

The Culverton Mine Disaster

By Katie Magnusson

When Dr. Watson had gone west after the War, he hadn't expected to have a successful medical practice, but he'd thought he could at least make a living. He had anticipated a life of treating wounded miners and sick settlers, perhaps even fending off the occasional Indian attack. He never imagined that the majority of his patients would be prostitutes. Of course, there were a great many facets of his life now that he'd never imagined back home in New York.

Not that he would ever complain. It was immeasurably better than patching up soldiers on the field of battle, the Confederacy just over the ridge...

"I swear on my mother's grave, Doc, I ain't takin' nothin' but the medicine you gave me."

The sarcastic comment brought his mind back to the present. Dr. Watson sighed, secretly grateful. "I may not be as observant as Holmes, but I can tell when you're lying through your teeth, Kitty. Besides, last month you told me your mother was living in Saint Louis."

"She could've died."

"She was dead the month previous."

Kitty grinned, "Guess I'm just used to fellas believin' anythin' I tell them when they're between my legs."

"If your employer didn't hire me to examine you, I wouldn't be down here, trust me."

"Holdin' out for an honest woman? You think any will marry a man what lives in a whorehouse?"

Watson rolled his eyes with a slight smile, "I think there's little chance of a single woman interested in marrying a poor army doctor coming to this town before I'm old and grey. Alright, Kitty, we're done here. As clean a bill of health as I can give any of you, but I'm serious about the laudanum." He fixed the young woman with as stern a look he could. It was, he reflected, the same look he gave Holmes whenever he found a new bottle of whatever the latest trial was in their rooms. Fortunately, the look seemed to be more effective on Kitty than it ever was on his friend. "Opium, no matter what form it's in, is not something to be taken at the merest whim."

“I get headaches, doc,” Kitty complained.

“You get headaches because you take laudanum. If you stopped, then eventually the headaches would go away.”

Kitty adjusted her faded red corset, and went to the door. “What’s the new snake oil this week?” she asked, rearranging her fiery tresses.

“There hasn’t been one.” Watson refused to be baited, straightening his brown suit, and replying as if they were discussing the weather. “Holmes was horribly disappointed to discover the last was merely camphor and mineral oil. ‘Not even a bit of morphine or cocaine to simulate some sort of effect,’ he’d complained.”

Kitty laughed a little, “Poor dear. Be honest with me, Doc, why’s he bother with all those things?”

“It keeps him occupied.”

“Takin’ quack cures?”

“No, figuring out what’s in them. Haven’t you ever wondered why snake-oil salesmen never stay in town long?”

Kitty’s eyes grew wide, “You’re kiddin’.”

“Not at all.”

Her eyes narrowed again, her expression subtly distrustful. Rather like a cat, actually. “But he still drinks them, don’t he?” She smiled at Watson’s sigh, “He’s an odd one, no mistake.”

“On that, Kitty, we are in complete agreement.”

Mrs. Hudson was waiting outside the door when Kitty opened it. “Took long enough,” she smiled. “Fancy the good doctor was giving you a lecture about the laudanum again?”

Kitty huffed, “Yes’m.”

“Your girls are all as healthy as can be expected, given the circumstances,” Watson reported.

“You don’t have to live here, doctor,” the greying proprietress arched a practiced brow at him.

It was an old game by now. “If I didn’t, you’d still send for me every month,” he said, smiling just a little.

She smiled back, “Even if you were in New York, I’d still have you make the trip out here. Let no one ever say I don’t take care of my girls.”

You’re also a businesswoman, and your clients less than gentlemen, Watson thought to himself, but let it pass. Mrs. Hudson ruled her Baker Street House with an iron feather. Anyone caught ‘damaging’ a girl was heavily fined, and banned. It was a ban that Holmes was happy to enforce, if ever necessary. As Holmes was fond of telling the men he tossed out, he firmly believed that any man who would beat a woman as a man would beat a disobedient dog was no better than the dog itself. Watson felt the same, which was one of the reasons their rent was practically nonexistent.

He started up the stairs as Mrs. Hudson prepared to open for business. He and Holmes shared quarters on the second floor. When Watson had first arrived it had been Room 22, but after the affair with the men from Utah cemented their friendship, Holmes prevailed upon Mrs. Hudson to permit them to turn his room and the room adjoining into something resembling a very small flat. Mrs. Hudson’s girls called the combination 221.

Watson found Holmes standing by the window, lighting his pipe as he looked down at the street. “How fares the fair sex this afternoon, Doctor?” he asked in his gentle drawl. That voice had given Watson pause the first time he’d heard it, to the good doctor’s embarrassment. Watson still didn’t know much about Holmes’s past, only that he’d been banished from his family’s plantation for supporting the Union and fled west to find a new life for himself. What possessed him to set himself up as an independent detective out here remained a mystery.

Even though the War had been over for three years, there were still those who didn’t care for turning to a ‘Rebel’ for help, even if he had been a Unionist. Holmes derived great satisfaction from watching those sort swallow their considerable pride.

“They’re not going to be giving their customers any unpleasant diseases, though I certainly can’t say the reverse. I don’t suppose you’d be willing to steal Kitty’s laudanum bottle, would you?”

Holmes chuckled, his gaze still on the street, “She’d have no trouble obtaining another. It would be as effective as the time you threw out my cocaine.”

Watson coughed. “Yes, well. At least you agreed to moderate your use.”

“Miss Winter will not be nearly so accommodating.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Watson sighed. “What’s so interesting on the street?”

“The Sheriff is coming.” Before Watson could comment that this was hardly an unusual occurrence, Holmes added, “He’s worried.”

That gave Watson pause. He sat down in the chair by the window, “I won’t bother asking how you can tell.”

Holmes’s gaze focused firmly on his friend, “You winced as you sat down, is your wound bothering you?”

“Been on the leg all day is all.”

Reassured, though possibly unbelieving, Holmes turned his attention back to the street. “Lestrade is mounted, despite the fact that the walk is short from his office to here. He’s donned his most official looking derby and jacket, but didn’t take time to polish his star, as he is so fond of doing. In addition, he’s tugged on his mustache no less than three times in the process of tying his horse to the post.”

“Aha. If the Sheriff is worried, and he’s coming to you...”

“Then the case must be of grave importance,” Holmes finished. There was a knock on the door. “He didn’t even stop to talk to the ladies, there must be something very wrong indeed.” Holmes answered, eager anticipation mixing with his concern, “Sheriff Lestrade, please come in.”

Lestrade’s drooping mustache rendered his face into a permanent scowl, but today a jumble of frustration and worry were clearly visible beneath it. “Thank you, but I’d appreciate you comin’ with me right away, Mr. Holmes. There’s been a... well, you better just come see it.”

“Of course. Watson, can you—?”

“Naturally.” He even stood without wincing, grabbing his slouch hat, “Where are we going?”

Lestrade was already headed down the stairs. “The Culverton mine.”

“Good Lord.”

Lestrade removed his derby to wipe the sweat from his brow, “The good Lord has got nothin’ to do with this, Doctor.”

The carnage was incredible. Every man in the mine lay dead, arrows sticking up from their bodies. Some of them had even been scalped. There were hoofprints still visible in the dirt, ranging all over the mine.

“According to Mr. Culverton, every last miner was killed,” Lestrade said.

Holmes’s stony countenance told nothing of his thoughts as he carefully walked among the bodies, stopping to examine one draped over a barrel of blasting powder. A figure all in shades of grey approached the site, tapping an anxious finger against his leg. He was fair haired and fair skinned, soft faced, and clearly a businessman.

“Mr. Culverton,” Sheriff Lestrade greeted him, “have you met Dr. Watson?”

“I’m happy to say I haven’t needed his services,” Culverton shook the doctor’s hand with a small smile, “No offense meant.”

“None taken. Did you discover the bodies this morning?”

Mr. Culverton nodded, “As I told the Sheriff, I’d only gone to town to place an order for more essentials. I didn’t think I’d been gone that long, but you can see—”

“Yes. You didn’t hear or see anything else?” Watson asked.

“No. The Indians were long gone.”

“This wasn’t the natives,” Holmes said.

Everyone stared at him. Culverton was flabbergasted. Lestrade cleared his throat, “Mr. Culverton, Mr. Holmes.”

“The ‘second opinion’ you wanted?” Culverton’s skepticism was obvious.

“Mr. Holmes has been of some assistance to me the past few years,” Lestrade stated with puffed up dignity, “and given the delicacy of the matter, I thought it couldn’t hurt to hear his thoughts.”

“Except that he’s clearly insane” Culverton frowned. “Who looks at a mass of scalped men turned into pincushions, and maintains that dirt-worshipping savages didn’t do it?”

“Any man willing to look at the evidence, rather than jump to the obvious conclusion,” Holmes said. He approached the group with a respectful tilt of his head to Lestrade. “Our good Sheriff recognized that we haven’t had any trouble from natives for months. The last incident was a stagecoach being harassed, just a minor scare to remind us that the natives are still in the hills, and have no intention of leaving. A massacre of this sort is unprecedented. Hence, his desire for a second opinion. I must say, Lestrade, I’m flattered.”

“Don’t ruin the gesture, Holmes,” Lestrade rolled his eyes.

Culverton’s frown had deepened as Holmes spoke. Now he looked Holmes up and down, taking in the fawn trousers and black frock coat, the scarlet waistcoat and matching thin cravat

precisely tied against his white shirt, the top hat. His estimation of Holmes was blatantly obvious; an aristocratic Southern dandy. “And what,” Culverton sneered, “do you know about ‘natives?’”

“I know they don’t shoe their horses,” Holmes stated. “I can clearly see the nails in some of these prints. You seem to take some issue with me, Mr. Culverton.” Watson was certain Holmes was exaggerating his accent on purpose.

“Just seem to recall hearing about a Southern dandy in town, supposedly on the run after the war. Wonder if you might be him.”

“Why should that matter?”

“The fellow I heard of might have supported the Union.”

“Yes, one can imagine that would be an unpopular position in the short-lived Confederacy. Judging from your vowels, you yourself hail from the Southeastern coast, North Carolina, perhaps?”

Culverton scowled. “My brother was gunned down by Union soldiers.”

“As was my father.”

The two men faced each other for a tense moment. It was Culverton who broke first. His face went a little red as he blustered a protest to Lestrade, “Sheriff, my men were killed and scalped, and if you aren’t going to do something about it, I will.”

“You know what’ll happen if a bunch of soldiers go up over those hills?” Lestrade said, “Every last Indian for miles around is going to come down on this town, and then you’re really gonna see a massacre. Yeah, we might wipe them out, but not without a whole lot of people dyin’ in the process. Rushing into things is the last thing we want to do!”

“Well, while you’re ‘not rushing,’ I’m going to see to the burial of my men.”

“At least let me examine—” Holmes’s protest was silenced by Lestrade’s elbow in his side.

“We’ll leave you to it,” Lestrade said with a tip of his hat.

“Mr. Culverton,” Watson said with a farewell gesture.

“Sheriff,” Holmes kept his voice low as they walked back to their horses, “those arrows were fired after the bodies lay dead.”

“And how the devil did you figure that?”

“If I’d been permitted the opportunity to examine a body thoroughly—”

“I’m not letting a bunch of bodies lay out in the sun all day just so you can experiment on them.”

Holmes bit back whatever callous remark he’d been about to make. “Do we agree that the natives weren’t responsible?”

“We agree it was unlikely.”

“Did you see the hoofprints?”

Lestrade hesitated a moment before confidently stating, “No, I didn’t look.”

“They were shoed. Surely you at least believe I can tell the difference between the print of a shoed horse and one that is not?”

“... granted.”

“It was not a native’s horse that rode around that mine, and without a horse, no natives could have killed every man in that mine fast enough that none of them fought back. And unless you think a group of bandits have suddenly taken to murder by bow and arrow, those arrows were planted there, and the men died of something else.”

“Something else. Such as?”

“If the physical wounds happened after death,” Watson reasoned, “then the men died of some internal distress.”

“You are positively scintillating today, Watson,” Holmes said.

Watson’s jaw dropped. “Holmes, you don’t think Culverton poisoned his own men!”

“I think it is a possibility we must consider.”

“Some of those men were scalped!” Lestrade protested. “Besides that, Culverton doesn’t even have a motive. What profit could there be in killing the men making him rich?”

“Many white men are as familiar with the act of scalping as any so-called savage, if not more so, and those men weren’t making him rich, were they?” Holmes challenged. “Culverton’s mine has never been terribly profitable.”

“Wanted to expand, I think,” Lestrade nodded, “Convinced there was more to be had nearby.”

“In the hills, perhaps?” Holmes said. “Where do those natives that Culverton was so eager to blame reside?”

Lestrade looked as though he’d been slapped. “He set up a massacre of his own men, just for an excuse to wipe out the Indians so he can expand his mine?” That ever present bull-headed

sensibility rallied to the fore, “Mr. Holmes, you have no proof that that is what actually happened.”

“It is the only explanation that accounts for all the facts.”

“Only explanation my foot,” Lestrade grumbled. “Mr. Holmes, you bring me proof that Mr. Culverton murdered his men just to frame a bunch of natives, and I’ll gladly put him behind bars. Your theories won’t cut it. Hard, solid proof.”

With that, Lestrade turned his horse in the direction of the jail.

“That man has so much potential to be intelligent,” Holmes muttered, “it’s remarkably aggravating.”

When they arrived back at Baker Street House, the place was open for business, with Billy playing a minstrel tune on the piano, and Mrs. Hudson herself behind the dark wooden bar. The daylight through the windows provided enough light for now, but as night fell the chandelier would cast a warm glow over the tables. Mrs. Hudson’s girls lounged against the bar and along the stair railing, chatting with customers. There was a decent crowd already, despite the relatively early hour.

Holmes and Watson made their way up the stairs, ignoring the curious looks of new faces as they went to their room, and nodding a greeting to the regulars. It wasn’t until they were outside their door that Watson finally spoke.

“Culverton certainly took a dislike to you.”

“Ha! Mr. Culverton fled the Confederacy after the war was lost to take advantage of the new opportunity and distinct lack of legal boundaries the western frontier provided. My father may have died defending the Confederacy, but at least he had principles. Culverton is an opportunistic businessman, little better than the carpetbaggers destroying the remains of the South with their so-called Reconstruction.”

“Somehow, I doubt he sees it that way.”

Holmes chuckled. His slow southern drawl became more pronounced when he was offended, “No doubt I am little more than a pompous scalawag in his eyes.”

Holmes retrieved his pipe once they were inside 221, sitting down in his basket chair. Watson sat in the chair across from him, not bothering to hide his grimace this time. “Well?”

“Well?”

“The case, Holmes. Culverton aside, what are your thoughts on the case?” Holmes smiled before regarding the window, a distant gaze in his eyes as if he looked across the town to the scene at the mine from his chair. “There is one detail, only one, that remains unaccounted for,” Holmes spoke softly, “I’m not certain of its significance, yet.”

“Are you going to tell me what it is? Or just sit there, being infuriatingly impenetrable?”

Holmes smiled a little, and drew a small bottle from his pocket, “What do you make of that, Doctor?”

Watson examined it carefully, trying to apply the same attention to detail that Holmes would use. Unfortunately, to Dr. Watson’s eyes, it was just an amber bottle with a solid black label. “A medicine bottle,” he shrugged. “Where did you find it?”

“It was lying just to the side of one of the bodies. I picked it up while you were talking with Culverton.”

“Why should a bottle be cause for concern?”

“It isn’t the bottle, Watson, it’s the label. No store in town has such, not even for the less pleasant substances. Where did it come from?”

“A traveling salesman with poor business sense?”

“You joke, Doctor, but...” Holmes froze, his eyes fixed on Watson with something almost like awe. He sprang to his feet, “Watson, you never cease to amaze me!” He was out the door and down the hall as he called back, “You are not yourself luminous, but you are a great conductor of light!”

With a curse, Watson followed. “Can all southerners make an insult sound like a compliment, or is it just you?”

Holmes gave no indication of noticing as he hurried down the stairs. “Mrs. Hudson!” His strident call was clear over the sounds of conversation and tinny piano.

“You’d think a gentleman would learn not to shout so much,” Mrs. Hudson scolded him from behind the bar.

“It’s the most expedient way to ensure your attention. Was the last silver tongued leech to pass through town a customer of yours?”

“The snake oil man? Sure was. Why, want your money back?”

“Your rapier wit knows no bounds, Mrs. Hudson. Whose favors did he purchase?”

“Kitty’s.”

Holmes scanned the room, spotting her almost instantly and crossing the distance between them in a few long strides.

“Is this case going to be worth the grief of him interrupting Kitty and her customer?” Mrs. Hudson asked as Watson approached.

“That depends on if you think solving a mass of murders worth more than the dollar you’d get from that fella,” Watson replied as he sat down at the bar.

Mrs. Hudson poured him a shot of whiskey, “I suppose.”

Kitty and the customer, a rough faced teamster, were fortunately still in the ‘negotiating’ phase of the evening. Holmes smoothly inserted his long arm between them, holding a gold coin up to Kitty’s face. “I require your services, Miss Winter.”

She smiled, “Can’t say no to a gentleman.” The other man started to protest, “Sorry, but I take the offers I get. Stick around, when I’m done with him, I’ll come back to you.”

“I ain’t in the mood to wait,” he grunted, grabbing Kitty’s arm hard enough to hurt.

Holmes knocked the hand away, “If that is your method of handling women, it’s no wonder you have to pay for their company.”

“I sure as hell won’t take lessons from some hoity-toity jackanapes, neither.”

Holmes smiled, his voice honey and molasses. “I doubt there’s anything I, or anyone else, could teach you.”

The people standing nearby were suddenly terribly interested in their drinks, or found something else to do on the other side of the room. The sudden exodus was enough to give the teamster pause. Holmes’s gaze remained fixed on him like a hawk, and that smile and those sickly-sweet words made the air a little colder.

“I apologize for interrupting your plans for the night, Miss Winter,” Holmes said. “It is ungentlemanly of me, but I have my reasons.” Holmes turned, leading Kitty to the staircase.

They were halfway across the room when the stranger’s pride flared. “Sonofabitch,” he muttered, and went for his gun just as Holmes spun around to face him, a small streak of silver flying from his outstretched hand. The gun never made it out of the holster. There was a moment of silence before the stranger howled in pain, Holmes’s knife lodged firmly in his wrist.

“Shall we?” Holmes offered Kitty his arm. “You’ll see that I get my knife back?” Holmes called over his shoulder to Watson as he went upstairs.

Watson sighed. Mrs. Hudson poured him another.

By the time Watson made his way back up to 221, he found Holmes in his chair, with Kitty sitting across from him. “Ah, thank you,” Holmes said as Watson handed him his throwing knife, tucking it back into its sheath, hidden in his sleeve. “The last salesman to come through was indeed one of Kitty’s customers. If you would kindly summarize what you’ve told me for the doctor?”

Kitty shrugged, “Mentioned he traveled a lot. Had some charms or something around his neck, came from the Caribbean. Tried to sell me his quack potion afterward! I laughed, of course. ‘I may be a whore, but I ain’t stupid,’ I said.”

“His reaction?” Holmes prompted.

“Well, he got a funny sort of smug grin on his face. Said he had something else, something special. Stole it in Haiti, or Barbados, one of them islands, I don’t know which. Supposed to be an ‘ee-lixir of immortality,’” she mocked, “though he never tried it. I laughed again, and told him he was supposed to pay me, not the other way around. Then he had a drink at the bar, and left.”

“I saw no such elixir in his wagon the next day,” Holmes said.

Watson shrugged. “Maybe it was well hidden.”

Holmes scoffed, “From me?”

“First time for everything,” Kitty muttered. “Can I get back to work, now?”

“Yes, thank you.” Holmes flipped the coin to her, “For your time, Miss Winter.”

She snatched it out of the air. “You know I hate it when you call me that.”

“You hate it when anyone else calls you that. When I do it, it is a sliver of respect for your continued skill at gathering information.”

“Oh hush,” her cheeks held the slightest blush as she left, “I just pay attention. Ain’t nothin’ special in that.”

“You’d be surprised,” Holmes called after her. “Rest up, Watson, we’re visiting the mine tonight.”

“Why?”

“Night will provide much needed cover, and time for you to be back to your peak physical abilities.”

“I meant why are we going back there? Surely by now the bodies have been taken away.”

“I want to see if there are any more of those bottles, or any other sign of foul play. I don’t imagine Mr. Culverton will take kindly to my having a look around his operation.”

The entrance of the mine was a spot of pitch in the moonlight. The bodies had been cleared away, the occasional dark stain on the dirt the only sign of the grizzly happenings of the daylight. Watson’s horse snorted in distress as they came to a stop, still a fair distance from the mine’s entrance.

“No need to take the horses closer,” Holmes said, his voice low as they dismounted, “as we’re trying to remain unnoticed.”

“Something’s got them spooked, besides,” Watson commented.

“So it seems.”

They quickly and quietly walked toward the mine, the clouded moon stretching strange shadows through the cool air. “The undertaker had no business today,” Holmes wondered aloud, surveying the area. “Where did the bodies go?”

“An unmarked pit in the ground,” Watson grumbled. “No doubt none of these men could have afforded the undertaker in the first place. Perhaps the bodies were distributed to families.”

Holmes shook his head, “Few had any, at least not in town. Something sinister is at work here...” Holmes froze, his head tilted to the side. He gestured for Watson remain still. Watson waited, trying to listen, but unable to hear whatever had caught his friend’s attention.

“Something is inside the mine,” Holmes said.

“Just a curious coyote.”

“No.”

Watson sighed, and followed Holmes as he crept over to the mine’s entrance. Now Watson could hear it, too, a strange, shuffling sound. They stood before the entrance, listening to the sound, accompanied by the occasional grunt or soft moan. “Well,” Watson said, “definitely not a coyote.”

Holmes smiled, and lit their lantern. Watson pulled his revolver. Together, they stepped into the dark.

A cold damp settled over them as they moved through the mine. The silence was immense, their footfalls the only disturbance to the mine’s stale atmosphere. They hadn’t gone far before coming to a junction of two tunnels.

Holmes spotted a crate full of empty amber bottles off to the side. He set the lantern down next to it as he knelt to examine the contents. All of the bottles had solid black labels. “We have found the stock of ‘elixir’ at least,” he said. “Culverton must have purchased it before I ran the seller out of town, though for what purpose I can’t quite determine.”

“The poison that killed his men?”

“That puts a rather darker aspect on the salesman’s character than I thought if he was hoping to sell it to his customers.”

“Kitty said he hadn’t tried it. Maybe he didn’t know it was poison.”

“Possibly, though I doubt it.”

“Holmes,” Watson looked down the mineshaft with a vague unease, “does it seem like those sounds are getting louder?”

Holmes listened, an expression of curious anticipation on his face. “Yes, Doctor, I’d say so. It’s coming closer.”

They watched as a dark shape was slowly illuminated by the lantern’s light. Arrows stuck out of its back, and its vacant face was stained with the blood that once dripped from its missing scalp. Its gait was rigid yet shambling, as if just recovered from rigor mortis and struggling to stay upright.

“Holmes,” Watson forced down the bile in his throat, “for the love of God, Holmes, explain that!”

“I... I can’t.” Holmes stared at the creature, confused, “It’s clearly one of the dead miners, but I can’t explain how he walks!”

“They were dead! All of them!”

“Apparently not.”

“Look at it Holmes! It’s in the beginning stages of rot!”

“I know, I see it, and yet... it can’t be!”

The thing lurched forward, swiping at them with a snarl. Watson leaped back and fired into the creature’s chest with no effect. Holmes grabbed hold of its arm, and with a quick move of his body flipped the thing onto the ground, its arm held at an angle. It jerked in an odd, slow thrashing movement, its mouth snapping as if it might manage to reach Holmes’s ankle.

Watson put a bullet in its skull, the sound of the shot echoing around them. The thing groaned, and lay still. Watson stared at it in disgust. “It was trying to bite you.”

“So it seems,” Holmes nodded, shaken but undeniably fascinated.

Watson holstered his gun, “How the hell did you get it onto the ground anyway?”

“One of the Chinese workers in town was good enough to demonstrate some of his country’s methods of defending oneself.” Holmes considered the corpse, “Whatever this is, it clearly doesn’t obey any natural law we’re familiar with.”

Watson looked skeptically at his friend, “Magic, Holmes?”

“I did not say that. That which we do not understand is not necessarily supernatural.”

“If you say so,” Watson shrugged. “Do you think there are more of them?”

Holmes sighed, “I’m afraid so, my friend. As much as I hope this was an isolated, bizarrely unique case, my instincts tell me such hope is in vain. If all the miners died of the same cause, then there is a real possibility that all of them now suffer this fate.”

“But what could cause it?”

Holmes pointed to the crate. “I suspect ‘immortality’ is a horrible mistranslation.”

“The elixir,” Watson was stunned.

“Culverton must have tested a bottle on a worker, either out of spite or on a whim, I don’t know or care which. The miners were dead when we saw them this morning, so it takes time to work. Culverton’s test subject would have died, and Culverton would have hid the body rather than risk discovery while disposing of it during the day. Once he saw the end result of the elixir’s effects, he decided to give it to the rest of his men, using the nearby natives as an excuse for the sudden death of his workers.”

“For what purpose?” Watson exclaimed, appalled. “What in Hell could he want with walking dead monstrosities?”

“Isn’t it obvious, Dr. Watson?” a voice called out in the dark. Holmes and Watson turned to see a familiar silhouette approaching, “Don’t draw that revolver, Doctor, unless you want to test your healing skills on your friend.”

“Mr. Culverton,” Holmes said, “how good of you to join us.”

“You’re trespassing, Mr. Holmes,” Culverton approached, gun in his hand, “I’d be in my rights if I shot you, and the doctor.”

“At least do me the courtesy of explaining the reason for this madness.”

“Madness?” Culverton’s eyes gained a frenzied light, “The Union, your Union, will fear the might of a new Confederacy of Territories. With an army of dead soldiers, The South will rise again!”

“In a slightly modified geographic location,” Holmes drawled.

“I don’t care about the opinion of some imitation Pinkerton,” Culverton spat. “With an unbeatable army on my side, there is nothing to stop me.”

“This one is rather beaten,” Holmes picked up the lantern to illuminate the corpse at his feet.

Culverton stared. “Where did you find him?”

“It attacked us,” Watson said, a hand discretely drifting to his gun.

“That’s impossible; I chained them up down the tunnel!”

An unearthly moan sounded from the depths of the mine. All three men faced the darkness, a shiver down their spines.

“They got out,” Culverton whispered, “God almighty, they got out.”

Guttural groans echoed all around them, born of throats never meant to utter sound.

“They don’t breathe,” Watson muttered, “where is the air to create sound coming from?”

“We have a more pressing concern, my friend,” Holmes licked his lips, suddenly parched. They were coming. He could hear the steps sliding closer, that odd, unnatural gait, bones somehow compelled to drag their skin across the dust. It was completely illogical, it defied everything he knew about how life and death were supposed to work. He could put it down to a strange disease, something to emulate the symptoms of death, to degrade the brain... Something inside him, whatever primal spirit still existed deep in his soul, screamed that he was lying.

The figures were visible now, slowly emerging from the black. Rattling metal sounded as more dead men came forth, lengths of chain still wrapped around their legs. One crawled, having abandoned its legs with the chain below.

Unblinking eyes stared from slack-jawed faces, stained with the dried blood that had dripped from their scalps. The smell of death smothered the stale underground air. Holmes swallowed his revulsion, forcing his mind to focus.

The sight of the oncoming hoard of monsters was too much for Culverton. He fired a panicked shot, immediately covering his ears as the sound reverberated through the tunnels.

Holmes tackled him, wrenching the gun from his hand as Watson fired a shot into the head of the nearest creature. It fell, its fellow creatures paying it no heed as the doctor and detective ran.

“Hurry, Culverton!” Holmes shouted over his shoulder. “You can try to kill me once we’re out of here!” A strangled cry stopped him in his tracks. Culverton was on the ground, the legless abomination trying to chew through his boot. He kicked at it, smashing its face, but still the thing chewed.

More creatures closed in around him.

Watson couldn’t get a clear shot at the one attacking Culverton, but he could hit the next closest as Holmes fired at the one behind that. Culverton managed to get his foot free of his boot as the corpses fell, nearly on top of him. “Run!!!” Watson shouted, but Culverton was too panicked. Dead hands grabbed at him as he struggled to his feet. They caught his coat as he stumbled, pulling him down once more. Culverton screamed as one of them bit into his shoulder and tore, releasing a spray of blood across the wall.

Holmes held Watson back, “There’s nothing we can do for him!”

“Like Hell there’s not,” Watson said, and took aim. Culverton stopped screaming as the bullet struck.

Holmes grimaced, “Let’s get out of here.”

They hurried out of the mine, hearts pounding as the echoing groans and rattling of chains followed them through the dark. Watson gasped as he stepped out into the night, gulping down the fresh air.

A blast of sound behind him sent him to the ground, his hands over his head. He forced himself to sit up. The entrance of the mine was collapsed.

“Holmes!”

Holmes blinked, his sight clearing. He was lying on the ground. He couldn’t hear anything except an incessant ringing. He looked around as the dust cloud slowly cleared, revealing the collapsed mine just behind him. Movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention. His dazed gaze focused on Watson, worried, limping, but running to him nonetheless. His voice was muffled, seeming miles away.

Sound returned with a distressing suddenness.

“Holmes!” Watson shouted. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Holmes groaned.

“What the devil did you do?”

“A box of dynamite was sitting by a support beam, so I shot it.”

“While you were still in the mine?”

“I was out.”

“Barely!”

“It was necessary,” Holmes coughed, “I couldn’t risk one of those... things, getting out.”

Watson sighed as he helped Holmes to his feet. “Can you walk?”

“I was going to ask you the same question.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not, but I’ll permit the lie,” Holmes coughed again.

Watson finished off his glass of whiskey, and reflected that there were unknown dimensions to Mrs. Hudson. She’d taken one look at them as they returned to 221, and personally brought up a bottle of her best. She hadn’t even lectured Holmes for playing his violin during business hours. The melancholic music seemed to have helped settle his mind, and now he sat in his chair across from Watson, his own glass in one hand, pipe in the other, a look of perturbed contemplation on his face.

“Do you think they could still be alive?” Watson asked.

“They weren’t alive to begin with, but if they are still functional, they are miles below ground. Eventually, natural decomposition will lead to there being nothing left to function. Presuming they continue to decompose, of course.”

“They would have to, wouldn’t they?”

“Not knowing the mechanism of their not-life, I wouldn’t want to make any promises. You’re the man of medicine, Doctor. Could what we witnessed be caused by some sort of disease, or a chemical reaction in the blood?”

Watson shook his head. “They were dead, Holmes. The appearance of death may be a symptom of a medical condition, but I would stake my reputation, small though it may be, on those men being dead when we saw them in the afternoon.”

“You’re the best doctor in town, Watson, everyone knows that. Best one I’ve had the pleasure of knowing for that matter, even if you are a Yankee.”

“Not everyone shares your opinion, and I don’t believe you’ve actually known many doctors,” Watson smiled. “We may just have to face up to never knowing how the elixir worked. And, honestly, does it matter? Whatever was in those bottles is gone now.”

A quick grin pulled at Holmes’ mouth, fading with the smoke from his pipe. “Assuming every sample was in that mine.”

“Holmes. Even if there were another bottle hidden somewhere, what sort of person could find any appeal in a potion that raises the dead?”

“Culverton did. A man with a perverse desire for profit, or power, or both.”

Holmes released a great cloud of smoke as he sighed, his words soft. “They were hungry, Watson. They descended on Culverton’s body like vultures.”

“We have to make sure they were all destroyed.”

“How? The mine collapsed. If we tell anyone about what happened tonight, they’ll think we’ve gone mad.” He finished his glass and poured them both another, “No, my friend. I’m afraid all we can do is keep one eye constantly on the surrounding land, and if anyone starts digging, we’ll be ready.”