A hundred hours
by breathedout

Summary

1921. Sherlock hasn't been to Paris since 1903; John since the War. At the request of Sherlock's cousin they cross the Channel, where they investigate a case nobody seems to want them on; do battle with the ghosts of their pasts; and make the acquaintance of a courtesan who seems different all the time, and is always different than she seems.

Otherwise subtitled, "Thinking about Death Is Uncomfortable; Let's Fuck Instead."

Notes
Hello all! Welcome to the long-planned "Unreal Cities Paris Novel," which, as it turns out, takes place largely in Brittany. O the vagaries of the creative process, etc.

**As you can see if you read the tags, things get pretty dark at certain points in this story.** I've tried to handle the difficult stuff—which is often also important stuff to me personally—in ways that felt honest, and neither trivializing nor fetishizing. That said, do heed the warnings, and feel free to send me an email or non-anonymous ask on Tumblr with any specific questions or concerns you may have.

This is a direct sequel to both The Violet Hour and Chez les bêtes. Neither is necessary to understand what's happening, although reading Chez les bêtes will add a lot of depth to the Irene characterization, and probably make her plotline more compelling (this is the middle story of three in her particular arc). *A hundred hours* is also a direct prequel to Ein Zimmer Mit Bad, so if your primary anxiety is over whether or not John and Sherlock stay together, spoiler: they do. In other news, as in Chez les bêtes, there is French dialogue scattered throughout; in most cases understanding exact phrases shouldn't be crucial to the scene; but if you're curious you can hover over most French phrases to display a translation. The exceptions are when French occurs in John's point of view, because he doesn't understand it himself.

Tremendous thanks to everyone in Antidiogenes for the ceaseless encouragement over the many months it's taken me to write the first nine chapters of this monstrosity; to Moonblossom for the lovely relationship map; to Pennypaperbrain for a smart & thorough Britpick; to Sandy for the checks and corrections to my French; and, as always and with my whole heart, to greywash/fizzygins for the hand-holding; cocktail-making; meticulous proofreading; history-related rhapsodies; spurs to rewrites; drunken communing over Narrative on breezy twilit patios with Edith Piaf playing in the background, and—well essentially it would be easier to list the things I'm *not* thanking her for, which are, when it comes down to it, vanishingly few.
You cannot face it steadily, but this thing is sure,
That time is no healer: the patient is no longer here.
When the train starts, and the passengers are settled
To fruit, periodicals and business letters
(And those who saw them off have left the platform)
Their faces relax from grief into relief,
To the sleepy rhythm of a hundred hours.

Fare forward, travellers! not escaping from the past
Into different lives, or into any future;
You are not the same people who left that station
Or who will arrive at any terminus,
While the narrowing rails slide together behind you;
And on the deck of the drumming liner
Watching the furrow that widens behind you,
You shall not think 'the past is finished'
Or 'the future is before us'.

—T.S. Eliot, from "The Dry Salvages"
Mme Carco. (29)
Wife
Part 1: A hundred hours

Wednesday, August 24th, 1921
2pm (Hour 0)

Irene Adler watched her own hands, drawing aside the heavy curtains. Thin they were, still. Still smooth; still white; red-tipped against endless black brocade. She felt herself a drop in an ocean: black brocade draperies on the walls and the windows and the massive four-poster bed. She'd
demanded it, once upon a time; the whole room was done up. Seven years, she thought, of black brocade; and she sighed.

Three stories down in the street, Charles was huffing along towards the Rue St. Anne, like an old biddy hen in a tight-fit waistcoat. Irene ought to have him plucked. She narrowed her eyes; he'd stopped now to berate an ill-met flower-girl. His broad back was to Irene, but she would bet his blond face was flushing up. Yes, she thought: plucked. Trussed up with twine, and basted with fresh salt butter. His arms bent tight against his ribs at the elbows.

The polish, she saw, on the fourth finger of her right hand, was chipped.


One accumulated such a store of hangers-on, staying so long in a city. One began to absolutely drown in personal addresses and black brocade, and bothering bustling explainers like Charles Humbert. Still, she thought, watching him crowding the girl—Léonie it was, on top of of everything—back against the wall. Intriguing, what he'd assume when given the chance.

He turned the corner, still flapping his elbows back at poor Léonie and her sunflowers. Irene pursed her lips. She turned from the window; let fall the curtain. Léonie adored finest drinking chocolate, and Irene's hands in her hair. She was sixteen; had no notion, how her lips parted when Irene used her nails. Léonie'd do anything, Irene thought, if Irene only asked: she'd forget the nerve of him; she'd remember it until her dying day. Irene sat down on a red morocco steamer trunk (bird details; anything but brocade) thinking: Charles. Christ. She hadn't thought of that night in ages. It hadn't even been Charles, in the first place, that she'd been—. And here he came to her place of business, bursting in at one in the afternoon. Ranting and raving. She ought to hang up his hock in the drawing room. His toenails still attached like the hairy hooves of Spanish hams.

And oh, she'd have to go out, anyway. She'd the Marquis de Beausergent this evening, and he was particular; he would look at her hands. She would tie him to the black brocade side chair, right up next to the mirror, floor to ceiling. She'd have him gagged with black brocade but with his eyes open, wide open, so that he could watch her hands on his throat as his face got redder and redder. He would whimper and moan and watch her hands in the mirror as she took one off his neck and dug her claws into the flesh of his inner thighs; marked him and mauled him, everywhere except his drooling untouched prick. Anastasie would have to see about her nails.

She looked down at the chip, stark in the red polish, and then back at the curtains, smoothing down her hair. It hadn't been Charles she'd been after, that night; but if he was spending his afternoon bursting into people's establishments—well. She'd kept up with both of them, after the War.

Irene rose from the trunk; regarded herself in the big gilt mirror—mounted, inescapably, on black brocade. Bloody hell, she thought. Black brocade behind her eyelids. Black brocade pressing lines into the skin around her mouth. When she was back in London, after she tired of traveling, she would do up her rooms in pale yellow: yellow and violet; and today she would wear the white, the new white Chanel. Léonie, with her freckled skin and long carnelian-coloured hair, would look a treat in black brocade. Irene could get in a dressmaker; oversee a whole new wardrobe. She could leave the girl gorgeous in this very drawing-room, sucking the marrow out of ox-bones. Presiding at table over a Spanish ham-hock and a tureen of drinking-chocolate.

Charles, thought Irene: of all the absurdities. But she'd an open afternoon. Anastasie's shop was just round the corner from the newspaper offices; and she could always fit her in.

And so, two hours later, Irene's nails were perfect, and her dress was white. The summer clerk at the front desk at Le Matin was somebody's nephew, she thought; fresh from Rouen and looking sour
when she breezed in off the street in the middle of the afternoon, chatting about the August holidays. Paris so empty this time of year, she said; it was frightfully solitary, didn't he find? She sat on his desk and lit her cigarette, and within minutes he was telling her about the August holidays of everyone from Mademoiselle Trébuchet the stenographer, who had accompanied her aunt to the Alps, to the editor and his famous wife, Monsieur and Madame Jouvenel, summering at their cottage in Brittany. Well, he amended. They called it a cottage.

'St Malo?' Irene asked. 'I always so loved St Malo,' putting on a London accent that had never been hers, and the kid got a look about him so smug she could smell it. 'I doubt you would know it, Mademoiselle,' he said. 'Roz Ven, outside St. Coulomb. So small they don't even put it on the maps.'

'Ah chéri,' Irene purred, 'You are a helpful one.'

Past his shoulder, through the set of cracked doors to the editors' offices, she could see where drawers had been pulled out, and papers scattered over the floor. Oh, she thought: predictable. And it really was deserted here; this provincial the only one who had seen her. She wanted to ruffle his hair. She slid past him to the tune of his half-hearted bleating, wondering if Charles, even in late August, would have had the gall to show his great blond face here, where everyone from the mail clerks on up could recognise him. The gall, she thought, or the initiative: both seemed unlikely.

The double doors were frosted glass, lettered in the pre-War style: *Henry Jouvenel, Rédacteur en chef.* Just to the left, the second door said *Colette Jouvenel, Rédactrice littéraire,* and under this, in slightly fresher paint: *Critique dramatique.* Irene glanced between them; Charles's boy had been thorough. Charles's boy, therefore, could hardly have been past in the few hours since his master had graced Irene with his clucking and carrying on. She wondered if Co—if they'd come down from St. Coulomb, when they'd heard. She wondered if—.

She pushed open the right-hand door.

A great wooden desk; papers everywhere. When she shifted aside the top layer of debris, there was another layer of debris, only with thicker dust. At the corner of Jouvenel's desk, the mailbox overflowed, even with some of the correspondence knocked to the floor. The bin was overturned; the blotter was black. Shoved off to one side were photographs: a petite blonde in a Vionnet gown from the '21 Spring line, signed *Bisous, XOXO*; a large group shot, posed on the stone steps of a country house; and—

Irene trailed fingertips over the frame: perfect glossy red over faded sepia. But, she thought: this picture must be ten, twelve years old. Colette in a pre-war traveling-suit, wiry and muscular as she'd been on the stage, years ago, years, with her haughty eyes and the sharp bones of her face not yet softened, as they were now in the newspapers, by flesh. Here was Madame Colette, young again, almost as Irene—.

Lifetimes ago. Stuck behind the photograph of the blonde, in her four-month-old dress.

Irene allowed herself a press of fingers to temples. Pressing, not rubbing; digging into the dull ache; preserving the powder. What did she hope to find, after all, in all this rubble? Plainly Charles hadn't got what he'd wanted; not if he'd come bursting into Irene's drawing-room hours or days afterward. It was, she thought, getting late. She ought to go. She'd have to bathe, and do up her hair; array herself for Beausergent. She drew Jouvenel's door to, and hesitated there on the threshold. The boy at the desk had gone off somewhere. Possibly there was some kind of guard. Possibly they were on their way. Amusing; tiresome. At her back, the door labeled *Rédactrice littéraire* still stood ajar.

Down the corridor a clock struck the hours with a thin scraping chime, and she counted them off. Three; four; five. Irene ought to go. With her lips pursed and her shoulders back, she slid through the
crack into the second office.

Charles’s boy had made his mess here, too; papers all over the floor; the chairs; the desk. Irene cleared a path through them with the toe of her shoe. Chaos: though when she moved the top layer of papers aside on the wooden desk, she saw fresh blotter-paper, with a row of pens and nibs across the top, and a spectacle-case aligned to the left. Irene tapped the ruler with one scarlet nail.

Down on the street, a girl called out *adieu* in a musical voice; a rough chorus answered her back. *Au revoir*, they said. *Au revoir. Au revoir.* Irene adjusted her bracelet, and recalled a dressing-room of old. Camisoles and stays scattered over Colette's chaise longue. Love-letters loose on the vanity, damp from the bath. She looked down at the regimented writerly tools; touched them one-by-one. On the desktop here, there were no photographs at all.

The clock down the hall struck the quarter. Irene smoothed the jumble back over the neat lines of pens, and nibs, and blotter, and ruler. Next to the desk the window was open onto the Boulevard Poissonière, a light mist settling onto the pavements and the leaves of the trees, and the head of the goodnight girl. Irene thought of the gown on the little blonde in the photograph on Jouvenel's desk. Yards upon yards of silk, in those wisps of dresses. Vionnet cut everything on the diagonal. Threw out more cloth than she sewed up. *Biaisée*, they called them: biased gowns. Skewed dresses, fickle dresses. Irene, petting over the pile of papers, her fingers catching on an envelope so that some scrap fluttered to the floor, thought: she should order one in white. And one in scarlet, perhaps, to go with her new morocco trunks.

She stooped then, to pick up the scrap. It was a single letter, cut from a newspaper headline: an N. Sepia like the photographs on Jouvenel's desk. The newsprint stuck to her finger. She turned over the envelope next to her other hand, and indeed: MmE JOUVE EL it said, letters pasted on hurriedly, haphazardly; several in the process of falling off. Irene leant back against the desk of the woman who was now, according to her glazed-glass door, according to her correspondence, 'Madame Jouvenel'; she turned over the envelope again, and drew out a single sheet of drugstore paper:

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un paquet vous attend à l'hôtel vernet
25 rue vernet (8ème)
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The clock in the hall clanked out the half-hour; Irene stared down at the odd little sheet. *Charles?* Dull, fretful Charles, leaving Co—Madame Jouvenel, a sort of pasted-up ransom note, like a gangster in a penny dreadful? Leaving her a package, waiting at a hotel across town? Leaving her—well. Anything at all?

But if not Charles…?

Outside, from the far end of the vestibule, came returning footsteps, and the drawl of provincial French. The boy was bringing someone back. Irene slid the sheet back into the envelope, and the envelope into her bag, and herself back out into the main room. She showed the boy and his bored-looking colleague a flash of her white, white teeth as she pushed wide the door.

Out on the street the rain had stopped. The clouds hunched, still; dark and flat on the horizon. But down the long stretch of the Rue de Faubourg Poissonnière, the sun slanted bright gold beneath the massed grey, gilding the shutters and the mullions and the sandstone chimneys of Paris. Irene had hours until Beausergent. She had red morocco steamer trunks, and a late-night engagement with a package behind a hotel desk in the back avenues of the eighth arrondissement. She bought a gladiolus from a flower-girl at the corner; tucked it into her hair, and let her lips curve up into a smile.
'I wasn't aware—ouch,' said John, stumbling across the threshold; catching himself on the jamb; standing to the side. 'Your French cousins doing all right for themselves, then, Holmes?'

Sherlock came up behind him. John was rubbing at his shoulder where he'd banged it on the compartment door. Sherlock should do that, he thought; and thought: your French cousins, with a clenching in his chest. But the door was open, so he shoved his trunk in behind John's, up against the foot of one bed, by the little writing desk with the brandy decanter. The rumbling of the rails picked up, he could feel it in the soles of his feet; and outside the curtained windows, the Calais harbour slipped away.

'Knowing this particular cousin,' he said, straightening up, breathing out, 'it'll be something in the nature of a joke. At my expense.'

'Oh yes?'

Sherlock gestured; John reached behind himself and latched the compartment door. 'Cousin Claudine, you said? I like her already.'

It was, indeed, elaborate luxury for a journey of less than five hours. They would arrive in time for a fashionable Parisian supper, but in the meantime it seemed they'd been settled in—well. A private sleeper carriage: polished mahogany, gold detailing worked into elaborate peaked moulding, and everything else done up in navy, and gold: navy and gold curtains; navy and gold accent tiles in the little white washroom; navy and gold on the linens and the cushions on the two tight-tucked single beds: one lengthwise under the windows across from the mirrored wardrobe; the other, perpendicular, along the compartment's short side.

'Paris, then,' said John. 'And what do you mean, a joke?' He was pouring out measures of brandy for them both, perched on the little leather bench in front of the writing desk, with the green fields of France unfurling behind him; still rolling his shoulder and giving Sherlock that dear wry look from under his brows, one raised. Sherlock—Sherlock thought he could look at him forever.

But now John was holding out a glass to him, and it wouldn't do for Sherlock still to be pressed up against the door. He cleared his throat, shook his head. Crossed and took the glass, and stood with his knees bracketing John's knees, ducking his head to accommodate the curved and rattling ceiling of the railway carriage.

Cousin Claudine had done the thing thoroughly. It was very fine brandy. But she couldn't have known, thought Sherlock, that when John drank Armagnac his Adam's apple gave a tiny extra bob, as if he pressed his tongue, twice together, to his palate. He did it now: a tiny shadowed motion in the dappled sunlight. He swallowed and turned his head, and looked up at Sherlock through dirty-blond lashes.

When Sherlock drank Armagnac, the taste went sharp on his tongue. His mouth watered.

But John pursed his mouth in his skeptical way; so Sherlock must exhibit. He drained his glass; set it down with a click and a flourish on the writing-desk, and turned away.

'Paris,' he repeated, throwing himself down on the bed by the desk. 'I'll take you to the Jardin des plantes. Lamarck's cabinets; Cuvier's anatomy collections. How can you have served in the War and not seen them?'
'Most people, you know,' said John, his mouth curving up at the edges, 'are talking about the Louvre when they say things like that.' But Sherlock waved a hand.

'It's a perfect preserved battleground of early evolutionary theory,' he said. 'No amusement like that at the Louvre. Not to mention, they've stripped all the skin off a corpse, and posed him with a fig leaf between his legs.'

John turned a chuckle into a cough. Oh wide blue eyes.

'It wasn't at its best, you know, Paris,' John said, 'in 1914. I imagine they'd probably packaged up the—your fig-leaf chap—and shipped him off to the countryside. And remind me what were you doing during the War, Holmes? Sitting in a government office with a set of telegraph transmissions and a—'

'Not even the hammam?' Sherlock cut in. 'I mean come now, Watson. A bit of steam and pummelling? I know we'd all got to make sacrifices for the War effort, but damn it all—'

'Do you!' John barked. Crows' feet; blue, blue. Sherlock stretched out his neck, gestured with his hands where John could watch them, saying:

'—It's really quite excellent for clearing the mind, you know. Mycroft maintains that with a bit of time in the steam room, Clemenceau himself might have seen reason at Versailles. Now that I know of all your—' (John with his hand to his forehead, his mouth curving, curving) '—degenerate tendencies, you can confess to me Watson; I'll not hold glistening Arab youths against a soldier's poor muscles.'

'Oh Christ,' said John, laughing now outright behind his hand. 'Not much time, sorry to disappoint you, Holmes, for glistening Arabian youths.' Wiping his eyes. 'And come now, out with it, what do you mean a joke at your expense? From what I can tell you're doing—.'

Sherlock reached out a hand for his glass, let the last drops of brandy fall onto his smarting tongue.


'Hmm,' Sherlock said. Swung his legs back over the side of the bed and stood, hoping the train might lurch or sway, but his way was smooth back to the brandy decanter. The colour was up a little, in John's face. Sherlock poured him another glass and smiled at the bob-bob of his Adam's apple, then sat on his trunk at the foot of the other bed, knees rubbing up against the side of John's thigh.

'The winter I met my cousin,' Sherlock said, drawing aside the curtain to watch the steady roll of grey-green fields, 'I was eleven. The sum total of my knowledge of her family, when I arrived in Paris, was that her mother, whom her father had never seen fit to marry, now languished on her death-bed; and that my father, being the upright middle-class—'

John snorted.

'—gentleman farmer that he was,' corrected Sherlock, 'was taking us across the Channel to fulfil our blood obligations, by paying our last respects to her, his fallen relation. I took this charge, as you might expect, Watson, extremely seriously.'

'You'd have been completely impossible,' said John.

'I arrived,' agreed Sherlock, 'prepared to shower my poor, orphaned cousin with pity and condescension.'
'You were eleven.'

'Mmm,' Sherlock said, letting the curtain fall to. 'She was twenty-six.'

John groaned, laughing.

'She was a journeyman boulevardienne,' Sherlock went on. 'Supported herself and her two sisters and her layabout brother; had done for years. Her skills as a violinist vastly outstripped my own. She lived alone in white-washed rooms, four floors up, with shuttered double doors that gave east; from her great white bed she could drink wine and watch the sunrise over Montmartre; and she'd done so with more women than I'd ever shaken hands with.'

'Oh,' said John, 'no,' with tears running out the corners of his eyes.

'I mean to say,' went on Sherlock, waving a hand, 'they made efforts to shelter me from all that, but it was an—.'

His voice stuck in his throat. Absurd. John was still laughing, leagues and leagues away; he hadn't noticed.

Sherlock cleared his throat with the compartment suspended around him. Motionless above the earth. He leant forward and said, mouth clumsy around the words: '—an educational winter.'

'I can imagine it was,' came John's voice. 'Oh, God. So all this, this posh treatment, she's rubbing your nose in it?'

'Did you go to the Palais Garnier, at least?' Sherlock asked, too loud. His voice echoed in his own head. In the mirror across from the bed his face stood out, preserved ghost-white against the dark draperies. 'When I was there in aught—,' he continued, but John, indignant, said from oceans away: 'Don't change the subject. She's making fun of you, then, this cousin Claudine? Honestly I'm surprised we're on our way to answer her telegram, after all this time. I hope she gave you hell. You must have been a holy horror, at eleven, in the grips of a do-gooder—'

'Not at all,' Sherlock managed. This was nonsense, he thought, with a bad flat saltless taste in his empty mouth, it was all years ago now, years. 'No,' he said, 'Claudine was. She was my saving grace, that winter.'

'And what did your parents think,' went on John, but Sherlock—he pushed to his feet, awkward, unmoored; stumbled over John's lap, shoving his brandy glass back onto the desk. Caught himself with his palm on the table-top and landed half-straddling John, his limbs nonsensical, his mad unruly heart beating out of his chest.

'Well,' said John. 'Hello. And what did you and Cousin Claudine like to talk about, in her east-facing rooms by her big white bed?'

Sherlock just kissed him. Tried not to sound too lost while he kissed him with his hands on John's shoulders, John's neck, John's back. Kissed his eyebrows and his soft laughing lips; sucked the sweet brandy from his tongue until his mouth lost its acid tinge; until Sherlock could taste nothing but home and John, and oh, and he licked at John's neck beneath the ear, seeking salt.

John hummed into him, low and lovely. It helped, it—Sherlock could feel his body again, wrapped around John's body. Moving against John's body on the small rectangular bench. His heart was going still; not skittering so but pounding, hammering blood out into all the far reaches of him. And John pressed up and Sherlock pressed down, down through John's humming flesh into salt and wood
and earth and rumbling steel; pressed himself forward into John, pressed back against the desk-edge. Pulled John in by the blue silk tie. Kissed him again, pressing Sherlock back into himself; hungry for it, as John laughed around Sherlock's tongue.

'I shouldn't be,' said John, then distracted himself, his hands under Sherlock's summer jacket, grabbing at Sherlock's are and the space between his shoulder-blades. Then: 'I shouldn't be jealous, I suppose? Your parents really would have kicked up a fuss if you'd sat in your cousin's—,' and Sherlock pushed his own hips tight into John's stomach; tightened his hand in John's hair.

John moaned, then chuckled. Sherlock pulled John's head to the side by the hair while he worked his tie loose, up over his collar. John's jaw, tipped back; oh, John's panting smiling breath. He was here, right here; Sherlock cinched blue silk back up against John's bare throat and ground himself into John's stomach with his lips at his ear.

'I did not, in fact,' he said, 'take an interest,' breathing in the dusty-sweet smell of John's hair; 'I do not take an interest'; as John moaned, breathless, and then—'the only person whose lap I take an interest in occupying, sir, is your own'—snorted with laughter. John shifted under him, warm, compact, pressing up with his solid thighs, fingers dipping under Sherlock's shirt and undershirt and the waistband of his trousers and Sherlock said, 'the only person tempting me to—to perversion, to—,' undoing the buttons of John's shirt, licking the salt of his skin where the blue silk tie cut into his bare throat, '—to felony in a foreign land—,' and John gasped and pressed up, hard through his trousers under Sherlock's are, the way he moved; but John said 'It isn't, though—not here,' and Sherlock, light-headed, laughed.

'Yes,' he said. 'True, yes, perfectly legal, isn't it, two men together, but this isn't,' and he tipped his weight, hard and sudden. Dragged the both of them sideways, into a cocoon of navy and gold, while their shins and their thighs tangled up on Sherlock's trunk at the foot of the bed.

John was laughing again; Sherlock could see him. Ungainly; beloved; scooting up towards the pillows to save his knees. Sherlock followed; got his legs and his arms working; felt himself grinning. He wrestled John around onto his side, facing the long window, and nuzzled into his hair, arm locked tight around his chest from the back.

'For public exposure,' Sherlock panted. He worked at John's flies, his whole front pressed to John's back, rumbling steel under their shoulders tight together on the too-narrow bed. John kept laughing and then moaning, soft, with his face so close to the window that his breath nearly fogged the glass. Sherlock could feel him hard and moving, twitching through his trousers; and when the train-carriage (moving) flickered into shade he could see over John's shoulder, John's reflection biting his own lips.

'For lewd conduct,' Sherlock went on, breathing the words into John's skin while John's helpless hands reached back and back, clutching at Sherlock's are and his thighs, 'they could have us in the docks,' and oh, Christ, John was wet already; even through his smalls. He pressed, pressed himself heedless into Sherlock's palm.

'Oh you—,' John said, gasping, and Sherlock brought his hand up; licked his palm. Worked it inside the flap of John's smallclothes and drew him out, red-flushed and leaking in the pale-grey Brittany sunlight. A low noise dripped out around the lump in Sherlock's throat. He made a fist, gentle around John's cock. John's reflection tipped his head back; moved. Panted, and squirmed.

'I may as well,' said Sherlock, 'be frigging you in the open air'; and John twitched his hips forward, wanting-not wanting, 'I may as well be—anyone who happened by, anyone who looked up, who looked at the—. God, you—.'

John cursed, in a whisper; fucked hard once, twice, into Sherlock's fist.
Sherlock swallowed. Over John's shoulder green fields unrolled in the beginning twilight. Miles of cows, and sheep, and the little brown dogs that nipped at their herds' heels and ran back to their masters. Surely no one really would look up. Not just at their car; not just as John sped past them, flushed helpless and moaning. Surely the outdoor reflections. (But the lamps, the little lamps on the writing-desk and the wall above the bed.) Surely they had picked up sufficient speed—?

John panted softly and thrust his hips and Sherlock said, 'Anyone could—just anyone could look up here and see you like this, see you—you in your rucked-up traveling-clothes with just your cock out and so hard for me, John, Christ, Christ,' and he pushed his hips hard against John's arse and groaned.

'Jesus, you—you menace,' John gasped, too breathless to laugh. Sherlock pressed and pressed against his back, nipping at his sweat-slick nape. He tightened his fist and tried to keep them both steady, but warm and John and salt down to the ground and he thrust his hips so hard that the tip of John's cock smeared wet against the window.

'Oh,' John said, 'hell,' his reflection staring down the length of his body. 'Oh Sherlock, hell,' and he shuddered forward, and did it again, and Sherlock—he had to—he wanted inside, his—his trunk was just there, just at their feet, if he could only reach. But peeling himself away from John's back when John was trembling for him, grounding him into his very skin—. He couldn't, he had to just—just rut John's arse through four layers of cloth, his mouth panting open, as John fucked Sherlock's fist in short shivery strokes and outside the window a young farmer, streaked with dirt and twisting a fence-wire in one hand, glanced up from his labours and wiped the sweat from his startled eyes.

'Oh God,' John breathed. 'Oh, God.' He throbbed in Sherlock's hand.

Sherlock swallowed and said, 'The high point of his day, I don't doubt,' and John laughed, high-pitched and wild.

'He can't have seen—,' John said, 'oh,' as Sherlock shifted his grip forward to get his fingers wet, sticky, John leaking all over Sherlock's knuckles and his palm. Sherlock said, 'No, he must have, he can't have missed it, he—can't have missed you writhing around on a train berth like you couldn't help yourself, you—getting the window all wet because you couldn't, he couldn't have missed—,' John throbbing, grunting, close, he was close, he was going to come all over the window, as Sherlock said, '—probably made his mouth water, wanting to get you into it, probably—probably he'll stretch out later under a fruit tree, under a Callery pear with his cider and his strawberries and imagine the thick—oh God how you taste—' and John groaned and ground out, 'Probably—probably saw you behind me, probably thinking about—about that lovely fucking—fuck, about you sodding him in a posh train carriage like he must've thought you were—'

And Sherlock just—just couldn't help himself. Scrambled half-over John's body while John groaned 'Oh you bloody cock-tease bastard,' twisting round onto his back, grabbing Sherlock wherever he could reach him, laughing and trying to pull him back but Sherlock couldn't—. Sherlock flung open the lid of his trunk, on his knees with his head and shoulders off the foot of the berth, Christ Vaseline, Vaseline, why had he not packed properly? as John, under him, knocked apart Sherlock's kneeling thighs, wriggled between them to tear at Sherlock's trouser-flies and his smalls and the hems of his shirts.

'John,' Sherlock said, 'no, God, John.' He thought of cold, of clear water; he tried to curl his hips away from John's fingers and John's laughing nuzzling face without giving up the search through the awful, the just—awful trunk, things thrown in at random, but John had undone Sherlock's belt; had yanked his trousers and underwear halfway down his hot thighs with John's hands just everywhere between Sherlock's legs, kneading his arse, tugging at his balls. 'Hell, John, John,' he cried out,
panting—cool, neutral water—rummaging through the—the ties, and shirts, and bloody endless useless trouser socks, Jesus, nothing, absolutely nothing of use. And he could feel the smile against the inside of his thigh as John lifted his head and said 'On display to the farm-boys of France, was it?' and swallowed his cock to the root, his hands hard on Sherlock's hips.

'Oh wait,' Sherlock gasped, 'I want,' but oh John's mouth. His mouth, wet, wet; hot; rumbling steel; salt to the ground. Sherlock's elbows locked and his eyes slammed shut and his fists closed on the edges of his trunk and John hummed while Sherlock, face flushed hot with his trousers around his thighs, let out a sob; gave in and gave up and fucked down hard into John's warm clenching throat.

And Sherlock was—fists hard on leather hot with the rumble of steel underneath him and his arse up wet for any milkmaid or goatherd to see, sweat on his throat on his collar, face just burning up hot pumping shallow and deep and shallow and frantic into mouth could they see John, could they see John letting him, could they see his aching swallowing throat full of Sherlock's prick, would they see him in seconds in—in moments with his mouth all full to overflowing with hot wet with Sherlock dripping down his chin—John,' Sherlock moaned, shaking, and John reached up and grabbed him hard around the base of the cock, pushing Sherlock's hips back, pushing him out of John's mouth and backward until he was upright, sitting upright and panting on the bed.

'Oh,' Sherlock heard himself say. A long whine. His arms were shaking; his whole body was shaking in place; it was on top of him, he couldn't—'John,' he gritted out, with his eyes still screwed tight shut—and heard John, sitting up in the vee of Sherlock's legs, panting and laughing at him.

'You idiot,' John said, breathing hard. 'God, look at you, you gorgeous—well. You did it to me first. Come on, I thought you wanted something.'

'If I—'; said Sherlock, swallowing. 'If I even move.'

Between his legs John shifted on the bed, and Sherlock needed not to—. Sherlock breathed. Breathed, and waited, the aching, pulsing want dripping slowly into the darkness, as John held as still as he could and Sherlock tried not to so much as think.

John's weight, slipping from the bed. Rustling sounds, hands on cloth. Sherlock breathed in; breathed out. Cloth on cloth; cloth on wood. The pressure at the core of him easing, millimetres at a time. The bed dipped; John's weight. John's murmur: 'Keep them closed,' pressing something cool and hard into Sherlock's palm.

Sherlock breathed in; breathed out. Kept his eyes shut, warming the tin in his palm. Brushes of John's bare arms on Sherlock's hands, on his arms; bare knees brushing him, light hair and warm skin. Sherlock breathed. 'Hold,' John murmured, so Sherlock held the tin steady while John unAPPED it. Light pressure; release. Shifting weight on the bed. Kneeling up, must be. Moving for Sherlock, though Sherlock couldn't move. Viscous sounds; creaking; John's soft and grunting breath.

'Are you—,' Sherlock said, with his eyes still closed. 'Two,' said John, and Sherlock said, 'Oh, I. I want to be watching, I.'

'Yes,' John said. 'Christ.' Sherlock didn't open his eyes.

'You're naked,' Sherlock murmured, breathing in, and out, still in the ruination of a full summer suit. He plucked at his jacket with the fingertips of his empty hand and John moaned, heartbreak-quiet.

'I could open my eyes,' Sherlock said.

'You could,' John grunted. So breathless. 'You can.' His voice angling up like it did; Sherlock knew
he was touching his cock, he was—.

Palms sweating. John moving for him, in the darkness on the other side of his eyelids. His hand on the tin kept clenching on it; letting it go. Moving. Sherlock's body was moving and John's body was moving next to it and they were moving at speed on steel rails as Sherlock held so, so still. John's breath was getting short, shallow; Sherlock if he listened could hear the motion of both his separate hands. Sherlock's left hand clutched the tin and his eyes were closed and his right hand was so empty, and somewhere in the vast distance eight inches in front of him John was naked, touching himself inside and out, for all of Picardy to see. Sherlock dipped his first two fingers into the warming jelly; heard John's intake of breath.

'Three,' John said, and Sherlock laughed a little, ragged around the edges, and nodded, and dipped in his ring finger; spread the stuff out with his thumb. John's skin would be. Would be flushed up golden-pink, in the grey and flickering light. Sherlock held out his hand; didn't open his eyes.

John's hand, closing on his wrist; John's shuffling knees. Sherlock got up on his knees as well (bagged trousers, ruined trousers; he had other suits, he had a trunk of other suits) so he could kiss John's mouth with his greasy fingers reaching down to feel where John was slick and stretched already, his own fingers drawing out of him as Sherlock moaned.

'Oh Christ,' Sherlock said. 'Oh Christ I want—John,' putting his fingers in him blind, sliding blind and hot, slick, as John bit Sherlock's mouth with his head on Sherlock's shoulder and made little abortive movements, to turn around.

'This—like this now, like this,' John panted, shuffling them around on their knees, his back to Sherlock's front, easing Sherlock's fingers out and onto his waist. 'Hold me up again,' so Sherlock hooked one arm around John's chest, chin to his shoulder while, light against Sherlock's side, John's left hand moved on his prick. John was grunting now, squirming; Sherlock fumbled two fingers back in him; felt him twitching inside and felt, oh, empty that John was so empty; Sherlock leaking against his leg.

'In—in me now, inside,' John panted. So Sherlock spread his knees, and angled his hips; rubbed his cock up into the slick cup of his palm with every, just every nerve in his body awash in blood.

'I might—I still might come off as soon as I'm—as soon as—oh,' Sherlock moaned into John's shoulder, drawing out his fingers, pushing his cock into their place, tight, hot, and he felt John start to clench down on him, reaching back to wrench up his head by the hair and saying, 'Sherlock, Christ, oh, look, Sherlock, open your eyes.'

And Sherlock, head held face-forward by John's hand, opened his eyes. Opened them onto the mirrored doors of the wardrobe; opened them on the sight of himself in rumpled dark wool, suited arm holding John's chest and his naked hips as John held Sherlock's hair; opened them on John's flushed-red golden body in the half-light; on John's flying hand and John's struggling half-mast eyes. Opened them wide just as John's cock in the mirror twitched and started to—Christ started spilling over his hand, over—and his body arched against Sherlock's body, and his head tipped back, and in the mirror Sherlock's eyes went wide, wide, and his hips moved once, twice, and he buried himself deep inside and pulsed and whined, and bit John's ear to keep from closing his eyes.

'Oh,' John was saying then, turning in Sherlock's arms as Sherlock slipped out of him, moving against Sherlock's front and the palms of Sherlock's hands; 'oh Sherlock,' and Sherlock kissed John's shoulder and his neck with John's muscles tensing and shifting under the skin; feeling the blood rush in his own ears, the pulse in his lips and his fingertips; and John kissed him as the green Ile-de-France fields rushed by.
1. Charles Humbert and Henry de Jouvenel were real rivals. Humbert was the hawkish vice-president of the senate army commission during the lead-up to the First World War; when the War began he became the director of *Le Journal*, a conservative daily paper in Paris. He used both his posts to advocate for expansion of the French military. Jouvenel served as a sergeant in the infantry; before and after the War he was the editor of *Le Matin*, a more centrist or slightly left-leaning paper. Neither of these rags was anything close to far-left, even in 1921, and both became steadily more Fascist-sympathising as the 1920s stretched into the 1930s. They were competitors, though, and at this point also ideological rivals.

2. Marquis de Beausergent: Not a real person; a minor ageing aristocrat character in Proust.

3. Coco Chanel's boutiques at Deauville and Biarritz had become famous during the War, and she was very much in demand for the simple, modern lines and younger, more active silhouettes of her clothes. In 1921 she had just opened her iconic couture house at 31 Rue Cambon.

4. Madeleine Vionnet and cutting on the bias: This is an anachronism and I am just blatantly leaving it in "because character development." Vionnet was already an active and well-known designer by 1921, but she didn't invent and introduce the bias-cut gown until 1927.

5. Georges Cuvier and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck were French naturalists and pre-Darwinian evolutionary theorists, and the natural history collections at the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle and the Gallerie d'anatomie comparée were (and still are, to some extent) organised according to their theories. Lamarck posited that all beings were evolving in an orderly fashion along a preexisting great chain of complexity, and that offspring inherited the traits acquired by their parents. Cuvier was an anti-evolutionist, who argued that each organism is a closed logical system, dictated by the functions of each of its parts. Stephen T. Asma's *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums* is absolutely fascinating on how these different philosophies manifested themselves in museum curation. (The skinned corpse with the fig leaf is also from Asma.)

6. 1914 in Paris: Paris was actually quite calm during most of WWI, but during the late summer of 1914, before the German advance was halted, the French government and other key cultural guardians fled to Bordeaux. They returned in late fall, when the Germans had been held at the Marne.

7. Georges Clemenceau was the French Prime Minister and the staunchest advocate of harsh reparations against Germany at the 1919 peace negotiations at Versailles. In *The Violet Hour* Mycroft makes a comment about backing Keynes's arguments against reparations, believing that they would (as they indeed did) bankrupt Germany and lead to another world war.

8. Claudine Holmès is tricky ground in this universe because her character is almost completely fictionalised, but her existence and backstory are historical. Everything Sherlock outlines on the train could have happened, and it's plausible that Claudine's mother could have been a French cousin of the family, were Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes themselves historical. Claudine's father, the poet Catulle Mendès, cohabited with but never married her
mother, the programmatic composer Augusta Mary Anne Holmès—who was, in turn, frenemies with the likes of Franz Liszt and Camille Saint-Saëns. Augusta Holmès was of Anglo-Irish descent, but was born in Paris, and there raised her five children (three girls, two boys), first with the help of their father and later without it, supporting them with the proceeds from her compositions. In 1888, before Holmès and Mendès separated, Pierre-August Renoir painted their three daughters in the work entitled *Les filles de Catulle Mendès*. Claudine, age 12, is shown holding her violin.

Augusta Holmès did indeed die in January 1903, the winter Claudine was 26. According to Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank*, her music went on to become popular in the lesbian bars of pre-WWI Paris:

There were clubs whose specialties were fondue and dancing, and cabarets where the blue haze of cigar smoke hung over a zinc bar, and a contralto with a faint mustache sang Augusta Holmes.

I choose to imagine that this niche popularity had something to do with the life and career choices of her violinist daughter. Everything else about Claudine's career and private life are, however, fiction.

Wednesday, August 24th, 1921
9pm (Hour 7)

Sherlock had wondered, after all—only for a moment, boarding the ferry, but he had wondered—whether he would recognise his cousin. The memories of an eleven-year-old boy, forged in a month and left to moulder for two decades, were not ideally suited to the quick identification of a forty-five-year-old woman in a crowded railway station.

As it turned out, though, in high August the Gare du Nord was near-deserted; and when a fleshy blonde, just as they pulled into the platform, bustled through the doors in dropped-waist silk, clearing her way with the end of a cream-coloured parasol, Sherlock was in no doubt who it must be. There were the Holmes stature; the Holmes jaw; Sherlock glanced sideways, half-amused, half-apprehensive. John, indeed, looked mildly alarmed at the sight of Cousin Claudine, as she shooed her way through a flower vendor, a flock of pigeons, and several small dogs; and finally came to a halt at the platform edge.

'Pity and condescension, was it?' John murmured. 'Your cousin looks as though she eats brigadier generals on toast at tea.'

'Brigadiers-chefs, over here,' Sherlock said. 'And did tales of Champagne at sunrise have you picturing a starry-eyed Romantic?' Down on the platform, Claudine widened her eyes, and raised her parasol to gesture vigorously up at their compartment.

They were descended upon, as soon as they handed out their trunks. 'Ah cher cousin,' said Claudine, 'all grown up,' kissing Sherlock's cheekbones firmly, one after the other, in a manner suggesting that once kissed they had better remain so. She drew back to look at him, tutting, dusting invisible lint from his (new, fresh) summer suit. It ought to be insupportable—and yet somehow he was smiling. 'All grown, mon petit cousin,' she said, 'et si célèbre. I have seen you in the English papers. I tell my friends at Le Matin, bring him over, this English detective; he will solve your crimes for you. You can report the answers before the police!'

She guffawed at her own joke, hand to her silk-covered belly, cracking the tip of her parasol repeatedly against the floor. Sherlock watched her; brought her back up in his mind; or rather, burrowed down through the layers of years accreted about the young woman he had known in her white rooms, in 1903. She was broader now, in voice and in body. But though she kept her hair dyed (expensive job; oils to counter the bleach; last touch-up a fortnight ago though she'd been in the country; made a special trip up to Paris just to have it done), and wore a corset though the girls these days were leaving them off, she still snorted when she laughed, and crinkled up her eyes and her nose as she used to do. She had never given the impression, Sherlock thought, of apologising. Not even—not for anything.

'They don't listen, of course they never listen,' Claudine was going on, summoning a luggage trolley seemingly from thin air, leading Sherlock by the elbow through the cavernous peaked arrival hall and out onto the cobblestones, with John trailing bemusedly after them. 'They have their little ways about them, and who am I? A old woman, simplement.' She shook her perfect coif, gesturing for a cab while Sherlock raised his eyebrows and John leapt in to protest that surely she was far from elderly, why she was yet in the prime of life. A taxi pulled towards them. Claudine turned about, catching
John by surprise with her closeness.

'Ah,' she said, 'and the dear Doctor Watson, my apologies,' drawing John in by the hand. Smacking kisses on both cheeks, a hand heavy on his shoulder. She studied his face as the driver loaded their trunks into the boot and John shifted from foot to foot, and let his gaze flick over to Sherlock, who wasn't sure whether to laugh or intervene.

'You are charming, Doctor Watson,' Claudine said at last, with a firm nod. 'My cousin mentioned you would be coming. Very charming indeed; I imagine you do absolutely—.' She paused. John licked his lips. 'Vous aussi,' said Claudine, in that French, that old remembered Parisian French, 'êtes dans la force de l'âge.'

'I don't—,' John started, but Claudine had smacked him on the shoulder and turned about; was already bustling them into the taxi, issuing instructions to the driver in that same tongue, so rapid that Sherlock could scarcely follow even as his mind formed itself back into the rhythms of it. Back into the rhythms of—he remembered her castigations, in her whitewashed rooms: Non, she had said, ton accent, ce ressemble à celui du fermier provençal. Comme ça, she had said, like this, like a Parisian, and had made him repeat himself, over and over until he had it perfectly; over and over until he was calm.

'You didn't used to speak to me in English,' Sherlock said, when the cab was pulling away. 'You used to insist you didn't understand it.'

'But I never fooled you,' said Claudine. Sherlock looked at her over steepled fingers.

'Didn't seem to matter, at the time,'

'Ouf,' Claudine groaned, blowing out her cheeks. 'We have changed, we have all changed, the world has changed. And you are here to help me, n'est-ce pas? In place of me, helping you.'

'Yes,' Sherlock said. Then added, in a rush, as John was looking back and forth between them with drawn-together brows: 'And you said—break-ins? Why call me in? All the stories one hears about the Paris police, I should think they'd be up to looking into a thing like that.'

'But that is the problem exactly,' Claudine said, cracking her parasol on the floor of the cab. 'They are impossible, the Paris police. Into nothing, or into everything. And Henry—bon, they are both famous, you know, Henry and Colette. Husband and wife. She is more famous than him, though I don't recommend saying that to his face. Yes, Doctor Watson—for John had snickered—'you know his type, I think. He is famous for his discretion, and she for her indiscretion; he cannot hope to compete.'

Sherlock hid his smile behind his hand, then felt ridiculous. It was only John, he thought, and there was no reason, with Claudine—so he took his hand away, and chuckled.

'But he does not want—,' went on Claudine. 'He is discreet but he is not innocent. And he was only just—I don't know what they report about us, in your English press—but he was just elected Senator, for Corrèze.'

'Hang on,' said John. 'I just—Jouvenel, that Henry?'

'Oui oui,' Claudine said. 'It is a change, of course. After years of newspaper life, and the War, you can imagine. And even before all this, he worried about his wife's past. She was in the dance-hall; she was divorced; she took up with men and with,' Claudine's mouth twitched up, and Sherlock's followed, 'women. And how does it look, you understand, to the public? He is preoccupied, and he
'Any unnecessary attention,' Sherlock finished, as the cab pulled up outside a pension, beside which an electric street-lamp was just flickering on. Sherlock put his hand on the door, but then Claudine's hand was on his wrist.

'Let the doctor take down the trunks,' she said. 'You must be famished. We can stop here a moment, then go to a café by the basilique.'

'Watson—his shoulder—,' Sherlock started, but John said, 'Don't be stupid, Holmes; talk with your cousin,' and slid out the other side of the compartment. His heels sounded on the cobblestones, and then: the clunk of the trunks leaving the boot.

'L’aubergiste is expecting you,' Claudine called out the window. 'One night only, name of Holmès.' John nodded, and waved, and dragged the trunks after him by their straps, up the stoop and into a darkened vestibule.

'Oh, he's lovely,' said Claudine, in an utterly different tone. Sherlock's head whipped round and she was sitting there with her eyes slit; with that slow, sly, delighted smile. Ages; lifetimes past. As if he'd never—. He sat there nearly winded, and then: 'Enjoy your private compartment, did you?' she said, and he felt himself blush hot.

'Yes,' he said. She waited, expectant, so he said: 'Merci mille fois,' in his best Parisian accent. She laughed outright.

'You are very welcome. Ought I to remind him to air the suits you changed out of, or isn't he the type to forget? You certainly would have, when I knew you years ago.'

Sherlock, choking with something strangely like laughter, said, 'I flatter myself I've developed many fine qualities, since we last met.' Claudine hooted; snorted; then shook, silent in her seat. Sherlock's cheeks were wet.

'If I were still a young woman,' she said. Sherlock said, 'You don't, even—do you?' and she shook her head, hiccuped herself into silence and dabbed at her eyes. John was coming back down the steps.

'No,' she said, as John slid back into the seat next to Sherlock, and then, leaning forward, with her hand on his knee: 'I am truly happy for you, Sherlock.' He put his hand over hers, and squeezed. She leant back and rapped on the glass with the handle of her parasol, shouting up an address.

'I got you rooms close to the gare,' she said to them both, as the cab pulled back into the flow of traffic, 'since we will all be traveling up to St Coulomb together tomorrow. It might have been faster for you to come directly from Calais, but there are—. You see, I wanted—.'

They waited, watching her, but she'd harrumphed herself into silence. She sat and stared out the window long enough for John and Sherlock to exchange looks. The cab was uncomfortably still. They climbed steeply, into twisting, narrowing streets.

'Well!' Claudine said at last, shaking herself from her reverie. 'No use discussing these things, when we are all starving to death. I know a place, my cousin will remember the arrondissement. Though it has changed, Sherlock, you will hardly recognise it. The huge, you remember, catastrophe at the top of the hill, all the digging and scaffolding? But it was finished before the War, the Sacré Coeur, la basilique. It is the new favorite pass-time to detest it absolutely. You will see,' she added, shaking her parasol at them, 'you tell the serveur at the café, you have not been to Paris since aught three, and the
thing looked better as a hole in the ground. Tell him!' she said again, nodding emphatically at John, who was snickering. 'I tell you, if you do he will bring you wine at no charge.'

Sherlock shifted in his seat. What was it, this talk of wine, and basilicas? His cousin, in perpetuity, was nothing if not staunch. And this was—office burglaries? Why not have it out? Her skittishness made him fidget.

He opened his mouth, and narrowed his eyes at her over the tips of his fingers. But Claudine, now, was scowling playfully, as if he'd imagined the last five minutes; and John, beside Sherlock, his hand brushing Sherlock's on the leather upholstery, fairly radiated enjoyment. Sherlock closed his mouth again, eyes to the heavens. Claudine beamed.

'You ought to know better,' John was saying, 'than to tell him things like that. He'll do it, you know, and they'll—'

'Cover you with gifts,' Claudine barked, so Sherlock said, 'They won't, we're English, they'll throw us out on our ears.'

'Oh Christ,' John said. 'Now he's sure to do it. Nobody worse for getting his way.'

'I can think of one person at least,' Sherlock muttered. It had been pitched for John's ears only, but Claudine, after all, had spent a lifetime listening; and she snorted with laughter and slapped his knee, just as John squeezed his wrist in amused warning. He looked out the window to hide his face. Unaccountably pleased.

'Well, you can test it if you'd like,' Claudine said, as they drew to a stop outside a bright-lit café perched at the top of some stone stairs. Light streamed from floor-to-ceiling windows along two sides; and at tiny round outdoor tables, August or no, men and women crowded: laughing and gesturing, sharing each others' cigarettes, stealing each others' wine; their hair mussed and their arms bare to the night.

'Go on!' Claudine was scolding John. 'Go on!! My cousin is good for nothing if he has forgotten how to get a table in a Paris café. I will pay the fare, I will follow you, go!'

'She's—memorable,' John said, in the narrow entryway. 'I can't believe—well. You obviously get on like a house afire. I'm surprised you've never mentioned her before now.'

'A table for three,' Sherlock said, the French coming to him with a swiftness almost surprising as the lanky blond maître-d arched an eyebrow at them. Then to John: 'Yes, you two seem to have formed a bit of a mutual appreciation society.'

The blond was leading them to a table towards the back, away from the street, when Claudine's voice boomed out 'Michel!' for all the restaurant to hear. The waiter turned, face transformed, boyish and delighted, and she beckoned to him, sweeping through the entranceway. Kiss-kiss, cheek to cheek, and she was bombarding him with words, so rapidly that Sherlock, though less than before, had trouble keeping up. My cousin featured prominently, and the window and you silly boy, and she leant close with her hand on his waist, and he batted her away, laughing, his wrist crooked. The upshot was that they ended up at the prime window table in the corner, beside the big glass doors open out onto the sidewalk. A carafe of Chablis materialised at Sherlock's elbow; but Claudine was the one who took the first taste.

'Oui,' she said, 'magnificent,' and then, lower: 'It's always easiest, don't you find, to lose oneself in plain sight. And they are drunk,' she added, gesturing fondly with her glass at the other patrons smoking and giggling together on the pavement. 'They are drunk from ten to noon.'
But John, whose back, anyway, was to the street, was pointing between the cousins, looking shrewd.

'Hiding in a crowd,' he said. 'Did you teach him that? He says that all the time.'

'Does he?' said Claudine. She beamed at Sherlock, and Sherlock coughed.

'In any case,' he said. 'You really think all this is necessary? Our driver might have been some kind of—of undercover agent, might he? Intent on details of criminal investigations?'

'I doubt it,' Claudine said, sucking her lips. 'Is that the kind of work your English cabbies take up, then? As pastimes?'

John snorted; Sherlock felt his lips tug up at the corners. 'Ah,' he said. 'Of course. The scandal-sheets.'

'Exactly.' Claudine nodded, and leant forward. 'They all read them, and you never know—. Bon. I told you in my telegram there had been a forced entry at the office of Le Matin.'

'Yes indeed,' Sherlock said, settling back. His hands settling. 'Which is—the newspaper is the Jouvenels' place of employment?'

'Yes,' said Claudine. 'Or I should say—Henry has given his duties to another for the length of his Senate term. But he keeps the title of editor-in-chief, and Colette is both the literary editor, and the theatre critic. Their offices are next to one another. Both were, ah. Fouillées? Deranged?'

'Mmm,' said Sherlock. 'Ransacked. Was anything taken?' Claudine shifted in her chair. She looked out into the street, where a bleary youth was wobbling towards his waiting bicycle.

'I don't believe so,' she said.

'You don't believe so? Didn't anyone check?'

'I—yes, of course,' said Claudine. 'Of course they checked. Colette came up with her secretary on the first train, the day after we heard. They found nothing missing.' But she still wasn't meeting Sherlock's eyes. Out on the corner the young man had at last got a firm grasp on his handlebars and was staring down at his own hands, swaying slightly.

'But?' John prompted, from Sherlock's other side. Claudine cleared her throat.

'It will sound very strange,' she said, and cleared her throat again. If she would just speak. Sherlock bit his tongue, at a glance from John. Behind him a young girl walked amongst the tables, calling out about flowers for sale.

'You've not seen what they are like,' sighed Claudine, at last. 'Out at Roz Ven. I made them call you in, you know, because I am... concerned. They don't realise that it's not just the two of them affected by these things, that—that other people rely—other people stand, stand to lose—.'

She was breathing hard.

'Would it be easier in French?' said Sherlock, in that language; but Claudine shook her head, impatient.

'Then,' he went on, 'do you stand to lose—' but at that she laughed.

'Nothing like that,' she said. She bit her lip, hand to her temple as at the table just outside the window, a young redhead caught sight of someone across the street. The girl raised her hand; called
out; stood up in a rush. One of her gloves dropped unnoticed to the ground.

'Ah,' said Sherlock. Speaking to his cousin as he looked out the window at the young girl.

'They've a whole household,' Claudine said, 'that follows them around, from the city to the country. That relies on them and their money and their—their reputation.'

'But only one of the bunch,' said Sherlock, as John made a little noise of realisation across from him, 'merits such a show of your protection.'

'That's not,' said Claudine. 'Not true in the least—Colette, for example, she is an old friend. We were in the pantomime together, years ago now. I shouldn't like to see her harmed. We were—we...'

Sherlock just looked at her. Claudine looked away first.

'She won't be a common servant, your lover,' Sherlock said. 'But employed by Madame Jouvenel in an official capacity, since you say money, and linked with her in the public eye, since you say reputation. Possibly a ladies' companion, still included in the household though Madame Jouvenel has remarried; or a photographer for the paper, who shares her byline, or a—'

'—a secretary,' said Claudine. She didn't continue.

'A poet,' she said, then, with her chin up. 'Hélène Picard, perhaps you know: Province et capucines? L'instant éternel? Nine volumes, she has published, but it doesn't pay. So she works as secretary to Colette. One of two.'

'And you are afraid—'

'I don't like to think! If they are robbed, blackmailed; if they must tighten their belts; Colette's other secretary, Mademoiselle Beaumont, she is extremely capable, with less of her own work to do; already Colette takes her to Paris instead of Hélène, and if Hélène loses her position, or is implicated, God forbid, in some, some criminal—'

'All right,' said Sherlock. 'I understand.' Out on the street, he saw, the redhead from the front table was returning, grinning, one strap of her green dress falling from her shoulder, with her hand through the elbow of a dark young man. He'd a sketch-book and a pencil-box under his other arm, and was leaning down to speak into her ear. She made the introductions, scooting back her chair; its leg ground her glove into the stone.

Sherlock sat forward. Clapped his hands together. 'Tell me about the Jouvenels,' he said, and Claudine took a breath, nodding; while John's foot pressed, under the table, into the top of Sherlock's shoe.

'In their own ways,' Claudine said, after a time, 'they have both made so many—I will not say enemies, but—so many have cause to resent them both. They have been married, unfaithful, divorced, remarried. Roz Ven itself, the house you know: it was a gift from Colette's lover before Henry, the woman she abandoned when she met him. And he! He likes to imagine himself in harems, I think. Down there now with his mistress, and his wife, and his previous mistress; and his three children by three different women. His ex-wife is Claire Boas, you know of her?'

John and Sherlock shook their heads. Claudine blew out her cheeks.

'Ouf, society woman, what you call...do-gooders? Yes. Huge house in the septième, holds large parties there for noble causes. All the money she can spend—her father owns factories. But Henry is a baron, and she is the daughter of a Jew. 'Claire Boas' doesn't have the euphonie of 'Claire de
Jouvenel'; not as many people come to her nights. She wants to keep his name. It is, she says, not as good for her son, Henry's son; she sent the boy Bertrand to plead her case.'

'And what did his father say?' said John, who was following the story like he would a melodrama out of Drury Lane, his toe still inching up Sherlock's calf. Claudine guffawed.

'She sent him to plead with Colette,' she said. 'Not with Henry.'

'Oh,' said John. 'And—did she allow it, then?'

'Oui,' said Claudine, shortly. John raised his eyebrows, but she didn't continue.

'And just how old is the boy?' Sherlock asked, elaborately casual. John's head whipped round at his tone, but Claudine just shook hers, slow and wry, pursing her lips.

'Seventeen,' she said.

'I—,' said John. 'Are you—her own step-son?'

'He is beautiful,' Claudine said, shrugging. 'And he was offered in the nature of a bribe.'

'Ah,' said Sherlock, as John said 'A bribe?' and Claudine gestured with her glass.

'Colette is forty-eight years old, and had, when Bertrand's mother introduced him to her, a novel in serial publication: the story of a fifty-year-old woman's love affair with a seventeen-year-old boy. It is a matter of life imitating art. In any case, he is willing. Even Henry seems not to mind, so long as the affair remains private.'

'Is that likely, though?' said John. 'The novelist wife of a senator, sleeping with the senator's teen-aged son? I know you have different—different standards, over here, for scandal, but—'

'Not that different,' said Claudine, straight-faced. Sherlock snorted. 'But this is what I mean to say. This is why I needed to call you in: because they both, Henry and Colette, they go on as if none of it will ever catch them up. They go to the country with their little suite, their little band; they believe it is the whole world, and that nothing could possibly—could possibly interfere.' She clenched her hand; looked down and, very consciously, unclenched it. 'And you know,' she said, 'they are convincing performers. After a time one starts to believe it, too.'

'Sherlock sat back, eyebrows up. 'Admirable friends,' he said, and Claudine coughed, low in her throat, as John applied himself to his coq au vin. Out on the pavement, the young newcomer to the front table had opened his sketchbook, and was glancing back and forth between it and the young girl. He bit his lip, Sherlock saw. His shoulder moved in ways that spoke of quick, bold lines.

'Colette did come up to Paris,' said Claudine, in a more normal tone. 'She stayed one night only, and came back having been made over at her favourite salon. She seemed more put out that her secretary Mademoiselle Beaumont had undone the new coiffure she'd been treated to, than that their place of business had been disturbed. But it is like her. You know, in the—in the War, she followed him everywhere, Henry. She went to the Front and wrote pieces on it in Le Matin. All about how charming and brave and comfortable everyone was. Incredible! No one was comfortable. It was
only, she was in love.'

Claudine tipped her glass back, set it down with a grimace. Sherlock took a sip of his, too, flipping back through his mental catalogue: France; politicians; novelists; the wary condescension of the English press. But the whole affair was outside his purview: Continental scribblers and scandal-mongers and their goings-on behind closed doors. Michel had returned; had taken John's plate and was bending politely so that Claudine could bray in his ear and pass him some counted-out coins. Sherlock squinted back out at the street.

'The world,' he said, 'warped by the lens of sentiment.' Claudine grunted her agreement, but John, in his warm post-supper voice, said 'Is that, I don't know. Engraved on the Holmes family crest, then?' with such obvious tenderness that Sherlock looked round.

Claudine, out of nowhere, gave her bark-like laugh.

'But if you don't like it,' John said to her, looking braced, 'I mean. Surely it would be easier to simply invite Hélène back with you to Paris, get her out of—unless you think—.'

Sherlock could have told him that she did think so, but there would hardly be any point to it now. Claudine, though, Sherlock remembered, was forever hard when one might fear her to be soft, and soft only when least expected. Her heavy hand came down again on John's shoulder.

'Mon cher,' she said, 'she would not follow me to the corner shop.'

'All right,' Sherlock said, getting to his feet, so that Claudine glowered and hoisted herself up in his wake, and John put his serviette on the table and followed. 'Come on. Surely you'd worked that out, Watson, must we spell it all out for you?'

'Only a Holmes,' said John, 'would take that tone about—'

'Bollocks,' said Sherlock, and John laughed, turning to gather his suit-jacket off the chair-back, as Claudine said, 'And you, Doctor Watson, if we Holmases are cold, then how do you explain your own presence in—' then cut herself off, mid-sentence.

Sherlock looked where she was looking. The back of John's head; John's shoulders; John frozen in a half-crouch, staring out at the sidewalk tables.

'What's—is there something wrong?' he said. But John was shaking his head. He'd turned back at the sound of Sherlock's voice. He'd his hand over his mouth.

'Watson,' said Sherlock, and then, 'J—,' but John said, 'No, nothing, nothing, it's just.' He closed his eyes, hard, and opened them again. Rubbed them; breathed in, and out. 'Someone I knew. In the War.'

Sherlock glanced back over to the pavement tables, with his heart thudding thickly in his chest. John's body had pointed, frozen. Which one—the man by the door was ex-military, but French; an officer, most probably, or—

'Bon!' said Claudine, 'you will introduce us!' and John said 'Oh, no, I. It's really not—,' as Sherlock scanned to the centre table, where the young artist was turning his sketchbook around, and the redhead and her shadowed companion were laughing uproariously in response. But surely—surely he was very young, wasn't he? To have been in the War?

Nevertheless, Claudine had her arm about John's shoulders, now, and led him forward. Sherlock followed behind; he could see when John, on the café side, tried to steer them towards the street and
away from the line of tables. But Claudine had two inches on him and probably a stone; she pulled at his shoulders, and was a damned woman, and he let himself be led. Sherlock pressed forward, but the crowd milled and clumped. Michel waylaid Sherlock on the threshold, leaning close: he hadn't realised, of course he hadn't, that Monsieur Holmes was Mademoiselle Claudine's cousin; he would of course have shown him the very best if he had only—and Sherlock nodded, and nodded, and pushed his way forward, watching as the girl leant her ginger head on the artist's shoulder, and the artist let his lips brush her hair, and Claudine steered John straight towards them both. It was the third person at the table, a blond man in a straw hat, who looked up inquiringly at the approach of two—three—strangers; but the motion of his head caught the artist's eye, and his head twisted round, and—

'Aïe!' said the girl. 'Daniel, you hurt me!' Sherlock looked: the young man's hands on her shoulders, indeed, had gripped tight. He unclenched them, slowly, rubbing her arms in apology, as he blinked, and blinked, looking up at John. John appeared to be holding his breath.

'I'm—pardon me,' Daniel said, at last. Scots accent: the boy sounded Glaswegian but Sherlock, swallowing around his heart, knew he came from Edinburgh.

'I don't mean to stare,' Daniel went on, 'it's only—you look remarkably like an old War mate of mine. I don't suppose—you wouldn't be any relation to Captain John Watson—'

All three of them interrupted him at once. Sherlock said, 'Actually—,' as Claudine let go of John in order to more effectively gesture at him, saying 'But yes, he is—,' and John, with a curt nod of his head, stepped forward at last, saying loudly enough to overpower them both: 'Mark Watson,' putting out his hand. 'John was my brother.'

Claudine's jaw snapped shut with a click. Sherlock would have laughed at her if he hadn't been breathing, deep and steady, and watching the lines in the young man's—in Daniel's—face, smooth out into even relief. He allowed himself a little nod, a moment later, when Daniel took his hand off his girl-friend's shoulder to shake John's, and said, grave but steady, in the way of the very young and the mildly drunk entrusted with missions of great importance: 'Daniel MacIntyre, Mr. Watson. It was my pleasure to serve with your brother. He died bravely in the line of battle, sir, defending British freedom and the freedom of France.'

_A golden youth_, John had said, a year ago, now, in the upstairs bed at Baker Street. _Believed he was was preserving the sacred English way of life. I never had that kind of faith_. Sherlock, with his whole skin still vibrating at the nearness of John's skin, had rubbed circles into John's naked hip as John had said: _I think I felt, somehow, that his would rub off on me if I just got… close enough._

So this, thought Sherlock, was Daniel MacIntyre. The lost, damaged boy of John's nightmares. The lad whom John had thought ruined; whom he'd thought contaminated irrevocably by the War or—absurdly, as if such a thing could be; and yet John had shouted it at Sherlock, that awful day last year—infected somehow by John himself, by his touch and by his devotion. Yet this very martyr was now sitting laughing, with a beautiful young woman, at a Paris café. The locked-up son, abandoned forever on a ward in Bresse, was this very moment smiling, rubbing a girl's shoulders, laughing against her cheek. Was gesturing now for John, for all three of them, to sit down. Showing around his sketchbook, which—Sherlock held out his hand, smiling into Daniel's smiling face, 'Sherlock Holmes,' he said, 'It's a pleasure'—showed the redhead, not in her sleeveless green evening dress, but reclining nude on a chaise with her hands behind her head, à la Goya's famous Maja. Sherlock thought the proportions remarkably plausible.

It was all—bizarrely companionable. Michel appeared at Claudine's elbow the moment she sat down, with another carafe of Chablis. John and Sherlock pulled up chairs on either side of Daniel and his muse ('_Agathe_,' she said, extending a hand, '_enchantée_'), and Claudine sat almost in the lap of their
blond friend, and howled with laughter when he gamely put a hand around her waist. Agathe professed herself fascinated with Sherlock's work—had she not seen him in the English papers? It would have been sometime last February, she said, when they were doing reclining poses at the atelier and she could read the papers while she worked. No wonder he'd got her proportions, Sherlock thought, as he said, 'And where is Monsieur MacIntyre's atelier?' Oh, quite near the university, Daniel chimed in, they were all together at the Sorbonne, but came up to Montmartre when they could; at which Sherlock caught John's eye and said, in his best Parisian accent, that he had been here in 1903, and had found the basilica more attractive as a pit in the ground. Daniel threw his head back and laughed; Agathe clapped her hands. Daniel bought the next round, and then Agathe felt he'd woken up in someone else's dream.

By the time they were weaving back down the hill to the auberge, pouring themselves into their room and then half-falling onto one of the narrow beds, John reaching for him, clumsy and gentle and carefully silent but for his hard breath as Sherlock clambered down his body to get him, half-hard, into his mouth—by the time Sherlock was anchoring himself through a Chablis haze to the heavy fleshy weight of John, gasping under him with a hand over his own eyes, Sherlock had almost forgotten those seconds on the pavement when John had stood frozen in place; and the moment, earlier, when stalwart Claudine had thought of Roz Ven, and the whole cab had been enveloped in silence.

Thursday, August 25th, 1921
2am (Hour 12)

In the lobby of the Hôtel Vernet, a three-piece orchestra was wrapping up their set. A single couple swayed together, blonde head to black-clad shoulder, to the shuffling bass-line and the wash of sleepy piano notes. In the quiet, the entrance swung open: a heavyset matron clicked through in t-straps and sable; and the porter, holding open the door, hid a yawn behind his hand.

Irene stood in an alcove by the coat-check counter. She shrugged off her jacket (black, again, and her dress; eternally in black, but one was never out of place); looked about her; didn't move.

It was unexpected, this beating of her heart. Why should she care, she thought. Why was any of it of any interest whatsoever? But she had hardly been able to concentrate, all through her appointment with Beausergent. She'd smiled, once, and his eyes had lit up with fear; but she'd only been wondering about the little scrap of pasted-together paper, waiting at the bottom of her bag. *Un paquet vous attend,* she had thought; and he had gibbered, and she had smacked him across the face to occupy his mind.

She really must be tiring of Paris, she thought: if Charles's botched-up ransom note could catch her interest like this.

Across the lobby, the furred matron retrieved her room key, and bustled over to the lift. The orchestra slid into a half-time rendition of 'Avalon.' Irene put forth an effort, and did not bite her mouth.

It was only, she thought, that the target was so unexpected. Charles? Leaving an anonymous note for Madame Jouvenel? Had the two of them even met? Since the War Irene had—well. She read the papers, like anybody. It wasn't unusual, with a client list like hers, to take three, four, even five of the daily rags: and if two of those happened to be *Le Matin* and *Le Journal,* what of it? Surely those two would be on most people's lists, were they in Irene's position. But most people wouldn't, would they, keep the kind of album Irene kept, in a lock-box under the false bottom of her black-and-gold wardrobe.
The lift dinged. The matron clicked inside, as Irene thought: most people kept albums of their families.

In any case, she thought she would have known if Charles Humbert and Madame Jouvenel had ever met in public. It might easily have happened: at a press dinner, for instance, or one of Claire Boas's charity balls. But the press photographs of Colette (heavy about the face now; lines around her mouth) hardly ever included even her husband, these days. Let alone his political rivals.

Beside the bay, the piano crooned, and Irene's mind sang along. I found my love in Avalon, and I sailed away. Behind the front desk, the concierge was riveted to the shape of the lavender-clad dancing girl, though she was now barely moving against her partner's front. Enough of this, then. Irene folded her jacket over her arm, slipping across the lobby in time with the slither of the snare. She came up in the concierge's blind spot. By the time she purred 'Good evening,' her mouth was practically against his ear. He jumped, hand to his heart, spluttering in indignation; then apologised when he saw the cut of her dress.

'A parcel,' she said, 'for Jouvenel.' She smiled, slowly, leaning on the counter, looking into his eyes.

'Yes,' he said, 'yes, madame, one moment,' rubbing his elbow where he'd banged it when he'd jumped. He turned about. Rummaged in the bank of cubby-holes. She'd expected him to have to look elsewhere—a full-size tintype, Charles had said, details writ large for anyone to see—but he came back with a plain envelope, small-to-middling.

'Is that all?' she said. He nodded. She raised her eyebrow, and he nodded again. 'Thank you, then,' she said, and was just turning, wrapping her jacket around the envelope, when he cleared his throat. She grit her teeth. Turned.

Pardon, he said, but he had expected—well. Jouvenel. Was she any relation, perhaps….? He had cast his vote, he said, for the senator just this past January, and he had thought…

She smiled. Was it not the senator, then, she asked, who had dropped the packet by to begin with?

But the man only shrugged. He didn't know; he didn't believe so. It had been René working that night, but he had said—the man felt sure that he had heard the person who dropped it was a woman.

Irene, thoughtful, nodded. The clerk stepped forward. Ridiculous, as the desk was in the way. There was a relation, then? he asked, a look on his face like a dog at suppertime, and her lip curled up as she turned away.

'A distant cousin,' she called back, over her shoulder. 'A distant cousin of his wife.'

I found my love in Avalon, Irene's mind parroted back to her, all the way home in the cab. The tempo ratcheted up and up her hands sweated on the fabric of her jacket, draped around the little package. I left my love in Avalon, and I sailed away.

She did not move her lips to the tune; she did not jiggle her leg. She sat upright, but not overly so; and gazed out the window with a studied calm, not biting her mouth. I left my love in Avalon! Besidethebay.

When they pulled up in a narrow street in the Latin Quarter, she counted out the bills with a steady hand. Swung her hips walking up the stairs to her door, and made a point of looking through her bag for her latchkey. Inside; upstairs; even then she didn't rush but climbed the three flights at her usual steady pace. Only when the door of her own flat did she let herself exhale, one hand flitting briefly to her throat.
The place in Rue Garancière was an extravagance. Most of the girls lived in their quarters at Le Chabanais; half the time Irene did, too. She hadn't been here in a week. And she could see now, even by gas when she lit the lamps, that a week's worth of dust stood on the little table; on the cups and the window-sills. If she opened the taps, she knew, they would scream, and run brown for minutes.

She stripped out of her dress. It was Jean Patou, after all (in black, eternally); and with all this dust—. Le Chabanais, if nothing else, kept chambermaids. She hung the dress and the jacket in the wardrobe. In her knickers and suspenders, jittery now and biting her lip, she took two steps to the kitchen to fetch a rag; then one step back the other way, to the table. She cleaned the surface free from dust, methodical; deposited the dirty rag back in the sink, and wiped her hands on a flour-sack. Fetched the small gas-lamp from the bedside. Positioned it on the table and breathed out, hand to her hair. Yes. That was fine. And when she turned, there was the envelope, still in the pocket of her hanging jacket; she smoothed its edges and sat in the straight-backed chair at the little table, with the shutters still closed on the Rue de Vaugirard and one tiny corner of the gardens of Luxembourg.

It wasn't as if she didn't know, or at least strongly suspect: and yet when she tipped the film negatives into the halo of the gas lamp, she heard her breath catch. There must be, oh: two, three packs' worth of film, here. Irene tried to remember. Had they changed it out? Had someone slipped away to the en-suite? Taken the time, exhausted and drunk as they had been, fumbling in the dark, to close up one film pack; then open the camera back, and slot in another? Which of them had done it? And when? It would have to have been—well. Jouvenel (Henry, that night, Henry) had been rather indisposed, hadn't he? She laughed, and thought: it had to have been Gretha, or idiot Charles; or Irene herself. Could Irene have forgotten that? Gretha slipping away? And Irene—but it was years ago, now. And perhaps, she thought, holding up a nitrate rectangle to the lamp, there were more images here than the ones taken that night. Perhaps, after all, none of them had been.

But no. In this square, at least, she could make them out. Not their faces, but their bodies: the four of them, Irene and Gretha flanking Henry and Charles, in—in the wraparound booth, surely, in the centre of Le Chabanais. Four wartime years in the place and she'd have laid odds on identifying any uniform in Europe, even in colour-reversed gaslight. And Charles great and dark (blond in life), and Henry lightly suave (almost Persian, really), sprawling at the table with their moustaches and their cigars. Six years ago; seemed an lifetime. And how might Irene's own eyes look to her now? How the expression on her younger face, if she should make a print on heavy, glossy paper?

Prints. She lifted another rectangle, and another. She had expected prints, after all, not negatives. Charles had said \textit{The largest print of the whole bundle, Irene}; he had said \textit{to my damned daughter, I had thought better of you}. She lifted another rectangle, wondering precisely which of these images young Agnès Humbert had been treated to, two days before. Surely not this one: Charles's face was hidden; it could have been anyone pinned under Gretha's long skirts and her hips. Or this one—well. Someone had changed the film, certainly. That particular shot had to be from quite late in the evening, from after Irene had untied Henry. Someone had—Christ. She couldn't remember. And Irene prided herself on her memory; always had done, always. But then—well, they'd none of them slept, had they? Not for days, maybe. Officers' leave and they would draw the curtains: it had always been midnight in Le Chabanais, that summer.

Agnès, thought Irene: the Humbert daughter with a tintype in her hand. Was it one Irene remembered being taken? Gretha in her jewels, Charles's arm around her in the Chabanais dining room? Henry gesturing, laughing, Irene in her black-velvet choker? Or one she'd forgotten entirely: her own arse (higher, slimmer than it was now, she could tell even by the negatives how she had aged) in belt and suspenders, hand at his throat, and Henry's panting mouth—? It must have been Charles, then, or Gretha, who had amused themselves with the camera.
It made her sweat, that she couldn't remember.

Her hand slipped too close to the gas lamp, and a dark hand, and a slim nitrate leg, curled up in flame. She dropped the film on a bare section of table and crushed it out with the base of the lamp; then sat back, her hand to the back of her neck. The room was stifling, suddenly. She rose, and reached over the table; unhooked the shutters and pulled them open. Down on the street students were laughing. Holding each other up. The cool night air washed over her wet neck, and her face.

There were prints, she thought. Enlargements, with her face in them, and Gretha's face: and someone was using them for—what? And Irene couldn't remember. And someone—some woman—had left the negatives, only the negatives—and surely that was backward, from how blackmailers normally worked—in a generic stationer's envelope behind a hotel desk off the Champs Elysées; had left them for a Jouvenel, for Colette, had left them for—

Not for Irene, that was certain.

She looked down at the little pile of film squares, stacked on the table. The breeze came in off the gardens and laid its cool fingers on her belly and her thighs. Jouvenel, the envelope proclaimed, and the desk clerk at Le Matin had said: Roz Ven, outside St Coulomb. So small they don't even put it on the maps. Tomorrow, Irene thought, undoing the clips on her stockings; loosing her brassière. Tomorrow the train; and her red morocco trunk.

Chapter End Notes

1. Pretty much all the details of the marriage/relationship between Henry de Jouvenel and Sidonie-Gabriel Colette are true. They had a stormy courtship, in which he "stole" her from her aristocratic butch lesbian lover Missy (Mathilde de Morny, the Marquise de Belbeuf), who had bought Roz Ven and deeded it to Colette in 1910.

   In 1912 Colette became pregnant and Jouvenel divorced his wife (Claire Boas) in order to marry his lover before the birth of their daughter Bel Gazou. Henry de Jouvenel served in the infantry at Verdun, and was elected Senator for Corrèze in early 1921.

2. In comparison to that in London, the Paris police force was developed earlier and given more power. Kate Summerscale, in the early chapters of The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher, gives a good run-down of why the spectre of the supposedly all-powerful French police force was a deterrent to (especially upper-class) British acceptance of an English equivalent. Essentially, practices like searching suspects' houses and persons struck the 19th-century upper-class English as invasive and unsportsmanlike.

3. The Sacré Coeur Basilica was finished in 1914, at the summit of Montmartre, after roughly 40 years of construction. It was immediately unpopular as an eyesore; people found it outdated and in bad taste. It was also politically controversial, being a monument to monarchy, religious piety, and conservative social values constructed in the midst of the city's most rebellious and bohemian neighbourhood.

4. Everything related about Colette's love affair with Bertrand de Jouvenel, and his mother Claire Boas's role in facilitating it, is true, as taken from Judith Thurman's Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette. Colette had written, and was in process of
serially publishing, *Chéri* (which revolves around the love affair between the 48-year-old courtesan Léa de Lonval and the 17-year-old Fred Peloux), when Madame Boas sent her 17-year old son to plead her case with his stepmother. After offering him to her secretary Mademoiselle Beaumont, who refused the pleasure, Colette seduced the boy herself, and they were involved for the next few years. In a delightful turn of events, given the economic gist of the Unreal Cities universe, Bertrand Jouvenel in later life went on to become a Keynesian economist.

John is also correct in guessing that the affair wouldn't remain unnoticed for long; the Jouvenels divorced three years later, amidst much scandal on the subject.

5. Henry's many affairs were likewise historical.

6. "Avalon" was a tune popularised by Al Jolson in 1920, and written by Vincent Rose and Buddy DeSylva. It went on to become a jazz standard, but in 1921 was still very new.

7. Le Chabanais was one of the swankiest and best-known licensed brothels in fin de siècle and WWI-era Paris. It was named for the street where it was located, and operated between 1878 and 1946 (when prostitution, and hence the *maisons closes*, were outlawed in France). At the close of *Chez les bêtes*, Irene is working at a back-alley lesbian-centric brothel in Montmartre; a move to Le Chabanais at the outbreak of the War would have meant less specialised, but more glamourous and lucrative work—and also that she was becoming well known in her field.

8. Jean Patou: Patou was a popular fashion designer at the time, specialising in activewear (particularly tennis ensembles) as well as eveningwear in the new, boxier, less restrictive "flapper" silhouette.

9. Agnès Humbert: The real-life Charles Humbert did indeed have a daughter Agnès, who at this point was an art student in Paris.

10. Further DVD notes on this chapter can be found [here](#).
Thursday, August 25th, 1921
2pm (Hour 24)

From the white wood sign with its black-lettered ROZ VEN, half-hidden by vines, a sea-path stretched down through grass and sand. Irene, one hand to her hat, held with the other to the fence-posts as she picked her way down. Her stomach rumbled. The sun beat hot on her shoulders, and back at the road something tacky had stuck itself to the ball of her foot. Still, at the path's base, stretching out sullen blue, and held fast by craggy black arms at either end of the sand: Oh, she thought. The sea.

She'd been on it only once, the sea. And she'd been weak, still; painfully young; standing on the deck of a ship at the end of June with the brisk salt air in her face. And then: a summer on the pantomime boards in Le Havre, sewing up the same damned shift every night, smoking Madame Colette's stolen fags on the docks in the afternoons, and then: Paris. She looked out at the waves, hand on the decaying fence, thinking: she hadn't left Paris for thirteen years.

To her right, up a steep slope through a patch of wheat-brown grass, a trampled-down footpath led up and up. She turned, and lifted her face to see. At the top of the hill was a great brick country-house, half-obscured by wind-striped pines. Whitewashed shutters stood open all along its seaward side; glass glinted in the sun. The windows shone like eyes, and Irene felt, for a moment, quite exposed, in her white shift under the sudden sun. It had been such an overcast summer, she thought; irrelevantly. Up until now.

Still, her best information said the family was away for the morning. There might be servants, certainly; but if she approached from the other side of the hill…

She held to her hat; made her way. Slowly. The provinces had proved themselves provocingly slow. A person, after all, could hardly hire a motor-car to go house-breaking; and so small they don't put it on the maps was small indeed. Irene had taken rooms at the resort in St Malo; even there, she had seen the porter eyeing her red morocco trunk. Not to mention her clothes. She'd been eyed by the cab driver from the train station, and by the boy in the bicycle rental booth, and by the elderly woman in the beach-side shop where Irene had bought three ensembles in execrable tourist taste, and mussed her own hair. Before her train had even left Paris there'd been two men, running breathless onto the platform as she opened the window to flick her cigarette onto the rails. They'd been too late. The shorter one had cursed and caught his breath, but the taller one had scanned the compartments as they passed, and Irene had drawn down her sash again with a click. Christ. It was no wonder she felt, now, that the very house was staring down at her, with Charles Humbert's rheumy little eyes.

She circled round through a grove of Scots pines; came up by the side entrance. For minutes together she stood still, under cover, watching the door. No sounds came from the house. Nothing stirred at the shutters, shadowed on this side. By the granite steps, in the dirt, a strange striped bird with a bright orange crest stabbed at something on the ground, over and over in a staccato motion, with its long, thin beak.

When Irene finally left the trees, the bird rustled its feathers at her. Bold little thing, she thought, as it fluttered black-and-white and whistled at her. Shush, she wanted to tell it; or to rush at it, drive it away. But it flapped a few feet off, still complaining, before she got close. She walked on to the
steps, and then the door, and she didn't even need the pick-locks in her pocket: it opened easily for her, creaking a bit in the silence and the shaft of sunlight she let spill onto the hardwood floor.

She knew, with a tight buzzing at the back of her neck, that she was late. She'd have to hurry. The hotel had taken ages; and then, bicycling all the way from St Malo had taken upwards of an hour. At least, she thought, making her way up the narrow wooden stairs, a bicycle could be covered over with vines. You couldn't say the same for a Rolls Royce.

Irene took her gloves from her shoulder-bag; pulled them on as she passed the first floor and climbed all the way to the top. Four sections of staircase with landings in between, and she was up on the partial third storey, just a faded canopy bed and blond hardwoods, with a washbasin under a window overlooking the sea. She crossed, and looked down, feeling: now she was the glinting eye; and this room the monumental head of the house, scowling down at that girl—that woman—that hapless man in the tan trousers, strolling along the beach. She brushed the edge of the chest of drawers, peering out, and then looked down, startled: a solid quarter-inch of grime on the pads of her fingers. She had made dark trails through the dust. The washbasin was encrusted with the stuff. She glanced round; shivered. Dust on the work surface; untouched. Dust on the window-sill. When she turned to look at the bed, she was struck by a sneezing fit.

And now, looking back towards the stairs, eyes watering, she could see the prints her own feet had left. She cursed in silence; rummaged in her shoulder-bag for the awful tourist jacket, and rubbed out her trail. It was still plain, now, but free from the prints of her feet. A moment later she wondered whether she ought to have left it. Servants must come up here, mustn't they? But no: it seemed not. The best room in the house, she thought: left to moulder.

She wiped out her footprints on the stairs back down. A blue-and-white runner stretched all along the first-floor corridor, and here, on the side-tables and the moulding, there was no dust at all. Only doors: white doors to both sides, with ornate cast-metal handles. Sea-side; garden-side. Irene thought: pasted-together note. Someone whose hand the lady knew, who knew her place of work. But that was surely true of anyone here; anyone she had invited to stay. And Irene, pointlessly, tried to recall: amongst all the notes passed between performers backstage at the pantomime, had Madame Colette ever seen Irene's hand?

Well. It hardly mattered, now. Irene crossed to the first room on the seaward side, and pushed open a door. A massive oaken four-poster; a wardrobe full of summer suits. Henry Jouvenel, it would be. Senator; master of the house. She made a quick search of the room, but found nothing and expected nothing: they would ruin him, those pictures, but he would hardly leave the negatives waiting behind a hotel desk for his wife. And the desk clerk had said—and Charles had said—a woman.

Irene moved objects only far enough to search around them. She put them all back where she found them, thinking of servants. Anyone could surprise her at any time.

She slipped next door, and was ambushed by a riot of fabric and colour. Already searched? she thought; and then: a band of artists? But no: only two people, on closer inspection. Two women: one to have moved the writing-desk up against one window and cracked the casement for the cool air, a black cardigan over the chair-back; another to have draped the armchair in dozens of pastel woolen scarves, and leant her violin case up against them. Irene moved amongst the mess: violin case; desk-drawers; mirror-backs; trunks. Nothing.

Nor was there anything in the room next door, where the books and the journals and the taped-up notes of the resident male overwhelmed almost completely the faint rouge smudges and rinsed-out knickers of his... wife, Irene thought. A lover would demand more attention. She passed the next door without so much as a glance. The last sea-view must be Madame Jouvenel's, and Irene would—
She was breathing so hard. She was running out of time.

Nothing, nothing: nothing in the garden-side room with the double windows, where every surface was littered with sketches and new-cut gowns, and in the wardrobe hung the white Vionnet from the photo on Jouvenel's desk. Nothing, either, in the room next door, looking out towards the ancient garage, where the bed was made with hospital precision, the severe black steamer trunk perfectly square with the foot-board, and the pens and the pencils marched in military lines along the top of the desk. (Female, though, from the chiffonier full of blouses and out-of-date shirtwaist skirts. Irene wondered how much Madame Jouvenel's ordered desk at Le Matin owed to the woman in this room.)

Irene, now, was coated in other people's dirt; weighed down with their ballast; and still there was nothing. Her hands sweated in her gloves. The clock ticked on the landing. The penultimate room was stuffed with short pants and illustrated novels: surely, she thought, a child wouldn't—. And she moved on to the last, next to the stairs, which swam in cravats and slim-cut trousers; high-button waistcoats that could have fitted Irene herself. A spoiled boy from the septième, she thought. Playing at being a man. Five minutes under the bed and in the wardrobe-bottom, and she'd found his second-rate smut and his third-rate poetry, and her own image nowhere in either one.

She was filthy; sweat-soaked; empty-handed. She straightened up and listened to the clock tick in the hall. No other sounds from indoors; not from the abandoned bird's-eye room or the floor below. Outside in the garden the orange-crested bird, like a child with a tin whistle, kept up its call, and in the distance—but there, she thought, catching at the sound: clattering wheels on the long dirt road.

Downstairs in the entryway she paused, then slipped back out the side door. The ancient garage was just there, up a slight incline; if she kept far back in the trees she could watch. And yes, the rattling increased; and yes, just there: a decrepit Renault wagon lumbered up the drive, and behind it a new Citroën with the top down and—that must be her, must be Madame Jouvenel at the wheel, headscarf and shaded spectacles and pursed dark lips. Beside her the boy dandy (last room on the garden side), and in the back seat—.

Irene blinked hard. When she opened her eyes the cars had passed.

She buzzed, and shivered; she was breathing too hard. It was only a glimpse, but she'd seen, she knew it—and she felt again, on her back, Charles's watery-eyed gaze. Absurd. She shivered, and buzzed. She circled round towards the garage, so that when the two men emerged from it, the taller one gesturing impatiently at a close-lipped Madame Jouvenel, Irene could be in no doubt. They had followed her, then: followed her down from Paris on the afternoon train. Hired by Charles? Or—as he emerged from the garage himself, on the arm of the tiny blonde from the desktop photo and the sketch-filled garden-side bedroom—Henry Jouvenel?

Irene stood in the trees, biting her mouth. Watching. The Jouvenels and spies and assorted guests all trailed into the house, and Irene was just about to turn away, to pick a path back through the pines and retrieve her hidden bicycle, when two more figures emerged from the garage: a rail-thin woman in English black, and by her side, hand held in a death-grip: a pot-bellied, grim-faced little Jouvenel girl.

Thursday, August 25th, 1921
4pm (Hour 26)

'Coucou!' called Madame Jouvenel, 'We return, Estelle, where are you?' cutting Sherlock off in the midst of another question about the state of her office as she'd left it in July. He stopped, confounded,
in the hall, his mouth working pointlessly in the silence echoing back from the far end of the house.

'Estelle!' the lady called again, and John almost ran into Sherlock's back: a warm press of fingers on his spine. There was no answer. No sound from either floor. Madame Jouvenel made a tutting noise, and moved off down the hall to see about her missing domestic. Outside in the garden, an unfamiliar bird called, over and over, in a detuned doubled whistle. It grated on Sherlock, just between his eyes.

'And you two,' said Cousin Claudine, coming up behind John in the bottleneck forming at the foot of the stairs, 'will be up in the top bedroom.'

He felt it as John turned, to follow her up the spiral stairs; heard him saying 'The top—we don't want to put anyone out,' and Claudine scoffing in her old way, 'Between those two? Which of them would take it?' Sherlock, though, still stood and scowled after the retreating back of the lady of the house.

And did you leave any manuscripts in progress? he had asked, firing questions into her ear the whole way out from St Malo. And no papers were missing? Nothing marked or altered? But she had just waved him off; had talked of the sun, which was finally warming them up after this unseasonably cool summer; had told them how, last year, she had taught Bertrand—her arm about the boy's shoulders, and he'd smirked over his cravat—to swim. And the clerk at the front desk saw nothing? And did guests often visit your office, or your husband's? And was the room generally ordered as it you left it in July? But it was no good. She only snorted; said Mademoiselle Beaumont saw to all that, and Mademoiselle Picard. Why have secretaries, she asked, if not to handle the tiresome and the banal? She was sure—with a glance in his direction—that either of hers would be glad to speak to Monsieur Holmès. Assuming, she added, smugly, that he could track them down.

And so on, and so on, a half-hour through the wide salt-choked pastures of Brittany. Why, Sherlock wondered, watching the rest of the party parading now through their own front door as if it were the entrance to a stage, should they bother to send out a whole battalion, to meet two people whose presence they'd determined to ignore? Here they came, one after the other: the Jouvenel husband; his foppish son; his tiny blonde mistress; even the dour eight-year-old child, and her English nanny. 'Holmes,' came John's voice, from the upper landing, and Sherlock turned, blinking away his cousin's tense smile, thinking that the only two people excluded from the welcoming committee were, conspicuously, the two apparently qualified to answer his questions.

He trundled up, in any case. Creaks on the second stair from the bottom and the fourth from the top (long corridor on the first floor), and up another flight, where—

'Ouf,' Claudine was saying. 'Estelle is just impossible! She was to have prepared this room,' at the same time that Sherlock, stopped in the doorway, said: 'But there's been another break-in.'

'Pardon?' said John and Claudine, more or less in unison, with their accents on opposing beats. Sherlock pointed to the floor, and the wide, clear swathe in the dust.

'Who else,' he asked, 'would want to obscure their own footprints?'

'Well,' she said, doubtful. 'Do you really think—?'

Sherlock crossed to the window, which looked down at the sea. Beneath it, on the top of the chest of drawers, four clear smudges marred the perfect blanket of dust. Slender fingers; slenderer than his own. He held his hand in the air over the marks. Fresh, they were. From today, certainly.

'How long has this room gone unused?' he asked. He bent down, examining the drawers and the grimy wash-basin. Apart from those finger-smudges the thing was pristine in its filth. 'Eight? Ten years?'
'They have been married ten,' Claudine said.

'Shame,' said John. He had cut a path around the wiped-clean section of floor, and was looking down at the shore through the second seaward window. 'What a view.'

'Missy used to say,' said Claudine, though she stood biting her lip at the dust-trail instead of joining him at the casement, 'that she could lie in bed with Colette, and see all the way to England, on a clear morning.' Sherlock snorted. 'Well,' said Claudine, 'Missy always did have a Romantic imagination. Had a carriage made, after the one of your Lord Byron; two black horses and she called them Ail and Vanille.'

'I don't—,' said John. 'Garlic and vanilla?' But Sherlock laughed, and Claudine said, distracted, 'Une gousse: a bean or a—a clove. It's what they call women like Missy. And me.'

'Brazen,' said Sherlock.

'She was, ah. Very brave, in those years. And also,' she added, stirring herself to motion with a little sigh, 'very rich.'

'She bought this house, then?' said John. 'You said she's Madame Jouvenel's former lover, who bought her this place? So this room was their—?'

'Mmm,' said Claudine. Sherlock flung out a hand to arrest her movement when she neared the wiped-clean path, but she stepped over it, neatly. He supposed—he supposed he oughtn't to have thought she'd do otherwise. Her gaze wandered between it and Sherlock—until, after long seconds, she looked away.

By the big red-draped bed she stopped; touched the mound of ornamental cushions. 'Two great blacks,' she said. 'Missy was mad about horses.' Sherlock glanced up: there indeed was a faded black Thoroughbred, rearing in needlepoint with its whip-bearing rider half-obscured by his cousin's hip. 'And Colette, of course,' she went on, gesturing to another pillow, 'has always been a fool for cats.'

'You mean to say,' said John, 'that actually nothing has been—that this is all still as they—?'

'We should get back downstairs,' Sherlock said. He straightened up into the quiet. 'Find the other guests; see if their rooms were disturbed.'

Claudine took a breath. Looking down at the cushions.

'Yes,' she said. It hung in the air, suspended between Sherlock and John. Falling on neither and on both.

'Yeah,' said John, at last. 'All right.' Claudine turned; he backed from the bed to let her pass. Shoulder to the window he glanced out again, and his eyes tracked, for a long moment, the progress of—Sherlock followed his gaze—a woman, black-clad on the sand, facing full into the wind.

Sherlock clapped a hand to John's shoulder, then led the way back downstairs. John and Claudine trailed after, with her saying, hearty and unconvincing: '—stayed with them in aught-nine. She and I were in the panto, still; Missy adored her. The two of them, in the tower for days, and silk and monocles in all the first-floor rooms. Never a dull moment, never—'

But here was a dull moment, Sherlock thought, looking up and down the first-floor corridor. Eight doors, eight rooms; and half of their occupants had come to meet him; but now all was silence. Maddening. Beneath them, from the wooden stairs, came a petulant thud of feet.
'This,' said Claudine, raising her voice a bit, clearing her throat, 'will be the youngest member of our party,' as a square-faced spotty boy trudged onto the landing. He started when he saw them; then lifted a shoulder, in eloquent and all-encompassing apathy, and pushed past Claudine to the second garden-side bedroom.

'Not the youngest,' the boy mumbled on his way past them. 'There is Bel-Gazou.'

'Of course,' said Claudine, 'I meant—the youngest to sit at table.' But she had always used to grimace like that to cover a lie. Sherlock recalled, Sherlock—and Sherlock thought of the bullish little girl; he doubted there was a person in the house who dwelt on Bel-Gazou Jouvenel with pleasure. A moment later, oddly ashamed, he felt John's warmth at his back.

'Can I help you,' called the boy, crashing about inside his room. John and Sherlock exchanged a look. John set off down the hall to check the other rooms, as Claudine, eyebrows raised, stage-whispered to Sherlock: 'Renaud Jouvenel. Henry's son by—well. His mother is lodging in the rooms above the garage.'

'Child of the baron's second connection, then?' Sherlock said. 'Naturally he wouldn't forget the most recent addition.' Then: 'Renaud,' he called, and proceeded to brave the lair, rapid-firing questions: the boy was to look carefully; was anything disarranged? Was this the normal state of the room? Where had he just been? Had he seen anyone about the place? To which Renaud replied in grunts and monosyllables: no, yes, by the shore, no; all the while hiding his toad face behind the cover of an illustrated novel. And his mother was staying with them? Sherlock asked, at which the boy raised his shoulder again, shrugged his chin out towards the single slim window that gave onto the garden.

There it was, indeed: moss-covered and falling-down, as it had been a half-hour before when they'd arrived, with a gabled roof that must leak dreadfully in the rain. There had been—indications of a presence, he remembered, raising the sash: the back stairs clear of debris, a flash of colour in the upstairs window. A cast-off mistress, though, of all things, living above her rival's garage. In the tree opposite, the tin-whistle bird repeated and repeated its call; and from down the corridor came the soft opening and closing of doors.

'My mother is a Countess,' came a mumble from behind the illustrated novel. 'Countesses don't need to break into other people's rooms.'

'Renaud,' said Claudine, leaning in the door, as Sherlock ignored the boy. 'You're being a nuisance. Monsieur Holmès is my cousin; and someone has been disarranging the rooms.'

'It will be Mademoiselle Patat,' the novel mumbled. 'Looking in Bertrand's room. Wants proof he's fucking his stepmother, force a divorce. As if everyone here couldn't testify to it in front of a court.'

'Mademoiselle Patat was with your father, actually,' Sherlock said, still looking out at the garage. If the apparent Countess had been in her rooms, he thought, she'd have an unimpeded view of the side-door. And if she hadn't been, then she'd know that nobody else shared it. 'As were your stepmother and your half-brother. They came to meet Doctor Watson and me, at the train.'

The novel grunted.

'Mademoiselle Beaumont, then,' it said. 'Tidied her own room until she couldn't stand it, she had to mess with other people's.'

'Yours would be the first on the list, in that case,' said Claudine. 'Thank God that I never had children.'
'Oh,' said the boy, dropping the novel with a huge false gasp and a glare at Claudine, as Sherlock turned from the window, and John came up to the door, shaking his head. 'Oh, Monsieur Cousin, I know who it must have been. It was Mademoiselle Picard. She was sneaking around in the Carcos' room.' The boy was speaking in a sing-song voice now, and Claudine's jaw was set. 'Mooning and sighing over all Monsieur Carco's things,' he crooned. 'Touching his suits. Does she make you wear his cologne, Mademoiselle Holmès?'

'For God's sake,' Claudine said. 'What a bore.' She made it look, sweeping from the room, unhurried; but her hands were in fists as she turned, and stalked out.

'To what depths the modern aristocracy,' Sherlock murmured. And then, with a false smile: 'The maid did it,' tossing the boy's book back on the bed as he, too, left the room.

Out in the corridor, John had his hand on Claudine's shoulder, but she brushed him off as Sherlock appeared.

'Mademoiselle Picard, then—,' Sherlock said, and Claudine said 'Hélène,' so Sherlock went on: '—is she lodging...?'

Claudine drew her shoulders back; led them across to the second seaward room. She opened the door on a jumble of fabric: wide swathes of black amongst Claudine's pale pinks and blues and violets.

'A poet, you see,' said Claudine, gesturing to the desk with its pens and its piles of notebooks, pushed up against the window. 'Like I told you. Like Monsieur Carco. It is a point of affinity, she feels, between them.'

She met his eyes; clenched her jaw. John shifted from foot to foot in the silence of the room, and Sherlock didn't know—so he stood, stupid, one hand at rest on the Picard woman's discarded black cardigan.

Claudine cleared her throat, then. Faced away from Sherlock to gaze down at the long sweep of grasses and sand spreading out towards the sea. John said, 'I'm—sorry,' in an oddly hesitating voice, but Claudine just snorted, and shook her head, and John licked his lips. Nodding, and nodding. Sherlock, suddenly, didn't want to look at either of them.

Against the shawl-draped armchair by the second window an old violin case was resting. Faded light-brown leather contrasted with violet wool, and Sherlock—he couldn't remember, quite. Was it the same? The one she'd opened in the Montmartre evenings, and made him play to the skeleton of the new basilica, while she scolded him on his technique? It was disconcerting, not knowing for certain.

'Madame Jouvenel,' he said into the silence. Bending to touch discreetly the old case. 'I assume she was the one who assigned the rooms?'

Claudine shaped her mouth to answer, but then her face just—just transfigured. Lit from within. He wondered if someone watching him when John—

'That's Hélène,' Claudine said, 'just there. Down on the shore.'

She opened the casement further; leant out, and waved—looking briefly, for the first time in the past hour, herself. Along the sea-path a wiry black-clad figure wended its way, a floppy white hat on its head and a satchel over one shoulder. It paused, and looked up. Raised its arm in greeting. John's woman in black.
'She'll be up in five minutes, or ten,' Claudine said. She leant back in, and fished a sleek cigarette-case from somewhere in her skirts. Lit up; looking, Sherlock thought, distastefully fortified. Saying: 'What did you ask? Ah, the rooms. You're thinking that Madame Jouvenel likes to move the knife in the wound.'

'The thought had occurred,' Sherlock said. John had moved over to the window, and was watching Hélène Picard appear and disappear among the dunes.

'You are not wrong,' said Claudine. 'Henry Jouvenel no longer cares much for how his wife carries on, so long as his colleagues don't find out. But there was a time when he cared a great deal. And women together… it's a sore subject, still.'

'And so she uses you to remind him of it?' said John, bristling up. 'Hardly sporting.' Sherlock swallowed, tender-throated; touched again the brown leather case. Claudine just shrugged.

'I mind it more,' she said, 'that she keeps the Carcos on the other side. The heads of the two beds, you know, are against each other, with only the wall in between.' She took a long drag on her cigarette, and exhaled towards the ceiling. 'How anyone could spend the summer, li—listening to the way he treats her, and still fancy herself in love—.'

'Violent?' John said, sharp, but Claudine shook her head.

'Only… indifferent. He is the enfant terrible of the avant-garde. He wants a new language, and a new world, endless nights of absinthe and poetry, and she wants… a child. She bores him, utterly.'

'And Mademoiselle Picard—?' John said. Claudine grimaced; exhaled.

'She bores him too, I think. But that is not much comfort, since she does not bore me.'

She looked back out the window, at that, but Mademoiselle Picard had vanished behind a dune. Claudine dragged on her cigarette until it almost burnt her fingers, and Sherlock breathed in the scent. If he could open the violin case, he thought—if he could open it now, while his cousin stubbed out her hand-rolled cigarette and looked down at the sea—then he would know by the smell, for certain, if it were the same.

Claudine shook herself, and turned to face them. 'On Madame Jouvenel's part,' she said, 'It is not precisely spite, it is…' She blew out her cheeks, and shrugged. 'Something of a joke, perhaps, and something of a—an artistic position. She puts Mademoiselle Patat across the corridor from her own room, you realise? So that Patat must walk the entire length of the corridor, to get to Jouvenel.'

On the stairs, across the hall, came a quick clatter of feet. Long legs, thought Sherlock, but a light frame; shoes sensible, and small. Anyway, there was no need to conjecture: Claudine's face, again. Luminous. John, by the window, was looking at her, his left hand clenching and unclenching from a fist.

'We,' said Sherlock, and cleared his throat. 'We should—does the Countess take sieste, then? We could go down, and—'

'The Coun—? Ah, la Panthère?' Claudine said. Fidgeting towards the door. 'I—well. To tell the truth, I have no idea. She seldom even comes to table, you know. She would no doubt be glad of the visit, if you were to—'

'Yes,' said John, and Sherlock nodded, too fast. Though there was no sense in fleeing, was there, from a wiry, large-hatted woman in a black dress?
It was too late, in any case. Picard was through the door, and upon them. Cheeks were kissed;
pleasantries exchanged. She was, thought Sherlock, in her late forties, and had that particular breed
of slenderness that crinkled in on itself in middle age. Her face was lined, and fine-boned. It looked
to have faced for years into the wind and the sun. He couldn't escape her fast enough.

Amongst the trees at the edge of the side-yard he caught his breath. Leant against a pine, fumbling a
cigarette to his lips, with that bloody bird hooting tinnily above him, and the house at his back.

'Well,' said John, coming up at Sherlock's side. 'Quite a motley assortment of friends your cousin has
collected. Mademoiselle Picard seems at least civil, if a bit...'

—a point of affinity, she feels, between them—

'Pathetic,' Sherlock said. He lit his cigarette, glancing up through the trees. High windows, looking
down. His breath hitching as John laughed, 'Distant, I was going to say,' and Sherlock, shuddering,
that distant echoing down his spine, was surprised to taste his own Dunhills, rather than the rich old
Turkish tobacco that Claudine had rolled for him in endless rice-paper, sitting on her balcony in 1903
as Montmartre spent itself at their feet. Distance, Christ. Christ. He hadn't—hadn't thought. Hadn't
tasted that in years.

And now: smoking, face-forward. Does she make you wear his cologne? the brat had said. And
Claudine, standing alone there and bearing it. And John's gaze, now, heavy on the side of Sherlock's
face.

'Are you—,' said John, low. Where had John been, in January 1903? Sherlock closed his eyes.

'You mind,' John said. 'You really mind. Seeing them together.'

'Don't be absurd,' Sherlock said.

'Am I being?'

John. His John. Just here, by him; too far away. His hand on Sherlock's waist through cotton
shirting.

'Yes,' Sherlock whispered, and John said 'She's a grown woman, Sherlock, she's been a grown
woman as long as you've known her,' thinking—what? Touching Sherlock across a gulf,
unacceptable; intolerable; with the house glowering down at them through the trees full of all its
estranging pettiness when just. Christ. 'Christ,' Sherlock said, and turned John; pushed him against
the puzzle-rough bark of a Scots pine; bent to kiss his worried mouth with the Dunhill dropped
amongst the pine needles.

And John just—just opened.

Pressed up. Up. Right up against him, overlapping with him. God, with his eager tongue in
Sherlock's clumsy mouth. John, pressed—pressed close, pressed inside. See how it can be, he
thought. Let them see, let them—

'Oh,' he breathed. Swallowed and, and pressed, and swallowed. His mouth, flooding. Hands full of
John's tacky nape, and his sweat-soaked back, and his belly (shaking), as John kept, kept opening his
mouth his arms his hips for Sherlock to fit inside. Enclose. Pressing up, and up.

'We're in, in view of the house,' John panted, but his fingers dug hard into Sherlock's arse through his
trousers.
'Let them,' said Sherlock. 'Let them, useless lot of—hell,' at the press of John's hip between his legs.

And John groaned. And John kissed him. Hard and close and Sherlock could fold himself together to fit under John's tongue. Wet ocean musk and salt skin; and the breeze off the brackish sea. If they washed out together they would float as one on the wide waters. Sherlock groaned with his tongue out. The sounds his John always made for him.

'The boy's mother,' John said, 'the—you wanted to—,' as Sherlock bit at his ear, at his neck. John shook for him. For Sherlock, where all those turncoats could—could see Sherlock's cigarette, dropped in the needles; see Sherlock's hand on John's—'Holmes!'—stretched-tight flies, Christ, Sherlock's panting writhing—

Sherlock's John. Bowed like John bent. Shivering like John shook. Pressed all against Sherlock who was aching, so—so fast, he was—

'I want to have you down my throat,' he gasped into John's ear. 'Show them all how you fit, how you—John,' riding John's hip and his thigh while John gasped and gasped, and turned his eyes towards the house turning its eyes down at Sherlock, having him.

'I'm—you're going to come in your trousers,' said John. Panting. His hands on Sherlock's arse, holding him close. Sherlock felt his face heat, and he didn't stop, he—'God, not five minutes and you're going to—,' with John's hands on him, 'you want,' said John, 'you want to have me in your smalls where everyone can see us—bloody—' as Sherlock pressed his hips into John's belly and his forehead into the bark of the tree and trembled apart.

'Oh God,' John was saying, petting, too quick and desperate, at the back of Sherlock's head and his waist under his summer suit. 'Oh Christ, what was that.'

'I'll still,' Sherlock mumbled, getting his breath. 'I meant it, I'll—,' groping his palm to the front of John's trousers, and 'Sherlock,' John groaned for him, 'you don't need—,' but he was pressing forward, halting, prick to palm.

Sherlock's mouth, still flooded wet. His smalls flooded wet. 'I don't,' he said, 'need to,' dizzy, fumbling at John's flies, his voice oddly well-regulated in his own ears. 'But you'll—won't you let me, won't you—?'

John, panting. 'You,' saying, 'God—' with his hands clutching at Sherlock's shirt and his trousers as Sherlock's clumsy fingers got him out. Got him open. Sherlock was awash; the seawalls, flooded over. But he moved aside; just a bit; cleared a path to look up at the house looking down; and clenched his hand—and John groaned.

For him. For Sherlock. Sherlock wanted to burrow into the sound.

John bit his lip. Moved, barely at all. Tiny thrusts through Sherlock's fingers. They'd hardly see it, if they were looking.

'You—' John said, '—what are you—'

'Look up,' Sherlock told him. John looked up and hissed. Bucked forward, just—just a bit. Four shining panes, reflecting down through the trees. Look at him, Sherlock thought, elated and furious. Look at how we are.

'Who do you think has got back?' Sherlock asked him. 'That fastidious spinster? All her pen nibs and her neat ledgers on the desk that looks down, right this way. She'll find you,' writhing; sweating, struggling in Sherlock's clenched fist, 'quite a spectacle.'
'You,' said John, breathless for Sherlock; half-laughing, 'in full view of your, your clients—'

Sherlock pressed closer against him. steadier. A body of water, contained. breathing. mouth to john's ear, pouring into it:

'Nothing new to that mercenary little blonde, though. She'll skip up to her room with some, some abomination of an American cocktail. See you down here, thrashing and—'

'christ.'

'—moaning for me, and she'll want to come down and—' john whined, and sherlock lightened his grip, teasing. '—join in. Advise me on technique,' letting the plosives go crisp so john would feel them against his skin, 'how to touch you and tease you. But she's doesn't know you, does she, like I do?' john's head, thrashing side to side: no. she doesn't know me like you do, no. sherlock felt he was flying. 'She'd have nothing to contribute,' he said. 'She's nothing to what I can do to you.' he firmed his grip again, so that john's breath caught, and he pulled back so just the head—

'Garage,' John panted. close now, sherlock could smell it. wanted to taste him, flooding, as John got out, 'The garage, too, you could—could walk over there with your shirt untucked and your smallclothes f—filthy and go put on bloody airs with a, God, a countess—Sherlock—'

Eyes screwed shut. inches from it how he said his name. sherlock's beautiful—

'Or our hostess's young diversion,' sherlock said, voice low. 'After a year like his, in company like that, he'd find the sight of you, christ, impossible to resist—' but john—

John recoiled against him. startled. but, sherlock was thinking, come back and no—

But John was stilled. Wrong breathing. John was saying 'Stop, stop, Holmes, stop,' so Sherlock took his hand away with his mouth dry and open, and John, panted, eyes closed.

Sherlock stood and stared. breathed. the thin skin of his container reassembling around him. Why had he said—idiotic. another of those tin-whistle birds. Crying out.

Slowly, slowly, biting his lip at the touch, John eased himself back into his trousers. Above them, the house with its blank-paned windows seemed, absurdly, to gloat.

And then, gentle, with his eyes still closed, John reached out with a trembling hand towards sherlock's chest. Tugged him in by the lapel. Kissed him, trembling, then pushed him back, just inches; smoothed out the lines of his jacket and his tie.

'I just,' John whispered. swallowed. shaky. sherlock's heart, squelching at his ribs.

John opened his eyes, at last, and let go sherlock's lapels with a little nod. said, turning: 'Let's get you changed for supper.'

So Sherlock followed mutely up the hill towards the house, which loomed in silhouette against the bright-gold glare of the sun.

Chapter End Notes

1. Roz Ven is a real house, which really was, in the summer of 1921, the site for the
party described here, minus Claudine Holmès, Sherlock Holmes, and John Watson. Their professions, relationships, and comportments as depicted are more or less true to Judith Thurman's account in *Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette*, with the obvious exceptions of the places where they intersect with the lives of fictional people. So: Mademoiselle Picard did not have a female lover with her at the house that summer, but she did spend it pining unrequitedly after Monsieur Carco, dressing like a nun, and writing poetry. The arrangement of rooms, and who is quartered in which, are both invented, although based on what I could gather from Thurman and from exterior shots of the house. Some visual references are below.

The "white wood sign with its black-lettered ROZ VEN":

The throughway down to the beach:
The beach at La Touesse, on a sunny day (the seaward side of the house looks
down on this beach):

The house itself. You can see the four upper-story windows across the top, with
one full-size bedroom on the level above them. Based on that I hypothesised eight
guest bedrooms on the middle floor, with the fancy master suite above, and the
servants' quarters and common areas below.

2. Apropos of nothing in particular, the bird that plagues Irene and Sherlock throughout the next few chapters is a hoopoe.

3. The story about Missy's Byronic carriage, and her horses, both of which she essentially named 'Dyke,' is true. ('Une gousse' is the word for both a vanilla bean and a garlic clove.) She had a fabulously wild aristocratic youth, which included morphine, women, and dusk-to-dawn debauchery. By the time she became involved with Colette, she had to some extent finished sowing her wild oats, and she envisioned settling down with her lover at Roz Ven; but as it turned out, Colette had not finished sowing hers.

4. I must say: I'm just so delighted that there happens to be a historical decaying Countess, historically nicknamed 'The Panther,' at this house party. Sometimes history thwarts my fiction-writing efforts, but other times it's very, very kind.

5. Further DVD notes on this chapter can be found here.
Thursday, August 25th, 1921
8pm (Hour 30)

'You just seem to be,' said John, 'taking it all a bit personally,' as Sherlock, not looking at him, slapped an open palm to the wall of the fourth and final inn in St Coulomb, spitting 'Oh this is pointless,' staring daggers down the country lane. A perversely optimistic sign declared the little road the Grand-Rue de la Poste.

'I don't know what you expected,' John said. 'August in Land's End, they'd all be Londoners. Here they're all from Paris. Almost nobody lives year-round in towns like this, and they don't generally visit each other.'

'I'm aware.'

'Well. On the bright side, there're still only about forty visiting Parisians to choose from, who arrived in the past two—,'

'Oh for God's sake, Watson, it's nobody here. Any house-breaker with half a brain is bound to be staying in St Malo, or Dinard, or—Christ.'

He sucked his teeth. Off down the lane, a rotund little crone pottered about her garden with a pair of pruning shears.

'You've taken the case of the Jouvenels' house-breaker very much to heart,' John murmured, close behind him. Very close. 'Unusual for you, to be more upset about a case than the clients themselves.'

'Never before,' Sherlock bit out, in the direction of the elderly gardener, 'have I been engaged by a group of people too self-involved to notice that there's anything meriting investigation.'

He kicked the wall of the inn again, for good measure, and set off down the lane, towards the little exchange where the Grand-Rue de la Poste quietly transformed into the Rue de Bel Air.

Infuriating, he thought to himself. Infuriating. If it weren't, after so much time, for the pained way that Claudine—

The Jouvenel husband had harrumphed, and his blonde Patat mistress had smirked, and they had both taken a single glance into their rooms and declared themselves unconcerned, leaving Sherlock to prowl about in their absences. Monsieur Carco, when Sherlock had first mentioned burglary, had let his jowls quiver and his Gitane bob; but as soon as he'd counted his notebooks he'd relaxed and begun grilling them instead about the novels of Mr Lawrence and Mr Joyce, before setting out on a defiant walk to the village with Hélène Picard. Madame Carco, a slip of a woman with black curls all down her back, had not even gone in: Francis, she had said, could tell them if anything was disturbed. She hadn't much she cared about, she said, in any case. Meanwhile, the lady of the house was berating her maid; her boy was at the sea-shore. Claudine was closeted with her violin; the Panther reported herself ill; and the elusive second secretary, Mademoiselle Beaumont, she of the pencil-regiments and knife-edge hospital corners, was nowhere to be found. Nor, it seemed, had any conspicuous visitor materialised of late in the tiny village of St Coulomb: only a parade of middle-
aged tourists, chasing the waters and the cool sea breeze.

'There's only one road in this whole bloody town,' Sherlock muttered, as John caught him up. (Measured breath behind his left shoulder.) 'They just re-name it every time it passes a new building.'

'Oh come on,' John said. 'There's the road out of town, too, and the—the beach road, the one down to La Tousse.' But Sherlock, turning finally to face him, gestured at the little tile on the building opposite: Route de la Tousse, it said: so this was the beach road, too.

John made that little noise in his throat, that meant he was trying not to laugh. His eyes, scrunched up. Sliding sideways and down.

And: Oh, thought Sherlock, standing in the dusty lane in the heat while his anger seeped out of him by drips and John Watson curled up his fingers in front of his mouth, to hide his smile. The sky was pinking up to the west, light bright-gold and rose-coloured on the stone walls, and the absurd street-signs, and the lashes of John's eyes.

'Wouldn't you,' Sherlock said, 'if you found evidence that some—some stranger had broken into Baker Street—?'

'Yes,' said John, looking back at him. 'Yeah. I would, but I—.' He cleared his throat. 'I have more call to credit your word, you know. Than some.'

Sherlock's chest hurt. 'Buffoons,' he said. 'The lot of them.' Wishing he might have—back at Roz Ven, under the trees, John had said go put on bloody airs with a, God, a countess, and A countess, is it? Sherlock could have said. And me, he could have said, taking her hand, kissing it, with mine still smelling of your—

'You want to go back, then?' John murmured. 'Might be in time for supper, if we hurry.'

Sherlock looked away, down the lane. At his waist and his shoulders and the nape of his neck, summer suiting rubbed his skin. All the chairs full of faithless Jouvenels, he thought: their spawn and their hangers-on. And Claudine's anxious, hopeful face.

'There was that inn,' he said, gesturing. 'Down by the water, a few name-changes down.'

'Yes?' said John. 'We could sit outside. This time of night.'

But twenty at least of the forty new Parisian tourists, splotchy with the sunburns they'd forced upon their skins on the first hot day of a cool summer, had taken the light-gilded tables overlooking the Anse Margot. So Sherlock and John were shown to seats in the back corner, by the door onto the back alley. The lamps indoors were already lit; the golden glow of the sunset outside was reduced to wavery reflections in the mirrors over the bar.

At the table the air was close and heavy. Sherlock's head felt packed full, and John a weight by his side. When he closed his eyes, he saw Claudine, with a melancholy expression, reaching out to touch a needlepoint cushion; and Colette Jouvenel, smirking in her Citroën, nails at her step-son's nape; and John, stepping forward with a curt nod to shake a young man's hand. It wasn't at its best, you know, John had said, in 1914; and Sherlock had listened; he had. But they had all sat together, after; and laughed.

The fish and the cider arrived. Sherlock took a deep swig, crisp and dry on the tongue. Autumn air against the wet weight of summer. He blinked towards the door, and blinked across the table, and John was watching him, chewing on a bite of sea bass.
'Back with us?' said John. Sherlock exhaled; rolled his shoulders.

'Apologies,' he said. His voice (*John was my brother*) sounded distant in his own ears. On a white plate by his glass lay half a mackerel. It shone grey-gold in the lamp-light, with seared lines black-blistered across its skin. *It is not much comfort,* Claudine had said, *since she does not bore me.* Sherlock, looking at his plate, took another sip of cider. He lifted the skin from his fish with the tines of his fork.

'Look, what really went on—,' started John, at the same moment Sherlock heard himself say, 'Daniel seems to be—to be doing well.'

The restaurant flickered, vague and oceanic. John huffed a little; looked down at his bass.

'Yes,' he said. 'He er. He does.'

He shook his head. Lifted another forkful into his mouth, and Sherlock, watching the working of John's jaw, could almost feel the rubbery give of fish-flesh between his own teeth. He put down his fork with a clank. His cider tasted clean, and bright.

'Must have been strange,' he said. His tongue heavy, and unstoppable. 'Seeing him again, like that.'

'Yes,' said John. 'You could say.'

Sherlock waited; nothing more. Nothing but John in the corner: tightening his mouth, tightening his shoulders. Hunching in on himself, away from Sherlock's eyes. Sherlock drank, and thought himself towards him. Toward—how it must've been. John, trench-bound, with his back curled up. Tried to imagine. Sherlock had seen the zeppelin damage in London, of course; had traveled down with Mycroft from the house in Oxfordshire, and he remembered feeling—almost relieved; hadn't he. Relieved, at the privilege. Relieved to escape the stifling commandeered study behind the stairs, just himself and his brother and the windowless deciphering of spycraft's more numbing banalities. *Barring two sets of proper equipment I refuse to work any longer with agent J18, and strapped for cash; have had to ensnare officer from Verdun; send 5k francs,* painstakingly transcribed to the nagging background noise of the half-dozen black-coated men who came and went at all hours, whispering about *Room Forty* in phlegmy Continental rhotics. In London, Sherlock had been glad of the open air. Glad of the feast of unfamiliar faces; unknown details to be deduced. As to the possibility that he'd be damaged—or that Mycroft, of all people, might be harmed—well. It had seemed irrelevant. He'd been so young. But—but not as young, he thought now, as that boy in the café, shaking John's hand.

Across the table John sliced and chewed, sliced and chewed; with near-mechanical precision.

'Good?' Sherlock asked.

John looked up, startled, then back down to Sherlock's uneaten portion. The specimen was starting to sweat now, Sherlock saw. The fat-sheen of its flesh had begun to dull, and congeal. He fumbled in his jacket pocket for a Dunhill, but John's face had softened. He had put down his knife, and his fork.

'You should try it,' he said.

Sherlock just smoked. Tang of stone fruit, coating his throat, while his fingertips traced the cool rivulets on the side of his glass.

'So,' said John, pushing away his plate. 'Anything interesting?'
'Hm?'

'Come on, that nest of vipers? You must've deduced their life histories, by now. All their dirty little secrets.'

Sherlock squinted through his cigarette smoke. John was smiling, open and expectant; the way he had, from the first. Sherlock's stretched-tight strings all loosened, together, half a turn.

'Whom would you like?' he said.

'Oh, let's not make things easy for you. What about…la Panthère,' exaggerating his atrocious English accent so that Sherlock snorted.

'I'm not a magician, Watson,' he said. Half a turn. 'We never even met her.'

'Go on then. Impress me.'

Sherlock exhaled at the ceiling, sitting back. 'Nothing you haven't worked out for yourself, I shouldn't imagine. Title-rich and cash-poor, though judging from the family crest on that Methuselah of a Renault she did have money once, most probably Henry Jouvenel's. Clings to her ancestry hard enough that her son throws it at people like a weapon; meaning that she's probably done the same to him all his life. Once fancied a beauty, for a man like Jouvenel to take her as his lover. But unsuitable for marriage, as everyone refers to Claire Boas, and only Madame Boas, as his ex-wife. Most probably married, then, before she met him, and not widowed, or not then. Not divorced, either, not in a family as Popish as hers is likely to be; but with her married status rendered moot, since Jouvenel legitimised her son. Possibly a scandal: her husband ill, or mad. Mad is most likely: less social stigma attached to moving in with her lover. Tall woman,' he added. 'Red-haired, once, going by the greens and russets of the dresses hung in her window. Though now, if she's as ill as she says—and she is; Madame Jouvenel wouldn't house her, otherwise—she must be grey. Can't drive herself into town, after all.'

'You're stunning, you know.' John spoke low, so quiet even Sherlock could barely hear.

'Don't be absurd,' he said. Stupid. But his fingers tingled on his glass, and all along his arms the hair pricked up. John pushed the mackerel a bit closer to him, and Sherlock lifted a bite to his lips, just to please him. It was soft. He could swallow it with hardly any chewing at all.

'Let's have—,' said John, and Sherlock's throat (our hostess's young diversion) clenched (as she does not bore me) for a moment; but John only said: 'the lovely and, ah, versatile Mademoiselle Patat,' with a smirk. Sherlock took another bite of fish, with a hot flooding mixture of shame and gratitude; raised his hand for a second cider 'and an Armagnac for this gentleman'—because John was helping him, and he ought to have known.

And then his own voice, gathering speed. 'Interesting choice, Watson,' he was saying, 'she really isn't nearly as decorative as she makes out. Styliste de mode, of course, and some time in the business if the quickness of her sketches and the breadth of her fabric samples are anything to go by. A pragmatist: she had gowns from three of her competitors' most recent lines hanging in her wardrobe alongside her own, with faint soiling around the necklines and under the arms. Meaning that, unlike our starry-eyed novelist friend Monsieur Carco, who hadn't a book in his rooms in danger of going into multiple editions, Mademoiselle Patat is familiar with the market, and tests out her competitors' gowns to see how they wear. Presumably she puts her findings to use in her own work. Her coiffure, cosmetics and manicure are all expensively done, in Paris; she must travel up for the day at least once a week. But her teeth say middle-, even lower-middle-class origins. Meanwhile, Jouvenel's pocket square bears her label, along with his embroidered crest; she's using his baronetcy to publicise her
business, as much as he's using her beauty to advance his status and satisfy his flesh. He spends money on her; but she doesn't depend on it, not like the Panther did. Mademoiselle Patat is unlikely to find herself, in her advancing age, living above her one-time rival's garage.'

John wet his lips with his tongue. He lifted his glass, and sipped, and his Adam's apple bobbed twice. Sherlock realised, belatedly, that he himself was chewing on lukewarm mackerel.

'Come on,' he said, looking at his glass with his face flushed up, swallowing it down. 'You're putting it on. You've heard me do this hundreds of times.'

John didn't answer; but he opened his mouth, and closed it again. His thumb tapped restlessly at the side of his Armagnac glass. He raised the brandy to his lips again, and his throat contracted—as heat dripped through Sherlock and he throbbed.

He took another bite. It was easy, he thought, swallowing. The restauranteurs had opened the doors, back and front. A warm breeze swept through off the bay. He took another bite, and another, with John, shoulders back, watching him across the table.

'Shall I tell you about the master of the house?' Sherlock said. 'Some high times in the War, if I'm not mistaken, though there's not much you couldn't deduce yourself from those moustaches and the—'

'Sherlock,' said John, very gentle. 'What happened, that winter?'

'—way he,' Sherlock said, voice faltering, 'handles the Renault,' and cleared his throat, and shut his lips.

John's hand, on his wrist.

'You know,' John said. 'The winter you met Claudine.'

Fish-flesh in rubbery strings, at the back of Sherlock's mouth. He laid his fork by the side of his plate. He reached for his cider glass, and swallowed it down like a dose.

'I just mean,' John was saying, as Sherlock looked round at the smiling wavering patron-faces, 'if all this is. If we're here for Claudine, you know, to do our best by her, which I—I certainly want to do. And if it all goes back to some, I don't know, some history between you, then I can't—'

'I,' said Sherlock, with his throat closing, 'it doesn't, it—'

'—and then, with Mademoiselle Picard. You hate it, to see them together, you couldn't wait, you just—just bolted down the stairs—'

'—so what do you,' Sherlock got out, 'want to know, I—'

But he couldn't. It was fine. It would be fine, it was only—not just now. Not after he'd said—and John—. He blinked and the grey-skinned old woman, humming thready arias, coughing in her sleep. His mother in her weeds, looking up over the bed at—and his—his father, demanding the papers from London as the rain beat, and beat, and beat. Claudine on the balcony, stripped down to her stays, with dimpled elbows and a hand-rolled cigarette, putting her violin into his child's hands. The thrashing; the soiling of sheets; the sheets sent to wash. The flask passed round the bedside. The cousins. All the sisters, les cousines, and the one—. Claudine in her blue wool shawl: Non, saying non, comme ça, like a Parisian; and the death rattle. John was watching him swallowing. Sherlock was standing. It was fine, it was only—he only needed some air.

'Holmes,' John was calling, after him. Sherlock needed some air. He was swallowing bones, heading
for the door.

Out the back, by the light of the moon, he reeled in breaths and pushed through a white wood gate, topped by a cross. \textit{(Per istam sanctan unctionem et suam,} the priest had intoned, and his mother had looked up across the bed at—) Sherlock pressed his back against the wood and the stone. Peeling paint to his right, under his scraping fingertips. Lavender to his left; and John coming through the gate.

'Holmes?' John said. Sherlock's fist closed on fragrant flowers. \textit{Tactum, gressum deliquisti.} His John, warm and solid, coming up on his right side.

'Sherlock,' said John, quiet in the warm dark of the night, as Sherlock breathed too fast and held to the shrubbery. Absurd. It was ages ago; ages and ages. Claudine's brisk hands and her chiding voice. Another world.

'You all right?' John said. Sherlock nodded. He exhaled. He looked straight ahead.

'I shouldn't have,' said John, his hand warm now on Sherlock's stomach over his shirt, under his jacket; with John's mouth to Sherlock's ear. 'Tell me what you were saying about—about any of them. Yes? Tell me about—,' and Sherlock groaned. Too hot; too full. He shut his eyes, tight, tight, and turned his face towards John's.

John's lips, John's—precise, wetted, tightening lips, John—tasted of sea bass and Armagnac, John—small and solid in the dark in the night. \textit{Tell me}, he had said, so Sherlock, with his hands inside John's shirt in an open footpath—:

'She wears black in August,' Sherlock got out, as John brushed a hand down over his hip.

'I didn't mean,' said John, low, 'you don't—I meant anyone,' but the words just came. Claudine in the café, with her head thrown back. John at the window, looking down at the sea.

'Black in August but white on her head,' Sherlock went on, with John's hands pressed to him through his clothes. 'She's not in mourning; she fancies herself a n—uh, a nun. Fancies herself ce—celibate. Remote. When my cousin had her pick of all the girls of Montmartre, for ages and—and ages—' and John's hand faltered on Sherlock's flies so Sherlock, gasping, pushed off from the alley wall and turned him, rough. John's back bounced on the stone.

'God,' John muttered. Sherlock said, tongue thick in his mouth: 'I told you I would—I want to—John,' with his hands at John's trouser-plies, and John made a sound. Muffled; biting his own hand. Sherlock dropped to his knees, listening to him do it, and his fingers burrowed in John's small clothes. Hard, musk-smelling flesh. \textit{Auditotum, odorátum, gustum.} Sherlock, whimpering; and John was petting his hair.

His fingers fumbled flaps; pulled down trousers and shorts in the new style, the army style. Sherlock's smalls were long, like he'd worn as a child in Montmartre, but habits change and John had been in Paris, in the War. \textit{(It wasn't at its best, you know, Paris, in 1914.)} Sherlock closed his eyes and nuzzled his cheek against John's cock and it twitched; and John's breath caught, in the quiet of the lane.

'Raised in Le Marais, by her accent,' Sherlock muttered, with his hands shaking on John's hips, and John's hand on the back of his head. 'And Claudine—she always said girls from Le Marais—' He hauled in air; John was \textit{hard}, John was leaking. John was trying—trying not to move, and Sherlock could—'She said they never got over themselves,' he choked out, with his mouth watering. 'Girls from Le Marais.'
John's hand clenched, quick, in his hair, and Sherlock groaned, and got his mouth around him.

'Sherlock,' John breathed. Sweated. Shifted his shoes on the hard dirt. Sherlock's throat clenched, and then. Then his whole body just hollowed open to make room for John, and he wanted to do without—without air, without—. Swallowing around John with his hands on John's arse and John's hands on his head and John's hips moving just a—just a little; he was so hard; he didn't want to hurt Sherlock, but Sherlock wanted to be—I wasn't at my best, you know, in 1914—. He opened his throat with his palms full of John's arse, and buried his nose against John's pubic bone close with Sherlock's knuckles scraping against stone.

John's voice was nothing like dying at all.

Sherlock's kneecaps bit into ground and his skin throbbed. He was aching, trousers half-undone. He pulled back and breathed and his head swam with the smell of lavender with the smell of dirt with the smell of John, and home. Sherlock's mouth, overflowing. Drawing John into himself like tides. He nosed under John's cock; licked awkwardly at his balls where the scent was strongest. Soaked, he thought, taking one in his mouth while John's thigh-muscles jumped, he wanted to be—to be stained with it. The lavender was wrong but John's noises were the noises Sherlock knew; how he knew him; John's sweaty desperate familiar smell was leaking down all over him, inside and out. If Sherlock were Parisian—comme ça, like a Parisian, as he suckled quick-gentle on John's ball and John cursed—if Sherlock were a Parisian then the lavender would be part of him; would be part of the mess of home and John, and Sherlock would want it too, would want it dripping down over his face and his neck and his lips and the back of his throat until the two of them were so intermixed that they would never have to—. He shuffled absurdly closer on his knees.

And John was panting for it. Panting for Sherlock's mouth back on his swollen, wet—Christ. John mewling around the hand in his mouth with his ankles tethered by his trousers, God, Sherlock could —. He rubbed his face at the top inside of John's thigh and pulled on John's balls which were dripping with Sherlock, which smelled of Sherlock's mouth and John's body. If Sherlock were from (not at my best, you know, in 1903) Paris, then he would pass through the galleries; would stop at Cottan and buy a cake of fine-milled soap, scented with lavender; he would bathe with it and leave it in the bath and then later John would laugh at him in that wry fond—Christ, closer, impossible, more together, Sherlock's fingers petting behind John's balls as John twitched against Sherlock's cheek—and later John would take it and use it on all his secret hidden places and then when Sherlock stripped him bare and rubbed his own skin against John's skin and licked him up with his tongue John would smell like Sherlock, if Sherlock were from Paris.

'Christ, Sherlock,' John whispered. He was leaking so. Dripping down Sherlock's cheek. John probably couldn't see that, in the moonlight, but his fingers still shook when he reached down, pressed himself against the side of Sherlock's face. 'Oh please soon, all right? Please soon.'

'Shhh,' Sherlock whispered, against John's skin. 'Shhh.' He raised his left hand, and John bent his head and opened his lips, and fucked his own mouth on Sherlock's fingers. And the sound Sherlock made. He didn't make such noises. They would hear; they would find them. They would find John, sweating, with his spine curled over, two of Sherlock's fingers down his throat; how together they could be. If John were from Paris he would understand the words they would call him. Garlic; vanilla. Lavender. If John had been in Paris, if John, not at my best, you know, in the War—

John sobbed around Sherlock's fingers, and just—broke. Pressed with a flat palm to the side of his own cock so that the other side pressed harder against Sherlock's cheek. Sherlock gasped while John, curled-up, made jerky desperate thrusts between Sherlock's face and his own hand. Everything wet with sweat and with John, where he had smeared against him. Per istam sanctan unctionem, the priest had said, and she had looked up—
Sherlock couldn’t breathe. John’s mouth fell open, two of Sherlock’s fingers still holding down his tongue, and he whined, rutting. Saliva dripped down Sherlock’s palm and his wrist and the inside of his arm.

So wet. So close; John so close; pressed under Sherlock’s cheekbone, grunting. Whining. Sherlock took back his soaked hand, and John moaned; didn’t close his mouth. The smell of him in this state. Reeking of home and the both of them; Sherlock smeared John's saliva over John's balls and John's thighs getting his soaked hand up between John's legs so he could press two fingers against John's hole and make John—yes, speed up his—Christ. There was a trail of saliva from John's mouth to Sherlock's cheek and Sherlock looked up and opened his mouth against John's skin just as John cried out and pulled back; painted Sherlock's cheek and his chin on the way to stuffing himself back into Sherlock's mouth and pulsing and pulsing.

'Sherlock,' John whispered. Sherlock's head was spinning; vanilla; holy oil; pear blossoms and cider, swallowing with John still half-curled over him. Aching, trapped inside his clothes. Breathing hard with his forehead to John's hip. Lavender.

'Sherlock,' said John again, plucking feebly at his jacket, so Sherlock pulled up John's trousers and his army-style shorts, and buckled John's belt with slippery hands. (Not at my best, you know, in 1914, with his shoulders hunched, at the window, looking down at the sea.) If Sherlock had fought in the War, he might wear the same. He and John, in the same cotton and the same wool and the same skin. If Sherlock were from London—but John said 'Come up, let me, come on,' so Sherlock wobbled up on creaking knees and John took his face in his trembling hands and licked himself off Sherlock's skin.

John's tongue, curling against Sherlock's tongue. Sherlock pressed his whole front against John's against the wall. If Sherlock had fought in the War then John would be able to push his trousers and shorts down together and just—Christ, a hand on his bare skin anywhere and Sherlock would be spilling on the ground. He heard himself whimpering; and John making quiet amazed little sounds, touching his shoulders, kissing his neck.

If Sherlock had fought in the War (John with his hands everywhere through Sherlock's shirt and his trousers, breathing 'Christ, when you're like this—')—if Sherlock were from London—but no, that was—if Sherlock were from Edinburgh, then John would smell of heather, and and peat. Wet wool, he would—they smelled of wool, the both of them, together in the winter in Baker Street, when they gave chase through wet alleys and he knew John down to his breath behind him and the falls of their feet brick-echoing through the fog ('beautiful, you're so beautiful'); knew they could die. John, touching him everywhere but bare skin. If Sherlock were from Edinburgh he'd have fought in France; gorse and heather and deep smoky burning whisky on the fields of Ypres, thinking Per istam sanctan uctionem, bruised and concussed, et suam piissimam misericordiam sucking John's cock under cover of darkness while John told him you're beautiful, Christ, so young in a voice Sherlock would know, for certain, while John fucked his mouth and thought they both might die, visum, audiotum, odorátum, gustum et locutiónem, as John panted and kissed Sherlock and drew him out of his old-fashioned smallclothes; as he made him come in billows and sodding crests with just two light fingers rubbing at the head of his cock.

Behind them, on the other side of the gate, the inn-door slammed.

John buttoned him back into his clothes, and moved him off down the alley. Sherlock could barely stumble after. They branched off through a side-lane, and another, and Sherlock made them stop in the shadows at the corner of Grand-Rue de la Poste, to gather up all his sagging strings, draw them tight before he went any further. John chuckled under his breath. He squeezed Sherlock's hand. After that they made their way in peace, with just a few comments murmured between them. And they
mentioned nothing, even as they walked up the hill in the waving grasses beneath a starved sliver of moon, about any year in any city at all.

**Thursday, August 25th, 1921**

**9pm (Hour 31)**

Hours later, hours; and still Irene was buzzing.

Back in St Malo. After hacking through the underbrush; after scraping her legs; after an hour on her bicycle on back roads, she'd ridden up in a lift and opened the door into her red morocco trunk. A bath, she'd thought, and then she would drop. She could order supper in her room, if she lasted that long; the salt air had her craving Champagne. Perhaps this close to the sea there would be oysters, even in August.

But in the bath she couldn't settle. She fidgeted, and sighed; had a vision of splashing water all across the white tile. And after, in her new lilac dressing gown, with the windows open to the balcony, she paced the floor.

After such a day anyone, she thought, would be—but there was no word she liked. She was not angry, not upset at the sight of an ageing actress scribbler and her half-grown brat. Her mother hadn't held the girl's hand, even. That black-clad martinet had held it, and Madame Jouvenel had swept into the house with her beautiful boy and her husband's hired spies.

Irene stripped off. She was not angry; she did not strip off angrily. Her fingers were steady as she untied the belt, as she arranged the light purple silk over the foot of her golden bed. She did not storm, or rage. And in any case: if she were displeased, it was surely because someone, still—here, or in Paris—was walking about with images of Irene's face, and Gretha's face; was using them in ways that Irene couldn't—in ways concerned with idiot men. That made her angry, certainly. That made her bite at her mouth, pacing the floor.

And Christ, her room was stifling. The clouds had closed over the heat of the day, had sealed it in; and she didn't want, somehow, to show herself on the balcony. She thought of the two men herded into Roz Ven with the Jouvenels; and of Charles Humbert's squinting piggy eyes.

It was supper time. She forced herself to stop in front of her trunk; forced her lips smooth, and her brows. Looked at the horrible tourist clothes from the shop down the way, but she couldn't—couldn't bear them. Yellow, then, pale yellow: the dress was another Patou, and she stepped into it with a smooth motion of thigh and ankle. Red her lips; and yellow in her hair. Her arms left bare, and she wasn't angry; she descended the stairs and smiled at a fellow-lodger, showing her teeth.

Down in the restaurant, since she'd thought of it earlier, she ordered Champagne; and a stew of fish harvested from the waters off La Touesse. She didn't mention, of course, that she'd been. The serveur heard her accent and took her for a Parisienne; treated her to three minutes on the area attractions before she cleared her throat with a look, and he scurried away to fetch her wine.

She was sat at the bar, buzzing. The supper hour drew itself together. Three stools to her left, a banker sort in a grey suit sipped at a glass of white Burgundy (engaged, thought Irene; unfaithful); and two stools to her right, nursing the dregs of a gin fizz, with the handles of a dowdy carpet-bag hooked over her foot, a mud-haired girl in a shirtwaist blouse and trumpet skirt hunched over the bar. She had rather a fine nose, Irene thought; though a mouth like a schoolteacher's. Irene cleared her throat.
'Unhappy in love?' she said. In English; bit of a gamble. But then: American cocktails; unfashionable clothes. The young woman moved her head as if worried by flies, but when she swung round, her eyes just locked to Irene's. Ages, it seemed. Unlooked-for; electric. Well.

'You could say,' the girl at last replied.

Irene slid over a stool, and beckoned to the bartender: another drink for her new friend. 'So,' she said. 'Did he leave you for another woman?'

'Which he?' The girl's inflection was Paris, but middle-class. Irene upped the vintage on her London by a few notches.

'Oh,' she said, eyebrows up. 'Goodness.'

The girl blew her cheeks out, and straightened her back.

'They're bastards, anyway,' she said, the s slipping out of the word, seemingly without intention. 'Fu—fuck them. Both.'

Irene put on the scandalised face expected in such circumstances, as the girl gave her drink a little nod. There was a wobble in it; and after such a day. Christ. It would feel lovely. Irene thought, to loosen her own joints, her hips and her shoulders; to—to tie the girl down and bugger her. Lick into every crevice of her flesh until she squirmed. Irene would order up the names of her lovers; the girl would only whine. Irene recrossed her legs. Sipped her wine.

'Is that a memory,' she said, 'or a request? Miss Wren, by the way.'

'You're—,' said the girl. Licked her lips, with her eyes shining, but finished: 'English.'

'Irene thought: ah. Well. And what had Irene expected from a dowdy shop-girl, frightened to have said the word fuck in a public restaurant to a rouged stranger? Irene was not angry, but a flare of loathing licked at her ribs. She was turning back to the bar when the girl said, blushing: 'I—I did. Both married, but I let them. And ever since they've been just—. I've nothing to show; I was only trying to—.' And she shut her mouth, and knocked her drink back in one.

Fair, fair skin. The way she flushed up all along the bridge of her long nose.

'Your English is quite good,' Irene said. No response, so she went on, her spine curved towards the girl: 'You've a friend, then. A woman who—they let her. Don't they?'

'I—,' the girl said, blushing and blushing. Strawberries in June.

'Olivia,' Irene said. She clicked the base of her glass against the girl's tumbler, and the girl almost tripped over her own tongue to say 'Ger—Germaine.'

Germaine took a sip of her drink, and looked back up at Irene. Just a flick of her lashes over the rim of the glass, but there was that current. Pale green-flecked irises, she had. Wrapped round with jade, they would mirror it back. Irene thought of turning them; of greening them; of binding the girl fast; olive and emerald at her neck and her wrists. There was, somewhere, a snapped green cord, and it would fasten Germaine together: the stuttering shop-girl in the middy-blouse, to electric aventurine eyes.

Irene set her glass down on the bar. She wanted to lean in, but she didn't. Did not press her mouth to a blushing ear; or to the nape of a blushing neck.
'I once had a man,' she said instead, 'who gave me just that scent.'

Germaine startled, but stayed. She got redder. Irene watched her get redder and redder as she thought it through. Irene said: 'He told me he fancied me a free spirit. Mitsouko, the exotic—,' murmuring gooseflesh all up the girl's neck, how she'd feel on the tongue, '—fruit and Chinese spice,' whispering now: 'Briseuse de coeurs.'

Germaine gave a little gasp. 'My employer gave it to me,' she blurted, shifting her hips on the barstool. Irene laughed.

'No,' Germaine said, 'no, c'est vrai, I am the secretary to a—to a writer, she has ideas, she—she is more like a mother to me. Gives me things, gives me,' she gestured around her, 'nights off.' She laughed. 'You can see how glamourous I am. Getting here, it's more trouble than it's worth, but she tells me to go and I do. I can never—never stand up to her. We are staying all the way in St Coulomb.'

Irene stared.

'Is that right,' she said.

Around her, the hotel lobby yawed.

Irene Adler did not bite her mouth. She did not steady herself, even for a moment, with her fingers on the surface of the bar. 'More like a mother, you say.'

'Yes,' said Germaine, dully. Irene raised her hand to the bartender for another drink. She arranged her lips into a kind of a smile.

'And,' she said, 'how did that come about? Exactly?'

'Oh, she,' Germaine sighed, waving a hand. 'She was the best friend of my mother. My mother's very best woman friend. And Maman—she died, oui, merci,' to the barkeep, who was sliding her drink under her nose, 'she was strong like a horse, always; but she died in the 'flu, during the War.'

'I'm sorry,' Irene said.

So many had, in '18. The strong, and the young. She'd heard it was the same, in England. She'd heard in Limehouse—

'Bon,' said Germaine, while Irene did not shift on her stool, did not lean closer. 'I had no father, either. An orphan, at twenty-five, and I had the 'flu myself. I cried for days, in my bed. She—Madame Jouvenel, she burst in frowning. Carrying—I think it was grapes.' Germaine laughed; shaking her head; it wrinkled up the skin on her nose. 'I wasn't seeing visitors, but you can't deny her, and she—she sat on my bed, and wouldn't cry; and said only: "Physical pleasure, it can overcome even the worst grief." And then—' Irene recrossed her legs; Germaine shrugged, '—she threw my hat at me. Took me to Prunier's, for as many prawns as I could eat.'

Irene—not touching her fingers to the hollow of her throat—thought of Le Havre; and of fish stew from which all the fish had already been taken. 'And now many,' she asked, 'was that?'

'A number, believe me. I'd lived on broth for three weeks. And then when I was done, she—she offered me a position.'

'And here you are.'
'Yes,' said Germaine, and pushed her mud-coloured hair off her forehead. It stayed where she put it; wet palms. 'Here I am. Reviewing foreign crime novels and the Jouvenel datebook by day. Unlucky in love by night.'

'Letting them—,' Irene said, and Germaine said 'Oui,' and slurped at her drink, staring straight ahead.

Irene sat back, eye on Germaine. The girl had been drinking, already, when Irene came down: two cocktails, at a guess, and Irene had bought her two more. She was leaning on her elbows. Not looking over. Germaine didn't look at Irene, because when she did—

'Your employer,' Irene said, 'does she...let you—?'

Germaine made an incredulous noise in the back of her throat. Her knee was bouncing. It was moving her skirt, and her foot, and her elbow on the bar. So.

'I had a man, once,' Irene said, in her airiest voice. 'Wounded in the War.'

'I think we all—,' Germaine began, but Irene spoke over her.

'I mean—in a chair, you know. Wheeled himself about.'

'Oh,' said Germaine. 'Yes?' Hand to her neck, just below her ear. Mitsouko.

'Best lover I ever had,' said Irene. 'I always wondered...well.'

Germaine didn't speak. Irene coughed, and looked at her watch.

'In any case,' she said. 'I should be going. It's a ways back to—over in Dinard, you know. Across the bay.'

'I'm staying—,' Germaine said, too fast, her glass clacking onto the bar, 'up in 415, it's my—,' and 'Oh,' said Irene, 'but I thought you were—,' and Germaine said '—glamourous night off, you know,' and jiggled her leg, staring down into her empty drink.

'Ah,' Irene said. 'Well. I suppose I—I'm a bit tipsy yet, after three glasses of wine.'

Germaine fidgeted her leg. Her chest rose-fell, rose-fell. Irene did not cast up her eyes.

'You should—should come up,' Germaine said, at last. 'And ah. I believe they have tonic water, you could—'

Irene waited. She let herself bite her mouth.

Germaine swung to her feet. She looked right at Irene; she didn't flinch. 'Come up,' she said, and her eyes sparked green.

She lifted her dowdy brown carpet-bag onto her shoulder, and didn't look back. Irene, staring down the barkeep, threw cash on the counter. It wouldn't do to have Germaine's gin fizzes charged to 513.

In the corridor to the lift, Irene followed after Germaine; followed her black trumpet skirt and her awful brown bag. Irene's mouth watered; she bit her tongue. Germaine muscled the accordion cage out of the way, and Irene, entering, let her shoulder brush Germaine's bust.

There was a hum, and a clatter. Irene snuck glimpses. Germaine out of breath; eyes raised to the lift ceiling. Wondering at her own daring. Naughty thing. The girl's corset was modern though her skirt was fifteen years out of fashion; it would have shown to best advantage in an s-curve from the gay
nineties. Bust thrust out in front; arse behind. Irene's fingers were relaxed on the straps of her clutch. More like a mother, in truth. She wanted to spank the girl raw.

There was a clatter, and a hum. Irene stood still while Germaine wrenched open the accordion gate. Mitsouko in spiced waves.

At the door to 415 Germaine fumbled the key. Irene's hand hovered at the small of her back while Germaine's fingers slipped and slithered until at last the thing swung open. Irene on the threshold stumbled; let Germaine catch her arm and steady her against the wall.

'Ah,' Irene said. 'Merci,' looking up into blue-green shocked-wide eyes.

Germaine wasn't small, Irene realised; though she'd thought of her that way all evening. It was the way she'd hunched into herself at the bar. But now she was thick; and middling-tall; her heavy breasts pressed up against Irene's sternum; and Irene had to lift her face to meet Germaine's gaze. Strong brow; strong jaw. 'Merci beaucoup,' Irene said again, with her lips inches from Germaine's, and Germaine swayed, and—

'Tonic,' Germaine murmured. Then she coloured, and stepped back. 'In the sideboard, I—I am sorry, pardon me,' blushing like mad as she backed towards the en-suite.

All right, Irene thought. She was nothing if not flexible. It was hardly likely, but—best to be sure.

The room, after all, was much like her own. Same exposure, even; on the building's western side. Supposing a girl like Germaine had prints like those: she would reckon them too large for the old painted-up mail slot; too important for the desk drawer. Water ran in the en-suite, and Irene searched the mattress—the rug—the niche in the window-seat—behind the wall mirror—under under the back of the floor mirror. If the girl was only pissing—. The en-suite the tap was still running. Squeamish? Irene wondered, distracted, as she ran fingers over desk bottoms and chair-bottoms and the inside surfaces of the wardrobe. Nothing. Would the girl be squeamish about the rest of it? She blushed and fumbled and talked of being an orphan, but her eyes—!

In the en-suite the water still ran. But in the WC there was nowhere, Irene thought, picturing her own. The tank of the toilet; the medicine cabinet; the tub. She ran quick hands over the drawers and shelves of the little bar. She took two deep breaths and a glass from the bar, and poured herself a water as the tap in the en-suite quieted at last; then jammed her fingertips back into the top of the left-most drawer, and slid the thing two inches shut on the skin of her own hand.

'Je suis désolé—but what's wrong?' Germaine said, emerging from the en-suite. Irene furrowed her brow at her own fingers.

'It's nothing. I went for a glass and I just—a splinter—.'

'But you're bleeding,' said Germaine, wide-eyed, 'let me see,' stumbling up to the counter against which Irene had backed herself; taking Irene's long fingers in her fresh-scrubbed hands. Standing facing, with both their heads bowed over Irene's wound, Germaine's breath came hot on the top of her head.

'I washed it off,' said Irene, low in her throat, 'but it's still—.' Blood oozed from the little cut.

Germaine's hands and her wrists were plump. Babyish, Irene thought. More like a mother to me, with Germaine, gawky and out-of-date, trailing along in the wake of her mum's old friend. Tutting and obeying, and putting things in order. Does your employer let you, and Germaine had scoffed, and Irene—
'I always liked that fellow,' Irene said. 'The one who—who called me a free spirit. Who gave me your perfume.'

Implausibly young, she sounded. She knew what she could pass for, and it wasn't twenty. But Germaine just frowned at Irene's finger. She was bent close, this girl who was like a daughter to—but Irene wouldn't know about that. She could feel the girl's breath on her skin. She wanted to—to press, to force her fingerprints into Germaine's pale—plump—bruiseable skin. Against her lips, and her teeth.

'He called me a free spirit,' said Irene, fast and high, 'but really, you know, it was him. He was the one, he would—whenever he got ahold of a few francs, he would,'—orphan girl, done unto—'he would spend it all on olives and Champagne, and a new white dress to take me out in. And he would keep me—,' Germaine, resting her forehead against Irene's forehead in the hotel kitchen paid for by—her employer,—'he would keep me out dancing until dawn. Kiss me in the back of the bar. Get his hands inside my dress and touch me everywhere, everywhere except—.' The girl was panting into Irene's palm, and: '—teasing me,' Irene whispered. 'And then, at sunrise, I'd be tipsy still, putting his hands back in my dress, I wanted him all over my skin, and he'd take me home, he'd spread me out on the bed and finally touch—'

And Germaine, at bloody last, pressed forward, aim bad but intentions good, making broken-off fretting sounds as she mouthed at Irene's lower lip. Irene let her, and let her. When Germaine snuck her tongue past Irene's lips, Irene sucked on the tip of it.

'Oh,' Germaine gasped. Breathing heavy in the space between them with her eyes green and panicky, but Irene put on a helpless face, and raised her bleeding finger to Germaine's mouth. Blood on the girl's lips as she kissed them. Trembling at the verges of chastity.

Irene whispered: 'I had always wondered, always—,' and thankfully, Germaine stopped her mouth, pushed her back clumsily against the tile.

And what Irene could do to her; more like a mother to me. She could turn her over her knee. She could tie Germaine's wrists with the girl's own corset-strings, heavy, looping; she could pull them so tight Germaine could barely breathe, her breasts overflowing the top of the thing; and Irene could knot the strings behind her and then tie her wrists with the excess so when she tried to get up off the bed she'd have to flop about on her fair dimpled elbows and her round pale swelling hips. The gay nineties, Irene thought: she'd a store of those corsets herself. They would shove the girl's great round arse out behind her; Irene could have her squirming on the bed, panting. More like a mother really and Irene could, God, get her wet, get her pink, spank her to watch her quiver and then suck at her arsehole until she shocked herself begging. (Germaine traced a trembling thumb around the side of Irene's throat; Irene heard herself moan.) She would get her wet with her mouth. Get her dripping. The girl would beg, and sob, and be scandalised that all she could think of was Irene's tongue, and Irene would pull back and put a whip-handle in her like a tail to mark her place. Turn her on her side with her hands still tied behind and her waist still cinched and the whip in her arse and then rub her open from the front. Put fingers into her, one after the other after the other; fuck her from the wrist, maddeningly slow until she started to tighten around them; then take them away and listen to her wail; turn her again and fuck her arse with the whip-handle while she leaked all over the bed and tried to hump herself down into the covers, nothing to show; turn her back over with her face a wreck and her breathing shot and her cunt dripping, wet to her knees; put left-hand fingers back inside her while the right held the whip, refusing to move, just watching her struggle and cry and try to fuck herself both ways at the same time. Christ, Irene could ruin her.

But she stood against the counter. She let Germaine tremble and coo, kissing Irene's neck and her cheek while Irene reached up to let down Germaine's Gibson-girl hair. Old-fashioned clothes; old-
fashioned coif. Irene wondered at this fixation on the past.

Germaine's hair tumbled down, and Irene put her hands in it. Light pressure, so light on the base of Germaine's skull, made Germaine's breath catch; made her press her lips hard to Irene's lips. So eager. She would just _crumble_, if Irene only—but no, Germaine had let them; Germaine had nothing to show. Germaine thought she wanted—

Irene let herself melt against the counter. Let herself (the whip-hand, wet; the corset, tight) breathe hard; let her knees fail. Germaine caught at her shoulders. There was a chair just outside the kitchen, and Germaine, with her hands on Irene's arms, steered her over; sat her down; then made to pull back, biting her swollen lip, but Irene still had hold of her skirts. Germaine stumbled, thigh to Irene's palm through wool. She caught herself; fell into straddling Irene's lap, apologising. Irene, for the first time in years, thanked whoever might be listening for that summer of training in the pantomime.

More like a mother, Christ.

'I'm sorry,' Germaine said again. Irene hushed her. She let one hand snake round Germaine's waist, up the back of her old-fashioned blouse; let the other fall to her hip. Regiments of buttons, under every one of her fingers. When she ran her hand down the row at Germaine's spine, she felt she girl shiver, and shift.

'My God, your skin,' Irene said, into her ear, undoing tiny loops at her nape, and down between her shoulder-blades. She could feel it, actually feel it as the blush spread over the girl's back. 'Such things with a woman, I've never—but you flushed downstairs, and I thought of strawberries.'

Germaine made a helpless little noise. Squirmed on Irene's lap with her shaking hands on Irene's waist. Irene pretended to take it as confusion.

_'Des fraises,' _she said. 'Your cheeks. So different from a man's.'

Germaine panted.

Irene thought of the whip (wet) and the corset (tight, Christ). She kept unbuttoning. Unbuttoning and unbuttoning as she ran her mouth over Germaine's round cheek and her throat. Let herself mark her with lip-paint, since Olivia Wren wouldn't realise. Scarlet stripes, Jesus, on the girl's soft flushed-pink throat.

'So soft,' Irene breathed into Germaine's ear. 'My mouth _watered._'

She made it a kind of purr. Germaine's hands tightened on her waist, and she actually scooted her hips forward. Almost a thrust. Irene could have cheered.

Instead she just shifted. Brought up her knee just a little, as if by accident. By accident she moved and by accident Germaine, with a shocked unshuttered look, and her blushing back now bared to the room, could hardly help but ride her thigh. Irene said 'Oh,' like this was a novelty for her, watching a timid young secretary lose their mind in her lap, with her hand on their hip, coaxing them on like one might a skittish dog. Yet still it was—compelling. At times. Germaine moaned like she would crack open. It was compelling, here and now.

_'Oh mon Dieu,' _Germaine said. Whimpering now, shoving herself in short, shaky thrusts against Irene's thigh as Irene unbuttoned dozens of seed-buttons at her hip. 'C'est impossible, je ne fais pas—with toi—'

'And what would you like to be doing?' Irene murmured. 'With me?'
Germaine shook her head; bit her lip. Irene had the girl's skirt open now; she pushed it down from the waistband and took hold of her hips. Corseletted; strapped and flattened. She no doubt despaired of her lovely spreading arse. Irene got two handfuls of it through silk, and ground her forward hard, so that Germaine gasped.

'What did you used to—,' Germaine said, then stopped. Losing her English. Irene ached between her legs.

'Unn,' Germaine said. Irene slid Germaine's blouse off her shoulders and onto the floor. She nuzzled her face into the pink-and-gold scrap left covering her. Germaine's panting breath. Germaine's nipple, hardening against Irene's cheek through pink silk. Irene took down a strap and got her mouth around it, just grazing with her teeth, and Germaine cried out.

'So beautiful,' Irene said. She licked at Germaine's gooseflesh, and looked up at her face. Eyes glazed; tensing her thighs. Irene could smell her through the bloody Mitsouko. Germaine's hand on her neck again, at the back of her throat; Irene let her eyes fall shut.

And at last, at last: 'What did he do with you?' Germaine got out. Irene didn't smile. 'Your—soldier lover,' Germaine said. 'What did he—'

'Mmm,' Irene said, 'he kissed me,' and Germaine just surged forward; pressed her lips to Irene's lips. Needy; wet and small-tongued. Irene smiled. She kissed back, smiling, with the weight of the girl's breasts heavy in her hands.

'Not there,' she said then, when Germaine pulled back. And she sat and watched Germaine's breathing change as she realised; watched the flush deepen and spread down her chest.

'Did they ever?' Irene asked. She painted Germaine's breasts with her lips and waited for an answer.

'Once,' she said at last.

'Did you like it?'

Germaine didn't answer. Wouldn't meet her eyes.

'I always thought,' said Irene, against her skin, 'I always thought I'd like it. Like to do it, I mean; I thought, when he—when he put his tongue on me and his lips—'

'Dieu,' whispered Germaine, at the ceiling.

'—I always wondered how I felt, against his mouth. I always wondered. After the first—first time he did it I took a hand-mirror, looked at myself. Spread myself apart and touched myself and tried to—to think how it felt on my fingers, how it would feel on my tongue, on my—my whole face—'

'Oh mon Dieu oui; merde—yes,' Germaine said. Scrambled back off Irene's lap and Irene let her go. Followed her up and let her step out of her skirt. Skin smeared with lip paint. Wide, green eyes.

Irene licked her lips and peeled out of her dress. 'Yes,' she repeated, and followed Germaine; pressed her back on the bed and kissed her school-mistress mouth.

Germaine. Flat on her back with all her mountains and valleys. Irene thought of Le Havre girls, half-unbuttoned from their dancing-dresses that summer Irene's fingers had been bloody from sewing up Madame Colette's shift every night, and her eyes red from—thought of of stolen minutes in the bathing-houses with those lovely fleshy girls as she unhooked Germaine's suspender clips. Kissed the bridge of her stockinged foot; and her calf; and her dimpled knee. Kissed up the insides of her
spread-wide thighs; got her hands under Germaine's corselet, full of Germaine's delicious fat arse. Germaine squirmed, hands to her flushing face—which would never do.

Irene reached up and grabbed the girl's elbow, pulled her hand away. 'I would always watch him,' she told her, still holding on as she kissed her navel and the warm soft rolls of her belly. Christ, those girls before the War. Flesh in such abundance, there used to be—and she was struck by a nostalgia so strong she felt herself colour, with her hand around Germaine's wrist and her nose now flush against her thigh.

'I liked to watch him,' Irene went on, swallowing. 'I would be as you are, and he would be here; and I liked to watch when his tongue came out.' She held Germaine's eyes as she made her tongue to be soft and broad, and licked over the folds of her with a long wet dragging slide. Germaine made a strangled sound but her eyes stayed open; so Irene pointed her tongue and burrowed down.

Hot: the first truly hot day of the whole summer, with only one door open out onto the balcony and no cross-breeze, and her head buried between sweat-soaked quaking thighs. So soft, so wet; hot like the days that July in Le Havre, like those wartime summers in Paris when the girls had still been—Christ, soft curving flesh. Her face wet with sweat and with Germaine; and Irene licked up her with the flat of her tongue, like catching the frothing head down the side of a cold cider-glass.

'Did you—,' Germaine gasped, above her, 'did you. Kiss him, too?'

Irene, with her face wet and her fingers tangled in the tops of Germaine's pink stockings where they cut into her thighs, had a sudden vision of herself in her harness and her big black cock; of Germaine on her knees with her mouth wet and stretched around the tip of it. She moaned against the girl's skin. Flicked into the heat of her with the point of her lizard-tongue. Germaine cried out.

'Did you—is that what he did?' she said again, 'is that—that—,' and Irene nodded and (I've always wondered, always—) let her feel a brush of teeth. 'Dieu,' said the girl, 'I'll never remember. I—let me, let—unh,' sounding lost and panicky and Irene Adler would keep her there, just there, beautiful and overwhelmed, but Olivia Wren in her yellow dress—

'Turn,' said Irene, pulling back, stroking down the insides of Germaine's thighs so she spread them even—Christ, even wider. Oh, Irene Adler would say, look at you, but Olivia just said 'turn on your side.' So Germaine turned on her side. Panting, with a crease between her brows. And Irene, skin buzzing, shuffled round on her knees, and lay down on her side too. Drew Germaine's thigh over her shoulder. Nosed into her thatch of dark-brown curls.

'Easier to remember,' she said, 'if you follow my lead.' She glanced up to see Germaine, with her forehead to Irene's thighs, looking down the length of her own body and nodding and nodding and nodding, so Irene—Irene liked biting and hard tongue, being bitten into like a peach, but Germaine—Irene licked another stripe up the centre of her, and Germaine, breathing too hard, licked a stripe up the centre of Irene.

Gentle; lizard-flicks and ale-glass stripes, and Germaine was following but she was trembling; Irene pressed her tongue and fluttered it, and Germaine pulled back. 'Attends!' the girl panted, 'wait,' so Olivia pulled back. Didn't shove her hand inside her or press her teeth against her or make her swallow her huge black rubber cock so her soft expressive throat—

'Quand tu étais,' Germaine panted, 'when you were—were close, what would he—'

So Olivia opened wide her mouth; bit down as into a peach and Germaine jerked back a bit but she followed; bit down peach-like and oh God. God, God, Irene's jaw clicked she opened it so wide, and bit, and Germaine bit, teeth, Christ, so (should she? Done unto, I let them, it had been ages since
she'd had it like this. And Irene could imagine the girl starved; she feasted on Germaine and
Germaine bit back, fruit of fruit of feasting flesh, she had to—)

Her tongue, soft again, flickering gentle against the wet hard heat of the girl, but Germaine didn't
stop.

Germaine didn't stop. Irene cried out. Irene relaxed her mouth and made her tongue so gentle, so
gentle, and Germaine was vibrating under her hands and her mouth but she bit at her, still; Irene felt
swollen in Germaine's mouth and she was shaking too. Shaking.

Gentler. Germaine fucked her with her tongue and Irene, shaking, drew back until she was hardly
moving, just an open mouth with her tongue out, broad and flat against her lip and her chin, letting
Germaine touch—touch (sparks)—touch herself to Irene's flat immobile tongue. So hard. Small, and
surrounded in swollen, wet-hot—

She heard herself, crying out. Hot; clenching down; so she pressed fingertips inside, hooked and
pulled while her tongue just tapped-tapped-tapped against Germaine and she felt her tighten and
pulse and it was—

A relief, she thought, flat on her back, coming down from it. From having curled her body around
Germaine's body, curling around hers, bearing down. Relief. And as Germaine groaned, and turned
her forehead against Irene's (Olivia's) thigh, she reached down, and petted her hair, and let herself
close her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

1. Although Sherlock exaggerates a bit, the street-naming conventions in Saint
Coulomb do tend to favour the strategy of just re-naming a single street over and
over again in honour of whichever local landmarks it is passing at the moment.
All its iterations here are taken from life.

2. "The novels of Mr. Lawrence and Mr. Joyce": Basically, Carco thought of
himself as an avant-garde modernist. DH Lawrence's *Women in Love* had come
out in 1920, and would have been of interest for its (for the time) frank sexual
themes and blatant homoeroticism. James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young
Man* had been serialised in 1914-1915, but Joyce would have been most
notorious at this time, especially with people like Carco, for *Ulysses*, which was
only partially available. It had begun serialised publication in Margaret Anderson
and Jane Heap's *The Little Review*, but publication halted in 1920 (with the
"Nausicäa" episode) when Heap and Anderson were convicted of publishing
obscenity. The book wouldn't be published in full until 1922, when Sylvia Beach
released it from Shakespeare and Company, in Paris. As such, in 1921 it would
have been the subject of MUCH gossip and speculation among literary types.

3. Room Forty was the shorthand name for the nascent British code-breaking
department in WWI. It was formed shortly after the war broke out in 1914, and
named after 40 Old Building, Admiralty, where it was mostly located. Much of
their work centred around decoding the Imperial German Navy's codebook,
which was recovered from a German destroyer early on in the war. The idea that
the family seat of the Holmes brothers was a covert outpost of it is obviously
fictional, but not outlandish given how new and untried it all was.

4. Sherlock is, of course, correct in all his deductions about "The Panther." The
Countess de Comminges, eccentric titian-haired Amazon and accomplished horsewoman, was married off to a wealthy Parisian banker at a young age to shore up her family's faltering fortunes. He then suffered a psychotic break, believing himself to be a dog, and was institutionalised by his family, leaving his wife to move in with her lover and bear his child, Renaud. By this point, her health and her beauty were both failing—which was, as Sherlock suggests, the main reason Colette agreed to house her.

5. Mademoiselle Patat was, likewise, much as described by Sherlock, although more of her personality is invented. She was, however, an up-and-coming clothing designer and a petite blonde, and spent the summer at Roz Ven as Jouvenel's acknowledged liaison.

6. In case it's not obvious, all the Latin is from the Catholic Last Rites.

7. Smallclothes in the new, army style: A new, shorter, more accessible style of mens' underwear was developed during World War I, and the fashion caught on and remained popular after the war. The old style looked more like what we now think of as Long Johns: essentially a one-piece bodysuit, or an undershirt and a set of leggings that extended most of the way down the calf. The new style looked closer to modern boxer shorts.

8. Again, Sherlock's deductions about Hélène Picard are mostly correct, with the exception of her accent: she was actually from the South of France. The comparison to a nun is taken from Colette herself; Thurman writes:

"She lived "a nun's life," as Colette calls it, while writing her "unbridled but chaste" books. Her last collection and "masterpiece," according to Colette, was a volume of "scandalous" love poems entitled *For a Bad Boy* and inspired by her obsessive yet unrequited love for Frances Carco: "A life as pure as hers can't fail to seem mysterious."


10. Everything about Germaine Beaumont and her relationship with her employer Colette, including that fantastic story about the prawn dinner, is taken from Judith Thurman's *Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette*, up to and including her unhappy love affairs with two married men—but not, so far as I know, including the identities of those men.

11. Mitsouko: Guerlain released their now-famous Mitsouko scent for the first time in 1919. It was indeed associated with free-spirited bohemian youth.

12. The Spanish 'flu pandemic of 1918 killed 50-100 million people worldwide, disproportionately previously-healthy adults and young adults.

13. Further DVD notes on this chapter can be found [here](#).
Their faces relax from grief into relief

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Friday, August 26th, 1921
11am (Hour 45)

Stepping on leaves. Kicking underbrush over her bicycle frame. From two feet away the thing was invisible, and Irene thought *I’m improving at this*, with a wild giggle bubbling up into her chest. Mademoiselle Adler, skilled provincial. Who’d ever have thought.

Up and around the hill she went. Out of the sun, hot already at mid-day, keeping to the cover of the Scots pine: it was a kind of second nature, now. She was black-clad and light-limbed. She felt unfindable. It was almost as if she watched herself from above, as she circled close to the lawn; and looked down, down, from behind a stand of trees, on a long white table set for luncheon.

Or *déjeuner*, Irene supposed. The first real meal of the day. White lace and silver, flashing in the heat, as a desert-thin woman bent her head to the extravagant gestures of a shirtsleeved man. Wraith-like, in black; melting towards him. The sun glinted on his spectacles. Glass, and yellow wire.

There was a wisp of a girl on the fellow’s other side, gazing at his shoulder, with her black curls all down her back. She could’ve been a ghost, for all the notice he took. At last, she turned to her left: to the foot of the table, where old Henry Jouvenel with his paunch and his moustaches pounded his place-setting with a pudgy fist. Irene reckoned he’d put on—what? A stone? Two, since the War? Like a pasha with his harem: a girl on either side. Jouvenel in Le Chabanais, she remembered: his lips shining with sauce from the stew.

Irene circled around. The sun was hot; and the matron across the table from the wraith in black—but surely. Surely, Irene thought, squinting through the trees: that was Claudine Holmès? Thicker now, and greyer, and tugging her shawl—light grey; dusty rose—closer about her shoulders despite the heat of the sun? Mademoiselle Claudine, Irene remembered, always had gone in for pastels. Blues and violets back then: a wavy blonde cloud spilling down over her shoulders as she scrubbed her face pink in the evenings after the panto shows. And now: light grey, and dusty rose.

Irene shivered.

Jouvenel gestured and his ladies smiled. Claudine Holmès looked across at the wraith, patting down her hair, adjusting the lace at her bust, as the man next to her—

There, Irene thought. *There*. The smaller man, the blond man, from the train station, blinking and smiling in his eager, anxious way. Brought down by—Jouvenel? By Charles? The fellow’s dark-haired companion was nowhere to be found, but there *he* was, anyway: smiling up at the side of Claudine Holmès's head. Licking his lips. Speaking to Claudine as she drew her shawl about herself, and turned to face him. As she shifted: a hand on his arm.

Irene circled, and watched the two of them. Both dirty-blond, both open-faced. Both smiling with sad eyes. His gaze flicked down to her décolletage, and she laughed, and Irene thought, sharp and brutal: *Christ*. Those girls, before the War.

And then, from the house, bustling through the door as if on cue, came Germaine. Sweeping in, lips pursed, with her wide hips and a fresh, lace-less replica of her out-of-date school-mistress shirtwaist:
work-a-day cousin to the blouse Olivia had unbuttoned all down the back and left lying on the floor before the balcony—it’s fabric crushed, fleetingly, in the light of morning, by Irene’s bare foot.

Germaine stopped a moment on her way round the table. Stopped to speak to the hacking crone, in the centre on the house-ward side; the red dye half grown out of her hair and a gown fit for evening in ‘89. A haughty air. And Germaine: so easy. Laying a light-meant hand on the dowager's arm, and the woman squinting up, up: towards the sun.

Irene watched the crone cough into her baguette. She watched Germaine take a seat at the straight-backed chair left empty near the table's head; watched her tuck her serviette round her thighs by the side of the half-grown boy, clanking his knife on his plate; watched her reach for the butter as she opened her mouth, a little tilt of her head towards the head of the table, seated as she was at the right hand of C—. Of Madame Jouvenel.

Irene, in the Scots pine forest, closed her eyes. She closed them for a beat; for two; with the after-image of white lace seared bright-hot into the backs of her lids. When she opened them again, she was looking up at the sky. Cloudless. Cornflower. Neither beast nor bird. And she lowered her gaze by inches, by feet; until it found again the tops of the seaward larches; and the gabled roof of Roz Ven; and the white-faced, black-haired figure at the dormer window, looking down at the company with something like loss in his eyes.

Friday, August 26th, 1921
11am (Hour 45)

Jacket, cigarettes, and—there. Notebook. Sherlock breathed out and straightened up through years of wardrobe-dust to face the bed, and the window beyond.

He'd swept a mountain of cushions off the head of the bed; pushed them to the floor in the corner, and still: all this needlepoint, and white lace. Detritus from a false life, Sherlock had found himself thinking, in the aftermath of last night's… display. And then he had thought: idiot. Had been thinking it already; skin hot and crawling; walking up the stairs.

Even so. Stretched out behind John, with the window open to the night, Sherlock's unmoored fingers had kept searching out shoulder; hip. The old known, familiar scars.

Laughter echoed up, faint through the open window. Sherlock twitched aside yet more lace to look down at the long white table. And there they all were, of course. Of course they would be. Even the elusive, militant Mademoiselle Beaumont (for it must be she, in her stolid shirtwaist at Madame Jouvenel's right hand) was settling to her coffee. Sherlock rapped John's notebook against the window-sill with a dull, leathern thunk.

One must consider the thing (Sherlock thought) impartially. A sequence of events, like any other. Only seven years had passed, after all: a shot through the neck in an open-top car in Sarajevo, and: action, reaction. Alliance; declaration; counter-declaration. War had come to the Western Front, and the harridan now shaking a finger at her fresh-skinned boy, had followed a flame to Verdun; while her austere, desert-faced second, alone in some Paris flat, had written verses and hauled in river-water; fancying herself a nun. Cause and effect; a continuous line of descent, surely, from those moments down to this. Sherlock, in Oxfordshire, in the room under the stairs, had listened to the whispers of Mycroft’s men. In Paris, they had said, children picnicked at the Marne: picked up shell-casings as souvenirs. Souvenired: to be pierced with a bullet; to be taken back in time. War had come to Reims, and young men had fallen. Impartially: thousands upon millions.
Thunk went John's journal on the window-casement.

And then. There were the rest of them.

Down at the table Claudine was leaning forwards to speak to Mademoiselle Picard, and John (trenchfoot outside Amiens) turned instead to his right, to Mademoiselle Patat. She smiled (lovely and, ah, versatile); she laughed. John gestured to her dress and she bent her hand, lazy from the wrist. Her practiced laugh filtered up through the window. She must be glad, Sherlock thought—looking at Monsieur Jouvenel (on horseback, at Verdun) and back at the man's lover—to have, on a sun-drenched Friday in August, John Watson at her side.

Thunk, the journal said. Sherlock should go down.

But Mademoiselle Patat was turning now; craning her golden neck. And John was craning his; as Claudine still leant forward, eyes on Mademoiselle Picard, while Mademoiselle Picard looked up towards the door, and Mademoiselle Beaumont, getting to her feet, put down her coffee-cup with a clink Sherlock could almost hear. She bustled forward like one born to it. Patting at her waist, now; snapping open her chatelaine bag to tip the telegraph boy. She waited to open it until he'd been ushered away, but did so without hesitation once he'd gone; then delivered the thing with steady hands to the head of the table.

Claudine was turning too, now. They were all turning; one from the other, action and reaction; dominoes falling along both edges of the table to look up at their hostess as she—

—as she did nothing more than groan. And wave a hand. And smile at young Bertrand Jouvenel in his cravat as she balled up the telegram, and tossed it down the table. Above the coffee-pot the wind caught it. Claudine darted a hand out; arrested and unfolded it. Whereupon Madame Jouvenel (writing platitudes home from the front) raised her eyes, ringed with kohl, to the heavens, and pursed her claret-coloured mouth. She looked at Claudine; then at Monsieur Jouvenel; then spoke a few words. A low buzz went up amongst the company.

Thunk, went the journal on the casement, with Sherlock looking down at Claudine's spine as it stiffened. Thunk as she brought her palms down hard on the table-top, and Sherlock turned, at last, from the window. He could breathe, he found, striding through the doorway; galloping down the stairs. Action; reaction; a sequence of events moving him clear of needlepoint and lace. From the set of his cousin's shoulders, no one else would be getting a word in for quite some time.

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'It is—absolutely incredible,' Claudine was bellowing, when Sherlock emerged from the sitting room into the bright light of the garden, 'that anyone could be this stubborn, this—cousin!' as she caught sight of him, and changed over to English. 'Kindly inform them that they are being impossible!'

Sherlock, looking from one Jouvenel to the other as they casually failed to meet his eyes, would have done so wholeheartedly and on general principle. For all the good it would have done.

'Oh, I doubt that,' he said, instead; his voice sufficiently treacly that John had to stifle a laugh behind his serviette. Familiar; beloved. Action, and reaction.

'About what could such charming people be impossible?' Sherlock said. Madame Jouvenel made a tutting sound with her teeth, not looking at him, and Sherlock beamed at full strength in the direction of Mademoiselle Patat. He flattered himself she looked a bit dazed. Then Claudine pressed the telegram into his hand.
'Another derangement,' she was saying. 'Just after the other two. At the home of Henry's ex-wife.'

'What nonsense,' spat the lady of the house, in French, as her husband rumbled to life at the other side of the table with a long string of newspaper qualifiers in the vein of _no reason to believe_ and _any connection at the present time._

'Someone,' said Claudine, her eyes on Sherlock and with the Holmes set to her chin, 'ought to go up to Paris.'

'Ouf,' from Madame Jouvenel. She made a lazy gesture to her right. 'Mademoiselle Beaumont can go. Poor child; must be starving for a few well-furnished men.'

'I would prefer not,' said Mademoiselle Beaumont. Clipped, and prim. In the Scots pines, that strange bird let out its tin-whistle cry.

Sherlock, into the silence, said 'Monsieur Jouvenel,' and followed it with a string of questions in Claudine's Montmartre French: had he seen his ex-wife recently? (Monsieur Jouvenel really didn't think—an outsider and a foreigner, after all—.) Had anyone seen her recently? Her son? (Bertrand shook his artfully-tanned head.) Was there a planned rendezvous in the future? He had heard Madame Boas threw balls—at which Mademoiselle Patat, apparently unable to stop herself, burst forth with 'Yes,' in very broken English, 'on the—on the first. A fancy dress ball. Mesdames Jouvenel et Carco, they are—are wearing, my gowns.'

The mesdames in question looked respectively fatigued to be reminded of the conversation, and mortified to be mentioned in it by name.

'You're _all_ attending?' asked John.

'But of course,' drawled Madame Jouvenel, still in French though she must know John could not understand. 'It's quite the spectacle, Madame Boas's costume ball.'

'Well,' said Claudine. 'Almost all. Not Renaud. Or the Countess, of c—.'

'Oh no,' interrupted a nasal, over-cultured voice, as Madame Jouvenel, under her breath, groaned 'Oh for God's sake,' glaring at the crone, who rose with a clatter to her feet, and Sherlock realised he'd yet to actually hear the Panther speak—but he was hearing her now.

'Oh no,' she went on, nearly spitting: she wasn't to come, was she? She was no longer invited to Claire Boas's precious fêtes, not like in the old days. Not like the days when she'd been sought out, consulted on the most suitable dates. Not like the days when their fine host here—what was he now? senator? soldier? (on horseback, _Sherlock thought, at Verdun_)—had forced his young wife to smile and grit her teeth, and consult with the Countess on gowns and Champagne. Not like the masked balls where he'd spirited her away under his lady's very nose, when he'd called her 'chère Isabelle', and kissed her neck in that cupboard that gave onto her very bedroom, his hand over his Isabelle's mouth when that shrew came in for her wrap, so she wouldn't hear them laughing; oh no—and she was taken, briefly, by a fit of coughing, her spotted shoulders shaking in the noonday light—they wouldn't catch her there, not for anything.

Madame Jouvenel blew out her cheeks. Her husband fidgeted.

The Panther, with a final glare, stalked away towards her garage loft, green velvet trailing behind her. John's eyes were wide and his chin drawn down with that wild well-known mirth; and Mademoiselle Patat had her silk handkerchief to her mouth; tears of laughter on her cheeks.

'One has to admire the woman's spirit,' Monsieur Carco muttered, and Madame Jouvenel said 'Her
malevolent devil spirit'; but the corner of her mouth curved up as her husband scrutinised the nonexistent clouds overhead—and Sherlock, in mild shock, felt his own doing the same. The Countess receded, coughing gently into the breeze.

'Doctor Watson could go,' Claudine said. All eyes swung back to meet her where she stood, looking mulish on Sherlock's other side.

'Absurd,' said Sherlock.

'But yes,' said the blonde, as John cut over her: 'I'm really not sure, Mademoiselle Patat, if—,' and she dimpled up, saying: 'Germaine, please.' And then, in a sing-song flirtatious tone: 'Tout le monde me tutoie.'

'Doctor Watson has never even met Madame Boas,' Sherlock told Claudine. 'And in any case, whoever goes ought to be someone who can venture an opinion on the evidence, on whether anything in her home has been disturbed. Someone who can look around himself and observe; someone with a modicum of—' sense; but Claudine tightened her hand around his wrist.

He said instead, 'Someone she trusts.'

'But any woman would—would trust Doctor Watson,' said Mademoiselle Patat, with a furrow between her (lovely, versatile) eyebrows. Sherlock's teeth clicked together.

'Consider the matter,' he said to Claudine, hand on her knuckles around his wrist, 'as if it were—'

'But look,' came a voice, from his other side. He turned to see, of all people, Mademoiselle Beaumont, getting to her feet. Saying, with an air of measured logic: 'Look at who is here. Madame Boas's ex-husband. Her first replacement as mistress. Her replacement as wife. Her second replacement as mistress. Her son, whose loyalty is suspect for his last year's liaisons. Her rivals' children. Her rivals' friends. The lovers and, ah. Employees, of her rivals' friends. I can only suppose that,all things considered, she would be charmed to speak with a stranger about this sad circumstance.'

Claudine's eyes burnt hot on the side of Sherlock's face, and that bird again. High up, in the Scots pines.

'Your English is very good,' John said, smiling at Mademoiselle Beaumont.

'So I have gathered,' she said.

Her voice was breeze-thinned. She was turning her head already, looking away.

Friday, August 26th, 1921
11:30am (Hour 45)

The spies exchanged a look, behind a mass of mud-coloured hair; and in St Malo, Irene remembered, at three in the morning—

At three, she had awoken in the cool breeze through the balcony doors, Germaine's hot breath on her nape. She had let her eyelids flutter once; twice. Surprised at herself. Burrowing against another body, solid at her back. Germaine had snorted in her sleep; Irene had laughed into her pillow. Had let out a breath, and another.
At six she was awake again, remnants of Olivia Wren clinging to her like a skin-husk about an adder. The hour before dawn. The sky through the double-doors was still dark, still royal, stars still winking over St Malo as she slid out from under sheets and Germaine’s damp, heavy arm.

Olivia probably loved the early mornings. Irene hated them. Always had. Factory work; shop work; work in the markets. Every morning, her brother had risen at four. Irene still thought of Dylan, at times; when she greeted four o’clock from the other side.

She stumbled. Slow. Gathered up the wrinkled mess of her yellow Patou, and the ball of her foot crushed Germaine’s cast-off cotton blouse. Tiny buttons dug into her heel. Her eyes watered.

In the WC, she clicked on the electric lights; winced; wished for candles. Late nights in the city, all her nerves lit up; she could feel a glance like a caress, and would wind it about her; let it touch her skin. In the mornings, though. Her eyes, sore in their sockets. She shielded them from the glare with a tender flat-planed palm.

Irene shut the door, and slithered into the cramped space between the stone washbasin and the toilet. She leant over the tub. Opened up the taps. Sat on the cold ceramic lip, naked, her dress in her hand; and blinked in the harsh modern light until she could see.

Cool air dripped down her back: a trickle from the air shaft. She climbed up onto the far edge of the tub and breathed it in, her adder-skin peeling away. Then she reached up; hooked her hand around the chain, and pulled the little glass door shut. Steam rose around her in waves.

She hung the Patou in the midst of the bath-steam and plunged herself in the hot water up to her shoulders: once, twice. Olivia hadn’t taken the paint off her face, last night: hadn’t let down her hair. Olivia, this morning, would wash herself and comb out her coiffure and borrow a spare dressing gown off Germaine, with whom, feeling scrubbed-clean and fresh, she would be drinking strong coffee in an hour and a half; but Irene—.

Irene scrubbed from her shoulders down, then towelled off, and used the hot water to fix her hair. On glass shelves over the bath were ablutions, Germaine's and the hotel's: glass jars of dried lavender, of cotton swabs and sponges; an ivory bristle-brush full of long dark hair. An empty pack of Wrigley's Doublemint; and Irene hadn't thought of chewing gum since 1918 had brought American boys to Le Chabanais. Hair pins; clothes-pins; a tiny pack of thread with a sewing needle and a tapestry one. Off by itself, on the uppermost shelf: the gold-toned bottle of Mitsouko, with its circular label and its lovely teardrop stopper. She picked apart a cotton swab. Wrapped it round her finger and fixed her face. She smoothed layers; removed layers; and left just enough to pass for what she could: day to her night, twenty-four to her thirty, Rouen to her Paris to her London.

Now she was sharp. Fresh-skinned. Scenting the air. She went through the items on the glass shelves. Did the thing thoroughly. Ran her hands along the back of the tub, the back of the mirror; climbed up on the back of the toilet to fish around in the tank. It all took less time than Olivia would have spared for her morning bath. By the time she was done, the yellow dress was smooth and warm, fluttering down into her hands. She drained the tub, and opened the air-vent; and five minutes later, when she slipped out the door of 415 with her stockings in her handbag and a dab of Mitsouko on her wrist, Irene Adler blew a kiss to Germaine Beaumont, still snoring under the coverlet as the sunlight tipped peach-pink over the roofs of St Malo, and into the sea.

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And now here she was, in a Scots pine forest behind a gabled roof in the midday August sun: watching, as the two men, the spies, hired by the husband of—of Madame Jouvenel, who was after all in late middle age, now; enamoured of men, now; boys, now; now hidden away from any but
private audiences and really, after all, had very little connection with anyone Irene had ever, ever
known. As the two spies, then, looked deep into each others' eyes. Germaine between them.

Somehow, Irene wished it were the little blonde in that position. Or Claudine Holmès. Or the
painstakingly tanned young dandy in the aubergine cravat. She squinted through the needles. She
narrowed her eyes at Germaine's stodgy, blousy sleeves.

One could hardly pick and choose, however. At the head of the table the modern-day Madame
Jouvenel was snickering. The spies were having an extended, wordless conversation; Germaine was
looking away. They could hardly pick and choose, themselves.

Irene tiptoed to the edge of the trees. At the edge nearest the two men, she could still only hear a low
hum of voices; nothing distinct. Over the head of the blond man she could see the top of Germaine's
mud-brown chignon, and standing over them both: dark curls, and a scowl.

The pale spy, the one who had looked down from the gable: he was gesturing now, towards the head
of the table and towards its foot, holding the newly-arrived telegram in one hand. Germaine leant
forward, on her elbows, as Madame Jouvenel waved a languid hand towards the garage. That
painted crone, she must mean. Living above that ancient Renault wagon.

A journey, then. A journey, when they'd only just arrived. News from Paris, it must be. They were
the kind of people, she thought (their rooms, in disarray), for whom one city had become their entire
world; news would only come from one place. And she shifted, a little uncomfortably, her hand at
the throat of her black blouse.

And now the blond spy was reaching around Germaine to put his hand on the other one's arm;
speaking up at him while the man scowled at the company, and at the countryside in general. Balling
up the telegram in his fist. Looking everywhere but his companion's face. Looking, Irene thought,
oddly familiar.

But: news from Paris; they would travel back. Irene's heart beat under her hand. She caught herself
staring at the crumpled telegram-paper as if she could divine the words on it. Oh Charles, she
thought, almost fondly. She could have giggled.

Or perhaps not Charles. The hotel clerk had said a woman. So: Agnès Humbert, perhaps, if not her
father; but someone, Irene thought, feeling like a skulking black-clad schoolgirl, someone had made
themselves her unwitting accomplice, and now—

She looked up at the attic room, from which the pale face had looked down. A journey. Irene had
people of her own. She could crook her finger and they would swarm. And these men had followed
her here but they had lost her. So lovely to be helped to disappear: so lovely to be doubly invisible.
Now they would journey away from her, believing her elsewhere.

At the table Claudine Holmès was gesturing even more extravagantly than the dark-haired man had
done. Her voice, thought Irene, was startling: it had always carried, but now it boomed. Even so,
only a word here or there reached the trees: Paris, indeed, and il faut considerer, and impossible.
Madame Jouvenel, turned three-quarters away from Irene, just shrugged, and Claudine stamped her
foot. When Irene looked back at the blond spy, he was gazing at Claudine with an odd amusement in
his eyes.

But Irene needn't stay, now. They would go, that was plain: one of them, at least; and she knew their
rooms. Already the wraith-woman and the paunchy expressive man were peeling off, edging away
from the table. Tiring, no doubt, of a debate in which they had no part. They wandered with their
notebooks towards the lawn-chairs on the bluff, while the little blonde stifled a yawn behind her
Irene drew back; back into the trees, feeling ghoulish and delighted. She would—not sleep, surely; and even she could not crook a finger at her people in Paris, armed only with vague descriptions and an unsettled sense of familiarity. Names, though.

She would keep to the forests; bicycle back to St Malo and bathe properly. Dine in the restaurant, early, with all this giddy relief bubbling up through her blood. Return at twilight and wait it out; and by morning, surely, she could give them names.

Friday, August 26th, 1921
11:30am (Hour 45)

'Yes, all right,' Sherlock heard himself saying, as Mademoiselle Beaumont nodded her satisfaction, and Claudine, at last, let go his wrist. 'No,' he said, 'it's a fine idea. Send Watson. Ladies are wont to find him charming. Madame Boas won't suspect.'

Everyone looked at him. Would wonders never cease.

'Good then,' he said. 'When can he go?'

'There is a train just after one,' said Mademoiselle Beaumont—who would be the first, wouldn't she, to get to her pocket watch—adding, 'if Doctor Watson takes the Citroën…'

'Yes,' Sherlock said. 'The Citroën. Excellent.'

He clapped his hands together, making as if to turn, and Monsieur Jouvenel broke in with, 'But Claire—Madame Boas—it's her house. What would she have to suspect?'

'Surely it's occurred to you,' Sherlock said, 'that in her campaign to continue aligning herself with your family—a family which is currently being preyed upon by a housebreaker or series of housebreakers—' Madame Jouvenel snorted, but Sherlock kept on: '—that staging a similar theft at her own home could hardly hurt her cause in the public eye.'

'But the… break-ins,' said Monsieur Jouvenel, 'are not in the public eye.'

'A state which is certain to last,' said Claudine. She turned from the table, casting her eyes to the heavens, and caught Sherlock's as she did. Below him, still seated, John (in his chair, at Baker Street) covered his lips with the back of his hand.

'Well,' Sherlock said again. 'Good. And where are the keys to the Citroën? Watson here is an excellent driver, though I assume the man of the house—'

'The woman of the house, actually,' Madame Jouvenel interrupted. 'And take it, take them. Bertrand can bring them to you. Myself? I am going down to bathe in the sea.'

She heaved herself to her feet. Made a mock-deferential bow. Left John to square his shoulders and Sherlock to follow in his wake, towards the garage; as Mademoiselle Patat stretched pale-gold arms towards the sun, and Bertrand scurried for the keys, and Mademoiselle Beaumont watched them all, biting her lip as if convinced that there were some more logical manner in which the whole affair really ought to be conducted.

Sherlock—well. He was hardly in a position to disagree.
Just inside the garage, to the accompaniment of the Countess's petulant footsteps overhead, John gave him a searching look; and told him, 'You could come too, you know.'

He said it with his shoulders still set; with that look on his face. Sherlock could have sketched from heart the line of John's mouth, just from the burr creeping in at the back of his throat.

'Nonsense,' Sherlock said, clearing his throat. 'They'll be back tonight.'

'The housebreaker? They're all the way up in Paris, surely.'

'One person is up in Paris. One person is quite close by. You saw the Matin offices, and you saw the top room here. You can't think the same person was responsible; one was chaos, and the other was barely touched. They'll most likely be back tonight.'

'We can both be back in time, then,' John said. 'Take the afternoon train, go see this Madame Boas, look at—'

'Come now, Watson,' with his wrist still aching, 'it doesn't make sense—'

'—her house, get an early supper and be back here by ten. Nobody will be in bed yet, it'll be—'

'Don't be absurd,' came a voice, and their mouths snapped shut. Claudine.

He turned from John and John turned from him, and there she was. Scowling and sweeping through the garage door, with her parasol and her driving-hat. The old force of nature he remembered.

'And I will drive back,' she said. 'One shudders to think of my cousin behind the wheel.' Then she clucked her tongue. Disgusted; a mother-hen. 'An early supper,' she went on. 'In Paris, on a Friday evening. I'm ashamed of you, my own flesh and blood.'

'Pardon?' said Sherlock. 'I'll be staying here. Watching the house.'

'I am in no doubt of that, Sherlock,' Claudine said, very severe. 'But Doctor Watson—and he ought to stay in my flat. Or an hotel, I can recommend—Jeanne and Yves just opened a new place, telephones in every room,' as John was saying, 'The entire house party will still be here, you don't think one or more of them could keep an eye—'

'Ah yes,' said Claudine, 'because they obviously take the threat so tremendously seriously.' Sherlock snorted; then looked back at John in time to see him lick his lips, with that narrow stubborn fold between his brows.

'Anyway,' Sherlock said, swallowing. 'It will be quite all right. It's one evening, in a house full of people who scarcely acknowledge my existence. How much trouble can possibly arise?'

'I can be back this evening,' John said, instead of answering, and Claudine huffed as she held the car-door open. Sherlock settled back in his seat, right hand circling left wrist where the marks of his cousin's fingers might (a sequence of events) bruise up a few hours hence; and Claudine, sliding behind the wheel and straightening her hat, only barked instructions about cafés and hotels, until John broke into a reluctant, half-charmed smile.
1. To the extent possible, all the war-memories are accurate. Jouvenel served in the infantry at Verdun; Carco was an aeroplane pilot. After the initial flight from, and return to, Paris in 1914, the French capital was remarkably sheltered from the war raging on the northern and eastern borders. The detail about Parisians taking picnic day-trips to, and harvesting souvenirs from, the site of the Battle of the Marne, is taken from Peter Englund's excellent *The Beauty and the Sorrow: An Intimate History of the First World War*, which I HIGHLY recommend, on general principle.

2. This particular charity ball is a fabrication, but it's true that Claire Jouvenel (née Boas) was an inveterate entertainer and society maven—also historical are her "new" family money, and her preference for using her ex-husband's surname.

3. Incidentally, I spent quite a number of hours, to no avail, trying to track down the historical make and model of Colette Jouvenel's car. It may or may not have been a Citroën. It was some variety of pre-War sports car, which Jouvenel bought for her during the early days of their courtship, when he was in the process of breaking from the Countess (and his wife), and Colette was in the process of breaking from Missy. And it's lucky he did, because he soon had need of it. Thurman writes:

"The baron [Henry Jouvenel] then hastened to inform Mme de Comminges ["The Panther"] that he was leaving her for another woman. She told him she would kill her rival. Colette reports to Hamel:

"A desperate Jouvenel conveys this threat to me...I go to her and tell the Panther, "I'm the woman." Whereupon she falls apart and begs me. A brief fit of weakness, because two days later she announces to Jouvenel that she plans to murder me. Re-desperate, Jouvenel has me picked up by Sauerwein in the car, and comes with me...to Rozven, where we find Missy icy and disgusted, having already been informed of the affair by the Panther. Then my two bodyguards leave me and Paul Barlet mounts guard, clutching a revolver. Here begins a period of semi-sequestration in Paris, where I am guarded like a precious reliquary by the detective squad...This period has only just ended, brought to a close by an unexpected, providential, and magnificent event! ... M. Hériot [one of Colette's rejected suitors] and Mme la Panthère have just embarked together on [his yacht] the Esmerald for a six-week cruise, having shocked Le Havre, their home port, with their drunken orgies. Isn't it nice? Isn't it theater?"

Even better, throughout this whole ordeal, Jouvenel had his arm in a sling because of "a dueling wound that he had incurred defending the honor of *Le Matin* against a slur from its rival [and Charles Humbert's paper], *Le Journal."

4. Further DVD notes on this chapter can be found [here](#).
Different voices, often together heard

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday, August 27th, 1921
1:30am (Hour 59)

Sherlock, at the desk near the doorway, listened to the last of the dinner guests make their way down the corridor below. The clicks of latches. The creaking of boards. By his left hand a telegram: WILL STAY NIGHT AFTER ALL STOP BACK TOMORROW STOP JW. He looked down to find his fingers caressing the thing without design. Outdoors the tin-whistle bird-cries had quieted; all that reached the top room was the heat-breeze, and the far-off roar of the sea.

John Watson thawed the ice on which he leant, Sherlock thought. Without him at Roz Ven Mademoiselle Patat, and Madame Carco—even Hélène Picard had increased their distances from him. That of the Jouvenels had had only to be maintained.

With Mademoiselle Beaumont, Sherlock had had an impeccably bland, perfectly accommodating conversation. Yes, she organised Madame Jouvenel's office. Yes, she could provide him a list of the ways in which it had been disarranged. Yes, there could be any number of people with a grudge against the paper, or its senator editor, or his novelist wife. No, she'd seen nothing more out of the ordinary. Certainly, she could show him any portion of the house and grounds he would care to request. Ought they to begin in her own room? The more pointed his questioning, the smoother and pleasanter her expression had become.

In the hall below, now, all was quiet. Sherlock rose from the chair; he could station himself in the niche by Renaud's room, by the stairs—or, more comprehensively, patrol the first- and ground-floor corridors. On the ground floor was only the cook, and the grim English governess, and the dour, ignored girl-child, Bel-Gazou. Unlikely targets, given their poverty. Unlikely perpetrators—except, perhaps, for the governess—given that the cook lived in St Coulomb, and the child wasn't yet nine years old. Still. Best to keep a thorough watch.

He slipped down the stairs; creaks on the fourth from the top and the second from the bottom. Soft murmuring behind the door across the corridor. Monsieur Jouvenel's deep voice against a soft backdrop of feminine notes.

Claudine, at least, had sought him out, in the garage and on the shore; had spoken to him in her old, garrulous, reassuring way. Had demanded his thoughts on the Jouvenels, and on London—and had bullied her way back, through the past eighteen years. Hadn't mentioned his infrequent, reluctant messages, curt to the point of rudeness, tacked on to his mother's letters. It had been, somehow, as if they'd never been apart. Sherlock's tongue grew actually tired from talking. And when he'd paused, throughout the afternoon; or attempted to steer the conversation elsewhere, there she had been: the old rock, against which he could dash himself to no avail. Yet it was not the same, was it. That was what had spooked him so shamefully, the day before: it was not the same, not remotely. For in her rooms in 1903, she had been focused on him, and him alone; or on her music; or on the wine that she drank with closed eyes. Whereas today, all the time, she'd been—she'd been pulled, hadn't she, almost tangibly, towards whatever port sheltered Hélène Picard. Hélène, who flowed in the direction of Monsieur Carco—who cleaved to the books of Messrs Owens and Pound—which plodded frozen-footed through the trenches outside Paris, where John—. Such a traceable sequence of events. It was convenient, really, Sherlock thought: Claudine, by his side, measuring out the distance
between 1903 and 1921.

Now, in the night, Sherlock passed his cousin's door, and heard nothing. No murmuring; no moans; no strains of the violin. Claudine Holmès and Hélène Picard, bedding down in silence.

That afternoon, as there was nothing to ferret out before the silence of supper, he had sat with Claudine in the grass, under the shade of the larches by the shore. Hélène Picard and Francis Carco had been up by the house, scribbling in notebooks in the lawn-chairs that faced out to sea. Claudine had been willing her own smile not to waver; willing herself not to turn her head. Her eyes would twitch, and blink too often, and she would swallow against it, as people did, though previously she never had: is she touching him? Is she looking this way? What is she writing, in her notebook, as he looks on? Sherlock had read a treatise in her face, but—these odd urges towards kindness. Was it kindness? Or self-preservation.

'Doctor Watson,' Claudine had said, raising her voice over the sound of the surf, 'seemed to bear up well, seeing his old friend.'

\[ e^{\pi i} = -1 \, , \] Sherlock had drawn in the sand, and then: 'Yes,' he'd said, and rubbed it out again with the heel of his hand.

'That is. He told me, this morning,' Claudine had gone on, 'it was very odd for him. Having so many memories all at once. He told me—you know. About the young man's illness. The damage to his brain. The reason that Doctor Watson did not use his real name with the boy, and—well. He said it was. Difficult.'

She'd squinted over at him. Near-bruised, her eyes had looked. Awake in the night, with the Carcos' headboard at her back. Claudine in '03 had fallen into bed at dawn, still in her clothes; and awoken fresh-faced in time for luncheon.

And now, in the dark of the early morning, he passed on. At the end of the corridor a window stood open to the ocean. Sherlock paused. Listened. Looked out at the sweeping lawn and the sliver of moon. There was a still, solid mist, settling over the grass.

And loud then, sudden: a belly-laugh from the room of Madame Jouvenel. Sherlock's teeth clicked together. Another guffaw rang out, and trailed off into a moan.

'Did he say all that?' he had asked—lightly, nothing ridiculous—down on the shore while his cousin tried not to look back towards the house. 'I suppose—yes. Difficult. It must have been.'

'He said he had thought never to see his friend again,' Claudine had said. She had looked out towards the waves. 'He said he'd expected the boy would be dead. He said it was a—a shock.'

Sherlock had not replied.

But of course, he thought now—walking down the stairs, passing Monsieur Jouvenel's room, from which came a muffled cry of 'Germaine!' and rapid pleading murmuring from Mademoiselle Patat—of course it was predictable, logical, that John would feel it incumbent upon himself to explain. To smooth the waters. To talk to Claudine—to Claudine, whom John had only met the previous afternoon—to talk to her about Daniel; even though the night previous, when Sherlock had asked him, John had looked down at his fish and flexed his jaw.

It meant nothing, Sherlock thought. His skin hot, and crawling. A chain of dominoes, falling from then to now: nothing had changed.
In the entranceway and the sitting-room all was still. A carriage clock ticked on the mantel; in the kitchen the supper dishes had been washed and put away. Someone had filled a single wine glass with water, and left it in the basin; and through the window, the faint moonlight caught at its edges. Smooth; shining and sharp.

Sherlock breathed out, and in. Between himself and John, nothing had changed. This story of Daniel: it was nothing that John hadn't told Sherlock a year ago; and again in the months since. John would want to be welcoming, would want to be polite. Would not want to seem difficult to his lover's cousin. Would feel compelled to tell Claudine what Sherlock already knew: about Daniel's fraying nerves, sodden feet and clenched teeth in the trenches of the Somme. About the the shell-blast to the head; about Daniel's subsequent refusal—no, inability, John would have said, as Claudine would have widened her eyes, and forgotten, for a moment, Hélène Picard—to recognise Captain John Watson, though Captain John Watson stood three feet from his face. A golden youth, John had told Sherlock: and three years ago—adoring the boy and also feeling himself, nonsensically, to be somehow responsible for his madness—Captain John Watson had had got leave; had taken Daniel to the madhouse himself.

All the pieces were quite the same, after all, as they had always been. And of course John wouldn't have wanted Sherlock there, making an exhibition of himself in a—listening in. He'd told Sherlock all about it, a year ago, while Sherlock held him from behind, tracing patterns with one hand on his naked hip as John clung to his other. In the upstairs bedroom at Baker Street. When they'd both known for a certainty that he would never see Daniel again.

On the stairs back up to the first floor Sherlock stumbled. A cat stretched its long black back and showed him its white teeth. Sherlock jerked back; caught himself on the bannister. The beast shot off into the darkness. He cursed under his breath; and in the scuffle he almost missed the clunk and skid from what surely must be his own rooms, two floors above.

Saturday, August 27th, 1921
1:30am (Hour 59)

The Jouvenels, it seemed, dined late. Irene had still been able to see them through the big double-doors, open to the breeze, as they sat at the long table just outside the kitchen, tearing into bread and meat. Parisians, playing provincial. She had clicked off her torch, feeling her way through the underbrush with her feet, and thought: just like me.

Because she had made calls, hadn't she? Hadn't been able to resist the chance that a general description and an instruction to meet the 4:15 from St Malo, would be enough to secure a tail on whichever spy or spies alighted on the platform. And then she had gone downstairs, to the hotel dining room, and swallowed around her urge to fuss: the bread not like in Paris; the wine not like in Paris; in Paris they were serving the meat simply dripping with blood.

And then she had bicycled back here. Even at half eleven, she'd been pouring sweat. It was lucky, she'd thought, that the Roz Ven chimney, with its trellis and its Russian Vine, were at the far end of the house, away from the kitchen and the outdoor table; because her wet hands had slipped on the struts, and her feet had scraped. Her gasping and clattering, as she climbed, had sounded in her ears like rifle-shots; and she'd paused, again and again: sure she'd be found out clinging to the trellis, with her hair sticking to her forehead and the back of her neck. She'd watched the flickering yellow lights from the house. Breath held.

No one had heard, though. No one had come. The faint sounds of clinking and chatter had gone on,
and she had hoisted herself, at last, onto the roof. For a minute together she'd just sat there, at the edge, looking down at the shadows on the grass; and then she'd slid, crab-like, inch by inch, over the rough wood-shingles to the gable at whose window, that afternoon, the pale-faced spy had looked down.

Breathing almost normally, then: her side pressed against the side of the gable. And she would have swung herself around, and prised it open, but for a flicker of movement in the shadow sloping down the roof. Not everyone at supper then. Or in Paris. She'd let out a breath, eyes fixed on the shingled patch of light. A fall of white lace billowed out, then settled; caught by the breeze.

Down below, the supper guests had never stopped moving. She could hear them pouring out their digestifs; could see them taking turns on the grass. But through the dormer window the stillness was almost perfect. Only once, as Irene sat in the shadows, hugging her black-clad knees, had she heard the scrape of a chair; and a man's shadow had gathered and solidified in the light from the window as he'd pulled aside the lace, and looked out at the night.

Irene had fallen into a kind of reverie. The diners had finished their drinks, and called out their bonnes nuits to one another, and the night had refused to cool. She had gazed down at the scene, side-by-side with the unknowing spy.

Then he had moved, at last, from the window, and back to the desk; and she had been alone. The surf had crashed, and the diners had trailed up to bed. And now again, the scrape of the chair. He moved away from her, away: and she was more solitary still.

She breathed through her mouth, and counted to three hundred. Then, carefully, she flexed the muscles of her calves and her shoulders, stiff from holding still. Around the window-casement she curled a scraped palm (Anastasie, she thought, would ban her on sight), and scooted down the shingles. Peeked round the corner: an empty room.

And she breathed out.

And she breathed in.

And she ducked in past the white lace, skinning her shoulder a little on the window-pane but without any real clatter. She wrangled her limbs and squeezed through the opening, and then she was standing on the hardwoods with white lace twisting at her back. She flicked on her torch. And Christ, the room looked like—like 1914 in her suite at Le Chabanais, before she'd had it refitted with miles of black brocade. Those girls, she thought, before the War. She breathed out, and in. Names.

On the desk by the door were papers, newspapers, a telegram. She ruffled through them, in the suffocating still air. JW, as the telegram was signed, was staying the night in Paris 'after all'; but nothing else. In the corridor down the stairs, she could hear footfalls: a tall man; alone. More likely the pale spy than the sandy-blond one.

Names; names. The wardrobe, just by the desk. She tiptoed to it; eased open the door and it creaked. Harsh against her ear-drums in the quiet. She breathed through her mouth. Inhaled, and could almost taste the wool and cotton. But down the corridor the footsteps continued on.

Jackets. Trousers. Rooting around in pockets with her torch in her teeth. Nothing. She clicked off her torch; slid a hand under the wardrobe door, and took the weight off it as she swung it back into its cradle. No creak; no sound. Breathing out, and in.

Names, she thought, peering around in the dark. Divan? Night-stand? But no, there: tucked by the wall, half-hidden behind the bed, was a steamer trunk. Surely it must be directed. She padded
towards it, careful to step high and light over the hooked rug, as in the distance a man's voice cried out: *Germaine!*

Irene stopped short. *Endless buttons, undone.* The same voice cried out, again. He was desperate, she could hear it. Close; seconds from it. One of Germaine’s married men, no doubt: filling her up, on the floor below, spilling inside her with her beautiful breasts in his hands.

Irene's eyes snapped back open: a creak, from the stairs. Headed up, or down? She waited; saw in her mind's eye the pale mask of her own face in the darkness. She didn't dare move, or he would hear: and her, exposed, dead-centre in the heart of the room. But then the clump-clump-clump came of footfalls receding. He was heading down to the ground level; and she let out a great lungful of air, and crept the rest of the way to the trunk.

It was old-fashioned. Worn. Leather straps and wood panels coated with decades of city grime. She clicked her torch on and shone it over the top and the sides. No labels, no address. So she eased the lid back against the bed, biting her lip, running her hands over leather and wood and bundles of cloth until: there. A neat laid-paper square, curling at one corner, was affixed to the inside of the domed lid, and she leant over the torch-beam to make out:

*Sherlock Holmes*

*221B Baker Street, London*

She could almost have laughed. Christ. No wonder she'd thought he looked familiar. And: *JW*, as well. She ought to have guessed.

From down the stairs, across the corridor, no sounds filtered up now; the lovers had finished, she supposed; he had, anyway. She rocked back on her heels, grinning, feeling oddly free. Sherlock Holmes, and John Watson: she wouldn't even need to provide a description; she'd have their life histories in her hands by lunch tomorrow. And Germaine, whom she'd imagined—well, it hardly mattered now; she would leave Germaine dozing in the arms of her awful married man, down the stairs and across the corridor as Irene slipped back out the window; heavy and sated in the first room on the first floor, with the big oak bed by the side of—of—

A clatter: her torch, slipping from her fingers and crashing to the wood floor. She gasped and scrambled for it, hearing someone stumble on the stairs two flights below; it skidded and spun, and came to rest illuminating a needlepoint cushion, stuffed into the corner, with an image of a great black leaping horse.

Feet were pounding now, up the steps, and she lost a second—two, staring at the thing. A remnant from another age. It was as if she fell, through it, into the crush and the reek of greasepaint, backstage on the panto boards; towards a magnetic actress who had marked Irene's arms and drawn her gaze and barked orders at her as Irene had seethed and writhed and snuck into her rooms and slipped into her silk Parisian knickers; and towards that actress's lover, bearing down on them in a Thoroughbred-drawn trap. *Ail et Vanille.* Crash, crash, crash, came the feet on the stairs; came the hooves on the cobblestones; came the stamping of the audience's feet; and Irene didn't think; just reached out and grabbed her torch and the cushion from the floor, and threw herself across the room—out the window—across the rough shingles of the gabled roof, and down, and down, and down.
'Yes,' said Irene, at eight in the morning, washing down her pastry with a mouthful of coffee. 'Sherlock Holmes. All over the English papers, as I recall; I knew I ought to have kept the Daily Mail in my usual rotation. Buy up the last six months' worth, if you can do it discreetly, and see what we've missed. Yes. There's a flower girl on the corner of les Poissonières; she can help you. Léonie Favre; tell her it's a favour for Irène.'

On the other end of the line, Antoine went on about wild dahut hunts and time-wasters; did she think he'd been sitting on his hands all night? Newspapers, he said, disgusted; and could this—this flower-seller of Irene's even read? Irene listened to him, licking pastry crumbs from her fingers. The tarts, she thought, were not quite like in Paris; though the berries here were fresh.

'No,' she told him. 'She can't read, but she can recognise shapes of words. Show her the name Holmes and set her searching.'

Irene paused, and listened. She stretched out an arm, put her pastry-plate on the side table on top of her black leather notebook, and rolled her shoulders. The morning was warm, already; the breeze from the double-doors ruffled her light-weight dressing gown; and on her lap, as Antoine rattled on, her fingers toyed with the edging of the cushion on her lap.

'I don't care,' she said, tipping her head back. 'Just get me everything you can on the man. I don't suppose—his partner, the one whose train I had you meet: you didn't manage to—?'

And from Antoine, another impatient flood of words: yes, the train, the train, he'd been trying to say—the blond man with the green blazer and the—'Watson,' she breathed, 'you found him,' and Oh yes? he said, as she sat up, grinning, straightening lavender silk around her neck, reaching back to the side-table.

'Yes,' she said, nails digging into needlepoint. 'How delicious. You did.'

Saturday, August 27th, 1921
11am (Hour 69)

'Watson?' Sherlock said, waving away Mademoiselle Beaumont, who was hovering officiously by the telephone niche. 'Watson,' as he fought the odd desire to lower his voice, and to grip too hard the receiver, 'is everything all right? What did you find at the Boas house?'

The connection fuzzed, and spluttered.

'Nothing was taken,' came a voice—John's voice—but thin-sounding. Absent-sounding. The connection, Sherlock reminded himself, was bad. He shielded his other ear, and curled his spine towards the instrument. Outside on the lawn, in tennis whites and to the accompaniment of much shrieking, Mademoiselle Patat was singlehandedly trouncing her lover and his younger son at a game of badminton.

'Nothing at all?' said Sherlock, into the receiver.

'Nothing was taken,' came a voice—John's voice—but thin-sounding. Absent-sounding. The connection, Sherlock reminded himself, was bad. He shielded his other ear, and curled his spine towards the instrument. Outside on the lawn, in tennis whites and to the accompaniment of much shrieking, Mademoiselle Patat was singlehandedly trouncing her lover and his younger son at a game of badminton.

'Nothing at all?' said Sherlock, into the receiver.

'She went over the whole place with me,' said John's voice, 'along with her housekeeper.' Fuzzing; crackling; and something, too, in John's voice. Sherlock squinted. As if by looking, he could make it out. '—probably have given me measurements down to the inch,' John was saying, 'on everything that was moved. Two of the rooms were ransacked. Madame Boas's bedroom and her smaller sitting-room, some curio cabinets. The two cupboards where they keep wrapping paper, family albums. Things like that.' There was a pause. 'Madame Boas said she was just glad they hadn't disturbed the
ballroom,' John added. 'Or the garden.'

Sherlock snickered, nervously. It rattled back, strange through the earpiece. He cleared his throat.

'A similar level of disorder as we saw at the Matin offices, I take it?'

'If by 'similar' you mean a high level of disorder,' said John, 'then yes.'

Sherlock laughed, hand pressed harder to his other ear as the Jouvenel child yelled something about a cheat. He cleared his throat, simply holding to the receiver. John. 'Yes,' he said, at last. 'So. This fancy-dress fête. She's already started on preparations, then?'

The static increased; washed over him; so that John, for a moment, was lost. When it subsided again: '-detail d'you want?' John was saying, and Sherlock wanted—his hand clenched on the receiver. He wanted John here, with him. He wanted to be there, with John.

'—mostly concerned with whether reporting the break-in would mean more people or fewer at her ball on Tuesday.' John was saying. Then, sounding scraped-up, foreign: 'Holmes? Do you want—'

'No,' Sherlock said, shaking his head a little. 'No, it's fine. So. So Madame Boas isn't inherently opposed to involving the Prefecture, the way the rest of the Jouvenels seem to be. Interesting. Has she reached a decision about reporting it?'

'She was leaning towards yes,' John said. 'Any limelight is good limelight. And the theme of the fête was already, er. "Crimes of passion", or some such. She reckons more people might show up if they run a chance of seeing a real criminal.'

*Not in the public eye, my foot,* Sherlock thought. He'd never met people who lived so firmly inside it. 'That would support the theory that she staged the thing herself.'

'About that,' John said, and cleared his throat. Renaud stomped past Sherlock's niche, kicking at the furniture, while out on the lawn, Mademoiselle Patat crowed with victory. Static, down the line.

'At this point,' said Sherlock, feeling clammy, 'I'd like slightly more detail than you—'

'Yes, yes,' John said. 'Er, the front desk at the hotel tells me someone called for me. Very late, last night.'

Up the stairs clomped the dirty pouting boy.

'Very late?' said Sherlock. 'Your passion for specificity is—'

'Yes, yes,' John said. 'Er, the front desk at the hotel tells me someone called for me. Very late, last night.'

That was late indeed.

'Look,' said John, almost too fast to make out over the connection, 'I tracked down the fellow on duty at the front desk, and I questioned him. He said the call came in at three-thirty, and it was a female voice, definitely a female voice, but he said it sounded muffled, like—'

'Through a handkerchief,' Sherlock supplied, thinking: surely the phones ring through to the rooms. Claudine had said, specifically: Jeanne and Yves put telephones—

'—and maybe like the woman was trying to lower the timbre of it,' John went on. 'And he said she spoke in English, which. Struck him. Um—cross-Channel tourism means he sees all sorts, so I asked him, did she sound like a Londoner, what did her accent sound like. He said—he swore she was
'Parisian?' Sherlock asked, and 'Difficult,' John said, 'to tell.' A pause. 'He said it was difficult to tell. What with the handkerchief and, and her doing a false voice and. She didn't talk for long. All she said was—hold on, I wrote it down—''

Over the crackles and pops came sounds of rummaging, and of—of possibly an opening drawer, and of John's harsh breath. A drawer: but he wouldn't have put such a note in a drawer anywhere away from him. He was speaking from the telephone in his rooms.

'All right,' John said, coming back on the line. 'She asked for me. And then she said, and I, I'm reading now: Call your dogs off Claire Boas. The whole mess has nothing to do with her. Leave her alone. And then she rang off.'

'That's… quite dramatic,' Sherlock said. Outside, Mademoiselle Patat was collecting her winnings in the form of kisses from Monsieur Jouvenel. Sherlock blinked. 'I wasn't aware we had any dogs,' he said. 'I assume you had the thing traced.'

'It came from a public phone box in La Rue de Bel Air. Which is what they call the road in St. Coulomb. You know, where it—''

'Passes in front of the druggist's,' Sherlock said. 'I saw her, Watson. Last night.'

'What? Really?'

'Yes. There was another break-in here, last night. She made straight for—for our rooms. Made off out the window and down the trellis. I gave chase, but I lost her in the trees.'

'Christ. Good thing you stayed.'

'I,' said Sherlock. A sequence of events. 'Yes,' he said. 'Well, I did mention. It was only common sense that there would be—'

'Did she make off with anything?'

Sherlock ran his hand over his own face. Saw in his mind's eye the rows of café tables lining the pavement, with the light spilling golden out of a stencilled window and young people, bright in their painted lips and their paint-brushes, smoking and gesturing, laughing late, late, late into the night.

'Holmes?' John was saying. 'Holmes?'

Out on the lawn, past the badminton net, a listless-looking game of croquet had sprung up between Mademoiselle Carco and the Countess. Those left behind, Sherlock thought, for sunnier climes.

'Yes,' he said, turning from the window. 'She took one thing, though I've no idea what to make of it. It was that awful bed-cushion. The one in red and cream, with the rearing black needlepoint horse.'

Chapter End Notes

1. I am copy-pasting my original note on Daniel MacIntyre's mental illness from *The Violet Hour*, since it all still applies. In addition to PTSD, Daniel is suffering from a rare but real disorder called *Capgras Syndrome*, which sometimes results from
severe head trauma. Victims retain normal cognitive ability with the exception of
the delusion that a person or people (or objects) close to them have been replaced
with imposters. Huge thanks to Emma de los Nardos for helping me sort out the
neuropathology of this syndrome and apply it to my preexisting ideas about
Daniel’s backstory.

2. Further DVD notes on this chapter can be found here.
The sea's lips, or in the dark throat

Saturday, August 27th, 1921
2pm (Hour 72)

Even in the shade of the buildings of St Malo, even with the breeze coming in off the sea, the heat was oppressive. Sherlock wiped the sweat from the back of his neck, which only meant slicking his fingers. His shirt stuck to his back. Nothing moved that could avoid it; and from the larches and the pines no insects buzzed, no birds called.

Leaning out his window the night before, he'd panted into the darkness with the cool breeze against his face, listening. The crash of the surf (nothing), and the susurrus of the curtain (nothing)—and then a scrape and a rustle at the base of the chimney, and he had scrambled out onto the roof. Crab-wise he'd gone, over the steep slope; his foot had slipped and his stomach had dropped and he'd taken his eyes from the darkness of the lawn and clutched, scraping his hands on the shingles, trying not to fall.

Breathing hard. No noise in his ears but his own heart as he blinked back down.

There had been a breeze off the water. The air had smelt of salt and dirt and there'd been movement all over: the waving tops of the trees, and the bats swooping over the lawn, and the darker shadows on the grass where the clouds obscured the moonlight. He'd eased himself towards the trellis, squinting into the gloom—and was that a shape? Out there, on the grass, was that—

—the bright light of a torch, already at the top of the hill. Moving fast. Slight and spare-boned in silhouette, with upswept hair: a woman.

Now, in St Malo, he dripped and panted. Twenty-three hotels just along the shore-line; and four bus routes; and five bicycle-rental establishments. For she wouldn't, logically, be staying in St Coulomb; and John had said the woman had phoned from the telephone box in the centre of the village.

Or, Sherlock corrected himself: that was what the local exchange had told John, at ten the next morning, when John had asked. When John had—had only just come in? When John had stopped on his way out? How could one deduce? Maddening, that Sherlock had never stayed at the Hôtel Bel Ami; that he had never even seen it. Maddening to be ignorant of the lobby geography; of the number of clerks staffing the desk; of the o'clocks of their cigarette breaks, and the statuses of their love affairs; of hotel quiet hours and of the mechanism by which calls rang through to the rooms; of the likelihood that a guest, newly arrived from London and asleep in his bed, who had surely instructed that all communications be put through to him at once, might receive a call at three thirty-nine in the morning and yet not be connected—and of the likelihood, on the other hand, that John Watson in particular might refuse such a call, or sleep through it; or else, at half three in the morning, be somewhere else entirely: not in the hotel at all, or listening to the clangour of the bell; but surrounded by different sounds, and looking on different sights. Maddening, here in the blasted-hot village street, that Sherlock should not know.

Maddening, that he hadn't brought himself to ask.

Sherlock wiped sweat off his forehead. It dripped off his fingers and the tips of his hair. Call your dogs off Claire Boas, the caller had said, in a woman's accent which the front desk clerk (at ten in the
morning) had told John sounded French. What kind of French? What kind of woman? Sherlock wanted to bite off his own tongue. Ten more minutes of this, he thought, and he may as well jump in the ocean fully-clothed. He was, already, soaked with salt; and his feet were squelching in his shoes.

*Call your dogs—*. It sounded like something out of a penny-dreadful. And all she'd taken was a single cross-stitched bed cushion. Nothing about the bloody thing added up. *This whole mess is nothing to do with her, you hear?* Like the villain in some American film. In the street, in St. Coulomb, no one else was about. The sun beat down, and down, and down.

Sherlock trudged up the steps of the Grand Hôtel, the sixth of the twenty-three, and delivered his speech. *My cousin,* he repeated in French, the syllables stagnating on his tongue, *So careless, I've misplaced her room number. Slight, dark-haired? With a sharp face, just down from Paris?* He'd broken into two rooms already, on the vague recollections of a series of front-desk clerks. His throat was parched, and aching, but at least he wasn't back at the house making an utter—at least it was something sensical, to do.

He was almost thankful when the clerk at the Grand Hôtel told him no slight, brown-haired Parisiennes had checked in within the last week. He trudged back down the steps; hesitated on the steps before plunging back out into the baking-hot sun.

In St Coulomb, after a few hours of restless sleep, he had spoken to the druggist, and to the grocer, and then, waiting impatiently for the lunchtime doors to open, to the keeper of the village inn across the street. Yes, the man had said, surprised and wary at the Englishman lying in wait on his stoop. Yes, as a matter of fact. He had been out at half three. There had been, he said, a woman in the telephone box across the way.

For such a promising lead, it had been of absolutely no use at all. Was she dark or fair? Sherlock had asked. Tall or short? Heavy or spare? But the man had shaken his head. About average, he had said; sort of medium weight, in a bulky coat; and then added that he hadn't put on his spectacles. And after all, he'd said, he'd only been out in the middle of the night because his wife was ill, and he'd been emptying her chamber-pot.

Useless, thought Sherlock, dragging himself up the steps to the seventh shore hotel. Bloody useless idiots, who saw strange figures in telephone boxes at half three in the morning and felt no curiosity about them whatsoever.

*My cousin,* he said, at the seventh hotel; *So careless,* he said, at the eighth, and the ninth, and the tenth. *Slight?* he said. *Dark-haired?* He broke into two more rooms, more reckless each time about his searches, but still: nothing. *Just down from Paris?* he said, at the eleventh, and the twelfth, and he was just contemplating the horrible possibility that she had booked rooms at an inland hotel, when the desk clerk at the Chateaubriand said 'Oh yes, Mademoiselle Wren.'

Yes, he said, wearily. Mademoiselle Wren. And after trailing up the stairs he rested with his back against the wall next to 503, rooting about in his pockets as the cleaning woman trundled past, her cart full of dirty plates, flies buzzing around her head. Mademoiselle Wren. Hotel thirteen of the sixteen on the shore, and how many more inland? Sherlock shut his eyes. The wheel of the maid trolley caught on a divot in the carpet, and he grit his teeth.

When she pushed the damned thing, at last, over the moulding at the front of the lift, he brought out his pick-locks. The lock was ancient and stubborn. It took him ages. An old man limped by with a cane; Sherlock had to feign a coughing fit that went on and on and on. His throat, ripped to shreds with the pick-locks slipping in his sweating hands.

And then the old man was past, and the tumblers fell, and Sherlock, in his sweat-sticking shirt,
slipped through the door and pulled it shut. Dark; cool. Mademoiselle Wren had bolted the big glass
double-doors that faced towards the sea, and pulled to the curtain; so that the room's only light snuck
in through cracks between cloth and wood.

Sherlock fumbled. He inched along. He opened a single curtain, and a beam of sunlight, hot and
harsh, cut across the room. It sliced from the casement to the hardwood to the rug, to the near post of
the four-poster bed. And on, and on: over the wool blanket and the dark-gold coverlet; and up to the
bed-cushions, where a cross-stitched rider on the back of a rearing stallion brandished a threaded
whip.

Sherlock sagged against the wall. Let out a breath with his hand over his eyes; then left the window
open to the sea, and, having drawn a glass of water, settled down on the chaise longue to wait.

Saturday, August 27th, 1921
6pm (Hour 76)

Irene, blouse still damp under the arms and down her back from bicycling in the hot sun—and
there'd been nothing, nothing of interest at all at Roz Ven this afternoon, unless one counted
Germaine Beaumont in full-length black sleeves in this impossible heat, fussing around the head and
shoulders of the now-soft, idle Madame Jouvenel as that lady reclined on the front lawn with a novel;
and though Irene was honest enough to admit that she did find a certain appeal in the spectacle, she
would hardly have ridden an hour through the blazing 90-degree afternoon in order to observe it—
Irene, with her calves aching and her face no doubt shining-wet, pushed open her hotel door to the
sight of a long, thin, winter-cool man, sprawled at ease on her chaise longue.

She stood with her hand on the latch. She could, she thought, be dryer; still, there were worse places
for her shadow to run her to ground.

'Mr Holmes,' she said. 'I do hope I haven't kept you waiting long.'

'Not at all.' Sherlock Holmes: stubbornly present in her drawing-room.

'I'll just freshen up a bit, shall I?' she said, and ducked behind her Chinese screens. Picked at her
buttons. God, it was hot. Without Holmes here she'd be stripping off and sinking into a cool bath,
and then: the lightest wisp of cotton. Or lying naked on her coverlet until the sun set. With him
here…

'To what do I owe the pleasure?' she asked, raising her voice over the top of the screen as she
wrapped herself in black brocade.

'You seem to be well apprised of my identity already,' he said, and she cast up her eyes though he
couldn't see, as she transferred the black leather notebook to her dressing-gown pocket, along with
her cigarette case. She ran a cool cloth over her neck, and her forehead; then patted them dry.
Smoothed back her hair. Looked in the mirror, and touched up her battle face. It would have to do.

'I mean,' she said, coming back around to the front of her screens to find him in just the same sprawl
as before, 'who is your client?'

'You know I'm staying at Roz Ven.'

'Mmm,' she said. 'Which is not an answer at all. Whiskey, by the way? Only I've been out in the sun
for ages.'
She was like a child, playing house; and he her little school-friend. The ice was all melted in the bucket, but the water still held a vestige of cool. She wanted to plunge her hands into it; pour it over her head and let the icy splash soak the silk about her shoulders. Instead she just reached in for the bottle; poured two tumblers neat and passed one to him as he sat up and stretched out a hand. It was gratifying, that he pressed the side of the glass to his cheek before taking a sip.

'Well,' she said, arranging herself on the sofa across from the chaise longue.

'Quite civilised accommodations,' said Holmes, 'for a house-breaker's provincial holiday,' as Irene crossed her legs towards the little side-table, with its ash-tray and its lamp. The little black notebook she placed between the two.

'And Doctor Watson still in Paris,' she said. 'How are we getting on, all on our own?'

'You're quite up to date, are you?' he shot back. 'On the current population of Paris.'

'Easy to keep track this time of year. The fashionable people have all fled to the country. The only ones left are either boring or deeply, deeply interesting.'

'And what about Claire Boas?' he said. His pale, darting eyes. 'Is she deeply interesting?'

Irene swirled her whiskey. Claire Boas. Didn't move her head; gave a measured smile.

'I like a good fancy-dress ball as much as the next girl,' she said. 'Why, is she your client? I once went to her fête de Noël as an American prospector, and… dug for gold.'

He barked with laughter. 'I can only imagine that you did.'

'How do you generally go to a fancy-dress ball, Mr Holmes? As Pierrot? Pining for your Columbine?'

'I'm a confirmed bachelor,' he said, head cocked, with his mouth curling up, 'Refer to any of the papers'; and: 'Oh,' she breathed, 'you know I needn't do that.'

His eyebrows, rising and rising.

She ran her nail down the spine of her notebook: red lacquer against white skin against black leather. Said: 'It takes one to know one, Mr Holmes.'

He laughed, incredulous. She looked at him from under her lashes.

'Are you telling me,' he said, 'that you go in for the abstemious life? Retire early? Not prone to late-night telephone calls, or—'

'Are you telling me,' said Irene, 'that you don't love a spot of house-breaking?' She tipped back her glass and let the liquor at her throat. The other side of her skin, which was… not cool; but warm with that humming warmth that meant she didn't mind it. Her visitor's cheeks were flushed.

'You admit to breaking into my—'

'Not your house,' she corrected, 'surely. And the Jouvenels seem none too eager to press charges.'

'You admit to breaking into the Jouvenels' offices?' His face was straight but she could almost smell a smirk in the air. A sheen on the skin at his open collar. She could have laughed.

'Don't be stupid,' she said. 'I'd never leave such a mess. I only dropped by, after the fact. But I was in
your rooms last night. As you very well know.'

'Doing what?' he said, leaning forward. 'To what purpose?'

'Oh,' she said, with teeth, 'taking the air. I love a musty attic room on an August night, don't you? Trying out your mattress. Lying down on the side you'd just left, and then the side your charming blond friend abandoned for the, ah. Paris art world.'

He went, for a scant moment, utterly stiff. His open mouth, unmoving.

'Art—' he said, and stopped; and he—oh, she thought, with her skin fairly buzzing, he didn't know.

'Mmmm.' She couldn't help but purr it. She let a nail pierce the side of her little notebook, split it open so its pages parted; and she read, glancing back and forth from her slanting black writing to his reddening face.

'Subject was joined at his table in Chez Manière,' she read out, 'by a young man with a sketchbook and pencils, whom subject seemed to recognise. Animated conversation over two bottles of wine, then a bottle of—'

'And what were you doing at—'

'—Glenkinchie,' she went on. 'An interesting choice, don't you think, Mr Holmes? Lowland blend? Someone in the party from—'

'—one in the morning?'

'Edinburgh?' with his eyes going paler now, his weird exotic snow-dog eyes. 'No? Both parties gesturing and touching, yes, hands and knees. Quite eager, wasn't he, your friend? Oh you keep him on a tight leash, I imagine. Just look at you. You can hardly bear it.'

'Was this intelligence,' he got out, 'being gathered while you were—' but she, raising her voice:

'Left café at one in the morning. Goodness me: after having arrived at nine. One's backside would be—'

'—placing a call from the telephone box in the village of St Coulomb?'

'Never use the things,' she said. 'Unhygienic.'

He gave a mean, hard laugh. Looked at her like she must be soiling the upholstery just by sitting on it: unhygienic.

'Much,' she said, 'like Doctor Watson's final destination of the night. Are you familiar with the Hôtel Marigny, Mr Holmes? Le Temple de l'Impudeur”? Quite a bohemian choice, on the part of Doctor Watson and his—'

'What were you doing,' he snarled, hand coming down hard enough to rattle the glass on the sidetable, 'in my rooms?'

She swirled the liquid in her glass. Smiled across at him.

'Going through your trunks,' she said. 'What else? Finding out the names of the spies who followed me down from the city. Listening to the master of the house fucking his wife's secretary.'

'Fucking his—'
'Germaine Beaumont is an… acquaintance, of mine. From Paris.'

His harsh breath; and blinking blinking blinking of his pale wolf's eyes.

'Germaine Beaumont,' he repeated.

The little notebook still rested in Irene's lap. She tipped up her glass again, and the ice clinked.

'You assumed,' he said, drawing all his lines together, 'that you were overhearing your acquaintance with Henry Jouvenel, when he called out her name in the night; which I don't doubt says more about you, and your willingness to believe yourself the centre of any unfolding dramatics—'

'Oh really—'

'—than it does about Monsieur Jouvenel and Germaine Patat.'

Germaine—

'Yes,' said Holmes, blinking again, hard. 'His mistress. Acknowledged as such. Tout le monde la tutoie, apparently; though I somehow doubt her business competitors do.'

'And you,' said Irene. Licking her lips, with her heart beating oddly. 'Are you alarmed by successful businesswomen, Mr Holmes?'

'No,' he said. 'But I don't make the mistake of taking them for harmless ornaments, simply because they tell me to.'

'Oh no?'

'No. Particularly when I can see they've come so far. Stepney, was it? Wapping?'

She blinked. Blount Street, and the Cahill Arms, and her mother asleep on the narrow pallet bed on the floor in the filthy walk-up.

'Limehouse, actually,' she said. He didn't miss a beat.

'Well within the sound of the bells, then, anyway. Quite a distance between that, and last season's House of Chanel.'

'Ah,' she said. Tried to laugh, but the bottom fell out of it. 'I'd be wearing this season's, but.' She waved her hand. 'Here in the provinces.'

'You're trying to blend in.'

'Needs must, Mr Holmes.'

'I don't believe for a moment,' he said, lip curling, 'that your powers of dissimulation exhaust themselves with the application of a six-month-old suit-jacket, Miss Wren.'

Not her school-friend anymore, was he. As if she'd know one to look at. Brutish, and pale; hardening under his skin: but he'd played his hand, just now. If he'd known the name Adler, he certainly would have said it. Would Charles—would Henry Jouvenel—take on a detective, and not bother to tell the man whom he was following? Her lungs, expanding in her chest.

'Ah,' she said. 'You don't underestimate a girl, do you. Not like,' with her fingers playing again over the black-brocade notebook, 'not like your Doctor Watson. Though perhaps it's not girls he
underestimates. Is it?'

He flinched; then smoothed out his face to blankness.

'Do you know what they specialise in,' she asked, 'at Hôtel Marigny? Apart from beautiful Italian boys, served up in sun-warmed clusters, like grapes? But ah,' she added. 'Being raised in Mayfair, you'd hardly know of such things.'

'Doctor Watson,' Holmes said, 'is hardly the object of this visit.'

'No,' she said. She snapped the book shut. 'I imagine the object of your visit is something tedious, relating to my photographs.'

And that: that dead space, that widening of the eyes: that wasn't feigned, she was sure. But then—

'Your photographs,' he said.

'You didn't know,' said Irene. Slowly. 'You're—you didn't know about any photographs at all. So you—what? Asked after my physical charms in every hotel on the shore? Did Jouvenel even have the grace to give you an image of me?'

'I had no need of one,' he said. Gathering himself together, from the shoulders on down. 'I saw you myself, from my window. After you broke into my rooms for the second time, and made off with—I give you credit for originality—a cross-stitched bed cushion, and seemingly nothing else; but before a person you claim wasn't you made a call to Paris from the village phone box at three-thirty-nine. I am, Miss Wren, of a congenitally inquiring disposition. I was not hired by any Jouvenel; indeed, I believe by now they'd all smile to be shot of me. But,' he added, sitting forward, 'if I didn't share your pursuit of these photographs before, I certainly share it now.'

Ice-grey steady eyes in the August heat.

'Who did hire you?' she asked. He gave her a wolf-smile.

'Tell me about these pictures,' he said, 'and I might not turn you in to the gendarmes for housebreaking.'

'They won't get on their horses, for a twenty-year-old bed cushion,' she said, but she found that the name Humbert hovered on her lips. Blustering Charles, it must be: just dull enough to hire a detective and then keep things from him.

'They might do,' Holmes said. Eyes flicking down. 'For a woman of your... attractions.'

'Oh Mr Holmes,' she said. Her hand at her neck; she could feel her beating pulse. She drew out her cigarette case from the pocket of her dressing gown, and caught a faint, spiced whiff of Mitsouko, smiling. 'I always did love a low blow.'

He gave a dry laugh, as she lit up. Not her school-friend, at all.

'All right,' she said. 'Let's try this. Three days ago one Monsieur Charles Humbert stormed into my place of business and demanded to know why I'd accosted his daughter.'

'Had you?'

'Christ, no,' she said. With her steady hands. 'She's not my type.'

Irene blew smoke at the ceiling, with her heart beating, as he smiled—and failed to react to the name
Charles Humbert, one way or the other. But if not Charles, and not Jouvenel—

'Is Claire—'

'Not her, either,' said Irene.

'Well then: were you acquainted with the fellow?'

'Oh yes,' she said, thinking: *if not Charles, and not Jouvenel—?* 'I knew Charles of old. But if he were your client, you'd have known all this already.'

From the double-doors and the street below no breeze stirred, and no motorcars rumbled past, and she thought, repeating, faster and faster: *if not Charles, and not Jouvenel—?*.

Beat-beat. Holmes narrowed his ice eyes; she felt almost cold. But surely it couldn't be—

'I'd have known he was once your client, you mean,' Holmes said. (Beat beat.) Rising to his feet; pacing by the double doors. 'During the War, probably, while he was back in Paris on leave. Given your familiarity with what you claim to be one of the more esoteric of the teeming hordes of Paris brothels, odds are excellent you work at one yourself, but you are also in possession—' beat-beat '—of a first-class wardrobe; brand-new, hand-tooled luggage; and the freedom to come down to the provinces for a few days' housebreaking. So: definitely a higher-end establishment, yours, and you one of their star players. All this traveling about in pursuit of photographs: your line of work, and Monsieur Humbert's fury at his daughter's exposure to the prints—'

'One print,' Irene corrected—*but who else*—beat—and he nodded.

'One print, then, which points all the more to their explicit nature, if one of them is sufficient to scandalise. They presumably document an interlude, involving—' beat '—you, Henry Jouvenel, and this Charles Humbert. In order to afford your prices, Monsieur Humbert will have been highly positioned in his line of work; given that your initial assumption was that Jouvenel—'

(*but she hadn't found the note; Irene had; and who else even would* beat-beat beat-beat and Holmes came towards her, furrowing his brow)

'—Henry Jouvenel, that is,' he said, and Irene's stomach dropped, 'had hired me, the odds are that Humbert, too, is in either journalism or politics, or both. In your opinion he is also a self-important bully and what I believe the people of your old neighbourhood refer to as a right bottle-and-glass—' as bubbling up frantic, she laughed out loud, '—and having spent the last two days at Roz Ven—' beat beat '—I can join you in that estimation of his honourable colleague. I am working for neither of them. It seems to me, therefore, that we find our interests well-aligned. Shall we lay our cards on the table? Or continue preening for each others' benefits?'

She took a breath. Wolf eyes, like ice, and her heart.

Beat, and she stubbed out her cigarette. Beat, with lips stretched in a smile, and the summer heat, *who else would*, and she looked at him standing in front of her beat—beat—beat—beat—

'Irene Adler,' she said. 'It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr Holmes.'

Chapter End Notes
1. The Hôtel Bel Ami does actually exist in Paris, but 'Bel Ami' would also suggest to Sherlock the Guy de Maupassant novella by that name, which has to do with the serial and manipulative love affairs of journalist Georges Duroy. So the phrase itself would suggest infidelity.

2. Pierrot is the iconic Commedia dell'Arte 'sad clown,' naïve and often pathetic, pining after his love Columbine, who generally leaves him for the character Harlequin.

3. Chez Manière is the former name of the Montmartre café now known as Le Cépage Montmartrois, a fact which greywash and I painstakingly reconstructed, via much trawling of Google Maps and some judicious abuse of French Scrabble cheating sites, from an illegible five-year-old vacation photograph I had lying around. Because she and I like to make our own fun. Basically nothing about the establishment, beyond its placement on a Montmartre corner at the top of a flight of stairs, is based on fact.

4. Glenkinchie is a single-malt Scotch whiskey distillery, just outside Edinburgh. It would be notable because most prestige single-malt Scotch is not produced in the Lowlands, but in Speyside (or the larger Highlands), or Islay. Daniel, being from Edinburgh, might be partial to it.

5. The Hôtel Marigny, or Temple de l'Impudeur (Temple of Indecency) at 11 Rue de l'Arcade, was a homosexual brothel owned by Albert Le Cuziat, established in 1917 with the probable financial backing of Marcel Proust. Proust was, in any case, definitely a patron of the establishment, and Le Cuziat both reported about, and let Proust observe, his other clients—an act which, for Proust, seems to have been half novelistic research, half sexual voyeurism. He put it all to use in the brothel and BDSM scenes revolving around the Baron de Charlus in A la recherche du temps perdu—one specialty of the house, as Irene hints.

6. Further DVD notes on this chapter can be found here.
Saturday, August 27th, 1921
7pm (Hour 77)

He'd got his feet back under him, Sherlock Holmes.

She took his hand.

'Miss Adler,' he said, with the corner of his smirk turned down, then shook out his cuffs like the both of them weren't dripping with sweat; and her heart: beat, beat.

Beat.

She uncoiled herself from the sofa. Slid the black notebook to the side-table, and rose up before him.

'These… photographs,' he said; and she said 'Your client'; and his eyes and 'Oh,' he said, 'I think not, Miss Adler,' clicking his tongue against his teeth.

'Besides,' he said, drawing out the sound. 'Why does it matter to you, who's paying my way?'

Chest to chest, with the heat from his breath on her face.

'I'm just managing how the world sees me, Mr. Holmes. It's what any performer would do. But it is remarkable,' with a fingertip tracing his jaw, 'that you should find yourself on my tail, and not know about the photographs. Given how… germane they are, to your interests.'

'My—pardon?' That bobbing of his throat: she could dig in her nail.

'It was lost on Henry Jouvenel, too,' she murmured, 'that I was the belle of the ball.'

And she turned her shoulder to him, to cross to the drinks trolley. His feet under him. His gaze at her back. But she'd had him, for a moment—his weird, pale, hardening eyes. She reached out a hand for her empty glass, and it didn't shake.

'Couldn't have maintained his apathy long,' Holmes said, at last.

'Couldn't he?' Her voice light. Her hands steady. She refilled her glass, thinking forward, forward; with Holmes's eyes mint-sharp on her back.

'I could tell,' she said. 'I could tell, looking at him. It's why they took me on: I could sniff out what people liked. And I could smell it on Henry Jouvenel as soon as he swaggered into the Chabanais dining room. War hero, famous editor, husband and father: all of it dead weight 'round his neck. Management wined and dined him, but he wanted—'

'Someone who wouldn't.'

'—someone who would push him,' she said, turning to face Holmes. 'Hard.'

He met her eyes and didn't look away. Lowered himself and his eyebrow and his stubborn smirk back onto the chaise: decorous, ankle over knee. Her beating heart.
'I always took the star guests,' she told him, 'and I was more than up to Jouvenel.' She swallowed. Said, 'I thought I knew what kind of a night it would be. Pinching his thigh in the horseshoe booth while I whispered in his ear. Ordering him about upstairs; a common enough night. But then.' She laughed. 'Then Charles Humbert walked in. You know: I wasn't even watching when Jouvenel saw him? I had my face turned to Jouvenel's ear. But I knew to look 'round,' she added. 'I could *smell* it on him.'

Holmes shifted, just barely, in his seat: *oh.*

'You'll know that smell,' she said, 'won't you, Mr. Holmes? A sort of musk, of—oh. Recognition.' He didn't answer, so she said: 'It gets all mixed up, of course, with the scent of wet flesh,' and watched, smiling, as he flushed up a dull, reluctant pink.

'I'll bow, in this particular area,' he said, 'to your... professional wisdom.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Probably for the best.'

And she touched her hair, smiling, with her sleeve falling back; he cleared his throat, and she swung her hips on her way to the sofa.

'Jouvenel and Humbert, then,' he said, 'they were—'

'Rivals,' Irene supplied. 'Competitors. Charles was serving at Verdun at the time, alongside Henry; and both before and after that he ran *Le Journal,* it's the—'

'Tory rag.'

'Right you are,' Irene said. Lounging back. 'Right you are. They'd been taking pot shots at each other in the press for years. Taking more than that, before the War. A duel, once: pistols at daybreak. No *ladies* allowed.' She toasted him, from her seat.

'They wanted one another.'

'Oh. Well. You know how that sort get, when they've been settled a few years. Bored. Restless. Craving their own.'

His chin up. His quick, sharp, *difficult* breath.

'They *wanted* one another,' she told him, 'like a lion does meat.'

'Did they.' Swallowing.

'Mmm.'

'So it was—'

'A godsend, for a woman in my position. My work would be half-done for me, wouldn't it, with the two of them going at each other's… throats.'

He inhaled, careful; and she smiled.

'So I hailed a, a visiting colleague,' she said. 'Gretha. A bit of decoration for Charles's arm. In the horseshoe booth we took the outside seats; jostled the men together, and laughed at their jokes. Fed them simply *bottles* of Champagne.'

Her arm extended, languid, to the side table; and she let her nail slip between the pages of the
brocade notebook while she watched Holmes's flushed-up cheeks. His gaze, for the barest moment, followed the movement of her hand, before he snapped it back to her face.

'So lovely in the summertime,' Irene said. 'Don't you find? Champagne in a Paris café?'

'And these photographs,' said Holmes. 'These—'

'Why, they're of the four of us,' she said, 'at supper.'

'At… supper.'

Irene smiled with teeth, into his eyes on hers.

'There was a photographer,' she told him. 'A kid from one of the scandal sheets. He saw two political rivals, dining together; and he started snapping pictures. Well. Henry Jouvenel didn't like it. Got grand and puffed-up, and Charles—Charles climbed right over the table for him. Wrestled the camera away from the boy. Such bravado. As if he didn't have a hundred pounds on the poor child.'

'Defender of the young and the innocent, are you?' Holmes said. 'The rest of us should tremble in our boots.'

'The rest?' Thinking: Germaine. Léonie. 'I might count you among that number, Mr Holmes.'

'You might be surprised.'

'It's possible,' she said. 'It has happened before.'

He didn't answer. Irene sipped her drink.

'They became more,' she said, 'involved. Wrestling, at first, for the camera, until Gretha got it away from them both. Then they were just reaching for each other's bottles, and each other's jackets; hands at each other's knees—waists—hips. Even in Le Chabanais, one didn't like to be so open. Not between officers; not when there were press-men about. People wouldn't like to think—'

'Quite,' he said. His voice broke; he cleared his throat. She let her fingers caress the notebook again, as if unconscious; tracing the black-flocked brocade.

'We got them moving,' she said. 'Gretha made a game of it. Holding up the camera and then backing away, so they would chase her. We got them onto the back stairs, which were—are—narrow. Dark. I kept running up against them: Charles and Henry, pressed up against the wall. Charles biting at him, licking at him, and Henry just, just trembling. Like current—' Holmes, visibly, flinched '—arching between them.'

He swallowed. Holmes swallowed. His hands unmoving, on his thighs.

'Your work, as you say, was almost done for you,' he got out. 'In your position I'd have—have left them to it. Slipped out with your colleague. A cocktail in the bar.'

'You wouldn't,' Irene said, and then laughed. For half a second together his face was a picture of offence. She leant forward, lowered her voice. 'You make your living observing people, Mr Holmes. The same as me. Secrets and lies: you feel them out, where they're graven on the body. Everyone you meet is a whetstone for your blade. So tell me: if you've a witness who wants something as badly as that, and it's in your power to give it or keep it from them: what do you do?'

The sheen of sweat, on his face.
'You kept them from each other, then,' he said. 'Humbert and Jouvenel.'

'Got them through the door to my rooms,' she agreed, 'and I—Henry was the more interesting, the more—' married three years; Irene shook her head '—desperate. I always enjoy my witnesses when they're desperate, don't you? Yes. I can tell that you do.'


She wasn't breathing as hard as Holmes.

'I kicked the door shut,' she told him. 'Heaved Henry off Charles—though he's a big man, you've met him—and Henry practically whined for him. Gretha dragged Charles towards the bed; started cooing at him about his war work, teasing him. And I opened Henry's trousers, against the wall; and I sucked him in the French way. Most men in that position, Mr Holmes, would grab my head, grab my hair. Henry Jouvenel put his palms against the wall, and closed his eyes. Can you imagine,' she asked, 'what he was doing?'

'Listening,' Holmes blurted. Voice chased deep, deep into his chest. 'Listening to—to Humbert.'

'Right you are.' She raised her glass to him. 'And what would you do, Mr Holmes, if you were me? You'd have your mouth full, knees on the rug—and you'd be listening, too, wouldn't you? A man like you'd be—' shifting his restless legs '—listening, already, to the talk across the room. Gretha asking, But aren't you afraid, Capitaine, of the Hun? and, But what if a mean old German snuck into your tent during the night? You'd listen to him stammering out his replies, and when she asked, Would you shoot him? Or tie him up so he couldn't escape? you'd feel Henry Jouvenel's cock twitch so hard you'd almost choke on it.'

'You're a—a—' he got out. 'A professional.'

'Doesn't mean I can't be taken by surprise.'

'Or you wanted to—' Holmes swallowed. Christ, look at him fight. 'To make sure Humbert knew how Jouvenel was… affected.'

'Oh, Mr Holmes,' she said, 'you overestimate me. Keep it up.'

His mouth, stretched in a grimace. Her heart: beat, beat.

'You're right, though,' she said. 'I heard Charles notice. I heard him curse. I pulled back and listened to—to Gretha, behind me. She was hardly taxing his intelligence, but Charles was groaning and stuttering; and whenever he'd start up—it's easier, he would try to say, if you can get hold of—of something solid—Henry would make these sounds. I could hear Gretha laughing, saying, I still don't understand, Capitaine Humbert, and, Why don't you show me what you mean? Show me on Sergent Jouvenel.'

Holmes grunted; inhaled, and let it out slow.

'You can imagine Henry's reaction. And behind me Gretha was giggling. Snapping pictures of Henry's panting face, and of me, on my knees in front of him. That's one of the prints we're after, you and I. That and the one later, after Gretha passed the camera to me: Henry, with his broad backside on my Louis Quinze parlour chair, Charles behind it, tying his hands, and Gretha looking on. Christ, the men could hardly breathe. Can you imagine it, Mr Holmes?'

'Vividly.' His chest, rising quick and shallow and hard.
'Mmm,' she said. 'And now that I've told you, you'll know what you're looking at if you—'

'When I—'

'—find the photographs in question. Shall I continue the list? There are quite a number like those. Charles just couldn't stop touching him, you see. Gave me time to get the scene from different angles: Charles wrapping the rope around Henry's wrists, licking his lips while he tightened it down. Henry with his front thrust out, and his cock jutting up hard out of his open trousers while Charles stuttered out some nonsense about how to make the knots.'

Holmes's breath. Tightening his whole chest on the exhale: she kept bracing for the blow.

'You were. Taking pictures,' he managed.

'Yes,' Irene agreed. 'But the three of them went on so long that the—'

—film ran out, the canister ran out: the metal body imprinted on the black brocade rug and then who picked it back up—

'—only thing I could do,' she said, 'was to put the camera down. Sit on Henry's knees. Play with him. Gretha was still asking Charles, oh: I thought you'd done this in the field, and, Surely he could escape by simply twisting his wrists. And Charles—'

'He wouldn't like,' Holmes said, sounding strangled, 'he's a, a braggart, he wouldn't like to be doubted,' and she smiled, slow.

'That's right,' she said. 'He puffed himself up, our Charles. Breathed in hard and moved his hips and said, Any of the boys at Verdun could tell you, you've got to cinch it properly. Properly. Henry just—'

'Couldn't have—'

'—lost his wits.' In a whisper. She swirled her drink as he sat there, hunching his shoulders like he hurt. 'Charles,' she said, 'did something with the rope, and Henry started panting. Struggling in his bonds. So I sank—'

'God—'

'—down around him, while Gretha said, like an innocent, What if you wanted them tighter?. And Charles. Oh, Mr Holmes. He said, Elbows, you tie the— elbows. Fumbled the rope. I could see his lips, trembling.' Holmes's lips, trembling. 'Henry, he stopped moving, in that way that means someone is—close. So I slapped him. Slapped his face, hard, and he moaned.'

Holmes. Fingers tensing; hands on his thighs.

'Gretha says,' said Irene, 'What if you wanted him tighter?, and Charles cinched his elbows closer together so Henry thrust up. Gretha said, Oh, you're so good at that, and Henry moaned, so I slapped him again, and he moaned, again, and Charles—can you guess, Mr Holmes? He was—'

'—incensed—'

'Well,' she said, 'yes, but—'

'—hard,' he choked out, blinking and blinking, 'he'd be—'

'—gasping,' she said, 'Just gasping for it. I saw him move to press his hips. Up against Henry's back, between his shoulder-blades, in the round empty oval of the chair-back between his trussed elbows.
Pressing them because he couldn't help it. And Henry, he shuddered through his whole body. Mindless, like a fit. He started fucking up into me just—wild, feet hard on the floor, so I slapped him again. Charles, all the while, rubbing little secret circles with his hard slick leaking cock through layers of fabric into Henry's back.'

Holmes got to his feet. It wasn't a stagger, but he wasn't—he curled his spine. Uncomfortable. She'd wondered. He made his way to the drinks trolley, with his empty tumbler and his mouth twisted up, Christ. She licked her lips.

'Jouvenel,' she said, 'with my handprints on his cheeks. Moving like he wanted to fuck through me. Charles's hands on his—his shoulders, and his wrists, and his neck; he was close, and Gretha said, *What if Irena—*'

His hand shaking, on the whiskey decanter—

'—*what if Irena weren't on his lap?*, she said, so I climbed off him. He sobbed, and Gretha. Charles even forgot he was supposed to be answering. So Gretha said, *Don't you see? Sergent Jouvenel could slide his hands over the chair-back.* It sounded like Charles was dying, trying to answer her. *Tie his, tie his, his ankles*, he said, and Gretha leant in and told him, *Oh yes, show me how you tie his ankles*, while Henry groaned, so I—' smiling, mean, full of Limehouse thinking bitterly, *Why, it were seeing his wifey get slapped 'round by her lady-love what got me into this business, and what a pair, what a pair the two of 'em must make*—hit him. I hit him again.'

It was a shame she oughtn't to say it aloud. Husbands and wives. Holmes stood hunched, with an arm braced on the drinks-trolley; breath ragged as he held himself up. Irene wanted—

'Gretha,' she said, 'got Charles 'round the front of the chair, somehow. You can imagine, the way he was walking. He went down on his knees in front of Henry and just stared up at his face, shaking. Running his hands up Henry's thighs. Tender. Like he'd forgotten himself.' She breathed in. 'To be a witness to such a thing, Mr Holmes.'

Her mouse-quick heart in her chest, and he swallowed an awful noise. If he were sick into the ice bucket, she thought—while her smooth red thumbnail rubbed circles on the notebook on the table by her side.

'You can imagine, it,' she murmured. 'Can't you. You can... relate. You know he has a—well. A history with the other man. You've heard about it; read it hinted at, but you needn't have. With both of them together you can *feel* it, can't you? Every time they look at each other. Every time they touch. The weight of it all, what they haven't said to their—'

'You—'

'—wives, or their children,* with his breath loud and her voice breathless, 'or even their *lovers,* but they needn't say it to each other, do they? They were both there. No one else can feel it—'

Hard crack on wood. He'd dropped his tumbler; and took a deep, a shaking breath.

'—not,* she said, 'the way they can feel it, with each other. But if you keep them together, Mr Holmes. If you only watch them long enough, and—and *observe* the—'

'Observe,*' he repeated; then laughed, too loud. 'Set them loose.' A strange hard stillness to him; her ribs tight and her whole skin gooseflesh. 'Read the whole of it,' he said, 'just in the—'

'—way they touch each other. The way they move. And they won't be able, will they, to keep the truth from you? Not a man like you. Not if you're watching properly, not if you're—'
'—close enough,' and he turned to face her with a shuttered look, and:

'—right up next to them both,' she said, 'next to their bodies; and you refuse to look away.'

'And you,' he said. 'You, of course, would never look away.'

She was breathing so hard. His eyes cut to her hip, to the needlepoint cushion; and drew together all the bleak lines of his face.

'I didn't,' she told him. 'Not that night.'

'Well. In that case, do go on. I imagine Humbert next removed Jouvenel's smallclothes. Shorts, were they? In the new army style?'

As if commenting on the market price of salt. As if he were doing her a favour; as if he had never dropped a glass of whiskey on the Chateaubriand parquet. Her pounding pulse in her veins. She rose to her feet as he strode towards her across the room.

'Yes,' she said, 'they were. And I—Gretha and I.'

From feet away he made her a little bow. Like a young gallant might to do to his dancing-partner, bloody bastard.

'Gretha went,' Irene said, through her teeth, 'and knelt down by Charles. Cooed in his ear about show me and his ankles, you're so good at it,' backing Holmes towards the chaise longue but he was smiling his strange closed smile as she said, 'undoing all Charles's fastenings. While Charles stared at Henry, and Henry panted back at him. Rope, Gretha said, over Charles's shoulder, so I fetched them more rope. Coils on the floor by the chair; and the length that Gretha pressed into Charles's hand. Henry's eyes, Mr Holmes, went so bloody wide.'

Holmes's calves against the chaise; she gave his chest a little push and he let himself sink down, smirking.

'Yes,' from below her, 'I can see them now, like dinner plates; I imagine he could scarcely see. Though he'd try, wouldn't he? For the sight of your young…'

'Colleague,' she said, with black brocade falling off one shoulder, so close he could hardly avoid looking.

'…friend,' he said, 'getting Humbert to truss up his ankles. That must have been a treat. With his face right up next to Humbert's thighs, and you looking—'

'Observing,' she said. Oh, to slap his face. 'I had time, Mr Holmes, to watch them very carefully. It was Charles, you see,' and she leant in: 'he couldn't stop putting his mouth on him. And there I was: observing. Thinking how my… tool-chest, was against the wall, behind Henry's back. And Gretha had Charles's trousers open, now. I could estimate.'

'You have a selection?' he drawled.

'Would you go housebreaking,' said Irene, 'with only one type of pick-lock?'

His smile like a slow slippery snake. She slid 'round the edge of the chaise; perched, hip to his shoulder. His eyes narrowed and his pink tongue, coming out slow to wet his bottom lip. He let her see it.
'I gather you opted for one of the smaller models?' he said.

'I may,' she said, 'have exaggerated. Slightly.'

Holmes laughed, harsh and giddy; and: 'It was worth it,' she said, as he reached up, long hand on her hip; and pulled her hard into his lap.

His trousers rough on the insides of her thighs. Black brocade, pooling around her arse and his knees, and she settled herself, grinning, as he smirked back.

'I'd lay odds he liked it,' he said, his vowels pure Mayfair. 'You on—what would it have been, to make up the height? A box? Standing on a crate to shove your cock between his shoulder blades?'

'I like it,' Irene said. Arms around his neck. 'Black,' she told him. 'Hard, and thick. Taking off my skirts. I like the leather straps against my skin.'

His mouth was open. He was breathing through it. Eyes into eyes into slippery ice-floe blue.

'More whiskey,' she offered, 'Mr Holmes?'

'Do you expect I'd like more whiskey?'

'No,' she said. 'I suppose not.'

'Clever girl,' he said. She ground down against him: half-hard between her legs, which meant—but he was still interested, plainly. Hot breath against her collarbone, saying, 'You must've come back to quite a show. Your little friend, and Captain Humbert—'

'—thrasing about,' Irene said, 'on the floor. Stripped, on his back, with his head between Henry's tied feet; Gretha on top of him with all her long skirts,' and she rolled her hips, 'spread out around them and Henry—'

'Staring down,' he said. 'Near drooling, he must have been—no?'

'Yes,' she said, and his hands came up. Clenched in the silk at her sides; his stony smile.

'And Charles,' he said. Holding her down by the hips. 'Held down by your—'

'—twisting his head,' she told him, 'one side to the other with his tongue sneaking out, like he wanted to, to lick. And Henry—to a thing like that—'

Holmes made a noise in his throat. 'Started to cry, did he?' he said. She put her hand down; he was hard. 'Started to—?'

'I thought he might,' she said, and pressed, and he tried to jerk away. His fingers: bruising-hard on her hips. 'Henry struggled,' she told him, 'and moaned; and I tugged on his ropes, up behind him. Took off my shift, close—' into Holmes's ear, all his lines drawn taut and humming '—so he could feel it. You can't even move, I told him; you're—'

'—helpless,' he growled, 'powerless—'

'—tied too well; and when I let him feel my cock between his shoulder-blades he gasped and gasped. Couldn't stop. Must have—'

'—made himself dizzy,' Holmes said.
'Mmmm,' Irene agreed. 'Gretha told Charles, *Lick his foot.*' Holmes laughed, breathless, and she said, 'Henry sobbed so I slapped him from behind. In all the tumult it was a minute before I realised Charles hadn't done it.'

'Couldn't take an order?' said Holmes. Grabbed at Irene's arse. It caught her off-balance; she gasped, and he grinned, and ground her down harder. *Oh* she thought: *good* boy; and pulled his head back by the hair and he snarled.

'He was *starving* to,' she told him. Mouth right up next to his ear as his throat worked, wrenched back. 'Rubbing the back of his head all over the rug, with Gretha saying, *Lick, Charles and I want you to taste him.* But he wouldn't.'

'Needed to feel,' managed Holmes, with his throat working, 'he was one-up on all and sundry.'

Irene laughed. Let go his hair and when his head came up she kissed him hard, like a slap. He gave it all back with teeth. When she pulled back his face was blazing.

'Do you think so?' she said.

His Adam's apple, and his angry mouth. She reached over: in the drawer of the second side-table, a fresh pack of cigarettes.

'You could've made him,' he said. He ground her down, and she moved with him.

She said, 'With a show like that?' Laughing. Unkind. Lighting a fag, saying, 'With Henry, whining, trying to—to draw his knees together? Pull his tied legs closer to Charles's face?'

'I suppose,' he said, 'you go in for that kind of thing'; and she said, 'With him opening up to answer Gretha, but his mouth—' Holmes's panting mouth '—watering so much he just slurped and shook his head.'

Holmes shook his head, like a dog.

Smiling. With her own clenched in her teeth, she put a cigarette between his lips. He closed around it, staring at her as she leant forward and lit it from her own. 'Needed to feel,' she said, 'he was one-up on all and sundry,' as he drew breath and the spark glowed.

'And what about your little—,' he said, 'playmate, your little—she'd not be pleased, she'd be—'

'She was almost spitting,' said Irene, 'climbing off him. *Stay on the floor,* she told Charles, and left him there—'

'—fussing,' Holmes said, around the fag, with his hands still hard on her hips, and her hand behind his head with her cigarette burning, 'and—*whining*—'

'Mmm,' purring, 'while Gretha took off her dress. Walked up to Henry, and sat on his cock.'

His hands tightened. Her dressing gown, gaping wide.

'With you,' he said, 'whispering in his ear.'

'Telling him, mmm,' she said, ' *Shame about the French letter,* while Gretha lifted herself up—' his palms on her arse, his smoke-streaming mouth and his mean eyes '—and let herself down. *Otherwise, I told him, Gretha could go back to Capitaine Humbert, and you'd leak out all over his bollocks, while he fucked up into her and licked your—*'
'Bloody—'

'—feet. And Charles, on the floor. He was—' sitting back on his thighs, dragging on her cigarette '—
touching himself, I think.'

'Yes?' Holmes said, laughing around his fag. 'You imagine he might have been?' and shoved his
hand under—

—and she shoved her hand down against him, and he growled.

'You think he might've,' he said, his face all red but his eyes drained out, with one palm on her bare
skin, 'might've tried for—'

'Yes,' she said. Rubbing him through his flies; look at him hate her. 'Yes,' sickly-sweet, 'but Gretha
said not to move. Henry whining now because he couldn't see Charles; and Gretha said, said, Stay
still with a little nod, and you see, Mr Holmes, I—I can take a—'

'Oh,' bucking up against her, 'can you—'

'So I circled 'round, and picked up the, the camera—'

(with a good, what, eight exposures in, and she'd turned the scene over again, and again, Jouvenel
already tied when she'd put the thing down, herself accounted for, must be Charles, or Gretha, or
Charles and Gretha: in the dark en-suite which smelled always of perfume, sweat, onions from the
kitchen; Charles who had, after all, wrested the film away from the scandal-sheet boy, or Gretha—
and now Irene, teeth and elbows, with Holmes stubbing out his cigarette and his wolf-blue eyes)

'—I picked up the camera,' she said, 'from the carpet. Charles looking up at Gretha between Henry's
legs, and the flashbulb,' she said with a wet mouth, hand between his legs and—

A muffled slipping thump through silk to her arse; and then, without thought: her hand hard to his
cheekbone his digging fingers to her hip smack to his knotted-up mouth, and again, and she
wrenched his hair and twisted off and and up and away from his surprised-sharp cutting teeth and
she hit him again, and pushed his shoulders hard.

His skull hit the back of the chaise before he caught himself. A breath. She could see him hard in his
trousers.

'Quite an image,' he panted.

She stood on the parquet with her dressing gown open and the sound of the surf.

Holmes sat up gingerly. His swollen mouth. Feeling with his fingers the flushed-up tender side of his
face, with his other hand still clenching in his lap.

'He thought so,' Irene said. 'Henry.' Her cigarette, still burning in her hand. 'Because I—I told him.
Gretha told Charles not to move, and I said, He can see you, Sergent Jouvenel and, He's watching
you fuck her, watching you, and he did it harder, and Charles. His wide,' she said, 'blond face.'

Holmes had his handkerchief out, now. Dabbing at his mouth and the sweat on his forehead, elbows
on his thighs. She took a drag; wrapped her dressing gown about her.

'I took a photograph,' she said, stubbing out her fag-end. 'Told Charles to get up on his front, and he
did. And I said, put your mouth on his feet, and he just couldn't—couldn't wait—'
She breathed out; steady. Steady on. Holmes said, 'You took a—'

'Charles,' she said, 'kissing Henry's heels, his legs. The skin all raw from the ropes at his ankles. With Gretha's—Gretha's hands on Henry's shoulders, and her hips slamming down.'

Holmes folded up his handkerchief. He tucked it back in his pocket, and didn't meet her eyes.

'I told him,' she said, 'You can taste him when he—'

'Did you.'

'—and Charles: the angle was bad, but he got his mouth up between them. His face up between Henry's legs, Gretha's arse against his cheek, that's in a photograph—'

Holmes's laugh was stony. She tugged black brocade closer about her, oddly grateful, as he pulled a new cigarette from the pack on the table.

'After Henry finished,' she said, 'I turned Charles 'round in the space between Henry's legs. Wrapped him in my fist, and asked: did he want it like this? Or did he want Gretha?'

Holmes tongued at his bleeding mouth. Irene remembered weeping, in the bottom of Madame Colette's wardrobe. She thought of the newspaper on Armistice Day, after Gretha was gone. She yearned, suddenly, to be alone.

'Charles very much did,' she said, 'want Gretha.'

Holmes levered himself off the couch; made his way past her to the drinks trolley. He bent; then straightened up, with the fallen tumbler cupped carelessly in his big hand.

'I made him beg,' Irene told Holmes's back, 'before I took my hand away. Gretha got in his lap, and it was...'

She cleared her throat. A soft click of glass on metal, as he, with great care, set the thing down.

'Well,' she said. Well. 'It was more or less immediate, after that. We untied him after, Gretha and I. Charles and Henry were both limp: nothing to do but put them to bed, and go tidy up. The en-suite was just through the door, and the kitchen was just down the hall. We didn't think we'd be a moment. It was stupid to leave the camera, but.'

'Oh yes,' he said. 'Quite,' with a perfunctory smile.

'They were dead to the world,' said Irene. 'But then. We were waylaid in the hall. Questions from the other girls. From the cook.'

'Chaos must have reigned,' he said, solicitous. 'During the War.'

She shivered, though the breeze through the window had hardly cooled at all; threw back her shoulders, and let her dressing down settle across her chest.

'By the time we made it back,' she said, with half a shrug, 'the men, and the camera, were gone.'

Holmes nodded; unperturbed. Almost unconcerned. It was fully dark out, now, but the air trickling inward from off the sea was still hot; stagnant. Irene's draperies hung straight down. A person could stand, she thought, on the footpath below: look up at the wall of bright-lit windows, craning up to the fourth floor, to the narrow slit of blazing light.
'Should I,' she said, 'remove the tail from John Watson?' and Holmes laughed, and pushed off from the drinks trolley with the palms of his hands.

'Why on Earth,' he said, making his way to the door, 'would I ask you to do a thing like that?'

**Saturday, August 27th, 1921**

9pm (Hour 79)

Sherlock made good time. Just flew along, on the walk back from the train station. His jacket swung from his arm and his shoes crunched on the gravel and he nodded to the elderly gardener, now smoking in a chair on her front porch. Showed his teeth, because he could. The old woman inclined her head as if to someone she approved, and he thought: well, why not? He could be the type.

Rue de Saint-Malo became the Place de l'Église and it was hot, still. Stagnant, and sweltering. The heat set up mirages: one gasped, and pointed. One doubled up with laughter in the open street (Sherlock, in the open street, snickered), when one saw, for example, emerging from the heat haze, plain Monsieur Oran the grocer—as though one had expected someone quite different.

Someone different altogether.

In the street behind Sherlock a motorcar honked its horn. He flattened himself, obliging, against the stonework wall. The driver waved a hand in thanks and Sherlock, on a whim, doffed his hat and then followed it through into an old-fashioned bow. Some giddy young man he could be, tonight, with no one to say different. Some hopeful romantic, en route to—to an assignation, or a political meeting, or the reading of a will; as a middle-aged vigneron motored by with smoke in his eyes and sweat trickling down his face. Sherlock might emerge from the heat-blur a barrister, perhaps. A sailor adrift; or a robber baron. What a lark! He might emerge as anything at all.

At the twilit crossroads the Place de l'Église intersected itself; then turned, as he crossed it, to the Rue de Bel Air. Snuffed itself out, he supposed: swallowed its own tail. And along its whole length not a church in sight.

There must have been one, once. People, he thought, lighting a cigarette with careless hands: what sentimentalists they were. Four walls and a set of pews, and they kept on about the thing for years after it had burnt or been replaced, or whatever happened to churches. They'd stumbled upon the chance to start afresh, and yet still: here they were. Referring each other to God, in an empty street.

And even the best ones, even—

Even Lamarck, for instance. (Sherlock breathed deep: English Dunhills in the black of the night.) Great Lamarck, with his shining galleries in the Musée d'histoire naturelle. Lamarck with his vast chain of being: every creature in Nature, straining upward along it towards the pinnacle of Man. With all his genius, Lamarck had looked into the face of chaos and come away with—what? A woman in a weaving-house, throwing a shuttle until the skill she pricked and pummelled into her fingers became graven in the cells of her daughters. It was, Sherlock thought, not only naive but observably wrong. The bloody fool. The street turned to the Route de la Touesse and he strolled along, blinking sweat from his eyes, as heat swamped him in waves.

At the top of the path, he stopped to unlace his shoes; to remove his socks. The Scots pines obscured the moonlight; but still he launched himself down at a run. Battered his feet on roots; scraped them on needles. The sand on his soles was cool, and cool, and then—as he came close to stumbling over a piece of moonlit driftwood—sun-warmed; then wet. He stopped in the surf, sweating. Short of breath. The moon silvered the sand, and the surf, and the looming silhouette of Roz Ven, with all its windows dark. Water lapped around his trouser cuffs; then around his knees. Undignified, he
thought, but—well. Some people were; and he, after all, might be anyone.

He waded out to his waist; to his chest. The buoyancy of the salt water, and of the waves. And how cool it was. His untucked shirt ballooned out all around him. Sherlock, on his back in the moonlight, might be a consummate swimmer. The type who sought out water wherever he went. He might be soaring above his own body. He might be miles away.

He might be an unknown village youth, dripping on the lawn in the front garden, where Madame Jouvenel stood with a glass of wine and what looked to be a bone china saucer.

'Good evening,' he said, in French that sounded alien. Certainly her head came up; and she gave him a hard, suspicious stare before grunting good evening in her turn. 'Kiki!' she trilled, soft, under her breath. Sherlock thought for a wild moment she was coining him a new nickname, until she turned and carefully placed the saucer on the ground.

A rustling, from beneath the rhododendron bush. Nothing came out. They both looked over anyway: her crouched low on her haunches, and him standing behind her, with his dripping shoes and socks in his hands.

'It's continuing hot,' the village youth might say; since perhaps he knew Madame Jouvenel to nod to. Perhaps he'd seen her at the station, or visiting the shops. He'd know of her fame; well, her face was in the papers. 'It's continuing hot,' he would say; said; just as she trilled, again: 'Kiki!' and the undergrowth stirred.

'The others are mostly,' she said, in an undertone, not looking at him, 'away at some... play.'

'Oh yes?' the dim-witted village youth might say. Said.

'So-called. In St Malo; you can imagine the provincialism. I excused myself, on the grounds of having taste.'

It was a clever remark. And there was a rough warmth to her voice; people smiled. Sherlock with his stretched face might be a friend of hers: just come up from Paris to take the waters. He pushed his wet hair out of his eyes.

'One imagines,' her Parisian friend might say, 'that the presence of Le Matin's drama critic might be more than the others bargained for.'

She snorted, softly, and he got down on his hands and his knees; then, careless of the dirt, lay on his stomach, in the grass in front of the rhododendron.

'Claudine is inside,' she said.

The smell of the soil. He rested his chin on his entwined fingers. Madame Jouvenel's friend, just up from Paris, might have met Claudine. Might have been accosted by her in the kitchen, and treated to a—might not want to go in.

'Henry,' he said, as a friend of the family might say: 'he's with—'

She opened her mouth, and then, seconds later: 'Yes.'

'And Mademoiselle Patat?'

He felt it, on the side of his face, when she slid her eyes at him sideways; but his own stayed straight ahead.
'What's Mademoiselle Patat to—'

'Shhhh,' he said, barely moving his mouth: a mottled nose peeked out from the gloom.

The stillness of the sea air settled around them: only the faintest breeze. Shared silence, he thought, with academic interest, could be almost like touching. Perhaps there should be clinics. Perhaps patients might sit together: silent in the company of other dumb beasts. Probably Madame Jouvenel's friend, just up from Paris, adored cats.

This one was white and ginger, with a single black splotch over its left ear. It lapped daintily at cream in the saucer; then picked its way through the grass. Rubbed its sides against Sherlock's salt-wet face and he brought his hands up, slow, to pet with damp fingers through its patchy fur.

'I hadn't thought,' she said, and then: 'Do you… incline, that way?'

'Oh,' he said, startled, 'no.' But then Madame Jouvenel's friend from Paris could—he might be—no, as the cat bolted into the night and she raised her voice to its normal, strident pitch: 'I'd have thought, after all, if you had it in you—you English, with your genital obsession—'

He laughed. Rolled on his side in his salt-encrusted untucked shirt, and perhaps Madame Jouvenel's friend, just across the Channel from London for the sea air: perhaps he was prone to such things. 'Oh come,' his hostess was saying, as he rolled in the dirt, 'you understand completely that I am correct, you would—'

'Putting—,' he got out—

'—hardly—'

'—my cousin,' levering himself up onto his elbows, to watch her being affronted, 'and her lover in the room next to your husband, because you know he dislikes two women together? Putting the Carcos next to them, so that Mademoiselle Picard can listen to her would-be lover with his wife? You feel yourself left behind for a much younger woman, so you take a lover young enough to be her son; young enough to be your—'

'English prudery,' she sniffed, with her mouth curling up. 'Someone must educate the boy.'

'—grand-son, and you want to tell me about English prudery?'

'I only meant,' she said, 'that here, things are more… advanced. One is free to choose, one is free to —'

'Take lovers,' he said, because her London friend, having come so far, would be allowed certain liberties, 'in full view of your husband.'

'Even in England surely it would be easier for you both. If you were to marry, or Doctor Watson—some cosmopolitan girl.'

He laughed. He was still laughing. Rising up in the back of his throat against the thought of three thirty-nine in the morning—no.

'More distasteful than hard labour, then, a wife?' She tutted. 'I only thought, if you had it in you, to live as a real man... I had thought that, living as you did, you must not incline so.'

The surf was a low roar below them, somewhere off to the left.
'And you, you're... cosmopolitan, are you? About his other women?' She didn't answer, and he said, 'Claudine,' with his palms flat on the grass and the dirt, 'said you dropped her in a hurry, your last—Missy.'

'Missy!' she said. Laughed. Shook her head, and shifted down so she was sitting next to him. 'Ouf. And what did Claudine tell you about Germaine Patat?'

'You're—'

'You English,' she said. 'Do you find that shocking? That my husband and I might share a lover?'

'She is,' Sherlock said, 'lovely.'

'In very truth,' said Madame Jouvenel. In her left hand, faced away from him, she still held a glass half-full of wine; she looked as surprised as he was, to remember it. But she raised it to him, and toasted his health; took a sip and then, considering, passed it over. He swirled it in the glass. Inhaled. Wet fur, and soil. Raised it to his mouth.

'Then,' he said, 'your placement of Mademoiselle Patat in the room across from yours: it was for your own convenience. Not a matter of annoying your husband at all.'

'I am always,' she said, with her hand out, and he passed back the glass, 'attempting to annoy my husband.'

Softly he laughed; her friend from London would laugh softly.

'Last night?' said Sherlock, and she nodded, looking up at the house.

'Last night,' she said.

'Because you... enjoy her.'

She raised one kohl-sharpened eyebrow at him.

'Not a matter, I mean,' he said, 'of punishing the girl,' as in the backlit doorway he noticed a haloed blonde head atop an Amazonian frame.

'That,' said Madame Jouvenel, 'is a matter between myself, and Mademoiselle Patat.'

'And Henry,' he said, 'who might he—?'

'Ouf,' she said. 'Well. He and my secretary carried on a bit, last year. Mademoiselle Beaumont, you know. Perhaps they were... reviving old flames. One has only so much attention, don't you find, Monsieur—'

'Yes,' he said. Getting to his feet as Claudine watched them from the doorway and the surf softened the edges of the distance. Saying 'Saumur Champigny,' nodding to the glass, for perhaps Madame Jouvenel's friend from London was a specialist in Continental wines. 'It always reminds me of—of leaves in a forest, of—'

'—a certain... animal musk,' she said, stifling a smile; and her friend from London would put out his hand so he put out his hand, and helped her up.

'Thank you,' he said. Closing his eyes against the light of the door. Opening them. 'The fresh air, the— the sea,' and she grasped his knuckles, with a hard, shrewd look.
'It's nothing,' she said. Dusting off her backside; taking his hand. 'Don't get any ideas, Monsieur,' as he flinched, and she said: 'Mr. Holmès.'

Chapter End Notes

1. Henry Jouvenel actually did fight a duel defending the honour of *Le Matin* against a slur from Charles Humbert's paper, *Le Journal*, though whether he historically fought against Humbert himself I'm not sure. It happened just prior to the First World War, in the heady first days of his and Colette's courtship; he incurred a wound to the arm that necessitated a sling.

2. Henry Jouvenel was historically on leave during August of 1915; was also historically bored with his marriage and very probably historically visited *Le Chabanais* or someplace like it, during this time. Humbert was also in Paris that summer. Their long-time adversarial relationship was much as described. Essentially, the entire foursome episode is a fiction with no direct evidence in reality—but nothing much to contradict it, either.

3. See the note to Chapter 1 for Georges Cuvier and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck; Lamarck was a pre-Darwinian evolutionist who posited that all beings were evolving teleologically along a great chain of being, of which humans were the head. He also theorised that offspring inherited traits acquired by their parents.

4. "To live as a real man": Colette had a complex relationship with same-sex desire/relationships, both her own and other peoples'; but when she left Missy to be with, and later marry, Henry Jouvenel, one of her standard phrases in letters and conversation was that she was now going to go "be a real woman." As she almost universally passed harsher judgment on other people than she did on herself, I think it's a fair bet she'd extend that hetero-preferential mentality to Sherlock.

5. According to Judith Thurman, the likelihood is high that Germaine Patat was indeed historically sleeping with Colette as well as with Henry during this summer, though Colette herself almost certainly wasn't sleeping with her husband, and her acknowledged liaison was with her husband's son. Are you dizzy yet?

6. Further DVD notes on this chapter can be found [here](#).
A problem confronting the builder of bridges

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday, August 27th, 1921
10pm (Hour 80)

Claudine was leaning against the jamb. Looking down at Sherlock, looking up. He climbed the hill, hearty and jovial: a sea-mad Londoner who'd held still for a cat.

'The water is superb,' he called up in English. He waved his sodden shoes at her. 'I couldn't resist. Run, fetch your bathing costume; we can go back together. It's perfect for a midnight swim.'

'My God,' she said, raising her voice. 'The salt water, on that suit. Who could imagine that an English Holmès—'

'Not at the play, I see?' he said.

'No, I—'

'To what are they subjecting the Roz Ven voyagers, then? Something overly ambitious, I gathered from our hostess. Molière? Balzac? Tell me they're not attempting Ibsen, I think I'd have to agree with Madame—'

'I take it Doctor Watson isn't with you?'

'—Jouvenel: it's an offence against all taste. One comes to the provinces, after all, with a certain social contract in mind.'

'He is staying in Paris another night, then,' Claudine said. 'Well, no doubt—'

'If you wouldn't—' he said. Gesturing to his soaked-through suit, on the Roz Ven threshold. 'A cloth, or—'

'—he will make good use of my—'

'Are you this,' he said, 'interfering with everyone, or do you only persist in—'

'Sherlock—'

'—codding me because you're still, despite my best efforts, labouring under a misapprehension about how tremendously reassuring I find a mother figure with your particular set of—'

'Sherlock!'

His empty working throat. All the fight gone out of him.

Claudine squinted into his face.

'What did she say to you?' she said.

'Pardon? What did who—ah.' Madame Jouvenel, still on the Roz Ven green. Observing the whole absurd exchange from afar. He permitted Claudine's hand on his arm.
'Nothing,' he told her. 'We just—just chatted. There was a cat.'

She frowned at him. He closed his eyes.

'I'm wet,' he said. 'If you could—'

'Of course,' she said. 'Of course.' She took her fingers from his elbow, and shifted her weight to let him past her.

In the ground-floor WC the shelves were heaped with clean white towelling. He unbuttoned his shirt; applied cotton terry to his hair and his shoulders. He might draw a bath, he thought. A civilised person, just over from London, would draw a bath. A civilised person would open the taps; sink down under near-scalding water—but here was a knock, on the door.

Claudine opened it a crack without waiting for an answer, and thrust his summer pyjamas through the gap. She must have run upstairs. Rifled through their—through the trunks. And now she shook the pyjamas at him—an impatient, disembodied hand—so he bestirred himself to cross the tiny room and take them.

The hand withdrew. The door clicked shut. He stood on the other side of it, blue cotton in one hand and white towelling in the other.

'I know she can be… difficult,' came Claudine's voice, and then she said: 'Colette.'

Sherlock rubbed at his face.

'You no doubt think—I can hardly imagine what you think,' said Claudine. 'Probably that I've gone soft in my old age. That I ought to remove Hélène by force; drive back to Paris and sell the Jouvenels' dirty secrets for enough to keep us both. Cut ties with the whole Jouvenel lot, and consider myself—consider myself lucky.'

Sherlock's grunt echoed off the tile. He'd bought these pyjamas, he seemed to recall, in a shop off Regent Street, on a chilly October afternoon.

'I hadn't really thought,' he said. 'Though you had, apparently.'

'I couldn't.'

'No. I suppose not.'

'Even if Hélène—even if she wanted it of me.' Claudine sighed. 'But she wouldn't.'

Sherlock pulled blue cotton over his tacky knees, and his hips. The shop-woman's husband, he remembered, had been planning to leave her: the cash-register drawer newly fixed after years of scraping, and lipstick stashed away in the back room in a colour that didn't suit his wife. She hadn't suspected. Probably the whole business was forgotten, by now. 'And in any case,' Claudine was saying, 'Colette is—she's my friend.'

'I know,' Sherlock said.

He gathered up his salt-damp trousers, and his shirt, and his sandy jacket; and considered the empty bath with his hands full of cloth. He might at least have run his hair under the taps. It was drying around his forehead in an itching salty crust.

Out in the corridor Claudine was leaning against the wall. He'd half-expected her to have gone off
somewhere. After Hélène Picard, perhaps. But Mademoiselle Picard, he remembered, was at the
play. At the St Malo village theatre, who were getting up Voltaire, or… Shaw, perhaps. Perhaps
Wilde.

'Have you eaten?' Claudine asked. 'There are fresh peaches. A baguette. Some cider.'

He didn't answer. She shifted back to standing, so he followed her into the kitchen: salt scraping his
sunburnt nape, and grainy between his toes. Claudine stood with her back to him, at the cutting
block. Anyway, he thought, supper meant another hour in which the linens on the big bed in the attic
room could remain… undefiled. Her startled eyes, over her shoulder: he must have made a noise.
*Undefiled*. His lips, stretched in a grin.

Must look like a clown's face. Crust cracking off it. He perched on a spindly white kitchen chair;
hands on his jaunty thighs.

'She isn't,' Claudine said, slicing into a peach, 'just a friend, you know.'

'Oh,' said Sherlock, 'Christ.' High-pitched noises—giggles, weren't they? clawing up the back of his
throat. 'Oh Christ, not you as well.'

'I don't—'

'Is playing bed-warmer for its owner, then,' he got out, 'some kind of—of Roz Ven boarding fee?
Will I too be—' doubled over '—called upon, to settle my debts? Only I'll have to plan ahead. Visit
the market. Smooth my way with enough wine, or cider, or—or a solution of—'

Tears on his face. He couldn't breathe.

'I never went to bed with Colette,' Claudine said.

'Ah, well.' Wiping his eyes on his pyjama-sleeve. Gasping. 'Don't give up hope. Statistically, the
odds in your favour are, not to say overwhelming, but—'

'Stop it.'

His teeth clicked together. Salt trails through salt. The silence stretched out.

'What happened?' said Claudine, at last.

He shook his head. Gestured, vaguely, towards the sea.

'There was,' she said, 'a cat?'

'I patted it,' Sherlock agreed.

'And then?'

'It ran off.' Waving his hand. 'Into the night.'

'Sherlock.'

Claudine's voice was bent back wrong. Sentiment: anxious. Heartbroken. Only, Sherlock had gone
for a swim. He had patted a cat. He hadn't laughed so hard in weeks.

'All right,' he said. His voice, lately of London, ought to sound just so. 'Tell me about you and
Madame Jouvenel.'
Claudine slid the peach and the knife onto a plate. She brought them to the table and sat down across from him, in one of the flimsy chairs.

'Your work,' she said. 'The way you live. It—you found it, and it lifts you up.'

Sherlock swallowed, bitter in the back of this throat. He didn't answer.

'But there was a time,' Claudine said, 'when it didn't.'

Her kitchen-knife clinked on the plate, to the wet thlunk of peach slices hitting porcelain.

'I remember,' said Sherlock.

Like so.

'Then. If there were someone who had helped you from—from one place to the other. And if that person were, themselves, in—'

'I'm here,' he bit out. Too fast. 'Aren't I,' and then he shut his teeth, hard, and closed his eyes.

'Well,' Claudine murmured, after a long moment. 'One does the best one can.'

On the wall of the kitchen, across from his seat, black saucepans hung on hooks. A house-fly buzzed, one to the next; and wouldn't settle.

'That person,' Claudine said, raising her chin at him, 'for me, was Colette.'

'Pardon?'

'Just as I say.'

'She's not a violinist,' he blurted out (too familiar, too——), 'I've seen her hands.'

'Nor did I teach you,' said Claudine, 'to deduce secrets, or solve puzzles.'

Sherlock took a breath; sighed it out. His skin itched. His eyelids and the backs of his knees and the cleft of his backside. He was suddenly very weary. By his left ear the house-fly buzzed.

'I thought you met on the stage,' he said.

'We met at the home of my father's fiancée. Or, as I called her to her face that day, my father's whore.'

'You wouldn't,' he said. Humouring her. Buzz, buzz, buzz.

'By the time I met you, of course not. The winter my mother died I was, what? Twenty-five?'

'Twenty-six.'

'Twenty-six. I should have been called it myself by then, and much worse. But I was scarcely eighteen, the spring of 1895. Eighteen, with my mother's compositions out of fashion; two younger sisters and a brother who—well.'

'Was not precisely swelling the family purse?' Sherlock managed. His tongue felt sharp in his mouth but loose laughter was welling up again, welling up in him from whence? Towards where? She wouldn't like it; so he blinked and blinked his salt-encrusted eyes.
'He'd gone to sea,' Claudine was saying. 'Already, by that time. Shipped out from Portsmouth on his twenty-first fête.'

Sherlock nodded: a civilised visitor, just over from London. She slid the plate of peach-slices towards him and he took one. The juice ran down between his fingers: a thing that was allowed on holiday. When he licked it up the salt mingled with the sweet.

'So,' she said. 'I was to be the well-behaved daughter. Putting my sisters through school, giving violin-lessons to brats from Le Marais. I knew I was not—not marriageable, you understand. And if I were not to marry… I thought I should be trapped in that room forever. I hated my father, and his woman, and my sisters too. Hated them all; as one only can at eighteen.'

At eighteen, Sherlock thought, or at—

'So you sought her out,' he said. 'Your father's fiancée.'

She jiggled the plate. He took another dripping slice. The fly buzzed-buzzed and the heat sat heavy on their heads.

'Her name was Moreno,' Claudine said. 'Marguerite Moreno, and she lived in an apartment off the Rue de Bellechasse.'

She sat back, digging in; Sherlock closed his itching eyes. He might be an old traveller, he thought. A Victorian gentleman, just over from London; who had known well the demimonde in the Rue de Bellechasse, twenty-five years before.

'And I had,' Claudine was saying, 'well, it hardly matters. A girl, an artist, she had asked me to go with her to Barcelona. I felt, if only this slut had not lured my father away. And then I was so angry, all that afternoon, with my students. One boy left in tears; so I'd lost that money as well. And there, in the Rue de Bellechasse, this glamorous woman, this actress. So, yes, I marched over to her flat. She was having coffee with a friend and I screamed at her. My God, the things I screamed. No doubt you can imagine them.'

'No doubt I can,' he said, with his eyes still closed. One's smile in such circumstances should be wry; yet amused.

'Marguerite,' she said, 'just sat there, her spine straight under a brand-new, oh, Worth, probably, green satin gown. And me in five-year-old linen. And this young Bourguignonne friend—'

'Ah.'

'—with her country accent and her long hair falling over her shoulder, laughing at me.' Claudine, now, starting to laugh herself. The table shaking in tremors under his fingers. These Continental women, the visitor might think: with their volatile tempers.

'A girl,' she was saying, laughing, 'from the provinces. Scarcely older than I was. I, who had lived in Paris all my life. And she didn't even try to hide it. Shrieking with laughter while I shouted myself hoarse.'

'Quite the kind of thing,' he agreed, 'that your Madame Jouvenel would enjoy.'

'Madame Gauthier-Villars, then. Married only two years. She was the toast of Paris because the scent still lingered on her: fresh country air and the slate-dust of a provincial girls' school. Can you imagine?'
He opened his eyes and let out a breath; made it shake into a clubbish chuckle.

'Not,' she went on, as he ran his tongue around his sticky mouth and pictured them both: slips of things, ghosts of girls, screaming in a drawing room on the Rue de Bellechasse, 'not that I knew that, then. I only shouted at Marguerite, while she stared and this country girl laughed, oh, it was dreadful. My voice broke. I started to cry. The little provincial falling out of her chair laughing. To feel so ridiculous, at eighteen.'

The window above the sink was black now, between white mullions: nothing to be seen. There could be, for all he knew, someone on the other side; someone looking in at Claudine with her hand half-obscuring her mouth and her distinguished relation in his Regent Street pyjamas, a man who had patently never been eighteen, or eleven, talking of the old days in Madame Jouvenel's whitewashed country kitchen. It would look… cosy. Well. Perhaps it was.

'Yes,' he said. 'Feels unbearable, doesn't it.'

'I ran out,' Claudine agreed. 'Ran down the stairs, could not see; skinned my knee. Me, and my visions of—of Barcelona, with a lover. Laughed out of a whore's flat; crying in the street like a child.'

The house-fly buzzed against the black glass and the mullions. Sherlock moved his head with the fond forbearance of a Hyde Park grandfather in the summer, his eyes slow against the movement of his skull. He blinked. Blinked. Got to his feet with his head aching, the plate clicking in the sink. It was almost as if he might leave himself behind.

'Colette caught me up,' Claudine was saying to Sherlock's back, 'before I had walked half a mile. She took me to a bistro; ordered a bottle of Bourgogne and a plate of prawns. She called me a bitter, mediocre bastard while I ate her food and drank her wine; said Paris was full of girls like me, said she'd seen it already; said that what I needed, if I were to make my own way, was to make an impression.'

'An impression,' he repeated. 'She would know.'

'She would,' said Claudine. 'Even then. She told me: they will notice, if you do the unexpected thing. They don't expect, that a girl like me and a woman like Marguerite could be—well, she needn't spell it out. And had I bothered to find out, she asked, how my father's new mistress spent her days?'

If Sherlock were outside, looking in, he would be staring into his own face. The face of a distinguished traveller. A man just over from London.

'And did she,' he asked Claudine, his heavy tongue moving from miles down the garden, 'allow you time enough to answer?'

'No,' she said. 'Not really. I nearly choked, you understand. An actress! I said, but she spoke over me: Marguerite Moreno, the most promising young actress since Bernhardt. And I had told her I played the violin: was I good? I said I'd been playing since the age of three; had she not heard my mother's name? And well then, she said: had I any notion how much more I could bring in: a young, blonde, premier violinist for a drama on the boulevards, than an eighteen-year-old tutor in a garret studio?'

Sherlock nodded; the skin of his neck hurt him, when he moved his head. Any sunburnt visitor would cross to the ice box. Sherlock crossed to the ice box. Chilled cider-bottle against his smarting nape. 'You, of course,' he said, with his voice like so, 'were incensed.'
'Of course,' Claudine said. 'I stood up at the table, to leave. Was she telling me, I shouted, to ask my father's whore for a position?'

Cool glass. Ice-wet against his neck. The gentleman from London, someone would think, looking in the window at the scene, is suffering from the sun. The English were always greedy for it, weren't they. Almost a match for the Germans for burning up on a sunny day. And the Frenchwoman going on. Saying, 'Colette just laughed at me.' Saying, 'Nibbled on a prawn.'

Saying, 'She told me: for God's sake don't say it like that. Swallow your dislike; do not show it on your face. People will say how men and women have no power over you. She told me she would prepare the way with Marguerite. Told me Marguerite felt for the children my father had left behind; and if she felt—if she felt she were doing something, and that I loved her for it—well. Then she would feel better about her marriage.'

'Ah.' \textit{Marriage}. Glimpsed from without, he thought, their faces must have changed.

'Indeed,' said Claudine. 'I felt sick, and she said, oh yes, he is going to marry her. Your mother can write a song about it; and you can play it to crowds on the boulevards. In a beautiful silk dress.'

The house was silent. The cider was cool.

'And did you?' Sherlock asked, for the benefit of the ghostly visitor, who might even now be standing on his toes outside the kitchen window, face to face with the long-time Londoner, unaccustomed to the sun.

'She spent a week,' said Claudine, 'telling Marguerite how charming I was; how talented, though she'd never heard me play. By the time I went 'round again to her flat, Marguerite welcomed me. Got me a place in the pit at the show she was playing. It was the beginning of—of the life I chose. And Colette made it possible, that I pay my own way. That in my bed last night Hélène—'

'Yes,' he said, and she said: 'And so you see, whatever she may have said to you—'

'No,' he said again. 'Of course.'

He put the bottle down by the sink, her eyes reflected in the window. Sentiment: pleading; expectant. If he turned around, there they would be. Anyone, he thought, would offer something in return. Some morsel of fellow feeling. It could be anything. Any little thing. It hardly mattered what he said, with his voice just so.

'Do you hear from him, then?' he asked her. 'Raphäel?'

Claudine inhaled.

'Dead,' she said. 'These four years.'

He nodded. He cleared his throat, at his image reflected back. His sun-pink salty face.

'He did tell me,' Claudine said, 'before he left, he took me aside—' and the London gentleman ('Oh, I'm certain,' Sherlock said) ran his hand over his face. Doubtless tired from all the fresh sea air.

'I don't—are you,' Claudine said, and licked her lips, and then: 'Doctor Watson has only gone to follow up a lead, in Paris.'

Glenkinchie. Three thirty-nine in the morning.
'But one never knows,' said Sherlock. He turned. And smiled.

The visitor from London, one might think, as one squinted through the gloom and the dirty glass into the warm-lit kitchen, had business to attend to; had thoughts that were returning, inexorably, to the City; to the fog and the vaults and the unanswered correspondence that must await him at his desk. He was, one would assume, a man of weight. A man of consequence, unflappable; turning over papers in a dark-wood room. Saying, serene: 'One never really knows. Does one?'

And he kissed his cousin's perplexed forehead, in the quiet evening; and she let her fingers slide along his arm; and he took himself up to bed.

Saturday, August 27th, 1921
10pm (Hour 80)

'Terrible, isn't it?' Irene said; and the woman next to her said, 'Hm?'

Huge brown eyes. Black curls down her back. If the woman seemed any less tiny removed from the bulk of Henry Jouvenel, it was a close thing; her bare ankle might fit the circle of Irene's thumb and her middle finger. Bowed over the bar with that look about her like she'd buckle in moments for a kind word; a soft hand at her back. Irene's hands, after Germaine, and Holmes, were twisting into shapes. Wanting to turn into some hard thing.

She'd watched his back from her balcony as he'd disappeared into the dark. Having struck; longing to strike. Longing to flex and spar. She couldn't settle and she hadn't wanted to so she'd thrown on the black Chanel with the red edges and her shoes (red) and her lips (red) and she'd filled her handbag (black) with paint and mirrors and come out swinging. And then: right in her lap. Parked outside the St Malo theatre was the ancient Renault from the garage at Roz Ven. Exquisite she'd thought, with her mouth watering and her hand cupped to its dirt-streaked window. Delicious as she'd slithered past the porter and into the bar, peeking past the dozing attendant into the theatre. The play was dreadful and the Roz Ven lot had Paris palates; surely some quarry would break cover and could be drawn out. Her photographs could be, this very moment, in a handbag perching on a restless knee. She'd thought: sublime.

'Terrible,' she drawled, now. 'Execrable.' Putting on Paris like a mantle; gathering it about her with an offended face.

The woman's head, drooping over her wine glass, nodded vaguely.

'I mean to say,' said Irene, 'their Kristine and Rank are fine, I suppose. But with a Nora like that! Ouf. And the children.'

The woman flinched. 'One mustn't expect too much,' she said, 'with regard to—to provincial players.'

Mustn't one, Irene didn't say, or isn't this my lucky night or in Le Havre, before the War, but only: 'Goodness! I should think one might dissuade them from looking directly at the audience, in any case. And from swallowing half their lines. Between my neighbour's snores and the wailing of the brats—'

The woman bit her lip.

'Oh,' Irene said. Only now saying: oh. Such moneyed viragoes were always so self-involved. 'Oh,' she said, 'I'm so sorry. I had thought—you did leave, you know. After the first act.'
The woman shook her head. A curl tumbled in front of her eye.

And so Irene shifted; cleared her throat. Disconcerting, they would be: these comings-down to the level of the populace. She shuffled and hemmed; and as she fusséd her handbag from one knee to the other, she caught the faintest lift at the corner of the woman's stretched-tight mouth.

'Diane,' she told her then. An uncomfortable smile. 'Diane de Lamartine.'

*Diane* bestowed her Christian name like a favour; like a gift-wrapped box held aloft on her outstretched hand; and Irene liked her neighbour more for every moment the woman eyed it, unconvinced. When she shifted her weight at last, it was to clasp the tips of the fingers, briefly, with a whisper-light touch.

'Madame Carco,' she said, with subtle stress on the *Madame*. That's me, Irene thought, put in my place.

'I fear I've alarmed you,' said Diane.

'No, I—'

'Let me buy you a drink.'

'It's not—'

'But I insist,' Diane said, and: 'All right,' said Madame Carco, after a beat. So: Diane's hard hand signaled to the bartender, for another of the same. He set to.

'You are here alone?' Diane asked. Making conversation, with her mouth pursed: see? she would be thinking. She could converse with the commoners, in the lobby of a provincial theatre. 'You are staying in St Malo? In one of the hotels along the shore?'

'No,' said Madame Carco, 'we—the summer house of a friend of my husband's, from Paris—'

'Oh you're married!' exclaimed Diane, who had as a flimsy excuse the glass blocking Madame Carco's left hand; and, as a less flimsy one, her own narcissism. 'I was married, you know. Only a few years we had, before I lost him. The War took so many brave boys.'

'Oh,' said Madame Carco, shifting on her seat. 'I'm sorry.' Then took a too-large sip of her drink, and choked when Diane, absentmindedly, patted her hand.

'Thank you, dear,' Diane said; and then, supremely unconcerned, 'Oh no,' as the woman coughed and spluttered. 'Are you quite all right?'

Madame Carco's shoulders shook. Diane cast down dubious glances, spine very straight; and when their eyes met, Madame Carco's were narrowed. *Getting there*, Irene thought, as Diane pursed disapproving lips.

Any of the Roz Ven men would've been simpler targets, if they'd only had the sense to leave the play themselves; but then Irene had always risen to a challenge. A shame she couldn't race him at it, really: Holmes. Given the same prize and the same course, surely she'd finish noses ahead; he was so wonderfully distractible. They could play it over the course of an evening, perhaps. Best four out of seven, choosing each others' marks.

Another moment and Madame Carco really was quite all right; though with wet eyes and flushed cheeks, and a hand that kept clicking nails against her glass.
'And your husband, dear,' said Diane, as the clicking picked up, 'what did he do, during the War?'

'He was an aviator,' Madame Carco snapped. Irene, conjuring an image of the man, pontificating at Roz Ven with his gold glasses glinting in the sunshine, let Diane raise her eyebrows and cut her eyes away so that Madame Carco amended, 'He had his license, anyway. And he was stationed with an air unit, in Gray, as—'

'Mmm.'

'—a bursar of the post.'

Her thin shoulders drew together, defiant. Her chin tipped up. She was no doubt trying to meet Diane's eyes—but Diane, as it happened, was looking away.

'That's all right, dear,' said Diane, vaguely. Gazing over at the front door, through which nobody in particular was walking. 'That's all right. Only so many Georges Guynemers, aren't there? They can't all be heroes. Especially when one must think about putting—' waving a hand, 'food on the table, as they say. Better that you got him back, wasn't it? You and the children.'

Like a slap; like a thunderclap; lovely. The woman started almost off her stool. Her hand came down on the bar, catching her weight and clinging on; while Diane, examining the wall, resumed patting at her tensed white knuckles.

'Just think,' Diane was saying. 'One could hardly hire a nanny off the pension and live on it as well. Why, I find the checks hardly worth the trouble of depositing. You'd have had to go out in the world yourself, and leave your little ones with strangers; unless, of course, you've relations nearby? Though,' she added, eyeing Madame Carco's dress, 'not family in Paris, surely.'

Though in truth it was only neglected, the dress. The dress, and the woman's wild curls, and her skin. She held herself perfectly still, a tiny battered wall against the onslaught, and Irene saw again, in her mind's eye, the room at Roz Ven that must have been the Carcos': his manuscript pages tacked up on all the walls; and in the WC her sad washed-out under-things, hung to dry on the far side of the bath. Grief, maybe, and fury: Irene could drink her from a Champagne flute. A woman like Diane, though: she would never know the difference.

Diane would say, as indeed she was saying: 'In any case, this way you needn't trouble them, and you needn't move house. Only proper, for a married establishment. And you can raise your children yourself, which I hear is all the rage amongst women of your—'

'I haven't any,' Madame Carco whispered; at last.

'I beg your pardon?' said Diane. The girl's face. Irene could play it like a harp.

'I have no children,' Madame Carco said.

'What, not any? I'd thought—didn't you say you had?'

'I want—but my husband—'

'My dear girl,' said Diane. 'Not even during the War?'

Madame Carco flushed up. Knuckles stretched tight, still, on the bar.

'I came out to the bar,' she said, 'because those precious children—and Nora seemed not to care.'
Nora, Irene thought, had seemed to be half-asleep, being fed her lines by a barely-concealed stage-hand; but she supposed that qualified as a disregard for the children. More likely Madame Carco had read the play to please her inflated husband.

'But surely,' Diane said, dismissive, 'men are very like children. You must only make him realise it is to his advantage to give you what you want. Another man, to make him hoard his toys; another girl to make him hungry, just as you happen along—why,' she added, looking as if in surprise down at her own body, with its beads and its pearls and its legs bare to the knee, 'is your seat still vacant? I can have him in your bed in an hour after curtain, my dear.'

She almost meant it. Almost laughed. Stumbling in, half-tipsy, in the guise of a dizzy American; giggling with him through the interminable third act, over—what? Imagined expatriate exploits in the Quartier Latin, no doubt. Mr Pound said to Mr Joyce, with her dress falling off her shoulder; winding him up tight, tighter, and then flinging him at last into the path of his wife. She was half-off her stool, with a quickness unseemly in Diane de Lamartine.

But Madame Carco fidgeted; wouldn't look at her. A shame, Irene thought, climbing back onto her seat. It would have made for some amusing pillow-talk: husband and wife, comparing impressions of that singular woman from the theatre.

'During the War,' said Madame Carco, 'he would. With me, and with—but it made no difference.' Irene speculated whether there was anywhere on her body the woman wasn't blushing. Diane just said, 'Heavens.'

Down the bar a young scion, hair and necktie rumpled, had just poured himself onto a stool. He winked at them. Diane smiled back. 'With you so much in love,' she said to Madame Carco, 'that is a difficulty. And not so much as a real indiscretion to justify you, from your bursar of the post.'

'You don't know,' Madame Carco said, 'the first thing—' with a weird wet hiccup that turned even Diane's head. 'Not the first thing.'

'Oh darling girl,' said Diane.

'Not a thing,' repeated Madame Carco, and then squeezed her eyes shut as the bartender brought them another round.

'You're setting yourself up as what, dear?' said Diane, treacly, as Madame Carco knocked back half her glass. 'A secret Bohemian? No dreams of a banking post and medals on your husband's coat? Of afternoons in the park with the children and conversation at dinner about how Versailles has made the world safe for—'

'I do,' said Madame Carco, very quiet, 'so I went to bed with our married host, just.' She laughed. 'He's got children on three women at least.'

'Oh,' Irene said, 'my'; her hands steady. 'And when was this, then, this… scandalous behaviour?'

'Last night,' Madame Carco said, with Irene practically mouthing along. 'I don't think he even wanted to, really. I was the only woman at the house under the age of forty whom he hadn't—I think he wanted to complete his collection.'

'Plenty to be said for women over the age of forty,' Irene said, not thinking, not even—Diane would never. She could have clapped a hand to her idiot mouth; and now the Carco woman was looking at her strangely, like coming out of a fog.

'I… suppose,' she said.
'If he was only adding a beast to his hunting-board,' said Irene—said Diane—'you must have been keeping track of your time.'

'Of course.'

Diane nodded. Irene nodded. 'I hope,' she said, 'it takes.'

'Thank you,' said Madame Carco, her small features twisted into a mask of puzzlement, her drink empty, her eyes scanning the room. From inside the theatre came the sound of sleepy applause; and the doors across from the bar swung open to release the first of the staggering audience.

'My husband,' Madame Carco said. 'The rest. I should—,' gesturing to them as they stretched and groaned into the lobby.

'Yes,' Irene said.

They were crowding now, from the doors. Madame Carco ought to be meeting them. 'Yes,' Irene said, again. 'Well, dear. It was lovely talking with you. I hope—,' and she nodded, as Madame Carco smiled and slid off her stool. Across the lobby, from the corner of her eye, Irene caught the figures of Henry Jouvenel and his beautiful blonde; and the stout spectacles of Monsieur Carco, who, spotting his wife weaving her way through the crowd, put up a hand.

'Germaine!' Irene called, in a roughened, lowered Germanic accent at Madame Carco's retreating back; and watched her startle; and stop, and turn her head to scan the crowd; but by the time she'd completed the turn, Irene had slid off her stool, and taken cover in the shifting mass of bodies, headed for the doors.

Chapter End Notes

1. This week, in 'History: I Couldn't Make This Shit Up': the historical Catulle Mendès (poet, and father to both the historical and the fictional Claudine) actually did leave the historical Augusta Holmès (composer, and Claudine's mother) for the actress Marguerite Moreno, who in 1895 met and became close friends with the young Colette, still married to her first husband. In 1895 Mendès was planning to marry Moreno, although that never panned out, because later that year she met the symbolist writer Marcel Schwob, and ended up marrying him in 1900. Judith Thurman writes that Marguerite Moreno became something unusual, for Colette: not a rival, a lover or an acolyte, but a friend and peer.

2. Please enjoy a gratuitous image of this beautiful 1895 Worth tea gown, which I have Marguerite Moreno wearing for her coffee with Colette:
3. Sarah Bernhardt was a dramatic actress whose fame, by 1895, had reached superstar proportions. Marguerite Moreno went on to share the stage with her at the Comédie Française, and later, in 1903 left that company to work at the Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt, which Bernhardt directed.

4. Re: Rank, Kristine, and Nora: As Sherlock feared, the play being put on by the provincial St Malo theatre troupe is Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

5. The little snippets of information about Francis Carco's military career are essentially true: he had his aviator's license but spent most of the War as a bursar of post; late in the War he was transferred to an airborne division, but didn't get to spend much time flying.

6. Georges Guynemer: Possibly clear from context, but Guynemer was a French flying ace and national hero, who was shot down by the Germans in 1917.

7. Also true: Germaine Carco's given name. Three Germaines, one country house, three weeks in August of 1921. Sounds like the recipe for a summer blockbuster to me.

8. Further DVD notes on this chapter can be found [here](#).
Sunday, August 28th, 1921
9am (Hour 90)

'Good Lord,' Irene said, as her coffee cup clicked, indignant, in its saucer. 'And you roust me out of bed at—did you sleep at all, last night?—for a little chat about this...'

'Imbecile.'

'Because I must not encounter many of the type, in my daily life. I'd be missing them.'

Holmes, across her little balcony-table, practically out in public and drinking her tea like some parody of a civilised person, pulled in his chin with his eyebrows up.

'You,' he said, 'of all people, can recognise a useless man.'

'I don't believe for a moment you're—'

'Who,' he interrupted, 'sees a strange woman at the public telephone at half three in the morning, and doesn't feel curious?'

She narrowed her eyes; but his face was blank. If she hadn't seen him herself when he'd been shaking; growling; trying to slap—

'Similar thoughts,' she said, 'had crossed my mind.'

'So,' he said; and she said: 'So.'

She sat up. Refilled their cups from the coffee pot. He smiled at her, quick and desultory: like the man they hired to keep the accounts at Le Chabanais, with whom Irene sometimes shared a pastry in her dressing-gown and hair-papers as he massaged their accounts. He holidayed with his granddaughter in Rouen. Irene, on the balcony, patted surreptitiously at her coiffure.

'But he told you,' she said, 'it was a young woman.'

'Seemed to have no doubt. Though with such paltry skill at observation, it could just as well be a diminutive man in a dress.'

'The person was small?'

'The person was assumed to be a woman, at twenty yards, in a coat, despite the heat. Was probably carrying things, needed places to store them. But a man in a full-length coat—and besides...'

He sipped at the steaming cup. Down on the promenade, a gaggle of white-clad girls sauntered past, chattering to set up an ache in her head.

'And besides?' she prompted him, and he let out a breath.

'I have reason to believe that if the person who placed that call from the telephone box in St Coloumb wasn't you—'
'You've already said the person was French.'

'For which you could easily pass,' he said; but there was no heat to it. 'And I saw you fleeing Roz Ven shortly after two-thirty: had you been traveling on foot, that timing would work out about right. Only, from the marks on your legs when you returned to the hotel yesterday, you'd stowed a bicycle.'

'I had,' she said, 'yes.'

'So. If you had intended to telephone to Paris from St Coulomb, why loiter about for the better part of an hour, when at the time you had no intelligence of—' no hitch, she listened for it but it didn't come '—Doctor Watson's movements, and therefore no reason to prefer one time over another? No, I can extend you the benefit of the doubt in that particular regard.'

Irene massaged her temples.

'Not,' she said, 'on the strength of my wit and charm?'

'No,' said Holmes. He almost smiled.

'Then we've got,' she said, 'we've got, well. Plainly I was the one breaking into Roz Ven, wasn't I, looking for my photographs and then for your name. And the break-ins at Le Matin and Claire Boas's house were—'

'Could have been—'

'—some half-rate burglar hired by Charles Humbert, but we still don't know,' with his clean empty eyes watching her over the rim of his coffee cup, 'who has my photographs. Or who might have called Doctor Watson from the village.'

'True,' he said, 'but that wasn't my point.' He set down his cup with a click as the girls on the promenade set up another round of squealing. 'I have reason to believe that our telephoner, if it wasn't you, was someone present at Roz Ven that day. During the luncheon.' He sipped his coffee. 'Before Doctor Watson went back up to Paris.'

Snarling, he had been. Spitting. Twisting away from her hands; and now it was almost as if he could scarcely keep his attention on their conversation. As she was no doubt supposed to do, she watched him watch the sea.

'Oh yes?' she asked him.

'I made a comment,' he said, waving a lazy hand, 'that implied I thought Madame Boas herself might be responsible. I think the call to Doctor Watson was a reaction. Meaning—'

'Meaning,' she mused, 'that one can rule out small-boned men.' He laughed, unexpected, into his coffee.

'Indeed,' he said. 'Unless one of the Jouvenel boys made the trek into St Coloumb. Renaud could never pass for an adult woman, but Bertrand might; though whether he could speak in a convincing female voice is another question. But supposing the caller was neither boy, it certainly can't have been, as you say, Henry Jouvenel, or Francis Carco.'

'The women, then,' she said.

'We can do better than that, I think,' said Holmes, pedantically. Irene was visited by the desire to kick him, just a little. 'Isabelle de Comminges, otherwise known as The Panther, might summon up
unsuspected reserves of energy to take her old Renault out under cover of moonlight; but I checked before I left this morning, and the mileage gauges on both cars remain untouched since I checked them on Friday afternoon. The woman is theatrical, which is a point against her; but she is also genuinely ill; Madame Jouvenel no doubt requested a doctor's signed promise of imminent death before letting her rival onto her property. The Countess won't have walked the distance.'

'Theatrical,' Irene repeated. Her voice was bland, but the syllables sat heavy on her tongue.

'It's a point against you, as well,' he said, gazing out to sea.

'Madame Jouvenel,' she said, 'could have—' but Holmes shook his head.

'I heard her quite distinctly, in the early stages of love-making just after two.' The early stages.

'Profiterole, by the way?' said Irene, with a smile.

'And again,' said Holmes, looking vaguely repulsed at the suggestion, 'as nobody took either of the cars into the village, she'd not have had time to walk; and in any case she strikes me as the type to take her time.'

Irene's face, she made sure, was blandness itself. On the boards in Le Havre, before the War.

'Your cousin,' she said, sinking sharp teeth into pastry. 'Claudine Holmès could have walked the distance, easily.'

'She could,' he agreed.

'She's theatrical,' said Irene. 'Did you hear any love-making from her room?'

He shook his head. Sipped his coffee with his delicate fingers cradling the cup and his legs crossed at the ankle. He had panted, she reminded herself; he had writhed.

'No,' he said, 'though, having braved the wrath of the united Jouvenel front in order to bring me across the Channel, I somehow doubt that my cousin would have gone to such trouble to protect Claire Boas.'

'Whoever stole those photographs,' Irene said, speaking in a wide arc around the nitrate squares and the pasted-up ransom note and the Hotel Vernet, 'they must be a person with some reason not to simply publish.'

'Like you, for example.'

'I am out in these hinterlands in order to track the things down. And in any case, I've no allegiance to Claire Boas. I've scarcely met the woman. Let her hang.'

'An admirable sentiment.'

'Oh, don't pretend. You take my meaning perfectly. You and I haven't the— the scruples, of whomever is running about with my photographs. Not like, say, your cousin, who wants to protect her friend.'

'Or the Panther, who wants to protect her son; or Mademoiselle Picard, who wants to protect her position; or Mademoiselle Patat, who wants to protect her business. The problem with the Jouvenels seems to be that everyone has reason to resent them; yet everyone owes them something they don't want to give up.'
Irene opened her mouth; then closed it. Below, on the promenade, the chattering girls had finally moved on to some point out of earshot. Holmes sighed.

'If it truly was a young woman, calling from St Coloumb,' he said, 'and it was also a person present at luncheon on Friday, then we are left with: Mademoiselle Patat; Mademoiselle Beaumont; and Madame Carco. Mademoiselle Picard and my cousin are also young enough to pass for it; though Claudine says that Mademoiselle Picard was in her bed that night; for whatever that's worth.'

'She would say so.'

'Probably,' he agreed. Hardly even blinking; his eyes very wide. 'Meanwhile, both Jouvenels were hard at it, audibly, a relatively short time before the call was placed. Sadly for young Bertrand, neither was with him: the lady of the house tells me that she was entertaining the lovely Germaine Patat.'

'Was she,' Irene said.

'So she claims. I must say,' he mused, 'for a stout woman, just shy of fifty, she doesn't lack for company. I don't see the appeal, but then that's more your milieu.'

Sticky pastry cream at the back of Irene's throat.

'Pardon?' she said, and he flicked his eyes to her for a moment before looking away.

'Women,' he said.

'Ah,' she said. 'Yes. Women.'

Germaine Beaumont. Gretha and Léonie. And Madame Jouvenel of Paris, all mixed up with Madame Colette in Le Havre. Odd to hold them all, fan-like, in her hand. One night in another life Irene had won a diamond bracelet off an heiress at La Garçonnière with nothing more than nonchalance and a pair of sixes. The fastenings had been real gold. She'd had nothing to wear it with, back then.

Holmes cleared his throat. Refilled his coffee.

'By an odd coincidence,' Irene said, boredom in every gesture, 'I learned last night that Madame Carco's Christian name is also Germaine.'

'What,' he said, 'are you sure?' His crinkled-up nose: oddly undignified.

'Positive,' she said.

'Well. Perhaps Monsieur Jouvenel fancied collecting the whole set.'

His spoon, tapping at the side of his coffee cup. Irene carelessly laughed.

'One never knows,' she said, 'about people. I've only seen the Carcos together from afar, of course, but I'd have said that Madame simply dotes on her husband. Perhaps…'

'Perhaps unreasonably,' Holmes agreed.

'But then,' said Irene, 'one can dote excessively on a person, can't one, and still misbehave with someone else.'

'Can one?' he said. An audible breath. 'What news from Paris?'
He’d been gutted. Hollowed out and gasping. Now his jaw clenched and his eyes stretched open and behind them a pale grey void.

'This hotel takes all the city papers,' said Irene.

'You kept your tail on Doctor Watson, I believe.'

She held his gaze, black silk on her shoulders. Not shifting her eyes towards the double doors, or the side-table by the chaise longue, or the telegraph held down by a blown-glass globe. She drew out a fag from the case by her coffee cup.

'Cigarette?' she said; and he exhaled; and leant in for her light.

'So,' she said. 'Who remains to us? Germaines Carco and Beaumont; Bertrand Jouvenel; Claudine Holmès; Hélène Picard, yes? One of them is sufficiently guilt-ridden, or sufficiently protective of Claire Boas, to place that call from the village. Odds are good that the same person has my photographs.'

Holmes, unblinking. Her coffee cup raised, and the smile strapped to her teeth.

'On strength of motive,' he said, when he looked away from her at last, 'or lack thereof, I'd eliminate Claudine Holmès and Mademoiselle Picard. Though I've no doubt you'll reach your own conclusions.'

'I've no doubt I will.'

'In any case. Perhaps we ought not to discount young Bertrand Jouvenel, if his stepmother-cum-lover wasn't with him. Assuming he could—and would, for some reason of his own—put on a convincing female voice, the message given to the hotel desk did reek of the kind of melodrama found in those penny-dreadfuls he reads. Claire Boas is the boy's mother, after all.'

Click-click-click, went something just outside Irene's field of vision. Like a camera-shutter, snapping open.

'I searched his room,' she said.

'As did I. He might have an accomplice, I suppose. If it was definitely a woman who accosted Agnès Humbert.'

Click-click. Click.

'I suppose,' she said. Her eyes focused half-inward.

'Both you and I,' he went on, 'heard Henry Jouvenel, well after two, calling out Germaine to a woman whom I took to be Mademoiselle Patat; whom you, probably correctly as it turns out, identified as Germaine Beaumont; but who could also, in theory, have been Germaine Carco.'

'As a matter of fact—' said Irene—Click—but Holmes's flat blank voice gave the slightest English tilt to the name Beaumont, and—Click—she thought: penny dreadfuls, and heard—Click—suddenly—Click—clear as day, in Germaine's French-tilted English—Click: Here I am. Reviewing foreign crime novels and the Jouvenel datebook by day. Unlucky in love by night.

And Irene—

Irene—
Holmes talking on, and on, as: the lovely, Irene thought, the untested, virginal girl. The magnificent bitch; shocked-wet and open and riding Irene's thigh: C'est impossible, Germaine had said, je ne fais pas—avec vous, and Irene, like a naïve bloody fool, like an ass in its blinkers, had thought the reference had been to her sex. Had smirked, had pretended—fireworks up her spine; the—the mouth on her—

'Mademoiselle Beaumont,' Irene managed, somehow, 'did tell me once—' had, had said, with her electric eyes sparking green when they snapped to Irene's eyes; and her face that had flushed the moment, the bloody moment she'd seen her; and her schoolgirl mouth stuttering out the word fuck while Irene smirked at her and all the while Germaine called up, in her mind's eye, the image of Irene with a cock down her throat, strapped into a Christ—that she'd taken up with a married man.'

'Rekindling an old flame,' came Holmes's voice, from far away, 'was the phrase Madame Jouvenel —'

Irene laughed. The phrase Madame Jouvenel had used, indeed. A wild fluttering in her chest and she was laughing. She rose to her feet on her balcony and thought, with a shock, that she might not be able to stop; might twist free of black silk and the sea and continue up, and up, and—more like a mother to me, Germaine had said, of Madame Jouvenel—Madame Jouvenel who for Irene, always, always, came overlaid on the old phantom Madame Colette—like a mother the girl's lips had said; as behind her eyelids, when she'd blinked, a strapped-up young-limbed Irene pulled on the yanked-tight ropes they'd—

'—employed,' Holmes was saying. Irene's hand to her hurtling heart. Swallowing floods, the mouth on the girl. 'Which means our caller,' Holmes went on, 'could be either Bertrand Jouvenel, who has the greatest investment in Claire Boas but is the poorest candidate physically; or Germaine Carco, who's a bit of a dark horse, and if she harbours any allegiance outside herself, her husband, and their potential future child, I've yet to worm it out of anyone; or Germaine Beaumont, who—'

Penny dreadfuls, Irene thought, fumbling her cigarette as the breeze licked at all the sweat-stuck flooded creases of her, hot, burning-drowning—Danger, she thought, your voice if you speak now, danger but—

'—has the plainest reason for a grudge against Henry Jouvenel; but may have an alibi in the form of—'

'—spending all night fucking him.'

—she said it anyway. Burning. Slick mouth sodden face and her tongue wreathed with smoke, making the word fuck a wavier tension-burst at the back of her throat but he just—danger—stretched languid legs as the deeps spread out beneath her and beneath her Germaine had licked—had opened her soaking lips—

Irene's filmy black silk was stuck to her back. She was soaked through. Laughing; transparent.

'Well,' said Holmes, eyes wide but apparently unseeing, 'whoever it is we're after, they're about to take the photographs back with them to Paris. My cousin tells me the family will be shutting up the house this afternoon.'

'Are they?' she said. Her quivering sweat-dripping flanks and her flaring nostrils. Germaine had looked straight into her face and in her mind's eye seen her fucking—seen her hurting—seen her with her hands around the throat, head over the shoulder, kiss—and had said to Irene, You should come up.
Irene, pulling up on her reins, said: 'Today?'

'So I gather.' Hollow in her head. He said: 'Spread across four different trains; and then Madame Jouvenel and her young amusement are motoring back together.'

'Quite the logistical challenge, then,' Irene said.

The sea-birds circled and her mind slid onto rails. Madame Jouvenel would want him to herself; she had always been most covetous of a thing just as it was ending. And Paris, Irene thought, along rails and rails: the secretaries, the—the cutthroat bloody Christ, they'd be sent ahead, wouldn't they, to smooth the way. Germaine was probably—probably waiting already, in her high-waisted full unfashionable skirt and her button-backed blouse in the heat of the station, her luggage lined up in a perfect row. With the photographs—

'...for Claire Boas's fancy dress ball,' Holmes was saying; as Irene, stubbing out her cigarette on the balcony rail, managed a line about supposing she'd have to arrange a costume, and thought: she'd searched Germaine's room at Roz Ven, hadn't she? And her room and her person, her—her begging deceitful beautiful body, at the Chateaubriand. Irony of ironies, if Irene had embarked on this—this provincial cycling holiday, while the prints remained ensconced in Paris. ('Crimes of passion,' Holmes was saying, and Irene laughed, far away: 'Claire Boas always did have a lively imagination when it came to fêtes.') Germaine had left the negatives, after all. The conniving little bitch had left the negatives for Colette—no, for Madame Jouvenel, more like a mother to me, really, after having accosted Agnès Humbert with an image of Agnès's father, and of Germaine's lover, and of—and of Irene, herself.

'As I recall,' Irene said—awash; alight; turning from the balcony rail, 'you were asking after the news from Paris, Mr Holmes.'

Even caught mid-sentence, he hardly faltered. Hardly blinked. Though last night he had gasped and struggled (as Germaine had—gasp—had been dowdy and meek but had ordered Irene up to her room though she'd known; had feasted on her; had let Irene pretend to innocence as Germaine had panted with her mud-brown hair all down her back, screwing shut her eyes as Irene's mouth watered and she fucked her and wanted to mark her, whip her, shove her crop in her to save her place—and Germaine had been seeing, all the time, Irene pushing her cock into a man's back; Irene hitting Jouvenel's face; Irene kissing, kiss—)

It shouldn't matter, here and now. But Irene, making her way through the double doors, thought: surely there could be some approximation of camaraderie. If she and Holmes could put on conspiracy and smile into each others' faces—school friends, she thought, again. She might like that. Gossiping behind each others' backs.

'Is there any?' he asked her. 'News?'

She turned, and there he stood: leaning on the jamb; with only the faintest tightness about his eyes. She did not grin at him; but she was falling, flying, wet from stem to stem—and it must show.

'We're both returning to the city,' she said, 'the offer stands: shall I remove my man from your Doctor Watson?'

'If I accepted,' he said, 'what would you actually do?'

'Why, I would remove him at once.'

Holmes pushed off from the jamb. Sauntered towards her where she stood, radiant, with her hand on
the blown-glass globe on the side-table by the chaise longue. When he came up level with her, he put out his hand; and into it, resplendent, she placed the telegram in its cheap brown envelope. She could've kissed him. She could have kissed that giggling schoolgirl, or the mother of that squalling infant, earlier, in the street. Holmes seemed not to struggle to meet her eyes.

'Well,' he said. 'This has been civilised. I've no doubt I'll see you in Paris, Miss Adler.'

**Sunday, August 28th, 1921**
**10:30am (Hour 92)**

Not even mid-day, Sherlock thought. Difficult to believe; when the heat hit his face like a solid wall as he stepped out of the St Malo telegraph office. All along the fortifications people dragged themselves up and down. Mopping their slick napes with neck-scarves. Adjusting their wide straw hats. An old man in a white suit, bowed under the weight of the sun, propped his cane with great care against a stone piling and lowered himself to a public bench, breathing through his mouth like a dog.

Roz Ven, thought Sherlock. A half hour in a crowded bus after waiting God knew how long in the open-air station just south of St Malo. But what could one do? There was Monsieur Carco to be found out. The Jouvenel boy ought to be talked to. In his summer suit with his jacket over his shoulder, Sherlock walked north along the battlements, squinting against the sun.

In the telegraph office, it had been cool and still. It had been Sherlock, and a small neat woman with a small neat dog in her small neat handbag, and the sleepy telegraph clerk scribbling figures on the back of a form in the half-dark. Sherlock had stood at the counter with the chill of the stone floors filtering up through his shoes: **PLS INVESTIGATE THROUGH STANDARD MEANS IRENE ADLER COURTESAN EMPLOYED LE CHABANAIS PARIS RUE DE LA FAUBERG POISSONIERE STOP**—his pen scritching over paper with her brown envelope folded in half in his inside jacket pocket. The dog owner had engaged in a ten-minute debate with the clerk over per-word rates to a chemist in Lyon while Sherlock had stood there, his eyes feeling oddly sandy, oddly heavy, staring down at the form. Heaven knew why he felt the need to stare at it so. It was, he thought, just what Sherlock Holmes would write. **BACK TONIGHT 735P** he added, at last—and then, because John so often chided him for not economising on words when sending telegrams: **HOPE YOU CONTINUE WELL STOP HAMMAM IN RUE DES BLANCS-MANTEAUX PLEASANT WALK FROM BD POISSONIERE,** then crossed out everything after ‘well,’ and transferred the remainder over to a fresh form, with his heart stuttering in his chest.

And now the old man panted, on the rampart in the heat of the sun. *Fear no more,* the line went; though Sherlock, walking along the sea wall, thought that wrong. *Fight no more,* perhaps. He put one squelching foot in front of the other, past lovers who couldn't bear to touch and children drooping from their nannies' hands, thinking: *Fight no more the heat of the sun; nor the desolate winter's slumbers.***

The bay viewed from the battlements glowed jade. Teeming with life. He might be a poet, he thought, fighting his heavy eyelids: for all these people knew.

By a tower and a staircase descending to the sea, a sunburnt vendor-woman sold cups of sorbet from a little stand. The night before, Sherlock had scrubbed the flavour of Claudine's peaches from his mouth, and since then he hadn't—well. He might be able to, now.

She took pains to smile up at him, when he handed over his francs. He forced the thought: he might be the kind of person, after all, at whom one smiled over lemon ices. On holiday, in France, he smiled in the sun as he handed over his coins.
Down the sea-stairs he went, with his cup. What shade existed was thronged; so he walked off down the beach. A few minutes on, he hung his jacket from a sun-bleached branch and perched on a piece of driftwood.

Cold sweet lemon slipped down Sherlock's throat. He hardly had to swallow. He licked the sticky dregs from the paper cup; then folded it up tight, and slipped it into his pocket.

His white jacket waved truce-like in the breeze off the sea. He might reach for it, he thought. His heavy limbs in the hot sun. He would have to reach for it. He closed his eyes and saw—and opened his eyes and listened to the surf on the sand, and the shrieking children soaked to their skins. If he could just—

If he could stand up. If he could walk away, happy-go-lucky on a Continental holiday. Or, failing that, if he could melt like pitch into the sands. *Fight no more the heat of the sun*, he thought, and breathed deep.

Half a mile down the beach a dark-haired man in khaki held a kite in his hands. Purple, flapping in the wind, as a little girl ran down the sand with her fingers through a string-wound spool. Sherlock took a breath. With every nerve, every tendon trained on the idea: he might, he thought, be a young father—brother—uncle; with a young niece. He might. (Breathe.) He might have watched for days, for the wind to be just so. Her father might have left, and she might—kites, he thought, his eyes watering, with the brown paper envelope open in his hands.

She might want to learn about kites.

Sherlock would collect her at her mother's house. Walk with her down to the beach. She'd be clamouring the whole way to hold the kite. Perhaps people let children do such things. They would arrive and he would hand her down the spool, and tell her to run. Run far away, Simone, he would say, and she would: she would run down the beach, past a middle-aged Englishman on a piece of driftwood with a brown paper envelope. Sherlock wouldn't notice in the slightest as the man read:

516 WATSON LEFT TEMPLE DU IMPUDEUR WITHOUT MACINTYRE OR OTHER COMPANION

605 PROCEEDED ON FOOT TO—

The older Englishman in the summer suit would be taking a deep breath. But Sherlock, a mile down the beach, would hardly notice, as his niece yelled *Look! Look, uncle, it flies! it flies!* and ran and ran and let the spool burn her fingers. And, *Very good, Simone!*, he would shout, as the middle-aged Englishman on the driftwood bench turned his gaze back down and:

—JARDIN DES PLANTES AND THEN TO—’ Simone with her ankles in the surf, he would be watching ’—MUSEE D'HISTOIRE NATURELLE. 831 RETURNED TO HIS ROOMS. 2005 DEPARTED HOTEL BEL AMI WALKED TO RIGHT BANK 2107 STOOD HALF HOUR MET NO ONE 2136 CROSSED TO RIGHT BANK—’

Sherlock—

Sherlock might be a young barrister, down from Paris for the week-end; on holiday at the sea-shore with his niece. He might be shouting down the beach to her now; might be telling her to run, to run, as he let go the kite like so, face into the wind, don't look back, Simone, run on, as he sprinted down the sand, past the nondescript Englishman with his crumpled ice cup and his driftwood seat and his envelope, limp in his hand in the hot harsh August sun.
1. A nod to Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* via lines from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*: "Fear no more the heat of the sun, / Nor the furious winter's blast; / Thou thy worldly task has done, / And the dream of life is past. / Golden lads and girls all must / Follow thee, and come to dust."

2. Further DVD notes on this chapter can be found [here](#).
Sunday, August 28th, 1921
1pm (Hour 95)

In the stone entranceway it was blessedly cool. Roz Ven, empty, hunched around Sherlock with its windows tied open and all its lawn-chairs folded up against its sides, like knees drawn to a naked chest.

Could a house, Sherlock wondered, really hollow itself out so, overnight? The little girl's room empty; the bed stripped in the room at the top of the stairs, so her father gone too, no doubt with his own (lovely, versatile) Germaine. Sherlock's steps clunked on the floor-boards, in the afternoon heat. The Carcos gone; the Picard woman gone; though Claudine (a tightening beneath his ribs) lingered on: had returned her violin to its case and bundled her many scarves back into her trunk, then had thrown all her luggage together in a haphazard mound just inside the door. From the window at the end of the upstairs hall he spotted her: reclining, in white, in the shade at the edge of the lawn.

Waiting for the news, no doubt; for a report from some long-lost relation. From her cousin, lately estranged. The man would have so much to tell her, Sherlock thought; as soon as he got back from town.

For just a moment, in the silence and the sea-breeze, he let his eyes close, but—open, then. A man of consequence, a banker from London, had—would have weighty matters to attend to.

The first two rooms on the garden side were empty, too: the floor of one littered with fabric scraps and cotton balls, the other in strict order. But when Sherlock's knuckles rapped against the boy Bertrand's open door, a yelped 'I'm doing it!' and a hasty rustling started up from inside.

Sherlock came around the jamb. Bertrand didn't even bother to uncoil himself from his unmade bed, where he was sprawled in tight trousers and a half-undone cravat, with one hand propping open a copy of *L'Éducation sentimentale*, and the other crinkling some papers on his desk just for the rustle they made. When he glanced up to find it was only Sherlock in the doorway, he left off even doing that.

Bit spindly, Sherlock thought. Beautiful eyelashes; bad skin. Ribcage of a young martyr. Madame Jouvenel probably liked him in all this silk. The way he was touching it: he liked it too. But, in the way of boys, did he ever take out his father's old uniform and wish…?

'Clinging to the vestiges,' Sherlock asked, 'of your provincial holiday?'

Bertrand just shrugged. Spared his visitor a withering glance, from head to foot. Sherlock supposed he wouldn't be up to a Flaubertian standard of personal grooming; not after trekking all the way to St Malo and back. And now to be here: standing in front of a boy who was thinking, *Philistines*—one could see it in his eyes—*the Commonwealth, indeed*. Sherlock had to stifle a weird hobbled chuckle behind his hand.

'Your stepmother is…?' he said.

'Down at the water.'
'And you, I'd imagine, are meant to be packing.'

Bertrand flopped about. Said, 'Plenty of time.'

'Still,' said Sherlock. 'You wouldn't mind a bit of help.'

And he found himself halfway across the room already; motion, he realised, not quite suited to a London banker. Best not to stop now, however. Best to see it through. Flaubert, anyway, had fallen shut on the bedclothes.

'I… suppose,' Bertrand said.

'My cousin always told me to empty out my trunk, and start over by putting my shoes at the bottom.'

Bertrand stretched his long arms over his head, so that his shirt gaped. 'Your cousin,' he said, 'has a separate trunk for her shoes alone.'

Her violin case resting atop it in her room, as she sat out on the lawn. Sherlock turned and slid open a drawer in the bureau, and Bertrand said 'What are you—'

'Helping!' Sherlock called out. 'Mustn't keep your stepmother waiting. I imagine she's formidable when crossed, and you have all these cravats that need packing. You are prepared to return, by the way? To the bosom of your actual mother?'

'To Paris, yes,' Bertrand said. 'Nowhere,' he added, with a lazy wave of his hand, 'is quite like Paris.'

Sherlock might have fallen over laughing. Might have—might have slept where he landed. Behaviour not becoming a London banker; so he transferred opera glasses and swim costumes from the drawer to the trunk, feeling along the bottoms of the drawers. Nothing.

'You're quite the dandy,' he said. 'You must be the guest of honour, at your mother's fêtes.'

'Hardly even make an appearance, anymore.'

'Really.' Sherlock moved on to the bottom drawers: sweater-vests and, Christ, short pants. No doubt insisted upon by Madame Jouvenel. 'Your mother,' he said, 'has persuaded you into considerable sacrifices to ensure the success of this ball.'

'A man like you would think it a hardship,' the kid said, and Sherlock felt his spine snap straight.

'Affectionate towards your mother, are you?'

'I—'

'Defend her, would you? If you felt it were warranted?

Hard-backed and grainy-eyed beside the hat rack by the wardrobe. But one never knows he had said to Claudine, lips tacky with peach juice; now the boy's mouth was open.

'Get yourself stirred up,' Sherlock asked him, 'over wrongs done to her? You can resent her but nobody else can? Venture out under cover of night, would you, to defend her honour?'

'I suppose anyone might, given the proper—'

'Anyone,' Sherlock snapped, 'isn't here to answer.'
The kid shut his mouth. Sherlock turned to face the wardrobe; nudged open the left-hand door.

'Ah,' he made himself say. Staring down into knife-edge trouser folds and pressed white collars, with motion at his back. 'Seems you, too, have quite a collection of—'

'Don't look in—'

Sherlock's grin: a poorly-affixed prosthesis. His lungs a bellows and his neck craning back over his shoulder.

'Where shouldn't I look?' he asked. 'In here?'

The boy just stood on his carpet, chewing on his thumb.

Sherlock knelt, with his eyes flicking back to Bertrand, and let his hands stray towards the floor of the wardrobe. No reaction. Standard assortment of men's city shoes—nothing suitable to the sand or the forest floor, nothing that might pass for a woman's—while out loud he said: 'How old are you?' and Bertrand said, 'Seventeen.'

Not reacting to stuffy, English, middle-aged hands up the inside edges of his wardrobe.

'When I was seventeen,' said Sherlock, drawing London back around him as he mussed the hems of Bertrand's many coats to no visible result, 'I used to climb down the drainpipe outside my window, and wander about the town.' No reaction as he touched the wardrobe-ceiling. 'I wrote down my findings in a tiny journal. Kept it in a hollowed-out copy of Harting's *Our Summer Migrants* on my mother's shelves. "An Account of Migratory Birds Which Pass the Summer in the British Islands." I enjoyed the irony of the thing, you see: it had been a gift; she'd never know. You, on the other hand — a wince from the boy as fingers skimmed the edge of the little set of drawers, suspended inside the wardrobe '—I wager you'd opt for a somewhat more pedestrian—ah.'

Tacked to the bottom of the drawers: a brown envelope, thick with sheets. Worn-soft paper. Welcoming to the touch. But *tacked through*? Surely not even a half-grown idiot would—

'Go on,' Bertrand was saying, and Sherlock looked up to see him squaring his shoulders. 'Read them. As if I care. You're not even Parisian.'

It was true. Sherlock was a man of affairs, from London.

'All right,' he said.

He watched the boy watch him, as he pulled out sheets of scribbled-over paper. Cast his eye over one. And another.

'I can see,' Sherlock said, reading, 'why you'd keep these from the literary editor of *Le Matin*. Especially if she were in the habit of letting you—' turning a page, letting his eyebrows rise, 'lap at her womb-rich dew.'

He could almost admire the boy, still keeping his chin up. But: *a man like you.*

'Not the extent of your little hoard, though,' Sherlock murmured, as Bertrand flinched towards his bed, realised what he'd done, and flushed red. 'Are they?' Sherlock said. 'Something a bit more visual —'

'How do you—'
Bertrand swallowed. Sherlock, with his smile still affixed, meandered towards the foot of the bed near the window. Bertrand shifted. He wasn't exactly in Sherlock's path. Couldn't exactly stop him. As Sherlock's knee hit the mattress: 'I thought you were helping me pack?' the boy said. Would-be jaunty. As if Sherlock were one of his own. As if they'd arranged to meet in some café in—in Paris. Absurd. Such children were beneath his notice. He ought to have spectacles, or a pince-nez.

A man of affairs, he settled back on the bed. Turned over a page. A man of affairs read juvenile pornography copied out in a fussy hand. Hardly the inspired range of subject matter one might expect, given what was under his mattress. Still.

'What is your considered opinion,' said the man of affairs, 'about your person being used as a bargaining chip between your mother and stepmother? In England,' he added, 'it's the sort of thing over which we might hold a grudge.'

Bertrand shrugged. His face tender-red. He started piling silk from the wardrobe into his trunk in great messy armfuls. Every time Sherlock shifted on the bed, the boy flinched.

'To us in England,' Sherlock said, laying the papers on the bed next to him, 'it might feel a relief in that circumstance, to have something we could hold over our tormentor's heads.'

Bertrand Jouvenel made a tiny, strangled sound. The man of affairs bowed his ancient spine; lay down on his stomach, on the side closest the door.

'We might like to take it out,' he told him, pedantically, 'and look at it when we were angry.'

Bertrand kicked his trunk. 'I thought you English never got angry.'

'We just manage to do it without making a fuss. Though,' added the man of affairs, 'knowing your family—'

'And why should either of them care?' said Bertrand. Watching his guest push his fingers between the box spring and the mattress, against a thin edge of paper. 'Either my mother or stepmother? And why should I be thinking about them when—'

'True,' drawing out the envelope, 'when it's your father in the—'

'My—pardon?'

'—starring… role.'

But there was no need to open the envelope. Bertrand's face was shocked open, incredulous. Just a boy: a kid who had never seen—never seen Henry Jouvenel tied to a chair; never seen Irene Adler in her elaborate acrobatics; never seen the fields of—just a boy; and now here he was. He gaped on the hardwoods at the absurd Englishman perching on his bed, with sagging skin and sandy corneas—

'My father,' Bertrand repeated. 'What's… my father?'

—clearing his throat. Opening the envelope, crisply, like a crisp, cool man of affairs.

Four utterly banal examples of mainstream photographic smut, of the type for purchase in Regent Street, back home; in the lot not a rope nor a bit of black rubber nor a military man with his tongue on the feet of his old—
Sherlock opened his eyes.

'No matter,' he said, then. 'My mistake. I'll,' waving to the mess of the room, levering himself up off the bed, 'I'll see you in Paris. At your mother's costume ball.'

Sunday, August 28th, 1921
3pm (Hour 97)

It was imperative, Irene thought, to concentrate. Imperative to decide. Imperative to run Germaine to ground in whatever haunt she’d absconded to: the home of the Jouvenels, perhaps, or the Matin offices, or running errands on the Rue de Faubourg Poissonnière. It ought to be so terribly simple. A matter of determining the likelihood of one action over another. But—

—but all the way out on the train she had—had panted; had twisted in her seat, horror-struck and aching, with sweat coming up on her face in the heat of the day. She wasn't like this, not since—and she'd dug her nails into her palms. Thought: Germaine would be preparing Paris for the arrival of the Jouvenels. Would she go first to the paper? Would she chat with the desk clerk? Flirt with him? Lie to him? Brush past him and through the glass doors to arrange her employer's, her foster-mother's, Madame Jouvenel's, Colette's fountain pens in neat marching lines like buttons unfastened on an old-fashioned blouse as she had gasped, pas avec toi, she had said, not with you, with Irene held in check by Olivia Wren though all the time Germaine had, Christ, seen Irene's name in beating-blood letters when she closed her eyes—

And now, in a cab trundling south, she had a running clock. Irene Adler, coming to pieces on the Rue de la Fayette over a twice-jilted secretary two decades out of date. Her leaking palms and her bloody beating heart.

She supposed she must have told the cab driver something. He stopped in front of the Matin offices and she marched through the double doors and there, lined up neatly with the foot of the stairs: a severe black steamer-trunk, its straps cinched tight.

She moved forward in a strange white heat and Germaine—

Was in Madame Jouvenel's bloody office, in the end. At the file box, with her back turned, sorting through cards with her ruthless efficiency in her unfashionable skirt. Half-turning, tensing at the sight of O—of Irene, but not moving to stop her from pressing up against her from behind.

The musk of the girl. Mitsouko in waves, and under it the things she hid. Her hand on the file-card was making it shake. Perhaps she (swallowing). Perhaps she meant it to.

'You brought your trunk,' Irene said, into Germaine's ear, 'to your place of employment. Something you want to keep close?'

'I didn't think I'd,' Germaine said, 'see you, I—'

'Where are they?'

'I don't—'

'Where?' She twisted Germaine's arm back. Germaine grunted. File-cards fell to the floor and fanned out by their feet; neither of them moved to pick them up. From the door Irene would appear an
interested friend, peering around the side of Germaine's shoulder.

'Guillaume will see you,' Germaine said.

'You'd like that, would you? For him to call the watchman? It won't matter; I've— I've a man outside. Just waiting for my word. He'll follow you home for a look through your things, would you like that?'

Germaine, with her sweat-soaked back and her shaky laugh.

'You've got,' said Irene, 'something of mine; you had— had them in the hotel, under your mattress in the hotel. Thinking of the man who threw you over while we were— and he'll find—'

'No,' Germaine said.

'No? Not thinking about Henry bloody Jouvenel strapped to my—'

'We're not all like—'

'Which is your favourite, then?" Seething hot, too hot in her lit-up skin. 'That's the one thing my man won't be able to tell, you see: which ones you like best to look at when you take them out, when you —'

'You'll be wanting,' faltering, 'to come up.'

'I don't think I ought.' Hands to wrists, tight. 'I think I ought to go get my man outside, let him—'

'I brought my trunk,' Germaine said, with the careful crispness of the drunk or the drugged, 'because I live in the flats upstairs.'

Irene's hands: sprung traps. Sweat in her eyes, and Germaine, with her breath shaking out, pressing back into her front.

'Do you,' Irene heard herself say.

'Yes,' Germaine whispered. The next moment she let loose a shriek of nervous schoolgirl laughter because— because of Guillaume, apparently: hovering at the office door. Irene pulled back, blinking; Germaine was laughing again, her hand on Irene's arm.

'Oh Mathilde,' Germaine was saying. 'Your stories were always so shocking.'

And Irene— fairground-dizzy—with the conviction ringing through her gasping chest gripping skull she'd have—

She'd have believed it. She'd have believed it all. Every spare un-showy gesture: Germaine stripped down to a gawky girl, awkward since school. So serious but for the one wild friend who could make her laugh. No theatre about her, just accident: like movements through a back window long-forgotten, never cleaned— and Irene, flooding hot through her crinkle-thin snakeskin, swearing on her mother's grave that this girl was real.

'I assure you,' she got out, 'every word is true.'

'All grown up,' said Germaine, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes, 'and still up to your old tricks. Mathilde,' to hovering Guillaume, 'was quite the Magdalene in our little village. She once went with two men at one time.'
Irene was mirror-warped and trembling under the mantle of this... Mathilde, was it. Mathilde, whom Germaine had—had made for her to wear. Throbbing, thickening, she pulled her on like crimson silk: Mathilde who shocked the village; who once went with two men at one time.

'I should leave,' she told her friend, trying for a laugh. 'If you still find me shocking then I should leave now, before you catch on. After all, you—you live in Paris now. Probably get up to. All sorts of things.'

The table cut into her palms where she pressed back. Her eyes on Germaine who was everywhere: in the sharp delighted giggle. In the shuffling embarrassment, after. 'Oh,' Germaine said, caught out by Mathilde for Irene to see. 'But I could never be so daring as you. Letting them bring their girlfriends along.'

—their girlfriends—

'In a tiny provincial town,' Germaine was laughing. 'The things they said she'd done!'

'What things,' said Irene—Mathilde, said Mathilde, 'to still be thinking about,' as Germaine's damp hand clamped down on her wrist.

'It was like something out of Madame Jouvenel's novels,' Germaine told Guillaume. 'It really was.'

'I,' Irene said, 'I don't know whom you considered anyone's—anyone's girlfriend. Wives, do you mean? she couldn't quite say, so she twisted her wrist in Germaine's grip. Strong and slippery and her big hands. Young Guillaume, thunder-struck, stared between the two of them.

'Henry,' Germaine murmured, 'Henry Tailler, he told it differently back in the village. He said it was—was quite a spectacle. Said you let them watch while you kissed—'

(—broken open and kissing pleading with a wet mouth Gretha in her veils over the shoulder of the bastard Jouvenel who moaned and begged and hadn't a glance to spare for either of his girlfriends—)

'I suppose you thought,' Irene said, 'it ought only to be you, with whom I misbehaved.'

And Germaine's face: almost shy. Almost pleading. 'We did, didn't we?' she said. 'The two of us, Mathilde? Misbehave?'

Irene thought: it was a game. It was her best game.

'Quite Germaine's crowning moment,' said Mathilde to Guillaume. 'She'll no doubt drag up that time before our terminal year of secondary school, our summer at the seashore—'

(imagine, remember: the girl Germaine, before the War, in a white dress by the sea)

'—Dinard was it? Or St Malo?'

(with Mathilde's secret red marks all down her arse and the tops of her thighs, and her Christ)

'In any case I've done what I can, I think,' Germaine was telling Guillaume, 'so if you'll let Madame Jouvenel know,' with her strong damp hand still circling Irene's—

(wrists)

'—I'm never sure,' Mathilde was saying, 'what gets into her about that night, but she will go on about —'
Oh you're fond of reminiscing,' Germaine was saying, 'just as much as I.'

Irene watched her back. Wearing Mathilde like a frock Germaine had sewn, and: 'My friend and I,' Germaine said, 'were just about to retire to my rooms. Yes, Mathilde?'

Yes, Mathilde. The girl Germaine, repeating to her schoolfriend the stories they told at the bar in the bistro. Laughing with her until their stomachs ached. Yes, Mathilde; so she followed her. The entranceway; the foot of the stairs; along the landing. The woman Germaine, with her secrets and her strong thick thighs. Opening the door for Irene to the fourth-floor corner room where she'd touched herself to thoughts of—what? of Henry Jouvenel in his uniform, or—or Gretha—

They entered, and didn't speak. The girl Mathilde. The woman Germaine. Irene was gasping. Trying not to gasp.

'Henry,' she repeated, 'and a girlfriend?' leaning back on the door as it latched behind her. Great heaving breaths.

Germaine still had her back to her. She was fussing in the corner over, over coffee? Irene could have laughed.

'Where are they, then?' she said. 'In your trunk? In these rooms? Tell me and I'll—'

'Hm?' said Germaine.

'He said you let them watch,' Irene parroted back in her wrong broken voice, 'while you kissed?'

'Ah,' said Germaine, to the coffee pot, 'well. You know how men like this kind of story.'

'I—'

'Don't you,' said Germaine.

Irene did laugh, she thought. Her fingers slid on the handle, on the lock, on the bureau beside the door on the leather armchair on the plain brown linen of Germaine's skirt and underneath it her hot moving skin.

'You know bloody all about it, you—you think you know bloody well.' Germaine under her hands, tensing. 'You think—what? She was Henry Jouvenel's little plaything? she—did you know she was barely a fortnight in Paris,' clutching with her hot wet hands through cotton and linen, 'and you think we, you think we tied him to a chair and took off our clothes, kissed each other blind as a little, a little treat? A little bonbon for him and his—his bloated self-important—'

'Who?' said Germaine but her hands trembled on the coffee pot. Irene was burning up.

'She was,' Irene said. Aching, like she could rub Gretha's memory intact through the too-solid membrane of Germaine's skin. Pressing; trying. Telling her: 'She wasn't meant to be in France, she'd had—had problems with her contract, or—so she gave a few dances at my club. Just. Among friends. And I wanted—I noticed her,' she said, 'the moment I saw her dance.'

'Who?' Germaine repeated, dry-throated, and Irene swallowed and said, 'Gretha.'

A small, neat click from the coffee pot as Germaine set it down. Irene's lips slick at her nape. The
susurration as she turned.

'A friend of yours?' Germaine said, with her mouth in a neat, prim line.

A friend of yours?

Irene eddied. Throbbed. Blinked and blinked and reached up her hollowed-out mouth and kissed—

Kissing like pleading. Kissing a schoolgirl, like the schoolgirl Germaine had made for them to wear. Kissing some—some secretary in a second-rate flat. Starving mouths over some bastard's shoulder as Irene dripped all down her helpless thighs for Germaine's open mouth and her cunt like a peach and her hands on Olivia's—Irene's—Mathilde's—God, burning craving skin. Irene pressed up, up against her, as if to get inside her, pressed, pressed and it stretched on for years.

Germaine pulled away. 'Mfh,' said Irene, 'mm, no.'

Germaine was heaving. Was panting. For show, could be for show, or, or she couldn't help it. Irene had to put her hands back on Germaine's hips.

'No,' Irene said again, 'she was never my—I never wanted her to be my friend.'

'I don't imagine you have them,' said Germaine.

*But you were my friend,* she could have said. Absurd; bereft. *In your white dress and your scars, at the seaside* craning up to kiss Germaine, kiss—false tongue failing heart hot fresh-forged skin—

'She was so beautiful,' she told her. Germaine pulling back by inches. Loosening. Mouth on Irene's neck. 'They said she wasn't even a courtesan. Just a dancer.' Licking her, Christ. Tasting. 'She was lodging with us; she would borrow my things, and I would think about.' Her hair. The way she smelled. 'She'd tie up her hair in my curling-rags and wear them to bed and I would stay awake—' touching, *pressing* '—and when she gave them back they would smell of all her—' panting working throat and the noises coming from it—

'What happened?' Germaine asked; and Irene, tingling and betrayed, said, 'But you know.'

Germaine's shoulders, going tight.

'No,' she said, pulling away, 'how could I?'

'But,' Irene said, 'if (couldn't bear it, couldn't) 'if your friend Mathilde, in the village in, in what?'

'Petit-Couronne,' Germaine gave her, and Irene: nodding and nodding.

'If your—your friend,' she said, 'you would have had friends, they'd all have loved you for—for getting so much done—' Germaine sniffed, good, laughing, Irene's hands petting petting petting from her shoulders down her held-tight arms, 'if your friend Mathilde had gone with two men and one of their—their girlfriends, and then you heard about it down at the café, how they—'

'—agreed,' Germaine said, 'to do for money whatever the men asked them.'

Irene laughed. Sobbed.

'Oh,' she said, 'It was all for the men.' Gasping. 'Is that what they're saying, these days?'

Germaine made a doubting noise that hummed against Irene's lips so she opened her mouth. Opened it wider, Christ. Craven. Ought to be terrified but she was—'I was so,' she said, pressing into
Germaine's awkward body, 'so hungry for her.'

Germaine's soft hands in her hair. On her face. Tipping back Irene's head to get a look at her, and oh uncertain green eyes. And how could they be? When Irene, with a touch—when in St Malo they'd lied to each other straight out and she'd ordered Irene up to her room, and let Irene inside her, hands, mouth, dripping wanting—

'They said,' said Germaine, 'of my friend Mathilde, that she was so eager to get on her knees for Monsieur Tailler that—.' She bit her lip. Irene's ragged breath. 'They said she couldn't wait, that she almost choked on it—'

Irene groaned. 'So that Gretha could watch,' Irene said. 'So that she could see—' Germaine's teeth in her bottom lip, her breath picking up '—my mouth, so she could see me making him—making him gasp, backed up against the door with the mirror on the other side. She'd a perfect view of my throat and I could hear her keep—keep losing track of what she was saying to Charles—'

Germaine's oh was a tiny breathless thing. Irene needed—needed her mouth back on her. Needed to kiss it out of her, to rub up against her just a little, just enough, just—she swallowed. Germaine's trembling fingers on her throat, tracing the line of it down and down.

'I'm sure the gossips,' Irene managed, 'down at the café did better than that.'

'They—' said Germaine, then trailed off. She shifted her leg. Shifted so it pressed between Irene's, and Irene let herself rock, just a, God, just a little against the soft give of Germaine's thigh. Eyes viridescent and she didn't pull back; beautiful that she didn't pull back; Irene was moaning just a little, just a—

'He said both the girls,' Germaine said, 'were so desperate for him—'

'For—!' '—that they tied him up so he couldn't move while they took turns f—fucking him.'

Rocking, unbearable. Couldn't stop. Staring up at Germaine looking down, her bitten mouth and her brilliant searching eyes and Irene shaking.

'He said she kissed the other woman,' Germaine said, 'behind because he liked it, but I think she must have—'

Hands in her hair. Sudden hard parting lips raised thigh pressing tongue pressing forward so Irene could ride her now, unabashed, rubbing and rubbing and kissing her. Pressing her back. Closer. Up against the little table, breathing in Mitsouko; the weight of her. 'Yes,' Irene said, and she couldn't stop, she couldn't—Germaine's bitten open mouth. 'All right,' she said, and kissed her, pushed at her climbed on her, put her hands on her: her hips and her gorgeous arse hot skin through fabric in the singeing hot and a—a yelp, and a crash.

Irene stood a foot back, shaking her scalded wrist. The little coffee pot, tipped onto its side on the floor, glugged brown liquid onto the hardwood.

They stood there watching it. Breathing like a pair of distance runners.

'Shit,' Germaine said. 'I— the kitchen.'

Irene nodded.
Hand to her pounding chest while Germaine walked away. From the kitchen, the sounds of cupboard doors.

Irene lowered herself to her knees. Set the coffee pot upright. She was soaked and tender between her legs; every time she shifted she could feel it. She might put anything at all up against her and she'd be shouting. Her wrist. The bloody table-leg. She straightened up and there was Germaine, paused in the doorway with flannels in her arms and in her hand a bowl full of great chunks of chiseled-out ice. Irene stood there absurdly with the coffee pot in her hands.

She put it on the table. Made each of her fingers relax away from its smooth metal sides. Germaine wet a flannel; held it out. Irene, for seconds, couldn't think why. By the time she remembered about her wrist Germaine had laid the cloth on the table, and got on her knees on the floor.

'She must have been mad,' Germaine said, laying neat layers of flannels to soak up the coffee sliding in rivulets along the floorboards.

'Who?' said Irene, with a little laugh, and Germaine said: 'Gretha.' Soft and hesitating. *Hesitating:* Germaine, with her head bowed.

'Yes,' said Irene. 'Mad. She must have been.'

'I mean,' Germaine went on, 'watching you, with—doing that, to him.' How was it possible for the girl to flush? Irene clenched her thighs together. Could still come off with a hard touch. Could take those two steps over to where Germaine was kneeling on the floor, put her hands in Germaine's hair and rub off against her flushing face. She grasped the table-edge, breathing in. Breathing out.

'I would,' Germaine was saying. 'I mean. I used to—'

'You mean you'd take out my photographs,' Irene said. 'You'd take them out and look at them.' Germaine pressed her palms down needlessly into the towelling, and opened her mouth but didn't answer. Irene laughed.

'Come now,' she said. 'Tying a man named Henry, to a chair?'

'You said—'

She could stride over. Could shove herself against Germaine's teeth.

'Which of the shots,' she said, 'do you particularly enjoy?'

'My friend Mathilde—'

'Oh,' Irene said, 'of course. Your friend, Mathilde.' Germaine coughed, where she knelt on the floor. She looked smaller, somehow. It was absurd to feel guilty.

'When I heard,' Germaine said, 'the rumours. I would think about—about Mathilde, letting him do what he—I would think about her, li, um—'

'Her lips,' Irene said, softly, but Germaine seemed not to hear. She still pressed flannels into rivulets of coffee, her hair falling down out of its twist.
'And then,' said Germaine, very fast, 'I would wonder how it happened, because he was in her mouth and the next—the next thing I heard—' so red, her face was so red '—he was tied to the chair, and I—I wondered,' gasping, and then easing, and sitting up. 'I thought the other woman might not have liked it,' she said. 'I thought... she might have wanted him to stop. I'd have.' She swallowed. 'I'd have wanted him to stop.'

Sharp, dark. Like menstrual pain at the small of Irene's back.

'You thought,' she said, 'that Gretha was jealous.'

Germaine shrugged. In the bowl next to her, the big chunks of ice were sweating. She dipped the last clean flannel in the ice-water; swirled it about. Took the pieces one by one from the bowl, and wrapped them in cloth.

'It's only,' Germaine said, 'I heard that she—that the other woman watched while Henry was tied. That she helped. And I thought—I wondered.'

Irene closed her eyes, and—

Gretha, giggling with Charles over the knots. Pressing herself into him: *Oh, you're so good at that* and Irene with the camera. Watching through the lens (through the keyhole). *What if you want him tighter?* Gretha had said. Had said, Surely Monsieur Jouvenel could simply twist his wrists, looking up at Irene and winking and then—Germaine had wondered. In St Malo, and the Matin lobby: *Oh Mathilde*, the girl had said, *your stories are always so shocking*, and, *Pas avec toi—pas avec...*—flinched away, startled, from the sudden hand on her arm.

Ice wrapped in a flannel dripped onto the floor. Germaine shuffled her feet.

'Unless you enjoy it,' said Germaine. She nodded towards Irene's burnt wrist. Irene let out a slow, slow breath, curled into herself. She shook her head, but didn't move.

'It was Gretha,' Irene told her. 'She suggested the ropes, while I was—she said Charles should show her how to tie someone... properly. She said he should show her on Henry.'

'Yes?' said Germaine. Cool fingers on Irene's forearm; coaxing. Turning her hand.

'Yes. To get me away from him, it must have been. Like you said,' and her back prickled up, 'because she was jealous. Because she wanted—' and her bitter tongue.

Germaine put a hand on the inside of Irene's wrist; held the ice to the outside with the other. Her mouth was very close. They kissed until Irene was shivering all over and her wrist was numb.

'She kept *stuttering,' Irene said. 'She did, she—I'd take him deep and she'd start repeating herself, *Oh Captain,* and she laughed; gasping like crying: *you've so much responsibility, haven't you, out there in the War?* I got that one out of her three times but Henry was on the verge of it and she must have wanted—'

'I'd have wanted,' Germaine said, 'your, your mouth,' and moaned, and rested her forehead against Irene's.

Irene tilted up her face. Breath, between them, and that blade in her back. She coaxed Germaine's lip out from between her teeth and gave her her mouth. Gave and gave. Germaine was burning hot. Slippery to hold.
'I'd have been going mad,' Germaine said. 'Watching you get him like that. All three of them watching you on your knees. When I s—since you told me, I can't stop thinking—'

'You really mean me,' harsh in the quiet, 'to believe—'

Germaine's hot face and her bitten lip. Irene twisted her neck away with ice-water still dripping down into her open palm.

'Given the choice,' she said, 'of your lover, in a situation like that, and—and Gretha: you spent time, did you, thinking about me?'

'I heard—' said Germaine. 'I thought about how all of them. All three of them, were looking right at you.'

Out the window there was nothing to see: tree-leaves, and the sides of buildings. Irene took a breath, and turned her head.

'You have my photographs,' she said, but Germaine shook her head. *Pas avec toi*, she had cried, half-stripped in Irene's lap as the sun set over the sea, and now the stubborn lying—Irene, with her hand clenching down on Germaine's hand on her numb wrist, said, 'You keep them in your trunk. Fuck yourself while you look at them.'

'No,' said Germaine, so Irene had to kiss it out of her mouth. Had to. Shivering and sweating. Take. Tongue in her mouth she didn't argue. Germaine melting into her thinking—thinking Irene had let it go, or—or just thinking of a good hard bloody fucking—Christ. Cold water soaked the cotton over Irene's thigh and trickled down between her legs and she yanked the ice from Germaine's hand and pressed it to Germaine's nape and the girl gasped. All the hollows of Irene's body. Pressed it to Germaine's cheek and her forehead and fumbled open her blouse; so she'd wanted her, had she? pressed the ice sloppy to the swell of her breast and two ice-cool fingers into her mouth and watched her *suck*. She pressed down on Germaine's tongue and Germaine went to her knees.

Some sound. An animal sound Irene had made. Germaine, kneeling, with her shirt all open and her tight-shut eyes and her warm wet mouth suckling at Irene's fingers, needing, mad for it and Irene—Irene followed her down.

'You want me to believe,' Irene said, 'that you've never seen—that you've no idea what I mean when I talk about photographs?' Germaine shook her head with her mouth still full, so Irene half-opened the flannel and pressed bare ice to the single layer of silk over her right nipple. Kept it there. Germaine's noises: cooing into whining. The ache of it. She pressed harder and Germaine's hips twitched forward.

'Oh yes?' Crowding closer. 'You like it?' Germaine nodded, nodding, fingers in her working watering mouth. 'Or you think I want you to like it?' and she moaned. Irene with her free hand grappled at buttons and buttons down the side of Germaine's skirt. Pushed it down. Pushed her knickers down. 'You want to be another Henry, another—another Charles?' she said, and Germaine slurped at her hand so she took it away; clenched it in Germaine's hair. 'You want me to do to you what I did to them?' she said. 'But they're powerful men, Germaine. Why would you think to compare? Unless you'd seen it happening and imagined *just what you'd do*, in their place.'

Germaine empty-mouthed gasped like a fish on ship-deck, 'I'd want you to—'

'You have my photographs,' Irene said. Pulled back Germaine's head to show her throat. 'And I'd
wager,' steady now, 'if you really did want to look at—at me in all that wreckage I know what I'd have looked at, I know—'

Water, welling from Germaine's skin. Wellling from her eyes. Irene with a fist in her hair moved the ice to her lips. Stuffed it in its flannel in her mouth like a gag and Germaine groaned, and sucked: how she loved to use her mouth. A woman might let her lick her for hours, let her—let her tunnel into the folds of her, drink her like wine—insensible—

'You're lovely,' Irene said. Her voice hardly shook. 'You're lovely,' she repeated, 'stuffed all full for me, you look—you know what I—'

And the sounds she made. Reaching down, touching—'Don't touch,' Irene said, and Germaine whimpered and—

'—you know what I'd have looked at,' Irene asked her, 'if it really was like you said? Gretha was—' tightening her fist, pulling her hair—'fucking Charles, fucking him on the floor between Henry's legs, telling him to lick Henry's feet but Charles wouldn't mind her. So she climbed off him and took off her—'

—took off her—

—yanking the ice from Germaine's numb drooling mouth and shoving it between her legs with the flannel half-open so it cooled and then burnt—and then kissing—

'Gretha,' Irene told her, 'was famous,' on her knees, 'for taking off her dress.'

Germaine squirmed and panted. Twisting away from, into, whimpering. Irene still tugging on her hair.

'And she got off him, looking—looking. Right at me. I was staring and the men might have been as well but Gretha was looking—' pressing the ice to Germaine's clitoris so it would hurt and make her—she gasped—right at me,' Irene said, and Germaine said, 'Please.'

'But I couldn't be outdone. Could I? I'd strapped myself into—well you know, you've seen. Haven't you, hm?' and she pressed with her ice hand but Germaine just twisted and and squirmed and begged please, so Irene: 'I stepped to the side. Let her see the leather straps and my black cock under my skirts so hard for her, and she picked up the camera,' shoving the last of the ice inside Germaine along with two fingers and the girl sobbing, convulsing, her whole body trying to fold in on itself beating in waves around Irene's hand as Irene, breathless, said, 'was that your favourite?'

'Oh,' Germaine panted. Eyes near-closed; loose-limbed; obvious she'd crumple to the floor without Irene to hold her up but she was still—still fucking herself weakly on Irene's fingers so Irene tightened down hard in her hair oh, oh, 'I want you to,' Germaine, crying out.

'Tell me,' Irene said, 'where you keep my photographs,' but Germaine just panted and moaned and twisted her hips with her hot creature smell dripping out of her around the melted ice. How many times would it take, Irene wondered, curious, as Germaine said, 'Oh God she'd have wanted you so—Gretha, she would want, she would want,' and Irene—Irene couldn't—

'You've,' Irene said.

Her hands repulsed.
Touching nothing.

'You've got to change your clothes.'

Germaine, down on the floor. Trembling on her knees with her brassière half-soaked and her blouse hanging off her shoulders and her mouth open and her eyes—

'You'll be wanting to wash,' said Irene, turning back to the window. 'And to change your clothes.'

Ages passed before she heard the girl stir. She didn't look around.

She just stood in the nonexistent breeze through the open window and listened to the sounds of sliding drawers in the next room over. The clink of metal in a dish. Taps opening, and the splash of water around a shifting body.

*She would want,* Irene thought. Christ.

But perhaps so. Perhaps Gretha had. Perhaps later she'd thought—perhaps she'd regretted. Germaine said so, and she had been looking at the photographs for months. Had obsessed on them, memorised them. Denied them and lied about them; carried them close to her skin. *Oh God,* Germaine had said. *She'd have wanted you so.*

A woman by a window in a flat in Paris, who was neither Mathilde nor Olivia Wren nor Diane de Lamartine nor Irene Adler, breathed out slowly; and closed her eyes.

She crossed the room. The flat was hot, and quiet.

She leant against the door jamb; and there, oddly familiar, was Germaine Beaumont in the bath, already watching the door when Irene walked through it. There was no telling whether her faint tremors were for show.

Irene, clearing her throat, felt oddly achy not to be touching her.

'The nonsense with the rope was a stunt,' she said. 'One of Gretha's… stunts. It was meant to wind me—it was meant,' she corrected, 'to distract me.'

Germaine opened her mouth, and closed it. She was sitting up in the water, hugging her knees. The tremors kept on, in her shoulders and her hands.

Irene sighed. She stripped out of her skirt and her blouse; folded them and laid them on the closed toilet lid. Bra, knickers. The wet patch from the ice, she saw, had almost faded.

In nothing but her made-up face she crossed the room and Germaine watched her over her knees. How much could the girl lie, Irene wondered, with only her body? Enough, probably. The tap dripped into the bath and Irene perched on the lip of the bath.

'Gretha came to my rooms one night,' she said. 'After I'd been with a client. She was no fool, she knew a—a puppy crush, when she saw one. I was coiling rope, and she teased me. Sat at my vanity and said she was sure she didn't know what they saw in it: getting tied up and whipped and all the things I did at Le Chabanais. Well, there was money in it, I told her, because she always respected—'

Germaine's hand twitched, on her calf. A twisting in Irene's gut.

'But Gretha said she could make her own money,' she went on, 'quite well enough. Had I seen the dress she was wearing? It had been a general who had bought it for her, she said. She could talk
about her men for hours, so I. I wanted to shock her, perhaps. Perhaps—'

She sighed. Germaine watched her. Oh God, Germaine had said, she'd have wanted; and Irene hadn't seen so much as a newspaper clipping of Gretha since 1917.

'She saw me move,' Irene said, 'and tried to block me. We ended up tussling on the floor. She was laughing. She seemed so, oh, delighted. Open. She was laughing and I got the rope around her wrists, not properly, I didn't know if she'd want—but I held them down so that she pushed up onto her elbows. Asked me, was that the best I could do, and then she twisted her wrists out of the hold. And she kissed me.'

And Germaine's eyes, green, green.

'And then she avoided me,' said Irene. 'For a week, ten days, after that, I don't know. That night in the photographs was the first time we were together, since.'

The tap went drip; drip; drip. Germaine didn't answer but her knees unbent, just a little.

'I always took care of Henry Jouvenel,' Irene said. 'Whenever he came in. I knew your—your employer once. And then—well, he visited us often.'

'You knew—Madame Jouvenel.' It came out too flat. Irene wanted to put her hand in Germaine's hair.

'Call it,' said Irene, 'I don't know. Sentimental of me.'

Germaine looked away; Irene looked too. The bath was white and the tile was white and the decades-old grout was as light as scrubbing could make it. Germaine stared straight ahead; then nodded, only just.

'But Henry didn't want me that night,' Irene said. 'He wanted Charles Humbert, and Gretha—Gretha liked the rich men, the important men. I knew she'd want to see to Charles, even though he was insufferable and a self-important bully and—'

'Is,' said Germaine.

Irene looked down at her, staring at the dripping taps.

'Charles,' Irene said. But of course.

Germaine nodded, into her knees.

'He was your... Charles Humbert was your other married man.'

Germaine nodded again. Irene allowed herself: her fingers, running through sweat-dark hair.

'You,' she said, close to laughter. 'Ah. When it comes to men. It may be possible to choose more wisely.'

Germaine leant, barely perceptibly, into her hand. Irene petted her forehead. Finger-pads through the frizz at her temples.

'That's where you got my photographs,' Irene said. 'You stole them from Charles.'

Germaine nuzzled her cheek against Irene's palm with her eyes closed, mouth open just a little. Her skin was tacky damp and Irene was tingling and very naked, perched on the lip of the bath.
'All right,' said Irene. Her thumb petted soft cheek-fuzz and Germaine tried to catch it in her mouth: whimpered, but didn't answer. 'All right.' Petting her hair. 'You don't have to,' Irene lied. 'It's all right.'

Germaine, body twisted towards the taps, still trembled.

Irene climbed in behind her back to sit on the narrow edge of the bath. Said 'come here,' and spread her legs for Germaine to sit back between them. Her soft shoulders. The little curling tendrils of hair at the back of her neck.

'It was all so,' Irene said. 'Absurd, I suppose. She'd kissed me, hadn't she, and I thought—she was new to France, new to the business, and I'd been in it since aught-eight, but she'd kissed me and then avoided me…'

'Hid from you,' Germaine said, and Irene said, 'If you like.'

Her fingers worked Germaine's hair-pins free, slowly, one by one. Sections of hair fell down onto her damp, trembling back. She was homely, and beautiful. It made Irene's stomach hurt under her ribs.

'I felt quite the clown,' she said, 'later. Thinking how she must have laughed at—oh, at how casual I tried to be that night, pulling her into our little group. At dinner I kept—kept sneaking looks at her, like a love-sick schoolgirl. I thought it was promising, then. That every time I looked, she was looking back.'

_Tink_ on tile and the last freed locks curled down onto Germaine's shoulder. Irene let her fingers dig in: from scalp to neck. Germaine made a deep cat noise in her throat; rolled her shoulders under Irene's hands. No more tremors, now.

'And then,' Irene said, 'thinking how she must have laughed to herself, seeing me on my knees. Thinking of her telling Charles, _You_ could tie a man properly no doubt, so he couldn't get away. She'd be watching me get red, I could feel myself—if she had wanted me to tie her properly I'd have had her trussed on the floor so she couldn't move, have had her—

Germaine made a stifled noise. Biting her lip, _oh_. Could be for show, Irene thought, queasy and naked all over. She made a fist and rolled her knuckles into the back of Germaine's neck; into the soft flesh of her shoulders and the dip of her clavicle.

'Oh,' said Germaine. Panting softly. 'It feels good.'

'Yes?'

'Go harder?'

Irene went harder. Germaine's soft noises echoed off the tile.

'The whole time,' Irene told her, 'that they were fiddling about with the ropes, she kept—kept needling me. Smiling at me. Secret smiles like we were in on a joke, and Charles so enchanted with her he'd never notice. _Oh Captain you must do this all the time, in the War_, and _But Captain, he could simply twist his wrists to escape_—because she knew I'd be thinking about how she'd twisted up to kiss—'

Germaine's breath faltered. Irene waited, but there was nothing more.

'Harder?' she asked. Germaine nodded and let her head fall forward onto her knees. The line of her
neck and her soft plump shoulder. Irene thought confusedly that she could bite; could soothe; could kiss—she let her nails dig in, and Germaine panted.

'She was standing behind Henry,' Irene said, 'asking Charles things to make me think of her—to make me want to be closer and so I. I went over and sat on Jouvenel's cock and her—her breath did catch—' her nails on Germaine's scalp, too hard, a bit too hard, fist in her hair but Germaine said 'Yes,' and moved her hips in the water and didn't say anything else.

'She—' said Irene, and her throat closed.

'Kissed you,' Germaine gasped.

'I almost came just from—'

'Please,' said Germaine, and 'Christ,' Irene heard herself say. 'Turn around then,' and between Irene's legs Germaine turned. Knelt in the water. Irene turned her head by the hair and kissed her as Germaine's hands fluttered like birds. Helpless lying Germaine, wanting her. Her soft seeking mouth and her breasts pressed up against the wet insides of Irene's thighs.

'And then, later,' Irene told her. She sat Germaine back, on her heels in the water with her eyes closed, panting. Germaine didn't like being pushed away but somehow Irene had to say it, to say: 'after she danced for—for me—and the men were taken care of, we—'

Swallowing and swallowing as Germaine whined.

'—it was stupid to leave the camera but I—we couldn't wait, we, we had to. In the storeroom down the corridor—'

Her hands on Germaine's neck and her face and Germaine turned her head like a flower seeking the sun. Eyes closed; mouth open; lips closing around Irene's ring finger, Christ. Irene gave her two and Germaine groaned.

'In the storeroom,' she said again. Queasy; skin prickling all up her back. 'Up against the wall I tasted her just—yes, like that, like—and she turned us and went to her knees and told me to show her how I'd sucked him—she let me—' gasping '—hold on to her hair—'

Her stomach, in knots. Her aching skin. She licked into Germaine's mouth around her own knuckles as Germaine moaned and sucked and 'Yes,' Irene told her, 'it was just like that,' moving her hand just a little, just a tiny bit. 'She got her fingers up me,' she murmured, 'and I could see my cock in her throat—' and Germaine's sloppy eager tongue. 'Can you try for me?' Irene said. Fingers pressed in further with Germaine moaning; sucking-swallowing; and Irene, so gentle, fucking her mouth with her hand.


'It took minutes,' she said, 'only minutes, I was desperate, I was—was bent over her head with my fist in my mouth and her hand inside me and then I got her down on the—oh on the floor and, and she let me eat at her mouth and, and fill up her cunt and she told me to, told me all right, yes, yes,' as Germaine pressed forward, forward between her legs and Irene took her hand back to brace herself and Germaine's wet—hot—mouth—

—and Irene, crying out shaking with Germaine's hands holding open her legs—

—and Germaine's greedy slurping moaning noises under her skin, vibrating—
—and bright—sharp—hard tongue slicing her open all her insides bursting *drowning* them and Germaine's teeth—

'Christ,' Irene said. Germaine made a sound that could have been anything and Irene said 'Jesus,' and slid down into the cool water and yanked Germaine's head back and pinned her against the side of the bath and filled her mouth with her tongue and her cunt with half her hand until Germaine cried out—out—and again—

'Ooh,' Germaine said, and kissed her. Irene clenched her hand on the lip of the bath, so that Germaine didn't slip sideways into the water. She kissed her. Kissed her. Ooh.

'Gretha,' said Irene. 'There was a knock on the door. And she was more—clothed,' laughing, with the bottom dropping out of it as Germaine softly grunted. 'So Gretha went to answer and whoever it was—Luce, or Marie—led her away, and I unstrapped myself and—'

Germaine's eyes, unfocused. Blinking and sleepy. Irene a raw wine-skin, stitched together with catgut. Continuing to be touched.

'When I got back to the room,' she finished, 'the camera was gone.'

Germaine licked her lips. Blinked her eyes. 'I just want…' she said, and wrapped her legs around Irene's hips, so Irene kissed her, exhausted. Not moving much. The little half-window above the bath showed peaches and violets. Irene sagged into the girl's soft front. Her skin sealing back up. Kissing.

Irene's foot on the plug. Her toes, pulling the chain. The gurgling draining bath.

'Mmmm,' said Germaine. Irene could about breathe.

'If I'd known,' she said. Breathing. 'Modesty doesn't pay, you know, for a woman like me. But if I'd known about you and Charles, and I'd a flutter on who in those photographs you'd look at, I'd have put myself dead last.'

'But nobody really likes Charles,' Germaine mumbled. 'His own daughter—'

Irene took a breath. Held it. Sounds of horses and motor-cars filtered up from the street below.

'She only seemed sort of—sort of interested, Agnès,' Germaine said at last. Rousing; sitting back; rubbing her forehead. 'She seemed bemused, I think, when I handed her the print of her father, licking another man's tied-up feet.'

Irene let out her breath, and couldn't stop laughing.

Chapter End Notes

JE Harting's *Our Summer Migrants: An Account of the Migratory Birds Which Pass the Summer in the British Islands, Illustrated From Designs by Thomas Berwick* came out in 1875.

Further DVD notes on this chapter can be found [here](#).
Sunday, August 28th, 1921
4pm (Hour 98)

Minutes later, Irene was laughing still.

'Christ,' she said. 'I—' but then started up again. Her aching stomach. She'd slid down to lie in the bath, gasping, back flat against porcelain. Germaine pulled herself up onto the lip and scowled and scowled and then giggled and Irene couldn't stop.

'That's what you were holding out for, was it,' she gasped out. 'A little petting and story-telling in the bath? In future—' Germaine snickering, poking Irene's stomach with her toe '—I'll know to skip over all that business with the ice and the—'

'Don't.' Toes clenching against her pubic bone.

The ball of Germaine's foot, pressed against the crest of her. Irene rolled her hips on a breath; coiling- uncoiling.

'Mmmm,' Irene said. 'You liked it, then.'

Germaine made to pull her foot back but was checked. Irene exhaled, her hand around Germaine's ankle and her wild laughter settling into stillness.

'I'm glad you liked it,' she told her. A careful smile and she rolled her hips again; pressed herself into the girl's foot. Quivered. 'I wondered, back in St Malo. I thought you might like me to lace you into a swan-bill and take a switch to that lovely great arse of yours.'

Germaine coughed, flushing. 'Not something,' she said, 'not, not quite something she would have tried, though. Miss Olivia Wren.'

'I—yes. It did seem rather beyond her, didn't it.'

'Would you,' said Germaine, very fast, 'some other time,' and held her breath with every muscle in her leg locked up. Irene stopped biting her mouth and smiled.

'Tell me, then.' On Germaine's ankle her hands were slick. 'Who were you putting on, in Paris, when you set out to scandalise Agnès Humbert?'

'I wasn't—' Shaky breath; foot unclenching. 'I never thought it out. I make an awful... blackmailer, or—it's all chance I wasn't found out at once.'

'Charles didn't recognise you, though. From his daughter's description.'

'Oh Lord,' Germaine said. Toes curling; squirming. 'Nor would you have done. Dowdy Mademoiselle Beaumont, always dressed against the fashion.'

'Suits you,' Irene said. 'You might be a schoolteacher, and I a pupil's angry parent.'

Germaine, laughing and flushing. Irene swallowed. Around the girl's ankle the flesh was starting to
redden.

'But,' said Irene, 'I hear Agnès Humbert studies art. A frump makes a better character study than some fashion plate.'

'Yes, that's the point, I was—well.' She sighed. 'I'd come back to the city with Madame Jouvenel to see about the first break-in. Only she couldn't be bothered. I kept telling her, I kept saying we should go by the office, see about the damages, and she would say, oh yes, Germaine, just after we drop in at the Rue Cambon, just after luncheon, just after the nail parlour, just after we do something about that—'

'Ah.'

'— hair of yours.' Her hands in fists. 'And so you see I looked quite unlike myself, by the end.'

'You're—you're angry,' Irene said. Gripping Germaine's ankle. 'Something about it makes you—' and Germaine laughed.

'What doesn't?' She scrubbed at her own face as Irene rubbed her marred-red calf.

'I thought it might be Charles,' Germaine said. 'The timing of it all; and then, the man on the telephone had said Monsieur Jouvenel's office was worse than that of Madame. Charles would think of his great rival, wouldn't he, if his little prize went missing? And then of his rival's wife, and not at all of—well. I was the one who took the call, you know, and I asked particularly. It was almost a confirmation, that he hadn't even thought to search my desk.'

'You—'

'He hadn't bothered,' Germaine went on. 'And then Madame Jouvenel, not bothering either, not bothering to try to defend herself, to limit the damage after months of Henry, just—he was just at her all the time. All the way up from Paris to Roz Ven and then all summer: how scandalous she was. The trouble he had, to cover up her past. That he was a senator now and she'd been on the stage and—and I do their accounts, I know who pays for their things. And him out in public with Mademoiselle Patat and—and Charles was just the same.'

Germaine was shaking like she might burst out of her skin and rise up in fury, resplendent on behalf of her mistress; Irene, stripped and wet under her in the heat. She ought to let go. To wrap up in terrycloth. Her mouth watered.

'He gloated to me, you know,' Germaine said. 'Over those pictures, he—all right, I snooped a bit to find them, but his hints were so broad I hardly needed to. What I could do to Henry Jouvenel, he'd said, with the little treasures I've got.'

'Had an itemised list, did he?' Irene got out.

'Well he couldn't really do anything. Not unless he wanted all of Paris to know that the upright family man of Le Journal had licked the feet of his libertine business rival and crawled on his knees to—to Gretha.'

To—yes. Irene forced herself to sit up. She looked away. Her squelching heart in the heat. Germaine talked on as Irene wrapped a towel around herself, crossed to the toilet and sat on the lid.

'But he liked to go on about it,' Germaine was saying, fierce, 'about—oh, blackmail, disgrace. Going on about taking over from Henry at Le Matin, and with Mademoiselle Patat. And he nagged me to know whether Henry had, ever. With me. I think it was most of the reason he wanted me in the first
place, the idea that he had, but I—I never said.'

Irene closed her eyes. Resting her head against the cool cabinet beside the bath, wondering to herself if Germaine Beaumont had ever fucked anyone she didn't hate and Germaine said 'Yes, I have.'

Irene—clenching-unclenching hands—counld't have spoken without meaning to, didn't make such mistakes. But Germaine was saying, 'I have now.'

Irene lurched to her feet. No surface as cool as it might have been. Germaine fierce and shaking and her snake-venom eyes and Irene's nape was dripping.

'You knew then,' she said. 'You knew Charles had some kind of little—little hoard.'

'He mentioned it enough,' Germaine told her. Irene breathed, looking away. 'And then one day when I was back down from Roz Ven,' said Germaine, 'and he got a telegram and went out without a word and I was left alone in his apartment I—I barely had to roll over, to find the photographs. He kept them tied with a ribbon, in his bedside bureau like a love-sick girl. I didn't look at what they were, just walked away from his building and walked and walked. I was afraid to take them out. Afraid to go home. Felt passers-by must see in my face what I'd done. I quite forgot I was supposed to meet Madame Jouvenel at the offices at four; the next morning she was shocked speechless at me and I was—'

'—satisfied,' Irene said. Germaine grunted and Irene—Irene said, 'It's a heady feeling, shocking people. And you must not often get the chance.'

'Nice, anyway,' murmured Germaine, 'that she missed me. And by that time, of course, I'd been back here. I triple-checked that all my shutters were closed before I could make myself open my bag and untie Charles's absurd lilac ribbon and really look—'

'And is that,' Irene said, open mouth with words coming out of it, 'Madame Jouvenel, is that—is she why you kept seeing them both, Henry and Charles?'

There was a silence. Green eyes at her back. She straightened her spine.

'She knew about Henry,' Germaine said, at last. Irene nodded, nodded. Germaine said, 'I'm almost sure she did; and she knew there was another man. And she treated me… better. Less like a child, once she knew. She said she'd worried I would turn out—but two men, two lovers. She bought me Champagne at Pruniers, when she heard.'

'Is that where she took you the—the other day, then? For luncheon, after Chanel, and the hair salon?'

'Yes,' said Germaine, sounding suddenly so weary that Irene looked around. There the girl sat, still: only Germaine, rubbing her eyes; straightening her back on the way to her feet. Saying, 'It's a favourite of hers. Normally we order the prawns, but having just come from a month on the coast she got us the flank steak. She attacked hers like she hadn't eaten for ages and I just—just sat there. Swilling Champagne with the photographs in my handbag, listening to her chatter on and while I—'

'You carried them,' said Irene, 'about with you, then.'

'Mmm,' said Germaine. Irene blinked and leant against the doorframe and thought of Germaine's ugly carpet bag and Germaine's nudging boots and the gin fizzes Irene had bought for her in the lobby of the Hôtel Chateaubriand, thinking she was Bernhardt, and Germaine a rube off the street.

Germaine who stood before her, gesturing backward out of the WC.
Irene cleared her throat. She flattened her spine against the wall to make room; then followed the
girl's long undone hair and her spectacular arse down the corridor.

In the little bedroom—*Germaine*. The edge of the coverlet, exactly parallel to the floor. The
bookshelf with every volume octavo, all bound in brown leather, all flush with the shelf-fronts.
Germaine. Strange, Irene had barely noticed the WC or the sitting room but here—the vanity-mirror
hadn't so much as a smudge.

'You should come with me,' Irene heard herself saying, a vise around her ribs. 'Come with me, when
I go.'

'Pardon?' said Germaine.

She could sit down on the side of the bed, Irene thought. Could close her eyes; she was so tired. She
didn't make such mistakes (except: Madame Colette; except: Gretha). So it must be only wise:
pretending to attachment until she had her photographs in hand.

'I'm leaving Paris,' she said. Standing straight, with her chin up.

'You're not serious, it's your entire—'

'It's all,' Irene went on, loud, 'got a bit dull. I thought: a year spent touring the Continent. Vienna.
Berlin. Venice. Well, wherever we want. Constantinople, perhaps, and then back to London. You
ought to come with me, when I go.'

Germaine stood against her bed, gaping. Surely she must be tired too. She looked more naked,
anyway, than she had done in the bath.

'Well,' Irene told her. 'Something to think on, in any case.'

'Yes,' said Germaine. 'Yes, I—I will.'

Irene Adler could be a brave fleshy smiling machine so she made her body creak back into its
accustomed tracks. This was how it was done: dropping the towel with an eye to Germaine's view.
Strolling to the wardrobe where she blinked back shoes lined up in high-shined pairs and fresh-
pressed sets of brown skirts and bleached blouses. But what else, she thought, could there be? Shoes
and skirts and blouses that had hung in witness when Germaine came home and checked her shutters
three times and made herself open her bag and—on a hook, on the back of the door, was a white
cotton dressing gown. Germaine had even ironed the belt; Irene couldn't quite bring herself to put it
on.

'If I bought you a peignoir,' she said. 'Silk mousseline in—in green, to go with your eyes. Patou, or
—'

'I'm not…' said Germaine, and Irene said, 'No.' Paper-thin, smiling. 'I suppose not.'

Under her fingers the wardrobe closed with a click. She turned, smart, practiced, towards where
Germaine sat perched on the side of her own bed.

'You kept them on you, then,' Irene said, and Germaine let out a breath. 'My photographs. You
carried them about with you all the time.'

'I didn't want anyone to find them,' said Germaine. She rolled her bare shoulders. Held her arms
away from her sides: the heat, still. Somehow Irene had almost forgotten. 'I didn't want,' said
Germaine. 'You know, I never thought out what I'd do. I never had a plan about them, I never—and
I would never have wanted some—some stranger to... what it would do to Madame Jouvenel. And all right, I was angry with her, that day at Pruniers, but then I saw what I'd done and I wanted to make it up. I would never want—I wouldn't take the chance.'

'You took them with you,' Irene repeated, 'everywhere. You had them at the Chateaubriand, then?'

Germaine, lip between her teeth, lifting her arm in the slanting sun from the window. Her reddish-brown fur, twilight-gilt. In Constantinople and Vienna Irene might let her crawl to her. Put her tongue in her. Germaine nodded and she shivered.

'But I searched your room,' Irene said. 'I searched your whole room and then I—I got up before first light, and searched your WC.'

'Chewing gum,' Germaine mumbled. Irene's hands, she realised, were gripping the girl's shoulders.

'Chewing gum,' she echoed. Germaine's fingers inched up Irene's flank to rest on Irene's hip. *Chewing gum* again and then: 'The airshaft.'

'I'm taller than you,' Germaine agreed. Rubbing light circles on Irene's hip as she said, 'So even if you thought to look, I—did you? Think to look? And anyway I couldn't think of anything else. It was, it was you and you were waiting in my room, and I'd—I'd put the pictures in an envelope, fastened shut. One day in the steam wouldn't hurt them. I chewed the gum and then crawled up on the lip of the bath. I reached up the airshaft as far as I could, and stuck the envelope to the wall.'

Light circles, light, light. Such racking tenderness. Germaine's mouth, turning down at the corners.

'I thought for certain,' she was saying, 'that you'd see through me. I thought they'd all see through me at once but somehow it just kept on and on and I feel like I haven't slept for simply. Ages.'

Irene stroked Germaine's forehead, which rested on her belly. Mud-brown waves tangled around her fingers like her mother had used to do for Irene. Perhaps, she thought. Perhaps when she left Germaine in Düsseldorf, or Vienna—perhaps before they left Paris—perhaps on a sleeper train they might—

But Germaine, in her exhausted voice, plodded on.

'That afternoon at Pruniers. She—Madame Jouvenel. She fed me steak and chattered at me like her husband chattered at her and Charles chattered at me and I—I drank a bottle of Champagne and only told her—took her to go see to her office without me, I needed. Needed a bit of air.'

'You went to find Charles?' Irene said. Germaine was nuzzling against her clenching stomach like an animal. Butting her with her head like some dumb beast and Irene had said it, tossed it out like nothing: *You ought to come with me, when I go.*

'I was going to,' Germaine mumbled, 'to finally make him see… something. Reason, or—or…'

Irene petted her hair. Her hands kept moving on their own. She could feed them to Germaine, to make them still.

'But of course it all went wrong,' Germaine said into Irene's skin. 'Charles wasn't at home; nobody was home, even servants. His daughter was standing ringing his bell, and she thought—well.'

'She'd have seen your done-up face,' Irene murmured. Touching her ears. Her mouth, moving, on Irene's queasy belly. 'And,' she added, 'your hair.'
Germaine was pressing into her and she didn't make mistakes. Irene Adler, who recognised people; who knew what people liked. She wouldn't be ill with Germaine's fingers digging into her hips. It would be all right. Hands in the girl's hair.

'It made me even—even worse,' Germaine was saying. 'That she thought I was cheap. Grasping.'

'Furious,' said Irene. In Berlin before she left her she could take her by the hair—'You'd have thought,' she said, 'that presuming bitch.'

'I wanted—'

'And your eyes,' Irene heard. 'So green.' In Madrid it would be all right; she would want to. She could take her hand from Germaine's head; move Germaine's hand away from her hip. Between her legs. Slide two of Germaine's fingers inside her and squeeze them with her body and Germaine's eyes—

'There,' Irene gasped. 'She must have been blind, not to see you.'

'I—' said Germaine, but Irene squeezed her again so she moved her hand, a shaking little. 'Good,' Irene told her, 'more'—so bloody tender—

'You wanted,' Irene said, 'you wanted to show her. You wanted her to see, well, what was it? Charles on the floor? Charles, with his tongue up—'

'—Gretha,' Germaine gasped, 'on top of him.' Irene was bruised. Sore. 'Hard,' she said, and Germaine said, 'Gretha riding him and his head between Henry's legs. You must have been—have been—'

'Practically on top of them with the camera, harder—'

'Agnès, she—she started a bit but then she just laughed.'

And Irene, laughing, 'Cunt,' as fingers clutched in her, hot, in Paris—

'I ran away,' Germaine said. 'I just left. I felt—you're, God—I felt she must be following me; I was practically running. Must have looked like a clown, with my, my face paint and my curled hair and thinking all of a sudden: what had I done to Madame Jouvenel?'

A jolt.

'Curl your fingers,' Irene said, though she didn't want, not again. But in the months alone, in Rome, and Barcelona—

'I couldn't stop thinking what I'd done,' Germaine gasped. Moved, moving. 'Sure they'd—they'd come for me, and I'd not a leg to stand on, and I—I ran for ages. Want to taste you now, I—'

'Tell me,' said Irene. 'Tell me, first.'

'I, oh. Couldn't think where to go. Thought of—of reading manuscripts for the Jouvenels, American ones. All the, oh, all the same. Tommy guns and midnight telephone calls and—'

'—ransom notes—' said Irene with her entire hand up her in Chicago, beating and beating, left dripping in a train station in New York—

'I ended up,' said Germaine, 'miles away. In the eighth. And where could I go at—Christ, Christ—'
And Irene didn't want—but in Constantinople she would move her hips—

'—at ten in the evening? I thought of, of ransom notes. I bought papers from a kiosk, but I didn't know—I'd passed a dozen hotels, but surely they could all see me—'

'I—'

'I want you to—'

'Go on, go—go on.'

Germaine swallowed. Germaine was solid and naked and halfway inside Irene's fractured body that in Lisbon would leave her and in Amsterdam would need but in Paris Germaine went on. 'I took a back table,' she said, 'in a café, and,' moving her hand, 'ordered more food than I could eat. I didn't touch it, I just, just cut apart the newspaper and made my note. Christ, my heart. And I'd passed a place called the Hôtel Vernet, so I put that in the—'

'Make me—'

'—note, ungh,' Germaine said, and pushed, and Irene buckled, forehead to knees, grinding, wanting it, wanting—

'Please,' said Irene, alone in London, far from all and everyone, 'please—'

'I couldn't decide how much to, to give her, but I—surely the negatives were enough of a—a gesture of good faith. And the man behind the, panting, 'counter took my envelope and I—I was sure,' she said, and Irene too never made such mistakes, 'that every passer-by would see through me but they didn't, they didn't, all the way to the paper where I snuck in and put my note on Madame Jouvenel's desk and then I didn't sleep the whole night and the next day I took down my hair.'

Irene, jackknifed. Shoving her pubic bone, into Germaine's palm. Building, cresting, Le Havre and St Malo and a Limehouse tenement before the War as waves of too much—Germaine—

'And wiped off my face-paint,' Germaine said, from far, far away. Irene was a rain-soaked paper doll, somewhere in Europe.

'And when Madame Jouvenel woke up,' Germaine went on, 'I tried to get her to go to the paper, but she said she'd dropped by the night before. She got us on the first train back to Roz Ven just as you—you were probably getting to her office as we pulled out of the station.'

Irene, with her lungs heaving, looking down. Panting. Germaine, soaked and defiant, who had got away with theft and deception and almost blackmail, whom Irene could crawl to in Morocco or leave weeping in Paris or be left by gloating in St Malo or take back to London in that unfashionable brown wool skirt, back to Limehouse on Irene's arm where Florence would still be living, younger than ever and asking no questions so that Irene would be delighted to say, Germaine and I, Mama, me and Germaine; and would never again tire of the stale air of the same three rooms or the endless bland Limehouse faces; and would never more run out gagging for the fresh air of Gracechurch Street or the Champs Elysées; but would sow her mother's flat with gifts and would reap her smiles and would sleep on fine sheets and be always, always happy. You should come with me, she had said, when I go.

Minutes later, or hours, stretched out next to Germaine on the bed, she might have asked about the photographs. What did you think, she would say, when you looked at them, that first night? But Germaine just shifted in her sleep.
Sunday, August 28th, 1921
6pm (Hour 100)

If he could only just shut his eyes. Surely it would be easier. If he could only sleep.

Why, though? So many times, hundreds of times on cases he'd gone days at a time without even wanting to blink. His head fell back towards the top of the train-seat and he thought maybe that was the key: to be swept along; to forget to want to; and then they wouldn't slide shut by accident and he wouldn't see—

John, pulling ropes tight around Henry Jouvenel tied to a chair asking Sherlock do you know what they specialise in here? Apart from beautiful Scottish boys, served up like steaks? and Irene Adler's cold-echoing laughter you'll have to content yourself with watching, Mr Holmes, you can't even swallow a mackerel filet as John chuckles, Oh he likes to, he likes to show everyone Christ, oh you beauty, halfway down Daniel's throat

—and jerk awake, bent nearly in two over his knotted-up stomach in the second-class train carriage which (breathe) had been the only seat available on such short notice.

Steady. Observe.

Across the aisle a pair of provincial newlyweds sped towards the city in their re-soled shoes and let-out hems. The bride kept reaching, surreptitious, into her handbag, to fondle the coins there: Paris would pinch, even in the off-season. But she was very pretty, Sherlock thought. Out of the groom's league, before the War. No doubt he wanted to stake his claim. Let all of Paris see her on his arm.

Outside the window the fields were browner, even now, than when he and John—than they had been, days ago. His burning stinging open eyes.

But this could be a case, he told himself. Was a case. In that racing mid-stream current of an interesting problem he never wanted to sleep. At times like that his whole body used almost to disappear.

Well. Irene Adler, of course, was as interesting as problems came. A woman at the top of her trade; the star player at the star establishment of its type, with the men of Paris at her feet and a reputation, already, for a repertoire on the far side of the exotic. Not exactly a secret, Sherlock didn't imagine: the staff of a place like Le Chabanais. A shrewd businesswoman, yes; but in Irene Adler's position, scandal would only bring her further into the public eye; would bring custom banging down her door. Or, he thought, considering the nature of her specialty, perhaps begging for—

John panting moaning begging tied to a chair with Daniel MacIntyre at his feet and Irene Adler on his lap but John wanting just to see and Sherlock—Sherlock behind him watching Daniel. Telling Daniel lick him as Sherlock's mouth waters and waters and John moans in that way that makes Sherlock—always, always makes him need to kiss him like Sherlock will die unless he can but the mouth against his is viscera-red and Sherlock is hard and ashamed and she's biting his mouth pulling hard hard hard on his hair

Short of breath. Soaked in sweat. The newlyweds must notice, he thought, for disgraceful seconds together before realising how absurd it was. The two of them were sweating, themselves. Dark stains under the arms of the woman's blouse. It was upward of ninety degrees and Sherlock could be one of the crowd. Outside in the browning fields, cows flicked their tails at stinging flies.
So: she had kissed him. His case. Who catered to men, but preferred women. Who had preferred, plainly, her foreign colleague—friend—to either of her officer clients. And Sherlock preferred… not Irene Adler. Not—not Italian boys (clenching clutching in his chest) in sun-warmed clusters, like grapes.

Sweat in his grainy open eyes.

But surely it needn't be a secret, he thought, if a whore wanted to meddle with her colleagues in her off hours. A draw, if anything. There were men who sought out such things. Did she put on shows, for clients who enjoyed such things? Plenty of that in the city. Men who wanted to watch, wanted to —

with ropes around his wrists, Irene Adler cinching them tight, as oceans apart on the bed John's golden legs and Daniel's darker ones and they laugh and kiss and rub—rub up against each other and John moans and pants and Sherlock moans, leaks and, and needs and Irene says if you keep them together, Mr Holmes. If you only keep your eyes on them long enough and Sherlock, panting, tries with everything he has to

—watch.

He rubbed his face. Probably quite a living to be made. From people like that.

But she'd known he wasn't one of them. Hadn't she? And she, in any case, was leaving Paris. Boredom; new trunks; English newspapers. What was it to her, what the city thought? Yet, threatened with the exposure of these photographs, she traveled out to the provinces just to retrieve them.

Certainly, Sherlock thought, it ought to be a sufficient puzzle. Was. Ought to be.

Screeching; steam. The train clanked to a stop at a mid-sized platform with signage that began to look suburban rather than provincial. The bride dabbed at her face with a handkerchief; her husband cleared his throat. A few more bodies boarded the carriage. No one disembarked.

So: his, his case. Not so different, he thought, from anyone: the things she did for money and why she did them. And if certain things were advantageous for a woman in her position, others must be the opposite. Things she wanted, and things she feared. Everyone, he thought, feared things and—

dusky young Daniel, tongue out and teeth, drooling all over John's feet as sinuous Irene, in John's lap, rolls her teasing hips and he moans, so close, so close Sherlock can smell it, Sherlock stripped and straining and hard, hard, tied down miles away on the miles-wide bed as John closes his eyes and begs for Daniel to give it him and moves like he wants to just—to fuck through her saying Sherlock, saying Please Daniel, and Gretha saying What if Irena weren't on his lap?

—and wanted them.

Sherlock needed—he needed to. To train his aching eyes out of the window and think not about John Watson but about. About Irene Adler, who would fear: obscurity. Disinterest. A clientele with whom she became boring or—or fell out of fashion.

And Paris was nothing if not fashionable. And London, in its own way, was the same. Feuding spinster sister to a flighty young thing; but the whole family, after all, had gone through the War.

And so now the fashion, he thought, was for survival. The fashion was for forgetting; for prosperity and forgiveness and the triumph of youth. Irene was nearing thirty if not upon it; but those pictures must show her at twenty-five, twenty-six. Living freely in the new fashion; wanting her colleague
while her clients wanted each other and everyone forgot the Somme. A draw, if anything.

Unless they cast her, somehow, as a reminder of the War. Unless they cast her as against—against survival.

Across the aisle the young bride was worrying at her plait. Sherlock, eyes smarting, lids heavy, looked at her. Her faded let-out hem and her threadbare coin purse.

Of the four of them in those photographs, he thought, three had not only survived, but grown to something more than life-sized. They were excessive. Rouged-up and vicious. And Gretha, asking questions; newly visiting Paris, though she wasn't supposed to be in France—

*what if Irena*

He closed his eyes. Couldn't help it. Felt the rumble of the train beneath him as it left Brittany behind.

And Sherlock, half-sleeping, knowing what he would see when he did, still thinking: in such a fashionable city, the only people who couldn't be forgiven were those already punished. The only ones who couldn't survive were already dead. In such a fashionable city, it wasn't done to dwell on them; or to associate with those who had.

The English, Sherlock thought, slipping back under, said Irene. The French said Irène. You had to go east, before you heard Irena.

*[END OF PART 1]*

Chapter End Notes

DVD extras notes on this chapter can be found [here](#).
Hello everyone! Long time, no see. For those who haven't been following me on Tumblr this whole time, a quick update on the status of this novel: it is now complete, and new chapters will go up at the rate of one per week for the next twelve weeks. Chapters 1-12 have also been re-edited slightly, in order to make the work as a whole cohere. This composition process has been, to put it mildly, quite a ride. If you'd like to read more about it, I've been posting "DVD extras" style commentary over on Tumblr as "new chapters" go up, and will continue to do so with each actually-new chapter as it's published. This chapter has a special audio commentary, if that's of interest.

While I've got you here, I'd like to stress that in its final incarnation, this novel very much earns all the warning tags up top. Reminder that those tags include Underage, Graphic Depictions of Violence, Infidelity, Consent Issues, Drug Use, and Mental Health Issues. Take care of yourselves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART 2

(EARLIER)

Friday, August 26th, 1921
9:30pm

Irene on the balcony of the Chateaubriand dining room: to be on the cusp of a plot was a quality almost chewy in the mouth. A spot of Champagne; a spot of house-breaking; the night was young and she was clean and cool, and though she wore a bright-orange shift from the House of Poiret, no one in the world could say where Irene Adler had got to. The provinces, after all, had their points.

She might stay a bit, she thought, after this was over. There was nothing to stop her, in fact, from staying here forever if she pleased. She could take a room in the hotel. Live off picking the pockets of visiting Parisians: no one would find her out. Even at Roz Ven nobody had known she was there; if they were unknown to her then she was even more unknown to them. On the balcony the sky was indigo, and the bay stretched out beyond the limits of her sight. Irene thought she could sunbathe in the summers. Get brown and leathery, she wouldn't care. A woman of a certain age: nobody wanted her so nobody noticed her—what damage couldn't she do?

The serveur appeared with her salmon and she thought: she might shed it all like a skin. Dress in loose cotton and forget the world. Take a house on the bluffs. Befriend her grocer; live like a nun. So far from the city you could believe there'd never been a War.

But—

The salmon, it transpired, was dry. At the next table over a mother sat down with her daughter, sallow in shapeless yellow; rapped the girl's fingers so she'd sit up straight; and Irene thought, with
fifty years stretching out before her: perhaps the Continent then, after all.

**Friday, August 26th, 1921**

9:30pm

The Boas woman had gone on for ages.

Ages, and that wasn't even taking into consideration her housekeeper. What with the haranguing and the showing-about, the fretting over the décor in the entryway, and the careful enumeration of every serving-spoon and coffee cup moved from its place; and what with John following in the wake of the two women with Sherlock's voice in his head whispering questions, which he tried to insert into the cracks and crevices of the conversation when either of the two ladies stopped for breath—it was already half nine by the time he stepped back out onto the street.

The last train would be just before ten. If he hailed a taxi here, and went straight to the station… His stomach rumbled so hard it hurt. The street around him had taken on a sharp-edged, unreal aspect; descending the steps from the house he tripped over a piece of broken pavement, and caught himself on the clematis trailing over Claire Boas's garden rails.

An old horse-cab clip-clopped towards him. John put up a hand. The cabbie's moustache, his eyebrow: John the Englishman felt his spine stiffen. He bullied his way through the direction in his schoolboy's French. It was only after he'd sat back in the seat that he realised a horse-cab would never be quick enough to make the Gare du Nord.

It was just as well, he supposed, as his stomach clenched. Did the late-night trains to the provinces even have open dining cars? And then there was the matter of who from Roz Ven would come to fetch him from a two a.m. train. Sherlock had been… absorbed, hadn't he. He'd been… but he got that way sometimes, on a case. He'd said John needn't return. Better to stay the night, as Claudine had said: dine, and retire early in the hotel room she'd suggested. Catch the first train out the next morning when those women's voices—John yawned, hugely—had stopped rattling about his brain. Sherlock would hardly notice the difference; and surely no one else would, if he didn't.

John leant forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder: a restaurant, he stammered, not the station. The man glanced over his shoulder and John—John hadn't the faintest notion of a place to eat. It was August, after all; shop-fronts boarded up all down the boulevards; and Claudine had scrawled some names on an envelope-back as he'd driven them to the station, but it must, he thought, have got away from him somehow. It certainly wasn't in his pocket now.

'Ah,' John said. The cabbie's eyebrows made his head hurt. 'Pour…dîner?' The cabbie clucked disapproval at him and his stammering French.

The horse clicked around a corner, and there, shining white in the dark: the horrible basilica they'd laughed about that night at—

'Chez Manière,' John said. The cabbie made a noise high-up in his throat; but he turned the horse's head. John sat back against the cushions and thought of *coq au vin*, the pale dome of Sacré Coeur peeking through alleys to his right. *It looked better*, Sherlock had said, *as a hole in the ground*: he had smiled as he'd said it, and caught John's eye so he'd know what'd been said; and they all had laughed.

The horse pulled them up and up until, there: light streaming from windows; young people at café tables. As if the fête had gone on continuously, thought John, handing his francs to the driver. As if
the same young poets and drunkards had sat drinking at the same tables, for the scant hours since he'd sat here himself.

Even Michel was working. He smiled, wide and superficial, and John was seated outside, on the corner by the steep stone stairs stretching down into darkness. They gave him a place to look, seasoned foreigner that he decidedly felt amongst the bright, chattering young creatures. At his elbow a carafe of Claudine's Chablis appeared. It was almost like coming home.

He rubbed his face. His head ached. Claudine had said to order the duck confit so he did: drank her wine and watched her friends. Brought out his moleskin notebook, scribbled a telegram to Roz Ven and gave it to Michel to send. He looked over his notes on the Boas household and his stomach growled and he tried to think what Sherlock would ask if he were here. In the street a motor-car slowed, girls screeching with laughter in the back, and turned down an alley with inches on either side. Behind John, from the other side of the open glass doors, a young man's voice called 'Dr Watson?' and he choked on his wine.

Turning in his seat; twisting against the glare; the voice's owner was blocked by the door's casement, so John had to scoot his chair to the side.

'Dr Watson!' the voice called out again, before John, squinting through the shifting crowd, made out Daniel's face.

'Private MacIntyre,' he murmured. Much too quiet for anyone to hear.

'Wait there!' Daniel called. He was three layers of tables in, shouting to be heard, his hands on the shoulders of a man and a woman both looking up at him laughing. 'I'll be out!' he called. 'Just one moment!'

John made a vague gesture of nothing much at all. Daniel commenced climbing practically over the laps of other diners: one man swatted at him in jest when Daniel used his head for leverage, and a woman gave a shriek and then a nip to his fingers on her shoulder. He turned about, laughter chasing shock across his face; spread his hands in injured question to her too-innocent face. When he turned back to make his way onward she reached up to pinch his arse; he jumped, and everyone at her table laughed. Even John was tempted to laugh. Hand before his quirking mouth he watched as Daniel, at last, squeezed through a half-open glass door to stand breathless just before his table.

'Dr Watson!' he said again. John gazed up at him, chin half-resting on his hand; Daniel smiled. 'Shall I join you, then?'

'I,' said John, 'Yes,' pushing back his chair, 'of course,' standing, gesturing to the empty seat for he had, hadn't he, been sitting behind his duck confit, extending no invitations at all. Daniel sat. Grinned. John sat. John made a show of adjusting the position of his little ironwork chair.

What did one say in such a situation? There they were. John Watson with his Chablis and Daniel MacIntyre with his highball, in a Paris café with Michel at their side promising another round. John couldn't quite think; wanted to—it was Daniel. Daniel in the flesh. There he sat. There he lounged, with that same old absent touch of his free hand to the side of his own neck, face bathed in golden light. Catching the eyes of this person or that from the room within, from the pavement outside, laughter always bubbling up for a moment when it happened, the overflow of a shared joke. There he sat, so—so young, still: dishevelled and bright-eyed, but with his shoulders broad now and his forearms, where he'd rolled up his sleeves, more muscled than they'd ever been before, even when the both of them had hauled their kits on their backs. He moved as if his body had never hurt him.

'Couldn't stay away then?' Daniel said. 'The allure of Paris and all that? City of Light?'
John cleared his throat. Pulled his focus back outside himself; let the smile come up on his lips.

'You must understand that, I think. You seem quite at home here, these days.'

'Hm' Daniel said. He shot imaginary cuffs; sat back and surveyed the pavement, putting on the critical air of a connoisseur. 'This old place is a haunt of mine, certainly.' He took a sip of his highball. 'S convenient to have a bit of a home away from home, isn't it, living sur les toits and all. Gets bloody hot in August, I can tell you, and cold in the winter.'

'Sur—you've got a—what? Attic?'

'Part of one.' That grin. 'Me an', er—' He scanned the crowd, then put up a hand, waving at a strapping young blond weaving back to a table in the midst of the crowd with a bottle of Champagne in his fist. 'Me an' Tom there, we room together, little place just around the corner from the university.' Tom caught sight of Daniel's raised hand, and lifted the Champagne in greeting, jerking his head to the side to stop a lock of hair flopping in his eyes. His smile, John thought, had the same mischievous tucked-corner quality Daniel's now had; his movements the same impish brightness.

John turned back in time to see Daniel give Tom a little salute, then lower his hand and meet John's eyes. John wanted to pinch himself; felt he might be floating away.

'He's a good—' John started, just as Daniel said, 'Me and Tom, and usually Tom's girl Marie.'

He twinkled. His eyes, twinkled. He said, 'She's not on the papers, but even so. I've got the one side of the curtain and they've got the other. They clear off in time for me to give my lessons on Saturdays, and I give them the run of the place on Tuesday and Thursday evenings to work on their sculpture project, but. What with one thing and another,' and he laughed, 'it's good to have a place to come, away from all the mess.'

'I,' John said, 'can imagine'; and felt at once a rush of affection so overwhelming—for Sherlock; for Baker Street; for mouldering dissection specimens and piles of papers with an organisational scheme obscure to any but their creator; for ragged dressing gowns and lost slippers and tobacco fugs, and to be talking to someone who might understand it all—that he had to shut his eyes for a moment and breathe; and it was hardly surprising when Daniel, with a wry twist to his mouth, asked 'And your—ah—colleague?'

John cleared his throat. Smiling like a fool.

'He's,' he said. 'I'm back for just the one night. Looking into something for him.' He gestured with the moleskin. Daniel's eyes dropped, and snagged, before he looked back up to John's face.

'Well then!' he said. Smacked the table with the flat of his hand. 'We'll have to show you a night on the town.'

'Oh,' John said, 'I don't, really—' but Daniel told him 'No arguments! Any brother of Captain Watson.'

'No, really.' John said, but Daniel was saying, 'What do you go in for? Music? Dancing? I heard the show at the Royal Box is all the rage with the tourists over from New York,' and John, wrongfooted, words caught in his throat, was repeating 'Oh, well, New York—' when a voice from across the street shouted 'Daniel!' and they both turned to look.

'Jules!' Daniel called out. He gave out a kind of a whoop and vaulted out of his seat; John squinted to make out a svelte Negro youth in a meticulous white suit, mid-stroll. He closed his mouth and pushed himself to standing. Daniel and Jules embraced, and exchanged kisses on their cheeks; when
they broke apart Daniel's hand still rested in the small of Jules's back.

'Mark Watson,' Daniel told Jules, 'the brother of my Captain,' and then something in French that made them both laugh; and then, straight-faced and gesturing with his hand, with his body angled towards John: 'Mark Watson, Jules Fournier.'

Jules took his time with his up-and-down gaze. John stood with his hand out, in his suddenly conspicuously rumpled suit. He cleared his throat just as Jules, at last, stepped forward to slide his palm against John's, purring 'Enchanté, M'sieur' with a sly smile. Daniel shifted his weight; said something in French. Jules said something back.

'You are English?' said Jules. His accent was thick, and not unlike Claudine's.

'Just over for a week or so,' John said. 'We were out in the country and then—'

'Ouf,' said Jules, and Daniel snorted laughter. 'Out in the country.'

John licked his lips. Looked down, then up, and Jules still looking at him, smile lingering around his eyes, said, 'Daniel will show you a night out? Show you Paris?'

'He was just mentioning—the Royal Box—'

'Ah oui?' said Jules, smirking, 'avec les Americains?' and Daniel clipped him on the back of the head —'Ouf!'—and let out a long laughing volley of French which Jules countered with his own as John opened his mouth, and shut it again. Daniel MacIntyre, he thought again: in the flesh. Being—getting his friend in a headlock, rubbing his knuckles into his close-cropped hair. Like John'd used to do, he thought, with his brothers, with the next-door boys; and with his shoulders unwinding he blinked stinging eyes as Jules, panting, laughing, extricated himself at last.

'Bon,' Jules said, straightening his slim-fitted jacket with Daniel's steering hand back at his spine. 'Bon, I will leave you to each other.'

He winked at John and turned, with a dancerly little hip-pivot. He made a show of walking away and Daniel made a show of watching him.

'It's good,' John said, welling up, not thinking. 'Seeing you doing so well.'

He felt his face and his neck flush hot. Daniel turned to look at him and John clearing his throat, still smiling awkwardly, tried to think of something to say as they pulled out their chairs and sat back down; but Daniel just mmm'ed with a lazy smile, and threw back the rest of his drink.

'Did your father use them, then?' Daniel said, with a nod towards the moleskin, and John—snagging —

'Pardon?' he said.

'Or did you and your brother… he was always carrying his about, you know.'

'Ah.'

'Wouldn't be caught without the thing.'

'Right, I—yes, of course.'

John shook himself. Of course Daniel would remember. Why wouldn't he? John'd kept notes in it, quotidian observations: his tether to some modicum of normality during the War.
'Well,' he said, 'it's as you say. Our father kept medical notes. We both…'

'You're very like him.'

John drank his wine.

Daniel, still smiling, told him, 'You've got that… authoritative something-or-other. I bet you gave 'em hell, the boys under you. There were boys under you, of course? Only your brother said—'

'Did he really?' John murmured. He hadn't thought he'd ever mentioned Mark to him, as Private MacIntyre or, later, as Daniel. But he didn't seem to have heard.

'Lord,' Daniel said, grinning at John over his highball glass. 'You should've heard him, getting on me and my mate Patrick for the gin we drank on the night watch. MacIntyre! Fletcher! You've forgotten what happened to Stan Whitcomb, have you,' and Daniel puffed himself up like a schoolmaster. 'Got spooked on the night watch when the wind came up. Mistook the barbed-wire fence-posts for Germans in the dark, and started firing. And him not even drunk..

'Mistook the fence-posts for soldiers!' he repeated, and howled, throwing back his head. 'I mean to say! The bloody goon, he actually fired on them!'

John was laughing along with the boy but some—something must have shown on his face. Daniel straightened his mouth when he looked back at him.

'We were idiots, of course,' he allowed, with a shrug. 'It was true enough about Stan, we should've… But we'd never known him, had we? And we were bored to tears night after night with nothing happening, and us barely, ah. Well. Something less than seventeen.'

John with the flush fading: all those lads of fourteen, thirteen. Owning seventeen in search of grand adventure and sent out instead amongst the guns of August but: look how Daniel laughed, he thought. Look how he laughed, tonight.

'No,' said John. Leant back. 'No, I can see, you can't be twenty-two, now.'

'Mmm,' said Daniel. 'No, I can't.'

His white teeth; his puckish roguish grin. How people loved him, he was—

'In any case,' he said, 'we only did it to get Captain Watson's attention; we reckoned—well, Patrick reckoned—that your brother saved his life one time, back in '15. We both thought Captain Watson quite the hero, truth be told.'

'A doctor's doing his job,' said John, 'same as a soldier.'


'Getting bollocked was getting noticed, wasn't it,' Daniel said. 'And what could you expect? I mean. God but it was dull. No action all winter, no movement but you had to move, it was frigid, and there was only so much daring each other to, to pissing contests and—' John chuckled, '—bloody footraces and,' laughing, hearty, Christ, 'quizzing the French and the Russian lads on the filthiest words they could think of, bloody hell. What were some of them? Je m’en fou…'

'Merde,' John said, halting, flushing because of course the boy lived here now; but Daniel laughed obligingly.
'Putain de merde, aye.'

Michel touched John's shoulder and turning: a bottle of Scotch. John shifted plates and glasses to clear space.

'Figa?' he said. 'The Italians used to say—fica?'

'Ah, aye they did,' Daniel said. 'And—pizdávoy, that one I remember, from Vasily.'

'Pidza—'

'Pizdávoy,' Daniel repeated, slower.

'What does it mean, then?'

Daniel looked at him through curling smoke. 'Cunted up,' he said, and bellowed laughter and John, startled, laughed too with Daniel's long Scots u's lapping at the insides of his skull.

'Bolloxed up,' said Daniel. 'Dicked about. Right fucked, really.'

'A handy phrase in a war.'

'Aye,' Daniel said, 'cheers.' John raised his Scotch and Daniel raised his. A soft wet clink where glasses met in the middle; the two of them smiling at each other over the tops like friends well-met of an evening. Christ but the world was strange.

'Cheers,' John said. He drank; and Daniel drank. And then, lowering his hand, Daniel said, 'A bloke was never bored like that, was he, around your brother? Thank God for him, that winter in Lens.'

John's glass, ever so slightly, clattered on the table when he put it down.

'Because,' he said, 'you thought him a hero.'

'No,' said Daniel. 'Because he knew how to keep amused. No, no, he did, that was the thing about him, wasn't it? Well, you'll remember. He'd all his little ways to ease the tedium. And he'd lived a bit, hadn't he, and we thought that was grand and—and when you could get him to take a bit of drink!'

'Oh yes,' John said.

'You can believe those were nights to write home about.'

John wincing almost laughed: if Daniel had written home about those nights in the, what, the hospital tent and the day watch and the—Christ, the school, John hadn't thought of it in years. If he'd written home about the fa—about the school then John had stood in the hospital corridor, had stood with the stern upright MacIntyre matriarch and her tender young Connie at the bedside of the bandaged-up remains of their ruined brother and son, had stood with his hat in his hands in his filthy skin wishing himself—and all the while: John Watson, they'd been thinking, so this is the man who likes a tipple of a Saturday night.

John in Paris sucked in a breath. Daniel was saying, '… night in January, Christmas hardly even gone but it seemed like it'd never happened, didn't it,' and John hadn't—he hadn't thought.

Hadin't, in ages.

'So your brother,' Daniel told him, 'he took us on a kind of scouting expedition, us lads.'
How could he not have remembered? Let years go by? Not remembered that through that whole
dragging winter they'd never moved; it had been impossible to believe they ever might. It was—was
dizzying, now: the memory rushing back into him like breakers into a pool, drenching everything
with the feeling of it, dragging his mouth down, dragging on his skin like it had used to do. How
could he have left and then simply… forgot? There, he could see it, had been the German line and
here had been the French; and in the daytime the boys could walk across, plain as blazes. The boys,
the lads. Borrow a cigarette from a German and the next day lend it him back: Fletcher and Williams
and Hoyle, how could John have just—he'd walked away and spent years. Years.

'And we get into this sort of abandoned school,' Daniel was saying, still grinning, leaning forward in
his seat, far away from John on the other side of the tiny table, 'Christ it had to have been ten below,
the wind coming down through the flue and nothing left to burn. But Patrick had a flask and your
brother got the bright idea of taking the newspaper,' laughing, delighted, 'out of the wall, so we read
out the news, right, from back in '14 before we put it on the fire—'

'In '14,' John said, in a haze of remembrance, 'The Eastern front.'

Daniel pounded the table with the flat of his hand. The sound came from miles away. 'All those
generals, aye,' he said, with a lift of his glass towards John. Strong as a bull. 'Sitting in their tents
saying this patch of ground, this one, this one, this is where the line would hold, no more
compromises, no—'

'No more retreats,' with his hand trembling.

'That was it,' said Daniel. 'All just salt in the wound by '16 but it made good fuel for the fire.'

How could he have—not even forgotten but simply… failed to remember? How in Lens in the
empty school they had drunk and thawed and and MacIntyre had caught John's eye over the heads of
his mates, absent hand to the side of his own neck and they'd cried laughing. Of that young arm
around his own shoulders John no longer thought. Not for years. No more retreats: how they all had
laughed.

'I'm amazed,' John said, 'you didn't all freeze to death,' but: 'Captain Watson knew what he was
about,' said Daniel. 'Captain Watson,' he kept saying, and 'your brother,' and John's bowels twisted
as Daniel '—the stories he could tell, mad bastard,' guffawing as if at his club, 'but even dead drunk
he'd tell you off if things got too… too… but your brother could hold his liquor, couldn't he?' and
John swamped by another wave remembered the boy private, who'd sought him out like a puppy
wanting pats on its sleek little head.

'Better a bit of frostbite than dead from boredom,' said Daniel, now, solid in his skin, beloved of his
friends. 'That's the crux of the thing, isn't it, not to be bored.'

John didn't answer.

'Well,' Daniel allowed, watching him. 'Maybe not for everyone. Maybe not for you. You're lucky;
I've always been prone to it. Don't know why your brother put up with me'; but John knew why.
Didn't he.

'He could, um. He could hold his own, I suppose,' John offered, casting about, 'in a game of darts.'

'Tsh, anyone can be amusing in a pub. Captain Watson could be amusing on a—oh, on a train ride,
say, crammed together in the blasted aisles, you remember the way things were during the War. Or
holed up all winter in that bloody dreary coal town I was mentioning, Lens: he'd find an excuse for a
day of leave. Sketching practice, he'd say. He was always kind about my little sketches. Get us off in
John's heart beat. He watched Daniel's strong gesturing arms, and eloquent hands. He drank his wine.

"He'd all those little games,' Daniel was saying. Laughing: hail-fellow-well-met: 'D'you remember?"

"No,' John said.

'Storytelling games,' Daniel insisted. 'You must know what I mean. Absurd nonsense but he got all the boys laughing. Or your—your sister, wasn't it? Your sister the artist—'

"Harry—"

'—her little game. Said it built the skill of observation, apparently; he taught it to me. Practically in the middle of a shelling attack, the mad bastard, you wouldn't believe—'

"No,' John said, remembering, 'I don't remember—'

'I'm telling you,' Daniel laughed. 'I'm—it was outside the town. Cold as a brass monkey's it'd been, all winter, and then we got that first faint sunshine and everyone got ants under their skin. Restless, couldn't settle. Smiling for no bloody reason and your brother found some excuse—' flimsy, Christ, transparent '—to sign us out on leave. Some villager's birthday party in the next town over or—well he just wanted to get out of it didn't he?' *in the countryside* 'Do a bit of scouting, a bit of—of adventuring with the lads,' but he hadn't, John thought, with his chest aching, taken the lads.

He'd just taken Daniel.

Not—not this Daniel. Not this cocky broad-shouldered bohemian but some. Some version of Daniel. Some Daniel deep-voiced but gangly, blushing at compliments and beautiful as the spring that didn't come, with his hand to his sensitive, flushed-up neck. Prattling to John about battle theory and bloody poetry, bloody *King and Country*, who'd followed him about day and night in the black December and the flint-grey February and the hopeless watered down March of '16 and wrestled with him like a great puppy and glowed in earnest when John slapped him on the shoulder in a fraternal—in a brotherly—in a way that brothers—

'She's,' John said. Head roaring, in waves. 'She's doing well, Harry.'

'Just get right away from the others, off on our own and—'

*Get us off in the countryside*

'Funny you should mention her, really,' John went on. Too fast—at random—absurd, he said, 'Because I—I just heard. Just had news I mean.' Daniel had paused with his mouth still open so John rushed on: 'I never would have thought she'd leave London, but if you'll, if you'll believe it she's settled down in Land's End. Regular artists' colony there, that's what she says. It's all a bit bohemian for me but she says the sea air and the colours, she likes the colours, you see,' too loud, Daniel with his paint-smeared knuckles over his mouth and his eyebrows drawing together and his glass dangling from his long, muscle-bared forearm as John said, 'for her drawings, well you'll understand that,' like a horrible John Bull mock-up with his dry mouth and his empty glass. His bitter-swallowing throat.

'Oh,' Daniel breathed, staring at him. 'Oh, I'm a bloody beast.'

'What with your—your line of work.'
'Christ,' Daniel said. 'I'm sorry.'

'I—it's fine,' said John. 'I only. I only thought.'

'I'm dreadful,' Daniel said, 'I am, I'm—I forget not everyone's—that some people are still—that some people's wars were more difficult than mine,' as, snapping: 'I didn't,' John said, 'have a difficult war.'

If his skin could just slither off his bones.

Daniel closed his mouth. Clicked together his strong teeth. John breathed. Pressed his lips together as Daniel opened his mouth; then closed it again.

'I suppose I just feel,' said Daniel at last, halting, 'as if I know you. It's no excuse, I realise. Only you—you remind me of him and so…' He laughed. Drew himself up into public-school posture. Ungainly, like he'd forgot how to do it. 'I lose sight of propriety. As my mother used to say.'

'It's not a problem,' John said.

He took a sip. Took another. Daniel smoked, egregiously; he seemed not to know what else to do with his hands.

'I know your family wasn't like…' Daniel said. 'That they didn't approve of taking things—'

'I'm all right. Just a bit tired.'

'Look here,' said Daniel, grinding out his cigarette in the ashtray, 'I'm trying—I'd wish to—to honour your brother's—Christ.' His golden hand over his eyes.

'I know he'd appreciate your condoling with me,' John heard himself say; and Daniel laughed. Hollow, and scraping.

'That's the kind of thing. That's it exactly, that kind of—of bland, comforting—I'm so out of practice, you see. Odd, with so many dead. I suppose I was just lucky. Patrick lived, thanks to your brother, so I never had to condole with his people. And then my mother and sister went at once and so I never—and Captain Watson would have known just what to say.'

Captain Watson. His dumb, dry mouth. His tongue thick in it.

'That's the thing about families like yours, isn't it?' Daniel said. 'Upright doctors' families. You always know the comforting thing. The respectable thing.'

'We all just get on,' said John, stupidly. Wondering—

'That's it,' Daniel said. 'That it exactly, that—that middle-class English—well. Not much was expected of me, luckily. Or I assume it wasn't. I got the news in the hospital, you see, in Bourg, and I can't quite…'

In the hospital. John let his breath out; in the hospital, in Bourg.

'It was the 'flu,' Daniel told him. 'Or… well it must have been.'

(*Imostors*, the boy had screamed. Bandaged head watering eyes, *Liars*; the MacIntyre women with their stricken faces like Daniel's had used to be, and John Watson with his hat in his hand ready to bolt.)

'It must have been,' Daniel was saying now. 'What else would it be?' Spreading his solid new arms;
raising his squared new jaw. 'I was ill, you understand, when I heard. They'd have found I wasn't up to much, even if I hadn't been—but I was wounded in the battle when your brother... and then at the hospital I got word, or—or I heard…'

Daniel shook his head like a dog with water in its ear, and John—. With the sea-roar still in his ears and an odd split down the middle I could tell him he thought, I could say… At the hospital; after the hospital—after the the hospital in Bourg—Liars, Daniel had screamed. Impostors, and young Connie had swayed where she stood and John had turned and—and left him, left them all, striding down into the town, relieved—

In Paris he closed his eyes. Sherlock, he remembered, had once asked him to travel to Bourg. Dangerous case, Sherlock had said; a call for a revolver (with his eyes shining); for a chap who'd stick by your side in a tight spot. Did John know anyone who fit the description? Did John know—

'It's just,' Daniel was saying, so John opened his eyes, looked at his smooth broad brow furrowing and the little dog-shake to his head, 'it's bloody odd.' Daniel's cigarette was, was—was trembling; John blinked. And Daniel was saying, 'It'd make a mint for a bloody head-shrinker.' Laughing. 'But I can never quite get at it. The memory of how I heard they'd died.'

John, swallowing. Daniel's cigarette in his strong and shaking hand.

In Bourg. In the hospital. John's hat in his hands; John's traitorous chest as he'd stood with the MacIntyres like a kinsman of Daniel's, too. Perhaps it would be easier for him, the nurse had told the three of them, less agitating, if you... And Connie had nearly swooned but John. John hadn't said a —not a bloody word. I could tell you, he thought now, his skin clammy. I could: how he'd turned, how he'd left: long strides through the door, able to breathe again, barely stopping himself running down the drive and he'd just kept on, hadn't he, into the town into the arms of filthy apathetic—laying down coins—

'Doesn't matter,' he said now. Daniel's mouth was twisted oddly, a bad job of a smile that meant, meant nothing. Meant nothing. He told him, 'Tell me about—'

'I can remember, um,' Daniel said. He was, was gripping his hair. Tugging on the back of his hair like he'd always done when he was—upset. Liars, he'd shouted; and the nurse with a little bow of her head: Agitated; but it welled up in John how tonight they'd been fellows together, they'd been. Acquaintances on the pavement in Paris and Daniel was hearty now; he was beloved; he'd shown him and John had seen, he was—

'It's funny,' Daniel said, 'I can remember, you know, arriving at hospital. I can remember—it was the very last days of the War, I remember the newspapers. I remember the baked potatoes, I—'

Tugging at his hair. John couldn't swallow made himself—in Daniel's cot on the ward the boy had yanked at his hair and John helpless had thought of Lens and twisted his hat in his hands and thought of Lens with his palm on Connie's shoulder his sister's shoulder and then they'd given him his excuse and he'd taken it. Just like he'd always done he'd, he'd taken it, he'd—he could tell him, tell the man Daniel who was chewing on his lip who was yanking on the back of his hair, he could tell him, he'd—he'd walked out of that place and kept walking, down the hill through the town and on into the outskirts. Thinking it was done. Thinking it was over and he was over, John was over, the man he'd been in London and the man he'd been in Lens, and he'd run over the river and into the bar with the watered-down beer and thin young women and the infantry rejects who hung about in hopes of a franc and he'd thought, this is the man I am now following hollow shoulder-blades down the stairs into in the back room where he pinned them down and took—and didn't think of anyone but—

'And after,' John said. Daniel's smouldering cigarette in his beautiful shaking hand. 'And afterward,'
John said. 'After the War?'

'I remember the,' Daniel said, 'drinking chocolate, and the way the bloody—the bloody nurse called me—'

'Daniel—'

'Inglesh no matter how—how many times I said I was from,' voice breaking, 'Edinburgh, I remember it all, so why—they must have sent—it must have been a telegraph. Mustn't it? Mustn't—'

'I remember,' John said, bitter filling his mouth, 'the game you mean.'

Daniel's eyelashes. Like a girl's.

'Harry's—Harry's observation game,' John went on. His rotten heart squelching up through his throat when it beat. He hadn't thought, not for years. When he'd been a boy in London, like Daniel—. But Daniel didn't speak.

John said, 'She'd count five, right,' licking his lips, 'while she took in the scene. And then she'd—then she'd close her eyes. It was better with someone else because when she told all the things she remembered, they could say whether she was right. She would play it in train stations, in—'

'Train stations,' Daniel echoed.

'—any new place.'

Silence with the street noise spinning out all around him; something unbearable caught in his gut and Daniel. Far-away eyes returning in increments. Daniel smoothed his hair and let his hand drop and John's breath shook out of him.

'Your brother and I played that game,' Daniel said. John, nauseated, nodded. 'I'd tell what I could remember,' Daniel went on. 'And Captain Watson would correct me.'

And John—all right, he thought. All right. If looking at the bloody thing were better for him than—

(It had been fair weather, for the season. In the quiet outside Lens John had turned backward to face him in the lane, and put his hand over Daniel's eyes. Long lashes tickling John's fingers. Daniel smiling. Hand to his own throat. Tell me what you remember, John had said, and when Daniel had licked his lips his tongue just grazed the bottom edge of John's palm; the breeze had whipped and fluttered against the tiny patch of wet.)

—what came after—

'So,' Daniel said. Clearing his throat. Forehead smoothing out he said, 'Yes, that's. That's what we were doing, as it happens, that day I was telling you about. When the, ah, when the shelling started.'

John grit his teeth and let it come: the noise from all sides. The billowing shock-waves of heat. Fire-punch at his back rushing along his shoulders arms a burning breaker pressing him forward nearly taking out his knees and, with his insides shocked-hot and slithering, his first bloody thought was We've been seen. 'Thank God for your brother in a crisis,' Daniel was saying, miles away, and John could laugh. Seeing to the safety, he'd told himself that morning, of a young private; so he'd turned his face from the eyes of the blast, got the boy's hand and run with him, boots on the dirt hearts beating. Next to him Daniel—How many battles had I seen by that point,' was saying, 'but I froze up. Just stood there—' while a little way on, a shell had hit a farmhouse '—gawping; couldn't think what to do—' and the roof had gone thirty feet in the air.

'Your brother had to lead me,' Daniel said, 'like a dog on a tether.' John with his shocked-hot heart and the boy had followed, 'into a farmhouse,' Daniel was saying, chuckling, deep in his broad new chest: 'probably damning his luck the whole way. Could have spent the morning having a lie-in, poor chap.'

The bastard. Look at him, look straight on, breathing like he was back in it: fine. If that was better for him, John could. Pairs of pounding feet pounding pulse and the noise of the guns. With his blood up and the countryside exploding around them and the mark of a boy's tongue on his palm in that farmhouse outside Lens (We've been seen, steady, on steady) he'd pressed his back against the doorjamb and made himself be still; and by the window Daniel had crouched, forehead to the glass. Soft open mouth.

'Protected you, did he,' John said, in Paris. 'Kept you you safe.'

'As houses.' And Daniel grinned, and knocked back the rest of his Scotch. All right, thought John, hand clenching, all—

_Come here_, had hissed from the doorway, but Daniel, face pressed to the glass, made no answer. Not to MacIntyre! or to Daniel!. John had hated him to be so—so exposed. He'd fancied himself seeing to the safety of a young private (Come away, MacIntyre) though the roof above them might go thirty feet up and the shells tear at random through wood and plaster to rip through mobile unmarrred skin sloping nape freckled nose shattered in pieces and the tingling touch of the boy's tongue. _Daniel!_ Come away! as outside the explosions—moving? closer? Noise everywhere and his surging blood, John crawled over the floor just to get him to look at him (face it, steadily); just to get him to safety; just to touch his shoulder and touch his neck and get him to turn and look and—

—all right—

_Oh_, Daniel had said, twisting under John's hands, _Christ_ and he had kissed him.

Only to calm him. Only—only his young tongue hard in John's mouth, pulse under his fingers with the heavy guns thudding outside. He'd got his legs around his hips; _Oh God_ Daniel had said, and John had rolled him over on the hard floor. Making noises. Not even, not even bothering to tell himself he was, what, was shielding him with his body or even (We've been seen) hiding him from view, not bothering, not—not giving a damn just pressing his hips down against him, hands on his wrists teeth on Daniel's fine soft unmarked throat; and Daniel's artist's hands (always so kind—Christ—about my little sketches) on his skin under his clothes, whining when John for an instant pulled away so John put his fingers around the kid's throat to feel it. Fingerprints to bruises. Shock-waves of heat and the windows rattling and he'd pressed him down. All right, he had. Put him where he wanted him, skin burning up, he hadn't stopped hadn't stopped Daniel had cried out and John had wanted it again so he did it again and Daniel tensed all over and came in his kit trousers as John kept rutting against him, bruising him, flushing his pink mouth up as he seeped through his flies on the filthy farmhouse floor and John pushing himself up pushing himself back flooded hot hot hot and then cold—

'What credit isn't owed your brother,' Daniel was saying now, waving his glass about, hair smoothed down, shoulders thrown back, 'for the fine specimen you see before you,' and John, awash with shame, rose to his feet.

Saying—what? He ought to know, ought to. Ought to be able to say. In Lens he'd flooded cold cold cold and ought to have looked at the boy but he couldn't look at him so he didn't make himself, did he. John Watson who over newspapers from 1914 had laughed at the irony: No more retreats; but in
that farmhouse he'd taken what he wanted and then just backed off the kid; the boy; the tousle-haired
private under his protection; had backed to the door; backed to the back yard to be sick in the half-
frozen mud back of the empty chicken run and in Paris it was sweltering. Inside the bistro voices
roared ricocheted and bodies—bodies in their multitudes. Pressing up against the sweat-slithering
fleeing skin of the man he—stifling. The man he was.

And in the WC—

In the WC he breathed.

There was no mirror, he noticed. He noticed there was tile. Black and white, he noticed, and painted-
yellow wood. Noticed the floor had a crack along the side away from the toilet; and he opened his
eyes.

Made his creaking knees unbend. Pushed up off the floor. Splashed water on his face and it ran
down his neck and the front of his collar; he did it again. His shaking filthy hands and his arms
braced on the basin, just—still. Just for a moment.

Just for another moment, now.

Out in the corridor there was a telephone. John stood and breathed out through his nose and pressed
his thumb hard to the mouthpiece, so he could feel it. So it might even hurt. He could disengage the
receiver, he thought. Hold it up to his mouth and pronounce some combination of syllables and then
wait and then—and then Sherlock would speak to him. Fond and impatient and eager for news; like
John was a chap who'd stick by you in a tight spot. Shoes on the pavement hearts beating, the man
he'd been in—in London.

Sherlock, he remembered, had been in a temper for a week the time he'd asked John to come to
Bourg, and John had refused. John wasn't meant to. He never did refuse him when Sherlock talked
about a gun with his eyes shining. Sherlock'd left John to repent in Antwerp while he'd worked the
thing alone, pointedly, as Sherlock could be pointed across national borders. In the end he had wired
him from Geneva with an urgent request for a copy of the Dijon telephone directory to be hand-
delivered to a bolt-hole near the University; when John had arrived with the thing two days later
they'd both acted as if nothing had happened. No crimes ceded, none claimed. No more retreats.

John took his hands off the receiver. Pushed finger-tips into the mushy hollows of his face: he
wouldn't know what to say, anyway, to the Parisian operator. Sherlock spoke French but John had
left Sherlock preoccupied at Roz Ven; and Daniel spoke it, but John had—all right he had—

(In, in Lens in—in Lens John had pushed the boy down and then. He'd pushed him and used him
and run out on him and then, sick in the cold air and the mud with the shells exploding around him
he'd thought if he kept on running. If he'd run and kept running then he'd be free, be—he be weightless
and unimpeachable and he'd starved for it with every atom of him but Daniel hadn't. John had
dragged himself back inside with regret sinking mercury-heavy in his throat and Daniel had been
grinning, the fine specimen you see before you, so grotesquely glad and breathless and so young)

—but Daniel wasn't here.

John took a breath. At the end of the corridor the darkness changed texture. A white-aproned serveur
with trays under one arm balanced a door open with his hip. Back alley. And John's own hand,
patting his trouser pocket for his moleskin before he'd thought. He pulled his fingers back with his
guts shrivelling inside him.

He would. Could do. Had done after the farmhouse and again after the hospital and so he could
again, could slip out the back way into the shadows to get rid of the wide-eyed boy he'd—to get rid of him. In the still of the back alley the night would be cooler. The people easy. If he turned uphill at every crossroads he'd find the basilica and from there Claudine's auberge. He could leave on the first train in the morning. From Roz Ven return to Calais via Rouen and on to London; and if Sherlock ever wanted to return to Paris then John could just, just say something. Just. Just say something, some reason, some lie, some refusal, some—

Hand over his eyes; shaky. Shaky breath.

The serveur squeezed by smelling of shellfish. The back door creaked shut. Before the hospital or the farmhouse or the sea of café tables, Daniel with his wide schoolboy's grin flush with warmth from his best mate's flask had slung an arm over John's shoulder, brandishing a clipping like a flag. John with his skin crawling made his way back through the glare and press of bodies and the heat.

Their table was empty and for a moment he thought with a wash of relief that Daniel had gone, but: no. There he was, just to the right. Bent double with—laughter. Plainly another Scotch in, at least: his body turned towards the fellow Jules. He looked… unscathed. Fairly glowing with health. Looking at him anyone would think—a person couldn't help but suppose—and Jules spotted John and beckoned and John remembered the back door and forced—. Forced himself on.

'Dr Watson!' Daniel said.

He turned his laughing face to John. Hand on his back.

'Mr MacIntyre,' said John, but Daniel made a face so he said instead, 'Daniel,' and then: 'Mark.'

(Liars the boy in the cot had screamed, tugging at his hair. Imposters, liars—)

'Mark Watson,' Daniel repeated, now, as John blinked. 'Just think of Captain Watson's brother, in Montmartre, with an evening to spare! What a prince. I just know you're all princes, your whole,' gesturing with his other hand, 'family, salt of the earth. Isn't he?' to Jules. 'He's a prince, isn't he? You should come 'round,' he added, 'let me draw you. I used to draw your brother, I used to—you should come 'round.'

'That's—kind of you,' John said, carefully. Sweating; swallowing. Daniel's arm tightened around his shoulders. Stifling warm.

'Always know the respectable thing,' Daniel informed Jules. 'Whole family full of English doctors. This one, his brother, his father. All of them! They always know just the thing to say.'

'Always?' said Jules, and then something low, in French: les hommes, and maison close, and John felt himself flush up as Daniel, hooting T'es bête, toi, lunged for a punch on the arm and tottered sideways when Jules ducked out of his reach. Watching them, drawn in by them, anyone would suppose that the War had never been. Anyone would. John reached out to steady Daniel as Daniel reeled back towards him: shoulder coming to rest against his side. Feel his ribs still heaving with breath. With the aftermath of laughter. Daniel turning his head down. His mouth almost against John's hair; John cleared his throat.

'You should, you know,' Daniel murmured. 'You should come 'round. I'd like to do your portrait.'

'I'm not much in the way of a model,' John said. Daniel's fingers rubbing circles at the small of his back like he used to do when he would come around mad for it and John would—. John forced his hands out of fists.

'You could be, um,' Daniel said. Humming laughing; fingers slipping under John's untucked shirt,
some man he had hardly met, 'you could be an art collector. There's starting to be, what do they say,' pressing his palm flat to John's skin like he'd done, 'some interest in my work, and I'd, I'd let you have it when I was finished,' voice low at his ear, bloody great hands on him in the open street I'd wish to honour your brother's Christ, saying, 'I'd let you, no charge,' and John, sick and furious, twisted away.

They stood there, in the Rue Caulaincourt, for anyone to see. Daniel snorted. Looked a bit surprised. John rank with sweat with his fingers twitching left his shirttails out and moved out of the path of a young smiling couple with their arms around each other stumbling past on his other side.

'Well,' Daniel said. Chin up. 'I think that's admirable.'

'Daniel,' said Jules.

'—lovely,' Daniel went on. 'Truly. To know there are still such—such principled men in the world.'

'He thinks a lot of himself,' Jules said. John, steady on, shook his head, deep breath, looked back at them.

'I'm glad,' he told Daniel, heart in his teeth, 'that you're doing so. Well.'

'Oh, well,' Daniel said. 'Our kind, you understand. We make do.'

'I'd wager,' John snapped, 'you do better than that.'

Breath rough breaking open feeling—feeling two feet to the right of himself as 'Ooooh,' said Daniel said, mocking, to John on the other side of London, of—of Bourg; of the kid pulling his own hair at a café table and the man chuckling banally at Claudine's joke about a bloody basilica with his hand around a highball and his lap full of a red-haired girl.

'I'd wager,' said John, 'you've got women lined up down your street.'

'Oh,' said Daniel, hand to his chest. 'Would that disturb you? Are you concerned about disease? Or—but no, you're probably,' giggling now, 'you're probably worried about my, my moral compass, you're probably—'

'I'd wager he does,' John said to Jules. 'Doesn't he?'

Jules said something in French in his deep voice, maison; médecin, and Daniel laughed harder.

'Idiot,' he told him. crois-tu, son frère—

'Or, or men,' John said, 'or women and men' over the ringing in his head and Daniel, like a lunatic, still laughing; shoving at Jules and Jules shoved him back. John breathed out through his mouth.

Boys, he thought, in the prime of youth; like the War, like—and John himself—in Lens—in—

'Or men,' he said again, softer, to make amends.

Daniel looked up at his tone, with his mouth twisting. 'You needn't worry,' he said. 'I wouldn't breathe a word to your… colleague.'

Christ.

John turned his back. Stomach churning shoulders up wrists glued to thighs he marched uphill, up,
away, clear of the sounds of giggling, son frère and médecin, thinking fine, he would—more good
them, to laugh about it, to be hearty about it, boys, rolling his shoulders, were boys all over and in
any War and he ought to be glad to find them here like everywhere. He would wash his hands of the
whole mess, he would—climbing fast enough his thighs burnt—he would turn uphill at every
crossroads, turn towards the basilica and then—

'I'd never cast stones,' called out Daniel's voice, behind him. 'Not at a member of the, the admirably
principled Watson family,' and John, clenching-unclenching, stopped dead in the street with his very
bones ringing. Footsteps ringing up the hill; he turned.

'What family's that?' he heard himself say. Daniel alone, now, wary eyes and a smirking mouth. He
came up even and they stood face to face, squared off and breathing hard in the night air.

'What's it like, then?' John asked. 'In my family?'

'Oh,' twisting up his lips. 'Captain Watson, you know, Captain Watson approved of, of taking things
seriously, didn't he, taking things—'

'Did he?' said John. 'What things, what—what sorts of things, exactly, were meant to be taken
seriously?'

'Honour, I suppose,' Daniel said, and John, lungs bursting, laughed out loud.

'Honour,' he repeated.

'You know. Responsibility. The—there's a way things are meant to be done, isn't there, and Captain
Watson—'

'Honour, and responsibility.'

'Your brother,' said Daniel, 'he took things to heart. I'm—I'm afraid he would think us tremendously
frivolous,' with a wave of his hand, 'if he had any notion what that idiot was suggesting just now.
You're lucky you don't parler la langue. Captain W—' and John, his jaw snapping open despite
itself, said: 'John.'

'—atson would never consent to—'

'John.' He kept spitting out the word and there it was still in his mouth. 'John,' he said, striding
towards Daniel as Daniel watched him, his mouth still with its artful little curl at the corner as alarm
leached into his eyes and John made fists. 'You called—I—,' me, him, hateful: 'he wrote me about
you and he—he called you Daniel and was quite sufficiently familiar so just—just, John, why can't
you just,' as he vibrated on the cobblestones a foot from Daniel, 'you can,' hand hard on his shoulder
not to punch him, 'call him John.'

Daniel just stared at him. Another cigarette between his fingers and it would—it would singe his hair,
that's all, the bloody child. The poor bloody bastard.

'John,' Daniel repeated, low.

'What's more,' John said, every muscle tight in him, 'I have a very good idea what your friend was
suggesting, I have a—I know what a fucking maison close is and if you want,' through his teeth, 'to
go about thinking my family's some sort of—of bourgeois English saints. If you think—' bitter
tongue, mouth twisting, 'I know it's—it's tremendously unfashionable. Tremendously out of fashion,
isn't it, to take to hear things that you might have—that might have happened; to not just—just laugh
about them or, or conveniently forget them as soon as they're over—'
'Conveniently—?' Daniel said. Stepping back as John advanced.

'—but if you think,' he said, 'we're incapable, if you think we're im-immune thanks to, to,' almost laughing, 'honour, and,' hard hands to the bastard's shoulders, 'responsibility—'

Daniel stumbled back, and John heaved breaths at him, sparking satisfaction as Daniel steadied himself on a lamp-post with both his hands. John's throat and his singing-burning skin.

'Christ,' he said.

'Well I'm sorry,' said Daniel, petulant.

'It's like you never met him,' John said, 'if you think that.'

'I told you, I'm beastly, I—'

'Don't. Just.'

'I did,' Daniel said, 'I told you,' grinding out his fag under his shoe, looking everywhere but at John. 'I can't help it, I forget about other people's Wars.'

And all the words jammed together at the back of John's throat along with Lens and, and Bourg, hospital ward and MacIntyre women and There's a way things are meant to be done isn't there Captain Watson, isn't there in the dirty hopeless back room of the dirty hopeless taking what a man he was and near spitting he got out, 'You want to be thought—bright? Amusing?'

'I don't—'

'Devil-may-care?'

'Think what you like, I—'

'Honestly,' John said, 'isn't it a bit boring? Standing here, with me? Arguing about some long-dead bastard who'll never know we even met?'

Daniel actually shrugged. John wanted to hit him to shake him but he prised his own jaw open to say, 'I thought your friend had the right idea. I thought you were meant to be showing me a night on the town.'

'Captain Watson,' said Daniel, as if by rote, 'wouldn't want,' and John—

'He would,' said, blazing. Daniel flinched and John, strings cut: 'He would. He would, by Christ, he'd want anything anyone could suggest, he'd—he'd want to see Paris, to—to do it right, the loudest, filthiest—he'd want to paint the town red with you young bastards, you have no idea, he was a, a menace, he was, was reckless, he was—'

—all unrecognisable—

'All right,' Daniel said, at last. John breathing hard in the street with his mouth open. Daniel licked his lips.

'Reckless,' he said, 'we can arrange.'

And he took John's arm and all right, John thought, he would and he let him, with his breath still scouring out of his lungs. He would, the hero that he was; in Bourg and Beaune and Dijon he had, and so he let himself be turned, and he walked stiff and vibrating arm-in-arm with Daniel with their
footsteps echoing on the stones. John moved his legs and hips and shoulders in parade precision with his teeth locked together and his eyelids up-down shuttering and all his joints snapping into place into place into place into place, over and over up the hill as looking straight ahead, echoing with every footfall Yes by Christ, with his stomach tight, he would, he did, over and over he had and nothing had changed, and when Daniel drew to a stop in front of the Hôtel Marigny John put his shoulders back and led the way through the door.

And the close hot vestibule and then. The low light of the corridor and then. Daniel's voice still rumbling up behind him, unremittingly and elaborately bored; and through chattering voices velveteen curtains miles of flesh John charged ahead still hearing honour with his mouth filling quinine-bitter and responsibility. His hands clenching-unclenching.

Took things seriously, did he. The kind of person who—as if there were one kind of person who charged into battle, who shook hands at bloody weddings, and another kind who, who deserted their posts, who—murderers, thieves—people thought—Christ, he'd thought, hadn't he, that a man'd either got it in him or he hadn't. Or else he betrayed himself. Went against his own nature. Wiped himself out with it, and woke up next day in a bloody—in a different world. But in Bourg he'd run out of the hospital; deserted his lover and thrown coins on a counter and held down a boy too sickly for conscription; and the next morning the sky had been the same old clear and cloudless blue.

He'd—he must have stopped walking. Could feel his breath; tried to slow it. Daniel behind him gazing over his shoulder into the midst of the waxed beards and plump pink cheeks, a cigarette between his fingers and his shirtsleeves rolled up over thick muscled forearms murmuring into John's ear 'That one there, then?' conspiratorial, like a tedious secret told to a bored stranger on a park bench. 'If he had gone in for this sort of thing, your brother,' Daniel said, 'he'd be just the sort, wouldn't he.'

John laughed.

Well: the man was beautiful. Lean-muscled; dark-haired; chest like a Roman god and skin he must oil every evening before the place opened. Just the sort, apparently, for the mythical Captain Watson on a red-blooded victory tour of the Continent. Manly athleticism, probably. A man among men sharing the strength of men; having acquitted oneself nobly in battle. Captain Watson would wrestle; would raise a glass to the memory of fallen comrades. Red-cheeked and satisfied. Daniel's breath came calm and even on the back of his neck.

(In Bourg John had gone back the next night to the bar; to the same bar in Beaune the next, to the same bar in Dijon the next, on the way back to his regiment. Each morning the birds had sung and the War had sped towards its end and he'd felt nothing at all.)

'Would he?' he said, now. 'Do you think so?''

Daniel hummed. He raised a lazy hand, and caught the man's eye with just a—just a movement of his fingers, really. A movement of his long eyelashes: deliberately casual, done easily as things came easily to people who didn't care about them one way or another—as they'd come to John in Bourg, and never used to come to Daniel. In Lens in the endless winter of '16, the boy had caught John's eye over the heads of his friends in that abandoned school and, flushing, made himself hold his gaze. John with his blood squelching-thudding in his gut and his throat, pushed himself towards the bar.

'What are you—oh don't be that way,' Daniel called after him. John forced saliva down himself and didn't answer. At the bar he raised a hand to catch the bartender's eye and drew instead, like some filthy worn-out magnet, the gaze of an exhausted boy of the house: too-thin too-tired, albino-fair and fragile, with eyes like Bourg looking back at John as Daniel slid up on his other side.
'Look,' Daniel told him. 'You don't have to stay.'

'Oh?' said John. 'Generous of you to say so.'

'I only mean… for someone not accustomed to, to seeking out excitement, for someone still—' honour, thought John, and responsibility '—well. If this is all a bit much for you we can go, we needn't—'

'I can't help it, though,' said John. 'I'm beastly.'

Daniel's face like he'd been slapped. And chasing the shock a flash of real fury, a genuine, vicious —yes, John thought, a flash of—but it had gone. Queasy, John looked away. Down the bar the pale boy's head swayed on his neck and behind him was another head just as blond. Twins: a matched set.

'Does it disturb you?' Daniel asked. Voice cold with an amused weight on the disturb as John raised his hand in a gesture to the bartender: drinks for the twins, whatever they'd take. (They took gin, straight. The one in back, who'd a scar at his cheekbone, raised his glass.) 'Does it bother you then, this place?'

'They never did,' John said. 'No.'

They hadn't. They never had: not once after Bourg, and the hospital; not through the last days of August and the onset of September on his way back to his regiment; he'd never been bothered. He'd only pushed down-taken-moved-on; and back in Verdun he'd pushed through and pushed through until a mortar-blast had pushed through him in turn; so that it had been in a field hospital that he had heard the cheers go up. The Armistice. Everyone was smiling so John had made his face do it too. Three days later they'd put him on a train and he'd got out at the next station. Found a bar. Put his coins on the counter and waited in the back room.

'Only,' Daniel said, 'you don't seem to be having much success amusing yourself, at the moment.'

'Oh well,' John told him. 'But you're amusing enough for the both of us.'

'Am I.'

'You know what has been amusing me,' John said, palm to bar-wood. 'You know what I've been thinking about. I've been remembering, and it's really fantastic, I think you'll agree: those letters John wrote to me about you, during the War.'

Daniel, laughing a little, glanced around as if for an audience. That flash of the boy he'd been, when the rage had come up in him: John could still see it in a lightning after-image when he blinked his eyes. Dry lips sticky tongue John—John gestured down the bar to the tired-eyed twins, who had finished their gins and now moved closer, as John signalled to the bartender for another round.

'Oh,' said Daniel, 'Tell me more,' and John in that split second couldn't, just couldn't bear it so he stood up with Daniel following and sat in one of a pair of brown leather armchairs facing each other in a little niche to the right of the bar. The twin with the scar at his cheekbone placed himself at John's side; languid fingers at John's waist; at his neck. John grinding his teeth didn't push him away.

'Is it?' said Daniel. 'Amusing?' He was sprawled in the other armchair: grinning, mean.

'Well, I think so. I think it's quite amusing. Having met you.'

'You've odd tastes, then.'
'To tell the truth,' said John, leaning forward, away from the twin's hands, 'I thought those letters were quite good, even at the time. But now, of course, they're that much more… diverting.' The scarred twin moved forward to nibble at John's ear and his mouth was wet. John's skin was frog-clammy draped over the meat of him. He told Daniel, 'The mistakes of one's youth, and all that. I can only imagine,' hardly audible over the ringing-rushing in his head, 'that our young friends here would be amused to hear about King and Country.'

Daniel laughed, startled; John's heart jumped. 'About… King and Country.'

'Certainly,' he said. 'England, even. One might expect a certain resentment from Scots boys but then you were always raised to be above those kinds of people, weren't you, and their little pettinesses? That's what John wrote, anyway. What a passion you had, he said, it was quite remarkable. Such an—an earnest, such a deeply-felt calling, for—oh, but you could tell it better. For protecting the civilisation of Shakespeare, was it, and Donne? Against the—'

'Oh,' Daniel said, eyes to heaven, 'Christ.' Smiling, the bastard, the bastard.

'—brute aggressions, was it,' said John, voice rising, 'of the apeish Krauts.'

Daniel was laughing, shoulders shaking. He snaked his arm around the hips of the unmarked twin who, with a practiced smoothness, slid into his lap without spilling a drop of his gin. Daniel made a pleased noise. *Held down*, John thought; stomach trying to climb up his throat with that after-image fading helplessly from him. Without deciding to move he'd come around Daniel's left side; leant against the armchair where Daniel sat straddled by pale-blond thighs.

'You used to be very, um, very touching about it, he wrote me,' said John, looking down at the nothing that happened to Daniel's face as Daniel—as he chuckled and didn't look up. He was playing with the twin's half-open shirt and the twin was letting him. 'The triumph,' John went on, 'of civilisation over Kultur, the triumph of—of—'

'Sonnets,' Daniel said. Petting the boy's side as John bit down on his own tongue. 'Christ. Poetry. It's all too much, isn't it.'

'It's certainly,' he got out, 'diverting.'

'So—what, did you sit in your tent at the— the um—'

'La Boiselle,' said John, vibrating. Mark had served on the Somme. Those deadly tunnels.

'—wondering why your brother would spend time with such an idiot? Sonnets!' Daniel rubbed his face along the boy's chest; reached up with his jaw and his chin, snickering. Nipped at the kid's clavicle and the boy, sipping his gin and not knowing Daniel, shifted to let him reach. John with his blood all thrumming through him could see nothing but Daniel's stubble scraping the kid's rat-pink skin.

'Maybe he liked them,' said John. 'The sonnets.'

'He always had more sense, Captain W—oh-h—'

—oh—

John's hand dragged Daniel's head back by the hair. His skull hit the back of the chair and his whole body jerked.
And John, looking down. Looking down at Daniel's open mouth and Daniel's lips quivering with Daniel's huffing-breathless breath. These places had never bothered John and after the Armistice and his own release from hospital with a shoulder still half-shattered by shrapnel there'd been nothing calling him back; so he'd spent time being not-bothered in Nice and in Lyon, not thinking of Lens, of farmhouse or school, not thinking of (tightening his hand in Daniel's hair) not thinking of much at all only waking up each morning with the sky above him and sun or rain or wind treating him just the same. It had been a relief, hadn't it. A bloody great relief. It had been as if—as if he'd left all the heavy joints and bearings of himself in the hospital in Bourg, and this rusted-out lighter person could do just—anything he took a notion to. Could be alone, so easily; or with the utterly insufferable, or with the insupportably kind. (Lightning-shook flashes; John's fist; Daniel squirmed.) In Paris in 1921 John held Daniel's head to the chair-back as Daniel gasped and in 1919 in a pavement café in Lyon a Genoese sailor had pushed John twice on the back and John had noticed in passing the man's skin splitting under his knuckles. The convulsing wriggle of the man's gut under John's knee. Far above them in the open square people were crowded around shouting and John seeing no reason not to keep hitting him kept hitting him until John's own shoulder was searing hot and the man's breath came clotted and gasping and he spat out a tooth and there being no reason to keep at it John had stood up and walked away and then woken in the night unable to remember whether he'd paid the bill for his Burgundy. It didn't matter, he remembered thinking, from the unfathomable lightness of his polished shell; and as long as he never spoke it out loud none of it had ever happened at all. He hadn't been bothered, no. It was only that he hadn't been able to recall, one way or the other.

'John,' he said now, in a room in Paris, fingers hard in Daniel's hair. 'You can call him John.'

Daniel swallowed—flashes—and shifted in his seat. John looked up with a kind of nauseated exhilaration to meet the eyes of the unmarked twin, who writhed a bit and Daniel's eyelids flickered. Head still held back. Held down. John with his heart clamouring twisted his hand and Daniel's breath caught and then he—

—and then he smirked.

'He always had more sense,' said Daniel, smooth-edged, widening his big brown eyes, 'your John.'

John let him go. His breath sour-ragged blowing through his twisted-up guts and he wanted to slap him so he loosed his hand in Daniel's hair.

'Do you know about, about sonnets?' he said, to the twin on Daniel's lap. Hand over his face; shaking his head. 'English? Italian?' The kid raised his eyebrows and John said 'Poetry?' and the twin said: 'La poesie, oui.'

'La poesie,' John repeated. All the needles in his mouth. Daniel with his head still back against the back of the chair with that lazy smile returning to his face, pressing himself up against the weight of the bored kid on his lap. John could have smacked him, hand to the side of his head.

Instead he closed his hand around air two feet behind Daniel's ear; Daniel, smug and breathless, letting himself be pinned. 'Go on,' John told him. 'Amuse us. I only heard it at second hand, all your quaint notions of 1914.'

'All right,' Daniel said. Laughing a bit again, twisting, 'I was absurd, wasn't I? I made—made speeches in pubs, Christ.'

'Speeches in pubs!' John echoed. 'Good lord.'

'The, ah, illiterate,' said Daniel, 'German swine could never produce a Milton, a—a Shakespeare, a Scott. Scott! Imagine,' panting-grinning, 'going to war for Ivanhoe!'
John laughed. Stifling hot he stood there with his crabbed hands, laughing, looking down at the sheen on Daniel's forearms and his hands on the arms of the armchair. Casual-light; resting, not gripping. Flashes of—John could tell him to—the twin could get his hands around Daniel's wrists and lock his elbows and hold him, wipe the blackguard smirk off him, John could—pressing his lips together—

'But then,' he said, 'you public school lads had quite the boy's own adventure in the war.' Daniel snorted. John breathed and said, 'You and, and what was his name? Patrick?' and Daniel, for a moment, went still.

In a lightning after-image John with his eyes on the back of Daniel's head could nevertheless see his face as it must—his earnest stricken boy's face as he lifted forward off the back of the chair gasping

*How could you* to John's lifting reaching heart and *what do you know about it, you can—can go to Hell*—

But he sat back. John hovered his hand over the back of the armchair and Daniel put his head back. Stared up with eyes hard and over-glinting. John's whole insides, a wrung-out rag.

'Did we?' Daniel said, nonchalant. 'Is that what your brother told you?'

'Pissing contests, didn't you say?' Licking acid off his cracking lips. 'But you hardly needed to. Everyone knows about public-school boys out in the country, once you've got your cocks out.'

Daniel's smart exhale: the barest moment before it curdled to a huff of laughter. John might—he could—

Such places hadn't bothered him because no words had ever been asked of him in them. The blue (grey) (black) sky he kept waking up to after Bourg, after Daniel's hospital and his own—the sky in Beaune and in Verdun, in Nice and Lyon had kept changing and never changed. Wilder he got, and lighter, untethered and hollow. He'd said nothing, felt nothing, nothing was real, nothing; and every day he got freer, and lighter—and lighter—and—

John looked down at Daniel's sweat-soaked hair spread out on the chair-back.

'Footraces?' he said. 'That's all very *Waverley*. Christ, the mischief your kind can get away with under cover of brotherhood and—' Daniel's breath caught, '—love of country and—'

'You bloody—'

'—masculine tests of strength.'

Hard breath bruising his ribs: *You bloody*. Daniel stared up and John said down at him, 'Frigging each other amongst the heather,' balancing on every word. 'Very picturesque. It's a wonder any of you got any fighting done, with a program like that.'

His hands and feet, tingling. Must be breathing too hard, must be—and he looked up at the pale twin sitting still.

'There would have been wrestling matches,' John told the twin. 'No doubt.'

A chuckle. Daniel forced out a chuckle and John said, 'Of course there were,' too fast. 'There must have been. Boys like you and Patrick couldn't keep your hands off each other, could you, you would've—sparred, yeah? Seen who could pin who to the floor?'

Daniel outright laughed. Thick forearms against velveteen and the sickening air in John's lungs.
'Did he pin your wrists?' Sickened by the quaver in his voice he nodded at the twin on Daniel's lap, who placed his glass on the side table and circled Daniel's wrists with his pale hands. Daniel made a little noise and John: 'Did he hold your hands down,' said, 'so you couldn't move?'

'All right,' Daniel said, smiling, sickening, rolling his head on the chair-back. 'If you want to play this game, then all right, me and Patrick—'

'Yes. Patrick. Your—your friend in your Boy's Own Life adventure. Did he pin you to the ground and have his way with you? Only, as the son of a respectable English doctor I never had the chance to find these things out.'

'Christ.' Daniel's voice didn't crack but it was rough. He moved his hips. The twin locked his elbows; bore down on Daniel's wrists with his weight pinning Daniel's legs.

'Did he?' John managed.

'I—yes, all right. All right,' Daniel said. His wild laugh; John's soiled and sinking heart. 'Whatever you—'

'Held you pinned?' Too loud; he couldn't stop. 'Made you beg for mercy? Did you like it, then, rough treatment like Patrick gave you?'

'Course.' Daniel, almost managing a drawl: 'I couldn't get enough of it.'

John tightened his claws on the back of the armchair staring at the twin so the twin tightened his grips on Daniel's wrists. Daniel's groan.

'Of course you did,' John said. 'You posh lads can't be left alone for a—for a moment.'

'He liked boats,' said Daniel, and John's chest—

Because Patrick had liked boats. Had crewed for Fettes, John remembered; and for a moment the floor yawed under him and he almost thought—But: 'He'd,' said Daniel, breathless, 'on the canal he'd, he'd tie my hands in the bottom of the Whitehall,' which John knew, in all his shrivelling skin, to be absurd.

'He would get me out,' Daniel said, 'and, and—Christ—'


'He liked to, to tease me,' Daniel said. 'All kinds of ways. His foot on my throat while he rowed, his heel on my prick, I couldn't—Patrick liked to hurt—'


'He liked to, to tease me,' Daniel said. 'All kinds of ways. His foot on my throat while he rowed, his heel on my prick, I couldn't—Patrick liked to hurt—'

'For you,' a voice said, by John's elbow, and he recoiled.

It was—but no, it was only the—(Patrick liked to hurt— John blinking and blinking with cold fever spreading down his back)—it was only the scarred twin. Returning with Scotch. That was all. Scotch, and more gin. The glasses clinked on the table. Daniel's wide eyes, his open mouth, he liked to tease me. John would swear it hadn't been Patrick Fletcher who'd liked anything of the kind.

'He would,' John said, 'torment you, then?' Swallowing, saying, 'That's the kind of friend this—this Patrick was then? The kind to hurt you and hu-humiliate you? Risk your safety, risk your life to leave you choked and bruised in the bottom of a Whitehall on the Canal de Lens—'
'Yeah,' Daniel said. Laughed. 'Right bastard, he was a—Christ,' as the twin in his lap dug his nails into Daniel's wrists and bent his lips again towards Daniel's lips and Daniel said 'God, let me—let me tell you, he was a villain,' straining up, begging for the kiss, and then, at the last moment as the twin leant forward, turning his head to the side. Denying in his turn. His face turned towards John with his hard laughing daring eyes with the twin's lips against his delicate—his sensitive throat—

'Lick,' John said. It burst up his chest through his teeth. The twin's pink tongue licked a swathe up Daniel's neck and Daniel's whole body jerked.

'Made me do it,' Daniel ground out. 'That bastard forced me to—'

'Bite,' John growled. The boy bit and Daniel's groan. John's hands, not touching, not touching anything, not touching tight enough to bruise and the twin's teeth on Daniel's throat. Daniel gasping-growling and still bloody laughing until he got a hand loose; dragged the twin's head around by his hair and kissed him. John ground teeth into chalk. The twin let go his other wrist and Daniel's hands: broad hands coming up clutching at the boy's narrow arse, the boy's ribcage. Daniel's mouth eating at the twin's mouth. Surging waves; heaving floor; John could hear the wreck of his own breath and he —

'Press him down,' he said. 'Press him down like his, his supposed friend—'

'Yeah, you—'

'Get his hands off you and hold him.'

Daniel's noises. Flashes of Lens and all the—gasping. The twin got hands back around Daniel's wrists; wrenched Daniel's hand off his own arse and pinned it to the leather and pressed and Daniel —'More,' John snarled, raw-throated; the twin dug his nails in and Daniel let his head fall back. The way his throat moved. The way he moved like he always had done when he came around virginal solemn and full of promise and John—

'Une chambre?' came a voice from John's left as Daniel's twin leant down to bite again, quick and fierce at Daniel's neck without being told. John growled and Daniel gasped and bucked, and, and 'A—a room?' came the voice again, and John made himself turn his head.

'Yes,' Daniel was already groaning. Head rolling on the chair-back, laughing: 'Oui, une chambre, all right, Christ, you nest of snakes,' and John, blinking, looked down, to one side; looked to the twin with the scar on his cheek standing with a hand over John's stretched-tight flies. The boy wasn't even moving. Simply holding his hand there, doing nothing, while John had just pressed himself against his palm like some kind of—

'Une chambre,' he said, 'oui.'

Daniel's twin got off him and helped him to his feet and lightning-struck John turned. John walked. John reaching out blinked away against too many onion-skin layers of, of Lens and—stumbling—and—all the outposts of 1918 how he'd moved how he'd—that hadn't thought in, in years and then Bourg and—and everything after. Numb and filthy in waves. In waves. John feeling for the wall followed down the corridor thinking—

Thinking: such places had never bothered him. They hadn't, not once after that first night in Bourg; and so it had been in a public park—not even a pub, John remembered, following behind Daniel who with his arm across the kid's shoulders was leaning into the side of his uncomplaining twin—not a brothel but the lane by the old vélocarome in the park in Lyon, where in the spring of 1919, under cover of twilight, boys and women offered themselves and men spirited them away. And the strange
thing had been—the strange thing, thought John, clutching his roiling stomach, was that even then he hadn't been bothered. Not really. Somewhere in him, vague and theoretical, he'd known that he oughtn't to talk to the girl; that none of it was real because none of it had been spoken. And too she had the long eyelashes, the chin square like a boy—like Connie MacIntyre. Like Daniel. John had noticed it, and felt nothing: but then, by that time he had become so very, very light. Almost weightless; so insubstantial his carapace might be blown away. It ought to be, he'd thought. He ought to turn; to drift; such perfect silent lightness. But the night had been warm; and his shell filmed with a light dew; and movement once begun was easier to continue. The girl had asked, and he had told her the truth. It had been the first thing that had come to mind.

John moved himself down the corridor blinked onion-skin layers out of his eyes and ahead of him Daniel was straightening. Was striding along. Hardly breathless at all anymore, hardly recognisable, becoming agile and polished-bright before John's eyes as John around his soft sliming entrails moved his bruising swelling skin. All right, Daniel had said, laughing, as John heaped up desecrations; all right he had said, if you want and then lied and lied—


'All right, old man?' Daniel called down the corridor. Next to Room 103 he was laughing with his back to the wall. His teeth shone needle-bright; his hand rested on his twin's arse. The kid should hit him, John thought. Should split his pretty mouth.

'What else did you hear, then?' said Daniel. 'About '14?'

"14,' John echoed.

'Me an' Patrick. What filthy stories? You want me to say we—me an' Patrick—' breathless laughing, '—went down to the mud flats, the mud flats outside Lens, and I—' almost too hard to keep on, '—I didn't want to but he talked me into it, he um, he overcame my, my virtuous objections and he, um, stripped us both and then he got me face-down in the mud and, um, held me there with my arm wrenched back, do you want to—' tears running down his face, '—that bastard, should I tell you about—'

'Tell me about your sister.'

Tongue thick in John's mouth and his head was spinning. Desperate, sinking, it was—it would be no good. Words were no good said to a polished husk getting lighter and lighter and Daniel's absurd smirking mouth with the bruises coming up on his throat and his jaw like they'd used to do. Like they'd used to do for John.

'My—pardon?' Daniel said.

'Tell me about Connie, then,' said John. Aching, every cell of him. 'Would she have been sent up to Girton, when the War was over?'

'Connie,' Daniel repeated. Not laughing. 'Girton?'

'I heard they're quite demanding,' said John—hopelessly—'those bookish English spinsters, when they get their hands on a batch of new girls. Worse than the men of the army, I hear, with a shiny trinket. And little Connie. Sweet young girl like that and St. George's never quite managed her accent, did they. How old would she have been, in 1918? Fifteen? Sixteen? Ready to be—'

'You—'
'—taken under some superior's wing.'

Back to the wall Daniel curled his lip. John's eyes, smarting-swimming, sickening in the dim light before the polished-bright shell of the boy he'd—the boy he'd left.

'Connie,' John said. Bile in his throat. 'She would've been a novelty, wouldn't she? They'd have to show her the ropes, have to—to make her earn her privileges. Work her way up the hierarchy, mustn't she, like the pr—like the girls before her. The things they'd have done to your little sister. If only she'd survived.'

'You're trying to shock me,' Daniel said. 'How bourgeois.'

'And you're—you've lied to me,' John said. 'All night.'

Daniel snorted and John thought he could slap him. He could. Could pull him back by the lapels; slam him back into place, back to the wall. Mark him, make him—make him—

'Think what you like,' Daniel said, but he was pale. 'I thought you might like to believe your brother was a good man.'

John's blood in waves.

'You'd have believed so,' he said. 'You'd have believed the world of him, wouldn't you have done, however he treated you.'

Daniel turned his back and waved his hand with his arm still across the shoulders of his pale twin; made his gait into a stride though his breath came fast and John, nauseated, followed him through the door.

'You'd have taken whatever treatment he decided to give you,' John said. 'And still thought he was a —a hero.'

'You reckon?'

'I know my—brother. I know how he was with your type, I know—' Dry mouth in the close dark velveteen room; nothing in his sight line but Daniel's untethered shoulders and the twin's blond head. John, with the door handle digging into his back just as the latch clicked, said, 'He'd have—he got you on the floor.'

Daniel laughed, harsh. Lucky guess, he didn't say, but he remembered; he must; John knew he must; his shoulders hunched and his breath caught and the sound of it hung in the air: got you on the floor.

Daniel's twin didn't move. But John's, darting from the blind spot just behind him, got hold of Daniel's wrists.

'Pushed,' John got out. His eyes squeezed shut; despair-soaked he wrenched them open. 'He pushed you down,' so the unmarked twin pushed Daniel off-centre and the scarred twin kicked his feet out from under him and Daniel landed on the floor gasping 'Christ! Jesus—Jesus Christ.'

Not sneering now. Not chuckling but wheezing; no your brother would never. No I can't help it I'm beastly, no I forget I forget I forget—

Daniel MacIntyre lay on the floor, looking up at the twins standing over him. As if surprised to find them there. His hands twitched by his sides. If he tilted his head a few inches to one side he'd be looking up at John like that: breathless and harrowingly familiar down on the floor where they'd
knocked him.

'Got you down,' John heard. His blood barely contained by his slipping-slinking skin. The scarred twin was getting on, Christ, on top of Daniel and looking to John and John told him, 'Held you there,' and the twin pinned his hips with his hips. 'You were just a boy and he got you—got your head—got you off in full view of the bombing. In full view of the window of that filthy farmhouse—'

'Farm—you—' said Daniel. John's heart and the unstoppable sounds from his throat:

'Amongst all the, the rubbish that the soldiers and the weather and the animals had tracked in.'

'—you can't—'

'That's the care he took of you and you didn't mind and neither did—neither did my brother. Pushing you down and rutting against you like an animal with your back against the bare filthy farmhouse floor.'

'Bloody,' said Daniel, 'oh—' scrabbling for purchase and then arching up as the scarred twin got off him and the unmarked twin yanked the rug out from under his back slamming back down against the wooden floor. Groaning. Full-throated. Snaking his spine, cursing, as the scarred twin got back on top of him, awkward and halting but Keep him, John was still thinking, back-brain buzzing. Keep him—keep his—his wrists to the floor, arm to his throat—

'And then you, Christ,' he said, 'and then you moved. The way you moved, you eager bloody, God—squirming and carrying on and he thought you might—'

'No—'

'—move away, didn't he. Didn't he. And he couldn't have you moving away, he wanted you to stay and be his little—his—so he h-held you there.'

Daniel gasped denial. Shifted his hips like that, bloody unmistakeable. John Watson, back to the door, hand to his mouth and the whole room pitching like a ship's deck, watched his twin hold Daniel down: hands to his shoulders which was wrong.

'He had his, his hands on your wrists,' John heard himself say. Daniel's noises: shocked-open. The twin used knees to hold Daniel's hands and moved his hands to Daniel's wrists with his—'Fingers tight,' John choked—fingers tight like John's heedless fingers bruising Daniel's beautiful artist's hands.

Daniel MacIntyre moaned.

Some sound bubbled up from John's own chest. He let go the door latch to take a step but his bad knee buckled. The unmarked twin caught him before he fell. Pressed him back up against the door and stayed kneeling in front of him holding John up, back against the door. The twin opened John's trousers with Daniel far away, worlds away, unreachable down on the floor—on the ward—on a cot in the field hospital as John panic-struck at sunrise after the Armistice on the banks of the Rhône had reached out his arms, reaching out for—anything—and Daniel tried to speak around his moans—

'Got your,' John groaned, 'got your wrists over your head, and. And pressed himself down against you.'

'I—'
'Didn't he.'

'I don't—'

'He did.' John slammed his own head against the door where he was pinned. 'Was rough about it. Wasn't careful, didn't give a damn about, about anything except—'

'Christ,' Daniel grit out. John's twin got Daniel's hands over his head, held them hard to the floor and pressed his thin body down against him. Daniel was held still but he was reaching out with his whole —whole skin and gaze and self as he pressed up to meet John's twin pressing down. And John knew those noises. Knew them from Lens and from everything, everything after. With an acid sting in his throat he buried his hands in the thin blond hair of the unmarked twin who knelt in front of him with his mouth open mouth full with his—with—with Daniel's mouth coming open under John's twin, coming open around John coming open at the farmhouse window in Lens his soft earnest open mouth—

'—bruising you,' John was panting. Fucking into, into groaning. 'He took what he, hell, what he wanted, that's what a hero he was. He didn't—'

'What did you,' Daniel got out. 'A, a journal? a letter? What, did you—fuck—'

'A letter!' John said, and laughed. Grotesque. 'I didn't need—he'd been, been thinking for months about your mouth, I. In the chapel, in the garrison mess, I know it, I—was still. Still thinking about your pretty mouth on him but was greedy, wasn't he. And you were squirming around on the floor, Christ, hard in your kit trousers in the middle of a fucking bombing raid—'

'Bloody,' Daniel said, moaning, 'hell—'

'—with your hands all over him under his clothes and him greedy for more of you, I. He—he wouldn't stop.'

'If he wrote all this and you—God, you bastards—'

'Wouldn't stop to get himself out and, and fuck your throat,' John swallowing as someone swallowed around him like—Please John had said, please soon, 'so he b—bit you.'

Groaned. The both of them. Daniel's desperate whimpering on the bare floor and John, skin snake-slinking baggy on his bones while some tired kid choked on his cock and John grit out, 'Bit you, hurt you, got his—got his teeth into you, into your—'

Hands-clenched eyes-closed he forced them open, gasping; the scarred twin was biting Daniel's shoulder and John growled, '—into your throat.'

A pale mouth drawing back. A film-reel gone wrong. Slowed down; speeded up; John panted with his knuckles groaning around thin blond hair and watched stained teeth at the flesh, at the, at Daniel's neck, teeth at his neck, Daniel's whole body jerking like John with his stomach sitting rotten in him had known, had known it would do, like it'd always done for him.

'God's—,' Daniel, moaning, transparent, 'blood—'

'Made you,' John said. Pressure behind his eyes saying, 'pressed down on t-top of you, bruised you, h-hurt you and you—'

'—how could you—
'—loved it, couldn't get enough of it, you always begged for it, you came around desperate and—'

'—look at the whole—Christ, fuck—'

'—came in your trousers at being—being pushed down, being—'

'—how—'

'—made to,' John gasped, 'beg for it,' and Daniel in an instant groaning, full-throated, fully clothed on the floor: 'Please, Christ, please, please—' with his voice stripped bare and—

—and familiar like—

—like he hadn't been all night, like he hadn't been since—

—since some stolen afternoon John hadn't thought to remember, some—some fleeting moment in an ambulance or out in the forest mud, still mostly-clothed against the miserable cold, when Daniel had jolted under his hands like he was jolting now and tried not to cry out and then in the aftermath had turned his nose and his mouth to laugh softly nuzzling against John's neck with John's arm about his shoulders and the brush of his eyelashes and his smiling tender mouth—

'I held you down,' John gasped. Ripped-up glasspaper throat and his body jackknifing as he said, 'I held you down my—hand on your—neck—'


Down on the floor John's twin had his hand wrapped around Daniel's throat and Daniel was making… noises. Beating beating cooling in the ticking seconds. The noises he'd always made and then the—the noises he was making now.

'I took any excuse,' John said.

Nausea in prickling waves dark at the edges. John kept himself upright. His wrong-fitting skin and Daniel struggling to speak; not speaking. Daniel on the floor going still under the hand that was digging into his throat. In Lens and everything after he'd never gone still like that.

'I took what I wanted,' John said.

His fingers dug into Daniel's twin's shoulder to keep himself up.

Daniel MacIntyre made wrong sounds on the floor of a Paris brothel with a stranger choking off his air and his skin clammy and his wide wide eyes and his trembling. John's—snagging. John's. No, John's. No. Rushing in his head so loud he couldn't. Pressed up against the door with his heavy intestines sitting in the well of his body watching it happen knowing it wasn't—good.

Jerked forward. Tripped and caught himself. Look at him far down there on the, on the floor.

Far down there on the floor Private MacIntyre was twisting to the side. Lidless eyes watched: MacIntyre kicked his heel to the twin's knee. MacIntyre's hips twisted. Pushed him off of him. Not right. Should push him off him and then MacIntyre did it and then. Curled on the floor.

MacIntyre coughing. Near seizing on his side. Shoulders shaking saying—

('Get out,' Daniel was sobbing)

MacIntyre made wrong noises curled up on his side. Someone could run forward, toward. MacIntyre
had one hand covering his face and the other at his nape. MacIntyre pulled at his hair like a little boy, saying—

('Liar, get out, get out')

MacIntyre bit into his palm shaking on his side on the floor and the other like always—

—at the door—

—in the corridor—

On the street the sky was black
On the street the sky was black
The black street the black street the sky

On the street the sky was pink

On the street the sky was—

Chapter End Notes

1. Many of the stories Daniel tells 'Mark' Watson are inspired by Peter Englund's *The Beauty and the Sorrow: An Intimate History of the First World War*:
   - For Rene Arnaud's account of becoming disoriented on night watch and mistaking fence-posts for German soldiers; then participating in a pointless tragedy when two sentries shooting at birds triggered a panic along his entire trench and sparked German retaliatory fire, see pages 86-87.
   - For Florence Farmborough's's account of one of the many German breakthroughs on the Eastern Front after the Russian generals' assurances of "No More Retreats," see pages 133-135.
   - For Kresten Andresen's account of being taken by surprise by a shelling attack while en route to a birthday party in Lens, France, see pages 183-184. I relocated this attack to outside the town and moved it one year later, to 1916, but made use of the time of year, descriptions of the country, and most notably the physical descriptions of the attack itself.

2. Mental hospitals, like all hospitals during the First World War, were totally overwhelmed during the First World War with wounded and shell-shocked soldiers. In addition to there simply being more demand for medical and psychiatric (such as they were) services, there was also a near-constant shuffle going on, especially in the early years of the war, as the fronts shifted and the
patients from one facility were evacuated to others. In addition, most of the male nurses and some of the male doctors were called to the front. Institutions were forever trying to cover their workloads with labor from female nurses and doctors from other hospitals which had been evacuated, but they were still perpetually overworked and understaffed, and space previously devoted to mental patients was constantly being reappropriated to house soldiers with more obvious physical mutilations. As such, it's pretty understandable that Daniel, and indeed anyone who could hold it together long enough to walk out of the hospital, would have been discharged. The hospital he ends up in is L'Hôpital Saint-Georges in Bourg-en-Bresse; for general background on the challenges facing medical and psychiatric professionals in this area during WWI, French readers can look [here](#).

3. As a reminder, the Temple de l'Impudeur was a real brothel, once partially owned by the novelist Marcel Proust. By 1921 Proust was mostly a shut-in, and so probably wouldn't have been patronizing the establishment on the night in question, but one can always hope.
Keeping his seasons and rages

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(LATER)

Sunday, August 28th, 1921
8pm

Germaine's arm. Sticky; heavy. She eased out from under it and Germaine grunted in her sleep.

She had to traverse the apartment in search of her clothes. Germaine slept on while Irene donned knickers; bra; skirt; blouse; shoes. She thought of the girl asleep in the bedroom with her neat pressed clothes in her neat wardrobe and on her perfectly-aligned shelves. Set her teeth and turned the door-handle, and was out on the street.

It was eight o'clock in the evening. Not even supper-time. Absurd. She could still get a full night's work at Le Chabanais, if she wanted, but—but how much she'd said. Charles and Henry and Gretha. Everything, all that had happened in her rooms, her same Chabanais rooms, in 1915. Irene had been in Paris too long. She curled her shoulders. Pretended she'd a vast winter coat, to bury her hands in the pockets.

She hunched into herself and thought of her Luxembourg flat and what she'd told the girl Germaine and then thought—a good place to make money, Paris. That was all it was. A good place to make money, and a good place to walk. She might walk all night, Irene Adler. Her legs and lungs and pocketbook were strong and at every crossing she walked uphill. Walked up, looked up. At the crest of the city: the abominable Sacred Heart.

Irene walked on. Up and up and up past shuttered boulangeries and raucous cafés spilling onto the pavement. And then—she laughed when she realised. Here she was, her pearls and her Chanel, just down the alley from, of all places, La Garçonnière. Women dancing for women. The nightclub she'd left seven years before, as the War had begun. Her first Paris home.

She stood on the pavement bemused. Oddly breathless. With nowhere else to go, she crossed the alley. Someone might remember her. They might start a fight. The night was long. It would pass the time.

Sunday, August 28th, 1921
7pm

With his hands tied and his legs strapped to chair-legs Sherlock hinged forward at the waist stretching his neck to put his eye to the peephole, squinting and blinking and biting his tongue biting his lips and the skin inside his mouth while on the other side of the wall Daniel shifted on his knees with John standing over him: *Lick*, saying, so gentle, *suck* and then rearing back for a *smack* hand to cheek: *Nicely*, in John's fond careful voice, like I told you as Daniel moaned and Sherlock, pierced through, reached and—and *reached*—

—and jerked awake again in the train carriage amidst the gold-glowing twilight.
And breathed, carefully. And rubbed his face.

This was. Insupportable. To still be falling asleep and seeing—over and over. Cold fingertips into his hot face. And John. Waiting to meet him at the Gare de Montparnasse with news of Irene Adler.

His shirt-seam itched at his shoulder. Dully thinking: the presence of contradictory evidence only means the existence of something previously unknown. He dug his nails into his palms.

And turned to the glass. Lit a cigarette. The smoke curled up. The newlyweds had at some point left the compartment; Sherlock was now alone. The sky through the window was bleeding into pink. Brakes screeched and the rail heartbeat slowed and slowed, and then stopped. Mantes-la-Jolie, read the tiled letters on the wall behind the station platform. Forty minutes, perhaps? Not more.

He is waiting for you, Sherlock thought. Waiting for you in Paris with news of the Adler woman. You must be ready; you must be—suitable. The Paris suburbs are thickening around you and he is waiting in the Gare de Montparnasse with sweat down his back under his jacket and the pink-red sun glowing through the glass dome of the station like it did that evening in Chelsea when you'd caught the wrong end of a street youth's knife and bled rather a lot and gone (he'd said later, thunderous with his hands on your skin) so pale, you could have died, Christ, you must wait next time, you must wait for him; yes you'd said, hardly listening, and he'd been fierce with you and so tender and afterward in the night you'd woken to his mouth at your nape, shaking, I thought you would die.

Sherlock closed his eyes. A muffled thud from the other side of the wall; laughter in the corridor. Then quiet. Eyes open. Shaky breath.

Without Sherlock quite noticing, the train had started up again. The villages outside the window clumped together: long-shadowed, vermilion-stained. A piece of ash had dropped on his trouser-leg so he brushed at it with his pocket-square. S.H., read the corner of the fabric, in stylised capitals like the ones on the placard in his trunk and again on its buckles, Sherlock Holmes, cinched tight with straps into the luggage rack above his head, crowding down under the weight close above him while something in his chest contracted. Tight.

He looked towards the door, instead. Dark-stained oak; beveled moulding. The worn-edged gold stencilling on the frosted glass. He looked at the little brass door-pull and the hook to the right of it where his jacket hung, his old holiday summer jacket with its shiny elbows and on the bottom of the lining a smear of grime Mrs O'Malley had never managed to erase. You know when that happened, he thought. Don't you. You won't have forgotten, being what you are: it was the night in Trafalgar Square, when the horse reared. And it was senseless, the whole sorry thing; you hadn't even been on a case, not that time, you'd only been coming back from the theatre, en route to Simpson's after staying in bed half the day making a—a feast of each other, his sweat still on your fingers, your bruises on his thighs. The horse had reared up and caught him with a hoof to the chest and he'd fallen, limp, and you'd felt the ground twisting out from under you while behind your eyes cannon-shot visions of lung pierced, ribcage collapsed, bloody and broken him gone forever in an instant or suffocating on the street gasping that you oughtn't to touch him, not in public, Holmes, not with the policeman around the corner who surely will have heard, all spinning out before you until he'd breathed in and pushed himself up and you'd had to sit, abrupt, on the muddy ground, you were so weak with gratitude to have him, still; to be wrong. But you might, instead, have been right.

And any other man who might have come after him—

The train was pulling out of the penultimate station. Twenty minutes to Paris? More? Fading violet on wood and metal and your skin.

Only natural people always said, when a woman had lost her true love in the War. Only natural,
you'd tell yourself, that after—you'd joined with him; worked alongside him; cut yourself open and poured yourself into him only to see him battered, broken, bleeding from his damaged head—after standing at his bedside, watching his blank face, unable to speak with the man you wanted—after a year of mourning the loss of your best, your truest and your first friend—it was hideous but it was also, inarguably, only natural that then, after all that, you might be drawn to someone else. It wouldn't be—wouldn't be the same. Of course it wouldn't. Obvious to the meanest intelligence that it couldn't be. Only a pale imitation of the treasured original: you realise this now. But there might be. You might be drawn to someone, say, for his dirty blond hair. (Daniel, after all, was brunet). You might, for his moustaches or his military bearing. (Sherlock having, too, those long artistic hands.) There might be, anyway, some superficial resemblance to the man you'd lost; something to cling to, which would be better than. Better than. (Remember, Holmes: alone in your rooms before you met him, you soliloquised to yourself.) And so you would accept this substitute, because your true love was gone.

And then on a case, or. Or a relation of your strange new companion might have called in a favour, and you, for his sake, undertaken a voyage. (Coming from you it would at least mean… care.) And then by chance. By pure happenstance! On a street in Paris, talking of something else entirely, to come around a corner and hear that dear lost voice and know, with certainty, with an inner cacophony, that upon turning your head you would see that face—

And you—if it were you, Sherlock Holmes yourself, you would be impossible with questions. Insufferable, you'd be, Christ, you'd. Could he be the same man? The very same? You'd have to prove it to yourself, you—your hands on him. On all the hidden parts of him. In the street, in a—in his rooms, in—just anywhere. Three years with all the colour gone out of your—Christ. Out of your life. After that you couldn't stop, no matter who else might be present. It wouldn't be a choice but if it were you would make it. You would need to. When it came to—to him you'd always bloody needed.

And he would know you, he'd. He would remember how the second time, only the second time you'd been together he had stripped you. You'd been flayed open and aching; absurdly young-feeling with nothing between you and ruin and he'd calmed you like a colt and then put you where you went. Shaped you, pressed you; ordered you to go slow so you did; commanded you to tell him so you did, torturous and supersaturated with adoration you'd cut yourself open like he'd told you. Every sinew of him pulsing recognition for every sinew of you.

How could you not want that again? Regardless of any other—if he were still himself then you would want him, and if he would have you then you would go. For his—his wrapping himself up in you again, hands on you again, in you again, his known scent and his knowing of you and the sight of his same books and his clothes and his army keepsakes on his new shelves in a—in his new rooms, you would give up anything on offer and if you didn't have it you would get it just to cast it away if only he might let you back in.

And then—

And then: creaking and groaning, the train pulled into Montparnasse. The lamps along the walls of the platform back-lit the cluster of figures awaiting its arrival; in the near-dark, human shapes stood out in silhouette. Sherlock felt them strangely uncanny, standing there with the harsh electric light glaring behind them: the young society girl with her hemline high but her hat missing; the portly banker in half-profile, looking not at the train but behind it. The elderly woman in a gown too young for her, but too old for the season. An English veteran, favouring his leg, a glaring halo around his dirty blond hair. Sherlock shivered, and alighted.

'Watson,' he said. He clasped the man's hand.
'Holmes.'

Still his face was shadowed. Though as Sherlock thought this he seemed to realise; or perhaps he only turned because he was thinking of the trunks, which were being unloaded by porters onto the platform. In any case it was, of course, the same face it had always been: John Watson, in the flesh. Sherlock could see now, perfectly clearly, the way John's eyes must have wrinkled at the corners when he'd smiled on shaking Sherlock's hand; though now, seconds later, the expression had gone.

'D'you want to—' John said, just as Sherlock said, 'Well! Shall we—' and then, John stopping: 'Yes. The trunks.'

The trunks were waiting for them on the platform. Sherlock fidgeted. John engaged a porter with a trolley; pointing the way out with the same gestures he would have used a week since. That execrable suit from that shop near the British Museum. The trunks, side by side on the trolley. Sherlock, as the man wheeled his luggage past him, reached out to feel the grain of the leather sliding under his fingertips. The same straps with the same worn in—lettering. It wheeled away and he put his hand back in his pocket.

They were on the pavement, and then they were in a cab. John hung back to hand coins to the porter while Sherlock climbed in and directed the driver to the Hotel Bel Ami: to the address Sherlock had come to think of as John's.

'It was,' John started, and cleared his throat, and then again: 'It was uneventful?'

Sherlock looked out the window. He didn't recognise the street along which they trundled. It seemed longer and straighter than any of the streets in Claudine's Paris.

'I'm sorry?' he said.

'Your journey. It was uneventful?'

He thought of Irene and Gretha and Humbert and Jouvenel and John and Daniel and Holmes and Adler. He said 'Yes.'

'Good,' John said. 'That's. Good.'

The cab sped on down the long straight street. He and John, he reminded himself, uncrossing his legs, had been silent in cabs times beyond measure. On either side of them rose stone-fronted edifices, largely darkened at (he checked his pocket watch) only eight in the evening. Sherlock had the impression of having arrived in a city that wasn't, in fact, Paris at all.

'It wasn't Bertrand,' he said. Pushing words into the airless air.

'Bertrand Jouvenel,' John said, then nodded.

What did he mean by that? By nodding? In the dark between street lamps Sherlock couldn't quite see John but he could feel his motion. And he could smell him.

'Bertrand Jouvenel,' he confirmed. 'I questioned him after I cabled you. I'd thought—Claire Boas's son, after all. If he felt she was being threatened, or that her character was being impugned… and, *Call your dogs off Claire Boas*. The boy reads melodramas of that particular stripe.'

'He was there at luncheon,' John said. 'When you made that comment about Madame Boas orchestrating the break-ins herself. He might've snuck out, made a trip to the village telephone box once everyone was asleep.'
'He might have, but he didn't. Didn't know anything about it. And I'd thought he might be keeping—but the whole thing was a waste of time.'

'You'd thought he might be keeping…?'

'Ohhhh,' Sherlock sighed. His hands were clammy, and wouldn't keep still. Outside the window the black façades repeated each other in an endless scroll. 'Something of use.'

He could feel John shifting in his seat. He was so solid by Sherlock's side. John's thigh and his audible breath through his mouth when he licked his lips. The cab took a turning down a slightly narrower, slightly crookeder street, and Sherlock felt a strange bubble welling up in his chest.

'He writes poetry,' he told him, and brought his hand up, in the dark, to hide his mouth.

'Pardon?'

'Filthy poetry,' Sherlock said. 'Bertrand Jouvenel. About his stepmother. About her… juices.'

John's shocked laugh like a lightning flash; Sherlock's giggles the thunder echoing after. They set each other off and couldn't stop.

'Awfual stuff,' Sherlock got out and 'Oh,' John said, 'Christ.' Sherlock kept laughing after he could have stopped. John's tremors shook the seat. An electrical storm.

'He showed you it?' John said. In the light of a streetlamp as they passed, he was wiping tears from his eyes.

'Of course not. I found it in his wardrobe.' And then: 'Worse luck for me.'

It bought them another few chuckling aftershocks. John's fingers curled in front of his open mouth. His compact shoulders turned towards the window, shuddering. Stilling. Still.

'I had some luck,' John said. 'Looking into that… person you asked me to investigate.'

'Oh,' Sherlock said, 'yes?'

This, he thought, was what they would discuss, as the cab slowed to a stop outside another black façade: Bertrand Jouvenel and Irene Adler. Steady, directed subjects of conversation. Cause and effect. In a cab Sherlock Holmes and John Watson had laughed. It could be done.

'This is us,' John told him. Unnecessary: Sherlock was already reaching inside his jacket for his money clip, so John went for the door. By the time Sherlock paid the driver and alighted on the pavement, John had lifted down their trunks.

The entryway of the hotel continued oddly un-Parisian: brand-new and gleaming. It felt free, he thought, from any past. John gave a tight smile to the man at the front desk, who returned a complicated look. Here was the recipient, then, of the three a.m. cloak-and-dagger message meant for one John Watson. (But he didn't move for the message-box: nothing, then, from Irene Adler.) Here the man, too, whom John had woken from his sleep to question. Sherlock's hands slipped on his trunk, following John's back into the lift. Looking at John's shoulders. The nape of John's neck.

They didn't speak in the lift. Nor in the corridor. In John's—their—rooms (shiny, new-built), Sherlock set his trunk down in order to bolt the door. John disappeared into the bedroom with his. When Sherlock joined him he was turned to face the thing, hands propped on either side of its open cavity. Sherlock slid his against the wall and straightened up. Looked about. Ran his hand through
his hair.

'You said you'd made progress,' he said. 'With this business about Irene Adler.'

'Yes, I.'

John. His jacket laid on the bed, his shirtsleeves rolled halfway up his forearms. Sherlock prowled. Couldn't settle.

'Took a bit of digging,' John said, 'Housing records. Ports of entry. That sort of thing.'

'Mmm,' said Sherlock. He opened the drawers of the bedside table. Closed them. The air was still and hot, and smelled of John's sweat.

'And nobody at any of the places I visited,' John was saying, 'was going out of their way to help out a mad-looking Englishman who spoke all of ten words of French.'

'Mad-looking?' Snapped.

'Tired-looking.'

John cleared his throat. His bent neck and the brown-gold whorls at the base of his skull.

Sherlock turned. Opened the wardrobe. Closed it. Went to the windows and made his movements crisp: latch up, left, pull the sash up, night air on his face. 'You said you'd had some luck,' he said, and heard John breathe in behind him. The rustle of an object pulled from John's trouser pocket; of pages flipped.

John read: 'She came to Le Chabanais, the, er, establishment where she's—'

'They call them maisons closes.'

'—employed.'

A breath. Sherlock shut his teeth.

John didn't go on. Sherlock waited, fingers drumming on the window-sill, until he couldn't stand it and then turned to find John glaze-eyed with his moleskin notebook in his hands. Standing there with his throat working. The bob-bob of his Adam's apple. Sherlock pressed himself back against the window sill: his long bent back and his aching palms.

'She came to them,' John said, at last, 'from another brothel in Paris.' Breathed out. 'La Garçonnière, caters exclusively to female... lovers of women. She performed there as La Fillette, the—the little girl. And before that she worked in Le Havre, in 1908. With a traveling pantomime. Le Chair. Starring Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, and—and Claudine Holmès.'

Claudine. John, and his—Claudine, and John.

'Well,' said Sherlock. Thrumming. The name hung in the heat-haze. 'That's. Worthy of further investigation.'

There was hardly a breeze. John's top two shirt buttons were undone. The sweat on his clavicles. The way it would taste.

'Will you, um,' John said. 'Will you be wanting to look into it now, then?'
He ought to do. Oughtn't he. Adler would be returning to Paris; Claudine presumably already had. He ought to go and—they, they ought to go. John obviously expected it. He stood there expecting it, watching Sherlock with the moleskin in his hands and his throat working and his shoulders and his sweat-stuck hair and a day's growth of stubble the same weight and colour it always grew in London. The same texture too, surely. Surely the same unmistakable scent at his jawline and his nape and the inside joint of his hip and Sherlock's mouth was full and he didn't answer him. John waited and then breathed out, slowly. Eyes so blue; Sherlock could fall forward and keep falling. John's shoulders squared off into military resolution, which was only logical, thought Sherlock. Having fallen in love with a soldier, during a war.

'Look,' said John, 'Sherlock.'

Sherlock pressed himself back. Hands to the window-sill, not reaching. Not speaking. John had stilled his hand from clenching-unclenching and was using the voice that meant he'd rehearsed it, and Sherlock made himself breathe while John, feet away, breathed back at him.

'Have you ever,' John said, and stopped. Licked his lips. And Sherlock—

'You didn't,' just bursting from him, 'sleep well, you didn't, they could tell, at the—'

'Sherlock.'

'—everywhere you went, you said they thought you. Looked.'

He made himself stop because John was putting up a hand. Sherlock with his mouth still open took a step forward and John sank down to sitting on the bed: leaning forward, elbows on knees.

'Have you ever,' John said again. 'I've been trying to think and I don't—has there ever been some—some event. Something that took the whole—shape of you, and forced, or—no,' correcting himself, 'not forced,' as Sherlock took another halting step.

'Not forced,' said John. 'I'm not making excuses, Christ, I—'

'John,' Sherlock said. His clattering rib-bruised heart.

'At, at Knapely,' John said.

'I—,' said Sherlock. 'All right,' with his voice sticking in the back of his throat.

'At the house party, at the—we went down for the week-end.'

It hurt. The height of summer, it had been: the two of them barely a month back from Charleston Farmhouse, from Keynes and Strachey and, and everything; Sherlock hadn't wanted to leave Baker Street again so soon in the first jealous blush of being allowed such closeness. But three days' work had promised to pay three months' rent, and Yorkshire would be cooler than the city, and the promise of John, claret-flushed in the countryside—

'All right,' Sherlock said, here in alien Paris with his hand at his sternum holding closed his rickety chest, 'Knapely, I remember, yes.'

'Nobody at supper,' John said, to his hands, 'had any idea of that—behind the library, you remember. There was a staircase down to that, that—damn it—'

'Priest hole,' Sherlock said. Pushing dull words out of the coiled knot of him. 'They date from Elizabeth, they're,' not reaching out, not crowding forward, 'all over the English countryside, refuges
for, for unconverted Papists, I don't—John—'

'None of the Arbuthnotts knew it was there,' John said. Oddly fierce. 'And the house has been in their family for generations. But you could tell.'

'Anyone could have told.' Desperate. Irrelevant! 'If they'd looked. Just—the way it deformed the shape of the corridor. Utterly out of line with, with the conventions of either late mediaeval or. Early Tudor architecture.'

'Deformed,' John echoed. 'Yes.'

Sherlock shook his head. He couldn't stop himself taking another step, his shins to John's knees with his pulse beating out to his bruised margins and his fingers reaching through a gulf to rest tremor-light in John's hair. It wasn't quite a flinch, he told himself: that tightening of John's shoulders.

'Af— Afterward,' John said. 'After you'd taken us all down into the, the priest hole and we were back upstairs in the drawing room the Arbuthnotts all said. They said they couldn't believe they'd never noticed that recess in the corridor. The bulge in the outside wall. Or they'd—they'd seen them, hadn't they? They had to have done, there's no way they couldn't. It was just. They'd never thought out the why of it.'

Sherlock's fingers were petting through the thicket of John's hair like they'd done at Charleston and Baker Street and Knapely and on the train to Paris. He forced his throat not to close.

'One could generally hope,' he managed, 'for greater insight than is usually displayed by Sir George Arbuthnot, first Baronet of the, um. Third creation. Fourth. Something like, like that.'

'Yeah,' John sighed. Shaky.

Sherlock petted and petted through John's hair.

'It seems—monstrous,' John burst out. 'How can a person. How can he live in a place for what, forty, fifty years. See it every day, f-feel its… shape. Walk around the grounds and the corridors and pass it off to all and sundry as—as straightforward, self-evident, you understand, when all the time it's obvious to anyone with eyes that there's something… rotten in the very structure of the thing. You can see the reality right there in front of you but either you never bother to look at—at—'

'John—'

'—or you're such a coward—'

John's shoulders were shaking. He was shaking and how could Sherlock—he sank to his knees. To his heels. His hands moving over John’s knees over John's wrists over the thin skin of John’s knuckles. Sherlock ached, face turned towards John's face turned crumpled away. Fingers reaching up to John's neck, wet cheek, the corner of his mouth.

'Don't,' Sherlock whispered. John shook his head: no, he wouldn't. Still twisted to the side. His ragged catching breath and his trembling.

And Sherlock couldn't stop so he—he kept on. Stroked and petted and clutched at John who felt and smelled in every particular just the same as he always did in London, when Sherlock had thought there was nothing they didn't know about each other. In Baker Street John had sat in front of the fire with Sherlock between his knees like he was now; in Baker Street John had let Sherlock peel him out of his trousers and smalls and down to his skin and then had—had let him and let him and Sherlock had felt known in his every pore while John, not-looking at something Sherlock hadn't
known was there, had clenched his hands in Sherlock's hair and cried out.

Here, tonight, in Paris, John didn’t stop him. Sherlock touched him and John let him. Hands petting at knees, and thighs. John's breathing evened out. His head was still twisted to the left. Sherlock put his hands on him. Calves, ankles. Listened to him breathe.

'I saw Daniel,' John said, and Sherlock's chest cracked open.

'I didn't intend…' said John; as 'No,' Sherlock said, holding himself up with his hands hard on John's knees, 'you—'

'But I, um, ran into him and it went… badly.'

'Badly,' Sherlock echoed.

'At first it wasn't too… But then it went badly and then it went *very* badly and then it got.' Deep breath, shaky. 'Out of hand.'

Knees thighs knees. *Out of hand.* Broad wrists tied together tied to the struts of a straight-backed chair.

John's mouth opened and his throat worked and he closed his mouth. His breath was rough and ugly-catching. Sherlock kneaded at John's thighs. Compulsive. Sherlock swallowing and John opening his mouth and making a torn-up grunt and then closing it again, hard.

*Badly,* Sherlock thought. John struggled and Sherlock touched him and couldn't reach and. *Out of hand.* What more did Sherlock—what more did he really know than—what more did he really know than—

'All right,' Sherlock said.

'I—' said John, but Sherlock, cutting over him, 'All right,' hearing his own voice *all right* echoing up out of him, feeling his own throat working like John's throat was working while Sherlock's limbs hinged on pivots pressing him up (beat), up (beat), straightening him up so he could push John back with a hand to John's shoulder—

'Sherlock,' John was hiccuping, shocked into 'Christ—'

What did Sherlock. (Lips pressed to salt.) What more did he really know than (throat) pleading-drowning fastening his (mouth) to John's mouth which John had opened and said. *Badly.* It could be letting Sherlock in. Christ couldn't it.

'Don't,' Sherlock said, 'don't, it's—' and couldn't finish, rubbing his face on John's face, hands on John's waist, mouth on John's neck and John still let him, he—he *more* than let him, he—*God—*

John was panting. Clutching at him. He wouldn't be, Sherlock thought, wouldn't be doing that if he didn't—and raked his starving fingers up John's flanks, ribs, arms, Sherlock's hips pressing down and his John pressing up. He kissed him until he couldn't breathe and then broke away saying 'Just,', telling him, 'Just let me—'

And John, *Sherlock—* sounding *anguished—*

Sherlock just—so. Shaking his head. Chest full of not enough breath with his fingers like a blind man's reading the lines of John's face that Sherlock knew by heart, by bloody *heart,* John's rough lips under Sherlock's. 'Just,' Sherlock told him, 'It's all right—'
'How could it be?' Sob-cracked-open John's voice fractured against bare rocks and desolate, but with fingers clenched in Sherlock's shirt-front he dragged him closer and Sherlock—

Was biting John's mouth, had to. Was sucking bruising John's dear lip between his teeth and breathing John's breath; *John*, who Sherlock—his John. Gasping-clutching. John, sending through Sherlock's every cell the tremor in his own hands as they shook—clawed—pressed to Sherlock's arse and his waist as if Sherlock—as if once lost he was—

'Please,' Sherlock said—

—irreplaceable—

John moaned. Panted. Cupped palm to Sherlock's shoulder-blade to drag his back off the mattress and his face up close to Sherlock's: 'I only—'

'Please,' said Sherlock, 'please,' pressing his thigh down between John's thighs, feeling him soft through his suit-trousers as John gasped, 'God, I—the—the case, or—'

'I,' shocked-laughing. 'I don't bloody—'

And too-fast, words bleeding together: 'It's just, I just—'

'—give a damn, I—John—'

'—do you—oh—' pressing his hipbone up—'John—Christ'—against Sherlock's stretched-tight flies; staring up into Sherlock's face with his wide bright bloodshot eyes.

'I don't care,' Sherlock said. Panting. Feeling in his thighs John's shaking. 'I don't, I, I just.'

Deep deep, get breath in breathing. Impossible to think with John under him. Salt-wracked and slippery but *solid* like he was, pressing up under him like he did, saying *Sherlock*, making—making the noises John made smelling like he did like he always—always, *fuck*—

Sherlock got up on hands and knees. He shook his head like a dog to clear it saying, '<i>Damn</i> the—all of them, damn the—' with his hands either side John's head and his hips over him, caging him, holding him fast; holding John's pleading unanswerable gaze and the uneven breath through his open raw-kissed mouth and his hands sliding soft between the plackets of Sherlock's shirt. Lovely warm gold-hued fingers against—against—

'Oh,' Sherlock said, 'John—'

Snaped. Involuntary: Sherlock curled in on himself, head down shoulders rounding towards hips cupping towards shoulders, as if he could—could enclose them completely with the shell of his body; and weight on his left hand on the bed, his right came up to clutch at John's, pressed together to Sherlock's chest. Breathless he laced their fingers. Pulled John's hand to his lips and John squeezed his eyes shut like he <i>hurt</i> so Sherlock kissed his knuckles again.

'I don't,' Sherlock got out. 'There could be a bloody—fire in the, the corridor and I wouldn't—'

Sherlock reaching-out with his—all of him. Aching. Knees sliding back on the coverlet he pressed his hips back <i>down</i> and John gasped like Sherlock had—like he'd known he would. Like he'd known. He had to sit back. Sherlock sat back; with his own hands only he stripped himself out of his shirt and his vest while John panted with his eyes shut tight. Sherlock's stung.

'There could be,' Sherlock told him. Swallowing. 'The window is open, I wouldn't care if the—the
door was open, just.'

'Sherlock—'

'Let them, let them watch us be together, let them—'

'Christ—!'

'—let them watch me.' Mouth full of tongue, swallowing. 'Be good to you.'

John's open eyes. Swimming blue and settling. Brimful. Not moving away. His shoulders melting down into the coverlet and the long shaky breath through his mouth.

'I missed you,' John said. His voice came crumpled up, deep in his throat. 'I was so far away from you and I didn't—I missed you so much—'

John's throat, swallowing. Didn't move; stilled to ripples in still water. Breath smoothed down to hiccuping and eyes so full not looking away.

'John,' Sherlock whispered, and 'God I want,' gasped John, and screwing his mouth up blinking hard turned his head to the side.

'Oh,' said Sherlock. 'Shhh, oh,' leaning back down, knees together between John's thighs, one hand to the mattress and the fingers of the other to John's face. Petting. Leaving his fingerprints on all the lines around John's eyes and his mouth where he smirked and glowered and—and laughed.

'Anything,' Sherlock whispered. 'No matter. Let them see.'

John with his eyes closed breathed out. Nuzzled hard into Sherlock's wrist next to his face and a noise spurred out of Sherlock, out of his chest; John's tongue flicking out licking and—and Sherlock groaned. Couldn't help it. Couldn't—

He bent his head down. Kissed. Kissed him like he had to do. Needing, he kissed him please, craning his neck until John turned his head and, and oh, Christ, gave it all back. Sherlock with all his bruise-knocked torn-asunder skin under John's shaking hands on Sherlock's—on his waist on his nape in his hair. Sherlock could feel him through his trousers. Twitching. Thickening. Thrusting up at last, and holding so tight with his ankles locked behind Sherlock's thighs and his elbows digging into Sherlock's shoulders and in Sherlock's hair his fingers opening-closing, clutching-convulsing, almost—could be almost—

'Let them,' Sherlock said, and John's hand clenched tight so arching Sherlock gasped, 'Anything'—Sherlock would do. Any bloody thing that John with his beautiful rough clutching hands battering heart and the way he always, always moved for Sh—

—the way he moved.

Sherlock pressed up. Hand under shoulder. Space between them: the breath shook out of him.

'I don't care,' he said. 'There could be a chambermaid, there could be a—a bloody committee at the window with—w—with hors d'oeuvres and—'

John's breathy laugh. Waterlogged. Bursting-aching and dripping down the insides of Sherlock's chest.

'—and tea,' Sherlock said. His mouth was wet and his throat. Couldn't quite manage a smile.
'Ohhhh,' John sighed. He bit at his own lips. Looked at Sherlock then looked away with his eyes brimming up but he moaned when Sherlock reached down one-handed, to undo his top trouser-button.

'Let them watch,' Sherlock said again. Reaching into the hot close space between them: unbuttoning. 'Let them watch me right in front of them undo your trousers and take you—'

'Oh, you—'

'—out of your smalls.'

John's breath stumbled.

Sherlock held his, and John didn't speak; so with his wrist twisted around, palm pressed flat over John's smalls, Sherlock said, 'Do you want me to?' and John: 'Yes,' too-fast, half-groaned. God. Sherlock burrowed fingers down through wool and cotton to damp hot John-smelling skin. That scent. The elbow nearly buckled, on the arm holding him up. 'Are—are you telling me to?' he said and John choked out, 'Sherlock—please,' so flooding with gratitude dropping down onto his forearm with his face next to John's face Sherlock closed his fingers around him. Touched and touched. John's breath hitched; and halted; and he held his eyes open as he got harder in Sherlock's hand. Only just a little soft now. Like the edge of night and morning. Like the mornings in Baker Street when Sherlock after a night spent hunched over beakers and flasks would lift his head to the sky purple in the west and then wait as long as he could before stealing in and waking him with his watering mouth. Christ he'd know him. Know him blindfolded with his hands tied. Just from the scent.

'Let them see,' Sherlock said, 'how I can be good for you,' to John with his hands hard on Sherlock's shoulder and his hip breathing in that struggling way that he had when—that he had.

'Let them.' Sherlock with his mouth wet and John's cock nearly hard in his hand said, 'Let them watch me kneel on the, on the floor for you.' Dropping his head, closing his eyes pressing his forehead to the God, the hot wet skin of John's cheek—could almost taste—gasping into John's ear: 'with your hands in my hair pulling my hair fucking my—'

'Kissme—'

'—throat—'

In an instant: moaning, plastered back down against; kissing h-hungry, prayerful, the whole front of Sherlock's body pressed along the length of John's because John in a voice like ground glass had told him. And John's—John's hands. Digging hard, hard into the bare skin of Sherlock's waist and then by the fabric at his hips dragging him closer. Let them see that, Sherlock thought, and sucked a bruise like a hosanna under John's ear.

'Sherlock,' John gasped.

'Any—anything,' said Sherlock. 'Anything, I don't—'

John heaving breaths like sobs forced his hands between them to fumble at Sherlock's trouser-buttons. 'Yes,' Sherlock said. 'Good, all right,' and lifting up by inches only, bent forward to put his tongue in John's mouth and reached down to undo them himself. His hands stumbled over John's hands on his flies and John groaned the way that Sherlock—he adored that sound, how could he get on without—God. Kneeling back up just enough to push them down, trousers and smalls and then shoes, feeling we'll run out of time and panic-stricken crawling—anything—rubbing his face on
John's wool-clothed London-smelling shins ('Let them') because John had ordered him and Sherlock
would do anything; John's thighs jumping under his lips through wool and then: Sherlock's mouth,
overfull of wet pleading, opened greedy to swallow him whole.

'Oh Sherlock,' John said, 'Oh—'

Let them, Sherlock thought. Drumming inside his skull let them watch as he squirmed about naked,
desperate and messy with his haemorrhaging heart and his burning face and John's clothed hips in his
hands. Let them watch me choke on him. John's back like a bridge let them sit there and—and
observe. See Sherlock stuffed full of him, drooling down him letting John—Sherlock moaned
brought his hand up over John's hard-petting hand in his hair; squeezed it closed and 'Ohhh,' John
breathed—let them watch him pull his hair tear up his throat Anything, John could do anything he
wanted and Sherlock would make it exemplary for him oh let them sit behind their peep-holes with
their open empty slavering mouths and their hands tied to their straight-backed chairs let them see.

'Let them,' he gasped. Pulling off, gasping, stroking John, spit-drenched from head to parted trouser-
flies. Saliva soaked into wool. The way they smelled together.

'God I'm so—oh,' John said. 'Oh—'

'Let them w-watch me take you out and. And put my mouth on you and then—'

'I want—'

'—anything,' in an instant, and John: 'On top of me,' tugging on Sherlock's shoulders—ribs—hips,
'between me and—over me, ag—around me—'

Bare knees either side John's waist; bare forearms either side his ears: because John had told him.
Sherlock kissed him and kissed him; let them see. Little shivery circles with his reaching-back hips so
their cocks dragged together and John with his head turned into the pillow moaned that broken—

'Don't, oh,' gasped Sherlock. He nosed at John's chin; kissed John's mouth back to centre, and then
rutted against him, slow, hard, Christ that noise.

'Let them hear,' he said, and did it again, and unsteady: 'Or else how will they know,' gasping, 'that
you like it?'

'That I—' John's watery laugh. The long breath-trail after. Sherlock pressed down and John gasped
and: 'If I could be,' he panted, 'surrounded by you, just—all the, all the bloody time—'

'You want—'

'God, I'm a terrible fucking—' John said, and laughed like a sob so Sherlock—'Shhh,' petting at him,
defiant, 'it doesn't matter, it's—anything, anything you want'—sat back on his heels, then lifted John's
hand off Sherlock's hip. Grasping; rough-knuckled. Tender familiar bones under skin. Sherlock
dragged it up, and put John's fingers in his own mouth.

And anyone—anyone tied up; anyone locked away in some, some observation room, blinking his
dry eyes twisting his hands, tied too tight to his straight-backed chair. Anyone could see, if they kept
their eyes open, if they only observed, the way Sherlock, bare, on top of John, clothed and sweating
and breathing like he'd run miles, took John's fingers down his throat because John had told him to.
Anyone could see the way he—sucking, flooding, Christ anyone—deep, he could—John's clutching
hand on his wrist as Sherlock, greedy, choking, leaking; anyone could see how wet he'd got them,
soaked in thick glistening—thick pulling tides from the back of his throat for John and any—anyone
watching them would see that thick snapping strand when, bereft, he pulled John's fingers from his
mouth and kneeling up pushed them—down and—and wet trails on Sherlock's thighs and his balls—
pressed them in—

'Sh—are you—bloody Christ—'

But John had said, he'd said: surrounded; and Sherlock would do it, Sherlock would—and John,
being given what he'd asked, panted and groaned and curled his fingers inside Sherlock with the
back of his hand resting on his own thigh, and Sherlock ground down smarting. Burning. Gasped
and then lifted up and—and down.

And even if. Even if the fool turned his head to the side; even if he—even if the poor bloody bastard
tied up in his chamber turned aside from the peephole, squeezed his eyes shut and even—even
thrashed about, frantic and biting like some kind of trapped beast rather than watch the way
Sherlock's whole sweat-smarting abraded body—Christ lifted up and then sank down opening,
wanting, wanting desperately with his eyes filling up and his stinging, splitting—opening for John's
fuck thick cock in him wanting; with John under him saying—telling him—ordering him to do it the
way he'd—God. Sherlock shoved himself down. And even if the poor idiot thrashed and struggled
he couldn't help but hear the way John's voice dipped—broke—and, bubbling up between the
scrapes of the chair-legs, Sherlock's wanting whimpering—

'Are you, fuck—' John said, his head slamming back into pillows fingers clawing at Sherlock's hips,
—this is—God—'

'Let me do,' Sherlock panted. 'What you want.'

Hot hands to John's shirt-front, bare calves hugging woolen hips, with all his skin prickling wet-dry
and smarting, burning, full to his throat, cut open and salt-stung dragging guts over rough steel and
he wanted that too, he wanted—shoving himself down feeling John get harder in him, bigger in him
and only wishing—bitterly, Christ, jealously—that any watching cur could see that, too.

'Tell me,' he ground out. 'I'll do it, I.'

'Christ,' John said, 'Sherlock, you—' and Sherlock ground balls to wool to get him gasping.

'I, I'll beg you, I don't care who hears, I'll—'

'Oh— God—' and Sherlock dropped down again and John moaned.

'Tell me,' he said again, and John: 'Down—here, get—' fingertips slipping on Sherlock's ribs,
pulling, knees bending up to press Sherlock forward; so Sherlock went down on his forearms again,
pressing his face against him. Kissing him. No footboard, was there; and furiously grateful Sherlock
thought how the blackguard in the other room could see him, Sherlock, his knees spread spread wide
and his arse stuffed full, could see—could see John, with his knees bent but his feet spread, drawing
out of Sherlock, stretched tight almost to the brink and then fucking up into him in short sharp bursts
over and—andoverand—and watching them together with his mouth twisting around and every part
of him feeling hollow and needing—overand—

'God, is this—ohChrist,' John said, sounding—high-pitched, overstrung—

'Someone,' Sherlock panted into John's hair and his neck, 'could be, could be standing behind us
watching you f-fuck me and I'd want you to keep—Christ—'

John's hands, tightening on his hips. God. He'd see that.

'Someone could be watching you c-come in me, leak out of me, I'd just—'
'Stay—'

'—stay there spread, leaking back out all over you—'

'—a-around—'

'—and me still—still hard. Let him see you leave me h-hard and, and the smell of, of us together. God it would, would drive me mad.' John's short huffing breaths and his frantic tender fingers, pet-pet-petting at Sherlock's sides. 'Trickling down my thighs,' Sherlock told him, 'onto your, your cock, and your hips and—and kissing you until you can get hard again and—'

'Jesus—'

'—make me full again—'

'God,' groaned John, 'Sherlock,' but he was—John with his sweat-soaked close-breathing face and his lip between his teeth moving his hips in tentative jerks with his hands on Sherlock's hips was still so careful. And Sherlock spitting, thinking of that—that pathetic specimen squirming about in his chair in the other room, all the time painfully, tediously hard; while to the nobody who would listen he whined all his dull desperation around whatever they'd had to hand to shove in his mouth—Sherlock put his hands over John's hands on his hips and dug in the nails.

'Let them,' he gasped, 'see you mark me.'

'What—,' John gasped. 'I—'

'I don't care.' Aflame. His back slotting back to straight one vertebra on top of the next with his hips shoving down under him and his hands on John's hands on his hips. Hard, harder. 'I can—can be good for you,' he told him. 'He can see me be so—so good for you, it doesn't matter what I—'

gasping, '—you can order me—'

John jolted, under him: not careful at all. Sherlock growled.

He ground down. Smarting-stinging, ripped open stuffed to the teeth with him. Did it again and John said 'Sherlock' like he couldn't bear it. Let him listen to that, the bloody bastard. John's mouth stayed open but no words came out so Sherlock moved and John. Hard inside him and flinching up and his hands on Sherlock's hips.

'You can,' Sherlock said. Dropping his weight down hard; hard enough to hurt. He took John's hand in his hand and raked the nails down his own chest so that pink trails bloomed up after them. Panted, 'Should've known you'd want—should've—Christ you can—'

'Should've—what—' with bright eyes wide on Sherlock's chest: exultant, Sherlock arched, pressed, moved.

'You like that,' Sherlock said. 'You can do it again.'

John's breath like battle. Loud enough to, to hear. 'Do you—' John said, and then. Words snagged ragged in his throat as Sherlock scored nail-lines into his own hips. Thighs. Marks for any idiot to—

'You can,' he told John, who shook. Was shaking. Had told him on top of me, over me, so Sherlock pressed himself back down to feel him tremble and John clutched—clutched at him. 'You can flush me up,' Sherlock said. 'Let them watch you turn me over the bed and take a belt to my—my thighs, my back,' as John held him tight, tight and Sherlock whispered in the hot space between them, 'or my arse, or with your hands you can. Let them see you h-hit me, you can—'
'Sherlock.'

John with a voice pulled from him like viscera, went still; and Sherlock—fist in the sheets—

'You can,' he insisted. Breath hot into the pillow, into John's ear, Sherlock with his thighs burning moving his frantic awkward hips to no purpose; John didn't move. 'Why are you,' John whispered, but Sherlock, over him: 'You can—can bruise me. Split my m-mouth open and then show them how you kiss me, John—'

But John was still. Couldn't be. Had to be, to be—Sherlock, with his panting animal mouth, nuzzled and kissed at John's cheek, at his neck, at the sandy line of his hair. John's mouth and his eyes screwed themselves shut against him. John turned. Turned his head.

'Let them,' Sherlock said. Too loud, in the close silence of the still bed. 'I wouldn't care, I'd—you could, could push me down. Take me on the floor, you could, oh—anything, anything you said—'

John wire-tight and motionless inside Sherlock and he. A whining dog at the door. Panic in a flooding tide, saying 'Could tie me to a bed, to a—to a chair. Put me wherever you want me, h-hurt me, just. That's what they do there, isn't it. Whatever you wanted, I would do—or I could, could struggle and you could f—'

'Stop,' John said.

'—force me—'

_Cold. _Still, and cold, but he'd been, been moaning. John _had_ been, he'd been pressing up into Sherlock's body and biting at Sherlock's mouth and Sherlock felt himself a boat adrift with the shore retreating—and retreating...

'Or just,' he managed. His ribs hugging together, squeezing the breath from him. 'If you could,' he said, next to John's ear, 'let me watch.'

Forcing his voice out through the sore straw of his throat. He should sit up but he couldn't—couldn't bear it. John lay unmoving under him, face turned away.

'You could,' Sherlock said. 'Could fasten me down if you're worried I'd.' Pressing down, pressing his face against John's neck horribly still, face horribly unturning as Sherlock whispered, 'Or you could get—someone else. They have people for that, surely, in places like the—the Hôtel Marigny. You and—and. _Uh_, um. You could do everything just the same as you did before, I wouldn't try to—' swallowing '—I'm almost sure I wouldn't if you only had someone to make me quiet, to hold me—John,' pleading, '—hold me down—'

Hipshoulders hotsharp blow to knee. John twisted out from under him and Sherlock. Flipped onto his back, face wet and arse burning and feeling like the whole front of his skin had been ripped from him, still fastened to the front of John's body severed from his.

And lifting his head: John. Still in all his rumpled familiar clothes. Shaking hand over his mouth. Standing on the floor, miles away from Sherlock at the foot of the bed.

'Never,' John said. His voice an icicle vibrating before the break. 'Just. Never do that again.'

Sherlock did not curl in on himself.

No.
You're, he wanted to say, sharp acid in his mouth. Face slapped-smarting but he didn't say it, drawing himself up, smoothing down his face opening his mouth, You're saying—?

'Just,' said John, voice shaking, 'shut up, just, just don't.'

But Sherlock was drawing up. Slotting together. Back into one piece.

'Shame,' he said. He didn't fail himself. Crisp; contained. Butter wouldn't melt.

'You want to be careful, Sher—'

'Oh careful,' he said. 'How tedious.'

Vest and shirt he plucked from the floor; shrugged them on. He said, 'I wasn't warned you'd be so retiring about the whole business. To think of a grown man, kicking up such a fuss.'

'You—and what were you—'

'No wonder,' he added, 'that Mr MacIntyre found it necessary to first ply you with drinks.'

John would hit him now. That look. He would hit him crack across Sherlock's face; the way his bones would echo through with John's fingerprints. Sherlock's teeth already ached with it but John just clenched from tip to toes. Didn't—

'What were you warned for, Holmes?' John repeated. 'Just what warnings did you receive about my movements? I'd—I think I'd like to know, really. While we're at it, from whom did you receive them?'

Didn't touch him at all.

'I'd—thought,' Sherlock said. Swallowing down hard on the unfairness of it so as not to sound like a bloody—like a child. 'I was, of course, informed of the outline of the thing.' Managing plummy. Donnish. 'And I'm aware of the tendency on the part of some individuals to censure the objects of their own desire, but I'd hoped you and I were perhaps beyond such banalities. I'm afraid my investment in this little... game of yours will pale if I'm to be both the defiled innocent and the reviled tempter. Such a lack of narrative integrity, Watson. It strains credulity, any critic would agree. I confess myself disappointed.'

'If you think you were informed,' John grit out, 'of anything—'

'All the relevant facts,' Sherlock said, 'I think you'll find.'

'Oh, all the relevant facts'

'Mmm.'

'You were having me followed, then,' John said, and Sherlock laughed.

'Not then, no.'

'Not—then.'

'Damned shame, too, I'd've done the thing properly. Followed you in. I hear they've, oh. Peep-holes. Trick windows. All sorts.'

'You hear.' The muscle in John's jaw. 'You're informed.'
'Reliable sources.'

'Such as, I don't know. This Irene Adler woman you've had me investigating all day?'

'Though I suppose not completely reliable,' Sherlock mused, 'if her agents were so lax as to wait outside for you. Poor choice in associates. And she'd seemed rather formidable, at the time.'

'You'd have done better, would you?' John said. 'You'd have, what, got yourself up in some costume? Taken a seat down the bar and sat there w-watching?' His voice shaking into breaking but he went on: 'Doing bloody nothing to intervene while the whole horrible night just—like a fucking motion picture? You'd have—have put an eye to the keyhole and, and just sat there with your notebook while I—'

'While you, indeed.'

'And you'd have just, what—'

'I'd have put an eye to the keyhole,' he said, 'and observed with the utmost assiduity.'

'Oh, the Holmes machine,' said John. 'The great Holmes apparatus. New data, would it have been? And did the—'

'The notes I'd have taken,' said Sherlock, 'would have been of the faithfulllest.'

'—formidable Irene Adler give you new data to work with, as well, then? She'll be practised at telling men what they want to hear.'

'Or perhaps one ought to say,' said Sherlock, 'of the carefulllest. Mr MacIntyre is a charming specimen, is he not.'

'Was she clever enough to listen,' John said, 'while you told the whole story yourself? That's what the really clever ones do, when they see Sherlock Holmes coming.'

'One feels,' Sherlock went on, 'when one sees him—'

'Let you make use of them,' said John, 'like a piece of—like a bloody—'

'—that one may fail at fucking that smirk off his pretty mouth, but—'

'—sack of meat, like an echo chamber and then—'

'—one will at least enjoy oneself in the attempt.'

'—feed it back to you.' Breathing hard. 'Just how you want to hear.'

John was leaning forward from his toes. Tiny; furious. Sherlock might touch him. Sweat-soaked. He couldn't get enough air.

'Convenient, really,' John said. 'Her happening along just when you'd been left for a single bloody moment without an audience.'

'No, I,' Sherlock said. 'She.' Cleared his throat. 'She interested me, she he-helped me.'

'Get you eating out of their hands,' voice rough, John said, 'some of them.'

'She told me about—' Stupid. He ran a hand through his hair. 'The way she put things one could.
Understand the appeal.'

John shook his head, and his mouth did something—complicated, that Sherlock didn't—that didn't belong on John's face. Curving down unhappy like in a moment he would bend forward, would—would reach out—draw Sherlock to him and press him to his chest and tell him about—Daniel MacIntyre, and Sherlock, choking on the impossibility of—

'But perhaps it's less thrilling for you,' he said, 'when the other party is at home, of age, and free to decline.'

The whole of John's spine and his shoulders. Cracked back. Snapped straight.

Away.

'Who, Holmes,' said John, and Sherlock's chest folded in on itself, 'is the formidable Irene Adler?'

Cut loose from the charm he turned, paced; gave the show. Dupin's peroration. 'Well. That's an interesting question, Watson. She's a highly-paid whore at one of the most prestigious brothels in Paris: but then you know as much. She's also rather a snake, which you may not; and both self-obsessed and highly intelligent, which you no doubt guessed. I met her in her hotel room in St Malo and she spotted me some excellent whiskey.'

'Did she.'

'Not quite Glenkinchie,' he said. Tossing it over his shoulder for John to catch. He imagined him flinching; burning triumph in his chest; he didn't look. 'But I had no complaints. Certainly better quality than one expects from an interview with a house-breaker in a seaside resort. And such far-flung stories she had, too. War-time dalliances between Charles Humbert and Henry Jouvenel. Difficult to credit, I thought. And Adler herself, sheltering illegally in her place of business a scandalous high-profile would-be lover from abroad. It all seemed rather sensationalist. And John Watson and young Daniel MacIntyre, frequenting a notorious house of vice—the whole thing, after all, would have seemed downright laughable, if I hadn't had it from your own lips that someone had telephoned at three-thirty in the morning, and that you hadn't been in your room to receive the call.'

'Holmes, I—'

'There are photographs, apparently,' Sherlock cut in, 'of the four of them together. Humbert, Jouvenel, Adler, and the—Adler's colleague. Gretha. That, I gather, is the prize for which we're all vying on this wild chase across Paris and the provinces. Salacious business. Adler sat in my lap and told me the whole story. My only regret is that she didn't offer me any pictures of you.'

'She sat—' came John's voice, and then stopped. A quick sharp intake of breath and then: 'No, of course. Only stories gleaned from having had me tracked through the night.'

'A bit more than that,' Sherlock said, 'actually.'

Coming to a stop, hands flat on the desktop, he closed his eyes. Thought of Irene, ki—hitting him. Red-lacquered claws and sharp white teeth, fighting him full-out all afternoon with her little black book and her mean red slash of a mouth; gloating over Doctor Watson and the Paris art world meeting him blow for low sharp-angled blow and later, pulling her black brocade dressing gown around her narrow shoulders, looking all of seven stone and utterly, utterly alone.

'Why,' said John, 'was Irene Adler having me followed?'

'All the way down on the train,' Sherlock said. Turning. Opening his eyes. He made himself look at
John, who stood with his arms crossed across his chest, a hundred miles away. Sherlock told him, 'All the way down in the train, I was thinking: if it were me. And you know, I'm—it's something of a specialty of mine, putting myself in, in others' positions. Well. You're familiar with my methods.'

'I'd have thought so,' John said. His voice gaping hollow. Every muscle in Sherlock's aching body drawn tight.

'All the way down on the train,' Sherlock said. 'I kept going over it. I kept saying to myself: if I'd spent years thinking I'd lost—well. For me, you understand, it would be you.' He waved a hand. 'I kept thinking, if you'd died, oh, that night in Chelsea—'

'In Chelsea.'

'You recall. When that horse kicked you in the chest coming back from the theatre and I had rather a bad moment or two thinking you'd—'

'Coming back,' John echoed, 'from the theatre.'

'Or not!' Hands in his hair; turning, pacing. That night, or another night. The lives we l-led. But if it had happened or if I'd—if I'd thought it had. If I'd thought I lost you, and then found out differently. I kept,' (breathing, turning, John there still with his arms crossed and his mouth drawn into a tight shaking line) 'running it over and over in my mind. And however I looked at it I just couldn't stop thinking that the first, the very first thing I'd want, if it were me and I'd got you back, if it was really you after, after all that time, would be to be taken back to your rooms.'

'Sherlock—'

'More specifically, to your bed.'

John closed his eyes; breathed in—in—in.

'It wasn't—,' John said. And then: 'I didn't—,' and then: 'I would never have—'; and Sherlock waited, breath held, for the thing John would never have done, with the muted alien silence of their modern, un-Parisian room and the indecipherable tone of every echo battering against the inside of his skull: Chelsea like an insult (but John had always rather liked Chelsea); and surrounded by you (Never) all the time (do that again) and Never, I would never with 2136 burning a hole in Sherlock's breastbone and John's posture stiff and furious but nothing about it whatsoever to indicate he was lying as he hesitated with his mouth open and Sherlock was breathing hard and he wanted, suddenly, to be far away.

'She gave me the telegrams,' he told John, and turned to face the window. All the fight gone out of him.

'The—'

'Correspondence.' His heavy, clumsy tongue. 'Between herself and your Paris watcher. The business about Hôtel Marigny she got over the telephone, but when I went back the next morning—'

'When you—of course.'

'—there were two telegrams. She made me a gift of them. No doubt for reasons of her own.' He cleared his throat. 'So you see all this time I've been belabouring a point unnecessarily. It seems that in remarkably short order you did get around to visiting your beloved in his rooms. After all.'

He waited by the window until his breath smoothed out, with the faint hot nothing of a breeze on his
Sherlock thought, twice, that John might speak. He did not.

'I shouldn't have doubted that you would go to him,' Sherlock said, after a time. 'But still: third-party confirmation is always valuable. 2256 departed café on foot; 2321 arrived at 3 Rue du Sommerard; 2334 entered apartment building at resident's invitation; 0724 departed on foot. I was glad, when I saw it, that I'd asked Irene to keep her man on your tail.'

The heat of the room bore down all around him. Tickling rivulets of sweat down his back and his neck and the backs of his legs. After a time he heard the bedroom door open, and shut; and then the outer door open, and shut; and when he turned around he was alone in the rooms. John had gone.

Chapter End Notes

1. Re: Irene's first Paris employer, I'm copying over my note from Chez les bêtes: The lesbian-BDSM-brothel-fronting-as-vaudeville-theatre La Garçonnière is invented. But it's absolutely probable that such a place did exist, given the enormous breadth and luxuriance of the Parisian sex industry at the fin de siècle. Unrealistic middle- and upper-class expectations of decorousness within marriage, low pay and grueling hours for non-sexual women's work, and the general decadence of the city at the turn of the century, created a perfect storm of supply and demand.

2. Knapely and its Arbuthnot owners are also an invention, but the place is modeled on Ripley Castle, in North Yorkshire, which does have multiple priest holes as well as a very storied history which also happens to be just about the most English thing I've ever read. (Choice snippet from the Wikipedia entry: "Sir Thomas Ingleby (c1290-1352) married the heiress Edeline Thwenge in 1308/9 and acquired the Ripley Castle estate with its mediaeval manor house as her dowry. His oldest son, also called Thomas (1310-1369), saved the king from being gored by a wild boar whilst on a hunting expedition and was knighted in return with the boar's head symbol as his crest.")

3. Further DVD extras notes on this chapter can be found here.
You cannot face it steadily

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(EARLIER)

Saturday, August 27th, 1921
7am

Naked, Irene made lists.

Buzzing with Holmes-Watson, Watson-Holmes, Paris Jouvenel Léonie and Le Matin. She hadn't slept, after Roz Ven. After the jolt of recognition: Sherlock Holmes. Back at the Chateaubriand just after four, she'd stripped off in the heat and surrounded herself with paper on the bed: scribbling scribbling with her double doors open to the breeze. Actions for the morning (to the north); conclusions drawn (to the south); everything she could remember from her all-too-scanty perusal of English newspapers (dead east), her hair tied up and her brain alight and firing-firing-firing. Possible connections: north by northeast. Tie-ins with her scrapbook back at Le Chabanais: north by northwest. Ink drying on hotel stationery, almost as fine as hers at home.

The sky turned purple and then cornflower and she lowered her naked body to the duvet. She laughed. Wanted to roll in it. Wrinkle the paper with her back. Bathe in paper until her night's discoveries were written on her body.

But that knock at the door was the bellhop with her croissant. Her coffee. She called out for him to wait, and pressed her lips together as she gathered all the paper out of sight. Pulled on a peignoir. The bed was bare and her chest hurt. In Constantinople, she thought: in Dublin and New York I'll refuse. I won't have to hide such things away.

Absurd, needless to say. She adjusted the drape of the silk at her neck, and smiled when she opened the door.

Saturday, August 27th, 1921
6am

On the street the sky was—

—the same was the same the—

(John is on the banks of, of of)
Sweated through soaked through. All over him hospital muck farmhouse muck shoved down into
his. Skin, sour-soiled. Penned him in couldn't move no moving. Standing in it by a river the banks of
a river rushing water the water would be. Cold.

Shadows gone crisp, full sun. Bars at his back.

The animal it shook.

(John is in Lyon. In the park, by the vélodrome, he is so light. Near weightless with apathy he tells
the girl everything. Absolutely everything he can.)

Blue sky on him right on him there was nowhere, no. So find a hole. Girl with a pram giving him
that look must. Find a cool dark. Turned shoulders to the left to the right no. No it's. Stretched at the
hide holding him in and the animal didn't. Couldn't do that. Doesn't.

Stay then stay let it. Held still he might not be. Might not. Might—

Pressed spine hard to living bark. The animal shivered though coated in Don't, don't, don't, don't
look. If he could not be. Not be here.

Could—could sleep. Bright blood-dark shivering in the blue sun bright dark blood. Shifted careful
on its side trying. Putting the here part outside just a bit outside. If he could. Curl it up make it sleep.

Breaths lengthened shadows drew up. He'd almost, he'd. Separate enough to. Watch. Not think not.
That bad meat, out of the house. Bad for the dogs for the boys. He'd sit just a. Way away. They'd not
scavenge it and and and and and hurt—

Steadied. Drew back from the animal where it lay. If he could be just. A bit less, just. A bit away for
the time it takes for the. For the time

(John is talking. For a long while he hasn't talked but now he is talking. He is talking about an
abandoned school. There was a boy, he is telling her. I was a bit, he is saying, like a father to him. A
bit like a brother. Yes, even that: a bit like a brother, he can say, to this strange girl sitting next to him
by the vélodrome in Lyon. Why not say it? It is true. This boy, he is saying, you have to understand:
he was an innocent. He put his arm around my shoulders and I should have been like a brother to
him. Instead I wanted to push him down. The listening girl is nodding. She is nodding. John is
talking about a boy entrusted to his care and he is talking about trains. That same boy, screaming on
a train. He is talking about trenches where there is always water. He is talking about boys whose feet
split open, rotting black in the cold water of the trenches and now John is talking about singing. He is
talking about some newspapers he once found, that he burnt with the boy when the boy was
laughing. The listening girl is listening. John is talking about a farmhouse, and he is waiting for
something to happen. The girl is far away and so is his story. He is telling a story about a bombing
raid and a roof that went thirty feet up in the air and kissing a private, quite young. Not very
probable, is it. Not a very believable story; not a very good one. Why would people do such things?
John is telling a tiresome anecdote about a time he stood in a hospital and talked to his lover's sister
about her plans for university, watching her face that had looked like his face, the lover's face. John
is saying these words and waiting for something to happen but nothing does. Why does he expect
Strange touch; the animal jerked. Jerked back. The bones rocked guts under bad-tight skin and he
had to. Sick. It would be. Blades of light squinting him open the woman said words. Pushed coins at
him at his hands; he shook. Shook his head. Warm tongue on his face his hand. Little claws little
feet. Licked his hand where the coins were. Pant ed up at him with its open mouth. Blue collar like
the sky blue all over him and the woman's crisp blue suit.

Words she said. He would have to. Shifted, no. With no movement he could be—not, he could. He
could not be. But the animal couldn't stay so he had to be in it. Got up on his knees. Got up on his
feet. Blue sky all over him getting all over him all over the blue-suited woman and her snow-white
hair and her little dog. Feathery ears. Tiny haunches set to trot.

He said words, said—said hotel, he thought, sounds the shape of his hotel. Her shoulders squared
back. She gestured, and he tried to make his face—he knew—knew again, didn't he, how it ought to
look. Tried to make it so as she stood there, still stood there. Her dog and her suit in the beating sun.
He nodded, blinking. Nodding. Held out his hand to give back her coins but she was already gone.

He kept breathing careful. Slow careful. Got skin and bones back into a copse. Behind, away. Flies
unbuttoned forearm to bark forehead to forearm he pissed against a tree. Stood there going still 'til he
was steady enough, then tucked himself away. Pillowed head on arms against the tree. Lowered to a
crouch. Swayed balanced on haunches with little claws scraping at the ground and furred eyelids
grainy when they

(John is in Lyon with the girl from the vélodrome and now he isn't talking. Now he is kissing her,
like he had used to kiss the young private, before the young private was harmed. He is stripping off
her chemise and her little shorts. Now he is telling a story without words, putting his mouth on her
neck. Putting his hands on her breasts. It remains an unconvincing story. He is putting his hand down
at the crook of her to check if she's wet. He feels he ought to be comparing them: this girl and his
ruined lover; but it is all happening very far away. It is happening at a distance and after this she may
be harmed as well but he is doing it anyway: fitting pieces of his body together with pieces of hers.
He is pumping between her legs and he is still waiting for something to happen. She says words; he
puts his parts where she tells him to. She moves. Makes noise, clenches floods. Nothing happens.
Why would anything happen? Why, he wonders. It's not a story a person would stay in a picture
house to watch on a screen.)

It was hot.
The shadows had shrunk and he was sweating. It was hot and he had to. He was supposed to have
cought the first train. He'd—and he hadn't ever even checked in at his hotel.

Couldn't stay, had to. Things he had to. Got himself up. Could move all right. Could move now if he
just. Moved. He breathed in breathed out. Moved off in the direction the blue woman had pointed.

Métro stop looming and he thought: the train, but his balloon stomach welled up hot so he kept
walking. There was the river, again. Hands to railings he rested his weight. Sun not yet overhead. He
faced east and felt the city warp around him. He'd. Couldn't remember crossing the river. Must have
done. Couldn't—it'd still been dark when he'd.
Shaking. Pressing palms to iron staring down at the. At the Seine.

A bridge, then. Nothing needed knowing but a bridge.

He turned about, hand to the ironwork. Walked back the way he'd come. A bridge. There'd been one by the park. By the tree where he'd.

Gingerly he stepped. All the sore missing places. Closed his eyes against the glare; felt along the rails with his hands. Just had to. Bridge; hotel. Get back. Telephone his stomach surged up again: bridge. Hotel. Hotel. Bed; his eyes filled. Head swimming clutching metal on the banks of the river he kept on. Bridge. Only: bridge.

His foot hit stone and the ironwork ended. He leant his back against the corner they made. Opened his eyes and looked. Fists anchored to the bars behind him; looked. To his back the slow Seine with the sun beating off it; to his left a wide bridge. In front of him a courtyard swarming with motor-coaches and horse-cabs and behind them tall iron gates flanked by stone tipped with gold and behind that flashes of trees flashes of arm-in-arm sweethearts. Flashes of a broad spreading dirt promenade lined on either side with red blooms and he, squinting up at a street sign: *Jardin des plantes*, it read. River. Bridge. Digging into his palms the iron bars (Bourg) on the bank of the (Lyon) Seine he was in Paris and days ago in that brocade train car he'd said they should. Lamarck's cabinets. (Paris.) Cuvier's anatomy collections. How *can* you have served in the War and not seen them? he'd said and John'd told him—*I wasn't at my best*—he'd told him he'd told—

(John is waking up in Lyon. Why? he thinks. Why, why: a pulsing hum in his head. The girl from the vélodrome is sleeping or pretending to sleep or her character is meant to be sleeping. John climbs out of bed and puts on his clothes. He doesn't try to be quiet. Maybe if he makes noise she will wake up and something will happen. Nothing happens. Why do things happen? He walks out into the street where it is still dark and all the iron grilles are rolled down over the shopfronts. He is almost sure there was a time when the boy and the trenches and the farmhouse and the hospital had been something else. Not a story. He is almost sure. If it was a story, it was a better story; or if you like a worse story. A more convincing story. John's story. But John was a different man. A different man entirely. Dawn is breaking on the banks of the Rhône and the river rushes in his ears ripe with something underneath that he can't catch. He walks on into the sky pinking up with sun. He thinks: I can keep walking. On and on. That man is a different man, he thinks, and I. I am a stranger. In Lyon; in Marseille. In London. (London.) The river roar increases and he thinks: I am a free and unmoored stranger to every place and every person on the earth. (Earth.) With a rumbling and a weak heaviness creeping on him he thinks: I am free. (London.) Utterly free; and no atrocity or beauty or sacred thing with all their exquisite indifference can hold me nor would any care to try. I can keep on, he thinks, and stumbles. I can keep on—I can—keep on and—on and—

—and on the bank of the Rhône a cavity broke open in his chest and he reached out) grasping—reaching out for—

—*Sherlock*—

**Saturday, August 27th, 1921**

11am

Sherlock said 'Anything taken?' and John—

'Nothing.' Wet his lips; swayed where he stood. The line crackled.
’Nothing at all?’ came Sherlock’s voice, down the line.

It sounded. Exactly as John had imagined it. When he’d taken the telephone mouthpiece off its cradle in the back corridor of Chez Manière before he’d gone back out to. And then.

He drew a breath. Drew another.

That voice precise. Steady-familiar. Physical pain in John's chest; he blinked hard. The Boas woman, he reminded himself. He could tell about—about how she’d gone over the house with, with John Watson, whom she had greeted as her guest. 'Along with her housekeeper,' John was saying. His voice, as if from a distance: he sounded natural, he thought. Couldn't quite tell. He thought so. Now was the time to—stay upright. Relay information. 'All at sixes and sevens,' he said. Held himself up. Across a gulf he told about rooms ransacked. The bedroom and sitting-room and curio cabinets: 'wrapping paper, family albums, things like that,' he heard himself say. As if he were Sherlock Holmes's right-hand man.

He swayed. Stopped it. His voice going on, far away, so immeasurably far as he closed his eyes saying—saying something about—

And then Sherlock's familiar little laugh. John forced. Forced his eyes open.

'A similar level of disorder,' Sherlock was saying, as John clutched the mouthpiece, 'as we saw at the Matin offices, I take it?' and wholly together, swimming into focus with him for just a moment, John Watson—

'If by similar,' he said, 'you mean a high level of disorder, then yes'; so that Sherlock (mid-case, conspiratorial, attention augmented—possessive—proud—proud—) laughed again and it was too much so John pushed down, away, down—

The room, floor. Yawning back slant so John sat on the bed. Closed his eyes and slipping green-falling rivergreen seablack he opened his eyes and the world hitched. Dizzy palm open on the sheets resolving into: seconds lost? Minutes? Out in the city this morning there'd been—he couldn't remember the sun coming up. He'd been shaking. He'd been seeing—kept—

Down the line he could hear one of the Jouvenel children shouting in the distance, and Sherlock talking on. Another world.

'This fancy dress fête,' Sherlock said. 'She's already started on preparations, then?'

John pushed himself up off the bed. Now was the time to relay information. Facts. Tethered to the wall by the length of the receiver wire he stood shifting from one foot to the other.

'How much detail d'you want?' he asked, and then: 'The housekeeper gave me a program. But Claire Boas was mostly concerned with whether reporting the break-in would mean more people or fewer at her ball on Tuesday.' The rushing and clicking of static. John stretched his eyelids up with the fingers of his free hand. 'Holmes?' he said. 'Do you want—'

'No,' Sherlock said. He sounded far away, and then: 'No,' closer to the mouthpiece, 'it's fine,' he repeated, and went on about Claire Boas calling in the authorities to attract more guests to her "crimes of passion" charity ball, and John because it was his task to complete relayed the observations he had written in his notebook, pulling on his own hair for the smart.

'That would support the theory,' Sherlock was saying, 'that she staged the thing herself.'

'On that subject,' said John, and then had to set the receiver on the side table and his head against the
He couldn't remember—by a tree in a park somewhere. Pissing, in public. People had seen him no
doubt. Oughtn't to think about it now. He remembered—remembered coming to himself with an old
woman clucking at him. A dog. It had been hot, and her dog had licked his face and then. He
couldn't. Most of the morning, lost. And then to come back here and find—

'At this point,' Sherlock was saying, voice tinny and faint from the receiver perched on the side-table,
'I'd like slightly more detail than you—'

'Yes,' John said. Cleared his throat. Picked the receiver back up; had to be done. 'Yes. The front desk
at the hotel tells me someone called for me, um. Very late last night.'

'Very late?' said Sherlock. John had the strange bruised fantasy of touching, gentle; pushing the
words back into Sherlock's mouth. 'Your passion for specificity is—'

'Three thirty-nine,' John told him. 'In the morning.'

He shuffled from one foot to the other. Blinked: close float sink waterrocking blue and the—open,
world snagged. Seconds lost? The silence he'd left was the same silence he came back to, but it was
Sherlock so there was no telling how long. Horribly it didn't matter. Sherlock would. Draw
conclusions. Or ask, and John didn't—there was nothing he could do.

'Look,' he said. Pinched hard the skin of his own arm: here (London), it was his job to do—and
talked too fast. 'I tracked down the fellow on duty, at the front desk. And I questioned him. He said
the call came in at three-thirty, and it was a female voice, definitely a female voice. But he said it
sounded muffled, like—'

'Through a handkerchief.'

Sherlock cleared his throat and John. A reprieve. He nodded hard though Sherlock couldn't see him.
Hand over mouthpiece he wiped at his wet face.

If I could just, John thought, and then didn't know. Couldn't say. There was a clear thing to say and
underneath it all this scorched jumble: actions and reactions. Reaching for them at random they came
out wrong. All John could do was say the words. If Sherlock could see John now, then—well if the
face of the night clerk when he'd opened his door in his nightshirt, rubbing his eyes, to find John
with his fist still raised and his mouth still open, calling out—if

he'd looked terrified then Sherlock.

And the clerk had done. John could remember that, though he oughtn't to think about it now. The
fellow'd probably told him more than he would have, John thought, pushing down hard on—wiping
at his face. The fellow'd probably thought the mad Englishman was dangerous. Was bloody right.

'He said maybe,' John told Sherlock, 'like she was trying to lower the timbre of it. And he said she
spoke in English, which. Struck him. Um—cross-Channel tourism means he sees all sorts, so I asked
him, did she sound like a Londoner, what did her accent sound like. He said—he swore she was
French.'

'Parisian?'

'Difficult,' said John. 'To tell, he said it was difficult to tell.' He ached and drifted. Said, 'What with
the handkerchief and, and her doing a false voice and. She didn't talk for long. All she said was—
hold on, I wrote it down—'

He crouched down by the bed. Knelt on one knee with the other out to the side so it pulled at his
thigh: excruciating, but he could feel himself sinking. Hitting the limit of his ability to, and—mustn't.
Mustn't lose more time. Mustn't sinking cool dry suncotton opening jerking mustn't. Mustn't close his eyes. Sherlock said nothing as John rummaged for his moleskin in the bedside drawer, and then in his suit-jacket tossed on the bed. John's heart was beating-sinking but he thought: whenever it comes, you can't stop it now. His fingers closed around the notebook. They shook as he opened to the bookmarked page.

'All right,' he said, to silent Sherlock far away at Roz Ven. 'She asked for me. And then she said, and I, I'm reading now: Call your dogs off Claire Boas. The whole mess has nothing to do with her. Leave her alone.' John closed the book. 'And then she rang off.'

'That's,' Sherlock said, and a pause. 'Quite dramatic. I wasn't aware we had any dogs.'

A wild giggle escaped John's mouth. It took almost the last of his energy to turn it into a cough.

Sherlock said, 'I assume you found out where the call originated.'

He had. Practically falling over. Let them think he was drunk; let them think he was mad. Bullying the morning desk clerk into translating for him with the operator; he'd been horrid and he'd cared not at all.

'It came,' he told Sherlock, 'from a public phone box in La Rue de Bel Air. Which is what they call the road in St. Coulomb. You know, where it—'

'Passes in front of the druggist's,' Sherlock said, sounding—Christ, quickened. Unmistakeable. John wiped at his eyes and Sherlock said, 'I saw her, Watson. Last night.'

'What?' he managed. 'Really?'

Yes, Sherlock said. Yes, he had seen her: he said so in that revelatory tone, and John, fast-sinking, knew it wouldn't happen now. Sherlock wouldn't ask now, not. Not now. Not now that—there had been another break-in last night, Sherlock was saying. She had made straight for their rooms. The rooms at Roz Ven that Sherlock and John had been given. John making sounds like listening was limp-twisting, losing shape surrendering. Dissolving down into the acid of himself and Sherlock was saying she'd made off out the window and down the trellis and he'd given chase but he had lost her and greengold tumbling now he'd found out that she'd escaped into the village and called John's hotel to seafolding flesh-plant disintegrate warn them off Claire Boas and Sherlock would not ask why John at three-thirty-nine in the morning was in a maison close forcing his—forcing—

'Christ,' John said. Nauseated. 'Good thing you stayed.'

A crackling-fuzzing pause, and then more talking, and his nausea crested and then decayed. Christ, with an edge on its echo, Good thing you stayed, words that swimming black-bluingly doubled into himself, undersurface, tumbled in undertow as Sherlock said house-breaker in Paris and John, with every cell liquid-woozy breathing on the oceanbed, said—something—and no answer and then something—something else and then Sherlock. That voice. Unearned; almost imagined: words out of the wrack black he said cushion and cushioned John gathered to his bruiseblack chest Sherlock's voice: a life-line as he sank.

It was sunset, already, when he awoke.

His clothes were crusted to him. The light through the window was pink and gold.

His stomach hurt with the sharp pain that comes after hunger so he pushed himself up on one arm.
and then up to sitting. He'd managed, apparently, to fumble the telephone earpiece back onto its cradle last—this morning. This afternoon. He held his head. The room was done up in pale yellow. White wicker furniture. The whole thing immaculate, bar the crumpled duvet where he'd tugged it over himself during the night. He'd probably soiled it beyond salvage. He stood on his feet and stumbled towards the bath and thought, sinking down onto the lip of the tub as the water ran, that they'd probably burn it, now.

The splash and the steam and the hot water. He slid down until his head went under.

Clanking reverberated through the plumbing. Through the water and through his skull. He held his breath as long as he could.


It couldn't be locked away. Not forever, not. To fail to make a decision, was to make a decision. He gripped the arms of the chair; fastened himself down to the earth through his two hands on the wicker and his two feet on the ground.

In Bourg: Get out, Daniel had screamed at him, liar, and repulsed and grateful John had run away; and in Paris: If this is all a bit much for you, Daniel had told him, we can go; and vicious and corrosive John had stayed.

John opened his eyes. The sky had darkened to violet. Around the eaves bats flashed and plummeted. Inside, at the far end of the corridor, a door slammed and a heavy tread descended the stairs. A man's voice called out 'Yvonne!' and then, fainter, 'Yvonne!' and then nothing. John took a breath, and another. There was no way, now, to have done differently.

His stomach pained him so he stood. Money clip in his pocket. Room key in the other. Despite the heat he was shivering, so: jacket. All the small motions of opening, shutting, locking, descending. John Watson on a night in August, standing on an unknown pavement as the crowd of Parisians flowed around him.

John's Paris, he realised, standing there, was unnavigable. A scattering of streets and buildings unlinked by lost time. The only place he knew on foot was Montmartre and he couldn't think of going back there; only perhaps he couldn't help it. From the Hôtel Bel Ami, hovering unconnected in space and time, finding Chez Manière or avoiding it seemed equally out of his control. Perhaps if he simply walked downhill. If he flowed downhill at every turning, then surely he could avoid the shadow of Sacré Coeur.

Small movements. A downhill turning, a downhill turning, a downhill turning. He caught the rhythm of it and held on, like a child with a blanket. Right foot left foot right foot downhill turning until: there running blackly before him was the Seine.

The night by now was dark. This stretch of embankment was near deserted and lighted only with a single arc lamp; but across the river there were clusters of lights. Couples strolled and laughed; and a bistro, two, three, were open behind a row of shut-up stalls along the bank.

There was nothing that could be said. Nothing he could do to make up for—for how curled gasping on the floor Daniel had said get out, get out and he hadn't said explain to me and he hadn't said make excuses and he hadn't said purge the infection. The least John could do would be to take him at his word.

And, forcing himself to it, forcing himself to stillness on the bank of the river: what if. John himself had lost hours. A whole morning, gone; even now he shook. What if Daniel had lost hours, too? What if to free up the dark velveteen room they'd thrown him out in the street when he was still…and then—?

But surely. (John's hands, white-knuckled on the rail.) Surely they dealt regularly with… extreme reactions, in a place like that. Surely they'd let him stay until he'd—recovered and then. Surely Daniel. He'd been years now, in Paris. He'd even been before to that particular maison close. Surely even compromised he'd find his way back to his flat. Back to his friends. He'd been so hearty, hadn't he. So hearty and beloved and belonging in Montmartre, before John had shouldered his way in, and remade the damage he'd done.

God. John remembered—a year ago, now. In that inn in Sussex where he and Sh-Sherlock had first—. And then Sherlock had pulled away and John had erupted at him. How do you think that makes me feel? he'd said. And hadn't that been the great winged monster John'd felt at his back these three years: the possibility that there was something so—fetid in him. So polluted that no matter how he tried; how he twisted; how he flung about petty rationalisations; the moment he touched another person they were lost. Yet wasn't it worse—wasn't last night—wasn't it worse—

John's arms, shaking. Face in his hands. When Sherlock's hands trembled like that—. John squeezed his eyes shut and doubled over and breathed, grounded down through the railing digging into his gut.

When Sherlock's hands trembled like that then John Watson, medical doctor, made him count back the hours to the last time he'd eaten, and Sherlock griped and insulted him and didn't want to but he still did it because. Because John had asked it of him.

Bent over the railing John clenched his whole gut around a deep sob and a gasp; forced his back straight and ordered himself to count out on an exhale two, inhale two, exhale two… three… four…

Across the river there were lights. John counted down to half a helping of duck confit, twenty-four hours before. Across the river there were bistroes. He could fit that much together. A quarter of a mile to the east a stone bridge arched in black silhouette against the navy sky. John pushed off from the railing and got his feet moving under him and soon he was crossing it. Simple movements. Small steps. If he could just find—just a bit of quiet. He turned off the embankment and into streets that got narrower and narrower. Student types, calling out to one another as John flinched and hurried on. Twisting and narrowing; shuffling through narrow streets of iron gates, locked down, fastened tight over the fronts of bookshops and stationers. He passed a bistro and another and then at an intersection that opened out to face the broad stone face of a university building, he lowered himself into a chair at the last table in the row of a half-empty café. His legs angled out. His back to the wall.

Small movements: one thing, then another. He pointed at the menu at random when the serveur stopped near his elbow, then sat sipping something he couldn't taste from a dirty glass, watching the windows across the way.

They were mostly dark. August, he reminded himself; and Saturday night. A lamp shone steadily in a single, northerly room on the first floor; and two more from rooms on the ground floor near the
broad front doors. In the far southerly room on the top floor—a large room, must be, spanning the breadth of two windows—came a flickering glow, as of the beams of several lamps distorted by shadows as people in the room went to and fro.

Air-cloth-movement in a gust to John's left and he jerked back: a girl on a bicycle. She pedalled on. With the dirty tablecloth John mopped up wine that had sloshed over his knuckles and his wrist. His shirt-cuff would stain. Jewel-red leached out into rusty pink and he dabbed at it, fruitlessly. He rolled it away from his skin; rolled it again.

He sat back in his chair. Head against the wall behind him; vertigo still lurching in his blood. He swallowed acrid saliva. The lights in the first and the ground floor windows shone on, unchanged; but a shadow moved in the top-floor room, and the double window went dark.

His eyes twitched; skittered. Bad on his gut. He tried to train them steady but they wouldn't. Window window window street door street door window. His back against the wall kept his breath steady. Window window window street door street door window and onto his table the serveur slid a baguette stuffed with ham and cheese. Across the way the doors of the university burst open and a group of students, laughing and chattering, burst onto the street.

He flinched but the serveur didn't notice, or pretended not to notice. John squared up his shoulders and thanked the man so he'd go away. He went away. The group of students flowed into the street and over towards the café and John was blinking down at his plate thinking: small movements: unlock jaw, lift object to mouth; as a female voice too close above him said, 'Monsieur… Watson?'

*Monsieur Watson?*

Jaw still clenched he dragged his eyes up along sandals, bare ankles, stained smock tunic, freckled hands. Masses of red hair. Daniel's—his red-haired—

'Je suis,' he managed, 'désolé, je—Mademoiselle… ?'

'Marchal,' she said, frowning. 'Agathe. Est-ce que tu… are you… all right?'

'Yes,' he said, and then, 'I,' and then Daniel—

'Were you looking for me?' she said.

'P-pardon?'

'Were you… I thought—Daniel told you, didn't he, that his rooms are just in the next street from the Sorbonne?'

'I,' said John. 'Did he?'

He might have done. Quite probably had. John, two feet to the left of himself with his sandwich barely touched and his creaky brain and his bones, reached back and back in memory to… Christ, it felt like years. That first night, not even a week ago at Chez Manière: Agathe on Daniel's lap, hail-fellow-well-met and Claudine's booming laugh and Sh-Sherlock. Had Daniel said, as they'd sat there laughing about the basilica: *our atelier, by the Sorbonne?* John's stomach roiling, sinking: had John, in some corner of his mind, remembered? Or, or last night, *You should come 'round*, had Daniel said, *to my rooms near the university, I'd let you, no charge* and had John—

'Monsieur Watson?' Agathe was saying again. John blinked. She had sat down in the chair across from him, had drawn it close. Was leaning across the table. John couldn't get his breath.
'Yes,' he said. 'No, I'm—I don't think Daniel mentioned that.'

'Were you looking,' she said, a furrow in her brow, 'for Daniel?'

'How could I have—Christ.'

His hands shook still but the swell of anger let him open his mouth. Let him sink his teeth into bread and flesh and fat and chew and swallow.

'Pardonnez-moi, Monsieur—'

'John.'

'Pardonne-moi... John... but you do not look—'

'Have you seen him?' he asked. Chewing and swallowing. Blinking and he—he had to look. He made himself look at her. 'Did you see him to-today?'

Agathe regarded him. Leaning forward and looking at him until he looked away. One of the ground-floor university windows, he saw, had gone dark; he gazed at it and made himself keep chewing and swallowing bread and meat and wine.

The flare of a match. Tobacco scent. Agathe leant back in her chair, ashing her cigarette on the pavement.

'Did you,' he said again. Cleared his throat. 'See Daniel, today?'

'He gives lessons in the afternoons, at the atelier.'

'Yes,' said John, 'but did he,' and made himself stop and breathe. 'Did he keep those appointments,' he asked, 'today, specifically? Did you see him keeping them today?'

Agathe said, 'Oui.'

John chewed and swallowed and waited for anything more, and Agathe smoked and didn't offer it. But that was. Daniel had arrived back at his atelier. Daniel had—he'd come—home and he'd. Kept his lessons like he apparently did every Saturday, and Agathe had seen him and that. Surely that was enough. Daniel had said Get out and that ought to be enough.

Agathe dropped her cigarette on the pavement, and ground out the spark with the heel of her sandal. 'I think,' she said, pushing to her feet, 'that you ought to ask him these questions yourself.'

'No.' He shook his head.

'It is your decision,' she said. She stooped and, on the bill for John's sandwich and John's wine, which had arrived without John's knowledge some time in the past—seconds? minutes?—she wrote out an address. John sat and looked at it and she stood there looking down at him.

'La tienne et la sienne,' she said, under her breath, and John, understanding nothing, could think of nothing to say. Agathe put out her hand; he shook it. He made himself meet her gaze and she nodded, too, and then shouldered her big bag and went inside.

Left alone on the pavement John rubbed his face. His sandwich was gone, and his wine. He felt they would stay down. That was something. Across the street, only the first-floor light was still burning. How long had he sat here? How long had he walked, beforehand? He fumbled in his pocket, and counted out coins, and then rose to his feet with Agathe's scribbled address in his hand. Along the
broad stone façade of the university he walked, and up through the winding streets branching up away from it, through the sparse groupings of students wandering along the pavements in the August night and past the shuttered shop fronts, and hesitated in the Rue du Sommerard, looking up through the overgrown courtyard and hung-out washing of a building of walk-up flats.

He didn't even know why he was here. He ought to. Turn about. Flag down a cab; get back to the hotel and then. Christ he could sleep for a year. Could sleep for. Ages.

*It is your decision* Agathe had said, but John couldn't—it wasn't, was it? Was it? There was nothing more he could do; nothing he could offer; no paltry, what—apology? Sum of money? The idea was laughable, was, *was horrible*, to think of coming around with some cheque. Some bauble. Wanting Daniel to say, what? *It's all right, John* when his John Watson was dead, would remain dead. *No harm done* when not twenty-four hours before he'd been sobbing curled on the floor clutching at his own hair because John had pushed and pushed and—and forced him to it.

For John to come around looking for—for *civility* after such a thing, it would be. Sickening. As if there were any possible way to not have done what he—but clenched stem to stern against the thought still he was weak and it just. It flooded him. Bile-hot and desperate with shame he let himself wish to have been different. To have been. It would have been so easy, if only he could have—have chosen a different café. Pledged a headache. Slipped out the back way when he had the chance. Pointless; reprehensible; the searing stupid ache in him to take it back and be the man who had chosen the less monstrous thing. To be the man he, now, could never—never—

Flinching, face heat-flooded, he thought: if Sherlock were here. Despicable but if, if Sherlock were only here and John. Like a hundred discussions they'd had in the sitting room at Baker Street: *All right*, John had said, *if you're so clever. What would you do, then, in my place?* and Sherlock had always told him. He could tell him now. He could tell him if there were any *possible*. Any justified amends that John could offer and—and Sherlock. He wouldn't lie. Wouldn't sugar-coat it; was always blunt to a fault when it was other people's weaknesses under discussion but he still had—had *compassion* he would. Would be near John, would. Gasping. Would touch him, and then would. Sit back in the sitting-room chair with his narrowed eyes and his steepled fingers and with logical precision break down the difficulty point by point by point saying *Obvious* and *the only option* and *all the facts at my disposal* but—but helpless, John thought: Sherlock couldn't. Even if it weren't, weren't abominable to want him to, to ask it of him, even if he weren't the one whom John—even then, Sherlock couldn't advise him; because Sherlock wouldn't have all the facts.

Standing stupidly on the pavement John wanted—wanted *killingly*. Wanted to bitter bursting a Sherlock who had all the time been tucked inside John's chest cavity. Who had been with him in the abandoned school and the farmhouse in Lens. Warm ghostly hand on his shoulder on the ward in Bourg and forgiving him forgiving him forgiving him. Absolving John with his body like some impossible priest in the bars and the backrooms of the countryside of France and at the Hôtel bloody Marigny the night before but he hadn't been there, had he. And what could John possibly. Vision prickling; there was nothing. Nothing John could possibly say. Nothing, to make Sherlock know how it'd been.

So he ought to. Hands to knees, lungs spasming at the top of his breath. Pushing hands into knees and straightened his legs. Ought to head—to find a cab, to—and—

'Mark.'

John turned. Leaning out into the night, elbows heavy on a second-floor balcony railing, rubbing at his face which in the streetlamp glow when he took his fingers away was shadowed so heavily he looked a skull: Daniel, saying, his voice rough: 'I'd thought you were too good to have your portrait
made,' and John.

'Not—no,' he said. Cleared his throat. 'Not too good.'

'You'd better come up, then,' Daniel said. 'I'll put on some coffee, and.' His hand in a loose fist, coming down on the balcony rail. Once, twice. 'Graphite, I think,' he said, as John on the pavement took a deep, deep breath. 'Capture all those. Fine lines.'

Chapter End Notes

DVD extras notes on this chapter can be found here.
The bitter apple and the bite in the apple

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(LATER)

Sunday, August 28th, 1921
11pm

Music and cards and screaming laughter and the best Champagne in the house: when the prodigal daughter returned then everyone, to Irene's surprise, reached out to touch her. Hands on her dress and her jewels. Even girls she'd never met: casual and familiar and in this together like they'd always been at La Garçonnière: the relief, the liberation it had been, after the oppressive attractions of Le Havre, and Madame Colette. Irene laughed back at them and wondered for just a moment how Germaine would get on with Delphine and the rest—and then, stopping herself wondering, smiled more firmly. Sometime during the second round she realised with a shock that she meant it. Tiny Oriane made a bad pun and Irene shrieked with laughter. Slammed her cards on the table and called for another round. If they wanted the prodigal daughter she'd be that girl to the hilt.

'And Lila?' she asked, and Emigrated, Delphine told her, with Delphine's old weary conspiratorial smile, to America, last May. 'Lila?' she asked, shocked voice, fingering her pearls, 'one would never have believed…' and The truth! they cried, hands on her back, fingers on the backs of her hands, Lila, we never would have thought it would be her and what are things coming to they said, as Irene herself refilled their glasses, who would leave Paris just before June?

'And Le Chabanais?' Berthe asked her, little Berthe whom Irene had taught to cry on cue and who, Irene remembered with a shock, had wept in the wings the day Irene had told them she was changing her place. Cried into her skirt-hem, Berthe had, with no one else about to benefit from the show; and Irene, world-weary at twenty-three, had felt… uneasy. Embarrassed on Berthe's behalf: what a display she'd been making. Then Berthe had spotted her and spit at her and called her traitor and Irene had been suffused with the kind of relief she'd remembered feeling when, back in Limehouse, having caught hold of the back of a passing hackney cab, her little school-friends retreated out of sight and she'd felt herself, for a moment, unobserved. She hadn't thought about that day in seven years, and now here was Berthe, no longer a girl but a woman of one- or two-and-twenty, hovering with her hip cocked next to the table where Irene the prodigal daughter was holding court. Berthe said, 'And Le Chabanais?'

'Men,' said the prodigal daughter, turning up her mouth on one side, and Berthe snickered and pulled a chair up next to—next to her old friend, Irene supposed she must seem to the girl. Old friend, old flame. Irene dealt Berthe in with the novelty fizzing all through her blood of returning somewhere. She had never thought of missing little Berthe, but now she put out a hand and squeezed the girl's knee and said, 'One hopes you've become less of an abysmal cheat,' and Berthe gave her a decidedly older smile than she'd had in her arsenal when Irene had left, and said 'I cheat superbly.'

She won, with Irene's blessing, three hands. And then Alice, and then Marie; and each time Irene basked in the odd sense that she personally was giving the winner a gift. The buzz of voices and the swoop and crash of the show on stage: and Irene's table the largest in the place, now, with something of the air of a private party, like they'd used to have for Renée and Natalie sometimes, before the War, with all the girls chattering at once. Mireille, they told her, had got married to a private client ('Men!' Berthe said), and Estrella, would Irene believe, had taken Denise with her back to Barcelona.
'No!' said the prodigal daughter, and 'Yes!' said her informant; yes, Estrella had gone back to Girona after so many years, back to her old stomping grounds and Denise with her. And what was more, said another girl, Estrella now wrote that her own mother, whom Estrella herself had always feared ('as I well recall,' Irene confirmed, eyes hurting in the smoke), wouldn't hear a word against Denise! Denise was given the best china and the good brandy and Estrella's late father's place at the head of the table, and Denise was consulted on all the family business until she and Estrella (Berthe with tears running down her face but this time from laughter) had had to decamp to a village down the shore to escape the wrath of passed-over uncles (whose consternated faces the prodigal daughter, with her hand to her pounding chest, assured them she could picture), and had now opened the mariscos taverna that Estrella had always—

'Private party,' Delphine said, in a voice very different to that she'd been using with Irene.

'Come now,' the man was saying, 'surely, so many lovely girls… I've got cash money, just look at this. You'll never know if you don't try it, eh? Eh? And how will you know, then?'

Marie was on her feet and Berthe behind her with her hand in a fist saying 'You filthy bastard we already said—' and Irene the prodigal daughter, looking on bemused as the tiresome man gave his recitation, smiling as if her eyes weren't stinging and her heart weren't battering under her hand on her chest, as if they were simply observing, mildly amused, the splutterings and calumnies of this grease-faced whiner, as if she weren't thinking of Denise, offered by the matriarch the best china of the family, and of the mariscos tavern in the village by the sea, and bitterly of Estrella who after so many years had gone home.

'We know,' Berthe was saying, 'because the very sight of you repulses us,' and then fell silent as Irene, to her right, got to her feet.

'They don't serve men in this establishment,' she told him. 'But I do.'

**Sunday, August 28th, 1921**

**11pm**

The air from the window was hot on his nape. It could hardly be called a breeze, Sherlock reflected. He could see only the armoire and the closed door and the sparkling new telephone on the wall and the bed with its duvet mussed from—

But he could sense the stillness in the whole suite. It bore down on him. Hot and humid and still.

He had. Leads. Logical next steps. Things to follow up, didn't he. He made his knees bend. Pushed off with his hands from the window-sill. There were tender red imprints on his palms. The ache when he pressed them together held a certain satisfaction.

In the full-length mirror by the armoire, there he was. The man himself: Sherlock Holmes. Quite recognisable. A bit tired, perhaps. His clothes a bit sweat-stained. His hair unruly. He watched the reflection unbutton its plackets and its cuffs; watched it pull cotton off its shoulders and slide wool down its legs. Those same freckles sprinkled across its hip. The same sparse light hair on its calves and his thighs. With a dizzy, far-away sensation he thought: how strange.

Paper crinkled in his trousers-pocket as the trousers slid down off his legs. He reached down. His reflection sat cross-legged on the floor and drew the things out and looked at them. Irene's telegrams. Quite crumpled, now. He'd moved them, already, from one pair of trousers to another, before departing Roz Ven. For a moment he wondered if, had he instead thrown them away, or simply put
them in his trunk, he would have been able to sleep on the train.

2005, he read, sitting in just his small clothes on the floor of John's empty hotel room. DEPARTED HOTEL BEL AMI WALKED TO RIGHT BANK 2107 STOOD HALF HOUR MET NO ONE. The illogic of what he was doing bothered him: reading and re-reading without knowing what he was looking for. A late-night walk; a half-hour reverie on a riverbank: and so? Yet he kept on. 2136 CROSSED TO RIGHT BANK 2150 ATE IN CAFÉ MARISOL 2245 CONVERSED WITH YOUNG WOMAN 2251 YOUNG WOMAN DEPARTED. Where was it, the detail he was looking for? The meal in the café? The words exchanged with the young woman? He'd memorised the telegram anyway, almost against his will.

He sighed. Closed his eyes. 2256 LEFT CAFÉ ON FOOT he saw, marching across the backs of his eyelids. 2321 ARRIVED AT 3 RUE DU SOMMERARD 2334 ENTERED BUILDING AT RESIDENT'S INVITATION.

Those thirteen minutes.

For thirteen minutes, near midnight, John Watson had stood outside Daniel MacIntyre's building. That—that was a discrete piece of information. Sherlock Holmes could grip it; turn it about; analyse it. Why did people linger so? The standard list: they were summoning up the courage to act; or they were debating with themselves; or they were waiting to be noticed; or they were waiting to notice something else happening. But now: even if he could pluck out with certainty the correct choice, what would he understand from it? Thirteen minutes, never to return; never to be Sherlock's; passed irredeemably in another mind and another body, across the Seine, almost twenty-four hours ago.

0724, the telegram read, referring to the actions of some stranger whom Sherlock could not fathom. DEPARTED ON FOOT CARRYING PAPER PARCEL; and that was all.

Sherlock opened his eyes. Despite everything in this hotel being so glaringly yellow and new-built, the housekeeping, he noticed, was lacklustre. Drifts of dust under the armoire. Paint flaking off the wicker-wood of the chairs. There next to the en-suite door sat John's trunk, open, next to Sherlock's trunk, closed. There, leaning against the armoire, was a sheaf of papers, tied with a length of twine. There in a heap by the mirror sat Sherlock's cast-off clothes.

The room's silence bore down on him. Bored into him. With the window open there ought to be some street noise. Motor-cars or horses or drunken passers-by. There was nothing. And how long now since John—?

Sherlock ought to bathe, probably. His skin itched; he ought to bathe and then seek out—seek out Claudine, he supposed. Cousin Claudine. Question her about this evidence (newly come to light Holmes would say, dispassionately): that she had, unbeknownst to her young relation, made the acquaintance of one Irene Adler over a summer in Le Havre in 1908, five years after the winter when she and Sherlock had spent every day together.

He ought to bathe, and then.

He pushed himself to his feet. Past his shoulder the mirror reflected the mussed bedclothes, and John's moleskin on the bedside table, and next to that the telephone. The telephone hung next to the side of the bed, Sherlock noted, where John had—had slept. Or. That he'd claimed for his own, in any case; via the placement of his little black book.

Thunk, the moleskin still said, when Sherlock rapped it against the top of the bedside table. Thunk.

The same noise it had made at Roz Ven, when he had looked down through the upper-floor window at the party at luncheon and had thought of the War; and had had no idea that out in the scrub pines
one Irene Adler was watching, too. **2334 ENTERED BUILDING AT RESIDENTS INVITATION 0724 DEPARTED ON FOOT.**

He did, after all, have a ready source of information at his disposal. Why shouldn't he? She'd given him the telegrams; given them freely; and not an hour ago he had told John that he was glad, not to have removed the tail. He ought to benefit from it, surely. Surely it was the logical course of action. Just what Sherlock Holmes would do: pick up the shiny new telephone receiver; speak into it in Claudine's Parisian French. Ask a series of simple questions and receive an answer. And he found, with a slight nonsensical shock, that doing so in point of fact came easily. The words left his mouth euphoniously; perfectly formed. He could have laughed. Standing up straight, squaring his shoulders and letting his voice boom out, filthy as he was and alone and mostly-naked in this soulless hotel suite which Claudine who, strangely, knew Irene Adler, had, strangely, recommended to John Watson. He inquired, with flourishes that came easily, after the health of the woman at the front desk. Returned her polite inquiries on his own behalf. Asked to be connected to one Irene Adler, yes, employee of the **maison close** Le Chabanais.

He stood and waited, facing the blank white door. After a time his new ally came back on the line: Mademoiselle Adler, she informed him, was not present at her establishment. Not present, he asked, with his heart creeping up his throat, or unavailable? But that, his new friend regretted to say, she could not tell him. And so he thanked her, elegantly; and so he placed the mouthpiece back in its cradle; and so he rested his forehead against it, just a moment, before turning about.

There was nothing for it, then. He pulled off his sticky smallclothes and there he was again in the mirror. Same flesh in the same old places. To get to the en-suite he had to walk past the parcel of papers. He brushed his shoulder against the door-frame on the other side, so as not to touch them. Then he stood over the bath and opened the taps and the water rushed out but the air, already, was so hot. So wet, and clinging. The steam snaked into his nose and his mouth and his lungs and he felt couldn't breathe so he shut off the stream.

He wiped down with just a cloth. Slid back past the armoire on the way to his trunk.

Thirty minutes. Thirteen minutes. Eight hours. Dumb numbers that turned blank faces to the man who would be Sherlock Holmes.

Well. He could be. Would have to be. He dressed from the trunk in his second-lightest-weight suit. He combed his hair down. Tied his shoes. He was queasy and couldn't get a breath between the tight knot expanding in his guts and the parcel he'd slid (looking away) into his inside jacket pocket; but a person couldn't tell any of that, from the mirror.

*You must be Holmes,* he thought, walking down the corridor, going down in the lift. *You do it regularly, after all. You're a specialist.* He didn't suppose, stopping at the front desk to ask after any missives for himself or for the room, that the woman who helped him (No, Monsieur, nothing at all) could tell anything was amiss.

Claudine would, though.

He stood on the street in this unfamiliar arrondissement and thought of his—of Claudine. Of Claudine, in the kitchen at Roz Ven, saying: *Your work: you found it, and it lifts you up.* And then: *But there was a time, when it didn't.*

What had he said in return? He hoped it had been… convincing. Civil, anyway. His fresh new shirt and his clean smallclothes already stuck to him. Well: there were other avenues of investigation.

He walked down the side-street to the long, straight boulevard and hailed a cab, thinking not of
Claudine but, determinedly, of Irene Adler. She had told him that Charles Humbert had stormed into her, as she had put it, place of business (they call them maisons closes; but Sherlock shook his head) and berated Irene for stealing his pictures and using one of them to accost his daughter. The Humbert daughter, now: her the consummate detective Mr Sherlock Holmes had indeed thought to drop into conversation with his recently un-estranged relation Mademoiselle Claudine Holmès, as she was driving him to the train station. Oh yes, Claudine had said. An art student, wasn't she? They spoke of her, sometimes, at Chez Manière.

The cab twisted and climbed. Sherlock touched his knuckles to his mouth and thought gingerly of nothing but Irene. Irene, who had broken into a house and made off with only his own name and J- John's name and a cross-stitched pillow of a horse. Irene, who had worked in Madame Jouvenel's company as early as 1908: well before the lady had met Henry Jouvenel. Irene, whose first situation in Paris had been at a maison close catering exclusively to Sapphists. Irene, who in 1915 had enlisted the help of a female visitor from abroad in entertaining the military husband of her old music-hall colleague. And had her friend been very interested in that proposal, Sherlock wondered? Had Gretha taken an interest, then, in the answers to the teasing questions she had put to the distracted Charles Humbert? Up and up the cab wove, through narrowing streets, towards the white basilica on the hill; when Sherlock pressed his fingers to his lips, they were almost steady.

In the shadows just shy of the front of Chez Manière, he paid the driver. It had occurred to him… but no: a scan of the faces out on the pavement revealed no one familiar. A relief, certainly. He stepped out into the light of the gas-lamps and Michel's face, seeing him approach with Holmesian charm apparently hoisted onto his features, lit up in greeting.

And then a hand on the man's arm; and then a joke exchanged; and then an inquiry after his darling cousin and a counter-inquiry of Sherlock's own, couched as a favour for Claudine. Two minutes later a map to the flat of Agnès Humbert was in his pocket, sketched out on the back of a blank bill of fare and labeled in Michel's small, neat script.

It was close enough to walk, so he did. The exertion would do him good (a relief, certainly) and this, after all, was the Paris he remembered. Even if it was summer now; even if eighteen years had passed since that January. More and more as he climbed; this was Paris, this was—he had the sudden fancy that each step took him back some days into the past. Two weeks; two months. He wound up stone steps back a year, three; back before Baker Street and—and the War, feet dragging through a year spent closeted with Mycroft deciphering the petty squabbles of German spies; up through winding alleys giving onto courtyards that had the look of 1908; of 1905; of 1903 when he'd gathered with his parents and his French relations, around the deathbed of Augusta Holmès. They had gathered and he had. (Turning onto the Rue de l'Abreuvoir.) He had sat by his mother's side. Had looked up at her; and she—and Claudine catching his eye (turning down the Rue des Saules, he'd know it anywhere); and the old woman's wheezing breath and her death rattle; and Claudine, in her stays, in the early hours of the evening in her whitewashed rooms (climbing uphill with strides that felt shorter, smaller all the time), making him hold her too-large violin and correcting his stance and his fingering and his breath and making him play for her and play for her and play.

It seemed ridiculous, suddenly, having put Michel to the trouble of drawing his little map. For there was the cemetery; and there the little gallery that had so intrigued him (still overgrown, after all this time, with wisteria), and there the boulangerie where Claudine had taken him the morning following that awful afternoon at the Quai de Grenelle—and across that very street, right there on the Rue Gabrielle, Agnès Humbert's address. Of all the absurdities. Sherlock had to lean, for a moment, vibrating between two worlds, against the stonework next to the boulangerie's glass front. His breath ragged. His bones at once monstrous and undersized. Its little bell: he heard it still, in memory. Heard it clanging against the glass of the door. The rich accreted thickness of the pastry cream that however much he swallowed still lingered at the back of his tongue. Claudine had made him speak to her in
French and his r's had been blocked up by the phlegmy mass and every time it had happened Non, she had said, pas comme ça, fais attention, enfant.

He could have laughed; but the sound he made instead.

Fais attention, he thought to himself. Concentrate. The plate glass behind him could be any shopfront in any street; but the flat on the third floor above him was that of Agnès Humbert. He'd bargained on Parisian art students still keeping raucous late nights, as they had done of old (as they still—but he shook his head). But from the upstairs window no laughter filtered down, no music; though the steady glow of an electric lamp shone from one side of the left-most window. Eleven, he thought, and then checked his pocket-watch and then: eleven-fifteen. But art students would scarcely dine before ten. Not in Paris, not in—not in Montmartre. Just a few words, in any case. He pushed off from the plate glass, moving forward to ring the bell, thinking: just a few words, and then… And then.

He rang the bell and waited long enough to wonder if the upstairs lamp had, after all, simply been left on; or whether it illuminated Agnès Humbert, underfed and overworked, asleep at her desk still in her artist's smock with her face smudged and her hair tied up in scarves; or whether she was otherwise occupied—sitting, perhaps, in some fellow-student's lap, in a party dress or partway out of it—and had simply decided, in the fickle way of artists, to ignore the bell. But there was, at last, a shuffling, and a clicking of the lock, and the creaking open of the door.

The woman who opened it was not clad in a party dress. She was plump, and round of face, wrapped in a plain white dressing gown with stains all down the right-hand side, and her hair in curling-rags all over her head—the top of which came to Sherlock's shoulder.

'Agnès Humbert?' he said. Her mouth quirked.

'Agnès Sabbagh,' she said, 'for five years now. You must be here on business of my father's.' Her French, art student or no, was of a costlier appellation than Claudine's.

'On business… relating to your father, yes.'

'Is he…' She squared her shoulders. 'Do I need to get dressed? Go with you to retrieve him?'

'Ah,' he said, interested. 'No, it's—'

'In that case it's very late, M—'

'Sherlock Holmes,' he said, in a rush, and for a moment it came back to him; as it had on the telephone with the hotel desk clerk. It felt familiar, flexing himself against the resistance of It's very late to say 'I'm a private investigator. I had some questions about the photograph of your father that recently came into your possession.'

'Ah,' she said.

And he knew, of course, when to wait out a witness. Holmes wouldn't fidget so he didn't. He just stood and watched her: this matronly little woman, crooking her neck to regard the stranger on her doorstep. She rested a round shoulder against the jamb; lifted the foot on that side and absently rotated the ankle. Even in the shadows of the street, there was a weightiness in the way she blinked up at him. She was, he realised, exhausted. Prey to an exhaustion so habitual she no longer truly noticed it; and he swallowed down a wash of vertigo thinking of—of all the people in all the buildings before him and behind him who were right now bedding down like always, or already asleep; of all the people who without thinking climbed into their beds tonight and every night and
had done since 1918 (since 1908) (since 1903) in this street and the next one, in the apartment above the boulangerie and the one with the big white bed and the view of the basilica and the one at 3 Rue du Sommerard and the one at 221B Baker Street and—and, at the same time, fought a surge of panic that Agnès Sabbagh would send him away.

'I had just a few questions,' he said, 'about the person who accosted you in the—'

'Yes.' She nodded to herself; seemed to settle on something to be addressed. 'Yes, perhaps you ought to come up,' and he breathed out, and out.

Inside, the floor was uneven and the staircase almost completely dark. On the way up the series of staggered landings between the ground floor and the third, Mme Sabbagh turned to point out three places that her guest should watch his step. With such frequent interruptions conversation was futile; and Sherlock had the fleeting impression of something almost reverent, vesper-like, in their ascent.

Before a third-floor door she turned to murmur to him 'Keep quiet until we get to the study,' and then: 'My sons are asleep.'

Sherlock nodded. My sons.

She led him past a stack of paintings leaning against the wall, through a small dining area giving onto, on one side, a tiny kitchen, and on the other, a short corridor with three doors off it and at least three times that number of canvases on the walls. Assuming an inside WC, that made a bedroom for the parents and one for the sons. Five years married, she had said; so both boys, assuming shared and legitimate parentage, would be younger than that. He imagined having had to share with Mycroft. Had there ever been an age at which they would have tolerated it? He supposed they'd have had to. Mme Sabbagh opened a door on the far side of the dining area, and Sherlock ducked under the low lintel to follow her in.

'You can close the door,' she said; once he'd done so she made her way without a mis-step to the lamp on the desk, which she then lit. Low light flared. The so-called study was the smallest room yet, windowless and lined entirely in bookshelves—Ruskin, Sherlock saw, rendered as Les Pierres de Venise; but also William Morris's Manifesto of the Socialist League, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's Principle of Art—with a small couch and a desk and chair wedged into opposite corners yet almost touching. His hostess took the desk chair, and motioned for Sherlock to take the couch.

'Madame Sabbagh,' he said, but she smiled.

'You needn't whisper. The boys are used to a certain amount of commotion from the neighbours. It's only noise just by their room that wakes them.'

'All right,' he said. He craved a cigarette, suddenly; but one could tell by the smell and the ceilings that no one smoked in this room. 'Madame Sabbagh, I—you'll forgive me, no one I've spoken to suggested that you were married. Your father…?'

'Disapproves,' she said. 'Or possibly, at this point, simply forgets.'

'It's quite a large thing to forget,' said Sherlock. 'The marriage of one's close relative. The birth of grandchildren.'

'Hm,' she agreed.

He leant back. The upholstery under his hands was good quality, but well-worn. Agnès Sabbagh sat with her mouth a little pursed and her hands clasped in her lap, and he looked for lines in her face that weren't there. She was, still, a young woman. Twenty-five, twenty-six perhaps. A youngish
mother, even if an oldish university student: older, certainly, than some. She would be, in fact, about the age Claudine had been, when Sherlock had first met her.

'Father finds the boys amusing enough,' she told him, 'on the occasions he has call to remember they exist. They find him alarming. They are fussy and demanding for days after he sees them. I don't go out of my way to engineer very frequent reunions.'

'No,' he said. 'I don't imagine you would. And you must have many demands on your time. University work, and—'

'Post-bac studies,' she said, 'yes. We are all very busy. I have my own painting, as well. You may have worked out that even in the day the apartment hasn't much natural light. Georges—my husband—and I share studio space, and get a girl in to see to the boys. Then supper, the three of us. Sometimes all four. After they're asleep I write. It's quite sufficient to keep us all occupied, and my father—well. Have you actually met my father?'

'No,' Sherlock said.

'He is… very much the centre of his own world.'

She clenched her jaw, briefly, then let it go. Circled her shoulders back, and let her eyes close for a moment. That tiredness hovering always in the background of her movements was visible again, before she recollected herself.

'And this person,' Sherlock said. 'Who accosted you in the street.'

She laughed; it hadn't much humour in it. 'I don't know why she thought I'd be—I, of all people. To try to shock me with the information that Charles Humbert is decadent, or traitorous, or in need of a good thrashing from time to time.'

'It's.' He wet his lips; chose his words. 'Not a light in which many people like to regard their parents, I suppose.'

'Quite a luxury,' she snapped, 'to ignore the truth, simply because it is inconvenient.' For the first time since she'd opened the door to him, her voice was sharp. It was the tone, perhaps, that she used to admonish her sons; and it took Sherlock the better part of a second to realise that the bite of it could hardly be directed towards him personally.

In any case, he told himself: she was quite correct. Of course she was. Agnès Sabbagh was obviously—sensible. Why should she shy away from such things?

'Even so,' Sherlock said. His throat was dry.

Mme Sabbagh pursed her mouth.

'This was,' he said. Cleared his throat. 'The evening of the twenty-first, then?'

'Yes,' she said. 'A week ago. Wednesdays my father is at his club, or that's what he puts about. I often go around for supper with my mother. I'd done that and I'd walked, oh, two hundred yards back towards the Métro when this girl ran up behind me. Called my name. Caught at my elbow so I stopped. Then she said some… I don't recall the exact words. Something about how she could show me a thing or two about my famous father. And she shoved the thing at me.'

'And this girl,' Sherlock said. 'This woman who showed you the photograph. You didn't recognise her?'
'No.'

'Could you describe her?'

She sighed. Closed her eyes. 'Made up,' she said. 'Not *theatre* paint, but. Showy. She had a little cloche, and a box skirt. Very of the moment, you know, fabrics good, lines simple. Very up to date. The kind of thing the well-to-do young girls are wearing to Georges' showings to chat to one another and not look at the paintings.' She considered. 'It's naturally quite winsome, that look.'

'Carefree,' Sherlock said, with his throat closing.

'Exactly. But she plucked at them, this girl. The way children at church always fidget. The starch against their skin, it fusses them.' Mme Sabbagh pursed her lips, and gave her head a little shake.

'Tall?' he said. 'Short? Blonde? Brunette?'

'She seemed… she was probably my age, middle twenties; she couldn't have been much younger, anyway. The clothes should have been just the right age for her, really, it wasn't… and her hair, that was another thing. Brunette, long hair, old-fashioned, you know, and curled very elaborately. She seemed… not to suit herself.'

'IIl at ease,' said Sherlock. Seeing, in memory, Claudine in Chez Manière four nights before, explaining the character of her Roz Ven hostess, saying that Madame Jouvenel, on hearing of the break-in at her office, had traveled to Paris for one night only; and had came back having been made over at her favourite salon. *She seemed more put out, Claudine had said, that her secretary had undone the new coiffure she'd been treated to, than that their place of business had been disturbed.* But she would have done, wouldn't she. It would be her first instinct, to rid herself of her disguise.

'Tall girl?' he said.

Mme Sabbagh nodded. 'And—not fat but big everywhere. An air of the Valkyrie about her.'

'Yes,' said Sherlock, automatically; but he was thinking of a different Germaine.

Because, considered logically—

Considered logically, as Sherlock Holmes would do, it came down to this. Of the habituées of Roz Ven who could muster any resemblance to a Valkyrie—Claudine, the Panther, perhaps Madame Jouvenel herself—only Germaine Beaumont could be taken for under thirty. Germaine Beaumont, then, was both the possessor of Irene Adler's photographs and also, very probably, John's l—very probably the long-distance telephone caller in the early hours of Saturday morning. Which meant that when Henry Jouvenel had called out in passion *Germaine!*, overheard both by Irene and by Sherlock himself, he had been speaking, not to his acknowledged mistress or to his wife's secretary, but to Germaine *Carco*. Madame Carco, Sherlock thought, with his hands closing into fists, who had never betrayed, even to Holmesian eyes, so much as a whisper of personality beyond her single-minded devotion to her husband and the child she wanted with him. And yet there she was, wasn't she. In the bed of her self-important host. And this—Sherlock swallowed and reminded himself, forcibly: this was nothing so surprising. Considered logically, there were myriad scenarios which would explain such a circumstance. Simple chains of cause and effect. A seeming contradiction, after all, often indicates simply that you are missing key—missing certain information. That you are facing a situation that you have—have looked at but not seen. Perhaps seen wrongly; perhaps only incompletely. You can't know, you have to—to reevaluate, to gather as much evidence as you can and revisit your prior conclusions. You must be sensible and—
'And,' he said. Swallowing his heart down: evidence. 'And the photograph?'

Sabbagh laughed a little, and cast up her eyes. 'Ah yes,' she said. 'The photograph.' She planted her hands on her knees and pushed to her feet; knelt on the floor to open the bottom desk-drawer. Sherlock sat on her couch with the front of his suit jacket pressing heavy and hot on his ribcage.

'There's no reason not to show you, I suppose,' she said, lifting piles of paper out of the drawer and putting them to one side. 'I'm not sure which part of the revelation the girl thought would wound me. That my father amuses himself with whores isn't even noteworthy enough to interest the gossip sheets. That he amused himself with…'

'Men?' Sherlock said. Tried for savoir-faire in the airless room. 'Or—one man in particular? A political rival, that would—'

'What is that to me?' she said. 'What do I care for Henry Jouvenel and their schoolboy games. Duels at sunrise,' she added, with a snort. 'I ask you.'

But of course she wouldn't care about such things, Sherlock thought. She was a woman of sense.

He got air into his lungs and pushed it back out again. Brought himself back to this little room: the worn-down upholstery under his fingers and the dust on the shelves and the Lunacharsky pamphlet on the second shelf down of the little side table.

'You are, however,' he said, 'political.'

She didn't look over at him, but took a breath, and held it. Her hands stopped rummaging in the drawer; then, slowly, started up again.

'To anyone who lived in any intimacy with my father,' she said, directing the words to the envelope she was now drawing out of the drawer, 'even before—well. It could hardly be a surprise that he had sympathies with the Kaiser.'

The Kaiser, indeed. The Holmesian slits he felt his eyes become. The steeples of his fingers. Irene had not seemed to know just which image Agnès Sabbagh had been given; perhaps Humbert hadn't told her. But if Humbert had assumed that Irene was the culprit, then by the logic of blackmail she herself was probably not identifiable; whereas he, Humbert, almost certainly was. And so, Sherlock was willing to bet, was Gretha. Agnès Sabbagh held out the envelope; Sherlock reached over, took it, and then placed it in his lap, skirting the tails of his jacket. Evidence, he thought again; but couldn't yet make himself open either one.

'One might think it surprising,' he said: 'German sympathies in the house of Humbert. I've been given to understand that the rhetoric of Le Journal is quite nationalistic in its—'

'But it was German money that bought Le Journal,' Sabbagh said, surprised. 'Didn't you know?'

'Was it?' Sherlock said.

'I'd assumed you—well it made quite a disturbance when the affair came out. You can read about it easily. He was arrested, about a year before the War ended. Accused of profiting off the sale of military intelligence to the enemy.'

'The sale? Or the disclosure?'

'The sale,' she said, firmly. 'And subsequent reinvestment of the proceeds. The secrets in question were not divulged during a moment of erotic decadence, as is proved in the event. One can't re-invest
past sexual bliss—or whatever was going on that night—in the purchase of a national newspaper.'

'Doesn't mean she didn't try,' Sherlock said. Thinking: *Surely he could escape by simply twisting his wrists.*

'I'm confident she did.'

'This,' he said, holding up the envelope, 'wouldn't have looked good for him, if it'd come out.'

'No. Luckily it didn't.'

His face must have betrayed something. She bristled.

'He *is* my father,' she said. 'The men accused along with him faced the firing squad.'

He turned over the envelope. Undid the fastening, feeling vaguely ashamed.

'Though,' Agnès Sabbagh went on, 'she was still alive at the time, wasn't she. I've thought—I assumed she was keeping the photographs close.'

'I've reason to believe,' Sherlock said, drawing out the print, 'that it was your father who was keeping them close.'

And—it wasn't as if there was any reason for surprise. It ought to have been anticlimactic, or else neatly satisfying: a pat confirmation of all the testimony he had gathered thus far. Cause and effect; claim and corroboration, just as he'd been reminding himself all week: the photographic corroboration of everything Irene Adler and Agnès Sabbagh had been telling him and everything he had extrapolated on top of it. Irene, behind the camera, had caught them in a rather neat three-part profile: Henry Jouvenel, trimmer in wartime but still the portly pasha, wrists tied behind him and ankles to the legs of a straight-backed chair, with Charles Humbert, on his front on the floor at Jouvenel's feet, face turned towards the camera with his tongue out, licking the man's feet; and on Jouvenel's lap, smiling as she straddled him in that way they'd called bewitching in the panto halls of Europe: Margaretha Geertruida Zelle, called Mata Hari.

Sherlock Holmes ought to feel so satisfied: seeing it there in black and white.

'Though it's remarkable, in that case,' he said, to the daughter of the man on the floor in the photograph, 'that he shouldn't destroy them.'

She snorted. 'It's not difficult to believe of him,' she bit out. 'He likes his—keepsakes. God.' She clenched her jaw; looked up at the ceiling and balled one fist inside the other hand. 'Can I ask who told you that, who…'

'The photographer herself,' he said. 'As it happens. Miss Irene Adler, of Limehouse and Le Chabanais.'

Agnès Sabbagh stood chewing her lip. 'I wonder if he'd have,' she burst out, then stopped, and breathed.

Sherlock looked from her to the little tableau, and thought of Irene behind the camera, in her leather straps and her black rubber cock.

'I looked into it, you know,' said Agnès Sabbagh, after a time. 'After that girl gave me the picture, I went to the university library and looked up the reports on her trial. It was a point of some importance, that she supposedly could not have been in Paris until October of 1915. The paperwork,
something. It seemed important enough to, oh, bring out correspondence. Letters from the Hague from September, how she was bored out of her mind to be stuck in the Netherlands. But the only time my father's leave overlapped with Henry Jouvenel's was in August of '15. Two months before she was supposed to be abroad.'

'I believe,' Sherlock said, 'that she had secured discreet accommodation with... interested parties.'

'With other spies.' Her inflection was blank, resigned. Sherlock thought of Irene calling Gretha her colleague; and the way she'd shuddered, in his lap, when he'd collected all the venom he could muster and injected the counterargument: friend. He rubbed his face.

'I think it more likely,' he said, 'that she was sheltered by a hoodwinked lover. She was someone, after all, to whom the art of seduction came easily. And there was—a certain feeling of urgency around these matters, wasn't there. During the War.'

Sabbagh pressed her lips together, still looking up at the ceiling. 'I suppose you're right,' she said. 'I only—there was some question, wasn't there, about her guilt; but this is—is evidence, and I like to think he'd have come forward, if it had seemed the trial would go in the other direction. I like to think he'd have come forward if he had evidence she was innocent, too.' She sighed. Rolled her neck and then met his eyes. 'But I'm not fooling myself,' she said. 'He wouldn't have done. Either way.'

She got to her feet, and he pushed himself to his. They stood regarding each other in the close little room.

'Loving people, Monsieur Holmes,' she said. 'It's difficult, sometimes, isn't it.' It wasn't a question, the way she said it; and in any case he had no answer he could think of.

'Thank you,' he said. 'For your time, especially so—'

_Late in the day_, he had been going to say, but it caught in his throat and he was taken by a fit of coughing. Cognisant of the two boys asleep next door he tried to be quiet, but muffling the sounds only seemed to make it worse, and he sat back down on the couch, breathing carefully. _Apologies_, he tried to say, but was again thwarted halfway through.

'Wine,' said Agnès Sabbagh, with a little nod and an authoritative tone that reminded Sherlock of Claudine. 'Come.'

She extinguished the lamp on the desk, then moved to the door and let in a suggestion of light. He followed her out into the main room, and hovered by the front door as she ducked into the tiny kitchen and put on the light. A rectangle of yellow stretched and dissipated across the floor, bisecting the table and the area rug and resting faintly on the stack of canvases by the door, which they'd passed as they'd come in. And Sherlock—

Madame Sabbagh reappeared at his elbow. He drained the little glass of wine she gave him: so tannic his teeth hurt, but it did calm his throat.

'Thank you,' he whispered, and then, gesturing to the little canvas, the little joke: red-haired Agathe in the pose of the Maja Desnuda (they all had laughed): 'You're acquainted with Daniel MacIntyre, then?'

'He is a student of my husband's,' she said, her eyebrows rising. 'As is Agathe. Georges thought the pastiche well done, so Daniel made it a gift.'

'Thoughtful.'
She shrugged. 'There's plenty of that kind of exchange, at the school. Students are stingy with their wine and their food but there's more than enough art to go around.'

'Do you—' he said, but then almost laughed at himself. What did he mean to ask? What, after all, could she possibly tell him? He ran his hand through his hair. 'Is his work any good?' he asked. 'In your opinion.'

He looked at her, then, leaning on the side of the front door she was holding open for him, and felt in a flash that it was inexcusable, absolutely unforgivable of him to be keeping her standing here; to be lingering on her doorstep at twelve-thirty in the morning. She'd nothing to do with him, had she, this tired, sensible woman with her stained dressing gown and her two sons and her bastard of a father and her husband who taught painting to Daniel MacIntyre. And her own work, he reminded himself. She had her own work, as well.

He hadn't the words, however, to apologise for a question he'd only just asked; or the power to take back an hour of time. So he stood there, and she stood there, and then, again, she shrugged.

'He has promise,' she said. 'He seems serious about his work. It's difficult really to know, until we've all kept at it for longer. Accumulated a portfolio.'

'A body of evidence,' he said.

'Yes,' she said. 'I suppose.'

And he thanked her, and she gave him her hand, and held open her door, and he walked back out into the night of Montmartre, still and hot and gathering into a storm.

Chapter End Notes

1. Agnès Humbert was the real-life daughter of the historical Charles Humbert, and her circumstances in 1921 were more or less as described: she'd studied art in Paris from an early age, married the painter Georges Sabbagh in 1916 (when she was 22 and he was 39), and had two children with him, who in 1921 would have been four and a half and three. Although she began as a painter and sculptor, Humbert eventually became noted more as an art historian with an additional postgraduate background in philosophy and ethnography—which background she amassed at the Sorbonne, while still raising two boys. She was also a Communist who in July 1940 was instrumental in forming the Groupe du musée del homme, the first organized resistance group in occupied France. She was later arrested and sent to a German work camp; after being liberated, she stayed in the area and set up soup kitchens that served refugees and German civilians alike. When the war was over she returned to Paris and resumed her career as an art historian, and was awarded the Croix de Guerre in 1949. Overall she is one of the more amazing and heroic personalities I discovered during research for this story, and she came as a total surprise to me since the only knowledge I started with about her was that corrupt newspaper mogul Charles Humbert had an arty daughter.

The one liberty I knowingly took with her life for this chapter, is that in reality she did not return to her studies at the Sorbonne for a few more years; but for obvious
plot-based reasons I had to give her a pretty solid acquaintance with Daniel MacIntyre. She did historically attend the school both a few years prior and a few years after 1921, though, so I don't feel like it's too much of a reach.

2. John Ruskin was an incredibly influential 19th-century English art critic. He was beloved of Proust, who translated his *Stones of Venice* into French.

3. William Morris was an early British socialist and leader of the Arts and Crafts aesthetic movement.

4. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was a 19th-century French anarchist and sometime-friend of Karl Marx.

5. Anatoly Lunacharsky was a Russian Marxist revolutionary, and also an active art critic and journalist.

6. Charles Humbert and Henry Jouvenel really did fight a pistol duel to defend the relative "honor" of their two papers. Jouvenel's arm was in a sling from Humbert's gunshot-wound during the first trip home on which he took Colette. For real.

7. In the grand tradition of politically-minded hypocrites everywhere, in February 1918 the militantly nationalistic Charles Humbert was placed under house arrest for war profiteering (selling intelligence to the enemy); he had bought *Le Journal* with German money. Mysteriously, he was acquitted while those accused with him were condemned to death and executed.

8. Obviously, this fictional universe strongly implies that Mata Hari was actually guilty of espionage, a fact on which the historical record itself is still not 100% clear. Agnès Sabbagh's concerns about chronology are based on fact, though: when Karl Kroemer, the honorary German consul in Amsterdam, approached Zelle with the intention of recruiting her, she was given the code name H21. Pat Shipman's *Femme Fatale: Love, Lies and the Unknown Life of Mata Hari* goes on to say:

   The H of H21 indicated her communications were to be handled by Captain Hoffman; all his agents had the prefix H. The numbers following the H were assigned sequentially; later analysis has shown she must have been recruited in the autumn of 1915, not in May 1916 as she later remembered.

   It's also historically true that Zelle was sending letters and postcards from the Hague throughout the autumn of 1915, complaining about being forbidden to travel to the more alluring, less boring Paris (because it was a war zone). Shipman doesn't leap to this extrapolation historically—evidence seems to suggest that, although she accepted 20,000 francs from Kroemer, she had as of 1915 no intention to do any spying for Germany—but in this fictional universe the implication is that, rather than genuinely misremembering the chronology, she was falsifying evidence of being in one place while secretly gathering intelligence in the other.

9. Further DVD extras notes on this chapter can be found [here](#).
The past has another pattern

Chapter Notes

(Up top because it wouldn't fit below: further DVD extras notes on this chapter can be found here.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(EARLIER)

Saturday, August 27th, 1921
11pm

Limehouse, like she remembers. Irene looks down at her hands: manicured but liver-spotted; her dress: operatic finery. The hem trails on the ground. She is small. Smaller than ever. Here are the Blount Street stairs: she climbs, faster-faster. She trips over her hem. It's taking so long to reach the top. If she delays any further—but here, the door is open. She hesitates; where is her stuff skirt? This red satin is wrong; she feels ridiculous; but her hands are empty and anyway she is very late. How long has she paused on the doorstep? What if they laugh at her, looking like this?

She lifts her hem to her knees. Satin overflowing in her arms. She runs into the main room. Mama? she calls, but nobody answers. Dylan?. Out of the corner of her eye she thinks she sees: but no. There is no one. Only, the old tea service is out; and in the middle of the room, a black horse. Gleaming. She approaches with satin in her arms and her bare legs. When must they find the time to brush his mane?

She touches his neck and he lets her. In a moment she'll run back down the stairs. Surely Florence and Dylan will have just left; she can catch them up. She rubs down the horse's neck and he turns his head. How did they get him up the stairs? How is there no shit on the floor? He must make a mess. He takes up practically the whole room, and it's already hard enough to keep the flat decent.

She blinks her eyes and isn't sure how long they were closed. She ought to go. Florence and Dylan will be gaining on her all the time; her dress is so long and she can't hike it up in public. She touches the horse's flank and puts a foot in his stirrup. Now she is seated and so high up that her head hits the ceiling. She has to stoop, though she's so small and withered. She pets his black back and begins to laugh. Tears on her face. She ought to go. But she will never get down from this height. She pets his flank and laughs and laughs and woke up laughing.

Saturday, August 27th, 1921
11pm

John waited on the pavement. Nobody came down, so he crossed the street. The door to the building sat warped and ill-fitting in its frame, with scratches in the paint around the latch. He would make of that, no doubt, that the atelier had been used as a centre for—what? Adulterating wine, say, during the forty years it'd been owned by Viennese merchants. The distinctive, God, twinned scratch-trails in the paint, or.
John breathed deep. He pushed open the door.

The staircase took his attention. He watched his step and gripped the old hand rail, climbing to the second landing. At the top, the corridor stretched away empty. John poked his way to the right. From the shared WC on his left: the high-pitched whine and clunk of pipes, and the splash of water on porcelain. Behind a door: a child's screech. Behind a door: quiet. Behind a door: an American dance-hall recording played on a gramophone. At the far end of the corridor one door stood cracked, casting a narrow slanting stripe of lamplit yellow.

John knocked. No one answered. He thought in a rush: the midnight train. The boat from Calais. He could—and pushed down hard on all of it and closed the door behind himself when he was inside.

The place was scarcely larger than a train compartment itself. The double French doors which made up almost the entire far wall stood open to the little balcony John had seen from the street, north-facing. During the day they would be the only source of natural light. Now the darkness outside was beaten back by old oil lamps scattered atop the disordered piles of sketchbooks, canvases, paint-pots. An easel stood half-propped against the wall; strapped bundles of pencils and pens lay on the floor by a chaise whose seat overflowed with sheafs of paper. Shoved up against the corner to the left, in the few square yards of space shadowed by the wall, was a thin mattress piled with tangled blankets, and next to it a makeshift bar: bottles and a little alcohol stove atop half a wooden door, resting on stacks of books; and bent over it, adjusting the flame, with his back to John, he was—

'You'll be wanting to help with the coffee,' Daniel said.

Looking just the same, John thought, dizzy. No different at all.

'Of course I will,' he said. 'If you—'

'John always did that.' The planes shifted in Daniel's back. He seemed to have been waiting for John to speak, in order to cut him off. 'Came around, wanting to help out. Make it up to a bloke when he supposed he'd made a mess of something.'

John took a step forward. Stopped.

'It'd make him feel better,' Daniel told him. 'About whatever he'd come 'round to apologise for.'

Daniel's movements were precise, unhurried: unscrewing the filter from an Italian-style coffee pot that looked to date from the last century, tapping grounds into it and screwing it back in. In Lens he had used to move with a stuttering, coltish enthusiasm; had compulsively turned his head to see if someone—if John—were watching. Now his body moved as if alone; or as if in conversation with a servant; or with an intimate friend. A friend, John thought, who wasn't here. Whom John had never met; whom he didn't know.

'Only,' said Daniel, 'I reckon that kind of thing is a family trait. I reckon you'll do it too. It's what your parents teach you, isn't it. All that bollocks.'

'You argued, then,' he said. 'With. With John.'

Daniel screwed the pot and filter upside-down onto the cup of hot water, turned off the stove and flipped the pot. Then he reached up to a shelf above the table, and took down two mugs that had once been white. Calm, broad shoulders, John thought: strange. Still so strange.

'And he,' John said. Licked his lips. 'It was John, sometimes, was it? It was him who came 'round afterward, knowing he was in the wrong, wanting to. Set things right.'
'Bringing me his sugar ration,' said Daniel. He turned, at last: leant against the table and looked straight at him. Chewed his mouth like he intended to stop the words but they just came. 'Putting air in the tyres of the bicycle I was using. Mending my jacket. As if he weren’t all thumbs at mending; I could have done it in half the time. It’d have been easier without him but even then, even. It made him feel better, didn’t it. And that's what was wanted. You knew it was what was wanted, and so you would stand there watching him just—fuss with needle and thread. Waiting for him to finish. Thinking about the fatigue duty you were on in a half-hour. Thinking about how you were missing luncheon for this. And not making conversation, either, were you. Since the nature of the transaction was, you weren't meant to come to terms until help had been rendered, and then when he'd done it he'd look up at you with these—eyes, Christ,' Daniel's jaw clenching. 'That stiff bloody upper lip and a too-hearty manner and he’d say, Good as new, don’t you think, Private MacIntyre with eyes just begging you to take it up, to play into this little game he had on: Crikey, Captain, thanks awfully, this'll keep me ever so snug, I'm so deuced grateful when all you'd wanted to do to begin with was just shut him up—'

His throat worked.

'I shouldn't have come,' John said, and Daniel snapped, 'I invited you, didn’t I.'

He turned back to the pot, his jaw still working, and poured out the coffee into the two filthy mugs. John saw him let his shoulders round down, almost; then straighten them back with an effort. He turned and thrust a cup at John. John took it. Looked down into it and listened to Daniel, breathing hard.

John knew what he was thinking; knew what had come after. Knew how Daniel'd rolled his eyes. How John had held out Daniel's mended jacket or John's own chocolate ration with a smile sickening between hope and regret and Daniel groaning had leant down and kissed the look off his face, savage—

'John was a bit of a bastard,' Daniel said. 'Wasn't he.'

'Yes,' John breathed. Swallowed the rest of it.

"s what I bloody—liked about him,' said Daniel. Chewing his lip. He looked like he wanted to kick a cat. 'But it drove me mad, as well. Wished sometimes he’d give it a rest, all that saviour bollocks. All that wanting to be the bloody—it was a war, we weren't any of us looking for our—mums or. Captain John Watson wasn't the only one with a temper. With Major Butler at least a bloke only had to suffer through the storm in the first place and then he'd let it be. Let it blow over like it'd never happened, and everyone just as happy for it. But John.'

'Not his strong suit,' John managed.

'Isn't that the bloody truth.'

Daniel laughed, a little. Shook his head; broke John's gaze. Across the courtyard came the sound of a baby crying. A squawk and then a scream, gathering into a long, high wail; and then, after a moment, the low crooning of a woman's voice as the wail took on a jouncing rhythm. The sound sat heavy, somehow, at the bottom of John's stomach.

'That is,' Daniel said again, under his breath. 'That is bloody well right.'

'Look,' John burst out, 'what I did last night was—'

_Crack_ on the makeshift table and John jumped. All the words jammed up behind his teeth _monstrous_
inexcusable and he held his breath for the moment Daniel's mug didn't break which was long enough for Daniel to say 'Come on then,' with his chin pushed out.

'I'm sorry,' John said. It wasn't a question. He knew Daniel would take it as one.

'You're not too good for it,' Daniel told him, 'then sit for me.'

'All right,' John said. He had done, after all. 'Where do—'

'Take off your shirt.'

Down his long, straight nose he looked at him. Eyes hard. Mocking. John's lips were cracked. He set his coffee cup on the table, and undid his top shirt button. Then the next. Before he'd got to the bottom of the placket Daniel told him, 'Trousers, as well.'

'I'm not going to—,' John said, and stopped.

He stood there with his skin prickling. Plucked gooseflesh, all along his side facing the bed.

'Too good for it after all,' Daniel said.

'No,' said John, quietly. 'But I'm not.' Seeing before him, on the brothel floor— 'I don't...'

'Oh yes, yes,' said Daniel. 'Fine, grand,' with a languid gesture. 'Whatever you say.'

He turned from John to root about in his supplies box. John stood there, vest in hand, watching Daniel digging through brushes and ink pots and pencils, lifting out trays and rummaging through the compartments under them. His delicate fingers: unhurried, familiar, as they'd been on the coffee pot moments ago, as they'd been on his cocktail glass last night: plucking at this, smoothing at that, utterly self-possessed until he lowered a hinged tray back into place and caught the pad of his finger in the joint and 'Bloody hell' he bellowed and then snarled and kicked out at the chair which skidded a foot towards the French door and Daniel said 'Fucking—bloody—' and kicked it again. It toppled; but the room was so small that its back hit the wall before it could fall over completely, and Daniel kicked it again and then turned to see John standing there watching him and 'Trousers!' he barked, 'off!' so John undid his flies.

Daniel shook out his hand from the wrist. He threw pencils and charcoal sticks in another dirty coffee cup, not looking back. John took down his smallclothes. He bent and picked up his trousers, vest, shirt. He folded them all and placed them in a neat stack next to his coffee cup on the table, then rearranged the stack so that the smallclothes were on top, then turned and watched Daniel, still arranging his supplies. Watched the back of Daniel's head; watched his hand come up to run through the hair at the nape of his neck, and then—retreat. Just rest on the cup of pencils on the stand of his easel.

'Should I,' said John, and stopped.

Daniel gestured, without looking, to the stained chaise. It was, of course, the only other place to sit in the flat. John shuffled over and lowered himself down and then—and then.

It was strange, wasn't it, to feel so ill at ease? Lifetimes ago he had laughed, nervously, not knowing what to do with his limbs. But to be doing it now... He'd had no idea, had he, the first few times he'd sat for Daniel during the War. That was before Lens, before he'd even—it'd just been a favour to a young private. A way to chip away at the monotony, for both of them. He hadn't even known the boy particularly well; not yet. He'd taken off his cap, he remembered—Christ, those old cloth caps. The boys with head wounds didn't even make it to the hospital tent; the things were worse than
useless. He'd taken his off, had it in his hands. *Ought I to, er. Strike a pose?* he had asked, with a self-conscious emphasis on the last three words, and then coughed to cover his awkwardness. But the boy had just shaken his head, shy. *Like that* he had said, almost under his breath, and started in with his wild loose-wristed strokes while John sat and smoked in his camp chair by the entrance to the hospital tent. He'd sat for him there; and then in Amiens by the church; and then in Lens by the fire. And then, and then. Daniel'd drawn him so many times John had lost count—would probably never know the full count, anyway, since Daniel's favourite pieces were always worked from sketches he'd made of John when John didn't realise he was being watched.

Here, in the dingy little room, John placed his palms carefully on his bare knees. Took them off again. Put them back. He had no cloth cap to fiddle with, now. Not even a cigarette. And he wouldn't know about any of that, would he. Not him, not Mark Watson, who probably never sat for a portrait in his life.

Daniel turned, at last. He stood and regarded him: smoking, not speaking, nothing changing in his face.

What must he see, John thought. Almost desperate. Daniel's eyes on his calves, on his bare feet that Daniel had sketched so often: did he look at them now and think to himself, *family resemblance?* Did he look at John's knees, at the skin of his thighs, and think, what? *Older,* probably. Only a few years but it looked like more than that, John knew. It felt like more. It would cover the gap between Mark's birth and John's, anyway. Daniel, drawing up his chair behind him now, sitting with his hand before his mouth, rubbing at his jaw, could look at John's Watson skin and his Watson stance and see the older, better-fed relative of the soldier he'd known. That was all. That was really—even if John had sat for him nude, during the war. He hadn't, ever; but even if they'd had enough warmth, or time, or privacy, it still, John thought, would hardly have mattered now. His cock soft, tucked against his thigh: had Daniel ever seen it so? Had he ever seen John properly, at all? Or had he only seen some stand-in, some stripped-down set of emergency functions which in 1914 had been squeezed down out of the raw material of John Watson? Had young Daniel seen a kind of mirage, then, when he'd looked at John's hips and his waist and his sh—

Sweat broke out. A sickly film all over him; he stopped breathing. How could he not have thought? His scar, his most identifying mark, and it hadn't even—hadn't even occurred to him. Daniel sat behind his easel and his stack of paper clipped to it, sketching big blocking-in lines with a practiced tightness that was new in him, and John's pulse beat against his sternum. Throat. Shoulder. Beat and beat. Daniel had seen, John thought. He must have seen. *Beat* with all his limbs locked up tight fizzing with panic while Daniel who *beat* any moment would look up, would look and see and *beat* be punched down again onto the floor like *beat* the night before, sobbing Liar with his *beat* hand in his hair, tore the top sheet of paper off and let it slither to the floor, and started again on the next one down. But—

But there was nothing to recognise, John realised.

His battering-ram pulse blurred out. *Beat,* by beat. Nothing at all.

'Change position, please,' Daniel said, in a businesslike new art-school tone, and John found he could. He felt like a character in a fairy tale, released from a magical paralysis which, it seemed, no one else had noticed. He pulled his feet up with him onto the chaise; put his arms around his knees. The smarting blood mellowed, under the skin of his scarred shoulder.

Because: there was nothing there, he realised, for Daniel to see. *His* John, after all, had suffered a shrapnel hit to the head. *His* John had gone down in one, with his shoulder and his leg still intact like they'd been when Daniel had drawn him last. If anything, the massy knot of John's bare shoulder, the
injury John had spent the last three years hiding and accommodating and damning and apologising for, was for Daniel one more bit of evidence that Mark Watson, the man who sat before him nude in his Paris atelier, was a stranger. A person whom, before this week, Daniel had never met.

'Change position, please,' Daniel said, again.

John felt—hollowed out. As if from a far distance he noted Daniel's words and the click of Daniel's mug and the susurrus of another sheet of paper slipping to the floor; he supposed he'd got off lucky. It was a kind of freedom, wasn't it, really? As far as Daniel was concerned it didn't matter how much of himself he displayed; whether he hugged himself into a ball or stretched himself out; dressed himself up in his own clothes or somebody else's. And of course it didn't, he told himself. Of course it didn't. Had he expected—had he thought, repulsively, somewhere in the back of his mind—?

He put his feet back on the cool floor. Pushed himself up. It was all right to stretch, he told himself. All right to wander. There was no cause for concern: he wouldn't be seen.

'Hold,' Daniel said, so John held his position. Just stood, faced away from Daniel in quarter profile, swallowing the last trickles of unnoticed panic. Behind him, the dragging and scratching of charcoal on paper. Daniel always had liked John's arse; only logical he'd like Mark's, as well. It was—nauseating, slightly; but no more than any of it. John's throat closed up, but he got it open again.

'So,' said Daniel, behind him. 'La Boisselle.' His voice came out tight. Combative.

'Yeah,' John said. He rolled his left shoulder because it ached; and also because he could. Come to that he could cross the room. Could go sit on the floor. Could have Daniel do a painstaking close-up textural study of the pocked and striated scar tissue. He could do anything he wanted to.

Only, thought John, that wasn't quite right either, was it? He could do anything, he thought, with his heart beating, almost anything and it would be all right—but he wasn't permitted to say, apparently, Look: what I did last night was—, and he couldn't say, as he had said pressed against the filthy wall of the maison close, I took what I wanted; say I remember; say I; and I; and I; and I; and I; and I; and I; and I.

'Change position, please.'

John turned around. Breathing a bit hard; but calm enough. He stretched out his shoulders. Right arm bent up over his head and his hand behind; left hand reaching over his head to push gently at his right elbow. 'Hold,' Daniel said, and he did.

From this position, facing Daniel, John could watch him watch Mark. Could see how his face held its concentration. How it didn't change at all. The floor around Daniel's feet was by now strewn with sheets of paper, face-up: just bare anatomy blocked out in pose after pose.

The quality of Daniel's lines, John thought, was different now than it had been during the War. Quicker, surer; but more constrained, as well. More cautious. He was trained, now, of course: three years at the Sorbonne. He could never have captured a model's whole-body gestures back then the way he was doing now; not from a half-hour's drawing from a single position, let alone a few minutes per pose. But there was a cautiousness, too; a guardedness in his human forms, even in these rough gestural sketches, that John never remembered seeing in his pictures during the war. They looked as if their bodies hurt them, these figures. Oh, not acutely. They weren't, as some of Daniel's war drawings had been, agonised blistering faces, and throats choking on poison. But there was a soreness about them. John wondered if it was a quality he, John, carried in his body, and therefore simply an accurate representation of the model at hand; or whether it was something Daniel now brought to everything he made. Something that had seeped into him, contaminated him, like a miasma, or—or been pushed into him. Been f-forced into him, like a bayonet, by another person's
careless violence. John thought of his own hands, white-knuckled hours before on the railing overlooking the black Seine. Thought of that winged monster at his back, whispering: you can twist however you please, you're rotten, you'll rot them too in the end. But, John thought: I didn't twist, did I. I took my own hands and I used them—

He closed his eyes. Steadied his breath. They were Mark's hands, at the moment. He tried to think of—tried to remember the sketch Daniel had done of Agathe as the Maja desnuda, back at the café on that first night. Had she, young and lovely and bubbling over with laughter as she'd been, looked as aching as Mark did in just a rough outline?

'Change position,' Daniel said, and John took a breath.

He let his hand fall. Shook out his arms; shook off that black water. What could he do? He walked over to the makeshift table where his cup of coffee still sat, next to the Italian pot still screwed together. He lifted the cup: still lukewarm. It was, after all, a sweltering night.

'Do the other side,' Daniel said, as if granting permission.

'Can't.' John turned, and looked at Daniel over the rim of his cup, then glanced down at the scar damage. Safe as houses. 'Never got the range of motion back up to what it was.'

'Not a bad war, though,' said Daniel, nastily. 'Hold.'

John stayed still, leaning his backside against the table with one ankle crossed over the other and his coffee cup cradled to his chest. An oddly domestic posture, he thought, swallowing his heart out of his throat. Oddly homey, for a—a visitation. A ghostly appearance in the garret of a madman.

'Not as bad as some had,' he said.

Daniel didn't reply. Just kept on working. John, sweaty-palmed, swallowed lukewarm coffee and watched him and tried to see. He tried, really tried, to trace the lineage of this man—with his broad shoulders and his sneer and his tightly-rendered figures in all their precise and pained anatomy—back to the youth he'd known. The wild, almost desperate way Daniel had used to sketch in his framing. He'd used to draw the way a feral animal would eat if you put food down in front of it: on the verge of panic, always. As if there'd been always too much to get down, all of it unutterably precious, and he'd known his fundamentals were shaky and the details he was choosing probably wrong but he'd worked anyway with an absolute certainty that if he didn't get it all now it would be yanked away from him, never to be recovered. Out of his control. As Daniel blocked out Mark's body like he would Agathe's or Claudine's or anyone's who sat for him, John tried to see it in him: that urgently particular passion. He could scarcely imagine it. Daniel held his hands differently, now; his mouth made different shapes, and he controlled the things he drew, rather than being controlled by them. John could scarcely recognise him.

He could scarcely recognise Daniel, and yet he'd thought—what? That he, John Watson, would work some miracle that all the overtaxed head-doctors of Bourg hadn't been able to? That leaving the man sobbing on a brothel floor would prove somehow beneficial? Like slapping a woman when she got hysterical, like—a glass of cold water in the face of a child? Had he thought he would push and push and Daniel would look at him with dawning understanding, blinking away the fog which was only there in the first place, after all, because of John himself? That Daniel would. Clenching his hands around his mug. Would recognise him? Thank him? That the boy would be cured? Had he really imagined—what? John Watson the saviour? Courageous restorer of health? Had he thought he was—had he somehow thought, then, that Daniel was pretending?

He wished he could bring the coffee cup up. Hide his face, or—whoever's face. Pointless though it
would be. Somehow, he knew, that was what he'd thought: that Daniel had been pretending; and that John could make him stop. *A whole family of English doctors*, Daniel had said, his arm suffocatingly tight around John's shoulders. *Always know the respectable thing.*

'I joined up,' John said, 'with a group of lads from my church.'

Daniel's expression changed not at all. John breathed deep. Fingers white around the coffee cup.

'It wasn't the whole street or the whole village or. Anything like that,' he said. 'Not like some towns, who lost all their boys in a single battle. This was just. Just me, and Jim Greenwood, and Arthur Cole.' He transferred the mug to his left hand, rubbed his face with the right. 'Jim was this big—big brute of a fellow. Boxer. Big practical joker. Bit of a blunt instrument but the sort you always want on your side in pick-up rugby matches and.' He took a breath.

'Street fights,' Daniel said. John looked up; but if it was a dig about one street fight in particular, it didn't show in Daniel's face. His gaze darted between John and the paper, John and the paper. He didn't meet John's eyes.

'Yeah,' John said. 'That sort. And Arthur—.' That pleading tone in his voice: stop. He cleared his throat and blinked and looked hard at Daniel looking at his drawing. 'Arthur,' John said, 'had a vocation for the Church.' Almost laughing. 'And he was so—anything I can say about him... he knew all about flowers and trees though he'd grown up in Stepney. He had no practical sense. He lit up when you talked with him about Augustine. He really believed things in a way that seems incredible, doesn't it? It seems unbelievable, now.'

'Hold,' Daniel said, and tore the top sheet from his stack of paper and started in again. In point of fact Mark's friend Arthur had been unbearably sanctimonious: forever buttonholing John and Harry and dispensing unasked-for words of doctrinal wisdom that even John could tell were hopelessly lacking in sophistication, and lacking also in a kind of basic compassion whose absence he found shocking, a bit, after years of being carted along to weddings and funerals and baptisms, and watching the way patients opened to his father, asked without words to be witnessed. John and Harry had once indulged, over a stolen cider, in a fantasy of pushing Arthur into the Thames and then (Arthur, in this scenario, being apparently able to remain afloat indefinitely but unable effectively to swim away) making him beg their pardon for his multitude of petty crimes before extending at last the club-house rope ladder of salvation. Behind the easel, Daniel appeared deeply involved in a study of John's legs and feet.

'Arthur was the kind of boy,' John said, shaky, 'that one wanted desperately to protect.'

He blinked, and took a breath. Looked down at his coffee cup, empty now. *Idiotic*, he thought; but Daniel might be making use of it. He couldn't put it down.

'You're right that I'm a doctor,' he said. 'My brother and I both. He went into the RAMC but I joined up as regular infantry, so Jim and Arthur and I could all serve together. It wasn't—it was early '15 by the time we volunteered. Not like John who joined up as soon as the guns started firing. By that time we had to have known it wouldn't be a lark. I can't imagine we had any grand illusions, or—but maybe we thought it'd be better together. Maybe we reckoned it was our duty, or maybe the white feather brigade got to us. I don't—.' He took a breath. 'I don't remember.'

Theorising in the absence of data, he thought; and for a moment his throat closed again.

'In any case,' he said, 'that summer we were sent to La Boisselle, on the Somme.'

Daniel made a low, dissatisfied noise. He rubbed the heel of his hand into the paper in front of him,
then reapplied himself with the charcoal. John wondered if he was listening. He supposed in a way it hardly mattered, one way or the other.

'It was farmland,' he told the room at large. 'Or—really it was a single farm. The Germans had taken the farmhouse from the French earlier in the year; by the time we got there the British and Germans were dug in just fifty feet from each other across this field, you know, by a country lane. What'd once been a country lane.'

By the time John had got there, of course—meandering blankly in the wake of Daniel's confinement and his own wound and then the armistice, back towards the coast and London—enough of the poison had washed away that grass was starting to regrow in the collapsed and cratered hillocks of the little field. In the ruins of the village, too. He had stood there with his feet pressing blades of grass back down to soil and thought: how tiny the distances. How ridiculous, how—how absurd, that we all—in any case. It was a safe deduction that there wouldn't have been any green there, in 1915.

'We were taking over the line from the French,' John said. 'There were, oh. Snipers, bouts of shelling, all that on the surface, and we were so close to one another there was no real shelter, but—but the real action was going on below ground. Tunnels. The French had been at it already, tunnelling down and across towards the enemy trenches, setting charges, hoping to undermine the German fortifications; but we brought in men who could do it right. British Mining Company men. Engineers, miners. The three of us, Jim and Arthur and me, we'd have—we were just the grunt labour. The BMC men would work all day underground, and then at night they'd send us in on fatigue detail to clear off the excavated material. Use it to shore up the communicating trenches or just clear it off. Keep the trenches clear.'

'Change position,' Daniel said.

John put his coffee cup down on the table. Moved back to the chaise. He made himself lie down on his side, facing Daniel. He made himself look up, too; though Daniel's eyes were still flicking back and forth, not meeting his.

'One night in September,' he said. Made himself say. 'We were out on fatigue duty. It was like any night that past month. We'd been—at first we'd been so frightened. And—you'll remember, it's—it's not that you get any less terrified, is it. But we went out every night and spent hours carting rocks from place to place. Back-breaking work and you knew the whole time that the Germans could start shelling at any moment. Night after night of it. After a while we were too tired and fear-numb to keep thinking about it all the time. You had to—to talk, to joke. Feel like you were human.' He looked at Daniel and thought of that schoolhouse in Lens, drinking with Daniel and Patrick and Billy and all the boys around a bonfire started with newspapers left over from that summer, the summer of 1915. He said, 'Reckon we weren't the only ones.'

And all at once, lying sweating on Daniel's filthy chaise, exhausted and aching he boiled over with it, wanting, fiercely—In the War you were different, he wanted to tell him. I remember you. He wanted to say, plain and direct: I'm so sorry, Daniel, Christ I'm so bloody sorry. He wanted to tell him, I remember how your laugh used to go high-pitched when you were truly pleased. I remember how you used to hold your pencil. I remember the schoolhouse, he wanted to say. I remember how cold it was and how your cheeks pinked up though we all felt bloodless, like there was no heat left in us. I remember that night as mostly good. Mostly blameless. I think you were glad to be there with me, even if I—but you put your arm over my shoulders, like a brother. And I'd missed that, John wanted to say; but couldn't.

'That night,' he said, instead. Breathed deep as Daniel's eyes flicked up and back, up and back. 'This night in September, it was—under different circumstances, it'd have been a pleasant evening.' He
liked to imagine, anyway, that it had been. Cool, but: 'Not cold. Good for that kind of heavy labour. Moon nearly full, and we were used to it a bit by then. It almost felt good. Everything was quiet, for the moment, and we were in a rhythm with the work, the three of us loading and carrying and returning and loading. Jim was always the strongest, the biggest, so we had him loading the carts, and Arthur and me pushing them along and unloading them further on, building up the trench walls. We were one of maybe ten teams like that. The loaders had to coordinate going in and out of the shaft, since the entrance was so narrow; and then they'd hand off one cart to an unloader and collect another; go back down.'

John rubbed his face. There was only so much you could extrapolate from evidence, if you weren't Sh—if you were John. When he'd been there four years later the communication trenches had in places come up only as far as his thigh. A local man had pointed to a hillock and said they'd overpowered that charge so it'd change the shape of the ground to give them more cover. They still must've had precious little when any shelling started.

'Jim'd just come up,' he told Daniel. 'To hand off his cart. Have a fag, maybe, before he went back down. He'd've—he was covered in stone dust, chalk dust. I always used to tease him about the way he looked. I think I was jealous. He took it in his stride. I'd have been saying, I don't know. That he fairly glowed.' John's boots had glowed, that night, covered in chalk dust in the moonlight when he'd left the inn. 'That the Germans would see him in the moonlight, covered in white. And he was laughing, straightening up just to stretch his back after bending over for so long, and then.'

John took a breath. Lay back, covered his eyes with the crook of his elbow and only then remembered he was meant to be holding still. There was a pause, across the room, but then came the sound of a sheet sliding to the floor. Daniel didn't tell him to change back.

'It seemed like it happened even before the sound hit my eardrums,' John said, because it must have gone like that, for Mark and them. They must, whatever had happened, have been taken by surprise. 'I don't know if it was a sniper, or if a shrapnel shell burst before the noise could register in my brain, but. I was looking up at Jim, laughing with his head back, and all at once this—little dark hole opened up in his throat.'

John cleared his. The scratch of Daniel's charcoal, across the room; he felt itchy in his skin. In his mind's eye he conjured a lad from Brixton who'd been hit in the throat while standing by the ambulance in Lens, when (careful) Daniel had been away on leave. The kid hadn't even changed position.

'He didn't even change position,' John told Daniel. 'He was laughing and then he was—gurgling. His mouth was moving. I think I must have started forward. I think—I think there must have been a moment when I didn't understand what had happened. I think I wanted to brush it away. Like I thought a bloody fly had landed on him. And then the sound came rushing back and—and that was something we knew. The drum-fire of the shelling. That was something you could react to on pure instinct. You didn't need to understand it, you just. Needed to move.' When the bombs had started in Lens, he and Daniel had barely been touching; but he still remembered in his bones the way the boy's whole body had locked up. Tip to toes.

'You needed to move,' he said, 'and you needed to make sure your friends were moving.'

The scrape of stool-legs; John tensed up. He didn't want—but then: clacking of metal on wood, over by the table. He made himself breathe out. It'd been some time, he realised, since Daniel had said Hold or Change position in that peremptory voice. It'd been some time since he'd said anything. John kept his arm over his face. Wet his lips with his tongue.

'The problem was,' he said, 'There was no place to move to. Not in any kind of hurry. Not with thirty
other men in the same stretch of shallow trench, all hunched over and making for a mine shaft entrance barely wide enough for one person to pass through. Jim was going to die but he wasn't dead yet and we couldn't just. Couldn't leave him. And Arthur—' (careful)—Arthur had frozen up, a bit.' John couldn't quite get his breath. 'The shock of it, he just. Stopped there, in place. So I pulled him over, got him under Jim's other shoulder. Jim was huge and he was losing so much blood; I wouldn't have been able to support him alone. Arthur got the idea and took his share of weight then we were—well. Queueing. More or less.'

The whole cobbled-together image faltered behind his eyelids. Jerked, and skittered to a halt, as his breath fugged hot between his elbow and his face; he couldn't come up with the next frame of the film. The sequence of events he'd imagined, exhausted and hollow-hearted standing that afternoon in a crater where grass was just now beginning to regrow—it was absurd. An orderly file, as at the market. Cloth caps, in the midst of a firestorm. He'd surely got it wrong; it was unthinkable. How could it have happened? But then: how could Lens have happened? Any of it? John had seen the trench, not thigh-high. He'd seen the entrance to the mine shaft. He'd held the telegram in his hand.

'Queueing,' he repeated. His voice too quick, like if he piled on words they'd break through to—to something—saying, 'In a bloody thigh-high trench, with the drum-fire all around us. Our packs and our clothes and all of it getting shredded. Getting hit or blown off or left behind in the mud. We'd been so careful, those first few weeks, all our packs to regulation and our masks clipped to our packs and our boots laced up tight—' which he would have, he would have, Mark was always a stickler for rules—'but when things stayed quiet for us and we got tired then we got sloppy. Now there were canteens, and masks, and boots just getting trampled in the mud of the trench. We kept tripping over them. There was no getting away from it, the—the hugeness of that sound.' Inadequate; his words painfully flimsy, but he was thinking of that day in Lens and Daniel had been there, too. He told him, 'We couldn't even crouch down properly. Not squeezed sideways, three abreast, supporting Jim's weight. The boys around us were hunching their backs up, trying to reduce the area of their exposed necks, but we weren't, we—we couldn't even do that. We were sitting ducks. I was hit in the shoulder. I hardly felt it at the time but I felt—I'd have—I tried to stop them panicking. Stop myself panicking. But—'

A light nudge to John's arm. Not flesh. Smooth, and heat-radiant. He hadn't noticed him approaching; he hadn't—he took a breath and took his arm away from his eyes and there was Daniel, standing over him with another cup of coffee.

'Runs in the family,' Daniel said. He held out the cup, and was quiet.

John flushed hot. Shook his head; that wasn't—he sat up and took the cup and stared down at it and felt sick with shame.

'It was only—to be trapped like that,' he said. 'Shells bursting left and right. The boys ahead of us were crowding into the mine shaft as fast as they could, but panic makes you clumsy. Stupid. Everything takes three times as long, or. That's how it seems.'

'Yeah,' Daniel said.

He was still standing in front of John. John sipped his coffee and didn't look up at him; didn't raise his eyes further than Daniel's hands still held awkwardly in front of his thighs, in the split echo of the shape of the coffee cup. He thought for a moment Daniel would reach out; would touch him. John felt that if Daniel did then his skin would crawl off his bones. He felt he'd have no choice but to let him.

But Daniel didn't touch him. He turned and went back to his easel and John took a breath. Took another. Took a sip of his coffee but didn't look up. He was too much of a coward to look up until he
heard again the rasp of Daniel's charcoal on his paper.

'Hold like that,' Daniel said, when he raised his eyes at last. He was looking right at him. Right at John where he sat with his elbows on his knees and his feet on the floor and his dirty coffee cup in his hands. John made himself keep meeting his gaze. When Daniel looked back down, started back in with his new, tight, quick style of line-blocking, John kept watching his face.

'We got into the mine shaft in the end,' he said. Guessed; supposed. 'We packed into it like sardines. Dark like night never is, not even in the country, and only a few of the men with torches. Some had cigarettes, some had candles, but it was dark. The ground got steep right away. There was a bit of moonlight from the entrance if you turned around, but you'd know you couldn't turn around. You'd know you had to keep going. That you had to go as fast as you could because there were more men behind you, but in the dark you were stupidly afraid. I shuffled forward, a bit, and I—I thought about what was right in front of my feet. I thought about not tripping because I didn't want to think about. Trapped. Dozens ahead of him and dozens at his back. 'I couldn't tell, really,' John said, 'if Jim was still breathing between us. Not for long stretches at a time. I didn't know whether it mattered, if he was or he wasn't; it wasn't as if we'd be able to save him. It was the not knowing, though. The not being able to tell. Having him hanging there, pressed to my side, and not knowing if it was still him or just a, just a sack of meat. And the crowd at our back, pushing us down. Further down. The sides of the shaft were rough and the three of us were moving crab-wise, sideways, the only way we could fit with Jim between us. Every time my shoulder rubbed up against a sharp rock I thought it was—no,' he said, panting, 'not thought. You couldn't think, it was—you felt like cattle. Like, like dumb beasts. Filthy—desperate—'

John was breathing hard with his eyes wide still fixed on Daniel, who sat back. Watching him. He ought to feel exposed, John thought, wildly, with all his naked ash-grey poisonous skin on display, but he didn't. He wanted to take the skin off, as well. Wanted to do better, more truthfully, than this spectacle. He wished, he—he wished. But when Daniel put his charcoal in the easel tray and made as if to get to his feet, John felt himself flinch back. He saw Daniel see it. Saw him lower himself back onto his stool.

'Move back,' Daniel told him. Low, like gentling a colt; John couldn't move.

'Back,' Daniel said again. Motioning, slowly, with his hands. 'Just—back up against the wall.'

John bent at the waist. He put his coffee cup on the floor. He levered himself up, and moved his arse back, and back, until his back hit the wall.

'Good,' said Daniel. 'That's good.'

John didn't speak. His legs extended straight in front of him, like a child in a chair built for a man. The arch of one foot curled over the top of the other. He and Daniel watched each other across a gulf.

'Can you tip your head back,' Daniel said. Almost a murmur. John tipped his head back so the back of his skull clunked against the wall.

'Like that,' Daniel said again, as John watched him through half-closed eyes, 'Hold it like that,' and John realised, flushing up from his belly to his face with hot sick shame, that Daniel's voice was gentle. Was almost tender. Had nothing in it at all of the sneer or the hard-shiny armour that had grated against John the night before when he'd almost punched Daniel in the street and then pushed and pushed. And now Daniel MacIntyre was sitting there, picking up his charcoal again, moving slowly, speaking in a low voice. Understanding nothing.
'We got to a fork,' John told him, holding himself still. Wetting his lips. 'Down in the shaft there was a side-tunnel that branched off from the main one. We got out of the main crowd and off down there, and we could stop. Catch our breath, get Jim down on the ground. He still had a pulse, only just. He came around a bit as I was kneeling down next to him and he made this. Noise.' The boy by the ambulance, John remembered, lying shot in the throat in the Lens mud, had taken twenty minutes to die. John pressed his back to the wall and his legs down into the decaying upholstery of the chaise and told Daniel, 'It seemed like everyone had made it to shelter, now. There was less pushing. More men were lighting torches. And with our backs pressed up against the wall of the side tunnel there was the bit of light filtering down from the shaft entrance and I could—could make out Arthur. His face. His open mouth—' steady '—soft. He looked so young. He didn't say anything but I kept thinking he must be thinking—must be thinking I should do something. Something more than bloody—kneeling in the dirt and holding Jim's hand, like some—some useless swooning sweetheart. Or maybe he was thinking—'

'Hold,' Daniel reminded him.

'Sorry,' John said, 'sorry,' jerking his head back up, looking up at the ceiling. Breathing to the scratch of charcoal. Daniel probably wasn't even paying attention. John could say anything, but—he couldn't.

'Maybe,' he said, forcing his breathing even, 'Arthur was thinking, what can we do for Jim, anyway? Maybe he was thinking I ought to be helping him. Helping Arthur. I'd always told myself I was helping Arthur, you understand. Christ. Protecting him. And standing there looking up at where the bombs were falling he had this—this wild animal blankness in his eyes. He had a look like he might—bolt, like he might, like he, like he would,' John went on, reckless, 'make for the door, like he would run out into the shelling, not caring what might happen. Like a spooked horse. That look in his face and I couldn't—maybe he was thinking, why was I just sitting there? Why was I mucking about on the floor, when my friend was trapped and suffering and holding onto nothing, with the world getting blown to pieces outside? I kept looking up at him and he kept looking down at me and I was thinking—I must've been thinking—'

But John hadn't thought. Not really. Mark probably hadn't either. He'd wanted, and he'd feared. The animal had clamoured for relief. John couldn't say: your soft nape before the open window; but perhaps it would have been wrong to, anyway.

'There was a shout, then,' he said instead, because that much was clear. That much he knew for certain; he hadn't needed to imagine it. In the quiet Daniel's charcoal scratched on. John said, 'From up towards the tunnel entrance: Poison gas! And A—Arthur looked up, and I looked up, and you could see it, in the moonlight. Yellowish-green and glimmering, rolling down on us. Slipping along the floor. The shell must've fallen right into the shaft. The first candle went out, and then the next. And then—then it wasn't quiet, anymore.'

Daniel paused; opened his mouth and John pressed his spine against the wall but Daniel shut it again. Narrowed his eyes and looked at a point not quite as high as John's eyes, and moved his hand in quick, concentrated motions.

'We were trapped,' John told him. The scene crisping up before him in his mind's eye. He'd been in gas attacks; he'd read the official reports of that one. He said, 'There was no way out but through the poison cloud and back out into the shelling. The torches were all going wild and the candles spluttering out, and all the men shouting and scrambling for their masks—the ones that had them. All those masks that'd got trampled down into the mud, on the way down. The men closer to the entrance, you could see them in silhouette, doubled over, coughing. Clawing at their chests. Others were trying to push further down, outrun it, but the pack of bodies was in their way and anyway in
such a confined space—a gas shell could poison the whole shaft. It was going to poison the whole shaft. My mask was still clipped to my back, just by my shoulder, but when I reached up to get it my—my fingers came away wet and my wet fingers went right through the cloth of the mask. Right through it.'

He'd seen enough such, dragged into field hospitals. Gas residue on the insides of the mica windows and the cloth torn right through; but John hardly needed to think about them now. He could see the scene, unrolling like a film reel, laid like an onion skin atop Daniel's intent face and his easel and the sketches scattered across the floor: Mark Watson with John's shrapnel-shot shoulder and a shot-up mask in the dark in the mine shaft John had walked a quarter mile down four years later, in June of 1919; and Mark's big daring mate the best part of dead; and Arthur, officious little Arthur with his unwanted explanations and his Church of England, whom John and Harry had wanted to throw in the Thames, terrified by his side in the tunnel in the dark. John could see it now as if it'd really happened, just like this; as if he'd really been there.

'Men were trampling each other,' he said. 'Trying to get further down. Crushing each other under their boots, tearing each others' masks from their heads. I could see their silhouettes, I could hear them. I could hear them choking. Coughing. Wet coughing, and I'd seen gas attacks in full daylight; I knew that red foam, oozing from their mouths. That drowning look in their eyes. I pulled my hood over my head and put my fingers through the holes to touch my own cheek and I thought—I thought, well. Maybe the gas won't come down this way. The side tunnel levelled out a bit, I told myself. Perhaps gravity would be enough to keep it rolling down the main shaft. Or maybe—there was so much less light, now; maybe it was already here in the tunnel with us, and my hood was working, somehow, despite the damage. But I knew when the gas got into our tunnel. I knew because I heard Jim, down on the floor—I heard him choking and choking on it.'

Daniel was sitting back. Looking at something that might have been John and might have been his drawing and might have been an image he alone was privy to. John still didn't know if he was really listening. He felt he couldn't stop now, regardless. The scene in the mine shaft felt clearer to him than his own bare legs, stuck out in front of him, one turning slightly towards the other.

'Then I thought,' he said, 'well. Perhaps it wouldn't rise as high as our heads. It was over Jim's, now, but that was only my calves. Perhaps it wouldn't... But it did; of course it did. It felt like—' in his trench in Amiens '—like hot needles in my eyes. In my throat. Hot piercing chemical fire burning its way out from the inside. And my body kept trying to run on it. That was the worst thing, my lungs kept drawing the poison in and my blood kept pumping it through until my arms were burning and my legs, all the blood in all my veins shot through with fire and I couldn't think.' In that farmhouse in Lens that farmhouse in Lens. 'I couldn't. I'd have done anything for it just to stop. For just a few seconds of. I reached out and grabbed—I'd have—I told myself later I didn't know. That I couldn't see in the dark who I was holding down. Who I was striking, who I was, was taking what I needed from, but.' John's face was wet, he realised. 'Who else could it have been?' he said. 'It was only the three of us there.'

A whole family full of doctors, John thought, staring blankly ahead into the dark of the mine shaft, breathing in. Always know the respectable thing.

Mark Watson had done no such thing, of course. It'd been John who'd done that. If his brother had ever failed to measure up to the standards of the noble Arthur or the ignoble Jim, the news hadn't survived them. It was one of the things John would never be able to piece together from tramping down tunnels and chatting with locals in pubs. Probably even Sherlock wouldn't be able to: Sherlock, who'd spent the war closeted in a house in Oxfordshire, deciphering encoded telegrams exchanged amongst ineffectual German spies.
'Well,' Daniel said, 'yes,' and John startled. There Daniel sat, behind his easel. Sounding neither repulsed nor conciliatory when he said, 'People do terrible things.'

'I was supposed to be protecting him,' said John.

'Yes,' Daniel said.

'I was supposed be like a brother to him,' John said, and Daniel didn't reply.

The silence stretched out. Tears dried to salt on John's face. Sick at himself, a little. He wasn't even sure, anymore, where he'd stashed the telegram. Regret to inform you; served bravely; missing presumed dead in the line of duty, La Boisselle, August 30, 1915. It must be somewhere at Baker Street. He and Mark had never been close.

'I was transferred away from the front,' he told Daniel. His stomach settling. Sinking. 'Because of my shoulder. I was back in England when I got John's letter.'

Daniel's shoulders, easing. His spine bending, just a little.

John told him, 'Course the censors cut it to hell, and he couldn't have said—everything that I guessed. But. He told a part of it. And what with him mentioning you before. Mentioning you after.'

John cleared his throat. He felt fidgety. Transparent. Daniel was sitting, regarding him, and John felt—the absurdity of imagining that he would've done any such thing. Written to Mark, of all people, about Daniel, about Lens; when he hadn't even spoken to anyone in his regiment when Mark had died. He'd just put the telegram in the bottom of his rucksack, and repacked everything on top of it. It hadn't even occurred to him, really, to bring anyone else into the matter.

Daniel looked right at him. Exhaled, long and slow.

'Your brother and I were lovers,' he said, then, putting down his charcoal. Still looking right at him; still meeting his eyes. 'And I was in love with him. Before Lens; long before. I don't know if he was, with me. He spent so much time raking himself over the coals, he probably didn't know himself. Always acted like he was making something up to me. Well, maybe he was right to, I don't know. Maybe I ought to've felt guiltier myself, only I never saw the point. Which was worse: that I was sixteen and he was thirty? Or that our general acquaintance would have felt we were relegating ourselves to eternal perdition had they known? Or that we were shooting other boys across sixty mined feet of barbed wire? The needing me to forgive him at every turn took more out of me than any corruption of what he persisted in considering my boyish innocence, if you want the truth. The unspoilt promise of England. That's what I resented. What I resent. Not the—John was brave and quick in a crisis and he made me feel good, made me laugh; he and Patrick saved my life, many times over, and in all that time it was just the—it was just, all the time I spent, bestowing my forgiveness when it was never going to do any good. He couldn't forgive himself, and I couldn't make him, and then he was killed in front of me. What should I say about all that? What did—what do you want me to say about it?'

He looked more boyish, now, than he had since John had met him again in Paris. Petulant, like a child stamping his foot, insisting a school rule isn't fair. Looking to him, to Mark, to sort it out. And John wished, stupidly, for someone else to look to, himself; something to hold to and have the answer provided him. A vicar or policeman or—or someone kinder, who lo—but a third party who could be looked to and be believed when they responded to the questions: what ought I to want? What am I allowed to ask? For John had no idea at all.

'You saw him—how it happened,' he said, instead.
'Yeah,' said Daniel, and sighed.

He stood up, and stretched. His charcoal-covered hands and his wide, strong shoulders. He turned to the double doors, away from John where he perched alone and stripped on the chaise, and looked out at the flats across the way.

'Saw him hit from behind,' Daniel said, 'loading a soldier onto a stretcher. Direct shrapnel hit. Blew half his skull off. I was hit just after that and I don't remember anything very clearly for four or six months after. But that, I recall perfectly. Isn't that the bloody way?' His voice cracked, a very little. 'I drew it a hundred times, probably. I could draw it for you, right now. Could probably draw it for you when I'm sixty, if I live that long. Come find me in '58, tell me "forty years, Mr MacIntyre, since the last war," and I'll make you a little window onto the one that ended them. My John, pitching forward into the muck with his head blown open. If only I could forget that, and remember something else, instead. Something… I don't know.' He sighed. 'Unimportant.'

Up between the buildings across the street, John could see a scrap of sky just beginning to lighten. The city, all around them, was quiet; and within John there was a… settling. Not something he could fight. He wanted, desperately, to reach out; to make amends; to be covered, somehow, or cover another soul; but here, in this little attic room, there was nothing to touch. Nowhere further to go.

'You'd rather I come find you in forty years,' he said. His voice didn't break. 'And you'd be able to paint me a picture of Billy Smith's cross-eyed niece? Or that Lens villager's birthday party, once you finally got there, with no cake and no wine?'

Daniel laughed.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Something like that.'

'Better yet, some dull night back in Edinburgh.'

'Christ yes,' Daniel said. 'Bored out of my skull. My gran in her rocker, wool to the left of her and wool to the right. Clicking her needles talking about.'

'The price of beef,' John said, and Daniel said, with a hitch in his voice, 'The bloody English.'

He stayed looking out at the street; John got up from the chaise. He put the coffee cup back on the makeshift table; climbed back into his smallclothes and his shirt and trousers. Beyond Daniel the street was lightening rapidly now: he could make out the little balconies and the mansard roofs of the buildings across the street. He stood, leaning on the table, with a sea of sketches between himself and his old flame. Saying nothing. Having nothing it was possible to say. This was how it would be now, he knew.

Daniel turned at last, from the door.

'Here,' he said, taking in John, reclothed; running his hand over his mouth; seeming to come to himself. John ached. 'Take some of these,' Daniel said. 'You should have them. I never meant, when I said—take this one, if you want it.'

Daniel turned the easel, for John to see. He stood with his hand on the easel, and his hand not in his hair but rubbing his shoulder where it met his strong, corded neck. John turned; and swallowed; felt his hand come up to his mouth.

Daniel'd seen… something. Heard something, in John's lies. On the page a soldier, half-stripped, with John's face and John's scarred-up shoulder, was hitting his knees in the trench mud in the moment after the impact. His face wrenched open in shock and pain. A dark wound blossoming in
the centre of his throat.

Hot, hot, smarting-up through John's chest. Unfair, he thought, aching. How can you. He let it ripple out from the core of him until it stilled.

He'd known it wouldn't be him. Not John Watson, because Daniel couldn't see John Watson, and John knew that, just as he'd known the picture wouldn't be him as Daniel had known him. And it wasn't. It wasn't, but—Christ. John made himself keep looking. Hand to his chest.

Well, the man had listened to him after all, hadn't he? At least a bit. At least enough to know there was a trampled gas mask in a trench in a firestorm, and a throat ripped out by a bullet. At least enough—

The portrait wasn't John but it wasn't Mark, either. Was it. Not the Mark in John's story, who kept his life, who kept the use of his throat, whose shoulder—John felt for his scar, there, rough under his fingers. Mark, whose shoulder had only been injured after his friend's throat had been shot through. Yet there it was, on the page: not even freshly shot, but healed already into a fleshy shadow.

But it was the face, John thought, that drew you. Or. That wasn't quite it. It was as if a cord pulled taut between the explosion of the throat wound, and the mouth and eyes wrenched open. The mouth pulled into a shape not quite regular. That instinct towards speech, in the fraction of a moment before conscious thought. He was about to try to speak, this figure. To exclaim or reach out, in extremis, and you knew he wouldn't be able to, John thought. You knew that'd be his vocal cords, shot to hell. That hole in his neck. You knew it'd gurgle out of him, unintelligible. Blood out his mouth seconds later. Choking on it. A man had had a voice since he'd first called out to his mother; it was his instinct, still, to use it. The boy in Lens had choked for minutes trying to explain, to plead for his life. Here, on the page, Daniel'd captured his eyes.

But John had been so careful: Daniel hadn't been in Lens at the time, hadn't witnessed that particular atrocity. So he had a different model for this figure, hobbled as it was, wracked and reeling from the blow and and choking on all the words it couldn't say. It was only that, that was—difficult to bear. That Daniel could look at Mark and see that he was haunted, hunted, half-garrotted with the things he couldn't say—but he couldn't see John, holding all that within himself.

It was what he had. Was it better, John wondered, than not being seen at all?

He stood and looked for what might have been an age. When he blinked again, a thin strip of direct sunlight was slanting through the open doors.

'Yes,' he said at last. He shifted his gaze to look at Daniel, who even smiled a little back.

He picked his way through the papers on the floor towards Daniel, who unclipped the image and slid it between two blank sheets and slipped that, together with some of the rougher sketches, between two sheets of cardboard. John stood, looking on, while Daniel tied the thing with string; and they embraced for a long moment in the doorway of the little flat. Thank you, John tried to say, but it wouldn't quite come. He pressed a hand to the back of Daniel's head; cradled it for a moment with his face pressed into Daniel's neck; and at his shoulder and his waist Daniel's hands pressed into him a little harder: an echo of an answer. Then they stepped apart, and John took the parcel and turned. He walked back down the corridor, and down the stairs, and made himself get all the way down the street and around two corners before he stopped and undid the twine. He would crumple the thing up, he thought; throw it away. He held it in his hands, still meaning to do just that, for minutes together. But in the end he only creased it in on itself: once, and then again: its surfaces kissing, hidden from view. He re-tied the smaller bundle, and slipped it into his jacket pocket; and then he put one foot in front of the other: back into Paris towards the Jouvenels, and investigations into one Irene
Adler, and back towards Sherlock Holmes.

Chapter End Notes

1. The story that John pieces together and then tells Daniel (as Mark) is a composite that draws on (a) the diary entries in The Diaries of Private Horace Bruckshaw, Royal Marine Light Infantry, 1915-1916 covering Bruckshaw's service in early 1916 in the tunnels of La Boisselle; and (b) Private William Hermans's account of a gas attack in a subterranean room of a French fort at Verdun, in 1916, as quoted in Peter Hart's The Great War; and (c) Hart's quotation of another soldier, Private William Quinton, on Quinton's experiences with poison gas:

   Our biggest enemy was now within a few yards of us, in the form of clouds of gas. We caught our first whiff of it: no words of mine can ever describe my feelings as we inhaled the first mouthful. We choked, spit and coughed, my lungs felt as though they were being burnt out, and were going to burst. Red-hot needles were being thrust into my eyes. The first impulse was to run… It was one of those occasions when you do not know what you are doing. The man who stayed was no braver than the man who ran away. We crouched there, terrified, stupefied.

   Black in the face, their tunics and shirt fronts torn open at the necks in their last desperate fight for breath. Man of them quite still while others were still wriggling and kicking in the agonies of the most awful death I’d ever seen. Some were wounded in the bargain and their gaping wounds lay open, blood still oozing from them. One poor devil was tearing at his throat with his hands. I doubt if he knew or felt that he had only one hand and that the other was just a stump where the hand should have been. This stump he worked around his throat as if his hand was still there and the blood from it was streaming over his bluish-black face and neck. A few minutes later he was still except for occasional shudders as he breathed his last.

   The detail about the man shot in the throat also draws on a story told by the excellent if slightly hawkish podcaster Dan Carlin, about an Australian soldier's experience on the beach at Gallipoli in 1915. I highly recommend Carlin's "Hardcore History" podcast; the multi-part "Blueprint for Armageddon" series was immensely helpful with the wartime flashbacks in this story.

2. The La Boisselle Study Group is currently involved in excavating the tunnel system at La Boisselle, which has apparently remained more or less intact since 1918. Their website features some very cool interactive 360-degree annotated panoramas of the present-day appearance of the entrance and interior of one of the shafts; the rest of the panoramas are fascinating as well. From the above-ground ones you can really get a sense of how tiny the distances involved were—astounding when you consider the numbers of lives lost to hold or gain a few feet of ground.

3. In the early fall of 1915 the iconic canister-style and small box respirator gas masks had yet to be developed; British soldiers would have been using P or PH style hoods, which were basically just chemical-treated fabric hoods with mica
eye holes for visibility.

4. In thinking about Daniel's art style and the changes wrought on it by the war, the Getty exhibition "Nothing but the Clouds Unchanged: Artists in World War I" was a huge help, as was Gordon Hughes and Philipp Blom's exhibit-specific monograph by the same name. In particular Leo Costello's essay "Wyndham Lewis: Art—War—Art" influenced my thinking about Daniel's more constrained and wary, if more practiced, mode of visual art-making after the War. Daniel's style is obviously more representational and less abstract than most artists his age working in France in 1920; I've been conceptualizing it as somewhat similar to the war work of the Belgian artist Henry de Groux (see, for example, his "The Trench"), but actually sharing more of an affinity with Weimar-era German portrait artists like Otto Dix. See, for example, Dix's "Rejection of War," which has the grotesque expressiveness of face and body that's one of Daniel's primary interests. Dix's post-war portraiture of sex workers, like for example "Salon I," also captures—and was very influential in my thinking about—some of the ugly sexual ambivalence that both Daniel and even more so John display in the brothel scene in Chapter 13.
The ragged rock in the restless waters

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(LATER)

Monday, August 29th, 1921
12:45am

'Knew it,' the man gasped. Spittle on his lips. 'Knew I could turn one of you if I flashed enough francs. Oh I—'

'Hm,' Irene said.

The paddle in her hand and his arse the only bit of red in a sea of black brocade. She said, 'You want so badly, don't you, for me to take your money.'

He squirmed. She hit him and thought, Estrella had always been sickeningly domestic, anyway. Her rooms at La Garçonnière always neat as a pin, and she'd missed cooking for (Irene hit him again) a family; she'd experimented with the leavings of the fish market, down in the shared kitchen in the mornings before any of the other girls were up. Irene shuddered. The man squirmed, wormed under her hands, whining, turned arse-up over her black brocade chair. She thought: I could never.

'Your kind are all,' the man panted, 'out for what you can get. Claim you don't miss cock but you're not about to turn down it down as soon as a little cash is on offer, you're not about to—fuck—'

She'd feinted; he braced himself, but the paddle didn't fall. He whined.

'I don't know,' she said, absently. Thinking of Denise at the head of the table, Estrella's mother treating her to the best china. Life in the familial bosom: of course it would drive Irene to murder. 'I haven't decided,' she told him, and she stepped back.

Sweat ran down her spine and her neck. It pooled in the pock-marked craters of the man's fish-belly back. The air so still; so breathless. The idiot turned his head and gave it a college try to smirk up at her, smugness undermined by his persistence in leaking all over her upholstery. She closed her eyes and black brocade pressed down on her shoulders; compressed her skull.

'I think you should beg me,' she recited. 'Don't you?'

He scoffed at her in the mirror and she shrugged at him, quite sincerely. 'Or I could leave you tied here. I've a craving for one of Rémy's cocktails.'

She turned to the door. To the armoire, half-empty now: a dressing gown, a few tools of the trade. She shrugged into a black satin garment halfway between a peignoir and a dress, and with utter predictability he opened his lips and the pleading started. For this, she thought, mouth flooding bitter, she had run out on the warm hands and the raucous laughing faces of La Garçonnière. He went on, and on. She firmed up her grip on the paddle and turned to lay into him, because a bargain once struck—and the door burst open on the both of them.

'No, oh—all right, all right,' babbled the man, whose eyes were now screwed shut and who seemed to have interpreted the opening door as Irene's exit, 'I'll, I—please hit me, Mademoiselle, please.'
Irene, standing staring at the door with her chiffon and suspenders and her bare flesh on display, with a paddle in her hand, started to laugh. The absurd man faltered in his pleas, which struck her as even funnier. She felt, for the first time she could remember, *scandalised*; and she had always wondered what that was like. The girl was holding Julien's ring of master keys in one hand—well, naturally, she would be. No lock-picks or back-alley deals for her. She'd probably convinced him through sheer frumpy officiousness that they'd be shut down unless she were allowed to inspect the rooms. He'd probably suggested she simply knock to be admitted, and she'd probably made him fear for his tax status. He was no doubt at this moment cowering in his office, drinking Gentian from the desk bottle to settle his stomach. Irene couldn't stop laughing. She felt vaguely panicked. Her eyes were smarting with tears.

'I've considered your proposal,' said Germaine Beaumont. 'And provided my concerns are addressed, I'll leave Paris with you, when you go.'

*Monday, August 29th, 1921*  
1:30am

The street, as Sherlock stepped out into it, was hot, and unnaturally still. Across the way, awaiting him just where he'd left it, stood the patisserie where in 1903 he had choked on pastry cream. A hand to his nape; his fingers came away slippery. *A body of evidence* he'd said to Agnès Sabbagh.

A body of evidence.

His feet took him uphill. Up and up. A cab trundled towards him going down and he pressed himself against stone that still radiated sun-heat.

In January 1903 the rain had been thin. Grey and cutting. They had stood facing one another on either side of the little ironwork border around the hole in the ground, and the wind had sliced cold water sideways against his face. He had expected that Claudine might hold his hand, as she had done three days before when she'd taken him to view the gouged-out foundation and rising scaffolding that had not yet become the Basilique du Sacré Coeur; but though he had rooted himself next to her, boots in the mud-slime, shivering, glaring across the grave at the phalanx of English Holmeses with his hand open by his side, she hadn't taken it. He had looked up at her, impatient, and her eyes—her eyes, he'd seen, were locked with the eyes of his mother in an expression, almost, of apology.

So Sherlock had balled up his hands in his coat pockets, instead. Later, in the lavatory on the train to Calais, he had torn up the calling card Claudine had given him, and tossed its fragments in the toilet. Pulled the cord and left them littered along the track with all the excrement of the North-bound trains. She'd written twice in the months that followed. He hadn't replied and hadn't replied; until eventually his mother had ordered him to append a message to his cousin to the letters she herself was sending. Eighteen years, and their only communication had been as curt and cold as he could make it.

He hadn't rejected everything she'd given him, though. Had he.

The streets got denser as he climbed. Narrower. Ever more still and tangled, oppressive, knotted in on themselves until, all at once, he emerged into the open space at the foot of the stone stairs rising in a steady line to a looming white dome. Sherlock came to a stop, staring up.

He had joked at Chez Manière that the basilica had looked better as a hole in the ground, but what it actually looked, he thought, was inarguable. Here was no stretched-thin tracery-skin yearning itself ever tighter; no attenuated buttresses suspended perpetually at the moment of collapse. No breathless aspiration, here, no giving-over but only this hulking hot mass: its sealed-tight domes, its enclosing...
arches. There it sat, settled and white: the unflinching exercise of will over raw materials over time. \textit{You have your work}, Claudine had said to him in the kitchen of Roz Ven, cutting peaches; and yes, he had. Eighteen years of it. Onto his lifted forehead a single fat raindrop fell.

He'd ripped up Claudine's card in the lavatory of the 8:19 to Calais but he had remembered her counsel, hadn't he. He had been so awfully proud. \textit{Contradictory evidence}, he had repeated to himself, \textit{merely indicates something you don't know}. He'd repeated it in 1903 and in 1914 and two hours previously and he repeated it now, leaning on a lamp-post in the shadow of the Sacred Heart: \textit{You must pull it apart}. The peach-flesh, sucking off the skin. \textit{Take the thing to pieces}, dark-slimy at the stone, \textit{there's no point in doing otherwise}. \textit{Take it, dissect it, disassemble it. Reconstruct it and take it to your work, clean now and useful like a spanner to a pipe, and do it again, and again, and then you will be—}

And then you will be twenty-seven years old and standing in your rooms in Baker Street and.

And then you will be twenty-nine years old in Brittany, and on examining the evidence surrounding one Germaine Carco, a slip of a Parisian wife and would-be mother, you will conclude her incapable of a banal infidelity of the type you routinely turn away from your door for lack of interest. You surveyed the facts and drew a conclusion and if you, who have devoted decades to amassing evidence, to cataloguing it in monographs and deducing from it betrayals and atrocities, to fashioning it into domes and immovable arches and pulpits and naves, acclaimed and at the peak of the profession you have revolutionised if not invented—if you, then, find such commonplaces still opaque to you—

He half-sat on the stone base of the lamp-post. Dripping down his back and his trouser-legs. Plop, landed another raindrop on his shoulder. Plop, on the top of his head. The dome of Sacré Coeur loomed over him. Clouds had obscured the sliver of moon from his view.

Turning the corner, a cab slowed. Perhaps he looked drunk, sitting here against the lamp-post. Or \textit{(plop, plop)}: the onset of the rain. He glanced up and the cab stopped and he thought, vaguely: all right. All right. Made his limbs lift him, carry him; folded himself into the interior which was hotter, even, and stiller than the outside air, drops splashing the handles and the seat leather which was cracked and scratchy against the palms of his hands. He shut the door. He ought to return to the hotel, he thought, giving the address to the driver. He ought—ought to get back there and check on any messages. And perhaps John—he shut his eyes.

Perhaps, at the hotel, he could sleep. Hadn't slept on the train. Hadn't—hadn't slept at Roz Ven, not much. You must take a knife to it, he thought, and rested his forehead on the inside of the window, hot against his skin. You must pull it apart, and look inside. His head was spinning a little. He breathed carefully.

It wasn't as if. It wasn't as if Sherlock had dismissed outright, to take one example, the possibility of a liaison between Germaine Carco and Henry Jouvenel. He had said—what had he said? Sitting in the sun with Irene, rattling off possibilities and deductions like he did, Sherlock Holmes; the both of them building castles in the air to see how they held. Irene had admitted to an acquaintance with Germaine Beaumont, hadn't she, and with Madame Jouvenel; and then he had said, what: \textit{Madame Carco dotes on her husband}, was that it? \textit{Perhaps unreasonably. But one can dote excessively on a person, can't one}, Irene had said, with her cruel smile, \textit{and still misbehave with someone else}.

Nothing in that was... definitive. Such oversights were committed all the time. It wasn't as if—not as if he, Sherlock, had \textit{known} Germaine Carco. Not really. It wasn't as if they'd exchanged more than a few words; not as if he'd had the opportunity to observe her for any length of time; certainly not lived in any intimacy with \textit{Christ}, God.
Christ.

It would split apart, he thought, his whole—gut, and his chest. The whole bloated carcass. He shut his eyes, and rocked his skull against the glass. Plink-plink-plink-plink came the drops now, quick against the glass, and You must be Holmes, he thought. You must. You must, you must.

It wasn't, he tried again. It wasn't as if he'd scoffed at the idea. He'd acknowledged the possibility. Hadn't dismissed it out of hand, not by any stretch. And Irene herself: despite the way she'd gloated over—over information she'd known and he hadn't, her logical edifices were hardly sounder than Sherlock's if, as she claimed, she knew Madame Beaumont and knew the contents of the intelligence she was getting from Paris, and yet didn't know where her photographs might be. What could she really know of the girl, in that case?

And Irene had known Gretha, too. In what did that knowing consist? Had she known Margaretha Zelle? Had she known Mata Hari? Or had she known only Gretha, some Gretha she'd invented, who'd lived only in her rooms—who'd lived only, perhaps, in her mind? (Sherlock's fist, hard on his own leg.) Had Irene's understanding of her glamorous Dutch houseguest been as shoddy as Sherlock's had been when, across the Channel, bored in an airless room under a staircase, he had decoded mechanically the message Agent H21 had sent to Berlin from what might have been the front room of Le Chabanais, perhaps as Irene, knowing or unknowing, looked on? Strapped for cash Sherlock had deciphered, have had to ensnare officer from Verdun; send 5k francs. What, from those words, had he known? Living together in—in intimate quarters, had Mata Hari known La Fillette, as well?

Divorced from all meaning the single homophone beat against the mushy overheated inside of his skull and his grit-hot eyelids as the rain hammered on the roof of the cab: know; no, know. He breathed out through his mouth, sour tongue hot breath, in a litany that seemed, now, to warp and shift, obscuring the shape of something precious: You must (know); the presence of contradictory evidence, as in his mind's eye arches closed over him, and just around a cornice the disappearing tail of a summer suit-jacket; no; the stone curving perfect and heavy and then (know) tearing at the edges like flesh; only means you must; to expose the sky—

Sherlock's eyes jerked open. Forward, lean forward, breathe. Head between his knees until the wave of nausea passed. He reached up and rapped on the divider. His hands were trembling. You see, he thought, looking down at them, watching them shake. Physiology. A body of evidence.

'A change of plans,' he told the cabbie. Cleared his throat. 'Take me to the rue Chabanais.'

The cabbie nodded and Sherlock nodded and the cabbie pulled right. Sherlock sat back, open-eyed in his heavy suit-jacket against the hot seat, and lit a cigarette. A series of familiar actions; a series of familiar reactions. Ones he performed every day.

The cab passed a young woman on the arm of a young man; a young dancer smoking against the side of a building. He made himself look. Made himself observe. By the time the cab disgorged him his hands were steady and his breathing, if not quite even, was at least controlled.

And then, observe. Twelve rue Chabanais had a double entrance: the unremarkable street door in the unremarkable façade, manned by an unremarkable if robust provincial in livery, opened onto an enclosing chamber got up, with great elaborateness, like a rustic stone grotto. To the right of the outer entrance a secondary artificial cave sheltered a smiling coat-check girl in what looked like a fashion-house interpretation of a milkmaid's costume; to the left rose a great spiral staircase (semi-obscured stone, carved to look uncarved), and beneath it snuggled a second wooden door, complete with mediaeval-looking fastenings. The overall effect, though startling, might have been womb-like; though as he thought it the knife-like stalactites affixed to the ceiling took on a vicious aspect.
Sherlock, following on the heels of a party of convivial Faubourg men with their hands on the shoulders of a reserved Faubourg boy, caught the eye of the doorman and let his mouth quirk and his eyebrow rise and: you see, he thought. You knew the man would quirk his up in return. You thought you'd, what—imagined the last eighteen years? A body of evidence. Why, it's because of those years that you know that if you—if you duck back outside, for example. If you duck back out and lean up next to him, your back against the marble façade and your jacket tugged tight against the damp chill, then you know this too: how an offer of an English Dunhill, passed between the two of you (deep inhale; exhale into the rain), how a few minutes' conversation and a discreet ten sous will buy you what you want, will buy you the information that Irene Adler—that Irene Adler, as it happened, had gone out.

He must have let some reaction show in his face. The man leant a few inches forward, involuntary, before he caught himself, and Sherlock hadn't—but after all it was a fine strategy. Instinct borne of long experience: the man's desire to ingratiate would lead to words piled on words. As it was doing, even now.

'Called me upstairs,' Sherlock's new friend was telling him, unasked. 'Had me come up to the Fleurs du Mal Room personally to escort her client out. The gentleman was not pleased.'

Sherlock made himself chuckle. 'I don't imagine he was,' he said. His tight chest. 'Is that… common? In the middle of an assignation?'

'Never happened before. Not with her. Some girls do, but Mademoiselle Adler can generally…'

'Shift for herself.'

The man laughed. 'You could say.'

He passed the Dunhill back to Sherlock; turned to hold open the door for a pair of young men speaking rapid Swiss German: something about trading shares in English automobiles as Sherlock thought: Irene had been here tonight, then. Been here for some time, working. And then…? Had there been news? Intelligence? Surely it wouldn't have been his business, that—Irene Adler had no reason to care about John Watson, not really. Not sufficient, anyway, to break off a no-doubt lucrative engagement in order to run off in the middle of the night to parts unknown.

'Left with a lady,' his new friend was telling him. He was looking at Sherlock out of the corners of his eyes. Concern in the furrow between his brows, under his rain-splattered cap. But that was fine, Sherlock thought. That was all to the good. 'Tall woman,' the man went on. 'Plump. Not what you'd call the height of fashion, and Mademoiselle Adler is always so chic.'

Hot slick of relief; Sherlock swallowed.

'Ah,' he said, and then shut his mouth. He made himself follow the thought, follow the trail: not such a casual acquaintanceship, then, if, on their first nights back in Paris, Irene and Germaine Beaumont were running around Paris together.

He, Holmes, might follow them. He made himself think it: there was something to the idea. Track them back to wherever they were going. Get his hands on these famous photographs or—or just seeing the two of them together, after all. Observing them together, would be. Instructive. And any intelligence arriving for Irene while she was out (though it had been hours, he thought—four hours, nearly, since——) would, logically, still be waiting for her when she returned.

'When was this?' he asked; his friend said, regretfully, that it had been oh, an hour ago now, at least. He felt his shoulders ease. It was always easy to act, wasn't it, when the decision was out of one's
hands.

Sherlock Holmes knew how to make his mouth into shapes. A smile warm yet regretful: the work of a moment. He took the last drag of his cigarette and ground it out on the steaming pavement. Well, he said. That was unfortunate. He had hoped to see Mademoiselle Adler, but he would just have to make do, wouldn't he, with another of the lovely denizens of Le Chabanais. He flashed teeth at just the moment, he knew, when they would bite back against the shadow of surprise showing on the doorman's face: Monsieur was going in, then? To patronise this house of, well. But faced with Sherlock's blank smile the man schooled his features back to pleasant blandness and held open the door; and Sherlock passed back into the false grotto of the entryway and then, bypassing the coat room with his damp blazer still heavy on his shoulders, ducked through the smaller door with its elaborate hinges and hasps, into the inner sanctum.

The little door opened out into a surprisingly modest salon. From her perch behind a desk by the door a smiling woman, beautiful still though with skin tending to papery, in what Sherlock judged to be her early sixties, with her hair piled on top of her head and her dress a mass of artful drapery, rose and fairly glided towards him. A hand at his back; a welcoming patter of—of English. Tinged with Dublin. She laughed at his surprise, leaning back, hand on her stomach. Claudine had made just that gesture, he thought, that first day, in the Gare du Nord. Remember Claudine, laughing, with her hand on Sherlock's arm and John, who not an hour before had, had, had been—

But you must. Must observe quickly, in a new place. Taking in details. The tinsel-wrapped pillars; the chaises longues in their niches; the staircase, straight, not spiral like the one in the grotto, rising up out of sight. You've moments only, that's—that's the fun of it. The challenge. To memorise the salient details; determine a helpful persona, and put it into effect. Think (noting the angle of the staircase with the strategically-positioned podium): a newcomer and a foreigner, a man visiting such a place alone for the first time: such a person would need time. Encouragement, before he'd part freely with his just-changed francs. Sherlock rounded his shoulders; made his smile flutter.

'To think,' he said. 'Meeting here, with someone from Ireland!' He pressed the madam's hand and she smiled up into his face. Patted his back.

'Mrs Kelly,' she said. 'And oh, I could tell as soon as I spotted you, couldn't I? It's that good English suit of clothes,' she added. 'An English gentleman always knows how to dress.'

She ran a hand down the lapel of his suit jacket. The damp wool scratched against his wrists and the back of his neck. Her touch was motherly; just a hint of the other. But, he said, shyly, in the Parisian French of 1903, he could speak with the girls in their own language, too. Mrs Kelly, like a proud auntie, made a show of being suitably impressed. She would introduce him to one of the French girls, then, she said; so that such impressive skill wouldn't go to waste.

And Sherlock smiled, and kept hold of her hand. He let his voice speed along on six-month-old anecdotes about Dublin at which she laughed and ooh'ed with a mixture of nostalgia and professional obligation—and he knew, of course he did, after eighteen years, how to turn their bodies subtly as they talked; how to adjust their angle so that he could take in the steps down into the bedecked salon; the staircase across from the podium where Mrs Kelly had perched; the door in a niche between the salon and the staircase; and at the top of the landing, angled so as to give a view to Mrs Kelly of all the comings and goings in the corridor upstairs, via a series of discreet mirrors.

He only caught a glimpse but he thought, you can deduce the rest, as she led him into the little salon: two sides of the corridor plus (likely) a room across from the head of the stairs, meant a mirror facing straight on plus one on either side angled to reflect the banks of doors. Mrs Kelly steered him towards a fair-haired—no, all right, a dark-haired girl in dark-red silk, rising now from a chaise
longue as he, the shy Englishman with a fine command of French, brought her hand to his lips. She brought out a smile that was warm, suggestive—exquisite professionalism, he thought, and showed her his. Two sets of angled mirrors would mean that over by the drinks table (thanking Mrs Kelly for her kindness) there would very probably be a location from which the far reflections of the near wall would be visible from the salon.

You see? Sherlock thought to himself. Not so difficult. The girl was pressing up against his side.

'I'm Rachel,' she told him. Smiled, perfect. Strong chin, Roman nose, her hair waved against her face, just mussed enough to suggest mussing it more. Her gaze delivered to him with an immaculate veneer of pleasure. Of deference. Her… dressing gown, he supposed it would be called—her drapery of claret-coloured chiffon, gold-trimmed and spilling in falls over her breasts and her shoulders, with slits shifting open around her long pale arms—it fluttered against him every time she moved. It tickled the backs of his hands. Itched at him. It was, there could be no doubt, a garment constructed with purpose. Not the kind of thing Irene, for example, would be likely to wear, not with her particular specialties; but for this Rachel it must, he thought, prove quite effective. With a certain type, with her clients, with—with the kind of men who would want to be goaded into asserting themselves. Press her down and stop the bloody thing teasing them. Sherlock wondered for a moment if—at other houses, for example. Among men, for, for example—

You can angle her the way you need her, he thought. They've made it simple for you. Almost a disappointment. You'd be grateful, almost, for more of a challenge.

'Paul Williams,' he told her.

She smiled.

'Paul,' she said, and then: 'We're all among friends, here,' shifting with a practiced movement so that gold inlay fell open an exact fraction along the curve of her right breast. Paul Williams, Sherlock thought, would blink, and clear his throat. Paul Williams, feeling none of Sherlock's—feeling nothing like Sherlock felt, would be nonetheless taken aback. Ill at ease. Would wait a full second before turning away.

'I could do with a drink,' he said, to Rachel's elbow.

'Well, goodness,' said Rachel, with the pale column of her arm rising towards him, red folds parting around it until her little hand closed around his wrist, 'Let's see what we can do.'

So she led him by the wrist where he wanted to go. By the drinks table—an array of wines and liquors with a vigilant-looking attendant manning a no-frills bar setup for cocktail orders—Paul Williams would stand what he would consider too close to her. He'd feel daring just for doing it; like a schoolboy the first time he danced with a girl. Sherlock stood close enough to feel the warmth Rachel gave off through the tickling chiffon. She poured a glass of Champagne, handed it to him herself and he toasted her. Then in the process of edging them over towards the other side of the table he launched on a barrage of nervous chatter about drink: a subject on which, he decided, Paul Williams fancied himself something of an expert. Ah, he said: the 1900 Clicquot, a topping choice, so difficult to get across the Channel; and (inching a hand around her strong little waist, with the dark fuzz standing up on her forearm): brandies, in such exotic flavours, so many Cognacs and A—Armagnacs and look up, turn your head up, just to the side. You see? The wall where, surely, Mrs Kelly's mirror must hang; and there, just to your left, a discreetly-positioned chaise longue. You see, don't you? You know these things; you observe them and deduce them and they are true. You see? His head ached and he smiled.

'Are you all right?' Rachel was saying.
Paul Williams, who seemed to be clutching at the edge of the drinks table, might after all have a condition of the heart. 'I think,' said Sherlock, 'I could do with, with sitting down, just—'

'Of course,' said Rachel. 'Of course.'

He moved towards the chaise longue in the convenient alcove. She helped him and he, ingratiating, let her: her long smooth arm crooked perpendicular to her dark draperies, her hands on his elbow and his waist though he was, of course, perfectly capable of walking on his own. She settled him on the seat and then strode back out to to fetch him, she said, 'something calming.'

From the position in which she'd settled him, the drinks table itself was half-obscured. He watched her out of sight and then just—

—just a moment. Eyes closed hands on knees. Sick rising grinding teeth into chalk not thinking, not —

—and then opening his eyes, all right. All right.

One glance told him he had calculated correctly. From this position he had a full view of Mrs Kelly's second mirror, which reflected back the tops of the five doors of the side of the upstairs corridor nearest him, as well as anyone passing the top of the stairs. As he watched, the dark blonde whom he'd thought Mrs Kelly meant him for, climbed laughing to the top of the stairs with one of the Swiss financiers who had come in when Sherlock had been chatting to the doorman. Smiling she pulled him to a stop at the top of the stairs, and pressing him against the balustrade kissed him. They were both giggling when she broke away. It looked deceptively adolescent. Like breathless infatuation. It was beautifully done. She took him by the wrist and raced ahead of him down the side of the corridor Sherlock couldn't see. He closed his eyes and estimated the pace of footfalls; and a few seconds later could just make out the sound of a closing door.

Rachel came back into the room with a generous glass of something on the rocks. He took it and sipped it: good Irish whisky.

'Thank you,' he said. Paul Williams, he thought, would bluster. 'It's, ah. Only the air in here. A mite close, don't you find, and in this weather.'

'My God, yes,' she said, 'you're not the first.'

'No?'

'Why, Angelique, the other day, fainted at luncheon. She had to be carried out onto the balcony of the Moorish Room until she revived!'

Sherlock laughed as Paul was meant to. She settled down next to him on the chaise, in an artful approximation of casual that had just enough splay-legged ease in it to be suggestive. She, too, her body seemed to say, suffered from the heat; but she could stand to suffer it a little more.

Paul would look; Sherlock looked. The shadows of her limbs, red-cast. Rachel moved her knees: silk snagging on sweat-slick skin. The fine dark fur on her legs, tips of it just poking through fabric. He drank his whisky, looking away though he felt her notice it. He drank his whisky. In the salon, on the other side of the drinks table, another blonde was rising from a seat with the second man in the Swiss party, crossing paths with a group of young Frenchmen as they made their way towards the stairs.

'Now these whiskies,' Sherlock said. Rachel was leaning forward now, fanning her face and her décolletage with a straw-coloured fan like a great moth. Great flaky wings flapping in front of her
bosom. He felt the back-draft of moving air on his face and his throat. He said, 'Mrs Kelly herself must select them, mustn't she? When she makes visits back home?'

'She does indeed,' said Rachel, 'yes.'

'Lovely town,' he said, 'Dublin. Have you ever been?'

Her eyes were appraising. He was looking into them again estimating footfalls until the blonde and her banker got to the top of the stairs.

'Last summer,' said Rachel, at last. 'Mrs Kelly always takes a girl or two with her when she goes.'

Paul fell victim to a well-timed coughing fit as Sherlock, apologetic, turned his head to the side to spare her the brunt of the noise. The fourth door on the visible side of the corridor was just opening. When he turned back Rachel was rubbing his back with her long pale hand, arm half-extended from the shoulder.

'That's pleasant for you,' Paul said, dumbly, having recovered his breath. 'A summer holiday.'

Rachel's mouth quirked up. Just the very corner, just for a moment.

Just for a moment it—it tugged at something in him.

'Oh yes,' said Rachel. Her hand on his thigh. 'It was tremendously amusing.'

'I,' Sherlock said. Through the entrance to the salon Mrs Kelly was leading a tall, near-skeletal old man in an impeccable antique suit. Was smiling. Was leading him to a plump young blonde in pale blue, young enough to be his granddaughter. Mrs Kelly tipped her head just so at the girl from behind the septuagenarian's shoulder; the girl curtsied.

Probably dimpled, Sherlock thought. Possibly even managed a blush. From behind the old man's back, Mrs Kelly gave the girl a curt little nod.

Probably dimpled, Sherlock thought. Possibly even managed a blush. From behind the old man's back, Mrs Kelly gave the girl a curt little nod.

'EASY traveling companion, is she?' Sherlock said to Rachel. 'Undemanding?'

Rachel snorted. It could almost have been genuine. He glanced back at her in time to catch another twitch of that corner of her mouth. And just a shadow of a tick upward in the opposite eyebrow—well. He supposed Paul probably wouldn't have said such a thing.

'LETS you scamper off on your own, I imagine,' he said, 'Take in the sights or——'

'Lounge about all morning,' Rachel said, her voice low and full of laughter, and it. It was well done, he thought. It really felt, in that moment, tucked together behind a half-curtain as Mrs Kelly eased the blonde into the fragile lap of the old man, as if Sherlock and Rachel were co-conspirators. Almost—almost like children. Giggling behind their hands, so as not to be overheard by the grown-ups and made to come in for supper.

'Wouldn't ever,' he murmured, 'dream of making you fetch and carry, or——'

'Taking her washing out——'

'Bringing a coffee in bed, with a splash of whisky——'

'More like a whisky with a splash of coffee,' said Rachel. His laughter shook his chest and hers was low and snickering and almost, but not quite, unattractive. Her hand high up on his thigh. He didn't really mind. Far away in the salon a ginger girl pulled an Italian towards the stairs.
'Or drumming up foreign business,' Rachel said. 'None of that, God knows.'

'Spreading far and wide the, um. Fame of the house?' he said, and there. There, again, that corner of her mouth just turning down. If she'd been laughing with one of the other girls, instead of here with Paul, there would no doubt be jokes made about—about spreading far and wide. They would cackle, and slap each other in jest. Looking at her face, composed with mischief, he suddenly, stupidly, ached.

'It's always,' Rachel said, as Sherlock just—just brushed, with a thumb, the soft skin of her jaw; her cheek; that sharp left-hand corner of her smiling mouth moving against his skin as she exhaled and he said, 'It's always a proper holiday.'

Her lips just parted. Breath a little quick from laughing. She was good at her work.

Fingers light on her cheek and a thumb on her bottom lip: it was nothing so firm as a grip but she followed where he led; he brought her face to his face with a trembling light touch and put his mouth just to that twisting-down corner of her mouth. She wasn't a particularly tiny woman but she felt so small. His hand in her soft hair. He opened his eyes over her shoulder as the first door on the visible side of the corridor swung closed. Rubbed his face against her neck. Under her rose perfume some disturbing animal tang.

Then it was—acceptable to pull back, surely. Paul hadn't done this kind of thing, not much; he'd be flustered; soon he'd have to be very flustered indeed, so Sherlock could—

'You're beautiful,' he said. Unplanned. His skin prickled up, poisonous and sour.

'You're no hardship to look at yourself,' Rachel said.

Sherlock swallowed and breathed and looked—in the salon the old man had his hands up the skirt of his doll-like girl; his face obscured by her long blonde curls. Across the room the Faubourg boy sat stiffly on an elaborate sofa as his… father? uncle? laughed uproariously next to him with a brunette on either knee.

'Rites of passage,' Sherlock said, and then flushed hot. Squirm-gutted. 'Do you—where do you come from, then? I mean.' He laughed. 'Originally.'

'Not far.' She took her hand off his leg and just wet her lips at the skin of her drink. 'Rue des Rosiers. Under the roofs.'

'The Pletzl,' he said, and when she looked taken aback: 'I've family here,' in explanation. 'In Paris, I mean not—and I was always good with—with geography. You know. Neighbourhoods.'

'A man of many talents,' said Rachel, and sat forward, and smiled.

Her dimples, he thought, sat oddly on her face. Though they were quite the thing, weren't they? Some men, men who came to such places would look at her and—and. Sherlock could see, through her layers of paint, a mole, or a blemish perhaps, on her right cheek. The faintest beginning of crow's feet in the bruised-thin skin around her dark eyes. She leant over and said, low, 'And what about you, then? Where do you come from?' and Sherlock could breathe, could stop—stop looking.

Out in the salon the little blonde was murmuring in the ear of her elderly client; was leaning back; was tugging on his hand. Where do you come from? Pushing down on weird laughter he thought: a body of evidence. She had so little evidence! He could say almost anything at all, and what would it be? He could be Irish, like her madam, but English-educated. Could make himself the product of an English rose and an American industrialist. Could be the favoured son of a mid-level colonial
functionary, raised to knee-high in the jungles of Ceylon or India before being sent back to England for boarding school. *What about you, then?* Her fingers on his thigh. He fought not to gag. He'd had eighteen years' practice being anyone he chose.

'London,' said Sherlock. 'Marylebone,' and bit down on the inside skin of his mouth, a chunk of flesh tasteless on his tongue so as not to add *rooms in Baker Street. Two twenty-one bee*.

'London,' Rachel repeated. Sherlock swallowed blood. The press of her hand. Kneading like a cat would do at his thigh, her long pale arm with the fine dark hair prickling all over it. 'There, I've never been.'

The little blonde tugged and tugged at the old man's hand and at last he creaked to his feet; and Mrs Kelly, passing behind them just at that moment, slipped a little bottle into the girl's hand. They stepped: unsteady. Sherlock felt unsteady. Leaning on his cane. Sherlock, chunk of his own skin in his bloody mouth, a bag of ligaments stretched to snapping, forced his eyes open as the two of them took a step together. Readjusted. Took a step. The blonde with that little glass phial tucked under her waistband. Whisky and rose scent, heavy and mingling in the heat and Sherlock was going to—

'You'll—you'll excuse me,' he said.

He pushed himself up. The room tilted but he breathed and shuffled from right to left his—cup, fan, money clip. So much detritus, as if it multiplied in his slippery hands. Paul Williams could have been drinking, could have been—but Sherlock—

'I'm sorry?' said Rachel. But she was not, he thought, surprised. Sitting back with her hand curling loosely at her mouth as he sweated and stuttered and he, he, Sherlock knew that face. Knew it from the other side. Blinking, not meeting her eyes, he thought: next time she would know better, wouldn't she. Play her cards better. And he, Sherlock Holmes, dropping handkerchief and cigarette case like a clown, barely managed to glance up a final time at the mirror to see the old man being helped by his blonde through the last door along the corridor on the visible side.

'You'll excuse me,' he said. Swallowed. 'I—is there a washroom, or a.'

'Just under the stairs,' Rachel said.

'Thank you,' he said, and Rachel extended a hand for him to—to kiss, he realised, after he'd shaken it. He gave Rachel an absurd, curt little bow, jointed at the waist, a poorly-trained monkey. (You must, he thought. You must.) Spun on his heel and walked at speed through the salon, eyes meeting, for a bare moment, the gaze of the boy still perching awkwardly on the edge of the sofa-cushion next to his very much engaged older relation. Sherlock looked away.

The door to the WC was tucked under the stairs next to a pair of velvet curtains. Inside he locked the door and put his weight on his hands on either side of the marble sink below the gilt-edged mirror and shut his eyes and tried not to be sick into the basin.

Sinking-feeling; spinning-feeling in the dark. Why not let himself, he thought. Would probably feel better if he could bring something up. Anything—but the thought of it. Long sticky strings snapping off his lips and the whisky smell, he didn't—didn't want. Shut his mouth hard and told himself *you have to*. If only there were a window in this room. Fresh air. He said to himself, *The presence of contradictory evidence only means*. And upstairs there would be. And John—

Sherlock could. (Pale brown puddle on porcelain. Didn't want.) He could walk out. Just go back to the hotel. Why not? John would come back, if only to. (Lips pressed together tight tight breathe.) If only to collect his things. Perhaps he could explain to Sherlock, and Sherlock could believe him.
Or. Or if.

If Sherlock went back to the hotel and went to bed. If he went back to the hotel and went to sleep and slept for, oh. An age. If he slept for an age and woke up and John was beside him and when he went out in search of luncheon John was beside him and when he got on the train back to Calais and the ship back to England John was beside him then he could. Could just—no reason he couldn’t. Acid-grit in the back throat swallowing. Just keep operating under the hypotheses that had after all taken him this far in—Christ—

Slow the breathing. Forearms to porcelain; forehead to forearms; stop the legs shaking. Slow the breathing. Slow the breathing. Breathe.

There are. Are five rooms on the north side of the upstairs corridor. You know because you’ve seen them in the mirrors and you have, have. Have deduced the probability of. Five doors on the south side. One room at the far end. You know, you—you know, through empirical bloody observation, that the first, third, and fifth north-side rooms and, with 80% probability, the fourth room on the south, are currently occupied and therefore not the quarters of Irene Adler and you must. Two hours, now, at least, since the doorman saw her leave the premises accompanied by Germaine Beaumont.

He could walk away and go to bed and wake up tomorrow morning and everything might—

Everything might be—

Straighten your back. Open your. Open your eyes. In the mirror is Sherlock Holmes and so.

And so. Straightening up breathing. Mirrors in the stairway, trained on the upper halves of the doors in the upstairs corridor. Could create a distraction; cover the ascent but even then. Visible unless you crawl, or shield yourself with the bodies of others. The pity of a Rachel or a Mrs Kelly would soon turn to suspicion. If you could have stayed longer, observed more, but. But you must make use of the information available to you. Deduce.

Velvet curtains used as wall hangings next to a WC door would be. Certainly, almost—almost certainly a supplies cupboard and a back staircase. Wouldn’t they be.

He ran his hands over his face. It stretched; distended; he took them away and there again was Sherlock Holmes. The man himself. This was what he could do. What he had to do. He opened the taps. Splashed water on his face, his neck, ran his wet fingers through his hair. Loosened his tie.

He patted his jacket; his pockets. Took stock of bunched smallclothes; crumpled trousers. Bills; coins; money clip with its discreet modifications; half-empty cigarette case; silver lighter monogrammed Norbury. Crumpled shirt and oppressive jacket with an interior pocket. Nothing so useful for a distraction as J—as a gun. Fingers to his temples, pressing, but—

From the direction of the salon, rapid Irish-inflected French scolding was approaching the WC. He rested his forehead, then his ear against the door. On barrelled the voice, faster than the footfalls under it, overwhelming the low-voiced answers it was getting. He closed his eyes and listened. Mrs Kelly and her quarry passed the cupboard; passed the stairs. Turned down a side corridor. The harangue rose in volume for a moment; then came the click of a key in a lock, and an opening mechanism. A back door, then, or a door into a back room. A slide; a pause; a click; and Mrs Kelly's voice could barely be heard.

He gathered himself. Filled his lungs and let it out. Out. Out.

Nobody was passing. There wouldn't be a better time. Someone—Rachel—might be watching from
afar but he would have to take his chances. Didn't he know about calculated risks. He rumpled his hair. Let his legs go alcohol-shaky and opened the door.

In the salon the libertine Faubourg gentleman had lost his waistcoat, and half his shirt. The Italian was gesturing towards the stairs. Rachel was standing with her back to the WC and her hand on the arm of a man who might be a banker, and he had to, before she turned—so he made himself do it. Pushed aside the curtain of the first door and opened the storage cupboard; closed it; caught the eye again of the awkward Faubourg adolescent before pushing aside the second curtain, opening the unlocked door, and sliding into the gloom of the back staircase.

Back pressed to the closed door. Observe, now. Eighteen years of practice. The stairs were narrow, and lit by low electric lights. Sconces in brushed-gold holders. Another door at the top of the stairs. That'd come out in the centre of the corridor, or on the stair side of centre. He fumbled in his trouser-pocket for the money clip; slid the little catch by the hinge, and eased out the two bent pins inside it. In a dark rush like laughing he remembered Irene: *Would you go housebreaking*, she had asked him, *with only one type of pick-lock?* and that day in her hotel room in St Malo Sherlock Holmes had conceded her point. But then, he thought, snapping the halves of the money clip back together and replacing it in his pocket, he hadn't left his hotel expecting to go house-breaking; and no doubt Irene, too, had travel solutions to satisfy her particular needs.

At the top of the stairs he paused. Ear to the door. No sound from the corridor, or from either of the rooms adjoining the stairwell. He'd half-turned the handle of the door, but: a girl's giggle; a squeak; a rumble of male laughter and he snatched back his hand. The couple mounted the stairs, still laughing. The lighter tread running ahead in little rushes, as if the man were giving her cause to lead him on a chase. Her voice, at the landing, was breathless; and when they shut the door of the room to Sherlock's right, it was with a slam.

He thought of Mrs Kelly, then, possibly back in her customary place downstairs, keeping one eye on her surveillance mirrors and another eye on the goings-on in the salon downstairs. She would look up, no doubt; watch a couple's progress up the stairs; watch them into a room and then, surely, turn her attention back to the salon to take stock of what she'd missed. He eased himself down onto all fours, then twisted the handle, and cracked the door.

The corridor was clear.

Sherlock shut the door and shuffled on hands and knees out from the stairwell. His heart picking up and it all coming easier: observe. Deduce. The door he'd just opened was the second one from the stairs, and the one adjacent to the stairs was, as he'd just heard, occupied. Along with the four he'd already taken into account, that brought the number currently unaccounted for down to six. He crawled directly across the corridor, to the second north-side room, and cupped his ear to listen. Silence, silence, and then a thud and a crash and it cracked through him. Just on the other side of the door.

He jerked back but it was. Fine! Good. Heart hammering he breathed into the old achy adrenaline drain-off and felt his brain click-click-click-click. Knew he'd another one down. Knew he had to move. Might not be alone for long.

The crash had sent him recoiling most of the way back across the corridor so he kept on in that direction. From the centre south-side he could make out no sound. Picks in the lock with his hands hardly shaking and he felt the pins fall like they always did; like they'd done for years. He held the handle open but the door closed; crouched on the floor feeling smoothed-out and humming, thinking of Mrs Kelly and waiting for any—there. A burst of male laughter from downstairs; a large group just arriving. He opened the door and stuck his head through the crack.
Front-lit by streetlamps and backlit by the corridor Sherlock peered back at himself. Mirrors lined the walls and the ceiling and reflected back the minaret-carved posts and peacock-embroidered coverlet of a massive bed; multiplied the painted panels of pashas in rich robes, and the carved grille-work of twisting Kama Sutra bodies. Not a room named for a decadent French poetic volume, then. Sherlock with a click closed the door and moved.

An ear to the door of the fourth room confirmed his hypothesis that it harboured the dark blonde and her Swiss banker client; an ear to the door of the fourth room yielded nothing. This lock came easier, came steadier, his hands sure now, his breathing steady and God, familiar, and again he waited, hand on the handle, for a noise from downstairs to serve as a likely distraction. Instead, just behind him, the turning of a latch—

He pushed open the door; had to move. Crawled through it and shut it again after him. Adrenaline warm good steady, thrumming under his skin: this kind of waiting. Like homecoming. Across the corridor the door opened and disgorged a besotted-sounding young male voice and a rather amused-sounding older female one. Their banter had not changed tenor. The door clicked shut and their footsteps receded, unhurried, towards the stairs. Their exit would have covered his own movements; he was safe enough, then, for the moment. But the room in which he found himself was outfitted with anchors and ingeniously-designed hammock swings and a bed like a wide berth mounted on a suspension system so that when he crossed and sat on it the rocking motion mimicked that of the sea; and it didn't take the intellect of Sherlock Holmes to tell it was not Irene's. He would have to secure an exit for himself.

He crossed to the window, thrumming. Thinking of ledges and fresh air. The rain sluiced and hammered on a drainpipe which he could have used to slide down to the ground; but other than that there was only an inch, perhaps, of cornice, and nothing to hold onto to get 'round the corner of the building. Back out into the corridor he would have to go.

So. It would come down to chance. Tingling he knelt by the door; he couldn't hear properly what was going on down in the salon, and another couple in the corridor could hardly cover his emergence the way it had his disappearance. He would have to—so he did: cracked the door, slid through and closed it behind him. No alarms rang out. Quick-quiet in the corridor he crawled to the next door. His buzzing fingers worked at the lock. No footfalls, rushing up the stairs as the lock clicked open; so Sherlock, under cover of a name called out from the salon, pushed open the door.

The curtains here, unlike in the first two rooms, were drawn. He had to flick on his lighter in order to see anything at all; but when the little flame jumped in his hand he almost crowed. Felt his face stretch into a smile, and crawled through. Back to the closed door he groped for the lamp on the table; pulled its cord; and rose to his feet.

‘Fleurs du mal’ it was. The room was papered floor to ceiling in black-on-black fleur-de-lis brocade. The chairs and couch were upholstered in it. The four-poster bed was covered with it; the pillow-shams edged with it. It hung from the curtain rods and stretched tight over the shades of the floor-lamps. It was, he thought, turning about in the midst of it, mouth curving up, an impressive bit of all-purpose misdirection. Under most circumstances it would be difficult to look at the room and come away with any impression at all beyond black brocade.

Tonight, though. He moved away from the window, left knuckles rubbing at right knuckles rubbing at left. Lit-up. There was evidence to be gathered from this room, tonight. On the floor by the chair pulled out from the wall lay a paddle and some un-coiled rope; but the hurried departure of Irene and Germaine was not new information. This, however: the black-lacquered shelves by the bed were mostly-empty. A half-dozen red morocco trunks, the only splash of colour in the room, stood grouped by the door, some half-empty, others full. When Sherlock opened the black-lacquered
wardrobe (gold fittings, impressed with fleurs-de-lis) the right-hand side held only a black brocade dressing-gown, a pair of high black boots and a couple of filmy scraps of black silk. Irene Adler, it seemed, was either moving house, or about to leave Paris.

Sherlock Holmes hummed.

The left-hand side of the wardrobe was fuller than the right-hand side. It was also utterly meticulous. It had plainly been custom-built, and its array of black-lacquered pegs and cubby-holes held a matched and extensive array of immaculate black implements with gold fleur-de-lis embossing on their handles and bases. A matched set: but of course. Sherlock could have laughed, knowing the woman as he did.

Some objects were recognisable. Sherlock too had whipped horses, though never with anything quite so spotless or of quite such high-grade leather; and he knew blades, didn't he. Had his own kind of intimacy with them. The existence of the entire bottom row of objects he could have deduced from the tale Irene had told him in the hotel in St Malo: any locks she set herself to, he thought, would be well and truly picked. The uses of certain other things were opaque to him. Rings, and rivets. There were men, no doubt, who patronised her establishment for the very particular implementation of... of this item, for example; turning it over in his hands. The endless iterations of human perversity. He noted, in passing, the film of sweat on the backs of those hands, and their faint trembling. He sometimes shivered so, in the heat of the hunt.

Humming, vibrating, he returned the object to its niche. Metal clacked on lacquered wood and he wiped his palms on his trousers. Evidence, he thought. Chair; rope; paddle. A body of evidence. Window. A body of. The fleur-de-lis bed was massive and undisturbed and there was nothing underneath it and his brain went click-click-click. On the surface of the desk in the corner: a pristine fountain pen, a blank blotter. In the drawers: fleur-de-lis stationery, a fleur-de-lis seal. A set of neatly labelled glass ampoules tied with black ribbon into a fleur-de-lis pouch along with a store of syringes. Click click. A fleur-de-lis address book, written in a code that looked to be a simple addition cypher. A vest pocket Kodak, imported from America; she'd apparently not found anyone to imprint it with her mark. In the bottom drawer, after Sherlock in a few steady motions picked the lock, a black-handled revolver and a selection of papers and photographs, filed neatly by subject name. Nothing under H. A drop of sweat from his chin plashed onto paper. Nothing. Nothing under W. Nothing, he thought, but—

—but—

Misdirection. It'd be. Right knuckles rubbing between left clickclickclick. It'd be token weaponry. Token protection. The whole room, the whole woman was—there would be more. He knew there would be more, there would be evidence. There would be layers, wouldn't there, had to be.

He sat back on his heels with his tendons quivering about his bones. Layers upon layers. Sherlock Holmes, sure in his own skin, squared each object back into its place. Re-locked Irene Adler's desk drawers. Meticulous; precise. Anyone who came looking, after all, would expect to find evidence of speculation; of menace; of self-protection; so she made sure they did. The locks had given for him almost at once; it was too simple by half. There would be more.

Hands under the mattress. Fingers in all the crevices of the massive wood bed-frame. He'd thought she might appreciate the irony, but. Nothing there, nothing in the cabinet or the toilet-tank or the airshaft in the massive, blue-tiled WC. His breath and his humming-racing blood. Her trunks (careful work, lifting, replacing; but he knew how to go about such things, didn't he, Sherlock Holmes, he knew) yielded nothing more surprising than a riot of colour: yellows, lavenders. Whites. Each layer of silk and linen smoothed down as she'd packed them. Careful. His fingers smoothing, smoothing.
The floor was polished oak and would show a disruption. He lifted rugs. Walked a speed-wound circuit, listening for creaks. There were four; none of them truly loose. And the window: sash, frame. His smooth-oiled joints in motion. Evidence. The wardrobe: solid door, true ceiling, true back. True bottom on the right half; he needn't even remove the remaining silk-scraps. Always, if a search were sustained long enough, he reached a point where he could almost listen to his fingertips. Lovely, Christ. Testing the sides of the wardrobe's left half; pushing, teasing, and there: a click and his head: clickclickclickclick! Floodingrightness as on a hidden hinge the entire peg-and-niche construction swung out; and underneath it a compartment and in the compartment—

Unclench your jaw, look, observe—

No papers. No telegram.

Nothing but what appeared to be… was, yes. A photograph album. A brown leather scrapbook, of the kind a child might keep.

His hands in fists. Infuriating. He had to—to take them off Irene's belongings. All the humming in his blood curdled up into a high-pitched sour drone. You must, he thought, there were—were other places, the ceiling-moulding the wainscoting an overlooked compartment at the back of the desk, you'll tear the place apart but something. Tugged at him.

It was the brown leather. He reached out; ran fingers over its embossing. Die-cut feline figures were stamped into it, their tails twining in the smoke-like curls of the '90s. Could Irene Adler, then, conceivably have a secret fondness for cats? He thought of the red morocco chests with their cargo of pastel silk and linen, themselves adrift in a sea of uniform black fleur-de-lis brocade. And then this. A brown-leather album of a type one might have picked up at any middle-class stationer at the turn of the century. It had never been expensive. And now it was worn. Used.

He dropped to a squat; then sat cross-legged on the floor and opened, of all things, Irene Adler's family photo album.

Only.

It wasn't. It wasn't Irene's family, it was—

Newspaper clippings as far back as 1900. The mid-life novels of one Henry-Gauthier Willy: Claudine à l'école, Claudine à Paris; Claudine en ménage. The scandalous divorce of the man from his young wife ("Claudine divorced!" crowed the papers); the lawsuits that followed regarding the books' true authorship; the acrimony playing out between Colette and Willy in the society pages of all the Paris papers. (Irene Adler, Sherlock thought, feeling as if he were sinking down into the turning pages, would have had to look specially for these clippings; to venture out in her Chanel and her Patou to pore through library archives in search of material about her—what? Former colleague? Irene hadn't even arrived in Paris until the autumn of 1908, at least if her history was correct as John—as Sherlock understood it.) And the story continued: the husband, shocking nobody by coming out of the whole debacle unscathed. The wife Colette shocking everybody by her descent into the world of the music hall. Dancing in La Romanichelle to the titillation of the city! Appearing at the Théâtre des Mathurins half-nude! Causing a full-blown theatre riot at the Moulin Rouge, Sherlock read, spine sagging, thumb smoothing the meticulously square corners of the pasted-in clipping, by performing a love scene with the Marquise de Belbeuf under the ancient de Morny family crest. And then, turning the page: notices in provincial circulars. Amiens; Rouen. Le Havre, Normandy, 1908: appearing with noted pantomime artist George Wague and Paris violinist Claudine Holmès.

Cross-legged on Irene Adler's floor he had one hand to his chest and one to the faded clipping. 'Claudine Holmès ravished us with her depiction of the handsome burglar (or should we say the
beautiful burglarress) who pays court to the young Yulka: there followed some delighted innuendo to the
effect that Mesdames Holmès and Willy, who had met in Paris a decade before the latter's
divorce, mightn't be above paying court to one another off the boards, as well. Might have, Sherlock
thought, awash with a kind of chest-clenching vertigo: certainly might have. But didn't.

And so, he thought, so, so—

So this was how it came about. This was all there was. This was how it happened that a person knew
one thing and not the other: a matter of having sat in a kitchen at the French seaside, salt drying itchy
on your face, wishing yourself elsewhere while the person whom as a child you'd thought was your
—your strongest hope; your most kindred, most—most recognised spirit; while this, this *stranger* let
peach juice draw ants to the cutting-board and insisted on telling you some irrelevant—some
unlooked-for piece of—I *never went to bed with Colette*. While you, the great detective, half-
listening at best, thought only of your lover. (*Christ*). Thought of patting a bloody cat. Thought of
floating like a great bloated puffer-fish in the ocean but heard her anyway, your long-lost relation,
heard her because you couldn't help hearing her, and uninterested filed away her words so that now,
sitting on a floor in a brothel in Paris and confronted with a logical inference—one you might make
yourself, from the available evidence, bringing to bear the logic of long practice and the characters of
the women as you—as you knew them, you knew them, cast out you knew them not at all; of the—

Sherlock felt dizzy. Brushed at his eyes, hot, leaking; there was water everywhere and his breath
came in great heaving spasms and *damn* the Work, anyway. How could he have thought—how
could he have believed—? *This* was how it happened. Unlooked-for, against one's will. Despite
one's every intention, one came to know something about another person. Sherlock's head tilted back
and he gasped up at the ceiling. Tears slicked his temples and pooled in his ears and Irene's ceiling
mirrors reflected him back as he—was he—sobbing, he was. Wracked, like a fish on the sand. Even
with the person who he'd thought—who had been like him, he'd thought. Who he'd recognised, he'd
thought. Who had given him, he'd thought, the gift of his Work. Even with Claudine, *this* was how it
happened, how it—how it *could* happen. Eighteen years, he thought. Bent his neck back down.
Curling himself down, around his spasming core.

In front of him, when he could open his eyes: 'Claudine Holmès ravished us, the notice still read.
Unsteady his hand smoothed down the clipping, swimmy, tear-distorted: the cheaply-set text, next to
a poorly-printed promotional photograph. They must have had it made in Paris, Sherlock thought.
Smoothing it. The three players posed together with that fixed quality that still hadn't quite vanished
from the photographs of thirteen years before. Colette: you could see in her a younger version of
Madame Jouvenel. Her sharp little chin and her dark eyes locked on the camera. But here, in her
mid-thirties, she had the vestiges of girlhood still clinging about her. And, thought Sherlock, still
touching the thing, Georges Wague, next to her. Gazing up at her from the chair to which he'd been
exiled; too weathered for his city clothes. And Claudine, looking—looking—Sherlock had been
about to think, *identical*. About to think, *preserved*.

*Restored.*

And he couldn't—

He felt himself—cracked open. Half-panicked, not *understanding* yet tumbled in the undertow of a
grief that left him prised apart. Washed open and flooded with—

They had sat, the two of them, on the edge of her bed. It swamped him now. Relentless, clear in
touch and scent and sound, returned to him against his will: how Claudine, in her high-ceilinged,
whitewashed rooms, had sat with him. How she had turned to him, looking just as she still did in the
publicity clipping at his knees, and as she no longer did miles away at Roz Ven. How she had explained. How she had said: you can't let what's happened deter you. You must keep observing, she had said; because you and I, we have our work. A piece of contradictory evidence, she had said (and Sherlock, now, curled over on Irene Adler's floor, choked out in into his own bent knees) only meant there was something you have yet to learn. You must learn it, she had said; you must fit it together; and he had been—God he'd been elated, in that moment. Despite everything, despite all the rest of it, he had felt—he had felt as if, cast off, declared an alien being and left failing, flailing, half-drowned, he had been thrown a lifeline and pulled to safety by the only other of his own species he'd ever met. We have our work, Claudine had said, and it lifts us up. And he had known—Christ he couldn't bear. He had known her; he had known her; he had seen what it did for her; he had known her and he had thought, he had thought, he had recognised: here is the way that I can live.

On Irene Adler's floor, he curled over his own knees. Pressed his fingers into his eyes and the tears seeped through the cracks between his knuckles.

He couldn't stop them now, the memories. His little—God. Observations. He'd believed what Claudine had told him and he had set out to perfect the life she'd shown him and so he'd practised. And now—now, unstoppable, he saw each detail again; like a. Like an endless series of minute farewells. The way, in her apartment, the windows were always left cracked. The temperamental E pin on her violin. The way she'd never said, I detest the high necks of dresses this season, but had always waited until the last moment to do up the top buttons of her jackets and her shirtwaists, and he had taken note, believing that by so doing he could become—what? A person who knew her? But no, it was, was worse, it was—it was that, already knowing her; already recognising her as the only other of his kind; that he might use these observations of her, Christ, her sartorial preferences, of her idiosyncratic possessions, to triangulate an understanding of other people, of. Of everything else.

She had said so, Sherlock thought, heaving. His eyes hot, and swollen. Like a child he thought: she had said so; she had promised. She had said. And he? He had believed her. Recognising, as it turned out, nothing; knowing no one; he had believed—for eighteen years he had kept believing—even after he turned away from her, even with how furious he'd been, he'd kept believing, and—and the most grotesque thing was, he had been so faithful—

He made fists in his hair. Elbows dug into the floor; the sounds coming from his throat. He felt his mouth twist, and distort; his hot eyes came open and there was the clipping, still before him. In the little picture, meaninglessly, just as he remembered, the top two buttons of Claudine's tight-fitting man's jacket were undone.

He couldn't—he couldn't. He shoved his knuckles into his mouth until the sounds stopped. He couldn't do without it. It had been his way to live.

It had been, but.

But he didn't know her. Not even her; and if he hadn't known her then how could he have imagined he'd known—anyone? He hadn't known her; and she wasn't like him. For if he had, and if she were, then five years would have wrought a change. Sherlock had changed, in that time. So much as to be, hell. Unrecognisable. Sherlock at sixteen had been different—better—more careful—more skilled—had been cuttingly brief in his grudging notes to his cousin—had never spoken, more than he could help, with his mother—and was he to believe, now, that Claudine had shrugged and simply continued on? In the photograph in the paper she was got up in breeches and a kind of pirate’s jacket, a swagger in her stance but her long blonde hair loose down her back and over her shoulder, exactly like she'd taken it down in front of the mirror as he'd sat in the corner on her wobble-legged Queen Anne chair. Her violin, dangling from one hand: the violin that had been slightly too large for him when she'd placed it in his hands on her balcony: exactly as he remembered, and so he had
understood nothing. Nothing at all. If at sixteen Sherlock had left London, caught a train and a boat and another train, could he have found her and said—and she would have been there still? Just the same?

But she was changed now, wasn’t she. Unmistakably. If she really had been like Sherlock; and Sherlock like her, then the break would have happened that winter. 1903: he’d ripped up her calling card in the lavatory of the Calais train and thought of her as—as gone, as lost; as something corroded, from which to turn aside and which had turned away from him; and believing he knew her, he had known her to be irrevocably altered, as well. Or, he thought, now: if not that winter, then some other time which Sherlock, knowing her, would trace, at once, to its root. But Claudine, of all people—was he to believe, did he have to believe, that he was only recovering her now by, by chance, now after a war, only to discover that all along she’d been a cipher around which he’d seen nothing, understood nothing; believed in nothing; crafted himself laboriously into a monument to nothing; and alone in a whore's bedroom with the lights all blazing and the curtains drawn while somewhere out in the city his, his, his lover who days ago, on the train—

He couldn’t, he.

For a long time he clenched, and shook. There was nothing about any of it that he could. That he could do.

Well, he thought. He was quieter, now.

He could lie flat. He’d never make it back to the hotel, not now; but he could lie here. On Irene Adler's floor. In Irene Adler's half-empty wardrobe. He could fasten himself in, somehow, with her straps and buckles. Stretch black brocade over his head so as to muffle the tattoo of evidence, evidence, the drum which his brain, despite everything, continued meaninglessly to beat. Evidence. It came slow now, and regular. It kept him from sleep and it tethered into his chest his belching sucking heart. Evidence, it said, stupidly. You must.

In some obscure past, then, he thought, breathing into prickling-spinning and staring up at Irene's ceiling mirrors set in black hammered-tin fleurs de lis—in some way, five years after Sherlock himself had first met Claudine Holmès over the Montmartre deathbed of her mother, Irene Adler had known Claudine as well. And. And who was she, then, the Claudine whom Irene had known? And what resemblance might she have borne, to the woman Sherlock had—had imagined? Had observed? For in both cases Claudine had looked the same, to a camera lens. Were the two related, even? Factually, he could grasp hold of—of this, of: some version of Claudine Holmès and some version of Irene Adler had known one another. And some version of each of them had been known by some version of the woman who was Claudine's friend (not, as it happened, lover) and Irene's—employer? obsession? Some version of Colette, anyway, had known them both, some version of Colette whom Claudine in her turn knew now, here, in—in Paris, in the present day, knew sufficiently to defame her character in a Paris café over a bottle of Chablis for the amusement of Sherlock and. And John.

Through a halting, hiccuping exhale, Sherlock closed his eyes.

Those pins and needles. Cold in his toes and his fingers. Dimly he knew to keep shallowing his breath. Couldn't remember who'd taught him that. Claudine or his mother or. Perhaps he'd discovered it for himself.

He rocked his forehead against the wood of the floor. His blood not an hour ago had thrummed under his skin. You must now disassemble the structure you've been given, he thought. Piece by piece by piece.
His hands flexed now. Could feel the pads of his fingers, which was. Oh… good, he supposed. Could feel it when he pressed his toes down inside his shoes.

Piece by piece. But there were (pushing himself, shaky, to his feet) so very many pieces. There was nothing but pieces. He couldn’t—a cigarette. Perhaps a drink. His knees, creaking straight. He’d picked up the key piece, hadn’t he, and its skin came off in his hands. Irene's album, splayed out on the floor, open to page eight. Its innards leaking out all over his fingers and his face. That was the thing about liquid. No putting it back. He rubbed at his eyes. Perhaps the best way was to—to plant himself, like a bulb. To winter over. (Hand on the door-handle). Perhaps a cigarette. He was stinking, already: filthy and perspiring under his heavy jacket, which he hadn't, after all, taken off, or even unbuttoned; sweat running down his chest. Ruining the fabric of the pockets, probably, on the inside.

But let it, he thought. Let it soak through. Destroy the evidence. After all.

Chapter End Notes

1. Irene's "Family life; togetherness. It would drive Irene to murder" is a paraphrased Patricia Highsmith quote. Or, as Highsmith herself would probably have preferred I put it, a forgery.
2. Much thanks to the documentary BBC Storyville: The Paris Brothel for a wealth of information and visual images of the interior of Le Chabanais, all of which were extremely useful in writing this chapter. I highly recommend watching it! The faux-grotto entranceway, the basic appearance of the salon, and the system of themed rooms are all historical. A Mrs Kelly (or Madame Kelly) was the historical founder of the house, though this Mrs Kelly would either be her daughter or a colleague who took the name for its business value: the original Mrs Kelly died in 1899. The detail of the strategically-placed mirrors is from the same documentary, though they talk about it in the context of a different brothel of the same period.
3. The Fleurs du Mal Room is not (as far as I know) historical, but in my opinion would have fit right in with the general decadent ambiance and with Irene's particular specialisation. It’s named for Charles Baudelaire’s 1857 famous erotic-nihilist volume of poetry.
4. I realized belatedly that the name Rachel is probably a nod to the courtesan turned famous actress Rachel, from Proust’s A la recherche du temps perdu. The Pletzl is a traditionally Jewish Paris neighborhood, so she shares that background as well. This Rachel not intended to be the same character, though; just a glancing reference.
5. The broad outline of the newspaper clippings described, including names of venues and productions Colette acted in, are taken from Judith Thurman's Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette, some of them verbatim. Le Chair was an actual production (more information in the notes to Chez les bêtes, which is Irene’s point of view of working with Colette and Claudine in 1908), though obviously, since historically Claudine’s part was being played first by Polaire and then by Christine Kerf, the review of her particular performance in it is invented. However, there was definitely similar speculation about Colette and Polaire, as the clipping in this chapter makes about Colette and Claudine.
6. Further DVD extras notes on this chapter can be found here.
The movement of pain that is painless and motionless

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(EARLIER)

Monday, August 29th, 1921
1:30am

Irene, vaguely queasy, allowed Germaine to herd them out of Le Chabanais. Having untied her abortive client and had him fetched out by Andres and sent on his way, she'd nonetheless found the conjunction of black brocade and Germaine Beaumont to be—undesirable. It created an uncomfortable buzzing in her, as of a stringed instrument not quite in tune. And so: room door locked, master keys returned to the front desk, out on the pavement in just her peignoir and her black summer overcoat, sweating with her hand in the sturdy hand of Germaine Beaumont as if Irene Adler were a hapless child being led along on an outing.

Germaine hailed a cab. Irene pushed Germaine into it, hands firm for a moment on her hips, and Germaine went. Irene settled beside her and told the driver 17 Rue Garancière without letting herself think too much about it. What did she stand to lose? She was leaving Paris, after all.

Leaving Paris.

The cab clattered downhill. The women didn't touch: Germaine with her spine like a steel column and Irene melting towards her closed window. Germaine opened hers an inch for the breeze that came from being in motion. The air was heavy and still, and wrapped around them like a smothering cloak.

'Constantinople, I thought,' said Germaine.

Irene nodded. Constantinople. Irene Adler had offered this girl a Continental voyage. Incredible, but she had. And Germaine, waking up alone, perhaps taking out Irene's photographs from the place she'd hidden them and looked them over—as if she were qualified to look at those images and use them; see into them; recognise what there was to be seen—had given some thought to her proposal and concluded that she preferred to holiday in occupied Turkey. Germaine had bearded Irene in her lair. Germaine had concerns, but she was, of course, sensible enough not to talk about them here.

'I believe the traditional route is south through Italy,' Germaine went on, 'and thence to Greece.'

Irene's skin itched. Her armpits and her face. She must look grotesque, she thought; and tried without success to remember the last time she'd been out in public without first checking her appearance in the glass. What might just anyone see, if they looked in at the window? What might they take away with them? She felt the edges of her mouth stretching away from each other, two smeared and cracking bands.

'By all means,' she told Germaine Beaumont. 'Let's take the traditional route.'

Sunday, August 28th, 1921
10:30pm
'I shouldn't have doubted that you would go to him,' Sherlock said. 'But still: third-party confirmation is always valuable.'

_That you would go to him_. John opened his mouth but vibrating he—what did people say? _Let me explain, darling_, didn't they, in novels and films. Coating the inside of his mouth, false and saccharine, protesting: _It wasn't like that_. He tried to say—could say. He could tell him he had stripped himself, layer by layer, and and sat on Daniel's filthy tattered chaise, flinching nauseated when Daniel'd so much as feinted in his direction, and what a joyous reunion it had been. True loves reunited, surely, as John lied and lied and lied to him while Daniel with a tight mouth seemed hardly to listen, seeing a different scene, holding a different grudge entirely. Two souls yet one, the poets said, and characters in films: _We hardly touched_, John could say; _nothing happened_, in a novel, _darling—but it had been going to him_. Hadn't it. John, vibrating with fury in this strange hotel room: he'd done it. It'd been the bloody horrible best that he could do.

And before that, when he had been—been cruel to him. Whatever Daniel said, John had been. Careless with him. Selfish and neglectful. That morning, walking back from Daniel's studio with that portrait in his hand and the ghost of that farewell embrace on his skin and—and _People do terrible things_ stated baldly, in the open—well, there was a place for feeling like that: freer, in the morning light, as if the weight of years could be lifted off a person in a single awful night. There was a time for idiocy like that, but now—massed at the back of his throat the, the horror. Loomed up between him and the window; him and air; him and Sherlock's beautiful grief-bowed back. _We were lovers_, Daniel had said, more honest than John had seen him since the War, but John knew violence. Knew it within the cocoon of the bursting bombs. Knew it over the velvet of the _maison close_. And now Sherlock thinking—_Sherlock_, Christ, telling him to—thinking John wanted to, to hurt him. To _force_ him, thinking John wanted to do to Sherlock what John had—what some hired watcher had—what Sherlock and a glamorous whore had paid a man to watch, what they'd waited on a telegram to report that John had—stopping himself—gagging—

'I was glad when I saw it,' Sherlock was saying, at the window. 'That I'd asked Irene to keep her man on your tail.'

Then John was stood on the stairs. Had left the hotel room. Had left him.

It was unbearable. Irrecoverable. Not even _desirable_, which was—

John walked. He walked.

He ought to weep, he supposed. Weep, or vomit. Make some incision; cut away the rot; but he couldn't make himself wish to. Sherlock's whore's spy, watching him with boredom or mild curiosity. Drawing up a chair. On orders not to stop him as he did as he did as he did that. Unspeakable thing.

John walked. Trembled. Kicked the base of a lamp-post; _Not quite Glenkinchie_, Sherlock had sneered, and John imagined him and the formidable Irene Adler, heads together over their most recent telegram. Locked in a competition; hooded eyes; John knew what _formidable_ meant; it meant not just that she'd been able to tell Sherlock things about John that Sherlock hadn't known; that wasn't even the important bit. The important bit was that she'd been able to do it _cleverly_. With _style_. John grit his teeth and imagined them: their bright-eyed one-upmanship, Sherlock's posture opening to her, losing its superior frostiness with every modicum of surprise, inching closer as they preened for one another over their knowledge of the neighbourhoods of Paris and the distilleries of the Scots isles and the battles, probably, of the bloody Somme; and all the while there'd been a man sat within sight of John and Daniel as they'd thrashed about at that bloody café. All the while the Adler woman could've—Sherlock could have _asked_ her to send a fucking cable and then Adler's man would have interrupted them at the café. He'd have cut in on John's conversation with Daniel, would have
claimed urgent business in the provinces, and John would have stood up and wished the boy well and they'd—and John would never—

Jaw locked John stopped. Panting. There, before him, was flowing water. It couldn't be the river, it was too soon; he spat on the ground; couldn't have walked so far; he refused for a moment to accept it but there it stubbornly was. He breathed it in. Furious. The motion of the water below stirred up the air around him just enough that he felt the breeze maddening soft against his soaked face.

Up ahead of him a solitary couple strolled arm in arm along the esplanade. As he watched, the woman inclined her head; rested it on the man's shoulder. Then they turned; crossed a bridge; were gone. John walked on, past the bridge, not turning where they had turned.

In Sherlock's place John thought he couldn't have even borne it. It wouldn't have been a choice. Sherlock'd had enough wits about him to think of Irene Adler as formidable, to debate with her, to enjoy her, it was plain as the nose on his face, but John—he could never have sat by, doing nothing, listening to some stranger tell him about Sherlock being brutal and careless and untrue.

The Holmes machine, he thought. And now the Adler machine, apparently, as well.

And how would they have liked it? If someone had posted an agent at the window of Irene Adler's St Malo hotel room, as she'd posted one outside Chez Manière and Hôtel Marigny to report back on John? If someone had been watching the two of them, what sorts of new knowledge would he have gained? What sorts of amusing trivia would the spy have provided, for John to receive in perfect equanimity? How the two of them had looked together? Where they had stood, and sat? Had she insinuated herself into nearness? Stood too close, so that Sherlock would be forced to look at her or retreat? Or had she got his measure well enough to let him just un—unfold like he did, Christ, come to life like he did, when he met his equal? John ground his fingernails into his palms thinking: had she touched him? How had she touched him? But of course she had touched him: Sherlock had said she had sat on his lap, and told him about John, and Sherlock had let her. And Sherlock had said: The way she put things, one could understand the appeal.

One could, could one? A cab turned along the embankment and he put up his hand. He'd noted it all down in his moleskin, but in the end he didn't need to bring the thing out; only to think to himself, for a moment, chanting out the numbers one through twelve.

'Douze,' he told the driver, 'Rue Chabanais.'

The cab pulled away from the pavement and John, pointlessly swiping at his sweat-soaked face, thought: this—this Irene Adler, then. This woman who had helped Sherlock Holmes to understand the appeal. John had his research notes in the moleskin in his pocket: her address, a sketch of her history. The few newspaper photographs had shown a slight woman, dark hair, narrow mouth; but he still couldn't have picked her out of a crowd with any certainty, let alone picture to himself how she moved. How she must have moved, with Sherlock. How she spoke. How she'd spoken with—earlier in the day John had imagined her, somehow, with the mannerisms of Germaine Patat, cannily vivacious; but Adler, he reminded himself, was a Limehouse girl, originally. What did her voice sound like, these days? How had she sounded when she'd said—well. John Watson would have been part of it. John, or—or Doctor Watson. Watson, anyway, he could be bloody sure of that, and had she still sounded like Limehouse when she'd said it? And Sherlock, impressed with her even so? Or did she sound like a Parisian? Or did she speak English, perhaps, as if she hailed from a different part of London, a more respectable part, even the Holmes' part, in which she'd never actually lived? How had she pronounced John's name, this courtesan who had shared her whiskey with Sherlock Holmes, who had watched his face when she'd played the card she held up her sleeve? This whore who, as little more than a girl, had known Sherlock's favourite cousin; who had broken into his
rooms and stolen nothing but his name and a needlepoint cushion; who specialised in hurting her clients, and who had made Sherlock see—John swallowed. Who had made it seem, Sherlock had said, appealing.

Had she hurt his Sherlock, then? John's eyes, stinging. They had that in common, if she had.

The cab drew up a little shy of a nondescript façade: a doorman outside a domed wooden door, by a number twelve. Confronted with it, no longer in motion, John sat and breathed, with the ground wavering under him. Was he going to—what? Interrogate a prostitute about the methods she'd used to seduce his lover? He wasn't—he surely wouldn't succeed. He didn't know, even, what he hoped to gain. He sat with his heart clattering, still seething, rubbing together coins in his pocket; and then the driver glanced over his shoulder and let loose a volley of French, so John drew out the coins. His hands were shaking. He didn't understand how much the driver was asking for, and hated that he couldn't; and still didn't know the franc coins well enough to tell them by touch in the dark; and he hated that, too. He moved closer to the window, closer to the glow of the streetlamp, awash in fury, and wetting his lips to ask if what he was holding was sufficient, glanced up and froze.

He couldn't place her at first. But that woman coming out of the door, all but dragging another woman after her—that was—it was Germaine Beaumont, surely? John blinked the sweat out of his eyes. Stinging. Madame Jouvenel's secretary, he thought, her right-hand woman: it was none other. She was surely the last person he'd expected to see emerging from the door of a brothel at (he checked his watch) one-thirty in the morning, but: that Amazonian stature. The clothes, too, that looked like something from back in the '90s. It was Mademoiselle Beaumont. John watched her nodding in her businesslike way to the doorman. Mademoiselle Beaumont, putting out her arm for a cab, which pulled up in front of John's. Mademoiselle Beaumont, leading by the hand—was it—?

John leant forward. Squinted towards the other cab. Her hair and clothes were more disarranged than the grainy yet impeccable photographs John had seen, and she was slight enough to be mostly obscured by the bulk of Mademoiselle Beaumont, but there was no question that she looked like the woman. It certainly looked like Germaine Beaumont, on her first night back in Paris, was leaving Le Chabanais with Sherlock's formidable Irene Adler.

He didn't even try for the direction in French. He'd probably never known it, and anyway the slant of the driver's eyebrow was already eloquent with disdain. John gestured to the machine pulling away from the pavement in front of them, and said 'Follow! Follow!' too loudly, like the worst kind of tourist. No matter; it got the job done. John licked his lips with his heart beating a little bit, just a bit, like London.

It was hardly a chase at high speed. Disgusted though the man might have been, John's driver knew enough to stay back a bit, and Germaine's cab seemed in no particular rush. So they moved in a stately progression along the Avenue de l'Opéra. John sat back, vibrating. He watched.

If that was Irene Adler, John thought. If that was her, then how pleasing—how immensely satisfying—to be turning the tables. Here he was: the unremarkable John Watson, watching her, following her, without her knowing he was here. He would find out where she went. He could find out what she did, and who with: discover something, perhaps, that Sherlock didn't know. Something that would come as a surprise when John—when John went back for his trunk. He swallowed, fingers hard on the seat-leather. Perhaps John could manage for once to take Sherlock by surprise. A parting—Christ. Parting shot. Besides, he thought, even if he knew bloody little else (every muscle tight in him) even if he hardly knew himself, John knew Sherlock Holmes, and Sherlock wouldn't shut him up; not then; not like he'd just done in the hotel room when John had tried to say—because this, this Sherlock would want to know. He'd want to know if Germaine Beaumont and Irene Adler were absconding together in the dead of night.
And were they absconding, then? John pressed forward in his seat. Squinted into the gloom as if he could see through the back of the cab ahead, past the edges of the back window. Coming out of Le Chabanais, he remembered, the women had been hand in hand, Beaumont pulling the other along; but now, as they passed beneath the street lamps, he could glimpse enough to see that they were seated well apart. The larger shadow sat very upright, in the centre of her seat so that her shoulder and the side of her up-swept hair showed in silhouette. The smaller one leant towards the window, all but hidden from his view. Unbidden John thought how, earlier that night in the cab from the train station, he and Sherlock had taken turns leaning towards their own windows in much that way. They had looked out at the Paris streets, and each had thought to himself about the Hôtel Marigny, and they had struggled to make conversation about Bertrand Jouvenel's dirty schoolboy poetry and—and Irene Adler. Irene Adler who had given Sherlock *all the relevant information* he could want, about John. The Irene Adler John had spent the afternoon researching. The same Irene Adler whom John was now following past—what? The Comédie Française, apparently, as she leant towards her window, away from her travelling companion, just as Sherlock had leant away from John. Were there things, then, that Irene Adler was trying not to say to Germaine Beaumont?

But—most likely not, after all. Most likely, John thought, sitting back against the leather, hands knotting in his lap, he was seeing in the shadow of Irene Adler what was already in his own mind. And John's mind, as Sherlock would no doubt remind him if he were here, was nothing like the formidable Adler's. Perhaps the woman was merely nodding off. Perhaps she was putting on an elaborate display of boredom, for reasons of her own. If she really were intellect enough, and actress enough, to impress the likes of the Holmes machine, then what could John Watson ever glean from watching the shadow of the tip of her right shoulder from a hundred yards, in the dark?

Even if—say, thought John, say some hired man could report back what he'd seen, looking in that window at Sherlock and Irene Adler because John had paid him to watch and not interrupt; to watch and do nothing. Say some hired man had been knelt on the balcony with a camera so that John, sitting unmoving in his own rooms, could hold in his hands a record of just the way the woman's narrow spine had arched; just how they'd turned towards one another, like sunflowers turning; just how Sherlock's face had looked when she'd—when she'd said *Watson*. What would John bloody know, from looking at those photographs, more than he already knew? If Sherlock had had photographs of John pressed up against the wall with his, his cock in a boy's mouth while Daniel's eyes rolled up and he sh-shook on the floor. If Sherlock looked at that he would know John had hurt him, hurt Sherlock; but he wouldn't know how John had been hurting Daniel. Not even Sherlock could have looked at a photograph like that and seen the Lens farmhouse, or the hospital in Bourg. Even if he'd had a phonograph recording, even if he could've heard John's story straight from John's own traitorous mouth. He still wouldn't know the half of how John, in that moment, had been weak. And if Sherlock Holmes couldn't make out the priest holes hidden inside a photograph like that, then John Watson wasn't worth the price of looking.

Yet he looked, didn't he. Still narrowed his eyes against the gloom of the Paris street so as to notice when Germaine Beaumont brought a hand up to smooth her hair. Didn't tell the driver to turn about. Did he.

The cab ahead jolted. John thought the smaller figure must have bumped her head on the glass; but she came to rest, again, leant to the left. John could almost taste the silence in that cab, stretched taut like the air had been between himself and Sherlock—only, perhaps it wasn't. The sudden thought, pitching in his head: perhaps they were talking. Perhaps they'd been talking the whole time. Neither posture spoke of communion, but perhaps—perhaps, John thought, this Adler was finding Germaine Beaumont exasperating. At Roz Ven Beaumont's speaking style had been clipped; undemonstrative; but also uncompromising. Perhaps she was talking at Adler, in her unavoidable way, and Adler's posture was an attempt to escape the barrage of words. Daniel, angry at 'Mark' for a family trait he'd held against John for three years, had refused to meet his eyes. And after John had—had bored him,
probably, with a confession he could lay no honest claim to, then Daniel had raised his eyes to the ceiling and told him he'd been in love with John, and still wasn't sure John felt more for him than guilt.

The cab before them veered right, into a traffic circle; John's followed. To their left, on three sides of a wide courtyard, columns rose up: familiar, even in the gloom, from a hundred notecards and commemorative plates. There it was: most people, John had said, in the train down to Paris, are talking about the Louvre when they say things like that. But Sherlock, the menace, the madman, who would have taken John to see skinned corpses and—what had it been? preserved battlegrounds of early evolutionary theory, Christ—Sherlock bloody Holmes wasn't most people, was he. He wouldn't be in any doubt, he'd—he'd know, surely, everything John had ever done, ever thought, ever felt in his presence. Even if there was no—hope, even if it were irretrievable. The man had known the Panther's life story from a gown glimpsed hanging in an upstairs window; he couldn't doubt that John—

John pushed down. Swallowed down pushed down.

They were crossing the river, when he opened his eyes. His cab was almost to the other side, and he peered out at the buildings they were passing until he glimpsed Voltaire. Took note. Up ahead, he could make out the silhouette of the Adler woman a bit more upright, though the two were still spaced carefully apart. They stayed that way: held still, as far as John could see, as they turned left, and left again. Against the rising unpushable tide inside him he listed meaningless details to himself: the slight looseness of the back-right wheel of the cab; Adler's black lace getup and her lack of a wrap, her lack of a hat; the officious way Beaumont had lowered her head to confer with the doorman. Everything he could see, or remember. The list wasn't long.

If bloody Sherlock could be here, John thought. The sharp edge of something yawed and settled and he thought again: if benighted Sherlock Holmes could be here in this godforsaken cab as he was in London then he would bestow upon the vehicle ahead one casual glance and then be impossible, be—scoffing, sneering, rattling off ten new facts about its inhabitants of which idiot John Watson, despite all his bleary-eyed staring into the dark and his enumeration of facts and his too-careful list (Université; Saint-Germain) had had no idea and no hope of an idea. What Sherlock did always felt like magic, but he got so angry when John said so. He always insisted John could do it too, that anyone could do it if they would only observe, so surely Sherlock in turn had observed John.

John rubbed his eyes. With common people, with—with ordinary people, like him, like Daniel and Mark and Patrick, it was understandable, it was—perhaps unavoidable. John had looked at Daniel and seen a ruined innocent; and Daniel had looked at John and seen his lover, unfaithful to him with his own guilt. With ordinary people it was only to be expected that such mistakes would be made, John thought, as the cab ahead pulled up to the pavement. Daniel was wrong; he was wrong; and it grieved John like a spot rubbed raw deep in his chest that there was nothing he could do about Daniel's vision of him; but it made him—it drove him mad, shifting panicked on his seat unable to settle, unable almost to breathe, to think Sherlock might see the same.

Up ahead, a cab-door opened. A large shape emerged; then a smaller one. He could see even less than before: from the niche by the gardens where his cab was pulled up, he stared down into the shadows of the the side-street and below a covered causeway that arced over it. The smaller shadow pushed open the street doors of a building halfway down, and walked through them. The larger shape followed after her.

They were gone.

John sat for a moment, looking at the shadow where they'd vanished and thinking: Sherlock wasn't
most people. He couldn't be. He wasn't. Was he.

The driver made a noise so John at last unclenched his hand. Gave over the coins and they were enough, apparently. Probably too much, but it got John out and back on the pavement, into the blanketing still heat. The cab pulled away from the curb and there he was, standing on a corner, staring up at a bank of windows. Up and up.

Down the right side of the little street John crept, keeping to the shadows. He passed under the causeway; walked about halfway down. His restless idiot body would have walked on. Freed from the confines of the cab it wanted to stretch itself. To flee again, no doubt; but he would master it. There was only one door through which the women could reasonably have gone: the big wooden double portal at number seventeen. So John stopped; pressed his back against the stone of the building opposite. It was damp from the damp air, and still warm from the heat of the sun.

It had been less than a minute since they'd disappeared from view. The steps up would be narrow, he thought. Twisting, worn-down stone steps. He let his eyes rise slowly, floor by floor. Behind a window here and another there, oil lamps flickered. Just at the very top, his eye snagged on movement: the casement on one of the half-windows under the mansard gables moved up; then jerked up again. The figure who raised it was a slim shadow: dark on dark. It withdrew, and a moment later the flicker of an oil lamp sprang up.

John settled back against the wall. Squared his feet against the hard pavement. Looked up at the flickering light in Irene Adler's second set of rooms.

Secret set of rooms, he would have wagered. The voice in his head that, damn it. A wealthy woman, et cetera, house of Patou house of Chanel house of God only knew, why would she take digs in a hovel like this one Watson, and so on, by God an imbecile could see it, and so forth, she wants a place she can lie low, a bolt-hole where she can transform. Are you certain we're still discussing Irene Adler, Holmes? Upon which, as if he hadn't heard: Or a place where she can revert. A pause, for effect. Where she needn't perform. So: she'd hardly have informed her place of employment et cetera feel free to confirm the fact but you'll find I'm correct Watson and so on. And so on, in that general vein. John ran his hand over his face; breathed deep.

Sherlock, then. Think about him. Dead-on.

John had had such a clear image. A half-hour ago, ten minutes ago, he hadn't been able to escape it: it had borne him along when he'd stormed from the hotel. He'd closed his eyes and breathed to the rhythm of his lover, sneering; his lover, laughing; Sherlock with well-earned contempt saying, I'd've done the thing properly, telling him, I'd have followed you in. John wanted it back, that clarity. That energy. But all he could see now, when he thought of Sherlock, were the awkward abrasive ill-fitting pieces of him. Sherlock, bristling at a once-favourite cousin. Sherlock, ill at ease in a hostile house, in a strange town. Sherlock awake as usual in the night, accosting a lady burglar. Sherlock, combing the coastal towns of Normandy in the first heat of a cool summer until he found her, and she proved formidable. Sherlock, who John loved. Who he loved—but, sinking down into a pool of himself, he couldn't feel it.

John was sweating. His bones ached. He thought of lying down on the warm pavement. Instead, upright and staring at the unchanging flicker of the oil lamp in the attic window, he imagined Sherlock, gawky and cutting as he was, in a hotel room in the provinces, drinking whiskey with one of the highest-paid courtesans in Paris.

He couldn't picture it. Not at all.

Sherlock had—had surprised her. Harried her. Questioned her. Laid it on thick with her, and then
she'd said *Watson*, and told Sherlock that he was betrayed. John wished, suddenly, nonsensically, that he had been there with Sherlock, helping him: as the two of them always did in such moments. Now, like this, he couldn't hold the pieces together. She'd sat on his lap? Told him about some photographs?

And how had they left it, then, with one another? After this compelling, this appealing, this *formidable* heart to heart, after which Sherlock had assured his new friend that she ought, by all means, to keep her spy on the movements of John Watson… had they embraced? Kissed good-bye? And before that, basking in his new discovery, had Sherlock been bright and exultant, the way he got when he was closing in on the solution to a tricky problem? Had he swaggered as he did? Twirled about like he did, catching her in half-truths? In lies? Gloated as he did, beautiful as he was, until she'd said—?

Up in the room where Irene Adler was illuminated by a flickering oil lamp, no movement showed at the window. John stumbled a little, stepping down off the pavement and into the street. Stepped up again onto the pavement on the other side. At his back a car rumbled by; his shadow stretched and jolted, and then folded back to the pavement, and faded away.

John put a hand out. He pressed a palm to the old paint. It was cool against his skin. He thought about opening it and following them up. But what would he do? By the time he opened the door to Irene Adler's secret rooms, she and her guest would have stopped whatever it was they were doing: leapt apart, or together, or shut their mouths, or opened them. Looking at them would no longer have any effect.

Instead John just stood, his hand pressed to the paint. A fat raindrop split against the back of his head; rolled down his neck; he didn't startle. Another, splashing onto the skin of his wrist. He backed up into the street. Raised his face for the drops to break against his eyes, his mouth. He had the sudden urge to take off his shirt. His trousers, even. The sky leaked down on him; he licked it off his lips.

It was hot, still, even with the rain. An odd sensation. All the rain John could remember was like London rain, like Lens rain: seeping and drizzling, like liquid leeched off ice. A person cringed away from it, all their muscles pulling onto their bones. All their skin prickling up. Winter in Baker Street was one long parade of Sherlock hunching his shoulders, layering on scarves, anything but his brother's umbrella: from September to June he was always, always cold. Warm rivulets ran down John's spine and his legs and pooled in his shoes and with the last of something important breaking apart deep in his chest he thought of Sherlock, hearing that John had hurt him. Had chosen to hurt him. Hearing it from a stranger, in a strange place.

And Daniel, that same night: —*I don't know if he was, with me.*

The storm rolled, and gathered. John stood in the street with his face tipped up, like a chicken about to drown. The water sheeted. It sluiced down into him: thousands of blunt-headed pins. In the light from the street lamps the sheets buffeted one another; hit and rebounded. Like swallows, he thought, massing in the autumn. Like an air battle. Where the water hit the pavement steam rose up. John's shirt was stuck fast to his skin. Water dripped off his nose.

John had been. Had spent months in love with Daniel. Years maybe. Daniel had been wrong, he thought, he'd been wrong, he had, only—

Car horn; headlights through the downpour. John jumped back. His heel caught the edge of the pavement and he sat, hard and sudden, on the wet concrete. The car splashed him as it passed; with the driver laying on the horn long past the point when he could see him. He kept at it long enough that the outraged sound faded with the car into the sheeting rain. John wiped water out of his eyes,
pointlessly, elbows on his bent knees, looking up at Irene Adler's window.

A shadow stirred. He wiped at his eyes again. A darkening movement coalescing into a slight, dark silhouette. She'd taken her hair down, he noted. Even in the heat.

Daniel hadn't been wrong, had he. Not exactly. John had felt—greedy; in need. Overcome, constantly. Possessed of a desire to, to atone, to protect. To be of use. But Daniel had been talking about how John had done things to make Daniel thankful because John approved of himself when Daniel was thankful. Because the winged monster John imagined at his back quieted when Daniel was thankful. Because a thankful Daniel was surely still uncorrupted; uninfected. Perhaps Daniel had loved John, but John—even now he wanted to bend his head down; sink to his knees. Perhaps John had only wanted to be absolved.

Had wanted it so much that he had chosen. If there was no congenital flaw, he thought. No miasmic contagion, no sinister winged beast pressing him forward into the fire but only ordinary John Watson, making decision after decision to re-make his lover, against that lover's will, into some amalgam of priest and sacrifice. John had chosen that. Had chosen to refashion Daniel to fit the shape in his own mind; again and again, rather than choosing to be with him. And then Daniel, past breaking, had refashioned John in his; and John—John had imagined that because he wanted it, because John Watson wanted it like he'd always wanted it but wouldn't earn it, he could stride back into Daniel's sight and force him present. Force him cured.

He hardly felt the rain, now. It was just a warmth, a blanketing. A tingling all through his skin. At the window Irene Adler put a hand to her nape; took it away. She was angled towards the room. The set of her shoulders: leant forward, face forward. She was listening, John thought. However she'd held herself, in the cab, however she still protected herself with (he thought) her crossed arms: she was listening now to Germaine Beaumont. They were talking. Arguing, perhaps; but now her spine was uncoiling. She was gathering something up; she was moving towards Germaine, away from John; and all at once John couldn't—couldn't bear—

As soon as he stumbled forward he felt the rain, again. So thick he could hardly see: he kept his right hand on the side of the building, and made his way back towards the gardens. He couldn't recall—didn't remember—but that had been a major street; surely there would be a telephone box on a corner. His eyes as good as closed in the torrent: he saw the image of Sherlock: Sherlock, begging him, Sherlock—Christ. Turned away from John. His beautiful bowed back at the window and John had left him. John had said hard words and not. Not gone to him.

John stepped off the pavement into water past his ankle. Sloshed on. He knew vaguely he'd be invisible to anyone: cars, bicycles, trams. He gained the garden side and grabbed out for the wrought-iron railings. It felt like swimming. Bizarre to be so thoroughly drenched with his shoes still on, squishing and sloshing: each foot must weigh a stone. His throat stung from breathing in water.

At a street corner he turned, keeping to the garden railings. Place like that'd be mobbed with tourists; there'd have to be—near the entrance, maybe. And yes: across another street, swift-flowing like a river out the garden gates: there was a telephone box. He forded the street: water above his ankles. When he opened the door of the telephone box and stuffed himself inside, the absence of the rain on his head felt for a moment oddlyitchy. Oddly lonely.

He hadn't even thought, until now, about whether there were coins in his pockets; but thankfully there were. Hotel Bel Ami, he told the operator, and then the room number in English to the front desk clerk, repeated loudly while he wiped his face and the glass of the call-box fogged. Sherlock, he thought, as the rain beat down on the roof of the box and the line clicked and whirred. Please, he thought, nonsensically. Please.
He had a momentary flash of that different Sherlock, the London Sherlock, with his raised eyebrow and his What's this, Watson? Leaving your observation post just when the subject showed herself? and John rested his forehead against the glass of the box and thought, I'll make it up to you please, thought darling, I can explain.

But the front desk clerk came back on the line. Pas de réponse, monsieur: but John had worked that out for himself. He felt his spine sag, then straighten.

'Bon,' he said, and put aside a dozen questions, requests he could have made in English, and said, 'Un—un—a message, je peux—leave him a message.' He couldn't make it a question. It was a demand.

'Oui,' the man said. 'Un moment.'

There was a sound of rummaging and then the man said, in a heavy Parisian accent, 'Go ahead,' and with a surge of gratitude out of all proportion with two words in his native tongue John said, 'Write—write.' he licked his lips. 'I'm so dreadfully sorry—' paltry, '—please for—no, I.' Clearing his throat. 'Please—don't leave Paris until I get back—' his battering heart, '—I—' darling '—want—no —' it was hard labour; but it was the Continent; but it was a written record, and inadequate besides; but it was Sherlock, imagining John wanted to hurt him, imagining John was leaving him, imagining John had been, been bidding time with him the past year, so '—I, I love you.' John told the front desk clerk at the Hôtel Bel Ami, and waited, head pressed to the glass, for the man to recoil.

'C'est tout?' he said, instead, sounding coolly professional. Like he did this every day. John closed his eyes.

'Oui,' he told him. 'Just—make sure he gets that, when he gets in.'

John breathed. The glass of the telephone box was completely opaque, now. The mouthpiece dripped gently down onto its cradle. Rivulets of condensation ran down the inside of the glass, and even the wood. The drumming on the roof continued, constant. Almost soothing. Like weeping, John thought, propped up against the wet side of the box, enclosed like an embryo in a glass and metal womb. And drumming against his skull as the water drummed at the roof of the box: Paris Sherlock, left alone, not calling him back; Paris Sherlock, saying formidable and, and helped me; and then, he thought, London Sherlock, the London Sherlock who was always with John, who never escaped him, berating him for leaving the formidable Adler so long unattended—so John swallowed the rabbit-panic under the surface of his skin, pulled his jacket pointlessly tighter around his shoulders, and opened the door.

Nothing had changed, when he beat his way back to his position in the Rue Garancière. The torrent continued unabated; the little light in the attic window still flickered. Germaine Beaumont, he supposed, might have left during his absence; but who left a brothel at half one in the morning with a woman like Adler, accompanied her back to attic rooms, and then left at five o'clock in the morning, in the midst of a storm? John certainly wouldn't have done, he thought—and then, stomach sinking, Sherlock's voice in his head: the very first thing I'd want, if it were me, would be to be taken to your rooms.

John swallowed. Hands on his knees he breathed. He'd tried him. He'd tried him, he'd left that message for him; he couldn't very well rush out pell-mell into Paris to find him and surely Sherlock hadn't left the city. He'd come back and get John's note, he would, he—he must; and in the meantime he'd want John to stay here, to learn what he could, he—wouldn't he? John pressed his back against the building. Looked up at the attic windows. The dizziness passed. He breathed.

If it were me; but there'd been more, hadn't there. If it were me, Sherlock had said, and I'd got you
And then, seizing in John's throat to remember: *if it was really you, after all that time.*

It wasn't, John should have said. It seemed so simple, now, standing impotent and soaked to the bone, looking up at Irene Adler's gas lamp. Why hadn't he leapt in, in that moment? Why hadn't he said: but it wasn't really me, that Daniel saw. It wasn't really him I remembered. Nobody regained anything, he should have said, and going to Sherlock, touching him—why hadn't he touched him? It had seemed so hopeless. But if it really were hopeless then what did it matter? He should have tried, he should have said—. There was no recognition in the business, he should have told him. And even if there were—

The wind came up. The little light in the open window flared, and diminished. A shadow passed, too far from the glass to be a silhouette; and then another. Both still there, then. John, pulling his jacket closer around him, thought he saw smaller flare of light from within, from John's left. A cigarette lighter, perhaps. It didn't come again.

The rain slackened to a pour; then to a drizzle, and the sky, too: for a half-hour together John wasn't sure if he were imagining the grudging grey lightness coming up behind the clouds. It was colder, now, in the chill of early morning. Still the oil lamp flickered on, though by seven it was more difficult to see the comings and goings of the shadows behind the glass. John shivered. The muscles in his thighs and his back had locked up; leaden.

'Pardonnez,' from his right, and he didn't turn at first. Nobody spoke to John in French; they could tell just by looking at him. But the voice, a girl's voice, again: 'Pardonnez, Monsieur,' and it hit him, at last, that she was talking to him.

His creaking neck. Stiff cold down his shoulders. She was a little thing. Too young for that black dress. Slitted eyes. Dark red hair down her back.

'Monsieur,' she said again, so he said, 'Yes, *oui, bonjour,*' feeling strangely put out, as though he ought to have been invisible: the unwatched watcher, keeping to the shadows. Which was absurd, obviously. He was, after all, standing in plain sight on a city street. Perhaps she lived in this building, and needed to get through the door.

'Oh, I'm sorry!' he said, 'sorry,' and moved to one side, but she didn't enter.

'Monsieur Watson?' she said, and he felt his spine snap straight.

'Yes?'

'Sur le téléphone,' she said, and then a rapid stream of French he didn't understand, to which he was just opening his mouth on 'Désolé, je ne—' when he heard her say, 'un Monsieur Holmès,' with Claudine's pronunciation of the surname, 'un Monsieur—Sherloque? Holmès.'

'On the telephone?' John said. She started nodding, relieved. 'Sur le—that box on the corner?' She shook her head: not a no, a lack of comprehension; so John, gesturing towards the telephone box he'd all but swum to a few hours before: 'Over—à la—jardin? At the garden, the 'phone box at the entrance to the garden?'

She smiled, uncomprehending, but turned and walked in that direction, looking over her shoulder to bid him follow. Sherlock had got his message, then. John's muscles creaked to life and his whole chest expanded and he followed the girl's slim back, red bracketed by black in the drizzling morning gloom. Sherlock had got his note and had the call traced to the box on the corner, and Sherlock had rung him back. Sherlock wished to speak with him. Surely that meant there was—hope, was—Sherlock wouldn't call him up at a public telephone box at half seven in the morning to say *Don't*
come home. He'd—the girl turned right, away from the gardens.

'I say,' he called after her, 'ah—*tu es sûre* this is the—damn it—'

She didn't turn; just kept on. Down a narrow alley; down another. Why would Sherlock call him at a different box? How did he know where John was? Had he seen him? Was he following him, then? He'd said he ought to have done, two nights before; but then why was he telephoning? Or perhaps (hurrying on, as the girl ahead of him broke into a trot) Sherlock's own researches during the night had uncovered this same second set of rooms that Adler apparently maintained? Perhaps—

But there was the telephone box, anyway. The mouthpiece rested on a ledge off the cradle, and John could think of nothing but hearing—

'Sherlock,' he said, closing his eyes, 'thank God, thank God, where—'

A stream of French in a woman's voice. The operator. John swore; rifled through his pockets; dropped coins in the machine.

'Hôtel Bel Ami,' he told the woman, and the line whirred and clicked, and the same detached professional desk clerk from earlier said 'Bonjour, Hôtel Bel Ami,' and then, when he recognised John's panting voice: '*Mais non, Monsieur, il n'a pas encore revenu*, he is not returned.'

He is not returned. Not at all? Non, Monsieur. Not since last night. John thanked him. Turned about. The girl, of course, was long gone. John was almost too disappointed to care.

He got his legs in working order; managed a kind of shambling run back towards the gardens and the Rue Garancière. By the time he arrived he was just in time to see a cab pulling away from the pavement, with, from what he could see, an indistinct tallish figure inside it; by the time he hailed his own cab, however, the woman he strongly suspected had been Germaine Beaumont was far away; and John, in any case, was too exhausted to follow.

He fell asleep in his own cab, almost immediately; and only awoke when it pulled up at his hotel. In a daze he paid the driver; stumbled out; through the door; into the lift. As he opened the door he *hoped*, with an intensity of such sharpness he could barely hold it in his body—but the suite was empty, still. The main room; the bedroom. John stood, dripping pointlessly on the rug, and stared at the bed. Sherlock's trunk was still there, anyway. That was something. Some very small thing.

John undid buttons with waterlogged fingers. Peeled off sodden garments. They squelched on the floor; he left them. Flannel from the WC: he felt he was towelling off the outside of a sponge, soaked all the way through. He couldn't keep his eyes open. It would have to do. Flannel on the floor on top of the clothes. Shivering he crawled into bed. Could still smell Sherlock. Could smell them together. Felt…

Jolting—slept?—shrill ringing in his ear he flailed out with a hand but it wouldn't do and it was—snapping into wakefulness: it was Sherlock, had to be. He jumped out of bed. Shivering with something that was only partially the post-storm chill he pressed his naked side to the wall, picked up the mouthpiece.

'Sherlock?' he said, 'Where are you?' but—

'Hello, Doctor Watson.'


'I'm awfully sorry not to have invited you up,' the woman went on. 'But as you could see, I was
'Irene Adler,' said John.

'Bright boy,' Adler said.

John shut his eyes. And—and if it wasn't Sherlock then where was he? Looking at the clock: it was past nine in the morning; he'd had been out all night.

'From your unconventional greeting,' Adler said, 'I take it your exquisite companion has yet to return. Don't bother to answer,' she went on. 'I feel we're old friends, now we've spent the night together—or at least watching each other, which is much the most important part, don't you find? I have every faith you'll pass on what I have to tell him.'

She sounded, after all, like she'd been at school with the Holmes set. Not a trace of Paris about her; not a trace of Limehouse. Though John suspected there could be, if she willed it. He thought of the woman in those photographs, with this voice, sitting in Sherlock's lap and telling him about John. He cleared his throat.

'And why,' he said, 'would I do that?'

'Well!' she said. 'You wouldn't keep secrets from him. Would you?'

He could hear the smile on her mouth; could hear the coldness in her eyes. Having never got a proper look at the woman's face, it was a strange sensation.

'Here it is,' she went on, not waiting for a response. 'Your—paramour's clients are looking for certain photographs, which incidentally belong to me. Mademoiselle Germaine Beaumont, good girl that she is, is going to pay a visit to you both, to inform you that they are in the hands of her employer's husband's mistress, Mademoiselle Germaine Patat.'

'Sherlock doesn't—' John started, before he could cut himself off, but Adler did it for him.

'Yes, beautiful Sherlock knows better,' she said. Purred, just about. 'Even you know better, and I, mon chèr Docteur, certainly know better. Nevertheless! We shall pretend, shall we not, that we believe the girl. I'm sure I need say no more; dear Sherlock will catch my meaning perfectly. Whenever,' she added, after a slight pause, 'he returns.'

John, a bit surprised he had the energy for it, felt himself clenching his jaw.

'All right,' he said. 'I'll tell him you telephoned.'

'Yes,' she said, musing, as if prey to a distraction that he would bet she'd never suffered in all her years on the planet. 'And do give your lovely boy my regards.'

She rang off before John could reply; before it could even occur to him that 'his lovely boy' might refer to anyone other than Sherlock Holmes. Shivering and sick at heart he crawled back into bed, to lie awake until Sherlock returned.

It was the last thing he remembered before the door opened, waking him, amidst the bright light of the early afternoon.
DVD extras notes on this chapter can be found here.
Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(LATER)

Monday, August 29th, 1921
3:45am

You couldn't call it a kitchen, the little niche off the main room in the flat overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens. Irene turned her spoon over; dribbled water that passed for cold through thick black liquid with Germaine's eyes at her back. Damp curls of hair at her neck, come loose from their twist: let her look. Irene did not pat them back into place.

She turned about, instead. Took in the view. Germaine Beaumont: pale, lavish, propped up on her bare elbow and her bare extravagant hip in the bed where Irene had only ever slept alone. Great green eyes. Irene's photographs were certainly nowhere about her now.

'You suppose,' Irene said, 'that otherwise I would… ?'

'Do anything you pleased.'

Anything at all. Irene's mouth watered: the smell of the coffee.

'And so you intend to string me along?' she said.

'I don't think—'

'A merry chase, across Europe?'

The tone of the girl's voice, Christ. Hand to her nape; she took it away. There ought, now the storm had broken, to be some modicum of a breeze; but the window when she checked it was still propped open to its full extent, and on the street outside the rain beat straight down. She turned back to the cupboards. In the kitchen at Le Chabanais she would have had to rattle about in search of what she was after, but it wasn't as if she'd ever stocked a full pantry in these rooms. Her back to Germaine's eyes and Germaine's silence, Irene took down the teacup and the wine glass. Into each of them she poured still-steaming black liquid. Bitch that she was, Germaine waited until Irene had turned about again with a glass in each hand before correcting her: 'Self-protection.'

'Hmm.'

Irene sipped from the teacup: bitter. In Constantinople, she'd heard, the coffee was sweet and so thick you could fairly sink your teeth into it. Like a custard slipping down your throat. She took the three steps to the bed and passed Germaine the wine glass as she said, 'Do I strike you, then, as the kind of person—'

'The sensible kind?'

'—who would agree to such—oh, sensible.'

'It's why we get on.'
Is that the reason, Irene Adler would say. Dropping down next to her on the bed. Hands on the girl's hips, Is that what we do?, with her mouth quirking the way she'd practised, back in the glass in her room at La Garçonnière. Is that what you like? she would say, digging in her nails, yes, and whether she'd imagined it or no, imagined herself into Irene's photographs or no, Germaine would stop making words. So, then. No point in debating terms she was only going to break. Only sensible. Just like the girl said.

Irene stood sipping her coffee in her old black brocade dressing gown. Germaine was very naked. The night was very warm.

'Self-protection,' Irene repeated.

'Of course.'

'Or protection of your—adoptive mother.'

Germaine snorted. 'That would be an exercise in futility.' She sat back on the pillows with her too-dark wine glass propped on her belly as Irene clutched her cup and thought of Venice and Amsterdam and of the packet that Germaine had left home tonight and of the album that Irene still hadn't brought herself to transfer into a trunk from the false bottom of her wardrobe at Le Chabanais.

'And I'd point out,' said Germaine, 'that I learned about all this, about—about self protection, from you. I certainly didn't learn it from her.'

'I wouldn't—wouldn't hurt her, you know.'

'Oh rot,' Germaine said. 'It's only common sense,' casting up her eyes in such a typical way that Irene could almost see the fusty skirt and the shirtwaist materialising around Germaine's naked form, and she didn't smile but she wanted—

'I—,' she said.

'No, listen. It really is the only thing that makes practical sense. I'd have been up for an advancement in position at the end of the year: a literary editorial position, nothing to sneer at. It's not as if I'm going to put all my considerable Paris connections on hold indefinitely to launch myself across Europe only to be abandoned at the first station. Some small personal safeguard is only logical and it's certainly, I mean to say it's—'

'All right,' Irene said.

'—absolutely, no question, what you would do. In my place.'

'All right,' said Irene again, softly. Holding her teacup in front of her black-clad chest.

Germaine narrowed her eyes. She lifted a fall of mud-brown hair off her wet shoulder. Looked at her, unblinking, and Irene looked back.

'Good,' Germaine said, at last. 'Then we're agreed.'

Irene broke her gaze. Turned her back to her, and put her cup, half-full, down on the washboard. The window sash, still propped open with its stick to admit the nonexistent breeze. On the street, in the downpour, the shadow sheltering in the doorway stirred.

'Then,' behind her, 'Constantinople?' just as Irene said, 'I am a thief, you know.'
Germaine laughed. Irene, looking down at the street, found her own mouth thinning into a smile.

'I'm quite serious,' she said. Still smiling, wasn't she. Mariscos tavernas and old china: but she wasn't the kind, Irene wasn't. 'I made my first francs as a pickpocket,' she told her. 'I could get them off you with no trouble.'

'I know,' said Germaine. No doubt she thought Irene was lying, Christ. The way she lied.

'E specially,' said Irene, turning, looking into green eyes, let her see her mouth, 'if at every opportunity I'm stripping you out of those—'

'Will you indeed!' so Irene laughed; bounded across the little room saying, '—ridiculous old-maid-ish clothes and—'

'Goodness.'

'—marking up your pretty skin,' into the soft slope of her neck, growled. Mitsouko and sweat; when Germaine hummed Irene could feel it in her lips all the way to the back of her throat.

'You've worn me out, surely?' Germaine said. Sounding like she was reasoning with a child not allowed a sweet, but she was undoing the tie of Irene's old dressing gown. Sliding her hands underneath and Irene shivered. Worn me out. No doubt she knew, didn't she, what Irene would think. The ways she could. Could do. Get her black and blue; watch her squirm for days. Did she look, still, at Irene in black and white and think of—Christ. Irene bent her head and bit and Germaine grunted. Gorgeous.

'If I'd done it properly,' lips to Germaine's ear, lapping at the mark she'd made, 'you wouldn't have had the breath to argue for this—' bruising ripe like a peach, shifting would be writhing, '—laughable—'

'You like it.' Hands on Irene's arse, grinding her down. 'When I argue.'

'—blackmail plan of yours.'

'God.' Gasping. Their thighs so slippery in the hot little room she could barely stay on top of her. No purchase for fucking. Christ she smelled like a feast.

Irene got up on her knees. Got Germaine's wrists over her head with Irene's knee wedged hard between her legs. Kissing her hard, wet, messy as she pressed her down. Nipping, pulling back; Irene mean and teasing so she would fight her and Germaine, gorgeous, thrust an elbow into Irene's ribcage and twisted up to kiss her with teeth. Gasping, God, good—

'I don't know,' Germaine panted. 'I didn't intend to stay out so late. Maybe I should go, should—'

'Summon a cab?' Irene said. Laughed, openly; slapped the girl's face and Germaine—groaning-arching in the blossoming moment after. Head arched back; Irene bent to bite at her sternum and the sides of her lavish breasts so she jolted, shocked. 'Back to—'

'To Madame Jouvenel,' Germaine said, 'Oh' as Irene bit hard at her right nipple and 'Oh' she gasped. 'Oh.'

Irene lifted herself up on her hands.

'Well,' she said, 'with all due respect to Madame Jouvenel,' thinking: Crete; thinking: Le Havre, 'you'll be followed right back to her if you leave now.'
'Will I?'

Irene bit at her belly; she jolted, breathless, the bloody lovely girl. 'You will,' Irene said. 'We're being watched.'

'Are we,' said Germaine. Irene looked back at her and, elbows bent, bit her way down Germaine's front as Germaine said, sighing, so that Irene's eyes prickled and she bit down on her own tongue, 'Whatever shall we do?'

'I'll tell them—I know what to tell them,' Irene said. 'They'll think, God, I'm double-crossing you, they'll. Don't worry, they're easy, I, oh.' Leant forward so she could kiss her, queasy and giddy and strangely seething, reaching up to press with her fingers at the join of their mouths while Germaine soaked Irene's thigh and her knee. 'I'll take care of it,' she told her again, moving her hand, heart in her throat, 'right after I take care of you.'

**Monday, August 29th, 1921**

3:45am

He could leave. Go home. Back to the hotel, he meant.

He could—

He could, after all this time, look up Claudine at her flat. Her new flat, he meant. It was past all reasonable likelihood that she'd have stayed in the same place. And it struck him, wandering back down the Le Chabanais corridor—Christ had he really made such a bother about Mrs Kelly and the mirrors, what absurdity—that he hadn't thought to ask. Not at Roz Ven or Chez Manière or down on the sand when Claudine's whole being had listed towards Hélène Picard. Where did she live now? Whence her income? Who, beyond Hélène and Colette, were her friends? She hadn't said. It hadn't occurred to him to ask.

And would it have done? If she had been, still, the young blonde in the jaunty man's jacket in the photograph in Irene Adler's album, would Sherlock have thought to say—what? *Where do you play, these days? Do you still see Renée? Natalie?* He couldn't imagine it. In any case what could possibly be gained? It was irrelevant. That woman was nowhere, now. Not to be found.

Sherlock passed along the corridor, and down the stairs. No one accosted him. It was easy, in fact. Just a stroll down a staircase, and when he emerged into the entryway Mrs Kelly was in the salon, chatting (as Sherlock passed them on the way to the drinks table) with a man who was apparently a Captain. Embroidered waistcoat, fitted in a pre-War fashion. Overly hearty laugh. Bedroom eyes at Mrs Kelly: too theatrical to be convincing. Sherlock thought, ordering a gin, that Monsieur le Capitaine would have been a good match for the young Faubourg boy who was now, he noticed, nowhere in sight. Presumably having a memorable time.

Sherlock closed his eyes for just a moment. Inhale, deep; exhale. The reek of whiskey scraped down inside his nose. Barely enough to wet his lips but it burnt down his throat. Easier not to think. Not to move. Easier simply to sit and let his skin vibrate to the shrieking laughter and the brightness and the slowed-down sped-up movement shuttering in the corners of his eyes.

Yet people came to such places. Looked forward to coming to such places. Stayed in such places all night, didn't they. With their… company of choice.

He picked up his whiskey and moved to a chaise against the far wall of the salon feeling hollowed
out, feeling… feeling, somehow, at a great remove. Feeling: people did such things. People one knew. People who—people who hired one. Whose cases one took, people like that Mr Fitzgerald, back in May, country squire up from the city. People like—like that government official, Sherlock thought: just there, sitting halfway across the salon where he chatted to a colleague with a hand on the knee of a plump brunette. Her price, Sherlock thought, probably paid by his concern. Do amuse yourself, Legrand, while you’re in town. All on the up and up. Look at him. (Sherlock’s head, spinning.) The man might be the Mycroft of the French service, he was so unaffected by his surroundings; and well he should be. It was all quite banal, wasn’t it: this jolting, over-exposed room. Sherlock had infiltrated any number of such places, unlicensed in London but no less tiresome for it. And he had thought no more of it than did that man; no more than the old Faubourg gentleman, sitting earlier with a girl on each knee; no more than that fellow near the door, up-and-coming merchant with a hand on the waist of a dark-haired girl and a lovely ready smile and the posture of a m-military man and Sherlock in the Le Chabanais salon made a noise something like a laugh and something like choking, and a voice said, 'You're feeling better, then?' which trickled down the inside of his skull, phoneme by phoneme, until he realised it had been addressed to him.

He turned. Squinted up in the direction of the words and Rachel shimmered into view. Rachel, his old—he had been about to think: his old friend. Unable to tell what his face was doing, he pointed it towards her nonetheless.

'I'd expected you'd be upstairs by this time,' he said. 'With a…'

'Client.' Her edgeless smile.

Sherlock indicated with a hand to the armchair positioned at an angle to the chaise, some feet away, but she sat down, of course, next to him. Thigh squeezed against his thigh. His hands sweated slick, palm to palm, and over by the door, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the merchant-soldier throw back his head and laugh.

'I've been up,' Rachel said, 'and back.'

Probably squeezed the girl's hip, Sherlock thought, when he did it. Probably she'd said something to make him. Fond and he. Gave her a little squeeze. Sherlock's teeth, clamped like a rat trap. Ought to be speaking.

'That was quick,' he said.

'Not particularly.'

Was she smiling? Laughing at him? He couldn't look and Rachel wasn't moving her thigh away from his thigh. The reek of alcohol burnt him. He wanted to look up; and to put his head in his hands.

'I suppose you're not the kind of girl to take all night about it,' he said, and straightened his back, and pushed his whiskey an inch further from him.

Rachel leant back on one arm. She was all of eight stone but seemed to him massive. Immovable. Impossible to get 'round. He tried to feel what was happening on his face but it was as if all the possible expressions just ground against one another: jammed-together gears and levers under the surface of his skin. Beneath the spiced sheen of her perfume he could smell, now that she'd told him, the traces of, of fresh exertions; but she looked just the same. Her upswept hair had the same degree of artful muss; the strap of her peignoir sat at the same angle, just slightly askew, as it had done an hour, two hours past. He. Admired that. Her professionalism.

'Have you?' she asked him.
'Pardon?'

'Been up,' she clarified. 'And back.'

Crawling about on his hands and knees; picking Adler's locks. He could see, almost, in the corner of his eye, the military man with a smile spreading slow over his whole face, cornflower eyes, leaning into whisper in the ear of his girl.

'No,' Sherlock said. Gasped. 'Not interested.'

'Really.' She purred it. Leaning forward, pressing towards him as if she knew him. As if she could know what would arrest him. The mounds of her bulging breasts.

'You think I'm—what?' Something surging in him, bitter like bile.

'I think you've spent the last three hours in the most expensive—'

'Christ.'

'—brothel in Paris, and you—'

'And you've constructed, no doubt,' he spat, 'an entire, what, fanciful report, analysing the different possible approaches, detailing what you might have said or—done to already have my francs in your—have you pockets? a purse? what is the proper—'

'I think you wouldn't have stayed,' she said, unperturbed, 'If there wasn't something you wanted, that you hadn't got.'

Stale sticky saliva. Tongue sticking itself back to the roof of mouth.

He made himself unclench his hands in his lap. Breathe and keep his eyes open, not looking at the door, forcing himself. Steady. Thinking of—of Rachel. To whom he was talking. In this boiler-pot of a room in a pas de deux which had—it had limbs, didn't it. Chains of action, and reaction. A thing with roots. A thing with long appendages, trailing their reaches forward; back; ever outward. Sherlock swallowed. She no doubt had a whole social circle, this woman. Rachel. Places she liked to get her coffee, and her wine. Favourite routes she liked when she took walks. A f-family, perhaps. Regular clients who felt natural with her. Looked forward to seeing her. New clients, too, who beheld her décolletage and her soft waist and felt—desire. Felt need, so that it didn't matter what other attachments—. Men who came in groups and alone.

'Well,' he said. He looked at Rachel; right at her. He didn't turn his head.

'I take however long I'm paid to take about it.' She put a hand on his hand on his knee. He didn't move away.

'Do you ever go back?' he said.

'Back?'

'To the Pletzl!'

She blinked. 'Well' she said, and paused, and then: 'it's only a half-hour's walk from here.'

'I'm aware of the distance involved.'

His teeth clicked shut but Rachel smiled. Pleasant. Professional.
'Oh yes,' she said. Squeezing his knee, a bit; he felt his muscles jump. 'Good with maps, weren't you.'

'I am,' said Sherlock. 'Yes.'

He kept his eyes open. Looked neither right nor left. By the door the merchant with the spine and the smile was probably laughing. Probably nuzzling into his girl's long neck with his voice gone deep and teasing and between him and them a sea of colour and of bodies in motion and Sherlock made himself still. Breathe.

Look at. At Rachel's right cheek, turned towards him: the skin faintly pocked beneath her paint. The hint of hair on the upper lip. The thinness of the eyelids; veins that stood out like blue rivulets in the pale country of her arms. She couldn't, he thought, be younger than Sherlock himself. Might be older. Might, even, be closer to Mycroft's age. Might have come of age in the Paris where. Where Claudine, with her long gold plait and her hastily done-up collars—where she'd played on the boards. Rachel's eyes were deep and brown and the single curl falling down over her eyebrow made him itchy, shifting under his heavy jacket. She gave no indication of wanting to push it aside.

'I thought.' Words in his mouth like alien fruit. 'I wondered, if you find it much changed.'

'From—changed from what?'

'I don't know.' His fingers itched for a cigarette. 'What it was when you were—were growing up there, say.'

Her big eyes narrowed on him. He cleared his throat. Felt a smile curdle. People didn't like to be looked at so, Sherlock thought. When he did it to them nobody—almost, Christ—almost nobody liked it. It would be natural to look away, then. Quite—quite normal to look—. He looked at Rachel and she looked back.

'Do you—did you know it?' she said, at last.

'No,' he said. Cleared his throat. Looked at her. 'No, not in the least.'

Rachel chuckled, a bit, but it was an uncertain, an untrusting thing. Almost at the same moment a peal of showy female laughter broke out behind him. He had the strange sensation that he was split, back to front.

'I knew women,' he said. Cleared his throat. 'Girls, really, I suppose. In Montmartre, in '03. Friends of my cousin. They'd grown up there.'

'And you were—curious,' Rachel said. 'About what it was like, where they came from.'

'Not particularly,' Sherlock told her, and tried to smile.

It was the kind of joke John could make, he thought, desperately. That kind of fun-poking, parroting back a person's words as a gentle ribbing; nobody would take it amiss. From Sherlock it came off as mockery. Hard-edged. He could feel Rachel cooling; leaning back.

'I see,' she said.

'They said,' he told her, 'those girls, that they couldn't wait to leave.'

'Did they.'
'They were quite put out with my cousin for mentioning it. Even though I was a—a child, at the time. A brat, and the only other person present. They couldn't have cared what I thought. Still.'

Sherlock's head ached. He saw Rachel move her mouth to bite at the inside of it; then she remembered and bit, instead, coyly, prettily, at one side of her bottom lip. He looked at her, still looked at her, as the woman behind him broke into another shrill peal and a blonde whirled by with drinks and his head ached.

'You left, too,' he explained. He tried to speak slowly; his throbbing head. 'But when we—before. You seemed not to share their distaste for the neighbourhood: you referred to your origins without flinching, and met my eyes while you spoke. Having gathered, when I first formed my impressions of Paris, that a certain stigma attached to the neighbourhood—unsurprising for a Semitic quarter given the preponderance of Roman Catholics in the city, and in France at large—when I encountered your attitude I noted the difference. A number of hypotheses then presented themselves. I am somewhat in the. In the habit.' Grinding on. 'Of attempting to narrow the field in such circumstances: has the public distaste for the breed diminished in the intervening—' Christ '—eighteen years? Or are you merely a less apologetic specimen than my Montmartre acquaintances? Additionally, there is the possibility that the breed of Jewess likely to leave the Pletzl for Montmartre in 1903, is cut from a different cloth than the type likely to leave it for Le Chabanais in 1921. Also, you're older than my aunt's friends were then. Perhaps acceptance of one's origins—' his stiff, unbending neck '—perhaps it comes with maturity. You can understand,' he told her, 'that your additions to my store of knowledge might prove valuable in resolving the question.'

'Might they,' she said. Cold as ice. 'Yes. I suppose they might.'

Silence stretched tight. She would stand up now. Would she? If she did then he could… He could feel the glass-brittle tendon in his neck, taut with the effort of keeping his head facing forward.

'Well,' he said. 'Which is it?'

'I don't wish to discuss it.'

'Oh, for—don't get hysterical. I've nothing against—any of it, I only wondered.'

'You fancy yourself Monsieur Freud?' She was sitting quite upright, now. 'Do you? Fancy you can teach me a thing or two about myself? About my kind? Feel you know me because your cousin knew some girls from the Pletzl, back before the War?'

'No,' he said, but she kept on:

'Or perhaps you merely wanted to sit here chatting. Exchanging stories of the schools we went to, mischief we got up to. Get a little story about the corrupting influence of the Jewish whores and anarchist artists for Action Française. Is that it?'

'Oh please,' he said. 'You can't honestly believe—'

'What would you have me think?'

'Oh,' he said. 'Are personal subjects off-limits, then, in establishments of this type?'

'If they weren't,' she said, leaning forward, 'I'd have recommended several hours ago an establishment more to your taste.'

A flooding, an irrational fear—he wanted but if she said it, if she said—then he would—
'Le Chabanais,' he got out, 'is quite to my tastes.'

'You want me to believe you remained here,' said Rachel, laughing, meanly, 'for—hours, in order to—'

'You must excuse me not knowing the local—'

'—drink the house whiskey while you talk with the girls about our—'

'—mores, I've very little—'


'—knowledge, you see, of—'

'—mothers?'

'—the sexual deviants' avant-garde.'

'Oh yes,' she sneered. 'I'm sure you've no idea at all.'

They stared each other down. Lips curled; hard-edged. Then Rachel snorted. Broke his gaze. Looked out at the room, breathing as hard as he was, with her mouth in a tight little frown. He'd kissed her, before. How strange.

He'd kissed her, and later had absurd thoughts about—about before and after. Disturbed and undisturbed. It was farcical. How (heart beating) utterly nonsensical, when he'd arrived at Le Chabanais at, what? Two in the morning? By which time Rachel had certainly been 'up and back' any number of times already; but he'd thought—because he was in the habit. Because he fancied himself the observer, because he'd only arrived when he had done. He, Sherlock Holmes. What a—

an arbitrary piece of happenstance. Unconnected to the fact that here he was and there was Rachel and there Mrs Kelly chatting to a group of drunken revellers, hands over each others' shoulders, slapping the arses of the girls who passed as Sherlock teetered for a flash at a great height vertiginous, tipping forward over the top of a citadel tower built on nothing—

—two bottles of wine, he thought, and the Glenkinchie—

'How much, then?' he said.

Rachel said, 'Pardon?'

'How much? Out of—of curiosity. If a fellow arrived at, say. One in the morning. And wanted to stay until shortly after five.'

'Shortly after?'

'Quarter past five.' Sweating. 'How much?'

'That's hardly all night.'

'It's longer than he lasted. Your last client.'

Rachel sighed. From the wrong lapel of his inside suit-jacket Sherlock took out his money clip. 'I'm well provisioned,' he managed. 'As you can see.'

'And what would this supposed client want to do,' she said, 'with four hours and fifteen minutes of
'Maybe he'd want to chat with you.' Gin-smell still scouring down his throat; drawing up—like priming a pump. 'About the schools you went to. Your father and sisters.'

'Monsieur Williams—'

'How.' Swallowing. Pushing it down. 'How much?'

His mouth tasted of carrots gone slick-brown, but for no reason: carrots weren't used in the making of gin. He dragged his eyes up to Rachel's as she slipped back into place her sutureless, cornerless face. He'd built one too, he thought. Hadn't he. He thought a bloody lot of the thing. Buckwheat for stuffing. Buttons for eyes.

'Three hundred francs,' she said, and nodding he peeled off a hundred-franc note, a hundred-franc note, a hundred-franc note. His burning face. Looking back up at her standing over him looking down. She snaked her waist and held out her hand, damp and delicate with little dimples in the fingers. His, stretching out, made contact.

The relationship of objects in space.

On the stairs it was cooler. Quieter. She went first and he followed behind. Client, he thought. She took his hand at the top of the stairs and turned him against the carved post and tugged at his hips, pressing her lips to his and he let her.

He let her press her front against his front. It was smoothly done. The move the blonde had made with the Swiss banker, and the couple, too, when Sherlock Holmes had hidden himself at the top of the stairs. The angle would show off their faces to Mrs Kelly's mirrors; the move was no doubt—could—might be—a security procedure, or. Not. His mis-sized hand came up to cup the back of his whore's little head as the Swiss man had done to his blonde. Rachel. Her tongue in his mouth.

She took his hand so he followed. From far away he made his eyes blink and his lungs expand-contract, expand-contract. When he did that he lost track of his feet but found himself anyway yards further down the corridor. Repeating evidence to himself: three syllables with a v like a needle through a smooth-worn button for an eye.

The whore Rachel, bending near him at the door of the second room to the end on the south side, smelled still of sex and whiskey and chemical florals and she always had, hadn't she. She must have done, though in the salon it had seemed so different, so… that corner of her mouth. She turned the key, cracked the door. Sherlock from the top of a citadel tower tipped forward, forward… then pressed her soft little body back against the closed door.

The dark. Sherlock might not be here at all in the dark. He might be let free. Adrift. A soft shape moving with a soft shape; a collection of nerves and tendons moving against another collection of tendons and nerves; not tethered in space or if tethered not a person in particular; not Sherlock Holmes at all—but a little hand closed soft around his wrist. He was here then; was. People came to such places, but not Sherlock; so Sherlock must not be—

But here Sherlock was.

Sherlock was here, and he was kissing her. His lips moving on hers: this woman, Rachel. How she pressed up against him. She breathed fast; so fast through her nose with his fat tongue in her tiny mouth. Pressing—but she was soft. She was too soft against him and her chemical spoilt-rose scent slid heavy down his throat. He kept kissing her but he had to swallow too; swallow; it was difficult
with—with the wetness of her lips. Slurping. Slipping against his mouth’s wetness. A slough; a wet lump; a lump of water—it rose in his throat. It blocked his gullet and he could—he pressed harder against her pillowy softness as she moved her mouth in her alien way and he with the wordless airless panic of the airless drowning—cried out! He could drown! he thought. The shock of it and then—the spread of welcome and then—then the wild panicked heart-jolt for it was senseless, untrue; no basis in reason it was false and had to be, must be; one didn’t; and Rachel moved in a sideways sliding slippery way and his stomach rolled and he stumbled—and then.

Her strong little hand pressed him back. His back, now, pressed tight against the wall. Neck to knees he shuddered in a wave, gasping air. The open air. She bit at his neck and pressed him upright and he had to even out his breaths, he couldn’t. Could swallow. Could breathe, was just. He brought up a hand. He closed an outsized palm over her little shoulder; bent down to blunder his mouth against slippery little pillows as she hummed under him and sucked on his lower lip with her weird sharp little teeth and pressed him back. To the side he shuffled; was pressed. To the right they jolted. He always knew what he would do; what they both would do; except he hadn’t and now he c-couldn’t. Clammy under his suit he couldn’t. Couldn’t see her, couldn’t tell. Where was—what was—he closed his fist in her hair because here, here, he was, and noise slid out of her. Some meaningless alien—no. Rachel. She was just. Scar-pocked skin under powder. He put a hand to her cheek to feel: Rachel: who’d been snappish and then been kind and he’d almost thought. Rachel, he thought: she’d a hand on his hip and another on his shoulder and another brushing the nape of his neck and and another at the placket of his shirt and that wet lump rose up again in his throat panic-tight and his knee gave out and he stumbled. She caught him. Back to the wall: a hard click and he jumped; something dug into his spine. Across the room another jolt. A rumbling. Huh-chunt from across the room. She was humming into his mouth and it was clanking. Some—Christ. Some engine of destruction. Creaking up from the floorboards, he thought, some weapon, some. Huh-chunt huh-chunt gathering speed. Under his mouth her mouth tugged up at the corners and the room rumbled and she tugged at his wrists for no reason turning him as he laboured for—for air and stumbled back, back, long gibberish legs a step behind stumbling, as she bullied him back towards the bed.

His knees hit a softness. They folded and in the dark with her long arms (columns, they’d been white), soft-hard huh-chunt she pressed him back. She pressed him down. The mattress jolted underneath him; jolting; the floor might open up. Might crack and, and swallow them, crush and mangle them and then he’d be no body at all. Could be, in the dark, not here at all, not tethered to—to pushing-pulling, huh-chunt those wet little pillows smacking down cheek, neck, ribcage, her hands on him at too many places and that slippery silk; teasing; tickling his arms and his face. Jolting. Dizzy in the dark he could be, might be, should only for a moment be formless and motionless and still, still, but—this damp membrane everywhere, skin. Everywhere moving. Hair in a heavy fall tumbled down onto his shoulder and his chest huh-chunt which was bare to the air since—since—? Her fingers snaked inside his trouser fastenings as under the both of them the sound of metal on metal in some sickening familiar rhythm he couldn't place though he was still—still himself, couldn't stop being. He gasped air around sea-salt; open-mouthed. She lay down on top him; pressed herself down and undulated. Made herself like a wave huh-chunt while his sour mushy meal-bones bruised under hips too small to fit his hands as tickling silk brushed his shoulders and his stomach and his face was drenched by her open sucking fish-mouth at his chin—his lip—

Turning his head away he sucked hair into his throat. Choked. Coughing huh-chunt huh-chunt he didn’t want—her teeth at his earlobe and her hands snaking down through his wrappings and his meaningless gasping. Spitting. Huh-chunt huh-chunt that salt tide in his throat but one didn’t, he thought; he wouldn’t—repeating one didn’t, one didn’t, one didn’t drown on dry land; people came to such places by horse by automobile by Christ and he squeezed his eyes closed then opened them wide. The bed, jolting: huh-chunt huh-chunt an idiot in the near-total dark. Rachel brushed knuckles against his cheekbone as she reached between them to angle up his half-hard cock between her legs
pressing down and too much to swallow in the hard empty thick of his throat he bent his head up. The jolting of the berth and above them a curtain. Light, faint-flickering. Trembling with the motion of the train.

He had been another man, Sherlock thought. The curtains. The train curtains in the breeze.

He couldn't be—*couldn't*—

He surged up. Turned them over on the berth, growling with—with his body here with another body.

*Huh-chunt* the rails under the driving wheels *huh-chunt* push-pulled by piston rods and through the little window the fields of—*couldn't*. Sherlock bent his head down blind and kissed hard her mouth. You—*menace*, he'd said, in the broad afternoon sunlight streaming through the compartment—windows, *huh-chunt* and laughing, *oh you bloody cock-tease bastard*—

An ocean rose up in Sherlock's throat.

Rachel was making words but he couldn't. He pressed it—down—

He growled. Choked on it. *Huh-chunt* and underneath there was that noise again and then—he bent his head down blind; only the moonlight to, no it was—he forced his tongue into her mouth and pushed her silk up and her legs apart with his stinging salt-wet palms and then in full view of—no one—shoved three fingers up her since he'd gone soft at—all pushed-down bile of his insides leaking into slimy-prickling soft cock, mushy tongue weak belly so he shoved his hand—she arched up. Her back, arching: through the window they would see he put a hand down for steadiness. Her breast too soft, beetle-nippled under his palm. Salt-stung. Yawning like a, like a ship-deck *huh-chunt* as he closed his eyes no couldn't; opened them to the window and the fields and the horrible wrong dark night and all the soft lumps of human body, jiggling with the motion of the train.

And Sherlock—he might *tear*—in the breeze from the open compartment window her silk fretted him tickled him bothered at his bare thighs straddling her leg and at his left hand splayed on the bed *huh-chunt* by her shoulder and his right wrist fucking—fucking into her, wet with her, and he choked on the stench of sweat and rosewater; snarled as she moved with him made word-sounds *huh-chunt* and twisted her head to nip at his left wrist. Word-sounds and nipping; she was nipping with her teeth. He shoved into her. Twisted fingers together like a tree-root thickening, *shoved* and she curled a leg around his waist *huh-chunt* raised herself up on her elbows in the faint flickering electric window-light to watch him *shove* *huh-chunt* inside to the thumb-joint, hard. Hard root like a Callery pear and her grotesque mouth for no reason was opening; she was writhing; she was reaching down *huh-chunt* to pull silk up off over her then craning up to kiss him, bare-breasted, on display to the—

—Sherlock—gut-hit pulled under heartburst in the hot undertow couldn't—

—*open air*—

—hands clenching throat clenching whole body jackknifed drawing in on itself, clench-tightening like a fist and the sound he made—

'Paul,' a voice was saying. He pressed it down, away, down to the berth, hitting out with eyes screwed shut to close a fist in hair—'Paul'—as curled on top of another body he whined and gasped and then a strange slithering animal sunk sharp teeth into the flesh over his wrist-bone and—jerking back in a short sharp—
Pain. He twitched back on the jolting berth.

'Paul.'

His wrist-bone, wet. Smarting-stinging. He scrabbled up to sitting. Heels against the mattress. Got his back to the wall.

A click and a light. A long white arm extending back from the lamp on the side-table to the red silk slit of a sleeve, and above that a face. Long nose dark eyes curls and paint over pock-marks. Rachel's face.

Just as. Sherlock exhaled. Just as he remembered it.

'Paul,' said Rachel, again. Almost kindly. She wiped her mouth, where she'd bitten him.

Sherlock nodded. Couldn't—. Not yet. He turned his face up to the ceiling. Swimming. Everything awash. Took a deep breath and let it out, shaky and slow-slow-slow, blinking up. Liquid all spilled out gathered in a cup becoming solider. Settling heavy down.

Sherlock and Rachel. Not touching they sat: her beside the bedside lamp; him with his legs out and his spine pressed to the wall. All right, he thought, and then, no, no and then. All right.

Weight shifted, and he was quiet, and then it shifted again. She'd come back with bandages. Was seeing to his battered hand. Red spotted through the first layer of cloth; she wrapped it around again. He breathed hard and turned his head to the side away from it. He had spilled out. All over the sheets, probably.

But she'd stopped, now. Finished. Put a pin in it to keep him contained.

They sat there, silent, for some time.

The bed really was jolting under him, he came to notice. He swallowed. Breathed.

It. It really did make a rattling sound. Like rails. He sat there a little longer, looking up at the ceiling. Tiled, he saw: each tile emblazoned with two rampant lions around a looping filigree. He breathed out out out and turned his head with his eyes open. Sat back, looking out at the room.

All the shapes of objects reassembled themselves. Sherlock Holmes: other hand, managing. Over mouth.

'The Orient Express Room,' Rachel said.

The Orient Express Room. Swallowing, he reported it to himself: smaller, certainly, than any of the others he'd seen. Yes. Smaller than appeared probable given what he remembered of its outside dimensions. The walls seemed to close in on either side of them; the ceiling was lower and the doorway into the WC more restricted. And the rumbling. Huh-chunt. The shaking: mechanical, must be. That's what would be hidden in the hidden spaces: the mechanisms that were rattling the glasses in the bar cart and the rings on the curtain rods while past the windows—he reached up a hand, and pushed aside the curtains. Past the windows over the bed-sized berth a screen was stretched: and on it the reverse projection of fields and trees.

'It wasn't designed for me,' Rachel was saying. Her voice uncomfortably close. 'The girl before me had it done. Then she left to marry a client.'

Sherlock shut his eyes.
'Paul,' Rachel said.

He nodded.

'You don't have to,' said Rachel. 'It's all right.'

Sherlock rubbed his face with his hands, shaking his head. There must be language. In his head he constructed phrases, sluggishly, every word a struggle: *Quite a piece of engineering*. He could say them if his jaw would only unhook and his tongue unstick from the roof of his mouth and his lungs press air out his throat. Could say, laborious: *A favourite, I would guess, of technically-minded men*; and then Rachel could rattle off her no-doubt rote speech about the mechanics of the room's design, which he wouldn't have to listen to: a relief. Or he could say: *the motion not quite convincing but the scenery, the scenery could be right out of—right out of Brittany—*

'I mean to say,' said Rachel, and Sherlock must at some point have opened his eyes, to be seeing the motion of the reversed projection flitting across the wall. 'For my part, it's all the same.'

Some sharp, strange, overflowing pain. Brimming up out of his chest, 'I,' he said. Shook his head and leant forward and—

—his palm to her hip. His mouth clumsy to her throat; to her jaw; to her lips.

They kissed in a careful, a shaky bridge: her mouth wet and soft and his clenched chest a foot from hers and his hands on her soft thighs.

People came to such places.

People did such things.

She was soft and human and they sat and kissed. Awash, he felt. Lost. Clinging to some tidal driftwood, soaked seaweed buffeted by waves, he kissed Rachel and thought of—of some other man, any of thousands of other men, who might come to this place; might sit on this bed. A middle-aged Parisian, say, who might look forward to this moment, with this warm human person, while—while, say, walking on the beach with his niece. Or his granddaughter. Flying a kite. Sherlock thought of a piece of bleached driftwood on the Brittany coast and he thought of the little blonde doll in the salon with her septuagenarian, and of Mrs Kelly, slipping a little glass bottle into her hand.

He pulled back and Rachel tried to follow but he held her.

His fingers to her shoulder. He reached out his fingers; ran them over her face. It disturbed her paint. She huffed out through her nose.

'Haven't you got, um,' he said; and: 'I saw—.' But he couldn't go on.

Rachel looked into his face and traced soothing lines along his lower thigh, down to his knee and back up. Down, and up.

'Downstairs,' Sherlock got out. 'There was an old man, with a young girl.'

Rachel looked at him. Steady brown eyes.

'Mrs Kelly,' he said. 'She gave the girl something.' Trying for a smile but her eyebrows drew together.

'Paul,' she said.
'I just need,' he told her. Shook his head. Then: 'I'm—well-provisioned.' Drawing out his money clip. 'As you saw.'

'It's not necessary,' Rachel said, and he said, 'It is, I can't—I can't—' and looked up at the ceiling, blinking, the hard brass edge of his money clip digging into his fingers as in shudders he breathed.

She sighed. Nodded, at last. Levered herself up off the bed, plucked a purple dressing gown from the trunk by the foot of the bed, and padded over to the chest of drawers made up to look like a train's trundle bed under the window. Woozy, careful, sitting up without looking down, he tugged himself away thinking of street maps. The order of Tube stops along the Bakerloo line. He refastened his trousers. Rachel, with her back turned, rummaging about in a drawer, asked 'Did you serve? In the War?'

'I—,' he said. Couldn't, could not. 'No, I. Not—abroad.'

'Doesn't make a difference to me.' She turned back to him with a small glass bottle in her hand, of the same squared-off shape as Mrs. Kelly's had been. 'I just thought, if you'd fought in the trenches that might be how you recognised it.'

He stayed quiet. He had no capacity to object that he'd done no such thing. She padded back over and sat on the bed, incongruously childlike with her ankles tucked under her. She held the label up so that he could see it. 'Burroughs Wellcome & Co,' it read. 'Tabloid Forced March! Allays hunger and prolongs the power of endurance.' And diagonally across the label: POISON.

'Fifty centimes,' Rachel said. Sherlock dipped a hand in his pocket. Dropped a franc coin into her upturned palm, not quite touching her skin with his fingers; and she uncorked the little bottle and tapped out two white pills. Would John? he thought. Tried to press it down, tried, but: Would John and Daniel remember these?

'To be dissolved on the tongue,' Rachel said. 'If you really think—'

'A bottle in every room, is it?' he managed, and she sighed.

'Sometimes,' she said, 'they help.'

Plain sugar-taste. Tongue-numbing. He pressed with his tongue the little nubs against his palate, thinking of London and watching the washed-out flickering projections of French fields with the heat of Rachel at his side. His burst-aspic heart began to remember how to be some rodent, scrabbling feeble claws in the cavity of its nest.

Sherlock hadn't fought in the trenches. And he wasn't among the men who came to such places. And he had chosen, possibly with the absurd notion of constructing an excuse for himself later, not to ask for the bottle, not to flip it over and look at its back label. So he hadn't known, but. Statistically speaking.

The blood-rush was slower, gentler than he'd been used to, as he sucked and swallowed and it seeped through the membranes of his mouth; the chemical-metal taste living only on the very decaying end of the masking sweetness. But they were there. It wasn't, he thought, hand to his chest, much of an impressive deduction, in the end.

He lay back against the pillows. Let the bed jolt him. Next to him Rachel lowered herself into a parallel line. Her wine-coloured dressing gown gaped a bit at the neck; he turned his face to the ceiling and shut his eyes.

'Better?' she said. She sounded dubious. He didn't answer.
Not yet, he would have said. Not yet, not with such a light, such a tickling hum spreading over him. Spreading through. His heart, gelatinous still, could still (cringing) spill out everywhere. Get away. But it came solid. Solid. Reciting: Waterloo. Lambeth North. Elephant and Castle.

'Paul?' said Rachel, just as he said, 'You should come to London.'

She snorted. He lifted his hand and touched her waist. He found he could touch her now clinically, as he would do evidence. The relief of it was beautiful. He stroked it. Her hip.

'You should,' he said. Clearing his throat, breathing out with his spine growing back solid under his skin. Almost encased, again. She was lovely, he thought: startled, and as if from a distance from himself. That other man, that Parisian uncle—he would look at her and find her so, so lovely; as she'd been, even to him, an age ago, downstairs. Sherlock reminded her, 'You said that you'd never been.'

'And what would I do in London?' she asked him. Stroke. Stroke. He could breathe now, almost easily. He didn't smile but he felt he almost might. He had wasted so much time.

Sherlock lay on his back stroking the soft, graceful curve of Rachel's hip as Burroughs Wellcome & Co in gentle frustrating sparkler-bursts nudged him back into his bones under the weight of this bloody night. It had to be, what? weeks ago, months, when he'd sat on the train back from Roz Ven, unable to stay either awake or asleep, sweating in the afternoon heat—had it been only hours? And had he reached any conclusion? Any resolution at all? He couldn't recall. The train had arrived at the station and John had been waiting and—Sherlock closed his eyes, hard. Opened them. Rummaged in his pocket, and handed Rachel another franc coin.

'Paul,' she sighed. She looked at him for a long moment, with her head tipped to one side; then shook out another white pill-pair into her hand. Dropped it into his. 'What would I do, in London?'

'Hm,' Sherlock said.

He sat up. On the bedside table was a hand-mirror atop a clothbound volume of Baudelaire. On loan, perhaps, from—. With the flat of his pocket knife to the surface of the hand mirror he crushed the little tablets; with the cutting edge he got a powder fine enough to inhale off the glass and then with his insides re-congealing allatonce into discrete organs bound neat and tight inside him and with metal at the back of his mouth he said, not knowing until it was half-out: 'There's a house.'

'A house.'

He scrubbed at his face. Scrubbed at his hair.

Rachel said, 'In London?'

'Owned by a peer,' he told her. Replacing her hand mirror atop its Baudelaire with his joints snapping all together strings tuned and firm remembering Irene Adler's scrapbook open on her floor, which he hadn't cleared away. Aloud he said, informative: 'A hundred years ago, a hundred and fifty. Georgian period, you know, in England.'

'All right,' she said. 'And you think I'd—'

'A collector,' he told her. 'This man. He was a natural historian. A collector of—of scientific oddities.'

Rachel trailed fingertips down his nape and the skin went prick-prick-prick. He rolled his shoulders. Drummed his fingers against the sides of his legs. Rachel sighed again. Tedious.
'He kept adding on rooms,' Sherlock supplied. He felt—God. Good. Good, Christ, things in their right shapes and he could—he was cramped and so climbed off the berth. Strode about the little jolting compartment which was not a train at all but a room in a brothel in Paris, France, where there was no reason he couldn't—take Germaine Carco, for example. Germaine Carco who had so unnerved him at Agnès Sabbagh's and in the shadow of the basilica. But it was the simplest thing in the world, looked at logically, for a woman who wanted a child to get one. Men, after all, didn't take much. Took only this, in fact, and Sherlock snorted to himself, mentally gesturing at the room as if he were a solicitor elaborating an argument to a jury: this narrow brothel consulting room made up unconvincingly—laughably! Sherlock could laugh!—as a train car. Men, as everyone knew, required only a wink and an opportunity; and Henry Jouvenel had impregnated three different women. The simplest thing in the world.

'Adding on rooms,' Rachel parroted, far away.

'More than rooms,' he told her. 'Wings! Adding on whole wings. For his collection. Buying up houses next to his, you see? And then connecting them all up together.'

'They say,' Rachel put in, 'that the English and the rich are all—eccentric.'

Such a statement, Sherlock felt, didn't merit a response. On the surface which was not a window, light shone through a film reel and projected an image of trees and of wide generic fields full of cows.

'The point is,' he said, only half-listening to his own words, 'It was preserved, you understand, after his death. As a museum. Now you walk the halls, it's like a labyrinth. You know, a labyrinth?'

Rachel nodded, slowly, but he was already turning his back to start another circuit of the room. 'You can get lost there,' he explained. 'It seems not to make any sense, not to have any logic from one space to the next but you can—but now, understand: you can't see the seams, not directly. Don't think it wasn't well-done; that's not the thing at all. In all his renovations this fellow had the best of everything, this lord. The absolute best. And even if seamlessness wasn't his first priority—and as to that I can't speak, I haven't read his papers, I've never conducted a proper investigation of his motives, or. Or even the motives he openly declared, you understand, in letters or a personal journal, something of that kind—but even if he had other, you might say higher priorities it's obvious he still put significant thought into integrating the different stages of construction with one another in a way that eliminates clear boundaries and makes for a cohesive whole. So you can't tell directly—but anyway, that would be too easy! Wouldn't it?'

He was laughing, a little. More than a little. The relief! He'd been ludicrous, all night. He might spin about, like a child in a field. Such a weight had been lifted from him. He was gasping; his eyes were streaming; he dashed them dry. Rachel had pushed herself back against the wall at the back of the bed—not a berth at all but a huge, lavish bed!—and her lovely little face was inexplicably wide-eyed and thin-mouthed, as it shouldn't be, so he put his hands on the edge of the mattress, shaking it as it shook. Shaking it! 'Too simple,' he repeated. Leaning in. Explaining it to her. Making his voice slow: loud over the rattling, so that she might understand. 'But if you look,' he told her, 'carefully!' She started, so he pressed closer. 'That's the key. If you—if you observe closely, over time, then you can tell.' He slapped the mattress with his palms. Grinned at her. 'You can tell! Can't you!'

Rachel just sat there. Not answering. She'd dropped the little bottle of pills, he saw, and was now running her fingers through the tassels of a bell-pull by the head of the bed. He could have slapped her, too, like he'd slapped the mattress; instead, inspired, he plucked the bottle from the bedsheets.

'Monsieur—' Rachel said, and he said 'Shhh,' and threw a five-franc note on the bed. She could hardly complain about that; there were only three pills left in the bottle.
'Monsieur Williams,' she said again, but he turned his back.

It wasn't, he thought, that she would be difficult to manage. Nothing simpler; only there was so much to think about. Taking the hand-mirror to the desk, away from that incongruous volume, he thought: he'd wasted so much time. Stupidly, stupidly; and he was so close now, he almost felt he could think about—about Claudine, say. Claudine. Christ, what a mess he'd made of the night. It was only logical that, however well or slightly one might have known her in one's youth, a woman's appearance would change more dramatically from thirty-two to forty-five than from twenty-six to thirty-two. Only bloody logical, he thought, crushing the last three tablets with his knife—only logical, so obvious in fact that he was perfectly capable of thinking it through while still explaining to Rachel, saying—

'You can tell,' refining the powder with his blade, 'through observation, you understand. Through close observation! You can see which sections were first and which were last. Most people don't bother, of course. They just look at the, the taxidermy and the cabinets of preserved fetal deformations. You'll know the kind of thing. Lamarck pioneered similar exhibits at the Natural History Museum here in Paris only he was never so careful with his formaldehyde solutions and so they haven't aged well—' thinking: thirty-two, forty-five, only natural, '—they've become cloudy, unfortunate but there you are, unlike the specimens in the collection of this fellow I'm talking about. Soane. But that kind of thing is of course very interesting in its own right and so most people don't pause to reconstruct the architectural background of the house, they just don't bother, but,' pausing to bend his head for—for blooming rushing metal his throat and his ringing ears—

'It's possible,' he assured her. And his whole frame, vibrating with clarity, chambers and corridors spreading out in front of him, 'that's the point,' he said, voice booming in his chest, fantastic, 'it's quite within the capacity of anyone with the patience to observe, to deduce what the floor plans of the buildings must have looked like before they were connected up, where walls must have been knocked out and added and how the rooms would have been used before. And not only that,' he insisted, 'but also, more essentially, the logic of it. The underlying reasons why he did what he did. You can tell.'

In the ringing silence after his words he felt he could sense, exquisitely, cleanly, with no conscious effort, all the activity in all the rooms and floors and buildings radiating out in an ever-expanding periphery about him. The laughter in the salon and the rushing of car-tyres below in the street and the heavy tread coming up the stairs.

'And you like that,' said Rachel, behind him. He turned about in annoyance.

'Anyone would!' The words crisp in his mouth, like an apple. 'Come to London! You must come; you have to just—come. If you came, you would see.'

'I don't think,' said Rachel, 'that's something I would enjoy.'

'You—pardon?'

She regarded him, with her beautiful closed-off face. Blank-eyed like she'd heard nothing at all of what he'd just explained. What he'd just taken such pains over explaining. Like he hadn't just said Lamarck and Musée d'Histoire Naturelle without so much as flinching, all for her benefit and Christ, he thought, he should have thought of this in Montmartre. Should have made inquiries at the hotel; in the midst of so much modern luxury they would be well-equipped for such requests. It was, in retrospect, with the old rushing ringing in his ears and his bones like steel and his mind narrowing down and down on absolutely whatever track he wished to set it, such an obvious, such an essential solution. There was so much to be done, and close to him, very close to him now if only he could be alone, if only he could find a quiet room for an hour, for half an hour, just around the next corner
came a place where the solution was ready to unfold for him, to give way and blossom out—

'It's not,' Rachel cut in blandly on his train of thoughts, 'the kind of holiday I prefer.'

Like being—slapped.

And Sherlock, alight—

'Better,' he said, sputtering, advancing, 'than—than fetching and carrying like some kind of vassal slave for Mrs bloody Kelly,' just as the heavy tread ceased its progress down the corridor and the door swung open.

'You!' came a voice behind him, and then: 'I've got the right room?'

Sherlock spun about: the open door, the corridor, his erstwhile friend the doorman with a truncheon in his hand. A look of puzzlement on his face.

'The incapable ones,' drawled Rachel, behind him, 'are often the most vicious.' The man's face relaxed into grimness.

'I'm—no,' Sherlock said, outraged. 'Don't—I only need—' but by that time the doorman he'd chatted to, how long ago? Two hours? Five? was pinning his arms behind his back, was saying, infuriatingly, over his shoulder in a conversational tone, 'What a night! Is it a full moon?' and the whore Rachel was saying in her bored, tight little voice that she'd buy him a drink sometime for his trouble and 'Sure,' he said, while Sherlock fumed, 'sure,' all the trivial nonsense beating at his head when all he needed was a sterilised room. Just. Someplace to think for a bloody half-hour at a stretch, just. Christ.

He let the man shove him down the stairs and through the still-bustling salon and past the now-disapproving Mrs Kelly and out onto the sodden pavement where, rushing in his ears like the rivers sprung up in the storm-troughs and his blood already levelling out, horribly, he was finally let go.

Out on the street, buzzing. Spitting. The doorman, once out of earshot of Rachel, was disposed to give him a ribbing: 'Didn't reckon you for the type, I must say,' called after his retreating back but Sherlock, thrumming and furious, didn't answer, just raised a hand. Strode off into the downpour down the rue Chabanais and turned down the rue Rameau with his blood racing under his skin.

He had to—Christ, the idiot mess of it all. If he'd only thought earlier of chemical assistance. If he could only be alone, now. If he could only be alone in a room for an hour, he could get it sorted, all of it. Look how the seeming inconsistencies of Germaine Carco and Claudine Holmès had given way before him, and that while he was chatting about architecture with a common Parisian whore! There was nothing, he thought—no, he knew—nothing at all that he couldn't manage if he could only be for an hour in a quiet place. He could think, for example, of the bundle. He was able to think of it, right now: the contents of the bundle in his jacket-pocket. Look at him, thinking of it! He could think of—of the telegram he'd gone looking for, and failed to find. Could think of it, even as a group of shouting students raced through the little square across the street, their jackets held over their heads, before the silhouette of the redundant fountain. In a quiet, clean place he would be able to think of Daniel MacIntyre and he could. Could think of John.

But the absurdity of the thing, he couldn't—could not simply break into an unused apartment and have a think, could he; because now there was this stupid, this unnecessary botched business of leaving, like an idiot, everything askew in Irene Adler's private rooms.

He stood in the street. Near-winded with fury with his blood cresting and levelling and his heels
backed up against the fussy little ironwork gate lining the garden across the Rue Rameau from Le Chabanais. He kicked it. Craned his neck to look up. The sliver of eastern sky he could make out above the top of 12 Rue Chabanais was beginning noticeably to lighten, though the French doors of the Fleurs de Mal Room remained closed, and dark.

*Christ.* If he could only—

But it was so simple.

He’d thought as much at the time. Hadn’t he.

Electric in his bones he fairly flew across the street. The drainpipe, thrumming-spewing with the storm, was new-built, solid, with jutting joints joining sections of pipe every four feet, a cornice at the level of the first floor, and balconies on all the rooms. It was a *dream*, he thought, wiping water out of his eyes; it was his first piece of luck tonight. With his soaked palms and jacketed forearms and slick-soled shoes he gripped metal. Lifted himself up. His shoes slipped, but his arms held him and he hugged the pole to his torso with his left arm, blinking rain out of his eyes while reaching up with his right hand; gripping; then holding with his right, reaching with his left to—to slip, twist, wrench his ankle as he fell.

White paint flakes on his palms. His window of opportunity was closing and it wasn't acceptable to simply. Desperate he knelt to untie his shoes; strip off his socks; wad them into the shoes and drape the lot over the back of his neck by the laces. Water pouring down his back, dripping off the ends of his hair and his nose. He shook out his hands, breathing deep into his chest and lifted himself up, again.

Right now, for a few minutes yet, he could still think of anything he liked. So he thought of clinging vine-like to the drainpipe: frog-legs holding him while his hands reached left over right over left. Digging his soles into the metal joints: the first, and then the second. No time to rest at the little platforms made by the joints. He could feel it seeping out of him but he mustn't think about that. Legs, burning but holding; hands left over right over left. His fingers' first knuckles flattening as he gripped the cornice. His soles were slippery but he clenched his gut; gripped with his heels as he reached out for the rail of Irene's balcony and felt his hand close around iron. Feet clenching, dragging up the pipe; second hand to iron. He breathed deep and gauged the distance, then swung out, and chinned himself up. Got his right toes up, with his stomach muscles screaming. Acetone taste in his mouth. Used his hands to lever his hips up, left toes on the ledge and then he was standing there, stepping easily over the waist-high ironwork and falling to his knees in front of Irene Adler's French doors.

Even through the rain it was light enough now that he could make out the lock; but not, he told himself, sufficiently light that a lamp in the rooms would prove superfluous if their regular occupant had returned. Ignoring the undertow, the slackening dragging at him, he set forth his lock-picks and felt out the pins: and they clicked and clicked into place. He turned the handle, and opened the door, and was inside.

Irene had not, in fact, returned. There lay the scrapbook, just where he'd left it, with its pasted-in print fragments and its incongruous rubbed-down brown leather bindings. Fifteen minutes ago, Sherlock thought, they'd not have seemed incongruous: their explanation would have appeared plain. He latched the French door behind him and in the half-light, muscles watery in his legs and his arms and his stomach, crossed the room and tidied the album back into its customary niche. Not difficult, the work of half a minute; though he'd dripped all over her floor and he didn't, he observed, much enjoy touching the thing. He slid the hinged wardrobe assembly back into place, and after that it seemed absurd to stand twitching in front of Irene Adler's bespoke collection of perverse sexual
paraphernalia, so he pushed those doors shut, too.

Then it was quiet in the Fleurs du Mal room.

Sherlock was breathing hard, but he was still for the most part steady. He nodded to himself. Nodded. The room around him was reluctantly lightening and he thought of Germaine Carco, wanting a child and getting one: simplest thing in the world. Even if her husband, beloved… but. But that was all enormously commonplace, too. Wasn't it. She no doubt assumed that when the baby came then Francis Carco would himself put aside childish things. Would care for the babe. Would love it. Did it matter, after all, the circumstances of a person's conception, in comparison to the circumstances of their growth? It did, he thought, to… some people. Was Germaine Carco one of them?

She had done what she had done: that was true of every victim and every perpetrator in every case he'd ever investigated.

Sherlock put his hand in his right-hand jacket pocket, and took out the packet of papers. You must, he thought. The presence of contradictory evidence only means.

He held it in his hand, and his hand hung by his side.

Outside it was fully morning now. The rain had nearly stopped. The light gave the Fleurs du Mal room an unfamiliar, almost dingy aspect; yet its contents were, of course, just the same. Pulled out from the wall, just where he'd left it, sat the straight-backed chair by its uncoiled ropes and its paddle. Just where he'd left them, the huge black bed and the lacquered desk and, with dust motes floating above them in the weak morning sunlight breaking through the clouds, the new, packed red morocco trunks.

Sherlock clenched his aching hand. His elbow wouldn't bend.

He stood there, Sherlock Holmes. It was a bright rectangle now: the glowing mullioned panes of the French door that five minutes before had opened to admit him like the bright stretching vistas that back in Rachel's make-believe train-car he'd almost—almost glimpsed.

It made him tremble. The chance he'd had.

Lowering himself into the little desk-chair he thought: it's not as if. Not as if you've gone mad, or. You know quite well what John would say if he were here. (Two fingers to his spasming eyelid.) The very fact that you can, can think of him, think of John, even now on the long nervous disjointed tail end of it: that proves or. Or indicates. Indicates a possibility that perhaps he is sometimes wrong. Sometimes, when you've specific requirements.

When you just need a clean white empty room.

Not like this room. In the soggy daylight the smoke-smudges stand out on the warped old window glass and the dirt under your fingernails.

If you'd simply asked Claudine. Never mind about—about Rachel and that entire—if you'd replaced Irene Adler's scrapbook and left this place under your own initiative and then crossed the city, woke up your cousin in her rooms and said: if I had come back to Paris, in 1906 or 1907 or 1908. If you'd demanded evidence, first-hand evidence. A full account, connecting cause to effect to effect to the present day. Demanded of her: what did it mean to you, when I left? And what caused the change in you, like that changed me? Was it the War, or—? In 1908 or 1910 who were you? Would you have been a different person, if I'd forgiven you then?
But what possible difference could it make? Nape to ankles, every tender patch of skin stretched thin over hollow bone.

Sherlock Holmes you have evidence before you. Just there, by your right hand. You were holding it not five minutes ago. Can't quite, now. Can't quite touch it, can't quite think to yourself—

You don't even like touching the desk surface, do you. Or the drawers. Would draw your hands with their dirty fingernails up under your chin like an old woman under hospital sheets. Don't even like touching the blotter or the wood but you keep doing it because otherwise. Running your fingers through the grime, you can tell the difference one from the other.

The lock doesn't listen now when you talk to it but that's only because your hands keep trembling. You get the thing open in the end. At least she cleans her gun, Irene Adler, unless this one is just for show. All the notes in her little first-tier blackmail book in the cabinet of misdirection: tidy, at least. At least all her ampoules are full and sealed and clearly labeled in their neat little case with the black ribbon and at least the syringes are plain.

You hardly want to. With the achy undertow dragging at you, strange, isn't it. Such a self-contained little ampoule with its neat Cocaine label sitting cool in your palm and the rain blanketing down outside. You find it distasteful to think of breaking the top of it but you do. You uncap the ink bottle next to the blotter, slide the cap over the pointed glass top and press with your thumb. You crack it, cleanly, as you must, or you're not—or you won't—won't have that well-worn ritual in the clean white vibrating-clear light where you'll be able to tell the difference, clear amongst all the discrete objects.

So you pull back the plunger. You tighten the belt. There is flexion in rhythm: muscle memory. You remember Claudine, one afternoon in 1903, correcting your fingering on her too-large violin saying your body remembers what it's done, and yours does. It remembers; you remember: you remember the hot sting of the needle and and the steady push and heartbeat you heartbeat think—

—no that isn't, that's—

—m—

—in the gut dissolving hot—

—then bolting falling knees to tile and hot acid erupting—

—hook stomach to blistering throat—

—but it feels, Christ—
Cool tile to cheek. Smell of sick. Might need to, again. Feels good, it's so. Too much Christ it feels.

Dark sinking. Darkness.

Black. Blue.

Day ocean. Darkness, can't. Darkness. The waves.

Blue. Black.


Blink open. Glisten. G—listen. Head down push at it sticky. List. Listen. Push down pull thuck fingers thuck thuck unsticking. The waves feel the waves feel the waves—

Hook gut to back-throat. Open lips and it falls out in tacky rivulets: thin, thinner. Slipping slipping stretching to pool on tile then Snap. Bottom lip acid-wet.

Cheek shoulder hip thigh to tile. In the calm the water feels... Sinking dark.

Listen. Ear cool to the tile. Ear to the air.


Gl—ister. Rrr.


Blue.

Black.

Blue.
One thing for another. Glister. Gristle.

Black.

Blue. Black.

Blink open on a tiled floor.

_Morphine._

Close up and sink down down down down down down until the surface pulls back.

Blink open.

The thin clear vomit next to his face was now half-crusted in an unbroken layer over the tile and the top of his hand. He flexed his fingers; watched it shift and crack over the tendons and the skin. Over the gristle. Grit. God. That feeling. Grow grown growl. Groan.

In the, hmmm. In the Middle Ages? Flat human figures; oddly-sized parts and miniature buildings and their humours. (Unjointing his thumb; putting it back.) Crackle; c—wrack. In the Middle Ages they'd believed in a kind of—hmmm. Word magic. Remembered reading that. Drifted remembering some... deep kinship, among things whose words sounded alike. Or. Contained each other. An affinity. Like a blood tie; it was—really so bloody—_funny_ shaking on the floor eyes leaking. You could do _magic_ with them, they'd thought. Rolling, laughing. There was some _meaning_ to it. List, listen, glisten. Because, because, wait, because pleasing and wanting and enumerating all bundled together into hearing and understanding and that was God of a piece with the sparkling trails on a rock in the sun after the snail had gone. Bloody—he lay curled around his aching stomach staring into a vision of a monk in a robe. Talking of a hidden bond, some—some deep foundation of cause and effect and, and—and knowledge of the future. Like divine right, like—like the accession of bloody kings.


His left arm lay straight out from the pinned-under shoulder. Prod it with his right and the needle-prick oozed fresh red into brown. His face crusted itchy and his throat parched but close his eyes and it was all still. Sinking-floating. Swathed in salt touching nothing. In _fucking_ exquisite in waves waves in waves.


Sinking down; down. Rising up. Between grief, and disbelief. Down; down. The pull of the surface.
Rising up.

Sherlock blinked back open in Irene Adler's blue-tiled WC. Rolled back onto his side.

*Morphine,* he thought. Jesus. His sloppy slow-squelching heart. That'd been... years. A person never forgot, it seemed.

But he. Hadn't remembered, had he. Not properly. Not the *sensation.* He'd held it in his blood and his bones to recognise but he hadn't been able to hold it in his memory. It had come to seem like. Like something he could describe in words. When in reality—even now...

He pressed his fingertips into the sick. *Thuck thuck thuck* he thought, but when he pulled them back the only sound was a kind of gritty *ssshht.*


*Howitzer,* he thought, and then he thought, *Holmes.*

It would be such a pointless thing to mourn: that they'd been wrong all those years ago, in the Middle Ages.

Well, morphine felt good. He'd remembered that much: impossibly, exquisitely good. The hunt felt good, too, at its best. The investigation. And in travelling tent-revival churches in America, he'd heard, they walked on glass for God. Their skin came off in strips and they fell down in bliss. They spoke gibberish, apparently, believing it meant something; together in a place without words.

Sherlock lay on his side on a stranger's tile floor. He'd stopped sinking, for the most part; and he'd stopped rising up. He blinked and blinked over white-rowed blue.

John Watson had lived, for two years, in Baker Street with Sherlock Holmes. John Watson had served with Daniel MacIntyre on the Western Front. Say they were just... just homonyms of one another. John and John. A coincidence of sound and body; nothing to extrapolate one from the other. And Sherlock, exiled forever from inhabiting the cells they shared. And besides that: different roots. Different branches. Different family. No relation to one another at all.

He lay on his side. His ribcage expanded and contracted. He breathed through his mouth and didn't close his eyes but looked straight ahead at the world as it might be; as it might have always been. He did that for what felt like ages of man.

And then Sherlock Holmes pushed up onto an elbow. A knee.

Pushed himself to his feet. Didn't feel the ache, not really. Not yet. Poison yes, but *sometimes it helped,* Rachel had said, and truly: Sherlock could move. Steady. He washed out his mouth at the sink. Dampened a flannel; wiped up the floor. All his movements were smoothed out, smeared down and none too precise; and he was nauseated, still, whenever he stirred; but his parts moved when he told them to. He walked back out into the main room and sat at the lacquered desk, breathing and thinking steadily, steadily as he made himself breathe through the idea of it: a John Watson unknown to him. A John Watson who might—might sleep on the side away from the door. Who might resent a cup of Assam, and feel ill at ease in a Scots Presbyterian church, and patronise a brothel on the whim of an old lover. About whom nothing could be deduced because no evidence existed outside a place without words where Sherlock had never been. Where he could never go. He extended a hand across the desk. Undid the twine which had fastened together the bundle of papers he'd taken from John's hotel.
The knot came easily. The wrapper, slightly damp, fell away to reveal sheets somehow unmarred by water. Sherlock let the twine fall to the floor. He scattered over the desk the little bundle of papers: most of them quarter-sized, quick gestural sketches of a full body. John's body. The frisson of recognition shouldn't be a shock, Sherlock told himself; for who else would the subject be? And Sherlock felt, in any case, too suppressed, too exhausted to be shocked at anything—yet still. That hot stutter of his heart. Falling face-up; or face-down to be turned by Sherlock's creaking hands: one figure after another.

He'd almost convinced himself, but. This was no homonym. It couldn't be. It pulled at him: a sharp hot crying out. A hook in his ribs. This was John. Sherlock's John. Even unfinished, without enough detail to tell if the figures were clothed or nude, black or white; with nothing more than an oval for a face still Sherlock would know John's body anywhere.

And what the body did—he knew John, he felt. Knew him so painfully. Over and over, turning over page after page it ached in him: the intimacy of recognition. In one sketch the figure—John, Sherlock thought, fiercely—reclined, propped up on his side like he'd be in their bed in Baker Street when Sherlock, intent on a sudden realisation, would spring up and pace the room, and John, exasperated and amused, would watch him. His John. Sherlock's. That particular angle of shoulder to ribs: heartbreakingly distinctive. Had John, then, propped himself up like that, to look at Daniel? Had he been amused for Daniel, as he was for Sherlock? But—here: the figure faced away from the artist as John would do, with shoulders hunched as John's would when Sherlock with the black dog upon him goaded John into battle, and John braced himself; did not leave; stood by the Baker Street windows and bore it. He had borne Daniel then, too. This was John, incontrovertibly. John Watson, who Sherlock knew, who he knew, suffering because of the presence of someone he loved, and forcing himself to stay.

Even these, look at these closer studies: overlapping sketches of hands. John's hands. The way—Christ. The way Daniel had captured John's left hand at full flexion: wrist taut, small fingers hyperextended. Sherlock reached out and touched. Feeling so horribly, bruisingly tender; his skin might bleed out like a sponge. He ran a finger along the angle of thumb to wrist. The hand had been held at John's side. Sherlock knew this and could not make himself doubt it, though Daniel had drawn none of the hand's surroundings. And Sherlock also knew that a moment later it had been clenched into a fist: a tell Sherlock looked for, always, in moments of stress. He searched the sheet for the next moment's fist, and: there, at the right-hand corner. He breathed, deep. He had known it. Knew it. Would know it anywhere at all. And knew that John wouldn't, would never—

But he had. He had, and yet Sherlock knew him, and knew he never would. Sherlock sat at Irene Adler's desk, the two truths dull and heavy, side by side.

Here, anyway, at the bottom of the stack, was a larger paper. In the spirit of completeness, Sherlock thought, and reached for it. His John, with a familiar look of invitation? His John, stretched or curled or arching up in Daniel's narrow bed? It was a full copy draught sheet, folded in quarters, and Sherlock unfolded it once and then again and then looked down until with cold shudders dripping down his spine and his throat as his eyes made sense of John's—his—

Christ, he thought. No.

Refusal.

No.

But. But this, too, was Sherlock's John. (No.) Wasn't it? (No.) He couldn't—even with his mind smeared quiet as it was Sherlock couldn't—he made his hands into fists. Opened them wide. Like John always did: his John, whom fiercely he knew.
Inventory, then. It was more finely-worked than the sketches, by far, this piece: John fallen to his knees, stripped to the waist in what looked to be a trench; the ground at his feet clogged with rucksacks and cloth helmets, and gas masks that looked, to Sherlock's eye, oddly unformed. He let himself linger on them because the figure was too horrible, too—and yet every detail, when he made himself look, was so intimately familiar to him. Wasn't it? Here, again, was the flexion of the open hands. There, suggested by just a few eloquent strokes and a shaded stain, the mass of scar tissue on the shoulder that Sherlock could draw from memory.

But the throat.

Sherlock's palms on either side the paper were so heavy and sweat-soaked he felt it might disintegrate under them. People did not, of course, recover unmarked from gunshot wounds to the throat.

He closed his eyes. Thanks to the brutality of Daniel's lines and and to the familiarity of John's body and perhaps to the narrowed flattened chemical exhaustion of Sherlock's blood, it was both easy and unbearable to imagine—he could see John's golden throat. Unmarked. So lovely. As if close enough to touch. John in the train carriage down from Calais; the bob-bob of his Adam's apple in his beautiful neck as he teased Sherlock; laughed at him; sipped Claudine's Armagnac before he let Sherlock lick the taste out of his mouth; before he let him bite, let him—suck kisses—and Sherlock, now, gripping at his own windpipe against the vision of his John, voice gurgling out of him around the blood—

Gasping he opened his eyes. Sweating vibration. He stared down at the picture. It hadn't happened. Of course it hadn't. It couldn't have happened and. What was more.

A salt slick pouring off him: he wiped his palm on his trousers. Even so it smudged the image, a bit, when he brushed a thumb over the scarred shoulder. Stared down at it. Prickling up him. The hairs on his back standing up like the hackles on a dog.

John had told Sherlock that Daniel believed he'd seen him—John—killed. But not like this. A head wound from the rear, John had said: an exploding mortar. And if—if this were a portrait, Sherlock thought, of John Watson in the trenches of the Great War. It plainly was an image of a soldier with John's body, and John's face, in that war. Probably… probably early in the War, Sherlock realised, taking in again the oddly formless cloth helmet and the mask like a window in a burlap sack: they'd had more shape, later on. But John's shoulder hadn't been injured until the War was nearly over. When he'd first met Sherlock, it hadn't even been fully healed. Yet there it was: impressionistic perhaps but suggested with draftsmanship control: the scar as Sherlock knew it, no longer raw or angry but shadowed as he had watched it become over the past year. Even the way the soldier held his torso as he attempted to recoil from the catastrophe of his throat: a stranger to John could tell the shoulder wasn't a new wound.

It was physically painful to keep looking; yet he found it impossible to stop.

The throat wound was terrible, Sherlock thought, but the hands: that familiar taut line of the convulsing hands. That was worse. And the weight of the figure: Daniel had captured, somehow, the force of the impact as it had occurred just the moment before, when the soldier had dropped; when his knees had hit the earth carrying his full weight (that weight Sherlock could feel, still, pressed down against him, panting). In Daniel's drawing the blow still echoed through the soldier's bones. It was present in the flung-back shoulders, the thrust-forward hips. The shocked body struggling unthinking to right itself. Trying to preserve itself, against all odds.

And the mouth. Wrenched wide, a rictus of agony. The mouth, Sherlock felt, with his throat closing, was perhaps the work's one weakness, as a piece aspiring to universal appeal. For surely no viewer
who didn’t know John as Sherlock knew John, could read the heartbreak of that mouth. One had to have watched—had to have observed over time—the way John kept it pressed tight when he was disapproving, when he was unconvinced: when he was thinking, that is, of how he appeared in the eyes of the world. (Of how, very often, Sherlock was making him appear in the eyes of the world.) One had to have observed that; and one had to have made a study, too, of how that same mouth came open, unbidden, the moment John's thoughts of faceless opprobrium were eclipsed by—by his fascination, yes; by his attraction; by his amusement or his fury or his pleasure. Watching him allow it had been—

Sherlock's eyes, his whole face, were leaking salt. It had been one of the great privileges of Sherlock's life: watching John Watson allow him to draw him fully into himself. Into conspiracy with Sherlock, against the world.

And it was—was unthinkable. Monstrous. To say, that for the sake of this—this patch of mud, or this great nation, or the mother tongue—to say that that allowing, that that consenting, should be denied him. That this man should be wrenched open by metal, and forced against his will to be fully inside his body only to feel it fail. That such happen to a stranger—to seventeen million strangers—was a piece of folly at which the Holmes brothers had snorted and shaken their heads. But that it should happen to John, Sherlock's John, was so insupportable as to be—even hobbled as he was, Sherlock would hunt down the devil in his hell. Pile blood on senseless blood that John Watson could be denied the right to sink, in his own time, into himself.

Grinding teeth into chalk Sherlock reminded himself: John Watson, whose throat was unmarked. Whose shoulder in 1915 and 1916 and 1917 had been unmarred.

A ragged sound in the room. Great gasping breaths. They came from Sherlock, and when he realised it the noise he made was brutal; but then he made himself quiet. Quieter. Quiet.

He looked down. It seemed incongruous, somehow, that the gruesome image could lie so matter-of-factly in the morning sunlight after a rain. It was not his John, Sherlock thought; and it was his John; but in the eyes there was so much pleading. Sherlock touched the paper, just there, by the side of John's contorted face. Blind fear, yes; but more than that, such piercing loneliness. Sherlock thought he wouldn't have been able to bear it; that he would cut out his own heart; would take himself off to the storm drains or the antipodes if John ever looked at him with such bottomless loneliness. When John looked at Sherlock—even the night before last, when he'd wracked them both with misery and had pushed Sherlock off him and then left him alone. Even then. When John looked at Sherlock he did it as if he knew Sherlock would find a way to meet him.

But John had looked at Daniel like... this. Daniel had looked at John and John had looked back with these unbearable eyes. As if across a divide that he knew could never be bridged. Sherlock had never seen that look and never wanted to see it, but Daniel had: which was, Sherlock knew, a kind of intimacy. Even if it was unspeakable, it was an intimacy. And it smarted; Sherlock couldn't help itsmarting: that country without words where John and Daniel had been together, and where Sherlock only went alone.

But—but if John looked at Sherlock like a bridge. If this was his John, even if it also wasn't his John; and if his John still looked at Sherlock like Sherlock could find him, and meet him, and let Sherlock draw him fully into himself, mouth opening against the world—

All right, Sherlock thought. Pushing himself to his feet, tired to his bones, suddenly splitting with sadness over the little boy who had torn up Claudine's card in the train lavatory, Sherlock thought: all of it: the unspeakable, the unknowable, the unending carrying on with the work in the face of failures, of betrayals, of doublings and fractures and the gruesome uncertainty inherent in human
evidence. It can be borne, he thought, looking about for his shoes, tying John's bundle together to bring it back to him. It can be borne.

Chapter End Notes

DVD extras notes on this chapter can be found here.
'And does… Madame,' the solicitor was saying, and Irene—why not? let her mouth tug up at the corner. Once she’d had money she’d chosen the firm for their condescension; for the fact they’d been open about looking down on her, hadn't rushed to please her except how it mattered. She’d felt it more honest. More amusing. And she had played to perfection the resentment she was meant to feel at the slights. But now, here she was. Not a week left in Paris! She'd most likely never see him again, this Monsieur Moreau, with his tisanes and his bluster and his waistcoats that had fitted poorly even back when they were purchased for him, before the War.

'Oh no,' she told him. 'No clear plans. One wants to see the world, you understand.'

Moreau's face suggested delicate incredulity that any world outside Paris was worthy of the name. 'Why! One might have all sorts of adventures,' she continued, breezily. 'One doesn't want to be tied down.'

He sniffed. She felt a strange fondness for him, this fussy little man with whom for so long she had performed this dance of incomprehension and disapproval. Thirteen years! Strange to think that he would go on without her. That she would leave—actually leave Paris—and that Paris would go on without her. That in these dark offices, painstakingly expensive but too conservative to be chic, Moreau would continue to fret and fuss and flawlessly carry out instructions left him by clients of whom he would continue, even in her absence, to sniffily disapprove. In a month, or two, when she was alone in Copenhagen or in Athens with—in Athens, she might sit on her balcony and think of this office. Absurd, no doubt. Why, in her new life, would she bother?

'And—these,' said Moreau. Irene felt her smile actually slip a notch. She was leaving, but even so.

'Yes,' Irene said, looking down. 'Quite the object of my visit.'

Five trunks: three, simple, in red morocco leather; and then the two in black brocade. For the larger of these, she thought, it was merely impractical to travel with a full complement; and for the smaller… that was distasteful, a bit. (Her palms clammy, a bit.) She ought to've made a clean break. That's what she would have told any other woman, if any other woman had been sufficiently in Irene's confidence to ask her. But. Sometimes a trial separation was necessary.

'I've written instructions,' she said. Folded, thrice, in a crisp white envelope: she retrieved it from her new red-leather handbag. 'The red you will send to me in a week, at an address I will write to provide. As regards the black, I want them both kept under lock and key, until such time as I send notice, with an address, to ship them on.'

Fitting his monocle to his eye, perusing her letter, Moreau opened his mouth. Irene said, 'I'll leave sufficient funds to keep them for five years,' and he shut it again.
'If you haven't heard from me at the end of that time,' she said, and swallowed. 'Then I authorise you to destroy them both.'

Nothing showed on her face. She was sure of it.

Moreau folded up the paper and nodded to himself. She said to herself that he was going to put it down on his desk and smooth it three times with the tips of his fingers, and then he put it down on his desk and nodded and smoothed it three times with the tips of his fingers. Irene smiled.

'But you will,' she said, 'hear from me, before that time. With instructions.'

'And may one ask,' said Moreau, 'what the Bank of France will be harbouring, during the intervening time?'

Fingers, smoothing over her handbag. She realised, with a moment of rising panic, that her fingernails and the leather of the bag were of slightly different shades. Not in thirteen years had she allowed such a thing to happen.

But it was all right, she told herself. Anastasie would fit her in.

'Oh,' she told Moreau. She made herself wave her mismatched hand. 'It's only some clothing I would find inconvenient on my travels. Tools I use in my work. A few old picture albums.' She smiled. She knew he would sniff and he sniffed. The world tilted back on its axis. She rose to her feet and held out her hand and assured him, 'Nothing of note.'

Monday, August 29th, 1921
1pm

A thump, a clicking—

—groaning and the light, squinting into the worn-warm—afternoon, must be, and John's back and—
and blinking open against the door—

'Sh'lock.' Thick tongued. 'Christ.'

Dirt all down the front of Sherlock's beautiful summer suit. Shirt untucked; ripped; his rat's nest hair. Scraped cheek. Bandaged wrist. And his mouth, chewed red. And the bruises under his eyes, and the bled-white shade of him. Of his beautiful—his beautiful face.

On instinct John had reached out. He wanted to gather him up, gather him to him; and then he remembered. He let his hand fall back to the bedclothes. Barely audible, Sherlock's soft sound.

'It's all right,' Sherlock said. That clicking in his throat. 'You can…'

Could he? John lifted his hand. Turned it over. Made himself keep it there, extended into space in the too-warm mid-day light. Sherlock could leave it there or, or take it. John held it out and watched Sherlock press his back to the door. God. The way he looked. It hurt, for John to keep his eyes on him. The both of them there, half a room apart.

'Y'look half-dead,' John whispered.

'Half kicking, then.' If he tried for a smile it didn't make it near his face.
Sherlock stood there: back to the door, sheet of paper in his left hand, brain speeding along behind his eyes. Totting up some calculation. John kept his hand outstretched because Sherlock had allowed it. His eyes felt sleep-hot and grainy and dread dripped into his gut but he’d never watched anything so urgently as he did Sherlock, watching him back.

He saw when Sherlock shifted his weight. When he closed his eyes a fraction of a second longer than a blink. When he winced at some pain—his knee, John thought. Or his foot. He saw when Sherlock let out his breath, and when his shoulders, infinitesimally, eased down. Squared themselves, as if for battle.

And then Sherlock pushed his weight off the door behind him. Let the paper drift to the floor. Three strides to the bedside and he took John’s hand. Seized it, clumsy, almost rough, as if he weren’t accustomed—John’s throat, closing. But Sherlock was here, still. In this moment he was standing over John, looking down. Smelling like the gutter behind a pub, sour and cigarette-fouled and tainted with someone’s cheap flower scent and so entirely, so painfully beloved. Gripping John’s hand like a child manhandling a puppy before its mother says Be careful, darling, or you’ll hurt him, but John would never—and Sherlock exhaled again. Shifted; rickety. Resting weight against the bed like his hips ached, he lowered himself down. Knees to the floor. Forehead to their clasped hands as if at prayer. There was dried sick in his hair.

‘I’m sorry,’ John said. Stinging eyes: it was so criminally inadequate. His whole chest trying to squeeze itself into words that couldn’t hold it. ‘I’m so, so sorry, Sherlock, what I did was inexcusable, I don’t—’

‘I understand,’ said Sherlock, ‘that there are parts of it that you can’t—that can’t be. Explained.’

He said it to the edge of the mattress. It made John’s bones ache: Sherlock’s beautiful neck still bent down. John dared tentative fingers through the curls matted at the base of Sherlock’s skull. Sherlock didn’t stop him.

‘Yeah,’ John sighed. ‘I suppose there are.’

‘And parts of it that were…’ Sherlock trailed off. ‘Monstrous,’ he said, finally.

‘All of it. More or less.’

Sherlock took a breath and held it. For a moment he was quiet, John’s fingers in his hair and at his nape, and then his hands clenched on the corner of the mattress and, in a rush, like he couldn’t help it: ‘We’ve—you and I, we’ve seen monstrosity. Together, we’ve—the Sorensen case, the MacElhaney’s, all those—’ with his voice catching, ‘—beggars and the—the children—’

‘Christ, Sherlock. You can’t—it’s not a footrace.’

His voice had been soft but he felt Sherlock’s flinch all up his own arm.

‘No,’ Sherlock said. ‘I know. I know that now. I do, but we’ve had, there have been. Depths.’

‘Yeah,’ John said. Thumb to thin skin; the scraped-up backs of Sherlock’s clenched knuckles. ‘There have.’

‘Not like that, though,’ Sherlock said, the words rushing out of him with his hand tightening around John’s hand, clutching like to break it and oh, love, unbearable, unbearable as John bent down, awkward triangle, cupped the back of his head. Kissed sour-smelling curls.

‘No,’ he said. ‘A different thing.’
Sherlock nodded against the mattress. Gripped John's hand. John breathed into his hair and thought: how many hours since Sherlock had been cruel and brittle by the window, his unbending back and his lovely skin and John had left him. And now—? Sherlock didn't look up. Bruises smudged up along his first two thoracic vertebrae, visible under his collar, tugged loose from his neck. John felt about to split apart.

'What do you want to know?' he said; and immediate, like a dog breaking from its lead: 'What did you want from him?' said Sherlock. John shut his eyes.


'Now, I mean,' Sherlock said. 'When you—when you went with him,' tangibly cringing but still saying, 'when you went back. I know it wasn't—but—the last few days.'

John breathed deep. Hand to Sherlock's nape, gentle. You have to, he thought. If you've anything of conviction at all you have to be here, now. Sherlock holding to his hand like a lifeline.

'I think,' John said. He stopped; swallowed and then. Words grinding from the back of his throat: 'I think I wanted him to—recognise me. I think I thought. Christ.'

It was awful. Sherlock's thin shoulders, heaving. Face pressed to cotton. John thought: I can't say this to him. But he had to do.

He said, 'I think I thought I could—could cure him,' and his throat closed, and his whole face flushed stinging hot with shame. He ground out, 'I think I thought I could f-force him to remember. Like he was—mistaken, about his own head, or—or. Or only pretending.'

He was breathing like he'd run a race. If he let go of himself for an instant he might flee. But Sherlock had asked, hadn't he. It had been the thing he'd immediately, desperately, wanted to know.

So John said, 'I think I thought. I told myself I'd talk him out of his mistake and he'd. I don't know, I. Be better off, somehow. Or I would be. That's more—God.' His voice caught; he swallowed. 'I thought if I could make Daniel see me, see me as I am then it'd mean I'd—that I'd made amends. Like it'd wipe out everything I'd remembered when I saw him again. Everything I'd done wrong. Everything that. Everything that happened.'

Sherlock's head stayed bent down. His death grip on John's hand: John hoped he'd crack bones.

'But Sherlock,' John said. His lungs like a creaking bellows. 'Even if there had been any… recognition, between Daniel and me. It wouldn't be what you were imagining. It wouldn't have been —regaining the love of my life. Or he his.'

Sherlock made a pained noise. Disbelieving. Awful to happen beneath John's hands.

'I—felt for him,' John told him. 'I felt—tremendously; and I wanted him; and—and he did me, apparently, as well. So he says.' Sherlock's shoulders, drawing together as John rushed on, 'But I did such a bloody awful job of being with him that he never properly—he never felt me there; and that's. That's what I have left now, of Daniel. That's not a grand love. That's not a friendship worthy of the name. I wanted him to make me feel forgiven but it wasn't—it wasn't ever something he'd have been able to do. Not something he should've been asked to do.'

John slid his hand around to Sherlock's cheek. Thumb brushed the scrape on his cheekbone. With shaking fingers he touched Sherlock's jaw. Pulled. Coaxed it up, and Sherlock made a raw kind of a gasp but he let John pull his head up. Let his wet eyes meet John's. Cradling Sherlock's cheek in his palm.
'It's,' John said. 'It's not something you should be asked to do either. But Sherlock, with you I.'

Breath shaking. 'I want so much to do it right. If there's—any possibility, still. Then I want to try.'

Pale eyes; a cord drew taut between them. The silence blanketed it, and the sun through glass beat down on it, and the dust motes floated through it, and John made himself hold tight. Hold tight to it like Sherlock held to his hand.

'Is that,' said Sherlock, at last, 'what you want with me, as well? That I—see you?'

'God,' John said. Thumb to his bottom lip: cracked. 'I can't—no one can ask that, without saying—I want to show you, I want to—to be with you. Sherlock.' Painfully inadequate. 'To—work to be with you.'


'You try to see me,' John said. Words breaking past his teeth. 'You—I love that you want to, I love that you look at me and you're so.' Teeth locked; he couldn't. 'I want to help you. I want to—to do that with you.'

'I want you to tell me what you want,' Sherlock said. 'With me.'

'I want.' Wasn't fair to; mustn't. But: 'Is there?' John got out. 'A possibility?'

Sherlock breathed hard, staring up. John bit down on the frantic clawing-up thing in his throat, in his chest. Clammy; regretful; shouldn't have said. Sherlock, at last, blinked at him. His mouth hard.

He said, 'I can bear it.'

'God,' said John. 'That's worse. To ask you to—when I can't even—' but Sherlock jerked his head. Shake.

'I'd have to bear it,' Sherlock said. Surely his ribs through shirt and suit jacket and undershirt weren't truly visible. 'I'd have to, regardless. Even if I went away, even if I told you—even if.'

Salt-stung. His sanded-off skin. The knot of him.

'Christ,' John said. Christ.

'But if you tell me,' Sherlock said. Too fast, he said, 'I want you to, to tell me what you want from—with me.'

Despairing, John said, 'I want you to be next to me.'

Sherlock breathed through his mouth, looking up at him. That knife-cord, drawn taut.

'All right,' Sherlock whispered. He pushed himself to his feet and made to draw back but John—

'Come on,' he said. Clung to his hand. 'Come here. Please. Stay.'

'I'm,' Sherlock said. Swallowed. 'They'll have to burn the linens.'

But he bent. Untied his shoes, one-handed; and John let go his arm so he could could shrug off his jacket. Trousers. Smalls. In just his shirt he stood hesitating before the bed so John moved to the edge. He took Sherlock's left arm, gently, and brushed the sleeve with his face—lips. Kissed the inside of Sherlock's elbow, through cotton. Sherlock, silent, undid the buttons at his chest and his wrists; John tugged it down. Just a bit of crusted brown. Not bad to look at. John, holding open the
covers, suspected it had been worse.

Sherlock crawled up onto the bed. Gingerly he lay down and John buried his face in his nape; held him and breathed. Perfume, and vomit, and smoke, and stale sweat stained with chemicals. Back-to-front in John's arms Sherlock felt perilously thin. Surely more damage than a few days could wreak.

'Just,' John said, into his shoulder.

Sherlock breathed out. Into stillness. He allowed himself to be held; John held him. Put his lips to a patch under Sherlock's ear and could feel his pulse: irregular. Sluggish.

'Could you eat?' he murmured.

Even Sherlock's shudder was slow. Tamped-down. John assumed he'd got his answer and then Sherlock shook his head against the pillow.

'Sorry.' Voice rough. 'I don't—'

'Shhh,' said John. 'S all right. It's all right.'

He pressed his face to his back and breathed him in. Felt him; the exhausted confused vibrations still rattling along under his skin. His lissome spine. His ribs and his hips, the long length of him. There wasn't enough of John to stretch along the whole of Sherlock, but oh. Knees to thighs. Sherlock's left shoulder curled forward over his own chest so that his arm bent down, awkward, pressing the inside to his ribs. John kissed the plane of the scapula. Under his lips Sherlock's breath was becoming evener.

He gentled him; Sherlock was gentled. If John were to say, Can you sleep? then Sherlock would jerk himself awake. Fight his body to be with him. His abused, unpeaceful flesh. Under John's hands, against his front, Sherlock made a little snorting, snoring sound, and John's eyes stung. He pressed flesh to flesh to flesh.

Sherlock's ribs rose and fell: his pulse settling; the chemical tremor smoothing down. John let his own head fall to the pillow and listened to Sherlock's sleep noises. Treasured. Beyond price.

Sherlock had come back. John had him here; in this moment; for this stretch of time. Could keep. Watch over him. Feel him breathe and. Watch the slant

angles of his too-thin back

The bed dipped. Creaked. The sky through the window shone pink and blazing gold.

'Christ,' John said.


Sherlock nudged him up on one elbow so John went. Pressed cool glass into his free hand; he drank. Parched, suddenly. Drank. Sherlock nodded at the glass.
'You were getting after me about it.'

'I w's asleep.'

Very much so. Clack of glass on wood as he fumbled the empty tumbler down too hard.

'Never stops you,' Sherlock said.

Sherlock'd had a look in the mirror, too. Washed clean the scrapes on his face. His hands. Leaning knees into the mattress, scrubbed and naked, the pink-gold light reflected back off his face. His chest. It softened his bruises, and the hollows under his eyes.

'Wanted to stay up, and.' Yawning; cracked open. 'Watch you.' John rubbed grit out of his eyes. 'Make sure you slept,' soft, and Sherlock huffed. Almost a laugh.

'Can we,' he said. He nudged at John's arm, so John rolled onto his back and raised up his arm for Sherlock to nuzzle under. Soft damp against his sides. Underarm, hip. Could sleep, again. Sherlock's head resting on his chest, God. Lovely wet curls.

'I did,' Sherlock said.

'Hm?'

'Sleep.' Burrowing down: face and shoulder. 'Six hours, more or less.'

'Six hours,' John repeated, blankly. But the sky, he remembered. 'Bloody hell. We should—restaurants'll be opening for supper soon, I can.' Yawning. 'Bathe and we could go—'

'Don't.' Sherlock's hand clenched, on his chest.

John could feel the effort it took to relax it again. To breathe evenly. He stroked fingers through Sherlock's hair.

'You have to eat,' he murmured.

Sherlock nodded. Breathed out.

'I know,' he said. 'Just—can we just.'

John bent his neck up. Kissed the top of Sherlock's head. Let his head fall so he could trail fingers, slowly, up and down Sherlock's spine. Up, and down. Down. On the ceiling and the wall opposite the light slowly flared bright, then bruised down into violet.

'I saw your portrait,' Sherlock said, at last. 'Daniel's portrait, of you. This morning.'

A flash of—what? Heat. It was gone before John could say.

'It isn't of me,' he said. 'Not really.'

'It is.'

'No, he—'

'It is,' said Sherlock. 'Do you think I can't recognise you?'

John petted Sherlock's back. Remembering Daniel, carefully slipping the thing between two clean
sheets of paper. Remembering standing in that alley, blocks from the studio, hesitating between
casting it crumpled on the river, and creasing its secret surfaces together. Folding it away.

'Between Daniel and me,' he said, at last. 'It really wasn't... like you were thinking.'

'I know it wasn't.'

John's hands in Sherlock's hair. Sherlock's fingers, gentle on John's chest. Scooping his knuckles
against the skin, against the roots of the hairs. John thought, scoured with fondness, how Sherlock
always did that, in this position. Did it to himself, sometimes, absentely. Lying on his back, lost in
thought.

'It was still—something,' Sherlock said. 'Wasn't it.'

He levered himself up onto an elbow to look down at John's face. John wrapped a loose hand around
Sherlock's forearm, resting on John's chest.

'It was a nightmare,' John told him.

'A nightmare—for both of you.'

John laughed without humour. Rubbed his face with his free hand.

'Different nightmares,' he said. 'One for each of us.'

He looked back up at Sherlock. Petted with his thumb at Sherlock's forearm, scrubbed clean. 'For
you too, I think,' he said, softly, and Sherlock made a little pained noise and bent down and kissed
his eyebrow—forehead—the corner of his mouth.

'I always want,' Sherlock said, against his face, 'to have them together. Or.' Little uncertain bird-
kisses. John felt bruised so tender he could let them soak into him. Expand to hold them. Become a
golden bowl gathering the kisses Sherlock dropped.

'I know,' John said.

'Or.' Sighing. 'Wake you up.' And John said 'God.'

Open-mouthed Sherlock kissed John's eyelids and his cheeks and when he got back to John's mouth
he tasted of salt. John's hands came up to hold him. Skin razor-soft, still damp from the bath, Deeper

John thought, oh.

'It's all right,' Sherlock told him and oh, cracked lips at his earlobe; and his hips and his hands:
that anchoring weight.

'—so tangled,' John said. 'I kept making things so much worse and I kept thinking, if I had you
here, if I, God—if Sherlock were here he would tell me it was all so obvious, he would—' big hands,
tightening in his hair, '—see things I couldn't see, he would—'

'John—'

'—make it all make s-sense; I couldn't—I couldn't make sense of it at all. I kept thinking, if I could
only.' Sherlock, shuddering, lips to John's forehead. Faces slippery, hot together. John got a breath—
in. Arms locked tight 'round Sherlock's back. Fingers dug in. 'If I could only talk to you,' he
managed.

'Christ.'

'Then you would. Make sense of it all.'

Sherlock's mouth against John's forehead. 'I want to,' Sherlock said.

'Yeah,' John said. Shaky he drew Sherlock's head down and kissed his mouth and Sherlock against him was unutterably gentle. Heaving, holding. Drawing in and out like waves; soaked in salt.

'Yeah, I,' said John. 'God. I wish you could.'

Sherlock closed his eyes and put his head up to gulp air and then breathe out and John held him to him and reached his own face up, kissing—jaw—neck, wanting—and Sherlock breathed again and it was evener—collarbones—evener—and John took skin between his lips and sucked, lavender salt, and Sherlock gasped.

'I want you to tell me,' Sherlock said, in a rush. 'Is there more, is there—' Exhaled. Steady.

Gentle John kissed his chest. Sparse hair; then his clavicles. His fine swan neck. Right palm to the lovely cap of Sherlock's shoulder. Petting. Full up with stinging water: mouth and eyes.

'You don't,' Sherlock said, 'You don't want to hurt me,' and John—

'Christ.' Squeezing. 'Sherlock. No.' If only his too-small hands could blanket Sherlock's whole frame.

'Then what do you want. With me.'

Tipping his head down. Suckling, so gentle. His bottom lip.

'I want not to be something you have to bear,' John whispered, and clamping down down down turned his face to the side as Sherlock's hands went hard on his shoulders and his interrogation voice: 'What do you want with me, John Watson?' and John, gushing into shuddering kissed—

Oh, kissing him. Oceans deep. Pulling in breath. His hands slipping on Sherlock's ship's-hull ribs, whale-bone ribs, undulating over him, bearing John down like the tide, tumbling him, tangling his legs with John's legs, salt pools in the basin of Sherlock's lower back John could crawl into, live inside—

'Tell me what you—' Sherlock said, and John breaking the surface gasped, 'I want you to kiss me,' and dragged him back down.

And Sherlock kissed him. Hard, pressing. Opening him; John moaned. Oh, Sherlock did know him, knew him enough, knew to—to go hard, splitting him open then pulling back to drag John back in with the undertow, oh. More. Sherlock teasing him, holding him, rimming his lips leaving him gasping and then down, pinned down, tongue in his grateful sucking mouth pressing him—

'Hold me down,' John gasped, and Sherlock's hands slammed John's wrists down either side his head. His knee between John's knees. His whole long body stretched out over John in an arc, grounding him down.

'God,' John said. Pressing up towards him. 'Oh, love.'

Sherlock leant forward; weight on his hands; John panted. Writhed and Sherlock held him. Anchored down; back flat pressed to the seabed, oh. Held fast; nowhere to fall; his restless hips, up
and pressing up and Sherlock, solid, with hips and thighs pressing down. John's starving open mouth, tongue and teeth, Sherlock filled it to bursting, he would—he would burst—

'You could do this to me,' said Sherlock. Gentle, in John's ear.

'Could—?' John said. The air so far above him. Sherlock was breathing hard, but—calculating.

'Hold me down,' Sherlock said. 'If you want—you could.' His voice soft. Hands pressing harder into wrists. 'Restrain me.' Soft lapping-water kisses: John's temple; his neck. 'Tease me. Order me about, make me feel—'

'Held together,' John said, as Sherlock said, '—helpless—'

John wet his lips. Looked up at Sherlock. Flexed his hands in Sherlock's grip, which had gone light now. Uncertain.

'I—do you want me to?' John said.

'I thought,' Sherlock closed his eyes; opened them. Body tensing above John; drawing up, away; he could feel it. Sherlock's fingers had gone almost limp but John didn't move his hands. Sherlock said, 'Daniel's so—so young; he'd have taken orders from you and—'

'Oh, Sherlock—'

'—and then where you went and Irene said—and. I know I always want to—'

'Shhh,' John said. Shaking his head, pressing up through the pain of his shoulder twisting back; kissing. Kissing him quiet. Slowly John let his head drop back to the mattress and Sherlock followed him down. Lowered down, his face close to his. Their arms and chests overlaid. Close.

'God,' John said.

Warm wetness, trickling down John's temples. Into his hair. 'Sherlock.' Aching John dragged his left wrist out from under Sherlock's hand; pressed his palm up into Sherlock's palm, and interlaced their fingers. He pulled; Sherlock shifted weight onto his right side so that John could bring Sherlock's hand to his own chest; to his mouth; the other still resting under Sherlock's on the mattress above their heads.

'That's not what you're doing,' John told him. 'I thought you—.' Knuckles to his lips. Aching. 'You're —being with me. You're always. Looking so hard at me. Fighting towards me. All the time.'

Sherlock sucked in air. For just a moment he pressed his forehead to the side of John's face; then levered himself back up onto his left forearm. Breath shaking. Hips pressed down against John's thigh, trembling. Light, barely pressing, he moved; and 'Yeah,' John said.

Sherlock closed his eyes.

And moved. His hand, interlaced with John's hand, twitched tighter by a shade then pulled, haltingly, back down to the mattress and John exhaled, long, faltering, with a little—moan at the end. Pinned to the bed.

'Yeah,' he said again. Leaking tears; half-hard. Half-painful. His cock pressed up against damp skin; the sparse fur of Sherlock's thigh. 'I want you to,' John said. Wet breath. 'I want you to—'

'This,' Sherlock breathed. Rocking. Tiny rocking, rocking, hips tucking-untucking, eyes closed,
trembling, 'Tell me—'

'Want you to look at me,' John said; couldn't help it. Sherlock made a choked-off noise and opened his eyes. His face screwed up as if looking at John was like staring into the sun, which was awful, *awful* but John couldn't help the hot wash of gratitude. He felt blanketed. Anchored in silver-grey; wanted to share it. Give it back. Hands still pressed down he craned his neck up; fought to kiss him. Tears sweat and trembling and Sherlock's torn-up breath while Sherlock's whole—shoulders and his spine melted towards John but he didn't move his hands. John kissed him and Sherlock trembled but he kept holding him down because John had said. Good God who could bear such tenderness. John if his hands were free would cradle his head; wanted. Would pet his curls; cup his face in his palms. Swear an oath with fingers butterfly-gentle over Sherlock's beating heart but instead, anchored down, he made of his whole body a hand. Curved to him. Cupped him unfurled for him. John kissed him and cradled him with the open palm of his hips-chest-throat opening to hold him, if only he could. If he could carry him. If he could gather him up and, and, and hand him to himself.

'I want you so,' he gasped, 'you're so,' and Sherlock with his bright-raw eyes still trained on him, *bearing* him he'd said, sweat coming up at his hairline as he pressed his hips down in shuddery little pushes against him, breaking off gasping—

'You want,' Sherlock panted, 'just this? Watch you come like this?'

John looked up at his open mouth and his wet curls and thought: I want to give you things. Bring you, God, sticks like a dog. Carry your books like a schoolboy, I want to give things up for you. Be the butt of jokes that make you snort, the bringer of news so thrilling you forget I'm in the room; I want to cut myself up in order to fatten you want to be sure of you, to be used be judged be commanded be bloody shrunken by you *Christ* and Sherlock, over him. Doing just exactly anything he asked.

'Yeah,' he said. Voice salt-sodden. 'Just this.'

Sherlock nodded and thrust. Shook. Eyes open, he kept them open, and his face flushed up—redder—wet—harsh breath and that shivering hitch to his hips every time he pressed—fuck—John could stay forever, Sherlock coming unbound as he held John anchored fast to the bed while he pressed and pressed and then whined. Broke off panting. He let his arms bend; his forehead dropped to John's forehead. John nuzzled his face against Sherlock's face. Rest.

'I want to,' Sherlock said. Low. His voice was so low it rumbled their bones together. Shook the bed against the floor, John thought. Shook the earth down to magma.

'I want you to,' John whispered, and Sherlock pushed himself back up again so there was space between them. Hair tugged wild around his flushed-up face. His eyelids struggled; John felt it down to his gut the moment when they succumbed. Eyes closed Sherlock made a little, overwhelmed noise and pressed—his cock to John's hip—and he groaned deep and rubbed himself—once.

'Christ,' John whispered, and Sherlock whimpered. His hips twitched forward but then he gave a little shake of his head. John watched him. Shake. Sherlock held himself still, vibrating: his mouth open, panting; his eyes closed.

And then in a long shuddering slide he again pressed: cock to hip, up-against; up, and back. Just once, then: still. John squeezed Sherlock's hands, breathless; Sherlock held himself still. He suspended them both: bracketed them with his quaking arms and his tremor breath and then his whole body *gave way* and he did it again. Once. T-twice.

Twice and then he *pulled* himself again to a stop. Panting. He was panting, and John was panting.
Sherlock was so hard he was glistening; John might die of the heat of him. Die of his tremors against him. Of Sherlock forcing himself still and then—groaning and—sli-i-ding again and. A high whine and again. Sherlock holding John still. Moving long, shivery against him; he kept stopping and panting and then with a little groan rutting once more—once more—warm fluttering breath against John's burning-up face so turning, kissing—kissing him—

'Fuck.' Sherlock pulled himself back. A trail of fluid on John's hip, God. Stretched and—snapped as Sherlock shifted onto his left side; took his right hand off John's left and held it, trembling, over his eyes. Come back, John thought. His left hand, useless on the sheet.

'What do you want, tell.' Sherlock broke off. Breathed deep. Said, 'Talk to me, I—need you to—'

'Want you like that.' Squeezed out. 'Ag-against me, pressing—close to me, into me—' and Sherlock's left hand spasmed. Tightened, next to John's face. John wanted to pull him back down. Wanted Sherlock's body to give like it had; to melt like it had; but he quieted.

Over John, Sherlock pressed his fingers to his eyes and breathed. Great gulps of air. At length his hand pressed back. At length it clenched in his hair.

'I'm meant. To be watching you,' he said. And John would have—have shaken his head or—but then Sherlock opened his eyes, which red-shot and desperate looked down at John, pleading, swelling every blood vessel in John's—arching-up—

'—fuck—' John heard himself, 'oh—Sherlock—'

'But I can't watch you,' Sherlock grit out, 'if I'm—' and hauled in a breath for John to choke out, 'Sherlock. You can—no—'

Cold, all down John's right side. Sherlock shifted—away—no, John thought, please, in a cold flash of panic that his hip was wet that his side was cold that Sherlock would let go his hand, but he didn't. He didn't. He kept hold of John as he shifted up onto his knees, and he pulled John's right hand up like his left next to his head: wrists under Sherlock's big hands. Tremors, still. Every place Sherlock touched his skin. Sherlock, crouched on hands and knees with his massive hands holding John down and his knee wedged up between John's legs for John to rut. Press. Pressing John's balls to his body with nothing touching but those three points of contact, hand hand knee; and Sherlock's head hanging between his arms. Panting. Watching, with his neck bent down.

'Do it,' Sherlock said. 'Let me see.'

His head was tipped down so low John couldn't see his face. Couldn't even see Sherlock's cock, hanging between them. But his damp curls. Clinging to his scalp and the back of his neck. That bruised skin over his lizard vertebrae: so delicate. So breakable. John wanted—he could cradle him to him. Kiss Sherlock's bruises, greening and purpling under his lips.

'John.'

Choked out. Sherlock with his strong bending arms rooted either side John's head and his big hands tightening on John's wrists said John's name like it burnt his throat so John thrust up against him oh and Sherlock moaned. Unsteady. Christ that sound. The muscles straining in Sherlock's neck, bent down.

'Nobody ever could,' John said. Pressed forward pressed up: t-those ripples. He told him, 'Nobody could, as much as you do.'

'You're so,' said Sherlock, 'Ch—rist—'
John pressed hips forward hard and held and Sherlock's voice tipped; crumpled. His breathing went hard-hard-hard and shaking; his arms shaking next to John's ears. His hands clenching around John's wrists. John pulled back then pressed back up against his leg, into Sherlock's, fuck, high-up panicked whine, pushed into, pushed; Sherlock's head hanging so low that damp curls tickled John's sternum, and Sherlock: looking down their bodies at John pushing cock to thigh rubbed slick and hot until Sherlock's hands went painfully tight and Sherlock would—he'd. Lose consciousness in a few more seconds of breathing like that.

So John softened. Softer. Sherlock's breath steadying. Slowing-steadying. His neck still bent down. Face so low he could have rested his forehead on John's chest; but he didn't.

John wished he knew if Sherlock's eyes were really open.

'I—crave it,' John said, instead. His voice creaked on the way out. 'I. Want it.'

Sherlock was quiet. Trembled.

'I love it when you—push me,' said John. 'Show me off.'

Above him Sherlock breathed out and melted by the smallest fraction and John let his insistent blood just nudge—nudge his hips forward. He pressed up burning-hot but gentle, so gentle against Sherlock's wet thigh. 'What you see in me,' he said, 'even when I—this vision of me that's—yours, it's—yours and mine but you.' Breathless. Gentle, rutting gentle; tiny careful movements of his hips and he could hardly breathe. 'You hold—hold me so fast that other people could see it, too.'

'Farmhands—' said Sherlock, high-up, tight in his throat.

'And bloody—clients.' Noise like a laugh, breaking into a groan. 'In full view of their—hell.' Nudging; gentle, Christ need, stay gentle; Sherlock gave a long, tight sigh.

'But you stop me,' Sherlock said.

'Yeah, I—because I, you'd get us tossed out on the street, or—arrested, and I'm not, n-not steadfast enough or heedless and so I—' pressing up and holding, little—jerky thrusting movements, God could feel himself leaking against the hard jumping muscles of Sherlock's thigh. And Sherlock looking down the length of them; had to be. Watching that. John got enough air to say, 'And then I w-woke up in the night with you in that room at Roz Ven and—and, fuck—and thought about what it would've been like if that afternoon I hadn't—'

And Sherlock moaned. Trembling tightened everywhere into vibrating as his hands went tight on John's wrists and fuck and his whole abdomen cupped forward pressing against nothing, against air. John's heart battering out of his chest and then—Sherlock groaning he—blind John could feel—a drip on his stomach—

'—if I'd let you,' John gasped, and Sherlock at last looked up. Eyes wide; lost. His open mouth. Undone.

'Oh God Sherlock,' John said, and pressed, and Sherlock moaned.

'I,' Sherlock said, 'I'll—' and moaned again and '—John, John—' and John slid against him, rubbed. With Sherlock's head held up John could see now, Christ, could look down and see—see himself smearing himself up-down along Sherlock's strong thigh, could see Sherlock's tensing stomach his bellows chest his erection drooling untouched onto John's belly and John—those far-off noises those were him, they were—
'Open you,' Sherlock gasped, above him. 'Love—when you're—' panting, '—let—let me—'

'Sherlock,' John said, 'fuck,' and looking up groaning into contact with wild-panicked silver and Sherlock: 'Have you,' gasped, 'let me look at you,' pinned him hard wrists and hips so John's body couldn't fold in on itself but stayed stretched under Sherlock's eyes burning to ash, squeezed into fire pulsing and—

—pulsing—

Blood like mountain rivers flooding back into his hands and his front. Unanchored: the mattress shifting. John's skin, cooling. Cool.

Sweat-drenched he pushed himself up onto his elbow. Sherlock sat with his back to John, at the edge of the bed. Elbows to knees; hunched into himself. In quarter profile he stared into the middle distance, mouth open, shivering, perched on the edge of the bed like a wild thing about to bolt. Was it kinder to let it? John reached out, his hand to Sherlock's hip; Sherlock flinched before he even touched him.

'It's all right,' John whispered.

Sherlock closed his eyes.

John pressed himself up to sitting. He scooted closer to Sherlock and touched—breeze-light—his nose to Sherlock's shoulder. Sherlock's skin jumped. Sparrow-fast pulse bare micrometres under his skin. His knuckles, claws on the sheets.

'Should I stop?' John said.


He drew back. Slid around Sherlock's side; his front. Not touching, but close enough that Sherlock would be able to feel the air change. Settling down—down. Sat on his heels between Sherlock's calves. Knees to the floor. Not touching. Looking up.

Sherlock's breath still came fast; hands still bunched in the sheets and those tremors through his whole frame. Easy, John thought, easy, and bent forward at the waist, hands to knees. Not-quite-nuzzling at Sherlock's left knee, he blinked eyelashes against the skin and Sherlock huffed out air. Not a laugh; but a tiny loosening. John breathed out on Sherlock's skin and felt that noise a crack into which he might flow.

No trace left of lavender. Sherlock smelt of sweat and John's come and the pearling-up liquid still running down the shaft of his own cock; the insides of his thighs. Smudged up beneath his navel. John's mouth watered: not important. He swallowed. Swallowed. Put a hand on Sherlock's knee but Sherlock's breath changed like it hurt him so John took it back. Hands hard on his own thighs. Nuzzle.

He nuzzled. Nudged: brushes of nose to calf. Forehead to knee. Gentle, he thought, easy. Let it be easy. Hypnotic, slow. Nothing moving in all of Paris but John's cheek to the outside of Sherlock's thigh. Then: John's hair brushing Sherlock's calves. Then: the bridge of John's nose butting like a cat's, gentle at the inside of Sherlock's knee. Sherlock breathed out—out—out, and John looked up. Sherlock's eyes were closed, still, but his mouth was open. His nod was so small John might have imagined it. John bent his head back down.

They would never have this again, he realised. Extraordinary thought. Was this relief or regret, that it would be so fleeting: this delicate, perilous moment? If they broke, or. Or if they healed. (Cheek to
inner thigh.) They would never be stretched quite like this. Suspended, just here, at the last or the first point possible to bear. Christ, John thought, how I want to care for you, and let his fingers dig into his own thighs as he nosed—nuzzled—swallowed and his lips brushed by accident Sherlock's knee. 'Yes,' Sherlock whispered; and exhaled, hard.

Quiet as a dream, breeze in leaves: *Yes*. John touched his open mouth to Sherlock's thigh.

Something more basal than kisses. A sightless, a glacial seeking: John's parted lips brushing the tops; the insides; the tender darkening bruises of Sherlock's thighs. John felt he might close his eyes and still feel by their achy heat the places the flesh was battered and blood-flushed. Could almost taste them. Taste him. John in the dark behind his eyelids, breathing in Sherlock. John Watson's—home, Lord, his home: Sherlock's furred shin-bones; his knobbly knees. Mouth pressed to the hollow at the inside of his knee: what I want to give you, John thought. What I wish I could give you, Sherlock and he breathed out, hard. Pressed his face for a bare moment too hard too high up the soft flesh of Sherlock's thigh. Sherlock's quiet startled grunt; *easy* John told himself, but then Sherlock's hand settled on the back of his head.

Don't look up, don't. Let him—if he's watching—


I want to stay, John thought. I want this to stay. Blasphemous. Grotesque; he didn't want—nobody would; couldn't; and nothing ever did. But John felt: in the dark in the reek of you. Covered with your sweat. Bracketed all sides by your limbs. Existing inside the bare possibility I can ground you, here, this side the razor line: my mouth on your skin. Listen, he thought. Just listen to the way you breathe.

In hitching inhales. Great measured exhales. John nudged his face up: Sherlock's cock twitched against his cheek. Sherlock's breath shook all the way out.

Nosing-nudging. Quiet, like tip-toeing through a sleeping house: Sherlock's thighs fell open and John let his lips graze the inside hollow where thigh met groin. Let Sherlock's erection rub up against John's cheek. Smearing across his cheekbone; across his jaw. He shifted his angle and Sherlock said 'Hell,' quietly, without touching John's face; so John knew for certain he was watching. Could see, John thought. Could see himself, dripping—

And Sherlock was quietly panting. His hand still gentle on the back of John's head; his hips hardly moving; but breathing in controlled little pants he had to be watching the way his cock twitched and throbbed every time John nosed—rubbed—gentle, let his lips graze the shaft. Almost, almost a kiss. Smell so thick John could feel the shape of it in his mouth. Swallow it off the back of his tongue. Again. Closed his eyes bent his head let liquid smear on his eyelids—'Oh Christ,' Sherlock whispered. A warm welling-up against the corner of John's left eye, 'Christ,' dripping down his cheekbone. John swallowed an ocean of saliva. Turned the other cheek.

Sherlock could have moved his hips. Could have pulled John's hair. There was nothing stopping him but he kept still. Just—stared down, had to be staring down, breathing like a sprinter and shaking with the effort of keeping himself still as John nudged at his twitching cock like a cat at its owner's hand. Sticky trails on John's forehead. In his eyebrows and his hair. Drips down the front of his neck.
could be anything. He opened his lips wide and let the tip—trace—the circle and Sherlock whined. He could shove himself in; had done and John had groaned for more. But now Sherlock just whined so John did it again. Wanted to lick him off. Wanted to kiss him. Wanted Sherlock to choke him but instead let him hold himself still with a godlike effort, vibrating through his legs and his stomach muscles as John let his cock rest just the very tip balanced on his bottom lip. Sherlock like a chant, under his breath: 'hell, bloody hell,' as John felt him slowly leaking down the inside of his lip. Could taste. Hell. John's eyes stung. His mouth, an ocean: he let it come. Let it leak out the front of his mouth, parted like the tide around the island of the head of Sherlock's cock.

'John,' Sherlock said, and then, urgent: 'John,' and John looked up. Up. Half-panicked wide blue eyes. Sherlock's whole flushed shaking body: 'John,' he said again, despairing, and John turned his head, nuzzled, rubbed cock to cheek and got his eyes closed again just as groaning convulsing sounding ripped apart Sherlock, impossibly gentle, barely nudging hips up, came all over his cheek; temple; eyelids; hair.

'Ooh,' Sherlock gasped. 'God. John.'

Oceans above him. Voice underwater; reaching down.

John breathed out. Opened his cleaner eye to the sight of Sherlock still gulping air looking seconds from losing consciousness. His eyes had stayed open, though. His darting, wondering eyes. He smeared a thumb through the mess dripping down John's face and then he leant forward and kissed —licked. Cradled John's face in his big hands, and kissed his face as, squeezed dripping out of John's clenched-tight abdomen the words: I adore you, unstoppable, cresting him like a wave. So many helpless platitudes: how I need you; worn thin with every ha'penny novel as for minutes awash in ages Sherlock licked him clean of all flavours of salt: don't leave me; forgive me; don't go.

Sherlock's forehead fell to his. John's knees ached. Itched. Sherlock's hands, heavy on his shoulders.

'All right,' Sherlock said. Almost murmured; almost to himself. John sat still, under his hands.

Awareness spread, gradually, in a circle that seeped wider around John's knees. Dark, now, all around them. The light breeze stirring the sweat on the back of his neck. And laughter, airshaft-echoing: Sherlock must have left the vent open after he'd taken his bath. Out on the street, a car horn. Sherlock's breath so even he might have fallen asleep.

'All right?' John murmured. Expecting—but Sherlock didn't startle; hadn't dozed off. Instead he tightened his hands on John's shoulders, just for a moment, and then sighed, and sat back.

'Could we,' he said. Ran his hand through his hair. 'I don't know. Have the kitchen send something up,' and John, rocking back on his heels, laughed, a little.

'It's only,' Sherlock said. 'A whole restaurant full of people.'

'We can do whatever you'd like,' John said. 'I was only—surprised, given—' Given. He rocked forward again: hand on Sherlock's knee; Sherlock let him. The rise and fall of his too-thin ribs.

'You were going to fuss.' Sherlock explained. Not quite meeting his eyes.

'Yeah. Do you want me to—'

'And it feels,' Sherlock said, 'frankly impossible, just,' with his mouth flat, unhappy, 'so—'

'I'll take care of it,' John said. Sherlock exhaled, and nodded. John pushed himself to his feet. Looking down at bowed shoulders. Pale; freckled. Dark sweat-damp curls.
'I need to—' Sherlock said, and gestured towards the WC, and John couldn't stop himself: he reached out and touched Sherlock's shoulder. Before he could take his hand back, Sherlock's came up to meet it. Covered John's hand with his big hand. They breathed together for a few beats before Sherlock nodded, a tiny little jerk of a thing; and then turned his head to the side and kissed John's knuckles before pushing himself to his feet. He gave John a rough, mis-aimed kiss to the cheekbone before shuffling off to the other room. Latch of the door. Water running.

John dug his fingers into his face. Breathed deep and then crossed the room and picked up the telephone to the front desk. A little bit of sugar followed by a little bit of protein. John ordered crêpes (lemon and sugar); and Sherlock, even at his worst, could generally stomach eggs if he could bring himself to try them. John wished his French were good enough to specify: four and a half minutes, in their little cups. But he thought he managed to get across the basics. And a baguette, he told them. To sop up the yolks.

Then he walked to the trunk. Walked away from it. Washed his face with the cloth next to the freestanding basin by the window, since Sherlock was apparently using the bath again. John had the compulsion to check on him. Instead he put his hands on the windowsill and looked out the at the dark nothing, listening to the water run and then stop running.

He felt unmoored, but—it was strange. It wasn't blankness; not numbness. Not giddy freedom like after Bourg; or spiralling loss, panicking, like that first horrible night with Daniel. But now, here he was. He was here. He felt—normal, nearly. Or if not normal then recognisably, inescapably John Watson, standing in a strange hotel in the quiet of early evening looking out a window at nothing in particular with all the assemblages of his body feeling just slightly foreign, mis-aligned; as if in order to get them in place he had to think through the proper linkages of hips with knees with soles on the parquet; of shoulders with elbows with fingers on the windowsill. Sherlock hadn't left. Could do, still. Could at any time. It was too soon to know. Too soon to have reconciled, too soon for forgiveness or its lack: John knew it, and now Daniel was there like a newly exasperated shade behind his left shoulder, telling him that that particular obsession was a time-waster anyway. John knew as much but he still felt greedy for it. Always would, maybe. It sat in his chest and itched at him. Sherlock had held himself still and observed what still felt like every detail of John and then licked himself off John's face and then—and he was just in the other room.

John jumped, when the bell rang.

And then looked down at himself: still nude. He called out for them to wait; fumbled in his trunk; pulled on pyjamas. By the time he'd thanked the boy in his exhausted choppy French, and manhandled the tray back into the room, and put it down on the little table and lifted up the domed lids on the different plates so that he knew which ones were the crêpes and which the eggs, and rearranged them so that the crêpes were nearest the WC, the WC door was opening.

'Ahh,' Sherlock said, from the doorway.

'Eggs.' John found it hard to look up, but he did it. 'Bread and. And lemon crêpes.'

Sherlock was soft again around the edges. Hovering. His poor bruised eyes. His scraped-up hands and his ribs. John with a great effort pulled himself back up out of some sort of quagmire.

'Come on,' he told him. He tried to remember how it felt, in Baker Street, to say such things. 'Before it gets cold.'

'Crêpes,' Sherlock repeated. 'All right, I—yes.'

He pulled out the near chair and then sat and scooted close to the little table, so John pulled the other
one up so they could sit together and eat whatever meal one was eating, when one slept all afternoon
and woke up famished at nine o'clock in the evening. With a stop or two, in between.

Sherlock set his jaw and cut his crêpe into six neat sections with his fork. John took a bite of his;
chewed and swallowed while he gazed across the table trying to show the concern of a lover rather
than that of a nursemaid; but Sherlock was working his way through his food in the determinedly
grim fashion of a solitary mountaineer pulling himself out of a crevasse with a pick-axe and a broken
ankle. Halfway through the food he looked up from his bread and caught John's eye; John somehow
felt he ought to look away.

'I suppose coffee would have been inappropriate to the time of day,' Sherlock said. Managing a half-
normal tone. 'Yet breakfast feels somehow naked without it.'

'I could order some.' John was halfway to his feet. 'I thought, after last night… But I can order some.
I'll order some.'

'A single night in a cat-house, Watson, hardly erases your greater claim to medically-minded
common sense.'

Sherlock applied himself to his first egg. Not looking up. John's shoulders felt wrong over his hips;
he'd missed the moment to either recoil or laugh.

'In all honesty,' he said, 'at this point, it probably won't make any difference. If you want coffee—'

'Sit down, John,' Sherlock said, so John sat.

They ate in silence, after that. Sherlock kept his eyes down, so John could keep his up: watch
Sherlock's fresh bread and his eggs disappearing with a dutiful regularity until they were gone.
Thank you, John wanted to say, but didn't.

'All right?' he said, instead, and Sherlock breathed out in a long unsteady stream. He placed his
serviette in the middle of his plate, and his two egg cups in the centre of his serviette, and pushed the
whole assemblage away from him and himself back from the table. Closed his eyes.

'Come back to bed with me?' he said. The interrogatory pulled at John. He wanted to bathe; to clean
his teeth; but—

'Yeah,' he said. 'Of course.'

So he climbed back into the big bed, and Sherlock crawled up behind him. All John's parts felt
awkward, still, badly connected and filthy to boot; he rolled his shoulder in towards his chest and
fidgeted his ear down into the pillow as Sherlock fitted his front to John's back, knees tucked into the
back of his knees. He snaked his arms around John's chest and held tight. Tighter. Too tight to be
comfortable, for either of them. Sherlock kept breathing in and then holding his breath, open-
mouthed, before breathing out again. Face pressed to the back of John's head. John ran badly-
coordinated fingers along Sherlock's forearms, wrapped around his middle. Sherlock sighed.

'Claudine,' he said, at last, into John's ear. 'She isn't my cousin.'

'Pardon?' John tried to turn, to look at him; Sherlock held him fast.

'Well,' he corrected. Low, and tight. 'She is my cousin. But she's also my aunt.'

John didn't know—so he stayed silent. Sherlock never spoke about his immediate family, besides the
occasional mention of his paternal grandmother; anything more seemed to make him unhappy; and
even Mycroft—and now, of all the times. So John ran fingertips along Sherlock's sharp wrist bones and his claws of fingers where they dug into John's side.

'In February,' Sherlock said, 'of 1891, Claudine's older brother Raphäel traveled to London to visit his English Holmes cousin. I only pieced this together after the fact, of course, but. No reason to spin out the suspense where you're concerned. In 1891 Raphäel was twenty, and he wanted.' Sherlock cleared his throat; John petted his wrist. 'He wanted to go to sea. Wanted to. To see the world.'

John thought, flashing for a moment to Daniel pink-cheeked as he had been in the schoolhouse in Lens, that he knew something like the ruefulness behind that sigh.

'Raphäel and Claudine,' Sherlock said, 'you know their mother was Augusta Holmès, the composer. Their father, though the two never married, was the poet Catulle Mendès. Neither of them precisely awash with mercantile connections. And in those decades before the War, the French navy wasn't much, but—but my father knew people, in England. So, Augusta, his father's sister, you know, she wrote to him. Could he, by chance, get Raphäel a better start in the British mercantile fleet than he'd have got back at home, in the French? Well. My parents had plenty of room to put the boy up, both in London and at the country place in Oxfordshire. They told him, come over, stay for six months—they were trying, you see, to persuade him into a more distinguished line of work. And then, so run my father's letters: if you still want to sail to foreign climes, why, I can get you a place as an apprentice officer shipping out from Bournemouth in the summer.'

'Kind of him,' John said. Careful.

'Officious,' said Sherlock. It came out pinched. 'It was my father's defining characteristic.'

Face buried in John's nape. Breathing in. He'd be able to feel it, when John nodded.

'I suppose your own eleven-year-old condescension towards that family had to come from somewhere.'

'I was probably excited at the prospect of someone to practice it on. The family condescension. Mycroft had me to kick about, at least. But Father did it to everyone, and Mother and I—'

He could feel Sherlock swallow. Swallow. John thought he guessed—but. Let him breathe. He reached a hand back to rub at Sherlock's hip; and Sherlock pressed his face into John's hair at the back of his head.

'Raphäel must have been a bright boy,' Sherlock said. 'To catch my mother's attention. Or.' He laughed, and it snagged. John wanted—he pushed his shoulder back, but again Sherlock held him still. Faced forward. He spoke into his neck. 'I don't know, you see, that's just—I never knew, what it was that attracted her. I never even knew how they spoke to one another when they weren't in company. She hadn't my father's cataloguing tendencies; and she was intelligent enough not to correspond with her husband's much-younger cousin, after she'd taken him to her bed. I never knew—I never knew, for example, if she would have done. Whether, had things been different, she'd have cared to write to him. If she regretted not being able—or if she was just as glad, to dodge the obligation. If he was—an amusement.'

John ran his fingers between Sherlock's fingers. Gentle rubbing. Harsh breath on his nape.

'It's often the other way 'round,' John said. 'You know: the young sailor. A girl in every port.' Sherlock was silent. His hands had slowed; gone lighter on John's side. Feeling increasingly foolish, John said, 'I just mean: if anyone was amusing themselves with anyone, it could've been him, with her.'
The silence stretched out.

'That contingency,' he said, at last, 'seems unlikely.'

But something wavered in his voice such that John, with a kind of grief-soaked tenderness, was visited by the suspicion that to Sherlock the possibility that Raphäel Holmès had used and then abandoned his mother rather than other way around seemed not only unlikely but unfathomable; that to the great Sherlock Holmes, who ran down murderers and embezzlers in a day's work, and could catch a seasoned con man in a lie from his armchair, without opening his eyes, this idea had quite simply never before occurred. And yet John had expected him to look at him, at John, and see—what? Some answer, invisible to John himself. Behind him, Sherlock's whole abdomen was tensing, and John wanted to pull him back. Blanket him, or.

'Was she,' he said. And then, 'were you—close?'

Sherlock breathed out, and gradually relaxed back into contact. He shook his head. The back of John's neck felt hot. Wet. He wove his feet around Sherlock's legs, and tensed them: an embrace, once removed.

'I never knew anyone to be really close with her,' Sherlock said, after a time. 'Not Father, certainly. But before we went to France she and I…'

His breath held; held. Exhaled long, and shaky, so John squeezed his hand. After a moment, Sherlock squeezed back.

'She was brilliant,' Sherlock said. 'Came top of her class at Girton—only their third ever. She read mathematics with Arthur Cayley. I saw them together, once. Of him I could've believed—I couldn't have been older than five, then, but the way her voice came alive when they spoke together… I'd never heard it sound like that, before that moment. I've never forgotten it.'

He was silent. John, who well knew that species of coming-alive, closed his eyes and imagined Sherlock at five. Rounded; unformed. As yet unchiseled into all his cut-glass edges. John who, even curled against him, couldn't protect the man Sherlock—who couldn't even keep from wounding him—nevertheless wished he could gather up that child and hold him.

In any case,' Sherlock said, at last. 'Her years at Girton were the only happy ones I think she ever spent. Once she came down from Cambridge her family considered they'd indulged her quite enough. She held out for some time—a European voyage with a long stop in Switzerland; tourism as a blind for independent research. But they called it dilettantism, and she hadn't resources to oppose them, in the end. They raffled her off on the marriage market to the most eligible suitor who came calling. Father was fifteen years older, and politically-minded. Mother made herself into the perfect hostess as one would rebuild an engine. By the time I remember her she was worn hard and glossy with all the evenings entertaining MPs. Captains of industry. I think she was bored, probably; all the time. By the time I knew her she was just. Freezingly correct in every particular, and barely a spark of anything else. Before that trip to France she used to tutor me, in maths, and I think I saw it then, sometimes. Just a glimmer. A leaning-forward into—something more. So faint I wondered if I'd imagined it. But it was there, I think. It kindled her. Even just. Going over trigonometry with a child.'

'Her child,' said John. Reached back: fingertips through Sherlock's curls. 'She must've been proud. Mind like yours.'

'Jealous,' Sherlock said. 'And—sometimes I think… Mycroft was always Father's son; a diplomat from the womb. I was so unlike them, both to look at and to talk to. I didn't favour Mother either, in looks; my parents had both of them that weak-chinned English solidity. But I think she recognised
herself in me, and—well. Being the way she was hadn't exactly brought her happiness, had it? But then, I'd have money of my own. A real degree, if I wanted one. The fellowship of my equals, or near-equals. Vocational prospects, anyway, beyond shackling myself to a bully and his brats.'

John thought of 221B as it had been before he'd moved in: piled tabletops, corroded surfaces. Meat rancid in the ice-box. It was difficult to imagine a place less redolent of fellowship. Though: an estate full of people who disliked one another. A despairing woman and a petty tyrant and an awkward, spindly boy. John petted Sherlock's forearm. 'Lonely,' he said, softly. Sherlock rested his forehead against the back of John's head.

'And then,' he said, in a rush, 'she'd have to have recognised him, as well. Raphäel. I had his fingers; I had his dark curls. I took one look at him, that first afternoon in Paris—'

'Oh,' John said. 'Sherlock.'

'He had his own ship by then. The *Aurélie*. It had a sort of—glamour for me, I think; the idea of it, before I met him. When he was only a cousin, and I thought… It was almost as if he were a pirate; a buccaneer. All the trappings. The sails. I'd determined to know how they worked. He'd ordered some repairs, so we went to meet him there: my parents, and Mycroft, and Claudine, and her sister Helyonne. We'd all been chatting, on the way from the boat. It was strange: we'd crossed the Channel for a death; you'd think it would have been sombre. But just at first—meeting us from the train, taking us for luncheon, all amidst a flurry of talk, everyone seemed—happy. Almost jovial. Greeting the long-lost English cousins. The bustle of it. Laughing. I remember laughing, somehow.'

'They were probably grateful,' John said. Reaching back to run fingers along Sherlock's flank. 'For a respite from sitting beside the sickbed.'

'Or—giddy. Yes. The novelty of it: everyone together. It felt like a holiday. To me it all seemed very new. Unreal. Already not what I'd expected. I'd thought: the poor Continental cousins. Pitiably. Not respectable. But they were so much more demonstrative than we were. They seemed rather to enjoy one another's company. And then Claudine, so much older than I'd realised and—and she was so amused, of course she was, to be confronted with this impossible child. She took me under her wing, I suppose, right off. And I was so unused to… oh.' Sherlock sighed. 'Forthright companionship. A person who asked me questions, took my hand. Christ, I don't suppose I stopped talking for an hour and a half. I think she probably knew the entirety of my little life, by the time we walked up the gangplank of the *Aurélie*. And then he stepped out of the cabin, and I—'


'I still remember,' he said, 'he shook my hand, and he had my same fingers, and—and my nose, and my long bottom canine teeth and my colouration, and—and the first place he looked was over my head at my mother. Who was perfectly cordial, oh, perfectly correct; and Raphäel's manners were no more familiar than those of any middle-class Frenchman, but I remember—it's absurd, but I remember feeling embarrassed on my parents' behalf. It was so obvious. And there we were, pretending nothing was amiss. Pretending—he'd lived with them, after all, for those six months, twelve years before. So the three of them stood there chatting about—about what had become of the neighbour lad, who had accompanied them on the outing to Oxford that day? And was the dog still with us, that Raphäel had first seen open its eyes as a puppy? And had they ever got round to restoring the folly, as they'd talked of? It was—*absurd*; I felt like laughing; why had Father insisted we come, if this was what awaited us? Surely he had known? And if he hadn't: surely he did now? And Mycroft—I remember looking up and finding Mycroft *studying* me, down the length of his nose. And that was—I hadn't felt ashamed, until then.'

John squeezed Sherlock's hand. What an age, he thought. And Mycroft Holmes, at eighteen.
'Claudine was—she was watching me, too,' Sherlock told him. 'She was holding my hand; I'd only known her a few hours and I don't remember anyone holding my hand in my life before that day. But.'

'I've met her,' said John. Sherlock chuckled against the back of his neck; John felt stupid with gratitude.

'She's always had that—heartiness, about her,' said Sherlock. 'Impossible to gainsay. She was holding my hand and after I saw Mycroft looking at me I must have—I'd felt like laughing, the moment before, and then the floor dropped out of it and I felt myself flushing, and—and the worst fate I could imagine, just then, was crying like a child in front of my brother and my mother and my—and Raphäel, when they were all standing chatting to each other about whether the grapes had grown up to cover the bloody west arbor. And having them all know why.'

'Yeah,' John said. He'd met Sherlock too, after all.

'But Claudine—she was perfect; I don't even remember what excuse she made. What possible reason there should be for the two of us to escape; but she thought of something. I remember saying goodbye. Being able to smile when I said goodbye because she smiled when she said it; and then she didn't let go of my hand all the way back along the Rue de Clichy to her flat. She talked at me the whole way, too fast for me to really understand, and I clung on and stared at the pavement under my feet and thought about my cold, upright paragon of a mother, who was the last person, I would have sworn, I would have sworn, before I saw him with my own eyes, that she was the last person in the world—'

Sherlock's arms had tightened around John's middle; John couldn't quite breathe but he let him. Squeezed his hand but Sherlock shuddered. It would be almost a recoil, if they weren't pressed so tightly together, and John felt, suddenly, the last person in the world—

—and Sherlock took a deep breath and said, all at once: 'So she took me back to her flat, her apartment on the Rue Gabrielle, which is what I remember, really, from Paris. I remember the boulangerie and the museum of natural history and the Jardin des Plantes but when I think of Paris I think of that room, that—she took me back to her flat and she knew—she knew everything I’d told her, didn't she? She knew I'd been labouring away at the violin so she sat me down with her full-size instrument in the light from her big window and she bid me play, had me sight-read Beethoven's Spring Romance and told me to play it again, play it again, it was the kindest thing anyone had ever done for me, how utterly she ignored that I was sobbing until I couldn't breathe. It was—,' he laughed. 'Mucous all over her chin-rest. Tears on the wood. She didn't comment. Didn't try to talk me out of it, didn't try to make me feel better. Didn't make me feel like a—like a child, having a tantrum. Even if, in the event, that's what I was.'

'It was grief,' John said. His throat closing. 'Everyone feels—betrayal, and. Grief.'

'The thing is,' Sherlock went on, a hardness coming into his voice. 'I don't know but what bothered me the most. What I felt most that day, out of any of it, as I stood at Claudine's window and played Beethoven until my arms burnt and my eyes swelled shut and I nearly fell asleep on my feet, was that I hadn't known. That I’d never even suspected. More than that: I'd thought—I'd thought: Mother. Of all people. Had I been wrong in everything I'd thought I'd known about her, if I was wrong about this? Had she—had she a secret love, for this black-haired bean-pole of a French captain? The woman with whom I lived? The woman so upright and correct she often seemed mechanical? Who sometimes flinched when I touched her—me, her own child? The woman who by every indication only came alive for the life of the mind? Even having watched them together, having caught the tells of this man who was both my father and an entire stranger to me, that he was meeting again a
woman with whom he'd had a liaison—even then, looking specifically for signs, I could see nothing in my mother's manner that told what was in her mind or. In her heart.'

'You were jealous,' John guessed; but shaking his head, hard, sounding almost angry, Sherlock said, 'I was *bitterly* disappointed in myself.'


'Probably,' he spat, 'she was *disappointed* in herself, as well.'

'Sherlock, you needn't—,' John said, and then stopped. Tried, 'It's not—'

But he didn't know how to go on. Sherlock's hand left John's side and his front left John's back and he rolled over, away from him; when John turned to face him, Sherlock was lying on his back, with his arm over his eyes.

'It is, though,' Sherlock said, 'a bit—ungenerous. Isn't it. Unflattering. One always gets the impression one's meant to cleave to people, and then be riven when one's bonds are torn asunder. One's not meant to unearth betrayals and feel *annoyance* that one's pet theories have been disarranged.'

John thought of waking up to the sight of Sherlock, leant up against the door in his ruined suit and smelling like a sewer. How Sherlock's back, hours earlier as John had left him spitting vitriol by the window, had been brittle with uprightness. How John, at the Hôtel Marigny, had pushed and —pushed—

Sherlock twitched at John's hand on his biceps. John didn't move it. 'Come now,' he said, very quietly, but: 'Well,' Sherlock said, over him, so John closed his mouth. 'I played myself out. I don't remember if Claudine ordered me to bed, or if I collapsed and she carried me. She must have gone out, at some point, to wire my parents' hotel or—or more likely talk to them in person, since the whole remainder of our time in Paris, a month or more, it was never questioned in my hearing, that I was staying with my cousin at her flat. That first day, she'd returned by the time I woke up again. Night, by that time. I woke up in a big white bed in a strange place, the closest thing to hungover I'd ever been, at eleven—and there she was. Brusque and cracking wise and acting like this was all utterly normal. A situation with which she was faced on a daily basis: chaperoning a strange child through the discovery of his bastard parentage. Indeed, she was used to thinking about such things, what with her own background, but it isn't as if she, I don't know. *Dispensed wisdom*, or. She'd a baguette and some Cantal, and table wine from the downstairs café which she didn't bother watering down before handing me half a glass. We ate on her balcony. She spoke to me in French more rapid and accented than I could comfortably understand. God but it was kind, it was the kindest bloody thing—'

'A good friend,' John said.

'Christ,' Sherlock said. 'What would I have done.'

What did they do, John wondered. The garrulous young bohemian woman and the strange, gawky little boy, thrown together for over a month. But he knew, he supposed. They went to see the construction on the basilica. And Sherlock knew Montmartre somehow. In Paris he spoke like her; laughed like her.

'She turned your French Parisian,' John said, and Sherlock, his eyes still covered, let the very corner of his mouth quirk up.
'Insisted I'd embarrass her,' he said. 'Sounding like a provincial as I did. As if her skin were so thin.'

'She—what? Showed you the city? Took you around the sights?'

'Took me with her to her work,' Sherlock corrected. Sighed; took his arm down and stared up at the ceiling. 'Oh, we went to a few museums. She bought me a print of the Seine from a bouquiniste by the Quai Voltaire. Overall it was such a strange reprieve. I kept expecting—well, once every other day or so we did spend a few hours at the bedside of her mother, my great-aunt or grandmother, by then not conscious much; and every time I kept thinking she'd return me to my parents. That Claudine would quite naturally want to be with her sisters and brothers and—and friends, her normal life; and that I would have to go back with my father and mother, who were no doubt dining with Raphaël, laughing at his jokes, exchanging stories with him like any set of long-lost acquaintances. I kept steeling myself. But every time, when Claudine left she took me with her. Took me with her to the boulevards, to the nightclubs when she performed. It was the first time I saw someone doing work that made them—free. Lit them up. She's not a brilliant musician, not compared to the best of the best, but—music was brilliant on her. She brought life to the boards. The audiences loved her. Like a secret ingredient in a dish. Audiences loved productions she worked on, and managers loved that audiences loved them, and actors loved that she heightened them; that the room was easier whenever she was playing. She was quite the entrée into that world. She introduced me to her colleagues. Actors, dancers. Her—friends.'

'Lovers?' John said, and Sherlock was silent.

'She only said "friends",' he said, at last. 'The rest I worked out on my own. That was actually the only time…'

He exhaled. Long. John cupped his palm to Sherlock's cheek, and Sherlock closed his eyes. Tipped his head into it, the smallest bit.

'I slept in, one morning,' he told John. 'Woke up to giggling. Claudine was leaning in the doorway, with the door open, laughing with this. Beautiful girl.'

'Ah,' said John.

'It just—I could tell at once. At once; I didn't even know how. It wasn't even Claudine; they weren't even touching; it was something about how this girl, this stranger, held herself. The way she tucked her hair behind her ear when she looked at Claudine. I'd never seen her before in my life; I never even learned her name; whereas, with my own mother—well. I was rather a little monster to Claudine, after.'

John could imagine. Ran a thumb along Sherlock's cheekbone; Sherlock's jaw.

'She ought to have slapped me,' Sherlock said. 'Instead she said—she said, look, I was observant. I had this ability, I could, could deduce things, couldn't I. She said, when I was in the midst of it, it made me feel good, didn't it. It made me feel like she felt, in the middle of a production, when she was sawing away and everyone was hitting their marks and it felt like they were leaning on each other, all pushing each other higher, the crew and the little orchestra and the actors and the audience. When she was in the midst of that it felt like her reason; and when I was in the midst of tracking something down, it felt like my reason, didn't it?'

'Lestrade should send Claudine Holmès a Christmas gift,' John said. To his own ear his voice sounded soggy with affection. Sherlock cracked one eye, so he supposed it was all right.

'In August?' Sherlock said.
'One for every month of the year, if I'm being honest,' said John. 'And three in December.'

Sherlock closed his eye again, but lifted the corner of his mouth. Shook his head, softly, on the pillow.

'And then Claudine said,' said Sherlock, 'that's why it makes you so miserable, doesn't it, when it doesn't work. When you get something wrong; when it's a bad night; when it's over and the magic never happened; when the solution to the puzzle only ends up making things worse for you. Because doing this, it was supposed to be your best thing; and so when it doesn't end up that way, you feel more than disappointed; you feel—a bit desperate, don't you. Like maybe you just imagined all those other times. Or they were just accidents. And they might never happen again.'

'Good grief,' John said. 'You'd just found out your mother had been unfaithful to your father; that they'd both lied to you. It wasn't a matter of—of having a bad night on the violin.'

'The thing is,' Sherlock said, and sighed. 'It was, a bit. Maybe more than a bit. That's what I—I've vacillated ever since, about the extent to which I believe that's at the heart of it. And the extent to which. The extent to which I hope it is.'

'I don't believe you,' said John, and even though it came out sounding remarkably like 'I love you,' Sherlock's mouth twisted down, too fast.

'Last night—' he said, but it crumpled up tight at the end.

His eyes screwed shut. Breath shallow; far away; but he didn't move away or indicate that John should take his hands off him so John didn't. For a long time, Sherlock didn't go on.

'Um,' he said, at last. 'In any case, I. At the time, I loved the idea that that's what it was. Because then Claudine said—I was eleven years old, and she said to me: it will happen again. She told me, you just have to learn your craft. You just have to, to use what you learn from these disappointments, in order to improve. That the presence of evidence contradictory to your hypothesis, only means there is something you have yet to learn. And once you learn it, your deductions will be sound.'

'Claudine said that? The presence of evidence contradictory to your hypothesis? Your deductions will be sound?'

Sherlock cleared his throat.

'That is—genuinely how I remember the conversation.' His toes squirmed, under the blanket, and John thought: it was Sherlock, after all. And he'd been so dreadfully unhappy. 'I've been over it many times, over the years,' Sherlock went on. 'I—admit it seems farfetched.'

John ran his knuckles along Sherlock's clavicles, and Sherlock flushed up. Eyes bright. John wanted—he wanted to tell him, wanted to say—until two days ago I'd—the worst year of my life, how could I have forgot—but the words knotted at the base of his throat. And in any case, it was hardly the time.

'I understand,' he said, instead, running fingertips over Sherlock's skin, and Sherlock made an impatient little noise under his hand and said 'I don't.'

He sighed. John petted him.

Sherlock said, 'I don't, I. Don't understand it. I thought—at the time it was a revelation, this idea of myself and Claudine and our raisons d'être against the world. We who'd discovered this secret that nobody else knew: The Work. I thought—it was obvious, now, why she'd adopted me during these
months in Paris; taken me away from my cold, ordinary, miserable parents, who didn't have anything like what the two of us had, who didn't know the secret we knew. I thought Claudine had recognised me as something extraordinary. Which was absurd, of course it was, and then, just before the funeral, I heard my mother thanking her for taking me off their hands, saying, *it made things more peaceful for Augusta, I believe and I do hope he wasn't too much of a burden*, and Claudine smiled and pressed my mother's hand in this understanding way, in this *feminine* way, almost as if *they* were the ones in on a secret; and I was so angry afterward that I tore up her calling card in the train back to Calais, and when she enclosed notes for me in her letters to my mother and my mother ordered me to answer them I wrote the briefest, most cutting non-responses I could muster; and once I left home I didn't exchange a word with her for—well, until she met us at the train station last week. It's all so banal, it's so—so *tedious*, the whole story; and if I can't even remember the bloody conversation then how did I spend the last eighteen years—'

'I know,' said John. He sighed. Thought of Daniel, saying *I don't know if he was, with me.*

'But it's not as if you imagined the satisfaction you get from solving cases,' John told Sherlock. 'Even I can see it; anyone can see it. It's what you talked about, what you saw in your mother during your lessons with her. It kindles you.'

Sherlock stared up at the ceiling. John brushed a stray curl off his forehead, and he exhaled, and blinked.

'I kept her at arm's length,' he said, 'after Paris. I kept showing myself at lessons because I wanted the chance to observe her at close quarters; I'd taken Claudine's words to heart even if she had her own reasons for saying them. At supper and lessons and out walking I forced myself to interactions with my mother and observed her: her movements, her expressions. Her reactions. We probably saw more of each other after the revelation than before, thanks to my concerted efforts. I kept notes. Wrote down my findings in a tiny book, which I kept in a hollowed-out copy of Harting's *Our Summer Migrants* on my mother's shelves. *An Account of Migratory Birds Which Pass the Summer in the British Islands:* just like the one who'd left me behind. It had been a gift; she didn't give a damn about birds. I liked thinking about how she'd never realise. She never did.'

Sherlock was aping his own post-case self-satisfied tone but his mouth looked like it was trying to spit something out. 'Sherlock,' John said, but Sherlock spoke over him:

'But after Paris I… threw the fight, as they say. Played stupid, or—no, played bored. Gave wrong answers intentionally. Skived off my exercises; said they were dull. Made a show of daydreaming out the window. She got angry and then she got cold and then I could—could sense her, shrinking in front of me. Getting *smaller*. It was,' he said, voice almost steady, 'one of the most satisfying revenges of my career.'

'You were young,' John said. 'Everyone acts thoughtlessly when—'

'She's alive and well,' Sherlock snapped. His jaw working. 'Still presiding over the estate. We could be there by tomorrow evening, if we applied ourselves. Shall we? Shall you see for yourself? She's still there, still just as cold and perfect and utterly without evidence to betray her. She was my object of observation for the six years before I left home, and even after all that time—even after I made a point of branching out to other subjects, of deducing a certain number of people every week, then every day; of confirming the truth of my conclusions through independent sources—even after I could tell you a dowager's life story on sight, or a clerk's most closely-guarded secret after five minutes in the man's presence, I never was able to locate the chinks in my mother's armour. You can watch her as closely as you like; her character is so solid as to admit of no aberrations. If I hadn't met Raphäel myself, if I hadn't had it confirmed by Claudine and by my own eyes, I would still never
believe it of her—I, who can spot a guilty lover at forty paces.’

'Sixty,' John said, very low, his heart beating nearly out of his chest next to Sherlock radiating hard hot fury, but then Sherlock gave a surprised little snort of a laugh and John could breathe again. Sherlock turned his head. Squinted at him with eyes so exhausted it hurt to look at them. Something shifted in his expression like he was only just remembering John was there—or, recalling that the man next to him in the bed, was John.

'On a good day,' Sherlock said. 'Perhaps. If I'm lucky.'

'Luck!' John said, 'perish the thought,' and Sherlock pursed his lips like a schoolmarm and pulled John to him until he was tucked under Sherlock's arm, head on his chest near his shoulder. John's heart beating painfully, still. Racing.

'You're not wrong,' he said. He could barely get enough air. 'To be bothered by—by whatever bothers you, about this whole business. If it's the same thing as would hurt, um, old Mrs McGillicuddy down the way, or if it's something that would never occur to her or—or—I mean, as far as I'm concerned how we've been, together, is—astonishing, and I don't really mind if what you've been doing is cleaving to me or not, or—I think it's clear I agreed years ago and every day after to be your, your object of observation for as long as the experiment is ongoing, so I. I hate it when you're in pain, I wish I'd not given you reason to be hurt by me at all, but I have, and I—I don't need you to be hurt by it for the right reasons. For God's s-sake.'


'I was only trying to make you see,' Sherlock said, into his hair, 'that I have to bear it. Regardless. These—unknowable countries, in people. In you. But that is—appreciated, John.'

John turned his head. Kissed Sherlock's chest. 'I have to live with them in you, too,' he said.

He shifted his shoulder under him. Pressed himself up onto one forearm. When he looked at Sherlock's face, it looked like Sherlock. Normal, slightly petulant Sherlock, Sherlock whom he chivvied off the chaise longue at Baker Street and wheedled into eating. Sherlock with whom he walked in the Strand and prowled about crime scenes. Sherlock who was meeting his gaze without seeming to think about it: a slight furrow between his brows.

'Is it as difficult?' Sherlock asked. 'For you?'

'Ohhh,' John said, and sighed. 'I don't know. I—probably not. I've never, you know. Never laboured under the hope I might not have to, one day.' The knuckles of his curled-up hand he brushed down Sherlock's temple; his cheekbone. 'But I do—I spend more time wishing I could really know what's going with you, than I spend wondering about—um. Most anything else. Anybody else, certainly.'

'Mrs McGillicuddy,' Sherlock supplied, and John huffed a laugh.

'Mrs McGillicuddy,' he confirmed. 'Mr Gage the greengrocer. Lestrade.'

'Mrs Hudson.'

'Even—oh, Harry, with all her odd bohemian notions. Madame Jouvenel. Irene Adler.'

His palm was resting on Sherlock's chest; he felt him startle.

'She telephoned,' John told him. 'I was meant to tell you.'
'Oh yes?' Sherlock said. 'I'll tell her to remove her man, I know I ought'n't to've—'

'No,' John said. 'I mean—yes, by all means, but that wasn't—she telephoned to tell you we ought to pretend to believe Germaine Beaumont, when she comes to us with a lie about the photographs being in the hands of Germaine Patat.'

Sherlock scooted himself back to prop himself up in bed. His chin drew down towards his neck and his forehead bunched up and he looked, John thought, feeling again that he might weep as Sherlock’s face flickered rapidly through surprise—consternation—dawning comprehension—like some variety of bruised, offended, and paper-skinned mole.

'Intriguing,' Sherlock said, at last. He leant back against the pillows, his hands steepled in front of his mouth. John could feel him withdrawing; folding in on himself; and he wanted, predictably, to reach out and draw him back. But it was a familiar kind of withdrawal. A reassuring one. One, thought John, that he could, more or less, trust.

Chapter End Notes

1. Arthur Cayley, thought leader in modern algebra and group theory, held the Sadleirian professorship of pure mathematics at Trinity College, Cambridge, during the mid-1870s when Sherlock's mother would have been at Girton. Girton at this period wasn't actually incorporated into the university, and it depended for its lecturers on professors from other, fully-fledged Cambridge colleges volunteering their afternoons to come teach the Girtonians. I don't actually have the remotest idea whether Cayley was among those who helped prepare early Girton women for the Maths Tripos, but we can imagine he was. For an interesting glimpse of life at Girton from the perspective of an American student there, check out this Nation article from January 27, 1876.

2. As usual, the French Holmès siblings are the slipperiest part of this story from a historical versus fictional perspective: the historical painter Catulle Mendès and the historical composer Augusta Holmès did actually have a relationship like the one described; they also historically had a son Raphäel, who was around 20 in 1891 when his sister Claudine was actually around 14. As with everything else about Claudine (except her violin playing), everything else about Raphäel (the affair, the career in British shipping, the death in WWI) is fictional, largely because I haven't been able to find any information about either of their historical lives.

As a side note: I'm not sure about anyone reading this, but writing Claudine and Raphäel as these historically liminal people who did actually exist but probably not as I've imagined them, has made reading about this era in Paris kind of a mind-fuck for me. I think something about creating an actual genetic link between the historical Holmès family and the fictional Holmes family has broken my brain a little bit, and now whenever I come across the historical Holmèses I feel get a weird sense of vertigo, as if I'd encountered someone claiming to be the third cousin of Mr. Rochester. Long story short, I apologize if this is happening to anyone else! It's a very strange and not entirely pleasant sensation.

3. A special audio DVD extras segment featuring me and greywash can be found here.
Observe disease in signatures, and tragedy from fingers

Tuesday, August 30th, 1921
4pm

'Go on,' Irene said. 'Open it.'

Léonie squinted up at Irene, then down at the key in her hand. She let her top lip pull up in a way Irene had trained herself out of years before she'd reached Léonie's age; then shrugged a piece of dark-red hair out of her face and bent to the lock. Irene had a sudden flash of bending next to the girl, years ago now, coaching her through picking the beginner's lock on the bottom drawer of Irene's desk. It was vaguely incongruous, now, to watch her unlocking a door in such an orthodox manner.

'You have to pull up on the handle a bit,' Irene told her, 'and—there we are.'

Léonie didn't walk like Irene had at her age, either. She strutted into the room flat-footed, like a boy, and peered about her. Reached out and ran her fingers over the table and the chair and the sink in the little niche that was less than a kitchen. Irene lit the lamp, and it flickered; spluttered in the old familiar way. Under Léonie's gaze the little place looked different, somehow: smaller, solider. Plainer. Léonie wouldn't be able to look at the table and see the film negatives spilled out across it. When she went to the window, as she did now, she would see only the darkness of the clear night, and the single street lamp lighting the wall—and not, layered atop it, the bustle of the week-end afternoons or the long shadows of the early morning or the way it had rained in torrents the night before. (And yet Germaine, with her little packet, believed herself capable of looking at Irene's photographs and seeing—.) Irene watched the girl lean out for a view of the pavement below and thought that such simplicity seemed restful; which was absurd, of course. Even at sixteen, Léonie would have a whole little world of storied places of her own. God knew Irene had, at her age.

Irene cleared her throat, and Léonie turned back towards her, with puzzled eyes.

'It's paid through the end of the year,' Irene said. 'And if you can find a way to manage seventy-five francs a month in the new year, I've the assurance of the landlord that he will continue to honour my rate. And that nobody will give you any difficulties. He'll be good as his word: what I know about him could catch up with him just as easily from across the Channel.'

'You want me to keep it for you?' said Léonie. 'Until you get back?'

That lock of hair was falling down in front of her eyes again. She scratched her nose, looking at Irene. Ridiculously, Irene found it difficult to keep looking back at her.

'You could think of it that way.' She cleared her throat, and turned away from the girl, towards the little wardrobe. 'I've left some of my old things,' she said. 'Things I can't use anymore.' She opened the door and the lamp cast dim light over black; red; yellow. Léonie came up behind her, then beside her. She put out a hand to touch black brocade: a Lebouvier, edged in gold, from before the War. Irene had still been at La Garçonnière when she'd bought it: that afternoon with Estrella on the Place Vendôme, laughing hysterically over their own daring at spending an entire week's pay on a dress. Now Irene pulled it off the bar, and held it up to Léonie's face. She regarded the effect: that fall of shimmering copper in the lamp-light against the dark depths of taffeta. Léonie smoothed her hands over the fabric over her own skinny hips. Her head tilted to the left.

'You'll want to sell all the scarlet, of course,' Irene told her. 'Don't let them cheat you; it's all real wool, real silk. But if you like the yellow, and the black, they'd look well with your hair.'
'It's so beautiful,' Léonie said. Her big eyes. 'But—where would I wear it? What would I do?'

And in a wave, as Irene held the dress up still to Léonie's little shoulders, the images swamped her, more sense than vision: laying ropes of pearls against that black brocade before swinging her hips on the way downstairs to card games in the salon at La Garçonne; hearing the fabric rip at the under-arm when Madame Baudin had pulled the thing up and off her and then—'I adore your little breasts'—fastened her mouth; mending the tear in the kitchen listening to Diane read aloud about the outbreak of the War, thinking: soldiers made tavern-keepers' fortunes, and they'd make hers; supervising, in black heels and knife-sharp red lips, the placement of her new-made cabinet in her new-made Le Chabanais rooms, where the cabinet-maker, eyeing the dress, had told her, *It's like you sprouted here* and Irene, in black taffeta, showing her teeth, had laughed; and she'd laughed with Frederick and she'd laughed with Marcel and she'd laughed with Simon and she'd laughed with Anton and she'd laughed with Henry Jouvenel in black brocade for thirteen years.

'If you're resourceful,' she told Léonie, now, 'you'll think of something.' She turned from her, and hung the dress back on its bar. Good riddance. 'And if you're not—sell them. Or, say, cut them up. You're good with a needle. Make of them something more suited to your taste.'

She pushed on the wardrobe door until she heard the click; then crossed to the little kitchen niche. Facing away from Léonie she ran the water until it was clear; then filled the kettle and lit the gas. The little flame jumped up.

'Why are you going?' Léonie said, behind her. 'Why are you giving me all this?'

'It's an exchange,' said Irene. Still faced to the wall. She took a breath, and battened her face down, and turned. Léonie was standing in the middle of the little room with one ankle tucked behind the other, and one arm tucked behind her back.

The night after tomorrow,' Irene said, 'at the home of Claire Boas, there is going to be a fête.'

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**Tuesday, August 30th, 1921**

**4pm**

'However you look at them,' Sherlock said, in his Holmes voice, to the little group assembled around Germaine Beaumont's spotless dining table, 'the fact remains that we are left with three targets. Our primary objective, as my cousin and client has expressed it to me, is to protect the Jouvenel family from the consequences of past and potential actions taken by all three persons. The family's preference is to secure assurances that they will no longer be troubled in this business, and to avoid police involvement. Accurate?'

He jerked towards the door, feeling himself a poorly-strung puppet pivoting in the direction of Claudine's violin-straight posture; her collar half-undone and her grey-blonde hair massed at the back of her head. Despite the presence of Hélène Picard, all in black at her side, she was watching him with a directness, an intensity, which made his belly lift. The hair prickled up on his arms.

'All accurate,' Claudine said. Sherlock nodded, and lurched back in the other direction.

'The targets, then.' Holmes made lists, didn't he. All the time. Sherlock cleared his throat. 'One: Charles Humbert: business rival, journalistic nemesis and sometime-sexual-competitor, sometime-lover of Henry Jouvenel. Humbert features to compromising effect in the scandalous photographs, which were stolen from his house at some point before the fifteenth of July, when he discovered their absence and began his search campaign for them. In the process of this search, he or his associates
are known to have broken into both the home and the offices of Monsieur and Madame Jouvenel, as well as the home of Claire Boas and the rooms of Irene Adler at the *maison close* Le Chabanais. During this last incursion, Humbert unintentionally alerted Miss Adler both to his possession of the photographs in the first place—of which she was not previously aware—and to their current at-large status.'

Did it feel—comforting? Sherlock thought. Familiar, surely: the pacing, the gesturing. The restating of the case. He knew this scene down to the ground; he ought to slip into it. Like an old jacket. It ought to smooth down the roughness of him, the unfamiliar discontinuity of of the last few days; the foreignness that was so nonsensical—for they'd been fine. He and John, the day before, in their hotel bed. They had wept, of course; but touched; but spoken—*into* one another. And yet he'd almost felt, the day before and the one before that, like coming to himself in the midst of a conversation he didn't know how to have. *This* conversation, this summing-up of a puzzle: if there were any conversation he, Sherlock Holmes, knew how to have, this was it. Yet he kept—kept turning his head, as if to catch a glimpse of himself, in mid-stream. Was it done thus? Thus? It was over now, he told himself, the worst was over. But he twitched in his bruises. Holmes (he hoped) covered it up.

The chair he'd pulled up earlier was empty now, pushed back at an angle from the foot of the little table, but everyone else was still seated, and they watched him. Their heads followed where he led. Claudine; Hélène; Germaine. John. When his eyes tried to skip away, it helped to clear his throat. He held up his hand, two fingers aloft.

'Two,' he said. 'Irene Adler herself. Highly-paid specialist whore; Sapphist and expatriate Londoner; who that night in 1915 took her turns both behind and in front of the camera which documented a four-person bacchanal including herself, Humbert, Jouvenel, and Margaretha Zelle, called Mata Hari. Adler considers the photographs to be her property, and has been working to secure them since Humbert alerted her to their theft last Wednesday, August 24. To this end she has admitted to spying on a luncheon gathering at Roz Ven; and, later, to breaking into the house on the night of Friday, August 26, while most of the party were asleep—or at least abed.'

Sherlock pivoted again by the window, turning on his heel a hair too far and there was John. Looking back at him from the far side of the table. John blinked, and licked his lips. That earnest London expression: lifting-up. A reaching out toward. Sherlock's gaze twitched away.

'Specifically,' he said, to a point above John's shoulder: 'Adler, believing that Doctor Watson and I were following her, broke into our Roz Ven quarters via the gabled roof. She succeeded in her goal, which was to learn our names; and upon hearing my footsteps approach, she made off out the window, taking only a needlework cushion. It's worth noting that in addition to Adler's role in the photographs, she also has a connection with Madame Jouvenel, having worked for a summer in the company of a pantomime in which Madame Jouvenel was starring, along with my cousin.' He made Claudine a little marionette bow. 'This was in Le Havre, after Madame Jouvenel's divorce but before her remarriage. Adler seems, based on evidence gathered from an inspection of her rooms and elsewhere, to have developed an enduring fascination with Madame Jouvenel, and has continued to follow her life and career. The cushion, which was worked by Madame Jouvenel as a gift for her former lover—the Marquise de Belbeuf, known as 'Missy'—probably dates from not long after the summer of 1908, when Adler first met them both.'

'That was the height of their affair,' Claudine put in. 'Missy's and Colette's, I mean. That summer. They couldn't keep apart from one another. By the time Roz Ven was ready to receive them, it was —the bloom was off the rose, I suppose you could say. Looking back, in any case. It seems so.'

There was something heavy in her bearing, Sherlock thought; though she regarded him straight on, with her chin up, looking neither right nor left. She had been so this morning, too, when he had
questioned her: weighed-down. Full of something he couldn't name. Then he thought: would she have seemed so, to the Holmes of a week ago? Or does it only seem so to me?

'And you don't—' he asked her. 'There's nothing you remember, about Adler as a girl?'

Claudine flung a hand up; blew out her cheeks; and for Sherlock, all in a rush, came fondness—then noticing—then a weird squelching useless uncertainty.

'I remember her, certainly,' Claudine was saying, as Sherlock shifted his weight from his left foot to his right. 'I remember—what. Oh, nothing of use. She had a gift for impressions. She imitated the Parisians for the amusement of the kitchen staff. She picked pockets; hung about Colette. She was pretty. Colette was a bit cruel to her, like she was to most pretty young girls.' Claudine shrugged. 'None of that was anything out of the common way. Colette has—magnetism. Charisma. And there are many girls both young and pretty. And many men.'

'And many boys,' came another voice, gravelly, from John's other side.

Heads swivelled. Isabelle de Comminges, swathed in blankets and scarves, seemed a kind of fabric mountain; its core composed of disapproval and hennaed hair. Silence hovered, expectant; but the Panther only chewed her mouth and huddled deeper into the overstuffed chair which Germaine had pushed up to the table for her—Germaine, who at the head of the table was now the only person not looking at the Panther, but gazing, instead, down at her notebook and her unmoving pencil, with the faintest flush on her cheeks. Sherlock wondered: Irene… Colette… Germaine. And he wondered, as Hélène Picard glanced down at Germaine's pad, and lingered a moment, whether Germaine's shorthand would be of a type legible to anyone other than herself.

'And boys,' Claudine agreed, at last. 'Undoubtedly.'

And Sherlock flashed—and couldn't help it: his gaze cut to John who, sea-eyed and exhausted, sat nonetheless with a spine was straight as it always had been. His shoulders as they always did faced square towards Sherlock. If he'd flinched, he had missed it. Would the Holmes of a week ago have missed it? Sherlock looked away.

(The tops of Germaine's bookcases, he noted, were free from even a day's worth of dust. In anyone else, it might have been taken as evidence of conscious preparation; of nervousness before the meeting. Germaine Beaumont, Sherlock thought, probably dusted every morning at seven, come hell or high water.)

'She—Irene Adler,' Claudine said. 'I do remember that there was an incident with Wague. Georges Wague, the male lead, in the pantomime. He woke me up one night, in the middle of the night. He'd had some kind of… encounter. Involving the girl and a horse-whip.'

'She deserved a whipping,' said Isabelle. 'From all I've heard.'

'Well,' said Claudine. 'That… is not what happened.'

Hélène snorted. Claudine looked at her, innocently enquiring, and Hélène looked back with raised eyebrows.

'She was, what? Sixteen years old? Ninety pounds?'

'He was not an unwilling participant,' Claudine said, then raised her eyebrows back in response to Hélène's expression. 'Though a chastened one, after the fact, when he came to me to apply the bandages. Apparently, in a forceful role the girl was both enthusiastic, and compelling beyond her years. The next morning she'd absconded, bound for Paris. Later I learned she'd found her calling
that night.’

Hélène let out a whistle; slowly, she shook her head. 'And Francis always says: the female subjectivity is insufficiently robust for the creation of meaningful art.'

'Time and time again I have said: a comic opera: Under the noses of men. I provide the raw material and the compositions, you write the libretto. We can send him complimentary box seats for the opening performance.' Hélène was still shaking her head, but despite herself she was laughing. Sherlock’s heart beat oddly, watching them, knowing how Claudine on the sand had listed; knowing they were neither of them—happy. Claudine put a hand out, for a little squeeze of Hélène's fingers.

Sherlock cleared his throat and said, 'In any case,' as Claudine smiled herself into silence. 'Miss Adler, to all accounts, has a continued interest in Madame Jouvenel—an interest which she extends to serving Monsieur Jouvenel when he visits her place of employment. She also has a practical interest in recovering the photographs, which could conceivably be used by her enemies—to paint her as a wartime collaborator, if nothing else, given that by her own admission it was she, Adler, who invited Zelle to join her that night in entertaining the officers, from whom Zelle may very well have gathered intelligence which she then passed on to her German handler. So: Adler and Humbert, mildly antagonistic towards one another, both in pursuit of the photographs to protect their own reputations. And both expected to attend Madame Boas’s fête on Thursday—among other reasons, to recover the photographs they both consider theirs.'

'Though,' said Germaine Beaumont, placing her pencil carefully in a parallel line with her notebook, on the polished table-top, 'I am certain that Charles and Mabel Humbert would have attended in any case. Félix Perrin is in Paris; this past week Henry Jouvenel has been able to talk of little else. Word is he is looking to invest, in either a newspaper or a wireless concern. The Perrins have known the Boas family for ages; and if they're there, the Humberts were always going to be there, too.'

'Perrin wouldn't sink money in Le Matin,' said Claudine. 'He's far too nationalistic for even the watered-down cosmopolitanism Henry has been peddling. And—well. Henry giving his wife the drama critic post, for example, over the heads of who knows how many qualified men. Ouf! You know I disagree! But Perrin would take exception to that, I'm sure.'

'All the more reason,' said Germaine, 'for the Humberts to show in force. Le Journal never tires of waving the Tricolour.'

'Hm,' said Sherlock. He shifted his weight again; and then, scratching at a flea-bite under his ear, caught John's gaze. Raw, blue eyes. Sherlock could—but he didn’t—a conductor of light, he'd once said, and now he didn't look away. Then John said, slowly, as if sounding it out: 'I know I wouldn't tend to appreciate it, if a potential investor, known for his conservative politics, were circulating in the same room as a billet of photographs of me, l-licking some man's shoe. Yes? In wartime, in the company of an executed spy.'

He'd flushed up, but pushed through; he'd held Sherlock's eyes. If Sherlock touched John's hairline now, his fingertips would find a fine, hot dew. Sherlock swallowed; and gripped the back of his own empty chair.

'Good,' he said. It came out mostly steady. John laced his hands together on the tabletop and nodded, once. The merest hint, in his tightening jaw, of a smile. 'Perhaps we can use it,' Sherlock went on. He wheeled to continue his pacing circuit. Heart beating inches high: though it had been nothing unusual, not at all, a back-and-forth like that. 'Charles Humbert's likely desire to impress, rather than alienate, this Perrin. The threat of being, oh—discovered with the photographs in his possession, or —'
'That someone,' said Germaine, and Sherlock's puppet head snapped around to look at her, 'might take it upon themselves to show the photographs to Perrin. That someone might—'

'But Humbert hasn't got the photographs,' said Hélène. 'And neither do we.'

'Ah,' Sherlock said, softly. He was still looking at Germaine, who had neither flinched nor coloured—not, in any case, that Sherlock had seen. Swallowing, he held up another finger. 'The third target, then. Rather a less clear-cut case. The perpetrator of the initial theft from Charles Humbert's home: a woman, in disguise, who later accosted Humbert's daughter Agnès Sabbagh in the street, taunting her with one of the photographs featuring her father in a compromising position with both Zelle and Jouvenel. This is likely the same woman who, upon hearing that Madame Boas herself might come under suspicion, took it upon herself to make an early-morning telephone call from the box in St Coulomb, warning Doctor Watson, and by extension myself, not to pursue that line of investigation. Thanks to intelligence from Miss Adler and Mademoiselle Beaumont here, and corroborated by events I myself witnessed on the night of the second break-in at Roz Ven, we believe with reasonable certainty that that woman was Henry Jouvenel's lover—who had also been Charles Humbert's lover—Germaine Patat.'

It was smoothly done; convincing, was it not, on both their parts: his half-bow to Germaine Beaumont, and her brisk little nod back at him. She'd come to them, as Irene had said she would, that morning, as Sherlock was finishing his coffee, and John was finishing his bath. Sherlock, still two inches to the left of the Holmes of the week before, had let her in and bade her sit. And then, hands firm on the arms of his chair, he had sat, and listened; and he had narrowed his eyes with a mixture of queasiness and exhilaration at the inevitability of Irene Adler's avaricious will to control. Germaine had sat before him, telling him what amounted to her own story, only with the part of herself played by Germaine Patat: Patat whom she, Germaine Beaumont, was meant to have observed arriving back from Paris that day, at the train station, tucking a bundle of photographs into her handbag. She had talked and he had listened, and he had thought: surely it would be well within Irene's power to seduce the photographs out from under this girl—this secretary, compulsively straight-ruled and frowsy as she was. Judging from Irene's willingness to take Germaine to her private rooms and stay there with her well nigh all night, Irene would mightily enjoy doing so. And yet, Sherlock had thought: the allure of self-sufficiency. The allure, perhaps, of betrayal.

Irene's suggestion made sense, however. (He was sure it did.) Surely to confront Germaine Beaumont; to alert her to the fact that they knew what she'd done, would only put her on her guard. She might destroy the photographs; or break and run; or make a surprise bid to ensure Humbert's punishment, before they all could act. To pretend to believe her story would lull the girl into complacency, and keep her close. If she was sufficiently committed to lie, bald-faced, to Sherlock Holmes—and what was more, to her mother-figure's close friend Claudine, a feat Germaine accomplished with surprising aplomb—then she plainly wanted to believe in Irene: to believe in some future for the two of them. Irene had plainly told her—what? That they would set up housekeeping together? Elope in the night? Sat in his chair, Sherlock had a wash of vertigo—dizzying—wherein he'd feared for a long teetering moment that he would gag in horror; would crawl out of his own skin; and all in front of this capable, lying girl. Instead he'd tightened his grip on his chair. Rode it out. He'd nodded his head, as Holmes did. He'd steeped his fingers: another standby. Reliable. He'd led her down the garden path, almost without listening to himself do it; and she'd relaxed, and then she'd gone. A minute later John had emerged, in a hotel dressing-gown, and put a hand on Sherlock's shoulder on the way to his trunk for a necktie. Sherlock had not registered the sensation until minutes later, when John's touch was already long, long gone.

So now they were allies, in appearance at least: John, Sherlock, and Germaine Beaumont. Perhaps more than allies, Sherlock thought. Perhaps... but here he shook his head, sharp, and felt himself tilt back into line with something he recognised. Here he paced, enumerating their shared targets. And
there sat Germaine, looking up at him with her pencil and her notebook perfectly squared with the edge of the table in her dust-free flat.

'Patat!' said Hélène, in response to Sherlock’s revelation. 'A girl like that—who would a girl like that, with a swine like Humbert?'

'Why would she take up with Henry Jouvenel?' Claudine pointed out. 'She wants continued financing for her couture house. She wants people to be seen in her clothes. The right people. In the right society.'

The Panther, from her blanket-pile, sucked her teeth. 'Young girls,' she said, 'have always loved playing powerful men one against the other.'

Sherlock did not look at Germaine, who in that moment, he was absolutely positive, was actively refraining from pointing out that in this case the powerful men needed little to no assistance to play themselves against each other.

In any case,' Sherlock said, 'Mademoiselle Patat soon came to agree with your assessment of her lover's character, Mademoiselle Picard: by all accounts the theft of the photographs and the subsequent confrontation of Agnès Sabbagh (née Humbert) were attempts to punish or chastise Charles Humbert. Mademoiselle Patat has kept the photographs from him, but she has not attempted to publish them or use them against the Jouvenels; and when suspicion seemed to fall on Claire Boas, who has only ever been a tertiary victim of the theft, she acted to dispel it.'

'Patat is hardly going to threaten the Jouvenels,' Germaine Beaumont agreed. 'She is in and out of both their beds, and they treat her well enough. Quite well, considering their standards. Henry's investment covered the initial costs of her fall collection; and with Colette—' Germaine did not flush, though her pause was perceptible. 'With Colette I believe she is half in love.'

'Love!' said the Panther, as Sherlock pressed inside knuckles to inside knuckles, his templed fingers against his lips. 'Madame Colette should not want to leave those photographs in the girl's possession. However much one talks of love.'

'I will not want to leave them there,' snapped Claudine. 'Which is more to the point.'

They glared for a moment, between them, as Sherlock blinked, and Germaine betrayed no reaction at all. John made a noise which, by the time Sherlock looked over at him, had become a cough. Hand up to hide his mouth, which would be smiling; and Sherlock thought for a dizzying, half-nauseated moment of pipe tobacco, and the susurration of newsprint turning as London rain beat on the windows outside. Then he turned back towards Hélène and Claudine, as Germaine Beaumont, who of all people could very well be believed, said:

In any case I believe Patat is essentially sympathetic to our interests in this. She wants to protect the Jouvenels and revenge herself on Humbert. As to Irene Adler, Patat has no allegiance for her or against her. For us Patat is not a target so much as a variable for which we need to control. With proper encouragement I think she will be more prone to cooperation with us than otherwise.'

'Hmm,' Sherlock said. His mouth still ran ahead of his steps; he said, or Holmes was saying, 'Then here we are: if Germaine Patat is likely to cooperate, and Irene Adler, though she will take any opportunity to secure the prints, is unlikely to act against the Jouvenels now if she hasn't yet in all her years of collecting intelligence about them, then our first and clearest goal is to neutralise Charles Humbert.'

He looked to Claudine. 'I agree,' she said. 'And Humbert ought to be easy. He's such a bloviating
brute. Afraid of blackmail and a tomcat besides. But—he'll be on his guard, won't he? He's already
coming to the fête knowing that these photographs will be there, in the same room as Perrin, whom
he and his wife will be wooing all night. I would say, dangle in front of his face a pretty boy, or girl.
Snap a few indiscreet pictures and we'd have material independent of the Jouvenels, that we could
use to keep him in line. But in this case? Tomorrow? I don't know that it would work.'

'It could, still,' said Germaine. Sherlock squinted at her, then corrected his expression. She made a
decisive series of marks on her pad with her pencil, then laid it down: a little click of wood on wood.
'He will know there will be danger, but he cannot help who he is. The way that he is. He's a bully.
None too bright, and easily drawn. Easily provoked to violence, as well, though that might not prove
to our advantage. But thinking ahead, intuiting stratagems—he's more the type for brute force.'

'We need to tie the bad behaviour to the photographs,' Sherlock said. Lodged in his sternum, a deep,
fretting—ache; but he talked. He paced. Towards the door: Claudine, Hélène; turn; Germaine; turn;
Isabelle. John. Sherlock cleared his throat. Said, 'We need to use Humbert's fear of exposure to force
him into a situation where he will expose himself. What does he care about? Experience says: his
family; his pride; his social standing. He was livid with Irene Adler when he thought she'd not only
stolen from him, but humiliated him in front of his daughter. He likes to go slumming but likes to
believe himself above the reputation for it. He'll hang himself; we just need to give him the rope,
and…'

'And document the results,' Germaine said. Something stirred in the back of Sherlock's brain
—masked balls and her very bedrooms. Germaine went on: 'We'll need to—to place Humbert in a
situation that can be observed. Chroniced. Otherwise it'll be his word…' but she trailed off, as
Sherlock turned abruptly from her to Isabelle.

'At luncheon,' Sherlock said. His tone was sufficiently urgent to rouse the Panther from her sour doze
in the blanket cocoon. It was enough to startle him, even: that self who sat, observing, from the inside
of his own head. 'That day at luncheon, at Roz Ven. You said… what was it? Back when Claire
Boas was Henry Jouvenel's wife, and you were his mistress. At balls, you said: he used to spirit you
away, and kiss you in a cupboard that gave onto—onto their bedroom, wasn't it?'

Isabelle blinked up at him.

'Her bedroom,' she said. 'They slept apart.'

'Her bedroom,' Sherlock repeated. 'Madame Boas's bedroom, then? In the same house where
Madame Boas still lives?'

'She'd never give up that house,' the Panther said. 'The ballroom, and the conservatory. The bitch has
a fever for greenhouses.'

'Brilliant.' Sherlock wheeled about. He had to move; had to let his feet carry him along like he was—
'And you said,' he asked her, voice raised a trifle too high, 'that when she would come in the room
for her wrap, you and he used to have to be quiet, so that she wouldn't hear the two of you together.'

The Panther grunted in agreement, looking dubious; though Germaine now tapped her pencil against
her lips, and Claudine's eyes darted, eagerly, back and forth. Even Hélène was sitting forward in her
chair. Sherlock glanced at John, whose face was opening, slowly, with that old exhilarated,
marvelling grin; and Sherlock smiled back at him despite his chest drawing together clenching—

'Which means,' John said, still looking up at Sherlock with his wide-open face, 'that any conversation
taking place in that room, at a reasonable volume—'
'At any volume,' the Panther cut in. 'There is a perforated duct, between the two rooms. Sound carries.'

'—could be heard from the—hold on,' John said, and Sherlock’s blood had jumped, too, 'this duct: is it removable? Or—does it let in light?'

Isabelle shrugged, looking disdainful. 'Quite possibly.'

'Then—a camera,' John said. He looked at Sherlock. 'A camera,' he repeated.

'Yes,' Sherlock said. John's smile lingered, his mouth not quite closing; and Sherlock, swallowing hard, had to turn back towards the window. 'It's a good start,' he said.

It was. A good start.

He put weight on his hands on the window-sill. A deep breath. In the courtyard of Germaine's building, idly playing at knucklebones, sat a boy and a girl with matching shiny-black hair.

'So then,' Sherlock said, 'Germaine Patat. Germaine Patat must approach Humbert. She must lure him into the—well, the cupboard, I should think: less danger of being interrupted there than in the bedroom; though we'll have to see to it that there is enough light to allow for photography. Given the vendetta which inspired her to steal the photographs in the first place, she'll presumably be amenable to the idea of using them to discredit him—and only him—or else to limit the further damage he can do. If she can get him into a compromising position, and assuming Watson's idea of the camera and the duct bears fruit, then we will have enough to keep him quiet. Barring that, if we can get him to admit to the burglaries, in detail, then we might subdue him with the threat to go to the police on that score, even if, in the event, the details of the photographs themselves would undoubtedly come out in an investigation. As Mademoiselle Beaumont noted, Monsieur Humbert is not remarkable for his perspicacity. But it will require quite a bit of quick thinking, and strategic acting, even with the photographs in hand, if she is going to get him to incriminate himself. Is Germaine Patat—do you think her capable of such a thing?'

Claudine snorted, and Sherlock resisted the impulse to hold his breath. She said, 'That girl could charm the spots off a leopard, given the proper motivation.'

'The proper motivation,' Hélène repeated, in a blank voice. Beaumont would take the opening, Sherlock thought. She must: she would need an opportunity to get Patat alone, and make—whatever her play was going to be.

'We did try to get in touch,' John put in. 'To invite Mademoiselle Patat today. But she's not answering her door, or returning calls.'

'She will be at her studio,' said Claudine. 'Putting the last touches on the costumes she is designing for the fête. Three that I know of. Probably more. She is a demon for such projects: it can be challenging to tempt her away. She will want everything perfect; it is a free show-room for her talents, after all.'

Sherlock hummed. He thought, suddenly, of that day the past week, when he and John had spent the afternoon canvassing the town of St. Coulomb for the hotel of an unknown house-breaker lately arrived from Paris—despite the fact that he himself, a week ago, hadn't cared a whit about who it had been, or why they'd done it, or even proving his own hypotheses correct. He seemed bizarre, somehow: that Sherlock Holmes. Why did one do anything, if one were so secure in oneself? This Sherlock, holding his breath, was still looking across at the little boy, who had just fumbled on foursies.
'Perhaps,' Claudine went on, her voice taking on a teasing cadence, 'if we were to send along, to convince her, the dashing blond soldier, fresh from foreign climes, with the lovely blue eyes and the quick smile and the tragic past—'

'I'll do it,' Germaine Beaumont cut in, and Sherlock, eyes closing, breathed out. Carefully. He counted to five before turning back to the room, away from the window.

'It won't seem anything odd coming from me,' Germaine was saying, as Sherlock skimmed past the tail end of John's blush to meet her gaze. 'I'm afraid I have quite a reputation for making myself inconvenient in the name of the greater happiness and security of my employer. And anyway, she knows I will be stopping by this evening to pick up Madame Jouvenel's costume. I can speak with her then about the photographs; about Humbert, and—whatever we decide.'

There was a wry little twist to her mouth. Sherlock wondered, then, with a sharp alien dislocation: how did Germaine feel, having decided to take what Irene Adler was offering? In Colette she was giving up, after all, something like—something like a mother. Overbearing, yes. Stifling, yes. Unbearable, no doubt, in the long term. Even in the absence of an exotic new lover, one had, eventually, to break away. But still. Likely she felt the loss. Sherlock swallowed. Stood, unmoored. Perhaps one always would.

'Thank you,' he told Germaine, and then, superfluously: 'I think that's best. She'll need to bring the photographs with her, of course; it's unfortunate that she'll have so little notice to modify her costume.'

'No need,' said Claudine. 'She's worked pockets into all her offerings. Germaine Carco's, Colette's, her own. She's especially proud of hers, since it gives the illusion of being too insubstantial for such an accommodation. I'm sure she'd be delighted to show Germaine, or Doctor—'

'That won't be necessary,' Sherlock said. He cleared his throat. 'I have every confidence that Mademoiselle Beaumont will manage Mademoiselle Patat, and that Mademoiselle Patat will manage her pockets. And I've every confidence that Charles Humbert, convinced of his superior strength and bluster, will chase the photographs when they are waved under his nose. A half-naked blonde beauty with a—'

'More than half,' Claudine put in.

'—solution to his embarrassments, who can threaten him over his unseemly attachment to Henry Jouvenel, and his links to German sympathizers? She'll be well-placed to egg him on to justify and thereby incriminate himself. What we're missing is a chronicler, and a trigger for the reveal.'

'The reveal to—Perrin,' said Claudine. She was riveted on Sherlock, eyes shining; it intensified his feeling of being, somehow, false. Hélène was sitting back in her chair, looking at Claudine with an expression of mild surprise.

'Unless you think there is a more effective choice,' Sherlock told her. 'I would have suggested Mabel Humbert, but judging by Agnès's attitude towards her father, I doubt anything in the way of Charles's misbehaviour could surprise any of the Humbert women, and I think he most likely knows that. We don’t want Perrin to discover the full import of the tableau in the cupboard, of course—not the photographs, since then Humbert would have no reason not to drag Henry Jouvenel's reputation down after his own. But we need a release valve: some effective way to allow Mademoiselle Patat to escape.'

Claudine nodded, slowly, smiling at him. 'Then we want—what? Someone stationed in the bedroom, I suppose, operating the camera—'
'Two someones, I think,' said Sherlock. 'One to take photographs and witness the conversation as it occurs, and the second to take notes and then set the wheels of discovery in motion, once Humbert has said enough.'

'I know shorthand,' Hélène murmured; and Claudine said, 'And I know Perrin by sight.'

'Then we're agreed,' Sherlock said. 'Beaumont will convince Patat; Patat will lure Humbert; Humbert will hang himself; Picard will write it all down and my cousin will act as a second set of ears in the bedroom and then steer Perrin towards his discovery, when the time is right.'

He took a breath, then nodded. He settled his hands on the back of his chair. Everyone was sat forward, watching him; even the Panther was wide-eyed, though she didn't quite stoop to nodding. John had a hand up again, hiding his mouth. Those beautiful unbearable eyes.

'And what will you be doing?' Germaine Beaumont said, and Sherlock—yes, he thought. Blinking, and turning. She would want to know. His pause must have gone on, because she added: 'You and Doctor Watson, during the fête?'

'Well,' Sherlock said. He held her gaze, then glanced back at John. 'There is one factor remaining, to keep under control.'

'Irene Adler,' John said, and Sherlock, at last, pulled out his chair, and sat.

'Irene Adler,' he agreed. 'Though we've agreed she is unlikely to be a direct or intentional threat to the Jouvenels, she is an unpredictable and highly motivated factor. She'll want watching, if only to guard against the possibility of her interfering with our plans for Charles Humbert. Doctor Watson and I will keep an eye on her, from her arrival at the fête, and will make sure that she stays contained, and doesn't intercept the photographs herself. With or without the knowledge and consent of anyone else involved. So that's—yes. Irene Adler, and Germaine Patat.'

Sherlock kept his eyes fixed straight before him, letting his gaze soften in Germaine Beaumont's direction, as if in thought. But she reacted not at all, or not visibly. She nodded, as Claudine was nodding, as Hélène and even Isabelle were nodding; and did not press her lips together, or reach up to touch the hair at her nape. Irene Adler, Sherlock amended mentally, and Germaine Beaumont; and he thought of John, that night, following them both from Le Chabanais to the Luxembourg gardens in a rainstorm; and felt John shift in his seat, at Sherlock's side.
But you are the music, while the music lasts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thursday, September 1st, 1921
10pm

The last night, Irene thought. The very last.

Her rooms at Le Chabanais were nearly empty, now. The bed stripped; the furniture waiting empty. The last of it all—the contents of her desk, the few articles that she had needed up to the very end—were packed away, in a traveling bag; and sent ahead to wait at the station. And all those rings, on which for years she had carried all those keys: one by one she had shed them. Like a pelt. The Luxembourg flat; the Chabanais back stairs and the front door. The half-dozen discreet entrances to auxiliary flats of regular clients, in far-flung arrondissements. Now here she sat, on the chair which was staying; before the mirror which was staying: with a single key before her on the desk, which she would be leaving behind.

One more night, she thought. She stretched gold stockings over her calves; over her knees. Fastened them to her belt and then stood to pull on close-fitted burgundy knee-breeches. Paris had one more night for her. One more fête for her. Her photographs for her to gather back to herself; and one more chase. A fitting send-off, she thought. Thirteen years.

She stood, and smoothed down the front of her breeches. Gold and burgundy; and at her throat and her wrists voluminous white lace. They'd done Don Giovanni at the Palais Garnier, oh—last season? The season before? In any case, her sex aside, it was a faithful copy. Irene pulled burgundy velvet over her shoulders: buttoned burgundy velvet up her chest. Shrugged on the jacket and straightened voluminous burgundy cuffs. Aligned gold buttons. A good effect, she thought. Sandrine knew her business. Irene had a brief flash of something—not fear, certainly, but: to think of Athens, and Constantinople, without Sandrine, and Anastasie. Pierre's macarons. The bottles of Chinon held back for her by Alexandre at a reduced rate. None of it necessary, of course. All of it possible to reconstruct, should she so desire. Unlike...

Irene reached out a lace-covered hand to touch the key, on the desktop. One more chase; one more game. And only one—two—no, one more question, really, wasn't there, left for her to answer. For if her lovely Germaine, flushed and panting in Irene's big bed the night before, had said: Patat has them now; I gave them her this afternoon; the Londoners think she had them all along—and if Irene knew, because she knew herself and she knew her girl, that Germaine Beaumont of all people will have done no such thing—then there is no question about this: there were two packets, now, that could pass for Irene's photographs. A real packet and a false packet: and Germaine Patat would have one, while dear Germaine Beaumont would hold on to the other. Would plan to use it, in Amsterdam and Oslo, to keep Irene at heel. To bind her close. Of that much, Irene had no doubt at all.

She filled her mouth with hair-pins, and fastened back the false Marcelled curls. Dark, slicked-down hair arced back from her forehead, and pulled back at the base of her skull to the silk ribbon that secured the wig over her newly severe tresses. Earlier she had sat before her old mirror, her face suddenly exposed and angular and yet somehow faery-like, shorn of its customary framing waves, and she had allowed herself to bring fingers up and touch. Cheek; lips. What will Germaine, she thought now, and then gave her head a little shake, fastening the false hair behind her with a scarlet ribbon.
But then, no: she must think of Germaine, after all. Irene leant forward, towards the mirror, to stain her lips, thinking: a false packet and a true one. Here, then, was the question: if Irene (and she smiled a little, to suppose such a thing) were a girl like Germaine. And if she were playing the game Germaine was playing, with a woman like Irene. How far ahead would she anticipate? And how well did she know Irene? If everything went to plan, of course, she'd have the opportunity to check the goods. But if it didn't…

She stood, and straightened her breeches in the mirror. Gave an extra little tug to the bows fastening them at her knees, and slipped into timber-heeled red morocco pumps. Fastened the buckles.

It was a stimulating question, she thought, as she bent to extinguish the light, and palm the key to the Fleurs du Mal room for the final time. On her last night in Paris, it would be pleasing to choose correctly on the first try.

Thursday, September 1st, 1921
10pm

Stationed to the side of the grand stairs at the entrance to the ballroom John tugged on the collar of his oversized black coat and wiped sweat from the back of his neck. Only ten and he was already catching himself thinking *slip out to the terrace and take it off just for a few minutes and before they all start arriving*; but he couldn't, of course. And glancing to his left, catching Sherlock's eye, he couldn't even keep wanting to. Sherlock gave him a quick head-to-toe and he nodded, just slightly. More than—the last few days. John wanted to take his hand. Instead gave him a little smile to get one in return; the corner of Sherlock's mouth dragged up. John's heart eased, a tiny fraction.

It was, still, damnably hot.

Claire Boas bustled by, also in black: full Jacobean regalia, complete with stomacher and acres of petticoats, and a lace collar which, along with her heavily grease-painted white face, emphasised the dark ligature marks at her throat. She glared at them, cautioning, before sweeping on. She must be just as warm as he was, mustn't she. Sherlock made an impatient noise beside him as she smiled at a newcomer in ragged tails, holding a knife.

'Murder for profit,' Sherlock murmured, glaring at the man with the knife. 'Utilitarian. Not a crime of passion at all.'

John did take his hand, then. Sherlock startled at the touch. Claudine was across the way, standing by the open French doors to the terrace with a drink in her hand, Amazonian in iridescent green from neck to toes. She, too, must be warm, John thought: the two long red plaits of her wig, threaded with gold, hung over her shoulders almost to her knees; her sleeves alone seemed composed of enough fabric to clothe several school-age children. And all the gold, John thought, hanging about her waist and her hips, and settled on her crowned head. Though it no doubt wasn't gold, not really. Even so, it looked heavy. Oppressive. She, however, seemed not to mind, waving her red-stained hand as she chatted to Hélène Picard, who was done up in an uncharacteristically airy-looking Greek garment, white decorated in geometric blue. John nodded towards them both, and squeezed Sherlock's hand, which twitched in his. Sherlock cleared his throat.

'I'm aware,' he said. But his tone had softened. They weren't, after all, standing absurdly by this entryway for the likes of Madame Jouvenel and Claire Boas, even if they had had to solicit Claire Boas's grudging cooperation.

'That's not one of Patat's, that Claudine is wearing?' John said. Sherlock shook his head.
'Germaine P. doesn't do copies, apparently,' he said. He sounded as if he were, half-ironically, mimicking someone else's intonation; then he dropped it, and made a sour face. 'She likes to work from her own artistic vision. Inspiration, yes; imitation, no. Or so Claudine said, this afternoon.'

John squeezed Sherlock's hand again before letting it go. Sherlock and Claudine had spent most of that afternoon together, after Sherlock and John had met with Claire Boas. John had no notion what they'd talked about. After the revelations of three nights before, and the abstracted withdrawals of the days since, he would have left them alone of his own volition, but in the event Sherlock had sent him to a local costumer's with orders to bring back something for the two of them for that evening. And so John had set off, in the crisp sunny late-morning of a Paris still fresh-washed by the late storm, with a sense of purpose out of all proportion to the task before him. He had felt, he supposed, like a man after an interminable carriage ride, who has finally got his feet upon the solid street once again: this, at least, he could do for Sherlock. In this, at least, he could feel firmly himself, solidly at ease in the world as he performed each little everyday action: consulting the map; traveling at a brisk walk; twisting the old doorknob on the green door off Avenue Ledru-Rollin, with Sherlock's measurements and his own tucked neatly into his trouser-pocket. It all felt reassuringly London, reassuringly solid: dogsbodying for Sherlock's latest case, while Sherlock was off consulting with his client.

Which was why, John had thought, making his slow way back to the hotel two hours later in the mid-day heat, he felt quite so wilted at the pieces he'd succeeded in securing. He supposed he ought to have expected the selection would be slim on the day of such a celebrated season-opener. Sherlock, he'd told himself, could hardly have done better; and what with everything that had happened… Well, John had thought, giving a little hitch so that the weight of the costumes shifted higher on his shoulder. Well. As for himself, it was all fine. Hamlet, or whomever: a black sixteenth-century get-up, with black hose and black slops, black doublet and even black buckled shoes, the only departure from monochromatism being the detachable white lace ruff. Walking back towards the hotel down a wide, sun-soaked avenue, John had felt: all of that would do. But for Sherlock—he had winced, in the shop; he hadn't been able to help it. The proprietor had seen it, and she had puffed up her chest and let loose a rapid volley of indignant French, and John had done his best to smooth his face back into a conciliatory expression. Yes, he had told her, though he'd never at any point in their interaction been quite sure how much English she had at her command: yes, he knew he ought to have planned better. Yes, he understood his friend was very tall. He had only wished, he explained, because of the nature of the fête to which they were invited—but yes, of course, the pink-and-white Harlequin would do nicely. He understood, he had said, getting out Sherlock's money clip, that he was lucky to get anything at all.

Now, in Claire Boas's rapidly-filling ballroom, a flurry of murmurs and scattered applause broke out near the entryway; John and Sherlock turned to look. It appeared the Jouvenels had arrived: she in beaded and diaphanous white, with a golden snake about her upper arm and another about her ankle; and he in rough brown, belted at the waist and with a stuffed lamb under one arm. Claire Boas swept over so that the three of them could kiss one another's cheeks and smile falsely all around. Ex-wife and ex-husband gestured in an overly-amused way to the twinned wounds circling their throats—hers a mottled-dark circle of bruising, his a bright ring dripping with blood—while Bertrand, in a toga and crowned rather unconvincingly with laurel leaves, skulked behind his stepmother. His reticence, however, proved useless: Claire Boas, spotting him, and careless of staining her hands or her clothes on the smears of red daubed across his back, half-lifted him into a bearish off-centre hug. John and Sherlock were too far away to hear the boy's squawking. Beside John, Sherlock tutted.

'Conspiracy,' he muttered, 'to assassination. Thirteen men. Hardly overcome by a sudden urge, were they.' He sounded genuinely annoyed, John thought; as Sherlock, in the general run of things, was so often wholeheartedly irked by trifles; the way he'd been that afternoon, on seeing John. It was—had been—perversely reassuring.
And so John'd kept it going as long as he could: when he had finally made it back to the hotel, deflated, soaked in sweat and with the hooks of the two garment bags still digging into his shoulder, he'd swung his own off first and opened it and felt Sherlock's attention—snap up. Onto him. John had explained; Sherlock's chin had tucked and his eyebrows had drawn together. *Hamlet?*, he had demanded, incredulous; John had nodded. *Hamlet*, Sherlock had repeated, and his tone had been one of such incredulity that it had hardly been answerable; his eyebrows raised now and his shoulders bearing straight towards John as they always did when he was about to elaborate to John, for John's enlightenment, on the extent of John's latest mental inadequacy. John had generally to gird himself against that look; back in Baker Street he'd sometimes reacted to it by simply turning around and walking into another room. And yet, standing there in their yellow-and-white-and-rattan hotel suite, he had at last been able to—he took a breath. He'd felt himself *sagging* into it—though that was dangerous too; and so he had allowed himself, in his gut and his shoulders, only the smallest and most tentative melting towards a Sherlock who was not at that moment, John was almost positive, thinking about Daniel MacIntyre at all.

'Hamlet,' John had repeated, to draw the moment out. Sherlock had given an exasperated little cluck.

'That's—he's the *least* appropriate character in probably—all of English letters for a *crimes of passion* theme. Did you not comprehend the—'

'There wasn't much left,' John said, 'in the shop.'

Sherlock had pursed his lips, spinsterish; then frowned and turned away to fling open his trunk.

'More like,' came his voice, as he rummaged through his things, 'A paralysis of passion. And crimes of—obligation, and mistaken identity, and,' flinging shirts to the floor, and trousers, 'matter-of-fact practical expediency, and—'

And he'd emerged, drawing from the very bottom of the trunk a long, dark Russian-style cloak, hooded and densely woven. John, startled, had brushed drops of sweat from his forehead and the back of his neck. But then, it should be no surprise that Sherlock had planned for weather. John would have welcomed such a cloak, wouldn't he, when he'd been standing outside Irene Adler's rooms all night in the downpour. Apparently Sherlock welcomed one now.

'Pozdnyshev,' Sherlock had said, his voice for the moment solid; pleased with his own cleverness. And though John had spluttered and told him 'The costume is—is *Elizabethan*, Holmes, you're three hundred years too late,' he had been more than in earnest when he'd smiled, and laughed. And Sherlock had waved a hand, dismissive, and said, 'You needn't wear it; just a false beard, and a dagger, and a dark suit of clothes; anyway the cloak will cover you, more or less.'

'Oh, more or less,' John had parroted. Almost, for a moment, it had been as if the last week had never happened. The next minute the tentative, searching quality had been back in Sherlock's posture and his expression; but John had held fast to the memory of that moment; and had taken the oilskin in good grace.

So now here he was: sweltering, again, scrunching up his face to ease the itching of the adhesive gum on the false beard Sherlock had produced for him, and dragging the toe of his left shoe up the back of his right calf as trickles of sweat itched the wool of his trousers against his legs. And here—here was another commotion near the door, marking the entrance of another little group of revellers. They jostled, and laughed, and spilled down the stairs before the manservant had the chance to get through their names: girls in bright colours with scarlet gashes on their limbs; centurions with mutilated faces. Towards the back of the group, John saw, were the Carcos: he, pallid of face and dark of eye, in a long black garment almost like a priest's cassock; and she, wound 'round with lacy strips of white, her under-eyes dark-hollowed and her long black hair loose down her back.
Germaine Patat, too, came in with them, ducking behind Madame Carco in a businesslike way to adjust some detail of that lady's gown which was not to its creator's liking. Patat herself, it appeared, was draped in many-hued diaphanous veils: glowing peach and rosy pink, tucked artfully about her to suggest a lack of structure only accidentally flattering; the whole thing overlaid with beads that echoed the shine-bright gold of her hair. She patted Madame Carco on the hip to signal her release; the wife took her husband's arm, and steered him down the stairs.

The Carcos thus dispatched into the fray, Germaine Patat stood on the top step, surveying the crowd. John, glancing between her and the fête-goers below, mingling by the bar and starting to trickle onto the dance floor, was able to connect her approving little nod with the sight of Colette's gown (its wearer currently foxtrotting with her step-son). And he caught, too, the mask of girlishness that sprang over Germaine Patat's face as she spied Henry Jouvenel, off to one side. It was as if she shed ten years in a single instant—years, John felt, with a rising sense of unease, that had suited her; years which one never doubted she had put to good effect. Gazing up, perspiring in his cloak and his beard, John thought about that mask. He thought, shifting his weight, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck—

But Sherlock's fingers fumbled at John's shoulder, and after a moment of indignant confusion: there. Just behind Patat, who was now skipping down the steps in to meet Henry Jouvenel coming forward: Germaine Beaumont, with her hair down and her eyes black-ringed, in black Grecian drapery cut with a long, dark-red train. John could almost have laughed: dowdy, buttoned-up Germaine. Sherlock murmured, as if to himself, though close enough that John could hear: 'The influence of her employer, no doubt.' John snorted.

'Madame Jouvenel is a difficult woman to gainsay,' he agreed. 'Though why she's developed this mania for making a vixen out of Germaine Beaumont, of all people…'

He half-expected some explanation, but Sherlock, at John's back, was silent. When John turned his head to look back at him he was gazing out over the heads of the dancers; and had brought the tip of his ridiculous mocked-up bow to the seam of his lips. Was tapping it there, considering. John snatched his lace-covered wrist, squeezed; Sherlock started and his gaze shifted back to John. He turned his hand, slowly, as if waking from a doze, to squeeze back.

John couldn't help feeling… oh. Guilty, of course. Grateful. One did; there was no avoiding it. But Germaine's arrival had been his and Sherlock's cue to separate. The three of them were meant to be co-conspirators, after all; they had agreed that Germaine Beaumont was to look after Madame Jouvenel ('A novelty,' Germaine had said, drily) on the theory that Irene Adler was likely to approach the long-time object of her obsession. Everyone present had known, but had not said, that in all probability Adler was even more likely to approach Germaine herself; and when Germaine had left them Sherlock had stated as established fact that Germaine Beaumont would never hand over the real photographs to Patat. Which meant it was as important to keep track of Germaine Beaumont and Irene Adler as it was to track Germaine Patat and (when he arrived) Charles Humbert; and so John squared his shoulders and peeled off to follow Germaine Beaumont's rather halting and apologetic progress through the crowd; and did not look back at Sherlock, standing no doubt with that far-away look back in his eyes, in pink and white satin at the top of the stairs.

John trailed Germaine as she left the stairs behind and skirted the dance floor, making her way towards the terrace, where (John now saw) Madame Jouvenel stood laughing with a pair of middle-aged women, in the low sashed collars and billowing sleeves of the seventeenth century, who drank their wine from some kind of ostentatious old-fashioned goblets. Germaine, however, had a difficult time reaching her: she stopped once to accept a cocktail from a passing attendant, and four times, decreasingly flustered and increasingly impatient, to apologise to dancers who had stepped on her train. Watching this unfold, John thought that Sherlock had probably been right: the drama of such a
costume was the kind of thing Madame Jouvenel would carry off to great effect, and if she could do it she seemed to think others ought to as well. An old anatomy professor of John's had often quipped that those who aimed to imitate their parents, grew up to resemble them; and that those who aimed to avoid emulating their parents at all costs, grew up to resemble them as well. John had thought about that often, from the perspective of the child: himself, and Mark, and Harry. He supposed that before now he had never really thought about it from the point of view of the parent. Or anyway, the parent-figure. Madame Jouvenel's manner of faux-parenting was to attempt to remake Germaine forcibly in her own image. John's had certainly been no better.

Just short of the terrace, as John was gaining on her, Germaine was waylaid and then coaxed into animated conversation by a Judith, in Caravaggio colours, complete with evening-bag made to resemble the head of Holofernes. (Generous breasts; of a height with Germaine: definitely not Irene Adler.) John, so as not to interrupt them, leant against a pillar from whence he could see Germaine and also Sherlock, who was still stationed near the stairs. As the Judith gestured wildly with her hands and Germaine nodded awkwardly, Sherlock scratched his nose; his shoulders were squared and his feet firmly planted. He had, still, that lonely, far-away look on his face.

But then, thought John: it was wrong to say to himself, still. It had been, God. Less than a week. That look would be there, he supposed, for some time.

In the makeshift orchestra pit in the corner, a trombone slid into a low resolving wail. The Macheath who had annoyed Sherlock earlier, when they'd seen Claire Boas greeting him, dipped a Lucrezia Borgia so dramatically that her long hair whipped between Germaine and Judith; Judith took a step back, startled. Then she laughed, in recognition; and as the piece dissolved into a smattering of cymbal-brushes she leant forward. Put out her hands and Lucrezia, back on her feet and flushed, ignored her partner's applause to take both Judith's hands in hers. They kissed cheeks, then Judith turned to Germaine. Introductions, no doubt. Lucrezia put her little hands rapturously together and then gestured towards the falls of Germaine's dress. Germaine in turn gestured to Lucrezia's hair, and Lucrezia, laughing, pulled on it near the root: not a wig. Exclamations all around. Germaine's posture took on the settled quality of a person no longer attempting to escape a social interaction.

John let his gaze wander. Further along the periphery of the dance floor, Hélène Picard stood listening, rapt, while Francis Carco talked. No sign, at the moment, of Claudine; but then John supposed the Humberts hadn't even arrived: Claudine and Hélène wouldn't need to closet themselves in the bedroom for some time. By one of the myriad French doors out to the terrace Germaine Patat, sparkling rosily on the arm of Henry Jouvenel, was apparently demonstrating a feature of her gown to a petite, mid-30s woman in a long green chinoiserie-print gown, with a high, split collar. And who was she meant to be, John wondered. Some famous Chinese woman murderer? A well-known Chinese victim? Was it meant to be some kind of broader political statement? John stared. He felt vaguely that he'd forgot every fact or incident he'd ever known, to do with China; and in addition, his chin itched. Germaine Patat, far from appearing to suffer any of these irritations, was nodding at the woman. She was turning sideways now, to show the woman something to do with the concealed waistband of her costume. Perhaps, John thought, the woman had simply forgot that she was meant to come in fancy dress. Or perhaps it was something clever. Some—some joke, perhaps, at the expense of the very idea of 'crimes of passion'; something like Sherlock had come up with when John had brought him back a Harlequin costume and he had said—

What had his word been? John couldn't exactly recall. Abstract? Artistic? No: notional. That was it. For after all John's agonising over the illogic and the indignity of it, and after all his own palaver about John's costume, Sherlock had gone out of his way to make his own costume even more ridiculous. John hadn't known whether to be relieved or strangely worried. He had recoiled, true, when John had first shown him the thing; and his long fingers had covered his stomach, as if he felt ill; but then he had nodded, resolute. Then he had turned; strode to the bed with a letter-opener from
the secretaire, and in one smooth stroke punctured the cotton pillow so that down exploded out all around him. John, wrong-footed, had said, *Sherlock*, and what—, but Sherlock had been looking distractedly about the room. 'Stiff,' he had muttered, 'something stiff'; and then, louder, and more emphatic, 'Something *stiff!*' and so John, without thinking, had gone to his own trunk, untied Daniel's parcel, and extracted the two cardboard sheets that Daniel had used to protect the drawings he'd given him. The next moment he'd thought, what have I done, why on earth would I, how could I; but after a moment's pale pause Sherlock had just nodded; had taken them, without comment. And so John had stood there watching as Sherlock had fashioned the sheets into crude wings; had pasted the down feathers from the pillows to the charcoal-smudged cardboard, had purloined some paperclips from the drawer of the secretaire, and re-bent them in such a way as to hinge the wings together. He remembered saying—what? *I'm sorry to be slow*, was it? as he had watched Sherlock scavenging once more in his trunk, and: *but what are you doing?*. But Sherlock hadn't answered. He had rummaged, and rooted, and then, a minute later, had straightened up, a thin, vaguely menacing length of wire in his hand. The wings, now strapped to his back with criss-crossed braces, had shivered, and fallen still. 'It's a notional interpretation of the theme,' he had said, looking rather at the wire than at John; and then clamped his mouth shut, chin up, shoulders set. Ten minutes later, back in his street clothes, he'd left for a walk. John, alone in the hotel room, had thought about the wings and the wire and crimes of passion and notional interpretation of the theme, and had realised: *Cupid*. Cupid, the bringer of passion, without whom—and then John had sat on the edge of the bed and breathed into his own hands for long minutes; an hour, perhaps; perhaps longer; getting to his feet again only when he had heard the outer door opening and closing, and then the inner door. And then Sherlock had come in, carrying the smallish tree branch he had located to serve as the limbs of his bow.

Notional, John thought, now, in Claire Boas's ballroom, scratching at his cheek through the beard. Notional: that was it. He swallowed the thin sourness at the back of his throat. But across from him, the woman in the Chinese gown was hopping up and down. She was hopping up and down and was—was actually clapping her hands, he saw, like a child; as Germaine Patat flipped down a pocket, previously concealed: designed, apparently, to lie flat against the ribcage of the wearer so as not to disrupt the fluttering, flowing lines of the gown. Germaine Patat withdrew a lipstick with the mien of a conjuror pulling a rabbit from his hat. *She's just landed a commission*, John thought. And indeed, the woman had shifted a hip closer to Germaine; had ducked her head to speak to her with a new intensity, and Germaine's face, as she nodded along, had dropped its unsettling mask of girlishness. She nodded, then nodded harder, and then flipped the pocket down again to draw out a slight bundle, tied with string.

John glanced up to Sherlock; caught his eye and nodded towards Germaine Patat. Sherlock raised an eyebrow, and with his bow gestured in turn towards Germaine Beaumont—whom John realised, with a rush, he had momentarily forgot; and who, he was relieved to see, was still just there, buffeted by the terrace breeze, in conversation with her Judith and Lucrezia. Though her posture had taken on a certain restlessness, again; and she was craning her head to look out over the sea of dancers. Whether she searched for Madame Jouvenel or Irene Adler, John had no way of knowing. But of course, he thought: he had been wrong to get distracted. Sherlock was more than capable of keeping up his end. And there was no reason, he supposed, to stick closer to Germaine Patat than he was doing, when the Humberts had not yet arrived and Sherlock would spring into action when they did. So John nodded up at Sherlock; gave him a little smile; and Sherlock inclined his head back at John, dipping just enough so that the wings on his back bobbed, a bit. As he straightened his neck, his gaze caught, for just a moment, before returning to the door. What was it, John wondered, and looked—that Macheath again—Henry Jouvenel—and there, Claudine had reappeared by Hélène's side. The two women were now listening together as Francis Carco, predictably, continued to talk. John glanced back; Sherlock's face, like his cousin's, had taken on a certain glazed immobility.

But then—what was that, John thought? That... bristling, that pricking-up, that snapping into place.
of Sherlock's neck and his heels? It wasn't the Humberts; nobody now entering the ballroom could remotely be taken for Charles Humbert. And surely that aged foursome in Napoleonic dress were of no interest to them. It had to be, then—it had to be, John thought, that slim youth, slipping in towards the back of the latest group of newcomers, done up in eighteenth-century finery of scarlet and gold. Speaking of others, John thought, whose costumes had to be over-warm. But he—she didn't look overheated. For—he'd have taken her for a boy if not for Sherlock's reaction, but surely it had to be she. And indeed, now she had spotted Sherlock. Now she was approaching him. Now she had taken his hand, her hip cocked, jaunty. And now—now she leant up, speaking into Sherlock's ear. John cringed hot with shame that chased a jealousy so sharp it might have cut his throat when he swallowed it down. And Sherlock, pink-flushed from his hairline all the way down to his rose-coloured collar.

The formidable Irene Adler was still smiling when she turned from Sherlock to swagger away from the stairs. John breathed, and watched her. Eighteenth-century adventurer was hardly the guise John was expecting to see her adopt, but he had to admit that she wore it well: her dark hair Marcellled into waves down her back, tied with a velvet ribbon to match her waistcoat and her long, wide-sleeved jacket. Her calves in gold hose would be the envy of any youth—and were admired, John saw, by all the youths whom she passed; for though she was hardly the most beautiful nor the most richly-attired woman present there was no denying she drew eyes as she moved through the room. Sherlock, when John glanced up, was watching her still; though Germaine Beaumont and Irene were meant to be John's responsibility and the Humberts could arrive at any moment. John closed his eyes; opened them; Sherlock, he knew, was far from alone. And she gave back their interest, didn't she. John watched her. He watched her for some time. He watched her wink, and meet eyes; watched her lay on hands and let them linger. Sherlock wasn't—John swallowed. Sherlock wasn't the only one who flushed, when she touched them.

Don't be absurd, no doubt; Oh, I couldn't; but Irene met her eyes and held them, and didn't answer Germaine's laugh with so much as a lifted corner of her

And then he jumped: a hand on his arm. Sherlock.

'What!' John said, then took a breath. 'Sorry, I—something happen? You want—Germaine Beaumont's just—' and he gestured to the periphery of the dance floor, where Germaine had spotted Irene and had, at last, extricated herself from the conversation of her Judith and Lucrezia.

Sherlock raised his eyebrows. 'So I see,' he said, but he left his hand resting lightly on John's upper arm, watching with John as Irene Adler sidled up to Germaine and made her, in courtly fashion, a low bow; and staid, officious Germaine Beaumont gave every sign of giggling. Sherlock's fingertips blundered across John's back, where he couldn't feel them, which flooded John, suddenly and irrationally, with a kind of desperate loneliness, until they fetched up again at the nape of his neck. They rubbed there. Rubbed. Self-consciously Germaine offered her hand to Irene. Lingeringly Irene kissed it; then pulled a blushing Germaine into the crush on the dance floor. John realised he was clenching his hands again; with an effort he unclenched them.

'Sorry,' John said. 'Sorry, I was. Distracted.'

'That's all right,' Sherlock said.

It's not, John wanted to say, but the least he could in all decency do was to remain silent. He managed that, and with Sherlock's fingers still at his nape watched as Irene pulled Germaine into a tango clinch: arms outstretched, Germaine's train held aloft in her right hand. Germaine laughed, surprised. Her shoulders curled down. Don't be absurd, no doubt; Oh, I couldn't; but Irene met her eyes and held them, and didn't answer Germaine's laugh with so much as a lifted corner of her
mouth. It was mesmerising: that provocative rigidity to her spine. That aggressive lift to her chin. There was a joke about it, John thought; but he wasn't sure quite where the thing was located; wasn't sure who was laughing, and at whose expense. Perhaps Germaine shared his uncertainty; in any case, the hunched off-kilter laughter soon faded out of her. She squared her back, left hand to Irene's little shoulder; and turned her face to her raised right hand, clasped in Irene's left.

And then the little orchestra moaned its way into the body of the piece, and they were off. And suddenly, as Irene with just a press of fingertips to Germaine's back placed her here; slid her there; dipped and righted her on a long shimmering high note held long, it no longer seemed remotely absurd that she, in her gold and her scarlet, was a full head shorter than Germaine; or that quotidian, practical Germaine Beaumont had come to the fête clothed in the cursed blood of antiquity. Irene moved her hand as she stepped back and then Germaine was leaning into her, right thigh between hers, left toe trailing behind her in a long slowing slide. I'd not have thought it of Germaine, John thought, but then they pivoted, and it was clear from Germaine's face that she'd not have thought it of herself. Formidable, John thought, again. Sherlock's flushed face. But he found that some of the sting of it had been replaced by—what? He'd forgot to glance at Sherlock for minutes, now. When he did, Sherlock wasn't even watching Irene. He was looking the other direction, up towards the entrance, where a pale, stocky middle-aged man in an absurdly oversized turban, long blue-black beard and elaborate Oriental robes in orange and blue, was just making his way inside. On his arm was a slight woman, some years his junior, in a feather headdress with an orange embroidered jacket made to match his robes.

'Humbert,' Sherlock murmured in John's ear; and John, wetting his lips and looking, with an odd disorientation, back to the dance floor, saw Germaine's head turned the same direction: gazing up at Charles Humbert's progress into the throng. He saw, too, Irene's sleight of hand: how, pivoting Germaine towards another dip, she then, in the moment of Germaine's distraction, reached her hand along her hip; beneath the red fall of her dress. John reached up for Sherlock's wrist, without taking his eyes from the two women. Irene, stepping to the side and spinning Germaine with her right hand, darted her left one inside the open left front of her jacket. When it reappeared, to clasp once again Germaine's right, it was empty. Apparently, Irene and Sherlock had been of one mind on the subject of Germaine Beaumont's attachment to the photographs. John squeezed the thought to the back of his throat, and swallowed.

'She'll realise,' he said to Sherlock, instead. 'Before much time has gone by, Mademoiselle Beaumont will notice they're gone. It's so early yet.'

'Mmm,' Sherlock agreed. Low purr in his ear; John shut his eyes. When he opened them again, Germaine's upper body was leant into Irene, with Irene's arm tight around her ribcage, dragging her forward—and as if she'd been born to it, Germaine Beaumont let herself be pulled. Their faces too close together for either to focus on the other, their gazes appeared nonetheless locked. Christ. 'I expect,' Sherlock said, in his ear, 'that once the dance is over I—Miss Adler will keep Mademoiselle Beaumont at arm's length.'

John's hand tightened involuntarily around Sherlock's wrist. Sherlock put his other hand on John's shoulder, then withdrew them both.

'I'll put Claudine and Hélène on the alert,' Sherlock said. His voice was still low; still close; John could feel his breath though they were no longer touching. John nodded.

'I'll keep an eye on the photographs,' he told him.

'And I on the Humberts,' Sherlock said. John felt the fleeting pressure of a hand to the small of his back as Sherlock pulled away. He breathed through gratitude—shame—grief—and then Sherlock
was gone and it—eased. Irene dipped Germaine once again as the orchestra brought the tango to a sharp, piquant finish; and John stood alone on the edge of the dance floor. Looking on.

The dancing couples broke apart, no longer united by the rhythm of the music. There was scattered applause, and awkward, half-breathless smiles as women remembered to reach up and smooth their hair; reach down and adjust their costumes. A violinist was tuning his instrument, and the rest of the musicians were stretching their hips, their shoulders; a man to John's left bent his head to murmur to his partner, who nodded, and the couple moved off the dance floor towards the angled bar on the other side of the room. Irene Adler still held Germaine Beaumont's hand, and without taking her eyes off Germaine's face was making her another deep, unsmiling, yet cheeky bow. There was something faintly—what? Resigned, was it? Sad? Something, anyway, about the manner in which Germaine was smiling back down at her. But then, John thought, catching a glimpse of Claudine and Hélène threading their way through mingling party guests: so much appeared that way to him, just now.

He shook himself. Squared his shoulders. He was, as Sherlock would say—as even Lestrade would say, if he were here and apprised of the situation—an unreliable witness. But he was the best they had at the moment; so he would have to be enough.

So. He would watch, and he would learn. And he would be—well. Surprised, apparently; since given Sherlock's prediction about the dancers, John hadn't expected that it would be Germaine who first broke away. She had apparently spotted someone over Irene's left shoulder. A friend, or—who knew? He followed her gaze, and: just there, in the little alcove of divans nestled just inside the near end of the terrace. An elderly woman with a shock of white-grey curls, a real, living parrot on her shoulder, and what looked to be a genuine peg leg, standing in the centre of a little circle of admirers, and—but was that? John squinted at the woman, who certainly looked like—but—surely not, after all, since the pirate woman was now lifting her chin, her gaze alight with recognition, and raising her hand back to Germaine Beaumont, as Germaine raised hers to the woman. After which Germaine bent to murmur in Irene's ear, smiling, her hand on Irene's shoulder; and Irene started. Glanced once, quick, over her shoulder at the elderly pirate; and when that woman saw Irene her face, at once, closed like a fist.

Irene turned back to Germaine and said a few words. Squeezed her upper arm, and Germaine, deflating for just a moment, squeezed Irene's hand; and then Germaine made her way through the dancers, hailed as she came by the pirate queen. John thought the fawning circle about the woman parted with some reluctance to admit Germaine; who, even as the woman enthusiastically embraced her, had regained her usual stiff uprightness. The old woman was plainly someone of consequence, then, even if she weren't? How on earth, John thought, caught for a moment by the intrigue of it, as the pirate, with one hand still on Germaine's back, made introductions around the circle. A connection through Madame Jouvenel, possibly; or possibly even Claudine. Or—Claudine's mother had composed, hadn't she? Had she done so for the stage? He supposed there were any number of possibilities, however out of place Germaine looked encircled in the divine arm. If Sherlock were still next to him, of course, he would no doubt deduce the connection. He had probably deduced it days before. But if Sherlock were still next to him... the thought seemed to draw John away from the other fête-goers. As if they dimmed. Faded, all around him.

He dragged a hand through the sweat at his nape. His chest hurt. He recalled himself.

It didn't matter about Germaine Beaumont and her pirate acquaintance. What mattered for John's purposes was keeping an eye on Irene Adler—and there, he saw with relief: in a little niche by the wall that angled back towards the bar: there she stood, holding a cocktail, chatting to Germaine Patat. Germaine, who was apparently not yet closeted with Charles Humbert in the secret niche off the bedroom (the investor, then, had not yet arrived), was yet again leaning forward, turning to and fro, obviously in full saleswoman mode to the very well-turned-out Georgian androgyne before her.
They won't be able to tear Patat away, John thought, from all these potential clients, long enough to ensnare anyone. And how, in any case, did they both look so untroubled by the heat? Irene was reaching out now, to lift this veil and that from Germaine's hips and her waist. She tilted her head to one side, and said something that had Germaine nodding and nodding before Irene had even finished moving her mouth.

But then, John thought: if Germaine Patat were here, then Sherlock must also be close by. He glanced about. There was Charles Humbert in his garish robes, accepting a drink from a passing tray; and there Madame Jouvenel in a waltz with Bertrand, her asps glinting in the light from the chandeliers, his laurels slipping sideways over his ear. There came the Macheath, from earlier, looking already a bit green, and heading at a brisk clip towards the corridor with the WCs, which led towards the bedrooms. No Sherlock, however. Back near the bar, Irene had a hand on the small of Germaine Patat's back, and seemed to be pivoting her this way and that in a little twisting motion, with a critical eye on the movement of the veils; Germaine laughed, and gestured towards the dance floor, and Irene made her a convincingly pleased little bow. They walked just in front of John, on their way across the room: Germaine holding Irene's hand, Irene letting herself be led. In the wake of bodies closing behind them: no Sherlock. He moved himself a few yards along the wall of open French doors, towards the dance floor, as Germaine Patat assumed waltz position, and Irene led them off. Irene spun her; Germaine floated under her arm, and rejoined her as they turned. Something stirred, at the back of John's mind. Irene pivoted Germaine sedately; held her decorously. They danced well; though there was nothing like the frisson there had been, when Irene had tangoed with Germaine Beaumont.

John looked around again for Sherlock. The room was getting genuinely crowded, now. He was grateful for the breeze from the terrace at his back, but facing into the crush of bodies the air was still close and hot. Each breath, he felt, contained not quite enough air. There was Henry Jouvenel, laughing uproariously at something said by the girl next to him, who was holding his stuffed lamb. She was got up convincingly as Waterhouse's Lady of Shalott. Germaine Beaumont, John saw, had been relinquished by the celebrated pirate queen, and was now dancing forebearingly with a very young girl, a child still really: long ginger hair in a plait down her back, fleur de lis tunic belted across, with a dagger in a scabbard at her hip. It occurred to John that that was something of a notional take on the theme, as well. Passion, he thought; passion—and notional—and passion—and was overwhelmed by a wave of dizziness.

He put out his hand: marble. Cool in the humid heat. He closed his eyes. His head swam, the itching of his false beard for a moment almost unbearable. It was only the closeness of the room, he knew; the heat; the press of bodies in this infernal heat... He breathed deeply. Let the music and the laughter and the raised voices blur together along the back of his skull. He was all right. All right. And then Sherlock—no. A hand came down, heavy on his shoulder; but looking up he saw it was attached not to Sherlock, but to Claudine. Touching his back; a look of concern on her face. Offering him—what? Mercifully, a glass of water.

'You're,' he said, and coughed. Dry-throated. Managed, 'Why aren't you—'

'Drink,' she told him. He nodded, and drained the little cup. She said, 'That's it. You—comment dit-on? Swayed. I thought you would faint.'

'It's this idiotic beard.' John grimaced, gesturing to it. 'And all the people.'

Claudine clucked, and handed him her glass of punch. It was still cool, he found. Still mostly full.

'And also the cloak of my cousin,' she said. 'What was he thinking, to make you wear such a thing. You should take them off.'
'Where is he?' said John. 'And aren't you meant to be installed in Claire Boas's bedroom? And isn't Germaine Patat—' But he looked out at the dance floor, where neither Germaine Patat nor Irene Adler were anywhere to be seen. 'Hell,' he said, hand out again to steady himself on the pillar, but Claudine shook her head.

'It's all right,' she said. 'Sherlock did not want to begin until les Perrins arrived. In case everything progressed too quickly, between Humbert and Germaine Patat. He sent me to fetch her, just now; which is how I noticed you were in distress.'

'So he's here, then? This Perrin?'

She gestured towards the entrance, where a middle-aged man in a long black wig, close-fitting white stockings, a great black seventeenth-century hat with a white feather, and a blue-and-gold brocade riding habit, was slowly processing down the stairs. As he neared the bottom, Claire Boas swanned over; when he extended his hand she, rather than clasping it, dipped into a low obeisance and kissed his ring, at which he appeared so pleasantly startled that he burst into laughter, before helping her up. He kissed her cheek and then, turning aside, discreetly smoothed his pencil moustache into place before moving into the crush.

'He is here,' Claudine confirmed. 'We were informed early, as Henry Jouvenel was outside smoking, and saw him arrive. And the lovely Patat has been sent along. See there! She is having great success, it seems, with Monsieur Humbert.'

It was true, John saw: over by the bar Germaine Patat had Charles Humbert backed against a pillar, one hand on his velvet-clad arm, her head thrown back in laughter. When she righted herself he spoke to her again, angling one shoulder forward and moving his elbow as if to jostle her, meaningfully, in the ribs; but before he could manage it she slid her hand from his arm, stepped back, and began to move before him in a kind of sinuous dance. She writhed; she twirled. She snaked a hand to her hip, and when she drew it back a peach-coloured length of gauze came away from her garment, stripping itself from her in a spiral up her bodice and down her skirt, to come fully away in her hand.

'She didn't show that to the woman in green,' John said. 'Or to Irene Adler, either. All she showed them was the pocket.'

'Our Germaine is a woman who knows her audience,' said Claudine, complacently; as across the room Charles Humbert crowded towards Germaine, who draped the diaphanous rose-hued nothing around his neck. Obviously, thought John, Claudine was correct. He remembered them saying, in the their planning meeting at Germaine Beaumont's flat, that Humbert would need more inducement than youth and beauty to slip away for a tryst; yet John had no doubt, as Germaine Patat leant up to whisper in his ear, that she could persuade him of almost anything on the strength of that laugh; that dance; that scrap of flimsy silk. But—no. Whatever she was saying to him, his smile was faltering. Falling. The colour was draining from his face. Germaine was taking his hand, and he was following her.

'Now I must get away,' Claudine said, into John's ear. 'It's starting.'

'Wait,' John said, 'wait—'

But when she turned back, expectant, it had slipped away from him again. Something about—about Germaine Patat, waltzing with Irene Adler. He found he was still dizzy, a bit. Something about Sherlock, wasn't it? But it was no good. He couldn't put his finger on it, now.

'Irene Adler,' he said now, to Claudine. 'I'm meant to be—to be keeping an eye on her.'
Claudine, from her Amazonian height, looked out over the heads of the crowd. To the left; to the right; behind her. John did the same. Madame Humbert, at the edge of the dance floor, was doing her wifely duty, holding herself very upright in proper conversation with Félix Perrin. The Judith who had waylaid Germaine Beaumont and the Jack the Ripper whom John and Sherlock had seen earlier, were now in the midst of some very modern, kinetic dance to a syncopated rhythm; they were so good that the rest of the dancers had cleared a little space around them, and many had stopped to watch. Irene Adler was not among them.

Claudine, too, was shaking her head. 'I don't know,' she told him. 'The last I saw her, Bertrand Jouvenel was offering her a drink. She seemed amused. She all but patted his head. I can't imagine she took him up on it.'

John couldn't imagine so, either. Though he wondered, for a second, if Irene knew how much time young Bertrand spent in his stepmother's bed. But—she must, of course. The affair was a secret, but it was an open secret; and Irene had been spying on the comings and goings of the household for ages. She'd apparently kept an album of Colette's press clippings. So Sherlock said.

And then Claudine was gone, and John was left to scratch at his chin through the false hair.

All right, he thought. If he had lost Irene, then the person he really needed to find was Sherlock. And there was something, he thought—as he circled around the dance floor, on the edge of which Jack and Judith stood panting, grinning at one another, their hands on their knees catching their breaths—there was something he ought to tell him, wasn't there, if he could only pin it down. Something about the Germaines, something about the photographs. Irene had pickpocketed Germaine Beaumont; they'd both seen that and they'd both expected it. Germaine Beaumont was meant to have given Germaine Patat the photographs; but they hadn't supposed that she really had done. A woman like Germaine Beaumont, Sherlock had said, will never willingly let her main bargaining chip out of her possession; and Irene had plainly agreed.

And yet, John thought—now pushing past the little seating alcove where the woman who may or may not have been the most celebrated actress of the bygone century was still holding court; now catching sight of the Waterhouse Elaine listening with obvious impatience to the opinions of Francis Carco—and yet, Irene had had flirted with Germaine Patat. Danced with Germaine Patat. Asked after the cleverly-constructed pockets of Germaine Patat. Solicited, to every appearance, a clothing order from Germaine Patat, when Irene Adler herself would not be in Paris long enough to receive her new clothes or even be measured for them. Why would she do that, unless she thought Germaine Beaumont had given Patat the photographs? Or if she were trying to cover all the possibilities? Collect packets from both Germaines, and leave them with nothing? But in that case Madame Jouvenel—

John's toe caught on someone's heel; he stumbled, and put his hands out, and then turned to apologise both to the elderly centurion whose armour he had clutched at to break his fall, and also, profusely, to the Marie Antoinette whose kitten heel had apparently snapped when he had kicked her. She held up the shoe in one hand and clutched to his jacket sleeve with the other, berating him in rapid French as interested spectators crowded around and he tried simultaneously to get out his money clip, keep his hands together in prayer position, and glance around the crowd for Sherlock's pink and white, and Irene's gold and scarlet. A doomed endeavour, of course. The dress of the Marie was the size of a chaise longue, and he could hardly see around it, nor around her hair, which was piled a foot high and topped with a model frigate in full sail. In addition to which, she appeared to have no English whatsoever. With the hand that held her broken shoe she was gesturing to his person, in a way that took in everything from the beard to the old boots, with a look of extreme disgust on her powdered face.
'I'm—je suis so dreadfully sorry!' John told her, peeling off notes from his money clip and feeling the desperate rush of minutes, around him. Surely the evening's main drama was well underway, now, in Claire Boas's bedroom, and Irene Adler would be—where? How long since he'd lost sight of her? 'I do so apologise, dreadfully, dreadfully sorry,' he told the Marie Antoinette, whose flow of invective neither slowed nor altered. In the end he simply thrust the full contents of his money clip at her, wrenched his shoulder from her grip, and fled.

And now—how much time had he lost? The room seemed even more packed than before; he had to elbow his way through revellers streaming to and from the bar area, and under the oilskin his skin felt about to boil. He hardly wanted to blink: red and gold, he thought to himself, pink and white; but he could barely make out distinct colours, now, in all the press of moving bodies. A fall of long blonde hair brushed his wrist and he looked up, expecting Germaine Beaumont's Lucrezia Borgia, only to be confronted with a much different, and older, face, and the line of a wig askew. Pressed up against the wall near the bar, he thought he glimpsed for a moment the ghostly white gauze of Madame Carco's costume; but he blinked, and whoever it had been was gone.

Christ, John thought, pressing the back of his head against the wall, closing his eyes. It was no good. He would have to—he didn't know what. It was useless even attempting to look for someone in such a crush. But thinking it, opening his eyes again, he looked along the wall towards the corridor and caught a glimpse of—yes, he thought, and pushed his way, ruthless, through black and orange and red and purple towards the sliver of white wing he had made out against the far wall.

'Holmes,' he panted. 'I lost her.'

Sherlock had been stood, slightly angled, with his left shoulder propped against the wall that led down the corridor past the ladies' and gents' washrooms and on towards the inner parts of the house: among them Claire Boas's bedroom and the secret room where by this time Germaine Patat had, presumably, lured Charles Humbert. Which was, in retrospect, only the logical place for Sherlock to have stationed himself—but Sherlock was turning to him, now. He'd found him, now. There was no time for self-recrimination.

'Bloody hell,' Sherlock was saying, for some reason. He was looking at John's face.

'I lost her,' John repeated.

'Watson—take this off,' Sherlock said. He reached out so quickly that John thought, for a moment, that Sherlock was about to hit him; but he only gripped the corner of the false beard and began peeling it off John's skin; his other hand coming up to cup John's chin and hold him steady. For the second or two that it took for the glue to unstick under Sherlock's firm, steady touch, John himself was so taken aback that he could only stand there, stupidly. Letting himself be daubed at like a child with jam on its face. Trying to get enough oxygen.

'You,' he panted. 'You're the one who—I'm only wearing this because you insisted I—'

'You look about to faint,' Sherlock said. 'Take off the cloak, too; it doesn't matter, half the people here aren't—there.'

God. The breeze on his back. When he breathed in it was like every pore of him inhaled fresh clean-washed morning air. John rubbed his bare-sticky face. Dug his fingers in.

'Better?' said Sherlock. He'd stepped back, cloak over one arm. The other hand to John's shoulder.

'I lost her,' said John, for a third time, and Sherlock sighed.
'I gathered,' he said.

'I'm sorry,' said John. 'I only looked away for—it was so warm. Close, with people, and then—'

'Good lord, Watson,' Sherlock said. He steered John back against the wall where he'd found him, and pressed his shoulders firm to the cool wood. 'John,' he said. 'Hang whatever I said. You ought to have taken these things off, if they were compromising your ability to—well, stay upright, for one thing.'

He was looking at John; right at him; looming over him and staring down at him, fully attentive as he hadn't been since Monday—not to anything, let alone John. John breathed in; breathed out; looked back up at him. Let it soak in.

'It doesn't matter,' he said, at last. His voice low. Sherlock snorted; shook his head. But he released John's shoulders and dropped back to his former position, his head half-turned away from John so that they could talk while he kept an eye on the corridor.

'They're in there now, then?' John said, and Sherlock nodded. Looking away.

'Claudine and Hélène were in place fifteen minutes ago; Patat and Humbert about ten.'

'All right,' John said, and thought: ten minutes, with Claudine and Hélène listening. Germaine Patat certainly still had something in there with her, to use as a bargaining chip.

'Then—listen,' he said. Sherlock grunted, but John soldiered on. 'When I had my… incident, and then your cousin found me, Irene was dancing with Germaine Patat.'

'With Germaine Patat,' Sherlock repeated, absently.

'Yes,' said John. 'She'd been chatting to her, showing an interest in her gown. I think she was asking—I think she was working up to commissioning Patat, for a gown of her own.'

'Why would she do that?' Sherlock's voice had sharpened, though he still looked away.

'Exactly,' John said.

'She thought—Irene thought Germaine Beaumont did give the real photographs to Germaine Patat.'

'That's what I think, too.'

Sherlock breathed out, hard, and turned his head to give John two seconds of a hard, breathing look. Those darting eyes, inward-turning. God but he was beautiful, John thought; though thinking it pained him, and was utterly without use. Sherlock had returned his gaze to the corridor now.

'But,' John said, 'she still pickpocketed Beaumont, before she did Patat. She had Patat show her how the pocket worked, in her gown—well, Patat's been showing that off to women all night. Seems to consider it a major selling point of the design. But if—if Adler took the mocked-up packet off Beaumont, then danced with Patat and swapped them—'

'Of course, of course,' Sherlock murmured, almost as if to himself. 'It explains Germaine Beaumont's relative calm all night, as well—she looked positively bored when I saw her twenty minutes ago, dancing with Henry Jouvenel. But she wouldn't be trying to recover the packet Irene stole from her, if she meant for it to go.'

He ran a hand over his face, and his gaze darted out into the crowd for a moment before settling back
on the corridor. John's followed it, though he wasn't sure what they were looking for. The too-calm Germaine Beaumont? The elusive Irene Adler? John in that moment saw no one at all whom he recognised, save the Germaine's Judith from earlier, still arm-in-arm with Jack the Ripper.

'And it makes sense,' Sherlock was saying, still half-under his breath. John turned his head again to look at him. 'Germaine Beaumont will have told Irene the general shape of the plan for tonight. If she'd taken both packets and left Germaine Patat with no ammunition with which to neutralise Charles Humbert, then—'

'—Madame Jouvenel,' John finished, 'would be left open to harassment.'

'Quite,' Sherlock said, but he sounded as if he were thinking, now, of something else entirely. His steepled hands. His lovely twisting long neck.

'That's what I thought,' John whispered. Sherlock didn't move; didn't speak. John breathed out, careful, and pressed his back to the wall.

'Anyway,' he said. 'We're right back where we were anyway, aren't we? It doesn't really make a difference. Irene Adler has the real photographs, and we've lost track of her. She's probably left the fête already. Probably left the country.'

'No,' Sherlock said, and John looked up, startled.

'No?'

'Not quite. The doormen have her description, and are on orders not to let her leave, at least not by the front way. I expect she'd elect to leave, instead, by the terrace, despite it being two floors up and there being not much in the way of footholds on the way down; but I've been stationed here for a solid, oh, forty minutes, and I haven't seen her come this way.'

'Forty minutes,' John repeated. Had it been that long, since he'd been watching Irene dance with Germaine Patat? He wouldn't have thought so, but it was so difficult to be sure. He bit his mouth, trying to calculate back: how long had he talked with Claudine? Less than five minutes, surely. And then the episode with the Marie Antoinette? Speak of many devils, he thought, as on the side of the room towards the dance floor Marie Antoinette elbowed her way past Madame Jouvenel, coming from the other direction. Surely, John thought, he couldn't have stood there listening to her berate him for more than a minute or two. And then—how long had he searched for Irene, and for Sherlock, half-dead from heat?

'I think—I don't believe it can have been longer ago than that, when I last saw her,' he said, at last, and he felt Sherlock nod, by his side.

'Then we may intercept her yet,' Sherlock said.

John breathed. He pressed his spine to the wall next to Sherlock's back, and breathed, and the breeze from the terrace cooled the sweat on his neck and his face. Was it his imagination, he wondered: surely it was much too early for people to be leaving, and yet it seemed to him that the crush of fête-goers was less dense, less oppressive than it had been just minutes ago. From where they stood between the corridor and the terrace there were moments when, through gaps in the moving bodies, he could see all the way to the dance floor, where the orchestra was once again playing a tango. In any case the crowd seemed to John to have resumed a less grotesque, and more familiar, aspect. There, for example, just by Madame Jouvenel, were the Carcos: long white gauze trailing in their wakes, her hand on his arm and his on her shoulder as he talked into her ear and she, seemingly happily, listened. And there, again, was Lucrezia Borgia and Macheath: taking sips of one another's
drinks, and making assessing faces before they again swapped back. And there: laurel leaves reaffixed to his short hair, heading determinedly away from the Lucrezia and Macky, the absurdly Romanised figure of Bertrand Jouvenel: his back a mass of red. He made his way towards his stepmother and did not pause when he reached her but wrapped her tight in his wiry arms and kissed her, full on the mouth and hard. Some way off from the Jouvenels Francis and Germaine Carco whooped in surprise. John laughed out; then looked over to Sherlock, who seemed scarcely to be watching the scene in front of him. His gaze had turned inward again; his eyes had slipped half-closed. 'The boy's an affectionate drunk,' John said, nudging him, and Sherlock said 'Hmmm?' coming out of his reverie to raise his eyebrows at John, so John gestured to where Bertrand had now released an apparently shocked Madame Jouvenel; and was striding—one might say swaggering—away from her, towards the stairs, as she stared after him, frozen in place.

'Hm,' said Sherlock. And then: 'But why would he—' but that moment, on his other side, Hélène Picard appeared, with a notepad in her hand.

'We've got everything,' she said. Sherlock nodded. Having shaken off a reverie not a minute previously, he now seemed similarly to shake off one subject of conversation for another; glancing just one last time over in the direction of the dance floor, next to which Madame Jouvenel was now shaking her head, gesturing in a confused way towards the door, in conversation with her husband. John watched them for a few seconds, before Sherlock's voice recalled him.

'Photographs?' Sherlock said.

'Yes,' said Hélène. 'And a confession as to the break-ins, with three witnesses.' She pursed her lips. 'Should my employers decide to pursue legal avenues.'

'And Mademoiselle Patat?' Sherlock said. 'She is—where?'

From down the corridor came the loud report of a door crashing open. From the other direction, Claire Boas rushed up as Sherlock rushed down.

'I imagine,' said Hélène, 'she is talking with Claud—'

'Monsieur Holmes,' Claire Boas said, rushing up and cutting her off, 'I thought we had agreed,' and then launched in to a barrage of French in which John caught only the odd cognate: fête, and derangement. Sherlock gave placating half-responses as he attempted to dodge around her other side, trying for a view down the corridor. She parried him at every thrust.

'Holmes?' John said, pushing forward. 'Are you—should I search out Mademoiselle Patat, then? Question her about—what we discussed?' but Sherlock gave an exasperated little gesture with one hand, as if he were batting away a gnat. 'Holmes,' John said, again, but was interrupted by another loud bang from down the corridor, followed by a low male voice speaking rapidly. In the interstices between Claire Boas and the wall, and Sherlock and Claire Boas, John caught glimpses of orange and purple. But Félix Perrin's peacock colours eclipsed totally the orange robes of Charles Humbert as both men made their way away from the fête, towards the back exit, Humbert pleading in a low voice all the time. John bobbed, and craned his neck; and Sherlock bobbed, and craned his; and then, from behind Madame Boas Claudine bustled up, already in mid-sentence to her hostess and her cousin at once.

'—puis: ouf! Madame Boas, c'est tout fini, il n'y a pas de—Sherlock, it all went perfectly. I do not doubt we have enough to keep Monsieur Humbert in a state of peace for years to come. But what is —'

'Have you seen Germaine Patat?' Sherlock asked her, over Claire Boas's shoulder, and then
'Madame!' to Claire Boas herself, followed by equally firm French accompanied by gestures towards the ballroom; and towards the corridor. She at last huffed; stepped aside and then, with a glare, made off towards the main room. Sherlock rubbed his own face; closed his eyes.

'Germaine Patat,' he repeated.

'She wanted to wash,' Claudine said. 'I don't blame her.' She shuddered. 'There are some more bedrooms beyond that of Madame Boas; some of them have en-suites.' She tilted her head, and Sherlock and John followed her down the now-quiet corridor, past a series of doors which she opened one by one. The ladies' WC; then the gents'; then Claire Boas's own room; then a storage cupboard full up with linens and smelling strongly of cedar. 'The last one, I think,' Claudine said, over her shoulder, and turned the handle to let them into a bedroom with——

'Oh, stupid,' Sherlock said, but John heard him as if at a remove; for there, face-down on the white bed and snoring gently, was the slim scarlet-and-gold figure of Irene Adler; her long Marcelled hair fanned out around her head on the duvet. By her left hip her hand lay half-curled, palm upward, nails bitten and—and dirty.

Sherlock wheeled about; clamped his hands to his cousin's shoulders.

'When did you last see Bertrand Jouvenel?' he asked her. She looked mildly offended; mildly concerned.

'Perhaps—an hour ago? He was trying to convince this one to have a drink with him and——'

'Watson,' said Sherlock. 'Go after her.'

'Go after——'

'Irene,' said Sherlock, 'Irene, she'll be past the doormen, she'll be——'

'What are you——' said John, but Sherlock was already correcting himself, saying 'Never mind, I'll go, we'll both go'; and anyway, John knew already, didn't he. Sherlock grabbed his wrist, rough, and tugged him towards the door, but John delayed just long enough to lean forward, put his own hand to the figure's shoulder, and turn it over onto its back, at which the Marcelled wig slipped half-off the forehead of the slumbering young Bertrand Jouvenel.

Chapter End Notes

For the curious, or those who wish to check against their hunches for characters whose costumes aren't explicitly named (in order of appearance):

- Claire Boas is dressed as the Duchess of Malfi.
- Claudine Holmès is dressed as Ellen Terry's version of Lady Macbeth, as immortalized in 1889 by John Singer Sargent.
- Hélène Picard is dressed as Phèdre, à la Georges Barbier.
- Colette is dressed as Cleopatra. Germaine Patat may want to claim artistic originality for her creations, but for my money she was nonetheless inspired by Theda Bara's costumes from the 1917 Fox film Cleopatra.
- Henry Jouvenel is dressed as John the Baptist.
- Bertrand Jouvenel is dressed as Julius Caesar, to coordinate with his lover's
Cleopatra.

- The Carcos are dressed as Roderick and Madeline Usher, from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." Similar to the Cleopatra costume she designed for Colette, I'm sure the resemblances to [Harry Clarke's 1919 book of Poe illustrations](https://example.com) here are purely coincidental.
- Germaine Patat herself is dressed as Salome.
- Germaine Beaumont is dressed as Clytemnestra, complete with murder carpet.
- Charles Humbert is dressed as Bluebeard, and Mabel Humbert is dressed as one of Bluebeard's wives.
- Sarah Bernhardt is making dramatic use of her amputated right leg, which she'd lost to gangrene in 1915, to come dressed as Long John Silver. (Why is there bad blood between Irene Adler and Sarah Bernhardt? One possibility: in 1908, when Irene started work at La Garçonnière, Louise Abbéma, Bernhardt's lifelong passionate friend and alleged lover, had just received the Legion of Honour. Perhaps she chose an unorthodox method of celebration. In any case, in 1921 Bernhardt was 77 and still performing regularly.)
- Félix Perrin is dressed as Louis XIV, the Sun King.
Here between the hither and the farther shore

Friday, September 2nd, 1921
6:35am

With twenty minutes until her train Irene couldn't rest. Having once located her compartment she couldn't sit; couldn't stay there; couldn't stand to think of it. She'd come back out. Stood on the platform and actually jiggled her foot: didn't stop herself. She tugged at her gloves. She fussed at her new bob, stuffed up under her livery cap. The back of her neck itched. She had to be in motion, had to be; or she felt she would ignite. And so, over and over: 'Can I help you, Madame?' she said, to this traveler and that, and hoisted their trunks onto trollies; strapped them up onto the backs of taxicabs; conversed brightly while opening doors. She picked out provincials and foreigners and Paris! she could see them thinking, City people and their ways, eyeing the ill-fitting uniform she'd bought off the cab driver she'd flagged down outside Claire Boas's house. I've a spare in my boot, he'd said, or—I'm off home, I could take yours off you, smiling sly and sideways at her, so she'd jogged his shoulder and told him in an oddly jovial way that he hadn't a chance. His shoulders shook when he laughed. She'd felt them to be… friends, almost. Stranger-comrades, she'd thought, changing in the alley around the corner from the station's grand entrance after he'd driven off. It was, somehow, a fitting exchange to mark the end of her Paris. The first moment of a new life; the last moment of the old one.

But it hadn't been the last, of course. Because here, now, in the Gare de Lyon, she couldn't be still. She kept imagining herself as she would be, in the motionless train compartment: taking off her hat; settling herself and her gold-buttoned coat and her high boots and ill-fitting, jodhpur-like woollen trousers, and waiting and waiting as the minutes ticked by and the other passengers filed in around her. It was, what? A Friday? Business travellers, then, who had come up to the city for the week and were on their way home. Young transplants, working as secretaries or clerks, on pilgrimages of obligation back to their childhood homes. On the train up to Saint Malo she'd had bestowed upon her the conversation of a young man—almost a boy, still, and Irene had wondered for a moment at his audacity at making advances to someone who looked like her, wearing clothes like hers; before an elderly middle-class provincial had got on at Rennes and he'd jumped up to lift her trunk into the luggage rack; and Irene had realised that all the time he'd merely been polite. Good-mannered. To her! She could have laughed. His mother, she had supposed, was proud. Now, in the Gare de Lyon, she imagined him sitting once again across from her in their shared compartment, inquiring after her health before the train was even moving; and her, having to answer back. On that other train, the boy had looked at her trunks and had asked questions. Well. She'd nothing about her, now. She'd only Bertrand Jouvenel's bloodied toga balled up in one pocket of her livery coat, and her ticket and her photographs in the other, and a trace of Madame Jouvenel's red paint on her lips. Madame—Madame Colette, Irene thought. Whom she might never see again. Paris, which she might never see again. And Germaine.

In any case, a person so little weighed down could hardly sit still. But Irene in shifting company could always smile, and charm; and so Irene smiled, and charmed. She charmed a dowager from London and a man of affairs in from Rheims, and a young mother with a little girl who gazed up at Irene with her mouth open until Irene, who had seen the trick done often enough and had nothing if not a firm grasp of the mechanics of sleight-of-hand, reached down and pulled a 25-centime coin from behind the girl's ear. Ay, Christine! Where were you hiding that? her mother asked her, laughing, and the little girl buried her face in her mother's leg and did her best to keep it there, as Irene pushed the trolley laden with both their bags. And then, looking up from the cab window, the young mother turned on Irene a smile so simple, so brilliant, that Irene stepped forward—and then the woman turned back to her daughter, and the cab pulled away.
Ten minutes, now. She should board, Irene knew. Back in the departures hall they were calling for the passengers for her train. Milano! the crier announced, walking past her with his measured pace, Milano, board at lane 17, and it was almost as if her breast, on the left side, just under the slip of paper, heated. At the ticket window she had said Constantinople, eventually; and the ticket seller had looked condescending. Istanbul, I mean, Irene had said then, thinking, irritated: just like Germaine to be so old-fashioned; and that hidden patch of skin. Like a blush.

And then, by the entrance, looking out at the platforms, like a slap: there she stood. Germaine Beaumont, in the flesh; just as Irene had been thinking—and still in her fancy dress. Irene swallowed; looked. Milano, they were calling; her train would leave; but her feet felt buckled to the train-station tile. She had always said to herself she wouldn't bring her. All along, of course, she'd never intended to bring her; she'd made the offer but she hadn't meant it; but now, with Germaine standing there not four hundred yards from the train platform, with nothing between them, with nothing stopping her, the realisation swamped Irene: she couldn't. She'd meant to extend her hand, and then choose to withdraw it. But standing here, now, there was no choice: it was outside Irene's abilities to reach out at all. She couldn't—couldn't accept the idea of—couldn't live herself into Germaine in Athens; Germaine in Zürich. Yet there Germaine stood, swaying with tiredness not a hundred yards away. The poor thing, Irene thought. Look at her: now she was rubbing at her eyes. Now she was yawning, hugely. Now she was laughing, in response to—but surely that was—it was. Irene smiled; then tried to think why she had. There was Sherlock Holmes. Talking with her Germaine. Standing looking out over the early-morning crowd at the Gare de Lyon in his absurd pink-and-white satin clown suit, as if he thought he would stop Irene leaving. Or as if he planned to collect her photographs and return them to the clutches of the Jouvenels, after she'd just gone to so much trouble to extricate them. Or possibly, she thought—feeling fanciful, watching him shifting from foot to foot as Germaine reached up to scratch her nose—possibly it was as if, in some imaginary world, she'd told him she was leaving; and he'd come to the station to see her off.

The crier called out four minutes until the train to Milan, and Irene—laughing suddenly, thinking of Paris, of leaving Paris, and then thinking with strange tears springing up in her eyes of London, where in another life she'd sat on a bench in Waterloo Station, still so ill she was barely able to keep herself upright, and then boarded and collapsed against the wall of the compartment as soon as the 5:47 to Dover had pulled into the station; and slept so soundly that the conductor had had to wake her near Gravesend to inspect her ticket—thinking of all this and also of her hotel suite in Saint Malo, to which she'd returned with a needlepoint cushion now packed in a trunk at a Paris bank, she reached into her left-hand jacket pocket. Three minutes, said the clock above the entryway; and so she took out her ticket and then the first other thing to hand, and scrawled seven words across the back of it; and then, a little clumsily, jostling this old woman and that young man and the other man as well (’Pardon me’ she said, but he hardly turned his head), she hurried through the press, and across the platform, and onto her train.

By the time she found her seat, they were moving. The train pulled out of the station and into the 11ième, headed towards the river. Irene, as it turned out, was not faced with a chatty young man, or a disapproving old one: she had the compartment to herself.

It was quiet, in essentials. Hushed. Just the motion and the noises of the train. An infant cried, down the corridor; and nearer Irene's door someone stumbled: a woman's voice cursing, then apologising for her language. And then, on top of all that, Irene could hear her own breath. It slowed, slowly, as the train picked up speed.

Constantinople, she thought. She shook her head, though there was no one there to see, as she tugged off the cab-driver's gloves. As if one could travel to Atlantis, or Babylon. And Irene had stood at the intersection of so many journeys, rooted to the spot, with her hands struck numb at her sides. She looked down at them. Naked. The middle nail on her left hand had bent back when she
had reached for a trunk; now the polish was marred. But the fingers flexed all right. Stretched. Out of the large right-front pocket of her jacket she took Bertrand's balled-up toga. The blind back walls of Charenton-le-Pont rolled by, and she untangled it. Smoothed it out over her knees and the grease-paint smeared on her fingers. She turned her hand over, and looked at the reddened finger-pads; then balled up her hand in a fist. Her knuckles stood out. Blue veins. The skin was thinner there than even last year this time. Why should it bother her, she thought, to find herself unable to do a thing against which she had always intended to choose? When she relaxed her hand there were four red smudges, dabbed into the meat of her palm.

Well, she thought, turning to the window. If anyone could manage the trip to Babylon, then it would be Germaine Beaumont. Irene could picture her, in her fusty old-fashioned skirts and blouses; refusing fine linen; consternated by the imprecision of time travel; bustling about with a hamper of Parisian conveniences, managing everyone about her. The interfering little bitch, Irene thought, fondly. Insufferable. She'd no doubt lay waste to literary Paris, given another fifteen years. And Irene, in fifteen years…

In another fifteen years Irene had no idea where she might be. Smiling to herself, uneasy, she pulled down the sash and tossed the paint-smeared toga through the window, out onto the tracks.

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Friday, September 2nd, 1921

5:15am

Rushing towards the stairs and the front entrance, Sherlock still felt—a chase, a chase, he thrived on chases. This, he could do, surely. He was doing it, surely.

He pulled John by the hand through the press of bodies, keeping hold of him while he scanned the crowd for the paint-smeared toga Irene had removed from the Jouvenel boy. To be a fly on that wall, Sherlock thought, pushing past Lucrezia Borgia flushed red now with drink and dancing; and for a moment the image of it replaced, in his mind's eye, the image of the room before him: Irene, fixing Bertrand with that exhilarated, predatory look of hers; Irene, stripping out of her gold and scarlet with a look of aligning; of forces gathered and ready; Irene, single-minded, smiling with wolf teeth as Sherlock had smiled back at her; and the boy, already swooning with the drug she'd given him, unable to believe his luck.

John squeezed his hand. Sherlock, almost tripping on the bottom step of the stairs up to the ballroom door, realised John was doing it back; that Sherlock had been gone, and at some point in his reverie had squeezed John's hand, hard; and had failed to look out for the real Irene Adler, now absconded in a paint-smeared toga to parts unknown.

He took a breath; and looking back at John, apologetic, consciously slackened his grip on his hand.

And then they stood out on the street, in the cool air, with the sky not yet lit anywhere except by electric light. Up and down the street no false blood stains caught his eye; no flicker of white motion. No slight figure rushed away, or reached up to hail a cab. By the railings a pair of revellers stood smoking, very close together: a woman in a green cheongsam and a man in top hat and tails. What crimes of passion or premeditation they might be attempting to reference, were as opaque to Sherlock as the murky blackness stretching away to either side.

A chase, he thought, again. A chase. He looked at John, who stood watching him with his flushed-wet face still streaked by gum adhesive, and his hot hand still loosely held in Sherlock's own.

'She'll be, she's leaving Paris,' Sherlock said.
John watched him. Didn't exclaim, or ask how he knew; and in a flash Sherlock saw: that restaurant in Saint Malo, ages ago or a week, wavery with sunset through glass and reflections off the water; where at John's insistence he had deduced Isabelle and Germaine Patat and John had said—John had said—and his face—so Sherlock, here in the street outside Claire Boas's house, squeezed again, convulsively, at John's hand. And John returned that steady pressure, but from what felt like. Miles. Vague, oceanic miles away.

'For good,' Sherlock went on. Swallowing. 'She's leaving. Permanently, or—for a long time. Probably going a long way. She bought an entire new wardrobe. She's starting afresh; probably she's leaving the country; that's what—one can hardly imagine her in the provinces, can one. She'll be—a train, she'll be on a train.'

And because he was angled towards the Boas house, and it was otherwise awkward to hail a cab, he let go of John's hand and then thought—but it was—a chase, he thought, it was what he knew to do, what they knew to do together and they were fine. It always went—a chase, and they were fine. The cab slowed for them and stopped, and he climbed up into the cabin chanting it to himself, with a faint acrid taste at the back of his mouth. When he opened his mouth to tell the driver—what?—'Gare de l'Est'—his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

The seat was spacious; they sat well apart. Sherlock looked out the window and thought: Irene Adler, leaving Paris. Escaping Paris, he corrected. Irene, with her photographs, boarding a train to—where? Berlin? Rome? Surely he'd been correct when he'd said to John, one can hardly imagine her in the provinces. He stole a glance at John, who was looking out his own window, his hands held unmoving in his lap; whereas in London, Sherlock thought; angry, suddenly; in a London cab, furious; in a bloody cab on a chase as they ought to be, together as they ought to be, in a cab coming 'round the bend of Regent Street and Picadilly—but that was impossible. Wasn't it.

Hollowed-out, he exhaled and turned.

Irene Adler, he thought. Misdirection. He'd said what he'd said just now, to John, but: that desk in the Fleurs du Mal room, with the clean gun and the file full of expected contacts and the little vial labeled Cocaine. Faced away from John Sherlock rested his forehead on the window. Perhaps that's exactly what she was doing, he thought: running to the provinces. She'd not even need to go as far as Normandy. With a new name and a trunk full of pale yellows and lavenders she could settle in Versailles or Rambouillet, some Parisian suburb where no one from her former life would think to look for her. For a moment, in the dimly striping light of the street lamps, this outcome seemed likely; even inevitable. They ought to have gone straight to the Gare Montparnasse. The Gare d'Austerlitz. Of course it was what she had done. Of course it was what what she, unavoidably, would do.

The cab jolted forward, and back. It manoeuvred amongst the six or seven others waiting sleepily outside the station colonnade, light shining out from the other side of mullioned arches. Sherlock shook himself. Handed coin up to the driver and climbed out, waiting with the door open until he realised that John, having slid out the street side, was now waiting for him on the pavement. He cleared his throat. Shut the door and then slapped it twice, absurdly, in the old horse-cab style, so that the driver of this automobile might continue on. Then he turned without speaking, and led the way through the line of columns, into the blazing light of the station.

Inside, under the giant electric-lit arch, the shops were just opening. Coffee, he thought. The notion felt oddly foreign. Coffee, and croissants. A few sleepy travellers waited outside a kiosk where a middle-aged woman in a kerchief was just pulling open the iron accordion-grate. On a few of the benches lining the great hall, men and women slept, their heads pillow on hand-bags and wadded-up jackets. The clock at the centre of the night-black rose window said 5:32.
'Where d'you think?' came John's voice. It pulled at Sherlock; he turned about to find John staring at the marquee listing departures. 'Prague? Berlin? I don't see... she ought to be easy to spot, oughtn't she, in a blood-smeared toga. Where do you think she'd go?'

'I haven't,' Sherlock murmured, hollow, 'the slightest idea.'

John didn't react. Just stood there, tongue between his teeth, looking up at the board. He didn't say a thing; and for a moment it seemed to Sherlock wholly natural that he wouldn't. For a moment it seemed that Sherlock should stand here, alone, in the midst of this—bloody pedestrian—bright-lit clearing-house; a place not home to anyone, for as long as he chose to. For hours, for—for years—

He reached out. Reached; touched him; just had to do: Sherlock's long knobbly fingers blundering along the cap of John's shoulder; the plane of John's back. It all felt—clumsy. Askew. As if he had misjudged the proportions of John's body, despite John's hand coming up to cover Sherlock's hand on John's shoulder. Despite the warmth of it. Despite the blunt, squeezing fingers; the anxious backward glance. Alone in their rented bed three nights ago they had felt almost too close for Sherlock to bear; but to go out in the world. To be Holmes and Watson, out in the world. Sherlock had been touching him thus all night; before the fête and during it. It wasn't that the two of them had actually been so very far apart; yet still he felt, reaching out for some part of John's body, that it eluded him. Or felt—felt now, standing here under the early-morning dome of the Gare de l'Est, touching the black cloth covering the scarred skin of John's shoulder—impossibly remote; irrationally unsure whether he'd made contact, or no.

He shook himself. 'She'll have changed,' he said.

Immediate, crestfallen, John's face fell; and Sherlock realised, feeling the idiot, that of course the most likely explanation for John's previous failure to react was that Sherlock had spoken too low to be heard. He cleared his throat. Said, 'She'll have—obviously she'll have got hold of something else to wear. Which won't do us much good. With no idea what sort of costume it is she's put on.'

He turned, then. Removed his hand from John's back and walked away and John followed. After having stood still for minutes on end they rushed nonsensically along the hall to the platforms, where the girl at the news stand, yawning and stretching, had just settled on her stool, behind her counter, and was cutting the twine off bundles of early editions—Le Matin, Sherlock saw, with a strange jolt, as they hurried past. And then: up the platform; and down. There was hardly anyone there, pulling trunks or hurrying onto trains. Scanning the windows of the two trains waiting to depart, he could see only a few scattered passengers in the compartment windows. Though: he and John were hardly difficult to pick out of a crowd, were they, attired as they were? Irene would have seen them rushing past the news stand; she could have withdrawn into her compartment, away from the train window.

'Oh,' he said, 'this is asinine.'

John by his side gave a shocked little laugh, and then tried to turn it to a cough; and something flared up in Sherlock: something hot, and desperate. He didn't want that: that John should cough, rather than show Sherlock that he was laughing. He didn't want his own anger, when he thought of Picadilly. He didn't want to touch John and feel—he shook his head.

'She could be anyone,' he said, and as John, dubious, said, 'Holmes, now, really—'

'I could be anyone on this platform,' Sherlock said, feeling wild, feeling he might shout, or—or weep, 'and Irene has fewer constraints than I do. A taller person can't sham short without drawing attention to themselves, but a shorter person can more easily sham tall. She might be that—that fat old man, say, dozing on the bench, there.'
'Shall we go and ask him?'

'We might just as well,' Sherlock said. 'For all the good it would do.' Desperation warred in him with a kind of wooziness. He wanted to sit down, in a dark place. He wanted John to enfold him there, and not speak. He said, 'She could be—oh, that boy, there. Or the boy's mother. Or the mother might be, might be some lover of hers, and she might be the teenaged daughter. A blonde wig isn't out of the realm of possibility. And this is one train station of how many? It's all—all senseless, we should return to Claire Boas's house and tell my cousin—'

But John had grabbed his wrist. Sherlock looked down, fastened: honeyed fingers, gripping hard the white protrusion of bone.

'Say that again,' John said.

'What—we should tell Claudine that we—'

'No,' John said. His eyes were fixed on the little family, across the way. 'The teenaged daughter,' he said, slowly. 'Sherlock. That little red-haired Joan of Arc. The one who danced for ages with Germaine Beaumont.'

'Yes,' Sherlock said, though he wasn't sure he'd noticed the girl. He was staring down at John's hand on his wrist. He could feel it, he thought, as he gathered his shaky breath back into his body. He could feel it—within him. John had reached out, and. It was that old sensation of uniting, only—molten, and jangling; as if, vibrating between them, a blade of golden light—

'I've seen her before,' John said. Sherlock blinked. Dragged his eyes up to John's face as John said, 'That night when I. We'd fought and then I.' He swallowed.

The slam of the hotel door. The shattering silence. And shuttering, flashbulb-quick: the suffocating bath; Agnès Sabbagh, tired feet and hard mouth and a body of evidence; fat raindrops at the foot of the horrible basilica and the jolting cab ride; Rachel's white arm rising up from claret-coloured silk; lock-picks, the Chabanais back stairs and black brocade; brown leather; Claudine Holmès nous ravie at thirty-two and the jolting darkness of the train and POISON and the white rush and the monstrous things he'd said; rain-slick drainpipe thuck thuck stuck fingers on white and blue tile and those pictures. Daniel's pictures. Sherlock didn't want. Looking down in the morning light at John, mouth wrenched open.

John's steady burning hand clasped still around Sherlock's wrist. The soldier's eyes, Sherlock thought. He looked up. Made himself look: and there was John. Looking back at him. As if, he remembered thinking, with something huge twisting in him; brightening in him—as if Sherlock would find him, as if—as if a bridge—

Sherlock closed his eyes. Put his hand over John's hand, in the dark. John was saying, 'Adler,' and Sherlock breathed. Could hear him saying, 'Followed her and Germaine Beaumont back to Adler's second set of rooms. I stood there all night, in the—Christ, it was pouring down rain. I stood out on the pavement and watched her light, waiting for—I hardly knew. For one of them to come down, I suppose.'

'Yes,' Sherlock whispered. He opened his eyes again. Found he was gripping John's shoulder. Could feel himself gripping it; how solid it was; how familiar. He didn't remember reaching out.

'I didn't see anyone leave,' John told him, 'because that little red-haired girl—she distracted me. She came, came up to me and said you were telephoning, from—doesn't matter, but she led me on a merry chase and then of course you weren't on the line. She's Irene's, Sherlock,' and Sherlock jolted
at John saying—*Irene* as he looked up at Sherlock, pleading, insisting. Trusting. Sherlock could see it before him, plain though he couldn't have picked her out of a crowd: the little red-headed girl, leading John forward on Irene's orders; the little red-headed girl, in a tunic, probably, and a scabbard, dancing as commanded with Germaine. John said, 'She was Irene's and she's still Irene's. It was *Irene* who must have told her to keep—keep Germaine Beaumont occupied while she seduced Bertrand Jouvenel. It was—she'll have—she's Irene's.'

'John,' Sherlock breathed. John's hand stayed firm around his wrist and Sherlock's light-stung watering eyes stayed locked on John's, and he could feel the two of them—the *togetherness* of them—a bright-white tintinnabulation that scraping upward modulating *flared*... and then softened. Dimmed. He turned, prickling all up and down him, towards the entrance. Oddly near tears.

Sherlock walked. The blood seeped back into the wrist that John had gripped; he couldn't help that. Couldn't control it. He could feel John at his back. Warm at his exposed back. He felt he was stumbling in the wake of—something; though he walked ahead, and John followed behind.

When they emerged from beneath the colonnade the line of cabs had grown. Sherlock flagged the first one and told the driver 'Luxembourg, les Jardins de Luxembourg, la rue...' But John didn't know the direction. Couldn't remember or couldn't say. So Sherlock said 'Just Luxembourg' and the cabbie pulled out into the street.

Now they sat close. Pressed together. Like they would in London, Sherlock thought; like they did; and closed his eyes, and opened them; and didn't move away. He breathed. He sat, face pointed straight ahead, and studiously looked back over his acquaintance with Irene Adler in light of the revelation of this child. This girl. He hadn't known of her. But then, he thought; nobody else could identify Sherlock's own Irregulars—or, nobody other than John. It was part of the arrangement he'd struck with them. And anyway, it would hardly do give away his trade secrets: Irene, of course, would feel the same. John's thigh pressed against Sherlock's; Sherlock's hand closed over his knee. Hard. Too hard; the little noise John made. But Sherlock didn't stop. He thought how it seemed impossible, now, what he had considered in the cab earlier: that Irene, with her sharp teeth and her silk dresses and this red-haired child whom she'd left behind, would hide herself in the provinces. She never would. He'd been right the first time, he felt sure—when he'd assumed some capital city for her destination. *Berlin?* John had said. *Prague?* Sherlock could feel John's eyes on him. Watching him. He could feel his heart beat in his throat.

The cab drew up at the garden's main gates. Sherlock's head creaked around to look at John. He tilted his head like they did, Holmes and Watson, and John nodded. Knew where to lead them, then. Sherlock followed behind as John dodged; turned; fetched up across the street from a pair of double doors at the front of a large, run-down building, flat windows facing out. There John paused, and did not proceed. Sherlock glanced over. Glanced down. John's hand fisted; flexed. That tensing in the muscle of his jaw. Breathing harder than he might.

'Which flat?' Sherlock asked, quiet. John flexed the muscle of his jaw.

'All the way at the top,' he said. 'Second window from the right.'

Sherlock nodded; shifted weight between his feet; but John stayed rooted, feet to pavement.

'Shall,' Sherlock said, and stopped. And then, 'Would you like me to—go on—'

But John looked around at him with such sharpness. Almost—almost afraid, Sherlock thought, for the fleeting moment before John straightened his face. His words shrivelled in his throat. That arc, he thought, childishly; wanting to reach out after it. Not flinch away. Take John's hand, and fasten it again around his own wrist. That arc: that bright high piercing blade. But they were separate now;
and it was gone. Out of reach.

'No,' Sherlock said. 'No, of course—shall we, then?'

'Yeah,' John said. Small tightening around the corner of his mouth. 'Yes,' and he darted forward; grabbed Sherlock's hand and squeezed and released and plunged out ahead of Sherlock, into the street.

Sherlock had thought he might put his pick-locks to more use, but the double doors were already ajar. Sherlock thought of Irene and: of course, he thought again, climbing the worn wood stairs from the ground floor to the first. That flair for the dramatic. Of course he and John would return here; of course Irene would predict it; of course she'd let them know she knew. It was—it was what Sherlock himself would do. In her place. And pivoting in the landing between the third and the fourth floors, watching before him the ascent of John's military spine under dark suiting and thinking of Irene, unlocking the door, touching perhaps the jamb in satisfied farewell; or standing holding the key while she issued instructions to her child deputy, he felt, somehow, absurdly—

'This'll be the door, then,' John said. Sherlock blinked.

John stood, fingers on the door-handle, looking back at Sherlock. His tone was half-statement, half-question, though of the two of them only John had any claim to authority on the location of the flat lately rented by Irene Adler. And again, though Sherlock fought it, didn't want it, that horrible night: John, sitting on their rented bed in their awful new-built hotel room; John, saying *Knapely*, talking into his hands about priest holes and monstrous deformity as Sherlock had forced himself—had wanted so horribly and had **forced** himself not to touch. Nobody knew it was there, John had said. *But you could tell.* Now, here, in his discordant skin in the corridor outside the room to which Irene had taken Germaine, Sherlock swallowed down hard; and blinked the vision away. He'd taken a step forward, he found. Perhaps two. He'd perhaps stumbled. If he reached out now he could touch the door-handle. Could touch John's hand.

'You'd know,' he said, 'better than I.'

And his face did—something. Must have done, because John's expression changed. Melted, uncertain; his tongue coming out to wet his lip and if Sherlock could have—have curled himself small enough to crawl into John's jacket-pocket, he would have done. Would press his face to damp cotton over John-smelling skin: safe, unspeaking. Tucked-away. To want so purely, so desperately, an impossibility—instead he cleared his throat, and nodded at the flat; and John, after a moment, depressed the handle. Pressed open the door. He walked in ahead of Sherlock, away from Sherlock; and Sherlock blinked eyes; squared shoulders; and followed after.

It was a bare little place. Dingy, Sherlock supposed it would be called; although his own first thought had been: **stripped down.** Two shuttered windows. A small cold-water sink; a portable stove; a single cabinet and a single drawer. A plain oak table; a single chair. A single mattress on an iron frame. A bolt-hole, he thought, steadying. And he thought of his own bolt-holes, in London: the dusty, unfashionable old bachelor's flat in Clapham; the hammock in the lean-to off the wharves in Limehouse. The hidden room off the clothing store on Oxford Street that wasn't much more than a cupboard equipped with a change of costume. Then he thought of Baker Street, and of Irene's rooms at Le Chabanais: floor to ceiling in polished black lacquer and brocade fleurs de lis. Perhaps that was the bolt-hole, after all; and this, something else.

John took a step forward and to the side, and Sherlock took in, shockingly late, the young girl, still in her belted tunic and her dagger, sitting cross-legged on the bed.

'She told me to expect you,' the girl said. Her manner was deliberate, and serious, as if she were play-
acting the part of a melodrama villain: 'Good evening, gentlemen; I am pleased to entertain you.' All this was delivered with the utmost gravity; and then, all at once and feral in her suddenness, she grinned, and then laughed out.

'Irene Adler left you—to meet us,' Sherlock said, slowly. 'She left you—of course—' thinking: Baker Street, '—she'll have left you in possession of this flat.'

'Monsieur Holmes,' said the girl, her smile fading. He nodded, once; and she scrambled to her knees and marched forward on them, to the corner of the bed. 'Léonie Favre,' she said, and stuck out her arm. Sherlock, awkwardly stepping forward, engulfed her hand—callused, filthy and bird-boned—in his giant's palm. The kid gripped with odd strength against his lukewarm touch.

'I like your costume, Monsieur Holmes,' said Léonie. She held to his hand, her eyes unwavering on his; and then released them both all at once and collapsed again, into a fit of giggles.

Sherlock wiped his palm on his hip. He looked at Léonie and then glanced to John, who was looking between him and the girl with an expression almost of desperation. And a jolt: pure senseless contagion: John's panic mirrored in Sherlock's own gut—until he realised that he and Léonie had been speaking in French.

'Irene's—,' he said, and then stopped himself. But: no. Why should he? John had said Irene, after all. 'This is Léonie,' he told John. 'Irene's left her this flat.'

John licked his lips, then turned to the girl on the bed. 'You led me on a merry chase,' he said, in English. 'You said—how did she get in touch with you? How did she let you know what to do?'

'There'll be a back way,' Sherlock said. Léonie was looking at John with a calculating expression, but no concrete understanding. He imagined, however, that Irene's girl could make a fairly good guess what this Englishman whom she'd last seen in the rain outside an unused public telephone, might be going on about. He said, 'Another way in and out of the building. She and Irene will have had signals from the windows; a way to summon her in case of trouble, you know, the way I. And now she's been here waiting for us since—' and switching back to French, 'You left the party when we did, yes?'

'Just before she did,' said Léonie, pointing, strangely, directly at John. Sherlock looked; then looked again, further back; and there, in the doorway: Germaine Beaumont, panting, sweating in her long black dress; wine-coloured falls gathered up into the crook of one arm. She was staring between Sherlock and John, to the place where Léonie still stood on her knees on the bed. One got the impression, Sherlock thought, that she looked through Léonie. At something else entirely, which only she could see.

'Mademoiselle Beaumont,' said Sherlock. Germaine's head jerked up. Her eyes met his.

'I thought perhaps—' Germaine said, and stopped. And then, straightening her back even further: 'When I spoke with Germaine Patat, after Charles left and poor Bertrand was discovered, I knew I hadn't fooled Irene; I knew she'd fooled me; but I thought. Well. Perhaps she was waiting for me here. Stupid, I know.'

'You were meant to leave together,' Sherlock said. Germaine nodded. Sherlock glanced at Léonie, whose face, for the barest moment, crumpled; and then righted itself.

Germaine said, 'I had her photographs; well, I'm certain you've worked that out. We'd agreed to leave the country together and she'd agreed that I would keep hold of them. A kind of insurance against abandonment in a foreign place. She warned me she could steal them and I knew she was
sincere but I suppose I thought—I don't know. That she wouldn't really want to,' Germaine sighed. Sagged, suddenly. Pressed her fingers into the skin just below her cheekbones. John, who must have still been utterly at sea about the substance of the unfolding conversation, nevertheless slid behind Sherlock to lift the chair by Irene's little table, and move it next to Germaine. The task was awkward in the small space, now crowded with four bodies. John bashed his knee against the leg of the thing getting it into position, at which he swore loudly and Sherlock felt such an upwelling of—grief, or—that he swallowed. Wiped sweat from his face. Germaine, weighed down by fabric, sat.

'I thought,' Germaine said. 'She kept insisting that we would travel the world together. I was the one who doubted, I who needed to be convinced, you know, but she kept—well. I wanted us to get off on the right foot, so that I wouldn't be. Always left behind.' She laughed a little; then she sighed. 'I thought, if I mocked up another parcel, so that it looked like the parcel of photographs—that it would be like a kind of game, you see? She would take the imitation parcel off me, assuming I'd do what I did but that I'd give Patat the false one and keep the real one myself, since I—what I told you about Patat was true of me, I did carry them about with me constantly. And it might have worked; quite possibly would have worked: Charles would recognise the look of the bundle from the outside. I matched his ribbon, and his paper. He was the one who tied it up like that to begin with. So I thought, Irene would assume those were the fakes, and not bother with them; and then later in the train she'd—' Germaine laughed at herself. Shook her head. 'She'd flourish the thing at me. Present me with proof that she could best me; and then I would untie the package and show her they weren't the real photographs; that they were other photographs, these quite anodyne, or at least only vaguely bawdy; and then at her look of panic I would produce her photographs, which I'd have got back off Germaine Patat, and then—and then,' she finished, lamely, 'we'd have a private compartment, for the rest of the journey. To—work things out.' Sherlock closed his eyes; opened them. The unspooling fields of France.

'Quite the little fantasy,' Germaine said. 'An absurd idea.'

'Where were the two of you meant to go?' said Sherlock. She shrugged.

'Wherever I wanted.' There was a bitter edge to it. 'Wherever the whim took me.'

'Yes,' Sherlock said, 'all right. But where had the whim struck you to go first?' Germaine looked up at him, and then down again at the bed, and then over towards the windows. For a long moment she looked out at the sky: still, Sherlock saw, a rich and uniform dark blue. The rooftops were just visible in black silhouette against it. He thought of the windows in the Baker Street sitting room, which looked out on other windows. One could watch the tenants across the way coming and and going, as one sat and pondered a problem; as one smoked a cigarette. As one listened to the scratching of, of John Watson's pen, on paper. Sherlock closed his eyes, and opened them. Here, he thought, one was higher up. One looked across at mansard roofs rather than into rooms. But Irene had had the nesting birds to watch, he supposed. And if she got right up against the window—as she must have done, the night John had followed her and then stood watch in the rain, water sluicing down his spine; under his shirt; into the creases between his nose and the corners of his mouth as Sherlock had skinned up a drainpipe stop—then. Then she could have seen the people passing, down on the street. The tops of their heads. Their hats, and shoulders. Possibly, Sherlock thought, if she sat at just the place the chair had been, next to the table, she could have looked down through a crack between buildings, to glimpse a sliver of the gardens beyond.

'Her train will be gone by now, anyway,' Germaine said, at last. 'It was probably gone a half-hour since. There's no point in trying to catch her up.' Sherlock looked at John, who was chewing on his bottom lip, looking from one person to another.
Not understanding. Not asking. On the bed Léonie had narrowed her eyes at Germaine.

'I don't think her train can have left,' said Léonie, slowly. 'She only left the fête a little over an hour ago. I don't—I've never gone by train, but.' She was blushing, and seemed suddenly near to tears, but she kept on. 'It seems to me,' she went on, 'that it takes more than an hour to do—anything, really. Can she have got to a station, and bought a ticket and all, and the train has already left?'

There was almost a note of pleading in the girl's voice. Germaine raised fingers, gingerly, to her own left temple: not looking at Léonie. Not speaking to anyone.

'It depends,' said Sherlock, into the silence. He took a breath. Thought of Claudine, lecturing to him all those years ago as they'd strolled down the Avenue de Clichy. He set his jaw: mustering Holmes. 'It depends, I think, where she was intending to go. I would say the Gare de l'Est and the Gare du Nord are both a ten or fifteen-minute cab journey from the Boas house, in early-morning traffic. Those would do if she were planning to head east, into Germany, or north to Belgium or the Netherlands. Given the subject matter of the photographs, and their memories for—for Irene, her feelings for the woman she called Gretha, perhaps Amsterdam is a destination she would consider.'

He paused. Germaine was still; and still looking away.

'It's also possible,' he said, 'that she is returning directly to London, the city she left thirteen years ago. Or to Normandy or Brittany, to the area of Roz Ven. In both of which cases she would leave from the Gare Saint Lazare, which is in the other direction from the Boas house: on the other side of Montmartre, traveling parallel to the river. This is possible, of course; but unlikely considering the impression she has given of embarking on a great journey—though those impressions could, no doubt, have been intentional misdirection.'

'She said she would go everywhere,' said Léonie. She said it tearfully, but Sherlock saw that out of the corner of her eye she was looking at Germaine. 'She said she would write to me from all over the world.'

Germaine shook her head, as if to dislodge a mosquito. 'She wouldn't go west,' she said. Everyone waited, in case she elaborated, but she only shook her head again, and squared her shoulders. Sherlock glanced at John, who was looking between Germaine and Léonie with a kind of riveted incomprehension. The way his mouth moved, in concentration. Sherlock's chest ached; he looked away.

'Another thing to consider,' he said, still in French, 'is her new clothes. The clothes in her new trunk, which looked all to be new-bought and of a different palette than the one she favoured in Paris. With the exception of a medium-weight jacket and few fine-woven scarves, they were by and large warm-weather garments, and we are now in the first days of September. Not planning for the autumn in Berlin, then, or Oslo. So: if she were planning to go south to begin her journey—to Spain, or Italy—then she would leave from the Gare de Lyon, which would take substantially longer to reach from the Boas house.'

'And we might still catch her up.'

Germaine had spoken so quietly that Sherlock had scarcely made her out. But then she nodded, once, and got to her feet, and spoke in her usual, decisive tone. 'She'll have gone south.'

She walked to the doorway, and in it she glanced back. Sherlock nodded in turn, and gestured to John, who nodded to Léonie, who sat back on her heels on the bed. She looked, in that moment, very small; and with a surge of memory that felt jarring and ill-sized in his chest, Sherlock thought of Irene, in her hotel suite in Saint Malo, pulling her black brocade dressing-gown closer about her
narrow shoulders.

'Thank you,' he said to Léonie, 'for your hospitality, Mademoiselle Favre.'

For bare moments passing over the child’s face: confusion; loneliness; surprise; and then she smiled. A lopsided little thing, still forced. But she seemed to settle into herself, and made him a facetious little bow.

'My pleasure,' she told him, 'Monsieur Holmes.'

When Sherlock emerged into the corridor John put his hands on him and pulled him bodily aside, although Germaine was already starting down the stairs. The two of them jolted. Stumbled. Overwhelming in the musty closed-off air John smelt of unfamiliar old wool and dried sweat, sharp, demanding; his hands fisted in pink satin at Sherlock's chest.

'What's going on?' John said.

The angle of his head, looking up. They were so close; too close; it was—like they always had been. Just the way Sherlock had wanted to—to reach out, and his veins set up a buzzing; a glaring humming; as of strings beating, a quarter-tone off-pitch; John wet his mouth with his tongue looking up at him. Sherlock wanted to press forward; and to step back.

'Germaine says Irene will have gone south,' he told John. 'Which means she'll be leaving from the Gare de Lyon, which is further afield from Claire Boas's house. We might still have time to catch her.'

'Germaine says,' John repeated.

'I admit I encouraged her in that direction.'

'You don't think she's—you know. Telling you what you want to hear, in order to help Irene get away? Maybe she expected to find her gone. Maybe they arranged the whole thing ahead of time, and plan to meet later. God knows we've done—remember Bruges? Or that to-do with the smugglers in Pimlico? That was twice as complicated. Isn't this the kind of thing you'd plan, to throw a pursuer off your track?'

Sherlock closed his eyes. Dizzy, almost. Twisting between—that craved imagined folded-up pocket feeling and—and. And the soft-scraping too-bright sound of John's voice fastened to the knowledge that that was what Sherlock would do. Had done. Hadn't he. Did all the time; relying always as a first instinct on Holmes-and-Watson when brought into conflict with anything outside. Gripping Sherlock's satin-covered front The kind of thing you'd plan, John had said, without having been told that not a half-hour ago Sherlock had thought of Irene's secret flat tangled up with Baker Street, and of Le Chabanais with his own bolt-holes; and he had felt sure, somehow. Sure of some… recognition. John was talking, still. Sherlock (raw, winded) watched John's face, John's eyes full even now of that look; that faith; that bridging belief that was absent from Daniel's drawing, Daniel's rendering of John stripped bare, which Sherlock could see before him as over the cacophony in his own head came John's voice: whole affair with the snake and the leather-tanner, swamping him sideways again with the absurd, irrelevant memory of John, on that case, standing lookout for Sherlock in the grudging guise of an inept and poorly-equipped street musician, heckled by the small crowd gathered, watching for Sherlock's signal in the window of the upper floor. The kind of thing you'd plan echoing back to Sherlock alongside the vision of Germaine, five minutes ago, hollow-eyed and raw, and that of Irene Adler, tugging her black brocade around her small body; and the memory as well of John's half-resentful laughter when Sherlock, returned from the tannery, had relieved him of his musical duties: I thought they'd break out the rotten cabbage at any moment,
John had said; and _I'll make it up to you_ Sherlock had said; and John, his mouth curling up—

Sherlock breathed out. Slowly, creaking down over years, he bent. Closed his eyes; and lowered his forehead to John's forehead, curling his shoulders in, sagging down.

Then John was quiet. His hand came up. Fingers pressed to the back of Sherlock's neck. If Sherlock could tuck himself into John's pocket and stay.

'I don't think,' Sherlock said, voice grinding into the space between them, 'that Germaine and Irene are like—you and me.'

John's fingers dug in gently at Sherlock's nape. Press, and release. Press. Release. Sherlock thought dimly of Germaine Beaumont, down on the street by now. Already gone, perhaps, or holding a cab. He knew John knew it, too; but John was silent, and his fingers were warm on Sherlock's neck. Sherlock pressed his closed eyelids and his nose against John's hairline. It smelled as it always, always did. Glacially slowly, through summer wool, Sherlock's left hand came up to rest on John's side. They stood together, sharing breath.

'In any case,' Sherlock said, drawing back at last. His voice sounded to his own ears thin. Exhausted. 'If it's not true, and she went to one of the closer stations, she'll already have departed. We've nothing to lose by targeting the most likely point of departure at which we still stand a chance of finding her.'


'All right,' Sherlock said. Parroting John, he realised; and felt a little smile on his lips when John pulled back. Still looking up at Sherlock. His hand coming down to meet Sherlock's hand, which enfolded it.

'All right,' John said, again. 'All right.'

Sherlock tugged him, gentle, towards the stairs. They were narrow, and steep, and he let go John's hand to descend; but the whole way down John's fingers curled over his shoulder like a small, warm animal. Towards the bottom he reached up and squeezed them; and then strode forward and out the double doors to find Germaine Beaumont, huffing at her pocket-watch, holding open the door to a cab.

The bustle of sliding past her, and of John climbing after Sherlock and Germaine after John, and of settling themselves and giving the direction to the driver, all gave Sherlock a moment in which to collect himself. To press himself tight-shut; and breathe; and then hinge himself, slowly, back open. Pressed against the door of the cab he thought of John, and his thoughts echoed back through that moment in the corridor when John's hand had rested on Sherlock's nape; back through the case of the snake and the leather tanner; back through every London Paris Prague Sofia moment of himself and back through the shuttered-dark country that was John in the War—and then he put it away, and thought of Irene. Irene, in a south-bound train. He thought, breathing, with sudden practicality, that having gone directly from the fête to the station she'd have had no time to collect trunks. There must be someone in Paris whom she had enlisted to send them on, once that person was forwarded an address. Unless, of course, the trunks Sherlock had seen—the trunks whose fine silks and linens Sherlock had unpacked, meticulous, sweating panic into the air of the Fleurs du Mal room in the wake of the click of the door and John, departed, John, gone from him, stop—had been left there intentionally. Another piece of misdirection. Perhaps they were always meant to be abandoned. It
was, as John had said, the kind of thing Sherlock himself might plan. But here, now, the thought of their yellows, and their lavenders, felt—too much, somehow, for that to be true. Incontrovertibly: Sherlock didn't know. He didn't know the woman. Despite thinking she is like me. Despite saying they are not like you and me. Despite these things he couldn't know her; couldn't know what she felt. Couldn't know about her trunks. But strangely, he realised—smoothing his hands on his satin-covered thighs, right pressed to John's left, left pressed to the door of the cab; sitting wedged in the corner, trapped by his too-long legs, blinking out the dirty window at the darkness and the shuttered storefronts with an odd welling-up in his chest—he hoped she meant to wear those clothes. He hoped she meant to send for the red morocco trunks. He hoped she meant, having flown to someplace new, someplace unknown to her, to receive them. To open them and choose amongst their contents and walk out, appareled, into some new city. He hoped it with a hope that he knew to be outsized. Irrational. But he hoped it, still.

John and Germaine were managing a conversation, in imperfect English: going over, Sherlock realised, the details of the night Germaine and Irene had spent together in Irene's Luxembourg rooms, and John had spent watching their light from the street, drenched by the rain. Germaine was unearthing Irene's deception: the things she'd said to Germaine, to convince her that John and Sherlock would believe her little piece of deception about the photographs. Sherlock probably ought to be helping them, he reflected. Germaine's English was very good but she was patently exhausted; she reached for words, and found them missing; and John would be feeling doubly un-gallant, forcing her out of her native tongue only to tell her that her lover had lied to her. The Sherlock of a week ago, he realised, would never have left them to themselves; and the Holmes of a week ago would be appalled to lose the opportunity to gather his own evidence. But now. He pressed the back of his hand to John's thigh, which returned the pressure. He kept his eyes on the dark city, as it jolted past.

The thing of it was, he thought, feeling inexpressibly tired. The Holmes of a week ago—before Daniel, and Irene, and Rachel, and the tiled washroom of the Fleurs du Mal Room, and that portrait of John—the Holmes of that time would have felt that hope, as well. He would have felt it; and then he'd have offered up rationales. If Miss Adler means to send for the trunks, he would have said, then there is someone in Paris with whom she will correspond. We can find that person, he would have gone on. We can intercept her message. We can pursue her. We can run her down; stop her in her tracks. She's slipped through our fingers for the moment, he would have finished, though he'd have seen in his mind's eye, just as Sherlock now saw, Irene at a table in some eastern café, transformed by yellow silk and the summer sun. She thinks she can slip her old life, her old obligations, and start afresh; but she'll give herself away. They all do.

They all do, Sherlock thought, as Germaine said, embarrassed, 'You must have found me very ridiculous the past few days, and John said 'No, oh, no,' and the cab pulled to a stop in front of the flat arches of the Gare de Lyon. We all do.

Back on the pavement the sky was beginning, at last, to lighten in the east. The sleepiness of the streets was beginning to give way to railway station bustle. John's look, when Sherlock met his eyes, was searching, but didn't demand; his gaze bridged a distance for a moment only and then asked, with a tilt of his head towards the doors: Shall we?, so that Sherlock could nod.

He could recall any number of frenzied pursuits through and around railway stations—Holmes-and-Watson's many slippings through St Pancras and King's Cross; that galvanising dash through Victoria after Wilson and Demergue—but this morning they walked. Germaine held her train up off the earth, her hands clasped in front of her as if they held a hand-bag. John was favouring his bad leg. Sherlock, watching the back of John's head as they made their way through the entrance arch,
was visited by a vision of Daniel's portrait; and swallowing touched for a moment his own throat.

And then, there they stood, under the wide, glassed-in angle of the roof, buffeted by travellers moving with urgent purpose. By the departures board they washed up: Barcelona, Nice, Genève. Lausanne, Zürich. Aix-en-Provence. Germaine looked up at the names and Sherlock looked at them and then at Germaine, imagining Irene buying sachets of Provençal lavender to tuck into her red morocco trunks. At his side, John too was watching Germaine: eyes narrowed, considering.

'Do you have an idea of where she means to go?' Sherlock asked, in French. She'd no reason to tell him. She shrugged, and with a little smile shook her head.

'I don't suppose she herself decided until she was standing at the ticket counter,' Germaine said. She didn't take her eyes from the board. Avignon, Sherlock read. Milano, by way of Lyon. From there possibly Venice, he thought, or Naples, thence perhaps to abandon trains entirely. And as the station clock chimed the half-hour he had a sudden vision of her all in white. White trousers and a white blouse, on the dark-wood deck of a boat: alone, unseen, short hair uncombed; and blue-green, stretching out all about her, the Aegean Sea.

After a moment, Germaine said, 'I expect she hadn't even decided, yet, whether to leave me some way to work it out. Should I be so inclined.'

He blinked. 'And would you?' he said. 'Will you?'

She pursed her lips, and looked away, at last, from the marquee. 'No,' she said, drawing the word out. 'No, I shouldn't think so. Should you?'

Sherlock couldn't think what to say. In the absence of any clear objective he led them over to a place nearer the entrance with a workable view of the platforms from which the longer-distance trains departed. Germaine followed with neither comment nor urgency; she seemed lost in thought. John glanced with bruised-looking eyes between Germaine and Sherlock, Sherlock and Germaine. Sherlock, feeling somebody ought to, looked out over the bustling crowd.

'You said,' said Sherlock, in French, 'that you don't like to be left. That you didn't want to start things out by being left. Is that why you won't?'

Her silence had a quality of consideration. Through the glass ceiling the sky was a riot of oranges now, and peach; as if the day struggled forward out of fire. Sherlock thought again of that image of Irene, all in white on boat-deck; and realised now that it had been himself he'd been remembering. Of all things. That day in, when was it? 1911? 1912? A year or two, in any case, after he'd at last escaped the family seat, and set himself up in London, and made a point of avoiding everyone associated with the Holmes family; and then, because he could and it was inexpensive there, decamped for the summer to Crete, where he'd baked in the sun and fallen in with the young son of an English family on holiday and ended up investigating the disappearance of the cash-box of one of the friends of their Greek hosts; and had then come in one afternoon to a letter forwarded three times which mentioned in passing Mycroft's imminent departure for Athens—whereupon, delighted with his scheme more than with the prospect of a reunion with his brother, he had run out that very afternoon and hired a boat. The old boatman had set their course and gone to drink ouzo in his cabin and Sherlock had been quite alone on the dark-wood deck. The ocean had stretched out on every side. He had felt: I made all this happen; I could make anything happen; and it hadn't mattered, not really, that when he arrived at Piraeus he'd found his brother departed and himself quite friendless; or that he'd neglected to dine that evening, and spent that night in a flophouse so thick with mosquitos he couldn't sleep. It had all been his; his very own. The farthest thing possible from the chilly, circumscribed, immovable watchfulness of the person he was in his mother's rooms. To be alone like that wasn't the same, he thought, fiercely, as being abandoned; not the same as craving and being
denied. Nor yet the same as cleaving, hot-hearted or terrified or—or grateful, pressing one's wet face to the skin of the person who made of every place a home.

Here, now, just in front of their little nook in the Gare de Lyon, he could feel John's warmth at his side. He could feel himself tensing as a woman in red hurried by with a terrier tucked under one arm and a porter panting after her with luggage on a trolley. The porter, catching sight of Sherlock's costume, stumbled, and jogged Sherlock's leg with the edge of a trunk. Amidst apologies, tsking, and outraged barking, the three of them wended their way away.

'I suppose one occasionally likes to feel overwhelmed,' Germaine said, finally, in response to the question Sherlock had almost forgot asking. 'Swept up. Swept along. I'd have gone with her, if she'd been there daring me to do it. But I'm—I don't think I could make a life of it, do you? Mystery, romance. Sneaking about at all hours.' She yawned, hugely. 'I'm better at all that on paper. Then I can edit them into a neater shape.'

Sherlock snorted. The woman with the dog had vanished into the crowd.

'And of course I am furious at being jilted by my passionate beloved,' said Germaine, in English, and with such an earnest tone that John and Sherlock both burst out laughing; and she did, too. The laughter eased something, Sherlock thought. He could feel some of the tension in John's body, tucked up next to him, seep out as he giggled himself back into silence. He could feel it in himself. A space opening, for breath. It was good, he thought; and gently, quietly, he swayed towards John, shoulders towards shoulders, hips towards hips; resting his weight half against John's side and feeling him pressing back; until they were jostled apart—'Pardon me'—by the harried progress of another stray porter, making his way towards the platforms.

They jumped. Settled. Looked back out over the shifting crowd. Sherlock breathed out, sharp, through his nose; and drew his pieces back together.

'In any case,' he said, in English, thinking of Germaine at her desk, editing American crime novels. 'I don't find all this to be without a certain neatness. Hélène Picard said they got photographs and a confession from Charles Humbert. The Jouvenel name will be safe, then; at least from everyone except the Jouvenels themselves, who answer to no one; and Mademoiselle Picard will keep her position. So my. He swallowed. 'My cousin will be pleased.' Past them walked the crier, giving the three-minute warning for Milan, and the ten-minute warning for Basel. 'We didn't let her down,' Sherlock said, 'in any case.'

The day before, John had gone out for the fancy dress rentals, and on the balcony of the yellow-and-white hotel room Sherlock and Claudine had sat together, drinking coffee after coffee in the slowly-growing mid-morning heat. Sherlock had felt that after all of it—after falling to his knees beside Irene Adler's picture album, after his absurd weeping over that photograph of Claudine at thirty-two, after hesitating on the verge of summoning a cab to her flat in the middle of the night to ask her—what? Something momentous, he still believed. Yet there she sat, on the balcony in his odd, new-built hotel room, unbuttoning unselfconsciously the top buttons of her blouse. Fanning herself, with the back of her hand, as Sherlock's mind pressed on the fact of John's absence as one would worry a bruise. It was, of course, impossible to say, as he had imagined: Were you telling the truth, when you told me about the Work? Or: How would we have found each other, if I had forgiven you when I was still a child?

But he had groped forward. Because he had known, too, that he and John would soon be back on a train, and a boat, and a train. For himself he needed London with a starved and hollowed-out craving; needed his feet set on pavements they could navigate by sound and scent, eyes closed; he felt himself half-absent from Paris even now; and for John… Sherlock, on the Tuesday, had said in
passing the words *Baker Street*, and John's eyes had closed, and he had had to turn away. And so Sherlock hadn't long to say—whatever it would be; and so he'd rooted himself to his chair as Claudine spoke of the heat and other trifles, and: 'It wasn't right of me,' he'd said, stiffly, painfully, 'to hold it against you. Everything that—that happened, that winter.' And she had looked at him, startled; and leant forward, and touched the back of his hand—just the way John, standing exhausted in the Gare de Lyon as a pair of stooped and elderly gentlemen shuffled past, brushed his hand against Sherlock's now.

'Yes,' Germaine Beaumont was saying. 'I suppose it has a certain neatness. Only, if this were a manuscript Irene should never be allowed to escape; even if those photographs are as much hers as anyone's. I'd have to reject it for immorality if it crossed my desk; we'd—oh, what do you think. Happen upon her as she came out of the ladies', or—' She yawned again, so John yawned, so Sherlock did. 'Or queueing for a croissant in the train station,' she said. Her eyes were slipping towards closed.

'We'd no doubt have a thrilling chase,' John said. His voice sounded so warm, Sherlock thought. He pressed the back of his hand back against the back of John's; the too-bright buzzing quietened to an exhausted glow. Germaine's eyes did close, now.

'Mmmm,' she said. 'Down the platform. Over the tracks. Only, she'd have been so wicked, wouldn't she? There'd be a train oncoming, and—' another huge yawn. 'It just. Wouldn't be able to stop. That's the sort of thing the censors approve, you know.'

'I should hope,' Sherlock said, reaching into his pocket, which he was somehow startled to find made of satin, and not London wool, 'that if you were making such concessions to the censors from your desk at *Le Matin*, you'd make sure to get us all down on the tracks.'

Germaine laughed. 'Quite a crowd,' she said.

'Yes,' said Sherlock, drawing out his lighter and his cigarette case, and—and a folded-up piece of paper of which he had no memory. 'Yes, it will be a regular social gathering. Down on the… on the tracks.'

It was a print; a photograph. One of the photographs, he saw: though not a particularly scandalous specimen. In it Irene sat, smiling with some secret knowledge, sandwiched snugly between Henry Jouvenel and Charles Humbert at one of the very tables in the Chabanais salon past which Rachel had led Sherlock, four nights before. Her posture was provocative, daring, the kind of gesture that invited in by pushing away: back straight, one shoulder thrust forward, as if there wasn't quite room for her between the two men. Jouvenel's left arm and Humbert's right were slung up along the upholstery behind her shoulders so that their forearms lay touching: one atop the other. But the look on Irene's face, Sherlock thought, did not dare the viewer; nor did it repulse them. It was, rather—not pleading, he thought; but searching. As if she looked, not at the aperture of the camera's lens, but through the body of the machine to the photographer who stood behind. Or perhaps, he thought, through that person, too; to something else, unknown, forever unrecorded, that stood just beyond Gretha, out of reach.

The brush of fingers; of John's fingers. Sherlock started, and then shook his head, offering it up; fumbling to light a cigarette as John took the thing from him and turned it over. The three of them crowded around; Sherlock holding his cigarette off to one side so as not to drop ash or a spark on the paper, where Irene had written, *Give my regards to Limehouse, Mr Holmes.*

John gave an odd little half-laugh, still looking down at the message, and Germaine sighed, quiet, to herself only, as Sherlock thought at last to look out at the crowd. She'd been here; she could be here still; and he remembered, now, the woman with her angry little dog, and the porter who had collided
with them minutes later. Had there been others? At Platforms 11 and 17 trains were departing; at 8 and 15 trains were just pulling in.

'Well!' said Germaine; and she sounded, suddenly, something akin to the officious young spinster they'd first met in the service of Madame Jouvenel, and got to know all those ages ago, the previous week. 'I should be off,' she said, and she smiled. Stuck out her hand, and Sherlock shook it; and John. 'Plenty to do, now we're back in Paris,' Germaine said. 'And I'd like a few hours' sleep before I undertake the repair of the Matin offices.'

'Yes,' Sherlock said. 'Yes, you'll have your work cut out for you, I think.'

'I will,' said Germaine. She nodded to herself, and then gave a little, inward smile. 'I will, indeed.'

She moved off towards the entrance with her customary uprightness of posture, but swinging, just slightly, as if to some faint melody only she could hear, the hand that held her train. They watched until she was swallowed up in the crowd; and then a little longer, until Sherlock supposed she had made her way through the double doors, and out onto the street. He could feel John, by his side, watching after her too. Then he could feel him turn to watch Sherlock, instead. Sherlock swallowed.

'I suppose,' John said at last, 'that Irene will be off by now. That her, um. Her train will be off.'

'Yes,' Sherlock said. 'I suppose she will.'

'You're—not planning to look for her,' said John. Not a question. 'To look further into where she's gone.'

Sherlock was about to turn to him; to face him; but for a moment, with his eyes still on the shifting morning crowd, as a young man with his shirt half-untucked hurried past with a baguette in one hand and yesterday's edition of Le Matin in the other, he was suddenly overwhelmed by the strongest awareness—like a swooping-up and out of his own viscera—of the bare fact of all these separate existences. Even as it happened, even as it washed over him and left him clinging to the warmth of John as if to a life-raft, he struggled to think how such a reality could strike him as new. That fellow, with the paper—Holmes, a week ago, would have deduced with a glance his middling salary; his liberal politics; his ageing mother; her two Pomeranians; his desk service during the War; the business meeting to which he was already late; the secretary at his destination with whom, to a small but sincere degree, he was infatuated. And if all that were true then how could he, Sherlock, possibly now be struck, so vertiginously that he might almost reach out to steady himself on the iron railing, that this young man—and that elderly man, with his hobbyist leather work and his basement rooms—and that middle-aged woman, worried about her daughter though not the one who was engaged to be married—and that little girl, dressed in hand-me-downs, holding tight to the hand of a relation who was not her mother—that they all, every human body in this gathering, thickening crowd, carried inside them the burning centre of a whole turning world? And that they looked out, every one of them, from that centre; looked out and yet hardly ever saw; and that they brushed up, constantly, against the edges of one another; and yet only occasionally, all unknowing, somehow reached out and touched.

'I suppose it's true, what Mademoiselle Beaumont said,' said John. 'Those photographs are as much hers as anyone's.'

Sherlock, blinking, turned from the falling-down sock of the little girl and the creased post-card of the woman and the hand-made belt of the elderly man and the overstuffed boutonnière of the young one and turned to John: his John, who had now turned Irene's photograph over again in his hands and was looking down at it, worrying the corner with his thumb. How could it make such a difference, Sherlock thought. How could it make that kind of difference, how could it invade
everything, alter everything, transform the significance of every other human on the face of the earth, that John Watson had encountered Daniel MacIntyre in a Paris bistro, and they had drunk Glenkinchie together, and patronised a brothel together, and that John Watson had tried and failed to tell Sherlock Holmes the story of all of this, and that instead they had torn at each other in their Paris hotel room? How could it make such a difference that then Sherlock had spoken to a bloody French housewife in her home at midnight about her sons and her father and an executed Dutch spy, and that he had walked in the shadow of the basilica as the rain started, and then kissed a whore in a maison close and been thrown out and broken back in and lain on the blue-and-white stop.

But what was the point in stopping, Sherlock thought. John's thinned mouth; his golden eyelashes, God. Christ. What was the point in trying to stop, and close himself off, and think how he didn't want it. The change had been made, now, hadn't it. He would have to take it as it came. Under the bits of beard adhesive still clinging to John's face, twenty-four hours of stubble shadowed his jaw. Sherlock put a hand through John's arm; pressed his upper arm to John's shoulder through the crumpled wool of his summer suit.

'Will you take me home,' Sherlock said, low.

'Yeah,' John said. His voice caught, surprised; and he gave a half-shake of his head; but he managed a little smile, too. 'Of course.' He glanced up at Sherlock and his shoulders inched down his back and he nodded. Turned them both towards the exit.

'I hear you in my head,' he told John, as they walked. 'Worrying at me about breakfast.' Then he yawned, jaw-cracking, and for a moment closed his eyes. He kept them closed; let himself be led. He let himself hold himself up a bit, clinging to John's shoulder and the slightly uneven shifting of his weight as he walked.

'I can call the front desk again,' said John. 'Get you crepes and eggs, or—'

'No, we can stop somewhere,' Sherlock mumbled. 'When I said home, I didn't mean…' but he yawned again, hugely, and didn't finish; just tightened his grip on John's arm.

Outside, it was full morning. The last sunrise golds were just blueing out into a cloudless summer sky. John steered Sherlock through the porters and the cabs and the hurrying travellers, and out onto the pavement of the Boulevard Diderot, and then hesitated, looking about him.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I don't—'

'S all right,' Sherlock said. ' Doesn't matter. Just— walk.'

So John turned them, and set them going towards the river. Walking along, Sherlock shifted his grip in the crook of John's elbow, and John's other hand came up to keep it steady. Steady, Sherlock thought: all right. He squeezed John's forearm. Between the back of his hand and half of John's palm: the edge of Irene's photograph. Sherlock felt John realise it was there.

'Oh,' he said, taking his hand back, holding it up. 'Here, I should—'

'Keep it,' Sherlock told him. Swallowed. Said, 'Any time I find myself in Limehouse, you're likely to be there, too.'

John opened his mouth and Sherlock could hear him breathing in. Long; steady. And out. They walked like that down to the corner where the street met the quai. John stood there a moment, breathing hard, then nodded to himself, once, and steered them left, along the river, taking his hand briefly from Sherlock's hand to stow the photograph in the pocket of his suit trousers. Then he put his
hand back on Sherlock's hand, on his arm.

Sherlock let himself consider, for a moment, the picture they made, two abreast on the narrow pavement, flanked by the Seine: an exhausted yet respectable-enough modern-day Englishman in a nondescript dark suit, and a disreputable bewinged clown. While Irene, who days ago had jibed at him in her hotel room in Saint Malo, was somewhere east of Paris now. No longer a swaggering Giovanni or a bloody Caesar but something else. Something as yet unknown.

He tightened his grip on John's arm and John squeezed his hand.

They walked on along the bank of the Seine. They passed a café, on the other side of the street, where a weather-skinned woman in a blue kerchief was sweeping out a doorway; but Sherlock didn't make a move to cross, and John didn't insist. Only, as she looked up at them, pausing in her work to watch them pass, Sherlock, thinking How do you go to a fancy-dress ball? As a Pierrot? Pining for your Columbine?, made the woman a stiff little puppet-like bow. The corner of her mouth turned up; she shook her head; and Sherlock felt for an instant, just an instant, as if he might somehow reach out—spread open his arms—

She turned back inside her café; the moment passed. The pressure of John's palm against the top of Sherlock's hand increased; and then lessened; and when Sherlock glanced at him John was looking up, meeting Sherlock's eye. He stayed, stood close to him, touching him, holding him with his eyes, until Sherlock broke the connection, ducking his head to look out over the river; and feeling John do the same, by his side.

They were stopped, he saw, at the turning over the Pont de Bercy. Along the wide flat stretch of riverbank, in the direction from which they'd come, extended a shipping-yard for wine. The gold light of the morning shone on row after row of oaken casks, twelve deep and a hundred or more wide, lain to rest in neat regiments, on their sides. Beyond them, on the river, a winch stretched up from an anchored boat: its long arm motionless; its hook hanging still against the summer-blue sky.

'Not quite the postcard vista,' Sherlock said, glancing over. 'L'Arc de Triomphe and… all that.'

John didn't smile; didn't react. He looked out over the casks and the winch and the river, breathing steadily, narrowing his eyes against the sun as if coming to some conclusion. Some judgement.

'There's a certain appeal, though,' he said, at last. 'Isn't there.'

There was, Sherlock thought. He looked out at the regiments of barrels and thought: yes. The neatness of the lines. The repetition of the forms. The moment of stillness preceding the resumption of industry. And too, in his present strange, needing, outward-reaching mood, the sense—so concrete he might taste it, though he could never before remember having such a maudlin response to banal evidence of the industrial shufflings—of all the multifarious bifurcations and connections latent in those resting casks. For each one would soon be lifted; split; bottled up; dragged over land and ocean; dropped, perhaps, broken, spilt over dirt or pavement to be walked over by soles forever after faintly stained; or perhaps haggled over; perhaps bought up by the caseful; perhaps left dust-collecting in the back-rooms of shops, the cellars of houses, the shelves of French families and Belgian grandmothers and English bachelors; and then one day wrenched open, somehow miles away from this riverbank which was even yet miles from whatever hillside those grapes had first grown upon—miles away, he thought, miles and miles; over the Channel perhaps, on a Thursday in —stop, but no, no, he thought, pressing his arm against John's shoulder, go on: a Thursday, then, in Baker Street, when Mrs Hudson had outdone herself with her shepherd's pie, and John's eyes at the first bite had closed without his meaning them to and so Sherlock (flustered he would be; fond; helpless to do otherwise; turning to fetch the corkscrew to cover his self-consciousness) had invited her to sit with them and share their supper. And then he would pour some unremarkable, mid-priced
claret for the two of them, and for himself; and it would be, in their minds and of itself, utterly unworthy of note compared to a dozen other things about that evening; an evening which itself—because they took for bloody granted nearly every precious thing they had until it was, was lost, or changed, or compromised—they might scarce remember a month afterward unless Sherlock, gesticulating over-enthusiastically, should overturn his glass onto Mrs Hudson's white tablecloth, so that thereafter they could point to the stain and say: it was the night that happened. Before, the cloth had been unsullied; whereas now…

An isolated occurrence, they would suppose, in an isolated household. And yet, looked at another way, they would be merely three of how many? All over England, all over Europe, there would be people with whom they would, all unknowing, share some obscure connection, as on that still-future day they raised their glasses to their lips. As, indeed, they went through every trivial motion of every day. People whom they would never know. Could never know, perhaps, it was true: and a deep-sea uneasiness stirred in Sherlock. But it turned. Groaned. Its eyelids, somehow, heavy.

'Do you say so for my benefit?' Sherlock murmured, still looking out at the barrels. 'Or for your own?'

John laughed, then. Just a breath of a thing. He shook his head; ran his tongue out over his lower lip. He looked up at Sherlock, who felt himself close to tears, and blinked hard, looking up at the bridge.

'Shall we, then,' he said, low. His voice shook, but not too much; and John squeezed his hand again, and steered them around the turning and up the stone incline onto the Pont de Bercy.

The bridge proper ran, long and level, across the water. There was a bit of a breeze, buffeting their faces; Sherlock breathed into it and it steadied him. Walking on. Mid-way across they stopped, turned, and looked out along the river, back towards the city. The sun, rising higher in the sky, shone on the wine barrels and on the boats and the barges moored the by riverbanks; and cast long, chill shadows into the water. John's hand rested, still, over Sherlock's hand on John's arm.

'Claudine taught me the order of the bridges,' Sherlock told John. His voice was mostly steady, now. Almost entirely steady; but still he breathed deep. He pointed, and John leant his head closer in order to sight along Sherlock's arm. 'That second one's the Pont d'Austerlitz. You see, there, just before the bend in the river. The next one's, er—Sully—which is actually two bridges, made of cast-iron; meets in the middle at the Ile de la Cité. We can't see it, anyway. But that one, that first one, the single long arch, looks to be a railway bridge: that's new, since 1903.' He cleared his throat; let his hand fall. John squinted in the direction of the railway bridge. Sherlock admitted, 'I don't know what it's called.'

'Did you talk, the two of you,' John said, after a moment. 'Yesterday morning. You and Claudine.'

'Do you know. I don't think she ever thought that I'd—held anything against her, at all.' His voice wavered again; but it held. He cleared his throat. 'I think she thought: well, the boy's eleven years old. He's got his. Friends and interests and so on, back in England. One year he had a difficult winter and then. Then he went home and got on with things. Growing up. They're growing up so fast at that age, she said. And: I never know what to make of children.' Sherlock laughed. 'Here I'd thought she could tell everything about me, at a glance. That we were—' he swallowed. 'That we were the same, somehow.' Blinking, fast, onto the summer morning. 'But—but I think she thought: it was hardly surprising that her young nephew would go back home and forget, or—or have no interest, beyond a few perfunctory words tacked onto his mother's letters, in corresponding with his odd foreign aunt. Cousin. What you will.'

He breathed out, shaky. John pressed his hand. Still looking out at the bridges.

'So,' Sherlock said. 'Anyway, if you think about it, it's all quite—there I was, thinking I was
punishing her. And then there she was, hardly thinking of it at all. Getting on with her wide circle of acquaintance; assuming my family had ours. Not taking it—not taking it personally.' He shook his head. To think of that child. Choking on bitterness in the lavatory of the Calais train.

'Well,' said John. 'I suppose—if she had taken it personally, she might not have wired you last week, to come. And then you wouldn't—'

Sherlock heard John hear himself. Felt him freeze. The locking tension of shoulder to forearm to elbow and doubtless all down his back and his legs and up his neck. Then we wouldn't. Then we wouldn't, in a yellow-and-white room, with a door that click. Then I wouldn't, sweat-soaked sparring with a she-wolf by the seashore. Then we'd be in London still, still Holmes-and-Watson. Then you wouldn't have, with a boy you loved once, with a man you hardly knew. Then I wouldn't have, skinning my hand on a drain-pipe; and you in the rain; and I, depressing the plunger, looking down at your mouth wrenched open and your hollow untrusting eyes in the pale light of the drug-sick morning; Claudine, Christ, John. But she did, he thought. And he might be—furious, might easily; had been. No doubt would be. John's words echoed and he tingled with the gathering potential hold them close. Close. It radiated out from his spleen through the tips of his fingers: how he could keep silent. Let it go on. Perhaps he ought. But in this moment he didn't want to, he found. Strange, perhaps; but there it was.

'Yes,' he told John, instead. 'And she says—so many years lost, of real correspondence. But we've agreed now to write one another, after—from England. When. When you and I go home.'

He didn't look at John. He looked, with resolute mercy, out at the railway bridge and the Pont d'Austerlitz and beyond that, invisible to him, the Pont de Sully and the Pont Marie and the Pont Louis Philippe and on and on; as John, beside him, shook; and then trembled; and then, gradually, let his breathing even out. He only took his hand from Sherlock's hand to wipe his face with his sleeve.

'Baker Street,' John said, at last. Clogged, but steady.

'Mmmm,' said Sherlock. He felt John nod; felt an easing in his own chest. John wrapped an arm around Sherlock's satiny middle. His small, solid fingers, gripping Sherlock's waist.

'We can—what do you think?' said John. 'Mrs Hudson's Yorkshire pudding? Wire ahead for the most—most promising postings in the agony columns?'

'Nobody knows which are the most promising,' Sherlock said, 'except for me.' He spoke without thinking, almost crossly, as he would on a normal day, in London. John laughed, a little hysterically, and gripped him tighter, so it must have been all right.

'Dinner at Simpson's,' John said, into Sherlock's chest. 'You'll eat—four courses, I'll watch you, I—'

'A full day at the Turkish baths,' Sherlock countered. 'I'll watch you.'

'Though,' John said, 'I'll be cross with you if we don't stay long enough for you to show me, what was it, Lamarck's cabinets? Whosit's anatomy collections? The musculature on the skinless—hey—'

For it had—had welled up in Sherlock. The whole great formless weight of it, and eyes shut tight mouth twisting he had taken his hand from John's arm and pressed fingers to his closed lids curling in breathing as John turned to him. Gathered him to him. Front to front, palms flat to Sherlock's back, as Sherlock pressed his face into the thatch of John's hair.

'A joke,' John said, into Sherlock's shoulder. 'In poor taste.'

Sherlock shook. John smoothed one hand along his spine: dragging up, and down, as the other came
up to cup the back of Sherlock's head. To thread his fingers through Sherlock's hair. To dig in their tips, he'd done in the corridor outside Irene Adler's old flat. Dig in; release. Sherlock took his hand from his own face and put his arms around John's middle. Squeezed, hard.

'Christ,' John said. 'As far as I'm concerned let's catch the next train out, and welcome. Have our trunks sent on. Write off my Hamlet suit; send a cheque to the costumer's.'

'Charge it to the Jouvenels' account,' Sherlock said, wetly, and John gave a little snort, and squeezed Sherlock's nape. Sherlock exhaled; exhaled. Then drew back. He took a deep, deep breath, and turned out to face the river; salt-wet face cooled by the breeze, groping for John's hand.

'Yeah,' John said. 'Yeah, let's—let's go back to Baker Street. Soon as we can.'

But they didn't move; not at once. Together they stood and watched the river. It was still early, Sherlock realised, with some astonishment. The shadows were long, still. When he pressed his thighs against the stone railings, they were chill; and the river was quiet, though along the bank, amongst the wine-barrels, work-men were starting stiffly to arrive for their day's work. Slowly, from under the bridge, its shadow stretching out to the left of it into the water, the leading side of a barge appeared, laden with coal. More of it emerged, and more. John stood, with his hand in Sherlock's hand, and Sherlock stood and watched it come: its wide sides and its heaped black mounds; and then, at last, the trailing squared-off end of the thing, with a single man hunched over at the wheel in his little concrete enclosure; who steered it away, and away; and further away; under the nameless bridge and the one after, until, at last, he could no longer be seen.

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