Underneath The Veil

by Holly Sykes (Artemis8147)

Summary

Lord Sherlock Holmes is a wealthy aristocrat who lives almost like a hermit and indulges in opium-eating and sporadic crime solving. One evening, in the throes of a drug-caused hallucination, he stumbles upon Doctor John Watson. It’s love at first sight for the still-virgin Sherlock, but he’s convinced the other man could never feel the same.

When a renowned painter is killed, Sherlock convinces John to help him with the investigation and their friendship takes an unexpected turn.

This story was inspired in some measure by my previous work, A Dangerous Liaison, and by the fact that I wasn’t done with 1920s London.

I have taken my account of opium intoxication from Thomas de Quincey and his Confessions of an English Opium Eater.

ETA 10th October: This work is now complete.

Notes
Cecil Valance did not exist, but he is a character in the novel The Stranger’s Child by Alan Hollinghurst, which is absolutely magnificent.

The Gladstone Arms is a real pub, it still exists and is now a music venue.

The characters belong to ACD and the BBC. The story is mine (and Thomas de Quincey's), so please do not post anywhere else without express permission.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Someone was knocking at the door.

My servant opened it and there stood a Malay. My servant, born and bred in London, had never seen an Asiatic dress of any sort; his turban therefore confounded her not a little; and as it turned out that his attainments in English were exactly of the same extent as hers in the Malay, there seemed to be an impassable gulf fixed between all communication of ideas. They summoned me and the Malay told me that there was a sort of demon below, whom he clearly imagined that my art could exorcise from the house. I did not immediately go down, but when I did, the group which presented itself, arranged as it was by accident, though not very elaborate, took hold of my fancy and my eye: there stood the Malay, his turban and loose trousers of dingy white relieved upon the dark panelling, next to a girl. And a more striking picture there could not be imagined than the beautiful English face of the girl, and its exquisite fairness, together with her erect and independent attitude, contrasted with the sallow and bilious skin of the Malay, enamelled or veneered with mahogany by marine air, his small, fierce, restless eyes, thin lips, slavish gestures and adorations. Half-hidden by the ferocious-looking Malay was a little child from a neighbouring cottage who had crept in after him, and was now in the act of reverting its head and gazing upwards at the turban and the fiery eyes beneath it, whilst with one hand he caught at the dress of the young woman for protection. I addressed him in some lines from the Iliad and he worshipped me in a most devout manner, and replied in what I suppose was Malay. On his departure I presented him with a piece of opium and he took it all. The quantity was enough to kill three dragoons and their horses, and I felt some alarm for the poor creature; but what could be done. He took his leave, and for some days I felt anxious, but as I never heard of any Malay being found dead, I became convinced that he would take his revenge, one day.

Sherlock woke up from this intense reverie and found that the small, rough hand that was shaking him belonged to a well built blond man with a tired face, serious blue eyes, and wearing crumpled, well-worn tweeds.

“Sir, sir,” he was calling, “can you hear me?”

Still lingering between dream and reality, he failed to reply. Raking a hand through his dishevelled curls, he wondered what had happened to his top hat and, as he looked for it, his gaze fell on the large, golden sign inscribed upon the door nearby: Gladstone Arms. It seemed so improbable, he couldn’t stifle a laugh. It came out weak and shrill and ended in a cough.

“Look at me,” the man said, oddly. Why would he ask that? Was he a mind reader? He’d heard all
about those and dismissed the practice as nothing but balderdash. The blond did not seem the type, though. And there was authority in his tone, so Sherlock complied. His grey-green eyes met a dispassionate, severe countenance and an instant later, he was being scolded.

“How much have you taken, sir? The sheer idiocy of it! How much, Sir?”

The appellation sounded almost like an insult, and the curly-haired man was intrigued and unaccountably stirred by the tone of it. Perhaps it was a new side effect, he pondered, as a novel realisation hit him: he was lying on the cold pavement, his cashmere scarf barely protecting his throat from the harsh wind. The man was kneeling by his side, cradling Sherlock’s head in his lap.

“A mere fifty grains,” he replied, trying for nonchalance and failing, as a shiver run through him under the stranger’s reproving glance.

“You are cold too; you need to go to the hospital. Let me call for help,” he said, and made to remove his coat, but Sherlock stopped him by placing a long, elegant hand on the man’s arm.

“No need, dear chap. I have all I require at home, prescribed by a great surgeon in Edinburgh: ammoniated tincture of valerian,” he declaimed, glad that his faculties were undimmed.

The blond man nodded and gave him a long, searching look that took in his black hair, his pale, gaunt face and the refinement of his attire, down to the bespoke two-tone shoes. Before Sherlock could draw another breath, a calloused thumb was pressing underneath his jaw, checking his pulse.

The touch was so exquisite he nearly sighed with the bliss of it: there was firmness in it but gentleness too, and the warmth seeped through him, underneath his skin, to his bones.

“Do you think you can stand on your feet? I am not sure I’d be able to carry you; you’re skin and bones, but too tall for me, I gather.”

Despite this remark, Sherlock felt a strong, brawny arm around his waist and for a second he feared he was going to be carried like a bride, but the man only helped him up, supporting him until he felt certain that no danger would ensue from his withdrawal.

What followed were the customary rituals of recovering his hat and his dignity, but this time, unlike the other few occasions in which he’d blacked out in the streets, his saviour would not leave him alone, and Sherlock was certain that offering him money would only enrage or sadden him. Besides, he didn’t want to be separated from this man - a doctor at Guy’s Hospital surely - in such abrupt fashion.

“John Watson,” the stranger said, offering his hand, which Sherlock took and shook eagerly.

“Sherlock Holmes, and I’m eternally in your debt, doctor.”

“How do you know what I do? No, don’t tell me here. If you insist on not going to the hospital, I have some valerian tincture at my lodgings. I live just around the corner, in Scovell Road.”

“The Queen’s Building, perchance?”

“How… never mind, you’ll tell me when we are there. If you don’t mind…”

He hesitated, his professional worries held in abeyance as the class gap between him and Sherlock became more evident.

“To be perfectly honest, dear chap, I’d really love a spot of warmth and a chair to sit down, to regain
my strength, so to speak,” the taller man waffled. It wasn’t like him at all to be so disjointed in
speech, but the blond man, John, only nodded and led the way to his apartment. He had a slight limp
that Sherlock meant to investigate thoroughly before the night was over.

The building was grim, with no concession to beauty in its grey brickwork and the multitude of tiny,
narrow windows. A wrought iron lantern shed his feeble, yellow light above the entrance door.
John’s lodgings were on the second floor and the staircase was nearly in darkness.

They mounted the steps in silence and when they were finally inside, John hurried to light the gas lamp and start the heater.

The place was small and tidy, modest but not squalid. Sherlock imagined himself there with John of
an evening, both ensconced in the battered armchairs, sipping piping hot tea and listening to the wireless; somehow that extremely domestic, and therefore boring, tableau seemed to him nothing short of heavenly.

“It’s rather nippy, I’m afraid, but it warms up pretty quickly; the rooms being cosy and all that,” John said, sounding embarrassed of his modest abode. “Won’t you sit down while I’ll get the tincture for you?”

“Thanks, I think I will, but I’d rather have a drink, if you don’t mind, dear chap.”

“I’m rather lacking in that department, but I can offer you some gin.”

“Topping!” Sherlock exclaimed, removing his cape, letting it fall on the carpet then flopping down
on the armchair and crossing his legs with a happy sigh.

John laughed and shook his head. He’d taken his jacket off and was rolling up his sleeves,
uncovering his muscled forearms in the process.

When he came back from the kitchen with two tumblers of gin and ice, Sherlock noticed that he was rather short, and wondered how he had not realised that before. Stunned at this unusual lack of perception on his part, he didn’t hear John’s question and had to beg his pardon.

“I said, why does a gentleman like you meddle with that poison? Your set is rather wild, or so I have heard, but…”

“My set?” Sherlock repeated, with more venom that was necessary, since John had guessed quite right.

“You are part of the aristocracy, the bright young things, aren’t you?”

“While it is indeed true that I am a Lord, I abhor titles and the sort of people who glory in them. I don’t have a ‘set’, I’m my own man,” he replied, haughtily. He regretted his tone, but John didn’t seem to mind.

“Alright, but the other question still stands, if you want to answer it.”

Sherlock extracted a silver case from his jacket and offered it to John, who shook his head, before taking out a slim cigarette and lighting it.

“I had some ailments that needed assuaging and the opium is just a cheap and convenient liniment. I only indulge on Tuesdays and Saturdays and never take more than 50 grains at a time. It’s fairly safe, Doctor.”
“So says the man I found passed out on the pavement on a cold February night! You were out of it, completely so, mumbling something about a Malay man.”

“Did I? That’s interesting.”

“It is a common side effect, I seem to recall: vivid dreams, black-outs, melancholia, agitation, throbbing, palpitations and a frequent recollection of things long past are all signs of opium intoxication. You should quit abusing that drug, Mr Holmes.”

“Sherlock, please.”

“Alright, you must call me John then.”

They exchanged a smile, as the smoke curled around them, enveloping them in an intimate cloud.

“You were injured in the war, but not your leg, despite the limp.”

John’s smile turned into a pained grimace, but he didn’t flinch.

“You are right, God knows how you guessed. I was shot at Maricourt.”

“That’s where Cecil Valance died; the poet. He was down at Cambridge with me, although he was slightly older.”

“I met him only once. He was a striking man, not unlike you, but more… of ‘his set,’” John replied, with a wicked glint in his eye that made Sherlock blush. He covered it up with a cough.

“Yes, he was rather enamoured with himself. I remember a spring day he was punting on the river with a couple of friends, one of whom was staring at him with doglike devotion as he declaimed his poems with a solemn, stentorian voice. You couldn’t help but laugh.”

“His war poems are alright though; not that I know anything about poetry.”

“They are a bit too ornate for my taste. But I do like the one about the soldier; you can detect love, not the fraternal sort, I mean.”

It was John’s turn to blush, and Sherlock wondered if the doctor was one of those who did not approve of homosexual dalliances. It was quite common by then for upper classes men to marry other men, but the working classes were still wary, as if it was a privilege to be accorded only to their betters. Many still felt hatred toward the practice and would cringe in disgust if propositioned.

“I wouldn’t be surprised; it happened rather frequently. What about you, did you not enlist?”

“My brother, a meddlesome busybody by all accounts, demanded my services here. Intelligence gathering.”

“Is that why you know all those things about me? Am I so interesting the government keeps a file on me?”

Sherlock laughed and threw himself in one of his famed explanatory deductions.

“Nothing of the sort, dear chap; I saw it, I observed it. You limp, but when you helped me up your weight was equally distributed on both legs. You strongly smell of carbolic soap and you immediately diagnosed my ailment, so you are a doctor. The closest hospital is Guy’s, which means you work there. As for your real wound, I don’t know where it is yet, but if you give me more time I shall find out.”
“Incredible... quite, quite incredible,” John enthused, looking at his new acquaintance like he’d just sprung a pair of angelic wings.

“You think?”

“Of course it is. Don’t people say that to you all the time?”

“They usually tell me to mind my own business.”

“Philistines!” the doctor replied, shaking his head in mock disbelief.

After a while spent in companionable silence, Sherlock guessed his host was tired - probably a long day, possibly more than one shift to earn money – and he got up to leave.

“I will leave you to your well-earned rest, John, but I would like to give you my card. Do you have a number where I can call you, should I need your services?”

John did not hesitate or ask for further information on the nature of these services; he took Sherlock’s card and on one corner he wrote a number. He cut out that scrap of paper and handed it to the other man.

“It’s the hospital number. Ask for Watson, there’s only one of me,” he said, smiling.

“Of course,” Sherlock replied. There could never be another like you, he mentally added.

That night, back at 221b Baker Street, he looked at the phone number and committed it to memory.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and kudos are great :)

Chapter Summary

Sherlock is called to investigate a murder. Obviously, he needs John to help him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“That as the creative state of the eye increased, a sympathy seemed to arise between the waking and the dreaming states of the brain in one point—that whatsoever I happened to call up and to trace by a voluntary act upon the darkness was very apt to transfer itself to my dreams, so that I feared to exercise this faculty…. when thus once traced in faint and visionary colours, like writings in sympathetic ink, they were drawn out by the fierce chemistry of my dreams into insufferable splendour that fretted my heart.” Thomas de Quincey – Confessions of an English Opium Eater

The night was unseasonably mild, with a sticky humidity that caused perspiration and increased sensuality.

Sherlock walked along the Marshalsea Road, gazing at the dilapidated buildings, recalling their Dickensian past as debtors’ prisons and feeling frightened and elated in equal measure.

His heart was beating a wild tattoo and the blood was pumping through his veins at such speed it made him light-headed.

When he turned into Southwark Bridge Road, he had to stop to a minute to compose himself; he lit up a cigarette, but after a few puffs, he found the taste unbearable and had to get rid of it. Perhaps a drink would do the trick, he thought, but there were no public houses in the vicinity and he couldn’t stand to waste any more time. Time, he fretted, extracting his fob watch from its pocket to check the hour, again.

He didn’t want to be early, show his hand so soon, his schoolboy eagerness; he scowled at the mere idea. But he detested tardiness, he insisted, once more rejecting the reality of his intense desire to reach his destination in favour of pure and simple courtesy. Liar, liar, liar, the echo of his footsteps of the pavement seemed to chant.

Inside the front door, which he found invitingly open, the temperature dropped and the frigid air settled his nerves, but chafed at his overwrought senses, too.

He ran up the stairs, because frankly he couldn’t wait any longer.

And there he was, flushed and moist-lipped, knocking like a supplicant, waiting to know his fate.

The interval between the knock and the opening of the door surely lasted no longer than a handful of moments, but to Sherlock it appeared as endless as Wagner’s Ring cycle.

“Come inside, dear friend, I’ve just put the kettle on,” John said, the smile twinkling in his eyes like a
spray of starlight.

Where the stars out or was the sky overcast? He had not bothered to observe. How absurd that he did not observe! Was his mind losing its potency? That would never do.

“Sherlock? Are you alright? Would you prefer to have your tea here on the landing? I’ve never done it before, but it could be an interesting experiment and I know how much you like those.”

“What? No, I… was thinking about the stars and wondering,” he mumbled, as he removed his coat and stepped into the cosiness of John’s apartment.

“The stars, well, I never!” John said, feigning astonishment. “I thought you’d never concern yourself with such romantic trifles.”

Sherlock was about to remonstrate, but he saw the other man’s wink and he laughed instead.

“The water’s almost ready, but perhaps you’d like something more… stimulating?” John asked, and there was an edge to his voice that surely – surely! – could mean only one thing. But did it, though? Sherlock’s experience was confined to adolescent fumbles and detached observations; besides, he’d never had a relationship of any sort with a real man; yes, there was Lestrade, but in Sherlock’s eyes he was a sort of colleague, therefore as functional as a table and nearly as inanimate.

“Tea will be perfect, John. I imagined just this sort of evening…” he let slip, before he bit his tongue; too late, alas.

“You imagined us taking tea, eh? And what else did you imagine, if I may ask,” the older man whispered. Suddenly, they were so close Sherlock fancied he could perceive John’s heartbeat through his dressing gown.

His tongue felt thick and useless and his legs had started to tremble.

“I... yes, I,” he started, and made another few, valiant attempts, before he gave up any pretence at further conversation.

Luckily, John didn’t appear to resent his silence, as he moved a step closer and took Sherlock in his arms.

The sensation stunned him for its novelty and the million details he’d need to catalogue: John’s smell, his touch, the grain of his skin in different parts of his body, the texture of his garment, the exact colour of his hair and eyes, and many more things besides. Their hearts were booming in their chests, as they pressed together, and Sherlock was in heaven already. Yet it was nothing compared to the following instant, in which his neck was being licked and sucked and kissed.

“Yes, yes, yes,” he heard his own ragged voice moan, and John growled low in his throat and redoubled his efforts.

The only thing he could do was hold onto the man’s waist, clawing at it like it was the handrail shielding him from a precipice.

“Buttons,” John scoffed, his displeasure muffled against the underside of Sherlock’s jaw.

“Rip them off, I don’t care,” he replied, with more than a hint of desperation. John giggled, and that moment of hilarity helped him calm down, so that he could undo the younger man’s shirt down to the base of his sternum.
Another infinite moment elapsed, in which Sherlock became so aroused he could feel it even in the back of his knees. John kept him suspended in this crystal bubble of lust, dazzling his heart and his soul with so much sensual, liquid light he could see and feel nothing but him, his breath, his scent and his touch.

And then it happened, and as much as he’d imagined it, it took him by surprise.

The rough pad of a finger descended on his left nipple, teasing, pressing, caressing and rubbing it to oblivion.

Sherlock screamed.

It was torture, it was paradise. He arched into the touch, wanting more, but what he did not know.

John was a step ahead of him though, and he licked greedily into Sherlock’s mouth, inviting him to respond. He had never done it before; or perhaps once, but so long ago he did not recall. There was nothing to be ashamed of, John was telling him with his body; the way his hand was caressing the nape of his lover’s neck suggested patience and devotion; Sherlock surrendered and found that the reward of his capitulation was an increase in pleasure, as John plundered his mouth like he was seeking redemption in its depths.

Sherlock’s desire was ready to spill out; in vain he tried to contain it, and when John’s fingers went to work on his neglected nipple, the barest tweak caused him to shout and writhe and spend with unchecked abundance.

His bleary eyes opened onto a new day. The light was grey and the skies the colour of dishwater.

He kicked the covers aside, stifled as he felt by their weight on his sensitised skin.

The dream had been scarily vivid; he could still feel the ghost of John’s touch on his chest, his neck, his cheeks. As he expected, he had climaxed in his sleep and there was a worryingly large stain on his bed sheet; he inspected it with a disgusted yet curious countenance: it was a most peculiar occurrence, one that had not happened to him in ages, not since his long gone Cambridge days.

It has to be said that, despite Sherlock’s attempts to forget those days - a past he considered remote even though only a few years had passed since then - they refused to be erased from his mind. In truth, ever since he’d started consuming opium – both in grains and liquid form – his university days had assumed a startling clarity; at times they were even revived in their minutest detail, so that an incident he had consigned to obscurity would regain the hue and texture of life.

At the very start, the drug had produced in him a sensation of unparalleled bliss, of calm and happiness, like the vastness of the desert or the blue horizons of the Mediterranean. He had taken to it, like an infant to his mother’s breast, and after years of tedium, solitude and heart-break, he’d become the man he was today: self-assured, independent, a master of sublime detachment.

The war had unwittingly helped him, giving him purpose and a renewed sense of worthiness. Although he resented his older brother’s interference, he was secretly grateful of the post that Mycroft had secured for him. That in turn had led to his acquaintance with Inspector Gregory Lestrade, who entertained with the elder Holmes a relationship whose nature Sherlock didn’t care to investigate. To be frank, the idea turned his stomach and he refused to ever dwell on it.

The policeman was a pleasant, moderately intelligent man in his late thirties, who wore cheap suits but with neatly pressed shirts and starched collars that went against the grain of his laissez-faire
He never took offence at Sherlock’s frequent barbs and snubs, and sought his help as frequently as his superiors permitted him.

All considered, Sherlock liked his life and thought it sufficiently agreeable, but his subconscious was telling him that something was amiss.

He left his dishevelled bed with a plaintive sigh and, wearing only his silk dressing gown, he went in search of his first cup of tea of the day.

What he had told John was the truth: Sherlock did not live in a state befitting his lineage. Most of his peers resided in luxury houses in Mayfair or Kensington, while he had chosen the relative modesty of a North London address.

His landlady, Mrs Hudson, was a brisk elderly lady whose husband’s demise Sherlock had facilitated. The man, a cunning and vicious bootlegger, had been consorting with the enemy; thanks to the younger Holmes he’d been arrested, tried and executed with as much dispatch as permissible in post-war times.

Once the conflict had ended, Sherlock had moved to the top floors, while Mrs Hudson still occupied the ground floor apartment; she took good care of his lodger, but at the same time protested her disinterest.

It was a well-oiled routine, and Sherlock simply took for granted that his landlady would provide tea, biscuits and other vittles while insisting she was doing nothing of the sort.

For his other needs – cleaning, laundry and the like – he had hired a maid who came during the day. They had arranged things in such a way as he never had to meet her, so that his home had the appearance of being serviced by fairies or efficient house sprites. He subscribed to the precept that no man is a hero to his valet, and preferred not to test its veracity.

He took his tea to the wash-room and - true to form - he found the round enamel bath already filled to the brim with warm soapy water, and a stack of clean towels on the stool next to it.

He lowered himself in the water with a contented hum and lay there, sipping his beverage and thinking of John.

The best part of an hour was spent in such fashion, and after having contended with a second arousal, which he treated with contempt and a stubborn refusal to engage with it, he emerged from the wash-room flushed, wild haired and fragrant like a Chambord rose.

He had just sat down at his breakfast table with a plate laden with slices of toast and honey, when there was a sonorous rap at the door.

“Yes, Mrs Hudson,” he called out.

“Sherlock, your friend is here,” she replied in her high-pitched voice.

I don’t have any friends, he was about to reply.
“Let the Inspector in; the door is unlocked.”

Lestrade walked into his kitchen and, with his customary lack of ceremony, poured himself a cup of tea. He was stirring the sugar in, when Sherlock lost his patience.

“Well, if you wanted breakfast there’s a tea room just around the corner.”

The man gave him a broad smile which reached up to his pleasant brown eyes.

“Be nice to me, Sherlock, I have been running around since dawn. No rest for the wicked, as they say.”

“Who’s the victim? It must be someone important if the Superintendent has given you permission to consult me on the same day of the murder. Calling a detective in without giving you time to do your own investigations, tsk!”

“I’ve just come from Conway Mews and,”

“Duncan Forbes? Pity, I really like his paintings, although some may say his colours are all over the place... but then again shouldn’t mood be integrated with hue and form,” he digressed, until Lestrade stopped him in dramatic fashion, by snatching his slice of toast and biting down on it. Sherlock scowled and shut his mouth.

“I knew that would get your attention. Yes, I don’t know how you guessed; I shouldn’t be surprised by now, since you always do that, but you are right. He’s been found dead by his valet and at first we thought it was a plain and simple heart attack. His doctor has requested the coroner to conduct an autopsy due to the traces of paint he found on the deceased forearms. It’s all a wild-goose chase, if you ask me. He was a painter, of course he’d have paint all over his body! All the same, I can’t object, but I would like you to take a look before the body is removed from the scene.”

“Nothing would please me more than to be of help; as I said, I admire Forbes’ work and if there’s been foul play, I’d love nothing better than bring his murderer to justice. You won’t mind if I bring a friend with me, will you? He’s a doctor.”

Lestrade’s eyebrows rose up to his hairline.

“You don’t have any friends!”

“Perhaps I do. I’m sure you have better things to do than assist me in my morning toilette. I will be at Conway Mews in one hour, alright? I’ll see you there.”

The Inspector mumbled something unintelligible and left.

“John Watson, please. Tell him it’s Sherlock Holmes… no, Sherlock; should I spell it for you? It’s urgent, yes, of paramount importance.”

He heard hurried steps, shouts, and finally John’s voice, warm and deeper than he remembered.

“When I gave you my number I never imagined you’d call me in a matter of hours. I hope you are not suffering a recurrence of last night’s symptoms.”

“Nothing of the sort; I’m as fit as a fiddle. Someone isn’t, though. A man, a painter to be precise, has died in mysterious circumstances. I need your help, John,” he said, lowering his voice to its sulriest
“What, now? I have just started my shift and I wouldn’t know what justification to… oh, all right. Give me the address, I will take the tube.”

“No need, dear chap. A car is waiting for you outside the main entrance and will take you to Bloomsbury.”

John laughed and Sherlock had never heard a more agreeable sound in his life.

“Impatient, are we? And what if I’d said no? I guess no one ever says no to you, do they? Probably not,” he said, amiably.

“Perhaps it was a tad arrogant of me, but you don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all,” John replied, and without adding another word, he was gone.

Sherlock stared at the receiver for a few moments, blinking furiously as he tried to process what just happened.

“I’m done for,” he realised, his heart thumping furiously in his ears.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and kudos are fab :)


Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John start their partnership.

Chapter Notes

Poet and WWI hero Siegfried Sassoon and socialite Stephen Tennant had a real, stormy relationship, but I obviously tampered with some of the facts and with the dates. This is supposed to be 1920, while their relationship was around 1927 to about 1932. The description of Tennant's bedroom is taken from Sassoon's biography. Duncan Forbes is an invented character.

Note: Sassoon, a keen sportsman, often played cricket alongside Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I found you in a loveless masquerade”

Siegfried Sassoon's poem to Stephen Tennant (excerpt)

The stench of manure was as potent in that part of London as it was in the countryside; Sherlock’s nose crinkled in distaste and his hand went to his pocket, to his sandalwood-scented handkerchief. That was how John found him: standing on the pavement, with his face buried in perfumed silk.

“Quite a few stables around here,” the doctor said, smiling and offering his hand to be shaken.

“Yes, indeed. And I was wrong earlier, on the phone: this is Fitzrovia, not Bloomsbury; to be precise,” he replied, taking the other man’s hand and holding if for a moment longer than was customary.

“And it’s important for you to be precise, I gather,” John observed, his head tilted to the side.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, it is. In my line of work, the devil is in the detail; at times, literally so.”

Sherlock stared at the man who had occupied such a vast share of his thoughts and dreams and found him… a riddle.

This time, he was wearing an overcoat, a brown, nondescript garment that he kept unbuttoned. Underneath it, he had a traditional suit and waistcoat and a snowy white shirt with a rounded collar. All very prim and proper, same as his face, shaven and scrubbed pink and his hair, neatly parted and
combed. And yet there was something that Sherlock could not define and that spoke of an untamed nature and perhaps a secret torment. He sensed that John could be dangerous if the occasion warranted and that he would be terrified of being the cause of his ire.

“Inspector Lestrade is waiting for us. We better join him or he may think we stood him up,” he said, trying to sound efficient and professional.

He had seen the Inspector's Crossley Chester parked nearby and the local copper, a red-faced, stout man nicknamed ‘Jock’ patrolling the street and keeping an eye on the proceedings.

Conway Mews was a cul-de-sac tucked away behind Conway Street and its only building was a crumbling brownstone with high windows recently painted white.

The painter’s studio was on the top floor and it had a suitable bohemian air: tubes and bottles of oil paint and a quantity of well-used brushes and canvasses were strewn all over the large main room,a timid skylight offered artistic views over the squalid roofs and sooty chimneys while in the corner stood a unmade bed with sheets of an impossible turquoise colour. The walls were painted mustard-yellow and the wooden slats of the floor, dotted in multicolour splashes, seemed like an experiment in pointillism.

The body of Duncan Forbes was sprawled on a chaise-longue upholstered in bottle-green leather, in a languid pose he would perhaps have disapproved of when alive: his head was resting on his outstretched arm while his legs were folded neatly to the side; his other arm was dangling over the rim of the chair, a brush still held stiffly in his clenched fist.

“You must be Sherlock’s friend,” Lestrade said, shaking John’s hand.

“And you must be Inspector Lestrade. He requested my help, so here I am,” the doctor replied, looking straight into the policeman’s eyes. An understanding passed between them, a silent conversation that left both men satisfied of the goodwill of the other.

“Did you find him exactly in this position or did you close his eyes?” Sherlock asked, as he examined the corpse with a silver-rimmed magnifying lens.

“That’s the only thing we did. Aside from that, this is the way his servant – his name is Jonas - found him. Forbes used this studio for working, but his lodgings are on the floor below this one. It’s a rather pleasant apartment, with a cook and a valet. The man usually brought him a pot coffee early in the morning. When Forbes worked at night, he slept in here and left orders to not be disturbed until it was time for his breakfast. I’ve been made to understand that sometimes he had…company. Jonas called the doctor – his name is Doctor Paul Bryant – and initially Bryant thought it was heart failure, until he saw the paint on his arm; there, you see, and got it into his mind that it could be murder. The Superintendent is very keen on the press not getting hold of this until we know for sure, one way or another.”

Sherlock was still bent over the body; he had removed his cape and jacket and rolled his sleeves up to his elbows. He had a way of ruffling his hair when he was concentrating, as if he couldn’t contain the nervous energy coursing through his veins, and when John gazed at him, he thought the younger man looked even more delicious than he had at first acquaintance. If he had to be precise, and apparently Sherlock loved precision, the word was: glorious.

After the war and all the horror and despair of it, John had never dared hope he would feel this way again: excited, happy and very much alive. He couldn’t aspire to anything besides a friendship with this marvellous, eccentric man - that much he knew - but it was more than sufficient, considering that the alternative was to lose sight of him and return to his dreary, uneventful life.
“John, come close and tell me what you see.”

“A tall man in his mid to late thirties, muscular body, healthy from what I can gather; no signs of a scuffle or other foul play; two of his nails are crusted with what I assume is paint, there’s a lick of it on his arm and a minuscule speck of it at the corner of his mouth, and,” he bent his head, his nose edging close to the deceased mouth, and sniffed. When he looked up at Sherlock, an expression of triumph mingled with pride illuminated his pale, striking face.

“Potassium Cyanide,” they said, at the same time.

“What, suicide?” Lestrade asked, dumbfounded.

“Murder, dear Lestrade. John, tell him how it was done,” Sherlock demanded, as if his new friend’s cleverness were a personal badge of honour.

“Mixed with dimethyl sulfoxide it can be added to any other substance and the barest contact with skin will cause immediate paralysis and death.”

“They call it ‘liquid death’ and it’s indeed lethal. Tell your superintendent that he better be prepared; the gentlemen of the media will have a field day with this. He was the stepson of Lord Asquith besides being a Fauvist painter of international renown; from what I’ve heard, he was also having a number of affairs with some of our most popular socialites and literary figures. Tread carefully, my dear fellow,” Sherlock said, patting the Inspector on his dejected-looking shoulders.

For the first time since he had entered the studio, Sherlock really observed the painting Forbes had been working at; it was a full-length portrait of an exceptionally slim and effete young man: grey-eyed, flaxen-haired, he had a swan-like neck and elegant hands, but the most interesting feature was his dress, a white Russian suit with a silver train. The colours were unusually muted for Forbes’ style, so that the red-painted mouth stood out in shocking contrast, like a bloody gash on that elongated, patrician face.

“Stephen Tennant,” Sherlock murmured, “the plot thickens.”

“Do you know him?” John asked, clearly mesmerised by the model.

“I have met him once or twice. Not the sort of person I like to spend my time with,” he replied, with a haughty shrug.

“No, I imagine not,” the doctor concurred, unruffled. “You don’t think it was him who…”

The younger man sniggered.

“He wouldn’t have the brains or the energy. Besides, I bet the only thing he cares about is his pretty face.”

“I’m sure you are right - you usually are – but I will have to pay him a visit nonetheless,” Lestrade intervened, his expression a study in discontent. Dealing with the aristocracy was by no means pleasant for him, especially in connection with murder cases; any misstep, and his superiors would be all over him like a persistent bad smell.

“I could… I mean, John and I could talk to him instead. If he has anything to reveal, he’ll be more likely to do so with a Lord than with a member of the police force. I know his kind; they pretend of being jolly liberal and modern, but deep down they are all snobs.”

Lestrade nodded and barely restrained a sigh of relief.
The cab was driving along Park Lane on its way to Smith Square and Sherlock suspected he was in the throes of a mild panic attack.

John’s thigh was brushing against his at every bump in the road and his soapy, manly scent was filling the younger man’s nostrils; the concurrence of these two factors rendered him dizzy. He was tempted to take John’s hand from where it lay on his lap and kiss it. In a sort of lucid dream, he saw it happening and felt the skin as it touched his lips. It was a feat of super-human will power to stifle the moan that surged from his throat. He was about to pinch his own flesh in order to snap out of it, when the blond man spoke. His voice was deep and warm and it electrified Sherlock down to his very marrow.

“That’s what you do then, collaborate with the police? Are you a private detective?”

“Consulting detective, the only one in the world, as far as I know; I sort of invented the job,” he replied, surprised that his voice wasn’t tremulous as his bowels.

“In that case, I owe you my fare.”

“Don’t be silly, my dear fellow, this is not why I do it. Besides, you saved my life last night. If you hadn’t come along, who knows what might have happened.”

“It was my duty and my pleasure, and I suspect our future meetings will always depend on someone being dead or risking their lives. Often-times that will include running after you to make sure you won’t get murdered. How did I do?”

“Not all of our meetings!” Sherlock exclaimed, feigning outrage.

John let out a high pitched sound that could only be defined as a giggle. It was silly and endearing and extremely contagious. Soon the detective joined in and the atmosphere became more relaxed and companionable.

“May I ask you a question that may sound odd?” he asked, after a brief silence.

“I’d be surprised if that wasn’t the case,” the doctor replied, a smile still curving his lips.

“Why do you not wear a hat? Doctors always wear hats; I have made a detailed study of the headgear worn by men and women, according to their age, class and profession and I have remarked that a high percentage of doctors wear hats,” he declaimed, and by the end he was slightly breathless.

“You are a veritable mine of information and, yes, you are right,” John said, and he cleared his throat before continuing, “but after wearing a helmet and nearly dying in it, I found the prospect of covering my head again simply unbearable. I suppose it’s a mild form of claustrophobia. I’m lucky it didn’t happen with clothes or I’d be prancing about in my birthday suit,” he joked, trying to lighten the mood.

And in truth, Sherlock was mortified. He had been looking for a foible and had met with trauma and who knows what depths of misery.

“I’m sorry, John; that was horribly indelicate of me,” he stuttered, “Sometimes I’m like the proverbial bull in a china shop.”

John patted his hand and smiled.
“You couldn’t have known. And it wasn’t shell shock, so I suppose it’s not even a serious ailment. But if you still wish to make amends, perhaps you will answer my question: where did you learn about poisons?”

“I studied chemistry at Cambridge and toyed with the idea of making it my life’s occupation. War intervened and my path was irrevocably diverted. I’m glad of it now, not of the war of course. Not that, never that,” he waffled. God that was embarrassing: words seemed to just gush out of him like jets from a fountain, entirely bypassing his brain. Really, he should decrease the opium dosage or heaven knows what he might say or do next.

Thankfully, they had reached their destination, where he would show John the extent of his eloquence. His work was what mattered, what he excelled at.

They were let in by an elderly woman that John mistook for Lady Tennant, but that was in fact Stephen’s old nanny, the only person the young boy really adored. He called her Nanny and she doted on him.

The young man was in bed with a cold, so they were about to leave, not wanting to distress him, when Nanny told them that Mr Tennant had insisted he would see them.

Stephen’s bedroom left John speechless and Sherlock queasy and more than a little jealous.

Silver sequins and sham pearls decorated the bed; the ceiling was dark blue with a gold star in the middle; the window had silver curtains and close to it was a green parrot in a cage. On a shelf, stood an Epstein bust of the boy while the air was suffused with the scent of tuberoses and while lilies.

“Oh, it’s too grim for words!” the owner of the room sighed, opening a golden case and extracting a powder puff which he lightly brushed against his nose and brow.

The portrait they had just admired was indeed a good likeness: there was the willowy slenderness, the large, deer-like eyes, the silken hair and the plump lips, although now they were bereft of paint.

There was febrile light in his pupils and a touch of pink in his cheeks: he looked consumptive, like the heroine of an Italian opera.

Sherlock had asked John to follow his lead, so the doctor merely gazed but did not utter a word. The best tactic with the likes of Tennant was to let them do the talking.

“Lord Holmes, I’m ecstatic to see you and your friend,” he said, throwing a flirtatious look the doctor’s way, batting his long and tinted eyelashes in a way that Sherlock found revolting.

“Our pleasure, I am sure. I wanted to talk to you about an acquaintance we have in common, an artist of immense talent.”

The young man’s shriek was all the more shocking for being unexpected. The parrot thought so too, as it squawked and screeched, turning the opulent room into a zoo.

When both had calmed down, Sherlock asked for an explanation, which was whispered in his ear, like a confession of a martyr on his deathbed.

“I’m posing for Duncan, yes, but it’s a secret. I’m seeing someone, an older man, and he’s horribly jealous. We only just met, but I’m madly in love with him. He’s a stickler for morality, a virginal soul, so you see, he should not, cannot find out.”
“I’m afraid it won’t be possible to keep it a secret for much longer, Mr Tennant, as Mr Forbes has been murdered.”

At this juncture, Sherlock realised what a blessing it was to have John with him, as the young man blanched and passed out.

“Poor boy,” John commiserated, as he plucked a small bottle from one of his pockets.

He applied it to the boy’s nose and in a few moments, after a coughing fit that shook him clean off the bed, Stephen Tennant regained consciousness.

“It was Sieg, wasn’t it? Oh, it’s simply too horrid. I will be called to testify and I will have to wear those drab clothes, manly ones. Not that I have anything against your attire, my dear, but they do look awful on my poor scrawny figure,” he prattled on, batting his eyes in John’s direction with shameless intent.

Sherlock wished he had some of that potassium cyanide with him, to sprinkle inside the boy's powder compact.

“The police have just started their investigation, but since you are the subject of the victim’s last portrait, we thought the best course of action was to inform you presently,” John explained, with a delicacy of manner that Sherlock simply detested.

Since there was nothing more they could elicit from the exhausted socialite, they left him in the capable hands of Nanny.

“Unless he’s an actor worthy of Sarah Bernhardt, he didn’t know that Forbes was dead,” John said, once they were outside.

“No, it certainly appears that he didn’t. But he seemed convinced his lover had done it. Sieg, as in Siegfried Sassoon,” Sherlock mused.

“That’s preposterous! The man is a decorated war hero, a brave soldier. I never met him, but I’ve heard… I’ve read… Oh, that’s absurd!”

Sherlock snapped, and crowded the smaller man against the nearest wall.

“What is so unacceptable? That he should be a murderer or that he should love another man? What,” he pressed on “That a craggy soldier should fall for a precious aesthete, is that what you find impossible to believe?”

John did not recoil; he stood his ground and stared into the mouth of the abyss.

“Not at all, my dear friend; what I do not comprehend is how a man of value and integrity would risk his life and his sanity for a superficial slip of a boy, a vapid aristocrat who is clearly incapable of loving anyone with intense, unguarded passion.”

Sherlock should have felt triumphant, for there was the dangerous, reckless side of John that he’d conjectured about. And a part of him was glad, but the other, the bit of his heart and soul that was aching and straining, was left battered and forlorn in the knowledge that he would never be capable of winning this man’s eternal devotion.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks for reading. Comments and kudos are very much appreciated :)
Once He Lived, in Charm and Grace

Chapter Summary

Enters Mycroft

Gabriel Atkin really existed. He did not die in the War and was one of Sassoon's lovers.

The party with the charade and the men dressed as nuns in sheets really happened :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Spirit of purity he stands
As once he lived, in charm and grace;
I may not hold him with these hands,
Nor bid him stay to heal my sorrow:
Only his fair unshadowed face
Abides with me until to-morrow.”

Song (I Listen For Him) excerpt - Siegfried Sassoon

William Park Atkin had been known to all his friends and acquaintances as Gabriel, though even after his death nobody could explain the reason for this sobriquet.

A painter by vocation and a pianist by hobby, he had been charming, pliable and reckless, with a worrying exuberance and a tendency to indulge his sensuality in every way. He loved drinking and at one point he developed a passion for a new liqueur named Drambuie; his swift descent into alcoholism came to an abrupt halt as the country went to war.

A frail, mercurial creature, Gabriel wasn’t made for the trenches and as a result, he ended up, like many other soldiers, at the infamous Craiglockhart sanatorium, a victim to shell-shock. The doctors fixed him, or so they alleged, and sent him back to fight. He died on the very day he returned to France.

These facts were widely known and some had been quoted in his obituary in the Times, but there were other things, of supreme importance, that the world had not been apprised of.

What they didn’t know, for instance, was that one morning, rising from his bed, his hair all tangled
and shiny like golden candy floss, he had faced the open window and a breeze had turned his white linen chemise into a majestic sail first, and then into a pair of wings; his lover, eyes still full of sleep, had gazed upon him and said, half in jest, half in wonder; “You look like the archangel Gabriel.”

The name had entered common parlance, the lover had remained a secret. His name was John Hamish Watson.

“The least I can do, after my unpardonable behaviour, is to offer you a spot of lunch,” Sherlock said, as they passed Café Conté on the corner of Charlotte Street and Goodge Street. Sherlock loved the French café, with his regular customers always sipping Pernod or drinking coffee and dunking their croissants, while playing dominoes, chess or draughts.

They had returned to Fitzrovia to report their conversation with Tennant to a flustered Inspector and his very concerned Superintendent.

John had not raised his voice or left in a huff, but his quiet, dignified demeanour had stung Sherlock much more than his anger would have.

“I think you should stop with these amends of yours; if we have to remain friends, you and I should be as we are. Otherwise what sort of friendship would that be, when you have to feign or apologize all the time?” the doctor replied, with a soft smile and a faraway look in his eyes.

The detective realised he’d just been check-mated as he couldn’t plead his case without seeming to disagree; he wanted John’s presence in his life, but being himself, as the man had demanded, would surely mean disaster, as no other person had ever accepted Sherlock for who he really was. What a blasted quandary; he could have screamed. And yet, maybe, just maybe… a foolish hope, surely, but worth a try.

“Alright, it’s a deal. But you still need to eat and I could do with a bite, too; which, by the way, and in the spirit of full disclosure, it’s such a rare occurrence it should be celebrated by a friend, such as you, with joy and total compliance with my wishes,” he replied, and because he suspected John wouldn’t want to be even more in his debt, he added “My lodgings are not far from here; we could walk, if your leg is not bothering you too much, that is.” That had been a tad awkward, but it was no use being guarded if it went against John’s wishes.

The weather had taken a turn for the better: even though the air was frosty, the clouds had dissipated and the sky was a deep Spode blue.

John agreed and as they reached the hustle and bustle of the Tottenham Court Road he turned toward him and asked: “That boy, Stephen Tennant, he knew who you were. Are you well acquainted with him?”

Sherlock sniffed and threw his head back in a show of eloquent disdain.

“Our paths may have crossed a handful of times. The sort of things they get up to at their disreputable parties,” he shook his head with such stately disapproval that made John grin and even stifle a giggle, “are puerile and unbearable tedious. Once I was invited to the Tennants' place in the country, Wilsford, but with the proviso that I would have to play charades and dress as a nun, wearing only a sheet! I politely declined and that was it.”

John was trying in vain to chase from his mind the image of Sherlock clad only in a sheet and it was proving so distracting that he couldn’t utter a single word in reply; naturally, his friend mistook his
silence for censure.

“You don’t have to think me incapable of having fun; I enjoy art and books and music; in fact, I even play the violin,” he added, with a hint of pride.

“No, I’d never think you dull, dear friend; what did you say, the violin? Once – Christ, it seems almost a lifetime ago – I used to listen to music, but after the War,” he hesitated, as if searching for the right words “beauty and grace were in such short supply, weren’t they?”

He glanced at the tall man next to him, and in profile, with his cheek rouged by the winter frost and his long neck shielded by the upturned collar of his cape, he looked fragile, as if spun from sugar and rosewater. If he were a painter, but no, his mind was not ready yet to go down that path.

“I could play something for you, later.”

“Yes, I’d love that.”

“Don’t expect the sublime technique of Jascha Heifetz; I’m little more than an amateur.”

John laughed and shook his head.

“I doubt that,” he replied and it was the best compliment the detective had received in ages.

When they reached their destination and ascended the three steps that led to the front door of 221, Sherlock knew immediately that something was wrong. The knocker was askew and there were fingerprints on the usually immaculate brass-work.

He opened the door and Mrs Hudson, who’d evidently been waiting for him, pounced on them like a dainty bird of prey.

“Sherlock dear, I’m afraid it couldn’t be helped,” she explained, flustered yet still managing to acknowledge John’s presence with a nod and a smile. “You know how he is, with his umbrella and talking of himself in the third person; he reminds one of Queen Victoria and it makes it quite impossible to say no.”

“Certainly a queen of some sort,” Sherlock muttered under his breath as he ran up the stairs. John briefly introduced himself to the elderly lady then followed his new friend, wondering about the identity of the pompous intruder.

A tall, spare, immaculately attired man was standing by the fireplace, tapping the wrought iron grate with the ferrule of his pewter-handled umbrella. Upon further inspection, he looked about John’s age but without the latter’s raw enthusiasm and warmth.

“Brother mine, I have instructed that excellent girl of yours to lay another cover. We wouldn’t want you friend to witness your haphazard domestic arrangements so early in your relationship.” The last word was uttered as if in a foreign language.

Sherlock felt John bristle and couldn’t refrain from smiling.

“The good Inspector could not help himself, I see,” he remarked, as he removed his outer garments with a flounce, piling them upon the closest armchair. He then plucked a cigarette from its case, lit it and started puffing on it with gusto. His brother’s nose curled and his eyebrows arched minutely, but he did not comment otherwise. He loathed tobacco, but he would not be chased out of Baker Street
before he had said his piece.

“You don’t seriously imagine Whitehall wouldn’t be informed first thing. Dear Sherlock, the man
was the stepson of one of our most influential peers; naturally, we want the culprit found and brought
to justice in the quickest, least damaging manner!”

“When you say ‘we’, do you mean the Government or your most noble self?”

“Don’t be silly! But I won’t be provoked; I lack both the time and the inclination to play your little
games, little brother. I came here to purchase your services on behalf of King and country.”

John, who had been observing the exchange like a spectator at a cricket match, nearly jumped at
Sherlock’s reaction. The detective strode towards his brother, jabbing the air with his cigarette, like a
fencer.

“I’m not for sale, Mycroft,” he growled, exhaling a cloud of smoke full into his brother’s face.

“Your theatrics, dear Sherlock, are entirely futile and, in this particular case, counter-productive. I
assume you will require some… assistance in your investigation and not everybody is as cavalier in
matters of finance as you are.”

He gazed briefly at John and the doctor blushed furiously, gritting his teeth to prevent a few choice
expletives to spill out of it.

The detective, however, had fallen silent and was reflecting on the unwelcome truthfulness of his
brother’s words. Certainly John couldn’t afford to give up his job to follow Sherlock and it would be
unthinkable not to have him around. It was exhilarating and a tad scary how soon he’d become
accustomed to John’s presence and was unwilling to give up this pleasure, despite its fleeting nature.

“But where are my manners?” Mycroft said, in a mellifluous tone, as he approached John holding
out his gloved hand to be shaken.

“Doctor John Watson,” the blond man said, his grasp strong but perfunctory.

“Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock’s elder brother and guardian angel. Until recently, that is,” the tall man
replied, with the ghost of a wink. Sherlock sniggered, but did not speak. His head was tilted to the
side, likening him to a snake assessing if, when and where to strike.

“I owe you a debt of gratitude for having rescued Sherlock from an extremely unpleasant situation.”

“How can you possibly know?” John marvelled.

“I have my methods, as I am sure my brother will tell you later, with an abundance of offensive
epithets. I leave you to your luncheon. Think about my offer, Sherlock,” he said, as he ambled
towards the door, followed by his brother’s glare.

“Goodbye Doctor Watson. I see that you’re very loyal, very soon. Interesting,” were his last words
before he left the room.

“Loathsome busybody!” the detective exploded, throwing his cigarette stub in the fireplace.

“How did he know about the details of our encounter? Was it just guesswork or does he spy on you
all the time?” John asked. He was incensed at the man’s arrogance, but also quite curious.

“Mycroft has eyes all over London. I suspect he never sleeps at night; he’s like a vampire preying on
the innocents and the unguarded.”

“But you think in this case he may be right,” the doctor remarked, shrewdly.

Sherlock gave him a searching look.

“Yes, maybe, I don’t know.”

“It could be easier to reach a decision once you have some food in your belly.”

The detective laughed.

“You have no idea,” he replied, as he led his friend towards the dining room.

The table was set modestly but with elegance and the platters contained a selection of cold meats, cheeses, pickles and bread.

John ate heartily, but he observed that his host was picking at his food like a fussy, dyspeptic sparrow.

After a glass of claret, he felt up to the task of discussing the situation with Sherlock. The truth was that as much as he admired the man – and he was well down the road of no return – he didn’t understand why he was so interested in a middle-class doctor he’d just met. He suspected the detective to be difficult and solitary and that his brilliance, which to him was as clear as crystal, needed an audience, but he wondered whether this sudden attachment was of a transitory nature, in which case he needed to know before it was too late. It would have hurt still, but not as much as in a month’s, or even a week’s time of continued frequentation.

“Your brother must have great faith in your abilities, despite his chiding,” John said.

Sherlock could hardly swallow a morsel of food for his distress.

A conundrum presented itself to his mind: if he took the case without accepting Mycroft’s commission, he could not ask John to help him. Relinquishing his post at the hospital, even for a brief period of time, would represent a loss of income that would be felt most severely. On the other hand, if he did offer John a recompense for his contribution and he accepted, their relationship would always be coloured by the issue of money. Hateful, dirty thing, money!

“He wants to control me; and what better way than by giving me a riddle to solve?” he replied, grimly.

“Some relationships exert a perverse hold on us,” John observed, with a sad shake of the head.

Brother or sister, Sherlock silently deduced, probably some form of overindulgence, alcohol, yes, that should be it.

“Well put, dear chap, I couldn’t have said it better,” he replied, and feeling suddenly brave, he placed a hand on the man’s arm. “I need your help. There are, at times, in my line of work, people who are willing to do anything to escape capture.”

“Even trying to hurt you?”
“Worse than that, dear fellow, much worse.”

John’s expression darkened and the grasp on the glass of claret he was holding tightened considerably.

“Have they tried before?” he whispered.

“I was almost pushed off Blackfriars Bridge, once. I was chasing the suspect in an abduction case.”

“And the police cannot protect you?”

“Not all the time. Besides, it isn’t the sort of protection I require.”

“But you don’t want to be indebted to your brother.”

“Or money to spoil our friendship,” the detective admitted, blushing a little.

John poured Sherlock another glass of wine, and suddenly his face lit up.

“There may be a third way. What if, instead of being your hired help, we became partners? The recompense the government is offering could be split between us. They are consulting you and I would provide part of the service. What do you think?”

Partners. The word stuck inside Sherlock’s throat, with its multiplicity of meanings, and the vista of possibilities that opened before him was breath-taking. John would follow him everywhere and be a witness to his genius; he would shoot his enemies and cure his wounds. Day and night, night and day.

“You should come and live here, with me,” he declared.

The Bohemia crystal chalice in John’s hand snapped. It fell to the floor, where it splintered into a million pieces.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and kudos are swell :)
The Rescuer of Beauty

Chapter Summary

Siegfried, at last.
Many of the people and places mentioned here are real, but I have tampered with the
dates and facts, obviously :)
Note: Sassoon's mother Theresa was nicknamed Ash.

“I love Music, Violin first, Piano next, with such strength that I have to conceal the passion for fear it may be thought weakness…” Poet Wilfred Owen writing to his mother Susan on May 24, 1914

The instant he said it, Sherlock knew he’d made a mistake of gargantuan proportions.

After the glass had shattered on the floor, John’s face remained blank and silence stretched around
them for longer than was comfortable. The detective racked his brains for the most suitable repartee
and decided to go for nonchalance.

“Dear chap, no reason to be so alarmed. It’s nothing but a suggestion dictated by eminently practical
reasons,” he drawled, reaching for his cigarette case to disguise his nerves. He toyed with it for a few
moments, to steady his twitching fingers.

He craved the soothing flame of the opium and was aware of the dangers of having John at his side,
heightening his powers to feel and thus rendering him more prone to seek refuge in the drug.
Willingly, he was pushing against his own boundaries, knowing that disaster may be the end result,
and that true ecstasy was a remote eventuality. He kept his eyes fixed on the workings of his hand,
trying to appear aloof.

What he didn’t know was the extent of his success.

John observed his countenance and found it frigid and distant, and was tempted to reject the offer.

That had been his downfall in the past, he pondered sadly; he had always been attracted to men of
impulsive and artistic temperament, creatures of delicate beauty and unstable character, who
displayed all the trappings of passion, but without the requisite depth and constancy.

Gabriel had been profligate with his declarations of love and sensuous in his raptures, but if the War
had not intervened, John was sure their relationship would have ended in tears and recriminations.
He’d been the one to request secrecy and John was convinced his motives were less than noble on
that score. Gabriel’s friends were all titled or at least rich and a poor doctor wouldn’t have been the
‘right fit’ among that illustrious company.

And now he feared that Sherlock, despite his protestations of indifference to his title and wealth,
would behave in the same vein, and John would not, could not suffer it.
Even in the handful of hours they’d spent together, he’d felt something for the younger man that he’d never experienced before in his life: not only a deep admiration for his independence of mind and a desire to cherish and protect him, but most worryingly, a physical yearning that was exacerbated by tenderness for the detective’s youth and unspotted beauty.

Unfortunately, he also saw the man’s vanity and his superciliousness, and he feared a repetition of past sufferings that would be made infinitely worse by living under the same roof. He had never shared lodgings with Gabriel and they had never worked together, so he’d been able to keep some distance from him.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” he replied, gazing at Sherlock’s downturned face. “I suspect that, being bachelors, we are both set in our ways, and sharing living arrangements would be cause for friction and ultimately discontent.”

Sherlock was frantically searching for a good reason that wouldn’t involve money or other practicalities. He finally decided that listing his faults would be the best tactic to appease John’s apprehension about his supposed inadequacies. Quite rightly, if partially, the detective had deduced his friend’s misgivings and was offering him his own shortcomings.

“I won’t pretend of being the world’s easiest companion: I’m short-tempered, untidy and at time even slovenly, I can be silent for hours or even days, nourishment and sleep are not my priorities; what else, let me see; yes, I play the violin at the most inopportune hours, often during the night, and I like to be first to read the newspaper as I like it when it’s freshly inked. Oh, and I loathe small talk of any sort. If the weather is damp or exceedingly stuffy, I can see it for myself; I don’t need a running commentary. I have a studio for my experiments, and that’s verboten even to my maid. I’m sure you won’t mind the interdiction, since it’s only a dusty, smelly little room filled with beakers and chemicals.”

He finally raised his eyes to John’s face and saw he was smiling broadly. He smiled in return and knew the battle was won.

John was staring at Sherlock’s elegant back, as the younger man played Delius.

The detective had removed his waistcoat and was in his shirtsleeves. The afternoon light had already dwindled, so they had turned on the gaslights; thanks to a game of transparencies and shadows, John could observe the play of muscles on Sherlock’s shoulders, the elegant dip of his spine and swell of his buttocks. He was as exquisite as a Praxiteles’ Hermes and as marble-skinned.

*This can’t end well*, he repeated silently, even as he lost himself in contemplation of that perfect tableau.

Earlier, they had read the afternoon edition of the Standard which already contained a sensational account of the painter’s death, but still no mention of Sherlock’s collaboration in the investigations. Superintendent Fitzwilliam had given a statement of suitable gravity and Lestrade’s name had also been present.

A brief phone call between the detective and his brother, consisting mostly of one party doing the talking and the other grunting, sighing and occasionally uttering monosyllabic words, had followed.
The gist was that Sherlock and John would act in an unofficial role, but they had been granted special status by the Prime Minister himself, and the police would liaise with them when necessary. Money was not discussed, but it was obvious that no expenses would be spared.

Despite John’s initial, bullish resistance, Mycroft had finally obtained permission to send a valet to pack the doctor’s belongings and bring them to Baker Street.

Their first assignment was one that John both longed for and dreaded: an interview with Siegfried Sassoon.

Thus, the violin playing was a fruitful interlude for both men: for Sherlock, it meant the calm before the storm and for John it was a tentative dip into a long-lost sea, the touch and taste of which he’d almost forgotten.

The previous day was another era, and this was the dawning of a new one.

In the cab that was taking them to Holland Park, Sherlock ventured to ask John some questions that had plagued him ever since their visit to Stephen Tennant.

“Are you acquainted with him personally?”

John cleared his throat before speaking.

“Not exactly; we always kind of missed each other. He was at Arras with the Royal Welch Fusiliers while I was with the Northumberland Battalion. When the two joined forces, he’d already been wounded. I was hit later in the summer. I knew a friend of his, a young boy named David Cuthbert Thomas; he died. An acquaintance of mine was at Craiglockhart when he and Owen were there. Theirs was a famous friendship; another that ended in sorrow. But I am sure you know all this already.”

“I have read his poems and I have met some of his lot; but as I told you, I do not mix with that crowd. My Cambridge days put paid to that type of frequentation,” he replied, grimacing.

“Oh, I see,” John remarked, imagining the quirky detective being bullied and abused because of his lack of social and athletic skills. He’d obviously never been part of that environment, but he knew how cruel boys could be at that age, especially when left to their own devices. “You really think him capable of murder?” he asked, softly.

“I'm not sure what to think yet. Except he was known as Mad Jack by his soldiers for his acts of reckless bravery in the trenches; yet he threw his Military Cross in a river in protest against the war.”

“I admire him for doing that,” John observed.

Sherlock gave him an oblique smile.

“I suspected you would. I did too, but knew how pointless his gesture was.”

“That didn’t make it any less admirable.”

“Quite, my friend, quite,” the detective concurred with a sigh.

In Campden Hill Square, they were let into a spacious room dominated by a grand piano with a
Reger score on the stand; on the chimney piece hung a painting of old Exeter signed by the artist J.B Pyne. To the side of the window - which afforded views over west London - stood a desk laden with books and overlooked by a convex mirror and a framed picture of a country house. On a shelf crammed with more books, pride of place was given to a photo of a woman dressed in taffeta with three small children at her feet. It was signed in faded ink, with one single word: Ash.

“Sorry to keep you waiting; I was on the phone and couldn’t ring off. Horrid things phones, don’t you think?”

Siegfried Sassoon was as tall as Sherlock, but not as lithe. Despite being slim, he gave an impression of barely restrained strength. He had a chiselled head with brown, wavy hair worn short at the back and longer on top. There was a vague air of sadness on his face, but his lips often curved in a sardonic smile.

They made their introductions and came to the reason of their visit.

“I was first introduced to Duncan in Half Moon Street by my friend Robbie Ross,” he said, speaking to Sherlock, but darting surreptitious glances at John.

“The last time we spoke, we had an argument, I’m afraid.”

“What about?” the detective asked.

“A silly discussion about a novel; but I don’t want to bore you with it. It was all to do with my admiration for the idea of living a dream life parallel to the dank truth.”

“Peter Ibbetson,” Sherlock exclaimed. “I used to read snatches from it every day, years ago.”

Sassoon’s face underwent a dramatic change: gone was the bored, courteous host replaced by a younger, eager man.

“Duncan hated the concept. He said that I was afraid to get my hands dirty with the business of living. I remarked that it was rich of him since he did not take active part in the fight.”

“He was stationed in Britain, like myself,” Sherlock replied, blushing a little.

John couldn’t be silent any longer.

“There was work to be done here too; important work, I’m sure, even though it wasn’t as risky,” he said, staring the poet in the eyes.

“Yes, of course, my dear fellow,” the man replied, with a shy, engaging smile “But you see, I have always felt overcome by fantasies of affronted innocence and seen myself as a rescuer of beauty.”

“It is my task to guard his beauty from wrong and so I bring him wounded home from war and love surrounds us both, like sudden flowers body and spirit wrought to a single heart of unison, like the embrace of lovers,” Sherlock quoted.

John looked at the two men with a mixture of admiration and dread. He felt he was intruding into something in which he could never take part.

Little did he know that the detective was performing for an audience of one which did not include the poet whose verses he was declaiming.

“I don’t know what to say, except that I’m flattered and glad to make your acquaintance, Mr
Holmes,” Sassoon said, biding them to sit down and offering them drinks, which they accepted.

“I always wanted to play the piano, but my father insisted on the violin. He gave me his Stradivarius for my seventh birthday, so I couldn’t refuse him. I’ve grown to love it, but the old passion refuses to die,” Sherlock confessed, as they sipped their whiskies.

John listened avidly to these recollections of his friend’s past, but guessed they were not typical of his character, that he was being unusually candid. This consideration produced a pain his chest that he preferred to not qualify for what it was: acute jealousy.

“You should come to Lady Morrell’s on Sunday: Violet Gordon-Woodhouse will be playing and I’m sure you and your friend will be more than welcome,” he said, again glancing at John from beneath his eyelashes.

Sherlock’s jaw tightened: he knew that look only too well; who better than him knew the ways of a shy man when struck with a sudden attraction for another man?

And Sassoon was a hero to John, someone who’d faced death and conquered it with grace and dignity. The fact that he could also be a murderer did not seem to matter, not if John really liked the man.

“We’d love to accept your invitation, but I’m not sure you will feel as welcoming once we’ve discussed the reason of our visit. You see, Mr Sassoon, we have been to see Mr Stephen Tennant in connection to Forbes’ murder.”

The poet’s expression darkened; he set the glass down on coffee table next to his armchair. A few moments of charged silence followed. He clearly wasn’t always an impulsive man, as he seemed to be debating what his next words should be.

“Stephen wouldn’t hurt a fly, if that’s what you are suggesting,” he said, his voice a bit ragged.

“Forbes was painting his portrait. We found it in his studio; he was working on it when he died.”

The implication in the detective’s words was obvious: it was widely known that the painter’s models always became his lovers too and the rest followed, like night the day.

“You have been sent to test the waters, to trick me into admitting something compromising, I see. Not quite cricket, wouldn’t you say Mr Watson?” he asked, finally addressing John directly, with a strange light in his eyes.

“A man’s life has been taken from him; I say that’s even less cricket, sir,” John replied, unabashed.

They stayed locked in this gaze for a long moment, and were at last interrupted by Sherlock’s glass being violently deposited on the table. Sassoon turned to look at him, but his mind was clearly miles away.

“I guess the police will want to talk to me next. If you don’t mind, gentlemen, I will have to make a few phone calls now.”

“Of course,” Sherlock and John said, almost at the same time. “I suppose the invitation no longer stands,” the detective added.

“You’re quite wrong, dear chap. I will be glad to meet you there. Here’s Lady Morrell’s card,” the poet replied, extracting a mauve piece of paper from a case on his desk. “Good day, gentlemen,” he said, keeping John’s hand in his for two heartbeats’ longer.
Sherlock and John left, both dissatisfied at what they had heard and seen, both gravely mistaken.
A Cry of Desire

Chapter Summary

Sherlock has troubles sleeping and so does John.

“They have murdered the voice that was you; and the dreams of a boy
Pass to the gloom of death with a cry of desire.”

Dedication (excerpt) – Siegfried Sassoon

The skies were closing upon him, dense and impenetrable; he was drenched in sweat and the pulse in his ears sang a thumping tune of fear and elation.

He was running in the dark, being chased through an orchard into a wood of ancient oaks and silvery birches, whose trunks shimmered and shone in the starless night.

Suddenly, he came across a clearing and there, on a bed of fallen leaves, two creatures were engaged in something he couldn’t quite comprehend. His own hand, when he gazed at it, was small and so were his feet; he had either shrunk or turned into a child again. That puzzled him for a moment, but there, again, were the cries of these two men – he realised what they were, as his eyes grew accustomed to the blackness of the woods – joined together in a most unnatural way.

He moved closer, slowly and softly, and contemplated their act with horror mingled with a sort of hunger he couldn’t name.

One of them, the smaller one, was on all fours, like an animal, and the larger one, his leonine, blonde head thrown back in ferocious delight, was behind him, mounting his prey and eliciting from him cries and sobs that could have been mistaken for pain if he hadn’t noticed something that completely changed his interpretation of the scene in front of him: the prey was pushing back into the other’s thrusts. He wanted to be taken; his cries were demands for more, deeper, harder.

The words became as clear as a bell as the child’s breathing became laboured and his heart felt as if squeezed by an iron fist.

There was a piercing cry and then another, in a deeper, more masculine pitch and the boy’s sight became hazy; through the strange, milky fog, he could see an embrace of a more intimate and sensual nature, heard the sound of wet kissing; he couldn’t take anymore; he started running back, faster and faster, until he reached an imposing, castellated edifice. In the shadows, someone was waiting for him, and he knew that he was safe, at last. But what did that mean, when that peculiar hunger inside him was unsated and the terror still crouching inside his bowels?
Sherlock startled awake, in a cold sweat.

Perhaps sixty grains had been too abundant a dose for his shaken psyche, regardless of the robustness of his body.

After Sassoon’s visit, he and John had visited Scotland Yard, where they had been given the keys to Forbes’ studio and apprised of the few things the police had ascertained, such as a confirmation of the cause of death and the time of it, which was between midnight and three in the morning. Forbes had no siblings and his mother resided in Mayfair with her second husband, Lord Asquith.

There were a number of friends and lovers and no doubt the Yard would have to interrogate all of them, which would be an exhausting and possibly useless process, but it had to be done, lamented Inspector Lestrade.

Sherlock had remarked the time of death was probably irrelevant, as the pot of poisoned paint could have been left there at any time, giving the murderer a cast-iron alibi.

With John, they had agreed they would visit the studio on the following day, and they had gone to dinner at a small restaurant in Marylebone, a dilapidated Italian mock-trattoria, with paper tablecloths and framed photos of Venice and Naples on the walls. Their conversation had been desultory and was little there had been, strictly confined to the case; Sherlock had felt a barrier being erected between them; it saddened him and he reacted with petulance and silence.

Mycroft had been true to his word: when they got back to Baker Street, they found the upstairs room already furnished with John’s belongings, which had been cleaned, dusted, washed and ironed. Clothes and shoes had been stored away and his other possessions arranged almost identically to how they had been at his lodgings.

The doctor’s astonishment had overcome his embarrassment and distaste at this blatant invasion of privacy.

He’d curtly bid goodnight to Sherlock, who’d realised that he did not want to be left alone quite yet.

The detective had wandered about the lonely, silent rooms, feeling restless and indignat at what he deemed was the unjust fate that had thrown him into John’s path only for the man to be cold and already fascinated by another’s attractions.

It was his own fault - that much he knew - as it had always been the case, as far as he could remember. He didn’t want to cast his mind back to the days at boarding school and afterwards, at University, as it was a history of frustration and rejection that still plagued him, despite the successes of the War and of his newfound profession.

He plucked the violin from his case and started playing a bit of Bach, but the notes jarred his nerves and the melody did not reach his heart.

What he needed was the halcyon bliss devoid of thought and pain; what he craved was the cessation of all febrile hungers and the embrace of undefiled serenity. He took the small phial from its secret alcove and counted fifty grains, before deciding that, to be safe, he needed a slightly heavier dosage. He ingested the miracle cure and fell into its oblivious grasp.
Unfortunately, it was still the dead of night, but despite his tremors and sweats, he had no desire to remain in bed.

He slid into his dressing gown and – barefoot - he slinked out in the direction of the sitting room. The remains of a fire still crackled in the fireplace, the embers winking orange in the velvety darkness.

“It seems I’m not the only one who can’t sleep.”

John’s voice, deep and roughened by disuse, echoed in the stillness and made him jump; surprise, unbidden fear and what else, hunger? That same hunger of the dream, that persisted at the edges of Sherlock’s consciousness, still as real as the carpet beneath his feet.

In the shadows, a figure had been waiting for him, but he had not seen its face.

He reached for the nearest lamp and lit it, wanting to shake free from the cobwebs of sleep.

“I hope I didn’t wake you,” he said, hoping his face wouldn’t show the turmoil of his heart.

“No, but as a matter of fact, I’ve heard you scream,” the doctor replied, gazing up into the detective’s eyes. “And judging by the state of you, I know the cause of your distress. But,” he added, seeing the other man wince “I won’t lecture you, as you know already what I think of it. Damn stupid, that’s what I think.”

Sherlock nodded, but he had the decency to not lie.

He banked the fire and poured whisky in two tumblers, handing one to the doctor, who was sitting in what would become ‘his’ armchair, caressing his injured leg.

Sherlock lit a cigarette, puffed on it for a handful of seconds and handed it to his friend, who accepted it with an air of resignation. He didn’t usually smoke, but was willing to make an exception.

“Young your wound is hurting. It’s your left shoulder, isn’t it?” the detective asked, fiddling with a second cigarette.

“Yes to both. Come on, explain it to me,” John replied, smiling through a cloud of smoke.

“Not that difficult to deduce. Lestrade patted you on the back when we left the Yard and you flinched; it was the minutest twitch, but I observed.”

“Astounding, dear friend, the way nothing escapes your notice. I’m confident that scoundrel stands no chance with you on the case.”

As he said this, his cigarette between his lips, he leaned towards Sherlock and gave his knee a brief squeeze.

To him it was but that, but for the younger man, it was a seismic shift, a bolt of lightning that shot him in the very pit of his bowels, setting fire to his groin, robbing him of the power of speech.

John had gone to sleep in a daze.

His new room was of ample proportions and crammed with familiar things, but it still didn’t feel like home. It was like being trapped inside a snow globe: the setting could be a castle or a prison, but the bell jar around it would always confer it a measure of unreality.
He was depressed by the cold making his shoulder ache, by his age compared to Sherlock’s youth, by the light on the detective’s face when Sassoon had talked of literature and music, and the myriad other things that made it impossible for the two of them to be anything but friends, or at most working partners.

His slumber was plagued by dreams of kissing and making love to Gabriel, only to realise he’d morphed into a raven-haired, milky-skinned tempter, with the mouth of an angel and the eyes of a devil. Even his voice had turned sultry and the words he said were as dark as his tone; *drink me, suck me dry*, he demanded, his breath hot on John’s mouth, and he’d never be able to resist him, not if his life depended on it.

In the end, he was awakened by the younger man’s voice, as his scream tore through the silence, right through John’s dreams into a reality that was cold and bereft of that mouth, of that body.

“You really do trust my detecting skills then,” Sherlock said, after a while. He seemed stunned, as if that had never happened to him before.

John still felt the warmth of the skin he’d just touched; he’d not quite realised the man’s knee was bare, as his dressing gown had parted to uncover a muscled thigh, white, smooth and hairless.

His dream came back to him with the power of a hammer blow: Sherlock’s deep voice, his hot mouth kissing him, while his sinuous body demanded attention, pushing against him, hard and wet, insistent and famished.

“Oh, course, I trust you,” he managed to reply, but he was glad of the distraction afforded by smoke and alcohol.

He felt like the worst of men, to indulge in such filthy reveries when his friend’s mind was so evidently tortured by its own demons, to the point that he needed an artificial paradise to chase them away.

“You are the first; to trust me so implicitly, I mean,” the detective whispered.

“I’m cleverer than I look.”

“I never thought otherwise.”

“I’m not sure if that’s meant to flatter me or yourself.”

“Both, probably.”

They exchanged smiles that turned into laughter and suddenly the night was no longer dark or solitary.

“Are you sure they won’t take us for a couple of burglars?” John asked, as they approached Conway Mews.

“Surely burglars wouldn’t wear silk and cashmere and use a key to open the door,” Sherlock replied, rubbing his gloved hands together to warm them up.

They had decided there was no point in trying to get back to sleep and that checking the studio by
night might afford them an alternative view on the situation. Luckily, Forbes had installed a private electricity generator in his home which meant that they wouldn’t have to do their search by gaslight or, even worse, by candlelight.

When they opened the door, the sweetish reek of death assaulted their nostrils, still strong despite the body having been removed and the smell of paint trying hard to overcome it.

The scene was, aside from that one detail, unchanged: the paintings were still piled up against the walls or on the easels and the painting materials still scattered all over the place.

Sherlock opened a door at the far end of the room, and looked down the fire escape.

“Lestrade thinks the murderer escaped from here, but I don’t see why since he didn’t need to be present when the pot of paint was used. That’s the genius of this plan: he could have swapped the good one for the poisoned one at any time; the only probable inference we can make is that the murderer was well known to Forbes.”

John was looking at the painting of a man with a moustache and a hat: despite the odd splashes of blue and orange, it was clearly an auto-portrait of the deceased.

“He reminds me of André Derain,” he said.

Sherlock’s jaw made a valiant attempt to hit the floor.

“How do you…” he started, but then fell silent. “Oh, I see. Was he well-known?”

John didn’t have to ask who he was talking about or how he had guessed.

“He was on his way to fame, when he was killed. I can’t tell you,”

“No, of course not; I’m sorry, John, I really am.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“What about you? Has anyone ever painted you?” John asked, to change the subject.

“God forbid!” Sherlock exclaimed. “I wouldn’t be able to stand still for such a long time. Besides, I abhor the idea. Even photography vexes me.”

“And why is that?”

“It captures a fleeting moment that is soon gone and people who are no longer with us, for one reason or another. I’d rather consign the past to memories than allow them to become yellow with age.”

“You are a romantic, my dear friend,” John said, with a soft smile.

“Not at all, John, it’s merely a matter of logic,” the detective replied, as he turned to examine Tennant’s portrait with his magnifying lens.

“Oh, what an idiot I have been! Look here, John, look at his lips, looks at the colour.”

“They are red, it’s the same colour of… oh, you don’t mean…”

“Yes, yes, yes! You remember that simpering fool’s face was painted; why, even his eyelashes were darker than his hair; what if Forbes put the red paint on his lips?”
“Yes, yes, you are right…”

“And if you recall, the red was the only trace of paint on Forbes’ skin. He needed to finish the lips and wanted to see how the colour looked against white skin and that’s why he smeared some on himself.”

“Paint is hardly a substance you’d put on your lips, though,” John remarked.

“This is special paint though, almost like stage-paint. Look at the blue one; it’s the same brand.”

John examined the pot - careful not to touch it - and saw that Sherlock was, of course, right.

Stephen Tennant had been the predestined victim, saved only by a providential cold.
Chapter Summary

The investigation begins in earnest.

Note: Stephen Tennant did live to be an old man, despite his weak lungs.

I knew a simple soldier boy

Who grinned at life in empty joy.

Suicide in the Trenches (excerpt) Siegfried Sassoon

There is always something, Sherlock thought.

He’d deduced John’s secret torment, but he’d made a vital mistake with regards to the identity of the person in question: a lover, not a sibling.

From the scant data – an artist, alcoholic and secretive – he could easily find out the dead man’s identity, but John had intimated he wanted to keep it a secret and Sherlock was afraid lest the consequences of his disobedience meant the ending of their fledgling friendship.

The one positive thing was that the artist had been male, but even that propitious bit of news was all but obscured by the means of his demise: a victim of War, dead in combat, perhaps a hero in the trenches or a young mind gone insane in the midst of all that horror. How could Sherlock compete with that? The War had not caused him bodily injuries or mental breakdowns.

On the contrary, he had worked day and night to solve riddles that helped advance the cause of the Allied Forces, but to him that fact had not mattered as much as the work itself.

He had decrypted codes and uncovered spy networks with great gusto, never really as interested in the human element as he was in numbers and formulas.

Despite knowing that men and women had been sent to their death, he wouldn’t be able to recognise their faces or their real names, as he’d only concerned himself with their coded communications and their aliases.

There was nothing heroic or daring in any of his successes and even if John had assured him, in front of Sassoon, that he deemed his work as important as that of the soldiers, Sherlock was certain he would never, could never match the memory of his dead lover and his courage while facing the enemy on the Western Front.

For the first time since his University days he felt a complete and utter failure.

“Sherlock, dear, there’s a gentleman here to see you,” Mrs Hudson announced, as she entered carrying a plate of cucumber sandwiches and fruit scones.
She looked at John, who was sitting in his armchair reading the paper and sucking on a pencil, and gave him a luminous smile; he reciprocated and jumped up from his seat to help her.

“Thanks ever so much, Doctor Watson. You are very kind,” she said, glaring at Sherlock who was perusing a tome on poisons and ignoring his surroundings.

“You must call me John,” the doctor said to the elderly lady, and to Sherlock “It seems we have a visitor.”

“Right, right,” the detective replied vaguely, his eyes still on the book and his mind thoroughly elsewhere.

John stared at him, willing to shake him out of his reverie, but upon realising it was to no avail, he sighed and asked Mrs Hudson to let the gentleman in.

Said person turned out to be an extremely agitated Stephen Tennant, almost unrecognisable in his flamboyant attire: his hair was now slicked back with the aide of a pomade that made it shimmer where it caught the light, and he wore a long, powder-blue overcoat entirely lined in what appeared to be leopard fur. His eyelashes were long and heavy with a dark tint and his mouth had been painted a matte coral red. He was feverish and manic, touching every object in sight with his long white hands and refusing to sit down in favour of flitting around, birdlike and elegant.

“I’ve been told by the Sitwells that you are a private detective. What a quaint profession for a Lord, I said to myself. But perhaps it’s better to be doing something, instead of being so frightfully idle like we are. I don’t mean we as pluralis maiestatis, of course; there’s a bunch of us but we don’t amount to anything much at all. As soon as one catches a glimpse of the truth, why, it’s the gloomiest of things, don’t you think?” he asked of no one in particular, staring at the back of his left hand, which was almost translucent, and at the platinum and emerald ring shining on his middle finger.

John offered him a cup of tea and was rewarded with a bewitching smile that immediately caused a line of displeasure to form on Sherlock’s brow, just above his nose.

“My profession is more of a vocation; I enjoy solving problems that the common mind can’t possibly comprehend,” he replied, and his mouth twitched as he saw his effete guest wince at the implied suggestion of vulgarity.

“It must put such a strain on your body, being so clever,” Stephen said, pointedly looking at Sherlock’s wrinkled forehead. “But perfectly heavenly, I’m sure.”

“A soldier, on the other hand,” he added, turning his doe-eyed gaze toward John, who couldn’t help a slight blush, “is carved from a more solid, ageless substance; there’s a virginal purity, a childish innocence inside the soldier’s heart and mind.”

“Despite all the carnage he’s been forced to witness and endure?” the older man asked.

“Not despite, but precisely because of them,” Tennant replied, moving closer to John with a languorous gait.

“If you have come here to talk to us about the murder,” Sherlock interjected, raising his voice.

“I’m here because I want to hire you to find Duncan’s killer. What a word, killer; I sound like one of those modern novels Revel loves so much. Revel is the novelist Revel Dester, a dear friend of mine,” he explained, still keeping his eyes fixed on John.

“I’m afraid I’m no longer a free agent with regards to this case. Forbes was an important man and the
powers that be are very keen that no stones be left unturned; no secrets undiscovered,” Sherlock replied.

Stephen Tennant batted his eyelashes in a show of demureness; he finally sat down on a chair and crossed his legs, showing off a chalk-white, finely-boned ankle; he was wearing a pair of turquoise brogues with no socks.

“In this case,” he stated, biting down on a slice of cucumber, “I better come clean. I do believe I have a sliver of Catholicism in my ancestry, same as my dear Revel, since confessions scare and excite me in the same measure.” He shivered in his furs and, after taking a sip of tea, he closed his eyes, as if in a sort of trance.

“I met Sieg at a party at Wilsford. The gang was there; all the usual people, except my elder brother, Lord Glenconner, but he can be such a bore! Anyway, we had a marvellous time playing charades (at this, Sherlock grimaced and John grinned) and walking all over the grounds at night, drinking champagne and singing songs. It was just divine. Sieg took me for a ride that night, to Stonehenge and Salisbury. There was a full moon; you know the silly things one tends to do when there’s a full moon. The following morning he behaved like nothing had happened and I went along with it because, to be honest, he’s so much older and I do love to have fun. Youth doesn’t last forever, Nanny always says, and she’s ever so wise. What I mean to say is that Sieg proposed to keep our relationship secret and I gladly accepted. You’d think I’d be the jealous, obsessive one, but I rather enjoyed the freedom it allowed me. When Rex Whistler – the painter, you must know him – introduced me to Duncan, I jumped at the chance of modelling for him. Rex cautioned me; Duncan had been to Paris for a long time and he had acquired the French bohemian lifestyle, Rex said. It didn’t seem that different from ours, when all is said and done. Drinking, partying, working at his paintings and taking his pleasures from wherever they came, that was his credo, which I do endorse most enthusiastically.”

“Did Forbes ask you to be his lover?” John asked.

“Not in so many words; when I first went to Conway Mews, he said he needed to see me undressed to gauge my bone structure and I accepted. I don’t mind nudity.”

Sherlock sniggered, but the other man did not react; his eyes were still closed.

“He said he wanted to observe me with his hands, as if he were blind. He had lovely warm hands, calloused and rough-skinned, but his touch was delicate. He caressed the back of my neck, remarking on its beauty, then the hollow of my throat, my chest, stomach, buttocks and all the way down, all of it, to my feet and back up again… it was heavenly,” he whispered, a bit breathless.

John had been licking his lips without being aware of it, and as he gazed up at Sherlock, he saw him dark-eyed and furious, his teeth worrying angrily at the inside of his mouth. When their eyes met, they stayed as if frozen in that moment, before looking away, each misunderstanding the other’s predicament.

“After that, I saw him a handful of times, always at his studio, but he did not know about Sieg and vice versa, or so I thought. But after what happened…” he murmured.

“Have you perceived any sign that Sassoon might have suspected of your tryst with Forbes?”

“It’s hard to say, as he’s always so unpredictable; moody, in a manner of speaking. The War, I suppose, but you would understand all about it,” he replied, opening his eyes, suddenly, and gazing at John with something akin to adoration.
Sherlock would have plucked those orbs out of their sockets, given half a chance. That John would fall for such gross and blatant tricks was unacceptable. Contradicting this reading of the situation, John replied, unmoved:

“Not all soldiers behave the same way; some of us are steadfast of character and cheerful of disposition.”

Unruffled, Tennant smiled, this time including Sherlock too in his riposte:

“Some people are luckier than little old me.”

The moment of embarrassment that followed was dispelled by the detective's abrupt question.

“Did Forbes tell you to put paint on your lips?”

For once, their guest seemed genuinely surprised.

“Why, yes, how did you guess? I told him I have my own crayons, my little box of tricks as I like to call it, but he wouldn’t have it; he said he had his own trademark red, the Forbes carmine he’d named it, and he wouldn’t use anything else. I told him there was no way I’d put that muck on my skin, but he assured me it was a patented formula, that it was bona-fide harmless. I tried it on my hand and it was not as good as my lemon cream but it seemed alright so – wait, why are you asking me that?” he asked, his face a suddenly creasing in fear.

John coughed and Sherlock looked at him, understanding his naïve attempt at dissuasion.

“Perhaps another cup of tea?” the doctor asked Tennant, who shook his head, his eyes on Sherlock’s blank countenance.

“He wanted to retouch the painting and since you were absent, he smeared some of the paint on his arm,” the detective replied, and both men saw understanding dawn on the young man’s face: his eyes widened in horror and what little natural colour was in his cheeks disappeared.

“You don’t really mean that – someone wanted to – why?” he blurted out, his hands coming up to his throat.

“I’m afraid so. We don’t know for sure; it’s early days yet. The Yard will get in touch with you within the next few hours, I expect. My advice is to be extremely careful.”

Tennant gathered his furs closer to his chest like a shield against a clump of daggers. He was genuinely scared yet couldn’t completely eschew the theatrical side of his character.

“I will leave for Wilsford with Nanny and Poll. Mother will be there and she will let no one in.”

“No even Sassoon?” John asked.

“Certainly not,” Tennant bit out, and he was gone in a swirl of furs.

“Perhaps you could have handled that a little better,” John said, as he poured himself more tea.

“What would you have me do, hold his hand, perhaps? Or maybe you wanted to do that, seeing as you are a valiant soldier and all that.”

John’s eyebrows shot up and he was tempted to ask his friend what bothered him so much, but he suspected it to be connected with his drug consumption, so he thought it best not broach the subject.
“I was just suggesting that scaring him to death wasn’t the ideal thing to do. Judging by his breathing and complexion, I’d say he suffers from some serious chest complaint.”

Sherlock slammed his cup on the table.

“Piffle! That fool will outlive us all. Those swooning types always do; idle and pointless as they are,” he said, curtly.

Luckily for John, the phone rang before he could reply.

It was Lestrade, informing them that the only fingerprints found on the scene of the crime were those of the victim and his valet.

They had contacted the makers of the blue and red paint and had been given the formula which, according to the boffins at the Yard, was as toxic-free as mother’s milk.

None of the neighbours in Conway Street had noticed anything out of the ordinary and the same went for the servants of the Forbes household.

“Of course they wouldn’t; the murderer is surely someone he knew and therefore it would have been a normal social visit, nothing exceptional,” Sherlock told the Inspector.

Lestrade confirmed they would interrogate Tennant and Sassoon presently, and added that they had a list of the painter’s closest acquaintances, a copy of which had been sent to Baker Street by same day post.

True to his word, the letter arrived and was in John’s hands before his partner had put the receiver down.

Sherlock opened it and upon reading a name he exclaimed “ah!” and threw the piece of paper at John, before striding toward his bedroom.

“Get ready for an additional helping of Tennant’s ilk, dear friend. I apologise for this in advance,” he said, his lips quirking in that half-smile John already loved.

“Not to worry, I’m used to that and worse,” John jested, as he too went to prepare for this new adventure.

Revel Dester was as picturesque as Stephen Tennant, but not as scatterbrained.

He lived in a large and airy apartment in Kensington Church Street, surrounded by prints of Italian renaissance paintings and by tall vases filled with fresh flowers. The place reminded John of a catholic church in France where he’d gone to pray just before being sent to kill and maim. Surrounded by peace and by the fragrance of lilies, he’d felt even more the fatuity of the War.

The novelist was a stout man of indeterminate age, tending towards the mid-thirties; he had a full head of frizzy ginger hair and a beard to match; his deep-set green eyes gleamed with amusement and perhaps a little malice. He wore a flower-print velvet dressing gown over a silk pyjama in the most offensive shade of pink John had ever seen on either gentleman or lady. He chewed on an unlit pipe, a finely carved rosewood affair which he evidently wanted to pose with rather than smoke from.

“I gather you must be here to talk about Duncan,” he said, once they were all sitting down on a
magnificent Chesterfield sofa upholstered in ox-blood leather.

“Yes, we’ve been asked by Scotland Yard to break the ice, so to speak.”

“You are the entrée and they are the main course, I see.”

John foretold Sherlock’s wince before it happened.

“If you want to put it that way, Sir Dester,” the detective replied with a smirk. The novelist disliked his title as much as Sherlock loathed his. He sighed and seemed to come to a conclusion.

“Touché,” he said and smiled, uncovering a row of teeth so white they seemed almost blue. John wondered if they were real, and felt like a lamb being approached by a wolf.

“I never posed for him, if that’s what you are hinting at. I wasn’t his type nor was he mine, but we had known each other since boarding school. Oh, Saints Peter and Paul, that’s a lifetime ago, almost prehistoric I’d say!”

“You of all people shouldn’t believe in Darwin,” Sherlock joked.

“Just because I worship at the altar of Rome doesn’t mean I do not allow for exceptions,” the man quipped.

“Rather a malleable sort of morality, that bends with the wind.”

“Provided the wind is ravishing and softly spoken.”

“And does Stephen Tennant count as one of those winds?”

“He’s a zephyr, I would never call that a wind, a breeze would be more apt.”

John was mystified by this conversation, but felt the tension behind the urbane sparring.

“Is there anything more you’d like to tell us before we leave you to your pretend pipe?” Sherlock asked, looking the man straight in the eye.

“If you are asking whether I suspect anyone, I’ll reply with a story. Once I foolishly tried to suggest to Duncan that his impulsive, reckless actions might come back to haunt him and he patted me on the back and said ‘my dear Des, we are what we are and that is our destiny, our beginning and our end’; honestly, it could have been a number of people. He did not bother with remorse; all he cared for were his desires and his pleasures. I suspect you know the type only too well.”

John saw Sherlock’s mouth tighten and his face redden, but no more words were spoken.

“A catholic!” the detective spat out once they were out on the pavement “Isn’t it the bloodiest, wiliest sort of creature?”

John let out a full-throated laugh, and as the sun was shining, Sherlock was seduced by the perfection of that instant.
Sherlock had not told John why he was in South London the night they met. In fact, John had been too stunned by the events that followed to ponder on that incongruity.

That insalubrious pocket of the city wasn’t one of the detective’s favourite haunts, but some nights, his opium nights usually, he couldn’t stand being alone or, even worse, in the company of his kind, either in a concert hall, a private ball or a chic restaurant.

His skin prickled with an itch that needed scratching, even though he never allowed the thought to form in his mind; he knew that once the idea had taken roots, all the drugs in the world wouldn’t be capable to quash it.

He wanted danger, physical peril; he needed to feel the thrill of the unknown, risk his safety; forget the years of unrealised opportunities, the unspent tears.

In London Bridge, under the arches, was a notorious club where drugs were served on trays, as men danced with other men, often made up as women.

Sherlock never took part in the revelries, only availed himself of the drugs.

Many a time, especially when he’d still been unknown to the other patrons, he’d been propositioned and he’d met those advances with scorn, although he knew only too well that fear was the cause of his rejection. He watched the spectacle, but when the lights dimmed and the laughter turned into something lewder, he left, back to roaming the squalid streets.

On that eventful night, he’d turned up at the club after enduring a couple of sleepless nights and having barely eaten for days.

The past had been tormenting him, he could think of little else.
The dosage of opium he ingested was within his permissible limits, but his body had rebelled against that additional abuse and that was how he’d ended up at John’s feet.

After two days with this new friend, the hunger seemed to have intensified and taken a more definite shape.

His brain was engaged in solving a new puzzle therefore his body was doubly sensitised, his skin blood-hot to the touch.

That night, when he went for his bottle, he found he’d nothing left but a handful of grains, not enough for a draught of bliss, let alone the oblivion he was seeking.

Satisfied that John was in his room, possibly asleep, he swiftly dressed and nimbly – he was adept at making little or no noise – he walked out of Baker Street. He had a cab always at the ready, a friend of Mrs Hudson’s was paid a monthly retainer for precisely such eventualities. Sherlock conveyed his intentions with nothing more than a touch to his hat, but the shrewd man knew him well and took him to his destination speedily and silently.

“No, I’m not taking the mickey, and yes, I really mean it. Follow that cab, please,” John intimated, trying not to sound as angry as he was.

He’d noticed Sherlock fidget since after their visit to Dester; in the afternoon, the detective had shut himself off in his study and he’d barely touched the delicious dinner his servant had prepared.

John had mentally noted: black shadows beneath his eyes, twitching limbs, heightened pallor and incapacity to focus.

He left his friend alone, knowing that questioning him would get him nowhere and, most likely, cause an outbreak of petulance or worse, silence.

After retiring to his room, it was only a matter of waiting for the detective to sneak out of Baker Street.

As the cab drove through Holborn in the direction of Waterloo, he felt on familiar ground again; when Sherlock’s car stopped in Druid Street, he knew what it meant and his ire deepened and burned incandescent in his heart.

“The idiot, the blasted fool,” he mumbled, as he tried to follow his friend without being seen.

Luckily for him, Sherlock was so far gone that he couldn’t see or hear anything outside of his troubled mind. His senses were alert, but only to a certain type of stimuli, such as light, touch and some sounds and smells.

John saw the tall, be-hatted figure duck underneath a low arch and disappear inside a tunnel-like entrance; he waited a little while and hoped he would not be impeded by a request for passwords or other silly devices.

In the end, it became clear that entrance was guaranteed to all those who knew where the door was, as it was by no means easy to discern it in that abandoned, badly lit area.

A busty woman with a cockney accent let him in, shutting the door behind him, so that he found that he had no choice but to follow the dim light at the end of a narrow, dank passage. He could hear the
hum of music and voices, the vibrations running through him like a low electrical current.

What worried him was that Sherlock might be waiting for him at the other side, and that he’d be furious at what he – rightly – would see as an unforgivable trespass.

But when he entered the main room of the club he found it crammed to the rafters with men and women, or at least that’s what he thought at first, before realising the ladies were in fact gentlemen in drag.

He’d never been to Berlin but knew about it, and he imagined the Eldorado was the place they were trying to imitate. He’d heard that customers were given medals for dancing with transvestites working there; the latter would be paid at the end of the night according to the number of coins they had accumulated.

As he approached the bar, he was intercepted by a petite creature in fishnets and feathers whose eyes, wide and child-like, reminded him of Stephen Tennant. He shook his head, as politely as he could, considering the lovely boy-girl had already placed a hand on John’s backside.

Holding a glass of gin in his unsteady hand, he looked around the place, trying to locate his friend. The search proved fruitless at first, but when he finally got his bearings, he saw, behind a smoky glass partition, another room, which seemed even darker than the one he was in.

Wading through a crowd of half-indifferent, half-rapacious revellers, he finally reached his destination.

The atmosphere was more quiet and rarefied, pervaded by a smell of incense and soothing oriental music. A number of pretty Asian boys carried trays laden with bottles, jars, pipes and cigarettes.

It didn’t take John long to locate Sherlock: he was sitting on his own, facing a secluded platform where a show was being performed.

Some of the punters were watching, some were in a stupor and others were entwined, undressing, panting, groping, moaning and kissing, and John had to look away as the spectacle was arousing him and Sherlock was only a few steps away.

He went as close to him as he possibly could and sat down to watch the show.

Shame: that was the topmost of Sherlock’s feelings.

This time he’d chosen liquid opium and the taste was still lingering on his tongue.

He was undergoing a well-known process of detachment, but this time he had not been able to tumble straight into ecstasy; this time, he saw himself as if from a spectator’s point of view: a lean, immaculately dressed young man whose favourite pastime was indulging in illegal substances while eavesdropping on other men’s pleasures.

The contortions he observed on that platform were not that far removed from the ones in his dreams and as much as he wanted to justify his actions, he knew they were perverted and morbid obsessions without an outlet, stains on his otherwise pure character.

Like a glutton who’s been gorging on food without really tasting its flavours, he’d been feasting on this alternate reality and now the dreams were overcoming his capacity to contain them.
If John knew, he’d be disgusted, or worse; he would pity him.

Suddenly, a coin was thrown at him from the stage, probably in jest; it took him by surprise and he turned his head to the side to shield it from the flying object.

That’s when he saw him: his blonde head was unmistakable.

There’s was only one thing to do: he ran away.

“Sherlock, please, stop. Quit behaving like a fool,” John shouted, as he finally managed to catch up with his partner who had absconded to one of the myriad of tunnels beneath the arches. They were both panting and red-faced, despite the cold and the humidity surrounding them.

“It’s a deuced impertinence, Watson; following me here, spying on me!”

“No longer your dear fellow, am I? I wasn’t going to lecture you or anything of the sort, I was only concerned for your well being.”

“I’m a grown man, in case that escaped your notice. I can take care of myself.”

“And what a splendid job you are doing! What’s next on your calendar, a trip to the madhouse or a dip in the river, perhaps?”

“I didn’t hire you so you could tell me how to live my life, my dear chap,” Sherlock replied, his voice dripping with venom.

“Oh, you hired me; I guess you’re no longer worried money will spoil our relationship then. Another job that’s costing you no effort at all,” John replied, clutching at Sherlock’s arm, as the younger man tried to wriggle away. He had little strength, and his skin was clammy to the touch.

“Come back inside. I have seen an empty room with a stack of chairs; we both need to sit down.”

Surprisingly, the detective agreed to follow him. He was entering the phase where he’d be dreamy and malleable, and John knew he had to be careful to not take advantage of his vulnerability. Not that he would do so intentionally, far from it, but it was sometimes difficult to tell where the line was; it had been the same with Gabriel.

They sat on rickety chairs in a dimly lit back room, probably used as overflow storage. The air was heavy with the reek of urine and other bodily fluids, but the place was silent and, most important of all, private.

Sherlock refused to look John in the eye: he had removed his top hat and was fiddling with it, his almond shaped nails glinting white against the black background.

“I didn’t want you to see me like this,” he whispered, sounding miserable.

“I met you like this,” John replied, softly.

“I mean, in this kind of club, watching men as they… as they…”

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t say it.
“Sherlock, dear friend, nothing you could do or say would shock me. Sadden or surprise me, perhaps, but that’s all. I have seen the worst of human nature these past few years, and not only in the trenches.”

“I can’t shake it off. I have tried, believe me I have, but it claws me back every time; this need, this consuming want to get closer, but when I do… oh, it’s no use!” the detective cried out, on the verge of hysteria.

“Tell me, what is no use? What is it that you are chasing?”

“I don’t know, perhaps I hope to relive my past and change it, or maybe I want to delete all the shame and the humiliation or it could be that I just want to wallow in it, because that’s all I’m good for. I don’t know, John, I don’t know!” he shouted.

“Tell me about the boy,” John said, calmly.

“What boy?”

“There must be a boy or a man; and since you were a schoolboy, I’m devoutly hoping he was not a man.”

“Peter Johnstone,” Sherlock whispered; his eyes would still not meet John’s.

“He wasn’t the first one, but the other stuff happened while I was younger and the school was policing us so it was only minor bullying.”

John emitted a disapproving sound, but did not otherwise interrupt his friend’s timid narration.

“At Cambridge, I had grown more confident. He shared my digs and I thought I – I fancied myself in love with him. He was the cricket captain; blond, blue-eyed, not dissimilar to… Anyway, he appeared to share my infatuation. We cut classes in order to spend more time together. He helped me rehearse my part in the house play; you know, the usual stuff friends do; special friends, I mean. It carried on for months; I had never been happier; then, one day, things started to change. The way these things do; a sort of cooling off, more distance between us, fewer touches; not that we’d ever done much, except for a few, chaste embraces. I didn’t want to ask him, didn’t want to upset the applecart; he was the popular one, and I was, well, not unlike now but worse, more shy perhaps. It all came crashing down one horrible spring day, when he sent me word to meet him at the usual place, a secluded spot by the river. He was different, more open, the way he’d been at the start; he kissed me more passionately than ever and wanted us to take the next step; I didn’t want to displease him and I wanted to do it too, so I said yes, and he moved away, and asked me to remove all my clothes.”

“You don’t have to continue, if it makes you uncomfortable,” John said, touching Sherlock’s shaking hand, suspecting where his tale was heading.

“I want to – I need to tell somebody. No, I need to tell you, John.”

He sighed and his fingers closed around the older man’s hand.

“There was half of the cricket team hiding further back; they were drunk and already naked. Peter said it was a bloodying, an initiation ceremony. If I wanted to be part of their secret society, I’d have to allow them to take turns in enjoying me; those were Peter’s words.”

John’s heart was pounding in his ears, like it did when he was underwater; and like in that instance he wasn’t able to breathe; he counted to three and tried again.
“What happened?” he croaked. His voice sounded alien to his own ears.

“I snatched up my togs and ran. I only stopped when I got back to my rooms. I caught a terrible fever and was sent down. When I got back, Peter was gone. Someone ratted on him, or so I was told. The others suspected I did it, I imagine it was Mycroft.”

“Your brother is not that bad, after all.”

“It’s a pathetic story; nothing really happened. And yet, here I am.”

“You must have been scared out of your wits and immensely hurt. That awful bastard betrayed you; you had given him your, heart, he wanted to say, but didn’t, “trust and he repaid you by nearly having you defiled in the vilest, most despicable way. I’m so sorry, Sherlock, you can’t begin to imagine how sorry.”

“We have barely started sharing lodgings and I’m already pouring my heart out to you; how utterly tedious for you. I bet you expected adventure and sophistication, not this surfeit of self-pity. It’s detestable,” he declared, his tone now tinged with disgust.

“I never imagined you’d be anything less than human, despite your aversion to sleep and nourishment,” John replied, squeezing his friend’s hand.

“Come on, let me take you home. You need a strong cup of tea and a warm bed.”

“I know that I expressed my dislike of Catholicism, but there is one of its features that I do hold in high esteem,” the detective said, finally raising his red-rimmed eyes to John’s face. He met an unwavering blue gaze, as comforting to him as a calm sea.

“Your secret is safe with me, Sherlock. Not only I won’t tell a soul, but if you prefer we will never have to mention this story again. Not ever,” the doctor replied.

Sherlock nodded and allowed John to guide him out.

Inside the cab, which had been waiting outside as per the detective’s instructions, the two men sat side by side in companionable silence.

“One good thing came out of tonight’s debacle,” Sherlock said, at last. “When you were running after me, and later, when we came out of the club, did you notice anything different?”

John shook his head. “Can’t say I did; what’s that then?”

The detective quirked his lips and eyebrows then glanced at John’s legs.

“You weren’t limping.”

Chapter End Notes

Next: John and Sherlock go to a party. There’s dancing :)
Doxology de Luxe

Chapter Summary

Party time!

Chapter Notes

Note 1) Doxology de Luxe is a poem by Sassoon, but it was never printed so my quote is derived from a biography

Note 2) Rex Whistler was a very promising painter who was killed during WWII. He would have been only 15 in 1920, but as I said already I'm doing a bit of a timey-wimey thing here :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“May the rich be damned forever more”  Doxology de Luxe - Siegfried Sassoon

When John had started practising medicine, a nurse had cautioned him that patients, after having unburdened their souls, were bound to act cold and standoffish, for the obvious reason that they were ashamed. Latin people, she’d said, don’t mind confessing the most outrageous things, but the Anglo-Saxon nature usually shies away from such emotional outpourings.

For this reason, John was not at all surprised when the following morning Sherlock came down to breakfast already dressed, with a blank expression on his face and giving off hauteur as if it were an expensive scent.

“I thought about the poison and I’m afraid we’ll draw a blank there. Potassium cyanide is frequently used by game-keepers to kill moles and by gardeners to exterminate wasps; the victim and his friends either own or have constant access to vast country estates. You see where I am going with this, don’t you?” Sherlock said, drizzling honey on a slice of toasted bread.

“And the dimethyl sulfoxide was used almost everywhere during the War to speed the healing of wounds, so that’s even easier to obtain; yes, I see that we are in a pickle,” John concluded, sipping black coffee.

“I suppose Lestrade is already going through that list, so you might as well suggest that he checks if any of those people keep potassium cyanide in their homes. Obviously, the murderer won’t be among the ones who eventually do.”

John was still surprised at the suggestion that he should inform Lestrade, so he didn’t immediately catch the excitement in his friend’s tone.
“You seem gleeful,” he commented.

“A clever murderer is a worthy opponent,” Sherlock replied, dreamily. His euphoria was irritating John, who was thinking of the victim of this so-called worthy opponent.

“I’m sure Forbes would agree with you, if he were still alive.”

“You heard what Dester said: Forbes knew his behaviour would get him into trouble, but kept doing what he wanted, regardless.”

“By the same logic, some lowlife should feel entitled to throttle you or dose you with arsenic.”

John regretted his reply as soon as he’d uttered it, but Sherlock only looked at him and laughed. It wasn’t acerbic or half-hearted, but real, joyous laughter.

“You’re probably right, dear friend. Luckily, I have you to look after me,” he added, and the gaze in his luminous eyes was soft and steady.

“Yes, you do,” John concurred, his throat a bit constricted. “I’ll ring Lestrade then,” he added, after a moment of strained silence.

“I don’t believe it was a crime of passion,” Sherlock said, before John had reached the door.

“I thought jealousy was the cause of the murder.”

“The method used to eliminate Forbes suggest premeditation and a heavy dose of sang froid. Anyone could have touched that paint and died, aside from Tennant. Evidently, the culprit didn’t care one way or another.”

“Nasty bit of work,” John observed.

“As I said: a worthy opponent.”

The doctor shook his head and limped out of the dining room.

Regents Park was awash with sunshine and the very air seemed alive: John sighed happily, despite the ache in his leg. He’d left Sherlock to his experiments – predictably, something to do with paint pigments and solvents – and decided to take a mid-morning constitutional to clear his lungs and his mind.

The previous night had been like a glimpse of a land between heaven and hell: faraway, enticing and dangerous.

He was honoured that he had been chosen as the repository of Sherlock’s secrets, but at the same time he was angry and saddened too. That his friend, a beautiful, fascinating young man, should have been forced into drug consumption as a way of deadening his emotional pain was unacceptable. Beneath his professional concerns, lay something more difficult to admit: his increasing regard for the detective.

Regard! He scoffed at his own cowardice; it wasn’t something so restrained and Victorian; not the polite affection he felt for the likes of Mrs Hudson; what he felt for Sherlock was a potentially lethal mixture of tenderness, admiration and unbridled passion. And that was the problem, because after his friend’s confession it was clear that a physical relationship between them would be impossible. He
wasn’t primarily after sex, but he could not imagine how he’d be able to be with Sherlock without being intimate with him.

Christ, just the idea was thrilling him to his core, and he found he suddenly needed to sit down.

The effect that pale skin and those eyes had on him was frankly worrying; yet he was not inexperienced, far from it.

Before Gabriel, he’d had many lovers, men and women. He lusted after both, but had fallen in love with a boy, never with a girl.

This with Sherlock though, was a completely different experience: it was like comparing the Scottish Highlands to Mount Everest.

It was a challenge that he feared and relished, and one that apparently could even cure him of his limp.

“I hope you won’t find my actions intrusive,” Sherlock said, but it was evident that he didn’t care what John thought.

The doctor was standing outside his bedroom, holding up a tuxedo in the way a vermin exterminator might dangle a dead rat.

“What are these doing on my bed?” he asked, his face red as Forbes carmine.

“We have been invited to a cocktail party and I suspected you were not in possession of the suitable finery.”

John’s ire was replaced by surprise.

“What party?”

“Rex Whistler, Tennant’s friend, invited us. He rang to thank us for ‘alerting’ Stephen; or so he said. I suspect he wants to see us in a non-official capacity.”

“Seems like an odd way to conduct an investigation.”

“My ways can be unorthodox.”

“And you accepted?”

“Obviously,” Sherlock replied, impatiently. “It may be advantageous to see them in their natural habitat, so to speak. In vino veritas,” he quoted.

“You may be right,” John conceded, “after a few drinks, people do tend to be more talkative.”

“I think I should warn you that there might be dancing at this party.”

“We won’t be expected to join in, surely.”

“But perhaps we should do our best to blend in.”

“Do you even know how to dance?”
Sherlock shrugged and smiled.

“Expensive boarding schools provide an extremely comprehensive education, John. No social or interpersonal skills are left untended; except when they are to do with emotions, naturally.”

His voice was laced with sarcasm.

“I’m a bit rusty, but I guess I should be alright,” John mumbled.

He returned to his bedroom, cursing his own meekness.

John Watson in a tuxedo was a concept to which Sherlock’s mind had not given its due consideration.

Malice aforethought is the legal definition of premeditation, but this was more a case of naïve miscalculation.

When John came out of his bedroom, hair shiny and face still rosy from his bath, Sherlock had just deposited his glass of sherry on the table; small mercies, he thought.

“What do you think, do I pass muster?” the doctor asked, unconvinced.

Perfect, absolutely, utterly, unconditionally perfect, the detective thought, berating his internal monologue for its abundance of adverbs.

“Spiffing, dear fellow,” is what he said, reaching for his dose of alcohol; he needed it more than ever.

“You look… interesting,” John remarked, staring pointedly at Sherlock’s choice of shirt.

The detective had opted for a magenta shirt instead of the usual white; his style was eclectic and he didn’t care about fashion, but what he’d chosen for John was timeless and classic, because that’s what he imagined him to be; it pleased Sherlock to think of him that way; like a bastion that would always stand between him and danger.

“I’ll take it as a compliment,” he replied.

“You’re welcome,” John said and smiled, proving that even perfection can be bettered.

The party was at the Sitwells’ home in Swan Walk, Chelsea.

The house was as pretty and dainty as a blancmange on the outside, while the interiors consisted in an alarming mixture of early Victoriana and cubist art.

The owner, Osbert Sitwell, a stout man with a large nose and wavy hair, greeted them at the door, together with his brother Sacheverell and sister Edith, two birdlike creatures with domed foreheads and long, aquiline noses. Edith’s hair were cut short and parted in the middle, styled like a pageboy.

John found her slightly alarming: with her inquisitive eyes, long neck and disapproving mouth, he feared she might peck at him should she find him irritating or dull.

He decided that he would spend the evening listening and observing and that he would let Sherlock do the talking.
It was quite a challenge to remember all the odd names and pretend to understand the anecdotes that were thrown his way, but luckily because of his profession, he’d been trained to wear a mask of bonhomie that conveniently disguised his real emotions.

He’d been forced to resort to it when he’d looked at Sherlock in his evening attire, otherwise he’d have gushed in a most inopportune way: gorgeous, magnificent creature, that’s what he’d wanted to say and couldn’t.

“You must think we are all heartless, empty souls. My mother frequently tells me that my eyes are as cold as sea water.”

Stephen Tennant was entirely dressed in white, with a pair of wide-legged trousers, Devonshire cream shirt with flounce long sleeves and Nottingham lace inserts, and chalk-white patent leather brogues.

His chest was rising and falling with quick, shallow breaths. Serious lung problems, John diagnosed.

“It’s not my place to judge you, since I do not know you.”

“Sieg hates these parties, absolutely loathes them. He’s a puritan at heart and can’t stand rich, idle people. He even wrote a poem about that.”

“Yet you like him and he must like you.”

“Sieg is a good man, a loyal man. Just like you, I bet. Your friend is jolly lucky.”

John followed Tennant’s gaze: Sherlock was taking distracted puffs on his cigarette while talking to Rex Whistler. He seemed to be having a good time and - judging from the tilt of his head - to be listening intently to what the man had to say. The painter who’d invited them was a slender, serious young man, with dark brown side-parted hair, melancholic eyes and a thin, pouting mouth.

“We are friends and working partners, that’s all.”

Tennant smiled invitingly and asked John to dance, and since Sherlock had instructed him to blend in, he couldn’t refuse.

“The police came to see me, like Lord Holmes said. Inspector Lestrade is a real pet, isn’t he? I was in my white velvet dressing gown and he took one look at me and blushed; he was ever so sweet. I told him all that I know about Forbes, which doesn’t amount to much.”

John was doing his best not to sneeze, immersed as he was in the sickening sweet scent emanating from his dancing partner’s hair and body.

“Was he a secretive man?” he asked, trying to inhale as little as humanly possible.

“Not entirely. There were parts of his life he had no trouble sharing, but he never spoke about his stint in the War. He was in France when the conflict started.”

“What about you; where were you during the War?”

“Too young, too adorable, too weak,” the young man joked.

“You should have your lungs checked and perhaps get away from London for a while.”
“Yes, sir,” he replied, miming a geisha curtsey. “Oh, I think you are being whisked away from me.”

“May I cut in?” a deep voice asked, and a moment later John had an armful of tall, raven-haired, sinfully perfumed detective.

John assumed he’d want to lead, but surprisingly he agreed to take the position that Tennant had been forced to vacate.

“I hope he wasn’t making you uncomfortable; your face looked pained,” Sherlock said against John’s cheek, so close that the blond man could smell the champagne in his breath.

“I suspect he bathes in Parisian perfume and milk, like and Ancient Roman,” John replied, trying to ignore the warm hand on his waist; it was as light as the wing of a dove, but it cut through him like a branding iron.

“Insufferable poseur!” the detective chided.

“Did you get anything out of Whistler?”

“He didn’t see Forbes as a competitor; their styles are quite different. Whistler’s is closer to realism. But that’s by the by; what he tried to convey in a roundabout yet utterly transparent way was that he suspected Forbes had been employed as a spy during the War.”

John couldn’t hide his excitement, which led him to hold Sherlock a little tighter. The detective’s chest, well defined beneath a thin layer of silk, rubbed against his partner’s heftier one.

“Why does he think so?” the older man finally asked, unable to draw back and hoping Sherlock would and also that he wouldn’t.

“He was in Paris with him and once, by pure chance - he said, though I doubt it - he went back to Forbes’ apartment to retrieve a forgotten scarf and heard part of a conversation. He didn’t understand a single word of it, but he knew it was in German.”

“But if he didn’t understand how did he…”

“Whistler always said he did not speak a word of German; that I can confirm, having spent part of the afternoon reading his interviews.”

“But what would Tennant have to do with it? The boy can hardly be involved in a spy story,” John said, as the music faded out.

The Delius song was replaced by a jazz tune, so they stopped dancing, not quite moving away from one another.

“I can’t discern the complete pattern yet, but I suspect it to be intricate and far-reaching.”

“Whistler could have come to Baker Street, but he chose to invite us to a party with his friends, instead.”

John steered Sherlock towards the bar, hoping the champagne would defuse the fireworks in his blood.

“He wanted us to be seen here, to warn the murderer that we are getting closer.”

“Are we?” John asked, draining his glass in one gulp. “I can’t imagine any of these people plotting a complicated murder.”
“Did you see Dester?”

“How could I not see him? His shirt is even more obscenely pink than the one he had on yesterday.”

Sherlock sniggered and soon they were both laughing.

“We really shouldn’t be enjoying ourselves,” John said, reaching for another glass of champagne.

“Mycroft is paying, so it’s morally imperative we do whatever is in our power to displease him,” the detective replied, raising his flute in celebration.

“What are we celebrating, gentlemen?” a half-familiar voice asked.

Sassoon, dressed shabbily in a navy suit and half-mast tie, stood before them, with a face that could have been carved out of stone and eyes dark like thunder.

The way Sherlock shrunk before the implied aggression induced John to move slightly, acting as a shield.

“We were told you don’t like this sort of parties.”

The poet grimaced and made a gesture to indicate their surroundings.

“A man was killed, a person we all knew; a friend to many, a lover, even,” he continued, glancing in the direction of Stephen.

“Bottle-party morals, that’s what they are. It’s sickening!” he concluded, trying to get closer to Sherlock but finding John in his way.

“I think you are confusing my friend with yours,” the doctors said, his voice low and threatening.

“If I were you, sir, I’d look into the definition of ‘friend’. You’ll find that it doesn’t include people who would abuse and manipulate in order to obtain favours of any kind.”

John’s jaw tightened.

“Like I said, you may be confusing my friend with yours,” he repeated.

They stared at each other for a moment, before Sassoon turned away, abruptly; he stopped in front of his lover, who looked at him, wide-eyed and with parted lips.

When he staggered towards the exit, Stephen followed him, gliding across the room like a swan in full regalia.
Drink to Me Only

Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John take a trip to the countryside.

It's a bit of a long one, but I didn't want to stop until I got to the bedroom scene.

Chapter Notes

Cecil is the famous photographer Cecil Beaton.
Edith Olivier was really a novelist.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Drink to me only with thine eyes,
And I will pledge with mine;
Or leave a kiss but in the cup
And I'll not ask for wine”

"Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes" is a popular old song, the lyrics of which are Ben Jonson's 1616 poem "Song To Celia."

From the teal of the Grand Staircase to the aquamarine of the Cocktail Bar, Sherlock reflected that the Garrick Club reminded him of a luxurious pool house, albeit one frequented by actors, lawyers and aged landowners.

Recently, his elder brother had discontinued his patronage of the Diogenes and was often found here, sipping sherry and discussing politics or law with like-minded gentlemen.

He would have loved to know the reason of this mammoth change in his brother’s usually unshakeable routine, and it bothered him that he couldn’t deduce it.

Naturally, Mycroft guessed his frustration and the ghost of a smile hovered on his lips in response. In turn, Sherlock realised he was being made fun of and thus he precipitated into a sulk.

“What may I offer you gentlemen? Champagne, perhaps, or does it embody ‘bottle-party morals’ too blatantly?” the elder Holmes quipped.

John gaped, and that only intensified the detective’s black mood.

“You really are a gossip of the worst kind, dear brother.”
“Merely doing my job of keeping abreast with the scandals of the day; from what I heard, Captain Sassoon was rather perturbed. It appears I have to thank you again, Doctor Watson, for protecting my brother.”

John’s eyes widened, but he was prevented from talking by Sherlock’s cutting remark.

“I wasn’t in any danger. Sassoon was merely stating an opinion that I happen to share, by the way. That dandified egotism of those bright young things is loathsome and completely out of touch with reality.”

Mycroft’s hilarity increased, and Sherlock’s sulk deepened.

“You criticising egotism is akin to Lord Byron denouncing romanticism.”

“Being aware of one’s talents doesn’t equate with egomania.”

The brothers exchanged a silent conversation which John couldn’t understand or translate, and Sherlock was the first to break the impasse.

The truth was that Mycroft often won such contests as his brother was more impatient and easily bored.

“Do you have the information I asked? Was Forbes really a spy during the War?”

“No need for such cloak-and-dagger language, brother mine. He was merely employed as an Intelligence officer in France on behalf of our government and in a similar capacity to yours here in Britain.”

“And his work…”

“All classified, of course.”

“But in a murder case…”

“You have to provide evidence the two are connected. The past should be done and dusted, but who we both know it has a way of coming back when we least expect it.”

“They should allow us to check whether any of the incriminated people are related to our list of suspects. I expected you would be able to help.”

Mycroft raised a hand in the direction of the waiter, who approached them with a bucket of champagne and three glasses.

The three men waited in silence as the decrepit man did his impeccable job of serving them.

“They should, but they will not, little brother. Not enough time has passed since the end of the conflict. I’m not a miracle worker, Sherlock.”

“But you said Whitehall would do anything in their power to find the murderer.”

“Almost anything, brother mine; find me proof of the connection and I will see what I can do.”

John sipped his drink, pondering the astounding fact that he’d always reprimanded Gabriel for his alcohol consumption and here he was, following in his very footsteps.

He also understood what Sassoon had been railing against: he had led men to battle, many of them
had died - young and innocent boys - while the present consisted largely in a succession of extravagant parties and shallow conversations. Young men like Stephen Tennant only thought about style and beauty, caring nothing for people like John and their daily struggle. They lived in a rarefied universe; it was not just coincidence that Tennant’s ancestral home had been named Clouds.

He looked at Sherlock’s fine clothes, at his aristocratic features and his manicured hands and once again felt a pang of inadequacy. The distance between them had shrunk after the detective’s confession, but inside this seat of privilege it was restored to its original status.

“I’m certain the murderer is connected to Forbes’ time in France,” Sherlock insisted.

Mycroft finished his drink and removed an invisible speck of dust from his navy blue jacket. It was a sign the conversation was soon to be over.

“I have full confidence in your ability, little brother. You can be charming, when you want to, as I’m sure John will concur. Information can be gleaned in many ways, some official, others slightly less so.”

Sherlock scowled and mumbled a good day before walking away; only when he was outside the door did he wait for John to catch up with him.

“You are worried about Tennant. No, don’t deny it; I can read it in your frown and in your limp, and the way you reacted when I mentioned him a minute ago.”

John put down the newspaper and sighed.

“I know what you think of him and in a way I do too, but whatever his faults he does not deserve to suffer.”

Sherlock wasn’t as convinced as his partner on this matter.

He and John had swapped allegiances: if at the start Sherlock had defended Tennant, now he couldn’t even touch his name.

“He’s not a defenceless victim, dear friend. He was having an affair with two men at the same time, and God knows there may be more waiting in the wings.”

“It doesn’t matter to me whether he was sleeping with a regiment. The way his lover behaved last night, how he attacked you verbally,” John said.

“So now you think he’s dangerous, just because he was mildly soused and annoyed that a group of his so-called friends were happily dancing when one of them has just been murdered?”

John’s face darkened.

“You like him, don’t you? I do, too: he is a brave man and has been, and still is, a credit to this country. But while I understand his point of view, I don’t believe it could and should compensate for his eventual violence.”

Sherlock laughed, but it was an ugly, joyless sound.

“That little fop has his lover wrapped around his little finger.”

And you as well, he meant to add.
“He may be a fop as you say, but he’s a harmless one. I’m not so sure about his lover though. Are you?”

Sherlock wanted to say that he was sure, that everything was absolutely par for the course, but in all honesty he couldn’t. Besides, he was very conscious of having unveiled his own past to John and he didn’t want his friend to think him cold hearted toward someone who might be undergoing a similar ordeal.

“There’s nothing we can do! It’s a private matter and can only be resolved by the parties involved in it. Any external intervention will be seen as an unpardonable intrusion.”

“And we both know how strongly you feel with regards to invasions of privacy.”

They glared at each other, but it was Sherlock who in the end conceded defeat.

“While I’m certain he can take care of himself, you could perhaps advise him to do what he’d suggested: retire to his country estate and forbid Sassoon to visit him.”

John bent his head in assent, but wanting to give him something in return, he said:

“Perhaps I should propose that he invites us there for a day or so, just to make sure there’s no immediate danger.”

Sherlock snorted in disgust.

“You do realise that he will have all his horrid friends with him, don’t you? The very same who wanted me to cavort around the place covered in a sheet?”

“They will hardly ask you again, especially knowing why you are there. Besides, you wanted to ask them about Forbes and his time in France and, as a brilliant man once said to me, it may be advantageous to see them in their natural habitat.”

The detective laughed, the clouds finally dissipating from his face.

“Quite so, my dear friend,” he said, softly.

Obviously Tennant had jumped at John’s suggestion, Sherlock thought grimly, as he finished packing his valise.

He should have predicted that a doctor would feel obligated towards a consumptive person who - into the bargain - had barely escaped death. Unfortunately the person happened to be an attractive young man with a penchant for ex soldiers.

From the back of the socks drawer, the glint of glass winked at him: the bottle of opium that he’d purchased in London Bridge just before John had shown up.

There was only the tiniest hesitation before he nodded to himself, wrapped it in tissue paper and placed it in a side pocket.

It would be a long few days, what with the lack of real solitude and the constant playacting that would be required of him, in addition to having to observe John and trying to decrypt his thoughts and actions. It appeared that when it came to the doctor, his well-honed skills ground to a distressing halt. His deductions came in flashes, but were contradicted the following moment: it was as
frustrating as reading a book missing some of the pages.

When he’d completed his task, he gazed around the room and caught his own reflection in the mirror; he wasted a few moments inspecting his face and body and concluded, as usual, that there was not much to be admired except for his unblemished skin and slender figure. His hair was unfashionable – no soft waves, but tight, springy curls – and his face was usually called interesting as a pitiful alternative to freakish or odd. Pity, was probably the feeling that John felt for him, at least for his personal grievances if not for his intellect, which he seemed to admire.

Hopefully, once Sherlock unravelling the mystery of Forbes’ poisoning, John would be able to see past the detective’s exterior and his lack of experience in matters of the heart.

Perhaps then Sherlock would be capable of forsaking his bottle of manufactured bliss.

They hired a car and John surprised Sherlock by confessing that he could drive, a skill he’d had to acquire during the War.

They reached Wiltshire by late afternoon and it was not unlike having stepped into a pre-Raphaelite tableau. Wilsford had been designed by the fashionable architect Detmar Blow, in the Arts and Crafts style of William Morris that had inspired Clouds.

Built of grey local stone and knapped flints, seventeenth century in appearance, the house had an older garden of yews, holm oaks and hedged-in lawns that erected a barrier against the world.

Stephen came to greet them with a breathless enthusiasm that grated on Sherlock’s nerves.

“Oh, my darlings, I already feel so much safer now that you are here. I hope that lovely Inspector won’t be too upset with me for leaving London,” he said in a high pitched tone.

“We’ve informed Lestrade and as you are not under caution, you are free to reside wherever you please,” Sherlock replied, curtly.

“Rex is here and Cecil, Zita and dear Edith. My brother David and his wife should arrive tomorrow,” their host replied, in the same breezy way. “I have been a good boy, dear doctor Watson, and I have followed your instruction to the letter,” he concluded, linking arms with John as he guided them inside the house.

Their rooms were part of a suite and were separated by a bathroom which could be accessed by two doors on either side of it.

They took turns at freshening up and when dinner time came, they descended the curved staircase and entered a dining room already swarming with a colourful crowd, some of them resembling birds of paradise. Their host was wearing a tight mauve tunic and crystal pendant earrings, while the boy next to him, almost his dead-ringer if slightly shorter and marginally less lithe, wore a peacock-blue doublet with matching breeches, the fabric threaded through with gold.

John felt out of place in his simple black dinner jacket and trousers, but he elicited a paroxysm of cries from Stephen and his doppelganger, who turned out to be his dear friend Cecil.

Lady Grey, Stephen’s mother sent her excuses: she would dine in her rooms as she did not feel up to facing the world that evening.

Holding the thread of a decent conversation proved to be impossible amidst all that din, but John
managed to find out that Edith Olivier was a novelist, that Cecil dabbled in photography and Zita
didn’t do much at all but gossip, drink and dance.

It was the latter who informed him that dear Duncan had been ‘heartless, hard as nails and totally
devoid of conscience.’

“He didn’t care one jot whether the poor sap who was sleeping with him fell in love and found out of
his other affairs. It was all the same to Duncan, as long as they left him alone when he wanted to
paint,” she explained, in between mouthfuls of Dover sole and sautéed asparagus.

“Was it the same when he was in France?” he asked.

“I wasn’t there, but Baby was – she’s my elder sister – and she told me the most frightful stories
about Duncan. He was mixing with the wrong crowd, she said. Shady people, not quite the right
sort, if you know what I mean. But then again, Baby always tends to exaggerate.”

“Do you think he may have been consorting with the Germans?”

She burst into a pretty cascade of giggles.

“Who… Duncan? Not on your nelly, my dear! He was as patriotic as they come. His morals may
have been slipshod, but not so his commitment to King and country. He would stand to attention at
the first few bars of the anthem.”

“It could have been an act,” John suggested.

“I bet my new ermine fur coat that it wasn’t. He could be quite ruthless too, so I shouldn’t wonder
that he made a few enemies over there.”

After dessert had been served and consumed, they all moved to a vast salon, where music was being
played by a dark-haired young man who looked suspiciously like Ivor Novello. He sat at the piano
with the practised elegance of the habitual performer and played with gusto, sipping from time to
time from a tall cocktail glass filled with vodka, lime juice and ice cubes.

“I don’t recall all the names, but I could try and jot down a list,” Whistler said to Sherlock. They
were sitting on a sofa at the far end of the room, as distant as possible from the hubbub.

“You went there and so most of the people here tonight, I gather,” the detective replied. He was
listening intently, but still keeping an eye on John who was being dragged into a game of hide-and-
seek by Stephen and the woman named Edith. She wore her black hair in a pile above her round
head and it trembled like jelly every time she laughed. Tennant was hanging on John’s every word,
as if his heaving chest needed oxygen that only the older man could provide.

“Stephen didn’t,” the young painter replied, following the direction of Sherlock’s gaze. “Nor did
Zita, but yes, most of us went there and visited Duncan. I know Cecil took photos of most of
Duncan’s friends and models, but they were destroyed in a fire.”

“The negatives too, I guess.”

“Yes, the entire studio was burnt down. Poor Cecil was nearly out of his mind with grief. It was even
worse for him because the War was still on and no one cared for the waste of material things when
so many lives were being lost.”
Rex Whistler was gazing at Sherlock with his large brown eyes; he really did look like a sad puppy, the detective thought.

“Did he keep a separate account of the work he was doing, a kind of journal perhaps?”

Whistler’s thin lips curved into the semblance of a smile.

“Cecil is a real artist; order and method are absolute anathema to him.”

“Did I hear my name, pet?”

The photographer asked pertly, as he sat practically on Sherlock’s lap; the detective shifted quickly to the side, making space for the slim, heavily made-up boy.

“Whistler was telling me about your misfortune.”

“That was the most dreadful thing in the whole of creation, my dear,” he exclaimed, carelessly side-stepping the death of thousands of people in favour of his private crisis.

“I’m particularly interested in Duncan Forbes and his French period.”

“Almost sounds like an artistic movement, doesn’t it?” Cecil said. “Rex, be a dear and get us some of that marvellous vodka & lime, pretty please?”

The painter made a little moue of displeasure, but in the end complied.

“He’s lovely, but there’s such a thing as being too serious, isn’t there? Anyway, Duncan, yes,” he sighed, a dreamy look in his lively eyes.

“We had a grand time together; he really knew how to make a boy happy, no matter how short the affair was. He had the most marvellous hands. But I guess Steenie must have told you about that; he can never keep his mouth shut that one. As I said, our relations were mutually satisfactory, but I’ve heard some people were not as forgiving. Some of the Oxbridge boys he seduced didn’t take the rejection too well.”

A servant presented them the two drinks they are requested from Rex and after a few sips. Sherlock started to feel light-headed. They’d had champagne, wine and port over dinner and he wasn’t used to such abundant libations.

John had disappeared with Stephen and a few other people, and he felt lost and a little nauseous.

“Any details you care to add?”

“The Oxbridge boys you mean? There were a few but I couldn’t tell you the names; the all look the same to me. That was before the War though. After that he was much more careful; if the people were soldiers, for instance. He was very patriotic. He wouldn’t joke about that, dear old Duncan.”

A vague pattern had started to emerge in Sherlock’s mind, but he was too intoxicated to pursue it properly.

He wanted to find John and ask him to accompany him to his room; the sentence sounded somehow wrong, but not as wrong as John being on his own with that damn Steenie, as his friend had called him.
“I’ve never come to this part of the estate before,” the boy murmured.

It was a small hut at the far end of the woods, illuminated by a sickly sliver of moon.

“We could hide in here. Edith and Zita would never find us” he whispered in John’s ear.

The last thing John wanted was to be trapped in a confined space with a concoction of narcissi and tuberose which had a tendency to cling like an octopus.

“It doesn’t look like it’s been used for ages. There’s a padlock on the door and the bolt is rusty.”

“We used to have a game-keeper, but he was killed in the Somme and Mother refused to hire someone new. Dear Pamela, she’s so soft-hearted,” he sighed, grasping John’s hand in both of his.

“The padlock is not rusty, though. Look, it’s practically new.”

Stephen looked at it really close, almost as if he were short-sighted. He probably is, mused John, and too vain to wear glasses. Would spoil the mystique, he concluded.

“My dear lovely John, indeed you are right. Your detective friend would deduce a million things from this. You must tell him, but perhaps not straight away,” he said, his eyes half-closed in mute supplication.

Like Sherlock, John was a bit inebriated, but he was sober enough to know where he was and with whom.

“As much as I enjoy your company, I think I should inform my friend of this new development. We are here to help the police solve a crime, after all.”

“And to protect me,” the young man added, pressing his body to John’s.

“The best way to protect you is to find the murderer, don’t you agree?”

“Of course you are right,” Stephen said, his fickle mind already distracted, “besides, Ralph promised he would sing for us.”

When they got back, the singing had already started.

A wonderful tenor voice was intoning the lyrics to an old English song.

“Drink to me only with thine eyes
And I will pledge with mine.
Or leave a kiss within the cup
And I'll not ask for wine.
The thirst that from the soul doth rise
Doth ask a drink divine;
But might I of Jove's nectar sip,
I would not change for thine.”

John searched around for Sherlock and when their eyes met, he saw something in his friend’s gaze that nailed him to the spot.

“Where have you been?” the detective asked, his voice hoarse and his breath hot and spicy.

“Let’s discuss this elsewhere. My head hurts and I need to sit down in a quiet place,” John replied, trying to manhandle his friend toward the door of the salon.

“Yes, alright; I don’t think they will notice if we go without saying goodnight.”

“I have already told Stephen we would retire early.”

“Stephen,” Sherlock spat out.

“That’s his name,” John replied, as they ascended the stairs towards their suite.

Once inside Sherlock’s room, John poured water into two tumblers and gave one to the detective.

“Drink,” he ordered and was obeyed.

They sat down side by side on the queen-size bed, too dazed to talk.

After the noise of the salon, the cool and quiet atmosphere of the bedroom was pressing down on them like a shroud.

“There is a small hut at the edge of the wood,” John started, at the same time as Sherlock said “He’s attracted to you.”

“What, oh, Stephen; no, he just likes to flirt; that’s the way he is.”

“You like that he comes to you for protection; after all, you are a doctor, a healer. Have you kissed him? Let me look at you, I can deduce it… I can…”

And suddenly, the room started spinning around him and John was the only safe thing to hold on to.

“Sherlock, are you alright? Here, let me…” the blond man said, but before he could do what he had meant to, Sherlock’s head was on his shoulder, his soft curls tickling John’s nose.

“I didn’t know where you were,” the baritone said, and it had never sounded so lost.

“I’m right here now,” John replied, his arm curling around his friend’s shoulder, firm and comforting.

Chapter End Notes

Next: At last, there will be love...
Storm my Throat with Bliss

Chapter Summary

Here comes the loving...

Note: if man/man sex is not your thing, you may want to skip this chapter and possibly
the rest of the story ;)

I wanted to thank all of you reading and commenting. I will try to reply asap, but
plotting and writing takes a huge chunk of my time, so bear with me please! :)
The detective smiled weakly.

“What were you saying about a hut,” he muttered, stifling a yawn.

“Yes, Step… Tennant and I came upon the game-keeper’s hut in the wood and while the bolt was old and rusted, the padlock was almost new.”

Sherlock sprang back to life: he sat up straight and tried to get back on his feet, but another wave of dizziness made him lose his balance.

“We have to locate the key and check what’s inside. We have to…” he mumbled, a manic look in his feverish eyes.

“You’re not going anywhere now. Come on, let me help you prepare for bed.”

The younger man tried to protest, but he lacked the focus and the energy.

As he was about to cede control to his friend, he suddenly remembered a vital question that had remained unanswered.

“You didn’t tell me whether you kissed him,” he said, gazing at John as the man removed Sherlock’s shoes and socks.

“Don’t be silly. He’s virtually our client.”

“What if he weren’t?”

“I don’t think we should have this sort of talk while we’re both drunk.”

“You don’t seem drunk.”

“It’s because I bother to eat at meal times.”

“Are you suggesting I don’t?”

“Not suggesting, stating,” John replied. He was starting to feel nauseous too, what with the strain of dealing with Stephen’s frivolity and Sherlock’s proximity.

“Do you think you can manage on your own or…”

His friend blinked owlishly, as he tried to rearrange his thoughts. He stared at John and deduced how exhausted he was.

“Not to worry, dear fellow,” he replied, trying to sound cheerful, “I’m absolutely fine. Just catching my breath for a minute and all will be alright.”

“If you need me, you know where to find me,” John replied. He patted his friend’s back one more time and staggered towards the bathroom, after bidding him goodnight.

He was in a garden filled with exotic flowers. In the distance, after a bend in the road, he could see a glasshouse in the shape of a prism whose refracted light designed impossible rainbows across the cloudless sky.

The sunshine was warm on his skin and it seemed to penetrate directly into his heart and inside his
bowels; everything was peace and permanence. But the prism was getting closer, and inside were fear and change; he knew it, even though he couldn’t define the source of his certainty.

He could faintly discern two people inside the glasshouse; as he moved closer, he could finally see and hear them.

A familiar, beloved voice was saying: “When you are like this, I cannot control you or myself.”

And the other, in its dulcet tones, replied: “You can do what you like with me.”

He looked on, petrified, as a fully dressed John caressed down the effete boy’s naked body: his strong, capable hands lingered along a graceful neck before touching the delicate knobs of the spine, one by one, and down, to cup the small, rounded buttocks. The boy swayed and keened with pleasure and John leaned forward to kiss him, full and hard, on the mouth. When the boy turned his head, he was none other than Peter Johnstone.

Sherlock woke up with a scream, his heart beating wildly and his nightshirt soaked and sticking to his body.

It was that time of the night they call the witching hour, when every horror is amplified, pain hurts more intensely and death overcomes meaning and hope.

He felt like every light in the world was extinguished and it was a while before he realised he was trembling and in dire need of the comfort of his little bottle.

His valise was on top of the wardrobe and the opium was still in its side pocket.

Sherlock counted to ten, took a deep breath and stumbled out of bed.

John couldn’t go to sleep and the official excuse was that he was too exhausted for slumber. As a soldier, he’d been used to doze in the noisiest, least hygienic and most perilous locations. Fear, worry and hunger had not kept him awake; deep down, he knew he was lying to himself.

When he’d come back from his brief outing with Stephen and he’d found Sherlock’s gaze on him, he’d read the content of his heart into it: there had been tenderness and desire in those pale, changeling eyes, he was certain of it; or at least he had been in that instant. But now, in the still of the night, it seemed nonsensical and fanciful.

Sherlock was his friend and his partner, and the nature of the unusual compact they had sealed placed John in the role of confidant and protector, rather than in that of the lover.

Besides, he was so much older, a decade in years and aeons in experience and disenchantment. The things he had seen, he didn’t even want to dwell on them; but they were inscribed in his bones and in his lined face and broken body, which were a world away from the pristine, algid beauty of his friend.

He tossed and turned until his soft pillows felt rough as jute and the comfortable mattress as hard as a slab of marble. He’d almost decided to get up, dress and go out for a walk when he heard a faint noise coming from the direction of the wash-room.

Because the night was eerily quiet, it was immediately clear to John that the commotion wasn’t as close as that and that it must in fact come from Sherlock’s room.
He quickly put on his dressing gown and went to check what the matter was.

In Maricourt, a day in June of the year 1916, John had seen the sun rise over a sea of red poppies. It had been like a glimpse of heaven, enchanting and fairy-like, and he’d always carried it in his heart, pulling it out like a photo to contemplate during those long hours when life had consisted only of destruction and death.

When he opened the door, he was confronted with a vision that superseded all such marvels, one that he would cherish until the day he died.

In the faint light of the anaemic moon, Sherlock, dazed and barefoot, his white nightshirt half-undone and his curls dishevelled and wild, stood in the middle of the room, clutching a flagon to his chest and biting his lips; the pale skin of his throat and sternum was almost translucent against the creamy fabric.

He was like a ghost in a gothic story, and for a moment John imagined he was fast asleep and that the youth in front of him would disappear if he closed his eyes.

The spell broke when he became aware that Sherlock was shaking.

“Go back to bed,” his hoarse voice said; in the silence, it was like the crack of a whip.

“John,” the younger man whined, and his knees buckled.

John got to him just before he collapsed to the floor, and ignoring the pain in his shoulder, he scooped him up into his arms and deposited him on the bed.

“Let go,” he commanded, as he prised the bottle from the rigid, claw-like grasp.

A desperate keen surged from Sherlock’s throat, silent tears spilling from his eyes. It did happen at times that the lack of his stimulant and a surfeit of excitement produced these pitiful crises, but the desolation John was witnessing was rare and thus more intense.

“What can I do? Tell me, dearest, how I may be of help,” he pleaded, but even as the lovely, coral lips parted to speak, no words came out of them.

As his eyes grew more confident in the half-light, he saw that his friend was drenched in sweat and tufts of hair were plastered to his forehead.

“Let me clean you up a bit,” he said, and run to the wash-room to get a flannel.

The fist touch of fresh cotton on Sherlock’s face seemed to wake the detective from his stupor.

“I’m so sorry, so very sorry; I don’t know what came over me; a bad dream, yes, a horrible nightmare,” he said, anxiously.

“You don’t have to apologize,” John replied, hypnotised by the sight of the skin he was massaging: cheeks, jaw, neck; the slant of the collarbones and the planes of the quasi-pubescent pectorals.

Sherlock heard the door opening and the terror of his nightmare came back to him and undid him.

Would his intimate life always be a repetition of that one, awful incident? Would that moment of
near-violence colour all his future relationships? His dreams were replete with repressed sensuality; he could not resist them any longer.

John appeared as if out of his reveries, but his touch was not ethereal: it was strong and safe and everything that was good and noble in the world.

His heart couldn’t take the strain nor could his body, and in the next moment he found himself in the other man’s arms, being lifted, carried and deposited on his bed.

From then on, he drifted into a state of physical torment: he needed to feel pleasure and needed the drug to make it permissible. But John wouldn’t let him, and was taking his bottle away; he tried in vain to hold on to it, but he had to let it go; with it, went his emotional protection and he had to endure the shame of tears.

John wasn’t disgusted by them; he wanted to help him, and in trying to do so, he was getting closer to the source of Sherlock’s agony.

The flannel chafed his skin, lighting it up from inside, so that he felt like it was leaving a glowing trail that demanded more pressure and heat.

Inadvertently, one of John’s nails grazed a rosy, sensitive nipple: Sherlock shivered visibly and John pulled away only to feel long avid fingers curl around his wrist, guiding his hand back to the injured spot. He looked up at his friend’s face and found a passionate defiance in his darkened eyes.

“Touch me, please,” the younger man demanded. John dropped the piece of cloth and let the pad of his thumb caress the tip of the same nipple and watched as it perked up; he couldn’t resist and pressed down on it, rubbing it softly at first then more vigorously as Sherlock arched off the bed, asking for more.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured, and bent down to lick and suckle the hardened nub, as his fingers worked the neglected one, kneading and tweaking it.

Fire was spreading up and down Sherlock’s body, the flames licking at his insides, burning his cheeks, neck and torso. He wanted everything at once: John’s mouth on his face, on his chest and between his legs. The mere idea intensified his blush, but there was no denying the truth of his desires. He wanted his friend’s tongue in his mouth, yearned for it, but he feared John would be reminded of Sherlock’s inexperience and cease his ministrations. When he sensed the man’s hesitation, he pushed his head down in unmistakeable suggestion.

“Please… please… I need…”

“Are you certain my dear… after what you told me… are you sure?” John husked, his breath hot on Sherlock’s groin.

“Please… please…” he pleaded.

John undid the remaining buttons of his friend’s nightshirt and parted it open.

What he saw made him sob with longing.
He had nearly forgotten how much he loved doing this, how he savoured the textures, scents and flavours. But here was the boy he loved – because what would be the sense in lying to himself – and he was probably scared yet wanting pleasure, craving its release. His flushed, straining erection was slim, long and slightly curved and so painfully hard it was kissing Sherlock’s meagre belly with every rasping breath he took; it left a trail of nacreous moisture on it; the sight drove John insane with lust.

“John,” the detective moaned, and his lover couldn’t let him wait any longer.

What if he didn’t taste good or wasn’t clean enough or, worst of all, what if he spent as soon as John’s mouth was on him? There was barely time for these thoughts before his mind shut down, subsumed into an ocean of passion; wave upon wave of fire, as his lover licked and sucked him with abandon. His body seemed to have a life of its own and couldn’t be controlled: a litany of moans escaped his mouth and his legs splayed wide, falling to the side; his hips were thrusting upward, pushing toward the wellspring of the ecstasy; he dimly realised John was emitting little choking sounds, but when he pulled away, the older man forced him back, slurping him down greedily.

Sherlock lingered on the edge of release for as long as he could.

“I’m going to….. I can’t… I can’t…” he cried out, when the time came.

“Yes, yes,” was the muffled reply, before a forceful suck pulled his orgasm out of him.

There it was again, the marvellous flood that he had missed so much. And because his darling boy had never been touched, it was so abundant he almost choked on it. Was there a better way to die? He couldn’t think of one.

He kissed his way up the flushed, sweaty, lovely body, desperate to get to Sherlock’s mouth.

“May I?” he asked in a ragged voice, as he stared at the swollen, parted lips.

“Yes, but I’ve never... not completely,” his friend replied, still trembling with the aftershocks.

“Let me… just let me,” John replied. His fingers dived into tangled curls, as mouth brushed against mouth. Sherlock’s breath was like a gentle breeze and he only wanted to steal it and hold it inside for a while; when his tongue touched the seam of the boy’s lips, they both moaned. It was shy and tentative, at first, and John was conscious that his mouth tasted of Sherlock’s release, was still wet with it. But that seemed only to arouse his friend even more, and soon they were devouring each other, chasing after a deeper, more intimate connection.

After a while, Sherlock felt John’s desperation, as the muscled body against him became tauter and more insistent.

“What do you need… should I?” he whispered, hinting at reciprocation.

John placed a kiss on the tip of his nose and shook his head.

“I won't last,” he replied, kissing the younger man’s cheeks, his chin and the hollow of his throat.

“Do it against me,” Sherlock croaked, and feeling daring, he pushed John’s pants down and held the shaft in his fist, eliciting a gasp. It was much heftier - if a tad shorter - than his own, and it thrilled
him to imagine it inside of him.

It didn’t take more than a few thrusts before the warmth of John’s climax spattered both their chests, some drops landing on the detective’s throat and some on his chin.

“Darling, sweet boy,” John chanted as he trembled in his arms, and Sherlock felt his heart swell with love and something akin to pride.

“I should wipe this mess away,” the doctor said, after a while; he was untwisting from their embrace, moving away.

“Don’t go,” Sherlock muttered.

“I won’t be gone for long,” was the whispered reply.

Through half-lidded eyes, the detective watched as John cleaned him up and removed his soiled nightshirt.

He pursed his lips to kiss his lover’s fingers, but it turned into a yawn.

“Sleep now, dearest,” John said, smiling, but Sherlock didn’t want to be alone.

“Stay,” he asked, softly.

Sleep found them in each other’s arms, as the frail fingers of dawn painted the sky gainsboro grey.

Chapter End Notes

Next: More guests arrive at Wilsford. The investigation continues. Sherlock and John are madly in love. What could possibly go wrong?
Danger and Defilement

Chapter Summary

The morning after

Note: The Enoch Arden complex was really a thing that Sassoon alleged to be suffering from.

“I still feel I must save Stephen from danger and defilement” Siegfried Sassoon

When John opened his eyes, he could not recall where he was.

Outside the uncurtained window, a pale sun was trying to make its way through a blanket of clouds and the livid light made every object in the room seem squalid and unclean. A pair of shoes had been discarded and lay on the floor like survivors marooned at sea; Sherlock’s shoes. And that’s when John woke up completely and remembered everything.

He turned slowly, not wanting to disturb the other occupant of the bed.

Sherlock was lying on his side, a sheet loosely wrapped around him: there was gunk in the corner of his eyes, a faint shadow of stubble on his upper lip and crusted semen on his chin and throat; his curls were matted and scruffy and his lips swollen and cracked.

John was certain he’d never seen anything more enticing in his entire life.

He was about to lean closer and kiss the young man awake when he saw the dark circles around his eyes, and farther away, on the bedside cabinet, the bottle of opium.

Sherlock had been drunk and desperate for a dose of his drug and John had done what, exactly? He’d comforted him by plundering his innocence. Suddenly, the sun shone brighter and merciless on his sins. That his friend had asked him, begged him, to be touched, was of no importance since it had been the behaviour of a person under the influence. He had no excuses: he was the mature, experienced one and he should have found a way to resist any temptation.

He shook his head and, softly, tried to disengage his limbs from the tangle of blankets, but in so doing he awakened his bedmate.

Sherlock’s eyelids trembled and lifted, and John found himself scrutinized by a pair of piercing celadon eyes. There was no trace of sleep in them and a seriousness that scared the older man into silence.

“You are regretting what happened between us,” the detective said, quietly. His voice was low and still infused with sleep.
John held his gaze, hoping his eyes would communicate the truth of his words.

“Not regretting, no; I’m just concerned… for you. You were not yourself and I…”

“And you what,” the younger man spat out, “perhaps you think that I’m tainted, that I’m broken, and you pity me. Yes, that’s it, isn’t it? You look at Stephen and see a sensual youth and then you turn to me and you only see this ungainly, tarnished thing, don’t you? For Christ’s sake, I even cried in front of you! Yes, I do remember everything; I wasn’t that far gone,” he shouted. His eyes were alight with rage, but John could perceive the self-disgust underneath it. When I look at you, I see everything that’s perfect and I want you so much a lifetime of making love to you could never be enough, that’s what he wanted to say, but couldn’t. He feared to be disbelieved and that would only make things worse.

He desperately searched for another way to reassure his friend and appeal to the part that he knew Sherlock valued the most.

“When I came to your room, you told me you’d just had a nightmare. Would you mind telling me?”

“Why would I tell you?” the younger man asked, but John could see he wanted to be convinced.

“Help me understand what is going on inside that genius brain of yours,” he replied, smiling.

“Hardly a genius; don’t patronise me, John.”

“Was it a dream about Cambridge?”

Sherlock sighed and combed a shaky hand through his curls.

“It was about you. You were entirely clothed and you were caressing a boy, up and down his naked body; at first I thought it was Tennant, but it turned out to be Peter Johnstone instead. There! Happy now?”

The mention of Johnstone made John cringe, but he kept talking.

“It must have been because of how Forbes treated his models. Your dream fits with Tennant’s description.”

“You can call him Stephen, if you like. It doesn’t bother me,” Sherlock said, shrill and vulnerable.

“Doesn’t it?” John asked, smiling a little. The detective was preparing a scathing reply, but it was kissed right out of him.

“Morning breath,” the doctor murmured, pulling back a little.

“Irrelevant,” was the reply and another kiss, deeper and greedier, followed.

“Let’s pretend I just woke up and saw you lying by my side, still asleep,” John whispered, licking his lover’s lips.

“And what happens in this imaginary scenario of yours?”

They had shifted so that they were skin to skin, and John’s hands were caressing the boy’s hair and face as they kissed; Sherlock was holding on to John’s shoulders, as if afraid the man would otherwise disappear.

“I’d open my eyes and you’d be lying next to me. I’d spend a long, long time staring at you,
marvelling at this beautiful boy, at his precious face and body.”

Sherlock snorted in disbelief, but again was silenced with lips and tongue.

“Then I would kiss your mouth, here, and your cheeks, here, and your throat, here and down, down, here and here and here,” John whispered, as he proceeded to do what he’d been describing.

Sherlock laughed and tried to reciprocate, smearing his lips against whatever bit of John he could reach.

It was all going well then Sherlock felt John’s change of mood, even before the man stopped kissing him.

“What is it?”

“Look at what I’ve done; I’m so sorry, dearest, I didn’t mean to.”

John was staring at Sherlock’s chest: his nipples were swollen and the area around them was slightly bruised.

“It’s nothing,” the younger man said, prodding them with his fingers, “they’re just a little sore, that’s all.”

To be perfectly honest, he liked that they were tender and wanted more of it; biting perhaps, and more pinching, too.

He guided John’s hand to his chest and looked him in the eyes.

“Make it better,” he said, pressing a calloused finger against the sore nub.

John licked his lips and Sherlock emulated that gesture to hint at what he desired.

“Yes, that… I want it… want,” he murmured, touching the pad of his thumb to the man’s moistened lower lip and rubbing it against his own nipple.

From that moment on, things became frantic and confused, like seeing the world through flashes of lightening during a storm: John’s mouth and hands were everywhere at once, and Sherlock could barely catch his breath as he tried to lick and suck and bite in return.

“My darling, sweet boy,” John was repeating, as he covered Sherlock’s body with his own, pressing down, grinding against it; and the boy hungrily grasped his lover’s buttocks, chasing friction where he needed it most.

“Give me your hand, dearest,” John panted, and Sherlock nearly screamed when he felt the man’s strong fingers close around their joined arousals. His own long fingers, unpractised as they were, deftly curled into a fist, and inside that tight, wet ring he found such pleasure he could have died from it.

“Kiss me again,” he pleaded, afterwards, as he lay in John’s arms, spent but still electrified with pleasure.

They passed a long while exchanging languorous embraces, until it was time to return to reality.

“I hope they won’t think us ill-mannered,” John said, against Sherlock’s curls.

“Judging by the state of the party last night, I wager quite a few of them won’t have left their rooms
yet,” the detective replied, pushing into his lover’s hands, demanding more caresses.

“Yes, perhaps you’re right. Still… we’ve got work to do, Mr. Holmes, don’t we?”

“Yes, I suppose we do, Doctor Watson.”

He smiled softly and John looked at him like he was a miracle, like his heart was breaking and it didn’t matter anymore.

Sherlock inspected his face in the mirror and his eyes bothered him: there was a febrile glint in them he’d never seen before.

He resumed shaving, trying to concentrate on the lower portion of his face and avoid his own gaze.

It would be idiotic of him to believe that John loved him: firstly, he had not uttered the actual words and secondly, he had kept calling him boy, never mentioning the detective’s given name, not once, not even in the throes of passion.

He stretched the skin next to the philtrum and took particular care as that bit was tricky.

The other boy John had loved, the one who had died, certainly had a name, and perhaps the doctor did not want to risk confusing the two of them.

Another idea took shape into his troubled mind: what if John had a thing for young, inexperienced men; what if he only cared until he’d taught them and fixed them, only to discard them to take on a new ‘project’?

He grimaced in disgust and narrowly avoided grazing his upper lip.

Right, he thought, slamming the razor down on the ceramic basin, the work is what comes first, now and forever. His eyes kept betraying him though, and as he rinsed the soap off his cheeks and mouth, he looked up and caught them telling a totally different story.

“Lady Grey has deserted us for good. Last night must have been too much for her, even from a distance,” Cecil quipped. John had stared at him when he’d entered the dining room: he was almost unrecognisable dressed in a blue cashmere pullover and grey corduroy trousers and with his face and hair scrubbed clean.

Zita, who appeared to be wearing the same clothes as the night before, sipped her black coffee and nodded.

“I can’t say I blame her. Steenie had us all play hide and seek in the woods. I’m quite certain I have chilblains on my feet,” she replied, good-humouredly.

They were having bacon and scrambled eggs, the smell of which turned Sherlock’s already pale complexion a sickly shade of green.

“You will eat something,” John muttered under his breath and the detective threw him a mutinous glare. In the end, he had some toasted bread with honey and a forkful or two of poached egg-whites, and he had to admit – to himself, never to John – that he felt better after that.

“Is our host still in the arms of Morpheus?” Sherlock asked of no one in particular.
Cecil smirked and his tone dropped to a conspiratorial murmur.

“I doubt he slept a wink. He’s waiting for Sieg to show up.”

“Surely he won’t come uninvited,” John retorted, mildly offended on behalf of the poet and War hero.

Zita arched her finely plucked eyebrows and cut into a slice of bacon with decision.

“It wouldn’t be the first time. Oh, don’t look at me like that, Doctor Watson! I’m not saying he broke in like a robber in a cheap novel, but he looked at him from afar; he explained it to me once; he calls it his ‘Enoch Arden complex.’”

“A Tennyson poem about a kind of Odysseus affected by a compulsion to watch his wife, unseen,” Sherlock explained to a bewildered John.

Behind them, the door banged open in dramatic fashion and Stephen made his entrance enveloped in his white velvet dressing gown. His face was paler than Sherlock’s and his slicked back hair and cold eyes reminded John of the head of a statue.

“I bring good tidings,” he announced, sitting down next to John, in a flurry of perfumed velvet. “Revel is gracing us with his presence.”

Cecil and Zita gasped and lifted their hands to their faces like actors in a Chaplin film.

Stephen laughed and hastened to explain for John and Sherlock’s sake.

“Revel never wants to come here. He detests the countryside, for some reason. I suspect he suffered a rejection while outside of London and has never wanted to repeat that mistake.”

“I can understand him, for I love London and would never live anywhere else,” Sherlock stated; an embarrassing silence followed, broken only by the sounds of chewing and sipping.

“Last night we spoke about something…” John said to Tennant, and the latter surprised him by producing a silver Yale key from the pocket of his silk pyjama.

“I haven’t forgotten, my dear friend. I spent hours looking for it and where do you think it was? Inside my old cigarette case, of all places! I had not seen it since Sieg – ever since I was given a new one as a present. My room is a battlefield, quite literally at times. Anyway, here it is,” he said, and he held out his upturned palm to John, offering him the key.

“Many thanks,” Sherlock said, curtly. “John,” he called, and walked out, leaving John no other choice but to follow suit.

“Don’t touch anything, please. Not that I expect our caution will be of any use,” Sherlock said, observing the incriminated object through his eyeglass.

The Yale key had opened the padlock and they’d entered the little hut: it was crammed with a collection of metal boxes, wooden crates and glass bottles, all covered by a thick layer of dust.

Inside a small, rusty coffer they had found what they were looking for. The bottle of poison looked untouched and its seal was still firmly glued around the cap.

“There could have been other bottles,” John said, frowning at his friend’s detached manner.
They had not spoken one word about the events of the night and morning, and while he understood there were more pressing concerns, he was unsettled by the detective’s stern, indifferent demeanor. His eyes were as icy as the cold wind that filtered through the hut’s decrepit walls.

“Obviously,” the younger man replied, tersely. “I’ll call Lestrade,” he added, and without another word, he left the hut, leaving John once again to limp after him.

*I’ll be damned if I run after him like a puppy*, he thought, angrily.

He decided to take a walk in the woods instead. The day was cold but not humid, and humidity was what afflicted him the most, both in body and mind. Standing for days and nights in a ditch filled with septic water waiting for the enemy to attack had made sure of that.

He imagined what the woods would be like in spring when the flowers were in bloom and the trees green and luscious and understood why Stephen loved Wilsford so much. But he also saw Dester’s point of view: London offered many distractions and for a novelist there would always be a plentiful supply of events and people to write about.

Deep into his reveries, he had not heard the footsteps approach until the man was near him.

“Captain Sassoon,” he exclaimed, slightly perturbed at the sight of the poet’s face, which seemed carved and suffering.

“Doctor Watson. I know what you must be thinking: that I shouldn’t be here, that I should stay away.”

“Well, yes, it appears to be the best course of action; at present, at least.”

Sassoon’s stare seemed to probe into his soul and left him hollowed out and dizzy.

“You of all people should understand that I *have* to be near him. Look at the way he behaves, the empty, frivolous crowd he surrounds himself with. Don’t you see what’s going on? I *have* to save him from danger and defilement,” the man explained, his eyes glittering from inside their livid sockets.

John shivered, thinking of his own situation.

“You should go, Captain. Sherlock is ringing the Yard as we speak. They shouldn’t find you here, loitering with intent.”

The tall man laughed – a brittle, mirthless thing – and grasped John’s arm, blocking his departure.

“We can’t really expect that any more exquisite young men will fall in love with us, can we?” he asked, and before John could reply, he walked away in the opposite direction.
The Imperfect Lover

Chapter Summary

Sherlock is being his usual maddening self.
Things go bump in the night
Also: more sexy times, so mind those tags.

Note: Thank you guys for being so nice in your comments. I truly appreciate it and will try and reply asap.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I never asked you to be perfect—did I?—
Though often I’ve called you sweet, in the invasion
Of mastering love. I never prayed that you
Might stand, unsoiled, angelic and inhuman,
Pointing the way toward Sainthood like a sign-post”

The Imperfect Lover (excerpt) – Siegfried Sassoon

Lestrade had contacted the local police in Salisbury and they had sent their best and brightest man in the person of Inspector Patrick Burns. A ginger-haired stout man with an ingratiating manner, he seemed to be impervious both to Sherlock’s fastidious hauteur and Stephen’s flirty effusiveness.

He had his Sergeant dusted the hut for fingerprints – as had been no doubt suggested by Lestrade – and interrogated the Head housekeeper without causing major chaos in the staff quarters.

As Sherlock had predicted, there seemed to be very little hope of solving the case in the traditional way: no one knew whether potassium cyanide had been acquired or when. Burns would check with the local apothecaries and other purveyors of chemicals, but he doubted – and so did Sherlock – they would find records of any such purchase. Before the War, sellers had been painstaking in their bookkeeping, but during it, well, everything had been at sixes and sevens, the Inspector stated, eliciting a pained grimace from the detective.

Lord Glenconner had been reached by telephone and so had Lord and Lady Grey, but neither the elder brother nor the parents of an over-excited Stephen Tennant had been able to contribute anything useful to the investigation, except for vague mentions of the late game-keeper and repeated assurances that the hut would be securely boarded up so that no intruder could gain further admittance.

The news from London was that the Press had been fed the story of an accidental death and so far
they had swallowed it.

In the meantime, Stephen’s other brother David and his wife Hermione had arrived, together with Revel Dester, bringing even more of that mindless effervescence Sassoon loathed with a surfeit of passion.

“I think we shall leave tomorrow morning. Our work here is done,” Sherlock announced, in the clipped tones he used when he was tired of company and getting closer to hysteria.

They were in Tennant’s private sitting room, what he called his ‘boudoir’. The cage with his parrot – Poll – was on the window sill of the dormer window; the bird seemed ready to squawk at the least provocation, not unlike its owner.

“You lied to us”, Sherlock continued, without ceremony.

“Dear Lord Holmes, what a horrid things to say,” Stephen replied, carefully massaging dollops of lemon cream onto his elegant hands. “At one time or another I may have been economical with the truth, but lying is not my style. Besides, I wouldn't be a good liar, for I have a terrible memory.”

The detective’s eyes narrowed and John feared that the confrontation could not be avoided.

“You said your relationship with Sassoon was a secret, but it seems all your friends know about it.”

With all that happened since then, John had nearly forgotten about it, but it was true that Stephen has suggested as much.

The young man blushed prettily, batting his eyelashes in a perfect display of contrition.

“What I meant to say was that Duncan didn't know,” he started.

“What you meant to say was that either of your lovers did not know of the existence of the other man in your life,” the detective interjected.

Stephen glared at Sherlock, as vexation replaced repentance.

“The truth is that even though my friends knew Sieg was after me, they were not fully acquainted with the terms of our relationship. Nobody knows what goes on within a couple, except the people involved. Wouldn't you say that is always the case?”

John cleared his throat and Sherlock's lips tightened into a thin white line.

"Let's not quibble, Mr Tennant. What you did was tease a poor man into submission then let him suffer the scorn and censure of your friends, who in turn were left to assume that you were rejecting a man whose love you had not intention of reciprocating."

The boy's face was the colour of beetroot and he looked daggers at the detective.

"What I did or didn’t do - Lord Holmes - is none of your business!"

"Unless your behaviour led to the murder," Sherlock suggested, coldly.

"You don't seriously believe that," Stephen exclaimed, and the bird in the cage shrieked in empathy.

"I believe it may have been part of the story, yes. And I also believe you should learn that your
actions have consequences and that some men are more reckless than others and more prone to obsession."

“You said you thought it wasn’t a crime of passion,” John said, once they were alone and taking tea in the deserted drawing room.

“I should have been more accurate: I don’t believe it was a spur of the moment decision, an act of folly dictated by sudden passion,” Sherlock explained, without looking his friend in the eye.

“Sassoon would do anything to remove Tennant from the influence of some of his friends. But he would not hurt him.”

Sherlock had a detached look in his eyes that John did not like.

"There are many ways of hurting people, some of which are not strictly lethal. In time, though, they cause a ripple effect that may impair a man’s life for good.”

John suspected his friend was no longer dealing in generalities.

“As long as there's life, there's always hope, my dear friend,” he said, touching Sherlock’s hand. The detective withdrew it abruptly, like he’d been scolded.

“Hope is not enough when the alternative is a safe withdrawal from all manner of feelings.”

“There is nothing safe about a perpetual lack of feelings. It can only lead to madness and despair.”

The younger man huffed and opened his mouth to reply, but suddenly he was struck by an intuition, and his face was illuminated with the joy of it.

“Yes, John, you are absolutely right. Years of repression of a particular feeling could lead to madness; especially in a certain kind of individual.”

“Thinking of anyone in particular?” John enquired, but his friend didn’t reply.

The younger man sipped his tea and looked outside the window, at the skeletal trees and barren garden; when he spoke, his voice was devoid of emotion.

“I think we should preserve our friendship as it was before the events of last night. I believe things are better that way; for both of us, I mean.”

John did his utmost to keep his stiff upper lip, but was infinitely glad his friend wasn’t looking at him.

“Alright,” he replied at last, getting up to pour some more tea in his cup. “Thy will be done.”

Dinner was an excruciating affair, conducted like a surrealist play, with Stephen playing the overbearing yet coquettish compère aided by his brother and Cecil, while the others jested in a loud but unconvincing manner. John tried to converse with Whistler while keeping an eye on Sherlock; the detective was silent throughout the entire meal, only throwing ill-disguised contemptuous glances at the flamboyant Dester and his fuchsia brocade waistcoat.

When the charades were announced, John thought it wiser to steer a prickly and increasingly
antagonistic Sherlock towards their lodgings.

Once they reached the door to Sherlock’s room, the detective turned a pinched face toward John, not knowing how to convey that he did not want to bid him goodnight quite yet.

“Pity that you didn’t bring your violin,” the older man said, looking anywhere but at his friend.

“I did bring it, actually. I didn’t want to make a song and dance about it, but I never travel without it.”

Sentiment, John thought, but kept it to himself.

“I wouldn’t say no to a whisky and a spot of music,” he said, cheerfully.

“Alright then,” was his friend’s reply, delivered with as much feigned indifference as he could muster. His muscles relaxed and his entire posture indicated relief.

He chose a sonata by Reger, who had recently composed a Requiem dedicated to the War.

John looked at him with a delighted if rather blank expression. His eyes had seemed to well up with tears, but Sherlock could not be sure whether it had been mere fancy on his part.

When the piece ended, John set the empty glass on the liquor cabinet and approached Sherlock to bid him goodnight.

“There’s one thing you need to know: there is nothing wrong with you, Sherlock, nothing at all.”

John had dreaded his friend’s words, had waited for them all day, fearing them like a death sentence; surprisingly – or perhaps not – when they did come, he felt oddly relieved.

If they were to build a partnership with any lasting potential, it would have to be based on reciprocal respect and trust, and it was obvious to John that Sherlock did not have enough faith in him.

He’d just entered his bedroom after a perfunctory wash and was craving the comfort of his bed and the solace of sleep when there was a soft rap on the door.

Sherlock stood there, scrubbed clean like a schoolboy before an inspection, in his dressing gown and nightshirt.

“May I come in?” he whispered.

John let him in, but didn’t invite him to sit down.

“I don’t want to dream, but I’m afraid that if I take another dose of opium I will have nightmares and I’m afraid that it will happen even if I don’t. I don’t know what to do!” he exclaimed, in a reedy voice.

“Stay here, sleep with me.”

Sherlock’s eyes widened and a blush coloured his cheeks.

“Just sleep, nothing more,” John added.

“Nothing more,” his friend echoed, and it was difficult to decide whether he was surprised or
displeased.

He pondered the request for a moment.

“Acceptable” he replied.

The lay down side by side, leaving a suitable gap between their bodies; at first John thought he wouldn’t be able to fall asleep, but the soft sounds of Sherlock’s breathing and the familiar scent of his hair soon led him into deep slumber.

Sherlock opened his eyes feeling bereft. The night was young and he was wide awake, his heart pounding in his ears and that strange emptiness in his chest, like a hunger that would not abate.

John was fast asleep, quiet and still, like a figure on a sarcophagus.

He shouldn’t wake him, but perhaps if he touched his hair, just a little, John wouldn’t feel it. But feel it he did, to the detective’s dismay.

“Mm, what is it?” the doctor muttered, husky-voiced and bleary-eyed.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Bad dream?” John asked, already more than half awake.

Sherlock shook his head, his eyes fixed on John’s half naked chest.

“What if I asked you to kiss me?” he said, inching closer to his friend, as if pulled by a magnet.

“You mean a chaste kiss?”

“No,” he replied, licking his lips with clear intent.

“You said you didn’t want…”

“Am I allowed to change my mind?”

Their mouths were so close they were exchanging breaths.

“I won’t be put back on my shelf like the discarded toy you no longer want to play with,” John said; his eyes were dark, with a fierce, unwieldy expression.

In reply, Sherlock unbuttoned his nightshirt and, gazing straight into those stormy eyes, he slid it off his shoulders and let it fall to the floor by the bed.

“Tell me with words; I won’t touch you otherwise,” the blond man intimated.

“I want your hands and your mouth and your skin all over me,” Sherlock said, the words falling into the silence like stones in a pond.

“Oh Christ, come here,” John ordered, sinking his hands in his lover’s curls and pulling softly, and there again was the passionate, greedy embrace Sherlock had craved all day. The kiss became deep and lewd, as their naked bodies entwined, wanting to thrust and rub and caress, until it was no longer enough.
“I want to… do what you did last night,” he panted, watching as the implication of his words dawned on John. The man gazed at him with lust-filled eyes and was too far gone to reply with words. He took Sherlock’s hand and with infinite care, he circled the base of his thumb with two of his fingers and pulled towards his parted lips. Never once taking his eyes off Sherlock’s, he sucked the head of the thumb into his mouth, licking it abundantly, never allowing the digit to go deeper than the tip, which he lavished with wet suckles and barest hint of teeth; all that while the two fingers stroked up and down the base of it. After what seemed like an eternity, he let it out and kissed it softly one more time.

“Let me taste you first… just a little, please,” John pleaded, and immediately bent his head to swallow his friend’s arousal into his mouth, all of it, until it made him gag. He went down on it with such savagery that Sherlock almost spent there and then.

When he came up for air, he looked completely undone, his breath ragged and his face twisted in supreme pleasure.

“I had to, couldn’t help myself,” he murmured, caressing the boy’s damp curls, his bewildered face and bee-stung lips, which he kissed tenderly, as Sherlock closed his arms around him in a tight embrace.

“Now, please, now…” the detective all but wailed, and in his desperation he only half-realised that John had arranged him face down between his splayed legs, with a pillow underneath his aching groin so that he could rub against it.

He soon appreciated the gesture, when he found himself so intensely aroused he could have cried at the relief of that chafing fabric against his blood-hot skin.

John’s erection was as painfully hard, the plump head unsheathed and drenched, begging for his touch. It was intimidating and exciting, and he was glad John had showed him what he liked. Sherlock mimicked it to the letter, and as he suckled and licked, saliva trickling down his chin, he looked up into John’s face; when their eyes met he felt a powerful shock of electricity pass through him, causing him to moan and writhe, which made the thick arousal in his mouth even bigger and harder.

They were both precipitating fast towards a violent climax, but Sherlock needed something, and he didn’t quite know what it was; he implored John with his eyes, and the man must have seen it in the depth of his soul, because he grabbed a fistful of curls and pulled hard enough to hurt. Sherlock cried out and spatted abundantly all over the pillow; almost at the same time, his mouth was flooded with a bitter-salty stream that he vainly tried to swallow in its entirety. Some of it spilled out of his reddened lips, and John opened his eyes in time to see the spectacle Sherlock was making of himself; terribly clumsy, he was about to berate himself, until he saw the wild, possessive look on his lover’s face.

“Here… come up here, my darling,” John growled, as he hauled Sherlock up bodily, so that he could kiss him into oblivion, licking him clean.

Afterwards, as they lay underneath the covers, Sherlock pondered on his unbidden reactions.

“I never imagined I wanted that,” he whispered.

“You must know that I would never hurt you,” John said, caressing down his back.

“Yes, I know. But it seems that I like pain,” he spat out the last word, disgusted.

“There’s pleasure in that pain; it’s not the same as…”
“Not the same as what those boys tried to do to me? How do you know? Perhaps they had guessed this is what I am like, this freak who enjoys being hurt and humiliated.”

“Did you feel that way with me?”

The detective thought about it for a moment then shook his head.

“You know why? Because there was something essential in our act, something that was missing from that awful episode at Cambridge: you wanted it too and you know that I care about you.”

“I am your friend,” the detective said, cautiously, “like the boy you had…before me.”

“No, that… no, that’s not it. I did love him, but you are an entirely different creature. You are maddening, petulant, clever, funny, haughty and I…” he stopped to caress the faint shadow of stubble above the boy’s upper lip and the stern sweep of a cheekbone. “And I love absolutely everything that you are.”

Sherlock went utterly still then blinked repeatedly, as he tried to digest the information.

“You never said,” he murmured.

“I wasn’t sure that you wanted to hear it, but after tonight I don’t want to be safe any longer. You will always have me, as a friend or a lover. I just ask you to believe that I will never hurt you, no matter how intense the provocation. I’d rather be without you than lose your respect and your trust.”

Sherlock’s heart was exploding and there were things he wanted to say, but John was kissing him and soon he couldn’t remember what they were, except for yes and more and again.

When it appeared that their bodies were ready for another bout of lovemaking, they heard voices and the sounds of footsteps hurrying up the staircase.

They had barely time to put on their dressing gowns and make themselves presentable, when there was a loud bang on the door.

“Doctor Watson, please come to Stephen’s room immediately,” it was Cecil high-pitched voice. “He’s horribly sick and we think he’s been poisoned.”

Chapter End Notes

Next: John saves the day and Sherlock starts seeing the light (so to speak).
Atmosphere of Devils

Chapter Summary

John shows what he's made of.
Stephen is rather more complicated than he seems.

Note: the thing about Stephen and the sailors (soldiers, in reality) truly happened.

Note 2: I'm sure that opiates poisoning is treated differently nowadays, but at the time this seems to have been the cure (according to "A Treatise On Therapeutics, And Pharmacology Or Materia Medica Vol1", by George B. Wood). As for the police procedures of the time, kindly suspend your disbelief. However, please note that the first case where fingerprinting was used as evidence dates back (at least in the UK) to 1905.

“You dream long liturgies of our devotion.
Yet, in my heart, I dread our love’s destruction
But, should you grow to hate me, I would ask
No mercy of your mood: I’d have you stand
And look me in the eyes, and laugh, and smite me
Then I should know, at least, that truth endured,
Though love had died of wounds. And you could leave me
Unvanquished in my atmosphere of devils”

The Imperfect Lover (excerpt) – Siegfried Sassoon

Luckily for Stephen, Cecil had been alone with him when the boy had fallen ill, and he’d had the good sense of coming directly to John, without rousing the rest of the household.

The valet had been summoned and asked to bring a large empty basin, a bucket of ice and a jug of cold water, together with a pile of blankets.

“He drank his hot milk with cocoa, like he always does before going to sleep. I was with him because he wanted to show me his journal. After a while, a half-hour later or so, that’s when the horror began. He started shaking and his eyes rolled back in his head, like he was having a fit. His pupils were strange too and he lost his balance. Oh my God, is he going to die?” the photographer asked; it was the first time John had seen him completely au naturel; his face was white with fear and his hair showed that fingers had been raking through it with no care for vanity.

When John entered Stephen’s lodgings, he found the boy laying across his bed, in a stupor; his
breathing was stertorous and his hands and face were clammy to the touch.

Poll the parrot was commenting the events in its usual way: making a terrific din that had John clench his teeth in annoyance.

“Help me get him up and walk with him around the room,” he said to Sherlock, who’d just entered the room and seemed pole-axed.

“Stephen,” John said, loud and clear, “you have to try and remain awake. Sherlock and I will help you, but you have to be really strong now and attempt to stay on your feet. Is that understood?”

Tennant looked at him out of his filmy eyes and emitted a wheezy sigh. He tried to nod, but even that tiny gesture was too much of an effort for his distraught body.

The valet came in with the basin, the bucket and the jug and set them on floor by the bed.

“Take that bird away,” John ordered, “then come back with the blankets.”

“I’ll just go fetch something from my room. Whatever you do, keep him awake,” he instructed Cecil and Sherlock. Before he went, he gazed at his partner who was unusually taciturn, his face chalk-white despite their recent exertions. He squeezed his hand briefly and found it cold and unresponsive.

There wasn’t time to probe and he told himself it would have to keep; once in his room, he took a phial from the internal pocket of his travelling bag. Thank heavens he’d been provident enough to carry the emetic with him.

Thirty grains of sulphate of zinc would be sufficient, he judged, considering the poison had only just taken effect.

He hastened back and found the odd couple of Cecil and Sherlock carrying their feeble bundle around the room, trying not to hurt him as they held him up by the armpits. Stephen’s head lolled left and right, but he was still conscious.

“Hand me a glass of cold water and a spoon,” he said to the servant – whose name he found to be William – and the latter quickly complied. The emetic soon dissolved and was ready for consumption.

“Stephen, listen to me,” he murmured, after he’d made Cecil and Sherlock depose the boy on the bed, in a sitting position. “I have to ask you to be really brave now. You have to drink this solution, all of it. It will make you feel very sick, but after that you will start feeling better.”

He was praying to any deity that may exist that Stephen was still able to swallow or he would have had to use much uglier ways to induce the discharge of the poison.

The boy was so terrified of dying that he swallowed the content of the glass in one gulp, even though he trembled with the effort.

John then charged William wit the tasks of placing the basin by the bed and using the cold water in the jug to splash it in Stephen’s face, neck and upper chest.

Because he knew what was coming, he needed Cecil out of the way.

“Mr Beaton, I would be most grateful if you could go downstairs and ask one of the servants to make tea; what we need is a vast amount of warm, sweet tea. Would that be alright?”
Cecil surprised him by agreeing without discussion.

The door had just closed behind him, when Stephen gave a powerful heave that shook his fragile frame; William – a muscular youth with short brown hair and intelligent eyes – held his master as he emptied the contents of his stomach into the basin.

Sherlock was pacing to and fro and appeared nearly as terrified as Stephen.

The unsavoury process went on for a while, after which Cecil returned followed by a young girl with a meek face, who never raised her eyes from her feet. She carried a tray with a jug of warm, sweet tea. She’d had enough common sense to not bring any milk, which she’d evidently realised wouldn’t agree with a perturbed digestive system. Cecil was dispatched back to his lodgings, with the assurance that he would be informed should anything untoward happen, and with the request of saying, touching and ingesting absolutely nothing.

When it seemed that the emetic had achieved its desired effect, John settled the poor boy inside a cocoon of blankets and gave William the task of keeping his master hydrated and of maintaining his cerebral centres awake by brushing ice against his pulse points at regular intervals.

“Can you talk?” he whispered in the boy’s ear.

Stephen shook his head, which at least meant that his understanding was undimmed.

“You should be out of danger now, but William here will keep an eye on you and make sure you don’t have a relapse. I’m afraid he will have to rouse you from time to time, but it’s for your own good. You should also drink as much warm tea as you can, it will cleanse your insides and help speed up your recovery.”

Stephen tried to curve his lips in a smile, but it came out as a grimace.

John patted his hand, which lay limp and waxen on top of the covers, and with Sherlock in tow, he made to leave the room.

“Please, John,” pleaded the reedy, raspy voice.

"Don't worry, I will be close by,” the doctor replied, returning to the sickbed.

“I want… I have to be with Sieg,” Stephen croaked.

“What? No, it’s out of the question! He may be involved in this, for all we know. The police will come here and ask questions and we can’t possibly lie. A secret relationship is one thing, but attempted murder is quite a different kettle of fish.”

Stephen gazed beyond John, at where Sherlock was standing.

“I need him with me,” he insisted, closing his eyes with the exhaustion produced by uttering these few words.

“We’ll find him,” Sherlock replied, softly. Before the doctor could protest, he took him by the arm and led him away.

“What is it? Why are you being so… strange?” John asked once they were back in his room. “And what’s with the promise of bringing Sassoon to him when you know we can’t possibly do that?”
The detective, who had been subdued until then, exploded like a rocket, leaving his partner flabbergasted.

“If only people would think! Why don’t you tell me what sort of substance caused the symptoms Tennant suffered from? The seizures, muscle cramps, breathing issues, clammy skin, pin-prick pupils?”

“It could be belladonna or arsenic, but most probably an opiate such as… oh my God!”

John exclaimed, nearly dropping the glass in which he was going to pour a measure of whisky.

“Precisely!”

Sherlock exclaimed, brushing a hand through his already dishevelled curls.

“Are you saying that someone stole your supply?”

“No, I checked and my bottle hasn’t been touched, but it hardly matters doesn’t it?”

“Of course it matters! It has nothing to do with you and your personal habits, no matter of how unsavoury they might be.”

The detective glared at him, an expression of profound disdain in his green-grey eyes.

“How naïve you are, John! It has everything to do with my personal habits, as you tactfully put it. My annoying brother knows, of course, and so does Lestrade, but the instant my habits become widely known, my suitability as a consulting detective in general, and for this case in particular will be cast into doubt. My entire life will be scrutinized by the gutter press and I will become famous!”

he spat out, inches from John’s bewildered face.

“There is no need for anyone to know. I won’t tell, you won’t tell and I am sure Lestrade and Mycroft won’t either.

“You still don’t see, do you? Whoever did this, whoever chose this method to poison Tennant, knows about my addiction. They must have known I had it with me… perhaps this is a warning… oh my God, John!”

His face went even whiter, bordering on sickly green. John made him sit down on the unmade bed and fixed him a medicinal dose of brandy.

After he’d drunk it, some colour was restored to his wan cheeks, but he was still deep in his unpleasant thoughts.

The budding relationship with John had maybe dimmed his faculties, obscured from his usually unflinching sight the ramifications of this sordid murder case. It was possible and in that instance, he would have to tell John that his request of mere friendship still stood, he would have to shun the human solace of another body, the beating of another heart, the touch of that warm skin… He shook his head, trying to banish the images projected inside his mind.

“Come here, my darling,” the doctor said, and took him into his arms, holding him tight. That was his chance to withdraw, to say his piece and leave the room for the cold comforts of his own empty, dreary one. But the game was lost before it even begun.

He let his head fall on John’s shoulder and everything inside him quietened and sharpened into blade-like clarity.
“It’s not merely that they want me out of the way because I’m after them,” he said, slowly, “it’s rather the opposite, I think: they want me in the investigation so they can destroy me.” He flinched and looked John in the eye. “They may destroy you too, while they are at it.”

“Let them try,” the doctor said, his gaze proud and unwavering. “I’m unashamed and unrepenting; nothing in my past or present can bring me dishonour.”

“You don’t have any secrets?”

“None that I’m ashamed of,” John replied, and as he caught his lover’s meaning. “I will tell you about him, but not now. We have to telephone Lestrade and Burns, get bathed and dressed and all the rest of it.”

“We’ll have to trace Sassoon too,” Sherlock added, letting John caress his hair and uttering soft sighs as he leaned into the touch.

“I don’t understand why this change of heart on your part.”

“It was the way Tennant looked at me; he was silently telling me that he needed what I had: the presence of his lover.”

“Do you believe he really cares about Sassoon?”

“I believe he knows Sassoon loves absolutely everything that he is,” he replied, quoting John’s words.

“My darling boy,” John whispered against Sherlock's throat, kissing it reverently.

“Yes,” was the muted reply.

More kisses followed: deep, intense, a little desperate.

“We better make a start,” Sherlock sighed, his body screaming things he had to ignore for the moment being.

“Yes, duty before pleasure; go ahead, I’ll write a few notes about what happened; just in case we need them for the trial.”

“Jolly good idea, John. We should not give them any additional rope to hang us with.”

“No one will get it in the neck but that crafty ruffian,” John stated, as he sat down by the rosewood desk, pen in hand.

“Quite so, dear John, quite so,” Sherlock replied, with a return of his devil-may-care manner.

The family doctor, an elderly gentleman with a shock of white hair and the demeanour of a general, praised John for his timely intervention and declared Stephen out of the woods. It was evident that the patient felt better, as he asked for a comb and a mirror and for Poll to be brought back into the room.

Burns arrived with his men and took charge of the cup of cocoa, samples of the contents of the boy’s stomach – John had made sure everything be stored away safely – and proceeded to interrogate the staff and everyone present in the house. His men conducted a thorough search with no notable results. Cecil underwent a more thorough grilling, as he'd been the one man present on the scene.
The remains of the previous night's meal were put into bags and taken away for examination. Face powders and suspicious containers were seized, but with little conviction, except for a wish to be seen as ‘doing something’ by the big shots at the Yard.

David Tennant kicked up a tremendous stink about his guests being inconvenienced, but was silenced by his wife Hermione, who seemed the more sensible of the two and the brains of the couple. Nanny was also outraged, but for another reason, that she’d not been allowed to tend to her beloved boy and had to find out about his near-death when it was too late to offer her services.

Lord and Lay Grey were motoring down from their respective locations, and Sherlock had every intention of leaving before they arrived.

He decided to go in search of Siegfried instead, having been informed that he frequently lodged at the cottage owned by the Wilsford gardeners, Beryl and Eileen Hunt. The grey stone, squat building was at the fringes of the estate, near the stables. He’d been told the two sisters were fond of horses, a passion they shared with the poet, who was a keen equestrian and huntsman.

The detective found him sitting in solitude in the vegetable garden, puffing at his pipe. He received an impression of a strong, self-contained man, a creature of contradictions and introspection.

“Mr Holmes,” Sassoon said, standing up to shake the younger man’s hand.

“Sherlock, please.”

“Then you shall call me Siegfried,” he replied, smiling. It was then that Sherlock understood the appeal of this man: he was not that different from John, really. He was steeped in sorrow for being kept away from the man he loved yet he would not give in to despair or surrender, no matter how faint he may believe his hopes to be.

Sherlock was sure John would never desert him; he felt it in his blood, regardless of his contrary brain.

“I know what you are here to say: that I should let him be, if that’s what he wants. But, you see, he’s not always like this. There are times when he regrets his own behaviour and swears he wishes for a different, more meaningful life.”

“He may be lying,” Sherlock suggested.

“It’s easier to lie with words than with your entire being,” the man replied, colouring a little at the import of his statement.

“The best liars are those who believe their own lies.”

“Where do you draw the line, though? When does a lie you believe with your heart and soul become the truth?”

The detective pondered on the question for a moment.

“Only when consistency is added to the mixture and turns the fancy of a moment into the habit of a lifetime,” he replied.

“For someone still so young, you’re rather wise,” Sassoon replied, putting the pipe back into his mouth. His hand clenched around it, a strong, manly grasp.

Yes, Sherlock could imagine Stephen desiring his presence, despite their past disagreements and
differences.

He told him what had happened and – as he’d imagined – the man immediately strode in the direction of the house, fast enough that Sherlock had trouble keeping up with him, and with a bullish determination nothing in heaven or earth could have shaken.

“God works in mysterious ways.”

Revel Dester, attired in maroon velvets that made his beard and hair seem like a plume of fire on top of an elaborate dessert, sat down on the divan, close to John.

The doctor was looking out of the window at the front path to the house, waiting for Sherlock to return. His bag was packed and he wanted to leave Wilsford as soon as possible.

“I wouldn’t say what happened is mysterious in any way: somebody wanted Stephen to leave this earth,” John replied, curtly. He had nothing against religion, as long as it stayed where it belonged: inside a church.

“But he didn’t die though, did he?” the novelist suggested.

“Because I was there,” John replied.

“Yes, you were, weren’t you? Strange coincidence, don’t you think?”

The man’s greenish eyes flashed with amusement and a shrewdness that belied his peacock-like exterior.

“How do you mean?”

“You should have a look at Steenie’s journal. It makes for very interesting reading. Not quite on the same artistic level as Pepys Diary, but as illuminating.”

“He’s an interesting character and he leads a rather… colourful life,” John conceded.

“You don’t know how much he likes being the centre of attention. When he was kid – fifteen or even younger – he used to go to the London docks chasing sailors. He wasn’t seeking anything carnal, not at the time; he merely sought admiration and praise. Unbeknownst to his parents, he was taking this spectacular risk, just for the sake of a paltry compliment or two.”

John shivered, remembering Sherlock’s tale and how his innocence had been nearly violated.

“Are you saying he provoked someone into doing this to him?”

Dester leaned towards John, forcing him to come closer too.

“I’m merely suggesting there may be a hint of the histrionic in what happened last night. A fine theatrical performance, if you prefer.”

“You think he took the poison to, what, to get our attention?”

The man erupted in a spectacular fit of laughter; his entire body trembled and rippled with mirth's seismic waves.

“Not our attention, dear doctor, but Siegfried’s! Steenie is madly in love with him.”
“I worship him. I am madly and utterly in love.”

Stephen Tennant, writing in his (real) journal about Siegfried Sassoon
Sleep No More

Chapter Summary

The boys are back in town (couldn't resist)

A bit of a long one, with a dream taken from the Confessions of De Quincey.

Some lovin', but there will be a lot more in the next chapter.

“Sooner or later came a reflux of feeling that swallowed up the astonishment, and left me not so much in terror as in hatred and abomination of what I saw. Over every form, and threat, and punishment... brooded a sense of eternity and infinity that drove me into an oppression as of madness.”

Confessions of an English Opium Eater (Excerpt) - Thomas De Quincey

“Lestrade told me that you are one of us, and where the Yard lead, we follow,” Burns said, a pleasant smile on his lips. His eyes were not exuding the same level of bonhomie, but they weren’t exactly probing Sherlock either.

“But,” the detective suggested, as his back stiffened and his fists clenched. Next to him, John moved closer and his posture became that of the officer he’d been not so long ago.

“No, no, there are no buts, except, this is Lord Grey’s family we’re talking about, so we don’t want any more chaos, if you get my drift, dear Lord Holmes.”

At the mention of his title, Sherlock visibly cringed.

“Are you suggesting this chaos is partly my doing, Inspector?”

Burns shook his head violently, as if the suggestion were unspeakably offensive.

“Not for a second, my dear chap! But perhaps, you would be so kind as to convey to the family that we have done all that we could, considering the circumstances...” he replied, vaguely. The implication that the Inspector thought him in the same league as Stephen Tennant and his lot angered Sherlock beyond words; he was about to express the gist of his ire, when John intervened.

“Mr Holmes is here on behalf of Scotland Yard and of the British Government. It is an assignment that he - and myself too, as his partner - take very seriously indeed,” he declared in his most commanding tone.

“I wouldn’t doubt it for a second, sir,” Burns replied, nearly standing to attention.

Sherlock’s lips curved in a half-smile and if he had to be perfectly honest, witnessing John as he
pulled rank thrilled him in a subtly sensual way.

He had been right in telling Lestrade about the opium he’d taken to Wilsford, so that the Yard man had made sure neither Burns nor his men would go near Sherlock or John’s property. Not that they would have done so intentionally, but mishaps do happen, and this would have been a particularly unfortunate one.

“Did you find Sassoon then?”

John was watching Sherlock as he packed his bags, marvelling at the elegant dexterity of the young man’s fingers as they folded items and stored them in their allotted compartments. He was entirely besotted, he realised, if he could be captivated by such a mundane activity. Well, it was too late to alter the course of things; not that he wanted to, anyway.

What he wanted at present was to hurry back to Baker Street and have Sherlock all to himself for a while.

“Yes, he was at the Hunt sisters’ cottage. I felt sorry for him.”

“You may have a point,” John concurred.

“Oh, now I do have a point, don’t I?” Sherlock teased, and John smiled brightly; they didn’t kiss, but it was a very close thing.

“I did tell you that I talked to Dester or rather that he deigned to converse with me. According to him, Tennant dosed himself with opium so that he could attract Sassoon’s attention.”

“But that’s absurd,” the detective replied, placing his folded socks neatly into a narrow leather box, arranging them according to their colours.

John’s attention was so caught by this, he didn’t realise his partner was waiting for his reply

“Yes, of course,” he said, shaking his head, a little befuddled. “Sassoon doesn’t need any additional incentive, as far as I can tell.”

“Although,” and the detective stared at his nightshirt, which conjured some very interesting memories. John joined him in contemplation, the almost exact same images passing behind his eyes.

“Although,” Sherlock repeated, and if John noticed the blush on the boy’s cheeks he didn’t remark on it. “I can see why Dester may have thought that. Tennant is exceedingly vain and he’d do almost anything to be the belle of the ball, but he wouldn’t endanger his own life, and most of all, he wouldn’t risk his looks.”

“All the same, I wouldn’t mind taking a gander at that journal.”

“We could ask him officially, but I’m sure he didn’t take the poison willingly.”

“Well, you are the brains, my dear; I’m only the brawn.”

Sherlock’s gaze travelled down John’s body, like a deliberate caress.

“Yes, so it would appear.”

“If you intend to leave these lodgings relatively unscathed, you should stop being such a tease.”
The detective prepared a scathing retort only to find John laughing at him, an occurrence that always triggered his own mirth.

After a long while spent in that pleasant way, they were distracted by a noise coming from outside. The room gave onto the back garden and thus was usually quiet at that time of year, as no one ventured in that direction during the cold months of winter, and certainly never during the day. At night, it might act as backdrop to one of Stephen’s elaborate charades, but the light of day put paid to that.

“I’m taking him with me,” Sassoon was shouting at someone who was hidden from their view.

He was carrying Stephen in his arms: the boy was enveloped in a white fur blanket, his arm artfully curled around his lover’s shoulders, his face buried in the man’s neck. His feet were encased in a pair of white velvet slippers and, altogether, he seemed to have taken great care about his appearance. The tableau was indeed a fetching one: the tall, strong captain and the frail, defenceless waif lying in his muscled arms.

“Apparently, Sassoon has a theatrical streak too,” John observed.

“So it seems.”

As the poet strode towards the woods with his lover in tow, David shouted back at him.

“I will have you arrested for abduction if you don’t let my brother go this very instant.”

“Do what you like, Tennant. I won’t let Stephen be hurt again while you play Lord of the manor. I’m taking him to the Hunts; he’ll be safer there. Nanny will bring his things and will stay with us, too.”

Tennant started after them, but his wife soon appeared and whispered something in his ear; he nodded and went back into the house with her.

“If that’s what Stephen wanted, he got it in spades,” John commented.

“I almost expected him to tilt his face up towards us and wink.”

“Are you sure he will be safe over there?”

“Yes, of course. Even if Sassoon were the murderer, he wouldn’t dare try that stunt while Stephen was alone with him. But I don’t think he’d hurt him that way. I could perhaps imagine a scuffle between them at the height of their passion, but not a cold-blooded act such as poisoning. Besides, I still believe what I told you: whoever did this wanted to cause me…us trouble.”

John sighed and took his friend’s hand in both of his.

“Let’s go back to London. There are things that need saying, but I don’t want to do it here. I want us to be home.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said, moving closer to John so that he could lean on him a little. “Let’s go home.”

Once they arrived at 221b Baker Street, things did not go the way John had anticipated or hoped. Along the way, Sherlock had grown increasingly distant and taciturn.

Mrs Hudson greeted them with her customary blend of affection and exasperation, and when they
walked into the flat they found a cheerful fire crackling in the sitting room and a pot of hot tea on the sideboard. Their landlady had also provided a ginger cake and everything seemed to be set for a long, intimate conversation.

“I will be in my study,” the detective announced as soon as he removed his cape and scarf, thus thwarting his friend’s plans.

“Won’t you have a cuppa? It’ll warm you up,” the doctor said, doing his utmost to sound cheerful.

“I need to think,” Sherlock replied, grimly.

A sliver of fear trickled down John’s spine.

“You won’t…” he started.

“No, John, I will not use, if that’s what you’re so concerned about,” was the huffy reply.

“Have something to eat, at least,” John insisted, but he was already talking to an empty room. A door slammed soon after and the flat was plunged into silence.

After a few minutes of frustration and ire, he made plans for the rest of his day, which consisted mainly in consuming tea and cake and writing up the notes of the case from the very start.

He retired to the wash-room and - after a hot bath - the situation didn’t seem as bleak.

There would be times such as this, he mused, when Sherlock needed to be alone; he’d been subjected to the company of people for the last couple of days and it was only natural that his need for silence would emerge at some point. Besides, Sherlock had been alone for a long time and he would have to come to terms with having a companion, even though it was he who had insisted John shared his lodgings.

The blond man sighed, pondering the enormous challenge that awaited him; he then rolled his shoulders and stared at himself in the mirror and nearly fell over right there in the wash-room: since Stephen’s poisoning, he had not limped once.

The past, there was something hidden there, that much was certain.

Shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows, hair like a bird’s nest, Sherlock was frenetically pacing his studio. He’d managed to purloin a small phial of the regurgitated contents of Tennant’s stomach and had examined them in his makeshift laboratory: it was definitely opium. Not that he’d ever doubted it, but it was more satisfactory to have it proven beyond any doubt.

Someone wanted to be rid of Stephen, but it seemed that it wasn’t as important as hurting other people in the process. And Sherlock was one of them. But why? What could possibly connect him to Stephen Tennant and Duncan Forbes? Before the murder, he’d only known them vaguely, not even enough to call them acquaintances.

He’d read about Forbes and knew a number of things about him. Perhaps he should have talked to his family, but the painter was the kind of man who would not show his real self to those related to him only by a bond of blood.

Dester had been right when he hinted that Sherlock shared some common traits with Forbes: his parents knew nothing of him, and Mycroft was au fait with his younger brother’s life only because
he was a born spy.

No, the victim’s parents wouldn’t know anything worth listening to, but perhaps his valet would.

“John,” he called out, opening the door onto a darkened corridor. “May I have some of that tea and cake?”

No answer came, and when he glanced at his fob watch, he saw that it was past dinner time.

The sitting room was only lit by the dregs of the fire’s embers and the evening paper carried the news of Forbes’ funeral, which would take place that Saturday at - of all places - Westminster Abbey.

Sassoon’s invitation to the Morrell’s musical soiree seemed to have occurred in another lifetime and he wondered whether it would still go ahead, despite the events that had taken place in the interim.

Considering Lady Ottoline’s pacifist stance during the conflict and the risks she and her lover had taken at the time, the detective doubted she would be a strict upholder of convention and decorum.

He put the paper down and searched the flat for John, but he was gone. There were traces of his past occupations - writing, washing and eating – but no indication as to his present whereabouts.

A sharp needle of anxiety pierced right through him, but he stifled it. In his bedroom, he wilfully ignored the drawer were he had stored away the damned bottle.

He put on a dark grey suit and a pair of black and white brogues and plucked his hat from the stand on his way out, almost as an afterthought; he then wrapped his cape around him and walked out into the night to hail his cab for Conway Mews.

Jonas was a blonde boy with a snub nose and narrow blue eyes. Short in stature, but with robust neck, shoulders and legs, he could easily have been a navvy. Sherlock judged that he probably had been and that Forbes had maybe literally picked him off the street. Unlike William, he looked shrewd rather than merely competent.

Even though he affected servility, the detective could perceive the latent effrontery in the calculating glances the boy was darting at him.

“Did your master ever tell you anything about his private life?” Sherlock asked, as they sat in the small sitting room on the floor below the painter’s studio. It was evidently a place that seldom saw any human presence aside from the servants’: the sparse objects had acquired the look of museum pieces; dusted to perfection, but never used. There was no sign of a cigarette case, a book or a vase of fresh flowers. The paintings on the walls were old works by the owner of the house, not in the style that he’d been famous for in his later years.

Jonas hesitated, not out of reticence, but of cunning. Sherlock sighed and decided he had to be blunter.

“Did he have many lovers?”

“If your Lordship wishes to call them that,” the boy replied.

He had a good speaking voice and didn’t sound too rough. Forbes must have schooled him well.

“What would you call them?”
“The master was a painter, a very famous one, so he needed models. And they would not do their job properly if they were all prim and proper, that’s what he used to say.”

“Did you model for him?”

“Me, Sir? Nah, I told him it wasn’t my thing, sort of; too much standing around with nowt to do.”

Sherlock couldn’t resist a pale smile.

“Where did he find them?”

“Oh, everywhere, Sir: it could be a pub, the park or down the street. But it didn’t always work out.”

“How so?”

“Not quite sure, Sir, but when he took me on he’d just been back from France and when his belongings finally got here, he looked at some of his things, drawings he called them, and burnt them in the big fireplace in the large drawing room. Thick paper they were, and took a long time to burn.”

“Did you see what was in them?”

Sherlock asked, trying to mask his excitement.

“Just a peek, wouldn’t call it a look.”

That was evidently one of his favourite turns of phrase.

“And what is it that you saw?”

“It were boys, or maybe the same, just ordinary gentlemen, but young, same as me, twenty or younger. Naked like the day they were born. There were no colours, just black on white.”

“Would you recognise the boy if you saw him?”

Jonas shook his head, but his reply was more satisfactory.

“Perhaps I would, but one thing is sure: it’s none of his usual friends, Sir.”

And you would know, Sherlock thought.

“Are there any journals or writings that you think could help the Police in their investigations?” he asked, as a last resort.

“He usually burnt them all; he learnt to do that in the War, he said. Then he added something in a foreign language that I did not understand.”

“Verba volant, scripta manent,” Sherlock quoted, “Spoken words fly away, written words remain.”

“Yes, that must have been it,” Jonas replied, nodding with satisfaction.

“If you think of anything, and I mean anything, please let me know. Here’s my card.”

“Well, I never… thank you, Sir.”

The boy grabbed the little square of paper and licked his lips, pensively.
It was almost ten o’clock when Sherlock returned to Baker Street, but John was not there.

A sense of fatality engulfed him, a reminder of the solitude he’d once enjoyed and that now greeted him like a death sentence.

He thought of playing the violin, but his hands had started shaking and the cure was the one he’d promised John he would shun.

But where was he? Gone, maybe; couldn’t cope with the detective’s moods, couldn’t stand being rejected. And who would blame him?

He lay down on his bed with every intention of cataloguing the facts of the case, but exhaustion vanquished him and he fell inside the inky well of sleep.

The dream commenced with a music which he often heard in dreams - a music of preparation and of awakening suspense, and which, like that, gave the feeling of a vast march, of infinite cavalcades filing off, and the tread of innumerable armies. The morning was come of a mighty day - a day of crisis, suffering some mysterious eclipse and labouring in some dread extremity. Somewhere, he knew not where - somehow, he knew not how - by some beings, he knew not whom - a battle, a strife, an agony, was conducting, was evolving like a great drama. As is usual in dreams, he had the power, and yet had not the power, to decide it. Then like a chorus the passion deepened. Some greater interest was at stake, some mightier cause than ever yet the sword had pleaded, or trumpet had proclaimed. Then came sudden alarms, trepidations of innumerable hours and heart-breaking partings, and then the everlasting farewell. With a sigh, such as Hell sighed when the name of death was uttered, the sound was reverberated - everlasting farewell! And again and yet again reverberated - everlasting farewell!

Sherlock awoke in a cold sweat, screaming. He said to himself I will sleep no more. The best way to calm his perturbed soul, he decided, would be a hot bath.

He’d been soaking in it for the best part of an hour, when a door banged in the distance, and familiar footsteps approached.

Without wasting a solitary instant, he got up and, dripping wet from neck to foot, he strode in the direction of the sitting room.

The blond man was kneeling by the fire, trying to revive it. The lights were out, as Sherlock had not cared about them and John had just arrived.

“I thought you were sleeping; I didn’t want to disturb you and…oh,” John gasped, at the sight of a naked and soaked Sherlock.

“Christ, dearest, what if Mrs Hudson had been here instead of me? Or a stranger?” he chided, running to the wash-room.

“You have been out a long while,” Sherlock said, accusingly, as his friend enveloped him in the largest towel he could find.

“You were busy and I didn’t want to disturb you. I jotted down a few facts and I found that I needed to consult some books for reference, so I walked to the London Library.”

“I have all you may ever need in my study,” the younger man retorted, in as haughty a way as he
could muster as John rubbed him down forcefully.

“As I said, I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“It’s late for the library. It must have closed hours ago.”

“I went for a walk. I needed to test something.”

Sherlock turned so that he could look John in the eye.

“What was it that you needed… oh, yes, the limp,” he deduced, looking very smug.

“Precisely, dearest,” the older man replied, kissing the hollow of Sherlock’s throat.

“I’m a miracle worker.”

“In more ways than one,” John agreed, licking the point he’d just kissed.

“Should I apologize for leaving you alone this afternoon?”

“You shouldn’t apologize, but you could, you know, make amends.”

A bite followed, hard enough to bruise the skin at the base of the detective’s neck.

“Don’t they amount to the same thing?” the younger man muttered, suddenly unable to argue.

“Let me show you the difference.”

For a moment, Sherlock feared – or hoped – that he would be carried like Stephen had been earlier that day, but John took him by the hand and led him to his bedroom.

He’d have wanted to examine carefully and store away the information about his lover’s belongings, but once there, the only thing he could see was the man in front of him: John unbuttoning his shirt, removing his shoes and socks, undoing his trousers, shedding his undergarments. Before he could draw a proper breath, he was lying on his back on John’s bed and his friend was on top of him, stroking his hair and placing delicate kisses all over his face.

“I would like us to take it slow this time, if you are amenable.”

Sherlock nodded, even thought he suspected that slow might finish him off.

“Kiss me,” John demanded. Because that’s what it was: a command.

“Mm,” was all the detective could utter; then came the languorous, sensual mating of their tongues. There was a firm hand around his neck and another fisting his curls, while a demanding mouth was stealing every breath from his lungs. With every moan, the embrace intensified, until their bodies were joined together, their arousals trapped between their stomachs.

“I would like to try something,” John panted, smearing his lips against Sherlock’s. The younger man was trembling already, his blood flooded with a desire so intense he was drowning in it.

“Yes, yes, please,” he replied, but the words did not mean anything; only hands, and mouths and their heated flesh held the power that he craved: that of release.

“I never done it before, not with anyone,” John whispered.
Wrong again, Sherlock thought, vaguely, from inside the fog of bliss that enveloped him.

Those words meant something; they meant everything.
Chapter Summary

Sometimes, a kiss is more than just a kiss...

Sexy times, so mind the tags from the start.

Thanks for reading and commenting!!!

"The Soul selects her own Society

Then shuts the Door"

The Soul selects her own Society (excerpt) Emily Dickinson

John had not lied when he’d said he wanted to take it slow.

They had been kissing for an indefinite amount of time and Sherlock’s body was drenched in sweat and lust.

His lips were throbbing and he couldn’t breathe without emitting strangled whimpers, sobs and cries.

The notion of time had dissolved and, even though Sherlock remembered John talking about something he wanted to try, he could not summon the strength to find out what he’d meant.

At one point, his lover mapped the contours of the detective’s face with his fingers, lingering along the line of the nose, the angle of the cheekbone, the dip of the cupid’s bow. Slack-jawed, with half-lidded eyes, Sherlock swallowed his emotions, trying to keep them at bay.

“You are incredibly beautiful,” John whispered. His gaze caressed Sherlock’s face with a tenderness that was made of flames.

“Not really beautiful,” he replied, tersely. He couldn’t accept the untruth, especially not when he was at his most vulnerable.

John’s eyes widened, in surprise.

“You must know how enchanting you are,” he said, pressing his thumb on the hollow of Sherlock’s cheek.

The detective sniffed and his mouth compressed into a moue.

“I’ve always been called odd, as far as I can remember. Even Peter – well, I suppose what he did was partly because he’d been teased about me,” he explained, but John stopped him, mouth against mouth.

“An act of violence has no justification but in the nature of the aggressor. Please never doubt that.”
“You find me agreeable.”

John laughed. While naked, entwined, en route to carnal intercourse, his lover was chuckling.

“Don’t be cross, dearest. Agreeable is a steak or a pint of bitter; you are like an angel fallen from the sky, one of Michelangelo’s perfect creations.”

To prove his point, John shifted a little to the side to contemplate his lover as he lay, sprawled on the bed, creamy skinned and lithe.

“Just perfect,” he whispered, and pressed his face to the boy’s abdomen, licking the inside of his navel.

Their conversation had dimmed their excitement, but that tiny gesture reignited the spark.

Inch by inch, John moved down until he was breathing musk and tasting salt.

“Let me, please,” the blond men panted, as he licked the base of his lover’s erection, opening him up with his warm, strong hands.

“Yes, yes,” Sherlock whimpered, begging for the heat of that mouth, and feeling it move away from its obvious goal.

“May I, please?” the older man asked, his mouth already dripping saliva on Sherlock’s testicles and perineum, wanting them so intensely he didn’t wait for a reply. He suckled the wrinkled sac until it was stretched and shiny and knuckled the sensitive point behind it, unleashing a throb so potent that the reverberations echoed inside the Sherlock’s bowels. He’d never experienced the like of that sensation: it wasn’t as immediate as that of fellatio, but more lasting and troubling.

When John sucked hard on the same spot, the throb became a jolt, and the waves of orgasm surged from the boy’s belly and irradiated his entire being.

Unawares, he had placed one hand on his lover’s head and was holding him there, sobbing at the madness of bliss that was fogging his senses.

“Can I kiss you here?” John was saying, in a broken voice.

At first, Sherlock did not understand the import of the question, until he felt a slick finger circle his most private orifice. His face flushed an even deeper red and his penis bobbed, painting his belly with copious moisture.

“I didn’t know,” he started, but the structure of the sentence was too impervious, so he nodded minutely. That was the last shred of coherence he would be able to summon until the thunderclap of release finally hit him.

John had never kissed anyone that way; not because he’d not wanted to, but rather for lack of a suitable lover. Penetration was not as intimate, not in his book. To him, a kiss on the mouth was an act of love, while intercourse could be the mere scratch of an itch. This other kiss, was the most sublime act of passion and faith, and no man or woman had ever meant that much to John.

It wasn’t a simple question of virginity; that would have been vulgar and offensive, like saying that Sherlock’s worth would dwindle once the boy aged in years and experience. That was the opposite of what he intended: he wanted to spend the rest of his life with that dazzling man, watching him
mature and age, holding him in his arms every night, laughing at his impromptu verbal mishaps and, above all, adoring every single part of his body, mind and soul.

He would be a liar if he didn’t admit that he cherished Sherlock’s innocence and his youth, but they were all the more precious to him because of their fleeting nature.

If the touch of him was intoxicating, his taste and scent were like a potent mixture that drove John insane with the desire to mark and own.

The fist lick was heaven: the tight ring quivered at the touch and Sherlock shook in a full-body shiver.

“More… please,” the younger man begged, and that cut his lover to the core.

No more hesitations, no more delays.

“Yes, my love,” he said, and Sherlock rolled his hips, offering all of himself to John, who had no choice but take him.

He lapped at the salty skin with the flat of his tongue, until it was drenched and softened, then he went at it like a man possessed: sucking and circling and stabbing; devouring the loosened muscle until he could finally dive in and take ownership of the innermost heart of his beloved.

Above him, Sherlock was lost and found, hungry and sated, writhing and floating; he was like an animal being feasted on, but also like a pure spiritual creature, whose sensuality was being distilled into incandescent love.

All around him was light and fire, but that state of suspended bliss was suddenly torn in half by a molten blade, as John closed a wet fist around his lover’s cock and stroked it from base to tip, hard and insistent. Sherlock screamed and screamed, and spurted thick, abundant ropes that reached up to his throat.

“I wanted to reciprocate,” Sherlock complained, half-heartedly, while John, red-faced and still shuddering with the aftershocks, lapped at his chest, cleaning him up with loving care.

“You did, dearest,” the doctor replied, placing a kiss on the skittering pulse of his lover’s delectable neck.

“Hold me.”

John complied, filled with tenderness for the exquisite creature that was clinging to him.

“Tighter,” the younger man urged, burying his fevered face in John’s neck, his slim body racked by tremors; his skin needed the comfort of pressure; a firmer hand to hold on to, come what may.

“My darling, my lovely, lovely boy,” John chanted, squeezing his lover’s plush buttocks so hard he left red imprints on the baby-soft skin.

“You said we would talk here at home.”

A sigh, a kiss on messy curls, and John was ready for his speech.

“Gabriel and I met because he got ill and needed a doctor. He wasn’t from London, and he’d only come to visit some friends. They’d partied hard and he’d been drinking too much, a problem which
was not infrequent, as I was to find out later. He was a painter, talented but easily distracted by other
pursuits, such as playing the piano, and generally enjoying life as a wealthy, attractive, young men.
Our relationship, for want of a better word, started as an attraction of opposites. Then War came and
we both enlisted. I was shot, he suffered shell-shock. After Craiglockhart, he was sent back and
that’s when he died. I didn’t get to see him, not after France.”

Sherlock’s heart was in his mouth, a pulsating presence that left a bitter, metallic taste on his tongue.

“A young addict who loved music and was a patient of yours,” he summarised.

“These are the only things you have in common, my dear; nothing more. He was infatuated with the
world of nobility and engrossed in his pursuit of beauty and pleasure. The War took him away from
me, but it would have been the bottle otherwise; or the secrecy; or both.”

Sherlock shifted up to inspect John’s expression.

“He didn’t want anyone to know you were together; was he ashamed of you?”

“Maybe he was, but the reason he gave was that he wanted to keep the two parts of his life separate.”

“It sounds uncannily like what Tennant was imposing on Sassoon.”

“Yeah, it really does. Except I never interfered with Gabriel’s other life.”

The detective pondered about this in silence. Gabriel Atkin the painter; he’d heard about him and
perhaps he’d known Forbes too, although they didn’t live in the same part of Britain. He vaguely
remembered having seen his portrait in the papers, maybe it had been his obituary: a Grecian profile,
wavy hair and limpid eyes; not unlike Stephen Tennant; in fact, quite a similar cast of features.

“You see Gabriel in him,” he murmured.

“Yes, to some extent I do. But the result is the opposite of what you have in mind.”

“If you are trying to imply that I may be jealous,” Sherlock huffed.

“You should stop using ‘imply’ when you mean ‘state’, ” the doctor replied, his mouth curved in a
wicked smile.

The younger man tried to unpick his limbs from his lover’s, but John pulled him down forcefully.
“You’ll stay right here with me, where you belong,” he breathed hotly in Sherlock’s ear.

Resistance would be futile, the detective decided; his body moulded itself to John’s and his traitorous
mouth even uttered a contented sigh.

“You have nothing to be jealous of; Tennant only reminds me how vain my struggles would have
been, trying to pin down a butterfly. You, on the other hand, are the opposite of them: there’s depth
in you, and constancy. I could never love completely if those qualities were absent.”

“Is that why you had not kissed anyone that way before?”

“Yes,” he replied, and because you are the love of my life, was what he did not say, fearing it would
be too much too soon.

“Oh,” was the faint reply, but Sherlock’s mind was speeding from one thought to the next in a
frenetic whirl: love, passion, devotion, doubt, fear and desire were the ingredients of that mixture, but
the detective’s tongue was as still as his brain was active.
In the silence, his stomach rumbled and this time John’s mirth was excusable.

“You haven’t eaten a single solitary crumb, have you?”

The doctor didn’t wait for a reply; he quickly put on his dressing gown and strode, limp-free, to the kitchen in search of food.

“I found a plate of sliced turkey in the icebox and a jar of pickles,” he announced, carrying his loot on a tray.

“Will it be enough for you?” Sherlock asked; he was sitting with his back against the headboard, naked to the waist.

“I had a bite to eat at the pub,” John replied, staring at the expanse of creamy skin in front of him. “Here, put this on.” He threw a pyjama jacket on the bed, and the detective smirked, but complied.

“Do you think Gabriel knew Forbes and Whistler?” he asked as he ate, for once not picky like a bird.

“He never mentioned either of them, but he must have, at least by reputation. Don’t forget that Forbes was in France for a long time and that Gabriel was not a Londoner.”

“Did you not live together?”

“Not for longer than a handful of days, when I could take leave from work.”

“But you immediately agreed to share my lodgings.”

“You do think more clearly on a full stomach.”

“Oh, fiddlesticks!” the younger man hissed, but his eyes were alive with laughter.

“I agreed to live here because when someone offers you a lifeline, you grab it with both hands and thank whatever God is up there that granted you that favour,” John said, solemnly.

“You, sir, are a romantic,” the detective quoted.

“Nah, it’s only a matter of logic, as a brilliant madman once told me.”

The kiss that followed was both necessary and unavoidable.

After all that had happened on that endless day, a separation was unthinkable. When John returned from the wash-room, Sherlock was already fast asleep, curled up on his side, soft and quiet like an angel. John sighed, got into bed and fell into the same well of slumber.

The following day Sherlock woke up to an empty bed; the sun was high in the sky and the clock on the mantel told him it was mid-morning already; still, he didn’t like the idea of being alone.

“Oh you are awake, at last. You slept like the dead, my friend.”

The aroma of toasted crumpets and fresh, melted butter filled the room.

“Don’t think this will happen every day,” John cautioned, with a smile that suggested the exact opposite. “Good morning, my dear,” he whispered, as he kissed a sleep-scented cheek.
“Shaving cream, soap and cologne: we are expecting a visit,” the detective said, accusingly.

“I was awakened by the telephone; Lestrade will be here later this morning. From what I could gather, he has nothing much to report and wants to pick your brain.”

Sherlock snorted, as he sipped the strong, sweet tea he favoured.

“There may be something which is not apparent to him, but will be crystal clear to me.”

John laughed.

“Poor man, I wonder how he can stand being treated like this,” he teased.

“He gets his quid-pro-quo, don’t worry.”

“As long as we are understood that I will not ever share you, I won’t mind.”

“Don’t be disgusting,” the young man shuddered. “Besides, you are looking at the wrong brother.”

“What, Mycroft? Well, the world really is full of surprises,” John observed, his face a study in astonishment.

Lestrade arrived at noon and his crumpled appearance spoke of a sleepless night and a frustrating morning.

Mrs Hudson felt sorry for him and, despite the Inspector’s weak protestations, brought him a bowl of hot soup and some cheese biscuits.

“Was it your idea to tell the Press Forbes’ murder was an accidental death? I would have thought your Superintendent was in favour of honesty and cooperation,” Sherlock said.

Lestrade swallowed a spoonful of soup and shook his head.

“The order came from above. Your brother is as silent as the grave, but I bet he knows everything about it.”

“Oh, I’m sure he does. Evidently, they don’t want the victim’s dirty laundry to be washed in public.”

“Understandably so,” John chimed in.

“It only takes one word from any of the gossips of that set: Beaton, Sitwell, Tennant, take your pick; only one word and the game is up.”

“Believe me Sherlock: they won’t dare publish anything unless the powers that be say so. Lord Asquith is not to be trifled with.”

“Alright, dear chap, what have you got for me; any news regarding the poison?”

The Inspector wiped his mouth on Sherlock’s monogrammed serviette and consulted a tattered pocket book.

“We found cyanide in all the country estates of the people listed; there are four of them: Garsington, Falloden, Renishaw and Weirlegh, which belong to, in order, Lady Morrell, the Hon. David Tennant, the Sitwells and Siegfried Sassoon. Game-keepers and even gardeners use the stuff and
because of the War and all that, there is no way of telling how much was purchased and how much was used. Crowds of guests come and go, and they are free to roam the premises without a by-your-leave; it’s not like the old times, when you needed a chaperon to visit an estate. And as for Wilsford, I bet you know already: no relevant fingerprints on the bottle of cyanide, the poison given to Tennant was indeed opium in grain form and it was administered in the cocoa, which was prepared in the kitchen and left there to cool, before the valet served it to his master. Anyone could have popped in there and poisoned the concoction, provided they were well acquainted with the boy’s habits. From what I could understand, everyone in the house knew when and how he took his cocoa.”

Sherlock sighed and brushed a nervous hand through his hair. Nothing of what he’d just been told surprised him

“I need you to find documentary evidence of Forbes’ years in France: anything relating to the people he knew, the models he painted, the concerts he went to, the exhibitions he took part in, everything. If there’s a recurring pattern, I will find it. His valet told me that Forbes destroyed some of his works of that period and there seems to be no other record of them, but he may have had a security box in a bank or a safe in one of his family's estates. When is the will going to be read?”

Lestrade kept writing and without looking up, he replied: “After the funeral, first thing on Monday.”

“I don’t want to wait that long. See if you can convince the family solicitor to speak before that. Forbes must have kept a catalogue of all his works, with their year and title.”

“We didn’t find anything in Conway Mews.”

“Of course not,” Sherlock replied, impatiently.

“Anything else?” Lestrade asked, unruffled.

“See if you can find anything in Rex Whistler’s past that may be suspicious: a spurned lover, a tragedy or incident of some sort, anything that could be cause for revenge.”

“Whistler?” the other men asked in unison.

“He was very keen to inform me of Forbes’ activities during the War. He’s also a painter and despite what he says, there may have been antagonism between them. He introduced Tennant to Forbes, which is a little unusual considering both Tennant’s good friend Dester and his lover Sassoon were acquainted with the painter. I seem to remember there were rumours of an affair between Whistler and Sassoon, but they were vehemently denied by both parties; I wonder now…”

“Alright,” Lestrade said, “what about you, what will you do?”

“I will chase the beast into its lair.”
Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John interrogate Rex Whistler

Note: Whistler was the same age as Tennant, but it's my usual timey-wimey stuff :)  
Note 2: what Rex says about Sassoon and Tennant (the garde malade thing) really happened.  
Note 3: The Whistler mural is in the restaurant at the Tate Britain and the Lady Caroline Paget nude is amazing.

Thanks for reading and commenting!

“Our whole life is thus an education of error.”

*On Life (excerpt)* P. B. Shelley

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Rex Whistler’s studio was on the Tottenham Court Road, only a short walk from Conway Mews.

They had telephoned ahead and discovered that the painter had followed their lead and returned to town, allegedly to work on an urgent commission.

Despite being busy, he’d agreed to see John and Sherlock for a brief interview, sounding slightly puzzled at their request.

“Do you really believe he’s behind all this, that he could have poisoned Forbes and Tennant, while trying to implicate you in some way?” John asked, as they walked past Warren Street Station.

He had insisted on walking all the way from Baker Street, curious and a tad fearful with regards to his leg’s sudden recuperation. Sherlock had deduced his timid optimism, and one side of his mouth was permanently curved into a smug grin.

“I believe he knows more than he told us or Lestrade. That affair with Sassoon may not have been merely gossip. And the possessive friendship with Tennant,” he explained.

“Why possessive? Beaton seems the clingy one; they are almost like conjoined twins.”

Sherlock threw him a condescending glance, which spoke of his little faith in his friend’s observational skills.

“Precisely, my dear; Beaton is like a partner in crime to Tennant, the Castor to his Pollux, while Whistler – knowing Sassoon so intimately – must have foretold what would occur when he introduced Tennant to Forbes. And by the way, didn’t you find it odd that, with all his friends coming and going from France, Tennant hadn’t met Forbes until the day Whistler decided to
introduce them?"

John gave up on Castor and his mate, but the other matters piqued his interest.

"You may be on the right track, dear friend, but why not prod him on the two occasions when he
was on the liquor, so to speak?"  

"I wanted him to believe I trusted him implicitly; remember that he was the one who invited us, and
by doing that he certainly hoped to dispel any suspicion we may have had about him. It’s the oldest
trick in the book: show your hand and keep the darkness behind the open door; few will bother to
call your bluff."

"And why would he want to hurt you?"

"This I don’t know yet and can only surmise. I suspect it’s connected to my wartime activities, as
there is little in my present life worthy of envy and animosity. I lead an extremely ascetic life."

It was John’s turn to raise a sarcastic eyebrow.

"My work during the War wreaked havoc on a number of lives,” the detective stated.

"You were just doing the job that you had been assigned."

"I didn’t care about them, John. Caring is not an advantage."

"It certainly wasn’t during the War or places such as Craiglockhart would not have been built,” the
doctor replied, sternly.

Sherlock felt like he’d been slapped.

"I didn’t mean to imply my superiority."

"I know you didn’t,” John said, in a frosty tone.

"What I wanted to say was that I didn’t fully realise… but that now I finally do. And I am so very
sorry."

The blond man’s hand brushed against his, and Sherlock grasped it with intent.

"Yes, I know, my darling,” John sighed, and the tension between them dissipated.

"The past was another life; much of it will never return,” he continued; his words and the voice in
which they’d been uttered saddened his lover, who had not partaken of that past.

"I’m sorry,” Sherlock repeated.

"I was thinking of the world we inhabited, so innocent and carefree. I believe these bright young
things are only vainly seeking to replicate that paradise."

"Et in Arcadia Ego,” murmured the younger man.

"And we may never see the like of it ever again."

There was nothing Sherlock could offer to this: no pithy repartee or learned aphorism could efface
the reality of John’s assertion.
Unlike Duncan Forbes, Whistler was not a man of ample means: his studio was not so much bohemian as cramped and smelling of mould.

He was a public school boy, but not steeped in aristocracy and his lodgings reflected the chasm between his way of life and that of his titled friends.

Typically, the walls were papered with paintings and drawing, but what caught John’s attention was the nude of an ivory-skinned beauty with auburn hair and a cherry red mouth; she was lying on her side on a white bed, propped up by pillows; her eyes were half-closed and her pose was languid, suggesting the exhaustion of lovemaking or the eroticism of watching and being watched.

John was intensely reminded of Sherlock, of the way he had lain on his bed, sprawled out and defenceless. He had to look away or risk embarrassing himself and his lover.

Naturally, the detective misunderstood his friend’s rapture. “A rather unappetising young lady,” he bit out.

“Is she? I was imagining someone else entirely.”

“You must know quite a few ladies intimately and I would advise… oh!”

John smiled at his confusion, delighting in the delicate blush that painted the young man’s angular face.

“That’s Lady Paget. She insisted I painted her in the nude. Alas, I’m no Duncan Forbes, so nothing interesting happened,” Rex Whistler intervened, mournfully.

He was wearing a pair of faded velvet trousers and an old jumper riddled with holes and smeared with paint.

“I apologise about the unseemly state of my attire, but I’m doing some preparatory work for a mural commissioned to me by the Tate,” he explained, with a hint of pride on his surly-looking face. He had the misfortune of being one of those creatures whose character was imprinted in their countenance: his features usually radiated an array of feelings that ranged from displeased to morose and every other melancholic state in between.

“It is a great honour, I am sure,” Sherlock said and John nodded in assent.

“It will get me more work, I hope. I’m tired of society ladies and of doing illustrations.”

“Forbes was really successful; did it bother you?” the detective said brusquely, wanting to shake the man’s composure.

Whistler shook his head disconsolately, but when he replied his tone was amiable.

“I told you already: we were friends and as you can see my style owes no debts to fauvism. Not that I dislike it, but I can’t feel it in my guts. It strikes me as contrived and sensational. It wants to attract attention and says: look at me!”

“While yours is the work of a modern classicist: nostalgic but coruscating. I imagine you are partial to Poussin.”

“That I am, Mr Holmes,” Whistler agreed, but he seemed suspicious rather than flattered at
Sherlock’s understanding of his art.

“Your works is rather varied; you could be accused of frivolity, especially considering the crowd you frequent.”

“And Duncan could not have been accused of that,” the painted said, his eyes devoid of expression.

“The violence of his palette and the firmness of his brush stroke were exceedingly manly.”

“And mine are baroque and effete,” Whistler seemed to be talking to himself. “I suppose you are right. You situate me in a submissive role and Duncan into a dominant one, artistically speaking.”

“Dear chap, I would never presume to tell you what you are. That would be inexcusably brazen of me.”

“And you are never brazen, are you?”

John had been silent and still up to that moment, but the palpable tension between the two men forced him to intervene.

“We wanted to ask you a few questions, Mr Whistler,” he said, in a tone that brooked no argument.

“Yes, of course. Please come and sit down.”

He showed them into a small, but pretty sitting room with a chintz-covered divan, a battered leather armchair and rows of shelves crammed with books.

Some volumes were amassed on the floor and others lay on pile on the side tables and window sills.

Whistler offered them drinks, which they refused. He lit a cigarette and Sherlock, whose smoking pattern consisted of bouts of intense consumption followed by days of abstinence, hungrily inhaled the tainted air.

“May I offer you one?” the painted said, with a rare smile.

“I only smoke mine. They are Turkish.”

“How very decadent,” the man observed and John cleared his throat, eloquently; Sherlock’s lips quirked in a half-smile.

“You invited me to a party with the express intent of giving me information about Forbes, but what you omitted is what interests me most; such as why you introduced Stephen Tennant to the painter when you knew of the former’s relationship with Sassoon and the latter’s promiscuity with his models?”

Whistler wasn’t rattled by the steel in the detective’s tone; he puffed on his cigarette with nonchalance and a touch of ennui.

“You are making a fair amount of assumptions, dear chap. While it is true that I knew of Duncan, who says I was aware of the other relationship?”

“I doubt it would have escaped your notice. After all you and Tennant were at the Slade together; you should know him well.”

Only the arching of an eyebrow suggested that Whistler had been ‘touché’.
“We were never that intimate, not the way Cecil is with him.”

“But you must have realised that Sassoon was serious about him. After all, you had an affair with him.”

The painter was finally roused from his inertia; he glared at the Sherlock and for a tense moment they faced each other like enemies. John clenched his fist, ready for any eventuality. In the end there was no need as Whistler let out a resigned sigh and stubbed out his cigarette.

“It wasn’t truly an affair; nothing untoward happened, much to my eternal dismay. It was like Romeo and Juliet, only without the sublime verse. No sooner had my Romeo seen his fair lady that humble Rosaline was forgotten. I saw it in Sieg’s eyes the moment they met; he didn’t have to say a word.”

“And you behaved honourably, naturally,” Sherlock said, without sarcasm.

“Not because of the British spirit and all that rot; only because I don’t believe in wasting one’s time in fighting against the inevitable. I don’t have a quixotic bone in me, I’m afraid. As an artist, I’m a real disappointment in that I am not of the romantic, obsessive credo.”

“Are we to believe that you did not try your best to contrive a situation whereby Tennant would cheat on Sassoon with a notorious libertine?”

Whistler took another cigarette from his case and lit it on the third attempt.

“You may believe what you prefer, but I did my best to warn Stephen. He just did not listen.”

Sherlock clicked his tongue in disapproval.

“This is child’s play, Mr Whistler: tell a famously vain man that he should beware a Don Juan and the result is as predictable as rain after thunder.”

The painter shook his head, as if he’d been displeased by the antics of a dear friend.

“You ascribe to my humble nature a twisted devilry it does not possess. I sincerely believed Stephen wouldn’t be Duncan’s type.”

“What type would that be, pray tell.”

“I don’t like to divulge any private detail, but let’s just say that with Stephen it’s a matter of smoke rather than fire, while Duncan used to go straight to the point.”

John perceived Sherlock’s uneasiness and wished he could touch his friend in some way without being obvious.

“As you said, better leave private matters alone. It’s never advisable nor is it desirable to comment on what doesn’t concern us directly,” he said, instead.

“But you are commenting on my private matters, aren’t you? Accusing me, in fact, of acting like a spurned lover, plotting a dastardly revenge against the object of my devotion,” he replied; his face was gloomy as usual, but his voice dripped with irony.

“Fair’s fair,” the detective agreed. “But you could at least explain why Tennant wasn’t already acquainted with the painter: he was famous and you all knew him; even Beaton met him in France.”

“Oh, of course Steenie knew of him, but he’d never met him personally; as you correctly suggested, we went to the Slade together, but he’s younger and wealthier; he never had to scrape a living like
your humble servant. Besides, you must have noticed,” he added, looking at John, “that he’s suffering from chest complaints. He always had weak lungs and consequently had to spend almost all his time in the country, resting.”

“Is it tuberculosis?” John enquired.

“I’m not sure, but I bet you that if it were the case, Sieg would act as garde malade and forbid all visitors; aside from himself, naturally.”

“That would probably the best course of action,” the doctor observed, staring the painter in the eye until the latter conceded the point.

“What about the time you spent in France, were there any ‘models’ that caught your attention? Anyone you already knew from your time here in Britain?”

“Like I promised, I jotted down a few names.”

He rummaged into his pockets and finally extracted a crumpled piece of paper which he handed to Sherlock.

The detective scanned the list, but his eyes revealed nothing. He passed it to John, who was not as poker-faced.

The name William Atkin was on it.

Gabriel.

He coughed to mask his surprise, but was severely affected and - judging by the darkening of his eyes - Sherlock knew precisely to what extent.

“You wouldn’t perhaps be in possession of any drawing or painting of any of the people on this list?”

“Unfortunately not; Cecil had pictures of some of them, but as I mentioned his studio was destroyed.”

“How horribly serendipitous; coincidences rankle my very being, as I sincerely believe the gods would never be that idle.”

“You wouldn’t call it a coincidence if you knew Cecil like I do; he drinks and smokes in abundance; nothing easier than passing out with a cigarette between your fingers,” Whistler said, indicating the one he was still smoking.

“A simple error then,” Sherlock sneered.

“Our whole life is but an education of error,” the painted quoted then he stood, suddenly, signalling the end of their conversation.

“I apologise fervidly, but duty calls me.”

Sherlock rose to his feet in his customary graceful way, but John’s toe caught on the table’s leg: the pile of books on it collapsed in a cloud of dust.

The detective looked on as his friend and the painter kneeled down to tidy up the mess.

“Interesting booklet you have there, Mr Whistler: On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts by
“Thomas De Quincey,” Sherlock observed, nudging the ancient-looking volume with the tip of his polished brogue. “I didn’t take you for a devotee of crime stories and penny dreadfuls.”

Whistler seemed at a loss for words.

“But I have never seen this before! Please, believe me Mr Holmes when I say that this book doesn’t belong to me. People come and go here: clients, friends and even mere acquaintances. I don’t keep a watchful eye on them since there is nothing valuable they could steal. I never imagined they would bring things secretly.”

“This is the problem with your set,” Sherlock spat out, “you don’t take anything seriously and do not imagine anybody else to be different. If the Yard found cyanide in your studio, you would plead innocence and we wouldn’t be able to prove your guilt because you don’t have the decency to keep your doors locked and a good head on your shoulders!”

John had never seen Sherlock so angry and it aroused in him a similar annoyance.

Whistler stared at them open-mouthed until a scintilla of recollection sparkled in his sullen eyes.

“Of course, now I remember! It was Edith Olivier who left it here. She came one night to discuss an illustration she wanted me to do for her book and she showed me the De Quincey for comparison. She writes the most outrageous stories,” he explained.

“I’m not familiar with modern works of fiction,” the detective said, haughtily.

“That a woman would write such bold stuff... and inspired by real events too,” Whistler exclaimed, grinning a little, mischievously.

“Perhaps I should read them,” Sherlock said, narrowing his eyes.

John knew that look: his friend was testing his prey.

“Yes, I think you should,” was the reply, uttered in a firm, suggestive tone.

The detective smiled brightly and John was sure he’d finally found what he was looking for.
The Defencelessness of Utter Beauty

Chapter Summary

The time has come, my dears.

A very sexual interlude, so mind the tags.

Thanks for reading and commenting; you make it all worthwhile!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“These roses, only half awake, in the
defencelessness of utter beauty.”

A Lost Lady (excerpt) - Willa Cather

After a very late lunch at the French Café – during which John had been thoroughly regaled by Sherlock’s elaborate deductions about the other patrons – they walked towards the Charing Cross Road and spent a pleasant hour inside Foyles bookshop.

Edith Olivier’s novels were their obvious purchase, but the detective also bought the Murder essay by Thomas de Quincey, a volume on modern British painters, a forbidding-looking tome on Catholicism and Guilt and the complete works of Revel Dester.

John’s loot consisted mainly of a stack of notebooks and a slim booklet by W. R. Rivers titled On the Repression of War Experience.

They made sure their acquisitions would be delivered by the shop clerk later that day and made their way back to Baker Street; the day was cold but not unpleasant.

“He’s as slippery as an eel and as opaque,” John remarked, on the subject of Whistler.

“False modesty is always exhausting as one is compelled to go along with the deception.”

“Not a risk you’ll be running any time soon then,” the older man quipped.

“Dear John, I sincerely hope you’re not singing from my brother’s hymn sheet,” the detective huffed.

“That would be truly detestable.”

The doctor sang out a joyous peal of laughter.
“Like you, dear friend, I don’t only see, I also observe. You are not one to disguise your brilliancy in cheap robes. You wear it for the whole world to see.”

Sherlock frowned and for a bit was undecided whether to take offence or join in John’s mirth.

He darted a side look at his companion and quickly realised it was no choice at all.

They mystery that was John Watson would keep him occupied for years to come, he mused, and that was a pleasing, heart-warming prospect.

In the cosy warmth of their home, Sherlock knew his friend’s wound was gonna hurt again: not so much the material as the spiritual one.

They shared a Turkish cigarette by the fire and leafed through the books: John stared at the Introduction of his, but his eyes were unfocussed.

The Modern Painters volume carried a few sketches by William Atkin that had been purchased by the Royal Academy: they were watercolours, delicate as Japanese prints. Perhaps they weren’t as fashionable as the works of Forbes or as varied as those of Whistler, but the detective appreciated the painstaking brushwork and the purity of lines and colours.

He raised his gaze to find John looking at him with inscrutable eyes. He felt obliged to explain, as if that list had been his own doing.

“He may have been only a passing acquaintance. After all he wasn’t a model, but a fellow artist,” he said, hastily.

“He did model from time to time; he said he needed the money, but I knew that it was more to do with vanity and, well, that was his weakness; that and drink and pleasure in all its guises,” John replied in a toneless voice. He had turned to stare at the crackling fire and Sherlock couldn’t decrypt him, except from the stiff lines of his back and shoulders.

“And you assume that,” the detective murmured, only to be silenced by an icy rebuttal.

“I don’t assume anything, Sherlock; you didn’t know him, but I did. He was subject to flattery in the same degree as Tennant is.”

The frigid tone coupled with the aloof, self-contained demeanour hurt Sherlock more than he thought possible; he felt useless; no, worse than that, he felt as if he’d brought on John the recrudescence of a malaise that had been dormant for a long while.

Like all highly sensitive creatures, he hid behind a haughty scowl.

“My apologies, John: of course you know best, in this instance. I think I will retire to my study,” he drawled.

Before his friend could react, he collected his books and moved to the secluded confines of his buen retiro.

“Damn idiot!”

It took John about a minute to fully comprehend the stupidity of his behaviour.
There was work to be done and Sherlock didn’t need a fractious child as his partner; whatever sordid affair his late lover had entertained with Forbes, what mattered at present was the investigation; the work they were supposed to be doing.

A man had died, another had been close to death and it was entirely possible that more attempts would be made; and he, John Watson, was wasting Sherlock’s time on his silly personal crises.

This time he wouldn’t leave his friend alone though; as his partner, it was his duty to share the burden of research.

Armed with a mug of steaming hot tea, with milk and two sugars, he went to knock at the forbidding door.

“John, if you don’t mind, I’d rather not have company.”

The doctor opened the door, determined to clear the air of their misunderstanding.

His friend was ensconced in a decrepit-looking armchair; the books were strewn all over the capacious desk and two gas lamps were shining their lemon-yellow light around the dust-filled room. A small lab was set up in one corner, which was also the only neat and tidy portion of it. The rest was a jumble of objects of disparate nature accumulating like detritus on every surface of the mismatched, and sparse, items of furniture. Basically, it looked like a junk shop set up by a mad scientist.

John saw in it the imprint of Sherlock’s personality and immediately loved it.

“I have been a blithering fool. Here: take this as a peace offering,” he said, handing Sherlock the hot drink.

“You don’t need to apologise, John. You said it at the beginning of our… of this: we should be ourselves and not waste our time in endless apologies.”

He was right, of course, but his voice sounded mechanical, and he wouldn’t look John in the face.

“I should help you; after all, this is my assignment too. If you don’t want me here, let me at least have some of the books.”

The younger man nodded but did not say anything nor did he offer any help in dividing the pile of volumes.

“You still love him,” he murmured, as John was about to leave with his haul.

“I wouldn’t say that,” his friend replied, and he immediately berated his lack of eloquence. Sherlock’s spine stiffened and a cold determination emanated from him, as if he’d just wrapped himself in a cloak of icicles.

“I am not implying, John, I am stating. You are still in love with him and I am only a plaster that you’re sticking on a bleeding gash. It won’t work; I will not countenance it. I’d rather go back to my nightmares and my bottle than stoop as low as to become the echo of a dead man,” the younger man said; his voice was devoid of emotion and his face as white and expressionless as a mask of the Noh theatre.

A fault line had cracked inside of John ever since Gabriel had died and the mention of him had deepened that fissure, but Sherlock’s resentful words brought the walls down with a mighty crash: enough was enough.
“You are nobody’s echo, you could never be…. don’t you understand? When I was in France, I saw things, terrifying, soul-shattering things and I thought of him and I knew he wouldn’t survive the horror of it. And you know what my greatest fear was? That he would return as an invalid, his beauty forever dimmed. He would not have stood for it; and to my eternal regret, I was ashamed of him for being so egotistic and superficial. I feel guilty yet I cannot shake off that old annoyance at his profligacy and his lack of common sense. With my inflexible nature, I became his judge and jury and I will never forgive myself.”

His voice cracked at the end and he felt the sting of tears in his eyes; stupid things emotions, surging and retreating like a tide, but unlike it so unpredictable in their ebb and flow.

A timid hand caressed his shoulder and with inexpressible wonder, he found himself in Sherlock’s arms, being comforted like a snivelling child.

“I would never presume to judge you, my dear, not ever,” Sherlock was whispering, his hot breath tickling John’s hair. “I know we said we shouldn’t apologise, but sometimes I forget that I’m no longer alone.”

“You are not a shadow, my darling, you have brought life to a world that I thought dead and buried. In fact, a world that I did not even know existed; I could never have envisaged such wild splendour.”

He looked up and found Sherlock staring, dazedly, in the distance. Convinced he’d said too much, he was about to suggest they returned to their tasks, when the younger man spoke.

“I want to belong to you completely.”

John stood stock-still, afraid that even a simple breath could break the spell.

The younger man’s chest was heaving and he was clutching a fistful of John’s shirt at the man’s waist.

“I had this unsettling dream recently. It shook me deeply and when I woke up you were awake too, in our sitting room.”

“Yes, my darling.”

“I want to tell you about it, but not here; in my bed, if you are amenable.”

There was no other reply but to hold Sherlock close and accompany him to his room as quickly as possible.

They undressed slowly in the hazy light of the fire; the air was suffused with sensuality and thick like treacle.

“There’s a jar of oil in my drawer,” was the only hint Sherlock gave of what he wanted to happen, but John was still unsure as to the configuration his lover would favour, although his senses and past experiences told him it would be one of submission. In silence, he did as directed and set the flagon on the bedside table.

Sherlock sat close to him on the bed and, wordlessly, they embraced and - thus conjoined - lay back down, mouth to mouth.

The kiss started timidly and grew in strength and fervour, and it was not long before they were both
steeped in mindless lust. John’s hands were restless, wanting to encompass every patch of skin at once. He steered clear of the most sensitive points, as he perceived that Sherlock wanted to talk and that he was seeking the courage to avow a secret he’d never shared before

“You know the drug has always induced dreams of the vivid sort and that I feared and relished them equally. That night you heard me scream, I had been awakened from such a dream.”

The detective buried his flushed face in his lover’s neck and in there he poured his confession of the two men caught by the young boy – Sherlock himself – in the act of bestial, heavenly copulation.

“It terrified me until I saw the smaller man pushing back and wanting it so much; wanting to be taken like that. I ran and ran until I reached a safe haven and I felt sure it was you. But I wanted the other thing, too. And I finally see that I can be allowed to have both.”

John couldn’t tell whether he was losing his mind to desire or tenderness, but he found it impossible to unravel the mystery.

“You can have me any way you like,” he croaked, desperate to get back to kissing his lover’s mouth. Sherlock was as passionate and needy and for a long moment John feared his hunger would overcome his restraints and exhaust itself in devouring that sweet, pliant mouth.

“Please, John, please,” Sherlock murmured, chasing him as he drew back to regain his breath and some of his composure.

“Do you want to?” he asked, glancing at the oil jar.

“Would you kiss me again?” the boy asked, with a wicked smile that meant he was referring to their previous encounter.

“If I did, that would be the end of it, my dear. I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, my dear. From what I can tell, I wouldn’t be able to resist either. How do we?” he enquired, blushing a little.

“I will take care of you, dearest. But first tell me whether you want to replicate your dream to the letter.”

Sherlock’s eyes widened and darkened and he was reduced to silence again; he nodded swiftly and bit his already swollen lips.

John helped him into a comfortable position, putting a pillow under his knees and gentling his tense back until he relaxed.

The distractions afforded by the boy’s agitated state and the various practicalities had kept John into a state of relative ease, but he was now faced, quite literally, with the sight of rounded, creamy buttocks and heavy, musky maleness waiting to be reclaimed for the very first time.

He took a deep breath and placed a kiss on a quivering thigh; since one wasn’t enough, he struck another one on the cleft, close to his prize.

Sherlock trembled and a thought finally breached his clouded mind.

“I have not… I should perhaps go to the wash-room,” he mumbled.

In reply, John parted him open and licked his skin, from sac to loins.
The younger man buried his moan into the mattress and no other coherent sentence was spoken for a while.

During his frequent outings at the London Bridge club, Sherlock had witnessed men committing the lewdest acts; before John, he’d rarely felt a corresponding desire, at least not in his wakeful state; but being what he was, he’d observed, catalogued and stored away in his mind’s repository the actions and reactions that composed the panoply of carnal intercourse.

Obviously, he knew that reality would differ in many subtle ways, but he’d not expected the quality of the pain he’d feel when John’s fingers entered him: at first, it was a searing, dull ache and then came the instinct of rejection; he wanted to be free of them and writhed until he was rid of the intrusion. When it became clear that his lover would not replicate the action, only then the pain turned into a gnawing imperative to be filled again.

Luckily, his lover understood the language of Sherlock’s body and his ministrations resumed, firmer than they had been.

Time seemed to stop and stare at them, at their frantic connection and desperate moans.

When Sherlock was finally ready, he wasn’t scared anymore; he wanted it more than he’d ever wanted anything; like air or a locked room crime on a secluded island.

“Please, please,” he begged and sobbed, until John – beloved, infinitely dear John – gave him what he was demanding.

Inch by inch, he was conquered: his lover was inside him and around him, his hands and mouth possessing every cell of his being, until there was nothing but fire.

John had imagined this more frequently that he cared to admit, but it had never been this soul-consuming ecstasy, never this never-ending bliss; with every thrust, he fell farther into the depths of his darling boy; he could feel his heartbeat and the reverberations of his whimpers and cries.

Once the walls had crashed down, there was no timidity or reserve in Sherlock’s manner: he was perfect in every way; unguarded, generous and famished.

He was the personification of contradictions: the innocence of the sinner, the strength of the vulnerable.

And so very beautiful, that even at the height of lust, John could still cry out of tenderness for the boy’s unsullied looks: the defencelessness of utter beauty.

Sherlock was getting close, he could feel it and there was something that he wanted, that his body needed, but couldn’t articulate.

“Let me touch you,” John panted, and curled his fist around his lover’s neglected erection.

Sherlock’s muscles spasmed and he rose up to his knees, collapsing back into John’s arms, effectively impaling himself on his lover’s cock.
“Yes, my sweet darling, oh again,” the older man pleaded.

“Use your hands on me, like the first time,” he whispered.

Thus, Sherlock was forced up and down by strong, firm hands, until he found his pace and those hands, merciless and wicked, went to work on his nipples and cock; when he tried to induce more pain by moving too rashly, John slapped his buttock with intent.

The intense, unpredictable jolt of pleasure that followed, coupled with a needling sensation deep inside of him, made him cry out. His sight went black and his orgasm hit him like a hammer blow.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the hot ribbons pulse out of him like an overflowing river.

“My darling, you’re mine, mine,” John was chanting, as he wrapped his arms around his pliant, sated lover.

“Yes, yes, yes,” was the breathless reply.

Sherlock was revelling in the feeling of being owned by the man he loved, and he wouldn't let him go quite yet, even though he’d been warned about the discomfort that would follow.

After a while, nature had its way, and after John had cleaned him up and checked him for eventual tears, he was again a solitary body, but not quite empty, as he still felt that presence inside him, sensual and loving at the same time.

“You are a marvel, my darling; an enchanting, fascinating marvel” John said, and his eyes were filled with love.

“I love you,” Sherlock replied, because it couldn’t wait any longer.

“Yes, love,” his dearest friend said, and held him tight as there were no more words left to utter.

Chapter End Notes

Next: two deeply infatuated men delve into the heart of the mystery.
The plot thickens (doesn’t it always?)

Note 1: Madeleine de Scudery created the first Roman à clef, French for novel with a key, a novel about real life but disguised as fiction.
Note 2: Edith Olivier did write The Love-Child, but I have tampered with the plot
Note 3: Croyant and Pratiquant = Believer and Practising
Note 4: Edith and Rex enjoyed a relationship of intense (platonic) love despite their age difference (she was 30 years older than him). When he died, she said she’d follow him soon and she sort of did.
Note 5: Bertrand is the philosopher Bertrand Russell who really did go to prison for protesting against WWI (he was also Lady Morrell's lover)

“She is my instrument.
The music within her is mine.
And now it is being called out, articulated:
And she and I hear it together.”

The Love-Child (excerpt) – Edith Olivier

Sherlock woke up at dawn, aching deliciously.

Next to him, John was fast asleep, in his usual quiet manner.

It was typical of their topsy-turvy relationship that he, who had not been in the trenches, would be the one with nightmares while his lover, who had every reason to be thus perturbed, was as silent as the grave.

In these tranquil moments, he could closely observe the man he loved: the scarred shoulder, the fan of lines around his eyes, the ropes of muscle in his upper chest and all the other details he’d never had the time to absorb and catalogue.

After a while spent in doing just that, Sherlock felt the need to get closer and touch, and because he didn’t want to wake his friend, he resolved to leave the bed and occupy the following hours with work.

He prepared a pot of strong tea and settled down in his study, eager to delve into the pile of volumes
in his quest for the truth.

During his stint as an Intelligence recruit, he’d developed a technique which allowed him to read a book from cover to cover in a tenth of the average time; if repetitive phrasing had been used, his speed would increase. In this instance, he did something different: after a quick look at their synopsis, he read a few pages from his each novel, alternating authors, assessing their styles and the extent to which the narrative revealed each writer’s character and personality. Like a pollen-drunk bee, he darted from one to the other, stopping to consult this or that reference text. It was akin to unpicking an intricate web, and while logic and intuition were paramount, Sherlock knew only too well that luck and randomness were contributing factors in his process of deconstruction.

Once he would have scowled at the words chance or fortuity as he’d maintain that he created his own opportunities, but as he’d grown in experience, he’d come to recognise the value of serendipity. His meeting with John was a testament to the value of the accidental, he mused.

And right then a terrifying thought struck him.

He took up Edith Olivier’s The Love-Child and started reading it carefully.

There was a boy; that much he knew.

He was not enchanted, like Barrie’s creation, but he was the crux of the problem.

His face changed, or perhaps like Janus he had two; yes, that was it!

Turning round and round, like a weathervane in high wind, he moved so fast that Sherlock could not discern either of his faces.

*Stop, stop*, he wanted to scream, but his voice stuck in his throat, and then he was no longer certain that he wished to talk.

The faster the boy spun, the more translucent he appeared to be, until there was nothing left of his slender, gold-infused form but a shadow.

And that shadow advanced apace, like a malignant growth that would soon envelope the detective; it would twine itself to every heart it encountered and squeeze all life out of them.

Suddenly, he understood the inevitability of it: it was the price he had to pay.

“Wake up, my dear, please wake up!”

John’s warm hand was on his neck; he could distinctly feel the pressure of his lover’s digits on his clammy skin: it was a solid grasp that brought Sherlock back to life.

He gasped, as his lungs tried to imbibe as much hair as they could contain; his heart was thumping in his body, down to the tip of his fingers.

“Breathe for me, Sherlock; slow and steady; come on, breathe.”

“What happened?” the detective asked when his functions had returned to normal.

John had fixed him a concoction of raw eggs, brandy and sugar and was waiting for Sherlock to
drink it. The latter did so with a pained grimace.

“You tell me,” the doctor replied and the fury in his eyes meant only one thing.

“I did not ingest anything but strong tea. I swear, John, I did not.”

John slumped down on a dilapidated armchair and a puff of dust swirled around him.

“I woke up and you weren’t with me. I imagined you’d be here and when I opened the door I saw you’d fallen asleep. I’d almost left when I thought something was wrong. Your chest wasn’t moving. Christ, Sherlock, for a moment I thought you…”

The detective tried to stand up from the sofa where John had deposited him after he’d revived him, but his legs wobbled.

The doctor immediately ran to his aid and helped him lie down again, but this time he sat there with him, cradling the boy’s head in his lap.

“I was reading and I must have fallen asleep.”

“And you had one of your dreams.”

John’s tone was suspicious.

“Yes, but I did not take anything; you have to believe me. It just came to me, after a deduction I had.”

“What deduction, dearest?”

A soothing hand stroked his curls, brushing them away from his forehead.

“It’s the oddest thing: I can’t remember anymore. It was a sort of revelation and it connected all the elements of our riddle.”

“What about the nightmare?”

“There was a boy and a weathervane, and that’s all I can recall.”

“You don’t think the tea was tampered with?”

“Impossible: I made it myself.”

“It could have been the shock. But what dream could induce such shock as to impair your breathing? I’m afraid it’s beyond my competences, my love. We’ll have to consult a specialist. I’ve heard good things about Dr Henry Head.”

Sherlock had ceased paying attention at some point.

“You called me ‘love’,” he whispered, capturing John’s hand and kissing its palm.

“I woke up in a cold, lonely bed. I was hoping to spoil you a bit, at least this once,” his lover joked, ducking his head to place a soft kiss on the tip of the detective’s nose.

“Only once?”

“It wouldn’t do indulge your bad habits, would it?”
Sherlock rolled over, so that he could part open John’s dressing gown and kiss his bare thighs.

“Well, you know how the saying goes: a good turn deserves another,” he declared, smearing his lips on sensitive skin, all the way up, until he reached his goal.

John closed his eyes and choked out a growl, but before Sherlock could use his mouth more expediently, he shook himself out of his sensuous trance.

“Stop, my darling, please,” he pleaded, caressing the tangled hair in order to soften the sting of rejection. “I want to make sure that you are alright.”

The detective was already embarking on a sulking ship, when he noticed a minute tremor in John’s leg and froze mid-pout.

“I’m perfectly fine, my dear,” he said, taking John’s hand and placing it on his heart, “Feel? All is tickety-boo.”

The doctor smiled broadly before surrendering to full-throated laughter.

“Did you just say ‘tickety-boo’? Heavens above, I’m in love with a school-girl.”

“I won’t stay here to be insulted by my… my… oh, damn stupid English language!” Sherlock huffed, and was about to flounce out in a swirl of silk and bad temper when the absurdity of the situation caught up with him: a quirked smile turned into a giggle, until he collapsed into John’s arms with tears of joy in his bright eyes.

When the mirth subsided, they embraced and their words were punctuated by soft kisses.

“I’ll call Lestrade about that list and a few other things and then we shall go talk to Edith Olivier. The funeral is tomorrow, so she must be in town. We may still see her on Sunday at Lady Morrell’s, but I’d rather meet her far from the madding crowd, so to speak.”

“You’ll eat a proper breakfast first. I won’t have you swooning around London when a murderer is still at large.”

This time Sherlock knew better than to start a pointless argument.

“Alright, but I’ll take a bath first. Care to join me?”

John’s wicked smile ignited the simmering fire inside him, but Sherlock knew he would not convince him this time.

“When this ordeal is over, I promise you we’ll take our time exploring all the nooks and crannies of this lovely flat.”

“All of them?”

“Well, perhaps not this mouldy room. Are you growing fungus in here, dearest?”

“You should know me well enough by now to eschew making such intriguing suggestions.”

John’s amused chuckle followed him as he exited the study.

Edith Olivier was staying a Lady Morrell’s town house in Gower Street.
The Lady in question was on her way back from Garsington to attend the funeral, but she wouldn’t arrive before dinner time.

Lestrade’s enquiries on the safe box had been fruitless, but he’d contacted the Sûreté and they had agreed to help with regards to Forbes’ stay in France. Investigating the dead man’s habits and pastimes would be more speedily executed by the locals than by remote research.

When Sherlock and John arrived at the address in Bloomsbury, they were astonished to find that the woman they had met at Wilsford was almost unrecognisable.

“Rex has convinced me to go for a bingle; apparently, it’s a cross between a shingle and a bob. My ‘spinsterish bun’ aged me; that’s how that naughty boy put it.”

John recovered his wits sooner than Sherlock, who was unused to dealing with eccentric women, aside from Mycroft of course, who was not unlike one of them.

“It suits you admirably,” the doctor said, “you have just the right face for it.”

“He’s a wild swan, you know? Rex, I mean. With all that he appears to blend into the background, unlike Stephen, he’s a true original. I can’t fathom how Sieg could prefer Stephen to him. All that rot about the mind and the soul, and he’s fallen for the first high cheekbone-d sham-angelic face he’s encountered.”

Sherlock couldn’t help but blush and John had to refrain from mouthing the words ‘wild swan’ in his lover’s direction, behind the woman’s back.

One night of unrestrained passion and it was like being permanently drunk on champagne, the doctor mused.

“Maybe he will see the error of his ways,” Sherlock observed.

Edith lit a long, thin cigarette and shook her head.

“No, he won’t. Sieg loves Stephen more than his own flesh and blood. Ever felt anything similar?” she asked, fixing her eyes on him.

He was saved by John’s timely intervention.

“Mr Whistler told us about your novels. He thinks they are rather bold.”

She smiled and her face was transformed from that of a plain woman into a gamine.

“What do you think?” she asked of Sherlock.

“I thought of Madeleine de Scudery,” he replied.

“You found yourself a clever boy, Doctor Watson,” she quipped, taking a perfunctory drag on her cigarette.

It was Sherlock’s turn to save his partner from embarrassment.

“The Love-Child is the one I’m interested in. Who is your main character based on; and what about the young boy? I’d rather you told us and save us the time and inconvenience to dig around for answers.”

“You assume I would try to impede your progress which is not the case.”
“Why did you leave the essay on murder by De Quincey in Whistler’s studio?”

“I must have mislaid it; I do that all the time,” she replied with an eloquent gesture, indicating her forgetful mind.

“You haven’t answered my first question.”

“The answer, Mr Holmes, is that I don’t really know for sure. We novelists are like magpies: snatches of conversation, old stories, songs, love entanglements; all of this and more serves the purpose of our muse.”

Sherlock clucked impatiently.

“You’re being deliberately evasive. Your book may be the key to solving Forbes’ murder investigation.”

For the first time, Edith seemed to lose her composure.

“I honestly don’t recall. Rex may have told me something and Cecil too. It was a story about a man whose life is entirely devoted to a younger boy, a lost boy; one of these stories that get re-told so many times till they become the stuff of legend. It may not have been the same story or the same boy; it’s quite possible. You must think me horribly scatterbrained,” she said, pleasantly.

“Quite the contrary; in fact, I think you are toying with me.”

She laughed happily, as if she’d been paid the highest of compliments.

“I won’t say I’m a complete innocent, but in this instance I’m whiter than white. Part of the story is fiction and part of it is truth, but whose truth I can’t really say.”

Sherlock looked her in the eye for a while and came to a conclusion.

“How well do you know your friends?” he asked, with a frustrated sigh.

“No need to italicise the word: they are my friends, after all. Let’s see: I have known Sieg and Ottoline for a while, same goes for the Sitwells; Cecil, Stephen and Rex I first met during the War; I became acquainted with Duncan briefly in France, but my stay over there was insufficient to establish a real connection. He was a great artist, a real talent; but with a cruel streak, like most geniuses. I always advise Rex to avoid falling in the same trap; there’s something to be said for a good bedside manner, isn’t there, Doctor Watson?”

“I couldn’t agree more,” John replied.

“His paintings may well be conquering the world for years to come, but what will be left of him apart from a handful of dust? Revel said the same thing, only he quoted some passage from the Bible. He knew Duncan really well, despite the fact they were so unlike: one a sinner, the other a catholic; although, I believe Dester is more croyant than pratiquant,” she rambled on.

“Yes, he mentioned as much when I questioned him about his devotion to the cause,” Sherlock concurred. “What do you think of Lady Morrell’s commitment to pacifism during the War?”

“Ottoline is no Rosa Luxemburg, but she was tempted to initiate her own version of the Spartacus League. She counted on Sieg, and he tried, poor boy, but we are talking about the British ruling classes, after all. We are no revolutionaries, only lukewarm protesters. We may decide, like Bertrand, to go to prison for a principle, but engaging with the masses is a step too far.”
The detective winced in distaste.

“She and Duncan did not see eye to eye; he loathed conchies and deserters and did his utmost to make sure they were court-martialled.”

“I imagine Lady Morrell must have resented him bitterly.”

Edith nodded, a smile of prankish wickedness curving her lips.

“Especially considering Duncan used to bed them, draw them and - only then - hand them over to the authorities. Revel too was furious; he called him lascivious and immoral, but Duncan only laughed and said they deserved exactly what was coming to them.”

“Not a pleasant man,” John commented.

“Would you know anyone from this list?” Sherlock said, showing her Rex’s note.

She perused it, showing no sign of emotion.

“Atkin rings a bell, but the others? No, I can’t say I do know any of them. Rex was in France with Duncan for a while and he’s good with names, but as I said I stayed only a short time.”

“I would like to show it to your hostess, but I’d rather not leave a copy of this lying around.”

“Surely you will come to the reception tomorrow, after the funeral. It’s held at Whitehall Banqueting House, Duncan being related to Lord Asquith and all.”

John raised his eyebrows in surprise: the Banqueting House was not normally used for the commemoration of artists, no matter how well connected the deceased had been.

“I’m afraid I have not been invited,” Sherlock replied.

“A foolish oversight,” she commented. “But I am sure you will find a way to be there.”

“I will certainly endeavour to do so,” the detective said, smiling.

After thanking her for her hospitality, the two men left; John was still in the dark, but for Sherlock the day was dawning.

When they arrived home, Mrs Hudson pounced on them to inform them that his 'Lordship of the ever-present umbrella' had come and gone, leaving a sealed letter which she handed on to Sherlock with a put-upon sigh. It turned out to be the invitation they had just discussed with Miss Olivier.

Sherlock sniffed and muttered under his breath, but John did not say a word, wanting very much to take a look at Edith’s Love-Child book instead.

He was deep into it when Sherlock telephoned Lestrade to find out whether he had obtained the information he’d requested; the inspector related what he had discovered so far, which caused the detective to frown and let out a strangled noise as he put the receiver down.

“What is it?” his friend asked, distractedly.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid!” Sherlock screamed, flitting around the room like an irate grass-hopper. “Mallay, Malay, the dream on the night I met you; it means something, but what does it mean? It must fit in with the rest of my theories, but does it? And if so, how, John, how?”
His friend was staring at him, startled by that display of frantic exuberance.

“I don’t understand a word you’re saying, dearest. What Malay?”

“It’s the lucid dream I had the night you and I met, John. And look at this name on the list: James Mallay. It can’t be a coincidence, I know it’s isn’t. You know why? Because Lestrade just informed me that this Mallay person is dead: tried in private and shot by firing squad at the Tower for espionage!”
Cortège Macabre

Chapter Summary

The end is nigh, but our boys are too much in love not to have a bit of fun

Mind the tags, as there will be smut

Note: Cortège Macabre is the title of a lost Sassoon poem about "lust and the soul". If anyone can find it, please let me know.
Note2: the quotes I used are not from Edith Olivier's writings, but from Stephen Tennant's.
Thanks for all your kind comments, they are much appreciated. I always try and reply to all, but I just don't have the time to do it straight away.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Out flew the web, and floated wide, The mirror cracked from side to side, 'The curse is come upon me,' cried. The Lady of Shalott.”

The Lady of Shalott (excerpt) – Alfred, Lord Tennyson

James Mallay was the boy of the weathervane, Sherlock was sure of it.

The problem was that he couldn’t remember his nightmare and that he could not take opium to try and recapture it. After what had happened to him in the study, John would not allow him to ingest even one grain of the drug.

To add even more unpleasantness to this impasse was the necessity of contacting Mycroft, now that Whistler had virtually given them proof of the connection between the murder and the deceased painter’s activity during the War. He knew what his brother was going to say even before he opened his mouth.

“It took you long enough, brother mine,” the elder Holmes said in his plummiest voice, when Sherlock telephoned him.

“Merely a handful of days,” he demurred, curtly.

“Was it one of his friends who gave you the idea or was it that horrid poison?”

“I’m not going to discuss my methods on the telephone, brother. Will your help me or not?”

Mycroft emitted a single, amused chuckle before replying.

“Of course, I will contact the relevant people presently. I trust you won’t be participating in the
“And I assume you won’t partake of the reception?”

The detective felt a shudder resonate through the line and smirked, as he put the receiver down.

When he returned to the sitting room, John was still in the clutches of Edith’s story.

“What do you think?” he asked, and in one fluid movement he sat down on the carpet at the man’s feet.

“I see Whistler’s point. Listen here: he sets my nerves in an erotic jangle,” the doctor quoted.

“Yes, the prose is a bit florid, I agree. But what about the man, does it remind you of anyone?”

Unawares, John had started to rake his fingers through his lover’s curls and the latter was finding it hard to not close his eyes and purr like a cat.

“He reminds me of too many of the people involved in this case, and one of them is yours truly. Miss Olivier was perhaps telling the truth about not recalling. It could be Sassoon or any other older man in love with a younger boy.”

“But in this case, the story traces an arc which starts in the past, when the boy was merely a kid. Have you ever had a relationship with an adolescent youth?”

John halted mid-gesture.

“That would have been a criminal act, dearest. I would never… I hope you don’t presume that because of our age difference, I would overlook the boundaries of law and decency,” he stated.

Sherlock nodded and nudged his friend’s idle hand, signalling that he should resume his ministrations.

“The boy is not an innocent though. How does she describe his looks? Evil or…”

John leafed through the book until he found the page in question.

“That’s how she puts it: ‘he was an exquisite, sad faun of null, poisonous beauty; it could easily apply to Stephen; in fact, it does remind me of him, but he was almost killed by a dose of opium. At least… you don’t think he’s done it on purpose so no one would suspect him? And that cold was very propitious too, if you think of it. He didn’t seem that ill when he came to ask for your help.’

“You said that he suffers from chest complaints, which we have ascertained he really does.”

“It doesn’t mean he couldn’t fake the aggravation of its symptoms. And as for the poisoning, maybe he bungled the dosage.”

Sherlock pondered these hypotheses then shook his head.

“Mallay must be our exquisite faun. Somebody must have tried to avenge his death and once we get the information about the boy’s past, the mystery will be solved and all the pieces will fall into place.”

“You know that you are amazing, don’t you?”

“Meretricious, or at least that’s what my null, poisonous brother defines what I do and am.”
John pulled a silken lock of hair at his lover’s nape and the younger man obligingly allowed his head to fall back, resting against the doctor’s thigh.

“I’d rather you wouldn’t mention your sibling in this circumstance.”

“What sort of occurrence are we speaking of: crime-solving or book-reading?” Sherlock murmured; he was feigning innocence, but a thrill of excitement was already spreading through his veins.

“I was thinking of allowing you to correct the mistake you made this morning, dearest. And since you disobeyed the laws of love and companionship, I feel that you should provide me with a suitable recompense,” John explained, trailing a finger along his lover’s throat.

Sherlock hummed and, grasping his friend’s wrist, tried to suck the digit into his mouth.

“Sweet and commendable gesture, but not what I had in mind,” the older man said, using the moist tip of said finger to wet his lover’s upper lip; Sherlock couldn’t help but moan.

“Enlighten me,” he croaked.

“I would very much like to watch you, my love.”

“Watch me?”

“As you touch yourself,” was the crystal-clear reply.

The detective blush started from his chest and spread to the root of his hair; it wasn’t only the implied act and the words spoken, but the tone the older man had used: firm, commanding and with a hint of coldness. He shivered a little, and something flickered behind his closed eyelids: a gossamer thread, a golden shadow, the hint of a memory, like a name on the tip of one’s tongue.

“Are you alright, my dear?” John asked, concerned; and like that, the web was broken and reality reasserted itself.

Out flew the web and floated wide, the curse is come upon me, the famous Tennyson’s verses came to Sherlock and, by association, he was reminded of Sassoon and his Enoch Arden’s complex: a man watching his beloved from afar, without being seen; caring desperately for them and not being able to save them from danger and death.

“Sherlock, what is it?” the doctor enquired, clearly worried at his friend’s prolonged silence.

The detective looked up into John’s face, into those stormy-sea eyes and knew that he was conquered and that nothing could ever taint or destroy the love that he felt for this man.

“Nothing, my dear; everything is absolutely fine,” he replied, and as their lips met in a kiss, he swore to himself that it was the truth and nothing but the truth.

Sherlock’s room was bright with the light of two gas lamps and of the roaring fire; the air was warm and crackling with electricity, but he was shivering hot and cold and his skin seemed too tight to contain the perpetual pulse of pleasure-fear that was threading through his blood vessels.

John had undressed him, taking his time unbuttoning and unfastening; using his professional dexterity to accomplish every act of disrolement without once directly brushing against Sherlock’s skin.
Again, there was a hint of the clinical and detached, almost as if John were an indifferent onlooker.

The expression on his face, however, told a very different story: there was savage tenderness and lust there, and such passion that stole the younger man’s breath away.

“Lay back on top of me, yes, just like that,” John instructed.

“Yes,” Sherlock whispered, and complied.

He was ashamed of his pale skin, the bony chest and hollow stomach, the spray of freckles on his shoulders and torso and the tracery of veins in the inside of his arms: all was brought into stark relief by the remorseless light.

John’s hands dispelled all his fears: they caressed every part of him with reverence and insistence.

Their respective positions meant that the older man was holding his lover between his splayed legs, embracing him from behind so that Sherlock could have the twofold pleasure of feeling John’s arousal pressed against the small of his back and his hot mouth on his neck.

The detective was conscious of being watched, but it was not as intrusive as being faced with the stare of a demanding lover.

“Stroke it, my love… there, and cup your balls – tug them – oh, Christ,” were the sensuous orders Sherlock was given, and he followed them eagerly, arching his back and thrusting into his own fist, as John branded his throat with bites and his nipples with pinches and grazes.

“Enough, dearest, enough,” the older man enjoined; the demand came when Sherlock’s glans was oozing moisture and he was bursting with need. His head, lolling between the pillow and John’s shoulder, was yanked to the side and his mouth invaded by a searing kiss.

After that, the world tilted madly, like a vessel on choppy waters: John climbed all over him and descended on his soaked cock until he gagged on it. Sherlock’s screams were muffled, as his own mouth was engaged in pleasuring his lover. He remembered what John liked and, through the haze of his own ecstasy, tried his utmost to satisfy him. It was animalistic and unrestrained, and not so long ago, he would have fled from the mere thought of it, but in reality, the smell and taste of sex were intoxicating, a wanton bliss that could not, would not be thwarted.

They finished nearly at the same time, and Sherlock let it spray over his mouth and throat - which felt both depraved and purely intimate - while John swallowed him down greedily, to the very last drop.

“Magnificent, darling boy, what have I ever done to deserve you?” John asked, as he cleaned his lover's face and body with a discarded undergarment.

“If it’s not a rhetorical question, I’d say it should be the other way round, my dear,” Sherlock replied, puffing on his cigarette with the contented, smug air of a duke surveying his domain from atop a hill.

“Age and experience mark me as the least worthy between the two of us. You are a spotless youth, in comparison.”

The detective pulled him close and kissed his cheek, as he pertly inserted the lighted cigarette between John’s lips.

“Would you still love me if in the past - like the Love-Child - I had been poisonous and cruel?”
“As long as you were truthful in what you are now, with me, then yes, of course I would.”

Sherlock sighed and burrowed closer to John, seeking to be enveloped by his arms and soon being granted his wish.

“I knew that,” he murmured against the man’s muscled chest, “when we met Sassoon that first time, I thought that if you loved someone, really loved them, you wouldn’t mind if they had done something bad, provided they’d won your respect and admiration.”

John kissed the top of his head, several times.

“Yes, but in that case you couldn’t have been more wrong, as I was looking at him and thinking you two would hit it off; you know, same class, similar tastes and refinements.”

Sherlock smiled, a little dazed with happiness and sleep.

“It was already too late for me, dear friend. I had just met someone I couldn’t stop thinking about.”

John twined a curl around his little finger and tugged it, gently.

“And who would that be?”

The younger man yawned, scrunching up his nose.

“I’m not sure, but from his demeanour and care-giving attitude, I deduced that he must have been a doctor.”

“Silly thing,” John laughed, fondly. “Go to sleep now, while I see to dinner.”

Sherlock was already fast asleep.

The Banqueting Hall was swarming with voices: it wasn’t a loud, vivid chatter, but rather a hushed murmuring, like monks chanting. Outside, it was a miserable day: gusty, rainy and cold.

The flower arrangement at the Abbey had been stately and sober: clumps of long-stemmed lilies pressed together like virgin girls in a tight embrace and sprays of velvety white roses, fresh and dewy.

In the Hall, instead, someone had decided to pay homage to the personality of the deceased and filled the vast salon with amber and bronze chrysanthemums and – more extravagantly still - with vases of Strelitzia reginaes.

“The bird of paradise,” said the deep voice of Siegfried Sassoon. “Beautiful and proud, but aloof too, and with absolutely no scent.”

John looked mystified for a moment, until he realised the poet was referring to the flowers.

“That description would be quite apt for some people, too,” the doctor said, gazing at Stephen, who stood a few steps away, talking vivaciously to a woman with a face like an Etruscan horse.

“His health is getting worse,” Sassoon said, with a pained look in his limpid eyes. “I’m thinking of taking him to Haus Hirth in Bavaria; it’s a small guest house owned by friends of mine. Clean air and a hearty, plain fare will do him a world of good.”
"Won’t he feel lonely, without all his friends and family?"

“Nanny is coming with us and naturally visitors are always welcome. But he needs rest and calm, if he wants to get better.”

John who had disagreed with Whistler about this very same topic, found himself taking the other side of the argument.

“But perhaps his nature needs this sort of excitement; being at the centre of attention, praised and complimented.”

Sassoon smiled wickedly and once again John was struck by the man’s charisma.

“This time, I fear, you may be confusing my friend with yours.”

“Touché,” the doctor replied, grinning.

At the other end of the Hall, Sherlock was deep in conversation with a tall, aristocratic woman with shoulder-length flaming red hair styled in tight, marcelled waves.

Unlike the other mourners, including an unusually subdued Stephen Tennant, Lady Ottoline Morrell was as flamboyant as a parrot, wearing a teal velvet gown with puffed sleeves and lace inserts, while rows of silvery pearls adorned her white neck. She resembled a pre-Raphaelite painting, until one examined her face, which vaunted a pair of inquisitive turquoise eyes and a long, beaky nose.

“Duncan would have hated this,” she drawled, obviously pleased.

A white-gloved waiter glided by, offering them champagne.

“You didn’t like him,” Sherlock said, hating that he was stating the obvious, but wanting to provoke a reaction. He swallowed his distaste together with the vintage Grand Cru.

“It was mutual, my dear. I gather Edith has told you about his despicable actions during the War: tricking those poor young men into trusting him then sending them to prison or worse.”

“Surely he was only doing his duty, you must see that.”

Her spine stiffened and suddenly, she seemed to tower over him, scornful and formidable like a messenger of truth.

“His duty didn’t comprise using these boys like they didn’t have a heart or a soul of their own. War is a dirty business; that I can accept up to a point. But anything more than a fair fight is as reprehensible as any other crime in time of peace. And for those felonies, he should have been punished.”

“Punishment should be meted out by a higher power,” a frosty voice interjected.

Revel Dester was quite a different person when not sporting any variation of his favourite colour; in a three piece black suit, with golden fob watch and stiff white collar he looked regal and vaguely alarming.

Lady Morrell wasn’t in the least daunted by his change of personality.

“Dear Revel, I believe in this instance, that’s precisely what happened. Like in one of your books,
“justice and love have conquered all.”

Dester bowed his leonine head and offered her a sweet smile.

“You do have the appropriate answer to everything, darling. Like the poet says, it is indeed a wonderful thing when all that is well ends well.”

Sherlock decided that it was time to throw the cat among the pigeons.

“But it didn’t end well for Duncan Forbes, nor was it all wine and roses for James Mallay.”

Neither of his companions showed any indications that they knew the name; Lady Ottoline was the first to reply.

“Was he one of Duncan’s lost boys?” she asked.

“Apt choice of words, dear Lady Morrell; it was exactly what he was, a lost boy; execute for being a spy, thanks to the late Mr Forbes.”

“Part of the Cabinet Noir list, I bet,” she replied, “A list of suspected defectors and spies that was sent to the War Office. Sieg told me all about it; afterwards, obviously.”

“Why did Sassoon see the list, if it was top secret?” Sherlock asked, mystified.

“Because, dear Holmes, he was collaborating with them, trying to weed out the poison ivy, so to speak,” Dester replied, coldly.

“The Cabinet Noir was reported as a hoax, a smokescreen,” Sherlock insisted.

Lady Morrell laughed loudly and everybody seemed to turn and stare.

“A double bluff, dear friend; and wasn’t it clever?”

“Deadly so, my Lady,” Sherlock replied, drinking the rest of his champagne.

“Orchidaceous,” Stephen quipped, in John’s ear. “That’s what Sieg called this room. A most marvellous word, don’t you think? He can be so splendid, when he’s not in a misanthropic mood.”

John was saved from replying by another torrent of seemingly haphazard comments,

“Peter Paul Rubens was a great artist naturellement, but the Union of the Crowns is such a dull subject for a painting. The beheading of John the Baptist would have been better: more dramatic, and it would have forced one to raise one’s gaze to the vault of the ceiling. No one ever does look up, unless one has reason to. Rubens was his real name, wasn’t it? Not like Caravaggio, whose name was something else entirely.”

Stephen plucked two glasses from a tray and offered one to John, who hoped it was filled with something stronger than wine; he was feeling a bit groggy.

“Edith writes under her own name too, despite it being somewhat tame, but Revel is obviously a pen name. No one could ever be called that; it’s too deliciously original, like Mirabel. Now, where did I hear this name, Mirabel? No, it’s gone, forgotten, parti. Funerals have something of the French in them, don’t you think? What do they call it… a cortège funèbre; what a marvellous expression. I think I should put it in my journal, as a note for my future book,” he explained, as he extracted a tiny
leather-bound notebook from his pocket.

John made his excuses and left, feeling wrung out like one who’s miraculously escaped from the coils of a boa constrictor.

He was about to walk outside for a breath of fresh air, when his lover appeared in front of him, red-faced and evidently in the throes of the blackest of rages.

“I should have known it, because it was always so; yet I did not suspect, even when I saw he’d switched clubs. I swear it to you, John, I will murder him.”

His partner frowned, uncomprehending.

“My detestable brother must have known about it from the start; that the Cabinet Noir list was bona-fide and that Sassoon knew about it. And he didn’t say a word.”

John treated the Cabinet Noir the same way as he had Castor and Pollux, but he understood the gist of what the detective was saying.

“Perhaps he was bound by secrecy, or thought it wasn’t relevant.”

Sherlock barked out a laugh even more sonorous than Lady Ottoline’s.

“You don’t know him, John. Come, I have a fratricide to perpetrate,” he declared.

Outside, the world was dark and silent, as they walked the streets through the whispery gallery of the rain.

Chapter End Notes

4th October: I had to add this because I just found it, and the coincidence is uncanny: "I am going to be a Bird of Paradise in the spring." Stephen Tennant (from his journals)
A Passing Husk, a Shadow

Chapter Summary

We are nearly there.
I almost deleted the entire work, as I felt suddenly very disappointed by it. But it's nearly finished, so it would be probably stupid, at this point.

Note: What Sherlock says to John about his life, part of which is the title of the chapter, is taken from the Journal of Stephen Tennant; same goes for what Tennant says about love, towards the end.
Note 2: Violet Gordon-Woodhouse was a famous harpsichordist.
Note 3: Peter Watson (I know!) was Cecil Beaton's lover and, incidentally, the founders of the ICA in London. Tennant really describes him like this in his Journal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Putting each one behind me, knowing but this—
That all my days are turning toward your kiss:
That all expectancy awaits the deep
Consoling passion of your eyes, that keep
Their radiance for my coming, and their peace
For when I find in you my love’s release”
Parted (excerpt) – Siegfried Sassoon

“What was Stephen telling you?” Sherlock asked, in what was such an anticlimax to his previous mood that John was tempted to demand he repeated the question.

They were sitting in the viridian-hued reading room, waiting for the elder Holmes to emerge from a sanctum into which non members were not admitted.

The detective had been seething with anger, almost literally fuming; John had almost expected the pouring rain to re-emerge as vapour from the contact with the young man’s overheated skin.

“What was he telling me? Something about assumed names, the painted vault of the Hall and a quantity of other abstruse words I can’t recall.”

“What assumed names?”
“Caravaggio’s and Edith, no, not Edith, but Dester; although, he wasn’t really sure, and some other person named Christabel or Mirabel, and the fact Sassoon really wasn’t all that bad when all is said and done; by the way, Siegfried wants to take Tennant away to Germany; fresh air and good food will do the trick, so he assumes.”

Sherlock suddenly plunged into one of his brown studies and seemed completely unaware of his surroundings.

His friend ceased talking, but was nonetheless alarmed when the detective jumped up from his seat and darted to the door, without saying a word.

Only when he was halfway down the stairs had he realised he was forgetting something, or rather, someone.

“John, I have been a blind fool,” he declared, his face creased in distress.

“Didn’t you want to speak to your brother?” John asked, from the top of the staircase. Luckily, the place was nearly deserted, due to the inclement weather and the fact that it was a Saturday evening.

“I don’t need to anymore. Not now anyway, and not for the same reason I wanted to before. He will come and find me, when he has what I requested. Let’s go; I need to look something up in Debrett’s and Burke’s. Oh my dear friend, the lies we tell ourselves are the most difficult to uncover.”

Covent Garden was bathed in a shimmering mantle of rain; inside the cab, the two men were enveloped in a warm cocoon, but the ride home passed in tense silence.

The older man was certain that something was wrong and that it wasn’t to do with their relationship; what worried him was a needling, irrational fear that he wouldn’t be able to help Sherlock. He tried to hold his hand, and wasn’t rejected, but wasn’t exactly reciprocated either; the detective’s skin was cold and there was a stiffness in his demeanour that didn’t bode well for the rest of the night.

As he’d expected, as soon as they got inside their lodgings, Sherlock disappeared inside his study to consult the publications he’d mentioned, but surprisingly he didn’t stay there for longer than a handful of minutes.

John was preparing tea and cutting the ginger cake that Mrs Hudson had left on a covered platter, when he heard the unmistakable sound of violin playing.

It was a sad, plaintive tune, one that he’d never heard before.

He brought the tea things to the sitting room and set them on the table, as softly as he could, in order to not disturb his friend.

When he looked into his face, he had to stifle a gasp: Sherlock’s eyes were staring into emptiness, and they were filled with misery and regret. His cheeks seemed more sunken than usual and the skin was drawn tight over them and the colour of wax. The melody grew in intensity and sorrow before ending on a note of faint hope; the detective put the instrument back in its case and slumped down on the rug by the fireplace, gazing into it as if it held the answer to all his problems.

“Dearest, is there anything I can do? Would you mind telling me what troubles you so?” John said, placing a cup of tea and a slice of cake in front of Sherlock, before joining him on the rug.

All the fight had gone out of the younger man, all his bravado of the afternoon had vanished.

His reply, when it finally came, was both desolate and cryptic.
“A thousand accidents may and will interpose a veil between our present consciousness and the secret inscriptions on the mind; accidents of the same sort will also rend away this veil," he whispered.

John didn’t press him for an explanation; instead, he put his arms around him and held him close, caressing his hair and his back, for what seemed like an interminable time.

“Have you updated your retelling of this case, my dear?” Sherlock asked later, sipping his lukewarm tea.

“I have tried, but whenever I read it back, it sounds as nonsensical as Alice in Wonderland. You, however, cut a splendid figure, my dear, as the hero of the piece.”

“You didn’t cast me as the Mad Hatter, perchance?”

“Tempting, but no, dearest; despite your extravagance and moodiness, you are entirely sane.”

For the first time that night, the detective gifted him with a watery smile that melted John’s heart with tenderness.

He was about to propose dinner, when the telephone rang.

Sherlock sprang up like a jack-in-the-box and ran out to answer; his companion stifled the impulse to follow him and eavesdrop.

When he came back, Sherlock’s face was drawn and pale, but his eyes were shining and determined.

“Don’t ask me anything, John. Let’s spend this evening as if we were alone in this world, just the two of us.”

“Alright, my dear; let’s see what we have been sent up for dinner.”

The dumb waiter revealed a tureen of legumes soup and a fragrant fish pie. There was a bottle of red wine already on the table, which was set for two.

“You really are lucky with this maid of yours: she’s invisible yet so efficient.”

Sherlock smirked, but couldn’t completely disguise his satisfaction.

“Only the very best for me, my dear; I don’t care for second class.”

John laughed and caressed the boy’s cheek.

“Will your Lordship be satisfied with a humble doctor?”

The detective’s smile waned and his eyes darkened.

“It is I, my dear, who may not be enough for someone as brave and decent as you.”

John took his friend’s hand in his and kissed every finger, one by one.

“I don’t know what caused this sadness that envelops you, but whatever the cause, I shall be here for you if you need me.”

Sherlock nodded mutely; his lips trembled a little and his eyes welled up, but he soon mastered his emotions.
They dined in companionable silence, exchanging smiles and caresses whenever the fancy took them.

That mellow mood followed them to the bedroom: John didn’t want to initiate anything and was sure Sherlock’s inclinations were of a kind.

He undressed and put on his nightshirt, knowing that his intuitive partner would immediately understand the meaning of the gesture.

“May I sleep here, dearest, or would you rather I left you alone?” he asked, when he saw that Sherlock hesitated on the brink of some declaration.

The detective shook his head.

“Stay, please; let me talk without asking questions, will you?”

They lay down beneath the covers, close but not quite touching. Sherlock was the first to make a move, for he was cold and needed the comfort and warmth of his lover’s body.

“You are like ice, dearest,” John said, rubbing the younger man’s back and arms.

“I can’t seem to get warm, tonight.”

They ended up in a chaste embrace, and the kisses they shared were deep and languorous, as if the night was endless and filled with unspent promises.

“There were times, in the past, when I believed life was nothing but a passing husk for my thoughts, a sheath, of no importance but for the radiance it shields and shadows, and I treated it accordingly. I did not care for anything or anyone unless it pertained to a riddle that I had to solve.”

John did as cautioned, and stayed silent. He couldn’t help kissing the boy's brow, his cheeks, his messy hair.

“And even then, it wasn’t really caring, but more of a detached interest, like an entomologist with his arthropods. I did not want anything real, made of flesh and blood, and I did not want the past, with its miseries and horrors. It occurs to me now that I only loved things that passed without leaving an emotional trace. Because those traces stayed within me and transformed into nightmares which I counteracted with sedatives that only made them worse. It’s as if I was two people, one precise and controlled like an instrument and the other savage and terrified like a beast.”

“Jekyll and Hyde,” his friend murmured.

“Something like it,” Sherlock smiled, leaning a little closer.

“Mycroft knows everything, of course,” he added, in a mournful tone that made John smile. “And he’s always fed me morsels of reality, as much as he deemed I could digest.”

The doctor felt that it was time to venture a comment.

“You are afraid he might pity you.”

“It’s not that I am afraid, but that I know he does. And perhaps you will too, once you know me for what I really am.”
John cupped his lover’s face in his hands and fixed a determined gaze on those unearthly eyes.

“You’re grossly mistaken, if you believe, even for a second, that you need me more than I need you. I was broken and lonely when I met you and you have put me back together. We are in the same boat, my love, and I dearly hope it shall always be so.”

The castellated building was shrouded in a mantle of shadows and the boy was running towards it, back to safety.

The man was on the threshold, waiting for him. But this time, a shiver of uncertainty was running through the boy. He slowed his pace and stared down at his hands, which were tinier than he remembered, and shaking.

The man’s stillness was alarming and his face was in darkness.

As he approached, the boy became certain that he’d made a fatal mistake: he was in danger, mortal danger.

It was too late to escape and when two strong arms held him in their iron grasp, he knew all was lost. Strangely, he wasn’t afraid. It’s not me - he told himself - it was never me.

“It wasn’t me,” he whimpered in his sleep, and John held him until he subsided and fell back into a quieter doze.

“Is it wise, dearest, to accept their hospitality when the Yard is about to arrest one of them for murder?”

John asked for the second time that day, while contemplating Sherlock’s painstaking toilette.

They had spent the best part of the day discussing everything but the case, until Mycroft had sent one of his flunkies to deliver a stack of documents that Sherlock had read in his study.

“The Yard won’t do any such thing, not without proof.”

“I thought your brother had provided you with that. Not that I would know, since you’ve decided to keep me in ignorance.”

Sherlock chose a dove grey silk scarf and fastened it around his neck. His hands lingered there and so did John’s gaze, for a long while.

“You’re doing this on purpose, you sly thing,” the older man said, shaking his head and grinning, “Trying to distract me from your lack of trust in my abilities.”

“I do trust you John; in fact, I trust you to be always honest and true and thus utterly incapable of talking amiably to a ruthless killer without giving the game away.”

“While I’m flattered by your compliments, I resent their implication. Besides, I do not see why you have to prod this beast with a pointed stick; why not gather your evidence quietly and let the Lestrade do the arrest once you’ve provided proof?”

Sherlock turned away from the mirror - in which he’d be looking as he adjusted his curls – and scowled at his friend with fiery eyes.
“Because, my dear, I need to finish this or it will finish me! I have to do it the only way I know how, John, and it may be dangerous, but this is what I do.”

There was a challenge contained in his words and John rose to it.

“I don’t fear danger, dearest, in fact I relish it. Since you won’t talk to me and I am here to protect you, I guess I will have to watch you like a hawk.”

The detective’s lips curved in a slow, blade-like smile as he went back to looking at his reflection.

“You always watch me,” he murmured.

John’s moved closer to him, enough to whisper in his ear.

“I can’t see anything else, when you are in the room.”

“Flattery, my dear, will get you everywhere,” the younger man replied, and for a moment they stood on the edge of an embrace.

“I’ll better get ready,” John said, licking his lips, “or we’ll never get to Lady Ottoline’s in time.”

“We’d be fashionably late,” Sherlock grinned, chasing a kiss.

“Not if we get there in middle of the night, we won’t,” John laughed, and made his way to his quarters.

“Now you’re boasting,” the detective shouted after him.

That was his life now, the doctor mused, and he’d fight Satan to preserve it, if he had to.

10 Gower Street had not been at its best, when they had visited Ms Olivier on the previous Friday.

Now that Lady Morrell was back and the house had been restored to its full magnificence, they could admire its peculiarities.

The entrance hall, painted in grey streaked with pink, reminded one of a winter sunset, while the salon’s deep red walls were inspired by a ruined castle in a Gothic novel. Paintings by Ottoline's artist friends were everywhere, including a large canvas by Forbes depicting a medieval church surrounded by rocky outcrops in swaths of bottle-green, bluish-black and orange. John felt vaguely repelled by it, but attracted too.

The gathering included Sassoon and Tennant, Beaton and his new boyfriend – a dark, handsome man named, funnily, Peter Watson, the Sitwells, Dester, Whistler and Edith Olivier.

Ms Sitwell’s Plantagenet chic battled with Lady Ottoline’s colourful extravagance, providing a stark, frigid counterpoint to the effervescence of her hostess.

The famous harpsichordist Violet Gordon-Woodhouse soon attracted everyone’s attention: petite as a Dresden figurine, large dark eyes and a dusky complexion, she had a certain imperiousness that demanded adulation. She sat down and played Scarlatti with the poise of a Queen.

Like the others, John enjoyed it, but what he relished even more was the rapture transfiguring Sherlock’s face.
Scarlatti was followed by Bach then Purcell; the detective barely blinked during the entire time; John wanted to have a picture of him, the way he looked just then; he decided that he would convince Sherlock to pose for a photo; maybe Beaton could be hired for the purpose, since he was so popular.

When the music ceased and after the rapt applause, the soiree lost some of its solemnity and became more relaxed; drinks were served, including some rainbow-hued cocktails.

Sassoon approached them with a cheery expression on his face and an unlit pipe in his hand.

"After what Ottoline told you, I wasn’t sure you’d come. She never got that part right, because she has a tendency to ignore what she doesn’t approve of. I never helped the War office as a spy; what I did was referring to Rivers – my doctor at Craiglockhart – the men I believed were sick or shell-shocked. I would have been the least reliable man to listen to with regards to desertions," he said, with a self-deprecating smile.

"Yes, I do realise that. John told me that you want to take Tennant away with you," the detective replied.

The poet gazed at his lover, who was showing his notebook to a baffled Revel Dester, and nodded.

"I’m only waiting to be given permission to leave the country with him."

"It won’t be long then; only a few minor details and the murderer will be safely behind bars."

Sherlock had raised his voice and Sassoon had gasped: there was a sudden hush in the salon and everybody seemed to be staring at them.

"Is the Inspector planning to raid Ottoline’s house and make an arrest?" Siegfried said, sotto voce.

"Nothing as dramatic, I’m afraid."

"I won’t have Stephen put in danger again," the poet exclaimed.

"You’ll just need to stay close to him then; are you both residing at your place?"

"Steenie insisted we stayed at Mulberry House, his mansion in Westminster."

"Yes, John and I have visited him there."

They were joined then by Tennant and Dester, who had returned to his customary colourfulness; Stephen wore gold dust on his eyelids and on his hair, and his neck was embellished by a choker of bluish pearls.

"Darling Revel was telling me the most marvellous stories about his other life, before he became a writer."

Dester laughed and blushed, a fact that stunned John for its absurdity.

"It was such a long time ago; it feels like it really was another person."

"And this naughty man even lived in the country! Well, now you lead such a fantastic epicene life, little wonder you don’t want to return to those humdrum, provincial ways."

A servant approached to refill their drinks and when he left, the conversation took a different turn.

"Aren’t Rex and Edith wonderful together?" asked Stephen, batting his eyelashes at Sassoon in the
way he had done with John when he first met him. Unlike the doctor, Siegfried was thoroughly captivated.

John looked at the couple in question and saw how close they were, that middle aged woman and the fey, melancholic young painter. He reflected that he’d not even realised they knew each other so well, and that it was like one of those games in which you have to spot a hidden figure inside a drawing and you only discern it when it’s been shown to you; after that, the figure is the only thing that you will be able to see.

She was smiling at something he’d just whispered in her ear, and there was a light of pure tenderness in her face, like on a Renaissance Madonna, that not even her awful new haircut could mar.

“Even if he weren't what he is,” Dester remarked, “the difference in age is far too significant. She would lose him sooner rather than later, and would never recover from it.”

There was an awkward silence, as it was obvious that Revel’s observation could also apply to Sassoon and his lover, who were separated by a gap of twenty years.

To John’s astonishment, Stephen was the first to react, and he did so in a composed, elegant manner.

“Age means very little to me; love is what matters. And I could never care for anyone deeply unless they asked too much of me. Love must make outrageous demands or it is not love. Love is not mild, considerate or precise,” he stated, looking demurely at Sassoon’s transfixed face.

For a moment, they were all unable to comment, but it was Tennant himself who broke his own spell.

“Oh, have you met Cecil’s new boyfriend, the divine Peter Watson? He has a frightfully gorgeous pair of black eyes, and a little behind, almost like a terrier.”

Dester erupted in laughter and the others followed suit.

As John and Sherlock were about to leave, after having thanked their hostess, they were approached by a flustered Edith Sitwell. Her long, pointed nose was quivering and, with her aristocratic appearance, she reminded the detective of an Afghan hound.

“We haven’t had a proper talk, dear Lord Holmes, but I couldn’t help but hear that the culprit has been found. Will there be an arrest tonight?” she asked, breathlessly.

“I’m not at liberty to say, but rest assured that it will happen soon.”

“I always meant to tell you this, but couldn’t quite bring myself to do so; quite unforgivable of me, I know. There was a boy… well, there was always one or more, with Duncan. But this one was different: he had fallen in love, he said. The reason I know is that he was painting my portrait, soon after the War, and he needed to talk, to unburden himself. He never mentioned the boy’s name, but he said that he’d died. We never talked about it again and I never had the impression that he was truly suffering. Duncan never asked me to keep the secret, but I felt I had to anyway, considering he was taking such pains to conceal his feelings.”

Sherlock smiled icily, but his words were not unkind.

“You should have told me earlier, Ms Sitwell, but I understand your reasons. As I said, the case is almost closed. Do not think on it, but please keep this confession to yourself.”

In nearby Malet Street, their cab was waiting for them.
“Forbes was in love with that boy?” John asked, incredulous.

“Love is not mild, considerate or precise,” the detective quoted, seriously. “We have sown our seeds, dear friend; let’s see how soon we shall reap.”

It was to be the longest night John had ever lived, and the most eventful.

Chapter End Notes

ETA 5th October: the next chapter will be posted tonight, UK time. It is a very long one, but I wanted all the action in one chapter and the residual explanations and smut on the next (and last) one.
Thanks for sticking with the story. It's been a long and at times difficult journey. Thanks again.
Chapter Summary

The mystery is solved

Beware, this is a long chapter :)

Note: The church is now a concert hall and the red curtain is still there, as dramatic as ever. Most world-famous musicians have played there. The square too has retained its charming otherworldliness. Oswald Mosley really lived there. Married to Diana Guinness (nee Mitford) he was the founder of the British Fascist Party.

Note 2: Stephen really dressed as Prince Charming and posed like that for a charade. He looked absolutely stunning, if I may say so :)

There will be another chapter with more explanations and a lot of lovely, sexy times.

Thanks again for sticking with the story!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Revenge is the naked idol of the worship of a semi-barbarous age."

Percy B. Shelley

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John should have suspected something was amiss when Sherlock asked him to go ahead while he had a word with the cab driver. He had remarked on it, but he’d figured the detective was giving the man instruction for the following day.

He was hoping for a peaceful quiet before the storm, but once inside their flat, he immediately realised his partner was restless and highly sensitive to the minutest noise.

“Perhaps some music?” he suggested, but Sherlock waved a dismissive hand at him and started pacing the sitting room, murmuring to himself.

“Maybe you can finally tell me who the murderer is, now that my honest nature cannot do any damage,” he said, albeit not very hopefully.

The detective stopped in his tracks and gazed at him in wonder, mixed with a little impatience.

“But surely you must know, my dear! I thought it would be pellucid at this point.”

“No, no, not to me, dearest.”
“But if you apply the principles of deduction and examine every facet of the problem, and add this to a thorough knowledge of human nature and its perversions and fallacies, certainly, you should come to the proper conclusion.”

The doctor’s exasperation was increasing and his impatience started to show on his face.

“I am not a detective, my love, but only a downtrodden physician with a scarred shoulder and an odd taste in companions.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed as he pondered whether to tell John what he knew to be the truth, but once again decided against it. He knew he was courting danger, perhaps even death, but he feared upsetting the tenuous balance that he’d achieved without recourse to his little bottle. He knew he was right about the identity of the murderer and the reasons behind it, but the slightest chance he may be mistaken was too horrid to contemplate.

The way John looked at him, the admiration and worship in his limpid eyes would be dimmed, or even disappear entirely, and he could not allow that to happen.

And he had lied to him already, even though it had not been a premeditated untruth: the shadows engulfing his past - aided and abetted by his consumption of opium - had rendered his memories unreliable.

The thin line that linked his life to John’s could be severed by a sudden turn of events or by bitter disillusionment; that he feared, despite the man’s insistence on the contrary.

All his life, Sherlock had witnessed promises being broken and assurances being betrayed, so that even if in his heart of hearts he did believe in John, his rational mind erected a barrier that his emotion couldn’t surmount.

He would face the murderer in single combat; that way, like Gabriel, he too would be in the trenches, fighting for his life.

The sand went down once again in the imaginary hourglass and John had fallen asleep, at last. Sherlock had convinced him to go to bed and he’d followed him there, lying down next to him, fully clothed underneath his dressing gown.

When he deemed that his lover would not feel his absence, he slinked out of bed and padded along toward the sitting room.

Lestrade had instructions to telephone him if anything happened, and he’d been in an agony of impatience lest he wouldn’t hear the damn thing or that it would actually ring while John was still awake.

He prepared tea and had barely scolded his lips with it when he decided that he couldn’t wait any longer.

If the murderer was under the covert yet watchful eye of Scotland Yard, he could still make sure nothing untoward happened.

After years of being a detective, in one capacity or another, he’d developed an instinct for danger – a pricking of thumbs – that told him that the game was afoot.

He went to his room, pocketed the small gun he’d already prepared for the eventuality, threw his
cape around his shoulders, grabbed his hat and, excitement coursing through his veins, he rushed out of Baker Street.

The ride towards Westminster seemed endless and his thoughts darted in every direction, without respite: should he have informed Lestrade of his outing, should he rouse the household and cause a scandal? But perhaps nothing had happened and he was only giving into his exaggerated penchant for melodrama. He’d banked on the vanity and exhibitionism of the culprit, that desire to be seen and heard and of explaining the whys and wherefores which is typical of every criminal, but that in this instance would be even more marked.

Smith Square at night was eerily quiet, like the abandoned stage of a theatre production. Mulberry House seemed fast asleep too. Nearby, at no 8, was the house of Oswald Mosley, who was an MP and therefore someone whom Mycroft wouldn’t want to upset.

“Perfect,” thought the detective, grinning and hoping for a big fireworks finale to the case, disrupting that haven of upper class tranquillity.

He stood there on the pavement, listening for any suspicious noise, but there was none except for the scurrying of rats inside the sewers and the soft keen of the chilly wind.

Not having much else to do except for waiting and smoking a cigarette, he observed the church in the middle of the piazza, recalling the description given by Dickens of that baroque edifice: “some petrified monster, frightful and gigantic, on its back with its legs in the air.” And admittedly, it looked too large for the space it occupied - rather like some great piece of machinery that had been parked in a tiny, slightly shabby drawing room.

The Greek columns and stylized towers soared, white and ponderous, above a row of brownstone town houses, prim and proper with their curtained sash windows hinting at bashfulness in the face of opulence.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed a flicker of light inside the church, a rosy glow coming through the latticed window. When he looked more closely, it was gone. But he realised it might have only receded, and that the velvet curtains could have been working as a screen.

Entering without being seen was out of the question, he judged. Besides, it was his intention to seek a confrontation, to prove to John that he could defeat his demons on his own, without manufactured or external help.

He walked round to the front of the building, ascended the marble steps and pushed the heavy portal.

No matter what Sherlock believed, John Watson was not a naïve sidekick. He had noticed that his dearest friend was perturbed and imagined he would not sleep that night. Thus when he’d allowed himself to drift off, he’d done so with the alertness of the soldier, who only needs a faint murmur to be shaken awake from his dreams.

Unfortunately, the secrecy of his predicament had not allowed him to follow the detective immediately and when he’d reached the street, Sherlock’s cab had already disappeared in the distance.

There was only one thing he could do: call Inspector Lestrade.
After many failed attempts, it was only after mentioning Mycroft that he was patched through to a private line.

“Doctor Watson, what could be the reason for such a tardy call? Has anything happened to Sherlock?” the Inspector asked, in a sleepy voice.

“He’s gone, but he didn’t tell me where. You know who the murderer is; I think it’s time you told me,” he replied, sternly.

“My dear man, I’m afraid I can’t. He’s asked me to not say anything and I have to respect his wishes. You shouldn’t worry about it, as I have put two of my best men in charge of surveillance and it’s all been quiet on that front.”

“Kindly do not my dear me, sir. This is a matter of life and death; my partner may be in serious danger and you are playing charades with me?” he shouted.

He heard a haughty voice intervene.

“My dear Doctor Watson, your concern for the welfare of my brother is truly commendable. However, you should have realised by now that he can be, how should I put it, stubbornly set in his ways.”

“Is he risking his life to prove that he’s clever?” John asked, enraged beyond words.

“That’s precisely what Sherlock is doing and we have to let him, at least this time.”

“Listen to me, you may be part of the British Government or even be the King himself, but that doesn’t mean I will allow you to toy with your brother’s life.”

“My, my, Doctor Watson, one could almost think you and Sherlock are more than just colleagues…”

“One could almost think what one wants, provided one quits wasting my time and tells me where Sherlock is,” John hissed, in his sharpest military voice.

He heard a pitiful sigh at the other end of the line.

“I imagine that, to your well-ordained mind, we may appear rather unconventional siblings, but you’d better get acquainted with our oddities if you want to entertain a long partnership with Sherlock. He needs to prove something to you and to himself, and since Lestrade and I have everything under control, we intend to let him deal with the dénouement in his own way.”

“You won’t help me then?” John asked, through gritted teeth.

A short silence followed then Mycroft emitted a sound which suggested he’d just rolled his eyes.

“Think of the victim, doctor, not of the culprit,” he said, and with that he put the phone down.

John resisted the impulse to throw the phone into the fireplace and lit a cigarette instead. He saw the cup with Sherlock’s cold tea and felt a twinge of panic, like the point of a dagger stabbing his chest.

Victim, he thought, certainly not Forbes, but who then?

“Idiot,” he screamed out loud, before darting back to his bedroom and prepare to follow Sherlock to Westminster.
The baroque exterior of St John’s had not prepared Sherlock for the lofty, spacious emptiness of its interior, for the white walls contrasting with the scarlet curtain and the dark, polished timber gallery or fort the giant white-painted Corinthian columns carrying the simple barrel-vaulted roof. It was as cool and quiet and evocative as the inside of a seashell. In the soft light of the candles, the shadows fell on the marble floor like ghosts emerging from a deep slumber.

He searched every corner of it: it was empty. But there was another surprise to come. Beneath the church and reached by a concealed stone spiral stairs in the corner tower was the entrance to the crypt. He plucked a candle from its holder, opened the door and was faced with low brick vaults - hardly more than head-high – and a pungent reek of mould and sewage, and something else too: a floral scent, sickly sweet and so intense it persisted, despite the other smells. He walked down, gingerly, in the semi-darkness. When he reached the bottom of the steps, the heavy door banged shut and a key was turned into its lock.

The cab departed, leaving John outside a dark and silent Mulberry House.

What now? he thought.

He had been so sure of finding Sherlock there or even of being faced with some scuffle or impending danger that he was momentarily nonplussed.

Knocking at the door was hardly an option, considering he wouldn’t know what to say and besides the place looked thoroughly untouched, not warranting his intrusion.

He was starting to think he’d perhaps misunderstood the situation and that he should have maybe gone to London Bridge instead, when he noticed the stub of a Turkish cigarette. He knelt down to touch it and felt a faint warmth still clinging to it.

Sherlock had been there and gone where? He looked around and despair surged in his heart. He could have gone anywhere. According to Mycroft, the murderer was being watched, but what if he had an accomplice? And he he saw it: barely a blink or pinkish light flickering inside the church.

He knew what he had to do and that it was dangerous, but it was no choice at all.

In his haste to leave the flat he had not packed his old service handgun, and there was nothing, not even a branch off a tree that he could use as a weapon.

Well, he would have to improvise: he walked up the steps and opened the portal, as softly as he could. He had not been inside more than a few instants, when something heavy descended on his head: sparks ignited behind his eyes before he fell into liquid oblivion.

Sherlock banged at the locked door, testing its robustness with his shoulders and feet, assessing its impregnability. Trying to force the lock would take some doing, as it was an ancient one, and anyway he was curious to discover what he would find inside the crypt.

There was a luminescence in the distance, past the narrow confines of the crypt’s entrance. He re-lit the candle with his lighter and carefully advanced towards the source of that gleam.

The spectacle was, as intended, rather breathtaking: on a slab of white marble supported by a pedestal and covered with a white velvet rug, stood an unconscious Stephen, dressed in white satin doublet and breeches, a white ruff around his neck. His posture was that of a sleeping prince, and the
atmosphere around him, filtered through that blanket of whiteness, was that of an Arctic prismatic fairyland.

For a terrible moment, Sherlock thought that the boy was dead, but when he touched his hands - that lay folded atop his breast - they were cool but alive, with a slow but steady pulse.

The detective ducked his head to smell the boy’s mouth, but there was no hint of cyanide in his breath.

“Stephen, can you hear me?” he shouted in the boy’s ear, to no avail.

In the distance, a door creaked open and steps approached.

“Dear Lord Holmes, such a pleasure to have you here, tête-à-tête, at last.”

The annihilating cold voice, now devoid of any ingratiating warmth, announced the entrance of Revel Dester.

“Nothing prevented you from coming to see me before, except for your propensity for over-dramatisation,” Sherlock replied, quietly.

The man was dressed in sober black tie, having eschewed his assumed flamboyance in favour of a return to his real personality. His expression was blank and his green eyes hard and unblinking.

“Coming from a self-obsessed egotist, it is high praise indeed,” he said. “Your friends will still be stationed outside my house, poor saps. I hope they don’t freeze in this inclement weather.”

“I was certain that you’d find a way to him before the night was over.”

The older man sat down on a marble tomb, inviting Sherlock to do the same. There was no point in refusing, so he complied: a civilised conversation between a murderer and his captor; surely that was the stuff one found in cheap novels, he cringed.

“It wasn’t him I wanted, but you.”

Sherlock was prepared for that, and replied with a nonchalance he wasn’t feeling.

“Peter was not…”

“That name no longer belonged to him; thanks to you, he had to forego his own identity, even his own family. He was sent to live with us, buried in the countryside, but I am sure you know the story.”

“Peter James Johnstone: that was his name, when I knew him.”

Dester let out a strangled sound that could barely masquerade as laughter.

“You never knew him at all, you vainglorious nonentity! He was a genius, a true chameleon, with the strongest will I have ever encountered in a human being. His parents sent him to us and left these shores for good. His own mother told me that she disowned him, her only child. And all because of you! We wanted to give him our name, Mirabel, but he insisted on taking the surname of our Irish footman, a Joe Mallay who had lost one of his kids to TB. It was all easily done, all it took was a paltry sum on money.”

“Thus Peter Johnstone became James Mallay. How old was he then?”
“Don’t play coy with me, your Lordship; you know full well how old he was: a thirteen-year old blond angel that you accused of atrocious deeds, when it was you who manufactured them.”

Sherlock’s memory of the past was still hazy, despite having ripped apart the cloak that had enveloped it; but he did remember that what he had told John was a lie that he’d unconsciously constructed, to avoid a more painful truth.

Like Salome, with each discarded veil the truth had emerged, vivid and naked: a boy who had worshipped another boy, and had been close to him every day, in spirit and deed, until that fateful night when he’d found him, in the room they shared…

Sherlock closed his eyes, and a nauseating sickness rose from his throat.

The two bodies, naked, sweaty, entwined; Peter holding the skinny boy by his pubescent hips and driving into him; their cries of pleasure rising like heat off a swamp; and he couldn’t watch but he had to, he couldn’t stop himself. An eternity elapsed, and then Peter turned towards the door and stared at him, a knowing smile stretching his lips; then Sherlock was running away, running like he would never, could never stop.

“You told your family that Peter had tried to rape you; out of spite and jealousy. He was sent down and your people made sure he’d never be accepted in any other reputable school and that his name would be dragged in the mud, should he attempt to crawl out of his anonymity.”

The detective’s heart was beating wildly and his skin was cold and clammy; he needed his opium, badly.

“You want this, don’t you?” Dester said, pulling out a bottle of laudanum and placing it out of the younger man’s reach. Sherlock swallowed audibly and clenched his fists to stop himself from being tempted.

“Why now… why Forbes?”

“Don’t be so modest, my dear. I’m quite certain you already know why, but I will indulge you. James fell under the spell of the wrong sort of people and, because he was against the War, he did what his conscience dictated to try and stop it. Forbes took advantage of him, much as you had done, then sent him to his death, without a moment’s remorse. That was Duncan through and through, ever since when we were boys: he could snap a hare’s neck and laugh as he did it. God’s justice is what struck him, killed him as he tried to take advantage of another boy,” the man explained, in even, unemotional tones.

“That boy was Stephen,” Sherlock murmured.

Dester turned to the sleeping boy and smiled; his first real emotion since he’d arrived.

“Siegfried was the one who urged the anti-war plea so that it gathered momentum; James was inspired by him, and yet when the time came, Sassoon helped the War office; he snitched on the boys who’d adored him. I thought it was time he learnt what it was to lose the single most important thing in his life.”

“Like James was to you…”

Dester threw him a venomous look.

“Don’t even presume to know what James was to me, you cold, unfeeling wretch! You cannot imagine the ecstasy of his company; it was like sitting under a huge lily, absorbing pollen like a
seduced bee, like being perpetually on the crest of a wave. When he came to us, I was lonely and about to embark on an uncertain path, that of the novelist. He was like water on barren soil; you don’t know what it is when you meet someone and suddenly, a flower opens in your heart.”

Sherlock’s face did something that he couldn’t prevent and Dester smirked.

“Or perhaps you do know; what a stroke of luck on my part! I had decided it was time to set the wheels in motion, having seen you lose your composure, and your senses, more than once, in London Bridge; but I had not banked on Doctor Watson coming into your life. It’s even better this way, as you can finally comprehend what it is that moves my actions.”

“And you would sacrifice Stephen too? He’s innocent, like James was, according to you.”

“You don’t know Stephen, my dear. Like Dorian Gray, he’s terrified of ageing and losing his health and beauty. Don’t believe for a moment that I lured him here under false pretences. I assured him he would die like a prince and like that he would be remembered like he is now, rare and unslaved.”

Sherlock’s eyes widened in surprise:

“He knew about you? And allowed you poison him with opium at Wilsford?”

“Oh, that! No, that was only a warning directed at you, Lord Holmes; the dose was far too low to be lethal. The only thing Stephen knows is my real name.”

“Edmund Mirabel: it’s a wonderful name, but naturally you couldn’t keep it. Although it seems nobody made the connection between Mirabel and Dester.”

“Our is an old family of landed gentry, residing in the unglamorous countryside and mostly forgotten, despite having kept our place in Burke’s.”

The detective nodded and chose his next words carefully.

“You could have gotten away with it. There was no real proof of you murdering Forbes and poisoning Tennant. If you’d stopped there, you would be a free man.”

The writer laughed, softly.

“Within God, all men are free. But on this earth, my freedom ceased when James died. Freedom without love is like light to a blind man: useless.”

“You want to die and take us with you,” Sherlock said, softly.

“I won’t force you, my dear. I know there’s a gun in your pocket, but I will let it go unnoticed. Have you read darling Edith’s book?”

“Yes, that’s what gave me the idea. That and Rex Whistler.”

“They suspected something was wrong with me, so I fed them bits and pieces of my past and Edith, being a clever woman, caught the spirit of my devotion to James. I would like you to understand the error of your ways and pay for your sins, my dear Lord Holmes.”

Sherlock laughed bitterly.

“You don’t think I’ll wilfully commit suicide because of a God I don’t believe in or a sense of guilt I don’t subscribe to.”
Revel grinned and moved closer to the detective, until he was within touching distance.

“You’re fooling yourself, my dear; your guilt is so strong you became addicted to this” – he indicated the bottle – "to assuage it. I don’t want you to commit suicide; what I want to give you is the ultimate challenge: to prove that you can face the lure of the unknown. This flagon contains a promise of untold paradises, are you sure you want to go back to your nightmares, when this can give you permanent oblivion?"

He uncapped the bottle and let a drop of liquid fall on the palm of his hand.

“Taste it and let heaven open its gates to you,” the man whispered.

The thirst and agony of withdrawal that had been substituted by John’s loving touch, came roaring back into Sherlock’s veins and limbs, weakening his resolve.

He closed his eyes, parted his lips and trembled in acquiescence.

John woke up and for a moment thought he must be dreaming still: he was lying on the floor of the altar of a church, bound with ropes and facing a dramatic red curtain, like those he’d seen in the theatre. His head was throbbing and a bump was forming at the back of it; he could feel it swell. He had a quick look around to ascertain that he was alone and quickly went about assessing his means of escape: his legs and arms were tied with ropes and there were no objects in his vicinity that he could use to sever those bounds.

At the far end of the altar, near the window, was a ledger mounted on a pewter tripod, whose feet were pointed and sharp-edged: he only had to wriggle like a worm and reach it and he would be free, provided that evil scoundrel did not make a comeback. Little by little, he got to the ledger, and by that time his injured shoulder throbbed as much as his head. The job of cutting the ropes around his hands seemed never-ending, ever more so because he was terrified of what could have happened to Sherlock.

When he finally broke free, and was able to undo the knots at his feet, he could have screamed in frustration and annoyance: the advantage he’d given to that criminal and how easily he’d fallen into his trap!

He searched the church from nave to nave, but couldn’t find any recent trace of human occupancy.

There were at least four turrets, but their entrance was barred and, judging by the bolts, they had been untouched for a long time.

And then it came to him: from outside, he had noticed two slit-like openings at the base of the edifice and he guessed the existence of a crypt. He searched for the entrance to no avail, until a soft breeze almost snuffed out the candle he was carrying with him. Behind a column in the corner tower, a Grecian bas-relief concealed a heavy door that appeared to be shut.

How he wished he had his gun on him! But there was no time for recriminations, so he looked around for a suitable implement to force the door; the only viable object was a sturdy wooden stool. He was poised to pound the door with all his strength, but at the first blow it opened an inch or so, as if a mechanism had been fixed so that it would give way at the first attempt.

“Sherlock, are you alright? Sherlock, where are you? What are you…” he shouted, and stopped dead as he saw the man he loved more than anything in the world about to lick something off Revel Dester’s hand.
“Doctor Watson, you are here just in time for the show,” the man exclaimed, smiling.

John was too stunned to reply; in his hurry to find Sherlock, he’d overlooked the question of the murderer’s identity and the revelation, together with his lover’s dazed, submissive attitude, rendered him speechless.

“Step away from him, Dester,” he hissed, when he came back to his senses.

“It’s not what he desires, isn’t it your Lordship? Those awful nightmares, the fear and the loneliness, the never-abating hunger: all of that, gone in a brief moment.”

The detective gaze had stayed on Dester’s hand, on that drop of liquid that still wetted the centre of his palm.

“Sherlock, look at me dearest; remember what I said: no matter what you’ve done and who you’ve been, I will always be here for you,” the doctor said, tenderly.

“You don’t know that, John, not really,” the younger man replied, mesmerised by sights unseen.

“One thing I know, my love: that you will never be on your own again. If you decide to fall into this precipice, there I will go too.”

These words finally shook the detective from his trance.

“No, you can’t… you wouldn’t,” he stammered.

John moved towards him, carefully, as Dester looked on, seemingly ready to pounce.

“Yes, darling, I would… I will follow you to hell, if I have to.”

Finally, Sherlock turned his eyes towards him: they were wide, terrified, bright with tears.

“Keep your eyes fixed on me, my dear,” John whispered, getting closer; out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a quick movement, but his attention was focused on his lover, who was coming back from his lucid dream; shaking like a leaf and deathly pale, Sherlock fell into John’s arms.

“My darling boy,” the doctor crooned, as he watched Revel Dester drink from the bottle.

“Revenge is the naked idol of the worship of a semi-barbarous age,” Dester quoted, with a stertorous breath.

“Shelley,” Sherlock replied, softly.

The dying man and the detective exchanged a look of understanding and forgiveness, and silence fell like a stone into a peaceful pond.

"This is my own life: rare, unslaved." From the Journals of Stephen Tennant

Chapter End Notes
I couldn't help the references to the Fall and to ASIP. More than a detective story, I wanted this to be Sherlock's journey, from pain and denial to release and happiness.

Next: sexy times for our boys
ETA 7th October As it turns out, I will need one additional chapter for the... happy ending (wink)
Apologies, I did not realise the explanatory chapter would be so long.
Siegfried Sassoon was on a jagged edge between pain-stricken and furious.

He stared at Jonas, the blond valet who still retained the astute looks of the street urchin he once was, and opened his mouth to insult him, but in the end, with enormous effort, restrained himself.

Stephen lay on his bed, on top of the covers, deep in his narcotic sleep; his golden hair shimmered and his mouth was painted coral pink, but his powdered face seemed nearly bluish in his paleness.

“He said he wanted to retire early and sleep until late. I was to come for him at noon of the following day, he said, and we would have gone to Wilsford together. Instead, he’d planned to die. I don’t understand,” the poet said, burying his face in his hands.

Sherlock - who had black rings around his eyes and a tremor in his hands - gazed at John, who immediately took the valet aside and gave him instruction to bring refreshments of the alcoholic sort.

When the boy came back, brandy was poured in tumblers, passed round and sipped, in silence. It was only when the valet had gone, that the conversation resumed.

“Why is he here? Whatever happened to William?” Sassoon asked.

“I needed a trustworthy person to watch over him and Jonas has been very useful. Tonight he couldn’t do much, as Stephen had made it very clear that he wanted to be on his own; the boy didn’t want to risk his position by disobeying. And, as you know, Tennant can be very convincing.”

The poet snorted, staring into his glass.

“You can say that again! He has this deceiving appearance of a frail flibbertigibbet, but he's as stubborn as a mule, and as uncommunicative. But I never suspected he would want to kill himself; not Stephen, so enamoured with life’s pleasures…”
“His chest infection must have taken a turn for the worse,” John said, “all that feverish enthusiasm and the excess nervous energy may be a sign of TB.”

“Dester convinced him the illness would reduce him to a shadow of his present self; that no one would love him anymore, but only pity him,” Sherlock explained, as if talking to himself.

Siegfried became apoplectic with rage.

“If Dester wasn’t dead already, I would kill him with my bare hands,” he hissed, clenching and unclenching his big, strong fists.

“Without meaning to sound too melodramatic, he had died a long time ago. He was clinging to his fictional life only in order to avenge the wrong that he believed was done to him,” Sherlock explained.

“But I never did anything to him; I didn’t even know him particularly well, not as a close friend anyway.”

“You knew his protégé, a young man named James Mallay.”

Sassoon shook his head, a blank expression in his eyes.

“The Cabinet Noir list,” John said, slowly understanding where Sherlock was going. The hadn’t had time for a proper conversation, what with the police, Tennant’s family physician and the coroner, all coming between them. Jonas had been told to telephone Siegfried who had come on his Packard driving at breakneck speed.

“I never had anything to do with that list!” the man shouted. “I merely picked out the names of soldiers I knew, who had suffered with shell-shock or other trauma; he was not among those and I don’t even remember his name.”

“Even more unforgivable, in his eyes; you had allowed a boy who deeply admired your rebellious stance against the conflict to be executed for treason, while you have gotten away with it and completely ignored the victim of your foolhardiness.”

“But I never,”

“I’m sure you never meant to hurt the boy, but ultimately you did. It doesn’t make you guilty: he was an adult and made his own decisions.”

“What did he look like, this James Mallay? If you describe him to me, perhaps it would help me remember.”

John saw the mounting panic in his friend’s countenance, but the detective replied, calmly.

“I knew him back when we were youths. Blond, blue eyed, regular features; he was only a kid at the time, but I assume he’d have become a handsome man; not too tall perhaps, but well-built and with an attractive face,” Sherlock said, gazing intensely at John, trying to convey some important message the latter couldn’t decipher. “I’m sure Dester’s private possessions will contain several photos of the boy; a few perhaps taken by Mr Beaton. And I suspect if there will be some of the drawings by Forbes too,” he added.

Sassoon’s eyes widened.

“It was Revel who set fire to Beaton’s studio? Dear Lord, the man was insane!”
“He didn’t want any trace of his boy’s life to persist in the hands of people who, he believed, had taken advantage of him. Beaton is lucky to be alive, and that probably because he only took photos of the boy without knowing who is was.”

“And Forbes slept with him, I guess?”

“According to Dester, he lured him into his life, used him up and discarded him, sending him to his death. But Ms Sitwell - and this is only between us - mentioned that Forbes had been in love with a boy and that he died.”

The poet sipped his brandy with a pensive, sad air.

“Duncan was the sort of man who would do that; he could be in love, but there were things that always mattered more to him: his art, his country. I told you when we first met that he accused me of living a dream life, and perhaps he was right; but I wouldn’t put anything above Stephen – I couldn’t; I ask for nothing but to be near him always.”

Sherlock looked at John, and the latter smiled, fondly, with a wicked glint in his eye. The detective’s lips quirked and his cheeks flushed, unbidden.

“I suppose we will know the entirety of the story in due course, but for now, if you have no objections, I would like to take care of my invalid,” Siegfried said, setting down his empty glass on the side table.

“The papers will be full of it soon enough,” John replied.

“Yes, it’s quite the scandal: both well known men, both from good families.”

Sherlock didn’t say anything and his partner made a note to ask him later about the implications of that silence.

They left Mulberry House when the sun was already high in the sky; both too hollowed out to talk, both only wanting to go back to the comforts of Baker Street, away from prying eyes, away from all that death.

Mycroft was already there when they arrived; once again, Sherlock had detected it from the position of the door knocker, but this time Mrs Hudson had been sent out on some errand, which John imagined would have annoyed her beyond measure; she would have disliked taking orders from the elder Holmes, but would not have been able to disobey his request.

However, she had taken time to leave them a plate of Chelsea buns and a pot of tea.

John had every intention of insulting his friend’s brother, but the lure of food and hot drinks superseded every other desire except for that of his bed, where he wanted to stay for at least a day and a night, possibly intertwined with Sherlock.

Mycroft looked vaguely disgusted as the doctor feasted on the cake, but the latter could not care less.

“The death of Revel Dester will be announced as a ‘bright young thing’ charade gone wrong. They took photos of Tennant dressed as Prince Charming and that will strengthen the case; since many are already upset at their excesses and lack of decorum,” here Sherlock sneered, “I imagine the backlash will only be temporary, but for a time all this… frivolity will be denounced for what it is: a poisonous waste of time.”
Neither John nor his companion could object to this, as they both agreed with the sentiment, if not with its purveyor.

“Won’t they connect it to the death of Forbes?”

“Probably, but the public is eminently easy to persuade, provided you feed them the same information over and over again. Two accidents due to a careless flirtation with drugs within a set of artistic, wealthy individuals: I assume many readers will just conclude it’s no big loss, after all.”

The doctor bridled at this suggestion: life to him was always important, no matter how superfluous the use made of it. Mycroft pre-empted his observations by raising a placatory hand.

“Let’s not quibble, my dear Watson. Whitehall are extremely satisfied and so am I, in more ways than one. I will deposit a very substantial sum in a joint account I took the liberty of opening at Lloyd’s. Sherlock, before you berate my unacceptable interference, remember how you hate financial transactions and setting foot in banks and the like.”

“John would have done it for me, but I suppose you are expecting my gratitude for what you did.”

“What gratitude?” the doctor intervened, “You nearly died because he wouldn’t tell me where you’d gone to! Don’t think I will ever forget, Sir. Just because you are Sherlock’s brother, it doesn’t mean you should be allowed to make decisions on his behalf.”

Mycroft looked him up and down, assessing something and coming to a conclusion; in the end, he sighed and opened his arms in a surrendering gesture.

“I accept that it’s no longer the case, but do understand, John, that I have always acted with my brother’s best interests in mind.”

“From what I understand, you willingly offered him a case which would plunge him back into a past which he was trying to forget.”

“Suppressing is not the same as forgetting.”

The two men stared at each other in silence, but the deadlock was broken by Mycroft, who suddenly gazed at his watch and grimaced, eloquently.

“I’m abominably late, gentlemen. If you need me, I shall be at the Garrick’s later this afternoon.”

Sherlock, who up until then had been lost in his reverie, gave a hoarse laugh.

“You left the Diogenes so that you could find out about Forbes and Dester, didn’t you?”

His brother shuddered, but didn’t deny it.

“Mirabel was not a well-known name, but elderly gentlemen in clubs tend to have excellent memory and plenty of time to wax lyrical about the past.”

“And the Diogenes only hosts politicians who care and know nothing about the arts and its frequent scandals,” the detective concluded, pleased that this mystery had finally been solved.

“I’m sure it will please you enormously to imagine my discomfort in those settings. Good day, little brother. Doctor Watson,” the elder Holmes said, tapping the floor with his umbrella as he walked to the door.

“Thank you, Mycroft,” Sherlock said, quietly. His brother didn’t turn round, but stopped for a
moment. “You’re welcome, Sherlock,” he replied, and was gone.

“Peter Johnstone was the boy who tried to… hurt you and he changed his name into James Mallay after what he did to you, but Dester, no, Mirabel, was convinced he was a victim, an angel who’d been wronged and forced to hide from the world? But surely a little research on his part would have proved that he was quite mistaken,” John exclaimed, a little bewildered.

Both being exhausted, they had ended up in Sherlock’s bed, but had been unable to fall asleep until the entire truth was out in the open.

“He wasn’t mistaken, not entirely. What I told you was a lie; not a purposeful one, because I had indeed forgotten and manufactured my own version of it. What really happened was that I was a young boy of thirteen, infatuated for the first time and seemingly reciprocated, until one fateful day,” the detective explained, unable to meet John’s gaze.

He told him what had happened, the sight that had greeted him, the sorrow, jealousy and arousal that he’d felt as he watched Peter pound into the other boy, the way the blond had smiled at Sherlock, knowingly, as if he knew the pleasure-pain he was causing and delighted in it.

“I wanted him gone, punished, destroyed for what he did it to me, so I invented that he and his friends had tried to rape me.”

“You said it had happened at Cambridge,” John interjected.

“Yes, because I couldn’t bear the idea of dwelling on what came before that period,” the younger man replied, crestfallen.

Here was what he had dreaded most: his lover’s contempt, the disillusionment in his good, honest eyes.

But John’s reaction was to hold Sherlock’s face in his hands, and kiss it: first his forehead then his cheeks, nose, mouth and finally his chin.”

“Dearest, you were only a kid and from what I understand, you didn’t have many friends; he was the only one. I’m not saying he deserved what happened to him, but I doubt his family would have forsaken him on the strength of only that one episode. There must have been others, and I am sure Mycroft knows about them and he will tell you, if you want to.”

“He’s already given me some documents, but I don’t want to read them. I don’t want things to be made easier for me, don’t you see?”

John kissed him again on the lips, softly.

“Yes, I do see. For you, that episode belongs to you only and that’s your own personal guilt; it was the reason you needed the opium, in order to forget and remember at the same time. And the club in London Bridge was a replication of that one scene you’d been made to witness, a scene which excited and terrified you beyond measure.”

Sherlock’s expression became one of utter surprise and John laughed.

“Well, I am a doctor, after all; besides being your lover, that is.”

“You would have died with me,” the detective whispered.
“I said I’d follow you wherever you went and I meant it.”

They embraced with a tenderness that soon spilled into ardour.

“Before I ravish you, dearest, there are few questions I still need you to answer,” the doctor said, caressing his friend’s neck and bare chest.

“I think it’s perhaps easier if I recount what happened from the start and perhaps all your doubts will be satisfied. When Peter became James Mallay he initiated a relationship which we can only assume was sexual with Mirabel - a distant cousin with whose family the boy had been left with. When Edmund Mirabel became Revel Dester they started living together, but the boy was kept hidden, as a secret. That must have made the relationship even more intense for both parties. This entente was scuppered by the War. Mallay, who was already an outsider, was against it and became a conscience objector, probably encouraged by Sassoon’s rebellious stance and by the example of the poets’ friends. By then, he’d decided that he should go to France to see whether he could convince more people to his cause and there he met Forbes. We can only imagine that the painter became enamoured with him, or so Ms Sitwell has intimated, and took him as his lover, drawing and painting him on repeated occasions. On one of those, Beaton, who came and went from Forbes’ studio without paying much attention to the man’s models, must have taken photographs, which had to be destroyed. As for Whistler, he must have suspected something about the relationship, but like Beaton, he knew Forbes to be a Lothario, so he didn’t pay any attention to his latest conquest.

This indifference must have enraged Dester, for whom the boy was the beginning and ending of his entire world. Later, the patriotic Forbes discovered Mallay was liaising with German troublemakers and came to the decision that the man was a spy. Despite his feelings for him, his duties lay with his country first and foremost, so the boy’s fate was sealed. As for Sassoon, he saw the name on the Cabinet Noir’s list, but had not mentioned it as a possible victim of War. He’s not to blame, naturally, as he was only telling the truth, but to Dester it was like he’d been signing Mallay’s death warrant. He let his rage fester and being a religious man - in his own way - he tried to find a way of turning his revenge into the work of God. Forbes died as he corrupted another boy, Stephen, who would have perished as punishment for Sassoon and I would have lost my mind to opium and probably been accused of negligence in my work and my name would have been dragged into the mud. Your appearance on the scene only added powder to his keg; he could use you to make me suffer.”

“How?” John asked.

“You would have come to know what I was like and despised me for it, compared me to your previous lover unfavourably; also, by letting you know that Gabriel had been with Forbes, you would have suffered, and I with you. He had a twisted mind; that of a cunning plotter with nothing left to lose.”

“And how did he get hold of the poison?”

“He comes from country stock, he must have known a thing or two about cyanide; opium is very easy to obtain and so is the dimethyl sulphate. Don’t forget he’s a novelist and may well have been researching it as murder weapon for a book he never wrote.”

“Tennant said Dester hated the country and was nearly impossible to make him move from London.”

“I bet he wasn’t lying. The idyll with James flourished at his country estate. After the boy died, it must have been unbearable for him to be reminded of that happy period.”

“And what about Stephen: why didn’t he kill him straight away?”
Sherlock sighed.

“I don’t think he would have, in the end. Little by little, Tennant conquered him with his mixture of innocence and sensuality. He can be very attractive,” Sherlock said, curtly. John held him tighter and sucked on his throat, humming with satisfaction.

“I wouldn’t know,” he muttered, “I was distracted by someone else’s charms.”

The detective smiled, relaxing in his lover’s arms.

“Like Romeo seeing Juliet and forgetting about Rosaline.”

“Precisely,” John replied, moving down Sherlock’s body to lick a path from chest to navel.

“And you’ll forgive my evil doings that brought about this tragedy?”

“You were just a boy; there’s nothing to forgive. The choices he made after that were his own. Besides, he did what he did in the room you two shared, he must have known you were coming and he left the door open, so that you would be treated to the sight of him having relations with that other boy. It must have been horrific for you.”

“He smiled at me; that I will never forget.”

John placed a wet kiss on Sherlock’s belly, feeling it tighten beneath his lips.

“I’ll make sure you do, my love, even if it takes a lifetime.”

"I ask for nothing but to be near him always." Siegfried Sassoon writing in his Journal about Stephen Tennant

Chapter End Notes

Next: Sexy times...and Sherlock testing John's patience, as per usual :)
The Fixed Comet

Chapter Summary

The End, alas.
First of all: thanks to all of you who have read, commented and left kudos. It has been an incredibly demanding fiction, but I have enjoyed the challenge. I'm glad I didn't give up.

Note: Like previously noted, the Rex Whistler mural is in the Tate Britain's restaurant and it's named "The Expedition in Pursuit of Rare Meats." It's been restored recently.

“You have fixed my Life – however short. You did not light me: I was always a mad comet; but you have fixed me. I spun round you like a satellite for a month, but I shall swing out soon, a dark star in the orbit where you will blaze.”

Letter from poet Wilfred Owen to Siegfried Sassoon

A large padded envelope had arrived earlier that morning addressed to Doctor John Watson.

When he opened it, he was confronted with a face not dissimilar from his: blond hair, blue eyes, straight nose, thin, sensitive lips. Beaton had done a great job with the Autochrome plate so that the colours were crisp and clear, and every fleeting expression had been captured: trying as he might to read innocence in those traits, John simply couldn’t. He was aware of his obvious bias, but he’d always prided himself on being as objective as possible: it was something in the eyes; they lacked warmth and not in the way Sherlock’s did, at times. While the detective’s gaze could be both detached and piercing, there was always directness in it and a complete absence of malice.

The boy had been flirting with the camera, and perhaps with the photographer too, but rather than playfulness, his attitude suggested a more calculating sensuality.

“What are you scowling at so early in the morning?” Sherlock asked, towelling his wet curls, as he went to pour himself a cup of tea.

“I’m not sure eleven qualifies as early in most people’s vocabulary, but I’m not sure you should see this, dearest.”

Naturally, this was the worst thing he could have said. The detective immediately came up behind him and looked down at the photograph. John couldn’t see his face, but heard his breath hitch and soon after a huff of air hit the back of his neck.

“He had not changed that much,” Sherlock whispered. “He doesn't really resemble you, it is only superficial. Anyone looking at you must see that you are a good, decent man.”

“Yes, I know what you mean,” the doctor said, turning round to place a kiss on his lover’s cheek.
Sherlock leaned into his touch, distractedly. His eyes had narrowed like they usually did when he was dissecting a problem.

“What is it, my dear?”

“I have been thinking about the reverie I fell into on the night we met. It involved a Malay boy who was to take his revenge on me. Part of the dream was surely a book I’ve read sometime in the past, but the name cannot be a coincidence. I never knew Peter Johnstone had changed his name, so I racked my brains over and over again but, alas, I can’t find the answer.”

“You did see that Cabinet Noir list at the time, I assume.”

“Yes, of course. But why retain the name in my memory and incorporate it into my nightmares when I did not know who that person was. The traitors were executed but it was done in secret; even the trial was private. And I wasn’t even in London at the time, but working in a top secret facility in Sussex.”

John mused a little while and then an idea came to him.

“Perhaps the name James and the fact that he was on a blacklist were enough for your fertile imagination to produce a connection.”

Sherlock smiled and shook his head.

“You presume too much of me: I’m not prescient. And in this case I have been wilfully blind, which makes your suggestion even more improbable; but no matter, the case is closed and I will have to accept that my own mind was playing tricks on me.”

“I may not be as clever as you, dearest, but I’m certainly not stupid enough to believe you will cease questioning yourself.”

John put the photo back in the envelope and gazed at his friend, an unspoken question in his eyes.

“Do what you want with it. I don’t need to ever look at it again,” the younger man declared, sitting on the sofa and pointedly picking up the still untouched newspaper from the side table.

“I’ll keep it in my desk. Part of the evidence of the case, which - should you want to know - I have titled: The Poisonous Revelation,” John replied, waiting for Sherlock’s sneer.

He was not disappointed: the detective rolled his eyes, scrunched up his nose and folded the newspaper with haughtiness, if such a thing were possible.

“Really, John, using the murderer's name as a substantive? Besides, why go to all this trouble writing the blasted thing when nobody can read it? My meddlesome brother has been extremely clear on this, and while I wouldn’t normally care tuppence about his silly edicts, I would not endanger your safety on any account.”

John sat close to his partner and placed a hand on his pyjama-clad knee.

“Perhaps one day things will be different, who knows? And in the meantime, I will enjoy chronicling our adventures, making sure your genius is preserved for posterity.”

“What genius? The opium did all the work, in this instance, by pointing me in the right direction: first to you and then to all the reminders of the past. I only followed a path traced by my obsessions; you can hardly call it a great achievement.”
“I shall call it what I wish, since it is my narrative. And one day, when people read it, they will make up their own minds.”

“You are very sure that there will be more adventures to commit to paper,” the detective observed, covering John’s hand with his own.

“That I am, my darling. But from now on, I will be the one carrying the gun; if another villain threatens your life, I need to be able to stop him. In this case, perhaps, I could even have saved him.”

“My dear, it wouldn’t have been charitable to him; he didn’t want to be brought back into this world. You of all people should understand him.”

John’s professional ethics railed against the concept of merciful death, but his emotions went their own, more inchoate way.

“Sassoon telephoned to let us know that he managed to convince Stephen to travel with him to Bavaria. After that, they will follow the sunshine to Italy and perhaps even Morocco,” he said, to change the subject.

“He’s a very persuasive man,” Sherlock replied, gazing down at their interlaced fingers. “I wonder how long their dalliance will last. He’s a puritan at heart, while Tennant is a profligate epicurean. At first, opposite attracts, but there comes a time when shared interests prevail over mindless attraction. His youth won’t last forever and then what?”

“I suppose art will preserve the wonder of youthful happiness,” John replied, and grinned when he saw his lover’s astounded expression. His delight at surprising Sherlock would never cease, he thought.

“Just because I am a mere doctor, it doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate the pleasures of artistic endeavour; speaking of which,” he said, lifting his lover’s hand to his lips and kissing it.

“I’d have never posited lovemaking to be an art,” the detective countered.

“This could be up for debate,” John replied, winking. “But it wasn’t what I had in mind. I know what you said about portraits and photographs, but I would dearly like to have one of you, and the latter would be the least tedious.”

“Oh, that’s what you’d been plotting the last few days! I was getting worried that you were hiding some secret dalliance.”

“No more secrets, my love. I was arranging things with Beaton: he’s extremely busy, but he said he would make time for you.”

“I wonder what you promised him in return,” Sherlock joked, licking the tip of John’s thumb; the blond man shivered and had to close his eyes.

“Nothing of the sort; and you forget he has his own Watson, and from what I can gather I’m not his type, you are.”

“Oh, I don’t know. He may favour tall, dark and lithe men, but he seems to have a penchant for authority figures and soldiers, so you’d fit right in, my dear,” the detective replied, sucking the digit into his mouth, to the hilt.

John was trying to wade through the rising tide of lust that was overtaking him and the only raft in sight was a thing that had been nagging at him since the night of Dester’s death.
“Why didn’t you tell me about that valet boy, Jonas?” he croaked, and that did the trick, as Sherlock let go of his thumb, with a wet pop that caused a dark twinge in John’s bowels.

“He telephoned me and asked whether he could help. After all, since the painter’s death he was out of a job and felt – he said – a tad guilty that he couldn’t provide more information on his master’s past conquests. I took the opportunity to ask Lady Grey to employ him here in town, to look after Stephen, and she was glad to indulge me.”

“He wasn’t much help though, in the end, was he? And what will he do now the case has been solved? Will he travel with the happy couple?”

Sherlock barked out an amused laugh.

“He did what he could, poor boy. Tennant sneaked out from under his nose; the poor boy was forced to do as told or risk being sent packing. You have seen how capricious Tennant can be. No, he won’t go with them. Sassoon would never allow it.”

A silence followed, with the detective unsure whether he should tell his partner about this other secret pertaining to his profession. In the end, he sighed and decided to come clean.

“You should know that in my activity one frequently requires assistance and I have found that people accustomed to street life are more suitable to the purpose; thus, ever since after the War, I have acquired a vast underground network of individuals who, in exchange for some money and excitement, will provide me with occasional help and information.”

“And Jonas has become part of this network.”

Sherlock nodded.

“That boy likes you,” John said, frowning.

“He likes my money,” his lover stated.

“No, no, he admires you. Well, as long as he knows he can look, but cannot touch.”

The detective curled his arm around John’s shoulder and whispered in his ear:

“A bit possessive, are we my darling?”

Suddenly, the older man turned and took Sherlock’s mouth with his own, in a wet, passionate kiss.

It was an unseasonably warm day in mid-March and the night before they had finally solved a case involving a purloined diamond necklace.

Beaton had telephoned them the previous week, with glittering news of a brand new engagement with motion pictures which would take him to America for the foreseeable future; however, he wanted to honour his promise and so they had firmed a date for Sherlock’s visit to Beaton’s studio in Pelham Place.

That day had finally arrived.

“John,” Sherlock shouted from his bedroom, “Come tell me what you think.”
The doctor was draining his second cup of tea and eyeing a third helping of eggs and bacon, when the detective screamed his name again.

When John entered the room, he nearly lost his balance.

Sherlock was wearing a flouncy blouse of Elizabethan cut in the purest white silk while his legs were encased in a pair of skin-tight black velvet breeches that left nothing to the imagination. His feet were bare and so was his sternum, as four shirt’s buttons were undone. The frilly collar was parted open to show off the long, elegant line of the neck and the delicate collarbones.

John licked his lips and instinctively moved closer until he remembered the reason of this outlandish attire.

“You are not going to Beaton’s studio dressed like this, I hope.”

“Why not? You said you wanted the portrait to look intimate and not posed.”

The blond man shook his head.

“I never said anything remotely like it,” he replied, blinking as he tried to regain his composure. “I agree that you should do whatever pleases you, my dear, but within reason.”

Things were not going as Sherlock had planned: John was supposed to fly into a jealous rage and forbid him to go; he would insist that he wanted to and his lover would be firmly opposed until their fight devolved into something more… physical.

He had to think of something.

“What if this is what pleases me?” he asked, undoing the placket of his breeches.

“Stay your fingers,” John commanded, his eyes as hard as flint.

The younger man complied and waited for what he hoped would be a harsh reprimand.

“What is it that you want, Sherlock? Why don’t you tell me instead of provoking me into a scene?”

The detective blushed, a little ashamed, until he saw the ambiguous pucker at the corner of his lover’s mouth.

“After the Dester case, you have been extremely solicitous, perhaps overly so and I need…” he stuttered. Thankfully, his lover had already understood: clever, perfect John.

“Take off your garments and lay down on the bed, on your back,” he commanded.

“I would like to keep my shirt on, if you are amenable,” the younger man asked, tentatively.

“Alright, but this is the last concession you’re going to get. Do as I said; I will be back in a second.”

Quickly, Sherlock removed his breeches, which was all he was wearing, since he had not put on any undergarments.

He had already prepared the jar of oil and a flannel on top of his nightstand; he did as John had demanded, placing a pillow underneath his bottom and two beneath his head.
When John came back into the room, he was undressed and in his hands he held a silk scarf and a glass of water, the latter of which he placed on the bedside table.

“Put your hands above your head,” he said, and proceeded to loosely tie the boy’s wrists to the wooden headboard.

“Tell me if it hurts,” he murmured, but Sherlock shook his head.

“Speak up, please.”

“No, John,” the detective replied, meekly.

“If you want me to stop, just say the word, alright?”

“Yes.”

While he had been preparing in the wash-room, he’d berated himself for not seeing what his young lover needed. Despite his algid beauty and feigned self-assurance, Sherlock was inexperienced and still testing the boundaries of his sexuality. What was becoming evident was that, as he was being weaned off the opium, he needed a firmer hand to steady his course.

John took a few long, deep breaths, as he admired the unblemished body stretched out in front of him.

There were so many things he wished to do, but it wasn’t what Sherlock needed: the twitching of the detective’s limbs, the flickering of his eyelids, the fullness of his arousal told his lover that teasing was no longer an option.

He slicked his hands and used them to open his lover up, pressing a thumb on either side of the young man’s groin, at the juncture with his thighs, he caressed the tender skin and, quickly, ducked his head and lapped at Sherlock’s perineum, lightly at first then with increasing determination. After a while, he moved up and took the boy’s testicles in his mouth, one then the other, suckling gently, as his fingers caressed the tender skin of the detective’s inner thighs.

In the distance, John could hear Sherlock cries and moans, and the boy's body was shaking, trying to push up into his lover’s mouth.

“Stay still, my love,” he ordered, and the detective obeyed, but a faint tremor went through him, like electricity.

“Please, John, please,” the younger man crooned, and was immediately rewarded with a lewd kiss in his most intimate place. John licked the furled knot of muscle until it relaxed and allowed him in. How he relished that act; and infinitely more because it was Sherlock on the receiving end. After he’d pushed in with his tongue a dozen times, he was so aroused he couldn’t wait a second longer.

When he rose up on his knees to assess the situation, he found his lover in a state of dazed ecstasy, unable to speak, with lips bitten red and eyes as black as night.

A litany of moans was all the younger man could utter, and his erection had left a thick mother-of-pearl trail along his belly.

“I’ll put one finger in, dearest,” John said, but Sherlock shook his head desperately, like a condemned man faced with the noose.
“No, no, no,” the detective sobbed.

“I can’t be inside you otherwise… I will not hurt you, my love, alright?”

He kissed those bee-stung lips until his lover opened them and allowed him inside.

Sherlock’s skin was tingling all over and his blood was aflame with pure desire.

With John’s tongue in his mouth, he felt like he was being branded, but more than this he needed to be filled to the brim, to have his lover so deep inside him he wouldn’t be able to leave him, not ever. Because more than anything in the world, Sherlock feared John would one day tire of him and go away, abandon him to a lifetime of solitude.

After the pleasure-torture of fingering, finally the head of his lover’s cock was breaching him, so slow he wanted to shout and pull him inside, but he couldn’t, not even with his legs, or else he might be punished.

When John was buried in him completely, Sherlock could finally let go of his fears and enjoy the intense bliss of it.

“I’ll start moving now,” the doctor croaked, and moments later the thrusting started; initially it was a measured pounding, but it soon turned vicious, relentless.

Sherlock arched off the bed, giving all of himself, like a sacrificial victim.

“Say that you are mine, that you belong to me,” John asked, as he unsheathed his sodden erection only to plunge back in, like a diver dropping off a cliff.

Sherlock screamed and his cock slapped against his stomach, dripping and swollen-red.

“Yours, yes, to you, only, always,” he keened, his eyes bright with unspent tears.

“Again, say it again.”

“Yours, yours,” Sherlock repeated, and his sight went fuzzy around the edges; he vaguely felt John kiss his throat and chest, before his cock stiffened and he came, hard; ribbons of hot ejaculate sprayed his sweaty skin; his lover licked them off greedily as he pushed into him, again and again, until he shouted the detective’s name and spent inside his beloved body with such violence that he couldn’t stop shaking and shuddering.

The first thing John did when he came back to himself was to untie Sherlock’s hands; he massaged and kissed the reddened wrists and gently helped him drink from the glass.

“I’m never going to leave you, dearest,” he whispered. “I could prove it to you in the same fashion, at regular intervals, for the rest of our lives, if you so wish.”

Sherlock managed a timid smile.

“There’s another way, of course; less enjoyable, perhaps, but more official and binding,” John added, grinning as he watched understanding dawning on his lover.

“Do you mean what I think you mean,” Sherlock stuttered.

John took his hand and kissed his ring finger.
“I intend to ask you in a more appropriate moment and setting, but yes, I do mean precisely that.”

Words couldn’t do justice to the love swelling in Sherlock’s chest, so he didn’t use any, but wrapped John into a passionate, tender embrace.

“Your shirt is ruined, my love,” the doctor said, after a long while.

“I intend to wear it all the same.”

“Why would you want to do that? You are usually very particular about your appearance, dearest, and rightly so,” John said, smiling.

“Since you’d be the only one to see the photograph, I want to give you something worth remembering.”

“I think you should not be alone with Beaton; if you don’t mind, I propose to accompany you.”

Sherlock threw his head back and laughed happily.

“At last, my dear, you finally got there in the end!”

Pelham Place was a secluded, leafy street in Chelsea and from the outside Beaton's house seemed decorous if not luxurious. The artistic touches of its owner were visible in the choice of potted plants, the shade of the door's paint and the carved and elaborate wood knocker. John was about to make use of it when the door opened and Rex Whistler came out of it.

“What a jolly surprise! I was on my way to Pimlico and I thought I should drop by to give my best wishes to Cecil. He’s going to be very famous soon,” the man said, with a sardonic grin.

“Is your commission completed?” Sherlock asked, referring to the Tate mural.

“Well remembered, my friend. Yes, I just need to apply the finishing touches,” he answered then seemed to ponder on whether to say something more.

“I just saw pictures of that man James Mallay. Sieg told us everything, but we shall keep the secret, of course. The only thing is… I remember the boy; I had a conversation with him once, as Duncan was preparing his palette. We talked of London and of his life here and I noticed that he was sort of evasive, but one thing he had no problem speaking of was his predilection for certain clubs south of the river; you know which ones I mean,” he said, looking Sherlock in the eye.

John saw his fiancé turn pale and took his hand.

“He was an habitué of a particular place in London Bridge; he loved the anonymity of spying without being seen, he said.”

The other men stayed silent and Whistler decided it was time to leave.

“Good day, gentlemen. May the future bring us all success and happiness,” he declared, with a sad expression that contradicted the sentiment.

“We certainly hope so, Mr Whistler,” John replied. “I’m sure your work will delight generations to come.”

“They’ll think of me as they chew on their steaks,” the man laughed and, chuckling to himself, he
walked away.

“That’s why I dreamt of him. I must have seen him at the club and registered his presence without fully being aware of it. The damn opium,” Sherlock hissed.

“Now that the mystery has been fully solved, dearest, you can close that tormenting book for ever,” the doctor said, caressing his lover’s cheek.

“I’d like you to be in the photograph with me. I want to be able to look at you, at us together, in the future, and reflect on the moment when the past became finally just that: past.”

John smiled tenderly and nodded, overcome with emotion.

“I bet you’d already decided that anyway,” he joked.

Sherlock gave him his most luminous, sincerest smile.

“From the very moment I met you,” he replied, fondly.

Their hands still intertwined, their walked through the door that represented the start to the rest of their lives.

Together.

“Art is the only way to preserve the wonder of youthful happiness.” From the journals of Stephen Tennant.

End Notes

Comments and kudos are much appreciated. :)

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