelic Giant as an excuse to get Watson out of himself.”

“Ah. Yes,” Jackson claimed, “In his fever, he has muttered his wife’s name, poor devil. It must have been wretched thing, losing her like that.”

“She was an exceptional woman, doctor, exceptional,” Holmes claimed, “I’ve never met her equal, and last year, fortunately, my cases were energetic and demanding. We often traveled, which was fortunate for Watson, taking his mind off of his loss. Even our journey into the North of England, clearing up the Holderness issue, took his mind off his troubles—as well as ensuring my financial comfort.

“But I could see the malaise set upon him, poor fellow, as autumn approached this year, and I hoped to distract him in some way. My own cases, though quite lucrative—pleasant enough challenges in their own way—have been so mundane as to be resolved without excitable effort. I’m rarely called to stir from the sitting room to solve them. Using the newspaper accounts of that Christmas apparition, I hoped to take his mind from his plight. Getting him into the east end, I was able to turn his attentions towards some work that would do him great good, as well as those he served.”

“Yes,” Jackson said, “He has done much in less than a month. I’ve always thought that he undervalued his gifts as a physician. I, for one, am grateful for whatever you’ve done to tempt him back into harness.” Jackson paused for a moment before he said, “And, as I see by that glum look on your face, my dear fellow, I will not have you recriminating yourself because of his falling ill. He could have done that in any case, even if his exhaustion did make him worse for a while. He is a stout fellow, thankfully. We’ll have him right in no time, and you need not take on the weight of needless guilt.”

“Perhaps you’re right doctor,” Holmes sighed, “perhaps you’re right, but I have been quite wracked with concern for his well being.”

“And I see that you’ve taken a blow to the forehead, unless I miss my guess,” Jackson observed, “It looks as if one case at least has been exciting?” I could hear Jackson putting on his coat and gloves, making ready to leave.

‘Ah, no, alas,’ Holmes laughed, “This is more self-inflicted. My height is sometimes a liability to me, Doctor. You might say I ran into a low bridge!” They both chuckled and exited the room. I drifted off to sleep, thinking of Holmes efforts to act as a friend ought to. I said grateful prayers for his presence in my life, as well as miraculous rescue that had gotten me to a place where I could convalesce.

I got up on unsteady legs quite early the next morning, shivering my way into my slippers and dressing gown. I ached far less, and my cough troubled me very little. My steps slow and halting, I made my way into the sitting room, pulled the bell to summons Mrs. Hudson and sought a chair by the fire. Soon, Mrs. Hudson came in with a pot of strong tea, and with many smiles and “Bless me it’s grand to see you up and about so soon,” she bustled back to fetch a breakfast for me. I had some appetite, but, on finding that I had spent two days unconscious with fever, I asked her for some toast and broth first, which she promised in under an hour, as soon as she could contrive to heat it up.

Feeling something of a chill, even near the fire, I got up in search of a blanket to wrap around me. Finding none at hand, I recalled that Holmes had the extra bedding in a trunk at the foot of his bed. I crept into his room, unwilling to wake him, after his watch-care over me. He lay in deep slumber, which I sought to leave undisturbed. I tried the lid and found that it opened without so much as a groan. Lifting the lid enough to find an extra blanket, which I dragged out and put over my arm, I happened to glance back inside the trunk. A brocade of complicated Irish knot work on the deep Lincoln green caught my eye. I let the blanket over my arm slide off onto the floor with a dull thump as I lifted out the long coat, much heavier than it looked. As I held it up, I saw its capacious inner pockets, the size of pillow cases. So. My friend Holmes’ theatrical abilities had fooled me once again.

On a lark, I pulled the enormous garment on, feeling like a young teen who tries on his father’s greatcoat. Its sleeves, many inches too long, and the shoulders much wider than my own, allowed the garment to engulf me down passed my toes. I found it warm, like most stage costumes. I let it drag the floor behind me as I quietly closed Holmes’ door.

A welter of emotions cascaded through me, almost too great a burden to bear. I had not had such a rush of sheer joy since my own childhood Christmases, long ago. That Holmes had played the part of Father Christmas for the poorest children in London warmed my heart. That he had done so for me, too, brought, I am unashamed to say, grateful tears to my eyes. The memory of his having found me in that freezing puddle and bringing me safely out of it moved me to prayers of thanksgiving. My thoughts returned to that night and recognized the disastrous effects that the fever had upon my thoughts, but I saw in the madness an understanding of what I had sought in my grief.

In all my adventures with Holmes, I have come to recognize the steadiness of his friendship and the depth of his compassion for all of God’s children. I recognized that his use of theatrical techniques had been what I suspected in the first place, an advertisement of sorts for a coming attraction. It’s just that in this case, the coming attraction was the Incarnation, the arrival of Immanuel, God with us. Holmes, dressed up to look like Father Christmas, had given me hope—perhaps had done so for a greater portion of London--that something beyond the mundane awaited us, for me something beyond my grief and loss.

I suspected that somewhere nearby, perhaps in his own rooms, I would find the wig, the stilts or whatever contraption he had used to exaggerate his height, even the padding that had made his shoulders seem so broad. I knew better than to doubt that he had the strength to carry me. Though thin, I had seen him call upon great strength when pressed. Clearly, Holmes made an excellent choice to play Father Christmas. I delighted in the memory of all that I had seen, and I sat amazed at the thought of his abilities with make up. I had failed to recognize him, even as close as I had been. That, I thought, could have been explained by the fever.

I searched out the coat's pockets and found, to my delight, that one piece, one candy cane such as Holmes had given out, lingered in the bottom seam of the left pocket. I wobbled away from the fire for a moment to find my greatcoat and compare this treat to the one I found in the alley on New Year's Eve. I broke the newer one in half to look at its qualities and found it nearly identical to the one I'd seen "Father Christmas" drop onto that darkened doorstep. I tasted both and found that after a moment, each had the same taste, or near enough as to mark no difference. I chuckled and wandered back to the fire to await my broth and toast.

I found that the taste, heavy with vanilla and extract of peppermint, had yet a malty quality to it that lay thick on my tongue, though not in an unpleasant way. Looking, I suppose, like a giddy toddler in his father's gown, I returned to the fire to enjoy my treat.

"Those will do you greater good, in your present condition," Holmes' voice came from behind me, "than any food for which you might find an appetite." I turned in my chair to see Holmes standing behind me in his dressing gown. The long, reddish white wig of his disguise sat awkwardly on his head.

"I see you've shaved for the occasion," I said with a broad smile.

"The beard was quite the worst part," he said pulling the garish wig off of his head and tossing onto a nearby deal table, "You've no idea how difficult it is to keep it straight without gallons of spirit gum, not to mention how badly it itches."

"Stilts?" I enquired, gesturing to his already long legs.

"In a matter of speaking," he said, "although the foot in these, is much more stable. It flexes on a stiff rubber ankle of sorts, and they attach firmly to one's lower legs. A device and trick I learned from a circus performer I knew from childhood. I only needed to be a foot or so taller. I had a devilish time acquiring a sense of natural ease in my steps. And, I found that you rather put me through my paces, Watson, forcing me into something of a run down a slippery alley!"

"I am awfully sorry, my dear fellow," I replied, though I offered it with a cough and a laugh. I had found that I was quite enjoying the treat that he had given to the children, so I ventured to ask, "Is the effect of these merely to cheer the mood? They are strangely flavorful, I find."

"Ah, there you come to it, Watson, the center of your mystery," Holmes exclaimed, going to the mantel to retrieve his ancient clay pipe, "Which actually began in my time abroad." He paused to prepare his pipe, and I settled in to listen to the disclosure, for the thought of a story that began in the past and resolved itself in the saving of my life woke my eager anticipation, making me childlike again, in keeping with my costume and the season

“In my travels as Sigerson, the itinerant violinist,” Holmes explained, “I chanced to meet two young men, Frederick Hopkins and Christiaan Eijkman, recent university graduates at that time, who were brought to my attention by another musician who knew my penchant for chemistry. These two fellows disclosed something momentous to me, and I predict great things for them, Watson, great things. I predict that their discoveries will be a benefaction to all men, across the globe. They shared their thoughts with me, thinking me just a curious amateur, about what they termed certain accessory factors in the foods we eat, which, if distilled to their essence, might be used by the body with greater efficiency, giving humans the power to resist disease and in effect, live up to our potential.”

“This reminds me, Holmes, of the work of Doctor Lind, a century ago, now, treating scurvy with citrus fruits,” I exclaimed.

“Indeed, it should,” Holmes explained, “For Hopkins and Eijkman began their work through the study of Doctor Lind’s discoveries. You know, of course, my affinity for chemistry, Watson, and I could scarcely wait to try my own hand at it once I returned to England. You see, old fellow, though I may affect a gruff exterior, I find that my work, having taken me into the most desperately impoverished areas of the City, has made me sensitive to the plight of those desperate children who die by the hundreds through disease and mischance. The slightest infection, Watson, will soon reduce an undernourished child into such a state that he cannot endure even a mild winter. I vowed to myself that if I ever came by the means to do so, I would give them such aid as is in my power to give. The generous fee that the Duke of Holderness settled upon me gave me the means. So, with the help of an Italian confectioner, whom I helped out of a minor difficulty several years ago, I experimented with a concoction of my own, based on the ideas that Hopkins and Eijkman shared with me—though I will never do so to a profitable end. Each treat that I devised, Watson, possesses the “accessory factors” as Hopkins and Eijkman would call them, of many good, hot meals.”

“And you did this dressed as Father Christmas,” I ventured, “because you wanted to give them hope, as well as nourishment.”

“Yes, something of the sort,” he replied from behind a cloud of pungent smoke, “although in my mind it was something of a social experiment, as well as a scientific one. To put it your way sounds rather too sentimental for my taste.”

Thinking it best to not pry too far into my friend’s generous motives, I turned the matter back to my pursuit of him through the dark lanes of lower Spitalfields. I asked him how he disappeared so fast, and how he came by the cut near his hairline, where the sticking plaster still showed.

“A narrow escape for me, Watson,” he laughed, “Yet I should have known that you would pursue me like the Bloodhound of Heaven Himself, once you had my scent. This,” he paused to finger his mild head wound, “was nearly my undoing. I sought to escape up that same narrow stair you ascended, where I believe you encountered a service of sort?”

I nodded my agreement and hastened him on in his story. “Well, I took one step up toward the stair, bending as low as I could. I’m afraid those doorways are far shorter than those to which I’ve become accustomed to in my late night arrivals up the back steps of this house, into Mrs. Hudson’s kitchen. I nearly rendered myself unconscious by ramming my head into that low lintel, Watson. The blow threw me back to the cobbles,

and I crawled away, removing my stilt contraptions and sheltering in a doorway further down the lane until I saw you go up those stairs. I was grateful that I escaped your determined pursuit. I had hoped to sustain my charade through the sixth, but the need was too great and I was running out of my product even as you were following me.”

“I, especially, am grateful for your taking on Father Christmas’ task,” I added, thinking it too little gratitude to the man who had rescued me from disaster. “Do you think that you will repeat your efforts in this regard?”

“Sadly, Watson, I do not think it likely,” Holmes claimed, “For I had to make efforts to have my sweetmeats manufactured locally, after I found that those I ordered from Italy had lost much of their potency by the time they arrived in England. Desirous of avoiding the attentions of local merchants, and thus ensuring my anonymity in the affair, I had to find another manufacturer in Scotland. Then, of course, I had to time the shipments and release accordingly, to get the concentrate to the children as soon as it reached London—Hence many of my late nights and early mornings.

“No, Watson,” Holmes continued with a shake of his head, “The work was, at best, only marginally successful, as you can attest, I’m sure, by the number of sickly children who came to your clinics. Next time, I shall likely put my efforts into a rather more mundane form of support, such as The City Mission.”

“But surely you have helped some of the children who habitually avoid any formal public service—those wretched little fellows, such as the one we spoke to that day in the Houndsditch Mews. I saw him before I began my pursuit of you, and I must say that he looked as fit as a fiddle. Besides,” I added, seeing Holmes nod his acceptance of my report, “I think that in carrying off your masquerade, you gave many of the people of London something to hope for, some sense that a higher power took thought of their welfare. You did that for me, you know, in addition to saving my life.”

“You go too far, Watson, too far,” Holmes replied with a laugh and a shake of his head. “Yes, I might have piqued your curiosity and steered you in a direction that would aid you. So might any friend do, but I hardly think that such constitutes saving your life. Surely, it was the work that you did which gave you the sense of hope you speak of. That, not I, is what you needed to get through your malaise.”

“No, Holmes,” I said, “I make reference to your timely retrieval of my prostrate form from that freezing puddle in Cheapside.”

“I beg your pardon, Watson?” he answered, fixing me with a hard stare, “What, pray, do you mean?”

“Obviously, I refer to your having lifted me bodily from where I fell in the street, once the fever had me in its grip. I saw you in your disguise, you know, not that I could tell it was you. The make up—or else I, in my fever—gave you an eldritch look, very affecting.”

Holmes got up from his chair and paced to the fireplace. He looked at me, put his hands in his dressing gown pockets, and said, “Pray tell me what you recall.”

I did so, recalling the smells, the sensations, and my reactions at the time, when I understood that Father Christmas had rescued me from my plight. Holmes listened to the details with his eyes closed, asking me to go over them again for him, as he returned to his seat in a pose of concentration. When I finished the account again, Holmes looked at me over his steepled fingers and said,

“After escaping you in the alley, Watson, I removed my disguise, and sought the anonymity of the Aldgate High Street. Within ten minutes, I had found a hansom cab and returned here to tend to this gash on my forehead. I saw you next an hour, perhaps two, later, a wet and shivering figure huddled on our front doorstep. I thought you had managed to come there on your own and only collapsed after ringing the bell to summon aid. I saw no one with you, my dear fellow. No one.” We both lapsed into awed silence at the enormity of the reality that confronted us.

And so, my “Epiphany” came several days earlier than the sixth of January in that Christmas season. Over time, Holmes offered several scenarios involving the grateful cab driver I had employed earlier on New Year’s Eve, but we could never verify them with that same man or any of the other hansom cab drivers I might have tipped well in my journeys through London. We could verify nothing. No one answered our advertisement in The Times, which offered a substantial reward for information surrounding my rescue on New Year’s Eve in Cheapside. And though I doubt that Holmes would admit to this himself, I find that I am most grateful for that mystery remaining unsolved, for its resolution lies outside of my friend’s capacity, as well as my own. Yet I treasure the recollection of the unsolved case of the Gaelic Giant, and I hold that particular Christmas Season as a rebirth in my life of hope and faith. I cherish it as much as any memory that gives me reason to go on.