Name: _____ Date: _____

The Man with the Twisted Lip

Reading level 15 · 1523 words

Late one June evening, when the day's work was over and I was sitting comfortably beside my own fire, I heard a ring at the door, and a moment later my friend Sherlock Holmes strode into the room. He announced that he was in the middle of a most perplexing case, and that he required a sensible companion for a long and uncomfortable drive, because it concerned a gentleman named Neville St. Clair, who had vanished from the city of London in the most extraordinary manner. We hurried to a cab, and while we rattled through the dark suburbs toward the village of Lee in Kent, Holmes sat with his chin upon his chest and described the problem from the very beginning.

Mr. St. Clair, he explained, was a gentleman of thirty-seven who lived in a large villa near Lee, with his wife and two small children. He was a popular, prosperous and affectionate man with no unusual debts and no apparent enemies. On the Monday of his disappearance he had gone into the city rather earlier than usual, promising to bring home a box of building blocks for his little boy. Shortly afterward, his wife received a telegram informing her that a parcel she had been expecting was waiting at the office of a shipping company, and she traveled to the city to collect it. At exactly twenty-five minutes to five, she happened to be walking down a narrow, shabby street beside the river, called Swandam Lane.

Suddenly she heard a cry, and when she looked upward, she observed her husband staring down at her from a second-floor window. His face was terribly agitated, and he waved his hands at her frantically, and then he vanished so quickly that he seemed to have been dragged backward by some invisible hand. She noticed that he had neither collar nor necktie. Convinced that he was in danger, she ran into the building, which was a low lodging house, and tried to climb the stairs, but the landlord and his assistant thrust her back into the street. She ran to find a policeman, and within a few minutes an inspector and two constables had forced their way upstairs into the room.

They could not find the slightest trace of Mr. St. Clair, but they did find a crippled beggar named Hugh Boone, who lived on that floor and swore that he had never seen the gentleman. On the table stood a small wooden box, and when Mrs. St. Clair tore off the lid, a cascade of building blocks fell out. It was the toy that her husband had promised to bring home. In the bedroom, the window was open above the river, with spots of blood upon the sill, and behind a curtain, the police uncovered all of Mr. St. Clair's clothing except his coat. The tide was exceptionally high at that moment, and everyone assumed that he had been thrown into the water.

Hugh Boone, as everyone in the City knew, was a professional beggar, a pale, unpleasant

man with a shock of orange hair, a hideous scar and an upper lip that was twisted into a permanent sneer by an old injury. Every day he sat in a corner of Threadneedle Street with a tray of matches, and a steady rain of coins fell into his leather cap. When the tide went out, the police recovered Mr. St. Clair's coat lying on the mud, and, to their amazement, all its pockets were stuffed with pennies and halfpennies, four hundred and twenty-one pennies and two hundred and seventy halfpennies, to make it heavy enough to sink. Hugh Boone was arrested at once.

When we arrived at the villa, which was called The Cedars, Mrs. St. Clair met us at the door, a charming, anxious lady in a pale dress. She assured us that she did not believe her husband was dead, because a note had arrived from him that very day, in his own handwriting, with his signet ring inside the envelope. It said that she should not be frightened, that everything would be put right, and that she must wait patiently. Holmes examined the pencil, the paper and the envelope very carefully with his lens. "The note was written by Mr. St. Clair," he said, "but the envelope was posted at Gravesend, by a man with a dirty thumb, and addressed by a person who had to inquire the address." Then he requested permission to sit quietly, because he was thinking.

For the rest of the night, Holmes built himself a nest of cushions in the middle of our bedroom, sat cross-legged like a statue, and smoked pipe after pipe of black tobacco, staring at the ceiling. He did not speak, and he did not sleep, and the little room filled with smoke. When the first gray light of dawn appeared at the window, he sprang up with a laugh and announced that he had solved the mystery. "I have been a blind fool," he said. "The solution has been under my nose since yesterday." He hurried into the bathroom, came back carrying an enormous bath-sponge in a leather bag, and instructed me to put on my coat. We were going to the police station.

At Bow Street we met a tall, stout official named Inspector Bradstreet, whom Holmes asked for a private word. The inspector took us to a cell where Hugh Boone lay on his plank bed, snoring peacefully. His face was so grimy that it was almost black, and the inspector informed us wearily that he refused to wash, however often he was asked. "I am sure he will not mind," said Holmes pleasantly, opening his leather bag with the air of a man who has prepared a surprise. He wet the sponge in the basin, bent over the sleeping man, and commenced scrubbing his cheeks and forehead as though he were cleaning a statue. "Let me introduce you," he shouted, "to Mr. Neville St. Clair, of Lee, in the county of Kent!"

Never in my life have I seen such a sight. The man's face peeled away under the sponge like the bark of a tree. The coarse brown tint vanished, and so did the hideous scar and the twisted lip, and the red hair came off in one piece. A pale, melancholy gentleman with black hair sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes. Then he understood that he had been discovered, and he burst into tears, burying his face in his hands. "It was not my wife," he sobbed. "It was my children. I could not bear for them to be ashamed of their father." The inspector gaped in

amazement, and then he commenced to laugh, because he had arrested the beggar many times without once suspecting the truth.

Mr. St. Clair informed us of his remarkable story, very slowly and clearly, as though he were relieved to have it told at last. He had once been a reporter for a London newspaper, and when his editor requested a series of articles about begging in the city, he disguised himself and sat on a pavement for a single day, collecting twenty-six shillings in seven hours. Soon afterward, he was forced to borrow twenty-five pounds, and by begging in disguise for a few days he earned enough to repay it. After that, he could not bear to return to his poorly paid job. Every morning he put on his paint and his orange wig in a room beside the river, and every evening he washed it away, and he became a wealthy gentleman who traveled home to his family by train.

On the Monday of his disappearance, he had been changing his clothes when he glanced out of the window and observed his own wife standing in the street, staring directly at him. In a panic, he threw up his hands, ran to put on his beggar's disguise, and hurled his coat, which was heavy with coins from his day's begging, out into the river, so that the police would not discover who he really was. Then the constables rushed into the room, and he realized, rather to his relief, that he was not arrested as himself, but as Hugh Boone. He had slipped a ring and a hurried note to the landlord, asking him to deliver them to his wife.

Inspector Bradstreet agreed that nothing more could be done, because no crime had been committed except a long and foolish deception. If Mr. St. Clair promised never to appear again in the character of Hugh Boone, the police would not pursue the matter. "I swear it," said Mr. St. Clair, with tears in his eyes. We drove back to Lee in the pale, cheerful light of the early morning, with the birds singing in the hedges, and Mrs. St. Clair, who had not slept all night, ran out to meet her husband in the garden. Holmes watched them for a moment, with a very thoughtful and satisfied expression, and then he turned to me. "I fancy, Watson, that we shall be in time for breakfast at Baker Street."

Questions

1. What did Neville St. Clair promise to bring home for his little boy?

A. A box of building blocks
B. A toy boat
C. A new coat

2. Why were the coat's pockets stuffed with coins?

A. He was carrying his savings
B. To make the coat heavy enough to sink in the river
C. It was a gift for his wife

3. What does "perplexing" mean in "a most perplexing case"?

A. Very dull
B. Very dangerous
C. Very puzzling

4. How did Holmes reveal who Hugh Boone really was?

A. He washed the beggar's face with a sponge
B. He read a confession
C. He followed the beggar home

5. Why had Mr. St. Clair kept his secret for so long?

A. He was ashamed and did not want his children to learn it
B. He was working for the police
C. He had forgotten who he was

6. What does this story suggest about appearances?

A. Faces never change
B. A disguise can hide the truth for a long time
C. Beggars are always honest

Words to know

villa: country house
disguise: false appearance
perplexing: puzzling
lodging: rented rooms
inspector: senior policeman

Answer key: The Man with the Twisted Lip

1. A. A box of building blocks
2. B. To make the coat heavy enough to sink in the river
3. C. Very puzzling
4. A. He washed the beggar's face with a sponge
5. A. He was ashamed and did not want his children to learn it
6. B. A disguise can hide the truth for a long time