Coping with the Coronet

– William Hyder, BSI

> Holmes walked over to his desk, took out a little triangular piece of gold with three gems in it, and threw it down upon the table.
> With a shriek of joy our client clutched it up.
> "You have it!" he gasped. "I am saved! I am saved!"

That is the high point of the adventure Dr. Watson called "The Beryl Coronet." The client, a banker named Alexander Holder, had made a substantial loan to a client of exalted rank (whom he did not identify to Holmes and Watson). As security he unwisely accepted the coronet of the title, which was a public possession. Even more unwisely, he took it home with him rather than entrusting it to his office safe. During the night an attempt had been made to steal it, and in the process a projecting part of the coronet had been broken off and was now missing. Holder was unhappily convinced that his son, in debt from gambling, was the thief.

Holmes recovers the missing piece, clears the son of theft and collects a huge reward. But the narrative ends with one important point unexplored. A Sherlockian scholar named A. Carson Simpson pointed it out:

"(T)he injuries to the coronet pose a problem to which there seems to be no solution. We are told that 'any injury to it would be almost as serious as its complete loss.' But it was in fact injured, being twisted out of shape and having a piece broken off. How did Alexander Holder expect to get it made as good as new between Saturday morning, when he got back the missing piece, and the following Monday, when the borrower would return to reclaim it? If this could not be done, how did he expect to placate the borrower on Monday, unless by a little genteel blackmail? Apparently he did not worry about these questions, for his first act, after getting back the missing piece, was to rush off – not to the nearest goldsmith, as one might expect, but – to make his peace with his son Arthur."[1]

Holder described his client as "one of the highest, noblest, most exalted names in England." Simpson identified him as Queen Victoria's eldest son, H.R.H. Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, later to become King Edward VII. Other scholars have agreed.[2] After warning Holder to take good care of the coronet, the prince added, "Any injury to it

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[1] Simpson, A. Carson, "Whose Was It? Conjectures on a Coronet," *Baker Street Journal Christmas Annual,* No. 2 (1957), 9-17.

[2] Jones, Kelvin L, "The Prince and the Coronet," *Wheelwrightings,* Vol. 10, No. 3 (January 1988), 21-24. The identification is generally accepted in the Sherlockian world.

would be almost as serious as its complete loss, for there are no beryls in the world to match these, and it would be impossible to replace them."

That statement is the crucial one. It was the loss of one or more of the beryls that the prince feared. He assumed that an injury to the gold could be repaired, and so did Holder when he found the coronet had been injured. It would have been a matter of melting the gold at the joint, molding the broken piece back and touching up the chasing to match the chasing on the body of the coronet. A delicate task, but within the ability of a master goldsmith.

Holder would have taken the coronet and the missing piece to a leading firm of jewelers, asked for their discretion, told them some cover story and paid them a stiff price for their skilled work, their speed and – most importantly – their silence.

The leading jewelers in London at the time were Asprey and Garrard. Holder would have avoided the latter. Garrard had been Crown Jewelers to Queen Victoria since 1843, and its personnel would have recognized the coronet as a public possession. Asprey, then. Holder's client had told him, "I should not dream of doing so [leaving the coronet as security] were it not absolutely certain that I should be able in four days to reclaim it," later adding, "I shall call for it in person on Monday morning." Therefore he visited Holder on a Thursday, the attempted theft occurred that night and Holder consulted with Holmes on Friday. Holmes did his work on the same day, finishing around 2 a.m. Saturday, and returned the missing piece, with its three beryls, to Holder on Saturday morning.

Simpson noted that Holder's "first act, after getting back the missing piece, was to rush off – not to the nearest goldsmith, as one might expect, but – to make his peace with his son Arthur" (and, presumably, see about getting the boy released from prison). It is true that the banker declared his intention to do so, but given that Holmes had already informed Arthur that his innocence was known, Holder's terror of returning a twisted, broken coronet to an exalted and powerful client might well have prompted him to take care of another little errand first.

With the right financial incentive, which Holder was rich and desperate enough to offer, Asprey could probably have started work directly and finished the work on the Sunday. On the Monday morning Holder would have been prepared to receive the prince in his office, return the supposedly unblemished coronet, accept the repayment and the interest, carefully refrain from writing a receipt (the prince would not have wanted any record of the transaction) and close the matter with a vast sigh of relief.

In the heat of the investigation, Holder had declared, "I would give my fortune to have [the beryls] back." But the fee he paid to the jeweler, though no doubt astronomical, was certainly less than that, and Holmes, though offered £10,000 per stone, settled for a total of £4,000. Except for the severe strain on his nervous system, Holder paid a relatively light price for his bad judgment in entrusting a priceless object to a bureau drawer with a common lock.