Name: _____ Date: _____

# The Blue Carbuncle

Reading level 15 · 1549 words

On the second morning after Christmas, I called upon my friend Sherlock Holmes to wish him the compliments of the season. I discovered him reclining on the sofa in his purple dressing-gown, surrounded by crumpled newspapers, with a shabby old hat lying upon the chair beside him; it was a battered black felt, cracked in several places and obviously far from clean. Holmes assured me that the hat was not connected with any crime. It belonged, he explained, to a commissionaire named Peterson, who had been walking home before dawn on Christmas morning when he observed a tall gentleman, carrying a goose, who was being attacked by a gang of ruffians. The gentleman had fled in alarm, abandoning both his hat and his Christmas dinner on the pavement.

Peterson had carried the goose home to his wife, but he had delivered the hat to Holmes, because a card was tied to the bird's leg bearing the words For Mrs. Henry Baker, and the initials H. B. were written inside the lining. Unfortunately, there are thousands of Bakers in London. "Nevertheless, I can deduce a considerable amount from the hat," said Holmes. "The man is highly intellectual, because the hat is enormous, and he was prosperous three years ago, because it was expensive; he is no longer prosperous. He has some foresight, but he has grown careless, and his wife no longer regards him with affection. His house has no gas lighting, so he must carry a candle upstairs." I protested that this was complete nonsense.

Holmes was about to defend his reasoning when the door flew open and Peterson burst into the room, flushed and breathless with astonishment. "The goose, Mr. Holmes!" he gasped. "My wife discovered this inside the bird!" In the center of his palm lay a brilliant blue stone, no larger than a bean, but so radiant that it seemed to glitter like an electric light in the dim morning gloom. Holmes whistled softly. "It is far more than a precious stone," he said. "It is the blue carbuncle, which was stolen from the Countess of Morcar only five days ago, and the reward offered for its recovery is one thousand pounds." A plumber named John Horner had already been arrested, and he was waiting in prison to be tried for the crime.

Holmes immediately composed an advertisement for the evening newspapers, announcing that a goose and a black hat had been found, and that Mr. Henry Baker might collect them at half-past six. Peterson promised to purchase a replacement bird, because the original goose had already been eaten. "Of course I cannot tell whether Horner is guilty," said Holmes, as he locked the glittering stone in his strongbox. "But I strongly suspect that Mr. Baker knows nothing whatever about the jewel. Whoever concealed it inside the goose must have intended to carry it away secretly, and the owner of the bird is probably quite innocent. We shall discover the truth when he reads our notice." Then we sat down beside the fire to await Mr.

Baker.

At exactly the appointed hour, a tall man with rounded shoulders, an enormous head and a pointed gray beard arrived, wearing a Scotch cap and a coat buttoned to his chin. He was extremely delighted to recover his hat, though considerably less delighted to learn that his goose had been consumed. "Oh, any bird will answer," he said, when Holmes presented the replacement, which was standing upon the sideboard. When Holmes inquired where he had obtained the original, he explained that he belonged to a goose club at the Alpha Inn, near the British Museum, where every member contributed a few pence each week and received a bird at Christmas; then he bowed politely, tucked the goose beneath his arm and departed.

"That is the end of Mr. Henry Baker," said Holmes. "He knows nothing at all. Are you hungry, Watson? Then let us postpone our supper and follow this clue while it is still warm." We hurried through the bitterly cold, frosty evening to the Alpha Inn, where Holmes ordered two glasses of beer and complimented the landlord on the excellence of his geese; the landlord looked surprised. They were not his geese, he said, because he had purchased two dozen from a salesman in Covent Garden market, a certain Mr. Breckinridge. Holmes thanked him cheerfully, and we set off immediately across the frozen, deserted streets, because he insisted that at the opposite end of this peculiar chain was a plumber who might be imprisoned for seven years.

We found Mr. Breckinridge putting up the shutters on his stall, a sharp-faced man with trim side-whiskers, and when Holmes inquired where he had obtained the geese for the Alpha Inn, he flew into a tremendous fury. He absolutely refused to say a word, so Holmes, who understood human nature as thoroughly as he understood hats, attempted another method. He declared that he was prepared to wager a sovereign that the goose he had eaten was bred in the country. The salesman, who could not resist a bet, snatched a ledger from his assistant and proved triumphantly that the geese had been supplied by a Mrs. Oakshott, who lived at 117, Brixton Road, and who bred them in town.

Holmes paid his sovereign with a look of tremendous disappointment, but as soon as we were safely out of sight he began to laugh heartily. "That is the quickest way to extract information from a man of that description," he said; at that very moment a loud outcry arose from the stall behind us. A small, pale, nervous man was standing in the lamplight, while Mr. Breckinridge shouted that he had heard enough about geese and would answer no more questions. "But one of them belonged to me," the small man pleaded, and then he fled into the darkness. Holmes was after him in a moment, and he laid a gentle hand upon the stranger's shoulder, speaking in the most reassuring tone imaginable.

The frightened man declared that his name was John Robinson, but Holmes smiled and observed that it was always awkward to conduct business with an alias; at last the little man whispered that he was James Ryder, and Holmes remarked, "Precisely so. You are the head

attendant at the Hotel Cosmopolitan." We summoned a cab, and in half an hour we were comfortably seated in the warm sitting-room at Baker Street, where Holmes poked up the fire, put on his slippers, and inquired whether Ryder was searching for a white goose with a black bar across its tail. "Can you tell me where it went?" Ryder cried eagerly. "It came here," said Holmes, "and it laid a small blue egg after it was dead."

Holmes unlocked the strongbox and held up the carbuncle, which blazed like a little star in the lamplight, with a cold and many-pointed brilliance. Ryder stared at it, white-faced and trembling, uncertain whether to claim it or deny it, and then he sank back into his chair. "The game is up," Holmes said quietly; he explained exactly what had happened. Ryder had learned about the jewel from the Countess's maid, and he had arranged for the plumber to be summoned to perform a small repair in her room, so that suspicion would inevitably fall upon the poor man; then he had taken the stone himself, and given the alarm. "You thought very little of Horner," Holmes said sternly, "while he stood in the dock accused of a crime of which he was completely innocent."

The wretched man threw himself upon his knees and begged for mercy, protesting that his parents would be heartbroken. He had never done wrong before, he sobbed, and he would never do wrong again; then he told us the remainder of the story. He had carried the stone to his sister's house in Brixton Road, where she fattened geese for the market, and he had decided to hide it inside one of her birds, so that he could transport it past the police to a friend; he had fed the jewel to a fine white goose with a barred tail. But his sister owned two such geese, and in the confusion she gave him the wrong one, so the stone went off to market with the rest of the flock, and he had been searching desperately for it ever since.

When he had finished, there was a long silence, interrupted only by his heavy breathing and by the measured tapping of Holmes's fingertips upon the table. Then Holmes rose, threw open the door and said only, "Get out." Ryder, who could hardly believe his good fortune, stammered out his thanks and rushed down the stairs and out into the street, and we heard his footsteps rattle away into the night. "After all, Watson," said Holmes, reaching for his pipe, "I am not employed by the police to supply their deficiencies; this man will not give evidence against Horner, and the case will collapse. If I sent him to prison, I might make a criminal of him for life. Besides, it is the season of forgiveness. Now, if you will kindly touch the bell, Doctor, we shall begin another investigation, in which a bird will once more be the chief feature."

## Questions

**1. What did Peterson's wife find inside the goose?**

A. A gold ring

B. A brilliant blue stone

C. A letter

**2. Why did Holmes make a bet with Mr. Breckinridge?**

A. He wanted to win money
B. He knew the salesman would not answer a plain question
C. He wanted to buy a goose

**3. What is an "alias", as Holmes uses the word to Ryder?**

A. A false name
B. A kind of coat
C. A friend

**4. How did the jewel end up in the market?**

A. Ryder gave the stone to Baker
B. Ryder's sister gave him the wrong goose
C. Horner dropped it

**5. Why did Holmes let Ryder go?**

A. He was afraid of him
B. He hoped a good scare and a second chance would make Ryder honest
C. He could not prove the theft

## Words to know

commissionaire: uniformed doorman
carbuncle: precious stone
deduce: work out
alias: false name
wager: bet

# Answer key: The Blue Carbuncle

1. B. A brilliant blue stone
2. B. He knew the salesman would not answer a plain question
3. A. A false name
4. B. Ryder's sister gave him the wrong goose
5. B. He hoped a good scare and a second chance would make Ryder honest