



Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XI -- The Adventure of the Engineer's Thumb

SUMMARY (Diogenes Club)

Watson is married and in practice. Hatherly is a bachelor who lives alone and has few friends. He is a struggling hydraulic engineer. He is approached by Stark to examine and diagnose a defective hydraulic press. Stark insists upon absolute secrecy and acts so suspiciously that anybody could see he is up to no good.

He has Hatherly come to Eyford late at night but pays him ten times the usual fee for his inconvenience. The press is located in an old mansion. Elsie begs Hatherly to leave but he refuses. After diagnosing the problem with the press and telling the counterfeiters how to fix it, the crooks try to crush Hatherly in the large press, but Elsie saves him at the last moment and takes him to a second story window and tells him to jump. While he is hanging by his hands, Stark whacks off his thumb with a cleaver. Hatherly falls, faints, and regains consciousness in the corner of the garden. He takes the train to London and the guard takes him to Watson who dresses his wound and takes him to Holmes who consults with Bradstreet.

When the party arrives at Eyford they find the lamp which was crushed in the press when the crooks tried to kill Hatherly has set the house on fire, and it burns completely. The counterfeiters escape. By examining the footprints in the garden, Holmes determines Becher and Elsie dragged Hatherly to safety before they left.

Holmes consoles Hatherly though he may have lost his thumb and his fee, he has gained a story which "will make him good company for the rest of his existence."



SUMMARY (ACD Encyclopedia)

Victor Hatherley meets Watson to heal his cut thumb. Watson treat the wounded part and lead Hatherley to Baker Street because the circumstances of the accident are curious. Hired by Colonel Lysander Stark to repair his hydraulic press at Eyford, Hatherley went there in the utmost discretion.

There he has been urged to be cautious by a woman, Elise, and he realized that the press was not intended to be used for honest purposes. Thanks to Elise, Victor Hatherley narrowly escaped death, but his thumb was cut by Stark who pursued him.

Holmes goes to the Eyford house but he discovers it burning and its occupants, counterfeiters, on the run.

SUMMARY (Wikipedia)

An engineer, Victor Hatherley, attends Dr Watson's surgery after his thumb is chopped off, and recounts his tale to Watson and Holmes. Hatherley had been hired for 50 guineas to repair a machine he was told compressed Fuller's earth into bricks. Hatherley was told to keep the job confidential, and was transported to the job in a carriage with frosted glass, to keep the location secret. He was shown the press, but on closer inspection discovered a "crust of metallic deposit" on the press, and he suspected it was not being used for compressing Fuller's earth. He confronted his employer, who attacked him, and during his escape his thumb is chopped off. Holmes deduces that the press is being used to produce counterfeit coins, and works out its location. However, when they arrive, the house is on fire, and the criminals have escaped.

The story, set in the summer of 1889, mainly consists of a young London consultant hydraulic engineer, Mr. Victor Hatherley, recounting strange happenings of the night before, first to Dr. Watson.

Hatherley had been visited in his office by a man who identified himself as Colonel Lysander Stark. He offered Hatherley a commission at a country house, in Eyford, Berkshire to examine a hydraulic press used, as Stark explains, to compress fuller's earth into bricks. Stark warned Hatherley to keep the job confidential, offering him 50 guineas (£52.50, equivalent to £6,173 in 2021^[1]). Hatherley felt compelled to take this work, despite his misgivings, as his business was newly established and he had very little work.

Upon arriving late at night at the appointed train station, Hatherley is met by Colonel Stark and is driven a considerable distance in a carriage with frosted glass windows to the house where he is to

examine the machine. (A minor detail is that the house was actually quite near the station; Holmes realizes that the carriage drove "six [miles] out and six back" to disguise the house's location from Hatherley.) Hatherley is still under the spell of the 50 guineas and does not become afraid even when a woman at the house warns him to flee. He is presently shown the press and makes his recommendations as to needed repairs. Then, he rashly decides to inspect the press more closely. His discovery that its floor is covered by a "crust of metallic deposit" confirms his suspicion that the machine is not used for pressing fuller's earth. When he rashly confronts Stark with the knowledge, Stark tries to kill him. He narrowly escapes getting crushed to death when Stark turns the machine on, but he escapes the press with the aid of the woman. Pursued by the murderous Stark, Hatherley is forced to jump from a second-story window, in the process getting his thumb severed by Stark's cleaver. Hatherley survives the fall but passes out in the rose-bushes, coming to hours later by a hedge near the rail station.

Holmes then makes sense of the happenings, recognizing Stark and his allies as counterfeiters (the machine had been used to press the metal for half crowns; Hatherley's story also helps Holmes solve the mysterious disappearance of another consultant hydraulic engineer a year before), but he, Watson, and the police arrive too late: the house is on fire, and the perpetrators have fled. The press was destroyed when Hatherley's lamp was crushed inside it, setting the machine on fire and ruining the criminals' operation, although they escaped with several "bulky boxes" presumably containing counterfeit coins toward the direction of Reading, Berkshire.

This case is one where Holmes fails to bring the villains to justice.