The Holly and the Ivy

by okapi

Summary

Holiday ACD ficlets, most written for the Watson's Woes WAdvent celebration. Chapters 1-6 are from 2015. Chapter 7-13 are from 2016.


Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The Christmas Wreath

Chapter Summary

**Prompt:** Doors and/or windows.

A surprise gift prompts Watson to remember his late friend.

I smiled at the unwrapped parcel.

I smiled because it was the finest example of a Christmas wreath that I had ever had the good fortune to view. I also smiled because it called to mind my old friend, the late Sherlock Holmes.

I judged the wreath to be a token of gratitude from a generous and, given its beauty and lushness, prosperous patient, but this was a mere guess. I knew that were my old friend at my side, or looking over my shoulder as was his want, the gift’s precise providence would be laid bare. With once glance, Holmes would proclaim its origin, and when queried as to his reasoning, would regale me with a litany of minute observations of, say, the crease in the brown paper or the twist of the bow or the stroke of the pen on the card that bore my name alone.

The wreath itself also reminded me of an occasion some years prior, when, on return to our lodgings following a case too insignificant to warrant my chronicling, Holmes and I passed a similar specimen in a shop window. When I expressed my appreciation, Holmes replied,

“Holly for domestic happiness. Cedar for strength. Blue spruce for hope in adversity.”

I stopped and stared at him.

As I have recorded previously, Holmes’s knowledge of botany was variable. He was well-up on poisons, but had no knowledge of practical gardening, so I was surprised to discover that he had acquired—and retained—something as prosaic as the language of flowers.

Holmes chuckled.

“My dear Watson, my vocation is to make clear that which is obscure. To find meaning in dancing men or orange pips or,” he gestured to the wreath, “an admiral display of seasonal flora.”

And for the remainder of our walk to Baker Street, he recounted the remarkable tale of one of his early cases, in which being proficient in said language had, indeed, proved not just useful, but life-saving, to him.

I smiled and thought what a handsome addition the wreath would make to the exterior of my quiet Kensington practice. And as I carefully set about mounting it to the door, I considered the message hidden in its boughs. There was cedar and blue spruce as well as boxwood.

“Constancy,” I whispered to myself. “And rosemary for remembrance and mistletoe, which means,” I thought of my friend and all we had shared,

“‘I surmount all difficulties.’”
By Candlelight

Chapter Summary

**Prompt:** Candlelight
Watson sleeps, Holmes muses.

Chapter Notes

Takes place at the end of "The Blue Carbuncle."

I bent to blow out the candle.

My companion had fallen asleep in his armchair. I say *his* because, regardless of circumstance, it belonged, and ever would belong, to its current occupant.

I confess that my normally impervious transport was beginning to feel the effects of the late hour and the evening’s feast as well. The woodcock had proved a delightful supper, more than worthy of the Montrachet that accompanied it, and the combination of the two, with perhaps the added satisfaction of witnessing a puzzle solved and a bit of seasonal forgiveness bestowed, had carried my faithful Boswell surely and swiftly to the land of Nod.

How could it not?

I studied his countenance by the glow of the dying fire and a single taper. The lines and crevices of his face told me of his loyalty, his bravery, his patience, his good humour, and his good will towards all, in every season, but especially this one.

A lie, of course. A trick of the candlelight, which, like the siren’s song, tempts even the most rational mind—and surely mine is the most rational in London, if not all of England—to poetic musing.

The man’s grooming, his clothing, even the way he had folded himself most comfortably into the armchair suggested certain aspects of his life, but to know his true character I would need more.

And more I had: his willingness to follow my instruction like a battlefield soldier; his unflinching courage in the face of danger to his own person and mine; his forbearance of my eccentricities; his pawky jests; his indefatigable compassion and generosity of spirit. Of each, I had ample proof.

I fetched a wool blanket as stalwart and unflagging as its intended beneficiary, and with it tucked tenderly and securely around his sleeping form, I bid him a whispered ‘Good night’ and snuffed out the flame.

Candlelight cannot dupe my eyes into seeing what my heart has long since known.
The Holly and the Ivy

Chapter Summary

Prompt: Good cheer.
Watson indulges in a bit of childhood nostalgia on a snowy Christmas Day.

Chapter Notes

Inspired by children’s book Stranger in the Woods by Carl R. Sams II and Jean Stoick. Please note that much of the fauna (especially the birds) is wrong for the setting. Apologies. Hope you still enjoy it.

My held breath escaped in a thin, frosty cloud.

The birds arrived first. They always did.

The earliest guests were a pair of little brown fellows whose bravery was, no doubt, fuelled by winter hunger. They flitted back and forth from the much-abused hat, with its furrows brimming with seed, to the gnarled nose, perfect for perching and twittering the joyous news of their find. Their chirps must’ve contained both invitation and particulars for very soon came the cardinals, bright splashes of red against a world of white and brown and grey. They were followed by the jays, no less elegant in their blue suits striped with black and white.

Moments later, fur joined the feathered fete as an intrepid squirrel scaled the mound with the grace and ease of a seasoned orienteer and swiped the two nut-eyes from their sockets with the panache of a legendary jewel thief. As he carried off his loot, a trio of mice appeared from an un-seen burrow and began to nibble at beak-and-wing-scattered seed. A thick-coated hare twitched in a dark copse. He watched, as I did, from a distance, but his keen eyes must’ve spotted the carrots staked round the base, for in a flash he was pulling up to the table and feasting alongside his neighbours.

The owl’s hoot and the doves’ coo formed appropriate fanfare for the final arrival: a young buck, marching through the snow as proudly and princely as a fairy-tale hero. Flanked by doe and fawn, the handsome nobleman approached the celebration, and, as was his due, took the choicest offering, the thick carrot-nose, for his own. The hare fled, leaving plenty of carrots for the missus and youngster.

I watched the festivity from my crouched hiding place until only a few straggling sparrows remained. As absorbed as I was in the spectacle, I hadn’t noticed the icy air creeping into my joints. I made to rise and discovered that I could not. About to topple into the snow and undergrowth, I cried out, startling the last of the birds.

A strong arm quickly wrapped ‘round my waist. It steadied me and then slowly raised me to my feet.

“Watson.”
I turned. “Holmes! I thought you were back at the inn, with your claret and biscuits by the fire.”

“I was, but a new case developed.”

“Another?” I shook my head. “Who would’ve thought this quiet snowy hamlet such a cesspool of yuletide villainy?”

Holmes smiled. “And I’ve just solved it. You may title it, The Mystery of the Absconding Physician. He disappeared with a bag of seed, a bundle of carrots, and a felt hat that would make the one worn by our old acquaintance Mister Henry Baker look positively regal by comparison.”

“My troves were not purloined, Holmes; they were uprightly bought from the innkeeper’s wife.” I gestured to my creation. “My brother and I used to fashion such snowmen. It was our childhood sport to see how many woodland creatures we could attract.”

“You have bested your record with that festive gentleman.”

I shook my head. “No, one year, we managed to tempt a badger with a bit of buttered-parsnip-filled antler.”

“But this year you have lured a much more ferocious beast out of his den and into the cold, a detective content with his spirit and sweet by a glowing hearth. What say we return to the inn for a glass of good cheer?”

“Lead on,” I said, laughing.

“And I deduce that there were at least two animals missing from your Christmas feast.”

“Which ones?”

“A pair of plump woodcocks, the guests of honour at ours!”
The Season of Forgiveness

Chapter Summary

Prompt: Trimmings
Watson finds a way to reach a troubled Holmes.

It was in the winter following the spring of Holmes’s miraculous resurrection from the dead that my fears about his well-being came to a head. It seemed that he had emerged from the grave only to send himself right back to it. He slept little, he ate less, he smoked constantly, and I knew that on more than one occasion he had also indulged in the darker of his habits of which I have written in earlier tales. In the rare instances when his body’s need for rest betrayed him, he slept fitfully and woke startled.

He took every case that crossed the threshold of 221B. Some were mere trifles, lost dogs and unfaithful sweethearts and the like. He solved them in minutes, sometimes seconds, but he solved them all. Of the more substantial cases, he would take on four, five, sometimes six at once so that he was constantly rushing between carriages and trains in all corners of the great city and, indeed, the entire country.

One very long train journey found him curled against the window with eyes pinched shut and me keeping worried vigil opposite him. A piteous whimper escaped his lips, and I resolved at once to do something to address the situation.

My first instinct as a physician when confronting a challenging case is to consult a colleague with a depth of knowledge of the matter. In this particular matter, there was only one.

“Mrs. Hudson, Holmes…”

And let it never be said that there is only one resident of the Baker Street lodging in possession of keen powers of observation, for with only those few words, she knew my mind.

“Perhaps a bit of Christmas cheer in the flat would remind him that it’s the season of forgiveness.”

“But my dear woman, I did forgive him. I said so plainly and sincerely months ago.”

She put a hand on my arm. “But perhaps it’s he who needs to forgive himself to put the past to rest. It haunts him so.”

I turned her words over and over in my head. By morning, I had a plan and secured my worthy counsellor’s assistance in securing the necessary provisions.

On Christmas Eve, I appeared in the sitting room with a stout fir in hand. Holmes snorted, but said nothing. Then Mrs. Hudson arrived with a tray laden with bowls and string. She set it on the table, and I went to work.

I moved slowly, deliberately, methodically. I forgot the world around me, including Holmes, and focused solely on the task at hand. I took a berry and then a nut and then a piece of holly and then a bit of dried fruit. I strung each with care and purpose. They sat side by side like prayer beads and so
they were, for with each movement, I bid Providence to grant my friend a blessing. I wished him peace of mind and calm and comfort and compassion and mercy and courage.

Piece by piece by piece, I prayed.

I had cut and knotted the first strand and was preparing a second when his voice broke the silence.

“Whilst away, I spent some days with the head lama in Lhasa.”

I stopped my work, but did not look at him. “So you said.”

He hummed.

“It is a pity that Providence saw fit to place you a long line of men of action, Watson. The contemplative life might have suited you.”

“I am no monk,” I said. I looked up at him, and he laughed, the first genuine laugh I’d heard issue from his lips in months.

It sounded like, well, an answer to prayer.

“Would you care to join me?” I asked, gesturing to the table.

“Certainly not.”

My hopes fell.

“But I will provide musical accompaniment.” He reached for his violin and launched into a jaunty ‘God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen.’

He played every tune of the season. Twice. I finished the garland and moved on to cutting and assembling paper chains. At some point Mrs. Hudson must’ve made a second visit because when I looked up, there was a pile of gilded pinecones, a bundle of candles, and a glass star on the table as well.

As I manipulated the paper, the melody changed to an unfamiliar one. I stopped and closed my eyes and listened.

It was, I realised without knowing exactly how, Holmes’s composition.

It was his song. It was his life.

His three years. The sadness, the danger, the fear, the horrors and strife, all laid out in notes and the scratching of string on string.

Then finally the darkness lifted, and the music became sweeter and hopeful, and then it shifted once more.

Right back to ‘God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen.’

I stood. “This is a two-man job,” I said, indicating all the decorations heaped on the table.

He lowered his instrument. “Oh, fine. But after our toil, you will allow me time to make myself presentable and we shall venture out and dine handsomely. I am in the mood for a pheasant with trimmings as delicate and delightful as the ones you’ve so carefully and lovingly crafted.”
“Happy Christmas, Holmes!” I cried.

He blushed at my florid expression but nevertheless returned it with one of his own. “Happy Christmas, Watson. And may our year to come be as bright as this shining star.”
An Undigested Bit of Duck

Chapter Summary

Three spirits visit Watson on Christmas Eve.

Chapter Notes

Borrowing the dressing gown from methylviolet10b's fic Many Gifts.

Stave 1

Sherlock Holmes was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. Now for two reasons I can’t say that he was dead as a door-nail or a coffin-nail or any other sort of nail, the first being the fact that he had met with a watery grave, which is more ethereal than the conventional landed sort and thus less appropriate for ironmongery similes. The second reason is that I cannot imagine anything related to Holmes, including his demise, being associated with something as prosaic as a nail unless, of course, it was a nail tipped with a rare Oriental poison, fixed in an ivory box, set to spring like a coiled viper, and sent through the post to its intended victim.

But I digress from the point, which Holmes would’ve told you, had he not been dead, was the chink in my literary armour, bar none.

I knew Holmes was dead. How could it be otherwise? I had seen with my own eyes the single set of his footprints at that fateful spot beside the Swiss fall along with sure evidence of a violent struggle. And most telling, any corporal sign of the man himself had vanished. So there is no doubt that Holmes was dead. This must be distinctly understood or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am to relate.

It was the first Christmas following my dear Mary’s death, and I was feeling the loss of her acutely. As anyone in my position can tell you, the first major celebration following the death of a loved one is the most painful. With passing years, one learns to make accommodations, and time itself lessens the suffering bit by bit. But that first year, one is simply and plainly at a loss, and my loss was compounded by the absence of Holmes. I was without his companionship and his marvellous cases, the latter of which would have served as worthy distractions from my grief.

Indeed, Christmas seemed to be all about me, in the shop windows and on the lips of people as they spoke of their preparations, but it never ventured farther than my eyes or ears. That is to say, it never made its home in my heart. Christmas was for other people. Not me.

This is, of course, an exaggeration, another of the more irksome features of my writing as identified by Holmes.

I did make a few nods to the season. Of the first, it is better said it was made for me, in the form of a beautiful wreath that was gifted to me by a grateful patient, and given the paucity of patients I saw that winter, I can say, without embellishment, that it hung with far more majesty than its supporting
door deserved.

The second nod was my feast on Christmas Eve. I dined at an establishment that, to my admittedly biased view, seemed to be catering to my sort as it was full of lonely and solitary men of varying stages of life. Bachelors by choice or by fate, we were each stationed at our own separate island connected only by waiters shuttling back and forth from the kitchen.

My dinner had been not the goose or pheasant that Holmes had always favoured, but rather a duck, which when served, as it was, with a superior sauce and fine trimmings elevated its humble status among birds to something that, no doubt, would’ve been the recipient of a word or two of praise from the ‘fowl fancier’ himself.

And now upon returning to my lodgings and ensconcing myself by the fire, I gave my final nod to the season by selecting that quintessential tale by Mister Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, as my night’s companion. I suspected, and quite frankly desired, for there is nothing as heart-wrenching as crawling into an empty bed that was once shared, that the combined effect of the meal, the fire, and the late hour to be a soporific one and was not disappointed when, before Scrooge had even inquired about the continued existence of prisons or poorhouses, my eyelids drooped.

I heard a rustling. My eyes flew open.

Holmes stood before me. The same face, the same form, the same wardrobe, but transparent.

A ghost.

“Who are you?” I asked.

The ghost huffed impatiently. “Really, Watson.”

“Sorry,” I gestured to the book threatening to slip from my lap. “I believe that is my line.”

“I am simply the result of an underdone potato,” the spectre said.

“The potatoes were not underdone!” I replied hotly, puzzled at my own vehemence.

“An undigested bit of duck?” it suggested. “More fair as it places the onus on your system rather than the cook’s. It was a most excellent duck.”

A half-smile twitched on my lips, then I looked down at the book and frowned. “You are no Marley.”

“You are I were partners, business partners in the industry of solving puzzles and shedding light on obscure and vexing problems. We were, I like to think, kindred spirits, but alas, of course, not precisely, like minds, my mind being far superior to yours in both sheer capacity and frequency of exercise.”

Now you might have thought that such an insult would’ve provoked me, and it did. It brought a smile to my face. Here was the man I had known and held so dear!

“Holmes!” I cried warmly.

The spectre returned my smile. “Watson.” Then it picked an invisible speck of lint from its trousers. “And moreover, can you imagine me in chains?” It shuddered.

“And I am already versed in the true meaning of Christmas, no roads to Damascus or epiphanies are
required of you,” I added solemnly.

It was the spectre’s turn to give cry. “You bludgeon your liturgical references as horridly now as ever! Ah, it warms my, well, not precisely ‘heart’ and, well, not precisely ‘warms’ either…”

I interrupted its rambling. “So why are you here?”

“It is Christmas Eve and my Watson is lonely. Where else should I be?”

“Ah.” My eyes went to the dying fire.

“You will be visited by three spirits, three separate incarnations of me, to keep you company this night. Expect the first tomorrow when the bell tolls one.”

“I welcome them.”

“Sleep well until then, my dear man.”

And with that, it faded into the mist.

Stave 2

I had no trouble falling back into a dreamless sleep, from which I woke when the bell sounded. One. A curtain was drawn aside by an invisible hand, and there was the ghost again, this time dressed exactly as I saw Holmes on that remarkable day when Stamford first introduced us in the hospital laboratory.

“Ghost of Christmas Past!” it exclaimed, with arms wide.

“You look splendid.”

“Thank you. So here we go.” It clapped its hands, and we were back in the flat on Baker Street. “Do you recognise…?”

“Of course, I recognise it, don’t be daft as well as insubstantial,” I admonished.

“Do you recognise the evening?” it replied testily.

I stood and studied the two plates on the table. They were littered with the vestiges of a lavish dinner. Woodcock. That narrowed the possibilities, but not by much. The bottle of Montrachet was, however, more telling.

“The Christmas of the Blue Carbuncle!”

The spectre nodded.

There was I, dozing by the fire in my armchair, and there was Holmes, making to put out the lone candle. He stopped and stared at my sleeping form and I tell you quite honestly that in that moment I saw something in his expression that I had never before seen: raw, pure, unfiltered, undiluted sentiment.

“Oh, Holmes.”

The spectre gave a wry smile. “Yes, I was master of disguise, wasn’t I? Keeping the depth of my feeling far more camouflaged than my stature or build or this very distinctive nose.”
Holmes draped a heavy mantle around my sleeping form. Then he bent over the candle and with a puff of breath, the scene went dark.

Another clap.

Now we were in a forest thick with snow. I saw myself crouching behind a mass of vegetation, watching a bevy of woodland creatures approach a snowman that I had just assembled and purposely festooned with carrots and seeds. My eyes were fixed on the animals, and some paces away, there was Holmes, his eyes fixed on me. His delight was clearly equal to my own.

I cleared my throat. “That tiny village, I forget the name. I believe this evening ended in dining on woodcock as well.”

“Yes,” said the ghost. “Every man has his weakness, doesn’t he?”

“And these are the shadows of the things that have been?”

“Yes.” The word was soft and gentle.

Sadness pressed like a weight on my shoulders. I said slowly and wearily, “Take me back, spirit. Haunt me no longer.”

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**Stave 3**

Like most armchair sleepers, I snore, and I was woke in the middle of a particularly prodigious one when the bell tolled again. One. There was a slit of light coming from the bottom of the door to the adjoining room. Remembering how Mister Dickens’s tale proceeds, I rose from my chair and went to investigate. Upon opening the door, I was greeted by an astonishing sight.

The ghost, dressed as in the garb that Holmes was wearing when I last viewed him alive in Switzerland, was standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by birds.

Live birds. They were squawking and cooing and cawing and quacking, in essence, making all the noises that birds are said to make. They were pecking at the floor and the walls and each other. They were waddling and shuffling and trotting hither and thither about the room. One particularly bold specimen was nipping at Holmes’s trouser leg.

And they were not just any random assortment of birds. From what I could tell, the flock was primarily composed of pheasants, geese, and a few duck.

And woodcock! So many woodcock!

The spectre extended his arms. “Who needs chains, my dear fellow, when one has feathers?”

“What is the meaning of this, Holmes?”

“These are all the birds who have graced my plate both at Baker Street and abroad.”

I burst out laughing. “So that makes *them* the Ghosts of Christmas Pheasant and not you, my dear man.”

The spectre smiled. “I see that your humour has not been entirely extinguished by your sorrowful circumstance. Come, let us leave our fowl friends and go in search of human ones.”

It clapped its hands, and we were in the home of another.
“Mother Lestrade?”

“Yes?”

“I believe we are ready.”

“We’re not expecting one more?”

“No. He very politely declined.”

She frowned. “I was so hoping that poor Doctor Watson would be joining us. I hate to think of him alone on tonight of all nights.”

“He has had a very troubling couple of years, what with Holmes’s death and now the loss of his wife. It is a shame that we meet so infrequently now. I once called him a close friend. Ah well, perhaps we should have a toast in his name?”

“Of course. Listen, everyone, quiet down!”

Lestrade raised his glass. “To John Watson, a noble soul, a stalwart companion, a faithful friend. Peace and comfort to you, sir, wherever you may be.”

“Here, here!”

My eyes were wet. “And to you, my friend,” I said quietly.

A clap of hands and we were somewhere else.

A steaming cup of tea was being offered. “Here you go.”

“Thank you, my dear.”

“By the look on your face, your thoughts were very far away.”

“Yes, I was thinking of my former tenants, Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson.”

“Former?”

“Yes, the one married, I hear that he’s a widower now. And the other died abroad.”

“How horrible!”

“Oh, they were horrible. The worse tenants I ever had! Untidiness, music at strange hours, revolver practice indoors! The smells! The stains on the carpet! And that tobacco!”

She fell silent. Then she raised her cup. “Happy Christmas, Doctor Watson! Happy Christmas to you and your horrible, horrible,” her voice broke, “horrible tobacco.”

She sniffed. Then she sipped her tea and stared into the cup and said in a low voice, “I miss them so.”

I gave the spectre a disbelieving look, “I think this one might be a bit of fiction.”

“Not at all.”

I grunted.
“One more,” it said.

This scene was dark. By a sliver of moonlight, I could barely make out the silhouette of a man standing in the mouth of a cave.

“Who is this?”

“A Norwegian explorer named Sigerson preparing to summit an especially treacherous Tibetan peak at daylight.”

I shook my head in puzzlement. “And he is thinking of me?”

“Most assuredly.”

“I do not readily know the man. He is someone whose path crossed mine in the army? Or, perhaps, a former patient?”

“He could be called both for he was at one time your brother-in-arms on the battlefield as well as someone who thrived under your care. And, on this very night, he is undoubtedly thinking of you and wishing you the best.”

“Well, the best to him, too. May he conquer every mountain that life sets before him.”

“I shall ensure your tidings are received and, with that, I bid you a fond farewell.”

Somewhere a bell struck twelve. The ghost disappeared, and a draped and hooded phantom approached.

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**Stave 4**

“So you are the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come?”

The figure nodded. It wore a gown of mouse-grey which might have been Holmes’s old dressing gown were it not for the voluminous hood that concealed the spectre’s face and the fact that the garment appeared to be free of the many stains, rips, and other disfigurements that Holmes had inflicted on the original.

Baker Street. I was seated at a table, stringing nuts and fruit and pieces of holly into garlands. Holmes was behind me, playing his violin. He looked gaunt, haggard, worn, like one afflicted with a serious, long-standing illness. Garlands completed, I switched to fashioning paper chains. My hands stopped and I closed my eyes while Holmes continued to play, and as he played, everything about him seemed to grow lighter. The darkness that clouded his expression dissipated; his steps about the room quickened; his hunched back and shoulders stretched and straightened as if suddenly unburdened. I watched us decorate the tree together, smiling warmly at one another, clearly appreciating a mutual, unspoken jest.

“So it is a lovely dream. Or is this, perhaps, the life after this one?”

The phantom gave a minute shrug.

The mist was thick. Everything was shadow and impression. The scene was Holmes and I, but aged some twenty years or more, in a bucolic surrounding. We were bickering. We were laughing. We were arguing. We were smiling as we always had at one another, only now with far more lines around our eyes and with white—or in Holmes’s case, a distinguished silver—in our hair.
“This is not the future. This is mere fantasy. Or that undigested bit of duck! Sherlock Holmes is dead, to begin with.” My voice grew strident.

At once, my companion’s hood fell back. It was the older, wizened Holmes.

“Have you forgotten your Scrooge?” it asked, nodding to the book clasped tightly in my hand. “Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead, but if the courses be departed from, the ends will change.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “This cannot be the future. Holmes is dead!”

The spectre continued, “You will remember very little of this, Watson. In the morning, you will wake with a feeling of hope and, if not joy, at least ease—“

“You are beginning to sound like a disciple of Mesmer,” I scoffed.

“—but one day, you will re-visit this entire night. For now you see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face. Now you know in part; but then shall you know even as also you are known.”

“Now who is clubbing the Good Book?” I cried hotly. I wanted to force myself to waking and be rid of the whole spectacle.

“Happy Christmas, Watson.”

My pique drown in its earnest gaze. Who was I to say that this was not some sort of manifestation of the spirit of my late friend? To butcher the words of another fine poet, there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in my philosophy. So I replied,

“Happy Christmas, Holmes, and as Scrooge says, ‘I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.’ Thank you for providing me good company on this loneliest of Eves.”

“It was my pleasure, and do not fret, my dear Watson, the seat in the poor chimney-corner will not remain vacant forever.”

And with those cryptic words, it waved a grey sleeve, and all was mist.

Stave 5

When I woke, it was day. I mumbled a ‘God bless us, everyone’ as I retrieved the book from where it had fallen on the floor. It took more time than I care to admit for me to rise and return it to the shelf, so stiff and cold were my settled joints.

I remembered nothing. Life went on much as before. Until, of course, everything changed.

Last night, the dream came to me again, vivid and clear. And when I woke, I remembered everything.

I set myself to transcribe the entirety of my experience before it faded into the mist as the memories of a man my age are want to do. But I have spent too long at my task, judging by the ominous crash that just sounded from the other room. What Holmes can be up to on this bright Christmas morn? Our days still contain their surprises, but I know at least some of what will transpire today: we will bicker, we will laugh, we will argue, and we will smile.

A ghost foretold it long ago.
CRASH!

I dropped my pen and hurried from the room.

BANG!

“Holmes!”

BANG! CRASH!

I covered my face at the burst of green glass shards.

“Ha-HA! Got one!”

I would like to say that the sight of Holmes at indoor revolver practice was a remarkable one. I would like to say that, of course, but history prevents me. The target, however, was novel.

“What has the Christmas tree—“

BANG! CRASH!

Red shards joined the green.

“Ha! Two for three!”

“—done to deserve your wrath?”

“New!” he sneered.

BANG!

“Young!”

BANG!

“Modern-day!”

BANG!

I thanked Providence for seeing fit to only place six chambers in my service weapon and quickly took it from Holmes’s hand.

He flopped down on the sofa and cast a disgusted look over my shoulder. I turned and followed his gaze to the newspaper scattered about the breakfast table in the adjoining room. I took several paces
towards the door and read the headline:

MODERN-DAY SHERLOCK HOLMES SOLVES CHRISTMAS EVE CAPER!

“These young chaps,” I growled as I gathered up the sheets of newsprint. “They can’t hold a candle to you! Your brains! Your daring! ‘Modern-day Sherlock Holmes,’ indeed! The real Sherlock Holmes could’ve solved it in his dressing gown!” As I fed the pages to the fire, my indignation fanned into fury. “They are just posturers! Imitators! Mere reflections!”

“They ARE NOT!” he roared. He rose to his feet with an elegance that belied his years and plucked a glass ball from the tree as if it were a ripe fruit. He advanced on me until our faces were a breath’s distance apart.

“They cannot be a reflection, my dear man, for they have no mirror.” He held the shiny orb high and I saw both our profiles distorted in its curved sides. “It is always ‘a new Sherlock Holmes,’ ‘a young Sherlock Holmes,’ ‘a modern-day Sherlock Holmes.’ And never a new or young or modern-day John Watson! And there is no Sherlock Holmes if there is no John Watson!”

I stared.

He turned and began to pace. “You are the lens through which the world has ever viewed me. These, these ‘young chaps,’ as you so lovingly call them, do not have the luxury of the loyal chronicler John Watson. Nor do they possess the absolute necessity that is the whetstone John Watson. Your mental slowness is the very irritation needed to produce my own flame-like impressions. It is the precise grain of sand that yields the pearl. These scribblers only tarnish my name when they forget yours!”

I smiled. “Breakfast?”

He grunted. “Have you finished recording your dream?”

My mouth fell open.

He rolled his eyes and huffed. “Really, Watson. You had a certain look in your eyes when you woke this morning, a look that I have not seen in quite some time. You did not have it when you retired for the night so it must be something that occurred in your sleep. And you’ve been holed up for the better part of two hours. Your hand is smeared with ink.”

“I’ve had the most singular dream of my life.”

“Then let’s postpone our breakfast and venture out. Both I and the winter cluster will serve as audience to your storytelling.”

I readily agreed. Holmes had convinced me early in our retirement that ‘telling the bees’ referred not only to current news but also past events. As such, I had spent many a morning reading to the hives from both the published and unpublished accounts of our adventures. Holmes always joined me, offering his own commentary. Our reminiscences would sometimes end in raucous laughter, sometimes in petty squabbling, and, on rare occasion, in poignant silence.

As I tucked the tails of my scarf into my coat, I chuckled. “After all these year, you still surprise me: you were shooting the Christmas ornaments for me.”

“I spared your beloved Venetian globes,” he said quietly. Then he opened the door. “Come, let us wish our friends the compliments of the season. Happy Christmas, Watson!”
“Happy Christmas, Holmes!”
Compliments of the Season

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

Inspired by this article on bizarre Victorian Christmas cards. Pope Leo XIII is known to have enjoyed Vin Mariani (a tonic of Bordeaux and coca leaves).

“You’ve had a very good year, Holmes.”

“How so, Watson?”

“Increasing fame. Illustrious clients. Immense practice. You’ve never been in better form, both mental and physical, than in this year.”

A smile tugged at the corners of this mouth. “You may be correct, but eighteen ninety-five is rapidly coming to an end.”

“What would you say to commemorating this very good year with cards wishing compliments of the season to colleagues and noteworthy clients?”

“Ah-ha! I thought as much! You’ve been brooding on the idea for some time, haven’t you? And as always, I am ahead of you.” He unfolded himself from the armchair and strode to the bookshelf. “Here are the cards.” He tossed a brown envelope in my direction. “I leave the wishing to my faithful scribe.”

“Holmes,” I protested. “I have already visited the printer’s shop and selected two possible designs.”

“Cherubim and seraphim? Surely not. Humble bricks and clay, my dear fellow. Proximity to angels suggests omniscience, which would, in turn, be blasphemy—and the greater sin of false advertising.”

“How did you know I had selected—?” I removed a card from the envelope and gasped. “Holmes!”

“The illustration is my own. Art in the blood is liable to take the strangest forms, but once in a while, it takes a quite conventional one as well.”

“Conventional? How in heavens did you come up with—?”

“A dream.”

At this, my eyes instinctively traveled to a floorboard and the old Moroccan case that lay beneath it.
“A sober dream, Watson.”

“Holmes, you might send a card with this scene to Mrs. Violet Morton née Smith—”

“Such an ardent bicyclist is certain to appreciate the transportation theme.”

“—but, despite investigating the sudden death of Cardinal Tosca at his request, you cannot send the Pope a Christmas card featuring a mouse riding on the back of a lobster!”

“Why not? The tidings inscribed upon the charming rodent’s scroll 'paise, joie, santé, bonheur’ are most ecclesiastically sound. And for all the archaic trappings of the office, his Holiness is a man of modern, sophisticated tastes. He appreciates whimsy. Here’s wishing for a bottle of his beloved Vin Mariani in return.”

I shook my head as I crossed the room and, once seated at the writing table, removed the entire set of cards from the envelope.

“Violet Smith, his Holiness.” I set two cards aside. My fingers hesitated on a third. “I’m not inclined to send one to young Mister Gilchrist, our long-jumping, proofs-copying, former university student, whether he actually rose to great heights in the Rhodesian Police or not.”

“No, nor to his accomplice Mister Bannister or even Mister Hilton Soames, the lecturer who interrupted my serious researches in early English charters with his petty academic drama. The case did not, in the end, possess as many features of interest as I first believed.”

“But Mrs. John Vincent Harden?”

“Yes, I think so, with a kind message, if you don’t mind, Watson. She’s a true embodiment of the seasonal virtues of charity and forgiveness. You recall that after learning the truth of her husband’s bigamous life and his self-inflicted death, she succeeded in persuading the courts to lessen Smith’s sentence for the crime of blackmailing his father. Also, because of her generosity, Smith’s mother, the late Harden’s other wife, is no doubt enjoying a far more comfortable Christmas in the first year of her widowhood than she ever did as a married woman.”

I set a third card aside. The card beneath it bore a new—and though I wouldn’t have thought it possible—even more bizarre artistic tableau.

“Holmes!”

“That’s for Hopkins for his assistance with the tragedy of Woodman’s Lee and the circumstances which surrounded the death of Captain Peter Carey.”

“It’s a frog-on-frog murder!”

“For penury gain, you’ll note. One of those for Lestrade as well, although I daresay the credit that he received for single-handedly taking down Wilson, the notorious canary-trainer, is enough reward.”

“Removing that plague-spot from the East End of London ought to be worth something, a pint, a meal, perhaps.”

“When that bottle of Vin Mariani arrives, we will invite Lestrade and Hopkins here for a toast, to their health and professional longevity.”
I smiled. “I will begin with these, and if you think of someone that you wish to add to the list—“

Holmes rose and plucked a card from the set. “The yuletide spirit is fogging your memory, my dear Watson. You’ve forgot our most recent noteworthy case. This one is for Mycroft.”

I stared, open-mouthed, at the rendering of a Christmas pudding with a maniacal grin and wine-bottle legs, then finally whispered, “You will see to that one yourself, Holmes.”

“Naturally. Don’t look so disturbed, my dear fellow. The more avant-garde the illustration, the more heartfelt the sentiment.”

I snorted and set to work.

Days later, however, Holmes’s words returned to me when I found, tucked surreptitiously in the handsome medical text that he had given me for Christmas, at the beginning of the section on cardiac ailments, no less, a card. One side bore a message written in a hand more familiar to me than my own:

*To the very best of men in the very best of years.*

On the other side was a picture of a dead robin, the sight of which, to this day, dear readers, never ceases to warm my heart.
**Mulled Wine (Mature Rating)**

Chapter Summary

“Holmes, you’re certain that I can’t interest you in some of Mrs. Hudson’s mulled wine?” Holmes/Watson. Post-"The Blue Carbuncle." **Mature rating.** Triple drabble.

For the WAdvent prompt: Winter beverages.

Chapter Notes

Reference to Holmes's purple dressing gown in "The Blue Carbuncle" as well as Matthew 6:28-29 of the King James Bible: "And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

“Holmes, you’re certain that I can’t interest you in some of Mrs. Hudson’s mulled wine?”

“No, my good man, I prefer my wine as I prefer my doctors…”

A chuckle rumbled in my belly before he had even finished his ribald jest.

“…unaltered, that is, by anyone but me.”

I cracked an eye at the two mugs on the table within arm’s reach.

“Help yourself to both, Watson.”

“Much though I enjoy it, Mrs. Hudson’s brew is a formidable one, Holmes. I consume the contents of these two cups, and you might well be forced to tuck me into bed like a child!”

“Don’t tease,” he teased and went on teasing. “To your health, Doctor.”

I laughed heartily and raised a mug to him.

“To yours.”

I grinned at the bottom of the mug and mused, “I’m almost mulled myself.”

“Almost?”

I nodded, set the mug on the table, and sank deep into my armchair. My thoughts wandered.

“Considering the lilies of the field, Watson?”

I blinked. “How in heavens—?”
“I bestowed a bit of wisdom and mercy earlier this evening upon poor Ryder, and someone has seen fit to array me in this stately purple raiment. An easy leap.”

My eyelids drooped. My voice was thick. “I should bow before my Solomon.”

Holmes’s reply was scarcely louder than the crackles in the fireplace. “A true sovereign treasures the brave who would, without hesitation, follow him into battle and fight alongside him. A true king kneels and serves.”

I looked down. “Holmes.”

He looked up. “Watson.”

“Finish me,” I groaned, “so I can take my royal liege to bed, strip him of his splendour, and have my muddled way with him.”

He smiled and drank me down as I pushed the head of my prick between his lips once more.
The Gift of Tea

Chapter Summary

Title: The Gift of Tea
Rating: Gen
Length: 500
Content Notes: Holmes/Watson, h/c, implied bed sharing at the end, not technically tea, actually herbal infusion, or tisane for the Poirot fans.
Summary: A bone-coldness grips Watson on Christmas Eve.
Author's Note: For the LJ Holmes_Minor monthly prompt: gift

I wiped the sweat from my brow on the sleeve of my dressing gown.

“No more blankets, Holmes. I’m going to retire for the night.”

“Very well. Good night, Watson.”

He kept his face turned towards the fire, which he’d been disciplining like a strict governess since dinner.

I rose, cast off my layers, and grimaced at the glass on the table beside my armchair. It had been twice filled and twice drained of brandy, to no effect.

Ignoring the familiar tickling of Holmes’s gaze as it danced across my features and form, I approached the stairs and stifled a groan at the effort required to raise a leaden foot.

A stubborn bone-coldness had ambushed me soon after Holmes and I had finished our yuletide feast. Was it a ghost of ailment past? A spectre-child of the present icy weather? Or, I shivered, a portent of things to come?

As a doctor, I might have hazarded a diagnosis. As a sufferer, I merely suffered.

I was cold.

No, cold was me. It had somehow traded places with my marrow and now filled the hollows of my skeleton.

Cold, cold, cold.

I lay beneath blankets, still wrapped in the woolen dressing gown, chanting my body’s mantra. I soon realised, however, that the noise of chattering teeth was, in fact, footfall.

At last, a spark! But like most, fleeting and insubstantial, as it was composed of pique.

“Holmes!” I roared at a volume that neared that of the howling winds rattling the pane. “No cases! You and the bloody King of Proosia can hang!”

“I come bearing gifts, Watson.”
“Holmes.”

He stood in the doorway.

“Try this.”

This, I saw by the light of his single taper, was tea.

“I don’t know what surprises me more,” I leaned forward and inclined my head toward the steaming cup, “that you know how to make tea or that Mrs. Hudson allowed you in her kitchen at this hour.”

“I have an infusing apparatus of my own, Watson, in perfect working order.”

I mumbled something laudatory about chemistry, then sipped, then sighed.

“Oh, that’s good.”

I sat up, took the cup and gestured for him to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Matricaria chamomilla,” he said.

To my ears, the words were both prayer and answer to.

I was warm.

Warmth was seeping, indeed, infusing through every channel of me. I paused, checking with a convalescent’s uncertainty, but no, it was working.

“Christmas miracle.”

“Perhaps.”

I drank more, drank all, and moment by moment, my corpus thawed.

But as welcome as the elixir was into me, it was soon pressing for exit.

I excused myself, taking Holmes’s candle and bidding him stay, but upon return found him mid-snore, slumped, eyes closed, lips parted.

I crawled into bed on the far side and whispered,

“I’m restored, Holmes. You’re a marvel.”

“Cold marvel,” he muttered.

“Shall I make some for you?”

He grunted. “Lend me yours.”

And at that, I drew him into a warm embrace.
“...and then he said, ‘Doctor Watson, I elect to live amongst four million human beings jostling each other within the space of a few square miles so that I might receive hard currency for my services rather than goods in kind, no matter how kindly bestowed. I am not a Neolithic hut-dweller. Or a yeoman farmer.’ Then he waved a hand, and I was dismissed.”

“Oh, don’t mind him, Doctor Watson. I’ve not seen prettier fruit in ages. Set them there.”

I laid the sack of oranges and lemons on the table where bid.

“Perhaps, Mister Holmes is cross because this week you’ve been more my assistant than his.”

“Upstairs you wouldn’t know there was a holiday approaching at all. Down here, well, it’s warm and, frankly, it smells like Christmas.”

“Not that I am not grateful for the additional hands, but have you suggested a tree or the like to His Majesty?”

I shook my head, then plucked an orange from the sack and studied it. “You know, when I was a child, my mother used to make these—“

Suddenly, brown thorns were being poured into a bowl on the table in front of me.

“Indulge yourself, Doctor. Christmas is for remembering the good times.” She produced a length of ribbon and a peeler. I rolled up my shirtsleeves and went to work.

“Beautiful, Doctor. And such a wonderful, rich scent.”

I had to agree. The pomander was handsome, thick orange skin crisscrossed with lines of cloves and wrapped in wisps of green and gold satin.

I inhaled and smiled.

“Why don’t you take it upstairs? Perhaps it will stir a pleasant memory in Mister Holmes as well. After all, he is a sleuth-hound. His nose leads him.”
I grunted.

Holmes glanced at the pomander, then returned to his work. But he had but scratched twice upon the paper, when he sniffed and stood.

“I’ll store it upstairs, Holmes, if it—“

He shook his head and began to pace. “I suppose you go in for those conventions.” The final word was pronounced in the same tone that a vicar might use for ‘perversions.’

“Not the raucous kind,” I said, “after all my nerves are shaken, but a bit of greenery—“

“No tree!” He shuddered.

“No, but a nice meal.”

“I’m a fowl fancier myself. I suppose a nice, plump goose might still be had at this late date.”

“Certainly.”

He took up the pomander and brought it to his thin, hawk-like nose and smiled. Then he strode to the mantle and set the fragrant orb between the stabbed correspondence and the skull.

“I suppose we might have visitors, clients, few though they’ve been, wishing us compliments of the season.”

“A bit of holly and ivy, perhaps?”

His shoulders shrugged.

“It’d be good for business, Holmes. After all, we’re not Neolithic hut-dwellers. Or yeoman farmers.”

He whipped ‘round, grinning. “Quite so, Watson, and if we are not those, then perhaps we should try our hand at being merry gentlemen.”
Holmes and I waited in the darkness.

The door opened. A blue flame appeared.

We sprang to our feet, clapping.

“Well done, Mrs. Hudson!”

“Thank you, Doctor. I told Bessie that I wanted to do something special for you and Mister Holmes this Christmas. It’s so good to have you both back.”

“Plum pudding for two,” said Holmes, “is a most thoughtful home-coming gift.”

The lights were turned up. Bessie swooped in with plates, spoons, and knife. In swift order, the miniature dessert was divided and tasted.

“Excellent!” I exclaimed.

“Indeed,” agreed Holmes. “My dear girl, would you mind lighting that lamp?”

“Certainly, Mister Holmes.”

What followed next was celebratory in its own way. The lamp sparked festively. The curtain began to smolder like ‘dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly.’ Bessie screamed and fled the room. Mrs. Hudson and I quickly responded.

With order restored, I returned to my pudding.

“Oh, my,” I said, pulling a round object from my mouth. “The bachelor’s button! Well, my future’s decided. I suppose that means you have the ring.”

“On the contrary, my dear man, Mrs. Hudson is astute and kind-hearted.” Holmes put two fingers to his lips and produced a second button.

I laughed. “Shall we remain tethered to one another as the years pass?”

“If it suits you.”

“Happy Christmas, Mrs. Hudson.”

She flushed. “Happy Christmas, gentlemen.”

“…so the Doctor got the button?”

“Yes, my dear.”

“Oh, too bad. He’s such an unlucky fellow. Wait, Mister Holmes got the ring?” Bessie giggled.

“Mister Holmes fashions his own luck,” said Mrs. Hudson, “which he is out of if he supposes that I am going to sew that button back on his trousers. We’ll see the ring soon.”

“Where?”

“In a pot beneath his bed.”
“You want me to be a fir, ever green in winter and snow.
You want me to bend like a willow,
but I tell you,
I am another tree!”

I stared. Watson spoke not to me, or more precisely, not only to me. His primary audience appeared to be the Indonesian puzzle box sitting on the mantle above the fire. The box was a wooden affair which had given up its bauble heart long ago. Having seen enough cursed gems, I bid a fond au revoir to the pretty stone, but had kept its teak coffin as a memento of an unforgettable massage at the hands of my faithful companion.

But I digress.

As I warn will occur, for your narrator is also your detective, wolfish sleuth-hound in gentle-lamb’s clothing, and not his beloved Boswell, whom we all agree is a wingless angel misplaced amongst the four million curs of this devilish metropolis. Oh, but you say, Watson veers, too, in his stories, and I agree, he does, horribly, terribly, luridly, so.

And when he does it, you beg for more.

Now where was I?

Oh, yes, the box, on the mantle, ensconced betwixt holly and ivy, silently applauding Watson’s oration. He was quoting something, either butchering it on purpose to make it his own or on accident because of memory’s error. I might stumble upon it one day, scribbled on a sleeve or tucked away in a corner like a cobwebby bottle of Montrachet. It may have been couriered from the future by Mister Wells’ machine into Watson’s brain.

Who knows?

But Watson’s outburst—being apropos of nothing—puzzled me. And when he turned and read my condition on my face, for I did nothing to hide it, he mumbled something about his club and fled the room.
Leaving me with a puzzle box.

And a puzzle.

I passed a moment or two in silent stillness.

In his flight, Watson resembled nothing so much as a fugitive, for surely among grown men of our time, strong and stoic, stalwart and stiff, such an expression of sentiment, of passion, of poetry, egad, was a crime.

Crime against nurture.

Naturally.

I sprang to life and poured myself a whiskey and soda. I do not like whiskey. I have no opinion of soda, save that it manages as well as can be expected aside so many inferior liquors. But were I to understand Watson’s cryptic recitation, I must first step into his shoes, and as they were, for the moment, otherwise occupied on his feet, then his glass must do.

I sipped and hummed and let my eyes rest upon the waxy, thorny Gorgon strands decorating the mantle. The holly and ivy season was well underway, with Christmas and Boxing Day behind us and a new year, indeed, a new century, only one and a half sleeps away.

And my dear man astir about trees, the trees that he was not.

Like dogs sans bark.

Curious, those.

As curious as the fact that Watson had forgot his cigarette case in his armchair. It was a gift of mine, silver with an obscure Latin inscription—is there any other kind?—that meant nothing, except they were the four words that fell from my lips at the precise moment that the scales fell from Watson’s eyes about the depth and nature of my—mercifully, reciprocated—esteem.

And you say, dear God, man, will you get back to the fir? And the point?

If you insist.

I was considering walking a mile in Watson’s tobacco as well as his liquor when I recalled that crafting bricks without clay is often a regrettable endeavour, mostly because one so often mixes generous portions of manure to round out the mould. So I finished my drink and set aside the Watson puzzle, much like an abandoned case or a safeguarded box, and dove headlong into one of my many pending scientific inquiries.

My next clue arrived with Watson himself. He’d not been his club at all. He’d been to the shops. His little sack held soap, toothbrush, tins of items best classified as ‘personal.’ How Watson’s change of toothpowder might be related to his earlier soliloquy, I could not fathom.

We both acted as if nothing had happened and passed the rest of the day and evening amicably.

But the storms were not over. Another thundered the following morning.

“He doesn’t even look like that!”

His newspaper fell. So did mine.
“It’s just like us, in *The Strand.*”

“Hmm?”

“I’m my own man, Holmes! Not just an extension of you! I have my own views, my own person!”

“Of course, you are, do.”

“And the face I show the world need not always be hidden in your shadow or prescribed by…” He sighed a weary, heart-rending sigh. “I’m sorry. The new year. It’s…” He dropped his gaze to table and made a flourish with his hand. “I’m…”

To see a man of words—as well as strength—as well as compassion—my Watson is corpus of so many things, is he not?—at such a loss, how could I not aide him?

“Philosophic?” I suggested weakly.

“Yes.” His relief was pure balm. To be understood is so much like being loved, one hardly notes the costume change. “A new century. Makes you think. ‘Out with the old, in with the new’ and all. Oh, Holmes, I shan’t accompany you to that concert tonight.”

Really, even Captain Basil might have had trouble navigating these changing winds!

“So much horrid German music. Any more introspecting, I’ll shoot the wall!” Then he calmly added, “And I think you’ll agree, the extras on the month’s rent are already considerable.”

I was suddenly awash with guilt. No, not about the rent, the wages of science and justice will ever be villainously stained rugs and smoldering curtains, but about the concert. Upon procuring the tickets, I had amused myself estimating the point in the evening’s entertainment when Watson would erupt into snores.

“It’s your pleasure, not mine,” he said and patted my hand dotingly.

*Dotingly*, I tell you.

Kick me in the teeth. Wrestle me to the ground. But for the sake of all the merry gentlemen resting, don’t *dote* while you speak of my selfish self-pleasuring.

“Very well.” I spoke a bit too quickly and removed my hand from his far too quickly. “I shall be occupied much of the day, but shall we welcome the new century together?”

“Certainly. A toast at midnight.”

I left at first intermission.

Watson stood facing the fire, or more precisely, facing the hawks.

I haven’t mentioned the hawks, have I?

That’s because I knew Watson would. Because he does. Every day.

“These hawks, Holmes, really should be removed to the lumber room.”

A pair of mounted—once mated, it was said—birds were perched on the mantle. They were a gift from a grateful client, a taxidermist whom we’d saved from professional ruin, the gallows, and an
early demise. Yet ever since their arrival, Watson and I had discussed putting them out of sight. Their
stares disquieted both housemaids and delicately-nerved clients.

But I liked them.

I liked their sharp gaze and their handsome plumage and their regal bearing.

And Watson liked them, too, for reasons left unstated. He may, like me, have thought they looked
like us in some other world. Or perhaps he simply appreciated their noble beauty.

Regardless, we never removed them to the lumber room despite agreeing on the decision almost
daily. In fact, in a moment of mulled-wine-induced frivolity, Watson had crowned their heads with
glimmering Christmas tinsel.

“I must make a change, Holmes.”

His words extinguished every flicker of cheer, yuletide or otherwise, in the room.

This was far more significant than toothpowder. My heart began to sink, that sense of horrible,
dreadful, suffocating, doom-falling horror.

“I hope you will accept it in time. Excuse me.” He made for the stairs.

“Watson, no, please stay, talk to me.”

“Enough words. Time to act.”

I turned back to the hawks. They did nothing but glare, silently commanding me to divest them of
their whimsical adornment, which I did.

I threw the tinsel in the fire and watched it burn.

They were right. Now was not the hour for whimsy.

But Watson was wrong. There hadn’t been enough words. Not nearly enough.

I heard movement in his room. Packing? I envisioned his trunk slowly filling with carefully-folded
belongings. No, surely just a valise. He’d go to a hotel or his club.

On New Year’s Eve?

No, he’d go to the new. After all, out with the old, in with the new.

Watson was leaving Baker Street. And me.

I sank into my armchair. There were many possibilities, but that one dogged me through the narrow
streets of calculations and conjectures.

Watson was his own man. Not an extension of me. Not my shadow.

Was he bidding adieu to his address and his consort? Or this whole maddening world?

No!

I rushed to the foot of the stairs. There had been no despondency in his utterances, his manner.
Uncertainty, yes, a bit of despair, then resolve.
Should I storm his bed chamber?

I shuddered, then looked at the hawks, at the puzzle box, at the whiskey, at the fire.

Damn!

I don’t know when I stopped pacing and returned to my armchair, but my head was in my hands and my joints feared the impending ache of movement when I heard his footfall.

Alive, but no trunk. Valise, then.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him pass by me towards the fire.

“I know I have fallen in your esteem,” he said.

“Not possible,” I whispered, turning my head, not towards him, but towards the stairs, then the threshold, where the valise would be…

And was not.

I stood and demanded,

“Look at me, Watson, and tell me plainly what this is about.”

He turned. I gasped.

“I must cross into this new century a clean-shaven man, Holmes. Illustrator and the reading public be damned!”

Now is the moment in my tale when you, gentle reader, succumb to sorrow, but I rejoice!

And in my joy, I threw my arms around my beloved and kissed him soundly.

It was his turn to be unnerved, for outside many sets of closed doors, we’d never expressed our affection so openly.

“I say, Holmes,” he sputtered.

“New century, my dear man.”

“Oh, yes, well. Do you like it?” He touched the expanse of pink, deforested skin above his upper lip.

“I hate it,” I said cheerfully. “It looks some thin-skinned rodent about which the hawks battle over for breakfast,” but before he could frown, I put two fingers to his lips and continued, “but I love you. And you are not a tree or a puzzle or a bird or even a handsome moustache. You are Watson, my fixed point in a changing age, and there is no time, this century or the next, when I shan’t want you by my side.”

He grinned. “That’s quite romantic, Holmes.”

“I’m a modern man.”

“Are you? A drink and a smoke and then we retire to be modern together?”

“Excellent plan.”

I released him.
He patted his sides and looked about. “Holmes, have you seen…?”

I produced the cigarette case.

“My dearest possession and I’m always leaving it somewhere.”

“Thank goodness I’m here to find it, claim it, and restore it to you,” I said glibly.

“Will you?”

Both our hands held onto the case.

I looked into his earnest eyes.

“Will you always restore it to me, Holmes?”

It was an oath. And I spoke it as an oath.

“Yes, Watson, I shall always find it, claim it, and restore it to you.”

He leaned close and pressed his lips to my cheek.

“And for that honour, I shall always be losing it. Happy New Year, my dear, dear man.”

“Happy New Year, Watson.”
Title: The Gifts of the Magi  
Rating: Explicit  
Length: 221B x three  
Content Notes: Holmes/Watson; oral sex; masturbation; feels; references to three gifts of the Magi (gold, frankincense, and myrrh) as today is also the feast of the three kings or Epiphany.  
Summary: Watson gives Holmes three gifts on his birthday.  
Author's Note: For the second year, I baked an epiphany tart (see below) for the birthday of Sherlock Holmes (January 6). It's a simple jam tart. I used strawberry, raspberry, blueberry, blackberry, apricot, peach, and golden plum preserves/jams. I also wrote a bit of smut. Greenaway's *The Language of Flowers* gives 'your purity equals your loveliness' as the meaning of orange blossoms.

My ears prick.

The intruder is well known, his movements alien.

He strikes match, no light greets my closed eyes.

I sniff loudly, announcing that my sleep is feigned, and breathe in a bitter, ancient, heady perfume.

Ah!

The tapers light one by one in my mind.

I smile and sink back into half-sleep.

He should not be so warm on so cold a winter’s morning.

He slips beneath bedding and nightdress like a thief. The gates are unlocked, the intrusion welcome.

He eases me onto my back. My legs fall open.

I breathe in the rich aroma which is now forever bound to the touch of his lips to the crease of my thigh.

I am entombed.

He licks coarse hair, suckles soft sauc, teases shaft’s base.


The room is dark and quiet, but for my breath and his soft reverence.

His holy, holy, *holy* supplication.

He travels up my shaft, slicking it with his mouth’s own water.
My mouth floods in sympathy. I swallow.

Ah!

I dream of shouting, throwing off mantle and pretense, spreading those lips wide with my thrusts, crowding that throat with my engorged prick, demanding the satisfaction of spent seed.

But as he takes me in his mouth and begins to suck, I merely breathe deeply, silently blessing the gift of Balthazar.

“Watson, this blindfold is ludicrous. I’ve already concluded that…”

“Indulge me. Feign surprise as well as you feign sleep.”

I lift, then lower, my leg as commanded.

He removes his shirt.

I sink.

No, I am interred.

The water is hot, sinfully hot.

The air is thick with vapour and fragrance.

Incense, though of a subtler note than the morning’s perfume, but also…

The blindfold is removed.

“Orange blossoms.”

They float before my eyes atop the water.

“The gift of Caspar was never so sweet,” I say.

A damp sponge crosses my back.

“To be born on the feast of the Kings,” he begins.

“And ravished like a queen on her wedding day,” I respond, looking over my shoulder with a smirk. “My purity equals my loveliness. Really, Watson.”

He giggles. I smile.

His face draws near mine.

I nuzzle, he kisses.

“Was there ever a bride cherished such as I?”

“No. Close your eyes. And lips.”

His hands roam. The water ripples.

I sigh and sigh again.
And buck the funeral by launching myself from the water, petals and scent clinging to my wet form, pawing at the jar of unguent, stroking my shaft, then spending myself ‘cross his nude torso.

“You see, Watson, the invigorating home-made article may be, on occasion, preferred over the relaxing and expensive Turkish bath.”

“Many returns of the day, Mister Holmes.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson.”

The table is clear.

Now?

Now.

He smiles and produces the pouch.

I smile, then sniff.


“Oh, you surprise me, Watson.”

“I do no such thing.”

“I deduced that you had purchased a fine tobacco, but I confess that I have never before enjoyed this particular blend,” my voice falls, “of pleasure.”

He flushes, then nods.

“I am quite spoilt because of you.”

“You were that long before I knew you.”

“Rotten is not spoilt.”

He laughs.

The morning’s entombment, the interred bath, the aromatic gold in hand.

My head swims.

I rise and rush him.

“Holmes!”

“Watson.”

“Here? Are you mad?”

“Yes. Watson, please.”

I am in his lap, knees balancing precariously on thighs.

My blood pounds. No further protest. He undoes me and takes me, stretches his lips ‘round my
thrusting shaft, softens his throat for filling.

It is my rough fantasy of the morn. I spend myself quickly with one hand on his head and the other hand holding the purple silk of my dressing gown closed ‘round him.

 Afterwards, we smoke, but it will be two weeks before I find the gold ring, in the pouch, buried in crushed leaf, and feel the heart-flutter of a bride.
We Three Kings

Chapter Summary

Title: We Three Kings
Rating: Gen
Length: 500
Summary: Mrs. Hudson & Mrs. Turner do something special each Christmas
Notes: for the DW Holmes Minor monthly prompt of Christmas carol titles, also for my Ladies Bingo square 'The Theatre.'

They start at the end of January, when they’ve recovered from previous year, and select a Christmas carol as a theme. They are both secretly pleased that this year it is ‘We Three Kings.’

Marie gets to work on the story, and Martha starts to dream of costumes.

By March, the script is ready. Martha laughs aloud when she reads the draft that Marie gives her. While following yonder star, the three wise men will confront a trio of comical quagmires, including stubborn camels and perilous quicksand and deceitful serpents.

Then they assess the previous year’s scenery, props, and costumes, deciding what can be reused and what remains to be forged anew.

There are three figures that will do nicely. Snakes are simple. Camels, not so much. And quicksand! How ever will they show that? They discuss the possibilities over tea and short walks through Regent’s Park.

They meet once a week, more when life allows, and slowly, slowly, everything comes together.

They start to spend the moneys collected from tickets and benevolent patrons of previous years. Marie insists that Martha take charge of the treasury as she has a much better head for such things.

By May, they know what they need and are ready to enlist the help of others.

They collect scraps of fabric and fur, lengths of string and pieces wood, balls of clay and pots of paint.

And they go to work.

The Flower Girls’ Mission is always a fount of assistance in finding the bits and pieces they need as well as extra hands to aide in the show itself.

Some of the girls are quite good.

So is, much to mutual surprise of the landladies, Doctor Watson.

Normally, Mister Holmes confines his support to a generous financial contribution, but this year—
perhaps as a result of Doctor Watson’s teasing that one of the camels bears a striking resemblance to his fellow lodger—he has decided to provide musical accompaniment himself on his violin. Indeed, to Marie’s delight, upon reading her script, he has decided to compose a few jaunty strains to complement the three kings’ travails. A few of the more musically-inclined of the Baker Street irregulars are assigned to noises and percussion additions.

By October, the final touches are being added to it all, and by November, they are in rehearsals.

Once in a while, Marie will look at Martha and Martha will look at Marie and they will both wonder if it is worth it and why they bother when they already have so much work, when life itself is so much work. But then one of them will remind the other that life isn’t all about work, and that is nice to create something quite wonderful out of nothing.

And it is, they will both agree, quite wonderful.

And on the longest night of the year, before a sea of bright smiling faces, the curtain rises, for the first time of a fortnight run, on the Figgy Pudding Marionette Theatre.
What Child is This?

Chapter Summary

Title: What Child is This?
Rating: Gen
Length: 500
Summary: A foundling comes to 221B.
Author's Note: for the DW Holmes Minor monthly prompt of Christmas carol titles.

“What child is this?” wondered Holmes aloud at the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in his armchair.

“A foundling,” announced Watson as he came tripping down the stairs.

“A foundling?” echoed Holmes as he watched Watson scoop the child up in his arms and hold it close to his chest.

“Meaning I found her on my rounds this morning. I asked about, but no one knew her. I notified the authorities. I’m certain someone will turn up. There is, in all probability, someone frantically searching for her at this very moment. But for now, I thought, well, it’s almost Christmas. There ought to be room at the inn made, no?”

“Another inn, Watson! This is no place for an infant!”

“Neither is a basket behind St. Cyprian’s.”

“Mrs. Hudson…”

“Has enough work on her hands. But she has offered to ‘round up the necessary supplies. I will take care of her, Holmes. Look, just look at her.”

Holmes looked.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” cooed Watson.

“She appears well-nourished,” Holmes observed.

“Exactly. Someone has been taking care of her. Don’t worry. I suppose it’ll only be a couple of hours.”

“A foundling, Watson,” said Holmes. “Not a keepling.”

Three days later…

“What child is this?” whispered Watson, with wonder.
Holmes was asleep, in shirt sleeves, stretched out on the sofa, with Violet, for what else could they call her, also asleep, lying on his chest.

Holmes’s eyes fluttered open, and he put one finger to his lips.

Ignoring the caution, Watson said very softly, “Holmes, do you think we could, well, take care of her ourselves? I mean, raise her.”

Holmes’ reply came quick.

“Not here. Early retirement in Sussex.”


“My memoirs,” added Holmes.

Boots pounded on the stairs; the infant startled and began to cry.

“Oh, ho!” called Inspector Lestrade when he appeared in the threshold. “What child is this?”

“Ours,” said Watson defiantly.

“And you’ve woke her!” accused Holmes, who rose and began to pace with the child in his arms.

“Yours, eh? Well, it just so happens I’m looking for a wee thing myself. She was left with a grandmother for the weekend, a grandmother who isn’t, as it turns out, as sound of mind as she appears, the poor dear.” He looked about the room. “Yes, there’s the basket.”

Holmes looked at Watson. Watson looked at Holmes.

“Look at you two. Fatherhood suits you, eh?” said Inspector Lestrade with a smile. “Well, c’mon. I’ll let you bring her to the mother and father yourselves; you can assure them she’s been in good hands all this while. They’re mad with worry.”

“Very well,” said Watson, his voice flat, his expression reserved.

Holmes nodded. “But if they prove unsuitable custodians…”

“Oh, Holmes…”

Holmes and Watson exchanged another look, then Holmes sighed resignedly.

“Very well.”

“But,” said Watson, brightening, “she mightn’t yet have godfathers.”

Holmes’s eyes lit. “An excellent suggestion, my dear Watson. Two shepherds to keep watch.”
Light (Italian Sonnet)

Chapter Summary

Italian sonnet for the Watson's Woes open prompt day. The prompt is light. POV Holmes.

The light from window pane is soft and sweet and beckoning,
beyond the glass, a fire by which a weary sleuth might rest,
find embered pipe and hearth-warmed plate of hearty sustenance.
For it is home that calls and home that draws the reckoning
of comforts dear, and home to share with one loved best
the crests and troughs of every day, tomorrow, times long since.

But then, the belly’s full, the day’s own yarn is spun and wound
‘round rings of dragon pipe-smoke and a night-cap’s good night bliss.
Exhaustion melts before the sight of candlelight’s soft kiss
upon a face held dear, held dear in palm’s caress, and bound
to bid with impish, love-lit gaze, to ask without a sound
‘come, follow me and be my love, no more, no less than this.’
By one lone taper, climbing stairs as cinders gasp and hiss,
then rekindling in darkness ‘til morning’s glory crowned.
Chapter Summary

Apologies to Robert Frost. Retirement!lock.

Whose chair this is I think I know
His place is on the sofa though;
He will not see me sitting here
To watch his garden fill with snow.

My Watson dear would think it queer
To sit apart from fire near
Before the panes, the wild snowflake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives a snore. The rafters quake.
He does not stir, nor does he wake.
Without, the clouds of angels weep
Their downy tears on sea and lake.

The snow falls swift in drift and heap,
As I by pane my vigil keep
Of snow and Watson fast asleep.
Of snow and Watson fast asleep.

What dreams he dreams I cannot know
But hazard I do even so.
Motif of winter’s reverie,
I think, has naught to do with snow.

For on his chest, spread carelessly,
are catalogues of seeds, and he
Has spent the day in study frank
Of verdant possibility.

Of blooms of proud and humble rank
Of borders stone and wooden plank
Of vegetables, picked fresh and new
Of pests to fight and weeds to yank.

He dreams of yellow, pink, and blue
Of all made green and wet with dew
Of bulbs in fecund earth a-steep
Of Nature’s fragrance, cry and hue.

He dreams of sow, he dreams of reap
Of what shall go and what shall keep
Of spring, while curled in winter’s sleep
Of spring, while curled in winter’s sleep

This chair of his I chose I know
So I can watch his garden grow
By tender bud and bravest shoot
Beyond the pane, beyond the snow.

Awake I dream of flower, fruit
Asleep he dreams of stem and root
And while the snow piles thick and deep
We share a reverie to suit.

Our dream is like the hope-full rose
But as I dream, I start to doze
And soon my eyes begin to close
And now…my eyes…begin…to…
The dark, pinpoint orbs which fixed Sherlock Holmes recalled at once the eyes of James Ryder; not for similarity in size, shape, colour, or any other feature save the quality of expression, that of abject plea, of the hopeless and desperate throw itself upon the mercy of another.

“Ah-ha!” rang out the hearty bellow of country innkeeper just beyond Holmes’ right shoulder.

The bird, brown and white, round and plump, endowed with fine paintbrush-worthy feathers, a thin bill and an unsettlingly gaze, attempted flight, and Holmes, as if pinned like a butterfly beneath glass, simply stood and stared. The phrase ‘gaol-bird’ flitted through his thoughts as the wings beat frantically, futilely.

“Yo-ur din-ner, Mis-ter Ho-lmes!” sang the innkeeper joyfully.

Attention wholly diverted to his dinner companion, Holmes had quite forgot the encounter with the bird by the time it made a reappearance on his dinner plate.

The dish was well prepared, but the bird might have been left with claws and feathers intact for all the notice Holmes gave it.

He was occupied with trying to make polite conversation with Watson while not looking at Watson and not smiling at Watson while Watson, a bit better at the game, was keeping up his end of the conversation while trying not to return the looks that he wasn’t receiving from Holmes and also trying not to smile.

In short, they were flirting.

It had been eight months since Holmes’s return; eight months for a debt of a thousand apologies to be paid in full, eight months for grief to fade and wounds to heal, eight months for trust to be rebuilt, stone by stone. Watson was once again living at 221B Baker Street and accompanying Holmes on cases.

The friendship had been mended, and a spark had been kindled.

The case which had brought them to this rural paradise had been solved. They would return to
London in the morning.

But tonight…

Watson was a romantic by nature, and December, with its long nights and mince pies and holly and ivy and peace on earth and good will to all, only encouraged that aspect of his character.

Holmes was quite looking forward to also encouraging that aspect of Watson’s character—and many more aspects of Watson—as soon as that very evening.

They ate. They gave their compliments to the innkeeper and his wife. They retired to their room. They prepared for bed. They slid beneath heavy blankets in their respective, monastic beds.

“Good night, Holmes.”

The mirthful teasing in Watson’s tone was unmistakable. Holmes’ body stirred as he replied,

“Good night, Watson.”

Holmes was taut with anticipation. He was just about to complain that his hot water bottle had gone strangely cold and wonder if he could he share Watson’s or to ask if Watson’s cramp of earlier in the day was paining him still and if so, might he remedy his companion’s discomfort with a bit of massage. He was just about to close the distance between them.

He was just about to say something, to do something, when he fell asleep.

_Sherlock Holmes…_

Two beady, birdy eyes fixed Holmes. The voice which spoke was a kind of garbled coo, but it was the least charming noise Holmes had ever heard. It seemed to pierce his chest like a thin skewer of a knife.

Or perhaps a pointy beak.

_To those who do not show mercy…
...mercy shall not be shown!
The curse of the woodcock be upon you and your foolish heart’s desire!

Even asleep, Holmes was conscious of a spasm of nervous laughter bubbling up from chest to lips.

It was absurd!

What had Dickens written?

‘There more gravy than grave about you.’

Obviously, something about Holmes’ meal hadn’t quite agreed with him, but it troubled him no further that night and when Holmes awoke, it was morning, and Watson was already readying himself for the journey back to London.

“Watson?”
“Ah, you’re awake.”

“Yes,” Holmes’s cheeks warmed with embarrassment as he began to veer into delicate waters, “about last night…”

“You were more tired than you let on, my dear man,” said Watson, good-naturedly. “You fell asleep at once.”

“Yes, well, about that. Matthew 26:41.”

Without a word, Watson smiled a wide, warm smile at Holmes and nodded and returned to packing with military efficiency.

The reference and its implication were clear.

‘…the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.’

But the next opportunity would not be for several days as a case was waiting for them in London. In fact, it was not until Christmas Eve that a certain light appeared in Watson’s eyes.

“Mrs. Hudson outdid herself with this Christmas feast.”

“God bless her,” said Holmes, with a grin, then he added in a teasing tone. “How shall we spend the evening, alone, just the two of us in this great empty edifice?”

“I’m certain there will be some form of entertainment. Look at that! Your favourite, Holmes!”

Holmes gazed at the woodcock and felt a pang of some emotion he couldn’t rightly name, but he quickly banished it and smiled at Watson.

“Indeed!”

“Have a wonderful visit with your sister, Mrs. Hudson.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Mister Holmes…”

“No experiments, I promise.”

“Happy Christmas to you both.”

Holmes felt odd, decidedly odd, but he did his best to hide his discomfort from Watson.

When the front door had closed and the sounds of the carriage had faded, Watson said, “Holmes, I’ve something for you for Christmas.”

“Oh, Watson.”

Holmes was in his armchair. Watson stood and stepped closer and leaned down and put a hand on each of Holmes’s thighs.

As Holmes’ anticipation mounted so did his feeling of uneasiness, raw uneasiness, like a person’s first day at sea. Perhaps something flickered across his face, for Watson stopped and said in a low voice,
“Of course, I’ve misread the situation…”

“No! No, no, no…”

Watson spread Holmes’s legs and lowered himself to his knees. He looked up and licked his lips.

“I shall give you yours immediately after, of course, my dear, dear, dear Watson.”

Watson smiled. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“Please do.”

But as Watson’s hand touched the front of Holmes’s trousers, Holmes felt his stomach twist hard. His mouth began to water, his guts began to churn, spasms of internal muscle and waves of dread began to pulse.

No, no, no…

Watson’s head was bent.

Holmes opened his mouth to issue a warning.

But, no.

BLAAARGH!

After three days, Holmes was well enough to apologise.

“I’ll admit the, uh, sudden onset of the illness left a lot to be desired,” said Watson with a pawkish wink. “But I’m a doctor, Holmes. People entering this world, leaving it, and everything in-between, none of it is a clean, sweet-smelling, predictable business. But what vexes me most about your case is that no matter how I try I simply cannot figure out what it was that caused it. We ate the same foods from the same dishes.” He shrugged and looked with a mother’s pity on Holmes. “And it was a horrible way to spend Christmas, my dear man. You suffered so, but I think you’re finally on the mend.” He stifled a yawn.

“Please, Watson, rest. You’ve been doctor, nurse, and sickbed attendant without respite for three days. Mrs. Hudson has returned. If I require anything, I can call on her or Essie.”

“Bessie,” Watson corrected.

“Bessie. I cannot thank you enough for all you’ve done for me, and as unexpected and unavoidable as it was, I cannot express how disappointed I am that I spoiled our,” Holmes blushed, “Christmas.”

“Don’t worry about that, my dear man,” said Watson. His voice was low and weary, but his palm’s caress of Holmes’s head was affection itself. “We shall ring in the new year famously.”

As Watson left, Holmes heard a cry, a cry that he only heard and only when Watson was not about.

*Kwauk-kwauk-kwauk!*
The curse of the woodcock is upon you!

“Of course, Mister Holmes, Doctor Watson, your table.”

“You’ve been planning this, Watson.”

“Well, I knew it would be a popular place to spend New Year’s Eve, so I got our booking in very early.”

“Good evening, gentlemen. The specials on this final evening of the year: we have a superbly prepared woodcock…”

Holmes went pale as the waiter prattled on.

“We’ll need a few minutes to discuss all the wonderful options,” said Watson. “Um, Holmes?”

“Yes?”

“Would it bother you terribly if I got the woodcock? There’s a new head chef and, well, they say he’s a wonder and…”

“Of course, why should I object to your dinner selection, my dear man?”

“Well, your illness…”

“Should I harbor a grudge against the whole species of fowl on account of one?”

But even as he said the words, Holmes shivered.

“No, but…” Watson shrugged. “Very well. Champagne?”

“Of course!”

The problem was not the one that Watson anticipated.

Holmes was repulsed by Watson’s meal, he was enchanted by it.

It smelled and looked thoroughly delectable.

As Holmes averted his gaze and tried to distract himself from the temptation of the woodcock, he found himself imbibing at a pace a bit swifter than was his wont.

“Goodness, Holmes. You are celebrating,” observed Watson. “Are you certain that you feel—?”

“I’m fine!” Instantly regretting the snap, he added in a soft, apologetic voice, “I’m sorry, Watson.”

“I know I’ve asked you a hundred times a day. It’s just you were very ill, and I know you’ve recovered, I just worry about you.”

“Thank you, Watson. And I so want to take as exquisite care of you as you do of me.” Holmes let his voice fall to a seductive rumble at the final phrase.
Watson grinned. “Tonight.”

Holmes hummed, then his gaze dropped to Watson’s plate.

“Would you like to try some, Holmes? It’s wonderful. Don’t tell Mrs. Hudson but it’s the best I’ve had.”

For an agonizing second, Holmes waivered and then he said,

“Just a bite.”

But nothing happened.

Holmes had his bite, enjoyed it, finished his own meal, assisted Watson in draining the bottle of champagne and left knee-to-knee in a hansom cab for home.

His stomach was fine. He was in no distress, just a bit warm but that was champagne, of course.

By the time they reached the sitting room, they were kissing.

“I can’t wait, Holmes. In the chair. I want to give you your Christmas gift now.”

“My bedroom. There we can commence a mutual exchange of gifts.”

Watson chuckled, and they stumbled together.

Holmes’s skin felt hot, feverishly hot, and he was, quite frankly, eager to be rid of tedious confines such as clothing, which is why he’d suggested his own bedroom though he was just as eager and impatient as Watson.

When they were in Holmes’s bedroom, Watson broke away to remove his jacket. Holmes had already removed his and was unbuttoning his shirt.

Watson turned back to Holmes and gasped.

It was not a good gasp, not the kind a lover wants to hear.

“Howls!”

Holmes looked down and gasped.

His chest was covered in spots!

There were large, angry, red spots, and the moment Holmes saw the spots, he began to itch violently.

And then he began to scratch.

And the noise that Holmes’s nails made against his skin?

*Kwauk-kwauk-kwauk!*

By morning, the spots had become festering boils that both itched and pained; neither cold compresses nor any of the ointments, unguents, lotions or powders at Watson’s disposal brought any
relief. With every passing hour, they cycled through waves of frustration and despair.

Sir James Saunders, that world-renown dermatologist, arrived in the afternoon, and his recommendation came as a shock to both Watson and Holmes.

“Isolation! Asylum!” cried Watson.

“Your case needs to be studied, Holmes. It is strange to the point of singularity, and you are at extraordinary risk, Doctor.”

Neither of them had slept and nerves were frayed.

“It’s fine, Watson.”

“It is not fine, Holmes! I will go with you!”

“You will not. I must get to the bottom of this. I need to discover how to remedy this. Then I will come back to you. I will send letters, messages, every day. Please."

“Every day, Holmes. Or I’m on the first train.”

“Every day. I swear.”

Holmes knew that there would be morphine, and he welcomed it. He dove into sleep as if into a very still lake, slipped beneath the surface, and began to swim towards a sound and a pair of eyes.

Kwauk-kwauk-kwauk!

What must I do to rid myself of this curse?

Kwauk-kwauk-kwauk! You must become friend instead of foe. Kwauk-kwauk-kwauk!

Holmes kept his promise. He dutifully wrote Watson every day. But if by the third day of his confinement, his missives were purposefully vague about his treatment, which had been royally successful, and more detailed about the scenery, his fellow patients—for whom Holmes solved puzzles and offered advice as problems warranted—and how much he adored his Boswell, Watson never questioned it.

Holmes negotiated the use of a small medical laboratory from Doctor Saunders in return for professional services rendered and there he quickly set about one part of his campaign. Soon, he had what he wanted and then, disguised, he set about England, wherever the fens were full, and sowed his seeds, quite literally. The seeds he’d developed would not hurt the woodland birds, but it would give their flesh a flavour bitter to the human palate.

Holmes also physically disturbed legitimate hunters as well as poachers as they went about their sport, becoming a sort of Robin Hood of the feathered world. And he funneled funds to anti-hunting efforts where he thought they might make the most effective in-roads.

Through all this, he maintained his correspondence and his letters became so ardent and longing that Watson was thoroughly distracted and never noticed the many different postmarks on the envelopes.
Finally, Holmes announced his return. The night before he left, he did not need to fall asleep to hear it.

*Kwauk-kwauk-kwauk!*

**Have I become friend? Have I rid myself of the curse?**

*Kwauk-kwauk-kwauk!*

**One last pledge: to never again put our flesh to your lips.**

**I swear! On all that’s holy!**

*Kwauk-kwauk-kwauk!*

“Holmes!”

“Watson!”

They clung to each other in the sitting room.

“You missed your birthday!”

“I’m here now. I’ve a story to tell, Watson, though you mayn’t believe it. If it’s all the same, I’d rather tell it in the morning.”

Watson looked up, eyes shining.

“Mrs. Hudson wanted to prepare a homecoming meal for you.”

Holmes’s reply was almost violent. “No woodcock! Ever! Doctor’s orders!”

“That won’t be a hardship. What little’s to be had these days, or so I’m told, is not fit for table. And I’m quite off it myself after everything that you suffered.”

“Good, Watson, good.” Somewhere, Holmes thought he heard a sympathetic coo. “It’s a much healthier and compassionate attitude toward one of Providence’s most singular creature. Well. Bed?”

“God, yes.”
Chapter Summary

Blitz poem + drabble

For the DW 100 words comm prompts 125 (merry) and 126 (knew/new).

Holly berry
Holly merry
Merry Christmas
Merry witness
Witness belle-and-beaux
Witness mistletoe
Mistletoe murder
Mistletoe gird-her
Gird-her loins
Gird-her coins
Coins carol-phrases
Corns stacked-a-maizes
Mazes wend
Mazes rend
Rend Yuletide-hearts
Rend not-garment-darts
Darts in-and-out
Darts a-sing-a-shout
Shout loud
Shout proud
Proud pony-prance
Proud Mummer-dance
Dance joyous
Dance chorus
Chorus sings
Chorus rings
Rings a-fire
Rings desire
Desire swells-to-bursting
Desire brats-a-wursting
Wursting links-a-kind
Worsting past-behind
Behind fancy-trees
Behind gifts-to-please
Please kiss
Please bliss
Bliss stillness
Bliss will-this
Will-this end
Will-this mend
“Good Lord. Watson?”

“Yes, Holmes?”

“The next time you decide to indulge your partiality for Mrs. Hudson’s Christmas eggnog, would you kindly refrain from writing Yuletide-inspired verse on my shirt cuffs!”

“I knew it! I knew I had written something, but I couldn’t find it anywhere. It wasn’t in any of my note-books. Let’s see. Oh, that’s rather good, don’t you think?”

“An admirable if sophomoric effort, but, going forward, I prefer you keep your merry on paper!”

“Just wait until New Year’s Eve, Holmes.”

“Dear me, should I fear for the sanctity of my shirt tails?”

“And your torso!”
Quite long ago and far away, 
on a cold winter's night,  
the wind blew hard, as if to flay 
a tiny hut tucked tight.

Inside the hut, two old maids dwelt,  
a pair of life-long friends.  
Two, soft of heart and broad of belt,  
two, strong as winter winds.

The younger was Marie the Fair.  
Her hair was hoar-frost grey.  
She scrubbed the floors, the cupboards bare,  
and fed the stove all day.

By day, the old owl Martha swept,  
hair a nest of thatch.  
By night, she strigine vigil kept  
before the wood stove hatch.

While raged without the bitter storm,  
while snow fell deep and swirled,  
the maids toiled on, all snug and warm,  
centre of a cold world.

So hut-proud were the two that when 
they heard the trumpet call,  
they fretted over dirt still in,  
the chores left, most of all.

A second bugle blast awoke 
the maids from their distress.  
Approached a train of traveling folk,  
a caravan noblesse.
Three grand white horses drew a sleigh of rare magnificence. Therein rode three in stately way, who smelt of rich incense.

In crimson and in ermine cloaks in crowns of gold and gems, with cavalry as strong as oaks, with footmen stiff as stems,

The fine procession stopped before the humble, little hut. There came a knock upon the door, then opened what was shut.

Two looked in wonder at the three, their regal dress to please. Each to herself thought silently, ‘What kind of men are these?’

“We’re following a yonder star to where a Babe is born. The snow has led us quite afar. We’re lost, astray, forlorn.

O Come with us, O maids of earth And aid us in our plight To celebrate the God-Child’s birth To follow yonder light!”

Marie and Martha shook with cold and tugged their shawls close ‘round, exchanged a glance at offer bold, at snow thick on the ground.

“Come, warm yourselves,” Old Martha said. “By the stove,” said Marie. “Rest the night, and by dawn be led,” they urged hospitably.

“We cannot stop. We cannot rest.” was the regal reply. “If you refuse to be our guest, Then we must say good-bye.”

Then something odd stirred in Marie, something she could not name, she gripped her friend’s hand urgently and spoke free all the same.

“Dear Martha, go. I think you should.
Despite the cold and snow.
I’ll stay. I’ll sweep. I’ll feed the wood.
If only you will go.”

So Martha left. Marie stayed on.
And hour by hour, she toiled,
and when she met the rising sun,
a firm resolve uncoiled.

To seek the Babe and offer him
her gift was her desire
She packed her sack and by light dim
snuffed out the wood stove fire.

Marie went searching for the Child
from door to door to door,
bestowing gifts on children mild
from poor and precious store.

But howling winds remember Old Martha and Marie
And the hut they left behind upon epiphany.

End Notes

Thank you for reading! Merry Christmas!

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