Child's Play

by rabidsamfan

Summary

A cache of old letters reveals an early draft of a story which never reached publication, wherein Watson must do much of the rescuing of a kidnapped child.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

*(The letters from the brassbound trunk are yellowed, and tied together with the ribbon from a box of rock candy. Some of the pages are lacy with snipped out pieces, victims of the censor’s scissors, and others are missives so short that it’s clear that they were sent merely to indicate the continued existence of the author. Near the end of the packet is a thicker sheaf, and the top page bears a date in the spring of 1916.)*

My dear Ann,

I know I have been a poor correspondent these past few weeks, but it is difficult to find things to tell you that the censor will not cut away. The war, like all wars, has its measures of tedium, and its bursts of madness, even here in the relative safety of the hospital, but I think the worst of the recent (paragraph removed). And I have time once again. I remember that in a letter last autumn you asked if I would ever write a story about me, and not my friend Mr. Sherlock Holmes -- one in which I played a major part. To be honest with you, my dear, I might dream at night of the Afghan war, but I have no heart to compare it with the fresh horrors that surround me. The years when Holmes was “dead” are equally painful to recall, given the other losses that befell. But if you will consent to be my editor, I have thought of a tale which might be of interest to you if no one else. Holmes is in it, of course, but in this case I truly contributed skills of my own.

--//--
It was in the hottest part of summer, in one of the busy years after his return, that Holmes and I were called in to act in an unofficial capacity in the matter of the kidnapping of the youngest son of a certain peer of the realm. I have hesitated to put pen to paper about this matter before, it is because at the time the utmost secrecy was required. Even in this letter to you, it is incumbent upon me to obscure the identity of the noble family involved by altering names, and more, for the matter was a delicate one. No whisper of the kidnapping reached the police or the newspapers at the time, although the boy was snatched from his nurse in broad daylight, right in front of his badly frightened sisters. Indeed, Holmes would not have been called in at all, had not the eldest of those sisters, a determined young lady in her ninth year, put her mother into an even greater panic by escaping her father's London house via the scullery and coming to Baker Street of her own volition.

"Lady Agatha Petherbridge," Mrs. Hudson announced our visitor with an amused light in her eye, presenting us with a visiting card that had been created from the side of a cardboard box, a sharp pencil, and great determination.

"Send her up, by all means," Holmes said, handing the card to me. I had cajoled Holmes into agreeing to a dinner at Simpson's, followed by a visit to the opera, and we were moments away from starting out, but I could hardly resent the delay. He had been skirting the edge of a black mood for days, and I welcomed any distraction which would keep his thoughts away from his dusty morocco case.

"Another missing cat, do you think?" he inquired brightly, referring to another case which had been brought to us by a child. But the moment that Lady Agatha stepped into the sitting room I saw his eyes darken with concern.

She looked from one of us to the other and settled quickly upon Holmes. "You don't look very like your picture in the _Strand _magazine," she told him, in a voice that trembled.

"It would be disadvantageous if I did," Holmes said, quite seriously. "Even criminals do read those stories, after all."

Her lips pursed and her eyebrows drew down. "Does that mean the stories aren't true? That you aren't as clever as they make you out to be?"

I thought it best to intervene. "Mr. Holmes is every bit as clever as the stories make him out to be, my lady. But even he cannot help you unless you tell him why you're here."

She twisted her hands together. "It's a secret. And I'm telling. And it may get Lammie killed, but I can't see any other way to get him back. We're not allowed to go to the police."

"Lammie is your brother?" Holmes asked.

"Yes. His name is Andrew, really, but we call him Lammie. He's just a baby, you see, so Nurse was calling him Lambkin, except Miggins -- my sister, Margaret -- she's a baby, only a bigger one, she started calling him Lammie and now we all do."

Her thin hands were still twisting relentlessly, and Holmes reached out to take them into his own.

"Did you see what happened? Were you there when your brother was taken?"

"Yes. And I know who took him. Well, one of them anyway. The little man from the corner. He had a scarf over his face, but I know it was him. He had the same trousers on. There's a patch on the knee that's been put on crooked."
"You're very observant," Holmes said, and her shoulders straightened at the praise. "What else can you tell me about the man from the corner?"

"He's not English. I heard him swearing at a stray dog the day before yesterday, and he didn't use any of the words that Father does, or even any of the ones that the grooms do when they've had a horse step on their toes. It didn't even sound like English."

"Could it have been German or French?" I asked. She shook her head. "No, the sounds were all wrong for either of those. And I don't think it was Russian." She tugged at Holmes's hands.

"Please. Come with me and you can see him for yourself. I had to climb out the scullery window and go through the mews to come here because he's watching our front door, or he was when I left. Please come. Mama's probably worried about me too by now."

Holmes and I returned with Lady Agatha by the same route as she had come to us, escaping a beating from two burly footmen only because our young client intervened. But we were hustled up the stairs roughly nonetheless, and into the presence of the Duchess, who was pale with fear, and heavy with the promise of another child to come. I will not recount the details of that discussion with the Duchess. I cannot, for even now there are parties whose lives and reputations would be at risk.

Suffice it to say that the Duke, at that very moment, was on the continent, engaged upon a secret diplomatic mission, despite the fact that all England thought him to be recuperating from a lengthy illness at home, and the Duchess was certain that even if he were informed of the kidnapping, his honor would demand that he refuse to allow his son to be a hostage against that mission. Indeed, the kidnappers were pressing the Duchess not for money, but for her husband's true location, promising to deliver the child into his father's hands intact if she would only deliver them the opportunity of discovering the parties to the negotiations. It was clear that Holmes would not be able to consult with the police for assistance. Not even Mycroft Holmes -- whose sympathies would be certain to lie with the diplomats -- could be trusted. With a European war hanging in the balance, the sacrifice of one tiny boy was of little moment to anyone but his mother, his nurse, and his badly frightened sisters.

The man whom Lady Agatha had identified as one of the kidnappers was selling pinwheels at the entrance of the park across the street. He was small, and dark, and his clothing made me think of the Balkans. Holmes and the Duchess were still discussing how to go about rescuing the child when another man came up to speak to him. "That's his friend," Lady Agatha told me, pointing out the arrival. "I've seen him before, too."

"That's a messenger," I realized. "Holmes! We can follow him to the child!"

"So we can," Holmes agreed. "Your Grace, as you do not actually know the location of your husband at the moment, continue to tell the kidnappers the truth. They'll be watching for messages to arrive. I'll send you messages too, pretending to be him, to throw them off the track, always including the word 'because' as the beginning of a sentence. We must buy time."

"Yes. Yes," she agreed, as we hurried down to the scullery again to make our way out of the house. And so it was that when we began to follow the trail of the kidnappers we did so with nothing more than the clothes upon our backs and the heavy moneybelts which were thrust into our hands by the Duchess at the last moment.

"Bribe them if you think it will work, pay any ransom you must," she ordered Holmes, "but bring me back my lamb!"

We were just in time. The messenger was sauntering away, and we fell into place behind him,
following as inconspicuously as we could. Thankfully, night was falling as we neared the docks, where our attire made us stand out far more than our prey.

He never hesitated, but leapt into a small boat tied amongst the others beside the quay and began to row out to a sloop which was anchored farther out in the river. He'd no sooner climbed aboard the sloop than we could see the men aboard it preparing to set sail.

"The boy must be aboard," Holmes said, pounding his fist against a piling in frustration. "If it weren't for the need for secrecy, we could have the river police stop them right now." He nodded to the familiar blue lights of a patrol boat further out on the water.

"If it weren't for the police," I countered, "we could take one of these boats and go out there to fetch the boy back ourselves."

Holmes shook his head. "I don't know how to sail a boat, in any case," he admitted. And at my incredulous look he shrugged. "I've never had the opportunity to learn."

"Holmes," I said patiently. "I know how to sail."

"You do?" he cocked his head at me and then nodded decisively, reaching for his purse. "Which one of these boats is big enough to sail across the channel?"

(at this point the page is cut across and new pages of a different size, written in a different the color of ink, are appended with a straight pin)

It may come as no surprise that Holmes and I were in the habit of always carrying our passports and papers. Still, the customs officials in Dieppe were openly curious as to why two English gentlemen had sailed to France in evening clothes and a rather ancient sailboat. Fortunately, the older man remembered Holmes's name from that business in Lyons long ago, and was more than pleased to find himself sworn to silence. He provided us with two heavy sailor's coats, and the direction of the doctor he had recommended to the party with the sick baby who had come ashore two hours before us, and from there the hunt began in earnest.

In theory, the chase was quite exciting -- Holmes was at his brilliant best, and the kidnappers were suspicious enough of possible pursuit that we were hard put to keep them from vanishing from our ken -- but in practice it was rather uncomfortable. We were seldom able to take a proper meal, and indeed seldom able to sleep in anything resembling a bed. Gradually we accrued the necessities. A razor here, clean stockings there, and eventually a carpetbag when our pockets grew too heavy. Our formal clothes were put into the bag as we acquired local attire, but even that precaution was insufficient. Holmes constantly traded our coats for coats of a different make or color, and I soon lost track of which hat was meant to be mine. Fortunately, the Duchess's largess was mostly in the form of gold coins, and they found a welcome everywhere we travelled. Our quarry moved constantly, and the child was handed over from one party to another whilst in France and again in Austria.

Ten days, and nearly as many countries later, the kidnappers finally went to ground in a decrepit neighborhood of Belgrade, affording Holmes and I the chance to rest and plan a rescue. Extracting young Lord Andrew from their clutches was not going to be simple, however, given that there was more than a little evidence that they had confederates among the officials of the city, and the need for secrecy was still paramount. We decided to take a leaf from the kidnappers' own book and simply take the boy back, rather than attempting to pay a ransom. Holmes would pose as an itinerant and insistent peddler of tinware at the front of the house whilst I crept in the back and retrieved the baby.

My instructions were specific. To collect the child, signal my success to Holmes, and immediately
leave the city, taking passage up the Danube to Vienna, where I would resume my persona as respectable medical gentleman, hire a nursemaid to take care of the boy, and make my way by rail to the port of Hamburg. From there I would take ship to Newcastle, and thence to the Duke's country estate in Yorkshire. Holmes would draw pursuit in another direction, most likely by rail, and send telegrams to various places for me to call for as his itinerary became clearer. He would attempt to join me, but I wasn't to count on his assistance. There was no guarantee he could shake off pursuit soon enough to be of any use.

It was necessary to make several purchases to support my role, since I would be crossing borders and my luggage was certain to be inspected at some point along the way; secondhand clothes, new collars, a medical kit from a pawnshop near the university, and a small stock of the remedies I thought I might need. But the most important of my preparations was the purchase of a medium-sized trunk. It I stocked with infant necessities -- napkins and small clothes, as well as the other sundries required for the care of a boy not quite eighteen months of age -- and a supply of tinned milk, rusks and jam to tide the child over until I could purchase better food. The trunk I sent with my newly acquired luggage to await my arrival at the dock. It was not, perhaps, the most ideal of cradles, but it would do once stuffed with cushions. I also acquired a bolster, which Holmes and I wrapped in a blanket and fashioned into a bundle of approximately the same size and shape as the bundle I hoped to be carrying after I had rescued Lord Andrew. As the rescue had to be made in the hour before nightfall, it wouldn't do for my appearance to alter noticeably.

The house where the boy was being held was at the end of the row, and my approach from the back had to be made under the eyes of several children and some young women who were out beating rugs. I paid them only as much mind as I might pay to the children of Baker Street, nonchalance being a better disguise than skulking. My ears were pricked for noises from the front. Holmes had promised me an excellent distraction. It came, right on cue, in a huge clatter of tin and a volley of shouts. The children immediately darted away to go watch what promised to be a fight, and the women weren't far behind them. That left me free to test the doorhandle of the house I wished to enter. Much to my relief, it turned, and I stepped quickly inside.

The kitchen passageway I entered was pleasantly cool in comparison to the heat of the low summer sun, and had my errand been less vital I might have lingered there. As it was, I paused only long enough to slip the felt covers over my shoes, to muffle the sound of my footsteps on the flagstones as I made my way deeper into the house. There was no telling in which room the kidnappers had the baby. He might be anywhere from the scullery to the attics. I searched as quickly as I dared, trying not to think too wistfully of my revolver, or the walking stick which waited with my luggage, for the only weapon I had to hand was a sand-filled sock. In the event, fortunately, neither weapon proved necessary. At the top of the stairs I found a door that had been left open and a glance through it showed me a cot in the corner of the room. I was beside it in a flash, and wasted no time in exchanging my bolster for the sleeping child. That he would continue sleeping was guaranteed by a bottle of "mother's helper" still open on a small table near the window. I took a moment to tip a bit of it out and taste it, so that I could estimate the concentration of the opiates and alcohol in the mixture. It was a foul brew, despite the treacle that had been used to sweeten it, but I could only be glad of it at that moment. The child would raise no fuss to alert his kidnappers as I removed him.

Holmes and I had argued about the next step in the plan, but as I gazed on the flushed face of the child, I conceded the necessity. Out of a pocket I drew a small pot of henna, mixed with water and oil. I lay a glob of it on Lord Andrew's upturned cheek. His opium-induced slumber was so heavy that he never stirred to disturb the dye.

From my vantage point next to the window, I could look down upon the street. Holmes, in his guise as a tinker, was exchanging shrill unpleasantries and occasional blows with three men, who were baiting him like dogs with a bull from different corners. The noise had gathered a large
crowd, and I took some comfort in the thought that so public a murder would be unlikely. But it
galled me nonetheless to have to turn away, knowing that there was already blood on Holmes's
shirt.

Down the stairs I went, then, the weight of the child in my arms as heavy as my duty, and back
out into the alleyway. Once clear of the house I pulled a dog whistle from my pocket and blew
upon it until every mongrel in the vicinity was howling, and half a dozen of the wretched beasts
were trying to attach themselves to my ankles. The howling I approved -- it would signal to
Holmes that I had the child and he could break off the confrontation in the street. The dogs at my
heels he had planned for, and I left them arguing over a string of sausages from my pocket. Four
streets over I was able to attract the attention of a cab driver, and I settled gratefully onto the
cushions.

The trip was not a long one, but it gave me sufficient time to change my jacket and to
check on the artificial birthmark which the henna had left on Lord Andrew’s face. I had to admit
that Holmes was correct. No one asked to describe me and the baby now would omit mention of
that temporary disfigurement. It drew the eye away from blond curls and blue eyes, and made the
small face seem older.

By sunset we were at the river. Holmes had negotiated my passage with a rapscallion Roumanian
riverman named Ionescu, whose boat, the Mirela, was primarily devoted to freight of one sort or
another, but which had a tiny cabin that could be turned to my use. “A smuggler, but an honest
one,” Holmes had told me, based on his observations, after he’d turned over the fare. “Just stay
out of the cargo hold and you should have no trouble.”

You can imagine my dismay when I realized that the launch which was drawn up against the side
of the Mirelabore the markings of a customs official. There were uniformed men on the deck of
the boat, along with the small crew, and it seemed that some sort of confrontation might be taking
place. But Ionescu, seeing me hesitate on the dock, raised a lazy hand in greeting and signalled
one of his men to take a small boat to fetch me.

Once aboard, I was ushered down to a tiny cabin by the crewman, half filled already with my
luggage. He demonstrated how to close the porthole, and lit the lamp, all the while explaining in a
mix of German and Roumanian and Turkish that I need only give the customs official the proper
baksheesh and we would soon be on my way.

But the customs official, when he came down to speak with me, seemed far more concerned with
the possibility of disease than of mischief. By that time I had begun my own examination of the
child, and my stethoscope was hanging from my neck, but I think, in retrospect, that my own high
color and perspiration must have made it seem as if I too were unwell. I said that the boy was
suffering only from mismanagement of the usual “summer complaint”, but it was not until we had,
by thermometer, eliminated the possibility of fever in the boy and myself, that the man’s scowl
lessened.

"This boy is your son?” I was asked. while Ionescu watched from the doorway, his eyes glittering
with curiosity.

"No. The son of a friend, whose wife has died in childbirth,” I explained, the lie coming glibly to
my lips. "I am taking him to his Aunt, where he can be cared for properly."

“And why do you go by river?” he persisted, drawing out a notebook. “Surely the train would be
faster?”

“Faster, yes, and more comfortable,” I agreed. “But no place to wash napkins if he soils them.” I
gestured at the porthole. “This way I have the entire river.”

“Why not wait until tomorrow, and the regular steam packet? It will reach Vienna much sooner
than the Mirela.”

“Because the hotel where I slept last night has bedbugs. And because I do not mind if the journey is slow. I can use the rest.”

Both answers were true, which is perhaps what made them convincing. In any case I have no doubt that my exhaustion from the long chase was evident upon my features. Ionescu thought them good enough, for he intervened. “You see my friend,” he said, clapping the customs man on the shoulder with one hand while he signalled to me by rubbing his thumb against his fingers with the other and then spreading his hand wide. “Everything is as I told you. And now you can finish your work and go home to your wife and supper.” The official nodded and smiled stiffly, stamped my passport, accepted the five sovereigns I belatedly offered, and made his way above decks once more.

Once they were gone I latched the door and lay the baby down on the narrow bunk before opening the trunk so as to ready it for the night. As I sorted through the clothes and cushions, looking for the oilcloth which I hoped would be sufficient protection for the rest of the contents, something crackled within one of the pillowcases. I stopped to draw it out. A sealed fold of parchment, addressed to the King of Bohemia in Holmes’s most formal hand, lay on top, and beneath it, on rougher paper, ten dancing men scrawled in a single line. “Just in case,” I parsed out. I admit it unnerved me. That Holmes thought it worth the risk to leave the letter in my luggage was bad enough — what if that customs official had insisted upon checking through my things — but that he foresaw the possibility that I might find myself in a state of such extremis that I must seek help from his former client! And yet, already I had spent more than I planned on bribes. I tucked the letter into my breast pocket and resolved that I would use my money much more carefully, in the hopes of never needing it.

I finished preparing the trunk and settled my young charge in amongst its cushions as the boat began to make headway, and the gentle lap of the waves against the hull became a steady, soothing splashing. The hot breeze came in at the porthole, promising to cool as the night deepened.

All at once, the exertions and excitement and oppressive heat of the day combined to rob me of all my energy. I stripped off my coat and waistcoat and lay down on the bunk, hoping that a short nap might revive me. I’d taken several measures to prevent the lid of the trunk from closing, but I thought it best to reach over a hand and rest it beside the baby too. With that precaution in place, I let myself doze, but I soon fell into a heavy sleep. I dreamt of Mary, and of our daughter Rose, who had not lived to see her first birthday, and woke from the dream in a cold sweat when the boat’s whistle sounded, anxiously lifting Lord Andrew out of the trunk to be certain that he was still breathing.

He frowned and blinked open his eyes, saw a stranger and began to wail his dissatisfaction. I found myself rocking him, and singing to him, as I had once sung to my own child, and after a time he settled his small head against my chest and stuffed his fingers into his mouth for comfort. It was well into the night, and the air off the river was damp and refreshingly cool. The lamp had failed, but the moonlight coming in at the porthole was sufficient for me to examine my situation and despair at the myriad of problems which were embodied by the child resting in my arms. Most pressingly, I had no notion of whether or not the lad’s abductors had kept him on a reasonable sanitary schedule.

Common sense told me that I should immediately set about ensuring that he would stay clean and dry, but I hesitated, caught in memories of another tiny warm body tucked up against mine, and Mary smiling from her chair. She had teased me, oh yes, she had, about how much I had fallen in love with our Rose. But it was she who died of grief not long after that terrible morning when we
woke to find the baby cold and still. No minister of the church can explain to me why God calls back a child who went to bed smiling and healthy and playing peek-a-boo between her fingers. Cot deaths, we call them, we doctors, and blame mothers for somehow endangering the babes they love. I had no answer for Mary when she begged me for one -- no logical reason why our Rose had suddenly become nothing more than a memento mori, a stiff, small bundle in a black-framed photograph, so clearly not merely asleep in her mother's arms. Not even Sherlock Holmes could have solved that mystery.

A spreading damp told me that I had lingered too long in contemplation, and I admit to being glad of it, for attending to the practicalities drew my attention inexorably to the present. Lord Andrew was older than Rose had ever been, and a boy, and the differences were all the more apparent as he argued the process of being changed into clean clothes with me in that astonishingly comprehensible infant language of tone and gesture. By the time I had finished he had lectured me quite thoroughly.

He did have a few words of English, however, the most important of them the word "Up!" delivered as an imperious command once his buttons were buttoned. "You'll have to wait a moment, my lord," I told him. "Uncle John needs to change his shirt." "Up!" he said again, and lifted his arms to me. "I'm wet," I protested, pointing to the evidence. He cocked his head at me, considering. "Weh?" "Yes, Uncle John is wet." I pulled my shirt up over my head and removed my equally damp vest.

As I bent down to set my things aside he grabbed for my hands and made his infant demand once again. This time I acceded to the request, and when he promptly began to investigate my face with his hands, went to sit where the moonlight would allow him to more easily study my features.

"No Don," he informed me, frowning.

"Yes, John," I said, realizing that he had hoped for some more familiar face. "I'm just a different John, Lammie. A new John." He wasn't sure whether or not to believe me, and studied me some more, as babies will, with touch as well as vision, tugging at my mustache and patting my bare shoulders. When his untrimmed fingernails found the scar on my chest, I flinched despite myself. The baby flinched in turn, freezing and watching me with trepidation.

"It's all right," I reassured him, moving his hand gently across the old scar. "It's all right, Lammie. It doesn't hurt any more."

A quiet tap at the door surprised me, but it was followed by a childish voice saying, “Awake? Want food?” in clear, if ungrammatical, English.

I got to my feet, carrying the baby, and went to unlatch the door. Ionescu’s son -- a lad of perhaps twelve years -- stood there with a tray of bread and grapes and cheese. He smiled up at me. “You sleep for food. I bring you. Papa say baby want goat? We get for daytime.”

I repaid Nicolae by furthering his English lessons at the same time...
that I played with Lord Andrew, drawing pictures on a slate with chalk for both of them to try to name. Nicolae in his turn offered to watch the baby whilst I did any errands ashore -- an offer I gladly accepted. When at last we came to the great twin cities of Hungary that afternoon, I found a vendor with English books and newspapers near the post office and purchased a copy of *Treasure Island*, knowing that a good story would do more for the boy’s grasp of English than a dozen dictionaries.

At the post office I found two telegrams in my name from Holmes. The first had been sent from Sophia, and the second from Varna on the Black Sea, and neither included any information to the point. I sent an equally nonsensical reply for Holmes to find at Constanta on the Black Sea, knowing he would look only at the time and place, as I had done.

With a lighter heart, I returned to the *Mirela*, only to find Ionescu in a dangerous mood. He scowled from the foredeck all that evening, even while I read aloud from Nicolae’s book to the fascination of more than one member of the crew. It wasn’t until we were five miles further upriver that Ionescu approached me. By then, Lammie was asleep, and I was ready to take him below again.

“Captain,” I said, recognizing that this was a moment to acknowledge his authority.

“Come with me,” he ordered gruffly. “Nicolae, put the little one to bed and stay with him until the Doctor comes.”

“Yes, Papa.”

I gave Lammie to Nicolae and followed Ionescu to his cabin. It was larger than mine, with a real bed and a large desk as well as space for chairs. He took one of the chairs and waved me into the other before spreading a newspaper out on his knee. “Can you read Serbian?” he asked.

“No more than enough to ask for a hotel or my dinner,” I said.

“Then I will tell you that on this page there is a reward posted worth more than 500 Lei to find a kidnapped child. A boy, with blond hair and blue eyes, of just the age of the boy you brought aboard my boat. A boy who was stolen from his home in Belgrade three days ago.”

“Lammie’s home isn’t Belgrade,” I protested. “You can try speaking Serbian to him, if you like, to see what he understands.”

“I did try. And you are right -- he does not understand the language. Too, he has the mark on his face, which the description does not mention.” He tapped the paper meaningfully. “But I have been to India. And I have looked in your cabin and found this.” He pulled the pot of henna paste from his pocket and set it on the desk. “Five hundred lei is a lot of money.”

I rubbed my face with both hands while I made the calculation. He was right. It was a great deal of money. “I don’t have the resources to pay you that much,” I admitted. “But I doubt the people who placed that advertisement truly intend to pay.” Holmes might have been able to think of a convincing tale, but I was going to have to resort to the truth. Holmes... I felt for the letter in my jacket pocket and drew it out. It was still sealed, and addressed to the King of Bohemia, but surely Holmes had considered what to reveal and what to keep secret when he wrote it. “Can you read German or English?”

“German of course. English,” he wobbled a hand. “Train schedules, bills of lading, that sort of thing.”

“Well, I’m not sure which this is written in,” I said, holding out the letter. “But it may explain
Ionescu scowled again, but accepted the letter and broke the seal after looking long and hard at the inscription. I caught a glimpse of a few words and took a deeper breath. It was in German, thank goodness, and by the way Ionescu’s gaze was moving down the page, he was reading with ease. When he reached the signature, he blinked and threw his head up to look at me, mouth fallen open. “Sherlock Holmes?” he exclaimed. “The Sherlock Holmes of London? You are that John Watson? They are your stories?”

“I thought you said you couldn’t read English!” I exclaimed.

“I read them in German. But in the last one he fought with Moriarty and went over the waterfall, didn’t he? But now you say he is alive? In the story you lied?”

“Yes, Sherlock Holmes is alive. You met him. He’s the man who negotiated my passage,” I said. “And no, I didn’t lie in the story. I thought he was dead for three years, until he came back to London.” I smiled ruefully. “Holmes thinks I’m a terrible liar.”

“It’s true, you are,” Ionescu said genially. “Your ears, they go red.”

Did they? “Well, there’s not much a fellow can do about that,” I mumbled into my mustache. Ionescu was reading the letter again, his expression flickering between pleasure and concern. At last he handed it back to me, shaking his head.

“We have a problem, my friend,” he said. “The man who gave me this newspaper -- he saw Nicolae playing with the baby, and I am a good liar, but I do not think he believed me when I said they were both my sons.”

“You lied?”

Ionescu shrugged. “He lied to me, I lied to him. He said he was a riverman, looking for work, but he smelled of police stations.”

“Oh, dear.” I wanted to pace, but the cabin was too small to do it comfortably. “I could disembark at the next village. Buy a carriage or a cart and a horse, and take the boy on that way. I don’t want to bring you trouble.”

Ionescu dismissed the possibility of trouble with the sweep of one broad hand. “If he was police you are safer on the river, where the police must argue about whose turn it is to make arrests. And I do not think he wished to involve the Hungarians, and will want still less to involve the Austrians. No, if he comes it will be to steal away the child from us. And he may bring friends.”

“Even more reason for me to go,” I said. “What if Nicolae were to get hurt?”

“Nicolae knows where to hide if he must. He will not be hurt, and if he is, it must be on my head. No, you will stay with me, and when all is done and safe you will find a way to make up for me those 500 lei I am not collecting.”

“His mother will probably pay it,” I agreed. “And gladly.”

Ionescu chuckled. “I was thinking more of a story from you, a story of how your friend came to be alive. There should be more stories of Sherlock Holmes in the world.”

I took the hand he offered. “And there shall be, if he ever gives me permission to publish them. But in the meantime I would be glad to tell you what I know.”
The next two days were busy for me. Between Nicolae’s pleas for more of *Treasure Island*, his father’s hopes for more tales of Sherlock Holmes, and Lord Andrew’s infant insistence that I spend his waking hours conversing with him about everything he saw or felt or heard or touched or smelt, I had little time to fret over the need to trust Ionescu and his crew for protection.

I could not, in conscience, ask Ionescu to alter his arrangements for cargo as we went along. Too much of what the *Mirela* carried from village to town was freshly harvested, and perishable. It was the man’s livelihood after all. But as we made our way west, on the final stretches to Vienna, I found myself watching every boat on the river with suspicion, and finding reasons to keep Lord Andrew in my arms or in our cabin whenever we were at a dock.

At last we reached the outskirts of Vienna, where there was far too much traffic on road and river for anyone to track it all. Lammie was excited by the trains that ran alongside the river, and Nicolae was eager to point out the buildings he knew, despite the glare of the setting sun. I was with them both at the rail, trying to divide my conversation between them, when a steam launch suddenly diverted from its path, coming straight towards us with the sun behind it.

I thrust the baby into Nicolae’s arms. “Quick, hide him!” I ordered, digging into my pocket for a candy that the lad could use to muffle the startled wails. My walking stick was in my hand without a thought, and if I’d had my revolver, I think I would have fired a warning shot at the approaching vessel. Ionescu was shouting orders to his men, for all the world as if we were about to be boarded by Stevenson’s buccaneers.

Suddenly the launch slowed and turned to parallel us twenty feet away. A tall figure stood near the prow and raised a megaphone. But instead of an order to heave to, I heard my own name, in a voice I knew as well as my own. “Watson!” It was Sherlock Holmes! “Watson, would you please ask Captain Ionescu if I may come aboard with a guest?”

(The bundle of letters ends here, as if the need for correspondence had ended. There is one more letter in the box, folded around the newspaper announcement of the death of a young officer. He is very young, and there is a daredevil air to his expression in the small photograph, despite the formality of the pose or the crispness of his new uniform. The letter itself is short, and sad.)

My dear Ann,

Will you forgive me if I never finish writing the kidnapping story? The exciting part is done with, after all, and I cannot consider polishing it for publication, now that the boy I called Lord Andrew has been taken from us at Passchendaele. I shall never forget him, nor his delight at discovering his father had joined us there on the river at Vienna. Nor shall I forget our parting in Paris, when we stepped down from the *Orient Express* to discover that the Duchess and her daughters had come from London to meet us. He gave me a kiss, as his mother bade him do, but I doubt he understood that we would never meet again in this life. Perhaps in the next I shall sit with him, and tell him the tale of those days on the river.

I’ll write a different story for you to take to Doyle, one that has a surer chance of being published. It will be about Holmes, of course, but that will mean it will sell. Get a good price for it and you should be able to repair the roof before winter. All my love to the children,

John
Originally posted here: http://acd-holmefest.livejournal.com/17439.html

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!