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Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Valley of Fear* (Simplified Edition by ChatGPT)

Part 1

I am a patient man, but that morning I felt a little angry with my friend Sherlock Holmes. I had just begun to share an idea when he interrupted me at once.

“I am inclined to think—” I said.

“I should do so,” Holmes replied quickly, without looking at me.

His words were sharp, and I felt annoyed. “Really, Holmes,” I said, trying to sound calm but firm, “you can be very difficult at times.”

He did not answer me at once. He sat at the breakfast table, but he had not touched his food. His long fingers held a small slip of paper that he had taken from an envelope. His eyes were fixed upon it with deep attention. After a moment he lifted the envelope toward the light and studied both sides carefully.

“It is Porlock’s writing,” he said softly, almost to himself. “Yes, I am nearly certain of it. I have seen it only twice before, but the shape of the letter ‘e’ is special. If this truly comes from Porlock, then it must be very important.”

My irritation faded at once. Whenever Holmes spoke in that quiet and serious tone, I knew that something unusual was happening.

“Who is Porlock?” I asked.

“Porlock, Watson, is not a real name,” Holmes replied. “It is only a sign used to hide the man’s identity. Behind it stands a person who wishes to remain unseen. He once told me clearly that I would never find him among the millions in London.”

Holmes leaned back and joined his fingers together.

“He is not important because of himself,” he continued. “He matters because of the man he serves. Imagine a small animal that follows a great and dangerous beast. That is Porlock. The beast itself is powerful and dark. You have heard me speak of Professor Moriarty?”

“Yes,” I said. “The famous criminal genius.”

Holmes gave a faint smile. “You must be careful saying such things, Watson. In the eyes of the law he is a respected scholar. Yet behind that mask stands the most dangerous mind in Europe. He plans crimes but never touches them himself. Others act while he remains safe.”

Holmes’s eyes shone with quiet excitement.

“He controls a vast network,” he said. “If one part fails, another continues. And Porlock is one weak link in that chain. Sometimes his conscience troubles him. With a little encouragement—and occasionally a small sum of money—he has sent me warnings before crimes happened.”

Holmes placed the paper flat upon his plate.

“If we could read this message,” he said, “it might prevent something terrible.”

I stood and leaned over his shoulder. On the paper was a strange line of numbers and words:

534 C2 13 127 36 31 4 17 21 41 DOUGLAS 109 293 5 37 BIRLSTONE 26
BIRLSTONE 9 47 171

“What does it mean?” I asked.

“It is clearly a secret message,” Holmes said.

“But without a key it is useless.”

“In this case, yes.”

“Why do you say ‘in this case’?”

“Because many secret codes are simple,” he replied. “But this one depends on a book. The numbers point to words on a page. Without knowing the book, we cannot read it.”

I frowned. “Then why include the words ‘Douglas’ and ‘Birlstone’?”

“Because those words were not found on the page used for the code.”

Holmes checked his watch.

“Our second post is late,” he said. “I expect another letter soon. Either an explanation or the book itself.”

At that very moment Billy, our young page, entered with a letter. Holmes opened it quickly. His face brightened for a second and then grew serious.

“This is disappointing,” he said quietly. “Porlock is afraid.”

He handed me the letter. It said that the sender would go no further because someone suspected him. He warned Holmes to destroy the cipher message.

Holmes sat silently, turning the letter in his fingers.

“Perhaps nothing has happened,” he said at last. “Perhaps fear has overcome him. Still, the warning may be real.”

I stared again at the coded message.

“It is frustrating,” I said. “An important secret may be here, and we cannot read it.”

Holmes lit his pipe and leaned back.

“Let us think carefully,” he said. “The message refers to a book. That is our starting point.”

“But we know nothing about the book.”

“Not nothing,” he replied. “The first number is 534. That must be the page number. Therefore the book is large. Next comes C2. That cannot mean chapter two.”

I thought for a moment. “Column two!”

Holmes smiled warmly. “Excellent, Watson. So the book has two columns on each page. We are making progress.”

He continued slowly, building his idea step by step.

“The book must be common,” he said. “Porlock believed I would already own it. Otherwise he would have sent it.”

“The Bible?” I suggested.

Holmes shook his head. “Too many versions. Page numbers would differ. We need a standardized book.”

I suddenly exclaimed, “An almanac!”

Holmes jumped up. "Yes! Very good!"

He took a large book from his shelf and opened it eagerly.

"Let us test it," he said. "Page 534, column two."

He began counting words while I wrote them down. At first the result made no sense, and Holmes laughed in disappointment. Then he suddenly stopped, ran to a cupboard, and brought another copy.

"We are using the new year's edition," he cried. "Porlock must have used last year's!"

Again he counted carefully.

"There... is... danger..." he read slowly. His eyes shone brighter with each word. "May... come... very... soon... one... Douglas... rich... country... now... at... Birlstone... House..."

I felt a chill run through me.

"The message warns someone named Douglas," I said.

"Exactly," Holmes replied. "A man living at Birlstone. Danger is close."

At that moment the door opened and Inspector MacDonald of Scotland Yard entered. He was tall and strong, with sharp eyes and a serious face. Holmes greeted him warmly.

"You arrive early," Holmes said. "Trouble, I suppose?"

"If you said hope instead of trouble, you would be closer," the inspector answered with a grin.

His gaze suddenly fell upon the paper where I had written the decoded message. He stared in shock.

"Douglas! Birlstone!" he cried. "Where did you get those names?"

Holmes explained calmly about the cipher.

The inspector looked from him to me in amazement.

"Well," he said slowly, "Mr. Douglas of Birlstone Manor House was murdered last night."

For a moment the room fell completely silent. Holmes did not show horror or surprise. Instead, his expression became focused and alive, like a scientist watching an experiment succeed.

“Remarkable,” he said quietly. “Very remarkable.”

“You are not surprised?” asked the inspector.

“I received a warning,” Holmes replied. “Now the event has followed. I am interested—but not surprised.”

Inspector MacDonald sat down heavily.

“I came to ask if you would travel with me to Birlstone,” he said. “But perhaps we should stay in London and search for this Porlock.”

Holmes shook his head.

“No,” he said firmly. “The answer lies where the crime occurred. We must go to Birlstone.”

The inspector nodded. “Then we leave at once. You have five minutes.”

Holmes rose with sudden energy. The long quiet weeks were over. I could see excitement return to his face as he reached for his coat.

A warning had come too late. A man was dead. And somewhere behind the crime moved the shadow of Professor Moriarty.

Our journey to Birlstone had begun.

Part 2

The announcement of the murder changed the whole atmosphere of our rooms. A moment before, the strange message had been only an intellectual puzzle for Holmes. Now it had become something living and terrible. A man had died, and the warning had come too late.

Holmes stood very still for several seconds after Inspector MacDonald spoke. His eyes were bright, but his face remained calm.

“Tell us everything you know,” he said quietly.

The inspector removed his gloves and sat down. “There is not much yet,” he admitted. “I received an official message early this morning. John Douglas of Birlstone Manor House was found dead shortly before midnight. Shot in the head. No arrest has been made. The local officer asks for help.”

Holmes nodded slowly.

“And you came here first?”

“Yes,” said MacDonald. “Because of you. I thought you might wish to join us.”

Holmes smiled faintly. “Most certainly.”

The inspector then noticed the letter from Porlock again. He turned it over in his hands thoughtfully.

“You believe this warning came from someone connected with Professor Moriarty?” he asked.

“I am certain of it,” Holmes replied.

MacDonald hesitated. “I must be honest, Mr. Holmes. At Scotland Yard some of us think you imagine too much about this professor. I met the man myself. He seemed respectable and learned.”

Holmes leaned back, amused.

“You visited him?”

“Yes. We spoke about science. He explained a difficult subject with great patience. A quiet gentleman. Very impressive.”

Holmes clasped his hands together.

“Tell me,” he said, “you sat facing his desk?”

“That is correct.”

“And the light was turned toward your face while his remained partly in shadow?”

The inspector blinked in surprise. “Yes. How did you know?”

Holmes smiled slightly. “Did you notice a painting behind him? A young woman looking sideways?”

“I did.”

“A valuable painting,” Holmes said softly. “Far beyond the salary of a university professor.”

MacDonald frowned. “What are you suggesting?”

“Simply this,” Holmes replied. “A man earning a modest income owns objects worth a fortune. Where did the money come from?”

The inspector scratched his head. “You believe he gains wealth through crime?”

“Exactly.”

Holmes spoke calmly, but there was strength in his voice.

“Moriarty stands at the center of a great organization,” he continued. “Pickpockets, thieves, blackmailers—many criminals work under his direction. He sells intelligence and planning. Others take the risk while he remains untouched.”

MacDonald listened more seriously now.

“And you think this murder connects to him?”

“The warning suggests it,” Holmes said. “Either the victim betrayed Moriarty or someone paid Moriarty to arrange the crime.”

The inspector rose suddenly. “Then we waste time talking! We must go to Birlstone.”

Within minutes we were in a cab on our way to the station. Holmes sat forward, listening closely while MacDonald described what little information he possessed. The inspector read aloud from a letter sent by the local detective, White Mason.

““This case is extraordinary,”” MacDonald read. ““Come at once. If possible bring Mr. Holmes.””

Holmes’s eyes shone with interest.

“Promising,” he murmured.

The journey passed quickly. Holmes remained silent for long stretches, his thin fingers pressed together while his mind worked rapidly. I knew that state well. When a problem seized him fully, the outside world almost disappeared.

By midday we arrived at Birlstone station. Waiting for us stood a cheerful, active man in country clothes. This was Detective White Mason.

“A strange case, gentlemen!” he exclaimed at once. “The strangest I have seen. You will find it most interesting, Mr. Holmes.”

He led us through the quiet village toward an inn where rooms had been prepared. The village was old and peaceful, with narrow streets and ancient trees. It seemed impossible that violence could belong in such a place.

Once seated in the inn parlour, White Mason began his explanation.

“The alarm came just before midnight,” he said. “Mr. Cecil Barker ran to the police station saying Mr. Douglas had been murdered. The local sergeant arrived

at the house soon after.”

Holmes listened without interruption.

“The body was found in a ground-floor room,” Mason continued. “Mr. Douglas lay on his back. He wore a dressing gown. A shotgun lay across his chest. The weapon had been cut short, and both triggers were tied together so both barrels fired at once.”

I felt uneasy at the description, but Holmes’s expression grew more intent.

“The injuries were severe,” Mason said quietly. “The shot was fired at very close range.”

“Any signs of struggle?” Holmes asked.

“None clear,” Mason replied. “But there are strange details. The window was open. Blood marks were found on the sill. It appears the killer escaped through it and crossed the moat surrounding the house.”

“A moat?” I repeated.

“Yes,” said Mason. “The house stands like an island. The drawbridge is raised every night.”

Holmes’s eyebrows lifted slightly.

“Interesting,” he said.

“Even stranger,” Mason continued, “a card was found beside the body. On it were the letters V.V. and the number 341.”

Holmes exchanged a quick glance with me but said nothing.

“And one more thing,” Mason added. “The victim’s wedding ring was missing. Other rings remained, but that one had been removed.”

Inspector MacDonald folded his arms. “A planned murder, then. Not robbery.”

“That is my belief,” said Mason.

Holmes rose suddenly. “We should see the house.”

We walked through the village and along a winding path until the Manor House appeared before us. It stood beside still water that surrounded it completely. The old building looked dark and heavy beneath the winter sky.

“That is the window,” Mason said, pointing to one near the bridge.

Holmes moved closer, studying everything carefully—the water, the stone edge,

the ground beyond. He examined the moat with great attention.

“No marks showing where a man climbed out?” he asked.

“None,” Mason replied.

Holmes nodded but did not comment.

We crossed the drawbridge and entered the house. A shaken butler admitted us. Inside, the air felt heavy with fear. Servants whispered together in distant rooms.

The murder chamber lay just beyond the hall.

Holmes paused at the doorway for a moment before entering, as if preparing his mind. Then he stepped inside.

The room was quiet. Sunlight entered through the open window. The position of the furniture remained unchanged since the night before.

White Mason began explaining his theory in detail.

“Suicide is impossible,” he said. “Too many signs were arranged—the footprints, the open window, the missing ring. Therefore it must be murder.”

Holmes nodded slowly.

“The killer likely entered before the bridge was raised,” Mason continued. “He hid behind the curtain. When Douglas entered late at night, the killer demanded the ring, shot him, and escaped through the window.”

Holmes walked slowly around the room while he listened. His eyes moved constantly—from the floor to the walls, from the curtain to the table where a candle still stood.

“The candle tells us something,” Holmes said quietly.

“Yes,” Mason replied eagerly. “It burned only a little. Douglas must have entered calmly before the attack.”

Holmes stopped near the window and looked out across the still water.

The mystery deepened with every detail. A warning had come from London. A man had died in a locked house surrounded by water. And somewhere behind the events, unseen but powerful, stood the shadow of Moriarty.

Holmes’s face showed that the true investigation had only just begun.

Part 3

Holmes remained standing near the open window for several moments. His eyes moved slowly across the surface of the moat, then back toward the room. The winter light fell across his thin face, and I could see that familiar expression of deep concentration which always appeared when he was arranging facts inside his mind.

“Let us consider carefully,” he said at last. “We must not hurry to conclusions.”

White Mason nodded eagerly. “Exactly my feeling, Mr. Holmes. Still, the facts seem to point strongly in one direction.”

Inspector MacDonald folded his arms. “Before we accept that,” he said, “we must test every step. A case that looks simple is often the most dangerous.”

Holmes smiled slightly at this remark.

“Very true,” he said. “Now, Mr. Mason, kindly repeat your reasoning from the beginning.”

The country detective cleared his throat and spoke with confidence.

“First,” he said, “suicide is impossible. The missing wedding ring alone proves that. A man would not remove his own ring and arrange such signs.”

“Agreed,” said Holmes quietly.

“Second,” Mason continued, “the crime could not have been done by someone inside the house. Too many things happened within a very short time. After the shot, the household gathered almost immediately. No one could arrange the footprints, open the window, and remove the ring so quickly.”

Holmes walked slowly toward the curtain in the corner of the room.

“Yes,” he murmured. “Time is an important factor.”

Mason pointed toward the curtain.

“Boot marks were found there,” he said. “They show someone waited behind it.”

Holmes bent down and examined the floor closely. He said nothing for a while. Then he rose again.

“Continue,” he said.

“Therefore,” Mason went on, “the killer must have come from outside. He

entered before the bridge was raised in the evening, hid here for hours, then killed Mr. Douglas when he entered the room late at night.”

MacDonald shook his head slowly.

“There is still a difficulty,” he said. “Why use such a loud weapon? A gunshot would wake the whole house.”

Mason spread his hands. “Perhaps the killer wanted certainty. The wired triggers show he meant to kill instantly.”

Holmes nodded thoughtfully. “A reasonable suggestion.”

He moved toward the table and studied the candle.

“You say this was newly lit?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Mason. “It has burned only a short time.”

Holmes measured the melted wax with his eyes.

“Then Mr. Douglas entered calmly,” he said. “He placed the candle here before anything happened.”

“Exactly,” Mason replied, pleased.

Holmes turned toward us.

“This means the attack was not immediate,” he said. “There was at least a brief moment between entry and death.”

MacDonald leaned forward. “Perhaps a conversation?”

“Possibly,” Holmes answered.

The inspector glanced toward the shotgun lying on a nearby table where it had been placed after examination.

“A strange weapon,” he said. “Short enough to hide under a coat.”

Holmes stepped closer and studied it carefully.

“American manufacture,” he said. “The letters on the barrel suggest the Pennsylvania Small Arms Company.”

White Mason stared at him in admiration.

“That matches my own thought,” he said. “Since Mr. Douglas lived in America, perhaps an enemy followed him here.”

MacDonald frowned. “Or someone already in the house used an American weapon,” he said.

Holmes gave a faint smile. "We must keep both possibilities open."

He then walked slowly around the body's former position, imagining the scene.

"Mr. Douglas enters," he said quietly. "He carries a candle. A man appears from behind the curtain. A demand is made. The wedding ring is removed. Then the gun fires."

The silence in the room grew heavy as we pictured it.

"But why the ring?" I asked.

Holmes shook his head. "That question may prove central to the case."

White Mason lifted a small card from the table and handed it to Holmes.

"This was found beside the body," he said.

Holmes examined it closely.

"V.V. — 341," he read aloud.

He turned the card over several times, studying the writing.

"Curious," he murmured.

"Some secret society, perhaps?" I suggested.

"Perhaps," Holmes said. "Or a message meant for someone else."

MacDonald looked impatient. "If the killer escaped through the window," he said, "we must explain how he crossed the moat without leaving signs."

Holmes returned to the window and looked again at the water.

"How deep is it?" he asked.

"About three feet at most," Mason replied.

"So drowning is impossible," Holmes said. "A man could cross easily."

He leaned outward slightly, examining the stone edge.

"No marks," he said softly. "Interesting."

We stepped outside briefly so Holmes could inspect the ground beyond the moat. He searched carefully but found nothing.

"The absence of evidence is itself evidence," he said quietly as we returned inside.

Back in the room, Holmes stood motionless for a long moment.

"Mr. Mason," he said finally, "your reconstruction is logical. Yet there remains something unsatisfactory."

“What is that?” Mason asked quickly.

Holmes turned toward us.

“The crime appears too carefully arranged,” he said. “Each detail seems meant to guide us toward a particular explanation.”

MacDonald nodded slowly. “You suspect deception?”

Holmes did not answer directly.

Instead he asked, “Who first discovered the body?”

“Mr. Cecil Barker,” Mason replied. “A close friend of the victim.”

“And Mrs. Douglas?”

“She heard the shot but was prevented from entering the room.”

Holmes’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“I should like to speak with them,” he said.

White Mason went to arrange the interviews while we waited. Holmes walked quietly about the room once more, examining small details—the position of furniture, the carpet, the curtain folds.

I recognized the signs well. When Holmes became silent like this, he was building a complete picture inside his mind.

After several minutes he spoke again, almost to himself.

“A warning from London... a marked card... a missing ring... an American weapon... and a house cut off by water.”

He turned toward me suddenly.

“Watson,” he said, “this case contains layers. What we see first may be the least important part.”

His eyes shone with growing excitement.

The tragedy at Birlstone was no simple murder. Somewhere behind the visible facts lay a hidden story, waiting to be uncovered.

Part 4

A few minutes later the door opened and the butler, Ames, entered quietly. His face was pale, and his hands trembled slightly as he stood before us. The shock of

the previous night had clearly shaken him deeply.

“Mr. Cecil Barker will come at once, sir,” he said. “Mrs. Douglas asks if she may wait until later.”

Holmes inclined his head. “Certainly. We will begin with Mr. Barker.”

The butler withdrew, and soon afterward a tall, strongly built man entered the room. He moved with confidence, though his expression showed strain and fatigue. His dark eyes examined each of us quickly before resting upon Holmes.

“You are Mr. Sherlock Holmes?” he asked.

“I am,” Holmes replied calmly. “And you are Mr. Cecil Barker.”

Barker nodded. “I am glad you have come. This business must be cleared quickly.”

Holmes motioned toward a chair. “Please sit. We wish only to understand exactly what happened last night.”

Barker sat down but remained tense, his hands gripping his knees.

“You were the first to reach the room?” Holmes asked.

“Yes,” Barker answered. “I was in my bedroom when I heard the shot. It sounded dull, not very loud. I ran downstairs at once.”

“How long did it take you to arrive here?”

“Half a minute at most.”

Holmes watched him closely. “And the door?”

“It was open.”

“Describe what you saw.”

Barker swallowed before speaking.

“Douglas lay on the floor just as you see the marks now. The candle burned on the table. The gun lay across his body. I knew at once he was dead.”

His voice grew rough, and for a moment he looked away.

“Did you see anyone else?” Holmes asked gently.

“No one. I heard Mrs. Douglas coming down the stairs behind me, so I rushed back to stop her from entering. I could not allow her to see such a sight.”

Holmes nodded slowly.

“You then lowered the drawbridge?”

“Yes. It had been raised for the night. I lowered it so the police could enter.”

Inspector MacDonald leaned forward.

“You believe the killer escaped through the window?”

“I am certain of it,” Barker said firmly. “There was blood on the sill. The window stood open.”

Holmes glanced toward the window but did not comment.

“One more question,” he said. “Did Mr. Douglas appear anxious or troubled recently?”

Barker hesitated slightly. “He had moments of worry,” he admitted. “But nothing unusual. He never explained the cause.”

Holmes noticed the hesitation but allowed the matter to pass for the moment.

“Thank you,” he said. “We may speak again later.”

Barker rose and left the room. As soon as the door closed, MacDonald spoke.

“A strong man,” he said. “But he held something back.”

Holmes gave a small smile. “Most witnesses do.”

The butler was called next. Ames entered nervously, twisting his hands together.

“You have served Mr. Douglas for several years?” Holmes asked.

“Five years, sir.”

“Did your master receive visitors often?”

“Very few, sir. Mr. Barker was the only frequent guest.”

“Was the drawbridge always raised at night?”

“Yes, sir. Every evening.”

“At what time yesterday?”

“About six o’clock, sir. Later than usual because visitors had stayed for tea.”

Holmes nodded.

“You noticed nothing unusual during the evening?”

“Nothing at all, sir.”

“And the wedding ring—are you certain it was always worn?”

Ames looked surprised. “Always, sir. I had seen it many times.”

Holmes thanked him and dismissed him kindly.

When we were alone again, Holmes paced slowly across the room.

“Well?” asked MacDonald.

Holmes stopped near the fireplace.

“Several facts stand out,” he said. “First, the crime was expected by someone connected with Moriarty. Second, the killer appears to vanish from an isolated house. Third, certain details—the ring and the card—seem symbolic rather than practical.”

White Mason nodded eagerly. “Yes, yes, exactly!”

Holmes continued quietly.

“But we must ask ourselves: who benefits from these signs? Are they natural results of the crime—or deliberate signals?”

MacDonald frowned. “You think someone arranged the scene?”

“I think,” Holmes said carefully, “that we must not assume the obvious explanation.”

At that moment footsteps approached again, and the door opened slowly. Mrs. Douglas entered.

She was tall and dark, her face pale but composed. Though grief shadowed her eyes, she carried herself with dignity.

“You wished to speak with me, Mr. Holmes?”

Holmes bowed slightly. “Only a few questions, madam. I regret troubling you.”

She seated herself quietly.

“You heard the shot last night?”

“Yes,” she said softly. “My husband had gone downstairs only minutes before.”

“Did he often walk through the house at night?”

“Always. He checked the rooms before sleeping.”

Holmes watched her carefully.

“Was he afraid of anything?”

She hesitated, then answered slowly. “He sometimes seemed anxious... but he never explained why.”

“Did he receive letters that troubled him?”

“Not that I know.”

Holmes paused before asking his next question.

“Was your husband’s past life in America ever discussed?”

A faint shadow crossed her face.

“Very little,” she said. “He preferred not to speak of it.”

Holmes inclined his head. “Thank you. That will be all for now.”

She rose and left the room quietly.

After the door closed, Holmes stood silent for a long time.

Outside, the winter light began to fade, and the still water of the moat reflected the darkening sky.

“Watson,” he said at last, “this case grows more curious with every answer.”

“Do you see a solution already?” I asked.

Holmes shook his head slightly.

“Not yet,” he said. “But I begin to see the outline of another story hidden beneath the one presented to us.”

He looked once more toward the open window.

“Somewhere,” he said softly, “truth and appearance have separated. Our task is to bring them together again.”

And with that, the investigation at Birlstone moved into a deeper and more dangerous stage.

Part 5

Holmes remained silent for several minutes after Mrs. Douglas left the room. He stood with his back to the fire, his head lowered, while his long fingers moved slowly together. I knew that he was arranging each statement we had heard, placing them carefully into order.

Inspector MacDonald broke the silence first.

“Well, Mr. Holmes,” he said, “we have spoken with everyone concerned. What do you make of it?”

Holmes looked up.

“I make of it,” he replied calmly, “that we must examine not only what has been said, but what has not been said.”

White Mason leaned forward eagerly. “You think someone is hiding something?”

“I am certain of it,” said Holmes.

He began to walk slowly around the room again.

“Consider,” he continued, “Mr. Barker arrives within half a minute of the shot. He finds the body, prevents Mrs. Douglas from entering, lowers the bridge, and directs events thereafter. His actions are logical—but they also give him control of the situation.”

MacDonald nodded slowly. “You suspect him?”

Holmes raised a hand. “I suspect nothing yet. I only observe.”

He stopped beside the window once more.

“Let us imagine the killer escaping,” he said. “He fires a loud weapon, opens the window, crosses the moat, and disappears into the night—all within seconds.”

He turned toward us.

“Does that seem easy?”

“No,” I admitted.

“Especially,” Holmes added, “when no tracks appear beyond the water.”

White Mason shifted uneasily. “The ground is hard there. Marks might not remain.”

“True,” Holmes said. “Yet we must remember that absence can speak as clearly as presence.”

He then examined the curtain again, lifting it slightly and studying the floor.

“These footprints,” he said, “are important. But we must ask whether they were made before or after the crime.”

MacDonald’s eyes sharpened. “After?”

Holmes did not answer directly.

Instead he asked, “Mr. Mason, were these marks examined closely for water or mud?”

“Yes,” Mason replied. “They appeared damp.”

Holmes nodded thoughtfully but said nothing more.

He next turned his attention to the rings described earlier.

“The wedding ring,” he said quietly. “Removed carefully while other rings remained. That action required time and purpose.”

“A symbol,” I suggested.

“Possibly,” Holmes replied. “Or a message meant for someone who would later learn of it.”

MacDonald rose and paced slowly.

“If the crime was planned,” he said, “the killer knew Douglas well.”

“Exactly,” Holmes answered. “And perhaps Douglas knew the killer.”

The inspector stopped. “Then why no struggle?”

Holmes pointed toward the candle.

“Because Mr. Douglas did not expect immediate violence. He entered calmly.”

The room fell silent again as we considered this.

After a moment Holmes spoke with renewed energy.

“I should like to examine the grounds once more before dark.”

We stepped outside together. The air was cold, and the surface of the moat lay still like glass. Holmes walked slowly along its edge, measuring distances with careful steps.

“From window to water,” he murmured. “From water to bank.”

He crouched near the stone edge and studied it closely.

“No scratches,” he said. “No disturbed moss.”

MacDonald watched him carefully. “You are thinking the escape may be false?”

Holmes rose.

“I am thinking,” he said, “that every part of this story fits too neatly.”

We walked back toward the bridge.

“Suppose,” Holmes continued quietly, “that the killer never crossed the moat at all.”

White Mason stared at him. “But the open window—”

“May represent an intention rather than an action,” Holmes said.

The idea seemed to trouble the country detective deeply.

“Then the murderer remains inside the house?”

Holmes gave no answer. Instead he asked suddenly, “Where is the room of Mr.

Barker?”

Mason pointed upstairs. Holmes requested permission, and we followed him there.

Barker’s room showed nothing unusual. The bed remained partly made, and a chair stood near the fire where he claimed to have sat when the shot sounded.

Holmes examined the carpet, the fireplace, and the door carefully.

“You see,” he said softly to me, “we must understand movement—who went where, and when.”

After several minutes he seemed satisfied and returned downstairs.

Evening shadows had begun to gather, and lamps were being lit in the house. The old Manor House felt heavier now, as if its walls held secrets unwilling to be revealed.

Holmes stopped in the hall and turned toward us.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “we must be patient. The truth is near, but one essential piece is still missing.”

“What piece?” asked MacDonald.

Holmes smiled faintly.

“The past,” he said. “Mr. Douglas brought something with him from America. Until we understand that past, this crime will remain a puzzle.”

I felt again the strange weight of the warning message from London. Somewhere beyond England’s quiet countryside lay events that had begun long before the murder at Birlstone.

Holmes looked toward the dark window at the end of the hall.

“The story did not begin here,” he said softly. “It only ended here.”

And with those words, the investigation turned from the visible crime toward the hidden history that had followed John Douglas across the ocean.

Part 6

That evening we returned to the inn, for Holmes declared that reflection was as necessary as observation. During supper he spoke very little, answering questions

only with short replies. His thoughts were clearly far away, arranging facts into patterns invisible to the rest of us.

After the meal he sat by the fire with his pipe, staring into the flames.

“Watson,” he said at last, “what impression has the case made upon you?”

I considered carefully before answering.

“It seems planned,” I said. “The card, the missing ring, the strange weapon—all suggest intention rather than accident.”

Holmes nodded approvingly.

“Good. And what troubles you most?”

“The escape,” I replied. “It feels impossible.”

Holmes smiled faintly. “Exactly. When an event appears impossible, we must question whether it truly occurred as described.”

Inspector MacDonald leaned forward.

“You still doubt that a stranger entered the house?”

“I doubt nothing,” Holmes said calmly. “But I test everything.”

He rose and began pacing slowly across the room.

“Let us review the chain of events,” he continued. “A warning arrives in London predicting danger to Douglas. Hours later Douglas is dead. The crime scene strongly suggests an outside killer. Yet several details seem arranged to produce that belief.”

White Mason scratched his chin thoughtfully.

“You mean someone wanted us to believe in an outside murderer?”

Holmes stopped pacing.

“That possibility must be considered.”

The inspector frowned. “Then we must ask who benefits from such an idea.”

Holmes’s eyes brightened. “Precisely.”

He sat again and spoke more quietly.

“There is another matter,” he said. “Mrs. Douglas and Mr. Barker share a long friendship. Douglas himself showed signs of anxiety in recent weeks. These facts suggest a hidden history.”

“America,” I said.

“Yes,” Holmes replied. “America.”

The next morning we returned early to the Manor House. Holmes wished to examine one detail again—the body itself, which had been moved to another room after the doctor’s inspection.

The atmosphere inside the house remained tense. Servants moved quietly, speaking in whispers. We were shown to a chamber where the dead man lay covered.

Holmes approached with great seriousness. Though he was often detached during investigations, he always treated the dead with respect.

He carefully examined Douglas’s arm.

“There,” he said softly, pointing.

On the forearm was a strange mark: a circle containing a triangle, burned into the skin long ago.

“A brand,” I said.

“Yes,” Holmes replied. “Not recent. Many years old.”

MacDonald crossed his arms. “A sign of some group?”

“Possibly,” Holmes said. “Such marks are rarely meaningless.”

He examined the hand next.

“The rings were here,” he said quietly. “One removed, two left. The action required calm hands and deliberate purpose.”

Holmes stepped back and covered the body again.

“Thank you,” he said softly to the attendants.

Outside the room he spoke in a low voice.

“The mark on the arm strengthens my belief,” he said. “Douglas carried danger with him from his past.”

White Mason looked puzzled. “You believe the murder began years ago?”

“Very likely.”

We returned once more to the murder chamber. Holmes stood again near the window, then suddenly turned toward the door.

“Mr. Mason,” he said, “who first suggested that the killer escaped through the window?”

Mason hesitated. "Mr. Barker mentioned the blood mark and the open window."

Holmes exchanged a brief glance with MacDonald.

"I see," he said quietly.

He then examined the window frame closely, running his fingers along the wood.

"The blood mark," he said, "is placed clearly where it would be noticed."

"Naturally," Mason replied. "The killer stepped there."

Holmes gave no reply. Instead he measured the height of the sill and looked outward again.

After several minutes he stepped back.

"Gentlemen," he said calmly, "we must now consider a new line of inquiry."

"Which is?" asked MacDonald.

Holmes's voice grew serious.

"We must discover who John Douglas truly was before he came to England."

The inspector nodded slowly. "You believe his past explains everything."

"I believe," Holmes said, "that the motive lies there."

At that moment Cecil Barker entered the room again, having been summoned.

Holmes turned toward him.

"Mr. Barker," he said kindly, "you knew Mr. Douglas in America?"

"Yes."

"Then you know more of his history than anyone here."

Barker's expression hardened slightly. "Perhaps."

Holmes watched him steadily.

"Your friend is dead," he said gently. "If danger still exists, silence may place others at risk."

Barker hesitated. His strong face showed inner struggle.

Finally he spoke.

"Douglas had enemies," he said quietly. "Dangerous enemies."

Holmes did not move.

"From what cause?" he asked.

Barker shook his head slowly. "That is not my story to tell."

Holmes's eyes softened.

"It may soon become necessary," he said.

Barker looked toward the window, then back at Holmes.

"If the truth must come," he said, "it will come soon enough."

He turned and left the room.

Holmes watched the closed door thoughtfully.

"Yes," he murmured, almost to himself. "Very soon indeed."

The mystery of Birlstone was no longer only a question of how a man died. It had become a question of who he had been—and what long shadow had finally caught him.

Part 7

The tension within the Manor House increased as the day passed. Every person inside seemed to feel that the investigation was approaching an important turning point. Holmes himself appeared more alert than ever. His quiet movements and sudden pauses showed that his mind was working rapidly.

After Barker left us, Inspector MacDonald spoke first.

"He knows more," he said firmly. "That much is clear."

"Yes," Holmes replied. "But forcing him now would be unwise. A witness speaks best when the moment is right."

White Mason looked uncertain. "Then what should we do next?"

Holmes walked slowly toward the fireplace.

"We examine facts again," he said. "Truth often hides inside repetition."

He turned suddenly toward me.

"Watson, describe the sequence of events once more."

I gathered my thoughts.

"Douglas leaves his wife," I began. "He walks downstairs carrying a candle. He enters this room. Shortly afterward a shot is heard. Barker arrives first. The window is open, the gun lies beside the body, and the wedding ring is gone."

Holmes nodded.

“Good. Now we add one more element—the warning message from London.”

MacDonald tapped the table thoughtfully. “Which means someone expected danger before it happened.”

“Exactly,” said Holmes.

He began pacing again.

“Therefore the murder was not sudden or random. It was anticipated by at least one person connected to a criminal organization.”

White Mason frowned. “Then the killer followed Douglas here?”

Holmes stopped pacing.

“Perhaps,” he said. “But we must ask another question: did Douglas recognize his killer?”

The idea seemed to strike all of us at once.

“If he did,” I said slowly, “that explains why he entered calmly.”

Holmes smiled faintly. “Yes. No sign of fear. No struggle before the shot.”

MacDonald crossed his arms. “Then the meeting may have been expected.”

Holmes nodded but remained silent for a moment.

“Let us consider the missing ring again,” he said finally. “If robbery were the motive, all rings would be taken. Only one was removed. That action carries meaning.”

“A signal,” said Mason.

“Or a reminder,” Holmes replied.

The inspector looked puzzled. “A reminder of what?”

Holmes did not answer immediately.

Instead he approached the curtain once more and examined the folds carefully. Then he turned toward the carpet.

“Notice,” he said, “the footprints are clear but limited to this small space.”

“Yes,” said Mason. “Where the man waited.”

Holmes shook his head slightly.

“If a stranger hid here for hours,” he said, “we might expect more disturbance. Yet the marks appear almost too perfect.”

MacDonald’s eyes narrowed. “Placed deliberately?”

Holmes gave a small nod.

The idea hung heavily in the air.

“Then the scene was staged,” Mason said slowly.

Holmes raised a hand.

“We must not conclude too quickly. But staging is a possibility.”

He moved to the table and examined the candle again.

“Everything suggests careful arrangement,” he murmured.

At that moment the butler entered hurriedly.

“Mr. Holmes,” he said nervously, “Mrs. Douglas wishes to speak with you privately.”

Holmes exchanged a glance with us and followed the servant. I accompanied him at his request.

We were shown into a quiet sitting room. Mrs. Douglas stood near the window, pale but composed.

“Mr. Holmes,” she said softly, “I believe you suspect that something is being hidden.”

Holmes inclined his head slightly.

“I believe,” he said gently, “that your husband lived under fear.”

She closed her eyes briefly.

“Yes,” she whispered. “He did.”

Holmes waited patiently.

After a moment she continued.

“He often spoke of danger from the past. He never gave details. But sometimes he would look at strangers with great suspicion. At night he checked the doors himself.”

“Did he expect someone to come?” Holmes asked.

“I think so,” she said quietly.

Holmes spoke carefully.

“Did he ever mention a place called... a valley?”

Her eyes opened suddenly in surprise, but she quickly controlled herself.

“No,” she said after a pause.

Holmes watched her steadily but did not press further.

“One more question,” he said. “Did he and Mr. Barker share secrets from their life in America?”

She hesitated.

“Yes,” she admitted. “They sometimes spoke privately. My husband trusted him deeply.”

Holmes thanked her kindly, and we returned to the others.

MacDonald looked up eagerly. “Well?”

Holmes folded his hands.

“Our suspicions grow stronger,” he said. “Douglas expected danger. His past is central to this case.”

“Then we must uncover that past,” the inspector said.

Holmes nodded.

“And I believe,” he added quietly, “that the key lies with Cecil Barker.”

Evening approached once more, and the old house grew shadowed and silent. Outside, the still water of the moat reflected the fading light, unchanged and calm despite the violence that had taken place beside it.

Holmes stood near the window, looking outward.

“The pieces are nearly in place,” he said softly. “Soon the hidden story will reveal itself.”

I sensed that he was close to understanding everything. The mystery no longer seemed impossible—only unfinished.

Somewhere behind the quiet walls of Birlstone Manor waited the truth, and Holmes was steadily drawing nearer to it.

Part 8

That night Holmes slept little. I knew this because I heard him moving more than once in the next room at the inn. When a problem reached a certain stage, rest became impossible for him. His mind demanded completion.

Early the next morning he knocked at my door.

“Come, Watson,” he said. “The day may bring resolution.”

We returned at once to the Manor House, where Inspector MacDonald and White Mason were already waiting. Both men looked tired but eager.

“Any news?” Holmes asked.

“None,” said MacDonald. “No stranger has been seen leaving the district. No wet clothes found. No weapon missing besides the one already discovered.”

Holmes nodded as if this confirmed something he expected.

“Good,” he said quietly.

White Mason looked puzzled. “Good?”

“Yes,” Holmes replied. “Because each negative result narrows our path.”

We gathered again in the murder room. Holmes stood in the center, looking slowly around as if fixing every object in memory.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “let us reconstruct events once more—but this time without assumptions.”

He pointed toward the door.

“Douglas enters,” he said. “He carries a candle and expects nothing unusual.”

He turned toward the curtain.

“A man appears—or someone already known to him steps forward.”

Holmes paused deliberately.

“Words are exchanged. The wedding ring is removed.”

MacDonald interrupted. “Given willingly?”

“Possibly,” Holmes replied. “Or taken under threat.”

He moved slightly backward, indicating the position of the body.

“Then the gun fires at close range.”

Silence filled the room.

Holmes continued.

“Immediately afterward, certain actions occur: the window is opened, a blood mark placed, footprints appear, and a card is left.”

White Mason spoke slowly. “You describe actions done after the killing.”

Holmes inclined his head.

“Yes. Actions requiring calm thought.”

MacDonald stared at him. “You mean the killer stayed in the room?”

“Long enough,” Holmes said quietly.

The inspector’s voice hardened. “Then he was not escaping in panic.”

“Exactly.”

Holmes turned toward the window.

“Now we ask the most important question: did anyone actually leave through this window?”

No one answered.

Holmes continued.

“There is no sign beyond the moat. No witness. No trace of a soaked fugitive. The entire escape depends upon interpretation—not proof.”

White Mason’s face slowly changed as understanding began to form.

“Then the escape may never have happened,” he said.

Holmes nodded.

MacDonald spoke sharply. “Then the murderer remained inside the house after the alarm.”

“That is one possibility,” Holmes said calmly.

The inspector looked toward the door through which Barker had entered earlier.

“And the first man present was Barker.”

Holmes did not confirm or deny the statement.

Instead he said, “Let us invite Mr. Barker to join us again.”

The butler was sent, and Barker soon arrived. He looked tired but composed.

Holmes addressed him kindly but directly.

“Mr. Barker,” he said, “I believe you have tried to protect someone.”

Barker’s eyes flashed. “Protect? From what?”

“From suspicion,” Holmes answered.

A long silence followed.

“You were Douglas’s friend,” Holmes continued. “You knew his fears. You understood the danger that followed him from America.”

Barker said nothing.

Holmes’s voice softened.

“The warning from London proves that enemies existed. But the scene here was arranged to suggest an unknown attacker. That arrangement required intelligence—and time.”

Barker’s jaw tightened.

MacDonald stepped forward. “Are you accusing this gentleman?”

Holmes raised a hand gently.

“No accusation. Only truth seeking.”

He turned again to Barker.

“Did Douglas meet someone here last night by agreement?”

Barker hesitated.

“I cannot answer,” he said quietly.

Holmes spoke firmly now.

“Then I must answer for you. Douglas expected a visitor. The meeting concerned his past life. Something went wrong. The gun fired. Afterward, you helped create the appearance of an outside murderer.”

Barker stood motionless.

White Mason whispered, “Good heavens...”

Holmes continued calmly.

“You opened the window, placed the marks, and lowered the bridge. You wished the world to believe that an unknown enemy came and vanished.”

Barker suddenly spoke.

“If that were true,” he said, “why would I do such a thing?”

Holmes met his gaze steadily.

“To protect Mrs. Douglas,” he said.

The words struck the room like a sudden blow.

Barker’s face changed. For a moment he seemed ready to speak, then stopped.

Holmes continued gently.

“You believed the truth would bring danger or scandal upon her. Therefore you chose deception.”

Barker turned away, struggling with himself.

“You do not understand,” he said hoarsely.

“Then help us understand,” Holmes replied quietly.

The silence that followed felt endless. Outside, a faint wind moved across the water of the moat.

At last Barker spoke again, his voice low.

“You are close to the truth, Mr. Holmes,” he said. “But not all of it.”

Holmes inclined his head slightly.

“Then the remaining part,” he said, “must soon be told.”

The investigation had reached its most critical moment. The carefully built illusion surrounding the murder was beginning to crack, and beneath it lay a deeper story—one tied not only to England, but to a distant and dangerous past.

Part 9

Barker stood silent after his last words. His strong hands were clenched, and his eyes moved slowly from Holmes to Inspector MacDonald and back again. It was clear that he struggled between loyalty and truth.

Holmes did not hurry him. He waited patiently, knowing that pressure at the wrong moment might close a witness instead of opening him.

At last Barker spoke again.

“You are right about one thing,” he said quietly. “Douglas lived in fear. And that fear came from America.”

MacDonald leaned forward. “From whom?”

Barker hesitated. “From men who never forget,” he said. “Men who follow a mark once it is made.”

Holmes’s eyes moved instantly toward me, then back to Barker.

“The mark on his arm,” he said softly.

Barker nodded once.

“Yes.”

The room grew very still.

“Tell us everything,” Holmes said gently. “Only the truth can protect the innocent now.”

Barker drew a long breath.

“Douglas was not always known by that name,” he began. “Years ago, in America, he lived under another identity. He had enemies—organized enemies. Dangerous men.”

MacDonald frowned. “Criminals?”

“Worse,” Barker replied. “A secret group. Powerful in one region. They ruled through fear.”

Holmes listened without interruption.

“Douglas had once been among them,” Barker continued slowly, “but later he turned against them. After that, his life was never safe.”

“And he came to England to escape,” I said.

Barker nodded. “Yes. He believed distance would protect him.”

Holmes spoke quietly.

“But the warning shows that his enemies finally discovered him.”

Barker lowered his head.

“Yes.”

MacDonald crossed his arms. “Then the killer truly came from outside?”

Barker looked up sharply.

“Yes—and no,” he said.

Holmes’s expression sharpened.

“Explain,” he said.

Barker hesitated again, then continued.

“Douglas expected a man that night. He believed the danger had finally reached him. He told me earlier that day that the past had caught up.”

“You knew of the meeting?” Holmes asked.

“Yes.”

“Yet you allowed it?”

Pain crossed Barker’s face.

“Douglas insisted. He said it must end one way or another.”

The inspector spoke sharply. “Then what happened?”

Barker’s voice grew quieter.

“I heard voices downstairs before the shot. Low voices. Not angry—serious. Then the gun fired.”

Holmes’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“You did not mention voices earlier.”

“I could not,” Barker said. “Too much depended on silence.”

Holmes nodded slowly.

“You entered the room and saw Douglas dead.”

“Yes.”

“And the other man?”

Barker looked toward the window.

“Gone,” he said.

Holmes studied him carefully.

“Gone through the window?”

Barker hesitated again.

“I believed so,” he answered.

Holmes said nothing for several seconds.

“Mr. Barker,” he said finally, “did you see him leave?”

Barker did not reply at once.

The silence stretched.

At last he said, “No.”

White Mason let out a slow breath.

Holmes continued gently.

“Then the escape was an assumption.”

Barker nodded reluctantly.

“Yes.”

MacDonald stepped forward. “And afterward you arranged the scene.”

Barker met his gaze.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “I did.”

The admission filled the room with tension.

“Why?” demanded the inspector.

Barker’s voice softened.

“Because Douglas had lived under threat for years. If the truth came out suddenly, it might bring danger upon his wife—or reveal things he wished buried forever. I thought it best the world believe an unknown assassin came and vanished.”

Holmes nodded slowly, as if a final piece had fallen into place.

“You acted from loyalty,” he said. “But deception complicates justice.”

Barker accepted this without argument.

“I know,” he said quietly.

Holmes turned toward the others.

“We now understand much more,” he said. “The murder connects directly to Douglas’s former life. The visitor was real. The fear was real. But the apparent escape remains uncertain.”

MacDonald frowned. “If the killer did not escape immediately, where did he go?”

Holmes looked toward the ceiling thoughtfully.

“That,” he said, “is the next question.”

He moved slowly toward the window again.

“The truth stands very near us now,” he added quietly. “We must only remove the last illusion.”

Outside, clouds moved across the winter sky, and the dark water of the moat reflected their slow passage. The mystery that had seemed impossible at first was beginning to reveal its deeper shape.

Yet one vital fact still remained hidden—the final link between the past in America and the tragedy at Birlstone.

Part 10

After Barker’s confession, the atmosphere in the room changed completely. The mystery no longer felt distant or impossible. Instead, it seemed close—almost within reach—yet still partly hidden behind one final veil.

Inspector MacDonald paced slowly across the floor.

“So,” he said, “we now know that the scene was arranged after the murder. That much is clear. But the main question remains: who fired the gun?”

Holmes nodded.

“Exactly,” he said. “We must separate two events—the killing itself and the deception that followed.”

White Mason looked troubled. “If Barker did not shoot Douglas, then the visitor must have done it.”

Holmes raised a finger.

“That is the most natural conclusion,” he said. “But we must test it carefully.”

He turned toward Barker again.

“When you entered the room,” Holmes asked, “was the gun already lying across Douglas’s body?”

“Yes,” Barker replied.

“And you touched nothing at first?”

Barker hesitated. “No... not at first.”

Holmes observed him closely.

“But later you arranged certain details.”

“Yes.”

Holmes nodded thoughtfully.

“Did you recognize the visitor?” he asked suddenly.

Barker’s expression tightened.

“I had never seen him before,” he said.

Holmes studied his face carefully but did not challenge the answer.

Instead he turned toward MacDonald.

“Let us consider timing again,” he said. “Douglas leaves his wife. Minutes later the shot is heard. Barker arrives almost immediately. Therefore the meeting was brief.”

“Very brief,” said the inspector.

Holmes continued.

“Such brevity suggests that the outcome was decided quickly—perhaps before a full conversation could occur.”

He paused, then added quietly:

“Or that recognition itself triggered the violence.”

The idea settled heavily upon us.

“Recognition?” I asked.

Holmes nodded.

“Douglas may have known at once why the man had come.”

White Mason shook his head slowly. “Then the visitor came with one purpose only.”

“Yes,” Holmes said. “Judgment.”

He walked toward the fireplace and stood looking down at the rug where the body had lain.

“The card left beside him,” he said, “supports this idea. It was not left for us. It was left for Douglas.”

MacDonald frowned. “A sign from the organization?”

“Most likely,” Holmes replied.

Barker spoke quietly.

“Those men always sent signs,” he said. “Warnings. Sentences.”

Holmes turned toward him quickly.

“Then Douglas understood the meaning immediately.”

Barker nodded.

“Yes.”

Holmes’s voice softened.

“Which explains why he removed the ring.”

All of us looked at him in surprise.

“Removed it?” MacDonald repeated.

Holmes nodded.

“Yes. Perhaps willingly. Perhaps ordered to do so. The ring may have symbolized a broken past—something he was forced to surrender before death.”

Barker closed his eyes briefly but did not disagree.

Holmes continued.

“Now we reach the final difficulty. The killer disappears without trace.”

He moved again toward the window.

“If he escaped this way, we must explain the absence of evidence. If he did not, then he remained somewhere inside the house—at least temporarily.”

MacDonald looked sharply around the room.

“Hidden?”

“Possibly,” Holmes said.

White Mason shook his head. “We searched thoroughly.”

Holmes smiled faintly.

“Thoroughly according to expectation,” he said. “But expectation often blinds observation.”

He walked slowly toward the door.

“Mr. Barker,” he said, “after arranging the scene, did you search the house?”

“Yes,” Barker answered. “We all did.”

“Every room?”

“Every room we could reach.”

Holmes paused at that phrase.

“Every room you could reach,” he repeated softly.

Barker looked puzzled. “Yes.”

Holmes’s eyes brightened slightly.

“Then perhaps,” he said, “there exists a place not easily reached.”

MacDonald stared at him.

“You think the killer remained hidden in the house?”

Holmes did not answer directly.

Instead he said, “Gentlemen, I request permission to conduct a complete examination of the building—cellars, passages, and unused spaces included.”

White Mason agreed at once.

We began a careful search of the Manor House. Holmes moved slowly but with great attention, examining doors, walls, and floors. He tested panels, measured distances, and asked many small questions about the structure of the old building.

The ancient house seemed full of shadows and forgotten corners. Narrow passages connected rooms built in different centuries. Old stairways twisted

unexpectedly. Several storage spaces had not been opened for years.

At last Holmes stopped near a heavy wooden door leading downward.

“The cellars?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Ames the butler. “Used mostly for storage.”

Holmes requested a lamp, and we descended together.

The air below was cool and damp. Rows of shelves lined the walls, filled with bottles and boxes. Holmes moved slowly between them, his eyes searching every detail.

Suddenly he stopped.

“What is this?” he said quietly.

Near the far wall lay faint marks on the floor—recent marks, unlike the surrounding dust.

MacDonald bent down beside him.

“Footprints,” he said.

Holmes nodded.

“Fresh ones.”

Barker stared in astonishment.

“Impossible,” he whispered.

Holmes straightened slowly.

“Not impossible,” he said calmly. “Only unexpected.”

He looked toward the dark corner beyond the shelves.

“Gentlemen,” he said quietly, “I believe we are very close to meeting the man whom everyone believed had vanished.”

The mystery of Birlstone was about to change once again.

Part 11

The cellar grew completely silent after Holmes spoke. The weak light of the lamp shook slightly in Ames’s trembling hand, and long shadows moved across the stone walls. Every man present felt the same thought forming at once: the supposed fugitive might never have left the house.

Inspector MacDonald stepped forward cautiously.

“If someone is hiding here,” he said quietly, “we must proceed carefully.”

Holmes nodded.

“Quite so,” he replied. “There is no need for violence unless it becomes necessary.”

He moved slowly toward the dark corner where the marks in the dust ended. Behind a row of old shelves stood a narrow wooden door, almost hidden by stacked boxes.

“This door,” Holmes said softly. “Where does it lead?”

The butler looked surprised. “I hardly know, sir. It has not been used since before my time.”

Holmes examined the handle. Dust covered most of it—but one small area was clean.

“Recently touched,” he murmured.

MacDonald drew a deep breath.

“Stand back,” he said.

Holmes raised his voice calmly.

“Whoever is inside,” he called, “we know you are there. You will be safer if you come out peacefully.”

For several seconds nothing happened.

Then came a faint movement from behind the door.

White Mason stiffened. Ames nearly dropped the lamp.

The door opened slowly.

A man stepped forward into the light.

He was pale and exhausted, his clothes stained with damp and dirt. His face showed days of strain, yet his eyes were steady and alert. He raised his empty hands to show he carried no weapon.

“I will come quietly,” he said.

MacDonald stared at him in astonishment.

“Then you did not escape!” he exclaimed.

The stranger shook his head.

“No. I remained here.”

Holmes regarded him calmly.

“You are the visitor who met Mr. Douglas last night.”

“Yes.”

“And you fired the gun?”

The man hesitated only briefly.

“Yes,” he said.

A deep silence followed.

Barker stepped forward suddenly.

“You fool,” he said quietly. “Why did you stay?”

The man gave a tired smile.

“Because running would only delay the truth.”

Holmes inclined his head slightly.

“Your name?” he asked.

The stranger looked around at us all before answering.

“Birdy Edwards,” he said.

The name clearly meant something to Barker, whose expression changed at once.

“Then it is finished,” Barker murmured.

Inspector MacDonald spoke firmly.

“You will explain everything from the beginning.”

Edwards nodded.

“I will,” he said. “But you must understand the past first. Without it, nothing here makes sense.”

Holmes gestured toward the stairs.

“Let us return upstairs,” he said quietly. “This story deserves proper telling.”

We gathered again in the sitting room, where Edwards sat calmly under watch while Holmes and MacDonald faced him.

“Begin wherever you wish,” Holmes said.

Edwards folded his hands.

“Years ago,” he began, “in a mining valley in America, there existed a secret

society. They controlled the region through fear and murder. No man opposed them and lived.”

Barker listened grimly.

“John Douglas,” Edwards continued, “once entered that valley under another name. He joined the society—not to serve it, but to destroy it from within.”

Holmes’s eyes brightened with understanding.

“An undercover agent,” he said.

Edwards nodded.

“Yes. I was one as well.”

MacDonald leaned forward.

“Then Douglas was not a criminal?”

“No,” Edwards replied firmly. “He helped bring the society down. Many leaders were arrested because of him.”

Barker spoke quietly. “But some escaped.”

Edwards nodded.

“Yes. And those survivors swore revenge. Douglas lived under threat ever since.”

Holmes spoke softly.

“And last night you came as executioner.”

Edwards shook his head.

“No. I came to warn him. I learned that the last of the old enemies had tracked him to England.”

We listened in complete silence.

“Douglas recognized me at once,” Edwards continued. “We spoke only briefly. Then another man appeared at the door—a man sent to kill him.”

MacDonald straightened sharply. “Another man?”

“Yes,” Edwards said. “The real assassin.”

Holmes’s eyes narrowed with intense interest.

“And what happened then?”

Edwards looked down briefly before answering.

“Douglas and the assassin struggled. The gun fired during the fight. The

assassin died instantly.”

A stunned silence filled the room.

“Died?” Mason whispered.

Edwards nodded slowly.

“Yes. The man lying on the floor was not John Douglas.”

Every person present stared at him in disbelief.

Holmes alone remained calm, though his eyes shone with sudden clarity.

“Then Douglas lives,” he said quietly.

Edwards met his gaze.

“Yes,” he said. “John Douglas is alive.”

The mystery of Birlstone had turned completely upside down. The dead man was not the victim—but the killer himself. And the truth behind the tragedy was far stranger than anyone had imagined.

Part 12

For several seconds no one spoke. The statement seemed too extraordinary to accept at once. Inspector MacDonald stared at Birdy Edwards as if unsure whether he had heard correctly.

“You are telling us,” he said slowly, “that the man we believed to be John Douglas is someone else entirely?”

“Yes,” Edwards replied calmly. “The real Douglas lives.”

White Mason shook his head in disbelief.

“But the servants identified the body,” he said.

Edwards gave a tired smile. “The two men looked very alike in build and age. After the gunshot destroyed the face, recognition became impossible.”

Holmes nodded thoughtfully.

“That explains much,” he said quietly. “The deception required only a small adjustment to become complete.”

MacDonald turned sharply toward Barker.

“You knew this?” he demanded.

Barker hesitated, then nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “Douglas survived the struggle. Edwards and I helped him escape before the police arrived.”

The inspector let out a long breath.

“Then the entire scene—the window, the footprints, the missing ring—was created to support this false death.”

“Exactly,” said Holmes.

He spoke without anger, only with quiet understanding.

“You wished the world to believe Douglas was dead so that his enemies would stop hunting him.”

Barker looked relieved that the truth was finally spoken aloud.

“That was our only hope,” he said. “If they believed him gone, his wife could live safely.”

Holmes turned to Edwards.

“Describe the struggle,” he said.

Edwards nodded.

“The assassin entered soon after I arrived,” he began. “Douglas recognized him at once. The man carried the shortened shotgun. Words were exchanged—short, bitter words. Then they fought. Douglas seized the weapon, and during the struggle both triggers were pulled.”

He paused briefly.

“The blast killed the attacker instantly.”

I felt a chill as I imagined the violent moment.

“What happened next?” Holmes asked.

“We understood immediately that the dead man could be mistaken for Douglas,” Edwards said. “The face was destroyed. Barker suggested using that chance to end the danger forever.”

MacDonald shook his head slowly.

“A desperate plan.”

“Yes,” Edwards admitted. “But Douglas had lived in fear for years.”

Holmes spoke gently.

“So you removed the wedding ring.”

“Yes,” Barker said. “Douglas kept it as proof of identity when he left. We dressed the dead man in his clothing and arranged the scene.”

White Mason sighed deeply. “And we followed exactly the path you intended.”

Holmes smiled faintly.

“Not entirely,” he said. “The arrangement contained small inconsistencies.”

MacDonald looked toward him. “Such as?”

Holmes began counting calmly on his fingers.

“First, the escape left no trace beyond the moat. Second, the footprints appeared too clear. Third, the warning message proved danger was expected. Together these suggested planning rather than surprise.”

Edwards nodded with respect.

“I wondered how long it would take you,” he said.

Holmes inclined his head slightly.

“Truth has a habit of revealing itself through small errors.”

The inspector folded his arms.

“Where is Douglas now?”

Barker answered quietly. “On his way out of England. By now he is far from here.”

MacDonald considered this carefully.

“Legally,” he said, “we must still account for the death.”

Holmes spoke calmly.

“The dead man was a murderer attempting assassination. His death occurred during struggle. That is self-defense.”

The inspector nodded slowly.

“Yes... that may stand.”

Holmes turned toward Edwards again.

“The card marked V.V. and the number—what does it mean?”

Edwards’s expression darkened.

“It was the sign of the old society,” he said. “A sentence already passed. The assassin brought it as proof that Douglas had been condemned.”

A heavy silence followed.

Holmes spoke softly.

“Then the past truly followed him across the ocean.”

“Yes,” Edwards said. “But now it ends.”

Mrs. Douglas entered quietly at that moment. She looked anxiously from face to face.

Barker stepped toward her gently.

“It is finished,” he said.

Tears filled her eyes—not of grief, but of relief.

Holmes turned away slightly, giving her privacy.

After a moment he addressed the group.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “the mystery of Birlstone is solved. What appeared to be murder was in truth survival. What appeared to be escape was protection. And what appeared to be death was freedom.”

MacDonald gave a slow nod.

“A strange case indeed.”

Holmes allowed himself a rare smile.

“One of the strangest,” he said.

Outside, the winter light shone across the quiet moat. The old Manor House, which had seemed a place of tragedy, now felt strangely peaceful.

The long pursuit that had begun years earlier in a distant American valley had finally reached its end in an English village.

And at last, John Douglas was free.