The Sinking Ship of Self

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Summary

Three weeks after Watson takes up his new residence, Holmes breaks in.

Notes

Contains spoilers for The Final Problem and The Empty House.

Watson does not attend Holmes's funeral, which is just as well when one considers the fact that neither does he.

It is four long months before Holmes returns to London, and even then it is not so much a return as a shameful slink. He is a rat that has deserted a ship before it's sunk, clinging desperately to flotsam of his own making.

The cacophony of sights and sounds in London's streets is as jarring as those of the East and there is no comfort to be found in their familiarity. There is in fact no familiarity to be found at all; his home on Baker Street is no longer a home, his few acquaintances are acquainted only with a ghost. He had not fully anticipated this outcome. Perhaps it's one last victory for Moriarty's damnable spirit.

The false whiskers as always irritate his face but they are necessary, as is the grime smeared round his eyes that now, running with sweat, threatens to obscure his vision. He nearly loses the thumbless man in the ragtag press of Covent Garden and that will simply not do. London's underground is a
garden in need of quite the judicious pruning.

He must know for certain what curse the years of his companionship have set upon Watson's head.

The first book appears in the early spring of 1892. Holmes, in the guise of a bent and ugly old professor—which he must admit is a petty jab at a man so far removed from caring but is satisfying nonetheless—picks it up and regards it with some level of shock. He had known of Watson's quaint hobby, had even encouraged it in subtle ways, but he certainly had not expected it to come to this.

It is a slim and modest printing, the title pressed into the cover and brightened with silver foil that will grey and fleck within the month. While he holds it, he wonders briefly if it is his absence that has prompted this. With that wondering comes the imagining of yet another conversation he has been denied the chance to have.

"I do not precisely require your permission," Watson would have said with that keen militant edge.

"Then why is it you have asked me?" Holmes would have replied. Perhaps they would have been seated near the window in Holmes's old room, so Holmes would have calmly packed his pipe as Watson rose to pace to the fire. The light would have been soft and warm, pleasing, and Watson would have stripped down to his shirtsleeves, his braces left dangling carelessly. "Do you desire my blessing?"

"I-" And there Watson would have paused with his mouth agape, his brow furrowed. There would have been plenty of time for Holmes to note the glow of the firelight through Watson's shirt, outlining the fine and strong cut of his body. For approximately three minutes Holmes would have remained attentively silent, and then Watson would have grudgingly admitted, "Well, yes, I suppose I do."

"Why?"

Oh, his tone would have been so insufferable. The light in Watson's eyes would have flared as brightly as the flames that warmed his hands. "Because they are for you," Watson would most definitely not have said, "because they are my treasured memories of my life with you, and you do so irritate me, Holmes, you vex me like no other. I wish the entire world to know how very insane I must be to need you by my side."

And Holmes, because he is a fearful fool, would have read that manuscript so lovingly penned and in some rash and shameful defence declared it sensational romantic drivel. His words a well-aimed knife to Watson's tender heart, Watson would have written not a word more.

Perhaps then, it is a good thing that Sherlock Holmes is dead.

Mindful of his disguise, Holmes totters inside to purchase the volume. In the weeks and months that follow, he buys them all, reads them cover-to-cover and imagines that Watson smiles as he sits at his desk and writes as he used to.

And perhaps if there was not so much cowardice in Holmes's useless heart, the scratch of Watson's pen would pause only when he requested that Holmes please play another.

"Mary, please," Watson says, rough and pleading. Holmes's entire chest swells with an ache that threatens to choke him. "I'm sorry I forgot. You know I didn't mean to."
Mary, still young and beautiful for barely a year has passed, heaves a sigh and fusses with her skirts. They rasp softly against the damp cobbles, their frayed hems a visible sympathy to their owner's tenuous bond of marriage. "I know you didn't mean to, John, but you did it anyway."

The foot traffic flows smoothly around them and while it seems as if no one is paying the bearded labourer lounging by the stacking crates any mind, someone is bound to notice his eavesdropping eventually. But his feet will not move. Watson's voice has cemented him to the cobbles; his mind has been deprived of Watson for so very long that it has conspired with his body and he is completely incapable of removing himself from Watson's presence.

"I've hurt you," Watson says, lightly touching her elbow. "I am so very sorry. Please forgive me, it won't happen again."

But it will. The past to some extent must dictate the future, and in the past Watson has missed many an engagement due to Holmes so it stands to reason he will do so in the future. It seems as if Holmes does not even have to be an active part of Watson's life for him to meddle in it. His mere memory is doing an outstanding job all on its own.

"It's all right," Mary says, and in that moment Holmes knows without a doubt that this time it is not. There must also always be a last straw, a final insult, and Watson has unknowingly delivered one unto Mary as effectively as if he had tossed a gauntlet to her slippered feet.

"Your books have been doing very well," she offers, a temporary yet ultimately pointless truce. She isn't a cruel woman. She knows the decision she has just made will hurt Watson when it comes to pass. Of course she seeks to soften the blow as much as her gentle hands will allow.

"It is not my talent that engages readers," Watson says, accepting her words for what they seem to be and offering her his arm, "but my subject."

"Yes," Mary agrees, her gaze on the ground, and two months later Watson stands alone outside their home in Cavendish Place as men once again load his possessions into a carriage.

The sun shines far too brightly for such a day.

As Holmes's concern for Watson becomes an all-consuming thing and he is continually frustrated by dead ends in his attempts to pinpoint the last of Moriarty's criminal ring, he takes to trailing Watson throughout the city both day and night. This evening's jaunt has taken his cherished friend to the sodden alleys of Drury Lane. Holmes crouches worriedly in a pile of filth as he waits to see if it his money or his body that Watson has come here to squander.

Near the middle of the alley, Watson steps from the fading light into the shadows, their fetid embrace hiding him quite effectively from view. He shifts his weight from his bad leg and waits, as still and silent as the grave he believes Holmes inhabits. The seconds become minutes that become hours and Watson does not move from his post. Passers-by do not notice him. The rats do not care that he is there. Only the quiet brush of his coat against brick when he eases the stiffness from his muscles betrays him, and Holmes hears that only because he is straining so desperately for its traces.

When what Watson has come here to do finally happens, it happens very quickly. A man leaves one of the houses through the sunken cellar and Watson comes down upon him like the very wrath of God. A poignard leaps into Watson's hand and slashes through the fellow's belt, relieving him of the burdensome pistol he may have given consideration to using. Watson's own pistol, sturdy service issue, digs in beneath his jaw as the poignard comes to rest precisely between his fifth and sixth ribs.
"Here, leave off," the man says, more bluster than brains. "Is all over now, no need to be at this sort of thing. I don't have nothing more to do with it."

In a voice that chills Holmes's blood, Watson says, "You are mistaken. You are yet owed the courtesy of a prompt reunion with your professor, much as I will be forever owed a reunion of my own," and drives the blade home. He slaps his hand over the man's mouth, the gun digging into sallow flesh, and twists his arm. His face remains impassive as the man's struggles subside and like the good doctor he is, he dutifully checks the man's pulse before letting the corpse slump to the ground.

Holmes remains where he is while Watson calmly wipes the blade off on the ruffian's clothes and smoothly slides it back into the sheath concealed inside his overcoat's sleeve. Aside from a slight pronunciation of his usual limp as he walks away, there is not a thing in Watson's manner to suggest he has just murdered a man in cold blood.

If Holmes moves now, and moves quickly, he can catch Watson before he hails a cab. He will run to Watson's side, grasp Watson by the shoulders and shake him, demand in his own raging disbelief, "What has become of you, Watson?"

And Watson will regard him the same as he regarded the dead man in the alley, because to him Holmes is simply another corpse. "I am what you have made me, Holmes. You have left me as I left you, but once again you have proven that in all endeavours my skill is no match for yours. Well done, old boy."

But Holmes does not move, and he prays that Watson would never say such things.

Three weeks after Watson takes up his new residence, Holmes breaks in. It is the singularly most inadvisable thing for him to do and yet he is compelled. Driven. Desperate.

The scent of light cologne and tobacco, both Watson's preferred blends, envelops him in the warmest embrace as he eases the window shut. Like the rooms of Baker Street there is no trace of a woman's softness to the ones Watson now occupies. Mary has not yet visited, though she made promises that one day she would. Holmes in his endless selfishness is glad of it. It's been so very long since he has been close enough to touch a part of Watson's life.

And like some pilgrim to the Holy Land, touch it he does. The books left open on the desk, the empty brandy glass beside them, the back of the chair where it is unevenly worn from Watson's slightly lopsided manner of sitting (It eases the pressure on my leg, Holmes, do stop laughing at me). His fingers trail over the embossed spines of all of their adventures put to paper, and beside them on the bookshelf sit many of the treatises he himself had penned. There are published articles, newspaper clippings, gossip sheets, faded photographs--of which none show his face--all the traces of Sherlock Holmes that remain to be found carefully collected and stored.

On a small occasional table to the left of the bookcase sits a violin case. Without opening it he knows it holds his Stradivarius. He had instructed Mycroft to please retrieve it from Baker Street to ensure it would be properly cared for, and while it is no surprise Mycroft had not seen fit to inform him that Watson had taken it, he wonders not for the first time if he'd miscalculated in not bequeathing any of his possessions to Watson.

Should their roles have been reversed, he is almost certain he would want not a single thing of Watson's lurking about to continually rip his heart asunder.
At the sound of the front door opening, Holmes freezes. He could simply wait for Watson to find him. He could put an end to all of this. Surely any chance of some scheme of Moriarty's rising from the grave to take revenge upon him through Watson has long since passed.

"Holmes," Watson might say, "my god, Holmes, you've come back to me."

And Holmes would reply, "I could not in truth ever leave."

There is a chance their meeting would go as such. But he is a damnable coward and he crawls back out the window before Watson leaves the foyer.

Watson looks wretched. The bleak sky weighs leaden on Watson's sodden shoulders as he trudges through the night. He is without hat, without greatcoat; his collar is undone and his tie is missing. Whatever pennies he may have had for a cab home are now sequestered in someone else's much dryer pocket.

While Watson is neither a particularly fine gambler nor a particularly unfortunate one, his game of late has been worse than usual. He stares at the cards but does not see them. He rolls the die but does not care how they land. Holmes was not witness to the worst of Watson's days following the Afghan war but he imagines this is exactly what they were like. His strong, dependable and so very reliable Watson has become a waif, a ghost, a mere shadow, a rat abandoning the sinking ship of self.

And this time, Watson is far too tired to stay afloat.

The sight of his fine doctor continually in such a bedraggled state--stubborn jaw in need of a shave, clothes in need of mending, gait little more than the plod of an old and tired nag--wrenches his heart so terribly that he thinks that it will soon fail him altogether. Watson would have such words for him if he allowed further decline, so it is only natural that to prevent such an occurrence he should immediately solve the problem of its cause.

But he has no claim to mastery over the delicate art of care as Watson has, not for others and most certainly not for himself, and revealing the slight exaggeration of his demise does not go quite as he'd planned. Worryingly, the tendency for his plans to go awry has become a bit of a trend he hopes he will soon buck.

As he stands for a second time in Watson's tidy study, he reflects that not only does Watson continue to surprise him even after all their years together, but also that he is no longer surprised by Watson surprising him. This conclusion summarily reached, he sits down on the floor and gently moves Watson's head into his lap. A soft lump is already forming on the back of Watson's skull, and after checking it for blood--of which he thankfully finds none--Holmes turns his head slightly to the left to keep from aggravating it.

He has done this only once before, shortly after they took lodgings together and Watson was still prone to fevers. He doubts Watson remembers much of that time. Selfishly he wishes that like he, Watson were incapable of forgetting even a moment of their lives together.

"Really, Watson," Holmes says to him, "if I had known your constitution so delicate, I wouldn't have startled you so. You do recall that I sometimes have a flair for the theatrical."

Watson predictably says nothing. It's a bit of a relief, actually. He's going to be so very cross when
he awakens, and the embarrassment of swooning like a lady combined with the headache that will no
doubt be plaguing him will do very little to improve his disposition.

Holmes is rather looking forward to it. It will be nice to have Watson taking him to task once again.

"I will tell you now how very hard these years have been for me so that when you wake there will be
room only for those words that you wish to say to me." He runs a finger lightly over Watson's
smooth forehead, down the gentle slope of his nose to the fine curve of his mouth. His breaths are
warm and even against the pads of Holmes's fingers. "I think perhaps you have said nearly all of
them in your writing, but I should like to hear them from your lips and not your pen. And there is,
there is one other thing."

Here he pauses and his blasted hesitation infuriates him. It takes a long moment to calm his suddenly
racing heart with the firm application of logic over emotion. He regrets what he has done; fine, it is in
the past. He is still afraid, fine again; he acknowledges that fear but also acknowledges that it is of
absolutely no use to him.

"My point is, Watson," he says, "there are the things you have written in your stories not in the lines
themselves but between them, and those are the things I pray so very dearly that you have been
waiting to say to me."

"There is no need to explain should you not wish to," Holmes says. They have moved from the floor
to the slightly threadbare settee pushed snug to one wall of Watson's study. Rather reluctantly on his
part, he might add. The floor was perfectly serviceable and he certainly had no difficulty in
conversing, but he supposes the settee is far more civilised for a gentlemanly reunion.

It's hard to complain when having Watson once again seated by his side feels so very wonderful,
buoying both his spirits and his body as the sun buoy the world after such dark and heavy storms.

"You already know." A small familiar smile graces Watson's lips. Holmes's heart nearly fails him all
over again at the welcome sight. "Of course you do."

"My dear man," Holmes says, freely allowing all evidence of his fondness for Watson to fill his
voice, "I believe even Lestrade knows, but his respect for you is far too great and the deaths of
Moriarty's remaining men so very far from tragedy."

Watson, his elbows braced on his knees, drops his head into his hands. "His pity, you mean."

"His respect," Holmes insists.

Silence reigns for a very long four and a half minutes, and then without looking up Watson says,
"You were in Tibet. For nearly three years."

"Yes," Holmes lies.

"While I was here."

Holmes winces. "Watson-"

Watson holds up a hand, palm out. "Say not a word. I have no doubt that your course of action was
the most logical, the most reasonable. Even necessary."

Possibly not as necessary as Holmes had first deduced and if he had paid proper attention instead of
moonring about like a milkmaid then he would have seen that truth far sooner. Whatever the danger that had remained for Watson following the Professor's machinations had passed by the time Holmes had made his way back to England's craggy shores.

But fear is the most irrational of masters. Fear for limb, for life, for heart.

Hushed and sombre, Watson says, "I thought I had lost everything."

There is much Holmes could say to that. *I was first to lose all that mattered,* or *You had Mary, Watson, you had a wife to warm you while I had only thoughts of you.* All are useless bitter emotions.

"Do you like it here?" he asks instead.

Watson eyes him askance. "Why do you ask?"

"I have simply observed that in comparison to our previous digs, it is not so charming a spot."

For a moment Watson says nothing. Then he lets out a quiet breath. "Holmes," he says, straightening, "I think perhaps it's time for you to speak plainly with me. You've given me quite the shock and I don't think I'm up to snuff for your mental acrobatics."

Plain speaking is the very last sort of conversation Holmes wishes to engage in. There's no room to wiggle with that sort of talk, no clever repartee to hide behind, no wordplay to dazzle and confuse.

And so it takes great effort to say, "Stay with me, Watson. The rooms at Baker Street remain ours still, though my brother holds them in trust. It would be no great difficulty to transfer them to your name."

Another man may have persisted, questioned why this, why now, but not Watson. The world is a much more refreshing, straightforward place with Watson in it, and if Watson had any qualms about this sort of thing their years apart have done away with them entirely.

The bristles of Watson's moustache tickle Holmes's lip and his breath is warm with spirits. He tastes ever so slightly of brandy when he pushes into Holmes's mouth but the flavour is quick to fade. For a time Holmes simply sits and revels in it, noting the heat of Watson's palm against his face, the rustle of cloth as Watson leans closer, the indecently wet noise and the moan that fills his ears when Watson deepens their kiss.

"This requires your active participation," Watson reminds him, teasing laughter in his tone, and with an indelicate snort Holmes rises up on one knee to taste the inside of Watson's mouth as Watson had tasted his. He pushes Watson down onto the settee, once again losing himself in the feel of Watson's body, so familiar to him but not quite like this. Never like this.

From there it is an awkward, joyous fumble, their hands tangling as they seek to relieve one another of unwanted clothing, their balance on the settee precarious so they return to the floor before they fall to it. Where the years have eroded Watson's reservations so too have they eroded his patience; they rut together on the Indian carpet like schoolboys, half in their clothing and half out of it. It ends far too soon a mess on both of their bellies and Holmes's open mouth presses to the hollow of Watson's throat as they catch their breath.

He pulls back with the intent to apologise--this sort of intimacy is not something he has had a terrible amount of experience with, after all, especially given his general disregard for the general population--but Watson is smiling up at him, *grinning* as brightly and fully as the day they solved their first case together.
"I'm still angry with you," Watson says, combing back the damp strands of hair clinging to Holmes's forehead. "It's my right to be completely illogical about this sort of thing."

Holmes makes a face. "I rather wish you wouldn't."

"Well, you simply should have thought of that before you rose from the dead."

Heaving a mighty sigh, Holmes settles back down on Watson's chest. The beat of his heart is pleasantly strong and steady.

*

It is a chill night in the very first March of the new century that, as Watson stands in front of the fire in their rooms on Baker Street clad in his shirtsleeves and not a stitch more, Holmes pulls his pipe from his mouth to say, "Tell me your thoughts on beekeeping, Watson."

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