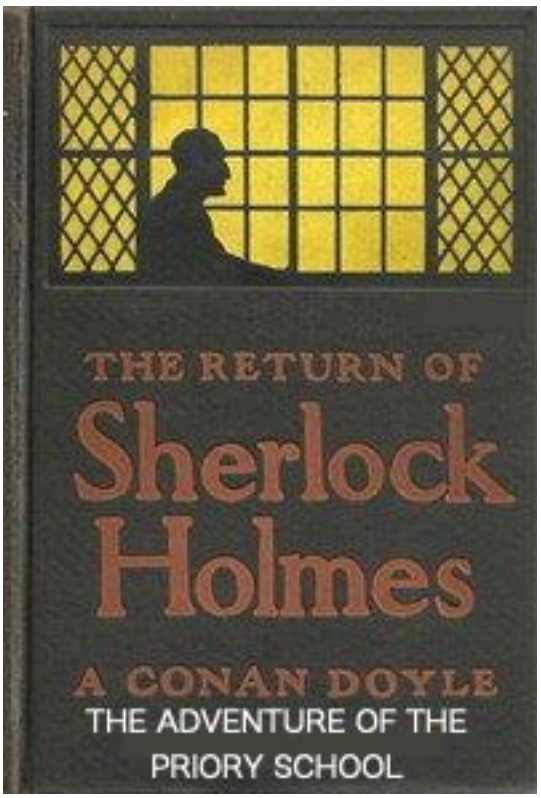

The Adventure of the Priory School

B1 Version

Part 1: A Man Who Has Not Slept

One morning at Baker Street a visiting card arrived, followed almost immediately by its owner — a large, pompous man of great dignity named Dr. Thorneycroft Huxtable. He was the founder and headmaster of the Priory School, one of England's most prestigious preparatory schools — a boarding school for boys aged roughly eight to thirteen, where the sons of noblemen and wealthy gentlemen were educated before going on to their secondary schools. The card was covered in academic qualifications. The man himself walked through the door and collapsed unconscious on the hearthrug.

Watson diagnosed simple exhaustion — the man had eaten nothing and travelled since before dawn from Mackleton in the north of England. Holmes found a return railway ticket in his pocket and deduced he had set out very early. When Huxtable recovered with milk and biscuits, he explained the crisis that had destroyed his sleep for three days.

The Duke of Holdernesse was one of the richest and most powerful noblemen in England — a former Cabinet minister who owned two hundred and fifty thousand acres of land. His only son and heir, ten-year-old Lord Saltire, had been sent to the Priory School at the start of term. The Duke and Duchess had recently separated — they were

living apart, the Duchess having moved to the south of France — and the boy had been unhappy at home, missing his mother greatly. At the school he had settled in well and seemed happy.

Then, on the night of the thirteenth of May, Lord Saltire vanished. His room was on the second floor; he had clearly dressed himself and climbed out of the window on the ivy plant below. The German master, Heidegger, was also missing from his room, along with his bicycle. Three days had passed and neither had been found. The police had chased a false lead to Liverpool and wasted all that time. Holmes, hearing that the Duke was offering five thousand pounds to find his son and a further thousand to name whoever had taken him, agreed immediately to travel north.

Part 2: Two Bicycles on the Moor

That evening Holmes, Watson, and Huxtable arrived at the school near Mackleton. The Duke himself was there with his private secretary, James Wilder — a young, sharp-featured, nervous man who seemed almost more agitated than his employer. The Duke was tall, gaunt, and formal, with a distinctive long red beard. He was cold and aristocratic in manner, and clearly disliked having outsiders involved, though he could not refuse given the circumstances.

Holmes examined the boy's room and the German master's room, finding little of use. But the following morning, out on the open moorland north of the school — the broad, flat, treeless landscape of peat and heather typical of northern England — he and Watson made a significant discovery. Following the only wet path across an area of boggy ground, Holmes identified two separate bicycle tracks.

The first set of tracks was made by Palmer tyres — the type confirmed to belong to Heidegger's bicycle. Holmes could read the tracks with precision: the deeper rear impression told him the direction of travel, and scuffed patches showed where the rider had fallen heavily. Spots of blood on the nearby heather confirmed that Heidegger had been seriously injured before his bicycle came to a halt. Hidden in gorse bushes — the thorny yellow-flowered shrubs that grow across English moorland — they found the bicycle itself, smeared with blood. A short distance away lay the body of the German master, with a devastating wound to his skull. He had been killed by a single powerful blow.

The second set of tracks was made by a Dunlop tyre with a distinctive patch. These tracks came from the direction of the school and led away toward Holdernesse Hall. Holmes puzzled over them: the boy had no bicycle, so who had made them? And crucially, there were no human footprints near the scene of Heidegger's death — only the tracks of what appeared to be cattle. But Holmes had seen cattle hoof-prints all morning without seeing a single cow.

Part 3: The Fighting Cock Inn

Holmes sent a local farmer to guide the police to Heidegger's body, and then followed the Dunlop tracks until they faded on firmer ground. The trail led toward a remote, run-down public house — a country inn — called the Fighting Cock, kept by a hostile, dark-faced landlord named Reuben Hayes. A public house in England is a licensed

establishment where people gather to drink ale and beer; in the countryside they also serve as meeting points and sometimes provide simple accommodation.

Holmes, feigning a badly sprained ankle — an injury he invented to explain his arrival on foot — tried to hire a bicycle or carriage from Hayes and received nothing but rudeness. But he noticed two things: first, fresh nail marks on the horses' shoes in the stable, suggesting the shoes had been recently changed; and second, a forge — a blacksmith's workshop with a furnace for heating and shaping metal — at the back of the yard. He also saw, in the distance, James Wilder cycling rapidly toward the inn with an expression of pure terror on his face. Wilder went inside, and shortly afterwards a horse and trap raced away toward Chesterfield. Holmes crept back to observe: Wilder was waiting at the door in the darkness, as if expecting someone. A second figure arrived. A lamp was lit upstairs.

Holmes climbed onto Watson's back to peer through the upper window. He came down without a word, said their day's work was done, and walked back to the school to send telegrams from the station. He promised Huxtable that by the following evening the mystery would be solved.

Part 4: The Secret of the Cow Tracks

The next morning Holmes revealed the final piece of reasoning that had eluded him. He had spent the dawn walking back to the murder site and examining the so-called cattle tracks again with fresh eyes. The hoof-prints showed three distinct gaits — walking, trotting, and cantering — which was, as Holmes said with dry amusement, a remarkable performance for a cow. The tracks had been made by horses wearing specially shaped iron shoes designed to leave an impression like a cloven hoof — the divided hoof of a cow or deer — rather than the solid round shape of a horse's shoe. It was an old trick for throwing pursuers off the scent; the iron shoes that made these prints were later found in a display case at Holdernesse Hall, labelled as medieval artefacts dug up from the castle moat, but still bearing fresh mud.

So Heidegger had seen the boy leaving in the night and given chase on his bicycle. The boy had left on a horse with a companion using these disguised shoes. The companion had turned, struck Heidegger a fatal blow, and continued with the boy to the Fighting Cock Inn.

Part 5: Confronting the Duke

Holmes and Watson arrived at Holdernesse Hall and demanded to speak privately with the Duke. He appeared after a delay, looking older and more troubled than before. Holmes asked Wilder to leave the room, and then laid out his full knowledge of events — calmly, precisely, and without accusation. He knew the boy was at the Fighting Cock. He knew who had arranged the kidnapping. And he demanded the Duke's complete frankness in return.

The Duke, with evident anguish, told the truth. James Wilder was not merely his secretary. He was the Duke's illegitimate son — born before the Duke's marriage to a woman he had loved deeply and who had died young. He could not acknowledge James publicly, but had educated him, employed him, and been unable to refuse him

anything. James had always known the secret, and had used it to manipulate his father. He bitterly resented Lord Saltire, the legitimate heir, because in his view the accident of his parents' marriage — or rather the lack of it — had robbed him of everything that should rightfully have been his.

James had devised a plan. He had opened a letter from the Duke to Lord Saltire and inserted a false note, using the Duchess's name, asking the boy to meet him secretly in a nearby wood called the Ragged Shaw at midnight. Arthur — Lord Saltire — went, and found Reuben Hayes waiting with a horse. Hayes took him to the Fighting Cock and confined him there. Heidegger had seen the boy leaving from his window and given chase, and Hayes had killed him. James had intended to bargain with his father: return Arthur in exchange for breaking the legal entail on the estate — the entail being the legal rule that forced the estate to pass to the legitimate heir — so that the Duke could leave his property to James by will instead.

But the discovery of Heidegger's body had shattered James's nerve entirely. He had confessed to his father, who — in a moment of terrible weakness — had given him three days' grace to allow Hayes to escape, and had not gone to the police. He had visited Arthur himself at night to confirm the boy was safe, but had not brought him home, for fear that doing so would expose James.

Part 6: Holmes Pronounces Judgement

Holmes was not gentle. He told the Duke plainly that he had committed serious crimes: concealing a murder, aiding a murderer's escape, and — most unforgivably in Holmes's view — leaving an innocent ten-year-old boy in the hands of a violent criminal for three days to protect a guilty man. The Duke flushed but said nothing, for he knew Holmes was right.

Holmes's condition for helping was simple. He rang for a servant himself and ordered the Duke's carriage to go immediately to the Fighting Cock Inn and bring Lord Saltire home. Once the boy was safe, Holmes told the Duke what he was prepared to do. Hayes would be arrested, tried for murder, and hanged — Holmes would not interfere with that. But the Duke could quietly ensure that Hayes had no reason to reveal James Wilder's involvement; as far as the police would know, Hayes had acted alone for ransom. And James Wilder must leave England permanently and make his own way in Australia. Furthermore, Holmes pointed out that the Duke's own account of his unhappy marriage suggested James Wilder's presence had been the root cause of the trouble; he recommended the Duke write to the Duchess and seek a reconciliation.

The Duke confirmed that he had already written to the Duchess that morning. Holmes accepted the six-thousand-pound cheque — five for the boy's location, one for naming the kidnapper — with characteristic irony, patting it and calling himself a poor man. As a final flourish, he asked about the cow-shoes and confirmed their recent use from the fresh mud on the iron. It was, he said, the second most interesting object he had seen on the visit. Asked what the first was, he smiled, patted the cheque in his pocket, and said nothing more.