The Frost Is All Over

by Chryse

Summary

John was brave and clever and loyal, a commoner who longed for an exciting life. Sherlock was dashing and brilliant and passionate, an Earl’s son who longed to solve crimes. Being a Tale of Glorious Adventures, Love Letters, Treachery, Longing, Secret Identities, Deathbed Confessions, First Kisses, Daring Escapes, and True Love.

Notes

So once again, I wrote the story I wanted to read, heavily influenced by the books I loved as a kid (plucky orphans save the day!), 19th century adventure novels, and all things Dickens--only centered around the relationship between John and Sherlock, and with sex, of course. In a nutshell: if the phrase "John and Sherlock in a Dickensian orphanage (with sex!)" makes you think "not really my area," no problem--see you around the comments on some of the worthier stuff out there. If, on the other hand, your reaction is "oh God yes", then pull a chair up to the fire, pour yourself a cup of tea, and let Chryse tell you a story.

Update: here is the beautiful cover khorazir made for this (as well as for the brilliant podfic by aranel_parmadil) and another beautiful cover by missmuffin221!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Recalled to Life

Part I: Sherrinford Hall

“Excuse me,” John said to the gnarled old man leading a plodding horse across the yard. “Can you tell me where to find Tobias Gregson?”

The old man stopped, considered John, and then appeared to ponder the question so long John wondered if he was deaf. Finally the man jerked a thumb over his stooped shoulder. “He’ll be around the back, in the paddock with the wee lasses.”

“Thank you,” John said and followed in the direction of the man’s vague thumb. Even so close to the stables the air smelled sweet, fresh with lilacs and spring flowers. The paddocks were well maintained to John’s eye, but he saw no small girls. He headed for a burly man leaning against a fence, watching three prancing yearlings. As John came closer, he realized the horses were all fillies. Ah. Wee lasses, indeed.

“Mr. Gregson?”

The man looked up, his weather beaten face open and cheerful. “Aye?”

“I’m John Watson. From the Chase?”

“Oh, aye!” The man shook John’s hand. “We thought you’d wire ahead—we’d have sent a gig for you to the station.”

“No need, I enjoyed the walk. Beautiful country around here.”

“It is that. The walk wasn’t…”

“I can walk and ride fine, as long as I needn’t gallop too long—it was my shoulder that was broken. But my racing days are done. I can’t hold the position anymore, there was some damage to my leg too.”

“What horse were you riding?”

“Lancer,” John said shortly. “He had to be put down.” The memory of Lancer screaming was the worst part of the ordeal, a nightmare that still haunted his sleep.

Gregson’s eyes were shrewd. “Hurt worse than the shoulder, I’ll wager.”

“Yes.”

“You look a mite young to be racing. How old are you?”

“Fourteen. Old enough to manage a horse, young enough to train up if your ways are different.”

Gregson laughed. “You’re a sharp lad,” he said approvingly. “I doubt you’ve learned bad habits at Sir Willoughby’s stables. Lovely racehorses he has…d’you know Moonlight?”

“Oh yes. He’s enjoying his retirement now, fat and happy in the pastures…we just had a colt of his born a few weeks ago, out of Lady Jane.”
“That’ll make a champion one day. We’ve one of his fillies here, can you pick her out?”

John dropped his bag to climb up on the fence. He considered the three young horses, all long legs and pricked ears, coats glossy in the warm spring sunshine. He held his hands out and looked to Gregson for permission. “Can I?” At Gregson’s nod, he clapped his hands together and shouted “Hah!” The fillies broke into a scatter of movement, tossing their heads and galloping about until they lost interest.

“That one,” John said promptly. “The bay. The way she picks up her feet? Beautiful gait on her.”

Gregson clapped him on the back so hard John almost fell off the fence. “Got it in one! All right, you can stay.”

John looked startled and Gregson laughed again. “You’d be staying anyway, but I’m glad the Chase hasn’t sent us a fool. Come on, let me show you around.”

They walked over the practice yards and stables, Gregson introducing John to everyone they met.

“We don’t raise racehorses here, mostly hunters, and the carriage horses, of course. His Lordship isn’t much for riding anymore, he’s getting on in years. The young Lord, Mycroft, he rides out for the hunt, but not much otherwise. They stay in London a lot of the year now, his Lordship’s in the government. The younger son, young Master Sherlock, he’s the rider. Loves a fast mount. Takes after his mother, God rest her soul.”

“So the family’s not here now?”

“No. Won’t be in residence for another month or so, probably.”

This was fine with John. Sir Willoughby had been one thing, a rich old bachelor who loved his horses more than his daily bread, but the Earl of Sherrinford and his family sounded a different matter altogether.

Gregson led John back to the cluster of buildings and through a low door into a long, cheerful room, with a fireplace at one end and a stove at the other. A woman and a girl a year or so younger than John sat at a large table, peeling potatoes.

“My missus, who does for us, and my girl Annie, to whom you’re never to speak,” Gregson said.

Annie rolled her eyes at John. “As if he would,” she said. “The only way a girl would be noticed at this table would be if she had four legs and a mane.”

John grinned back. It was true enough for his part—he’d yet to meet a girl who made his heart pick up the way a fine horse did.

“You’ll spend a lot of time here, evenings and winters,” Gregson said. “The other unmarried grooms and the gardeners have their quarters upstairs, but you’re the newest and youngest, so you’ll be replacing Young Tom in the stables.”

“Fair enough,” John said cheerfully. It was usual for someone to sleep in the barn, in case of fire or emergency. At Willoughby Chase he had spent his first two years bunking with the other stableboys in the hayloft.

The stables were well enough—not as extensive as those at the Chase, but airy and clean. A very tall young man leading a gray mare stopped and said, “Ah, you’ll be the lad from the Chase.”
“John Watson,” John said, offering his hand.

“Tom Abbot—everyone calls me Young Tom.” Young Tom had a pleasant, narrow face, and a slight cast to one eye.

“I’ll be taking your bed out here, I’m told?”

“Right you are—Young Tom, show him where to go, I’ll take Circe. My knees aren’t up to those ladders anymore.” Gregson took the lead rope and Young Tom pointed John to a ladder at the far end of the barn.

John was expecting a corner in the hay with a blanket roll, but as he reached the loft he saw a whitewashed door a few steps in. “That’s it, push the door open,” Tom said behind him.

The room was tiny—barely room for a narrow bed, small chest, and some hooks on the wall—and the ceiling sloped sharply, but the small windows set into the walls made it bright and cheery. John blinked at the quilts and pillow, the cozy rug, the lacy patterns of the furling baby leaves on the chestnut outside the east window. “All by myself?”

“Everyone else is just there at the house, and there’s a bell in case of fire,” Young Tom said reassuringly.

“No, I don’t mind, it’s lovely! I never thought of a whole room.” John had been born and raised in a one-room cottage, and even after graduating from the hayloft had shared a chamber at Sir Willoughby’s with three other boys. He had never even had a bed to himself, let alone a bedroom.

“Oh, I know what you mean. It’s lovely and quiet here, that’s sure—no snoring, no farting…”

“…no elbows in your back,” John said wryly. And no one to hear him if he had nightmares, he thought.

“And no one taking all the blankets—that was my brothers,” Tom agreed. “You’re right, I’d quite miss the place if only I could stand upright in here. It’s better suited for you, I think, no offense meant.” It was true that Young Tom could not straighten up even at the doorway, and he would be bent double by the window.

John laughed. “I’ll be snug as a mouse in a nest.” He dropped his bag at the foot of the bed. “Let me help you carry your things over, then you can show me the tack room.”

Tea at the big kitchen was lively and cheerful. John was the youngest, but most of the grooms and several of the gardeners were close to his own age, and were a boisterous lot in spite of their long day’s work. John made sure to compliment Mrs. Gregson’s cooking, which was excellent.

“It’s a treat to find peas and lettuces on the table,” he said. “We won’t have them for a while yet back home.”

“What’s it like there?” Annie asked, so John told them about the tiny village, the long winters and treeless moors.

“Have you had much of the trouble there?” Young Tom asked, looking up from his plate. “We heard it was worse, in the north.”

“More so in the cities, I think,” John answered. “The ladies that were taken up and, er, mistreated—
that was in Blastburn, or maybe York. We’ve had not trouble in the countryside, nor likely to, I should think. Sir Willoughby’s a fair master and a just lord; there’s none with cause to complain. My father died in a barn fire a few years ago and Sir Willoughby let my mother stay on in the cottage, rent free, until we were grown.”

“Not many would,” one of the gardeners, Len, said. “My own mother was turned out when my father died.”

“But if the reforms were passed,” said Young Tom, “then your mother would have been entitled to the widow’s mite by law, and not dependent on the charity of the lord.”

“I didn’t know that.” Len looked up in surprise. “I thought the reforms were all about schools.”

“You hear that most, around here,” Gregson said, “but that’s because of the Earl—his Lordship is a leader of the reform movement, he’s behind the Schools Act,” he explained to John.

John nodded politely. He had little interest in politics, but of course if his employer was a supporter, then John was too.

“Don’t hold with it,” Old Tom said unexpectedly. “I’m a horse man. God made me a horse man. I was born a horse man, I’ll die a horse man, and sending me to school and making a scholar or a parson out of me would have just made me a…horse man in a collar.”

“I’d go to your church, Reverend Tom,” Danny, another of the young gardeners, said seriously.

“Why’s that,” Old Tom said suspiciously.

“Short sermons,” Danny said and John laughed with the rest. He had seen already that Old Tom was parsimonious with his speech.

“I don’t know about that,” Gregson said, leaning back amiably. “I feel much the same, but I was born to the work. Maybe if I’d been born in Plymouth I’d think I was a seaman instead of a horseman. What about you, John? Were you brought up with horses?”

“Oh, I was bred to the stable,” John said seriously. “My father wanted to be a jockey all his life, but he grew too tall and it broke his heart. So he traveled the country delivering horses for Sir Willoughby until he found the smallest girl in England and married her, so he’d be sure to have a short son. So he always said, anyway.” Everyone laughed again, and he smiled too, but he felt the sting of bitterness in the story now. Was his father disappointed in him, up in heaven?

Mrs. Gregson tactfully changed the subject, asking the gardeners about the spring planting. The meal ended and the men settled around the table, cleaning boots, reading the newspapers, or playing checkers. John watched for a while, but it had been a long walk and a longer day. He soon excused himself.

Up in his new room, John climbed into bed alone for the first time in his life. He stretched experimentally, savoring the freedom to sleep in any position he chose, sprawling out over the bed. Within a few minutes, though, he found himself curled onto his side, staring wakefully into the dim room. The walls did not go all the way to the ceiling, so he could hear the horses’ soft rustlings below, mice scurrying in the hay, but the stable still seemed too quiet. The bed felt big and empty. For the first time in years he felt the ache of the empty space at his side, the absence where Emmy had always curled under his arm.

There was a soft thump and John looked up, unsure where the sound had come from. He saw nothing out of place, but a minute later he heard a small sound—prrrp—and felt a second thump by
his feet. A barn cat. She sniffed John’s blanket, picked her way delicately over his legs, and finally settled behind him, curled up into the backs of his knees. A loud rumbling purr rose.

John smiled. He could just see that the cat was a ginger, with white face and tail, fluffy and plump on barn mice. Emmy had been a redhead too. Her hair had been the brightest in the village, the brightest thing in John’s life.

“Did my sister send you?” John asked the cat. “It’s just the kind of thing she would do.” He pictured Emmy, as he supposed, in a white gown and wings, looking down at her homesick brother, deciding that what he needed was a cat. “Tell her thank you for me,” John told the cat gravely. The cat purred. John tucked himself more comfortably under the blankets and closed his eyes, still smiling. He still felt the awful burden of his empty life, a life without racing, but the bed felt warm and cozy now. His room was not quite so empty.

Over the next several weeks, John found himself gradually settling in. Mr. Gregson was kind, if a firm taskmaster; the other lads were friendly; the grounds of Sherrinford Hall lovely—the parks where he rode the horses more beautiful than any he had seen in the north. He was content enough, he supposed, but it was a dull quiet life, nothing to the excitement of racing. And no matter how hard he rode and worked during the day his sleep remained fragmentary, broken all too often by dreams of pain and fear and Lancer’s distant screams.

One drizzly and dreary morning John stumped to the kitchen feeling dull and gloomy, only to find everyone in an unexpected uproar.

“What’s up?” he asked Young Tom.

“The family comes back today. Don’t you remember? Mr. Gregson’s in a state because he says we didn’t get the carriage shined up properly yesterday.”

John had been working with the colts, and had been missed carriage duty. “Can I help?”

“Ah.” Young Tom waved the offer away. “He’s never satisfied til he goes over it himself. Do you want to go along to town? They’ll need a wagon for all the luggage, and lads to load it. We always go early so there will likely be time for a pint. You’ve only been the once.”

John was tempted. Sherrinford town, with its high street and shops, seemed a bustling metropolis to him, but his family needed his wages and he would need new boots come winter. “Best not, but thanks,” he said. “Next night off I’ll go to the pub with you though. I want to walk Circe a bit today anyway, she’s favoring that right foreleg.”

“All right then.” Tom drained his tea and sighed as Gregson bellowed from the doorway. “I’d best get to it, it’s never a good sign when he turns red in the face like that.”

The drizzle had turned to full-on hard rain by the time the carriage and wagon returned in the afternoon, mud spattered halfway up the freshly polished sides. John saw the entourage from where he was riding and hurried back to the barn, knowing the wet horses would need to be rubbed down. He had just pulled out a pile of pleasantly horsey-smelling blankets when Young Tom appeared, drenched to the skin and leading the carriage horses.

“You look like you need this more than the horses,” John said. “Go over to the house and get dried off—Old Tom will be along in a minute and we’ll take care of them.”

“Ta. It’s really pissing down right now, I’m glad the footmen have charge of the luggage.” Tom
shook himself like a dog, spraying water everywhere, and handed the reins to John. “Let me just get some dry breeches on and I’ll be back in a jiff.”

John got the bridles off and the halters on, draping one horse with a blanket while he went to work on the other. Old Tom appeared, grumbling, just as Ned brought in the wagon horses, every bit as soaked as Young Tom had been. Mr. Gregson appeared in the doorway, looking wet and harassed, and said, “Where’s Young Tom? We need to get the carriage—oh, I beg your pardon, my Lord.”

John looked up. Standing just outside the barn door was a tall, impeccably dressed young man holding a large umbrella, which he lifted courteously to cover them both as he said politely, “May I have a word, Gregson?”

“Of course, m’Lord,” Gregson said. This must be Lord Sherlock, the rider, thought John, arranging for a mount the next day. “Optimistic of him,” he muttered, rubbing at the horse’s mane as he glanced at the rain sluicing past the barn door.

Gregson came back inside, wiping rain from his eyes, “John—oi, where have you been?”

“Dry trousers,” Young Tom said succinctly as he ducked inside. “I’ll take him, Ned, you change now—sir, Davy says can you come to the carriage house, he thinks the wagon’s loosed an axle.”

“Blast it,” Gregson muttered, going red again.

By teatime man and beast alike were dry and warm and spirits had risen considerably. There was a great deal of gossip about the family, most of it secondhand from the house servants. John, whose acquaintance did not stretch past seeing an indistinct wet clutch of aristocrats making for the front door, could not muster much enthusiasm, but everyone else took a lively interest. One of the lords, or maybe more than one, looked well; one seemed pale; someone had yet another new tutor; and there was general pleasure that some cousin or other would not be joining the party until later.

“I’m glad this is letting up,” Young Tom said, looking out at the rain, which had once again slowed to a misty drizzle. “Lord Sherlock will ride fair weather or foul tomorrow and we just got all that mud cleaned up in the stables.”

“Right,” Gregson said, looking up. “John—“

“Sir, I’m sorry I meant to tell you earlier, Circe’s got a limp,” John said. Circe was the fastest of the riding horses, and he assumed she would be Lord Sherlock’s first choice. “I just walked her today, but she’s still favoring it. I’ve put a poultice on and I think she ought to rest a few days. I’ll be changing the poultice after tea, if you want to take a look for yourself.”

“No need. You’ve got a good eye for an injury,” Gregson said and John felt himself flush with surprised pleasure. He had always taken care to learn all he could about tending to the horses when they were sick or lame, but hadn’t realized Gregson had noticed.

“We’ll need the farrier out soon anyway—Leviathan’s got a shoe loose now,” said Davy, and Gregson groaned.

“Oh, by the—” he cut himself off at Mrs. Gregson’s disapproving glare. “—blessed St. Eligius. Lads, if there’s any more trouble, save it until tomorrow unless it’s life or death, all right? It’s enough to drive a man to drink.”
The rain had all but stopped when John went to Circe’s stall, hanging the lantern carefully so that he could see her foreleg. The poultice seemed to be irritating her, but he saw no swelling, so he cleaned off the leg and put on a clean bandage. Then he leaned against the wall and let her nibble sugar lumps from his palm.

“Is this my life from now on?” John asked the horse. “Mucking out stalls, bandaging forelegs, talking to horses and cats?” He sighed. “I don’t know, girl. There’s plenty would say I don’t know my own good fortune—room and board and good wages, I know I’m luckier than most, but…nothing ever happens to me. Not anymore. Is this all there will ever be?” Circe nuzzled at his palm, snuffling for more sugar, and John stroked her soft nose. “Well, that’s all the sugar there will be, for tonight, anyway.” Circe huffed. “Spoilt lassie,” John said with affection. “Go have a nice sleep now, it’s the low pasture for you tomorrow.”

Even a glimpse of the stars in the east could not cheer John from his gloom as he climbed to his loft. So it would be clear tomorrow, so what? Another dull day. He tucked himself into his bed and thought again nothing ever happens to me as Emmy’s cat leapt happily down and tucked herself into his legs.

John woke abruptly, in the pale gray dimness of too-far-before-dawn. Something had woken him, but he did not know what. A horse, took sick? He sat up to listen.

Down below, in the stable, he heard a soft, human-sounding chirrup, followed by the slow clopping of hooves. Someone was taking a horse out of its stall, John thought with sleep-fuddled astonishment. What on earth? Sir Willoughby had never had guards—Willoughby Chase’s isolation made them unnecessary—but John knew the big racing stables down south feared theft. The Earl’s horses, however, though fine, were hardly in a class to tempt horse thieves. Someone from the village? Mobs as they had heard of in the north, raiding aristocrats?

Well, there was only one way to find out. John considered ringing the fire bell, but that would rouse the whole estate, and might be a bit excessive if this just turned out to be a village lad on a dare. As quietly as possible, John slipped into his clothes and boots and leaned out over the ladder. No one in sight. No lights either—whoever was down there did not want to be seen. He quickly nipped down the ladder, grabbed a pitchfork, and crept along the center aisle, eyes wide and already adjusted to the dim light. Halfway down he spotted an empty stall: Circe’s. John set his jaw.

At the crossway in the center of the stable John came to Circe, cross-tied and waiting patiently, but no one else was in sight. Circe nosed at John in the hope of more sugar. “Shh,” John whispered, looking over his shoulder just as someone came out of the tack room carrying a saddle. A very small someone. “What do you think you’re doing?” John said loudly.

The boy jumped so hard he almost dropped the saddle. He was wearing a very shabby coat and hat that were far too big for him, and he had to tip his chin up to look at John from under the brim. “I am going for a ride,” he said haughtily. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“How do you think you’re doing?” John said loudly.

“Stopping you,” the boy said indignantly. “That’s my horse!”

“That’s my Lord the Earl’s horse. Who might you be?” In spite of the coat and hat this was clearly no villager—his accent was far too posh. A guest?

“I’m Sherlock Holmes. Who are you?”
“You’re not either. I’ve seen Lord Sherlock, and you’re not him. And you mean to tell me that’s a lord’s coat?”

“It’s a disguise!”

“What’s going on?” Gregson pushed through the small barn door. “Ah, Master Sherlock. I had a feeling you might be here.”

John’s jaw dropped. “This is Lord Sherlock? Then who were you talking to last night?”

“Lord Mycroft,” Gregson answered.

“Lord Mycroft,” repeated John in confusion, while Lord Sherlock said crossly, “What was Mycroft doing here?”

“Telling me your father’s orders. Which were that, after the kidnappings recently, you weren’t to ride out alone. And as I understand it your latest tutor doesn’t ride, so your father’s made it known that you’re not to go out without a groom to accompany you.”

“I don’t want a groom! I’ve a great deal of ground to cover today and I can’t be bothered with Old Tom holding me back and whining that we have to get home or he’ll miss his luncheon. Anyway look, I’ve got a disguise—no one’s going to know who I am.” Lord Sherlock held out his arms to show his coat.

“Oh, that will fool everyone,” John said sarcastically. “If the kidnappers are too dim to notice the quality of your horse and saddle, they’ll still know you for an aristocrat the minute you open your mouth.”

Lord Sherlock frowned, momentarily distracted. “Do you think so? Maybe I should work on that.”

“Work on it all you like. You’re not going out alone,” Gregson said. “And you needn’t worry about being slowed down because I’m not sending Old Tom with you, I’m sending John.”

“What?” John and Lord Sherlock both said in unison, identically outraged.

“I’ll wager he can keep up,” Gregson said placidly. “And you’re not going out on that horse, either—she’s favoring her foreleg; I’m surprised you didn’t notice. You’re taking Blackbeard.”

“Blackbeard’s got fat! How am I supposed to escape from rampaging aristocrat-hating mobs on Blackbeard?”

“I’m a lot less worried about those mobs than I am about you giving John the slip. That will be a lot harder to manage on Blackbeard. Mind your manners, and you can have a faster mount next time.”

Sherlock looked mutinous. John felt much the same as he said, “But sir, I’ve got my duties, and Circe—“

“I wager I can manage those colts, and Circe’s likely to survive until you come back. “

“But…” John could think of no other ending to this sentence than the honest one, which was “I don’t want to spend the day nursemaiding a spoilt child,” which didn’t seem the wisest thing to say out loud. Judging by the glare Lord Sherlock shot him, he didn’t have to.

“What horse is John taking?” Sherlock demanded.

“Hermes.”
Sherlock opened his mouth in enraged fury, and John waited for him to fling the tack to the ground, threaten to tell his father, or at least stamp his foot. Instead—to John’s grudging respect—he blew out hard through his teeth, snapped “Fine,” and turned on his heel to stomp back into the tack room. He was actually going to put up Circe’s things, John realized in surprise.

“You go on over to the kitchen,” Gregson said to John. “Missus had a notion he would try to sneak out early, so she’s getting you some breakfast. Sorry I forgot to tell you last night.”

“But the—“

“I’ll get Hermes, and if Master Sherlock wants to roust decent folk out of their beds before sunrise, he can tack his own horse.”

“Oh,” John said, casting desperately for a last minute argument that would save him from this chore and failing utterly. “Yes, sir.”

Mrs. Gregson was just taking the kettle up when John came in. “Ah, he tried to slip off, didn’t he? I thought as much. Thank goodness you caught him, John, Lord Sherrinford would be in a taking if he’d managed it.”

“I suppose,” John said, and then, feeling he sounded a bit churlish, “He’s a bit young to be going off on his own in any case, isn’t he? How old is he?”

“Oh, he’s twelve and a half now. Midwinter baby. Came early too, but it was a mild winter and all went well, that time.” She set a plate before John.

“Thank you,” John said, and then, “But not the next?”

“Too early again, and the childbed fever. My Lady and the baby both lost. A hard way to go; my own mother was the same.”

“My oldest sister too,” John said. Mary had been nine years older, more a parent than a sibling, but he had loved her and her death had nearly broken their mother’s heart, coming after their father and Emmy. “He’s rather little then, isn’t he? For twelve?”

“Oh, he’s always been delicate. Weak lungs, they say, though he’s always done well enough here in the country. He’ll grow tall in the end though, you mark my words—Lord Mycroft was just the same.” Mrs. Gregson brought a satchel over to the table. “Now, if I know Master Sherlock, he’ll be gone for hours with no thought to his own meal or anybody else’s, so I’ve put up enough bread and cheese for two, and there’s a bottle of ginger beer for a bit of a treat. Just for today, mind, don’t go expecting it every day.”

There was an impatient shout from outside. “John!”

Mrs. Gregson rolled her eyes fondly and put her hand out as John made to get up. “You finish your tea, he can wait another minute. I’ll just have a word with him about these silly tricks, waking us all up so early.” She bustled out as John sank back, clutching his mug and thinking with horror, *every day?*

The sun was just up when John made his way out with the satchel, making him squint up at where Sherlock was already perched impatiently on Blackbeard as though ready to lead troops into battle. He had done off with the ridiculous coat and hat and John saw him properly for the first time: the fine straight line of his back, his long neck and high cheekbones, the piercing grey-blue of his eyes. John’s chest gave a funny, squeezing clench. Lord Sherlock was…beautiful; there was no other word for it, as beautiful and proud as the finest Arabian John had ever seen. He realized abruptly that
he was staring and flushed, turning to Hermes.

“Don’t let him run off,” Gregson muttered, handing John the reins.

“I heard that,” Lord Sherlock snapped. “I’ll have no reason to run off if John can actually keep up as you say, but I can’t be responsible if he doesn’t.”

“Oh, I can keep up with you,” John said, swinging himself easily into the saddle. “Let’s be off then.”

They kept to a walk up to the gate, where John waved to the porter, wondering how Lord Sherlock had planned to get past him if he made it out of the barn. He had no idea why they were leaving the grounds at all—Sherrinford Hall’s parkland seemed practically endless to John—and he assumed they were headed to town, so he was surprised when they reached the road and Lord Sherlock turned right.

“I assume I’m allowed to canter?” Lord Sherlock asked haughtily.

“Certainly,” John replied, and they were off. John felt his spirits rising with the sun. It was a beautiful day, he was out for a lovely long ride on a fine horse, someone else would have to muck his stalls, and his charge had not given him too much trouble. Yet. John had to admit that Gregson had been right: Lord Sherlock was an excellent rider, although he would be no match for John mounted on fat old Blackbeard. John almost hoped he did try to escape—it would be lovely to give chase.

They had gone only a few miles when Lord Sherlock stopped abruptly, slid off, and said, “Here—hold my horse,” and walked into the woods. John stood uncertainly, holding the reins. Was he trying to escape? He couldn’t get far around here on foot, surely. Perhaps he just wanted a piss. John was beginning to feel annoyed when Lord Sherlock reappeared and swung himself back in the saddle without a word of explanation, adjusting, John noticed for the first time, a satchel even bigger than John’s own. What was he up to?

“Keep up,” Lord Sherlock snapped and heeled his horse to take off again, not even waiting for John to mount. John cursed and flung himself back into the saddle, catching up easily as Sherlock continued along the same stretch of road.

Lord Sherlock stopped several more times. Once they had turned onto a smaller road and were out of the woods John could see what he was doing, although that didn’t make his actions any clearer: he seemed to be collecting dirt with a teaspoon, tipping it carefully into small envelopes and then making copious notes in a leather notebook. “What are you collecting?” John asked curiously.

“Soil samples,” Lord Sherlock snapped curtly, and that was the end of that discussion.

Eventually they came to a curve in the road in an area of gently rolling turf, meadows and pasture spreading in all directions. Lord Sherlock pulled his horse to a halt and turned, rather stiffly, to John. “I want to go to a pond—it’s about a mile away, that direction.” He pointed over the smooth grass. “You’ll see the trees around it when you get closer. I wish to gallop there, but I give you my word I will wait for you at the pond and not try to leave before you catch up.”

“You think you can beat me to this pond, do you?” John asked mildly.

Lord Sherlock looked taken aback. “Of course.”

“Well, only one way to find out,” John said. He wheeled around so he was next to Blackbeard and said, “On your mark…” He felt himself automatically falling into starting position, knees tight and hips raised, without the slightest twinge in his leg.
“One, two, three, go,” Lord Sherlock shouted and John shot forward like a rabbit startled from cover. He flew out over the grass, wind in his face and eyes streaming, all but laughing with the sheer joy of riding swift and smooth on a fast horse. He kept his eyes fixed on the direction of the pond, trusting Hermes to see to the ground, filled with the thrill of it, of racing, hearing his opponent’s hoofbeats fading behind as he…wait. That wasn’t good. If he got to the pond first Lord Sherlock was likely to be furious—aristocrats were always sore losers in John’s experience—and would make his life miserable. Or the whole thing could be a clever trick and Lord Sherlock was actually planning to peel off the second John was far enough ahead not to notice and take off in a completely different direction. Then everyone would make John’s life miserable. There was a small ridge up ahead, not likely to be steep, but John seized the chance to slow as though nervous about a drop. Lord Sherlock was by him in a flash, low and determined with his eyes narrowed against the wind, and John made a great show of shouting and haranguing at Hermes to catch up while keeping him back. Only when the copse of trees came into view did John dig in his heels, putting on a last burst of speed to arrive at the bank of the pond just a bare length behind Blackbeard.

John slid off Hermes, short of breath and grinning like a fool, only to be rounded on by Lord Sherlock in what looked to be a fine temper. “You let me win,” he accused.

“What?” John said, taken aback.

“You let me win. Don’t deny it, you’re a far better rider than I am, I saw it when we started out. But then you pulled back halfway through. It isn’t a fair race if you hold back.”

John was astonished. Of all the outcomes he was expected, it had never occurred to him that Lord Sherlock would be angry about winning the race, but here he was, clearly furious, blue eyes burning in his pale face. “Well,” he said fairly, “you’re quite a good rider yourself. If you’d been on Hermes and I’d been on Blackbeard, I think we’d have been quite evenly matched.”

Lord Sherlock’s face lit with inspiration. “We could switch on the way back!” Then it darkened again. “You won’t though, will you. You think I’ll run off.”

“Would you?”

“This morning, perhaps, if you’d not let me canter, or you couldn’t keep up,” Lord Sherlock admitted. “But if you let me have Hermes for a race and I swore to switch back at the end, then of course I wouldn’t.”

“Well, let’s see in a bit,” John said. “These horses have earned a bit of a rest and I wouldn’t mind one myself. I’m going to take them around the other side where the bank slopes down and let them drink, and then find a good spot to tie them out. I’ll fetch you when I’m done, if you like?”

Lord Sherlock agreed to a break without fuss, so John led the horses around to the far side of the pond and took off their bridles, wiping them down and replacing them with rope halters. He took them down to the pond and let them drink, idly watching Lord Sherlock on the other shore; he now appeared to be tipping mud into a glass vial. John shook his head, thinking rich people, but without any real rancor. Lord Sherlock might be headstrong and rude, but John was coming to see that he was also clever, determined and honest, and spoke to John as though he were an equal. He was surprised to realize that he was actually looking forward to sitting with Lord Sherlock and sharing a meal--maybe he would find out what he meant to do with all the dirt. Their drink finished, John brought the horses up to a nice patch of grass. He liked this place: there was a fine sunny slope overlooking the pond, a tiny trickling stream for water, and a large inviting willow if the sun grew too hot.

As he set out to round the pond again John heard voices. He looked up, shading his eyes with his
hand, and saw three boys making their way down the back. Village boys or farmers, John thought; they would likely recognize Lord Sherlock and keep going, but he was probably finished with his mud anyway. John set the satchel in the willow’s shade and followed after them, unnoticed.

John was cutting through the small stand of trees when the idle chatter suddenly stopped and one of the boys—the biggest, John thought—said, “Well, look who it is, Lord Freak. Playing in the mud now?”

“How charming to see you too, Daniel. Out thieving again?” Lord Sherlock drawled. There was absolutely no trace of nervousness in his voice. John groaned inwardly. Had the boy no sense at all? Perhaps he just trusted to his status to protect him. John began silently edging his way sideways through the trees, trying to circle around the village boys while still keeping them within earshot. “And you, Robert Moreland—skiving off school? Your mother thinks you’re there; she wouldn’t have packed you up that nice luncheon to get into trouble with Daniel Watts.”

“Don’t you talk about me mum,” a second voice snarled, and then a third, lower, said, “Come on, lads, let’s be off.”

“Kit?” Lord Sherlock said, surprised and suddenly uncertain. John stepped on a twig that snapped loudly underfoot and froze, but the little group down below showed no sign of hearing.

“Kit?” Daniel said, a jeering note in his voice now. “What, were you friends with Lord Freak, Christopher?”

“Course not,” the boy mumbled. John was almost behind them now. He saw the boy, skinny and towheaded, head down as though unwilling to look any of them in the eye. “Used to see him around when we lived on the grounds, is all.”

“Why aren’t you in school, Kit? You were clever. You wanted to go to school.” Lord Sherlock sounded more curious than dismayed: John couldn’t tell if the other boy’s denial had hurt him or not. “It’s your stepfather, isn’t it? He can’t abide the thought of you rising farther than he did, not that that would be hard, it’s a fairly low bar—“

“Shut up,” Kit snarled, his face now suffused with red.

Lord Sherlock hesitated, then plowed ahead. “Would you like me to talk to—“

Daniel sniggered and Kit said abruptly “I don’t want anything from you. I don’t need school anyway, everybody knows it’s just for nancy boys and pansies—“

John was far enough out now that he saw the brief flash of shocked hurt in Lord Sherlock’s eyes before his face went cold and aloof again. He turned away with a shrug, saying, “Go on then, at least you’ve made it easier when things go missing in this area later today. I would be careful in those boots though, Daniel, the prints will be even more distinctive than the last time you were caught. Did you try to mend them yourself? Rather a mistake, I should think. Funny, your brother always has new boots, do you think your father favors him because he’s so much more likeable than you are or because he knows you’re likely a bastard? You do realize it’s the worst kept—“

Daniel roared and threw himself at Lord Sherlock with such force that they both toppled into the pond. John sighed, cleared the trees, and leapt down the bank after them. Lord Sherlock came up swinging—he was no coward—but he was also no fighter, and Daniel knocked him down easily again before the other two boys reached them and hauled Lord Sherlock to his feet between them for Daniel to punch.
John jumped the rest of the way, landed behind Daniel, and tapped him on the shoulder. Everyone looked up as Daniel turned, and John hit him with a swift uppercut that knocked him into the water in turn.

“Is this how it’s done here?” John asked them. “Three against one, and all of you bigger? Doesn’t seem like a fair fight to me, but then I’m new in these parts.” Kit had already let go of Lord Sherlock and was edging away, but Robert was foolish enough to leap for John, so John knocked him down too. Daniel had got to his feet by that point and landed a lucky punch that split John’s lip, but then Lord Sherlock, still winded from getting struck repeatedly in the solar plexus, threw himself at Daniel’s knees and knocked all three of into the mud. John kicked out at Robert, who was getting to his feet again, and caught him in the jaw; he then dragged Daniel bodily up by his clothing and tossed him toward the bank. He was blazing with fury. “You want to pick a fight,” he shouted, “then go start one with someone your own size. Now GET OUT!”

They got out. John was left standing on the edge of the pond, wet, bleeding, and trembling with rage. He took several deep, calming breaths before looking around for Lord Sherlock, who was standing behind him knee-deep in the muddy water, wide-eyed with shock.

“Well,” John said, “not how I expected to spend my first day as a Lord’s groom,” and then suddenly they were both laughing, doubled over and shaking with the giggles.

“That was,” Lord Sherlock gasped, trying to get his breath, “That thing that you, that you did, that was...good.”

“That was ridiculous,” John said and that set them both off again. John was laughing so hard his sides actually hurt.

“Here, let me…” Lord Sherlock said, digging in his pocket, and before John realized what he was doing the Earl’s son had caught the back of his head and was pressing his own immaculate handkerchief to John’s lip.

“No, please, my Lord, it’s fine, don’t--”

“Sherlock,” Sherlock interrupted him firmly. “You will call me Sherlock.” And when John stared at him, “We’re brothers in arms now, after all, aren’t we?”

John looked into that pale patrician face, a tiny crease between the clear bright eyes, and knew instinctively that Sherlock was every bit as lonely as he was himself. “All right,” he said, “Sherlock. But only when we’re alone, mind.”

Sherlock’s face lit with a brief, brilliant smile. “Excellent,” he said. “I think this has almost stopped bleeding, but you should hold the handkerchief on for a bit just to be sure.”

“All right,” John said, pressing the cloth to his mouth. He had never held anything so fine, and it seemed almost a sacrilege to soil it with his blood. The linen was as smooth as paper. “Listen, I’ve got bread and cheese in my bag over there. What do you say we have a rest and some luncheon?”

They ate in companionable silence, swapping the ginger beer bottle back and forth, watching the horses graze and the lazy lapping of the water in the pond. They had spread their jackets out to dry and when they finished John lay down on his stomach to dry his backside, closing his eyes and dozing in the sun. When he woke, he cracked one eye to see Sherlock lying next to him, chin propped on his left hand as he made more notes.

John stretched and yawned, rolling to his right side to face Sherlock. He was curious about the
notebook, but wasn’t sure if it was something he should ask about. “Why was that boy Daniel so rude to you? I mean, before you started insulting his mother.”

“Oh.” Sherlock looked over as though he had forgotten John was there. “Last fall someone stole chickens from old Widow Turner. The thief had climbed through a small window and there was a band of gypsies camping on the green at the time, so suspicion fell on them and some of the children were actually arrested. Which was ridiculous, as there were clear footprints at the chicken coop made by someone wearing muddy boots, and of course the gypsy children had no shoes. I explained this to the inspector, but he wasn’t inclined to listen to me, especially as he and his men had trampled the coop so thoroughly that no footprints remained to be seen. Fortunately, there was a clear print on the windowsill and some of the mud had dried. When I looked at the mud through my magnifying glass, I could see there were bits of chaff and flour caught in it.” He paused and looked at John expectantly.

“A mill?”

“Exactly! You’re far cleverer than the inspector, although he did get there eventually. I identified Daniel as the most likely suspect—he lives at the mill, he was the right size to fit through the window—well, he was then—and had already displayed character traits that seemed consistent with someone who would rob an old lady and let innocent children take the blame. His boots were a match, and the gypsy children were released. Daniel never went to jail himself. I’m not sure if the inspector was more likely to be merciful to the son of someone he likes to share a pint with, or if he knew Daniel’s father would thrash him so thoroughly he would have preferred to go to jail. We weren’t exactly friends before anyway,” he added. John rather thought it had been a different story with the boy Kit, but it might be a bit of a sore subject.

Sherlock rolled over onto his back, to look up at John. “John? Would you show me how to punch like you do, so it actually knocks someone down?”

“Course.” John sat up. Sherlock looked like he wouldn’t top six stone if you threw in his saddle, but he was fierce, and he might actually be able to hold his own with a few pointers. “But you have to tell me how you knew all those things you said earlier when you made them angry. Not that they didn’t deserve it—I heard the whole thing, that Daniel lout definitely started it. But how did you know?”

Sherlock shrugged, squinting up at John. “I observed,” he said. “Anybody can, it’s just that most people don’t bother.”

“So you can do it to anybody?” When Sherlock shrugged again, John said, “What can you tell about me?”

Sherlock considered him a minute, eyes half closed against the brightness of the sun, then pushed himself up to sit cross-legged in front of John. “All right,” he said. “You come from the north, obviously, but not more than half a day’s journey by train. Your father is dead—the knife you used was his, the initials are the same but it’s too old to have been yours first, so you were the eldest son and it came to you on his death. Your mother is still alive, judging by the care and the skill of the person who mended your clothes and embroidered your handkerchief, but she lives with your elder sister now and you don’t get on with your sister. You were a jockey, trained for years, but you suffered a fall in a race and were injured. The interesting thing is that the more severe wound was to your shoulder, hardly career-ending for a jockey, but you gave up racing because of your leg injury. But. You limped back at the stable and favored that leg in the saddle when we started out, but when we raced you braced both legs equally and when you came to my rescue earlier you showed no limp at all. It’s not the injury that really ended your racing career, it’s the guilt, over what? Oh, of course, the horse. He had to be put down, didn’t he.” He stopped, out of breath, and raised his eyebrows.
“That,” John said, stunned, “was amazing.”

Sherlock looked away to hide his grin. “That’s not what people usually say.”

“Yes, I saw what people usually say. It doesn’t matter, that was unbelievable.”

“Did I get anything wrong?”

“Not much...well, I do get on with Harry. I wouldn’t say we’re close, she’s older and a bit of a scold, but. It’s her husband I can’t stand, he drinks.”

“There’s always something--I knew there was someone you didn’t like, otherwise you would have gone to live with them after your injury and found work closer to home.”

“How do you do that?” John asked, still amazed. “I mean, I know how, you explained it, but how do you know, I don’t know, what to look for? You saw things about me that I didn’t know myself.”

Sherlock shrugged. “I observe, and I deduce.” He looked at John, the worried wrinkle returning. “Will you go back to racing?”

John lay back on the grass and closed his eyes, feeling the sun warm on his face. He thought about it for a while. Would he go back? No. Maybe the guilt did underlie the injury, but the guilt was real. He had put the race ahead of his horse, and Lancer had paid the price. He could never go back to that again. But it was astonishingly freeing to realize that Sherlock was right--his leg had not pained him since the moment they set out on their race. He was not a cripple trapped in a job he had got mostly through charity--he could do something else, maybe even join the army in a few years, see something of the world. He was truly finished with the life he thought he would have. It was time to look to the future, a future that seemed much brighter than it had last night. For the first time in months, John realized, he felt truly alive.

He opened his eyes and smiled up at Sherlock, who sat watching with his arms wrapped around his knees. “No,” he said. “I’m not going back. I think I’ll stay around here for a while.”

Sherlock’s smile shone brighter than the sun on the water. “Will you ride out with me tomorrow then?”

“Looking forward to it,” John said, and smiled back.
Chapter Summary

Look! Khorazir made beautiful art for this chapter!
"They rode out almost every day"

They rode out almost every day. Sherlock’s only restriction was that he be back in time for lessons with his tutor; John had no restrictions at all. The news that his younger son had somehow found a companion he could tolerate and who was willing to tolerate him had made its way to Lord Sherrinford, who passed down word in turn that chaperoning Sherlock was henceforth to be John’s primary responsibility. John worried that this might lead to ill feeling among the other grooms, but he needn’t have bothered. They were more inclined to feel sorry for him.

“Wears me out, that boy. All that rushing about,” Old Tom said over tea.

“I can’t make out what he’s on about half the time,” Young Tom told John as they brought the colts in from the pasture. “I went to school, I did well enough, but he gets to talking and I’m fair baffled.”

“He knows things,” Davy whispered in the tack room, glancing nervously over his shoulder. “Things as he has no business knowing. It’s uncanny.”

“He just observes,” John tried, but Davy shook his head darkly as though John would regret not listening to him someday.

“You mark my words. It’s unnatural.”

Sherlock might be unnatural, but he was rapidly becoming the center of John’s life. On misty days they went to the forest, where Sherlock collected fallen leaves and mosses and knew a little cave in the rocks that made a fine shelter for their lunch. When it truly rained they would ride to town, where Sherlock made purchases at the stationer’s or the chemist. John liked when they stopped at the pub after, but Sherlock preferred the tea room near the train station, where he was more likely to spot travellers to deduce. But every fine day they roamed the countryside, racing on the straightaways and stopping for Sherlock to collect more samples. Mostly these were soil, but sometimes he gathered plants or grasses, and on the third day they rode almost to the end of the county so Sherlock could get a bit of wool from a farmer whom he heard had an unusual breed of sheep.

“All right, I give up,” John said as he held open the little envelope while Sherlock carefully dragged fleece off a gate with a pair of small tweezers. “What on earth are you doing with all this?”

“Making an index. Didn’t I tell you before? I’m hot, let’s stop here, there’s a stream over there.”

“No, you didn’t tell me,” John said as he led the horses over. “What do you mean, an index?”

Sherlock took Circe and began unfastening her bridle. “Remember I told you about Daniel stealing the chickens and how I identified him by the mud from his shoes? Well, I started thinking after that, and I decided that if I could identify from the soil on a person’s shoes where he’d been, it could be an invaluable tool in solving crimes. So I saved until I could buy a microscope, and now I’m collecting specimens of anything I can think of that might be found on the sole of a shoe. There are quite a lot.”
“I imagine so,” John said. “There’s some lovely manure on mine, if you’re interested.”

Sherlock scowled at him. “There is nothing unique about manure,” he said, “unless the animal ingested something interesting which was unaffected by the digestive...actually that could make a fairly clever hiding place, especially if it were something small and easily consumed, perhaps a jewel...” his eyes slid out of focus and John gently took the bridle from his hand.

“It’s a shame you weren’t here when I arrived, you could have had some northern soil from my shoes. It’s all gone now.”

Sherlock looked heartbroken at this missed opportunity. “You will bring me some when you go back?”

“All sorts,” John promised.

“Moor, I need some northern moor. I’d love to get some samples from the fens too. Of course, what I really want is some dirt from a freshly dug grave, but I can’t imagine how that’s to be managed.”

John had never known anyone like Sherlock. Before they met, he could not even have imagined anyone like Sherlock, with his lightning brilliance and mercurial passions. Strangest of all, Sherlock seemed just as taken with John as John with him.

“My cousins are coming tomorrow,” Sherlock said one particularly lovely afternoon. Sherlock had obtained permission to stay out until tea so that they could visit an abandoned quarry he had heard about, and they were currently lounging on a limestone shelf overlooking the quarry pool. John, who had been warned three separate times by Gregson not to let Sherlock fall into anything, had set the satchel in front of them in a feeble attempt to keep Sherlock from leaning over the edge. The pool was dazzling, a startlingly intense blue that nearly matched Sherlock’s eyes.

“You don’t sound pleased about it,” John remarked. Guests had been coming and going all month, and as far as he could tell had been largely disregarded by their youngest host.

“I’m displeased because they’re loathsome and horrid,” Sherlock said.

“Oh.” John looked over at where Sherlock sat scowling at the pool. “Well, they won’t stay long, will they?” Most didn’t.

“The rest of the summer,” Sherlock said gloomily.

“Really? Why?”

"Sherlock sighed gustily. “It’s a long story…”

“...and I’ve hours to hear it. We needn’t be back until four.”

“All right. Aunt Wilkes--well, she’s not my aunt really, she’s some sort of cousin of father’s, but I’m made to call her Aunt. Her son Sebastian is a year older than I. Aunt Wilkes’s husband was a bad lot who gambled away everything they had, and when I was about five he shot himself. I wasn’t meant to know about that, of course.”

“How dreadful,” John said, shocked.

“No, you haven’t met Aunt Wilkes. It was actually quite sensible. Maman had died the year before,
so Father offered her a home with us. I suppose the idea was that she was to be as a mother to me, and Sebastian and I would be raised together and love each other as brothers. We did not."

“Let me guess,” John said, “Sebastian is an idiot.”

“Most people are idiots, John, that’s not the problem. I was quite pleased when they came as I’d never really had a playmate—Mycroft is seven years older, you know. I took Sebastian out into the gardens after tea. I’d just got my first magnifying glass and I was eager to show him all the wonders one could see through it.” Sherlock’s gaze went flat and distant. “He took it away from me and used it to burn ants. When I protested, he knocked me down, and when I tried to get it back, he broke it.”

“He sounds a right bully,” John said gently. From the way Sherlock was avoiding his gaze, he was sure that Sebastian had done more than just knock him down.

“A bully, a liar and a sneak. Aunt Wilkes was blind to his faults of course, but she was very eager to make everyone aware of mine. Fortunately Father was not so unperceptive. Sebastian was packed off to boarding school as soon as he turned seven, and Father settled an allowance on Aunt Wilkes. Her rooms in London are quite small though, so they spend the summer holidays here each year.” Sherlock pulled his legs up and rested his sharp chin on his knees, looking small and unhappy. “Sebastian has only one real talent, and that is for finding out what I care about, and ruining it.”

“Your microscope? Can you give it over to your tutor whilst he’s here?”

“Not the microscope,” Sherlock said irritably, “Although that’s an excellent idea—I’ll do it at least until Mr. Brooke goes on holiday himself.”

“What then?”

“This.” Sherlock looked away, his cheeks reddening. “Our rides. You.”

“Oh.” John felt his own cheeks warm. ‘Well, I’m a lot harder to break than a magnifying glass, and if Cousin Sebastian tries to hurt the horses, then he’s all of us to reckon with.”

Sherlock’s rare quick smile flashed and John grinned back. “Now you’ve got me curious. Not that I’m keen to try it, mind, but how do you burn ants with a magnifying glass?”

Sherlock let go his knees and knelt up, enthusiastic. “We can burn paper, I’ll show you. The lens concentrates the sunlight…”

“Wilkes are coming tomorrow,” Gregson announced that night and everyone groaned. “Come on, now, we’ve got to make ready to fetch them from the station.”

“John should go, he hasn’t had the pleasure yet,” Ned said.

“John has his duties with Master Sherlock. You three can draw lots if you like, just be sure you’re on time.”

“The maids at the house are in a right taking, they hate Mrs. Wilkes,” Annie said. “They say she’s more demanding than the queen herself. Always making trouble and complaining.”

“Better than that boy. Vile little bugger,” Danny the gardener said and when Mrs. Gregson scolded him he added in a whisper to John and Ned, “Well, he must be. Goes to one of those schools, doesn’t he?” Danny and Ned dissolved into silent giggles and John smiled politely, not wanting to
admit he did not understand the joke.

“They’ve got his measure, missus,” Old Tom spoke up unexpectedly. “That boy is a bad one. Always whinging and beating his pony with the crop, when he learned to ride, and I still see him throwing rocks at the dogs.” Old Tom’s opinion of most people was much the same as Sherlock’s, but he loved animals and could not abide cruelty.

“Well, at least he doesn’t seem to have much interest in riding anymore,” Gregson said placidly, “so maybe he’ll stay in the house tormenting the maids too and we won’t have to have anything to do with him.”

John did not witness the Wilkes’s arrival, being out in the woods with Sherlock, who was even more reluctant than usual to return. He heard plenty from Young Tom, who had been the unlucky groom sent with Mr. Gregson to fetch them from the station. After everything he heard he half wanted to see the infamous Sebastian for himself—he expected to see him sprouting horns and a tail. As it happened, however, Sherlock turned up in the stables next morning so early that the grooms were only just begun on their morning chores.

“Good morning,” Sherlock said brightly. “I’ve had Cook pack us a luncheon today, so we needn’t wait for Mrs. Gregson, and I’ve some breakfast for you as well.”

“A man needs his tea,” John protested.

Sherlock held out a flask and said, “Milk, no sugar.”

“How did you--”

Young Tom appeared round the corner. “Master Sherlock,” he said mock-sternly, “you wouldn’t be trying to give your cousin the slip, would you now?”

“It’s possible he expressed an interest in going for a ride,” Sherlock admitted. “But I do not believe he specifically said today, and surely he is much too weary from his journey to go this morning.”

Young Tom laughed, took the bag from Sherlock, and tossed John a roll. “Eat up, John. I’ll get your horse ready.”

When they were mounted John turned automatically for the drive, but Sherlock said, “No--this way,” and led them around the side of the stables toward the kitchen gardens.

“Are we staying on the estate then?” John asked, confused—it seemed an inefficient way of escaping Cousin Sebastian.

“No, there’s a back gate past the formal gardens. It’s a bit of a secret. I know some of the house servants know about it though; they use it if they want to sneak off to the village after hours.”

“Tell me truly now, are you going to get in trouble for leaving your cousin?”

“Oh definitely,” Sherlock said cheerfully. “I’ve planned it all out. Sebastian will throw a great silly tantrum, so Father will have to take notice, and he’ll punish me for being rude to a guest. He’ll almost certainly confine me to the house and gardens for three days; everyone knows I hate it, so that will satisfy Sebastian, and he can then spend three days tormenting me as much as he likes. By that time he’ll have got bored of it. He’s got fat anyway so I know he doesn’t really want to ride. He only said it because he knows I wouldn’t want him. His mother was going on at tea about how worn out he was from working so hard at school—” Sherlock snorted disbelievingly, “--and one of the other guests said he should go out riding with me, I went every day and see how well and hearty I was
This did not sound like one of Sherlock’s better plans to John, but undoubtedly Sherlock had a strategy which would enable him to elude Sebastian if necessary. They followed the wall of the orchards to the formal gardens. John had rarely been to this part of the grounds, and never since the family returned; now he saw the flowers and rose gardens in their full glory. “This is lovely,” he said.

“Yes, but come on, Sebastian will catch on when I’m not at breakfast,” Sherlock said, turning his horse toward the manicured lawns. He led the way down the slope to the elegant parkland and around a small lake John had never seen, complete with a tiny island and miniature Greek temple in the center. John wanted to stop and admire, but Sherlock urged them on, heading for where the park gave way to the fields of the tenant farmers, now tall with swaying crops. A high stone wall ran around the edge of the estate and John frowned in confusion as they approached, not spying a gate.

“Here,” Sherlock said and dismounted to reach under the ivy. Sure enough, the gate opened, just wide enough for them to get through on their horses.

“So this is how you were going to get out that first day!” John said. “I wondered how you were planning to get past the gatehouse.”

“Exactly. It comes out on the town side, and it takes ages to walk the horses here, so I hardly ever go this way, but it’s handy if you want to leave the grounds unnoticed.” Sherlock latched the gate again and swung himself back into the saddle. The gate was just as hard to spy from the outside and looked as though it were rarely disturbed—John was surprised anyone found it at all.

“Where shall we go?” he asked Sherlock. “It’s still quite early.”

“Let’s go out the other side of town. There’s a spot where I can gather some mud from the river banks, I think, and then we can loop round and have lunch at the pond. There’s a lovely long stretch there for a gallop. If I’m to be imprisoned for three days I want a glorious ride first.”

Sherlock proved correct in his prediction. At tea that night Mr. Gregson told John that he would not be required to ride with Sherlock for the next few days, as the young lord would not be going out. Young Tom threw John a commiserating look and Mr. Gregson then added, “I’ve also been informed that Master Sebastian does plan to ride tomorrow.”

“Do I have to go with him?” John asked, horrified.

“No, I sent back to ask if that would be required, but his mother says he’s to stay on the estate. So I don’t see that he needs a groom to accompany him unless he requests one.”

“Not me,” Young Tom said immediately. “I had him coming back from the station.”

“If he wants someone to go with him it’ll be Old Tom. We won’t have any trouble that way.” Old Tom’s authority with horses was unquestioned, and he had been at Sherrinford Hall since he was younger than John. If there was to be trouble, Old Tom would prevail.

John ate the rest of his meal feeling rather gloomy, and excused himself early from the usual card game. He was surprised to realize how cast down he was knowing there would be no ride with Sherlock tomorrow. Three days without Sherlock seemed a very long while, and he found himself wondering, for the first time, how it would be when Sherlock went back to London, leaving John alone for the long dreary winter without his bright eyes and quick wit.
John climbed rather slowly to his little room and pulled off his boots in the lingering midsummer twilight. He might as well go to bed, he thought; they had ridden hard that day and his muscles were pleasantly achy. As he thought this he noticed a folded paper on his pillow.

John paused, startled. Who would leave a note in his room? It was hardly an accessible spot, and in any case he had just seen all the other lads not ten minutes ago. Besides, although he took pains not to advertise the fact, he was sure they all knew he couldn’t read. John was hardly the only illiterate in the servants’ quarters—he knew Len could not read either, nor Old Tom—but most of the others had grown up in the area, where Lord Sherrinford’s schools were well established. Which left Sherlock. But how would Sherlock have gotten a note to his room?

John lifted the piece of paper and looked at it, trying to observe as Sherlock would. The paper was heavy and probably good quality, although John was no judge of such thing; he could tell that it had not been torn from Sherlock’s notebook, but that was all. The black scrawl on the paper told him nothing. Probably, John thought, Sherlock had just meant to tell him that his plan had worked and he would see John in three days. The thought warmed him, that Sherlock would want to communicate with him, and he tucked the note carefully under his pillow before he went to bed.

Young Tom had Terpsichore ready and waiting when Master Sebastian finally strolled into the stables next day. He was a large youth, a bit taller than John and far more stocky. His breeches were too small and too tight; probably last year’s. Sherlock had spoken of him as a distant cousin but John saw he actually did look a little like Lord Mycroft, although his eyes were more close-set and his mouth narrow and petulant. His hair was darker, like Sherlock’s, but primly combed, and his face was fleshy where Sherlock’s seemed to consist entirely of delicate bones. And he was carrying a crop, just as Old Tom had said.

Sebastian stopped so that young Tom could lead the horse to him and looked down his nose. “I don’t want this old nag,” he said contemptuously. “Bring me my cousin’s horse.”

Young Tom looked shocked and affronted—Terpsichore was a fine horse, the one Lord Mycroft usually rode—but lowered his head in assent.

John, lurking in the shadows, spoke up quickly. “If you’ll pardon my saying, sir, Circe’s a little boy’s horse. She’d be a bit small for you.” This was ridiculous, as Circe was of course nothing of the sort, but John was banking on Sebastian not knowing the difference. He did not trust Sebastian with Sherlock’s horse.

Sebastian turned his cold stare onto John. “I didn’t ask your opinion, boy,” he said with sneering malevolence. “Get the horse.”

John bowed his head. There was nothing for it. He had seen Sebastian’s sort often enough in the past to know that saying anything else would only make things worse. He went silently to Circe’s stall and whispered in her ear, “Be a good lassie and throw him into a ditch.”

John was sorely tempted to follow Sebastian, but he had enough sense to know that that idea was unlikely to lead anywhere good. Instead he helped Young Tom pasture the horses and then took Blackbeard for a long, hard ride. By the time he led poor weary Blackbeard into the stableyard, he was feeling much calmer.

John shoved the reins into Davy’s hand and ran to the stable. Young Tom was trying to calm Circe, who was snorting and biting. “Easy, easy,” John soothed, shouldering Tom aside to kneel by the injured foreleg.

“That’s the one she hurt before, isn’t it?” Tom asked.

“Yes…hold her head,” John probed gently and then sat back on his heels with relief. “I think it’s all right. It’s just the tendon swollen, the joints and bones are all fine. A cool poultice and a few days’ rest and she’ll be good as new.”

“That little shite,” muttered Young Tom and then looked over his shoulder guiltily as though afraid Mrs. Gregson could somehow hear him from the house.

John was applying the poultice when he heard the clattering of the carriage returning. In a moment Mr. Gregson was there, kneeling next to John to inspect the damage.

“Shall I clean this off so you can see?”

“No need. Looks like the tendon, you’re doing the right thing.” Gregson’s face was as dark as John had ever seen it. “Fool probably pulled her up jumping. Too bad he didn’t go over her head...how did it happen he was on Circe anyway?”

John told him and then said, “I should have tried harder to stop him. If she’d been lamed…” To his horror, he felt a hot lump in his throat and he had to stop.

Mr. Gregson put a kindly hand on his shoulder. “Nothing you could have done, lad. I’ll be having a word with Lord Mycroft though. From now on if Master Sebastian wants to ride, he goes with Old Tom on a horse of my choosing or he doesn’t ride at all.”

John nodded gratefully, swallowing hard and trying to muster up a grateful smile. “Make sure you tell him she’ll be all right, will you sir? Lord Sherlock’s sure to hear of it and be upset, else.”

“I will that. You wrap her up tight, mind.” Gregson pushed himself up and went out, calling for Davy to put the carriage up.

At the table that evening there was a great deal of indignation and abuse heaped on the head of the absent Master Sebastian, who was widely held to be the the biggest idiot ever to sit a saddle, and ugly to boot.

“I hope he comes to the gardens when I’m there, I’ll dump a load of manure on his feet,” Len promised. He plastered a fairly convincing simpleton’s blank stare on his face and said, “So sorry about that, sir. Me name, sir? ‘s Danny, sir.”

“Well, he won’t have the chance again,” Mr. Gregson said confidently. “Lord Mycroft agrees with me on the matter of him riding, and his word is law when the Earl’s away.”

“Why was his Lordship called to London anyway?” Ned asked.

“The dockworkers have been demonstrating, demanding the reforms,” Mr. Gregson said. “The new minister wanted to send the army out to put them down, and Lord Sherrinford went to London to try to persuade him against.”

“I should think so,” Mrs. Gregson said, shocked. “Soldiers to fire on their own citizens, for a peaceful demonstration!”
“It wouldn’t stay peaceful long once the soldiers got there,” Young Tom said. “Shouldn’t wonder if that’s not what the minister wants, to provoke a riot, so he can say he was right in calling out the army all along.”

“You may be right,” Gregson said. “Do you know anything about the new minister?” Young Tom followed politics more closely than any of the rest of them.

“Sir James Moriarty,” Young Tom said. “Conservative, for sure, hates the reformers, but I don’t know much more than that.”

“Never had him here, have we?” Mrs. Gregson asked, looking round the table, and heads shook.

“Nor likely to by the sound of it,” Mr. Gregson said, pushing his chair back comfortably and reaching for his pipe. The others took this as their cue to stand, carrying plates over to the large sink. “John, come by me a moment.”

John obediently perched on the bench near Mr. Gregson’s chair as he got his pipe drawing to his satisfaction. “Lord Sherlock sent along a note,” he said around the pipestem. “In a right taking, he was. Seemed to think it was his fault his wretch of a cousin hurt Circe and that she was worse off than I’d made out.”

“I’m sure that beast Master Sebastian told him she’d have to be put down,” John said rather more viciously than he intended. “You did tell him she’ll be fine?”

“Aye, I did, just thought I would check with you first, see if there was anything else I could say to ease his mind. He said he would have come right away to see about her, only he’d promised his father he wouldn’t go to the stables.”

John shook his head. “Just tell him that, that I swear she’ll be well by week’s end, and that he should keep out of harm’s way himself.” He did not want Sherlock provoking Master Sebastian to do anything worse, after all.

Gregson nodded thoughtfully. “I’ll be sure to tell him. And John? It goes for you too. If he comes back, you leave him to me.”

“I will.”

Master Sebastian did not come back. That was the only bright spot in the next two days, which dragged abominably. Circe was visibly limping less by the third day, which should have cheered John, but he still felt miserable and guilty that she was hurt at all and likely could not be ridden for another week. He worried about Sherlock too, although he comforted himself that if Sebastian had done anything truly abominable Annie or Mrs. Gregson would have heard about it from the maids. But what if Sherlock were angry at John? What if he held him responsible? On the last night John was so anxious he could not fall asleep, tossing and turning until Emmy’s cat gave up on him in disgust and went off to seek calmer accommodations.

But next morning Sherlock was there at his usual time, bouncing into the stables like a sunbeam and lighting the whole place with his smile.

“Ah, you’re alive then,” Young Tom said cheerfully. “We thought you might have taken on your cousin and got flattened.”

“Certainly not. How could you think I’d do anything so foolish? I’ve taken precautions he won’t be riding for a bit though. Remember those nettles we collected?” he asked John. “I had plenty of time the last few days to prepare a finely ground extract and apply it to Sebastian’s drawers. He won’t be
sitting on anything for a while, least of all a horse. How’s Circe?”

“How’s she doing?”" John asked. “Want to take Terpsi?”

They trotted down the long drive to the gate, Sherlock clearly overjoyed to be free again and John so happy he could not think of what to say.

“How did it play out then?” he finally asked, when they reached the gatehouse and turned toward the countryside. “Did he get bored, or was what he did bad enough to get you free of him?”

“Bit of both, I think. It was dreadful being trapped at home with him though. Why didn’t you meet me at the orchard?”

“What? When?”

“The first day. Didn’t you get my note? I was very scrupulous in giving Father my word I wouldn’t leave the house or gardens for the next three days, so that I could nip out when they were at dinner that night and leave a note in your room.”

John looked away, at the road. “I got it. But, Sherlock, I couldn’t read it. I can’t read.”

“Oh,” Sherlock said, sounding startled. “But I’d hoped…”

“What?” John said, curious enough to look over.

“Nothing.”

They rode in silence for a few minutes before Sherlock said hesitantly, “I could teach you.”

“What, to read? Why?”

“I’d hoped to write to you. When I returned to London.” Now it was Sherlock who did not meet John’s eye.

“To me?” John was astonished. “But why would you want to write me? You’ll be in London! Aren’t all your friends there?”

Sherlock shrugged. “I don’t really have friends, except for you.”

“But I’m not--” John bit down on his words but too late to stop the flash of hurt on Sherlock’s face. It beggared belief. Certainly Sherlock was the most important person in John’s life, but he was an Earl’s son, a lord, and John was an illiterate peasant. It would be like expecting the sun to call him a friend. Yet here was Sherlock, biting his lip, clearly upset.

John took a deep breath. “I’m not someone your family would approve of as a friend, or as a correspondent. I’m a groom, Sherlock. I’m grateful for your regard, but I could never presume on your kindness to--”

“Stop that.” Sherlock rounded on John, eyes blazing in his white face. “Stop talking like that, as though you were just a servant, as though I just happened to be the master you serve today, as though I mean nothing to you--”

“You mean everything to me,” John snapped before he could stop himself.

They both sat frozen, staring at each other. John swallowed, nervous, but he could not take it back, and in any case it was true.
Sherlock’s face broke into a huge, radiant smile. “Really?”

“Really, idiot. As though you couldn’t have deduced it yourself.”

Sherlock grinned wider and John felt a warm glow of affection bloom in his chest. “Well.” He glanced away and then back to John. “Shall we go around to that stream where we saw the plum tree last week? They ought to be ripe by now.”

“Race you to the crossing,” John said and they were off.

The plums were ripe, and John and Sherlock stuffed themselves. They were tiny oblong fruit hardly bigger than cherries, swollen and sun-warmed and so ripe the skin was splitting.

“These are more pit than plum,” John said, spitting a pit toward the river with a satisfying thunk. “Barely a mouthful.”

“But such a tasty mouthful,” Sherlock said. He had scrambled up the tree like a cat, gathering more plums from the high branches, and now he spat a pit too. “Oh, look at that, mine reached the river.”

“It can go downstream, be washed ashore, and grow another tree,” John said dreamily. “Maybe one day our sons will find it and eat the fruit, and they’ll spit their pits in the river, and there will be another tree, and...”

“That is an unlikely scenario for a number of reasons,” Sherlock said. He dropped from the tree and landed next to John with a thud. “I’m all over sticky, pass me that napkin.”

John handed him the damp napkin and watched idly as Sherlock pushed up his sleeves. He sat up abruptly. “Sherlock--”

Sherlock followed his gaze. “Oh. That’s just Indian burns, it’s nothing. Sebastian wouldn’t really hurt me, even he’s not that stupid.”

It did not look like nothing to John, but he held his tongue as Sherlock wiped his wrists and carefully refastened his cuffs. “So...have you thought about it? Will you let me teach you to read?” Sherlock was still looking down at his sleeves as though he did not want John to see in his face how much he wanted him to say yes.

John had thought about it quite a bit on their ride. It was odd; he had never even thought of learning to read before that morning, but now that he thought of all the things he could do, he wanted it desperately. He could read the newspaper like the others, follow the prayer book at church, read the labels in the barn; he could write home and ask after his family. He could never afford books of his own, but perhaps if there were books that dealt with the afflictions of horses Lord Sherrinford might find one a good investment. And, of course, the prospect of letters from Sherlock was almost incentive enough in itself. “I don’t know, Sherlock. Don’t you think I might be too old to learn?”

What he was really afraid of was that he was too stupid, and that Sherlock would finally realize it and be disappointed.

“Don’t be absurd, you’re nothing of the sort. And don’t be thinking you’re not clever enough either, you are, and anyway look at the great fools who go about reading and writing all day long--half of Parliament, if my father’s to be believed. Even Sebastian can read, after a fashion.”

That settled it; John could not possibly be stupider than Sebastian. “Give it a go, then,” he said, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt.

Sherlock clapped his hands in delight and pulled his notebook and pencil out of his satchel. “I’ll
bring a slate tomorrow, it will be more efficient,” he said, tearing a page from the notebook and placing it on top. “All right, think of a word, a short word.”

“John,” John said immediately. If he accomplished nothing else, it would be worth it to be able to write his own name.

“No, John’s tricky, we need something simple to start. I promise we’ll learn names in a few days. Something else.”

John had been going to say Emmy next, so instead: “Cat.”

“Oh, that’s perfect. Now say it again, slowly, so you can hear all the separate sounds.”

“Caaaaaa--”

“No no no, slower, there are two sounds there, listen.”

John frowned, thought, then tried, “Cuh, aaaa, t?”

“Yes! Now again, I’ll write it.”

John said it again, as slowly as he could, and as he did Sherlock printed it on the paper: C, A, T.

Sherlock pointed to each letter in turn. “Letters make sounds, sounds make up words. You see? Once you learn the letters, the rest is just practice.”

“Cuh, aa, t,” John said again, looking at the paper. “Cat.”

“Exactly! Now we can try some different letters, see how that changes the word. I’ll go first: I’ll change the C to an M. M makes a sound like this: mmmmmm. So M-A-T is?”

John stared at the new word. He was teetering on the edge of bewildered, but he thought he glimpsed what Sherlock was saying, so he obediently shaped his mouth around the new sounds: “Mmmm, aaa, t. Mmmaaat. Mat!”

“Yes, you read a word, John! Well done! Now you.”

“Rat?” John tried.

“Excellent.” Sherlock wrote R-A-T under CAT and MAT. “Rrrrrrr is made by R. R is also in railway and ribbon and rope--”

“--and riding--”

“--and river.” Sherlock grinned at John. “Now in honor of cousin Sebastian, this is F, and F makes a sound like…”

They were so caught up John did not even notice the time passing until the sunlight slanted into his face. He blinked at the sky in dismay. “Oh no, we’ll have to hurry,” he said. “We’ll be late as it is and you haven’t gathered a single specimen today. I’m terribly sorry, Sherlock.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” Sherlock gathered up their things with brisk efficiency as John went to ready the horses. “I’ve had Mycroft lock my microscope in Father’s study for now. Do let’s hurry though, I want Mr. Brooke to be in a good temper so he’ll help me find an alphabet book and a primer for tomorrow. He’ll be leaving on holiday in a week, then we can stay out all day until tea, every day!”
They worked on the reading every day after that. John was a little daunted by the number of letters in the alphabet book—and some of them made more than one sound, who invented such a trying system? But as Sherlock had predicted, he did catch on quickly. After a few days Sherlock taught him both their names, which left John with a lasting hatred of the letter H. Bad enough that it made a sound in “Holmes” and not in “John”, but to change the sound of the S in “Sherlock” was simply ridiculous.

“It’s not just Sh, either,” Sherlock said, scribbling busily on his slate. “Look, there’s also Ch and Th…”

John rode home that afternoon feeling more discouraged than he had since they started. But later as he was helping Young Tom haul feed bags into the barn, he suddenly spotted one of the tiresome combinations on one of the bags. He stopped to look. “Ch,” he muttered under his breath, hearing Sherlock’s quick voice in his head, “It’s in church and chase and choice and…”. He looked at the word and there, ck, he knew that sound from Sherlock’s name, and the n from his own. “Ch, ck, n,” he whispered, looking at the letters in between and fitting their sounds in, and then, “Chicken! Tom, there’s a bag of chicken feed in here.”

“Oh, hell,” Young Tom said, coming out to peer despondently at the bag. “Just leave it against the wall there, all right? I’ll take it round the farm tomorrow in a barrow.”

John was elated. Chicken! He had read a word, all alone, without any help from anyone, and a big word with an h in it at that. He, John Watson, could read. As Sherlock kept saying, the rest was all practice.

Sherlock was just as delighted as John when he heard of this feat the next day. “Well done, John! All right, let’s start on some proper reading then, shall we? I’ll write a sentence.”

John looked at the three words on the slate. He knew the first and the last without thinking, but the middle...he puzzled over it for a minute and then read uncertainly, “Sherlock licks John?”

Sherlock stopped looking expectant and burst into giggles. John realized what he had just said and was just beginning to grin too when Sherlock abruptly pounced on him, shouting, “Sherlock licks John!” and licking a broad stripe up his neck. They tussled, rolling around in the grass and trying to lick at any exposed skin they could reach, breathless from laughing.

Sherlock managed to get his tongue in John’s ear and John yelped, flipping Sherlock over and pinning him down by the wrists as he licked all over his face. Sherlock squirmed beneath him, helpless with laughter, and shrieked, “I can’t breathe! I can’t breathe!”

John pulled up a little, grinning, and was abruptly aware of Sherlock’s slender body twisting, trapped, under his. Sherlock was still giggling wildly and John felt suddenly hot all over in a way that had nothing to do with the sun, his clothes seeming tight and strange.

“I surrender,” Sherlock gasped, and John quickly rolled off and let him go. He felt oddly light headed, and sat up quickly to get a drink of water while Sherlock lay sprawled on his back on the turf, catching his breath.

“All right then,” John said, sitting down cross legged and offering Sherlock the water. “Show me why this isn’t ‘licks’”.

Sherlock sat up, wiping his face with his handkerchief, and explained the role of the letter e in such detail that John quickly grew distracted enough to forget the strange feeling that had come over him. He understood it fairly quickly, although they spent a bit of time practicing with rod and rode and
mat and mate. When Sherlock was sure John understood, he took the slate, cleaned it, and wrote a new sentence. John got this one quickly: “John likes horses,” he read triumphantly. “Now me.” He took the slate and changed only the last word so that it read, “John likes Sherlock”.

Sherlock smiled, his eyes crinkling, and reached for the slate, but John pulled it out of his reach. “No, wait, I have another one.” He erased the slate and printed carefully, frowning briefly over the last word.

Sherlock took the slate and read out, “Sherlock likes dirt.” He smiled again, huge and warm. “I do! I do like dirt. But I like John better.”

“And I like you better than horses,” John answered, “But now we’d best be getting back or Mr. Brooke is not going to be liking you.”

“Two more days,” Sherlock said happily.

They were nearing the crossroads to town when Sherlock spied something or other near the hedgerow that he absolutely had to collect, so John held the horses while Sherlock crawled in, emerging with leaves in his hair and dirt smudging his nose. Coupled with the grass stains from earlier, John thought it would be hard for an outsider to tell master from groom. They mounted and John said, teasing, “Sherlock likes dirt.”

“They’re soil samples,” Sherlock said, nose in the air, but spoiled it by grinning and adding, “At least I don’t lick them. Just John.”

“Sherlock licks dirt,” John said and Sherlock shot back “John licks horses,” and they were both laughing so hard they could barely stay in the saddle when the Sherrinford Hall carriage turned onto the road right in front of them.

“That must be Father! Let’s beat them back,” Sherlock cried, spurring his horse. John dug in his heels to follow and they shot past the carriage, Sherlock waving and John pulling off his cap. He caught just a glimpse of Lord Sherrinford through the window, a smile on his austere face for the first time in John’s memory. He thought suddenly that it must be a tremendous burden to be the Earl: trying to improve the lot of his own county, convince a reluctant government to spread your ideas for the good of the people throughout the land, put out fires, manage his estate and family. No wonder he always looked so serious.

They were busy when John got back putting up the horses and the carriage, and it was not until he went to bed that night that he remembered the strange feeling he had had earlier, the heat that had filled him as he pressed Sherlock’s writhing body to the ground. He pushed the memory away and thought about the words he had learned that day. When he slept, though, he dreamed. He did not remember what he dreamed when he woke, but he did remember the rush of pleasure, hot and unexpected and exquisite, and felt the damp stickiness of that pleasure on his belly and nightshirt, warm in the cool night air.
That late summer was the best time of John’s life, a string of glorious golden days perfect for rambling the countryside and sprawling on riverbanks. John felt sorry for the gardeners, who came to tea each evening so weary they could barely finish their food.

“Only a fool complains about a good harvest,” Danny said when John sympathized.

“Aye, that’s true,” Mr. Gregson agreed. “A good harvest should help the country too, help to calm the unrest.”

“Why?” John asked.

“A good harvest means plenty of food, and plenty of food means low prices,” Mr. Gregson explained. “A bad one means high prices, and the poor go hungry. A hungry man’s a lot more likely to riot than one who can feed his family.”

“Looks to be a mild winter, too,” Old Tom opined.

“Which should help as well,” said Mrs. Gregson and John, catching on, said “Less spent on coal.”

The unrest had continued sporadically over the summer, mainly in the dockyards and mines, although Parliament had promised to take up at least the Fair Wages Act in the fall. That had calmed things a bit.

“Father says we’ll need to go back to London by the end of September since he needs to be there,” Sherlock told John one day as they were eating wild raspberries with their lunch. “It’s a shame, as some years we’ve stayed right up until the hunting. But my cousins will be leaving in two weeks to go back to London to get Sebastian ready for term, so that’s some consolation.”

“Why don’t you go to school?” John asked. He had been wondering this for some time. It had been discussed in the servants’ hall to great extent, with Mrs. Gregson holding that Sherlock was too delicate and everyone else of the opinion that he simply refused to go.

“Look how many tutors he’s gone through!” Ned had said. “At least Mr. Brooke returned from holiday. The last one didn’t.”

“And then there was the one who demanded to be taken to the station at midnight, said he’d rather sit there all night than spend another night under this roof,” Davy added reminiscently.

“Master Sherlock had blown up his bed!” Mr. Gregson exclaimed. “Where was he to sleep?”

Now Sherlock said gloomily, “I’ll have to go next year. I’ve managed to avoid it so far, but it’s been made clear to me that I can’t expect to carry on the noble name of Holmes without suffering several years at Eton. All I can hope is that I get to Oxford at sixteen as Mycroft did and then at least I won’t
be there very long.”

“Oh,” John said, feeling downcast. He had assumed Sherlock would carry on with his tutors indefinitely. Sherlock did not look any more cheerful than John felt; he had abandoned his food to flop sadly on the grass. “Well, it’s a whole year off, after all. Maybe the place will burn down or something in the meantime.”

Sherlock brightened. “Or I can burn it down when I get there.”

“Oh, brilliant thought,” John said. “Shall we read?”

John had graduated from the primers and was now reading easy storybooks. These were not very exciting, being mostly concerned with imparting dull moral lessons, but it was boosting John’s confidence every time he made it through a page without correction. The stories clearly bored Sherlock senseless. “I’ll bring you something better after this one,” he promised.

The next day dawned startlingly warm, with a clear sky that promised a hot afternoon. The stables smelt of warm straw and, less pleasantly, manure. “Dog days,” Old Tom said at breakfast.

Even Sherlock seemed a bit limper than usual when they set out on their ride. “Let’s just go to the pond,” he said when they reached the road. “There’s always a good breeze there.”

“Race?” John asked, and Sherlock brightened.

“To the crossing, then the hill to the bridge, then the curve to the pond--best two out of three.”

John won--he usually did--and by the time they reached the pond he was drenched in sweat and panting. He tied out the horses and then said impulsively, “Let’s go for a swim.”

“What?” Sherlock looked at John as though he had proposed a nice warm bonfire.

“In the pond. Come on, we’re melting, it’ll be glorious.”

“I don’t know how,” Sherlock said slowly.

“Really?” John said, astonished. Was this one of those peculiar things about rich people? But then, how would he learn, after all--it wasn’t as though he had mates to throw him into the millpond. “Well, I’ll teach you then. It’s a fair sight easier than reading, I promise you.”

Sherlock hesitated, looking nervously at the pond.

John pulled his shirt off and started on his breeches. “Please, Sherlock, you’ll like it, I know you will. Look.” He stripped the rest of his clothes off, took a running jump, and landed with a whoop and an enormous splash. The cool water felt delicious on his hot skin. He surfaced and looked around for Sherlock, who was standing at the edge of the water fully dressed, wide-eyed with trepidation.

“Here,” John said, standing up. “See? The water’s just up to my chest out here. You’ll be able to stand in it. See these rushes--if you can see the rushes, then the water is shallow enough for you to stand. It only gets deep out toward the middle.”

“And you won’t, you won’t…”

“I won’t let you sink, fall, drown, anything,” John promised.

Sherlock reluctantly began to strip off his clothes, pausing to glance at John nervously, and John backed away and splashed about to give him some privacy. Another difference he had not
considered. John had been born in a one-room cottage, had grown up swimming naked with the other boys, still bathed in the company of half a dozen lads all arguing over hot water and flicking each other with towels. For all he knew, the last person to see Sherlock naked had been his nurse. He paddled back when Sherlock tentatively edged his way toward the water, hands covering himself, and that was another surprise. John had got so used to Sherlock’s brilliant mind he now thought of him as being the same age as himself, but Sherlock’s body was still that of a child, smooth and innocent and hairless. John suddenly felt tender and immensely protective, as he might of a newborn foal.

“All right now,” he said gently. “Come on in, nice and slow, just as you would to get a specimen, right? Here, take my hand. I’ll be in front of you, you can see how deep the water is that way. There, doesn’t that feel lovely?” Sherlock’s fingers were trembling in his, but, as John knew from their first day at this pond, Sherlock was nothing if not brave. He waded forward with set determination.

“Let’s get a bit deeper now, then you can cool off properly.” John led Sherlock until they were waist deep and waited until he finally let go John’s hand, trailing his fingers in the water and beginning to smile.

“It does feel nice,” Sherlock admitted, swishing his hands in the greenish brown water and craning his neck to be sure there were still rushes ahead.

“You need to get wet all over,” John said. “Here--” he splashed water straight at Sherlock. Sherlock shrieked and ducked, trying to splash back, but John dove into under the surface and swam several yards out toward the center, where he stayed treading water and laughing while Sherlock flung water and shouted at him.

After a bit John swam back, grinning, to where Sherlock stood with his hands planted on his hips and scowling. Sherlock squared his narrow shoulders and raised his chin. “All right. Teach me to swim like that.”

John thought it would be better to start with a float, but after half an hour he was beginning to wonder if reading were not easier after all. Sherlock’s lean body was completely devoid of natural buoyancy, and it did not help that he went stiff as a poker every time John tried to lean him back. Worse, he tended to panic whenever he thought he was about to sink, flailing around and clutching at John until they both went under.

“We need to try something else,” John said as he clambered to his feet for the tenth time, hauling a sputtering Sherlock up after him. “Remember when you learned to ride, how you had to learn to fall first? Who taught you to ride anyway, Old Tom?”

“Gregson,” Sherlock answered, pushing his wet hair out of his eyes.

“And he taught you to fall, didn’t he? How to roll when you hit the ground.”

“He didn’t need to, I never fall.”

“Sherlock, everybody falls.”

“Not me.”

“And I’m sure Gregson believed that as much as I do,” John said, exasperated, “so I’m certain he still taught you.”

“He did,” Sherlock said grudgingly, “but I’ve never had to use it.”

“How lovely for you. Well, this is the same thing, you’re going to learn how to fall in the water.”
“You said you wouldn’t let me,” Sherlock said, going pinched again.

“Sherlock, the water is only up to your waist. You’re going to practice falling so you can put your feet down and stand up. That way you won’t have to half drown me every time you sink a little.”

Sherlock looked down at himself as though realizing this fact for the first time. “Oh.” He looked back at John. “All right. How do we--”

John reached out and showed him in the chest. Sherlock staggered backward and fell, flailing wildly, as John shouted, “Put your feet down!” A minute later he gained his feet, coughing wildly.

“You got water up my nose!”

“And now you know you can stand up,” John said, unrepentant. “Now let’s do it again.”

They did it again. And again, and again, until Sherlock gained enough confidence that he was willing to lean back without going rigid with fear. John finally got him maneuvered him into position, adjusting his hands so that one splayed between Sherlock’s shoulder blades and the other supported the tops of his clenched skinny buttocks. “Good! Good, Sherlock. Now let your arms relax a little.” Sherlock unclenched his fists, letting his arms float out a little from his body. “That’s wonderful. You’ve almost got it.” John softened his voice to his gentlest, most soothing tones, the ones he used when a horse was injured or in foal. “I have you, Sherlock, I won’t let anything happen to you. I won’t let you fall. Feel the water, see how it wants to hold you up? Let it hold you.”

Sherlock’s tightly scrunched face loosened minutely and his breathing calmed. John could actually feel the moment that he got it, arching his back slightly and relaxing his limbs. His eyes opened slowly and he looked up at John, who was grinning.

“You’re doing it,” John whispered. “That’s you, floating.”

Sherlock smiled and let his eyes close, face turned up to the sun. The sunshine sparkled on the surface of the water and on the droplets in his eyelashes as he drifted slowly off John’s hands. John stepped back, feeling an odd mixture of pride and loss.

Sherlock held perfectly still, barely breathing, floating on the surface of the water until he bumped gently into one of the rushes. His eyes opened and he looked at John standing a few feet away, hands high. Sherlock’s face split into a huge grin and he shouted, “I did it! Look, John, I--” and promptly capsized.

John waded over but Sherlock had managed to get his feet under himself and was already standing. John pounded him on the back as he choked and coughed, laughing, and finally managed to get out, “Now teach me to swim.”

“You are the most impatient creature that ever was,” John said fondly. “It’s getting late and we’ve not had lunch. Let’s eat and then float a few more times and I’ll teach you to properly swim tomorrow, all right? It’s going to be hot all week, Old Tom said so.”

Old Tom was proved correct. The weather stayed unrelentingly hot and bright, and John and Sherlock went straight to the pond every day to swim. Having conquered his fear Sherlock did fairly well for a beginner, and by the end of the week he could flounder his way across the pond in a serviceable if inelegant crawl.

“Storm coming tonight,” Old Tom announced at tea.
“Thank goodness, maybe this heat will finally break,” Mrs. Gregson said fervently to unanimous agreement. John was a tiny bit sorry about the swimming, but he was ready for the heat to end too--he had hardly been able to sleep the past few nights.

The storm had still not arrived when John went off to bed. All the windows in the stables were already as wide open as they could go, and John propped his door open in the hope of a breeze. The room was swelteringly hot. John sighed, stripped to his nightshirt, and lay on his bed picturing a midwinter morning back at Willoughby Chase: dark, freezing, water frozen in the troughs, his toes numb in their boots, fingers fumbling with the bridles. He drifted into a dream of wandering in the Chase tack room--which in his dream had grown hopelessly large--trying to find Lancer’s bridle. Someone had rearranged all the tack, and he could make nothing of the labels. “No,” he said suddenly, “I can read now,” and a great gust of winter wind blew all the tack away.

John woke, shivering. It took him a moment to realize that he had not dreamed the wind--a cool updraft was blowing into his room from the west window on the far side of the barn. “Finally,” John muttered. He pulled up the covers for the first time in days. As he drifted off to sleep, he heard the first raindrops pattering on the roof.

John was dreaming a far more pleasant dream involving the sun-dappled pond when he was awakened for a second time, this time by a loud thump of something hitting the floor. For a minute he thought it was the cat, but the cat was still draped over his feet. It was raining hard now. Perhaps something had blown loose outside? John sat up, frowning into the dark, and then yelped in shock: Sherlock was standing by the window, fully dressed and soaking wet.

“What are you doing here?”


“Of course you can, get out of those wet things.” John climbed out of bed and went to his small chest, pulling out one of his own nightshirts. It would swamp Sherlock, but then it wasn’t as though anyone would see him. “What do you mean, locked out? Why were you out?”

Sherlock was bent over scrubbing at his hair with his damp shirt. His voice emerged somewhat muffled. “I’d been wanting to get some samples from where the farmers have been cutting hay, but I’ve had such fun swimming that I didn’t want to take the extra time. Today Mr. Brooke said he’d heard there was a storm coming tonight, and I thought I wouldn’t have another chance, so I waited until after the adults went to bed and sneaked out.” He straightened up and passed John the shirt in exchange for the nightshirt. “I climbed down the ivy. That’s how I came to your room before when I was punished, only they were at dinner then. But Sebastian saw me fetching my boots from the boot-room after tea and he must have worked out what I was up to. I have to admit, it shows more brains than I ever would have guessed he possessed. When I came back he’d bolted the window and left a sweet little note on the sill.”

“Isn’t there a back door, or something?” John asked, hanging Sherlock’s wet clothes on pegs.

“I suppose he thought I’d have to knock up the scullery maid and that would roust the whole house, and I’d be in no end of trouble. They lock the doors about midnight. But I can get back in at dawn when they open up the kitchens--I’ll slip past without anyone seeing me, and be back in my bed before the chambermaid comes up. Sebastian will be furious! I’d have stayed out in the cherry orchard normally, only the rain came, so I climbed the tree outside your window.”

“Well, you’re more than welcome here. Come on,” John said, going to the bed.

Sherlock frowned at the small bed. “How will we both fit?”
“Haven’t you ever—” but of course he hadn’t. It was the pond all over again, John realized: Sherlock had probably never even shared a bedroom before, let alone a narrow bed. “Sorry. You take the bed, I’ll bunk out in the loft.”

“No! I want to sleep with you. Besides, it’s your bed, I’m not turning you out. Just tell me how it’s done.”

“Ah.” John scratched his head. “Well, there’s back to back, with people you don’t know well; that’s how we did it at the Chase mostly; or head to toe if it’s very crowded; or back to front, like family. It’d be your back to my front, as I’m bigger.”

“Like family. Yes,” Sherlock said. He climbed in next to John and lay down, a little awkwardly, and asked, “Like this?”

“Like this...bend your knees a little.” John tucked Sherlock under his arm, nestled against his chest. Sherlock smelled of rain and fresh hay, and of a sweet scent John supposed was his soap: something like sun-warmed clover. He himself probably smelled of sweat and horse, but there was not much point in worrying about that. The warm weight of Sherlock’s smaller body against his was immensely comforting, like finding something much loved but half-forgotten.

“You’re used to this, you’ve done this before,” Sherlock murmured. “Who? I thought your sister was older.”

“Harry is older. I had two other sisters.”

“Tell me.”

“Mary was the eldest, she died...April last. In childbed.”

“She wasn’t your favorite though,” Sherlock said with certainty. “Tell me about your younger sister.”

“Emmy. She was only just four when she died. She had the winter fever. I was seven.”

Sherlock was quiet a minute. “My mother died in childbirth too,” he said softly. “I was four. I can’t hear her voice anymore. I can’t see her face in my mind either. There are portraits, but they aren’t the way I remember her.”

“I can’t remember Emmy’s face either. But she had ginger hair, and it was very soft and silky. I remember that. I can remember what she sounded like when she was laughing. And...you’re right, we used to sleep like this, and I remember how she felt against me. It was like a hole in the bed, when she was gone.”

“You didn’t have a brother.”

“No. Well, a baby, stillborn.”

Sherlock reached up and laced his fingers on top of John’s, pulling his hand tightly against his chest. “Mycroft is too old to be a proper brother. I will be your brother, and you will be mine.”

“All right,” John said, smiling against Sherlock’s damp curls. “Brothers.”

Sherlock shifted a little, settling. “I should warn you, I don’t sleep much.”

“I’ve had worse bedmates. I’ll sleep right through whatever you do, unless you jump through the
window again.”

“I won’t,” Sherlock promised seriously.

The cat, apparently accepting that Sherlock would not be moving anytime soon, jumped back up on the bed and sniffed at him. John felt Sherlock’s slight huff of laughter as the cat touched his damp hair with a delicate paw, decided it was not to her liking, and padded down the narrow bed to settle behind John’s knees.

Brothers, John thought, still smiling. He curled around Sherlock’s warm body, and slept.

“What have you got there, my Lord?” Young Tom asked. “Shall I help you with it?”

“It’s for John,” Sherlock said brightly. John, hearing his name, looked over the low wall to see Sherlock carrying a box. “I’m going to take it to your room, all right?”

“I’ll get it,” John said, as much to get away from Tom’s raised eyebrows as anything else. He took the box from Sherlock, hoisted it up to his shoulder, and carried it up the ladder without difficulty.

“So, back to London tomorrow, eh?” he heard Tom saying below. “Are you looking forward to it?”

“Not in the least. I’m going to have to have dancing lessons. Father sprung it on me last night.”

“Ah, that’s good news, that is. You can teach me and John next summer, and we can impress the lassies. We’ll be the envy of all the others.”

“Ugh,” Sherlock said, disgusted.

John slid down the ladder. “Bring them out to the stableyard, all right, Lord Sherlock? I’ll just run over to the kitchen and fetch our lunch.”

Mrs. Gregson had the satchel ready in the kitchen, bulging rather more than usual. “I put a bit of a treat in, seeing as how it’s his last ride for a while.” She smiled warmly at John. “A treat for you too. A few months ago I would have thought it being the last ride would be treat enough, but I think you’re going to miss this, aren’t you?”

“I am,” John said. Even to himself, he did not want to admit how much. Not just the rides themselves, as enjoyable as they were, but being with Sherlock: talking, laughing, swimming, racing, arguing. Sleeping. Sherlock had snuck into his room two or three times a week since the night of the storm, curling himself under John’s arm so quietly that sometimes John did not even realize he had come in until he woke the next morning, Sherlock’s soft curls tickling his cheek and filling his nose with that clean clover smell. Sherlock claimed he often had trouble sleeping and found it easier to settle down with John, which was probably true, but John suspected he also just liked it.

“It’s been good for him,” Mrs. Gregson said. “You’ve been good for him, I think. He’s happier, and not so…”


“Well, high-strung. Let’s say that.”

“John!” came the impatient shout from the courtyard.

John rolled his eyes and said, “Right. Bit more work to do, I think,” and carried the bulging satchel
out to the horses. “Don’t get on yet, I want to check the girth.”

“Tom checked already. I do know how to put on a saddle, you know, I’ve been doing it since I was eight.”

“Good for you,” John said equably, checking the girth. “All right, hop on. I want to hear about the box. And I’ve something for you too, only it’s information. I was having a pint at the pub last night—”

“Why? Why were you?”

“Because it was my night off, Sherlock,” John said patiently. Actually it had been his birthday too, but he hadn’t mentioned that. “Anyway, John Culpepper told Sally he’d be harvesting his hops today. The other men say they’re waiting another week, so I think he wants to get a jump on the market. So if we swing around by his farm, you should be able to get a specimen.”

“Fantastic! I thought I wasn’t going to be able to get any hops. I don’t think I’ll be so lucky with the cider though. Pencey says they won’t be ready to press before we go.”

“I could get you some pomace,” John said. “I’ll be your assistant. Leave me some of your envelopes, and tell me what you want to write down--do you want the pomace to dry first?”

“I suppose so, otherwise it might molder. Oh, thank you, John. I’ll leave you some extra envelopes in case you run across anything else exciting.”

“I’m not robbing a grave for you,” John warned. Soil from a fresh-dug grave was still Sherlock’s holy grail, as he knew very well.

“I know. Maybe I could slip out in London...I’m joking! Here, let’s race to the crossroad from here, then we can cut across the fields to Culpepper’s.”

They were eating their lunch, having the cakes and ginger beer Mrs. Gregson had put in, when John remembered to ask. “What’s in the box?”

“Oh! I almost forgot! It’s for writing letters. I’ve put in everything you need, paper and postage and all, and my address at the top.”

“I’ve never written a letter. Maybe you should show me how?”

“All right.” Sherlock sat up and tore a page out of his notebook. Writing quickly, he said, “Mr. Brooke would probably want me to be more formal, but we’re brothers now, after all, so you needn’t. Here.” He flourished the paper and read aloud, “September 22, Bank of Sherring River, Dear John. See, you put the address and date at the top, like so. Dear John, I am already sad at the thought of parting from you tomorrow. I beg that you write me regularly, and collect any interesting samples that come your way. Let me know how you are getting on with your reading, and I shall endeavor to find you some interesting books whilst in London. Yours sincerely, Sherlock Holmes. There! Ours will be longer, of course.”

“It doesn’t seem very hard,” John agreed. “You will tell me if I make mistakes?”

“Can you imagine I would not?”

“No.” John smiled. “Sherlock, that box seemed quite large…”

“I want you to write often.”
“I will! But would you mind terribly if I wrote to my family occasionally as well?”

“No, of course you may, but who will read it? Can your brother-in-law read?”

“Sherlock, no one in my village can read. Only the shopkeeper and the vicar, and the vicar only comes once a fortnight. Even if they could, I’d wager the only book in the village is the Bible at the church. The nearest town is eight miles away, and even they don’t have a school. I’m going to send it to the vicar, and he’ll read it to my mother and sister and write me back with any news.”

“All right.” Sherlock abandoned his cake to lie back in the grass, spreading his arms out and turning his face up to bask in the early fall sun. He closed his eyes. “As long as you write to me more.”

John looked down into his small fine-boned face, sprinkled faintly with freckles from the summer, and felt an ache of impending loss. “I’ll write you all the time,” he promised, and then tickled Sherlock up his exposed sides and armpits so that Sherlock shrieked and threw himself back at John, and they wrestled until their laughter drove the ache away.

Sherlock climbed through the window that night just as John got into bed.

“Rather early, aren’t you?”

“I didn’t want to waste any time that was left. Look, I brought you something.” He held out a book. “It’s called Treasure Island—it’s terribly good, one of my favorites, and it’s not hard to read so you should get on well once I’m gone.”

“Thank you,” John said, pleased. He opened up the book and looked at the picture opposite the title page, which showed a pirate menacing the reader with a raised sword and a leer. It did look exciting. He set it carefully on the little table. “Are you staying?”

“Of course.” Sherlock shucked his outer clothes with brisk efficiency and slid in next to John, nestling comfortably into the curve of his body. “I’m going to miss you awfully. London will be terribly lonely.”

“Well, you’ll have Mycroft now,” John offered. Mycroft had finished at Oxford and gone into government as well; he and the Earl had already returned to London.

Sherlock sniffed. “Mycroft is grown up and boring.” He drew John’s arm around himself like a blanket and clasped his hand. “When we grow up, we’ll live together always, and we’ll travel the world and have all sorts of grand adventures. And we’ll never get stuffy and dull.”

“I’d like that.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

John did not watch Sherlock and Mr. Brooke leave the next morning. He was not needed, and Mr. Gregson had told him at breakfast that poor fat Blackbeard could do with a good canter, so he was far up on the hills when he saw the twinkling of the carriage heading for the station. He knew he was too distant to be seen, but he waved his cap all the same.
That night after tea Mr. Gregson called John over.

“Mr. Brooke gave me something before he left,” Gregson said, reaching into his pocket. “Lord Sherrinford asked him to be sure I passed it along to you.” He handed John a golden sovereign. “As a token of his thanks for you looking after his lad so well this summer.”

John stared at the money. He had never even seen a gold sovereign before, let alone expected to receive one, and yet...he felt tainted, somehow, for accepting it.

“But I enjoyed it,” he said, faltering a little. “I liked being with Lord Sherlock. He didn’t need to do this.”

Gregson sighed deeply, sat back, and adjusted his pipe. “John,” he said gently. “Let me give you a bit of advice. I know the bond between master and servant can be strong. I’ve seen children who love their nannies more than their parents, ladies who hold their maids dearer than sisters. My cousin was a batman in the army and swore he’d have given his life to save his captain’s.” He drew on his pipe. “But the children grow up, and the nannies move on. When the money gets tight, the maid is let go. My cousin’s captain left the army and went to India. Don’t make it more than it is, John. You did good work, and you’ve been rewarded, and now the summer is done.”

John looked at his hands. He couldn’t tell Gregson the truth: that it broke his heart to think that Sherlock might learn of this and believe that John had been acting his friend only in the hopes of earning some reward, because he knew that in the eyes of the world Gregson was right. John could never hope to be Sherlock’s friend.

“Thank you sir,” John said dully. “I’ll be going up now, if that’s all right.”

“Good night, John,” Mrs. Gregson said kindly.

John saw to the stable doors and climbed up to his little room, where he lay the sovereign next to Treasure Island and sat looking at them. A sensible lad would heed Gregson’s advice. He could save the money, put a little more by and by, and in a few years maybe begin thinking of courting, finding a nice girl and settling down in one of the cottages, live out his life here on this fine estate with its beautiful grounds and horses. It was a better future than many could hope for, and yet it made him feel as though he were suffocating. Or, if he wanted excitement, he could save up, and in a few years he could join the army--maybe travel a bit, see something of the world. Or...he thought of a small hand clasping his, a promise in the dark.

In the end, it was not really a decision at all. John rather thought that it never had been. He tucked the sovereign carefully into his small purse, opened the box of writing supplies, and began a letter to Sherlock.
Earth stood hard as iron

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

September 23
Sherrinford Hall, Stables

Dear Sherlock,

I hope you are well and had a safe journey back to London. It is very quiet here now that you are gone. Mr. Gregson has told me that the other riding horses have been sadly neglected of late and I am to work at exercising them, so it seems as though my long rides are not done after all. So I can visit other orchards and collect different varieties of apple pomace, if you like.

Your father was kind enough to leave some extra wages for me. Please give him my deepest thanks and also, if you could, say that I wish him to know that it was not necessary. I could not in clear conscience accept reward for something in which I took such pleasure, so I have made arrangements to send the money to my family, for whom it will be a small fortune and will help to ease the burden of winter. (I have also taken steps to be sure that it goes to fill my nephews’ bellies and not their father’s tankard.)

Sincerely,
your friend,

John

October 10
London

Dear John,

Pear pomace! I had no idea that cider could be made of pears. How clever you were to find it out! I have now made a study and have learned that pear cider, or perry, is in fact preferred among some aficionados as retaining more of the natural sweetness of the fruit. To ascertain whether or not this is the case I have procured a quantity of apples and pears and pressed them in the kitchens (to the voluble annoyance of Cook) and am now fermenting the resulting ciders to determine whether indeed some sugar-like substance remains in the perry after the sugars have been converted to alcohol. I really need a proper laboratory, but when I raised this subject with Father he told me that Eton has excellent laboratories and perhaps I would like to consider attending sooner. So I will have to get by with my hydrometer for now. Thank you so much for bringing my attention to this interesting subject and for collecting the pomace.

My other studies are going well enough. I have resumed the violin and attended several concerts. I have begun on German as many scientific papers are published in that language, and it is quite interesting. I can not say the same for dancing. Fortunately I am allowed to ride on the Mall when
the weather is fine, so at least I have some exercise, though it is not the same as riding with you.

October 25

Sherrinford Hall, Stables

Dear Sherlock,

Thank you, a thousand times over, for the box of new books, Or perhaps I should say fourteen times over, as your gift brought pleasure to more than just myself--more on that in a bit. I suppose you to believe that I have finished Treasure Island and I would have done if things had gone as planned, but as it turned out I was called upon to go back to the beginning and start again.

“Might share that with the rest of us, then,” Len said.

“What?” John looked up from where he had pulled his chair over to the fire, away from the games and chatter at the long table.

“I said, you might read that aloud, so the rest of us could hear,” Len said, gesturing with his chin at John’s book. “It must be good, you’ve hardly heard me call your name. Sea story, is it? I always wanted to go to sea when I was a lad.”

“I thought you were playing cards tonight?”

“Too tired. Been digging potatoes all day.”

“Well, I suppose...if no one minds?”

No one did, and John, feeling far more self-conscious than he had under Sherlock’s eye, turned back to the first page and began unsurely, “Part one: the old buccaneer.”

He was pleased to discover that it was rather easier reading aloud something he had already read to himself first, and his voice gained confidence as he went along. He was vaguely aware of the other noise in the room gradually quieting, but did not really register it until he came to the end of the first chapter and looked up to find every face turned to him.

“Well, go on then! What happens next?” Young Tom asked.

Mrs. Gregson intervened. “That’s enough for tonight. It’s a fine story, but John will be tired, and it’s time for all of us to be getting to bed.”

“But you’ll read more tomorrow?” Annie cried, disappointed.

John looked to Mrs. Gregson, who smiled, and said, “Of course, if you’d like me to.”

“I wouldn’t mind maybe hearing a bit of the newspaper, too,” Jem, one of the older gardeners said. “Keep up with what’s going on.”

“I’d like that too--but someone else is reading that part,” John said.
...and so now we have quite a pattern established: after tea Mr. Gregson or Young Tom reads selections from the newspaper, and then I read a chapter of the book. Everyone is enjoying it very much, and I have heard Ned and Davy speculating in the stables on what the next night’s installment will bring. But to our sorrow only a few chapters yet remain, so you may imagine our delight when your box arrived. There has been considerable discussion as to the next selection, with The Adventures of Robin-Hood being the current favorite.

November 1

London

Dear John,

I find myself quite envious of you, or rather of your audience, who are able to sit with you by the fire and listen as you read. Companionship is something I had always thought highly overrated and unnecessary, but I have felt differently since knowing you.

London is unspeakably dull these days. Father and Mycroft are always off meeting with some peer or other, and one of the housemaids made the mistake of stoppering my fermenting cider bottles to keep them bubbling over. The resulting explosion was clearly not my fault as I did not stop the bottles, but most unfairly I was blamed all the same. A nasty fog has been fouling the air of the city for some days now, so I am no longer allowed to ride, as it makes me cough abominably. The only bright spot is that I have been allowed to give up dancing lessons, or rather, the master refused to have me back, after I deduced his highly inappropriate liaison with a person I am not at liberty to name. None of the other students were willing to partner me anymore in any case.

I have just spotted a dead bird outside in the area. I see no sign of visible injury and wonder if it suffocated from the fog? If I am very quick I might be able to sneak it upstairs before I am noticed. I shall let you know what I determine.

Yours most sincerely,

Sherlock Holmes

John smiled as he folded up the letter. It never failed to charm him the way Sherlock always signed his full name, as though he were but one among dozens of Sherlocks with whom John corresponded. He stood and stretched, ready for bed but not looking forward to the chilly dash across the stableyard.

“John, wait a moment--I have something for you.” Mrs. Gregson went out into the hallway and returned with a stack of blankets. “It’s gotten quite a bit colder, and I know the stables can be chilly, what with your bed right up against that stone wall.”

“Thank you.” John accepted the pile of blankets and then stopped, arrested by their fragrance. “What’s that nice smell?”

“Hmm?” Mrs. Gregson leaned over and sniffed. “Oh, that’s lavender. They grow it in the gardens and the housekeeper dries it, then they put it in little bags to keep the linens sweet. I like the rose sachet better myself, but it’s a bit flowery for the men.”

Lavender. So that was what it was. John thanked Mrs. Gregson and carried the blankets back to his
room. That night, warm under his new covers that smelled of Sherlock, John dreamed again of the pond, of the day he had taught Sherlock to swim. He was holding Sherlock in the water, and the water was as warm as the air. Sherlock’s body was even warmer, slithering and sliding against him, sliding and sliding until that rush of shocking pleasure took him again, jolting him from sleep to find his groin and belly wet and his body still quivering slightly.

November 11
Sherrinford Hall, Stables

Dear Sherlock,

I am sorry you were not allowed to go to Bonfire Night, although from what we read in the papers next day it certainly sounds as though your father was right to keep you at home. Does your father believe that if the Fair Wage Act had passed in its original form that such terrible events might have been prevented?

We had no such excitement here, of course. I had an errand to town the next day and collected some ash from the bonfire for you though, if you would like it.

I am happy to hear that you have embarked on a new course of athletic study in the absence of dancing. I have no idea what singlestick fighting is, but I hope you can make use of it against your cousin George.

Yours sincerely,

John

November 18
London

Dear John,

Father and Mycroft are working harder than ever, trying to persuade various parties that the Guy Fawkes riots mean that the people will not accept the watered down version of Reform. The minister, Moriarty, is of course intractable and believe anything the people do not not accept must be beaten into them by force, a position he shares with my first tutor, but there is hope of bringing some of the others around. Apparently we are to anticipate a large house-party before Christmas. I am pleased by this as it means that with luck we will be coming back to Sherrinford rather earlier than originally planned. I so long to see you again.

“The family is coming tomorrow,” Mr Gregson announced.

John looked up in astonishment, hardly daring to believe it. He had received a frustrated letter from Sherlock only yesterday, in which he wrote: I ask Father, but he just says “soon”, and then Mycroft tells me not to tease as though I were still in the nursery.
“Anyone else?” Young Tom inquired.

“Not tomorrow, but the housekeeper says his Lordship’s planning a great many guests over Christmas.” Mr. Gregson was already acquiring his harried expression. “So for tomorrow, the three of them, plus Lord Sherlock’s tutor--”

“I’ll wager ha’penny it’s a new one,” Young Tom whispered.

“You’ll lose your money, it’s still Mr. Brooke,” John said under his breath.

“--and the two valets, and all their luggage, of course. So the carriage for the family and the gig for the servants and the wagon for the bags. Me and Bill and Ted to drive--Annie, run over to the cottages after tea and tell them they’ll need their livery--and Young Tom, you’ll come along for the bags. Old Tom will stay back to help with the horses when we return, and John, you and Ned and Davy will take out the other riding horses; if there’s truly to be a great party we need to make sure they’re all in tip-top shape.”

“Sir,” Young Tom said and John, who had hoped to see Sherlock return, swallowed his disappointment and said “Yes, sir,” in his turn.

The next morning was predictably hectic, as Mr. Gregson found his usual fault with the carriage, the harnesses, Ted’s livery, and all of the grooms for being a slow-witted pack of louts, so John and Ned and Davy escaped with the horses as quickly as possible. It was rare for all three of them to be sent out at the same time—long exercise had rather devolved into John’s job—and he was surprised to find he quite enjoyed racing about the cold, stubbled fields with them. It was not as good as riding with Sherlock, but it was fun all the same. They changed horses twice, and returned from their final outing tired but cheerful to find everyone else back from town.

“Master Sherlock came by to see you, but you were out with the horses, so he said he’d see you tomorrow,” Mrs. Gregson told John when he came gratefully into the warm kitchen.

“How was he?”

“Puny as ever,” Young Tom said from the basin. John felt a flash of annoyance. He had thought the same thing initially, but now thought of small, slender Sherlock as something delicate to be cherished, not as an aristocratic runt.

“He’ll grow,” Mrs. Gregson said, as she always did. “And he’s planning to ride tomorrow, he made sure to tell me.”

“All right?” John asked Mr. Gregson. “May I?”

“As long as you take poor old Shovel. Sounds like a big party they have coming, we’ll need all the riding horses,” Gregson said, looking harried again.

John knew very well that Shovel was actually called Beau Cheval, because Sherlock had drummed it into his head the summer before, but secretly he thought Shovel suited the slow old horse better. Still, he could be coaxed into a gallop in the right mood, so it would be a good ride nonetheless. “I’ll have the old boy prancing like a colt,” he promised.

John thought Sherlock might visit him that night, but he woke the next morning alone in the chilly loft. Moreover Sherlock did not appear in the stables until all the others had left for the pastures. John
was beginning to wonder if he ought not to take Shovel and Circe out to the pastures too when Sherlock came bounding in, shouted “John!” and threw his arms around John’s neck as though he were one of John’s small nephews instead of a scion of one of the noblest families in the realm.

“There you are,” John said, grinning. He meant only to pat Sherlock’s back indulgently, but somehow his arms wrapped around Sherlock of their own accord, hugging him tightly. He could feel the sharp edges of Sherlock’s shoulder blades beneath his thick jacket.

“You’ve got bigger, “ Sherlock said accusingly, breaking the hug.

“I’ve not...have I?”

“Almost an inch, and at least half a stone. It’s all muscle though. It’s not fair, why do you get to grow when I don’t?”

“Mrs. Gregson says Lord Mycroft was the same,” John offered. “She says you’re going to shoot up overnight, like a bean plant.”

Sherlock looked comforted. “I like that. Everyone else says I need to eat more."

“Well, it wouldn’t hurt,” John said. “Let’s go work up an appetite.”

“What on earth are you riding?”

“Shovel. Mr. Gregson wants him got in trim.”

“It’s not Shovel, it’s--”

“--Beau Cheval, I know. I just said it to rile you. Let’s ride!”

The day was damp and chill, so they took the path through the woods, making their way to Sherlock’s little cave where they sheltered for lunch. Sherlock built a fire and they sat in comfort, watching a halfhearted drizzle drip from the branches outside. Sherlock nestled against John’s side for warmth and chattered about London.

“So what are all these people coming for? Is your father going to try to pass the rest of the Fair Wage Act?”

“No--he says that doesn’t have a hope in the current climate, so he’s shifting back to education. But he’s got a terribly clever plan. Do you know what would happen, right now, if you or I stole, say, a horse?”

“Hanged, I imagine.”

“Yes. Only children under twelve are protected from hanging. Or prison, for lesser crimes. But Father has a scheme to introduce reform schools. Boys up to sixteen will instead be sent to reform schools where they will stay until they’re eighteen, and be taught a skill.”

“That sounds...lovely, but how is it going to pass?”

“The greatest opponents of the Fair Wage Act were the factory owners, and the dockyard and mines. The reform schools will be located near dockyards and factories. The boys will labor there to learn skills, while at the same time providing the factories--”

“--with free labor,” John finished, impressed. “So the factory owners will support it.”
“And here’s the really clever part. One of the only parts of the Fair Wage Act to pass intact was the part that protected the wages of experienced workers--those who had worked at least two years. So once the boys leave the reform asylum, they are experienced workers and their wages are protected. Father’s banking on the factory owners to be so blinded by the desire for slave labor that they won’t notice. So he’ll be pushing that for the next session.”

“That is clever,” John said. “Politics sounds terribly difficult.”

“And terribly dull. And there are all sorts of tedious little back room arrangements and handshake promises and so on and so on, which is why all these people are going to be coming here to have, hopefully, a lovely time and drink a great deal of expensive wines.”

“And have the best hunting and riding of their whole lives, if Mr. Gregson has anything to say about it. I’ll probably be kept busy whilst they’re here--we should ride all we can until then. Oh, what do you want me to do with your samples? I’ve got them all ready up in my room.”

“I wanted to come last night,” Sherlock said, frowning at the fire. “But I had to wait until Father went to bed, because he often comes in the first night, but he stayed up forever, and I didn’t get a wink of sleep the night before because I was coming here, so I fell asleep. And then I overslept.” He looked shamefacedly at John. “May I come tonight?”

“Of course you can, goose. I’ll keep a spot warm for you.”

“I’ll be busy once the house party arrives too,” Sherlock said gloomily. “Most people don’t take children to a house party, of course, but one of Father’s friends is bringing his son, and some immensely rich industrialist is bringing four daughters, two of whom aren’t yet out, so they’ll be my responsibility as well. I assume they’re hoping at least one of them will catch Mycroft’s eye. I’ve been informed it’s incumbent on me to act as gracious host...although how Mycroft can say such a thing with a straight face after knowing me nearly thirteen years is mystifying.”

“How on earth are you going to manage?” John said, amused.

“Oh, I’ll make myself ill. Not seriously ill--don’t look so alarmed, I’ve done it before. Malingering is a very useful skill, you know. I’ll stop the fireplace flue and stand over it with a blanket over my head until I can’t stop coughing, then air out the room and ring asking for lemon and honey. I’ll be kept to bed for at least a few days and with any luck cough myself hoarse, so I can spend the rest of the time with a flannel round my throat pretending it hurts to talk. That way I won’t offend anyone.”

“Well,” John said, torn between protesting Sherlock doing anything remotely risky and thinking that, under normal circumstances, he was in fact quite likely to offend everyone. “Don’t overdo it.”

By the time the guests began arriving a week later, John was too busy to worry about Sherlock. The arrivals kept the grooms running from dawn until well past dusk, and then they were busy arranging for riding horses and leading parties out into the countryside, finding sidesaddles, adjusting stirrups, and running themselves ragged trying to keep everything shiny and polished enough to satisfy Mr. Gregson. John fell into bed each night so exhausted he barely spared a thought for Sherlock. Ned had been sent to fetch the doctor the day after all the guests arrived, so John could only assume Sherlock had carried out his plan--he didn’t hear any gossip from the house one way or the other. The two younger daughters of the rich industrialist did ride out one day, accompanied by their governess and Old Tom, and on John’s brief acquaintance seemed to be monstrously silly. The other grooms did not share this view.

“That older sister cuts a fine figure,” Ned said, admiringly. “Too bad Mr. Gregson said Old Tom was to go with them. I could swear she was making eyes at me.”
“She can’t be a day older than I am!” John said.

“That’s why she was looking at Ned,” Young Tom said seriously. “Hasn’t seen any real men to compare him to.”

John did not see Sherlock until the fourth night, when he was startled awake by Sherlock crawling under his arm, shivering.

“How have you been out rambling again?”

“No, it’s just dreadfully cold. Warm me up.”

“I can feel your cold feet right through your stockings, you idiot. Why did you come out?” John pulled Sherlock’s back against him and wrapped him up in his arms.

“I haven’t seen you for days! I might have gone a bit too far with the smoke. I coughed so much I kept myself awake the last few nights—I couldn’t keep you up too.”

Sherlock did sound scratchy. “What did I say? I said don’t--”

“--overdo it, I know, but I was introduced to those dreadful ninnies at tea and I knew I would have to take drastic steps. They’re awful.”

“I know they are, I met them. I might have stuck my head in the fireplace too if it were me. Has your brother picked one yet?”

Sherlock’s laugh quickly turned into a hard, rasping cough. John could feel the wheezy roughness of his breath against his chest with every inhale. “Oh, Sherlock, you shouldn’t have come out.”

“No, it’s all right, I’m all right. The cold doesn’t trouble my cough, really it doesn’t.” Sherlock swallowed, still a little breathless, and burrowed his feet backward between John’s legs. “But don’t make me laugh anymore!”

“I won’t.” John pulled the blankets up a little higher, up to Sherlock’s ear, and wrapped his arms around him again. “Go to sleep now, you need the rest. I’ll make sure you wake up in time to go back.”

“May I come every night?” Sherlock’s hoarse voice was muffled under the blankets. “Until they leave and I can see you in the day?”

“Will you wear your hat next time? Your ears are so cold I won’t be able to sleep next to them.”

“Hat, gloves, muffler, whatever you like.”

“Then yes.” John took a breath and blew the warm air over Sherlock’s ear. Sherlock giggled a little, stifled another cough, and curled himself tighter so that he was almost completely buried in blankets. John rested his cheek against the soft curls and fell asleep, content.

The house party was to culminate in a great ball, to which all the other prominent families in the area were also invited.

“You know what that means,” Young Tom said grimly.

John looked at him over the top of the stall. “A lot of horses to stable?”
“A lot of horses to un-stable once the ball’s over.” When John still looked uncomprehending, Young Tom added, “Which is after midnight.”

“Oh, don’t say it.” Like everything else in service, unpleasant tasks were delegated by seniority. There was no chance whatsoever that John and Young Tom would not be the last two grooms on their feet the night of the ball.

“It’s not completely awful,” Tom said fairly. “We get to talk to the other drivers, and the kitchen at the hall sends over a late supper for us; it’s quite nice, not what the great folk have, but better than the usual lot. And Gregson’s fair enough that he’ll let us have a bit of a lie-in and the others will cover our morning chores, so we needn’t come down until breakfast.”

Young Tom was right. Staying up with the other grooms and coachmen turned out to be more fun than John expected, fueled by several pots of coffee, the really excellent supper and a fair amount of gossip. As was usual, more time was spent discussing horses than employers. Still it was well past one o’clock in the morning when John finally dragged himself up the chilly ladder, where he discovered Sherlock waiting for him.

“I’ve been waiting for hours,” Sherlock complained as John flopped heavily onto the bed. “Here, get your boots off and get under the covers, it’s lovely and warm.”

John crawled over Sherlock to his usual spot against the wall and slid in. It was deliciously warm. Sherlock even tried to put his feet down to cover John’s.

“How wuzza ball?”

“Oh, I’m not allowed to go. We had a little fete up in the schoolroom with the tutors and governesses, but I’m still pretending to have lingering laryngitis, so I had an excuse to hang back and leave early. I’ll be at the servant’s ball on Boxing Day though, you’ll see.”

“Opening the dancing with Mrs. Gregson?”

“Not quite.” Sherlock twitched over onto his back so that the back of his head was pillowed on John’s arm. “Shall I tell you a secret? I loved dancing. It was all the silly girls I couldn’t bear—well, and the awful master, of course.”

John was already halfway asleep, or he probably would have thought better of what he said next. “Could dance with me.”

He registered, distantly, Sherlock going suddenly still, his caught breath, but was just too tired to pay attention. He did feel Sherlock turn all the way toward him, but was never sure after if Sherlock whispered, “Yes,” or if he dreamt it.

In the morning when he woke, though, they were still facing each other, Sherlock’s small sleeping face buried in John’s neck, fully in each other’s arms.

Christmas night John once again came to bed late—although nowhere near as late as the night of the ball. Although their holiday would not officially be until the next day, Mrs. Gregson had cooked a special supper, and they had all sat around the fire after with mulled wine, reading “A Christmas Carol” and singing. They were not a particularly tuneful lot, but it was a lovely time nonetheless.

John felt warm and slightly fuzzy and fond of everything, which probably owed a lot to the mulled wine. He was thinking a little guiltily of his mother and sister, hoping their Christmas had been as
warm and merry, when he stepped into the stables. He looked up and saw the dim glow of the lantern in his room and forgot all about his family.

“Finally!” Sherlock said when John appeared at the top of the ladder. He was perched on John’s bed, wrapped up in a blanket, bright-eyed with expectation. “You’ve been ages!”

“Merry Christmas,” John said, smiling. “Are you a visitation?”

“Of a sort,” Sherlock said, sliding off the bed. “Get in quick before it gets cold. I’ve a present for you—I brought it up earlier today and hid it in the hayloft.” He had got his boots on now, and darted nimbly out the door into the loft. John moved quickly to his chest, rifled through it silently, and made it to the bed just as Sherlock returned with his arms full.

“Boots!” John cried, astonished. “New boots!”

“Your old ones were too small,” Sherlock said smugly. “I calculated the correct size last summer and made allowances for growth since then, although I believe you’re largely done growing now, except maybe in breadth. Try them on, I want to see if I got it right.”

Of course Sherlock had got it right. The boots were a perfect fit, and even in the dim light John could tell they were far nicer than any he had ever owned. “These are lovely.”

Sherlock stopped his excited hopping around and frowned. “What’s wrong? I got something wrong.”

“No, you didn’t, they’re perfect. Just...everyone will know you gave them to me.”

Sherlock cocked his head like a curious bird. “So? I’m allowed, surely?”

“Yes of course, but it will look like favoritism. And that can cause ill feeling.”

“Oh, that’s easily managed.” Sherlock sat down on the side of the bed and pulled off his own boots. “Don’t wear them yet. Tomorrow you’ll receive your wages and Christmas bonus, and a coat, of course, it’s always a coat or a suit of clothes, Father alternates every year, and then in a few days we’ll ride to town, and you’ll come back with the boots, and everyone will just assume you bought them.” He waved an airy hand. “Problem solved. Now put out the light and let’s go to bed, it’s cold.”

“Wait.” John carefully took off the beautiful boots and tucked them deep under his bed. He reached into his pocket and said, “I’ve a present for you too.”

Sherlock’s eyes went wide at the sight of the little envelope. “That’s not…”

“Look and see.”

Sherlock took it reverently in both hands and read aloud, “‘Soil from the freshly dug grave of Mrs. Fred McCracken, October 18, southwest corner of the churchyard, Church of St. Michael and All Angels, Sherrinford Village.’ Oh, John.” He looked up at John with shining eyes. “However did you manage it?”

“I was at the pub, and the sexton came in and bought a round for us all to drink to the soul of the late Mrs. McCracken, for having the kindness to die that very morning so that he could dig the grave before the hard frost that was coming. So of course I downed my free pint, and then I pleaded a headache and said I was going back early. I was terrified! What if somewhat had spotted me sneaking around like a grave robber?”
“This is the best day of my life,” Sherlock said solemnly. He slid off the bed and carried the envelope to where his coat hung on a peg, tucking it carefully into a pocket. Then he took a flying leap at the bed. “Now let’s get under the covers! My feet are freezing!”

John had never been to a servant’s ball before--Sir Willoughby’s idea of Boxing Day festivities had consisted of tips all round and a keg of beer--but it turned out to be great fun. There were goose and chestnuts and Christmas cake, and even a punch with oranges and lemons, which was delicious. He had assumed that the house servants would snub them, but the maids and kitchen girls at least were very friendly. “They need us to make up the numbers for the dancing,” Young Tom told John.

“No, they just like us. We’re real men, not like those namby-pamby footmen,” Ned retorted.

Whatever the reason, John found himself sitting with Young Tom and two of the maids, giggling and telling stories about the recent guests--"Sugar cubes the afternoon of the dance, like we don’t know what she wants those for"--when a sudden scraping of chairs made him turn round to see everyone rising quickly to their feet. He could just make out the Earl entering the room, followed by the equally tall and serious Lord Mycroft. Through the crowd John caught a glimpse of Mr. Brooke, so Sherlock was undoubtedly up there also.

Lord Sherrinford made a gracious and blissfully brief speech, thanking everyone for their exemplary service and hoping they had enjoyed the repast, which elicited a great deal of cheering and applause, and then announced, “And now it is my privilege to open the dancing. Mrs. Medlock, if you would do me the great honor?” He held his hand out to the housekeeper, who swept an elegant curtsey.

John craned his neck with the rest, watching as the floor cleared and Lord Mycroft led out the cook, followed by the Gregsons, the head gardener and his wife, and a handful of the maids, valets and footmen. At the first strain of music, though, he forgot the dancers, somehow knowing before he even turned to look. Sherlock was standing on a chair, immaculately dressed, playing a waltz on his violin. John stared, mesmerized. He heard the chatter behind him start up again (“I don’t know these fancy dances, I’ll wait for the reels, thank you very much”) but could not tear his eyes away to join in. Sherlock was intent on the music, completely absorbed and confident, glancing up now and again to check the tempo. John watched as his eyes focused on nothing, biting his lip, his whole body caught up in the magic he was weaving. He was as flawless in his fine clothing as a marble angel in a church and, it seemed to John in that moment, as impossibly distant.

The waltz drew to an end and there was a smattering of applause as the gentlemen bowed to their partners. Sherlock jumped down, and John saw that another violinist--one of the footmen, he thought--and two gardeners with flutes were joining him. They huddled together for a minute, the footman speaking, Sherlock and the others intently listening, then straightened as the footman called out, “Sir Roger de Coverly!”

There was a general stampede to the floor and John found himself pulled along, his hand clasped by one of the maids he had been sitting with--Cathy? Cassie? Callie!--and shepherded into the line. The music started up, bright and festive, and John joined in with the rest, laughing and clapping and twirling his way down the line with Callie when their turn came. He was having too much fun to watch Sherlock, although he caught glimpses here and there. Sherlock was playing away, cheeks pink and eyes on the footman, who was clearly the leader of their little band.

At intervals between pieces the dancers would shout out tunes they wanted played and in one of these Callie called, “‘Kitty Lie Over’!”

“Oh, I know that one,” John said, surprised.
“I don’t,” the leader said, bow poised. “How does it go?”

Callie looked at John helplessly, already starting to laugh, and John, emboldened by the attention and the punch, sang out the first line: “‘Oh, what would you do if the kettle boiled over?’”

“‘What would I do but to fill it again!’” Callie sang back.

“What would you do if the cow ate the clover?”

“What would I do only set it again!”

“That’s ‘The Frost is All Over’,” the musician said chidingly, and swooped into the rollicking song. John and Callie, laughing harder at the scolding tone, kept on singing as they danced, the rest of the party joining in on the choruses as they went along.

By the time the piece ended John was completely out of breath. “I think I need a rest,” he told Callie, staggering from the floor. “Can I get you a drink?”

“That would--” but just then the violinist shouted, “Circle!” and Callie’s face lit. “Oh, I love this one!” she cried, and darted away to link hands with the other girls.

John, not wanting a sore head in the morning, drank what felt like a quart of water before refilling his cup with punch and settling into a seat where he could see Sherlock. His hair was damp with sweat and he wondered if he could remove his jacket.

“May I join you?” a voice said. John looked up, surprised, and leaped to his feet.

“Mr. Brooke! Sir! Of course, sit here…” Mr. Brooke, smiling, waved away John’s offered chair and pulled up his own. Up close John saw for the first time that he dragged one leg, and was clutching a cane.

“Polio when I was a child,” Mr. Brooke explained, following John’s gaze. “It’s why I don’t dance. Or ride,” he added, tipping his head at John.

“I had a bit of trouble with that myself for a bit. Trained as a jockey for years, then went down in my very first race.”

“A shame,” Mr. Brooke said gently. “Your misfortune was a gain for us, however. I’ve wanted to meet you for quite some time. Lord Sherlock speaks of you constantly.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you too, sir. In fact, I believe I owe you a debt of thanks--you helped Lord Sherlock choose the books he sent, isn’t that right?”

“I did. And now he tells me that you are reading them aloud?”

“Yes--the winter evenings are long, as you know, and our days not so wearying as at other times of the year, so the reading has become very popular. Many of the married men are joining us now with their families, and I hear there is talk of the servants here in the house starting their own circle.”

“How wonderful! I am so pleased to hear it. Tell me, what suggestions do you have for future books?”

“Everyone likes adventures. And if I may be so bold as to suggest, I think sea stories would be very well received. It seems that every groom was once a boy who longed to run away to sea.”

“And a few tutors too,” Mr. Brooke agreed. “But what of you? Lord Sherlock speaks of your
intelligence, and I can see it for myself. The winter evenings sound as though they would afford some time for private study. Now that you can read so well, would you like books of a more studious nature? Natural sciences perhaps, or history?"

“Oh, I would, sir. But I do not mean to impose—”

“You do not impose, John. I am a tutor, and to aid in imparting knowledge is my great joy in life. And fortunately I am blessed with an employer who shares that joy. You must be aware that Lord Sherrinford is the father of educational reform—he believes education to be the birthright of every Englishman, from the prince in his castle to the farmer’s son in the field. The thought of filling his servant’s halls with well-thumbed books will bring him great pleasure.”

“That would be lovely, sir,” John said sincerely.

The music came to a halt, and the violin-playing footman called out, “A brief rest for us!”

“Oh, I must go,” Mr. Brooke said, rising. “I would love to talk further, but it has been impressed on me that Lord Sherlock must be kept out of the punch at all costs. Apparently last year he was allowed to imbibe, and there was a brawl...well, it’s past time he was in bed anyway.” He gave John’s hand a brief squeeze, added, “A very great pleasure to meet you,” and pushed through the milling crowd.

He need not have hurried. John watched with amusement as Sherlock’s stealthy sidle toward the punch bowl was efficiently intercepted by Mrs. Medlock, who turned him over to Mr. Brooke with what appeared to be quite a scolding. Sherlock, not in the least abashed, pushed his violin and bow into Mr. Brooke’s hands and came running over to John.

“That was brilliant!” John said. “That dance at the beginning was beautiful. I never knew you were so skilled.”

“I made a few mistakes in the waltz, but I don’t think anyone noticed. I’ll see you later, may I?”

“Of course,” John said. Sherlock gave his hand a quick squeeze, grinned, and downed John’s full cup of punch in one go.

“Oi!” John said, but Sherlock was already darting back to Mr. Brooke, who was put a firm hand on his shoulder and steered him out of the room.

“How did you know that song?”

“Mmm?” John was warm, sleepy, full of punch and had his cheek tucked into Sherlock’s sweet-smelling hair.

“The song earlier, that you sang with Callie. ‘The Frost is All Over’.”

“Oh, everybody knows that song where I come from.” John yawned. “I should have asked Callie how she knows it, it doesn’t seem to be widely known in the south. I think it may be Irish, actually.”

“I’ve never heard it.”

“Well, you wouldn’t though, would you? It’s a poor man’s song.”

“Music is for everybody,” Sherlock objected.
“Not really. Didn’t you hear the words? It’s all about bad things happening. It’s a song for the poor, like your waltz is music for the rich, who have the leisure to learn such complicated pieces and the fancy dances that go with them.”

“But you liked the waltz.” John could hear the frown in Sherlock’s voice. “And bad things happen to everybody. Anyway, I thought the song was more about starting again when something goes wrong.”

John was too comfortable to argue. “You’re right.”

Sherlock was quiet a moment. “Sing it to me.”

“What, ‘The Frost is All Over’? Now?”

“Please? I want to hear the words again. I was too busy trying to get the tune right before.”

“Mmmm. All right, but quietly.” John sang softly, just over a whisper, into Sherlock’s curls.

What would you do if you married a soldier?
What would I do only follow his gun
And what would you do if he died on the ocean?
What would I do but to marry again.
Potatoes are dug and the frost is all over
Kitty lie over, close to the wall
You to be drunk, and I to be sober
Kitty lie over, close to the wall.

February 1
Sherrinford Hall, Stables

Dear Sherlock,

Thank you ever so much for the lovely crate of books! I was not here when they arrived but am told the excitement was immense, especially for the sea stories. I have enclosed a note of thanks for your father and Mr. Brooke also, which we have all signed. The days here are no less dull and cheerless than in London, and spirits have been rather low with Christmas over, so it was wonderful to receive such a treat.

I have just returned from my trip north to visit my family, and in answer to your kind query am happy to report that all are well and in good health and my sister looks to be providing me with what she dolefully assures me will be another nephew come spring. The ground was frozen there, of course, but by using my pocket knife I was able to obtain some samples of both vegetation and soil from various parts of moor and heath for you. The estate agent, Mr. Morris, will be traveling to London later this month to meet with your father, and has kindly agreed to transport the specimens
There was much discussion going on when I returned of a minor scandal involving a man from the town who had been arrested, and I thought I would have an exciting tale of crime to report to you. Alas, it seems the man was guilty only of moral indecency, and there was no mystery after all.

“I don’t understand,” John said. “How was he being indecent if he was just with another man? Was there a lady who escaped out the window, or something?”

Ned and Davy burst into laughter and John frowned, looking to Young Tom.

“John,” gasped Ned, practically doubled over. “There was no lady escaping out the window, nor a sheep, not that I heard anyway.” This sent them both off again. “Sodomy? Ring a bell?”

“Buggery?” suggested Davy, barely able to get the word out.

John had heard both terms of course, but never given much thought to their actual meaning. “Right,” Young Tom said, losing patience. “He’s nought but a lad! He’s fifteen! You just forget because he can ride better than the lot of you. Now get on out before Mr. Gregson hears you.”

Ned and Davy led their horses toward the doors, still snickering and murmuring. John heard a fresh burst of laughter as they went outside.

“All right, explain it to me,” John said, red faced and feeling hot.

“Well.” Young Tom looked uncomfortable. “Ah, you know how it’s done, between a man and a woman, right?”

“Course,” said John, who had been helping to breed horses since he was eight. He was not quite as clear on the actual workings of the two legged, but surely it couldn’t be that different.

“Well, sodomy, or buggery--they’re the same thing--is when two men do it. That.”

“But, how?” John said, honestly bewildered. “There’s no--we’ve no hole.”

“You do though. Think about it.” Tom made a vague gesture toward the back of his breeches.

“You mean--no. They put it in each other’s arsehole? How is that even possible?”

“Well, I don’t know, I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about it, do I?” Tom said, looking relieved that John had finally caught on. “It’s unnatural! That’s why it’s a crime, it’s a sin, it says so right in the Bible. Sodom and Gomorrah--that’s where sodomy comes from, see?”

John felt stunned, still trying to imagine such a thing.

“It’s a bit much to take in, I was gobsmacked too. You hear though, some places, it’s quite common. Happens all the time in the army, they say. And…”

“What?”

Young Tom paused for a moment, clearly uncomfortable, and then said in a whisper, “I hear tell that they put it in each other’s mouths too.”

John’s jaw fell open. He felt sure that this was not what Tom had originally meant to say, but it was
certainly distracting. “Their pricks?”

“So you hear, I don’t know for sure.”

John blinked at him. “That’s…”

“It is,” Tom agreed fervently.

They were silent a moment, leaning side by side against the stall, not looking at each other.

“Have you ever been with a lass?” Young Tom asked tentatively, and John shook his head.

“I have. Once. I think I bollixed it up, and it was over almost before it began.” He looked at the ceiling. “I suppose if you’re with another bloke, well, at least you know where all the bits are supposed to go, don’t you?”

John started laughing, more out of relief than because it was funny, and Tom joined in. “Blimey,” he said. He shook himself briskly. “All right, let’s get these horses out, or Ned and Davy will start telling everyone I’m giving you a demonstration, the bastards.”

The startling information Young Tom had given him haunted John for the next several days. He remembered a few incidents in the past—things overheard but not understood, jokes he had not caught—that were now clear. Mostly, though, he tried to get his mind around it. Men actually did that? On purpose? Willingly?

One night he lay sleepless, thinking it over, and abruptly he pushed one hand down into his drawers. It wasn’t really touching himself, he thought, everyone knew that was a sin; he just wanted to understand. He pulled up one knee, face hot even though he knew he was all alone in the stable, and tentatively prodded himself. That just felt...odd. And wrong. He tried again, pushing in a little, and felt his muscles clench around his finger, which was not only odd but uncomfortable. And that was just his finger! How much more would a prick hurt?

That thought suddenly gave him pause. He hadn’t really considered what it felt like from the other side. How did they work that out? Did they draw lots? Take turns? The thought of that clench, though...he raised his finger and spat on it, then tucked it down into the cleft of his bum again. This time he wrapped his hand around the head of his cock—just to see, he told himself—and when he pushed his finger in a third time, he squeezed his cock as his arse clenched, imagining it. And that—John yanked both hands out of his drawers as fast as he could and turned quickly onto his belly, shoving both hands under the pillow and concentrating on not moving at all, keeping his suddenly swollen prick pinned and still beneath him.

It was a long time before he slept.

March 2

Sherrinford Hall, Stables

Dear Sherlock,

I hope that this letter finds you well, and that your family remains in London. I have had no reply from you since my last letter, and wondered perhaps if you had left town?
March 4

London

Dear John,

I am sure you will be surprised and alarmed to receive a letter from this address in a strange hand, and wish that I could set your mind immediately at rest. Alas, I cannot. It is my unfortunate duty to tell you that Lord Sherlock has been confined to his bed with a cough. Although we are assured that he is in no danger, his physician feels that he has overexerted himself and that a period of absolute rest must be imposed in order for him to recover.

I am sorry for not writing to you earlier, but did not realize the frequency of your correspondence, and am afraid it did not occur to me that you might be alarmed at not receiving a letter. Please accept my deepest apologies.

Sincerely yours,

John Brooke

March 6

Sherrinford Hall, Stables

Dear Mr. Brooke,

I must first thank you for taking the trouble to write and tell me of Lord Sherlock’s condition. To hear that he was ill was a great blow, the more so knowing that he had been so for some time whilst I was unaware.

All of the other servants, grounds and hall, share my deep concern. If you should have the opportunity and feel it appropriate, please convey to the Earl that Lord Sherlock and his family—as well as you yourself, sir—remain foremost in our prayers.

If I may be so forward as to beg another kindness from you: will you please keep me informed of Lord Sherlock's progress? We are all most anxious, and Mrs. Gregson bids me say that a telegram to Mrs. Medlock at the Hall would not be amiss, if there is any sudden change.

Your most grateful servant,

John Watson

March 9

London

Dear John,

I fear I was not so reassuring in my last letter as I had supposed. Please rest assured that Lord Sherlock is in no danger, and I sincerely doubt that a telegram will be required. In truth he is
tormented far more by ennui than by dyspnea, and I hope very much that he will be allowed up soon.

March 12
London
Dear John,

I am pleased to be able to write with some happy news at last: Lord Sherlock is at last allowed up in a chair. Now it is my turn to beg a favor from you. Lord Sherlock is, as you can imagine, driving his caretakers to distraction. If you could take the time to write him a letter with news of the Hall--preferably a very long one, with as much detail as you see fit--we would all count it a very great kindness. He will of course not be allowed to read it himself, but any of us would be delighted to read it aloud to him.

Sincerely yours,
John Brooke

P.S. Please do not feel that you must stand on ceremony in your letter, though other eyes may see it. The fact that Sherlock counts you his dearest friend is no great secret, and I would venture that there is not a soul in the house unaware that you are as David and Jonathan.

March 14
Sherrinford Hall, Stables

Dear Mr. Brooke,

Thank you so much for the great good news of your last letter. I appreciate your kind words, but do not wish to presume on the limits of Lord Sherrinford’s liberality, and so I have enclosed my letter to Sherlock within. If you would be so kind, I would prefer that you be the one to read it aloud.

March 22
London

Dear John,

As you have no doubt deduced by the writing, I have at last been allowed freedom to read and write for myself, as well as resume my studies and my violin, all of which had been forbidden me by that idiot doctor. Father had sense enough to consult an eminent specialist of the lungs when I did not seem to improve. The specialist, Sir Leslie Oakshott, came this morning and impressed me very favorably by his willingness to listen to me on the subject of mental exertion. I have always maintained that I am far more exhausted by boredom than by intellectual activity, but that moron Dr. Craven insisted that overwork was to blame for my illness, and had kept me from resuming my usual habits. Fortunately Sir Leslie agrees that this is not the case and instead advises clean air, which of course may be found in the country at Sherrinford Hall, as well as some other banal and
less important things which I have already forgotten. I am enormously pleased, not only that I now have respite from the crushing tedium of so much rest, but that I may anticipate returning to Sherrinford Hall in the company of Mr. Brooke when I am well and my other tutors feel that I have caught back up with my studies.

I look forward to being able to read your letters now for myself, and am eager to hear about the foaling. However, you may dispense with the endless detail about the gardens and servants’ dalliances, all of which were clearly intended to distract me at the instigation of Mr. Brooke.

Yours sincerely,

Sherlock Holmes

March 22
London

Dear John,

While I have enjoyed furthering our acquaintance, I have never been so glad to end a correspondence. Pray continue to write Sherlock frequently and do not hesitate to call on me if I may be of any service in the future.

Sincerely,

John Brooke

March 25
Sherrinford Hall, Stables

Dear Sherlock,

I can not tell you how delighted I was to receive a letter in your own hand, and bearing such welcome news. I pray that you are continuing to recover. I also hope very much that you will take all of the expert doctor’s advice, and not only the parts that appeal to you. If you will not do this for your own sake then I beg that you will do it for mine, as the last month has been a most terrible ordeal and I have no wish to ever repeat it.

I am astonished that you should ask about the foaling as Terpsichore this very morning presented us with the most beautiful filly. She is the most lovely gray with a snowy mane and tail. We are of course waiting for you or your father to name her, but for the time being the grooms are calling her Misty.

I have taken the liberty of telling Davy about the gate in the wall leading to the village, and he is making most excellent use of it. But I know you do not wish to be bored with tales of his dalliances, so will say no more. In any case I am very tired from being up all night with Terpsi, so I will bring this letter to a close and hope it finds you improving.

Sincerely,

John
March 30
London
Dear John,

I may have been a bit hasty in my last letter. What is Davy up to? I have no data from which to deduce.

As the mother is a Muse and you say the foal is beautiful, then clearly her name must be Callisto. Please tell Mr. Gregson at once so that he may put a stop to this Misty nonsense.

April 17
London
Dear John,

Reading your descriptions of the gardens beginning to bloom makes me long so for the country and you that I can hardly bend my mind to my work. But I must, because Father has consented that I may return before him only if my tutors are satisfied that I will be ready to begin Eton in the fall. Therefore I have devoted myself to my studies with renewed vigor and attention. I have not even been riding, though this has been deemed safe as the fogs have finally lifted.

I did, however, take the time to visit the book-sellers after you took me to task for expecting you to be familiar with a subject on which you had never read. Enclosed you will find a comprehensive guide to the Greek gods and heroes, which I hope you will find interesting.

May 2
London
Dear John,

I AM COMING HOME.

Chapter End Notes

"The frost is all over": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-VND5EkAGC4
The adventure of the golden pince-nez

Chapter Notes

I kept meaning to note this and forgot. Mr. Brooke is named after the extremely long-suffering tutor in "Little Women". It did occur to me at some point that this was likely to cause confusion with Richard Brook, but it turned out to be one of those names I just couldn't picture any other way, so I left it and hoped the different spelling would be enough. He's not going to turn out to be a secret villain!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“So how was it?”

“How was what?”

“You know what. The thing at the village school, that your father wanted you to go with him—the end of term?”

“Oh, that.” Sherlock stretched like a cat. They were sprawled out on the grassy slope at the pond, trying to warm up in the sun. It was the first day hot enough to swim so they’d taken advantage of it, but the water was chilly enough to send them scrambling after very long. “Tedious, but not awful. The tea after was worse. Horrid Lady Lynde was there, she’s the patroness of the girl’s school, she always acts as though I’ve one foot in the grave. Told Father twice I looked flushed.”

John raised up on one elbow to take a look. “You’re not flushed. You’re sunburnt,” he said.

“I know. Once I would have let slide, but the second time I waited til Father turned to talk to someone else and then told her my very eminent physician in London could doubtless recommend a specialist if she wanted to do something about her piles.”

“You didn’t!”

“I did. She was being ridiculous.”

John looked Sherlock over objectively. Lady Lynde was ridiculous. Sherlock might still be small—John was beginning to suspect that, whatever Mrs. Gregson maintained, he would always be small—but he was hardly recognizable as the pale wraith who had got off the train nearly two months ago. Sprawled out in the sunshine with his eyes closed, Sherlock appeared strong, healthy and faintly spattered with freckles.

“The school demonstrations weren’t unbearable. The younger pupils mostly sang insipid songs; I suppose their intellectual accomplishments aren’t up to much. But some of the older ones seemed to have done well. Father’s going to sponsor four or five to the grammar school, which is better than last year—I think there was only one then.”

“Is grammar school where you’re going?”

Sherlock snorted. “Hardly. Eton is the nursery of England’s statesmen, which means it’s where aristocrats send their sons to meet other aristocrats’ sons and form lifelong friendships, so when they grow up they can go into government and pass laws keeping their privileges intact, marry one
another’s sisters, and generally perpetuate the status quo. Grammar schools are where the reasonably
clever send their sons to gain an education so they can go on to become doctors and barristers and
actual useful members of society.”

“Ah,” John said.

Sherlock was quiet a moment, then asked in rather a different tone, “John? Would you have liked to
go to grammar school?”

“Sherlock, we didn’t even have a village school, remember?”

“But if the education reform Father wants had passed, and fifteen years ago, and your village had a
school, and you won a spot. I know you would have done, you’re cleverer than any of the boys
yesterday.”

John rolled onto his stomach, feeling the vague exasperation that he always did when Sherlock
seemed unable to grasp the vastness of the gulf between them. How to make him understand that for
John to have thought any higher than becoming a jockey was as ridiculous and inconceivable as if he
had wanted to become a horse? The thought triggered a memory, so old and faint he had almost
forgotten it.

“When I was young,” John said slowly, “my father was thrown from a horse and broke his arm. Sir
Willoughby had the doctor out, and he let me help to set it. He was kind, but he was honest. He told
my father, ‘This is going to hurt like the blazes, but you must hold still like a man, and then it will be
done, and if you do as I say it will heal good as new.’ I saw how he made my father believe it, and
how my father set his teeth through the pain while the doctor pulled and I held the splint. And do you
know, he was right—that arm healed straight as the day he was made.” He paused. “Later I asked
my mother if she thought my father would mind if I became a doctor instead of a jockey. She
laughed and told me that I could no more become a doctor than Mary could grow up to be a horse or
Harry to be a jockey, which apparently they had wanted in their time. That was the way of the
world, she said. And it was, for me.”

John opened his eyes to see Sherlock had rolled to his side, so their faces were only inches apart. He
was looking straight into Sherlock’s pure blue eyes, though even as he watched the pupils spread so
wide that the blue shrank to a thin halo.

“But you can read now,” Sherlock said, almost as though he was forcing himself. “You could—"

“I’m too old, Sherlock. No, stop, this isn’t like the reading. Even if I could stop work, which I
couldn’t because my family depends on me, and I could somehow learn all I needed to know by the
end of the summer—I’ll be sixteen then, Sherlock. Too old, to go to school with thirteen-year-olds.”

Sherlock opened his mouth, paused, shut it again, and sighed. “Is it terrible that I’m glad you aren’t
going to leave? It is, isn’t it, because I should want you to be happy. And I’m going away to school
myself, although it’s hardly because I want to.”

John touched his unhappy face very gently with the tips of his fingers. “I’m not going anywhere,
don’t worry. But of course you have to, so you can do something magnificent when you’re grown.
What are you going to do, anyway?”

“I don’t know.” Sherlock closed his eyes and rolled disconsolately on his back. “A scientist, I
suppose. I know I don’t want to go to balls and make a good marriage, so thank God that’s
Mycroft’s lot and not mine. It’s traditionally the church or the military for the second son, but
fortunately the Holmes family has a long history of producing scholars, so no one will mind if I
spend the rest of my life in a dreaming spire, making great discoveries.”

“An exploding spire, more likely,” John said drily.

Sherlock grinned without opening his eyes. They lay for a few minutes in a comfortable silence before Sherlock said, “Did you eat all the strawberries?”

“You said you were finished!”

“Well, I was then, but now I want more.”

“I’ll tell Mrs. Gregson to pack more tomorrow.”

Sherlock gave a dramatic sigh and sat up. “Time for our smoke then,” he announced.

John groaned and covered his head with his arms. Sherlock had finally finished cataloging every naturally occurring substance in the south of England, and had decided to create an index of tobacco ash. He had convinced John to assist him in smoking his way through the vast collection of various types of tobacco he had amassed. John found this disgusting, and though Sherlock claimed to like smoking, John had noticed he tended to stop after a few puffs. “How about you smoke mine today? You like it, after all.”

Sherlock made a noise like an outraged puppy. “You eat all the strawberries and make me do all the work? You can’t do that.”

“I can.”

“How?”

“I’m bigger.” John leaped up, tackled Sherlock, and tickled him into submission, Sherlock howling, “You--just--wait! I’m going to be bigger than you one day, John Watson, I’m--oooh, stop it!”

It was a good summer, lovely and peaceful. Even the arrival of the Wilkes did not spoil their pleasure.

“I don’t understand it,” John said. “He’s been here a month, and Master Sebastian has yet to break anything of yours.”

“He doesn’t need to,” Sherlock said bitterly. “He’s been at Eton a whole year already. All he has to do is drop dark hints, how everyone will despise me and so on. I hate him.”

“Yes, but he’s an utter idiot,” John said, and Sherlock mustered a lopsided smile.

August brought another house party, even larger and busier than the winter’s, and with more work for the grooms as the fair weather kept everyone out-of-doors. On the third day John returned to the stableyard to see a commotion by the carriage house. Mr. Gregson was in the thick of it, already red in the face.

“What’s going on?”

“There’s some sort of trouble back in London, and Lord Mycroft is going down in his father’s stead,” Young Tom explained. “The Earl and most of the guests are off on that big picnic outing...and so are all the conveyances.”
“Why can’t he go to the station in the dog-cart?”

“Where’s his valet to ride then?”

John had not been in service long enough to automatically double every aristocrat. “Oh, right.”

“So Mr. Gregson had us drag out the old charabanc and try to get it cleaned up, but there’s a great crack in the rear axle, see?”

“I beg your pardon for intruding,” the perfectly smooth and polite voice of Lord Mycroft said behind them, “but is there a problem?”

“My Lord,” Mr. Gregson said, wiping his face, which was now edging dangerously close to purple. “Not at all, sir, we’ll have this ready in just a moment, only need to harness the horses.”

At this propitious moment the axle gave way, and the rear of the carriage fell to the ground with a resounding crash. A cloud of dust rose from the cushions.

“Ah,” Lord Mycroft said into the stunned silence. “I must apologize, Gregson, I believe my failure to be specific has caused you great difficulty. Anderson will not be accompanying me to London, as he is needed here to tend to those of the guests who did not bring valets. I will be well looked after by the head footman at our house in town. So I would be entirely agreeable to riding to the station in the two-seater, if that would be more...expedient.” One of the wheels fell off the lopsided carriage and clanged onto the cobblestones.

“We’ll get the horses,” Young Tom said quickly, catching John by the arm, and they barely made it into stables before doubling over in hysterics.

John told the whole story to Sherlock that night as they lay curled in John’s bed, laughing so hard the bed shook.

“Poor Gregson,” gasped Sherlock, wiping his eyes.

“I thought he was going to have apoplexy, I truly did. He was a long time coming back from the station—we all reckoned he stopped in at the pub for a pint.”

“What he quite deserved.”

“Quite.” John drew a long breath, settling back down. “I didn’t know some of the gentlemen traveled without valets.”

“Oh, it’s not uncommon for the younger ones or those who lack funds. I don’t think I’ll want a valet. How hard is it to shave oneself and do up one’s own cuffs, anyway? And any manservant can polish shoes. The Colonel though, he doesn’t have a valet but he used to—he’s come down a bit in the world, so he likes to order Anderson around when he gets the chance. I hear he’d have nothing if not for what he wins at cards. I’ve been spying the past few nights but if he’s cheating, I can’t make out how.”

“Sherlock Holmes! How are you spying on him?”

“Secret passage, with a peephole. The Hall’s full of them. When I was young I hid behind what I thought was Aunt Wilkes’ room and tried to make her believe it was haunted, but I misjudged either my location or the frightening quality of my ghostly moans, and was rumbled by the housekeeper.”

John was shaking with laughter again. “You shouldn’t be spying on people!”
“Well, how else am I to find out what people don’t want me to know?” Sherlock asked indignantly. “It’s not like I’m peeping at, at—ladies in a state of undress, or something.”

“That’s only because you find ladies boring.”

“That is not true. I would find them very interesting if they were up to no good in a state of undress.” When John went off on a fresh gale at this Sherlock said crossly, “Oh, you know what I mean.”

Sherlock had continued his habit of spending every night with John, something neither had commented on, but which John considered the best part of his day. Now Sherlock laced his fingers over John’s and tucked their joined hands to his chest, as he always did when he got sleepy. “I need for the Colonel to sit with his back to the peephole so I can see the cards,” he said, yawning. “If he does that tomorrow I’ll watch every hand. Might be late.”

As it turned out, by the next night Sherlock forgot all about the card game.

“Now what?” John asked when he came in the kitchen that afternoon for some bread and cheese and found everyone buzzing.

“Something’s up at the house,” Ned told him. “No one’s coming out, and the police were sent for. They came up, three of them, and then just now drove off again.”

“The police!” John said, thinking that whatever was going on, Sherlock was surely in the middle of it.

“D’you think someone’s been murdered?” Len said, wide-eyed. “Maybe Lord Sherlock blew someone up, on accident?”

Mr. Gregson bustled in. “I’ve just had word to ready the cart,” he said. “Whose turn is it to drive to town? Davy, run fetch Bill and get the horses.”

One of the footmen appeared a few minutes later. “Cancel the cart,” he said. “But his Lordship’s got a wire to take to town.”

“Well, I never,” Mrs. Gregson said. “Run and tell Mr. Gregson, John.”

They all waited about another hour or so, but no more orders came, so Mr. Gregson told John and Young Tom they might as well take the horses out to pasture.

“What do you think?” Tom asked John.

“No idea. Strange, isn’t it? Whatever it is, I’ll get the story from Lord Sherlock—if he’s not the cause of it and confined to his room for the rest of the summer.”

“Blimey,” Tom said suddenly, shading his eyes. “Look there, John. Isn’t that Mr. Anderson?”

John looked too. “I think so, but...he’s not in his fine clothes.”

“Maybe he’s gone to Lord Mycroft after all?”

“But why those clothes? And why would he walk? And besides, there’s been no telegram brought to the house, has there?”

“Not by horse, I’ve been at the stables all day,” Tom said, frowning. “You don’t think...”

“What?”
“You think he was sacked?”

John looked at the Anderson’s stiff back, growing smaller in the distance. “What could he have done? It must have been something really awful.”

“I don’t remember the Earl’s ever sacked anyone,” Tom agreed. “Let’s go back and see if anyone’s heard anything.”

By tea, of course, Annie had the whole story.

“It’s ever so exciting,” she said, eyes shining at the attention. “I’ve heard it all from Elsie the chambermaid. One of the young men, Mr. Adair, had planned to play at cards last night. He put a sum of money into a purse, meaning only to play until he had depleted those funds, but then he forgot the purse in his room. He decided providence meant for him to be prudent and to spend the evening in the music-room instead. Just as he went to bed, he noticed that the purse was gone from his dressing-table, but supposed that his valet had put it away for safekeeping. This morning, he learned that his valet had done no such thing—the purse was gone when he came to prepare Mr. Adair for bed. There was a great fuss, and suspicion fell on Mr. Anderson, for it was said he was seen leaving the room looking very furtive whilst all the guests were at dinner. Mr. Anderson is known to be a bit of a sourpuss and not very popular, so none came to his defense save…”

Everyone leaned in. “Who?”

“Lord Sherlock!”

John was as astonished as the rest. He had never even heard Sherlock mention the valet’s name before the previous night.

“Lord Sherlock said that Mr. Anderson could not have taken the purse, as he was not in the house during the time in question, though he would not say how he knew nor would Mr. Anderson say where he was. Lord Sherlock then said that as it was impossible for him to have been in the place where he was accused, then suspicion must naturally fall on the accuser.” She paused for effect and announced with a flourish, “Sebastian Wilkes.”

“Ha!” shouted Young Tom.

“Lord Sherlock said Master Sebastian’s room must be searched, and sure enough a hiding place was discovered, and in it not only the missing purse, but other things of value which had gone missing either without notice or without mention as their owners must have supposed them lost.”

“But,” Danny said, “Master Sebastian is a right prat, and we all know how he torments Lord Sherlock—what if Lord Sherlock and Mr. Anderson set the whole thing up, to frame him?”

John opened his mouth in outrage, but Annie broke in. “So Master Sebastian said! And then Lord Sherlock reached in and pulled out a golden pince-nez and said, ‘And this also? I believe this belongs to none other than your own mother, who was lamenting the loss of her spectacles only last week. Do you suppose me to be a regular guest in your mother’s rooms?’ And that was Master Sebastian caught red-handed, so he confessed with great ill-grace, and the Earl made him apologize to Mr. Anderson, and then made him a very handsome apology himself, in front of everyone, and the police inspector said he assumed Lord Sherrinford would prefer to handle the matter himself from that point, and they took their leave. But then Mr. Anderson shocked everyone by announcing that he was giving notice that very day. He said that he had worked for the Holmes family for nine years, and if his word was not enough set against that of a mere boy known to be a liar and a bully, then he would tender his services elsewhere, where the bond between master and man was unsullied by
thoughts of reform. Or something like that, it was all very grand and shocking. So the Earl said of course he was deeply sorry, and would personally write an excellent letter of reference whilst the carriage was got ready. But Mr. Anderson was so on his high horse that he said he would prefer to take no more favors where he was not appreciated and that he would prefer to walk, so off he went.”

“He must be touched in the head!” Davy said. “Left a good place because his feelings were hurt?”

“And blamed it on Lord Sherrinford being a reformer?” Young Tom added.

“What happened to Master Sebastian?” John asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Annie said. “Elsie didn’t say. A right tongue lashing, I imagine.”

“Better a bum lashing,” Young Tom muttered, and John heartily agreed.

Everyone was talking at once. John gathered that this was the most exciting thing to happen at Sherrinford Hall since Sherlock had poisoned a tutor (“Now, that was an accident,” Mrs. Gregson claimed). The crime, the comeuppance of the widely detested Master Sebastian, the brilliance of Sherlock, the idiocy of Mr. Anderson, whether Lord Mycroft would stay in London to hire a new valet—the discussion possibilities were endless, and they lingered round the table far longer than usual.

John was dying to hear Sherlock’s version of all this, and he was not disappointed. Sherlock was so eager to tell John of his brilliance that he slid through the window only minutes after John arrived in his room.

“I was watching for your light,” he said breathlessly. “Have you heard?”

“Only a little, pray tell me everything,” answered John, who could tell Sherlock was bursting to tell every detail. He settled back comfortably against the bed and watched as Sherlock paced the tiny room, eyes shining and hands flying, describing all his clever deductions.

“But if Mr. Anderson was at the village, why wouldn’t he say? He might get in trouble for going without leave, but it’s not likely he’d be sacked, and certainly not arrested.”

Sherlock paused to look at John expectantly, steepling his fingers under his chin. “Of course not. So if he kept silence not to protect himself, then what does that suggest to you?”

“Someone else? Someone he was meeting?” Abruptly John thought of the man who had been arrested the previous winter, and hoped the dim light hid his blush. “A woman, whose family might not approve?”

“Oh…?”

John shook his head, hoping Sherlock was not implying what he thought he was.

“A married woman, John. Sally Donovan, to be precise.”

“Sally Donovan!” John knew the pub owner to be easily twice the age of his wife, but many such unions were happy ones, after all.

“Sally never wanted to marry Donovan, her mother pushed her into it. Although I can’t really see what she sees in Anderson, frankly…”

“Why did she?”
“What, see Anderson?”

“No, why did her mother push her into the marriage.”

“Oh that. Her mother had been a servant in a great house. Seduced by the son, discovered by the mother, cast out without a reference, found herself with child, came to the attention of my mother, established in the village as a seamstress with the polite fiction of being widowed. I assume she worried that her daughter would have difficulty making a good marriage, and so obliged her to accept the first offer that came her way.”

“How awful,” John said, startled. “Does that happen often?”

“Well, not at Sherrinford obviously, can you see Mycroft seducing a maid?”

“Ah...no,” John admitted, remembering the poker-stiff Lord Mycroft dancing with the cook. “Don’t suppose you’ve got round to it yet either.”

Sherlock blinked several times in rapid succession and then said, “If we could get back to my tale…”

John let him run on to the end, which was even more dramatic in Sherlock’s telling, and then said sincerely, “That was marvelous. How clever you were!”

“I was, wasn’t I?” Sherlock said happily, throwing himself onto the bed beside John. "I'd love to be a detective someday, but I don't think 'police' is on the list of pursuits Father considers acceptable.”

“So what happened to Sebastian?”

“Confined to his room, and I’m sure there’s going to be a grueling talk with my father once the house party’s over. He'll probably whinge and make excuses. I know why he did it: I heard him earlier in the summer, trying to tease his mother into asking for an increase in her allowance. He says he needs more spending money so that he can be in a set with the better boys at Eton.” The contempt in Sherlock’s voice could have stripped paint.

“Wouldn’t it be cheaper to just make friends with you?”

Sherlock tossed him a wry look. “Money can buy a great deal of popularity, John, but I don’t think it will ever be sufficient in my case. Befriending me is unlikely to advance anyone’s social ascent.”

“Oh well, if that’s how it is, I’ve changed my mind. Go sleep in your own room,” John said and, when Sherlock looked stricken, “I’m not serious! Goodness, Sherlock, I think you tired your brain out, to believe such a thing. Come on, let’s get in bed.”

As the day of his departure grew nearer, Sherlock grew quiet and withdrawn, sometimes snapping at John for no reason but more often sticking close to his side as though it were John on the verge of leaving. John knew he lay awake long after John fell asleep, curled up tightly with his fingers clutched around John’s. Some mornings Sherlock was still awake when John woke; others he was heavily asleep, turned around so that he was burrowed into John’s chest, fingers twisted in his shirt.

John took to suggesting longer and longer rides in an effort to keep Sherlock distracted. One fine hot day they went all the way to the quarry, where they could swim in the fathomless blue water. They stayed so late they had to race most of the way back, slowing only when the estate walls came in sight.
“I wonder how deep the water is?” Sherlock was saying, picking up on a conversation they had started earlier. “There’s a way to tell the height of a tree by the length of its shadow, you know. Perhaps there’s a similar way to calculate the depth of a pool?”

“You could ask Mr. Brooke,” John said. Something caught his eye as they turned onto the smaller road and he looked back, frowning against the slant of the sun.

“Or perhaps a weighted rope, with knots at intervals,” Sherlock mused. “How do they do it at sea? John?”

John’s heart gave an unpleasant, lurching shudder. There were three horsemen behind them, rough and unfamiliar, and this was why he was with Sherlock in the first place, wasn’t it? There had been talk at the house party about the young son of a noble family who had been kidnapped in Suffolk.

“John, are you even listening?” Sherlock said impatiently.

“Sherlock,” John said quietly. “Listen to me. There are three men following us. No, don’t look back, I don’t want them to realize we noticed them. It might be nothing, but we can’t take any chances.”

“The gate,” Sherlock said immediately, “the hidden one, it isn’t far, we turn off just over that rise.”

“Good. Good, Sherlock, good thinking. As soon as we’re over, you make for the gate as fast as--”

“You mean we make for the gate.”

“No, I mean you. Shut up and listen. You ride as fast as you can for the gate. You’ll be out of sight in a moment, but if we both go they’ll see we’re gone and know we’ve turned off. I’ll carry on down the road at a gallop so it looks like we’re racing and you’ve pulled ahead. They’ll follow me, and by the time they realized you’ve given them the slip you’ll be safe on the grounds and can send help.”

All this time they had continued at their same even rambling pace. The rise was growing closer by the minute. John’s shoulders ached with the strain of not looking back.

“I can’t--”

“Sherlock,” John said through gritted teeth. “They don’t want me, they want you. So help me God, if you don’t do as I say, I’ll make sure your father hears of it and you won’t be let out to ride again until you’re old as Old Tom.”

They reached the top of the hill and started down and distantly John heard the sound he had been listening for: the faint hi of a man spurring his horse.

“Go,” hissed John.

“I hate you,” Sherlock said, sounding close to tears, and John reached out and smacked Circe’s flank and cried, “Go!”

He dug in his own heels at the same time, praying Sherlock would do as he was told. For a minute he heard nothing but his own flying hoofbeats—thank God, Sherlock had done as he said, he had turned off, John would know otherwise, Circe was a fast horse and would be close enough to hear if she were racing him on the road. Then with a jolt of relief and terror he heard the sound of several horses closing in fast behind him. They had taken the bait, but they were going to catch him up too soon—Hermes was already tired, and the strangers’ horses were gaining faster than John had expected.
John weighed his options, eyed the road, and dug in his heels. Hermes put on a burst of speed—not enough to get clear, the men were gaining too quickly—but enough to get him to the little crossroads where the road turned off to the Hall. He used the space to wheel his horse around in a wide circle and pull up, blocking the crossroads.

“These are my Lord Sherrinford’s lands,” John said, amazed at the steadiness of his own voice.
“What do you want here?”

“Last I heard the road was free to all,” the man in the center said. He had a thin, feral face, ill shaven and unpleasant, but he was no farmer or laborer; his horse and gear were too good. “Or are the aristocrats claiming that too now?”

John cocked his head, assessing the men, their clothes, their accents and mounts. He was no Sherlock, but he could observe. “You don’t care what the aristocrats claim or don’t claim,” he said. “You aren’t reformers. If you were, you’d know better than to trouble the Earl, for he’s the reformers’ patron saint. You’re looking for easy money by kidnapping a rich boy and if the reformers take the blame, so be it.”

“Our reasons are our own business,” the rat-faced man answered, “and we have no interest in you. Get out of the way.”

“Sorry,” John said pleasantly, “can’t do that.”

The thin-faced man pulled a fowling piece out of his belt and cocked it. John felt a minute’s brief icy terror and then a wonderful, glorious calm. This was it: he was going to die in the middle of the road, down like a dog on the highway, why was that poem in his head now?—die saving Sherlock, and really, what finer ending could he have? He smiled at the man, a huge, genuine smile, and saw the man’s brow wrinkle in confusion.

“Ha!” shouted John, kicked his horse, and rode straight at him.

The men’s horses were good enough, but not in the same class as Hermes. Hermes drove directly at the other horse, who shrieked and reared, throwing his rider. John wheeled around and made for the man on the right, but the other rider grabbed for the reins and yanked them from his hands, sending John spilling to the ground. He flashed back to Sherlock saying he had not needed to learn to fall as he tucked and rolled, coming up bruised but unhurt, and then the silhouette of the man with the fowling piece blotted out the sun, the butt came down on his head, and everything went black.

John opened his eyes and immediately wished he hadn’t. The world tilted dizzily around him, and a second later he was rolling onto his side, heaving.

“Whoops! Here now, just lift up a bit—there, now we’ve got it, here’s the basin. All right now, all right.”

The voice was soothing and wholly unfamiliar. A gentle hand wiped his face with a damp cloth.

John swallowed around the vile taste in his mouth. His head ached terribly, and the rest of him did not feel very well either. He shut his eyes against another wave of nausea.
“Here, take this. Just a little. Just rinse your mouth, there we go.”

Cool water, faintly flavored with lemon. John took a little in his mouth and, when he did not immediately retch, let it swish around. He was suddenly thirsty, but he spat obediently and then asked hoarsely, “May I drink a little?”

“Just a bit.” The cup came to his mouth again and John sipped, waited a minute, sipped again, and then again. The cup was taken away, and the gentle hand eased John back down to the bed.

John lay quietly for a moment waiting to see if he would die. When he didn’t, he tried cracking one eye experimentally. The room swam blurrily and he immediately shut it. He had a brief impression of a green background and a woman in black.

“How does your head feel?”

The fuzzy image and the kind voice resolved into a name: Mrs. Medlock. “Er…”

“Hurts quite a bit, I see. Just lie very still.”

John lay very still. It did not help. “Where am I?”

“You’re at the Hall, dear. Do you remember what happened?”

“We were at the quarry…” They had been riding back, Sherlock was talking about trees, why trees? and then–”There were men, men behind us. Sherlock!” His eyes flew open and he tried to sit up, which was a mistake. Mrs. Medlock, lightning quick, had the basin under his chin in a flash.

John rinsed his mouth again, spat, sipped a little more, and let himself be settled. “Sherlock,” he whispered.

“Lord Sherlock is fine.” There was no reproof for his familiarity. “Except for being half out of his mind with worry for you. The only reason he isn’t standing over me right now is that he’s been exiled from the wing as the doctor said he would agitate you and make you worse.”

John felt the corner of his mouth tug up. That was definitely Sherlock.

“Lord Sherlock made for the men in the hayfield, screaming for all he was worth, and they all came on the run with their scythes and pitchforks and ran the ruffians off,” Mrs. Medlock told him. “They fetched a cart and put you in it, and Lord Sherlock sent one of them on your horse right away for the doctor. The man had the sense to go to the police right after, and they apprehended the men that same night. They’re a dangerous gang, we’re told.” She paused, evidently considering her next words.

“They’ve done this before, haven’t they,” John whispered.

“Yes. It ended badly, they say. You saved Lord Sherlock’s life, John.”


“No, you won’t.” Mrs. Medlock’s voice had a smile in it. “Lord Sherlock won’t have that. You just need to keep very quiet, and rest.”

That sounded just fine to John. He tried to keep as still as possible, breathing shallowly through his nose. After a few minutes he felt a fresh cloth settled carefully over his eyes. He thought of when he had been hurt in the race—that had been worse than this, surely, unless he had actually broken his
head, which seemed possible. It would get better. Eventually. He lay very still, and after a while he drifted off to sleep again.

John floated in and out of consciousness for the next few days, the pain and nausea gradually decreasing. Mrs. Medlock was replaced by a parade of maids and once, in the night, Mrs. Gregson, a sight so welcome John was ashamed to feel his eyes prickle. He became aware that he lay in what seemed to him to be an enormous four-poster bed, in a room with green wallpaper, though he could not make out the pattern as the curtains were kept closed to block the light.

The doctor came at regular intervals, peering into his eyes and palpating over his head. Finally, on a day when John’s double vision had finally resolved, he mustered up the courage to ask, “Will I recover, sir?”

“Oh, I think so,” the doctor said, smiling down at him. “You’re young, of course, and have a fairly hard head. But you must be still and rest for several days yet.”

“As you say, sir.”

“Do you think you could manage a little broth? Tea?”

John considered and was a little surprised to realize that he rather thought he could. “I believe so, sir.”

“If that goes well I believe we may dispense with the need for an attendant,” the doctor said to Mrs. Medlock. “And what of a visitor? Could you manage that?”

“I think I could, sir,” John said, smiling a little. He assumed Sherlock was pestering the doctor incessantly.

The visitor, however, turned out to be not Sherlock but Lord Mycroft.

“M’Lord,” John said, startled, reflexively trying to leap to his feet and then falling back as the room swam around him.

“No, please, John, do not disturb yourself,” Lord Mycroft said, touching John’s shoulder. He actually looked slightly distressed. “My father very much regrets that he could not be here to thank you personally also, but he has been called urgently back to London. I do not wish to impede your rest and recovery in any way, but the doctor said that you were able to receive visitors.”

“I am, my Lord, if you don’t mind me like this,” John said, wondering if he would ever find himself in a more uncomfortable position.

“I am delighted and grateful to have you at all,” Lord Mycroft said. “Our family owes you an enormous debt.”

Apparently he would. “Just doing my job, sir.”

“No, you do not understand,” Lord Mycroft said gravely. He sat in the chair next to John’s bed, resting his umbrella between his feet. “My father never thought there was any actual danger to Sherlock. Having instituted reform in its most liberal form everywhere he held influence, he assumed that the agitation and violence which have plagued so many less fortunate parts of our nation would not trouble us here. Having a groom accompany Sherlock was actually my idea, but I thought it only a prudent precaution. We never thought of armed villains seeking to exploit the peace we had
established, or we would never have let the two of you roam the countryside without even a weapon. Our complacency left us open to the opportunistic. It left my brother vulnerable, and it put you in danger. We owe you not just our thanks but our apologies.”

“No, my Lord,” John mumbled. His face felt as though it were on fire.

“Thank you, John Watson,” Lord Mycroft said simply.

John looked up at his pale eyes, saw their deep sincerity, and said, “You are welcome.”

Lord Mycroft smiled very slightly and shifted back in his chair. “My father has authorized me to express our gratitude as I think best, so I discussed the matter with Sherlock and, at his suggestion, Mr. Brooke. On their advice I have settled a small trust on your mother and sister, which Sherlock felt strongly would be what you preferred.” He hesitated. “Mr. Brooke tells me that you are uncommonly intelligent and determined. If at any time you feel that you would wish to pursue a different occupation, or further your education…”

“No, my Lord, I’m quite happy here,” John said quickly.

“Quite.” Lord Mycroft tapped his stick meditatively then rose. “I will not keep you from your rest any longer, John. However, if I may…Sherlock’s departure has already been delayed some days, as he is refusing to quit the house until he is assured by his own eyes that you are recovering. If you feel that you are able to see him tomorrow morning…”

“Of course, my Lord,” John said, smiling for the first time.

“Very well then,” Lord Mycroft said, and strolled off.

Alone in the green room for the first time, John slept peacefully through the night and in the morning woke hungry for his broth. “We’ll see about some food for you when the doctor comes,” Mrs. Medlock said, smiling.

The doctor was pleased too. “You’re getting on very well,” he told John. “Another day or so and we will open the curtains a bit, hmmm? Don’t want to rush things. Eyes all right?”

“Yes, sir. My head hurts a good deal when I move about, but much better than it was.”

“Very good. And now I believe you have a visitor.”

The doctor went out, saying, “Just a few minutes, mind,” and in crept Sherlock, looking thoroughly wretched.

John held his hand out, smiling, and Sherlock burst into tears.

“Oh, don’t, there, lad, don’t cry, it’s all right,” John said, realizing he sounded just like Mr. Gregson.

Sherlock only wept harder and clutched at his hand. “I’m sorry,” he cried. “I never should have left, I should have stayed and fought with you, we’re brothers, you’re my brother in arms, I should have…”

“You did exactly right, it’s fine,” John soothed. “No, actually you didn’t. You should have gone straight to the barn after you raised the men, idiot, but as you saved my life, I won’t scold you for that.”

“You were on the road,” Sherlock sobbed. “There was blood, and you weren’t moving, and, and…”
John inched over as best he could in the bed and stroked Sherlock’s tumbled curls with his free hand. “I’m fine,” he repeated firmly. “See? I’m just fine. Doctor says I’ll be good as new. Moreover I’m to have light duty when I get back on my feet, so I’m hoping Mr. Gregson will let me work with Callisto. She’s a beauty, isn’t she? I was thinking, if we breed Terpsi again and she has another filly, we should call her Calliope. What do you think?”

Sherlock gulped and nodded. He was breathing in shaky, hiccupy gasps, but was no longer actively crying.

“What about a handkerchief?” John prompted gently, and Sherlock let go his hand to fumble in a pocket and wipe his face. He blew his nose and looked at John with watery eyes.

“I’m all right,” John said firmly. “You saved my life.”

“You saved mine first,” Sherlock pointed out.

“We saved each other, and we’re fine. I’ll be back on my feet in a day or so, and you’ll be back from school before you know it.”

“For the hunting, Father promised.”

“Good.”

Sherlock managed a tentative smile that broke John’s heart worse than the tears. “I’ll write you,” John whispered. “All the time. Even about the things you say are trivial.”

“I don’t mind them too much, I suppose….”

“I know.”

There was a knock on the door. “Sherlock? We need to be leaving for the station.”

Sherlock looked at John. His eyes were filling again. “You will be fine,” John told him. “You are brave, Sherlock. You rode into a gang of armed ruffians! What’s a school compared to that?”

Sherlock made a miserable little sound and John squeezed his hand just as the door opened and Mr. Brooke’s head appeared. “Sherlock!”

Sherlock darted forward and kissed John’s cheek swiftly. Then he turned and bolted, pushing past Mr. Brooke and running off down the hall.

Mr. Brooke sighed, threw John an exasperated look and said, “Swift recovery, John. I’d best go after him before he hides someplace and we miss our train.”

John tried to smile but Mr. Brooke had already gone. He lay in the big bed in the dark quiet room, all alone, and felt lonelier than he had ever felt in his life.

Chapter End Notes

There really is an "Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez" in ACD canon, although it bears no resemblance to this particular crime--but it does feature a secret passage!
John moved back to the stables a week later, the same day a letter from Sherlock arrived. Sherlock detailed the tedium of shopping, the horrors of his new school clothes, and his heartfelt wish that John was fully recovered.

*I leave for school in the morning, so of course I cannot sleep. Normally I would play my violin but it is already packed, and in any case I am sure I will not be allowed to play at two in the morning at school, so best to learn to do without. Besides, the violin is a poor substitute for you. How cold and lonely my back feels, without you behind it! Keep my place warm until I come for the hunting.*

*Ever your devoted friend,*

*Sherlock Holmes*

John wrote back the next day, as soon as he had been around the stables and collected all the news he could. He kept the letter light and amusing, not wanting to worsen Sherlock’s homesickness.

*I too am lonely without you,* he could not resist writing at the end. *Though my bed here is so small compared to the one at the Hall, even so it feels overlarge to me now.*

He sealed the letter and put in in the post. Off and on over the next few days he pictured Sherlock, small in a sea of boys, looking up as his name was called, face lighting as he saw the letter. He saw Sherlock bent over a desk scribbling out his own letter, full of deductions and scorn and faint praise. He wondered if Sherlock was picturing John, in his little room in the stables, waiting for his reply.

It never came.

One week passed, then two. John wondered if perhaps Eton was much farther away than he had supposed, or if something had gone amiss with the post. He wrote again, and again received no reply.

In October Mr. Gregson came into the kitchen just before tea and said, “Post–here, John, one for you.”

John’s heart leaped, then fell when he saw the Reverend St. John Eyre’s writing. He took the letter to the table to read.

“Is that from Lord Sherlock?” Young Tom asked.
“No, my family.”

“All well?”

“Yes.”

“Good. How is Lord Sherlock anyway? Has he blown up the school yet?”

“I don’t know,” John said, trying to sound uninterested. He kept his eyes fixed on the letter. “Haven’t heard from him.”

Young Tom paused, and then slid into the seat opposite him. “Really? Do they not let them write the first term, or something?”

“Don’t know...maybe. Or maybe he just, you know. Made some new friends.”

Young Tom snorted and John could not help a reluctant smile of his own. He did not need to look up to know what Young Tom would be thinking. “He had to grow up sometime,” Tom said, very softly.

“I know,” John said, just as softly.

“So you haven’t heard from him?” Mrs. Gregson, said, bringing a pot of soup to the table. “Annie, any news of the family?”

Annie looked up from where she was counting out spoons. “All away, it sounds like. Lord Mycroft went to France to work on the new treaty, and the Earl is traveling about setting up his new reform schools. Lord Sherlock’s at school of course, apparently he’s not making much of a go of it.”

“What do you mean?” Mrs. Gregson asked.

Annie shrugged. “I don’t know. I just heard them say he wasn’t doing well. What do you know, John?”

John shrugged back. “Nothing. He doesn’t write.”

“That doesn’t sound like him,” Mrs. Gregson said, frowning. “Maybe they’re punishing him for something by not letting him write.”

“Not letting him talk might be wiser,” Ned said and even John laughed.

“There’s a big party coming for the hunting in a few weeks, I dare say we’ll see him then,” Mr. Gregson said comfortably.

A few weeks. John held onto that thought as he curled into his lonely bed that night. A few weeks, and he would see Sherlock. If he wasn’t allowed to write at school, they would come up with some kind of a plan. Sherlock was brilliant at plans. He would see Sherlock. Everything would be fine.

Sherlock did not come.

The stableyard was a milling confusion of men, horses, and dogs, and John took advantage of Mr. Gregson’s red-faced distraction to grab the Earl’s horse. “Here you are, my Lord,” he said, leading
him over. “Will this saddle suit?”

The Earl looked up in mild surprise. “Yes, thank, you, John.”

John was so taken aback that the Earl knew who he was that he almost forgot what he meant to say next. “Lovely day for it,” he said as casually as he could. “A shame Lord Sherlock couldn’t be here.”

“Yes,” Lord Sherrinford said, pulling on his gloves. For a moment John thought that was all he was going to say, but the the Earl went on, “He’s having a bit of trouble settling in at school. Not uncommon, but the master feels it best in such cases not to go home during term. The boys come back more distressed than before they left, he says.”

That sounded cruel to John, no matter what the master said, but he was not about to say so. Nor could he ask the other questions burning on his tongue—was writing letters also thought to bring distress? would he be allowed to leave for Christmas? did he still count John his friend? “Well, I hope he settles in soon, my Lord.”

“I may give him your regards?”

“That would be very kind, my Lord.” John smiled politely and touched his cap. He went back to the stables, and, under cover of the general mayhem, ducked inside and slipped into the dark quiet of the tack room. He went straight to Sherlock’s old saddle and rested his forehead against it, as though it still retained some hint of Sherlock’s presence. The longing felt like a weight on his chest. “I miss you,” he whispered into the cool leather. “Oh, I miss you.”

“Storm coming,” Old Tom announced.

“I believe you’re right,” Mr. Gregson agreed. “Best stay in tonight, lads.”

“Ah, a bit of rain, what’s that to us?” Young Tom scoffed.

Gregson shook his head, gesturing out at the bleak November twilight. “There’s a north wind, didn’t you feel it? Once the rain comes it will bring the bitter cold behind it. Bad enough that you lot get cold and wet without risking the horses, too. I’ll tell you what. Stay in tonight, and I’ll let you go with Len and Danny on their night off—then you’ll have a proper party. It’s not likely anything will happen that we’ll need all of you here, not this time of year.”

“He just wants you to stay to read,” Annie said to John in a stage whisper. “He wants to hear about the joust.”

John grinned at her. He had been looking forward to their night at the pub, but going with Len and Danny as well would be a rare treat, and actually he was curious about *Ivanhoe* himself.

“But John’s been ever so long without a proper drink, sure his throat’s too parched to read,” Ned wheedled.

“Well, maybe just a bit of mulled cider, as it’s turning cold,” Mrs. Gregson said, and that settled that.

It was a pleasant evening, made special by the cider, and sure enough the rain arrived an hour later. That was the drawback to living in the barn, John thought as he readied himself for the dash across the stableyard: having to leave the warm cozy companionship of the servants’ hall for his cold and solitary room. Oh well, at least it was snug and dry, and his bed would warm quickly once he tucked himself up in his blankets.
John had been asleep only an hour or so when he was startled awake by a loud banging on the stable door.

“What on earth,” he muttered, sitting up. The door was unbolted—anyone could open it, who would knock? “Come in!” he shouted.

The banging continued, harder than ever. “Ah, bloody hell,” John muttered. He pulled his coat and breeches on over his nightshirt, stuffed his feet in his boots, and headed for the ladder, shouting, “Hang on! I’m coming!”

“John!”

John froze on the ladder. He knew that voice. Jumping the rest of the way, he pulled the door open and in tumbled Sherlock.

“I c-c-ouldn’t open the d-d-oor,” Sherlock managed. He was shaking so hard John could barely make out the words. “I think I’m f-f-rozen.”

“Christ,” John said. “Stay right there, don’t move—” He snatched a horse blanket from the tack room and pulled it around Sherlock, who stumbled and nearly fell. “We need to get you warm, come on.”

John half-dragged, half-carried Sherlock across the sleet-slick courtyard to the kitchen, which felt warm as an oasis after the freezing rain and unheated barn. He dumped Sherlock in an uncivilized heap in front of the fire and ordered, “Get as close as you can, and take those clothes off.” He built up the fire as quickly as possible and then turned to stripping Sherlock.

“What on earth are you wearing?”

“D-d-isguise,” Sherlock said. “I g-got off the t-train at the last st-tation so no one would r-recognize me.”

“Oh my God,” John said. He stopped halfway in the act of pulling off a sock. “You ran away.”

“Ob-ob-ob-—” Sherlock’s teeth were chattering too badly to finish. John got the rest of his clothes off and went for blankets. Naked, Sherlock resembled nothing so much as a drowned mollusk turfed from its shell, skin blue-white and wrinkled.

“You idiot,” John muttered. He took off his own nightshirt and socks and tugged them onto Sherlock, then pulled him against his bare chest and wrapped the blanket around them, trying to warm Sherlock with his own body. Sherlock’s head rested limply in the hollow of John’s shoulder as he shivered and shivered. John looked down at his fragile, blue-veined eyelids and said, “Stay awake. Talk to me. Does anyone know where you are?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“You.”

John sighed. “And I’m right glad of it, but I meant your family.”

“Oh. No.”

John considered the situation. First priority would be getting Sherlock warm, dry and into a proper bed, tucked up with all the hot water bottles and warm drinks that the Hall could muster, and then
getting a wire to the Earl, wherever he was. That would be someone else’s job. Not just yet though. Sherlock was still so cold, so much lighter in John’s arms than he remembered; he needed John’s warmth around him.

“I wrote to you,” Sherlock said. His eyes were still closed. “I wrote and I wrote. So many letters...they took them all away. They ripped them up, they burned them, they read them out loud, they laughed. They said it wasn’t right for me to write you, they said...” A hard tremor wracked him. “And your letters too, I never even got to read them after the first.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” John said gently. “I knew you would have written if you could.”

Sherlock put a cold hand on John’s chest, curling his fingers. His body was gradually relaxing into the warmth of their little cocoon, growing heavy and sleepy. “Can we stay here by the fire? Can we sleep here?”

“No, you need to go to the Hall. You need to be in your bed, with the fire built up to roaring and a mountain of blankets and a hot brandy, so with any luck you won’t catch your death of pneumonia.”

Sherlock opened stricken pale eyes. “But I want to be with you.”

“No tonight,” John said firmly. “All this time, what’s one more night? You’ll know I’m right here.”

Sherlock made a dissatisfied noise and closed his eyes again. “It was a very long time.”

“I know. It was for me too.” John hesitated. “Was it terrible?”

Sherlock’s whole body shuddered hard, and John thought he was cold again, but then he turned to bury his face in John’s neck. He nodded once.

John lay his cheek against Sherlock’s damp hair and held him tightly for a long moment. Then he took a deep breath, untangled himself, and settled Sherlock as close to the fire as he dared.

“I’m going to fetch Mrs. Gregson now, he said. “Stay there, and keep warm.”

There was, predictably, an enormous fuss. Half the Hall apparently had to be roused to get Sherlock’s bedroom warmed and ready, but finally he was whisked away by a footman, wrapped in about five blankets and looking exhausted and cross. John looked around at the clock on the mantle and was astonished to see it was not even midnight.

“I thought I’d been up all night!”

Mrs. Gregson looked up from where she was gathering Sherlock’s wet clothing and sighed. “It does feel so, doesn’t it? I’d tell you to have a bit of a lie-in, but we’ll need to send for the doctor and wire London first thing in the morning, so that’s going to leave us a bit short as it is.”

“It’s all right.” Now that the dust was settling, John felt the joy expanding like a bubble in his chest. Sherlock was here, back at the Hall where he belonged. He had wanted to write John. He had not gone to London; he had walked five miles in the dark and cold and rain, to reach John. He could barely keep from grinning. “I don’t mind it. I’m happy to see him, although I don’t fancy being anywhere near once his Lordship arrives.”

“Oh, if he were my boy, I can promise you he wouldn’t try a stunt like that again,” Mrs. Gregson agreed. She paused, looking at John with an expression he could not quite read. “Why did he do it, John? Do you know?”
“Not really,” John said honestly. “It sounded like the other boys were tormenting him, and I supposed he felt he couldn’t bear it.”

Mrs. Gregson’s gaze lingered on him a moment, a small pucker between her kind eyes, but then it smoothed away and she smiled. “Well, he wouldn’t be the first boy to feel it the first time he went away from home,” she said. “Would you believe if I told you Davy cried every night for a month when he first came? Don’t tell anyone I told you, mind.”

“I wouldn’t. My family lived on the grounds of the Chase when I was a lad, so coming here was really my first time away from home too. I’m not saying I cried for a month, but that room by myself took some getting used to.” He remembered the ginger cat, fondly. She had abandoned him over the last summer when Sherlock took up full-time residence in his bed, and produced an astonishingly large litter of orange-and-white kittens in a far corner of the loft some months later. “I like it now though.”

“Well, you’d best be getting along to it, or you’ll regret it tomorrow. Good night, John.”

“Good night.”

It was a good night. Wet, cold, frightfully windy, and the best night John had had in months.

By morning, the rain had turned to a stinging, icy snow. John buttoned his coat up over his thickest jumper and thanked his lucky stars that his midnight adventures had exempted him from being sent to town. The doctor came before they had even finished breakfast.

“Oh, John, hello,” the doctor said when John brought his little gig around to the house after. “How’s the head?”

“Just fine, sir, thank you. How is Lord Sherlock?”

“Astonishingly well,” the doctor said drily, “although I shouldn’t complain, there are times I think he singlehandedly accounts for half my income...he’ll stay in bed today, but I think he’ll be fine. His lungs are clear, which is more luck than he deserves.”

“Glad to hear it, sir,” John said, smiling.

Ned returned from town cold, shivering, and bearing a return telegram that Lord Mycroft would be coming on the afternoon train. “That’s your turn then, Young Tom,” Mr. Gregson said.

“If the train even makes it through,” Young Tom said hopefully. “Look at it now! That’s a proper snow. I’ll have to take the sledge.”

The snow was now drifting down in fat, fluffy flakes. It was very pretty, but not if one had to take horses out in it, as the grooms did. By teatime the ground was entirely covered and Mrs. Gregson had taken to peering worriedly out the window. “I do hope they’re all right,” she said.

“They’re fine, I’m sure the train’s just delayed by the snow,” Mr. Gregson.

The sledge finally returned as they were clearing the table, so John and Ned rushed out to take charge of it so that Young Tom could get in by the fire.

“That was awful,” Young Tom said, shivering, as he relinquished the reins. “I waited in that little tearoom for a while but then it closed and I had to see to the horses, anyway.” He brightened. “Gave
me half a crown though, Lord Mycroft did.”

“That was decent of him,” Ned said. “You can buy us all a round when we finally go for that night out.”

“Get in quick so Mrs. Gregson can get you dry and warm,” John told him. “She says there’s been someone dripping in front of the fire continually for the past day anyway, so she’s just keeping blankets out there now.”

“Blankets. Fire,” Young Tom moaned longingly, and scurried off.

“I’m going to stay here and go on to bed,” John said, once they had the horses dry and warm as well. “Bit of a late one for me last night, and I don’t fancy going back out in the snow again.”

“No Ivanhoe?”

“Extra chapter tomorrow, I promise.”

John was still feeling the happiness fizzing in his veins like Christmas punch, but he was cold and now very tired, and quite looking forward to a good night’s sleep. He was out as soon as his head hit the pillow, and then of course Sherlock woke him up.

“John.”

John blinked and sat up. The room was luminous with a pale glow he remembered well from back home in the north, the ghostlight that came when the whole of the visible world was covered in snow. Sherlock was kneeling by the bed in his white nightshirt like an angel, snow dusting his hair and lashes. “You’re supposed to be in bed.”

“Well, really, I’m always supposed to be in bed when I’m here,” Sherlock said, standing to tug off his boots and trousers. “But I have permission tonight, of a sorts, and if you’ll budge over I’ll be in bed.”

“Permission,” John said fuzzily, moving back to make room. Sherlock snuggled up against him with a blissful hum.

“Oh, it’s so lovely and warm in here. Yes. At the end of my long and highly unpleasant discussion with Mycroft this evening he told me that if I planned to, as he put it, ‘go visiting’ tonight that he would prefer me to use the door, as my usual method of egress was likely to be icy and dangerous.”

“Mycroft knows you come here?”

“Mycroft knows everything.”

John thought vaguely that this ought to alarm him more than it did, but he was just too sleepy and happy to remember why. He let Sherlock’s cold fingers twine around his and tuck his hand up into his chest, smelled the sweet lavender smell of his curls, and slept.

“The snow’s stopped.”

John opened his eyes and saw the faint first blush of dawn light. Sherlock had turned over at some point in the night, and they were now practically nose-to-nose.

“You were awake all night, weren’t you.”
“Yes,” Sherlock admitted. “I used to think of this every night, when I was at school. I would close my eyes and try to believe I was here with you. I told myself when I came back I would lie awake all night and memorize everything.”

“What happened there, Sherlock?”

Sherlock shook his head slowly, his gray-blue eyes never leaving John’s face. John worked a hand up between them and wrapped it around Sherlock’s. “Do you have to go back?”

“No.” Sherlock exhaled softly. “Back to London. I don’t know what’s going to happen then, Mycroft said Father would decide when he returned. Tutors, I suppose. It doesn’t matter, I’ll do anything not to have to go back to Eton.”

“Are you going back today?”

“Early train.”

John tried to push the sadness down, but his fingers tightened around Sherlock’s almost against his will. He had hoped for at least a few days--had, if he were honest with himself, secretly hoped that Sherlock would stay on until Christmas. “You’ll be able to write me in London, though. And it’s nearly Christmas, so we’ll see each other then.”

“I know,” Sherlock whispered. His eyes were huge and unblinking, fixed on John’s.

“You’d better go if you’re taking the early train,” John said. He made to push himself up. “And if the maid goes in before you return she’ll think you’ve run off again, and then where will you be?”

“No, don’t,” Sherlock said. He sat up quickly and pushed at John’s shoulder to make him lie down. “Stay there. Will you stay like that, please?”

John lay down obediently and pulled his blanket up against the room’s chill. “Why?”

“Because.” Sherlock was pulling on his outer clothes. “Because I want to remember. I want you fixed like that in my mind, as though I could just slip back in where it’s warm it’s warm and safe, next to you, any time I want.”

John couldn’t help smiling, although Sherlock’s face was deeply serious. “Sherlock, it’s only a month until Christmas. We’ll see each other in a few weeks.”

“I know,” Sherlock whispered. He looked one last time, his gaze so intense John actually felt it on his face, and then he stepped carefully out the door and was gone.

John did not see Sherlock again for eighteen months.
November 30
London

Dear John,

I know you will wonder why on earth I am writing already, when we parted only this morning. It is true I have no real news to impart as I remain in a sort of purgatory until Father returns tomorrow, so this will be a very short missive. The truth is that the knowledge that I can write you, freely, is still so delightfully novel that I simply cannot resist. In addition, I realized that I was remiss in not expressing my gratitude to you. You welcomed me with kindness and concern, with no word of the recriminations you must have believed I deserved, no reproach for my apparent abandonment of our friendship. You are truly an exceptional person, and I count myself deeply lucky to be ever your true, loyal and devoted friend,

Sherlock Holmes

“Oh, John,” Mrs. Gregson said, looking up from the table. “Just the one I need. Would you help me bring up some apples from the cellar?”

“Of course,” John said. “May I just warm my hands first? I’m likely to drop the apples else.” John had left on Blackbeard directly after breakfast. A good long ride through the pristine fields of snow was the best way he knew to distract himself from Sherlock’s departure, but he had returned hours later with his face and wrists red and stinging.

“Oh mercy, as long as you don’t drip. If I have to mop up that hearth again…”

“No dripping,” John smiled. Ned came clattering down from the servant’s bedrooms, wiping his nose.

“Raw, isn’t it?” he said, catching sight of John in front of the fireplace. “Second time I’ve replaced my hankie today. Can’t believe you were out so long.”

“Oh, Blackbeard needs the exercise. Besides, the snow will be gone in a day or so—it’s a beautiful sight on the hills. Ready when you are, Missus.”

“Do you need me too?” Ned asked a little hopefully.

“No, dear, you carry on with the mucking. Tell Mr. Gregson I’ll have John along in a minute.”

John followed Mrs. Gregson down to the cellar and, at her direction, located a box of apples. “I’ve a sack here, let’s just fill it up,” Mrs. Gregson said, setting her lamp on a nearby shelf. “Actually, I wanted a bit of a word. Mr. Gregson and I had a wee chat, and we thought it best…well. You need to be more careful.”

“Am I bruising them?” John asked, setting the next apple down gingerly.

“No, not the apples…everyone saw the footprints this morning, John. And that means probably everyone at the house saw them as well.”
“Footprints,” John said blankly. Mrs. Gregson glanced up at him quickly, then back at the apples. “Oh! Sherlock’s? From the barn to the Hall?” John had seen them too. They could hardly be missed, a straight trampled line marring the smooth virgin white of the lawn. “But what does it matter if they see them at the Hall? They’re certainly used to Lord Sherlock running about.”

“The family,” Mrs. Gregson said, visibly reluctant, “might not…”

“But they know. Well, Lord Mycroft does, anyway. He told Lord Sherlock to use the door last night—he usually climbs out his window, and Lord Mycroft was worried about ice.”

“Lord Mycroft knows Sherlock visits your bedroom?” Mrs. Gregson said in bewilderment.

“I suppose so,” John said. He was beginning to feel as perplexed as Mrs. Gregson looked. Was he missing something?

“Why? Why does he?”

John shrugged. “I suppose he’s lonely. You know how he is. We just chat, mostly. Well, and sleep,” he added hastily. “I’m not shirking any of my duties, nor too tired to pull my share, never, I promise you.”

“You never thought the family might…not like it?”

“I never thought about it much,” John said honestly. “Lord Sherlock mostly gets his own way, as you know. And I suppose…back at the Chase we had race horses, stallions, who would get skittish on their own, but they couldn’t abide the company of other horses, so we’d match them up with a goat or a donkey. I suppose that’s what I am, in a way, Lord Sherlock’s donkey. I keep him company, settle him down.”

“I think you’re much more than a donkey,” Mrs. Gregson said. Her face had smoothed out again and she looked almost—relieved? “But you’re right, you do settle him down. He’s gotten into ever so much less trouble since you’ve come. Well, until yesterday, anyway.”

“See? He was away and he got into trouble.” John grinned at her, knowing it was a little cheeky, and Mrs. Gregson smiled back, face smoothing out.

“Well, let’s hope he’s not sent back to school then, who knows what might happen,” she said briskly. “Good then. Let’s get these apples upstairs, that pie won’t cook itself.”

December 5

London

Dear John,

At last I have some news to impart, although some is such that I will have little pleasure in the telling. Father has returned and agreed that I need not return to Eton, which is no small relief, as I had feared that he might after all have determined that I must. Almost as good, Mr. Brooke has agreed to return as my tutor. As you know he had been assisting Father in setting up the new schools, but says he will be doing a far greater service to England to keep me under his eye.

Now for the hard part: Father is determined that I not remain in London for the winter. He fears for my health after last year—which is ridiculous as I am ever so much stronger now—and also for my
safety, as he must travel very often and be very busy and believes that the poor harvest and coming of winter will mean a great deal of unrest. I tried to remind him that I had assisted you in fighting off a gang of armed ruffians only last summer, but that served only to make him more determined. He has therefore decided that I am to be sent abroad. Mr. Brooke and I will go to Munich, where I may study the sciences, as well as music and German philosophy and Mr. Brooke’s usual trivia. While the idea of this would normally delight me, I am torn by the sadness of being parted from you yet again. Worse, after giving Father my word that I would accede to any decision he made rather than return to school, he informed me that the difficulty in making so many arrangements combined with his usual pressing business make it such that we will not be able to come back to Sherrinford Hall for Christmas. I was very upset by this news, and only my recent promise kept me from making a shameful scene. I did press him on the subject of how long I will be away and he was very vague, so if by dint of diligent application to my studies I may be allowed to return this summer, then I assure you I will not lift my nose from the grindstone until I achieve the goals set for me.

I am so sad and angry that even my new violin—I do not believe I told you that my old one was broken at Eton—can console me. Why can I not be an adult and do as I please! What does it gain me to achieve my heart’s desire if I do not have you by my side?

I promise you that I will write as constantly as may be polite, and quite likely more than is polite. I will miss you every day and think of you every night. I beg that you will not forget me but remember your faithful and most devoted of friends,

Sherlock Holmes

It was a long, hard winter.

Lord Sherrinford’s worries proved not only prescient but conservative. That first early snowfall turned out to be a mere overture to the coldest winter England had seen in years. Coupled with the bad harvest, conditions for the poor were dire indeed, and as a result every night John heard of more riots and strikes. Lord Sherrinford had little time for his schools now, as he was constantly striving to push through emergency measures to help the poor on the one hand, and thwart Sir James Moriarty from sending soldiers in to quash every demonstration on the other. John realized how protected they were in the Earl’s domain when he went north to visit his family, a trip he made later than usual due to the harsh weather.

March 17

Sherrinford Hall, Stables

Dear Sherlock,

I have returned from my visit home much saddened and at the same time glad for the generosity of your father. My home village is suffering terribly in this horrible winter, and Sir Willoughby, unlike the Earl, does nothing to appease the dreadful burdens suffered by his dependents. To be fair he may be unaware, as he is said to be abroad for his health—he is not a young man—and his manager is known to be hard and grasping. If it were not for the income arranged by your father last summer I am not sure that my family would have survived at all; as it was, my two youngest nephews have most sadly both died of a coughing sickness.

I am not the only one to suffer in this way; Len—who can not read or write and so was not blessed
with any means to keep track of his family as I am-- learned only recently that his mother and young sister had been removed to the poorhouse and had there died. His grief is very great, the more so as he has no family now left at all. Even the Gregsons’ eldest daughter Sarah--who as you know is married to the cooper in the village--took sick in the terrible weather, was brought to bed early, and lost her infant. Mrs. Gregson has been staying in the village to look after her and we are all the sadder for her absence.

April 9

Munich

Dear John,

I am terribly sorry and offer my heartfelt condolences on your loss, and pray you offer the same to Mrs. Gregson and Len on my behalf. I have told Mr. Brooke of these sad events and he is corresponding with Father to ensure that funds are in place so that in the future medical care may be available for the family of any under his protection who may need it and, in the event of all earthly efforts failing, Christian burial may be provided.

April 25

Sherrinford Hall, Stables

Dear Sherlock,

Even the darkest winter must finally give way to spring, and so it is here. Finally the cold’s icy grip has broken and we have flowers and even occasional sunshine, although of course the early spring was beyond wet and so there is mud everywhere now. The horses seem to take delight in rolling in it so that we are constantly swearing as we lead them back to the stables for another wash. The new foals are particularly clumsy, but we are not allowed to swear before them as Old Tom says they are but wee children.

Speaking of children, I am sure you recall Callie the housemaid from the Hall. Her mother died this past winter, leaving her brother an orphan, and he has to come to the Hall as boot-boy and page. He is really too young to be in service, being only eleven, but he is so happy and friendly and often comes to the barn to see the horses. I do not think he is given very onerous duties. And after making good use of your secret gate these many months, Danny is engaged! They plan to wed in the fall and will live in a cottage here on the estate.

I cannot wait for you to see Callisto who is the most beautiful yearling. She has already begun to lighten and, when not covered in mud, is the most lovely silver white. Unfortunately, she is almost always covered in mud. Meanwhile Circe has become quite plump over the winter and I must exercise her hard now to get her ready to race.

“Not coming,” John repeated blankly.

“What, not at all?” Mrs. Gregson said in surprise. “None of them?”

“Well, not exactly,” Mr. Gregson said a little shifty. “It seems his Lordship always intended Lord
Sherlock to stay abroad for a few years, and of course Lord Mycroft is in France most of the time now, and the Earl himself is needed in London, trying to push through the next round of reforms."

“Which are desperately needed if we’re not to have another winter like this one,” Young Tom said grimly, to general agreement.

“So what do you mean, not exactly,” Mrs. Gregson said, narrowing her eyes.

“Apparently the Wilkes are still coming,” Mr. Gregson admitted, and everyone groaned.

“I’m being punished,” Young Tom moaned, burying his face in his arms. “The good Lord has seen fit to judge me for my sins and is sending that beast of a lad to be my penance. And without even Lord Sherlock to keep him in line.”

“Oh, enough with that, Sebastian Wilkes is his mother’s punishment and not yours, and no woman deserves it more,” Mrs. Gregson said with uncharacteristic sharpness. “And anyway he won’t want to ride if Lord Sherlock’s not here to torment, so he’ll be the maids’ problem and not yours.”

As it turned out, Mrs. Gregson was wrong. A week after the Wilkes had arrived (and after John had received a furious letter from Sherlock in which he described how his impressively well-designed plan to run away to Sherrinford had been foiled by Mr. Brooke, who had finally convinced him that doing so would void his agreement with his father and send him back to Eton), Mr. Gregson told them that he had just learned that they would soon have guests.

“It seems that Master Sebastian is hosting some of his friends from school. For a fortnight.”

There was a stunned silence.

“Is that--I mean to say--does the Earl know?” Davy asked.

“Wait.” Young Tom leaned forward. “Are you saying that Sebastian Wilkes has friends? More than one?”

“Are they thieves too?” Annie piped up.

“All right, all right.” Mr. Gregson held up his hands up. “I don’t know anything about the lads in question, but I did ask the housekeeper if his Lordship was aware, and she says that he is. So that makes them guests of the Earl, and therefore we will do our best by them as we would any guests, likeable or unlikeable, thieves or not. They’re unlikely to steal anything of ours in any case.”

John sincerely hoped that everything Sherlock valued was at the house in London.

“Lovely,” Young Tom said gloomily. “Let’s hope they’re all as terrible at riding as he is. Your turn to fetch them from the station, Ned.”

John did not see the visitors until a few days after they arrived, when they decided to go for a ride on the grounds. John was in Shovel’s empty stall, preparing to muck it out, when he saw Sebastian stroll in accompanied by his three friends. They were older than John had been expecting—young men rather than boys—but then Sebastian himself would be sixteen now, John supposed. John held still, hoping not to be noticed.

“So this is really your cousin’s house, isn’t it?” the tallest was asking in a bored drawl.

“For the moment,” Sebastian answered. The dark-haired young man next to him gave a sudden, high-pitched titter that made John’s neck crawl.
“So where is he?”

“So Abroad,” Sebastian said carelessly. “Are those horses ready yet?”

“All set, sir,” Ned said in his slowest and heaviest voice.

The tall man said something John missed but then Sebastian said, “Ah yes. Which of you was my cousin’s special friend?”

There was a brief pause.

“Don’t know what you mean, sir,” Ned answered.

“Everyone liked Lord Sherlock,” Young Tom said. “He was a proper good rider.” There was the very slightest emphasis on he.

“I’m sure,” the dark-haired man murmured and they all laughed. He had a strange, sing-songy lilt to his voice that put John’s teeth on edge even worse than the laughter. John caught a glimpse of his strangely gleeful pale face in the filtered light of the barn, his oddly glittering eyes. It gave him a sick twist in his gut, an instinctive revulsion combined with an almost atavistic fear.

John worked with Callisto for an hour and then brought her back to the paddock, where he was surprised to see Tom and Ned leading the riding horses into the stable. “Are they back already?” he asked. “That was a short ride.”

“Well, poor Master Seb took a bit of a fall,” Young Tom said sadly, his voice was shaking with suppressed laughter. “Not much of a rider, I’m afraid.”

“Got a good bump to his arse by the look of it,” Ned added. He pulled a lugubrious face and said, “Bless him, he’ll never be the horseman Lord Sherlock is, will he?”

“Shovel threw Sebastian?” John asked in genuine surprise.

“I always knew old Shovel had sense,” Tom said. “Although in this instance I don’t think he was as offended by Master Sebastian as he was by what we put under his saddle blanket.” He pulled Shovel’s bridle off and offered him a carrot. “Good lad, Shovel.”

“You didn’t!”

“We did,” Ned said, pulling some sugar from his own pocket. “And Terpsi too, she threw that tall one.” He affected a haughty drawl. “Oh dear me, I’ve dust on my beautiful breeches. Gawd. Hang the wretched peasants who saddled this horse.”

John was already laughing “Give me that.” He took Terpsi’s bridle and fed her all the sugar out of his own pocket. “That’s a good lass then...you’re genius, the pair of you, I’ll do all your mucking the rest of the week. Hope that cures them of wanting to ride our horses.”

The visitors did not go riding again. Instead they spent most of their stay holed up in the billiard room drinking Lord Sherrinford’s brandy, and occasionally going to town where they could give offense to local girls away from Mrs. Medlock’s stern eye. John never drove on these expeditions. There seemed to be a tacit understanding that he was to be kept from view, and John had no objection. Sebastian Wilkes, after all, had been breaking Sherlock’s toys from the age of six, and his friends did not seem to be much better.
Late one beautiful evening when the visitors had gone to town John returned to the barn and was startled by a soft hiss behind him.

“John!”

For a moment John’s heart leaped, but it was only Callie, peering around the doorframe of the tack room and looking anxious.

“Callie! What are you--”

“Shhh.” She gripped his arm and dragged him inside. John opened his mouth to protest--if they were caught alone together there would be no end of trouble--but then he saw Callie’s brother pressed back behind the door.

“All right, Billy?”

Billy nodded, but he looked scared. John liked Billy, a slight boy with a mop of dark curls who sometimes gave John a sharp pang when he caught sight of him from behind. His face, however, was round and sunny, and he had Callie’s big brown eyes and dimples.

“What’s going on?”

Callie put a finger to her lip in warning. “Keep your voice down, I don’t want anyone else to know we’re here. Billy, tell him what happened.”

Billy hesitated, toeing the floor, and Callie said impatiently, “Oh, I’ll tell then. You know Master Sebastian’s friend, the one with the slicked back hair? The one called Jim?”

“Course,” John said immediately. “I don’t like him. He gives me the willies.”

“He come up to me,” Billy piped up, unwilling to let his sister steal the attention. “In the servants’ hall. He told me to come to his room tonight after they came back and take his shoes to be polished. Andrew, the footman, was in the silver room and he must have overheard cause he pops out and says I can do that sir, the lad will be in bed at that hour. And Master Jim turns all scary with his teeth--” he drew his lips back to bare his incisors in a snarl, “--and tells him to get on with his business or he’ll be sorry. So Andrew gets. Then Master Jim tells me to come up and to keep my mouth shut about it and there’ll be a shilling in it for me. He says he’ll show me how to do the undressing so I can be a valet someday. Then he goes off, and Andrew comes back round the corner and he tells me to fetch my sister and bring her to Mrs. Medlock’s parlor.”

“I thought he was in trouble,” Callie said fondly, but her eyes on John were deadly serious. “Mrs. Medlock asked me if we had anyone Billy could go to for the week, but we haven’t so she said she’ll send him over to her own sister’s first thing in the morning. No one’s to know but us though. Mrs. Medlock’s going to put it about that he’s got the measles, so she’s sent him there because they’ve all had it already.”

“But what--” John began in bewilderment, but Callie cut him off with a sharp negative shake of her head. Whatever the unnerving Master Jim wanted with a twelve-year-old page, it wasn’t something Callie wanted discussed in front of him.

“Well then, we’ll have an adventure, won’t we, Billy? Ever slept in a barn before?”

Billy shook his head, brightening. “Where do we sleep?”

“Up in the loft, it’s great fun. Come on and I’ll show you.”
Callie beamed at John and kissed him swiftly on the cheek. “Be good,” she told Billy, who ducked as though fearing to be kissed too, and she darted out.

“Don’t be excited she kissed you,” Billy said, sounding exactly like the little brother John had been himself. “She kisses everybody.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not,” John said, wiping his cheek. “Let’s jump in the hay.”

They jumped in the loft until it grew too dark to see and then settled into John’s narrow bed. It was strange having someone else next to him, and John felt the ache of missing Sherlock more keenly than he had in some time; but Billy’s warm weight was comfortable at his side, and he soon grew sleepy.

“John?”

“Mmm?”

“What if he comes up here?”

“He won’t. Posh one like that in the hayloft? He wouldn’t know how to climb the ladder, even. And if he does I’ll knock him down with the pitchfork.”

Billy giggled. “I know who he is,” he whispered after a minute. “I think he and Master Sebastian don’t want it known, but we all do. He’s Jim Moriarty.”

“Moriarty? You mean he’s the son of Sir James Moriarty?”

“Yes. Well, I suppose so.”

John was quiet, thinking that over. He felt disquieted. True, Sherlock had said all the aristocrats sent their sons to Eton, but that remark Sebastian had made, about Sherrinford Hall being Sherlock’s home for now...were they up to something? Surely he was overreacting.

“No reason they can’t be friends, just because his Lordship and Sir James’ father are opponents in government--they’re all gentlemen, surely they are civil to each other,” he said, to reassure Billy.

“Well, I don’t like him, gentleman or no,” Billy said with sudden vehemence. “He looks at me like he’s a cat, and I a mouse, and I don’t know yet he’s got his paw on my tail.”

“He’s got nothing on you and he never will,” John said. “Now go to sleep--you’ve got to be ready early tomorrow.”

Fall came, and John’s spirits dropped with the temperature. It was easier in the summer when he was distracted, working sunup to sundown. but now as the pace lessened he had more time to miss Sherlock, to wonder what exactly he was going to do with his own life. Sherlock’s letters came as often as ever, but his life in Munich seemed impossibly distant. John had more time now to keep up with his own little studies, but Sherlock’s talk of chemistry and German philosophy and music sometimes seemed as though it might have been in German for all he understood. Sherlock once waxed rhapsodic over Clara Schumann for two entire pages, which John had to read over twice before he realized Clara Schumann was a concert pianist and not a girl Sherlock fancied.

The week before Christmas a great box came addressed in Sherlock’s distinctively elegant slash of a hand, and they all gathered around it in the kitchen to conjecture.
“It must be books,” Len said.

“It’s not, it’s too light.” Ned tipped the box to demonstrate.

“Well whatever it is, it can’t sit in the middle of the floor,” Mrs. Gregson said in exasperation. “Put it off in the corridor until Christmas, or I’m likely to trip over it and you’ll have to lick your stew off.”

The box was dutifully removed and off and on over the next week John found himself making excuses to go by, just to look at the writing and wonder if there was something particular for him.

The servants’ Christmas was quiet that year as there was no family in residence, so they had their festive tea a bit earlier than usual. Everyone was impatient for the box.

“John, do you want to open it?” Mrs. Gregson asked.

“It’s addressed to all of us, so it should be Mr. Gregson.”

Mr. Gregson opened up the large package with a flourish and they all crowded around to look. There was a letter in an envelope, a parcel addressed to John, and what appeared to be a large quantity of woolen knit.

“It’s, well, I don’t know what it is,” Mr. Gregson said. “Let’s read the envelope. John, you do the honors, you’re our reader.”

John, now as curious as the rest, opened the envelope and read it out.

December 7
Munich

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Gregson, and everyone at the stables and gardens,

I hope you have all had a warm and merry Christmas, and that this winter proves kinder than last year’s. I am sure you are curious about the presents I have sent you but I am afraid it is a bit of a tale.

A few weeks ago I chanced to see a driver wearing a curious and ingenious pair of gloves. If you will take out a pair, you will see how they work. The inner fingers are of fine knit, enabling the wearer to perform delicate tasks such as buckling a harness, but then there is a covering of thick warm wool with a leather palm, for firmness of grip on cold reins, and a sort of heavy mitten top which can be flipped up or down for warmth, as needed.

Mr. Gregson fished a pair of the remarkable gloves out of the box while John paused and they all examined them. “That’s quite clever,” he remarked. “Look, lads, you can button the top back when you need to do something, and then pull it over to ride or drive.”

I asked the driver where I might acquire a pair for a friend and was told that the making of these gloves was a closely guarded secret known only to the wives of the drivers of Munich. As I hail from a long line of politicians, I understood this to mean that the gloves could be purchased, but the price would be steep. I persuaded the man to take me to his dwelling to meet his good Frau. Sure enough, after some haggling she agreed to knit me a pair and told me the type of wool and where it might be purchased. I did as directed, but on my return the Frau laughed and told me that the wool I had bought was too fine. She suggested that she could, for a price, knit me a fine gentleman’s scarf,
which would make a lovely Christmas present for my tutor. I accepted this arrangement and bade her tell me again the type of wool to purchase, as my German appeared to be weak where fibres are concerned. Once again I bought wool, and once again I returned, only to be told that I had once again purchased the wrong type but that this wool might make a good thick working man’s comforter for my friend. (She had finished the scarf for Mr. Brooke, which was indeed very nice. I noticed that some of her many children now had mittens of a suspiciously similar wool, which they had not been wearing before.)

I suspected that I was being fleeced, in every sense of the word, but the cold children had not failed to make an impression on me and I had noticed many others in that street. This time, I took the good Frau with me to the wool shop. I asked if she had friends who might also be interested in knitting for me, and happily it seemed that she did. I therefore bought out the shop and engaged all the wives of the neighbourhood in the making of gloves in every possible size, as well as scarves for all my other tutors and my family. Since, of course, I had no use for the extra wool, I requested they do me the favor of disposing of it as best they saw fit. When I returned to collect my purchases I was very gratified to see all of the urchins now warmly clad in all manner of jumpers, hats and scarves.

“Bless his kind heart,” Mrs. Gregson said, wiping her eyes on her apron. “Oh, his lady mother would be so proud.”

Please tell Mrs. Gregson not to cry and I have not forgotten her and Annie--their shawls are folded together and may be distinguished by their feminine colors.

I am now quite out of spending money, but Mr. Brooke reckons this a better gift than the scarf as now I cannot purchase chemicals. There should be gloves to fit all of you as well as everyone else taken on for approximately the next half century. I sincerely hope they prove useful and that you receive them as a token of my high regard.

Yours sincerely,

Sherlock Holmes

“Well,” Mr. Gregson began, and then paused, and Mrs. Gregson buried her face in her apron and sniffed.

“A toast,” Danny said hopefully, and Mr. Gregson ladled out the mulled wine so they could all raise a cup and chorus “Lord Sherlock” before diving into the box to try on the gloves.

John waited until he retired that night to open his parcel, less out of a desire for privacy than anticipation. Inside he found a heavy woolen comforter, a jumper, and what seemed to be an extremely thick pair of socks. He turned them over, puzzling. These would never fit in his boots; what was he to do with them? They seemed lovely and warm though--they were lined with a velvety soft flannel--so John put them on while he opened the letter. They were lovely and warm.

December 7

Munich

Dear John,

I hope you like the enclosed items. My new friend tells me the stockings are called bed-shoes, and
her relations up in the Alps wear them to bed in winter. They are meant to keep one’s toes from freezing off in the Alpine cold. While I know your bed in the barn is not nearly so inclement, it can feel downright Alpine at times, and I am sure you do not miss my cold feet in the night.

I have also arranged with Mr. Talbert in town for you to have a new pair of boots. I did not order a pair this time as I could no longer be sure of the size, it having been so long, although I doubt you have grown much more. Happily I myself am now growing at long last, and very quickly. I went to dress for the opera last night and was dismayed to discover that my trousers which fit perfectly only a few weeks ago were now comically short. My landlady laughed herself nearly sick before consenting to perform an emergency alteration.

I know you will have read the letter and heard the story behind why I have sent you the product of what must surely be an entire flock of sheep. In all honesty, you deserve far more. Before I met you I never cared much for any virtue beyond the intellectual; I saw value only in pure reason, rather than any of the softer passions. But now I am haunted constantly by thoughts of you, and so of thoughts of what you would think, of what you would wish me to do. When I saw those small children it was your nephews that came to my mind, and I realized how it would please you for me to see them warmly clothed. So you see, my dear John, those blessings I am sure Mrs. Gregson called down upon my head really belong on yours. It is you who inspires me, you who makes me want to be worthy of your friendship. I miss you so desperately much. When I walk in the Christmas market, smell the spiced nuts, hear the choirs, I think always John should see this, John would like this, I must remember to tell this to John. No matter how long I stay away, I will think of you. The Scripture speaks of putting away childish things, but it also says that with age comes clarity: For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

And so, I know, and I pray to be also known. Mein liebster Freund, mein Geliebter, I remain yours faithfully,

Sherlock Holmes

John set off for the servants’ ball in great good spirits. He had been carrying Sherlock’s letter tucked in his pocket all day, the words within warming him far more than the thick new jumper. It had been so long; so long since he had seen Sherlock, so long since Sherlock had spoken of anything but his day-to-day life, so long since the warm golden days when they sat by the pond and made their plans. The plans had shifted in their specifics but at heart had always remained the same: Sherlock and John, traveling the world together, having adventures. John had begun to think, sadly, that Young Tom had been right when he said Sherlock had to grow up sometime. He had begun to think that he had been a fool after all; that he should have made plans for his own life and not waited for Sherlock to come back another self-satisfied young aristocrat, amused that John should still cling to the dreams of their youth.

But now he had Sherlock’s assurance that his affection and friendship were as important to him as ever, and he had a fine new coat and a Christmas bonus and new boots he need only to choose, and he felt himself as rich and as happy as a lowly groom could be. He was, in short, prepared to enjoy himself enormously, and he did. John ate and drank and danced and drank with a great deal of enthusiasm and found himself, after a particularly energetic dance, waiting thirstily with Calie for the punch bowl to be refilled.

“Merry Christmas, John! Are you enjoying the dancing?”
“Very much. It looks like Billy is the king of the ball, though.”

“It does, doesn’t it? He just danced with Cook. I should probably send him off to bed, but he’s having such fun. Mind you, to hear him talk nothing on this earth is as grand fun as sleeping in the hayloft. He still goes on about it.”

“Good that he enjoyed it. I was glad of the company,” John said, smiling.

“I heard Lord Sherlock enlisted the entire kingdom of Bavaria to knit presents for the grooms. What did he send you?”

“It did look like it,” John said, laughing. “I have a jumper, a muffler, the famous gloves, and a great thick pair of stockings meant to keep my feet warm up in the loft. I’m quite cozy now.” They received fresh cups and moved a little way off together.

“I never thanked you properly,” Callie said, after she had drained her punch. “For helping us out the way you did.”

“It was nothing, truly, I was happy to do it.”

Callie considered him a moment, head tilted a little to the side, and then said, “Come here, I want to show you something.” She took hold of John’s sleeve and tugged him along a darkened corridor until they reached a sort of alcove. John noted with mild interest that the floor seemed to be tilting a little. How much punch he had drunk?

“Here,” Callie said, smiling, and John frowned around in the dark. She gestured upward with her chin and John followed her gaze. Oh. Mistletoe. Well, this would make an excellent tale for Young Tom in the morning, John thought. He leaned forward, pressed his lips against Callie’s, and pulled off with a resounding smack.

Callie burst out laughing. “You haven’t done this much, have you?”

“Never,” John admitted cheerfully.

“Let me then.” She looped her arms around his neck and brushed her lips softly against his, then again, then again with a little pressure, now moving a little closer so she was pressed against him, her mouth opening under his.

Well, that was...nice, if not particularly the earth-shattering excitement John had always supposed accompanied kissing, but then he had never really had much interest in kissing to begin with. But Callie was soft and warm against him and he found himself wrapping his arms around her, enjoying the soft warmth of her pushing up into his front. Actually, rubbing up into his front. And that was maybe a bit more than nice, that was maybe even exciting. John’s hands had somehow ended up on her waist, he realized as he pulled her more snugly against him. He was now rather breathless, which made the kissing a good deal more messy.

Callie pulled her head back just enough to breathe, “Shall we go to your room? I promise I can keep you a great deal warmer than any old stockings.”

John had to clench his teeth to keep his jaw from dropping, which probably looked ridiculous, but he did not need to appear any more gormless that he already did tonight. He knew Callie was no smitten maiden (“At least one of my father’s guests and I’m almost certain the French diplomat but I wasn’t here so can’t be positive; likely a good many village boys before that”) and probably didn’t even particularly fancy him overmuch, but, still. John may not have spent a lot of time thinking about getting himself into this position, but he was fairly sure that if a girl offered herself to you on a plate,
then unless you were aiming to be a vicar or engaged to someone else, you went along. He could only imagine what the other lads would say if he didn’t.

“Ah...all right, then,” he managed.

There was a lot of stumbling--when had his ladder got so narrow and tricky?--but they finally made it up into the loft, through John’s door, and onto the bed. John was trying very hard not to think about Young Tom telling him how he couldn’t work out where to put it, but thankfully Callie seemed to have no problem taking charge here too. “Now listen,” she told him once they had finally got their clothing off, “I don’t want any little strangers, hear me? So when I say stop, you STOP.”

“Stop,” John agreed dazedly.

Callie took hold of him quite briskly, saving him from any embarrassing fumbling, and OH, all right, yes, that was exciting indeed, he could see now what the fuss was about. John was just drunk enough to be unselfconscious but not too drunk to find this far more pleasurable than he had expected, which was lucky. “Oh God, oh God,” he gasped.

“Hold on, not yet,” Callie said and maneuvered them so that she was astride him, grinding down on his cock in a way that caused her breasts to bounce in his face, which distracted him somewhat from his enjoyment of the situation. He knew most men would have found the view quite pleasant, but at the moment was just glad that their only effect on him was to slow things down a bit. Callie was riding him mercilessly, crying out under her breath and then shuddering and spasming around him, which felt so good he forgot all about her bosom. He closed his eyes and thrust up in earnest, and the rising feeling of pleasure suddenly made him flash back to the dream, long ago, of Sherlock’s slippery body against him in the water.

“Stop,” Callie hissed and clutched him firmly as she slid off. She reached for him but John was too far gone to need it, spurting over her hand and choking back the cry in his own throat.

“That was close,” Callie said cheerfully, sitting up. John lay still, the room spinning around him. He had never before climaxed while fully awake, and all his limbs seemed to have turned to tingling jelly. Callie climbed off the bed and unabashedly pulled a handkerchief from John’s trouser pocket, which she used to wipe her hand. “Here’s the story,” she told him, reaching for her clothes. “You had too much to drink and couldn’t find your way outside, so I took you out to be sick, and then you came back to your room and went to sleep. I’m even going to ask one of the grooms to look in on you to make sure you’re all right. Got it? So don’t go back to the party, understand?”

John could not have gone back to the party if his life depended on it. He managed a sluggish nod.

“Wipe yourself off, or you’ll regret it tomorrow,” Callie advised.

John cracked an eyelid and looked down at himself. He saw the sticky mess on his abdomen and reached for the hankie she handed him. It belatedly occurred to him that he was probably expected to say something respectful and affectionate here, or at least something more than a grunt. He looked over at Callie a little helplessly.

“It’s all right, you needn’t say anything, you were lovely.” Callie stooped and brushed a kiss on his sweaty cheek. “Maybe we’ll do it again sometime. Sleep well, John.”

She even pulled the covers up over him before she left. John fell asleep so quickly he did not even have a chance to put on his warm new socks.
Of course John said nothing to Young Tom after all. Kissing and telling was one thing when it was just kissing, but when it was...no, definitely not. He also didn’t tell Sherlock, although he supposed Sherlock would work the whole thing out eventually anyway.

He thought about it off and on, but although the sensation of climax had been fantastic, he couldn’t really muster up much enthusiasm for the rest of it. Maybe Callie wasn’t really his type, or maybe, as he’d always assumed, he just wasn’t much of a ladies’ man; more the sort who lives out his life devoted to his horses. He bought a pint for Mrs. Gregson’s niece Lila and got a few kisses in the dark at the back of the pub one night, but that wasn’t very exciting either.

Callie seemed just the same as always whenever they saw each other in passing, always a cheerful smile and a word, and John would have been content enough going on as they were. But then one night in March Callie went to town with some of the others on her night off, had several drinks bought her by a man who was then forcibly reminded of his wife at home, and apparently decided that John would make an excellent substitute.

John woke with a start, briefly confused by the awareness of someone in his room, and then he sat up quickly, hope rising so fast he could feel it constricting his throat. He saw the slender form in the dark and sucked in his breath, but then she turned and the bitterness of the disappointment nearly choked him. “Callie?”

“Evening, love,” she said brightly and slid into the bed. Things did not go so smoothly this time. John’s sudden awakening and disappointment left him a good deal less eager, and Callie’s matter-of-fact efficiency just seemed irritating. He tried desperately to remember how he had felt before, at the end, and of course that brought back the memory of the dream again, the warm wet water and the slithering body--he abruptly pushed Callie onto her side and pulled her back flush against him, gripping her hips and grinding into her backside. Better, Callie, getting nothing out of this position, wriggled and reached down until John’s prick slipped between her legs, tightened her thighs and breathed, “Oooh, all right.”

John clutched at her and thrust, no real clear idea of what he was doing, only that this was far better than the breasts in his face. He reached for the swimming dream again but instead abruptly found himself remembering something else: the time he had touched himself and imagined pushing into...oh, God, there, there, there, it was going to happen, Callie was clenching her legs and John held the fantasy desperately in his mind, of pushing into that tightness instead of the loose slick of Callie’s thighs, hard hard hard, and then finally the heat unspooled up out of his groin and spurted in throbbing wetness.

“Clever you,” Callie murmured, “no need to stop that way.” She was heavy and drowsy and John pushed back from her a little, trying to get a little cool air between their sticky bodies. He felt exhausted and empty. Why did people think this was worth it? All that work for such a brief burst of pleasure.

When John opened his eyes again he knew immediately they had made a huge mistake. “Bloody hell,” he muttered, rolling to shake Callie. “Bloody, bloody--Callie, wake up. It’s nearly dawn, I can hear the birds.”

“Oh blimey,” Callie gasped, leaping to her feet and clutching her head. “It’s not, is it? Oh God, I fell asleep. Where’s my clothes?”

John gathered up various articles as best he could and Callie threw them on, frantically peering out the window. “It’s not light at all yet, I think I’ll make it. Bless you for waking me, John, I’ll see myself out,” and she slid down the ladder with impressive agility for someone wearing a skirt.
John sighed and thumped himself back into the cooled bed. “I am never doing that again,” he told the swallow nested in the rafters. “And I miss the cat. She was better to talk to than you.”

John did not go back to sleep, but he was so depressed and listless that he was almost late for morning chores anyway. His heavy spirits went unnoticed–everyone tended to be silent in the morning. He perked up a little over breakfast, enough to notice the tell tale signs that something was up. Len and Davy were whispering together and occasionally bursting into suppressed giggles, while the Gregsons looked pinched and worried, and Annie was uncharacteristically quiet.

“All right, that’s enough,” Mr. Gregson said when they finished, cutting across another burst of suppressed laughter. “Let’s get the horses to pasture and then I want you lot to get the stables mucked out and put down fresh straw. Looks to be a fine day today, might as well do some spring cleaning. After that you can exercise the riding horses,” he added more kindly when Ned groaned.

“John, come and have a word with me before you ride.”

Cleaning the barn was not high on John’s list of favorite activities, but it was vigorous exercise and by the time they had all the old straw cleaned away his head at least felt clearer. It was nice to see the stalls clean and fresh-smelling in the spring sunshine. He climbed up into the loft after Ned and Davy, Young Tom bringing up the rear.

“Whew, that was a chore, let’s rest a bit,” Davy said, throwing himself down on a bale of hay. “Bet you’re a bit tired, aren’t you, John?”

John looked over, confused, and Ned and Davy burst into laughter again.

“Wore you out, eh?” Ned managed. “She stayed long enough.”

Even Tom was grinning. “Come on, tell us. It was Callie, wasn’t it? We all saw her flirting with you on Boxing Day. Hope you did us proud, John–we’re supposed to be good riders here in the stables, after all.”

“Oh, hell,” John said, feeling his face flame. “How did you…” But of course he already knew. We all saw the footprints, Mrs. Gregson had said long ago–Callie had left just before dawn; there would have been frost. The others had come out for morning chores at precisely the right moment to see the clear evidence of their transgression before the sun melted it away.

“Bet you won’t be going back now that you’ve had a taste of that,” Davy said and John felt the beginnings of his smile freeze on his face.

“What?”

“He means,” Ned said, barely able to speak for laughing, “now that you’ve had the real thing, Lord Sherlock’s bony little arse probably doesn’t look so good any more.”

John could not breathe. Dimly, he was aware that Young Tom had stopped laughing.

“You think,” John whispered, “you think I ever laid a hand--you think I did that, to Lord Sherlock?” Sherlock. Sherlock, who was a lord, who was his employer’s son. Who was a child. John was on his feet before he was even aware of it, fist raised to strike.

“John!” Tom’s arms were around his waist, pulling him back. “He doesn’t mean it, he’s just teasing. Come on, John, sit down. Please.”

John let Tom push him down onto a bale, shaking violently. There was a red haze in front of his eyes.
“Listen,” Tom said to Ned and Davy. “Go get some water, say we’re taking a break. All right? Clear off. We’ll carry on in a bit.”

Davy and Ned, not laughing now, clattered off down the ladder. John took several slow, deep breaths, trying to tamp down his fury. He became aware of Young Tom sitting quietly facing him.

“You thought that,” John said raggedly. “You thought I was buggering Lord Sherrinford’s son.”

“John,” Tom said, “Lord Sherrinford thought you were buggering his son.”

This second blow hit John like a fist in the gut. He bent double, trying to catch his breath. Finally, the nausea receded a little and he sat up, looking steadily at Tom. “Tell me.”

Tom looked miserable. “Nobody thought it before, not until he ran away,” he said. “But you remember when we, er, talked before, how there are some places where it, you know, where it goes on? Well, those schools the rich boys go to—they’re known for it. Some of it’s the older ones using the littler ones, of course; they say some get a taste for it, keep doing it after they leave. There’s places in London, like whorehouses, only boys. Young boys.”

“That’s vile,” John managed. He felt sick.

“It is,” Tom agreed. “But they say others take to fancying each other, like girls. They write each other love poems and such. It’s not discouraged whilst they’re at school, I guess, maybe so they won’t be tempted to go out and get a girl in trouble. My mate who went to the grammar school, he told me it went on there too—not that he did it, he said, but many did. So when Lord Sherloch ran away and came here instead of London, everyone thought, well, that he fancied you. And everyone knew that he came to your room that night, so I guess it seemed, we thought…”

“You thought he offered himself and I took it,” John said through his teeth.

Young Tom looked ashamed. “Not just us. I heard the Gregsons that night after I brought Lord Mycroft from the station—Lord Mycroft had had a word with Mr. Gregson, asked if he thought that there was any unnatural attachment.”

“He came to say farewell, because he was leaving in the morning! And Lord Mycroft gave him permission to come! Why would he do that if he thought there was something wrong?” The odd conversation in the cellar now made perfect, horrible sense, John thought, and then realized that undoubtedly Sherlock had had a similar conversation with his brother. “He asked Lord Sherlock,” John said, looking fiercely at Tom. “He asked him and Sherlock told him just what I’m telling you: there was never anything like that. For God’s sake, how can you think I’d--even if, and I wouldn’t, he’s just a lad!” He saw Sherlock in his mind as he’d been that night, bright and pure and untouchable as an angel, snowflakes in his hair.

“I know.” Young Tom looked miserable. “I didn’t--I wasn’t sure I believed it, really, not of you anyway. But Lord Sherlock, the way he is with you--he was never like that before, not with anybody.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

“John, you go on and take Hermes and go for a great long ride. The lads and I will finish the barn and I’ll make sure they’re set straight, all right? I’m sorry about all this.”

“Thank you,” John said. “Not just for the ride. For everything.”

Tom shrugged. “You’re still my mate, you know? Even if--you’d still have been.”
“Thanks,” John said again. He sighed.

“Er, John,” Tom said tentatively, “you’d best have that word with Mr. Gregson, before you go.”

“Oh Christ,” John said, letting his head thump back against the barn wall. “They know about Callie, don’t they? I thought something seemed off.”

“Just tell the truth and throw yourself on his mercy,” Tom advised. “I don’t think you’ll get in too much trouble. He might actually be pleased you’ve been with a girl—put everyone’s mind at rest.”

If Mr. Gregson was pleased he certainly did not show it, but John’s abject misery coupled with his desperate assurances that nothing of the sort was ever going to happen again seemed at least to temper his anger. By the time John had finished apologizing he thought Mr. Gregson was more desperate to end the conversation than he was. Callie’s fate was in the hands of Mrs. Medlock, but John knew her to be a kind woman at heart—he doubted Callie would lose her place, but she would not be going to town on her night off anytime soon.

Ned and Davy both apologized with genuine sincerity when he returned to the barn, and John stayed to finish the cleaning with them. There was still a little residual awkwardness, but that would pass. Still John was glad to finally escape on Hermes, pounding over the fields feeling the fresh spring sun and the biting air scouring him clean.

He rode more slowly on the way back, letting himself finally think about the things Young Tom had told him about Eton. He thought of Sherlock, small and delicate and—undeniably—pretty, and about Sebastian Wilkes’s awful friends, and wondered how Sherlock had not run away in the first week. And then he thought of something else that made him stop in his tracks.

Some of them get a taste for it.

Like a cat looks at a mouse.

Callie’s eyes, fierce and scared, the hard shake of her head: not in front of him.

He knew now why Billy had been sent away, and he knew with a sudden deep certainty that Jim Moriarty was the closes thing to pure evil he had ever known.

Two months later, Sherlock finally came home.
By the waters of Babylon

Chapter Notes

Warnings.

John could not sleep the night before Sherlock returned. After a long time lying wakeful he gave it up and lit the lamp, reading over all the letters Sherlock had sent him. He knew it was foolish, but it had just been so long; what if, after all, things were no longer the same between them? Then, too, there was the lingering worry about the eyes that would be on them, an uncomfortable awareness that had never troubled him before. He read Sherlock’s Christmas letter over again one last time, rubbed his gritty eyes, and finally slept.

The family and a party of diplomats came directly from France and arrived on the last train, so John had the whole day to endure the tight fluttery anticipation in his stomach. Fortunately Mr. Gregson made the usual flap about the carriages, so John was busy enough polishing and scrubbing to stay distracted. He was far too junior to go to the station, so he brought the horses in from the pastures and worked in the barn until he heard the rattle of wheels on cobblestones. John was out in the stableyard taking off harnesses when he heard a shout from behind him.

“John!”

John, thinking it Lord Sherrinford’s voice, whipped around so quickly his spine snapped as he straightened. He stopped short, staring. Was that Sherlock? “You’ve got tall!” he said, stunned.

“Finally,” Sherlock said happily. “I’m a still an inch or so behind Mycroft, but he didn’t finish growing til he went to Oxford, so I’ve another year to catch up.”

“You’ve got to go see Mrs. Gregson! She always said you would sprout up like Jack’s beanstalk, just wait until she sees how right she was.”

“I will, I’ll see everyone, but I want to see Callisto first. She can’t possibly be as magnificent as you make out.”

“Oh, she can,” Young Tom said, grinning at him. “Even Old Tom says she’s the prettiest horse he ever saw. Will you look at you, my Lord, you’re as tall as I am.”

Sherlock had changed, and not just from boy to young man. Before he would have hugged John in the stableyard in front of them all, but now he waited—not very patiently—for John to finish his chores, proudly greeting everyone who had not yet had the chance to gawk at his height, and followed him all the way out to the quiet paddock before taking John’s hand in both of his and saying, “I am so, so glad to see you again.”

And John, looking into his bright clear eyes that were just the same as he remembered, knew that nothing that mattered had changed at all.

John assumed Sherlock would think himself too old now to visit John in the stables, but he was awakened late that night by Sherlock trying to scrunch his too-long arms and legs into the hollow of
John’s body.

“Shouldn’t you really take the back now?” John asked, half asleep.

“No,” Sherlock said with such distress that John gave it up immediately. He pushed Sherlock down on his side and tucked himself up behind him, fitting his face between Sherlock’s sharp shoulder blades. Sherlock might have gained six inches and dropped an octave, but he was no wider across, and still fit easily under John’s arm. Sherlock still smelled of lavender and clean soap, but there was a slight undercurrent now, a musky, male scent.

“I’m allowed to stay up for dinner now,” Sherlock said, fumbling around trying to find John’s hand. He laced their fingers together—his much longer—and drew them up to his chest. “It’s rather more tedious than I thought. Father says you’re to have a gun. Will you let me shoot it?”

“Maybe,” John murmured, smiling against his back.

“There’s so much I don’t know about firearms. If I mayn’t shoot it will you let me look at the casings after you do?” Sherlock yawned hugely, his jaw cracking. “I wanted to stay up all night talking, but I couldn’t sleep last night, I was so excited to see you.”

“I couldn’t sleep either. It’s wonderful you’re back.”

“Mycroft says…he says I’m too old to sleep with you anymore. He said just for tonight and I have to go back very early. He says it’s all right for boys, but I’m too big now, people will talk. I said I didn’t care but…”

“He’s probably right,” John said softly, knowing it was true even as his chest already ached with anticipating Sherlock’s absence under his arm again, so soon. “But I wish he weren’t.”

“When we grow up, really properly grow up,” Sherlock said vehemently, “we’ll live together always and no one can tell us what to do.”

“I still won’t let you ride until I check your girth.”

“Well, you can tell me what to do.”

“And you can tell me.”

“Yes.” Sherlock yawned again, and then he heaved a deep, contented sigh that seemed to come from his very toes. He wrapped both hands around John’s hand, cradling it close to his chest like something precious. “Good night, John.”

“So, done much shooting before?” the gamekeeper asked.

“Just hunting back home,” John answered at the same time Sherlock said, “No.”

Mr. Rouncewell raised an eyebrow. “The Earl said nothing about giving you a gun, my Lord.”

“Oh well, worth a try,” Sherlock said cheerfully. “I’ll just stay back and watch John then.”

The gamekeeper drilled John on the basics, mostly things he had learned from his father long ago, but also how to draw quickly in the event that it was needed. “You’ll be just fine with a bit of practice,” he told John as they set up tins. “You know what you’re doing, and you respect the weapon. But I wouldn’t trust that one, he’ll shoot off his foot.”
“He doesn’t really want to shoot. He just wants to look at the casings and the spent bullets, and whatever I manage to hit.”

“Always did have strange ways,” Rouncewell muttered. “Have a go then.”

John managed to hit about half the tins (“Not bad for your first time”), to the delight of Sherlock, who collected the victims.

“Look, one of these holes is bigger. It’s the one the bullet goes out, isn’t it? Why is it bigger? The bullet must expand on impact, why, how much, does the distance from the target matter, does the velocity, does the substance being hit? It’s all physics, I must do more research, can John shoot something different?”

“Sherlock,” John said patiently, “get out of the range before John hits you. And you can collect anything you want me to shoot and I’ll shoot it—within reason, I’m not killing your cousin for you.”

John practiced for a week while they kept their excursions close to home, with Sherlock feverishly filling several new notebooks with his observations.

“The police in Paris are far more advanced in their scientific methods,” he told John. “I read about them and Mycroft arranged for me to have a tour when we went to France before coming here. It’s fascinating. I’d love to be a detective, but I’m sure Father would think it dreadfully unsuitable. It’s so unfair! Here he spends all this time trying to make sure poor boys have all sorts of new opportunities, but I’m stuck with the same choices I would have had a hundred years ago: clergyman, officer, scholar.”

“What do you mean?” John said, amused.

“I’d make an excellent vicar, actually,” Sherlock said thoughtfully. “I’d deduce everyone’s sins and let them think I learnt them directly from God. I’d have the saintliest parish in England; they’d be too terrified to misbehave...well, that would get dull rather quickly, wouldn’t it? Never mind clergy. Unless I could be a bishop. It would be lovely to make Mycroft kiss my ring.”

“I think you might have to give sermons, too,” John pointed out and Sherlock made a face.

“Clergy definitely ruled out.”

“Is his Lordship expecting trouble?” Rouncewell asked. He was watching John clean the revolver.

John glanced up, then over at Sherlock. The gamekeeper had inevitably succumbed to Sherlock’s enthusiasm and found a dead duck someplace, which John had obligingly shot, and now Sherlock was happily engrossed in poring over it with his magnifying glass.

“I don’t think so,” John said quietly. “After what happened a few years ago, I think he just wants to be careful. And then all that with the revolutionaries—”

Rouncewell’s face darkened. “That was a bad business,” he said.

John looked up at him, curious. “What do you mean?”

Rouncewell watched Sherlock for a minute in silence, then looked back down at the revolver. “Careful you don’t use too much oil.”
“Sorry,” John said, wiping.

Rouncewell took a long breath and blew it out. “I was a soldier,” he said. “Twenty years in her Majesty’s army, a sergeant, I was. Would have laid down my life for Queen and country. But the day I was sent to Manchester to put down the uprising was the day I knew I was done. To draw arms on our own people, some of them women and children, asking only enough of a decent wage to keep body and soul together...the Earl gave me a place when I left. And now all this. A revolution? Maybe there really was a plan to overthrow the government, and maybe it was just a bunch of starving men armed only with knives and pitchforks. We’ll never know, will we, since they were all shot down? Not a one of them survived to stand trial.” He spat on the grass. “Bad business,” he said again.

John’s hands had stilled on the gun. He did not know what to say.

Rouncewell glanced at him. “Do you know who has the contract to supply her Majesty’s army?”

John shook his head.

“Sir James Moriarty.” Rouncewell looked out into the distance. “Made his fortune that way. Guns and cannon. And now he’s the loudest voice for sending the army in to quell every demonstration, and of course they need more arms for that. And how likely do you think it that he’ll support Lord Mycroft’s new treaty with the French?”

“I should think...not likely at all.”

“No.” Rouncewell looked straight at him, his soldier’s unyielding gaze holding John’s. “You keep that revolver with you, and you keep it loaded. I think there will be trouble, whether the Earl does or no. And I don’t think it will be from revolutionaries.”

John looked at Sherlock, who was now pacing off the distance from the bird to where John had been standing when he shot it, muttering to himself. “Anybody touches him it will be over my dead body,” he said without raising his voice.

Rouncewell put a heavy hand on his shoulder. “Good lad,” he said.

May gave way to June, and June to July. Mycroft went back to France. John and Sherlock resumed their long excursions, spending a lot of time in the forest as it was a damp, rainy sort of summer. John was constantly on the lookout for trouble, but none came.

“Shouldn’t your cousins be arriving soon?” he asked Sherlock. The morning’s pearly mist had given way to halfhearted sunshine, and they were lunching under the plum tree on the riverbank.

“Unfortunately, yes, but only my Aunt Wilkes, at least at first,” Sherlock said. “Sebastian is going home for a few weeks with one of his loathsome friends.”

“As long as they don’t come back here,” John said fervently. He had written Sherlock at the time of last summer’s visit, of course, although he had not told him anything of the conclusions he had drawn later. Sherlock, writing back, had seemed unusually reticent, in the way he always avoiding talking about anything to do with Eton. He was not surprised when Sherlock changed the subject now.

“Are you a good enough marksman yet to hit one of those plums?” he asked, squinting up into the tree. Then he sat up. “John! You haven’t shot any fruit yet. If you shoot something very soft, like a
plum--no, a tomato--would it deform the bullet? We have to try when we get home."

“I wouldn’t mind shooting a cabbage,” John said, sitting up in his turn. “Think what a lovely explosion it would make! I’m not sure the gardeners would think much of our wasting food though.”

“Maybe if I buy fruit at the market,” Sherlock said, clearly thinking out loud. John watched him as his eyes flicked around at something only he could see, probably the market, or maybe how he planned to arrange his purchases back home for John to shoot. Sherlock was more prone to these bursts of abstraction since he came back, which John did not mind at all. He liked watching Sherlock’s pale unfocused eyes narrow and widen and flicker, his hands making small, mysterious gestures in the air. Truthfully, John just liked watching Sherlock. The sight of him, straight and elegant on his horse or dashing about with his magnifying glass, gave John a warm twist low in his belly that was almost like pain.

Sherlock suddenly gasped, snapping back to the here and now and whipping around on John. “Fish!” he cried. “Come on, John, let’s hurry, the shops will close.”

Sebastian Wilkes did not arrive until August. “Not improving with age much, is he?” Annie said slyly over tea. “Not like our Lord Sherlock.”

Her mother scolded her for being forward, but not very vigorously. It was true enough. Sunday at church, John watched the family filing up to their pew and felt a spike of mean pleasure: Sherlock, elegant and slim in his perfectly tailored Paris suit, made Sebastian look more than ever like an ill-dressed, hulking toad. He spent the rest of the service guiltily praying for forgiveness.

Lord Sherrinford was called back to London the following week, and there were once again rumors of insurrection in the papers. As Mr. Brooke had already left for his annual visit to his family in Wales, this left Sherlock in the nominal care of Mrs. Wilkes, a situation which pleased nobody. Somehow they negotiated an unspoken agreement in which Sherlock stayed away from the house entirely, and in turn was allowed to do more or less as he liked as long as he returned for dinner. Sherlock would have preferred to avoid dinner too, but Mrs. Wilkes rather desperately invited anyone she could think of to serve as buffer (“We’ve had the vicar twice, and now Lady Lynde, God help us”) and at least open warfare was avoided.

The telegram arrived early in the morning of the first really hot day of the summer. John and the others were still at their chores when it arrived, but Mr. Gregson already had it when they came into breakfast.

“John,” he said, motioning with his mug of tea. “I’ve had a wire from his Lordship. Lord Sherlock’s not to leave the estate until he returns; he wants him to stay on the grounds.”

“Did he say why?” John asked, surprised. The morning papers had been no more alarming than usual. It was hard, on that warm sunny morning, to imagine anything very terrible happening.

“No, but he’s very clear. Don’t let Lord Sherlock run off and give you the slip, mind.”

“It’s all right. I think the gardeners have been trapping some rabbits and we haven’t shot any of those yet; he’ll like that.”

“There should be some early pears too,” Mr. Gregson said. “If you get really desperate you can take some of the old horseshoes. You haven’t shot anything like that, have you? Nail one to a fence post and shoot it; that’ll smash a bullet up proper, that will.”
Sherlock, however, came slamming into the stableyard a good bit later than usual and in a towering temper. “It’s not fair!” he shouted, kicking angrily at a mounting block. “Why can’t we go out? You’ve got your gun. You can even hit what you’re aiming for now, most of the time.”

“Thank you, Sherlock,” John said pleasantly. “We’re not going out because your father says you are not to go out, and he is actually my employer, so I do as he says. In addition he probably has cause for concern, which you might take into account whilst you smash up the stables.”

Sherlock glared at him. “It’s beastly hot and I wanted to go swimming. I haven’t been swimming in two years.”

“We can still go swimming. We’ll go to that little lake with the temple in the middle. Remember? It’s on the estate, and there aren’t any guests right now. Mrs. Wilkes never goes out that far, so we won’t shock anyone.” John and some of the others had enjoyed a few furtive dips there last summer when the family was away, but he did not tell this to Sherlock.

Sherlock still looked cross, but he righted the mounting block and came over to Circe. “I suppose so. Can we race through the parkland first though? I need a good hard ride. Sebastian was laughing at me after Aunt Wilkes said I couldn’t leave the grounds, and it made me out of sorts.”

“Whatever you like,” John said. “Mr. Roach caught some rabbits too. We can shoot them and pretend they’re Sebastian.”

“Oh, rabbits,” Sherlock said, perking up. “We haven’t shot anything with much fur yet. I want to see if there’s still any on the bullet once it’s recovered.”

They shot rabbits while it was still somewhat cool, and had a picnic in the orchards, and raced, and in the heat of mid afternoon finally ended up at the ornamental lake. The cool water felt blissful on John’s hot skin. They raced to the island and for the first time Sherlock won--his greater reach gave him an edge over John’s skill.

“Ha!” Sherlock cried. He danced around the little temple, crowing in triumph, as John sat on the bank and laughed at him. “I beat you to the island, I can finally, finally beat you at a race!”

“I’m fairly sure you can run faster too,” John said, still amused. “It doesn’t make you better just because you’re longer, you know.”

“Yes it does,” Sherlock said maddeningly.

“Well, see if you can catch me then,” John said and dove off the edge. He heard Sherlock shout behind him, then a great splash, and he swam harder as Sherlock tore after him in an effort to catch up. A minute later he felt long fingers close on his ankle and started laughing again, choking and spitting out water, as Sherlock yanked him under and tried to swim over him. John flipped, grabbed him about the middle and tickled him, so they both ended up tumbling and flailing in the deep water until Sherlock finally reached a level where he could just stand, where he proceeded to hop up and down taunting John.

“I--can stand up--and you can’t” he shouted, whereupon John dove under and knocked into his knees, and they both went down again. John backstroked, kicking water in Sherlock’s face as he chased after him, then got his feet down and stood up.

“Ta da,” he announced, and Sherlock made a dive for his neck. John stumbled, trying to get his balance, and Sherlock clutched at him and John clutched back, catching himself and pushing back upright. “You can’t do that! What are you, a barnacle?” Sherlock had now wrapped both legs around
his waist. John was standing chest deep in the water holding Sherlock, whose arms were around his neck. He suddenly realized that it was almost like his dream: the sun, the warm water, Sherlock’s slippery body tight against his—very tight against his. His heart suddenly thudded, uncertain. Sherlock’s face was so close that John could see every tiny detail: the water droplets sparkling on his skin, his wide darkening eyes, his parted lips. Sherlock shifted slightly and John instinctively adjusted his grip, arm sliding under Sherlock’s thighs, and suddenly heat pooled in his groin.

“John,” Sherlock whispered.

John swallowed. Sherlock was holding very, very still, but John could still feel the hardness of him pressed into John’s abdomen. The look on Sherlock’s face was one John had never seen before: trepidation, desperate hope, joy. His face was so close their noses were almost brushing, and John could feel Sherlock’s quick breath on his own mouth as Sherlock leaned closer, closer—

“Ha!”

The sudden loud noise startled John so badly that he leaped, losing his balance again. He pinwheeled backward and came up coughing, shaking water out of his eyes, and struggling to get to his feet. Sherlock, already standing, was wading furiously toward the shore.

“Get out!”

“I knew it!” Sebastian Wilkes shouted. He was sitting astride Blackbeard, face alight with malicious triumph. “I knew I’d catch you sooner or later! Too good to let anyone at Eton touch you, but you go running off to give it up for a filthy stableboy every chance you get!” He backed the horse up several paces as Sherlock neared the bank, rage in every line of his body. “I’m telling Mother,” he said, almost snarling. “I’m telling Mother and she’ll write your father right away and we’ll see what happens to you then, and your precious little—”

“Get out, get out, get out,” Sherlock screamed. He had reached the shore and grabbed up a good sized rock, which he hurled with surprising accuracy at Sebastian’s head. Sebastian ducked and it clipped his shoulder. He cursed, wheeling his horse about, and Sherlock caught up another one, swinging his arm back.

“You just wait,” Sebastian shouted, his face contorted with anger and a terrible vicious glee. Sherlock flung the rock and Sebastian dug in his heels, shouting incomprehensibly, and galloped off.

John waded slowly to where Sherlock stood shaking on the edge of the lake, breath coming in great heaving sobs. His guts felt like a mass of twisted ice. “Sherlock,” he whispered.

“I don’t care!” Sherlock cried. “I don’t care what he says or who he tells, I don’t—”

“Well, I do,” John snapped. “I’ll lose my place, Sherlock. Your father sent you to Munich for a year and a half because you came here instead of London when you ran away, what do you think will happen when he hears about this? I could be arrested, even. I’m all my family has and I’ll never be able to get another place, not after this.”

“No,” Sherlock said desperately, “No,” but John could see that his words had hit home. He turned away from the twisted misery in Sherlock’s face and began gathering his clothes. “We’d best get back,” he said dully.

They dressed in silence but as they readied the horses Sherlock said in a trembling voice, “I’ll write him myself, I’ll wire him, I’ll—I’ll go to London, I’ll tell Father it was nothing, just my own foolishness or—an experiment, you did nothing. Nothing.” There was an edge of what John thought
might be bitterness in his tone.

“You won’t go to London, Sherlock,” John sighed. In truth, he doubted whether Sherlock throwing himself at Lord Sherrinford’s mercy would make any difference. He had a terrible thought: would his family’s little income be stopped too? Surely the Earl would not let John’s mother and sister suffer for John’s crime?

Sherlock went to swing himself into the saddle but John stopped him automatically and checked the girth. Sherlock made a choked, awful sound and pulled himself up, digging in his heels and riding off without waiting for John. Numbly, John followed. He was distantly glad they were on the estate, where the horses knew the way back without any guidance from him.

The clenched, icy knot in John’s guts grew worse as the stables came into view. As he led Hermes into the yard after Sherlock he was surprised to see Bill and Mr. Gregson unfastening the traces from the carriage. “Who’s arrived, then?” he asked, momentarily distracted.

“Lord Sherrinford,” Mr. Gregson said, pulling off his hat to wipe his sweating face. “Got the wire just in time to make it to his train, too. I hope Mrs. Gregson thought to tell Mrs. Medlock, she won’t have been expecting him.”

Sherlock, without a word, pushed Circe’s reins into John’s hand and ran for the Hall.

“He all right?” Gregson said, frowning after him.

“He was just saying when we came back he wanted to talk to his father about something,” John said, not untruthfully.

“Well. You can manage both those horses, John? Young Tom’s got Blackbeard. He’s taking him out to pasture now.”

So Sebastian was already inside. John wondered whether he knew the Earl was back yet. “I’ve got it, sir.”

John led the horses inside and into their cross-ties to take off the tack. He felt as though he were moving very slowly, as if in a dream. The cool stables with their high ceilings and sweet hay smell had never seemed so lovely, so familiar. How much longer would they be his home? He thought with a pang of Young Tom and Ned and Davy, of the horses he had grown to love, Mrs. Gregson’s warm fragrant bread and kind smile, evenings by the fire. Would he ever learn what happened in A Tale of Two Cities?

John considered his options, which were few. He could go directly to Gregson now and tell him the literal truth: they had been bathing, nothing untoward had occurred, Master Sebastian had seen an opportunity to seize an advantage. He thought Gregson would probably believe him—being caught with a girl had helped him in that regard at least—although it would do nothing to dispel the popular notion that Sherlock harbored a secret crush. But Gregson would know as well as John that even if the blame lay with the master, the servant would always pay the price—just look at Sally Donovan’s mother. Gregson would probably give him an excellent reference, maybe some ideas of where he might go…and then what? He had once thought of becoming a soldier, but Mr. Rouncewell had rather cured him of that.

Besides, John knew full well he would not do it. The literal truth was not the whole truth. In that moment in the water, John had wanted, wanted more than possibly he had ever wanted anything; wanted, perhaps, all along. It was a sin and a crime and he could never have acted on it, and it was even more imperative now that he leave Sherlock, but he could not run away and leave him alone to
face Sebastian’s accusations. He was not such a coward as that.

John was so lost in his thoughts that he barely noticed running footsteps until Young Tom clattered up behind him, out of breath. John’s heart immediately stuttered in a panic, but Tom said only, “Help me with Terpsichore? I’m being sent to town posthaste.”

“For the police?”

“The police? Why would we want the police? It’s a telegram has to go right away, and I’m to wait for a reply, too.”

“Oh,” John said. He was sweaty with relief. “Of course, bring her here and I’ll get her saddle.”

Tom had just set out at a trot when Mr. Gregson arrived, which sent John’s heart hammering again, but all he said was, “Can you take poor old Shovel out for a bit of exercise? Ned was to take him but then we had to go to the station.”

John was beginning to wish that Lord Sherrinford would just send for him and get it over with. “Yes, sir.”

“Not too long, mind, we’ve the other horses to bring in, and now Young Tom off.” Mr. Gregson sighed. “What a day, and so hot too.”

Mr. Gregson’s day was not destined to improve. John was on his way back to the stables, riding on the high ridge, when the carriage passed right below him on its way to town. His heart sank right into his boots. So Lord Sherrinford had not even waited for John to leave—he was packing Sherlock off that very day. John would never even have a chance to say goodbye. He would undoubtedly be sacked or in prison by nightfall, and Sherlock would never be able to write to him, even if his family allowed it.

Feeling sick and heavy with grief and fear, John led Shovel into the stables and was surprised to find Ned and Davy whispering in the tack room.

“Aren’t we meant to be getting the horses in?”

“Did you hear what happened?” Ned asked gleefully. “The Wilkes are gone!”

“What?”

“I know, it’s like Christmas, isn’t it? They left in an almighty hurry too. Suppose they’re trying to make the last train to London. No idea why, but Her Highness was in an awful taking when they left.”

“They didn’t have all their things though,” Davy pointed out. “Must be coming back.”

“Or sending them on,” Ned said hopefully.

“Annie will know everything, she always does. We’ll find it all out at tea.”

But at tea Annie was as much in the dark as the rest of them. “Something’s up though,” she told them, eyes wide with excitement and worry. “There was ever such a scene with the Wilkes and Lord Sherrinford, apparently. They say Master Sebastian was practically in hysterics. It seems his Lordship was trying to persuade them from leaving, but Mrs. Wilkes said they wouldn’t stay another night where they weren’t safe in their beds.”
John lay his fork down, unable to swallow around the tightness in his throat and gut. Did Mrs. Wilkes actually think Sherlock was such a degenerate reprobate? Or did she fear John?

“What on earth does that mean?” Young Tom asked, frowning.

“No one knows. And then there was a row between Lord Sherlock and his father—”

There was a knock at the door and Andrew the footman stepped inside. “I beg pardon for disturbing you at your supper, but his Lordship has one more wire that needs to go to town.”

There was a pause as everyone looked around the table, trying to work out whose turn it was, and finally settled on John.

“Will there be a reply?” John said, getting to his feet. Truthfully he was glad of the chance to get on a horse and escape for a bit. The dread of waiting for judgment was going to kill him before Lord Sherrinford could.

“Likely not, but his Lordship asks that you wait an hour to be sure. He said I was to give you a coin that you might wait in the pub.”

“Thank you,” John said, taking the paper and the money. “His Lordship is very kind. I’ll bring the response straight away if any should come.”

John took the road to town at a full hard gallop, hoping the wind and the fierce exercise would clear his head a bit. Something else must be going on; the Earl had arrived unexpectedly before Sebastian had even got back, and all these telegrams, but what? And what could the Earl and Sherlock possibly have been fighting about if not John? In any event, it seemed John was not likely to be arrested tonight, which was a huge relief. John sat in the pub, nursing his pint and a plate of bread and cheese, and thought things over. Arrest was still a possibility, he supposed, but thinking more calmly he could see it was unlikely that Lord Sherrinford would want any possibility of scandal. There was no way John could stay in his employ, however. No matter how much he tried to convince himself of his own strength, the temptation would always be there, and to yield—even once—was to risk sin, shame for his family, penury and maybe prison. Besides, even if Sherlock was no longer a child, all of the other arguments John had made to Young Tom last winter still held. Lord Sherrinford had been more than kind to John; he could not betray his trust and generosity by bringing the shadow of impropriety to his son's name. Even had Sherlock been born a girl, John could no more think of touching him than he could the Queen.

There was no reply to the Earl’s telegram. John rode home, exhausted by the strain of the day, and went to his room to put his things in order. He did not suppose he would be staying long. Thinking that there was always the possibility that his room would be searched, he made a careful bundle of Sherlock’s letters, wrapped them in an old shirt, and tucked them in a far corner of the loft, behind a loose board where the cat had her spring litter. At the last minute he took out the Christmas letter and tucked it into a pocket. The thought of leaving Sherlock was like ripping out his own heart; surely, if he was far away and would never see him again, it would not hurt to keep just one letter?

Back in his room John put all his little savings carefully into his old purse and set it by the lamp. He sorted through his clothes, making neat stacks of what would fit in his old bag and what he would leave behind. His winter things smelled faintly of the lavender sachet Mrs. Gregson had given him. He sat for a moment, turning it over in his fingers, and then gently placed it in his bag. Mrs. Gregson would not begrudge him so little a thing, he thought.

When he finally lay down in the dark, too worn by anxiety and dread to feel more than a dull weariness, he realized the lavender scent was still on his fingers. He brought his hands up and curled
them under his nose. It was, it was--it was so little, not enough, just the ghost of a ghost, and for the first time since his father died John felt hot tears trickle over his face.

“John.”

John surfaced from a troubled, heavy sleep to find Sherlock crouched over him, shaking his shoulder. “John, wake up. We’ve got to leave.”

“What?” John said thickly. He sat up and Sherlock pressed a bundle of clothing into his hands and said, “Get dressed, quickly.”

The habit of obedience was so ingrained that John was doing up his buttons before his mind fully caught up with the situation. “Wait. What’s going on?”

Sherlock was moving about the room stuffing things into John’s satchel. He found the purse and added it, then said, “I’ll tell you once we’re underway. Where’s the extra ammunition for this?”

“On the shelf. Sherlock--”

“The horses are ready and I’ve saddle bags for us both. We just have to go. Come on, John.”

John had sat down on the edge of the bed to pull on his boots. Now he crossed his arms, planted his feet, and said, “I’m not going anywhere until you explain where we’re going and why, and also what happened with your father and Sebastian last night.”

Sherlock straightened, smacked his head on the low ceiling, and cursed in German. “Nothing happened. It never even came up, Father had rather other things on his mind.”

“Then what--”

“There’s a threat, John, some kind of plan to attack my family here. We’re going to my brother in France. We’ll ride to Danforth, that’s the station ten miles south of here--no one will recognize us there--and take the morning train to London, then the boat train to France. Father learned about it yesterday somehow, that’s why he came back.”

John was a little surprised to realize he was relieved that Mrs. Wilkes had not fled the Hall for fear of him after all. “What about your father?”

“Oh, he’s staying in London. He says he’ll be safe there but he doesn’t want to take any chances with me running around.”

“No. I mean, do you seriously expect me to believe your father knows that you are sneaking out in the middle of the night to go to France by yourself?”

“I’m not by myself, I’m with you.”

John raised his eyebrows, even though Sherlock could not see him in the dark. “Without talking to Mr. Gregson? Sherlock.”

“Oh, all right, fine. Father wants to take me back tomorrow and send me on with his secretary.”

“And what’s the problem with that?”

“I’m not leaving you here! Haven’t you been listening? It’s dangerous here!”
“Sherlock, it’s not dangerous for me! And we can’t just--run off, especially after--”

“Hush.” Sherlock suddenly stopped him with an upraised hand. “Do you hear something?”

“What?” John, distracted and irritated, got to his feet.

“I hear voices.” Sherlock had turned to the east window, the one that faced the Hall. John knew Sherlock had keen eyes and ears, but he himself heard nothing. He looked out the south window and sucked in his breath.

“Oh Jesus. Sherlock. Sherlock.”

“Is that--”

“It’s fire, the only thing that way is--the lodge at the gate. Sherlock, my God, it must be on fire.”

They stood frozen for half a second, staring, then John gave Sherlock a shove toward the door and said “Go,” followed after him, and grabbed the rope that rang the fire bell, yanking it down with the whole weight of his body. He gave three hard pulls to set the bell swinging and leaped down the ladder after Sherlock. He ran out into the stable yard on Sherlock’s heels, the bell pealing in the still night air and his heart thudding in his chest.

Sherlock was untying the reins of the horses when Young Tom came pelting out first, Mrs. Gregson on his heels in a wrapper. “Stop. Listen,” John said quickly. “There’s no fire in the barn, it’s at the gate. Lord Sherrinford got word yesterday they were in danger here, that’s why the Wilkes left, and I just saw, from my window, there’s a fire, I’m sure it’s the lodge. They’re coming. They’re coming right now.”

Young Tom and Mrs. Gregson both stared, stunned, and then Tom looked at the horses and said “Go. Now, take him, get him safe.”

The rest of the men were piling out now, Mr. Gregson bellowing “Get the horses, get the horses out!”

Mrs. Gregson gasped “Annie,” then “the maids,” and turned to dash back.

Sherlock was already mounted and John felt a moment’s ridiculous panic that he hadn’t checked Sherlock’s girth before he swung up himself. Sherlock hesitated, clearly torn. “My father,” he said and just then they heard the first running footsteps from the drive. Some of the attackers must have gone ahead while the others fired the lodge.

“You can help your father by getting to safety and staying there. We’ll tell him. Go!” Young Tom said and slapped Circe’s flank.

Sherlock dropped his head, dug in his heels, and went. John followed directly behind him, not without a pang of guilt and fear. The night was utterly dark, not even the faintest glimmer of starlight to guide them, and John could only hope Sherlock’s infallible memory could get them out without mishap. They were clearly making straight for the gate, cutting directly through the formal gardens and groves. John strained his ears but although he heard shouts from behind them there were no sounds of pursuit.

Quicker than John would have thought possible, they were at the gate. Sherlock paused with his hand on the latch once they were through. “We can’t just--”

“Yes, we can,” John said firmly. “I know how you feel, Sherlock, that’s my home and the people I
love as well. But two more won’t make a difference and Young Tom was right. The best thing we can do to help your father is to get you out of the way.”

“We have to go to the village, get help--”

John was shaking his head. “We can’t. They may have come from the village for all we know. Did your father say anything about the warning, who was threatening you, anything?”

“No.”

“Mr. Rouncewell didn’t think there was really a revolution at all. He thought there was danger, but not from any sort of popular uprising--from Sir James Moriarty, somehow. We don’t know who those people are, and we don’t know who we can trust. We need to get someplace safe until morning.”

“The cave in the woods,” Sherlock said with certainty.

“You can find it on a night like this?”

“Of course.”

Sherlock was right. He led them unerringly along the little back road to the forest, and then through the twisting paths as though he held a map of the entire region in his hand. As they went deeper into the woods a cool breeze suddenly stirred up the back of John’s neck and a halfhearted rain began to fall. He turned up his collar and was just wishing for a hat when Sherlock’s voice said, “In your satchel.”

“Thanks,” John said, pulling it out. His fingers brushed the gun and he felt that guilty pang again, in spite of his words to Sherlock. He hoped Mr. Rouncewell had been roused. He hoped Annie and Callie and the other girls had run hard and far. To distract himself, he asked, “So how exactly were you planning to run away this time?”

“I told you,” Sherlock said. “Make for the station. I’ve my own clothes in the saddlebag, and some for you, so we’d look like a respectable pair going to London. I was going to pay someone at the post office to take the horses back.”

For the first time John realized that Sherlock was in one of his beloved disguises, a workingman’s jacket and patched breeches. “Did you at least leave a note?”

“I left Billy. I paid him a shilling to sleep in my bed. That way if Father looked in during the night, he’d think I was still there. I told him to scarper when it was time for him to go to his duties, so he wouldn’t get into any trouble--Callie always makes up the fire in my rooms, so even if he overslept she’d make sure he got out unseen. I was planning to wire Father when we left England.”

“And when we got to France?” John said, half exasperated and half amused. “What was going to happen to me then?”

“You would stay with me. Always.” Sherlock’s voice held a steel John had never heard before.

“And your brother was just going to agree to that.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said simply.

“Sherlock, for heaven’s sake--”
“I don’t want to talk about this right now,” Sherlock cut him off sharply. “Be quiet and help me listen for the brook.”

John subsided and in a few minutes they both heard the incongruously cheerful burbling of the stream that passed near the cave. John dismounted, and he and Sherlock took care of the horses, leading them to the water to drink before tying them out in reach of some of the long patchy grass at the edges of the stream. They carried their gear into the cave and sat side by side in the mouth of it, huddled silently together.

“What time was it when you left the Hall?” John asked.

“Not quite one.”

It was probably no later than three, then. There were still hours to go until dawn. They lapsed into silence again, both of them tired but too keyed up to rest, the damp air around them growing steadily cooler. Sherlock got up without a word and returned with a blanket from the saddlebags, which he wrapped around them both, and they sat with their shoulders pressed together, looking out into the dark rain.

John must have fallen into a half doze because he started when Sherlock said softly, “It’s stopped raining.”

John blinked and stretched his chilled, stiffened limbs. He looked out of the cave entrance. Sure enough, the rain had stopped, although the leaves dripped a slow, steady rhythm onto the wet ground. A faint grey mist covered everything. He could just make out the solid shapes of the horses in the pale, indistinct light of early morning.

John turned to Sherlock and opened his mouth, but Sherlock said, “I know.” He had both arms wrapped tightly around his knees and was not looking at John. “It’s too dangerous. Just...come back right away. Please?”

“Yes.” His voice sounded hoarse to his own ears. He went out to drink from the stream and have a piss, splashing water up onto his face to try and clear the cobwebs from his head. John felt cold and stiff. If only when he went back everything turned out to be fine, and he could climb into his warm dry bed and sleep...he shook himself briskly and ducked back into the cave to collect Hermes’ saddle and bridle.

Sherlock stayed, unmoving, in the cave entrance whilst John readied the horse. “Stay right here,” John told him. “If anyone comes, hide. They’ll see Circe, but don’t let them see you. Understand?”

“Nobody ever comes here but us,” Sherlock said, which was true, but John was in no mood to take chances.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he said and Sherlock nodded, looking at the ground.

John rode as quietly as he could through the silent, gray-shrouded forest, starting constantly at every snapping twig. It was not long before he realized he was lost. The thick mist obscured every landmark, and with the sun shrouded he had no sense of direction. He looked around hopelessly, and decided to take the path that led up--maybe it would lead him out of the fog.

John had been climbing no more than a quarter of a mile when the sound of voices made him freeze in his tracks. He listened hard, holding Hermes perfectly still, and heard them calling back and forth: a lot of people, it sounded like, and spread over a fair amount of space. In a flash he knew where he was. There was a large clearing on the far side of the forest, near the main road, that he and Sherlock
had visited several times. The very first summer Sherlock had told him that he used to play at Robin Hood there and John, at fourteen, had still been young enough to answer, “Let’s have a go then!” Only a month ago there had been a band of Gypsies, and they had come to have their fortunes read. John had gone entirely the wrong way.

But what were these people doing there at all? These were not Gypsies—all the voices John could hear were male. Sherlock was right that for the most part they usually had the woods to themselves. As silently as he could, John led Hermes back down the path to the fork and tied him to a tree. “Be quiet,” he told him in a whisper, “and I’ll give you my last bit of sugar.”

John had his bearings now. He pictured the clearing in his mind and began creeping back up the path. He was just getting close enough to make out indistinct shapes in the fall when he heard a voice louder and clearer than the rest call out from the direction of the road, “Captain Reichenbach!”

“Here!” another voice came, nearer and to John’s left.

John slipped off the path. Moving mostly by feel and memory and concentrating hard to avoid stepping on twigs, he worked his way around to where he knew a pile of enormous rocks edged the clearing near the captain’s voice. So these were soldiers. He thought of the gamekeeper’s words and watched his steps. The loud clear voice was coming nearer, talking to someone, and through the thick fog John saw the back of a tent. He ducked behind the rocks and edged to the back.

“Were you able to identify them?” a new voice was saying, crisp with an air of command.

“Yes.” John frowned in sudden confusion; the nasal, petulant tone seemed vaguely familiar. “It’s them.”

“You’re sure? You haven’t seen the boy for two years and we’d heard he’s changed, how can you be certain?”

“I worked for that family for nine years. It’s him,” the nasal voice said coldly. “He hasn’t changed that much.”

John had to clap a hand over his own mouth to stifle his shock. The man was Anderson. And he was talking about--

“What happened in France?” Anderson asked.

“What do you care?”

“I was Lord Mycroft’s valet for the last two years. He was decent enough, I bore him no personal ill will.”

“Well, he’s dead nonetheless,” Captain Reichenbach said indifferently. “We had word last night.”

John slid silently down the rock to sit on the ground, hand still over his mouth.

“If you’re sure about the bodies then we need to move out,” the captain was saying. “We’ve a rebellion to put down, after all.” Someone stifled a laugh and Reichenbach went on, “Go on back to Sir James and tell him the deed is done. Have you heard anything of the others?”

“No, I was sent here straightaway when things were moved up.”

“Very well then. Dismissed.”
There was the sound of footsteps, heading away, and John knew he had to move. His mind was still reeling with the implications of what he had heard, but it sounded as though the soldiers would be striking camp any minute, and he did not know how long he had until the fog lifted. If he backtracked through the woods the way he had originally intended to go, he could get to Sherrinford Hall long before the soldiers. As quietly as he could, he backed up through the towering rocks and slipped silently through the misty woods back to the path and down to Hermes.

John was at the gate almost before he realized it, distracted from his journey by the terrible things he had heard. Lord Mycroft, dead, and the others—he shied away from the horror of it, even in his head. At the walled orchard he tied Hermes inside where he would not be seen, and moved toward the Hall on foot. It was full morning now and the thick fog was beginning to lift; he would have to make haste. The grounds were utterly, eerily silent. He heard no noises coming from the stables or the gardens. At the back near the kitchens he paused to listen, but there was nothing: no voices, not clattering of pans.

The bodies were at the front of the Hall. John knew as soon as he saw them, but he crept forward anyway, feeling obscurely that he owed it to Sherlock to be absolutely certain. Even with his face distorted in death, strung up like a common criminal, Lord Sherrinford still seemed dignified to John. It was the smaller figure that was hard to look upon. Billy’s face was turned away, but his mop of curls was unmistakable.

John pulled off his cap without even thinking and was just about to turn away when he saw two or three other bodies farther off lying on the ground. Probably there were more shrouded in the fog. John wanted desperately to go and look, see which of his friends lay dead on the grass, but there was no time—the mist was lifting, the soldiers were on their way, what would become of Sherlock if he were captured? John set his teeth and crept back the way he had come.

When John returned leading Hermes, Sherlock was standing in the mouth of the cave, eyes huge in his white face. He took one look at John and said, “No. No.”

“Sherlock, I’m--” John began helplessly.

“My father?”

“Yes. And Mycroft too. There was no revolution, it was all a plot of Sir James Moriarty. There’s an encampment of soldiers and I heard them talking.”

Sherlock turned without another word and ducked into the cave. John followed him to the entrance and saw Sherlock had curled himself into a tight, anguished ball at the back. John hesitated, but there was nothing he could do, so he stepped quietly away and went to see to the horses.

End Part I
Chapter Notes

Welcome back to those of you still reading after this sweet little story went all "Game of Thrones" in the last chapter. Since this begins Part II, it seems a good time to thank everyone who has been reading and commenting, with extra thanks to those of you who helped me with my continuity errors, posting date weirdness, and lack of chapter count. Crumpets all around! You all are the best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part II: Bart’s

Sherlock did not emerge from his fetal curl until early the next morning, when John roused from a restless sleep to find him huddled over a small fire near the cave entrance.

John stumbled blearily to his side and Sherlock said, “Tell me,” without looking up.

“Food first,” John said. He pulled over the saddlebag where he’d found bread and cheese the night before and handed Sherlock a chunk. The bread had grown rather hard, so he put his piece on a green stick over the fire, hoping it would taste more toasted than stale. Sherlock for his part pulled a few bites off which he chewed and swallowed mechanically, washing them down with water from their bottle. The water at least tasted fresh; Sherlock must have refilled it from the stream.

John told of getting lost and stumbling onto the soldier’s camp, and the conversation he had managed to overhear. Sherlock looked thunderstruck on hearing of Anderson’s involvement.

“But I cleared his name!”

“I know…I guess he was really offended at not being believed from the beginning,” John said. “I supposed he must have given them information about the house?” He told Sherlock the rest of what had been said. Sherlock looked up suddenly, his face alive with a desperate hope.

“But he was wrong about me, maybe he was—“

“No, Sherlock,” John said as gently as he could. “I went to the Hall. I saw them.”

Sherlock looked down again and took a deep breath. “All right.” Then suddenly, stricken, “But who —“

John hesitated but Sherlock had already worked it out. “Oh, God. Oh—“ He leaped to his feet and outside. John followed and found him on his knees by the muddy stream, retching.

John laid his hand gently on his back. Sherlock had both hands clenched in his hair, bent double. “Sherlock, listen to me. He would have died in any case. I saw the other men, Sherlock, they were dead, it looked as though they were shot. They killed all the men. Billy was as tall as I am now, they would have killed him anyway.” He had had plenty of time to think about this. Likely as not it was true, and if not no harm would come of Sherlock believing it for now.
Sherlock curled over himself, still miserable, but he seemed slightly calmer. John cupped water from the stream and lifted his hand to Sherlock’s mouth, and Sherlock drank shakily. John thought wistfully of tea, and then of Mrs. Gregson’s cheerful kitchen, and felt a lump in his own throat. “Let’s go back to the fire,” he said softly.

“How...how did they...”

“Hanged. It was very quick. They didn’t suffer.” This was definitely untrue, but John felt no qualms whatsoever.

Sherlock rested his face on his knees, fingers still knotted in his curls, then slowly pushed up and followed John back to the cave. John told him everything he could think of, every detail and word, and Sherlock frowned into the fire, rubbing at his head.

“I need more data,” he said finally. “Sherrinford’s out, we’ll have to go to Addleigh Crossing.”

“Sherlock...”

“Fine, you’ll go to Addleigh Crossing. Don’t be all day.”

Addleigh Crossing was a fair-sized village on the far side of the forest. There was no direct road to Sherrinford, so John had only been once or twice when out with Sherlock. “I’ll be less conspicuous if I go in on foot,” he pointed out. “Let’s both ride to that little meadow between the woods and the road, and you can stay with the horses whilst I walk into the village. It won’t take as long that way and the horses need to graze.”

Even on foot, John still felt nervous as he approached the village. He could see at once that things were off. People were clustered in small anxious knots, humming with talk, and a group of soldiers passed by the window whilst John was in a shop. He did not bother trying to overhear, just bought three newspapers at two different shops and restocked their food. After some consideration, he also bought matches, tea, sugar and a small pot. He was just about to set out when he realized they had no cups, so he went back to the first shop for that.

“Traveling?” the shopkeeper asked him, ringing up the tin cup.

“What makes you say that?”

The shopkeeper shrugged. “A lot of people afraid to stay in these parts, after what happened.”

“I’m not actually from these parts...what did happen?”

“You didn’t hear? All the great houses around here, attacked. Revolutionaries they say, but we’ve never had any talk like that here. If they was revolutionaries, they weren’t from Addleigh Crossing. But these soldiers are going about everywhere, questioning innocent folk. Take some away, they have.”

While this was not unexpected, it was certainly unnerving. “Expect I won’t be staying long then,” John said, trying for a smile. “Ta very much.”

John knew perfectly well that as a stranger in town he might as well have a target painted on his back. He tried to remember which way he had seen the soldiers going; were they between him and the road back to Sherlock? The shopkeeper seemed to read his hesitation. “Come on out the back here,” he said quietly to John, glancing over at the two elderly ladies twittering by the teakettles. “If you’re trying to reach the forest road, which I’d advise, go straight down the alley and through the gate—you’ll be on the other side of the hedgerow then and like as not won’t be seen at all.”
“Thank you,” John said gratefully and followed his directions. John’s heart was in his throat all the way back to the meadow, a slower journey than he would have liked since he kept off the road the whole way. Sherlock was sitting in the shade of a large tree where John had left him, looking pinched and worried.

John told him about the developments in the village as they made their way back to the cave. “I bet you anything it’s even worse in Sherrinford,” he said.

Sherlock nodded agreement. “They’ve made a witch hunt. It’s really quite clever when you think of it—no need to frame anyone when you can convince the people to accuse themselves. I want to see those papers. Let’s go faster, this part of the path is quite straight.”

Back at the cave, John built up the banked fire and blew it to life, then took the paper Sherlock had already tossed aside. He read more slowly than Sherlock, so was only halfway through his second paper when Sherlock threw his last one down and stood.

“Wait, where are you—”

“I have to think,” Sherlock snapped furiously and strode off down the stream.

John thought of going after him, but he didn’t think Sherlock would go far. He went back to his paper. When he had read them all, he set to work on dinner: the last of the stale bread, toasted, the last of the cheese, a sausage toasted on a stick. It looked quite appetizing when he was done but Sherlock was nowhere in sight. John sighed, divided his little feast in half, and ate. He was very hungry.

Sherlock finally returned just as the last of the light was finally fading. He thumped down across from John and said abruptly, “You should go.”

John had rather expected this to come up sooner or later, but worry had made him snappish and now he said impatiently, “Oh, for heaven’s sake, Sherlock. It’s not like you to be inefficient. You know I’m not going to leave, so this is just wasting time.”

Sherlock looked a little taken aback. “You’d be safer—”

“Wasting. Time.”

Sherlock subsided, clearly nonplussed, and John pushed the food at him. “Here, eat this, and I’ll sum up what I think we know so far. You can correct me when I go wrong.”

Sherlock accepted this as John had known he would. “So, three great houses in the county were attacked, all in the same night: yours, Lady Lynde’s—although she’s away, so she wasn’t harmed—”

“More’s the pity,” muttered Sherlock around a mouthful of bread.

“--and the Bennet’s, that’s got the most attention in the papers because of the, you know, the daughters.” John remembered the Bennets from the ball. The whole family, like that of Lord Sherrinford, had been murdered, and there had been hints of atrocities in the papers. “Which was clever of Moriarty because it increases public outrage while at the same time distracting from the fact of his real target, which was your father. Now he has leverage to overturn the reforms and use the military to crack down on his opposition and strengthen his own position.”

Sherlock seemed to have no argument with this, so John went on. “Which brings us to your foul little beast of a cousin.”
Sherlock set down the remains of his meal. “Sebastian must have been in on the whole thing all along. He was Moriarty’s spy. The Wilkes were going to be leaving at the end of the week to visit friends—Moriarty, no doubt; that was when the attack must have been originally planned to take place, but Moriarty would have had everyone in position already. When Father was tipped off, it was Sebastian who insisted that he and his mother leave that very night. That way he could send a wire from the station alerting Moriarty that he had to strike immediately, as well as get himself and his mother out of harm’s way.”

“Your own cousin,” John said through his teeth. “And now he’s Earl of Sherrinford. Did you know he was the heir to the title after you?”

“He wasn’t,” Sherlock said flatly. “It was my father’s nephew, Joseph Bell. He was a career diplomat and was with Mycroft in France.”

“Ohhhh,” John said on a long breath.

“And it’s even better than you realize. Did you see who was named Sebastian’s guardian and his proxy in the House of Lords?”

“Somebody from the military?”

“Colonel Sebastian Moran. Father tried to make an ally of him a few years back, but Moriarty must have offered a sweeter deal. Now he’s not only removed his opposition, he’s strengthened his own side.”

John shook his head. It all still seemed so unbelievable, even now.

“We need to get to France,” Sherlock said. “My mother’s family will help me. The problem is, now that Moriarty’s accused the French of aiding this so-called rebellion, we’re close to open war. There’s no way we can book passage without getting arrested.”

“All right,” John said. He peered into his little pot, where the water was finally come to a boil, and added the tea. “You’re the mastermind; I just tend the horses. How are we going to get to France?”

“By doing the exact opposite,” Sherlock said. “We’re going to go north. To Willoughby Chase.”

John stared as the full implications of this plan sank in. “That,” he said, pointing at Sherlock with his knife, which was doubling as a spoon, “is a really excellent idea.”

“Sir Willoughby’s not a reformer, so no one will be paying him much attention,” Sherlock said. “But he and Father were lifelong friends; he’s not actively opposed, either—”

“He just doesn’t care about anything but his horses,” John agreed.

“So he’ll be willing to help me. The catch would be that he hasn’t seen me since I was a child and would be likely to doubt my identity, but he does know you.”

“He does. He’ll see me and believe me, and he’ll help you. But how can he get us to France?”

“He doesn’t need to. We can get to Amsterdam from any of the ports on the coast, and from there to Paris.”

“Brilliant,” John breathed, and for a second Sherlock did not look quite so wretched. “Let’s celebrate. I’ve got tea! There’s only one cup, mind, so we’ll have to share.”
“Sensible not to buy two,” Sherlock agreed.

“And I’ve even got sugar for you. But I need you to make me a promise, and before we sleep tonight.” Sherlock looked up quizzically and John said, “I know how clever you are at planning escapes. I want your word you won’t try to give me the slip.”

“I won’t,” Sherlock said immediately. “I told you to go because of--after--because I couldn’t live with myself, if I didn’t try. But I don’t think I could have borne it if you’d actually gone.”

John thought of Sherlock curled in the cave like a wounded animal, and he swallowed. “I’m not leaving you,” he said. “Not ever.”

And he meant it. The events of the lake seemed a lifetime ago, the concerns that had been so enormous now completely irrelevant. He knew he would never leave Sherlock. He would just have to be strong, that was all.

After, John never remembered much about their journey north. It was all a blur of sleepless nights and hard ground, cold and damp and constant fear. They had initially planned to ride only a few days and then take the train, but soon realized that Sir James’ crackdown extended throughout the country. So they took to the back ways and trusted to Sherlock’s astonishingly detailed recall of maps to get them to their destination.

Everywhere they traveled, even the smallest villages, the terror was evident. People were afraid even to complain about the constant presence of soldiers, since even the slightest hint of dissent could result in an arrest for treason. John found himself almost grateful for Sherlock’s detached, silent grief, since it meant he was less likely to get them into trouble, but Sherlock’s listlessness worried him. At night he inevitably sat up long after John rolled himself in his blanket, staring into the fire. Some mornings John found him still sitting; others he seemed to have curled up and fallen asleep without ever moving. He never sought the comfort of John’s side, and John did not try to impose himself where he was no longer sure he was wanted.

They were slowed further by the necessity of going around Blastburn. A grimy industrial city, Blastburn had seen the earliest demonstrations and the worst riots; if there were actual revolutionaries anywhere in the country, they were probably in Blastburn. John therefore assumed the resulting crackdown was something they would do well to avoid.

Late one afternoon, when John reckoned they had probably only about four more days to go, the early autumn drizzle abruptly thickened into an outright rain. John sighed. He was utterly tired of being wet, and this rain was cold to boot. He pulled his hat forward and looked around for Sherlock.

“There was a milepost back there that showed a village, probably less than a mile from here now,” he said. “Why don’t we stop at the inn if there is one? We can get dried off, have a hot meal. maybe even stay the night if the rain doesn’t let up.”

Sherlock gave a halfhearted shrug, apparently not really caring one way or the other, and John spurred his horse. The village did have an inn, a good-sized establishment that probably did a brisk business when folk felt brave enough to travel. Thankfully, John saw no soldiers.

“Stopping the night?” the ferret-faced man who took their horses asked.

“Don’t know yet,” John said easily, handing him a coin. “We’d hoped to get a bit farther along, but if this rain keeps up a dry evening would look a sight better.”
“Fine horses you’ve got there.”

“Yes,” John answered and escaped with Sherlock to the dining room.

The restaurant was almost empty save for a small clutch of elderly women gossiping in a corner, but the food was hot and John ate with relish. “Eat your stew,” he told Sherlock, who was mostly stirring his in circles with his spoon.

“We can’t stay here,” Sherlock said in a whisper.

“What? Why not? Tell me.”

“It’s too quiet. Even for these days, it’s harvest time, the main road to Leeds is only two miles away. They’re used to a lot more custom, you can see by the chair legs. Either there’s a company of soldiers nearby or the owners are bearing tales, or both.”

“Well, eat up then, we’ll likely have a long wet ride tonight.”

Fortunately the rain slacked off whilst they finished their meal. John frowned at their bill, which seemed rather higher than he had expected.

“Argue it,” Sherlock told him in a low voice. “They’re trying to make up for the lack of business, but if you don’t say anything they’ll think you’re scared to make a fuss.”

“I am scared to make a fuss.”

“I know. But you don’t want them to know that.”

The proprietress was initially inclined to invoke hard times and high prices, but when she realized the gossips in the corner had fallen silent to listen in, she backed down. John was so pleased with his own daring that he found himself whistling as they set off down the road. It was a damp, sullen fall evening, but he was full of stew and relatively dry, and felt cheerful.

“Well, hopefully that diverted them,” Sherlock was saying, “but we need to go as far as we can tonight. If they end up telling their new friends about us, there’s no place for us to get off the road.”

“How do you know--” John began, and then as if on cue he heard hoofbeats behind them. A lot of hoofbeats, and moving fast. “Bloody hell. Remember, keep your mouth shut.”

The soldiers caught them up in less than a minute, half of them flashing ahead and then wheeling to neatly trap them. They stopped where they were in the middle of the road. Sherlock had been right: back home they might have made for the woods or turned off down a side road, but here on the moors they were as exposed as rabbits.

“Name and business,” the man who was clearly the captain barked.

“John Watson. I’m a groom and trainer at Willoughby Chase. My cousin--”

“Let him speak for himself,” the captain said sharply.

“Stephen,” Sherlock mumbled at his saddle.

“What? Speak up, boy.”

“Please, sir, if I may,” John said hurriedly, “his speech is slow, sir, he had the summer fever, a few years ago.”
The captain looked back at John. “What brings you here? A bit far from the Chase, aren’t you?”

“We’re going back there, sir.”

“And why were you gone?”

“We were taking these horses south, sir, to the Earl of Sherrinford. But when we reached there we found the Earl and all his family had just been murdered, and we thought best to come back home again straight away.” *Don’t elaborate*, Sherlock had drilled into him; the fact that they were terrified youths anxious to get home through a countryside crawling with soldiers was clear enough.

“Did you.” The captain tipped his head to one side. “And when did you set out from Willoughby Chase?”

“August, sir.”

“And how did you leave Sir Willoughby?”

John had a terrible sinking feeling now, but there was nothing to be done but to play it out. “Same as always, sir?”

“Well, that part is true anyway,” one of the soldiers said and there was a ripple of laughter.

“How interesting,” the captain drawled, “given that Sir Willoughby died last spring.”

John backpedaled frantically: “I beg pardon, sir, I meant the new owner, I was a bit--”

“The new owner is in London. He doesn’t care for horses; the stock was all sold off months ago. He means to use the Chase as a hunting lodge eventually, I hear, but for now he’s quite happy to rent it to Her Majesty’s army. We’ve a large battalion quartered there. Unfortunately for you, we send out regular patrols.”

John’s mind had gone utterly, horrifyingly blank. He stared at the captain in mute terror.

“Not Chase,” Sherlock suddenly said unexpectedly, his speech slurred and slow. At least his crystalline accent wasn’t apparent. “Hall. Grooms.”

“We were grooms at Sherrinford Hall,” John said slowly, hoping it sounded as though he were guiltily admitting something instead of making it up as he went. “But I did work at the Chase before then. I left for the Hall three years ago. When the Hall...when we escaped, I just wanted to go home where it was safe.”

“On the Earl’s horses,” the captain said, brows arched.

“I knew Sir Willoughby would see them back safely, I didn’t know he was dead,” John said desperately but the Captain had already turned to his men.

“That village has a jail, doesn’t it?”

“It does, sir.”

“We’ll take them there for the night. They’ll be transported to Blackburn in the morning to await trial. You two,” he said sharply to John and Sherlock. “Straight back to the village, and no trouble, or you’ll have a lot more to worry over than jail.”

John felt as though he were drowning in cold panic. There was nothing for it but to follow behind
the soldiers leading them back to town. To have come so close—but even had they reached their goal, all still would have been lost. To whom could they turn with Sir Willoughby dead? What would become of them? He could see Sherlock’s bent head and devoutly hoped he was thinking of something.

Darkness had fallen by the time they reached the jail. John swung down carefully, clutching his satchel in the hope he would be at least allowed to keep that. Sherlock stumbled and fell when he dismounted. “Come on now, none of that,” one of the soldiers said roughly, bending over him, but Sherlock cried out wordlessly and flinched away.

“Here sir, let me,” John said, darting forward and reaching to hoist Sherlock to his feet. Immediately Sherlock’s nails dug into his arms and he hissed into John’s ear, “You’re sixteen. Remember.”

John blinked, confused, even as he hauled Sherlock up and followed behind the soldier into the little station. A weary sergeant said, “Charges?”

“Stealing horses,” the soldier said and John suddenly understood. He remembered them in the cave, so long ago, Sherlock saying, Do you know what would happen, right now, if you or I stole a horse?

“Will the horses be held for evidence?” the sergeant asked as if by rote and it occurred to John that this was likely quite a profitable sideline for the soldiers.

“Forfeit to the Crown, of course,” the soldier said a little pompously.

The sergeant took the soldier’s statement and documented the value of the horses—probably not even exaggerated, John thought; the double-dealing ostler at the stables had likely recognized their value more accurately than the soldier had. He thought with a pang of Hermes and Sherlock’s beloved Circe, lost to the army. The soldier finished his work, collected a receipt for the two prisoners, and left without a backward glance.

“Name?” asked the sergeant, barely paying attention.

John gave his true name and his age as sixteen, two years younger than he actually was. He explained again that Sherlock did not speak well and gave his name as Stephen Watson, fourteen. The sergeant did not seem at all suspicious, and John thought they would probably get away with the lie; John himself was short, and Sherlock’s delicate features and soft snubby nose still seemed to belong on a younger boy.

The sergeant confiscated their satchels and patted down their pockets, removing Sherlock’s purse without a word but ignoring the letter John still kept tucked inside his jacket. Then he collected a ring of keys from the wall, said, “Come along now and let’s have no trouble,” and led them down a darkened hallway. John stepped obediently into the small room when the sergeant opened it, then turned just as the door shut in his face.

Sherlock, John thought, and then there was a terrible despairing shriek as Sherlock was pushed into another cell and the door slammed. “John!’

“Sher–Stephen, I’m right here,” John called. He reached for the small barred window just over his head, gripping the bars. “Can you see through your window? I’m here, it’s all right.”

“John! John!”

John rested his head against the hard door and tried to breathe. He had never been so terrified in his life—for himself, but also for Sherlock, who sounded as though he might actually be losing his mind. Sherlock had borne the loss of his family, his home and even his name with a bleak stoicism that had
worried and impressed John by turns, but apparently being separated from John was the last straw.

“Stephen,” he said again, but it sounded as though Sherlock were flinging himself against the door of his cell. He waited for Sherlock to take a breath and then tried in a low voice, “Sherlock?”

“Johhhhn,” Sherlock moaned brokenly.

John looked around. In the dim light he could just make out a narrow little room, even smaller than his bedroom back at the stables, barely wide enough for a single cot and a bucket. There was a tiny barred window high on the wall. He sat down on the edge of the bed and put his head in his hands, listening to Sherlock pound frantically at his door, crying out in a thin desperate keening that made John’s skin crawl.

Hours later, it felt to John, he heard footsteps and looked up to see the glow of a lantern brightening as it reached his cell. Sherlock had grown hoarse from screaming but was still howling for John, banging and rattling the bars of the little window in his door.

“Stand back there,” the sergeant’s voice said and John answered, “I’m sitting on the bed.”

The door swung open and John said quickly, “Please, he’s not right in the head, don’t hurt--”

“If I take you to him, will he stop that noise?” the man asked.

“Yes,” John said, hope flaring for the first time that night.

“All right, come on then,” the sergeant said gruffly and pushed the door all the way open. He banged on Sherlock’s door and shouted, “Stand back there!”

“Sh--Stephen, back up,” John called. “If you go back by the bed, he’ll let me in.”

There was a scrabbling sound and the guard turned the key to open the door. Immediately Sherlock flung himself at John, clutching him frantically. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he whispered in a ragged, broken voice. “Don’t leave me, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, please don’t.”

“Shhh,” John whispered. He stroked Sherlock’s thin, trembling back. “It’s all right. I’m here, it’s all right.”

John managed to get them maneuvered over to the cot, half-carrying Sherlock, and finally sat down on it with Sherlock practically in his lap. Sherlock clung to John, his breathing shaky.

“Handkerchief?” John asked him gently.

Sherlock groped in his pocket and pulled out a square of crumpled, once-white linen. Sherlock being Sherlock, he had of course packed spare handkerchiefs, but after weeks on the road they were all fairly grimy. He wiped at his eyes and nose, sniffled, and blew his nose. Sherlock had always been scrupulously clean—even his disguises were immaculate—and somehow the sight of him carefully folding the dirty handkerchief saddened John more than his tears.

“Let’s get some rest,” he said. “Look at this cot, it’s about as small as my bed at home, isn’t it? Just like old times.”

Sherlock managed a watery smile and John wrestled both their boots off. He pulled the blanket down and arranged them the way they had always slept, John closest to the wall. Sherlock was so exhausted he was asleep before John even lay down, breath still hitching like a child who had cried himself out. John lay behind him and pulled the blanket up, folded his hand into Sherlock’s limp one, and pressed his face into his shoulder. He had no idea what was going to happen to them in the
morning. He closed his eyes and prayed hard for them not to be separated, and for Sherlock to come up with a plan.

In the cold early morning John woke with a start of panic before he realized that Sherlock was sitting on the floor, head resting against the cot.

“What are you doing down there?”

“Thinking,” Sherlock said. He looked terrible. His thin face was pale and bruised from the previous night, his grey eyes heavily shadowed, and John saw for the first time that his fingers were scraped and bloodied. “We need to work on our story.”

“Right,” John said, sitting up. “Sorry, it was the best I could--”

“No, you did fine. We just need to have the details straight if we’re asked. And the most important thing is that we didn’t run off, we were sent to fetch help. When that failed we were advised to return north.”

“Oh, that’s good. But even if we get off, what then?”

“I think we need to try to contact Mr. Brooke,” Sherlock said slowly. “It’s a bit risky as I imagine he’s lying low at the moment, but it’s all I can come up with. Do you think the guard would let us write a letter?”

“He might. He seems kind enough, he let me in here last night.”

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock said in his hoarse voice, looking at his drawn-up knees. “I won’t do that again.”

“No, Sherlock, don’t apologize, I felt the same. It’s all right.” John disentangled himself from the blanket and stood. “I’m going to use that bucket now, so don’t look, all right? Then let’s work on that story.”

They practiced their story until John was confident it couldn’t be any better—the parts anyone would care about were mostly true, which helped. The sun was well up when they heard the corridor door opening.

“Look at what he brings us,” Sherlock said in a whisper. “If it’s just bread, don’t ask.”

“Stand back there,” came the now-familiar voice at the door.

“We’re by the cot,” John answered.

The guard pushed the door open and peered in. His face was impassive, but his “All right there, lads?” was not unkind.

“Yes, sir,” John said, and Sherlock mumbled, “Sorry.”

“S’alright,” the guard said, hoisting a tray and handing it into John. “Spot of breakfast here for you. The wagon’ll be along to take you to town in an hour or so.”

The tray was heavy: porridge, and bread with butter, and even tea. John looked up at him gratefully. “You’re very kind, sir,” he said. “If I may—you know we’re innocent, sir, we never stole those horses. Would it be possible to send a letter? You’ve our bags up there, you know we can pay.”

The sergeant scratched at his whiskers, considering. “No rule against it as I know of,” he said. “Have
to charge you for the paper and postage, mind.”

“Of course,” John said quickly.

“I’ll see what I can can find, bring it along when I come for the tray.”

The tea was hot and Sherlock drank all of his, even without sugar. He even managed some of the porridge. John ate the rest, not knowing when they would next eat. When they had finished the guard brought them paper and ink and John wrote the letter, carefully, while Sherlock dictated over his shoulder. They had to be circumspect, but Mr. Brooke was an intelligent man—he would understand the identity of John’s so-called cousin.

The letter was finished and dried by the time the wagon came for them. The sergeant tucked it into his pocket, promising he would have it sealed and posted.

“Thank you,” John said as he led them out. “You’ve been very good, and we won’t forget. God bless you for your kindness.”

“I’ve put a word in for you, they should keep him with you to the trial.”

John tried to smile. He felt as if every eye were on them as they were led out to the black wagon, shackled hand and foot and chains clanking for the whole village to see. It was awkward climbing into the wagon, and Sherlock had to slouch under the low ceiling. The wagon smelt of animal despair.

“When we get out of this, you should get that sergeant promoted,” John told Sherlock, trying to distract himself.

“He has a child,” Sherlock said, looking absently out the barred window. “Well, more than one, obviously, but one is lame, or feeble, as he thinks I am. He likes to think her brothers will look after her some day, as you do me.”

The wagon started up, jostling and bumping over the rough roads. It was impossible to brace himself with his shackled hands, and John felt his teeth bang together. The cold knot of fear was back in his stomach.

Sherlock drew a deep breath that was not quite as steady as he probably hoped and said, “Help me with my accent.”

To John’s surprise, it helped. Listening to Sherlock struggle to soften his razor-sharp consonants and broaden his vowels could not help but make him smile, even as he knew the task’s importance. “You need to say ‘sir’,” he told Sherlock. “All the time, to everybody. It’s like punctuation for people like us.”

“As you say, sir,” Sherlock said meekly, and John almost laughed. Sherlock sounded more like an aristocrat who had drunk too much port than anything else. “Stop smiling! This is harder than German. I’d like to hear you try my accent.”

“It’s not dirt, it’s soil samples,” John said in a perfect imitation of Sherlock at his haughtiest, and Sherlock actually smiled. Then he stiffened, turning to peer out the window again.

“Cobblestones,” he said. “We must be in the city.”

John fell silent. He watched as Sherlock drew into himself, his tall elegant form somehow shrinking into something small and hunched. He hated it, but at the same time he knew it was the most
effective disguise Sherlock could adopt, all the more believable for not really being feigned.

The wagon slowed and they heard shouts and the rattle of a gate opening, and then they were in shadow. John peered out the window and saw only walls. “I think this is it,” he whispered.

Sherlock said nothing. The wagon slowed again, and then stopped. They felt it tilt as the wagon guard climbed down and John heard the driver clucking softly at the horses. The sound gave him a fierce pang of homesickness.

“All right. Any trouble?”

“All right.” There was a clanging of metal and the back of the wagon opened. “Come on out, you lot. Horse thieves,” the wagon guard said to the man who had come out to meet them.

The man gave a snort. “You’d best keep a close eye up there Bob, or they’ll have you up for stealing those horses next.”

“Don’t I know it,” the driver called back.

John climbed down, a little shakily, and the guard unlocked his shackles. It was a relief to be able to rub his wrists. Sherlock had his head down beside him.

The guard gestured with his chin toward Sherlock. “Village constable says this one’s not the full shilling, but he’s docile enough if you keep them together.”

“Good thing our private cells are all full up then,” the jailer said and they laughed. John realized he had likely been correct in his assessment of Blastburn: between the industrial workers imprisoned for insurrection and the army’s need for horses, the prison was probably bursting.

The wagon rattled off and the jailer opened their file, squinting at whatever was inside. “John Watson and Stephen Watson,” he read, and gave John an eyebrows-raised look of frank disbelief.

“We’re cousins, sir,” John said quietly.

The man shrugged. “Just keep him quiet and you can be his grandsire for all I care,” he said. “Come along now.”

He led them into a dimly lit corridor to a clerk, who took the file, noted their names with indifference, and said, “Block 9.” The jailer then took them to a storeroom where they were each handed two rough blankets, a tin plate, and a cup.

“Hold tight to those, you won’t get more,” the jailer told them and then, after a few more twists and turns, unlocked a stout door with a large brass key.

The noise struck John first, and then the smell. They were heading into a long hall lined with bars on either side, like cages, all crammed full of men who shouted and banged their tin cups on the bars at the sight of someone coming in. The only illumination came from small windows set high up in the thick stone walls. The jailer ignored all of it, leading John and Sherlock to a door halfway down, where he banged on the bars with his truncheon and shouted, “Stand back there.” When the men backed away, he unlocked the sliding barred gate, pulled it open far enough to push them through, and slammed it shut again.

John was overwhelmed. The cell was not large, but it was seemed crammed full of unwashed, glowering men. There were no cots here; the ground was covered with a thick layer of straw on which the men had spread blankets, clearly identifying individual territories, with several areas joined
together like tribes. John looked around hopelessly and was about to head for the largest patch of clear straw he could see, on the left near the gate, when Sherlock said in a low whisper, “No, over there.”

John followed Sherlock as he picked his way carefully to the back right corner. There was a clear space, although it looked only big enough for one blanket to John’s eye, and was right next to a towering hulk of a man who appeared to have no interest in neighbors. As they drew closer John could see that he had actually claimed two blankets, and that he had two more rolled up behind his back and another across his legs. As they drew closer, the man glared at them so fiercely that John’s footsteps instinctively faltered, but Sherlock kept on. John saw that the man’s eyes were a hideous dark yellow.

Sherlock knelt deferentially at the edge of the blanket and murmured to the man, in a voice too low to make out, but the man barked out an unexpected laugh. “And how are you going to do that?”

“I’m resourceful,” Sherlock answered.

“Are you then.” The man considered Sherlock with his jaundiced eyes, then looked John up and down. “All right, you can bunk down here. But if you bother me or you’re a poor player, you’re going over there by the bucket.”

Sherlock grinned. “Stephen,” he said, offering his hand.

“Angelo.”

“John.”

Angelo then proceeded to scoot over and fold up his second blanket, leaving enough room for John and Sherlock to spread theirs. “Thank you,” John said, surprised.

Angelo only grunted. As he settled back down John realized that the impression of enormous size was due mostly to his thick shoulders and neck, and his prodigious gut; his arms and legs were somewhat thin and wasted. “What did you say to him?” John muttered to Sherlock.

“I said if he would make room for us I would fashion a chessboard and we could play,” Sherlock whispered back. “You can see the tattoo where his shirt is torn—no, don’t stare—it’s a rook, a chess piece.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

Sherlock grinned again, his eyes bright. “I’m resourceful,” he said.

They spread their blankets and settled down, eyeing their new surroundings. “Why here and not there?” John asked.

“Those men are all together. Probably from one of the factories, now likely in for pushing for reform, or objecting to the crackdown, or both. They’ve known each other for years, they’re a brotherhood, we’ll never break in.”

“Oh,” John said. “What’s Angelo in for then?”

“Actual crime,” Sherlock said with relish and turned to him. “How do you come to be a guest of the Queen?”

“Housebreaking and murder,” Angelo said, offhand.
“Hmmm.” Sherlock gave Angelo a long, considering look. John let his head thump back against the stone wall. “We stole horses,” Sherlock said with some pride.

“We did not,” John said, shocked.

Angelo actually laughed. “Every man in here’s innocent but me,” he said, “but I think maybe you actually are.”

“Don’t tell anyone,” Sherlock hissed, and John sighed. He supposed things could be worse. They were together, Sherlock was taking an interest in things again--maybe not things he should be, but still--and surely their trial could not be too far off. For better or worse, they would not be here long.

They were there two months.

By rights it should have been awful. It should have been the worst two months of John’s life, far worse than the journey, and yet somehow it wasn’t. In spite of the damp, the cold, the crowding, the hunger, and the constant gnawing fear of their looming trial, prison turned out to be not as terrible as John had assumed. He never knew whether the fascination of being surrounded by criminals had brought Sherlock out of his darkness, or whether he had simply decided after his utter breakdown in the village to will himself out of the shadowlands of grief; he was just desperately grateful to have him back.

Sherlock spent hours with Angelo, learning all the finer points of housebreaking: how to jimmy windows, find hiding places, disarm dogs. Once Angelo’s fund of knowledge had been exhausted, several of their cell mates proved to have other criminal knowledge they were delighted to impart--everyone was bored in prison.

“Have a nice time?” John asked drily when Sherlock returned from an afternoon spent soaking up wisdom from a man who had been introduced to John as “Freddy the Fence”.

“Fantastic,” Sherlock said happily. “I’ve learned more in a few weeks here than I did in a whole term at Eton.” And then he began coughing.

Sherlock had picked up the cough almost immediately, a wet hacking thing that kept them up nights. They were sleeping together again--they would have been half on top of each other in any case, and their first night in prison Sherlock had nudged his way back under John’s arm as though they were still twelve and fourteen--and at night John could hear the wheezing where he pressed against Sherlock’s back. Angelo had even given them one of his rolled-up blanket pillows.

“Get your head up, then maybe I can get some sleep,” he told him. “If I’d known you were going to make that kind of racket I’d have kicked you back over with the other rats.”

John did not believe a word of this. He had actually seen Angelo trying to get Sherlock to eat some of his own meager food. They were all starving, but Sherlock, who had eaten precious little in the preceding weeks, had gone from thin to gaunt almost overnight. There was very little food at the best of times, but John’s sharp elbows and Angelo’s fearsome reputation kept them from going without entirely.

“Here,” Angelo said to John one day, when Sherlock had gone to visit a pair of near-feral pickpockets even younger than he was. “I really can’t eat it. Too much pressure on my belly.”

John looked at the bread with longing, but shook his head. “Bet it on the game tonight,” he advised. “Make sure he bets something good in return though.”
Sherlock and Angelo were fairly well matched at chess, although Angelo won more often. Sherlock had taught John to play, but Angelo refused to play with him, saying he was too easy to beat. Angelo also helped Sherlock with his accent, which was coming along. Sherlock had meanwhile decided to teach John French.

“I know some of that French,” Angelo said unexpectedly. “Learnt it hanging around the docks when I was a nipper. Wanted to run away to sea.”

“Did every boy in England but me want to go to sea?” John asked.

“Probably,” Sherlock said. “I wanted to be a pirate.”

In the last week of October, the guard named Angelo in the list of prisoners going to trial the next day.

Angelo and Sherlock were playing their evening chess game. Angelo merely glanced up, his expression one of mild interest, and then said to Sherlock, “Best finish this game then.”

When they had finished he handed John the folded blanket on which Sherlock had drawn the chessboard. “You keep playing,” he told John. “You’ve got the makings of a good player one day. Not as good as Stephen, maybe, but as good as me.”

John glanced at Sherlock, a little surprised, but Sherlock did not seem startled at being caught out. He was gazing at Angelo over his drawn up knees. “Are you frightened?”

“Over tomorrow? No. Not of no earthly judge, not now. I’m not going to contest the charges. You have to know I’m dying; better to go quick and clean at the end of a rope than go on like this, and one less lie on my conscience that way.”

“But you are lying,” Sherlock said simply. “You’re innocent. Oh, not of the housebreaking, you definitely did that, but you never killed that man.”

Angelo’s eyes narrowed, and for a moment he looked every inch the fearsome criminal he had been. “How the devil can you know that,” he growled.

“It was your partner, wasn’t it? He’s younger, hot-headed, and he panicked. So you told him to take the dosh and run and you’d take the fall, and in return--what? Was he to go straight?”

“Yes. He swore he would.” Now Angelo simply looked tired, and ill. “I thought it all square enough. Someone had to be punished for that man’s death; better me than him, with a wife and little ones to look after. And I thought it might count for me, against what I’ve done in my life, though I’ve never killed anyone. But if I could get him to go straight, that’s a soul saved, innit? Thought I could do one good deed that way afore I went. I’ve got no regrets.”

Sherlock regarded Angelo unblinkingly. “Yes you do.”

“What?”

“Your daughter. She believed the charges against you, and she’s cut herself off from you.”

“Oh, my God.” Angelo had gone pale, which made him look more jaundiced than ever. “How can you know these things? You’re a devil of some kind, you must be.”

“The darning on your clothes,” Sherlock told him. “A woman’s work but a young woman, not your wife, and your wife would have learned what you were long before and made her peace with it. A
daughter then, she loved you, look at the care she took letting out the waistband there when you got ill, but she hasn’t come to visit, not once.”

“It’s for the best,” Angelo said, looking away. “She’s just married, her husband wouldn’t want shame brought on the family. New name now. There’s none to know her da’s a murderer if she keeps it quiet.”

“But you aren’t,” Sherlock said in a low fierce voice. “Tell me her name and where she lives. When we’re free, John and I will go to her and tell her the truth.”

Angelo looked at him in surprise. “You would do that? You’d clear my name?”

“I’d clear it a bit,” Sherlock said, smiling a little.

Angelo closed his eyes a long moment. When he opened them, John saw the shine of tears. He leaned forward and put his huge hand on Sherlock’s head in a gesture of blessing. “I take it back,” he said. “You’re no devil. I still don’t think you’re quite natural, but if that’s the case I don’t need to know more than I do, do I? God keep you.”

In the morning Angelo made a neat stack of his things--his extra blankets, a long sharpened nail which he handed wordlessly to John--and ceremoniously moved John and Sherlock’s blankets into the coveted corner space. When the guard came he was standing with his shoulders straight and his head high, ready. He shook both their hands, smiled at them, and left without looking back.

Sherlock stood still for a moment looking after him. Then he turned without a word and lay down on his blanket and curled up like a child, facing away.

John sat down and looked at Sherlock’s back. He was not sure if Sherlock wanted to be alone or was just tired; it had been a long, restless night. Finally he lay down behind Sherlock, not touching him, but close enough Sherlock could sense the warmth of his body.

Sherlock turned abruptly and burrowed into John’s chest. “Oof,” John said, startled, and then “Here, let’s--” He shifted them so that his head and shoulders were propped on the new trove of blankets, Sherlock’s face tucked into his neck. Sherlock was an armful of angles and bones, one arm wrapped around John’s waist.

“Let’s just stay like this,” Sherlock said, muffled, into John’s clavicle.

They did. There was, after all, nothing much else to do. So they lay there all day, Sherlock dozing and coughing, dozing and coughing, John napping a little and thinking about Angelo.

Two weeks later the guard paused on his nightly round and called, “John and Stephen Watson, you’re for trial tomorrow. Will you be wanting a wash or the barber?”

“A minute, sir,” John said and turned to Sherlock. “We haven’t much money left,” he whispered.

“And a fat lot of good it will do us if we’re hanged,” Sherlock hissed back. “Anyone would convict us looking like this. I can hardly see through my hair, and no one is going to believe you’re sixteen when you’ve practically got a beard.”

That was a good point. “We’ll have both, sir,” John told the guard. “Let me just fetch you the coin.”

In the morning John and Sherlock distributed their store of goods and shook hands as Angelo had
before them. John, after some thought, gave the sharpened nail to the older pickpocket. “Look after him,” he said, not trusting his look to convey the message as effectively as Angelo’s had.

“I will,” the boy said seriously.

The guard took them to a cold stone washroom, already full of men, where they were given a basin of water and a piece of soap. Sherlock went into raptures over the soap. “Ohhh,” he crooned. “You go first, John, I’m going to use all the water and it’s best you get your turn in before I do.”

John followed the lead of the other prisoners and washed only his hands and face— they had no clean clothes in any case— but Sherlock stripped down unselfconsciously and scrubbed every inch he could reach. The water in the basin was black when he finished.

“I wish I could wash my hair, but I supposed most of it will be gone soon in any case,” he said, peering out through his overlong fringe. “It feels disgusting putting these clothes back on.”

“I think you’ve grown,” John said in surprise. They had been ankle-deep in straw for weeks— he hadn’t noticed Sherlock’s trousers were now too short.

Sherlock made a rueful face, looking at his loose waistband. “Not in my middle. Where do we go for the barber?”

Sherlock with his curls lopped off looked like nothing so much as a shorn spring lamb, his face pitifully thin, but he was delighted by John. “Oh, much better,” he said, touching John’s smooth cheek with a delicate finger. “Don’t ever grow whiskers, I like you this way.”

“Why are you so cheerful? We could be hanged tomorrow.”

“We’re not going to be hanged. We’re not going to be exonerated either, but that doesn’t matter. We’re going to be convicted and sent to the reform school, and then we’re going to run away.”

“How can you know? They could have closed the reform schools—they probably have done, they’ve done away with the other reforms.”

“Not the schools. They were one of the few reforms that were almost universally popular, and if they were to close anywhere, it wouldn’t be Blastburn.”

“How can you—“

“John, look around. Half these men were factory workers. The factories here have been losing workers to unrest and crackdowns for years, and it will have been even worse since the summer. They need workers, and the only place they’re going to be getting them right now are…”

“…the reform schools,” John finished. “Huh. I suppose you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right,” Sherlock said with maddening certainty. He tilted his head. “My neck feels cold.”

“So does my face,” John said.

Even Sherlock quieted when they reached the courthouse though. They were shepherded, shackled and stumbling, through a long corridor and into a large cell already crowded with silent men, hunched on benches awaiting judgment.

“Remember, don’t elaborate,” Sherlock whispered as they huddled together at the end of their bench.
“Just stick to the story. They aren’t going to ask many questions anyway, they’ll want to get through each case as fast as possible.”

“I know. Remember to say ‘sir’, or ‘my Lord’. Don’t deduce anyone, whatever you do.”

“I won’t,” Sherlock said and then, unable to help himself, “that man across from us murdered his wife.”

“Shhh.”

“The guard has ingrown toenails; he needs bigger boots.”

“The guard is going to knock you cross-eyed if you keep talking. Just be quiet, all right? You can deduce all you like once we’re out of here.”

Sherlock subsided, although John could see his pale eyes scanning their companions. He knew Sherlock was trying to keep himself distracted. If John hadn’t been so worried about attracting attention, he might have enjoyed hearing whatever Sherlock came up with, but the last thing they needed right now was an enraged guard. Or wife murderer.

“John Watson,” the clerk called.

John leaped to his feet, startled, and almost fell over when his shackles brought him up short. He made his way up to the front of the room, glancing back once to see Sherlock’s pale scared face before he was escorted out.

The courtroom was big and intimidating and crowded with people, none of whom were interested in John, so they were all chattering and buzzing away even as the clerk shouted for order. The statements of the soldiers were entered into evidence and the case presented. John was sworn in, identified himself and, on being asked, gave his age as sixteen.

“When were you sixteen?”

“Michaelmas last,” John answered, hoping this was acceptable and the age limit had not been changed.

“You say that you did not steal the horses in question; how did they therefore come to be in your possession?”

“We did not steal them, sir. My cousin and I were raised at Willoughby Chase, trained to be jockeys. When Stephen grew too tall and I was injured, the Chase had no need of more grooms, so we were fortunate to procure employment with Sir Willoughby’s friend, the Earl of Sherrinford. On the night the Earl’s household was most vilely attacked my cousin and I were sleeping in the top of the barn and were the first to see the fires where the villains attacked the lodge. We raised the alarm, and were sent by the head groom, Mr. Gregson, to fetch help in town. But two other houses had also been attacked—though we did not know that at the time—and there was no help to be had. By the time we were able to procure any assistance it was too late, and everywhere was chaos. With no family in those parts we believed it wisest to return to our home, where we thought Sir Willoughby would be able to determine to whom the horses should be returned.”

“And the revolver that was found in your possession?”

“Given me by Mr. Gregson, sir, in case we met with more of the attackers on our way,” John said, stretching the truth only a little.
“You may stand down,” the counsel told him and John slunk nervously to the dock. There was a brief moment of conference and the judge banged his gavel.

“John Watson. You are found guilty on the charge of stealing a horse from the current Earl of Sherrinford. In consideration of your tender years, the Crown is inclined to mercy in the hope that you may learn from your mistakes and live a godly life henceforth; therefore you are remanded to St. Bartholomew’s School for Wayward Boys where you shall reside until you reach the age of majority. Next case.”

John blinked, stunned. For a moment he was so outraged at being found guilty that he almost forgot to be relieved at not being sentenced to death. Then he was being hauled up and led out the door as he heard the clerk bawl the name of the next defendant. Sherlock, he thought. How long until Stephen Watson was called?

John was led down a different hall—no less crowded—and deposited in an identical, smaller room. This one was empty save for a boy several years younger than John, who looked up hopefully when John came in and then went back to rocking slightly in place, eyes clenched shut and hands gripped together. The room was so silent that John could hear him muttering and realized the boy was praying.

John sat, and sat, and sat. The door opened again and another boy came in, this one a little younger than John, with a round face and spectacles. He looked dazed. He sat down opposite the younger boy who stopped his rocking long enough to ask in a quick whisper, “Did you see Jimmy? My brother Jimmy?”

The bespectacled boy shook his head just as the guard shouted, “Shut it there.”

The boy went back to praying. John was beginning to feel like rocking himself. Where was Sherlock? Another boy came in and was neither Jimmy nor Sherlock. John edged a little farther from the small boy, whose increasingly frantic muttering was beginning to put him seriously on edge.

The door open and there, thank God, thank God was Sherlock. He went straight to John and sat down pressed hard against his side. John could feel him trembling and understood that Sherlock had been as terrified of their not being reunited as John had. He leaned into Sherlock’s arm a little, trying to convey solidity and reassurance.

The day dragged on. Two more boys were brought to the room, none of them, apparently, Jimmy. Finally the door opened and a clerk told the guard, “That’s the lot for today. Wagon’s ready now.”

“No, we can’t go,” the small boy cried. “Jimmy’s not here, my brother’s not here.”

“Get up and move along,” the guard said shortly.

“He might be in the wagon,” John whispered quickly. “Come on now, don’t make a fuss or he’ll hit you with that stick. We’ll talk in the wagon.”

Of course no one was in the wagon, but the boy managed to contain himself until they had been unshackled and the gate clanged shut before bursting into wails. To John’s surprise, the round-faced boy produced a relatively clean handkerchief and said kindly, “All right there, lad, we’ll look after you, won’t we? What’s your name?”

“Scrap—it’s Matthew really, nobody calls me that. Where’s Jimmy?”

John and Sherlock exchanged a quick glance. “How old is Jimmy?” Sherlock asked, and John saw the round-faced boy glance up on hearing him speak—Sherlock had forgotten his accent.
“Seventeen. He said we’d always be together, he said he wouldn’t leave, after Mam died, he said he’d never leave me.”

Sherlock bit his lip and looked at John. “Seventeen year olds go to a different school,” John quickly. “Don’t they, Stephen? You’ll meet up with him when you get older. And in the meantime, we’ll look out for you, just as he said.”

“They don’t,” Scrap said dully. “One of the others told me. He’ll be hanged.” He pushed the handkerchief back into the other boy’s hand and turned his face away, shoulders shaking.

John looked at the small form, feeling miserable. He thought of Sherlock screaming in the village jail and of this wretched orphan, all alone now. He rubbed at his face and looked at Sherlock.

Sherlock, however, was peering at the round-faced boy with the spectacles. “You’re educated,” he said with interest. “And your mother is still alive, at least. What are you doing here?”

The boy blinked at him, startled. “What?”

“Stephen,” John said, “manners? I’m John Watson, and this is my cousin Stephen.”

“Michael Stamford,” the boy said, offering his hand. “You’re quite right, I was at grammar school, but how did—“

“Ah, home for your holiday when the trouble broke out,” Sherlock said. He had steepled his hands together and was staring intently at Michael Stamford in the dim light of the jostling wagon. “Probably assisting your father...a printer?”

“Yes. He had printed up some of the handbills the factory demonstrators had made, so he was arrested for treason and hanged.” Michael smiled humorlessly. “One of the first to go. The shop and building were forfeit to the Crown, of course. A seamstress down the road took in my mother and sister; they sew for her now. No place for me to go but the streets. I hoped to find a place as a clerk at least, but the crackdown was a disaster; no one would hire me. I was finally arrested for vagrancy and then charged with insurrection since the assumption was that I wouldn’t be out on the streets unless I was trying to stir up trouble.”

“My God. That’s terrible,” John said, shocked.

“Yes, well.” Michael’s mouth twitched in that humorless smile again. “We were luckier than some, right? At least I’m still alive. My father’s friends said it was Lord Moriarty’s men behind that so-called revolution in the south and look at those aristocrats: their whole families were killed, they say. Even the children.”

John glanced at Sherlock, who had half turned to look over the other three boys in the wagon. “Yes,” he said. “I heard that too.”

Chapter End Notes

There's going to be a lot of medical trivia in this section of the story, and here it starts: "summer fever" could be a lot of things but in this case is viral encephalitis, traditionally a warm-weather illness because most types are carried by ticks or mosquitoes. Survival
is variable even today but neurological sequela--such as speech problems--are common. For any "Little House on the Prairie" fans out there, this is almost certainly what caused Mary Ingalls' blindness.
The wagon shook as it seemed to be climbing. “We’re going over a bridge,” Sherlock muttered. He twisted around, trying to see out the window, but it was too high and the angle was too bad to afford much of a view.

“Is it going to storm?” John asked.

“Maybe,” Sherlock said, frowning. “I can see the sky a bit, it’s very black. It doesn’t look like storm clouds though.”

Michael looked at them with weary amusement. “You’re not from Blastburn, are you?”

“No, why?”

“That’s not storm clouds, it’s the smoke that hangs over the factories. We must going to the far side of the river. It always looks like that over there, the wind from the coast keeps the foul air on that side.”

The wagon clattered onto level street again, the sky grew darker, and right on cue Sherlock began to cough. By the time it drew to a stop he was watery-eyed and flushed, completely out of breath.

“This,” John said, worried, “is not going to be good for you.”

“It will be better indoors,” Sherlock gasped. He stumbled out from the wagon, whipping around in a quick circle as he tried to take in everything at once before he was hauled inside. John had only a brief impression of dark sky and soot-stained brick before they found themselves following a shabbily dressed young man down a dimly lit corridor and up a flight of stairs. The next corridor at least had windows, and John caught a glimpse of the river below.

“New boys,” the young man announced to a slightly older clerk, who wrote down their names and ages and then took them into an inner office, where he announced, “New boys,” in his turn.

“Oh,” the man behind the desk said. He looked weary, eyes bloodshot as he looked up at them from a mass of what looked like accounts spread before him. John was aware of Sherlock flicking his eyes everywhere, trying to be subtle. “I am Mr. Temple, the headmaster. You have been sent to St. Bart’s to learn a trade and keep out of trouble, so keep out of trouble and you will get along very well here.”

John had the impression that Mr. Temple had given this speech many times in the past, and no longer particularly cared whether they got along well or not so long as they did not give him any trouble.
“Do any of you have any education?”

They were all silent for a second, trying to work out the desirable answer to this, and then Sherlock said, “Yes.” John shot him a look which Sherlock evidently misinterpreted, because he quickly added, “Sir.”

“What sort?”

“Reading, writing… I am very good at maths. Sir.”

“Hmmm.” Mr. Temple leaned back in his seat, and John caught a clear glimpse of the sums he was evidently struggling over. “If I have two hundred and forty seven boys and staff here—two hundred and fifty four now, but we’ll leave that for the moment—and the school buys potatoes in twenty pound bags, at approximately seven potatoes to the pound, and four bags go to the evening meal, how many potatoes should each receive?”

“Two and a quarter,” Sherlock said promptly.

Mr. Temple’s eyebrows went up. “You’re quick,” he said. “That’s how I make it out too. But somehow the kitchen is coming up short the past few months.”

“Someone new in the kitchen?”

“Same staff. Some new boys helping, but they can’t be filching that many potatoes. Same in the storerooms.” He regarded Sherlock for a minute. “I’ll put you to work in the storerooms. Find out where the losses are, and it will go well with you.”

“All right,” Sherlock said, eyes gleaming, and then, “sir.”

“Any of the rest of you been to school?” Mr. Temple asked, looking around.

“I can read and write,” John said as the same moment Michael Stamford said “Had a year at the grammar, sir.”

“Did you? What did you hope to study?”

“I wanted to be a doctor, sir.”

Mr. Temple looked at John, who said, “So did I,” because in another life it would have been true.

“Well, they can always use more help at the hospital. What about you lot? Any schooling? No? You’ll be for the factories then.” Mr. Temple sighed. “Time was you’d have had school in the morning and work in the afternoon, but that’s all done now. You’ll be doing a man’s work there, but when you finish at St. Bart’s you’ll be skilled enough to earn a decent wage, and at least you have a roof over your head and regular meals. That’s all now. Mr. Cleves.”

The clerk took them back out and said, “Alfred’ll take you along to matron, she’ll get you cleaned up and in your uniforms. Pay attention and I’ll tell you your dormitory.”

John was relieved to hear himself and Sherlock both assigned to B dormitory. Michael was in D, and the rest were scattered about. Scrap and the next smallest boy were in G, which John hoped meant they were separated by age to some extent.

A boy about John’s age with a friendly, broken-toothed smile wearing a dull blue shirt and brown trousers appeared and led them through another maze of stairs and corridors. “You’ll soon learn your
way round,” he told them. “It looks big but it’s not bad really. All right, this is where we bathe, matron wants you scrubbed up and then she’ll check you over.”

John was almost as happy as Sherlock to shuck his disgusting clothes and have a proper bath, even if the water was barely lukewarm. He scrubbed his hair hard, amazed at how dirty it was. “Come on now, Scrap, you’ve got to wash your hair,” he heard Michael saying kindly.

“Don’t like water,” Scrap muttered rebelliously. “C’n drown in water. Me brother told me.”

“This is too shallow to drown in. Here, watch me.”

John, clean at last, scrubbed himself dry with a thin towel and peered at the pile of grayish fabric set out on a bench. “There’s only drawers here. Surely we get something else to wear?”

“After Matron looks you over,” Alfred said, coming back in with an armful of blue and brown clothing. “And she’s right on my heels, so cover your bits.”

Matron turned out to be a steely, gimlet-eyed woman who looked at Sherlock as though he had acquired a weak chest out of sheer obstreperousness. “This one will need to see the doctor,” she told Alfred crisply. “Take him over to the hospital. The rest of you can go on.”

“If you please, ma’am,” John said quickly, “Michael and I are assigned to work at the hospital. May we go as well?”

Matron narrowed her eyes at him, but could hardly fault him for this industriousness, so she assented with a quick jerk of her head. “Make sure they get coats,” she added to Alfred.

The coats were hardly thicker than the uniforms, and were the same dull blue, but at least they blocked the wind a bit when Alfred led them out into a cobbled courtyard. “This place is enormous,” John said, looking around with astonishment. “Is all that the school?”

“No, that’s the school behind us. The hospital’s up ahead, and that’s the poorhouse over there. The orphanage for the little ones is past that, and the girls have their school beyond the hospital. There’s nothing on the other side of this wall but the river.”

The hospital was the of the same looming design as St. Bart’s, and built of the same blackened brick. Inside was dark, crowded and noisy. Alfred managed to corral a nurse, who told John and Michael to wait where they were and whisked Sherlock away, ignoring John’s requests to accompany him.

“He’ll be all right,” Alfred said comfortingly. “Dr. Woodcourt’s a good doctor, he’ll soon get him sorted.”

“This air can’t be good for his lungs,” John fretted.

“The doctor will have a lot of practice with that,” Michael pointed out. “You see it a lot around here. My sister was the same, but she’s better now she’s older.”

John still felt anxious, but he appreciated Michael’s attempt to cheer him up. “We should learn a lot, working here, won’t we, Michael? Are you hoping to resume your studies when you leave?”

“Call me Mike. I’d like to think so, but….I probably need to find a job if I can, help support my mother and sister.”

“I’m the same. My sister’s married, but her husband’s a drunkard, and can’t hold a steady place. Will your family visit?”
“If they can, I suppose. I don’t know if it’s allowed. They were at my trial so they know I wasn’t hanged, at least.”

“They can visit last Sunday of the month,” Alfred said, leaning over. “Some of the mothers and sisters bring little baskets even, muffins and such. I’m an orphan, but some of the lads share.”

“I used to be fat, would you believe?” Mike said, grinning a little lopsidedly. “If my mother had the money she would bring muffins for every lad in the place.”

A girl about John’s age appeared. She was wearing a dull gray dress, ill-fitting, that smacked of uniform in the same way that John and Mike’s clothing did, with a dingy white apron and cap.

“Are you the new workers from the boys’ school?” she asked shyly. “I’m Molly, I work here too. I’d be happy to show you round tomorrow. Go to the third floor wardroom and tell the sister who you are, and I’ll meet you there.”

“That’s kind of you,” Mike said earnestly. Molly blushed and pushed a stray strand of hair into her cap.

“It’s nothing, I--”

Sherlock came stomping back into the hall. “I have to take lung tonic,” he announced in disgust, “and the doctor doesn’t even trust me to deliver the message to Matron, he’s tagged me like a parcel.”

Sure enough, a card was pinned to the front of his coat that read “LUNG TONIC, 1 tsp BID.”

“Bid?” John asked.

“It means twice a day,” Molly offered. Sherlock spun around and pinned her with a stare, and John watched with wry, sympathetic amusement as she froze like a rabbit, a deep red flush suffusing her face. Apparently even pale and thin in an ill-fitting uniform with a tag, Sherlock’s...Sherlockness was like being in the path of an oncoming train.

“America,” Sherlock said.

Molly blinked and squeaked, “What?”

“Ameri--America. You want to be a physician. You always have done, and you should, you’re very clever, far cleverer than most who study medicine, but you’re an orphan and, worse, a girl. You should go to America, they have schools there especially for the training of lady physicians.”

Molly managed to look shocked and pleased at the same time. “That would be lovely,” she said, her blush deepening even as she raised her chin, “but I’d have to get there somehow, and then pay for the schooling.”

“Well, yes,” Sherlock admitted. He tilted his head, studying her. “I’ll give it some thought. As soon as I solve the potato mystery. Shall we go back?”

“Lovely to meet you,” John said hurriedly just as Mike said, “In the morning then,” and they took their leave.

“So, is he...” Mike said, looking in the direction in which Sherlock had vanished.

“Always like that, yes,” John answered.
“But you’re...not?”


They emerged into the courtyard in time to see Sherlock being dragged back from the direction of the poorhouse. “All these brick buildings look alike,” he was protesting unconvincingly, neck still swivelling to try to get a look. The wind had died away, and there was a bitter, acrid scent in the air that made the back of John’s throat sting. Sherlock coughed, coughed again, and gave up trying to see over the wall to the poorhouse.

“Where are the factories? Is that where the smoke comes from?” John asked.

Alfred gestured toward what seemed to be the source of the dark sky. “Over that direction. Downwind mostly, which helps. You’re not working there, are you, Stephen?”

Sherlock shook his head and gave a last wistful glance over his shoulder as they came to the gate.

“You can’t go over there, I told you,” Alfred said patiently. “Come on now, you need to see Matron before dinner.”

Dinner was, as John rather expected, a meager affair, but it was hot and he did not have to fight a gang of factory workers for it. “I can’t tell how many potatoes are in here,” Sherlock said, peering at his spoon with a critical eye, “but it seems to be mostly cabbage.”

“What won’t fatten will fill. My mother used to say that,” John said, eating with gusto. “It’s not bad, anyway.”

They were separated by dormitories for meals, so John and Sherlock had parted from Mike to sit at one of the two tables pointed out to them as belonging to B dorm. John was starving--his breakfast at the jail seemed a lifetime ago--so he ate with gusto, and even Sherlock steadily spooned soup into his mouth as he scanned the table. They had been told they were to be silent during the meal, but the staff seemed inclined to ignore talking as long as things did not get too noisy. John finished his soup and scraped the last drops from the bowl with his bread, wondering if he could switch bowls with Sherlock if he wasn’t going to finish. He looked over and suddenly realized Sherlock had gone quiet, staring down at his lap with a closed, distant expression.

“What is it, is something wrong?”

Sherlock glanced up but didn’t meet his gaze. “We’re at the wrong table.”

“What? But this is for B dorm, that bloke said so.”

“There’s a rigid social order, and I’ve just worked out we’re violating it. There’s a hierarchy--”

“Who’s on top?” John may not have studied these things in school, but he had once been the youngest of a pack of stableboys, and knew how it worked.

“Down at the end of this table, that big one there? He is. The ones around him are the inner circle, and the rest are the sycophants and hangers-on. We belong at the other table with the outsiders.”

John slid a glance along the table without being obvious, sizing up the oligarchy in case it came to a fight. He did not think the big one would be much of a problem; he looked like the type who had
always got by on size and intimidation alone. The fair-haired, narrow faced boy--no, man, he looked even older than John--and the one with the squint would be harder, but the real threat was the ginger, John thought.

“That big one’s called Tank. I heard someone talking to him,” he said. Tank was even at that moment looking down the table at them, with an unpleasant smirk that John did not care for at all.

“Tank?”

“Like a tank engine, I suppose? Looks like he has the brains of a tank engine, doesn’t he?”

Sherlock smiled, but it looked half-hearted. “I’m done. You have my soup.”

“Finish your bread at least,” John said as Sherlock covertly switched their bowls. “If that lot decides to fight us to show us our place, you’re going to need your strength.”

Strangely, this suggestion actually seemed to cheer Sherlock up, and he ate his bread without fuss. When the meal was over they had an hour for recreation; most of the boys sat in groups talking or playing cards, though some were reading--there must still be a library from the days when St. Bart’s had actually been a school. John thought about looking for *A Tale of Two Cities*, but the idea made him homesick and he was happy when Mike came over to join them.

“I saw Scrap. He looks all right. He’s in a dorm upstairs with a bunch of little ones, they seem to be getting along well enough.”

“Oh, that’s good,” John said, pleased. He made room for Mike on the bench and they all sat together, John and Mike chatting and Sherlock watching the room unblinkingly from over his drawn-up knees.

Alfred appeared. “I almost forgot--we need to get you lot settled before lights out,” he said. “Come on and I’ll show you your dorms. It’s likely to be a bit crowded. I know B is full up, so you two will likely have to share a cot.”

“That’s fine, we’re well used to it,” John assured him.

B dorm proved to be a long room with windows at one end, a line of beds along each wall and a double line in the middle, placed head-to-head. The beds all seemed occupied. D, however, had two bare cots near the door.

“Perfect,” Alfred said, pleased. “That bed’ll be yours, Mike, and we’ll just shift this one over to B for you two. Wobbly, isn’t it? Hope it holds your weight. Maybe we should leave it for Mike as he’s on his own.”

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“I think it’s all right, probably just needs the bolts tightened,” John said. The metal cot was surprisingly heavy, and it took all of them to maneuver it out the door and along the hallway. Alfred then took them to fetch blankets and nightshirts. By the time they had made up the beds, the other pupils--inmates?--were thundering up the stairs.

“Change in the dorms and then to the washrooms,” Alfred said, pointing. “I’m on the top floor with the other junior staff. That room there belongs to Mr. Minchin, the proctor--he’s a tartar, so stay out of his way. Good night!”

The nightshirts were of linen so old they had been rubbed perfectly smooth; not very warm, but at least they were soft. John changed quickly and followed the others to the washroom. He had somehow got separated from Sherlock, and craned his neck to look for him as he washed at a basin
of cold water.

“Hurry up, you sorry lot of maggots!” a bald man even bigger than Tank roared, striding into the washroom. He had a red face with an expression of what seemed like permanent rage, a yellow-toothed snarl, and a long wooden switch in one meaty hand. “Lights out in five minutes.”

“Is that Mr. Minchin?” John whispered to the boy next to him.

“Yes,” the boy whispered back. “Don’t cross him—he loves using that switch. He’ll give you half a dozen for not jumping out of bed fast enough in the morning.”

John filed this away to tell Sherlock. Where was Sherlock? The boys were heading back to the dormitories now. He pushed his way against the flow of the crowd, looking, and finally spotted Sherlock in a corner of the washroom. John saw with a stab of unease that he was surrounded by Tank and his cronies, one of whom was gripping Sherlock by the upper arm. Sherlock had his head down and was nodding.

“Stephen?” John called. Sherlock glanced up, said something to Tank, and then jerked his arm free and hurried toward John. John looked back and saw the little gang laughing in a way that, somehow, he did not like at all.

“What did they want?” John muttered as they made their way back.

“Make sure we knew our place,” Sherlock said through his teeth, and turned his face away. He did not look at John all the way back to their dorm and was still turned away when they climbed into bed. John perched stiffly on the thin mattress, wary of their new surroundings and Sherlock’s strangeness, as Tank and his mates sauntered up the aisle on their way to their places in the far corner. They all had beds to themselves, John noted, whereas the boys closer to the door were doubled up, as he and Sherlock were.

“LIGHTS OUT,” shouted the choleric Mr. Minchin, stumping in the door. He went up one aisle and down the other, extinguishing the lights and catching every boy out of bed a swift lash across the backs of his legs. John scrambled under the covers. At the door Minchin turned, glared, threatened painful death to anyone who dared make a sound before morning, and finally left.

There was a collective exhale and John heard the rustling of dozens of boys settling themselves into bed. Their own cot swayed alarmingly, and John hoped devoutly he wouldn’t be woken in the night by it crashing to the floor. He heard the creak of bedsprings somewhere and turned to tuck himself along Sherlock’s back as he always did, but Sherlock abruptly rolled over and flung himself, shaking, into John’s arms, clutching at him as he had the day Angelo left.

“What—” John began but Sherlock cut him off, speaking in a panicked whisper into John’s ear. “I’m sorry, I had to, just do as they say, please John—”

John tried to pull back to get a look at his face. He heard more bedsprings, footsteps on the floor, coming nearer.

“I’m sorry, just–don’t watch, please don’t watch,” Sherlock said in an agonized whisper and then someone yanked John off the bed.

John stumbled and came up whipping back toward Sherlock, not trying to fight yet, just sizing up the situation. Tank was standing on the opposite side of the bed where two of his cronies had pulled Sherlock off, holding him between them. “Out of the way, Shorty,” he said to John.

“Sorry,” John said in the same pleasant but deadly tone he had used on the would-be kidnappers.
“That’s my cousin. You touch him, you have to go through me.”

Sherlock cried out, muffled—it sounded like there was a hand over his mouth—and then the squinty-eyed lieutenant who had pulled him off the bed abruptly punched John in the solar plexus. It caught him by surprise and he doubled over, trying to catch his breath, and stayed over an extra second while he considered his next move. He had no idea what was going on or why they seemed to want Sherlock, and while he was still weighing his options Squinty punched him again and then caught him from behind in an armlock.

“No!” Sherlock cried. “You said you wouldn’t hurt him, you promised you’d leave him alone if I did what you want!”

John got his head up to look. Sherlock had been pushed down across the bed, his wrists gripped by the fair-haired man and his nightshirt rucked up to his waist. His drawers were gone and he was looking up at John in utter terror. Behind him stood Tank, who had hauled up his own shirt to reveal his jutting prick, and who now spat into his hand as he kicked Sherlock’s legs apart.

“I lied,” Tank said calmly. “Stop his mouth.”

The ginger in front of John yanked Sherlock’s head up by a handful of his short curls and reached down his own drawers with his other hand. John went from stunned incomprehension to blinding fury so fast that his body was moving before his brain had really caught up. He slammed his elbow and head back simultaneously, hearing a satisfying “oof” from his captor, and at the same time stomped down hard on his instep. The arms holding him fell away and John delivered a swift knee to his groin, sending Squinty toppling in agony. Then, remembering his earlier assessment, he planted his feet and drove his good shoulder hard into the ginger, knocking him into the blond and sending all three of them rolling over the foot of the wobbling cot. The fair-haired man scrambled away, but John and the ginger rolled on the ground in a furious grapple, kicking and punching at every inch of each other they could reach. John heard a thumping behind him and hoped Sherlock was all right. He let the ginger get on top of him, thinking he had the upper hand, and then kneed him in the groin as well without a speck of remorse. If they were going to try—to do that to Sherlock they deserved to have their pricks out of commission.

John shoved the ginger off and leaped to his feet, already turning, but Tank grabbed him by the arm and yanked him around, pulling back for a punch. John sighed and prepared to go under it but suddenly the blond was back, grabbing John’s arms and pinning them from behind. There was a sudden resounding crash that seemed to shake the entire room and then, with Tank still frozen halfway to knocking John unconscious, Sherlock suddenly rose up behind him like an avenging angel and hit him across the back of the head with what seemed to be a length of pipe. Tank doubled over, the blond let go of John—who took advantage of this to punch him in the gut—Tank straightened up like a furious wounded bull as Sherlock raised the pipe again, and then the door flew open.

“Sodding little rats,” Minchin bellowed as he stormed into the room, swinging a lantern. They were so close to the door that he went right past them and shone the lantern into the entire room, illuminating a sea of wide-eyed faces before finally swinging around to take in the frozen tableau behind him. “What the bleeding hell?”

“Please, sir,” Sherlock, said, stepping forward. The terrible seraph had vanished; he looked as meek and innocent as a lamb. “Our bed broke, and these gentlemen were very kindly attempting to help us repair it.” He held up the piece of metal in his hands, which John now realized was the leg of the cot. He looked around. There indeed was the bed, collapsed drunkenly on its three remaining legs.

Minchin looked first at him, then at Tank and John, and finally at the other three, who were all on the
floor. “What are you lot doing down there?”

“Looking for the bolt,” Sherlock said quickly before any of them could respond.

Minchin frowned and held the lantern higher. “It’s right there,” he said triumphantly. “Morris, you’re practically sitting on it, you blind scab.”

Morris was folded over with his hair flopping in his face, trying to look as though he were crawling around looking for a bolt instead of recovering from a blow to the bollocks. “Thank you, sir,” he gasped and picked it up. Sherlock plucked it neatly from his hand.

“I believe we’re going to need a tool of some sort to replace this,” he said, giving Minchin a look of melting helplessness. “Perhaps we’d best do it in the morning.”

“Of course you’ll bloody well do it in the morning,” Minchin snapped. “Just take the bed off the frame and sleep on the floor for tonight. The rest of you, back where you belong. I don’t want to hear another sound out of this room tonight or it’s a half dozen for each of you, do you hear?”

“Sir,” they all muttered. Minchin gave them a final glare, and stomped out.

For a minute none of them moved. The sweet innocence fell off Sherlock’s face like a mask, leaving him cold and stony, and John held himself rigid as he waited to see if the battle was going to resume.

Then Tank unexpectedly grinned. “You are one bloody clever sod,” he said to Sherlock. “I thought you were hiding under that bed! How did you even think to do that? And then you told him we were helping—” he broke off, laughing, and then turned and gave John a genial punch in the shoulder. “And you! Not so soft as you look, are you?”

“Have another go and find out,” John said grimly, but Tank ignored him to pull Morris to his feet. “Relax,” he said to Sherlock. “I’ve decided your brain’s more valuable than your arse, not that it didn’t look like a fine arse. You’re one of us now so you’ll be off limits; they know better than to touch you.” He spat on his hand and held it out.

John’s guts twisted at the gesture, given what Tank had been about to do the last time he did it, but Sherlock just looked wary. “When you say ‘one of you’, you mean…”

“One of us. In. The aristocracy, if you will, of B dormitory. The guvs, of this place, anyway.”

Sherlock broke into a huge smile and promptly spat into his own palm to shake Tank’s hand. “Deal. As long as we’re not required to sodomize anyone.”

John closed his eyes in horror but Tank just laughed. “I like you. Come on, Leo, get up--where’d Flea get to?”

John endured the spit-and-shake routine too and then helped Squinty--Flea-- to his feet (“All right then?” “Aye, no hard feelings, mate”). He and Leo helped John wrestle the mattress off the bed and onto the floor, pushing the listing cot onto its side, so it made a nice little wall between them and the next bed.

“See you in the morning,” Tank said cheerfully and they made their way back to their own corner, arguing over who had come off worse in the brawl.

John let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding and turned to Sherlock, who was surreptitiously rubbing his hand on his nightshirt. The sight made John’s gut clench, thinking of how Sherlock might have been left if things had not gone their way. Sherlock caught his eye. “Do you
suppose Mr. Minchin would mind if I just popped over to wash this off?”

“I think Mr. Minchin would beat you cross-eyed, yes,” John replied. “I’m dead knackered. Let’s go to bed.”

They crawled onto the thin mattress and then the humor of the situation suddenly struck them both and they began laughing, doubled over and trying to stifle the noise in each other’s shoulders.

“That--was ridiculous,” John gasped. “That was the most ridiculous thing--I’ve ever done--”

“--and now you’ve joined a criminal gang,” Sherlock reminded him and they both started giggling again.

When the laughter had finally tapered off and they were trying to catch their breath, foreheads pressed together, John said quietly, “You knew at dinner, didn’t you.”

Sherlock nodded, a tiny movement against John’s head.

“Did that…” John hesitated, but he had to know. “Is that what happened when you were at school?”

Sherlock was silent a long time, so long John was beginning to think he’d overstepped, but then he sighed. “No,” said softly. “But it would have...it would have been worse.”

“Will you tell me?” John asked gently.

Sherlock turned a little and wriggled so that he was lying with his head pillowed on John’s shoulder, instead of nose to nose. “I will tell you,” he said. In the dim light, his slim hand lying on John’s chest was the same bleached white as the nightshirt. “Mycroft told me what Eton was like before I left. He warned me that the older boys had complete power over the younger ones, and that some of them abused that power for their own pleasure. I didn’t really understand at first, so he made it very clear.”

His fingers twitched, and John reached up and gently folded his hand in his own. “Most of the older boys take a younger one as a slave. Some do use them as catamites, but mostly for menial tasks: blacking boots, running errands and so on. I was fortunate that my master had no interest in using me in any other way, and as his slave I was considered off limits to the others. He was not kind to me, exactly--he made no effort to shield me from the boys my own age, who were viciously cruel--but he did not go out of his way to be unkind. But then Jim Moriarty lost his slave. I don’t know what happened exactly--it was hushed up--but I know he nearly died, and he left school. They say he tried to kill himself.”

John remembered Jim Moriarty, his gleeful, strangely soulless eyes, and shivered.

“Jim wanted a new slave. He decided on me. I begged Victor to protect me, but he would not go against Jim. No one would. Jim thought to make a sport of my reluctance and told me that he would give me a head start to hide, and then he and his dogs would hunt me down like a fox in a hole. The dogs included my own cousin, by the way, but I have no doubt he would have taken his turn in tearing me to bits.”

Sherlock fell silent. John tightened his arm around his skinny shoulders and said, “No one will ever hurt you like that. They’ll have to kill me first.”

Sherlock squeezed his hand. “I ran away then, obviously. The head start ended up being very helpful. When I was walking in the rain that night, I kept thinking of them still looking and it made it all worthwhile.” John could feel him smile against his chest. “But I don’t think this school is going to end up being all that different, except that we’ve managed to come out on the side with power, so we’ll just have to do what we can.”
“We will,” John said. “We’re gangsters now, after all. We’ll do what we can.”

That night, for the first time in months, John dreamed. He was back at Sherrinford Hall at the hunt, the autumn Sherlock had not come home from school, racing over the hills on Hermes. Somehow he knew where the fox was; he tracked it easily to where it was hiding, teeth bared, beneath a tree and pinned it down beneath him on the damp autumn leaves. But then it looked up him with Sherlock’s grey-blue eyes and John leaped back in horror and woke shaking and sweating and churning with nausea.

Never, he thought. He remembered that day on the lake now with a shame so hot it burned him. He had known it was wrong; in his own defense he had not even known he wanted until that moment, but now he fully felt the weight of how very, very wrong it was. He would never think of it again. He turned and wrapped himself around Sherlock protectively, feeling his slow, slightly wheezy breathing as he slept on, safe in John’s arms.

In the morning when Minchin shouted them all out of bed John was deeply grateful their bed was on the ground when he fell off, but less so when he tried to scramble to his feet. His ribs and jaw felt bruised and tender, and Sherlock winced sympathetically at his black eye. Sherlock’s wrists were black-and-blue as well. John wondered grimly if their new friends might have changed their minds now that their own bruises had set in, but when they arrived at breakfast Tank unceremoniously turfed some of his hangers-on further down the bench.

“Shove over there, Watson and Seven are sitting here now.”

“No, Seven. You can’t both be Watson, and you’re seven times cleverer than a normal bloke.”

Sherlock was delighted. “I have a nom de guerre,” he told John.

“Is that a nickname when it’s at home?” John asked. “Just watch yourself down in the storerooms, Seven, I won’t be around if the potato thieves aren’t as impressed by your brains as Tank seems to be.”

“You’re working in the storerooms?” Tank said, pleased. “Excellent. I knew you would be a good investment. See if you can nick us some gin.”

“How would I nick gin?”

Tank held up seven fingers and pointed them at Sherlock. “You’ll work it out.”

Seven times cleverer or not, it still gave John a pang to leave Sherlock. Aside from the previous day they had not been apart for months, and after the previous night...but Sherlock was clever, and resourceful, and he was clearly itching to get in the storerooms and start sniffing around the potatoes, so John tried to put it out of his mind as he followed Mike to the hospital.

He was soon too busy to worry about Sherlock. The hospital was big and full to bursting, and Molly barely had time to show them around before they were put to work.

“There are separate wards for men and women,” Molly told them, “and long-term wards, and critical wards, and the surgery. The lying-in is in a separate building and it’s all midwives over there, though
they use our kitchens and chemist. The orphanage has its own infirmary but we’ve a children’s ward here as well for children from the city.”

John liked the hospital. The work was hard and a lot of it was drudgery--John spent a lot of time spooning gruel into slack mouths--but it was useful, and the patients were pitifully grateful for any kindness. After a few weeks when they had shown themselves to be capable, one of the ward sisters began showing John and Mike how to take pulse and temperature and read the doctor’s orders, which made them both feel immensely important.

Sherlock, meanwhile, was having a fine time in the storerooms.

“The cellars are immense,” he told John. “And they’re quite old--far older than this building; I think maybe there was an abbey here previously. Some of them are walled off but I think I’ve found a way to get back there--I’m just waiting for the opportunity to try it.”

“What about the missing potatoes?”

“Oh, I solved that ages ago. Now I’m trying to work out what to do about it.”

“Shouldn’t you tell Mr. Temple?”

“Of course not. How would that help us? I’m going to suss out a way to turn it to our advantage.”

John grinned. They were in the hall after dinner, leaning back against the wall. “Go on then, tell me about the potatoes.”

Sherlock sat up straight, bright with the joy of sharing his deductions. “Oh, it’s not just potatoes. It’s all kinds of things--they even managed to do what I still haven’t, which is find a way to pilfer gin.”

“How?”

“Most of the work in the storerooms is done by pupils, like me, with varying degrees of experience and competence, overseen by two junior staffers who have been at their posts for some time.”

“It’s the same at the hospital,” John agreed.

“The entire operation is overseen by Old Peters, who has been on the job since approximately the Norman Conquest, and who knows absolutely every last inch of the storerooms--which is not the same as every inch of the cellars, as I’ve said. He knows it so well, in fact, that it took me the better part of three days to realize he’s gone blind. He stands at the gate for every delivery, counting as the goods come in, and he can remember how much of everything should be anywhere at any given time. What he can’t do is read the manifest when he signs it.”

“So no one is stealing at all? The suppliers are cheating us?”

“Yes and no. I realized that if I caught on in a few days, one off the staffers must have as well, and sure enough after watching closely I divined that the two of them were in on it--they would verify that the number Old Peters counted was what was on the manifest, when the order listed was higher. I assume they receive a cut of the profits from the suppliers.”

“And they’re doing that with gin too?”

“No--the gin is the clever part. The school does order quite a lot of gin, because Mr. Temple is a dipsomaniac--”
“Really?” John had thought all drunkards were like his brother-in-law: loud-voiced and heavy-fisted.

“--obviously, and a lot of the other staff like a little tipple as well. They’ve been increasing the order lately because Mr. Temple has been drinking more heavily. It’s astonishing what you learn in the storerooms, John. Mr. Gamfield, the upstairs proctor, has jars of lard sent straight to his rooms.”

“Why?”

Sherlock looked at him for a minute, bit his lip, and said, “Never mind, let me tell you about the gin. So the two staffers take the gin, pour half of it into empty bottles, and refill the bottles with water, which they then send along to Mr. Temple as usual, who has to drink more and more to feel any effect, and so continues to increase his order. Then they take the gin along to a hiding place in the unused part of the cellar where there is a very old hatch that open out on to the river. While I have not yet witnessed this--I believe they do it at night--I am certain they are selling the gin to a buyer who collects it by boat.”

“That is actually fairly clever,” John said. “So what’s holding you back turning them in? Are you trying to think of a way to get yourself a cut now that you’re part of a criminal gang?”

John was joking, but Sherlock did not smile. “Yes,” he said. “Only I have to think of a way to do it that doesn’t leave the school short of potatoes, and butter, and meat. Gin is one thing, but I won’t take food from the hungry.”

“Why? Why not just turn them in and be done with it?”

“I thought about it,” Sherlock said slowly. He looked out at the crowded room, his eyes distant. “I thought about giving up, in fact. Just staying here until I’m a legal adult and then going to London and trying to set up as a detective. There would be no one to stop me, after all. I never wanted to be Lord Sherrinford, John, and I don’t want to now, even though obviously the thought of my cousin with the title makes me physically sick. But I can’t. I can’t let go of everything that my father and Mycroft worked for, particularly not now that I’ve been on the other side of it. So I have to stop them--stop Moriarty--and for that we need money and a way to escape this place and get to France, and this is the only way I can see to get it.”

“All right,” John said. They were quiet a minute. “I’m with you no matter what, you know that.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said, looking at John with his intense, focused blue eyes. “I know that.”

“Now tell me about the lard. I know when you’re hiding something.”

“I’m hiding it because you don’t want to know,” Sherlock bit out, looking away.

“Sherlock,” John said patiently. “How about you let me be the judge of that?”

“Fine. Gamfield is the proctor for the younger boys’ dormitories. He buggers the youngest of them nightly and he uses the lard for lubrication.” Sherlock was looking away, his arms folded, cheeks flushed.

“Oh,” John said lamely. He hated to admit it, but he really hadn’t wanted to know that. Bad enough that the older boys got up to it; he heard them at it at night, much as he tried to close his ears. “Is that why Leo asked you to get--”

“Yes.”

John thought that over, frowning a little. Leo was the mildest of Tank’s inner circle. “That’s--I
thought he didn’t--the younger boys don’t keep away from him like they do the others.”

“Of course they don’t.” Sherlock looked at John as if he had accused Leo of arson. “He doesn’t hurt anyone.”

“But you just said--”

“Oh my God, are you blind as well as dense?” Sherlock snapped, leaped to his feet, and stalked away.

John felt completely perplexed. He looked at where Leo sat with Pip, one of the members of Tank’s outer orbit, a tall young man with chocolate-dark eyes and a dimpled smile. He was smiling now, looking at Leo’s face as he said something, and Leo smiled back in a way that made his long horsey face look actually handsome.

John blinked. Did Sherlock mean...what did he mean? John had thought that what happened between men must necessarily be an act of violence. He watched Leo and Pip covertly the rest of the evening. That night--Sherlock curled stiffly away from him--he listened as well, trying to pick out the sounds coming from Pip’s nearby bed. They were different, he realized. The noises he heard were not those of one person taking pleasure and the other receiving pain. They were almost too soft to hear, but the sounds he heard were tender, and the muffled climax was definitely Pip’s.

John’s face felt hot and the bed felt far too small. He realized he was straining as hard to hear now as usually he tried to avoid it. They were kissing. After a while he heard the slide and thump of Leo leaving the bed, moving back to his own place higher up the room’s pecking order, and everything was quiet. John lay perfectly still, uncomfortably aware of Sherlock next to him, clearly still awake. Part of him wanted to ask Sherlock about this, but the larger part of him felt that that would be dangerous, in some ill-defined way. He felt confused and awkward. It was not until he had become so uncomfortable that he finally rolled to his back that he remembered Young Tom telling him something of the sort long ago: *They fancy each other, like girls, they write each other love letters.* Was it only because there were no girls available that Leo and Pip turned to each other, as he and Tom had assumed? But Leo had no need of softness and sentiment; he could take what he wanted.

John stared out into the darkness a long time, but he knew Sherlock was still awake when he finally drifted off to sleep.

“Care to go outside?”

John looked up in surprise. He was almost positive Sherlock had been avoiding him since their near-quarrel a few nights ago. Usually they spent their precious Sunday afternoons outside in the courtyard unless the air was too bad, but today Sherlock had been nowhere in sight and John had resigned himself to reading. Yet now here he was, coat already buttoned up, brimming with suppressed excitement.

“Course,” John said, jumping up. “Just let me get my things.”

Outside the air was cold with a bitter wind, but the courtyard was still full of younger boys running about and snatching each other’s hats. The wind kept the sky clear though, which pleased John even as it made his eyes water. Sherlock had been doing very well since coming to Bart’s, whether due to the slightly better air or the lung tonic or simply luck John had no idea.

Sherlock led them to a corner near the river where the wall gave shelter from the worst of the wind. “I’ve found the way into the blocked part of the cellar,” he said gleefully. “Guess what I found!”
“A cache of gold?” John said hopefully. “King Arthur’s tomb?”

“King Arthur is buried in Glastonbury, everyone knows that. No, I found the wine cellar. Look!” Sherlock pulled a dusty bottle out of his coat with a flourish.

“The wine cellar?” John peered at the dusty label. “Chateyoo...is this French?”

“Of course it’s French. Here, taste it. I opened the bottle in the cellar to make sure it was still good and recorked it.”

John, feeling somewhat awkward, sipped as carefully as he could from the mouth of the bottle. He has almost no experience with wine. Lord Sherrinford always sent a few bottles over at Twelfth Night, which was also Sherlock’s birthday, but that was about the extent of it. The mouthful he swallowed now did seem to be very good--almost chewy, he thought, like leather. He sipped again.

“It’s good, isn’t it? I don’t really like wine--I don’t understand why people want things that slow them down--but it’s one of those things I had to learn about, and this one is really excellent.”

“I suppose,” John said. “Can’t help thinking that a cache of gold might have been a bit more useful.”

Sherlock frowned at him. “John, this is a cache of gold. Don’t you understand? This is a bottle my father would have served to guests. Important guests. Some of these vintages are rare and all of them are old, and with the trouble in France getting wine will be much more difficult right now so the prices will be even higher. And certainly no one at St. Bart’s needs to be drinking any more than they already are, so selling it won’t be harming anyone.”

“Dr. Woodcourt sometimes says patients should have wine at the hospital,” John pointed out.

“John. For what this bottle alone would fetch, we could buy a bottle of wine for every single patient, including the babies. We’ll make an anonymous donation when we escape, if that would ease your conscience.”

“Oh.” John said. He handed the bottle back to Sherlock. “You keep it, I’m afraid of dropping it now. How exactly are you going to manage selling it though? You can’t exactly go to Mr. Temple and ask to take a cart so you can visit the wine merchant.”

“All the pieces are in place,” Sherlock said, sliding the cork back into the bottle. “I just have to work out how to play them. I’ve got the wine, and Al and Norb have got the connections. But obviously I’ve got to find a way of cutting out Al and Norb, preferably altogether so they stop siphoning off our food, but without enraging them so much they won’t give up their contacts.”

John made Tank’s seven-finger gesture. “You’ll work it out. You’re Seven! What are you going to do with the rest of that?”

“Give it to Tank, of course. It’s totally wasted on him, and he’ll probably complain it isn’t gin, but he and others will enjoy it well enough. I’m going to get this all sorted by Christmas. Then I’ll bring up another bottle and you and I will drink the whole thing.”

Chapter End Notes

1) The first medical school for women in the world was established in Philadelphia in 1850 (supported, of course, by those notorious 19th century lefty badasses, the
Quakers). While medical schools in England, Ireland and Scotland established colleges for women later in the century, access to clinical training was severely limited. This was less of a problem in America due to the burgeoning (poor) population.

2) Asthma has been described in the medical literature for as long as we have HAD medical literature, but effective treatments weren't available until the 20th century. "Lung tonic" probably contained a lot of stuff which was largely useless, such as lungwort--a plant thought to be helpful in treating pulmonary diseases for the excellent reason that it resembles a pair of lungs. It is, however, a mild anti-inflammatory, so probably didn't hurt.
A cradle of fog-bred pestilence

Chapter Notes

A word about the timeline: when this chapter starts, John is 18 and Sherlock almost 16 (I'm using the end of September for John's birthday and Sherlock's is traditionally held to be January 6).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock did not have it sorted by Christmas, because he got sick. For three nights he coughed, and on the fourth morning presented to Matron for his morning tonic so short of breath that she dispatched him straight back to John with a tag on his front.

“I don’t understand this obsession with tags,” Sherlock complained between coughing bouts as he followed John and Mike to the hospital. “I’m perfectly capable of describing my own symptoms, even if they weren’t obvious to any idiot at first glance.”

“Probably to keep lads from skiving off,” Mike said. “Otherwise half the factory boys would be cooling their heels over there saying they felt ill, and the doctor is busy enough as it is.”

“I would never--” Sherlock began indignantly, and then doubled over in another coughing fit that rendered him too breathless to speak.

John had been hoping that Sherlock could be put right with a few days of rest and a double dose of lung tonic, but instead he was sent straight to the respiratory ward, where he was miserable. John did everything he could to help: found him an extra pillow and blanket, brought books from the school, but Sherlock was just ill enough to be uncomfortable but not too ill to be thoroughly bored.

“Sir, why does he not get better?” John plucked up the courage to ask one afternoon. It was the day before Christmas and Dr. Woodcourt was making his afternoon rounds, Molly a half step behind him, scribbling into a notebook.

“Oh.” Dr. Woodcourt smiled at him. “You are used to the other patients in this ward, who usually follow a predictable pattern: fall ill, worsen, and reach a crisis, to which they either succumb or or survive, with a resulting convalescence. That is because most of our patients suffer from an infectious disease, particularly in the winter time. But here is no contagion in this case. Your cousin instead suffers from a weakness of the lungs, also called asthma.”

“That’s what—” Sherlock caught himself. “I saw a physician before when I was younger, and he said the same thing.”

“Yes. You told me yourself that you were much worse as a child and had been improving, which is typical for such cases. We have a great many in the children’s ward right now, don’t we?” Molly nodded. “Unfortunately, the foul air here is very bad for weak lungs, as you know well if you were living in the country before.”

“I was fine for years,” Sherlock said and then had to pause to cough into his handkerchief. “Until I came to Blastburn.”
“He seems so very worn, sir,” John ventured.

“The medications that we use to try to stimulate the lungs sometimes stimulate the mind as well, unfortunately. Is that the case with you? Is it hard to sleep?”

Sherlock shrugged. “I cough all night and it makes my chest hurt, and I can’t lie down properly to get comfortable. I wouldn’t sleep well in any case.”

Dr. Woodcourt flipped through the notes at the foot of Sherlock’s bed. “I prescribed a draught, but they say you have not been taking it.”

“I did the first night. But it made me so heavy and dull, and I woke in the night and John was not here and I was so confused, and I was sick in a basin. I didn’t like it.” Sherlock had to stop, out of breath, and John put a hand on his thin shoulder. He had not known about this.

“Well, that’s not what we want. I’ll prescribe a different draught—just honey, and a bit of something for the pain in your chest. But it won’t make you confused as the other did.” Dr. Woodcourt smiled kindly, and Sherlock actually smiled back—the first real smile John had seen on him since coming to the hospital. John, however, was still not completely reassured.

“So you’re sure—you don’t think he’s…”

“Consumptive? No. The history, the examination, all are against it. Show me your handkerchief.”

Sherlock, surprised and a little abashed, held out his damp handkerchief.

“You see, John, there is little sputum and none of it is purulent, and there is no blood. Your cousin is very thin, but besides this complaint he is healthy and strong—he just needs a bit of feeding up.” Dr. Woodcourt made another note on the chart. “We will get you something a little heartier and you will try to eat it, so your cousin will not worry so much, all right?”

“All right,” Sherlock agreed.

Dr. Woodcourt replaced the chart. “You are finished with your duties, John?”

“It’s my tea break, sir, but I’ll be back at it in a few minutes.”

“Very well.” Dr. Woodcourt smiled in farewell and moved off to the next bed, Molly following.

“I’ll bring you some fresh handkerchiefs tomorrow, take that one back to be laundered,” John told Sherlock.

“Mmm.” Sherlock was still watching Molly. “He’s teaching her, you know.”

“Molly?”

“Yes. That’s why she’s taking notes, he tells her what to read up on after. He must be loaning her books.” Sherlock paused for breath. “You should ask. He would likely teach you too.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t,” John said reflexively.

“John,” Sherlock said in exasperation. “You lack confidence, not intelligence. There’s no reason you couldn’t read medicine under him.”

John regarded him fondly. “I’m flattered, but I’m no seven, and we both know it.”
“I’m the only seven. But you’re at least a five. And most of the other doctors I’ve known have been twos. So ask.”

John could tell Sherlock was getting tired, and he had to get back to work himself. “I’ll think about it. Here, let me fix your pillows a bit, and then try to rest a little, all right? Will you take that new draught tonight?”

“I’ll think about it.”

Sherlock let John fluff up his pillows and arrange him so that he curled on his side against them, the position that seemed most comfortable, and tucked the blankets around him. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here. The night you woke up confused.”

“I wish you were here every night,” Sherlock mumbled. He coughed, clutching his handkerchief up under his mouth, and closed his eyes.

John patted his back, stealthily in case anyone was looking, and said, “Get some rest, and you’ll be back in B dorm before you know it.”

Christmas night John volunteered to help with the night shift, so the staff who usually tended to the men’s wards could enjoy the wardroom party.

“Are you sure?” Abbott asked. “You’re missing the fete over at St. Bart’s.”

“I’d rather be here where I can see my cousin,” John said truthfully. Being at the festivities at Bart’s would only remind him of last year, and all the friends whose fates he still did not know.

“Well, at least come by and have a bite then. No one will begrudge you that!”

John made his rounds, leaving Sherlock’s ward until last, and finally slipped in quite late. Sherlock was still awake, hunched up on his bed with his arms wrapped around his knees, the gleam of his eyes visible in the dim moonlight. John could see the muscles of his neck working to pull in breath. He looked very weary and ill and alone until he saw John, when the brightness of his smile could have rivaled the Christmas star.

“Merry Christmas,” John whispered. “Budge over, I’ve brought you a present.”

Sherlock budged and John toed off his shoes to slide in next to him. He set a napkin-wrapped bundle on his lap and unfolded it to show a piece of Christmas cake. Sherlock beamed. “Cake! Did you have some?”

“Yes—there was a great lot of it in the wardroom, some charity ladies brought it. They told me to take a second piece for later, so of course I brought it to you.”

Sherlock ate the cake slowly, savoring the sweetness and licking every crumb off his fingers. “I don’t have a present for you. I was going to have a bottle of that wine to celebrate setting my plan in action—I could tell you liked it.”

“It’s enough being with you. We haven’t had Christmas together since that first year.”

“We haven’t, have we?” Sherlock coughed and rested his head on John’s shoulder. “Will you sing me that song again, the one you sang that year?”
“What, ‘The Frost Is All Over’? You know it’s not really a Christmas song, right?”

“It’s our song,” Sherlock said. “Things go wrong so you start again, isn’t that what it’s about? I’ll start my plan again when I get better, and we’ll have that wine yet.”

“We will,” John agreed. He hesitated and then gave in and stroked Sherlock’s silky hair, wrapping his arms around him. He could feel Sherlock’s bony chest laboring to breathe: short struggling inhale, long wheezing exhale. Sherlock shifted a little, making himself comfortable. John hoped he would fall asleep like this, so he would have had John with him for Christmas at least, before John needed to go back and check the other patients.

Oh, what would you do if the kettle boiled over?

What would I do only fill it again.

And what would you do if the cow ate the clover?

What would I do only set it again.

Praities are boiled and the herrings are roasted,

Kitty lie over, close to the wall

How would you like to be married to a soldier?

Kitty lie over, close to the wall.

Slowly, very slowly, Sherlock did get better. It seemed to take a long while. When he could deduce a new patient without stopping to cough, Dr. Woodcourt told John to start getting him up for walks. At first Sherlock could barely get to the door of the ward and back, but he was desperate for something new to look at and determined to improve, so every day he hobbled out with determination.

“I’m going to try the stairs today,” Sherlock announced one afternoon when they had reached the end of the hall.

“Are you sure?” John asked dubiously. “We’ve gone back and forth once already and you’ve still to walk back to the ward.”

“Just the landing,” Sherlock wheedled. “Then we’ll see about the rest.”

John rolled his eyes. Sherlock worked his way up to the landing, where he collapsed against the wall on the pretense of looking out the window.

“The river’s not frozen,” he said, sounding curious even whilst panting. “Look, John, I think I can see the hatch from here!” He coughed, coughed again, and reached to unlatch the window.

“For heaven’s sake, Sherlock, it’s January,” John said with exasperation, batting his hands down. “The last thing you need to be doing is hanging out a window. You can see the hatch fine anyway.”

“This could be useful.” Sherlock’s eyes were narrowed in thought. “I’ll have to think about it.” He sucked in a deep breath and announced, “I’m going up the rest of the flight.”

John rolled his eyes but said nothing. By the time he reached the top of the steps Sherlock was hauling himself up the banister by sheer force of will, his neck and skinny arms corded with effort.
He sat down gracelessly on the landing, chest heaving.

John stopped a few steps lower so they were eye to eye. “Are you going to be able to get back to your bed now?”

“Of course,” Sherlock gasped and flopped backward to wheeze on the floor like a stranded fish. Abbott stepped into the stairwell and looked down curiously.

“What’s he doing out of bed?”

“Supposed to be getting a bit of exercise,” John said. “Overdid it a bit.”

“Need a hand?” Abbott asked Sherlock, who tried and failed to look haughty while flat on his back out of breath. “Up we go then.” He put his hands under Sherlock’s armpits and hauled him up. Sherlock wobbled but John got under his arm, and between the two of them they got Sherlock down the stairs and walked back to his ward whilst maintaining the illusion that he was really doing it on his own.

Sherlock gulped some water and crumpled to his bed in exhaustion. “I might need a little rest,” he admitted. He was so knackered he let John tuck him up like a child, eyes already closing. John looked down at him with affection, then at the clock. If he hurried, he could catch Mike for a cup of tea.

Mike was up in the wardroom when John arrived and so, to his surprise, was Molly. “Oh, hello,” he said. “Aren’t you with Dr. Woodcourt this afternoon?”

“He said he’d meet me here, he just needed a few minutes with a patient in the children’s ward,” Molly said. “I know who it is and I think he’s just worked out she’s in the family way. He wants to, ah, spare my maidenly sensibilities.”

Mike turned red and stared into his mug. John, who had grown up in the country and lacked such sensibilities, grinned.

“How’s Stephen?” Molly asked, catching Mike’s blush and tactfully changing the subject.

“Doing well, he just climbed the stairs for first time and he’s utterly done in. He’s taking a nap. You should see the ward, all the men are holding their breath for fear of waking him up.” It was Mike’s turn to smile; he had seen Sherlock when he had nothing to distract him.

John took a deep breath, working up the nerve to ask Molly the question that had been on his mind for a month. “Molly? Do you think Dr. Woodcourt would be willing to teach us too? Me and Mike?”

Mike looked up in surprise, his startled expression quickly changing to tentative hope. Molly glanced at him and John saw the struggle on her face: asked to give up the exclusive teaching and attention, possibly being upstaged or forgotten…

Mike, bless him, said exactly the right thing. “We’d slow you down terribly, wouldn’t we,” he said sadly.

“No, of course not,” Molly said quickly. She might be brilliant but she was also at heart deeply kind. “We’d have to take turns with the books but I’m sure he would. It’s part of the Hippocratic Oath, you know, to teach those who wish to learn the art of healing.”

“Thank you,” John said, heartfelt, and Mike added, “We’ll try not to get in your way.”
Dr. Woodcourt was delighted to teach them. “The Blastburn Medical College,” he said, smiling. “I’ve already learned a lot from teaching Molly, so you two are the beneficiaries. I’m going to have you read this anatomy book to start, so Molly can carry on with the books she’s using currently, and you can join us on afternoon rounds whenever you’ve finished your duties.”

This proved more taxing than John had realized, and now he understood why Molly always seemed to be the first one at the hospital every morning. Fortunately Sherlock insisted that he was now capable of taking his afternoon walk unassisted, which John thought really meant unsupervised, but how much trouble could he get up to in a hospital overrun with patients and staff? And he still seemed to be recovering nicely, so John decided not to worry about him. At least until the morning when he came in and found Sherlock fast asleep.

“Sherlock,” John said, worried. Had he been ill in the night? Why on earth was he so hard to rouse? Sherlock was always wide awake when John came. He shook Sherlock’s shoulder.

“What?” Sherlock said crossly. He pulled the pillow over his head and coughed into it. “Leave me alone, I’m tired.”

“I need to look at you.” John pulled the pillow off. “What’s wrong? Why are you tired? Are you worse?”

“Oh, it’s you,” Sherlock said. He pushed himself up and held out his wrist so John could take his pulse. “Of course I’m not worse, I’m better, I’m better than better. I’ve got ever so much to tell you! When can you come back?”

“Er,” John said, curiosity replacing concern as he checked Sherlock over--he did seem no worse than before. “Wait for me this afternoon--if I just grab some bread-and-butter I can come when everyone else is at luncheon, and I’ll go for your walk with you.”

“Fine. I’m going back to sleep,” Sherlock said and burrowed into his cot again.

By the time John returned that afternoon, though, Sherlock was up and waiting impatiently, his eyes bright with news. “Come on,” he said urgently and led John briskly along to the third floor and from there to a stairway that John knew led to the orderlies’ dormitory. “No one will come here right now, the night staff are sleeping and the day staff are at work. Oh, John, you’ll never guess! I’ve worked out how Al and Norb are selling the gin.”

“How are they doing it and how did you find out?” John asked, eyebrows up. He had had time to become suspicious of Sherlock’s fatigue.

“I watched the hatch every day. I thought it most likely that they were doing their business when the moon was full, or near so--that corresponded with when the gin would disappear before, too. So I kept a close watch as the time drew nearer and sure enough, yesterday afternoon I saw a yellow scarf tied to the outside of the hatch. So last night I slipped over there--”

“You what?”

“Oh, John, think. I could hardly have done from St. Bart’s--I wouldn’t be able to see the signal, and I’d have to go past all the staff rooms to reach the cellar. I’d be far more likely to be caught. It was much easier from here. I hid my clothes and shoes in the downstairs washroom, and poured some of my broth at dinner into my basin and then spit in it and left it by my bed when I slipped out. If anyone noticed I was gone I would say I’d been sick, went to look for help and got disoriented. But
“Sherlock, you are sick. You’re in hospital. You can’t just lark off—”

“I’m fine! You checked me this morning yourself.” Sherlock promptly broke off to cough and amended, “Well, mostly fine. Don’t you want to hear what I found out?”

“I do, but first we have to settle this. Sherlock, you can’t just do things that put yourself at risk without talking to me first. We work together or not at all.”

“You would have said no,” Sherlock pointed out with no apparent guilt.

“Well, maybe, or maybe you would have talked me into it. But we have to work together, Sherlock. We have to be able to trust each other.”

“Of course I trust you,” Sherlock said, taken aback. “I trust you more than anything, you know that. Without you I’d probably have just...shrivelled up and died in that cave in the woods. But it’s my job to come up with the plan to get us out of here, isn’t it?”

“Yes. And I want that as much as you do. So you have to tell me, so that I can find a way to protect us if your plan doesn’t work out!”

Sherlock scowled, but John stood firm. Finally he sighed. “Fine. I swear I will tell you before I...what? Anything?”

“Anything that involves you slipping off in the night for starters.”

“All right. I promise. Can I tell you now?”

“Go on then,” John said, interested despite himself.

Sherlock, always delighted to have an audience, settled himself happily on the step. “It was dead easy to get to the cellars from here; I just went through the kitchens, and then I slipped into the back part of the cellars the way I found and came upon them from the other direction. I was behind a great lot of rubble, so they never knew I was there. I arrived about 11:30— I waited for Kent to make his rounds, he never comes between about 10:30 and four unless someone is very badly off—and Al and Norb were already there, with the hatch open, waiting.”

“How long did you have to wait? How did they not hear you coughing?”

“I waited to take my draught until just before I left. The honey helps, but only for a while. I did have to slip back down the passage to cough a few times.”

John just shook his head. “You’re lucky they didn’t catch you and toss you through the hatch yourself,” he sighed.

“I could have coughed up a lung and spat it through the bricks and they wouldn’t have noticed. They never even looked my way. At any rate, about ten minutes after midnight, they obviously spotted the man they were awaiting, who turned out to have a rowboat and be called Greaves. They gave him bottles, he gave them coins, he said, ‘Next month then?’ and they said, ‘Safe crossing’. Simple as anything, Scrap could probably manage it. All I have to do is get them out of the way.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“Tell them the truth,” Sherlock said. “Well, part of it. Tell them I was sent by Mr. Temple to uncover
the problem with the missing food, I worked out they were the culprits and the game is up, but because they’ve always been decent enough to me--true, by the way--I’m willing to give them this warning and a head start before I go to Mr. Temple. They can collect their ill-gotten gains and sneak out while we’re all eating. I’ll hide the yellow scarf first, of course. Then next month I tie it out and Seven takes over the operation, but with rare and expensive wine instead of cheap gin. I’ll also tell Mr. Temple I’ve decided who should replace Al and Norb in the cellars.”

“Who?”

“Ernie and Pip. They’re both fairly literate and Ernie’s actually quite clever--he’s wasted in the factory. And that will get Pip out of the laundry, for which Leo will think he owes me some obligation, which never hurts. And they’ll both be completely under my thumb.”

John had spotted a rather large hole in this plan. “And how exactly do you plan to get into the cellars next month? You can’t stay in the hospital forever, and you can’t make yourself ill every full moon. People will start to think you’re a werewolf.”

“Ah.” Sherlock looked discomfited. “Well, actually, it turns out there is a secret passage in the cellar that leads conveniently up to the second floor and comes out in Mr. Temple’s study. Too bad he never noticed--he could have been fetching up his own gin all this time. So as long as he doesn’t pass out in his study it should be fairly easy to bypass the staff quarters.”

“A secret passage.”

“Yes, so I just said,” Sherlock snapped.

“That you never noticed?” John was just barely keeping from laughing out loud. “That Al and Norb have been using and you didn’t notice it? You?”

“It was right where they’d hidden the gin! I just thought they’d spotted an excellent hiding place; I didn’t realize it had always been hiding something.”

“Well, nobody’s perfect,” John said kindly, which made Sherlock huff up like an angry cat. “But it sounds like it could work. You could set up as an actual criminal mastermind; you’ve got a real knack for this.”

“I do, don’t I?” Sherlock said happily, soothed by the compliment. “I can’t wait to get back.”

Sherlock finally returned to St. Bart’s in early February. It was not a festive homecoming. The upheaval of the previous summer and fall had had the predictable effect of sending prices soaring over the winter, and St. Bart’s was chronically short of food, heat, and candles. The only thing it had in any abundance, John told Sherlock, was damp.

“And soap,” Sherlock said absently, poking in his watery soup. “There were mountains of it in the cellars before I got sick, for some reason.”

“Can we eat it?”

“I’m not that desperate yet...too many times having my mouth washed out by Nanny.” Sherlock held up his spoon for John’s inspection. “What do you think this is? I honestly can’t tell. It doesn’t have any taste at all. Is it cabbage or onion?”

“I think it’s a parsnip peeling that’s been boiled to death and came back as a ghost.”
“Does your soup contain any actual vegetables?” Sherlock asked. “Mine only has these little translucent bits.”

“I’ve a bit of turnip,” John said, dumping the sad little piece into Sherlock’s bowl. “You eat it. We get better luncheon at the hospital than they do here.”

“Because you work harder,” Sherlock answered, dumping it back. “I’m sorting this tomorrow. Imagine what Lent will be like.”

Somewhat to John’s surprise, Sherlock did just that. By the time they went to bed the next night, Al and Norb were gone, Ernie and Pip had been reassigned, and John’s nose and throat were still burning from his share of the gin Sherlock had smuggled up to Tank to celebrate.

“Potatoes are scheduled to be delivered tomorrow,” Sherlock murmured happily. He was trying to fold himself up like a Chinese puzzle so that John could wrap around him. “I can’t wait.”

John tucked himself against him and wrapped one arm around his narrow waist, pressing his cheek between Sherlock’s shoulder blades. He used his arm and weight to still Sherlock’s restless twitching so that he quieted. “Are you listening to my back?” Sherlock asked.

“Mmmm.”

“How does it sound?” There was the tiniest thread of anxiety.

“Perfect,” John smiled. It did. Suddenly he felt almost deliriously happy in a way that had nothing to do with the gin. In spite of his one thin blanket and empty belly and the fact that he was packed into a tiny cot with what felt like six feet of bony elbows, the warmth of Sherlock under his arm with his clear, even breaths made him utterly content.

“This bed must be smaller than yours back home,” Sherlock muttered, wriggling again.

“Be still, you’re making it smaller yet,” John said. “You just only slept in mine that once since you got tall.”

“I know it was bigger,” Sherlock growled, but he settled down. After a minute he said quietly, “I miss home.”

“Me too,” John whispered back.

“I miss the mist on the orchard in the morning. I miss the way the horses looked, in the pasture in the sun. I miss riding. I miss my violin. I miss the pond.”

“I miss Mrs. Gregson’s cooking,” John said. “And being in the kitchen of an evening, in the winter. And being with the lads in the barn, doing chores and taking the piss.” He thought of Young Tom and Ned and Davy and all the rest, and he had to stop.

Sherlock was very quiet. John had seen the depth and intensity of his grief for his family, and did not know now whether he could not bear to speak of them, or if he thought it odd to say he missed them when he had seen them so little.

“I hope Mr. Brooke went to Europe,” Sherlock said softly.

“I’m sure he did,” John said. They had never spoken of Mr. Brooke or the letter that was never answered. John thought it more likely he had been arrested and was even now in jail or dead, but he would never say so to Sherlock. “He would have gone back to Munich—he knew lots of people
there, he’s a good teacher, he surely found a position right away.”

Sherlock did not answer directly, but his fingers wrapped around John’s hand. John was beginning to feel drowsy when Sherlock said suddenly, “As soon as I sell the first of the wine you must write your family.”

John was startled awake. “Is it safe?”

“I’m sure Moriarty’s men aren’t monitoring your family’s mail after all this time, if they ever did, and even so you have to tell them you’re alive.”

“I won’t mention you at all or say where I am,” John promised. “But I would like them to know I’m all right. I’m sure Dr. Woodcourt will allow me some paper, and I can give one of the orderlies money to post the letter once you have some. It should cost only a very little.”

“Three weeks,” Sherlock said. He pulled his knees up even higher so he could curl more tightly around John’s hand, which pushed the sharp knobs of his spine into John’s face. John managed to scoot back about half an inch before he felt the edge of the cot, so he pushed Sherlock forward so his knees hung off the edge. “I’m falling off,” Sherlock complained.

“Put your knees down then.”

Sherlock stubbornly used the hand still holding John’s to yank his furled knees closer to his body, so close he could no longer get his arm down, so he wrapped it around his knees instead. John now had the entirety of Sherlock’s long frame folded up in one arm, which for some absurd reason was not as uncomfortable as it should have been. He hugged his bony bundle close and settled his ear against Sherlock’s upper back again, luxuriating in the noiselessness of his breaths until he was lulled to sleep.

“Absolutely not.”

“John.”

“Don’t John me,” John said. “What if Al and Norb have gone into business with Greasy or whatever his name is? They’ll be just delighted to see their own scarf tied out there, won’t they? What do you think, they’ll row up and say, ‘Cheers, mate, thanks for taking over our illegal business’?”

Sherlock shrugged. “As long as they get a cut, why not?”

“You are an idiot,” John said. “This is exactly why you have to discuss these things with me. I’m coming with you, and that’s final.”

“But what if Minchin does a bed check? He probably won’t notice if it’s just me gone, but he’d definitely notice an empty bed.” Minchin did sometimes carry out terrifying raids in the night, although usually earlier than when Sherlock was planning to sneak out.

“That’s why we kept our bed behind the door when Tank offered us one by them. Minchin never looks back there. But if you like we could tell Ernie to sleep there while we’re gone, he’s always complaining Horace—”

This was the wrong thing to say. Sherlock went pale and tense, his eyes grey ice. “No. I will never, never put someone else in harm’s way in my place again.”
“All right, you’re right. Sorry.” John held up his hands in a placating gesture. “Look, it will be fine. Minchin never comes in that late, he knows he won’t catch anybody up to anything. Besides, think how dreadfully tiresome it will be waiting about in the storerooms by yourself--if I’m there, you can show me the secret way into the back cellars.”

That settled it.

At midnight that night they were pressed to the little hatch, watching as a solitary boat with a lantern on its prow drew steadily nearer.

“Is that him?” John asked in a whisper.

“I think so.” Sherlock frowned at the boat. “I couldn’t actually see last time, but he’s definitely headed this way. Stand back a bit.”

John backed off—not very far--and watched as Sherlock drew himself up to his full height, doing his best to look imposing. He caught the rope tossed up to him and looped it through the iron ring at the side of the hatch. “Mr. Greaves,” he said coolly.

John could just see the man in the boat squinting up at Sherlock. He had an impression of immensely bushy grey eyebrows and long mutton-chop sideburns. “You ain’t Al,” he said suspiciously.

“Al and Norb have moved on. I’m in charge now. You may call me Seven.” Sherlock was not making any effort to disguise his accent, clearly trying to use every tool in his arsenal to make himself look like an intimidating black-market mogul instead of a sixteen-year-old orphan. “The nature of our business has changed a bit also.” He reached behind him, and John carefully put a bottle of the French wine into his hands. “You will find this of considerably higher value than the gin.”

Greaves lifted the bottle to the lantern light and studied it. His eyebrows went up at the label, but he said only, “And considerably harder to sell, I’d say. Not really my market, this stuff.”

“Ah, but I’m sure a man of business such as yourself has many contacts who would have no trouble finding a buyer,” Sherlock said smoothly.

“I might,” the man allowed. He examined the bottle again. “I’ll tell ye what. I’ll take this along to a friend of mine. If he likes what he sees, I’ll be back in three nights’ time with his price. Fair?”

“Fair. One more thing.” Sherlock reached back again and John handed him another bottle, of the gin this time. “This is for you. In appreciation of your time.”

“Why, thankee, Mr. Seven.” Greaves grinned, showing blackened teeth. “I think it’s going to be a pleasure doing business with ye.” He touched his woolen cap and Sherlock nodded back, untied the rope, and tossed it back. He closed the hatch and looked hopefully at John.

John was already sitting on a crate, convulsed with giggles. “What?” Sherlock said crossly.

“Nothing, you were brilliant, just...’You may call me Seven’!” He imitated Sherlock’s growling, haughty voice and Sherlock smiled in spite of himself. “D’you think he’ll be back?”

“Oh yes.” Sherlock sat down next to John with a sigh of relief. “Even he recognized that the wine was valuable. If he’s really got friends who supply Blackburn society--such as it is--they’ll be desperate to get their hands on it.”

Despite his seeming confidence, Sherlock spent the next few days so high-strung and twitchy that
John was sorely tempted to bunk at the hospital just to get some sleep. When they arrived at the cellars on the third night to see no light on the river he immediately began pacing, hunched and frantic in the low-ceilinged room. John looked at the whites of his eyes showing and a lifetime of horse habit took over. He placed his warm palm on the back of Sherlock’s neck and said soothingly, “Calm down. We’re early. Now tell me how old you think this cellar is.”

Sherlock’s vibrating muscles immediately calmed under John’s hand. He stopped pacing, leaned forward, and nuzzled his forehead against John’s, transforming from anxious racehorse into docile housecat. He took a deep breath and said, “Well, if you look at the arches…”

Five minutes later, during which John understood perhaps one word in ten, they spotted the light. Sherlock stopped in mid-sentence, squeezed John’s arm, and strode to the hatch, Seven once more.

The negotiations were quick and amiable—”That’s as high as ye’ll get from him, I c’n promise you”--and ended with John and Sherlock passing a dozen bottles down into the boat, where Greaves carefully wrapped them in burlap sacks and lay them in a straw-lined crate.

“I’ll be back next month,” he told them finally, eyeing the full crate with a judicious eye. “Me mate said only about a dozen at a time—he doesn’t want to come to any unwanted attention, you catch me. How much ye got?”

“Enough to take us to summer, at that rate,” Sherlock said.

“All right then. Mebbe by then this foolishness’ll be over, aye? Ye put the scarf out next month and I’ll be here.”

Sherlock thanked him and cast the rope off, and closed the hatch. He showed John the handful of gold in the light of their small candle. “This is good,” he said, tying it carefully in an old napkin, to secrete in a distant part of the cellar. “I’d hoped for a bit more, but by the time we sell it all we’ll have plenty to get to France. Probably better to go when it’s warm anyway.”

“Now you have to start planning our escape,” John said, checking to make sure the hatch was secure.

“Oh, I’m good at that part. Should we have that wine now?”

“No, we’re going to wait. Otherwise we might jinx it,” John said seriously. “We’ll take the very last bottle with us when we leave and we’ll drink it when we’re safely away.”

Sherlock’s eyes were warm and bright in the candlelight. “In the summer. On a warm night, under the stars.”

“Yes.”

But of course, it didn’t work out that way. Because when the summer came it brought the Woman, and Mr. Brocklehurst, and everything changed.

Chapter End Notes

19th century treatment of asthma, part 2: very few of the treatments Sherlock would
have received would have really helped much. Caffeine analogs were known to relax the smooth muscles of the airway and improve airflow, and one of these--theophylline--was still widely used up until almost the end of the 20th century. The mainstay of asthma treatment today, albuterol, acts in the same way and has similar side effects to caffeine (increased heart rate, wakefulness and so on). Ipecac--which causes vomiting--was a popular remedy for almost everything breathing-related; "Anne of Green Gables" fans will recall that she saves the life of a croupy toddler with ipecac. (For the record, we now know that this doesn't actually work.) My personal favorite is the "asthma cigarette", which contained strammonium. This Indian import actually did improve airflow, but it also acted as a mild hallucinogen, which decreased the sensation of air hunger. Sherlock is going to spend most of his adult life chain-smoking these, but introducing them into the actual story seemed a little distracting.
At the beginning of June, Mr. Temple startled everyone after dinner one night by rising like a spectre and announcing that anyone who had turned eighteen within the past year was obliged to present himself for disposition. Since Mr. Temple usually took only the vaguest interest in the boys under his care, this in itself was remarkable, all the more so for the possibility of being turned out to face the world with whatever meager skills had been acquired at St. Bart’s.

“It’s the governors coming,” Tank explained to John on Sunday, as they enjoyed a rare sunny day in the courtyard while the unfortunately mature were being sorted. “They always come in June, and he’s got to get the house in order.”

“So are you not eighteen then?” John asked.

“Naw. I’ve always been big, is all. I won’t be eighteen til November. Morris is, though, and Leo’s almost twenty. But old Temple never checks the records, see? So they just go on saying they’re seventeen. What about you?”

“Nineteen come Michaelmas,” John admitted, “But I lied when we came in, so officially I’m sixteen.”

“Clever,” Tank said approvingly. “Not Seven though, right? He’s never eighteen.”

“Sixteen, but we lied there too, so officially fifteen.”

“Could have passed for younger,” Tank said musingly. He looked fondly at where Sherlock had scaled the brick wall and was hanging nearly upside down to look at the river. “Bless him.”

John felt a surge of affection for Tank.

“Best thing about old boys moving on,” Tank said suddenly, clapping John on the back with a lascivious grin, “is the little ones coming in.” At which point John remembered that he did not, actually, like Tank much at all.

The little ones, mostly boys who had aged out of the upstairs dormitories, came along in due course. Most were sad, stunted creatures, beaten down by hard work, little food, and Mr. Gamfield’s tender attentions. But not all.

“Here’s B dormitory, you’ll sit at these two tables,” Alfred announced one evening as he deposited yet another boy at their section of the dining hall. John looked up to see a slender boy eyeing the table with an assessing glance not unlike Sherlock’s. He had honey-colored curls, big brown eyes, and a pouty, cupid’s-bow mouth. He caught John’s eye and gave him a cheeky grin and then, undeniably, winked at him.

John blinked.

“What?”

“Teddy,” Sherlock repeated, baring his teeth and clipping the consonants. He was fishing peas out of his soup and depositing them into John’s. “He’s the school errand boy, a position he enjoys due no doubt to his great personal charm. Also, he’s Mr. Posey’s catamite.”

“Mr. Posey!” Mr. Posey was the chaplain, a vague but kindly man who spent most of his time shut up in his rooms, where he was rumored to write poetry.

“Don’t worry, he’s not exclusive. I saw his type at Eton. He’s sized up the dorm and worked out that all the power is at this end of this table, and you’re the most likely to treat him well. You could have him tonight if you like.”

“Of course I don’t,” John said, horrified. “Bloody hell, Sherlock.”

Sherlock shrugged and picked out another pea. “I’m sure Tank will oblige.”

Tank and his cronies had Teddy that same night, two at a time over the bed the way they had tried with Sherlock. In contrast to most of the upstairs boys, who had learned to lie limp and unresisting under Mr. Gamfield--or the occasional new inmate who fought and struggled--Teddy wriggled, moaned, sighed, and cooed about the size of their cocks until Morris, who was at heart more of a sadist than a sensualist, gave up in disgust and went to harass a new arrival who still had some fight in him. Tank, however, found Teddy delightful. All he really wanted was to get off with as little effort as possible, so he was happy to have Teddy every night.

“The things he can do with that mouth!” he told John one evening, when Teddy had gone off for “spiritual instruction” with Mr. Posey. “And he likes doing it. You really should have a go, John. Or you could take him tonight if you’d rather, it’s lovely when he comes back from Mr. Posey already stretched out and slippery--”

“I have to study with Mike,” John said hastily and beat a quick retreat.

Business at the hospital had slowed with the warmer weather, and John and Mike and Molly had more time for study now. They often met in the wardroom after their teaching rounds, talking about what they had learned and deciding who would read up on which topic that night. Dr. Woodcourt warned them that warmer weather often brought dysentery, so they went late one afternoon quizzing each other and had to race to get back for dinner.

In the dining hall, John could see at once that something had happened. There was a low excited buzzing filling the room, and the staff scolding for quiet seemed more anxious than usual. “What’s up?” he muttered to Sherlock as he slid into his seat.

“The board of governors arrived unannounced today,” Sherlock said quietly. In contrast to the rest of the students he was frowning. “They found Mr. Temple insensate from drink, so he was sacked on the spot. Mr. Posey is temporarily headmaster until the board appoints a replacement.”

“Oh,” John said. He was not sure why Sherlock seemed to find this concerning. “Well, he wasn’t exactly doing a bang-up job, was he? Maybe the new bloke--”

“Will have been appointed by a board who are themselves Moriarty cronies, John, how likely do you think it that they’ll have our well-being at heart? We should go. Quickly, before the new headmaster arrives.”

“How?” John asked, startled. Sherlock’s initial plan for their escape had hinged on the assistance of Mike’s mother, who had agreed to purchase clothing and provide a night’s shelter. Sadly, the
unfortunate woman had died of a fever a month before, and Sherlock was still trying to come up with an alternate plan.

“I should have spoken to Greaves when he was here last week,” Sherlock muttered, clearly annoyed with himself. “Now he won’t be back for ages, and we’ll have to have clothes, and a place to stay, but I’m not sure we can trust—”

“All right, don’t panic.” John lay a soothing hand on Sherlock’s arm. “It will take them some time to get a new headmaster, and in the meantime Mr. Posey isn’t going to start cracking down all of a sudden. Just take a day or two and think about it.”

Sherlock thought about it. This meant, of course, that he neglected to do much of anything else, such as sleeping or eating, and John had to go back to pinning him down with his arms at night to get any sleep at all. He was tired and a little grouchy at work.

“Shepsis,” Dr. Woodcourt said. “In this case due to blood poisoning, but we have seen it before in pneumonia or brain fever, and often it follows childbirth. You see the fever, the body burning itself—how do we fight it?”

“We replenish what the body loses in the fight,” Molly said, gesturing. They were in the critical ward, standing over the cot of a man who had previously been a strong and healthy laborer before his foot was crushed by a stone. He had survived the removal of his gangrenous foot, but the infection had already spread. One of the nurses was spooning broth into the man’s mouth, a little at a time, as he shook with chills. “Broth for salt and meat, tea for sugar, as much liquid as possible.”

“Yes. As long as the body still burns we can still help. When the extremities begin to grow cold—” he broke off, frowning. “What was that?”

They had all heard it—a dull, echoing BOOM that rattled the glass in the panes. “Something at the factory, I think, sir,” John said.

“There’s smoke,” Molly said suddenly, a tinge of alarm in her voice. They all looked out the window, seeing a plume of smoke rising over the river, and John had a moment’s gratitude that Sherlock was safe in the cellars, where the little air that circulated came right off the river and was usually free of pollution.

“A fire,” Mike began, and then they heard the sound of shouting. Without even stopping to talk they all made for the stairs at once.

The chaos hit a few minutes later, when workers began arriving from the factory carrying the injured. Dr. Woodcourt had already set up a command station in the front hall by then: the experienced nurses sorting patients as they came in, he and Molly taking the more seriously injured patients, the walking wounded going to John and Mike. Some, John saw, were being sent straight to a ward sister in a corner, who would give them an injection of morphine and bid their friends stay nearby. They were the ones who could not be helped, John realized.

“John!”

John turned at the cry and saw Tank barrelling past the nurses at the front as though they were not even there. He was clutching a burned, bloody bundle in his arms and John realized in horror that it was Leo. “Oh my God,” he said.

“Help him, you have to help him, you’re practically a doctor now, HELP HIM,” Tank bellowed, but John did not need the nurse following on his heels to know that Leo was beyond help.
“Set him here,” John said and knelt beside Leo, who was still struggling to draw breath. “Leo? Can you hear me? We’re going to give you something for the pain, all right? There’s going to be a bit of a sting. Tank is going to hold your hand.” Tank grabbed for it, desperately grateful for some way to help. “His--his brother,” John said, thinking quickly, to the nurse. “His brother is at the storerooms at the school. I’m going to run fetch him.”

“Be quick about it,” the nurse said, already turning away.

John ran faster than he had ever thought possible. He flew through the kitchens, registering the startled faces of the workers there, and down to the cellars, where he almost crashed into Sherlock, counting out soap.

John had a split second of astonishment that Sherlock had been right--there was an incredible amount of soap--before he sucked in enough air to gasp, “Pip.”

Sherlock, who had been staring at him in bewilderment, now seemed to read his face in a glance and said “Wait here.” He shot off into the labyrinthine darkness of the storerooms without even a candle.

“What happened?” a voice behind him asked and John turned to see an old man who had come up with Ernie, frowning. Old Peters, John assumed.

“I’m going to take you to him, come on,” John said and they ran, pelting back across the courtyard and back into the hospital, which was filled the cries and moans of the injured. John spotted Tank’s big form across the room and led Pip over quickly. Pip crumpled at the sight of Leo, folding to the floor at his side with his face screwed up in anguish.

“Hold his hand,” John said thickly. “Let him know you’re here, all right?”

“Leo,” whispered Pip. He curled over the battered body, clutching it, tears running over his face and dripping onto Leo’s. Leo’s eyes cracked open and found Pip and John felt a brief flicker of gratitude that they had at least returned in time. He pushed himself up and pulled at Tank.

“What? What are you doing?”

“Let’s go. Give them some privacy.”

“You can’t go,” Tank said in disbelief. “You have to do something! Look at him!”

“There’s nothing I can do, Tank.”

“Don’t say that!” Tank shouted. He loomed in front of John, huge and threatening, raising his fist as though as to pummel John into submission. “There has to be something!”

John stepped forward, directly into his face. “You listen to me,” he said, voice utterly quiet. “There is nothing I or anyone else can do for him now, not in this world. But there are others here who need me. Now either be a man and help, or get the hell out.”

For a minute he really thought Tank would punch him, but then he lowered his fist and all the fight went out of him. “Where? What do I do?”

“Go to that nurse there, the one with the papers. Tell her you can shift patients, and be gentle when you pick them up, all right?”
Tank nodded, gave one last sad look at Leo and Pip, then squared his shoulders and marched off. John turned and almost smacked into Ernie, who was directly behind him.

“What are you doing here?”

“Seven said we could help,” Ernie said. He held up his hands, and John saw he was clutching a pencil and a handful of tags. “You tell me what needs doing, and I write it on the tag, see?”

John glanced over in time to see Sherlock deftly tagging a badly burned man and then hopping over him to follow Dr. Woodcourt to the next victim as a nurse scurried to read the tag. “Clever Seven,” he muttered. “All right, let’s go.”

They worked for hours, long into the night. John lost track of Sherlock, although he once glimpsed his tall head over the crush in the hall, moving swiftly toward the stairs on some errand. Ernie proved quite useful, staying on after the patients were tagged to hold the lamp and pass supplies for John while he worked. John’s suturing skills were rudimentary and did not produce a very lovely result, but they held flesh together and stopped the bleeding, which he hoped was good enough.

It was quite late when one of the nurses stopped at his side to tell him, “That’s the lot for down here. They could use you up with the burns when you’re done.”

“All right,” John said. He looked around, surprised to see the room had emptied out.

“Two doctors came over the river to help, with some more trained nurses as well,” the nurse said, seeing his look. “They’re all in the operating theatre now.”

John nodded. He was about to ask the time when he heard the great church clock beginning to chime: one, two, three. Jesus. He pushed himself up before he could register how tired he was and turned to Ernie. “You go on back to the school and get some sleep. You’ll be needed tomorrow in the storerooms.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure...you were a great help, though, Ernie. Thank you. Look after Pip, won’t you?”

“Course,” Ernie said gravely.

“And tell Stephen...” John hesitated. “Tell him I don’t know when I’ll be back, and to be careful.”

“I will. There’s bread and tea in the wardroom, if you want to get a bite before you go up.”

“I might, once I clean my hands.” John sighed. “You get some on the way if you like. Go on now.”

John cleaned himself as best he could, swigged some lukewarm tea, and went to look for Mike. The smell upstairs was horrible, charred and sweetish, and he followed it into the largest ward, packed close with beds. The man Mike was working over was tall and thin—a bit like Sherlock—and John’s stomach roiled at his burns, which were so extensive as to render him unrecognizable. He saw a tag in Sherlock’s elegant handwriting reading “GEORGE BAKER, wife MARIA, Cobbler Lane” at its top and realized he must have sought identification from the man’s work mates. The man was moaning, a continual, grinding noise that put John’s teeth on edge.

“We’ve no more morphine,” Mike said grimly. “The head nurse has already sent an appeal to the patrons, but for now we’re getting by with laudanum for those who can drink. Sister thinks Dr. Woodcourt has some stowed in his office for emergencies, though, and she reckons this is an emergency, so she’s gone to hunt for it.”
John went to the next bed, occupied by a much smaller figure almost as badly burned, muttering to itself in a soft whisper. The muttering was familiar, but it took John a moment to realize that the boy was Scrap. He recognized the prayers now, having heard them a few times at the hospital. “Scrap?” he asked gently. “Are you a Roman Catholic?”

Scrap did not pause in his muttering or open his eyes, but he nodded. John took a cloth and carefully wet the charred sleeve on his burned arm. “Should you like a priest?”

Scrap’s eyes flew open as John tried to work at the cloth, “No, don’t! Please don’t!”

“Scrap, I have to,” John began but Scrap begged, “Please, it hurts. And please don’t fetch the priest.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ll have to make my confession and I’ll have to tell him that I want to die. And then he won’t let me go to heaven.”

“You don’t mean that,” John whispered.

Scrap closed his eyes again, one tear trickling slowly over his blistered cheek. “It hurts too much. And I don’t want to be here anymore. I want my brother, and my mam.”

John let go of the sleeve. He looked down at Scrap, at his ruined, blackened hands. Even if he survived his burns—which was unlikely—and the inevitable infections he would be crippled, unable to work; he would have to beg in the streets or starve. He looked at the pain on his face and thought of his life at St. Bart’s: the factory, Mr. Gamfield, watery soup. He put a soft hand on a patch of Scrap’s remaining hair and said, “We’re going to get you something for the pain. Just a bit longer.”

At that very moment he heard brisk footsteps and in came the ward sister, face a mix of guilt and satisfaction, a clutch of bottles in her hands. She handed one to Mike and one to John and said, “That’s really the end, so use it sparingly.”

John thanked her absently and filled his syringe, wondering if poor Scrap had any decent veins in his unburnt skin. He reached for his tourniquet and then abruptly realized he had automatically filled the entire syringe, as he would for a full-grown man. God, he was tired. That was far too much for Scrap, it would…

John stilled. He looked at the syringe. He thought of the words Dr. Woodcourt had taught them: *I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked. I will do no harm.* But John had not taken any oath, not yet. And where, here, was the greater harm?

Scrap whimpered when John lifted his arm to fix the tourniquet, but he did not respond at all to the bite and burn of the injection. John took the tourniquet off and put his hand in Scrap’s hair again. “Scrap?” he whispered. “I don’t know those prayers you’re saying, but I know the Our Father. Do you know that one? Catholics say that too, don’t they? Shall we say it together?”

The next several days passed in a blur. At times John felt as if time were passing incredibly slowly--hour after hour of cleaning and bandaging and coaxing patients to drink--and yet he would blink and somehow day had changed to night. When his hands began shaking he would snatch quick meals in the wardroom, downing cups and cups of tea drunk standing or sitting briefly to make notes. When he was too exhausted to see straight he would stumble upstairs to the orderlies’ dormitories and sleep in the first empty bed he found, regardless of the hour, until someone shook his shoulder to take his place.
He learned later it was a week to the day that Dr. Woodcourt found him writing on a chart and took it out of his hands. “John,” he said. “Go home.”

John stared at him blankly. For a minute he thought Dr. Woodcourt wanted him to go to Sherrinford Hall and he felt a kind of confused exultation: had Sherlock solved everything whilst John had been at the hospital?

“Go back to the school,” Dr. Woodcourt said patiently. “Sleep in your own bed tonight. Have a full night’s sleep and a real breakfast and come back in the morning. All right?”

“Mike and Molly…”

“Already gone. Go on now.”

John nodded dumbly and took his leave. He had no idea what time it was, but when he stumbled out into the courtyard he thought perhaps it was evening; the air had a kind of softness to it, and the sun was low behind the factory. He saw a thin, straight figure sitting on the steps by the kitchen door at Bart’s. As he drew nearer he realized dimly that it was Sherlock, sitting very still and watching John stumble toward him. His eyes were the same twilight gray as the sky, John noticed. He felt, distantly, that he was glad to see Sherlock, but he seemed to belong to another world or another life, far removed from the charred, bloody place that had been John’s reality lately.

He came to a stop in front of Sherlock and Sherlock looked up at him, a little crease between his eyes. “What are you doing sitting out here?”

“I saw Mike come back at the end of dinner,” Sherlock said. “He said you were coming.” He lifted his cupped hands: a slice of bread. “I thought you might be hungry, I saved you this.”

“Thanks,” John said. He sat down next to Sherlock and ate the bread, slowly, a bite at a time. He was no longer sure if he were hungry or not. There was a dull sound in his ears, like the groaning of George Baker. He finished the bread and then looked at his hands, which had dried blood under the nails, and had no idea what to do next.

“Come on,” Sherlock said quietly, “they’re going up to bed,” and he hauled John up to his feet. John followed him, still feeling numb and distant, up to the washroom, where Sherlock took the soap from him and scrubbed John’s hands clean without a word.

In the dormitory a few people tried to hail John but Sherlock glared them all into silence and John climbed gratefully into bed. He was exhausted now, thankful for the familiar feel of his saggy, swaying cot. Sherlock pushed him onto his side and wrapped himself around him, arms encircling his chest, cheek against John’s hair.

I told you we would fit better this way, John thought, but he could not quite manage to say the words aloud. He felt warm, and clean, and safe, and so terribly tired. Sherlock began to sing to him, very softly, barely a whisper in John’s ear.

*Potatoes are dug and the frost is all over*

*Kitty lie over, close to the wall*

*Summer is come and we’re all in the clover*

*Kitty lie over, close to the wall.*

He sang every verse and did not get a single word wrong, but long before he finished John was fast
“John, I have a request to make of you.”

John looked up in surprise. He was unaccustomed to seeing Dr. Woodcourt so early in the morning. Nearly two weeks after the explosion the hospital still had not returned to normal, and they had three packed critical wards. John had not been back to Bart’s since the night he slept eight straight hours in Sherlock’s arms.

“Of course, sir.”

“A young woman came in last night with a complaint of the abdomen,” Dr. Woodcourt said, fiddling absentmindedly with his pocket watch. “She is very young—unmarried—and it seems her condition has deteriorated significantly in the night. From what Sister tells me, she thought to erase one sin by committing another, and is now paying the price.”

John nodded to show he followed.

“She needs to be moved to a critical ward and normally I would place her in the one currently being overseen by Molly, as she has the women’s ward as well as some of the injured workers. However…” Dr. Woodcourt was now downright fidgeting, not meeting John’s eye. “Sister tells me that as her fever has risen the young woman has become very intemperate in her speech. It seems that she was previously living a life of the most shocking debauchery, and she has spoken quite lewdly to the nurses who have her in their care. I know Molly feels my concern rather too delicate, but I see her as under my protection and take my responsibility in acting *in loco parentis*, as it were, very seriously. I should not like her to be exposed to such conversation.”

“To be sure, sir,” answered John, who was not really certain exactly where the doctor was going with this.

Dr. Woodcourt looked relieved. “Of the two of you I rather thought you the better choice than Mike. I believe his life to have been somewhat more sheltered before he came here, and from what I hear of the patient’s talk…I should not like for him to take any ideas, or perhaps become, ah, interested…” He was now somewhat red in the face. “I do not think there is such danger in your case.”

“I suppose not, sir,” John said, now completely confused.

“Excellent.” Dr. Woodcourt beamed. “I’ll have her moved over directly.”

John frowned after him as he made his departure. What kind of ideas did the doctor think the young woman would give Mike? And why did he think John more likely to be immune?

He soon found out. The patient who was moved into the last bit of empty space in John’s ward turned out to be very young indeed—only a few years older than John, he thought—and startlingly pretty, even with her face flushed and swollen from fever. She had an enormous mass of thick dark hair that the nurse hefted with disapproval. “We’ll want this off,” she said decisively, reaching for her scissors.

“Not my hair, you old bat,” the woman slurred from the pillow. “The gentlemen like my hair—oh.” She clutched at her abdomen, face screwed up in pain.

“What’s your name?” John asked kindly, fetching a basin and a cup of water.
The girl cracked heavy black lashes to show deep sapphire eyes. She licked at her dry lips. “I’m the Woman,” she said, lips curling up in a slow, seductive smile. “The only woman you’ll ever want. Everyone else will be nothing, after me. Mmmmm, look at you. I think you must have a very thick cock, mustn’t you? Maybe not very long, but so plump...is the hair down there golden, too?” She lowered her lashes further, looking almost drunken, even though her hands were clenched in the bedclothes from pain. She lowered her voice to a throaty purr. “Shall I suck it?” Her cracked tongue flicked out again, like a lascivious cat.

John blinked. He set the basin down and looked at the nurse, whose eyebrows had disappeared into her cap. “Cut away,” he told her. “Maybe that will get her fever down.”

They called her Mrs. Smith, a polite fiction, even as the young woman hooted at the idea of marriage but refused to give them any other name. She did not hoot long, however. As her pain and fever worsened she subsided into moaning, tossing her shorn head on the pillow and holding her body rigid, the slightest jarring of the bed causing her to cry out in pain. John had seen women on teaching rounds suffering sepsis following abortions, but this was the first he had had personally under his care. The smell of the foul bloody flow between her legs was bad enough to make him miss the stench of burns, but in the end sepsis was sepsis and he fought it as he always did: broth and tea and water; cool cloths; poultices. It was a hard fight.

Three days along Mike stopped in his ward. “Aren’t you going back to the school? Dr. Woodcourt said he thought we could resume our regular shifts.”

“No,” John answered. “He’s asked me to take special charge of this patient, and she’s in a bad way. Dr. Woodcourt reckons the crisis will be tonight.”

Mike leaned over to look at the Woman. She was not so pretty now, with her hair shorn and eyes sunken, but even deep in fever she was still arresting. “She looks bad. Do you think she’ll pull through?”

“She’s young and strong, so...I hope so. Oh, Mike, wait.” As Mike turned to leave John had had a sudden flash of Sherlock sitting in the courtyard waiting, growing anxious when John did not appear. “Will you take Stephen a note?”

“Of course,” Mike said. John tore a piece of paper from a chart and wrote swiftly, Dear Sher--,” then quickly scribbling it out and writing Dear 7, I’m not able to return for a few days yet but will be back as soon as I can. Be careful. Yours, John. He folded it over once and handed it to Mike.

Mike tucked it into his pocket and said, “Right, see you in the morning then. Rest a bit if you get a chance.” John watched him go, feeling oddly bereft knowing that he was returning to the dining hall and Sherlock while John remained behind. He made his rounds, checking on the other patients--all more or less stable--before returning to the Woman’s bedside and resuming with his sponging and spooning. “Come on lassie, swallow it down now,” he murmured. “You’re hot as an oven and dry as a bone, just drink a little.”

After a while John switched to wiping her face and brow with a damp cloth, trying to cool the fever. He kept talking to her, knowing it was unlikely she could hear him, but trying everything he could to bolster her in her fight. He wondered idly how Dr. Woodcourt had known that her teasing would neither shock nor arouse him. If there was one thing he was certain of after Callie--well, he’d really known it long before, but that had cemented it--it was that women held no interest for him. As for what he really did want, well, that was a secret he would take with him to the grave.
The Woman stirred for the first time, lashes flickering. John reached quickly for the water and held it to her lips. “Here you are. Just wet your lips a bit, there’s a girl.”

She tried, but then grimaced and turned her face away, wincing. “It hurts,” she whispered. “It hurts in my belly.”

“I know, lass, just a drop.”

He wet the cloth and dribbled a little into her mouth, then lay another across her dry, burning forehead. It was very late, after midnight, the time when death drew closest to those hovering on the threshold. The Woman seemed to doze for a bit but then she opened her eyes again, fixing them on John with a desperate intensity.

“Where am I?”

“You’re at the hospital,” John said gently. “In Blastburn.”

“Has he found me?”

“Who?”

“Him.” She shuddered. “I know he’s looking. He’ll want me dead, he won’t rest until I’m dead.”

“There’s been no one here, Missus.”

She gave a sharp bark of hoarse laughter and for a moment he caught a glimpse of the bold girl who had teased him when she first came. “I’m no one’s missus,” she said and then caught her breath in a groan.

“Miss, then. There’s been no one looking for you.”

She rested a minute, panting shallowly through the pain. She gritted her teeth and looked at him, her eyes bright with fever. “Am I dying?”

He hesitated, but somehow he knew she would scorn anything but the truth. “I don’t know, Miss. You’re very ill. But not if I can help it.”

“I have to tell you,” she said abruptly. “Someone else has to know. I can’t die with no one else knowing. If this doesn’t kill me he will. I see him all the time, I keep seeing him, I see him right now but you say he’s not here—he isn’t, is he? Is he here?” Her voice was rising and John hastened to soothe her.

“No one is here. It’s just the fever. Will you not drink just a little? I have tea, or broth…”

She subsided and let him drip a little tea between her cracked lips. “Someone else has to know,” she whispered again. She fixed her burning eyes on him. “He killed those people. The Bennets and the Sherrinfords. And then he used their deaths as a pretext to arrest and imprison and hang everyone who opposed him. And now he’s trumping up a war with France. He did it and he kept the letters so I know there is proof, and he has them in his rooms, and someone else has to know.”

John stared. He felt as though he were frozen in place, as though all the air had gone out of the room.

The Woman gasped for breath, shallow and fast, her eyes turning up to the ceiling. “Now you know,” she said hoarsely.

“Who?” John asked, jolted by the weakness in her voice. “Who did this?”
“He is a terrible man,” the Woman said hoarsely. Her eyes squeezed shut as though to hold back tears she was too dehydrated to cry.

“Who? Who is looking for you?”

She looked at him one last time, her hot eyes burning like a blue flame. “Sir James Moriarty.”

The Woman did not speak again. Instead as the night wore on to its darkest hours she seemed to fall into a sort of stupor, unresponsive to John’s words or his touch. He kept on, valiantly sponging her with cool cloths and dripping water into her mouth. The lamps burned low. John thought tiredly that he could understand why the poor girl saw Moriarty everywhere—the shadows on the wall were enough to give anyone fright even without a fever. It felt as though he were the only one awake in the world.

John realized suddenly that the Woman’s intermittent moaning had stopped and she lay still on the bed. His heart stopped. Slowly, he leaned forward and lifted her hand; it was cool, and for a second John felt a rush of utter failure and despair before her fingers twitched and he felt hurriedly for a pulse. It beat rapid and faint under his fingers. She was not dead. Her fever had broken.

“You’re going to live,” John whispered. He reached for the basin and wiped the sweat that now beaded her brow. “ Brave lassie, you’ve walked through the Valley and come out the other side.” He made her as comfortable as possible as she slept heavily on, no longer feeling tired in his exaltation, wishing he could dash straight to Bart’s to tell Sherlock of the secret he had learned. But as that was impossible, he kicked off his shoes and swung himself onto an empty cot next, thinking to ponder more on what she had told him, but he was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

“John? John!”

John blinked sluggishly. Morning light was streaming through the windows and Mike was shaking his shoulder, holding out a cup of tea.

“Unf,” John said. He sat up, shaking his head to clear it, and took the tea gratefully. “Thanks, Mike. Is it late?”

“No, I just got here. Looks like her fever’s broken, then? Well done you!”

“Yes,” John said, grinning. Then he remembered what he had learned last night and almost choked on his tea.

“Easy there,” Mike said, patting his back. “There’s more in the wardroom if you need it. And Stephen sent this.” He handed John a slice of bread and his note, written all over the back in Sherlock’s tight handwriting.

“Ta,” John said, sliding the note in his pocket for later and eating the bread hungrily. “I’d best get to work. Thanks for waking me up, Mike.”

“No problem. See you on rounds,” Mike said, taking his leave.

Dr. Woodcourt was delighted to find their mysterious patient appeared likely to survive. “Let her sleep today, and when she wakes have her take some broth and a little wine,” he instructed John. “Broth, not tea--she’s lost a fair amount of blood over the course of the illness, and will need to build
up her strength.”

“Broth,” John muttered, making a note.

The Woman did in fact sleep most of the day, rousing only briefly and taking no interest in the broth and wine John tried to press on her. Her fever stayed down, though, and her color was better. When Mike came by to see if John would be returning to Bart’s that night John hesitated, torn between the longing to see Sherlock and tell his news and the hope that he could persuade the Woman to talk to him again when they had relative privacy. “Just a minute,” he finally begged, and wrote Sherlock a fast note on another scrap of paper—not much more than I miss you too and eat your bread tomorrow, I’m fine. He pressed it into Mike’s hand and bit his lip, turning back to his patients.

Late in the evening, she finally stirred, long lashes flickering. She looked, for a minute, briefly disoriented before she caught his eye, when she smiled her slow, knowing smile. “I’ll have that wine now,” she purred.

John could not help smiling back. “Maybe a bit of water first,” he said. He helped her sit, wincing and hissing, and brought her a cup of water, which she drank thirstily, and then the wine. He was aware of her considering eyes on him.

“Are you my doctor?”

He laughed. “Just a student, miss.”

“Well, you seem a very good one...can you answer a question for me?”

“I’ll try, miss.”

“Am I barren now?”

John stilled. He could answer the question, but was not sure he wanted to. The Woman’s voice had been light, but he could not imagine that she did not care about the answer.

“It’s impossible to be sure, miss, but...most likely so, yes.”

She turned her head away as though interested in the dark window and John busied himself refilling her water cup. When he returned she was perfectly composed, ruffling the short hair at the back of her head with curious fingers.

“You know, I quite like my hair off like this. So much lighter! Pity I shall have to grow it back.” She sighed in a dramatic way that reminded him a little of Sherlock. “I suppose I shall have to get a wig in the meantime. Well, actually…” Her face turned considering and John followed her thought easily: if she was hiding in fear of her life, a different hair color might come in very handy.

John’s heartbeat picked up. “I understand from what you said before that you are in a bit of trouble,” he began carefully. “It’s possible--”

“What?” she said sharply. “What did I say?”

“You said that you are in danger, that you have a powerful enemy...”

She forced a laugh, a tinkling carefree sound utterly at odds with her terrified eyes. “Oh, that was just the fever. I’m in no danger now that you’ve taken such good care of me.” That smile again, the smile that said I know all your deepest desires, and I can make them come true. “I hope I can repay you for all your kindness.”
John smiled back, undistracted. “I think I can help you.”

“No.” Her eyes were hard now, the seductive smile gone. “You can’t. You must forget what you thought you heard.”

“But--”

“No. I’m tired now, I’m going to sleep. Is there a screen you can bring for my bed? I don’t like to think of all these men’s eyes on me, now that I’m in my right mind.”

John doubted very much that she ever minded men’s eyes on her--not that many were, in this ward--but he obligingly found the screen nonetheless. Then he took himself off to the orderlies’ dormitory to sleep, disappointed but not deterred. John was no Sherlock, but he could deduce well enough that the Woman had not survived so far by trusting men, not even one who had saved her life. He had another idea.

The next night John returned to St. Bart’s, hurrying into the dining hall just as the evening meal was beginning. He made a beeline to Sherlock and pulled up short. Pip was sitting in John’s place.

Well, that was...totally reasonable, of course it was, Pip was alone and grieving now and Sherlock was surely his friend, after all, they did work in the storerooms together. Although so did Ernie, John thought a little resentfully. But everyone had already started eating, and he could not be so churlish as to turf Pip out of his seat when he was already chewing his bread. He took a seat farther down the table, realizing after he did so that he had sat down next to Teddy.

“John!” Teddy said brightly. “You’re back! We’ve so missed you. Has it been dreadful at the hospital?” He gazed at John with an expression of melting sympathy that made John grit his teeth. He glanced away toward Sherlock and saw his expression of delighted surprise turn to confusion at John sitting apart from him. John shrugged and grimaced.

“Mr. Posey’s had a letter,” Teddy remarked. “The new headmaster’s coming in a few weeks, at the end of July.”

“Oh?” John said without much interest. “Do you know anything about him?”

“Apparently he was the head of a workhouse. The letter said he was a strict disciplinarian, and they hoped that he would be able to correct the appalling moral laxity rampant at St. Bart’s.”

That got John’s attention. “Really? That sounds a bit worrisome, doesn’t it?”

Teddy shrugged, fluttering his eyelashes at John and smiling coyly. “Maybe he likes spanking,” he said. “I don’t mind a good spanking, myself.”

Why, John wondered, tucking determinedly into his soup, was everyone determined to flirt with him lately? He responded to the rest of Teddy’s conversational overtures with distracted Mmms, trying to seem as though he was too desperately hungry to chat. When the meal was over he stood, trying to catch Sherlock’s eye, and saw him saying something to Pip as they got up. Pip caught his arm almost angrily but Sherlock shrugged him off, tossing something back over his shoulder as he turned to speak to Tank. John frowned. What was going on? Was Sherlock hatching some new scheme in John’s absence?

When John came around the table, though, Sherlock lit up as he always did.
“I’m so glad you’re back! I didn’t know you were coming.” He clasped John’s hand with so much warmth that John felt his concern melt away.

“I’ve got something to tell you,” he said quickly. “Do you think we can slip out to the courtyard?”

Sherlock understood the implications of what John related to him immediately.

“Letters,” he breathed. “Clearly written by others—he’s keeping them because they implicate his co-conspirators, leverage, but it cuts both ways. If we can get them we can end him. We’ll need her cooperation though.”

“Which is where I’m stuck,” John said. “I don’t blame her; I wouldn’t trust me either. But I’m thinking she might trust you.”

Sherlock was already nodding. “I need to make myself sick,” he said.

“Oh no you don’t. I was thinking you could use your secret staircase to slip down to the cellars and then—”

“Far too risky, anybody could see me. If I convince her to work with us we’ll need to meet multiple times. No, I need to be in the hospital. Don’t look like that, John, you know I’m an expert at making myself mildly ill. It won’t take much in any case, every time I clear my throat Matron is on me like fleas on a dog.”

“I don’t want you taking any chances! You were sick for two months last winter!”

“That was winter, and we’d been in jail for months before that. I’ll be fine.”

Sherlock refused to tell John his plans, and since John could hardly stop him from doing whatever he had in mind in any case he finally gave up arguing. Sure enough, the next afternoon John was just finishing up checking on his patients in the long-term ward when Molly hurried in, her face anxious. John’s heart plummeted right into his shoes.

“John, don’t worry, it doesn’t appear to be serious, but your cousin is here. They’re taking him up to your ward now.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” John muttered. He made for the hall without even waiting for Molly, pounding up the stairs to where he could hear Sherlock coughing from the end of the hall.

Sherlock had just been settled in the empty cot, already propped up with an extra pillow. He was flushed from coughing and looking pitifully up at the nurse who was dosing him with medicine.

“What did Dr. Woodcourt say?” John asked her.

The nurse handed him Sherlock’s chart. “He’s not too bad, but Doctor wants him to stay a few days as a precaution. Here’s the medication list. You’re to stay in bed for now,” she said sternly to Sherlock, who nodded meekly and coughed.

“You idiot, what did you do?” John hissed as soon as she left.

Sherlock immediately left off swooning against his pillows and sat up. “I smoked Old Peters’ pipe whilst he had his nap. Don’t worry, I’m very good at it—I know exactly how much smoke to hold in my lungs to make myself good and wheezy for a day or so, but it will clear up quickly. Mycroft went through a stage where he smoked a pipe so I pilfered one and used to use it in London to get out of
things like parties.” He coughed again. It sounded awful.

John handed him some water. “I hope you’re right,” he said. “Well, act as sickly as you want today, it will give me an excuse to stay the night.”

Sherlock nodded at the screen. “Is that her?”

“Yes, but wait until tonight when everyone’s asl...
“Am I?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said simply. “You are. Because he is your enemy too, and you don’t have the protection of being dead. Was that his child you were carrying? He is a ruthless man and he will track you down eventually, and you know it.”

The Woman was silent a long time, looking at the window again. Finally she turned back to Sherlock, that assured gleam once again in her eyes.

“I am honored to make your acquaintance, my Lord,” she said, lips curving as she held out an elegant hand to be kissed. “My name is Irene Adler, although I will thank you to forget that name after tonight.”

Sherlock bent his head over her hand in a graceful bow, then gave her a sly grin that mirrored Irene’s own. “Please, call me Seven.”

Chapter End Notes

1) Dr. Woodcourt was way ahead of his time. He studied under the legendary Dr. Lister at Glasgow, so he was into handwashing before handwashing was cool. His approach to sepsis was cutting edge for the period, when "feed a cold, starve a fever" was still considered gospel. Of course, in the pre-antibiotic era, surviving sepsis was more dependent on luck and how healthy the patient was to begin with than with the medical care received, but aggressive supportive care definitely had a role to play.

2) Triage as we know it today came out of the Napoleonic Wars, but was not well-established outside of the military at this time. Large-scale industrial accidents actually played a large part in pushing the practice into civilian emergency medicine.

3) Louisa May Alcott--who was a Civil War nurse and knew what she was talking about--wrote: "Seldom, except in books, do the dying utter memorable words, see visions, or depart with beautified countenances." She was absolutely right. But as a purveyor of faux-Victorian melodrama, I reserve the right to include a highly unrealistic deathbed confession scene.

To complete the classic girls' stories trifecta: Beth's story in "Little Women" (she contracts rheumatic fever while caring for a poor family, develops secondary heart failure, and dies several years later) is completely accurate.

4) Dickens, who lost children of his own, undoubtedly knew this too, but his deathbed scenes are such a hugely memorable part of his books that no self-respecting faux Dickens could go without. The one in this chapter is an homage to the death of Jo in "Bleak House". It's at the end of Chapter 47. You can Google it--the whole thing is online--scroll down to the last couple paragraphs, and just try not to cry. Seriously, I dare you.
“When I first learned that Sir James Moriarty desired an introduction, I was quite surprised,” Irene said. John had brought another chair and they were now gathered in a little knot around her bed, their fledgling conspiracy lit by a single candle. “He has no reputation for licentiousness—truthfully he has the reputation of being no fun whatsoever. I was inclined to decline, but it seemed imprudent. Even then—this was a few months ago—he was known to be the most powerful man in England. And it seemed a bit of a challenge, so we met. As it turned out, he did not desire my acquaintance for himself but for his son.”

John felt Sherlock still beside him.

“Little Jimmy had been sent down, it seemed; it must have taken a tremendous amount to hush up the scandal—or maybe not, perhaps everyone was too afraid of Sir James to speak. But at any rate his university career was finished. Obviously, something must be done about the boy, and apparently that something was me. I had the impression,” Irene said meditatively, “that he really didn’t care that his son was a sadist and a killer, although he wished he’d been more discreet. No, what bothered him was that his son was an unrepentant invert. ‘He was supposed to have given up that nonsense when he left school,’ was what he told me. Well, you’d know about that, wouldn’t you, love?” She raised her eyebrows at Sherlock.

“Actually, yes,” Sherlock said quietly. “I was at school with Jim. He was known to be viciously cruel even then.”

“Ah. I assume Sir James had tried the usual whores, but Junior still preferred boys. Quite young boys, and he liked to hurt them. As it happens, I am no ordinary courtesan, Mr. Seven. I have a very select clientele who appreciate the rather specialized services I provide.”

“And those services are…?”

Irene smiled her mischievous smile. “Certain gentlemen find that, shall we say, a little pain spices up their pleasure. Fortunately for me they generally seem to be very rich and powerful gentlemen. Maybe there are working men who liked to be spanked on the bum, but I’ve never met any. Perhaps it’s something to do with those schools again? Anyway, I’m much in demand, both because I’m quite good at what I do—not many ladies have the stomach for it—and because I’m very discreet. Apparently Sir James thought that I was some sort of kindred spirit to his little monster and that I
would therefore persuade him to man up at last.” She rolled her eyes. “Of course this wasn’t going to work. I did try to tell him at the beginning, but he was quite persuasive.”

“Meaning he offered you a great deal of money up front,” Sherlock said.

“Of course. So I packed up some little ropes and whips and called on Jim, who enjoyed inspecting the merchandise quite a bit—I could tell he was getting all kinds of ideas—but had no interest in the main item on offer, namely me. He did volunteer that he thought if he beat me bloody he might be able to stiffen enough to take me from behind, but as I declined that suggestion, he thanked me for showing him my things, and that was that.” Irene looked thoughtfully into the distance. “At the time I thought he wasn’t all that bad. Mad as a hatter, of course, you could see it in his eyes, but without that calculating quality his father had. But later I heard things that made me wonder if he weren’t far cleverer than he let on. I think he thought he could use me one day. But at the time, as I said, he was polite enough and so I went to his father to tell him it was hopeless, that the best I could do for him was to give him the names of some discreet establishments that could keep Jim in boys as long as he didn’t mess them up too badly. It was late at night, we were at their house in London, most of the servants gone to bed of course, and I saw him in his study. Usually I have gentlemen come to me where my manservants are available if needed, but this being a special case I had agreed to call. Sir James was a bit put out that things had not gone according to plan, and seemed to feel that he had wasted his money; he therefore announced that he intended to have his money’s worth out of me, and rather forcefully took me to his bedchamber.” She had been looking away but now glanced at John for the first time. “I had no opportunity to take precautions,” she said quietly. “And no opportunity to refuse. Otherwise, I never would have found myself in this situation.” Her gesture took in the bed, the hospital, her general debilitation.

“I’m sorry,” John said.

“Lady Moriarty almost never comes to London,” Sherlock said softly. “They say she is in ill health. They also say she is never seen in public without a veil.”

“Yes, well. Got off rather lucky, then, all in all—and now I’ve one less thing to worry about in the future.” Her bright smile flashed again. “Now for the interesting part. There I am in Sir James’ bed, after a perfectly dreadful time, wondering how I can get to some vinegar quickly with the most powerful man in England sprawled out snoring on top of me, when all of a sudden comes a knock on the door and a man calling to Sir James that there is an urgent letter for him. Sir James bolts up, snatches up his dressing gown, and hisses for me to go and hide in his dressing room. Off I pop and of course I have a quick snoop, but spy nothing good, so instead I put my eye to the keyhole. Sir James was evidently outside in the study for I could hear him talking, and then he came back in the bedroom saying, ‘Just wait a minute, I shall need to write a reply.’ He reached for a picture on the wall and it swung open to reveal a little cupboard filled with papers, set the letter inside it, pushed the picture back, and went back out into the study, shutting the door. Now understand, Mr. Seven, that while I rarely encounter any trouble from the gentlemen with whom I associate professionally, it is always wise to take precautions to ensure that if anyone wishes to make any trouble for me, he might find it a bit insalubrious.”

“You provide for the possibility of blackmail, in other words.”

“And I’ve not had to use it yet, but as I say, it’s wise to be prepared. So as soon as the door shut I nipped out and opened the picture myself to have a look. The letter he had placed on top was several pages long and I saw at once that it was from a colonel in the army—"

“Sebastian Moran?” Sherlock asked quickly.

“I don’t remember, I’m afraid. But the upshot was that Moriarty and this colonel were planning an
attack on a cargo ship, an East India Company vessel, which they intended to pass off as an attack by
the French. I was shocked. Of course, I was also deeply interested. I quickly rifled through the rest of
the papers and a name caught my eye, a former client, which was how I saw that Sir James had also
been behind the dreadful attacks of last summer.”

Sherlock blinked.

John looked from him to Irene and then said awkwardly, “The, ah, client…”

“Oh! No! Heavens. My dear Mr. Seven, please believe me, if there was a man in London with a
more…ah…chaste reputation than the Earl, there was certainly none that deserved it more. Except
perhaps your brother. No, the client was the late Mr. Bennett. Lovely man, such a pity; he liked to
call me ‘Nanny’.” Irene rolled her eyes, then apparently realized she was speaking of the dead and
composed her face into a more solemn expression, though her eyes danced. “Most unfortunately I
was still entirely naked so when I heard footsteps approaching I had no opportunity to snatch
anything incriminating. As it was I barely had time to slam the picture closed and make a dive for my
clothing, acting as though I thought he had gone and I was dressing to take my leave.”

“And he let you go,” John said.

“Yes. I did my best to forget the incident until several weeks later, when it became clear that the
consequences of that night were to be more long lasting than I had hoped. The very week I became
sure of things was the one in which he became Prime Minister. I rather thought this would act in my
favor, as Number 10 Downing Street would be a far more public venue than that of our last
encounter. Alas, I underestimated his both his temper and his command. When I told him of my
situation, he expressed amusement that I would think he was to fall for such a whore’s trick. When I
assured him I spoke the truth, and that the child was without a shadow of a doubt his, his face grew
very dark and he told me I would be unwise to threaten him. At this point I had grown angry in my
turn and I told him he was a greater fool than the nation thought if he believed I had threatened him.
Would he like to hear a threat? Very well, here it was: I knew he was creating a false situation to
instigate a war with France, and I knew some newspaper editors who would find the detailed
information I possessed extremely interesting.”

John could feel his mouth hanging open and realized he was, literally, on the edge of his seat.

“And then he became truly angry, and he struck me. Right there in Number Ten! Of course I
screamed blue blazes and he struck me again and I fell down and hit my head on the edge of the
desk. There was a most tremendous commotion, thank God, all sorts of people rushing in, and Sir
James telling them all I had had some sort of fit, and to carry me into a quiet saloon and put me on a
sofa and fetch a physician. I was terrified out of my wits, of course, but I pretended to be in a deep
swoon and when briefly left unattended, I was out of the window in a flash.”

“Oh, well done,” Sherlock said, admiration for a fellow malingerer in his eyes.

“I keep a little house in St. John’s Wood in the name of Mrs. Norton. Occasionally I go there for a bit
of a rest—Mrs. Norton is a widow, and lives very quietly—but I also kept a sum of money there, and
plain clothing. I went straightaway knowing none knew of the house save myself and the old
housekeeper I employ there, who knows me only as Mrs. Norton. I let her clean and bandage me and
then I dressed as a young man—I sometimes do, one can move about so much more freely, and I
thought I would be much less likely to be recognized—went to the station, and caught the first train
to Blastburn.” Her arch smile was a little bitter. “I knew I had to flee. I couldn’t go to France, and I
hoped no one would connect me with the city of my unhappy girlhood. I took a room and sought out
the women who know the dark business I needed. It went wrong, as it often does, and here we are.”
There was a brief silence, broken by Sherlock breathing, “What an excellent adventure.”

“Sherlock!” John gasped.

But Irene threw her head back and laughed. “Do you know, sir, I am beginning to think you may be correct.”

“Just think what fun it will be when we take him down,” Sherlock said. His eyes were sparkling. “There will be plots and hidden identities—you can dress as a boy, I’ve already thought about it—and secret messages—we’ll need a code, oh, what fun, and in the end he will be gone. We shall have a pact.”

“But no spitting this time, please,” John said quickly. “And no, Sherlock, I am not going to fetch a scalpel so that we may all nick our thumbs. Three musketeers.” He held out his hand, palm down. Sherlock shot him a you-are-spoiling-my-fun scowl but wrapped his long fingers over John’s, and Irene lay her small hand daintily over his. “All for one…”

“…and one for all,” Irene and Sherlock chorused and then they drank the rest of Irene’s wine to seal it.

The conspiracy met every night after that. Even John could not help enjoying himself, gathered around Irene’s bed behind her screen in the dim light of the flickering candle.

“We can be certain Sir James keeps the documents still in his rooms, but the question remains as to where,” Sherlock said. “He surely has a new hiding place in his new digs. We need access.”

“Well, that’s not going to be difficult to manage at all,” John said sarcastically.

Sherlock shook his head. “Being at Number Ten makes Sir James more vulnerable, not less. We’ll go in as clerks.”

“I can’t pass as a clerk!”

“Oh, John, don’t be ridiculous. Of course you can. This is the British government—most of those people are there because of who they’re related to, not because of their skill. Half of them are likely far less literate than you are.”

“Which raises the question of whose relative you will be,” Irene said.

“Oh, I’ll be somebody’s natural son. Preferably somebody recently dead, so they can’t disown me. Educated abroad, provisions made by the father I never knew and therefore can’t answer any questions about—I’ll pretend to be older of course—it will be perfect. Whose reputation needs a little tarnishing?”

“No, I’m thinking of whose wife was nastiest to me,” Irene said happily and they were off, discussing the merits of various dead or dying grandees John had never heard of.

“I’m off to bed,” he said, pushing himself up. “Tell me whose bastard you decide to be tomorrow. Sherlock, don’t forget your draught, all right?”

Sherlock coughed into his drawn-up knees and smiled up at him, sweetly and wholly happy. “I might not sleep tonight,” he said. “It makes me look sicker when I sleep in the day.”
John rolled his eyes. As he sank gratefully into an empty cot in the orderlies’ dormitory, though, he thought sleepily that Sherlock had a point. He and Irene were both improving in spite of their late nights; it was only a matter of time before Irene was sent to the women’s ward, and Sherlock returned to the school.

In the end, it was John’s fatigue that was noticed.

“Sherlock,” John said, coming into the ward in the late afternoon, “I’m going back to Bart’s. Dr. Woodcourt says you’re doing fine, and I need to resume my regular shifts.”

“Oh.” Sherlock looked up vaguely, half his mind clearly on the diagram of Number Ten sketched on a piece of paper he had evidently swiped from John’s notebook. “Well, all right. We don’t really need you at this stage; I’ll tell you tomorrow if we come up with anything concerning you.”

John had thought he would need to reassure Sherlock, and was left feeling extraneous and slightly resentful. “Don’t get caught out of bed,” he said shortly, and, when Sherlock did not even bother to answer him, took himself rather sulkily off to school.

Tank at least was happy to see him, judging by the teeth-rattling slap to the back he received, and John found himself relaxing into the familiarity of the dining hall almost against his will. So Sherlock didn’t need him; well, he was happy to have a real meal at a table for once, with the prospect of a full night’s sleep ahead of him. He could even study with Mike, who had brought a textbook back, as they used to.

But before he could cross the hall to join Mike John found himself corralled by Flea.

“When’s Seven coming back?” he demanded.

“Don’t know,” John said, surprised, “Are you needing something from the cellars?”

“No, I want to know about Pip.”

“What about Pip?”

“Is he still laying claim to him?”

“What?” John frowned at him in confusion.

Flea frowned back as though having to explain to the dim-witted. “Seven snatched him up right away, didn’t he? Let Pip have him every night from what I hear. But when you came back he told us he wouldn’t be wanting Pip while you was here but he was still hands off to the rest of us. But now he’s gone off sick and I want to know if it still holds, or if Pip’s free for the taking now.”

“No idea,” John said shortly. “You’ll have to ask him when he comes back.”

Flea scowled and muttered something irritable but John had stopped listening. He felt as though he had been knocked from a horse at full gallop, tumbling into the dirt with no idea of what had hit him. *Let Pip have him every night?* Sherlock? His Sherlock? All this time, all these months—*years*—that John had wanted and longed with every fiber of his being but had pushed it down, never even let himself think of it because it was wrong, it was a sin, it was a terrible thing and Sherlock was so pure, so immaculate, so untouchable and he had let... Pip...

John turned away and strode straight for the staircase, upstairs to the dormitory where he knew Tank kept the gin hidden. He sat down against the wall and took a long pull from the bottle, relishing the burn of alcohol down his throat. His guts roiled with a scalding jealousy and he drank again. He
couldn’t bear to think of it, to think of Sherlock--but he saw in his mind’s eye that night in the dining hall, Pip’s face darkening when Sherlock turned away toward John. Pip had taken him. Pip had had Sherlock, had pushed him down on the bed and done what John had never once even let himself admit he wanted and Sherlock had let him.

By the time the other boys came pounding up the stairs John was half drunk and half angry and thoroughly miserable. It was easier to feel the anger than the pain, which he thought might destroy him, so he had kept feeding the anger with the gin. Now he replaced the bottle in its hiding place and headed for the washroom, almost hoping someone would jostle him so he had an excuse to start a fight.

No one did. He was halfway through washing when someone joined him at the basin and said brightly, “Oh, hullo, John. Are you back for good?”

John looked up. Teddy. Something must have shown in his face, for Teddy said tentatively, “John? Are you all right?”

“It’s nothing,” John said shortly. To his horror he felt a hot lump of pure, desperate hurt clog his throat.

Teddy looked at him sidelong. “If it’s about Seven and Pip--”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” John bit out.

“All right.” Teddy reached for the towel, looking up at John from under his long lashes. “But if you two aren’t together anymore--”

“I said, I don’t want to talk about it! And we never were, anyway.”

“Oh.” Teddy blinked, looking honestly startled before ducking his head again. “Well. Ah. Well then, if you fancy some company…”

John stared at him. “How old are you?” he asked abruptly.

Teddy smiled in a way that reminded John very much of Irene. “How old do you want me to be?”

“No. Don’t do that. I’m not one of those that--tell me truly, how old?”

For an instant, Teddy looked John in the eye, a straightforward unguarded look, and this time it was John who wanted to drop his gaze. “Almost seventeen. Don’t tell. It’s Mr. Posey; he likes to think me some kind of cherub--Ganymede, he calls me.”

“You?”

“I don’t know, I never had much schooling--”

“No, why me?”

“I like you,” Teddy said simply.

John looked at the basin. He could barely think past the horrible vision of Sherlock with Pip, the sick wondering of what they had done, how it had been, how it felt. He wanted. He had thought himself so much better that Tank and the others, he would never take, but if Teddy was offering…”I’ve never,” he started, almost disbelieving his own choked voice.

Teddy smiled his usual bright flirtatious smile, although there was something in his big eyes that John
John took himself back to the dormitory and undressed in silence, his veins buzzing with a mixture of arousal and confusion and alcohol. He knew there would be shame there, underneath, but did not want to face it and instead focused on the arousal. By the time Teddy slipped under his covers, drawers already shed, John was painfully hard. For a minute, feeling the brush of the soft fabric of his nightshirt, John felt the misery choking him again, but he shoved it down roughly and whispered, “Tell me what to do.”

Teddy pushed something into his hand: a twist of greasy fabric. “Rub the lard on your fingers. I loosened myself before I came, but if you could do a little more…”

John had no idea what he meant but he greased his fingers and, at Teddy’s direction, pushed them into the boy’s slack hole. It was so much looser than he remembered from the single time he had touched himself. He rubbed his fingers around, curiously, and felt Teddy shiver beneath him. Did it feel good? He was about to ask when the thought of Pip touching Sherlock like this caught up to him and his throat closed again. He pulled his fingers out and used them to rub more lard on his cock.

Pushing into Teddy was the most glorious sensation he had ever known and the worst feeling of John’s life. This was what had been lacking with Callie: this tightness, the firmness of him so different from a woman, the feeling of it so indefinably right, but the knowledge he was doing it from jealousy burned in him like acid. He paused for a moment, torn between pleasure and shame, but then Teddy moaned softly under him and reached down for himself. Oh, God. He was touching himself, rocking his backside back toward John, wanting more. Somehow, even though John knew that what he himself was doing was a much greater sin, the masturbation taboo had been so deeply ingrained in him that the knowledge that Teddy was doing that to himself sent a dirty, illicit shock straight to his cock. “You like this?” he whispered and Teddy moaned again, pushing back. John lifted up on his elbows and pushed forward, burying himself deep, then pulled back and thrust hard, hard enough to make his vision sparkle. “Yes,” Teddy gasped, “please--” and John thrust and thrust, each shove a burst of pleasure that built and built, and then Teddy jerked and muffled his face in the pillow, his arse spasming around John, and that felt so fantastic that John felt his own climax rising and pounded faster and more frantically until it burst over him, a white lighting burst of pleasure that left him burnt out and hollow.

He pulled out, feeling cold and empty, and Teddy rolled quickly to the side and came up with a cloth of some kind—a hanky, or maybe a napkin—that he had clearly dropped by the side of the bed for this purpose. He wiped himself off, front and back, and tugged his nightshirt down. John could not look him in the eye.

Teddy hesitated and John steeled himself to ask him to leave, but there was no need. Teddy slid silently from the bed and padded away without saying a word.

John rolled over and tugged the covers up over his head, though the night was warm. He scooted a bit sideways to avoid the damp spot that still remained after Teddy’s ministrations and buried his face in the thin pillow. and wished with all his heart for an earthquake to come and swallow him up.

John woke the next morning feeling half sick from shame and gin. He could hardly bear to even think of what he had done. He was a sodomite. He had committed a terrible sin, and he had liked it, even if the larger part of his mind hated himself now. Now that he was no longer half-drunk he knew with awful, burning shame that he had done wrong by Teddy, a boy who had clearly felt something for him beyond idle attraction.
John closed his eyes, unable to face that particular line of thought, and heaved himself out of bed. His head was pounding and his stomach churned. Stumbling to the washroom, he splashed water on his face and realized, dully, that his fierce anger at Sherlock had not ebbed one iota. He considered his options. Breakfast held no appeal, and if he slipped over to hospital now he could confront Sherlock and get it over with before he had to begin work.

Sherlock was fast asleep, curled on his side with his handkerchief clutched in his hand as though he had been coughing in the night. John looked down at him and felt a stab of such hurt and longing that he had to close his eyes against the sting of tears. “Sherlock,” he said harshly. “Wake up.”

Sherlock opened his eyes and sat up, blinking in sleepy alarm at John’s tone. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Staircase. Now,” John bit out, and turned without waiting for Sherlock to respond.

Sherlock was silent as he followed John to the attic stairwell. The exertion of climbing the stairs set him to coughing, but John did not slow down or turn to check on him. When he reached the stairway to the dormitories he stopped and folded his arms, feeling his heart slamming furiously in his chest. Sherlock coughed, took a few wheezy breaths, and then sat down on the stairs, looking scared and confused.

“So,” John said. He could hear his voice shaking but no longer cared enough to try to hide it. “Pip. Were you going to tell me, or just move into his bed when you got back?”

“What?” Sherlock stared up at John in honest bewilderment. “Why would I--oh.” His face cleared and to John’s astonished rage he looked as though he were about to laugh. “You didn’t honestly believe that I--that he and I--”


“Anything,” Sherlock said helplessly. “We didn’t do anything. He was afraid of Tank and his gang. Tank might have left him alone out of sentiment but not Morris or Flea. So I said whilst you were gone he could sleep with me where he’d be safe. When you came back I told him he’d have to go back to his own bed but he was scared, so I told Tank he was mine now and to make the others leave him alone. I did hear from Ernie that the story had got embellished a bit, but I didn’t really care. I don’t mind what the others think. But I never thought--I didn’t imagine you would think I--I wouldn’t ever, you must know that--” Sherlock no longer looked as if he would laugh; he seemed on the verge of tears.

“I’m sorry,” John said. He sat down on the stairs next to Sherlock and put his head in his hands, not wanting him to see the relief and shame in his face. “I’m so sorry. That damned Flea said things, and I just thought he was too stupid to lie. I never should have believed him. Please forgive me. I am so, so sorry.”

“No. It’s not your fault.” John scrubbed his hands over his face and sighed a huge, gusty sigh. He tried to smile. “I might have drunk a little of the gin.”

Sherlock smiled tentatively, though his eyes were still worried. “Or more than a little. Tea. Lots of tea. Or coffee. That’s what they always said back home the morning after big parties. Well, and more gin, but that hardly seems practical.”
“No,” John agreed. He sighed and stood up, desperate to get away so Sherlock would not read the truth on his face. “Let’s get you back to bed so you can get some more sleep, and I’ll go to the wardroom and have some of that tea.”

The next few days were miserably awkward. John felt uncomfortable whenever he was around either Sherlock or Teddy, made worse by the conviction that Sherlock would work out what John had done. He spent a lot of nights lying awake, mentally apologizing to Teddy, saying something like you deserve better, you deserve so much better, but knowing all along he would never say it. He caught Sherlock watching him narrowly on more than one occasion, and quickly made excuses to hurry off. Fortunately, the predicted dysentery outbreak had finally hit the poorer neighborhoods of Blastburn, and the hospital was filling quickly. The children’s ward was particularly busy. Mike, who liked children and had an easy rapport with them, removed himself there entirely, leaving the rest of the hospital to John and Molly. John practically had to drag him out to return to Bart’s.

“That Bridie is a stubborn one, you have to coax her to drink,” he was fretting as John tugged him across the courtyard. “I don’t know that Sister has the patience for it.”

“Sister’s been keeping little ones alive longer that you’ve been alive,” John pointed out. “Come, on, we’re late and I’m starving—”

The total uncharacteristic silence of the dining hall struck him at that moment and he stopped in mid sentence, disquieted. What had happened? The whole room was sitting stock still, as though frozen.

“You’re late.”

John turned quickly. The man who had spoken was tall and cadaverous, dressed all in black down to his ebony-handled walking stick. He had a high forehead and cold, unblinking eyes.

“I’m very sorry sir, we work at the—”

“I did not bid you to speak.” The man did not raise his voice, but the flat tone sent a chill down John’s spine. “I am Mr. Brocklehurst, your new headmaster. As I have already explained to your fellows, tardiness will not be tolerated at St. Bartholomew’s henceforth. Nor will speaking unless you are required by me.” He gestured with his stick. “Join the others.”

John saw that five boys were already lined up in front of the masters’ table—other latecomers, presumably. He and Mike took their places at the end of the line.

“Those who arrive late to a meal will miss that meal,” Mr. Brocklehurst said, moving around behind them toward the table. “Those who talk during a meal will miss that meal as well as the next. And of course, there will be punishment.”

John had no warning other than the swishing of the stick through the air before it struck him hard on the backside. He barely had time to tense, bracing his knees, before the next blow landed. He set his jaw, closed his eyes, and counted: six strikes, not too bad, but the stick was swung with force and it hurt fiercely. John had been thrashed plenty of times as a boy, first by his father and later by the groom in charge of the stableboys at Willoughby Chase, and he knew how to take a beating; but he saw at once that Mike did not. Grammar school must be a tender place, John thought, glancing at Mike’s screwed-up red face out of the corner of his eye.

“Mr. Posey, the benediction,” Mr. Brocklehurst said, moving to take his seat at last.

John had never thought he could long for Bart’s cabbagey soup, but he was very hungry and the
sounds of eating—louder than usual in the silent hall—were torture. He watched his feet to avoid having to see the food and surreptitiously shifted his weight to ease the ache in his backside, glancing up every now and again to the crawling hands of the clock on the wall. At least it would be over soon and he could join Mike to moan over their sore bums and distract themselves with studying.

But Mr. Brocklehurst had other ideas. When the meal finally ended—an event which included two more boys joining the lineup for whispering, and getting six strikes in their turn—Mr. Brocklehurst announced that their spiritual education had been woefully neglected of late and that instead of pursuing ungodly and idle distraction they would be treated to Mr. Posey reading an edifying work. John and the others were expected to remain standing as an example of the wages of sin, of course.

It was a bad hour. By the end of it John’s knees were trembling from hunger and fatigue and pain, and he thought another five minutes would do him in. He was amazed Mike was still on his feet. Occasionally a boy would be caught wriggling or dozing and be hauled up to join the line, which at least enlivened the tedium somewhat. John rather doubted that anyone had found anything about the experience edifying in the least: he himself had no idea what Mr. Posey had been reading, and all the faces he could see were glazed with incomprehension.

Finally, finally, they were released. John stumbled wearily upstairs with the others, all quiet as though terrified the ebony-handled walking stick would descend upon them if they so much as coughed. Even Mr. Minchin seemed cowed. There was no sign of Mr. Brocklehurst, but nonetheless John kept his head down, scurrying quickly to his bed as soon as he finished washing where he curled gingerly on his side and worried, exhausted and hungry, until sleep overtook him.

Next morning John found Sherlock perched on his bed in a curious knot, studying a new patient across the way. As soon as he glimpsed John, however, he unfolded swiftly and knelt up in concern.

“What’s wrong, you aren’t walking right, what happened, you’re hurt, what—”

“I’m fine,” John cut him off. “A little sore. I have to talk to you though. Staircase, one o’clock?”

“I’ll see if I can fit you in,” Sherlock said drily. He pulled his knees up again and frowned at John. “All right. You aren’t going to tell me any more right now, I can see that, so you’d best get to your rounds so we have time to talk.”

When they met later that day John filled Sherlock in on the new headmaster.

“You were right,” he finished. “We should have got out before he came. I’m wondering if it wouldn’t be best to just leave now whilst you’re in hospital—it would be much easier than escaping the school.”

“We can’t leave now. We’ve no place to go and no clothes, and you don’t even have a pretext to be in the cellars to get our money. It will be weeks before Irene is recovered, and then she needs to go to London and see how things lie there.” Sherlock was biting his lip, thinking hard. “We’ll just have to stick to the plan. Keep your head down and try not to get in trouble again.”

“Yes, I’d actually worked out that bit for myself, thanks,” John said. “I’m not worried about myself—I know how to go unnoticed. I’m more fussed about you.”

Sherlock shrugged. “I’ll just have to stay here as long as possible, and then lie low.”

“Maybe Mr. Brocklehurst just wants things quiet and timely, and he won’t go looking for more trouble,” John said without much hope.
Oh, I doubt that,” Sherlock said. “I think he’s just warming up.”

Sherlock was right, of course. When John arrived—early—for dinner that night, he was surprised to see several empty spaces at the tables. Among the missing were Morris and Flea. John shot a puzzled look at Tank, who looked curiously pathetic hulking alone at his end of the table, but there was no way to ask him, so he settled down to eat. At least his plate was full for once; evidently news of whatever happened had not reached the kitchens before dinner was prepared.

“They’re gone,” Tank said shortly over the washbasins. “Mr. Brocklehurst called us in first thing this morning and asked our ages. Morris and Flea tried to lie but of course he checked so they was chucked out. I said I was eighteen so I could go too, but my papers had my true age, and he said I was sentenced here til I turn eighteen. Then I suppose he checked all the ages, on the bigger ones anyway—there’s a great many gone.”

“What are you going to do?”

Tank shrugged morosely. “Stay here, I suppose. Not much else I can do. Don’t much fancy my chances of scarpering with that bastard running the place.”

Tank took Teddy to his bed that night, which John thought an insane risk—maybe Tank was hoping this would get him kicked out? But Mr. Brocklehurst did not appear, and Tank had Teddy rough and hard. John lay in the dark listening and hating himself for not intervening, hating himself more for the low heat of arousal he felt. The sounds of Tank grunting and thrusting reminded him of what he himself had done, of the feel of pushing his prick deep into Teddy, and he clenched his hands in disgust at himself and his hard aching cock. When it was over, though, Teddy did not immediately return to his own bed. John, still lying wakeful, heard Tank’s voice, low, muttering rough endearments: “There now, pet. Good lad.”

John lay on his saggy cot, alone and aroused and staring into the dark, and wondered what Mr. Brocklehurst would do next.

It turned out that what Mr. Brocklehurst did next was search the dormitories for contraband. Of course he found the gin in B dorm, which brought him closer to actual anger than John had seen previously. “Strong drink, here, in this Christian house--whose is this?” he asked, voice dangerously low.

“Morris, sir,” John answered, thinking quickly. Heads nodded in swift agreement.

“Indeed.” Mr. Brocklehurst’s pale face was flushed slightly along his sharp cheekbones. “And yet none of you reported it.”

“He would have thrashed us, sir,” John faltered.

“Then you shall be thrashed all the harder, to teach you that it is always better to avoid sin and wrongdoing.”

And he did exactly that. The thrashing was in fact quite a bit harder than the one John had received in the dining hall, although the fact that there were nearly thirty boys to beat helped quite a bit—even Mr. Brocklehurst eventually tired of swinging his stick. John supposed it could have been worse, which seemed to be something he was thinking a lot these days, although Sherlock did not see it that way when John limped in the next morning.

“Sherlock, I’m fine,” John said impatiently for the third time. “He just caught me across the backs of
my thighs, is all. At least he didn’t hit my kidneys--Nicky is still pissing blood this morning.”

Sherlock’s eyes went saucer-wide. “Isn’t that dangerous? Is he in hospital?”

“No, he’ll be all right. The same thing happened to me once when I took a hard fall onto a fence.”

John grimaced at the memory. “Lucky I didn’t break my back, and that hurt a lot worse than this does. Now get back in bed and look ill--we’ll be rounding in a bit.”

The truth was that Sherlock could have returned to St. Bart’s days ago. He was completely recovered, but Dr. Woodcourt was distracted enough with the dysentery epidemic to take John’s word that he was still sick, and he remained happily ensconced in John’s busy ward on the second floor. Irene was still there too, although unlike Sherlock she belonged there: she had not even advanced to sitting up in a chair yet.

There was at least one silver lining to Mr. Brocklehurst’s reign of terror. A few days after the gin incident, the headmaster finally began surprise inspections after lights out. The very first night he discovered Mr. Gamfield in flagrante with a recent arrival and sacked him on the spot. The boy, who was new enough to struggle and plead, got off with a beating. This was the only really popular thing Mr. Brocklehurst had done yet, especially since Mr. Gamfield’s replacement seemed as sternly pious as the headmaster himself and showed no inclination to take boys to his bed.

“But he hasn’t caught any boys at it yet?” Sherlock asked in the staircase.

“No...most of the older ones are gone now, and the ones that are left are too scared. He did catch a boy out of bed in A dorm the other night but he said he was just going for a piss. Mr. Brocklehurst locked him in the coal cellar for three days, without food or water. He said if we didn’t appreciate the beds provided for us by the charity of our betters, then we didn’t deserve them.”

Sherlock shuddered. For all his love of storerooms and secret passages, he had a terror of being locked up. “Is he still there?”

“Let out this morning. He could barely stand up, but Mr. Brocklehurst packed him off to work at the factory anyway. He did get breakfast at least.”

“You’re not in as much of a hurry today,” Sherlock observed.

“The dry weather’s broken the back of the dysentery, looks like,” John agreed. “I’m glad things are slowing down. although it means Dr. Woodcourt will have time to pay attention to my ward soon, which doesn’t bode well for the Musketeers.”

Sure enough, a few days later Irene was sent back to the women’s ward--since she no longer seemed in any danger of seducing anyone in a feverish delirium--and Sherlock was declared well enough to return to school. John could not help feeling guilty as Dr. Woodcourt reassured him that his cousin would be just fine. He clearly thought John was simply overprotective, and John was grateful not to be scolded for keeping Sherlock so long at a time when the hospital was desperately overcrowded.

“Don’t worry, John,” Dr. Woodcourt said kindly, smiling down at Sherlock as he perched on the edge of his cot to put on his shoes. “Your cousin has done very well except for this little hiccup, and as long as he avoids spending the fall in a damp and overcrowded prison I think that his lungs will be fine this winter.”

John smiled weakly. He did not say that he was not worried so much about Sherlock’s lungs as about his backside; he could not help feeling that Sherlock was likely to attract exactly the wrong attention from Mr. Brocklehurst. Not that there was a good kind to attract.
“Remember,” John hissed as they made their way back, “don’t say anything--”

“I know, John,” Sherlock said in exasperation. “There’s absolutely nothing wrong with my ears. You’ve told me three times today alone.”

“I know you won’t be able to help deducing things about him! Just keep them to yourself until we get upstairs, all right?”

“That’s four times,” Sherlock hissed, which at least meant he got the last word as they had now arrived at the dining hall.

Just as John suspected, Mr. Brocklehurst loomed up over Sherlock within seconds of his arrival at B dormitory’s table. John stifled a sigh. Sherlock was sitting meekly with his head down and his eyes lowered deferentially; he was doing everything as correctly as he knew how, yet even in his ragged uniform that was too big in the shoulders and too short in the cuffs he stood out in the hall like a swan in a henhouse.

“Name,” Mr. Brocklehurst said flatly.

“Stephen Watson, sir,” Sherlock said in his best working class accent. He had even remembered to say “sir”. John felt a glow of anxious pride.

“And why have you not been present for meals previously, Stephen Watson?”

“Been in hospital, sir. I have a weakness of the lungs.”

“Really? You seem quite healthy to me. Be advised, boy, that malingering to get out of your duties will not be tolerated as it may have been in the past.”

“As you say, sir,” Sherlock muttered to his lap, having evinced a fairly convincing brow wrinkle at “malingering”.

“What is your work assignment?”

“Storerooms, sir. The cellars.”

“Indeed.” Mr. Brocklehurst considered Sherlock a long minute. What was holding his attention? John realized it was Sherlock’s posture. He had his head bowed and was trying to copy the hopeless slump of the other boys, but his long proud spine simply would not slump. At some level Mr. Brocklehurst recognized that pride, and wanted to crush it. “I have not noticed any problems with our supplies during your illness. It seems that you are less than essential to the running of the storerooms.”

John’s heart stopped. Not the factory, not the factory, he thought desperately.

“On the other hand,” Mr. Brocklehurst said smoothly, “I am told that the laundry is shorthanded. You will report there tomorrow.”

John’s heart sank right into his shoes.

“Yes, sir.”

Mr. Brocklehurst regarded him another long minute, then glanced around the table--everyone frozen like rabbits who have spotted a hawk--and then swept back up to his seat.

“Cheer up,” Sherlock said that night after Mr. Minchin had shouted the lights out. “It won’t be for
long, and I am sure the laundry is lovely and warm in winter.”

“We won’t be here come winter,” John said firmly. “And what about the wine? and the money?”

“We’ve enough money now; we don’t need to sell the rest of the wine. As for the money, we’ll see how things are when the time comes to leave. If worse comes to worse I can tell Pip where to find it and he can bring it to us.”

“Mmm.” John did not want to talk about Pip. He had been worried there would still be some awkwardness, but Sherlock had nestled into his arm as contentedly as ever. Sherlock’s curls tickled his nose, and he wished he could bury his face in them, smell and smell and rub his nose against the back of his neck….no, he did not. John sternly schooled his mind to safer topics. “So what can you tell about him?”

“Puritanical,” Sherlock said, “but you knew that yourself. He’s the sort who associates happiness with sin. Father died early--likely something sinful--raised by a stern and pious mother, little money. He’s not a sadist, not like Moriarty--he really thinks he’s saving our souls through cruelty.”

“What does that make him more dangerous, or less?”

Sherlock wrapped his long hand around John’s. “I don’t know. We’ll have to wait and see.” He squeezed John’s hand and said, “I missed being in this stupid rickety bed with you.”

John felt immediately lighter. “Please don’t break it again. Mr. Brocklehurst would beat us with the leg,” he said, and smiled at Sherlock’s amused snort.

The next night Sherlock dashed into the dining hall at the last possible minute, falling into his seat beside John just as Mr. Brocklehurst came through the door. He looked exhausted, wet through and reeking of lye soap, and when he reached for his food he jerked his hands back with a wince. John saw that his fingers were burned.

John looked away, unable to bear the sight of the blisters on Sherlock’s delicate violinist’s fingers, and darted a quick glance at the head table. Perhaps Mr. Brocklehurst would find someone to punish and John could feed Sherlock a few bites of food. But Mr. Brocklehurst was firmly planted in his seat, steely gaze raking the tables, and John turned back quickly. He glanced helplessly at Sherlock, but Sherlock, resourceful as ever, had wedged the end of his spoon through the buttonhole on his cuff and propped the handle on the undamaged space between his finger and thumb. The angle was awkward, but he managed to shovel a large spoonful of beans in his mouth. He caught John’s eye and grinned. It was a pale imitation of his usual smile, but the triumphant spark was back in his eye, and he sat as straight as ever. John grinned back.

Upstairs he did what he could for Sherlock, bathing his hands silently in cool water and wrapping them in handkerchiefs spread with grease from Tanks’s twist of lard--how that had got missed in the search John had no idea. Sherlock groaned with relief when John helped him into his dry nightshirt.

By the time John got his wet things spread out and hung as best he could Sherlock had collapsed onto the bed, too weary even to get under the covers. John got in behind him and arranged him the way Sherlock liked, tucked up against John’s chest, cradling his bandaged hands tenderly in his own. He had planned to sing to him--very quietly--but for only the second time in John’s memory Sherlock was asleep before John, already dead to the world. So instead John gave into the temptation and pressed his nose into Sherlock’s neck, rubbing his cheek against the softness of his skin and kissing the vulnerable juncture at his shoulder, just once.
“Irene’s gone,” John said. They were at their weekly bath, one of the few occasions where they could actually carry on a conversation these days. “She left yesterday. Do you want to go first?”

“No, you go, the water stings when it’s hot. Did you talk to her?”

“She slipped me a note on rounds. I thought it better to read it there in case I got searched.” Mr. Brocklehurst was in the habit of having the boys who worked outside the school turn out their pockets on the way in, in the hope of catching something illicit. “Hold on--” he poured water over his head to wet his hair, then took the soap Sherlock handed him and began to scrub. “It sounds like she’s sticking to the plan we worked out. She’s going to go to London dressed as a boy--says it’s ironic that her hair has grown so much, although she thinks it’s still short enough to get by--and make sure her Mrs. Norton place remains safe. Once she’s settled there she’ll set up another identity and suss out the situation around town, and then come back here and make contact. We still have to work out how we’ll get out of here.”

“Leave it to me. I was a master escape artist before I became a criminal thug,” Sherlock replied, all seriousness.

John laughed as he stood up, rubbing himself dry quickly and wrapping the thin towel around his waist. Sherlock had already shucked his clothes and now he climbed in, hissing at the touch of the lukewarm water. His skin was red and raw from the constant wet and the lye, and his hands were cracked and bleeding. John frowned, looking down at him in the tub. “I’m going to see if Dr. Woodcourt will give me some salve for you,” he said. “I’ll ask him to tag it and take it to Matron, that way Mr. Brocklehurst can’t say anything against it. I don’t like those sores on your arms.”

“They hurt, but not as much as my hands,” Sherlock said. “At least I don’t burn myself anymore.”

“Lean back and I’ll wash your hair,” John said. He knelt behind Sherlock and worked the soap through his curls, enjoying the feeling of having Sherlock’s head in his hands. Sherlock tipped his head back and smiled with his eyes closed as John’s fingers massaged his scalp. John looked down at the long curve of white throat and swallowed against the dryness of his mouth. “Rinse,” he said a little hoarsely.

When Sherlock climbed out John moved around to put the tub between them as he handed Sherlock a towel, not wanting him to see that John was half-hard under his own towel. Sherlock thankfully did not look at him, and John realized abruptly that Sherlock was trying to stay turned away from John in turn--because Sherlock himself was completely erect. Well, that was...John gulped and almost dropped the towel, pushing it into Sherlock’s hand and turning away swiftly. His face burned and he thought furiously of the names of the cranial nerves. Olfactory, optic...even if it weren’t, even if he were, even if Sherlock, even if everything it was just too dangerous, even only looking.
Mr. Brocklehurst finally caught two boys in C dorm together. John heard about it from Mike on the way to work, although everyone on the floor had heard the shouting and the wails of the boy being beaten.

“It was Hugh,” Mike told John, in a whisper. “Mr. Brocklehurst caught him with Robin, you know, the ginger who works in the kitchens. Beat Hugh half to death and locked him in the coal cellar. But Robin…” Mike swallowed and looked away. “Mr. Brocklehurst said he was the worse sinner for being on his knees. He said it was blasphemous. He took Robin off to his office for punishment, and he didn’t return. I suppose he’s in the coal cellar too.”

Robin was not in the coal cellar. John was heading up the stairs to his usual ward when he was corralled by a ward sister. “Dr. Woodcourt asks that you come to the private area right away.”

“Of course--thank you,” John said, surprised. The corner where he had set up the screen for Irene had become their de facto private room, although it was rarely used. He felt a stab of anxiety that Irene had somehow been caught and returned, and he hurried to find Dr. Woodcourt.

The figure on the bed was not Irene. John felt such a powerful wave of relief that it took him a moment to realize that he recognized the ginger hair, because the boy’s face was so swollen and bruised as to be unrecognizable.

Dr. Woodcourt stood when John stepped around the curtain. “I have a bit of a heavy task for you, John,” he said seriously. “I apologize, once again, for taking advantage of the fact that you possess a maturity and wisdom beyond your years, but my other duties call.”

“Anything you need, sir,” John said immediately, unable to stop staring at the unconscious boy on the bed. There was a strong smell of ether.

“This boy was brought to us in the small hours of the morning. We were told that he was discovered in a lewd act and was taken to the headmaster’s office to be chastised. In the course of returning to his bed, supposedly, he took a wrong turn in the dark and fell down the stairs.”

“He hit his head, sir?” John ventured.

Dr. Woodcourt shook his head. “He may have done, but no fall can account for the severity of his injuries. I operated immediately but I am afraid there is a perforation of the bowel and, as you know, there is little that can be done in such cases. I wish you to keep him comfortable, and bear him company, but if he should wake and speak…”

“I don’t understand.” John frowned. “A perforation?”

Dr. Woodcourt regarded him a long moment and then moved around to the far side of the bed. John followed, still puzzled, and looked as Dr. Woodcourt lifted the blanket to show the boy’s back and bottom. John took an involuntary step back, feeling that he might be sick.

“This was not sustained in any lewd congress,” Dr. Woodcourt said quietly. “I believe that it was done as a punishment, but far too vigorously, and perforation was the result. But of course my suspicions are not actionable. As I say, I wish this boy made as comfortable as possible--you see the morphine there--but if he should wake, and name his murderer, I need you to bear witness that I may report this to the police and the governors of the school.”

“I understand, sir,” John said.

“Good lad.” Dr. Woodcourt squeezed his shoulder briefly. “You are excused from your other duties for the duration, of course.”
Robin died several hours later, without ever regaining consciousness. John sat beside him as he grew hotter and then cooler, bathing his forehead and holding his hand, watching in case the morphine was needed, but after the first hour Robin ceased even to moan. His breaths came more and more slowly, farther and farther apart, until the space between them was wide enough for the soul to slip through and away.

John waited a full count of three hundred after the last breath before he reached for the cold wrist and felt for the pulse he knew he would not find. Then he crossed Robin’s hands gently on his chest, whispered words of heaven and peaceful rest that he desperately wished to be true, and pulled the blanket over his face.

Sherlock read John’s distress the minute he walked into the dining hall, although of course they could not talk about it at dinner. When they climbed into bed that night, Sherlock wordlessly turned them so that their positions were reversed, John’s back to his front, the way they had been after the factory explosion, and wrapped his long arms around him.

John told the story in a whisper, comforted by the feeling of being enfolded in Sherlock’s embrace. Sherlock was quiet a long moment when he finished. Then he said, “We need to tell the others.” He hesitated a bare second before adding, “You need to warn Teddy.”

John went still. He could not tell from Sherlock’s flat tone if he knew or if he was just referring to Teddy’s well-known status as the dorm tart. “Yes,” he said neutrally.

Sherlock stirred restlessly and John reached up to pin his hands. “Don’t scratch. You know it makes it worse.”

“It’s driving me mad,” Sherlock said through his teeth but he subsided, twisting his fingers in John’s. John could feel him surreptitiously rubbing his arm against the bed and pulled his hands up higher, so they were out of the blankets and out in the cool air. Sherlock settled a little and pressed his forehead against the top of John’s head. John smiled and, without really thinking about what he was doing, kissed Sherlock’s knuckles. Sherlock stilled and went quiet again, for so long this time that John wondered if he had drifted off into his own head, or fallen asleep. John was finally beginning to relax into sleepiness himself when Sherlock said softly, “I don’t believe it’s a sin.”

“What?”

“I don’t believe it’s a sin. Taking without consent, yes, whether a man or a woman. But two men together, consenting, out of love--I don’t believe it’s a sin.”

“But it says so, in the Bible--”

“The Bible says a great many things, many of them contradictory and a great deal more patently ridiculous.”

“But,” John said, wide awake now. He did not know what he was going to say. He thought of the Reverend Mr. Eyre, who had seemed the wisest man on earth when John was young, his long stern sermons warning of the dangers of lust. Mr. Eyre had never mentioned sodomy but he was quite clear that lust in all forms was a grave sin, and surely…”But it’s still fornication, isn’t it? or worse?”

“Honestly, John, are you really going to claim that as an argument?” Sherlock sounded exasperated and John’s heart stuttered before Sherlock went on with a tiny catch in his voice, “I know you were with Callie.”

Of course he did. John was simultaneously relieved and embarrassed. He shifted a little in Sherlock’s
arms. “I suppose not.”

“I have a cousin, on my mother’s side. French.” Sherlock’s voice was very low. “He came to visit, with his ‘particular friend’--they went on to America after visiting England. I understood from what I overheard that there was something unusual about Etienne and his friend so of course I spied and I saw them together. I had seen men with women before, of course, and I felt only revulsion; I knew very young that I would never want such a thing. But when I saw Etienne and Francois...it was wonderful, and terrible, to realize I was not above the common desires of ordinary humanity, that I might--want--someday, that there were others who were the same. I thought it did not matter, really, for who would ever tolerate me? Whom would I tolerate in turn? But still...understand, John, I was nine. I had not been to school, no one had ever touched me in such a manner. I was not turned, or bent. I was born that way. It might be a blessing, like my brains, or a curse, like my weak lungs, but it was--is--as much a part of me as my eyes and hair. God made me to want men and not women. How then can it be wrong? Why does God make us lust if not to love? I cannot believe that God would give the means to love, and then have it denied. I cannot believe it a sin. Do you see?”

John heard his words, the intensity in his voice. He saw the possibility of what Sherlock was saying. That everything he had believed all his life might not be true, though...it made him feel dizzy and a little sick, as though he were falling.

“I just--no,” he said, not really understanding what he was saying even as he said it. “If that’s true then how--if everyone makes up the rules for themselves…” John trailed off. It was too much. “I want to believe it,” he said finally. “But I can’t.”

“You’re afraid,” Sherlock said flatly. “I never would have thought it of you, John Watson.”

John swallowed hard but could find no words in reply.

“All right.” Sherlock extricated his hands from John and pulled away, rolling to his other side. He set his back against John’s and curled into a tight ball. John lay staring into the dark alone, confusion and unhappiness burning in him, long into the night.

John woke the next morning feeling heavy headed and heartsick. He had lain awake a long time and then slept badly--the narrow cot seemed a lot smaller when they were back to back. He felt miserable and a little resentful. Why could Sherlock not have been content to carry on as they were? It was as though he had tried to convince John that black was white or up was down. It was no consolation that Sherlock had clearly not slept at all; he had slid out of bed the minute Minchin came shouting in. Now he was struggling into his still-damp clothing, which he had neglected to spread out the previous night. John realized he had skipped doing it to comfort John and felt a wave of guilt on top of his other misery. The raw areas on Sherlock’s skinny arms were scored and bleeding--he had clearly given into the temptation to scratch at the itchy patches in the night. Even now as John watched Sherlock hunched over to dig his nails furiously into his wrist.

John had to clench his fists at his sides to stop from taking Sherlock’s hands. Well, at least he could do something about that, if nothing else. He would go straight to Dr. Woodcourt as soon as he reached the hospital.

“The laundry?” Dr. Woodcourt repeated in surprise. “Are there no other jobs that need doing at Bart’s that they must put someone with weak lungs in the laundry?”
“I suppose Mr. Brocklehurst thinks not, sir,” John said. “But he’s not had much trouble from the damp air—just a little coughing at night, hardly anything. The problem is that the caustic soap and his wool clothes being wet all the time have given him the most dreadful rash, and he scratches until I worry he will give himself erysipelas.”

“Oh, that’s easily helped.” Dr. Woodcourt drew a pad from his pocket and scribbled on it quickly. “Take this to the chemist, and he will give you a jar of salve—have Stephen apply it to his skin night and morning when he is dressing, and he can put it on his hands throughout the day. I’ll wager his hands are pretty badly off.”

“They are, sir, but could you write a tag for me to take it to Matron? Else—”

“Better to keep it with him. It’s not a medication; Matron doesn’t—”

“Sir.” One of the ward sisters appeared, her competent face pinched. “They’re asking if you can come to the orphanage infirmary—Matron there thinks they have the diphtheria.”

“Oh dear,” Dr. Woodcourt said, handing the paper quickly to John. “John, if you see Mike, tell him to come to the orphanage, would you? I must be off.”

John got the jar of salve from the chemist, tucked it into his pocket, and then spent the rest of the day worrying about it. He knew that this was partly to distract himself from thinking about what had happened between himself and Sherlock the previous night, but how to keep the salve from Mr. Brocklehurst’s notice was still a serious concern. He finally decided to leave early and take the jar straight to Matron. Mike would likely be at the orphanage for the next few days from what John heard at luncheon, and fortunately the rest of the hospital was not particularly busy, so he could get away. It was not until he stepped into the hallway at Bart’s that it suddenly occurred to him that he could have simply written a tag himself. It was not as if Mr. Brocklehurst knew his handwriting. Stupid, sleep-deprived idiot, he thought to himself in annoyance.

“What are you doing here?”

John spun around. Of course there stood Mr. Brocklehurst—one more minute and John would have been safely on his way. “Sir,” he stumbled.

“John Watson, isn’t it? Aren’t you supposed to be at work in the hospital?”

“Sir, I finished already and—”

“What is that you have there?”

John reluctantly pulled the jar out from where he had been clutching it in his pocket. “A jar of salve, sir, I’m—”

“I know what you are doing with it.” Mr. Brocklehurst's eyes had narrowed and his pale face was flushing as it did when he was truly furious. “Did you really think you could bring such an aid to sin in this Godly place and go unnoticed?” He took the jar from John with his fingers and thumb as though the very jar were sinful and dropped it, the jar smashing to pieces beneath their feet. Ointment spattered John’s legs. “Turn around.”

John gaped, stunned. Mr. Brocklehurst thought he was going to use it for— “No, sir, it’s for—the laundry workers, sir, Doctor—”

“Six more strikes for insolence,” Mr. Brocklehurst said. He did not raise his voice, but the flush deepened. A few faces had appeared in the doorway from the dining hall. “And twelve for aiming to
John turned. His head was buzzing and he was so bewildered by the way events had gone so spectacularly wrong that he had not braced his legs when the hard whistling blow struck him across the back of his legs. He stumbled, slipped on the greasy salve, felt his legs fly out from under him and the edge of the stone staircase strike him sharply across the temple, and everything went black.

John woke to the sensation of chill autumn drizzle on his face. He felt himself jostle and realized he was being carried by many hands--the men from the hay field? But that was wrong--it was August, surely, a hot sunny day, not cold and damp...his head ached terribly and he felt a wave of nausea. He gritted his teeth and felt everything slide away again.

“John? John, can you hear me?”

John opened his eyes. He was lying on a bed, Dr. Woodcourt’s face swimming over him.

“Good,” the doctor said, smiling. “Can you tell me your name?”


“Lovely. And where are we?”

“Sherrinford Hall,” John said, and then frowned. That wasn’t right. He shut his eyes again.

“Very well. Just lie still now, John. You’ve had a bad blow to the head, and you will need to rest and be very quiet. Can you do that? Abbot will look after you.”

“Yes,” John murmured gratefully, and let the darkness close over him again.

The next two days were a long blurry stretch of confused dreams and a succession of kindly hands giving him water and broth and placing cool cloths over his eyes. The headache receded a little and his head grew clearer, although trying to think about anything at all made him feel as though he were swimming in cotton wool. At least he knew where he was now, though.

Mike came in at the end of the second day and smiled to see John’s eyes open.

“Ah, you’re awake! How are you feeling?”

“Like the morning after the longest night off of my life,” John said, wishing Mike would lower his voice.

Mike laughed. “I’ve never had the pleasure, but if that’s what it’s like, I think I’ll take the pledge. Dr. Woodcourt wants me to ask if you remember what happened to you yet.”

“No idea. That whole day is just--gone. When I try to think about it my head pounds.”

“All right, not to worry. You know where you are now, right? Yesterday you told me you were at a quarry.”

“No, we were coming back from a quarry when we were--never mind, it’s a long story,” John said, catching himself. “The short version is, I hurt my head once before falling from a horse, and I keep getting confused with that. I know I’m in Blastburn at the hospital.”

“Well, you’re definitely improving,” Mike said encouragingly. “I’ll pop back in in the morning. I’m
off to Bart’s—I’ve been staying over at the orphanage, but Dr. Woodcourt says we’ve got that contained for now, so I’m to go home for a night’s sleep."

“Will you try to get a word with Stephen and tell him I’m all right?” John asked. “Lie if you have to. I don’t want him doing anything foolish.” Now that he thought of it, he was surprised that Sherlock had let two days go by without making some effort to check on John himself.

“Of course. I’ll try to catch him going up to the dorms, that’s the best time when there’s all the noise on the stairs,” Mike promised. “Now get some rest, all right?”

Mike took himself off and John lay down, closing his eyes against the lamplight. He should have felt reassured, but the niggling feeling of anxiety persisted. Nothing he could do now though. He drifted into an uneasy sleep.

He was dreaming, his favorite dream, the one where he was at the pond teaching Sherlock to swim. He felt the old joy at being back here, but something had gone wrong. The sun had dimmed and when he looked up he saw only storm clouds crowding the sky, and the water had grown cold around him. When he looked down he saw Sherlock’s eyes on him but all the color was washed out of them, leaving them the same gray as the sky.

“No,” he heard his own voice saying, as though from a great distance. “I just can’t,” and he let go. Sherlock sank without a word, his eyes still wide open as the water closed over them, and he sank down into the depths out of John’s sight.

John woke with a start, shaking and gasping, clutching the blankets as though to stop them drowning. In an instant it all flooded back: the quarrel, the ointment, Mr. Brocklehurst. “Oh, God,” he whispered. “Oh, my God.”

John was watching anxiously for Mike to arrive the next morning, but as soon as he came through the door he knew it was no good. Mike shook his head. “I couldn’t find him,” he said apologetically. “He must have got up the stairs ahead of me. I asked a lad from your dorm to pass the word but he seemed confused, and then Minchin came through shouting and I had to hustle to my own dorm. I’ll try again tonight.”

“Thanks, Mike,” John said heavily. He lay back down and put his arm over his eyes. Maybe Sherlock did not know John was hurt, and thought he was just staying at the hospital, using work as an excuse to avoid him? Or worse, maybe Sherlock had decided to move on if John did not want him? John pictured him with Pip—for real this time—and had to stop because it made his head throb so badly.

Face it, John Watson, he thought; you made a mistake. In fact you made a right hash of things. If nothing else was clear to him he knew down to the bottom of his soul that he loved Sherlock as completely as it was possible to love another human being. He needed to tell Sherlock. Surely he could be that brave at least? As for the rest...they could give it some time, think it over, talk about it when they got free of this dreadful place. Yes. Slightly comforted by having made up his mind, John drifted into a restless sleep.

Mike came by that afternoon on his way back to school. “I thought I’d go a bit early, try to catch him before dinner,” he said before John could ask. “You’re looking better.”

“I feel better,” John agreed. “It still hurts like the blazes, but at least I don’t feel like my head is full of cotton wool.”
“And you know where you are all the time now, although that might not be such a good thing.”
Mike grinned. “All right, I’m off. I’ll let you know how I get on in the morning.”

Dr. Woodcourt was pleased too. “A good night’s sleep would help most now, I think,” he said. “I will have you sent a mild draught. It can be difficult to sleep when one has been abed all day, and your rest has likely been very broken, has it not?”

John took the draught without complaint. He had seen Sherlock’s colorless eyes falling away from him every time he tried to rest all day, and dreaded another night of bad dreams. He settled into his cot to take to let the draught take effect, hoping for a clear head and good news in the morning.

John was unused to sleeping draughts. As a result he slept heavily, far past when he usually would have woken in the morning, and it was only the commotion in the hallway that roused him. He sat up, too fast, and clutched at his head—what was all the racket? Was that Tank? What on earth was he doing in the hospital and why was he shouting?

“John! Where is he? John!”

“In here, young man, keep your voice down. No, bring him over here.”

John forced his eyes open. There seemed to be a great many people crowding into the room, including the ward sister, leading the way toward a bed by the fireplace where they put the sickest patients, and Tank, who was clutching a pitiful bundle to his chest. John blinked, trying to make sense of what his eyes were telling him. That could not be Sherlock—Sherlock was nearly six feet tall, far too big to be carried in anyone’s arms like a child. But as Tank turned away John could still see one limp dangling arm, too-short sleeve rucked up to show the chafed, raw skin of his wrist.
“Pneumonia,” Dr. Woodcourt said grimly. “Not surprising—working in the laundry and then beaten and starved for three days in a coal cellar—" He broke off, his mouth a tight line.

John had reached Sherlock’s side in the same moment as Dr. Woodcourt, just as the nurses peeled away his blackened clothing to reveal his pitifully wasted body, raw weeping skin overlaid with bruises. Dr. Woodcourt had immediately sent John back to bed under threat of being moved to a different ward and John had gone reluctantly, taking Tank with him to fill him in.

“We didn’t know anything had happened to you til after dinner that night,” Tank explained. “No one was there yet but the kitchen lads. One of them told us up in the washroom. I thought Seven would rush off right then and there--I had to hold him back, I mean with my arms, like.” He mimed restraining a struggling Sherlock. “I got him to settle down and agree to wait until after lights out at least. He said he knew a secret way out that would get him around the staff quarters, but I reckon it couldn’t have been too secret because Mr. Brocklehurst caught him--I heard the ruckus not five minutes after he slipped out. This morning I come down a bit early for breakfast and I heard Alfred telling Mr. Brocklehurst he had gone to let Seven out of the coal cellar and he couldn’t get to his feet. Mr. Brocklehurst says to leave him then, and if he wants to come along for breakfast he can and if not he may rot there. Well, that made me see red, I can tell you, and I just went right along down there and scooped him up. He was curled up by the door like a kitten, all cold and still. Didn’t weigh much more than a kitten, either.”

“God,” John sighed. He was leaned back against his pillow, trying to calm himself in the hope his headache would abate. Three days alone in the dark, not knowing if John were alive or dead--Christ. He looked over at where the screen had been drawn to shield the bed from view, unable to see anything. “You’ve best be getting on now, shouldn’t you? You’ve already missed breakfast; you don’t want to be late to work.”

“Not going to work,” Tank said calmly.

“What?”

“I’m leaving. It’s nigh impossible to escape Bart’s, but easy as anything to leave the hospital. I’m walking out the front door. There’s nothing for me here anymore, and that Brocklehurst--I’m going to see if I can find Morris and Flea.”

“But your uniform!”

“Sod it, I’ll steal something else.” Tank held out his hand. “Best of luck to you, John Watson, and look after our lad there if he pulls through.”

“I will,” John said, a little dazed. He shook Tank’s hand and was still staring after him when Dr. Woodcourt came over to tell John about Sherlock’s condition.

Now John said immediately, “I want to look after him. Please, sir.”

Dr. Woodcourt looked at him appraisingly. “Are you recovered enough, do you think?”

“Yes, sir. Well, I’ve a headache, but I would lying in bed and I would just make it worse worrying. And you know how difficult he is, he’ll listen to me--”

“He’s very sick, John,” the doctor said gently. “I don’t think he’s going be causing much trouble this
time. But he is going to need constant care, and if you think you are up to the task then I know it would be a great help to the nurses.”

“I am, sir.”

“We’ll have your cot moved, then.” Dr. Woodcourt put out a hand as John made to rise. “Not yet. First you will eat your breakfast and bathe and dress. This will be a long march--best to start it with your belly full and your boots fresh, so to speak.”

John gulped down his porridge, borrowed a razor from one of the orderlies, and made short work of his cold bath. Somewhat to his surprise he did feel better once he was clean and dressed, and he headed for Sherlock’s bedside with renewed vigor. The nurse handed him a tin cup and a little curved spoon.

“Slowly, mind,” she cautioned. “He was crying for water when he first arrived, but he drank it too quickly and was sick.”

John nodded and sat down. Sherlock was shivering beneath a pile of blankets, his fever-bright eyes sunken in his gaunt face. “Oh, John,” he said, voice cracking with relief. “Is it bad?”

“Of course not. A few days’ rest and some medicine and you’ll be--”

“Not me, you,” Sherlock said impatiently. He was struggling to breathe, propped up on the thin hospital pillows. “You head, how is your head?”

“Oh! It’s fine, Sherlock, really. I was rather badly dazed for the first day or so and thought I was back at the Hall, after those men attacked us, remember? And then I asked Mike to tell you I was all right, but…”

“I was already in the cellar,” Sherlock finished. He turned his face away and reached weakly to scratch at his bandaged wrist. “I know you think I was foolish.”

“No, I don’t,” John said, taking his hand and holding it firmly. “I probably would have done the same. But you need to stop talking and drink a little now, and then rest.”

“No broth. I don’t like the broth.”

“Just water right now. Maybe some tea in a bit. With sugar--you’ll like that.”

“Yes,” Sherlock whispered. His eyelids drooped. John tucked him back into his blankets and gave him water in little sips until he had finished the whole cup. He went to fetch tea, but when he came back Sherlock had dozed off, so he drank the tea himself as he held Sherlock’s hand, watching over him as he slept.

Sherlock’s fever kept climbing. By nightfall he was delirious, talking in a confused rush of German that John could not understand. “Sie sind ein Idiot... Mendelejew hat Recht, siehst du das nicht?” He battted at John’s hand in frustration when John tried to get him to drink.

“Sherlock, please,” John pleaded. “It’s tea with sugar, you love sugar, just a bit?”

“Das Periodensystem,” Sherlock gasped, staring raptly at thin air.

“Your cousin read chemistry in German?”

John jumped, sloshing tea onto his lap. “Bloody--sorry, sir, so sorry.” Dr. Woodcourt was standing
just behind him, surveying Sherlock quizzically as John blotted at the tea. “Ah, our employer made sure we had plenty of books in the servant’s hall, he, Lord Sherrinford, he was a great educational reformer and Stephen, er, he loves chemistry and, and…” John trailed off, unable to come up with any reason why Lord Sherrinford, educational reformer or not, would think his grooms learning German a sound investment.

“It’s all right.” Dr. Woodcourt looked down kindly at John. “I don’t know who your cousin really is--or if he is even your cousin--but it’s been obvious from our first meeting that he was no servant. You should know that it makes no difference to me, or to the care he receives. I will not speak of him to anyone, if that is what worries you.”

“Aus meinem Labor, Dummkopf,” Sherlock muttered darkly.

Dr. Woodcourt regarded him with amusement. “Is he as clever as he thinks he is?”

“Yes, sir,” John said. He was too worried about Sherlock even to be relieved that Dr. Woodcourt seemed disinclined to ask questions. “He really is.” He took advantage of Sherlock’s distraction to slip the spoon into his mouth. Sherlock weakly shoved at his hand, swallowed automatically, and then grabbed for his wrist. “Mehr.”

“Sherlock!”

“No, he’s saying more,” Dr. Woodcourt said.

“Oh.” John tipped the cup to Sherlock’s mouth and felt a flush of triumph when he slurped thirstily. “There you go now, good lad. Not too fast, mind.”

Sherlock subsided into what sounded to John like a muttered garble of consonants, eyelids falling shut as he slumped into the pillows. John wiped at his face with a cold cloth, worriedly watching the rapid rise and fall of his chest.

“I think he’ll sleep for a bit now,” Dr. Woodcourt said. “Why don’t you get some rest? I’ll stay here with him. You need to get some sleep or your head is really going to pain you,”

John hesitated but Dr. Woodcourt was right, and he was very tired. “You’ll wake me if anything happens?”

“Of course.”

“He won’t take the broth, he doesn’t like it. Oh, and watch he doesn’t scratch in his sleep--”

“I won’t let him scratch.” Dr. Woodcourt took the cloth firmly from John and pushed him toward his cot. “Get some rest, John.”

John toed off his shoes and lay down, too tired to protest. He was asleep almost before his head hit the pillow. When he woke Dr. Woodcourt had been replaced by one of the nurses, who was trying to coax Sherlock to take a little porridge. Sherlock grimaced and turned his head away. “John,” he muttered confusedly.

“Right here,” John said, sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He leaned forward to take Sherlock’s hand. “I’m right here, Sherlock, I won’t leave you. Can you manage just a little porridge?” Sherlock’s hand was burning hot and his breathing was labored. He looked desperately ill.

“Tea.”
“I’ll fetch you some fresh. Five minutes.” He sprinted to the washroom to splash cold water on his face and was back with a cup of hot sweet tea in four. The nurse was more than happy to surrender her seat. “Here you are, lad. A little tea and then your medicine, all right?”

Sherlock steadily deteriorated. John worked over him constantly, dripping water and tea and even the hated broth into his mouth when he was too confused to resist, sponging him with cool cloths, spreading fresh salve on his arms and legs. Most of the time he lay limply against the pillows with his eyes closed, one hand clutching John’s, his whole body laboring over each breath, but when his fever climbed at night his mind wandered and he babbled in confusion.

The worst for John were the times when Sherlock thought he was back in the coal cellar. Watching Sherlock try to curl himself up, whimpering about the dark, crying for John who was right in front of him—John thought he could not bear it. He put down his cloth and cup and just put his arms around Sherlock’s gaunt shoulders, crooning their song in a whisper until Sherlock slid back into his heavy, restless doze.

He had finally got Sherlock settled late on one difficult night when he heard unfamiliar light footsteps behind him and looked around to see Molly.

“Dr. Woodcourt said you could use a bit of help,” she said diffidently, twisting her hands in her apron. “He says you haven’t slept in ages, so I thought I’d stay tonight. That’s your cot just there, isn’t it? I can wake you in a second if he asks for you.”

“Oh, thank you,” John said gratefully. “I should warn you he’s a bit out of his head, so if he says anything odd—”

“Dr. Woodcourt warned me already,” Molly said, smiling slightly. “Don’t worry. In spite of what he thinks, Stephen isn’t likely to say anything I haven’t heard before.”

John doubted that, but he was really very tired and in any case he trusted Molly, who had always inexplicably liked Sherlock. He sank onto his cot without even taking off his shoes.

The sound of Sherlock’s fretful voice woke him a few hours later. He lay still a moment, too tired to open his eyes, and heard the low comforting murmur of Molly’s in reply. Sherlock mumbled again, too low for John to make out the words, and John cracked his eyes to see Molly spoon a little water into his mouth. John thought he really should get up in case Sherlock wanted him, but he closed his eyes for just a second and fell asleep again.

When he woke again Sherlock was sleeping fitfully, propped up against freshly fluffed pillows. “All right?” he asked Molly.

“All right. He talked a little, something about oysters, but it was mostly in French—I don’t speak French.” She hesitated. “He was asking for his mother, I think.”

“His mother was French,” John said absently. He lifted the blanket to check Sherlock’s pulse and look at his bandages.

“I changed them,” Molly said. “The sores seem a little better, don’t you think?”

John nodded. They were better. It was ironic, he thought, that Sherlock’s awful rash—which had arguably precipitated this whole disaster—was actually improving with the salve and dry clothing. If only the same could be said of his lungs.

Sherlock did not rouse all day. John redoubled his efforts, coaxing and pleading and ordering and offering tea so sweet it was practically treacle, but Sherlock’s lashes only fluttered feebly. John
finally resorted to dipping his fingers in the cup and dripping the water into his parched mouth. Sherlock had stopped even shivering, so John stripped the blankets off and sponged him down with cool water. The fever seemed to be consuming him alive, John thought; he was nothing but bone and burning skin, and John could feel his heart fluttering frantically through the fragile cage of his ribs. He pulled the blankets back up and began to drip cold syrupy tea onto Sherlock’s tongue.

As the daylight faded and the lamps were lit, John realized with a vague, aching sadness that he had done everything he could. He put the cup and basin aside and gave Sherlock the only thing he had left: the comfort of his presence. He held Sherlock’s hand and talked to him, singing, crooning in a soft whisper as he would to a sick horse: “There now, sweetheart, my lovey, my good lad. All right now.”

Dr. Woodcourt stepped into the ward quietly and came over to Sherlock’s bed. He stooped to listen to his chest and check his pulse. When he straightened, he lay his hand gently over John’s where it clasped Sherlock’s. He did not say anything. There was no need.

“Sir,” John said finally, hating the way his voice cracked, “may I ask a favor of you?”

“If it is in my power to give, of course, John.”

“He gets, distressed, sometimes, and I talk to him and he grows calmer. I don’t know...I don’t know where his mind is--I know a little French and sometimes it seems better….I would have some German words, sir, that I could say, some soft words.”

Dr. Woodcourt’s hand tightened briefly over John’s. “Liebling,” he said. “Or Geliebter. They mean the same as ‘sweetheart’, or ‘beloved’.”

“Liebling. Geliebter,” John said, trying them out. “They have the same sound.”

“Liebe. It means ‘love’.”

The word triggered something deep in John’s memory. His right hand went almost unconsciously to his chest. “Geliebter,” he whispered.

“Should you like me to stay with you?”

“No, thank you, sir. I know...there will be others who need you come morning. I am all right.”

Dr. Woodcourt squeezed his hand again. “I will come back in a few hours,” he said. John knew he meant the low part of the night, the last few hours before dawn when experience had taught him the soul was most likely to take flight.

“Thank you, sir.”

When Dr. Woodcourt had gone, John drew the letter out from where he always kept it near his breast. The letter had lived in his pocket for nearly two years now, its creases so worn that it almost came apart when John opened it; he had it essentially memorized in any case. But not the last line, and that was what he was looking for. He skimmed down and there it was: mein liebster Freund, mein Geliebter . “My beloved,” he whispered. All these years, Sherlock had known. He lifted the hot thin hand and held it to his face. “Mein Geliebter, my love, my love.”

John was studying Sherlock’s face, trying to commit the details to memory--the sharp line of his cheekbones, the soft curve of his lower lip--when the clock struck two. Sherlock stirred at the sound, his fingers tightening briefly in John’s. John felt a moment of sick, swooping terror, but Sherlock’s lashes fluttered.
“John?”

“I’m here,” John whispered. “I’m right here, love.”

Sherlock closed his eyes, fighting for breath. He opened them again, focusing on John with what looked like a heroic effort. “I’m sorry,” he managed finally. “I’m so sorry, John, I--”

“No.” John cut him off. “No. Stop it, stop it now. You are not doing this. You are not apologizing, you are not saying good bye, you are not dying. You are not leaving me, and anyway, you have nothing to regret.”

“But I do,” Sherlock gasped. His words came haltingly, as though each one were a struggle. “I do. I don’t want to go, John, but I am so tired...and the irony is that I’ve never actually really sinned, so I suppose I’ll go to heaven, and I don’t want to. I would give up any chance of heaven in a heartbeat if I could have been with you, just once.”

John had to close his eyes against the overwhelming rush of feeling because it was really that simple, wasn’t it? Heaven was no paradise if Sherlock were not with him. Either Sherlock was right and their love was as sacred in the eyes of God as any other, or he wasn’t, but either way the only thing they could be sure of was their time on earth.

John kicked off his shoes and slipped onto the bed. He gathered Sherlock’s fragile body tenderly in his arms. “I’m the one who is sorry,” he said softly. “You were right all along, you were right about everything, and I was too much of a coward to admit it. I love you, Sherlock, I love you more than anything in the world, and I’m yours as long as you’ll have me, however you will have me.”

Sherlock made a choked sound somewhere between a sob and a laugh. His thin chest heaved as he struggled for air. “Then will you kiss me? just in case?”

“I will, but not in case. I will to remind you what you have to fight for.”

Sherlock was too weak to lift his own head from John’s shoulder, so John carefully fitted his fingers along his face to lift his chin. He brushed his lips tentatively across Sherlock’s and held still; when Sherlock did not immediately stop breathing and the heavens did not open to smite them with a bolt of lightning, he kissed him, slow and sweet. Sherlock kissed back until he had to break off to gasp for breath, at which point John continued to brush kisses over his nose and cheeks and forehead while Sherlock trembled and trembled.

One more kiss, because he just had to whilst he had the chance, and then he whispered, “You will live for me, do you hear me?”

Sherlock’s frail fingers clutched at his shirt. “You tried to die for me.” He paused, his chest heaving to get enough breath to speak. “I suppose it’s the least I can do.”

John smiled down at him and dipped his fingers in the cup of water, bringing them to brush gently at Sherlock’s lips. Sherlock opened his mouth, letting the water fall in, and John repeated the action over and over, until Sherlock’s eyes drifted closed without leaving John’s face, and he grew slack in John’s arms.

John jolted awake with a start. He had the impression of a welcome gust of cool air hitting his chest before he realized abruptly that Sherlock’s body had been lifted out of his arms.

“No, wait--” He sat up fast, grabbing at Dr. Woodcourt’s sleeve--Dr. Woodcourt who was turning...
away, cradling Sherlock’s limp form. “No, please, don’t take him yet, please--” The cry seemed wrung from the bottom of his chest.

“John, he’s only sleeping,” Dr. Woodcourt said softly. “His fever has broken.”

John was off the bed so fast his stocking feet slipped on the wooden floor. Dr. Woodcourt lay Sherlock on John’s bed and John knelt next to him, feeling his forehead and listening to his chest. Just as the doctor had said, Sherlock’s skin was cool to the touch. His lungs sounded awful, wheezy and rattling, but his pulse was strong and steady. John dropped his head to the edge of the bed and just stayed there a moment, breathing deeply and squeezing his eyes shut, still clutching at Sherlock’s wrist.

Dr. Woodcourt’s hand rested on his shoulder. John could hear the smile in his voice as he said, “Let him sleep, and when he wakes--”

“--broth and then wine, I know.” John raised his head, too overjoyed to realize he had interrupted. “He hates that broth but I’ll get it down him, every drop, sir.”

“Good man.” Dr. Woodcourt squeezed John’s shoulder and slipped away.

John retrieved the pillows from Sherlock’s bed and lifted him so that he could breathe more easily. Sherlock opened unfocused eyes, blinked once, and slid straight down into unconsciousness again. John smiled, tucked the blankets around him, and set about stripping the sheets from Sherlock’s bed to replace with clean ones.

Sherlock slept for fourteen hours and woke up feverish and cranky. “I feel terrible,” he said crossly. “You’re much better,” John said, still unable to stop smiling. “You’ll probably still have a fever at night for a bit, but it’s lower. You need to drink.”

Sherlock coughed, a horrible thick wracking thing that shook his whole body, and John held him and smoothed his hair until he finally spat a gob of vile green sputum into the basin John held out and sagged limply against his chest. “I knew I should have died,” he moaned.

“Don’t even say that. Look, I’ve some lovely sweet tea for you...just a bit, you’re supposed to have broth. No, don’t start that, you’ll have the broth. It will help to build up your strength. But I’ve got a piece of lovely bread for you and we can dip it in, how will that be?”

Sherlock made a noise like an outraged cat with emphysema. He then proceeded to sulk, refused to let John feed him even though he was so weak and shivering that John had to steady the bowl, complained until he ran out of breath, and finally fell asleep clutching John’s hand. But the broth and bread were nearly finished, his lips were no longer blue, and John was happy enough to kiss Mr. Minchin had he chosen to drop by for a call.

Sherlock’s recovery was long and unpleasant. It was days before he could finish a sentence or sit up unsupported, and his weakness made him miserable and fractious. After several days he spiraled from irritability into depression, a bleak listless silence that reminded John far too much of the journey north.

“Dammit, Sherlock,” he snapped finally one day, hefting the still-full bowl. “I know you don’t like the damn broth, but if you would just--”

“Watson?” One of the nurses stuck her head in the door.
“Sorry,” John said quickly, chastened.

“No, there’s a young man to see you downstairs. Someone you knew from the school, I think?”

“Oh,” John said, surprised. Tank? “Thank you.” He hurried after her down to the head nurse’s little parlor, where he was brought up short by the sight of a totally unfamiliar youth. “Er…” he said awkwardly.

The young man smiled a slow, well-known grin, wicked and lazy, and John burst into laughter. “Irene!”

“Good, isn’t it?” Irene said, laughing too and taking his hand. “I think I’ve got about another month before my hair has to go under the cap, which is a shame, but I already look a bit of a fop.”

“A very handsome fop,” John said gallantly. “Tell me about London.”

She did, at length. “Moriarty had paid my landlady off to watch my rooms, but I sussed that out quickly enough. He probably had someone on the take at my bank too, but I was not such a fool as to keep all my accounts in one place…” It was an exciting story and John wished Sherlock could have been there to hear it. “So after convincing Sir Percy I could be trusted, he has tasked me with delivering a message to the other men of conscience opposed to Moriarty who have taken refuge in Edinburgh. I thought I would stop here on my way north and make arrangements so that you could travel with me on my return.”

“There’s a problem,” John said. “Sherlock fell ill--really ill, not like before--and he’s only just now beginning to get better. He hasn’t even got out of bed yet. It will be weeks before he’s ready to travel.”

Irene rested her chin on her hand, considering. “Well, that is a hitch in the plans. Hmmm. I think I’ll set up shop in Edinburgh for a bit, then. From what I hear it’s frightfully dull, so I should be quite a sensation. And it’s also apparently the headquarters for the silent opposition--you can understand why it’s silent, opposition to Moriarty tends to be a bit unhealthy--and here I am with an introduction ready-made. I’ll leave you the address of the hotel where I’m staying and when darling Seven is recovered, write and I’ll come help you break out.”

“You’re going to work with the opposition?” John said frowning. “I didn’t even realize there was one. You won’t tell--”

“Don’t worry, love, I won’t give anything away about you two.”

“Do you ever give anything away?” John asked, quirking a smile, and Irene laughed her full-throated laugh again.

“Tell me, can I do anything for him? I’ve plenty of money.”

“No, thank you--wait, yes, newspapers. He’s been dreadfully low since he’s been sick and that will give him something to think on at least.”

“Oh, I can do better than that,” Irene purred. She kissed John’s cheek in farewell.

John fairly skipped upstairs, his cheerful mood undimmed by the sight of Sherlock draped against his pillows in tragic ennui. Even the untouched broth did not dampen his spirits. “Sherlock, guess who was here!” Normally this was the type of conversation they would have had on the upstairs stairwell, but that being impossible, he drew the chair close to Sherlock’s bedside.
Sherlock listened, getting more and more agitated as John explained the new plan. “But you must write right away!” he exclaimed in a vehement whisper. “We have to go as soon as possible now that Irene has established the situation in London. Edinburgh! She mustn’t stay in Edinburgh. I’m fine, I’ll be completely recovered by the time she returns.”

This was so patently untrue that John gaped at him. “What are you talking about? You can’t even finish a bowl of broth.”

“That’s because the broth is vile.” Before John could react, Sherlock swept his blankets aside and stood up. His expression of triumph lasted a half second before his legs collapsed under him and he crashed in an ungainly heap on the floor.

John manfully fought down his laughter and bent to haul Sherlock upright. “One thing at a time,” he said as he heaved Sherlock, protesting, onto the bed. “Get some nourishment in you today and tomorrow we’ll try you up in the chair.”

Sherlock glared at him furiously, then yanked the bowl toward himself and began shoveling cold broth into his mouth, face screwed up as though John were torturing him. He got half a dozen spoonfuls down before his shoulders heaved. He dropped the spoon and clapped his hands to his mouth.

John sighed. He gently took the bowl from Sherlock and said, “If I get you some bread, will you eat it?”

The first of the newspapers arrived the next morning, followed in short order by an enormous hamper. Everyone gaped in astonishment as the porter lugged it into the ward—even Sherlock looked startled.

“Let’s see what’s in it,” John said, delighted. He pulled off the top of the hamper and peered inside, letting Sherlock lean on his shoulder to look too.

“Yes,” Sherlock breathed rapturously. He reached into the box and pulled out the topmost object, a small Bible of the sort handed out by earnest church ladies. John stared. “Oh, yes. Is there a letter?”

Mystified, John handed him the note that had come with the parcel. Sherlock grinned even wider and hugged note and Bible to his chest. “God bless this kind Christian lady,” he said piously.

“I trust you’re going to explain your sudden attack of holiness at some point?” John said, eyebrows raised.

“Book code.” Sherlock opened the letter and showed it to John: a string of numbers arranged in sets of four. “Normally, of course, a book code uses page and word number, but that necessitates both parties having the same edition of the same book, and I might not be allowed a book at Bart’s in any case. But for a Bible, any King James will do. Book, chapter, verse and word, do you see?”

John didn’t, but he could see that decoding his letter would keep Sherlock happy all day, and that was good enough for him. He looked back in the hamper. “Sherlock, there are oranges in here!”

“Are there?” Sherlock asked, flipping through the Bible. “I like oranges. Save those and give the rest away. There’s sure to be wine and beef tea and other horrid things the other invalids will appreciate far more than I.”

In the end John picked out the oranges, jellies and confits and gave the rest to the ward sister to
disperse. There was still a great deal of it, and even John took a section of the orange Sherlock pressed on him. “This tastes like sunshine,” he said, savoring it.

Sherlock was sucking the last of the juice from his fingers. “That was good,” he admitted. “When we are done with all this and living together, we’ll have oranges every day.”

“Then they won’t be special.”

“Every day for a year then.”

“All right. And then on special occasions.”

“No, then we’ll go to where they grow and eat them there.”

John laughed. “You are ridiculous,” he said affectionately.

Now properly motivated, Sherlock threw himself into recovering with ferocious intensity. He ate everything that was put in front of him, even the broth—although John suspected him of tipping most of it into his chamber pot—took the bitterest medicine without complaint, and submitted to having his back pounded to loosen the mucus. He still had black days when his slow progress made him withdrawn and brooding, but for the most part these spells were brief. John was deeply grateful for the newspapers and Irene’s letters, which kept Sherlock happily engrossed for hours on end.

With Sherlock no longer in danger, Dr. Woodcourt told John reluctantly that he would have to return to St. Bart’s.

“I’ve had a letter from the headmaster,” he told John. “He suggests that if you have not recovered from your injury after so much time that you should perhaps be removed to an asylum for the weak-minded. I wrote back to tell him you would be able to resume your duties shortly and would return by the end of the week.”

John took the news stoically; it was not unexpected. “Thank you, sir. I could go back to my regular duties today if you like, but I appreciate the chance to stay a few more nights.” Sherlock occasionally still had nightmares about the coal cellar, and in any case still spent most nights coughing and restless.

Sherlock was much less sanguine. “I don’t want you to go back there,” he said, sitting up in alarm. “That man almost killed you. Can’t you have Dr. Woodcourt take you on as an apprentice or something?”

“We’re sentenced to St. Bart’s until we turn eighteen, remember? It’s really a prison, not a school. I don’t think there’s anything Dr. Woodcourt can do. I’m fairly certain he wrote to the board of governors after Robin died, but nothing ever came of it.”

Sherlock started to speak, but this turned into a prolonged coughing fit that left him out of breath and gasping. “You will be very careful?” he managed finally.

“I promise. Not a toe out of line. Model prisoner.”

It felt odd to be back at Bart’s. B dorm’s table seemed strange and unfamiliar with Tank and his cronies gone, although some of the other boys had moved quickly to fill the power vacuum at the top of the pecking order. One of these was Pip, John noticed. Uncertain of his standing now, he slipped into an empty seat at the bottom of the table.
Going up the stairs, though, Pip caught his arm. “Glad you’re back,” he said in a low voice. “How’s Seven?”

“Getting better,” John said cautiously.

“Good. They put some new boys in your cot and they finally broke it, so we’ll be clearing a bed for you up at our end. Seven can go in with you when he gets back, or we’ll clear another if he’d rather not share.”

John did not miss the slight hopefulness in Pip’s voice. “He won’t be back for a while yet,” he said, trying not to sound as though he were hedging. It wasn’t that he feared disapproval—Pip was certainly not going to cast stones at anyone else taking a lover—but whatever Sherlock thought about their supposed liaison being a convenient fiction, Pip clearly hoped for it to become fact. If Pip now held the power in B dorm, John would be a fool to get on his bad side. “I’ll send him your regards, though, shall I? And thanks for finding me a spot.”

John settled a little uncomfortably into his new bed. He missed the old one, creaky and wobbly though it had been; it had always seemed to retain a faint essence of Sherlock even in his absence, and he had liked the semi-hidden location. This spot felt exposed. He noticed, though, that the beds were spaced much farther apart at this end of the dorm. He also noticed that the boys were evidently finding ways to satisfy their carnal urges in less risky ways than outright sodomy—John heard a lot of rhythmic creaking and stifled grunting. He opened his eyes in the darkness, unable to restrain his curiosity, and watched the boys in the bed next to him. They were fully under the covers and almost entirely still, but as he stared he realized that one was rubbing the other in a rapidly increasing tempo, watching the door over his shoulder as the second threw back his head and stiffened, teeth clenched.

John turned over quietly and buried his hot face in his pillow. Since the night he had kissed Sherlock he had of course not touched him in any such way—there was no privacy in the wards, and at any rate Sherlock was too ill—and he had not really allowed his thoughts to wander too far down that particular path. But now—what would Sherlock looked like if John touched him like that? What would it feel like if Sherlock touched him? John shivered all over. What would Sherlock want? Would he let John...John found he could not even finish the thought; he was already so hard his cock was throbbing. He heard the boys behind him going at it again, the previous recipient now presumably reciprocating, and thought longingly of how good that long slender hand would feel. Hell, how good any hand would feel. And then it suddenly struck him that he had two perfectly good hands of his own. Really, what was he holding back for? He had already fornicated and sodomized and was hoping desperately to do it again; touching himself was hardly going to send him to hell at this point. Feeling horribly illicit, John slipped his hand inside his drawers and wrapped it around his straining prick. Well, that was...good...now what? John began to try to mimic the sounds behind him, sliding his fist up and down in time with them, and that was really good. He experimented a little: tightening his grip, loosening it, going faster, slower, twisting, going just to the head and then over the head and stroking his thumb and there. John felt every muscle in his body tighten as his climax rushed over him, pulsing hot and wet over his hand. John slumped bonelessly, feeling sated and slightly ashamed and a little lonely and very, very messy, but before he could do anything about any of it he fell fast asleep.

John was now far behind Mike in their studies, but he still left teaching rounds early every afternoon to care for Sherlock. He did not trust anyone else to help him to his chair or, eventually, to walk up and down the hall.

“You’re getting much stronger,” John said approvingly as Sherlock settled back into bed. “And I
“think you’re putting on some weight at last. Your elbow doesn’t feel so bony.”

“Can I write to Irene now?” Sherlock asked at once.

“Another week. If you can manage stairs by then we’ll write.”

Irene seemed to be thriving in Edinburgh. She was less successful at convincing the silent opposition to take her into its collective confidence, but Sherlock attributed this to the gentlemen’s inability to recognize intelligence in female form. This did not particularly bother him. They could carry out their plans without help from the opposition, though it would certainly prove helpful.

Sherlock conquered the stairs on the sixth day and retired in triumph with his Bible to craft his letter. John, though far more cautious by nature, let him write it. With winter closing in the hospital was filling back up, and another infection could prove fatal for Sherlock—they were approaching the point where he was safer outside hospital than in it.

Dr. Woodcourt agreed. “Stephen is really doing well,” he told John after rounds. “I think he could safely return to the school if we had some assurance he would not be sent back to the laundry.”

“The factory would be even worse, sir,” John pointed out.

“True.” Dr. Woodcourt considered. “I believe I will send a note to Mr. Brocklehurst. He initiated our correspondence, after all.”

This made John a little nervous, but he supposed it did not really matter. Once Irene received Sherlock’s letter she would return to Blastburn and arrange accommodations, and they would simply escape the hospital before Sherlock’s return to school. As Tank had pointed out, it was far easier than escaping Bart’s.

But as the days went by, no response from Irene arrived. However, one did come from Mr. Brocklehurst.

“Good news,” Dr. Woodcourt said, smiling down at Sherlock. “I have received a note from Bart’s in reply to the letter which I sent to the headmaster. It appears that since your departure things have reached a woeful state in the storerooms, with food in particular in inexplicably short supply. The man in charge of the cellars, a Mr. Peters, has apparently implored Mr. Brocklehurst to restore you to your previous position, so he was well-disposed to receive my plea. Mr. Brocklehurst writes that you may resume your duties in the storeroom as soon as you are able and they look forward to your quick recovery.”

“He must be getting really hungry,” John said, unable to keep from smiling.

“Oh, that potato merchant,” Sherlock said impatiently. “I thought Pip and Ernie would keep them in line, but I suppose not. I’ll have to have a word with them. Otherwise Old Peters will get sacked in a heartbeat—I’m surprised Mr. Brocklehurst hasn’t done so already.”

“Do you feel you are ready to return?” Dr. Woodcourt asked.

Sherlock hesitated. John read his thought: it would be best to stay at the hospital as long as possible, but now he felt a tug of responsibility toward Old Peters. “Whatever you think best, sir,” he hedged.

“I think the end of the week,” the doctor said, smiling. “And no more hanging out the windows. The wind’s turned, and the smoke stays over the buildings now.”

“Why have you been hanging out the windows?” John asked curiously when they were alone.
Sherlock shrugged. “Studying the patterns of the boats and barges on the river. It might come in handy if we’re forced to escape from the school. Which seems likely, if I don’t hear from Irene in the next day or so.”

“Do you think we should try to go now and take our chances?”

Sherlock shook his head. “We’ve no place to go, no clothes, and no money—or at least no money we can get easily, though now that I’m going back to the cellars at least I’ll be able to get that. No, I’ll need to work out a backup plan. The difficulty is that we need to have clothes and a place to go waiting for us, and for that we need someone on the outside. Maybe Teddy could help...he goes out on the school’s errands.” He looked questioningly at John. John could not tell if he wanted John’s opinion, or thought John was in a better position to ask a favor. For the hundredth time he wondered guiltily if Sherlock knew.

All of a sudden he was sick of the whole thing. “I had Teddy,” he blurted.

Sherlock blinked several times in quick succession. “What?”

“I had Teddy. When I thought you’d been with Pip. I was angry and jealous and I...I got drunk and I had him. It was dreadful and wrong and I hated myself for it and I don’t want to keep it from you anymore. I’m sorry.”

Sherlock’s face was utterly devoid of expression. “But you said…”

“I know. I know! That was part of it, because I felt so guilty! And I really believed it was wrong then, but I...I always thought I could never have you, even if it weren’t a sin, because you were rich and beautiful and an earl and untouchable and, I don’t know, somehow it didn’t seem so terrible to take Teddy when so many had had him before.”

Sherlock’s eyes flicked back and forth, too fast to follow. He cocked his head. “Beautiful?”

“Well, of course you’re beautiful. You know you are.”

“No,” Sherlock said. “I’m pale and I’m slight and my face is all pointy. Like a triangle.”

“You’re mad,” John said in disbelief. “You’re the most gorgeous thing on earth. The most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. Your neck is so long and your eyes are so blue and it’s all just...beautiful.”

“Even now?”

“Yes, even now, you vain peacock. Really, that’s all you have to say?”

Sherlock shrugged. “We didn’t have an understanding of any kind then. What could I say? But now that we...you won’t…” His forehead was creased and he began to cough.

John soothed him with a hand on his back. “Never. Only you. Remember, I’m yours, for as long as you’ll have me.”

Sherlock’s coughing tapered off. He took a careful breath and drank the water John handed him. Then he smiled, triangle face transformed. “Now you know how to do it,” he said happily. “So when you take me, you won’t muff it up.”
John’s vision went blurry for a moment, which was apparently a side effect of all the blood in his body rushing simultaneously to his face and his cock.

“Christ, Sherlock,” he finally gasped. “Stop talking. Why don’t you try another letter to Irene?”
And purity of virgin souls

John greeted Sherlock’s return to St. Bart’s with a mixture of trepidation and guilty relief. The truth was that he had very little confidence in Sherlock’s plans to take down Moriarty; in spite of Sherlock’s airy assurances, John was convinced his cover as a gentleman clerk would never hold—and that was assuming they managed to escape at all. Now that Sherlock would be returning to the safety of the storerooms, John was inclined to see Irene’s disappearance as something of a blessing in disguise.

On the other hand, there was Moriarty, who had to be stopped. And there was Mr. Brocklehurst.

The headmaster stood over Sherlock within minutes of his arrival in the dining hall. “What is that in your pocket?” he asked in his quiet, cold voice.

“A Scripture, sir.” Sherlock kept his head meekly lowered as he proffered the little book. “A lady gave it to me.”

Mr. Brocklehurst flipped through it, holding the book with the tips of his fingers as though it were dirty, but of course the Bible was just a Bible, clearly well-thumbed. “You can read this, can you?”

“Yes, sir.”

Mr. Brocklehurst’s chilly gaze crawled over Sherlock, whose studied deference remained just short of convincing. John could see the suspicion in his mind.

“Don’t let it interfere with your work,” Mr. Brocklehurst said. He dropped the book in Sherlock’s lap and strolled off.

John blew out a long breath. “How long are we giving Irene?” he murmured.

“No, Twelfth Night.” Mr. Brocklehurst reached the head table then, and they fell silent.

Of course, John still had other reasons to be glad of Sherlock’s return.

Up in the washroom that night, John reached out impulsively and covered Sherlock’s hand with his own as they rinsed their hands in the basin. The touch was meant to be affectionate, but he grabbed too hard out of nerves and it came off as possessive, gripping Sherlock’s wrist. Sherlock went abruptly still and his whole body shivered.

“Oh, John thought in surprise. He likes that.

Sherlock remained frozen a moment, then carefully turned his hand under John’s so it lay palm up, oddly submissive. John squeezed once and then drew his fingertips over Sherlock’s palm, tracing from the ends of his long fingers down to the delicate skin of his wrist. Sherlock shivered again, not looking up, and John saw his mouth curve in a small, secret smile.

John led Sherlock to the new cot, still holding him by the wrist, and drew him down on the bed. Sherlock followed without a word, letting John pull the blankets up to cover them so they lay facing each other with their hands clasped, faces only a few inches apart. John stared into Sherlock’s wide pale eyes until Minchin extinguished the light and slammed the door. Sherlock drew a breath.
“Shhh,” John said in a whisper, and began counting in his head. If Minchin did not return in the first five minutes, he was usually out of the way for the night--Mr. Brocklehurst was less predictable but also less likely to turn up. At two hundred Sherlock shifted, but John squeezed hard to still him.

When he reached three hundred, John relaxed his grip. He slid his other hand under Sherlock’s head, threading his fingers through the soft curls until he held Sherlock’s skull cradled in his palm, and pulled Sherlock’s face to his. He had been nervous about this, but Sherlock’s responsiveness in the washroom gave him confidence. “Can I kiss you,” he whispered.

“Yes,” Sherlock hissed and John covered his mouth with his own. The first kisses were gentle and chaste, like the ones John had given Sherlock before, just a soft meeting of lips. But then Sherlock exhaled hard--John had not realized he was holding his breath--inhaled on an almost-whimper, and opened his mouth. John gripped his head, crushing their mouths together as his tongue found Sherlock’s. God, he had never known kissing could feel like this. All that fumbling under the mistletoe and at the pub, all those girls--this was what real kissing was, this yielding sweet mouth that he adored now his for the taking, to taste and lick and own.

They kissed and kissed and kissed. Their hands stayed clasped together between them, clutching tight enough to bruise, John’s other hand gripping the back of Sherlock’s head possessively. Occasionally Sherlock broke off to gasp, his head falling back a little in John’s palm, and always John brought him back, drawing him in with his fingers tight against the curve of his skull, and Sherlock surrendered his mouth to John with almost desperate fervor. They kissed and kissed, and John thought he could never stop, that he would never be willing to let Sherlock go.

Eventually John gentled the kisses, relaxing his grip to let Sherlock’s head relax back just a little. Sherlock sighed and turned his face to nuzzle into John’s palm.

“Is this a sin, do you think?” he asked quietly. “Because I think I would be happy to do this forever.”

“I know,” John whispered back. “We can. We have forever.”

Sherlock smiled, eyes closed. “Yes.”

John cupped his head to kiss his forehead and then shifted them to wrap his arm around Sherlock so that his head rested against John’s shoulder, their hands still clasped together. He rubbed his cheek against Sherlock’s curls. Then he realized that Sherlock’s feet were dangling off the end of the cot.

“Sherlock.”

“It’s fine,” Sherlock murmured sleepily. “I like this.”

John sighed and manhandled him until they were folded around in their usual position. “When we get out of here, we’ll get a great big bed and sleep however we want.”

“And eat oranges.”

“Every day.”

“And kiss.”

“Every day. All day. All we want.”

“I want a lot of kissing,” Sherlock said. “I want a lot of everything.”

John kissed the back of his neck to show him it was mutual. “Forever,” he reminded him.
John had spent years liking Sherlock, admiring Sherlock, missing Sherlock, pining for Sherlock, falling in love with Sherlock; but he rapidly realized that none of this compared to being head over heels besotted with Sherlock. He felt as though he spent the remaining twenty-three hours in the day dwelling obsessively on the time they spent each night kissing. After so many years of longing, being able to touch Sherlock’s soft skin and silky hair and hungry lips was a pleasure so exquisite John felt he would never get enough.

The kissing stayed fairly innocent at first. John was blissfully happy just touching Sherlock’s hands and face, and he felt the weight of Sherlock’s innocence like a responsibility. Sherlock was so pure and untouched--John knew he was making a fetish of it, a little, treating Sherlock like a blushing maiden, but everything being so new made him want to go slowly and cherish every step.

It didn’t stay like that, of course. Christmas Eve Sherlock took John’s face in his hands and sang “The Frost is all Over” in a low sweet whisper, John singing the responses back with a heart so full of love and happiness he thought he might burst. At the end they slipped naturally into each other’s arms and for the first time their hands were really free to roam, sliding over the expanses of back and sides with awkward enthusiasm as they kissed with increasing heat.

John ran his hands down the endless expanse of Sherlock’s flank just to the curve of his backside and Sherlock pressed against him, gasping. John felt the hardness pressing against him and a jolt of heat flared in his groin. He needed to slow this down, but there was a fantasy that had been haunting him for days now and he just couldn’t resist. John threaded his fingers in Sherlock’s curls and tugged, not hard enough to hurt but hard enough to pull Sherlock’s head back. Sherlock dropped his head with a breathy sound and John fastened his lips to his white throat. Oh, it was just as soft as he had imagined. John ran his mouth and tongue over and over his long neck, pulling his head back further to nip and nuzzle whilst Sherlock moaned and arched his back, exposing his neck and pushing his erection harder into John. God, John thought.

Sherlock worked his hands up and clutched at John’s hair as John sucked gently at his throat. “Oh,” he gasped. “Oh—John, I love you, I love you, Oh God I love you.”

John pulled back to take Sherlock’s face in his own hands. He could see himself in Sherlock’s huge pupils, his wide dazed eyes. “In German,” he whispered, kissing him. “Tell me in German.”

“Ich liebe dich,” Sherlock breathed into John’s mouth. “Ich liebe dich.”

“Ick…” John tipped his head, smiling. He stroked Sherlock’s face with his thumbs. “Do you know what that sounds like?”

Sherlock shook his head, eyes still unfocused.

“I lick dick,” John said in his ear.

Sherlock’s look of addled lust dissolved in a fit of giggles. He leaned his forehead against John’s. “John licks dick,” he managed.

“John licks Sherlock,” John countered and licked Sherlock’s ear, which caused Sherlock to squirm and stifle his squeal in John’s shoulder.

“I would like to lick John,” he finally managed, settling back down and looking up into John’s eyes. “I would like to lick you everywhere.”

“Plenty of time for that when we get out of here,” John said, having come to his senses now that
Sherlock was no longer pressing against him.

Sherlock gave a put-upon sigh and leaned in for a kiss. “I do love you. Ich liebe dich. Je t’aime. Te amo. That one’s the same in Latin and Spanish, by the way.”

“The English is just fine.” John wrapped Sherlock up in his arms, hugging him tight. “Merry Christmas, love.”

Sherlock smiled radiantly, enchanted to be John’s love. “Merry Christmas.”

There were no festivities on Christmas Day that year, a fact which clearly disgruntled the staff even more than the boys, whose lives had not generally featured merry Yuletides.

“Maybe they’ll mutiny,” John said hopefully. They were enjoying a rare clear day out in the courtyard, Christmas being treated as a sort of de facto Sabbath with church in the morning and no work in the afternoon. This had less to do with any desire on Mr. Brocklehurst’s part to make merry than with the fact of the factories being closed.

Sherlock snorted. “Hardly. They’d all be sacked, and then there will they be? There’s hardly any jobs to be found these days. Anyway, it’s good there’s no holiday for them, it plays into my plan.”

“Have you worked out how we’ll get out yet?”

“Almost,” Sherlock said, looking shifty.

Mike came out in the courtyard and spotted them. John waved to him—Mike looked sad; it was the first Christmas since his mother had died. Mike came toward them and John heard Sherlock sigh slightly—he liked having John to himself—but he shifted over on the wall to make room.

“Christmas cake?” Mike asked, holding out a cloth. “The seamstress who adopted my sister brought her for a visit, and she brought me cake. Kind of her, wasn’t it? I’m no relation to her at all. I can’t eat all of this and heaven knows I don’t want Mr. Brocklehurst catching me with it.”

“Thank you,” John said, pleased, breaking off a piece and handing the larger share to Sherlock, who adored sweets.

“Merry Christmas,” Sherlock said, breaking his cake into tiny pieces to make it last longer.

“How old are you, Stephen?” Mike asked. “I would swear your voice got even deeper whilst you were in hospital.”

“Se—sixteen, almost,” Sherlock said, correcting himself quickly.

“You sound older, but you look younger,” Mike remarked. “What about you, John?”

“Eighteen next September, so I suppose this is my last Christmas here one way or the other.” He would actually be twenty, but somehow no one ever questioned his age, even Mr. Brocklehurst.

Mike raised his cake in a mock toast. “Hear, hear. Mine too. May next year be merrier, eh?”

“Hear, hear,” John echoed dutifully, privately thinking they’d be lucky not to be hanged by next Christmas.
The long-awaited letter finally arrived on New Year’s Day. This had never been much of a festive occasion at Bart’s even before the advent of Mr. Brocklehurst, so like everyone else John was at work when the hospital porter hailed him.

“Thank God,” John muttered. He still had no idea how Sherlock was going to get them out of Bart’s but at least they would presumably have somewhere to go after. He turned the letter over. Postmarked three days ago; maybe Irene was already here then. He tucked it into his pocket, planning to smuggle it into Bart’s in his shoe. The letter made him even more distracted than usual, which was saying a lot—he could hardly concentrate on teaching rounds these days for thinking about the feel of Sherlock in his arms.

After work John hurried to the dining hall and spotted Sherlock coming from Matron’s rooms, where he reported daily to get his lung tonic and salve. John sat down in his seat, trying to look as though he were just impatient for dinner, worked the letter out of his shoe, and sat on it. When Sherlock arrived he elbowed him in the ribs and pushed the letter toward him.

Sherlock sucked in a breath but did not otherwise respond—Mr. Brocklehurst had arrived—but during the nightly reading John saw him covertly decoding the note under cover of the table. It was one of the advantages of being in Pip’s good graces that their seats were at the back of the room, farthest from Mr. Brocklehurst’s searching eye. John, desperately bored, longed to know what the letter said, but of course Sherlock did all the decoding in his head. John assumed he would drop it in the fire on the way out. Sherlock had previously tried eating them, but found chewing high-quality writing paper harder than he had predicted.

John meant to ask on the way upstairs but found Sherlock buttonholed by Pip. They muttered together all the way up, heads together, with John trailing behind them trying to shove down his jealousy—his **completely unfounded** jealousy, he kept sternly reminding himself. At the top of the stairs Pip turned, gave John a wink, and disappeared off down the hall.

“What was that all about?” John asked, trying not to sound as churlish as he felt.

“Oh.” Sherlock waved a hand dismissively. “Pip found my stash of gin in the cellars. After Mr. Temple was sacked I took the liberty of concealing several bottles, as one never knows when a supply of cheap strong drink might come in handy. I’ve got a plan for most of it, but I told Pip he might as well have one bottle, so he’s planning a bit of a private New Year’s celebration tonight. We’re invited, of course.”

“I don’t know,” John said dubiously, thinking of the last time he had indulged.

“Just take a sip and pass it on. I can’t stand the stuff either, but it never hurts to put on a show of jolly unity.” The disdainful tone in which Sherlock uttered this sentiment made it clear he had even less interest in unity than in gin.

The thought of Sherlock displaying “jolly unity” was entertaining enough to make John forget his pique. Pip turned out to have a knack for planning mischief: once a suitable interval had passed after lights out, a couple of younger boys were bribed to listen at the door whilst Pip’s inner circle gathered at the back to pass around the bottle. The gin was awful, but it was exceedingly strong, and even following Sherlock’s advice John soon felt the effects. Sherlock had already gone sloppy and uncoordinated, leaning against John’s shoulder and waving Ernie off when he offered him the bottle.

“That’s the end of it,” Pip announced finally, holding the bottle up and peering at the last few drops. “Here! Benny!”

A small boy rolled out of bed and trotted up obediently.
“Last bit’s for you, and then tuck it up in the ceiling,” Pip told him. The boy upended the bottle over his open mouth, swallowed the scant mouthful, and nimbly climbed up to the top of the window, where he balanced precariously whilst he pushed open a small flap of loose plaster and shoved the incriminating bottle inside.

“Nice one,” John said approvingly. Pip grinned.

“And a Happy New Year to us all,” he said, slurring a little. John hoped sincerely that none of the boys working in the factory would fall asleep the next day, since a mistake there could be fatal. He hoped he wouldn’t fall asleep himself. He hoped Sherlock wouldn’t fall asleep before John could get him into bed and kiss him senseless. Actually he thought he was safe on that last; Sherlock had already bounded to his feet, suddenly bright-eyed again as he dragged John off to their cot.

“I thought we’d never finish,” Sherlock said breathlessly as they tumbled into bed. “I’ve been waiting for hours to kiss you.” He wrapped around John and tilted his face up like a flower, eyes falling closed as his lips parted for John’s.

“Oh, I’ve wanted you so much,” John said, closing his mouth over Sherlock’s and feeling that indefinable sense of the world shifting into rightness. Sherlock’s deep voice rumbled like a purring cat, the vibration tickling John’s chest where they were pressed together. He wrapped an arm around Sherlock’s waist and pulled him closer, wanting every inch of their bodies to be in contact, every part of him to be touching every part of Sherlock. They were kissing frantically, tongues sliding and mouths panting, far messier than usual, and Sherlock moaned and brought one leg up, struggling to wrap it around John’s waist but hampered by his long nightshirt. “Oh, God,” John said and reached down to drag his hand up Sherlock’s thigh, pushing the nightshirt up and running his palm over—oh God oh God—the curve of his buttock. Sherlock’s arse felt hot under the worn linen of his drawers, hot and smooth and perfect. He rubbed over the smooth curve of it, down to the juncture of his thigh and back up, mesmerized by the feel of the soft flesh. Sherlock sucked in a desperate breath and rolled on top of John so that both John’s hands closed on Sherlock’s arse, kneading and stroking and pulling Sherlock tighter against him as Sherlock rutted, his hands clutching frantically and his high-pitched panting loud in John’s ear.

John was just clear-headed enough to know that they were getting carried away, and he was fairly certain Sherlock knew it too, but the feel of Sherlock’s thighs spreading under his hands, of his hardness grinding into John’s, seemed irresistible. The covers had come off and fallen to the floor. This was utter madness—they should at least get under the covers and back on their sides. Soon. Now. Any minute now.

John’s fingers brushed lower over Sherlock’s arse and Sherlock shuddered all over. He raised his head, bracketing John’s with his forearms and kissing him desperately. “I want you,” he whispered, staring directly into John’s eyes. “I want you to take me, make me yours, I want you inside me, please John please—” he was grinding down hard as he said this and his words, coupled with the friction on John’s cock, made him almost explode right then and there. He stilled Sherlock’s hips with a monumental effort of will.

“No,” he whispered. “No, don’t look like that, God knows I want to, but not like this, not hiding and half drunk on cheap gin and—”

“I want,” hissed Sherlock, wild-eyed and suddenly sounding like the petulant twelve-year-old he had once been. He abruptly sat up, shoving up John’s nightshirt and yanking at his drawers in a single motion to reveal John’s prick, swollen and dark against the white linen.

“Sherlock, let’s at least get—” but Sherlock dove forward and sucked John’s cock into his mouth.
John yelped in shock. Part of his mind--the part that was already terrified of discovery--noted that they were putting on quite a show for B dorm, but the vast majority was just desperate for more. Sherlock obviously had no idea what he was doing; he was sucking frantically and essentially choking himself, but John could not have cared less. It felt fantastic. Just another minute, he thought, and then I’m going to climax like a bloody freight train and then--

_BANG._

John froze in terror, his incipient orgasm rushing away like a wave, seeing the slow swing of the lantern coming up to illuminate him. There was a long, terrible second in which the lantern light seemed to hang suspended, and then suddenly Sherlock leaped to his feet and and there was a second _BANG_ as he shoved the cot on its side. John hit the ground hard, banged his head, and rolled over in a daze, thinking _why is it always my damn head_? as a hand grabbed him by the neck of his nightshirt and yanked. John slid across the polished wooden floor and under a cot, where another pair of hands pulled him out the far side. Bewildered, John opened his eyes and saw Pip looking down at him in the dark, holding up the edge of his blanket and mouthing “_Get in_” with his teeth bared. John pushed up silently and rolled under the blanket. He lay frozen, eyes wide, fixed on the lone figure of Sherlock illuminated in the light.

John understood, too late. Sherlock had leaped out in front and flipped the bed to protect John. Mr. Brocklehurst had not seen his face, and none of the others would give him up. He started to gasp and Pip’s hand came down hard over his mouth. “You can’t help him,” he hissed in John’s ear.

“And just what were you doing_?”

The sound of Mr. Brocklehurst’s voice, cold with fury, sent a shiver up John’s back. Sherlock, however, seemed unafraid. He stood in the light as though on a stage, head high and back straight, and blinked slowly once, as though considering.

“I said--”

“Oh, I heard you.” Sherlock’s clear voice cut across Mr. Brocklehurst’s angry snarl. “I was merely wondering if you were asking a rhetorical question, or if you actually did not understand what you were seeing.”

John closed his eyes in horror. What the _hell_? Sherlock was making no effort to disguise his accent now, which was as upper-class and cutting as he could make it. Oh Jesus, he was trying to distract him, to make the headmaster so angry he would forget all about looking for John.

“I really can’t tell,” Sherlock went on. “But I rather think you understand the purpose, if nothing else. The Latin is _fellatio_, does that help? You must have been at school once--oh, but nobody wanted you there, did they. A poor boy, plain, charmless; they couldn’t even be bothered with you enough to bugger you, could they? And certainly the girls had no interest in you. Is that why you’re so obsessed with the sins of others? You’d like the chance to sin, I think.” Sherlock licked his lips, lazily, drawling his words. “You’d like to know what my mouth felt like, wouldn’t you? You’re going to turn me around and bend me over and hit me with your cane and then you’ll think about how my arse must look all red from the beating, won’t you?”

“Enough,” hissed Mr. Brocklehurst. Sherlock’s speech seemed to have stunned him as thoroughly as it had the rest of the room, but he had clearly recovered his senses. He strode forward.

“You’d love to hit my backside, wouldn’t you?” Sherlock asked. “Look how hard it’s making you right now just thinking about it. You’ll hit me but what you really want is to take out your--”
Mr. Brocklehurst had reached Sherlock and grabbed his arm, yanking him hard enough to make him stumble off balance. John, who had been frozen in fascinated horror like the rest of the room, jerked. He felt Pip shove him down with his body and fought silently to see.

“Go to my study,” Mr. Brocklehurst said, deadly calm. “Now.”

Sherlock yanked his arm free and strode to the door without a glance back. Mr. Brocklehurst paused a moment, swinging his lantern up in a high arc, and for a minute John feared he would demand to root out Sherlock's partner, threaten every boy in the room with beatings or worse. But Mr. Brocklehurst lowered the lantern and turned to go.

There was a sudden explosion of running feet in the corridor and a shout that John recognized as Mr. Minchin. Mr. Brocklehurst strode quickly to the door and out, not bothering to close the door, and John shoved off Pip and leaped to his feet. He was not the only one. Drawn by the possibility of more fireworks, half the boys in the dorm were up and crowding toward the door. There was a sudden echoing crash from the end of the hall and John reached the door just in time to see Mr. Minchin’s white face as he turned from the shattered window. He looked terror-stricken.

“He jumped,” Minchin whispered. “Lord help us, he jumped.”
Of all the million million stars

John never knew how he got through the next few days. Of that first horrible sleepless night he had no recollection whatsoever, nor of the morning after; his first clear memory was of Molly’s horrified face.

“Oh, John, what is it? What’s happened?”

“It’s Stephen,” Mike said quietly, steering John into a chair in the wardroom. “He was caught—well, he was caught out last night, and the headmaster was taking him for punishment. I suppose he couldn’t bear the thought of going back to the coal cellar. He jumped out a window.”

“Oh.” Molly’s hands flew to her mouth. “Is he…”

Mike shook his head. “He went into the river. Men went out with lanterns, but there was no sign of him.”

Molly’s eyes were huge over her hands. “I’ll fetch Dr. Woodcourt.”

Dr. Woodcourt was kindness itself, offering John his own rooms if he desired to rest in privacy, but John shook his head. “I need to keep moving,” he said, in a dull, distant voice he hardly recognized as his own. “I need to be useful.”

For the first day, and the next, and even a bit for the third, he still hoped. Every footstep in the hallway made his hands still in their task, his heart hammering in the desperate hope that this time it would be someone coming to fetch him: There’s a young man been brought in. He’s tall thin dark hair blue eyes curly hair pale wet. He’s half drowned struck his head lost his memory washed up miles downriver raving with fever asking for you. He looks like your cousin.

But it never was.

It was almost a relief to crawl into his cot each night, to finally let the weight of sorrow press him down. He had always slept on his back when he was alone before but now he found himself lying on his side, curled around the emptiness, staring into the lonely dark. His cock lay soft and useless between his legs. He hated it.

On the third night he lay down and knew suddenly with a terrible ache of grief that there was no hope left. Sherlock was not coming back. He pushed his face into the pillow and cried, a soundless wail of overwhelming misery and despair, scouring his throat with the raw agony of it. The other boys were silent, pretending not to hear, and John was grateful for that little mercy.

The fourth day. He dragged himself through it, distantly glad to be working in the hospital where none of the patients knew his pain, no one looked at him with sad grieving eyes the way Pip and Ernie did. At the end of it he sagged onto his cot, stared out into the darkness, and forced himself to consider his options. He could leave—simply slip away from the hospital one day, or even ask Dr. Woodcourt’s assistance, which he did not doubt would be granted. Make his way north, see his family, find work as a groom somewhere. With Sherlock gone, surely that was where his primary duty now lay. The thought of it filled him with a bleak emptiness, year after year of being alone; but perhaps there would be good moments: with the horses as he had known before, seeing his sister’s children grow and thrive if John’s income could buy them security. Or he could stay on at the hospital after his birthday, as he knew Mike hoped to do. It would still be a long lifetime of emptiness, and it was highly unlikely he could ever actually become a doctor—a sort of overqualified
orderly was probably the best he could hope for—but it would be interesting, challenging, a service to mankind. Or.

John had no idea what had been in Irene’s last letter—Sherlock had taken that knowledge with him to the grave—and no way of knowing if she were even now waiting in Blastburn or still back in Edinburgh. If the former, it was possible she might write again or come to the hospital to see why Sherlock had not replied. Or perhaps if no word came John might write her in Edinburgh. John had no illusions of his ability to carry out Sherlock’s plans alone—he had not been very sanguine on that score even when Sherlock was alive—but the idea of fulfilling Sherlock’s wishes had an undeniable appeal. Then, too, eliminating Moriarty would undoubtedly do more good for the nation than John could hope for in a lifetime of work at the hospital. John considered. Maybe he did not, after all, need to be as clever as Sherlock. He was good with a gun, and if he lost his own life in the process, well, that was not something he found much cause to regret. John closed his eyes, feeling a certain measure of exhausted peace as he made his decision. If Irene returned, John would go with her.

The next day was cold, with lowering clouds promising snow. John had slept several hours for the first time in days and felt a little, just a little, better. He tended to his patients and decided to join Mike and Molly on rounds.

When he entered the wardroom Molly immediately looked up at him with such brimming, sorrowful eyes that John quickly turned to the window to avoid her gaze. “What’s happening on the river?” he asked. “I’ve been seeing all these boats.”

Both Mike and Molly looked out the river as though seeing it for the first time. “It’s for tonight,” Molly said. “They take parties out on the river—all the swells in fancy dress, drinking wine and playing music.”

“It’s a bit of a Blastburn tradition for Twelfth Night,” Mike explained. “Did you not hear the revelry last year? It’s usually quite loud.”

“I’ve seen them dancing, even,” Molly said wistfully. “On the barges. It’s lovely.”

John had stopped listening. How had he forgotten? This was Twelfth Night, January the sixth, the Feast of the Epiphany, Sherlock’s birthday. “Ah, I need to—I need to check something,” he muttered and escaped, hurrying through the halls to the limited privacy of the stairwell.

Sherlock’s birthday. He would have been seventeen, and now he never would. For the rest of his life John would have to live through this day, getting older and older and farther away from Sherlock, who would be forever sixteen, young and beautiful and lost. John leaned his forehead against the wall and breathed through the wave of pain, not knowing if it would help to think that it might not hurt so badly next year, or make it worse.

John was dragging himself miserably up the stairs that night when Pip caught him by the arm.


John blinked at him. “All right.”

“I need you to bring Seven’s Bible. You have it, right?”

Now John stared. “Why?” As it happened, he did have Sherlock’s Bible. Someone—probably
Alfred—had cleared his clothes away the next day, but left the little book tucked under John’s pillow. John did not particularly care about the Bible as long as he had Sherlock’s letter, but what could Pip want with it?

“I’ll tell you later. Just bring it with you.”

Bible tucked into the pocket of his nightshirt, John made his way to the far end of the washroom, where a lifetime ago he had caught Tank threatening Sherlock on their first night. He held out the book and Pip took it. “What’s this about?”

“Seven’s alive.”

John blinked. The washroom went gray and then blurry, and then Pip shoved him toward the washbasin and efficiently splashed cold water on his face. “Don’t faint! It was a bit of a shock to me too.”

John clutched the edges of the basin, breathing deeply until the dizziness passed. “How? How do you know?”

“Because he’s hiding in the cellar right now.” When John’s mouth fell open in outrage Pip held up his hands quickly. “Not all this time—he just came today, smuggled himself in with a load of potatoes. Almost pissed myself when his head popped out of the sack.”

John’s mouth fell open again, with disbelief this time. “He what?”

Pip grinned. “He said he’d been watching the river for months and worked out that the potato merchant was right across the river. Stuff comes up the river by barge to his warehouse there, and he drives it across the bridge in a wagon. Seven said he reckoned the man owed him one for never reporting him for shorting us on the food before, so when he went out the window he swam straight across to the warehouse and dragged himself up on the wharf like a drowned rat. Being Seven he found a way in, dried himself off with sacks, and hid until morning.”

“Why didn’t he come back before? Wait, why did he come back at all?”

“You can be sure I asked. He said there wasn’t a delivery scheduled before today and coming early would have been suspicious; besides, he had to make his plans. As for the other…he came back for you, of course.” Pip was almost successful at hiding the wry sadness in his words.

John closed his eyes and took a deep breath of pure happiness. Alive! He held the breath in his lungs, wanting to prolong this moment, this exquisite joy, as long as he could. Then he exhaled and looked at Pip.

“All right,” he said. “Tell me the plan.”

An hour later, John lay rigid in bed, every ear straining to catch the slightest sound. His jaw was beginning to ache where he had been clenching it. How long had they been waiting? It had to have been hours now, maybe the clock was broken…

A tentative knock sounded on the wall, followed, more confidently, by a sharp rat-a-tat-tat.

“That’s it,” Pip said, sitting up. “Teddy! That’s the signal.”

Teddy sat up in his cot halfway down the room, took a loud breath, and screamed. He then
proceeded to carry on impressively, wailing and tearing at his hair and babbling frantically so that John’s ears were fairly ringing by the time Mr. Brocklehurst threw open the door in a rage. “What is the meaning of this?” he snapped.

“Oh, sir,” Teddy gasped. “I saw him, sir! Standing right there just as I see you now, dripping wet all over the floor, all white and eerie–”

“Who? Who are you talking about?”

“Stephen,” Teddy said in a dramatic, terrified whisper. Several of the smaller boys near the door had begun to whimper and Benny actually cried, “Me too! I saw him too!”

“His shade won’t rest, sir, not til–”

“Quiet.” Mr. Brocklehurst’s voice was deadly calm again. “You saw no such thing. There is no need to rouse the whole household for a mere nightmare. Now get up.”

“But sir, I swear, I–”

“Up,” Mr. Brocklehurst repeated icily.

Teddy climbed out of bed, sniveling, and bent forward to grip the edge. Mr. Brocklehurst’s cane whistled down a dozen times--he must really be angry, John thought--while Teddy wailed and pleaded. Finally Mr. Brocklehurst stood, tucking the stick down by his side.

“Another sound out of this dorm and you will all miss breakfast,” he said coldly. He swept out and they heard him calling sharply, “Minchin!” as the door shut behind him.

Teddy leaped nimbly onto his bed and hiked up his nightshirt to display the multiple pairs of drawers he had layered on to protect his backside from the beating. As the other boys cheered silently, he wriggled his arse and twirled, relishing the attention. Meanwhile Benny had leapt to the floor and was standing with his ear pressed to the door. John and Pip were kneeling up, listening, when a single quick knock sounded on the wall.

“He’s checked C dorm,” Pip said, flinging back the covers. “Let’s go. He’ll be through the others in a minute.”

John followed to the door where they joined Benny, listening. “What if he doesn’t go downstairs?”

“He’ll go,” Pip said confidently. “He’ll hear the noise when he gets to the end by the main staircase.”

There was a few minutes’ silence and then the sound of another door opening and closing. John held his breath.

“Here it is,” Pip had told him as they huddled in the back of the washroom. “Seven laid it out for me today. Late this afternoon I went to Old Peters and told him I’d found a great store of gin. ‘Oh, what shall we do?’ I asked, all frightened. ‘Mr. Brocklehurst won’t half be angry when he hears. Maybe we should pour it out into the river?’ Seven told me to say just that. And Old Peters says ‘No, no, leave it to me lad, don’t worry about a thing, I’ll manage it.’ Seven said he’d say that, because he’d want to take the gin up to the staff quarters and then they’ll have a little party tonight, for Twelfth Night, maybe a little more festive than they might have seeing as how there was no merriment on Christmas or New Year’s. Of course Minchin will be down there, so all we had to do was raise enough of a ruckus to get Brocklehurst here so he’d realize Minchin was gone and go looking—and there’s your moment.”
Another door, distant. John held his breath as Pip eased their door open a crack and peered through. A moment passed, then another. Pip straightened and grinned.

“He’s gone down,” he said. “Wait—” he darted across to the washroom and returned holding a cup and something else out in front of him, dripping.

“What’s—”

“Never mind, you’ll see, go!”

They sprinted in the opposite direction, to the back stairs that led down to Mr. Brocklehurst’s study and the secret passage. At the study Pip dashed in and placed the wet object on Mr. Brocklehurst’s desk, then flung the water from the cup around the room, taking great pleasure in soaking the papers on his desk. John leaned in and realized that the dripping object was Sherlock’s now-waterlogged Bible.

“What are you doing?”

“Seven’s ghost, of course,” Pip said. He pushed his hair out of his eyes, grinning. “It’s open to ‘Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord’, in case Brocklehurst is too dense to realize he’s being haunted.”

“Oh my God,” John said, pressing a hand to his mouth to stop a hysterical snort of laughter.

“Go on now, you need to hurry. Best of luck to you,” Pip said sincerely. John looked at him and for a minute wished desperately that he were good with words, that he could say something to Pip to express his gratitude and understanding of what this must have cost him.

“Hurry back to bed, you don’t want to be caught out with that cup,” was all he could manage. Then he put out his hand and Pip shook it, and John thought maybe he understood what John wanted to say after all.

“Godspeed, John Watson,” he said softly, and turned away.

John hurtled down the hidden staircase so fast he barreled right out the open door at the end of it, smacking straight into Sherlock, who staggered backwards and then caught John up in fierce embrace so tight he choked. “John!”

“Don’t you do that again,” John gasped when Sherlock finally set him down. “Don’t you ever do that again.” He grabbed Sherlock by the back of the head and pulled his head down, kissing him passionately. Sherlock wrapped his arms around him and kissed back so frantically he forgot to breathe and had to break off to pant for breath.

“For heaven’s sake--are you all right? Did you catch a chill?”

“I’m all right, I’m fine, I just--I’m so happy to see you.” Sherlock beamed at him. “And I’m glad you aren’t furious with me. I tried to send a note to the hospital, but I had to give it to a street urchin, and I think he ran off with my coin--Pip said you never received word. Here, get dressed.” He shoved a pile of clothing into John’s arms.

John registered for the first time that Sherlock was wearing full evening dress, but entirely black down to the shirt and onyx cufflinks. “What are--”

“Hurry. Give me your nightshirt when you’ve got it off; I’m going to drown it.” Sherlock crossed swiftly to the hatch, opened it, and passed his lantern three times across the opening. John heard the strains of music and revelry floating in from the river.
John swiftly did off his nightshirt--pulling out his cherished letter first--and passed it to Sherlock, then began pulling on his own pile of clothing. He too had evening dress, he realized, but mystifyingly it all seemed to be gold in color. The trousers went on easily enough but the shirt bewildered him. How was one supposed to fasten it?

“Here.” Sherlock returned and held up a pile of golden studs. “Oh, let me do it.” He reached for the front of John’s shirt, frowned, and then stepped behind him to fasten up John’s shirt. John held still, feeling vaguely ridiculous, until he was dressed, at which point Sherlock stepped around again and handed him the coat whilst he stooped and picked up what seemed to be a feathered headdress. He slipped it over his head and John realized it was a mask, transforming Sherlock into a black swan.

“Oh,” John said, struck with admiration at the sight of Sherlock’s graceful neck and pale eyes against the black.

Sherlock seemed equally pleased as he surveyed John. “You look magnificent,” he said happily. “I knew I had the measurements right.” He handed John what appeared to be an armload of fur. John pulled it on and reached up to touch the thick mane: he was a lion.

Sherlock was still studying him. He looked older in his fine clothing, tall and elegant, but his eyes were wide and dark. “I am having exceedingly sinful thoughts at the moment,” he informed John. “But that did not work out very well the last time, so I have decided to defer to your judgement.”

John growled. “Bring me that neck, you great swan. Just once.”

Sherlock bowed his head and John ran his lips over his neck, opening his mouth and breathing hot over Sherlock’s carotid as he grazed the smooth white flesh with his teeth. Distantly, he registered the sounds of music and merriment growing louder. Sherlock shuddered so hard his knees buckled and John had to catch him about the waist. “Oh, you beauty--” John breathed, but just then came a shout from beyond the hatch. “Ahoy there!”

Sherlock swept his lips across John’s in a brush of silken feathers and then darted to the hatch. “Come on, John!”

John followed him and looked out. To his astonishment, one of the festive barges was floating only a few yards away, held in place by two men with long poles. The decks were crowded with laughing revellers, and a sort of gangway had been braced between the deck and the hatch. At the far end of it stood a woman in a brilliant blue gown, her wicked smile immediately recognizable beneath a dazzling peacock mask.

“John’s coming first,” Sherlock called, pushing a crate over to the hatch for John to use as a step. John climbed up and stepped out. The air was cold on the river, and a few snowflakes had begun to fall; the boards under his feet rocked dangerously as he crossed over to where Irene waited to hand him down. He jumped to the deck and kissed her cheek swiftly, then turned around to help Sherlock. He was not there.

“Where’s--he’s coming, isn’t he?”

“Of course. Look, he’s out now.”

John turned. Sherlock was climbing out of the hatch, something clutched in his hand. He crossed the gangway in two long strides and leaped lightly down, brandishing a bottle. “Champagne!” he cried. “I have champagne! It’s fifty years old, too.”

“Well, open it then,” Irene said, laughing, and Sherlock popped the cork, liquid bubbling up over his
hand. He passed the bottle to Irene with a bow. Irene tipped her head back and drank straight from the bottle, her cheeks flushing, and handed it to John.

John, not knowing what to expect, took a sip and almost choked. “It’s--alive!” he said, astonished, unable to convey the sensation. “It sparkles!”

“Only the best for my birthday,” Sherlock said happily. Snowflakes were settling on his dark curls and feathered mask, reminding John of the long-ago night he had come to John’s room in the stables. He had thought Sherlock beautiful then, but untouchable, a dark angel; how much more beautiful he was now. As if reading John’s mind Sherlock smiled straight into John’s eyes as he tipped the bottle up to his mouth and said again, “Only the best.”

Irene was laughing again and now John was giggling helplessly, with the deep rumble of Sherlock’s laughter under them both. The barge was turning, caught in the current, the snowflakes spinning around them, the sound of music and laughter everywhere, champagne fizzing on his tongue and joy in his veins, as they floated out into the river and away from St. Bartholomew's forever.

END PART II
John Watson, most junior of Her Majesty’s clerks, sat at his desk in the bowels of Number Ten Downing Street frowning down at the document he had just laboriously copied. Was that word spelt correctly? It somehow did not look right. He reached for his pocket dictionary, realizing he was absentingly stroking his mustache again and snatching his hand back quickly. They all hated the mustache—Sherlock especially—but even Sherlock admitted it made him look older. Sherlock’s own attempt at whiskers had resulted only in a sparse gingerish dusting, which he had shaved off in an enraged fury after Irene mistook it for dirt.

“John Watson? Which of you is Watson?”

John looked up, just barely remembering not to leap to his feet. A uniformed man with luxuriant black mustachios was looking in at the room of clerks.

“I’m John Watson, sir,” John said politely. “How may I be of assistance?”

“Well, I was looking for Percy Phelps; the Admiralty has a matter of some import,” the man said. “But they say upstairs he’s gone to Portsmouth, so I wanted to talk to his secretary—between you and me he’s really the brains of that outfit—and I was told I should ask you, that you’re some sort of relation.”

“No relation, sir. Stephen lived with my family as a child, before he went abroad to study.” Rich man’s bastard, fostered with a respectable but hardly aristocratic family; most people tended to leave the matter discreetly unquestioned. “And I’m afraid he’s in Portsmouth with Mr. Phelps. They should return at the end of the week, I understand.”

“Ah.” The mustachioed man looked dissatisfied. “Well, give him my card, would you? Tell him to contact me when they return.”

“Certainly, sir.” John tucked the card away, wondering if he should talk to Sherlock, again, about reining it in a bit. Sherlock found working for the government excruciatingly dull, which did not stop him from being astonishingly efficient at it and showing off the results.

John found the work dull too, but since he simultaneously lived in terror of being exposed as a fraud, he tended to treat his duties with a great deal more care. He worked late again that night, checking and double-checking all of his work, eating a cold supper at his desk so as to save time. He had nothing to go home for in any case; their little room was unbearably lonely with Sherlock away. He had dined with Irene a few times, but she was engaged this evening. Even wandering about London—which he thought would be a great deal more pleasant without Sherlock’s constant impatient “Come on, John”—was not as much fun on his own as he had thought it would be.

Eventually John had satisfied himself that his work was as perfect as a clerk with no actual education could make it, and he extinguished his lamp—the last one still lit in the large room—and headed for the door. He was tired, but it was not the pleasant weariness of a long day’s riding or physical labor; his back and neck ached from stooping over the desk. He decided to walk home. It was a fair distance, but it would feel good to stretch his legs.

Even after six weeks in London, John had not tired of walking the streets and seeing all the sights: the people, the great buildings, the shops selling all manner of things John had never seen. He had
vaguely pictured London as a bigger Blastburn, but it was something else entirely. A small part of him still missed the country and always would, but for the first time he understood why Sherlock loved this city so much. At least now he could find his way round without gaping like a bumpkin. Their first days here--cooling his heels in the small but respectable hotel Irene had found where Sherlock had written their forged letters of introduction, ordered their clothing, and arranged their lodging--he had gotten lost so many times that Sherlock had threatened to pin a hospital tag on him.

He had reached their lodging house. John was tired now, and as he turned onto the landing for the final flight of stairs leading up to his room he thought longingly of the comfort of his bed. He paused. Was that music?

John cocked his ear and made his way up the rest of the stairs. The melody grew louder as he went up, and finally he stood outside his own doorway, a smile spreading slowly across his face. He pushed the door open quietly and there was Sherlock, clad in his dressing gown, playing a gleaming violin. He was so caught up in the music he did not register John’s arrival until the door snicked closed.

“John!”

“Don’t stop, that was lovely! I didn’t expect you back until Friday.”

“Oh, Mr. Phelps claimed to have business in Bath. I think he just wanted to take the waters really, so he said I might return as he had no real need of me there.” Sherlock looked John over. “Burning the midnight oil again, I see...cold chicken and pickle, ugh, you’ll have to clean your teeth if you plan to kiss me.”

“Oh, will I,” John said. He put his hand to the back of Sherlock’s head and dragged it down, running his mouth over Sherlock’s neck in the way that always made him go weak at the knees. “I could just do this.”

Sherlock shivered and arched his neck. “John,” he said inarticulately, which made John smile against his throat. He loved rendering Sherlock incoherent.

John pressed a final kiss just over his collarbone and pushed Sherlock back gently. “Actually, if I don’t get out of this collar I may choke. Will you play some more?”

“Tomorrow.” Sherlock blinked, clearly forcing his eyes to focus, and laid the violin tenderly in its case. “Tonight I want kissing.”

John sat down to pull off his shoes. “Where did you get a violin anyway?”

“Portsmouth. I saw it in a curiosity shop--the owner bought it off a widow of a soldier who got it in Italy. I don’t think he realized how fine it is, or I never could have afforded it. I could barely afford it in any case.”

“How did you afford it?” Sherlock looked away, clearly thinking up some fib, and John said in amused exasperation, “You didn’t eat, did you.”

“I did eat! I merely ate...frugally.”

“Meaning bread-and-butter and tea at your hotel.” John shook his head and moved to clean his teeth. “Silly idiot. We’ll have to feed you up again.”

“Anything happen whilst I was away? Has Irene had any news?”
“Not yet.”

Irene, as it turned out, had gone to France in early December with one of the silent opposition (“some secret errand, they love their cloak-and-dagger, those boys, they’re worse than Seven”) but had been annoyed to discover that the man’s liberality did not extend to including a woman in their schemes. He was far more interested in having Irene in his bed away from the sharp eyes of his wife. Rising tensions between the two nations and inclement weather had combined to delay their return by several weeks, which had resulted in Irene’s late arrival in Blastburn. Recently she had been corresponding with some of her other connections back in Edinburgh, trying to get some idea of who in London might be trusted--her previous contact had been caught and executed for treason--but thus far had been unsuccessful.

“Oh well.” Sherlock hung his dressing gown carefully on a peg and sprawled on the bed, smiling up at John. “I suppose if there’s nothing to talk about then we’ve more time for kissing.”

John and Sherlock had not yet advanced much past kissing, although Sherlock had made it clear he was more than amenable anytime John wished to take things further. John had been happy to move slowly--aside from anything else, he enjoyed teasing Sherlock’s impatience--but tonight the feel of that soft yielding skin of Sherlock’s throat had him feeling hot and itchy with want. He hurried through his teeth and slid gratefully into the warm bed. “Come here,” he growled.

Sherlock scooted closer and John wound his fingers into his soft curls, tugging his head back to lick and nibble at his neck again. Sherlock sucked in his breath, tipping his head to let John scrape his teeth gently under his jaw. “Oh,” he gasped. John brought his face down, brushing his lips lightly over Sherlock’s cheekbones and forehead, down the angle of his jaw and over his ear and back down his neck, biting at his collarbone. Sherlock groaned and twisted his neck around like a flamingo, trying to catch John’s mouth with his own. His hand came up to scrabble at John’s shoulders and John took his wrists and pinned them flat to the bed. Sherlock’s mouth fell open and he looked up at John with his pupils huge and dark in his pale face. He managed a breathless “Oh,” again and then John rolled on top of him, kissing and kissing. Sherlock went yielding and pliant, tipping his head back to let John plunge his tongue into his mouth, tasting the sweet softness of his surrender before pulling back again.

Sherlock’s gaze was completely unfocused now. He arched his back, trying to push up into John, who kept his wrists fixed so that Sherlock could not reach for him. “John,” Sherlock whimpered, dazed, writhing in John’s grasp. “I need, I need…”

“What, Liebling? What do you need?” John pinned him back down with his weight again as he moaned, enjoying the sensation of Sherlock’s long, lithe body squirming helplessly beneath him, just as it had when they used to wrestle as boys. He kissed Sherlock deeply, letting Sherlock suck at his tongue and pant into his mouth, and then slid down to bite at his neck again as Sherlock arched impossibly further. He let out a grunt of surprise as his cock rubbed up against Sherlock’s tense abdomen. Sherlock’s desperate uncoordinated wriggling suddenly found focus: he braced his feet and pushed back up into John, and abruptly their pricks were sliding against each other through the layers of fine linen. Now John’s mouth fell open. It felt—good, better than good, they had found a rhythm and were rubbing against each other and the sensation of the friction through the thin slippery cloth was fantastic. He had never felt anything like this. He wanted more, and he squeezed Sherlock’s wrists and bowed his head into his shoulder and thrust and thrust and---

Sherlock sucked in a huge breath and said frantically, “John, John, I--I--” and then abruptly bucked and spasmed, his body bowing in a stiff arc as he cried out voicelessly. John felt the warmth pulsing over his own groin, had a moment’s confusion, then realized in a flash of heat: Sherlock had climaxed, right there, just from rubbing against John. Somehow, that ratcheted his own arousal up
impossibly higher, and he shoved his aching cock against Sherlock again and felt the sudden roughness of the wet linen. The drag of it was almost enough to send him over the edge by itself and in a few more thrusts he was there too, biting into Sherlock’s neck as he fell.

They lay still a few moments, panting in each other’s arms, and then as John came back to earth he realized that Sherlock was shaking. “What is it?” he asked in concern, drawing back a little to look into his face. “What’s wrong, love? Sherlock?”

“What--” Sherlock gulped, eyes, closed tight. “Is it always--was that--”

“Ah,” John said, understanding dawning. He stroked Sherlock’s hair and said very gently, “Has that never happened before?”

Sherlock shook his head. “Of course not. I haven’t been with anybody.”

“Yes, but--wait, not even in your sleep?”

“In my sleep?” Sherlock opened his eyes to frown at John. “How is that even possible?”

John had not actually considered this question before. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “It used to happen to me sometimes back at the Hall. Mrs. Gregson said something once about if I needed my bedding washed…” he grimaced at the memory. “I was horribly embarrassed. She said it was natural for boys though. I think most times I was dreaming about you, actually.”

“Oh.” Sherlock mulled this over. “Well, no.” He frowned again. “Is it always so messy?”

“It’s definitely messy. So you’ve really never…you haven’t ever touched yourself?”


Now John was sheepish. “After we’d decided, when you were still in hospital,” he admitted. “And maybe a time or two over the past week when you were gone.” Or ten. “It’s much better with you though. Er…I can tell you from experience, we’re going to want to wipe that off soon.”

“Why bother?” Sherlock asked. He stretched luxuriously against John. “I want to do it again. That was amazing.”

John burst out laughing. “You can’t right away. No, I don’t know why, you just can’t. No, stop that, you can’t. Look.” He reached over and rubbed his palm over the soft damp patch on Sherlock’s drawers, and Sherlock swallowed a yelp and twitched away. “And anyway it’s late, and I for one need my wits about me at work. We’re cleaning up and going to sleep and we’ll do it again tomorrow. That ought to give you something to think about when you get bored.”

It was perhaps a measure of how much the newly-discovered pleasures of carnality affected Sherlock’s thought processes that the idea of taking their clothing off did not occur to him for three days. Sherlock had this epiphany whilst he and John were kissing frantically up against the door, having just returned from a late supper/strategy session with Irene. John kept breaking off the kissing to wrest his way out of his hated collar and cuffs whilst Sherlock chased his mouth. Suddenly Sherlock stopped stock still and said. “John. If we don’t bother putting our nightshirts and drawers on, they won’t get sticky and we can touch everything.”

“You are a genius, you’re a sodding genius,” John said breathlessly, flinging his shirt off in an excess
of abandon. Sherlock’s fingers went to his own collar but John stopped him: “No, I want, to, let me.”

John made quick work of the rest of his clothes and then started on Sherlock’s, slowing his pace as he worked buttons through holes and gently slid the clothing off. He ran his fingers over Sherlock’s chest for the first time, marvelling at the softness of his skin, the hard muscle underneath, the way his nipples hardened and peaked under John’s fingertips. Sherlock closed his eyes and shivered, reaching up to steady himself against John.

“Beautiful, so beautiful,” John murmured, sliding a hand into Sherlock’s hair and pulling him down for a kiss. Sherlock melted into him, sucking in a breath at the feel of their bare chests touching for the first time. John stroked his back and down over his arse, then reached his left hand between them to fondle over the hardness at the front of Sherlock’s trousers. Sherlock gripped his shoulders and pressed up into his hand. John rubbed down his hard length and was suddenly struck by a genius idea of his own. “Sherlock,” he said, “Let’s get these off and go over by the fire.”

Sherlock followed obediently enough as John stripped the blanket from the bed and made a little nest on the hearthrug, where he could lean his back against the foot of the bed. He had had more than a few passing thoughts of the boys back in B dorm on nights when he lay spooned behind Sherlock, and he thought this might work even better. “Sit between my legs--that’s right, now lean back against my chest.” He ran his hands over Sherlock’s chest again, one hand rising to stroke his throat and the other drifting lower on his abdomen.

Sherlock’s eyes closed and his head fell back onto John’s shoulder. His hands clutched at John’s thighs as John tentatively slid his down to Sherlock’s hard cock, which he had never actually touched before. “Is this all right?” he whispered.

“Oh, God, yes.” Sherlock arched his back, rolling his head as John wrapped his hand and stroked. “Now, I know you haven’t actually done this to yourself--”

“Yes, I have.”

“What? When?”

“At Number Ten. The last few days. I would start thinking of you and before long I would be in such a bad way that I had to do something about it.”

“You--truly? Where on earth--no, don’t tell me. I’m not going to be able to stop thinking about that as it is, I certainly don’t need ideas of where to go looking for you. Well, in that case, tell me what you like.”

“I don’t know.” Sherlock shrugged a little. “I was usually so desperate, it wouldn’t take much.”

John resolutely closed his mind off from that line of thought and set up a slow firm, stroke, watching for Sherlock’s response. “Faster? Slower?”

“Yes,” Sherlock moaned, already loose-limbed and dizzy. John slid his other hand down to stroke at the soft skin of his sac and Sherlock’s arm came up to wind around John’s neck, pulling him round as he blindly sought John’s mouth. John kissed him deeply, feeling the stirring in his own groin as Sherlock’s back rubbed against him and their tongues twined. He moved his fingers lower, touching the smoothness behind Sherlock’s testicles, and Sherlock’s other hand came up to fist in his own hair as his legs spread wider. John picked up the pace a bit and brought his free hand up to cup Sherlock’s jaw possessively, holding him in place as he plundered his mouth with his tongue in time with his strokes. Sherlock shuddered, thighs tensing, and John deliberately slowed his hand as he
caressed Sherlock’s neck and shoulders.

Sherlock broke off the kiss, gasping for breath as his head lolled back. John stroked his face, his thighs, his chest, slowing down whenever Sherlock’s hips began to tighten and then bringing him back to the brink again. God, was there anything more fantastic than taking Sherlock apart with his hands? He was so beautiful, so sensitive.

Sherlock’s back tensed, a bowstring ready to let fly, and John cupped his head with his free hand and breathed into his mouth, “I love you, you’re so beautiful, I’m going to make it happen now, you can’t do anything to stop it, I’m going to make you feel so good and you’ll--”

Sherlock cried out and jerked and John held him tightly, soothing, “Shh, shh,” as he slowed his hand and gentled Sherlock through his release, never taking his eyes from his face. Gradually Sherlock’s tremors slowed and he went limp and content, nuzzling into John’s neck as John rutted languidly at his back.

Sherlock opened his eyes and fixed his crystalline stare on John. “I might be willing to concede that this is one area where you are cleverer than I.”

“Don’t forget riding and fighting,” John reminded him.

“Hmm.” Sherlock reached for the flannel John had dropped nearby and began wiping John’s hand, then himself. Abruptly he stopped still, eyes flicking, and then sat up straight. “Or maybe not. Move up a bit.”

John watched in bemusement as Sherlock leaped, unfairly gracefully, to his feet and shook the kinks out of his long limbs. Then he strode over to the washstand and dipped two fingers into the jar of salve he kept there.

John immediately remembered the feel of slick grease and his already-hard cock gave a throb of enthusiasm. “Oh, you are clever,” he said, budging up so Sherlock could settle behind him and wrap one arm around his chest. “Maybe even--oh God and holy Jesus.” Sherlock had reached straight down and smeared the salve right over the head, wrapping his long hand around John and giving him a long, luxurious stroke. John’s head fell back against Sherlock’s chest with a thump.

“Tell me what you like,” Sherlock purred in his ear.

“Slow, with a twist at--Oh God yes, just like that, that’s perfect, oh God oh God don’t stop--” John was peripherally aware that he was babbling but the slide of Sherlock’s fist over him was incredible, so much better than rutting in their nightshirts had been. He was already so aroused from touching Sherlock that it took an embarrassingly short time for him to bury his teeth in Sherlock’s arm and explode pulsing over his hand. “Jesus,” he gasped at last, turning his face up so Sherlock could kiss over every bit he could reach. “You win, you’re the cleverest thing that ever lived, and you’re all mine, God I love you.”

“Mein Liebster,” Sherlock murmured. He reached for the flannel again and wiped them off, then wrapped his other arm around John to hold him close to his chest. “Ich liebe dich.”

When John spotted Sherlock hovering in the doorway looking tense, his first thought was that Sherlock had finally lost his mind and was about to drag John off for a grope in a cupboard. He glared.

Sherlock glared back, looked exasperated, and jerked his head hard to the side. Curious, John gave
up and got to his feet.

“I need your help,” Sherlock said in a low voice when John joined him in the corridor. “I’m supposed to take these papers up to Sir James, but when I went over just now I saw Jim Moriarty arriving. I can’t chance him recognizing me.” There was an uncharacteristic tremor of anxiety in his words and when John looked up at him properly, he saw that under his cool exterior Sherlock was terrified; he had bitten right through his lip.

“It’s fine, don’t fret.” John laid a soothing hand on his arm. “He never clapped eyes on me before--I took care to stay out of his way. Even if he did chance to see me three years ago he’ll never know me now that I’m all high and mighty in a clerk’s clothes, and with this fine mustache to boot.” He took the papers from Sherlock’s hands and said “Go get a cup of tea. Get me one too, and meet me back here in ten minutes.”

John had never been to the Prime Minister’s offices before, but everyone knew where they were. When he arrived, however, he was surprised to find no one in the antechamber. John paused, stumped by the correct behavior in this situation. Should he wait for Sir James’ secretary? Leave the papers on the desk? Knock?

John’s quandary was interrupted by the sound of raised voices coming from behind the inner doorway.

“--a dead body,” a coldly furious voice that must be Sir James was saying. “Even I cannot--”

“It’s being managed,” the sing-songy drawl that John remembered all too well interrupted him. “I told you, I won’t need your help anymore. I’ve got the police under control.”

There was a low murmur too indistinct for John to hear and then Sir James, a bit louder: “--your little card games--”

“Pardon me, but what are you doing in here?”

John jumped a mile and turned quickly to see a haughty man with a pince-nez entering. “Sorry sir, I was sent with these papers for Sir James and I wasn’t sure what to do with no one here--”

“Give them here.” The haughty man held out his hand and said, “In future, you will wait outside if no one is in the antechamber.”

“Yes sir. I do beg your pardon, sir, never been sent up here before.” John did his best to look starstruck by his exalted surroundings. The haughty man sniffed and turned away in dismissal, and John was out the door like a shot.

“A dead body and card games,” Irene repeated, taking a drink of her pint. They were at their usual pub, all three of them dressed as working men, at a secluded table in the corner. “Oh, I know all about that.”

“Dotell,” Sherlock said, steepling his fingers expectantly.

“The dead body is the Honorable Ronald Adair. It’s been kept out of the papers out of consideration for the family, I expect. Official word is suicide, although that’s far from certain. Young Ronald played cards at his club and had a regular partner who was part of a cheating ring that’s been quite successful.”
“I know Ronald Adair,” Sherlock said in surprise. “I thought he’d given up gambling. And he certainly wasn’t the sort to cheat.”

“Which is rather the point. Some think he was a dupe who didn’t know what he was caught up in--he just thought himself the luckiest player alive. When he finally caught on his conscience got the better of him and he killed himself--or that’s the theory, anyway. The other possibility is that he was killed to keep from spilling the beans.”

“What does this have to do with Jim Moriarty?”

“Oh, Jimmy is the brains behind the cheating ring,” Irene said. “He’s been quite the busy little bee lately. Didn’t I tell you? Apparently Papa set him up running one of his companies, but Junior discovered what he really liked was to use the legitimate business as a front whilst he got his fingers into all sorts of illegal--but far more profitable--pies. He doesn’t do anything illegal himself, of course. He just sits in the middle like a spider in a web. All kinds of threads running...some of them to the police, which is one of the ways he stays out of trouble.”

“Hmmm,” Sherlock said. He pressed his fingertips together in front of his mouth, looked off into space, and promptly disappeared into his own head.

John and Irene were used to this by now so John just asked Irene, “How are you faring with your...paramour?”

“Effie?” Irene grinned over her pint. “We’re coming along nicely. She let me steal a kiss last night. Shy little thing, but still. I’m hoping for a bit more once we’re engaged.”

“I can’t believe she hasn’t caught on you’re a woman.”

“Why on earth would she? No one here has. Look, the barmaid’s making eyes at me. I might just take her up on it, she looks a far tastier morsel than Effie.”

“Aren’t you worried your mustache will come off if you kiss her too much?” John asked drily.

“Spirit gum, love. Maybe I should lend it to Seven...no, he’d look dreadful with whiskers. At any rate Effie’s quite keen to meet me tomorrow night for a bit more, so I’m hoping I’ll have the information soon.” Irene sprawled back in her chair, tipped her pint up to drain it, and winked at the barmaid, who winked back.

“Do you--I mean--do you prefer it like this?” John blurted out. He had been wondering this for some time. “I mean, being a man?”

“God, who wouldn’t? You’ve clearly never worn a corset. But if you mean do I want to be a man, no, not really. If you mean do I prefer girls, then the answer’s yes, although there are some men I could fancy.” She tipped a glance at Sherlock that was fond and just a little sad. “But mostly the ladies. I assume that doesn’t shock you,” she added, giving him a knowing look.

John flushed, although part of him was relieved to have it out in the open. It was fairly ridiculous to think they were fooling Irene, who was hardly going to report them to the police in any case. “No,” he said honestly. “It doesn’t.”

“Good.” She licked her lips, gave him her cat-like grin, and said, “Now watch and learn.” She got to her feet and swaggered toward the barmaid.
Sherlock was quiet on the way back. John did not try to talk to him; he knew from experience that any discussion of Jim Moriarty had the effect of making him go withdrawn and distant. When they reached their rooms, though, Sherlock reached for him with an almost desperate eagerness and within moments they were on the bed, grappling and rolling and flinging their clothing to the floor.

“Kiss me,” Sherlock demanded and John obliged, seizing his head in his hands and crushing their mouths together. Sherlock moaned and wrapped his longs arms around him, pulling them tightly against each other, gasping when John rolled them over and trapped Sherlock’s wrists as he had before. He ran his hands over the delicate tracery of veins, down Sherlock’s arms to his chest where he fondled and licked at Sherlock’s nipples, then back up to seize his wrists again whilst he mouthed at his throat. Sherlock’s head fell back and he arched his whole body against John.

“Please,” he gasped. “Please, John, I want you to take me, I want you inside me, I want to be yours, please--”

“I want you too.” John gentled his biting and let go Sherlock’s wrists to cradle his head and kiss him deeply. “But not now.” Not out of fear, not so that he could mark Sherlock like a dog. He knew better than to say this, however.

“Why?” Sherlock groaned, letting his head fall back. “You said no at Bart’s but there’s no one here to hear us, that’s why we’re at the top of this wretched building.”

“Because this isn’t real,” John said. “This isn’t your real life, and it certainly isn’t mine. Right now it’s just you and me against the world, all bound up and in love and it’s all so intense and passionate; but really, take away the life-or-death-fate-of-the-Empire stakes and we’re still just playing make-believe, as we did at Robin Hood when we were boys. When this is over you’ll be the Earl, Sherlock and--”

“I won’t marry. I won’t,” Sherlock bit out. “That would be the greater sin, to make a mockery of marriage--”

“I know. I know,” John soothed. “But you’ll be in society, go to university, be where you belong, and maybe you’ll realize I’m not what you want anymore, not in that life. You can only give this away once, Sherlock, and I don’t want you to regret--”

“Oh for God’s sake! I’m not a holy vessel! And why can’t you understand that I will never want anyone else? I’ve been in love with you since I was twelve years old, since the first day I met you, when you waded into a pond and took on three boys bigger than you even though I’d been an utter brat! I’m like those birds, oh I’ve erased the details, the ones who mate for life--I have always, always loved you and I always will.”

John held him tightly, surprised to feel the prickle of hot tears at the backs of his eyes. He knew it was true. John still cherished the letter to prove it: Sherlock had known long before he had.

“I’ve loved you even longer than that,” he said when he was sure his voice would not betray him. “Since the first moment I saw you astride a horse. I thought you were the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. It just...took me a little longer to understand. But I’ve always loved you, and I knew from the first that meant I would do anything to protect you.”

Sherlock made his angry-cat noise. “I don’t need protecting. How long? How long do I have to love you before you believe me?”

John bit back his hot retort and thought it over. It was a fair question. “When this is done,” he said finally. “When you’ve resumed your rightful identity. If you still want me then, then I’m yours, body
Sherlock huffed a little but subsided. John stroked his hair and then asked tentatively, “Sherlock? When you talk about it--I mean to say--have you never, er, wanted to try it? I mean--”

“Me buggering you? Is that what you’re asking?” Sherlock’s shoulders moved in a shrug. “Maybe sometime, just to see what it’s like. But we’ll both like it better the other way. You like to touch me, to see how much you can make me feel and how completely you can make me fall apart, and I love when you do it. But for you, what you really want is to take your pleasure from me. You were far more aroused holding me down just now than you are when my hands are on you.”

“Oh,” John said, startled by the unexpected accuracy of this and beginning immediately to feel guilty.

“John,” Sherlock said in his don’t-be-so-tiresome voice, “I like when you hold me down. In fact, if you aren’t going to sodomize me, I’d appreciate it very much if you did it again.”

John rolled on top of him again and pulled Sherlock’s wrists high above his head, looking down into his fathomless pale eyes. “Idiot,” he growled, reveling in the way Sherlock’s pupils dilated. “After all the trouble I had to save your virgin arse--the prison, Bart’s--you think I’m just going to let you give it away? You are mine, Sherlock Holmes, mine. Don’t you forget it. I’ll have you when I’m ready and not before.”

A full-body shudder ran through Sherlock and he arched against John, eyes falling closed and baring his throat. “Yours,” he rumbled in his deep throaty purr. John kissed him deeply and thoroughly and then scraped his teeth all down the length of his neck, biting at his collarbone where no one would ever see the mark. Sherlock was panting and writhing now, rutting the length of his erection against John’s thigh. John let go Sherlock’s wrists and slid down to align their cocks, which felt much better without their nightshirts and drawers in the way, and gave into the desire to just grind against him for a bit. He rolled them to their sides so he could grip Sherlock’s arse, which made Sherlock thrust against him frantically.

John opened his eyes to see if he could see Sherlock’s face and caught sight of the jar of salve, which they now kept on the nightstand. “Oh, yes,” he said aloud. “Hold on--” he rolled up over Sherlock and scooped some up in his fingers, then flopped gracelessly back in place, took Sherlock’s hand, and smeared the ointment over both their palms. Sherlock fumbled for John’s cock, but their hands kept bumping, and then Sherlock said suddenly, “Oh--no, like this,” and he wrapped both their pricks together in his long fingers. John caught on at once and wrapped his own hand around them and after a minute they found a rhythm, both of them sliding their hands and thrusting and holding onto each other for leverage. It was messy and awkward but also incredibly arousing to be touching each other at the same time, and when John caught the back of Sherlock’s neck and pulled him down for a bruising kiss he suddenly caught the perfect spot, Sherlock’s cock sliding against that sweet place where the pleasure built inexorably until it burst out of him, leaving him muffling his cries against Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock stroked him through it and then let John’s softening prick slip out of his grasp and began rubbing himself, right there in John’s arms, with John watching. John raised up on one elbow, greedy to see, thinking faster and lighter, must remember that and then Oh as Sherlock’s head dropped back and he bit his lip, stiffening and pulsing. John waited until his hand went limp and then he rolled back on top of him, smearing their salve-and-semen soaked bodies in a way that sent little aftershocks of pleasure through him and murmuring, “Mine mine mine, I love you,” into Sherlock’s ear.

“Congratulate me, lads,” Irene announced as she thumped their pints down on the table. “I’m
John covered his eyes with his hand, shaking his head, but Sherlock said with impatience, “Finally. Have you got the information then?”

“Yes, but it’s not good for us, I’m afraid. Sir James is out every night this week. However, Effie says he usually spends every Sunday night at home, so we can try for that.”

“We have to be absolutely sure he’ll be in, or the whole thing fails,” Sherlock said.

“I know. What about on your end, is everything ready?”

“Of course,” Sherlock said curtly.

“The actors are easy enough, we just need to give them the day and time,” John said, kicking him a little under the table. “And Sherlock’s been paying a street urchin for weeks now to keep an eye on Number Ten and bring us news of the comings and goings after hours. He’s got a whole gang he says he can have in place at a moment’s notice.”

“All right, let’s try for a meeting Saturday then and--what’s going on?”

There was a tremendous amount of shouting and hubbub on the street outside the pub. As John looked toward the door it burst open, and a man clutching a newspaper rushed in.

“The Gloria Scott!” he cried. “Pride of the Indian Fleet, taken! by the French!”

There was an immediate uproar. “This’ll mean war!” shouted a grizzled man with enormous mutton-chop whiskers, brandishing his pint furiously.

John, Sherlock and Irene looked at each other, white-faced and silent amidst the din.

“Get back to your housemaid,” Sherlock said in a low voice to Irene. “We’re out of time. Find out when Moriarty will be at home, for certain. If he’s not going to be staying in then we’ll get Effie out of the way, put you in her place and poison him.”

To John’s relief Irene did not argue with this insane plan. She merely nodded, touched her cap in farewell, and slipped away.

Sherlock did not come to bed that night. John fell asleep listening to the quiet strains of his violin, playing something soft and melancholy so as not to disturb John, and awoke hours later to find him sitting in his chair by the cold fire, staring at nothing.

“Come to bed, love,” John said gently, pushing himself up. “You can’t do anything until we hear from Irene, and it’s sure to be a madhouse tomorrow.”

“What if I can’t pull this off?” Sherlock asked in a very low voice. “What if we fail?”

John looked at him, seeing for a moment not the tall elegant man he was now but the small fierce boy who feared nothing but school. “Then we make a new plan,” he said simply. “That’s what we do, isn’t it?”

Sherlock glanced at him over his drawn-up knees. “Yes,” he said. “It is.” A ghost of a smile touched his face.

John lifted the edge of the blankets and said “Come on now, Liebling,” and Sherlock sighed, got up, and crawled under the covers. His hands and feet were like ice and John wrapped himself around
him, tucking Sherlock’s hands under his own as he sang in a whisper into his ear.

*Oh what would you do if the kettle boiled over?*

*What would I do but to fill it again.*

*And what would you do if the cow ate the clover?*

*What would I do only set it again.*

Sherlock burrowed into him gratefully, but neither of them slept any more that night.

As John had predicted, the next few days were mad indeed. There were people coming and going constantly, and the clerks were kept frantically busy copying the flood of documents that the crisis seemed to generate.

“Here, Watson, do you have those ship reports finished yet?” the head clerk asked. The head clerk’s collar was slightly askew and there was a smudge of ink on his cuff, which for him was practically *deshabille*.

“Just now, sir,” John answered.

“Good. Run them up to Phelp’s office, apparently the bloke from the Admiralty’s there and he wants them. Fetch us a cup of tea when you come back.”

“Right away, sir,” John said, blowing on his papers to make sure the ink was dry. He darted up the stairs, happy at the thought of seeing Sherlock.

When he arrived however, Sherlock was deep in conversation with the mustachioed man who had been looking for him when he was in Cornwall. In fact, now, that John thought about it, the man had been around quite a bit lately. He frowned. The man was also leaning extremely close to Sherlock, far closer that John really thought necessary for a conversation in an office, and speaking directly into his ear. What was *that* all about? Whatever it was did not seem to particularly interest Sherlock, who seemed to be trying to lean away.

“I’ve some reports here the Admiralty wanted?” John said loudly enough to make Sherlock jump.

Mustachios--no, wait, his name was something German sounding--Gruner!--actually had the temerity to *lay his hand* on Sherlock’s shoulder as he straightened and turned to John. “Ah, excellent,” he said, smiling his annoyingly white smile. “I was beginning to fear that I might need to return later to get them, but now we can discuss them at once. May I draw up a chair?”

“Best take them into Mr. Phelp’s office,” Sherlock answered, throwing John a look of relief. “Thank you, John.”

“Oh, no need to bother the Tadpole,” Gruner began, but Sherlock was already flinging the door open and announcing, “Sir, the ship reports.”

John did not realize he was digging his nails into his palms until he had to pry his cramped fingers apart to get the tea. He consoled himself with the thought that if all went as planned, they would be out of this place in a week, and they would never have to deal with Gruner again. Or with the head clerk, who took his tea and immediately handed John a fresh stack of documents to copy, all of which looked even more boring than the ship reports.
“I had a note from Irene,” Sherlock told John on the way home, rattling along in the privacy of their hansom cab. “Sir James has canceled some of his engagements, but only because he’s having so many meetings about the diplomatic crisis. Apparently his Sunday night in is sacrosanct, though. We’re all to meet Saturday to go over the plans.”

“Wonderful,” John said fervently. The cab bumped and lurched, jostling him into Sherlock, and he had to put a hand on his arm to steady himself. Which reminded him: “Has that man Gruner been coming around an awful lot lately?”

“He always has done,” Sherlock said. “And he stares at me. It made me nervous at first--I thought he must recognize me from somewhere before, though I couldn’t imagine how. Finally I asked Irene to make inquiries.” John was surprised to see Sherlock grin. “Apparently Baron Gruner is an invert, although he goes to immense pains to hide it. In fact, he’s acquired such a reputation as a womanizer that he isn’t received by many of the more respectable families. He even went so far as to become engaged at one point, but the young lady broke it off when she learned about his shocking past.”

“So--” the cab lurched to a stop and John was obliged to hold his tongue until they had paid the cabbie and mounted the steps to their little room. “So he’s been coming around all this time because he fancies you?”

“I suppose so,” Sherlock said, fitting the key in the lock. “But of course he hasn’t actually said anything outright, so I’ve been--”

John took hold of his coat and shoved him up against the wall, kicking the door shut behind him. He grabbed the back of Sherlock’s head with his other hand, fisting it in his curls.

“Were you flirting with him?” he asked in a low, dangerous voice. He wasn’t really jealous. For one thing, if he ever thought Sherlock wanted someone else--someone more his station--he would of course do the honorable thing and withdraw; he knew Sherlock had no interest in Gruner, but they hadn’t really touched in days now, and they had both been so tense--

“No, John, never,” Sherlock gasped. John growled and tightened his grip in his hair, pressing Sherlock harder into the wall. “I don’t--he just thinks me an easy mark, an orphan, a bastard, no powerful friends--”

John realized with a sudden thrill that Sherlock actually thought he was jealous and, moreover, that he was aroused by it. Sherlock was already hard and squirming against him. He let the hand not tangled in Sherlock’s hair drop to grip the back of his arse and pull them together.

“Is that what you want? You want that rich man with his fine clothes and his mustachios and his fancy ways?” He pulled Sherlock’s head down and took his mouth in a hard, plunging kiss, running his tongue possessively over Sherlock’s teeth. Sherlock clutched at him, his hands skittering over John’s back and arms as though unable to settle where they should go. John wrapped his arm around his waist and crushed Sherlock against him as he kissed him again. Sherlock’s knees were trembling and John braced him against the wall to run his mouth over his throat.

“You want his aristocratic little prick?” John asked. He rubbed the flat of his hand down over Sherlock’s straining cock, right between his legs to fondle at the entrance there. Sherlock’s head fell back against the wall. “His little prick in your arse, you want that?”

“No,” Sherlock cried, clearly dismayed. John grinned into his neck. He knew he was big--he’d spent most of his life bathing in public--and more, he knew Sherlock knew it too. If Sherlock had put one
tenth of his enormous brain to actually thinking about this he would know perfectly well John was teasing him, but that was one of the things John loved about him—that John had only to pull his hair or lick his neck or even kiss him in the just the right way, and Sherlock the genius simply stopped thinking.

“I want your prick, John, only yours.” Apparently he stopped thinking about what he was saying too. “Please, John, please, let me—” and Sherlock abruptly dropped to his knees and began to mouth at John’s cock through the fabric of his trousers.

John heard himself make an indecent groaning noise and decided he was done thinking too. “Take it then,” he ground out, already out of breath as Sherlock yanked at the fastenings to free his cock and immediately sank his mouth onto it.

“Oh my God,” John moaned, hearing rather than feeling his head hit the wall in turn. Sherlock hadn’t really gotten any more skilled at this since the last time he tried it, but John didn’t have any experience either, and warm and wet seemed all that was required anyway. Sherlock seemed to decide that whatever worked with his hands would also do for his mouth, and he curled the flat of his tongue against the most sensitive spot on John’s prick. John almost shouted and he thrust into his mouth without thinking, making Sherlock choke, but then Sherlock moaned and gripped at John’s hips to pull him closer. John tried to pull back but Sherlock held on harder and sucked at him, which was insanely distracting, and then John remembered what Sherlock had said about liking it when John took his pleasure from him, so he tentatively thrust forward again. Sherlock rewarded him with a suck-slide of his tongue that made John gasp and grab for his hair.

Maybe Sherlock didn’t stop thinking entirely during sex, John thought hazily; he certainly had an excellent idea of John wanted, better than John had himself. He could do this every single night for the rest of his life. Sherlock Holmes—amazing, beautiful, clever, high-born Sherlock Holmes—on his knees before him, keening for John to shove his cock in his mouth. God. And the feel of it—Sherlock’s wet eager mouth—John thrust in again and then suddenly he couldn’t stop; he shoved farther and felt Sherlock’s throat convulse around him; he was gripping Sherlock’s hair and shoving his cock down his throat and it felt fantastic. He felt a familiar tightening and pulled back, making a hoarse rusty noise when he tried to say Sherlock’s name. Sherlock opened his mouth to get a breath and then sucked him in again.

“Sherlock,” he managed, “Oh God Sherlock, I’m going to—” and then Sherlock licked at that spot again and John slammed forward, feeling his release spurt out of him into Sherlock’s mouth. He thrust again and again as Sherlock jerked and clutched and gagged and wrapped his tongue around him until John finally got enough self-control to pull out, spattering the last few drops over his face. He sank down to his knees next to Sherlock, panting.

“Oh, my God, you--I’m sorry--” John tried to reach to wipe his face but Sherlock shoved his hand away.

“No,” he said. “I want it on me, I want to keep it, I want to go to Downing Street tomorrow just like this and I want him to smell it on me and know I’m yours.”

John looked at him, his wild hair and burning eyes and wet smeared face, his swollen mouth, and said, “Christ, you can’t, you’re already starting to make me hard again just looking at you.”

“Good,” Sherlock said fiercely.

“Anyway, we’re not done,” John said, pulling him up and dragging him to the bed.

John dropped his own clothing—he was half out of it anyway—and made short work of Sherlock’s,
stripping him and then pushing him so he lay propped against the pillow. “You like when I touch you, remember?” he said, straddling Sherlock’s hips and running his hands over his chest. Sherlock shivered and pressed upward, trying for some contact with John’s body, but John kept him pinned with his thighs. “I’m going to touch you, and I’m going to make it so good that you won’t be able to do anything tomorrow. Every time you move or turn or sit you’re going to think about my hands on you.” He took Sherlock’s hand and sucked the fingers into his mouth. “I’m going to make it so you won’t be able to touch a pen without getting hard.” He sucked each finger in turn, licking them deliberately, keeping Sherlock’s other hand pinned to the bed. He trailed his fingers down Sherlock’s neck and over his chest again, stroking his nipples until they were hard little nubs, then twisting them until Sherlock whimpered, then licking them until he writhed. “Every time you move,” he whispered, “you’re going to feel your shirt brush against you there and think about my mouth on you.”

Sherlock’s were wide, his pupils huge and amazed, so John moved up to kiss him for a bit, running his hand along his long smooth flank to his hip. Sherlock tried to turn toward him, but John held him down with a firm hand on his hip. He pushed his tongue in further, tasting himself on Sherlock’s lips, deliberately reminding him of the feel of John’s thick cock in his mouth. “Every bite you taste, you’ll think of me,” he said softly, reveling in the feel of Sherlock’s shudder.

John slid down a little and took Sherlock’s hands, kissing the thin skin at the inside of his wrists tenderly, and then stretching them up over his head. “Hands on the railing. Don’t move them until I say,” he instructed, then reached for the salve.

At the first touch of John’s slicked hand on his cock Sherlock moaned and tried to plant his feet to push up, but John pressed them gently apart. “Spread your legs. Wider. That’s good.” He settled between Sherlock’s legs, stroking him slowly with one hand while he caressed between his thighs with the other. He found Sherlock’s entrance and rubbed his finger over it, very lightly, while Sherlock spread his legs as far apart as they would go and made an inarticulate pleading noise.

“This is mine,” John reminded him, sliding just the tip of his greased finger inside. God, he was so tight, far tighter than poor much-used Teddy had been. John did not try to push further, just used the end of his finger to massage the clenched muscle until he felt Sherlock loosen slightly. “Mine. One day I will have my cock inside you, only mine, no one else will ever touch you here. I want to make sure that every time anybody looks at you and even thinks about your arse that you remember who it belongs to, remember my hands inside you, my hands owning your body.” He slid his slick hand over the head of Sherlock’s cock, pumping him lightly several times so that Sherlock tightened his grip on the headboard and shivered with the effort of holding still.

“That’s right, that’s good,” John praised him. “You stay right where you are; I’m going to take care of you.” He slid the finger in the rest of the way and rubbed, distracted for a moment by the texture. He hadn’t really paid attention with Teddy, or had maybe been too drunk, but Sherlock was so soft in there, like hot velvet, and when he turned his hand he brushed--

Sherlock made a noise like nothing John had ever heard before and almost shot off the bed. John looked up quickly, afraid he had hurt him, but Sherlock pushed back against him and begged breathlessly, “Do it again, oh my God John what did you do, please--”

John swept his finger around until he brushed the place again and Sherlock arched his back, moaning. A flush had spread over his pale face. John watched, fascinated, as he coordinated his movements so that he stroked Sherlock’s cock in the same slow rhythm as he slid his finger over the sensitive nub he had found. John worked Sherlock slowly, wanting to draw it out, slipping a second finger in when he loosened a little. Before long, however, Sherlock was panting in time with John’s strokes, tightening, and then he gasped out, “Oh, oh, oh,” as he went rigid and clenched rhythmically, climaxing with John’s fingers buried deep inside him. John stared, mesmerized by the
sight of Sherlock’s long slender body quivering under his hands. He was already half hard again just from touching Sherlock, and the sight and feel of this was almost too much. Sherlock spasmed around his fingers and John swallowed hard, thinking about how easy it would be to push Sherlock’s knees up and just sink into that hot, loosened opening...no no no no no, he thought, sliding his fingers out reluctantly and climbing off the bed to find a flannel.

John had to pry Sherlock’s cramped fingers loose from the headboard. When he smoothed them down by his side, Sherlock was still so limp and disoriented that John began to worry he had somehow suffered permanent damage. He lay down beside him and ran his thumb along Sherlock’s thin face until Sherlock’s cloudy eyes blinked open. “You are so beautiful,” John whispered. “I love you so much, so much.”

Sherlock smiled, turning his face into John’s hand. “I rather think you needn’t worry about my thinking of anyone else,” he said drowsily. “I may not be able to think of anything else. Ever.” He stretched decadently, shivering at some little aftershock.

John grinned at the sight of him. Sherlock looked like some sort of debauched fantasy: hair a mad halo, lips still red and swollen, the evidence of John’s enjoyment of him still drying across his face. “You know I didn’t mean all that,” he said. “It was just a good pretext to have you up against the wall.”

“Oh? Oh. Of course I knew.” Sherlock still sounded as though he were half-drunk. If they didn’t dress and get under the covers soon, John thought, they were going to fall asleep and wake up in an hour freezing their bollocks off. “I love you. Mein Geliebter,” Sherlock murmured into John’s neck. John wrapped his arms around him, buried his nose in Sherlock’s wild tangle of hair, and loved him with all his heart.

“One more time, from the start,” Sherlock said. “Everyone is to be in their places at eight-fifteen precisely, that being the time that John and I should be arriving at Number Ten. Wiggins?”

“On the street, me and the lads. Some of us’ll be sweeping the crossings and some will be begging.” Wiggins was a pallid, unprepossessing youth, but his sunken eyes held a sharp intelligence John had grown to respect. “We watch for the signal. Third story, third window from the right, easy enough. When we sees the signal we sets up the cry and start running around, stirring up as much fuss as we can.”

Stoker, the actor, said, “At which point the thespians dressed as students will begin shouting, ‘Burn the minister! Death to Moriarty! Sic semper tyrannis!’ Or whatever else comes to mind. Those of us dressed as gentlemen will begin remonstrating with the guards to do something about the students, which will give the students time to get away, and then this lady--” he gave a slightly ironical bow to Irene, who was dressed as an ostler and had a pipe clamped between her teeth--“makes her dramatic entrance.”

“I faint dead away in front of the guards, in other words,” Irene said.

“Whereupon we all crowd around and impede the guards from doing anything useful, in the grand tradition of the upper classes.”

“And then my lot joins the fun,” Wiggins picked up, “and you gents begin shouting that we’ve picked your pockets and the guards must give chase, and we all takes to our heels.”

“By which time, presumably, you’ve accomplished whatever you came for and the fire is
“Extinguished,” Stoker finished.

“Precisely,” Sherlock said, looking pleased. “Meet back here at ten-thirty and Miss Adler will give you your payment.”

“Once I’ve recovered, of course,” Irene added.

Stoker and Wiggins finished their pints and departed, and Irene poked at Sherlock where he sat staring morosely into his full glass. “Cheer up. You’re Seven! You’re a wizard at planning these things. It’s going to go off like clockwork, you’ll see.”

And in the beginning, it did. At eight-twenty precisely John found himself being ushered into the Prime Minister’s private sitting room, heart hammering so loudly he was sure Sir James could hear it. Sir James, however, merely looked up from where he sat before his fire reading, looked them over, and then said to Sherlock, “You’re Phelps’s, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Prime Minister, but he did not send me tonight. A contact from the Admiralty asked me to bring you this letter as a matter of the utmost urgency.”

Sir James took the letter, slit it open, and read it over with his eyes narrowing. When he had finished he stood and said curtly, “I shall need to pen a reply. Wait here,” and strode off through an inner door without a backward glance. Sherlock sprang soundlessly after him and just barely caught the door with his toe before it clicked shut. He looked back over his shoulder at John and gave a quick jerk of his head.

John nodded in reply and took the small paper package from his pocket. He tossed it onto the fire. For a moment nothing happened, and then there was a small pop and the room began to fill with thick black smoke. John dashed to the window, flung it open, and waved his handkerchief three times in the prearranged signal. The response was most gratifying: a high voice shouted “Fire!” and immediately answering cries rose up all along the street, in a growing tumult of shouting and confusion. John stepped back, feeling pleased with himself, and then realized he had no idea what to do next. Somehow this had not come up in their discussions. Surely John would not stand staring like a ninny? Should he try to put out the fire? John looked around wildly, spotted the glass that had been standing at Sir James’ elbow, and dashed it onto the fire; immediately a great wall of blue flame whooshed up. John gaped, dumbstruck: evidently Sir James had been drinking brandy, and now John was going to send the whole plan crashing around their ears by burning down Number Ten.

“Ring the bell!” Sherlock shouted, darting past him into the hall and bellowing, “Fire! Quick! Bring water!”

Right! The bell. John found it and yanked so hard the thing probably came apart, then spun around looking for water, a gasogene, anything. His eye fell on a vase of early daffodils that stood on the mantel. He caught it up and flung the whole thing on the fire, which immediately gave a great hiss and subsided in a cloud of black smoke. There was a strong smell of burning flowers.

“What is going on here?” Sir James asked icily, standing in the doorway as Sherlock came flying back in bearing a pitcher of water and followed by two chambermaids dragging sloshing buckets. Sherlock quickly upended his pitcher over the smoking mess in the fireplace, sending ashes billowing everywhere.

“I’m terribly sorry, sir,” John said, quailing under that cold gaze. “I think—I think the chimney caught fire, sir, and I threw the first thing to hand, but it was your, uh, brandy, sir, and it flared up worse.”
Sir James raked him with a look that suggested that John should have burnt himself up in the fire as well and spared the world his stupidity. He turned without another word and shut the door firmly behind him.

“I’m so sorry--should I leave the window open a bit to air it out?” John asked the maids. Sherlock gave him a swift kick in the ankle and John winced. He had forgotten he was meant to act as though the servants were invisible.

“‘S all right, sir,” one of the maids said, giving him quick shy smile. He caught a glimpse of bright red hair under her cap and was reminded piercingly of Emmy. “We’ll close it in a moment.”

They waited, John feeling horribly awkward as the maids mopped up the mess, for an excruciating ten minutes until Sir James came out bearing a freshly sealed letter. He handed it to Sherlock without a word, glanced at John as though he were something nasty he had scraped off his shoe, and turned his back in dismissal.

“Did you see it?” John asked breathlessly as soon as they were safely rattling away in a cab.

“Clear as anything,” Sherlock said happily. “Oh, John, you were so clever to think of the brandy! Moriarty will never suspect anything now and the smoke bomb will be all cleared away by the maids.”

“Er,” John mumbled, not wanting to admit he had been anything but clever.

“I wish this thing would go faster,” Sherlock said, frowning up at the hatch. “Watching you set the grate ablaze made me quite heated. I want you in my mouth right now.”

John’s peacefully slumbering cock zinged to full alertness as though shouted awake by Minchin. “Oh God yes,” he said. He leaned up, lifted the hatch, and shouted, “Make speed, my good man, and don’t spare the horses--half a guinea if you make it in twenty minutes.”

John had been so busy worrying about their deception that he had not really given a thought to the fact that they would be breaking into Number Ten the next night, a fact for which he atoned by spending most of Monday in a state of low-grade panic. Fortunately Sherlock was far more sanguine.

“It will be fine,” he assured John as they sat in the pub with Irene. “Unless we’re actually caught red-handed, which we won’t be, we’ll be able to bluff our way out of just about anything else. This is much less risky.”

“We’re committing burglary!” John hissed. “How is that less risky?”

Wiggins came in, spotted them, and slipped around to their table. “He’s gone,” he reported. “Drove off in his fancy carriage, all dressed up, like.”

Sherlock handed him a coin. “Excellent. He’s going to the opera, correct? Unless France jumps the gun and invades us themselves, he’ll be gone for hours. We’ll wait until curtain time just to be safe.”

“Ermione,” Irene said a little wistfully.

Sherlock looked at her in surprise. “You know opera?”

“My mother was a noted contralto. She used to sing to me when I was young, and I hoped to follow in her footsteps, but Aunt didn’t approve of the stage.”
“My family didn’t approve of my chosen profession either,” Sherlock said. “Not sure how they would have viewed housebreaking, although one must admit the cause is noble.”

Irene finished her pint. “I’m off to see my little honey-dove,” she said, grinning. “Ready, Wiggy?”

Half an hour later, John and Sherlock were pressed into a narrow alcove in the Downing Street mews, waiting, when Wiggins ambled out of the alley and strode off toward the high street, whistling what John recognized as “The Frost Is All Over.” “Did you teach him that?” he whispered.

Sherlock gave him a mischievous look. “For luck,” he answered. “Irene has Effie occupied—let’s move.”

They slipped around to the back door that Effie had propped open when she came out to meet her supposed fiance. John could not help looking around and, sure enough, there was Irene in a passionate embrace with none other than the red-haired housemaid. He hoped she wouldn’t be too broken-hearted at the end of all this—at least Irene could hardly steal her virtue. Could she? This question distracted him enough that he forgot to panic as he followed Sherlock noiselessly up the back stairs and into a corridor he recognized from the night before. That brought him back with a jolt.

The sitting room was as they had left it, a low fire burning and a single lamp casting a dim glow over the room. “Bring the lamp,” Sherlock whispered, and John followed obediently as Sherlock slipped into the small dark chamber. He went straight to the fireplace—this one cold—and pressed unerringly at a carved knob in the decorative mantle. A panel immediately swung open.

“Good thing you spent your childhood becoming an expert at secret passages and hiding places,” John murmured.

Sherlock was too focused to answer. “I won’t need the light now—take it back and stand watch by the door,” he said in a low voice. John went back, set the lamp on the table, and pressed his back against the wall where he could watch the corridor. Perhaps two minutes passed before he heard Sherlock’s soft voice call him.

“I’ve got all the papers, but something’s keeping this from closing. Bring the light back a minute.”

John retrieved the lamp and held it over Sherlock’s bent head. He strained his ears for any sound from the corridor, but heard only the rattling of carriage wheels on the street below. The catch on the hidden door was apparently a little bent, and Sherlock had to work at it a minute before he was able to push the panel back with a click. John blew out a breath in relief. “Let’s go,” he said and turned to replace the lamp. Then he stopped in his tracks. Behind him, he heard Sherlock draw a single sharp breath.

There on the threshold, face utterly devoid of expression, stood Anderson.
Unto the breach

Chapter Notes

Everyone, I am sorry about the chapter count weirdness--there are really 20 chapters. It keeps changing it to ?, and I go into edit and change it back and update, and it still says ". Just letting you know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For a moment nobody moved. Then John pushed forward, lowering the lamp and stepping to the side in an effort to block Sherlock from view, but too late. Anderson’s eyes had traveled up and back from John and held there. For a moment he just stared, and then his sour face suddenly split in a smile.

“Lord Sherlock,” he breathed.

John stood frozen, glancing from one to the other. Sherlock might have been carved from stone.

Anderson shook his head once as though clearing it. “I know you’ve no reason to trust me,” he said. “But I’ve known you were alive all this time. I was the one who told Sir James you were dead—I’ve been covering for you.”

Sherlock had gone completely white, but he stood fast. “And why would you do that?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

Anderson took a step. “We must talk, but not now, there’s no time. Jim Moriarty is even now at the door and he’ll be up here any minute. Tomorrow night, at the Fisherman’s Rest.” He looked at Sherlock’s disbelieving face and pulled a ring swiftly from his finger, pressing it into Sherlock’s hand. “Please believe me—the fate of England may hang in the balance. Now go.”

Neither Sherlock nor John spoke a word until they were safely back in their little room, the door bolted and the washstand pulled across it for good measure. John crouched to build up the fire as Sherlock pulled the ring from his pocket and stared at it in the firelight.

“What is it?” John asked, taking his own seat.

“This was my father’s,” Sherlock said, holding the ring up and staring at it as though looking for something. “It belonged to my great-grandfather, Sir Percy.” He pressed something on the side of the ring and the top sprang up, revealing a hidden device beneath. He passed the ring to John.

John looked at the design, a raised flower that could be pressed into ink or warm wax. Something stirred in the back of his mind. “Sir Percy—was your great-grandfather the Scarlet Pimpernel?”

“Oh, you’ve heard of him?” Sherlock took the ring back and closed the top carefully. “Not as good as a pirate, but exciting enough as ancestors go. I know this ring well. Anderson could only have been given it by my father.”

Sherlock was looking down, fiddling with the ring, but John could hear the note of hope in his voice. “Sherlock, he’s dead,” he said gently. “I made very sure, I promise you. He must have given the ring to Mr. Anderson before, somehow.”
“But why?” Sherlock said, frowning. “He’d been gone for two years! Unless they met whilst I was abroad…”

“One way to find out,” John said. “Are we going to meet him then?”

Sherlock considered. “He could have given us away easily tonight, far more easily than at a dockyard pub. If it’s a trap, I can’t see the point of it.” He looked into the fire a long moment. “We’ll meet him,” he said finally. “But we’ll make sure to look it over very thoroughly, just in case.”

“What about the papers? Do we take them with us?”

“Definitely not. I said meet him, not trust him.” He grinned unexpectedly at John. “But we will take copies. How fortunate that you’ve become such an expert clerk!”

John had expected to spend a third night staring sleeplessly at the ceiling whilst Sherlock’s violin sang its mournful song, so copying a tall stack of incriminating documents at first seemed like a pleasant diversion. They sorted through the pile in order to prioritize the more shocking—especially the ones dealing with the seizure of the *Gloria Scott*—and John kept shaking his head as more evidence of Moriarty’s nefarious deeds came to light.

“Anderson was right; we have simply got to get Moriarty out of power. You take those, I’ll take these,” Sherlock said finally, pushing a stack towards John. “I hope we’ve got enough ink.”

The ink outlasted John. The monotony of copying set in by about the third letter, and by the time he was halfway through the pile he nodded off and nearly upset the ink. “I’m going to bed,” he told Sherlock, who was scribbling furiously. “I haven’t slept in days. If I don’t get some rest I’m liable to get sacked tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Sherlock said absently. “I’ll give your notice.”

“What?”

“We’ve got what we needed from Downing Street. There’s no need for you to return. I have to, because I’ve made myself indispensable enough to Phelps that there’s likely to be a fuss if I don’t show up—the last thing we need is for me to draw attention to myself. But I’m going to tell him tomorrow that your father has died and we’ll both soon be going north for an indefinite stay. I won’t even be lying, since I won’t actually tell him *when* your father died.”

“Oh God, why didn’t you say so before? I can copy all these tomorrow!”

“Oh.” Sherlock’s pen paused in mid-air. “So you could. That didn’t occur to me.”

“Saints above, Sherlock, it’s past midnight. Let’s go to bed.”

They got to the Fisherman’s Rest very early, spent some time lurking around, and finally sent Irene in to take a look. She returned half an hour later, shaking her head.

“A lot of hard men drinking. Nothing out of order that I could see, unless you count the reek of mildew, but the beer’s not bad.”

“All right,” Sherlock said. “You go home. We need to make sure one of us stays out of reach; if anything happens, get the papers to the opposition.” He looked at John, frowning.
John could read the thought as easily as if Sherlock had spoken aloud. “Don’t even bother. If you’re going, I’m going, and he’s not going to betray us—he could have done last night, and besides he’s got the Pimpernel ring, so—”

“Wait, the what?” Irene interrupted.

“My father’s ring, I told you,” Sherlock said impatiently.

“You didn’t say anything about a pimpernel. No, it’s important! It’s a thing, in the silent opposition—I wasn’t meant to know of course, but I heard them talking about it when I went to France—somebody was meeting with the Scarlet Pimpernel.”

“See?” John said “And it doesn’t matter if he’s the Scarlet Pimpernel or the Scarlet Plague; we go together or you don’t go at all.”

Sherlock scowled. “Still checking my girth, aren’t you.”

“Always,” John agreed.

“Take care,” Irene said, her mischievous face serious for once, and she squeezed their hands and melted away.

John got them pints and food and they settled in to wait. Sherlock, unsurprisingly, did not even pretend to pick at his food, but John managed about half of his. At five minutes to nine Anderson walked in the door, surprisingly unobtrusive in an old coat and cap.

Anderson sat down and nodded to them. “John Watson. I’m sorry, I should have remembered,” he said in a low voice. “I assume neither of you are using your own names?”

“John is, it’s common enough,” Sherlock said stiffly. “You may call me Seven.”

Anderson shook his head. “You’ve already got a name,” he said, pulling a telegram out of his pocket and passing it to Sherlock. “I hope this will go a long way toward establishing my bona fides, as well as providing you with some welcome news.”

Sherlock opened the telegram and read it. His expression did not change, but he went so white that John instinctively put out a hand to steady him.

Sherlock read the telegram again, and then a third time, and then he passed it to John and folded his hands in his lap to hide their shaking. John looked at the telegram.

**REDBEARD YOU MAY TRUST THIS MAN HE IS ONE OF THE FRATERNITY OF PIRATES CAPTAIN BB**

John felt his forehead wrinkle. He looked at Sherlock. “Redbeard?”

“I am Redbeard,” Sherlock said. He seemed to have regained his equilibrium. “And Captain Blackbeard is my brother. Mycroft is alive.”

“I was sent to spy on Moriarty from the beginning,” Anderson said. He now had a pint in front of him and had managed to get a brandy for Sherlock, although Sherlock only sipped at it. “It’s a bit of a long story, but we set the whole thing up with the stealing—not that your cousin was in on it, but Lord Mycroft knew he’d been pinching and thought he could make use of it. Of course it had to be
when Lord Mycroft was away, as otherwise he would not have stood for me being accused.” He looked affectionately at Sherlock. “You almost ruined the whole thing, though of course I’m grateful. It worked out all right in the end.”

“If Mycroft had told me what he was up to,” Sherlock began impatiently and John laid a calming hand on his knee.

“The Earl gave me the ring before I left, of course. It was a long time before I could get any information about what Sir James was planning—he keeps his cards close to the vest, that one—but I soon learned something else.” He hesitated, looking at Sherlock. “The son came home from school. He was furious that you’d got away from him somehow, and he didn’t care who heard about it. You should know he was obsessed with you right up until your death. I knew enough of him by then to know the danger. I made sure your father understood, and he sent you abroad to get you out of his reach.”

John blinked. All these years he had thought Sherlock’s family was trying to keep him away from him, but it seemed he wasn’t the reason for Sherlock’s exile after all.

“Well, that explains a lot,” Sherlock said thoughtfully.

“Yes. Jim might have been a headache for his father, but he was a boon to me—he was the type that thinks servants might as well be furniture for all we see and hear. You know the type, I’m sure,” he added, rolling his eyes at John who found himself smiling back. “He was part of the plan to kill your family. I found out about it and tipped off your father and Lord Mycroft—I didn’t know about the attack on Lord Mycroft as Jim wasn’t part of that, but his Lordship was astute enough to see the warning signs. He’s been alive and working with the opposition from France this whole time, with Joseph Bell as well.”

“Mycroft is the Scarlet Pimpernel,” Sherlock breathed.

“He is,” Anderson confirmed. “He knew you survived because I told him, but you had vanished without a trace after what happened at the Hall—wiring him last night was the happiest task of my life.”

“Can you get me to him?” Sherlock asked. “I have money—“

Anderson was shaking his head. “He’s coming here,” he said. “He’s already on his way.”

“What?” Sherlock was astonished. “But that’s not safe, he’s known here—“

Anderson leaned forward. “Listen to me. Everything’s changed now. Tomorrow the Cabinet takes up the question of war with France before it goes to Parliament. We have to stop Moriarty before that happens, and now you’ve got the means to do it. I’ve known there had to be letters for ages—I overheard Sir James threatening someone who got cold feet before and he said he had evidence. But I’ve never been able to find them. If you’ve got the proof—”

“Oh, we have proof.”

“—that, taken with your brother’s testimony—it should be enough.”

“But Sir James isn’t going to just let us just walk into the Cabinet meeting and announce, ‘Look, we’ve got proof that Moriarty was behind every dastardly deed of the past several years, and now he’s trumped up a war with France!’” John said.

“No, he’s not,” Anderson admitted, looking discouraged.
Sherlock sat back and smiled. It reminded John of Irene’s smile, slow and wicked. “I do believe we need a plan,” he said.

Sherlock was quiet on the way back, but John knew him well enough to know that he was not quiet from anxiety but because he was humming with joy and excitement. They were in their room, washing for bed, when Sherlock broke the silence. “You know what this means?”

“Another sleepless night?” John asked. “A chance to spit in Moriarty’s face? Another opportunity for us to get caught and hanged?”

“All that,” Sherlock admitted. “But more important.”

John shook his head.

“I’m not the Earl anymore.”

John stood still for minute taking that in, and then he surged forward and grabbed Sherlock to pull him down for a kiss. It was true. Sherlock was free—or as free as an Earl’s brother could be, anyway. He could be John’s. Sherlock kissed him back, winding his long arms around John and pressing to him tightly. After a moment he pulled back, breathing heavily, hair already disheveled.

“You were right though,” he said. “About getting caught and hanged.”

“Yes, well, that’s starting to seem just about normal for us,” John answered, sliding his fingers in those silky curls to bring him back down.

“No, wait. It might—this could be our last night together.”

That gave John pause. He stilled. Sherlock looked at him, soft and young in his unfastened white shirt, his hair a wild tangle.

“I will regret a great many things, if that happens,” Sherlock said. “But I think—I would wish most ___”

John knew what he was trying to say, and he knew in his heart that it was Sherlock’s decision to make. Sherlock might always be John’s to cherish and protect, but only because he chose to put himself in John’s hands. John looked into his hopeful face, his pure blue eyes, and really there was no choice at all. “Yes,” he whispered.

John took his time undressing Sherlock and spreading him out on the bed. If it turned out that he spent the rest of what would likely be a short life locked in a cell apart from Sherlock, he wanted to remember every detail. He drew his fingers over the pale smooth skin, traced the ridges of veins and lines of muscle. He caressed Sherlock’s long feet, stroking the arches until Sherlock shivered. He stretched Sherlock’s arms up over his head, kissing along the tender undersides. He ran his lips over that long beautiful throat as Sherlock arched his neck, quivering, and then he kissed him slowly, drawing his mouth away whenever Sherlock grew feverish and then bringing it back. Finally he deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue in to caress Sherlock’s, cupping his head possessively, taking ownership of his soft mouth. Sherlock yielded under him, offering up his mouth for the taking and keeping his hands stretched out over his head as though he were tied down and laid out for John’s enjoyment. The thought stirred the heat of John’s desire. He straddled Sherlock’s chest and pinned his wrists, and then in one smooth motion he slid his prick into Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock moaned
around him, sucking eagerly, and John thrust into his mouth a few times to get himself good and wet. God, Sherlock’s mouth felt so good. And of course he was right: half the thrill for John was the power of it, holding Sherlock down as John shoved his cock down his throat. Fortunately, it was very obvious that Sherlock was enjoying himself every bit as much as John was.

John pulled out before he got carried away and slid down to rub his slick cock over Sherlock’s. He pulled Sherlock into a tight embrace, no longer taking but winding their arms tight around each other as they moved together, Sherlock’s long legs wrapping around John’s waist. John’s hand drifted down to caress at his arse and pull them tighter together still and Sherlock’s head fell back, panting. His hips jerked into John’s. “Oh please,” he gasped. “I want--”

“I know,” John said, running his hand between Sherlock’s legs, rubbing at that soft place that made Sherlock arch further. “I’ll take care of you. I’ll always take care of you.” He gently pressed Sherlock onto his back again and scooped up a generous amount of salve, which he smeared over Sherlock’s prick. Sherlock twitched and whimpered but John said, “Shhh, trust me,” and then stroked his slicked fingers over Sherlock’s entrance. Sherlock immediately spread his legs and planted his feet, tilting his arse up to give John access.

John was trying to remember how this had gone with Teddy. Teddy had already been loose when he came to bed, but John had no idea if he had done it all himself, or if he were permanently stretched out from being used so frequently. Poor Teddy. Sherlock, on the other hand, was so tight John could barely work a fingertip in. He decided to simply go slowly. When he had touched Sherlock before Sherlock had eventually loosened, and so it was now: after a few minutes of gentle rubbing, the grip of muscle around John’s fingertip gradually relaxed to let him slide farther in.

“Does that feel good?” John crooned. He reached up to kiss Sherlock, keeping up a slow, sliding rhythm. “You’re so warm in there. I can’t wait to have my cock in you. Do you want me to touch that place you like?” He turned his finger, seeking, and felt the change in texture just as Sherlock jolted and shuddered. “Oh, I’m going to make you feel so good, I’m going to push into that spot with my cock whilst I take you in my hand…”

“So, please now,” Sherlock begged, writhing.

John took that as an indication that Sherlock was ready for him to press a second finger in. The added stretch made Sherlock whimper once, but he seemed to relax more quickly this time. John tried to picture his cock in relation to his fingers. Definitely wider than two. He tried opening his fingers like scissors, but he was too deep for that to be effective; three fingers it was then. John reached over awkwardly to scoop up a bit more salve, then pulled out far enough to add his ring finger, slopped the salve on, and pushed straight back in, reaching for the sensitive spot as Sherlock tensed and grimaced. Stroking him there definitely helped speed things along—it took almost no time for Sherlock to return to arching and moaning.

John looked down. Sherlock’s arms were stretched high over his head, making him look even longer and slimmer than usual. His eyes were closed and his mouth was open and panting. His cock was hard against his flat abdomen, dark and wet at the tip; his pale skin seemed to glow in the dim light, and his hips undulated against where John’s hand was pressed into his body. He was beautiful, a bit out of his head with lust, and utterly within John’s power. John felt a familiar throb of desperate tenderness. He slid his free hand under Sherlock’s head and brushed his lips over Sherlock’s forehead. “Do you remember the day I taught you to swim?”

Sherlock’s cloudy eyes opened and found John’s: so dark, so trusting. He smiled. “You said you would not let me fall.”

“And I never will.” John kissed him deeply. “Turn over for me, love.”
John wiped his fingers on the bedclothes as Sherlock turned, feeling a little illicit thrill—they were never coming back here either way. Sherlock arranged himself on his knees and elbows, head resting on his forearms. John considered and then pulled his hips back a bit farther and pushed his knees apart. Right. More salve, he thought, and carefully slicked his cock and then smeared a bit more around Sherlock’s hole for good measure. Then he knelt up and took hold of Sherlock’s hip with one hand whilst gripping his own prick with the other, and slowly pressed the head inside. Oh, it was so hot, so smooth—but Sherlock’s long spine had gone stiff and he was clenching around John. John took the hand that was still coated in salve and reached to wrap his hand around Sherlock’s cock. He had gone half-soft from the discomfort, but as John held his hips still and stroked him, he soon grew hard again and a few minutes later he rocked his hips toward John, nudging him deeper. John gritted his teeth to keep from pushing back and let Sherlock control the pace, his cock sinking deeper with every roll of Sherlock’s hips. When he felt the touch of Sherlock’s arse against him he closed his eyes and pressed forward, feeling the exquisite sensation of himself entirely sheathed in Sherlock’s body.

For a minute they were still. “Is it all right?” John asked finally, knowing Sherlock wouldn’t answer him truthfully in any case.

“Yes—” Sherlock’s voice definitely sounded a little strangled.

John leaned over his back, kissing between Sherlock’s shoulder blades where his spine was now glistening with sweat. “You’re mine now,” he breathed. “No matter what happens, I’ve had you.” He rubbed his thumb over the head of Sherlock’s cock and rocked back and forth, barely moving as Sherlock’s breathing evened and then began to pick up. John felt the loosening as his cock began to slide a little. He let himself slip back a bit and pushed, and oh God that felt good, and Sherlock still seemed fine, so he did it again, and then again.

“Ah,” Sherlock gasped, his back arching in a convulsive shiver, and John let go to grip his hips with both hands and thrust again. He wasn’t sure he was consistently keeping the angle right, but it didn’t seem to matter—Sherlock was still making frantic “ah, ah, ah,” noises and pushing back into John in a quickening rhythm. John could feel his bollocks tightening—it wasn’t going to take long like this. He tried to decide if he should try to reach around and grab Sherlock again before he got too close, but he was afraid if he let go they would slip, and anyway oh God oh Christ it was too late anyway, it just felt too fantastic and he couldn’t stop and now he was just pounding into Sherlock as the blissful heat pooled low in his groin and up into his cock oh GOD it was so good. “Sherlock, Sherlock, Jesus, oh,” he heard his own voice moaning, as he pulsed deep into Sherlock’s willing body.

The climax was so good John literally saw stars. When his vision cleared he was draped over Sherlock’s back, panting, still gripping Sherlock’s hips. He groaned and slid sideways, taking them down on their sides still joined together, like a scandalous version of their usual sleeping position. Perfect, John thought hazily; he reached for Sherlock’s hard cock and slipped his still-slick fist over the head as he pressed his thighs against Sherlock’s to keep himself inside as long as possible. It didn’t take much. A few pumps of John’s hand and Sherlock was crying out into his own arm, trying to muffle the sound as he sobbed out his release.

They lay there panting for breath a long moment, sweaty and sticky with salve and semen. John felt as though he would never want to move again. Sherlock stirred, gropping, and John wiped his hand on the bedclothes again and reached to lace their fingers together. “I love you,” he murmured.

“I love you too,” Sherlock said happily. “I thought the first time would be awful, but it wasn’t at all. You said you would take care of me and you did.”
John smiled and squeezed his fingers. “I always will.”

“I can’t wait to do it again. Now that I know what to expect.”

“Greedy little sodomite.”

“Catamite,” Sherlock corrected, “I’m the innocent youth you’ve corrupted. You’re the sodomite.”

“Greedy little tart, then. I rather think you’re going to want to wait a day or two.”

Sherlock made a dissatisfied sound and John held his hip and slid out in a little gush of warm fluid.

“Oh, I see what you mean. Ow.”

“Stay there, I’ll clean you up.” John wiped himself down quickly at the washstand, then soaked a flannel in cold water, wrung it out, and pressed it to the red, swollen flesh. “Better?”

“Better.” Sherlock sighed with relief.

John brought another cloth and cleaned the rest of him up, then their night clothes and got them dressed. “Let’s get some rest. We can continue with debauching you tomorrow night to celebrate our certain triumph.”

“Mmmm,” Sherlock was almost asleep. John pulled the blankets up—he had only wiped his hand a few times, how was everything covered with sticky damp spots?—and curled around Sherlock protectively, nuzzling at his soft curls.

“Sherlock, when you’re properly home again, and have all your money back, will you do something for me?”

“Shave myself?”

“What? No, Sherlock, good God, you know I never thought once about you that way when—“

“I know, I was teasing. What?”

“The soap you used to have back at Sherrinford Hall. That you would use to wash your hair. It smelled like lavender, do you remember? Will you buy some? I loved that smell—it always reminded me of you.”

“Oh, I remember. I liked that soap. Yes, I’ll buy some.” Sherlock turned a little in John’s arms to nuzzle at his neck. “You used to smell like sun and sweat. I thought it was so grown up! When I went for fencing lessons in Munich I would smell the sweat on the men sometimes and I’d have to duck into the changing rooms and think about chemistry because I would get so aroused.”

“Mrs. Gregson gave me some winter blankets that had a lavender sachet,” John confessed, “and I dreamed about you and I climaxed in my sleep.”

“Really?”

“Really.” John was smiling, remembering his confusion at the time…how young he had been. Then something else occurred to him and he said hesitantly, “Sherlock? What if your brother doesn’t let us stay together?”

“He will.” Sherlock wrapped his arm around John so they lay entwined, faces almost touching. “I told you before. When I went to France before I came home I heard the story from some of my cousins: Mycroft had been in love with a lady there, very brilliant and accomplished, but married.
Even if her husband had agreed to a divorce, Mycroft could never have married her—not a future Earl; she’d never be received. I don’t know exactly what happened, but she killed herself. My cousins said Mycroft was devastated.”

“Oh, no,” John whispered.

“When Mycroft met me in Paris, we didn’t talk about it precisely, but we did talk about my situation. Mycroft told me that he would never stand in the way of my happiness. We had to talk around it a good bit before I was sure I understood him, I can tell you. It was a great load off my mind, but he also made it clear that I must always be careful to avoid scandal, and that our father was unlikely to be so accepting.” There was a note of sadness in Sherlock’s voice. “He was also concerned that my feelings might not be reciprocated. I had rather planned to come back and make a great dramatic announcement declaring my love, but Mycroft felt strongly that you would be shocked and appalled and that our friendship might never recover.”

“I can’t say he was wrong,” John said ruefully. “I knew I had feelings for you by then, but I was so sure they were depraved and sinful—and even if they weren’t that they would get me sacked.”

Sherlock kissed him softly. “That’s all done with now,” he said. “And Mycroft will never separate me from you, he as good as promised.”

John was not nearly as certain of this. It was possible that he would avoid hanging, but still end up back working as England’s most over-educated groom. Well, he thought consolingly, it was better than being a clerk. Sherlock kissed him again and then turned over, pulling John’s arm over himself and wrapping both hands around John’s. He kissed John’s fingertips and curled into his usual tight ball. John fitted himself around him, sniffed at Sherlock—who now smelled mostly of sex, which was pleasant in its own way—and closed his eyes.

“This is a closed meeting of Her Majesty’s Cabinet,” the guard said, looking down his nose at them.

Sherlock drew himself up to his full height and looked haughtily back. “I know exactly what meeting it is. I’m here from Mr. Phelp’s office with important papers.”

“I know that man.” Baron Gruner, all dashing mustachios and blinding white smile, leaned out from behind the Lord Admiral. “It’s all right, you can let him in.”

Sherlock slipped into the room and settled into the seat behind the Admiralty contingent, giving Gruner a dazzling smile of gratitude. John, as usual attracting no notice whatsoever, followed behind him and sat down, trying to ignore the way Sherlock was practically batting his eyelashes at Gruner. He covertly looked around the room, feeling a fresh wave of anxiety as he recognized various august personages. What the hell was John Watson doing in this room? And there was Sir James Moriarty, thankfully too distracted by the man murmuring in his ear to notice John and Sherlock. According to Anderson Moriarty had gone to bed directly after returning from the opera Monday and was seemingly unaware as yet that his papers were gone, but the sight of him gave John a jolt of unease all the same. He wondered what everyone was waiting for.

The guards at the door suddenly thumped their staffs and shouted and every man in the room leapt to his feet. Queen Victoria herself swept in, magnificently indifferent to the low bows of everyone present as she took her seat at the head of the table. John clenched his teeth to keep from gaping. The Queen!

“Let us begin,” the monarch said crisply, seating herself and glancing keenly around the table. “We
are here to take up the question of this most grievous assault on a British ship, the *Gloria Scott*. Whilst such an act is certainly a dreadful provocation, we do not wish to proceed on so dire a course as war unless we are quite sure of our facts.”

“Your Majesty is in the right,” Sir James said calmly. “All civilized men must regard war as an extremity into which we must only enter a last resort.”

“Do you count yourself a civilized man then?” Sherlock asked with interest. His clear voice rang out in the still room. “How lovely. That will make things ever so much easier. I was under the misapprehension that you not only wished for war but were actively promoting the cause, Sir James—how delightful to learn we are on the same side.”

Every single person was staring at Sherlock in shock. Sir James seemed as stunned as the rest, but recovered his wits quickly. “You forget yourself, sir,” he growled. “I do not know what you think you are doing here—“

“Helping to prevent the war, of course. Isn’t that what we all want?” Sherlock had risen to his feet and now held aloft a handful of papers. “Happily, Your Majesty, I have here evidence that the French were not behind the attack on the *Gloria Scott*. In fact it was Sir James himself. You see here: ‘My dear Sir James: as per your instructions—’”

“Enough!” Sir James was on his feet now too. “Guards, remove this interloper at once—“

“No,” the Queen said icily. “I will see these papers.”

Sherlock crossed the room and handed them to her with a low bow. The Queen scanned the papers as Sir James glared at Sherlock so furiously that John wondered if he would be called upon to shield Sherlock with his body. His heart was thudding in his chest.

Sherlock, in contrast, appeared to be enjoying himself tremendously. “I have a great many more interesting papers,” he told the Queen as her eyebrows climbed. He held out his hand and John, recognizing his cue, stood and passed Sherlock the next stack. “These detail the massacre of the so-called revolutionaries—no more than some of Your Majesty’s more humble servants asking only their rights as citizens of your realm. And these describe his role in the cold-blooded murder of my family and dependents, by soldiers disguised as a rampaging mob. Sir James believed me dead as well, but happily through the efforts of some of my most devoted friends I survived.”

The Queen looked up, interested.

“I beg your pardon for the liberty,” Sherlock said, dropping to one knee. “We have not been introduced. I am Sherlock Holmes, son of the late Earl of Sherrinford.”

Sir James laughed coldly. “Sir, you are a liar. Sherlock Holmes is dead. Your Majesty, this young man is a nobody, a secretary to Percy Phelps.”

“He is telling the truth.” Every head in the room swiveled at this new voice, in time to see the guard who had spoken pull off his helmet—taking with it his gray wig, sideburns, eyebrows, and enormous mustache, which required an extra tug to get off. Spirit gum, John thought a little hysterically. “He is Sherlock Holmes, and I am his brother, Mycroft Holmes. Sir James also made an attempt on my life which I too was fortunate enough to evade.”

There was a brief, stunned silence at this second shock. “Mycroft, old chap!” one of the lords cried with evident emotion.

Mycroft bowed low to the Queen. “We are not well acquainted, Your Majesty, but I believe you
knew my father quite well. I am told I resemble him strongly.”

“You do indeed,” the Queen said with a spark in her eye. “Welcome home, my Lord. Sir James, we remove you from your office, and we request that you be escorted under guard to answer charges of high treason. If you would call the other guards, Sergeant.”

The second guard saluted smartly and stepped from the room, and Lord Mycroft turned to John to say, “If you would request the gentlemen waiting outside to join us, I believe we have some information to convey to Parliament as soon as possible. In addition you may want to ask the guards to find Colonel Moran and take him into custody also—he will no longer be required to act in the House of Lords, obviously.”

“At once, m’Lord,” John said. He followed the guard out and immediately spotted the group of elegantly dressed men sporting red flowers in their buttonholes. “Sirs,” he began and they charged past him with a most un-aristocratic whoop.

John paused a moment to take in the unexpected pandemonium. Word was already spreading, apparently—there was a low murmur of excitement that was beginning to swell into an outright roar, and men were gathering in clusters or breaking for the stairs. John felt his face split into a huge grin. They had pulled it off!

No sooner had this occurred to him than a large arm went around his neck and a cloth was pressed to his face. He smelled a familiar sweet smell, thought in bewilderment hospital?, and then everything went black.

John woke to the sensation of a damp breeze on his face and hardness under his arse. He blinked in bewilderment and registered that he was outside, propped against some kind of wall, sitting on the ground. Low clouds scudded across the sky, giving intermittent flashes of sunlight, and there seemed to be a great deal of noise—but it was all very far away. Where the hell was he? And why had he never known that chloroform gave one such a headache?

“Wakey wakey.” sang a horribly familiar voice, and John sat bolt upright. Jim Moriarty was lounging against the wall a few feet away. There was nothing visible but sky behind him, and John realized suddenly where he had been taken: they were on the roof.

“We were going to leave the building,” Jim explained as though apologizing for a disappointing dish at a dinner party, “but things got a little wild after your little bombshell. Didn’t really want Papa seeing me, even if he was being dragged out to the Black Maria at the time. There might have been a scene!”

John stared at him. Had he hit his head again? Or had Jim finally gone properly insane? He glanced around surreptitiously and saw a hulking man by the roof entrance—the one who had drugged him and dragged him up here, John assumed. The man reminded him a bit of Tank—hopefully, like Tank, he would rely more on his size than skill if it came to a fight. Jim seemed more like the type to go mad and bite, but he was several yards away. All in all, John liked his chances of getting out of this. He decided to give himself a few more minutes for his head to clear.

As though reading his mind, Jim pulled out a pocket watch and grinned his demented smile. “Two more minutes!” he said brightly. “Any last words? You can talk, Johnny boy.”

“Two minutes until what?” John said, feeling a new unease in the pit of his stomach.
“Until Mick there throws you off the roof, of course. Unless…” Jim’s eyes lit with demented glee. “Oh, you’re saved! Sherlock’s come for his pet after all.”

John’s head whipped around so fast that his headache doubled. Sure enough, Sherlock was stepping through the door, followed by none other than Sebastian Wilkes. John felt a flash of pure hatred and made to push to his feet, but Jim pointed at him warningly.

“I think you’d best stay seated right now, don’t you? Chloroform can make one so dizzy. Wouldn’t want you to fall, would we?”

Sherlock’s eyes were fixed on John, his face white and still. John hoped fervently that he was thinking up a plan. He still wasn’t entirely sure what Jim hoped to accomplish with all this—he couldn’t think this would help his father?—but he was no longer as confident of their chances of getting out of it, especially as Mick had now been joined by two equally hulking friends.

“I can’t thank you enough for getting Papa out of the picture,” Jim was now saying pleasantly to Sherlock. “He was useful in the beginning, but now he was just in the way. And war with France! It’s been hard enough getting opium to London lately as it was.”

“So glad I could be of assistance,” Sherlock said, looking at Jim with an unsettling intensity.

“Yes. I was delighted to hear you were alive. You surely don’t think you’re the only one with spies? But now you’ve rather served your purpose now, haven’t you, Sherlock? I rather think things will be simpler for me if you go back to being dead.”

“So why all this little drama?” Sherlock asked. “Why didn’t you just have your spy take me out downstairs?”

“Well, I don’t want you dead right away,” Jim said as though explaining the obvious. “We have unfinished business, don’t we, my dear?”

John felt the chill of his words travel down his spine and freeze him where he sat. He couldn’t breathe. After all this time, that Jim Moriarty should get Sherlock under his power…

Sherlock was still regarding Jim unblinkingly. “You’ll let John go,” he said, not a question.

“Well, of course. I don’t want him.”

Sherlock stepped forward smoothly, confidently. The wind had picked up and was blowing his curls wildly; John felt a few errant raindrops spatter his face. “All right,” he said calmly.

Jim blinked. “All right?”

“You remember the rules, correct? The rules you yourself established? If you can catch me, you can have me.”

John was frowning, still trying to work out what Sherlock was doing, when he took a step forward and leapt lightly to the low wall that ran around the edge of the roof. John’s heart surged into his throat. “Jesus, Sherlock, no,” he gasped.

Sherlock did not so much as glance John’s way. “Get out of here, John,” he said calmly, and John realized that if he made a run for it now—with Sebastian and the muscle all distracted by the bizarre tableau in front of them—he would have a good chance of fetching help; but what if it came too late?

John was still frozen with indecision when Jim burst out laughing. “The game’s afoot!” he cried, and
leaped up onto the wall after Sherlock. There was an immediate crack and Jim stopped laughing abruptly, looking down in amazed fury as the section of wall on which he was standing began to tip outward. The river, John realized suddenly: they were over the Thames; that was the noise he had heard. “No!” Jim cried.

Sherlock was already turning away, about to leap back down to safety, his black coat swirling behind him, when Jim fell. At the last minute his wildly flailing hand grasped the hem of Sherlock’s coat. John was on his feet in an instant, crying, “Sherlock!” but too late—Sherlock fell backward with a look of astonishment on his face.

John leapt to the broken section of wall in time to see Sherlock plummet into the river, like a downed black bird. He did not hesitate even a second: he dived in after, praying in the brief second as the world flashed by that last night’s sin wouldn’t be held against them if they both died in the next few minutes.

Chapter End Notes

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more…
I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
Straining upon your start. The game’s afoot:
Follow your spirit, and upon this charge
Cry “God for Harry, England, and Saint George!”
Henry V, Act 3, Scene 1
Bright shining as the sun

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John hit the surface of the water as though blasted into it from a cannon. He plummeted straight down, trying to kick off his shoes; the water was freezing cold and he struggled to divest himself of his coat before his fingers went numb. Freed, he pushed frantically towards the dimly visible light, his lungs straining.

When his head broke the surface John’s first thought was that the current seemed a lot faster when you were in it. His second was that he was facing the wrong way. He flailed, went under, got himself turned around and paddled like an otter scanning for any sign of Sherlock. Some boatmen were shouting ahead of him, pointing and making for something black floating along just ahead. A man, surely, but was it Sherlock or Jim? At that moment the black shape slipped under, a piece of driftwood knocking up one pale hand as it sank. John knew that hand. He adored Sherlock’s hands, those long elegant fingers and delicate wrists; he would know them anywhere, and he was damned if the last sight he had of Sherlock on this earth was his bloody hand.

John took a deep breath and dove.

He was on the verge of giving up, lungs almost bursting, when his fingers snagged wet wool. He grabbed hold and kicked furiously for the surface, gasping in a quick breath before sinking back down to push the coat off Sherlock and get under him. Even without the coat, Sherlock waterlogged was a lot heavier than he looked. John barely managed to get both their heads out of the water, and even so he could grab only quick breaths as he kept bobbing under.

Something hard struck him in the side and he inadvertently yelped in pain, sucking in river water, but he kept his wits enough to grab at it with one nerveless hand. An oar, thank God; he clung to it and was pulled a little way out of the water, to where he could at least breathe. He heard shouting, and then the oar rocked alarmingly as Sherlock’s wet weight was pulled off him. John tried to reach for the side of the boat with his now-free hand, but his limbs had lost all strength and in the end the boatmen had to haul him over the edge too.

John slumped to the deck, shivering uncontrollably, and heard the men on the boat shouting over his head—had they spotted Jim? No, they were answering the calls of someone on shore. John opened his eyes and spotted Sherlock lying limp a few feet away. He crawled over and turned Sherlock onto his back, noting with dismay the blood now spreading over the side of his face. “Sh-sh-sherlock,” he managed. “Sherlock. Open your eyes.”

Sherlock’s eyes flickered open and he stared at John in unfocused bewilderment before letting them fall closed again. Good, John thought, teeth chattering, if they could just get ashore, get warmed up, quickly—

The boat bumped and stilled and John closed his eyes in relief. There was more shouting and then what seemed a great many men, lifting Sherlock and hauling John to his feet and leading him to a waiting carriage, all surrounded and cheered on by a crowd of London’s curious. Someone draped a blanket around John. It smelled of horse, a smell so familiar and comforting that John actually felt his eyes prickle. He clambered into the carriage, clutching the horsey blanket around him and trying not to drip all over the elegant velvet upholstery. Sherlock was lifted in, wrapped in still more blankets, and settled with his head on John’s lap.

“Do you have a cloth, or anything?” John asked the finely-dressed man sitting opposite. He was
warming quickly in the enclosed space, so at least his teeth were no longer chattering. “He’s bleeding pretty badly.”

The man handed over an immaculate linen handkerchief, which John pressed against the wound on the side of Sherlock’s head. Sherlock groaned, blinked at John and subsided.

“Where are we going? “ John asked, not really caring as long as there was a fire there.

The man lifted his eyebrows. “Buckingham Palace, of course. This is the Queen’s own carriage; did you not see the device on the door?”

John stared at him stupidly. Maybe he had hit his head as well. “I’m sorry,” he began, “Did you—“

But at that moment Sherlock opened his eyes again, cried out “John,” and vomited half the Thames all over John, the velvet upholstery, and the equerry’s fine handkerchief.

John was not allowed to see Sherlock for hours. Fortunately, in the intervening time, he was taken to a lovely dry room where he was provided with a fire, a hot bath and—thank God—a luncheon on a tray, and even a suit of clothes that was only a bit too long.

John was standing on a small stool as a footman pinned the trousers preparatory to giving them a quick hem when there was a knock on the door and another footman announced, “Lord Sherrinford.”

“My Lord,” John said, reflexively trying to leap up and touch his forelock and managing only to kick the footman in the face as he leapt up.

“No, please, carry on as you were, certainly you must have trousers,” Lord Mycroft—Lord Sherrinford now, John reminded himself—said, with that smile that always looked slightly pained. “And John, I believe we are well past such formalities now. You will call me Mycroft.”

This was so preposterous that John could only stare at him, utterly incapable of speech.

“The Queen’s physicians are still with my brother, but they have assured me that he should make a full recovery. I believe you will be allowed to go to him in short order. If you would be so kind as to provide me with the address of your lodgings, I will see to it that your belongings are brought here as soon as possible.”

“Thank you very much, my—My—sir,” John managed. He was actually taller than Mycroft on the footstool, which made him feel more uncomfortable than ever. “We do not have much there, but I believe your brother would be pleased to have his violin.”

Mycroft’s eyes softened. “Of course,” he said. “I have a great many claims upon my attention, as I am sure you can imagine, but of course my brother takes precedence over all else, and I would not feel at all easy in my mind if I did not know that you would be with him, and would send for me immediately if the need arose.”

“Of course, sir,” John said immediately.

“We are in your debt yet again, John Watson,” Mycroft said, and he actually bowed to John before turning to go. The door closed behind him before John could think of anything to say.

The physician who came to speak to him was not so intimidating as John had feared. “There is a
concussion, but it appears to be mild, and I believe he will do very well with a few days’ rest. I am told that he has a complaint of the chest, however, which certainly river water is unlikely to improve —Lord Sherrinford tells me you would be able to tell me more about his recent circumstances.”

“He has a bit of asthma, sir, and had a bad time with pneumonia last fall, but he’s been quite well since we left Blastburn,” John explained. He described the treatments that had worked well for Sherlock in the past and those that had been unsuccessful. The doctor asked several pertinent questions and listened intently to John’s answers, and after a while John forgot his shyness; it was quite like presenting a patient to Dr. Woodcourt.

“Very well,” the doctor said presently. “A few days’ rest should help with the lungs as well as the head; try to keep him quiet, and I will be back to see him later. A low diet too—broth perhaps.”

“As you say, sir,” John replied deferentially, “but he does much better with jellies; I should have said.”

Finally, after a great deal of cautioning by the nurse that Sherlock was not to be bothered or excited —which John endured as patiently as he could—he was allowed into the darkened chamber where Sherlock lay in a great four-poster bed.

Sherlock looked small there and very pale, his head swathed in a white bandage, his lashes dark smudges on his thin face. John, veteran of many concussions, first checked to make sure there was a basin near to hand before he brought his chair over to the bed and gently took Sherlock’s hand. He had an abrupt flash of that same hand flung up by the river, and brought it up to his face to kiss the fingertips, careful not to jostle.

Sherlock’s eyes opened and fastened on him. “John?”

“Right here, love.”

“Mycroft said you saved me in the river. Did you jump in after me?”

“Of course I did. What the hell were you thinking anyway?”

“I don’t think I was thinking very clearly,” Sherlock admitted. He was frowning. “But I could see the break in the masonry where I knew he would jump on the wall. I just didn’t realize he would come so close to me.” He closed his eyes as though in pain. “I told you to run!”

“And I told you I would never let you fall. And I never will.”

Sherlock made a noise a little like a sob and John said, “Shhh, shh, you’re supposed to be resting. It’s all right now. We’re safe. You’re safe. We’re safe together. But no more rivers, please? One more might be the death of me.”

Sherlock’s fingers relaxed in John’s, but then he drew a quick breath and said urgently, “John, I’m sorry, I—“

“Right here,” John said cheerfully and grabbed the basin just in time.

They ended up staying at the Palace for a week. It was an ordeal for John, who alternated between constant terror that he would commit some grievous faux pas and crushing boredom. Sherlock spent a few days feverish and coughing and complaining of his head, but overall he recovered far more quickly than John had dared hope.
The day after their arrival John was slumped in the darkened room, wondering if ringing a servant to ask for something to read would be a horrendous breach of etiquette, when the nurse swept in and told him that he had a visitor. John checked that Sherlock was dozing and went out, curious.

“Mrs. Norton for you, sir,” the footman said, sweeping the door open.

John was trying to remember if he knew a Mrs. Norton when the beautiful woman in the demure black dress smiled, and he burst out laughing. “You got me again!” he said. “I forgot that was your name in polite society.” He gave her his best bow. “Shall I ring for tea?”

“I’m going to France,” Irene told him over tea and cakes—which were delicious; John was beginning to think he could get used to this part of living in the palace. “One of Lord Sherrinford’s diplomatic associates that I met when I went before is here, and has taken quite a fancy to me. He wants to set me up as his mistress.”

“I thought you said that would be dull?”

“Oh, I’m sure it will be. But Paris! And the past year has rather depleted my funds, I don’t mind telling you. And Monsieur says he doesn’t mind at all if I see other girls as long as I don’t see other men—he’s actually quite keen on the idea.”

“I’m going to miss you,” John said sincerely. “You will write? I don’t know where I’ll end up, but I’m sure your friend will have the address of the Holmes’ town house and a letter will surely reach me from there.”

“But you’ll be with Seven, surely,” Irene said, looking at him questioningly.

“Well,” John said and then had no idea what to say next. He shrugged helplessly.

Irene’s mouth quirked. “Of course you will, if Seven has anything to say about it. It’s you who will have to decide in the end.”

John was not so sure. That was perhaps the worst thing about their stay in the palace: the feeling that he was trapped in a limbo with no clear idea of what he was meant to do next. For years they had had a singular goal, which they had accomplished, and now…what?

Fortunately he had not long to wait. The first day Sherlock was allowed up, they had just finished breakfast when a footman announced Mycroft’s arrival—accompanied, to the delight of them both, by Mr. Brooke.

“I knew you were all right!” Sherlock said joyfully. “John thought you’d been arrested—oh, hush John, it was ridiculously obvious, you’re a terrible liar. Did you go to Munich?”

“I did,” Mr. Brooke said, smiling. “Once Lord Sherrinford’s agents found me we decided it was best that I stay there, to keep my eyes and ears open in case you managed to make your way there.”

“You must have been frantic,” John said to Mycroft, remembering Anderson’s words.

Mycroft nodded. “I did not receive word of Sherlock’s survival for a few days, so in that time I believed myself bereft of both father and brother. My joy at the news can therefore scarcely be imagined, but it was tempered by the fact that you seemed to have vanished into thin air. I sent agents to Sherrinford at once, of course—”

“Tell us,” Sherlock said.
Mycroft paused, clearly reluctant. “Tragically, most of the male servants perished in the attack.” He shot John a quick look and went on, “I know many of those were very good friends of yours, John, and you have my deepest condolences. All of the women escaped unharmed, happily. In fact one of the maids, Callie, who took shelter with Sally Donovan, was recruited by her to aid in our efforts and returned to spy on the household for nearly a year before being discovered. Mrs. Donovan was able to aid in her escape and she is now in Paris. I’m told she is doing quite well.” Did Mycroft’s eyes rest a bit too long on John? Was any secret on earth safe from the man? “I am glad that I can also tell you that Thomas Abbott was injured but recovered from his wounds. He and Mrs. Gregson were finally persuaded to tell my man about your escape, but from there the trail went quite cold. Truly, I thought there was literally no stone in the whole of England under which did not look—“

“—or Wales, France or Munich,” Mr. Brooke added wryly.

“So please.” Mycroft clasped his hand around his knee. “Now it is your turn to tell us.”

“Well, it was mostly John—“

“Sherlock had all the ideas—“

They looked at each other and burst out laughing at the same time, and then John said, “You tell. You’ll make a better story of it.”

Sherlock told their tale with relish, interrupted occasionally by John. By unspoken agreement they glossed over some of the more harrowing aspects of life at St. Bart’s and the details of Sherlock’s abrupt departure, as well as the severity of his illness.

“So then I came out of the chamber to look for John, and there was Sebastian Wilkes of all people, grabbing my arm and hissing that I had to come up to the roof right away as Jim Moriarty had taken John. I should have told you at once, only Sebastian said it would mean John’s life if I did.” Sherlock looked disgusted. “All the way up the stairs he was mewling on about how sorry he was and how he had never meant to fall into such a life of depravity and wanted to make a break with Jim—honestly, I was ready to throttle him just to shut him up. I told him he must run for assistance the second I caused a distraction, but then when the moment came he just stood there looking gobsmacked, so I told John to run instead.”

“We have arrested Sebastian, of course,” Mycroft said, “but he has actually cooperated fully, and voluntarily given up everything he knew about both Sir James’ operations and Jim Moriarty’s criminal endeavors. I do not believe he will stand trial for his crimes. Likely I will have to find him a position to keep him out of trouble and under my eye.”

“Percy Phelps needs a secretary,” John offered and Sherlock snorted in amusement.

“What happened to Jim Moriarty?” Mr. Brooke asked, looking at Mycroft.

At that moment there was a knock at the door and the footman stood aside to announce, “Sergeant Lestrade, my Lord.”

A young officer, dark-eyed and handsome, entered carrying what seemed to be a bundle of clothing.

“Good morning, my Lord, sirs,” he said crisply. “I’ve been in charge of the search of the river, as you may recall, and wish to make my report. We found nothing for miles on both sides downstream, but I put out the word among the river-scavengers and this morning I received a tip that one of them had something that might interest me. The man had found these clothes under a dock, all together—he thought they might have been tied around a rock and come loose. The handkerchief said ‘J.M.’,"
so I brought them along to see if either of the young men could recall if these were what Moriarty Junior was wearing when he went in the water.”

Sherlock leaned forward, eyes narrowed in concentration, and studied the garments intently. “These are Jim’s,” he said immediately, “You see the stitching, here, characteristic of—oh, never mind. They’re his, all right.”

“So he drowned?” Mr. Brooke asked.

Sherlock, Mycroft and the young sergeant all shook their heads at once. “No trousers,” Lestrade said at the same moment Sherlock said “He would have still had on his shirt if he drowned.”

“Well,” Mycroft said, a little wearily, “I supposed I shall add that to the list of things which will require attention sooner or later. I’m sure he’s already left the country, but I’ll see what can be done...thank you, Sergeant—please see that the sergeant has a cup of tea before he goes,” he added to the footman, who had magically reappeared to show Lestrade out.

“Rather clever, thinking of the scavengers,” Sherlock said musingly, looking after the departing policeman.

“Yes.” Mycroft was clearly uninterested in the merits of police officers. “As I was saying, I think Sebastian Wilkes will be managed easily enough as long as he is kept busy. I have already made arrangements for his mother to be installed in a house in Bath near her sister, a rather expensive outlay that will be well worth it if we never have to see her again.”

John stifled his laugh in a cough.

“I’m having the town house cleaned and redecorated, and trying to see what can be done about the servants—Mrs. Wilkes sacked most of ours—but the house should be ready for habitation in a day or so, even if everything is not entirely in place.”

“I was rather thinking of getting my own digs,” Sherlock said.

“Certainly not,” Mycroft rejoined, not even raising an eyebrow.

“Oh well, it was worth a try,” Sherlock said cheerfully. “In that case, John and I will be moving into the apartment in the East Wing that used to belong to Great-Aunt Cecily and her companion—you remember, the one who was always embroidering cats on things? We’ll need tutors to catch us up—not too much of a job in my case, but John will need to be got ready for medical school, and I won’t go to university until he does—Mr. Brooke will do for me, and—“

Mr. Brooke was shaking his head. “I’m afraid not,” he said, kindly but firmly.

Sherlock stopped in mid-flow. “What?”

“You’re nearly grown now, Sherlock, not a wild child who needs special handling. And you must know that returning the reform schools to their original purpose is one of your brother’s highest priorities, and it sounds very much as though the school in Blastburn will be in need of a new headmaster.”

“Oh,” Sherlock said, and then, catching on, “Oh! of course! And that reminds me, Mike Stanford must be returned to grammar school—or he can stay on and study with you, as he prefers, but we’ll be seeing to his education along with John’s. And Molly Hooper will be sent to America. I’ll help you with the details. I have to return to Blastburn anyway; I’ve a housebreaker’s daughter to visit.”

He frowned at Mycroft’s raised eyebrows. “Oh, stop it. If Moriarty’s convicted of treason his
property will be forfeit to the crown, and I’m sure the Crown would appreciate the irony of using his own monies to support a cause he so disdained.”

“Ah,” Mycroft said thoughtfully. “The Crown might, at that.” He glanced at John, then turned back to Sherlock. “Well, I will look into it. In the meantime, I believe you are due to rest.”

“I am not. I feel fine,” Sherlock said indignantly.

“If you rest now, I will allow you to dictate how you want your new apartments to be arranged this afternoon,” Mycroft said. “I have a man coming to discuss furnishings. As I recall, there might be a suitable space for a laboratory.”

Sherlock’s face tried to light up and scowl at the same time, producing an expression so endearingly Sherlock that John felt his own face melt into sappy affection. “Lie down and think about your laboratory for a bit,” he said, moving to pull the curtains closed—it was the kind of thing he could never get the hang of ringing for a servant to do; what a waste of time! “Then you can tell me all about it over luncheon.”

“Well, just for a bit,” Sherlock said grudgingly.

John followed the others out into the hallway and was surprised when Mycroft said, “John, if you would be so kind—I would like a word with you alone, please.”

Well, it was not as though John hadn’t expected this sooner or later. He took a deep breath. “Of course.”

Mycroft led him into what John assumed were his own temporary chambers, an elegant suite of rooms overlooking the grounds. He gestured for John to take a seat.

“As often occurs, I have news both pleasant and difficult,” he said, and John thought, here it comes.

“I believe we shall begin with the pleasant. Her Majesty is deeply grateful for your efforts and the great service you have done the realm, and has instructed me to inform you that the Crown will settle a property on you as a reward, the income of which should allow you to live in comfort or to pursue any number of paths: education, a stables of your own, whatever you like. This is entirely of her own initiative. I must hasten to assure you that my gratitude is also considerable and that you will always have a home with my family, but…should you wish to pursue your own way in the world, now or later, you will always have the means to do so.”

“Sir,” John said, utterly overwhelmed by this turn of events. “I…thank you, sir.”

Mycroft regarded him a long moment over his steepled fingers. “You feared I would send you away.”

“Yes, sir,” John said, relieved to have it out in the open at the same time as he felt his mouth go completely dry.

“I will never do that,” Mycroft said simply. “However, I will never force you to stay, either.”

“I understand,” John said. He did. “Again, sir, thank you.”

Mycroft nodded. He sat back in his chair a little. “When we learned that you and Sherlock had left Sherrinford together, I immediately sent men north in case you decided to return to your home. When they reported that the village was too small for them to remain without attracting attention, I had a charitable foundation establish a dame school in the area and installed a young lady, Miss Clara Hunter, to be the teacher and to keep an eye on your family. I am very sorry to tell you, John, but
your mother died last fall. Miss Hunter assures me she had all available care and was in no discomfort.”

John felt numb and shocked. His mother, dead? But—

“Did she get my letters?” he asked desperately. “Did she know I was alive?”

“She did, and Miss Hunter said that she was very proud of you. She informed me that your mother said you had always longed for excitement, and she was glad that you had the chance to lead an adventurous life.”

John had never known that his mother even knew this. He was still trying to accept the fact that his mother was gone; had been gone for months, and he had not known.

“I have a letter from your sister here,” Mycroft said, handing him an envelope. “If you have other questions after you read it, I am of course at your disposal.”

“Thank you, sir. I think—if I may take my leave?”

“Of course,” Mycroft said, standing and extending his hand. “You have my deepest sympathies, John.”

John sat in his room staring out the window, seeing not the grey spring sky but his tiny cottage, thinking of his mother: her sharp wit and quick tongue, her knotted hands that were always busy, her kind heart. He felt very far away from home. As he gazed out, a carriage rolled up and a liveried groom darted out to speak to the coachman. John felt a stab of irrational envy, thinking of how simple life had been when he was just a boy caring for horses. Simple and dull, he reminded himself. He sighed. Enough moping about; he should read his letter.

John was expecting a schoolteacher’s prim script, but he was surprised to see the papers within the envelope covered in a careful writing that reminded him of his own when he first learned.

My dear Brother,

I know you will be amazed to see a Letter from me in my own Hand. But when Jacky and Hal went to school and began to learn I did not like to think that they would grow up to be ashamed of their ignorant Mother, and so I asked Miss Hunter to teach me as well.

We were overjoyed to hear that you had been found at last, safe and well and a Hero! I quite wept and the boys long for you to come and tell us the tale. We had your Letters but could not help being worried not knowing where you had gone. I am so glad you are all right.

I know you will want to hear about Mother. She began with the pain and swelling last Summer and thanks to the increased allowance we had of the Estate since you had gone on the run with the young Lord, she was able to see the Doctor and a Specialist in York, but they all said there was nothing to be done. We were able to have Medicine to keep her very comfortable. She missed you every day but she always said how glad she was that you were leading the life you wanted. She died in October, very cheerful and peaceful, and she said a few days before that it was a Blessing, that she did not want to face another of our long northern winters. Before she died she had a great joy. Will you believe, after six boys—three still living praise God—last August I was finally brought to bed of a girl? I had meant to call her Mary after Mother and our Sister but she was born with the
most beautiful head of red hair, and so Mother and I agreed that she should be Emmy.

I have a bit more news. About a month after Mother passed my Husband drank too much, or lost his way coming home, and was found frozen to death in a field. As you know the Affection that was once between us was much lessened by his Intemperance, so I cannot say with honesty that the loss was keenly felt. His income was little enough in late years, and we do not feel its loss, as Miss Hunter the teacher now boards with us. Clara has quickly become the dearest Friend of my Heart and I am very happy with her here, so that I doubt I shall seek to marry again.

I know that you must be very busy now, but know that we are safe and well, and Mother is buried next to Father in the churchyard with a fine Headstone for both. I hope that you will be able to come to see us when you can, but until then, please write soon to

your loving Sister,

Harriet

John folded the letter carefully and tucked it into his pocket, feeling much lighter. He had a twinge of sadness as he always did when he touched the empty pocket—the letter from Sherlock he had carried for so long had not survived his dive into the Thames. But now he would have the actual Sherlock with him always, and it would be Harry and her family—baby Emmy!—that he would carry in his heart. He thought about returning to his village a month or so from now, with spring properly underway; Emmy would be crawling then, maybe pulling up with her little baby hands on his knee as he sat by the fire. He turned that thought over for a minute, prodding at it: would he mind never having children of his own? No. There was Emmy, and Jack and Hal and Gerry; and one day Mycroft would surely marry some stuffy lady, and he and Sherlock would teach their children to ride…John grinned a little at himself. When had he started thinking of Mycroft as family?

There was a knock on the door, and a moment later Sherlock sidled in.

“Shouldn’t you be resting?”

“Hardly. It’s two in the afternoon.”

John looked at the mantle clock in surprise. “So it is! I’m sorry, Sherlock, I forgot all about lunch.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” Sherlock settled himself on the footstool and wrapped one arm around John’s legs. “I’m sorry about your mother.”

“Thank you.” John stroked his fingers gently through Sherlock’s soft curls, and Sherlock rested his head against John’s knee. “I wish I could have seen her again, but it sounds as though she was comfortable and did not suffer overmuch, thanks to your brother.”

Sherlock was quiet, although John could sense him chewing at his lip. “Mycroft also said that I had been presumptuous. That I shouldn’t have just assumed I knew what you would want to do and where you would want to live.”

“Your brother,” John said dryly, “has once again underestimated the depths of my feeling for you.”

“You do want to live with me?” Sherlock looked up, a small crease between his eyes.

“Of course I do.”
“And you want to be a doctor.”

“To tell you the truth, I hadn’t really let myself think past this point,” John admitted. “But if it’s possible…yes, I think I would. I should maybe like to discuss the matter over with Mr. Brooke to see if he thinks I have a chance of being able to prepare for medical school in a reasonable period of time.”

Sherlock dismissed this impatiently. “Of course you do. You will make a fine doctor. Besides, I think your medical expertise will come in very useful when I’m a detective.” He looked up with a glint of mischief in his eyes. “I haven’t told Mycroft that part yet. I said we would go on to university and then travel a bit, which is true—I want to show you Munich and Paris, and you’ve always wanted to go to India—”

“How did you know I’ve always wanted to go to India?”

—and Tibet, I’d like to see Tibet.”

“It sounds a marvelous adventure,” John said, smiling down at him.

Sherlock knelt up, clasping his hands on John’s knees. “It will be. Don’t you see? The winter is done now, the frost is all over. It’s spring for us now—”

—and we’ll be in the clover,” John finished. He leaned down and gave Sherlock a swift kiss. “It will always be an adventure, as long as we’re together.”

Epilogue

16 months later

John woke at dawn, as he had done all his life and probably always would. It was a few weeks past the solstice and sunrise came early. He stretched, enjoying the feeling of having no reason in particular to get up. He had had his nose to the grindstone for months, toiling away to cram into his brain all he needed to learn, but the thing was done and settled now: he and Mike Stamford would be starting at the University of London in the fall. And now he was on holiday for two glorious months—he and Sherlock would be leaving for Sherrinford Hall that very afternoon. John stretched again, smiling, and realized his left side was cold. He looked over and sure enough, Sherlock was curled in the exact center of the bed like a field mouse in a nest, all the blankets pulled up over his head. John tugged.

“Stop it,” Sherlock’s muffled voice came from under the pile of blankets. “The sun’s in my eyes.”

“The sun is barely up,” John pointed out. “And I’m cold. You can’t have all the blankets.”

“Come over here and I’ll warm you up,” Sherlock purred in his deepest, most velvet voice.

“Oh, right. You’ll go right back to sleep.”

“I won’t go back to sleep. I haven’t been asleep. I just got in bed.”

“You said last night you’d be along in an hour! That’s why I slept in your room!” John and Sherlock had separate bedchambers, of course, although John only slept in his when Sherlock was planning an all-night experiment.

“I would have done, only it took longer than I thought, and then I realized I still had to pack up all my equipment.”
John reached out and touched Sherlock’s knobby back under the covers, feeling bare skin. He ran his hand down and discovered Sherlock’s backside was bare as well, and also—“Did you just wash?”

“Mmmm.” Sherlock unfurled and rolled to his back, stretching lazily. “I told you I would warm you up. Why don’t you come over and see.”

John laughed and sat up, stripping off his nightclothes and drawers and tossing them swiftly off the bed. He pounced on Sherlock, knocking a surprised “oof” out of him as he straddled Sherlock’s chest and pinned his wrists with one hand. Sherlock looked up at him, alight with mischief. The sunlight fell full on his face and lit it up like alabaster, constricting his pupils so his eyes were all bright unearthly blue.

“You think you can just steal all my blankets and then have your way with me?” John said mildly. “I don’t think so, Sherlock Holmes. I think you need to be taught a lesson.”

“No,” gasped Sherlock, already beginning to squirm. John’s rapidly hardening prick surged at the sensation.

“Yes,” John said seriously, and tickled him. Sherlock shrieked and flailed, thrashing as John mercilessly went after his exposed armpits and flanks, bucking and yelping. John was laughing almost as hard as Sherlock when he finally slid down to pin Sherlock’s body with his own.

“Learned your lesson yet?” he asked.

“Yes,” panted Sherlock and John gripped his head with his free hand, holding him still to plunge his tongue into Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock shuddered and arched beneath him and John kissed him harder, running his tongue possessively along Sherlock’s. Sherlock’s breath huffed out in a hard exhale.

“Good boy,” John praised, pulling back and down to mouth along Sherlock’s long neck. “You’ve learned your lesson? A little reward, then.” He let go Sherlock’s wrists and kissed his way down his body, flicking at the nipples with his tongue and feeling them harden, biting softly at the juncture of hip and thigh. He knew Sherlock’s body as well as his own by now, knew what made him moan and spread his legs, knew how to make him dazed and needy with desire. “Give me that pillow,” he directed and Sherlock quickly pushed one down to him. He slid it beneath Sherlock’s hips and Sherlock pulled another over his face, stifling his sounds as John slowly ran his tongue over Sherlock’s testicles and the soft skin behind, swirling lower and tasting the residual soapy cleaness where Sherlock had scrubbed himself. He pressed the tip of his tongue inside and Sherlock’s breath huffed out in a hard exhale.

“Is this what you want?” he asked kindly, pushing one finger inside Sherlock and twisting it expertly. Sherlock’s body jerked. “Shall I see if I can make you climax just like this, with one finger and nothing on your cock?”

“Please,” Sherlock moaned. He pulled the pillow off to show his face, flushed and sweaty, making John realize he himself no longer felt cold at all. “Please, no, I want you to take me, please I want you inside me, please, please.”

John slid another finger inside and brushed deliberately. He leaned over and blew hotly on Sherlock’s cock, grinning as it twitched. “Are you going to steal my blankets again?”
“No, never, I promise, never, please.” Sherlock was clutching frantically at whatever he could reach: the pillow, the bedclothes, his own hair. His long, pale body was stretched and wanting and spread open for John. He was the most gorgeous thing John had ever seen.

“All right then,” he said agreeably and knelt up, withdrawing his fingers and spreading the ointment on his cock. He took hold of Sherlock’s hip with one hand and lined up with the other, and then pulled Sherlock’s hips up onto his lap as he slid in. Sherlock would never be as loose as poor Teddy had been, but after months of regular intercourse entering him was considerably easier than it had been the first time. John steadied himself, took a deep breath, checked to make sure Sherlock did not seem uncomfortable, and began to thrust with slow, even strokes. He loved taking Sherlock in any position—hands and knees, or Sherlock astride him, or pinning Sherlock’s back against his chest as he thrust into his arse whilst fisting his cock—but watching Sherlock’s face as John brought him to the edge of ecstasy with his prick made this one his favorite. Sherlock’s head thrashed from side to side as John began to pick up speed, taking him deeper and faster.

“Tell me,” he said, jerking the words out as he shoved his hips harder, making Sherlock slide on the bed. “Tell me you’re mine.”

“Ich bin--,” Sherlock gasped, arms spread, back curving. "Yours, oh, Ich—oh God, oh, oh--“

“You’re mine, God, you beauty, give it to me,” John said, and slid the slicked circle of his fist over Sherlock’s cock. Sherlock cried out over and over as John stroked him lightly in time with his thrusts: “Oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh,” and the whole long line of him convulsed as he shuddered, cock jerking and pulsing in John’s hand. John pushed up a little to get a better angle, shoved the pillow back in place, and slammed himself into Sherlock’s still-quaking body, harder and harder until he saw stars and the entire galaxy seemed to explode across his vision. The only drawback to this position, he thought hazily as he folded over, was that there was no easy way to simply collapse afterward. He ended up more or less shoving Sherlock off of himself and then tipping over to land on his side.

They lay there a moment, panting and trembling, and then the sweat began to cool on John’s skin and he realized he was getting chilly. He reached to pull Sherlock’s mouth to his. “Je t’aime,” he whispered into the kiss. “Je t’adore, mon amour, bien-aimee, ma coeur…”

“Mon coeur,” Sherlock corrected.

“That too.” John smiled into his eyes.

“I love you,” Sherlock said softly, gazing up at John with the same intensity that he had as a boy. “I love you.”

“I know. I love you too,” John said, twisting one of Sherlock’s curls around his finger and brushing the backs of his knuckles against his elegant cheekbone.

They lay there for a moment, just looking, and then John pushed himself up with a groan. “I’ll get us a towel,” he said, padding to the washstand.

“Might as well just ring for hot water, it’s late enough now,” Sherlock yawned.

“I have to muss my bed first.”

“I don’t know why you bother.” Sherlock took the towel John handed him and began to clean himself up. “Lily could walk in to see you buggering me over the desk and all she’d want to know is if she should dust it later.”
John laughed. It was true. Their apartment was at a considerable remove from the rest of the household, and Sherlock had been very explicit with the new housekeeper when they moved in.

“John and I keep late hours studying, and I often sleep late in the morning. I have trouble sleeping and I don’t wish to be waked before I’m ready, so no one is to come to our rooms until we ring. Oh, and they mustn’t touch my experiments.”

“Oh, of course, m’Lord,” Mrs. Hudson had said cheerfully, confirming John’s suspicions that Mycroft had hired the woman specifically to spoil Sherlock rotten. “I think Lily will do nicely. She’s a bit of a charity case—blow to the head as a girl, poor thing—and a bit slow, and half blind, but very good with her duties once she understands them. Oh, and no one can understand her speech but me, so very discreet, you understand.”

“You’ll have to talk to the new housekeeper at the Hall when we arrive,” John said now, climbing back into bed beside Sherlock. None of the surviving servants save Callie had stayed on at Sherrinford Hall during Mrs. Wilkes’s tenure, and most were now well established elsewhere. Mrs. Medlock had retired. John was secretly glad of this, since returning to the Hall as a de facto family member in the great house would have been extremely awkward otherwise.

“Mmm, yes. That reminds me, we must pay a call on Mrs. Gregson,” Sherlock said, curling up to burrow into John’s chest. Mrs. Gregson and Annie were now living with her married daughter in the village.

“And I’m going to try to meet up with Tom for a pint on his night off.” Young Tom—just Tom now, John remembered with a twinge of sadness—was working for the family who had inherited the Bennet’s estate. They had corresponded several times and it sounded as though Tom was doing well—he even had a sweetheart, and cherished dreams of asking for her hand once he had increased his meagre savings.

Sherlock tipped his head up to look at John. “Will you tell him?”

“I don’t think I’ll tell him right out,” John said slowly, “but he might guess, and if he does, I won’t deny it. Of course, he might guess and not say anything. You know I’m not ashamed,” he said quickly, looking down at Sherlock’s clear eyes.

“I know,” Sherlock said. “But being convicted of criminal indecency would do neither of our careers any good. Although we’re old hands at managing jail.”

“That we are.” John leaned over and pressed a kiss to Sherlock’s forehead. “I’m going to ring for that water now. When do you want breakfast?”

“Oh, in a bit.”

John pulled on his dressing gown and went to his own room, where he drew the curtains and rolled around in the bed to make it look as though he had just spent the night in it instead of committing criminal indecency in Sherlock’s. He rang for hot water and tea, then returned to his room to collect the letters he had written the previous evening so they could be posted before they left. One to Molly lay on the top. Molly had finished her first year of medical school in Philadelphia at the top of her class, and was already talking about going west when she finished. Apparently lady physicians are quite desired there, she had written. Imagine me who never thought to leave Blastburn, in the Wild West with the buffalo and the Indians!

“Won’t you be frightened to go to America all alone?” John had asked her when they had gone to Blastburn the previous summer.
“I’ve always been on my own,” Molly answered matter-of-factly, pushing her hair back into her cap in the old familiar gesture. “I was more worried about Dr. Woodcourt doing without me, but now that he’s taken Ernie on as his new protégé I think he’ll be fine.”

John also had letters to send to Mr. Brooke and to Pip, with whom—to his own surprise—he had become quite good friends; Pip was one of the few people in the world to whom John could write openly of his relationship with Sherlock, albeit circumspectly. Pip had recently graduated from Bart’s to become bookkeeper for the potato merchant, a position of which he was clearly enormously proud. Mr. Brooke was making quite a success of Bart’s now that it was actually being run as a school, and many of the boys were leaving well prepared for careers as bookkeepers or clerks. John was deeply grateful he was not one of them. Apparently Mr. Brocklehurst had gone utterly mad after John and Sherlock’s escape, egged on by the boys who continued to “haunt” him, and had thrown himself from the same window as Sherlock a few weeks before Mr. Brooke’s arrival. He was now safely locked away in an asylum someplace. Forever, John hoped.

John took the letters into their comfortable sitting room and placed them on the little table to be posted, then stuck his head through the door to say to Sherlock: “First thing tomorrow let’s go for a proper long—“

He broke off. Sherlock was fast asleep, every blanket in the bed drawn around him in a vortex of linen. Only the top of his tumbled head was visible. John shook his head, smiling. “Mon coeur,” he whispered, and collected his French grammar from the bedside table to study whilst he had his tea. He had a lot of catching up to do.

Chapter End Notes

...and they all lived happily ever after! Well, not Mr. Brocklehurst, because another inmate put his eyes out with a knitting needle at the asylum; and not Sir James Moriarty, who went to the gallows muttering "And I would have got away with it, too, if it weren't for you meddling kids." But everyone else did, including Irene and Callie, who certainly joined forces in Paris, and Sally Donovan, because her husband died of a heart attack and left her the pub, and she and Anderson took it over together. And eventually John and Sherlock will end up at Baker Street (taking Mrs. Hudson with them), and then Jim will turn up...

But that doesn't belong in this story, and now this story is done. This universe was an enormously fun place to live in for a while, and I'm beyond thrilled that so many of you liked being there too. A million million thanks to everyone who read and commented and made this story (and its abysmal German) so much better! I love you all.

I planned to put the chapter references in the end notes, but it turns out that there are word limits on end notes and I exceeded it. Who knew? So I'm tacking them on as a separate chapter, which should at least make it easier to skip if you prefer.
Chapter title references

Chapter 1: “Recalled to life” is from “A Tale of two Cities” by Charles Dickens.

Chapter 2: Taken from an actual 1859 Victorian alphabet book that Sherlock used to teach John to read. The page reads: “B is for Ball, that boys kick about”.

Chapters 3, 12 and 17 are from the 19th century Anglican hymn “Not here for high and holy things”. In this universe, it is John’s favorite hymn. These are the first two verses:

Not here for high and holy things
we render thanks to thee,
but for the common things of earth,
the purple pageantry
of dawning and of dying days,
the splendor of the sea,
the royal robes of autumn moors,
the golden gates of spring,
the velvet of soft summer nights,
the silver glistening
of all the million million stars,
the silent song they sing.

Chapter 4: “Earth stood hard as iron” is taken from the Christina Rosetti poem and Christmas carol “In the bleak midwinter”, which the servants sing (not very well) on Christmas. It is also the world’s most obscure shout-out to the excellent CaitlinFairchild story “In the bleak midwinter”.

Chapter 5: “The adventure of the golden pince-nez” is an ACD canon story, of course.

Chapter 6: “Nothing in life shall sever” is a line from the “Eton boating song”.
Chapter 7: From the Friedrich Schiller poem which Beethoven used for the “Ode to Joy” chorus in the Ninth Symphony. The passage translates as “Whoever can call even one soul/his own upon this earth” (shall join the jubilation, and so forth). Sherlock heard this performed in Munich and, being that kind of adolescent, felt that the music was capturing his anguished soul, because certainly no one else in the history of the world had ever loved as Sherlock did.

Chapter 8: From Psalm 137: “By the waters of Babylon we lay down and wept, remembering Zion”.

Chapter 9: “The Valley of Fear” is one of the book-length (and least successful) tales in ACD canon. Good title though.

Chapters 10 and 11 are both taken from “Jane Eyre” by Charlotte Bronte, specifically the section that describes Jane’s miserable tenure at Lowood School. “So shine before men” is part of the inscription on the school’s nameplate, and Jane describes the school as being “a cradle of fog-bred pestilence” during a deadly outbreak of typhus. Somehow this book ended up getting sent to John and he dutifully read it, although he wasn’t all that into stories about girls. He did notice a striking resemblance between Aunt Wilkes and Aunt Reed though. Random fun trivia: I originally had Sherlock’s obnoxious cousins named for the Reeds (Jane’s cousin is George Reed) and changed it later using “find and replace”. I proofed chapter 19 right before posting and realized that I had never caught that it changed the name in the Shakespeare quote too, so now the last line read, “God for England, Harry, and St. Sebastian!”

Chapter 12: Taken from the first chapter of Romans, which goes on to say, “and likewise the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust toward one another…”. Ah, St. Paul. “Use of the woman” indeed.

Chapter 13: “Milady’s secret” is a chapter title from “The Three Musketeers” by Alexandre Dumas. This book was a great hit in the servants’ hall.

Chapter 15: “De profundis” is a Latin phrase used to refer to Psalm 130, which begins “Out of the depths I cry to thee”. Random trivia: it also refers to a letter written by Oscar Wilde to his former lover while Wilde was imprisoned for sodomy, which was not published until 1905 and has absolutely nothing to do with this story, but is interesting all the same.

Chapter 16: “Purity of virgin souls” is taken from the hymn known as St. Patrick’s Breastplate. Sherlock is not the type to have favorite hymns, but if he did it would be this one, which he likes because of its utter refusal to follow convention (it changes melodies and even keys every few verses). Really random trivia: “St. Patrick’s Breastplate” is a Holy Trinity hymn (what passes for its chorus begins “I bind unto myself today/the strong Name of the Trinity”) and I posted this chapter on
Holy Trinity Sunday.

Chapter 18: taken from the prayer of confession in the Book of Common Prayer: “We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.” John and Sherlock would have recited this prayer many times (John sincerely and Sherlock less so).

Chapter 19: From the St. Crispin’s Day speech in “Henry V” which is cited at the end of the chapter. The line “the game’s afoot” is arguably better known from Holmes shouting it to wake Watson up in ACD canon than it is from its original context, but it is frequently misinterpreted to mean a game that one plays. It actually refers to game that is hunted.

Chapter 20: “Bright shining as the sun” is a reference (apparently) to paradise in the hymn “Amazing Grace”. This hymn was written by a former sea captain and slaver, John Newton, who had a religious conversion, became a clergyman, and subsequently devoted himself to the abolitionist movement. I imagine this hymn as being the equivalent of a 60’s protest song and very popular with the imaginary reformers in this story.

End Notes

People and place names taken from the works of Charles Dickens and Arthur Conan Doyle, "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte Bronte, "The Scarlet Pimpernel" by Baroness Orczy, "The Three Musketeers” by Alexandre Dumas, "The Secret Garden” and "A Little Princess" by Frances Hodgson Burnett, and the ne plus ultra of plucky orphan stories: "The Wolves of Willoughby Chase" by Joan Aiken.

Chapter title references will be noted with the last chapter, because I put way too much thought into them.

In case it isn't obvious: all the political events that take place in this fic are COMPLETELY made up.

Works inspired by this one

[Podfic] The Frost Is All Over by aranel_parmadil, Cover for The Frost Is All Over and its podfic by khorazir, Cover Art for 'The Frost is all over' by Chryse by missmuffin221

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