

The Adventure of the Engineer's Arm

By Jen Matteis

If there was ever a profession whose narrow orbit and internal jargon rivaled that of my friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, it is that of the most expert engineers. Like Holmes (and, perhaps even more so, his brother Mycroft), their work determines their list of acquaintances. That fact served to reignite a case involving an engineer who was our past client. The original case was long cold. The events were, however, fresh in my mind, as I had only recently gotten around to recording them.

It was a quiet afternoon in November. Fog clung to the streets and promised a cold rain to come. I'd left my practice early to join Holmes for tea, after which we settled into a comfortable silence. We were each involved in our own version of casual reading: Holmes in his armchair with the elaborately illustrated *British Entomology*, I with a recently published collection of medical oddities.

Our reading was interrupted by quick footsteps in the passage and an excited knocking on the door. "An informal knock like that hints at someone we know—come in!" Holmes called, putting aside his book on the coffee table.

In came the young engineer, Mr. Victor Hatherley, who had sought out Holmes's services two years earlier. Involuntarily, I glanced at his thumb—still missing, of course. He saw me glance at it and gave a wry smile. "Turns out I got off easy."

"You ran into the counterfeiters again?" asked Holmes.

He shook his head. "Not me—another engineer. I met him at a recent conference on the gravitation scheme at a hotel in London."

Holmes must have noticed my blank look. "A longstanding plan to build dams to pipe water more cheaply into East London," he explained.

"Anyway—I noticed he was missing an arm! Naturally, I thought we could swap anecdotes. As Holmes suggested at our last meeting, my loss has at least given me a conversation starter."

"I'm pleased it has served you well in that respect." Another would have taken Holmes's half-lidded gaze as boredom, but his attention was riveted on the engineer, hungry as he always was for mental diversion in quiet times. "Pray, continue."

"I told the engineer my story. As I described what had happened, he became visibly agitated. Finally, he took me aside. We found an empty room and there he explained to me that he had run into the very same group. They had sworn him to secrecy, as they did with me, and he had kept it for several months—until now. He begged me not to go to the police, and I said I wouldn't."

"A good thing, too," said Holmes. "Without a subtle approach, this group will no doubt vanish as effectively as they did the first time. What did you learn of them?"

"They are in London, operating under new names. They hired him to help construct an enormous hydraulic press. It sounds similar in size to the one that I saw. He was brought there blindfolded, so he couldn't say where it was exactly. However, he thinks he has a few clues to its location."

"Did they offer him any explanation of what they were doing with the press?"

"None at all, though I would guess the same purpose as before."

"How did he lose his arm?" I asked.

"Obviously, he lost it in the hydraulic press," said Holmes. "He must know more than he told you, Mr. Hatherley, or he would

still have it. What is the name of this engineer? I would very much like to meet him.”

“His name is Mr. Alexander Ward. He is eager to meet you, Mr. Holmes. I apologize if it was presumptuous of me, but I arranged for him to come see you tomorrow afternoon at one o’clock.”

“I am eager to meet him as well,” said Holmes. “Watson, you will come too, of course.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” I said.

The two engineers arrived together promptly at one o’clock the next day. Ward did not match my expectations. Where Hatherley was young and forthright, Ward was older and had a reserved demeanor. He wore a long grey overcoat, pince-nez, and had a shock of black hair lined with streaks of white, giving him the appearance of a highly educated badger. Though we were there to help him, he shot us an appraising look as he came in the door.

Hatherley introduced us. “Mr. Sherlock Holmes and his associate Dr. Watson; Mr. Alexander Ward.” We both shook his left hand—there was no other—then sat down.

“These are wicked men,” Ward said to Holmes. “I am sorry to bring them back into your life.”

Holmes raised an eyebrow. “Mr. Ward, one engineer lost his life to these criminals, Hatherley lost his thumb, and now you’ve lost an arm. These are people who will continue to hurt other people until they are stopped. I am delighted to have an opportunity to do so.”

The engineer plucked at the loose sleeve of his coat. “I’m afraid, Mr. Holmes.”

“Tell me everything. I promise we will find them and you will see them behind bars.” Holmes poured out generous measures of brandy for the two engineers.

Ward took a sip before continuing. “I met them the same way that Mr. Hatherley did. The colonel—he gave a different name but went by that title—came to my office and offered me a deal that was

too good to be true. Like Mr. Hatherley, I was in a dry spell for work and only too happy to accept.”

“How much did he offer you?” asked Holmes.

“Two hundred guineas for three nights’ labor. They blindfolded me and took me to a destination not far away, maybe on the outskirts of London. There they had me help install a hydraulic press of about the same size as the one Hatherley described.”

“Not farther?” Holmes was fascinated. “It seems they are laying aside caution. A counterfeiting operation would not need to be located in the city. Perhaps there is another use for the press, one that requires the availability of some resource.”

“They did have more men than Hatherley encountered. I don’t know where they took me, but it was a large warehouse. I only saw the portion that had the press, but there were many other rooms as well, and the sound of machinery all around.”

“What did you smell, see, and hear?” asked Holmes.

“Mostly just the interior of the warehouse, which had the smell and sound of a metal shop. But at one point there was a break in the noise, and I thought I heard a gull’s cry.”

“So near the river,” said Holmes. “An easy route for whatever supplies they might need—or to ship out their own goods. What kind of people were they?”

“I agree with Hatherley that the colonel had a German accent. I did not see the woman he described. I believe most of them were our fellow countrymen, but rough laborers with little knowledge of machinery.”

“What did they have you do?”

“For three nights in a row they picked me up from my office and brought me in a carriage to the warehouse. They had ample men and parts to build the press, but they needed an engineer to oversee the assembly. I obliged.” He took another sip of brandy. “It was a strange press, the purpose of which I could not fathom. I would recommend Hatherley go with you, if you ever get a chance to

examine it. He had some success in identifying the purpose of their previous press, whilst I failed woefully, as I shall relate.”

“I will keep that in mind,” said Holmes. “At what point did it go wrong?”

“I said something foolish and it cost me my arm.” Ward stared sourly at his glass. “It was on the third night, when the press was almost completed. I was there ten, twelve hours each night, so they let me take breaks in a small room off to one side.” He knocked back the rest of his glass before continuing. “We were almost done. It was around six in the morning. Light was beginning to come in the windows, though they were coated with paper so it was impossible to see out. There was another man in the breakroom, one who I’d made small talk with during the project. We’d been working all night for three days straight. I was exhausted and I wasn’t thinking clearly, but I was delighted at the prospect of almost being done with the project and having earned so much in such a short time. I said the wrong thing to the other man.”

“What did you say?” Holmes asked. “Your exact words.”

“I said, ‘It must have cost an arm and a leg to get that machinery in here, much less pay us so much to install it. That press must be quite the moneymaker for them.’ The man gave me a strange, long look that immediately told me I was in trouble. Without a word, he left the room and came back with three other men. They strong-armed me into the room with the press, which had been cleared of all other people.” He paused again. “Do you need the details?”

“Everything,” Holmes said.

“Holmes!” I interjected. “This man has suffered a terrible trauma.”

Ward waved his hand. “It’s alright. I made it through it; I should be able to tell it, especially to one who might be able to help me get revenge.”

“With enough facts, there is no doubt I shall,” said Holmes calmly.

Ward smiled at him bleakly. "The three men he'd returned with held me down on the edge of the press. I cried and hollered until they gagged me, then struggled in silence. It was no use—one man on three. The first man switched it on. I watched the press descend upon me."

Hatherley went suddenly pale. Holmes glanced at him and refilled his glass.

"The pain was excruciating, but worse was knowing the permanent damage being done. I blacked out and next thing I knew, I was on the table at a dirty little medical practice, God knows where. The doctor was German, too—I remember his accent. I'm guessing he was a war doctor since he seemed unfazed by the injury. He calmly bound it and then sedated me. I found myself the next day back in my flat, alone in my bed. There was a note with me."

Holmes perked up. "A note? Do you have it?"

"I did bring it." He took a piece of paper from his jacket pocket and handed it to Holmes. "I am frightened, but the worst part was being alone."

"You are not alone now," said Hatherley quietly.

Holmes read the note aloud: "Remember, the cost could be an arm *and* a leg." He studied the front, then flipped it over and looked at the back. "No envelope? Nothing else?"

"None."

Holmes nodded at Hatherley. "Mr. Hatherley said you had a few thoughts about where it might have been. Do you think you can lead us there?"

"I will not go back to that place," said Ward. "Not after what happened. But perhaps I can help you find it. Though I was blindfolded, I heard a few familiar sounds. Between that, the papered-over windows, and the sheer size of the place, maybe—"

"We can find it," said Holmes, producing a large map of London from a drawer. "Church bells?"

"What?" asked Ward.

"Did you hear any church bells?"

"No."

Holmes's gaze shifted to another portion of the map.
"Fishmongers?"

"What?"

"Fishmongers. Did you hear any of their cries?"

"No."

Holmes went through a litany of questions; I admit I lost track of them all. Finally, he asked: "Your shoes—did you wear them there?"

"Yes."

"If I could borrow them, please." Ward removed his congress boots and handed them over. Holmes examined the soles, then prised something out. He sat at his microscope for a closer look. Suddenly, he shot out of his chair. "Hah!" he exclaimed.

Hatherley startled awake in his chair; he'd dozed off. "Hm? What?"

"This clears everything up considerably," Holmes said with satisfaction. A new vigor had entered him. He stood and held out his hand. "Mr. Ward, it has been a delight. Thank you for your time. I intend to investigate this matter the night after tomorrow, and I will be in touch the morning after."

Ward glanced at Hatherley. "Mr. Hatherley, I am loathe to send you back into the fray, but Holmes will need an engineer to determine the purpose of the press."

Still pale, Hatherley nodded. "I won't be alone this time."

"Excellent," said Holmes. "Mr. Hatherley, come back on Wednesday evening, seven o'clock."

I watched, bemused, as he sent the engineers on their way.
"So, what did you find?"

"Too much evidence. Oh, a wealth of evidence. I promise you an interesting time tomorrow, Watson."

"I thought you said Wednesday?"

"I do not intend to drag Mr. Hatherley back into this. You and I can wrap it up without him."

"Why is it that the more excited you get on a case, the more I fear for you?" I asked.

"Where's your sense of adventure, Watson?" he cried. He ushered me out the door almost as quickly as he'd seen the engineers out. "I'll send for you tomorrow. I don't know at what time, exactly, so be ready. Oh, and Watson? Bring your pistol. Loaded with blanks."

Holmes sent for me early the next morning. He was filled with the quiet anticipation that I have seen before on so many cases. We were on our way out the door again the moment I arrived. He hailed a carriage and gave a specific address in East London.

"You seem to know exactly where we're going," I said.

"How many sheep are there in London?" He waved a finger at me. "Not the human kind, we both know there are plenty of those."

I shrugged. "Not many."

"Indeed. Ward's shoes left no doubt of his sojourn in the East End, at the docks. Specifically, the St. Katherine Docks, where wool comes in. A strand of wool lodged in the mud of his shoe was an obvious marker."

As always, Holmes's ability to pin down the facts of a case was somehow both convoluted and straightforward at the same time—much like the man himself. "Astonishing," I said.

"Indeed."

Holmes sunk into deep thought, staring out the window. We spent the rest of the ride to the docks in silence.

Once there, Holmes led the way with uncanny certainty. "There," he pointed. "That warehouse." It was an enormous rectangular building. A dull yellow light shone from within, a result of papered-over windows, just as Ward had described.

"Should we inform the police?" I asked.

"They will be here in one hour," said Holmes. "Which gives us, hopefully, enough time to find out exactly what they are using it for, before the circus shows up and startles everyone into silence."

"I thought we already knew," I said.

"Counterfeiting is certainly part of the story. But open your eyes, Watson—the sheer size of the thing! What else is it being used for? You do not need something this big to churn out half-crowns."

"What is your theory?"

Holmes turned aside. "You would not like it. Hopefully I am wrong." He stared at the yellow windows for a moment. "It will get ugly in there, Watson. Trust me, and do as I say."

I nodded, regretting that my pistol was merely decorative. "Are those your only instructions?"

"Have you ever needed more?"

I laughed. "Not so far."

"Now, let's see what our friends have gotten into." Holmes ducked into the dark shadows on the side of the building. I followed, feeling far more visible. Together we crept along the outside wall. At each window, Holmes poked his head up and peered in, then shook his head. At the fifth window, he stopped. "Here," he whispered. "Take a look."

A small corner of the paper had come loose. I put my eye to the gap. Inside, a group of rough-looking men stood around a table. The table looked like it was made of silver; it was completely covered in coins.

"No surprises there. Come, let's stir this hornets' nest and see what we can find." Holmes went to the back and tried the door; it was locked. He knelt and examined it. "A Yale cylinder lock. Not bad. But not good enough, either." Holmes took a lockpick out of his pocket and worked the lock open.

"What are you doing?" I whispered. "There are five men in there."

"Five that we could see," said Holmes.

"Somehow that does not reassure me."

"Put your hands up and look innocent," said Holmes. "And let them take your pistol if they manage to find it."

"Why did I even bring it?"

"And pretend you are startled when they come for us," said Holmes.

"Pretend?!"

"Patience, Watson." Holmes opened the door.

The men inside exploded into action. Two of them scooped coins off the table into boxes; the other three rushed us. Holmes had his hands up and a disarming smile on his face; I copied him on the former. "Gentlemen," he said, as they took us by the arms.

"Who are you?" snarled a man with unruly red hair and a scar down his cheekbone.

"Friends of Mr. Ferguson." Holmes must have guessed he was somewhere within. "Please, take us to him."

Unsmiling, the red-haired man dragged Holmes through a door into the next room; a bald man with spectacles pulled me along behind them. The third man, his face red from excess drink, ran ahead. They led us into the main room, which Ward had described. The air smelled like metal and grease. The hydraulic press was inactive but hummed like a living thing in the center of the open space. Its metal frame towered far above our heads, almost into the building's rafters. Inside the frame hung a tremendous piston: a guillotine built to crush instead of cut. A door slammed shut on the far side of the room, then a portly man with a beard hiding in his double chin came in. His appearance perfectly matched the description given by Hatherley.

"Ah, Mr. Ferguson," said Holmes. "I am sorry to see only your coiners here tonight. I was hoping to get a glimpse of a more interesting operation."

Ferguson looked most unhappy at the prospect. "I take it you're the illustrious detective friend of Mr. Hatherley."

"Mr. Sherlock Holmes, at your service." Holmes inclined his head. "And my associate, Dr. Watson."

No words came to me, but I stuck out my hand like a fool. Ferguson ignored it.

Light footsteps approached from the back of the warehouse.

"That would be the colonel," said Holmes.

"Mr. Holmes." Hatherley had not exaggerated the man's physical state. If anything, he was thinner than I'd expected; a coat hanger might have had more success filling out his shirt. His bright eyes were fixed on Holmes.

"I'm afraid I don't know your last name, so I will have to call you Fritz."

The thin man flinched. "You can call me Colonel."

"Colonel Fritz," said Holmes casually. "Still, not the man I was hoping to see. Where is the man who owns this press? It's him I've come for." There was an edge of threat to his words; the colonel heard it too and laughed.

"You are not likely to ever meet him."

"Oh, I think I might yet."

"There is nothing for you here, nor the police if they belatedly arrive. Those coins you think you saw just walked out the door. Nothing illegal remains on the premises, and you will not be here to direct the police in any case."

"Despite your strong words, you and your men are not the worst tier of criminals. But I think you have terrible taste in friends and I intend to deal them a blow."

Ferguson shifted uncomfortably.

"And speaking of friends, I have a client who would be only too happy to bear witness against you in court," said Holmes.

The colonel laughed. "It would be nice if you'd brought him with you to make things simpler. Either way, I don't see a reason to risk anything by letting you walk out of here tonight." He spat on the floor. "Check him for weapons, if you haven't yet done so." The

redhead frisked Holmes and took his pistol. He handed it to the colonel, who aimed it at me. "If you are armed, yield your weapon."

Holmes nodded at me. I took my pistol out slowly and placed it on the floor. The colonel motioned to Ferguson to pick it up; he did, with an equal amount of caution.

"You should stop this charade," said Holmes. "You are coiners, not murderers—other than the engineer you killed out of desperation."

The colonel smiled unpleasantly. "We have moved up in the world considerably since our last encounter. You correctly discerned this operation involves a criminal circle of incredible breadth. Even if you informed the police of your whereabouts, a simple hose will do to sweep all evidence into the river in a matter of moments. They will find a hydraulic press in a warehouse, owned by a reputable metal-working company whose deep pockets and formidable connections will guarantee we are once again left alone."

"I feared as much," said Holmes. "A press of that size, available to all the wrong people in London. I can imagine it's quite the draw."

"You have no idea."

"I have some idea," said Holmes. "Metal-working on an industrial scale—that suggests weapons manufacturing, perhaps shell-loading, a brisk trade of illegal goods to criminal elements near and far. And I imagine the press itself gets loaned out for all manner of nefarious uses."

"Correct on all counts," said the colonel. "Though some of its uses are more straightforward than you've guessed so far. You have quite the nerve coming here, Mr. Holmes."

"I am a thrill-seeker, in my own way."

"Then let me oblige." The colonel motioned to the men holding us. "Both of them," he said. To my horror, they pulled us in the direction of the press. My only hope lay in the fact that Holmes was entirely unfazed. The bottom of it was a metal platform sunk into

the ground; they pushed us roughly down into it. We stood in the center, our own guns pointed at us. The knowledge of the immense weight and force of the piston looming over our heads frightened me more than I care to remember. Underneath my boots was a perfectly clean and smooth floor; I imagined it being hosed off and shivered.

"It's a fast death. Cheer up," said the colonel.

"One of the very few ways to dispose of a body entirely. Fascinating." Holmes looked up at the machine with interest. "The disappearance of Mr. Jeremiah Hayling, age 26, hydraulic engineer. Perhaps that death inspired the criminal mind. Quite a few bodies go missing in London that are never recovered."

"Yes, now you understand our operations in full. It's one of our most lucrative services, but for you? No charge." He smiled unpleasantly.

"Oh, I doubt it will come to that."

The colonel frowned and studied Holmes. "I have read much about you. Part of me is disappointed that our meeting is this brief, but I suppose it is a relief."

My ability to follow the conversation had diminished with my proximity to the press. I stared at Holmes helplessly. He had told me to trust him; I took a deep breath.

"Mr. Ferguson," said Holmes. "Now is your time to shine. You could put an end to this."

Ferguson glanced at the colonel. "Leniency is what got us into this trouble. We can't afford to make the same mistake twice. I'm only disappointed Hatherley isn't here as well to share a fate that should have been his two years ago."

"Start it up." The colonel gestured to the red-haired man. I was hoping for a complex procedure that would give us more time, but with the touch of a single button the gigantic piston began to descend. It hummed smoothly to itself; for the first time I caught a glimpse of worry on Holmes's face. It was not a time I would have chosen to see it.

"Tell me," said Holmes, "since we will not live out the day. Which mastermind set up the great Sherlock Holmes?"

The colonel bared his yellow teeth in a grin. "A mathematician and a man you should not trifle with. He comes down a hundredfold on those who fail or obstruct him."

"Then I suppose I must apologize for what happens next," said Holmes. With a thud so loud it shook the walls, the hydraulic press lurched to a halt. The colonel's eyes widened.

"These machines have been known to explode with tremendous force when tampered with," said Holmes.

Smoke began to issue from the machine. The red-headed man took one look at it and ran for the door, which set the other two lackeys running.

"How is this possible?" The colonel's gaze was transfixed by the piston frozen in its track.

"Did you honestly think I would let myself be taken so easily? Or that I'd rely on the police to save me?" Holmes scoffed. "Watson and I are perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves."

"No, you don't understand. We already lost the press once before. It cost a tremendous amount of time and effort to rebuild it; he will not be happy." The colonel was pale as a ghost. He tightened his grip on the pistol and turned it on Holmes. "At least I will have succeeded in one thing that will please him immensely: killing Sherlock Holmes." He pulled the trigger; the blank fired.

Holmes charged the colonel the moment it went off; I went for Ferguson. A welcome figure in a dark blue uniform kicked open the front door: Inspector Bradstreet. More police rushed in behind him. The hydraulic press smoked and shook. The piston did not descend any farther, but I was still happy to be out from under it. The police took Ferguson from me, and I sank to the ground.

The shot had left a ringing in my ears. When it subsided, I became aware of another sound: Holmes laughing. "Are you alright?" I asked.

"I'm fine, Watson. It's all just terribly funny."

"How is it funny? We could have been killed!"

"How? I found the building last night, and had my Baker Street boys keep an eye on it to see when the press was in use. When the coiners' work was done, I went in and sabotaged it. I made sure we would arrive before they had a chance to figure out what I'd done. Besides, our guns had blanks in them, as you were well aware."

"And if they'd had guns?"

Holmes put a hand on my shoulder. "If these people had guns, they wouldn't have chased Hatherley around that old mansion with a cleaver, Watson. We were perfectly safe. They were coiners. And we may not have unmasked whoever else was using that machine, but we've managed to set them back quite a bit and get some information in the process."

"So what's funny, after all this?" I asked.

"The look on your face. You thought we really were in trouble."

"You could have told me the press wasn't operational."

"Ah, but then your face might have given us away. You're not much of an actor." I must have grimaced. "Cheer up, Watson. I may have omitted some information, but I didn't lie about one thing: that you and I are perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves."

Bradstreet came over. "I hope you got what you wanted out of this. We could have come in earlier and spared you a heap of trouble."

"And miss what the colonel might say to someone he thought was a dead man? Never. Besides, now you can add attempted murder to their list of crimes."

I thought that seeing the coiners booked signified the end of the adventure, but Holmes directed the carriage driver to Scotland Yard. He asked for Inspector Lestrade at the front desk; soon our sly detective friend appeared.

"Lestrade, were you able to find the man I described?"

"I know you like puzzles, but I never thought you'd have me try and put a one-armed man in cuffs," said Lestrade.

"Ward?" I asked. "Isn't he a victim of these people?"

"Mr. Alexander Ward's real name is Mr. Ian Hamilton. And he has been missing an arm since birth," said Lestrade. "However, I did not find proof of any crime beyond deception."

"I'm so sorry you don't have enough to hold him on," said Holmes. "But we can follow him and see where the trail leads."

"How did you know Ward was in on it?" I asked. "He took us down quite the convoluted path."

"You saw Hatherley have more trouble with the story of losing an arm in the press than the supposed victim showed. Besides, don't you think it a little suspicious how he showed up right after your story went to print?"

"I'm honored that you noticed," I said. "And the wool in the shoe?"

"It simply points to a higher class of criminal than we are used to." Holmes was positively beaming. "We dodged quite an elaborate setup by showing up a day early. I am almost sorry we missed it—except that it could have proved fatal. I am not entirely reckless, Watson."

"And that's why Ward wanted Hatherley to go with us as well, since he's the only person who could identify the coiners," I said.

"Indeed. It seems they had a plan to tie up all their loose ends. Thankfully, they did not manage it. Still, it would have been interesting to meet the mind who planted our trail there."

"I've said it before and I'll say it again: the more excited you get on a case, the more I fear for you."

"And I would again say where's your sense of adventure, Watson, but I know you love the game almost as much as I do. Now let's see where the one-armed, so-called engineer leads us. Oh, and Lestrade? Before you let him go, tell him one thing."

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“What?” asked Lestrade, clearly frustrated by Holmes’s machinations.

“Tell the mathematician, Sherlock Holmes says: stay out of my city!”