The Verdant Heart

by doctornerdington

Summary

A wounded John Watson returns from India to England to convalesce at the gloomy and isolated Holmes Manor. But there are mysteries aplenty to draw him out of his misery, and one day he will discover a key that unlocks much more than just the door to a secret garden. A Johnlock remix of The Secret Garden.

Notes

Updates every Sunday throughout the summer. Thursday teasers posted on Tumblr (doctornerdington). Currently rated G; this will change in future chapters. Plot points and (some) language borrowed from Frances Hodgson Burnett -- all credit and love to her.
When John Watson came to Holmes Manor in the winter of 1858, everybody said he was the most surly, disagreeable, and sickly man ever seen. It was true, too. He had a dull, sunbaked complexion and down-turned lips; his hair was clipped unbecomingly short and did not, it seemed, care enough to decide whether it was light brown or grey or simply some lifeless combination of the two. His face was thin and drawn from illness and pain, and he wore a thunderous expression that positively prohibited conversation. He appealed to exactly no one.

John had been so long in India that England felt strange and foreign to him now; for all that he’d been born there, he no longer belonged. This, he felt, was no great loss, as England held little to attract him. His father had been a physician, unremarkable in every way, and given to drink. He was always either busy with patients or insensible with drink, and John saw him only on rare occasions as a child. His mother had been a great beauty who cared only to go to parties and amuse herself with gay people. She had not wanted a child at all, and when John was born she handed him over to the care of a nurse, who was made to understand that if she wished to please her mistress she must keep the child out of sight as much as possible. So he had grown up alone, and when he was sent off to school at the age of seven, he had no one to miss, and no one to miss him.

His years at school were happy enough. John was friendly, if quiet, a skilled sportsman who was generous with his schoolfellows. He was well-liked, but not well-understood, for he always held a bit of himself apart from the others; he had many chums, but enjoyed the intimacy of true friendship with none of them. He was never at the top of his class, but he had a solid mind and was ever willing to work.

The masters therefore were fond of him. To that fondness was added a near-parental concern and pity when news came of the tragic death of his parents in one of those terrifying but all-too-common London house fires that could have been caused by any number of misadventures, but was most likely a result of a poorly-tended lamp or a misplaced cigarette. John shrugged, and turned back to his studies. Given his father’s proclivities, he was unsurprised. He felt little grief for the parents who had taken so little interest in him.

John received a small inheritance – too small, almost, to be so called, but it paid for his tuition and board, with a small pool of residual savings for his future. When he left school at 16, he turned his back to England and set sail immediately for the far reaches of the Empire, with romantic notions of adventure and fortune-hunting. After a number of dissolute years, he determined that adventure required money to back it if it were to be any pleasanter than a kip in a slum washed down with bad beer, and that the only fortune-hunting to be had in India required rather more interest in marriage than he himself had yet displayed. He’d used the last of his savings to purchase a commission with the Second Bombay Fusiliers of the East India Company, thus tying his future to that illustrious arm of the British Empire. He did this not for reasons of patriotism, but pragmatism: this, he felt, was a place where his talents and ambitions might be allowed to thrive.

And indeed, this was the happiest period of his life. The hardships and privations of army life bothered him not in the least: the endless marches took him to fascinating places, and he saw many exotic and unexpected sights that expanded his experience of the world beyond anything he could have dreamed as a boy in England. Whether barracked in Bombay, hunkered down in a hut in a tiny village, or pitching a tent in the wilderness on a long march across country, as long as he was in the
company of his men – British and sepoy both, for he did not discriminate in his affections between his own countrymen and the native Indians – he felt more at home than he ever had before.

There was plenty of action, as well – more excitement, some days, than a sane man could reasonably be expected to handle, which occasionally made John wonder exactly how sane he could possibly be. It seemed, sometimes, as if Britain was hanging on to India by a single thread, but John never wondered how long it would be until the thread would break. Instead, he focused on acquitting himself well; at battle, his manner was direct but by no means cruel. He would never kill a man he could capture, never even needlessly injure one. He kept himself well clear of the infantrymen with reputations for sadism, and their number was not small.

But any man imagining that this made John soft was greatly mistaken. He fought fearlessly, dangerously, and without excessive regard for his own wellbeing. The thrill and adrenalin of the battle spied his blood and quickened his breath; he knew better than to say so aloud, but he loved it, and yearned for action even when there was none to be had. He became well known for his efficacy in times of extreme stress and pressure, and was trusted by his commanders with increasingly sensitive and difficult missions. It seemed, in short, that he was destined to rise through the ranks to a position of no small influence in the Company.

The regard with which he was viewed was amplified by virtue of another of John’s unexpected and valuable skills. In a land nearly devoid of field medics, John had gained a reputation for healing. He had no medical training to speak of – certainly he had learned nothing from his own father – yet somehow he gleaned small bits of knowledge here and there, reading as widely as he could and conversing eagerly with the doctors who occasionally crossed his path. This knowledge was something of value he could offer his men, a way he could keep them safe, or keep them alive when he couldn’t keep them safe. John was the man the others sought out when a sepoy succumbed to a viper bite; he could often be found splinting a child’s leg as they passed through a village or bandaging a wounded fellow who would not live to see the inside of an infirmary. In countless ways, John was proving his worth and building the foundation of a long career with the Company.

And then, as is so tragically common, John’s life was caught up in the hurricane of history, that great, sweeping global force that breaks many worthy men and forges others into steel. One frightfully hot morning in May, word reached his regiment where it sat camped outside of Delhi of disastrous happenings in the city: a mutiny, the men said, and very bloody. In the hours that followed, more information swept through the camp and the men pieced together the terrible events: mutineers had taken Delhi. There had been a mass slaughter. Hundreds upon hundreds of people killed. Men, women, children. The enemy was gaining strength and confidence every minute, men said.

John shrugged. He put his head down, straightened his shoulders, and prepared to carry out his orders – as he always did. Politicking was beyond his sphere of influence; he concerned himself only with doing his job and doing it well.

But in the weeks that followed, British ranks were rapidly thinned by cholera, sunstroke, desertion, and continual sniper attacks by distant mutineers. Several of the sepoys in his regiment disappeared, men he had grown to love, leaving holes in the family John had built around him. Rumours swirled: mutiny breaking out all over the country! Sepoys murdering their officers! If Delhi was not swiftly retaken, they said, and the mutineers put back in their place at once, the whole of India would have to be re-conquered.

In September, John’s regiment was sent in for the final push to retake the city. The mutineers fought with desperation from house to house. For seven days and nights the contest lasted—a handful of men against a host—but on the 20th the flag of Empire was once more floating over the whole of Delhi, and this though not a single sword or bayonet from England had yet reached them. But what a
scene presented itself! In a week, the army had lost 64 officers and 1680 non-commissioned officers and men, to say nothing of the fearful number of natives who had lost their lives. In some areas, the streets ran dark with blood, the vital fluid of the dead mingling, English and Indian indistinguishable one from the other. It was awful to witness.

After the fall of Delhi – or, more properly, the recapture of the city – the enemy’s heart for fighting was broken, and John’s along with it. He’d never minded battle before, never lost his nerve, but the ugliness of the mutiny was a constant grind, pitting friend against friend, comrade against comrade, and John began to wonder whether he would not fight just as fiercely as the natives had he been in their shoes. Why should they not wish to control their own land, he even dared to wonder? But this, he knew, was a dangerous thought. Treasonous, even. He strove to put it from his mind, and was successful in all but the darkest moments of the long, sleepless nights of the post-mutiny watch.

In the end, and for all his exceptional promise, it was not an act of heroism that ended his military career, but a random coincidence, a slight misstep in the grinding routine of military life that put him in the wrong place at the wrong time. He’d been ordered to take a small group of men and patrol a stretch of road on the outskirts of Delhi. The road was empty and held little tactical significance; John assumed the exercise was intended mainly to fight the complacency that threatened to swamp the regiment now that control of the city had been regained. There was no reason for them to be there at all, and John felt vaguely resentful that his superiors saw fit to waste his time in pointless patrols. His life, he reckoned, was not what it was. He frowned, marching up and down the same 3-mile stretch in the mid-day heat. Sweat trickled down his back, and he paused to swig from his canteen. 2 hours remained in their patrol. He scanned the roadside, seeing nothing but scrubby brush, deserted buildings, and an occasional stray dog.

He had just turned to offer his canteen to the man behind him when he heard the high whizz of a bullet singing past his ear and saw the man fall in a spray of red. John was shocked, dimly registered his shock as a failure of preparation, of observation, but simultaneously he bent over the body of the man feeling blindly – vainly – for a pulse while protecting the prone body with his own. The protection was futile. The next instant, a path of fire was searing its way through his shoulder. Another hit his thigh. He gasped, clutched his hand over the first wound, and crumpled over the man he had been trying to shield.

John never saw the sniper who came so close to ending his life. Later, he considered this to be a blessing – better not to know if the face of his would-be killer was familiar to him. A sepoy deserter, perhaps? Better to be haunted by a nameless, faceless assassin than the eyes of a man he had called friend. But at the time, it was an added terror, for all was unknown. Who was shooting at them? Why? Delhi was theirs, and the mutiny put down. No one should dare fire on them. Impossible that it should be happening. But even then, he knew that nothing was impossible, and all was fair. He should have been on his guard.

He tried to roll away from the dead man beneath him, thought frantically to call out a warning to the men down the road, to somehow order them to cover at the side of the road, but he could not speak or move; could barely even breathe for the pain radiating out through his shoulder. In the shock of the moment, he barely even noticed the wound to his leg. He could only lie helpless, listening to bullets fly overhead, impotent as his men fell, one by one, inexorably, around him. He watched as dark liquid pooled into the fabric of the man’s jacket beneath him. It was his own life’s blood. He was not alarmed. It seemed a just and fitting end for him to join the men he’d failed. The scent of blood was sickeningly strong in his nose and a roaring filled his ears. And then he knew no more.

John woke in a confusion of agony and desperate fear. He struggled mightily against restraining hands until the pain in his shoulder expanded though every nerve in his body and took over every shred of his attention. Even then, he did not stop – he had men to find, to warn, to save! Where were
they? Where was he? The sniper! He screamed and thrashed, blind to everything around him, shouted warnings becoming cries of pains, becoming gasps and sobs. Strong hands thrust him down again and held his head to force a drink down his throat. It was bitter and burning; John tried and failed to spit. The world spun around him and faded, faded, faded again to nothing.

When John woke again, he was too weak to panic but he was at least master of his own mind. Looking around, he saw that he was in the make-shift military infirmary the Company had rigged up in a commandeered residence hall for the casualties of the Delhi battles. He was naked beneath a light sheet, and his shoulder and thigh were thickly bandaged. He tried to move, to raise himself; as his muscles flexed, burning pain shot through him.

At once, he relaxed back into the hard mattress, his mind racing. “Nurse!” he called. “Nurse!”

He was attended, moments later, by a harried-looking woman who explained shortly that he had sustained serious injuries, and that he was not to try to move about until the doctor had seen him. She gave him water, holding the glass for him when he could not. When John asked after his men, she only shook her head and raised a small vial to his lips. He swallowed the laudanum without complaint, and sank back into oblivion.

He woke again. He had no idea how long he had been unconscious, but his bandages had been changed and the light coming in through his window looked different.

His nurse stood just outside his door talking together in low strange voices with a young man. John thought he recognized as the voice of the young man as very young doctor who had just come from England. The nurse sounded scared.

"Is it so very bad? Oh, is it?" John heard her say.

"Awfully," the young man answered in a trembling voice. "Awfully, I’m afraid. The ward should have been closed two weeks ago. You ought to have gone to the hills with the others. We all should have."

"Oh, bother what I ought!" she cried. "Was I to leave the men? Would you?"

At that very moment such a loud sound of wailing broke out from the servants' quarters that she gasped in fear, and John began to shiver from head to foot. The wailing grew wilder and wilder. "What is it? What is it?" the nurse cried.

"A native has died," answered the boy doctor. "You did not say it had broken out among your servants."

"I did not know!" the nurse cried. "Come with me! Come with me!" and then their steps retreated down the corridor.

After that, appalling things happened, and the mysterious conversation became gradually clear to John, who caught snippets of conversation from his drug-fueled haze as people hurried by his room. It was cholera, and in its most fatal form. People were dying like flies. No medical staff had yet been affected, but a servant had been taken ill in the night, and it was because she had just died that the servants had wailed in the huts. Before the next day three other servants were dead and others had run away in terror. Nurses were hurried and wore haunted looks; they came less often to his room. There was panic on every side, and dying people in all the corridors.

During the confusion and bewilderment of what he thought must be the third day, John slipped in and out of consciousness. Nobody thought of him, nobody cared for him, and strange things
happened of which he knew nothing. He heard mysterious and frightening sounds. A nurse he did not know came and gave him his sweetly bitter draught when he could no longer contain his cries at the pain that pierced him through with every breath, and at last, he sank back into unconsciousness.

When John next came to himself, everything was silent – almost eerily so. It was dreadfully hot in his room; no one had been in to open the shutters, and the midday sun was powerful. He felt fuzzy and confused. Where was the nurse? The doctor? Why would no one come?

He called again and again into the silence; not even a breath responded. Were there no other patients, even?

After what felt like hours, but may have been mere minutes, a scared looking servant girl came in bearing a tray. She stepped to his bedside and offered him a glass of water and a piece of fruit, but John was too weak even to properly grasp the glass. Her eyes widened, but she held the glass to his lips. He gulped the tepid water, quickly draining the glass and relaxing back down again with a grunt of pain. She offered him the fruit, but he shook his head.

“Where is the doctor?” he asked, fighting for breath against the agony in his shoulder. “I need more medicine.”

She shook her head uncomprehendingly and picked up her tray.

“The doctor? Please. What’s happening?”

But the girl was already backing towards the door.

“Please!” he called again, more weakly this time. A wave of pain and nausea swept over him. “Please. I need help. Kripaya.”

But she was gone.

He retched, pitifully, over the side of his bed. His eyes closed, and again he drifted away in dreams of fire and pain.

“Water!” he cried weakly, when next he woke. “Paani.” He knew next to no Hindi; just the survival words his sepoy comrades had taught him. It had entertained them all, his strange pronunciations. “Kripaya. Please?”

He was weakening. Still no one came. “Kripaya…”

The pain increased from a fuzzy burn to a roar, the effects of the laudanum entirely dissipated. He screamed for the nurse, for a doctor, for the servant girl. No one came.

Again, he slept.

When he awakened he lay and stared at the wall. The infirmary was perfectly still. He had never known it to be so silent before. He heard neither voices nor footsteps, and wondered if everybody had got well of the cholera and all the trouble was over. He wondered idly if anyone would remember him.

But no one came, and as he lay on the cot flitting in and out of consciousness the halls seemed to grow more and more silent. As long as he lay without moving, the pain was tolerable. His thirst, however, grew more and more acute. Sometime in the afternoon – judging only by the heat of the sun baking through the shuttered window – he heard something rustling on the floor and when he looked down he saw a little snake gliding along and watching him with eyes like jewels. He was not
frightened, because it was a harmless little thing who would not hurt him and it seemed in a hurry to get out of the room. It slipped away under the door as he watched it.

"How queer and quiet it is," he thought. "It sounds as if there were no one in the infirmary but me and the snake."

His lips were dry, and in the heat he found it more and more difficult to swallow. The strangeness of his being so alone in what was usually a bustling military infirmary left him the longer he lay there. He began to think that this was all there was for him, now, that this was kind of purgatory in which he could expiate his guilt for failing to prevent the attack on his men. Perhaps he would die here, he thought. Perhaps he already had.

Almost the next minute he heard footsteps in the hall. They were men's footsteps, and the men came down the hall talking in low voices. No one seemed to meet or speak to them and they opened doors and looked into all the rooms as they came down. "What desolation!" he heard one voice say. "Everyone. How could it have taken everyone so quickly?"

John knew that he would not have another chance to save himself. With the last of his strength, he pulled himself painfully up to a half-sitting position, panting and straining with the effort. The agony of his wounds burned white-hot; his vision wavered. "Please," he croaked. "Please."

"Christ! What the devil--?" the voice in the hall swore. The next instant, his door was flung open and a man strode in. He looked tired and troubled, but when he saw John he was so startled that he almost jumped back.

"Charles!" he cried out. "There is a man here! A man alive! In a place like this! Mercy on us, who is he?"

But John could not answer. He had fallen back in a dead faint.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter uses phrases from A Soldier's Experience by Timothy Gowing and, of course, The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett. The chapter contains several significant historical inaccuracies of which I am aware, and probably more that I am not. I plead AU, and hope that any details that don't make historical sense do, at least, make sense within the frame of the story.
John Watson was the only survivor of the cholera outbreak in the infirmary. He later learned that he had been carried on a stretcher out to a waiting dogcart, where his rescuers had propped him up between them and taken him to the nearest place of shelter they could think of, which was the home of a kindly English clergyman of their acquaintance. John remembered nothing of this journey, but when he came to himself again he found himself dressed in a clean nightshirt, his wounds freshly bandaged, reclining on a great feather bed in the clergyman’s own, comfortable bedchamber.

The clergyman and his household cared for John for several weeks, evidently assuming that he had been a great hero of the Mutiny and treating him with almost comical reverence. John was, at first, too weak and ill to take notice of them, and then, although his strength slowly returned to him, he was sunk far too low in spirit to care what the servants said and thought, and forbore to correct them. He knew that he was no hero. His men had died under his command, and his military career was over: his wounds, though no longer life-threatening, would never allow him to return to active duty. He had no home to go to, no family to fall back upon, and no prospects to speak of. It would be better, he reflected, for his life to have ended with the sniper’s bullet.

He lay in the clergyman’s room without speaking. He drank and ate sparsely when the servants brought him meals. He allowed his wounds to be tended, but refused any medicinal aids for the pain, which was at times intense. He bathed and changed clothes when required to do so. At night, he was tormented with dreams of battles gone terribly wrong, of tortured flesh and crushing betrayal. As the weeks wore on, he began to move about the room a little. With the aid of a cane and a stout servant, he could hobble to the armchair by the window, and then back to the bed again. But as his body grew stronger, his mind grew blacker, and everywhere he looked he saw the darkness of bitter defeat and failure.

One evening about three weeks after John’s rescue from the infirmary, the clergyman came to sit with him, as had become his habit. He often spent an hour or two with John in the evenings, chattering about household matters or offering small bits of gossip about people John didn’t know. He studiously avoided any mention of matters political or military, and didn’t seem to mind – or even notice – that John rarely responded.

"Your wounds have closed up well," the clergyman said that night, for the gaping, horrible bullet holes in John’s shoulder and thigh had sealed themselves over at last, now masking the weakened, shredded muscle within. "You are going to be sent home at the end of the week."

"Home!" exclaimed John. His voice was rough with disuse, but the shock of that word roused him from his lethargy. "Where is home?"

“England, of course!” the man replied. “Received word today. The Company has agreed to a medical discharge, so home you go!” He sounded positively cheerful about it.

“I don’t… I don’t have a home to go to.”

"I know you don't," the man answered, “or rather, you didn’t. You do now.”

“I… do now. How?”
“It seems you’ve found yourself a benefactor. Responsibility for your transportation and care has been taken on by a Mr –” and here he paused and removed a letter from his pocket, referring to it as if to refresh his memory – “Ah yes! A Mr. Mycroft Holmes. He proposes to bring you to his estate in Yorkshire so you may convalesce at your leisure.”

“I know no Mr. Mycroft Holmes.”

“Well, he appears to know you, and he has taken a decided interest in your wellbeing.”

John digested this in silence. It made little sense. He was sure he’d never heard the name before.

“Why would a perfect stranger – ?”

At this, the clergyman smiled. “Let us not look for trouble where there is no need. He must be a good man, a Samaritan of sorts. Perhaps he helps many men like you. There are such souls in the world, you know. Men who wish to do good and help others, even as our Lord commands. Let us assume that he is such a one.”

John looked so stony and stubbornly blank that the other did not know what to think.

“You have,” and here the godly man coughed delicately, “You have, forgive me, few other options open to you.”

That was true enough. John could not impose on the good will of the clergyman forever, and he was in no shape yet to work for his keep. The Company would have little use for such a broken man, that was for certain.

Wordlessly, he nodded and held himself stiffly when the clergyman patted his good arm.

Yorkshire it would be.

John made the long voyage to England under the care of an officer's wife who was taking her children to leave them in a boarding-school. She was very much absorbed in her little boys and paid little attention to her patient, other than to look in on him and assure herself, morning and night, that he was still breathing. It was a miserable crossing for John. He was too weak still to walk much about the ship, and his leg and shoulder pained him terribly. He kept to his tiny cabin and grew quite savage in his wretchedness, hating the ship, hating his failing body, hating himself. All said, the woman was rather glad to hand her patient over to the agent Mr. Holmes had sent to meet them when they docked in London.

Miss Anthea was her name, and she guarded her surname so closely that John never was able to discover it. She was Mr. Holmes’ secretary at Holmes Manor, and his aide in all his various business affairs.

She was a beautiful woman, with luxuriant chestnut hair arranged in an artful twist and sharp, intelligent eyes. She wore a very purple dress, a black silk mantle with jet fringe on it. John, on principle, did not like her at all, but since his injury he did not like anyone so there was nothing remarkable in that; besides which it was very evident that Miss Anthea did not think much of him. She offered no information, and answered exactly none of his questions about Mr. Holmes, his motives for treating John with such apparent kindness, or his position in society.

John knew he ought to be suspicious – ought, probably, to refuse to take another step without some kind of assurance of Mr. Holmes’ character and position – but he was too miserable to care much what happened to him. Since his injury, he’d felt like some great force external to him was steering his life and directing his path. He had no stomach or strength to resist.
When the next day they set out on their journey to Yorkshire, he walked through the station to the railway carriage with his head up and shoulders back, trying to rely as little as possible on his cane while keeping pace with the relentless Miss Anthea. He did not want to seem an invalid; it made him furious to imagine anyone looking on him with pity. And yet, a walk of any distance was exhausting and pierced him through with pain.

But Miss Anthea was not in the least disturbed by his scowl. She was the kind of woman who would stand no nonsense from anyone. At least, that is what she would have said if she had been asked. She had an excellent, well paid place as Mr. Holmes' secretary, and not many men of his stature would be willing to employ a woman in such a sensitive position. The only way in which she could keep it was to do at once what Mr. Holmes told her to do. And so she did.

"A Mr. John Watson has been wounded in the Indian mutiny," Mr. Holmes had said in his short, cold way. "My office has been watching him closely for some time. We had high hopes for him, and even now we are loath to lose a man of such potential. He has no family or position to fall back on. You must go to London and bring him yourself."

So she had packed her small trunk and made the journey.

John sat in his corner of the railway carriage and looked ill and unsettled. He had nothing to read or to look at, so he folded his thin hands in his lap and retreated into his thoughts.

Miss Anthea scribbled incessantly into a small notebook, barely looking up even to speak to him. Then: "do you know anything about Mr. Holmes?" she asked abruptly.

"No," said John.

"Never heard your commanders mention his name?"

"No," said John again, frowning.

"That is well," she muttered. She did not say any more for a few moments, apparently concentrating on her notebook. Then she began again.

"I suppose you might as well be told something—to prepare you. You are going to a queer place."

John said nothing at all.

"Not but that it's a grand place, and Mr. Holmes is proud of it—but it's gloomy enough, in its way. The house is six hundred years old and it's on the edge of the moor, as far as one can reasonably get from anything civilized in this country. There's near a hundred rooms in it, though most of them are shut up and locked. And there's a big park round it and gardens and trees with branches trailing to the ground." She paused and took another breath. "But there's nothing else," she ended suddenly.

John had begun to listen in spite of himself. It all sounded so unlike India – unlike, even, his old life in England – and anything new rather attracted him. But he sat still and said nothing, for he had nothing at all to say.

"Well," said Miss Anthea. "What do you think?"

He grunted. "What I think doesn't matter."

"True enough," she replied. "It doesn't. What you're being kept for, I don’t know, and why you're to be kept at Holmes Manor I can’t imagine. He's not going to trouble himself about you, that's sure and certain. He never troubles himself about anyone anymore."
She stopped herself as if she had just remembered something in time.

“You’re to keep to your rooms, or walk about the grounds to regain your strength. Locked doors are locked for a reason. You’ll keep yourself to yourself, and you’ll have no problems.”

John turned his face toward the streaming panes of the window of the railway carriage and gazed out at the gray rain-storm which looked as if it would go on forever and ever. He ached so, and he watched it so long and steadily that the grayness grew heavier and heavier before his eyes and he fell asleep.

It was quite dark when he awakened again. The train had stopped at a station and Miss Anthea was shaking him.

"You have had a sleep!" she said. "You’ve not been drugging, have you? Lord, an opium eater is all we need. Get up! We're at the station and we've got a long drive before us."

John stood indignantly, but winced sharply as his wounded leg protested. He’d refused analgesics even for the trip.

The station was a small one and nobody but themselves seemed to be getting out of the train. A brougham stood on the road before the little outside platform. John saw that it was a smart carriage and that it was attended by a smart footman who helped them in. His long waterproof coat and the waterproof covering of his hat were shining and dripping with rain as everything was, the burly station-master included.

"Look out of the window in about ten minutes and you'll see the moor," Miss Anthea told him as the carriage began to move. "We've got to drive five miles across Missel Moor before we get to the Manor. You won't see much because it's a dark night, but you can see something."

The carriage lamps cast rays of light a little distance ahead of them and John caught glimpses of the things they passed. After they had left the station they had driven through a tiny village and he had seen whitewashed cottages and the lights of a public house. Then they had passed a church and a vicarage and a little shop-window or so in a cottage with odd things set out for sale. Then they were on the highroad and he saw hedges and trees. After that there seemed nothing different for a long time.

At last the horses began to go more slowly, as if they were climbing up-hill, and presently there seemed to be no more hedges and no more trees. The carriage lamps shed a yellow light on a rough-looking road which seemed to be cut through bushes and low-growing things which ended in the great expanse of dark apparently spread out before and around them. A wind was rising and making a singular, wild, low, rushing sound. It reminded John of nothing so much as the sea.

On and on they drove through the darkness, and though the rain stopped, the wind rushed by and whistled and made strange sounds. The road went up and down, and several times the carriage passed over a little bridge beneath which water rushed very fast with a great deal of noise. John’s body ached to the bone, and his wounds burned with pain. He felt as if the journey would never come to an end and that he should be locked in misery forever.

The horses were climbing up a hilly piece of road when he finally caught sight of a light. Miss Anthea saw it too and drew a long sigh of relief. She had no great love of her errand, and longed to be back at her comfortable desk with her papers and books before her.

The carriage stopped before an immensely long but low-built house which seemed to ramble round a stone court. At first John thought that there were no lights at all in the windows, but as he got out of
the carriage he saw that one room in a corner upstairs showed a dull glow.

The entrance door was a huge one made of massive, curiously shaped panels of oak studded with big iron nails and bound with great iron bars. It opened into an enormous hall, which was so dimly lighted that the faces in the portraits on the walls and the figures in the suits of armor were barely visible. Despite himself, John began to feel as small and lost as he looked.

The manservant who opened the door for them addressed Anthea, ignoring John. "You are to take him to his room," he said. "The master doesn't want to see him. He's going to London in the morning."

"Very well, Anderson," Miss Anthea answered, and she dismissed him with a gesture.

And then John was led up a broad staircase and down a long corridor and up a short flight of steps and through another corridor and another, until a door opened in a wall and he found himself in a room with a fire in it and a supper on a table.

Miss Anteha said unceremoniously: "Well, here you are! This room and the next are where you'll live—and you must keep to them. Don't forget!" And she swept out, leaving John alone to his new, strange life.

When he opened his eyes in the morning it was because the manservant called Anderson had come in to light the fire and was kneeling on the hearth-rug raking out the cinders noisily. John lay and watched him for a few moments and then began to look about the room. The walls were covered with tapestry with a forest scene embroidered on it. There were fantastically dressed people under the trees and in the distance there was a glimpse of the turrets of a castle. There were hunters and horses and dogs and ladies. John felt as if he were in the forest with them. Out of a deep window he could see a great climbing stretch of land which seemed to have no trees on it, and to look rather like an endless, dull, purplish sea.

John stretched, tentatively, where he lay. He was so sore and stiff after the rigors of the journey that he wished only to remain in bed all day.

But Anderson finished with his fire, and then set a tray noisily down beside him.

"Here’s your breakfast," he said shortly. “I won’t be waiting on you, and I won’t be ordered about. I’m not your servant,” he added.

John nodded. He preferred solitude to attendance, in any case.

“I’m not your valet either,” he said pointedly.

John sighed. He considered simply turning over in bed and ignoring the man, but a niggling remnant of pride got the better of him: he would not be condescended to.

He rose, stiffly and slowly, washed perfunctorily at his basin, then went to the wardrobe, limping heavily. He opened it, but gaped in astonishment at the clothing it contained.

"These are not mine," he said. He looked the thick blue wool, the creamy shirts and finely woven trousers, and added with cool approval: "These are nicer than mine."

"Well that’s what you’ve got to put on, and, sir, I might suggest a hint of gratitude for Mr. Holmes’ thoughtfulness,” he added imperiously.

John grunted and waved Anderson out of the room.
He slowly dressed himself in the good clothing, pausing to massage his painful, stiffened muscles. He drank some tea and ate a mouthful of toast, then went to the window. There were gardens and paths and big trees, but everything looked dull and wintry.

He glanced about his room. There was nothing to do. No books, no newspapers – not even a pen and paper. Nothing at all to do, then, but to sit alone in the ringing silence and think on the many failures and disappointments of his past.

Perhaps it would be better to take a turn in the gardens.

He found an overcoat and hat hanging in his wardrobe, and a pair of stout boots, and took up his cane and made his way slowly downstairs. At the door, he passed a bored-looking footman who provided him with directions.

"If tha' goes round that way," he said in his broad Yorkshire accent, pointing to the right, "tha'll come to th' gardens. There's lots o' flowers in summer-time, but there's nothin' bloomin' now." He seemed to hesitate a second before he added, "One of th' gardens is locked up. You mustn't disturb that one."

"Why?" asked John in spite of himself. Here was another locked door added to the hundred in the strange house.

The footman looked at him strangely, as if he could not decide if John were an impolite gentleman or an ignorant servant. "Tha'rt new, aren't tha'? We don't go askin' why this or why that – not in this household. Mr. Holmes locked th' door to the garden an' dug a hole and buried th' key. That's all ye need to know. Ah, now there's a bell ringing—I must run."

After he was gone John turned down the walk which led to the gardens. It was a relief to be alone; he could walk as slowly and as crookedly as his body demanded without fear of mockery or – what was worse – pity. As he hobbled along, he could not help thinking about the locked garden. He wondered what it would look like and whether there were anything still alive in it. When he had passed through the shrubbery gate he found himself in great gardens, with wide lawns and winding walks with clipped borders. There were trees, and flower-beds, and evergreens clipped into strange shapes, and a large pool with an old gray fountain in its midst. But the flower-beds were bare and wintry and the fountain was not playing.

At the end of the path he was following there seemed to be a long wall, with ivy growing over it. He was not familiar enough with England to know that he was coming upon the kitchen-gardens where the vegetables and fruit were growing. He went toward the wall and found that there was a green door in the ivy, and that it stood open. This was not the closed garden, evidently, and he could go into it.

He went through the door and found that it was a garden with walls all round it and that it was only one of several walled gardens which seemed to open into one another. He saw another open green door, revealing bushes and pathways between beds containing winter vegetables. Fruit-trees were trained flat against the wall, and over some of the beds there were glass frames. The place was bare and ugly enough, John thought, as he stood and stared about him. It might be nicer in summer when things were green, but there was nothing pretty about it now.

Presently an old woman with a basket of root vegetables on her arm walked through the door leading from the second garden. She looked startled when she saw John, and then curtseyed vaguely. She had a kind face, and walked with a gentle limp.

"What is this place?" John asked curtly. He had forgotten, or perhaps become impatient with, the
niceties of social intercourse.

"One of the kitchen-gardens," she answered.

"And that?" said John, pointing through the other green door.

"Another of 'em," she answered. "There's another on the other side of the wall and there's the orchard the other side of that."

John made no response. Conversation had become unnatural to him, and he withdrew quickly from the woman's kindly gaze.

He went slowly down the path and through the second green door. There, he found more walls and winter vegetables and glass frames, and beyond, an orchard. There were walls all round it also and trees trained against them, and there were bare fruit-trees growing in the winter-browned grass—but there was no green door to be seen anywhere. John looked for it, and yet when he had entered the upper end of the garden he had noticed that the wall did not seem to end with the orchard but to extend beyond it as if it enclosed a place at the other side. He could see the tops of trees above the wall, and when he stood still he saw a bird with a bright red breast sitting on the topmost branch of one of them, and suddenly it burst into its winter song—almost as if it had caught sight of him and was calling to him.

He stopped and listened to it and somehow the cheerful, friendly little whistle gave him a pleased feeling—for the big closed house and big bare moor and big bare gardens had begun to make John feel as if there was no one left in the world but himself. The bright-breasted little bird brought a look into his pained, irritable face which was almost a smile. He listened to the song until the bird flew away.

Perhaps it was because he had nothing whatever to do that he thought so much of the deserted garden. He was curious, and he hadn’t felt anything like curiosity for a very long time. Why had Mr. Mycroft Holmes buried the key? He thought of the robin and of the way it seemed to sing its song at him, and as he remembered the tree-top it perched on he stopped rather suddenly on the path.

"I believe that tree was in the locked garden—I feel sure it was," he said. "There was a wall round the place and there was no door."

He began to feel tired; his small walk had taxed him greatly. He turned back into the first kitchen-garden he had entered and found the old woman still there, snipping some winter herbs. He went and stood beside her and watched her a few moments.

"Is there no gardener to help you?" he asked at last.

"Psht! I'm not so old as that!" she grumbled, but she was smiling at him all the same.

John nodded, and they stood in silence together for a few moments. Then: "I have been into the other gardens," John said.

The woman positively cooed. "Ooo, lovely, aren't they? Well," she added, "not lovely now, maybe. But you can see that they will be. You can see the potential, and that's almost better than anything else."

"There was no door there into the other garden," said John.

"What other garden?" she asked quickly, stopping her work for a moment.
"The one on the other side of the wall," answered he. "There are trees there—I saw the tops of them, and a robin sat in one, singing."

A slow smile spread over her face. She turned about to the orchard side of her garden and began to whistle—a low soft whistle. Almost the next moment, John heard a soft little rushing flight through the air—and it was the robin flying to them, and he actually alighted on the big clod of earth quite near to his foot.

The bird put his tiny head on one side and looked up at him with his soft bright eye which was like a black dewdrop. He seemed quite familiar and not the least afraid. He hopped about and pecked the earth briskly, looking for seeds and insects. It actually gave John a queer feeling in his heart, because he was so pretty and cheerful and seemed so like a person. He had a tiny plump body and a delicate beak, and slender delicate legs.

"Will he always come when you call him?" he asked almost in a whisper.

"That he will. I've known him ever since he was a fledgling. He came out of the nest in the other garden and when first he flew over the wall he was too weak to fly back for a few days and we got friendly. When he went over the wall again the rest of the brood was gone and he was lonely and he came back to me."

The robin hopped about busily pecking the soil and now and then stopped and looked at them a little. John thought his black dewdrop eyes gazed at him with great curiosity. It really seemed as if he were finding out all about him. The queer feeling in his heart increased. "Where did the rest of the brood fly to?" he asked.

"There's no knowing. The old ones turn them out of their nest and make them fly and they're scattered before you know it. This one was lonely."

John went a step nearer to the robin and looked at him very hard.

"I'm lonely," he thought. He had not known before that this was true, but once he had thought it, he realized it had been true for his entire life. He seemed to find it out when the robin looked at him and he looked at the robin.

The woman straightened her back and picked up her basket again.

"Are you the soldier come from India?" she asked.

John nodded. "What is your name?" he inquired.

"Mrs. Hudson," she answered. "I'm a jack-of-all-trades around the Manor. Mr. Holmes That Was took me on as an undercook when I was a girl. I did that, and I did housekeeping, and nursing, and anything else the family asked of me. Practically raised the boys, and Mycroft kept me on when he inherited. Now I potter around in the gardens and the kitchen. You'll be seeing plenty of me, now as you've come to join us." She winked.

Suddenly a clear rippling little sound broke out near them and they turned round. They were standing a few feet from a young apple-tree and the robin had flown on to one of its branches and had burst out into a scrap of a song. Mrs. Hudson laughed outright.

John looked at her inquiringly.

"He's made up his mind to make friends with you," explained Mrs. Hudson.
"With me?" said John. Forgetting his fatigue, he moved toward the little tree softly and looked up.

"Would you make friends with me?" he said to the robin just as if he was speaking to a person. 
"Why would you do that, then, hmm?" He used his softest, most coaxing voice, so that Mrs. Hudson looked at him with warm surprise.

But just that moment the robin, who had ended his song, gave a little shake of his wings, spread them and flew away. He had made his visit and had other things to do.

"He has flown over the wall," John said, watching him. "Into the locked garden!"

"He lives there," said Mrs. Hudson. "He came out of the egg there. If he's courting, he's making up to some young madam of a robin that lives among the old rose-trees there."

"Rose-trees," said John. "Are there rose-trees still?"

Mrs. Hudson turned once again to her herbs. "There was ten years ago," she mumbled.

"I should like to see them," said John, for his interest was piqued. "Where is the green door? There must be a door somewhere."

"There was ten years ago, but there isn't now," she said, and some of the friendliness had left her voice.

"No door?" said John. "There must be."

"None as anyone can find, and none as is any one's business. Don't you be meddlesome and poke your nose where it has no cause to go. Here, I must go on with my work."

And she turned, picked up her basket and walked off, without even glancing back or saying good-bye.

Chapter End Notes

Next week: The Cry in the Corridor.
Thursday Teasers posted weekly on Tumblr (doctormerdington).
The Cry in the Corridor

Chapter Summary

Mysterious happenings at Holmes Manor...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At first each day which passed by for John Watson was exactly like the others. Every morning he awoke from nightmares in his tapestried room and found Anderson kneeling upon the hearth building his fire; every morning he painfully rose and drank his tea and ate a few bites of his breakfast alone in his room which had nothing amusing in it. After each breakfast he gazed out of the window across to the huge moor which seemed to spread out on all sides and climb up to the sky, and after he had stared for a while he realized that if he did not go out he would have to stay in and do nothing—for somehow it did not occur to him that he might request books or newspapers of the servants. It did not occur to him to ask for anything at all. And so he went out.

He did not know that this was the best thing he could have done, and he did not know that, when he forced himself to walk down the paths and down the avenue, he was stirring his slow blood and making his injured leg stronger by fighting with the wind which swept down from the moor. He walked as quickly as he could to make himself warm, and he hated the wind which rushed at his face and roared and held him back as if it were some giant he could not see. But the big breaths of rough fresh air blown over the heather filled his lungs with something which was good for his whole broken body and whipped some red color into his cheeks and brightened his dull eyes though he did not know anything about it.

But after a few days spent almost entirely out of doors he wakened one morning knowing what it was to be hungry, and when he sat down to his breakfast he did not glance disdainfully at his deviled kidneys and push them away, but took up his fork and began to eat and went on eating until his plate was empty.

Anderson grunted in surprise when he came up to collect the tray. "You got on well enough with that this morning, didn’t you?"

"It’s better today," said John, feeling a little surprised himself.

“It’s the same it always is. It’s you that’s better today, I reckon.” Anderson spoke these words in his usual scoffing tone, yet John was strangely warmed by them. He shrugged his good shoulder and said nothing.

After breakfast, as had become his habit, he went to his window to survey the weather and to take note of the small changes to the landscape of the winter moor that he seemed to be able to discern more clearly every day. Today, however, he was shocked to see a carriage careening up the road to the Manor. That road was usually so quiet as to seem almost abandoned; John had seen neither man nor horse on it since he had arrived. The driver had whipped the horse into a lather and the carriage itself was shaking with the strain of the speed. Whoever the passenger was, his errand must be an urgent one. John watched the carriage approach the Manor until it disappeared around the elegant curve of the east wing and then, questioning nothing, turned away.
John spent his days walking round and round the gardens and the paths in the park. Sometimes he looked for Mrs. Hudson, but though several times he saw her from a distance, she would give a quick wave and disappear before he got near. Once when he was walking toward her she picked up her basket and turned away as if she did it on purpose.

One place he went to oftener than to any other. It was the long walk outside the gardens with the walls round them. There were bare flower-beds on either side of it and against the walls ivy grew thickly. There was one part of the wall where the creeping dark green leaves were more bushy than elsewhere. It seemed as if for a long time that part had been neglected. The rest of it had been clipped and made to look neat, but at this lower end of the walk it had not been trimmed at all.

John had walked past this many times, but today he stopped to notice this and wondered why it was so. He had just paused and was looking up at a long spray of ivy swinging in the wind when he saw a gleam of scarlet and heard a brilliant chirp, and there, on the top of the wall, forward perched his friend the robin redbreast, tilting forward to look at him with his small head on one side.

"Oh!" he said softly, "is it you?" And it did not seem at all queer to him that he spoke to him as if he were sure that the bird would understand and answer.

He did answer. He twittered and chirped and hopped along the wall as if he were telling John all sorts of things. It seemed to John as if he understood him, too, though he was not speaking in words. It was as if he said: "Good morning! Isn't the wind nice? Isn't the sun nice? Isn't everything nice? Let us both chirp and hop and twitter. Come on! Come on!"

John began to laugh at his own fancy, and as the robin hopped and took little flights along the wall, he followed after him. Poor sickly, lowly John—he actually looked almost hearty for a moment.

The robin spread his wings and made a darting flight to the top of a tree, where he perched and sang loudly. That reminded John of the first time he had seen him. He had been swinging on a tree-top then and he had been standing in the orchard. Now he was on the other side of the orchard and standing in the path outside a wall—much lower down—and there was the same tree inside.

"It's in the locked garden," he said to himself. "It's the garden without a door. He lives in there. I do wish I could see what it is like," for this was the first spark of curiosity John had felt in many long months, and he had no desire to quell it.

He walked up the walk to the green door he had entered the first morning. Then he walked down the path through the other door and then into the orchard, and when he stood and looked up there was the tree on the other side of the wall, and there was the robin just finishing his song and beginning to preen his feathers with his beak.

"It is the garden," he said. "I am sure it is."

He walked round and looked closely at that side of the orchard wall, but he only found what he had found before—that there was no door in it. Then he walked through the kitchen-gardens again and out into the walk outside the long ivy-covered wall, and he walked to the end of it and looked at it, but there was no door; and then he walked to the other end, looking again, but there was no door. He did not even notice how much farther he could walk now, or how much stronger he was becoming.

"There must be a door," he said. "Mr. Holmes buried the key— he did not wall the door up. So the door must still be here."

He stayed out of doors nearly all day, and when he sat down to his supper at night he felt hungry and drowsy and comfortable. The ache in his body was from good, healthy exercise, and it was not an
unpleasant sort of ache at all.

When Anderson came to remove his supper tray, John stopped him with a question. "Why did Mr. Holmes lock up that garden?" he said.

Anderson’s lip curled. "That’s not to be talked about," he replied shortly. "There’s lots of things in this place that’s not to be talked over. That’s Mr. Holmes’s orders. His troubles are none of his servants’ business, he says. And they’re none of yours, neither."

And with that, he turned on his heel and left John alone.

John sat and looked at the red fire and listened to the wind. It seemed to be wuthering louder than ever, with a hollow shuddering sort of roar which rushed round and round the house as if the giant no one could see were buffeting it and beating at the walls and windows to try to break in. But one knew he could not get in, and somehow it made one feel very safe and warm inside a room with a red coal fire.

At that moment a very good thing was happening to him. Four good things had happened to him, in fact, since he came to Holmes Manor. He had laughed with a robin, and at himself; he had walked in the wind until his blood had grown warm; he had been healthily hungry for the first time since his injury; and he had rediscovered an interest in the world through his curiosity about the secret garden, which his gave him something to think about other than himself. The fresh wind from the moor had begun to blow the cobwebs out of his unhappy brain and to waken him up a little.

But as he sat listening to the wind he began to hear something else. He did not know what it was, because at first he could scarcely distinguish it from the wind itself. It was a curious sound—it seemed almost as if a person were crying somewhere. Sometimes the wind sounded rather like crying, but presently John felt quite sure this sound was inside the house, not outside it. It was far away, but it was inside.

Or – his heart hammered suddenly, forcefully – was it inside of him? Several times since the dreadful attack that nearly took his life, John had experienced strange moments of unreality; moments, almost, when he felt himself to be reliving those terrible events in endless, infinite repetition. He could hear the sounds, see the sights, even smell the very blood of his men as it spilled, over and over, to the ground. Always, he came to himself after these waking nightmares trembling, sweating, gasping. Sometimes he vomited. Sometimes it took him many long minutes to remember where he was.

He did not think – but he did not know – that such was the case now. The not knowing was torturous, intolerable. He rang for Anderson.

"Do you hear any one crying?" he asked urgently when the servant appeared.

Anderson looked evasive.

"No," he answered. "It's the wind. Sometimes it sounds like as if someone was lost on the moor and wailing. It's got all sorts of sounds."

"But listen," said John. "It's in the house—down one of the long corridors."

And at that very moment a door must have been opened somewhere; for a great rushing draft blew along the passage and the door of the room they sat in was blown open with a crash, and as they both jumped, the light was blown out and the crying sound was swept down the far corridor so that it was to be heard more plainly than ever.

"There!" said John. "As I said! It is someone in great distress! "
Anderson ran and shut the door and turned the key, but before he did it they both heard the sound of a door in some far passage shutting with a bang, and then everything was quiet, for even the wind ceased wuthering for a few moments.

"It was the wind," said Anderson stubbornly. "And if it wasn't, it was little Betty Butterworth, the scullery-maid. She's had a toothache all day."

But something troubled and awkward in his manner made John stare very hard at him. He did not believe he was speaking the truth.

The next day the rain poured down in torrents again, and when John looked out of his window the moor was almost hidden by gray mist and cloud. There could be no going out today.

Anderson made up his fire and brought him his breakfast as usual, and made no reference to the disturbance of the evening before.

John ignored him completely in favour of looking out the window at the bleak moor. He hadn't realized how much he had grown to enjoy his walks, but now that he could not go out he felt strangely bereft.

"Why don't you read something, then?" Anderson asked him carelessly.

John had grown used to his forwardness. "I haven't any books," said he. "Those few I had were left in India."

"That's a pity," said Anderson. "If Mr. Holmes would let you go into the library, there's thousands of books there – but that's not likely to happen."

John did not ask where the library was because he was suddenly inspired by a new idea. He made up his mind to go and find it himself. He was not troubled about Mr. Holmes. Mr. Holmes seemed never to be in residence, and in this queer place one scarcely ever saw any one at all. In fact, there was no one to see but the servants, and when their master was away they lived a luxurious life below stairs, where there was a huge kitchen hung about with shining brass and pewter, and a large servants' hall where there were four or five abundant meals eaten every day, and where a great deal of lively romping went on. Anderson himself was engaged in a dalliance with a lovely scullery maid named Sally Donovan which pulled his attention from his duties to an even greater degree than was usual.

Now, John's meals were served regularly, and Anderson waited on him – at least nominally – but otherwise no one troubled themselves about him in the least. He'd not seen Miss Anthea since he had arrived, and no one inquired as to what he did or told him where to go.

He stood at the window for about ten minutes this morning after Anderson had swept up the hearth for the last time and gone downstairs. He was thinking over the new idea which had come to him when he heard of the library. He did not care very much about the library itself, but to hear of it brought back to his mind the hundred rooms with closed doors. He wondered if they were all really locked and what he would find if he could get into any of them. Why shouldn't he go and see how many doors he could count? It would be something to do on this morning when he could not go out. He needn't ask permission to walk through the house, surely. He was not, after all, a prisoner here!

He opened the door of the room and went into the corridor, and then he began his wanderings. It was a long corridor and it branched into other corridors and it led him up short flights of steps which mounted to others again. There were doors and doors, and there were pictures on the walls. Sometimes they were pictures of dark, curious landscapes, but oftenest they were portraits of men and women in historical garments made of satin and velvet. He found himself in one long gallery
whose walls were covered with these portraits. He walked slowly down this place and stared at the faces which also seemed to stare at him. He felt as if they were wondering what a man like he was doing in their house. Some were pictures of men in military dress—highly decorated and highly ranked. He always stopped to look at them, and wonder what their names were, and what their experiences had been, and what had become of them. There was a stiff, plain man in a simple uniform leaning on a cane. His eyes had a sharp, curious look.

"What happened to you, my friend?" said John under his breath. "How did you come by that cane?"

He had never spent such a queer morning. It seemed as if there was no one at all in the huge rambling house but his own self, wandering about upstairs and down, through narrow passages and wide ones, where it seemed to him that no one but himself had ever walked. He began to feel as if he must be asleep and dreaming, or that he had stepped into a fairy story.

It was not until he climbed to the second floor that he thought of turning the handle of a door. All the doors were shut, as Miss Anthea had said they would be, but at last he put his hand on the handle of one of them and turned it. He was almost frightened for a moment when he felt that it turned without difficulty and that when he pushed upon the door itself it slowly and heavily opened. It was a massive door and opened into a big bedroom. There were embroidered hangings on the wall, and inlaid furniture such as he had seen in India stood about the room. A broad window with leaded panes looked out upon the moor; and over the mantel was another portrait of the man with the cane who seemed to stare at him more curiously than ever.

"Perhaps he slept here once," said John. "It makes me feel quite queer."

After that he tried more doors and more. He saw so many rooms that he became quite tired, and as many again were locked fast and could not be opened at all.

And then, at the end of a very long, very dark corridor, he came to a plain oak door with a brass plate stating Laboratory. John paused in surprise. He had little experience of grand country estates, but he did not suppose it usual for them to contain laboratories. Curiously, he turned the knob. The door was not locked, but it stuck fast, the wood swollen with seasonal changes and the hinges rusty and untreated. John set his good shoulder to it and pushed sharply three or four times. The reluctant door opened. John stepped through and closed the door behind him.

The room was not large, but it was obvious at a glance that it was, indeed, a laboratory – and an exceedingly well-equipped one, at that. In the dim light that seeped through the shuttered windows John saw a workbench covered with what he supposed to be experimental contraptions, shelves upon shelves of dusty bottles and scientific equipment, and sample jars filled with mysterious specimens.

Intrigued, he stepped further into the room. His footsteps made a trail in the dust; the room was evidently completely abandoned. In the far corner he spied a small writing desk and chair. Sighing with relief, he sank into the chair and rubbed gently at his injured thigh. He had been walking for a long time. The desk itself was as fine and simple and elegant as everything else in this strange room. Idly, John pulled open the centre drawer. It contained nothing but a few scraps of paper and a silver pen engraved SH. He closed it again.

In all his wanderings through the long corridors and the empty rooms, he had seen nothing alive; but in this room he saw something. Just after he sat down he heard a tiny rustling sound. It made him jump and his heart race. He looked over at the fireplace, from which it seemed to come. On the floor was a cushion, and in the velvet which covered it there was a hole, and out of the hole peeped a tiny head with a pair of frightened eyes in it.
John crept softly across the room to look. The bright eyes belonged to a little gray mouse, and the mouse had eaten a hole into the cushion and made a comfortable nest there. Six baby mice were cuddled up asleep near her. If there was no one else alive in the hundred rooms there were seven mice who did not look lonely at all.

"If they wouldn't be so frightened I would take them back with me," thought John.

He was now too tired to wander any farther, and he turned back, closing the laboratory door carefully behind him. Two or three times he lost his way by turning down the wrong corridor and was obliged to ramble up and down until he found the right one; but at last he reached his own floor again, though he was some distance from his own room and did not know exactly where he was.

"I believe I have taken a wrong turning again," he said, standing still at what seemed the end of a short passage with tapestry on the wall. "I don't know which way to go. How still everything is!"

It was while he was standing here and just after he had said this that the stillness was broken by a sound. It was another cry, but not quite like the one he had heard last night; it was only a short one, a single, terrible shout of anger, then a whine muffled by passing through walls.

"It's nearer than it was," said John, his heart beating rather faster. "It is still in distress."

He put his hand accidentally upon the tapestry near him, and then sprang back, feeling quite startled. The tapestry was the covering of a door which fell open and showed him that there was another part of the corridor behind it, and Miss Anthea was coming up it with a bunch of keys in her hand and a very cross look on her face.

"What are you doing here?" she said angrily, and she took John by the arm and pulled him bodily away. "What did I tell you?"

"I turned round the wrong corner," explained John. "Listen, someone is crying. I'm afraid whoever it is has been ill all night." He quite hated Miss Anthea at the moment, but he hated her more the next.

"You didn't hear anything of the sort," said she. "Your mind must be compromised by your condition. Who knows what you might imagine! You come along back to your own rooms or I'll turn you out on the moors and we'll see how you like it!"

And she half pushed, half pulled him up one passage and down another until she pushed him in at the door of his own room.

"Now," she said, "stay where you're told to stay. The master has no patience for insubordinate guests. Lord knows, I've got enough to do."

She went out of the room and slammed the door after her, and John went and sat in his armchair, pale with rage. He ground his teeth.

"I know what I heard!" he said to himself. "I am not compromised. I am lucid. My mind is clear."

He hoped that it was true.

Chapter End Notes

Tune in next Sunday for chapter 4, in which John discovers a key and makes a new
friend...
Two long and dreary days passed. The rain kept John to his room, and although he often heard strange sounds in the corridor, there were no more cries or shouts – only people passing to and fro, and the sort of thumps and bumps that sounded like furniture being moved about. He forbore any investigation. The damp left his leg and shoulder sore and aching, and in the dark of the storm he found he preferred his bed to his armchair, and slept away great parts of the day.

On the third morning, when John opened his eyes he sat upright in bed immediately and gasped. The rainstorm had ended and the gray mist and clouds had been swept away in the night by the wind. The wind itself had ceased and a brilliant, deep blue sky arched high over the moorland. Never, never had John seen a sky so blue. It was of a deep cool blue which almost seemed to sparkle like the waters of some lovely bottomless lake, and here and there, high, high in the arched blueness floated small clouds of snow-white fleece. The far-reaching world of the moor itself looked softly blue instead of gloomy purple-black or awful dreary gray.

He went out into the garden as quickly as possible. The sunshine made the whole place look different. The high, deep, blue sky arched over Holmes Manor as well as over the moor, and he kept lifting his face and looking up into it. He thought, perhaps, that spring might finally come.

He walked away, slowly thinking. He thought about the cries he had heard in the corridor, and about the carriage he had seen arrive at the Manor. He wondered about the mysterious Mycroft Holmes, and about Mrs. Hudson, and about his little robin friend. That was a good many things to be thinking about, when one was grown used to thinking of nothing but one’s own misery.

He heard a chirp and a twitter, and when he looked at the bare flower-bed at his left side there he was hopping about and pretending to peck things out of the earth as if to persuade him that he had not followed him. But John knew he had followed him and the surprise so filled him with warmth that he almost trembled a little.

"Remember me?" he asked softly. "I remember you."

He chirped, and talked, and coaxed and the robin hopped, and flirted his tail and twittered. It was as if he were talking. His red waistcoat was like satin and he puffed his tiny breast out and was so fine and so grand and so pretty that it was really as if he were showing John how important and like a human person a robin could be. John forgot that he had ever been miserable in his life when he allowed him to draw closer and closer, and bend down and talk and try to make something like robin sounds.

The flower-bed was not quite bare. It was bare of flowers because the perennial plants had been cut down for their winter rest, but there were tall shrubs and low ones which grew together at the back of
the bed, and as the robin hopped about under them John saw him hop over a small pile of freshly
turned up earth. He stopped on it to look for a worm. The earth had been turned up because a dog
had been trying to dig up a mole and he had scratched quite a deep hole.

John looked at it, not really knowing why the hole was there, and as he looked he saw something
almost buried in the newly-turned soil. It was something like a ring of rusty iron or brass and when
the robin flew up into a tree nearby he put out his hand and picked the ring up. It was more than a
ring, however; it was an old key which looked as if it had been buried a long time.

John stood up and looked at it with a pounding heart.

"Perhaps it has been buried for ten years," he said in a whisper. "Perhaps…"

He turned the key over and over. If it was the key to the locked garden, he thought, and he could
find out where the door was, he could open it and see what was inside the walls, and what had
happened to the old rose-trees. It was because it had been shut up so long that he wanted to see it.
How had the garden fared in the face of such prolonged neglect?

"You showed me where the key was," he said to the robin. "You ought to show me the door as well;
but I don't believe you know!"

The robin flew from his swinging spray of ivy on to the top of the wall and he opened his beak and
sang a loud, lovely trill, merely to show off. Nothing in the world is quite as adorably lovely as a
robin when he shows off—and they are nearly always doing it.

One of the nice little gusts of wind rushed down the walk, and it was a stronger one than the rest. It
was strong enough to wave the branches of the trees, and it was more than strong enough to sway
the trailing sprays of untrimmed ivy hanging from the wall. John had stepped close to the robin, and
suddenly the gust of wind swung aside some loose ivy trails, and more suddenly still he jumped
toward it and caught it in his hand. This he did because he had seen something under it—a round
knob which had been covered by the leaves hanging over it. It was the knob of a door.

He put his hands under the leaves and began to pull and push them aside. Thick as the ivy hung, it
nearly all was a loose and swinging curtain, though some had crept over wood and iron. John’s heart
began to thump and his hands to shake a little. The robin kept singing and twittering away and tilting
his head on one side, as if he were as excited as John was. His hands found the lock. He put the key
in and turned it. It took two hands to do it, but it did turn.

And then he took a long breath and looked behind him up the walk to see if any one was coming.
No one was coming. No one ever did come, it seemed, and he took another long breath, because he
could not help it, and he held back the swinging curtain of ivy and pushed back the door which
opened slowly—slowly.

Then he slipped through it, and shut it behind him, and stood with his back against it, looking about
him and breathing quite fast.

He was standing inside the secret garden.

It was the sweetest, most mysterious-looking place any one could imagine. The high walls which
shut it in were covered with the leafless stems of climbing roses which were so thick that they were
matted together. All the ground was covered with grass of a wintry brown and out of it grew clumps
of bushes which were surely rosebushes if they were alive. There were numbers of standard roses
which had so spread their branches that they were like little trees. There were other trees in the
garden, and one of the things which made the place look strangest and loveliest was that climbing
roses had run all over them and swung down long tendrils which made light swaying curtains, and here and there they had caught at each other or at a far-reaching branch and had crept from one tree to another and made lovely bridges of themselves. There were neither leaves nor roses on them now and John did not know whether they were dead or alive, but their thin gray or brown branches and sprays looked like a sort of hazy mantle spreading over everything, walls, and trees, and even brown grass, where they had fallen from their fastenings and run along the ground. It was this hazy tangle from tree to tree which made it all look so mysterious. Indeed it was different from any other place he had ever seen in his life.

"How still it is!" he whispered. "How still!"

Then he waited a moment and listened at the stillness. The robin, who had flown to his treetop, was still as all the rest. He did not even flutter his wings; he sat without stirring, and looked at John.

"No wonder it is still," he whispered again. "I am the first person who has spoken in here for ten years."

He moved away from the door, stepping as softly as if he were afraid of awakening someone. He was glad that there was grass under his feet and that his steps made no sounds. He walked under one of the fairy-like gray arches between the trees and looked up at the sprays and tendrils which formed them. "I wonder if they are all quite dead," he said.

If he had been Mrs. Hudson, for example, he could have told whether the wood was alive by looking at it, but he could only see that there were only gray or brown sprays and branches and none showed any signs of even a tiny leaf-bud anywhere.

But he was inside the wonderful garden and he could come through the door under the ivy any time and he had solved a mystery and he felt as if he had found a place for himself at last in this strange new life. He began to walk slowly along the wall of the garden.

There seemed to have been grass paths here and there, and in one or two corners there were alcoves of evergreen with stone seats or tall moss-covered flower urns in them. As he came near the second of these alcoves he stopped walking. There had once been a flowerbed in it, and he thought he saw something sticking out of the black earth—some sharp little pale green points. Gingerly, favouring his stiff leg, he knelt down to look at them.

"They might be crocuses or snowdrops or daffodils," he whispered.

He bent very close to them and sniffed the fresh scent of the damp earth. He liked it very much.

"Perhaps there are some other ones coming up in other places," he said. "I will go over the garden and look."

He went slowly and kept his eyes on the ground. He looked in the old border beds and among the grass, and after he had gone round, trying to miss nothing, he had found ever so many more sharp, pale green points, and he had become quite excited again.

"It isn't a dead garden," he cried out softly. "Even if the roses are dead, there are other things alive."

He did not know anything about gardening, but the grass seemed so thick in some of the places where the green points were pushing their way through that he thought they did not seem to have room enough to grow. He searched about until he found a rather sharp piece of wood and knelt down and dug and weeded out the weeds and grass until he made nice little clear places around them.
“Now they look as if they could breathe,” he said, after he had finished with the first ones – “as if they have room to grow and stand on their own.”

He went from place to place, and dug and weeded, and enjoyed himself so immensely that he was led on from bed to bed and into the grass under the trees. The exercise made him so warm that he first threw his coat off, and then his hat, and without knowing it he was smiling down on to the grass and the pale green points all the time.

John Watson worked in his garden until it was his usual dinner time. He had worked through luncheon without even realizing it, and was rather late in remembering about dinner. When he cleaned his hands as best he could and put on his coat and hat, he could not believe that he had been working outdoors for most of the day. He had been actually happy all the time; and dozens and dozens of the tiny, pale green points were to be seen in cleared places, looking twice as cheerful as they had looked before when the grass and weeds had been smothering them.

“I shall come back tomorrow,” he said, looking all round at his new kingdom, and speaking to the trees and the rose-bushes as if they heard him.

He ate a hearty meal that evening, more than he had eaten at one sitting since long before his return to England. He noticed, even, the excellence of the food; one thing that could be said for Holmes Manor, he thought, was that Mr. Mycroft Holmes kept an excellent kitchen staff.

Just before Anderson went downstairs with his dinner-tray, John asked a question.

“Anderson,” he said, “has the scullery-maid had the toothache again today?”

Anderson started slightly.

“What makes you ask that?” he said.

“Because when I first came in I opened the door and walked down the corridor to see if you were coming. And I heard that far-off crying again, just as we heard it the other night. There isn't a wind today, so you see it couldn't have been the wind.”

“Eh!” said Anderson restlessly. “You mustn't go walking about in corridors and listening. Mr. Holmes would be so furious there's no knowing what he'd do.”

“I wasn't listening,” said John. “I was just waiting for you—for my dinner. And I heard it. That's three times.”

“My word! There's Miss Anthea’s bell,” said Anderson, and he almost ran out of the room.

“It's the strangest house any one ever lived in,” said John drowsily, as he dropped his head on the back of the armchair upon which he sat. Fresh air and hard work had made him feel so comfortably tired that he fell asleep.

***

The sun shone down for nearly a week on the secret garden. At least, that was what John called it when he was thinking of it. He liked the name, and he liked still more the feeling that when its beautiful old walls shut him in no one knew where he was. It seemed almost like freedom – an odd thought, given that he was not exactly a prisoner. What exactly he was did not, somehow, concern him. He felt himself to be in a kind of purgatory, marking time while the world around him decided what would become of him.
He was beginning to like to be out of doors; he no longer hated the wind, but enjoyed it. He could was faster, and longer, and had less pain afterwards. The bulbs in the secret garden must have been much astonished. Such nice clear places were made round them that they had all the breathing space they wanted, and really, if John had known it, they began to cheer up under the dark earth and work tremendously. The sun could get at them and warm them, and when the rain came down it could reach them at once, so they began to feel very much alive.

John was determined, and now he had something interesting to be determined about, he was very much absorbed, indeed. He worked and dug and pulled up weeds steadily, only becoming more pleased every hour instead of tiring of it. He stopped to rest quite often, allowing his injured body to stretch and his heart to grow calm, but even that was a pleasure to him. He found many more of the sprouting pale green points than he had ever hoped to find. They seemed to be starting up everywhere and each day he was sure he found tiny new ones, some so tiny that they barely peeped above the earth. These had been left to themselves for ten years and perhaps they had spread into thousands. He wondered how long it would be before they showed that they were flowers. Sometimes he stopped digging to look at the garden and try to imagine what it would be like when it was covered with thousands of lovely things in bloom.

There was a laurel-hedged walk which curved round the secret garden, starting at the door and winding its way forward from there. One morning, about a week after his discovery of the key, he determined to start the day with a walk around the path, for he had heard a low, peculiar whistling sound and wanted to find out what it was.

As he turned round the first curve, he saw a very strange thing indeed. He quite caught his breath as he stopped to look at it. A man was sitting under a tree, with his back against it, playing on a rough wooden pipe. He was a rough-and-tumble looking man about John's age. He looked very hale, with grey hair and a rosy glow to his cheeks. And on the trunk of the tree he leaned against, a brown squirrel was clinging and watching him, and from behind a bush nearby a cock pheasant was delicately stretching his neck to peep out, and quite near him were two rabbits sitting up and sniffing with tremulous noses—and actually it appeared as if they were all drawing near to watch him and listen to his strange low call.

When he saw John he held up his hand and spoke to him in a voice almost as low.

"Don't move," he said. "It'd frighten them." John remained motionless. The man began to rise from the ground. He moved so slowly that it scarcely seemed as though he were moving at all, but at last he stood on his feet and then the squirrel scampered back up into the branches of his tree, the pheasant withdrew his head and the rabbits dropped on all fours and began to hop away, though not at all as if they were frightened.

"I'm Gregory Lestrade," the man said. "And I think you are John Watson?"

He did not speak to him as if they had never seen each other before but as if he knew him quite well.

“Well, that's... yes. How do you know?” asked John in awkward mystification.

“Oh, everyone knows about you.”

At that, John was silent. He found it hard to credit.

“How did you do that? With the animals?”

Gregory laughed. "I've lived on the moor with the animals for so long. I've watched the birds break shell and come out and fledge and learn to fly and begin to sing, till I think I'm one of them."
Sometimes I think perhaps I'm a bird, or a fox, or a rabbit, or a squirrel, or at least that I should have been." He laughed again.

"How did you enter this garden?" John asked. He felt almost as if he were speaking to a ghost, so astonished was he by Gregory’s sudden appearance.

Gregory looked at him with his laughing, crinkled eyes. “Oh, there’s no wall high enough to keep me out. Everything on these moors is my business – that’s what I say. I stick my nose in everywhere.” He winked cheerily.

John nodded. This seemed eminently credible.

"And this garden!" Gregory continued, "it has always been a queer, pretty place! It's like as if a body was in a dream. I do believe that’s why he loved it so. I come to look in on it every few years."

John was silent again, wondering to whom Gregory had referred, and whether or not he dared to enquire.

"It was a shame to lock it up," he said at last, in a whisper.

“And why was it locked up?” John dared at last to ask.

Gregory winced. "We must talk low," he said, "or some one'll hear us over the wall and wonder what's to do in here."

"Oh! Of course," said John lowly. He was too used to being alone.

Without answering John’s question, Gregory looked about him again. "The nests will be here come springtime," he said. "It'll be the safest nesting place in England. No one ever coming near and tangles of trees and roses to build in. I wonder all the birds on the moor don't build here."

"Will there be roses?" John whispered. "Can you tell? I thought perhaps they were all dead." His disappointment at having his private kingdom disturbed by another was quickly disappearing in the face of Gregory’s kindly, friendly chatter.

"Dead? No! Not them—not all of them!" he answered. "Look here!"

He stepped over to the nearest tree—an old, old one with gray lichen all over its bark, but upholding a curtain of tangled sprays and branches. He took a thick knife out of his pocket and opened one of its blades.

"There's lots of dead wood as ought to be cut out," he said. "And there's a lot of old wood, but it made some new last year. This here's a new bit," and he touched a shoot which looked brownish green instead of hard, dry gray. John touched it himself in a reverent way.

"That one?" he said. "Is that one quite alive quite?"

Gregory curved his wide smiling mouth.

"It's as alive as you or me," he said.

"I'm glad," John whispered heartily.

They walked from tree to tree and from bush to bush. Gregory carried his knife in his hand and showed him things which he thought wonderful.
"They've run wild," he said, "but the strongest ones has fair thrived on it. See here!" and he pulled down a thick gray, dry-looking branch. "A body might think this was dead wood, but I don't believe it is—down to the root. I'll cut it low down and see."

He knelt and with his knife cut the lifeless-looking branch through, not far above the earth.

"There!" he said exultantly. "I told you so. There's green in that wood yet. Look at it."

John was down on his knees before he spoke — heedless of his injured leg — gazing with all his might.

"When it looks a bit greenish and juicy like that, it's alive," he explained. "There's a big root here that all this live wood sprung out of, and if the old wood's cut off and it's dug round, and took care of there'll be—" he stopped and lifted his face to look up at the climbing and hanging sprays above him — "there'll be a fountain of roses here this summer."

Gregory seemed to have nothing better to do with his day than to show an invalid around a garden. He never mentioned John's cane at all, and matched his pace to John's quite naturally.

But after a time, John grew curious. "Do you work for Mr. Holmes?" he asked.

"Mycroft?" he scoffed. "Not I, no."

He was the first person John had met who spoke Mr. Holmes's name with anything less than reverence. "Are you not a gardener, then?"

"By habit and long practice only, not vocation. I'm not much of anything, really. I've cottage on the moor, and few needs and fewer wants. I come and go as I please."

They went from bush to bush and from tree to tree. Gregory was very strong and clever with his knife and knew how to cut the dry and dead wood away, and could tell when an unpromising bough or twig had still green life in it. In the course of half an hour John thought he could tell too.

They were working industriously round one of the biggest standard roses when Gregory caught sight of something which made him utter an exclamation of surprise.

"Why!" he cried, pointing to the grass a few feet away. "Who did that there?"

It was one of John's own little clearings round the pale green points.

"I did it," said John.

"I thought you didn't know anything about gardening!" he exclaimed.

"I don't," John answered, "but they were so little, and the grass was so thick and strong, and they looked as if they had no room to breathe. So I made a place for them. I don't even know what they are."

Gregory went and knelt down by them, smiling his wide smile.

"You were exactly right," he said. "A gardener couldn't have done better. They'll grow now like the devil. They're crocuses and snowdrops, and these here are narcissuses," turning to another patch, "and here's daffodils. Ah! They will be a sight."

He looked from one clearing to another.
"You’ve done a lot of work," he said, looking him over.

John flushed. “I’m getting better. I was injured, you see, in...” He paused, clenching his left fist, and looked away.

“In the mutiny,” he finally finished. It was the first time he had spoken of it, even indirectly. “But I’m stronger than I was. I don’t feel tired at all anymore – not when I’m here.”

"It's rare good for you," Gregory said, nodding his head.

He was working all the time he was talking and John was following him and helping him as he could.

"There's a lot of work to do here!" he said once, looking about quite exultantly.

"Would you… Would you like to come again and help me to do it?" John asked. “I can dig and pull up weeds, but I don’t know what I’m doing – not really – and as you are so knowledgeable…” He trailed off.

"I'll come every day if you want me to, rain or shine," Gregory answered stoutly. "It's the best fun I’ll ever have—shut in here and wakening up a garden. I’ve tools, too. A spade and rake and a fork and hoe. A trowel, too. We’ll get on well.

John smiled, but then suddenly a thought struck him. “I couldn’t offer you wages,” he said hesitantly. “I’ve got none myself.”

Gregory cut him off with a wave of his hand. “I’d take no wages, for this is not a job. We’ll be great friends, shall we? And we’ll bring this garden to life together.”

He began to walk about, looking up in the trees and at the walls and bushes with a thoughtful expression.

"I wouldn't want to make it look like a gardener's garden, all clipped and spick and span, would you?" he said. "It's nicer like this with things running wild, and swinging and catching hold of each other."

John nodded, relieved.

Gregory stood, rubbing his head with a rather puzzled look. "It seems like someone besides the robin must have been in it since it was shut up ten years ago."

"But the door was locked and the key was buried," said John. "No one could get in."

"That's true," he answered. "It's a queer place. Seems to me as if there'd been a bit of pruning done here and there, later than ten years ago. And I didn't do it, that's for certain. I've no more than poked my nose in once or twice."

"But how could it have been done?" said John.

Gregory was examining a branch of a standard rose and he shook his head. "Aye! how could it!" he murmured. "With the door locked and the key buried."
Next Week: "I am Sherlock Holmes."
"I Am Sherlock Holmes"

Chapter Summary

A fateful meeting, late at night.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John Watson came in from the garden that day smiling. His life had taken a great turn, although he did not yet know it, and he fell asleep looking forward to the morning.

But you never know what the weather will do in Yorkshire, particularly in the springtime. He was awakened in the night by the sound of rain beating with heavy drops against his window. It was pouring down in torrents and the wind was wuthering round the corners and in the chimneys of the huge old house. John sat up in bed and frowned. He did not know if he could bear another stretch of days kept indoors by the rain.

He threw himself back on his pillow and buried his face. He could not go to sleep again. The mournful sound of the wind and rain kept him awake. How it wuthered and how the big raindrops poured down and beat against the pane! How the thunder crashed!

He had been lying awake turning from side to side for about an hour, when suddenly something made him sit up in bed and turn his head toward the door, listening.

"It isn't the wind now," he said in a whisper. "That isn't the wind. And it's not thunder. It is different. It is coming from inside the house."

The door of his room was slightly ajar and the sound came down the corridor, a far-off faint sound of objects crashing, smashing, of wailing and shouting. He listened for a few minutes and each minute he became more and more sure. He felt as if he must find out what it was. It seemed even stranger than the secret garden and the buried key, and much more urgent. Who was in such distress, and why would no one offer help? He put his foot out of bed and stood on the floor.

"I am going to find out what it is," he said, "once and for all. Miss Anthea and everyone else can go to the devil!"

There was a candle by his bedside and he took it up and went softly out of the room. He thought he remembered the corners he must turn to find the short corridor with the door covered with tapestry—the one Miss Anthea had come through the day he lost himself. The sound had come up that passage. So he went on with his dim light, almost feeling his way, his heart beating so loud that he fancied he could hear it. The far-off faint raging went on and led him. Sometimes it stopped for a moment or so and then began again with a crash. Was this the right corner to turn? He stopped and thought. Yes it was. Down this passage and then to the left, and then up two broad steps, and then to the right again. Yes, there was the tapestry door.

He pushed it open very gently and closed it behind him, and he stood in the corridor and could hear quite plainly, though it was not loud. A woman's voice was murmuring, and a man's, speaking over her in excited tones. There was a sudden crash, and then silence. It was on the other side of the wall
at his left and a few yards farther on there was a door. He could see a glimmer of light coming from beneath it. The murmur had started up again.

Boldly, he walked to the door and pushed it open, and there he was standing in the room.

It was a big room with ancient, handsome furniture in it. There was a low fire glowing faintly on the hearth and a night light burning by the side of a carved four-posted bed hung with brocade, and on the bed was lying a man, his chest heaving with recent exertion.

John took in the room with amazement. It looked as if it had weathered a hurricane: books lay flung across the floor; newspapers were littered around the large armchair nearly ankle-deep; and a tea tray was up-ended, its contents scattered about the room in many pieces. Paintings had been pulled off the walls and ruined. A tapestry had been spattered with India ink. In all, it was a disaster.

Next, John noticed a smart-looking young woman seated by the hearth, looking toward the man on the bed with apparent trepidation, her chin resting in her hand.

John wondered if he was in a real place or if he had fallen asleep again and was dreaming without knowing it.

The man on the bed had a sharp, delicate face the color of alabaster and he seemed to have eyes too big for it. He had also a lot of dark hair which tumbled over his forehead in heavy curls and made his thin face seem smaller. He looked like a man who had been ill: his brow was covered with a sheen of unhealthy sweat and his striking eyes were red-rimmed and seemed shrunken in.

John stood near the door with his candle in his hand, holding his breath at this unexpected tableau. The woman at the hearth murmured something, rose and crossed to an adjoining door and disappeared.

Then John dared to creep across the room. As he drew nearer, the light attracted the man’s attention and he turned his head on his pillow and stared at him, his eyes opening so wide that they seemed immense.

"Who are you?" he said at last in a half-frightened whisper, almost gasping for breath. "Are you real?"

"I believe I am," John answered, his own whisper sounding half frightened. "Are you?"

They stared and stared and stared. The man had strikingly strange eyes. They were agate gray, and blue, and also green and gold, and they looked too big for his face, with black lashes all round them.

"I… believe I am," he replied after a moment. "I am Sherlock Holmes. Who are you?"

"I am John Watson. Mr. Holmes – Mr. Mycroft Holmes – is my benefactor."

"He is my brother," said the man, looking away at last.

"Your brother!" gasped John. "No one ever told me he had a brother! And living here! Why didn't they?"

"Come closer," Sherlock said, looking back and fixing his strange eyes on John once again.

He came close to the bed and Sherlock put out his hand and touched him.

"You are real, aren't you?" he said. "I see such things in the night. Such terrible and strange and
unreal things. You might be one of them."

"I can pinch you a little if you like, to show you how real I am. For a minute I thought you might be a dream too."

"Where did you come from?" Sherlock asked.

"From my own room. I heard you. I’ve been hearing you for days, now."

Sherlock’s face heated. He flung himself to his feet and began to pace almost violently across the room and back. "Apologies if my distress has endangered your evidently delicate constitution," he said with something approaching a sneer. He picked up a lovely book from the floor, shining with gilt, and heaved it onto the fire with a grunt. "You can go now."

John said nothing. He did not wish to go – not when the man was in such a strange state.

But now the woman had returned, and had gasped in shock to find Sherlock in company. “Oh, no!” she exclaimed, attempting to draw John to the door. “No, you must go! He’s not to see anyone. It’s for his own good – for his health. He’s not yet well. You really must go.”

Still, John was rooted to the spot.

Sherlock turned on him suddenly, peering closely at his face.

“Wait! Was it India or Afghanistan?”

“I beg your pardon?” John asked in astonishment. The woman was now all but tugging on his arm.

“Which was it: India or Afghanistan?”

John blinked. “India. Sorry, how did you—?”

But Sherlock interrupted with a wave of his hand. “Molly!” he bellowed at the woman. “John is staying. Bring coffee!”

The woman’s shoulders slumped in defeat. She did not look pleased, but she turned and headed towards the door, dodging a teacup Sherlock lobbed at her as she went. As she passed John, she murmured in his ear, “Keep him here, at the very least. Please. He cannot leave this room."

John was shocked. He had no wish to be any man’s jailor, but everything had seemed to happen so quickly. Before he could gather his wits to reply, Molly was gone.

“How do you feel about the violin?” Sherlock asked curiously.

John began to feel quite dizzy. “I’m sorry,” he replied. “What do you mean?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “I play the violin when I’m thinking – sometimes rather loudly. Would that disturb you? I would so hate to further inconvenience you.” He tossed a hideously false smile at John.

“How did you know about India? Have you spoken to Anderson about me?”

“I know much more than that – and certainly not from Anderson. I simply deduce facts from what I observe. I know you’re a recent army discharge and that you’ve been invalided home. I know you’ve got no wife and no family to speak of, and that you had no prospects to return to. I know you were excellent in your position, that your potential vastly outweighed your opportunities. And I
know that your injuries, though grave, were less seriously incapacitating than your mental state upon your return home.”

Then it was John’s turn to flush. He looked down at the cane still clasped in his hands.

“I am… amazed,” he said.

Sherlock positively started with shock. “Are you?”

“Of course I am. That was extraordinary; it was quite extraordinary.”

Sherlock said nothing.

And then John smiled. “But wait!” he exclaimed. “If Anderson did not tell you these things, you must be in communication with your brother.”

“I am not,” Sherlock spat back, “nor do I require his disgusting intervention in any of my affairs, intellectual or otherwise.” He spoke with such venom that John was unsurprised when he bent to retrieve the upended tea tray and hurled it again against the far wall.

“How did you know, then?” John asked, thinking his best course to calm the man might be distraction. “If not from Anderson and not from … anyone else?”

Sherlock’s chest was heaving again. He closed his eyes, visibly forcing himself to be still. After a moment or two, he crumpled again to the bed.

Then he began to speak, very quickly and in an almost expressionless monotone: “Your tan lines, your military bearing, these things say recent discharge from service overseas. India is, of course, most likely – especially given your injuries – but Afghanistan was a distinct possibility. You would not be here had you a wife or family or even a career to return to, and Mycroft would never have taken you in were you not exceptional in some way. His benevolence is always in service to his own interests. Ergo, he wishes to recruit you. He only recruits exceptional people. You, therefore, are exceptional – for he is rarely” he gnashed his teeth in rage, “rarely wrong. Your injuries, though severe enough to warrant a discharge, have largely healed, and are in any case eclipsed by the many physical manifestations of a long period of profoundly low spirits to be found upon your person.” He stopped to draw a breath. “Shall I go on?”

John was speechless. Slowly, he shook his head.

Wordlessly, Sherlock dropped his head back on to the bed. Neither man spoke.

It was something of a relief when the door opened and the woman returned with a sturdy coffee pot and two cups – no tray – in her hands. She looked immensely relieved to find Sherlock and John sitting peaceably together, and set about preparing their refreshments.

John cleared his throat. “You arrived not many days ago, I believe?” he asked, striving for normalcy. “Where were you before you came here?”

"London. I was in London. I would never be anywhere else, if I had my way.”

“And why shouldn’t you?”

Sherlock glanced at the woman, Molly, who lowered her gaze. He didn’t answer, quite, but nor did he entirely evade the question.
"I’m not well. At least, my brother is concerned for my health.” He spoke these words in a blustery, antagonistic kind of way, but the next words he spoke were almost whispered — well below the hearing of Molly, who had withdrawn again to her seat by the hearth, although her quick eyes were always upon them. “Sometimes the things I see are so real,” he said. "Sometimes when I open my eyes I don't believe I'm awake."

"We're both awake," said John. He glanced round the room with its high ceiling and shadowy corners and dim fire-light. "It looks quite like a dream, and it's the middle of the night, and everybody in the house is asleep—everybody but us. We are wide awake."

"I don't want it to be a dream," the man said.

“No more do I,” John answered — and to his surprise, the words were true.

“Stay,” Sherlock said in a low voice. “Talk with me a while. Tell me things.”

John moved closer to the bed in order to facilitate this private conversation, sitting down on the cushioned stool. He did not want to go away at all. He wanted to stay in the mysterious hidden-away room and talk to the beautiful man.

"What do you want me to tell you?” he asked.

Sherlock wanted to know many things, but all of his questions surprised John, for they were not the usual questions about India and bland inquiries about life abroad; rather, Sherlock’s questions were all strangely specific: what plants did the rural natives rely upon for healing purposes during the rainy seasons? What types of fiber produced the most comfortable clothing in extreme heat? Did the Company provide its regimental soldiers with boots or shoes? How were the sepoys trained? John answered all these questions and many more and Sherlock lay back on his pillow and listened.

He seemed to like the sound of John’s voice. The violence of his earlier agitation gradually ceded ground to pleasant lassitude. As he went on talking Sherlock listened in a drowsy, interested way. Once or twice John wondered if he were not falling into a doze.

Eventually, he turned to the question that had been present in the back of his mind all night. "What would Miss Anthea do if she found out that I had been here?” he inquired.

"She would inform her employer, my brother, immediately," Sherlock answered lazily. "And then Molly would be fired and I would be sent away. But I don’t care. I am glad you came."

"So am I," said John cautiously, for he had no wish to cause such a calamity.

“Do you know Molly?”

"Not at all. I’ve never seen her before tonight."

Sherlock nodded his head toward the hearth where the woman sat, now nervously knitting. “She works for my brother, but her loyalty is mine. She will not betray my trust, or our secret. You may come at night, when she is my only attendant.”

John’s heart warmed, that this strange and brilliant man should wish to see him again. "I have been here a long time," said John. "Shall I go away now? You should sleep."

"I was almost asleep several times, just now," he admitted.

"Shut your eyes," said John, drawing his footstool closer, "and I will stay awhile."
"I should like that, perhaps," Sherlock said, and suddenly he seemed very young.

Somehow John was sorry for him and did not want him to lie awake and alone. He remembered his own convalescence in India, when he had felt so very alone, and he did not wish such misery on this man. And so he leaned against the bed and took Sherlock’s cool, slim hand in his own.

When he looked at him again his black lashes were lying close against his cheeks, for his eyes were shut and he was fast asleep. So he got up softly, took up his candle and crept away without making a sound.

***

The moor was hidden in mist when the morning came, and the rain had not stopped pouring down. There could be no going out of doors. All morning, he sat before his fire and thought of his two new friends, Gregory and Sherlock; how very different they were from each other, and how strange it was to go from having no friends at all to having two in such a short span of time. His mind returned to the encounter of the night previous. Could it be true that Mycroft Holmes intended to recruit him? To what? Why? And then too, try as he might, he could not puzzle out the nature of Sherlock’s illness. His mind was razor sharp – that much was apparent. Perhaps a form of epilepsy brought on by nervous excitement? The man was clearly prone to overstimulation of the mind. And yet, why should secrecy and isolation be so vital…? He shook his head.

"I wonder," he said slowly to himself, "if it would not do Sherlock good to go out into a garden and watch things growing. It did me good."

He sat and mused before the fire all that long day. It was an agony that so many things had changed for him yet now he was prevented from pursuing any of them. At four o’clock, there was a soft knock at his door. He rose and answered it. To his shock, the instant he had opened the door, the woman Molly pushed forward and slipped inside, shutting the door firmly behind her.

“'I’m sorry,” she stammered, a flush blooming on her cheek. “I mustn’t be seen here. I shouldn’t even know you exist! We are to keep entirely separate from the rest of the household.”

John was puzzled, but demurred politely and motioned her to a chair by the fire.

“'Oh, no! I mustn’t stay. He only asked me give you this, and to ask you to come tonight.” With that, she thrust John’s cane into his hand. “Please be sure you’re not seen,” she whispered, and scurried out again. Her entire visit had taken less than a minute.

John looked at the cane in his hands in shock. He felt as if he were a sleeping man plunged into frigid water and was suddenly gasping awake. He had not noticed the absence of his cane during the long walk back to his room last night, nor had he missed it all day. Perhaps – perhaps he could now manage without it, if he walked slowly and carefully enough? He fell into his armchair, lost in thought.

Eventually, he stood and decisively tucked the cane into the back of his wardrobe. He would try. He would work harder to get better, and he would help Sherlock to do the same. Whatever his illness, it could not be so very grave – he was so very vital and full of life.

The rest of the afternoon seemed interminable.

When at last night fell and the servants began to retire, John prepared for his nocturnal outing. He washed, combed his hair, and changed his jacket, feeling as if he were dressing for an audience with nobility. For all he knew, he reflected, he very well might be.
There was a bright fire on the hearth when he entered Sherlock’s room, and the candles were lit. In the light he saw it was a very beautiful room indeed. Someone had made an effort to clear up the destruction John had seen the night before: the books were tidied away and the newspapers straightened. There were rich colors in the rugs and hangings and the pictures were back on the walls. Everything looked glowing and comfortable even in spite of the night sky and falling rain. Sherlock looked rather like a picture himself. He was wrapped in a velvet dressing-gown and sat on his bed against a big brocaded cushion. He had a red spot on each cheek.

"Come in," he said. "I've been thinking about you all day."

"I've been thinking about you, too," answered John, ducking his head.

"No cane tonight?" Amusement glinted in Sherlock’s eyes.

"No cane," John held up his empty hands.

"Go and tell Molly to come here, would you?" Sherlock said. "She is in the next room."

John went and brought her back. The poor woman was almost trembling; Sherlock evidently had a tremendous effect upon her – but then, he was awfully intimidating, John supposed.

“Molly,” Sherlock began sternly. “I wish us all to be in agreement. You are charged with my care and wellbeing.”

Molly nodded.

“You are also charged with keeping me isolated until such time as my hideous brother deems the precaution unnecessary.”

Molly nodded again, turning quite red.

“I wish to inform you that I will no longer abide by that edict. I am more than content to be isolated from the rest of the household, but John Watson may come and go as he pleases. Do you understand?”

“Yes. But Sherl—”

He cut off her muted protest: “No further discussion is required, Molly.”

And then, seeing her continued discomfort, he rolled his eyes. “Fine. Let us set your little mind at rest, shall we? John: a question for you. Do you have upon your person, in your rooms, or in your power to obtain, any of the following substances: opium, laudanum, cocaine, or hashish?”

John positively boggled at him.

“Did you visit me in my room last night for the purpose of delivering said substances to me?”

John shook his head vigorously, still speechless with shock. He was beginning to believe that was his natural state when in company with Sherlock Holmes.

“Would you seek to obtain such substances on my behalf should I ask, require, or demand you to do so?”

Indignation allowed John to find his voice at last. “Of course not. Never!”

Sherlock turned to Molly. “You see? He is an innocent. Or, if not innocent, he is innocent of this…"
Molly was gazing at John with her intelligent eyes, weighing his character and intentions meticulously. John looked back at her, straightforward and confident.

Finally, she nodded. “Very well, Sherlock. But if you cross me in this – if either of you cross me in this – my wrath will be the least of your worries.”

Somehow, John absolutely believed her.

“Thank you, Molly,” Sherlock drawled. “In return, I’m sure John will do all in his power to act out Mycroft’s ridiculous pantomime. His visits shall be invisible and untraceable. Your position is safe. You can leave us now.”

Molly shook her head. “I cannot entirely abandon my promises to your brother, Sherlock. Your welfare is my responsibility. But I shall take a lamp and sit by the far window with my knitting.” So saying, she withdrew to the alcove by the far window.

The men were as good as alone.

Sherlock found John gazing at him as if he had set him wondering.

"Why do you look at me like that?" he asked him. "What are you thinking about?"

"I am thinking about two things."

"What are they? Sit down and tell me."

"This is the first one," said John quietly, seating himself on the big stool. "Once in India I saw a boy who was a Rajah. He had rubies and emeralds and diamonds stuck all over him. He spoke to his servant just as you speak to Molly. Sherlock, he was a child, and not a pleasant one."

"I shall make you tell me about Rajahs presently," he said, "but first tell me what the second thing was."

“Why have you agreed to this strange arrangement?” He waved his hand vaguely at the room.

Sherlock did not pretend to misunderstand the question. He was silent for several minutes, and John began to fear he had offended him.

And then: “Mycroft,” he answered flatly. He threw himself back upon the bed and spoke up to the canopy, avoiding John’s eyes. “I live in London. I went up as a young man, and it was as if the entire world had opened up to me. John, it was glorious! There was so much to see, so much to learn! I spent days and days in the study of the city and its inhabitants. Days turned to weeks and months; then years. You see, I have a mind that rebels at stagnation. It tears itself to pieces when not put to use. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. But I cannot…” and here he shuddered convulsively – “I cannot tolerate the abyss of blank existence, the unceasing misery of boredom…” He clutched at his hair. “When I say my mind tears itself to pieces, I speak quite literally. It tears apart; I lose myself in it, John. The blackness and the horror and the endless monotony… I require stimulation. I require it as I require air.”

“And that is why you turned to drugging.”

Sherlock nodded. “And that is why. It helped. When I had nothing to pull me out of the black morass
of hopeless boredom, cocaine provided the perfect stimulation. And then, when I could not shut out the swirling, racing, mindless jabbering, opium shut it out for me. It was perfect, John. Quite perfect. And I discovered other substances, too – things that effected my mind in new and interesting ways, things that allowed me to experience entirely new levels of mental activity! John, it was bliss. For a while, it was bliss.”

“And then it wasn’t anymore.” John spoke with certainty. This form of sickness was not unfamiliar to him; he had seen its destructive power too many times in his life.

Sherlock sighed. “As you say. It became… a horror. I won’t bore you with the sordid details. You are a man of the world, and I’m sure you can imagine the result of my activities. Well. You need not imagine. The result is lying before you. I am a mass of misery. I am my mind – I am my mind, John. And I cannot now trust it. The things I see in the night sometimes…” He began to shudder again.

John leaned forward and pressed Sherlock’s hand warmly. He felt honoured to be trusted with this man’s unburdening. Sherlock started, then turned his hand and pressed back. He took a breath.

“I spent some years in this way. It became problematic for my brother, who is a man of some influence with the British government. I became problematic for him. He came to London and offered me an ultimatum. I could return to Holmes Manor and submit myself to this forced isolation until such time as he determines that I am free of the pull of the drugs (or until I die of the effects of sudden stopping and solve his problem permanently), or I could be locked up in an asylum for an undetermined length of time. Forever, probably. He has the power and the gold to do it, John. This is intolerable, but that would be… worse.”

John’s heart clenched in sympathy for the distressed man before him, but he could not think of a single thing he could say that would provide comfort.

“I can see that, yes.”

They sat in silence again. John had seen sturdy men brought low by the easy escape of substances like the ones Sherlock apparently favoured, but he had seen them recover from these terrible habits, as well. He knew it could be done. He thought Sherlock could do it, if anyone could. He just needed help – help and distraction from the clamour of his mind.

“Tell me about the outside,” Sherlock asked, turning on his elbow to look at him. “Tell me about your walks in the garden.”

"It's the most beautiful place," John said softly. "It's so alive. Thousands of plants grow in it, and it smells like honey. There are thousands of little creatures all busy building nests and making holes and burrows and chippering or singing or squeaking to each other. It's their world, really."

"I never see anything at all anymore," said Sherlock restlessly. He looked like a person listening to a new sound in the distance and wondering what it was.

"You can't if you stay in your room," said John.

John was silent for a minute and then he said something bold.

"You might come—sometime."

Sherlock moved as if he were startled. “You would wish that?”

“I would.”
“The risk is considerable. You never know when a servant might be sneaking about. It could be dangerous.”

John winked. “I think we could manage an outing or two, just between ourselves?” He felt his blood singing in his veins, and started to laugh at the ridiculousness of two grown men planning illicit midnight garden parties.

Sherlock looked surprised, and then joined in, bursting out in deep, heart-felt chuckles.

Just then, Molly approached, looking worried. "I am afraid there has been too much excitement today, Sherlock. Excitement is not good for you now. Perhaps it’s time for John to go.”

"I should be excited if John kept away," exclaimed Sherlock, his eyes beginning to look dangerously sparkling. "I am better. He makes me better.” And then, more lowly, he added something that sounded almost like a plea: “I want to forget. He makes me forget.”

Molly looked troubled, but there was evidently nothing to be done.

"He does look rather brighter," ventured John.

Molly did not look happy, but she withdrew again, giving a puzzled glance at the man sitting on the large stool.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter contains several phrases taken from Conan Doyle.
Nest Building

Chapter Summary

"It's part of the springtime, this nest-building is. I warrant it's been going on in the same way every year since the world began. The birds have their way of thinking and doing things and a body had better not meddle. You can lose a friend in springtime easier than any other season."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After another week of rain the high arch of blue sky appeared again and the sun which poured down was quite hot. Though there had been no chance to see either the secret garden or Gregory, John had enjoyed himself very much. The week had not seemed long. He slept late into each morning so that he might spend many hours of each night with Sherlock in his room, talking about India or gardens or anything at all that came to their minds. They went over the substantial library of books with which Sherlock’s room was furnished and often passed time silently reading together, pausing to discuss points of interest. When he was amused and interested, Sherlock scarcely looked unwell at all, John thought. He seemed almost happy. The trick, he was discovering, was not to allow Sherlock’s exceptional mind to turn in on itself, but to keep it always engaged in external pursuits in accordance with its natural inclination.

And this was not onerous for John – indeed, it was a pleasure. Sherlock astonished him daily with extraordinary observations and fascinating tales that led their conversations in unexpected and delightful directions. John felt as if he had been starving all his life and now he was devouring his first true meal.

Even the cautious Molly was won over by the healthful changes she observed in her charge. "There's no saying you've not been a sort of blessing to us," she said to John one day. "He's not had a serious episode or a setback since you became friends."

In his talks with Sherlock, John had tried to be very cautious about his secret garden. He did not know how Sherlock would react to it at all, and he still felt somehow shy and private about it. Would the garden be as prized if it were no longer his secret to keep? Then again, he already shared the secret with Gregory, and far from diminishing the garden’s value, it had doubled it. Perhaps sharing the secret with Sherlock would treble it! And yet, Sherlock could be so very cold and strange at times. If he took a dislike to Gregory, John was not sure he could bear the disharmony.

He could not resolve in his mind what to do.

One night, as he sat with Sherlock pretending to read but really thinking over the matter, he decided to test the waters. “I met a man out in the gardens the other day,” he said to Sherlock as if in passing. “A friend.”

Sherlock’s eyes snapped up from his book and fastened on John’s face. “Did you? Who?”

“His name is Gregory. He has a cottage on the moor and he seems to know everything there is to know about gardening and animals and the like. He charms the birds right down from the sky! It is
the most extraordinary thing.”

“Ah! Gregory. I know him, or I did as a boy. He was — kind. He was kind when we were boys, and I’ve no doubt at all that he’s a kind man still. I have not seen him for many years.”

And John felt that he need not fear about Gregory. Pleased, he returned to his book, but Sherlock’s attention remained fixed upon John’s face for a long time afterwards.

On that first morning when the sky was blue again John wakened very early – and that though he had sat up very late with Sherlock. The sun was pouring in slanting rays through the blinds and there was something so joyous in the sight of it that he jumped out of bed and dashed to the window. He drew up the blinds and opened the window itself and a great waft of fresh, scented air blew in upon him. The moor was blue and the whole world looked as if something magical had happened to it. There were tender little fluting sounds here and there and everywhere, as if scores of birds were beginning to tune up for a concert. John put his hand out of the window and held it in the sun.

"It's warm—warm!" he said. He leaned out of the window as far as he could, breathing big breaths and sniffing the air until he laughed aloud.

He ate his breakfast and dressed in no more than five minutes, then all but flew downstairs. He sprang across the step with one bound, and there he was standing on the grass, which seemed to have turned green overnight, and with the sun pouring down on him and warm sweet wafts about him and the fluting and twittering and singing coming from every bush and tree. He clasped his hands for pure joy and looked up in the sky and it was so blue and pink and pearly and white and flooded with springtime light that he felt as if he might burst. He went around the shrubs and paths straight towards the secret garden.

"It is all different already," he said. "The grass is greener and things are sticking up everywhere and things are uncurling and green buds of leaves are showing. This afternoon I am sure Gregory will come."

The long warm rain had done strange things to the herbaceous beds which bordered the walk by the lower wall. There were things sprouting and pushing out from the roots of clumps of plants and there were actually here and there glimpses of royal purple and yellow unfurling among the stems of crocuses. Months before, John would not have seen how the world was waking up, but now he missed nothing.

When he had reached the place where the door hid itself under the ivy, he was startled by a curious loud sound. It was the caw—caw of a crow and it came from the top of the wall, and when he looked up, there sat a big glossy-plumaged blue-black bird, looking down at him very wisely indeed. It made him a little nervous, but the next moment it spread his wings and flapped away across the garden. John rather hoped it was not going to stay inside and he pushed the door open wondering if it would. When he got fairly into the garden he saw that it probably did intend to stay because it had alighted on a dwarf apple-tree and under the apple-tree was lying a little reddish animal with a bushy tail, and both of them were watching the stooping body and slate-grey head of Gregory, who was kneeling on the grass working hard.

John crossed the grass to him.

"Gregory!" he cried out. "You’re here so early! The sun has only just risen."

Gregory got up himself, laughing and glowing, and tousled; his eyes like a bit of the sky.

"Ha!" he said. "I was up long before the sun. How could anyone have stayed abed! The world’s all
fair begun again this morning. It's working and humming and scratching and piping and nest-building and breathing out scents, till you've got to be out in it! When the sun did come up, the moor went mad for joy! I came straight here. I couldn't have stayed away. Why, the garden was lying here waiting!

John put his hands on his chest. He felt as if something inside him was cracking open.

Seeing Gregory talking to a stranger, the little bushy-tailed animal rose from its place under the tree and came to him, and the rook, cawing once, flew down from its branch and settled quietly on his shoulder.

"This is the little fox cub," he said, rubbing the little reddish animal's head. "It's named Toby. And this here's Soot. Soot flew across the moor with me the morning and Toby came too, running as if the hounds had been after him. They both felt same as I did."

Neither of the creatures looked as if he were the least afraid of John. When Gregory began to walk about, Soot stayed on his shoulder and Toby trotted quietly close to his side.

"See here!" said Gregory. "See how these have pushed up, and these and these! And oh! Look at these here!"

He threw himself upon his knees and John went down beside him. They had come upon a whole clump of crocuses burst into purple and orange and gold, and John’s heart gave a leap of pure and uncomplicated happiness just to see them.

"It is a shame that people are so different from plants," John mused.

Gregory looked puzzled but smiled. "I have never found that to be so."

They went from one part of the garden to another and found so many wonders that they were obliged to remind themselves that they must whisper or speak low. Gregory showed John swelling leafbuds on rose branches which had seemed dead. He showed him ten thousand new green points pushing through the mould. They put their eager noses close to the earth and sniffed its warmed springtime breathing; they dug and pulled and laughed low with rapture until John’s hair was as tumbled as Gregory’s and his cheeks were almost as poppy red as his.

There was every joy on earth in the secret garden that morning, and in the midst of them came a delight more delightful than all, because it was more wonderful. Swiftly something flew across the wall and darted through the trees to a close grown corner, a little flare of red-breasted bird with something hanging from its beak. Gregory stood quite still and put his hand on John’s arm almost as if they had suddenly found themselves laughing in a church.

"We must not stir," he whispered. "We must not scarce breathe. I knew he was mate-hunting when I saw him last. It's our robin. He's building his nest. He'll stay here if we don't scare him." They settled down softly upon the grass and sat there without moving.

"We mustn't seem as if we’re watching him too closely," said Gregory. "He'd be out with us for good if he got the notion we were interfering. He'll be a good bit different till all this is over, shyer, and readier to take things ill. We must keep still a bit. Then when he's got used to seeing us I'll chirp a bit and he'll know we'll not be in his way."

They sat together, wonderfully still, and when Gregory spoke again he dropped his voice to such a softness that it was curious that John could hear him at all, but he could.

"It's part of the springtime, this nest-building is," he said. "I warrant it's been going on in the same
way every year since the world began. They've got their way of thinking and doing things and a body had better not meddle. You can lose a friend in springtime easier than any other season."

"If we talk about him I can't help looking at him," John said as softly as possible. "We must talk of something else. There is something I want to tell you," he said, for a plan was forming in his mind.

"He'll like it better if we talk of something else," agreed Gregory. "What is it you've got to tell me?"

"Well—do you know about Sherlock Holmes?" he whispered, testing the waters.

Gregory turned his head to look at him. "What do you know about him?" he asked.

"I've seen him. He's at the Manor, but he's keeping to his rooms until he's—. Until his brother judges him well. I have been to talk to him, quite secretly, every night this week. He wants me to come. He says I'm making him forget about being poorly," answered John.

Gregory looked actually relieved as soon as the surprise died away from his face.

"I am glad of that," he exclaimed. "I'm very glad. It makes me easier."

"How so?" asked John, surprised.

Gregory shrugged. "We were boys together, weren't we?" he asked rhetorically. "We grew up playing together. A fellow could see, even then, that he would grow into an exceptional man—truly exceptional. But I do not think he has ever been happy. A person worries, is all. I'm glad he knows you. I'm glad he's home, though I never thought I'd see him back."

Without breaking any of Sherlock's confidences, John told Gregory as much as he could: only that Sherlock had grown ill in London, and that his brother had brought him back him to Holmes Manor to recover in the utmost privacy and retirement. He added his own misgivings of the extremity of Sherlock's enforced isolation.

Gregory nodded. "I've never known a locked room or a life bereft of companionship to cure a single thing. There's no reasoning with Mycroft, though—not where his brother is concerned."

The fox was lying on the grass close by him, looking up to ask for a pat now and then, and Gregory bent down and rubbed his neck softly and thought a few minutes in silence. Presently he lifted his head and looked round the garden.

"When first we got in here," he said, "it seemed like everything was gray. Look round now and tell me if you don't see a difference."

John looked and caught his breath a little.

"The gray wall is changing!" he exclaimed softly. "It is as if a green mist were creeping over it. It's almost like a green gauze veil."

"Aye," said Gregory. "And it'll be greener and greener till the gray's all gone. Can you guess what I was thinking?"

John shook his head, but hope rose in his chest.

"I was thinking that if Sherlock was out here he wouldn't be dwelling on his illness; he'd be watching for buds to break on the rose-bushes, and he'd likely be healthier," explained Gregory. "I was wondering if we could ever get him in the humor to come out here and work the garden with us."
John smiled. "I've been wondering that myself. I've thought of it almost every time I've talked to him," he said. "But I've wondered how we could bring him here without any one seeing us. It would have to be at night, after the servants have gone to bed. It must be quite secret, you understand."

Gregory scratched Toby's back.

"It'd be good for him, I'll warrant," he said. "Better than any medicine and better than any doctor."

John nodded. "I think so, too. He hasn’t been outdoors in ages, and he asks me about the gardens so often. I've never told him about our garden," John added quickly, “but if you are agreeable, I would like to.”

"Yes, do! And we'll have him out here sometime for sure," said Gregory cheerfully. "If we wait until nightfall we’ll manage it well enough. Have you noticed how the robin and his mate have been working while we've been sitting here? Look at him perched on that branch wondering where it'd be best to put that twig he's got in his beak."

He made one of his low whistling calls and the robin turned his head and looked at him inquiringly, still holding his twig.

"Wherever you put it," he said, "it'll be all right. You knew how to build that nest before you came out of the egg. Get on with it, lad. You've got no time to lose."

"I do like to hear you talk to him!" John laughed.

Gregory laughed too and went on talking.

They found a great deal to do that day, and worked steadily together for many hours.

The afternoon was even lovelier and busier than the morning had been. Already nearly all the weeds were cleared out of the garden and most of the roses and trees had been pruned or dug about. Gregory had brought a spade of his own, and by this time it was plain that though the lovely wild place was not likely to become a "gardener's garden" it would be a wilderness of growing things before the springtime was over.

"There'll be apple blossoms and cherry blossoms overhead," Gregory said, working away with all his might. "And there'll be peach and plum trees in bloom against the walls, and the grass'll be a carpet of flowers."

The little fox and the rook were as happy and busy as they were, and the robin and his mate flew backward and forward like tiny streaks of lightning. Sometimes the rook flapped his black wings and soared away over the tree-tops in the park. Each time he came back and perched near Gregory and cawed several times as if he were relating his adventures, and Gregory talked to him just as he had talked to the robin. Once when Gregory was so busy that he did not answer him at first, Soot flew on to his shoulders and gently tweaked his ear with his large beak. When John needed to rest, Gregory sat down with him under a tree and took his pipe out of his pocket smoked quietly.

"You're a good bit stronger than you were," Gregory said once. "You're beginning to look quite well."

John was glowing with exercise and good spirits. He smiled and said nothing, for he had grown surprisingly fond of his life at Holmes Manor, and although he knew it could not be permanent, he had no wish yet to consider how things might change when his convalescence was complete.

The sun was beginning to set and sending deep gold-colored rays slanting under the trees when they
"It'll be fine tomorrow," said Gregory. "I'll be at work by sunrise."

"So will I," said John. He planned to see Sherlock for the first part of the night, and then sleep for a few hours before morning.

But when John at last returned to his room, his whole body ached with delicious fatigue. Even as he ate his dinner, his eyes drooped and his head bobbed. He barely managed to undress before he stumbled to his bed and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

He awoke with a start almost twelve hours later to the sun streaming in his window and the entire beautiful day before him. As he dressed, he thought of Sherlock with a pang. The truth was, he missed him—missed him with a bone-deep ache that caught him by surprise—and that though it had been scarcely more than a day since he had seen him last, and less than a fortnight since he had first met him.

There was nothing for it, though, but to wait patiently for the night. He must not allow himself to fall asleep tonight, he told himself sternly.

And so, he worked steadily and happily through the day, side by side with Gregory, but he was more careful than he had been not to overtax himself, and to pause for a pleasant mid-day rest under a gnarled oak while Gregory sat and smoked a pipe.

When John returned to his room that evening, the first thing he saw was an envelope propped up on his mantle with his name scrawled across it. He smiled, for it could be from no one but Sherlock. Eagerly, he tore open the envelope.

_Dear John,_

_Your disregard is unacceptable. I expect to see you in my room tonight._

_Sherlock_

John’s lips pinched themselves together. The terse, imperious tone of Sherlock’s order (for this was certainly an order) put his back up. He longed to see Sherlock, but he never had been of the disposition to be ordered about like a child. He was master of himself—surely Sherlock could not imagine otherwise!

Sherlock was not on in his chair by the fire when he went into his room. He was lying flat on his back in bed and he did not turn his head toward John as he came in. This was a bad beginning and John marched up to him with his stiffest military manner.

"What are you doing in bed?" he said.

"I did get up _last night_ when I thought you were coming," he answered, without looking at him. "Tonight, I didn’t see the point. Why didn't you come?"

"I was working all day in the garden with Gregory," said John, “and I exhausted myself. I fell asleep right after dinner, despite my very best efforts.”

Sherlock frowned and condescended to look at him.

"I'll have Mycroft bar him from the property if your work with him stops you from coming to talk with me," he said carelessly.

John’s vague irritation with this prickly reception was growing quickly into a fine rage. It was no less
violent for all that it was carefully contained. He could rage without making a noise; he just grew thunderous and looked away and clenched his fist and said little.

"You don’t control me, Sherlock," he retorted, “and I’m not a child to be bidden. I’ll pass my time in the way I choose.”

"Your very life is in the hands of my brother," Sherlock sneered. “Any agency you believe yourself to hold is entirely fictitious. I do hope you realize.”

A muscle in John’s jaw twitched. "I can choose to leave this room immediately. I can choose not to return," he said tightly.

They glared at each other. If they had been entirely well they would have sprung at each other and had a rough-and-tumble fight. As it was, they did the next thing to it.

"You are entirely selfish!" spat Sherlock.

"And what of you?" said John. "You're more selfish than anyone!"

"I'm not!" snapped Sherlock. "I'm not as selfish as your dear Gregory is! He keeps you playing in the dirt when he knows I am here waiting, alone. He's selfish, if anyone is!"

John’s eyes flashed fire.

"He's been kind to me," he said. “He was kind when no one else was, and I will not hear him denigrated!”

"Kind!" Sherlock sneered ferociously. "He's a common cottager off the moor! I should hope he’s kind – for kindness is all he can afford."

"He's a thousand times better than you!" John shouted, for he was very tired indeed and his temper was beginning to get the better of him.

At that, Sherlock turned his head on his pillow and shut his eyes.

"Get out of the room" he said coldly.

"I'm going," John replied. And he left.

He marched out of the door and closed it behind him, and there to his great astonishment he found Molly standing as if she had been listening and, more amazing still—she was laughing. John simply stood and gazed at her as she stood giggling into her handkerchief.

"What are you laughing at?" he asked her.

"At you two," she said. "It's the best thing that could happen to that stubborn, childish thing to have someone to stand up to him that's as stubborn as himself;” and she laughed into her handkerchief again. "I daresay you will be the saving of him."

They both jumped at the sound of a tray being overturned within the room. Molly sobered and sighed a little. She went into the room, closing the door behind her.

John went back to his room not feeling at all as he had felt when he had come in from the garden. He was cross and disappointed but not at all sorry for the things he had said to Sherlock. He had looked forward to telling him all about his plans for outings to the secret garden, but now he was too cross. He felt so angry and unrelenting that for a few minutes he almost forgot about Gregory and the green
veil creeping over the world and the soft wind blowing down from the moor.

But as he sat, the memory of the breeze and the sky and the sweet smell of growing things came over him once again, and he began to think of how it must feel to be shut up inside against one’s will when such lovely things were happening outside.

“Perhaps Sherlock has been thinking too much,” John thought to himself. “Perhaps he spent all last night waiting for me, and thinking terrible things, and wishing for something to calm his mind, and having nothing, and what if it set his mind roiling, as he says it sometimes does?”

He looked down at the carpet, thinking.

“Perhaps, just perhaps, I will go and see—if he wants me—early in the morning. Very early, before the servants stir. Perhaps he'll try to throw his pillow at me, but—I think—I'll go.”

He was very tired. As he laid his head on the pillow he murmured to himself: “I'll go to see him. I'll rise very early. I'll go long before sun-up.”

Hours later, John startled awake. All was dark and silent—but something had woken him from his deep and dreamless sleep. What could it have been? He strained his ears, but there was nothing. Even the wind on the moors had died to the gentlest breeze; the birds and insects were muted. His room felt airless.

Just then he heard feet almost running down the corridor. He rose up from his bed just as his door burst open and Molly tumbled into the room. She was not laughing now by any means. She even looked rather pale.

"He's worked himself into hysterics," she said in a great hurry. "He hasn’t slept in two days! He'll do himself harm. I can’t do anything with him. You come and try, please. He likes you."

"He turned me out of his room!" said John doubtfully, but Molly’s discomposure worried him.

"You have the right humor for it," she pleaded. "You can scold him. Give him something new to think of. Do come, please, as quick as ever you can. I'm afraid of what he might do to himself, or that he will run, or wake the household, and then it’s the asylum for certain for him." She was almost sobbing.

John’s decision was made in an instant. He flew along the corridor and the nearer he got to Sherlock’s room, the greater his fear – for the silence was complete and it was terrible. By the time he reached the door, all his anger was forgotten and he felt only fear and tenderness for the troubled man within.

He opened the door. At first, he could not see Sherlock at all. Molly pointed to a dark corner in the furthest recesses of the room. There, at last, was Sherlock, huddled on the floor with his knees drawn up and his arms wrapped around himself as if he were physically holding himself together. His thin body rocked back and forth, back and forth, at a frantic pace, and his skull banged so forcefully into the wall with each movement that John winced to see it.

“Stop!” John almost shouted. "You must stop! You are harming yourself. You are harming yourself!”

"You see?" Molly whispered. “He’s been there for hours. He won’t speak.”

Just then, a deep groan emanated from the distressed man on the floor. Starting up, he seized great handfuls of his hair and pulled dreadfully.

"Stop!" John almost shouted. "You must stop! You are harming yourself. You are harming yourself!”
Sherlock actually almost jumped around, he turned so quickly at the sound of John’s voice. His face looked dreadful, white and red and swollen, and he was gasping and choking. Tears were streaming down his face and he shook all over.

"I can’t stop!" he gasped and sobbed. "I can’t—I can’t!"

"You can!" said John more quietly. “You can. I am here. I will help you.”

And then John did the first thing he could think of, the only thing that made any sense to him in that moment. He pulled Sherlock into his arms and clasped him tightly, trying to still him, to calm him. But Sherlock reared back, shaking his head.

“No, no, no,” he whispered, “I cannot. I cannot be still. Please. This is the only way I can…” He shook his head. He looked quite panicked. “The only way I can fight it,” he finished.

John was not dissuaded. “We will not be still. I promise. I promise, Sherlock.” He felt as if he were approaching a wild horse, poised to kick and run. Slowly, he held out his arms once more, and Sherlock hesitantly came forward, his eyes wide and wary. This time, though, instead of attempting to hold Sherlock still, John took his lead, and followed his movements. Together, they began to rock, and gradually – very gradually – John’s slower, comforting rhythm overtook Sherlock’s more manic, spasmodic pace.

It took an hour or more, but Sherlock calmed within the circle of John’s arms. John found that he was whispering into Sherlock’s ear, foolish reassurances and endearments that should have felt foreign on his tongue, but somehow did not. “There, now. There now. Breathe deeply with me. Good. Yes. That’s lovely. You’re lovely. Another, now. Good.” And on it went.

When Sherlock was at last breathing normally again, John dared to lead him to a nearby settee. Sherlock sat easily. He seemed dazed now, and disoriented. He would not release his grasp on John’s dressing gown, so John sat down beside him.

“John?”

“Yes, Sherlock. Yes, I am here.”

“What is this horror?” he asked in a trembling voice. “When will it cease to plague me?”

John shrugged. “It will release you once it has run its course. You have abused your body and your mind for many years; the poison causes this pain as it leaves you. It makes you weak for a time. But it will pass. You are not the first, nor will you be the last, to weather it. It will pass. It always passes.”

“Do you promise me this?”

“I do.”

“What is your evidence?”

John smiled to himself, that even in the midst of a nervous attack, Sherlock would require empirical evidence for his comfort.

“I have seen it before, Sherlock. Many men in India fall prey to the lure of the poppy, and I have seen how the withdrawal progresses. It will leave you weakened for a time, and susceptible to nerves.” And then John took a very great leap. “I have felt something similar myself, you know. After… after the Mutiny. After the attack. My mind was not always my own. I understand that terror.”
Sherlock took a deep, shuddering breath and nodded.

"I am selfish, John" he whispered. "You were quite correct, before. You see, there has never been anyone worth thinking about, other than myself. I don't have friends. I mean to say, I never have before—not really. And I find—I don't know how to keep one."

John grunted in surprise. "You needn't do anything at all, Sherlock. You have me. A row won't change that. You have me."

The episode had passed and Sherlock was weak and exhausted. This perhaps made him feel gentle. He put out his hand a little toward John, and John met him half-way with his hand, so that it was a sort of making up.

"I wish—I want to go out with you, John," he said, "into the fresh air of the gardens. I should like to go out with you, and—and with Gregory, if he will come."

John squeezed his hand. Something in his chest had seized up earlier that night when he had quarreled with Sherlock—now it felt very warm and loose.

Molly remade Sherlock's tumbled bed and shook and straightened the pillows while he and John sat together on the settee. Then she made him lie down and gave him a cup of beef tea and gave a cup to John as well, who really was very glad of it. And then she turned to John gratefully.

"You must go back and get your sleep as well," she said. "He'll drop off after a while, and I will be here with him."

But Sherlock's hand pulled John's gently and he turned his tired eyes on him appealingly.

"I will stay," John said. "You can rest, Molly, if you like."

"Well," said she, with an attempt at reluctance. "If he doesn't go to sleep in half an hour you must call me."

"Very well," answered John.

In a minute, she had gone to her adjoining room and as soon as she was gone Sherlock pulled John's hand close again.

John looked at his poor tired face and swollen eyes and his heart pounded painfully in his chest.

"Shut your eyes," he whispered.

Sherlock closed his eyes and lay quite still and John held his hand and began to speak very slowly and in a very low voice.

"One night, Sherlock—one night very soon, I am going to take you out of this room, and out of this house, and into a secret garden that I know. This garden has grown all into a lovely tangle. The roses have climbed and climbed and climbed until they hang from the branches and walls and creep over the ground—almost like a strange gray mist. Some of them have died but many are alive and when the summer comes there will be curtains and fountains of roses. The ground is full of daffodils and snowdrops and lilies and iris working their way out of the dark. Now the spring has begun—"

The soft drone of his voice was making Sherlock stiller and stiller and he saw it and went on.

"Now they are coming up through the grass—there are clusters of purple crocuses and gold ones—
even now. The leaves are beginning to break out and uncurl, and the gray is changing and a green 
gauze veil is creeping—and creeping over—everything. And the birds are coming to look at it— 
because it is—so safe and still. And perhaps—perhaps—perhaps—" very softly and slowly indeed, 
"the robin has found a mate—and is building a nest."

And Sherlock was asleep.

Chapter End Notes

A Sunday Summer Serial. Next update on Sunday!
In the Garden

Chapter Summary

With one strong, steady, splendid push, the door opened, and Sherlock and John stood side by side at last in the secret garden.

Chapter Notes

So sorry about the lack of update last Sunday! I was mired in a slight writerly mental breakdown, haha. But I worked through it, and here's a nice, long chapter to keep you all going. Just two more chapters to go, and no more delays anticipated! Please note that this chapter contains some very mild period-typical internalized homophobia.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Of course John did not waken early the next morning. He slept late because he was tired, and Anderson had brought and removed his breakfast tray and his lunch tray before he stirred himself from bed.

He did walk out into the gardens that afternoon, but he went slowly, pausing often to examine a new plant or to gaze up at the cloud-studded sky.

He called in briefly to the secret garden, and only to explain to Gregory, who was very much engaged in wrestling with a patch of wild brambles that had overtaken an entire corner, that he was too fatigued to be of much help that day.

“Are you quite well?” Gregory inquired, pausing to turn and inspect the tired man before him.

“ Entirely. I simply did not sleep well last night. I will return tomorrow, when I am better rested.”

Gregory nodded and returned to his task.

John, meanwhile, plodded slowly back to his room. He had not realized how very tired all of his recent exertions, combined with the lack of sleep during the nights, had made him. He spent the remainder of the day in a comfortable fog of dozy noddings, and half-rememberings.

Sherlock was in bed when John arrived late that night. His face was pitifully white and there were dark circles round his eyes. "I'm glad you came," he said. "My head aches and I ache all over. I'm so tired. Have you been out today?"

John went and leaned against his bed. “Just for a turn ’round the kitchen gardens. I’m tired, too. But I wanted to see you.” In fact, John would not have kept away from Sherlock for anything. All day he had been waiting with little patience to satisfy himself as to the man’s wellbeing after the difficult night he had passed. Since the night before, he had rather begun to feel as though there were a thread—gossamer in appearance, but of incredible tensile strength—that connected something in his chest
He observed him closely; Sherlock looked up at him with dull and tired eyes.

"Let us make our plans, then—about the garden," John suggested.

Sherlock’s whole face brightened and a little color came into it. "I believe I thought about it all night. I heard you say something about gray changing into green, and I dreamed I was standing in a place all filled with trembling little green leaves—and there were birds on nests everywhere and they looked so soft and still."

“You heard what I said?” John asked, startled. He had thought Sherlock to be sleeping fast.

“Bits of it. I take things in very imperfectly when I am so unwell. John, I must thank you for your patience during my—my episode last night. If I gave offence, please believe it to have been a consequence of my ill health, and not a natural expression of my regard for you, or for our friendship.” Sherlock seemed greatly ill at ease, and spoke formally, as if reciting the words by rote.

John cleared his throat. “Think no more about it,” he begged. “We are neither of us at our best just now.”

Sherlock shook his head. “Certainly I am not. You are quite superb.”

John flushed. He felt himself to be in danger of revealing an unseemly degree of emotion, so he quickly changed the subject.

"About the garden. Do you still wish to see it?"

“Yes,” answered Sherlock, in a low, fierce voice. “I want to get out of this house and away from these walls and forget that I am living in a bloody prison.”

John nodded. “I know just the place,” he said, smiling. “Listen—”

And he related to him the full story of his garden walks, his acquaintance with the robin, his finding of the buried key, and his first forays into the secret garden.

“That is where you first met Gregory, is it not?” Sherlock asked.

“It is,” John answered, surprised. He did not know how to explain to Sherlock that his life had been so very small and bleak and narrow before finding the garden, or how much it had blossomed since then. He did not know how much of this Sherlock could read in his face, but he suspected the man knew something of it, for he merely nodded mildly.

“I believe I know the garden you speak of, although it never used to be locked. Who did it? Where was the key buried?” he asked as if he were suddenly very much interested.

"It is the garden Mr. Holmes—Mycroft—hates,” said John nervously. "He locked the door. I have not discovered why. No one—no one knew where he buried the key, or why. No one seems to question any strange thing he does."

“No, I would imagine not,” Sherlock replied grimly.

John pursed his lips, but continued, hoping to distract Sherlock again.

“Would you like to see for yourself? Perhaps tomorrow night? I shall ask Gregory. The fact that the garden is abandoned is a fact greatly in our favour, for we can pass many hours there entirely
undetected, so long as we can get there without being seen.”

“Indeed. Well, that shouldn’t be too difficult, given the sorry level of intelligence Mycroft’s household staff displays.”

John snorted.

"Open the window!" Sherlock said suddenly.

And though he rolled his eyes at being so ordered about, John was at the window in a moment and in a moment more it was opened wide and freshness and softness and scents and crickets’ songs were pouring through.

Sherlock lay back with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Yes!" said John. "Lie on your back and draw in long breaths of it. Imagine you’re lying on the moor. Breathe it and breathe it."

John was at his bedside again.

"Things are crowding up out of the earth," he said, carrying on with his strategy of distraction. "And there are flowers uncurling and buds on everything and the green veil has covered nearly all the gray and the birds are in such a hurry about their nests for fear they may be too late that some of them are even fighting for places in the secret garden. And the rose-bushes are coming alive, and there are primroses in the lanes and woods, and the seeds we planted are up, and Gregory has brought the fox and the crow and the squirrels and a new-born lamb."

And then he paused for breath. The new-born lamb Gregory had found three days before lying by its dead mother among the gorse bushes on the moor. It was not the first motherless lamb he had found and he knew what to do with it. He had taken it to his cottage wrapped in his jacket and he had let it lie near the fire and had fed it with warm milk. It was a soft thing with a darling silly baby face and legs rather long for its body. Gregory had carried it over the moor in his arms and its feeding bottle was in his pocket with a squirrel, and when John had sat under a tree with its limp warmness huddled on his lap he had felt as if he were too full of some strange emotion to speak.

He was describing it with great joy and Sherlock was listening and drawing in long breaths of air when Molly entered. She started a little at the sight of the open window.

"Are you not chilly, Sherlock?" she inquired.

"No," was the brusque answer.

John glanced at him warningly, and inclined his head to her, indicating that Sherlock should speak. Sherlock sighed, as if greatly put-upon.

"Molly!" he said imperiously, "John and I will be taking a turn in the gardens tomorrow night."

And he closed his mouth again as if he had quite settled the matter.

Molly gaped at him. “What can you mean?”

“Just what I said. You needn’t worry about us being found out—I have no wish for self-destruction. We shall be exceedingly cautious. John knows a secluded spot in the gardens. We shall walk out, take some air, and be back well before first light. Obviously, you will not report this to my brother.”
But Molly’s eyes were wide with horror. “John!” she said appealingly. “Surely you would not countenance this. The risk to us all is too great! Think of the disaster if you were to be seen—and think how easily it could happen. You must not!”

John shook his head. “This room,” he said, “this prison—it does nothing to aid his recovery.”

“I will do anything that makes me forget the horrors, Molly,” Sherlock added lowly. “I don’t want to remember. When I lie by myself trapped in this room with no distractions and nothing to do, I begin to have terrible longings and pains everywhere and I think of things that make me want to rage. John makes me forget. He makes me better.”

Molly sighed. She shook her head skeptically, but a tiny smile played at the edge of her mouth. John saw it and began to smile, too.

“You two,” she chided. “You’ll be my undoing. In any case, it is only my employment that I am gambling. It is your freedom, Sherlock—your very life. You must promise to take no more risks than necessary, and to be back well before daybreak.”

“I promise.”

“John, you must see that he honours his promise.”

“I certainly shall.”

She nodded, once, and left them, for she had long since decided to trust John implicitly, and no longer supervised their visits.

That night Sherlock slept without once awakening and when he opened his eyes the next day he lay still and smiled without knowing it—smiled because he felt so curiously comfortable. It was actually nice to be awake, and he turned over and stretched his limbs luxuriously. Instead of lying and staring at the wall and wishing he had not awakened, his mind was full of the plans he and John had made yesterday, of pictures of the garden and of Gregory and his wild creatures. It was so much better than thinking of himself.

Meanwhile, John found himself that morning in a secret garden that was fuller with life than he had ever seen it. Gregory had come with the fox and the crow with him again and this time he had also brought two tame squirrels. "I came over on the pony this morning," he said. "He is a good little chap—Jump is! I brought these two in my pockets. This here one he's called Nut and this here other one's called Shell."

When he said "Nut" one squirrel leaped on to his right shoulder and when he said "Shell" the other one leaped on to his left shoulder. John laughed aloud to see them.

When they sat down on the grass with Captain curled at their feet, Soot solemnly listening on a tree and Nut and Shell nosing about close to them, it seemed to John that it would be scarcely bearable to live without such creatures for friends, now that he had found them. He felt a tug on the thread that was wrapped so carefully around his heart, and with that, began to tell Gregory a little of what had passed between himself and Sherlock. He could see that Gregory was moved by Sherlock’s plight.

"Just listen to the birds—the world seems full of 'em—all whistling and piping," he said. "Look at them darting about, and hearken at them calling to each other. Come springtime, it seems like all the world's calling. The leaves are uncurling so you can see 'em—and, my word, the nice smells!" sniffing happily. "And that man shut up indoors and seeing so little that he gets to thinking of things as sets him raging. Eh! We must get him out here—and we must lose no time about it."
"That we must," John said with relief. "Could it be done as soon as tonight? We'll get him to come out once all the servants are abed, and we'll bring him here and show him everything. Remember that secrecy must be our watchword, for Mycroft would be most displeased to hear of such an outing, and the consequences for Sherlock would not be pleasant."

Gregory nodded. "Of course," he replied. "Tonight is just as good as any other. Bring him, then. I will be happy to see him."

John smiled widely and shook him heartily by the hand.

He was careful, for the rest of the day, to act in ways that would excite no suspicion—not that he was noticed, particularly, within the household, but he wished to be as careful as possible, for Sherlock’s sake. He returned to his room for dinner, he spoke briefly with Anderson about the weather predicted for the following day, and then he “retired early” to rest up for the rest of the night.

He woke as the big clock in the hall was striking midnight. The house was silent, and John’s heart leapt in excitement. He all but ran to Sherlock’s room. There was no one in the hall.

A few minutes afterward John was sitting on his stool again telling Sherlock exactly how and when they would walk out so as not to risk being seen by anyone who might chance to look out a window in the bright moonlight. He and Gregory had mapped out a careful path, shrouded as much as possible by shrubbery and trees, that would allow them to approach the door to the secret garden without being seen. Sherlock nodded as he listened, and John knew he need not repeat any information.

These preparations completed, John called to Molly to bring Sherlock’s jacket and scarf.

“Really, John,” Sherlock scoffed. “I don’t require coddling.”

But he did not object when John helped him into his jacket, nor did he say a word when John wound his soft, woolen scarf around his neck.

“There now,” John said, smiling up at him. “Are you quite ready?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, but he grabbed John’s arm and all but pulled him out of the room.

“Be back before dawn—well before dawn!” Molly called fretfully after them.

Not a human creature was stirring as they crept through the halls of the great house. Every servant was long in bed, but they dared not even light a candle, for the penalties for discovery were far too severe to warrant that small convenience. But the moon shone bright and cheerily in through the windows, and led them to the small servants’ entrance beside the kitchen. At last, they were out of doors—Sherlock, for the first time in many weeks. Every gardener and gardener’s lad was gone home for the night, but they wound in and out among the shrubbery and out and round the fountain beds, following their carefully planned route for the mere mysterious pleasure of it. But when at last they turned into the Long Walk by the ivied walls the excited sense of an approaching thrill made them break their silence, if only in whispers.

"This is it," breathed John. "This is where I used to walk up and down and wonder and wonder. And this here is where I found the key."

"Is it?" asked Sherlock, and his eyes began to search the ivy wall with eager curiousness. “But where is the door? It should be here, but I cannot see it!”

John smiled. Quite forgetting a propriety that Sherlock himself seemed to care little for, he took
Sherlock’s hand in his own and led him to the secret door, so grown-over with ivy now as to be almost invisible.

Taking the key from his pocket, he turned the lock. With one strong, steady, splendid push, the door opened, and Sherlock and John stood side by side at last in the secret garden.

Sherlock actually gasped with delight, looking round and round and round as Gregory and John had done. Over walls and earth and trees and swinging sprays and tendrils the fair green veil of tender little leaves had crept, and in the grass under the trees and the gray urns in the alcoves and here and there everywhere were touches or splashes of moon-silver and deep blue and shadow and above his head and there were flutterings of wings and faint sweet pipes and humming and scents and scents. The moon fell cool upon his face like a hand with a lovely touch. And in wonder John stood and stared at him, thinking that he had never seen a sight more beautiful and strange than this man—ivory face and neck and hands and all.

One of the strange things about living in the world is that it is only now and then one is quite sure one is going to live forever and ever and ever. One knows it sometimes when one gets up at the tender solemn dawn-time and goes out and stands alone and throws one’s head far back and looks up and up and watches the pale sky slowly changing and flushing and marvelous unknown things happening until the East almost makes one cry out and one’s heart stands still at the strange unchanging majesty of the rising of the sun—which has been happening every morning for thousands and thousands and thousands of years. One knows it then for a moment or so. And one knows it sometimes when one stands by oneself in a wood at sunset and the mysterious deep gold stillness slanting through and under the branches seems to be saying slowly again and again something one cannot quite hear, however much one tries. Then sometimes the immense quiet of the dark blue at night with millions of stars waiting and watching makes one sure; and sometimes it is a look in someone’s eyes.

And it was like that with Sherlock when he first saw and heard and felt the Springtime inside the four high walls of the hidden garden. That night the whole world seemed to devote itself to being perfect and radiantly beautiful and kind to one man. Perhaps out of pure natural goodness the spring came and crowned everything it possibly could into that one place.

It was a perfect moment—one of the few truly perfect moments that John could remember experiencing in his life. Sherlock turned his eyes to John, then, and the world stood still around them, cool and bright with silver, and flashing in their eyes with something that might be joy.

A small cough behind them brought them back to themselves, then, and John turned to see Gregory staring at them with a broad grin on his face.

“Sherlock!” he said heartily, and enveloped a very surprised Sherlock Holmes in a crushing embrace. “Welcome. It is good to see you. It’s well that you came home. A man should be among friends.”

Sherlock recovered from his shock enough to make a reply, and Gregory released him with a friendly pat.

Delight reigned that night in the secret garden. It was different place in the nighttime, and John thrilled to see it so changed, and yet still so familiar. He and Gregory pointed out to Sherlock things to look at—buds which were opening, buds which were tight closed, bits of twig whose leaves were just showing green, the feather of a woodpecker which had dropped on the grass, the empty shell of some bird early hatched. Together, they walked slowly round and round the garden, stopping every other moment to let Sherlock look at wonders springing out of the earth or trailing down from trees. It was like being taken in state round the country of a magic king and queen and shown all the mysterious riches it contained.
Every moment of that night was full of new things and every hour the moon seemed to shine brighter. After a while, they put down blankets under the plum-tree, which was snow-white with blossoms and musical with lazy bees. It was like a king's canopy, a fairy king's. There were flowering cherry-trees near and apple-trees whose buds were pink and white, and here and there one had burst open wide. Between the blossoming branches of the canopy bits of the star-filled sky looked down like wonderful eyes. Sherlock lay back on the blankets with his hands behind his head and stared up at the sky. John settled himself beside him, sitting with his back against the trunk of the tree.

Gregory sat down on the grass and drew out his pipe. They passed around a small flask of sweet tea.

At last, Sherlock broke the silence.

"This was our garden, once," he said wistfully. "Mine and Mycroft’s, I mean. We played here as children. Well, I say ‘played.’ He brought out his books and his papers, and I toddled about with our dog. He used to have the servants serve our meals here so that we wouldn’t be interrupted in our pursuits. One summer, he even had them carry out a writing desk and chair for his use. There used to be a swing hanging from a branch of that far tree. Especially after our parents died, it was—" he paused. "Well. It was ours. I cannot understand why he should abandon it."

John had never heard Sherlock talk about his brother without anger before, but now he detected a note of hurt in Sherlock’s usually haughty voice.

He laid a hand on Sherlock’s shoulder and squeezed gently.

The night was dragging towards its mellow hour. The moon was deepening the silver of its lances, the bees were going still and quiet, and the birds were flying past less often.

"I don't want this night to end," Sherlock said; "but I shall come back tomorrow, and the night after, and the night after. I shall spend as little time as possible in my room."

"You'll get plenty of fresh air, won't you?" said John.

"I'm going to get nothing else," he answered.

They were really very quiet for a little while. The moon was dropping lower on its path across the sky. It was that hour when everything stills itself. Sherlock looked as if he were resting luxuriously. Even the creatures had ceased moving about and had drawn together and were resting near them. Soot had perched on a low branch and drawn up one leg and dropped the gray film drowsily over his eyes.

In the midst of this stillness it was rather startling when Sherlock half lifted his head and exclaimed in a loud, sudden whisper: "Look!"

Gregory and John scrambled to their feet.

"What!" they both cried in low quick voices.

Sherlock pointed to the high wall. "Look!" he whispered excitedly. "Just look!"

John and Gregory wheeled about and looked. There was Mrs. Hudson’s astonished face peering at them over the wall from the top of a ladder!

"Mrs. Hudson," called out John, finding his breath. He stood below her and called up with a sort of gasp. "Mrs. Hudson, do take care! And don’t be angry at us, please."
Mrs. Hudson’s mouth opened and closed in shock. And then her jaw actually dropped as she stared over his head at something she saw coming over the grass toward him.

At the first sight of her Sherlock had been so surprised that he had only sat up and listened as if he were spellbound. But in the midst of it he had recovered himself and beckoned commandingly to Gregory.

"Come!" he bid.

And this, if you please, this is what Mrs. Hudson beheld and which made her jaw drop: the boy she had known from a baby, and lost to London, and thought not to see again, sprung up suddenly in a locked garden in the otherworldly, pre-dawn light.

How she stared! Her eyes fixed themselves on what was before him as if she were seeing a ghost. She gazed and gazed and gulped a lump down her throat and did not say a word.

"Mrs. Hudson! Do you not know who I am?" demanded Sherlock still more imperiously.

Mrs. Hudson put her trembling hand up and passed it over her eyes and over her forehead and then she did answer in a queer, shaky voice.

"Who you are?" she said. "As if I could ever forget those eyes! But Lord knows how you came to be here!"

“As to that, you may ask my brother. Now, are you coming in, or are you standing up there on a ladder all night?”

Mrs. Hudson passed her hand over her forehead again and gazed as if she could never gaze enough. Her hand shook and her mouth shook and her voice shook. Seeing this, John feared for her safety, perched as she was so high above the ground.

“Come around, Mrs. Hudson. Come, I've found the key to the garden. I'll let you in properly.”

She nodded gratefully, and her head disappeared down the ladder. When John met her at the door, her face was wet with a rush of tears. She could not take her eyes from the sight of Sherlock standing behind John in the garden.

And then, for the second time that night—and one of the very few times in his entire adult life—Sherlock found himself enveloped in a spontaneous embrace. Mrs. Hudson wrapped her arms around him and pulled him down to kiss his cheek.

“I never thought to see you again, Sherlock!” she all but sobbed.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” he whispered. “It was wrong of me to leave you so abruptly. I was not thinking entirely clearly at the time. My behavior did me no credit.”

Mrs. Hudson gripped him tightly for another moment or two, and then stood back, sheepishly wiping at her eyes. “There,” she said briskly. “I’ve had my little cry. Now you can tell me how you came to be standing in the forbidden garden?”

“Ah, Mrs. Hudson. You and I both know that nothing is forbidden and nothing is locked to a man of my… particular talents. But perhaps you can tell me how it came to be forbidden at all.”

“Oh, Sherlock,” she said sadly. “I had words with him when he locked the place up—believe me, I did what I could. But since you left, there’s been no talking to him. He’s queerer than ever. He cares
about nobody. He won't see people. Most of the time he goes away, and when he is here at the Manor he shuts himself up in the West Wing and won't let anyone but Anthea see him at all."

Sherlock’s brow furrowed. “He never was a sociable man,” he suggested, but Mrs. Hudson shook her head emphatically.

“It’s more than that. He’s changed.”

Sherlock hummed thoughtfully, but he still seemed puzzled.

John, meanwhile, was entirely surprised at the warmth of Sherlock’s reunion with Mrs. Hudson. He had never heard Sherlock say a good word about any member of his brother’s household, and this remnant of childhood affection both pleased and startled him.

He judged it best to leave them to enjoy their reunion in what little privacy the garden could afford them, and withdrew a little to rejoin Gregory under the plum tree. He found, however, that his eye was continually drawn back to the elderly woman and the young man who now offered her his arm, and escorted her on a tour of the garden paths. He cut a fine figure. Very fine, John thought: dashing and slender, preternaturally beautiful in the moonlight. But why should such beauty—fine though it was—make John ache so? The answer frightened him.

He sighed and resolved to look away, but always his rebel eyes returned to Sherlock. Sometimes it seemed as though he was gesturing towards John, making some point to his companion, but their discourse was too low to overhear.

Gregory began to snore lightly beside him.

In a little time, perhaps only a half of an hour, Sherlock and Mrs. Hudson returned to the tree under which John and Gregory reclined.

“Mrs. Hudson may call on us again here, John, if such an arrangement is acceptable to you?”

“Of course!” he warmly exclaimed. It was kind of Sherlock to consult him at all, for certainly the garden belonged more properly to Sherlock than himself. “But only upon the understanding that she use the door. If she will just give me notice, I shall admit her properly whenever she wishes. She need not risk herself on a ladder.”

“I was climbing ladders before you were born, young man!” Mrs. Hudson exclaimed, but she was smiling as she said it. “Who do you suppose tended yonder trees all these many years?” She pointed to the small, well-pruned copse of trees that Gregory had remarked upon on their first day in the garden. “Someone had to do it, for they are exceptionally rare! The Elder Holmeses brought them back from the continent 35 years ago. It would be criminal to neglect them.”

But now, the earliest fingers of dawn were appearing at the edges of the sky. Gregory was stirring, and Sherlock and John were yawning tiredly. It was decided that they should leave the garden separately, to avoid detection. John and Sherlock first, then Mrs. Hudson, and finally Gregory—although he declared himself perfectly happy to kip under the plum tree for a few hours more.

Quickly and quietly, Sherlock and John slipped out to the garden door, retracing their steps and taking as many precautions as they could to remain invisible to the Manor.

“I suppose Mrs. Hudson is entirely discrete?” John whispered to Sherlock as they rounded the kitchen gardens.

“She is an inveterate gossip in nearly everything except that which is truly important. Do not trouble
yourself. I have explained the situation to her, and where my own wellbeing is concerned, she may be trusted implicitly.”

John nodded, quite satisfied. This accorded with his own estimation of the woman, who he was growing to like very well.

In another five minutes, they were sneaking through the halls of the grand house, listening for stirring servants.

John found it almost physically painful to consider parting from Sherlock when they reached his chamber door. That thread around his heart pulled taut, indeed it became so dreadfully tight and sore that he wondered if Sherlock did not feel it himself. Surely, it could not be such a strong and real attachment on one side, and not the other? They stood for some moments, leaning back together against the wall of the corridor in the grainy pre-dawn light. Every time their eyes met, they grinned at each other. At last, John began to chuckle—only, perhaps, at the very strangeness of the scene. Sherlock smiled wider, and a low laugh escaped him as well.

“We managed that rather well, I fancy,” Sherlock said.

John nodded. “Was it worth the risk?”

Sherlock’s eyes crinkled up with amusement. “Need you ask?” Sherlock was suffused with enjoyment; he was a man transformed. John slowly shook his head.

Reluctantly, then, he took his leave, wishing Sherlock a restful slumber.

“John?” Sherlock called softly after him.

John turned around, inquiringly.

“Tonight was a gift. Thank you.”

“It was entirely my pleasure.” And then he fled down the hall, for he greatly feared that if he stayed a minute more, he would not be able to tear himself away at all.

* * *

John did not rise until quite late the next day. He woke feeling out of sorts: unsettled and vaguely feverish. His thoughts were unruly. As he dressed, his left hand shook and trembled, but he could not have said why. It was mid-afternoon before he made an appearance in the garden, where he found Gregory hard at it, weeding a small patch of strawberry plants they had uncovered the day before.

“Do you never sleep?” he asked the kneeling man.

“I sleep when I’m tired. I’m not tired now.”

“Ha!” John said, though his voice sounded thin even to his own ears. “You sound like Sherlock.”

There was a telling pause in the conversation. Gregory kept to his work, but he turned his eyes briefly to John. “Something troubles you,” he said. It was a statement of fact, not a question.

John nodded. He was not a man given to sharing confidences, but he felt now as if he must give voice to his thoughts or risk combusting with the strength of them. They had grown entirely out of his control. “Something does,” he admitted softly. “Tell me, Gregory, have you ever—loved?”

Greg wrinkled his brow, but he did not look surprised. “Have I ever not loved, would be a better
question. I’ve loved too much for my own good, I’ll own.” He came and sat on the grass beside John.

“No, I mean—have you ever loved another, body and soul, to the point of distraction? To the point of… torment?” He trailed off. The question in his mind, he did not know how to ask.

Gregory sat patiently. He had learned that, given time and stillness, people usually found the words they needed.

“I have taken much pleasure in my life,” John said, flushing up, for such intimate conversation did not come easily to him. “I believe you understand me.”

Gregory tucked his chin to his chest in agreement.

“I have shared pleasure. I have had dalliances with women who I held in high esteem. I thought, even, that I loved some of them. But it was never”—he was again silent. He looked away, and said in a strange, halting voice, “I have been taken by surprise. I love him, Gregory. I love him with such a fever that I did not, at first, even recognize it for what it is. I fear I grow sick with it. And I am beside myself, almost, for it is unnatural. I know it is unnatural. And yet when his eyes look into mine, I feel myself to be in communion with something great, and something good. It does not feel unnatural.”

He groaned and buried his head in his hands. “What am I to do, Gregory? I am the happiest and most wretched of men.”

Gregory was not quick in his answer, nor was he cruel, or facile, or glib. Unknowingly, John Watson had chosen a perfect confidante, for Gregory was inordinately wise in the ways of the heart, and weighed his answer carefully.

“I do not believe that love can be unnatural,” he said at last.

John let out a great, shuddering breath. “No. No more do I,” he whispered. “Not really.”

They sat in silence together for a few minutes, watching the robin flit back and forth across the garden.

"You cannot plough a field by turning it over in your mind," Gregory said finally. And saying no more, he stood and returned to his work.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading and commenting. Next week is going to be romantic. Possibly a wee bit sexy, as well. :)
Truths Spoken

Chapter Summary

John looked at Sherlock, despairing and uncertain. The stakes were so very high, for if he should read Sherlock’s intent incorrectly and act imprudently, he knew he risked losing the man altogether. If only he could be sure...

All through the long and lazy summer months, the secret garden bloomed and bloomed and every evening revealed new miracles to Sherlock, for John and Gregory—and sometimes Mrs. Hudson, as well—received him there nearly every evening. Early on, there were eggs in the robin’s nest, and the robin’s mate sat upon them keeping them warm with her feathery little breast and careful wings. At first she was very nervous and the robin himself was indignantly watchful. Even Gregory did not go near the close-grown corner in those days, but waited until by the quiet working of some mysterious spell he seemed to have conveyed to the soul of the little pair that in the garden there was nothing which was not quite like themselves—nothing which did not understand the wonderfulness of what was happening to them—the immense, tender, terrible, heart-breaking beauty and solemnity of eggs. All three men spent their time digging and weeding, and the nest in the corner was brooded over by a great peace and content.

Oh! the things which happened in that garden! If you have never had a garden you cannot understand, and if you have had a garden you will know that it would take a whole book to describe all that came to pass there. At first it seemed that green things would never cease pushing their way through the earth, in the grass, in the beds, even in the crevices of the walls. Then the green things began to show buds and the buds began to unfurl and show color, every shade of blue, every shade of purple, every tint and hue of crimson. In its happy days flowers had been tucked away into every inch and hole and corner. Mrs. Hudson had seen it done and had herself scraped out mortar from between the bricks of the wall and made pockets of earth for lovely clinging things to grow on. Iris and white lilies rose out of the grass in sheaves, and the green alcoves filled themselves with amazing armies of the blue and white flower lances of tall delphiniums or columbines or campanulas. The tiny robin babies hatched from their eggs, and the men watched, rapt, as the proud parents gradually taught each to fly. Trees that had flowered began to show fruit, and everything began to ripen.

Gregory made the stimulating discovery that in the wood in the park outside the garden there was a deep little hollow where you could build a sort of tiny oven with stones and roast potatoes and eggs in it. Roasted eggs were a previously unknown luxury for the gardeners, and very hot potatoes with salt and fresh butter in them were fit for a woodland king—besides being deliciously satisfying. It became habit for him to stop in the wood and begin the preparations for a midnight supper on his way to the garden every day, so that the three men never grew hungry, no matter how strenuous their work.

Seeds that Gregory and John had planted grew as if fairies had tended them. Satiny poppies of all tints danced in the breeze by the score, gaily defying flowers which had lived in the garden for years and which it might be confessed seemed rather to wonder how such new people had got there. And the roses—the roses! They were Sherlock’s darlings. Rising out of the grass, tangled round the sundial, wreathing the tree trunks and hanging from their branches, climbing up the walls and spreading over them with long garlands falling in cascades—they came alive day by day, hour by hour. Fair fresh leaves, and buds—and buds—tiny at first but swelling until they burst and uncurled into cups...
of scent delicately spilling themselves over their brims and filling the garden air.

Sherlock saw it all, watching each change as it took place by the light of the waxing and waning moon. Every evening he went out and every hour of each night when it didn't rain he spent in the garden. He would lie on the grass "watching things growing," he said. If you watched long enough, he declared, you could see buds unsheath themselves. You could see the stars move. Also you could make the acquaintance of strange busy night insects running about on various unknown but evidently serious errands, sometimes carrying tiny scraps of straw or feather or food, or climbing blades of grass as if they were trees from whose tops one could look out to explore the country. A mole throwing up its mound at the end of its burrow and making its way out at last with long-nailed paws had absorbed him one whole night. Even the dark nights of the new moon pleased him, for then he brought out a small candle and risked a flame which attracted yet more fascinating night insects.

Molly sometimes became fearful when Sherlock returned to his room too close to dawn for her comfort.

"You should not have stayed so long," she would scold. "Remember the risk. Do not allow familiarity and habit to lessen your fear of the consequences of discovery."

"I am well aware of the risk, you tiresome woman," was Sherlock’s answer. "Do not try to dissuade me." And then he would go out again the next night, just the same.

Early on in their acquaintance, John had found out that one of Sherlock's chief peculiarities was that he did not know in the least what a rude brute he was with his way of ordering people about. He had lived on a sort of desert island in his own mind all of his life and as he had been the king of it he had made his own manners and had had no one to compare himself with. John had indeed been rather taciturn himself in his early days at Holmes Manor, but he knew that these manners were not to his credit. Nor, he thought, was Sherlock’s behavior always creditable. He would sometimes look at Sherlock curiously for a few minutes after he absently dismissed Molly from his presence.

"What are you looking at me for?" Sherlock asked once.

"I'm thinking that I am rather sorry for poor Molly."

"Why on earth should you be sorry for her? Since I met you, she is constantly at leisure!"

"I'm not sorry for that," said John, "but I was thinking just then that it must be very horrid to have had to be so kind and polite to a man who was always rude in return. I would never have the patience for it." This last was not exactly true, for he had near-infinite patience for Sherlock’s many eccentricities now that he was familiar with them.

"Am I rude?" Sherlock inquired undisturbedly.

"If she had been a slapping sort of person," said John, "she would often have slapped you."

"She daren't," said Sherlock.

"No, she daren't," answered John, speaking quite without prejudice. "But perhaps it would have been better for you if she had. Just once or twice."

Sherlock snorted and rolled his eyes, but John was pleased to afterwards notice an alteration in his behaviour towards Molly—who, after all, was the person who ultimately enabled their evening excursions, for without her cooperation and her silence, Sherlock would never have been to the garden at all. He did not become gentlemanly; no, not exactly that. But he was, perhaps, less condescending and more kind than he had been. Molly had always been fond of him, had always
treated him with far greater consideration than he truthfully deserved. But now, she felt respected by him, too, and that meant a great deal to her.

It happened, however, that Molly’s cautions sparked an idea in John’s head—an idea that was in fact far riskier than their nighttime excursions. Simply: he longed to see Sherlock’s face out of doors in the daylight. He could not make up his mind to say anything to Sherlock about it, such was his concern for the other man’s safety, but he tucked it away into a corner of his mind to await a better time.

And too, during these long summer months, John watched Sherlock as closely as ever the robins watched the men in the garden—closer, even, if such a thing were possible.

Gregory, being the soul of discretion itself, never referred to the confidences with which John had trusted him that spring day in the garden, but he did direct meaningful and questioning glances at him, for John seemed paralyzed with indecision, or perhaps with fear. He would sit gazing at Sherlock with such intensity of focus, such delighted adoration, and then like a cloud coming over the sun his face would darken, and he would look away again, and sigh and sigh, until Gregory took pity on him and called him away to some garden task or another.

* * * * *

The summer was quite advanced before John discovered an opportunity to put his idea into action. “What if,” John asked Sherlock one night as he collected him from his room, “what if we tried something different tomorrow? Are you feeling adventurous?”


“Wouldn’t you like to see the garden in the daylight? It is so different in the sun, you would scarcely recognize it.”

“I would, of course. But how to manage the thing?”

“Nothing easier. Miss Anthea is away to London for some unknown purpose, and she and Molly are your only attendants. Tomorrow, you shall sleep all night long, and then come out to the garden before dawn. You shall spend the entire day—quietly, mind!—in the garden, and return to your room after the servants are in bed. Gregory will join us at midday, for he has errands of his own to pursue in the morning. Think of his face when he hops over the wall and sees you! Yes?”

Sherlock looked at John with astonishment and grasped him by the forearms in his excitement, quite spinning him around. “You are, at times, quite brilliant,” he said, his eyes dancing.

John flushed and said nothing lest he forget himself and say all, for his heart leaped now, always, at Sherlock’s touch.

And indeed, nothing could have been easier or simpler than putting the plan into action, for it was merely a reversal of their usual movements, and it went off perfectly.

Before they knew it, Sherlock and John were sitting side by side in their garden, watching together for the first time as the sun rose over the stone wall. The golden rays illuminated Sherlock’s pale skin so that it gradually turned from cold alabaster to honeyed milk. Sherlock watched the sunrise, rapt, but John had eyes only for Sherlock. His chest ached unbearably as the sun crept up in the sky. It was almost agony to sit so near to the man he loved—yes, loved with all of his heart—and not to touch him, not to stroke that velvet skin with his own hands, not to speak of his beauty, his exceptional value. And yet, he said not a word.
In the end, it was not John but Sherlock who spoke first. Looking away at last from the sunrise, he turned to John. His eyes widened at the pain he saw on his face, and then a look of frightened resolve stole over his own.

“In the past months, John,” he said at last, “I have discovered a very real truth, and that is that nothing of interest is particularly likely to happen unless one makes it happen. There are many things I have sought to avoid, and very few I have actually pursued. In my estimation, born of unhappy and unwise experience, the former path is unlikely to bring much satisfaction.”

John caught his breath in his throat, and tried manfully to master his emotions as he had so many times before. He did not wish his fancies and hopes to mislead his understanding.

“That seems true,” he said tentatively.

Sherlock sighed and looked away. “That seems true,” he quoted back under his breath, and it was not mocking but rather frustrated and almost sad.

John looked at him, despairing and uncertain. The stakes were so very high, for if he should read Sherlock’s intent incorrectly and act imprudently, he knew he risked losing him altogether. If only he could be sure…

“This—” Sherlock gestured to the little space between the men—“this is not my area of expertise. I told you once that I have no friends, and I spoke truth. I have had no friends, and no lovers. Nothing at all, until I met you. I rely upon you, John, to lead me. I find myself at a loss as to how to proceed, how to declare my ardent admiration and… yes, and desire for you, in terms adequate to the magnitude of my sentiments. Please, John!” And here his face flushed and his voice broke with the emotion burning in his breast. “Please.”

John looked at him and finally saw, he heard his voice and at last believed. The greatest gamble of his life was not, perhaps, a gamble at all.

And so it was not in the dark and secret nighttime hours that John first took Sherlock into his arms as a lover, first embraced him, first kissed hand, then cheek, then mouth—but under the approving countenance of the sun, with all the warmth of it full on their faces, and all the garden looking on.

"When you found this garden it looked quite dead," Sherlock murmured against John’s ear. "Then something began pushing things up out of the soil and making things out of nothing. One day things weren’t there and another they were. So it must be all around us. In this garden—in all the places. In us, John. In us, too.”

John said nothing, but clasped him closer; and kissed him, again and again. Sherlock twined his arms around him and responded in kind. He did not let go again.

They lay down together, under the sun and in amongst the plants, and the sweet clover beneath them and the verdant canopy above them became their marriage bed, and each found in the other the truest expression of pleasure and love of which mortal beings are capable, and the air was filled with their gasps and sighs and the sounds of their joining.

The garden, lush and alive and ever-changing, bore solemn witness to their sacrament.

* * * * *

After that day, Sherlock and John’s time together in the garden took on an even more splendid timbre. Here they came to be themselves more fully than they had known possible before—more fully than ever they could have, without the other. They met sometimes at night, and sometimes at
day, when Miss Anthea’s absences would permit it. Sometimes they roamed the garden, and sometimes they preferred to remain indoors, nestled together in Sherlock’s opulent bed with the curtain drawn firmly around them and the world beyond themselves quite forgotten.

Private men, both, they found that the garden suited them, for here they could walk arm in arm—or even hand in hand—without prying eyes observing them. John could pull Sherlock down and kiss his cheek when the inclination struck, and Sherlock could curl himself around John like a satisfied cat and catalogue the many and various colours of his hair, as he had wished to do since their first meeting. Gregory was a true and constant friend to them, although he often winked and smirked and behaved entirely abominably.

One hot and lazy afternoon, John and Sherlock were sprawled out under their plum tree. Barely a whisper of breeze stirred the leaves, and the ripening fruit which hung low on the branches filled the air with a sweet, amber fragrance. John was sitting with his back against the trunk, while Sherlock reclined against him, tracing the subtle veins on the back of his hands with a curious fingertip. Fat honeybees buzzed around them. After a time, Sherlock nuzzled his head down into John’s lap and closed his eyes. John carded his fingers gently through Sherlock’s curls and thought that he had never been so absolutely content as he was in that moment. He closed his eyes, too, and drifted into a light slumber: where Sherlock led, he always would follow.

When next he looked up, the sun was sunk low in the sky and Gregory was crossing the overgrown lawn with Mrs. Hudson at his side.

“I discovered this intruder lurking around the door,” Gregory called out, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “I thought I ought to take her into custody. We brook no espionage in our domain, madam!”

Sherlock looked up, delighted, and sprang up to take Mrs. Hudson’s arm.

John strove to stifle his own alarm; his pose, asleep in the setting sun with Sherlock in his lap, had surely been indiscrete in the extreme. He had no fear of censure from Gregory, but Mrs. Hudson was an unknown element. He did not like to feel so discomfited in his own garden (for indeed, he had begun to think of it as his own).

Sherlock, however, had no such qualms, and began speaking animatedly to Mrs. Hudson about his recent discovery of the beehive that housed the friendly bees who were such common visitors to the garden now.

He paused when he looked back and saw the confusion on John’s face.

“Now, Mrs. Hudson,” he said deliberately, though his eyes were on John’s, “you must shake my hand and congratulate me.”

“Indeed?” she replied. “I am always pleased when you are pleased, dear boy. But for what am I to offer my congratulations?”

“You are all I have of family, now,” Sherlock said softly. “Congratulate me and wish me well in my future life with John Watson. Somehow—and certainly it has been through no special quality of my own, but rather must be attributed to some unwarranted benevolence of fate—I have thoroughly enchanted him into believing himself to love me. I plan to keep him. I ask your blessing.”

All at once Mrs. Hudson reached up and drew him with her warm arms close against herself—as if he had been her child. The quick mist swept over her eyes. She grieved to hear him speak so when he had a brother living, yet her heart rejoiced, for she never thought to see the man so happy and so
very well loved.

Simultaneously, John reached up and grasped his hand tightly in his own.

“Of course you have my blessing. How could you doubt it? I daresay John has been the saving of you,” she said. “But as for your family, I won’t hear you talk so. You’ve a brother who yet lives, and who loves you well. Far better than you think. You will find your way back to each other before long.”

Sherlock merely shook his head. He drew John up by the hand, and took his arm in one of his and Mrs. Hudson’s in the other, and the three walked along the path to meet Gregory. A new varietal of rose had just bloomed that very day, and they were all eager to see it.

That hour, Mrs. Hudson made a decision.

Much later that evening, when the household’s dinners had been made and served, and the kitchen cleaned and readied for the morrow, Mrs. Hudson took a sheet of paper and a nib with ink and the stub of a candle to the little table in the corner of her room.

"Dear Sir" she wrote, for knowing Mycroft Holmes’s character as she did, she judged it best to begin politely,

“I beg you to forgive me if I speak of matters which give you pain. I will make so bold as to ask something of you, and to offer a piece of unasked-for advice. First: please, sir, come home. It would gladden your heart to be here, I know it would, and it would gladden the heart of he whose wellbeing I know to be your highest concern. Second: make amends. I know your nature, and I know his, and this is the thing that must now be done.

If you will excuse me, sir—I think your late father and mother would wish you to come if only they were here.

Your obedient servant,
Mrs. Hudson."
While the secret garden was coming alive and two broken men were coming alive with it, there was another man wandering about certain far-away places of great power and global importance which I cannot here name. He was a man who for ten years had lived in accordance with some very dark and terrible thinking. He had not been courageous in facing the sorrows of his life; he had pushed the things worth caring about deep down into the forgotten corners of his heart and given himself over entirely to the intellectual and political demands of his work. He had deserted his home and his duties—or at least, he had tried to. When he traveled about, he wore a façade so bland and impervious that the sight of him was a wrong done to other people: he consumed every detail of every person around him but offered nothing of himself in return. Most people were content to ignore him entirely, which suited him perfectly. His pleasure was to complete his work and then withdraw to solitude. He was a tall man with a rigidly straight spine and a severe expression on his face; the name he entered on hotel registers was "Mycroft Holmes, Holmes Manor, Yorkshire, England."

He had traveled far and wide in the decade preceding, and had rarely returned to his family home, preferring to leave the running of it to a trusted aide, Miss Anthea. He had been in the most beautiful places in Europe on political missions of utmost importance, though he had remained nowhere more than a few months. He had gone to the Far East on matters of life and death as an agent for his government; and too, he had worked diligently in London on many schemes that would never grace the pages of a newspaper, but which had large and lasting effects on the daily lives of the British public nevertheless. In between his mysterious engagements, he chose the quietest and remotest spots in which to pass his time: dark archives unvisited by scholars; silent clubs filled with grey-haired, musty men; hilltops and little valleys where he could walk for hours and see no one at all.

But one day he realized that for the first time in ten years a strange thing had happened. He was in a wonderful valley in the Austrian Tyrol and he had been walking alone through such beauty as might have lifted, any man's soul out of shadow. He had walked a long way and it had not lifted his. But at last he had felt tired and had thrown himself down to rest on a carpet of moss by a stream. It was a clear little stream which ran quite merrily along on its narrow way through the luscious damp greenness. Sometimes it made a sound rather like very low laughter as it bubbled over and round stones. He saw birds come and dip their heads to drink in it and then flick their wings and fly away. It seemed like a thing alive and yet its tiny voice made the stillness seem deeper. The valley was very, very still.

As he sat gazing into the clear running of the water, Mycroft Holmes gradually felt his mind and body both grow quiet, as quiet as the valley itself. He wondered if he were going to sleep, but he was not. He sat and gazed at the sunlit water and his eyes began to see things growing at its edge. There was one lovely mass of blue forget-me-nots growing so close to the stream that its leaves were wet and at these he found himself looking as he remembered he had looked at such things years ago. He was actually thinking tenderly how lovely it was and what wonders of blue its hundreds of little
blossoms were. He did not know that just that simple thought was slowly filling his mind—filling and filling it until the feelings that he had locked down deep inside himself could rise up within him. It was as if a sweet clear spring had begun to rise in a stagnant pool and had risen and risen until at last it swept the dark water away. But of course he did not think of this himself. He only knew that the valley seemed to grow quieter and quieter as he sat and stared at the bright delicate blueness. He did not know how long he sat there or what was happening to him, but at last he moved as if he were awakening and he got up slowly and stood on the moss carpet, drawing a long, deep, soft breath and wondering at himself. Something seemed to have been unbound and released in him, very quietly.

"What is it?" he said, almost in a whisper, and he passed his hand over his forehead. "I almost feel as if—I were alive!"

I do not know enough about the wonderfulness of undiscovered things to be able to explain how this had happened to him. Neither does anyone else. He did not understand at all himself—but he remembered this strange hour months afterward when he was back at Holmes Manor again and he found out quite by accident that on this very day his brother Sherlock had entered the secret garden with John Watson for the very first time.

The singular profundity of feeling remained with him the rest of the evening and he slept a new reposeful sleep; but it was not with him very long. He did not know that it could be kept. By the next night he had again pushed away the influx of human sentiments back from whence they had come trooping and rushing. He left the valley and went on his wandering way again. But, strange as it seemed to him, there were minutes—sometimes half-hours—when, without his knowing why, the blank numbness seemed to lift itself again and he knew he was a living man and not a dead one. Slowly—slowly—for no reason that he knew of—he was "coming alive."

As the bright spring changed into the deep, verdant summer he went to the Lake of Como. There he found the loveliness of a dream. He spent his days upon the crystal blueness of the lake or he walked back into the soft thick verdure of the hills and tramped until he was tired so that he might sleep. But by this time he had begun to sleep better and his dreams had ceased to be a sorrow to him.

"Perhaps," he thought, "I am overcoming the weakness of mind that has made me subject to these bouts of melancholia."

For all that Mycroft Holmes was a clever man—and he was so, exceptionally—his self-knowledge was almost equally lacking, so that when he imagined himself to be conquering the "weakness" of sentiment, he was in fact learning to gracefully succumb to it. In short, his soul was growing stronger. He began to think of Holmes Manor and to wonder if he should not go home. Now and then he wondered vaguely about his brother and asked himself what he should feel when he went and stood by the carved four-posted bed again and looked down at the sharply chiseled ivory-white face while it slept, the black lashes rimmed so startlingly the close-shut eyes. Or when those eyes opened and glared at him with vitriol approaching unbridgeable hatred. He shrank from it.

One marvel of a day he had walked so far that when he returned to his lodgings the moon was high and full and all the world was purple shadow and silver. The stillness of lake and shore and wood was so wonderful that he did not go in. He walked down to a little bowered terrace at the water's edge and sat upon a seat and breathed in all the heavenly scents of the night. He felt the strange calmness stealing over him and it grew deeper and deeper until he fell asleep.

He did not know when he fell asleep and when he began to dream; his dream was so real that he did not feel as if he were dreaming. He remembered afterward how intensely wide awake and alert he had thought he was. He thought that as he sat and breathed in the scent of the late roses and listened to the lapping of the water at his feet he heard a voice calling. It was sweet and clear and happy and
far away. It seemed very far, but he heard it as distinctly as if it had been at his very side.

"Mycroft! Mycroft!" it called, and then again, sweeter and clearer than before, "Mycroft!"

He thought he sprang to his feet not even startled. It was such a real voice and it seemed so natural that he should hear it.

"Sherlock!" he answered. "Sherlock! where are you?"

"In the garden," it came back like a sound from a golden flute—not Sherlock’s adult baritone, but the tiny voice he had as a boy. "In the garden!"

And then the dream ended. But he did not awaken. He slept soundly and sweetly all through the lovely night. When he did awake at last it was brilliant morning and a servant was standing staring at him. He was an Italian servant and was accustomed, as all the servants of the villa were, to accepting without question any strange thing his foreign master might do. No one ever knew when he would go out or come in or where he would choose to sleep or if he would roam about the garden or lie in the boat on the lake all night. The servant held a salver with some letters on it and he waited quietly until Mr. Holmes took them. When he had gone away Mr. Holmes sat a few moments holding them in his hand and looking at the lake. His strange calm was still upon him and something more—a lightness, as if the cruel things which had been done had not happened as he thought—as if something had changed. He was remembering the dream—the real—real dream.

"In the garden!" he said, wondering at himself. "In the garden! But the door is locked and the key is buried deep."

When he glanced at the letters a few minutes later he saw that the one lying at the top of the rest was an English letter and came from Yorkshire. It was directed in a plain woman's hand but it was not a hand he knew. He opened it, scarcely thinking of the writer, but the first words attracted his attention at once.

Mr. Holmes read the letter twice before he put it back in its envelope. He kept thinking about the dream.

"I will go back to Holmes Manor," he said. "Yes, I'll go at once."

And he went through the garden to the villa and ordered his servant to prepare for his return to England.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in England, John watched with increasing anxiety as Sherlock grew more and more restless. He had known that the garden would not be enough to distract such a brilliant mind indefinitely, but it was all he could offer to stave off Sherlock’s boredom—and boredom, he feared, was what had brought Sherlock so low in the first place.

Generally, John and Gregory were able to distract him from the frustrations of his confinement with the new wonders that emerged every day in the garden. There were several happy days when it seemed as though beekeeping would provide a suitable outlet for his considerable energies, and indeed it did for a time. But after detailed study of the hive local to the garden and reading all the relevant books in his library, Sherlock’s impulse was, as always, expansive: what did the other hives in the area look like? Where were they located? Were their cultures different in any significant way? How did the quality of the honey vary between hives? How did apiarists train? Did bees produce venom? Of what chemical composition? Might the queen be segregated? On and on his mind went,
and John had no way to satisfy it. Eventually, Sherlock gave up on the line of study altogether in a state of greater frustration than when he had begun.

And yet despite his increasing boredom, Sherlock’s desire for chemical stimulation was kept largely at bay, for now he had a beloved to bear witness to his life. He was loath to subject John to the horrors of his addiction. His was no longer the desperate, despairing, frantic boredom of his previous life, but rather a slow, distasteful stagnation, and it hurt John’s heart to see it.

“You told me once you would return to London if you could,” he said to Sherlock one day when the other had been sitting alone in the garden, unusually quiet and still for several hours. He was not reading or otherwise visibly engaged.

“Mmm,” Sherlock said, which John took as agreement, and although he waited, Sherlock did not elaborate.

“Where is your mind, love?” he tried again. Often, a simple endearment would be enough to recall Sherlock’s attention from wherever it had wandered.

“I am dreaming, John. Just… dreams.”

John nodded, and moved closer so that Sherlock’s side was pressed against his own where they sat.

“What would you do, John? If you could do anything or go anywhere in this world?”

John considered. He had carefully avoided this very question ever since he had left India; the truth was, he did not know, and did not care to think about his uncertain future. He feared the upheaval that was sure to come.

He simply shrugged. “I’m not fit for the army anymore, and I’ve no other real training. I don’t know what I’m fit for, quite honestly. I could perhaps return to India, but… Sherlock, I do not wish to.”

Sherlock reached out and squeezed his hand. “Nor shall you. I meant what I said to Mrs. Hudson, you know. I intend to keep you.”

John smiled, and leaned in to quickly kiss his lips. “Yes, but Sherlock, I shall have to do something. Your brother will not keep me forever, and surely he will expect some form of return for his care of me these past months.”

Sherlock scoffed.

“No, Sherlock. He will. He has reason to care for you—you are his family. He has no reason to treat me with kindness. There is motive behind it, and I shall find out soon enough what it is. There is no point in me speculating about my future when it is not within my own control.”

Sherlock turned to look at John with surprise.

“Can you imagine that I would allow you to be used by my brother? To remain under any form of obligation to him? It is impossible, John. You are mine. We shall go to London together, I daresay, once this arrangement with Mycroft has been resolved. You will come, will you not?”

John was already nodding before his brain had caught up with Sherlock’s words. Of course he would go to London with Sherlock—the possessive, imperious devil. He had no idea if such a course would ever be open to them, but he thought he would probably agree to anything Sherlock proposed.
“Our family has several properties there,” Sherlock was continuing. “You would be free to pursue whatever career or interests you wish, and I would return to my studies. John, I have been considering the practical applications of several of my most successful chemical experiments, as regards to the detection of criminal activity. If it were possible to—”

But then he checked himself. “In any case, it doesn’t matter now,” Sherlock said with a sigh, withdrawing into himself once again.

* * * * *

In a very few days Mycroft was in Yorkshire again, and on his long railroad journey he found himself thinking of his brother as he had never thought in all the ten years past. During those years he had only wished to forget him—forget Sherlock and all the pain associated with him. But now, although he did not intend to think about Sherlock, memories of him constantly drifted into his mind. They were not the usual memories that he had buried down deep and tried to forget. He did not think of Sherlock calling upon him at his London club, raving like a madman, off his head on some new and terrible chemical concoction. He did not dwell upon the image of Sherlock’s body, collapsed and convulsing on the floor of his chamber in pools of filth, more dead than alive. His mind was not occupied, as it too often was, with methods for pacifying his vicious, hysterical, half-insane temper, or with bargains he might strike with him to prevent self-destruction. No—instead, Mycroft was thinking about the boy Sherlock had been: sweet, solemn, doting, strange. Mycroft had not meant to be a bad brother, but he had failed Sherlock all the same. Being so very much older than him, he had not been a playmate, and after their parents had died, his responsibilities were too great to concern himself much with Sherlock’s day-to-day happiness. He had supplied nurses and tutors and luxuries, and had spent as much time as he could afford with the boy in his garden, but truly he had buried himself in his own work. The first time after a year's absence he returned to Holmes Manor and the small miserable looking child had languidly and adoringly lifted to his face and raised his arms, he could hardly bear the emotion that rose up in his chest. He had never—never—intended to abandon the boy. And yet, he seemed to be doing it continually.

All this was not an uplifting thing to recall, but as the train whirled him through mountain passes and golden plains the man who was "coming alive" began to think in a new way and he thought long and steadily and deeply.

"Perhaps I have been all wrong," he said to himself. "It may be too late to do anything—quite too late. What have I been thinking of!"

Of course, to begin by saying "too late" was not a good way to begin. Even Sherlock could have told him that. But he had much yet to learn about the human heart and about himself. He wondered if Mrs. Hudson had taken courage and written to him only because the motherly creature had realized that Sherlock was much worse—was not likely to recover? If he had not been under the spell of the curious calmness which had taken possession of him he would have been more wretched than ever. But the calm had brought a sort of courage and hope with it. Instead of giving way to thoughts of the worst he actually found he was trying to believe in better things.

"Could it be possible that she sees that I may be able to do him good? Perhaps help to control him?" he wondered.

The drive across the moor was a soothing thing. A warm, gentle rain beat down on the top of the carriage, and Mycroft felt himself relax. Why did it seem to give him a sense of homecoming which he had been sure he could never feel again—that sense of the beauty of land and sky and purple bloom of distance and a warming of the heart at drawing, nearer to the great old house which had held those of his blood for six hundred years? How he had driven away from it the last time,
shuddering to think of its closed rooms and locked garden and terrible memories. Was it possible that perhaps he might find it changed a little for the better and that he might overcome his shrinking from it? How real that dream had been—how wonderful and clear the voice which called back to him, "In the garden—In the garden!"

"I will try to find the key," he said. "I will try to open the door. And I must—I must try to talk to Sherlock."

When he arrived at the Manor the servants who received him with the usual ceremony noticed that he looked better and that he did not go to the remote rooms where he usually lived. He went into the library and sent for Miss Anthea. She came to him somewhat excited and curious and flustered.

"How is Sherlock, Anthea?" he inquired.

"Well, sir," she answered haltingly, "he's—he's different, in a manner of speaking."

"Worse?" he suggested.

She flushed. "Not worse, except that he sleeps away most of the day. I scarcely speak to him at all, for he always seems to be exhausted when I visit his room."

Mycroft considered. "Send Molly to me immediately. And Mrs. Hudson, too, if you can find her."

"Yes sir," Anthea said, and went out.

A quarter of an hour later, there was a faint knock at the door and Molly entered.

She was exceedingly surprised to find Mycroft returned to the Manor, as she had understood it to be very unlikely that he should ever return at all.

"Miss Hooper. Report, if you please. How is my brother?"

"If you please, sir," she began, "he is surprisingly… He is unexpectedly quite well, sir."

Mycroft’s eyebrows rose. "I am gratified to hear that. He has not been what I would call 'quite well' in a number a years. Does his solitary confinement agree with him so well? Does he not rail against it?"

Molly flushed. "I do not believe it is his solitary state that has made the difference," she stammered. She was entirely discomfited, but loyal to a fault. She would not betray Sherlock’s trust in her. "To tell the truth, sir, Master Sherlock might be better able to explain himself. He has, as you know, a somewhat unusual character, and I do not feel easy commenting upon it. Physically, he is very well. The withdrawal of the—unfortunate substances—has made all the difference. It was difficult for him at first—very difficult. But his constitution is strong. He is recovering."

"How does he look?" was the next question.

"He’s putting on flesh, and his colour is better. Sometimes he laughs, now; he never used to laugh at all."

"Has he become more—more peculiar?" her master, asked, knitting his brows.

Molly burst out in a half-hysterical giggle. "How could one tell?" But then she clamped her hand over her mouth and blushed scarlet.

Mycroft blinked mildly at her. "Thank you, Miss Hooper. That will do. I shall be up to see him.
shortly."

Molly scurried out of the room, grateful that her work was at night, so that she needn’t see the imposing Mr. Holmes again.

* * * * *

The morning of the day Mycroft arrived back at Holmes Manor, rain streamed down unceasingly and Sherlock’s mood plummeted with it. Normally, John would suggest a spell in the garden to pacify and soothe his temper, but the soaking rain prevented this from being an appealing prospect. As the day went on, John grew concerned that Sherlock’s isolation and his prolonged imprisonment were beginning to do real damage to him.

"I cannot sit still anymore," Sherlock said that morning, practically vibrating off the sofa where he sat. He leapt up and paced across the room and back. “I cannot bear this, John. I feel sometimes as if I were going mad, staring at the same walls day after day. I am not a beast to be caged, and I am not a child to be punished. I need… Bah!” He snarled. “I need freedom! I need to walk! I need to think. My life is worthless without those things.”

John’s blood ran cold at those dreadful words. “Never say that,” he beseeched.

But Sherlock turned away from him and threw himself upon his bed, curled in around himself and facing the opposite direction. “It grows intolerable, John,” he said over his shoulder. “I fear I begin to sink.”

John’s heart ached for Sherlock, and the ache was tempered with a cold finger of fear. Sherlock must never fall back into his old, destructive habits. He must never relapse—never risk himself like that again.

It was then that the soldier in John Watson, that part of him which had been dormant since his injury, suddenly woke up—and woke in a fine rage over his impotency to protect the one he loved. The more he thought over the situation, the angrier and more determined he became.

“Sherlock!” John said firmly. “Sherlock, look at me.”

Sherlock remained motionless and silent on the bed.

“Sherlock!” John shouted, and sprang across to grasp his shoulders firmly, giving him a violent shake, as if to wake him.

Startled, Sherlock flung himself over and stared at John.

“You are quite correct—this imprisonment grows intolerable, and I fear it begins to harm you as much as it ever aided you. I was wrong to permit it to continue this long.”

Sherlock snorted and again turned his back on John.

“No—listen, Sherlock. You are here because you were unwell. You are now well—do you not agree? You are well.”

“Yes, of course,” Sherlock said impatiently. “The effects of the drugs have long passed from my body. I desired them only to counteract my boredom and unhappiness, and was foolish enough to lose control of my intake. I will not allow such a situation to recur. In that sense, I am ‘cured.’ Certainly I am well. But what of Mycroft’s edict?”
“Sherlock, I swear to you that I will never allow him to take you without your consent. I will not see you suffer here, and I will certainly not see you suffer in an institution. I will always come for you. Always.”

Sherlock looked at him with wonder, as if seeing him anew. He could not help but believe him. Mycroft might be a dangerous man, but so, clearly, was John Watson.

Suddenly, John lit up with inspiration.

“Where would you go today, Sherlock, if you could move about the house freely?”

Sherlock thought for a moment.

“I should go to my laboratory. I should begin work again at the chemical experimentation I abandoned when I went up to London.”

“Then let us go,” John said instantly.

“And if someone should see us?”

“It makes no difference,” John smiled. “You are well. You are harming no one. You are safe, for I am with you.”

Sherlock smiled widely. He did not yet understand the magic of John Watson—the strange and exceptional power he had to untangle complexities with simple, solid pragmatism. It was madness, this plan: an underestimation of Mycroft’s influence that Sherlock knew to be naïve in the extreme. But for the moment, he allowed himself to believe. The risk was almost as irresistible as John was himself. He rose from the bed and followed John from the room.

They retraced the path through the Manor that John had taken in what now felt almost like another life. They wandered down the long corridor as it branched into other corridors and led them up short flights of steps which mounted to others again, and never did they meet another soul. They went through many doors and stopped often to examine portraits and landscapes that adorned the walls nearly as thickly as trees in the garden.

They stopped before a particularly fine painting of a plain little girl dressed in green brocade and holding a parrot on her finger.

"All the portraits," said Sherlock, "are my relations. That parrot one, I believe, is one of my great, great, great, great aunts. The bird looks rather like you, John."

John slapped his arm and they both laughed, giddy with the freedom they had seized.

They found the room furnished with Indian décor, and Sherlock paused to inspect some of the embroidered hangings which, upon careful examination, proved to be both very old and exceptionally intricate.

They found an adjoining rose-colored brocade boudoir, and John taxed Sherlock to deduce, from the physical evidence alone, who the last person to inhabit the room had been. Whether or not his answer was accurate or imaginative in the extreme, it served John’s purpose, for it kept the man occupied and entertained for well over half an hour.

In all, it was a curiously entertaining morning and the feeling of wandering about in the same house with other people but at the same time feeling as if one were miles away from them was a fascinating thing.
"I'm glad we came," Sherlock said. "It’s interesting to ramble about this queer old place with you. I like it."

“I’m glad too,” said John, “but we are not yet finished for the day.”

Taking Sherlock’s hand, John led him from the room and down to the end of a very long, very dark corridor. They came to the plain oak door with the brass plate stating Laboratory. John looked over at Sherlock, who had gone still beside him. Slowly he reached up and traced the brass lettering.

Then all at once he turned the doorknob and entered the room, leaving John standing in the doorway. John watched as Sherlock swept eagerly through the room, opening the shutters and running his fingers over the workbench, over the dusty equipment and unused desk.

In silence, he began pulling open drawers and examining the contents, spilling some out upon the workbench and returning others to their places. Cupboards were ripped apart, their contents spread out upon the floor. He became almost frantic, pulling bottles of chemicals from boxes, greeting delicate scientific instruments as if they were old friends, running hands over shelves of books and pulling out several, only to open them for a moment and discard them again in piles on the floor.

“He is like a child,” John thought with delight, and he stood silently and watched, unwilling to break the spell of Sherlock’s happiness.

Finally, John stepped in and gently closed the door behind him. At the small sound, Sherlock looked up. His smile was brilliant.

“John,” he breathed.

John never could resist Sherlock, and their weeks of increasing intimacy had only magnified this effect. He moved towards Sherlock, pulling him into his arms and embracing him fiercely.

“I will never again allow you to be kept from this, Sherlock” he whispered against his throat.

Sherlock wrapped his arms tightly around his John and nuzzled into his hair. “And I will ever strive to assure your happiness, John, if I can.”

“Oh Sherlock,” John said softly, and then he kissed him, proud and tender.

The men were too wrapped up in each other to hear the sound of footsteps approaching the door to the laboratory.

Suddenly, John pulled back and twisted around, looking intently at the door. Sherlock stilled against him and together they watched in surprise amounting to near horror as the doorknob turned and the door itself swung open.

A tall, angry-looking man stood silhouetted in the doorway for an instant before striding into the room. "Sherlock!" the man exclaimed in a thin, shocked voice. For an instant, everything about him indicated astonished disapproval, but he quickly mastered himself and a mask of bland inquisitiveness fell into place over his features.

Sherlock looked up over John’s shoulder, aghast, his body gone rigid.

Then: “Mycroft,” Sherlock said, and John began to understand the seriousness of their predicament. Instinctively, he turned to face the intruder, setting his chin defiantly and subtly pushing Sherlock further behind him.
“Sherlock,” the man—Mycroft Holmes, apparently—said again, more coldly this time. “You weren’t in your room. I knew I’d find you here, although I thought to find you alone.”

He looked pointedly at John.

“And this must be John Watson.” Mycroft’s piercing eyes swept over every inch of John, taking in and cataloguing each tiny detail of his appearance. John had rarely felt so vulnerable, but he held his gaze steady and did not flinch.

“I must say,” Mycroft continued, ignoring his brother entirely for the moment, “I am disappointed, sir. I offered you a home and a safe convalescence. I thought to offer you employment—indeed, I have a position hand-picked for you. I did not expect you to take advantage of my hospitality in such a vulgar manner.”

John’s hands tightened into fists.

“Still,” he went on, “I believe you could be useful to me. I could send you out on little tasks—I do so hate running about myself. I would pay you a meaningful sum of money on a regular basis to ease your way, John.”


“Information gathering in India; perhaps Afghanistan, as well. Nothing indiscreet. Nothing you’d feel uncomfortable with. Just enough excitement to remind you of your glorious war days.”

“What do you—? Are you a spy?” John asked in amazement.

“He’s not a spy,” Sherlock said quickly. “In fact, quite the opposite. He works for—and occasionally stands in for—the highest levels of the British government.”

At the same time, Mycroft interjected: “I haven't mentioned a figure.”

“You needn’t bother,” John replied. “It matters not a whit to me who you work for. I’m not leaving England again. Not… not now. I will not work for you, and if you require repayment for expenses related to my keep over the past months, I shall find another way to raise the money.”

Mycroft raised an eyebrow and looked between John and Sherlock curiously. “You’re very loyal, very quickly.”

John flushed and made no reply.

Sherlock sighed crossly. “Stop this, Mycroft,” he said. “Your interest now is not with John, but with myself. John—please—leave me with my brother.”

Now it was John’s turn to look surprised. He pulled Sherlock aside and spoke to him under his breath: “I fear to leave you alone with him.”

“He will not lay hands on me,” Sherlock replied lowly. “It is not his method. Go to the garden. I shall meet you there directly.”

“Are you quite sure? You are safe?”

Sherlock smiled slightly. “I am not in danger of physical harm.”

John nodded tightly. “If you are not in the garden within one hour, I shall return—and I make no promises about your brother’s probable wellbeing in such a case.” He turned and left the room,
scowling at Mycroft Holmes as he went.

Sherlock and Mycroft faced each other from across the room, eyes locked and glaring.

“His intentions cannot be—” Mycroft began, but Sherlock cut him off.

“This is not about John. This is about your desire to—to control me. Mycroft, I was not well when I came home to the Manor. I freely admit that. I had been unhappy within my own mind, and I allowed this unhappiness to lead me down dangerous paths. But I am well now. I am well, and I am once again my own man.”

Mycroft sighed. “I cannot trust that this will last, Sherlock. The danger, should you fall back into your old habits—it is too great a risk.”

“Look at me, Mycroft. Observe my person. You have no cause, perhaps, to trust me, but you can trust your own powers of observation and deduction.” Sherlock’s usually imperious tone had become softer and almost pleading.

Mycroft crossed the room. He put his hands on his brother’s shoulders and held him still, looking Sherlock full in the face for several long minutes. And this is what he saw: a man who glowed with wellbeing; a man whose rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes, whose sturdy musculature and steady posture spoke of health and—yes!—even of happiness.

“You are well,” Mycroft finally said in wonder.

“I am,” Sherlock said. “John, and my friends, and the garden—they have made me well.”

It took Mycroft Holmes several long minutes to truly understand and believe the man standing before him, so different was he from his brother as he had last seen him. Indeed, his eyes dimmed, and he found it necessary to put a hand to his head and steady himself with several deep, fortifying breaths before he could continue.

"Take me into the garden, brother," Mycroft said, when he could safely speak. "And tell me all about it."

And so the brothers, side by side, walked out towards the garden which need not, ever again, be a secret from anyone.

The place was a wilderness of autumn gold and purple and violet blue and flaming scarlet and on every side were sheaves of late lilies standing together—lilies which were white or white and ruby. Sherlock remembered well when the first of them had been planted that just at this season of the year their late glories should reveal themselves. Late roses climbed and hung and clustered and the sunshine deepening the hue of the yellowing trees made one feel that one, stood in an embowered temple of gold. The newcomer stood silent just as Sherlock and John had both done when they came into its grayness. He looked round and round.

"I thought it would be dead," he said.

"John thought so at first, too," said Sherlock. "But it came alive."

Mycroft nodded, still looking with astonishment at the garden around him.

“I have been puzzled, though,” Sherlock continued hesitantly. “Why did you lock it up? Why bury the key? I was gone away, you were almost always away—why not just leave it to the gardeners? It makes no sense.”
Mycroft pursed his lips and looked away from Sherlock. “Sentiment, little brother. Only sentiment. It makes no sense, but I could not bear for the garden—our garden—to grow and flourish in beauty and health while you… declined. I could not bear it. Your loss, Sherlock, would break my heart.”

And then it was Sherlock’s turn to look away and blink his eyes very fast and swallow around the lump that came up in his throat.

And then John came up, and Gregory behind him with eyes like a hawk, and no one spoke very much but words were not necessary when eyes, hearts, and souls spoke with such eloquence. The garden itself was the only witness to this excellent reunion.

* * * * *

Mrs. Hudson’s duties rarely took her far from the kitchen, but on this occasion she made an excuse to carry a tea tray up to Miss Hooper’s room. Mrs. Hudson, knowing Molly had seen Mycroft that day, hoped that she might have gleaned some information about his attitudes towards his brother, now that he had finally come.

One of the windows in Molly’s room looked out upon the courtyard, and gave also a glimpse of the lawn. Before long, Mrs. Hudson and Molly were standing together in the large bay window, watching first as John strode angrily out of the house, making for the garden with a face of thunder; and afterwards, as Sherlock and Mycroft walked slowly together across the lawn in the same direction, talking together animatedly.

"How did he seem?" Mrs. Hudson asked Molly. “What was his disposition?"

Molly took a delicate sip from her tea cup and shrugged her shoulders. “Who can tell? He’s harder to read than Sherlock, even. He seemed, perhaps, a bit stunned. That is all.”

"Hmm," Mrs. Hudson answered with a shrewdly significant air.

"He said he would be up to see Sherlock shortly" suggested Molly, “but when I looked in afterwards to inform Sherlock of his brother’s sudden arrival, he was not in his room.”

"Was he not with John, then?" returned Mrs. Hudson.

“I went to look, of course, but John was also gone.”

"They were off somewhere together?" said Mrs. Hudson, hastily overfilling her teacup in her excitement.

"Aren’t they always?" and Molly gulped down half of her cup in one sip. Her hands shook, slightly.

"I’ll tell you this,” Mrs. Hudson said after a pause. “There have been things going on in Holmes Manor of which Mycroft knows nothing—to the detriment of all involved. The sooner he knows all, the better.”

"Oh, lord,” Molly fretted. “They are such fools together! It should not have happened in this way."

Mrs. Hudson shrugged. It was done now, for better or for worse.

And it was not two minutes later that she waved her cup solemnly toward the window which took in through the shrubbery a piece of the lawn.

"Look there," she said, "if you’re curious. Look what’s coming across the grass."
When Molly looked she threw up her hands and gave a little shriek of delight.

Across the lawn came Mr. Holmes, smiling broadly and resting his hand on his brother’s right shoulder. Molly had never seen him look so pleased. And beside him, Sherlock walked with his head up in the air and his eyes full of laughter, his left hand clasped tightly in that of a smiling John Watson.

Chapter End Notes

Tiny epilogue to follow...
In each century since the beginning of the world wonderful things have been discovered. In the last century more amazing things were found out than in any century before. In this new century hundreds of things still more astounding will be brought to light. At first people refuse to believe that a strange new thing can be done, then they begin to hope it can be done, then they see it can be done — then it is done and all the world wonders why it was not done centuries ago. One of the new things people began to find out in the last century was that thoughts—just mere thoughts—are as good for one as sunlight is, or as bad for one as poison. To let a sad thought or a bad one get into your mind is as dangerous as letting a scarlet fever germ get into your body. If you let it stay there after it has got in you may never get over it as long as you live.

So long as John Watson’s mind was full of dark thoughts about terrible happenings and bleak futures, he was a sickly, wretched, and unhappy man, unlikely to ever recover from his injuries and lead a full life. Circumstances, however, were very kind to him, though he was not at all aware of it. They began to push him about for his own good. When his mind gradually filled itself with robins, and moorland cottages, with friends, with springtime and with secret gardens coming alive day by day, and also with a deep and profound love for another man, there was no room left for the disagreeable thoughts which plagued his recovery.

So long as Sherlock, shut up in his room, thought only of his weakness and fury and pain, he was a hysterical half-mad creature who cared nothing for anyone or anything and did not know that he could be well again. When new beautiful thoughts began to push out the old hideous ones, life began to come back to him, his blood ran healthily through his veins and strength poured into him like a flood.

Much more surprising things can happen to any one who, when a disagreeable or discouraged thought comes into her mind, just has the sense to remember in time and push it out by putting in an agreeable determinedly courageous one. Two things cannot be in one place.

"Where you tend a rose,
A thistle cannot grow."

John Watson and Sherlock Holmes had many, many years together to learn and forget and relearn again the truth of these words. They made their home in London, but travelled frequently back to Yorkshire to sit in their garden—often with Gregory, and sometimes with Mycroft and Molly Hooper and Mrs. Hudson, as well—and to reflect with gratitude and wonder on the felicitous and unlikely circumstances which had brought them together.
THANK YOU for reading and commenting and following along with me this summer! Your comments and encouragement have meant so much to me. It's been a joy!

XOXOXOXOXOX

Come find me on Tumblr; I'm doctornerdington over there, as well.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!