London, 29th December 1940, 8 pm.
The London Blitz reached its nadir with the bombing of the City of London and the area around its most beloved landmark, St. Paul’s Cathedral.
John Watson and Sherlock Holmes meet as the flames blaze and roar all around them. But who is that dark-haired young man and why is he risking his life in such a careless manner? This is what Doctor Watson is wondering, as he eventually becomes enmeshed in a mystery that will take him away from his dreary, hopeless life and plunge him into the secret life of wartime London.

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“But now, since the silence will not rise and surround us,
Leaving us wondering about ourselves, looking each to the other,
Sketching the gesture that will finish with consummation,
We shall not know what meaning was held by that dream.”
Memorial for 1940 – John Gould Fletcher
Notes

Note: First of all, May the Fourth be with you (couldn't resist)

Note 2: William Sansom and the song he and his mate are singing were in the film "Fires Were Started" by Humphrey Jennings.

Note 3: Paternoster is Latin for Our Father or Our Lord (in case of the Lord's Prayer)

Note 4: I have taken my description of that night from several books and from the documentary The Blitz: London's Longest Night

See the end of the work for more notes
End of the Year of Our Lord

“He already knew that life was largely illusion, that though wonderful things could happen, nevertheless as many disappointments came in compensation: and he knew, too, that life could offer a quality even worse - the probability that nothing would happen at all.”

― William Sansom (Writer and Auxiliary Fire Fighter during WWII)

John Watson was breathing ashes.

The very air felt singed and reeked of burning; the raw, brutal stench of bombing, the irritation caused by the powdered rubble of disintegrating masonry was nothing compared to the thick, cold smoke of continuing fire.

Shoe Lane was a towering inferno and, despite the heavy units, the trailer pumps and the intensified efforts of the AFS, soon there would be nothing left to save; the rapidly spreading flames were winning that unequal battle.

It had started just after the black-out sirens had sounded, with the anti-aircraft guns firing and a clatter like that of trays of tin cans, after which thousands of fluorescent lights had burst like spectacular fireworks; deadly and dangerous, they foretold the advent of the HE bombs, the 500 pounds explosives that shattered into deadly fragments after their powerful blast.

John wasn’t a fire auxiliary, only a modest ARP warden; he’d been patrolling the Aldwych area when a pink and orange cloud had risen above the imposing Victorian buildings. Disregarding his lack of fire-fighting expertise and his injured shoulder, he’d ran towards the danger and used his tin hat and the sand bucket he’d collected along the way to put out as many incendiaries as he could.

He’d been so wrapped up in his task that he’d not paid attention to the raging hurricane of fire that was enveloping the Square Mile, edging closer to the beloved dome of St. Paul’s. Close to it was Paternoster Row and its warehouses and shops filled with books; paper that would burn as easily and quickly as patches of weed.

His eyes and nose were running, so he wiped his face on the back of his grimy hand, and he couldn’t quite believe his ears when he heard the notes of the famous children’s counting rhyme: “One man went to mow, went to mow a meadow, one man and his dog, went to mow a meadow. Two man went to mow, went to mow a meadow,” sang by two young men who were sitting inside a sort of makeshift landau, a pump and hoses hitched to the back of it.

“Get out of here, mate; them walls won’t hold for much longer,” one of them said, as he quickly jumped off his vehicle and hastened to attach the pump to a street hydrant. His friend was unfolding the hoses and whistling the rest of the tune under his breath.

“Bill, down!” the pump man suddenly shouted; the three men ducked just in time to avoid the incendiary that fell from the sky; it shook and fizzled then shone its greenish lights that would have started yet more fires had not John being quick at smothering the device with his tin-hat.

“Bastards!” he shouted, as he stamped on the devilish tube with his thick-soled rubber boots.
“Sorry,” he added, as the one of the men rushed to help him out.

“Quite alright,” he replied, smiling. “William Sansom, Bill,” he said, shaking John’s hand; “And the rascal over there is my brother-in-arms, Leonard Rosoman.”

“John Watson,” the ARP warden returned the smile and clapped a hand on Sansom’s shoulder. “Better let you get on with it.”

The tall, long-faced fire-fighter nodded and, seemingly realising John’s discomfiture, he said: “We have been told St. Paul’s in a really pickle; they can use all the help they can get.”

“Best of luck,” Watson replied and waving a hand in Rosoman’s direction, he walked through the ruins, past Fleet Street and down Ludgate Hill.

Even the avalanche of fire that was Shoe Lane had not prepared him from the spectacle of Paternoster Row: the buildings were ablaze in such a sea of violent orange light it almost looked like a summer noon; the water that was being pumped and poured over the raging flames did not seem to have the least quenching effect.

A handful of wardens were digging through the rubble, trying to salvage what they could while others were tending to the injured.

Watson was on his way to join the latter group when he heard a noise, akin to a wail, coming from the innards of what once had been Trubner & Co.

The magnificent premises of the famous publishers had been gutted by HE devices, but portions of the lower storeys were still standing, even though they were rapidly being devoured by the fire. Clenching his jaw and trying to see through the tears streaming from his reddened eyes, John kicked the singed door down and jumped on it to make sure it wouldn’t turn into an oversized torch.

“Is anyone there? Can you hear me?” he shouted, but no reply came, except for a furious scuttling, as if a congregation of sewage rats had been demolishing a well-stocked pantry. Rats wouldn’t stay and be roasted, he thought. Looters then, he concluded, and the blood went to his head. The criminals and low-lives who took advantage of this terrible war to make an easy profit were worse than vermin, he thought.

“I’m coming to get you, damn scoundrels!”

He forgot his tiredness, the sharp ache in his shoulder, as the blood sang in his ears at the approaching danger. A jagged piece of masonry lay on the grimy floor; he seized it and, brandishing it like a club, he approached the source of the noise.

If the man was a spiv or a wide-boy, he certainly didn’t look the part: he wore neither pinstripe suit nor trilby hat; at first sight, he appeared to be a young man of eccentric appearance: black curls worn unfashionably long, an oversized dark coat, and a striking, angular face with prominent cheek-bones and slanted eyes. He was clutching a pile of volumes to his chest, while the shelf from which he’d extracted them was being attacked by the blaze.

“What the hell do you think you are doing?” Watson screamed, as he approached the lunatic and removed the scarf from his neck with one sharp tug. Nothing more dangerous than a dangling piece of flammable material, he thought, cursing the stranger’s dearth of common sense. The man turned and glared at him, but did not desist from his dangerous mission.
“Right,” John said, and without further ado, grabbed the man by the waist and pulled him away from his prize. Underneath his bulky garments, he was as slender as a school-girl. He had a temper to match and tried to struggle, but he was no match for the heftier ARP warden.

“You have to let me,” he begged, once it was clear he wasn’t going to overpower his opponent. “You couldn’t possibly understand, but that’s the First Edition of the Drömboken.”

John had never heard of any such publication, but it was clear to him that if they didn’t get out in the next minute, they would share the books’ fate.

“Either you follow me or I will have to carry you out,” he said, staring the man in the eye to convince him of his seriousness.

“Blasted nuisance,” the stranger muttered, but he followed John all the same. The air was a soup of acrid smoke and ashes and by the time they were out on the pavement, the frosty air felt like a balm on their over-heated skins.

“What possessed you to come here at this hour? Don’t you know about the blackout?” Watson chided, but the man wasn’t paying him any mind; he was caressing the books like they were the only things that mattered to him. John should have found this infuriating, but he was unwittingly amused.

“De Rerum Natura, one of the oldest editions ever to survive outside of a Museum, and it was about to be incinerated,” the man explained, in a gravelly voice that was shot through with the grit of a thousand cigarettes; a plummy tone that spoke of public schools, manicured green lawns and cream teas at the Savoy. A posh boy, thought John, with a mixture of sneering contempt and bitter desire.

“Sherlock Holmes,” the toff went on, “I apologise for putting your life at risk.”

In the vivid light, his eyes shone like sterling silver and his oddly-shaped lips quirked into a half-smile.

“John Watson,” the warden replied, returning the smile and barely refraining from inspecting the younger man’s body for eventual injuries.

“Doctor Watson, to be precise,” Holmes countered and, enjoying his saviour’s surprise, he recited, “You were giving me the once over like a physician would, your fingers have the deftness and suppleness associated with your profession. Yet you are not taking active part in the war which suggests an injury, but one that does not allow you to pursue your profession here; since your hands are unaffected, it must be either arms or shoulders; probably a tremor of moderate gravity; you could still practice, but not surgery, which is your speciality. Since you are enraged with life, you think nothing of risking it every night. Fire-fighting is also out of the question because of the nature of your wound, so what better way of courting death than patrolling the streets at night while the Luftwaffe do their darnedest to raze us to the ground?”

Around them, the battle for the ruination of the City was still raging; the noise was deafening and yet for a moment John thought the world had suddenly ground to a halt: that tall, lanky youth seemed to know him so well; his eyes - like a bodkin - had sliced him open and made an inventory of his present predicament; once again, he realised he was not angry but rather intrigued.

“How did you guess?” he asked, as Holmes extracted a crumpled packet of Caporals from his jacket’s breast pocket.
“I never guess,” the young man replied, lighting two cigarettes with one match. “I observe that’s all; did I get anything wrong?” he asked, and John thought he discerned a note of insecurity vibrating through the nonchalance; for some reason, he didn’t like that, so he was quick to reassure him.

“No, you were right on all accounts. Quite depressing isn’t it? The Hun is destroying Europe and I’m absolutely useless,” he replied, puffing on the cigarette Holmes had offered him. “What about you? You seem fit enough, although you could do with a bit more meat on those bones.”

“Food is an unnecessary distraction,” Holmes declared with a flourish of his pale, elegant hand, “Besides, it only slows me down. As for this war, it’s a long story, but let’s just say that my presence is needed here.”

He’s said war with a scowl worthy of a disgruntled dowager faced with the prospect of music and dancing.

“I would like to know more, but I should go back,” John started, but was rudely interrupted by the clatter of yet more incendiaries; they fell down by the entrance of the building they had exited and their fire went to feed the ones already lapping up the crumbling walls: in a matter of moments, the place where he and Sherlock had been was a collapsing furnace.

“If it hadn’t been for you,” the youth murmured, and unbidden, he took John’s hand in his and held it tight enough to hurt.

“I’ll just leave the books in the crypt then I’ll come and find you,” Sherlock said, even though he was starting to doubt his own sanity.

He’d been on his way back from the offices of the Daily Mail in Tudor Street – a deuced waste of time if you asked him – when the blackout sirens had sung their plangent melody.

Not for him to stay put or seek refuge inside a shelter: instead, he had braved the bombs and walked towards Charing Cross; his progress had been interrupted by the sudden vision in his mind of the entirety of Paternoster Row being burnt to a crisp, its precious contents forever lost to humanity.

At twenty, he was by all accounts still in the first bloom of youth, but he had been called heartless, cold and calculating more times than he cared to remember; it wasn’t unusual that he would suffer more for an object or an idea rather than for flesh and blood, unless that flesh and blood proved worthy of his attention.

Human beings alternatively bored or annoyed him, at least when alive and devoid of criminal intent.

John Watson did not seem special: he was a plain and honest man – of this Sherlock was sure – yet there was something about the doctor that tickled his fancy. It wasn’t that he’d saved him, nothing that pedestrian, even though he’d allowed the pathos of that moment to tarnish his sangfroid.

Emotions, he shivered at the memory of his hand in John’s strong and calloused one. He banished the image from his thoughts, shaking his dusty curls left and right, like a wet dog after a bath.

Watson had intimated that he would go help the men at St. Paul’s, since there would be plenty of fires to be put out up on the dome. Usually, they had a set number of volunteer fire-fighters and wardens, but on that particular night the emergency was so severe that they would surely welcome...
an extra pair of hands.

“I can come and help, too,” he’d said, the words rushing out of his mouth before he could stop them. John had frowned, and this time he had checked him for injuries, inspecting Sherlock’s scalp and the back of his neck. The young man had quite enjoyed being thus manhandled even though he pretended to remonstrate against it.

“You’re sure you’re up to it?” asked the doctor, eyeing his new friend’s rake-thin torso and his sunken cheeks.

“I am in tip-top shape,” he’d sniffed, nose twitching proudly, “I even fence, occasionally,” he added, unaware of the hilarious connotations of that remark. John’s blackened face was transformed as he surrendered to laughter: his blue eyes shone brighter and his mouth relaxed into a dazzling smile. Sherlock couldn’t help joining in; he didn’t even try and resist it.

“Come on, D’Artagnan,” John had said, eyeing the young man with something akin to fondness, “Let’s go fight the enemy.”

Walter Matthews, the Dean of St. Paul’s had the haunted, hollow-eyed look of a man who had not slept for weeks.

“Gentlemen,” he said, running towards them, but unable to stop his gaze from darting upwards. Sherlock suspected the prelate wasn’t even aware of his nervous tick, too exhausted to fully realise what his body was doing.

He directed them towards the labyrinthine path that led up to the dome, and it was at that point that Holmes suggested he should first dispose of his precious cargo.

John nodded and followed another ARP warden up the steep and narrow passage.

Once on the roof, he contemplated the skyline with a heavy heart, but could not suppress a measure of dazed wonder. London was in tatters, broken and hurt, but it wasn’t going out without a fight; its people were resisting the attacks on their homes and lives not merely with weapons but also with their decency, sense of humour and fortitude.

“Magnificent show, isn’t it?” a deep, cultured voice murmured in his ear. John nodded and for a moment he felt almost hypnotised by the combined power of the landscape in front of him and the warmth of Sherlock’s body at his side.

“Terrifying,” he replied, ambiguously. “There’s work to be done, Holmes,” he added, stamping on the remains of a charred piece of wood.

“The game is afoot!” exclaimed the young man, and with a swish of his long coat, he started to dispose of the remains of the exploded devices that littered the rim of the dome.

“Hardly a game,” mumbled John, but as he got down to work he couldn’t help grinning a little. Life had shed some of its dreariness and in all sincerity he could not but welcome this newfound sense of purpose.

“There’s hot tea for everybody in the crypt,” the Dean said, his careworn face lit by a timid smile.
The all-clear siren was still sounding, and the dawn of a new day, a cold, grey morning, released them from their exhausting duties.

John was covered in grime; he’d never felt so grubby in his life; what made it worse was the fact that Sherlock, tangled curls aside, looked almost pristine.

He was about to ask him how he’d managed it when the youth offered him a cigarette, saying, as he lighted it:

“You need a good scrub and a hot meal,” he took the cup that the Dean’s wife had set in front of him and sipped the scolding hot drink.

“Yeah,” Watson replied, thinking of his dingy rooms with its spartan furnishings and cold fireplaces. Rationing wasn’t doing much for his morale or for his wounded shoulder.

“I have more food than I can eat,” Holmes continued, avoiding his companion’s gaze, as if afraid his directness would spook the older man.

“Oh, I don’t doubt that!”

“And I need help carrying those books.”

“I thought you were in tip-top shape. Where are your digs?”

“Baker Street, near Regent's Park”

“Badly hit back in September.”

“Yes, I was one of the lucky few. What about you, where do you live?”

“Can’t you observe it?” John asked, with a grin that his companion found irresistible.

They’d finished their drinks and were slowly emerging from the cathedral into the livid, acrid air. They were faced with a spectacle of destruction, of a desolation so wretched as to be even divested of the noble robes of tragedy.

“Camden Town,” John murmured, closing his eyes for a brief moment.

“We are practically neighbours,” Sherlock observed, “Park neighbours.”

It was evident to the doctor that his young friend was trying to distract him from the depressing sight that had greeted them.

“I shall be immensely glad to see the back of this awful year,” John sighed.

“Not long to go,” agreed the young man, “We should celebrate.”

“A hot bath will do for me, thanks very much.”

It was Sherlock’s turn to grin.

“We could take the tube at Charing Cross,” he suggested.

“Here, let me help,” the doctor said, plucking a couple of volumes from Sherlock’s grasp. “So you speak Latin and French,” he continued, noting the title of one of the books.
“The Méthode de Nomenclature Chimique is a text of paramount importance, as I am sure you know.”

“You just said it so that I could hear your impeccable accent,” John said, barely containing a smile.

“Hardly impeccable,” murmured Sherlock whose cheeks, despite his most valiant efforts, had coloured a fetching shade of rose.
The Blackout Ripper

Chapter Summary

Sherlock takes John to Baker Street and tells him about his latest case.

Chapter Notes

Note: The Blackout Ripper was a British spree killer, convicted for the killing of 4 women in London over a six-day period in February 1942. I tampered with the facts and the dates.

Note 2: Room 40, also known as 40 O.B. (Old Building) was the section in the British Admiralty most identified with the British cryptanalysis effort during the First World War. Later it became Bletchley Park.

Note 3: The EMS was a centralised state-run Emergency Hospital Service (also known as the Emergency Medical Service, which was strictly speaking the medical staff of the service) which employed doctors and nurses to care for those injured by enemy action.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I suppose we were worn down and shivering. These things were an every-night nonentity. They happened and they were not forgotten because they were not even remembered.”

William Sansom

“Not again! Oh, Sherlock!”

The petite, tweed-clad elderly lady exclaimed, as soon as the two men set foot inside 221b Baker Street.

It was as if she’d been waiting for them, or at least for the tenant of the flat above hers: the tone of her voice expressed worry and exasperation, but also intense affection.

She shook her head several times and, after having thoroughly examined the newcomer, she greeted him with an approving smile.

“I suppose I should thank you for bringing him home in one piece,” she said.

“This is Mrs Hudson, my landlady,” the young man explained. “This is Doctor John Watson. He saved my life.”
There was a pride in that last statement, and a touch of defiance.

“This boy will be the death of me, doctor.”

“John will do, madam,” the man said. “A handful, isn’t he?”

His companion sniffed audibly and the landlady heaved a sonorous sigh.

“You don’t know the half of it! But don’t let me keep you here, you look all done in. There’s a hot bath waiting for you upstairs; fresh tea and a bite to eat, too,” she added, looking pointedly at Sherlock’s concave stomach.

“It’s extremely generous of you,” the older man remarked.

“Oh, that’s the least I can do,” she replied, briskly, “Knitting is not quite as satisfactory as taking care of those who keep us safe.”

“If we are quite done with the pleasantries,” the young man said, and if John was struck by his rudeness, the woman seemed unperturbed.

“It gets worse,” she murmured, and went back to her flat, muttering to herself.

“She’s a dear,” Watson remarked.

“Don’t be taken in by her delicate appearance,” Sherlock said, “Beneath that Victorian primness lies a core of pure steel. She would stab you with a knitting needle if she so much as suspected you of being a German spy.”

Somehow, John was certain that would indeed be the case.

The upstairs flat was a perfect expression of its lodger’s peculiarities: untidy, crammed to the rafters with disparate objects, but also endowed with a singular sort of beauty, one that was both unsettling and unforgettable.

The vast living room was warm and scarcely illuminated by a Bauhaus table lamp; the damasked Victorian wallpaper was here and there marred by a hole or a tear, the shabby Persian rug and leather armchairs were exquisite albeit well-worn; piles of books, magazines and papers cluttered the shelves of a tall walnut bookcase and the surface of the mahogany desk. A skull took pride of place on the mantelpiece of the cavernous fireplace, flanked by a quantity of flasks, rocks and exotic weaponry.

A carriage clock of burnished brass served as support for a small stuffed owl, whose eyes, by some clever trick, appeared to follow one around the room.

“You clock is wrong,” John said, feeling under observation.

“A bomb went off next to it, so it stopped working.”

“You should have it fixed.”

“I’m not interested in knowing the time,” replied the youth, impatiently. “It’s a keepsake, from a case.”

“You work for the Police.”
“Not for them…” he scoffed then added, more gently: “You should take that bath; I can’t tell the colour of your hair for all the grime on it.”

“Very kind of you to not mention the way I smell.”

“Can’t say I noticed,” murmured Sherlock, looking away.

There was a moment’s silence, which John couldn’t fill with a witty repartee as he had lost all his words. The owl was obviously glorying in their momentary impasse.

“The wash-room,” the doctor suggested, and, without uttering a word, the young man led him to it.

“Thanks for that, I feel like a new-born man. Hair’s blond, in case you’re still wondering,” the doctor said, happily sipping a strong cup of English Breakfast.

“So I observed,” scoffed Sherlock.

The youth had had a quick wash in his rooms and was now wearing a turquoise dressing gown made of heavy shantung.

They were sitting at the kitchen table, on which lay a large platter with bacon, eggs and toast. A luscious square of butter was sweating on a saucer next to a jar of thick cut orange marmalade.

“Either you saved a mountain of coupons or you’re hiding something unsavoury,” the doctor commented, as he gazed greedily at the banquet.

“Nothing of the sort,” replied Sherlock, spreading a dollop of marmalade on a wafer-thin slice of bread. “My brother works for the Government.”

“I thought they would be even tougher with their own.”

“It’s all above-board, don’t worry.”

“So, what is it that you do exactly? You said you don’t work for the Police, but you spoke of a case. How young are you, eighteen?”

“Twenty,” the boy huffed, swallowing a mouthful of black tea. “They call me when they are out of their depth; which is fairly often. I’m a consulting detective, the only one in the world; I invented the job.”

“Course you did,” grinned John. “Well, Holmes, care to tell me what you were doing out in the City past your bedtime?”

“I would prefer if you’d call me Sherlock; last names remind me of Harrow, a place I ardently wish to forget. I was at the Mail’s offices, trying to find some information about a photo they published in connection with the Blackout Ripper case. Unfortunately, they did not know who sent it to them, which is extremely unprofessional and more than a little annoying.”

“What do you expect from a rag that supports the likes of Mosley and Hitler? But why bother with the Ripper? I thought they got their man… Cummins, wasn’t it, and hanged him at Wandsworth prison last month.”

“They did get a man…”
“Wait, if I remember correctly, he left his gas mask which had his service number on it and they identified him from his billet pass book; he also left his fingerprints on the scene of one of the crimes.”

“At the Blandford Hotel, where Greta Hayward was killed, yes, you’re indeed right.”

“But you don’t think these are conclusive proofs.”

“He always maintained he was innocent and that he was being treated as a scapegoat.”

“People tend to say anything when faced with certain death. Eat your eggs,” John said, in a martial tone that brooked no dissent.

The detective opened his mouth to utter a scathing retort but no sounds were produced by his treacherous vocal cords. He gave up and ate a forkful of bacon, just to prove that he could still put up a token resistance.

“The Blandford was already being investigated.”

“Security Services?” the blond man whispered.

“No need to do that,” smiled Sherlock. “This room is not under surveillance; at least I hope it isn’t; with Mycroft, it’s hard to know for sure. My brother,” he explained, with a dyspeptic scowl.

“I see,” said John, whose heart was brimming with excitement at the prospect of working with Section 5. “I thought you might be employed by Room 40.”

“It’s no longer called that; now it’s…”

“Don’t tell me, or you will have to kill me,” the doctor quipped.

“And I have only just met you,” concurred Sherlock. He immediately realised what he had just implied and a fierce blush spread from his throat up to his cheeks. While same sex relationships were no longer against the law, he had no experience in these matters and was vaguely aware that many people were still unhappy about showing their true colours for fear of being shunned or worse.

“Must have been my lucky night,” said John, looking his young friend in the eye, thus quashing his doubts. In truth, he had not thought about sentimental relationships in a long time. After a brief marriage to his school sweet-heart, Mary - who had died of pneumonia during the perishing cold winter of 1938 - he had immersed himself in his work, giving it his heart and soul. He’d always known that he was also attracted to men, but he’d only had brief dalliances in Soho clubs such as the Crown or the Golden Lion. He’d found intense physical pleasure but nothing more. He didn’t know whether he had a type, but if he did, Sherlock wouldn’t be it, because he was sure that the black-haired boy was no serial-manufactured item, but rather a unique creature, a quirk, a splendid oddity.

The current of sensuality that passed between them electrified them both, producing such a startling effect on Sherlock - who had never felt anything like it in his life - that he polished off his plate without noticing until he was done.

“Here… have some more tea,” John said, pouring the hot drink into the Wedgwood cup.

“I would like to know why a man who lives in Camden Town was patrolling an area so far from his lodgings,” the detective asked, a little hoarsely. “And before you say it, yes, I could observe it,
“I have nothing to hide,” the doctor replied, with a tight smile. “I work at the EMS section IV in Hampstead, the one that used to be the General Hospital until 1939. Before that, I was at the Royal Free in Holborn; I lived there too. I was hit by a HE blast last September; nothing to show for it, except my shoulder was a mess and I’m left with an intermittent tremor that rules me out of the operating theatre and prevents me from serving my country. At twenty-eight, I’m already an invalid: a darned disgrace, but mustn’t grumble and all that. I couldn’t stay on after what happened, so I moved to North London, a fresh start, new colleagues: the lot.”

“But you can’t let go, not completely.”

“I figured that I could be in both places, if I could keep my warden’s post.”

“Doctor by day and hero by night,” said Sherlock, aiming for sardonic but falling well short of it.

“Still not as glamorous as a detective and spy,” replied John, stifling a yawn. The warmth of the flat and the onset of digestion were doing their work on his over-tired body. “I should be going. If I walk through the park, I’ll breathe some clean air. I still feel a bit… smoked.”

“You could sleep here… I have a spare room upstairs. It’s quiet and Mrs Hudson changes the sheets every week, Lord knows why,” Sherlock said. He was babbling, which was another novelty. Too many unwarranted emotions, he thought, with a vexation that bordered on ferocity.

“I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you. You must have things to do, secret plots to unravel,” the blond man replied, and this time the yawn couldn’t be suppressed. The idea of putting his boots on filled him with dismay, but at least it was Sunday and he could kip for the rest of the day and night.

“No inconvenience, I assure you. I do play the violin sometimes, but only when faced with a particular thorny conundrum.”

“Well, at least it isn’t the trumpet; that might put me off my stride,” John said, “Who am I kidding? Bert Ambrose and his orchestra couldn’t wake me when I am under: I sleep like the dead.”

Sherlock hadn’t the least idea who Bert Ambrose was, but he suspected it wouldn’t matter if he did.

“The trumpet is not conducive to reflection,” he replied solemnly, which had John in a fit of giggles. If only Sherlock could understand what made the older man laugh, he felt sure he wouldn’t mind devoting himself to the task with some consistency.

“Shall I show you to the room?” he asked, trying to sound unconcerned.

“All right,” John said, rubbing his reddened eyes, “I suspect I will be out as soon as I touch the mattress.”

And so it came to pass.

“And he insisted he was the son of Viscount Tremayne, which is utter bunkum since the old darling is a confirmed bachelor, as they used to say. I heard his confession in the nick and he had a trick of lowering his voice when he was lying. I told Lestrade but he wouldn’t listen. Not that he could have done much, not with all the odds stacked against the poor wretch, but I still think he should have paid more attention to the psychology of the case. Anyway, as I was saying… he was
lying, but there was a rehearsed quality to his voice, so he must have been coached by someone behind the scenes. He paid his victims five pounds each, which is vastly above the going rate for ladies of that profession. Not that I would know personally, of course. All the same, a RAF cadet of modest means like Cummins would not have been capable of squandering money in such carefree fashion. Somebody was paying him and that ruffian is still on the loose. That picture seemed to indicate that Cummins had an alibi for the time Greta Hayward was murdered, which begs the question: why didn’t he speak? Why did he allow judge and jury to condemn him to death?”

John emerged from his slumber with the odd sensation of being in a confessional. He was not a religious man and he had been brought up as a reluctant member of the Church of England. Besides, he wasn’t talking, so the person, whomever they were, must be under the misconception that John was a priest. He awakened fully, only to find Sherlock sitting at the foot of the bed, lost in a soliloquy which he was reciting with gusto and theatrical flair.

“Oh John, my sincerest apologies if I woke you,” the detective said, seeming genuinely contrite. “I was under the misapprehension that you were a heavy sleeper.”

“And you intended that I should be asleep while you were talking?”

“It helps my concentration,” Sherlock explained, “I usually talk to Maggers… that’s my skull… the skull of my grandfather’s butler. He was a sterling chap, deaf as a post, but he could guess what you were thinking even before it had crossed your mind. He taught me a lot about observing people. When he died, I decided I would keep him around. He’d have loved that.”

“If you say so,” John replied, wondering whether he was still dreaming and if perhaps he had been ever since he’d entered that warehouse in Paternoster Row. “What time is it?”

“Afternoon, late, irrelevant” the detective mumbled. “I have no idea.”

“Let me get my watch.”

It was gone five. Aside from the obvious absurdity of the present situation, John felt more refreshed than he’d been a while. His wound wasn’t as painful, only a bearable throb. He looked down at his hand and realised that the tremor had been absent since the previous night.

“Mrs Hudson has prepared something for us,” said the young man, sniffing the air. “Fruit scones, I believe. She must know you’re still here; probably keeping an eye on the front door.”

“Did I help with your deductions then?” John asked, as he followed his friend down the stairs. He hadn’t undressed and his shirt was crumpled, but for once he wasn’t fussed by it.

“Maybe,” replied Sherlock, brushing a hand through his already dishevelled hair. “The fact is that I didn’t have enough time to look into this case: the murders were too close together and when Cummins was arrested, the evidence was so damning that Scotland Yard did not stop to consider any alternative solution. The only reason I was involved in the investigation was because of the connection with the Blandford Hotel. My brother expressly told me to stay away and I could not resist.”

“You always do the opposite of what he says?”

“You would too, if you knew him. By the way, I’m pretty sure he already knows about you, so I advise you to be vigilant. He’s an obnoxious busybody, with a rapidly expanding waist and a
John laughed with abandon, a sound that kept delighting Sherlock, no matter how many time he heard it.

The detective extracted a silver case from the pocket of his dressing gown and plucked two thin cigarettes from it.

“Black Cat,” the doctor said, observing the slim sticks with unconcealed delight.

“I know a chap who works at the Arcadia; when I say know… I helped him arrest a smuggler, so he keeps me well stocked.”

“You had Caporals earlier…”

“I pinched them from a desk at the Mail’s offices.”

“I don’t usually advocate theft, but in this case…”

They sat by the fire, smoking in companionable silence, until Sherlock resumed his train of thought with regards to the Cummins case.

“What compels me to search for the truth, aside from the certainty that I am right - since you should know that I never happen to be wrong - it’s the fact that he did not bother to produce an alibi for the night one of the victims were murdered. And I am sure he was elsewhere that night, although I can’t yet prove it.”

“He may have been guilty of the other crimes, but not of that particular one.”

“I don’t believe he was the killing sort; even his friends said as much. One of them, a chap named Sansom, insisted on this. He said he’d never met anyone meeker than Gordon Cummins; a bit of a fantasist perhaps, but a harmless one.”

“It doesn’t necessarily mean… what did you just say? What was the name of that friend?”


“Because I met him last night, before I came to your rescue. He’s with the AFS and was tackling the Shoe Lane fire. He was with another serviceman, Rosoman something or other. What a startling coincidence!”

“A perfect spot of luck, you mean. I wanted to talk to him, but he seemed like the sort of chap who wouldn’t open up to a stranger, not when there’s no longer a reason for it. But you, he may talk to.”

“We barely spoke a few words; he’s probably already forgotten me.”

“Impossible,” Sherlock said, and this time he braved John’s gaze and the look they exchanged was simmering with promise.
A New Face at The Door

Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock celebrate the end of the year in style. The flirting intensifies, but will the case come between them?
Also, enter Mycroft.

Chapter Notes

First of all, thanks to you guys for always being so lovely and supportive. Also, Vive la France!

Note: the Pink Sink was a renowned gay spot during WW2.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“His face is growing sharp and thin.
Alack! our friend is gone,
Close up his eyes: tie up his chin:
Step from the corpse, and let him in
That standeth there alone,
And waiteth at the door.
There’s a new foot on the floor, my friend,
And a new face at the door, my friend,
A new face at the door.”

The Death of The Old Year – Alfred Lord Tennyson

John was about to cross Park Road when a black Humber Pullman stopped right in front of him.

The passenger door opened and from the interior of the lugubrious limousine emerged a be-hatted man with a sallow face and a sour expression. He was dressed in a sombre attire and at first the doctor believed to be in the presence of an undertaker; that was until he saw that his gloved fingers were clasping the ivory handle of an umbrella.

“Mycroft Holmes, I believe,” he said and thought he perceived a glint of surprise in the man’s inscrutable eyes. It was gone before he could be certain.

“Doctor Watson, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” the elder Holmes said, with a tone that implied quite the contrary. “If you don’t mind, I would like to have a brief… chat.” It was obvious that he was trying to downgrade his vocabulary to what he believed was John’s level; the
blond man smiled, remembering Sherlock’s description of his older sibling.

“Provided you really keep it short; I have an early shift tomorrow.”

“I could give you a lift to your lodgings. And about that…”

“What about it?” he asked, irritation starting to bubble up inside him. “Thanks, but I’d rather walk. I enjoy the exercise; helps me stay trim.”

He could have sworn that the older man had sucked his stomach in.

“Please, come and sit inside the car. It’s warmer and more discreet.”

Judging that he’d better obey if he wanted the encounter to be over quickly, the doctor complied. A thick cashmere blanket was spread over the back seats and the air smelled of expensive tobacco and French cologne.

The chauffeur seemed far away behind a panel of frosted glass and, once the door was slammed shut, it was as if the war was a faraway, forgotten thing.

“Sherlock warned me about you.”

“I’m sure he was his usual charming self. You seem to have become, how shall I put it, extremely friendly over a short period of time. Is that what you usually do?”

“I don’t usually do anything. We met, I pulled him out of a burning building and he invited me home for a spot of breakfast: nothing out of the ordinary and certainly none of your business.”

“He’s never taken anyone home since the time he saved a hamster from the deadly attentions of our dog, Redbeard. He was nine; the poor animal died.”

“A charming story, but I still don’t see the point of this chat.”

“My brother thinks nothing of risking his own life to prove a point, but what he fails to fully realise is that we are at war and that this is not a game. Perhaps, you could suggest to him that he stays away from what doesn’t concern him.”

“Are you saying that I should tell him what to do?”

“We could maybe come to a mutually satisfactory arrangement…”

John had never felt the blood go to his head quite so rapidly.

“I really don’t think we could,” he replied through gritted teeth. “Now if you’ll excuse me…”

“You are very loyal, very quickly. Before you go, my dear Doctor Watson, let me give you a word of advice: should you decide to help my little brother in his imprudent quest, you may be forced to abandon your job, your volunteer post and even your home.”

“Are you threatening me?”

Mycroft Holmes smiled and shook his head.

“Far from it, doctor: I am merely predicting your future.”

“Well, maybe I need a holiday from my life,” John countered, bullishly. The older man seemed
amused.

“Considering that your tremor has disappeared since you met my little brother, perhaps that is indeed the case. How very unfortunate,” he declared, with a piteous sigh.

“How do you…? Oh, never mind! Goodbye, Mr. Holmes.”

“Till next time, doctor,” the man said offering him his hand; John shook it briefly then hurried out into the frigid air.

He spent the last day of that wretched year tending to the sick and the injured: the increasing number of civilian casualties was straining the seams of the hospital services; he was so busy that he didn’t have time to think of the events of the previous week-end. When he sat down to luncheon, a slap-dash affair consisting of vegetable stew and a lump of bread, the image of Sherlock in his dressing gown drinking tea and puffing on a cigarette seemed like the stuff that dreams were made of.

The evening descended on a bruised and scarred London and there was little of the excitement usually felt on that particular time of the year. Outside, it was a regular pea-souper: walking down Haverstock Hill, he could barely see the outline of Chalk Farm station. Along the way, he was struck anew by the desolate spectacle of gutted buildings and fallen houses; the vast, lunar-like craters that dotted the landscape emanated a silence that reeked of death. He wondered what Sherlock would be doing: whether he’d be sipping champagne at the Dorchester or chasing some criminal along the canals, dressed like a posh highwayman.

The last thing he’d have imagined was truth itself: when he inserted the key into the lock of his front door, he found it already open. Inside, the unmistakable smell of Black Cat tobacco was impregnating the humid air; a milky cloud of smoke greeted his entrance, together with a baritone voice that appeared to be half-way into an animated conversation.

“And I told Mrs Hudson you wouldn’t object to some poached salmon, even though you don’t seem like a fish sort of chap.”

Sherlock had taken full possession of the tiny sitting room, even starting a coal fire in the hearth, the richness of which mystified the doctor; he had brought with him a picnic hamper filled with all manner of delicacies, including three bottles of fine French champagne.

“How did you get in?” asked a befuddled John, as he removed his overcoat.

“I have my methods,” replied his friend, with a shy grin. “I hope I’m not intruding.”

“Wasn’t it precisely what you intended to do by breaking and entering?” the older man retorted, but his wide smile belied the harshness of his words.

“Mrs Hudson suggested you might need a pick-me-up after a long day at the hospital.”

“How very thoughtful of Mrs Hudson,” John said, staring the youth in the eye and licking his lower lip, “And what about the food?”

The same intense current of desire coursed through them and Sherlock suddenly realised how transparent his actions had been. He felt the sudden compulsion to run away, but his feet were pinned to the threadbare carpet. He was terrified and some of his panic must have been apparent, because his companion turned away and made a great show of looking at the contents of the
basket.

“Almonds, oranges, black chocolate: have you ransacked Fortnum and Mason? I feel like I have
suddenly landed into an Evelyn Waugh novel and that I should expect plover’s eggs for luncheon,”
he said, in a mock-posh voice.

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about, but if you’re suggesting I merely wanted to
show off,” the detective started, but was immediately rebuffed.

“No, it’s not at all what I’m suggesting,” he replied, softly. “I think that you are absolutely
marvellous and if you wait here until I’ve made myself presentable, I will be more than glad to
show you how grateful I am for this… for everything.”

He couldn’t help but gaze at the young man’s lips, which were slightly parted and bitten red.

“You appear to be unduly obsessed with ablutions and body odours,” Sherlock muttered, “I don’t
perceive anything wrong with your appearance, but I wouldn’t want to interfere.”

“Oh, I’m quite sure you’ll do that, eventually,” the doctor replied, and to himself he added. “And
I’m looking forward to the day.”

How they had ended up sitting on the floor by the fire, Sherlock could not exactly remember.

John had returned from his room wearing a grey flannel dressing gown over a pair of shapeless
woollen pyjama pants; his hair was still wet and his face was pink and freshly shaven. Sherlock
had felt overdressed, so he’d removed his jacket and undone the top button of his silvery-grey shirt.
The gesture had been like a tacit admission of what was happening between them; more than that,
the younger man had realised that he wanted to let go, to surrender: he felt as if the rope that had
kept him bound tight for years and years was rapidly fraying, bit by bit, until the barest tug would
snap it and set him free. He was breathless with elation and fear, but a part of him, the part that
looked on with cynical detachment, was slightly disgusted and incredulous at the swiftness of his
capitulation. He’d always scorned feelings and attachments and yet here he was, seeking the touch
of another human being, thirsty for it.

“You’ll regret it,” that voice said, in a tone suspiciously alike his brother’s “Alone is better, alone
protects you.”

But the undeniable truth of these statements was drowned by the pleasant warmth of the crackling
fire, by the intimacy of the setting, with the calico curtains shutting out the world and the bakelite
lamp providing minimal illumination.

By the third glass of Cordon Rouge, the voice in his head had completely dissolved, and so had the
salmon with sautéed potatoes.

“I met him,” said John, lighting a Caporal he’d taken from a wooden box on the mantelpiece. He’d
offered one to his friend, who’d said no, taken as he was by the strange pattern the shadows were
drawing on the skin of the blond man’s jaw and neck.

“Who?” asked the detective, distractedly; when John had thrown his head back, a drop of light had
pooled at the hollow of his throat. It was fascinating.

“You brother; you were right: he was carrying an umbrella, a pricey affair from what I could see.
He warned me against you, said something about your hamster.”
Sherlock groaned loudly.

“Did he offer you money to spy on me?”

“Not in so many words, but that was the gist of it, yes.”

“And you refused?”

“I wanted to punch him, but I remembered you said he works with section 5. He’d make me disappear and no one would ever find me. Not even you,” he said, poking Sherlock’s shoulder with two fingers.

He was on his merry way to tipsy, which always made him tactile if not downright amorous. Coffee, he thought vaguely, but he couldn’t face the prospect of leaving that cosy cocoon.

“That’s where you are mistaken, my dear sir,” mumbled the youth, his curls already reduced to a tangled nest; he had a way of scrubbing his hands through it when he was agitated or on the verge of an important discovery. “I am a veritable bloodhound; I never surrender until I’ve hunted down my prey. I’m indefatigable and indomitable.”

John nodded, surveying his friend with the admiration of the inebriated.

“Fighting words,” he commented, “And complicated.”

“Abstruse,” corrected the youth.

“Yeah, that too,” agreed John, pouring more champagne in both their glasses.

Sherlock stole the half-smoked cigarette from his friend’s mouth and took a rakish puff from it: he looked glorious, the doctor thought, feeling suddenly ravenous.

“What did your brother mean when he said that if I followed you, I should have to give up my job and my home?” he asked, to cause a distraction.

“He was being overly dramatic, histrionic, I should say,” replied the detective, delighted that he had thought of the right appellative. “Yes, that’s what he is. Although it is true that things could become dangerous. I hope that won’t put you off,” he added, blinking through a cloud of cigarette smoke. He had forgotten about the cigarette dangling from his lips, but John came to his rescue, like a knight on a white steed; he plucked the offending stub and threw it in the fire.

“Dangerous doesn’t bother me. In fact,” and again, John recalled what Mycroft had insinuated “It appears that it may help with my… injury.”

Sherlock nodded furiously, searching for the appropriate term.

“Therapeutic,” he exclaimed at last and John congratulated him by way of kissing the palm of his hand.

“Yes,” he moaned, and the young man felt it in the pit of his abdomen. He let his head fall on the blond man’s shoulder and every trouble fled from his mind.

They stayed like this, still and silent, for a long while.

Far away in the distance, someone was singing Auld Lang Syne.

“It must be close to midnight,” John whispered in Sherlock’s hair.
“Unimportant,” murmured the youth, afraid that the spell would break.

“Let me just get the bottle,” the doctor said, and with some difficulty he crawled towards the table. The clock on the mantelpiece said that it was two minutes to the New Year.

“Shall I switch on the radio?” he asked, indicating the cumbrous box on the cabinet by the window. “We could dance.”

“Dancing is not one of my many talents,” replied the detective, with a grimace.

“I could teach you, sometime,” he said, and returned to his friend, sitting down next to him.

“Here’s your glass, three, two, one, Happy New Year,” he exclaimed; Sherlock laughed and some champagne trickled down his chin.

“You silly old thing,” the doctor giggled, as he bent down to sip the liquid off the young man’s skin.

“I was going to drink it,” murmured the boy, his lips trembling a little.

“You still can,” husked the doctor, pressing his mouth to Sherlock’s, letting him taste the fizz of the champagne along with the caress of his tongue.

It was the sweetest, most perfect of touches, and it could have evolved into something more sensual if John hadn’t remembered that he was drunk and his friend quite certainly inexperienced.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to,” he said, caressing Sherlock’s flushed cheek. The boy’s eyes were closed and he was breathing hard through his nose. When he realised what was going on, he drew back as if he’d just been slapped.

“Of course, you don’t have to, not just because I’ve brought you food, I mean, gratitude and all that rot,” he said, buttoning up his shirt.

“No, what are you saying, no,” John remonstrated, staying the young man’s fingers. “It’s only that my head’s not all there and I want it to be, when we do, if we do.”

“Yes,” agreed the detective, staring down at the strong hand covering his. “When, not if.”

There was a brief, charged silence before a chorus erupted outside; people were singing for the sheer delight of being alive, of having survived months of air-raids, death and destruction.


“Yes, I have heard about it, but I never imagined you would want to be seen inside the pink sink.”

“I’ve never been there in my life, but I know that many RAF cadets and ASF servicemen spend their evenings there.”

“They start it there, but end it somewhere else entirely,” said John, arching his eyebrows suggestively, before understanding dawned on him. “Oh, you think Sansom is going to be there.”

“He’s been known to frequent the place,” admitted the detective. He still felt a bit dazed and he was certain that it wasn’t due to the alcohol.

“I haven’t the right clothes,” the doctor candidly admitted.
“No one will notice tonight. Mycroft’s name is well known there. At the Ritz, I mean, not the pink sink.”

“Imagine that,” said the John.

“I’d have to scrub my brain clean afterwards,” the young man quipped.

They both collapsed into raucous laughter, which forced them to sit back down. The arduous task of tending to their attires took some time, more wine and a few stealthy caresses. As they contemplated each other’s reflections in the mirror, the year that had just begun seemed infinitely more promising than the one they’d just kissed goodbye.

“We’ll never find a cab,” declared John, staring at the empty street. At least, the fog had lifted some, and it was now little more than a chilly haze.

“Didn’t I tell you about my many talents? One of them is the ability to always provide transportation, whatever the circumstances. Once, I got a bus ride in the midst of an air-raid. Bombs were raining down like confetti and down the street it came, the intrepid driver of the 25 to Barking.”

“Barking is what he was,” said John, “And you as well. Mrs Hudson was right; you’ll be the death of the people who care about you.”

“I need someone to keep an eye on me, she says.”

“Wise lady,” replied the doctor, his eyes going comically wide as he saw the black car driving down Baker Street. “How did you…?”

“I won’t disclose my secrets, not even under torture,” replied Sherlock, solemnly.

“We’ll see about that,” said the doctor, firmly pressing a hand against the small of the young man’s back to guide him inside the car. “I have my methods,” he murmured in the detective’s ear.

“Whereabouts, gents?” asked the driver.

“The Ritz, my dear chap, and there’s an extra fiver for you if you make it snappy.”

The Ritz below the Ritz was one of London’s choicest underground clubs, one with a deeply peculiar décor: sandbags packed the walls, kept in place by wooden props and naked metal struts; gently smutty graffiti adorned the woodwork; candles burned in the necks of wine bottles set on utility tablecloths. A candelabrum composed of more bottles cast light upon a modest dance floor. Behind the stage occupied by the band stretched a panoramic mural of the Western Front, circa 1914. On the wall of the adjoining bar, a painted Siegfried Line snaked past caricatures of Hitler and Goering.

And it was there, sporting a French-style beret and a striped foulard, that they found their quarry. He was sitting at the piano, playing a medley of Glenn Miller tunes.

As soon as his eyes met John’s, his mouth curved into a joyous smile.

“Watson,” he cried, above the din. “I thought we’d never meet again and there you are!”
Chapter End Notes

Next: Things kick off and Sherlock is a tiny bit jealous...just a smidgen.
Sherlock and John visit the Pink Sink and the gayest baths of wartime London.

Note: The Savoy Turkish baths had always had a bit of a gay reputation and it was there that Christopher Isherwood and WH Auden took the 24 year old Benjamin Britten in 1937. It was also there that Rock Hudson was arrested for improper behaviour in 1952, even though this fact became public knowledge only in 1985.

Note 2: The song Sansom is singing is entitled Scatter Brain and it was recorded in 1939 by the Bert Ambrose Orchestra.

Note 3: Edomie Johnson, a gifted shoplifter, was known in the Ritz Lower Bar as Sod Johnson, the buggers' Vera Lynn.

“Very pleasant sensation. Completely sensuous, but very healthy. It is extraordinary to find one’s resistance to anything gradually weakening.”

Composer Benjamin Britten talking about the Savoy Turkish Baths

I know I'll end up apoplectic
But there's nothing I can do
It's just the same as being in a hurricane
And though my life will be too hectic
I'm so much in love with you
Nothing else can matter
You're my darling scatterbrain.

“Come on, you must know how it goes!” Sansom shouted, inviting John to sing the next verse, which he did, after protesting a moment and to no avail. He nodded in Sherlock’s direction, but the detective scowled fiercely. While his voice was deep and full-bodied, he couldn’t hold a tune if his
life depended on it.

To his astonishment, the doctor displayed an unexpected vocal talent and his pleasant tenor voice joined the fire-fighter’s high pitched rendition of the spirited ditty:

*You’re as gay as New Year parties*

*You’re as sweet as sugarcane*

*But when you get serious, you’re such a scatterbrain*

*When we dance I think it’s heaven*

*Till about the third refrain*

*Then you start your patter, scatterbrain*

“My dears, my dears,” cooed a large-bosomed lady, dressed in shocking fluorescent pink and resembling a decommissioned battleship. Her eyes were round as a fish-bowl and as liquid, the lids painted black and periwinkle. She emanated a whiff of lazy summer afternoons spent in dark, musty rooms invaded by blue-bottles; when she opened her mouth to sing, her tongue darted out, fat and moist.

“And who do we have here?” she asked after the song ended, staring intently at Sherlock like he was some costly item she’d been asked to evaluate.

The bar was impossibly noisy, but the woman soon succeeded in finding a deserted corner with a velvet-upholstered divan illuminated by the iridescent light of a tiffany lamp.

“This is my little slice of heaven,” she explained. “They are such pets to keep a quiet spot for poor old Edomie. Are these your new friends?” she enquired of Sansom, much like a spider considering a cluster of flies.

“I met Watson the other night in Shoe Lane,” the man explained, regarding John with a warm gaze and an oblique smile which Sherlock found too familiar and, quite frankly, rather reprehensible.

“There wasn’t any time for proper introductions,” agreed the doctor. “John Watson,” he said, taking the woman’s plump hand and kissing the air just above it. “And this is my friend, Sherlock Holmes.” The detective gave a curt nod and the woman clucked amusedly, before grasping his hand and squeezing it tight.

“I have heard your name mentioned, dear boy,” she said, in an admiring, godmotherish manner. Before anyone could comment, a slender, young waiter brought them a bottle of gin, a bucket of ice and three glasses; it was evidently a well-oiled routine that contributed to the feeling that Edomie was an invaluable member of the Lower bar.

“Mr Holmes was involved in Gordon’s case,” explained Sansom, gazing at Sherlock with cold, speculative eyes.

“Not a successful intervention,” the woman remarked, plucking ice cubes from the bucket with a pair of silver tongs.
“Look here,” intervened John, colour mounting to his cheeks “The chap was guilty, as plain as day: his gas-mask, his fingerprints, his pass book number. He had no alibi and no plausible defence.”

“That boy was no more capable of murdering a woman in cold blood than I would be of working down a mine, and you know it,” she exclaimed, uncorking the bottle with a violent tug.

Sansom sighed and proceeded to serve himself and the other two men.

“Yes, Sod,” he agreed, and it was clear they’d already had that discussion already more than once. “But you also know that he wasn’t to be trusted. He invented stuff, like that story about the Count of something or other.”

“They used him, that’s what they did,” she insisted, tapping her chubby fingers against the glass, “They chewed him up and spat him out, poor soul.”

“What if he’d been turned?” Sherlock suggested. “From what I gathered, he was a suggestible man.”

“He wasn’t a traitor,” Sansom replied angrily, before gazing appealingly at John, with fine grey eyes. “I’m not sure that he wasn’t a bit dotty, if you take my meaning. But he meant well and he wasn’t violent.”

“What was he like, in his private life?” asked the doctor, hinting at the clientèle of the Pink Sink and their evident proclivities.

“Like many a young soldier, he liked variety,” replied the woman, her porcine eyes fixed on Sherlock. “But I have this idea that should he have fallen, it would have been hard and painful and lasting. You know the type I’m talking about, Mr Holmes?”

The detective felt like a mouse in the clutches of a garish python.

“I wouldn’t know,” he murmured, fingerling the rim of his glass. John felt a sudden jolt of sympathy for Cummins, as he would have loved to strangle that interfering hag.

“If you are quite finished,” he hissed, and stood up at once, meaning to go and take his friend with him. “We came here to celebrate, not to be given the third degree. Hell, we can’t even be sure we’ll be alive tomorrow!”

“Don’t you be upset now, my dear boy!” she pleaded and patted his arm in a calming gesture. “Anyway, the show must go on and it can’t if dear old Sod isn’t there, can it?”

Without waiting for a reply, she winked at Sansom and tottered towards the stage, her dainty spangly kitten heels barely supporting her considerable heft.

“She didn’t mean to offend you,” said the fire-fighter, “poor Sod.” He grinned at the pun, and John accepted the implied apology. Still, he wasn’t fully satisfied that Sherlock had been treated fairly.

“You must see that they had every reason to condemn your friend,” he insisted. “Not even God himself could have prevented it.”

“I don’t know about non-existent deities,” interjected Sherlock, whose eloquence was being lubricated by a second helping of gin, “But I could have cracked it, if they had called me in from the start. Inspector Lestrade was convinced he had the right man, which is more than enough to believe that it wasn’t the case.”
On the crowded stage, Edomie was crooning "We’ll meet again," helped by a feminine young man in a striped blouse opened down to his navel and leather jodhpurs. John stared and licked his lips, while Sherlock muttered something about Calvinism and total depravity.

“This place reminds me of a Weimar cabaret,” said Samson, addressing the detective in a friendlier manner. “I imagine Hitler would be disgusted if he knew what our soldiers get up to, when they are not fighting.”

“Defending our way of life is paramount,” replied Sherlock, “Losing this war is not an option worthy of consideration.”

“We should talk, but not here. Despite all appearances to the contrary, this is not merely a pick-up joint. Business deals are struck and not only of the carnal type.”

John was about to suggest Baker Street, but something in his friend’s expression stopped him dead.

“The Savoy Turkish Baths should be half-empty tonight, and they are just around the corner,” suggested Sansom.

“Just what the doctor ordered,” the detective concurred, with suspicious enthusiasm. The truth is that he wanted to inspect John’s wound and he couldn’t fathom a better occasion for doing precisely that without incurring the man’s displeasure.

William Sansom’s prediction had been accurate: once they’d paid their five bob each and been provided with towels, slippers and locker keys, they were directed to the changing rooms whose doors opened onto a deserted Frigidarium.

It was only then that Sherlock realised he’d overlooked the essential fact that he too would have to undress. Luckily, the towels provided were in fact bath sheets large enough to cover the entirety of his skinny body.

His companions were as modest as he, probably deterred from complete nudity by the low temperatures of the Frigidarium. Their attire was however scant enough for Sherlock to establish that John’s muscled torso was only rendered more attractive by the star-shaped wound that disfigured his left shoulder. Years at Harrow should have rendered him impervious to the lures of a naked male body, but he felt sure that he’d never properly considered them in a sensual light, but only as objects to be perused.

As for the other man, he was of a similar build to his own, albeit older and more sinewy, and if he didn’t find his body repulsive he was surely not attracted by it. But what if John preferred a more experienced, less awkward specimen? He brushed a hand through his curls, leaving them in total disarray.

“Let’s not waste any time,” Sansom said, sitting on the marble bench and stretching his long legs in front of him. He was joined by the two men, who sat close together.

“Like Watson here knows already, at night I volunteer at section A at the Davies Street sub-station, but during the day I work at Senate House, at the Ministry of Information. It’s mostly boring pen-pushing work, but at times we stumble upon something interesting. Now Cummins was on a list of names that I was given to archive. It was an oversight, I’m sure I wasn’t supposed to see it. After he was arrested, I went to consult the list and it was gone. When I asked my direct superior, he said that he knew nothing about it.”
“Do you recall any of the other names?” the detective enquired.

“That’s the trouble with this sort of larks, don’t you see? When one thing stands out the others somehow fade into the background,” the AFS man replied, clearly annoyed at his own forgetfulness. “I should have made a copy, but it was before the fact, and it seemed such a harmless list. I guess I imagined it to be a list of RAF cadets that had passed the selection programme at Regent’s Park Receiving Centre.

“Was the Centre mentioned on the list?” asked John.

“No, it was a blank sheet of paper with names on it. I just inferred it might have been related to that since at the time Gordon was about to terminate his three weeks’ training.”

“One should never infer,” chided the detective, who frequently did so himself.

“I know, don’t you think I am not berating myself about it every single day?” Sansom exclaimed, slamming a hand down on the cold stone. He immediately regretted it and, lowering his voice, he continued: “I think my work phone has been tapped and there are times when I could swear I’m being observed. Not all the time, as if they only wanted to warn me, if you see what I mean.”

“The Daily Mail recently published a photo of your friend. Behind him was the Victoria station’s clock. It marked 8:45, but it couldn’t be morning since a chap next to him was reading the Evening Standard. I looked at it closely with a magnifying lens and the date on the paper was the 5th November.”

“But that’s when Greta Hayward was killed! He couldn’t have been at the Blandford Hotel at 9 pm, if he was at Victoria only fifteen minutes before. Are you quite sure of the place?”

“My dear man, I assure you that I wouldn’t confuse the clock of one station for another; what a preposterous idea!” Sherlock replied, and he was so incensed that he allowed the edges of the towel to part slightly, showing a strip of milky white skin that John found tantalising. It was by following the man’s glassy gaze that he became aware of the mishap and if it hadn’t been for the presence of a third person, he would have not corrected it. As it was, he gathered the bath sheet closer to his chest and continued speaking in a more sedate tone.

“You can take my word for it, it was as I say. I was planning to inform Scotland Yard of this, but before that, I meant to find out the identity of the photographer. Alas, the Mail couldn’t help me, as they were sent the photo by post and since it was a good quality shot and free of charge, they thought nothing of using it. Are you a keen photographer, by any chance?”

The AFS man snorted.

“I’m a good with words, but as for my other artistic talents, I have none.”

“What about that chap who was with you the other night?”

“Leonard? Well, he’s a splendid draughtsman, but I have never seen him with a camera. But why would we...”

“I only wanted to be certain you weren’t involved in this stunt.”

“And why take my word for it? I could be lying,” Sansom said, and as he did so, he stood up, revealing the slope of his back which was brawnier than Sherlock had previously judged. He caught the doctor looking at it, not in a fixed manner, but in a clearly appreciative fashion, like one might contemplate the body of a Caravaggio nude. By comparison, his own scrawny, hairless chest...
was more similar to one of Cranach creations and had his detested sibling been present, he’d have scorned both his jealousy and the vacuity of his artistic pursuits.

“You could, but I should warn you against lying to me,” he huffed. “You’ll only make an enemy of me, and believe me that wouldn’t be a clever idea.”

“His brother works for the government; scary chap, the grim undertaker type,” explained John.

“Oh, yes, I know the sort: black car with darkened windows, top hat and Savile Row suits,” said the serviceman. “I don’t wish to attract more attention that I already have. I am a quiet soul and I prefer writing and singing to killing people, but I cannot let the death of an innocent man go unpunished.”

“Quite,” concurred the doctor. “Sherlock will do his best to find out the truth. And I will help him as much as I can. I am only a doctor, but if I can’t fight in the trenches, at least I can do my duty here at home.”

“Bad luck,” Sansom said, indicating the blond man’s shoulder. “How did that happen, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“HE bomb in Holborn, the darnedest piece of rotten luck; I was due to leave for France the following week.”

“You could still make it; this show is not going to end any time soon.”

Sherlock shuddered at the thought and decided it was time to bring the night to its conclusion.

“I will give you my card,” he declared imperiously, “Call me if you see or remember anything. No information should be exchanged on the phone or put down in writing. We’ll make an appointment and talk in a secure place. What’s the name of your superior?”

“Fellow named Lawn, Oliver Lawn: mousy, inoffensive chap, has been there since the start. We don’t do anything much apart from trying to raise morale of the British public and making sure people mind what they say and who they talk to.”

“Careless talk costs lives,” recited John.

“I devised that one; pretty nifty bit of work, if I say so myself.”

“I love the ‘keep it under your hat’ poster,” the doctor enthused, “Captures one’s imagination.”

“Doesn’t it just?” muttered the detective, shivering in a theatrical manner. At that very moment, a loud trio came in from the Tepidarium; they dripped with sweat and teased one another in clipped, drunken public school tones.

It was, indeed, time to leave.

“Where are you going?” asked Sherlock. They were alone outside Jermyn Street, Sansom having decided to walk home to his flat close to Hyde Park.

“Aldwych, hoping to catch the Kingsway tram to Camden. If I’m lucky, I’ll get a few hours’ kip before my evening shift.”

“Nonsense,” said the detective, hailing the cab that had mysteriously appeared from around the
corner of Duke Street. “Mrs Hudson said she would leave fresh coffee and omelettes in the kitchen.”

John decided that he didn’t have the strength to protest and, besides, the lure of a hot breakfast was too delicious to resist.

“What do think about our writer friend?” the detective asked, once they were inside the car, speeding towards Oxford Street.

“Seems a nice enough lad,” replied the doctor, “Deft piano player and can he hold a tune.”

“It’s not what I meant.”

“I know, I know,” teased John. “But it’s too late or too early and we haven’t yet celebrated the New Year.”

“How do you mean? We had champagne and salmon and the Ritz and… oh,” Sherlock was halted in his tracks, as a calloused hand caressed the side of his neck.

“Yes, oh,” husked the doctor, leaning closer to murmur in the detective’s ear. “My head is as clear as a bell and you smell delicious.”

“The towel was sprinkled with lavender, which means you’re probably been affected by it too,” the youth protested, feebly.

“Shut up and let me kiss you,” John whispered, and pressed his mouth to his friend’s throat. To his own disgust, Sherlock let out a moan and threw his head back, placing both hands on the doctor’s head and pulling him flush against his body.

“You taste even better,” muttered the older man, in between open-mouthed kisses. “Salty and with a hint of smoke and chocolate,” he hummed approvingly. “Let me try here,” he went on, lapping at the hollow of a collarbone. “I knew it, this is positively edible.”

“John,” gasped the youth, seeking his friend’s mouth, yearning for a more intimate connection.

“Not yet, dear,” replied the doctor, rubbing the pad of his thumb along the boy’s lower lip. “Let’s wait until we’re home. I won’t give you the first real kiss in public.”

“You didn’t seem to have any problem with the rest of it,” protested a supremely annoyed consulting detective.

“I say, mate, don’t you stop on my account. Been blind and deaf since I started on the job,” the driver informed them laconically.

“Not totally blind, I hope,” commented John, taking Sherlock’s hand in both of his and caressing it gently. “I can’t wait to get to Baker Street,” he whispered and the young man nodded, closing his eyes and listening to the soft hum of their combined breaths.
Chapter Summary

Sweet boys doing sweet things, so mind the tags ;)

Also, odd things start happening to our dear Doctor Watson...

“One can go back to one’s own home after a year’s absence and immediately the door closes it is as if one had never been away. Or one can go back after a few hours and everything is so changed that one is a stranger.”

The Ministry of Fear — Graham Greene

It wasn’t a long journey but by the end of it, Sherlock had worked himself up into a bit of a state, alternatively languid and agitated.

When they entered 221B, the building was unusually quiet and the detective remembered that Mrs Hudson had mentioned a friend she was planning to visit. Silently, they mounted the stairs and when the door closed behind them, the detective had decided he’d better confess his dearth of experience in all things sexual.

“John, I think you should,” he started, but was rudely interrupted.

“Kippers, as I live and breathe,” exclaimed the blond man. “Smoked kippers, to be precise; I can smell them from here.”

“Can’t see why anyone should get this excited about herrings,” grumbled the youth.

“Well, it was precisely what I wanted for breakfast,” explained John. “All the way from Piccadilly, that’s the only thing I cold think of: kippers.”

“Was it?” asked Sherlock, incredulous and more than a bit deflated.

“You clot, of course it wasn’t,” the older man laughed. “But you had the look of a hen just about to lay, so I thought I’d distract you.”

“A dirty trick,” chided the detective, but he allowed his friend to divest him of hat, overcoat and jacket. After he’d removed his own outer garments, John guided him towards the sitting room.

“Can’t kiss you standing up,” he explained. “You’re much too tall.”

“I think you will find that it is you, Doctor, who are too short.”

“I’d cut the cheek if I were you, my dear.”

“Or what?” asked the detective, trying to sound cocky, which was difficult as he was breathless and out of his depth.
“Or I’ll do this,” replied the doctor, pushing his companion until he collapsed on the sofa.

“Right where I wanted you,” John exclaimed, stepping back a little to observe the supine young man. With a devilish glint in his eye, he kneeled on the floor by his side and ducked his head until his lips touched the detective’s jaw.

“Perhaps I should have informed you that I have a partiality for freckles, like this one here,” he murmured, kissing the incriminated spot. “And this other one here,” he continued, pressing his lips above the arch of one thick eyebrow.

“Are you aware that when you are puzzled a line forms between your eyes? It’s absolutely maddening,” he stated, caressing the tiny wrinkle.

During all of that, Sherlock had remained silent, his mouth parted and his eyes closed. He felt like he had once when, giving chase to a criminal, the ruffian had pointed a gun to his throat: he’d been terrified, exhilarated and determined to enjoy the thrill of it to the very last second.

“You have such a lovely mouth,” he heard John say, “Fine lines, as if drawn by a copperplate pen. May I?” he asked and the detective emitted a strangled whimper.

This time he thought he would be prepared, but when John’s firm lips touched his, his entire body shook violently.

“Gently,” the doctor murmured, and proceeded to softly nibble and lick at his friend’s lips, until the kiss became a mutual endeavour.

“Let me,” John whispered after a while, and slid his tongue inside, caressing Sherlock’s timid one, tenderly at first, but with increasing impetus.

In time, the detective kissed back with the same enthusiasm, until he realised that it was infinitely more pleasurable if he allowed his lover to take the reins. Thus, he melted into the armrest of the settee, allowing John to ravish his mouth to both their hearts’ content. It was the most blissful of sensations, except for a nagging ache in his abdomen and between his legs. His companion must have felt a similar discomfort, because he came up for air, looking thoroughly dazed.

“We should stop now, before we go too far,” he panted. “As a matter of fact, I’m already half-way there. Can’t even look at you now,” he added, and closed his eyes to regain his composure.

“I don’t see any problem with going whichever way we wish to,” Sherlock complained, tugging at his friend’s shoulders, to pull him back down. “Unless you have other previous… commitments, that is.”

John laughed briefly, but he resisted the youth’s advances.

“The war is one big commitment, my dear,” he replied. “If my shoulder’s healed, I will be sent out to fight and about time too.”

“So you will go and forget all about me?”

The doctor caressed Sherlock’s face and neck and smiled like his heart would break.

“I couldn’t forget you if I lived to be a hundred. You are pretty memorable, you are,” he said, placing a light kiss on the bridge of the young man’s nose. “And as thin as a lamppost; come on, let’s go get some grub.”
“I’m not hungry,” the detective protested, but it was a feeble attempt, not helped by the fact that John was holding his hand and dragging him bodily towards the kitchen.

“Sit down; I’ll see what’s on the hot plate.”

“I won’t eat kippers,” declared Sherlock, curling his nose, “Beastly stuff.”

“That too proletarian for you, old bean? Only lobster and champagne are good enough for my Lord,” John quipped, as he filled a plate with bacon rashers and scrambled eggs and placed it on the table, pushing it towards his friend.

“I’ll have the kippers and the mushrooms, ta very much. How did you get hold of them, I wonder? No, don’t tell me; if they ever come to arrest me, I can always plead ignorance.”

“Mrs Hudson’s niece lives in the country,” explained the detective, who was almost ashamed of admitting to such trivial knowledge.

“Black coffee is really the nectar of the gods.”

“I think you’ll find that was ambrosia,” Sherlock argued, primly. “I usually take mine with plenty milk and two lumps of sugar.”

John’s mouth became a thin, white line and for the first time since they’d met, the detective felt chastened and a little unworthy, as if he’d attended Ascot in a soiled tweed two-piece.

“Black will suit me just fine,” he murmured, and started on his eggs with more zeal than appetite.

“I think Sansom’s story is sound,” the doctor declared, almost like he expected Sherlock to contradict him. “Maybe that list was about people considered unsafe by the Ministry for any number of reasons.”

“He’s a charming fellow, I suppose,” commented Sherlock, stabbing a piece of meat with his fork, “If you like the uncomplicated type.”

“I am that type,” retorted John, devouring his herrings with some ferocity.

“Not you, my dear,” exclaimed the youth, his eyes wide and filled with surprise. “What about that tremor you told me about? I haven’t seen any trace of it since we’ve been together. Must have been psychological rather than physical; and who knows what other fascinating riddles you are concealing.”

“You make it sound like I’m a cross between the Times crossword and a Bedlam inmate: an experiment, not a friend.”

The ferocity was now tinged with sarcasm and hurt.

“You’re being unfair,” replied the detective, his throat suddenly constricted.

“Perhaps I am,” said John, touching Sherlock’s hand with his. They exchanged tentative smiles, and the detective was so relieved, he let out the words he’d longed to speak since the previous night.

“You should come and stay here, at Baker Street. There’s room enough for two, and plenty of everything you might need. You could help me with my investigation and in return, you could save your coupons.”
Horrified, he saw that John was glaring at him, his face as dark as night.

“Are you proposing some sort of mercenary arrangement?” he growled. “I’ll have you know that while I may not swim in champagne, I manage all right. I am not your charity case, Sherlock.”

It was the detective’s turn to feel incensed.

“It must be hell to carry such a heavy load of self-loathing on your wretched shoulder,” he thundered, “No wonder it hurts so damn much!”

“I’m a rotten scoundrel, that’s what I am,” replied the doctor, gently. “I will think about your offer, I promise. Now, if you have a spare toothbrush, I’d love nothing better than to clean up a bit and take my forty winks.”

His sleep was not as tranquil and undisturbed as it had been the previous time: not only did he feel guilty for the way he’d treated Sherlock, but he was also beset by anxiety for the uncertain state of his health; the detective’s observations had struck a chord within him and upset the fragile structure of his scant convictions. In addition to all this turmoil, he fancied that he’d dreamt of the Ritz bar, but instead of Sansom playing the piano, he was being serenaded by the mournful strains of a violin.

He woke up in darkness, but when he checked his watch it was only a few minutes past four.

Time to go, he thought bitterly, and wouldn’t he have liked to be spared the trudge back to his gloomy lodgings.

Downstairs, the only light came from the sitting room’s hearth, so he went in there in the hope of finding his friend. The first thing that caught his attention was the crystal-topped table by the window, over which was an opened violin case containing the instrument that had obviously just been in use. The player himself was a sight worthy of a Pre-Raphaelite painting: sprawled on the divan, one bare forearm covering his eyes, his shantung dressing gown lay open to reveal a portion of his ivory white torso.

John moved closer and that was his mistake: had he contemplated that spectacle from a distance, maybe he would have been able to value it only for its artistic merits; as it was, his proximity to the youth brought into bas-relief the glossy quality of his curls, the fine slope of his cheekbone, but first and foremost, because the doctor was after all a carnal being, what captured and nearly hypnotised him was Sherlock’s uncovered chest. On the left-hand side, the fabric had slid down and a rosy, tight nipple was timidly peeping out of it: it was small, hairless and begging to be touched.

Just one kiss, he told himself, and fell down to his knees like a worshipper at the church of some ancient pagan deity.

When he pressed his lips to it, the musk of Sherlock’s skin undid him; he opened his mouth and teased the nub with the tip of his tongue.

The effect was immediate and startling: never one to awaken by degrees, the detective jolted as if electrified and pulled John’s head closer, inviting him to sample more of his body.

Time being in short supply, the doctor did not protest or dither, but did what felt right to him: he bit down on the tender skin and, simultaneously, pinched the other nipple between thumb and forefinger. The detective bowed his back and let out a hoarse scream.
“Too much?” asked John, his mouth breathing hot air on reddened skin.

“Don’t stop,” begged Sherlock, and splayed his thighs, which obtained the opposite result to what he was aiming for.

It had been so long since John had seen - let alone touched - another man’s erection that the craving for it socked him squarely in the solar plexus.

The detective’s manhood was nothing out of the ordinary: pink, barely post-pubescent in length and girth with pebble-smooth testicles to match; yet John wanted nothing more than have it, again and again. After an uneasy handful of moments had elapsed, Sherlock’s dejected voice echoed his observations.

“You must have had better,” he murmured. Despite his disappointment, his enthusiasm had not flagged and a trail of moisture was dripping from glans to abdomen.

“Shut up,” replied the doctor, in a hoarse tone. In a second, he decided what needed doing, and to hell with reason and caution. There would be other occasions, where he’d tend to his own pleasure too. This was Sherlock’s moment, and he would give him what he desired. Instinctively, he knew what that was; he’d gleaned it from the way the youth responded to orders and the manner in which he preferred to be kissed.

“I’ve never wanted anything more,” he said, fiercely, and closed his fist around the base of the boy’s swollen prick, as his lips sucked hard at his nipple.

Sherlock screamed; he writhed and shook, and pleaded for more. He found that he liked being bitten and scratched and that a firm hand between his legs was the most heavenly of delights.

“Oh, Christ,” he shouted when John strangled his glans and flicked at its slit, and climaxed with such violence and abundance it left him light-headed and shaky.

“You are all right,” the doctor kept repeating, caressing down the youth’s sweaty back and up to the nape of his drenched neck.

“What about you?” the detective gasped, when he’d partially recovered his senses.

“A long walk through the park will cool me down,” replied John, who was very glad his trousers were fashioned in a way as to conceal the large wet patch that had formed on their front.

“I’ll miss you,” said the young man, caressing his lover’s cheek. He was repaid by a voracious kiss that left him speechless.

“I’ll see you soon,” John promised and, unwillingly, took his leave.

When he got back to his flat, it appeared to him like the set of a ramshackle theatre: the remains of the previous night’s revels did nothing to dispel the sensation of extraneousness. He’d never been happy there; moderately comfortable, yes, but never as content and relaxed as he was at Baker Street. This was a place to live while that was a home. After washing and changing clothes, he walked to the hospital, reflecting on the time he’d spent with Sherlock.

The next morning, after a relatively quiet night shift, he went to see his physician, a pasty-faced, no-nonsense man named Donald Reed, a member of the Medical Board who’d known John since his training days. The evening before he’d been lucky enough to obtain an appointment at short
notice, which was proof that the RAMC were keen to welcome him into their ranks. He had to know were he stood, whether he was miraculously on the mend or simply being granted a momentary reprieve from the pain and the tremors.

When he knocked at the door of Reed’s study, he was greeted by a young woman he’d never seen before.

“Has Miss Baring left?”

The girl, a big-boned brunette with hair like a gleaming shell, regarded him blankly.

“She’s left with Doctor Reed.”

“What do you mean, left? Isn’t Doctor Reed here?”

“No, but Doctor Pritchard is expecting you. I have your name down for 9 am.”

“Yes, the time is accurate, but I am here to see Doctor Reed. I have nothing against your employer but - you see - I have been a patient of Reed’s for years. He knows me and my medical history.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you,” the girl replied, in a professional yet uninvolved tone. “All I know is that Doctor Reed was called away and Doctor Pritchard has momentarily replaced him. Perhaps you can ask him whether he knows more about it than I do.”

John nodded and went in to meet the mysterious new physician.

Anthony Pritchard was a cheerful looking, middle-aged gentleman who wouldn’t have looked out of place on the golf links or in the cocktail room at the Dorchester: he was slim, straight-backed and fair of hair and complexion; he wore gold-rimmed spectacles and an affable expression.

“My dear man, I wouldn’t know what to say. It was most unexpected and highly unorthodox,” he explained, jovially. “Special circumstances demand a more finely-tuned capacity for tolerance.”

John was too surprised for words, but Pritchard did his best to reassure him.

“I have seen your file, Doctor Watson, and it seems pretty straightforward: partial damage to the nerve tissues and consequent occasional numbness, pain and intermittent tremor. Has anything changed since the last examination?”

He nodded and showed the physician that his left arm was steady, utterly exempt from twitches or quivers.

The older man prodded him and inspected the wound, with the same cheerful smile on his lips.

“Jolly good,” he commented, but for some reason John did not feel reassured.

“Will you send me to Aldershot for my training?” he enquired, and was convinced that a shutter had descended behind Pritchard’s mask of bonhomie; he was also certain that any attempt – no matter how shrewd - at breaking down that wall would prove futile.

“Not so fast, dear chap, not so fast,” the man replied, removing his spectacles and cleaning them meticulously with a fine linen handkerchief. His eyes were pale and unfocussed, with that peculiar fixity pertaining to all short-sighted people when deprived of their glasses.

“The file indicates that your last visit was only a fortnight ago,” Pritchard said, without consulting his notes. “Hardly long enough to come to a definitive conclusion; I will see you again in another
fortnight, if possible. Kindly make an appointment with Ms Rylands; she’s frightfully efficient,” he added, smiling.

“Will it be with yourself or Doctor Reed?”

“This, my dear fellow, is entirely in the hands of lady providence.”

He was tempted to return to the hospital and discuss this odd encounter with his friend and colleague Mike Stamford, but a seed of doubt had been planted in his mind that secrecy and silence would guarantee his safety.

Sherlock was a different matter: he would hide nothing from him, but before he went to see him again, John wanted to think carefully about the detective’s proposal. Even in those uncertain, war-torn times, he was sure that, once he’d made that decision, he could never go back.

His mind was finally made up that very evening, when something even more unfathomable occurred.

“What do you mean I have been discharged from all ARP duties?” he asked, incredulous. Pete, the elderly man who sat at the enquiry desk of his Wardens’ Post next to the Aldwych tube station, read something that he’d scribbled on a piece of grimy paper.

“Control Centre said you were to return your helmet, coat and badge and relinquish your duties,” he recited. “They said summat about rest and recuperation.”

Seeing that he would get no joy from old Pete, he did as told and marched out of the little office.

“Right,” he said, and straightening his posture in a defiant gesture, he started walking in the direction of Baker Street.
Sherlock had been at Cambridge when the conflict had started.

A Trinity College alumnus, he’d heard of the exploits of Guy Burgess and his Apostles clique. They all confessed to Marxist leanings at the time, but they were now – or so Mycroft had informed him – part of the establishment, embedded in its fabric, like their fathers and fore-fathers before them.

Unconscionably, he had found the news rather dispiriting; even though he did not care a jot about
politics, he detested the concept of normalisation.

His own brother had undergone it, perfecting a chameleon-like assimilation into his chosen environment. In his youth, which had lasted until he’d entered puberty, Mycroft had been as unpredictable as his little brother, but as soon as he’d grasped the mechanisms of the adult world, he’d started to imitate - and after a short while - even surpass them.

With this cautionary tale always before his very eyes, Sherlock had carefully avoided treading the path that his family had traced for him. Naturally, he knew about Bletchley Park, even though it was supposed to be a national secret; attempts had been made to lure him into an intelligence role, but he would rather die in the trenches than be confined inside a world that would forever crystallise his role in society; he would always be the maths genius, the code-breaker, the eccentric scientist.

Creating his own job description meant that he could stray from the prescribed path whenever he wished to. This life choice had estranged him from his family, but since they’d never been particularly close anyway, he paid it no mind. As for his brother, he had shown an unlikely attachment to Sherlock that had proved insidious and resistant to eradication, much as a noxious weed. Even the detective’s brief dalliance with opiates and the presence of a few unsavoury fellow travellers had not obtained the desired result.

When he’d bothered to reflect on his sibling’s motivations, he’d concluded that Mycroft was living vicariously through his younger brother, and because that realisation had touched him, Sherlock could never forego the irritation that went with it.

The elder Holmes’ frequent jibes about sentiment and its mortal perils had found a permanent abode in the detective’s heart and mind; like most things which are considered terrifying, they were wrapped in illogical robes and steeped in a mythology that was enriched by snatches of images that dated back to Sherlock’s school days: boys kissing in a darkened chapel after chorus practice, naked bodies frotting vigorously on the grass by the riverbank at night and ghastly cries of pleasure emanating from the changing rooms of the gymnasium. There had been something vulgar in those displays of sensuality, and it wasn’t a matter of class. Some had argued that it was precisely the case; that their class would never be dragged down into the mud like those beastly stable boys whose company one indulged from time to time, but whose behaviour one would never, should never emulate.

Commonness was an eternal source of attraction and revulsion for the British elites, but not in the detective’s case. What he feared was not the loss of his social graces, since the few he had were ingrained and irrelevant, but rather a depletion of his individuality, which he cherished as much as his intellect.

He had never considered the possibility of sexual attraction or – heaven forfend – love, because, quite simply, they would put him on the same level as the rest of humanity.

Nevertheless, what mattered to him most of all was the truth, and to deny the truth would invalidate the entirety of his philosophy and render it as tawdry as Mycroft’s volte-face or Burgess’s conversion.

And the plain and simple truth was that he wanted John Watson, body and soul.

When he reached Baker Street after a brisk walk, Doctor Watson realised that part of his determination had evaporated. Here lived a posh young man he’d only just met, a creature of many
contradictions, a spoilt brat with a volatile character and a superior intellect; not only were these reliable indicators of trouble, but there was also the small matter of his murder investigation that most probably would lead them to a coven of spies. The cherry on top was his sinister sibling, whose umbrella possibly hid an envenomed spike or some such fanciful weaponry.

In another life, John would have found it tremendously funny – and to be frank he still did, a bit – but they were fighting a cunning, monstrous enemy and John wasn’t sure that Sherlock cared about the war; not as much as he cared about his own pursuits anyway.

Like the detective, John also prized truth above most things, and in the end he had to admit, with a rueful sigh, that he was being unfair to the young man and that his doubts were mostly of a personal nature: would he measure up to the task, would his arm betray him again, would Sherlock use him and reject him when he’d had enough? He’d never frequented a public school boy, but knew what his sort was like: hard to please, easy to bore.

Not unlike Sherlock the previous day, when he walked through the door of 221B, John’s inner monologue had boiled over and was ready to spill out.

“You have questions,” the young man said, as soon he gazed down at his friend’s face.

“Yes, you can say that.”

The detective moved aside to let him in and was about to offer him a drink and a cigarette when John darted in the direction of the window.

“This is precisely what I was saying!”

“Do you have your own Maggers or was it a living person you were conversing with?”

“This is not a joke, Sherlock,” exclaimed the doctor, as he pulled the calico curtains down to obscure the room. “Not only are you transgressing the law, but you are putting your life at risk!”

“It’s an obviously ineffective measure and you know it. The Luftwaffe relies on more than my meagre illumination; if they would, they’d be a pretty laughable opponent.”

John felt the blood go to his head, and he had a pretty shrewd guess that it wouldn’t be the last time.

“Every single thing matters,” he hissed, “Your blackout curtains, my ARP helmet, Sansom’s trailer pump, every single darned thing!”

The detective, who at first had been struck by the violence of his friend’s attack and had retreated into his stubborn shell, was now regarding him shrewdly.

“Something has happened,” he concluded, with a triumphant smile, “You did not care as much before now… you lectured me, but not with this virulence. Have they given you the sack? No, you would not be here if they had… not your hospital post, but the ARP one, which is why you mentioned your helmet… But there’s something more… your shoulder twitched, but you still have no tremor… you went to see your physician, but he would not give you the all-clear…how did I do?”

John blond man had kept it all inside for the entire day, and surely he was no to blame if he over-reacted.
“It was you, wasn’t it? Your old school tie arrogance is astounding,” he shouted. “I can just imagine it: dear chap, would you do us a favour? Nothing much, only a bit of a nuisance, there’s a good fellow,” he went on, mimicking his friend’s clipped tones.

“What did your doctor say?”

That was the worst thing Sherlock could have asked at that juncture.

“My doctor is vanished, gone, disappeared into a puff of blasted smoke!”

The young man's next utterance was possibly even worse.

“But that’s absolutely perfect,” he enthused. “At last, the wall of silence has been breached. Mycroft could never resist a touch of drama.”

The blond man bit the inside of his cheek, looking daggers at his friend. When he spoke, he sounded like a rubber band stretched beyond endurance.

“Does your brother always act as your pimp or is it a special honour?” he growled, stalking towards the detective. “Did you two talk about me?”

Sherlock’s expression turned from confused to haughty in the blink of an eye.

“Frightfully presumptuous of you, don’t you think old bean?” he said, scathingly. “You are not that special.”

“Oh well, special enough to be plied with Cordon Rouge and poached salmon,” the doctor hissed, and immediately regretted it.

“If that’s what you truly think, I won’t waste another syllable,” Sherlock replied, and tying the sash of his dressing gown with a firm tug, he left the room.

“I’ll miss you.”

These inane words resurfaced in his mind, as he paced his study.

The room was cluttered with various objects, but the precious black enamel Leitz microscope took pride of place. Recently, he’d been examining the different types of explosives and the traces they left on disparate fabrics and materials.

He was particularly interested by the mechanism of the incendiaries and the fluorescent lights they emitted.

It was fascinating work, but his attention kept flagging, drifting back to the events of the previous day.

John had known with unfailing accuracy what Sherlock had needed and had given it to him, but there had been an unbalance in their exchanges which had transcended the purely do-ut-des of carnality.

He had been the beggar, the supplicant, while the doctor had been almost clinical, regaining his sang-froid immediately after the act.

After John’s initial burst of passion, his steely control had joined the fray and a barrier had been
raised between them, which Sherlock had tried to shatter with uncharacteristic affection.

“I’ll miss you.”

He grimaced every time he recalled his own vulnerability, his lack of sophistication.

Perhaps John’s more seasoned lovers were light-hearted about such dalliances, especially at a time when their lives were constantly in danger. Sherlock could never abjure his intensity, as it was indispensable to his character, almost like the oxygen to his lungs.

When his lover had returned that evening, he’d hoped the air would be cleared, but the situation had suddenly precipitated into a maelstrom of recriminations.

He wasn’t going to demean himself in order to placate John’s lack of self-worth nor did he intend to abandon the Cummins case only because there was a war on; and if his obnoxious sibling had indeed intervened, if definitely meant that something dark and dangerous was hiding in the wings.

The game was all that mattered; and if John didn’t want to play, he would continue on his own.

Alone was better, alone would protect him.

“Thermite,” he murmured, as he examined a fragment on B1E1 under his magnifying lens. He was scraping the compound and decanting it carefully into a test-tube, when he heard a knock at the door; he ignored it, but John entered all the same.

“I’m an idiot,” he said, and touched the young man’s shoulder.

“I have frequently observed that people translate regret into aggression. If that’s the case, you have nothing to worry. I will pretend nothing’s ever happened,” the detective said, without turning to face his friend.

“Will you? I couldn’t and anyway I don’t want to.”

“And what is it that you want?”

“A stiff drink, a smoke and your theories on Doctor Reed’s sudden disappearance,” replied the doctor.

“You said you would help me, but you changed your mind after… yesterday. What should I believe?”

John caressed the line of the detective’s spine, clearly outlined beneath the shivery silk of his dressing gown.

“I want to come and stay here, with you,” he replied, “If you’ll have me.”

“No more second thoughts?” the youth asked, trying to resist the temptation to lean into the touch.

“No way back for me, my dear,” John laughed; a defiant, harsh sound that made Sherlock shiver. “Not anymore.”

“Your brother warned you to stay away from the Blandford hotel and you decided to take the case
because of that,” said John, recalling what his friend had told him on the first morning they’d spent together.

They were sipping whisky by the fire and a bluish cloud of smoke hung over them like a shroud.

“Basic reverse psychology,” said Sherlock, scratching the back of his head. “He wanted me to get involved.”

“And now he’s decided I should be your partner in crime; and that without informing either of us.”

The detective suppressed the groan of impatience that had surged to his lips.

“No, that would be too pedestrian even for my brother. His modus operandi suggests a need for utter secrecy. Your Doctor Reed has probably been replaced by someone who works for MI5 or MI6. As for your ARP post, they won’t want to risk an agent’s life, not it they can help it.”

John didn’t know whether he should be flattered or terrified.

“I haven’t done anything yet.”

“We spoke to Sansom and he works for the Ministry of Information.”

“You suspect him of being part of the conspiracy.”

The young man’s lips curved into a half-smile.

“We are not in a cheap detective novel,” he said. “And no, I don’t believe he betrayed us, but if he’s under surveillance, they will know about us. They must know about the list, but they can’t very well ask Sansom about the names, since their line of defence, from the very start, was that such a list never existed.”

“What will we do next?”

“A visit to the infamous Blandford, I should think.”

“I will take my gun with me,” John declared, “Just in case.”

“You own a gun?” marvelled the young man, a flame leaping up into his eyes. “You have it on you now?”

“Yes and no. It’s in a drawer at my lodgings.”

“Oh,” murmured Sherlock, dejectedly. “I was hoping to go there under the cover of night.”

“We are not going out.”

“You just walked all the way from Holborn.”

They were locked into a stubborn silence for a handful of moments then a potent whistle sliced through the nightly quiet and a thunderous explosion shook the walls and rattled the glass-panes.

“We should hurry to the nearest shelter.”

“The cellar, but let’s not go yet. It wasn’t as close as it seemed.”

The doctor opened his mouth to remonstrate, but decided it wasn’t worth the aggravation.
“And this same flower that smiles today, tomorrow will be dying,” Sherlock murmured, draining his glass in one gulp.

“Is there a suggestion hidden in there?” asked John, wiping a drop of whisky from the corner of his friend’s mouth.

“I don’t feel like sleeping,” the detective replied, staring squarely into darkened blue eyes.

In daylight, Sherlock’s bedroom was as immaculate and spartan as a nun’s cell, but at night, illuminated only by a dwindling fire and a low wattage desk lamp, it appeared as eerie as a Victorian chamber.

The bare walls, white bed linen and the lack of ornaments contributed to this feeling of virginal austerity.

“Not what I expected,” John murmured, as he slid underneath the sheets next to his friend.

“When I rest, I don’t require any additional stimuli.”

The detective was trying to appear nonchalant, even though his heart was thumping against his nightshirt.

“You said you weren’t tired.”

“I’m seldom tired. My mind is constantly churning and I do most of my productive thinking at night.”

He was babbling and didn’t know how to stop it.

“I was too hasty,” the doctor whispered, reaching out to caress Sherlock’s shoulder. “We need to talk about that, about what it meant to me, to us. But not right now.”

“No,” agreed the detective, without having the least idea where the conversation was going.

“I would like to have you in my arms, if it’s all right with you.”

“Yes.”

Before he could say another word, he felt John’s fingers on his chest, unbuttoning his shirt.

“I want to feel your skin on mine.”

“Yes,” repeated the detective, whose mouth had dried up like a pond in a drought.

“Come here,” urged his lover, and Sherlock blissfully rolled into the safe haven of his embrace.

“I missed you too,” John whispered, caressing down the velvety length of the young man’s back. “And I didn’t want to leave you like that.”

“You had to go to work.”

“I wanted to kiss you without waking you, but once I started, I couldn’t stop.”

“It was extremely pleasant.”
“Was it really?” asked the older man, rubbing the boy’s chest and lingering on his nipples.

“Hmm,” moaned Sherlock, arching his back and feeling a sizeable bulge press against his lower abdomen. “Your pants,” he gasped, and surprising even himself, he quickly removed the offending garment.

“I want to see you,” he husked, and was instantly obeyed.

The covers were kicked out of the way and the bedside lamp light revealed a muscled torso with sparse fair hairs and a flat abdomen with a trail of darker fluff. What sprang up from between John's legs deprived Sherlock of breath, words and thoughts.

It wasn’t a matter of size, although it was both thicker and larger than the young man’s petite affair. What had mesmerised the youth, was the sheer brutality of it: the meaty, veined heft, the purplish hue and the rounded head, flushed and glistening.

He imagined it inside of him, its ridges scraping against sensitive, delicate skin; his mouth watered.

“You don’t have to do anything,” argued John, who’d misread his stillness.

In reply, Sherlock wrapped his lips around the fat glans and sucked.

“Jesus,” screamed the blond man, unable to prevent his hips from bucking. He felt Sherlock's indecision and caressed the back of his neck, gently.

“Stroke the shaft with your hand and keep your teeth away,” he explained, but he hadn’t considered that he was dealing with a polymath who’d mastered far more arduous things than a simple fellatio.

Soon he lost all his eloquence, as the boy’s clever mouth slurped him down with a voracity that was immensely more erotic because of its lack of elegance. Whether it was due to pure serendipity or the fruit of Sherlock's deductions, it was the filthiest suck John had ever experienced. When he gazed down at the young man’s face, he found it disfigured by pleasure: his cheeks were flushed and his chin and mouth wet with saliva.

He had to close his eyes to postpone the inevitable.

“Yes, yes,” he chanted and at that very moment Sherlock hollowed his cheeks and moaned around John’s swollen prick.

“I am going to,” he cried and tried to pull out, but the youth kept at it and received the copious release into his eager throat, as if he’d long been thirsting for it.
Mata Hari

Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock enjoy a little morning loving but they are interrupted by a visitor...

Chapter Notes

Note: Mata Hari was a Dutch exotic dancer and courtesan who was convicted of being a spy for Germany during World War I. The movie Mata Hari starred Greta Garbo.

Note 2: Vivian Van Damm, the manager of the Windmill theatre, was a man. I decided I wanted him to be a woman.

Note 3: The horses stunt really happened. On the night that two fire-bombs landed on stables near the theatre and set them ablaze, Margaret and fellow Windmill Girl Annie Singer grabbed three horses each and led them by their halters around Piccadilly Circus.

Note 4: Sir Alfred James Munnings was known as one of England's finest painters of horses.

“\textit{The wave that died the death which lovers love,}
\textit{Living in what it sought; as if this spasm}
\textit{Had not yet passed}”

\textit{The Boat On The Serchio (excerpt) – Percy B. Shelley}

\underline{La petite mort} the French called it, and John thought it was an accurate description of his predicament, and not only with regards to its usual meaning.

Last night had been like a dream: after his intense orgasm, he’d returned the favour and swallowed Sherlock’s erection down to the root. He’d sucked and licked him, with long, firm pulls and teasing flicks of tongue, until the detective had pulsed into his mouth, spasm after violent spasm.

He’d drifted off to sleep and felt vaguely that he was being left alone, but when he’d gone to relieve himself, still in the dead of night, the young man had been there, his crown of curls fanned out on John’s pillow.

And now that a chink of light was sneaking through the side of a curtain, he gazed at Sherlock’s face, as the man lay in his arms, and thought that a part of him had died and been reborn and that it was the end of a quest he hadn’t even known he was pursuing.
“What?” mumbled the detective, blinking awake and immediately preoccupied by his friend's pensive frown.

“Good morning,” replied John, smiling brightly. “You look a mess.”

He kissed the pouting lips and was pierced by a bolt of tenderness and desire.

“You scratched me with your stubble.”

“I should have shaved before I got into bed with you. How thoughtless of me,” the blond man jested.

“I liked it, really,” Sherlock admitted, cuddling closer to his lover and returning the kiss.

“The thing is, it’s never happened to me before.”

“Don’t pretend you never had sexual intercourse with a man,” the detective snorted.

“But not with you.”

“An inexperienced lover.”

John shook his head and rubbed at the hollows beneath the youth’s cheekbones with his thumbs.

“The lover to end all lovers,” he whispered, “The face which eclipses all other faces before and after it.”

The detective bit his lips to stop them from quivering; blasted sentiment.

“You won’t miss women? You had a wife; I observed the discolouration on your ring finger.”

“I won’t say I didn’t love her, but this, with you, it’s nothing like that.”

“Fewer curves, more angles,” Sherlock tried for sarcasm and failed miserably.

“I will never get enough of you, not if we were to spend a hundred years together.”

“A public school boy with a very big mouth?”

“A very talented mouth,” John agreed, forcing a finger between the boy’s lips.

“Was it only my mouth that you admired?”

“Let me see,” the blond man replied, observing his lover with the discerning air of a theatre critic. “Your throat is to be commended too,” he noted, but his feigned coldness was immediately belied by the way he latched onto his lover’s neck, sucking hungrily on his Adam’s apple. Sherlock swallowed and threw his head back and found that he didn’t mind being eaten alive if John was doing the ravishing.

“I want you like I never have wanted before;” the older man husked, after a long while.

“It’s the war; fear of imminent death sharpens feelings and sensations.”

“No, it’s not it; well maybe a bit, but not entirely. It’s your voice, your face, your body…”

“Skin and bones, you said.”
John wrapped his hands around the young man’s narrow waist: they nearly encompassed it; rough, calloused hands against silky white skin; his gaze took in the concave stomach, the rounded navel and the bruised nipples; when he replied, he was already as hard as stone.

“Beautiful,” he groaned, and bent down to devour his lover’s mouth, pressing the young man into the mattress with the full weight of his naked body.

With John deep in the throes of sleep, Sherlock had felt restless and as electric as a live wire.

Slinking quietly out of the room, he’d sought refuge into his study, amongst his most cherished objects.

In the past, the drugs had evinced a similar effect: a quicksilver clarity shooting from veins to nerves, sparking revelatory deductions at dizzying speed. But that had always come with a disastrous downside, a tide of numbing depression.

This was different in that it wasn’t icy brilliancy but a more permanent sort of high: a fire that was made to last; embers that would not be extinguished and die. He was too excited to sleep and too enamoured to stray too far from his lover.

He returned to bed.

“Is this the way you like it?” John demanded, nipping the detective’s lips.

“Yes, yes, yes.”

“It’s not only to please me, I hope.”

Since it wasn’t the time for conversation, Sherlock replied by raising his arms above his head, in a gesture of surrender. He wrapped ten fingers around the wrought iron bedstead and looked squarely at his lover with darkened, unblinking eyes.

“Kiss me again,” the doctor said, and dove inside that wet mouth with his tongue, thrusting and teasing, his hands roaming all over the undulating body beneath him.

“No, no,” he heard the young man whine.

“What is it; did I hurt you?”

“Damn and blast,” the detective complained in a hoarse voice. “It’s the door-bell downstairs, probably a client.”

“Maybe it’s someone for Mrs Hudson.”

“I can guess from the impatience and vigour of the ringing that it isn’t.”

“You are not trying to tell me something?”

Sherlock grimaced, staring down at where both he and John were desperately in need of attention.

“I wish I had a magic implement to make them disappear.”
“Speak for yourself!” cried John.

“I meant our visitor.”

“I know, you daft boy. Come on, better make ourselves presentable.”

“Go to the wash-room; I have running water in my study.”

“I’ll see you soon, partner,” said the blond man, kissing the tip of the detective’s nose.

“Silly nuisance,” drawled Sherlock, echoing John’s parody of his Oxbridge tones.

“I was tired and angry. Forgive me?”

“Always”

The identity of the visitor was so unexpected that even the world’s only consulting detective was surprised, even though he did his utmost to hide it underneath a mask of urbanity.

Margaret McGrath was a curvaceous girl of Sherlock’s age or thereabouts, with a heart-shaped mouth and caramel-coloured hair, styled in loose curls that barely touched her shoulders. Her green eyes were bright and full of spirit.

After the introductions were made and the tea poured, the detective noticed that his friend was staring at their guest, and didn’t even have the good grace to try and disguise his interest.

“How can we be of help?” he asked, coldly.

“You are one of the girls who led those horses to safety through Piccadilly last October,” John exclaimed, slapping his own thigh. “It is you, isn’t it?”

Ms McGrath giggled and nodded. There was nothing remotely shy about her, which boded well for the remainder of their interview.

“It was just one of those things,” she explained. “We were in a café in Great Windmill Street and the bombs came raining down. There was an explosion behind the Ham Yard stables and the poor creatures were in a right lather. We - that’s Annie Singer and yours truly - were running back and Annie said to me, Maggie, we can’t leave them here, so we got them out and took them to safety. The wardens were ever so nice about it; perfect dears they were!”

Sherlock knew about the girls’ exploit but would never admit to reading such trivia.

“Is there anything we can do for you? I trust you haven’t mislaid one of your equines?”

The girl giggled again and John couldn’t help but join her; the detective’s patience was wearing thin. Just when he thought the girl was hopeless, she suddenly became serious.

“Ms Van Damm at the Windmill – that’s where I work – says we have to do our bit for the country, so we rehearse and dance and look pretty. After work, we have our share of fun and why shouldn’t we? Here today, gone tomorrow, that’s what I say. Only thing is we always take care of ourselves. Be smart, Ms Van Damm says, and keep your mouth shut. So I have; for weeks, I have kept as silent as the grave. Not even Annie knows about this, and I tell her everything. I even told her about the bottles of milk I got from a young lad who works at Boulestin’s.”
“What is it that you haven’t told her?” asked John, softly.

“That Greta Hayward, the girl that was killed by the Ripper in that hotel in Marylebone...”

“What about her?” asked the detective.

“Her face wasn’t right. They styled the hair alright, and the body type was the same, but you can’t do much to change the shape of the eyes, can you? I mean, you can put make up on and pluck the eyebrows and all the rest of it, but you can’t alter the shape.”

“What are you saying?”

John was puzzled, but his companion had already understood.

“Are you sure it wasn’t another girl with the same name?” he asked.

“Yes, I thought about that, but you see, if that was the case, why would they have tried to make her look like Greta?”

“You mean that the girl that Cummins murdered at the Blandford hotel wasn’t Greta Hayward?” the doctor exclaimed, starting to feel very excited.

“The Greta I used to know had eyes like Mr Holmes here, very far apart and almond-shaped, but the woman in the pictures had round, bulging eyes. It couldn’t have been her.”

“And you knew from the orphanage, I guess.”

Ms McGrath stared at Sherlock as if he’d just pulled a rabbit from a hat.

“How?” she gasped, and at once her eyes became circumspect. “You aren’t spying on me, are you?”

“No, trust me, he did that with me too and only minutes after I had met him,” John said, patting her rounded shoulder.

“I merely guessed that they wouldn’t risk involving someone who had a family and, consequently, I deduced you two must have met back then.”

“We weren’t friends or anything like that. She was alright, Greta was, but she was always daydreaming and inventing stories; at one point, she started saying she was from a titled family or something equally far-fetched. I never had time for people who can’t face reality,” she declared, her face hardening and making her seem much older than her age. “Take the rough with the smooth and always pay your bills; that’s what I was taught and I still swear by it.”

“A perfectly decent way to live one’s life,” agreed the doctor.

“Why did you come to see me? Why not go to the police?”

“You were in the papers along with that Scotland Yard Inspector,” she explained. “Good looking man, grey hair...”

“Lestrade”

“Yes, that’s the one, and I asked who you were and someone, one of the girls I think, mentioned that you were a detective. Not a very famous one, I said, since I’ve never heard of him.”
Sherlock sniffed audibly.

“I don’t want to be famous,” he said, ice-cold, “It would be rather counter-productive in my line of business, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose it would. Anyway, I happen to know a police sergeant quite well, a smart lad named Dimmock and he assured me that you were the real thing. So here I am, telling you my secret.”

“You still haven’t explained why you didn’t go to the police.”

“I figured that if Scotland Yard had been fooled and a man, a soldier, had hanged for the murder, I wouldn’t stand a chance. Whoever did this, wouldn’t think twice about getting rid of little old me.”

“Any idea where the real Greta Hayward could be?” asked John.

“None at all,” the girl replied, firmly. “I haven’t seen since we left Brixton Orphanage eight years ago. I’m twenty-two, even though I seem younger.”

“Girls change quite a lot in that interval of time,” said the doctor.

“She was already grown up. Some of us looked like schoolgirls and others like women; you know the way it is at that age; Greta was already well-developed, if you catch my drift.”

“Greta is an unusual name, rather grand and foreign-sounding,” the detective pondered.

“She probably took on a new name, as her real one was something plain, such as Mary or Lucy, and it didn’t fit with her tall tales, I guess.”

“But as far as you know, it could be her name. She could have been partly foreign: Scandinavian or even German.”

The thought had clearly never crossed the girl’s mind and she was horrified by its implications.

“A spy?” she whispered, her eyes nervously sweeping from left to right.

“It’s a possibility,” replied Sherlock.

John offered her a cigarette and her fingers trembled a little as she accepted it. Her nails were manicured but unvarnished, a necessary economy that she probably cultivated with pride.

“What should I do?” she asked, and some of the brightness had gone from her eyes.

“Go back to work and don’t say anything; do not tell anyone you’ve come to see me. Did you tell Sergeant Dimmock that you meant to do so?”

“Oh no,” she exclaimed tartly, as if reacting to an undeserved barb, “I only told him that one of the girls was interested; that she thought you were a good-looking lad and all that.”

The detective’s eyes widened, but he didn’t comment; John, on the other hand, puffed on his Caporal to conceal a smile.

“Forget everything about it. Get on with your life and leave everything to us.”

“We will do all we can to solve this mystery, I promise you,” said John, to soften the impact of his partner’s harsh words.
Miss McGrath contemplated both men’s faces for a while then nodded once, with a resolute dip of her chin.

“I will do as you ask. I just wish you’d tell me once it’s all done and dusted, but I suppose it will be to dangerous even then; long shadows and all that rot. Well, must hurry back for rehearsals. Ms Van Damm will come down on me like a ton of bricks if I’m late.”

After she left, her rosewater perfume hung in the air like a memento of lost innocence, of defiled purity.

“What about the murdered girl?” wondered John, once they were sat at the breakfast table, eating marmalade on toast, “Was she the intended victim?”

“Most probably just a wretched girl who served the purpose; her misfortune was that she resembled the real Greta. What a piece of luck for us that Miss McGrath is not your typical featherbrained dancer and that she noticed such an important detail from a picture in a newspaper.”

“You sound sceptical.”

“Trusting people can be a costly mistake in times like these.”

The blond man fell silent, considering his friend’s assertion.

“Oh don’t be like that,” exclaimed Sherlock, “Naturally, I have every faith in you and Mrs Hudson. But as for the rest of the world, I’d rather keep an open mind.”

“Yes, of course, it’s only sensible. She’s a nice kid though, and she seemed genuinely concerned. And brave enough to save those horses from certain death.”

“Not the horses again,” sighed the young man, “If you like them so dearly, I should perhaps purchase an Alfred Munnings for your room. Unless you have changed your mind, that is.”

“I’d rather you didn’t buy me anything and no, of course I haven’t, but I need to go to work. I have the evening shift and I’m sure they’ll be looking forward to seeing me, after last night’s bombing.”

“About that,” said the detective, buttering a slice of bread with energy.

“Your brother can’t do that! My job is not something I can discard like an old boot. I chose it because I like taking care of people. And the hospital is desperately short of personnel as it is.”

“It’s only temporary, my dear. Imagine if those scoundrels decided to injure your colleagues or your patients.”

“Why would they do that? What purpose would it serve?”

“Keep you from going after them? Dissuade you from working with me?”

“They don’t really know me then.”

The young man smiled.

“No, they surely don’t.”

“One thing I don’t understand: why didn’t Scotland Yard investigate the identity of the victim?”

“Greta Hayward was an orphan, so there was no family to contact. The documents and rations
book she was carrying were in her name: why would the police question her identity when there was no cause for it? No, this was a carefully planned operation and no risks were taken. I bet that the girl who died was a refugee with no links to this country: a girl with no past and no future.”

“It’s terrible. We can’t let them get away with this. Surely the dental records at the Brixton Orphanage will be conclusive, if we manage to have the poor girl exhumed.”

“We can’t do that, John. We can’t show them that we know. They may suspect we are sniffing in the right direction, but proving it to them would be unforgivably stupid.”

“What then?”

“I think you should pack your belongings and accept the leave of absence you will be offered; protest, but not too much; just enough to be consistent with your customary behaviour; if I were you, I’d pretend the tremor has intensified.”

“I won’t lie!”

“No, better not,” agreed Sherlock, “But make them believe your change of routine is nothing out of the ordinary.”

“How do you know my friends won’t find out I left my Camden flat?”

“Your friends don’t usually visit you at home; in fact, they don’t even know where you live. I could guess as much from a number of clues; shall I relate them to you?”

John bit his lips and decided that anger would be pointless. He stood up and put his overcoat on.

“Maybe another time,” he replied. “I’ll see you later then?”

The detective grinned wickedly.

“Yes, and, John… bring your gun with you.”
Last Love

Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John pay a visit.

Oh, and Mycroft appears at 221B. Sherlock is not exactly overjoyed...

Chapter Notes

Note 1: You may have noticed that I changed the Count into a Viscount. At first, I had conceived a half-baked idea of making him a bit foreign then I realised I was straying into Wilkie Collins territory, so the old darling is now a plain and simple English aristocrat.

Note 2: In my search for the suitable Green Park House, I stumbled upon William Kent House. I decided to give it the name of the town house belonging to the Flytes in Brideshead Revisited. Only later did I find out that it WAS the house in Brideshead Revisited. Wow.

“Here my last love had died.”

Brideshead Revisited - Evelyn Waugh

“Holmes? Not the tall, young bloke with a plummy accent and the annoying habit of glaring at one while repeating obviously and curling his nose in distaste?” asked Stamford.

They were drinking watered down coffee at the hospital canteen and discussing John’s situation.

Watson stared at his friend, feeling as if the entire city must be aware of what was happening in his life. Immediately after that came the depressing realisation that perhaps Sherlock had not observed; that he wasn’t a brilliant genius, but merely a skilled actor with an excellent retinue of informers.

“Have you spoken to him recently?” he asked, trying not to show the symptoms of bitter disappointment.

Mike chuckled.

“You don’t talk to the fellow; you listen to him and nod when appropriate,” he guffawed, “I have met him when I was still working at Barts, before this horrible mess started. He came into the morgue with a Yarde, a chap who looked about as delighted to have him there as the rest of us; turned out all right in the end though: he solved the case for them and I got a lecture about the time delay in the formation of bruises on a corpse.”
“And you haven’t seen him since?”

“Well, he returned to Barts a couple of times; we even had coffee once, at Lyons of all places. I thought he would be out of his element, but he knew all the Nippies by their real names. Amazing, I thought. I haven’t met him again after that day.”

John beamed, his confidence in his friend having been fully restored. Stupid of him to doubt him in the first place, he thought.

“I shouldn’t have told a soul, but it’s just too awful to keep it from you after all the years we’ve known each other.”

“You know you can trust me with your life,” said Mike, his placid brown eyes regarding John from behind thick lenses.

“I will be staying with Sherlock for a while, until I’ve regained my strength,” he said, a trifle ashamed that he was lying, but he had to, as he wouldn’t put his lover’s safety at risk.

Stamford’s eyes twinkled.

“I wouldn’t have guessed him to be your type,” he remarked. “You’ve always detested the posh set, especially the blokes.”

“Sherlock isn’t a type of anything. You won’t find another like him anywhere,” replied John, passionately.

“Well, it seems you’ve stumbled upon something special then.”

“Stumbled is the right word. I saved him from being incinerated in the Paternoster Row fire.”

“Dear me, what was he doing there?” Mike exclaimed, pouring some more of the ersatz coffee into his cup. “Don’t tell me he was chasing a criminal.”

“He was salvaging some valuable books from the blaze. I thought I was dealing a with a looter.”

“Damn spivs,” growled the usually pacific doctor, “I am with the Jerries on this one: the scoundrels should face the firing squad.”

John nodded in assent, scowling at the thought of people stealing rings from corpses or ransacking shelled houses.

“I bet he didn’t want to be saved and that he put up a fight.”

“Would you believe that he had the cheek to order me to leave him alone?”

“It seems that it didn’t work.”

“Apparently not,” the blond man concurred, with a fond smile.

While John and Mike were thus amicably engaged, 221B Baker Street was serving as backdrop for the fractious confrontation between the Holmes siblings.

Sherlock had been cataloguing explosives samples in his study when he’d heard the unmistakable tapping sound of a ferrule being used as a door-knocker. He sighed theatrically, even though
Maggers was his only spectator.

“Insufferable meddler,” he mumbled, hastening towards the sitting room; once there, he plucked his Stradivarius from its case and started sawing away at it like an artist punch-drunk on Modernism.

Mrs Hudson let Mycroft in without uttering a single word of introduction; Sherlock’s landlady had made every effort to try and appreciate the elder Holmes, but without success. She respected him and was invariably polite, but always retained the impression of dealing with a dangerous beast that had to be contained rather than befriended.

“I wouldn’t set foot at the Blandford, brother mine; and certainly not in the company of your bumbling doctor and his firearm.”

The detective kept abusing his instrument, hissing at John’s mention.

“You have ruined his life,” he said, coldly.

“What nonsense, my dear,” replied Mycroft, unabashed, “I simply facilitated his severance from a world he no longer belongs to. What would the alternative be? You must see that there isn’t one.”

Sherlock agreed with his brother, but would rather suffer under torture than admit he was right.

“There are plenty of alternatives,” he huffed, nose in the air, “He could have kept his post and could have accompanied me whenever it suited him.”

The older man arched his eyebrows.

“At the first sign of real trouble, he would have dropped everything and come to your rescue, like the knight in shining armour that you believe he is.”

The eventuality of this being true pleased Sherlock enormously, but he would not concede an inch.

“John is hardly quixotic; in fact, he’s a rather practical sort of fellow. He won’t allow you to interfere.”

“He already has,” replied Mycroft, glancing at his watch. “He’s packing his bags as we speak. Besides, I don’t have time for your silly games, brother mine; I have a date with an old friend of mine.”

“Has that obnoxious chap with a lisp already returned from his transatlantic adventures?”

“If by any chance you are referring to Lord Marchmain, you know very well that it’s quite out of the question. You’re being evasive, which means you know I am right. While I’m enjoying our little skirmish, I am rather pressed for time; what I came to say goes as follows: the Blandford is under strict surveillance, so you’d only scupper the entire thing if you trampled all over it like the proverbial bull in a china shop.”

“I never trample!” protested the younger Holmes.

“You do when you’re convinced that there’s half a chance of real trouble. And this time the stakes are too high even for you.”

The discordant notes returned; a cacophony so strident it set even Sherlock’s teeth on edge. He stopped abruptly and returned the violin to its rightful abode.
“And what is your advice?” he enquired, “Because that’s what you really came here for, isn’t it?”

Mycroft didn’t bother to deny it; he took a silver case from the inner pocket of his jacket and from it, he extracted a slim cigar which he fingered softly, with no apparent intention of lighting it.

“Last night I was at St. George’s Hall for the Elgar, the Dream of Gerontius: perfectly marvellous acoustics. At the interval, I had the pleasure of bumping into a splendid specimen of our aristocracy: none other than Viscount Tremayne. Interesting old darling, with an impeccable memory: he remembered our last meeting and even our conversation. I found it extraordinary.”

“I’ll say,” concurred his brother, “I try to delete our conversations as soon as you’re out of the door. I have to admit that you do tend to stick for longer than one wishes you to, but that a fellow would actually want to remember…”

Mycroft stood up and walked towards the door, his cigar still unlit.

“How very funny,” he said, “Anyway, Tremayne is in London and he will remain here until the end of the week. He’s staying at Marchmain house,” he added.

“You see? I did guess that your lisping paramour was in the picture and he is, in a way.”

The older man sighed, and adjusted his hat so that it sat perfectly straight on his head.

“I shall see you soon. In the meantime, try not to trample over anything, if you can.”

“I’ll be as nimble as a Balanchine dancer,” Sherlock replied, kicking the door shut with a bang.

“We have a friend in common,” said John, his breath a white cloud in the frosty air. “Mike Stamford, used to work at Barts.”

“When you say friend,” argued the detective, “We met a couple of times and he was not as irritating as his colleagues. Why do pathologists care so much about a dead body I will never understand.”

“I think you’ll find most people would object to the flogging of a corpse.”

“Why?” asked the young man, truly puzzled, “I can’t understand it; after all, I wasn’t doing it for my own pleasure, but for the purpose of collecting evidence that would help capture a criminal; practically a charitable endeavour.”

“Yes, you are the epitome of the good samaritan,” said John, grinning. “Anyway, he seems to like you and sends his best wishes.”

“You shouldn’t have told him about us.”

“It was bad enough that I had to lie about the reasons of my leave; I couldn’t also pretend you did not exist. Besides, I didn’t want to.”

Sherlock felt a strange glow spread in his chest, which he attributed to the feeble winter sunshine.

“You are not getting awfully sentimental about this, are you?” he said, casually touching John’s gloved hand with his.

“Heaven forbid,” was the amused reply, “A purely sensible decision, based on the coldest, most
clinical data; not a glimmer of sentiment to be found in it, not the tiniest speck.”

“That’s exactly what I told Mycroft.”

“Your brother came to see you? Is this why we are paying a visit to this old codger?”

Sherlock scowled and pulled up the collar of his cashmere coat, as if preparing for battle.

“He may have suggested that Viscount Tremayne was in London and I may have thought it a good idea to investigate Cummins’ claim about his paternity. The two things are not necessarily connected,” he stated, haughtily.

“Why do I vaguely remember something about this fellow?” asked John, wanting to unruffle his friend’s feathers.

“I might have mentioned him in passing, while you were sleeping.”

“When you used me as a substitute for your skull?”

“Maggars wouldn’t take Mycroft’s side,” replied Sherlock, a fond expression in his eyes. “He couldn’t stand his priggish manners; he was always courteous, but he failed to understand him on purpose. His deafness was never an issue with the rest of the family, only with my brother. And there was nothing the pompous ass could do; it was the most astute of strategies.”

“I’m on your side too,” said John, taking hold of Sherlock’s wrist and squeezing it hard enough to bruise. “Never forget that.”

A sudden calm descended on the young man, like a missing piece had finally slotted into its proper place. That side of his life, the part he’d never considered worthy of attention, was – by a stroke of pure luck – settled for ever. Death and disaster might strike at any moment, but he would always belong to John Watson.

Marchmain House was an imposing, detached town house built in the Palladian style, with its trademark Venetian windows and neat, symmetrical proportions. In stark contrast, the greenery that surrounded it was bleak and unkempt. Lack of gardening personnel was certainly one of the least disheartening consequences of the war, but Sherlock liked to imagine it as one of the reasons for Lord Marchmain’s escape to the Americas. Not that he could accept any sensible excuse for leaving London for a prolonged stretch of time, especially when it could suspiciously appear like desertion, albeit not of the literal sort.

They were greeted by an elderly, straight-backed servant who wore the blank expression of one who’s seen his share of scandals and had to avert his eyes.

He guided them to a stately room that served as a library, facing onto Green Park.

The sumptuous furniture and crimson flock wallpaper conferred on it a gloomy air, despite the valiant efforts of the bright sky and crystalline sunshine peering through the heavy velvet curtains.

“Mr Holmes the younger, I presume,” the words were uttered in a boisterous tone that bounced off the cathedral-high ceiling like a gunshot inside a cave.

Lord Tremayne was every inch the aristocrat, with his iron-grey mane accurately combed in elegant waves, his immaculate Jermyn Street shirt and Savile Row morning suit, and a self-
deprecating smile that seemed to dismiss his own privileged life as a mere result of the throw of a dice.

“Sherlock Holmes,” the detective said with similar hauteur, “And this is Doctor John Watson.”

The introductions were made and sherry was offered, and it was only when they were ensconced in the Chesterfield sofa that the detective noticed that John had adopted a military stance and that their host was noticeably captivated by it.

“I assume your brother must have mentioned our little tête-à-tête; grand old place that St. George’s Hall, pity about the damage; wonderful of them to soldier on despite this jolly awful quandary.”

And then gazing at John, he added, “You must have seen more than your fair share of fatalities, I imagine.”

The doctor nodded, sipping his drink with a pensive expression. He’d decided that he would let his companion do most of the talking, a strategy that seemed to be working in a way he’d not foreseen.

“I don’t wish to appear impertinent,” said Sherlock, who was obviously about to do precisely that, “But I was wondering what brought you to London. Your Hampshire estate is certainly safer than Piccadilly at present.”

Lord Tremayne gave a full-throated laugh that warmed his cerulean eyes.

“Mycroft warned me about you,” he chuckled, “His description was impeccably accurate. I like your sort; directness saves time. And mine is more precious than yours, my boy. As for your question, I am here in order to hire your services, Mr Holmes; yours and those of Doctor Watson, of course. Naturally, I don’t wish to presume that you will drop your ongoing occupations at a moment’s notice.”

“You did know Gordon Cummins then,” suggested the detective.

The Viscount’s face remained impassive, but his eyes betrayed his emotions; there was deep sadness in them, but also a tinge of something akin to irritation or, possibly, anger.

“I met him for the first time a little more than a year ago. It was here, of all places,” he exclaimed, as if surprised by the coincidence. “Marchmain was holding a party to honour the armed forces. Gordon was undergoing his RAF training and was looking forward to being at the centre of things; that’s how he put it. He was a dashing young fellow, with refreshingly earnest manners.”

“Did he speak about his family or his friends?” asked John.

Tremayne reflected for a moment, caressing the base of the sherry glass with his thumb.

“There were a few of his colleagues at the party; they were in friendly enough terms, I suppose. As for his family, no, he did not mention it at the time.”

“On a subsequent occasion perhaps?” ventured Sherlock.

“Yes, we had tea at the Dorchester a week or so after the party, and I believe he said something about a dreary town in Yorkshire,” he said, in a dismissive tone that irked John. “From what I gathered at the time, he didn’t have any living relative.”

“I presume that you are aware of his assertion that you were his real father. Why do you suppose he said that?”
The Viscount waved his hand in a dismissive gesture.

“He knew people wouldn’t believe him and that they would question his mental faculties.”

“Was he trying to avoid a murder charge by pleading insanity?” the doctor asked, trying to conceal his surprise.

“That’s what I would like you to ascertain,” replied the nobleman. “You see, I became quite attached to the boy and I tried to help him; naturally, I couldn’t be publicly associated with him after he was arrested, but I paid for his defence. It was done in a most discreet manner.”

I bet it was, John thought, bitterly.

“Carruthers, that’s the name of the solicitor I employed, was utterly baffled by Gordon’s behaviour. One day he was perfectly sensible, the next he was inventing stories that could never have stood up in court.”

“Perhaps he really was suffering from mental illness,” John suggested.

Tremayne seemed to hang on to his words for an instant, but it was clear that he’d already considered that option and had been forced to discard it, despite the relief it would have provided.

“I try to believe that, but his eyes always told a different story. He was intensely scared of something or someone; perhaps he was even shielding them, I’m not sure.”

“He did insist that he was being used as a scapegoat,” Sherlock suggested.

“Yes, but what good could it do when he would not provide any proof to support his assertions?” said the Viscount.

“I heard his confession, or his statement to be precise, and I believed that he was lying, that someone had told him what to say. I also thought he couldn’t have had enough money to pay for his victims’ services; that those funds too had been provided by the person who had coached him,” observed Sherlock, rather brutally.

“I did provide him with an allowance,” replied the elderly man; his embarrassment translating into defiance, as customary for his class. “Nothing extravagant, just so that he could enjoy himself; time is always precious, and now doubly so.”

“Did he frequently indulge in that sort of pastime?”

For the first time, Tremayne’s debonair armour appeared to have been pierced.

“Not at all; that was the first I heard of it,” he replied, hoarsely. “He didn’t usually appreciate the company of women, not in the least. But when Carruthers tried to allude to it, Gordon refused to cooperate. It was most puzzling.”

“Weren’t you upset that he mentioned your name, that he insisted he was your son?” asked John.

“I would have been, had the newspapers got hold of it, but thankfully we succeeded in keeping them in the dark.”

“Is there anything else you wish to tell us about your relationship with Cummins?” enquired the detective.

The reply - when it came - was a masterpiece of half-truths and embellishments, but the gist of it
was as plain as day: he’d formed an attachment to the dead RAF cadet that was as close to love as
desire is to passion, and for that reason he could never believe the worst of him. Nor could he
leave London for good, since it was the place where he'd last seen his friend alive.
The Baker Street Irregulars

Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John go to 84 Charing Cross Road...

Chapter Notes

Note: Marks & Co of 84 Charing Cross Road was the bookshop depicted in the book and film (starring Anthony Hopkins and Anne Bancroft) of the same name. Leo Marks was indeed 20 (like Sherlock) in 1940. And the organisation I mention really existed and was called The Baker Street Irregulars. As I said in a previous story, the world is a giant Sherlock conspiracy.

Note 2: My description of Oxford Street is taken from the book Life in 1940s London. I only tampered with the dates.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The imagination will concentrate itself upon the waistcoat. Waistcoats will show whether a man can admire poetry or not.”

The Philosophy of Dress (excerpt) – Oscar Wilde

“It bothered you,” said Sherlock, as they walked down Piccadilly in the direction of Regents Street.

The day was swiftly turning into night, painting broad indigo streaks across the frosty dome of the sky.

“What did?” asked John, for there was a multitude of annoyances to choose from.

“You disapproved of Tremayne’s secrecy with regards to his relationship with Cummins. You did that thing with your mouth, same as when I told you that I usually put plenty of sugar in my coffee.”

“He couldn’t have behaved any other way, I suppose. Not in his situation.”

During the silence that followed, the detective’s mind worked feverishly to formulate an appropriate response.

“I hope you know that I would never treat our relationship so underhandedly,” he said, feeling foolish and inadequate.
“You wouldn’t mind introducing me to your friends?”

“I don’t have any friends, except for Maggers and Mrs Hudson.”

“What about Inspector Lestrade?”

Sherlock snorted.

“He tolerates me,” he replied, “I help him and he keeps me around: hardly the stuff friendships are made of.”

“You are not as impossible as you like to paint yourself. It’s all smoke and mirrors, to confuse the lesser mortals who don’t happen to be as brilliant as you. Like now, for instance: where are we going? You clearly have a plan, but you’re distracting me with mind-reading twaddle and cheap psychology.”

“There’s nothing cheap about my methods,” the young man protested, “It’s not my fault if you lesser mortals prefer to engage in idle contemplation rather than painstaking observation. Your body language told me about your reaction to Viscount Tremayne and, likewise, his was very eloquent with regards to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“And now you are doing a beastly job at pretending you haven’t noticed. As soon as you started acting all soldierly, the old darling couldn’t help but dote on you like a mother hen with its chicks.”

John glanced at his friend, his lips curved in a half-smile.

“You don’t need to be jealous, my dear. I thought I’d made it quite clear already, but if you need further reassurances, the Watson firm will be more than eager to provide them.”

“Why would I be jealous of that perishing windbag?”

“That windbag is our client,” remarked John, trying to disguise his amusement, “We should treat him with the utmost respect. And you still haven’t told me where we are going.”

“To visit an old acquaintance,” replied Sherlock, cryptically.

“Not a friend then.”

“Not quite.”

They had reached Oxford Street by then, and the wreckage caused by bombing rendered them speechless: John Lewis had been partially destroyed by the fire; a pitiful attempt had been made to board up its frontage and the entire building resembled the ruins of a Greek temple.

The pavement was littered with what at first had seemed mutilated corpses, but were in fact mannequins. Amongst that desolation, a group of shop workers wearing gas masks were trying to salvage what was left of the merchandise. Some of them were affixing lines of bunting to the debris; the result was as pathetic as a flame-red lipstick on the lips of an octogenarian dowager.

Next door, Bourne and Hollingsworth had been gutted by an HE bomb but, proving their resourcefulness, they were trading through a gap in the frontage.

At Waring & Gillow, the flurry of activity was of an even more serious nature, as a group of soldiers and AFS men were dealing with an unexploded device.
“I wish I could be there with them,” John said, bitterness oozing from every pore, “Do something really useful, dirty my hands.”

“Our time will come, don’t worry,” replied the detective, “Lives can be saved in more ways than one. There’s a type of rot that inflicts more damage than bombs ever will. The loss of life and property is a terrible thing, but betrayal and dishonour are even worse, because they destroy hope and engender cynicism and despair.”

“A rather romantic idea, if you don’t mind me saying so,” remarked the doctor, archly, “You are not surrendering to sentimentality, are you?”

The young man looked mortally offended.

“Not at all,” he argued, “It is a statement of fact that most people in this would rather die than betray their country or see it betrayed by a friend or someone they hold dear.”

“I can’t imagine anything worse except for losing the person you love above all others.”

Sherlock turned towards his friend, his face a study in astonishment.

“You would place that above the loyalty you owe to your country?”

“If someone was threatening to kill you, I would do everything in my power to prevent it. Unless you asked me not to, that is.”

“I would not want you to sacrifice your ethics in order to save my life, if that’s what you are asking.”

“We are in a pretty pickle then,” said the blond man, grinning, “Each willing to burn in hell for the sake of the other. I don’t see how this is going to end up with us living happily ever after.”

“Fairy-tales are unspeakably dull,” said Sherlock, with a smirk, “I prefer the sweat and grit of real life.”

“I don’t mind the sweat, but I doubt your silk shirts would survive the grit of real life.”

“You should know better,” huffed the detective, “In fact, you do know better. Remember where and how we first met. And speaking of that, here we are.”

They had arrived at 84 Charing Cross Road, and the green plaque that announced the ownership of the shop as belonging to Marks & Co, booksellers was a welcome reminder of the long-lost days of peace, when one was allowed to spend lazy afternoons browsing the reduced hardbacks on the pavement stalls, or to sit down and read in the benighted quiet of the church-like interior. Even now, it smelled of musty paper and of the beeswax product that was used to polish the numerous mahogany shelves and tables on which the book reposed, like princesses waiting for a chancy kiss.

Frank Marks – the proprietor - was a rotund man of mousy appearance and unobtrusive manner; like him, his clothes were unremarkable to the point of drabness, except for his waistcoat which was absinthe-green and decorated down its front with two parallel rows of small star-shaped ruby buttons.

“An admirer of poetry,” murmured the detective.

“Mr Holmes,” the man said, his granitic features barely enlivened by a thin smile, “To what do I owe the honour of this visit?”
“This is my friend, Doctor John Watson. I was looking for a copy of the Méthode de Nomenclature Chimique.”

John’s mastery of languages was rudimentary, but he did remember that particular title; he swallowed his surprise and waited for the bookseller’s reply.

“I should have one in the basement,” he said, “if you care to follow me.”

Sherlock nodded and touched his companion’s hand to indicate that he should follow them.

The bowels of the shop were so tightly packed with books that – like Atlas with his globe – they appeared to be supporting the entire edifice. The ancient floorboards creaked at their every step, and the wood boards were blanched and stripped like an ascetic monk’s pallid complexion.

“The walls have ears,” Marks murmured, “rather a trite saying, but we can’t afford to be fastidious. What are you really looking for, my dear Holmes?”

“I would like to know about Leo,” replied Sherlock. “The grapevine told me that he’s working for the War Office, but even my brother doesn’t know the details.”

“And you think I would know? Leo left home and I assume the same goes for you,” he added, glancing briefly in John’s direction.

“My parents live in Sussex. I could never bear to be in the countryside: the mind becomes atrophied and the senses stultified.”

The man’s humid brown eyes brightened.

“London’s pulse is quicker; it enables a fellow to drive life into a corner and reduce it to its lowest terms.”

“And to suck out all the marrow of life,” said the detective, in the same quoting vein.

Aside from their literary - and thus purely abstract – nature, the words carried a sensually evocative power that stunned John, leaving him misty-eyed and filled with inconvenient erotic longing.

“I only want to help Leo, since I fear trouble may soon be crossing his path,” said the detective.

“I know, dear boy, I know. The truth of the matter is that I don’t know, because he wouldn’t say and I couldn’t ask. It is often the case with those we love: fewer words are needed when the heart is overflowing.”

“You are a shrewd businessman, with an innate ability to dig out hidden treasures and untold secrets, this is how Leo described you once, when we were still at Cambridge.”

“Impudent boy,” Marks said, and let out a full-throated laugh.

“One evening last year, I visited him at his lodgings and I’m ashamed to say that I went through his waste-paper basket; I found a scrap of paper with a list of names that had been crossed out; there were a dozen or so, but only one was left untouched: the Baker Street Irregulars. This is truly all I can tell you about Leo’s present occupation.”

“Very well,” replied the detective, amiably. “I will come back soon and ask you about a couple of volumes I’m interested in.”

“Don’t wait too long my lad, or we might no longer be standing.”
“Shouldn’t you take your books away from London? Just a handful of incendiaries could destroy the lot,” said John, as they ascended the narrow staircase.

“I fight the enemy in the only way I can: leading my life as I always have, selling my books and arguing with my suppliers. This dreary routine may seem unadventurous to a lad your age, but to me this is an act of resistance.”

“I would never presume to judge you. In fact, I’m the last person in the world who should.”

“Is it your shoulder?” Marks asked.

John’s eyes widened, in surprise.

“How did you guess?”

“I have been doing this job for longer than I care to remember and you learn to observe people.”

Behind him, Sherlock chuckled.

“He’s a devout follower of the same religion,” the doctor commented.

In the meantime, they had reached the ground floor and it was time for them to take their leave.

“I was a pleasure to see you again, Mr Holmes and to meet you, Doctor Watson. I just have one request about the information I gave you: tread softly, for there is more than Leo’s life at stake,” Marks whispered, as he shook their hand.

“You are not the first person today to give me this sort of advice,” muttered the younger man. “I may start to feel offended.”

The bookseller laughed again and let them out, closing the door after them.

“He seems to know you well,” said John, as his friend hailed a cab, which appeared in front of them with the swiftness usually only found in dreams.

“At Trinity, I was sharing digs with Leo. We didn’t have much in common, but once Mr Marks came down and invited us both to luncheon. I found him infinitely more to my taste.”

“Another Maggers?” his friend suggested.

“Not exactly,” pondered the detective, “I appreciated his sense of humour and his lack of affectation. Completely at odds with the world I had inhabited in my childhood.”

“Is your family really so terrible?”

Sherlock shrugged.

“You have met Mycroft and he’s the best of the lot. As sinister as he is, at least he can still judge a fellow according to his value. My father would never even consider your existence if your name was not in Debrett’s. Once during the Easter vac I brought home one of the scouts; only for a laugh; I paid him handsomely and he had the jolliest of times. My father has never forgiven me.”

“You paid the scout,” said John, quietly; the detective fell silent, as he became aware of his blunder. It was like stumbling through a dark forest disseminated with booby traps.

“The boy needed the money and I wanted to teach my parents a lesson.”
The older man gazed out of the cab window, seeing nothing at all; bits of his childhood played in front of his eyes, like slides in a diorama: the pebble-dash semi-detached in Streatham, his father waking up at the crack of dawn to go the factory, the smell of cabbage, the constant saving and scraping. He won a scholarship, but was already an orphan before he started his training. As it turned out, privations didn’t make people stronger; not in his parents’ case.

He felt Sherlock’s fingers, cold and nervous, on the back of his hand; they lay there, light as a feather and as inert.

“It didn’t occur to me that by placing the scout in that position, I was behaving as horridly as my parents,” he explained.

“Not until a minute ago, apparently,” the blond man said, in the same gentle manner.

“It wasn’t at all like that,” Sherlock exclaimed, his free hand brushing through his already messy curls. “Not half as beastly as you are painting it.”

John glared at him and his voice broke.

“Someone, a young boy, who badly needed some pocket money accepted to be made into a figure of scorn so that you could teach a silly lesson to your pater. Isn’t that what you posh boys call your parents: pater and mater?”

As he spat out the words, he felt a painful twinge in his shoulder and watched in horror as his hands started to shake.

“Let me help,” the detective pleaded, holding the hand below his, and squeezing it with infinite care. His companion looked him in the eye and nodded; his jaw was clenched and his lips bloodless.

“I’m infinitely sorry,” the detective said, his voice thick with emotion. “I shouldn’t have…” he started, but John didn’t let him finish.

“The past is dead and buried,” he said, “Besides, you were little more than a boy.”

“I can do better,” Sherlock, forcefully, “I can be better; if you stay with me.”

“Don’t worry about that, my dear; I won’t let you out of my sight.”

Their brief yet violent disagreement had been like a summer downpour: ruinous while it lasted, but with negligible cooling effects. What it had achieved was to distract them from the task at hand, and it was only at the dinner table that the subject was broached again.

A luscious mushroom omelette with roasted potatoes was a delicacy John wasn’t going to spoil by arguing, so he valiantly ignored his friend’s lack of appetite and allowed the excellent gin to warm his insides.

“The Blandford hotel is only a five minute’s walk from Baker Street,” announced the detective, “And the secret society to which Leo belongs is called the Baker Street Irregulars; I don’t believe in coincidences, and certainly not in this instance.”

“Your brother must know about their activities; perhaps he’s lying to you.”
“Trust me, I know when Mycroft is withholding information: the point of his nose starts twitching; always the same flaw, ever since we were infants.”

“What made you think of Marks?”

“His name cropped up because my brother had spotted him in the toilets at the War Office. Leo did not realise he’d been recognised: he was always a very mousy fellow, not unlike his father, and he could always go unnoticed if he chose to.”

“What gave him away?” asked John, as he poured some water into his glass to dilute the gin.

“Did you notice his father’s waistcoat?”

“I’d have to be blind not to. I have never seen that shade of green outside of the National Gallery.”

Sherlock chuckled and deigned to ingest a potato.

“His son’s predilection is for gaudy socks. Mycroft caught a glimpse of fuchsia and Leo’s jig was up.”

They gazed at each other and burst into laughter, and it was like the incident in the cab had never happened.

“We should celebrate your first night as a bona-fide lodger of 221B.”

“I should hate to be interrupted again.”

The detective lit a cigarette and gazed up at his friend from beneath his long lashes.

“No one would dare, not at this hour,” he murmured.

“What about Mrs Hudson?” John asked, taking the Black Cat from the detective’s lips and placing it between his own. He sucked on it with decision; it wasn’t a flirty gesture, nor was it a vulgar one; and for all this, it was deeply effective, as Sherlock’s pupils dilated and his tongue felt thick and heavy inside his mouth.

“She won’t disturb us,” he managed to say, and the older man was already taking him by the hand and guiding him towards the sitting room.

“I would like to undress you,” John said, as they stood in front of the fireplace. He threw the cigarette in the flames, and when he turned, Sherlock was staring wildly at him, ready for the plucking.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the cliffhanger, but there will be plenty of sex + action in the next chapter.
Sackcloth and Ashes

Chapter Summary

Sex and explosions, basically.

Thanks to my lovely readers: you are the best!

“It came about when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently”

Kings 21:27

Sherlock was wearing his flimsiest dressing gown and an old cotton pyjama, so threadbare that his translucent skin shone through it, like the sun beneath a layer of wispy clouds. After the afternoon’s debacle, he had resisted the impulse of shutting himself away in the study, but when the time had come to dress for dinner, he cast one look at his collection of silk and cashmere robes de chambre and shuddered. Truly, there was no need to be ashamed, he reproached himself, and yet he couldn’t repress his desire for atonement, a yearning for sackcloth and ashes.

Thus, when both men stood facing one another astride the hearthrug, the detective’s clad erection was as apparent as if he had been naked.

“My poor love,” John murmured, palming the young man’s groin with increasing urgency, “Let’s offer you some respite”, he added, as he kissed down Sherlock’s throat.

Presently and with one swift gesture, he pulled the pyjama’s elastic waistband down and underneath the detective’s taut sac.

Sherlock’s prick leapt up, slapping against the flat abdomen, but the blond man did not touch it. He emitted a strangled growl and licked his lips, yet did not relent, evincing a string of pleading moans from his frustrated lover.

“Let me take care of you,” said John, undoing the long row of small mother-of-pearl buttons; consumed by age and usage, they slipped silkily through their holes, and in a short while, Sherlock’s pale torso emerged from it, white as sea foam.

Before the youth could assess what was happening, his friend had stroked and rubbed down his chest, his stomach and his sides, licking as he went, whipping up Sherlock’s desire to an almost unbearable pitch. The ache between his legs had worked itself into a dull throb that worsened with every heartbeat, while a stream of juice dribbled down his shaft, begging to be licked off.

Vaguely, he heard John disrobe and after he’d taken care of that, the older man positioned himself behind his lover and removed his pyjama pants.
“Brace yourself against the mantelpiece and splay your legs,” he ordered.

John would never consider punishing Sherlock for a misdeed of his youth; not only was the past dead and gone, but it also belonged to another era in which there had been no war and life had been more innocent. There was no malice in the detective’s behaviour, of that he was sure.

No, he had not wished to inflict a form of erotic torture, but as soon as he’d set eyes on the young man’s revealing garments, something inside of him had snapped.

At dinner, sitting down and with scarce illumination, he had not noticed it, but the situation had changed when they had moved to the sitting room.

Sherlock’s manhood was a tempting snake coiled beneath the fabric; one look at it and John knew what he wanted and how he wanted it.

He scooped it out and enjoyed the soft slide of Sherlock’s skin beneath his fingers, even as the brine of their sex was permeating the room.

The young man was losing his head over his lover’s negligence, trembling and begging; his urgency was reverberating down John’s veins, pulsating like an additional heart at the pit of his abdomen.

His clothes, soft and well-worn as they were, chafed and constricted him, so he quickly undressed; he removed Sherlock’s pants with the same cool efficiency.

It was then that it came to him that he’d never really paid attention to the young man’s rear side, to his back, loins and buttocks, and that it was time to address that shameful inattention.

After he made the detective lean forward, legs open wide, John was able to contemplate the spectacle of fleshy, rounded perfection barely caressed by the hem of the threadbare shirt.

“Oh dear Lord,” he husked, and went to work on it.

For a young man of his class and education, not to mention his brains and striking looks, Sherlock was exceptionally green. It wasn’t that he had not seen nudity or encountered eroticism, but that he had managed to isolate those experiences and observe them with a scientist’s detachment. Even in the throes of perception-altering substances, his mental faculties had prevailed over his physical needs, planting their scornful flag on the territory and declaring it conquered.

As his body regained control of the proceedings, the stirrings of shame were, at times, inevitable.

When he felt John’s fingers stroke and knead his buttocks, he flushed red like he’d been just sprayed with colour; his lover then did something even dirtier: he pulled the two mounds apart and licked along the seam of them, stopping short of his anus.

If he’d been fully cognisant, he’d have spotted the pattern; as it was, he had quite enough of a job by staying on his own two legs and resisting the need to scream and beg and frot against John until he was empty and sated.

“Fist it,” the blond man commanded, his breath hot against the ring of furled muscle; “I want to feel you masturbate,” he added, as he closed his hand around the distended sac and started pulling
gently at Sherlock’s testicles.

Reality became strangely blurred and fragmented then: the detective was aware of his own urgency, of the slick sound of his own hand stroking at maddening speed, the sweat that veered strangely between hot and cold, and at the centre of it all, John’s mouth and hands torturing him with a needling pleasure that was teetering on the edge of pain.

The end came when at last, the blond man allowed the broad tip of his thumb to breach his lover’s entrance. After having denied him so cruelly the capitulation was unexpected, forcing a loud scream from Sherlock’s lips and a violent tremor which unsettled his entire frame; not content with that, John pressed his palm to the youth’s groin, close to the root of his prick, massaging it roughly; that was it for the boy, who sobbed and shook and emptied himself onto the dying fire embers.

Later they adjourned to Sherlock’s room, which was closest and had a bigger bed.

Time was leisurely spent touching the bits that had been overlooked and exchanging deep, searching kisses.

“You didn’t, oh, didn’t,” the detective tried to articulate, but was thrown off-piste by the blissful sensation emanating from his nipples, which were being rolled, tweaked and pinched.

“Didn’t what?”

“If you only, oh Christ!” he cried, as teeth and tongue joined the steamy party.

“Climax,” he managed to choke out, causing his lover to giggle in the most endearing way.

“You were too distracted to notice that I took care of that well before your fireworks began, my dear.”

“What if I wanted to lend a hand?”

“You did plenty as it was,” John replied, kissing the young man’s pouting mouth.

They let the minutes elapse, relishing the touch of each other’s skin, but since there was a nagging thought tormenting the detective’s mind it wasn’t long before the spell was broken.

“Why didn’t you penetrate me?” he asked, abruptly. He daren’t look his lover in the eye, but he would not be thwarted by pointless timidity, “Is it a practice you find distasteful?”

“Trust you to demand everything and at once,” the older man replied, twisting a curl around his finger and tugging softly.

The sackcloth and ashes made a swift comeback, and Sherlock cuddled back into his lover’s arms. “I am perfectly content, as a matter of fact,” he murmured and closed his eyes.

“Want me to sod you then?” John asked after a while, grinning. There was nothing he craved more, but he was hardly going to confess it at that juncture.

“Hmm,” was the young man’s reply, and he was concocting a plan to obtain what he wanted when the walls were shaken by a thunderous explosion.
“Put something on, we are going down to the shelter.”

Instinctively, John had covered his lover’s body with his own; when the danger had passed, he jumped off the bed and was dressing as fast he could, while Sherlock lay back against his pillows like a smug pasha.

“I’m not telling you twice,” he said, and glared at the detective, who sighed, got up and slung a blanket across his thin shoulders.

“I don’t want Mrs Hudson to get an eyeful,” John complained, “Here, put this on,” he ordered, handing Sherlock a cashmere dressing gown that was draped over the back of a chair.

“She won’t be there,” the youth replied, as he was being dragged towards the front door like a recalcitrant donkey. “She likes company, so she usually goes to the Turners’: they have one of those corrugated steel Anderson shelters; ghastly death-traps; but then again they would be, what with that name.”

The doctor was about to ask for clarifications, but another explosion, even louder than the first, sent both men tumbling down the stairs.

Neither man was seriously hurt: John had a shallow cut on his right forearm while Sherlock’s nose was bleeding profusely. There were bits of plaster in their hair and a coating of dirt and powder on their faces and garments.

Still shell-shocked, they hurried down the flight of stairs that led to the cellar.

The door was a sturdy, fire-retardant affair and thankfully it opened without a hitch.

The detective switched the lights on; his face was a gruesome mask.

“Head back, pinch the bridge of your nose and breathe through your mouth,” John said, ignoring his own injury. “Is there a first-aid box in this… palace of luxury?”

“We had to consider the eventuality of being trapped inside here for a long time, hence the amenities.”

“There’s even a refrigerator,” exclaimed the blond man, with a mixture of surprise and annoyance.

“You can shout at me later,” muttered Sherlock, “There’s a wash-room on your left.”

“Course there is.”

Somewhere up above them, London was being put to the sword.

John tended to his friend’s nose while the young man kept mumbling about his skull and microscope.

“You never come down here, I bet,” the doctor said, as he disinfected his cut and covered it with an adhesive bandage.

“What for?” the detective huffed, “Nothing will destroy this building; it’s inconceivable.”

“The Luftwaffe is begging to differ; we could have died out there.”

“I should go back for Maggers; if anything should happen to him,” said Sherlock, shivering at the thought.
“You are not going anywhere; your nose is still bleeding, for one.”

“And to think you were an ARP warden,” replied the detective, in a tone redolent of lese-majesty.

“I would still be if weren’t for your brother, but that’s neither here or there. We would only be wasting some poor sods’ time, if we get trapped underneath the ruins. Don’t think on it. Tell me about the Anderson shelter’s name,” John said, sitting more comfortably in the plush leather chair.

“What… oh that,” replied the young man, scowling, “Anderson is the coroner who works with Lestrade. He hates me and I have to admit it’s entirely mutual.”

“I’m sure you’re about to tell me why.”

“Unlike Stamford, who may not have the sharpest of minds but knows his job, Anderson is slap-dash at best and incompetent in the majority of cases.”

“Did he examine the victims of the Ripper?”

“As far as I know,” said Sherlock, whose voice was still muffled by the cotton balls stuffed up his nostrils. “I told you that I was already too late. They’d arrested the chap and, because they didn’t want the nation’s morale to be affected, the trial and conviction were speedy affairs.”

“Greta Hayward attracted your attention because of the alibi and the place where she was killed, but what about the other victims? There were three of them, or so I remember.”

“The first, Evelyn Oatley, a street walker, was found strangled in her flat. The second, Katherine King, a Soho dancer, was found two days later in the basement of the club she worked in: her body and face had been brutally mutilated. She was identified by her clothes and by her documents. Three days after that, it was Greta Hayward’s turn, but this time the alleged killer had left his fingerprints and his billet pass book. Cummins was arrested and you know the rest. I was wrapping up another investigation, which is why it took me over a month to get reacquainted with this case.”

“Why were they so certain it was the same man who’d done them all in?”

“There were similarities in the modus operandi, in the way the clothes had been torn and the nylons ripped, the fact that none of the victims had been interfered with in a sexual manner and that the killer had given each of them a five pound note. The notes were new and seemed to come from the same batch. On the last one – the one found at the Blandford – they found his fingerprints.”

“What do you know about the other two victims?”

“Nothing much, aside from what the papers printed, which isn’t worth a farthing. Lestrade refused to cooperate; after all, he got his man and, since there have been no more such murders since Cummins was hanged, it will be hard to convince him otherwise.”

“Thanks to the man you called a perishing windbag, we can force the Inspector to reopen the case,” said John, “At the very least, he will have to share what information he had with us. And should we suspect foul play, we could well obtain permission to exhume the bodies and have another pathologist examine them. I bet Stamford wouldn’t mind.”

Sherlock’s face lit up and for a while all his woes were forgotten.

“You’re a marvellous conductor of light, my dear,” he exclaimed, and went to look for a bottle to celebrate with.
“Don’t tell me you keep champagne in here,” said John, who was secretly preening at the compliment.

“Where do you want me to stock wine if not in the cellar?”

And there, he had done it again, he thought. But as he hazarded a side-glance at his companion, he observed nothing of the anger and tension that John had displayed that afternoon in the cab.

“Give us a glass then, what are you waiting for?”

The detective decided that the occasion demanded something less frivolous than a fizzy drink, so he uncorked a bottle of Montrachet; it happened to be Mycroft’s favourite, which redoubled the pleasure he took in sharing it with John.

They drank it slowly, listening to the faraway rumble of death, wishing it gone; the famous combination of alcohol and lovemaking induced in them a stupor that soon metamorphosed into oblivion.

The following morning, when they emerged from their enforced seclusion, they were glad to find that the building had survived the night.

“Oh my dear boys, here you are! I was ever so worried.”

Mrs Hudson, immaculately dressed and coiffed, greeted them with a warm smile and worry in her kind brown eyes.

“Surely this is the first place you should have tried,” said John, trying to lighten the mood. The lady shot him a derisive look and snorted loudly.

“His majesty here has never been set foot in a shelter, especially not his own,” she said, but was mollified by the sight of the young man’s swollen nose.

“I left the morning papers for you upstairs and a pot of fresh coffee. There’s bread and marmalade too, and sausages on the hot plate. I tidied up a bit; the books had been dashed about, but thankfully those new window panes seem to be doing the trick.”

“You are a treasure,” John replied, pushing his scoffing friend towards the stairs.

“Get him to eat something before he tackles the newspapers,” she whispered as soon as the detective was out of earshot.

“What is it?” he murmured back.

“Keep him away from the Morning Post,” she replied. “Better hurry up or it’ll be too late.”

“What was she muttering about? Not about food again, I hope,” protested the detective, whose first port of call had been the shelf that housed his beloved skull. Mrs Hudson had done her best to put every object back in its proper place, but evidently it hadn’t been enough. Sherlock was rearranging the papers on the sitting room desk, when he suddenly realised his friend had not replied.

“John,” he called, and hurried to the kitchen, “why aren’t you talking?”
“I’m setting the table for breakfast, that’s why,” the man replied, but the detective stared at him as he poured the coffee, and guessed something was out of joint.

“Your shoulder isn’t hurting again, I hope?”

“Course it bloody hurts, but I can bear it.”

“I would never dream to suggest otherwise; if that’s not it, what then?”

He scanned the room and his gaze fell upon the pile of newspapers: Mrs Hudson always put the Post on top, because it was the one with the freshest news, but this morning she seemed to have changed her routine. It could be that she was unsettled by the events of the previous night, but even that wouldn’t account for the change of such an ingrained habit. It came natural to her; she didn’t have to think about it.

“You’ve read the Post,” he said, and by John’s reaction, he knew he had guessed correctly.

“Have some coffee at least,” the man said, but Sherlock had already grabbed the newspaper and spotted the incriminated article.

“I’m so sorry, my dear,” John said. “The Blandford Hotel was hit by a large cluster of incendiaries; ancient building, lots of wood; it burnt to a crisp before the fire services could get there.”

“But it says here that the buildings that flanked it were left untouched,” Sherlock said, as he read the report, which was in the Post’s usual sensational, ungrammatical style.

“It happens all the time, as you know only too well.”

“One of them is the Evangelical Library,” protested the detective. “Books, mountains of them; and why weren’t the AFS there in time? It is Baker Street after all, not ruddy Old Kent Road!”

“I haven’t looked outside yet, but I bet a few more building will have disappeared.”

“This wasn’t a random attack, I tell you,” Sherlock insisted. “It was meticulously planned and executed. We have to go there now, before they destroy all the evidence.”

“And what do you propose we do?”

“Collect samples of the exploded devices, for starters,” replied the young man. “What about the lack of fatalities? The article said the hotel had been evacuated two hours before the air-raid started. Why did that happen? You’d think the chinless wonders who write this pap would know the rudiments of investigative journalism, but no, my dear, no such luck! We shall have to do their job for them.”
By The World Forgot

Chapter Summary

Our boys go to the Evangelical Library. They might go back there at night, if Sherlock manages to convince his very stubborn friend.

Chapter Notes

Note: The poem by Hardy is The Riddle. "Stretching eyes west Over the sea, Wind foul or fair, Always stood she Prospect-impressed; Solely out there Did her gaze rest, Never elsewhere Seemed charm to be"

Note 2: The Father Brown story is The Queer Foot and it is referenced in Brideshead Revisited.

Note 3: I have tampered with the facts pertaining to the Evangelical Library, but it does exist and used to be where I said it was. Now it's in North London ( Bounds Green)

“How happy is the blameless vestal's lot!
The world forgetting, by the world forgot.
Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!
Each pray'r accepted, and each wish resign'd”

Eloisa to Abelard (excerpt) – Alexander Pope

“Will you tell me,” urged John, who was the very picture of befuddlement, as he tried to keep up with Sherlock’s longer strides, “Why are we dressed like vicars and going to the Evangelical Library, rather than, quoting your words, doing the chinless wonders’ work for them?”

“A sober choice of attire doesn’t necessarily mean that we’ve suddenly taken holy orders,” replied the detective.

“Stop quibbling and explain, please,” said John, who was inches from losing his temper.

“I don’t think it wise,” replied Sherlock with a swagger that tipped his friend even more over the edge. “You see, it came to me as I was rearranging my books on the shelves.”
“What did?”

“This idea which I don’t want to tell you about. We may have to improvise and a certain amount of dishonesty might be needed. I don’t believe you are an adequate liar.”

That was it; the rubber band had snapped at last. The doctor stopped dead in the middle of the empty, crater-pitted pavement and crossed his arms over his chest in a belligerent manner.

It took Sherlock a few moments to realise his companion was no longer by his side; when he did, he sighed deeply and rolled his eyes, as if he’d been dealing with a naughty child.

“I’m paying you a compliment,” he said, “Your nature is so unspoilt and devoid of artifice that any attempt at dissembling would be painfully noticeable.”

“I’m a qualified physician and I was about to become a soldier, if it hadn’t been for this! And now I am supposed to follow you around like a faithful dog, yapping on occasion, but only as long as I don’t disturb the precious flow of your clever ideas. If you believe my presence to be only a source of trouble, why have me here at all? I could go back to my duties and we could still live together and be… whatever we are.”

The detective’s expression became one of astonishment mixed with sadness.

“I don’t want you to leave; I’m just asking you to trust me. Improvise, play it by ear, I’m sure you’ll be brilliant at it,” he exclaimed, gesticulating like a conjurer.

Against his better judgement, John started to laugh.

“You maybe a genius, but you are abysmal at flattery,” he chuckled. “We are doing as you say, but if things get tasty, I shall intervene in the way I see fit.”

“Bring your gun?”

“Course I did, you maniac. For all I know, this place may be crawling with Jerries.”

“They wouldn’t be quite so blatant.”

“Probably not,” the older man concurred, having recovered his good spirits.

They had reached the tube station and the scene that greeted them was a depressing one: gutted buildings, charred belongings disseminated along the pavement and the street, shattered windows facing onto desolate nothingness, heaps of rubble among which a handful of scruffy kids played hopscotch.

“We are the lucky ones,” John murmured, feeling deeply ashamed of their late-night Montrachet-soaked feast inside their luxury shelter, while other people had lost their possessions and even their lives. He was no different from the rich crowds who quaffed cocktails at the Savoy or partied at the Café de Paris, he thought with disgust.

“You are nothing like them,” Sherlock said, which made him believe he’d said it out loud. He hadn’t.

They crossed the Marylebone road, took a left and a right and reached Chiltern Street.

It was, like the Post has described it; an impressive sight: the block of flats to the left of the Hotel and the Library to the right were still intact albeit a little worse for wear, while the Blandford had
been razed to the ground and was nothing but a mountain of debris. A dozen fire officers and soldiers were dousing the last of the flames and searching for unexploded devices.

“There’s nothing left,” marvelled John, his mouth agape.

“It was one of the oldest constructions in the area; a mock Tudor monstrosity usually patronised by foreign tourists who believed they were getting the ‘ye olde England’ experience.”

As they got closer to the cordoned-off site, the stench of smoke and of wet, charred wood became almost unbearable.

“I say, have a look at this and tell me what you think,” said Sherlock, collecting the remains of an incendiary bomb and passing to his companion.

“The tin plate casing is burnt, but not as damaged as it would be if it had been dropped from a considerable altitude. But that’s not possible!” he said, carefully returning the object to his friend.

“I bet my entire ashes collection that the fire was started by other means and that the incendiaries were thrown in afterwards, to muddy the waters.”

“Would you two gents please move away? Nothing to see here,” shouted a fireman, a short fellow with a grimy face and tired eyes.

Sherlock immediately assumed his full upper-class identity; posh drawl, scatterbrained patter and all the other trimmings of arrogance and self-entitlement.

“My old governess, bless her departed soul, used to treat her nieces when they came up to London; she always mentioned the Blandford; used to positively rave about it. I hope there haven’t been too many fatalities,” he enquired, offering the man a Black Cat and eagerly lighting it for him.

The officer, a thick-set lad younger than John and of the same class, accepted the cigarette, but regarded the detective and his companion with diffidence.

“They must form an odd couple, the blond man reflected: severely attired in black, Sherlock with his top hat and starched shirt collar and John, more modest with bowler hat and shabby overcoat.

“Rum business, but at least no one’s croaked,” the man said, smoking with evident relish. “They were told to clear out hours before the ack-ack fire started.”

“How extraordinary,” commented the detective, in a fatuous tone, “I hope it wasn’t one of those clairvoyant fellows; my mater used to see a ghastly painted hag who told her the most frightful fibs.” He curled his nose in distaste and caught John’s gaze, which was filled with barely suppressed mirth.

“Nothing of the sort, sir; the order came from high,” the lad explained, “I don’t mean God, of course,” he added, half-smiling. “Government, don’t know which Ministry.”

“A providential intervention, that’s for sure,” commented the doctor.

“We’ll leave you to your duties, dear chap,” concluded Sherlock, touching the brim of his hat in salutation.

“You two gents be sure to tread with caution,” the officer said, and crushed the fag end under his sturdy boot.
The performance stirred something in the detective’s insides and for a while he stood there, stockstill, like the prospect-impressed lady of the Hardy poem.

“Enjoying the view?” asked John, not without a tinge of jealousy.

“Don’t be silly,” the young man bridled. “I couldn’t tell you what colour his eyes were.”

“You could invite him home for a wash and find out the exact shade of his hair.”

“It wasn’t that at all,” said the detective, curtly.

“Oh, I see,” said John, who was starting to piece it all together. “You liked his boots and what he did with them.”

“Maybe,” replied Sherlock, trying for nonchalance and fooling absolutely no-one.

“Dear me, aren’t you going to be a thorn in my side. Come along, before I drag you back to bed.”

“That turn of phrase is hardly helping.”

“Remember that we’re men of the cloth.”

“Just shut up.”

The building that housed the Evangelical Library was a more resilient, albeit uglier, construction than its unfortunate neighbour: a tall and narrow Georgian red-brick with twelve-panel windows and a forbidding entrance portal made of polished mahogany. The brass handle glinted in the pale winter morning, even as it was speckled here and there with cinders.

The knocker produced a booming sound which suggested a cavernous emptiness on the other side of the door.

The man who responded to their summons was a blue-eyed elderly child, or at least that’s how John would have described him: a spare, monastic type with a domed forehead and aquiline nose, he had pale, veined hands whose skin had the appearance of creased vellum paper. His watery periwinkle eyes were guileless and unused to daylight. He was like a vestal: contented in his role and overlooked by the world.

“Oh dear, I’m afraid we are all at sixes and sevens today. Have you come to collect the rest of the crates? Of course not, what am I saying? You must be here to make use of our services, but I fear that’s impossible.”

“I’m Holmes and this is my friend, Doctor Watson.”

“Geoffrey Williamson, at your service,” the old darling said, offering his hand which neither man dared shake too heartily for fear of breaking it.

“We’ve been given your name by a good friend of ours, the vicar of Chipping Norton,” said Sherlock, in a pious sotto-voce, “He said you had the most marvellous...I mean, the best collection of Vulgate Latin bibles. Terrible times an all that, but we were hoping you’d still be here.”

Williamson shook his head and invited them to follow him. His gait was in stark contrast with his august appearance: he lolloped along the dark and humid hallway, hunching his shoulders to ward off the cold.
The main body of the library was a vast and well-lit room, but the light that streamed through the numerous windows did nothing to alleviate the sense of abandonment that always characterises a recently vacated abode.

Ponderous mahogany and chestnut shelves lined the walls and the marks on the discoloured carpet indicated the places where chairs and tabled had been.

Crates and boxes were stacked on one side against a wall and the stone hearth had been brushed clean and was evidently out of commission.

“It is a sad moment, when your life is uprooted and who knows for how long. I shall miss London and the company of our loyal members.”

“Where are you moving to?” asked John.

“A small village in Surrey… Beddington is the name. Never heard of it in my life… always been a Londoner. Not easy to start anew at my age, but the Lord will show us the way, won’t he?”

“Indeed,” said Sherlock, with compunction. “He was watching over you last night, that’s for sure.”

The old man’s nose twitched visibly and his eyes narrowed, showing his crepey eyelids, bluish and frail.

“Something not quite right, recently,” he said, in his telegraphic manner, “People using the security entrance at the back, coming and going too frequently.”

“Thick walls you have here,” commented John, trying to appear indifferent, “You must have formidable hearing.”

Williamson chortled, a sweet, child-like laugh that revealed the unevenness of his teeth.

“I wish it were so, my dear boy,” he said, gasping a little, “We are as quiet as the grave here and that door of theirs was squeaking like the gates of hell. I almost lodged a complaint, but it seemed trivial, with all that’s going on.”

“I assuming that was during the daytime,” said Sherlock.

“At night too, my lad,” replied Williamson, “I live here, you see? Or lived, I should say. As the custodian of the Library, I was granted permission to reside on the premises. Comfortable I was, too,” he added, wistfully.

“I imagine it must have been a nuisance,” said the doctor. “Noises are always amplified when you are used to silence.”

“Precisely, my friend, you hit the nail right on the head, if you permit the pedestrian idiom. All of a sudden, people where coming and going like at Oxford Street.”

“Wasn’t it here that someone, a girl I believe, was murdered?” asked the detective.

“Terrible thing the slaughter of innocents,” proclaimed the old man, who was about to steer the conversation towards more pious matters.

“The killer was apprehended, so justice was served,” suggested John, who did not believe in any higher power and hoped not to be tested on that score.

“Earthly justice, perhaps,” replied Williamson, with a sigh. His next words though were nothing to
do with the Testaments. “The comings and goings didn’t cease after that, quite the opposite; a mystery that will never be solved, alas.”

“Do you like mysteries?” asked the detective.

The old man edged closer to them, craning his stringy neck forward, like a bird.

“I have to confess a partiality for detective stories. Father Brown is a great favourite of mine. There’s a great line in his collection of novellas.”

“I caught him, with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world, and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread,” quoted Sherlock.

“But that’s exactly the one, my dear boy,” the librarian exclaimed, “You are a mind reader.”

“Isn’t he just,” muttered the blond man.

“I don’t mind a good story either, when the time is right. There’s such satisfaction in a symmetrical conclusion, in which all the loose ends have been tied up and all evil uprooted like a poisonous weed,” said the detective, who had never read a work of what he considered cheap fiction in his life. The bit he’d just quoted had been part of a lecture on guilt that he’d been forced to attend and that he remembered precisely because he’d contested all the assumptions that had been posited in the course of it. It was a frequent occurrence with him, that he recalled arguments and disagreements with great clarity.

“Something we seldom achieve in our daily lives,” agreed Williamson.

“We don’t want to keep you; I am sure you have plenty more to do. I was just wondering: what are the owners going to do with this building?” asked Sherlock, “They won’t leave it empty, I hope.”

“The Evangelical Society will take care of it,” replied the old man, “Good, caring people. Made sure we had a safe place to move to, paid handsomely for the removal.”

“It must have been decided quite a long while ago,” suggested John.

“December, that was when we received the letter,” said Williamson. “Everything was stated as clear as day. There was a photo of the new location too; charming place, painted white and with green window shutters; cosy, that’s what I call it; reminded me of Wordsworth, for some reason.”

“An epistle seems a rather impersonal way of going about it, if you don’t mind me saying so,” John commented.

“It’s their way,” said Williamson, looking up at the ceiling as if God itself had written the missive. “Busy people, they are. Always punctual with money for new purchases or petty cash for repairs; can’t complain.”

“The saintly are always secretive,” said Sherlock, and his friend almost choked in order to suppress his laughter. “They don’t seek gratitude.”

“Well put, dear lad, excellent gift of the gab, imperative for a vicar.”

John dearly wished they would leave, as it was getting increasingly difficult for him to stay serious.

“Would you write down your new address in my notebook?” Sherlock asked, presenting a leather-bound diary that fit into the palm of his hand.
“Most assuredly, my dear friend,” Williamson said, and plucking a pencil from one of the pockets of his jacket, he proceeded to scribble the required information in a spidery hand.

“Take good care of yourself,” said John, as they took their leave, and the man thanked them profusely.

They left him on the threshold, his transparent eyes filled with the wonder of this novel friendship.

“What was that about?” asked the doctor, as soon as the door closed behind them. “Your reluctance to explain to me what we were about to do, I mean. Harmless old bird, wasn’t he? Where are you going?” he called out, as his friend disappeared around the corner. When he caught up with him, he was inspecting the back of the building.

“Didn’t you smell something?” he asked.

“What, like a whiff of evil, you mean?” asked the doctor.

“No, I mean a real, physical stench,” replied Sherlock, with an exasperated sigh.

“The building next door has just gone up in flames. I’m reeking of smoke, so do you and so does the air around here.”

“It wasn’t smoke nor was it an organic sort of smell.”

“Explosives contain any manner of chemicals.”

“Perhaps you are right,” conceded the detective. “I wish I hadn’t listened to Mycroft or to you. If I had come here before, we would not have been pipped to the post.”

“Surely your brother knows the identity of these mysterious nightly visitors; he must be the one who ordered the evacuation of the hotel.”

“I doubt that very much,” replied Sherlock.

“He was the one who told you the Blandford was being watched and that we should keep away: of course he knows.”

“It’s not how my dear brother operates. The mere fact that he warned me tells me that there are vast gaps in his knowledge; fatal gaps, that we could have filled by coming here while the building was still standing!”

“No use shouting at me, my dear. The horse has bolted and who knows where to.”

“Here, look at this,” the young man said, indicating the stairs that led to the basement.

“What of it?”

“What if the door that he heard banging wasn’t the one next door but this one, in his own building?”

John observed the door in question: it was in good condition and made of sturdy-looking metal.

“I’m not sure I like this possibility,” he whispered, patting the pocket that contained his revolver. “I think we better leave while we are still in one piece.”

“I concur most heartily. We will come back tonight, after all these busybodies have gone. I have
just the perfect key for this lock.”

Watson grabbed his companion’s arm and led him away.

They walked in silence until they passed the tube station and as they approached their lodgings, they saw the Humber Pullman parked in front of the cafeteria next door to 221B.

“Speak of the devil,” murmured John.

“Not a figure of speech in this case,” replied Sherlock, with a mighty scowl.
Laughter was the last sound Sherlock had expected to hear.

John turned towards his friend and saw a look of astonishment painted on the man’s features, mixed with profound distaste.

Mrs Hudson had decided to keep to his lodgings, which indicated her unwillingness in dealing with what she deemed was as unusual an occurrence as Sherlock demanding to be fed or the sun revolving around the earth.

“Say, I was thinking of nipping off to the British Library and take a gander at what the papers wrote about the case. Make sure I haven’t missed anything,” the detective said, retracing his steps. However, John was quicker and grabbed him by the scruff of his coat collar, holding on to him like one would to a hissing cat.

“You are not going anywhere,” he cautioned. “Face the music, my dear, that’s what life’s about; even yours.”

“I’m not quite sure what you are implying, but…”

“The British Library can wait,” stated John, and opened the front door, dragging the detective after him.

In the drawing room, sitting around a steaming teapot and a dish of buttered muffins, they found Mycroft Holmes in the company of a well-built man with an attractive face whose youthful appearance contrasted with the greyness of his hair.

The two men seemed to be enjoying each other company, to the point that the elder Holmes could even be mistaken for a fully-formed human being.

“Inspector Lestrade has kindly consented to wait here for you, brother mine. I cannot fathom why a man of his standing would stoop to such inexplicable behaviour, but I guess that wonders never
The Yarder laughed heartily and the detective glowered at him, hoping that his disapproval would succeed in breaking up that detestable entente.

“I trust you have something important to convey, since you chose not to use the telephone,” the younger man hissed, directing his glacial stare at his sibling.

“Telephones can be tapped,” replied the elder Holmes, with a smug grin that John felt in his fists. “Besides, I wanted to make sure you hadn’t ventured out last night. I was glad to know that your new friend has already exerted a positive influence and restrained your juvenile antics. Mrs Hudson told me about the shelter.”

“Did she really?” Sherlock snarled.

“When I say told…” his brother said, winking at Lestrade, who had the good grace of biting his lips before they could curve into a smile.

The brief conversation had already reached an impasse, which was broken by John introducing himself to the Inspector; hands were shaken and tea was served, in the best of English traditions.

“It’s about the Ripper case,” said the Inspector, who’d concluded that Mycroft could be allowed into the secret. Sherlock, predictably, was vehemently opposed to the idea.

“Let my brother state his case first,” he said, still staring at his sibling, who sighed and rolled his eyes.

“You already know about the Blandford, obviously. We didn’t give the evacuation order.”

“We, meaning…”

“Meaning that someone has been very clever and we can’t get to the source of it. Lives have been saved, so we can hardly waste our precious time in finding out: that’s the Cabinet’s line.”

“Your surveillance wasn’t up to snuff,” commented John, as he sipped his brew.

Mycroft grimaced, resenting the accusation but unable to deny it.

“Our men’s attention was diverted, for obvious reasons. This is not a game, Doctor Watson.”

The gall of the man! Sherlock saw his friend’s features tighten and wished, not for the first time, that he could change his brother into a turnip.

“Unlike you, Mr Holmes, I never thought a man’s life was a game to be trifled with. Some of us don’t like being treated like puppets on strings,” the doctor said, in the placid and deadly tone that Sherlock had already learnt to fear.

“My sincerest apologies,” murmured Mycroft, swallowing the last of his tea. He then set the china mug back on its saucer with finicky precision. After that, adjusted his undertaker-like attire and took his leave, which was unduly warm when it came to Lestrade. The two older men shook hands firmly, at which the detective cringed, certain that he wouldn’t be able to sit down to luncheon, no matter what John threatened him with.

“What about the Ripper then?” he asked, as soon as the front door had clicked shut. “Are you finally ready to admit that you got the wrong man?”
The Yarder’s gaze moved from the detective to his friend and back again.

“John works with me now,” Sherlock explained, hoping that he wouldn’t be subjected to a third degree about his personal life. Thankfully, Lestrade was too preoccupied with his own problems.

“George Oatley came to see us: young fellow, currently stationed in France. He couldn’t obtain furlough when his sister was killed, poor lad. Naturally, he was relieved that we found the man who murdered her and was doing his best to put it all behind him, when he received this letter.”

He extracted a piece of paper from where it lay between the pages of a battered notebook.

“No point in being careful, it’s been handled more times than a bible in church.”

Sherlock placed the letter in such a way that John could read it too.

“Dearest Georgie,

I’m leaving this letter care of old Mrs Buckley, to forward to you in case anything should happen to me.

I was never a good one with words, but can’t find the guts to tell you eye to eye.

There’s this bloke, you see, and we started seeing each other frequently, serious-like.

Nice manners, not like most of my usual crowd.

Fact is, he’s a foreigner. Came over here when he was a nipper; changed his name and you couldn’t tell he wasn’t one of us.

But that’s how it is all the same.

He seems on the level, but there’s no asking him what he does for a living, as it’s all hush-hush.

His name is Peter Brent and he lives in Maida Vale of all places.

Before you ask me why, it’s the usual song and dance, I’m afraid.

I love him and I will see this through to the bitter end.

As for him, it’s nowt that I can pin down; let’s just call it a woman’s intuition.

All my love, in the hope you will never have to read this,

Affectionately,

Evelyn Oatley”

“He’s only just received the letter, due to Mrs Buckley having been taken to hospital when her house was bombed. That delayed things considerably, besides the added difficulty of finding Mr Oatley’s precise whereabouts.”

“Cummins could have been the fellow she was talking about. His family could have come to England after the other war. The dates seem to tally,” suggested John.

“Except for the fact that he was an RAF cadet and was very proud of it,” said Sherlock. “I wonder if her brother knows what she did for a living.”
“When we spoke to him, he was convinced that she was a dancer. She may have been, of a sort,” said Lestrade.

“When you started to investigate the murder and before you arrested Cummins, what did you find out about Miss Oatley?” asked John.

“Not a lot, because the murders came one after the other; in normal circumstances, we would have done more, but what with London under the cosh and being short of personnel,” Lestrade replied, shaking his head. “What we did know was that she worked for herself; she didn’t have a pimp or a madam; quite a reserved girl, considering; not many friends, except this Mrs Buckley, who had been her landlady before Miss Oatley took up her new… profession.”

“And what about her new landlady, did she know about this mysterious man of hers?”

“Nah, she was clever enough to take lodgings in a disused building along the Clerkenwell Road. They needed a custodian and she wanted anonymity. The owner of the place only saw her when she paid her rent. He went around at the start, just to make sure she was to be trusted, but after that it was all plain sailing for Miss Oatley and her clients.”

“Who is this Peter Brent then?” asked John, who was starting to relish the mystery, much like Williamson with his Father Brown.

“That’s the thing,” sighed the Inspector. “It’s a common enough name and we’ve found a couple of chaps who are the right age, but as British as you and I. Nominal ration books make it easier to track people down, but the way things are looking, this bloke does not exist.”

“He gave her a false name, obviously,” said Sherlock, who was pretending to be bored by the whole affair. John wasn’t taken in; he could tell by the young man’s posture that he was captivated.

“You’re probably right,” replied the Inspector, “And that leaves us in complete darkness. I haven’t the manpower to re-open this case, but how can I refuse to help a young man who’s fighting for our country? It’s not right; it’s not decent.”

“You sound like Mrs Hudson,” remarked Sherlock, who had no intention of making it easy for the Yarder. After all, he had a reputation to uphold, and Lestrade had ignored his well-founded suspicions about the cadet’s innocence in favour of a swift verdict.

“We’re taking the case,” intervened John, who felt sorry for the Inspector. His friend cast him a disdainful glance, but he didn’t contradict him.

“I want your full cooperation and I don’t want to work with Anderson. We shall have to dig out the victims and re-examine them,” said the detective, while his companion stared at him in surprise.

“The Blandford is no more,” he said, answering John’s unspoken question. “Whatever was going on there, someone put a stop to it in a drastic manner. Even my brother thinks that secrecy on that score is no longer necessary.”

Lestrade regarded them with a puzzled expression. Seeing that he wasn’t going to receive an explanation, he followed his usual method which consisted in agreeing to what didn’t cost him much anyway.

“Have you someone in mind to replace Anderson?” he asked.

“Stamford would be perfect,” the detective replied, smiling at his companion. “Fellow who used to
work at Barts; he’s John’s friend.”

“Yours too,” said the doctor, and this time Lestrade wouldn’t be waylaid.

“Are you two… you know…”

“Yes, John lives here and we work together.”

“Good, I’m glad for you both,” the Inspector replied, grinning. “Your brother is not as bad as you described him,” he added.

Sherlock groaned loudly, making John laugh.

“You could ask him out,” he suggested to Lestrade. “I bet he’d like that.”

His suggestion provoked such a deluge of protests from the younger Holmes that the Yarder thought it best to beat a hasty retreat. Before he went, he assured both men that he would make sure they got what they’d requested, included permission to work with their pathologist of choice.

“If your brother is unattached, why begrudge him a little happiness?”

John had convinced his reluctant lover to partake of a modest luncheon consisting of mutton chops and mushy peas, but he’d now made the faux-pas of choosing the one topic that was sure to unsettle Sherlock’s appetite.

The detective pushed his barely-touched plate aside and sniffed in his haughtiest way.

“Mycroft would never lower himself to what he considers Lestrade’s abysmal level.”

“You could have fooled me. I don’t claim to know your brother, but he was positively beaming at the bloke.”

“Beaming,” Sherlock spat out the word as if it had lodged in his gullet. “Simpering, more like! He enjoys playing the châtelain to the poor peasants, that’s all; a sordid little game, I’d call it.”

John returned the plate to its proper location and glared at his friend. The young man resisted for a paltry minute then cut a thin strip of mutton and daintily speared it with his fork.

“You don’t know that,” said the doctor. “And anyway, I would have thought you’d have welcomed the distraction. After all, if he’s busy making love to the Inspector, he won’t trouble you as often.”

“If you wish me to remain at this table, you will cease your revolting insinuations at once,” Sherlock protested, and regretted it instantly. “I apologise for shouting at you like a fishwife. Let’s change the subject, if you please.”

John, who was deeply enjoying teasing his lover, took pity on him.

“What do you think about this Brent type?” he asked, wolfing down a forkful of meat, “Do you think he’s our man?”

“Possibly,” agreed the detective. “Greta Hayward could have been a foreigner too.”

“Since we can come out in the open, we should check those records at the Brixton orphanage,” suggested the doctor, “She may have made a male friend while she was in there. Girls of that age
always find a way to escape confinement.”

“It’s no different for boys,” the detective grimaced. “I remember more than one instance of fellow students risking detention in order to meet some ungainly specimen of the opposite sex.”

“How perfectly ordinary of them!” quipped the blond man, “I assume you had better taste than that.”

“I have impeccable taste, as I’m sure you have realised.”

John felt the sudden – and rather worrying – impulse to blurt out a quantity of embarrassing loving words, but he succeeded in stemming the flood by reminding himself that Sherlock abhorred sentiment.

“I would kiss you, but I suspect it’s against the precepts of good table etiquette,” he said.

“Quite,” said the youth, with evident dismay.

“Perhaps I should phone Miss McGrath and ask her about Greta Hayward and her potential friend.”

“Good idea,” said the detective, “Unless of course you don’t prefer seeing her in person. Maybe go there on horseback.”

“Beware of the green-eyed monster,” misquoted John, mimicking his friend’s cut-glass accent.

“Shut up,” said Sherlock, acidly, and receiving a kiss on the tip of his nose with barely concealed delight.

Miss McGrath had been incapable of providing them with a satisfying answer. There were plenty of occasions, she said, when a girl could sneak out for an assignation. At night, especially in summer time, the surveillance was not as strict. She and Greta had not shared the same dormitory and, as far as could recall, there hadn’t been any gossip with regards to a possible boyfriend. She was dreadfully sorry that she couldn’t be more helpful, she said, and her despondency coloured the tone of her voice.

“Nothing doing,” said John, “We may have better luck at the orphanage. Might be better to telephone in advance, in case they have been relocated, like the Evangelical Library.”

Sherlock, who had been consulting a pile of newspapers about the case, nodded distractedly. Obviously, he had been fibbing about the British Library, as he had copies of all the relevant rags. Not that John had minded about the lie, but he’d been nagging him about it all the same.

At the mention of the Library, however, the detective instantly perked up.

“I haven’t changed my mind, you know? I still intend to go there tonight.”

“We are not scaring that poor soul to death.”

“At least, he will be reassured about the source of the noise.”

“That won’t help him if he’s laid down in hospital with a mild case of angina.”

“What dramatic exaggeration! And besides, you are a doctor; you would look after him. He won’t find better care anywhere else in London or in Surrey. I can only imagine what sort of quackery
they will practise over there.”

“It’s the English countryside, my dear, not the Amazonian jungle. And like I said earlier this morning, you are terrible at flattery. Why don’t we wait until that sweet old man has moved with the rest of the books? After that, we could even go during the day, when we won’t risk being bombed to kingdom come.”

“Detective work is often a matter of urgency,” said Sherlock, pedantically, “Traces may wiped away, prints may be erased, evidence may be compromised.”

“And you accuse me of being dramatic!”

The spat was interrupted by the arrival of the afternoon post; among the circulars and bills was a thick, creamy envelope that had not been franked.

“Mrs Hudson,” the detective bellowed, until the landlady returned into the room. “Was this letter among the ones the postman gave you?”

“I suppose so, my dear. He handed me two separate packets and I didn’t even look at yours. I brought it straight to you, like I always do. They never make mistakes, our postal services; very reliable, I should think,” she said, with a tinge of defiance, as if she dared anyone to contradict her.

“One of them is without stamp, which means it’s been delivered by hand,” explained John.

“Oh, I see,” the lady commented, after which she left. She knew Sherlock well enough not to bother him with idle questions.

“Good quality paper, the ink that was used is an interesting charcoal shade, the writing is elegant and masculine.”

The detective brought the envelope closer to his face and sniffed along its length, deeply.

“A hint of sage and even bergamot, perhaps,” he concluded.

“Will you open it?”

“Patience, my dear,” he said, as he cut the flap open with a scalp-like implement.

Inside, was one single sheer of paper of the same excellent quality, folded in half.

“32 Denbigh Road, Kilburn,” he read out loud and, almost causing John a case of not-so-mild angina, he jumped up from his chair, screaming in exultation.

“What is it? What are you so excited about?”

“Kilburn, John,” Sherlock replied, “Maida Vale!”
The House in Maida Vale

Chapter Summary

Our boys go looking for Peter Brent.
Not the best of ideas....

Thanks to all of you commenting and leaving kudos, you are the best!!!!

“London’s got the fascination of a girl you never quite get to know.”

Flowers for the Judge – Margery Allingham

After the disastrous air-raids of the previous night, the façade of Baker Street tube station had suffered serious injuries, but like a battered soldier who would not raise the white flag, it wasn’t at all conquered. Trains were still chugging in and out of it, bravely implying that life went on, same as it always had.

The Bakerloo line to Maida Vale was no different, and even though Sherlock had suggested driving there, John had refused to cost their client more than was strictly necessary. Besides, if the enemy insisted attacking their public transport, it was their duty to show their support to those who tried to uphold the values of the British way of life.

“It could be a trap,” John said, not for the first time, “If they meant no harm, they wouldn’t have sent an anonymous message. And they must have known about Mr Oatley’s letter. I don’t like this one bit.”

“We are not defenceless,” replied the detective, hinting at the Webley in his friend’s pocket.

“How could they be sure that we wouldn’t inform the police?”

Sherlock surveyed the upholstery of his seat with interest, trailing his fingers along its velvet surface, as if searching for a hidden treasure.

“They must know my modus operandi,” he replied, continuing his tactile exploration.

“What are you doing?” enquired the blond man, at last.

They were alone in their carriage, but the train was slowing down as they approached the next stop.

“Making sure we are not being observed.”
“They couldn’t possibly predict we’d be sitting in these very seats!”

“No need to get all flustered, my dear. I was merely indulging your appetite for mystery.”

The doors opened and closed, but they were still alone.

“I wish you’d start taking this seriously,” John said, with a deep sigh. “A man, most probably an innocent fellow, was sentenced to death and the real murderer is walking the streets, possibly aware that we are on his trail.”

“It could be a woman, my dear. Don’t believe for a moment that the fair sex wouldn’t be capable of a criminal act.”

“Are you thinking of Greta Hayward?”

“Maybe,” said the detective. “Although, from what your Miss McGrath told us, she appears to fit the characteristics of an accomplice rather than of a perpetrator.”

“How so?” the doctor asked, clearly intrigued.

Sherlock’s features became sharper; his eyes glittered and his already impressive cheekbones turned even more regal. What a truly magnificent specimen he is, John thought to himself, and without realising it, he bit down on his lower lip.

“Well,” the youth started, “Greta was a dreamer, an inventor or tall tales, with a tendency towards self-aggrandisement. Her kind is easy to seduce, once her weakness is exposed. She is subject to flattery and manipulation. Dreamers aren’t usually doers, unless they are pushed and influenced by someone whose personality is stronger and more defined; a day to complement their night.”

“That was astounding, my dear Holmes.”

The detective remarkably resembled a preening peacock, but his voice when he spoke was tentative.

“Do you really think so?”

“Of course it was,” insisted John, taking Sherlock’s hand in his and giving it a good squeeze, “Quite, quite remarkable.”

“People don’t usually say that.”

“What do they say?”

“Shut your gob, and that’s when they’re being polite.”

“Idiots, that’s what they are.”

The younger man’s cheeks coloured a fetching shade of Rose Pompadour, and no further words were spoken.

When they finally arrived at their destination, they emerged on to street level to find that the dull, greying sky had darkened and the clumps of suburban buildings that lined both sides of the main road emanated a general impression of dampness and dignified poverty.
The stamp of the war was less marked and indelible as it was in other, more central parts of the city, but there was an air of provincial primness that crippled their prospects of unearthing something truly evil.

“No monster would think of hiding here,” said John, “He would stand out like a sore thumb.”

“What a damnable verdict,” replied his friend, smiling, “And incorrect too, I fear. I have found that often the most cunning and evil among the criminal classes have a knack for hiding in plain sight; their guile has a protean quality that allows them to adapt to their environment with the ability of the chameleon.”

The doctor shot him a glance that wasn’t entirely tame.

“I think I should give you fair warning that this sort of talk is affecting me in ways not suitable for public display.”

Sherlock’s brows arched and a line appeared between them.

“I find it unduly arousing,” explained the blond man, chuckling at his companion’s alarmed reaction. “Don’t worry, I can contain my enthusiasm, for a while at least,” he concluded, a wicked smile in his eyes.

They recognised the house as soon as they pushed open the gate in the crumbling wall behind the huge ochre-coloured block of flats and came out on to the iron staircase high above the square of untended garden.

Resembling a country cottage, it only succeeded in suggesting a garden suburb. Its four tall windows faced south and the back of the flats and had diamond panes. The skylight had been leaded over.

There was a solitariness about the whole building and a preponderance of bright colours which conveyed a forceful and original personality. The paint was green, the curtains blue, the window-sills and step cardinal red; it looked extraordinarily clean and new in the dinginess of its surroundings and no more in bad taste than a painted dolls house, which it resembled.

It was not yet dusk and the houses appeared to be deserted; there was a certain evening melancholy upon the scene that seemed sacrilege to defile.

“Shall we?” whispered the detective.

“Unto the breach,” was John’s reply.

They went slowly down the iron staircase and, picking their way over the grass, tapped with the brass knocker which bore a relief of St. Paul’s.

The silence that followed was untainted by any evidence of human presence.

“What now?” asked the doctor, “Break the door down?”

“Let’s try this first,” Sherlock said, as he kneeled down and inserted his hand underneath the coir door-mat. “Voilà,” he said, and produced a silver Yale key with the agility of a magician.

“Should you tire of your current career, you’d have little difficulty in starting a new one.”
“Meretricious,” whispered the detective, with a fake-bashful grin.

The door opened without any ominous creak but because of the dwindling light, the velvety blackness soon enveloped them.

Inside, they decided that they wouldn’t stumble around in the dark, so they flicked the first switch they found. A warm golden light illuminated what was an ordinary drawing room: the floor was covered with imitation red and grey tiles and would have shined like a ship’s deck were it not for the patina of dust that was layered over it. The dark oak furniture was solid and unpretentious. There was a bench under the windows and a comfortable leather divan flanked by two chintz-covered chairs by the unused fireplace.

On the mantel, in simple brass frame, was a black and white photograph of a girl with long fair hair and a defiant smile. The sun was in her eyes, so she squinted a little, but there was a noticeable sadness in them that contrasted with the smile and with her posture, which denoted a sort of abandon.

“Evelyn Oatley,” said Sherlock, “I bet that she was looking at that Brent fellow.”

He removed the picture from its casing and inspected the back of it.

“Webster Photography, 98 Upper Street, North London,” he read. “We should pay them a visit, of course. Won’t be much use, but no stone unturned and all that.”

The rest of the room didn’t yield anything else of interest: there was a dozen or so of books on the shelves, second-hand and containing no inscriptions; the remaining objects were impersonal and of little value.

They quickly inspected the other rooms and in the bedroom, which was small and sparsely furnished, the mahogany armoire contained a number of modest-quality suits and a tweed overcoat.

“The labels have been removed, but I should say that the man who wore these is around five foot-nine and well-built. He hasn’t worn any of the suits more than a couple of times, but the coat has seen a fair amount of usage.”

Sherlock took out his magnifying lens and inspected the garments in question.

“Not even a single hair on any of the collars,” he commented, ducking his head to sniff at them. “Traces of chemicals: they have been professionally laundered to erase any trace of the wearer.”

The shirts, undergarments and shoes were given the same treatment with the same paltry results.

“Why leave them here then? Why not take them with him?” asked John, whose senses were becoming more attuned to danger as the minutes elapsed.

He raised the blackout curtain and gazed out at the darkened grass and leaden sky; there wasn’t a soul as far the eye could see. Not a comforting view, especially not for a spectator in his frame of mind.

“Maybe he was in a hurry to leave, but my guess is that this is a show for our benefit; a cheap trick, not really worth our while,” said the detective, angrily.

“You mean that this man does not exist but has been created so that we would waste time looking
for him? But we know that this isn’t the case, since Miss Oatley wrote to her brother about Brent.”

Sherlock shook his head, impatiently.

“Not that he doesn’t exist, but that he doesn’t fit this clothes nor did he ever live in this house. What a waste of time!” he groused, pocketing the photograph all the same.

“Come on, let’s get out of this place,” said John, “I don’t know what it is, but it sort of feels like someone is watching us.”

“It’s just the power of suggestion,” replied the detective, who felt the same disquiet but wouldn’t avow it.

“I am not used to all this silence; I’ve never lived so far from the hustle and bustle of the city,” said the doctor, in an effort to calm his own nerves.

“That’s why I would never leave London,” Sherlock concurred. “Imagine being buried in this cemetery for the rest of your life.”

As he said that, he locked the front door and bent down to put the key back where he’d found it. Being a young, nimble man, his gesture was swift and sudden, and later John reflected that it probably saved his life.

The whistle rang out in the night and was only audible because of the deadly silence that covered them like a shroud.

“Down!” shouted John, pushing Sherlock to the side of the house, where a narrow strip of alley provided some cover.

“Silenced pistol,” he panted, grabbing the handle of his Webley, preparing to shoot. “Not a civilian’s weapon.”

“If we stay here, he’ll come and get us,” whispered the detective. “Let’s try the back.”

The dusk had turned into a pitch-black night and because of the enforced black-out no lights shone out of the seemingly deserted houses.

“Wait, I have my lighter,” he said, but John stayed his hand. “Better not give him a ruddy clear target,” he hissed.

They felt their way along the muddy path, feeling the frigid breath of the unspoiled winter air on their faces and throats. The echo of their steps was loud in the stillness, but ominously, it was the only noise they could hear. Danger is always amplified when the source of it is unknown and untraceable.

“If we keep walking in this direction, we’ll reach Christchurch Avenue,” said Sherlock, who was having a hard time disentangling himself from John’s steely grasp.

“I’m not letting you go, so stop fidgeting and stay near me,” said John in a commanding tone.

At one point they had to come out in the open: a gap between two buildings didn’t leave them any other choice so they made a dash for it, and for a suspended moment they both feared they might be shot at again. Nothing happened and no other sound could be heard but the pounding of their
feet and the heaving and puffing of their breaths.

After what seemed the longest ten minutes of their lives, they reached the back of what turned out to be a pub.

“Lord knows that I need a drink,” John panted, pulling his friend by the arm and shoving him towards the beckoning lights of the inn.

“What if they are waiting for us here?” the detective hissed, and peered through the filthy glass pane. “It’s no use,” he whispered, “The lights are on, but the place is empty.”

“A trap,” said the doctor, “Keep your head down and run,” he urged, but in that instant, another muffled shot breached the night.

“Damn!” shouted John, ducking to the side and shooting once, twice in the direction of the attacker.

The benighted roar of an engine surged from somewhere behind them, and soon a stretch of land became illuminated enough to show that they had reached the main road.

“Stop,” he shouted, flailing his arms wildly until the car swerved and came to a halt. The driver was an elderly white-haired gentleman who wore a soft felt hat and an elegant top-coat, and was probably going out to dinner or to the theatre,

“Say, were you trying to kill yourself? I could have easily run you over and it wouldn’t have been my fault,” the man protested; he’d got out of the car and was standing next to it, just outside the reach of its headlights.

“My apologies, sir,” replied John, “My friend and I got lost and since we don’t know the area we feared being stranded here all night. Would you mind giving us a lift to the station?”

“I can take you as far as Paddington, but what about your friend, where is he?”

In the confusion, John had hardly noticed that his companion was no longer standing beside him. His blood froze when he saw him lying in the grass that sparsely adorned the roadside.

“Sherlock,” he shouted, and as the terror gripped his chest and throat, he fumbled to find the man’s pulse and the source of his injury. The shot had wounded the detective’s left shoulder. A fair amount of blood had been spilt, but there was no doubt that he was still alive.

“What’s happened to him?” the elderly man asked, getting closer to assess the situation.

Instantly, John decided that it wouldn’t be a good idea to tell the truth. “Damn Germans,” he growled.

“Poor lad, oh dear, oh dear,” said the gentleman, pacing to and fro, not quite sure what to do next.

“Have you a blanket in the car? And some rags?”

Happy to be of use, the man went to search for the requested items, which he speedily found and handed to John.

The doctor bandaged the wound as tight as he could to stem the flow of blood then swaddled his friend into the soft blanket and scooped him up into his arms, carrying him to the car.

“The hospital then,” said the gentleman, once the three of them were safe and sound and back on
the road.

“If you would be so kind to drive us to Baker Street,” John replied, holding his lover tight against his chest. “I’m a doctor; I can take care of him. You wouldn’t happen to have a bottle of something strong, by any chance?”

“Just a nip of gin,” replied the man. “Name’s Millward,” he added, handing John a leather-bound flask.

“Watson,” he said, glugging down the soothing drink. “And Holmes is my friend’s name.” He refrained from caressing the young man’s hair, but the hand that cupped the back of the detective’s neck was drawing frantic circles on the clammy skin.

“Plenty of unexploded devices all over the place,” said Millward, mournfully, “Can’t be safe anywhere these days.”

“I hope we haven’t ruined your evening,” John said, feeling as if he was watching himself from the outside. His heart was aching in his chest, like a lump of dead flesh, and all he wanted was to be home with Sherlock, so that he could ascertain the damage. The young man’s face was white and his lips pale, but his eyes were moving rapidly underneath the shell-like lids. My love, my darling, a strangled voice in John’s head repeated, over and over, and yet he made an effort to keep the conversation alive. Normality was all that stood between him and madness, so he hung on to it, like a survivor to a raft.

“Not to worry, my lad, I’m only going to meet my brother’s train. He lives in the country, the lucky sod, so he’s bringing over some butter and eggs from the farm; meat too, if he kept his word,” the man replied, with a wink.

He was a careful driver, and as he talked he never took his eyes off the road.

“How is he doing?” he asked after a while.

“Still out of it,” replied John, trying to keep his voice steady, “But the bleeding seems to have stopped.”

“He’ll be all right,” Millward stated, in reassuring tone that failed to penetrate the curtain of terror that pressed around John’s heart.

“What were you doing down Maida Vale?” he asked. “Not the sort of place I imagine two young fellows such as you would go traipsing about.”

“We had been visiting a friend and he insisted we take a short cut. We shouldn’t have done it.”

“I was never one for taking risks myself,” agreed the man, “Walking down the street is a scary business, these days. Unless you know the place like the palm of your hand, don’t try and be funny about it. I work in insurance; it’s all about the laws of probability.”

“Must be rather grim,” said John, who loathed the idea of an industry profiting from the threats of death and disaster.

“On the contrary, my boy! It’s as exciting as gambling but without the addiction,” he exclaimed, and proceeded to enumerate the advantages of his profession. He droned on for a while, but the doctor’s attention was fixed on his friend’s stertorous breath and faint heart-beat.

He was so lost to the world that when the car turned into Baker Street, he barely realised it.
“Which number my boy?”

“221B,” he replied, and it was then that Sherlock let out a weak moan.

“John,” he murmured, and opened his eyes.
Sentiment

Chapter Summary

Sentiment.... pretty much what it says on the tin...

Next chapter: Sherlock is shown the error of his ways... wink wink

Chapter Notes

Note: ack-ack guns were anti-aircraft guns.

Note 2: I'm not a doctor, so I gleaned the informations about Sherlock's wound from the internet. Any mistake is mine. Kindly suspend your disbelief if you are a doctor :)

“I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”

Walden - Henry David Thoreau

He was inside a maze, a green-moist-soaked labyrinth, with the suck-suck of muddy, springy ground beneath his feet. He was walking, but he couldn’t feel his legs; in fact, the entire mass of his body had become incorporeal, like a vapour that was hovering above the verdant scenery, surveying it from a safe distance. And yet, his steps resounded as they pounded the soggy earth, and he had a distinct feeling of motion, of the world passing him by, of the air closing around him, constricting his chest and throat.

The notion of pain occurred to him like an abstract concept, letters floating around; a phosphorus light-strip that fizzled out in a cloud of smoke.

A magician’s trick, that’s what it was!

He turned to tell John; he wanted to declaim his deductions like one unfurls a red carpet so that his friend could tread over it and admire its intricate pattern; he would tell Sherlock how clever he was, how worthy of admiration.

But John wasn’t there.

In his place, was the vast black sky; a soulless sea of darkness; and now the pain was no longer
imaginary; it was searing through him like a brand of fire; and the noises would not cease; those repugnant squelching sounds of live and breathing mud, a mire that was sucking him in, fast and deadly. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t…

“Sherlock… wake up, my dear,” he heard someone say, faraway, unreachable.

“Here, let me make your more comfortable,” continued the voice, but now it was edging closer; he could almost cup it within his hands.

“Impossible,” he babbled. His own words were even more outlandish, it seemed. He laughed, or so he thought.

“No more Meperidine for you then,” was the reply, which bounced against the walls of his mind and remained there, a sweet, reassuring presence.

When Mary had fallen ill, John had been unable to save her and the guilt, albeit unwarranted, had never left him. Part of it was due to the knowledge that he’d not loved her enough, not in the way a husband should love his wife.

When he’d been injured, it had been a different sort of torment, one mixed with anger, resentment and hate.

That Sherlock should suffer the same fate was unacceptable; losing him wouldn’t only end one life, but two.

With Millward’s kind help and much fussing by a distraught Mrs Hudson, the detective had been laid down on the wash-room floor, over a mattress of bath-towels that were soon smeared with his blood.

A blurry nightmarish while later, John had managed to convince the two elderly people to leave him alone with his patient.

He had acted with precision and detachment, continuing in the same impersonal vein he had maintained during the journey home.

The bullet had avoided the subclavian artery as well as the brachial plexus, which meant that Sherlock had been luckier than his doctor. It had penetrated between the top and the outside of the shoulder joint and through the deltoid muscles, hitting only brawn and fat, causing some blood-letting but not the serious damage that John had feared. A small calibre, he concluded after inspecting the entry and exit holes; certainly less than .40. High speed, accuracy and silence were a deadly combination, which made him wonder whether the killer had intended it only as a warning.

The penicillin and opioids that he’d stashed away after he’d been injured were a real boon; that and the relative uncomplicated nature of the wound, had allowed him to treat it at Baker Street instead of risking another trip into the unknown.

After his brief reawakening in Millward’s car, Sherlock had lost consciousness again and he’d stayed that way, only to whimper and cry out in his dopey sleep.

Stabs of timid dawn sunshine peered bravely through the bedroom windows, but John had never fallen asleep.
At some point - it must have been the witching hour, when every little blunder has the potential of wearing the robes of tragedy – he had gazed at Sherlock’s waxen face and feared that he would no longer wake up. Not even the warmth of his feverish skin or the steady beat of his heart convinced his flustered lover, who, overcome with exhaustion and achy tenderness, spent a long stretch of time covering the pale, angular face with soft kisses and murmuring soothing words. Incredibly, Sherlock had reacted by coming back to reality, even though a heavily sedated one. He’d wailed and laughed hysterically, but after hearing John’s voice he’d settled into what had appeared a more comfortable slumber.

Just after dawn, Mrs Hudson had brought them coffee and a hearty breakfast, and a basket of apples, which had mysteriously appeared on the doorstep together with their daily delivery of milk.

“Mycroft,” John suggested, cursing the all-knowing powers of the elder Holmes which had been unable to prevent the terrible accident of the previous evening.

“Not this time,” replied the landlady, with a twinkle in her eye, “That nice Mr Millward, or Arthur as he insisted to be called.”

“Didn’t insist with me,” the blond man quipped, “He didn’t even tell me his first name; but then I am not a charming lady, am I?”

Mrs Hudson coloured a little, but she refused to be the subject of idle speculation.

“I couldn’t just let the poor man go without offering him something to drink,” she sniffed, in a way that reminded John of his lover. “It wouldn’t have been decent. How’s my dear boy; has he rallied a little?” she asked, anxiously.

“JOHN,” the detective shouted, in his timely way, “what is this awful din? Someone’s playing the trombone inside my head; I can’t think!”

The blond man smiled happily, smacking a heart-felt kiss on the woman’s powdered cheek.

“And there he is,” he declared, “Our Sherlock has come back to us.”

“You didn’t give me morphine,” the detective said; it wasn’t meant as a question.

They were in the sitting room, where he’d insisted he’d stand and walk on his own two legs, thanks very much. He’d gritted his teeth and by the time John had lowered him onto the divan, his face had been shiny with perspiration. He’d refused to eat until he’d been convinced to ingest a bowl of oxtail soup that, the doctor said, would fortify him and hasten his recovery.

“Meperidine, a less potent painkiller,” the blond man replied, stuffing a thermometer in the young man’s mouth.

“Better keep me away from all opiates,” the detective mumbled.

“Tell me in five minutes, after I have measured your temperature.”

“Dull.”

This was a typical sample of their verbal exchanges since Sherlock had woken up: practical and devoid of sentimentality. The detective had asked about the night before and his friend had filled in the gaps, refraining from recounting of the terror that had gripped him like a vice.
Their bodies had refused to be thus constrained: the patient had quickly revealed a propensity for being held and caressed, and the fingers of his unimpaired hand had sought John’s, demanding a closer connection.

Much was being left unsaid, or rather expressed physically, in a surreptitious way.

“Temperature is down a little,” said John, after the prescribed interval. “You should drink more water. And eat something solid, for the blood loss. Perhaps I should take you to hospital.”

“Not necessary,” replied the detective, who made an attempt at moving his bandaged arm, before giving up with a grimace.

“I will if you don’t stop doing that. And I certainly will if the swelling doesn’t go down. Still feeling your fingers?”

Sherlock sighed and made a fist with his left hand.

“It’s little more than a scratch,” he muttered, and thought of something that made him grin. “We’ll have matching scars.”

Not the right thing to say, he realised as soon as he saw the cloud darkening John’s features.

“Not funny, my dear,” the doctor murmured, “Tell me about the morphine, although I can guess how that story goes.”

“Not much to say, really,” replied Sherlock, looking unbearably young, “I experimented with a few substances. Found them a jolly fun ride at the start, but that didn’t last, as you can imagine.”

“What made you stop?”

“Boredom, mainly,” said the detective, pretending not to notice that the palm of his hand was being rubbed; it was a soothing touch that could evolve into something more sensual if Sherlock had wanted it to. “An intense dislike of dependency, a desire for independence; I quit when I stumbled upon a crime that had baffled Scotland Yard. Lestrade was not as hopeless as the rest of them, and at last, I tasted real excitement.”

“Like last night?”

The younger man tried to reject his lover’s touch, but John held him in a steely grip.

“I thought you liked danger,” the detective protested.

“Not the unnecessary kind. We should have been more careful; a few inches and you could have bled to death in Maida Vale.”

“Hardly the ideal spot to wave goodbye to one’s life,” said the detective, with a flippancy that was largely feigned.

John let go of Sherlock’s hand and fingered the hollows under the youth’s eyes instead.

“I won’t watch you die, do your hear me?” he hissed, his breath hot on the detective’s skin. Their faces were only inches apart and the pull of the blond man’s cobalt eyes was demolishing his friend’s already flimsy resolve.

“You would go back to your duties,” Sherlock tried to counter, weakly, but was silenced by a fierce kiss; lips were bitten and licked, tongues sparred wildly until the detective’s was conquered; he
submitted gladly, unaware of the soft moans escaping his throat.

“Sentiment,” he husked, when they parted, and John’s lips pressed on his, gently this time.

“I’m afraid so,” the doctor whispered, his voice hoarse. His eyes were large and dark, brimming with hunger and affection.

“I love you,” he said, firmly; he wouldn’t let Sherlock slide into cynicism or nonchalance. The detective could reject his declaration, but not belittle it or reduce it to a scene in a sophisticated comedy.

But the young man had neither intention nor desire to play games: his eyes filled with tears and his lips trembled.

“Why?” he asked, so quietly John could barely hear him.

“I could give you a thousand reasons, but they all amount to the simple fact that I can’t imagine being without you.”

“You love me against your better judgement.”

The doctor laughed; this sudden joy after last night’s ordeal was a balm for his tired limbs. His chest, which for hours had been heavy with grief and fear, expanded and relaxed; even as he knew a collapse was imminent, he couldn’t help that exhilaration that gripped him; he imagined that was the way mountaineers felt when they reached the top after a steep climb.

“You are my better judgement,” he replied, and as tears spilled out of his glittering eyes and down his sunken cheeks, Sherlock shook with laughter and slumped into his lover’s arms.

“Let’s get you back to bed,” John said, after a long interval of mutual bliss.

“Nothing would please me more, but I don’t think I’m up to the task yet.”

“Very funny and all that, but if we don’t move soon, I will fall asleep here.”

Slowly, they relocated to Sherlock’s bedroom, where the miraculous Mrs Hudson had made the bed and left a tray with tea, coffee and a jug of water.

John forced his patient to drink some tepid tea and a sip of water, and after that gargantuan effort, they both drifted off into oblivion.

Muffled voices confabulating somewhere in the distance, Sherlock reflected, while still residing in the limbo between dream and wakefulness.

Pain returned him to reality, but with it came the memory of John’s words and the ecstasy they had produced in him. There was no point in being coy, not within himself anyway: he was nothing short of exhilarated, as if he’d been faced with a complicated murder to solve. In this instance, he seemed to have been endowed with both: the case and a man who loved him; not just any man either, but John Watson.

Nothing could dampen his enthusiasm; certainly not something as mundane as a wounded shoulder.

The voice belonged to Lestrade, he realised and, exhaling a deep sigh, he proceeded to disturb his
“What, are you unwell?” the doctor asked, going from asleep to wide awake in record time.

“The Inspector is waiting for us. I trust that Mrs Hudson has done her best to be rid of him, but to no avail. I bet my brother has got to him,” the detective explained, scowling. "Mycroft is like one of those mysterious tropical diseases they warn you about; they sneak up on you and when you realise you’ve caught them, it’s already too late.”

“Lestrade is not a victim, my love,” John replied, as he slid into his dressing gown. They both startled at the endearment, and went glassy-eyed for a moment, both with doltish grins on their lips.

The most threadbare of the detective’s robes de chambre had been fixed so that he could wear it: the left sleeve had been cut out so that it could accommodate the voluminous bandages. In the doctor’s opinion, it wasn’t enough to keep his patient warm, so a woollen blanket slung over the man’s healthy shoulder completed the attire and acted as an ersatz sling for the injured arm.

“Did my brother send you?” Sherlock asked, as soon as he was face to face with the Inspector. Lestrade had been offered a glass of sherry which he had not dared to refuse, not after upsetting Mrs Hudson as he feared he had.

“No one tells me what to do except for my Superintendent,” replied the Yarder, as he rushed to help John; together, they poured the detective into his armchair. The young man scoffed, but allowed the two men to carry him like a human sedan-chair.

“He may have told me about a suspicious incident in Maida Vale, but it was my idea to come and see you. Why didn’t you report it? They tried to kill you, for heaven’s sake!”

“There’s hardly been any time,” intervened John, pouring sherry for himself and for his lover, “By the time I fixed him up, it was the dead of night and he needed to rest. We haven’t even looked at the papers; that’s how unwell he was. Was it reported?”

“Not a line; a young widow heard some commotion, but she was listening to the wireless and when she telephoned the Yard, they shut her up pretty thoroughly. Aside from that, it could have happened in ruddy Siberia. Not an easy ride for us coppers, not by a long chalk. Before this damn show, we could count on the general public, but not anymore. If it’s not the Jerries then it’s our ack-ack guns. It confuses matters.”

“I don’t envy your job,” said the blond man, clapping the Inspector on the back.

“The secrecy works in our favour, in this case. Besides, the gun had a silencer.” stated Sherlock, whose new-found alertness was aided and abetted by the alcohol.

He jauntily recited a detailed account of the previous night’s revels to an increasingly flabbergasted Lestrade.

John added the missing details, relating his ideas with regards to the weapon’s specifications and calibre.

“Not the sort of pistol your average East End spiv would carry,” he concluded, “I wish we had the bullet, but it went right through him, and for that we should be thankful.”
“Indeed,” agreed the Inspector, “And you didn’t find anything at Brent’s house.”

“Only a photo of Ms Oatley,” replied Sherlock. “I handled it carefully, so you may dust it for
prints. Same goes for the billet-doux from my secret admirer.”

“Not my idea of courtship,” said John, before he could refrain himself. The younger man grinned and looked away.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said, in a silky tone, “There’s something to be said for a jolly game of hide-
and-seek. A brisk jog to improve the old blood circulation, not to mention the thrill of the chase,
and hey presto, the compact is sealed.”

“You want thrills,” said John, sotto-voce, “I will give you thrills to last you a lifetime.”

Lestrade was glancing at them with the air of a chess player who’s not yet mastered the rules of the
game. At last, he had an inkling of what the detective was suggesting.

“You think the killer didn’t want to finish you off, but that he wanted to warn you.”

“Or attract my attention; maybe he knows how much I like a good mystery and he’s giving it to
me.”

The doctor’s expression was increasingly pugnacious.

“He better wish I don’t catch him before that,” he growled.

Sherlock was enjoying himself enormously; he had never been the object of jealous passion before,
and he only regretted that his body was sore or he would have looked forward to being shown the
error of his ways; roughly, if possible; and multiple times; over and over again. His penis twitched optimistically, but the opiates in his system were tenacious gatekeepers.

He heard his name being called and he returned to the matter in hand; in a manner of speaking.

“He had us both in his sights and he could have murdered us both if he wanted to,” he insisted.

“There was a pub close to Christchurch Avenue,” John intervened, “It was illuminated, but clearly
no longer in business. If that’s was a trap, perhaps you could find out about its ownership and
management.”

“Don’t expect too much,” said the detective, who was certain they were dealing with a worthy
opponent. “Brent, or whatever his name is, will have covered his tracks.”

Lestrade nodded, and after taking the photo and the anonymous letter with him, he strode out of
Baker Street with every intention of getting to the bottom of things.

After all, his own failure had brought about these events and he would not rest until that wrong had
been put right.
The Other Woman

Chapter Summary

Our boys pay a visit
Sex will happen in the next chapter, when Sherlock is better (John has spoken!)

Chapter Notes

Note: King Zog's story is true. You couldn't make these things up, could you?

“Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!”
He chortled in his joy”

Jabberwocky (excerpt) - Lewis Carroll (From Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There)

Taking care of a convalescing Sherlock Holmes was more trouble than he’d predicted.

The detective insisted that he was completely cured and ready to resume his activities. If he’d been a teacher or a banker, still John would have advised against it, but he was even more adamant in Sherlock’s case.

Banned from leaving their lodgings and from other pursuits of a more amorous nature, the youth had taken to analysing each and every movement and thought of his nearest and dearest.

“What did you say to her?” John asked, trying to remain calm.

“I can’t imagine who you’re referring to,” the detective replied, riffling through the Morning Post with an air of cool disdain.

The blond man sighed and scratched the back of his head.

“Mrs Hudson; what did you tell her?”

“Nothing.”

More frantic page-turning and haughty sniffs followed.
“She barely replied to me when I thanked her for the stew.”

“See here, it says that King Zog of Albania has raided the county’s gold reserves and now lives at the Ritz. They can’t say ‘like a king’ since he really is one. What a silly thing to do, don’t you think? Coming here in the midst of a war with bagfuls of bullions; Zog of Albania... almost sounds like something out of Kipling doesn’t it?”

John wished he wouldn’t find that funny, but he did.

“Let me see,” he said, and read the two paragraphs devoted to this juicy bit of gossip masquerading as foreign politics.

“King Zog and Queen Geraldine occupy the entire third floor of the Ritz,” the doctor read, “You don’t think they could have been at the Pink Sink that night we went to meet Sansom?” he asked, grinning.

Sherlock tried in vain to hang on to his sulky mood.

“Imagine the king in full regalia singing Scatterbrain with that old galleon in high heels,” he quipped.

“And tonight ladies and gentleman, we present you Zog & Sod in a medley of Cole Porter classics,” John declaimed and gazed into his friend’s eyes.

A moment later they were laughing in earnest, holding their stomachs and wiping tears from their eyes.

“You can be truly lovely when you’re not trying to drive me insane,” the doctor said, kissing his lover’s cheek.

“You could show me how lovely you think I am,” Sherlock husked, as he took his friend’s hand and brought it towards his lips.

“One more day,” conceded John. “If by tonight the pain is still supportable and there’s no infection, I may agree to revise the rules of the embargo.”

“O frabjous day!” exclaimed the detective, raising his face heavenward, as if to thank an invisible deity.

“Silly boy,” chuckled John, “Now, will you tell me what you said to our long-suffering landlady?”

“I merely pointed out that insurance is an unspeakably dull occupation and what with his brother living in the country, sooner or later she would have to move to a ghastly village in the middle of nowhere, like that poor Williamson fellow.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about rose water and lipstick, brand new cashmere cardigans and apple crumble, of which we have been offered not a single slice. In short, Mrs Hudson is seeing that Millward fellow.”

“That Millward fellow saved your life and probably mine too,” exclaimed John, “And what business is it of yours anyway?”

“I just think she could do better than a suburban widower with a penchant for cheap spirits.”
“I imagine your family would think you could do better than a working-class doctor with a dodgy shoulder.”

Sherlock went as still and white as a marble statue.

“Mycroft wouldn’t dare,” he hissed.

“Not the point I was trying to make, my darling. You can’t interfere in Mrs Hudson’s life, same as you wouldn’t want your brother to meddle with yours. Besides, she’s only baked him a cake; it’s hardly the end of the world.”

“I have been reliably informed that cake-baking is women’s way of declaring their affection.”

John couldn’t help but chortle.

“Where did you find this valuable bit of information, on the Tatler?” he asked.

“I have my sources,” the detective huffed, tightening the sash of his dressing gown.

“By the way, what did Lestrade have to say about those fingerprints?”

“Nothing, or at least that they didn’t belong to anyone on their records nor did they belong to Cummins.”

“Well, that’s one step in the right direction, I suppose; any news on Maida Vale?”

The detective heaved a frustrated sigh.

“The house was precisely as we left it. I bet it was never lived in.”

“Spies have to create non-existent agents and give them a fully-fledged identity. There wasn’t any smell in those rooms, not even mothballs or tobacco.”

“Yes, exactly,” replied Sherlock, a glassy, faraway look in his eyes, “What does that remind me of? No, I can’t quite grasp it.”

“It will come back to you, don’t worry. Just think of something else, like those post-mortems on the victims.”

“We could have arranged them already, if you hadn’t insisted on treating me like a swooning Victorian maiden in constant need of her smelling salts.”

John ruffled his companion’s long and messy curls and guffawed.

“You’d make a fetching young lady,” he said, stooping to kiss the top of Sherlock’s head, before going to answer the phone that had started to ring.

“Who was it? Not Mycroft again, I hope.”

The elder Holmes had been kept at bay and restricted to increasingly monosyllabic telephone conversations which had mainly yielded the information that he was pestering Lestrade instead. The news had done nothing to improve the detective’s mood nor had it helped the already scarce consideration in which he held the Inspector’s brains.
“It was Mike,” John replied, with an uncertain, puzzled expression, “He says Pearson – that’s a colleague of ours, a psychiatrist who specialises in war-related trauma – has a lady patient who’s being recovering from shock. She lives south of the river and her home was bombed back in November. She’s been anxious about a friend of hers; wait for this, her friend’s name is Katherine King.”

“The other woman,” whispered Sherlock, “The only one we still know very little about.”

“Well, it seems that this woman, her name is Laura Summers, has been in a shocked stupor ever since the bombing; a couple of days ago, she suddenly woke up and started talking about Miss King. She remembers that her friend’s been murdered, but she’s flustered because her accident prevented her from appearing at the trial. She’s asking to talk to the police. Pearson asked Mike for advice and the rest you can figure out for yourself.”

“We should go see her now,” the detective said, springing up from the divan and cringing a little when his left arm was jostled by the sudden movement.

“We should do nothing of the sort,” replied the doctor, who had noticed the grimace. “I will lunch with him and after that, he will introduce me to Miss Summers. If you tell me what questions I should ask, I promise I’ll write down the answers, verbatim.”

“It’s out of the question,” protested Sherlock. “I won’t have to do anything but sit down and talk. Surely that won’t strain my muscles! Besides, we are going to a hospital.”

“You don’t trust me.”

“Of course I trust you, but you will have to let me out of here, eventually. I won’t be put in a cage because of your fear that someone will hurt me. That’s what I do: chase criminals and get shot at.”

“Not when you are still recovering from being almost dead!”

John had not meant to shout, but it had happened all the same; he was left a trifle deflated by this anger he hadn’t know he was suppressing.

Sherlock moved closer and was encircled by his lover’s arms.

“Nothing will happen, if you are with me,” he murmured, “Who knows what I would have done in Maida Vale without you?”

John laughed through his own despondency.

“You’d have found a way. You’re a lucky little bugger,” he joked.

“Promises, promises,” husked the detective, canting his hips forward and pressing his not-entirely-tame groin into John’s belly.

“You’ll be the death of me,” sighed the doctor, “Come along my juicy wench, let’s get you fixed up for this entirely unnecessary outing.”

“You are not my guardian!”

“God forbid.”

Laura Summers was very different from the frail, defenceless girl John had imagined.
Sitting ramrod straight with her back against the plain iron bedstead, she painted a picture of stubborn courage in distress.

Her square, boyish face bore the traces of the disaster that had almost befallen her: one of her amber-coloured eyes was swollen and circled by mauve and greenish bruises; there were scratches on her chin and a bandage on her right cheek covered a cut that went from the side of her nose to the edge of her jaw.

The rest of her body was riddled with similar injuries and her right leg was in a cast.

“You are not the police,” she spat out, looking daggers at Sherlock who, because of his wound, had been forced to wear a highly theatrical cloak.

“The police arrested the wrong man,” said the detective, staring back at her with cold, piercing eyes. “I thought you cared about your friend, but perhaps I misunderstood what doctor Pearson told us.”

“Don’t you dare,” the girl said, clutching the coverlet with short, stubby fingers, “She was the best friend a girl could have. I won’t have you speak badly of her, of our…” she sobbed, but soon recovered her poise.

“We are investigating the murders on behalf of the police,” said John, quietly, “We have reasons to believe the killer is still out there. If you know anything that could help us finding him, we would be extremely grateful.”

“I suppose you will have to do,” she said, regarding the doctor with diffidence but no marked hostility.

What followed changed her grumpy attitude to one of amused understanding: John helped the detective remove his cloak with revelatory solicitude and the young man pretended to scowl at the gesture, but was obviously enjoying the attention.

*Lovers,* she thought, and the pain in her heart subsided a little.

“Can I get you anything, a glass of water perhaps?” asked John.

“I’m good, thank you. I just need to talk to someone or I’ll lose my head. You see, I was at home when I read what happened to Kate. I had nipped out to buy a loaf of bread, so I got the Evening Standard too. And there it was on the front page… you can imagine the shock,” she stopped, on the verge of tears. Her stubbornness prevailed: she clenched her jaw and drew a deep breath, almost irritated at her own weakness.

“I read the entire article and went straight to Scotland Yard. I even took a cab, which cost me a fortune. They wouldn’t talk to me; I wasn’t family, they said. I could have slapped that rodent-faced copper, but I thought that wouldn’t help Kate, if I ended up in the nick.”

“What did he look like, that officer?” asked Sherlock.

“Skinny, mousy, sneering,” she replied.

“Anderson,” said the detective, contempt written all over his face.

“Isn’t he a pathologist?” said John.

“Yes, that’s what he was. I begged him to let me see her body and he said I wasn’t allowed to. The
owner of the club identified her, he said.”

“Idiot,” growled the detective, and the girl finally smiled at him.

“You could say that,” she said. “I did everything, almost went down on my knees to speak to the Inspector in charge, but they wouldn’t let me. A few days later, they arrested Cummins. They said he’d paid her to sleep with him. That’s when I thought something wasn’t right. Kate was a dancer, but she wasn’t that sort of girl; she didn’t mix with that crowd, didn’t go out with the soldiers after hours, like the Windmill girls do. She kept herself to herself, so to speak.”

“She didn’t like men, is that what you are trying to tell us?” said Sherlock, abruptly. John threw him a dirty look, but Miss Summers wasn’t taken aback.

“Yes, I suppose I was. It may be legal and all, but you still get funny looks if you are a woman. Men are allowed to see other men, but with us, it’s not as easy and that’s the ugly truth,” she explained, glancing at them with such unflinching honesty that John almost felt the need to apologise for his present happiness.

“It is unfair and it shouldn’t be this way,” he murmured. “I am deeply sorry that you had to suffer from a distance. It must have been terrible.”

“Kate was a hoot,” Laura said, softly. “She loved to dance, even if it didn’t pay that well. They get tips of course, but only if they allow those chaps to get their money’s worth. And she wouldn’t do it; she was a feisty one, my Kate was; a red-head, inside and out.”

“What happened after you read about the arrest?” asked John.

“This happened,” she replied, indicating her wounded body. “That same night, all hell broke loose in Vauxhall. My house in Bonnington Square was shelled and I’m lucky that I got out of it alive. They told me my flat is still standing, can you believe it? They tell you to go to the shelter and when you do, you end up buried alive; if I had stayed at home, I wouldn’t have ended up here.”

Sherlock glanced at John to convey his heart-felt approval as to the futility of shelters, and the blond man stifled a smile.

“What do you think happened to her?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. But she wouldn’t have been alone with a client at her workplace. It was utterly unlike her.”

“Why didn’t any of the other dancers suggest that at the trial? Why didn’t any of her friends speak up?”

The girl let out a snort of derision.

“The other girls didn’t like her much; they thought that she was all hairs and graces, which is the last thing Kate was. As for her friends, what could they say? They wouldn’t want to ruin her reputation, you see? Imagine what the rags would have made of her being a sapphist! And what good would it have done? It wouldn’t have brought her back, would it?”

“But you are not satisfied,” suggested Sherlock.

“I want justice to be done and if my name is dragged through the mud, well, I never cared much for it anyway. I never did feel like a Laura. Such a simpering, mealy-mouthed name,” she stated, with some violence.
“What about mine then?” said John, “Plainest name in the English language.”

“God is gracious,” the detective explained, “That’s the meaning of it, in Hebrew.”

The two men gazed at each other with such fondness that Laura had to close her eyes. It pained her too much, that happiness, even though she knew it was irrational to feel that way.

“Were you supposed to see her the night she died?”

“Not that night, no,” Laura replied. “I had the night shift at the food factory where I work. I slept all the following day, until late afternoon, that is, when I went out for that loaf of bread I told you about. We were supposed to meet that evening and spend the night at my lodgings. The landlady is a witch, but she was staying with her sister in Bermondsey for a couple of days, so we had the place to ourselves. I was so looking forward to it,” she said, anger seeping through.

“What can you tell us about her? What sort of person was she: curious, patriotic, outspoken? If she’d seen something untoward, what would her been her reaction?” the detective enquired.

“She hated the war; her father had died during the previous one and her mother had followed him soon after. Both her brothers left the county for greener pastures and she never heard from them. Kate wasn’t one to fly the flag, but she wouldn’t betray her country, that much I’m sure of. She was a sharp girl; she could tell bunkum when she heard it. When you have a childhood like the one she’d had, you have to grow up fast.”

“Did she smoke, drink?”

“The usual, nothing excessive, not on her wages; not that she would have, it’d ruin her looks, she said, and her health too. She needed both to keep her job.”

“What was her attitude to men?”

“Friendly, a sort of easy camaraderie, if you see what I mean; they felt that they had someone they could talk to, someone who did not judge them. It was a good trick of hers, to avoid the more… personal touch.”

“Perhaps one of them said more than he should have,” the detective suggested.

“War secrets?” she exclaimed. “But that could be treason!”

“Did she know the other victims? Have you ever heard her mention them?”

“I thought about that and no, I don’t believe she did. Certainly not the Oatley girl; Kate would have told me about it, when we saw her in the papers.”

“Is there anything else you think may be connected to Kate’s death?” asked John.

“Yes, well, I couldn’t really put my finger on it, but there was something bothering her that week. At the time, I thought it was to do with her job - that Mayfield woman could be a right gorgon – but maybe it wasn’t. She didn’t seem angry, more like puzzled or uncertain; lost in her thoughts, which was not her line at all.”

“We will talk to the gorgon. The Bouillabaisse Club in New Compton Street, right?”

“That’s the one,” the girl replied, but the fight had gone out of her voice.

“We’ll let you rest,” said John, and she gave him her hand to shake.
“Come back soon,” she added, looking at Sherlock too.

“We will need to do a proper post-mortem,” the detective murmured. “I hope you understand.”

“Yes,” Laura replied, but she seemed lost and horrified.

“Whoever killed Kate tried to kill Sherlock too,” John said, in a calm yet firm tone. “We will find them, whatever it takes.”

“Yes,” she repeated, and closed her eyes, smiling.
“What do you think about her story?” asked Stamford, while they sipped ink-black tea in the hospital canteen.

“What is she here?” enquired the detective. “She lives in Vauxhall, at the other side of town.”

“Doctor Pearson was at Lambeth Hospital before being transferred here. They were bombed back in December,” explained John, “Poor girl, she’s not been lucky.”

“She seems to have recovered pretty well, considering what she’s been through,” said Mike. “Will you be able to do something for her?”

“We will need your help,” said Sherlock, glancing sideways at his lover to gauge his reaction, but the doctor only nodded in agreement. “John didn’t tell you the whole truth before because I asked him not to. There was a secret to keep, but now the cards are on the table.”

A short explanation followed, with the salient details of the case and a mention of their adventure in Maida Vale.

Stamford couldn’t hide his amazement: behind his thick lenses, his eyes were wide like saucers.

“A rather dangerous show,” he said, “Of course, I’ll do what I can. Just have the Inspector inform the Hospital; they won’t object if the order comes straight from the Yard. What do you expect to find? Most poisonous substances are not easy to detect after such a long interval.”

Sherlock took a cigarette out of his case and lit it; it was the first since he’d been injured and he intended to take only a few drags before passing it to John. He didn’t make it past the first one.

“Here,” the blond man said, and handed it to Stamford, who grinned at the amusing charade and accepted the unexpected gift.

“Black Cats,” he said, “Someone is a lucky chap.”

The detective muttered under his breath.
“And someone is harbouring the mistaken belief of being indestructible,” John replied, placing a hand on his friend’s thigh and pressing down, firmly. They were sitting side by side and the table stood between them and Mike, shielding the lower parts of their bodies. Sherlock’s reaction was immediate: he relaxed into the touch and his mind became sharper, more lucid.

“We will know it when we find it. I trust you to keep an open mind, unlike that sot Anderson. The causes of death were pretty evident in all three cases, which is why any anomaly was overlooked. Why notice a mark on the calf or a pinprick on the wrist when someone’s been strangled and battered to death? It’s not unlike finding your home burgled and failing to see the tear in your drawing room curtains. We see what we are meant to see. It’s only the detached observer that notices the trifling details.”

“I guess you will be present too,” Mike said, as he contentedly puffed at his cigarette.

“Obviously”

“We’ll hold your hand, don’t worry,” added John, with a smirk.

“I’d rather hold my scalpel, thanks very much.”

The two physicians laughed and the detective did his best to ignore the delightful sensation caused by his lover’s fingers caressing the inside of his thigh, but soon gave up and revelled in it.

“We’ll let you go back before they send a search party,” Watson said, after drinking the last of his tea.

“It was a pleasure to see you,” the man said, “And you Holmes. Take care of yourselves.”

“One can but hope,” Sherlock sighed, covering his lover’s hand with his own.

“What if we made a quick stop along the way?”

“We are not going to a noisy club in the most crowded part of town. Early morning perhaps, when there’s less chance you’ll be pushed around.”

“People don’t usually do that,” Sherlock protested. “I hardly see what difference a few hours will make.”

“You don’t have to, because you’re not your doctor; I am.”

There’s was no arguing with that; not that the younger man intended to; that could be done later, in the seclusion of their flat.

“I didn’t mean to pay a visit to Ms Mayfield, but rather to make a short detour to Clerkenwell.”

John was silent for a moment and then he remembered.

“That’s where Miss Oatley used to live,” he said and then whispered in the detective’s ear, so that the cabbie couldn’t eavesdrop, “I don’t have my gun on me, hence it’s out of the question.”

“Maida Vale was different; they were waiting for us, because they sent us that note. Besides, the place is probably occupied by another tenant by now.”

“I doubt it. Lestrade said she was a sort of custodian to it after it was hit. It’ll be empty, I bet. We
are going back to Baker Street.”

Sherlock sighed like a child who’s been refused another ride on the Ferris wheel.

“I dearly hope you are going to make it worth my while,” he declared.

John smiled quietly to himself and, once again, pressed the palm of his hand on the young man’s thigh.

By the time they had reached their lodgings, a thick, insidious fog had descended on London, permeating the desolate remains of the shelled buildings like the vile stench of a rotten tooth.

The relative excitement of the day - in sharp contrast with the tameness of those which had preceded it - and the bleak weather had electrified the atmosphere between them.

Quietly, they had adjourned to the wash-room, where John was going to change the detective’s bandages. The wound was healing faster than he’d predicted, but after all Sherlock was little more than a boy and, despite his poor eating habits, a rather healthy one.

“Is that true what Miss Summers said, about women being with other women?”

“I’m not an authority on this, but yes, unfortunately it is.”

He swiped the disinfectant sodden cloth along the length of the shoulder, gently.

“Why the difference?” the detective murmured, swallowing nervously. John’s groin was dangerously close to his face and he could smell the scent of the man’s soap mixed with tobacco and a hint of sweat.

“I don’t know; perhaps because women are mainly seen as mothers and housewives.”

“That’s a limiting perspective.”

“Terribly unfair, that’s what it is,” replied the doctor, pulling out a clean bandage and starting to redress the wound. For a while neither of them spoke and the procedure was taken care of in a swift, professional way.

“You should have a bath,” Sherlock suggested, “I had one this morning and you only took care of me.”

“That I did,” John said, his fingers trailing up the young man’s throat, along his jaw, and getting tangled in the mess of curls at the nape of his neck.

They both fell silent, as they thought of the intense current of tenderness and sensuality that had formed between them in the past few days: every gesture, every night spent in each other’s arms had increased and cemented those feelings, to the point where their blood was dense with its intoxicating mixture. At times, John had believed that it would seep out of him, like some potent love nectar that he could feed his lover on, soul to mouth, in a pagan incantation. Sherlock was glorying in it, but at the same time he desired to be handled with less caution; he knew that his lover’s restraint was only temporary and contingent, yet yearned to break his resolve; he was sure he could push him with cunning and malice, playing on his jealousy, but he also knew that a victory earned that way would not be half as pleasurable; the well would be tainted and the resulting passion not as pure.
There were other ways.

“Let me take care of you,” he murmured, turning his head to kiss John’s flexed biceps, hard beneath his shirt’s sleeve.

“I don’t want you to strain yourself,” replied the blond man, as he allowed Sherlock to undress him.

The young man did that with school-boyish primness, removing each garment like a stuttering man-servant on his first working day. His fluttering eyelashes, bitten lips and silent concentration were more arousing to his lover than any lascivious touch: his instincts were, as always, perfectly attuned to the mood of the moment.

“Is it very hurtful?” he asked, when John was soaking in the lavender-fragrant water, and he was sponging the man’s back.

“Not if you keep touching me,” his friend replied, smiling.

Sherlock ducked down and mouthed at the silvery scar, careful not to graze it with his teeth.

“I want you all the time,” John murmured, as the water trickled down his brawny chest. “I have been holding back, but you know why.”

“You didn’t want to hurt me.”

“I’d rather die.”

“What if I were to ask for it?”

The blond man stared at his friend’s gold-flecked eyes, capturing his gaze for a long while, considering what to say next.

“No real brutality,” he replied, hoarsely.

“I wouldn’t want that.”

What happened next left Sherlock speechless and numb with desire: John held the detective’s wrist in a steely grip and bit down at the base of his thumb.

“Would I get you down on our knees and have at you like a dog in heat?” he husked, hot breath on the palm of the youth’s hand, “Oh God, yes, yes and yes.”

For a moment, Sherlock believed he was going to climax, as a shot of liquid fire filled his bowels and pooled in his groin.

He whimpered in the most undignified way, but John was moaning too, so it didn’t matter.

“We can try something,” the doctor said, in a scratchy tone, “If you promise to do as told.”

It was music to the detective’s ears.

“Your wish is my command,” he replied, and helped his lover out of the bathtub.

The bedroom was as dark as the dying embers in the grate permitted it.
The world outside seemed to be conspiring with them, as no sound punctured the soupy darkness.

It was like being cloistered inside an anchorite’s haven: the ivory linen was almost luminous in the blackness, giving off a pale glow, evocative of the milky skin of its owner.

John pushed the young man towards the bed; he quickly removed his dressing gown – letting it fall on the floor – and pushed him on to his knees, face down on the mattress and buttocks on full display. He checked the bandages and once he’d made sure the detective was comfortable and not in pain, he planned his attack.

The previous time John had been in that position, he had denied him the most intimate of kisses and Sherlock had deduced that it was perhaps a taboo that could not be overcome.

Thus, he was woefully unprepared when his lover spread him open and dove in, sinking his face in between the rounded flesh and closing his lips around the tight, puckered ring of muscle. He cried out and his hips jerked violently.

John halted for an instant to warn him:

“Scream all you want, but don’t thrash around or I’ll stop,” he commanded, his words like the crack of a whip.

Sherlock made a sound of assent which turned into a moan as John lapped a lewd stripe, from loins to scrotum. The man growled deep in his throat as he sucked at his each testicle, leaving them dripping and taut and achy.

“Yes, yes, yes,” the detective begged, and was rewarded by that hungry mouth lapping at his entrance; it wasn’t a tender kiss but rather a ferocious banquet, all slurping and suckling and satisfied, lustful groans.

When John’s tongue speared him, stabbing and probing, in a relentless, filthy penetration, he felt like he’d just been dipped in a vat of boiling water.

“I can’t, oh please, please, I can’t,” he shouted, but didn’t know what he was asking for. He was shivering with shame and pleasure, and his lover was needling a spot inside of him that hurt and vibrated; it tormented him like a nail inside an open wound. His erection was frotting against the coverlet, a maddening, slow masturbation. The contrast with John’s animalistic gluttony was driving him insane; sweat was cooling down his back and prickling his armpits. He was a dirty, shameless creature, submitting to the basest of acts; he was in blissful heaven.

“Mine, you’re mine,” John rasped, and his hand found the dripping head of Sherlock’s prick and rubbed at the slit.

“Oh, Lord,” the youth screamed, lights exploding behind his eyes; he had only enough presence of mind to add, “You too, please, please,” and try and contain the orgasm that was about to burst out of him.

Dimly, he felt the heft of his lover’s erection as it slid between his buttocks. He welcomed it, melting into the mattress, sobbing in ecstasy. John stroked him hard and fast, while at the same time fistig his own erection, teasing Sherlock’s quivering hole with his moist glans, but never allowing it to be sucked inside.

How Sherlock wished it would; he’d never wanted anything more desperately.
“Let go, my love,” John urged him, doing something wicked to the underside of Sherlock’s prick. It was like the pleasure was being wrung out of him, squeezing him dry. He trembled with the effort of keeping still and felt the jets of semen erupt from him, like blood spurting from an artery.

He heard his lover cry out and felt the warm embrace of his pleasure drenching him like a spring shower.

“I thought you wouldn’t want to,” Sherlock said, settling into his lover’s arms with a contented sigh.

In reply, John kissed him on the mouth, deep and eloquent.

“Greedy boy,” he said, brushing his lips along the detective’s cheek, “Want everything at once, don’t you?”

“I certainly didn’t get it, did I?” the young man quipped.

“Oh, but you will, don’t worry about that.”

Sherlock closed his eyes to savour the moment, and recall what had just occurred between them; the consuming fire of it and the abandon and trust it had demanded of them both.

“I do, you know, even if I’ve never said it,” he confessed, quietly, “Very much.”

“Yes, my dear,” said John, caressing the boy’s hair, his chest, and everything within his reach. Their romantic idyll ground to an undignified halt when Sherlock’s stomach emitted a rude sound of protest. He tried to ignore it, but his companion was grinning at him, regarding him with delighted affection.

“I’ll reheat some of that stew and bring it here, your Excellency,” the blond man said, giggling as the detective’s belly rumbled again.

“A cup of tea will do,” Sherlock said, furrowing his brow in discontent; that made John laugh even louder, so he waved him away, feeling as happy as a child on Christmas morning.

The following morning, the fog had given way to a melancholic drizzle and a leaden sky.

It was a dank and cold day, but Sherlock had made up his mind that he would not spend another day at Baker Street. He knew that John would not object, not when his shoulder was doing so well: no swelling and very little pain.

“Clerkenwell Road then,” the doctor said, after the first cup of coffee had been disposed with. “Don’t look so surprised,” he smiled, “Eat your bacon and eggs and tell me exactly where the house is and how we’ll get in if no one’s there.”

“Northampton Square,” replied the detective, picking at his food, “I have a passe-partout, but I doubt I’ll need it.”

“It’s where the Polytechnic is,” exclaimed John, “I knew a fellow who’d studied there.”

Sherlock pricked up his ears, even as he pretended to fuss with a rasher of bacon.
“An acquaintance or a friend?” he asked, trying to sound vague; to John, he was as transparent as gauze.

“A fine figure of a fellow,” the doctor replied, “I believe he was part of the Gymnastics Club; strong as an ox, but graceful with it.”

There was a surly rat-tat-tat of cutlery, as the detective mutilated his portion of meat.

“I wouldn’t have taken you for a sports devotee,” he muttered.

“Not a devotee, but appreciative, yes, why not?” the blond man countered, pouring more coffee into his mug.

“If that’s what you fancy, you could pay them a visit later.” The scrambled eggs bore the brunt of the detective’s irritation, and were reduced to an even more pitiful mess.

“I don’t need to stare at young men sweating, unless it’s a very specific one,” John said, leaning to the side to kiss his lover’s cheek. “You are not supposed to wrestle with your breakfast, you know?”

The stormy clouds having dispersed, Sherlock grinned at his companion.

“I will do as I please,” he said, “But since you are my very specific friend, I agree to bow to your superior knowledge on the matter.”

“I won’t accept anything less than a royal curtsy.”

“Light me a cigarette and I will think on it.”

Like many other such secluded places in London, Northampton Square was not half as grand as it sounded. Standing on land donated by the eponymous Marquess, it was an enclosure surrounded by lugubrious Georgian buildings with a bandstand and a mangy garden at its core. Printmakers, silver smiths, jewellers and watch-makers had, at one time or another, plied their trade in this pocket of the city, but now it looked half-deserted and more than partially defaced. Only in the Institute of Technology – an imposing red-brick construction with a clock-tower and a weathervane in the shape of a frigate – were there signs of human activity.

The other buildings, some of which had been deprived of their roofs or gutted like fishes, were as unreal as crumbling doll-houses.

“What are we looking for?” John asked, squinting through the needle-like rain.

“The one with boarded-up windows,” said Sherlock, cutting across the puddle-strewn greenery to the other side of the square.

“That doesn’t really help me,” the doctor complained, an quickened his strides to keep up with the taller man.

“That’s the one.”

The detective has stopped in front of an ugly, three-storey house, with a sooty, pitted frontage and mould-infested steps, like gravestones in a cemetery.

“Poor Miss Oatley,” John murmured, “Can’t imagine many people wanting to loiter around here.
Who found her? It wasn’t Brent, obviously.”

“The milkman,” replied Sherlock, cheerfully. “She always put her empties out; never missed a day. He knocked a couple of times and realised that the door was ajar. He went in and found her.”

“Must have been ghastly.”

“These boys are made of sterner stuff,” said the detective and then, with a chuckle, “If memory serves, he got his empties in the end.”
Ozymandias

Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John meet a new friend...

Chapter Notes

First of all, thanks to all you lovely people reading, commenting and leaving kudos. You are precious!
Note: During World War II, the docks were a key target for the German Luftwaffe and were heavily bombed. Unexploded bombs from this period continue to be discovered today.

“And on the pedestal these words appear:
’My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

Ozymandias (excerpt) – P. B. Shelley

The day Evelyn Oatley had died could have been precisely like today, thought John, and not a soul would have noticed that she was being strangled.

The house was almost Dickensian in its desolate abandon: the two rooms, kitchen and tiny washroom that completed the custodian’s lodgings were encased inside a vast, draughty warehouse that had been hollowed out like a cavernous shell.

As one ascended the litter-strewn wooden staircase, taking good care not to stumble on the rickety steps, the impression that prevailed was that religious cosmogony had been upended so that where the heavens should have radiated their sanctified air, the foetid, sulphuric reek of the underworld reigned instead.

“That lad must have been very determined to get his bottles,” John muttered, as he mounted the stairs in front of Sherlock. He had insisted he’d go first, since he was the one with the gun and he wouldn’t take any chances.

The detective snorted a laugh.
“Never discount the grit and determination of the average Londoner, my dear,” he replied, “Tea shall be had, no matter what; I firmly believe that tea deprivation would spell the end of our noble nation. What the Jerries will never achieve, the lack of this humble beverage could.”

“Can’t disagree with that,” John said, chuckling, “Although what it says about us, I’m not quite sure.”

“Frivolous as it may seem, in truth, it’s of paramount importance. These little things are what we are fighting for. The lofty ideals mean nothing if they are not built on habits and traditions.”

The blond man stopped and turned to look at his companion, amazement painted on his every feature.

“I thought you despised habits and traditions!”

The youth shot him a look of fond exasperation.

“Of course I do, my dear,” he drawled, as posh as the King himself, “But for a thing to be opposed, it has to exist. What would I rail against, if these ghastly commonplace things disappeared altogether?”

“Child,” said John, taking the man’s face in his hands and kissing the tip of his nose. Sherlock’s reaction was both dazed and vexed.

“A perfectly sound philosophy, I believe,” he muttered, slightly flushed.

“A wise child, perhaps,” conceded the doctor, as he climbed the last few steps to the top floor. “What are we looking for?” he asked, when they entered the squalid hovel Miss Oatley called home.

As the detective had predicted, all the doors they had encountered until then had been unlocked; in fact, they were barely worthy of their name, hanging as they did from rusty hinges; the wood panels were riven with cracks and the jambs appeared to have been ripped out.

“Anything that may constitute a clue,” replied the detective; he gazed around the place with his nose in the air, scenting it like a setter. “Can you smell anything?” he asked.

John inhaled deeply and considered for a moment.

“Humidity, dust and the usual stench of burnt masonry,” he concluded, “To be expected, after all.”

“This is where the body was found,” Sherlock said, indicating a threadbare rug lying in front of a cast-iron stove. “It was still warm, as the fire had just died out.”

“And she had been dead for how long? I must read the documents of the case,” said the doctor, shaking his head in frustration, “Or I will keep asking all these silly questions.”

The young man smiled his customary oblique grin.

“I don’t mind; it helps me remember. If we can trust Anderson’s handiwork, she’d been only a dead a few hours. Late in the afternoon or evening, he said. There were no witnesses, no one had seen her alive since the day before the murder.”

They searched the squalid lodgings, but there seemed to be nothing untoward. Miss Oatley’s brother had been asked to not remove her meagre belongings, but the request seemed pointless.
There was a modest array of garments in the creaky wardrobe and paunchy cupboard, but no books on the shelves or trinkets on the tables.

The faded-velvet armchair by the stove had no secrets hidden beneath its shabby cushions.

“What about her money?” John asked, “If she worked as a prostitute and took her clients here, there should have been more cash aside from that five-pound note.”

“She had a few guineas in the bank, but that was it. They found her account book together with her other documents; there was nothing suspicious there,” replied the detective, who was inspecting the place inch by inch, with meticulous, gloved hands.

“I can’t help but feel that location has a bearing on the case,” he added.

“This house gives me the creeps,” his friend concurred, looking out of the smudgy glass panes into what was left of the back garden, which consisted of a muddy patch unevenly covered with scorched grass. Unlike the windows that faced onto the square, the others had been left to their own devices, with mixed results: some were almost untouched, but most had cracked panes or were altogether broken.

“It’s not cosy, I agree, but it’s not what I meant. Remember the letter she sent to her brother: she wrote that Brent lived in Maida Vale, of all places. Why would she say that?”

“Perhaps the Oatleys had a link of some sort to that area.”

“Maybe, but why didn’t George Oatley mention it to Lestrade, if that was the case? We will have to ask him, that’s certain. But what if Maida Vale was not important per se, but merely as an unlikely location due to its distance from here? Put yourself in Miss Oatley’s shoes: if you were a lady in the oldest profession in the world, would you take abode in this bleak house?”

“No, if I could help it,” replied the doctor, shuddering, “What proof is there of her occupation, aside from the fact that Cummins had allegedly been one of her clients?”

“She told her previous landlady, Mrs Buckley, that she wouldn’t want to work in factory, because she couldn’t stand the long shifts. She vaguely mentioned lovers and the lady put two and two together. As for the other murders, the investigation was damnably shallow, and I wasn’t there,” proclaimed the young man, through gritted teeth.

“You said you were on another investigation; what was that about?”

Sherlock waved his hand in an elegant gesture that indicated irrelevance, but was startled mid-way by a sudden thought.

“What?” John repeated.

“It was a series of burglaries in the Piccadilly fine-arts district. There was no connection between the stolen paintings: artists, values and provenances seemed to have been picked at random.”

“Did you find the culprit?”

Sherlock shook his head, unaware that he was softly massaging his injured shoulder joint.

“It was the darndest thing,” he murmured, a faraway look in his eyes as he re-traced the meanders of his memory, “The stolen lot was found in a shipyard in the Isle of Dogs.”
“That place is a bloody powder keg,” exclaimed the blond man; he removed Sherlock’s hand and replaced it with his, unknotted the muscle with delicate touches. “It’s a miracle you and the paintings didn’t get blown to smithereens.”

The young man wheeled around and smacked a kiss on his partner’s lips.

“I did say you were my conductor of light, my dear, and I was right! It is what they meant to do: keep me distracted and try their luck at annihilating me. If it worked, so much the better, if not, at least they would have kept me away for long enough to succeed, which they did.”

“Who are they and why would they go to such lengths to incriminate Cummins rather than simply kill him or make him disappear?”

“It may not be as intricate as that and I don’t yet know who they are, but they must have known about me and feared my intrusion,” said the detective, who was clearly basking in the glow of his own importance.

John couldn’t help but smile; he’d thought about cracking a joke but he found that he didn’t much care for pricking Sherlock’s happy bubble. Perhaps he was exaggerating a tad, but there was little doubt about his ability and the fact that they’d already tried to stop him at Maida Vale.

“What if, my dear,” said the detective, now fully aboard his deductive roller-coaster, “What if the issue with Maida Vale was that she knew this Brent man was operating in a part of the city that was far from there, that was perhaps this very spot where we are standing?”

“But she said she didn’t know about his activities!”

“That’s not how she worded it though,” protested the young man, excitedly. “She was very evasive and impersonal: but there’s no asking him what he does for a living, as it’s all hush-hush. It would have been easier to simply write: I don’t know about his profession because it’s war-related, or something to that extent. But the way she described it implies that she asked and wasn’t told anything, but also suggests she might have found out by herself. And thus she signed her own death warrant. We need to find out when she moved to these premises.”

“Do you think Brent was working in the warehouse before it was bombed?”

“What was the first thing you said when I told you about Northampton Square, my very own dear lighting rod?” asked Sherlock, swirling his cape around like a dervish.

John bit down on his lip to stifle a giggle, but he was struck dumb by the implications of the reply he was about to give.

“The Polytechnic,” he said, “There is a department of Applied Physics and Electrical Engineering.”

“And one of Electro-Chemistry too,” said Sherlock, whose eyes now glittered like stars.

“Oh my god,” John whispered, “They may be concocting a new chemical weapon, something that could lose us the war.”

“Better not jump to conclusions,” warned the detective, who had just done that, “It could be something of a different nature, such as the plans for a new aircraft or something along those lines.”

“You don’t believe that, not for real! The War Office would certainly be aware of such a plot. There would have to be prototypes and testing and that’s not something you can hide inside a
laboratory. With chemicals, it’s a different story; you can do that in your own back-yard.”

“Or in your own flat, if you have the requisite equipment,” said Sherlock, with a smirk.

“You sneaky sod,” John said, pinching his lover’s buttock until the young man squirmed in delight.

“Ouch,” he screeched, “I never meant to hide it from you. It simply never came up.”

“Didn’t it now?”

Thankfully, neither of them had a taste for lovemaking among the squalor, or it would have been hard to resist. As it was, they left the insalubrious flat and inspected the other floors. The view was even more depressing there, albeit absurdly cramped: piles of detritus were sharing the spacious, high-ceilinged rooms with the skeletons of cheap furniture and mountains of bric-a-brac. It was not unlike a rag and bone shop on a grander scale, and for some reason it reminded John of Alice in Wonderland.

“This could be utterly unimportant or a very shrewd ruse,” murmured the detective. “Unless one knew what to look for, almost anything could be hidden in here. A piece of paper, a photograph, an objet d’art: it would be arduous to find it unless one spent days searching for it. And if that was the case, it’s already too late anyway.”

“I thought I had seen the light for a moment, but it’s all tangled up again,” John sighed, wishing he was miles away from that macabre pawn shop.

“It is indeed a web, my dear,” replied his companion. “A pattern with more threads that we can count as yet; the colours and shapes are still blurry, but they will be revealed to us, don’t you worry.”

Suddenly, a faint squeak breached the quiet and a scuttling noise followed soon after. A rat, they thought, but a concert of outraged mewls heralded the presence of a stray cat. The animal, a skinny striped tabby with big yellow eyes, made a beeline for Sherlock who hunkered down to pet it, while John looked on, once more utterly lost for words.

“I used to have a cat before they sent me to boarding school,” the detective murmured, as he scratched behind the animal’s ears. “It was called Percy.”

The doctor waited in silence for the rest of the story.

“Because of Shelley,” continued Sherlock, as he petted the underside of the cat’s chin, “I was obsessed with his poem Ozymandias. I remember running around the house declaiming look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

“You should have named the cat after the poem.”

“I thought of it, but it would have pleased Mycroft. He detested the name Percy, said it was too common. Maggers fed him when I wasn’t there. Few things gave him more pleasure that shouting for Percy in my brother’s presence.”

“What happened to it?”

“Him, John; it was a boy,” protested Sherlock, “He drowned, poor beast. There was a shallow ditch at the edge of the park. It had been a rainy summer and the drainage had been clogged with leaves. He must have tried to jump across it and fallen in.”
“How terrible; you must have been crushed.”

“Mother didn’t appreciate exaggerated displays of emotion,” the detective replied, and John caressed that arresting face, wishing he’d been there at the time to wipe away the tears. He examined the tabby and saw that he too was a boy.

“We can’t leave him here,” he said.

Sherlock gave him a smile of such unadulterated joy that made even that hideous place seem brighter.

“Mrs Hudson needs a distraction from that boring Millward chap,” he said.

“What did I tell you?” said the doctor, in a mock-exasperated tone.

“The cat will give them something to talk about.”

“Unless the poor man can’t stand them; some people are terrified of cats.”

“Can’t imagine why,” argued the detective, as he scooped the animal up and cradled him in his arms. Incredibly, the tabby did not fight against that sudden invasion of his privacy. He blinked softly and purred.

“You’re a regular Don Juan of felines, my dear,” John said, contemplating that vignette with amusement.

“Let’s go before he changes his mind.”

They had almost reached the hallway, when the front door opened and on the threshold appeared a short, pot-bellied elderly man with a shock of white hair and a bulbous nose. When he saw them, he waved his walking stick in their direction, looking like a Cruickshank caricature.

“Mr Potters, I believe,” said Sherlock, who mustered up an incredible amount of dignity for a cloaked young man carrying a half-sleeping cat.

“We are here on behalf of Scotland Yard,” he explained, “Sherlock Holmes, and this is Doctor John Watson.”

“They got their man,” he said, narrowing his button-like eyes, “What is there to look for?”

“This is Inspector Lestrade’s card,” the detective said and, handing the tabby to John, he extracted a square of paper from his notebook. “You can telephone him and he will give you all the information you need.”

The man squinted at the card and sighed.

“Can’t understand why you didn’t come to me before,” he said, still on the defensive.

“Is this your house?” asked John, who was trying not to move too brusquely in case he startled the tabby. “Because we found all the doors open and I don’t have much to say about the rest of it either.”

“I manage it, so to speak. The owners have fled sometime after the first air raid; left for the countryside. They have a property in Richmond, I believe. There’s no worth valuable to steal and
besides there’s never a soul round here, except for these buggers and their mates,” the man replied, indicating the cat.

“And yet you rented the custodian flat out to Miss Oatley,” said the doctor.

“It weren’t as bad back then. Some of the workshops were still open; that was back in the spring, well before the raids of November and December. She’d heard from one of them shops that I was looking for a lodger and she paid me a month’s rent in advance, no questions asked. She was a nice girl, no matter what they said about her. A street-walker, they said. Now, I wasn’t born yesterday, and I don’t believe one of them ladies would spend one minute in this area of London.”

“Perhaps her clients liked the peace and quiet,” suggested Sherlock, “No one to see them come and go, no one knowing who they were… unless you kept an eye on the proceedings, perhaps?”

Potters grimaced, revealing a mouth of big yellow teeth, like piano keys.

“I wouldn’t survive long as a landlord if I went around pestering my lodgers. If they pay on time and keep to the rules their life is their own. I visited her once or twice at the start, only to make sure she wasn’t doing something improper, like taking in more people or preaching some weird religious cult. I don’t care for that ouija board and ghosts nonsense myself; can’t see how anyone with their head screwed on right would,” he said, flourishing his stick like a conductor’s baton.

“And she didn’t, I suppose?”

“Not Miss Oatley! She was a practical sort of girl. Nothing fancy or feather-brained about her; she would have made a perfectly good wife to some lucky bloke.”

“And did you meet the chap in question?” asked the detective, who had started caressing the cat, much to John’s intense amusement.

“I never met a soul,” Potters replied, patting his paunch, “She listened to the wireless, sometimes.”

“There was no wireless in her rooms.”

“Maybe the police took it and gave it to the girl’s family.”

“They didn’t take anything aside from the girl’s purse and her documents. What else is missing, in your opinion?”

“I’m not the nosey sort, I told you. If the wireless isn’t there, someone must have pinched it,” the old man said, furrowing his brow.

“We’ll have to check if it was there when the body was found,” said John.

“I don’t think it was,” intervened Potters, who was starting to enjoy the mystery, “They called me in soon after they had taken her away and I don’t recall having seen it there.”

”When did her tenancy start? You said spring, but when exactly?”

”It was April the 5th, that I know for sure.”

“Very well,” said Sherlock, “If you remember anything you haven’t told us or the Yard, my telephone number is on the back of that card. Good day, Mr Potters.”

“Taking that bugger with you?” the man guffawed, “A right fleabag you got there.”
“His name is Percy,” said John, and winked at his friend.
The Young Marchmain

Chapter Summary

In which we learn something new about Gordon Cummins

Chapter Notes

Note: Unity Valkyrie Freeman-Mitford (yes, really), was an English socialite best known as a devotee of Adolf Hitler. She tried to shoot herself in the head after England declared war on Germany. She survived the suicide attempt, but could not walk, talked with difficulty and was a changed personality, like one who had had a stroke.

“Take therefore no thought for the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.”

Matthew 6:34 - King James Bible

“Why would the murderer rip their clothes but not interfere with them sexually?” asked John, as he tried to prevent Percy from climbing over the barrier onto the cabbie’s shoulder. The chap had announced his disapproval about having carrying four-legged aboard his car; Sherlock had simply ignored him, so it was up to John to make sure they weren’t thrown out of the cab, lock stock and barrel.

“Here, here,” said the detective, and the tabby jumped onto his lap and started his meticulous toilette by licking his front paws.

“Carnality doesn’t interest him, power and violence do.”

“But if Brent is indeed the killer, he was in a relationship with Miss Oatley.”

“We can’t really tell whether it was physical or not.”

“But surely his proclivity for easy virtue suggests that he was after something more than hand-holding at the pictures.”

“What do these girls really have in common, my dear? Think about it.”

Percy was now scratching behind his ears with his hind paw, catching at Sherlock’s cloak with his claws.

“Young, unmarried…”
“And?”

“No close family to speak of,” said John, smiling as he watched the detective try to free his garment from the cat’s grasp without causing too much damage.

“Precisely,” the young man replied. “No-one to make a fuss once they were gone; these girls enjoyed a vast amount of freedom; the freedom of loneliness.”

“But Katherine King was not lonely.”

“In the eyes of the world, she was.”

“Why do you think the killer mutilated her so brutally?”

“It’s only a theory, obviously, but maybe he wanted her identity to be questioned rather than Greta Hayward’s.”

“No one identified her?”

“There was no need,” said Sherlock, caressing Percy’s back to calm him down, “She had just rented a room at the Blandford. The concierge had seen her documents, including her ration book.”

John’s expression darkened and a muscle in his jaw twitched.

“Those poor girls,” he asked, after a while, “Were they sacrificed for no reason then?”

“As far as we can tell, from the information we have, two of them knew too much, one was used for her resemblance to the Hayward woman who, in turn, is probably up to her neck in it.”

“Have you any idea why the killer befriended these women if he was so adamant about keeping his activity secret? Why run the risk of being found out?”

“I have a feeling that I am missing something important, something about Cummins and the Polytechnic.”

The tabby was now playing with the detective’s fingers, chasing them with his paws, opening and closing his mouth at the same time.

“Could he have studied there?”

Sherlock grimaced as a claw grazed the back of his hand. That was going to be fun, John thought, trying hard not to grin like an idiot.

“Perhaps, but I don’t believe the connection to be quite as straightforward as that.”

At Baker Street, Mrs Hudson showed little surprise at the new addition to the Holmesian household.

“I always knew you’d be a cat person, my dear. This little boy here is exactly what we need for the yard outside the scullery; plenty of mice and rats for him to chase,” she said, eyeing the tabby with the same warmth she reserved for Sherlock.
“He will need proper food,” the detective groused, making both his friends laugh.

Percy was reluctantly left in the care of their landlady and they were about to mount the stairs, when she called them back.

“I left the post by the telephone. One of the letters looks interesting: luxury envelope, with some sort of watermark."

The two men stared at each other and said nothing other than express their gratitude, but their heartbeats quickened.

“Another missive from our mysterious foe?” said John, who was torn between worry and elation.

“I wonder,” replied the detective, sprinting up the last few steps and unlocking their front door with impatient fingers.

The envelope was custard yellow and had a pleasing veined texture; the stamp on it depicted a crest which Sherlock identified as soon as he set his eyes on it.

“Three buck’s heads: it’s the emblem of the Marchmains. Lord Marchmain is the Duke of Beaufort's heir,” he explained. “He and my brother used to have an… entente of some sort.”

“That’s where our client was staying, this Duke’s house.”

“This is not his handwriting,” Sherlock continued, and tore the envelope open without ceremonies.

“It’s from Crispian, the younger son,” he said, curling his nose, “He’s about my age, but thankfully he’s an Oxford man. A frightful fop, the most deplorable of aristocratic poseurs; even his brother is not as atrocious.”

John chuckled.

“What does he say?” he enquired.

“He wants to see us. Tremayne has probably gone back to Hampshire and prior to that, the annoying bounder must have found out about Cummins. He must have wheedled the truth out of him!”

“Should we ignore the invitation?”

“I wish we could,” the detective said, heaving a piteous sigh, “But we have a case to solve and our client told us that he met Cummins at a party given at Marchmain House. Crispian must have met him and now he badly wants to gossip.”

“Do you think there might have been something between them?”

“I am a neophyte in matters of sentiment, as you know only too well,” Sherlock replied, lowering his gaze, “But I could never tell whether that family have any blood in them at all. Vegetable or mineral, possibly, but animal?” he shook his head. “Terribly refined, up to the point that there’s hardly any humanity left in them.”

“Why is he not at the front?”

“Not because he’s smart enough for intelligence work,” the young man replied. “It appears that he
has a dicky heart: fainting spells, shortness of breath, the lot.”

“You don’t think it’s true?”

“His brother Alexander, stolid and plain-looking as he is, was always the main attraction: first child, heir to the title, strong as an ox. Crispian could never compete by turning on the charm, since he doesn’t possess any.”

“I hope you never felt you had to compete with your brother,” remarked John, softly.

Sherlock shot him an affronted look.

“I never wanted to be anything other than who I am.”

“What a fool I’ve just been,” the doctor said, taking his lover’s hand and kissing the superficial graze that had been caused by Percy’s exuberance, “It is the other way round, isn’t it? You are the brilliant star and Mycroft has always admired your singularity. He must love you more than you or he are prepared to admit.”

“What an unsavoury topic of conversation,” the detective protested, grimacing. “Especially when we’re about to eat luncheon.”

“You are trying to distract me with food,” suggested John.

“Can you blame me?”

“I can smell the roast lamb and turnips from here,” said the doctor, scenting the air, “But first, let me have a look at your shoulder. And I’ll better disinfect that hand of yours too. That tabby may be lovely, but heaven knows what disgusting muck he’s been rolling in.”

“Yes, sir!” saluted the detective, with a mocking gesture that wouldn’t have fooled a casual observer; he simply adored being ordered around by John and there was no disguising it.

The invitation had not set a time, but Sherlock knew that sherry and cocktails would be served at Marchmain House from 6 pm; he was also convinced that it would be prove wise to arrive early lest the vapid scion of the family embarked on one of his notorious drinking sessions.

“It won’t do him any good,” said John, as they walked past the iron gates of Green Park, “Alcohol will only make his condition worse.”

“You could tell him that,” suggested the detective, who was wearing his most elegant Homburg hat and a pearl-grey silk shirt to match. “I’m looking forward to his reaction.”

“He’ll probably ignore me; dipsomaniacs don’t care about medical advice.”

“There’s where you are wrong, my dear.”

The same blank-faced servant of their previous visit led them to an opulent drawing room which reeked of hot-house flowers and expensive tobacco.

Here was no stately, gloomy severity, but such abundant luxury that was almost in dubious taste: the rich tapestries on the walls were gaudy, the console tables gilt-topped, the William and Mary
chairs upholstered in damask the colour of ripe apricots. Above the majestic fireplace hung an imposing oval mirror with a preposterous frame of white Dresden daisies.

A rosewood inlaid marquetry cabinet in the style of Louis XV was laden with a selection of spirits. Next to it, intent in concocting an esoteric mixture, was their host.

Sherlock had not lied: Crispian Marchmain was that odd specimen one only encounters among the English aristocracy or the in-bred nobility of some Asiatic potentates; he was a young man who appeared to have been trapped between childhood and puberty, so that he veered from high-pitched, overstated innocence to shrill, goat-eyed malevolence. In the midst lay an emptiness as staggering as it was inevitable.

His personality wasn’t in any way improved by his unappealing features: pale gooseberry eyes set too close together, sparse sandy hair and a receding chin. His nose and lips were not ugly, but so nondescript as to merit no attention; he was not yet a portly man, but he had the physique that was prone to thicken with age, especially around the waist.

To counteract these iniquities, he wore a loose oriental jacket over a silky trouser-suit that reminded John of a French bedroom farce.

“My dear Holmes,” he screeched, pushing his longish limp fringe out of his eyes, “And your friend, Doctor Watson, I believe?”

The hand he offered them was a sickly shade of grey.

“Have some of my Deadly Gin, my darlings. It’s a terrific mixture of Tanqueray and this Romanian wine they call the blood of the vampire. So very theatrical, but one can’t deny the frisson that comes with all that bosh.”

“A glass of sherry will do for me,” said John, “I don’t really have a head for cocktails, I’m afraid.”

Marchmain studied him with the interest he would have dedicated to an unusual piece of crackleware found in a second-hand shop. His sudden smile, crowded with small, pointy teeth, was alarming in a way John couldn’t explain; he had to suppress a full-body shudder.

“An honest-to-god medico,” Crispian enthused, circling around the doctor to properly assess his qualities. Sherlock’s palms itched with the desire to slap the confounded sot.

“I’ll have sherry too, if you don’t mind,” he stated, bluntly. “Cocktails are so passé.”

If he hoped to offend the young nobleman, he was wide of the mark.

“It must be heavenly to be always so sure of what one wants,” he exclaimed, handing his guests their drinks and taking them towards the enormous Morris Rose chintz sofa.

“One does get so confused with the things one reads in the papers: only a few years ago that funny German man was idolised by many of our friends; he’s the real deal, the Mitfords said. And look at what happened to them: Diana has been locked up and Unity is only fit for the loony bin,” he said, nodding his head with child-like cruelty. He set his tall glass on the crystal top of a low walnut stool and opened the chased box that lay on it.

“I simply adore these Cyprian delights,” he said, offering the yellow cigarettes to his guests, who politely declined. He made a great show of lighting one by dint of squeezing the encrusted head of a dragon-shaped lighter, a tasteless objet d’art that crouched ominously by the side of the fire-grate. For the first time since they entered the room, John noticed the nicotine stains on the man’s
fingertips; they were a light shade of ochre and quite revolting.

“Why did you invite us here, Crispian?” asked Sherlock, who was fast losing his patience; the heavily-scented atmosphere was nauseating and so was the young man’s affectation.

“You haven’t changed a bit, my dear Holmes; always so shockingly direct. I wish I could be like you, but it wouldn’t do, not with my poor old muddled head.”

“You’re really quite young,” said John, who could not stand this faux self-deprecation.

“I feel as old as the pyramids, my friend. All this death around us is quite unsettling, not the sort of memento mori a chap like me needs. Did Sherlock tell you about my ticker? Oh, I see that he has; don’t feel too sorry for me, doctor: I have acquired the famous Latin motto and made it my own. Carpe diem, that’s my new second name.”

John didn’t reply, but gazed at his friend and it was clear neither of them felt the least compunction.

“I heard from Tremayne that you are investigating the Cummins case,” Crispian continued, in his desultory manner, “I thought that was yesterday's news, but perhaps I was wrong.”

“Did he tell you?” the detective asked, staring him in the eye.

Marchmain let out a shrill laugh, like a naughty child caught red-handed.

“Wilcox mentioned you’d been invited here and I did wonder why for a minute, until I remember this strange little hobby of yours.”

“It’s not a hobby,” said Sherlock, “You interrogated your servants? I never knew you could be so cunning.”

The blow was deeply felt, as that was an offence that Crispian truly resented: he cherished his sham vagueness and wore it a like an ermine mantle. To be thus accused of practicality and shrewdness was like being clad in vulgar jute.

“What must you think of me, that I would trouble my servants in order to enjoy a moment’s diversion,” he protested, balancing his cigarette on a marble ashtray. “No, it was a mere coincidence, I assure you. Your name was spoken an immediately I recalled how utterly crushed Tremayne was when that cadet was arrested.”

“Did you know him well?” asked John, in the hope of steering the conversation in a new direction.

“I met him a few times,” was the defensive reply, but the moue of displeasure soon melted into a smug smile. “He was handsome in a rugged sort of way. The type our sort tend to be enamoured with, more often than not,” he said, glancing from John to Sherlock in a suggestive manner. The detective bit the inside of his cheek and his companion strangled the stem of the crystal glass he was holding.

“But I digress,” Crispian said, aware that he got his small revenge, “I was led astray, as the chaste maiden used to say. And I, as pure as the driven snow,” he sighed, pressing a hand against his chest. “Alex invited him over, with all his ghastly RAF pals and I couldn’t very well extricate myself without causing a minor annoyance. He was showing off, you see; the Dukedom supporting the war effort or something to that effect.”

“Did you speak to Cummins?” enquired the detective.
“The usual inane chat one reserves for a nondescript crowd; the state of the nation and the price of a pound of bacon didn’t enter into it, that’s certain; we spoke of nothing, which is my favourite sort of talk.”

“Did he seem the dangerous sort?” asked John; Marchmain snorted and took a sip of his carmine drink.

“Perhaps a physician like you would have guessed his recondite thoughts, but I was more interested in what sort of drink he favoured. He was partial to champagne and brandy, but I managed to convince him to taste my special Dubonnet.”

“Was he inebriated by the end of the evening?”

“What sort of a question is that, my dear Holmes? One is never anything but sober in the presence of my august brother,” Crispian replied. “All right, he was perhaps a little tipsy but nothing as peculiar as he was weeks later.”

He fell silent to enjoy the surprise he’d caused; he ground his cigarette into the ashtray and crossed his stubby legs,

“It was at the Café de Paris,” he continued, admiring his well-manicured nails, “I was there with my usual crowd and he was looking for a friend of his, another military fellow I suppose.”

“And he was drunk, you say?”

“That’s the devil of a thing,” Crispian replied, scratching his silk-clad thigh. “I can’t quite put my finger on it, but there was something different in him, like he was not quite the same oafish cadet I had met at my brother’s little soirée,” he stopped again and giggled nervously. “One can never be sure of what one has seen... and that sort of man is often deceptive. That’s part of their charm,” he concluded, smiling at John.

“How different?” insisted Sherlock, who was very close to snapping.

“Oh dear me, what have I done?” complained Crispian, and rose to refill his glass from the decanter on the drinks cabinet. He was stage-managing his confession, wringing as much twisted pleasure as he could from their impatience. “You must think me a dreadful gossip, but I was honestly dumbfounded. You see, Cummins didn’t really recognise me, which is why at first, I thought he had drunk himself into a stupor.”

“But he hadn’t?”

Marchmain leaned against the mantel, his head cocked to one side like a malignant bird.

“Even though I lack medical expertise, I have yet to meet a drunk who can walk and talk as straight as Cummins did that night.”

“Perhaps he genuinely forgot who you were,” suggested Sherlock, with undisguised glee.

“Touché, my dear,” said Crispian, acidly, “Far be it from me to suggest that I’m as memorable as you are, but I am pretty sure he would have recalled me since we had met once more after the party. Tremayne invited us to dinner at Boulestin’s; there were a dozen of us and I was sitting opposite Cummins. We didn’t have much of a conversazione, but we did say the odd word to each other.”
“Why didn’t you tell the police?”

The man rolled his eyes and clicked his tongue.

“Didn’t I mention poor Unity Mitford? A splendid girl as I live and breathe, and now she’s nothing more than a vegetable,” he replied.

“But that’s nothing to do with you,” said the detective “She tried to kill herself because she couldn’t bear being at war with Germany.”

“Like I said, it’s so damnably confusing,” was the cryptic reply. “One’s head’s positively whirling.”

“Is that all you have to say on the matter?”

Crispian contemplated the iridescent pattern of his jacket and murmured:

“I think it’s plenty, don’t you?”
Apologies for the delay, but... elections!

Sherlock and John visit a club in Soho.

Once again thanks to all of you reading and commenting, you are all made of stars.

“Love, that can quickly seize the gentle heart,
took hold of him because of the fair body
taken from me – how that was done still wounds me.
Love, that releases no beloved from loving,
took hold of me so strongly through his beauty
that, as you see, it has not left me yet.”

*The Divine Comedy – Inferno – Canto V (Paolo and Francesca) – Dante Alighieri*

“Execrable pup,” Sherlock grumbled, as they left the Marchmain mansion and walked up Piccadilly. “An honorary black-shirt, if ever there was one.”

“A rather unsavoury type, I agree,” replied John, who felt an impellent desire to wash his face, hands and all his clothes, “But a traitor? Wouldn’t his family nip that sort of thing in the bud?”

“His father, the retired Duke of Beaufort is decrepit, suffers from gout and never leaves their estate in Somerset, where he macerates in his self-importance and swims in vast quantities of port. He hunts occasionally, but that’s all you can expect from him; he no longer cares about the rest of the world. As for Alexander, aside from being Mycroft’s *special friend*, he’s a puffed-up idiot, who thinks the rest of humanity should roll out the red carpet just for the Marchmains and their ilk. I bet he was like the Mitfords and their horrid friends, supporting Hitler to the very last. A strong man, exactly what this country needs, they used to bleat.”

When John curled his upper lip in disgust, the detective reflected that if ever that look was directed at him, he’d hide somewhere and pray for death.

“I thought it was only the Daily Mail and the other beastly rags, but that our ruling classes would be taken in too... it’s truly contemptible.”

“The Palace was spellbound too for a while; never underestimate the hatred some of them harbour for the…” the detective stopped abruptly, but it was too late.

“For the lower classes, the plebeian rabble, is that what you meant to say?” asked John, quietly.

*Tread softly,* Sherlock thought, struggling to find the right words.
“For those who do not belong in their empyrean circle,” he replied. “There’s a god-like presumption to them, which I despise as much as you do.”

“I know you do, my dear; I’m only teasing you.”

The blond man patted the detective on the arm, but then his mind changed its course.

“Wait, where are we going? I know that the last few nights have been relatively quiet, but the sirens could sound at any given moment and you are not fit enough for running around, not yet.”

“New Compton Street is only minutes from here.”

John glared at his friend, but after a while he relented.

“I need to stretch my legs anyway,” he sighed. “I didn’t dare move in there.”

“A stifling menagerie,” agreed Sherlock. “The stench of those flowers could suffocate a man, provided his lungs weren’t up to par.”

“I feel like I have just swallowed an entire bottle of cologne.”

They shared a laugh and their hands connected, fingers brushing fingers.

“What was he hiding? Could he be a spy?”

The detective considered the proposition for a moment.

“He would have the inclination, but I doubt they would entrust him with any real secret.”

“Can’t keep his gob shut.”

“Precisely,” the young man concurred. “He wants to be life and soul of every party, poor, deluded Crispian.”

“What did you make of his story?”

Sherlock was about to pull out his cigarette case but realised that John would never allow him to light up in the open air during blackout. He was gasping for a decent smoke, after the miasma of Marchmain’s Cyprians. His little crisis had not escaped his companion, who feigned to not be amused by it.

“I would discount it as pure speculation, but after what Tremayne told us, coupled with what we already knew about Cummins, I suspect he was telling the truth. Something happened to the RAF man, of which he was perhaps not even aware. Look, I said from the start that he appeared scared, as if afraid of incurring the wrath of the real murderer, but perhaps his fear was of another kind.”

“How do you mean?”

“Diminished responsibility, that’s what our client hinted at.”

“A mental disorder like amnesia?” suggested John.

“You are the doctor, as you like to remind me ad nauseam,” Sherlock jested, “Would the symptoms fit that diagnosis?”

“It could have been caused by a tumour. What happened to his body, was he buried in the prison
“cemetery?”

“He was cremated.”

“Very unfortunate,” commented the blond man, “And unusual too, if I am not mistaken.”

“You’re quite correct, but at the time I did not believe it would make much difference. The psychology of the case was all that mattered to me.”

“You couldn’t have prevented it anyway, unless you had a concrete reason to.”

They had reached Shaftesbury Avenue and delved into the warren-like maze that was Soho, with its boisterous eroticism and tacky glamour.

The Bouillabaisse Club vaunted a bistrot-style restaurant - with guttering candles on the neat square tables and posters of singers and actors tacked on the walls - and a basement dance-hall which tried vainly to imitate the much grander Café de Paris.

The Grecian splendour of that venue was replaced by a more subdued ambience; the glittery chandeliers and carpeted staircases were absent, but the lavishness of the velvets and prismatic glass served as counterpoint to the jazzy tunes played by the resident band of Joe Loss.

“We wish to see Ms Mayfield. Tell her it’s about Katherine King,” said Sherlock to the brunette that had approached them as soon as they’d descended the narrow staircase.

“I won’t be a moment,” she replied, her round blue eyes only just betraying her surprise at the mention of the dead girl’s name.

They sat at the crowded bar, watching the sweaty couples jitterbug and jive in time with the frantic rhythm of the transatlantic tunes belted out by a scantily-clad platinum blonde.

“I don’t think I will sing along this time,” John croaked, after having shouted his order for two Martinis at the unflappable barman.

“They wouldn’t be able to hear you anyway,” replied Sherlock, a lit cigarette already dangling from his lips. His shoulder was starting to ache, but he’d be damned rather than let it show. He wrapped his fingers around the icy stem of his glass and took a long sip.

“Don’t be a martyr, my dear, I know that it must hurt,” his lover whispered in his ear; he’d plucked the Black Cat from the detective’s mouth and held it between his fingers in a way that Sherlock found deeply provocative. He stared at it, mesmerised, incapable of defining which of his sensuous chords had been strummed.

“Later, not here,” John husked, stealing a quick kiss from his vermouth-sweet lips.

“I guess you are not in here looking for a girl,” said a gravelly voice that contained more than a hint of sarcasm.

Mrs Mayfield – for such was her title, since she had been a wife at some point – was a creation of Weimaresque ambiguity: her square face was caked with stage make-up while her short dark hair was bobbed and frizzy. The black-smudged eyes and cardinal red lips belonged to a long-gone era, and so did her freshness of which not a whiff remained, smothered as it was by the rice powder and bergamot. She wore a black shantung trouser-suit and a several rows of pearls around her crépey neck.
“We’d like to ask you a few questions about Miss King,” said Sherlock, handing her his card. “On behalf of Scotland Yard,” he added, certain that she would not talk to him otherwise.

She puckered her lips, and a fan of wrinkles appeared all around it, as if by magic.

“Not a lot to say about it,” she replied, but her expression betrayed her interest; it was hard to tell whether it was worry or concern or both mixed with what seemed only superficial curiosity.

“You identified her body,” said John, and the woman turned towards him, as swift and sleek as a python. She opened her mouth to reply, but changed her mind and stared at them in silence.

“You better come into my office,” she capitulated, after a short while.

Her sanctum was a room of fair proportions made to appear more spacious by its bareness: whitewashed walls, dove-grey carpets and a handful of tasteful pieces such as a Sheraton bureau and two Queen Anne chairs indicated a taste for costly elegance which was at odds with Mrs Mayfield’s attire and personal appearance.

Ironically, she seemed to possess that touch of class that Crispian, the son of a Duke, tragically lacked.

She invited them to sit down, but didn’t offer them any refreshment.

“I found her sprawled on the floor just inside the back door of the club,” she said, without preamble. “But you must already know that.”

“Did you know the man who murdered her?” enquired Sherlock.

Mrs Mayfield inspected her nails: they were painted with a matt varnish of the same shade as her lipstick.

“I saw him at the trial and in the newspapers. We never spoke.”

“And you never met him prior to that?”

She found a chip in the paint and frowned at it, as it were responsible for her predicament.

“There are many people coming and going, Mr Holmes, I can’t remember them all.”

“Would a military man be easier or harder to recall?” asked John, and she gave him a tight smile.

“Once I would have said the former, but lately we’ve been having hordes of them and, after a while, they start to look the same. Tragedy of life, isn’t it? Originality is a rarity,” she concluded, casting a suggestive glance at Sherlock’s unusual features.

“And what about Miss King?” the detective asked, “Was she a reliable girl?”

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

“Men liked her, even though she wasn’t the demonstrative sort. Her kind never is, with men,” she explained.

“What kind would that be?” John enquired, feigning ignorance.

“I’m sure you know the kind I’m talking about” she replied, staring him in the eye. If she expected him to lower his gaze, she’d wait in vain. In the end, she was the one to look away, returning to the
perusal of her manicure.

“Did they confide in her?” Sherlock demanded. He was paler than usual and his shoulder was throbbing; both facts had been observed by his companion, who was eager to bring that unproductive interview to a close.

“Confide? What a peculiar assumption,” she replied, annoyed, and then, “They talk to all the girls, after they’ve had a drink or two; it’s only human and it doesn’t do any harm.”

“Words can be deadly,” he suggested. “We are at war and the enemy is shrewd and dangerous.”

She studied him with interest, like an entomologist would an exotic bug.

“You work with the Yard yet you are still wet behind the ears. You can’t be more than twenty,” she spat out, with sudden ferocity, “Don’t try and teach me lessons, kid.”

“I would never presume,” Sherlock drawled.

“Upper class kid,” she continued and now her contempt was apparent, “Wants to lecture me on life’s pitfalls.” She tittered, but it was an ugly, bitter sound.

“I assure you that’s it’s nothing personal,” the detective insisted, but John interjected.

“Miss King had people who loved her and miss her and they need to find out the truth. Cummins could have killed her, but we have reason to suspect it might not be the case. You can help us or try and hinder us; either way, we’ll get to the truth, make no mistake about it,” he said, firmly.

Her heavily powdered cheek turned a shade duskier.

“What fervour,” she exclaimed, a little cowed, “I have no intention of hampering your quest for the truth; I was only concerned for your friend’s welfare.”

“What about it?” the doctor asked, his heart beating faster. For his part, Sherlock had fallen unusually silent.

“He’s very pale,” she muttered, “I just wondered that, perhaps, he was unwell.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me!” the detective half-shouted, “I presume you have nothing more to tell us and that we are only wasting our time.”

This emotional outburst left him inexplicably exhausted, and since he was annoyed with himself, he lashed out.

“You are a widow,” he recited, “lost your husband in the other war. You are still angry because of it, perhaps because he left you no money, but I don’t really believe that to be the case. You take great pride in this business of yours; one just has to look at this room; you enjoy working so that’s not the reason of your annoyance. Maybe you loved him enormously and he was taken from you and you can’t forgive the manner in which it was done. How that was done still wounds me,” he went on quoting, in a softer tone that seemed to move the woman; she licked her dry lips and her reptilian eyes were moist. She didn’t speak, so he continued.

“You can’t even bear to set eyes on them, these men in uniform, with their bluster and shining brass buttons; they don’t know what fate awaits them, and these girls they dance with could be their last dalliances and they wouldn’t know any better.”
Mrs Mayfield’s hands were curled into tight fists and she was snorting air out of her nose, in a passion of repressed emotions. She inched closer to the detective and regarded him with disgust.

“What you just described may be the truth, but that naïve girl is gone forever,” she hissed, “She’s not standing in front of you now.”

“No, she isn’t,” agreed the detective, in a faraway voice, “You won’t tell us anything more, is that so?”

“There is nothing more to say.”

“You must have seen her talk to several men,” insisted John, who had been unsettled by Sherlock’s preternatural display. “We only need their names or whatever bit of information you can provide.”

“All I can say is that she was a hard-working girl who gave me no trouble and that her death was sad and unexpected,” the woman replied, but the emotion had gone from her voice and from her features; there was a finality in her mien that left the two men in no doubt as to its meaning.

They thanked her and headed for Charing Cross Road, where they hoped to find a cab. For once, there was neither fog nor rain and the sky was fretted with stars. After the ordeals they had undergone, John was happy to finally breathe the frosty air and contemplate the majesty of the universe.

“It’s magnificent,” he said, and nearly gasped when he felt Sherlock’s hand clutch his, violently.

“I don’t want to lose you,” the youth murmured, his patrician profile etched into the blackness of the night, like a Greek head on a medal. “I fear that a bad omen has descended on us.”

“We have had a long day,” the doctor said, rubbing his lover’s frigid fingers, trying to warm them up. “And you are in pain, which makes you imagine things that aren’t there. That woman didn’t help; a gorgon, indeed! Poor Miss King and poor Miss Summers, too,” he added.

“No, it’s more than this,” insisted the young man, “And I’m sure you know what I’m referring to.”

“She’s angry and sad, and I would be too if I had lost the love of my life in a stupid war. Or worse still, if he got septicaemia by walking the streets of London at night instead of resting, as he should.” He glared at Sherlock, but the youth had been stunned by the import of his declaration.

“Is that what I am?” he asked, forgetting all his aches and fears.

“What, stubborn and exasperating?” the doctor teased.

“The love of your life?” repeated Sherlock.

“Yes,” John replied, simply. It was the surest he’d ever been about anything.

“How can you be certain?” asked the young man, mind-reader that he was.

“If I said that two plus two equals four what would you say?”

“That it’s undeniably true.”

A few people passed them by, hurrying to their destinations and paying them no mind, not realising that a momentous event had just taken place between the two men who stood on the pavement, transfixed, and pretending to stare at the sky above them.
“I told you already that I can’t think of a future without you, but there is more to it,” John murmured, still gazing at the stars, but feeling the almost violent pressure of Sherlock’s fingers digging into the palm of his hand. “It may sound crazy, in fact I’m sure it is, a bit,” he giggled, a bit tipsy with drink and tiredness, “But I feel that you’ve always been there at the outskirts of my conscience, waiting for me to find you. And I can’t even call it good fortune, because it was always going to happen, it was just a matter of time.”

He shook his head.

“I’m talking gibberish,” he added, and at last, looked at his lover. The detective’s lips were parted, his eyes open wide and a deep furrow had appeared in between his brows. He tried to speak, but his vocal cords had dried up or perhaps it was his brain which was malfunctioning.

“Let’s go home, my love,” he heard John say, saving him once again from himself.

Dimly, in brief flashes of consciousness, like shafts of lights from a torch, he felt that he was being bundled into a cab; felt the remoteness of the landscape moving away from them and, all the time, this fist of emotion was squashing his heart and a terror whose cause he could not name coursed through his veins.
When Sherlock opened his eyes, the room swayed and tilted around him like a sinking ship. Even more absurdly, a striped cat was curled up atop Maggers.

The quaint image reminded him of a Braque painting he’d seen at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, with its absurd geometries and garish colours. There was nothing plausible in those artworks; they were depictions of nightmares or hallucinations. At the time, he had not cared for them: he had been irked by the inaccuracy of their proportions and by the unreality of their settings. It was only afterwards that he’d realised that they’d had an effect on him which had little to do with their
artistic merit. They articulated feelings he had not known he possessed until that very moment.

“You are awake, at last,” he heard John say, “You really scared me, you know?”

“Why?” he croaked, “I’m in tip-top shape,” and he tried to sit up, but the world shook and careened as if struck by an earthquake.

“Don’t move, you silly sod,” the doctor admonished. “You’ll end up with a concussion and then I will have to be the one investigating the case; imagine that!”

“What’s happened to me?” the detective asked, allowing his lover to take charge of the proceedings.

“You over-tired yourself. That horrid young man and poor Mrs Mayfield were too much even for me, especially after our little morning excursion.”

Northampton Square, Sherlock recalled, even though it was still a tad blurry and fantastic in his mind.

“Is there really a cat perched on the top of my skull?”

The doctor laughed. “That’s Percy. Have you forgotten about him?”

“Of course I haven’t,” he protested, although he’d only remembered when John had mentioned the pet’s name.

“I was afraid of something,” he continued, unravelling the thread of worry that was tangled around his heart. “There was evil coming towards us, fast-approaching... I could almost smell it, taste it.”

“It was Marchmain’s aftershave,” replied John, “A devilish concoction, like his vampire cocktail.”

“Don’t mock me,” Sherlock huffed.

“I would never do that,” replied the blond man, stroking the boy’s rebellious curls, “Not after they nearly killed you. I know they are dangerous, but we are prepared for them.”

“Are we?”

“Obviously,” the doctor replied, caressing his lover’s fever-flushed cheeks.

Sherlock tried to find the words to explain the nature of his fear, but he was too exhausted. He closed his eyes and fell into a black, heavy slumber.

He found himself awake in the middle of the night, heart and bowels gnawing with hunger.

Beside him, John was fast asleep and it seemed like a crime to wake him up.

Outside, in the distance, bombs were falling; their distant rumble was another portent of tragedy. Logic and detachment had been Sherlock's gods and now they were failing him.

A monster of yet unidentified nature was crouching in the wings and he could only think of Mrs Mayfield’s desiccated soul and the loss that had begotten it.

“John,” he murmured, inching closer to his lover’s naked body. How fortuitous, he thought, and let
his hand trailed down the brawny torso.

“Oh,” the doctor exclaimed, and in the next instant, he had Sherlock in his clutches.

“Is anything the matter?” he asked, hoarsely, but the detective didn’t want to talk and kissed him on the lips instead.

With infinite care, John lay him down on the pillows and licked inside his mouth; it was a timid advance, until the young man demanded more; he sucked at his lover’s tongue and at his lips in provocation, begging to be bitten and tamed. He wanted to be eaten alive and John rose to the challenge, shoving his tongue down his lover’s throat and nipping at his lips until he tasted blood. His hands were everywhere: on Sherlock’s neck, rubbing over his pulse point; down his chest, tweaking a nipple; between his legs, squeezing at the base of his leaking prick and rolling his testicles.

This time, the detective didn’t need to be told: he stayed still of his own accord, relishing that delicious torture.

“How do you want it?” John whispered in his ear; taking his time to tease the delicate lobe with the tip of his tongue; making the young man shiver.

Sherlock was breathing hard and his body was tingling all over, but he knew what he craved and the best way to get it. Words, he thought, accurate and without embellishments.

“Feed me your prick, I want to choke on it,” he replied, in his coldest upper-class drawl.

The reaction he elicited was as cool and calculated: John bit down on his earlobe while simultaneously palming Sherlock’s erection, viciously grinding it against the boy’s groin.

“Christ,” he whimpered and raised his arms in surrender.

“I won’t hurt you,” said the doctor, and he made sure the position wasn’t affecting the detective’s injured shoulder.

Sherlock let him take care of things, abandoning any pretence of defiance and finding that state of utter subjugation the sweetest of drugs.

“Open your mouth,” the doctor murmured and soon the moist head of his thick penis was nudging the detective’s lower lip, forcing its way in. Sherlock let it breach him and the heft of it slapped his tongue: it was heavier than he remembered and delightfully silky. When he wrapped his lips around it and sucked, he felt John hesitate, afraid to let go. Knowing that he shouldn’t use his hands, he swallowed hard and licked teasingly at the underside of the shaft. The provocation worked: John grunted and pushed all the way in, with a violent snap of hips, until the engorged head bumped against the youth’s palate.

“Yes, yes,” John moaned, and penetrated the young man’s mouth with relentless determination. Sherlock’s eyes were smarting and more than once he believed he was going to faint or be sick; he had no control over the act: he could not stop the saliva from dribbling down his chin or the gurgling, guttural sounds his throat was emitting; he could not direct John’s movements nor guide his thrusts. It was terrifying and supremely pleasurable to the point that he was sure he would orgasm from it, untouched.

It went on for an eternity, in a punishing rhythm that eventually devolved into jagged frenzy.

“I’m going to... now,” gasped his lover, and tried to pull out. Sherlock latched on him desperately,
growling deep in his chest, tongue lapping and slurping the plummy glans.

“God!” John cried, and streams of bitter seed flooded Sherlock’s mouth; his wish had been granted, and he was blissfully gagging on the evidence of his lover’s pleasure. As he gasped for breath, he felt his own orgasm rip through him, and the added stimulation tipped him over the edge.

“Thank you,” the detective murmured, when he was able to speak again. He had come to his senses to find that John had cleaned him up and fetched him a glass of water. He drank it greedily, feeling a bit dizzy.

“My dear, you were magnificent,” the doctor replied, dotting his face with gentle kisses, “But I wish you told me what’s bothering you.”

Sherlock wanted to tell him of his nightmare, of the Braque painting with the skull; of the indefinite terror in his heart; he could not do it, afraid that the expression of his fears would turn ghosts into an army of foes.

“I love you,” he said, instead, and it was only then, when John held him tight to his chest, whispering words of adoration, that he truly understood how immensely fortunate they were, and how vulnerable.

The morning welcomed them with a cacophony of distant voices and more proximate sounds.

“Percy is scratching at the door,” John mumbled, his nose buried into his lover’s curls.

“Mrs Hudson is angry at someone,” replied Sherlock, who was trying to suppress the joy he felt at being naked in bed with the man he loved. The room reeked of sex and passion and he didn’t want to have to leave it.

“Time to get up,” John said, even though he’d rather stay where he was, with the front of his body plastered to the detective’s enticing back.

He dropped a kiss on a freckled shoulder, and the frailty of that translucent skin filled him tenderness.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, and touched the boy’s cool forehead. “No temperature,” he declared.

“My throat hurts a little, otherwise I’m ready for battle,” Sherlock replied, and was rewarded with a tender kiss on his sore lips.

“Should I apologise?”

“Only if you didn’t enjoy it.”

John grinned, and stroked along the length of his friend’s jaw with the pad of his thumb.

“Had I enjoyed it even more, I would probably be in heaven now.”

“Who says you’d go to heaven? You and I are sinners through and through; we are lost souls in the eyes of Christianity.”
“No deity would punish true love, of that I’m certain.”

Sherlock stretched his long, naked body, arching his back and sighing contentedly.

“Come here, you blackguard,” the doctor murmured, and threw himself on top his lover only to jolted back by Mrs Hudson’s scream of “Sherlock, someone’s here to see you!”

“Does she do it on purpose?” he complained, and the detective laughed.

“Hardly,” the young man said, “She’s extremely glad you are here to take care of me.”

“I wish she’d let me then.”

Swiftly, they put on their dressing gowns and did their utmost to look presentable. As soon as they opened the door, Percy darted in, heading for Maggers.

“They’ve become best friends,” noted the detective, with a pleased smile.

“That cat is as batty as you, my dear.”

“Isn’t he splendid?”

And John could not find it in himself to disagree.

Before they could set foot in the sitting room, they were greeted by an extremely flustered Mrs Hudson.

“I found him outside the scullery when I went looking for the tabby. He’s drunk and filthy and smells like he’d been kipping inside our rubbish bins; he may have done, come to think of it.”


“He said he wanted to talk to Mr Holmes,” replied the woman, shaking her head, “He insisted and I was afraid he might become violent.”

“You did the right thing,” Sherlock said, patting her arm.

“I’ve told him to sit in the old leather chair.”

“But that’s John’s chair!”

“It doesn’t matter,” said the doctor, “We’ll see what he wants. How about some tea, Mrs H?” he asked, giving her his most brilliant smile.

“The tea is in there already,” she replied, “Don’t let him eat all the muffins,” and on that victorious line, Mrs Hudson exited stage left.

The stranger was pouring tea into a mug and his hand wasn’t shaking. He was tall and lean and was wearing an oversized ARP coat; his youngish face was grimy and his eyes grey-blue and lively. A stench of cheap alcohol and inferior tobacco permeated the atmosphere, the exact opposite of the death by scent that had assaulted their senses at Marchmain House.

Sherlock took one look at the man and smirked.
“Very shrewd of you, sir,” he said.

“I hope you’ll forgive the manner of my intrusion.”

“Wait, I know you,” exclaimed John. “I have seen your face before, haven’t I?”

“Perhaps during an inspection; I am a warden in the Bloomsbury area.”

“I was a warden too, but no, that’s not it.”

The detective stared at the two men, incredulous and a tad annoyed.

“Maybe this gentleman will introduce himself,” he intervened, stepping in between them.

“Greene’s the name. I won’t offer to shake your hand,” the stranger said, grinning.

“That’s it! You are the chap who writes for the Spectator. My wife used to love your reviews.”

“What does a writer want with Sherlock Holmes?” enquired the detective, snarling at the mention of the man’s profession, but in truth upset about the late Mrs Watson. “And why go to such lengths to contrive an encounter?”

“I work at the Ministry of Information,” Greene explained, “With William Sansom. Or at least I did, until the day before yesterday.”

After that surprising revelation, generous helpings of strong tea were required by both John and Sherlock, while muffins were buttered and offered to the famished writer, who devoured them with gusto.

“He promised he wouldn’t tell a soul about our meeting,” said the blond man.

“And he didn’t,” Greene replied, pulling out a book from one of his coat’s pockets and handing to Sherlock.

“The Méthode de Nomenclature Chimique,” the detective exclaimed, and his eyes lit up in elation. “Leo Marks,” he added and Greene nodded. The only one who was still in the dark was John, who wore a worried expression that his companion found oddly endearing.

“The Baker Street Irregulars,” he clarified, obtaining a brief nod from a more relaxed Doctor Watson.

“I kept an eye on him, but I don’t know whether he was aware of it.”

“He knew he was being observed,” replied the detective. “He told us as much. We haven’t seen him or heard from him since New Year’s Eve.”

“You must wonder whether you can trust me.”

“Unless Mr Marks has joined the enemy, there’s no other way you could have known about the book. I would trust him with my life.”

“You should be very careful, Mr Holmes. These are times when loyalty can be tested to the limit.”

“No need to caution me, dear chap. I only allow a handful of people inside my inner circle.”
Greene fixed his cerulean gaze on Sherlock, considering his statement.

“Marks said the same thing about you, so I guess I’ll have to take it as read,” he concluded; he glugged down the rest of his tea, fished out a surprisingly white handkerchief from his coat and wiped his lips and fingers on it; he folded it and put it away then started his narrative.

“I will tell you what I can; it isn’t much, but I hope it will be enough. To be perfectly frank, you shouldn’t be anywhere near this business, but since you already are, we might as well limit the damage and make the most of the situation. I know that there was a piece of paper with names on it and that one of those names was Gordon Cummins’.”

“Do you know the other names?” asked John.

“No, but I doubt that’s important.”

“The man’s been hanged for crimes he did not commit and he was on a list that disappeared and you are saying it doesn’t matter?”

Greene scratched the back of his head and grinned. He had one of these grave, austere faces – not unlike Sherlock’s - which were transformed by smiling. Attractive, the doctor thought, and a bit reckless. As he pondered this, he caught his lover’s gaze and was certain that the young man had just read his mind. The usual line had appeared atop his nose and he was biting his already sore lips.

“I can’t quite explain in full, I’m not allowed to, but let’s just say that it’s not as crucial as you may surmise,” the writer continued.

“What do you think happened to Sansom?” the detective asked, his eyes still fixed on his companion. “Was he removed by force or is he part of the conspiracy?”

“That we really don’t know. If he’s part of it then he’s been quite crafty about it. There was no need to involve you nor was there any reason to insist about Cummins’ innocence. What I can tell you is that he was seeing a woman, of late.”

John had assumed the young fire-fighter had been more inclined towards his own gender. Why would he have known about the Turkish Baths otherwise? And why frequent the Pink Sink? He then thought of his own late wife and of his present partner and pocketed his assumptions.

“What sort of frequentation?” he asked.

“I didn’t make it as far as his bedroom,” Greene jested, “But they seemed to be fairly intimate; enough to be holding hands, at least. I saw them from the Senate House’s windows; amazing view of the British Museum, especially if one owns a good pair of binoculars.”

“And what did this girl look like?” Sherlock enquired, his curiosity finally piqued.

“Young, slim and of average height is all I can tell you, I’m afraid. She was wearing a wide brimmed hat with a veil; frightfully dramatic and very effective. She had a fabulous pair of leopard print shoes, which I thought was a tad unpatriotic, considering the rationing and all the rest of it.”

“A girl from a wealthy family,” suggested John.

“Unlikely,” commented Sherlock, “They are the ones who try their hardest to support the war effort. Haven’t you noticed the ATS girls driving the ambulances? Some of them are peers’ daughters.”
“Yes,” Greene concurred, “I thought of a foreigner, perhaps, or someone who was not used to having money and was suddenly in the position to spend lavishly. They stood within the gates of the Museum and talked for a long while then left separately. He came back to the Ministry and she headed towards Holborn. He held her hand and squeezed it hard before they parted. A day later, he was gone. He didn’t come to work and he wouldn’t answer the door of his flat.”

“Did you inform the police?” John asked. He wondered about Mycroft: whether he knew about this and if so, why he hadn’t told his brother.

“Ah, there’s the rub, as the poet would say,” Greene replied, cheerfully, “When I asked about him, his superior - a nondescript fellow named Lawn - he told me in confidence, the silly old cuss, that the War Office was involved. Boniface, he said in a stage whisper that would have been the envy of Sarah Bernhardt.”

“That’s quite clever,” Sherlock piped up, “Boniface is codename for Winston Churchill,” he added, for John’s benefit.

“Precisely,” said the writer, “Boniface means we can’t investigate any further.”

“It also means no one, not even my annoying brother, could know for sure. The only way would be to ask the Prime Minister, but since it’s to do with intelligence agents, any interference might be construed as treason and treated as such. Checkmate,” said the detective.

“Perhaps for us, but not for you,” said Greene, and he extracted a card from an internal pocket. “This is his address, in case you don’t have it already.”

“Isn’t there anything else you can tell us?” asked John.

“I’m not authorised to discuss our activities, but there’s one thing I’d like you to know,” the man replied. “It’s about the Blandford Hotel. We know that SIS was keeping a watchful eye, but they had the wrong end of the stick.”

“The Evangelical Library?” asked Sherlock.

“Most probably,” said Greene, and that was clearly the end of their conversation, as the man stood up and walked to the door.

“You will have to ask your landlady to throw me out of the scullery door,” he said, grinning.

“With pleasure,” said John, returning the smile.
Chapter Summary

Things start to go seriously wrong...

Chapter Notes

Note: the use of the Blake quote in this chapter is my hommage to P D James' "An Unsuitable Job For a Woman"

Note 2: Sir Bernard Henry Spilsbury was a British pathologist. His cases include Hawley Harvey Crippen, the Seddon case and the "Brides in the Bath" murders by George Joseph Smith.

*"Down the winding cavern we groped our tedious way, till a void boundless as a nether sky appear'd beneath us, and we held by the roots of trees, and hung over this immensity. But I said: 'If you please, we will commit ourselves to this void, and see whether Providence is here also. If you will not, I will.' But he answer'd: 'Do not presume, O young man, but as we here remain, behold thy lot which will soon appear when the darkness passes away.'"*

*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (excerpt) – William Blake*

“Cherchez la femme,” exclaimed John, when he returned from his brief expedition.

Sherlock was furiously munching on his muffin, annoyed at having been caught eating ad at his friend showing such unwarranted enthusiasm for another man; a tall, lean, blue-eyed man who was also an ARP warden and, the cherry on top of this nauseous cake, a spy.

“I’m not quite convinced we should take his word as the Holy Scripture,” he huffed, “As much as I trust Mr Marks, we should not rush into anything too swiftly.”

“I thought you were the one who wanted to court danger no matter what and I was the one holding you back,” the doctor replied, sitting down to continue his breakfast, “Besides, you are the brains of our little operation; I’m only the muscle and the gun for hire, should the occasion warrant it.”

“You’re starting to speak like an American pulp fiction magazine,” the detective replied.

“What I meant is that you decide what we should do, and I will watch your back, come what may.”

Mollified by this testimony of devotion, Sherlock consented to eat another muffin, even though he maintained he was so doing just to please John who, once again, had understood the situation and
found it both hilarious and endearing. One day, the doctor reasoned, his lover would cease to be so patently jealous, but for the moment being, he’d continue to relish it.

“Who’s the mysterious lady?” he asked.

“The inference is childishly obvious,” the young man replied, staring reprovingly at his friend as the latter dunked a chunk of bread into his black tea.

“Plebeian, I know,” remarked John, “Should I go eat in the kitchen?”

“I wasn’t,” mumbled the young man, “I was merely interested, in an anthropological sort of way.”

“Mm right,” was the amused reply, “So, what about this lady then?”

“Greta Hayward, only the real deal, this time.”

“Why, yes, of course! You must be right, and if that’s the case, we have to go there immediately. Hyde Park, wasn’t it?”

“Knightsbridge, the seedier part,” replied the detective.

“I wasn’t aware that there was one; not before the blitz started, anyway.”

“You’d be surprised,” said Sherlock, surreptitiously dropping a cube of sugar in his tea, “London is never predictable; nobility and poverty are frequently interwoven.”

“And yet never the twain shall meet.”

“Quoting Kipling, that paladin of imperialism? You stun me, Doctor Watson.”

“I don’t have to agree with his politics to enjoy his writings.”

Sherlock grinned, clearly delighting in their sparring.

“How very debonair, my dear,” he said.

“Sounds like you are trying to get me back into bed, Mr Holmes,” John replied, removing a smidgen of butter from the youth’s upper lip. “I’ll have you know that I need no inducements and that plain speaking will do me just fine.”

Like in the best Feydeau farce, as they were about to kiss, a squeaky sound interrupted him and they both turned to see Percy demanding their attention by rolling about on the carpet and stretching in an exaggerated fashion.

“I can definitely see the resemblance,” the blond man laughed.

“I do not usually lie down on the floor and writhe.”

“That could be arranged, I am sure,” John replied.

He stood up and ruffled his lover’s curls, before proceeding to pet the tabby, which closed his yellow eyes and purred.

“Yes, it’s uncanny,” he murmured, gazing at the detective, who coloured a little and then joined the fray; while he scratched behind the cat’s ears, he found the position conducive to being petted too; his lover dutifully obliged and when Mrs Hudson came in to tidy up, she was confronted by a
tableau worthy of a Renoir painting: on the rug by the hearth, Sherlock was sprawled on John’s lap, his head on the man’s shoulder while Percy lay next to them, half-asleep.

“What did that drunk want with you then?” she asked, knowing that her intrusion would embarrass the young man. About time too, she thought. She had been long waiting for the detective to finally surrender to his badly-concealed emotional needs.

Like she’d predicted, Sherlock moved abruptly and would have quickly risen to his feet, if it hadn’t been for John’s arm curled around his waist.

“He’s an ARP warden fallen on hard times,” said the doctor, “I was a warden too,” he added, as if that explained why the man had asked specifically for the detective.

Mrs Hudson wasn’t to be so easily deflected.

“I wasn’t born yesterday, my dear. That man wasn’t your usual tramp.”

“Perhaps he wasn’t,” intervened Sherlock, “But it’s safer for us all to pretend that he was.”

She stopped suddenly, and the saucers clattered in the bakelite tray.

“Is that to do with your shooting? Arthur said he’d been seriously thinking of moving out of Maida Vale after what happened.”

“And maybe moving into Baker Street?” suggested John, and Sherlock snorted loudly.

The elderly lady cast them a reproachful glance.

“I’m not as modern as the two of you,” she retorted, “Young people may do as they please and in these dangerous times one can hardly blame them. But when you’re older, you are not as keen to give up your habits and accommodate another’s. It’s not as simple.”

“Absolutely,” said the detective. “Take all the time you need, that’s what I advise. If you want, I could investigate…”

“You keep your nose out of my personal business, Sherlock Holmes. And see that you button up your shirt before you go out,” she replied, cryptically, then finished her tidying and toddled off, tray in tow and head held high. Percy followed her, wagging his tail and thus marginally ruining the dignity of her departure.

“What,” Sherlock started, and his companion indicated a bruise near the hollow of the detective’s throat.

“I plead guilty,” John said, looking a bit contrite, “I will be more careful next time.”

“Not necessary,” replied the youth, who as pleased as Punch about it, “It won’t be visible when I’m fully clothed.”

“All right then. It is my stipulation to keep everything under wraps, so to speak.”

“Is that so?”

“My love, you don’t have to take everything as a challenge.”

“We’ll see about that,” the detective said, preening like a peacock as he padded towards the washroom.
Lancelot Place was a quiet, residential alley tucked behind the Harrods department store. Knightsbridge had been scarred like the rest of London; the patrician squares were littered with detritus and the stately mansions gashed and bathed in dust.

Sherlock had been accurate in his description, since there was precious little indication of luxury in that narrow street lined with straggly cherry trees.

Number 9 was part of a low-rise red-brick tenement, with white sash windows and the dried-up remains of a wisteria plant creeping up its frontage like a harbinger of decay.

The day was frosty and overcast; the greyish light did nothing to alleviate the sense of dignified decadence that characterised the area.

They rang the bell and knocked at the door, but the entire building seemed to be uninhabited. The scrunch of wood on concrete provided a timely diversion: a decrepit man tottered along the pavement with the help of a walking stick; he was dressed in the fashion of at least four decades ago, with a colourful waistcoat, starched collar and a broad neck-cloth. He appeared to have sprung from the pages of the Yellow Book and to have been good friends with Wilde and Beardsley.

“This perishing war,” he muttered, stopping to catch his breath and wipe his brow with a large magenta foulard that reposed inside the breast pocket of his tailored jacket.

“Are you from around here?” asked John, who was finding it very difficult not to gape at the absurdity of the man’s attire. “We are looking for a friend of ours, a Mr Sansom.”

“Am I from around here?” the man jested, eyes glinting in between his concertina-like eyelids. “I used to frequent the opium dens when you were not even a twinkle in your father’s eye. We didn’t have it half as easy as you, my boy, but secrecy was double the fun. As for your friend,” he continued, “I wouldn’t know his name, as people come and go as they please, not like in my time when one used to know one’s neighbours.”

“It appears that the entire street has been evacuated,” said Sherlock. “Don’t be fooled by the lack of noise, my boy,” the man replied, “Silence can be deceptive and so can clamour: the former may be caused by fear and the latter may serve to hide it. I better go and leave you to it. My club is one of the last bastions of our civilisation and I’d rather not upset them by arriving late for the bridge.”

“Which club?” the detective asked.

“You striplings won’t have heard of it,” the man replied, smirking, “Diogenes is the name; Toodle-pip, my dears!”

They stayed and looked at him depart, like an ancient motorcar with a defective engine, sound structure and flamboyant paintwork.

When John turned towards Sherlock, he saw that he was more than mildly irritated.

“It’s Mycroft’s club,” the young man scoffed. “It can hardly be a coincidence.”

“He wouldn’t have put that relic in charge of Sansom’s surveillance,” protested the doctor. “That’s preposterous even by an eccentric man’s standards.”
“No one would suspect him of being anything more than a barmy old darling,” said Sherlock, “Even Sansom wouldn’t have paid him any attention.”

“What shall we do now? We have to find out what’s happened to him.”

The detective secreted a leather pouch from inside his overcoat: it contained a bunch of brass keys, some of which showed signs of usage while others were shining and pristine. He looked at his partner who gave him a curt nod. “Needs must,” he said, simply.

The house was like a cottage, despite being attached to a row of similar dwellings: it contained a large drawing room, a scullery and a lavatory on the ground floor with two bedrooms and a wash-room on top. The front door opened onto a tiny hall which was fairly dark even during daytime. A mahogany hat-rack was laden with coats and umbrellas but, oddly, no hats. On the white-washed wall, an oval mirror in a stained verdigris frame reflected their worried countenances; below it was a flimsy console table littered which an array of circulars, bills and other correspondence.

“No letters on the floor by the door,” whispered Sherlock. “Either there hasn’t been any post recently or someone’s been around to pick it up and place it on the table. We’ll check the date on the stamps later. By the way, put these on,” he said, and handed John a pair of white cotton gloves. “I’d rather not make any silly mistakes.”

They briefly examined the downstairs rooms, finding nothing interesting but the remains of a stew in the refrigerator and a half-empty bottle of cheap gin on the sideboard in the sitting room.

At first sight, even the upper part of the house appeared to be as devoid of interest, until they opened the door of the wash-room.

Inside the bathtub, filled to the brim with dirty, soapy water, was the lifeless body of the man they had known as William Sansom.

“This isn’t what it’s supposed to look like and this time we won’t be fooled, so why even try?” Sherlock said, pacing the victim’s second bedroom, which Sansom had turned into a study. There, on the unadorned walnut writing table was, among the volumes and the reams of note paper, a page torn from a book, a few words underlined:

‘If you please, we will commit ourselves to this void, and see whether Providence is here also. If you will not, I will.”

The man had appended his signature at the bottom and, when they’d compared to the scribbles on various other papers, there seemed to be no doubt that they were by the same hand.

“We should call Lestrade,” said John, who was not relishing the idea of being in the abode of a murdered man, whence they had been sent by a writer masquerading as a tramp and moonlighting as an MI6 agent. “We’ve already waited too long.”

“You are a doctor,” Sherlock spat, “What is your professional opinion?”

“From what I saw, there was no sign of struggle: no water splashed on the bath mat, no overturned objects, no marks on his skin, nothing. It was a peaceful death, which means that it was either voluntary or that he had been drugged.”

“It can’t be suicide.”
“He left a note.”

The detective made a sound of incredulity.

“You can’t call that a suicide note. Only a man under duress would produce that in lieu of a handwritten message.”

“Maybe those lines mean something to someone,” John said, “By the way, what are they?”


“Give me the Inspector’s number,” said the doctor. “I’ll telephone him.”

“He will bring Anderson with him,” groused the young man.

“Well, it can’t be helped. When they are finished with their preliminary examination, we could always ask Stamford for a second opinion.”

Sherlock relented, although he was still visibly annoyed.

“That man is a pox on the whole of humanity,” he complained, “You’ll see whether I’m right or not.”

The blond man smiled and prised the card with Lestrade’s personal number from his lover’s fingers.

“I’m sure he’s only jealous of your many talents,” he said, and went looking for a telephone kiosk.

“Who is this gentleman and why is he on the scene of the crime?” were the first words Philip Anderson uttered when he clapped eyes on Doctor Watson.

Lestrade’s expression was on a knife-edge between irritated and exhausted. He looked like a man who had not had a full night’s sleep since Chamberlain had resigned to be replaced by Churchill.

“Anderson, never mind Doctor Watson,” he said, combing a hand through his hair, “He has my permission to be here, along with Mr. Holmes.”

The mousy creature regarded both the intruders with his cold grey eyes and shook his head, a moue of disgust on his pale, unattractive face.

“The Holmes family is the flavour of the moth, evidently,” was his parting shot, after which he donned a pair of gloves and pointedly turned his back to them.

“By the way, Spilsbury is a good friend of my brother’s,” Sherlock said, loud enough for Anderson to hear, “He’s the best forensic pathologist this country has ever had. Why, he’s practically invented the discipline.”

“Quit provoking him Sherlock,” Lestrade sighed, “And tell me what happened here. Why are you here and what is this about?”

“You know what this is about!” cried the detective then stopped as he remembered something, “What did he mean about the Holmes family? You and Mycroft, you are not…” He couldn’t bring himself to even say the words.
“This is neither the time nor the place,” intervened the doctor, “I’m sure you remember that Sansom was involved in the Cummins case,” he added.

“Of course, yes, the name did ring a bell. They knew each other, didn’t they? He testified in his friend’s favour; not much he could do, poor chap. And now he’s dead too. Could it be suicide? You are hiding something from me. Aren’t you?” he asked, proving to be more perceptive than Sherlock gave him credit for.

“There are some details which we are not at liberty to divulge,” the young man said, “But we are almost certain that he didn’t take his own life; not after what happened at Maida Vale.”

“Could he be part of this evil conspiracy,” the Yarded suggested, “Maybe he took some part in it and, plagued by remorse, he decided to take the easy way out.”

“You and John should write detective stories together. You both have a talent for cheap melodrama and gaudy prose. Look, it’s rather simple: he knew something, he foolishly acted on his suspicions and he had to be eliminated.”

“And the signed piece of paper?”

“It may be a coded message,” the doctor said, “Could we have it once you’ve dusted it for prints?”

“Yes, of course,” Lestrade replied, “I can’t imagine what sort of code it could be, but then I’m not very good at those newfangled crossword puzzles.”

“He must have been good at them,” John remarked, “considering that he worked for The Ministry of Information.”

Sherlock looked daggers at him.

“What? That surely was no secret. He wrote those posters, like the ‘keep it under your hat’ one.”

“Did he really? I like that one; it capture’s one’s attention and stays with one.”

They were interrupted by Anderson: he cleared his throat in the fake-polite way that Sherlock despised.

“Naturally I shall need to conduct a more thorough investigation, but from what I could gather from this preliminary observation, the victim does not display any sign of coercion nor are there any blatant traces of poisoning or other external interference. Death by suicide, most probably.”

“Poppycock,” Sherlock exclaimed, glaring at the pathologist. “You will surely find that he was drugged and the nature of the substance will be crucial in establishing the reason of the man’s demise.

“I resent your tone, Mr Holmes,” Anderson bridled, “And once again, I wonder why we are to be burdened with the presence of a dilettante, when we already employ the best professionals in the world. Perhaps some people should not allow their private lives to interfere with their work.”

“That’s quite enough from you, Anderson,” said the Inspector, in an uncharacteristically glacial tone, “There’s still a lot of work to be done here, but if you’re finished with the body perhaps we could have it removed to Barts Hospital.”

“What” the pathologist spluttered, “Why? There’s no reason…”
“This is a very serious matter which may involve the War Office. I will authorise Doctor Mike Stamford to carry out the post mortem.”

“I won’t forget this,” Anderson said, and after glowering at Sherlock, he stormed out of the room.

“You were right,” murmured John. “The man’s a pox on humanity.”
The Sea is the Sea

Chapter Summary

A post mortem and a visit to the Senate House.

Also, Mycroft meets Percy :)

Chapter Notes

First of all, thanks for staying with me and leaving your much appreciated comments. I couldn't do it without you.

Note: There is a lot of scientific mumbo-jumbo in this chapter which I have gleaned from the internet. I am not a pathologist, so kindly suspend your disbelief.

Note 2: Pervitin was the Nazis' drug of choice. At some point, they even put it in chocolates. If you are interested, the book Blitzed is the best place to start. Think only of this: at one point, Peru's entire production of cocaine was legally purchased by Germany. High Hitler, indeed.

“For in tremendous extremities human souls are like drowning men; well enough they know they are in peril; well enough they know the causes of that peril;--nevertheless, the sea is the sea, and these drowning men do drown.”

Pierre or the Ambiguities - Herman Melville

Forensic pathology was never to be one of John’s preferred disciplines.

As a doctor he obviously wasn’t squeamish, but the dissection of what had once been a human being filled him with misery and dread. Curing the sick was his mission and while he appreciated those who toiled at the other end of the medical spectrum, he was glad not to be counted among their number.

The corpse of William Sansom lay on the slab and Mike’s scalpel had already done most of its work. Stomach, liver, bladder and viscera samples had been taken and sent for examination as well as blood from the femoral artery and urine samples.

The heart and cerebrum were the organs he’d been inspecting last, and his findings had left him perplexed, a confusion he was now trying to put into words; he’d never been an eloquent fellow and the presence of someone as forbidding as Sherlock Holmes only increased his indecision.
“Dry drowning,” he blurted out, looking hopefully at John.

“The larynx went into spasm as the water entered the throat: in these cases, the passage to the lungs is blocked and any water that is already in there cannot get out and more water cannot get in,” the blond man clarified for Sherlock’s benefit.

“Death results from immediate sustained laryngeal spasm due to inrush of water into the nasopharynx or larynx. Thick mucus, foam and froth may develop, producing a plug,” continued Mike, emboldened by the formal jargon.

“Is that unusual?” the detective enquired.

“Happens in about 20% of cases and if the victim is promptly resuscitated, the possibilities of survival are higher than in other types of drowning.”

“But that’s not what’s worrying you,” said John, who knew his friend well enough to spot the signs of uncertainty in the man’s rotund face.

“The symptoms are those of asphyxia, there’s a congestion of the stomach and intestines, but that’s consistent with the diagnosis. His heart is enlarged and I found several traces of fibrosis and contraction band necrosis.”

“Stimulants,” murmured Sherlock.

“Yes, but you see, I also found evidence of accelerated atherosclerosis, which is highly unusual, for want of a stronger word, in a man who was otherwise healthy. That would only be determined by frequent use of a substance like ephedrine. And I said, the lungs had no oedema, only signs of anthracosis.”

“He was with the AFS,” John explained, “That’s most probably the reason.”

“It could be, but only if he’d been doing that job for years. You said you knew him; was he often short of breath? Did he have a chronic cough?”

“I only met him twice, but he seemed in good health; we heard him sing and his breathing was fine. What about his brain?”

“Ah, that’s another thing: a minor intracerebral haemorrhage had occurred, but there no signs of concussion nor was there any evidence that he suffered from hypertension.”

While the two doctors were thus engaged, Sherlock had been lost in a reverie and when he emerged from it, his eyes shone with excitement.

“Temmler, chemicals, Pervitin,” he exclaimed, sounding like a deranged oracle.

“What?” said Stamford and Watson in unison.

“Methyl-amphetamine,” replied the detective. “A drug the Germans call Pervitin. You must have heard about it. A chap named Hauschild – a genius in my modest opinion – patented it and now it’s produced in mass quantities at the Temmler factory.”

“Why would they do that?” asked Mike.

“War is a tiring business,” replied the detective, “The longer you stay awake, the better you perform and the more efficient you will be at despatching the enemy.”
“And these drugs allow you to do that,” stated John.

“Amphetamines are nothing short of miraculous.”

“Should I ask you the reason of your certainty in the matter?”

He looked his lover in the eye and saw him flinch.

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” asked Stamford, even more flabbergasted that he’d been at the start of that conversation. “That this Sansom fellow was a German spy, addicted to a deadly drug and that his death was an accident due to high dosage?”

Neither man replied, but the detective asked another question instead.

“Was there any needle prick anywhere on his body?”

Stamford shook his head.

“No pricks, no cuts, no bruises except for the obvious discoloration due to being immersed in water. The death was probably instantaneous and it happened no longer than twenty four hours before you found him.”

“And if you had to guess the most likely time?”

“Judging by the body temperature and the lack of rigor mortis, I’d say death could have occurred in the evening or even overnight,” Mike replied, adjusting the spectacles on the bridge of his nose. “You still haven’t given me an answer, Holmes. Is that a spy lying on my slab?”

“You tell me, Doctor, and please call me Sherlock,” replied the detective. “Would that be logical for a man to ingest a fatal dose of a stimulant then fill a bath with water and immerse himself in it until he passed out? Why would he take the drug if he merely intended to have a wash?”

“He wanted to die and wanted to make sure of it: if the amphetamine didn’t work, the water would do the rest,” suggested Watson.

“Maybe he did not want to die, but was aware that he might,” said his friend, “No, to answer your question, I do not believe he was working for the enemy. We still need your help with the other autopsies and now at least we know what we are looking for. Come along John, there are things we need to discuss and Stamford will want to get on with his job. And remember: secrecy is the byword.”

“Shall I bring you the toxicology report when it's ready?” Mike called after them.

“Obviously,” Sherlock replied and “Thanks Mike, great work as usual,” added John.

“Why the hurry,” he asked, as he tried to keep up with his lover’s diabolical stride.

“I need to talk to you, but I don’t want anyone else to listen,” the young man said as he ran down the steps of St. Paul’s tube station.

On the train, they spoke about Anderson’s jaundiced behaviour and Lestrade’s burgeoning friendship with Mycroft.

“It was bound to happen. The Inspector is precisely the sort of man your brother needs: strong, unpretentious and, to be frank, rather easy on the eye too.”
“You forgot to add clever,” said Sherlock, who was trying to suppress his disgust.

“Mycroft has enough brains for the two of them. Like you have,” he started but couldn’t finish his simile.

“Don’t even try to compare what we have with… with…” he stuttered.

A young woman sitting opposite them looked up from her book and smiled at no one in particular.

“Look at the bright side, my dear: at least he isn’t attracted to someone like Anderson.”

At the mention of his foe, the detective shuddered dramatically.

“Although I doubt he’d even be able entertain a personal relationship with another human being. And no, you were never like that, no matter what you used to tell yourself,” John continued, quashing his lover’s retorts before they were uttered, “On the other hand though, he would be perfect for that awful Marchmain fellow. One can just imagine them, oozing evil from every pore and dripping arsenic from their lips.”

The young man grinned.

“You do have a penchant for florid prose,” he said, “But I have to agree that it would be like the mating of two scorpions.”

John erupted in a fit of contagious giggles whose lure his lover could not resist.

“Is he always so unprofessional?” the doctor asked, as the mirth subsided, “He didn’t even try to collaborate with us. If you hadn’t warned me, I would have said he was trying to obstruct the course of justice.”

Sherlock’s back stiffened, as it usually did when he was struck by a sudden intuition.

“He was exceptionally uncooperative,” he murmured, “And I think that perhaps we shouldn’t discount the possibility that you may be right.”

Unfortunately, their wish to be alone in their own home was not to be fulfilled as soon as they’d hoped.

Mrs Hudson’s scowl was sufficient to suggest the identity of their visitor, but there was also a naughty twinkle in her eye.

“I couldn’t convince Percy to follow me downstairs,” she said, and Sherlock could have kissed her and nearly did.

As expected, Mycroft Holmes was ensconced in his brother’s armchair, but his customary aplomb was marred by his attempt to keep the vivacious tabby away from his Savile Row suit.

“I see that you have made a new friend,” Sherlock said, emitting a deep, guttural laugh that stopped John in his tracks. In one instant and for no other reason, he’d been catapulted into the future; he’d seen his lover as an older man, his angular face fuller and lined, his luscious curls rougher and flecked with grey, and he’d been overcome with the ferocious desire to hold him and kiss him and never let him go. He strode to the window and pretended to gaze at the landscape, swallowing the knot of emotion that was clamouring to burst out of him. If he’d ever entertained the possibility
that this love was a passing thing – which he never had – this yearning for a future together put	paid to it.

“Drugs,” he heard Mycroft sneer; he drew a deep breath, and when he turned round Sherlock was
frowning at him. He smiled to reassure him, but there must have been something in his
countenance that did not convince his shrewd companion.

“Not something so pedestrian, surely,” the elder Holmes said, his eyes fixed on the feline which
was still trying to climb his trouser leg.

“Where did you find this creature?” he asked.

“His name is Percy and he lives with us now,” replied John, savouring the grimace that traversed
the man’s features at the mention of the cat’s moniker.

“But seriously, little brother?” he sighed.

“The post-mortem has all but confirmed it,” stated the detective, refusing to discuss his childhood
passions with the sworn enemy of yore. “We are only waiting for the toxicology reports.”

“What a serendipitous occurrence that you should both be there in time to find the body! I assume
you won’t tell me who informed you of Sansom’s disappearance.”

“A very reliable source, it seems.”

“The most reliable witness in murder cases is often the killer himself.”

“The culprit may not be a man.”

“Cherchez la femme,” said Mycroft, with a marked French accent.

“I said the same thing only this morning,” exclaimed John, and that shut the older man up for a bit.
“Why are you here, if you forgive my curiosity?” he enquired, and to temper the rudeness of his
question, he scooped up Percy and placed him in his second favourite place: on the rug by the
fireplace. As predicted, the cat settled down and started on his lengthy toilette routine, occasionally
gazing into the fire with the fixity of a sphinx.

“Gregory told me about Lancelot Place,” the older man replied, somewhat begrudgingly.

John threw his lover an eloquent glance and the latter rolled his eyes and clicked his tongue.

“Sansom worked for the Ministry of Information, and his superior, a chap name Lawn, hinted that
his disappearance was connected with the intelligence services. The name Boniface was
mentioned.”

The mention of Churchill’s code name shook Mycroft out of his complacency.

“Did Sansom say that?”

“Gregory,” replied Sherlock, “was going to question Mr Lawn, but I supposed you already knew
that.”

“I thought this Boniface thing was meant to be a secret,” protested John.

“And it will stay that way,” agreed Mycroft, “Unless of course, Mr. Lawn decides to – as you
might put it – spill the beans.”
While John and Sherlock were attending the victim’s post-mortem at Barts Hospital, in Bloomsbury, in a stifling hot, cramped, little office at the Senate House, Inspector Lestrade was at the end of his tether. Oliver Lawn had initially struck him as a conscientious middle-age civil servant on whom the war had conferred an honour that he had never hoped to deserve yet had always waited for.

His shabby clothes were immaculate and his sparse ginger hair combed to perfection, while his equine features aspired to the distinction of the gentry, but fell short of it for lack of arrogance and a surfeit of servility: in short, not only was he destined to be eternally duped by his betters, but he was also born to commend them for the privilege. As loyal as he would be to a Lord or a Dame, he could also be stubbornly unwieldy with those he deemed his inferiors; the Metropolitan Police were among this wretched group.

He had taken the news of the young man’s death in his stride, as he was secretly convinced that all young people were reckless and that those who survived were surely the most deserving. His beliefs had less to do with Darwin than with his blind faith in the omnipotence of the nobility.

“What can you tell me about the victim?” Lestrade asked.

“Clever boy, good with words and brave as a lion,” Lawn said, rolling a pencil between his knobbly fingers. “He was with the AFS and risked his life every other night.”

He had light green eyes and sandy lashes of the shade that went almost unperceived; they lent his gaze an exaggerated vivacity, at odds with the solemnity of his words.

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Two days ago he went out for lunch, which was unusual as he normally had a sandwich at his desk, and when he returned, must have been going on two, he told me he had been temporarily moved to another department. It’s the last I saw of him.”

“And what department would that be?”

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to say.”

“I have shown you my credentials, Sir, and informed you that I’m investigating a crime. Your refusal to cooperate could be construed as an attempt to obstruct the course of justice.”

Lawn’s eyes widened, like the Queen’s might have done, had she been accused of a similar absurdity.

“You may rest assured, my dear Inspector, that my actions are only dictated by prudence and by the demands of a superior agency.”

“The superior being what, SIS or the War Office?” asked Lestrade, who by now was too exasperated for niceties.

The man let out a horrified whimper and the pen fell on the desk and nestled between two piles of documents.

“Like I said before, my discretion and the claims imposed on me by the devotion that I owe to our
King and Country compel me to be silent.”

The Yarder had been in his job long enough to know when to press on and when to let go. In due course, Lawn could be forced to confess what he was now withholding. He was the type that changed his attitude as soon as he set foot inside a police station. In the meantime, there were other questions that needed asking.

“Where you aware of Mr Sansom’s friendship with Gordon Cummins, the man whom the Press nicknamed the Blackout Ripper?” he enquired and, to his great surprise, Lawn guffawed. It was a shrill sound, almost like the clucking of a hen.

“What do you take me for, Inspector? I’m not a cloistered monk, am I? It was a sensational case and Mr Sansom took it really badly. He tried his utmost to get his friend out, but that Cummins boy was rotten to the core.”

“You say that because he was found guilty or because you knew him personally?”

“I wouldn’t say I knew him, but I had met him and when I heard that he claimed of being the son of Viscount Tremayne... well, everybody knows the gentleman in question is unmarried,” he paused for effect, before driving his point home. “Only a wicked soul would be as wantonly cruel to a poor man who’d been kind enough to befriend him.”

“But Sansom tried to get him acquitted.”

Lawn shook his head and smiled.

“The poor boy was as innocent as a babe in the woods,” he said. “He was not the sort that can tell good from evil.”

“Maybe Tremayne was lying and Cummins had been born on the wrong side of the blanket,” Lestrade suggested, not because he believed it, but only to annoy the other man.

“My Inspector, between the word of a Lord and that of a murderer, surely there can be no doubt which to believe.”

Confounded snob, Lestrade thought, and imagined how Watson and Holmes would have dealt with that particular challenge. That notion restored a little of his equanimity and when he left, as empty-handed as when he’d arrived, he was ready to confront Mycroft and his prissy ways, which for some peculiar reason, he found enticing.

At Baker Street, after partaking of a substantial dinner of beef and potato stew, Sherlock and John were finally at liberty to conduct their own post-mortem on the events of the day.

“That suicide note, I wrote down the quote,” John said, and produced a piece of paper on which the few verses had been jotted down by pencil. He read them out loud and looked at Sherlock who was drinking brandy from a greenish goblet and sitting on the hearthrug in the spot formerly occupied by Percy.

“We will commit ourselves to this void, and see whether Providence is here also,” repeated Sherlock, savouring the words as he did his liquor. “What do these words indicate if not a desire to try something dangerous, hoping for the best?”

“Perhaps he wanted to sample the drug and had he not survived the experiment, it would have
seemed like he had committed suicide. But the fact is that no doctor would have signed a death certificate without an autopsy and that would have always led to finding out about the amphetamine.”

“You are looking at it from the wrong perspective, my dear. Think about what Crispian Marchmain said about Cummins and Tremayne’s testimony; think about my own impressions of the cadet’s behaviour,” the detective said, in a low, hypnotic tone,

“He forgot about Marchmain and he alleged he was Tremayne’s son, but he refused to cooperate with the defence… he didn’t even say he wasn’t at the Blandford when that poor girl was killed. Are you saying he was under the influence of this Pervitin drug?”

Sherlock leaned closer and kissed his friend lightly on the lips. He smelled of tobacco and spice, and John was eager to take him to bed.

“No, my dear Doctor Watson,” he murmured, “I’m saying that someone has concocted a similar drug which alters the personality of those who use it.”

“Amazing,” John said, and expressed the full extent of his admiration by devouring the young man’s mouth.
Revelations

Chapter Summary

When in bed with your lover, do NOT talk about other men... John should have taken my advice but he didn't. Silly doctor.

“All that was needed was that our predilection should become exclusive. And that condition is fulfilled when – in this moment of deprivation – the quest for the pleasures we enjoyed in his or her company is suddenly replaced by an anxious, torturing need, whose object is the person alone, an absurd, irrational need which the laws of this world make it impossible to satisfy and difficult to assuage – the insensate agonizing need to possess exclusively.”

Remembrance of Things Past – Marcel Proust

The sullen, vaguely obsessive mood that had overtaken John earlier in Mycroft’s presence had lingered on and he’d taken it to bed with them.

Sherlock was rattling away, reciting his deductions on the case with glee, but his lover was only half-listening: first he’d made sure the wound was healing properly then he’d re-dressed it and now he was lying by the young man’s side, staring avidly at his naked body as if he was seeing it for the first time; the prominent breastbone, the dusting of freckles on his torso, the dip of his concave stomach, the shell-like cavity of his navel: every single detail was precious to him, worth dying for.

But this brittle compendium of barely post-pubescent beauty would one day become a knowing, sophisticated man; his effrontery would become self-assurance while his bright-eyed enthusiasms would be tempered with a more sedate brand of satisfaction.

If the boy next to him was entrancing, that future man would become irresistible: strikingly dark, deservedly haughty and with intellect and experience to match.

John couldn’t possibly believe that Sherlock would still want to be with him when that came to pass; there were several issues at play: the detective’s lack of experience, his tendency to submit and his superiority to John in everything, from class to brains.

Surely, the doctor reasoned, his lover would want to broaden his horizons, to take on a more commanding role in the relationship and, perhaps, to find a life companion closer to his impressive stature.

“…And we should still visit the Evangelical Library and possibly at night, even though I know you are opposed to it,” the detective was saying.
“What? No, in no way are we going to visit that place at night!” he replied and saw Sherlock smile.

“That was bound to capture your attention,” he said. “Was I boring you?”

John placed a the palm of his hand on his lover’s chest, above his heart, and said nothing.

“What was it before, when you were staring out the window?”

Trust him to always get it right, the blond man thought, fondly. He drew a deep breath and started stroking the soft skin with his thumb.

“I was thinking of the future,” he said, and his voice sounded strange to his own ears, “When you'll be older and even more handsome.”

Sherlock’s heart sped up and his posture became more rigid, as if he'd scented danger.

“Perhaps you won’t like me then,” he replied, icily, “Maybe you will find someone younger. Naturally, you are free to do as you choose. Far be it from me to become a hindrance.”

The only thing John wanted was to kiss him until his lips were numb, but that would have to wait.

“You got it completely wrong,” he said, tracing a winding path between the constellations of freckles on the youth’s torso. “I was thinking that a man like the one you will one day be, successful, well-known and devilishly attractive to boot, might wish to widen his set of experiences.”

“Am I not already devilishly attractive?” the detective quipped, but his voice was still cold.

John looked him in the eye, hoping to convey the maelstrom of emotions in his heart.

“No matter what happens to me, I’m certain I will never meet your like again. From the very first, I knew that you were unique and that I would never forget you. But surely you must be curious; you must want to try something different.”

“Must, must, must,” protested the young man, as he sat up abruptly, thus severing the contact with John’s hand, “I may not be au fait in matters of the heart, but you seem to be the one who has doubts about the future.”

“Look at me,” the doctor said, his fingers smoothing down his lover’s side, “I’m older than you and my shoulder still hurts; I may not be able to return to my chosen profession; and look at you…”

“Yes, let’s look at me,” hissed the detective, “An inquisitive, cold-hearted freak of nature who only gave up drug addiction because it wasn’t exciting enough; a virtual monk with no friends and an eccentric brother fixated with umbrellas.”

That last dig made the blond man laugh through the sadness; he straddled Sherlock’s thighs and pinned him to the headboard then held the young man’s face within his cupped hands and held his gaze.

“You are the most perfect creature I have ever encountered,” he whispered fiercely, “And earlier when I was looking at you, I saw the man you will become and I wished that I could be right next to you, but maybe I don’t deserve to be.”

Sherlock’s eyes were wide and bright and he was biting his lips and the inside of his cheeks. For a long while he did not speak, and his jaw was clamped so tight that the tendons and sinews of his
neck stood out. When he finally opened his mouth, his voice was treacle-thick.

“I don’t want to be with other men and I most certainly do not wish to be in charge here,” he indicated the bed with a scornful gesture. “You said that I was yours,” he added, and a shrill chord of distress shook the calm of his deep baritone.

“Oh damn,” was all John was capable of uttering, as he crushed his mouth against the detective’s lips. Their kiss was a feral thing because Sherlock was still upset and thus unwilling to surrender. The brief power play coupled with the knowledge that he had caused his lover’s displeasure, made John even more determined to conquer his prize. The young man’s tongue teased and caressed then slid away, shy and maddening; it promised the most lewd acts but refused to see them through.

“Give it here,” the doctor growled; with one hand he was clutching the back of his friend’s head while the other was rubbing at his throat, stroking it with increasing pressure.

Sherlock shook his head, waiting for something, words that he needed, but didn’t want to demand.

“Look at me,” John murmured and when their eyes met, he understood. “You belong to me,” he declared, and that put an end to their fight.

From then on, their embraces became more tender than passionate and their lovemaking slow and trance-like. Neither of them wanted to change position and by the time their erections were rubbing together, they were both so hard and dripping that a handful of strokes brought them to a climax which seemed deeper and more meaningful than those that had preceded it.

“Kiss me again,” Sherlock murmured, his chest and stomach sopping wet from their combined emissions. The sweetest touch of lips and tongues followed; delicate, sipping kisses mingled with adoring words.

“Darling boy,” John was repeating, not even fully aware that he was saying it out loud. “Lovely, perfect creature,” he crooned, and only stopped when he felt the detective’s lips curve into a grin.

“Do you realise that I can hear you?” he asked, relishing his lover’s worshipping touch.

“Is that a problem?”

“No, I rather enjoy being praised,” he replied, stretching his arms above his head and arching his back. “In fact, I wouldn’t mind if you kept at it for a little while longer.”

“Silly old thing,” the doctor said, using a discarded undergarment to wipe away the mess.

“You didn’t even hear my brilliant deductions on the case. Perhaps you are right: I should find myself a companion who listens raptly whenever I deign to speak.”

John pinched a rosy nipple, enjoying the high-pitched whimper that escaped Sherlock’s mouth.

“I deserve it,” he replied, “But it’s partly your fault for being so devilishly attractive.”

“Idiot.”

“Darling.”

“Don’t darling me! Only minutes ago you pushed me into the arms of some imaginary stranger.”

“I never,” John started, but saw the mischievous glint in his lover’s eyes and shut him up in the usual, blissful way.
Later, as they lay in each other’s arms, the conversation went back to more serious matters.

“What did I miss?” the doctor asked, as his fingers threaded through tangled curls.

“I was pointing out the probability that Stamford’s toxicology report won’t find any trace of the drug.”

“What, not even the amphetamine?”

“Not even that. Think on it: if we had not had our suspicions already, a police surgeon such as Anderson would have given a verdict of suicide or accidental death. The coroner wouldn’t have questioned his opinion, especially when in the presence of what could be termed as a suicide note. Besides, like you said, there were no traces of an altercation and neither bruises nor needle-pricks on Sansom’s body. An inquest would have been inevitable, but probably with a foregone conclusion.”

“Do you believe that this new drug could have forced him into killing himself?”

“With the addition of a malignant interloper,” murmured Sherlock, dreamily.

“That woman he met at the British Museum.”

“His sense of guilt,” the detective chimed in, before embarking on a monologue which had the immediacy of a re-created reality.

“From the start I wondered why this man that you had only just met by the merest of chances and that I mentioned to you almost by serendipity, would suddenly decide to confess about a piece of paper that he’d allegedly seen at the Ministry of Information, of which – or so he said – his immediate superior knew nothing at all, or at least pretended not to. Didn’t it bother you? Of course not, because you saw him in the act of saving lives and his bravery obliterated all other considerations. I was not under the same constraints and anyway, I wouldn’t have placed the same value on it as you did. I may be greener than you, my dear, but I am also more cynical; proximity to the likes of my father made sure of that.”

John squeezed him a little tighter.

“At the time,” he continued, inhaling the spicy fragrance of his lover’s skin, “I didn’t make too much of it, but I wondered why he would tell us of all people and why only then. A chance encounter in a seedy bar; a brief conversation with a louche lady and then, like in the tritest of mysteries, the Turkish Baths: everything timed to perfection, with the right dose of camaraderie mixed with the fear of being placed under surveillance. But the real touch of class was his convincing denial with regards to the photograph in the Daily Mail: such modesty about his artistic gifts, such shrewdness in steering the conversation towards his achievements as a writer, not to mention his best trick, that of proposing that he might be lying so that I would not suspect him of doing precisely that.”

“He was the one who sent that picture to the Mail? How can you be so sure?”

“Lestrade’s prints man gave me a list of the contents of Sansom’s writing desk; amongst other things, there was an Ensign E20 camera. It’s an old model, which suggests that he was something of an enthusiast.”

“He took a big risk,” said the doctor, “We could have delved a little deeper before and we would
have found out.”

“But don’t you see? He wanted us to find out,” countered Sherlock, excitedly. “He did everything he could short of telling us plainly. That he couldn’t do because he wanted more of the drug, he craved it like oxygen. It was stupid of me not to see it.”

“How could you when he didn’t display any of the usual signs of drug consumption? I am a physician and I didn’t notice any. He did have a close friend, that Rosoman chap; he’ll certainly come to the inquest and Lestrade will question him. The truth will come out.”

“Maybe, but it won’t be conclusive. Acts of excessive courage or a tendency to run into scrapes will only be seen as relating to his youth and to the present circumstances.”

John pondered these revelations for a long while, until a horrible thought came to his mind.

“Do you think he was the Blackout Ripper and that he killed Miss Oatley and Miss King?”

“Well, he certainly couldn’t have done away with the third girl, as he was following Cummins and snapping photographs,” replied Sherlock, who was gasping for a cigarette, but did not want to leave the warm shelter of his lover’s embrace. “I don’t think he was capable of killing and I doubt the drug would be powerful enough to overcome the strictest of self-censures. I’m almost sure that he knew who the murderer was or at least that he strongly suspected who that might be.”

“We forgot about him,” John said, as he reached out and grasped the packet of Black Cats on the bedside cabinet. Next was the box of matches, after which he even managed to light the cigarette singlehandedly and place it between the detective’s lips. “If we hadn’t, would he still be alive?”

Sherlock took a long drag and exhaled a cloud of bluish smoke.

“Quite the opposite, my darling,” he replied. “If we’d intervened, his end would have come even sooner.”

The ashtray was on Sherlock’s nightstand, but the detective pretended that he wasn’t aware of the fact until his companion nudged him in the ribs; his response was a sullen sigh of resignation, as if he’d been forced to endure some terrible hardship.

“Peter Brent,” John exclaimed, as the idea came into his head, “Oh Jesus… that was him, wasn’t it? The picture of Evelyn Oatley, the empty house, the pretence that he lived in Maida Vale must have come as a surprise when she knew, because she must have known, that he volunteered at the Mayfair fire station and that he worked for the Ministry.”

In his astonishment, he’d purloined Sherlock’s cigarette and had been puffing on it hungrily, until the detective had stolen it back, feigning annoyance.

“Yes, well done, my dear. That note was written by an elegant, masculine hand, so why not him?”

“You don’t think he was the one who shot you,” John suggested, lighting another cigarette, this time for himself.

“I don’t think he was in command of the situation,” the detective explained, “But rather that he was the victim of a series of unfortunate events. His bad luck started when he was employed at the Ministry and we should ask Lestrade to find out who recruited him.”

“But what would be the reason of this, why would the enemy go to such lengths only to test a drug? And why kill all these women?”
“Manipulating human beings is not as easy as it seems, my dear. Even the least patriotic of fellows will display a modicum of loyalty when the safety of the nation is at stake. This drug would allow them to infiltrate the highest levels of the British government and could be the difference between winning and losing the war. When the stakes are so high, experiments have to be carried out on human lab-rats. Those women knew too much and so they had to be silenced. Cummins was also part of the experiment and he had to be dispensed with.”

“That Greene chap must have known and so your friend Marks and yet they did nothing.”

The detective ground the stub of his cigarette into the ashtray and immediately pounced on John’s, prising it from his fingers.

“I told you that we weren’t friends,” he huffed, “You and Greene on the other hand. I saw the way you smiled at him.”

“It was the first time I met someone famous.”

“What do you mean ‘the first time’, what about yours truly? That girl with the horses knew who I was because she saw my name in the papers.”

“Anyone can get in the papers these days; it doesn’t mean anything. Besides, I only have eyes for you, my love.”

Sherlock grimaced to express his distaste, but he allowed John to pet his hair, leaning into the touch.

“What are we going to do?” the doctor asked, barely suppressing a yawn.

“The question is: what are they going to do? They must know that their game is almost up, that it was since I became involved in this investigation and that things are bound to come to a head. What would you do if you were in their shoes?”

“I would try and get rid of you.”

“Which they have tried albeit in a very amateurish manner, which is what baffles me,” the detective pondered.

“You said that they were trying to warn you.”

“That was the only viable reason, but I would have expected them to try again in a more convincing fashion.”

“They will have to go through me first,” John said, in a menacing tone.

“That’s what I feared you would say,” was the detective’s riposte, as a shiver ran through him, shaking the ash off his cigarette.

“Better go to sleep, we’ll need all our energy tomorrow.”

Without waiting for a reply, he tidied up, putting all the objects back in their rightful places; he then embraced his fidgety lover and held him tight until he stilled; they lay thus peacefully entwined until they surrendered to sleep.
Chapter Summary

Things are unravelling, sorry about that :( 

Once again, thanks to you super-duper-lovely people for reading and leaving your amazing comments!! You know who you are ;)

Chapter Notes

Note: A priest hole is the term given to a hiding place for a priest built into many of the principal Catholic houses of England during the period when Catholics were persecuted by law in England. Many priest holes (priest closets) were designed by the Jesuit lay brother Nicholas Owen who spent much of his life building priest holes to protect the lives of persecuted priests.

“For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.”

_Thessalonians 5:2_

Sherlock had obviously been right: when Stamford called with the toxicology report a few days later, he was baffled and a mite embarrassed by its lack of positive confirmation of the detective’s surmises. He was therefore even more puzzled when he saw the young man’s delight and John’s pleased smile.

“I won’t be able to lie at the inquest,” he said, shaking his head as if he regretted his inability to perjure himself.

“Don’t worry, dear fellow,” the detective replied, cheerfully. “There won’t be one.”

“Of course there will be an inquest. I don’t need to tell you that this is the usual procedure.”

“This case is different,” said John, who had come a long way since he first set foot into Baker Street, “We can’t tell you anything more now, but hopefully when it’s all over,” he let the sentence unfinished, but Mike understood and patted him on the shoulder, amicably.

“I say, you wouldn’t have another of those Black Cat cigarettes?” he enquired, colouring a little at that sudden fit of impudence.
“Here, have the packet.”

Sherlock roused a disgruntled Percy from his nap and extracted a sealed packet from underneath Maggers. The cat glared at him briefly then curled back into his original position.

“Not a full one surely,” Stamford said, observing his bounty with a beady eye.

“I have plenty more hidden around the flat,” the young man explained, “In case of emergency.”

“God forbid he’d have to go without a smoke,” John exclaimed, winking at his lover who grinned back, in his oblique manner.

“I was expecting you’d want me to examine those other bodies,” the chubby doctor said, as he fumbled inside his pockets for a lighter.

“We’ve been fairly busy,” his friend replied, handing him a box of matches, “And there was this toxicology report to consider.”

“You think those girls were dosed with the same drug?”

“Possibly,” replied Sherlock, who’d taken advantage of the momentary diversion and lighted a Black Cat for himself. His lover was trying to wean him off the nicotine, but he was manfully opposing the irksome embargo. Well, sort of. “But mostly I think it would be a waste of your time. I suspected something which turned out to be both right and wrong.”

There followed a silence during which the three men enacted a scene typical of any sophisticated comedy: the detective puffed on his fag, relishing the mystery he’d created, John was metaphorically rolling his eyes at his friend’s infantile behaviour and Mike looked between the two of them, waiting for further explanation.

In the end, it was his old friend who took pity on him.

“Let him be,” John sighed, “He’s been acting weird ever since Sansom died. If I didn’t know any better, I’d suspect he was the killer.”

Stamford nearly spat out his cigarette.

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“John has a point,” said Sherlock, who was sitting on the sofa with his legs crossed like a prim debutante. In that position, he reminded John of Mycroft. It both horrified and amused him, but he would not tell the young man in case it interfered with his charming spontaneity.

“I would make a frightfully good murderer,” the detective continued, “Because I would never tell a needless lie. Even if you have astounding memory, you’re bound to stumble on the occasional mistake: the pattern of a tie, the label on a bottle. Stick to the truth, that’s my motto. Your only lie has to be the one about your innocence.”

“I’d be awful,” Mike said, with a rueful smile, “I’d confess to every crime in the book, even if I were innocent.”

“Especially because of that,” Sherlock agreed, “Your sort is the worst. Cummins must have been like you, at heart; and the drug only enhanced his proclivities. A very clever invention, I must say.”

“I fear he’s taken a fancy to the inventor of that deuced drug,” exclaimed John, who felt secure enough to joke about other men, “I have this idea of them eloping together with a Bunsen burner and a stash of cigars.”
“What a preposterous idea,” drawled the detective, in his plummiest tone, “I would never bother with cigars; they do stain one’s nails so dreadfully.”

He hazarded one flirty gaze in his lover’s direction and they both laughed merrily, showing Mike a picture of true - if a tad outlandish - happiness.

“You won’t get into trouble, will you?” he said to John, when the latter accompanied him to the door.

“That I can’t guarantee,” the blond man replied, “But he’s not as unconcerned as he affects to be. Besides, his brother and Inspector Lestrade are also involved, and they know what we are dealing with.”

“His brother is the chap with the undertaker’s car who works for the government.”

“The very same,” John replied, smirking.

“Will there really not be an inquest? Sansom’s parents came to see the body and a friend of his made an appearance, too.”

“Leonard Rosoman. Yes, we have spoken to him. No, I don’t suppose there will be an inquest. Better for all concerned that it should go down as death by suicide rather than the alternative, which would certainly ruin his family.”

Mike nodded and his spectacles slid down his nose.

“The truth doesn’t always set us free,” he stated.

“No, unfortunately it does not.”

On that philosophical note, they shook hands and parted.

The days that had come before that meeting had not been spent idly nor had they been untouched by the lethal fist of war.

The air raids, which had become less frequent at the very start of the year, intensified again, bringing even more misery and destruction. There was a rumour that Churchill was desperate for the code breakers to finally come up with the goods; there was talk that he’d even decamped to their location in the countryside, destination unknown, so that he could provide them with an even more conspicuous incitement.

The overall morale was low, and no clever ditty from the Ministry of Information would change the situation unless there was tangible proof that the Allied forces weren’t succumbing to the enemy.

Lestrade had not succeeded in breaching the formidable Mr Lawn’s barricades, but in Mycroft Holmes the man had found a more insidious opponent.

The results, however, were still inconclusive: the elder Holmes was already aware of the Boniface allegations, but there was some confusion with regards to the hiring of William Sansom by the Ministry. The departments in question declined responsibility in a game of ‘pass the buck’ that was typical of the civil service, but which in that instance probably pointed to a shrewd and powerful mind behind the scenes.
The conversation with Mr Rosoman proved more productive.

Out of his uniform and away from his duties as a fire-fighter, it was evident that the man did not lack refinement. His hands were as elegant as Sherlock’s, with long tapered fingers only marred by slightly blackened nails; there was nothing for it, since - to paraphrase the Bard - no amount of scrubbing could remove the stains of a thousand fires. Before the war, he’d been a painter and illustrator on the brink of fame, but he’d gladly put his fine draughtsmanship to one side in order to serve his country. Unlike his friend, he had no daytime office job and his spare moments were dedicated to the reproduction on paper of the horrors he’d witnessed while in service.

He had delicate features but rather large ears and wavy auburn hair with a left-side parting.

John liked him immediately and even Sherlock found him tolerable.

“We first met at the Davies Street sub-station, never before that,” he said, sipping a cup of Mrs Hudson’s robust coffee, “I had heard about him, here and there, the way you do when you move in similar circles. He was a talented writer, wasted on that trite war propaganda.”

“Did you know Gordon Cummins?” the detective asked.

“No, until the man was arrested and Bill decided he would testify for the defence.”

“Were you surprised?”

Rosoman cast a critical glance at his own ravaged nails.

“Nothing really surprises me any more,” he replied, “I have seen women cling to their charred love-letters even though their legs have just been blown off; parades of garments festooned on tree branches as a result of a violent explosion; the other night, we were called to a house in Bottle Street where the entire front had been destroyed: a young girl kept playing the piano even as we went in to rescue those trapped on the upper floors. War does things to people,” he concluded, “Sustained fear can change you irreparably.”

“And was Sansom afraid?” asked John.

The man chewed on his lower lip and tilted his head to one side.

“Not afraid, but strangely gleeful. He used to sing, you know?”

“Yes, we heard him perform at the Ritz bar,” the detective replied; he observed his interlocutor closely to capture his reactions, but there were none.

“Dreadful place,” he said, smiling, “Although I wouldn’t mind painting that Sod woman; she evinces the same unwholesome fascination as natural disasters and decayed animal carcasses.”

Sherlock concurred, and the man continued.

“I never doubted his courage, because he risked his life with me almost every night, but I have had my reservations about his excessive enthusiasm, which at times, was out of place. As for Cummins, I did not see anything odd in it, because Bill seldom spoke of his work at the Ministry, nor did he tell me anything about his personal life.”

“What if I told you that one of the Blackout Ripper’s victims had been his girlfriend?”
Rosoman nearly dropped his Royal Worcester mug.

“There are still things that can surprise you, it seems,” John observed.

“But if that were the case,” Rosoman said, slowly, “It would mean that he knew Cummins had not killed her and,” he stopped, and his rosy complexion suddenly acquired a sickly tinge. “He didn’t murder that girl, did he?”

“You tell us,” said the doctor, “Do you believe he was capable of that?”

“Oh, everybody is capable of murder,” replied the man, gazing at Sherlock with his warm brown eyes. Only a week before, John would have been jealous of that glance, but not anymore. He would still shoot anyone who lay a finger on his lover, but only as proof of his devotion and because the detective found his gun oddly arousing.

“Given the proper motivation, that is. Bill could only have killed to defend someone under threat, but a woman? No, I don’t think so.”

“We don’t either,” said the doctor. “But someone did and we are pretty sure it wasn’t Cummins.”

“Are you sure he was seeing that girl?”

“There’s an empty house in Maida Vale where the girl supposedly lived with her companion. The fingerprints were not on the police records; not until your friend died, that is. There was a snap of the girl; on it was the name of a photographer in Upper Street; the first time the police visited them, they couldn’t remember the face of the customer and the name he’d given was an assumed one. You can guess the rest,” said Sherlock.

“Why are you giving me this information? I should imagine the police would rather it remained a secret.”

“Why do you think?”

Rosoman frowned briefly then slapped his thigh and guffawed.

“You wanted to check whether I knew it already. Study my reactions,” he replied.

“We are up against some very dangerous people,” the detective explained, “And the things I just told you don’t matter anymore. They were important only while your friend was alive, as a means to blackmail him. Now the case is wide open, which is why is better that you are informed of the risks you are facing.”

“But I don’t know anything!” the fire-fighter exclaimed. “Why would these people waste their time on little me?”

“They thought their plan had succeeded but now they must realise that we are on to them. And you were Sansom’s friend.”

“Indeed I was,” Rosoman stated, with determination. “Let them come; they will find me ready for them.”

“Do you own a gun?”

“I have a Browning and I’m not a bad shot, if I say so myself.”

Sherlock’s eyes glittered and his hand moved closer to his lover’s.
“Don’t be afraid to use it,” he whispered. “What do they say? In love and war, and all that rot.”

“Yes,” said Rosoman, smiling, “All that rot is the perfect definition for it.”

Like a light being shined over a congregation of mice, the death of William Sansom had partly revealed the enemy’s hand, alerting them to the presence of a watchful eye. However, Sherlock’s deductions about the Pervitin-like drug was still unproven, since no traces of the substance had been found inside the man’s house.

Lestrade’s men had collected several fingerprints aside from the ones of the deceased, but none were known to them.

As for the post littering the console in the hall, the date stamps on two of the letters that had been opened indicated that they had been delivered after Sansom had already died, which meant only one thing.

“Somebody was there before us,” said Sherlock, while they were having their breakfast. “This person wanted to make sure that there was nothing that could compromise them, but they didn’t bother to take the letters with them or destroy them. There were several fingerprints on them, probably all belonging to the Royal Mail people. In any case, they are now on the Yard’s record.”

John served him a portion of scrambled eggs and bacon.

“I hope it wasn’t Greene,” he said, pouring himself a second cup of tea. “Perhaps we should go see him at the Ministry.”

“We can’t do that,” Sherlock replied, “He came to us incognito and we shouldn’t betray him. Not yet, at least. Think on it: he knows we can, and he’s trusting that we won’t. We owe him that much.”

“Well, what can we do then?”

The detective turned towards his companion and gave him his brightest smile.

“I think it’s time we visit the defunct Evangelical Library.”

As a thief in the night was one the few biblical references that Sherlock recalled from his not-so-distant Harrow days. In young Sherlock’s opinion, the only passable thing about the King James Bible had been its language, the poetic turns of phrase that he’d appreciated even when their meaning was repellent.

In that instance, the idea that the Lord’s arrival could be as surreptitious as that of a burglar suggested a not entirely benevolent deity, and certainly one that the young Holmes could live without.

When he’d embarked on his chosen profession, he’d quickly realised that the criminals didn’t care about time, and that thieves were as likely to strike during the day, provided they had done their homework and ‘cased the joint’.

Thus, he was not unaware of the possible pitfalls of visiting a place which had been, at some point, visited by their killer.
Now that the elderly custodian had left for greener, more salubrious pastures, the imposing mahogany and chestnut wooden shelves seemed even more cavernous.

They unlocked the door with one of Sherlock’s skeleton keys and went in: their steps echoed in that emptiness as if they’d just walked inside a cathedral.

“Where should we start from?” asked John.

“We could separate,” the detective suggested, more in jest than in earnest, knowing full well that his companion would never allow it.

“Very funny,” replied the older man, but he wasn’t laughing.

“If they used the door at the back, it’s more likely that they were heading for the cellar.”

After a few wrong detours, they found what they were looking for: a rusty metal door that opened onto a flight of stone steps and down, into a vast, unlit space.

They flicked a switch by the side of the door and a light came on, anaemic and tremulous.

“I bet we’ll need our torches soon,” John said, patting the pocket with the implement in question. Sherlock sniffed the air. “Sulphur,” he said, “Ammonia and ether.”

“The Devil has been here,” his lover replied, seriously.

“The whiff of chemicals is stronger here than upstairs. This is what I was struggling to remember: not a fact, but a smell. When I used… I never purchased the drugs from those who produced them, but once I was stalking a suspect and he turned out to be an amateur chemist, among other things. He produced his own brand of stimulants and the stench… it was unbearable.”

They inspected the room, but it has been scoured clean and what furniture it had contained had been removed, leaving the tell-tale traces on walls and floors.

“They left nothing behind but the stink of cat’s urine,” John replied, and he was right, as the odour was remarkably similar to that of Percy’s emissions, which had once been discovered in a corner of their wash-room, much to Mrs Hudson’s dismay.

“There’s a legend about the Baker Street underground and its disused tunnels,” Sherlock murmured, “Some say that they connect the station to a series of locations and that they were used by spies during the previous war.”

His companion snorted.

“That’s what they say about every station! Aside from the Westminster one, which is well known, I suspect all the rest of it is bunkum. Besides, what if a tunnel linked the Library to the tube? I don’t see what the point would be. They could threaten to blow up the city, but it’s already happening anyway. What I don’t understand is why they used this place instead of a proper laboratory, like the one in the Northampton Square Polytechnic.”

“They could hardly run the risk of being discovered,” the detective said, his voice becoming fainter as he continued his inspection of the cellar.

“True,” John conceded, “But they could have hired a private one and no questions would have been asked. I can think of a dozen places which would fit that description. Sherlock, where are you? I
can’t see you.”

He followed in the detective’s steps towards a recess in the brickwork that resembled a church niche without its statue.

“I’m here, I think I may have found something,” the young man shouted, and a loud bang resonated in the silence, while at the same time the trembling light flickered out.

“Sherlock, stay where you are and talk to me,” John shouted, reaching for his torch with one hand and his Webley with the other.

“Nothing to worry about,” the detective called out, “It’s only a priest hole, I think. Let me see, yes, that’s what it appears to be. Not unusual for an Evangelical Library, I suppose. What do you think? John, are you still there? John?”

But, as thief in the night, his lover had been taken from him.
Cherchez La Femme

Chapter Summary

What happened to John and why?
And how will Percy stand all this melodrama?

“She wondered which wounds went deeper: the jagged wounds of reality, or the profound invisible bruises of the imagination?”  
_All Passion Spent - Vita Sackville-West_

Was there any feeling worse than guilt?

Sherlock lay down on his bed, staring at the ceiling and wishing that it would crash down on him.

Rationally, he knew that it wasn’t his fault, but that did not help clear his conscience nor did it decrease his self-contempt.

Inside of him, a kernel of suspicion was acquiring mass, like a malignant growth.

Maybe he’d always known that if he wanted to solve the case, to truly crack it rather than merely skim along its surface, he’d have to risk losing something vital to him, like his sanity or even his life. But had he perhaps suspected that he might lose John and been wilfully blind to this eventuality?

He shook his head violently and jumped off the bed, startling Percy awake; the cat had been snoozing by the detective's side, emboldened by the young man's stillness and solitude.

“No, it can’t be,” Sherlock said out loud, but even his furry companion didn’t seem convinced.

John had disappeared as neatly as a deck of card in a conjurer’s trick.

It was impossible and maddening and a fearsome challenge.

In the near complete darkness of the Library cellar, he’d forced himself to stay still and listen: he hoped to hear the noise of retreating steps or even a cry for help, but there had been none; he could discern no sounds, aside from his own stertorous breathing and the creaks and sighs of the dormant house above him. He convinced himself that he’d heard a distant click, like the cocking of a gun, but it could have been his heart hammering in his throat.

After that, he’d searched the building, room by room, inch by inch, until the day had dissolved into night.
Lestrade had been called in and his men had turned the place upside down but to no avail.

“The tunnels,” the detective had muttered, sounding like a madman, “I was telling John about this story of secret passages linking the Baker Street underground to various buildings. This could be one of them.”

The Inspector had given him a glance filled with incredulity and compassion.

“I’ve heard about that too,” he’d said, “But trust me, it isn’t true. Ask your brother, he’ll confirm it. People can spread all sort of fanciful tripe: remember when they started that rumour about Germans being parachuted into the country disguised as nuns? Everyone’s a spy, according to some.”

“But John’s gone: he was here with me and he can’t have just disappeared into thin air!” he’d shouted, eyes stinging with stubborn tears.

“I don’t have a ready-made answer for you,” Lestrade had admitted, “But we won’t help him by wasting our time on this nonsense. We have taken this building apart and there are no traces of a passage, a trap door or even a chink in the brickwork. I have contacted the London Transport authorities and they’ve given me these maps. You can see it for yourself: no mysterious tunnels, no link between the station and the Evangelical Library. I’ll leave two of my men here to guard the place, but we should start planning a different strategy.”

Sherlock had glared at him, but he knew that the Inspector was right, and that made his failure even more disastrous.

When John returned to the land of the living, a pair of slanted eyes was peering at him so closely he could hardly tell their colour. For a joyful moment, he thought he was looking at Sherlock, until the face moved farther away, coming fully into focus.

It belonged to a young girl in her early twenties, with platinum blond hair cut and curled in the Hollywood starlet style; her eyebrows were savagely plucked into pencilled accents and in stark contrast, her large, plump-lipped mouth resembled the flower of a carnivorous plant.

Where had he seen those features before, he wondered. He was about to question her, when the words of Miss McGrath echoed in his head: “she had eyes like Mr Holmes here, very far apart and almond-shaped, but the woman in the pictures had round, bulging eyes.”

“Greta Hayward,” he whispered, his voice still hoarse from his ordeal.

She flinched and couldn’t suppress a shrill cry of surprise.

“That’s not my name,” she replied, even though she’d already betrayed herself. “I’m Christine Brent,” she affirmed, with a sham cultivated accent.

He took stock of his situation and found that he was tightly bound to a chair, hands and feet rendered immobile and understood that the girl was there not only to watch him, but to make him talk.

“I saw her picture in the papers,” he said, “And you’re dead rings; you could have been twins, if it wasn’t for the shape of the eyes.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she replied, sitting in a plain wooden chair opposite John
and smoothing down the skirt of her tight-fitting dress. She was wearing a burgundy cashmere number with a cowl neck collar and patent black pumps with a silver buckle in the shape of a ribbon: expensive garments that fit her sinuous forms and flattered her creamy complexion, but were at odds with the animal coarseness which lurked from beneath that superficial elegance.

He pondered about caution and decided it was too late for tiptoeing.

“Gordon Cummins, the Blackout Ripper,” he started, trying to imagine what Sherlock would have said in his place. “You were his third victim, only you weren’t. Christine Brent was the name of the poor girl who took your place.”

“Of course I remember about the case,” she said, staring at something behind John’s head, which in fact was her own reflection. Greta was one of these women who couldn’t resist the lure of self-contemplation and who always perfected their lies in front of a mirror. She wasn’t bright in the same vein as Sherlock, but once she was given a script, she could stick to it to the letter, provided she had good reasons for the tiresome deception.

“It was a frightening thing,” she continued, putting on a mask of assumed fear, “It was lucky for us girls that he was captured and executed. Monsters like him should not wander free.”

“What were you doing at the Blandford?”

Greta allowed herself a little detour from her prescribed route and laughed.

“That crummy old place?” she gasped, “But I have never set foot in it, not once in my life!”

“How do you know that it’s ‘old and crummy’ then?”

She gave him a complacent little smile.

“I do have friends, don’t I?”

“And relatives,” he suggested, “Are you related to Peter Brent?”

“He’s my brother,” she replied, going back to her rehearsed story. “I can’t really talk about him, but he’s working for the War Office. All hush-hush, you know?”

“That’s precisely what he told his girlfriend,” said John, “Evelyn Oatley, the first of the Ripper’s victims.”

“Are you insinuating that my brother is related to those sordid crimes?”

Pitch-perfect indignation, he thought.

“I’m suggesting that you don’t have a brother or a family, and that you were raised at Brixton Orphanage.”

John could almost hear the glass of her confidence shattering into brittle pieces, leaving behind a jagged, vengeful insecurity.

“You mistake me for another girl,” she said, her creamy cheeks turned dusky. “I can’t fathom who could have told you all these lies.”

He wouldn’t be fooled that easily.

“It’s understandable that you should want to forget your childhood,” he said, “Most of us do, for
one reason or another. And when you’ve had to scrimp and beg for a scrap of affection, it’s easy to fall for the first scoundrel who pays you a compliment.”

Greta stood up so quickly her chair tipped backwards; she paced right and left then walked towards an area of the room which was out of John’s field of vision. He heard the clink of glass and liquid being poured. Dutch courage, he thought.

“Affection,” she snorted, after swallowing down a measure of gin. “What a patronising assumption, that women should be moved by their emotions rather than by more practical concerns.”

“You sound like a very good friend of mine,” he said, grinning. That brought Sherlock back to him with the force of a hammer blow.

“Why am I here? Surely there’s no reason to continue this charade,” he said, “The people you are working for must know that their game is up. Frankly, I expected better from them.”

“I don’t know,” she replied, and he sensed that she was telling the truth, “I was told you’d been collected from the usual place and brought here, that I’d find you tied up and I was to wait until you woke up. You can scream all you like, by the way, because no one will hear you; place’s as empty as a beggar’s belly.”

Slowly but surely the fakery was pealing off, like paint from mouldy walls. He was curious to know what lay beneath, so he chipped away at the remains of her act.

“Why did you meet William Sansom outside the British Museum?” he asked. “Was it because of you that he died?”

Her smile was a shiny blade.

“I’ve never heard that name,” she replied, cautiously, “But if I had, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“Why not?” he insisted. “After all, we are here and we haven’t anything else to do.”

Greta remained silent.

“You won’t be here for long,” she said, wiping the gin from her glistening lips, “They never do.”

“Who are they?”

John realised that he’d make a mistake, allowing her to regain some of her composure.

“I thought you’d know that by now,” she crowed, “You and that nosey mate of yours. He’s a real blue-eyed boy, your friend; born with a silver spoon in his mouth and all.”

“You leave him alone,” he said, as a cold stone settled on his chest.

He vaguely recalled what had happened at the Library: the niche in the wall, how he’d stumbled and activated a mechanism which had clicked shut after him; he remembered his fall, that terrible sensation of precipitating down a never-ending void. Sherlock had been outside; he’d been safe; at least, that’s what he’d thought, but now he wasn’t so sure.

“Don’t you worry, my pet,” she crooned, “We won’t touch a hair on his head. That’s not how it works.”

“And how does it work?”
Greta finished her gin and lit a cigarette; it was an exotic affair: thin, long and yellowish.

“Here, have some.”

Before he could protest, she put it between his lips and, caught by surprise, he inhaled. Immediately, he became light-headed and his eyes watered.

“Again,” she said, and he couldn’t find the will to refuse.

The room, which he’d had barely the time to observe, started to disappear, as if it had only been the stuff of dreams.

His last thought was for Sherlock: he saw his beautiful eyes as they fluttered shut just before a kiss, but even that memory was marred by the doubt that had infiltrated his mind like a pernicious parasite.

When morning came, the detective was still pacing his room, muttering to himself and tugging at his hair which, by then, was a veritable nettle bush.

He was shivering and his wound ached, and his lack of sleep was another reminder of John’s absence. It was only a matter of weeks, but it seemed ages since he’d last slept alone. It was intolerable - he briddled - that a man he’d taken away from his life and his job should be made to suffer because of his relationship with Sherlock. And like in a vicious circle, he was back to chastising himself, buckling under the inescapable burden of his own guilt. It led nowhere, and he badly needed a plan.

“Think, I need to think,” he hissed, and that was the last straw for Percy, who could no longer take the drama and scurried away to quieter shores.

At some point - he hadn’t kept track of the time - Mycroft had telephoned him from somewhere in Buckinghamshire, which despite his sibling’s damnable reticence Sherlock knew was the location of the code breakers.

His brother’s feathers had been badly ruffled, he could tell even in his deranged state, which meant that something ominous had happened or was going to.

“I’m sorry about John,” he’d said, “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“You haven’t kidnapped him, have you?” Sherlock had spat out, with some venom. At the other end of the line, Mycroft had sighed.

“Don’t be childish, brother mine; this is hardly the time for games.”

“If you really think that John’s disappearance is a game to me,” he’d shouted and slammed the handset down.

And that had been the nadir of his crisis, which he reflected later wasn’t too bad for someone who’d been used to dull his pain with opiates and cruel recriminations.

The stalemate had been broken in the most unexpected manner a handful of hours later.
The phone rang again as Sherlock was half-way down the stairs. He intended to inspect the Library once again and after that to pay a visit to Mr Greene. After Sansom’s death, Greene had been interrogated like most of his colleagues, but he’d revealed nothing useful and even his home address in Clapham was outdated, as the house had been bombed during the previous year. He slept here and there, he’d said, winking at the Inspector, and to confirm that he’d produced a buxom young lady named Dorothy, who appeared to have no qualms about the married status of her lover. The detective did not intend to get the Irregulars into trouble, and a visit to the man's ARP warden post near the Tottenham Court Road should have caused the least possible damage; anyway, it was time to shake things up and to hell with it, he thought.

This bullish attitude – eyes flashing and mouth acrid and sore from too many cigarettes – was coloured with puzzlement as soon as he heard the news that Lestrade gave him.

The previous night, a cluster of HE had been dropped close to Northampton Square, so the egregious Mr Potters had visited his property to assess the eventual damage.

“What is that word the Frenchies use, deijaviu?” he’d told the inspector, and his assertion had not been as inaccurate as his pronunciation.

“Her name is Christine Brent,” said Lestrade, who this time had brought with him a surgeon named Drayton, as Anderson had finally been ‘promoted’ to another division.

“Is it?” Sherlock whispered, distracted by the almond-shaped green eyes that stared back at him in eternal astonishment.

She had been shot in the head, as testified by the scorched and messy hole in her right temple.

Drayton, a man as unobtrusive as Anderson had been troublesome, indicated that in his opinion the woman either knew her assailant or had been taken unawares, as there were no signs of struggle. She lay on the floor, where she must have fallen after the shot; her nails were clean and unbroken, and her mouth didn’t yield any trace of fabric or other material that could have been used to gag her.

“What about the gun?” the detective asked, his gaze darting about the place, registering every possible detail. Obviously, he knew the answer even before it was given.

“We haven’t extracted the bullet yet, but we found the cartridge case, which had rolled underneath the stove,” the surgeon said. He had pale, unemotional eyes and he glanced at Sherlock like he did at every single thing that wasn’t a corpse on a slab.

“I should say she was shot with a Webley,” he concluded.

The young man tried to swallow, but his mouth was parched. He cast his mind back to the Maida Vale incident and realised Lestrade had never been told about John’s weapon. They had even insisted the episode must have gone unnoticed because of the assailant’s gun being fitted with a silencer. If John had shot the girl, Sherlock would not be the one to get him into trouble. The girl was Greta Hayward, obviously, but he wasn’t sure that he should guide the Inspector towards a truth the man would certainly discover at some point. He needed time to digest what had happened and make sense of its significance.

“Could it be another type of pistol of the same calibre?”

Drayton blinked at him and the shadow of a smile curled his upper lip.

“Anything could be, but I have been at this long enough to know an Enfield No 2 Mk 1 cartridge
“The official service pistol for the British military,” Sherlock exclaimed, in a talented display of feigned surprise. If John could have seen him, he would have rated his acting talents miles above Greta’s.

“Yes, quite a common sort of weapon at present,” Drayton continued, that timid smile already replaced by blank efficiency.

“That’ll make things more difficult for you,” the young man observed.

“Indeed,” the surgeon agreed, before returning to his task.

He walked up to Lestrade, who was holding a plastic wallet containing the victim’s documents.

“Seems all bona-fide to me,” the Inspector sighed, “And yet according to your theory, Sansom was impersonating Peter Brent, which would suggest that even her identity is bogus.”

“Oh, I am fairly sure that a woman named Christine Brent really existed. She probably died and this girl took her place.”

“But why kill her? And why bring her here of all places? She’s not the type… say, wasn’t there a girl in the Sansom case, one he’d met during his lunch break just before he died?”

This time the detective didn’t have to feign his surprise.

“And how did you find out about that?”

“I have my little secrets,” Lestrade smirked, but then remembered what Sherlock was going through, “Not everybody at the Ministry is as tight-lipped as that Lawn fellow. A colleague of Sansom’s, a curious chap named Salisbury, was out and about that same day and caught a glimpse of the girl’s shoes. It enraged him that anyone would wear leopard print shoes at this juncture, that’s what he said. He was still angry about it when he told me.”

“And this girl is wearing patent shoes with a silver buckle,” the detective said.

“I can’t imagine what Salisbury would say about that.”

“Cherchez la femme,” quoted Sherlock, and his heart gave a painful twinge.
Sherlock discusses the situation with Mycroft.
I know, it is THAT bad.

Thanks to all you lovely peeps; you make this bizarre 2017 enormously better...

Note: The Battle of the Somme took place between 1 July and 18 November 1916 on both sides of the upper reaches of the River Somme in France. More than 3 million men fought in this battle and one million men were wounded or killed, making it one of the bloodiest battles in human history.

Note 2: The song Speak Low was sung by the protagonist at the end of the marvellous movie "Phoenix". I still cry thinking about it.

“Speak low when you speak, love
Our summer day withers away too soon, too soon
Speak low when you speak, love
Our moment is swift, like ships adrift, we’re swept apart, too soon
Speak low, darling, speak low
Love is a spark, lost in the dark too soon, too soon

I feel wherever I go that tomorrow is near tomorrow is here and always too soon
Time is so old and love so brief
Love is pure gold and time a thief

We're late, darling, we're late
The curtain descends
Everything ends
Too soon, too soon
I wait, darling, I wait…”

Speak Low (excerpt) – lyrics by Kurt Weill

“Tell me about your husband,” Sherlock urged, lighting a new cigarette from the stub of the one
he'd just smoked.

Mrs Mayfield glowered at him.

It was early afternoon and the club was still closed. The polychromatic array of bottles behind the counter resembled a giant perfumery and the mirrors were lifeless, like they always are when nobody’s looking at them.

“I thought you already knew everything,” she replied, coldly.

“He was German, wasn’t he? I should have guessed. I looked at you and I thought Weimar, Berlin, Bauhaus. I almost expected Kurt Weill to be played the other night, instead of that vulgar jazz.”

Her heavily painted mouth twitched.

“You got all that just by looking at me?” she asked.

“Observation is an underrated talent which people should learn to cultivate,” he replied. “You still haven’t answered my question: was he from Berlin, or are you merely an enthusiast of the whole Periclean scene?”

The woman stared at him, but said nothing.

“What if I refuse to tell you?” she asked after a while.

“I will find out anyway. I am extremely well connected.”

“I bet you are, but I doubt it’ll help you in my case.”

“Why, have the records been deleted? You must know that it’s impossible to do that, no matter how hard you try. Papers can be incinerated and documents seized, but not people. Even if you silence most of them, there will always be some willing to talk, be it for money or for nobler reasons.”

“Where is your friend?” she asked, abruptly, and Sherlock nearly crushed the cigarette between his fingers.

“He’s busy,” he replied, trying to sound unconcerned.

“He isn’t of your set, is he? I did guess. I looked at him and thought: South London, cabbage soup and darned socks. I almost expected him to be smoking Caporals instead of those posh Black Cats.”

He was taken aback by her perceptiveness, but refused to be distracted.

“I don’t have a set. Birth is an accident and I refuse to be defined by what is beyond my control.”

“Control is very important to you; your choice, your rules.”

“Don’t think you can read me like a book. I may be young, but I am not an innocent child.”

She took the cigarette from his fingers and sucked on it, hollowing her cheeks in a theatrical manner.

“I’m sure you are not,” she said, exhaling a nimbus of smoke, “The things you must have seen and done, before you gave up your nasty little habit.”
“What are you talking about?”

He wanted to shake her and scream at her, but he forced himself not to react. The effort drained him; it was almost like an act of violence.

“You have the greedy expression of the addict,” she replied, eyes narrowed into slits, “I have seen it too many times to be mistaken. I suppose you will say that you are clean now, but you can never really be safe, can you?”

“It depends,” the detective said, ignoring the flutter in his belly, “I quit because I got bored; my choice, not somebody else’s.”

“You don’t seem bored, but you are tense. Perhaps you need something to ease your nerves…”

“No, I don’t,” he hissed. “What I really need at the moment is for you to answer my questions.”

She sighed, grinding the cigarette butt into a pewter ashtray.

“He wasn’t German, but he might as well have been. He had been brought up in Berlin until the age of thirteen. When the war came some years later, he didn’t know which side he should be on. I have always believed he let them kill him. When the time came, he couldn’t pull the trigger.”

“You should have hated them, but instead you went to Berlin.”

Mrs Mayfield’s cheeks coloured and for a moment she was back to being the young girl who had just lost her beloved.

“I hated them all right, but don’t you see? I wanted to know them, the way he’d known them. I wanted to see them through his eyes.”

“And you were fortunate, in a manner of speaking,” Sherlock continued sotto-voce, eager to not break the spell. “Because during the time you were there Germany experienced a renaissance almost as bountiful as the Italian one. And it was almost like having him again.”

“You should have seen the life they used to lead, the freedom and the thirst for knowledge and for beauty,” she explained, her eyes shining at the memory, “We British cannot even imagine what it is like, to be so liberated. With our restraint and that ghastly stiff upper lip; our senses don’t matter, our bodies dead from the waist down.”

“In public, perhaps; but in the privacy of our homes…”

She laughed, bitterly.

“You of all people should know better,” she said, “My club is stuffed with upper class husbands looking for a cheap thrill in the arms of a young girl. Why do you think? Because in the ‘privacy of their homes’ they treat one another like furniture!”

“They have taken John,” the detective confessed. “You have to help me find him. I can’t be without him.”

“Why do you think I can help you?”

“You didn’t ask me who they are and you are still talking to me,” the young man replied, his expression swiftly changing from pleading to shrewd. “The sanctum where you took us last time indicates a taste which doesn’t coincide with yours. You may like luxury, but not that sort.
Someone furnished it according to their liking and I want to know who that was.”

A sliver of fear shone in Mrs Mayfield eyes, and she lost some of her self-assurance.

“I don’t have anything to do with your friend’s disappearance.”

“But you know who killed Miss King,” the detective pressed on. “You knew as soon as she was found. And you’ve been playing a part ever since. You even pretended to disapprove of our kind, but you couldn’t, not when you lived in Berlin in the twenties. It’s all an act, and initially I suspected it was driven by hate for our country, but I’m no longer sure.”

“What a preposterous idea!”

“That you would hate Britain?” he suggested, “Why, you wouldn’t be the first to have mixed allegiances. You talked about your husband, but recently a young man belonging to the nobility, the young Marchmain, was telling me about Unity Mitford.”

Mrs Mayfield rose to her feet and nearly lost her balance.

“I don’t know who murdered Miss King and I have no idea where your friend is, but I will give you this piece of advice: don’t dig too deep, let the tide of events wash over you. Nothing is as important as the person you love, not if you care for them as much as I did – do – for Archie. Let the country take care of itself, and look after what truly matters to you.”

“I can’t just look the other way,” Sherlock protested.

“And why not?” she asked, in a belligerent tone, “Do you think anything will change? A war was won and impossible conditions imposed on the losing nation; it has only led to more death and more destruction.”

“If we don’t stop them, they will obliterate our way of life, same as they did with your beloved Weimar Republic. Freedom of expression will become history.”

“Those who can see both sides of the argument are cursed,” the woman said, and she looked older and more creased than at the start of their conversation.

“I am certain that you know more than you’re telling me,” Sherlock observed, “Perhaps a visit from Scotland Yard will loosen your tongue.”

She let out a short, bitter laugh.

“The average Englishman’s faith in law and order is rather touching. The police are welcome to inspect every inch of my place, like they did after Miss King’s murder. They didn’t find anything then, they won’t find anything now.”

“Perhaps they should investigate your accounts; find out who purchased the antique pieces in your office.”

“My accounts are in order, and as for my furniture some of it was given to me as a present.”

“As a reward for your silence,” Sherlock spat out.

“There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune,” she quoted. “Good day, Mr Holmes.”

“Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries,” he replied, completing
the quote, “Till next time, Mrs Mayfield.”

“Archie Mayfield was killed at the Somme at the beginning of November 1916,” said Mycroft. He’d returned from his expedition unscathed, but he had worried eyes and deeper lines on his forehead.

The situation was so bleak that even Mrs Hudson had not commented on his presence. She’d offered him tea and Bath buns, before retiring to her lodgings with a discomfited air.

“Almost at the end of that battle,” Sherlock commented, “He must have thought that he’d made it, that he could maybe go home again; wherever his home was, but that’s another matter.”

He thought of what he’d have done if John had been a German and war had come between them. The horror of such a situation left him breathless, a sensation worsened by his sibling’s next question.

“John owns a Webley revolver; where did he get it from?”

“He was about to leave for France, before he was injured by that bomb.”

“They didn’t issue one out to him,” replied Mycroft, “I checked. He would have been assigned one later on together with his uniform, but as you pointed out, lady luck intervened.”

Sherlock puffed a plume of smoke straight into his brother’s face, making him cough in that fastidious way of his.

“Webley guns were in use during the other war too,” he said, “It was probably his father’s.”

“I wonder if he happened to be at the Somme.”

“What, and met Mayfield? Far-fetched, to say the least,” replied the detective. “And what would that have to do with John’s disappearance anyway? His father and Archie Mayfield were on the same side.”

“I never said that there was a connection,” the older man noted, dabbing his mouth with an immaculate handkerchief. “I was merely pointing out that lack of information may lead to mistaken assumptions. Even if Watson owns that brand of revolver, it doesn’t mean it was his Webley that killed Miss Brent.”

“Don’t be silly!” Sherlock bellowed, “Of course it was his gun. Why else would he have disappeared as the same time as the murder occurred? Eventually, the weapon will be found and it will be traced back to him. He won’t remember anything and they will put him in prison.”

Mycroft did not contradict him, which made him even more apoplectic with rage.

“Did you go see your source, the fellow who told you about Lancelot Place?”

The detective had tried to contact Greene, but the man had relinquished his post and taken a leave of absence from the Ministry. He too seemed to have gone underground, a fact which had added to Sherlock’s anguish.

“I see,” the older man said, tapping the floor with the ferrule of his umbrella. “That girl is not Christine Brent; her documents are pristine, but she reminded me of somebody. Her hair had been
bleached and her eyes were the wrong shape, but otherwise she could be Greta Hayward’s twin sister."

“Miss Hayward’s dead; the Blackout Ripper killed her.”

“You are talking to me, remember? Not to some credulous idiot.”

“Speaking of which,” Sherlock said, “Gregory did not realise who she was.”

He thought he would relish his brother’s embarrassment, but in truth he felt nothing. If John had been there, he would have chided him then he would have waited until they were alone and shut him up with loving kisses.

“That’s because he’s worried about John,” Mycroft replied, flushing a little. “You knew she was alive, I take it. This entire operation is more intricate than we thought.”

“I assume our code breakers are in trouble too,” the detective asked, pouring his sibling another cup of Earl Grey. It was his version of an olive branch, and Mycroft accepted it.

“They are almost certain of having been infiltrated by the enemy. If so, months and months of work would have been for nothing,” he sighed, after he’d sipped his drink.

“They would have to find another location.”

“Nearly impossible, at this stage; the damage would be almost certainly irreparable.”

“And you don’t have any suspicion,” said Sherlock, staring at his brother with narrowed eyes, “It must be someone pretty high up, someone with impeccable credentials… someone like you.”

The older man chuckled.

“There’s no one quite like me, brother mine,” he said.

“Immodest, but not untrue”

“Modesty is a waste of time, as you know only too well. What of that drug theory of yours?”

“Pervitin, what do you know about it?”

“Pilot’s salt, that’s what they call it, if I am not mistaken; methamphetamine in pills, to combat fatigue and stimulate alertness. There was none in Sansom’s body. I read the report.”

“Of course you did,” said Sherlock, who wasn’t in the least surprised. “No, I think they found a way of making it untraceable and even more psychoactive.”

“A psychotropic drug,” murmured Mycroft, “That’s interesting, but what proof do you have?”

“They had their laboratory in the cellars of the Evangelical Library,” the young man explained, “You can still smell the chemicals. The Blandford was next door, and now it’s been burnt to a cinder.”

“They knew the intelligence services were closing in on them.”

“But it was too late for Cummins and even for Sansom. I won’t allow them to take John too”.

An idea struck both men at the same time, as it frequently happened when they discussed a subject
in depth.

“They could have given him the drug,” Mycroft started.

“He wouldn’t have killed a woman.”

“Sansom did. Don’t look at me like that, brother mine, and credit me with a little intelligence. He was Miss Oatley’s lover and she was killed. After a while, he dies in mysterious circumstances and it turns out he shares his fingerprints with this Brent fellow. Even a maths-starved cretin could solve this equation.”

“This drug would still not force an individual into doing something against his conscience.”

Mycroft shook his head.

“You always were an idealist,” he said, with some affection, “I suppose you sold this foolish theory to John; he’s as bad as you, if not worse.”

“There’s nothing the matter with him.”

“I didn’t say there was, but he’s a romantic and so are you. Don’t deny it; it would be as pointless as my attempt at modesty. As you very well know psychotropic drugs alter perception, mood and consciousness; they modify brain and behaviour. Sansom might have believed his girl was trying to kill him and that he was only acting in self-defence. Watson may have been convinced that the Hayward woman wanted to hurt him or even you.”

“It may have been the truth,” Sherlock countered, but he knew it wasn’t possible.

“She was shot in the temple,” his brother said, rolling his eyes.

“Yes, yes, I know!” he shouted. “Why would they give him the drug, why take him and not me?”

“Do you really want me to say it?”

Sherlock shook his head; he felt sick to his stomach, which could be also due to the fact that he hadn’t been eating properly since his lover had gone.

“That case you had, during the Ripper investigation; did you find out who was behind those burglaries?”

“I had an idea, but it led nowhere. It was to do with a possible insurance scam. A few arts dealer had been robbed, so I started to suspect they might have been in it together. The premiums have increased because of the war; besides, there was no connection between them.”

“You followed the trail up to the Docklands and you found the stolen goods.”

“Too easy, I know; almost as if somebody wanted to keep me occupied.”

“I wouldn’t have thought you’d be contented with that.”

“A mere trifle,” Sherlock replied, waving his hand, “Now, if it had been a murder; that would have been another kettle of fish. Besides, I was interested in the Ripper case, even though it seemed an open and shut one.”

“But now you’re wondering if there might have been more to it than a scam gone awry.”
“I know there was more to it, but I can hardly go back to them and start asking questions again. I returned their paintings and they paid me. They seemed perfectly satisfied, I have to say.”

Mycroft folded his handkerchief into a neat little square and placed it inside his breast pocket; it was an indication that he was about to leave.

“I could do the digging for you, if you wish. I shall be discreet; your name will not be mentioned nor will mine. I will also look into that Bouillabaisse club and its eventual benefactors. There are other things I could find out on your behalf, if you trusted me with the names of your sources.”

Sherlock lighted another cigarette and inhaled deeply.

“I’ll think on it. Thanks for offering and for the other… thing.”

“We’ll find Watson,” the older man said, touching his brother’s shoulder with his fingertips. “I have a hunch that he’s not far from here.”

“You didn’t see that batty fortune-teller again, I hope.”

“Not a fortune teller, Sherlock, but a hypnotist. He helped cure my insomnia.”

“Stay away from the cheese tray after dinner: that would have been my advice, and free of charge too.”

Mycroft put on his hat and his gloves and walked to the sitting room door.

“At least I eat regular repasts,” he said, “You look quite peaky. I will have a word with Mrs Hudson before I leave.”

“You will do no such thing,” the detective huffed. “I won’t be treated like an invalid or a child in need of a governess.”

“Eat those buns then.”

“What an ominous suggestion,” he muttered, but after his brother had left he reluctantly complied.

Chapter End Notes

Next: John and Sherlock are reunited....
Chapter Summary

Our boys are finally reunited, but what has REALLY happened to John?

I just watched Their Finest, a British film set in 1940's London and the main character, played by Gemma Arterton, finds refuge in a shelter in Baker Street. Oh yes!

Chapter Notes

Note: "Round and round the racecourse, Catch a little hare" is the Irish version of the nursery rhyme quoted by Sherlock in his famous tirade about the solar system (round and round the garden like a teddy bear).

Note 2: "On the viewless wings of poesy" is a snippet of "Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats

“Methought I heard a voice cry,

'Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep’—the innocent sleep

Sleep that knits up the raveled sleave of care.”

Macbeth – Act 2, Scene 2

Sherlock couldn't sleep.

Consuming drugs was not an option nor could he seek the solace of any other type of manufactured tranquilliser, except for alcohol and nicotine. He could endanger his life in more useful ways, such as walking alone in the night while the incendiaries came whistling down like rowdy confetti.

John would disapprove, he thought, grinding his teeth and feeling ferocious.

Three days had elapsed since his lover had disappeared and he had no intention of letting another night go waste in the dead calm of Baker Street.

His stomach was past the stage of gnawing emptiness to one of odd hyperactivity: he felt that it was there, but only to contain a swarm of moths that never ceased to flutter. He’d become a restless cage for his bodily functions, a thing which he’d always dreaded and tried to avoid. Take the heart, for instance: after a brief flirtation with Shelley and Shakespeare, he’d relinquished poetry precisely because of the cant which confused a muscle pumping blood with a series of hormonal
processes leading to procreation. He’d entertained a longer dalliance with the Jacobeans because they didn’t waste their time being sentimental about the heart; they’d rather cut it out and eat it together with a surprising number of other organs. They had produced the revenge plays, whose blood-splattered depictions of violence and obsession had both terrified and fascinated his younger self. He knew now that they were only two sides of the same coin: you couldn’t have that derangement of the soul without the tender love the poets were chanting about.

He’d find the scoundrel who’d taken John and hurt him in ways that hadn’t been devised yet. Sherlock didn’t own a gun, but he possessed a selection of sharp pocket knives, a vivid imagination and an unquenchable rage.

The murder of Christine Brent had made it to the front page of every newspaper, since it provided a welcome distraction from the horrors of the war. A grisly mystery still retained a modicum of glamour which the daily dose of explosions and fires had long ceased to evince, and human beings have always needed a bit of variety, even of the macabre sort.

This time Lestrade had every intention of conducting a thorough investigation, which included the discovery of the deceased girl's real identity: she was the real Greta Hayward.

The resemblance had been startling when he thought about it later, but he was at an age when girls of a type looked all the same to him, and Miss Hayward was not the sort that stood out; hundreds of them wore their hair and make-up in the style of movie starlets; after a while, one stopped noticing them, same as one could hardly a well-known song playing in the background.

They had tried to trace her movements in the days before the murder, but it had led nowhere: she hadn’t made use of her coupons and despite the publicity, nobody had come forward to provide information or reclaim the body.

After Lestrade had established the girl’s identity, his conversation with Sherlock had been even more frustrating than usual.

While Stamford was taking care of the post-mortem, they met outside the door of the mortuary. The detective had black shadows under his eyes and was muttering to himself.

“How long was it since you had a full night’s sleep?” Lestrade asked, not expecting the growl that came from the unkempt young man’s throat.

“Sleep,” he snarled, “I can do perfectly well without. This,” he tugged hard at his unruly hair, “is just transport. It’s only the mind that matters.”

“Yes, I can see that you’re doing splendidly,” the Inspector commented, but Sherlock had been bypassed by his irony. “By the way, why didn’t you tell me about this Greta Hayward?”

The young man rolled his eyes and patted his pockets in search of something he couldn’t find, so Lestrade took a crumpled packet of Navy Cuts and shoved it into his shaky hands. Sherlock exhaled the breath he’d been holding, his tight chest easing up a little.

“Don’t you think you should have realised that as soon as you clapped eyes on the corpse?” he asked, between greedy drags of his favourite poison. “No wonder you need me to prevent further miscarriages of justice. In fact, I’m surprised you can even manage to arrest the right person once in a while.”
The older man did not take offence, because he knew that Sherlock’s scathing comments were only his attempts at diversion.

“You could have told me all the same.”

“I wanted to test a theory first. Besides, it’s better if the press don’t know about the real name of the victim.”

“They noticed the resemblance and they are connecting this murder to the Blackout Ripper anyway.”

“But they don’t know the truth, so they can only suggest that the new killer is copying the methods of Gordon Cummins. It wouldn’t do if they started accusing the Met police of incompetence.”

“They did find out about Northampton Square and I bet that pompous little Potters fellow is charging admission.”

They shared a laugh which dissipated some of the tension.

“Your brother is worried about you.”

Immediately, the mood soured.

“On the surface, perhaps,” the detective snapped, “Underneath, he’s awfully pleased of witnessing my failure in preventing all this from happening.”

“You are not infallible, dear chap, and Mycroft is not your enemy. He wants you to be happy.”

“Does he really? Do you know that he practically forced John away from his life, so that he could risk it in order to provide some jolly entertainment for yours truly?”

Lestrade hadn’t known, but the fact only reinforced the truth of his previous statement.

“I can’t claim to know Doctor Watson, but he strikes me as the sort who wouldn’t accept something unless he wanted to.”

“Stubborn as a mule,” Sherlock concurred, with evident pride, “And loyal to the death, which is why I’m certain something terrible must have happened.”

“We’ll find him,” said Lestrade, who already believed that Mycroft was capable of almost anything. The man displayed the uncanny ability of reading people’s minds, which would have been unsettling had not the Inspector been already well versed in Holmesian, its genius and eccentricity.

“This is not the question,” barked the detective. “How will we find him, is what I ask myself and the death of Miss Hayward doesn’t fill me with undue optimism.”

The result of the autopsy didn’t add much to what they already knew, except for the negative of sexual intercourse and the positive of some light abrasions found on the girl’s lips, on the surface of her tongue and in the interior of her mouth.

“My guess is that she smoked a cigarette a short time before she was killed. There are no traces of the substance itself, save for a hint of sodium hydroxide, but we have to wait for the toxicology report,” Mike said, staring at Sherlock’s maniacal eyes and ashen face.
“Lye,” the young man murmured, “Used to prepare methamphetamine compounds. In pill form he
doesn’t leave any trace, but in cigarettes, a minor abrasion would be inevitable.”

“She wasn’t already dead when they shot her, was she?” asked the Inspector.

“Sedated perhaps, but not dead,” replied Stamford, “Your man Drayton was right with regards to
the bullet, but you already know about that; the death was instantaneous and if she was intoxicated,
she may have not suffered at all, poor girl.”

Lestrade thanked him and was about to question Sherlock when one of his men stalked in and
whispered something in his ear.

“The weapon’s been found,” he announced, “A plod heard a shriek coming from the pile of rubbish
at the scene of the crime. He prodded it with his truncheon and upset a colony of mice: turns out
that they were sitting on the gun, like ants on a sugar stick.”

“Oh damn,” the detective muttered, but Lestrade was already on his way and didn’t hear.

“How are you, Sherlock?” asked Mike, bracing himself for the abrasive reply which didn’t come.
In fact, the young man was too lost in his reverie to pay any attention to the outside world.

“The registration and the fingerprints,” he was mumbling, “If I had found it first, I could have…but
too late now, always too late, what is the use of me if I can’t help him… no use, might as well find
this Pervitin abomination and drown in the deuced stuff!”

He staggered towards the door and the pathologist caught him before he hit the floor.

“We are going to the cafeteria,” Mike said in his best John Watson imitation, “And you will have a
cup of tea and a sandwich.”

“I have to go back to the Evangelical Library,” Sherlock objected, feebly, “I want to try an
experiment.”

“You won’t go anywhere until you’ve had something to eat and drink,” Mike insisted, “John would
never forgive me if he came back only to find you bedridden.”

“I’m not an invalid, but perhaps a cup of coffee would revive my synapses.”

“That’s not only your synapses that need reviving,” the surgeon said, with an amused smile that
reminded Sherlock of his lost lover.

“Yes, all right,” he sighed, grasping that paltry consolation with his trembling hands.

“You have hypoglycaemia,” Mike said, as they consumed their spartan meal, “Low blood sugar.”

“Yes, thanks, I know what that means, but that’s not the case,” the detective replied, casting a
supercilious look at his humble bacon sarnie before biting down on it.

“Happens to all of us,” continued the pathologist, “Hell, it even happen to John once, not so long
ago. He’d been working day and night non-stop for two days and when they let him go, he decided
to walk home without a drink or a bite to eat. Thankfully, I caught up with him outside Chalk Farm
station and half-carried him home. He’s a lovely fellow, but he can be a stubborn one too.”

The young man chuckled.
“I was just saying the same thing to Lestrade.”

Mike smiled and kept talking about the episode, hoping that it would lighten the detective’s mood.

“And it wasn’t even a short walk, considering his lodgings are in Camden Town on the Park side. Well, they were at the time. It would have been even worse had he been at the other side of the Park,” he said and looked on as Sherlock’s eyes widened in shock and the mug nearly escaped from his enfeebled fingers.

For a moment, influenced by their conversation about the post-mortem, he feared that Holmes might have ingested a poisonous substance and that he was gasping for air. That surmise only lasted until the young man slammed his hand down on the table, making every person in the room turn towards them.

“What is it?” he asked, offering him a glass of water just in case. People returned to their food and their chattering, while Stamford waited for an explanation.

The last thing he expected was an explosion of laughter: Sherlock’s mirth was such that soon he really couldn’t breathe and Mike was forced to slap him in the face.

“Sorry mate, but you were having a hysterical episode.”

“We have been going round and round the racecourse like the proverbial hare,” the detective gasped. “And while I racked my brains and Mycroft tackled the Prime Minister, John always was where he was meant to be.”

Another crisis overtook him, but less violent. Inside Sherlock’s chest, a taut spring had been released, and he suddenly felt ravenous. He stole Mike’s untouched cucumber sandwich and pocketed it.

“What do you mean?” asked the surgeon, his face a study in perplexity. “And where are you going?”

“Where do people go when they are in trouble and need the comfort of their familiar surroundings?”

“Home, I suppose, but John lives with you now; he would come back to Baker Street.”

Sherlock rose to his feet and gulped down the rest of his coffee.

“Something has happened to his memory,” he replied and then “Lye,” he said, as if the name had mystical connotations.

“Do you know where you are going?” Mike shouted after him.

“Back to the start,” the detective replied, and in a whirlwind of coat-tails, he was gone.

He’d had flown there on the viewless wings of poesy, had he been thus inclined. As things stood, he hailed a cab and gave the driver John’s old address.

A pipe had burst in the Camden High Street, so he had to run the rest of the way.

It wasn’t long since they’d supped on salmon and champagne to celebrate the new year yet things had changed so drastically Sherlock could hardly recognise himself in that bumbling youth.
Better prepare for the worst, he thought, and caressed the sheathed knife in his jacket pocket.

Despite this bravado, he was certain that the worst peril wasn’t the enemy shooting or stabbing him but the state of John’s mind and body.

When he opened the front door - at his fourth attempt - he suddenly felt disheartened.

The flat smelled of abandonment, and the sparse furniture was covered with inches of dust.

He moved nimbly, touching nothing as he went, in case he was disturbing a crime scene; not that there was much to upset, since John had taken all of his meagre possessions with him. In the bedroom, the pinewood armoire was empty and so was the chest of drawers. He reached out for the bedside cabinet, when he heard a noise coming from underneath the bed, but when he ducked down he found only more dust and cobwebs. He was about to return to his inspection when he heard it again: it was a scratching noise, of nails dragging along a hard surface.

And then it came to him: some rooms in these old flats used to have a concealed trap door underneath the carpet, which led to a cavity wide enough to store a couple of trunks. Space in London had always been at a premium and landlords had to find ways to maximise it.

Sherlock went down on his knees and inspected the surface of the threadbare carpet until he found what he was looking for: a flap that served to hide the metal hook of the trap door. He pulled the metal ring with all his strength and the door opened.

He would never forget the sheer horror he felt at the sight of John’s clouded eyes as they blinked open and failed to focus on Sherlock’s shocked countenance. His lover was wearing the same clothes in which he’d disappeared, but three days later they were dirty, creased and crusted with blood. Initially, the detective had feared that it could be John’s blood, but upon further inspection, the older man appeared to be unscathed, superficially at least; only his nails were broken from trying to scratch his way out of the hole into which he’d been thrown.

“John, can you hear me?” he whispered.

With a strength he hadn’t known he possessed, he succeeded in extracting his friend from his cramped hiding place and in laying him down on the bare mattress.

“Who are you?” the blond man stuttered and Sherlock’s heart broke a little.

“Sherlock Holmes,” he started to explain, “I am a consulting detective and I live at 221b Baker Street.”

Incredibly, John let out what could only be defined as a giggle.

“What?” he asked, a bit miffed despite everything,

“It is really you,” the older man said, coughing in between words, “No one else could come up with that consulting detective guff.”

“Why, who else could it be, and what do you mean by guff?” he protested, but he soon found that he was being smothered by John’s embrace and all explanations were set aside for a long while.

“Are you able to see?” he managed to ask, while they avidly caressed each other’s faces and bodies, thirsty and hungry for the taste of each other’s skin. Sherlock wished to be home so that he
could take care of his friend, but there were questions that needed an immediate answer.

“It’s still blurry, but I can see that you haven’t been eating while I was gone,” John replied, stroking his lover’s lips with a calloused thumb.

“Slander,” the detective said, removing Mike’s sandwich from his pocket and placing it under the doctor’s nose. “See? I even carry food with me. Here, you should have some; you must be starving.”

“I’d rather have a drink of water. There should still be a couple of glasses in the kitchen.

The detective hurried out of the room and quickly returned with two tumblers filled to the brim.

“Who did you think I was?” he enquired.

“You won’t believe me when I tell you,” John rasped, after a fit of coughing brought on by drinking too fast.

“Greta Hayward,” Sherlock suggested, and was rewarded with an admired if unfocussed glance.

“Yes, how do you know? What am I saying, of course you know; you always know everything. Her eyes are similar to yours; Miss McGrath was right. And when I passed out, they were the last thing I saw and I thought of you… when I opened mine again, there they were, so I wasn’t sure, not until I heard you prattle on about Baker Street.”

“What else do you recall?”

“She was acting out a part, like you said Cummins had been doing during the trial.”

“Where did she take you?”

“I can’t say, but she mentioned that I was collected from the Evangelical Library and brought there as usual. That she had not been the one to abduct me and that I could scream as loud as I wanted as the place was deserted. Has she been arrested?”

Sherlock swiftly decided that it wasn’t the time or the place for telling the truth.

“No, not arrested,” he replied. “But what happened after that?”

John tried to scratch his head and grimaced when his broken nails touched his scalp.

“I can’t remember,” he murmured, “There was something… that had gone wrong, as if I’d let you down, because I’d allowed them to capture me while you were out there, on your own.”

His voice broke and he closed his eyes to stave off the disgust and the nausea.

Sherlock took him in his arms and rubbed his back, whispering soothing words against his sweat-soaked hair.

“Home,” John murmured, tearfully. “Please let’s go home.”
The Paraffin Test

Chapter Summary

Our boys are back together, but will it stay that way, and for how long? Trouble is brewing, as per usual :)

Chapter Notes

Note: Gunshot residue contains burned particles (potassium nitrite) and some unburned particles (potassium nitrate), and for decades criminal investigators collected these particles by applying melted paraffin wax to a subject’s hands. Upon removal of the wax cast, a reagent containing diphenylamine and sulfuric acid was applied to the cast. The development of blue specks was indicative of the presence of nitrates. But in the 1970s the courts took the position that the presence of nitrates in the environment was a common occurrence, and the dermal nitrate test was no longer a valid means to determine that the subject had fired a gun.

“Every man is guilty of all the good he did not do.”

*Voltaire*

In novels, a form of prose that Sherlock couldn’t abide, people usually move from one location to another seamlessly: one paragraph is all it takes for an injured man to start walking again or for a rejected lover to find his peace of mind.

In real life, however, it was not as simple or clear-cut.

John’s limbs were too weak to support him and even his presence of mind, which had swiftly returned thanks to the adrenaline produced by the relief at having been saved, was dwindling at an alarming rate.

Briefly, the detective considered the possibility of staying put until the situation improved, but he found it untenable, since they would be at the mercy of their enemy.

As for requesting help from his brother or another such source, it seemed an almost as repellent and unacceptable proposition.

In the end, he chose the path of least aggravation.
Following the clever suggestions of Mrs Hudson, Arthur Millward had managed to keep away from Sherlock, but that didn’t mean that the detective hadn’t been aware of his frequent presence at Baker Street. He’d noticed the wet footprints in the hall, a manly size that didn’t belong to either man residing at 221b. There had been other signs too, which he’d remarked without paying them any undue attention, absorbed as he was in the complexities of the case and his relationship with John.

“Emma warned me that you tend to get into scrapes,” the elderly man commented, as he helped Sherlock carry his friend downstairs.

The doctor was barely awake, but he arched his eyebrows at the mention of the lady’s name.

“Mrs Hudson,” the detective explained.

Millward seemed rather too cheerful for Sherlock’s liking and for the occasion, but he would not start an altercation when there were more important things to take into account.

The burst pipe had not been fixed yet, but thankfully Millward had come from the opposite direction and left his car on Parkway.

“It’s in the nature of the work I do,” the young man replied, “That we do, John and I,” he added, noticing his companion’s smile at his correction.

It did feel good to have a partner who not only shared one’s abode but also the highs and lows of daily life. He couldn’t even imagine doing without him.

“Yes, she did say,” Millward said, chuckling, “Listening to her, it’s like you are a cross between the King and a naughty child. She worships the ground beneath your feet.”

They stopped mid-way so that he could get his wind back and John could fully enjoy his lover’s embarrassment at the elderly man’s words; Sherlock had opened his mouth to reply and closed it again and was now scowling silently.

“He’s well aware of it,” the doctor replied, “Without Mrs Hudson he would have starved to death.”

“I thought you were feeling groggy.”

“It comes and goes, same as your sense of humour.”

Millward couldn’t resist a chuckle and when John joined him, Sherlock knew he was defeated. He tried to control his facial muscles, but a smile forced its way through.

When they finally got out of the front door, it had started to rain.

“At least it isn’t snowing,” Millward said, “They were saying it would, the papers I mean.”

“I wouldn’t trust anything you read in there,” the doctor said, “They tart up the truth until there’s nearly nothing left of it.”

“They wouldn’t interfere with the weather, surely. The British weather is crazy enough already, I should think.”

Sherlock marvelled – not for the first time – at how people delighted in meaningless conversation even in times of trouble.
With some effort, they got John into the back of the car and soon were on their way to Baker Street.

“I think you may need this again,” Millward said, handing his flask to the detective, who was sitting in the back with his companion.

“I don’t mind if I do,” John said, and Sherlock unscrewed the cap and held the container as his lover drank from it.

“Ah, that sure woke me up!” the latter exclaimed, “That’s quality gin you have in here.” Millward guffawed.

“I figured that if I have to die because of the bombs, I should at least try and do it in style.”

“You said you worked in insurance and that you didn’t take unnecessary risks,” intervened the detective.

“That I did, dear chap, but you see, I decided it was time to call it a day. I was still going to the office every day because I had nothing better to do.”

“And now you do?”

“Of course,” Millward replied, with a jaunty bob of his head, “Look at me now: transporting Mrs Hudson’s own royalty back to their palace.”

“And you provided the apples for that delicious cake,” said John. “I hope Mrs Hudson conveyed our thanks.”

“My brother has bushels of the stuff. Not much else I can offer, except for a car and a friendly ear next time one of you is in trouble.”

“More than enough,” the blond man replied, and Sherlock could only agree.

“What’s happened to him, is he all right?” Mrs Hudson was more flustered than usual.

“I can hear you, you know?” John said, smiling warmly at the landlady, who was hovering around them like a pollen-drunk bee in the summer sunshine.

“They’ll need something hearty to build up their strength,” Millward suggested, “Like that lentils and bacon soup you made the other night.”

“Right, right, of course,” she muttered, “And a strong brew. I should still have some of that Lapsang I was given for Christmas.”

“I’ll come and give you a hand, shall I?” the man replied, guiding her down the stairs.

“Thanks ever so much, Mr M,” the doctor said, looking up at Sherlock, eloquently.

“Yes, we are extremely grateful,” the young man chimed in. “Not a bad sort, but he’s horribly cheerful,” he added, after Millward and Mrs Hudson had left.

“Heaven forfend anyone should dare crack a smile in your presence.”
The detective glared at him, but was soon overcome with worry.

“This sofa is not comfortable enough for you; you should be in bed.”

“I don’t want to be in bed,” said John. “As a matter of fact, I’d like to take a bath.”

“Yes, I’d say it’s a great idea, but first there’s something I have to do.”

When he returned with his impedimenta, his lover had already lost consciousness.

After having made sure that he was only asleep, Sherlock went to work. He didn’t like the surreptitious manner in which he was proceeding, but he couldn’t waste any more time.

He prepared the paraffin wax and applied a layer to his lover’s left hand, to obtain a cast. He waited until it had cooled down then he removed it and took it to his study. There, he applied the diphenylamine solution.

As he waited for the reaction to take place, there was little doubt in his mind.

The blue flecks that soon appeared on the palm and fingertip parts of the cast dispelled the remains of his uncertainty: John had definitely fired a gun.

Typically, it was the smell of bacon that roused him from a heavy, syrupy sleep.

As relieved as he was at being reunited with his lover, he couldn’t overcome the sense of being adrift in a murky sea.
He vividly recalled the conversation with Greta, but after that it was only emptiness coloured by the uneasy feeling of having collaborated with something untoward.

It was then that he remembered about his gun; he patted his pockets, but there was no sign of it. It could be in his overcoat, naturally, and of that he’d been divested.

He would ask Sherlock, he thought, but when his lover entered the sitting room, carrying a tray with a bowl of soup and buttered bread, he was only too glad for the distraction.

For some reason not entirely clear to him, he was afraid of knowing the answer. If only the fog inside his head would evaporate; if only he could seize the hem of the fleeing impressions that sped past his eyes; that wouldn’t do, he realised. It was like trying to recall a name one’s forgotten: better leave it alone and it would come back to him.

He had not taken into account that he was, after all, sharing his life with the only consulting detective in the world.

“What’s happened to your gun?” Sherlock asked, as soon as John had finished his meal.

“I was hoping it would be in my overcoat. By the way, did you wash my hands?”

“Of course I did, they were filthy.”

“Thanks, but you could have waited until I was awake; I did say I meant to wash.”

“You needed to rest and have something to eat first.”
“I thought our bodies were unimportant,” said the blond man, grinning, “As long as our minds were functional.”

“I was talking about a superior…oh, never mind!”

“No, no, you are alluding to a superior being, which sounds very unpatriotic to my ears, Mr Holmes.”

“You are trying to distract me.”

“As if I could ever hope to succeed,” the doctor protested. “You haven’t even kissed me yet. Not that I expected anything, in the state I’m in.”

Sherlock sat on the edge of the sofa and stared at his lover, nonplussed. Seconds elapsed, until John started to feel uncomfortable.

“I didn’t mean to chide you, my dear, I was only jesting,” he said, reaching out to caress his lover’s pallid face. The touch set the detective on fire; he unwound like a mechanism that had been let go after having been tightened beyond endurance. Once he’d started talking, he couldn’t stop.

“You were with me and then you weren’t. I couldn’t find you anywhere… it was like a magic trick, a macabre prestige game. We searched the Library inch by inch, and we couldn’t find a single trace of you. I was going back again today but then I saw Mike at the mortuary and he told me of the time he took you home… And suddenly it became obvious that you would have gone there… This time I would not have left the flat… I would have taken it apart with my bare hands, I swear…”

“Come here,” John murmured, tugging at Sherlock’s arm until the detective was lying down on top of him. They soon reversed their positions and, at last, after so many days, the young man was able to breathe freely.

“I’m so sorry, my darling; it all happened so quickly: you are right; one moment I was there and then next I wasn’t. I wish I could tell you more, but I still can’t remember much.”

He caressed his lover’s face and throat, softly and reverently, marvelling at how young and lost the detective seemed, and how large his iridescent eyes were in the angular topography of his features.

“Sorry,” he kept whispering, as he lavished gentle kisses on him. When John got to his mouth, he lingered, rubbing along its seam with the pad of his thumb until the lips parted and let him in.

“Give me your tongue,” he urged, but instead of complying, Sherlock sucked at the tip, staring back, wide-eyed, in defiance.

“You little minx,” John growled, and pulled his finger off its tight sheath; the wet noise it produced was almost obscene. His senses had awakened all at once: his face was flushed and every point of contact with the man underneath him tingled and throbbed. He knew he didn’t have the energy for a more intense encounter, but he could use his body weight to press down on his lover and tame him into submission.

It was clear that Sherlock wanted this, but also that he didn’t wish to cause his lover any pain.

“I want you,” John husked, trying to contain the fireball of emotion trapped inside his chest.

“Yes, yes, please,” the detective pleaded, his lips parting in invitation.
As much as he wanted to dive right in, John decided to take his time: he grazed each lip with his teeth then sucked on them; he pretended to shove his tongue inside only to tease Sherlock’s eager mouth with tiny cat-licks. When it was sure his lover had been captivated, he bracketed his face within his hands and pressed in, kissing him deeply and with all the violence of unrestrained passion. He felt Sherlock’s heart beating against his own, as their bodies entwined and the embrace unveiled even more layers of tenderness and lust. When they finally re-emerged from it, they couldn’t blink afraid that the other might disappear; scared that it was all a daydream.

“I love you so very much,” John murmured, trying to untangle the skein of his feelings and finding it impossible.

“It was my fault,” replied the detective, with raspy, broken tones. “I should have predicted something would happen, and perhaps I did. I can’t be sure that I didn’t do it on purpose, to instigate a reaction and force their hand.”

“I doubt it, my darling,” John said, stroking the black curls he’d missed so much. “But even if that were the case, I wouldn’t mind. We live together, we work together: there is a measure of risk involved in it, of which I was aware right from the start. Was there a reaction… aside from my abduction, I mean?”

He saw the shiver of hesitation in his lover’s eyes.

“Wait, why did you ask me about my gun?”

“You had it with you and now it’s gone.”

“Yes, but why ask me? I was asleep; you had plenty of time to search my coat. But you chose to ask me instead.”

“I was only testing your memory, to see whether you might remember.”

John recognised the signs of evasiveness: skittering gaze, tight lips, nervous fingers...fingers...hands.

“My left hand is a bit sore, like you scrubbed it harder than the right.”

“I did not!”

“Why are you lying to me? What did you do?”

He probed the skin underneath his nails: a minuscule particle of something waxy had stuck to a crack in the nail of his index finger. Wax, he pondered and then understood.

“You took a paraffin cast of my left hand to check whether I had fired my gun,” he said, raising his voice a little. Beneath him, Sherlock’s body had stiffened and a dusky flush was spreading to his throat and face. John slid down to the side and freed him, so that he could sit up if he wanted to, but the detective stayed still, even as the colour drained again from his features.

“I had to know,” he replied, in a calm voice at odds with his demeanour. “Lestrade has found a Webley revolver at Northampton Square and must have already dusted for prints.”

John sprang up so fast he nearly pushed his lover off the sofa.

“What was my gun doing there?”
“I didn’t say it was your gun, but a revolver of the same make as yours.”

“Darling, this is not the time to play clever detective with me. What was it doing there?” he asked, underscoring every word.

“It wasn’t the only thing that was found there.”

“Sherlock!” he shouted.

“Greta Hayward is dead,” the detective said, quiet and deadly cold, “She was found by Mr Potters, who was inspecting the property after another night of bombing. She was shot in the head and the bullet was fired from a Webley revolver.”

“And I suppose that the test was positive.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, why did you have to take it from me while I wasn’t even conscious?”

“It had to be done before the traces disappeared and I didn’t want to wake you. Besides, it’s not a gentle procedure; I sort of expected you to wake up at some point.”

“Did you really? Well, pardon me for having been exhausted after almost dying inside a hole in the ground!”

“You wouldn’t have died. The trap door didn’t seal properly, so you had a steady supply of oxygen. Well, there was starvation of course, but dehydration would have…”

Sherlock stopped talking and blanched; he brought a shaky hand to his mouth and his eyes filled with horrified tears.

“I don’t know why… I said that,” he stuttered.

John exhaled a gusty sigh and grasped his lover’s hand in his, weaving their fingers together.

“I know why: it’s because logic is your only safety net when you’re overwhelmed. I apologise, my love, I shouldn’t have screamed at you. You were only doing what you thought best, and I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for your brilliant mind.”

He kissed the long, elegant fingers one by one.

“The truth is that I probably killed Greta Hayward and I don’t remember having done it nor do I know what the reason was. I suppose self-defence has been ruled out or you wouldn’t be so upset.”

“I’m not upset,” started the detective, only to shake his head and give up. “It’s nearly impossible, since she was shot in the temple from a close distance. It would only be consistent with the hypothesis of a tussle, but there was no indication that she’d been fighting off her aggressor.”

“An execution, that’s what it appears to have been. How could I have done that? And yet Cummins must have felt the same and taken the easy way out, which was to admit to his guilt even as he tried to defend himself, saying that he had not done it. It places you in an impossible situation.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you, of course,” John said, “Viscount Tremayne has engaged us both, but I can no longer be part of this investigation, can I? Not if I am part of the problem.”
“Don’t be silly. I can’t do it without you and I won’t!”

“I don’t think you have a choice, unless you are prepared to lie to Scotland Yard. No, what am I saying, obviously you would. But I won’t allow you to be placed in that position.”

“We don’t even know if there’s a position. The revolver may not be yours.”

“Telephone Lestrade and find out.”

Sherlock’s mouth was a stubborn white line, but his courageous resistance was to no avail.

They both heard the front door open and the voices of Mrs Hudson and of the guest she was letting in.

“He wouldn’t have come otherwise,” murmured John and - unfortunately - he was right.
Chapter Summary

Sherlock does his thing and John is not quite recovered yet....

Chapter Notes

Note: The Black Tower is a novel by P. D. James and the American painter is Edward Hopper, whom I love and admire. His most famous lighthouse painting is dated 1927.

“Thus fortified I might take my rest in peace. But dreams come through stone walls, light up dark rooms, or darken light ones, and their persons make their exits and their entrances as they please, and laugh at locksmiths.”

Camilla – J. Sheridan Le Fanu

Lestrade’s enthusiasm upon seeing John was only slightly dented by the information he’d been intending to convey to Sherlock.

“You look well,” he said, squeezing the doctor’s hand, “For someone who hasn’t had wash or a change of clothes for days.”

“Thanks, I suppose,” John replied, with a mischievous smile, “We’ve only just come from Camden.”

“And what the hell where you doing there?”

“I wish I could tell you, but I can’t remember much about the last few days.”

After Mrs Hudson had brought them a fresh supply of tea, Sherlock and the Inspector pushed their armchairs closer to the sofa on which John was still lying.

The doctor related his story, from his disappearance to his encounter with Greta Hayward. At the mention of the girl’s name, Lestrade’s expression darkened and his preoccupation became more evident.

“Sherlock told me that she’d dead and that she was shot with a Webley revolver.”

The grey-haired man nodded.
“Plod found it on the scene and we’ve examined it: it’s definitely the murder weapon. The unfortunate thing is that the gun is registered to one Hamish Watson, deceased father of John Watson. You didn’t tell me that he was armed,” he added, glancing at the detective.

“We are frequently in peril; it’s only fair that we should be equipped for all eventualities.”

“I thought that Watson was a surgeon and was only helping you solve this particular case.”

“I have bad days,” explained John. “Some of them quite horrific, as you may imagine, volunteering as an ARP warden. I’ve learned from experience that it’s better to err on the side of caution.”

“And you still had your gun when you were in the presence of Miss Hayward?”

“I cannot be sure. My hands and feet were bound and I was trying to make sense of the girl in front of me.”

“You knew who she was?”

“I didn’t know, but I guessed. Sherlock showed me the documents of the Cummins case. I saw the pictures of the victim known as Greta Hayward and the resemblance was striking.”

He didn’t speak of Miss McGrath, since he didn't know what the detective had chosen to share with Lestrade.

“Did she threaten you or Holmes?”

“No, she hinted to the fact that her accomplices did not usually operate in that manner; that they would not physically hurt him.”

“What is the last thing you remember?”

John tried to cast his mind back to that room, but he couldn’t piece together a single detail of its appearance; the memory was frayed at the edges and oddly drained of colour, aside from those pertaining to the dead girl. Her red mouth, candycfloss hair and the burgundy of her dress, the yellow of the cigarette… the cigarette.

“What?” the detective asked, sensing that his partner was having a eureka moment.

“She lighted a cigarette, a yellowish one, exotic-looking, maybe Turkish? I’m not sure. But after she put it between my lips and I inhaled; it was only then that I passed out.”

“Yes,” his lover concurred, “That would explain the light abrasions in her mouth and lips. Your mouth is quite sore too; I felt it.” His voice petered out and his cheeks flushed, but the two men pretended not to notice.

“You shall have to explain your drug theory to me in more detail, Sherlock,” said Lestrade, “You can no longer afford to leave me out in the cold.”

The detective didn’t have to think on it; he knew there was no other way if he wanted to keep his partner by his side.

After he’d finished his narrative, the Inspector stared at John with concerned eyes.

“You must have been dosed with it, but I guess the question is: could you have killed her if you’d been told to?”
The doctor scratched the back of his head, once again forgetting his chipped nails. He scowled and curled his fingers into a fist.

“I don’t know,” he replied, “I wish I could tell you one way or the other, but the truth is that I can’t be certain. That must be exactly what poor Cummins felt like. He did not commit murder as far as he knew, but he could have, because he couldn’t remember!”

“He tried to fabricate some incredible stories,” said Lestrade.

“That was the drug,” the detective intervened, “It was the drug which altered his personality and it was the deuced substance that tampered with his memory.”

“Why would they bother with a minnow such as an RAF pilot and why implicate him in a multiple murders case, I wonder,” the inspector commented. His head was reeling a little from all these revelations.

“The drugs needed to be experimented on and an alarm bell had to be rung,” Sherlock said, cryptically.

“You sound like the riddles of the sphinx,” argued his lover, with a wry grin. “Neither of us speaks hieroglyphics.”

The detective pursed his lips and shrugged.

“What would you do if you’d just produced a drug that could alter the course of the war? You would have to test it and show your buyers what sort of substance they are purchasing. Think of Cummins as a guinea pig: the sheer publicity of his case and the manner in which his life was ended must have reassured the client, so to speak. The laboratory must have been working over time after that, which explains the noises that poor Williamson was constantly hearing. Comings and goings, he said, but he believed it was the Hotel next door, the Blandford.”

“And it wasn’t?”

“The Hotel was only a decoy.”

“Miss Hayward described it as a crummy place, so she must have been there, even though she denied it,” said John.

“I’m sure that, despite what Lestrade thinks, there must have been a secret passage connecting the two buildings. What else is around there?”

“Not much still standing,” replied the Inspector, tiredly, “The block of flats next to the Library was hit last night. There’s the Crown Hotel, which was evacuated at the end of November, a couple of restaurants and a tobacconist. Aside from that, it’s mostly office premises: solicitors, insurers, funeral directors; the usual.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” asked the detective, sporting his lopsided grin.

“No, I don’t think so, unless… oh my god! There’s the RAF Receiving Centre’s detached office.”

“What?” the doctor exclaimed. “Isn’t it where Cummins had been trained?”

“Yes, my dear, and I bet that’s how they came across him at first. His friendship with Viscount Tremayne is what made up their minds for them.”
“They must have taken me there; there could be an underground passage connecting the two buildings.”

“I thought of that, but it would be too dangerous. The intelligence services are extremely vigilant.”

“Not vigilant enough to detect a drug laboratory in the basement of the Evangelical Library,” said Lestrade.

“But don’t you see? It wasn’t at all what they were looking for at first. They were thinking of German spies infiltrating their ranks, and so far as they could see nothing of the sort was happening. Yes, the Blandford was suspicious, but as long as they kept an eye on the clientele, they thought that they had all under control.”

“Why not attract attention in another part of town, rather than so close to the actual laboratory?”

“Our criminal enjoys taking a risk or two,” Sherlock stated, sounding too admiring for his partner’s taste. “Besides, there might be a more practical reason. After all, even scientists need to rest and they could hardly do that at the Library.”

“We should check the records of the Blandford hotel…oh…”

“Yes, oh,” echoed the detective, “Unless we can travel back in time, there’s no way to do that. But it wouldn’t matter.”

He stopped talking and walked towards the bookshelf. He pulled out a volume and inserted his hand into the cavity. When he removed it, it was clutching a blue packet.

“Navy Cut,” he said, and offered it to the Inspector.

John sniggered, shaking his head.

“You think you’re really clever don’t you, boy?” he quipped. “I know you’ve been smoking like a chimney in my absence, so you stocked up on Lestrade’s cigarettes, because you figured that if you are two against one I won’t remonstrate?”

“Oh, alright then… if that’s the case, light me up, please.”

“Avec plaisir,” the detective whispered.

He plucked two cigarettes from the packet before handing it back to Lestrade; he put them both in his mouth and with a flourish he produced a box of matches from the pocket of his dressing gown.

“When you two have finished flirting, I would like to know why it doesn’t matter about the records being lost,” said Lestrade, lighting his own cigarette and biting down on it with some relish.

John knew he shouldn’t be enjoying this so much, and certainly he shouldn’t be smoking, but he’d just cheated death and perhaps become an involuntary murderer, so it was hardly the time to quibble about a stick of nicotine. Sherlock winked at him, the arrogant little blighter, and he couldn’t even kiss the grin off his face; well, not yet.

He was in his element, reciting his deductions and showing off a bit, and John would never take that away from him.

“I thought it would be obvious: the day the Blandford was set on fire was the day Mr Williamson
of the Evangelical Library was going to move to Chipping Something in Surrey.”

“I don’t think that was the name of the place…” interjected the doctor.

“Trivialities,” replied the detective, with a dismissive wave of his cigarette-holding fingers. Statuesque and ivory skinned, he reminded his besotted lover of a diva of the silent age: John would have said Greta Garbo, if that name hadn’t given him the creeps.

“Those scientists or chemists or whatever their titles were, are dead.”

“But in that case, someone must be looking for them,” said Lestrade, who was already half-way to the telephone, ready to give instructions to his men.

“I don’t think so, dear chap. The brain behind this operation has made sure that the people involved are unattached or as close to that as possible. And if they weren’t, they would be now. What’s the best place to hide a book? A library. And what’s the best time to make people disappear? During a blitz. You won’t find those people; they are history. ”

“Without leaving a trace? But that’s impossible!” protested Lestrade.

“Maybe someone knows about them,” said John, referring to the Baker Street Irregulars, who had possibly been keeping a watchful eye on the entire operation.

“Intelligence services?” the Inspector suggested, and saw both men exchange an eloquent glance.

“How can I possibly get on with my job when vital information is kept hidden from the Met Police? We are no longer to be trusted; in fact, we are almost a hindrance,” he complained, throwing his cigarette butt into the fireplace.

“Are you going to arrest me?” asked John, eyes fixed on his lover to silence him. “Because if you are, I'll understand. After all, I don’t have an alibi for the time of death and it was my gun that killed her. And Sherlock just tested my hand and found traces of gunshot residue.”

In reply, the detective lit another cigarette and took a long, vicious drag on it.

Lestrade wished he could be anywhere but there.

“Mycroft already threatened me,” he said, pushing the packet of Navy Cut away from the young man’s reach. “I even thought he would stab me with his umbrella at one point. I didn’t know he had it in him to be so physically threatening.”

“It’s all pretence,” Sherlock muttered, his voice simmering with contempt. “Squirt a drop of ink on his shirt-cuff and watch him squeal like a stuck pig.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” John said, grinning, “When I met him the first time, he was a tad scary. But if you aren’t going to take me in, then what? There must be an inquest and when all the facts are presented to the jury, they will surely find me guilty of manslaughter at the very least.”

“There won’t be an inquest, not for a while, at least.”

“What? In Sansom’s case it was understandable, but Greta Hayward has been murdered. First of all, the papers will rip you to shreds if they find that you’re not protecting the populace and for once, I am inclined to agree with them.”

The Inspector fell silent and it was Sherlock’s turn to wish that he and his lover were on a jolly
holiday in Chipping Something rather than at 221b Baker Street.

“What has my brother’s evil mind devised this time?”

“I wouldn’t say evil; cunning, perhaps.”

“I’ll stick to evil, thanks. So what devilry has he fabricated?”

“Naturally, he wasn’t sure whether Watson had been found already, but he suspected he might have been; in that eventuality, he suggested I should bury the inquest for a while, give us more time to find the real culprit. As for the press, the government will intervene: careless talk costs lives and all that. Nothing out of the ordinary, these days. They will assume Miss Hayward was spying for the enemy and invent all manner of preposterous stories about her.”

“She will end up as a German middle-aged man in disguise by the time they are done with her, poor girl.”

Sherlock was clearly pleased with this solution, but an entire cargo of Cuban cigars would not induce him to praise his sibling.

“After all, John was abducted,” he objected, “And he would have been within his right to fight his kidnappers.”

“The publicity wouldn’t do you any good.”

“That it wouldn’t” the doctor concurred, stroking his temples. He felt a headache coming, which wasn’t at all surprising.

The detective intuited his discomfort and accompanied the Inspector to the door, shoving the Navy Cuts into the pocket of his coat.

“Does it hurt a lot? Perhaps it’s time for a painkiller,” he said to his friend.

“I think a bath will do the trick. All this talking about spies and murders has probably been too much too soon. It still feels like a nightmare, and we haven’t yet had a visit from your brother.”

“Yes, that is a bit odd, isn’t it? But I guess that from now on he will send his minion to do his work for him.”

“Come on, don’t be unfair,” John remonstrated, “They are only trying to help. Perhaps your brother has bigger fish to fry.”

“He did mention something about the code-breakers. He didn’t give me the details, but he sounded rattled, which means the problem is indeed very serious.”

Later, Sherlock undressed him, helped him inside the bathtub and scrubbed him clean: it would have been intensely arousing if John hadn’t been feeling like his head was filled with lead and his sinews and bones had undergone a sophisticated medieval torture. Aside from a few random bruises, there was no testimony of his ordeal yet his mind ached with the loss of those precious hours, like it would have done for a severed limb.

Once in bed, he slid into a feverish sleep, not dissimilar to the times when, as a child, after a day at the seaside in which he’d stayed too long in the sun and salty water, he’d stretch out on the mattress
feeling it undulate underneath him, like a rocking boat. It had not been unpleasant at the time, although it had disturbed his repose.

Now, he held on to the raft of slumber, craving oblivion but fearing the nightmares that might accompany it. He hadn’t had any when he’d slept on the sofa, but then he hadn’t known about Greta Hayward’s death or about his own involvement in the murder.

He thought of Gordon Cummins and the fear he must have felt at being trapped inside a mechanism he couldn’t even begin to comprehend.

Sherlock was lying by his side, and he must be hurting too: his shoulder wasn’t completely healed and he’d not looked after it while John was away. He wished he could tend to him, but he didn’t have the strength. His lover’s spidery fingers were caressing him, softly, and he allowed himself to plunge into that velvety burrow, trusting that it would shelter and soothe him.

He was walking along a craggy path flanked by overgrown vegetation; a solitary walk among yellow grass and lavender bushes: why was he there? In the distance, he saw a black tower: it was built like a folly, but it reminded him of a lighthouse in a painting, only not as bright as those American ones that were like postcards.

When he looked at it again, it was on fire: a plume of smoke as dark as the tower itself surged from it and tinted the blue sky, like a biblical omen. Suddenly, it was no longer a tower but the dome of a cathedral: it was St Paul’s and he knew with absolute certainty, knew it in the marrow of his bones that Sherlock was up there, trying to quench the fire. He thought that he could see him, his mad hair and swirling cape silhouetted against the raging sky. He shouted but no sound came from his throat; and then he was running like the wind; he was inside the church and climbing the endless spiral staircase; when he reached the top, the vault of the dome was invaded by a light as bright as the desert sun; it was a suspended moment, like holding breath underwater; its perfection was unbearable; it couldn’t last and it didn’t. The explosion ripped through the delicate wooden frame of the dome, cracking it open like a nut. Dozens of people were blown to pieces, but some crashed down to earth, grim angels flying to their gruesome death. Among them, his curls spreading out like a halo, was his lover, his heart, his best friend in the whole world.

“John, wake up, please,” the voice said, and it sounded, impossibly, like Sherlock’s. “You were screaming my name; you wouldn’t stop.”

He stared into his lover’s face then inspected it with his fingers, to make sure it was unscathed.

“I saw you fall… from St. Paul’s… I tried to save you, but it was too late… too late,” he cried.

“It was only a nightmare,” the detective murmured, and he let his lover hold him tight enough to hurt, “I’m here with you and all is well.”

“They’ll never have you,” John said, his voice still shaking but laced with determination, “I will kill them first.”
First of all, to all my US readers: I hope you had/are having/ will have a great 4th of July. Here it was a normal day, if you can consider the present madness as 'normal'.

In this chapter: the plot thickens but Sherlock has a brilliant idea. Of which more to follow in the next chapter...

Note: Nigel de Grey had been working in intelligence since 1915; he was at Bletchley and his secretary was a Miss Reed. His father was the rector of the village of Copdock and the capture of the Naval Enigma happened more or less as I described it. The rest is fiction :)

“Love feels no burden, thinks nothing of its trouble, attempts what is above its strength, pleads no excuse for impossibility, for it thinks all things are lawful for itself and all things are possible”

Thomas à Kempis

John woke up with a melody in his ears and a weight on his stomach: neither of them was unpleasant, since the former assuaged his anxiety and the latter provided warmth.

He half-opened his eyes and was confronted by a yellow feline stare.

Ever since the detective had frightened him with his incoherent mumblings, Percy had found asylum at Mrs Hudson’s and both the landlady and Millward had spoiled him rotten. He was no longer the starved kitten they had rescued, but a well-fed tabby with a rotund rump and lustrous fur.

“What’s he playing? Never heard this one before,” he asked, referring to the piece that Sherlock was playing on his violin.

The cat blinked and kneaded the bed-cover with his front paws before producing a yawn worthy of a crocodile.

“Guess someone’s not very enthusiastic,” he chuckled.

When he turned to check the time on the mantle clock, he saw that next to it was a small silver bell, similar to those used in church. He reached out for it, thus dislodging Percy, who decided it
was high time to rejoin his long-lost friend Maggers.

It was a lovely little object, with a Celtic inscription engraved along its rim. He was so engrossed in the contemplation of it that he didn’t realise the music had stopped.

“It was gifted to me by a prelate,” the detective said, “I helped him recover an altarpiece which had been stolen by the kleptomaniac sister of his verger.”

John appraised the silk-clad figure of his lover - with his tousled hair and his precious violin - and felt unsuitably cheerful.

“Someone should write down your cases,” he said, sitting back against the pillows, “What was the altarpiece depicting?”

“Christ at Gethsemane by a Danish painter named Carl Heinrich Bloch.”

“You could have called it The Redoubtable Sister,” John said, smiling broadly at his own cleverness. The detective rolled his eyes and smirked.

“I see that you’re feeling better,” he commented and, as he put the instrument in its case, he added, “No more bad dreams, I trust.”

“None to report, fortunately,” the doctor replied and then to change the subject, “Why is the bell here? I don’t recall having seen it before.”

“Isn’t it obvious? In case you should need assistance. Sometimes I can get lost in my own mind, especially when I am playing.”

“What was it?”

“Nothing, I was just improvising; it helps my memory processes.” Before John could compliment him, the detective sat down next to him and checked his temperature.

“May I remind you of my profession, my dear? I am a doctor and I’m not running a fever. I’m battered and bruised, but I should be able to stand on my own two legs, thank you very much.”

Sherlock lingered, unsure on how to navigate the transition from concerned partner to affectionate lover: in short he was angling for a kiss, but had unlearned its alphabet.

Thankfully, John’s partial memory loss hadn’t affected his understanding of his partner’s body language.

“Come here,” he murmured, “I want to show you how much I loved your music.”

He pulled the young man closer by tugging at the lapels of his dressing gown; he kept pulling until they were breathing each other’s air.

“You smell of bergamot,” he noted, dipping his tongue inside the warmth of his friend’s mouth, “And you taste of it, too.”

“Earl Grey,” the detective tried to reply, but his words dissolved into a guttural moan.

John was kissing him with finesse and determination, as if he wanted to recoup a previous possession whose ownership had been contested. To bolster his claim, his slid one hand underneath the young man’s robe while the other sank into his curls.
While John’s tongue massaged and teased, his fingers scratched and tweaked and rubbed: the surfeit of sensations was delicious; it made Sherlock’s body thrum and his blood sing.

“Let me take care of you,” he husked, but the doctor shook his head. “Together,” he murmured, showering his boy’s face and throat with kisses.

Since neither of them was wearing any undergarment, it was easy and natural to come together that way, their erections - musky with sweat and moisture - nearly leaping into the circle formed by their joined hands; fingers entwined, thumbs stroking up and down their shafts. Their pleasure came swiftly, since the wait had been long and hurtful; their climax spurted out of them in hot, pulsing jets; it was sublime and real, and chased away their terrors and their nightmares.

“Nigel de Grey.”

They were tucking into a lavish breakfast of eggs, ham and sausages when Sherlock pronounced that name out loud, as if it was supposed to mean something to his companion. It didn’t.

“You are doing the sphinx thing again,” John said, humming with pleasure as he smeared a dollop of mustard on to a slice of ham.

“It was hidden away on The Times’ obituary page; small print, like the corrections and retractions. A quote from The Imitation of Christ, by Thomas à Kempis: In omnibus requiem quaesivi, et nusquam inveni nisi in angulo cum libro,” he recited.

His friend ignored him, cheerfully devouring his tasty banquet; he didn’t speak Latin and was sure that a translation would be forthcoming. He was wrong.

“You must be wondering why I know about this book, since I’m not exactly religious.”

“The Case of Redoubtable Sister?” asked the doctor.

“It wasn’t the name of… it didn’t have a name… oh, never mind! Yes, it was something the verger told me. He was a pious fellow, who favoured books over people. His sister had had to take care of him since they were children and was exasperated by his unwordliness and his tendency to pepper his conversation with obscure quotes.”

“You don’t say,” John quipped. He poured the Earl Grey into two Worcester mugs and pushed one towards his friend.

“Well, at the time I happened to discuss the case with Mycroft. He collects theological books and…”

“What, really? I wouldn’t have thought he would be interested in religion. He’s not a Catholic, is he? Seems that many of your set are. Can’t understand why, considering what we are.”

Sherlock would have indulged in a sulk at the mention of his set, but he had more important things to do.

“No, he’s not croyant, but he likes to feel superior even when he’s reading a book. Anyway, the point is that he told me about an acquaintance of his, a certain Nigel de Grey whose father was the rector of a small village named Copdock. Apparently, this chap worked for Room 40.”

“And what is that to do with that paragraph in The Times?”
“De Grey knew the book almost by heart. He could recite entire pages from it and the one I just mentioned was his favourite quote: *everywhere I have sought peace and not found it, except in a corner with a book.*”

At last, John’s curiosity was piqued.

“And you think someone is looking for him and put a cryptic advert in the newspaper?”

“No, my dear. I suspect it to be some kind of message from him. I fear you should be prepared for a visit from my tiresome brother and make allowances for his insufferably smug demeanour.”

“Oh Christ, not another of your verbal fights,” the doctor sighed, but in truth he’d started to enjoy Sherlock’s over-acted disdain; he could be as hammy as Henry Irving and as deliciously compelling. One thing that would probably never cease to astound John was how invariably accurate his lover was.

They had only just adjourned to the sitting room with their tea impedimenta, when they heard two masculine voices: evidently Mrs Hudson had found a new occupation for her companion, which consisted in dealing with the people she disliked.

“This Millward fellow, is he a recent acquisition?” Mycroft asked as soon as he entered the room.

“I expected better of you, brother mine,” replied his sibling, with a silky smile.

The elder Holmes seemed to gaze at something in the distance then he took his seat on what was usually John’s armchair. From there, he observed the domestic tableau in front of him with the interest of a theatre critic on opening night.

“No, of course not,” he replied, “He’s the gentleman who gave you a lift from Maida Vale and he must have relished the adventure and decided to stay on for the rest of the journey. You are quite the attraction, my dear.” And to the other man, he said: “Glad to see that you’re recovering from your trials, Doctor Watson.”

“I’m indebted to you for my freedom,” John said, extending his hand. The older man stared at it with arched eyebrows and shook it with reasonable warmth. In the meantime, his brother was making noises akin to a boiling kettle.

“Do not encourage him,” he piped up, “Or he will think himself a modern Lancelot.”

“I would never take that mantle from your shoulders, my dear.”

Therein, thought John, lies my future; he imagined the two siblings as cantankerous old men bickering over port and savoury biscuits and had to bite his lips not to laugh out loud.

“Shall I get you a cup of tea?” he said, swinging his legs off the sofa, but Sherlock’s solicitude for his lover's health trumped his lack of politesse.

"I'll do it," he said.

He poured the beverage and added a bit more milk than his brother usually preferred. Mycroft contemplated this manoeuvre without rolling his eyes, but it was a close call.

“I’ve seen you’ve read The Times,” he said, taking a cautious sip from the porcelain mug.

“What’s happened to Mr de Grey?” the detective asked, “Has he defected to the other side?”
“I knew you would remember about that whimsy of is. As for what happened to him, your guess is as good as mine, although we may both be accurate in our surmises. You know that I recently paid an unofficial visit to our code-breakers' abode and that things were not going well, to use a euphemism.”

“You hinted that the operation might be compromised.”

“I’m sure you’re familiar with the Enigma machines and the bombes that are being used to decrypt German’s coded messages. I won’t bore you with the details but there are several types of machine and the Naval one is the hardest to break. They use bigram tables, which are frequently changed. The only way to crack it would be to get hold of a machine together with its books of tables.”

“And you succeeded, I suppose.”

“Their U-33 was sunk by our Gleaner in the waters of the Firth of Clyde near Glasgow. Two of our men died trying to salvage the machine, but one of them returned with the precious cargo.”

John’s eyes were bright with enthusiasm.

“Which means that now you can decrypt their messages,” he exclaimed.

“Yes, that was the general idea,” agreed Mycroft. “Until we realised that, while the information appeared to be correct, there was always a detail, a fatal flaw that would invalidate the data. To give you just one example: we may have known the precise coordinates of a warship and the date of the attack, but the hour would be stated as am instead of pm; trivial mistakes that were ascribed to the inefficiency of the enemy. We are used to their errors and initially we thought that this was yet more proof.”

“But now you’re certain that it wasn’t the case.”

“Nigel de Grey was in charge of Hut 6, which was employed to decipher the Naval Enigma. As you know, he’s an old, trusted officer; he has been at it since before the previous war. He’s also a good friend of mine, for what it's worth.”

“And now he’s disappeared,” said Sherlock.

“He went missing more or less when John did. Unlike the younger officers, who are billeted around the countryside, he had his lodgings inside the main buildings. His secretary, Miss Reed reported that de Grey told her he was going for a walk. He was seen by two people who confirm that he was wearing his overcoat, hat, scarf and gloves, and that he wasn’t carrying any luggage, not even a briefcase. Naturally, he could have prepared his escape and hidden his bags somewhere in the woods. It’s easy enough to do and there are plenty of suitable places.”

“But if before you may only have suspected his guilt,” said the doctor, “his disappearance has now made it evident.”

“Unless he’s innocent,” countered the detective.

“Of course he’s innocent! We are talking about Nigel de Grey, who’s been in service since 1915,” declared Mycroft, with an unusual display of vivacity.

“But even if that were the case,” John intervened, “Surely nobody would trust the information which has been decrypted by his department.”
“And that’s our present conundrum, my dear Doctor Watson: should we abort a mission which could potentially save thousands of lives or do we proceed and possibly walk into a deadly trap? Even if we prepare for the latter possibility, we don’t know when and how the enemy might strike.”

“I still don’t understand why he had to leave at this precise moment and be as innocent as you both claim. He could have stayed at his post and tried to find out who the traitor was.”

“I think that’s precisely what he’s doing,” said Mycroft. “He’s discovered the identity of the criminal behind this enterprise; surely one of this scoundrel’s minions has infiltrated the code-breakers, but de Grey knows that the tentacles are not as important as the head of the hydra.”

“The message was for you,” noted Sherlock.

“Perhaps, yes. He knows how dangerous it is to convey even the most innocent message, but his mnemonic knowledge of that text is something only his oldest friends are aware of; most people would think it was just the Latin motto of the day or some such idiocy.”

“Sherlock did know.” said John.

“I’m not most people,” replied his partner, smiling wickedly.

For a moment, their eyes locked and they would have stayed that way for a while, hadn’t it been for their guest’s impatient sigh.

“Gregory warned me about you two and he was right,” Mycroft said, tapping the handle of his mug with a manicured finger.

His brother’s face expressed sincere surprise.

“Kindly stop this silly pantomime; you know perfectly well that it is the Inspector’s first name.”

In order to break the deadlock, John brought the conversation back on its intended track.

“What should we do now?” he asked.

“You should stay out of it until your name has been cleared. Another indiscretion and it would be impossible even for MI5 to keep you out of the newspapers.”

“I’m not leaving Sherlock’s side,” the blond man said, “If they want to charge me, they should do that. If not, everything is unchanged. After all, that must have been the reason of my abduction.”

“Perhaps it was time to get rid of Miss Hayward, so they decided to kill two birds with one stone,” said the detective.

Mycroft was frowning, but knew that only a prison cell or a hospital bed would have kept these two men apart. Besides, if they didn’t unveil the identity of their enemy, the Germans might still conquer the seas and invade Britain. If that came to pass, John Watson’s predicament would be irrelevant.

“Here,” he said, pulling out of his pocket an object wrapped in a silk foulard and letting it drop in the doctor’s lap.

“It’s a Luger P08,” he said.

“I can see that, but I wouldn’t have thought you’d give me a gun after what happened.”
“If you insist on following my little brother, you’ll need a weapon. This belonged to a Nazi officer, so they won’t be able to trace it back to you.”

“They might, if you told Gregory,” said the detective, in a mocking tone.

“This is not something I would share with him.”

“There are no secrets between John and me.”

“Please,” the doctor intervened, “this is not a competition. Besides, it’s not completely true, since I still don’t know what I did before you found me underneath the floorboards of my old flat.”

Mycroft made his preparations to leave: he put on his coat, hat and gloves, clutched the handle of his umbrella and looked intently at his brother.

“The end is approaching, little brother. A week from now, we shall know what our fate is. Do your best to stay in one piece, I beseech you.”

“This time we’ll be more careful,” John replied, before his lover could utter an offensive repartee.

“I’m sure you will,” the older man replied, and left.

After his brother’s departure, the detective made sure John was comfortably settled on the sofa; he left him happily tackling a stack of newspapers, a notebook and a pen ready by his side. Sherlock needed to reflect and for that trance-like meditation, he required silence and loneliness. There was something that escaped him: it was nothing grand or even elusive, but rather a minuscule speck of a coincidence that he had overlooked because it must have been brushed away in favour of more momentous occurrences.

Everything that Sherlock knew was neatly stored away inside his mind and during his investigations he did not keep a written diary, but a kind of virtual library. He sat down in his study and started to peruse the books of the case.

The young man who returned to the sitting room was so red-cheeked and bright-eyed that his lover was momentarily alarmed.

“Are in you in pain, my dear? You look feverish.”

“The Windmill,” the detective announced, obviously very pleased with himself.

“You are doing that again. I’m not a mind-reader, so kindly explain what you mean.”

“Miss McGrath works at the Windmill Theatre,” replied Sherlock, “We need to talk to her as soon as possible.”
“But my deepest and most secret love belongs to the fair-haired and the blue-eyed, the bright children of life, the happy, the charming and the ordinary.”

Tonio Kröger - Thomas Mann

If John had believed in reincarnation, he would have sworn that Ms Vivian Van Damm must have been a bird in her previous life.

Of indeterminate age and class, the manageress of the Windmill Theatre had a round shapely head with a helmet of auburn hair, and a long scrawny neck. The skin of her flat-boned face seemed to be stretched as tight as a drum, while her beaky nose twitched every time the shrewd black eyes lit on something she deemed interesting. Her eyebrows had been plucked into a thin arched line and her lashes were thick with mascara, which was her only concession to make up; she may have worn face cream, but it was impossible to tell unless one went close enough to smell her, and John doubted anyone would dare.

She was dressed in a tight black sweater and jodhpurs; a pair of flat-heeled pumps completed her monastic attire.

When she spoke, her foreign accent was as intermittent as the quiver of her nostrils.

“What do you want with Maggie?” she asked, briskly. It wasn’t meant rudely, but only to convey the fact that she was running a business and had no time to waste.

Sherlock glared at her and before he could recite the rosary of her crimes and misdemeanours, his
“She came to see us recently,” he replied, “We are here on behalf of Scotland Yard.”

The detective extracted Lestrade’s card from his coat pocket and she grabbed it with her rapacious fingers.

“Why hasn’t this Inspector visited us?”

“He’s a busy man, as I’m sure you’ll understand only too well. You can telephone his office if you need confirmation,” John said, smiling and hoping that Sherlock would keep his mouth shut.

She stared at the card for a long while, like she hoped it would disintegrate before her very eyes.

“The girls are rehearsing. Usually, I would ask you to come back, but I’m assuming it’s important.”

“It won’t take more than ten minutes,” said the detective, “Provided we are not interrupted.”

“I’ll make sure you won’t be,” she stated, and guided them upstairs, where they were left to wait in a sort of box room crammed with old costumes and props; its saving grace was the large sash window with its dizzying view over the roofs and chimney pots of the West End.

“You still haven’t told me what we’re here for,” the doctor said. “If it’s about Greta Hayward, I hope you’re not being secretive to spare my feelings.”

Sherlock clicked his tongue.

“That’s water under the bridge, my dear. Miss Hayward is dead and I’m sure our friend already knows that. We can also be sure that she’s kept her mouth shut.”

The door opened and Margaret McGrath came in; she was wearing a crimson satin robe edged with boa feathers and sequinned, high-heeled sandals, while her loose curls were kept in place by a number of diamanté hairpins. Even in that louche attire, she still looked wholesome and unpretentious.

“Of course I have kept my mouth shut,” she said, her green eyes made cat-like by the stage make up. “Young girls seem to be dropping like flies lately. It wasn’t my fault, was it?”

“No one knows what you told us,” the detective replied.

“But you are here now. Ms Van Damm never gossips, but she can put two and two together; she’s the cleverest person I have ever met.”

“She pretends to be foreign,” said Sherlock, coldly.

“Her grandfather was Dutch,” said the girl, “She thinks the English accent is not exotic enough for the vaudeville.”

“We need your help,” the detective continued, brushing aside the irrelevance that was Ms Van Damm and ersatz shrewdness. “And time is running out.”

“I’d prefer to stay alive, if you don’t mind.”

“There’s little danger of you dying, but your friend could get into a spot of trouble. From the little you told us about him, I suspect he won’t mind. In fact, I bet he’s gonna relish the challenge.”
“What friend?” she asked, and John’s eyes widened in surprise.

“When you came to see us, you mentioned that your friend Annie knew all your secrets, even the one about the bottles of milks you got from a young lad who works at Boulestin’s.”

“You remembered that? Wow, I’m impressed,” she exclaimed.

“I wouldn’t be any good as a detective otherwise,” Sherlock replied. “What is the boy’s name?”

“George, but everybody calls him Georgie. He’s only a boy, but he fancies himself an experienced man. He’s at the awkward age and he has a crush on me. Not that I encouraged him in any way. I’d never lead him on, but he won’t listen to a word I say.”

“Would this Georgie know about the restaurant’s customers or is he only toiling away in the kitchen?”

“If there’s anything to know, he’s is your man, so to speak.”

“He sounds like the sort of chap who’d invent stuff only to please his audience,” said John. “The kind who tells tall stories to impress the ladies.”

Miss McGrath laughed, curling her pretty nose. It was too close to flirty as far as the detective was concerned.

“No, he’s not really like that,” she replied, “He may embellish his stories a little, but only if he had a part in them. I don’t think he would lie outright.”

“What would be the best way to approach him?” Sherlock asked, “We don’t want to be seen at the restaurant and I imagine you wouldn’t want him to come here.”

“There is a corner shop named Spangler’s a few yards from the restaurant. They sell tobacco and strong tea; behind it there’s an alley where the lads usually go for a smoke. Georgie goes there for his elevenses.”

“It’s a bit late now,” remarked the doctor, glancing at his watch.

“Matter of speaking,” she replied, rubbing at the corner of her eye. “He’ll be there until noon. If you have a piece of paper and a pen, I’ll scribble him a message.”

Sherlock handed her one of his cards and a pencil. Margaret wrote slowly and neatly, the tip of her tongue protruding from between her painted lips.

“Here,” she said, contemplating her handiwork. “Georgie is easy to spot: he’s a carrot-top with the freckles that go with it. He will be wearing the Boulestin’s overalls. The restaurant is quite famous and he likes to show off a bit, if you know what I mean.”

John knew what she meant, but didn’t dare look at his friend.

“You shouldn’t be in any danger,” the detective said as they parted, “But be watchful all the same.”

She chuckled and patted his arm, like he’d just told her the most amusing joke.

“I hail from Brixton Orphanage, Mr Holmes,” she replied, “I have been doing that since the day I was born.”
“Don’t rub your eyes with your fingers,” said John, “Use a clean piece of cotton.”

Her giggle turned into full-throated laughter.

“Soon you two will demand to adopt me,” she said.

“You’re too old for that; and we already have a high-maintenance cat.”

“It’d be a bargain then. I’m as undemanding as can be.”

Sherlock had witnessed this banter with increasing impatience, but didn’t want to appear jealous, which of course he wasn’t. What a preposterous concept, he fumed.

“Take good care of yourself,” he heard his lover say; the girl wished them both good luck and went back to work. Before they could make a move, Ms Van Damm reappeared to escort them out.

“I wasn’t eavesdropping,” she said, “But I hope you won’t get us into trouble. The war hasn’t succeeded in closing us down and I’d rather not tempt fate any further, if I can help it.”

“There are more important things than dancing, I should think,” John replied, annoyed by the woman’s egotism.

Ms Van Damm cast him an icy stare, but said nothing. It was Sherlock who, unpredictably, came to her aid.

“This is your world and you’re entitled to defend it against all external interferences. We won’t come here again, unless we are needed. Good day, Ms Van Damm,” he said, and before the manageress could react, he stormed out.

“Yes, well, goodbye,” added the bewildered doctor, and ran after his friend.

“Is anything the matter?” he asked when he finally caught up with Sherlock.

“Panton Street is a heap of rubble and Leicester Square is almost completely disfigured,” the young man replied.

“That's not what I meant.”

“I know what you meant and I was trying to answer your question. Look around you, my dear: the London we used to know and love is only a memory. People have lost their lives, their jobs and their families; their homes have been blown to pieces. Don’t ever believe that our side of the fence is more important than the Windmill’s. I’d have imagined that you of all people would have understood.”

If he’d been completely honest, Sherlock should have admitted that some of his vexation had been engendered by seeing John engage with Margaret McGrath.

“You’re right, my darling. After recent events, I may have lost sight of the bigger picture. I had momentarily forgotten that there’s a world besides our cloak and dagger version of it. We can't expect people to abandon their daily grind or else there would be nothing left that’s worth defending,” the doctor replied, with earnest contrition.

The detective sighed and decided to come clean.
“You like that girl,” he said.

“She reminds me of myself a bit; when I was her age or even younger.”

“You are not much older.”

“I feel ancient sometimes. I bet this Georgie chap will make me feel positively decrepit. I still cannot believe my amazing luck,” he said, brushing Sherlock’s fingers with his.

“I’m the fortunate one,” the young man replied; he squeezed his lover’s hand and when he saw that they were alone, he brought it to his lips and kissed it.

“When things have calmed down a little and we’ve recovered from our injuries, I intend to keep my promise,” the blond man murmured.

“Which one?”

“I may not be as bright as you are, but even I won’t fall for this fake ingénue act.”

“Always worth a try.”

“Next time you do that, we better be at home. I’ll teach you some manners yet, you impudent boy.”

They smiled but avoided each other’s eyes, for their desire was always simmering beneath the surface, ready to pounce.

Boulestin’s may have attracted the cream of high society and seen the likes of Noel Coward and Marlene Dietrich, but Georgie Dillon preferred his pleasures to come in humbler packages; Spangler’s provided him with good cheap coffee, decent tobacco and a spot of peace and quiet, which was all a bloke like him could desire. Usually, he shared that patch behind the shop with a couple of chums from another restaurant - one not as grand as his, but acceptable enough - but on that day he had the back alley all to himself. The block of flats next door had been evacuated so he could sit on the steps by the railings without disturbing anyone.

When he saw the two men approaching, his mind conjured up a number of possible scenarios, all connected to the War Office and the invaluable contribution he was going to provide to the Allied Forces.

“Ms McGrath told us we would find you here,” said Sherlock, skipping the introductions, “Please read this,” he added, showing him the card with the girl’s message. In the meantime, John was inspecting the area, making sure no one was going to interrupt them. Luckily, the alley was a cul de sac and the only other way out was through the shop.

“You two working for Scotland Yard? I swear I never do any of that black market malarkey. I just give Maggie a few scraps that would be thrown to the rats. You can’t imagine the amount of wastage we have,” he said, with the air of a connoisseur of detritus.

“We don’t care about what goes on in your kitchen, but we would like to know what happens upstairs, if you catch my drift,” said Sherlock, taking the magic passe-partout out of his coat pocket; the boy could only afford roll-ups and a proper cigarette was hard to come by, unless one of the customers offered, which only happened once in a blue moon. When all was said and done, they were not as generous as one might think.
“May I have one?” he asked, but the tall gentleman gave him the entire packet of Black Cats.

Odd looking chap, he thought, but the other bloke was more up his street. Judging by how he positioned himself, Georgie suspected he was the muscle while the skinny fellow was the brains.

“The card says that you are Sherlock Holmes,” he said, trying to appear worldly. “I think I have heard your name before.”

The detective studied the boy’s frank countenance, his round cornflower eyes, the turned-up nose and the clean, freckled face and decided that it would be pointless to stay silent: the lad was curious and insistent, so he would find out one way or another.

“I was involved in the Ripper case.”

“That’s right!” exclaimed Georgie, slapping his thigh with his broad, calloused hand. “You were in the papers and all. There’s not another one, is there? Yes, come to think of it, they found another girl, didn’t they? Looked a lot like one of them victims of that Cummins fellow.”

“She did rather, didn’t she?” the detective said, “Now, I suppose you will have to return to work and I don’t want you to be late and get in trouble or arouse suspicion. We are trying to track down an extremely dangerous and rather shifty criminal and we need all the help we can get.”

“All hands on deck.”

“Precisely. The information that I require could be easily obtained by the Met Police or by the Secret Services, but at this point any external meddling could bring down the entire house of cards.”

John smiled at his partner’s flowery language, which was being adapted to suit their young and impressionable interlocutor.

“My next question is: does Boulestin's keep a list of their habitual customers and if they do, could you gain access to it without being noticed?”

Georgie had been so mesmerised by Sherlock’s tale that he’d nearly forgotten his cigarette; he shook off the ash and took a defiant puff on it.

“You are in luck,” he replied, “They didn’t have one before the war, but they do now. Not for the large parties or for the odd booking, but for the regulars and the top brass.”

“Cummins was one of them,” John intervened.

Georgie’s eyes widened.

“By Jove, yes, you’re right! I was damn unlucky that time,” he declared mournfully, “It was my day off and no one paid the slightest attention to the Ripper. They were all excited about the nobs, as if they’d never seen one before. Cor blimey, we even had Robert Donat once!”

Sherlock cast a perplexed glance in his lover’s direction; John mouthed 'actor' and was rewarded with a highly amusing grimace.

“You must have kept a note of that dinner party, I imagine.”

“Course we did; not that the police ever asked for it. Not a mistake I’d make, if I was an officer.”

“I will need a copy of that list and I would like you to check if any of those present had been to the
restaurant before or since and with whom. Unfortunately, we don’t have much time, but I trust it shouldn’t be an arduous task. Look at the records from up to six months before that dinner. Viscount Tremayne was the host in that occasion; no matter what you think of the aristocracy, he should not be overlooked. In fact, no one should, not even that actor fellow.”

Georgie chuckled, but one glance from the detective wiped the smile off his face.

“Sorry, sir,” he replied, a little abashed but undeterred. “Tonight I’ll be closing shop and there’s nowt to prevent me from taking a peep, if I want to. Would they be spies, sir? If one’s allowed to ask.”

“One would be better off by keeping one’s mouth shut,” said John, with a smile.

“Course, sir.”

“You’ll be paid for the information, obviously,” said Sherlock. “Would ten shilling be adequate?”

A deep flush spread on the boy’s face, nearly obliterating his freckles.

“More than enough, sir.”

“There’s our number on the card,” the detective said, “Call us when you have the information. Tell no one, not even your lady friend at the Windmill.”

“Careless talk costs lives,” he quoted, winking at John, who grinned and shook his head.

“Remember to watch your back,” he said. “And look at where you are going. Yes, that's very important.”

Georgie was about to reply that he wasn’t a kid and he knew how to look after himself, but those ten shillings would pay for a night out at the pictures with Maggie.

“I sure will, sir,” he answered, instead.

“Am I supposed to guess or are you going to tell me what’s going on?” John asked his friend.

“All in good time,” was the frustrating reply.

They were walking towards the Charing Cross Station, wading through the crowd that surged from Trafalgar Square. A long queue was forming in front of the National Gallery, which caused a momentary distraction.

“Myra Hess,” said the detective.

“You’re doing it again, my love.”

“Sorry, I thought you knew her name,” replied Sherlock, with faux-innocence. “She gives daily concerts at the Gallery, now that the paintings have been moved to storage.”

“When the case is over, if we survive, maybe we could go too.”

“I hate queues.”

“An Englishman who doesn’t love queue is an aberration,” the doctor quipped. “But I’m sure
you’ll get us in, somehow. Hell, you could perform with her.”

“I never play in public.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Sherlock muttered something that was lost among the noise, but John saw that he was preening and that made him tremendously happy.
Love to Hatred Turned

Chapter Summary

I'm up and running again yay!

The end is a-coming and our boys are having a little fun, sort of....

“Heav’n has no rage, like love to hatred turn’d
Nor hell a fury, like a woman scorn’d.”

The Mourning Bride – William Congreve

“You didn’t need the help of that boy at all, did you?”

John was sipping scolding coffee from a dainty mug and glaring at his partner, who was lying down on the sofa and staring at the ceiling. Sherlock barely deigned to acknowledge his presence, lost as he was in one of his reveries: a hiss and a grunt was all he got from his august lover.

“I never said that,” the latter mumbled after a while, his eyes now closed and his lips pursed into a petulant pout.

“You didn’t want to involve Lestrade or, heaven forbid, your brother because you want to be one to solve this case, come what may.”

“I don’t need their help in this instance.”

“Because you have the information already,” countered John, who was fast losing his patience.

“I didn’t say I had it, but that I deduced it and so would you, if you had bothered to think about it. Why don’t people just think?”

“Oh, so I am people now?”

“Your words, not mine,” Sherlock hissed.

Suddenly, he sprang up like a jack-in-the-box and - making a show of it - he took a packet from underneath Maggers, shook out one cigarette and lit it; he then proceeded to puff on it with voluptuous greed, exhaling clouds of smoke in his partner’s face.

“Very nice,” John gritted out, “But going back to our conversation, you just told me that you knew what Georgie would find yet you put in harm’s way. You could have spared Margaret too by telephoning or waiting outside for her, rather than being seen at the Windmill.”

“George Dillon wanted a bit of excitement and I gave it to him.”
“He’s risking his life!”

“Spare me the sermon, Doctor. If I wanted one, I’d go to church,” the young man drawled, in his poshest accent. There was disdain in his tone, as if he were condescending to address one of his servants. John was desperately trying to hold on to the last shreds of his patience. He was a short-tempered man by nature, even if his job had tempered that to an extent.

“I didn’t intend to preach,” he replied, icily. “I just don’t like people being killed for no reason.”

“We are at war,” Sherlock replied, scathingly, “People die every day. I thought you of all people would understand that.”

“Why, because I may have murdered a woman in cold blood?” enquired John, in the quiet voice he only deployed when he was extremely angry.

“Because you enlisted as soon as Chamberlain gave his little speech on the radio.”

“And you despise me for it?”

It wasn’t really a question.

“The plebeian masses,” John continued, with some ferocity, “the dim-wits and low-lives who have not been to bloody Harrow or bloody Cambridge.”

“Profanity is the last resort of the inarticulate. Usually blasphemy would follow, but you are not the religious type.”

“You could have told me in Latin, but I wouldn’t have understood, would I, because I never studied languages.”

“Read,” Sherlock said, his lips curved into a smirk.

“What?”

“You don’t study Latin at Cambridge; you read Latin.”

“Right,” said John, his mouth a narrow white line. “I shall be in my room reading the papers, if you need me.”

“I never would have taken you for a coward,” murmured the detective.

The word remained suspended in the hazy, bluish air and for a long while, the two men stood like duellists, glancing at each other as if across the edge of a ravine.

In those instants, John doubted himself like he never had before in his life. He thought of Greta and of her garishly made up face, the horrible childhood that she must have had and the loneliness she’d had to endure. He told himself that no matter what crimes she had committed, he didn’t want to be the one who’d consigned her to an early grave. And besides, what sort of man was he, how could he tell, when he didn’t remember any of it? It was frightening not to be able to know.

It was then, while he was reflecting on guilt and morality that his lover made a dismissive gesture; elegant it was without a doubt, but also uncaring, like a master waving his servant away. The last fragile thread of John’s restraint broke and a surging wave of rage invaded his field of vision. When he regained his bearings, he was holding Sherlock by the hair, tugging viciously at his nape curls and biting down his throat hard enough to bruise. His mouth was on its downward
journey to the young man’s nipples, but he was jolted back to sanity by the realisation that - under his grasp - Sherlock was trembling.

When he raised his head and looked his lover in the face, he saw that the detective was laughing.

“Your face,” the youth gasped, tears spilling from his eyes, “You should have seen your face when I called you a coward.”

“You cock,” John exclaimed, kissing the angry marks he’d just made. “You utter cock. I should have guessed you were acting again, but I’m still not quite myself.”

“I got you exactly where I wanted you,” Sherlock husked, and circled his hips, brushing his clothed groin against his lover’s stomach.

“You could have just asked.”

“Maybe,” conceded the detective, “But you would have procrastinated again. You always say tomorrow or when we are feeling better or when the case is over. I wanted to show you that we are both more than ready and moreover we can do with a little distraction.”

“And your idea of seducing me is to insult my intelligence?”

Sherlock undid the sash of his dressing gown and let it fall open; underneath it, he was naked and very aroused.

“I never did,” he replied. “I was rather skilful in my provocation; I allowed your assumptions rather than disputing them.”

“You sound like a barrister,” John murmured, as he admired the view before him, “An extremely sexy one.”

“I wouldn’t have disliked it as much as some of the other professions, but I do hate being told to shut up when I’m in full swing.”

“And what a marvellous swing it is,” the older man commented, cupping his lover’s testicles and stroking them with his thumb.

“What an interesting analogy,” the young man said in a breathy tone, “Ah, yes, yes,” he moaned when the hand moved up, grabbing the base of his prick.

“You like this don’t you, pretty boy?”

“Hmm,” was the best the detective could offer. Words had left him and his mouth was otherwise occupied, as his partner kissed him quiet.

They couldn’t have made it to the bedroom, Sherlock agreed later on.

His legs had given way when John had started stroking him in earnest, using both hands with maddening dexterity.

John had pulled him down onto the hearthrug and had taken command of the situation, which is what Sherlock had been wanting all along. He’d prodded and teased until he got his lover to bite, pinch and graze him and if it hadn’t been for the laughter which had overtaken him, he would have obtained exactly what he had imagined so vividly.
The mirth had been unpredictable; probably a slightly hysterical reaction due to the accumulated tension of the days and nights during which he’d paced the enclosure of his mind; where terror had momentarily prevailed over logic and detachment.

“Lie down, stay still, let go,” had been his partner's demands and he’d obeyed all of them willingly; he’d let John pleasure him with his mouth and his fingers, and his climax had been a drawn-out affair, an exhilarating tight-rope walk from hilarity to brittle vulnerability. By then, the moisture in his eyes was not a consequence of mirth, nor was the tremor which shook him and wouldn’t cease until John held him tight against his chest, whispering endearments and half-formed words.

“You have trust issues,” he said afterwards, glancing at a very dishevelled Doctor Watson. “After what we’ve been through, I was hoping you'd know me better than that.”

John, still dazed by the onslaught of sensuality and pleasure of their lovemaking, returned his companion’s gaze, stroking the marks he’d made on his lovely neck.

“Yeah,” he sighed, “But in my defence, you picked at the nastiest scabs.”

“I don’t believe you killed Greta. My guess is that you were unconscious and someone pulled the trigger for you, using your hand as a sort of human glove.”

“Who is this someone?” asked the doctor, while searching for their discarded garments and using them as makeshift blankets. “Was it all a lie about knowing what Georgie will find at Boulestin’s?”

“No, I believe we know most of the truth. It was told to us.”

“What, when, how?”

Sherlock smiled, but this time it was a broad, guileless grin; that of a mischievous kid.

“That wouldn’t look good on a propaganda banner,” he joked, “Not a patch on the fighting words the British bulldog likes to bandy about.”

John pinched his cheek, making him yelp.

“You really are an incredibly exasperating man,” he said. “Quit playing guessing games and just tell me.”

“Unity Mitford,” the detective stated, with another of his oblique smiles.

“I swear that if you keep at it, I will no longer punish you,” John protested, twisting a stray curl around his finger and tugging.

The young man barked with laughter.

“And we can’t have that,” he quipped, “It would be frightfully boring and you know that I abhor tedium above all things.”

His partner tried to scowl, but his heart wasn’t in it.

“Come on, show me how brilliant you are,” he said.

“Flattery will get you everywhere.”

“Not fast enough, apparently.”
“Apologies, my dear,” Sherlock said, sheepishly. “In truth, I should have known from the moment he told us the story.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Marchmain, of course.”

They were drinking gin because John’s head was spinning and not in a pleasant way. The revelation had disconcerted him mainly due to its utter implausibility.

“Crispian Marchmain told us the story of the Mitford sisters as a sort of parable,” explained Sherlock.

“You should really abandon the biblical references. They are making me queasy.”

The detective chuckled.

“In this instance, I think it may be apt. There is a vein of obsessive, cultish mania running through this case. The mind who devised the entire plan is in thrall to a heady mixture of narcissism and delusions of grandeur. But there’s also a nasty and deranged side to it, which is caused by more than simple craving for personal power.”

John stared at his lover as if he’d just recited the entire Beowulf from memory.

“You can’t seriously be suggesting that Crispian Marchmain, that irritating fop, is a fiendishly clever criminal. If so, he surely is the best actor of his generation; aside from you, that is.”

“I’m not and he isn’t. Remember that ghastly cigarettes he offered us? It was another way of telling us what he knew.”

“But if he’s part of it, why did he give himself away? He was the one who told us about that dinner with Cummins. We discussed it, remember? We said he couldn’t be a spy because he can’t keep his gob shut.”

“Because he’s scared, my dear,” replied the young man, “He’s absolutely terrified that he will end up like the Mitford girl. His heart may be weak and he may boast about memento mori and all that rot, but don’t fool yourself; he very much wants to live.”

“Strange way to go about it,” remarked John.

“Also, he probably needed the money to fund his lavish lifestyle.”

“Aren’t they obscenely rich?”

“One never quite knows with these old families. And anyway, he’s the youngest and they seldom hold the purse strings.”

“And what about our client?” asked John who was only now contemplating that grim eventuality.

“I fear that we have risked out lives for very little recompense this time,” replied Sherlock, “Unless you wish to profit from ill-gotten gains.”

“But why?” repeated his companion, who had not yet gathered his wits.
“Arrogance, surely,” said Sherlock. “And an ancestral distaste for democracy; remember that his kind have acquired their status by authoritarian means. Our Magna Carta is little more than a glaring celebration of feudalism.”

“Are you turning into a socialist, my love?”

“Hardly,” the detective sniffed, “Have you ever heard of Guy Burgess? He was very popular at Trinity. He was a bona fide Marxist, but when his time came, he was only too glad to join the top ranks of the civil service. I prefer to keep my counsel and not flutter in the wind like a cheap rag.”

“Why did he hire us? Why pretend he needed to know what happened to his protégé, when he knew it right from the start?”

“I suspect that he wasn’t lying, that he truly doesn’t know. I did tell you that there was a streak of insanity at work, but also, I fear, a maniacal penchant for secrecy and control. Tremayne is not murdering people or peddling drugs; there are minions employed for those tasks. He provides his good name and all benefits that go with it: introductions into high society, the best restaurants and the glitziest clubs; doors that open without a glitch with no questions asked.”

“And he fell for Cummins?”

Sherlock leaned closer and planted a kiss on his lover’s lips.

“What’s it for?” the doctor asked.

“You are unspeakably soft-hearted, my dear. Yes, he fell for the RAF man, as you so chivalrously put it. And that, alas, sealed the man’s fate. That list Sansom spoke of may not have existed, but if it did, it might have held the names of other officers that could be plied with the drug. In the end, Cummins became the guinea pig because Tremayne had to be taught a lesson. He must have understood that his paramour’s odd behaviour was due to chemical substances, and he attracted our attention to it.”

“They were all trying to warn us, all of them: Sansom, Tremayne and even that obnoxious Crispian.”

“Not warn us, but planting the seeds of doubt. They must be on the verge of collapse, since the blitz has not achieved what they must have believed it would. London is scarred, but not vanquished. The nation is defended and they haven’t gained any significant ground.”

“Not yet, at least.”

“Nigel de Grey’s disappearance is evidence that they know time is running out. This operation my brother was talking about is probably their best chance to gain a substantial advantage by inflicting a mortal wound on our naval forces. As for the air supremacy, we know what their plan is for our pilots.”

“Surely the drug would be traced and they wouldn’t be allowed to fly the planes.”

Sherlock shook his head, and the mass of his hair bounced in what John deemed a rather fetching manner.

“There was no sign of it in Sansom’s or Greta’s blood.”

“Why did they kill Katherine King,” the doctor wondered. “Miss Oatley was a victim of her curiosity about her lover and the third girl was merely a stand in for Miss Hayward, but what of
Miss King? I think we owe Miss Summers an explanation of why her lover was so brutally butchered.”

“I can’t be certain,” replied the detective, brushing a hand through his curls. He had not missed his friend’s rapt gaze and was encouraging his little fetish; a scalp massage was a heavenly thing, so why not indulge if they both liked it? Right on cue, John followed his lover’s example and buried his fingers into the tangled mane.

“But you have an idea?” he asked.

“Hmm? Oh yes, I have a surfeit of ideas,” Sherlock replied, pushing into the doctor’s hand.

“Silly boy”

“It could have been a number of things: she could have heard Mrs Mayfield talk to one of her accomplices or seen the person in question. She was in the wrong place at the worst possible time and needed to be silenced. I don’t know if we will ever find out for sure, but I have an inkling that she knew already. We were told that men confided in Miss King and someone must have said a little too much. Because she already knew part of the story, it was not difficult for her to figure what was going on.”

“And Mrs Mayfield was recruited because of her bitterness about her husband’s death?”

“She feels that she owes no loyalty to anyone but the memory of the love that was so violently torn from her. The fall of both nations and even of the entire European continent is nothing to her.”

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” John cited, only to earn a sidelong glance from his partner. “What did I say?”

“Congreve is often misquoted,” the detective replied, wishing he could take the words back as soon as he’d spoken them.

“For someone who frowns at literature, you are suspiciously versed in it.”

“I merely found parts of it impossible to delete. They do clutter my memory, but there isn’t anything I can do about it and believe me, I have tried.”

John guffawed.

“Trust you to delete things rather than simply forgetting them like us poor mortals.”

The detective huffed, but he was reduced to contented moans as his partner vigorously stroked the back of his head.

There followed a blissful interlude which almost lead to another sexual encounter, hadn’t it been for the interfering ring of their telephone.

“Your brother or Lestrade,” the older man said, as he went to answer.

“Maybe,” Sherlock replied, but he wasn’t convinced.

“Is that Mr Holmes?” a young voice whispered.

“Georgie?” replied John, “No, it’s John Watson; isn’t it too early for you to ring? You said you
were staying late after closing time.”

“The thing is, sir, that the books have gone,” the boy said.

“I see,” said John, feeling a chill down his spine, “They must have known we were on to them. Not to worry, son; we will have to find another way. Say, how do you know that they have gone?”

“It was the cook who told me; said the managers were in a proper stew because of it. Government inspectors will make a right meal of it.”

“Well, it certainly is a very odd coincidence.”

“Indeed, sir. In detective stories, it always means that somebody’s about to cop it.”

The blond man suppressed a chuckle.

“You may be right, my lad. Do me a favour now: get off the phone before someone realises you are missing.”

He sensed the hesitation at the other end of the line.

“I guess that’s not worth ten shillings,” Georgie murmured.

“More than worth it, kid,” John replied. “I’ll see that you get them tomorrow in time for the pictures.”

“That’s jolly decent of you, sir! Thanks ever so much and to Mr Holmes too.”

“I’ll convey your sentiments to Sherlock. And please call me John. Goodbye for now.”

“Goodbye, sir.”

And so it has begun, John pondered.

The beginning of the end.
Vegetable, Mineral, Animal

Chapter Summary

We are almost there. But not quite.
And in the end, all roads always lead to Sherlock Holmes and why wouldn't they?

There will be at least two more chapters, but thanks to all of you who followed my story and left comments and kudos. You lovely people you.

Chapter Notes

Note: The Land Registry offices weren't open to the public back then. You could only obtain the information by return post.

Note 2: The grand old man is Winston Churchill. Max Miller dedicated him the song by the same title. "He's the grand old man For us he's doing all that he can Britain's guiding star Known near and Far, etc."

“And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?”

The Importance of Being Earnest – Oscar Wilde

The Land Registry Head Office at 32 Lincoln's Inn Fields had been an impressive Neo-Jacobean building before the 193rd air raid on central London had done its cruel corrosive work on the steep slate roofs and French-style corner turrets. As it was, the archives were being evacuated to the Marsham Court Hotel in Bournemouth, a move which, had it already taken place, would have forced the two men to undertake a trip of monumental boredom, as far as Sherlock was concerned.

Luckily, the removal procedures had yet to be set in motion and the offices were still open to the public. Certainly, Mycroft could have provided the information they were seeking, but aside from his natural dislike of asking his brother for help, the detective was also troubled by a gloomy feeling that he couldn’t quite dissect. He’d often scorned the notion of fatality and despised the chicanery of mediums and fortune tellers, but he was now experiencing a bout of what could only be described as dark forebodings.
“What are we looking for?” John asked, patting the side of his coat where the Luger was hidden.

“Property ownership, the only sort of information we can find here. And yes, I could have spared us a journey and asked my brother.”

He knew he sounded churlish, but he wasn’t used to confronting such dissonant and unpredictable sensations.

“I didn’t say a word,” replied his companion, with a fond smile. “I’m on your side, remember?”

They paid the requisite two bob and were let into a brightly-lit room as vast as a hangar. A quantity of leather bound volumes and colourful maps were laid out on the sturdy mahogany tables and lining the towering rows of shelves.

One of the archive clerks, a youngish fellow with rimless spectacles and fine sandy hair, sat at the desk near the entrance shuffling papers with fussy, mincing gestures.

From time to time, he cast a wary glance in their general direction, signalling his preoccupation that the visitors might do something unconscionable, such as deface the records or even demand his help. His marked antipathy for intruders had been sharpened by the calamity of the Registry’s impending evacuation from London, but it was by no means limited to that.

“Better make it snappy,” remarked John, “Or that poor sod will have kittens.”

“Never mind him,” Sherlock huffed, “I paid the fee and intend to get my money’s worth. Let’s see whether we can clarify the money angle.”

They pored over the indexes, maps and property listings for almost an hour, but it became soon clear that some of the records were missing and whether it was intentional or a simple case of inefficiency was hardly in doubt.

“Say,” the detective called out. The clerk looked up from his papers wearing a thunderous expression, but when he spoke his tone was courteous if obviously fake.

“How may I help?” he said, adjusting his spectacles atop the root of his nose.

“According to the index map of Marylebone, there should be a set of title numbers for the corresponding properties listed in the register. We don’t seem to be able to locate them.”

“Impossible,” the man replied, sounding outraged, “The maps are entirely accurate and the numbers always correspond to one or more entries in the registers. Perhaps you haven’t quite mastered our system. It isn’t exactly complicated, but it can be confusing to neophytes.”

John looked up at his partner, hoping that the explosion wouldn’t be too ruinous.

“I assure you that I do not lack the basic capabilities of the Homo Sapiens. Even a child could understand your risible system,” Sherlock replied.

Scathing, but not too offensive, the doctor decided. The clerk thought differently, judging by the two red spots tinting his sallow cheeks.

“Let me have a look,” he said, and swiftly made his way to the bench in question.

Ten minutes later, his expression had morphed into one of utter surprise and alarm.

“I don’t understand,” he kept muttering under his breath, the tip of his long nose twitching in
sympathy. “We never allow anyone in here without supervision and we never permit the removal of any document.”

“By the way,” the detective added, haughtily, “The same goes for a number of properties in the Clerkenwell and Maida Vale areas. The index lists properties which can’t be found on the registers. Someone must have been very keen on secrecy.”

“We don’t let,” the man started again. He was starting to look apoplectic, John considered.

“Yes, we understand,” he intervened, trying to calm things down, “No one says that it’s your fault. Evidently it was done overnight, when the offices are shut.”

“Some pages had been taken out; as you will realise when you look at the books closely. I suppose you don’t have a second copy of these registers.”

“What we do have are the copies of the title deeds, but without the register entries the task of locating the appropriate ones,” he shook his head in a desolate manner.

“Arduous and likely useless, as they must have been purloined too,” noted the detective.

“But who could have done such a thing and why? Surely this information is obtainable from the notaries or solicitors who dealt with the conveyances,” the clerk opined.

“People can be silenced or bribed while public documents can be obtained upon request by any member of the public. This is what we are fighting against, my fellow: the concentration of money and power in the hands of the wrong sort of people,” Sherlock argued. Above all, he was furious that his own class, the public school types he’d always abhorred, had taken brutal advantage of lonely women such as Miss Oatley and impressionable young men like Cummins; and how they had spat on the very British principle of fair play, showing contempt for their own government and institutions.

“I shall have to let the Chief Registrar know,” the clerk sighed, briefly excited by the prospect of a little drama.

“You do that,” John said, shaking the man’s limp hand. “And good luck with that.”

“I guess they will blame it on the blitz,” he said, once they were out and walking towards Holborn station.

“They might, but we’ll know better. It doesn’t matter anyway, I only wanted confirmation of what I mostly know. It baffles me that they would go to such lengths when the information can still be gleaned from other sources. The only real mystery left for me is to find out how they abducted you from the Evangelical Library and what occurred after that.”

“And you hoped to find out today?”

“Yes, well, I suspect one of the properties around there to be connected via tunnel to the Library, and I was hoping the title deeds could help us solve that riddle.”

He pulled out a packet of Black Cats, but his companion stopped him mid-gesture.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” he said, “You had more than your fair share last night.”
“Nicotine clears my head.”

“Your head’s fine, astounding even. All the tobacco in the world couldn’t change this basic fact.”

It took John a few moments to realise that Sherlock had stopped talking. When he turned, the man was no longer by his side. His heart stopped in that second, only to recover when he saw the detective standing still as a statue, his eyes shining and his lips parted.

“What is it, my love?”

“Remember when I said you were my conductor of light?”

“Yes, but I wish I knew what you meant by that. I haven’t done or said anything remarkable.”

“Do you remember when Lestrade told us about the buildings in the vicinity of the Blandford? Well, one of them was a tobacconist shop.”

John gaped, obviously still baffled.

“The cigarettes, John, the ones stuffed with the drug,” the young man exclaimed, “Hiding in plain sight, disguised among the other packets. Come along, we are going back to Baker Street.”

“We should telephone Mrs Hudson and tell her where we are going. In case we disappear, at least they will know from where to start their search,” the doctor suggested, "Of course we should tell Lestrade, but I know you wouldn't dream of that."

Sherlock rolled his eyes, but in truth he considered it a wise suggestion. He couldn’t chase away the sensation that something had gone seriously wrong.

“Might as well stop at the flat and check the post,” he replied and, intercepting his lover’s surprise, he added “We may get another of those letters, you never know. The clock is ticking, my dear, and wicked deeds are afoot.”

“Is that from a play?”

“Certainly not; why would I be quoting lines from a play?”

“No reason.”

John smiled and Sherlock could never resist him, so he grinned too, even though he tried to hide it behind the upturned collar of his coat.

At Baker Street, that state of apparent calm came to an abrupt end.

Millward was on the doorstep as soon as their key was in the lock and behind him their landlady seemed even more diminutive than usual.

“Thank heavens you are back,” she said, wringing her hands, “Better come in and close the door.”

“What is it?” asked John, but Sherlock was already climbing the stairs two steps at a time.

“Someone’s waiting for us,” he said, and when the doctor followed him up, the gun was in his
Of all the faces the detective had imagined to see once he entered the flat, the youth's was not in that number.

The tall, mousy-haired man stood there smoking a cigarette, unruffled by the oddness of the situation.

“Leo?” the detective said, and after a while the doctor recalled the man they had met in the little book shop in the Charing Cross Road, the father of their impromptu guest.

“Apologies if I frightened the old darling downstairs,” Leo Marks said, “She came in with a tray of cucumber sandwiches and nearly had a heart attack. I didn’t tell her my name, only said that I was a friend of yours from the olden days.”

“She will remember your face.”

The youth shook his head.

“I am not memorable like you, genius.”

He threw John an appraising look.

“Greene mentioned that you had a friend here. Wonders never cease.”

It wasn’t said with malice or even irony yet the doctor felt he couldn’t let it pass.

“I may be wrong, but I think it’s not your place to judge what Sherlock does or doesn’t do with his life.”

“Too right,” Marks concurred, smiling broadly.

It was true what he’d said: he had one of those wholesome countenances which are soon forgotten; fair complexion and light brown eyes and hair; one could imagine him in his whites playing cricket for the village team and confuse him with scores of other similar boys, present and past. Nothing stood out, everything was average, except for what lay beneath the carapace of his skin and bones.

“Why are you here?”

“Straight to the point, the way I like it. You haven’t changed a whit, dear chap.”

“Where are those sandwiches then?” said the doctor, to break the ice.

“She left them in the kitchen, I think. I wouldn’t say no, I’m a bit peckish.”

John nodded and went in search of the food. On the counter, he found the napkin-covered tray and all the necessary paraphernalia to prepare tea. He put the kettle on the stove and walked close to the door, straining to hear what the two men where saying, but heard nothing.

He found them in the sitting room, smoking in companionable silence.

“You needn’t have waited,” he said, but Sherlock cast him a look which said otherwise.

“You’ll forgive my ghastly manners, but I will have to eat while I’m talking,” Leo Marks said.
“White or black?” the blond man asked, as he poured the tea.

“Milk is always welcome.”

Once they were all set, Marks started recounting his tale; he spoke as fast as the detective did, but without his swagger.

“Nigel de Grey has joined us. I know you saw the notice in The Times and that you must have guessed what it meant, but I’d rather tell you anyway. He was trying to stop the rot from infesting his team, but he failed. He came to us for help. We were his last resort. Oh, naturally he could have gone to the source, but it wouldn’t have done him any good. The grand old man himself won’t believe what we have discovered, unless we can prove it. That’s the devil of the thing. We knew about the Blandford only it wasn’t it, but the perishing joint next door. They distracted us by burning the entire show to the ground. The drugs aren’t distributed in the usual ways; no street peddlers or dodgy packages delivered by spotty kids; they are more sophisticated yet obvious, when you think of it.”

“Classy restaurants for the drinks and corner shops for the cigarettes,” Sherlock intervened.

“Precisely,” agreed Marks, as he devoured his third sandwich. “You are good!”

John saw his partner grimace, but he also notice that his eyes had flashed with pride for a moment. Delectable boy, he thought, getting distracted for a moment.

“We were about to visit the tobacconist in Chiltern Street and see whether it's connected to the Library.”

“We still don’t know how I got abducted from that cellar and ended up in my old flat, trapped under the floorboards,” the doctor explained.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Marks muttered, chewing vigorously. “Not yet at least.”

“You can’t stop us,” Sherlock raised his voice a little, just enough to alert his partner, who made sure the Luger was safe inside his jacket pocket. “We haven’t the time to play games any longer. You and Greene and your little recreation of the Apostles society can keep doing this cloak-and-dagger stuff till the end of days, but I have a client who is probably part of a criminal scheme to help Hitler, so you’ll forgive me if I’d rather not dawdle.”

Marks gulped down his tea and coughed.

“I wasn’t suggesting caution for the sake of it, old bean,” he said, “Lord knows we are past that. I supposed you knew that already. You seem awfully calm, but then again you’ve always been quite… unflappable.”

“Knew what?” asked John.

“Mycroft Holmes has disappeared.”

“He did what? That’s impossible! Lestrade would have told us, unless he’s vanished too. He hasn’t, has he?”

In the meantime, Sherlock had retired into a brown study.

“Scotland Yard has been alerted that no interference shall be allowed. The good Inspector was duly informed that I would get in touch with you. Well, when I say informed.”
John wanted to remonstrate, but he wasn’t sure whether Mycroft’s true relationship with Lestrade was supposed to be a secret.

“Surely they must know that their time is up,” he said, “And that we know that those decrypted messages must be a trap. That mission should be aborted without fail.”

“We are ready to sacrifice the lives of a few hundred people for the benefit of the many.” Leo concurred, “But the problem is more serious than that.”

“If we don’t stem the haemorrhage at the source, we’ll only be patching up one hole after another, until there won’t be any fabric left to repair,” the detective murmured.

His voice was hoarse and his skin was the colour of wax.

“Believe me, we have tried,” said Marks, “We’ve put our best people on the case, Some went too close for comfort, others couldn’t get close enough.”

“Miss Summers,” Sherlock murmured.

“Poor girl, she nearly died. Officially, it was shock due to the bombing of Bonnington Square.”

John’s eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

“What happened to her?” he asked.

“The same that happened to you, Doctor, but slightly worse; she no longer had a friend to watch over her.”

“And Rosoman is one of yours too, I gather,” said the detective.

“Not from the very start, but we needed someone close to Sansom and he fit the bill to perfection. He can draw too, which is handy for maps.”

“Greene came to us because you didn’t want to involve Rosoman in the death of his friend.”

“At that point, there was nothing he could have done and it was preferable to keep him away from Knightsbridge; plenty of curious types in that area, as you may have noticed; some colourful old dears, too.”

The inaction was driving John crazy and the absurdity of Leo’s tale wasn’t helping matters.

“From what you’re saying, it appears that the entire city is playing cat and mouse. It’s preposterous,” he exclaimed.

“Chess,” their guest countered, “the deadly sort, I’m afraid.”

“And the creator of the game wanted to destroy my brother all along?” Sherlock’s tone was a mixture of admiration and disdain, “A torturous way to achieve the objective, but not inelegant.”

“The aim is to consign the country to the enemy, but I concede that there’s a trace of class in this plot to ruin the reputation of a well-respected intelligence officer to punish his brother,” said Marks, arching his thin eyebrows.

The detective’s eyes widened.

“You must be mistaken. I’ve never professed to be modest, but a consulting detective is hardly the
most troublesome of adversaries.”

“Not a consulting detective, but you, Sherlock Holmes. If I remember correctly, you were not easy to impress, but I bet you are a tiny bit thunderstruck now.”

Sherlock felt that his brain had slowed down, as if circuits and synapses had been dipped in glue or treacle. He was experiencing reality in slow-motion, and all the while his heart slammed against his chest.

“We should never underestimate the hurt we can inflict when we are not paying attention.”

“What is it, what happened…Sherlock?” John asked, reaching out to make sure his lover was not going to faint; he was as white as a ghost and his eyes were bright and dark like jet beads.

“Vegetable, mineral, animal,” the young man whispered.

“Yes, I see what you mean,” Marks tilted his head to the side and smiled, softly.

I’m going to scream, the doctor thought. His frustration had reached its zenith, but before he could let it out, his partner spoke.

“Alexander Marchmain,” he said, and his voice broke.
Alexander the Great

Chapter Summary

And in the beginning.... we go back to the real start.

I said two chapters, but I think it may possibly be three. These things take time... :

Chapter Notes

Note: The defeat of the Caudine Forks was the worst defeat in Rome's history. Not so much because they had lost. The humiliation lay far more in the nature of the defeat: they lost without a fight.

Note 2: I know it's confusing, but the Duke of Beaufort is also the Marquess of Worcester.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"But truly, if I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes."

Alexander the Great

"He's the Marquess of Worcester," Mycroft hissed, "You possess an excellent memory, brother mine, yet you persist in conveniently forgetting Alexander's subsidiary title."

"Irrelevant," said Sherlock, his Trinity striped tie undone and wrapped around his neck in the guise of a scarf. "Why should I remember your tiresome friends? Besides, he hardly cares about us second class citizens. He only bothers with you because you are the British government."

The elder Holmes clicked his tongue and stared daggers at the dishevelled boy draped over the damson velvet settee in Mycroft's private sitting room at the Diogenes Club.

"I'm nothing of the sort, little brother. Your penchant for hyperbole is getting worse, alas."

"You didn't contradict my opinion about your ghastly friend."

Mycroft rolled his eyes.

"I never take you seriously when you're under the influence."

"I only smoked one of the dreadful cigars I found in that mausoleum that you call the Members' Hall."
“Kindly spare me your sordid lies; you took something; what was it this time?”

Sherlock sniffed and pretended to be aggrieved, but he didn’t waste his time lying.

“Morphine,” he muttered.

“I won’t allow you access to your funds, unless you come and live with me during your vacations.”

The younger man knew it was the best offer he would get, but curse him if he wouldn’t protest. An idea came to him that seemed perfectly splendid.

“If you don’t let me have my way, I will ask your friend the mighty Duke of Tarragon for support and hospitality.”

“Leave Alexander alone,” his brother said, his tone laced with unusual steel.

“Oh it’s Alexander now,” Sherlock needled, “I guess that all that talk about feelings being chemical defects was only nonsense. You have found your chosen mate, like a praying mantis,” he shuddered at the notion.

“Quit being childish, my dear,” his sibling replied, but there was a chord of indecision in his voice. “We could perhaps come to an agreement. I could allow you enough money for food and lodgings,” he started, but the younger man had scented blood.

“You would do anything to keep me away from your precious Marchmain, wouldn’t you?” he said, fiddling with his tie.

Mycroft’s expression became impenetrable.

“Try not to kill yourself with that loathsome stuff, will you my dear? You know that I care about you.”

An intolerable blend of horror, pity and affection gripped the boy’s guts.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” he mumbled, but sensed that somehow, even as he’d won the battle, he’d lost the war.

The real war was in the air, so close that one could almost smell its acrid smell. A number of influential people, Mycroft among them, were meeting to discuss the implications of Chamberlain’s visit to Hitler at Berchtesgaden. To his sibling, these a abstruse names and the complications of foreign politics meant very little, engrossed as he was in his newfound sleuthing occupation. There was also the minor matter of his drug addiction, which was in its infancy but promised to develop into a delightful pastime.

He really should have gone home to his parents for the holidays, but the lure of London had been impossible to resist.

The last place he wanted to be was a stuffy club in Pall Mall, but he needed more cash and his vexatious brother had insisted he’d show his face, probably as a form of humiliation; surrender without a fight, like the Romans’ defeat at the Caudine Forks, he thought with masochistic glee.

He’d just entered the hallowed sanctum that was the Members’ Hall when an unprepossessing blond man turned to greet him, evidently mistaking him for somebody else.
“And who would you be?” he drawled after he realised his error and introduced himself.

“Sherlock Holmes,” the younger man replied, “We’ve met before.”

No handshake took place, but for an instant something unsettling had clouded the blue-eyed gaze of Alexander Marchmain, a rip in the placid mantle of bland superiority he usually affected. The boy was still flying on the wings of his last morphine dose, so that momentary flicker had eluded him. Marchmain was at least a decade older than Sherlock, which would have been irrelevant to the boy had not the man been such a crashing bore.

“You’re a Cambridge man,” the man said, pointing at Sherlock’s uniform.

“Obviously,” was the careless reply, “It’s a frightful nuisance, but they won’t let me quit. Naturally, I could contrive to be sent down, but I trust this Hitler fellow might still manage it for me.”

“Are you interested in politics?”

“Hardly,” muttered the young man, “Powerful men are excruciatingly dull, some more than others. Besides, I loathe the ruling classes, generally speaking.”

Marchmain sniggered, but he was not amused. Perfect, Sherlock thought. His blood was still sluggish with the golden weight of the morphine and he didn’t have a care in the world. He’d read about a spate of suicides in the Morning Post and he had a hunch there might be more to it. The tedium of Cambridge had been fought off with a combination of not-so-legal substances and now there might be a case which required his intervention. If only he could get Mycroft to unlock his funds, he would be in clover.

The man in front of him was a trifling obstacle, like the meal one was forced to eat before enjoying dessert.

“You shouldn’t hate the class you were born into,” the Marquess said, with the tone of a schoolmaster. “Leading is a gift and a privilege which should never be shunned.”

Gibberish - the boy thought - monotonous piffle. He undid his tie and the topmost button of his shirt and breathed deeply.

“I leave that to Mycroft,” he replied. “I have more interesting things to pursue.”

“Of course, higher education is where the foundations are laid,” said the man. He had a slight lisp that evidently annoyed him greatly.

The boy curled his lips into a half-smile.

“I wasn’t talking about dreary old Cambridge,” he said, flexing the fingers of his left hand; he still felt the sweet ache of the needle injection in the crook of his arm. A shower of stardust descended curtain-like and dazzled his eyes; he was invincible, there was absolutely nothing he couldn’t achieve, no problem he couldn’t solve.

“I have just invented a job for myself,” he boasted. “I will be a consulting detective. When the Police are stumped, which I suspect they often are, I will offer them my invaluable contribution.”

“I doubt Scotland Yard would pay for a consultant. It would be like conceding defeat.”

“I don’t need their money,” the young man countered. If he hadn’t felt so languorous, he’d have
been offended. “And I’m not doing it because of virtuous reasons. I like solving puzzles and I don’t mind danger.”

“You could pledge your services in order to help your country.”

Pompous old crone, Sherlock considered, and yawned.

“As I said, I leave that to my brother.”

Marchmain took a step closer and studied the young man’s countenance with his blank eyes.

“You should not believe yourself exonerated from responsibility, dear fellow. Escape all you wish, reality will eventually catch up with you.”

Sherlock blinked the glittering dust from his eyes, but his brain refused to engage with his interlocutor’s words.

“I doubt it, old bean,” he replied, derisively, “I shape my own reality. You and Mycroft and the rest of the perishing aristocracy can keep scheming and plotting, but while you entertain your lofty selves with your elaborate games, life will still go on for the rest of us. There will be crimes to solve and I will be the one doing the solving.”

“You think our lives are uninspiring.”

Having already lost interest in the conversation, Sherlock drifted towards the Sheraton bureau at the far end of the Hall in search of cigarettes. A smoke was exactly what he needed; nicotine to add an edge to the torpidity of the morphine.

“Can’t say I care much for your idea of domination as birthright,” he stated.

Where was Mycroft hiding, he wondered. He discovered a chiselled silver box filled with thin cigars, so he lit one up using a solid brass contraption in the shape of a panther’s head. He inhaled with relish and plonked himself down on a chesterfield sofa, one leg slung over the arm-rest, foot dangling.

Marchmain remained where he was, but swung round to survey the rest of the room. He was as unremarkable as the Diogenes’ architecture and as filled with self-importance.

Neither tall nor attractive, he had the washed-out, equine features of the Beauforts which were not improved by his nondescript personality and anaemic nature.

“What other forms of domination are there?” he enquired, pleasantly.

“Merit, obviously,” replied Sherlock, “The supremacy of the intellect, the hegemony of genius.”

“And what about brute force, what role does it play in your pantheon?”

The young man sucked on his cigar and uttered a snort of disgust.

“Violence is the preserve of the stolid and the unimaginative,” he replied, hinting that his interlocutor probably belonged in both categories.

Marchmain’s pallid face didn’t register any emotion, not even a shred of resentment or outrage.

“There may be other reasons, such as having exhausted all other avenues,” he suggested.
“Self-defence I can understand, but that’s all I’m prepared to agree to.”

“We are going to be involved in a war, pretty soon, I should think.”

The pronouncement couldn’t have been more anodyne had he been talking about a weather front. Of course, he was adamant about being on the side of the angels, Sherlock considered, with mounting contempt. The waning effect of the drug coupled with the dull conversation was making him belligerent.

“And we are going to win it because how could we not?” he snarled, “We were put on this earth to conquer it with the might of our nobility. Rule Britannia, the Elgar march and jam for tea: how unspeakably condescending.”

He shook the ash from his half-smoked cigar and let it fall on the well-brushed oatmeal carpet; it made him feel better, childish as it was.

“What would you suggest?”

“I don’t need to suggest anything, because I don’t care!” he bellowed, and his diaphragm hurt; he was becoming nauseous, but the other man was unmoved. The only sign that he was a living and breathing creature, aside from speech, was the intermittent narrowing of his fish-cold eyes. Sherlock detested everything about this supercilious ass, from his wavy blond hair down to the bespoke leather brogues.

“One day, not far from now, I suspect that you might,” the Marquess stated, “Care, I mean. It should be very interesting to witness, I bet.”

The venomous retort Sherlock had devised was left unspoken as a butler came in to announce that Mycroft was waiting for him.

“Till next time,” Marchmain said.

“Don’t hold your breath,” the boy replied, depositing the butt of his cigarette on the palm of the man’s hand.

Officially, they never met again after that day.

“We don’t have to believe what Marks told us,” John was saying.

The detective was emerging from his meditative trance and had missed most of his partner’s cogitations.

“I didn’t pay attention back then,” he observed, “But how could I imagine that he would take my words seriously? Besides, I was stuffed with morphine, I could barely think; well, I can always think, but I wasn’t as alert as I could have been.”

“When have you taken morphine?” asked the doctor, immediately peering into Sherlock’s eyes to check the state of his pupils.

“Not now, it was years ago at the Diogenes.”
“You’re not making any sense, my love,” the older man said, stroking his lover’s worried face.

“We met a couple of years ago at my brother’s club,” he said and narrated what had taken place during that encounter.

“After that, I sometimes heard about him, but never saw him again. Mycroft seldom mentioned him, but it was always implied that they were entertaining some form of personal relationship.”

“Marchmain, you mean. I thought you said he’d been travelling overseas; America, you said. Was it Mycroft who told you?”

Sherlock pondered the question for a moment.

“No, I don’t believe it was. I think I read it in the papers, but my brother never disabused me of the notion. It didn’t seem important,” he replied in a shrill tone.

“Nothing about Alexander Marchmain and his ludicrous family ever interested me in the least. They were always doing the *appropriate thing*, whatever was needed to preserve the Beaufort name and heritage. You know how these notions bore me down to my very marrow!”

He’d started pacing up and down the sitting room, pulling at his hair as he reconstructed the events of the past and realised the extent of his own misjudgment.

John frowned at him, worried that his friend was losing his grip on reality.

“You can’t think that he betrayed his country, corrupted friends and family and killed many innocent people just to give you a case worthy of your interest.”

“He said he wanted to witness what it was for me to care,” Sherlock murmured, “He must have been watching us, somehow. His family must own parts of Marylebone; Baker Street too, I bet.”

“You would know, if that was the case.”

“Not necessarily,” said the detective, “These titled families have many subsidiary titles and several different names. He knew what were doing, all this time,” he continued, his tone starting to verge on the hysterical.

“But why would he care about you when he’s only ever met you a handful of times?” asked his lover, stupidly, since he knew the answer already.

Love, even the most sordid and unhealthy kind, can steal upon us unexpectedly; and Sherlock was exceptional, a singularity made man. John too had fallen for him almost at first sight and he was hardly an inexperienced juvenile.

His partner, however, held a different opinion on the matter.

“He suffers from a delusion of grandeur, obviously. He must have thought I was throwing down my gage, that I was challenging him for real. But Mycroft must have known he was dealing with someone dangerous, which is why he kept me away from him.”

“But he encouraged you to meet Tremayne,” John argued, “He must have realised how that would have played into Marchmain’s hand.”

“My brother knew that he couldn’t have kept me away, no matter how busy…oh, how stupid, how unaccountably cretinous have I been?! Of course, he was the one who invented that ridiculous case
of the stolen paintings just to keep me away from the Cummins investigation.”

“Why didn’t he simply tell you? If he knew Marchmain was behind the entire conspiracy…”

“Because he must have realised that the moment the Duke felt that the attention was focussed on him, he would have become even more volatile. See what he did to poor Miss King? She must have seen him or heard of him and thus signed her own death warrant.”

“Mycroft could have simply had him killed,” the doctor suggested. He was in a bloodthirsty mood himself, if truth be told. “I would have obliged, gladly. I still might.”

Sherlock threw him a heated glance.

“I may have to remind you of this pledge,” he husked. His partner took hold of his hand and kissed its knuckles, one by one.

“Any time, my love,” the doctor replied.

That tender moment was all the more precious because of the storm that was brewing, a threat which didn’t leave them time to indulge their feelings for as long as they might have wished.

“Besides, you heard what Marks said: they don’t quite know where he is. They lost track of him ever since he announced he was travelling overseas. And supposing they had found him, they couldn’t simply murder a Duke.”

“He’s a traitor,” John growled, “he belongs in the Tower. Execution by firing squad is the least he deserves.”

“We can’t prove anything. Those who could have talked are no longer of his world and those who survive don’t know who’s behind it all. His brother is the only one who could ruin him, but he knows that he wouldn’t last long should he confess.”

“If Tremayne doesn’t know, he must have guessed.”

“Possibly, but you fail to consider that he’s on the same side as his friend,” the detective said, viciously scratching the back of his head. “Marchmain was right when he said the day would come when I would care, damn him! Remember when I said they had all been admirers of that ghastly Austrian dictator? Well, they still are, all of them, not only the Mitford sisters. The difference is that they do not profess it openly, but have planned and schemed in the dark. They fear that should Britain win the war, a new form of democracy might prevail, one in which they wouldn’t retain their privileges. How they must despise these young working-class women toiling in factories, performing in theatres, driving trucks; it must enrage them to see society change and class distinctions blur.”

“Marchmain must have been horrified when he saw Tremayne taking an interest in Cummins, but that was nothing compared to what he must have felt when he found out about the two of us,” John said, bitterly. To think that he’d endangered the life of the man he adored, even thought it wasn’t his fault, sickened him to the core.

“He had you brought back to your flat and buried you there, hoping that I would find you when it was too late. He could not be sure, but that was the challenge that he set me… he must have been on the sidelines, eager to watch me dance to his tune,” said the detective, sounding forlorn.

“You were right, about madness and obsession being at the roots of this case.”
“And a thirst for power which knows no bounds,” agreed the detective.

He slumped down on the sofa and John immediately joined him and pulled him close.

Outside the window, the light was fading and the sky was indigo. Soon, the blackout curtains would descend on another day, and a bleak night would envelop them in its sleepless arms.

Chapter End Notes

Next: the boys go in search of Mycroft, but before that they indulge in a little loving...after all, life is short and they don't know if they will survive the night...
Drown’d in Security

Chapter Summary

There will be sex, so mind the tags.
This chapter could easily be called the beauty and the beast too :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“O, I tremble for you:

For I do know you have a storm within you,

More terrible than a sea fight, and your soul

Being heretofore drown’d in security,

You know not how to live, nor how to die”

The Devil’s Law-case Act V Scene IV – John Webster

The perversity of the winter weather was piling yet more fuel onto their misery: the lack of light had concealed the gathering of stormy clouds and before the evening had properly started, a torrent of rain was crashing down on the dilapidated pavements and a frigid wind was whistling through the chimneys.

Inside the Baker Street flat, the two men were immersed in their own different worlds, but the thread of emotion that linked them was pulsing at the beat of the same drum.

They had discussed the situation, but at some point they had run out of words.

Sherlock was trapped inside the castle of his past, visiting every nook and cranny, rewriting mistaken impressions and hasty assumptions; he hated being wrong, but what he loathed even more was superficiality. He would never do that again, he thought ferociously: underestimate someone just because of lazy stereotypes.

He kept pacing the sitting room, wanting to smoke but suspecting it was the worst thing he could do. Casting a sidelong glance at his partner, he perceived the tempest behind the man’s eyes, and couldn’t refrain a shudder; it was a fierce expression, determined, and with more than a hint of violence.

After Sherlock’s retelling of his past encounter with Marchmain, John’s imagination had begun to torture him: he could see the young man’s slender, frail body clad in his College uniform; he
conjured up with uncanny precision the loose tie, the unbuttoned shirt and the sliver of skin it had
uncovered; he even imagined the marks on his arm left by the needle and the sheen of sweat on his
brow and neck caused by the morphine. He wanted all of it, with a gnawing hunger that was spiked
with fury.

A deranged, powerful man, someone John had never met, had known Sherlock long before he had,
and had built a monument of evil in his honour.

The detective insisted it wasn’t out of sentiment or even attraction, but his lover wasn’t convinced.
With every minute which elapsed, with every drop of rain battering the window panes, he became
more aware of the young man’s physical presence, of his slightly musky scent and soft breath.
There was an almost supernatural intensity to the silence between them, not unlike that of the prey
waiting to be devoured by its attacker. He couldn’t feel his own tiredness or his aches and pains; he
only wanted to erase the presence of Marchmain from their lives, at least until they would be
forced to confront him and possibly kill him; because that’s where they were heading, it was no use
indulging in comforting delusions.

They might not survive and he wouldn’t die without having taken what belonged to him.

“I could run a bath,” the detective suggested, wishing to prick the balloon of John’s indecision.

“Is that because you want one or because you think you or I need one?” the blond man replied, in a
quiet-seething tone of voice.

“We’ve had a trying day and I may not be as… pristine as you might wish.”

Outside, the rain chorus resounded with groans and moans, and a siren wailed in the distance,
almost like a warning: this is your last chance to be alive; take it and be forever grateful.

“I prefer to taste skin rather than soap,” John said, inspecting his surroundings in a soldier-like
manner. Without further ado, he took the cushions from the sofa and arranged them on the rug in
front of the hearth. When he was done, he stared at his lover, who was standing a few paces from
him, completely still but for the butterfly tremor of his lashes and the instinctive curling of his
fingers. He thought about what he was going to say and decided that the occasion warranted brutal
honesty; he was also deeply aware that Sherlock needed to relinquish control.

“I’m going to strip you naked and then I’m going to get you on your knees and bugger you until
you ask me to stop.”

The young man’s breath hitched as he let out a muffled whimper.

“Yes, yes,” he stuttered, blood already tinting his face and throat.

He would not say another word for a long while.

“I wish I had been there,” John said, as he undid the buttons of the burgundy shirt, “I was married, I
know, but if I’d known you back then,” he swallowed his words, mesmerised as he was by the
sight of the lithe torso and narrow waist, which he could almost encompass with his hands. On this
glorious sight, he superimposed the tormenting one of an even younger Sherlock, with scrawnier
limbs and a voice still hoarse from puberty. The mysterious blend of arousal and fierce
possessiveness caught him almost by surprise; he couldn’t see straight through the mist of desire.

“I want you,” he growled, and dove into the boy’s mouth, biting and licking at it, tongue sliding
against tongue, pressing and demanding; the time for teasing had long gone, so he made quick work of Sherlock’s garments until the detective stood naked in front of him like a Parian statue. He examined him like he would have a war zone, but his strategy wasn’t guided by cold calculations; steeped in hunger and passion, he could feel in his veins the call of his lover’s blood; he saw it pulsing in his neck and the throb reverberated down the boy’s body, in the dark stain of his hard nipples and the shameless jut of his engorged sex.

Sherlock’s eyes were open wide and he was breathing hard through his parted lips.

“Here, here,” John murmured, voice sweet and caressing to lull his lover into a deceptive sense of security. When he saw the detective’s broad shoulders sag in relaxation, he pounced on that creamy skin, latching onto a nipple and biting down on it; at the same time, his hands were busy stroking and tormenting the boy’s nether regions, back and front, without respite. It was a comprehensive attack which left nothing untouched; when it was over, Sherlock’s sparse moans had turned into a litany and his body was moist and flushed. Finally, John deposited him on the cushions, on which the detective kneeled, letting the weight of his upper body rest on his forearms, his head fuzzy, the world tilting madly before his half-lidded eyes.

Behind him, his lover was swiftly losing his mind, and he divested himself without being aware of it, intent as he was in staring at the young man’s obscenely devotional posture. When he was done, he fell to his knees, spread the rounded flesh and placed a wet kiss on the tight ring of muscle. His ears were muffled by the song of his blood, so he barely heard Sherlock’s cries, but he felt its vibrations on his tongue and they spurred him on, until he was blind with desire. His heart was drumming in his chest, but when he shoved his tongue deep inside that tight tunnel of flesh, he could have sworn that he’d sensed his lover’s pulse and that it tasted like eternity.

He could have stayed like that forever, had it not been for the urgency of his own arousal: his erection was almost painful and dripping so profusely that he feared he’d already climaxed. Beneath him, Sherlock was begging and circling his hips in a hypnotic dance. John wanted nothing more than be inside him, but he’d rather burst into flames than hurt him. He coated his fingers in saliva and opened him up, as patiently as the situation allowed.

All the while, the young man was calling his name, demanding to be taken and owned, pleading sweetly, knowing it would drive John insane.

“My love,” he groaned, when he pushed in at last; my own fey magnificent creature, he thought, and plummeted into the fateful night.

It hurt; a sharp, lancing pain that sliced through his bowels and seared his most tender flesh like an incandescent bodkin; a glorious ache that put an end to his loneliness; he would no longer be separate from John; surely now they would be forever united, together till the end of time.

This philosophical train of thoughts was brought to a sudden halt by the fierce slap of pleasure. Without noticing, he’d spread his legs wider and tilted his pelvis so that his lover had slid in even deeper, and with the next thrust, he’d grazed Sherlock’s prostate, causing a shudder of ecstasy to spread through his entire body.

“Oh god, god,” he screamed, and John dug his fingers into the detective’s loins and pumped into him, hard and fast, moving deeper with every thrust, until the young man felt the fat prick’s head nudging at the base of his solar plexus.

“You’re mine, mine,” the blond man was snarling, as if it hurt to say it but he would anyway, even
if it killed him.

Sherlock’s erection was a live thing, bobbing and drenching the cushions against which it was being pressed with every violent shove.

His mouth and tongue felt swollen and eager like carnivorous flowers, and his nipples were still sore from earlier ministrations; his skin was tight like a shrunken garment and he’d never felt so deliriously complete, not even while in the throes of the opiates or after he’d solved his first case.

“Too good, I can’t, can’t,” his lover was crying, and drove into him so viciously Sherlock’s teeth rattled. Catching him by surprise, John reached around and closed his fist around the detective’s prick. His orgasm hit him with the impact of a waterfall: it surged from the point where he was joined to his lover and licked at his insides until he could no longer bear it and had to let it burst out of him, in frantic, copious spurts. He screamed and shook, squeezing John’s pleasure out of him as he tightened around his thick shaft.

It seemed to last forever, the bliss of their release and the pain of their impending separation so entwined that Sherlock couldn’t tell why he was shedding tears.

“Don’t leave me,” he was repeating and John smeared his mouth against the nape of his lover’s neck, lapping at the salty skin with relish. “I love you,” he said it like a prayer, a statement of worship that meant more than any promise.

Reality returned to them in flashes, and it was only when they were lying down on their sides, still conjoined, that their surroundings seemed tangible and not the stuff of daydreams.

“I hope I didn’t hurt you,” John said, softly, as he started to pull out. The detective winced; it burnt and stung, but the squelching sound it evinced, lewd as it was, helped counteract the emptiness he’d dreaded more than any ache.

“It was,” he started, and his voice was ruined by too much shouting, scratchy as tweed, “I don’t have the words to describe what it was like.”

“Let me check,” the doctor said, and before Sherlock could protest, he was ducking down to inspect the young man’s private parts. The boy felt the tip of a finger sinking inside the loosened ring, and moaned.

“You seem to be fine,” his lover chuckled, placing a kiss right there, uncaring of the mess. “I should get something to clean us up,” he added, but the detective would have none of it.

“You said you wouldn’t leave,” he protested. He sounded petulant and weepy, but John did not mock him.

“I won’t,” he replied, gathering the still-trembling body in his arms, “I never will.”

“We are never to part.” Sherlock declared, solemn like a judge, “Promise me.”

“Yes, I promise,” the doctor replied, forcefully.

They stared into each other’s eyes, mutely exchanging the vows that were to last them a lifetime. When they kissed, it was as two parts of the same whole.
The first discordant thing was the smell; he could have called it stench, but he didn’t mind that reek of Thames and sewage; it always reminded him of his beloved London.

Even when he’d been at Cambridge, the delicate odour of the Cam had barely scratched at the itch of his longing for the real thing.

Their flat was not in the proximity of the river, which meant that an explosion must have damaged the drains, causing a sewage overflow. Or it might be another burst pipe, like the one in Camden, when he’d gone to rescue John.

“The rain has stopped,” he said, hearing nothing but a distant swishing murmur.

No reply came, and then he realised his partner wasn’t there.

He opened his eyes, or tried to, since his lids were heavy and gummy.

Thankfully, the light was pale and soft; it issued from a long-stemmed art-nouveau lamp curving above the large brocade divan on which he’d been sleeping. He was dressed in his shantung robe and his feet were bare. His mouth was parched and his lips swollen, and there was a tell-tale throbbing on his lower back; he hadn’t dreamed of having been taken; that had truly happened. He combed shaky fingers through his hair and felt the thick texture of it with near-anguish. Why would touch cause him such strong emotions? And where was he? But most importantly, what had happened to John?

He couldn’t think, couldn’t stem the rush of terror that sprang forth every time his skin brushed against fabric or was swept by a cooler gust of air.

There was evidently something unnatural in this onslaught of feelings, something artificial and possibly chemical.

And then he realised he was not alone.

“Was that an adequate challenge, my dear boy,” the man said, “I sincerely hope you relished it.”

“What challenge?”

A peal of full-throated laughter and, “You shouldn’t play coy, my treasure, it doesn’t suit you in the least,” he added, the lisp barely disguised by the careful enunciation.

Alexander Marchmain materialised in front of Sherlock, gliding forth as if he’d been treading on water.

Another effect of the drugs, the detective thought, wondering which manner had been used to intoxicate him.

“Where have you taken me?” he asked, anxiously peering into the face of his enemy, only to realise that it was as devoid as expression as he remembered it. He was wearing the jacket of a military uniform, which the young man had never seen before. It was navy blue with brass buttons and epaulettes; he had gone as far as award himself medals, but his ramrod straight back and the proud posture of his shoulders and head told their own eloquent, terrifying story.

“You are a very clever boy, my dear,” the man purred, “I’m sure you can guess where we are.”

“Nearby the Thames,” replied Sherlock, wrinkling his nose, “Or so I hope. What have you done with my Mycroft?”
Marchmain moved closer to the bed and offered him a cigarette from a solid gold case; he refused, even though he was badly tempted.

“How virtuous of you,” Marchmain drawled, “As for your brother, I can’t be sure, but I suspect that he’s back at his club. Why, don’t tell me that you’re worried about him.”

“You let him go then,” the detective said, feeling as if he were stumbling about in the dark.

The Duke of Beaufort cast him a glance filled with pity.

“It was never in my power to restrain him,” he replied, taking a long drag from the cigarette he’d just lighted, “You must have been misinformed, my dear.”

Sherlock sat back against the armrest, which was made of finely carved rosewood, and felt hollow and bruised. He needed to know where John was, but was certain he couldn’t trust Marchmain’s replies.

“He knows about you and so does the War office,” the young man stated, because after all Greene, Marks and all the others were acting on behalf of the government.

“Naturally,” the man said, with calm arrogance, “We are all on the same side, fighting the same enemy.”

The detective’s head whirled, and he felt like he was going to be sick.

“Mycroft is not betraying his country,” he said, swallowing a mouthful of bile.

“What a curious idea,” replied the blond man. He had walked to the side of the divan and he sat down, close to Sherlock’s feet. The boy resisted the impulse to clutch his knees to his chest, like he’s used to do as a child when he’d been hurt.

“The concept of betrayal is not a binary one, as I’m sure you realise,” the Duke continued, “Allowing the destruction of what we hold dear by a bunch of amateurs is surely the blackest of sins.”

“By amateurs, you mean,”

“Chamberlain first and now Churchill; those shabby, pathetic old men, who have neither vision nor understanding of what the real threat is,” Marchmain said, his voice heavy with contempt.

“Russia,” the detective whispered, suddenly finding that he was on the verge of laughter. Everything, the entire blood-soaked business, could not have been caused by this deranged creature’s dislike of communism, could it? He stifled a giggle.

“We have to preserve the purity of our nation and the Germans understand that. We have much in common, if you think about it.”

“Once I told you that I dislike politics and it’s still true. I know my brother; he has a staggering quantity of faults, but he’s not interested in this purity cant; that much I know. If he let you believe that he was, I’m afraid that you’ve been played.”

With a swift, unexpected movement, the blond man grabbed one of Sherlock’s ankles and squeezed it tight enough to leave a mark. His lips stretched into a mirthless smile, his white teeth glinting like fangs.
“How do you think I got you here, if not thanks to your brother’s help?” he asked.

“You must have your ways; ways that don’t include asking for Mycroft’s help,” the detective replied, firmly, even though he was trembling inside.

“And your little friend,” the Duke’s thumb pressed against the protruding bone, “Wasn’t it Mycroft who sent him to Baker Street and almost forced him to live with you?”

“My brother did not abduct John and left him to die,” the detective shouted.

“What a melodramatic streak you have, my dear. Your brother did mention that, but I never quite believed him. You seemed so distant, so wonderfully unconcerned about the trifles of the heart.”

“You lies about Mycroft would be too transparent even to an undereducated child,” Sherlock said, more calmly, “I won’t fall for them, even with another dose of your filthy drug in me.”

Marchmain clicked his tongue and shook his head.

“I’d never lie to you, my sweet,” he said, and bent down, so close that Sherlock felt his acrid breath against his lips.

Chapter End Notes

Next: what happened to John and where is Mycroft????
The Solution to the Riddle

Chapter Summary

A tale of two nights or where Sherlock and John are still separated but at least have found out the truth...

Chapter Notes

We are almost there guys!!! Thanks for sticking with the story and putting up with my convoluted plots.
Some notes:
1) In 1800, Axminster made a 74-by-52-foot (23 m × 16 m) carpet for Mahmud II, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, known today as the most famous Axminster Carpet of all. Depicting a blazing sun, moon and a whole constellation of stars, it cost £1000 (equivalent to £72,815 in 2015). Carried out of the factory by thirty men from the local Congregational Church, it was initially placed in the Topkapi Palace.
2) HM Prison Wormwood Scrubs (informally "The Scrubs") is a Category B men's prison, located in the Wormwood Scrubs area of the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, in inner west London
3) The East End intelligence man I was alluding to is Tommy Flowers, unsung hero of Bletchley. He built the Colossus machines without which Turing & co. couldn't have done their decrypting. Largely unknown because he wasn't posh or a public school boy. Things never change, alas.

“I can't go back to yesterday because I was a different person then.”

Alice in Wonderland - Lewis Carroll

“Stay away from me!” he shouted, loud enough that it echoed through the cavernous space they were inhabiting. Despite the absence of dampness and mould, he knew that he was underground, but he was no longer certain about the proximity of the river. His senses had been tampered with and it could very well be yet another deception practiced by the cunning, unhinged man sitting next to him. He wasn’t really afraid anymore, but he needed to gain time. Something still eluded him and he intended to ferret it out of the Duke before the latter forced him again into inebriation.

Marchmain’s eyes widened in what seemed like real surprise.

“My dear boy,” his tone expressed genuine contrition, “You wound me with your mistrust. Please believe that all my acts originated from the deepest of devotions and that I only had your best interests at heart. Weren’t you seeking solace in drugs and desperately yearning for one whose
effects would last without impairing your faculties? And isn’t it also true that you were intensely excited by the possibility of solving riddles for a living? My plans only happened to coincide with your desires, so why not give you what you craved when it also furthered my long-cherished plans?”

The insane logic contained in the Duke’s statements struck Sherlock as plausible even as he fought against its significance. Sensing his revulsion, the older man had pulled away and was now sitting at the foot of the divan, his hands clasped together in his lap, like paws.

“I never asked you for anything,” the detective replied, “We barely know each other and when you met me that one time at the Diogenes I was a different person. I was little more than a spoilt child, for god’s sake!”

“Your brother told me about you once,” Alexander continued, staring into the distance, “He said you would not be constrained by the rules that bound other people. He said it with exasperation but with a measure of pride too. He envied you, but he also knew that he couldn’t provide you with the necessary diversions to keep you from constantly going off the rails, which is why I stepped in, answering his unspoken request.”

The detective sniggered.

“And you really think that Mycroft would leave such a demand unsaid? You are quite wrong, by the way, since what he did was to always keep me away from you. He let me believe you two had an entente, knowing full well that I would have travelled to Lapland rather than meet my brother’s paramour.”

It was Marchmain’s turn to laugh and he did so uproariously.

“Mycroft and I? That’s the funniest joke I have heard in ages, my dear. He has all the fascination and daring of a middle-class accountant, which is all the more aggravating considering his more than average intelligence. Besides, I do not mix with that sort of things; all those silly chemicals only interfere with the workings of the mind.”

Sherlock tried to contain his surprise, but doubted he was doing a competent job of it.

His sibling had always warned him against feelings and emotions, but that view was now tainted by the suggestion that he wasn’t the originator of that philosophy of life. And if Marchmain had influenced him on that score, what more damage could he have inflicted on Mycroft’s psyche? In addition to that, he saw for the first time, in all its dismal misery, the absurdity of following those precepts: John’s life, his flesh and blood, were entwined with Sherlock’s and he could never, would never give them up, for a pure, cold, aseptic ideal of platonic perfection. He knew that it would be pointless to communicate his conclusions to the other man, since he was blinded by his delusions; he opted for speaking of crude, objective realities.

“You cannot win,” he said, “Your game has been up for a while now, ever since Sansom died. He directed us towards the solution, that only a drug could have done the damage suffered by his internal organs even though we could find no actual trace of it in his blood or anywhere else in his body. It’s only a matter of time until we find a link between you and the stock of drugs, which have been distributed through high-class clubs and restaurants and low-rate tobacconists. And even if we don’t, we know what to look for and we shall block your efforts. Your strategy could only work until people didn’t know why they were acting the way they were.”

He soon realised that his tirade had not obtained the desired effect. A pleased yet slightly disdainful smiled curved the Duke’s thin lips.
“I apologise if the drug is not faultless yet,” he replied, “It appears to have meddled with your marvellous synapses and their matchless prowess. Unless the close proximity to mediocrity has already affected you beyond repair.”

After this scathing pronouncement, he stood up and moved away from the divan, leaving Sherlock to his own cogitations.

The boy heard the clink of glass and the splashing of liquids, so he guessed what he couldn’t see, due to the lack of illumination in that part of the room.

Since he had not done that before, he took some time in assessing his surroundings: the walls were painted in cheerful yellow and the divan he was lying on was in a bastardised Regency style which combined the lush excess of the brocade to the finer artisanship of carved rosewood. The art nouveau lamp should have clashed with it, but its elegant lines tempered the exuberance of the divan. The floor was covered with a carpet depicting a blazing sun, a moon and a constellation of stars: it looked suspiciously like the famous Axminster which had been in the Topkapi Palace. Would the Duke accept a copy? Sherlock doubted it. And if that was the original, Marchmain would certainly never allow it to be in any other place but the one where he spent the majority of his days and nights.

He could have got up and explored the rest of the room, but somehow he felt it would seem like a concession he wasn’t yet prepared to make, as if confirming that he needed external help for his deductions. Naturally he always did, but he didn’t want Marchmain to gaze into his soul anymore than he already had.

Another conclusion he did draw was that this luxury mirrored the one of Mrs Mayfield's buen retiro at the Bouillabaisse. Like he’d guessed at the time, it wasn’t her own doing but that of her wealthy patron. She must have been easy to convince, he thought, with her hatred for those who had killed her beloved Archie. Even the Germans must be preferable to the same British establishment which had sent her husband to his untimely death. Even her business was little more than an afterthought that she would gladly lose in order to enact her revenge.

Yet Marchmain was unruffled, so he didn’t expect his wicked plan to fail, but how could it not, when Sherlock was in his lair and people would be looking for him? John would never rest until he found his partner, unless he was in the same predicament or worse… but that was unthinkable, so he refused to dwell on it.

The drug must have been administered to him while he was sleeping, but that hypothesis did not satisfy him: how could anyone be sure that they were sleeping unless they were already hiding inside the flat? And no one was, or Marks would have found them. He certainly had not waited for them inside the flat without checking if it was already occupied.

His mind went back to the previous afternoon and their encounter with his Trinity fellow: the way he’d devoured those sandwiches, the insistence that they shouldn’t contact Lestrade, the cigarette he’d convinced Sherlock to smoke… the cigarette! He’d been so preoccupied about Leo’s presence he’d not questioned his loyalty, but what if he, unbeknownst to the War office and his colleagues, had turned to the enemy and had become a German spy? That would explain so much: both his and John’s odd behaviour after Marks had left, that frenzy of sexuality which had overridden their most pressing concerns, the deep sleep they must have succumbed to after their lovemaking, so deep they had not been aware of the intrusion. If that were true, it meant Marchmain was telling the truth and Mycroft was safe and sound at his club. It also meant, without a doubt, that Marks was dead.

His life wouldn’t be worth a penny, since he’d been seen at Baker Street by four people.
And it was then that Sherlock understood the masterful cunning of the Duke’s plan.

“You do see it now, don’t you, ducky?” purred the blond man, who’d silently returned by the detective’s side, holding two flutes brimming over with champagne; he offered one to the young man, who didn’t have the strength to refuse it. He gulped it down in one go and his eyes watered.

“It won’t work,” he said, wiping away the moisture, “Lestrade and Mycroft will know the truth.”

“My dear, you really have no respect for our wonderful press. The Daily Mail and the Morning Post have been dying to find out who killed that poor girl and they will not fail to appreciate the coincidence of someone murdered in the same manner. And what with the chief suspect residing in the flat where the poor victim died, not to speak of the paraffin test proving that he was the one to fire the shot. I made sure a couple of very insistent hacks would get to Baker Street before the police.”

Sherlock was shaking with rage, but when he spoke, his voice was firm.

“The truth will come out, that Marks was a traitor and that John shot him to defend me. My disappearance will strengthen the case for the defence.”

“What truth, my pet? Mine, that of a respect peer of the realm, of yours, that of an eccentric loner on the outskirts of society? Which truth do you think they will believe? Even your brother hasn’t helped his cause by entertaining a relationship with a Scotland Yard inspector. Oh yes, of course I knew about that as soon as it happened. I have very good friends at the Yard.”

“Anderson,” the detective murmured, his lips a thin line of despondency.

“Doctors can prove rather useful, provided that they know their place in society.”

“You want me to work with you or you’ll make sure John is tried and executed for murder.”

“You did get there at last, my dear,” exclaimed Marchmain, “Another glass to celebrate?”

“Wake up! I say Watson, wake up! Excuse me, but I have to do this.”

The nagging voice quietened, but a sudden avalanche of freezing water descended on him, shaking him awake. For a terrible moment, he believed that he’d been thrown inside a well and that he was drowning, but when he finally regained consciousness, he found that he was in the sitting room at Baker Street, naked as a newborn baby and in the sole company of a very flustered Leonard Rosoman. The man’s auburn mane was dishevelled and his countenance, which during their previous meeting had been sardonic and self-assured, wore an expression of horrified urgency. He had an ice bucket in his hands, but the handle of a gun was peeping out from his trouser pocket.

It was then that John realised that the fingers of his left hand were tightened around the Luger and that on the sofa was a man who, despite the racket they were making, was suspiciously still.

“Sherlock,” he murmured, and his heart stilled in his chest. What if he’d hurt him in another drug-induced amnesia? He looked down at the pistol and knew with certainty that it had been fired. He’d use to kill himself too, if that were the case.

“It’s Marks,” said Rosoman, who’d partially read his thoughts. “They must have taken Sherlock. I
was just in time, my friend. I bet you were going to be found in this undignified state by the police or worse.”

“Worse?”

“Have you ever heard of Lord Rothermere?”

Despite the seriousness of his predicament, John snorted a laugh.

“Was I going to be splashed all over the front page of the Daily Mail?” he quipped.

“Probably,” replied Rosoman, as he helped the doctor to his feet, “That loathsome man is an admirer of Hitler and a great advocate of the aristocracy.”

“What happened to Sherlock and why is Marks dead? Did you kill him?”

“I think you should make yourself presentable and put a kettle on,” said the fireman, smiling. “We have a long night ahead of us.”

“It was Greene who suspected him first.”

They were drinking black tea and eating soup from a can, since Rosoman had taken a look at the rest of the cucumber sandwiches and declared them unsafe.

“His comings and goings from the War Office were frequently unexplained. I believe he was seen by Mr Mycroft Holmes once, who naturally thought nothing of it. The Irregulars are not supposed to go there unless specifically instructed and he wasn’t. But what tipped the balance was the way he drew Sherlock in. Leo must have realised your friend would visit Marks & Co and made sure Mr Marks had something to tell him.”

“But Greene used that information to validate his own credentials and he got us involved in Sansom’s death.”

Rosoman looked embarrassed.

“I’m afraid that wasn’t strictly cricket, but by that point, we were forced to play the game to see where it was going. We didn’t yet know about Beaufort then. We suspected his brother, but he was too timid to be the architect of such an intricate enterprise. And we truly believed the Duke had been of the country for a long time. Mycroft Holmes suspected that he wasn’t, but even he had trouble believing how deeply steeped in corruption his old friend was. Greene had fewer scruples and kept an open mind. He’s a writer, after all.”

“Well, he certainly got this one right, but not soon enough to prevent Sherlock from being abducted.”

“It was bad timing, I agree. De Grey came to consult us as a matter of urgency and we were still trying to agree on a strategy when Leo gave us the slip. He made us believe he was heading for the code-breakers’ place in the country when in fact he was coming here. I was sent here a secondary measure, and thank heavens for that.”

“I always thought Mycroft had Baker Street under surveillance.”

“He may have tried, but Marchmain’s word counts for more.”
John shook his head, amused.

“I never thought I’d see the day,” he said, but was immediately reminded of his lover and the manner in which he’d been snatched from his side.

“It no longer matters,” he bit out, “We need to find Sherlock and I won’t wait for the Yard to do it for us. Where is he hiding? You must know by now.”

Rosoman took another sip of tea and placed the cup down with extreme care; he was stalling, John realised.

“We know he’s hiding in this neighbourhood, but we couldn’t figure out where exactly. There is a network of underground tunnels which have never been mapped. I have tried to trace them but it’s an impossible task. The easiest way would be to find out who owns the buildings and whether they are related to Marchmain.”

“But the records have been removed from the Land Registry,” John said, remembering the previous morning and marvelling at how distant it already seemed.

“Finding the solicitors who dealt with the conveyances could take months and even when we do, they may decide to say nothing.”

“A man cannot just disappear into thin air, let alone keep someone hostage with him.”

Leonard Rosoman grimaced in dismay.

“Anything is possible when you have money, power and a twisted imagination.”

“What do you suggest? I’m not staying here, waiting until that madman kills us all! By the way, what is de Grey going to do?”

“He and a small group of code-breakers and bombe technicians have set up a small unit in London with the help of a very clever East End fellow. He has devised a special decoding machine and they will operate independently. The other location has become tainted and unreliable, at least until Marchmain is still on the loose.”

John stood up and moved closer to Rosoman, until they were eye to eye.

“If you are lying to me and Sherlock has been hurt because of you and your colleagues’ machinations, I will do all that’s in my power to make your life a living hell,” he said, every word dropping like a stone in a pool.

“I understand,” Rosoman replied, holding the doctor’s gaze, “And I’m prepared to suffer the consequences. We did what we thought was best, but perhaps you could argue that we should have kept Mr Holmes away from the case.”

The blond man relaxed and bit his lips.

“That you couldn’t have done unless you’d locked him inside Wormwood Scrubs; and even then…”

“Quite stubborn is he?”

“A barren of mules has nothing on him.”

A tide of longing swept over John and threatened to weaken him; he pushed it aside and repeated
his earlier question.

“How do we find him?”

“I think that we should go back to the Evangelical Library. You were taken from there and the manner of your disappearance suggests either a magic trick or a clever system of concealed doors which lead elsewhere.”

“I don’t believe in magic,” said the doctor.

“We are of a mind then because neither do I,” replied Rosoman, and grinned.
Alexander weaves his web of deceit...

I swear this story does not want to end! :)

“But man, proud man,
Dress’d in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he’s most assur’d—
His glassy essence—like an angry ape
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep; who, with our spleens,
Would all themselves laugh mortal.”
*Measure for Measure* – William Shakespeare

After the disorientation and the sheer rage came the curiosity, which always was the mainspring of Sherlock’s actions; as a child, even before he’d known of intuition or learned about the principle of causality, he had already been driven by the desire to dissect, to pry open objects real and imaginary so that he could find the truth hidden behind them, the mechanisms which operated them and those which could undo them, should they become obsolete or, as was the case with people, villainous.

Alexander Marchmain, Duke of Beaufort and Marquess of Worcester, descended from noble ancestors who had been favoured by Charles II, the king who had created their peerage; their line went as far back as John of Gaunt and Edward III, rising to prominence during the Wars of the Roses; he was as quintessentially British as Buckingham Palace and the Crown Jewels yet he had started an enterprise which would consign his country into the hands of a madman of humble Austrian origins, a dictator who was determined to put the European continent to the sword.

The current monarchy was virtually German, but Sherlock doubted that was the motive behind any of the Duke’s machinations.

“Your dukedom is French,” he said, as the blond man sipped the sparkling drink.

“Beaufort is a castle in the Champagne region,” Marchmain grinned, “How apt, don’t you think? We no longer own it, of course, not for centuries.”

“A loss of influence which must have been keenly resented.”

“That sort of power was interwoven with our strength as a conquering nation. We’ve lost our empire and we shall be reduced to begging, unless we do something to redress this abomination.”
The man’s sallow cheeks were gathering colour and his non-descript eyes were as hard as gemstones.

“Hitler is not the solution to your woes,” said Sherlock, wanting to provoke him even more, “Insanity is never a wise counsellor. He will always overestimate his power and undervalue his opponents.”

Once again, Alexander’s reactions surprised him: the man smiled broadly, and for the first time the detective understood his appeal: there was a crazy insouciance in that grin, a quality of devil-may-care courage which could easily seduce the impressionable and engender hero-worship in the meekest of men.

“I would never dream of suggesting the opposite, my lovely,” he drawled, “The Germans and this preposterous war are but the means to achieve another objective: establishing the sovereignty of the truly deserving. There has to be a ruling class and you rightly put me in my place that time we had our little talk.”

Like the majority of gifted men, Sherlock was deeply susceptible to flattery and he couldn’t deny that he was a little impressed by the effect he’d had on the Duke. It was dangerous, he realised with a shiver of fear, like flying too close to the sun.

“You give me too much credit,” he muttered, staring down at his own nervous hands.

“Perhaps I do,” agreed the older man, “But without a doubt it was you who made me see what I had not perceived until then: that a superiority of lineage, as paramount as it is, won’t last the course unless it’s sustained by the supremacy of the mind.”

“Morals have no place in your cosmogony.”

Marchmain curled his lip in a show of disdain.

“Don’t pretend you care about morals, mon chou, when you expressly told me that you didn’t.”

“It was two years ago and I wasn’t thinking straight!”

“You were purer than you are now. And not because you hadn’t been tainted by that doctor of yours, although that surely didn’t help; your vision was clearer, undimmed by the fogs of maturity and unmarred by convention’s smeary fingers. Your words went through me like a sword and I won’t allow you to recant them.”

The young man shuddered violently, as if his veins were filled with ice; yet he felt feverish, his face hot and his pulse throbbing. He sat back on the divan and closed his eyes. Only for a moment, he thought, until I can see clearly again.

“And after that, you started weaving your web,” he murmured, unable to resist the seduction of knowledge, the fierce throb of delight evinced by the unravelling of a pattern whose thread he’d been trying to tug ever since he’d met Cummins.

“And are you impressed?” asked Marchmain, softly.

Sherlock ignored the question, intent as he was in recreating that past in which he’d been designated to star as the principal actor, even though he had not been aware of it. His eyes still closed, he narrated the story as if he’d been reading a fairytale to a child.

Something was wrong, he was still in thrall to that fiendish drug, he must be; all the same, he had
to let himself fall into the arms of that sharp-sighted oblivion, for knowledge would save him, like it always had.

“Your family own a considerable portion of the country, but you’ve secretly purchased most of Marylebone, especially the area around Baker Street. Before the war started, you had one of your architects draw an intricate set of underground tunnels and refuges, so that you could act undetected from there. The only problem was providing the appropriate air supply, which is why you couldn’t risk producing the drug deep underground, as the fumes could be lethal. You could have done so anywhere in Britain or even abroad; why you decided to use the Evangelical Library puzzled me for a while and the answers I came up with never quite convinced me. But then I met you and realised you wanted all of your empire to be in the same place, where you could control it directly.”

“Like you, I only trust few people and I could not risk betrayal.”

“The scientists must have been expendable.”

The Duke chuckled; when Sherlock briefly opened his eyes, he saw that the blond man had pushed a high-back Queen Anne chair close to the divan and was ensconced in it like a sovereign on a throne.

“They were refugees,” he replied, “They had no papers; those without a country are always expendable. Some had worked at Temmler at the start of the 1930s and had come across a compound that presented interesting personality-enhancing faculties. It was a complex process of trail and error and the drug is not perfect yet, but the Germans were impressed all the same.”

“You chose Cummins as your guinea pig.”

“My little brother and old Tremayne did my work for me, in that instance. The boy was ready for the plucking, so to speak. He had all the specs I was looking for: non-existent family, rampant sensuality and a penchant for self-aggrandising.”

“And you needed a scapegoat after those two women had been murdered.”

“I wouldn’t say murdered: the first one was practically an accident. The Oatley girl knew too much and was infatuated with Peter Brent.”

“Only Brent did not exist; she was in fact in love with William Sansom, one of your little helpers,” Sherlock couldn’t hide his dismay at the thought of the fire-fighter’s duplicitous behaviour.

“He indulged her because he needed to believe he could lead a normal life. He had the artistic temperament, which can never be satisfied with only one identity. That girl had to die or she would have gone to the police and caused unnecessary trouble.”

“Cummins had met her, I suppose, since he was friends with Sansom.”

“He’d met the other insolent bitch too,” said Marchmain, acidly “That King girl was too nosy for her own good. I suppose that since she couldn’t make money in the usual ways, she decided to pry into the club’s business.”

“The brutality of her murder was unwarranted, but I guess you wanted to raise the issue of identity, because by that point you’d already decided to frame Cummins for the killing of Greta Hayward’s doppelganger. You took many risks, since you couldn’t be sure you would pull it off.”

The Duke smirked, but his self-assurance didn’t waver.
“Gordon Cummins was a weak, malleable subject. He was easy to ensnare and even easier to manipulate.”

“Tremayne gave him the drug and yet he insisted that he loved him. He paid for his defence and feigned surprise at the RAF pilot’s incoherent statements even as he knew the reasons behind his confusion.”

“Isn’t this drug marvellous? Only the strongest among us can resist its effects. He didn’t stand a chance. Because he didn’t like women, it was easy to make him believe he could have murdered those two in a fit of rage, even though he couldn’t remember.”

“Yet he had an alibi for when the third girl was murdered,” the detective suggested. His eyelids felt heavy, but he fought against the impulse to close them. He saw Marchmain’s sardonic expression and understood.

“You did that on purpose,” he exclaimed.

“Rothermere is a good friend of mine. After Sansom sent it to the Daily Mail, I made sure the picture was published. I knew you would eventually see it and draw the right conclusions.”

“My brother tried to drag me away from the case.”

“Poor deluded Mycroft,” sniggered the older man.

“But why did you have to kill someone and identify her as Greta Hayward? That I couldn’t fathom,” the detective said; he was seriously struggling to stay awake, but his mind was oddly alert.

For once, Alexander was truly surprised and when he spoke, he did so with glee, like he’d been presented with a magnificent and unexpected gift.

“It never ceases to astound me,” he said, “That the detail we choose to focus on should go frequently unnoticed by the spectator. I’d imagined this would be among the first of your guesses.”

Sherlock reflected on Greta’s provenance, her name and her fair looks, the Brixton orphanage and Miss McGrath’s story about their childhood there.

“She was your sister,” he said, and Marchmain scowled.

“Step-sister, born on the wrong side of the blanket, as they used to say,” the Duke argued. “Her mother had been our cook. I’m sure you know how attached one can become to one’s servants. When her mother died, my father brought her to London. Someone at the orphanage must have talked, I suppose. In any case, she found out the truth and came to see me at Marchmain House.”

“You thought that you’d pay her off, but after you talked to her, you decided you could use her.”

The blond man nodded.

“She was a crafty little slip of a girl, but she had pluck. I guess blood does tell, in the end. When the time came, she even found a woman who looked like her. Another orphan, I imagine. We needed to get her out of the picture.”

“You did, you mean. What she failed to realise was that once she was officially dead, it was only a matter of time before she would be killed for real.”
“I had reserved her for your devoted paramour. Your lover killing my step-sister: I couldn’t imagine anything more delicious, in a twisted sort of way.”

“You spied on me, with the help of your friends at the Yard no doubt.”

“I knew you would find out about the Evangelical Library sooner or later, so I was prepared. Your doctor revealed to us what you knew about Greta.”

“You could have killed him or called the journalists and implicated him in the girl’s murder.”

“I wanted you to have your puzzle first,” said the Duke, with such solemnity Sherlock felt like giggling. “And you did solve it, like I thought you would. Where would a weary man go at the end of the day if not to the place where he belongs?”

“Home?”

“His grave, which in this instance amounted to the same thing,” was the cruel reply.

“You went to all this trouble and yet your drug hasn’t won you the war; far from it.”

“That’s where you are wrong, ducky. Why do you think your brother was so troubled after he went to Bletchley Park? He understood no one can be trusted any more. He may count on old fogeys like de Grey, but the Young Turks are a different kettle of fish. And you must have noticed how ineffectual our Air Forces have been in preventing our cities from being razed to the ground. London is a pile of rubble, my dear, in case you haven’t noticed.”

The fact that his beloved city was being destroyed and that this awful man rejoiced in it awakened Sherlock’s rage.

“I’ll kill you rather than allow you to prevail!” he screamed, pouncing on the aristocrat and closing both hands around the man’s scrawny neck.

“At last we are getting somewhere, my sweet,” gasped Marchmain, and let the crystal glass fall to the floor, where it bounced on the thick carpet and rolled away, as if made of rubber.

Of the many things one could have accused Georgie Dillon of, dishonesty had never been one of them. Sure, he did sprinkle his facts with a dusting of exaggeration, but he liked to work for the money he earned. And he certainly had not deserved the money Sherlock Holmes had sent him at Boulestin’s. Naturally, it wasn’t Georgie’s fault, but it still seemed like a dereliction of duty. It was because of this nagging feeling that, after closing the restaurant, he decided to head to Baker Street and see whether the detective could still use his services. He’d always wanted to be a spy and now was his chance and he was going to grab it and hold it tight.

He didn’t stop to think about the late hour and the possibility that Holmes might be sleeping; in his mind, sleuths never slept, and in Sherlock’s case he wasn’t altogether wrong.

At that hour the tube was already shut, so he walked to the Charing Cross Road and took a bus to Marble Arch. From there it was only a ten minutes’ walk to Baker Street. It was raining cats and dogs, but better than being bombed to kingdom come, he supposed. The rain did a good job at washing down the rubble-strewn roads, but when he arrived at his destination he was drenched to the bone.

Got to make myself presentable, he thought. Most places were closed, but he found a poky shop at
the other end of the street, one not dissimilar to Spangler’s. He purchased a steamy mug of Bovril and a box of matches.

“Mind if I smoke?” he asked the wrinkled, shrewd-eyed decrepit man behind the counter.

“Not if you offer me one,” he replied, and after Georgie offered him a Black Cat from Sherlock’s pack, he opened a book and let his customer enjoy the companionable solitude he himself relished.

Left to his own devices, the boy strolled to the shop door and glanced outside, in the direction of 221b: the first floor windows were blacked-out, but he fancied that he could see a glimmer of light. He’d almost finished his beef tea, when he saw a man emerge from a doorway and dart into Sherlock’s building.

The rain had abated and was now a feeble drizzle, more like thick mist than rain; the last thing he needed was a pea-souper, he reflected. That would make it impossible to do a spot of surveillance, which seemed the best course of action, considering recent events. He smoked a second cigarette, duly offering one to the old man too, and by the time that was over, he could barely see the steps leading up to 221b.

He paid for this drink and dove back into the freezing cold night, feeling excited and smelling of tobacco and cheap grub. The street was empty and the silence near complete, save for the distant noise of sirens, which was now so frequent it had become enmeshed in normality, like the rumble of car engines. When he got to the black-painted door with its polished brass knocker, he suddenly felt shy: what would he say when they came down and found him there? What if that man was another client and the case Georgie had been employed in was already yesterday’s news?

“Well, there’s now for it,” he said to himself, “Can’t go home without finding out for sure.” Ever since he’d started living on his own, he’d taught himself to always check that his front door was properly shut; thus, by sheer force of habit, he tried the handle and realised the door was neither locked nor bolted. Inside, the staircase was bathed in musty darkness; he slowly mounted the steps, taking care not to make any noise. Unfortunately, one of the wooden slats was loose and an ominous creak broke the silence. He waited for a moment, but nothing came of it.

When he finally reached the top, he bent down to peep through the keyhole, but the view was obstructed either by the key or by other means. He pressed his cheek against the cool wood and waited. Seconds passed which seemed suspended in time and space; he was tense, but not fearful; thus it was a shock when the door opened and a gun was pointed at his face.

“I wouldn’t move a muscle if I were you,” a voice said and a shaft of light stabbed at his eyes.

“Georgie?” asked another voice, which he recognised as Doctor Watson’s. “What the hell are you doing here? Come inside, before we wake up the entire street.”

In the sitting room, another shocking sight awaited him: a dead man was sprawled face down on the sofa. In their urgency, John and Rosoman had forgotten to cover up the corpse.

“Not Mr Holmes, I hope,” the boy murmured, trying to keep his teeth from chattering.

“Drink this,” the unknown man with the pistol said, and offered him a glass filled with amber liquid. “It’s whisky; it will settle your nerves. By the way, I’m Leonard Rosoman; apologies for the gun, but we are in a bit of a pickle.”

“George Dillon,” the boy replied, gulping down the liquor, “I say, did you kill that man?”

“No, he did not,” replied John, “I may have, for all we know. But we haven’t time for the post-
mortem. We are going to find Mr Holmes and we could use a third person, in case we need to send for help. Up for it?” he asked, staring the boy in the eyes.

Georgie had never wholeheartedly admired a non-fictional man before, but he regarded John with shining eyes.

“You try and stop me, Sir,” he exclaimed, and the two older man burst into laughter.
The Wolf’s Lair

Chapter Summary

John & friends are on a mission, but what is happening at Marchmain House?

Two more chapters to follow, this time for real :)

Chapter Notes

Note: the film Georgie alludes to is The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari

Note 2: Homing pigeons were used extensively during World War I. In 1914 during the First Battle of the Marne, the French army advanced 72 pigeon lofts with the troops.

Note 3: Wolf's Lair was Adolf Hitler's first Eastern Front military headquarters in World War II. The complex, which became one of several Führerhauptquartiere (Führer Headquarters) in various parts of eastern Europe, was built for the start of Operation Barbarossa – the invasion of the Soviet Union – in 1941.

Note 4: A priest hole is a hiding place for a priest built into many of the principal Catholic houses of England during the period when Catholics were persecuted by law in England.

Note 5: It's proven that Hitler took Eukodal – the German brand name for [the synthetic opiate] oxycodone – intravenously.

“I envy you for being able to experience the great world-historical events in the Führer’s headquarters. The Führer’s genius, his timely intervention and the structuring of our Wehrmacht, thought through with the greatest precision in every direction, ensure that we can look into the future with great confidence.”

From a letter to Theo Morell (Hitler’s personal doctor).

Returning to the Library without Sherlock, after the events which had happened in the interim, was a weird experience, John mused.

Armed with powerful torches, they found their way to the rusty metal door and thence to the ample underground room from which the doctor had been so mysteriously and efficiently abducted.

Rosoman’s delicate features were tense and his gaze darted around like a punch-drunk moth.
Georgie had the expression of someone trying hard not to gush. Everything about their ordeal delighted him: the thick fog, the deserted streets, the abandoned building, and not even the threat of serious harm could dampen his enthusiasm. After all, he had become accustomed to peril and as for death, at his young age, he was still impervious to any argument against his own immortality.

“You were snatched from here from under Mr Holmes’ nose? Cor blimey, they’re really something, aren’t they,” he exclaimed.

John chuckled and scratched at his chin.

“They way it happened, it wouldn’t have been possible for someone to **snatch** me at all. And Sherlock must have taken this room apart, so I seriously doubt we’ll be able to get anywhere.”

“O ye, of little faith,” Rosoman quipped, “You said you were in the dark when you lost sight of each other, which means someone was controlling the switches remotely.”

“You think they were observing us?”

“Not necessarily. Think of it as a giant trap that you walked right into.”

“But that means that they couldn’t know that I would be the victim.”

“Perhaps they didn’t care,” the man said, “They took their chance and it paid off. Show me what you did.”

John’s mind went back to that night and he tried to piece together what remained of his memory of it. They had talked about the stench of chemicals, of Sherlock’s past and then the anaemic light had flickered out. What was it that he’d been admiring? He couldn’t quite recall.

“I wish I could tell you,” he replied.

They were about to embark on a meticulous inspection of their surroundings when they heard Georgie’s voice, high-pitched with excitement.

“Maybe they are magicians,” he declared, “I saw a picture once, about a foreign chap who hid a man inside coffin; the man woke up at night and stalked the streets in search of victims.”

“They are nothing of the sort,” Rosoman said, “And you should stay close to us. We better not separate and not switch the lights on, just in case.”

The light produced by their torches was vivid enough, but the pockets of darkness and shadows seemed even more threatening by contrast.

“All right,” Georgie conceded, even though he couldn’t fully understand how that empty cellar could be dangerous. “But if Doctor Watson disappeared from a secret door, it could well be a magician that built it,” he insisted.

“One of the criminal type,” John said.

“That fellow in the film was a criminal too,” explained Georgie, “A sleep-walker, but he only pretended to be. In reality, he was mad as a hatter.”

“Our scoundrel is not quite sane either.”

They decided to explore each side of the room, floor to ceiling, starting from the entrance and moving clockwise. The doctor insisted he would go first and that the boy should be second, with
Leonard on the other side making sure Georgie wouldn’t wander off on his own.

“If this building were a church, this would be the perfect crypt,” Rosoman said, admiring the recessed brickwork panels. He pressed the palm of his hand against the cool stone, searching for the hidden passage.

“Yes, well, after all this is a religious institution of a sort,” replied John, rapping his knuckles on the wainscoting, “Wait, what did you just say?”

“He said this could be the crypt of a church,” Georgie intervened; he scented the revelation which was about to take place with the prescience of a dog before a hunt.

“It’s slowly coming back to me,” murmured John, “Sherlock mentioned a priest hole, but it can’t be it, because that would have been the first thing he’d have checked after I disappeared.”

“Here it is,” said Rosoman, indicating a wooden panel concealed in the opposite wall. It wasn’t easy to discern it, as it had been painted over to resemble the brickwork which surrounded it.

“Why would they have a priest hole in a Library?” wondered the boy.

“It was the norm to build them in the most unusual places, because of the savagery with which Catholics were persecuted during the sixteenth century. They had to find a way to profess their faith without risking their lives.”

They tried to force the panel open, but it was clear from the start that their efforts would be worthless; the mechanism was blocked by centuries of disuse or perhaps it had been rendered so by other means; in any case, it was not to be the solution to their problem.

“I still believe there was something in your words which sounded familiar,” the doctor insisted.

“Let’s see,” said Rosoman, “What is that can usually be found in a church? Altar, pews, ledger, hymn books,” he recited.

“Jesus on the cross,” Georgie supplied, “It scared me stiff when I was a kid. Once, at Lent they took me to the evening service and I will never forget it as long as I live. They had thrown a purple sheet-thing over the crucifix and even covered the face of the Virgin Mary. But the scariest part was that all the statues had gone. You see, they had this one I sort of liked because it depicted St. Anthony with a little sheep and I know it sounds stupid now, but at the time,”

“Yes, that’s it!” the doctor exulted, “I remember thinking the alcove in the wall was empty like a church niche deprived of a statue. Well done, Georgie!” he said and the boy felt like he’d just won the pools.

Not far from the priest hole, they found what they were looking for: a shallow recess with the markings on the plaster indicated the spot where once must have been a shelf supporting a statue.

“This must be it,” said Rosoman, but when they shone their lights on the alcove, there didn’t seem to be anything remarkable in it nor did it strike them as a plausible entrance to the enemy’s lair.

“It can’t be,” replied John, and his stomach fell, as he’d truly hoped they’d finally succeeded.

“You should re-trace your movements. What did you do exactly?”

“I still can’t remember with precision, but I recall Sherlock talking about the priest hole then I turned towards him, but the lights went out.”
“Did you lose your balance and lean against the wall?”

Rosoman tried a few positions, but none yielded the desired result. He kicked the base of the wall, but it was solid and without evident fissures.

“It could have been opened from the other side, I suppose. And once it’s locked shut again, it’s impossible to go through from here,” the doctor suggested, but he sounded unconvinced. The boy’s eagerness had not abated and suddenly he started to jump up and down, as the two older men looked on with a befuddled expression.

“Would you please stop it?” John asked, but he’d barely uttered the words when Georgie lost his footing; he reached out to grab hold of the wall and his knee knocked against one the bricks, which from the outside looked identical to its companions.

The result was indeed almost magical: with nothing more than a soft swishing sound, the alcove portal slid to the side and a moment later it was shut again, as secretive as a cloistered nun.

“Did you see that?” the boy marvelled, “That was incredible! Wait until I tell Maggie about it.”

“You’re not to speak a word of it to anybody,” Rosoman ordered, in a tone that brooked no dissent. “We better decide where to go from here.”

“I’m going in,” the doctor said, without hesitation, “But perhaps it’s time to inform the Yard or Mycroft Holmes.” He glanced eloquently at the boy, who immediately showed his disappointment.

“Do I have to go?” he asked, “This could be my only chance to confront the enemy. And it was me who found the secret passage.”

“He has a point,” Leonard concurred, “Besides, he’d be on his own out there in the middle of the night, while I have my Browning to keep me company,” he gave a tight smile and patted Georgie’s head like he might have done with a dog.

“Ask for Lestrade and if he’s not there try and find Mycroft Holmes,” said John.

“Don’t worry, I know what to do.”

“We should have telephoned from the flat and they would be here already.”

“Better to inform them in person,” Rosoman replied, “I wouldn’t trust the other forms of communication at the moment.”

“A friend of mine used to train homing pigeons,” said Georgie, “He told me that his father used them to send messages during the other war.”

“Maybe we should try that too,” John replied, and he imagined Sherlock drawing complicated diagrams illustrating the birds’ behavioural discrepancies. His heart ached for his missing lover, but he couldn’t allow it to overpower him.

“Tread carefully and don’t accept anything from strangers,” was Leonard’s parting recommendation.

“Right,” the doctor sighed and looked the boy in the eye. “I must tell you that there is a chance we won’t get out alive from this damned cave. It must be sound-proofed too, considering that Sherlock didn’t hear me screaming; because I must have been, not that I remember it… anyway, if we cry for help, they won’t hear us.”
“But we wouldn’t be disappearing, sir, not really. Your friend just went to ask for help.”

“You have hit the nail right on the head, my lad. At this point, I no longer know who my friends are. No, don’t look at me like that. I know you are alright and that Mrs Hudson is to be trusted too, but as for the rest,” he shook his head, “I’m starting to sound like Sherlock,” he added, smiling.

“Should we wait for the charlies then?”

“We could, but I’d rather not. I’ve grown quite impatient and more than a tad annoyed. You would too, if you woke up with a dead man in your sitting room.”

“Too right, sir,” the boy agreed with fervour.

“Here goes,” John said, and tapped against the fake-brick. “Now,” he ordered and when the portal opened, they threw themselves unto the breach.

Crispian Marchmain woke up with a jolt; he was gasping for breath and feared that death had come to him at last. He hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep since he’d started smoking those deuced cigarettes. He switched on the bedside lamp and his night-terrors nearly turned into a prophecy.

By the bedroom door, partially shrouded in darkness, stood a man whose identity he couldn’t discern. If he didn’t scream it was only because he lacked the strength.

The mystery didn’t last for more than a handful of moments.

“My dear fellow,” the man said, “I think it’s time we ended this charade, don’t you?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” the youth replied, trying to sound haughty but missing the target “You should leave now or I will have to ring for help.”

“You could do that, but I doubt it would do you any good. Tell me about the drug and how it works.”

Crispian poured himself a glass of water from the jug on his bedside table, but his hands shook so much he spilled most of it.

“How did you get in?”

“There is a war or have you forgotten? I am an ARP warden, so I can get access to most places, no questions asked.”

“You went to Balliol,” Marchmain said, making it sound like an accusation.

“I’d rather not dwell on the past,” the stranger said, “Some call it arcadia, but it’s more like desolate marshland to me.”

“I didn’t mind the old Alma Mater; at least, one could always get gloriously smashed while in jolly good company.”

“And now you’ve turned to chemicals. What is that, Eukodal maybe? If you are trying to commit suicide, there are easier ways; although I wouldn’t try ingesting nightshade. It certainly didn’t work for me.”

At any other time, Crispian would have been evasive or simply refused to reply, but the shock of
that apparition combined with the fright engendered by the witching hour had rendered him unusually malleable.

“I can’t tell you because I don’t know,” he replied. “I don’t see why the name matters as long as it does the trick.”

The man said nothing and waited.

“It’s the ghastly pain, old chap,” he explained, drinking another mouthful of water, “No one likes being a frightful bore and I do love to party, if you see what I mean.”

“Suppose I told you the drug is costing us the war, would you not consider it an act of treason to participate in its distribution?”

Marchmain’s pale eyes were like livid green marbles at the bottom of an aquarium.

“I never,” he stuttered, “You don’t really mean…”

“Of course I mean it, you silly little idiot! I will personally make sure you are locked inside the Tower without even so much as a scrap of soap or a comb. Tell me everything and make it snappy.”

Marchmain’s fear was dissipating together with the irrational apparition of death; in front of him stood a creature of flesh and blood; a clever and attractive man, maybe also a dangerous one, but like Macbeth, Crispian no longer feared those born from a woman.

“There is nothing to tell, dear fellow. You threaten one with imprisonment, but one can’t languish in gaol if one is food for worms.”

“Quit talking like you’re royalty and don’t be so melodramatic. You’re not going to die just yet, not if you give up this poison and stay away from bad company.”

“Who says I was talking about myself?” the youth replied, with an unpleasant smile on his moist lips. “You are too late, old bean. The game is over, has been for some time,” he smirked.

“It’s no game,” shouted the stranger, who was a formidable sight when angry, “Look, I’m not going to hurt you, but if you refuse to talk, this interview could take an unsavoury turn.”

The young man cackled, but there was little joy in it.

“You misunderstand me, my friend,” he said, “I can’t give you what I do not possess, but one thing I can offer you: my condolences. Perhaps you could return the courtesy.”

“Why, who died?”

Crispian clapped his hands in feigned delight and barked with laughter.

John had been right: the wall which separated the basement of the Evangelical Library to the underground reign of their adversary had been thickly padded out; on the other side, it was like stepping into a different world similar to the fabled rabbit hole.

Money had been lavished on the project, no expenses spared: it reminded him a little of the Baker Street shelter, with its luxury he’d so denigrated.
The tunnel was narrow and only high enough for John and Georgie to walk without stooping, but there was no discernible humidity or overpowering stench. All the same, John’s stomach clenched at finding himself in such a confined, dark space with only a faint light at the end of it.

“I can’t believe they built all of this recently,” he whispered, “There must have been something already in place and they took advantage of it.”

“I read a story about the Baker Street tunnels once,” Georgie replied, “It was set during the other war. This is so much better than I imagined,” he added.

“It is undoubtedly clever: if the entirety of London were reduced to rubble, they would still have this bunker to live in.”

“They say that Hitler lives in a bunker too,” the boy continued, “They call it the Wolf’s Lair, and it’s in the middle of a forest, they say.”

The doctor sniggered.

“Well, at least no one can doubt that we have more style.”

Luckily for them, the tunnel came to an abrupt end and they found themselves in a brightly lit space which served as a control station: on one of the walls was a large electrical panel with a number of fuses and switches. Cables as thick as pythons disappeared into various slots, while the whirring noise of a generator filled the muffled silence.

“Don’t touch a thing,” John said in his most commanding tone, but the boy did not even flinch: he was mesmerised by the apparatus in front of him, evidently convinced he’d been just catapulted inside one of his favourite stories.

“We should go,” he added, pulling Georgie away when he realised that the boy wouldn’t listen.

Their progress was made easy by the lack of choices: either go back to where they came from or open the door that stood at the opposite side of the electrical panel.

“Let’s hope it’s not locked,” he murmured, or worse, he thought.

Neither supposition came to pass; when he tried the handle, the door opened without a problem.

What he had not expected was the appalling sensation of being confronted by his recent past, a dreadful déjà-vu which held an even more lurid fascination for its lack of visual details: it was an emotional evocation, in which only the two plain chairs and the drinks cabinet played a more concrete role. He had not even seen the cabinet at the time, placed as it was behind the chair he’d been occupying.

A dusty glass containing the residues of gin was set on the onyx-topped table next to it; on the rim was the ghost of a lipstick smudge. There were no traces of the cigarette Geta had smoked, but close to the tumbler was a solid marble ashtray. It still reeked of tobacco and of something else, stronger and deadlier.

“This is where they took me,” he whispered, still a bit incredulous.

He wondered whether the other memories would now resurface, and how dreadful they would be, but this wasn’t the time; he still had to find Sherlock.

“There’s another door behind here,” Georgie was saying, and true enough, the bottle-green velvet
curtain that conferred a stage-like appearance to the room concealed a sturdy mahogany door.

“Perhaps you should wait here,” the doctor suggested.

“Please don’t make me,” the boy pleaded, and he didn’t have the stomach to insist.

“All right,” he conceded, “But you do as I say and if you smell trouble just get back to the control room and wait there; understood?”

Georgie nodded swiftly; his heart was thudding in his chest and he felt like he could have climbed an Alpine peak.

The dying night was still withholding its final surprise, which no amount of detective fiction could have prepared him for.
And There’s an End

Chapter Summary

One down, one to go.

I hope you will enjoy the ride...

Chapter Notes

Note: "Dulce et Decorum est" is a poem written by Wilfred Owen during World War I, and published posthumously in 1920. The Latin title is taken from the Roman poet Horace and means "it is sweet and honorable...", followed by pro patria mori, which means "to die for one's country".

“Some also have wished that the next way to their Father’s house were here, that they might be troubled no more with either hills or mountains to go over; but the way is the way, and there’s an end.”

Pilgrim’s Progress - John Bunyan

Mycroft Holmes had never felt so discomfited.

Since childhood, he’d always known which direction his life was going to take, and unlike his younger brother, he’d never fought against what he’d always perceived as his destiny.

Feelings, as uncomfortable as they were, had seldom hampered his progress and the rare occasions in which he allowed them to hold sway over his intellect were mostly to do with Sherlock and his juvenile escapades.

‘Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori’ had never been his motto, but he was happy to serve his country, and even though he would never admit it openly, he was proud that he’d never been fascinated by Hitler, not even during the first stages of the dictator’s rise to power.

He was aware that many of his acquaintances and colleagues had not been as steadfast, but he’d never quite believed that when the time came, they would go as far as trying to overthrow their government.

He should have realised sooner that Alexander would be the exception to that rule.

The Marchmains had always been a peculiar breed: staunch conformists on the surface, they cultivated a strain of eccentricity which had frequently skirted the realms of insanity. The old Duke
was a virtual hermit and his life was consisted in the utter avoidance of the trappings of the century he inhabited. As far as he was concerned, Britain was still under the reign of Queen Victoria.

His sons had seemed to embrace the opposite attitude: they socialised and painstakingly performed the duties which befitted their station.

Mycroft knew Crispian only superficially, but didn’t like him. In fact, he found the boy vaguely revolting, with his childish ways and his shrill theatricality.

When he compared him to Sherlock, he felt immensely relieved that he’d been spared the worst.

Alexander had puzzled him from the start: he’d been an affable young man, a tad vain and proud of his lineage, but nothing out of the ordinary. Under the skin, one could perceive a darker undercurrent, but it was never more than a surmise.

There had been rumours about his trips abroad, gossip concerning his personal life and his business affairs, but nothing more lurid than an occasional male lover had ever been produced as example; even that had been speculation rather than fact.

And yet Mycroft had been aware that something wasn’t quite right. He’d never confessed his suspicions, least of all to his little brother, who could not stand any of his sibling’s friends. He’d never told Sherlock the truth in order to protect him, and now he feared that his silence had caused irreparable damage.

There was no proof - of course - that Marchmain was the culprit, nor would they ever find any; nothing as conclusive as a confession or an accusation coming from an accomplice. Their best bet would be to eliminate him, and the rot that he’d contributed to create would be surely contained.

The War Office and the Secret Services were both mistaken in their belief that Mycroft Holmes would assign the task of saving his brother’s life to Greene and his confederates only, not when Marchmain could have bought them off with is considerable wealth. And that was another thorny issue: the extent of the Duke’s hidden fortune. Aside from their estate in Somerset, there were swathes of London and possibly numerous properties in South America, but Alexander had carefully deleted all the records. Powerful as Mycroft was, he wasn’t a Duke or a Marquess; as astute and devious as he could be, he wasn’t criminally insane.

The man whom Georgie had seen enter Baker Street wasn’t Rosoman, but the boy couldn’t have known that the latter had been there for a while; long enough to wake John up and have a conversation with him.

The man was one of Mycroft’s minions, a creature whose identity was irrelevant, but who had been keeping an eye on the comings and goings at 221B. Mrs Hudson and the Millward fellow had also been instructed to the letter, which wouldn’t have surprised Sherlock had he not been so masterfully waylaid by his old acquaintance, Leo Marks.

But again Mycroft had underestimated Alexander’s daring and his ability to elude even the closest type of surveillance.

In his heart of hearts, the elder Holmes believed in fatality: Sherlock had foiled his brother’s attempts to divert his attention from the Cummins case. He had done so with considerable help from Marchmain and his acolytes, but the magnetic attraction of the investigation had pulled him inexorably towards the centre of things.
Mycroft’s man intercepted Rosoman when he came out of the Library, and the fire-fighter told them about the secret entrance in the basement of the building and how to gain access to the bunker. Scotland Yard had been informed and so had the War Office.

Meanwhile in Mayfair, Crispian Marchmain contemplated the ending of his short, dissipated existence, as he gazed outside the window at the shadowy expanse of Green Park. In his hand was a glass of his favourite cocktail, which he sipped like Socrates had his poisoned concoction.

He recalled the face of Unity Mitford, the lack of understanding in those blank eyes and the terror which that sight had engendered in him. He’d told people, but they wouldn’t understand; they couldn’t, since for many of them death was one of the necessary consequences of war.

To him, it signified the brutality of nature and the ravages of illness, which robbed people of their individuality.

He’d never loved Alexander, but he’d learned to fear and respect him. And he’d always believed he would get whatever he wanted, because it had always been the case.

His brother wanted Sherlock Holmes, but Crispian was fairly certain that it wasn’t in a sexual or sentimental capacity; not that he’d ever pondered that eventuality in depth, he would never indulge in something as vulgar as critical thinking; his vagueness was a badge of honour which he rated as highly as his ability to mix drinks and his aloofness in matters of emotion.

Despite these admirable qualities, he’d been shaken by the apparition of that grey-eyed man, by his firmness of purpose and his certainty that the Marchmains' story was coming to its end.

Alexander had failed; even saying the words seemed sacrilegious.

He would have another drink and pour some of that mysterious white powder into it.

Somewhere in the park, a tiny dot of light blinked, as if agreeing to his plans.

Crispian sighed and raised the glass to cheer the approach of eternity.

Like Rosoman had mentioned once before, it was difficult to shock someone who’d been daily witnessing the maiming of innocent people and the destruction of their country.

John Watson had been shot, abducted and drugged, left for dead and accused of a murder he couldn’t recall; in little over a month, he’d fallen in love with the only consulting detective in the world and together they had delved inside a universe of treason and corruption. The doctor believed that he could withstand most surprises, but when he opened the door which led into Marchmain’s bunker, he was left agape; next to him, Georgie’s astonishment was not as silent; the boy let out a low whistle and his eyes were like saucers.

They found themselves in a luxuriously appointed sitting room: the walls were lined with valuable paintings; John wasn’t an expert but even he could recognise a Turner when he saw one. The furniture and carpets revealed an impeccable taste albeit one that didn’t conform to one style or epoch; it combined classical lines with modern ones, never quite settling for a definite theme. The personality of the owner wasn’t revealed; on the contrary, it was obfuscated, smothered by that
glorified opulence.

In sharp contrast with this grandeur, the stench which rose to their nostrils told of the vicinity of the sewers; not even the money of a Duke or the mastery of Balzagette could keep the smell at bay, especially in humid winter weather.

The silence which at first had seemed absolute was suddenly sliced through by a loud scream and then by a muffled wail; the latter even more alarming than the former, as it resembled the squeal of a wounded animal.

John gripped the handle of his Luger and, gritting his teeth, he turned towards Georgie.

“You stay here.” he ordered. For once, the boy did not protest, stunned as he was by the succession of shocks that he’d been subjected to.

“That was Sherlock’s voice,” John croaked, “If you hear gunshots and I’m not coming for you, get out as fast as you can and wait outside the passage to the Library.”

The boy nodded and stayed in the middle of the room, as if he were afraid to spoil the furniture, or possibly of being contaminated by it.

“Be careful, Sir,” he said, and kept his eyes fixed on John, as the doctor went to fulfil the role that destiny had bequeathed him.

Of the many options which he had considered, the real thing, as it’s often the case, transcended plausibility.

The room he’d just left could have been a reproduction of any of Marchmain House’s lavish salons, but this one was different: this was the abode of a deranged Emperor.

The exiled Napoleon could have sat on a similar throne-like chair and imagined he was still ruling Europe.

Alexander Marchmain was ensconced in a high-back Queen Anne chair, a rictus grimace on his mouth, more of a gash than a smile. If it weren’t for his closed eyes, he would have appeared to be staring up at the creature looming over him: a forbidding, almost biblical figure, enveloped in an ermine cape similar to the one worn by the King during formal ceremonies.

The figure had not heard John approach and was inspecting his own hands, holding the palms close to his face; he was murmuring something which the blond man couldn’t discern.

“Sherlock, are you hurt?” he asked, and was answered by a peal of shrill laughter.

Is he dead? he wanted to enquire, but his vocal cords failed him.

“There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries,” was the detective’s reply, delivered in a monotone which cracked in the middle of the quotation.

A stupefied silence followed.

“He’s not dead, if that’s what you were wondering,” Sherlock replied, but even though it could be an apparent return to normality, John wasn’t fooled. His partner’s face was tense and livid, with the
skin stretched tight over the prominent bones; his eyes were excessively bright, their expression unreadable.

“Julius Caesar,” he continued, “Mrs Mayfield warned me, but I wouldn’t listen. She knew, don’t you see? Because it’s a family trait, his mother had it too, and he must have thought: what better way to oppose the tide than by adding to its ruination?”

“What are you saying?” murmured John, who was starting to detect a fearful pattern.

Sherlock still wouldn’t look him in the eye, but kept contemplating his hands, curling and uncurling his fingers.

“Remember Crispian and his weak heart?”

“Yes, but you also said that his brother was strong and healthy.”

The detective’s gaze finally met John’s: there were fathoms of desperation in it, but also a manic determination and a world-weariness which was out of place in one still so young. The ermine cape was framing his gaunt figure like a portent of certain doom.

John wanted to wrap him in his arms, but he didn’t dare move a muscle lest he proved to be only a mirage. He stayed there waiting, his heartbeat loud in his ears. He could perceive Marchmain’s stertorous breath too, and that realisation relieved him considerably; not that he’d doubted Sherlock, but he didn’t know whether he could trust this new world he’d been thrust into.

“He must have known that his mother’s disease was hereditary, but perhaps for a while he let himself believe that he was as robust as his father and his self-assurance convinced those near him; his exploits around the world and on the polo fields were well publicised, his stamina never questioned. He must have duped Crispian too, for a while at least. He’s not the most observant of men, when it doesn’t concern him directly. But it did start to, when it became clear what his older sibling’s plans were.”

The detective moved away from Marchmain’s chair, turning his back on the unconscious man. He’d barely taken a step when he swayed, losing his balance. John caught him just in time and helped him towards the ornate divan. Sherlock felt frail within his embrace, despite the bulky fur.

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“His objective was really quite simple: he would work to restore the splendour of the English aristocracy while simultaneously annihilating everything he deemed unworthy or inferior.”

“And what part did you have in his designs?”

The detective let out a pained sound.

“He appealed to my vanity,” the young man replied, baring his teeth in a skull-like grimace. “He knows me better than I know myself, it seems.”

“What do you mean?”

John suspected they were entering dangerous territory, so he’d better exercise caution.

“Give the lad a case and watch him dance, that’s what! Didn’t I preen like a cheap tart every step of the way? Look at me, see how bloody clever I am! Even as he revealed the depth of his depravity, I still refused to comprehend the true extent of it. I was blind and deaf and stupid.”

“Did he touch you?” John murmured, choking on his bile.
The detective sniggered and his hands closed into fists.

“I almost throttled him,” he replied, “I was so close and if he hadn’t smiled at me, I would have gone through with it.”

“But you didn’t kill him and that’s all that matters now. We are both alive and he’s going to be languishing in a prison cell until he’s tried for treason and eventually executed.”

They were nearing the end of their journey and they had survived the machinations of a madman; why was Sherlock so despondent?

Once again, his lover read his unspoken thoughts.

“I have done what he wanted me to, almost to the letter. I never wanted to be that sort of man; I have defended my independence from my family and from Mycroft, but in the end, here I am, a puppet manipulated by the great Alexander Marchmain! You almost died and it would have been my fault. As far as we know, you may have killed Greta Hayward and that’s my fault too. And as for Marks, I’m almost sure it was he who pulled the trigger, but we may never find out.”

John shivered, “He told you about him?”

“If the drug was in the cigarette I smoked, it could only have been Marks. And he wouldn’t have been allowed to carry on after that.”

“But why would he goad you into murdering him?”

“Think on it, John,” said the detective, sounding more like his usual arrogant self. “I was part of his experiment; when he met me, he must have decided I was the perfect guinea pig: haughty, willing to try anything as long as it was exciting; uncaring of convention and devoid of humanity.”

“You are the most human person I have ever met, my love.”

“He didn’t think that and when he created this depraved universe, he put me at the centre of it, like a spider in its web. He trusted that I would arrive here, and he timed my actions with surgical precision. He even bought me a shroud,” he added, with a watery smile, indicating the cape, “When he died, he wanted his executioner to be suitably attired.”

“Why did you put it on?”

Sherlock shook his head and his curls tickled John’s cheek. God, how he loved him in that moment and how he wanted to convince him that he was brave and bright and for all that, infinitely fallible.

“I’m not sure,” the youth replied, “I have flashes of memory, but they refuse to coalesce into a meaningful sequence. One moment I had my hands around his throat and the next the cape was around my shoulders.”

“It’s that deuced drug,” argued John.

“Yes, and it’s rather brilliant in a way. It’s a masterful weapon, which can turn any man into a killing machine. What you can’t remember will never truly bother you.”

“It seems to have bothered Cummins and Sansom.”

“Only because they had been found out,” the detective countered, “And Sansom abused the drug on purpose, to test its and his own limits.”
“Your brother could have done a better job of protecting you,” the blond man protested, “He should have had someone watching over you at all times.”

“He did,” the young man said, taking his lover’s hand. His touch was tentative and his skin cold and clammy, but it was like home and safety and all the many marvellous things which awaited them.

“We are a right mess, aren’t we?” John sighed, and pulled his friend closer, dotting his brow and temples with soft kisses. “You are safe, we’re safe,” he crooned then he took Sherlock’s mouth sweetly, as if to chase away the violence they had witnessed.

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you,” said a voice which John knew, but couldn’t quite place. Tired, dazed and lost in each other, they had not heard the stranger approach nor had they realised that Marchmain was awake and determined to get his way. He had sidled up to them and was holding a loaded syringe in his hand while he unsheathed the needle with the other.

Greene advanced, gun in hand and a sardonic smile on his lips.

“I come directly from your brother’s bedroom,” he said.

“I’d rather not dwell on my sibling’s sordid habits,” the Duke replied. His throat bore the signs of Sherlock’s botched strangulation attempt and his eyes were red-rimmed; otherwise, he was his customary cool-blooded self. Greene was as collected and unflappable.

“I’m afraid I don’t lean that way,” he replied, “I wanted to make sure he unburdened his soul before the end. He was endearingly certain that you would succeed poor boy.”

“He always was a meek, cowardly soul.”

“Perhaps he was, but at least he knew when he was beaten.”

“Give your gun to Sherlock or I will plunge the content of this syringe into Doctor Watson’s neck,” and true to his words, he pricked John’s skin with the tip of the needle. “If you shoot me now, I will take him with me.”

“You’ll never get out of this alive,” Greene said, and the man laughed.

“What’s it like – I wonder - to be trapped inside your empty little minds? How immoderately dull it must be. Give your gun to Sherlock and go sit down against the wall, there where I can see you,” he indicated a spot.

After having quickly assessed the situation, Greene did as he was told.

“Now, my darling, your friend and I will walk gently into the oblivious darkness. One bullet to the head and let’s see whether you can stop me from taking him with me.”

“And if I don’t?”

“He dies all the same. I have added cyanide to the mixture; he won’t survive the trip to the hospital. You see, ducky, I have an advantage on you: I’m not afraid to die and I want you to be the cause of you lover’s death.”
Enduring Love

Chapter Summary

We have come to the end. Three months and 40 chapters later. I hope you have enjoyed the story and I want to thank my readers, especially the most faithful and patient ones. You are super-stars. I had promised a happy ending and you shall have it. Also; fluff and smut with fur (yes, really); you have been warned. Thanks again guys!!!!!

PS This chapter is quite long, but I couldn't stop until the story was truly done :)

Chapter Notes

Note: Turmeaus is a cigar shop in Mayfair.

“From there we came to love. We told each other what lovers never tire of hearing and needing to say.”

Enduring Love – Ian McEwan

Turmeaus was one of those ancient London shops which had survived modernisation and, because of their resilience to the ravages of time, appeared to defy the blitz too.

Established in 1817, it had never succumbed to the lure of fashion and its window was as dusty as its interior. What kept it going was the excellence of the merchandise, which was kept well-stocked despite the obstacles presented by war and rationing.

The manager, a cockney by the name of Mr Farr, was a short, swarthy man with protuberant jet-black eyes and a sallow complexion. His age was hard to tell, since his face was unlined and his hair not yet streaked with grey. Faithful customers might well believe that he was also the owner, since he’d been there for a very long time and knew the place inside out; in truth, he was merely a paid employee; very well remunerated for sure, but still only a hireling.

If he was aware of the identity of his master, he’d never told a soul; the reality was that he suspected something was amiss, but he’d never sought confirmation of his surmises. He sensed danger and he wasn’t the sort of fellow who’d risk his own safety for the sake of idle curiosity.

Like most shops of its kind, Turmeaus usually closed before dinnertime, but that week, like every year, was dedicated to the stock-take; rather than shutting down during the day – a practice he
abhorred – Farr preferred to stay on late in the evening and through part of the night if necessary. He didn’t have anywhere to be, since his wife and child had been evacuated to a village in Kent.

He was counting the boxes of Delgados when he heard a rap at the door. It was but a perfunctory one, as the man entered without waiting for permission.

“We are closed,” he said, even though it should not have been necessary, considering the late hour.

The stranger was a dapper gentleman in a fine tweed coat and homburg hat, and he carried an umbrella in lieu of a walking stick.

“Of course you are,” he said, and extracted a card from his pocket, which he shoved under Farr’s nose. “I need to inspect the basement of your shop,” he added, curling his nose on the last word, as if he detested the banality of it.

“There’s nothing there, Mr… Holmes,” Farr hesitated, peering at the card. “Only piles of boxes and dust.”

“I really have no time for pleasantries, deal fellow,” Mycroft said, as he hurried towards the door behind the counter. “And don’t bother coming with me; I must insist that you stay here and keep doing… whatever it is that you are doing.”

“Stock-take,” the short man replied automatically. Holmes arched his eyebrows, but didn’t comment. A second later, he was running down the steps.

“The light switch is on your right,” Farr shouted, and the stranger must have heard him, because a chink of light was now visible below the lintel.

He wondered briefly why the bigwigs at the War Office were interested in the basement of his shop, but decided he’d better not worry his mind with things he couldn’t possibly benefit from.

Mycroft had never intended to leave his brother solely in the hands of Mr Greene, but he’d preferred to let him believe that there was no alternative plan. In his experience, people tended to become negligent when they knew there was a net to catch them should they stumble and fall.

He knew that Sherlock had reached a similar conclusion; that at least one of the entrances to Alexander’s lair must be through the smoke shop, the one which distributed the cigarettes stuffed with the drug. He’d also guessed that finding the door wouldn’t be easy, but he had the advantage of knowing about the one in the Library; there must be a similar mechanism, he thought, making his way through stacks of boxes.

Odd, he pondered, that they would keep cigarettes in a basement, but he soon realised how well insulated the room was; there was a faint whiff of sewage, but aside from that, it was as dry as his lodgings at the Diogenes.

He started by stabbing the wainscoting with the ferrule of his umbrella, while he tapped at the bricks with his free hand; the procedure went on for a handful of minutes, before he found what he was looking for: a brick had been painted over to resemble its companions, but Mycroft’s piercing gaze discerned the soft gleam of varnish.

“Here we go,” he whispered, and dislodged the block in question. He knew he had to be fast, so he jumped inside as soon as the portal opened. He had taken a torch with him, which was lucky since on the other side, he was greeted by darkness and dead silence.
“Don’t,” John murmured, watching his lover’s struggle with fury and fear.

“If I don’t, he will kill you and then I will have to kill him all the same.”

Marchmain sniggered, but his hand didn’t tremble; it was holding the syringe so firmly his knuckles were the colour of wax.

“I shall count to ten, my pet, and then it’ll be decision time. You can say goodbye before I start counting; no moving though, just words. I’m not that magnanimous.”

Sherlock locked eyes with his partner and in his gaze was a desperate appeal.

“Promise me you will take care of yourself,” the doctor said, wanting so much to touch, to kiss and comfort that he had to bite the inside of his cheek to force himself still.

The detective’s face went through a number of expressions, but settled on one of ruthless determination.

“I won’t let you down, John,” he replied, cramming the entirety of his feelings into the one name he loved more than all of the sophisticated words he knew.

Suddenly, something happened; it was so completely absurd that for a moment they all stared at each other, mystified.

“One man went to mow, went to mow a meadow, one man and his dog went to mow a meadow. Two man went to mow, went to mow a meadow,” Greene sang, out of tune and at the top of his voice.

“Have you gone quite batty, dear chap?” hissed Marchmain, but as the man went on chanting, he shouted, “Shut up and keep your hands where I can see them.”

In that instant of confusion, Georgie had emerged from the shadows and before anyone could acknowledge his presence, he threw the marble ashtray in Alexander’s face. He pretended he was playing a game of darts with his mates down the pub; he’d become quite good at that, before the war spoiled their fun.

“Ace shot!” Greene exclaimed, but Marchmain had ducked down to avoid being hit. Sherlock sprang up like a man possessed and pointed the gun at his head, but John grabbed his forearm in an iron grip.

“Don’t give him what he wants,” he said, and was about to kick the syringe out the way, when the Duke grasped it and made to stab John’s ankle with it.

“I don’t think so,” the detective gritted out.

A single shot was fired and the Marquess of Worcester finally went to meet his maker.

“I say, Mr Holmes, I didn’t know you were so effective with a revolver. You’re wasted behind a desk,” Greene said, his grey-blue eyes glinting with mischief.

Mycroft pocketed his gun and dusted himself off with a few fastidious flicks of his hand.
“I despise violence,” he replied, “But this was my score to settle. Are you alright, Doctor Watson?” he asked.

John was still clutching his lover’s arm, while Sherlock scowled at his sibling.

“You took your time,” he groused.

“We are fine,” replied the doctor, plonking himself down on the divan and taking his disgruntled lover with him, “Never been better.”

“You were utterly useless,” were the first words that Sherlock threw at Lestrade, as soon as they emerged into the foggy night. “And Anderson was collaborating with Marchmain; I always said he was a thorn in my side. Turns out he was worse than that. You should hire Stamford in his place.”

“Yes, yes, all right” the Inspector replied, “But you should discuss it with your brother; he was the one who told me to stay out of your way. He was afraid we would never catch him red-handed otherwise.”

“It did work splendidly in the end,” John quipped, “Except for the fact that we were very nearly killed. But I suppose I should get used to being treated like a pin-cushion. The lad was invaluable,” he added, pointing at Georgie, who was still in shock. “We could use someone like him, in the future,” he said to Sherlock.

“We arranged our little distraction beforehand and I admit that he didn’t disappoint me,” Greene said, offering the boy one of his cigarettes. The lad took it, but his hand shook and the Ministry of Information man had to light it for him. He seemed remarkably calm, almost nerveless.

“What have you done with Rosoman?” John asked, scanning the streets in search of his newly-acquired friend.

Greene exhaled a thin plume of smoke while Georgie stared at him like he’d just sprouted a golden halo.

“He’s at Baker Street dealing with our little problem,” he replied, and at last his face showed a trace of contrition; there were lines on his forehead, but his mouth was stubbornly curved into a wry smile. “Your landlady was going to cook him a proper breakfast, which is probably the best news he’s received in a while.”

“She likes feeding people,” the doctor replied, relieved by the mundane nature of their conversation.

There would be time for complex explanations and possibly for recriminations too, but presently he only wanted to be with Sherlock in a quiet place with no corpses or any other sort of intrusion.

“You could go to my club,” suggested Mycroft, who had appeared behind them like mournful ghost.

John looked at Sherlock, who was gesticulating to Lestrade and his men, probably questioning their intelligence and ability.

“Thank you, it’s a very kind offer, but I suspect it would be the last place on earth he’d want to be. You have provided us with a very safe shelter at 221B though,” he added, to soften the rejection.
The elder Holmes arches one eyebrow in surprise.

“I thought he hated it.”

“He does, but I don’t.” he replied, with a wink.

Greene laughed and Georgie decided it was permissible to do the same. They were going to be fine, he decided, and he’d just helped destroy a dangerous criminal. Naturally he couldn’t reveal the details to anybody, but he would still have plenty to tell Maggie when she took her out, and by Jove, he would insist until she said yes. After all, he was a man now.

Lucien Dryden was an eminent toxicologist and he was also a member of the Diogenes, a fact which had to be concealed from Sherlock in order to convince him to see that renowned luminary.

John knew of him, but he’d never imagined a day would come when he would become one of Dryden’s patients.

A robust, grizzled man with large, square hands, he had the air of a mountaineer, of someone who led his life in the open air. Only his piercing grey eyes suggested his intellectual inclinations.

He had been hired by the War Office in secret and he was studying with great interest the peculiarities of Marchmain’s drug, which they had nicknamed ‘amnesyl’ from its most common side-effect.

“I can’t guarantee anything definitive yet, but in my opinion the damage will be limited to your memory-loss, which may be temporary anyway. As for your personality, the alteration ceases once consumption stops. In that respect, it’s not different from any other drug.”

Sherlock frowned, avoiding John’s gaze. It was all so unnecessary, considering the damage had been done and couldn’t be repaired unless they could go back in time and change the course of events.

What he couldn’t bear to admit was that what he didn’t mind about the murders they might have committed under the influence; he didn’t even care that he almost strangled Marchmain; what really bothered him was that – because he’d smoked that cigarette with Marks – he’d maybe forced himself on his lover, imposing on him an act that John must have surely wanted to happen in a different and more sober manner.

Unfortunately, John insisted in accompanying him to every session, since he too was a patient and Dryden had suggested they might benefit from sharing their preoccupations in the same sessions.

“Is it likely that we may experience the sudden return of the memories we have lost, by associating them with the present?” the blond man asked, “We do tend to get into trouble, in our line of work.”

Sherlock’s frown threatened to turn into a fully-fledged sulk. Was John reproaching him for his careless behaviour and for having asked him to virtually forfeit his career?

Dryden gave the question a lot of thought.

“It’s possible, I suppose,” he replied, “But I doubt it. You have already suffered a lot of stress and those memories still haven’t resurfaced. In any case, you are prepared for them so it won’t come as a surprise. Is there anything else I could help you with?” he queried, staring at the detective, who bit his lip but did not respond verbally.
“There will be more to discuss once I have further experimented on the amnesyl.”

“We shall see you again later in the year,” agreed John, “If we are still alive, that is.”

The toxicologist chuckled and accompanied them out.

From Harley Street they decided to walk home. They turned into Portland Street, trying to avoid the mounds of rubble which obstructed the pavements.

“Cat got your tongue?” asked John, and he smiled thinking of Percy and how the tabby had taken to sleeping on Sherlock’s lap while the detective read the newspapers or sat in his armchair lost in his thoughts.

“I detest being coddled,” the young man replied, “Mycroft is doing too much of it already.”

“We hardly ever see him.”

“I can sense his smugness from here. I will have to be forever grateful to him for saving your life. I don’t think I can stand it.”

“I doubt he’ll mention it in your presence.”

Sherlock sighed piteously.

“He won’t need to.”

“You will forget about it, in time.”

“Don’t you think we’ve already done enough forgetting for a lifetime?”

“You have a point, my love. But it’s in the nature of things: time is…”

“If you say ‘a great healer’, I will refuse to eat breakfast for a week. You know how I loathe platitudes.”

“Mrs Hudson won’t let you get away with it; she’ll badger you until you do as she says.”

“Perhaps we should emigrate.”

“You, leave London?” John snorted, “That’ll be the day! You are bored, that’s what it is. Bombs and shelters are not enough to keep you entertained. You need another case.”

“Not true,” the young man replied, smiling obliquely, “I have experiments to conduct, on a very rare and lethal drug.”

The doctor stopped dead and turned to look at his lover.

“They impounded the entirety of it. Greene and Lestrade gave me their word,” he said.

“I know,” agreed Sherlock, “But you forget the obvious.”

John rolled his eyes and shook his head, but he was clearly amused.

“You stole it from Dryden’s lab, didn’t you; when you said you were going to the gents.”

“When have you ever seen me use public facilities?”
And it was after that conversation that John realised he was going to spend the rest of his life with Sherlock; he no longer had any doubt, he knew it for certain.

“What is it?”

The detective removed his goggles and lifted his head from his experiment. John never interrupted him unless it was urgent, but the soft scrape of teeth along his throat indicated another sort of emergency. He didn’t know whether he was prepared for it. Since that night, they had been tender with each other, sometimes urgently so, but always in control. He couldn’t tell whether that caution originated from John or from himself, but he was afraid to break the impasse.

“I want to show you something. Come with me,” John murmured and took him by the hand, guiding him to their bedroom.

Once there, he saw the object spread out over the bedcovers and froze: it was the ermine cape.

He kept his gaze on it, while his lover disrobed him and undressed himself. When they were both naked, John pushed him backwards until his legs touched the rim of the mattress and he was forced to sit down. The doctor stood in front of him, gazing at him fondly and caressing his face.

“I remember the first time you took me in your mouth,” he whispered, “I thought it was the filthiest suck I’d ever received.”

The words hit Sherlock in the groin, leaving him breathless.

“I thought it was barely adequate,” he murmured.

“Best suck a man could ask for,” the doctor said, and licked into Sherlock’s open mouth. The embrace was infinitely sweet, but it elicited complex sensations, because of the way the fur caressed his genitalia every time John slid his tongue in with more decision; then there were his lover’s hands: one was buried into the detective’s curls, but the other was wrapped around his neck, thumb rubbing at the hollow of the young man’s throat. That juxtaposition of control and release rendered him dizzy and soon he forgot about his doubts and surrendered to the demands of his blood.

“I want to do it again,” he croaked, and his lover nibbled his lips, whispering endearments which he felt in his skin.

He spread his legs wider and pulled John closer intending to tease him a little, but when he was faced with the man's stiff, moist erection, he relinquished all his strategies and descended on it like a starved creature.

“Oh my god,” John moaned, watching that perfect mouth as it devoured him with relish. Sherlock’s eyes were closed and his cheeks hollow; his stretched lips were crimson and there was a trail of saliva trickling down from the corner of his mouth.

It was better than he remembered, and as unrestrained.

After a while, the young man’s mouth travelled down to his testicles while his hand stroked the shaft. The noises he made were as intoxicating as his touch.
“Enough, enough,” he begged, when he was on the verge of climax.

The detective looked up at him with hazy, uncomprehending eyes.

“Your turn now,” he explained, and fell down on his knees.

The musk between Sherlock’s legs could drive a man insane, John was sure of that.

If ever he were deprived of it, he’d miss it like a phantom limb.

He nuzzled at the slender prick with his unshaven cheek and his lover opened his legs even wider, tilting his pelvis up. It was all the invitation John needed: he pressed both palms against the detective’s thighs, caressing the inguinal folds with the pad of his thumbs; he breathed hotly on the distended sac then swallowed Sherlock’s erection down until he gagged on it.

Sherlock couldn’t say whether he had screamed. His throat was sore, but it could be because of the fellatio; he was moaning and couldn’t stem the litany of cries and whimpers. He was clutching at the ermine like a drowning man and going cross-eyed trying to watch John as he fed on his prick.

The words were enough to make him wild, the idea that his lover was eating him up.

“Ah, ah,” he keened, and the blond man rewarded him by pushing him down on the bed until his back rested on the silken fur; he then spread him open and his tongue probed the detective’s entrance. He seemed hesitant, until he heard Sherlock’s shouted “yes, yes, yes,” after which he let himself go, taking what he needed.

“I want to try something,” he said, when he believed the detective was ready; they were both flushed, sweaty and desperate, so it took Sherlock a few moments before he could focus on the words.

“Yes,” he replied, because he would try anything as long as he could have John inside him.

“Put the cape on and sit on me,” John explained, his eyes dark pools of yearning.

Time solidified around them, while Sherlock complied, taking his time to fasten the heavy garment around his neck, as tight as he could.

His lover was sitting with his back propped against the pillows, watching him intently.

“Come here,” he ordered, and a weight lifted from the detective’s chest.

He straddled John’s lap and with his help, impaled himself on the rigid shaft.

This vision would stay with him until he died, John thought.

That imperious creature was his and his only, he marvelled, steeped so far in pleasure that he could almost drown in it.

Above him, Sherlock was bobbing up and down in a frenzied rhythm, his back arching at every thrust and his face disfigured with the ecstasy of it.

“I love you, I love you,” John bit out, stroking Sherlock’s chest, his thighs, and everywhere he
could reach.

When he knew it was time, he reached up and unfastened the cape, letting it fall down on the bed. He then gathered it close, until they were surrounded by that sea of fur. The detective’s skin was shiny with sweat and his torso was flushed red, from abdomen to chest.

“You are my miracle,” he whispered, and stroked the young man’s nipples and his belly.

“Touch me, please,” Sherlock pleaded, and circled his hips.

“My darling, my love,” the blond man replied, as he wrapped his fingers around his lover’s erection.

After that, it was only a matter of moments: the detective bent forward to try and kiss John on the mouth; it was impossible, but the position contributed to his bliss to the point where he could contain it no longer: his orgasm was violent and abundant, but joyous too. When his partner came inside him, he knew there would never be a reason to apologise for what they gave to one another, not before, not now and not ever.

“We have ruined the cape,” Sherlock declared, trying not to sound pleased.

He was sprawled over John, and they were both too exhausted to worry about the mess they had made.

“Couldn’t have happened to a better item of clothing,” the doctor commented.

They both giggled.

“I was thinking,” the detective said, brushing his cheek against his partner’s stomach, “That it would be agreeable if this could become permanent.”

“What, copulating while wearing Royal gear?”

“Idiot”

“I’m not going anywhere, I’m sure you must know by now.”

He kissed the top of Sherlock’s head and felt him pout.

“What if something bad happened? There’s a war on and our lives are not exactly free from danger. I don’t want to rely on Mycroft in case…”

“I have always thought hyphenated names a bit fussy for my taste,” the older man said, smiling. The detective looked up into his eyes and for a moment John thought he was going to cry.

“I wouldn’t mind to take your name; I would be honoured,” Sherlock murmured.

“We’ll see about that, Mr Holmes,” the doctor replied, and he hoisted his lover up for a celebratory kiss. It went on and on and on, until Sherlock complained about the mess between his legs.

“I better go to the wash-room,” he said, wrinkling his nose.

“Maybe I could give you a hand,” John said, and dipped his finger into the young man’s entrance.
“I have heard that there are … implements which keep… things in place after the fact,” the detective suggested, flushing a little.

“Are there indeed?” the blond man jested, “I will buy you one as an engagement present then.”


“Don’t pretend to object. I know that look in your eyes: you can’t wait for it.”

And he was right, obviously.

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Epilogue

March 1941

Laura Summers invited them into her tiny flat in Bonnington Square, not far from where his previous lodgings had been. It was barely furnished, but the cheerful fire made it cosy.

The girl looked healthy and content, even though one wouldn’t call her happy.

In the small sitting room, she had prepared a pot of strong tea and a plate of scones.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t see you before, but I couldn’t,” she explained, “I only wanted to immerse myself in my work and forget the rest. I know it sounds callous.”

“I understand,” Sherlock replied; then looking at his husband, he said “We understand. We came very close to losing… what you have lost.”

“Yes, Leonard explained everything. I’m surprised the papers didn’t get hold of the full story.”

“The Beaufort’s lineage goes back to the War of the Roses,” explained the detective.

“Their father must have suffered terribly; losing both his sons at the same time and in that awful manner,” she said.

“The old Duke lives in a word of his own,” John replied, “He barely acknowledges what goes on outside his manor. Same goes for Viscount Tremayne, who appears to have taken internment in his stride. What troubled us most was Leo Marks’ father.”

“He’s not the sort of man one can lie to,” Sherlock agreed.

“How did he take it?” the girl asked.

“He sold his shop and moved to Ireland. He has relatives there and at least he won’t be troubled by the war. Not as much as in England, anyway,” replied the detective. He took a sip of tea and his wedding band gleamed in the candle-light.

“I must congratulate you,” Laura said, staring fixedly at that symbol of enduring love.

“We have been very lucky,” John replied, “But there have been times when we thought it could be
“It never is,” she said, softly, “Even after the one you love is gone forever, the pain never leaves you and then it becomes something different, like a knife twisting in your blood.”

He thought of consoling her, telling her she would love again, but what right had he, when he would have felt as desperate, had he lost Sherlock?

“Greene mentioned that you will start working for the Ministry of Information,” he said, instead. “Help him disband the rest of the Duke’s network.”

She smiled; it didn’t reach her eyes, but it was a start.

“They think I could be useful.”

“Indeed you could be,” said Sherlock. “We have just been informed of a series of high-society blackmails. It seems that the perpetrator is a woman whose preference is for her own sex. A dominatrix, whatever that means.”

John glared at him, but the girl was interested.

“Tell me more, Mr Holmes,” she said, pouring him another cup of tea.

“Sherlock, please. I insist,” he replied and winked at her.

End Notes

Kudos and comments are food and drink to us writers; keep them coming!!!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!