North and South: A Johnlock Love Story

by redscudery
Preface

This adaptation (for it is an adaptation, rather than a completely new text) of North & South is motivated by two things: nerdery and prurience. Elizabeth Gaskell wrote North & South as a serial for Charles Dickens’ paper Household Words in 1853 and 1854. As I already wanted to do a crossover, because the tension between the characters in both North & South and Sherlock is similar enough to make it worthwhile, I decided to write it as a serial because that’s what Gaskell did and I wanted to see what it was like (hey, I did say nerdery). As for prurience, if you don’t think a smouldering Sherlock in a frock coat slamming John up against a factory wall and kissing the smug South-ness off his face is sexy as hell- well, this may not be the right fic for you.

That said, the pace here is going to be mostly Victorian; when I decided to do this, I wasn’t sure just how much of Gaskell’s language I would be using. I’m still not completely sure. However, as with doctornerdington’s Sherlockian adaptation of Lady Audley’s Secret (also part of the 2014 Sunday Summer Serial, and which you should go and read right now), I am using some of her text verbatim, particularly in the first instalment. I have pruned out some of the substories and a lot of the description, but I did keep quite a bit in. Some people will probably find it slow to start, but it’s a Victorian novel, which Henry James famously referred to them as “loose, baggy monsters”. Later chapters will likely be more original writing and definitely more porny.

I hope you enjoy it! I’m always happy to hear comments and questions.

-Red

P.S. follow me on tumblr at www.redscudery.tumblr.com for updates and other nerdery

P.P.S. Re: the text. I am using the Project Gutenberg text for convenience; the origins of this text are not stated but it is likely from Gaskell’s revised text rather than from the original, serialized text. Gaskell was dissatisfied with the serial, so she made extensive corrections and rewrites before issuing it as a novel (nerd note: most novels of the early and mid-Victorian period came out as serials, then were issued as books afterward, usually in a three-volume format. There’s a strong resemblance to today’s television shows; they came out over a period of time, with the “box set”, as it were, available afterwards). I’m already fairly certain I’m going to end up doing the same thing. At issue are not only the regular things like characterization (Mrs. Hudson in particular is really just Dixon with a name change) and story arc, but also chapter division; my chapters here are very long, comprising several different events, while Gaskell’s tend to just deal with one. I wanted to cut the novel down and have the instalments appear weekly, but I think I could have done different chapters.
“A wondrous subtle thing is love” -Arthur Conan Doyle, The Sign of the Four

John Watson, recovering from a nervous breakdown, leaves his aunt's in Harley Street for his home village of Helstone.

“Ella?” said John, waking suddenly. “Ella?”

But, as John half suspected, Ella had fallen asleep as well. She lay curled up on the sofa in the back drawing-room in Harley Street, looking very lovely in her white muslin and blue ribbons. If Titania had ever been dressed in white muslin and blue ribbons, and had fallen asleep on a crimson damask sofa in a back drawing-room, Ella might have been taken for her.

John was struck afresh by his cousin's beauty. They had known each other from childhood, and all along Ella had been remarked upon by every one, for her prettiness; but John had never thought about it until the last fortnight, when his increasing health and Ella’s approaching marriage had become the harbingers of their separation. She had been a comfort to him these last six months, when, forced to abandon his medical course at Edinburgh because of a breakdown in his health, he had come to the Shaw’s house in Harley Street to convalesce. Ella had petted and amused him, and listened to his confidences, but now that he was almost well again and she was to be married, their intercourse would be much reduced.

He pushed down the sadness and turned his thoughts to his future. He had been on the point of telling Ella about his future life in the country parsonage where his father and mother lived and where his bright holidays had always been passed, though he had been at school and at college since he was nine. But in default of a listener, he had to brood over the change in his life silently as heretofore. It was a happy brooding, although tinged with regret at being separated for an indefinite time from his gentle aunt and dear cousin. He longed for Helstone, beautiful place that it was, with its great forests and sleepy cottages. As he thought of the delight of returning to Helstone parsonage to the society of his parents, a call of “Ella! Ella!” came from Mrs. Shaw, Ella’s mother, as she came out of the drawing room where she had been entertaining her dinner guests. John sat up.

“Ella is asleep, Aunt Shaw,” he said, “Is it anything I can do?”

“It was only to ask her if she would tell Newton to bring down the India shawls: perhaps you would go, John, dear?”

As John went towards the stairs to the old nursery at the very top of the house, he heard Aunt
Shaw’s oft-repeated refrain as she turned back to her dinner guests, “Such a nice boy; so considerate” and the predictable hum of acquiescence on her guests’ part. He did not quite like the tone she took, as though he were Tiny the lapdog. Yet he did go to Newton, in the upstairs nursery, and ask her to undo the shawls.

As he was carrying them into the dining room, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror over the chimney-piece, and smiled at his own appearance there—the familiar features draped in bright Eastern colours like a maharajah. He touched the shawls as they hung around him, and took a pleasure in their soft feel and their brilliant colours. He rather enjoyed the idea of being royalty, and smiled, but just then the door opened, and Miss Mary Morstan-Lennox was suddenly announced. He tried hastily to hand the shawls to Mrs. Shaw, but as he did, his aunt held out her hand to the new-comer and he could but stand there, perfectly still, and nod to Miss Morstan with his most courteous smile on his face, as if sure of her sympathy in his sense of the ludicrousness at being thus surprised.

His aunt was so much absorbed in asking Miss Morstan—who had not been able to come to dinner—all sorts of questions about her cousin the bridegroom, and his sister the bridesmaid (coming with the Captain from Scotland for the occasion), and various other members of the Lennox family, that John saw he would have to remain shawl-bearer for the sum of the evening if he did not take matters into his own hands. He made his way to the unused chair by the tea table and set them down. Then, as a “nice boy” should, he devoted himself to the amusement of the other visitors, whom his aunt had for the moment forgotten.

Soon, Ella came in from the back drawing-room, winking and blinking her eyes at the stronger light, shaking back her slightly-ruffled curls. Even in her slumber she had instinctively felt that a Morstan-Lennox was worth rousing herself for, and she twined her arm around Mary’s waist and started asking many questions about the family home. As John sank rather more into the background on his aunt’s joining the conversation, he saw Mary directing her look towards a vacant seat near him; and he knew perfectly well that as soon as Ella released her from her questioning, she would take possession of that chair. He hoped she would; he had not been sure that Mary would be able to join them. Though it was almost a surprise to see her, he was sure of a pleasant evening. She liked and disliked pretty nearly the same things that he did, had a smiling, open face, and their conversation was always enjoyable.

Finally, Ella released her, and she came over to John, sitting next to him without any self-consciousness or fluttering.

“Well, I suppose you are all in the depths of wedding business—ladies’ business, I mean. Very tiresome to you, I can imagine.”

“Ah, I knew how you would be amused to find me draped in shawls.”

“But really Indian shawls are very perfect things of their kind. You did look very princely, you know.” She said this without a trace of flirtation, and John was, momentarily, stung by her indifference. She seemed to read it in his face, and went on,

“This is your last dinner-party, is it not? There are no more before the wedding?”

“No. I think after this evening we shall feel at rest, which I am sure I have not done for many weeks; at least, that kind of rest when the hands have nothing more to do, and all the arrangements are complete for an event which must occupy one’s head and heart. I shall be glad to have time to think, and I am sure Ella will.”

“I am not so sure about her; but I can fancy that you will. Whenever I have seen you lately, you have been carried away by a whirlwind of some other person’s making.”
“Yes,” John said, rather sadly, remembering the never-ending commotion about trifles that had been going on for more than a month past: “I wonder if a marriage must always be preceded by what you call a whirlwind, or whether in some cases there might not rather be a calm and peaceful time just before it.”

“Cinderella's godmother ordering the trousseau, the wedding-breakfast, writing the notes of invitation, for instance,” said Mary, laughing.

“But are all these quite necessary troubles?” asked John, looking into Mary’s face for an answer. A sense of indescribable weariness of all the arrangements--for a pretty effect, Ella had said--descended upon him and he really wanted some one to provide him with a few pleasant, quiet ideas connected with a marriage.

“Oh, of course,” she replied with a change to gravity in her tone. “There are forms and ceremonies to be gone through, not so much to satisfy oneself, as to stop the world's mouth, but there is no need for it to be so fine.”

Here she paused, smiled, and asked, boldly, “But how would you have a wedding arranged?”

“Me?” John was somewhat abashed by this very frank question, only in part because he had never yet taken the time to think of marriage. But Mary’s brave question required an answer, “Perhaps walking to church, on a very fine summer morning, for a simple ceremony. There would be neither carriage nor wedding-breakfast, and just one bridesmaid I assure you,” Here he paused to smile at Mary, who was herself bridesmaid, “though I dare say I am resolving against the very things that have given Ella the most trouble.”

“That’s lovely,” Mary said, “The idea of utter simplicity accords well with your character.”

John was made exceedingly uncomfortable by this speech, which seemed forward in the extreme. He recalled former occasions on which she had tried to lead him into a discussion (in which she took the complimentary part) about his character and his future prospects. It was done very prettily, but nonetheless, he always attempted to turn the conversation to other channels. Now, he said,

“It is natural for me to think of Helstone church, and the walk to it, rather than of driving up to a London church in the middle of a paved street.”

“Tell me about Helstone. You have never described it to me. I should like to have some idea of the place you will be living in, when ninety-six Harley Street will be looking dingy and dirty, and dull, and shut up. Is Helstone a village, or a town, in the first place?”

“Oh, only a hamlet; I don’t think I could call it a village at all. There is the church and a few houses near it on the green—cottages, rather—with roses growing all over them.”

“And flowering all the year round, especially at Christmas—make your picture complete,” said she.

“No,” replied John, somewhat annoyed, “I am not making a picture. I am trying to describe Helstone as it really is.”

“I am penitent,” she answered frankly. “Only it really sounded like a village in a tale rather than in real life.”

“And so it is,” replied John, eagerly. “All the other places in England that I have seen seem so hard and prosaic-looking, after the New Forest. Helstone is like a village in a poem—in one of
Tennyson's poems. But I won't try and describe it any more. You would only laugh at me if I told you what I think of it—what it really is."

"Indeed, I would not. But I see you are going to be very precise. Well, then, tell me that which I should like still better—to know what the parsonage is like."

"Oh, I can't describe my home. It is home, and I can't put its charm into words."

"How stern you are to-night, John."

"I beg your pardon, Mary" he said, his blue eyes clear and honest. "I did not know I was."

"Why, because I made an unlucky remark, you will neither tell me what Helstone is like, nor will you say anything about your home, though I have told you how much I want to hear about both, the latter especially."

"But indeed," he said earnestly, "I cannot tell you about my own home. I don't quite think it is a thing to be talked about, unless you knew it."

"Well, then"—pausing for a moment—"tell me what you will do there. Here you rest and read, walk if it is fine, go for a drive with your aunt after, and have some kind of engagement in the evening. There, now fill up your day at Helstone, especially as you are no longer convalescent. Shall you ride, drive, or walk?"

"Walk, decidedly. We have no horse, not even for my father. He walks to the very extremity of his parish. The walks are so beautiful, it would be a shame to drive—almost a shame to ride."

"Will you study?"

John turned his face away, abashed by the question. He missed his medical work, but was loth, following the events prior to his leaving the university, to pick up his studies once again.

"I don't know. Perhaps I will work at my German, but I cannot say for certain."

"Archery parties—pic-nics—race-balls—hunt-balls?"

"Oh no!" said he, laughing. "Father's living is very small; and even if we were near such things, I doubt if I should go to them."

"I see, you won't tell me anything. You will only tell me that you are not going to do this and that. Before the vacation ends, I should like to see this village for myself and know what you do there."

John blinked, quite taken aback, but said, hoping that perhaps her guardian would not permit it, "I hope you will. Then you will see for yourself how beautiful Helstone is."

Mary smiled, then exclaimed, standing,

"Ella is sitting down to play! I must turn the pages for her."

Ella played brilliantly for a while, but in the middle of the piece the door half-opened; Captain Sholto Lennox stood there, hesitating whether to come in. She threw down her music, and rushed out of the room, coming back with her tall handsome Captain, glowing with pleasure. Mary leaped up to greet her cousin. As he bent to kiss her cheek, John stood, although a pace behind, waiting to shake his hand. When Sholto finally extended it, John took it, somewhat awkwardly; Sholto smiled. John looked down and away, trying to disguise and diffuse his blush at the firm pressure of Sholto's hand.
Mary watched them closely, seemingly amused with the family scene. She had something of Sholto’s look; fair, with an intelligent, keen, and mobile face. As he turned carefully away from Sholto, John wondered what she could be thinking about, as she was evidently observing everything that went on; his reverie was interrupted, however, by the flurry of departing guests. He went up to bed exhausted, and could not revisit the puzzle, as after this evening all was bustle till the wedding was over.

John only drew a breath of relief when he was on the train, travelling quietly home with his father, who had come up to assist at the wedding. His mother had been detained at home by a multitude of half-reasons, none of which anybody fully understood, except Mr. Watson, who was perfectly aware that all his arguments in favour of a grey satin gown, which was midway between oldness and newness, had proved unavailing; and that, as he had not the money to equip his wife afresh, from top to toe, she would not show herself at her only sister's only child's wedding. John, then, only knew that his mother had not found it convenient to come, and he was not sorry to think that their meeting and greeting would take place at Helstone parsonage, rather than, during the confusion of the last two or three days, in the chaos of the house in Harley Street. His mind and body ached now with the recollection of all he had done and said within the last forty-eight hours. The farewells so hurriedly taken, amongst all the other good-byes, of those that had meant so much to him in his weakest moments, oppressed him now with a sad regret.

He wrenched his thoughts away from this depressing topic and turned it to something more glad: Helstone, the place he had longed for for years from school dormitories and grimy lodgings. His father was the nearest physical reminder of the place. John turned his eyes to the other seat. His dear father was leaning back asleep in the railway carriage. His blue-black hair was grey now, and lay thinly over his brows. The bones of his face were plainly to be seen—too plainly for beauty, if his features had been less finely cut. The face was in repose; but it was rather rest after weariness, than the serene calm of the countenance of one who led a placid, contented life. John was suddenly, painfully struck by the worn, anxious expression; and he went back over the circumstances of her father's life, to find the cause for the lines that spoke so plainly of habitual distress and depression.

“Poor Harry!” he thought. “Oh! if Harry had but been a clergyman, a doctor, a tutor, anything instead of going into the navy, and being lost to us all! I wish I knew more about it; Father never said clearly in his letters. I only knew he could not come back to England because of the terrible affair of the mutiny. Poor Father! how sad he looks! I am glad I am going home, at least for a while, to be at hand to comfort him and mother both, though I do wish I had qualified first.”

John, though he had been feeling much improved, sighed at the thought of his lost qualifications. He had suffered a nervous breakdown following a traumatic incident at Edinburgh, and had had to leave just prior to the exams. It would take at least another year for him to build his strength up sufficiently to re-sit them, and by then he would likely have to spend some time with his tutors beforehand. He would so have liked to return to Helstone a full-fledged doctor, ready to carry out his parents’ ongoing plans to improve the cottagers’ lives.

When the train pulled into the station, though, John was ready with a smile, in which there was not a trace of weakness or disappointment, to greet his father when he awakened. Mr. Watson smiled back again, but faintly, as if it were an unusual exertion, his face returning into its lines of habitual anxiety. He had the same large blue eyes as his son—in fact, John was more like him than like Mrs. Watson. Sometimes people wondered that parents so handsome should have a son who was pleasant-looking at best; his jaw and nose were very decided, and his mouth small. His only
really handsome features were his eyes and his well-shaped head, adorned with a thatch of straw-blond hair. If the look on his face was, in general, too dignified and reserved for such a young man, now, talking to his father, it was bright as the morning; his dimples, so rarely seen, were making an appearance, and he looked young and glad, with boundless hope in the future.

It was the latter part of July when John and his father arrived at Helstone station. The forest trees were all one dark, full, dusky green; the fern below them caught all the slanting sunbeams; the weather was sultry and broodingly still. John would tramp along by his father's side, crushing down the fern with glee and sending up the fragrance peculiar to it,—out on the broad commons into the warm scented light, seeing multitudes of wild, free, living creatures, revelling in the sunshine, and the herbs and flowers it called forth. This life—at least these walks—realised all John's anticipations. He took a pride in his forest. Its people were his people. He made hearty friends with them; learned and delighted in using their peculiar words; took up his freedom amongst them; read with slow distinctness to their old people; told stories to and carved whistles for the tribe of boys that was waiting for him whenever he stepped foot outside the parsonage. His out-of-doors life was perfect.

His in-door life had its drawbacks. He blamed himself, perceiving that all was not as it should be there. His mother—his mother always so kind and tender towards him—seemed now and then so much discontented with their situation; thought that the bishop strangely neglected his episcopal duties, in not giving Mr. Watson a better living; and almost reproached her husband because he could not bring himself to say that he wished to undertake the charge of a larger. He would sigh aloud as he answered, that if he could do what he ought in little Helstone, he should be thankful. At each repeated urgency of his wife, that he would ask for something greater, John saw that his father shrank more and more, and he strove at such times to reconcile his mother to Helstone. Mrs. Watson said that the near neighbourhood of so many trees affected her health, and John would try to tempt her forth on to the beautiful, broad, upland, sun-streaked, cloud-shadowed common. This did good for a time, but when the autumn drew on, and the weather became more changeable, his mother's idea of the unhealthiness of the place increased, and she repined even more frequently that her husband should still receive nothing from the bishop.

This marring of the peace of home, by long hours of discontent, was what John was unprepared for. His enjoyment of the Harley Street pampering of his convalescence was balanced finely, if not overbalanced, by his conscious pride in being able to do without it. But the cloud never comes in that quarter of the horizon from which we watch for it. There had of course been slight complaints and passing regrets on his mother's part, over some trifle connected with Helstone, and his father's position there, when John had been spending his holidays at home before; but in the general happiness of the recollection of those times, he had forgotten the small details which were not so pleasant.

This came to light particularly in the latter half of September, when the autumnal rains and storms came on, and John was obliged to remain more in the house than he had hitherto done. Helstone was at some distance from any neighbours of their own standard of cultivation.

“It is undoubtedly one of the most out-of-the-way places in England,” said Mrs. Watson, in one of her plaintive moods. “I can't help regretting constantly that papa has really no one to associate with here; he is so thrown away; seeing no one but farmers and labourers from week's end to week's end. If we only lived at the other side of the parish, it would be something; there we should be almost within walking distance of the Stansfields; certainly the Gormans would be within a walk.”

“Gormans,” said John. “Are those the Gormans who made their fortunes in trade at Southampton?
Oh! I'm glad we don't visit them. I don't like shoppy people. I think we are far better off, knowing only cottagers and labourers, and people without pretence."

“You must not be so fastidious, John, dear!” said her mother, secretly thinking of a rich, young Miss Gorman whom she had once met at Mr. Hume's.

’No! I call mine a very comprehensive taste; I like all people whose occupations have to do with land; I like soldiers and sailors, and the three learned professions, as they call them. I'm sure you don't want me to admire butchers and bakers, and candlestick-makers, do you?’

“But the Gormans were neither butchers nor bakers, but very respectable coach-builders.”

“Very well. Coach-building is a trade all the same, and I think a much more useless one than that of butchers or bakers. Oh! how tired I used to be of the grimy city streets in Edinburgh, and the drives every day in London, and how I longed to walk on Helstone common”

John did walk, every day, despite the rain and his mother’s warnings. He was so happy out of doors, striding into the wind. But the evenings were rather difficult to fill up agreeably. Immediately after tea his father withdrew into his small library, and he was left alone to amuse himself and his mother. Though he had brought down a box of books, they were soon read through, and only his pile of schoolbooks remained. He was reluctant to delve into them, and turned himself instead to telling his mother every particular of his time in London, to all of which Mrs. Watson listened with interest, sometimes amused and questioning, at others a little inclined to compare her sister's circumstances of ease and comfort with the narrower means at Helstone vicarage. On such evenings John was apt to stop talking rather abruptly, and listen to the drip-drip of the rain upon the leads of the little bow-window.

Once or twice John found himself mechanically counting the repetition of the monotonous sound, while he wondered if he might venture to ask where Harry was now; what he was doing; how long it was since they had heard from him. But a consciousness that his mother's delicate health, and positive dislike to Helstone, all dated from the time of the mutiny in which Harry had been engaged,—the full account of which John had never heard, and which now seemed doomed to be buried in sad oblivion,—made him pause and turn away from the subject each time he approached it. When he was with his mother, his father seemed the best person to apply to for information; and when with him, he thought that he could speak more easily to his mother. Probably there was nothing much to be heard that was new. In one of the letters he had received before leaving Harley Street, his father had told him that they had heard from Harry ; he was still at Rio, and very well in health, and sent his best love to him; which was dry bones, but not the living intelligence he longed for.

Harry was always spoken of, in the rare times when his name was mentioned, as “Poor Harry.” His room was kept exactly as he had left it; and was regularly dusted, and put into order by Hudson, Mrs. Watson's maid, who touched no other part of the household work, but always remembered the day when she had been engaged by Lady Beresford as ladies' maid to Sir John's wards, the pretty Miss Beresfords, the belles of Rutlandshire. Hudson had always considered Mr. Watson as the blight which had fallen upon her young lady's prospects in life. If Miss Beresford had not been in such a hurry to marry a poor country clergyman, there was no knowing what she might not have become. But Hudson was too loyal to desert her in her affliction and downfall (alias her married life). She remained with her, and was devoted to her interests; always considering herself as the good and protecting fairy, whose duty it was to baffle the malignant giant, Mr. Watson.

Master Harry had been her favorite and pride; and it was with a little softening of her dignified
look and manner, that she went in weekly to arrange the chamber as carefully as if he might be coming home that very evening. John could not help believing that there had been some late intelligence of Harry, unknown to his mother, which was making his father anxious and uneasy, but which Mrs. Watson had not perceived. John, however, noticed an absence of mind, as if his father’s thoughts were pre-occupied by some subject. Mr. Watson did not go out among his parishioners as much as usual; he was more shut up in his study, only emerging by the study window until the postman had called, before he turned into the room to begin his day's work, with all the signs of a heavy heart and an occupied mind.

John, though, was at an age when any apprehension, not absolutely based on a knowledge of facts, is easily banished for a time by a bright sunny day, or some happy outward circumstance. And when the brilliant fourteen fine days of October came on, his cares were all blown away as lightly as thistledown, and he forgot everything but the glories of the forest. The fern-harvest was over, and now that the rain was gone, many a deep glade was accessible. He had begun to sketch landscapes again when he had been at Harley Street with Ella, a thing which he had not had time to do since he took up his medical studies and had to confine his gift for sketching to more practical, gruesome subjects. He had sufficiently regretted, during the gloom of the bad weather, his idle revelling in the beauty of the woodlands while it had yet been fine, to make him determined to sketch what he could before winter fairly set in. Accordingly, he was busy preparing his board one morning, when Sarah, the housemaid, threw wide open the drawing-room door and announced, “Miss Mary Morstan-Lennox and Mrs Elizabeth Wilson.”

“Miss Mary Morstan-Lennox.” John had been thinking of her only a moment before, remembering her inquiry into his probable occupations at home. She was a welcome distraction, however, despite his previous misgivings, and he put down his board and smile as he went forward to shake hands with her.

“Tell Mother, Sarah,” said he, “We shall both want to ask you so many questions about Ella; I am very obliged to you for coming.”

“I did tell you that I should,” she said, her face luminous.

“I did not realize you were not in the Highlands, Miss Morstan,” John said.

“Oh!” she said, lightly, “it was finally so arranged that they did not need me; Sholto’s sister Jeannette accompanied them. I was disappointed, but since Mrs Wilson agreed that it was quite all right to pay you a visit to-day I feel quite rewarded.”

John could not help but return this smile; Mary looked utterly charming in her simple blue dress and bonnet, and she was evidently in good spirits. He turned to Mrs. Wilson, who he had only rarely met, and shook her hand as well.

“Ella gave me all sorts of messages for you, Mr. Watson” Mrs. Wilson said, “I believe I have a little diminutive note somewhere; yes, here it is.”

“Oh! thank you,” John exclaimed and then, half wishing to read it immediately, he made the excuse of going to tell his mother again (Sarah surely had made some mistake) that they had visitors.

When he had left the room, Mary and Mrs. Wilson scrutinized the room. The little drawing-room was looking its best in the streaming light of the morning sun. The middle window in the bow was opened, and clustering roses and the scarlet honeysuckle came peeping round the corner; the small lawn was gorgeous with verbenas and geraniums of all bright colours. But the very brightness
outside made the colours within seem poor and faded. The carpet was far from new; the chintz had been often washed; the whole apartment was smaller and shabbier than either of them had expected.

“The living is evidently as small as he said,” Mary remarked.

“It seems strange, for the Beresfords belong to a good family,” replied Mrs. Wilson. “Ah, well, doctors are usually comfortable, when they don’t die of overwork.”

“Mrs. Wilson! Mr. Watson—the younger—is only a friend.” Mary blushed slightly as she said this, but her tone was firm.

John meanwhile had found his mother. It was one of Mrs. Watson's fitful days, when everything was a difficulty and a hardship; and the appearance of company took this shape, although secretly she felt complimented by them thinking it worth while to call.

“It is most unfortunate! We are dining early to-day, and having nothing but cold meat, in order that the servants may get on with their ironing; and yet, of course, we must ask them to dinner—Ella’s cousin-in-law and all. And your papa is in such low spirits this morning about something—I don’t know what. I went into the study just now, and he had his face on the table, covering it with his hands. I told him I was sure Helstone air did not agree with him any more than with me, and he suddenly lifted up his head, and begged me not to speak a word more against Helstone, he could not bear it; if there was one place he loved on earth it was Helstone. But I am sure, for all that, it is the damp and relaxing air.”

John felt as if a thin cold cloud had come between him and the sun. He had listened patiently, in hopes that it might be some relief to his mother to unburden herself; but now it was time to draw her back to Mary and Mrs. Wilson.

“Papa likes Miss Morstan-Lennox; they got on together famously at the wedding breakfast, and Mrs. Wilson is pleasant enough. I dare say the change in routine will do Father good. And never mind the dinner, my dear mother. Cold meat will do capitally for a lunch, which is the light in which they will most likely look upon a two o’clock dinner.”

“But what are we to do with them till then? It is only half-past ten now.”

“I’ll ask Miss Morstan-Lennox to go out sketching with me. I know she draws, and that will take her out of your way, Mother. Mrs. Wilson may come too, as chaperone, although she is very pleasant, mother, and I am sure you and she would have some subjects in common. Only do come in now; they will think it so strange if you don't.”

Mrs. Watson took off her black silk apron, and smoothed her face. She looked a very pretty lady-like woman, as she greeted the company with the cordiality due to one who was almost a relation. They evidently expected to be asked to spend the day, and accepted the invitation with a glad readiness that made Mrs. Watson wish she could add something to the cold beef. They were pleased with everything; delighted with John's idea of going out sketching; would not have Mr. Watson disturbed for the world, with the prospect of so soon meeting him at dinner. John brought out his drawing materials for Mary to choose from; and after the paper and brushes had been duly selected, the two set out in the merriest spirits in the world, Mrs. Wilson following sedately behind.

“Now, please, just stop here for a minute or two,” said John. “These are the cottages that haunted me so during the rainy fortnight, reproaching me for not having sketched them.”

“Before they tumbled down and were no more seen. Truly, if they are to be sketched—and they
are very picturesque—we had better not put it off till next year. But where shall we sit?"

“Oh! You have come straight from the city! Look at this beautiful trunk of a tree, which the wood-cutters have left just in the right place for the light. I will put my plaid over it, and it will be a regular forest throne.”

“With my feet in that puddle for a regal footstool!” Mary laughed.

“Stay,” said John, “I will move, and then you can come nearer this way.”

“Who lives in these cottages?” Mary asked, eyes bright.

“They were built by squatters fifty or sixty years ago. One is uninhabited; the foresters are going to take it down, as soon as the old man who lives in the other is dead, poor old fellow! Look—there he is—I must go and speak to him. He is so deaf you will hear all our secrets.”

The old man stood bareheaded in the sun, leaning on his stick at the front of his cottage. His stiff features relaxed into a slow smile as John went up and spoke to him. Mary hastily introduced the two figures into her sketch, and finished up the landscape with a subordinate reference to them—as John perceived, when the time came for getting up, putting away water, and scraps of paper, and exhibiting to each other their sketches. He laughed and blushed, feeling Mary’s eyes on his countenance.

“Miss Morstan!” said he. “I little thought you were making old Isaac and me into subjects, when you told me to ask him the history of these cottages.”

“It was irresistible. You can't know how strong a temptation it was. I hardly dare tell you how much I shall like this sketch.”

She was not quite sure whether he heard this latter sentence before he went to the brook to wash her palette. He came back rather flushed, but looking perfectly innocent and unconscious. Mary was glad of it, for the speech had slipped from her unawares—a rare thing for her.

The aspect of home was all right and bright when they reached it. The clouds on Mrs. Watson’s brow had cleared off under the propitious influence of a brace of carp, most opportunely presented by a neighbour. Mr. Watson had returned from his morning’s round, and was awaiting the visitors just outside the wicket gate that led into the garden. He looked a complete gentleman in his rather threadbare coat and well-worn hat.

John was proud of his father, seeing how favourably he impressed every stranger; still, his quick eye sought over the beloved face and found there traces of some unusual disturbance, which was only put aside, not cleared away.

Mr. Watson asked to look at their sketches.

“I think you have made the tints on the thatch too dark, have you not?” as he returned John’s to him, and held out his hand for Mary’s, which was withheld from him one moment, no more.

“No, Father! I don't think I have. The house-leek and stone-crop have grown so much darker in the rain. Is that not like, though?” said he, as his father looked at the figures in Mary’s drawing.

“Yes, very like. Your figure and way of holding yourself is capital. And it is just poor old Isaac's stiff way of stooping his long rheumatic back.”

“I wonder if I could manage live figures.” John said, “There are so many people about here whom I should like to sketch.”
“I should say that a likeness you very much wish to take you would always succeed in,” said Mary, “I have great faith in the power of will.”

“I think you have succeeded pretty well in yours.” John said, rather gallantly he thought, though Mary’s face as he said it embarrassed him sufficiently that he turned away to employ his hands in picking some roses for the table.

“A regular London man would understand the implied meaning of that speech,” thought Mary, “But does he? He is so very unworldly, for all his twenty-four years.”

She said, however, only “Those roses are lovely.”

“Stay, then,” John said, and, glad for further distraction, he gathered for her some velvety cramoisy roses that were above her reach, placing one in his button-hole and giving her two for her dress.

The conversation at dinner flowed on quietly and agreeably. There were plenty of questions to be asked on both sides—the latest intelligence which each could give of Mrs. Shaw’s movements in Italy to be exchanged, and in the interest of what was said, the unpretending simplicity of the parsonage-ways—above all, in the neighbourhood of John, Mary forgot the little feeling of disappointment with which she had at first perceived that he had spoken but the simple truth when he had described his father’s living as very small.

“John, you might have gathered us some pears for our dessert,” said Mr. Watson, as the hospitable luxury of a freshly-decanted bottle of wine was placed on the table.

Mrs. Watson was hurried. It seemed as if desserts were impromptu and unusual things at the parsonage; whereas, if Mr. Watson would only have looked behind him, he would have seen biscuits and marmalade, and what not, all arranged in formal order on the sideboard. But the idea of pears had taken possession of Mr. Watson’s mind, and was not to be got rid of.

“There are a few brown beurres against the south wall which are worth all foreign fruits and preserves. Run, John, and gather us some.”

“Could we not adjourn into the garden, and eat them there?” said Mary, somewhat shyly, “It is one of the loveliest gardens I have ever seen.”

“Of course,” John smiled, happy that Mary seemed to like the spot. Mr. Watson, too, got up directly, and prepared to accompany his guest. Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Watson remained in the dining room, to eat biscuits and marmalade and use the finger-bowls that had been so carefully set out.

John made a plate for the pears out of a beetroot leaf, which threw up their brown gold colour admirably. Mary looked more at him than at the pears; but Mr. Watson, inclined to cull fastidiously the very zest and perfection of the hour he had stolen from his anxiety, chose daintily the ripest fruit, and sat down on the garden bench to enjoy it at his leisure. John and Mary strolled along the little terrace-walk under the south wall, where the bees still hummed and worked busily in their hives.

“What a perfect life you seem to live here! I have always felt rather contemptuously towards the poets before, with their wishes, "Mine be a cot beside a hill," and that sort of thing: but now I am afraid that the truth is, I have been nothing better than a city mouse. Such an exquisite serene life as this—such skies!” looking up—”such crimson and amber foliage, so perfectly motionless as that!” pointing to some of the great forest trees which shut in the garden as if it were a nest.
“You must please to remember that our skies are not always as deep a blue as they are now. We have rain, and our leaves do fall, and get sodden: though I think Helstone is about as perfect a place as any in the world. Recollect how you rather mocked my description of it one evening in Harley Street: ‘a village in a tale.’”

“Mocked, John! That is rather a hard word.”

“Perhaps it is. Only I know I should have liked to have talked to you of it, and you—what must I call it, then?—spoke of Helstone as a mere village in a tale.”

“I will never do so again,” said she, warmly. They turned the corner of the walk.

“I could almost wish, John—— “ she stopped and hesitated.

It was so unusual for Mary, normally so articulate, to hesitate that John looked down at her, in a little state of questioning wonder, but in an instant—from what about her he could not tell—he wished himself back near his father—his mother—Mrs. Wilson—anywhere away from her, for he was sure she was going to say something to which he should not know what to reply.

In another moment the strong pride that was in him came to conquer his sudden agitation, which he hoped she had not perceived. He must change the course of conversation; it was poor and despicable of him to allow her to expose herself in any unmaidenly way.

“Miss Morstan, shall we not go…” he said, turning to her. He hesitated a moment before finishing his sentence, and this was his downfall.

“John,” she said. The sound of his Christian name took him by surprise, and while he was still under the shock, Mary stood on the tips of her toes, and getting sudden possession of his lips. He stood, frozen, at the featherlight touch of her mouth on his, despising himself for his immobility. After a moment of stillness, she stepped back from him and clapped her hand over her mouth.

“Oh! Mr. Watson! I am,” she breathed in, “so sorry. I do.. I do love you, John, almost in spite of myself, and I could not wait another moment.”

Still unmoving, John looked at her, so lovely in the late autumn light. He saw her lips quivering almost as if she were going to cry, but he could not move.

“John, have I startled you too much? Speak!” She had made a strong effort to be calm, and he did the same.

“I was startled. I did not know that you cared for me in that way. I have always thought of you as a friend; and, please, I would rather go on thinking of you so. Miss Morstan-Lennox, I cannot answer you as you want me to do, and yet I should feel so sorry if my response causes you pain.”

“Mr. Watson.” Here, she blushed pink as a crabapple blossom, but looked him straight in the eye. John’s eyes met hers with an open, straight look, expressive of his intense reluctance to give pain.

“Do you”—she was going to say—"love any one else?” But it seemed as if this question would be an insult. “Forgive me. I have been too abrupt. I am punished.”

John reproached himself acutely as the cause of his distress.

“It isn’t…it is not you, Miss Morstan, only that I am not yet situated to think of anyone.”

“So there is hope,” she breathed.
Flustered at her tone, John said, quickly, “Let us both forget that all this” (‘disagreeable,’ he was going to say, but stopped short) “event has taken place.”

Mary paused before she replied. Then, in a somewhat colder tone, she answered:

“Of course, as your feelings are so decided, and as this has been so evidently unpleasant to you, it had better not be remembered. That is all very fine in theory, that plan of forgetting whatever is painful, but it will be somewhat difficult for me, at least, to carry it into execution.”

“You are vexed,” said he, sadly; “yet how can I help it?”

He looked so truly grieved as she said this, that she struggled for a moment with her real disappointment, and then answered more cheerfully, but still with a little hardness in her tone:

“You should make allowances for the mortification of someone who has been carried out of her usual habits by the force of an attachment, and has met with rejection and repulse. I shall have to console myself with scorning my own folly.”

John could not answer this. The whole tone of it annoyed him. It seemed to touch on and call out all the points of difference which had often given him pause; while yet she was the pleasantest person, the most sympathising friend, the person of all others who understood him best in Harley Street. He felt a tinge of contempt mingle itself with his pain at having refused her.

It was well that, having made the round of the garden, they came suddenly upon Mr. Watson, whose whereabouts had been quite forgotten by them. He had not yet finished the pear.

John was unable to recover his self-possession enough to join in the trivial conversation that ensued between his father and Mary. He was grave, and little disposed to speak; full of wonder when Mary would go, and allow him to ponder on the events of the last quarter of an hour.

She was almost as anxious to take her departure as he was for her to leave; but a few minutes light and careless talking, carried on at whatever effort, was a sacrifice which she owed to her self-respect. He glanced from time to time at her sad and pensive face.

“I am not so indifferent to him as he believes,” thought she to herself. “I do not give up hope.”

Before a quarter of an hour was over, she had fallen into a way of conversing with quiet sarcasm; speaking of life in London and life in the country, as if she were conscious of his second mocking self, and afraid of his own satire. Mr. Watson was puzzled. His visitor was a different person to what he had seen her before at the wedding-breakfast, and at dinner to-day; more worldly, more fashionable, and, as such, dissonant to Mr. Watson. It was a relief to everyone when Mrs. Wilson said that they must go directly if they meant to catch the five o’clock train. They proceeded to the house to find Mrs. Watson, and wish her good-bye. At the last moment, Mary’s real self broke through the crust.

“John, don’t despise me; I have a heart, notwithstanding all this good-for-nothing way of talking. As a proof of it, I do not hate you for the disdain with which you have listened to me during this last half-hour. Good-bye, Mr. Watson—John!”

Chapter End Notes

One of the major challenges of this serial was the genderswap from female
protagonist (John Watson in the original) to male protagonist. I had to do some serious re-jigging to put John Watson in the same position that Margaret is in throughout the story: she’s tied to her father’s fortunes, until she marries at least, and so she must go to Milton-Northern. John wouldn’t have to do that normally; he could likely have gone into practice as a physician without his qualifying exams. Also, I’ve basically given John Arthur Conan Doyle’s medical education at the University of Edinburgh Medical School, although John would have attended at least 20 years earlier. That’s kind of a muddy period in the history of British medicine, but I’m following along with Gaskell when she talks about doctors, not distinguishing between physicians and surgeons (she probably means ‘physician’ but nonetheless). This also meant that I had to age John up a bit; he’s 24, which means he’s 5 years older than Margaret Hale. Sherlock remains about the same age as Thornton, “about thirty.”

Also, Mary’s characterization is turning out to be a lot more ambiguous than I thought it would be, and it’s another issue related to genderswap; in the original, Mary is "Henry Lennox", Sholto's brother. However, a great deal of what Henry does and says is incredibly forward and calculating even for a man, and when it's put in the mouth of a woman, it becomes almost scandalous. Combine this with the original John (i.e. Margaret Hale) being both female and a paragon of good behaviour, and the genderswap means that there's a kind of icky dynamic surrounding Mary right now. I will say, though, that Mary in the BBC version is fairly ambiguous too, so I'm not sure it doesn't work.
The Country and the City

Chapter Summary

"Any truth is better than indefinite doubt." Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Yellow Face"

John learns why the Watsons must leave Helstone for Milton-Northern, has a bad dream, and meets Sherlock Holmes.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to airynothing for her quick and thorough beta!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Their guests were gone. John had to wait a long time in the drawing-room before his mother came down. He sat by himself at the fire, with unlighted candles on the table behind him, thinking over the day, the happy walk, happy sketching, cheerful pleasant dinner, and the uncomfortable, miserable walk in the garden.

How different they were, must be! Here was he disturbed and unhappy, because his instinct had made anything but a refusal impossible; while she, not many minutes after she had met with a rejection of her frankly scandalous advances, could speak as if London, a good house, and clever and agreeable society, were the sole avowed objects of her desires. Oh dear! how he could have loved her if she had but been different, with a difference which he felt, on reflection, to be one that went low—deep down. Then he thought that, after all, her lightness might be but assumed, to cover a bitterness of disappointment which would have been stamped on his own heart if he had loved and been rejected.

His mother came into the room before this whirl of thoughts was adjusted into anything like order. John had to shake off the recollections of what had been done and said through that day. Mr. Watson sipped his tea in abstracted silence; John had the responses all to himself. He wondered how his father and mother could be so forgetful, so regardless of their prior company, as never to mention their names. He forgot that Miss Morstan-Lennox had not kissed them.

After tea Mr. Watson got up, and stood with his elbow on the chimney-piece, leaning his head on his hand, musing over something, and from time to time sighing deeply. Mrs. Watson went out to consult with Hudson about some winter clothing for the poor. John was looking out the window and rather shrinking from the thought of the long evening, and wishing bed-time were come that he might go over the events of the day again.

"John!" said Mr. Watson, at last, in a sort of sudden desperate way, that made him start. "Could you come into my study? I want to speak to you about something very serious to us all."

“Very serious to us all.” Mr. Watson could not have seen that kiss—John felt shamed even thinking of it—or else there would have been very serious consequences. John felt guilty and ashamed that he had not, in good conscience, been able to offer Miss Morstan-Lennox marriage.
He knew that his father would not have permitted anything less.

But he soon felt it was not the subject about which his father wished to speak to him. Mr. Watson stirred the fire, snuffed the candles, and sighed once or twice before he could make up his mind to say—and it came out with a jerk after all—“John! I am going to leave Helstone.”

“Leave Helstone, Father! But why?”

Mr. Watson did not answer for a minute or two. He played with some papers on the table in a nervous and confused manner, opening his lips to speak several times, but closing them again without having the courage to utter a word. John could not bear the sight of the suspense, which was even more distressing to his father than to himself.

“But why, Father? Do tell me!”

He looked up at him suddenly, and then said with a slow and enforced calmness:

“Because I must no longer be a minister in the Church of England.”

John had imagined nothing less than that some of the preferments which his mother so much desired had befallen his father at last—something that would force him to leave beautiful, beloved Helstone, and perhaps compel him to go and live in some of the stately and silent Closes which John had seen from time to time in cathedral towns. They were grand and imposing places, but if, to go there, it was necessary to leave Helstone as a home for ever, that would have been a sad, long, lingering pain. But nothing to the shock he received from Mr. Watson's last speech. What could he mean? It was all the worse for being so mysterious. Could he have become implicated in anything Harry had done? Harry was an outlaw. Had his father, out of a natural love for his eldest son, connived at any—

“Tell me, then, Father. Why can you no longer be a clergyman? Surely, if the bishop were told all we know about Harry, and the hard, unjust—”

“It is nothing about Harry; the bishop would have nothing to do with that. It is all myself. John, I will tell you about my painful doubts.”

“Doubts! Doubts as to religion?” asked John, more shocked than ever.

“No! not doubts as to religion; not the slightest injury to that.” He paused. John sighed, as if standing on the verge of some new horror. He began again, speaking rapidly:

“You could not understand it all, if I told you—my anxiety, for years past, to know whether I had any right to hold my living—my efforts to quench my smouldering doubts by the authority of the Church. Oh! John, how I love the holy Church from which I am to be shut out!” He could not go on for a moment or two, and John could not tell what to say.

“But, Father, how can you!” said John. The one sure foundation of his home, of his idea of his father, was fading away, and he was overtaken with a wave of dizziness and anger and had to sit down.

The sight of his son’s distress made Mr. Watson nerve himself. He swallowed down the dry choking sobs which had been heaving up from his heart hitherto.

“John!” said he, “think of the early martyrs; think of the thousands who have suffered.”

“But, Father,” John said, on a fresh wave of fury, “the early martyrs suffered for the truth, while you…while you…”
“I suffer for conscience's sake, my boy,” said Mr. Watson with dignity; “I must do what my conscience bids. Your poor mother's fond wish, gratified at last in the mocking way in which over-fond wishes are too often fulfilled—Sodom apples as they are—has brought on this crisis, for which I ought to be, and I hope I am thankful. It is not a month since the bishop offered me another living; if I had accepted it, I should have had to make a fresh declaration of conformity to the Liturgy at my institution. John, I tried to do it; I tried to content myself with simply refusing the additional preferment, and stopping quietly here,—strangling my conscience now, as I had strained it before. God forgive me!”

He rose and walked up and down the room, speaking low words of self-reproach and humiliation, of which John was thankful to hear but few. At last he said,

“John, I return to the old sad burden we must leave Helstone.”

“Yes! I see. But when?”

“I have written to the bishop—I dare say I have told you so, but I forget things just now,” said Mr. Watson, collapsing into his depressed manner as soon as he came to talk of hard matter-of-fact details, “informing him of my intention to resign this vicarage. He has been most kind, but his arguments have been in vain. I shall have to take my deed of resignation, and wait upon the bishop myself, to bid him farewell. Next Sunday I preach my farewell sermon.”

Was it to be so sudden then? thought John, and yet perhaps it was as well. Lingering would only add stings to the pain; it was better to be stunned into numbness by hearing of all these arrangements, which seemed to be nearly completed before he had been told. “What does Mother say?” he asked, with trepidation.

To his surprise, his father began to walk about again before he answered. At length he stopped and replied:

“John, I am a poor coward after all. I cannot bear to give pain. I know so well your mother's married life has not been all she hoped—all she had a right to expect—and this will be such a blow to her, that I have never had the heart, the power to tell her. She must be told though, now,” said he, looking wistfully at his son. John was almost overpowered with the idea that his mother knew nothing of it all, and yet the affair was so far advanced!

“Yes, indeed she must,” said John. “How could you, Father?” The force of the blow returned upon him in trying to realise how another would take it. “Where are we to go to?” said he at last, struck with a fresh wonder as to their future plans, if plans indeed his father had.

“To Milton-Northern,” he answered.

“To Milton-Northern! The manufacturing town in Darkshire?”

“Yes,”

“Why there, Father?”

“Because there I can earn bread for my family. Because I know no one there, and no one knows Helstone, or can ever talk to me about it.”

“Bread for your family! But… Harry is not provided for? And can I not earn? I know I have not yet the qualifications, but perhaps…” He stopped, as he saw the gathering gloom on his father’s brow. But Mr Watson, with his quick intuitive sympathy, read in his son's face, as in a mirror, the reflections of his own moody depression, and turned it off with an effort.
“You shall be told all, John. It is certainly past time; it is only that you have been away, and we have never liked to spoil your few holidays by speaking of our cares. Only,” and here he hesitated, “help me to tell your mother. I think I could do anything but that: the idea of her distress turns me sick with dread. If I tell you all, perhaps you could break it to her to-morrow. I am going out for the day, to bid Farmer Dobson and the poor people on Bracy Common good-bye. Would you dislike breaking it to her very much, John?”

John did dislike it, did shrink from it more than from anything he had ever had to do in his life before.

“Father, you…” John stopped and turned towards the window, unable to express his anger.

“You dislike it very much, don’t you, John?” At his father’s defeated tone, John conquered himself, saying,

“It is a painful thing, but it must be done, and I will do it as well as ever I can. You must have many painful things to do.”

Mr. Watson shook his head despondingly: he gripped John’s hand in gratitude, his eyes bright with unshed tears. John tore his eyes from his father’s devastated face to ask,

“Now tell me, what our plans are. You and Mother have some money, independent of the income from the living, have not you?”

“Yes. I suppose we have about a hundred and seventy pounds a year of our own. Seventy of that has always gone to Harry, since he has been abroad. I don’t know if he wants it all,” he continued in a hesitating manner. “He must have some pay for serving with the Spanish army.”

“Harry must not suffer,” said John, decidedly; “in a foreign country; so unjustly treated by his own.” Then, nerving himself, he continued,

“A hundred is left. Edinburgh is very cheap, you know; could not you and Mother come and live with me until I qualified? It would mean lodgings, certainly, but it would only be a year at most. Then, I could find a practice and keep us all.”

“No!” said Mr. Watson. “That would not answer. I must do something. I must make myself busy, to keep off morbid thoughts. And, even if you were to qualify right away” here, John turned away again, a hot blush of shame on his face, “you must buy a share in a practice, and so your earnings, even with the hundred a year, would go a very little way, after the necessary wants of housekeeping are met, towards providing your mother with all the comforts she has been accustomed to, and ought to have. Removal so far would be deleterious to her health as well. No, John, we must go to Milton. That is settled. I can always decide better by myself, and not influenced by those whom I love,” said he, as a half apology for having arranged so much before he had told any one of his family of his intentions. “I cannot stand objections. They make me so undecided.”

John resolved, then, to keep silence. After all, what did it signify where they went, compared to the one terrible change? The vague, uncomfortable mixture of relief and disappointment he felt at not having to return to Edinburgh he tamped down and away.

Mr. Watson continued: “A few months ago, when my misery of doubt became more than I could bear without speaking, I wrote to Mr. Stamford—you remember Mr. Stamford, John?”

“No; I never saw him, I think. But I know who he is. Harry's godfather—your old tutor at Oxford, don't you mean?”
“Yes. He is a Fellow of Plymouth College there. He is a native of Milton-Northern, I believe. At any rate, he has property there, which has very much increased in value since Milton has become such a large manufacturing town. Well, I had reason to suspect—to imagine—I had better say nothing about it, however. But I felt sure of sympathy from Mr. Stamford. It is owing to him we are going to Milton.”

“How?” said John.

“Why, he has tenants, and houses, and mills there; so, though he dislikes the place—too bustling for one of his habits—he is obliged to keep up some sort of connection; and he tells me that he hears there is a good opening for a private tutor there.”

“A private tutor!” said John, “There! What in the world do manufacturers want with the classics, or literature, or the accomplishments of a gentleman?”

“Oh,” said his father, “some of them really seem to be fine fellows, conscious of their own deficiencies, which is more than many a man at Oxford is. Some want resolutely to learn, though they have come to man’s estate. Some want their children to be better instructed than they themselves have been.”

“Can I not also work, Father? I have the knowledge necessary, and though I have not your experience I think I could teach children.”

“John, my son, you had better recover entirely first. You came so close,” and here Mr. Watson turned his face away to the window, “so close, my boy, to dying, and we cannot afford to have you lost to us.”

John gripped his father’s hand.

“I am so much improved, Father, I truly am. I cannot sit at home and let you work yourself to an early grave.”

“Let us remove, John, and we will see how you are after the journey. There will be much to do. Mr. Stamford has recommended me to a Mr. Holmes, a tenant of his, and a very intelligent man, as far as I can judge from his letters. Perhaps he will know of some employment for you that will not tire you beyond your strength.”

John wanted very much to object, to this, at least, but seeing his father’s downcast face, refrained from further argument. Mr. Watson continued,

“In Milton, John, I shall find a busy life, if not a happy one, and people and scenes so different that I shall never be reminded of Helstone.”

There was the secret motive, as John knew from his own feelings. It would be different. Discordant as it was—with almost a detestation for all he had ever heard of the North of England, the manufacturers, the people, the ugly, disfigured land—there was this one recommendation—it would be different from Helstone, and could never remind them of that beloved place.

“When do we go?” asked John, after a short silence.

“I do not know exactly. I wanted to talk it over with you. You see, your mother knows nothing about it yet; but I think, in a fortnight;—after my deed of resignation is sent in, I shall have no right to remain.”

John was almost stunned.
“In a fortnight!”

“No—no, not exactly to a day. Nothing is fixed.”

“Well, Father, it had better be fixed soon and decidedly. It is that Mother doesn’t yet know!”

“Poor Maria!” replied Mr. Watson, tenderly. “Poor, poor Maria! Oh, if I were not married—if I were but myself in the world, how easy it would be! As it is—John, I dare not tell her!”

“No,” said John, sadly, “I will do it. Give me till to-morrow evening to choose my time.”

He arose and went, without another word or look, towards the door.

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For the rest of the evening, John made a good listener to all his mother’s little plans for adding some small comforts to the lot of the poorer parishioners. He could not help listening, though each new project was a stab to his heart. By the time the frost had set in, they should be far away from Helstone. He glanced out the window, greedily taking in the beloved view.

“Do you feel ill, my darling?” asked Mrs. Watson, anxiously, misunderstanding John's look. “You look pale and tired. It is this soft, damp, unhealthy air.”

“No—no, Mother darling, it is not that: it is delicious air. It smells of the freshest, purest fragrance, after the grittiness of Edinburgh and the smokiness of Harley Street. But I am tired: it surely must be near bedtime.”

“Not far off—it is half-past nine. You had better go to bed at once. Ask Hudson for some gruel. I will come and see you as soon as you are in bed. I am afraid you have taken cold—I am sure you are not fully recovered, my son, and you have been exerting yourself excessively.”

“Oh, Mother,” said John, faintly smiling as he kissed her, “I am quite well—don't alarm yourself about me; I am only tired.”

John went upstairs. To soothe his mother’s anxiety he submitted to a basin of gruel. He was standing motionless at the window when Mrs. Watson came up to make some last inquiries and kiss him before going to her own room for the night. That morning when he had looked out, he had been so glad at seeing the bright clear lights on the church tower, which foretold a fine and sunny day. This evening—sixteen hours at most had passed by—a dull cold pain, seemed to have pressed the youth and buoyancy out of his heart, never to return. The hard reality was, that his father had so admitted tempting doubts into his mind as to become a schismatic—an outcast; all the changes consequent upon this grouped themselves around that one great blighting fact.

Miss Morstan-Lennox—her visit, the kiss—haunted his dreams that night. Time and again she pressed her lips to his in the garden, and each time a hot wash of shame broke over him. Then, they were back in the Harley Street drawing-room, and she was reaching for his shirt buttons. He backed himself into a corner, entreating her urgently to desist. Someone was coming towards the room, and, as he placed his hand on her shoulder to save them both from being thus discovered, she fell away and back and was suddenly sprawled flat, bloody and broken on a pile of corpses in an Edinburgh street. He reached to save her, but could not, torn away by the hand of some skeletal thing and whirled into a dark maelstrom of unconsciousness.

There was a lull, then, in his dream. He opened his eyes to the soft blue tile of the --- Street baths; he was on his back in the steam room, unclothed but for a towel. Sholto walked towards him, his face sympathetic, and placed a hand on his bare chest, light but sure. John groaned and his towel fell away. The look of blatant passion in Sholto’s eyes was somehow mortifying, but the pulse of
his exposed cock was agony. Despite himself, John arched his body to meet the touch he knew was coming, the smooth, practiced rhythm of those large and capable hands.

Then, just as the crisis approached, he was back once again on the hellish scene, the groans and screams of the injured mingling with the sharp orders of the police constables. He lay, naked and hard, on the dirty cobblestones, unable to help.

When he awoke with a start, he was still in a state of inexpressible arousal. He set his hand on himself, and in a few strokes brought himself to spend, focusing on the vivid memory of Sholto’s hands in order to shut out the noise and dirt and pain of the other.

He arose from his bed guilty and unrefreshed, and yet conscious of some reality worse even than his feverish dreams. The events of the preceding day all came back upon him; not merely the sorrow, but the terrible discord in the sorrow.

The fine crisp morning made his mother feel particularly well and happy at breakfast-time. She talked on, planning village kindnesses, unheeding the silence of husband and son. Before the things were cleared away, Mr. Watson got up; he leaned one hand on the table, as if to support himself:

“I shall not be at home till evening. I am going to Bracy Common, and will ask Farmer Dobson to give me something for dinner. I shall be back to tea at seven.” He did not look at either of them, but John knew what he meant. By seven the announcement must be made to his mother. Mr. Watson would have delayed making it till half-past six, but John was of different stuff. He could not bear the impending weight on his mind all the day long: better get the worst over; the day would be too short to comfort her. But while he stood by the window, thinking how to begin, and waiting for the servant to have left the room, his mother had gone up-stairs to put on her things to go to the school. She came down ready equipped, in a brisker mood than usual.

“Mother, come round the garden with me this morning; just one turn,” said John, taking her arm. They passed through the open window. Mrs. Watson spoke—said something—John could not tell what. His eye caught on a bee entering a deep-belled flower: when that bee flew out he would begin—that should be the sign. Out it came.

“Mother! Father is going to leave Helstone!” he blurted forth. “He’s going to leave the Church, and live in Milton-Northern.” There were the three hard facts hardly spoken.

“What makes you say so?” asked Mrs. Watson, in a surprised incredulous voice. “Who has been telling you such nonsense?”

“Father himself,” said John, wanting to say something gentle and consoling, but not knowing how. They were close to a garden-bench. Mrs. Watson sat down, and began to cry.

“I don’t understand you,” she said. “Either you have made some great mistake, or I don’t quite understand you.”

“No, mother, I have made no mistake. He has written to the bishop, saying that he has such doubts that he cannot conscientiously remain a priest of the Church of England, and that he must give up Helstone. He has also consulted Mr. Stamford—Harry's godfather, you know; and it is arranged that we go to live in Milton-Northern.” Mrs. Watson looked up in John's face all the time he was speaking these words and the shadow on his face convinced her of the truth.

“But, John, dear, he would surely have told me before it came to this.”

Once again, John thought angrily that his mother ought to have been told; he sat down by her, and
took her unresisting head on his shoulder.

“Beloved mother! we were so afraid of giving you pain. Papa felt so acutely—you know you are not strong, and there must have been such terrible suspense to go through.”

“When did he tell you, John?”

“Yesterday, only yesterday,” replied John, detecting the jealousy which prompted the inquiry. “Poor father!”—trying to divert his mother's thoughts into compassionate sympathy for all his father had gone through. Mrs. Watson raised her head.

“What does he mean by having doubts? Can't the bishop set him right?” asked Mrs. Watson, half impatiently.

“I'm afraid not,” said John. “But I did not ask. I could not bear to hear what he might answer. It is all settled at any rate. He is going to leave Helstone in a fortnight. I am not sure if he did not say he had sent in his deed of resignation.”

“In a fortnight!” exclaimed Mrs. Watson, “I do think this is very strange—not at all right. I call it very unfeeling,” said she, beginning to take relief in tears. “He has doubts, you say, and gives up his living, and all without consulting me. I dare say, if he had told me his doubts at the first I could have nipped them in the bud.”

Mistaken as John felt his father's conduct to have been, he felt that hearing it blamed would result in a show of temper that he would not be able to restrain. He reminded himself that his father's reserve had originated in a tenderness for his wife, which might be cowardly, but was not unfeeling.

“I almost hoped you might have been glad to leave Helstone,” he said to his mother, after a pause. “You have never been well in this air, you know.”

“You can't think the smoky air of a manufacturing town, all chimneys and dirt like Milton-Northern, would be better than this air, which is pure and sweet, if it is too soft and relaxing. Fancy living in the middle of factories, and factory people! Though, of course, if your father leaves the Church, we shall not be admitted into society anywhere. It will be such a disgrace to us!”

John was glad that his mother's thoughts were turned away from the fact of her husband's silence. Next to the serious vital anxiety as to the nature of his father's doubts, this was the one circumstance of the case that gave John the most pain.

“You know, we have very little society here, mamma. The Gormans, who are our nearest neighbours (to call society—and we hardly ever see them), have been in trade just as much as these Milton-Northern people.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Watson, almost indignantly, “but, at any rate, the Gormans made carriages for half the gentry of the county, and were brought into some kind of intercourse with them; but these factory people, who on earth wears cotton that can afford linen?”

“Well, Mother, I give up the cotton-spinners; I am not standing up for them, any more than for any other trades-people. Only we shall have little enough to do with them.”

“Why on earth has your father fixed on Milton-Northern to live in?”

“Partly,” said John, “because it is so very different from Helstone—partly because Mr. Stamford says there is an opening there for a private tutor.”
“Private tutor in Milton! Why can't he go to Oxford, and be a tutor to gentlemen?”

“You forget, mamma! He is leaving the Church on account of his opinions—his doubts would do him no good at Oxford.”

Mrs. Watson was silent for some time, quietly crying. At last she said:—

“And the furniture—How in the world are we to manage the removal? I never removed in my life, and only a fortnight to think about it!”

John was inexpressibly relieved to find that his mother's anxiety and distress was lowered to this point, so insignificant to herself, and on which he could do so much to help. He planned and promised, and led his mother on to arrange fully as much as could be fixed before they knew somewhat more definitively what Mr. Watson intended to do. Throughout the day John never left his mother; bending his whole self to sympathise in all the various turns her feelings took; towards evening especially, as he became more and more anxious that his father should find a soothing welcome home awaiting him, after his return from his day of fatigue and distress. He dwelt upon what Mr. Watson must have borne in secret for long; his mother only replied coldly that her husband ought to have told her, and that then at any rate he would have had an adviser to give him counsel.

John felt anger and trepidation merge in his breast when he heard his father's step in the hall. He was, all at once, both furious and faint. By his mother's twitching lips and changing colour he saw that she too was aware that her husband had returned. Presently, Mr. Watson opened the room-door, and stood there uncertain whether to come in. His face was gray and pale; he had a timid, fearful look in his eyes, but that look of despondent uncertainty touched his wife's heart. She went to him, and threw herself on his breast, crying out—

“Oh! Richard, Richard, you should have told me sooner!”

John watched, jaw set. His hand clenched and unclenched at his side. He turned abruptly and left the room, taking the stairs one slow step at a time, willing himself not to rush upstairs and bury his fist in the wall. Instead, once at his room, he paced angrily, then flung himself into his chair and sat, head in his hands, motionless. How long he sat thus he could not tell, and it was only when Hudson came in with a candle that he came back to himself.

“Oh, Hudson, is it so late?”

“I hardly can tell what time it is,” replied Hudson, in an aggrieved tone of voice. “Since your mamma told me this terrible news, when I dressed her for tea, I've lost all count of time. I'm sure I don't know what is to become of us all. No wonder you've no notion of time just now! And master thinking of turning Dissenter at his time of life, when, if it is not to be said he's done well in the Church, he's not done badly after all. I had a cousin, miss, who turned Methodist preacher after he was fifty years of age, and a tailor all his life; but then he had never been able to make a pair of trousers to fit, for as long as he had been in the trade, so it was no wonder; but for master!”

Hudson had been so much accustomed to comment upon Mr. Watson's proceedings to her mistress (who listened to her, or not, as she was in the humour), that she never noticed John's flashing eye and dilating nostril. To hear his father talked of in this way by a servant to his face!

“Hudson,” he said, in the low tone he always used when much excited, which had a sound in it as of some distant turmoil, or threatening storm breaking far away. “Hudson! you forget to whom you are speaking.” He stood upright and firm on his feet now, confronting the waiting-maid, and fixing her with his steady discerning eye. “I am Mr. Watson's son. Go! You have made a strange
mistake, and one that I am sure your own good feeling will make you sorry for when you think about it."

Hudson hung irresolutely about the room for a minute or two. John repeated, “You may leave me, Hudson. I wish you to go.” Hudson did not know whether to resent these decided words or to cry, but, finally, she, who would have resented such words from any one less haughty and determined in manner, was subdued enough to say, in a half humble, half injured tone:

“Mayn't I bring you something hot to drink, Master John, or send Sarah with more coal?”

“No! not to-night, thank you.” And John gravely lighted her out of the room, and bolted the door. From henceforth Hudson obeyed and admired John. She said it was because he was so like poor Master Harry; but the truth was, that Hudson, as do many others, liked to feel herself ruled by a powerful and decided nature.

John needed all Hudson's help in action, and silence in words; for, for some time, the latter thought it her duty to show her sense of affront by saying as little as possible to him; so the energy came out in doing rather than in speaking. A fortnight was a very short time to make arrangements for so serious a removal; as Hudson said, “Any one but a gentleman—indeed almost any other gentleman—” but catching a look at the twitch of John’s jaw just here, she coughed the remainder of the sentence away. But almost any one but Mr. Watson would have had practical knowledge enough to see, that in so short a time it would be difficult to fix on any house in Milton-Northern, or indeed elsewhere, to which they could remove the furniture that had of necessity to be taken out of Helstone vicarage. Mrs. Watson, overpowered by all the troubles and necessities for immediate household decisions that seemed to come upon her at once, became really ill, and John almost felt it as a relief when his mother fairly took to her bed, and left the management of affairs to him. Hudson, true to her post of body-guard, attended most faithfully to her mistress, and only emerged from Mrs. Watson's bed-room to shake her head, and murmur to herself in a manner which John did not choose to hear. For, the one thing clear and straight before him, was the necessity for leaving Helstone. Mr. Watson's successor in the living was appointed; and, at any rate, after his father's decision; there must be no lingering now, for his sake, as well as from every other consideration. For he came home every evening more and more depressed, after the necessary leave-taking which he had resolved to have with every individual parishioner. John, out-of-place though he felt in all the necessary household business to be got through, did not know to whom to apply for advice. The cook and Sarah worked away with willing arms and stout hearts at all the moving and packing; and as far as that went, John's good sense enabled him to see what was best, and to direct how it should be done. But where were they to go to? In a week they must be gone. Straight to Milton, or where? So many arrangements depended on this decision that John resolved to ask his father one evening, in spite of his evident fatigue and low spirits. He answered:

“My boy! I have really had too much to think about to settle this. What does your mother say? What does she wish? Poor Maria!”

He met with an echo even louder than his sigh. Hudson had just come into the room for another cup of tea for Mrs. Watson, and catching Mr. Watson's last words, and protected by his presence from John's blue glare, made bold to say, “My poor mistress!”

“You don't think her worse to-day,” said Mr. Watson, turning hastily.

“I'm sure I can't say, sir. It's not for me to judge. The illness seems so much more on the mind than on the body.”

Mr. Watson looked infinitely distressed.

“You had better take mamma her tea while it is hot, Hudson,” said John, with some asperity.
“Oh! I beg your pardon, sir! My thoughts was otherwise occupied in thinking of my poor—— of Mrs. Watson.”

“Father,” said John, “it is this suspense that is bad for you both. Of course, Mother must feel your change of opinions: we can't help that,” he continued, as gently as he could, “but now the course is clear, at least to a certain point. I must know, though: are we to go straight to Milton? Have you taken a house there?”

“No,” Mr. Watson replied. “I suppose we must go into lodgings, and look about for a house.

“And pack up the furniture so that it can be left at the railway station, till we have met with one?”

“I suppose so. Do what you think best. Only remember, we shall have much less money to spend.”

They had never had much superfluity, as John knew. He felt that it was a great weight suddenly thrown upon his shoulders, one so very different from the world of examinations and study.

His father went up after tea to sit with his wife. John remained alone in the drawing-room. Suddenly he took a candle and went into the study for a great atlas, and lugging it back into the drawing-room, he began to pore over the map of England. He was ready to look up brightly when his father came down stairs.

“I have a plan, Father. Look here—in Darkshire, hardly the breadth of my finger from Milton, is Heston, which I have often heard of from people living in the north as a pleasant little bathing-place. Now, don't you think we could get Mother there with Hudson, while you and I go and look at houses, and get one all ready for her in Milton? She would get a breath of sea air to set her up for the winter, and be spared all the fatigue, and Hudson would enjoy taking care of her.”

“Is Hudson to go with us?” asked Mr. Watson, in a kind of helpless dismay.

“Oh, yes!” said John. “Hudson quite intends it, and I don't know what Mother would do without her.”

“But we shall have to put up with a very different way of living, I am afraid. Everything is so much dearer in a town. I doubt if Hudson can make herself comfortable. To tell you the truth John, I sometimes feel as if that woman gave herself airs.”

“To be sure she does, Father,” replied John; “and if she has to put up with a different style of living, we shall have to put up with her airs, which will be worse. But she really loves us all, and would be miserable to leave us, I am sure—especially in this change; so, for mamma's sake, and for the sake of her faithfulness, I do think she must go.”

“Very well. Go on. I am resigned. How far is Heston from Milton? The breadth of one of your fingers does not give me a very clear idea of distance.”

“Well, then, I suppose it is thirty miles; that is not much!”

“Not in distance, but in—. Never mind! If you really think it will do your mother good, let it be fixed so.”

This was a great step. Now John could work, and act, and plan in good earnest. And now Mrs. Watson could rouse herself from her languor, and forget her real suffering in thinking of the pleasure and the delight of going to the sea-side. Her only regret was that Mr. Watson could not be with her all the fortnight she was to be there, as he had been for a whole fortnight once, when they
were engaged, and she was staying with Sir John and Lady Beresford at Torquay.

The last day came; the house was full of packing-cases, which were being carted off at the front door, to the nearest railway station. Even the pretty lawn at the side of the house was made unsightly and untidy by the straw that had been wafted upon it through the open door and windows. The rooms had a strange echoing sound in them,—and the light came harshly and strongly in through the uncurtained windows,—seeming already unfamiliar and strange.

Mrs. Watson's dressing-room was left untouched to the last; and there she and Hudson were packing up clothes, and interrupting each other every now and then to exclaim at, and turn over with fond regard, some forgotten treasure, in the shape of some relic of the children while they were yet little. They did not make much progress with their work. Down-stairs, John stood calm and collected, ready to counsel or advise the men who had been called in to help the cook and Sarah. There he stood, pale and outwardly quiet. His heart was aching all the time, and constant exertion for his faculties was the only solution.

Moreover, if he gave way, who was to act? His father was examining papers, books, registers, what not, in the vestry with the clerk; and when he came in, there were his own books to pack up, which no one but himself could do to his satisfaction.

John moved stiffly and slowly away from the place in the hall where he had been standing so long, out through the bare echoing drawing-room, into the twilight of an early November evening, for a walk under the pear-tree wall. He had never been along it since he paced it at Mary Morstan-Lennox's side.

Here, at this bed of thyme, she had kissed him. Only a fortnight ago! And all so changed! Where was she now? In London,—going through the old round; dining with the old Harley Street set, or with gayer young friends of her own, while he walked sadly through that damp and drear garden in the dusk, with everything falling and fading, and turning to decay around him.

When he came in, the study was all ready for tea. There was a good blazing fire, and John sat down on the rug, partly to warm himself, for the dampness of the evening and over-fatigue had made him chilly. When he heard his father's step on the gravel outside, he started up and went out to open the door for him.

"Have you been a very long walk to-day?" asked he, on seeing Mr. Watson's refusal to touch food of any kind.

"As far as Fordham Beeches. I went to see Widow Maltby; she is sadly grieved at not having wished you good-bye. She says little Billy has kept watch down the lane for days past.—Nay, John, what is the matter?" The thought of the little child watching for him, and continually disappointed—from no forgetfulness on his part, but from sheer inability to leave home—was the last drop in John's cup, and he turned away, angrily clenching his fists. Mr. Watson rose, and walked nervously up and down the room. John heard him talking, as if to himself.

"I cannot bear it. I cannot bear to see the sufferings of others. I think I could go through my own with patience. Oh, is there no going back?"

"No, father," said John, looking straight at him, and speaking low and steadily. "It is bad to believe you in error. It would be infinitely worse to have known you a hypocrite." He dropped his voice at the last few words, as if entertaining the idea of hypocrisy for a moment in connection with his father savoured of irreverence.
Railroad time inexorably wrenched them away from lovely, beloved Helstone, the next morning. They were gone; they had seen the last of the long low parsonage home, half-covered with China-roses and pyracanthus—more homelike than ever in the morning sun that glittered on its windows, each belonging to some well-loved room. Almost before they had settled themselves into the car, sent from Southampton to fetch them to the station, they were gone away to return no more. A sting at John's heart made him strive to look out to catch the last glimpse of the old church tower at the turn where he knew it might be seen above a wave of the forest trees; but his father remembered this too, and he silently acknowledged Mr. Watson's greater right to the one window from which it could be seen. He leant back and shut his eyes against the sting of tears.

They were to stop in London all night at some quiet hotel. Poor Mrs. Watson had cried in her way nearly all day long; and Hudson showed her sorrow by extreme crossness, and a continual irritable attempt to keep her petticoats from even touching the unconscious Mr. Watson, whom she regarded as the origin of all this suffering.

They went through the well-known streets, past houses which they had often visited, past shops in which John had lounged, impatient, by his aunt's side, while that lady was making some important and interminable decision—nay, absolutely past acquaintances in the streets; for though the morning had been of an incalculable length to them, and they felt as if it ought long ago to have closed in for the repose of darkness, it was the very busiest time of a London afternoon in November when they arrived there. It was long since Mrs. Watson had been in London; and she roused up, almost like a child, to look about her at the different streets, and to gaze after and exclaim at the shops and carriages.

“Oh, there's Harrison's, where I bought so many of my wedding-things. Dear! how altered! They've got immense plate-glass windows, larger than Crawford's in Southampton. Oh, and there, I declare—no, it is not—yes, it is—John, we have just passed Miss Morstan-Lennox and Mrs. Wilson. They are going into Mitchell’s, for handkerchiefs, I suppose.”

John started forwards, and as quickly fell back, half-smiling at himself for the sudden motion. They were a hundred yards away by this time; but Miss Morstan-Lennox seemed like a relic of Helstone—she was associated with a bright morning, an eventful day, and suddenly he should have liked to have seen her, without her seeing him,—without the chance of their speaking.

The evening, without employment, passed in a room high up in an hotel, was long and heavy. Mr. Watson went out to his bookseller's, and to call on a friend or two. Every one they saw, either in the house or out in the streets, appeared hurrying to some appointment, expected by, or expecting somebody. They alone seemed strange and friendless, and desolate. Yet within a mile, John knew of house after house, where he for his own sake, and his mother for his aunt Shaw's, would be welcomed, if they came in gladness, or even in peace of mind. If they came sorrowing, and wanting sympathy in a complicated trouble like the present, then they would be felt as a shadow in all these houses of intimate acquaintances, not friends.

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The next afternoon, about twenty miles from Milton-Northern, they entered on the little branch railway that led to Heston. Heston itself was one long straggling street, running parallel to the seashore. It had a character of its own, as different from the little bathing-places in the south of England as they again from those of the continent. To use a Scotch word, every thing looked more “purposelike.” The country carts had more iron, and less wood and leather about the horse-gear; the people in the streets, although on pleasure bent, had yet a busy mind.

They were glad to take the first clean, cheerful rooms they met with that were at liberty to receive them. There, for the first time for many days, did John feel at rest. There was a dreaminess in the rest, too, which made it still more perfect and luxurious to repose in. The distant sea, lapping the
rest, too, which made it still more perfect and luxurious to repose in. The distant sea, lapping the sandy shore with measured sound; the nearer cries of the donkey-boys; the unusual scenes moving before him like pictures, which he cared not in his laziness to have fully explained before they passed away; the stroll down to the beach to breathe the sea-air, soft and warm on that sandy shore even to the end of November; the great long misty sea-line touching the tender-coloured sky; the white sail of a distant boat turning silver in some pale sunbeam: and yet he felt a strange, uncomfortable dis-ease under his skin, as if this were too calm. The blank dreaminess of their time there was as an echo of the first days following his illness, and his natural active self rebelled against it, though he did not quite dare contemplate the future.

But the future came—one evening it was arranged that John and his father should go the next day to Milton-Northern, and look out for a house. Mr. Watson had received several letters from Mr. Stamford, and one curt note from Mr. Holmes, and he was anxious to ascertain at once a good many particulars respecting his position and chances of success there, which he could only do by an interview with the latter gentleman. John knew that they ought to be removing; but he had a repugnance to the idea of a manufacturing town, and believed that his mother was receiving benefit from Heston air, so he would willingly have deferred the expedition to Milton.

For several miles before they reached Milton, they saw a deep lead-coloured cloud hanging over the horizon in the direction in which it lay. It was all the darker from contrast with the pale gray-blue of the wintry sky; for in Heston there had been the earliest signs of frost. Nearer to the town, the air had a faint taste and smell of smoke; perhaps, after all, more a loss of the fragrance of grass and herbage than any positive taste or smell. Quick they were whirled over long, straight, hopeless streets of regularly-built houses, all small and of brick. Here and there a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up, like a hen among her chickens, puffing out black “unparliamentary” smoke, and sufficiently accounting for the cloud which John had taken to foretell rain. As they drove through the larger and wider streets, from the station to the hotel, they had to stop constantly; great loaded lorries blocked up the not over-wide thoroughfares. John had, of course, spent several years in Edinburgh, but there the heavy lumbering vehicles seemed various in their purposes and intent; here every van, every waggon and truck, bore cotton, either in the raw shape in bags, or the woven shape in bales of calico. People thronged the footpaths, most of them well-dressed as regarded the material, but with a slovenly looseness which struck John as different from the shabby, threadbare smartness of a similar class in London.

“New Street,” said Mr. Watson. “This, I believe, is the principal street in Milton. Stamford has often spoken to me about it. It was the opening of this street from a lane into a great thoroughfare, thirty years ago, which has caused his property to rise so much in value. Mr. Holmes's mill must be somewhere not very far off, for he is Mr. Stamford's tenant. But I fancy he works from his warehouse.”

“Where is our hotel, Father?”

“Close to the end of this street, I believe. Shall we have lunch before or after we have looked at the houses we marked in the Milton Times?”

“Oh, let us get our work done first.”

“Very well. Then I will only see if there is any note or letter for me from Mr. Holmes, who said he would let me know anything he might hear about these houses, and then we will set off. We will keep the cab; it will be safer than losing ourselves, and being too late for the train this afternoon.”

There were no letters awaiting him. They set out on their house-hunting. Thirty pounds a-year was all they could afford to give, but in Hampshire they could have met with a roomy house and pleasant garden for the money. Here, even the necessary accommodation of two sitting-rooms and four bed-rooms seemed unattainable. They went through their list, rejecting each as they visited it. Then they looked at each other in dismay.
“We must go back to the second, I think. That one in Crampton,” John said firmly, “There were three sitting-rooms; don’t you remember how we laughed at the number compared with the three bed-rooms?”

“I dare say it will. But the papers. What taste! And the overloading such a house with colour and such heavy cornices!”

“Surely, Father, you can charm the landlord into re-papering one or two of the rooms—the drawing-room and your bed-room—for mamma will come most in contact with them; and your book-shelves will hide a great deal of that gaudy pattern in the dining-room.”

“Then you think it the best? If so, I had better go at once and call on this Mr. Turner, to whom the advertisement refers me. Do you go back to the hotel, where you can order lunch, and rest, and by the time it is ready, I shall be with you. I hope I shall be able to get new papers.” His father left him and went to the address of the landlord of the house they had fixed upon.

John hoped so too, though he said nothing. He had never come fairly in contact with the taste that loves ornament, however bad, more than the plainness and simplicity which are of themselves the framework of elegance.

As John entered the hotel, with his hand on the door of their sitting-room, he was followed by a quick-stepping waiter:

“I beg your pardon, sir. The gentleman was gone so quickly, I had no time to tell him. Mr. Holmes called almost directly after you left; and, as I understood from what the gentleman said, you would be back in an hour, I told him so, and he came again about five minutes ago, and said he would wait for Mr. Watson. He is in your room now, sir.”

“Thank you. My father will return soon, and then you can tell him.” John opened the door and went in. The tall man standing at the fireplace turned towards him with an assessing gaze. John held himself straight and steady, but his heart began to beat in a curious pattern. His whole impression was of a strange kinetic beauty; the man was slender but powerful, with light eyes and an unfashionable riot of dark curls.

Sherlock Holmes was a good deal more surprised and discomfited than John was, though his outer aspect remained unchanged. Instead of the quiet, middle-aged clergyman he was expecting, he saw a young, blond man in a very plain, dark suit, well-worn and cut in such a way as to emphasize his slimness. For a moment, he did not understand who John was—he had thought Mr. Watson’s son still at school—but with a look it was clear who and what this man was: a very different type of man to those Sherlock was in the habit of seeing.

“Mr. John Watson, is it not?” He stepped closer, and John was forced to look up into his face, “I hope you are feeling much better; will you retake your exams soon?”

“Mr. Holmes, I believe!” said John, after a half-instant's pause, too well-bred to not to answer a question which had in fact seemed to him impertinent, though his voice was cool when he answered,

“I am well, thank you, and have not yet made any plans to return to Edinburgh. Will you sit down? My father has gone away on some business, but he will come back almost directly. I am sorry you have had the trouble of calling twice.”

Sherlock sat. He was in habits of authority himself, and had not intended to sit, being much occupied that day, but this John Watson seemed to assume some kind of authority over him at
“Do you know where it is that Mr. Watson has gone to? Perhaps I might be able to find him.”

“He has gone to a Mr. Turner’s in Baker Street. He is the land-lord of the house my father wishes to take in Crampton.”

Sherlock knew the house; he had seen it, his visit instigated by his own curiosity. Sherlock had thought that the house in Crampton was really just the thing, but now that he had seen John, with his well-cut, if shabby, suit and quiet firmness, he began to feel ashamed of having imagined that it would do very well for the Watsons, in spite of a certain vulgarity in it which had struck him at the time of his looking it over.

John could not help his looks, but his open face and quiet bearing always gave strangers the impression of calmness, even of tameness. Though Sherlock knew men, and knew them well, he did not quite think this was the case, and so he sat and observed.

John, on the other hand, rather wished Sherlock would go, but then, he rather wished he wouldn’t. He was drawn to this stranger, neither over-brushed nor over-polished from his encounters with the rough Milton populace, but at the same time he was deeply uncomfortable. Sherlock exuded a power, a vitality, that ruffled something deep inside him that he thought had died with those people on the Edinburgh street: a desire for action, for excitement.

As if reading his mind, Sherlock suddenly asked, “You are nearly qualified, are you not?”

This question so startled John that he answered abruptly, “Yes. But I am no longer at school.”

“There is a place here for a doctor, you know.” Sherlock continued. “Our mills are desperate for a competent man.”

“I am not a competent man, Mr. Holmes.” John said quietly, his dark blue eyes flashing.

Sherlock looked admiringly at John’s tree-straight back as he said this, and noted the thinning of his lips. The quiet coldness of demeanour that descended upon him Sherlock interpreted into contemptuousness, and, conscious of his own value, resented it in his heart to the pitch of almost inclining him to get up and go away, and have nothing more to do with these Watsons, and their superciliousness, no matter how contradictory and different this young man was.

At this critical point, however, Mr. Watson the elder came in, and with his pleasant gentlemanly courteousness of apology, reinstated his name and family in Mr. Holmes's good opinion.

Mr. Watson and his visitor spoke briefly respecting their mutual friend, Mr. Stamford; and John, glad that his part of entertaining the visitor was over, went to the window to try and make himself more familiar with the strange aspect of the street. He got so much absorbed in watching what was going on outside that he hardly heard his father when he spoke.

“John! the landlord will persist in admiring that hideous paper, and I am afraid we must let it remain.”

“That is most unfortunate!” he replied, and began to turn over in her mind the possibility of hiding part of it, at least, by some of his sketches, but gave up the idea at last, as likely only to make bad worse. His father, meanwhile, with his kindly country hospitality, was pressing Mr. Holmes to stay to luncheon with them. Sherlock never lunched, especially on market days, yet he felt that he might have yielded, if John by word or look had seconded his father’s invitation; Sherlock was glad he did not, and yet he was irritated at John for not doing it. John gave him a low, grave bow when he left, shaking his hand firmly, which made Sherlock feel more awkward and self-
conscious in every limb than he had ever done in all his life before.

“Well, John, now to luncheon, as fast we can. Have you ordered it?”

“No, Father; that man was here when I came home, and I have never had an opportunity.”

“Then we must take anything we can get. He must have been waiting a long time, I'm afraid.”

“It seemed exceedingly long to me. He asked the most unusual questions.

“Very much to the point though, I should think. He is a clearheaded, farseeing fellow. He said (did you hear?) that Crampton is on gravelly soil, and by far the most healthy suburb in the neighbourhood of Milton.”

When they returned to Heston, there was the day's account to be given to Mrs. Watson, who was full of questions which they answered in the intervals of tea-drinking.

“And what is your correspondent, Mr. Holmes, like?”

“Ask John,” said her husband. “He had a long attempt at conversation with him, while I was away speaking to the landlord.”

“Oh! I hardly know what he is like,” said John, who was not quite sure that he would be able to describe Sherlock Holmes without bursting into some inexpressible emotion. He gathered himself together and said, instead, “He is a tall, slender man, about—how old, Father?”

“I should guess about thirty.”

“About thirty—with a face that is neither exactly plain, nor yet handsome, nothing remarkable—not quite a gentleman; but that was hardly to be expected.”

“Not vulgar, or common though,” put in her father, rather jealous of any disparagement of the sole friend he had in Milton.

“Oh no!” said John. “With such an expression of resolution and power, no face, however plain in feature, could be either vulgar or common. Altogether a man who seems made for his niche, Mother.”

“Did you like him, then, John? Will he perhaps be a source of companionship for you, dear?”

The idea of a regular intercourse with Sherlock Holmes made John feel ill at ease. Holmes, with his pointed questions, had gone to the heart of John's self, pulling at painful memories and fragments of ambition that John had thought buried. To be in that presence seemed impossible.

And yet, he had seen something that nobody had seen, not even before the tragedy, before his illness. That, and Holmes' personal magnetism, made the idea appealing. Yet how could he say these things to his ailing mother? The words would not come. Instead, he elaborated on the plans for the house, Sherlock Holmes’ face and voice floating in his mind like a ghost.
As I mentioned in the Preface (Chapter 1), this is an adaptation of North & South rather than a re-writing, so I'm still using a fair bit of Gaskell's text verbatim. At this point, I would estimate that about 40-50% of the text is hers.

I'm always happy to hear comments, questions, etc, so please feel free!
The thick yellow November fogs had come on, and the view of the plain in the valley, made by the sweeping bend of the river, was all shut out when Mrs. Watson arrived at her new home. Hudson, aided by John, for lack of any other help, had been at work for two days, unpacking and arranging, but everything inside the house still looked in disorder; and outside a thick fog crept up to the very windows, and was driven in to every open door in choking white wreaths of unwholesome mist.

“Oh, John! are we to live here?” asked Mrs. Watson in blank dismay. John’s heart echoed the dreariness of the tone in which this question was put. He could scarcely command himself enough to say, “Oh, the fogs in London are sometimes far worse!”

“But then you knew that London itself, and friends lay behind it. Here—well! we are desolate. Oh Hudson, what a place this is!”

“Indeed, ma’am, I’m sure it will be your death before lo….” Hudson stopped at John’s quiet glare, and changed direction, “I’ll get a cup of coffee.”

“And I will get her room quite ready for her to go to bed,” John said, “It will be best.”

Mr. Watson was equally out of spirits, and equally came upon John for sympathy.

“John, I do believe this is an unhealthy place. Only suppose that your mother’s health or yours should suffer. I wish I had gone into some country place in Wales; this is really terrible,” said he, going up to the window. There was no comfort to be given. They were settled in Milton, and must endure smoke and fogs for a season, for all their ready money was gone.

At night when John realised this, he felt inclined to sit down in a stupor of despair. The heavy smoky air hung about his bedroom, which occupied the long narrow projection at the back of the house. The window, placed at the side of the oblong, looked to the blank wall of a similar projection, not above ten feet distant. It loomed through the fog like a great barrier to hope. Inside the room everything was in confusion. All their efforts had been directed to make his mother’s
room comfortable. John sat down on a box, and read Ella’s letter, which was long and inconsequential, asking John to come out and pay her a long visit, and if he remembered the day on which they had first met Sholto Lennox and Mary Morstan-Lennox.

Yes! John remembered it well. Ella and Mrs. Shaw had gone to dinner. John had joined the party in the evening. The recollection of the plentiful luxury of all the arrangements, the stately handsomeness of the furniture, the size of the house, the peaceful, untroubled ease of the visitors—all came vividly before him, in strange contrast to the present time. Nobody thought of him, either at Edinburgh or London, except Mary Morstan-Lennox. She too, he knew, would strive to forget him, because of the pain he had caused her, and likely for the best too, it seemed, given his current situation.

And so John rose up and began slowly to undress, feeling the full luxury of acting leisurely, late as it was, after all the past hurry of the day. He fell asleep, hoping for some brightness, either internal or external. But if he had known how long it would be before the brightness came, his heart would have sunk low down.

His mother and Hudson both were ill, and no servant girl could be met with, so they had to keep a charwoman in almost constant employ, and John performed many tasks that his mother and father scolded him for, as being either beyond his strength—though he had, in fact, felt stronger and better in the bustle of removal than he had in the whole of his time in London—or out of his purview. However, as there was nobody else to do these feminine tasks, he did as well as he could, watching enviously as his father began to meet with pupils, recommended to him by Mr. Stamford or Sherlock Holmes.

Holmes himself, though he was not officially a pupil, visited regularly, and spent much time in Mr. Watson’s study. John was never sure just who was teaching whom, but his father always emerged refreshed, and Mr. Holmes’ opinions were regular fare at teatime. John, despite his personal reservations about the man, encouraged this acquaintance with Mr. Holmes, for it lifted his father’s spirits. After a quiet life in a country parsonage for more than twenty years, there was something dazzling to Mr. Watson in the energy which conquered immense difficulties with ease; the power of the machinery of Milton, the power of the men of Milton, impressed him with a sense of grandeur, which he yielded to almost immediately. But John had gone less abroad while they were setting up the house and as such was more sceptical of the good done by the factories and the masters thereof.

In fact, despite his increasing health, it was something of a trial to John to go out in Milton at all. While recovering in London, he had stayed either in Harley Street or one of the parks, and in Edinburgh, before the accident, he had been whole. The loud, dirty, crowded Milton streets, therefore, were a rude awakening. The side of the town on which Crampton lay was especially a thoroughfare for the factory people. In the back streets around them there were many mills, out of which poured streams of men and women two or three times a day. They came rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs, particularly aimed at all those who appeared to be above them in rank or station. The tones of their unrestrained voices, and their carelessness of all common rules of street politeness, angered John a little at first.

Many girls simply looked him in the face and passed him by, but others, with a rough, but not unfriendly freedom, would comment on his dress and looks, even touching him by times. He was not used to remarks upon his appearance, much less undisguised admiration, and from these outspoken girls!

The workmen only jostled him, with some comments as to the whiteness of his linens and the slightness of his build, but there was little disrespect. One day, however, he was nearly knocked over by a poorly-dressed, middle-aged workman. John wheeled to face him, fists already
clenched, ready to ensure his personal safety and his dignity, but the man was already halfway down the street.

“Here!” John yelled, and gave chase. His blood thrilling, he followed the man around corners and down alleys, gaining on him until they fetched up in a dank, noisome street. He grasped the ruffian’s collar just as he ducked into a doorway and yanked the fellow towards him, stopping abruptly when he saw that this man looked both careworn and frantic.

“Gerroff me! Out of my house!”

John dropped his hands. He had meant to ask, sternly, what the man meant in pushing him so rudely, but found he could not. In the ensuing silence, the man had wheeled away and was on his knees in front of a bed, in which there was a girl, evidently his daughter, and, if possible, still more unhealthy than he was himself. She was pale and clammy, John saw, and shaking in convulsions.

“Speak to me!” he demanded, and, picking up the small glass on the deal table by the bed, he set it to her bloodless lips. Before he could think, John sprang forward and pushed the man aside.

“No, man, don’t give her that! She’ll choke, can’t you see?” Keeping the man’s body out of the way with his own, John turned her on her side, then felt in his pocket for his handkerchief.

“Wipe her brow, that’s fine, but don’t give her anything until she’s conscious.”

The man had rocked back on his heels as soon as he saw that John meant no harm, and he took the handkerchief as if in a daze.

“If she vomits, keep her on her side.” John continued, firmly.

“She’s none so bad, Greg,” came a voice. John turned, surprised, and saw a slim woman in a very faded blue dress standing uncertainly in a corner.

“Thanks for sendin’ word, Molly,” the man answered gruffly, never looking away from his daughter’s face.

“Why’d you bring the doctor?” Molly asked, her voice barely audible.

“Go home,” he growled, and she disappeared out the door without further word.

“I’m none so fond of strangers in my house,” he said, “But thank yo’. Yo are a doctor, I reckon, tho yo’re not from here?”

“No!” said John, half sighing. “I come from the South—from Hampshire.”

“But yo’re not a doctor.”

“I was going to be. I am not anymore. What street is this?” John hoped that the workman would not insist, and he did not.

“Nine Frances Street.”

“And your name?”

“I’m not ashamed o’ my name. It’s Gregory Lestrade. She’s called Janine Lestrade. What yo’ asking for?”

“I thought—I meant to come and see her again.” He suddenly felt rather shy of offering the visit, as it seemed all at once to take the shape of an impertinence on his part for this independent
John was half-amused, half-angry at this answer. He was not sure if he would go where permission was given so like a favour conferred.

“Aye, aye,” said Lestrade, impatiently, “yo’ll come. Yo’re a bit set up now, because yo thinks I might ha’ spoken more civilly; but yo’ll think better on it, and come. I can read it in your face.”

John, struck by the man’s perception, went home, wondering at his new friend, and from that day Milton became a brighter place to him.

The day after this meeting, Mr. Watson came upstairs into the little drawing-room at an unusual hour. He went up to different objects in the room, as if examining them, but John saw that it was merely a nervous trick—a way of putting off something he wished, yet feared to say. Out it came at last—

“My dear! I’ve asked Mr. Holmes to come to tea to-night.”

Mrs. Watson was leaning back in her easy chair, with her eyes shut, and an expression of pain on her face which had become habitual to her of late. But she roused up into querulousness at this speech of her husband’s.

“Mr. Holmes!—and to-night! What in the world does the man want to come here for?”

“Because I wish it, dear, and after all, the wind is from the east.”

“And what has that to do with it?” said Mrs. Watson, shuddering up, and wrapping her shawl about her still more closely. “But, east or west wind, I suppose this man comes.”

“Mother, that shows you never saw Mr. Holmes. He looks like a person who would enjoy battling with every adverse thing he could meet with—enemies, winds, or circumstances. The more it rains and blows, the more certain we are to have him. And he won’t want any amusement beyond talking to Father.”

“Perhaps you and he shall strike up a closer acquaintance, John. You haven’t spoken to him beyond your first meeting. Although I do not know whether you will like him; he is very rough and curt, though he can be charming when he chooses.”

John laughed, a brief huff.

“When we first met, he said some very startling things, certainly, and I am not at all sure that we will get on. But Mr. Holmes comes here as your friend, so we will give him a welcome, and some cocoa-nut cakes. Hudson will be flattered if we ask her to make some.”

“Make her cocoa-nut cakes for someone in trade! You are in for a sad disappointment, John dear.”

“As to Mr. Holmes’s being in trade, why he can’t help that now, poor fellow. I don't suppose his education would fit him for much else.” John lifted himself slowly up, and went to his own room; for just now he could not bear much more. His nerves were vibrating under his skin and his chest felt tight; his mother had blamed this last on his yesterday’s walk, but he knew it was trepidation. What would Sherlock Holmes say to him to-night, if anything?
In Mr. Holmes's house, at this very same time, a similar, yet different, scene was going on. A large-boned lady sat in a grim handsomely-furnished dining-room. Her features, like her frame, were strong and massive, rather than heavy. Her face moved slowly from one decided expression to another equally decided. She was handsomely dressed in stout black silk, of which not a thread was worn or discoloured, and writing a letter, over which she never paused, writing fluidly until she heard a step, like her own in its decisive character, pass the dining-room door.

“Sherlock! Is that you?”

Her brother opened the door and showed himself.

“What has brought you home so early? I thought you were going to tea with that friend of Mr. Stamford’s; that Mr. Watson.”

“I am come home to dress,”

“Dress! humph! You are usually satisfied with dressing once in a day. Why should you dress to go and take a cup of tea with an old parson?”

“Mr. Watson and his son are gentlemen, and his wife a lady.” Sherlock answered carefully.

“Son and wife! Do they teach too? What do they do? You have never mentioned them.”

“No! Myfanwy, because I have never seen Mrs. Watson; I have only seen John Watson for half an hour.”

Myfanwy Holmes looked at her brother, her eye piercing.

“But you would not be averse to seeing him a great deal more. You must be careful, Sherlock. Remember Victor and what that cost us.”

“I am no longer so easily caught, as I think you know. And John Watson is useful, no more. He is nearly through his medical studies.”

“Then why, pray tell, is he languishing here instead of qualifying?”

“Recovering from a nervous breakdown, and suspected consumption, Donaldson tells me, although I don’t believe it.”

“Sounds like a poor stick to me, Sherlock. No backbone.”

“Ah, but there is backbone in John Watson, Myfanwy, more of it than even he suspects, so do you not speak of him that way.”

Myfanwy shrugged her massive shoulders.

“Does he show any signs of,” and here she paused to choose her words carefully, “interest, Sherlock?”

Sherlock, who had been looking out the window at his mill yard below him, stood a little straighter at this question, but did not immediately answer.

“I see,” Myfanwy said. “Well, tread carefully. Perhaps the Milton hands that are so inclined would not take money from you, but you know what these Southern men are like. Indolent, and only too
Happy to take your hard-earned money in exchange for heartbreak.”

Sherlock’s brow contracted, and he turned towards his sister.

“Myfanwy,” he said, “you will make me confess. The only time I saw John Watson, he treated me with a haughty civility which had a strong flavour of contempt in it. He held himself aloof from me as if he had been a prince, and I his humble, unwashed vassal. Be easy and do not coddle me.”

“I would sooner coddle a wild wolf than you, Sherlock Holmes, though if this renegade clergyman’s son turns up his nose at you I would not dress for them. Impertinent parvenus!”

Sherlock turned his back on her and left the room.

“Despise Sherlock! treat him as his vassal, indeed! Humph! For all his freaks he’s the noblest, stoutest heart I ever knew. I don’t care if I am his sister; I can see what’s what, and not be blind.” Myfanwy turned back to her letter, but she sat motionless, pen in hand, for a long time.

Sherlock left the house and walked rapidly out to Crampton, anxious not to slight his new friend by any disrespectful unpunctuality. The church-clock struck half-past seven as he stood at the door awaiting Hudson's slow movements; always doubly tardy when she had to degrade herself by answering the door-bell. He was ushered into the little drawing-room, and kindly greeted by Mr. Watson, who led him up to his wife, whose pale face, and shawl-draped figure made a silent excuse for the cold languor of her greeting.

John was lighting the lamp when he entered, for the darkness was coming on. The lamp threw a pretty light into the centre of the dusky room, from which, with country habits, they did not exclude the night-skies, and the outer darkness of air. Somehow, that room contrasted itself with the one he had lately left; his sister’s drawing room was handsome and rich, twice—twenty times—as fine; not one quarter as comfortable. An open davenport stood in the window opposite the door; in the other there was a stand, with a tall white china vase, from which drooped wreaths of English ivy, pale-green birch, and copper-coloured beech-leaves. Books, not cared for on account of their binding solely, lay on one table, as if recently put down. Behind the door was another table, decked out for tea, with a white tablecloth, on which flourished the cocoa-nut cakes, and a basket piled with oranges and ruddy American apples, heaped on leaves.

John stood by the tea-table wearing the same dark suit he had when they had first met, his gold hair shining in the soft light. He looked as if he was not attending to the conversation, but solely busy with the tea-cups. Sherlock watched the movement of his wrists, memorized the way John’s hands moved efficiently and noiselessly amongst the dainty objects. A surgeon’s hands, Sherlock thought, strong and deft.

He willed John to look up at him, but John--deliberately, Sherlock thought, given the set of his shoulders--did not. Promising, then. Sherlock stepped forward to the table.

“Good evening, Mr. Watson.”

“Mr. Holmes,” John answered politely and, Sherlock thought, looking carefully into the navy eyes, with some excitation.

“You will excuse us for our unconventional arrangements,” John continued, handing Sherlock a cup of tea with a proud, unwilling air, “My mother is not well.”

“It is nothing to me,” Sherlock said, “I do not hold any particular beliefs on the subject. Two
sugars, thank you,” he added, for the pleasure of watching John’s hands on the silver tongs.

John watched him move gracefully across the room and sit next to Mr. Watson. He filled his own cup and went to join them, resolved to throw himself into the breach, if there was any long untoward pause, rather than that his father's friend, pupil, and guest should have cause to think himself in any way neglected. But the conversation went on; Sherlock and Mr. Watson were both absorbed in the continuation of some subject which had been started at their last meeting, and John was free to observe them.

The difference of outward appearance between his father and Mr. Holmes, as betokening such distinctly opposite natures, was really very striking. Mr. Watson was of slight figure, which made him appear taller than he really was, but Mr. Holmes was tall in fact. The lines in his father's face were soft, brows arched and eyes large and dreamy. Now, in Sherlock Holmes's face the brows were straight, set up over clear, deep-set earnest eyes, which, without being unpleasantly sharp, seemed intent enough to penetrate into the very heart and core of what he was looking at. The lines in the face were few but firm, as if they were carved in marble, and lay principally about the lips, which were slightly compressed over a set of teeth so faultless and beautiful as to give the effect of sudden sunlight when the rare bright smile, coming in an instant and shining out of the eyes, changed the whole look from the severe and resolved expression of a man ready to do and dare everything, to the keen honest enjoyment of the moment.

When this smile flashed out, John was immobilized. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, but could not look away; Sherlock caught his eye and his smile shifted, taking on a quality that could only be described as slightly predatory. John felt himself flush, and straightened his back, returning the gaze.

Sherlock took in the seeming fearlessness with something like pleasure. The edge of aggression in young Mr. Watson’s eyes and jaw bespoke a challenge, and confirmed his idea that here was no nervous, consumptive lad.

“Gregory Lestrade tells me you helped his daughter,” Sherlock said, wanting to test his theory.

John did not flinch, though Sherlock could see the undercurrent of some excitement run through his body. His left hand fluttered.

“I did, yes.” John said shortly, getting up. “Another cup?”

“Who is this Lestrade, John,” Mr. Watson asked, with interest, “Another manufacturer?”

“He’s one of my weavers,” Sherlock supplied, watching John move towards the tea table, “A good worker. His daughter is ill.”

“And you treated her! Is that quite wise?” The quaver in Mrs. Watson’s voice seemed to electrify her son.

“Mother, I did not mean to, but I had no choice. She was in front of me, and ill.”

“That was well done of you, John,” his father said, quietly, and John smiled, a genuine smile, at him. Sherlock marveled at the sudden softness in John’s face, wishing—quite contrarily, as he had been enjoying the sharp tone and angry edge in John’s demeanour—that the look were directed at him.

John, meanwhile, had refilled the cup. As he bent to serve Sherlock, their eyes met, and for a moment all was silence. John refused to flinch at Sherlock’s gaze, and Sherlock, with a small thrill
at the unexpected, once again felt the authority of John’s self upon him.

Mr. Watson spoke, and his voice broke in on Sherlock like a calm wave,

“You seem to have a strong objection to acts of parliament and all legislation affecting your mode of management down here at Milton,” said Mr. Watson.

“Yes, I have; and many others have as well. And with justice, I think. The whole machinery—I don’t mean the wood and iron machinery now—of the cotton trade is so new that it is no wonder if it does not work well in every part all at once. Seventy years ago what was it? And now what is it not?”

John frowned, but somehow he was compelled to listen by the power and conviction in Holmes’ voice.

“Some of these early manufacturers did ride to the devil in a magnificent style—crushing human bone and flesh under their horses’ hoofs without remorse. But by-and-by came a re-action, there were more factories, more masters; more men were wanted. The power of masters and men became more evenly balanced; and now the battle is pretty fairly waged between us. We will hardly submit to the decision of an umpire, much less to the interference of a meddler with only a smattering of the knowledge of the real facts of the case, even though that meddler be called the High Court of Parliament.”

“Is there necessity for calling it a battle between the two classes?” asked Mr. Watson. “I know, from your using the term, it is one which gives a true idea of the real state of things to your mind.”

“It is true. It is one of the great beauties of our system, that a working-man may raise himself into the power and position of a master by his own exertions and behaviour; that, in fact, every one who rules himself to decency and sobriety of conduct, and attention to his duties, comes over to our ranks; it may not be always as a master, but as an over-looker, a cashier, a book-keeper, a clerk, one on the side of authority and order.”

“You consider all who are unsuccessful in raising themselves in the world, from whatever cause, as your enemies, then, if I understand you rightly,” said John in a clear, cold voice.

“As their own enemies, certainly,” said he, quickly, not a little piqued by the haughty disapproval John’s form of expression and tone of speaking implied. But, in a moment, his straightforward honesty made him feel that his words were but a poor and quibbling answer to what John had said; and Sherlock felt it necessary, though he rarely did, to explain exactly what he had meant. He could best have illustrated what he wanted to say by telling them something of his own life; but was it not too personal a subject to speak about to strangers? Still, it was the simple straightforward way of explaining his meaning; so, putting aside the touch of shyness that brought a momentary flush of colour into his pale cheek, he said:

“I am not speaking without book. Sixteen years ago, my parents died under very miserable circumstances. I was taken from school, and had to become a man (as well as I could) in a few days. I had such a sister as few are blest with; a woman of strong power, and firm resolve. We went into a small country town, where living was cheaper than in Milton, and where I got employment in a draper’s shop. Week by week our income came to fifteen shillings, out of which three people had to be kept. My sister managed so that I put by three out of these fifteen shillings regularly. This made the beginning; this taught me self-denial. Now that I am able to afford to keep my sister and our cousin in comfort, I thank her silently on each occasion for the early training she gave me. Now when I feel that in my own case it is no good luck, nor merit, nor talent,—but simply the habits of life which taught me to despise indulgences not thoroughly earned,—indeed, never to think twice about them,—I believe that this suffering, which young Mr.
Watson says is impressed on the countenances of the people of Milton, is but the natural
punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure, at some former period of their lives. I do not look on
self-indulgent, sensual people as worthy of my hatred; I simply look upon them with contempt for
their poorness of character.”

“And I suppose in the South our character is poor?” John said, with some heat.

“I won’t deny that I am proud of belonging to such a town. I would rather be a man toiling,
suffering—nay, failing and successless—here, than lead a dull prosperous life in the old worn
grooves of what you call more aristocratic society down in the South, with their slow days of
careless ease. The work is what is necessary. Without work one’s brain rots.”

“You are mistaken,” said John, roused by the aspersion on his beloved South to a fond vehemence
of defence, that brought the colour into his cheeks, “You do not know anything about the South.
If there is less adventure or less progress—I suppose I must not say less excitement—from the
gambling spirit of trade, which seems requisite to force out these wonderful inventions, there is
less suffering also. I see men here going about in the streets who look ground down by some
pinching sorrow or care—who are not only sufferers but haters. Now, in the South we have our
poor, but there is not that terrible expression in their countenances of a sullen sense of injustice
which I see here. You do not know the South, Mr. Holmes,” he concluded, collapsing into a
determined silence, and angry with himself for having said so much.

“And may I say you do not know the North?” asked Sherlock, rather gently for him. John
continued resolutely silent, yearning with a passionate, nameless longing after the lovely haunts he
had left far away in Hampshire.

“At any rate, Mr. Holmes,” said Mrs. Watson, “you will allow that Milton is a much more smoky,
dirty town than you will ever meet with in the South.”

“I’m afraid I must give up its cleanliness,” said Sherlock with the quick gleaming smile, and,
seeing the time, rose to go.

After shaking hands with Mr. and Mrs. Watson, he made an advance to John to wish him good-
bye. John shook his hand, but did not bow, and Sherlock said to himself as he left—

“Proud and disagreeable, angry, and brave, and tender, if I’m not mistaken. A puzzle and a
problem, but I will have you, John Watson, there is no doubt.”

Chapter End Notes

First, the opinions that Sherlock states, that poor people are only poor because of their
bad character are the original opinions (softened, even) of John Thornton and are
personally distasteful to me (and to Elizabeth Gaskell, actually). I left them in because
it does kind of reflect the way that Sherlock sees other, ordinary people in BBC
canon.

Also, the role of Bessy Higgins, which is finally being played by Janine Hawkins,
was originally supposed to be Molly, but a) I didn't want what happens to Bessy to
happen to Molly, and b) I wanted Lestrade and Molly NOT to be blood relatives.
Therefore, I'm expanding the role of Lestrade's kind neighbour for, ahem, future
purposes.
Visits and Visitations

Chapter Summary

“The game is afoot.”
—Arthur Conan Doyle, "Adventure of the Abbey Grange"

Janine's condition worsens and we meet Anthea Aldridge. John learns not to underestimate Myfanwy Holmes. Sherlock entices John into the factory, and Mrs. Watson's secret is revealed.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to airynothing for the excellent beta.

John felt the touch of Sherlock’s hand even after he had stood at the window and watched him stride away through the night, never looking back.

“John!” exclaimed Mr. Watson, “I could not help watching your face with some anxiety, when Mr. Holmes made his confession of having been a shop-boy. I knew it all along from Mr. Stamford; so I was aware of what was coming; but I half expected to see you get up and leave the room.”

“Father, you don't mean that you thought me so snobbish? I really liked that account of himself better than anything else he said.”

“I am surprised at you, John,” said his mother. “You who were always accusing people of being shopy at Helstone! I don't think, Mr. Watson, you have done quite right in introducing such a person to us without telling us what he had been. I really was very much afraid of showing him how much shocked I was at some parts of what he said. His father "dying in miserable circumstances." Why it might have been in the workhouse.”

“I am not sure if it was not worse than being in the workhouse,” replied her husband. “His father speculated wildly, failed, and then killed himself, because he could not bear the disgrace. No one came forwards to help brother and sister. So they left Milton, but long after the creditors had given up hope of any payment of old Mr. Holmes's debts, this young man returned to Milton, and went quietly round to each creditor, paying him the first instalment of the money owing to him.”

“That really is fine,” said John. “What a pity such a nature should be tainted by his position as a Milton manufacturer.”

“How tainted?” asked his father.

“By that testing everything by the standard of wealth. When he spoke of the mechanical powers, he evidently looked upon them only as new ways of extending trade and making money. And the poor men around him—they were poor because they were vicious.”
“Not vicious; he never said that. Improvident and self-indulgent were his words.”

“Nonetheless. It is heartless, what he said, and very nearly un-Christian. He may be a great man, but I am not sure he is a good one.”

“I am.” said her father laughing, “Or, if he is not, to your standards, perhaps he only needs society of the right kind to make him one. Perhaps, when you are stronger, you should take him on—a reforming project of sorts.”

“Father, it is you that is doing the reforming, I am sure. Now good night.” John said, anxious to cut this conversation short.

“Good night,” his father said, adding, “Your mother looks sadly tired to-night, John.”

John had noticed his mother's jaded appearance with anxiety for some time past. Mrs. Watson and Hudson had been holding mysterious consultations in her bedroom, from which Hudson would come out crying and cross, and John felt they were withholding most serious information about his mother’s health. He was torn, here, feeling that he should nerve himself to use what training he had but terrified as to what he would find, and whether he would be able to be of any help at all.

He went to sleep that night and dreamed again of the accident, and the baths. Yet now it was his mother dying before him, and Sherlock’s eyes and hands upon him, and he got very little rest.

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Several days later, John had been for a walk as far as the fields that lay around the town; he had gathered some of the hedge and ditch flowers, dog-violets, lesser celandines, and the like, in remembrance of the sweetness of the South. Then, acting on a sudden impulse, John turned his steps towards the Lestrades’, thinking that Janine might like the flowers.

Lestrade himself was not home when he entered, but Molly the neighbour was, busy at the wash-tub.

“I’m come to see Miss Janine,” John said, and crossed the room to give her the flowers. Her pale blue eyes lightened up as she took them, though she said nothing.

“So yo’re the doctor as Father says helped me.”

“I’m no doctor, Miss.”

“And I’m no miss. Janine is good enough.”

“I’m afraid you are not very strong.”

“No,” she said, “nor never will be.”

“Spring is coming,” said John, as if to suggest pleasant, hopeful thoughts.

“Spring nor summer will do me good,” said the girl quietly, “and there’s a strike coming, an’ Father is sore vexed about it. I’m feared that he will be hurt or lose his place wi’the Union work.”

“But Janine, is it quite right for your father to organize against the masters?”

He was startled by hearing Lestrade speak behind him; he had come in without John noticing him.

“I’ll thank yo, young man, not to say anything about the Union, as yo knows nothing about it.”
“My apologies,” John said, ill at ease at having been overheard, and resolving to be more cautious about his statements in future.

Just then Janine was seized with a coughing fit,

“Oh! my heart!” She put her hand to it, and became ghastly pale. John held her carefully, and presently the spasm that foreshadowed death had passed away, and Janine roused herself.

John leaned her back and checked her temperature, then begged a roll of parchment—a rare article in that house—from Molly. He listened to her chest and checked her eyes and mouth.

“What is it, Janine, that makes you so ill? I would have said you were consumptive, but it does not sound as it should.”

“The fluff got into my lungs and poisoned me,” she answered.

“Fluff?” said John, inquiringly.

“Fluff,” repeated Janine. “Little bits, as fly off fro’ the cotton, when they’re carding it, and fill the air till it looks all fine white dust. They say it winds round the lungs, and tightens them up.”

“But can’t it be helped?” asked John.

“I dunno. Some folk have a great wheel at one end o’ their carding-rooms to make a draught, and carry off th’ dust; but that wheel costs a deal o’ money.”

“How old are you?” asked John.

“Nineteen, come July.”

John shook his head.

“I must go. I will come again as soon as I can; but if it should not be to-morrow, or the next day, or even a week or a fortnight hence, don’t think I’ve forgotten you.”

“I’ll know yo’ won’t. But remember, in a week or a fortnight I may be dead and buried!”

“I’ll come as soon as I can, Janine,” said John, squeezing her hand tight, “But you’ll let me know if you are worse.”

“Ay, that will I,” said Janine, returning the pressure, as Lestrade lifted her up to carry her to bed, nodding curtly.

John left, feeling both sad and uneasy. He made his way home through the dark, labyrinthine workers’ quarters, half-hoping someone would challenge him. One catcall would be enough to unleash the tension he carried within him like a stuck watchwork and set him to rights, he thought, but the streets were quiet.

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He was late for tea at home. At Helstone unpunctuality at meal-times was a great fault in his mother’s eyes; but now this, as well as many other little irregularities, seemed to have lost their power of irritation, and John almost longed for the old complainings.

“We shall have visitors tomorrow, you know. Sherlock Holmes has told me that his sister intends to call on us.”
“Miss Holmes!” exclaimed Mrs. Watson, “I shall like to see her. She must be an uncommon person,” his mother added.

John silently agreed, and dreaded the visit not a little.

Sherlock had had some difficulty in working up his sister to the desired point of civility. Myfanwy did not often make calls; and when she did, it was in heavy state that she went through her duties. She was, indeed, curious to see these Watsons, John most particularly, however, so she made her preparations.

“I will order the horses, Myfanwy.” Sherlock said, as he passed through at teatime.

“You will not. I will take a cab, especially at a time like this.”

“The last time you took a cab you came home with head-ache, Myfanwy, and you’re unbearable enough already. And you know Anthea cannot walk that far.”

“Sherlock, I refuse to go. You know how I dislike small talk.” Anthea Aldridge, tall and graceful, glared at him from the other side of the tea table.

“You are my legal ward, Anthea, and I must insist you go.”

At this piece of stiff dignity, both Anthea and Myfanwy exploded in laughter.

“Pulling that card over something like this, Sherlock. You must be utterly besotted.” Anthea laughed.

In point of fact, Anthea was Sherlock’s ward in name only, and very much her own woman, but she had been at the mercy of a drunken father when Myfanwy had first met her, and Sherlock’s protection had been Anthea’s sole possibility of escape. Though her father had died shortly afterward—and Sherlock suspected, though he did not know exactly how that had happened—Anthea remained his ward. It was he supposed, the simplest way for her to remain under their roof, as she and Myfanwy would not be separated.

“I suppose you’ll tell me now that if there is any little thing that could serve Mrs. Watson as an invalid, to offer it?” Myfanwy asked, with a sardonic lift of her eyebrow.

“I assumed you would do so yourself.” Sherlock said, and went abruptly out of the room, leaving Anthea and Myfanwy to laugh over their tea.

They sobered, though, not long after, at the thought of what John Watson held in his hands, and what it could mean for them all if he refused it, publicly or privately.

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It was for this reason, then, that Myfanwy Holmes looked more than usually stern and forbidding as she entered the Watsons’ little drawing-room.

John was sitting with a book, fiddling nervously, which did nothing to dispel Myfanwy’s impression of him as a ‘poor stick’, though he stood straight and shook her hand firmly the moment he saw her.

Tea was brought, and John served once again, watching Miss Holmes interact stiffly with his mother. Mr. Watson was doing his best to be affable to Miss Aldridge, who was slowly unbending.
When everyone had their tea, John went to sit with the former pair, the latter having moved into a
detailed discussion of Dante. Immediately he sat, and Myfanwy asked,

“Do you know anything of Milton, Mr. Watson? Have you seen any of our factories? our
magnificent warehouses?”

“No!” said John. “I have not seen anything of that description as yet.”

“And yet, as strangers, I should think that you would like to know more about this place.”

“It is true that they drive the town, so different from Helstone,” was his noncommittal answer. He
could not quite place her tone, but he knew she was measuring him to some unknown standard,
and already finding him wanting.

“I can arrange for you to visit, if you like. Surely it will be very instructive, though perhaps not so
different from Edinburgh?”

“Edinburgh was very different.” Had Sherlock…Mr. Holmes…been discussing him? An
unwonted thrill shot through him.

Myfanwy looked at him curiously.

“And you left because?” Her tone was quieter now, and she turned towards him, Mrs. Watson
having transferred her attention to Hudson, who was bringing in more hot water.

“I left for my health.”

“And yet you walk deliberately through the streets at night.”

“You will excuse me, Miss Holmes, if I decline to confirm or deny such a personal thing.”

Myfanwy nodded in acknowledgement, and turned back to Mrs. Watson for the remaining time of
their visit.

“Anthea!” said Myfanwy, as they drove away, “Keep on good terms with the father. Oh, I would
dearly love to know who diagnosed your nervous breakdown, John Watson, because their
qualifications are suspect in the extreme.”

“You know,” Anthea mused, “I do think his analysis of that one excerpt of Hesiod is not quite
right. Perhaps…” and here she trailed off, lost in thought and entirely unaware of Myfanwy’s fond
look.

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From that day forwards Mrs. Watson became more and more of a suffering invalid. She was
gentle and quiet in intense bodily suffering, almost in proportion as she had been restless and
depressed when there had been no real cause for grief. It was a comfort to John about this time, to
find that his mother drew more tenderly and intimately towards him than she had ever done since
the days of his childhood. John took pains to respond to every call made upon him for sympathy
—and they were many— even when they bore relation to trifles, and eventually, he received his
reward: his mother began to talk to him about his brother Harry, the very subject on which John
had longed to ask questions.

“Oh, John, it was so windy last night! It came howling down the chimney in our room! I could not
sleep. I never can when there is such a terrible wind. I got into a wakeful habit when poor Harry was at sea; and now, even if I don’t waken all at once, I dream of him in some stormy sea, with great, clear, glass-green walls of waves on either side his ship, but far higher than her very masts, curling over her with that cruel, terrible white foam, like some gigantic crested serpent. It is an old dream, but it always comes back on windy nights, till I am thankful to waken, sitting straight and stiff up in bed with my terror. Poor Harry! He is on land now, so wind can do him no harm. Though I did think it might shake down some of those tall chimneys.”

“Where is Harry now? Our letters are directed to the care of Messrs. Barbour, at Cadiz, I know; but where is he himself?”

“I can't remember the name of the place, but he is not called Watson; you must remember that, John. Notice the H.B. in every corner of the letters. He has taken the name of Baker.”

“Mother,” said John, “I was at school when it all happened; and I suppose I was not old enough to be told plainly about it. But I should like to know now, if I may—if it does not give you too much pain to speak about it.”

“Pain! No,” replied Mrs. Watson, her cheek flushing. “Yet it is pain to think that perhaps I may never see my darling boy again. Or else he did right, John. They may say what they like, but I have his own letters to show, and I’ll believe him, though he is my son, sooner than any court-martial on earth. Go to my little japan cabinet, dear, and in the second left-hand drawer you will find a packet of letters.”

John went, and carried the packet of yellowing letters back to his mother, who untied the silken string with trembling fingers, and, examining their dates, gave them to John to read, making her hurried, anxious remarks on their contents.

“You see, John, how from the very first he disliked Captain Moran. He was second lieutenant in the ship—the Orion—in which Harry sailed the very first time. Poor little fellow, how well he looked in his midshipman's dress, with his dirk in his hand, cutting open all the newspapers with it as if it were a paper-knife! But this Mr. Moran, as he was then, seemed to take a dislike to Harry from the very beginning. And then—stay! these are the letters he wrote on board the Russell. When he was appointed to her, and found his old enemy Captain Moran in command, he did mean to bear all his tyranny patiently. Look! this is the letter. Just read it, John. Where is it he says—Stop—’my father may rely upon me, that I will bear with all proper patience everything that one officer and gentleman can take from another. But from my former knowledge of my present captain, I confess I look forward with apprehension to a long course of tyranny on board the Russell.’”

John slowly read the letter, half illegible through the fading of the ink. It might be—it probably was—a statement of Captain Moran’s imperiousness in trifles, very much exaggerated by the narrator, who had written it while fresh and warm from the scene of altercation. Some sailors being aloft in the main-topsail rigging, the captain had ordered them to race down, threatening the hindmost with the cat-of-nine-tails. He who was the farthest on the spar, feeling the impossibility of passing his companions, and yet passionately dreading the disgrace of the flogging, threw himself desperately down to catch a rope considerably lower, failed, and fell senseless on deck. He only survived for a few hours afterwards, and the indignation of the ship's crew was at boiling point when young Watson wrote.

“But we did not receive this letter till long, long after we heard of the mutiny. Poor Harry! I dare say it was a comfort to him to write it even though he could not have known how to send it, poor fellow! And then we saw a report in the papers—that's to say, long before Harry's letter reached us—of an atrocious mutiny having broken out on board the Russell, and that the mutineers had remained in possession of the ship, which had gone off, it was supposed, to be a pirate; and that
Captain Moran was sent adrift in a boat with some men—officers or something—whose names were all given, for they were picked up by a West-Indian steamer. Oh, John! how your father and I turned sick over that list, when there was no name of Harry Watson. We thought it must be some mistake; for poor Harry was such a fine fellow, only perhaps rather too passionate; and we hoped that the name of Towsons, which was in the list, was a misprint for that of Watson—newspapers are so careless. And towards post-time the next day, papa set off to walk to Southampton to get the papers; and I could not stop at home, so I went to meet him. And when I got to him, he did not speak, or seem surprised to see me there, more than three miles from home, beside the Oldham beech-tree; then, he gave me a wicked newspaper to read, calling our Harry a "traitor of the blackest dye," "a base, ungrateful disgrace to his profession." Oh! I cannot tell what bad words they did not use. I took the paper in my hands as soon as I had read it—I tore it up to little bits—I tore it—I tore it with my teeth. I did not cry. I could not. My cheeks were as hot as fire, and my very eyes burnt in my head. I saw your father looking grave at me. I said it was a lie, and so it was. Months after, this letter came, and you see what provocation Harry had. It was not for himself, or his own injuries, he rebelled; but he would speak his mind to Captain Moran, and so it went on from bad to worse; and you see, most of the sailors stuck by Harry.

“I think, John,” she continued, after a pause, in a weak, trembling, exhausted voice, “I am glad of it—I am prouder of Harry standing up against injustice, than if he had been simply a good officer.”

“I am sure I am,” said John, in a firm, decided tone. “Loyalty and obedience to wisdom and justice are fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used—not on behalf of ourselves, but on behalf of others more helpless.”

“For all that, I wish I could see Harry once more—just once. He was my first baby, John.” Mrs. Watson spoke wistfully, and almost as if apologising for the yearning, craving wish, as though it were a depreciation of her remaining child. But such an idea never crossed John's mind. He was thinking how his mother's desire could be fulfilled.

“It is six or seven years ago—would they still prosecute him, mother? If he came and stood his trial, what would be the punishment? Surely, he might bring evidence of his great provocation.”

“It would do no good,” replied Mrs. Watson. “Some of the sailors who accompanied Harry were taken, and there was a court-martial held on them on board the Amicia; I believed all they said in their defence, poor fellows, because it just agreed with Harry's story—but it was of no use.”

“They were hung.” John said flatly.

“At the yard-arm,” said Mrs. Watson, solemnly. “And the worst was that the court, in condemning them to death, said they had suffered themselves to be led astray from their duty by their superior officers.”

They were silent for a long time.

“And Harry was in South America for several years, was he not?”

“Yes. And now he is in Spain. At Cadiz, or somewhere near it. If he comes to England he will be hung. I shall never see his face again—for if he comes to England he will be hung.”

There was no comfort to be given. Mrs. Watson turned her face to the wall, and lay perfectly still. Nothing could be said to console her. She took her hand out of John's with a little impatient movement, as if she would fain be left alone with the recollection of her son. When Mr. Watson
came in, John went out, oppressed with gloom, and seeing no promise of brightness on any side of the horizon.

Some days later, John was making his way home from the Lestrades’, musing on the sad nature of Janine’s fate; her resignation and acceptance of death showed that she had undergone an enormous change.

He kept walking, and, only half consciously, directed his steps towards Holmes’ mill in Marlborough street. He had gone past it once or twice with only slight interest, but now he slowed his pace at the factory lodge-door and looked into the yard. He felt a small thrill of trepidation at deliberately going so close to Holmes’ territory until he remembered his father’s statement that Holmes largely did business from his warehouse.

The bustle of the yard was nearly overwhelming; on one side, there were offices for the transaction of business and on the other, an immense many-windowed mill, whence proceeded the continual clank of machinery and the long groaning roar of the steam-engine. Opposite to the wall was a handsome stone-coped house, massive and somewhat forbidding, like Myfanwy Holmes herself. John stood, taking in the unfamiliar noises, and, perhaps rather fancifully, wondering if Miss Holmes already knew he was there, with her uncanny way.

“John Watson!”

John nearly leaped out of his skin at this, worried his fancy had come true, but it was Gregory Lestrade.

“Lestrade!” John shook the workman’s rough hand.

“Here yo’ are at last. His office is thro’ here,” Lestrade said, “Himself said to show yo’ here, if I saw yo’.”

“It’s quite all right, Lestrade,” John said, wanting desperately to go, “I was only passing. I’m sure Mr. Holmes must be very busy.”

“Nah, he is, but he wanted to see yo’, he said ‘specially. This way.” Lestrade’s authoritative tone brooked no argument, and John followed him past clusters of men, goods, and carts to a large door, through which Lestrade escorted him.

He sat, perched uncomfortably on the visitor’s chair, not knowing why he had been ushered here. Some minutes passed before the door opened and Holmes swept in, disturbing the motes of cotton in the air.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Holmes.” John said, not knowing quite what to expect.

“Sherlock, please,” he said, in a tone that was several shades more genial than John had been expecting.

“Sherlock,” he said, the unfamiliar name coming off his tongue with a softness that made Sherlock turn towards him with an unreadable expression that reminded John so suddenly and horribly of Myfanwy that he had to look away.

“You’ve got questions,” Sherlock said, interrupting him. John looked back from the window and was pleased to see that the expression was gone, replaced by a mild smile that brought out all the beauty in the strange angles of his face. He was saved from speechlessness by the presence of several tufts of cotton in Sherlock’s dark curls; the contrast just humorous enough that John could
concentrate on the man before him.

“I do, several. How does Miss Holmes know what I do?” Sherlock laughed at this.

“Mr. Watson, I cannot say how my sister obtains her information. It defies all reason. I can, however, say that I will aid you in thwarting her when I can.”

John, encouraged by this very human reaction, continued, “How did you know I was a medical student, before? Did Mr. Stamford tell you?”

“That I can answer. No, Stamford was so vague on your subject that I thought you were still at school. It was the crease on your coat pocket, in fact, that showed me what you are; doctors always carry their most important implements there. That you were here, and that your face was drawn, could perhaps have been ascribed to the change in your father’s circumstances, but you are not so tender as that; the flexing of your left hand betokens some traumatic event. What did happen, there?”

John set his mouth, and the flash that Sherlock so admired was back in his eyes.

“Mr. Holmes…”

“Sherlock, please.”

“I refuse to discuss that with you.”

“Yet you’ve been doctoring Janine Lestrade. You went back a second time, under no compulsion but that which your conscience lays upon you. What is the attraction, Mr. Watson, what?”

John felt he could not ask this man to call him John just then.

“Once again, these are my private concerns,” he said stiffly.

“Very well, then let us discuss our common concerns.” Sherlock came closer, and in a low voice, said, “Take a walk with me, through the factory.”

John followed, his protest dead on his lips, and it was not just curiosity that drew him on into the noise and unfamiliar space of the mill. Sherlock’s shoulders seemed to straighten as he advanced into it, and his steps took on an even greater power. John rushed to keep the pace, taking in the long rows of spinning machines and the men and women that were bent over them. He saw the fluff that Janine had spoke of floating in the air, and equally, a large wheel in the back, blowing a draught of air through the place. So Holmes…Sherlock had installed the wheel, then. It spoke well of him, as it brought no profit but the health of his workers.

John was just on the point of asking where they were going, and, indeed, what their common concerns were, when a young man came dashing up.

“Master! Come quick!”

“What is it, Lyons?” Sherlock asked.

“Anderson ha’ sliced his arm and the blood’s pourin’ out, sir. Will yo’ come?” The boy turned
and began to run even before Sherlock’s curt nod of acquiescence was finished, and John found himself hot on Lyons’s heels.

Anderson, a tall, gaunt man with unkempt black hair and beard, was slumped over in the arms of two of his fellow workers. A ragged shirt was pressed to his left arm, and great gouts of blood stained the cloth, the machinery, and the floor.

John stopped running, arrested, for a brief second, as his heart roared in his ears, but in a moment the world faded back, and the only thing that existed was him and the injury. Kneeling before the injured man, he took the cloth away and assessed the damage, giving orders and demanding supplies as he swabbed and stitched.

It was only after the worst of the danger was past that John could look up.

“He won’t lose the use of it, though he should not work for a time. Is there an infirmary?” he asked, “The man should rest, and have something nourishing, to replace the blood.”

“Right,” Sherlock said, and gave the direction. They walked back to Sherlock’s office in silence.

Once inside, he turned to John.

“Well done, Mr. Watson. I suspected your nerve was greater than even you knew.”

There was a pause.

“Mr. Holmes,” John asked, very quietly, “did you have that done on purpose?”

Sherlock noted the violence that ran under the surface of that question; it animated every fibre of John Watson’s being, sparked, it seemed, by the idea of deliberate harm to another human being.

“I did not.” Sherlock said. Which was almost entirely truthful.

John stepped forward. He was now dangerously close to Sherlock, and Sherlock could see the tension in the lines of his jaw.

“You knew, though.”

“Anderson is a bungler, and that machine is his particular bugbear. But,” Sherlock came closer to John in his turn, “I would not hurt a man, even to prove a point.”

John could smell the starch of Sherlock’s shirt now. He had loosened his cravat during the emergency, and the lines of his neck were graceful above his high collar. In his anger John was not sure whether he would not strike the man, just to dispel the tension.

The dilation of John’s pupils had not escaped Sherlock, who had been looking intently at his face, taking in the minute shifts of his expression. His mobile face and thin mouth spoke of desire all entangled with anger and exhilaration; Sherlock was surprised at the strength of the temptation to reach out and touch John’s jawline, and folded his fingers into a fist to prevent it.

It was at this interesting moment that Lyons knocked respectfully at the door, to say that a customer had come, and John, notwithstanding his recent bravery, fled home. Going swiftly to his chamber, he flung himself on the bed and shook, both with the aftermath of the accident and the strength of his desire for Sherlock Holmes. Though the man was rough and all-knowing to an infuriating degree, there was a fineness and strength of character that John found irresistible. He could not, however, jeopardize his father’s position by any outward manifestation of this desire, and so he resolved to have as little contact as possible.
Sherlock himself, after he had taken the customer’s order, sat immobile in his office for a long time. Then, picking up a piece of paper, he wrote a short note and sent for an errand boy.

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“John,” said his father, the next day, “we must return Miss Holmes's call. Your mother is not very well, and thinks she cannot walk so far; but you and I will go this afternoon.”

John, who had been lost in a reverie, started at the name of Holmes, but he put on his best suit and steeled himself to face Myfanwy Holmes once again. He resolved that she would not discomfit him, no matter what statement she made; know she what she would, she must not hold sway over him.

As they went, Mr. Watson began about his wife's health, with a kind of veiled anxiety.

“Can you not examine your mother, John?” he began timidly, “She is surely not well.”

“Father, I am not sure that is wise,” John answered, “You know I am not qualified, and it is after all Mother’s health. But if I only knew of some good doctor, I would go this afternoon, and ask him to come, for I am certain Mother is seriously indisposed.”

His father answered in a despondent tone:

“Do you think she has any hidden complaint? Do you think she is really very ill? Has Hudson said anything? Oh, John! I am haunted by the fear that our coming to Milton has killed her. My poor Maria!”

“Oh, Father! don't imagine such things. Many a one is not well for a time; and with good advice gets better and stronger than ever.”

“I hope and trust you are right. We will ask Mrs. Holmes if she can tell us of a good doctor. We won't throw away our money on any but some one first-rate, if we cannot have you to do it.”

Here, they stopped their conversation, as they had arrived at the factory yard. They went up the scrupulously clean steps of the house and were ushered into a scrupulously clean drawing room. The whole room had a painfully spotted, spangled, speckled look about it, which impressed John so unpleasantly that he was hardly conscious of the trouble that must be willingly expended to secure that effect of icy, snowy discomfort.

At last Myfanwy Holmes came in, rustling in handsome black silk, as was her wont. John explained how it was that his mother could not accompany them to return the Holmes's call; Myfanwy listened coldly, remembering Sherlock's morose face at dinner, and, though she was certain Mrs. Watson’s ailment was genuine, she gave John no sympathy for it.

“How is Mr. Holmes?” asked Mr. Watson. “I was afraid he was not well, from his hurried note yesterday.”

“Sherlock is rarely ill; and when he is, he never speaks about it, or makes it an excuse for not doing anything. He told me he could not get leisure to read with you last night, sir. He regretted it, I am sure; he values the hours spent with you.”

“I am sure they are equally agreeable to me,” said Mr. Watson. “It makes me feel young again to see his enjoyment and appreciation of all that is fine in classical literature.”

“I have no doubt the classics are very desirable for people who have leisure. Anthea, for example, is very right in her study of them.”
“But, surely, if the mind is too long directed to one object only, it will get stiff and rigid, and unable to take in many interests,” said John.

“Having many interests does not suit the life of a Milton manufacturer. It is, or ought to be, enough for him to have one great desire, and to bring all the purposes of his life to bear on the fulfilment of that.”

“And that is—?” asked Mr. Watson.

“To hold and maintain a high, honourable place among the merchants of his country—the men of his town. Such a place my brother has earned for himself. Go where you will—I don’t say in England only, but in Europe—the name of Sherlock Holmes of Milton is known and respected amongst all men of business. Of course, it is unknown in the fashionable circles,” she continued, scornfully.

“Idle gentlemen and ladies are not likely to know much of a Milton manufacturer, unless he gets into parliament, or marries a lord's daughter.” Both Mr. Watson and John had an uneasy, ludicrous consciousness that they had never heard of this great name, until Mr. Stamford had written them word that Mr. Holmes would be a good friend to have in Milton. The proud sister's world was not their world of Harley Street gentilities on the one hand, or country clergymen and Hampshire squires on the other.

“I see in your face, young Mr. Watson, that you think you never heard of this wonderful brother of mine, nor value his high place.”

“No,” said John, with deceptive calm, “It may be true, that I was thinking I had hardly heard Mr. Holmes's name before I came to Milton. But since I have come here, I have heard enough to make me feel how much justice and truth there is in what you have said of him.”

“Who spoke to you of him?” asked Myfanwy abruptly. John hesitated before he replied, not liking this authoritative questioning.

“It was as much from what Mr. Holmes withheld of that which we had been told of his previous life by Mr. Stamford.”

“Mr. Stamford! What can he know of Sherlock? He, living a lazy life in a drowsy college. But I’m obliged to you. Many a young man in your position would have shrunk from giving me the pleasure of hearing that my brother was well spoken of.”

“Why?” asked John, looking straight at her, genuinely surprised.

“Why! because I suppose they might worry that they would be seen as trying to curry favour with the family of an influential man, in order to gain some preferment.”

When John laughed outright, though, a short bark, at the notion presented to him, her somewhat grim smile disappeared. John saw this, and said,

“I beg your pardon. But I really am very much obliged to you for exonerating me from such a thing. I would not for the world seek a preferment that was not earned, and never from Mr. Holmes.”

“Young men have sought his attentions, before now,” said Mrs. Holmes, looking into his eyes. Her expression carried more than a hint of threat, and John was sure that the emphasis on the word “attentions” was deliberate. He felt as though she had seen his soul and read the conflicted emotions about Sherlock therein; she must know, then, of their argument on the previous day.
“I suppose I may hope to see Mr. Holmes on Thursday?” asked Mr. Watson, by way of changing the course of conversation, for John was immobile and mute.

“I cannot answer for my brother’s engagements,” Myfanwy said, “There is some uncomfortable work going on in the town; a threatening of a strike.”

“A strike!” asked John, shaken out of his reverie. “What for? What are they going to strike for?”

“They are wanting higher wages, I suppose?” asked Mr. Watson.

“That is the face of the thing. But the truth is, they want to be masters, and make the masters into slaves on their own ground. They are always trying at it; they always have it in their minds and every five or six years, there comes a struggle between masters and men.”

“Does it not make the town very rough?” asked John.

“Of course it does. But surely you are not a coward, are you? Milton is not the place for cowards.”

John had thought himself brave, once, and now he did not know, so he could not answer, and the visit ended in a silent shaking of hands. As he shook Myfanwy’s hand, she drew him in and said, “You are brave, I know it, but do not overstep yourself, John Watson.”

Sherlock came that evening to Mr. Watson's. He was shown up into the drawing-room, where Mr. Watson was reading aloud to his wife and son.

“I am come partly to bring you a note from sister, and partly to apologise for not keeping to my time yesterday. The note contains the address you asked for; Dr. Stapleton.”

“Thank you!” said John, hastily, holding out his hand to take the note. Sherlock withdrew his hand quickly, but the slight brush of skin seared them both. Mr. Watson began to talk about the strike. Sherlock’s face assumed a likeness to his sister’s worst expression, which immediately repelled the watching John.

“Yes; the fools will have a strike. Let them. It suits us well enough. But we gave them a chance. They think trade is flourishing as it was last year. We see the storm on the horizon and draw in our sails. But because we don't explain our reasons, they won't believe we're acting reasonably. We must give them line and letter for the way we choose to spend or save our money. But we Milton masters have to-day sent in our decision. We won't advance a penny. We tell them we may have to lower wages; but can't afford to raise. So here we stand, waiting for their next attack.”

“And what will that be?” asked Mr. Watson.

“I conjecture, a simultaneous strike. You will see Milton without smoke in a few days, I imagine.”

“But why,” John asked, angry because of Sherlock’s expression as well as his autocratic tone, “could you not explain what good reason you have for expecting a bad trade? I don't know whether I use the right words, but you will understand what I mean.”

“Do you give your servants reasons for your expenditure, or your economy in the use of your own money? We, the owners of capital, have a right to choose what we will do with it.”

“A human right, necessary even in this strange place,” said John, very low.

“I beg your pardon, I did not hear what you said.”
“I would rather not repeat it,” said he; “it related to a feeling which I do not think you would share.”

“Won't you try me?” pleaded Sherlock, his thoughts suddenly bent upon learning what he had said. John was displeased with his pertinacity, but did not choose to affix too much importance to his words.

“It is strange because I see two classes dependent on each other in every possible way, yet each evidently regarding the interests of the other as opposed to their own; I never lived in a place before where there were two sets of people always running each other down.”

“Who have you heard running the masters down? I don't ask who you have heard abusing the men; for I see you persist in misunderstanding what I said the other day. But who have you heard abusing the masters?”

John reddened; then smiled suddenly,

“I am not fond of being catechised. I refuse to answer your question. Besides, it has nothing to do with the fact. You must take my word for it, that I have heard some people, or, it may be, only someone of the workpeople, speak as though it were the interest of the employers to keep them from acquiring money—that it would make them too independent if they had a sum in the savings bank.”

“I dare say it was that man Lestrade who told you all this,” said Mrs Watson. Sherlock did not appear to hear what John evidently did not wish him to know. But he caught it, nevertheless.

“I heard, moreover, that it was considered to the advantage of the masters to have ignorant workmen—not hedge-lawyers, as Sholto used to call those men in his company who questioned and would know the reason for every order.” This latter part of the sentence John addressed rather to his father than to Sherlock. Who is Sholto? asked Sherlock of himself, with a strange kind of displeasure, that prevented him for the moment from replying! Mr. Watson took up the conversation.

“I must confess that, although I have not become so intimately acquainted with any workmen as John has, I am very much struck by the antagonism between the employer and the employed, on the very surface of things. I even gather this impression from what you yourself have from time to time said.”

Mr. Holmes paused awhile before he spoke.

“My theory is, that my interests are identical with those of my workpeople and vice-versa. Young Mr. Watson, I know, does not like to hear men called “hands,” so I won't use that word, though it comes most readily to my lips as the technical term, whose origin, whatever it was, dates before my time. On some future day—in some millennium—in Utopia, this unity may be brought into practice—just as I can fancy a republic the most perfect form of government.”

“We will read Plato's Republic as soon as we have finished Homer.”

“Well, in the Platonic year, it may fall out that we are all—men women, and children—fit for a republic: but give me a constitutional monarchy in our present state of morals and intelligence. I will use my best discretion—from no humbug or philanthropic feeling, of which we have had rather too much in the North—to make wise laws and come to just decisions in the conduct of my business—laws and decisions which work for my own good in the first instance—for theirs in the second; but I will neither be forced to give my reasons, nor flinch from what I have once declared
to be my resolution. Let them turn out! I shall suffer as well as they: but at the end they will find I have not bated nor altered one jot. I say, that the masters would be trenching on the independence of their hands, in a way that I, for one, should not feel justified in doing, if we interfered too much with the life they lead out of the mills.—I should equally rebel and resent such interference.”

“I beg your pardon,” said John, “but is not that because there has been none of the equality of friendship between the adviser and advised classes? Because every man has had to stand in an unchristian and isolated position, apart from and jealous of his brother-man: constantly afraid of his rights being trenched upon?”

“I only state the fact. I am sorry to say, I have an appointment at eight o’clock, and I must just take facts as I find them to-night, without trying to account for them; which, indeed, would make no difference in determining how to act as things stand—the facts must be granted.”

“But,” said John in a low voice, “it seems to me that it makes all the difference in the world—.” His father made a sign to him to be silent, and allow Sherlock to finish what he had to say. He was already standing up and preparing to go.

“You must grant me this one point. Given a strong feeling of independence in every Darkshire man, have I any right to obtrude my views, of the manner in which he shall act, upon another (hating it as I should do most vehemently myself), merely because he has labour to sell and I capital to buy?”

“No in the least,” said John, determined just to say this one thing; “not in the least because of your labour and capital positions, whatever they are, but because you are a man, dealing with a set of men over whom you have, whether you reject the use of it or not, immense power, just because your lives and your welfare are so constantly and intimately interwoven.”

“John,” said his father, warningly, smiling, yet uneasy at the thought that they were detaining Sherlock against his will, which was a mistake; for Sherlock rather liked it, as long as John would talk, although what he said only irritated him.

“I will cease, Father. I am only trying to reconcile Mr. Holmes’—”

“Sherlock”

“Sherlock’s,” said John, unwillingly and yet with the same softness as the previous day, which discomfited them both not a little, “I am trying to reconcile your admiration of despotism with your respect for other men's independence of character.”

Sherlock flushed at the tone and at the sound of his name on John’s lips, “I choose to be the unquestioned and irresponsible master of my hands, during the hours that they labour for me. But those hours past, our relation ceases; and then comes in the same respect for their independence that I myself exact.”

Neither spoke again for a moment, as they were too much vexed. But Sherlock shook it off, and bade Mr. and Mrs. Watson good night. Then, drawing near to John, he said in a lower voice—

“I spoke hastily to you once this evening, and I am afraid, rather rudely. But I am not a gentleman, as you know; will you forgive me?”

“Certainly,” said John, though rather grudgingly. Sherlock’s beautiful smile broke forth, calling a corresponding sunniness from John’s countenance that any observer would have thought impossible a moment before, and so they left each other on cordial terms that night.

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The next afternoon Dr. Stapleton, a crisp, middle-aged man, came to pay his first visit to Mrs. Watson. John assisted him, and noted with increasing worry both the litany of symptoms and his mother’s pain during the examination; Dr. Stapleton, though he spoke cheerfully, had a grave face by the end of the visit.

When they had left Hudson attending to Mrs. Watson in the bedroom and sat in the drawing room, John asked,

“What is the matter with my mother? You will oblige me by telling the simple truth.”

“You’re almost a medical man yourself, Watson—what do you think?” Stapleton said, not unkindly.

“It is cancer, is it not?”

“It is.” John was grateful for the man’s matter-of-factness.

“Will there be much suffering?”

Stapleton shook his head. “That we cannot tell. It depends on constitution; on a thousand things. But as you know the late discoveries of medical science have given us large power of alleviation.”

“She will not be herself for a great many more days, then, if you are speaking of the new opiates.”

“It is the kindest thing.”

After that, there was nothing left to say, and John was silent as he showed the doctor out.

“A fine young man, that.” thought Dr. Stapleton, when he was seated in his carriage, “He might do very well for an apprentice if he weren’t consumptive, although he doesn’t have the look. Ah! here we are at the Archers’. So out he jumped, with thought, wisdom, experience, sympathy, and ready to attend to the calls made upon them by this family, just as if there were none other in the world.

After a brief moment to collect himself, John went upstairs slowly. Hudson was not in the room. Mrs. Watson lay back in an easy chair, with a soft white shawl wrapped around her, and a becoming cap put on, in expectation of the doctor’s visit. Her face had a little faint colour in it, and the very exhaustion after the examination gave it a peaceful look. John was surprised to see her look so calm.

“Why, John, how strange you look!” And then, as the idea stole into her mind of what was indeed the real state of the case, she added, as if a little displeased: “you have not been seeing Dr. Stapleton, and asking him any questions—have you, child?” John did not reply—only looked wistfully towards her. Mrs. Watson became more displeased. “He would not, surely, break his word to me, and”—

“Oh yes, Mother, he did. I made him, though I could see it for myself once he showed me some of the symptoms.” He knelt down by his mother’s side, and caught her hand.

“John, it was very wrong of you. You knew I did not wish you to know.” But, as if tired with the contest, she left her hand in John’s clasp, and by-and-by she returned the pressure faintly. That encouraged John to speak.

“I will care for you, Mother, as best I can.”
“But John…your lungs…”

“My lungs are no worse than they were, and I am inclined to think that perhaps I should ask Dr. Stapleton to examine me when we have the funds, I have felt so well in the last months, despite the smoky air here.”

A silence fell across the room.

“I shall never see Helstone again, John,” said Mrs. Watson after a moment, the tears welling up into her eyes. John could not reply. Mrs. Watson went on. “While I was there, I was for ever wanting to leave it. Every place seemed pleasanter. And now I shall die far away from it. I am rightly punished.”

“You must not talk so,” said John, impatiently. “He said you might live for years. Oh, mother! we may have you back at Helstone yet.”

“No never! That I must take as a just penance. But, John—Harry!” At the mention of that one word, she suddenly cried out loud, as in some sharp agony. It seemed as if the thought of him upset all her composure, destroyed the calm, overcame the exhaustion. Wild passionate cry succeeded to cry—”Harry! Harry! Come to me. I am dying. Little first-born child, come to me once again!”

She was in violent hysterics. John fetched her salts and rang for cold water, and did what he could, then put his mother to bed, and sat by her till she fell asleep.

When he left the room, Hudson bade him drink a cup of coffee which she had prepared for him in the drawing-room, and stood over him in a commanding attitude as she did so.

“No need for you to wear yourself to a shadow with this, Master John, though you will insist on doing things above your strength. I suppose you'll tell master, and a pretty household I shall have of you!”

“No, Hudson,” said John, firmly, ‘I will not tell Father. He could not bear it as I can” and, as if to show how well he bore it, tears rose to his eyes and he began to cough uncontrollably.

“I see how it is,” Hudson said, “Go out and take a walk, and come in something like. Many's the time I've longed to walk it off—the thought of what was the matter with her, and how it must all end.”

“Oh, Hudson!” said John, “how often I've been cross with you, not knowing what a terrible secret you had to bear!”

“Bless you, child! Now go, and I'll watch over missus.”

“I will,” said John. He hung about Hudson for a minute or so, as if afraid and irresolute; then suddenly kissing her, he went quickly out of the room.

“Bless him!” said Hudson. “He's as sound as a nut. There are three people I love: it's missus, Master Harry, and Master John. Just them three. That's all.”

And, casting a glimpse towards the sleeping invalid, she went resolutely down to her washing.
A Dangerous Time

Chapter Summary

“The unexpected has happened so continually in my life that it has ceased to deserve the name.”
— Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Stark Munro Letters"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After learning of his mother’s illness, John went out heavily and unwillingly enough. But the length of a street—yes, the air of a Milton Street—cheered his young blood before he reached his first turning, and his step grew lighter. He began to take notice, instead of having his thoughts turned so exclusively inward. He saw unusual loiterers in the streets: men with their hands in their pockets sauntering along; loud-laughing and loud-spoken girls clustered together, apparently excited to high spirits, and a boisterous independence of temper and behaviour. The more ill-looking of the men, the discreditable minority, hung about on the steps of the beer-houses and gin-shops, smoking, and commenting pretty freely on every passer-by. Though John was not afraid—in fact, fisticuffs would have been a welcome relief—he felt that his parents’ feelings would be much disturbed if he came home bruised and disheveled. Instead, he would go and see how Janine Lestrade was. It would not be so refreshing as a quiet country walk, nor as soothing to his feelings as a fight, but still it would perhaps be doing the kinder thing.

Gregory Lestrade was sitting by the fire smoking, as he went in. Janine was rocking herself on the other side.

Lestrade took the pipe out of his mouth, and standing up, he leant against the chimney piece in a lounging attitude, while John asked Janine how she was.

“I’m rather down i’ th’ mouth in regard to spirits, but I’m better in health. I don’t like this strike. This is th’ third strike I’ve seen,” said she, sighing, as if that was answer and explanation enough.”

“Yo’re a deal too much set on peace and quietness at any price,” said her father.

“Why do you strike?” asked John. 'Striking is leaving off work till you get your own rate of wages, is it not?’

“No’ exactly. Do they ever strike then, i’ th’ South?’

“No,” John said. “I suppose they know if they do there will be no bread for anyone.”

“I have heerd they’re a pack of spiritless, down-trodden men, too much dazed wi’ work to know when they're put upon. Now, it's not so here. We known when we're put upon; and we’ve too much blood in us to stand it. We just take our hands fro’ our looms, and say, ‘Yo' may starve us, but yo'll not put upon us, my masters!’ And be danged to 'em, they shan't this time!”

“O, father!’ said Janine, “what have ye gained by striking? Think of that first strike when mother died—how we all had to starve—you the worst of all; and yet many a one went in every week at the same wage, till all were gone in that there was work for; and some went beggars all their lives.
“Ay,” said he. “That there strike was badly managed. Folk got into th’ management of it, as were either fools or not true men. Yo’ll see, it’ll be different this time.”

‘But all this time you’ve not told me what you’re striking for,’ said John, again.

‘Why, yo’ see, there’s five or six masters who have set themselves against paying the wages they’ve been paying these two years past, and flourishing upon, and getting richer upon. And now they come to us, and say we’re to take less. And we won’t. We’ll just starve them to death first; and see who’ll work for ’em then. They’ll have killed the goose that laid ’em the golden eggs, I reckon.”

“And so you plan dying, in order to be revenged upon them!”

“No,” said he, “I dunnot. I just look forward to the chance of dying at my post sooner than yield. That's what folk call fine and honourable in a soldier, and why not in a poor weaver-chap?”

“But,” said John, “a soldier dies in the cause of the Nation—in the cause of others.”

He laughed grimly. “My lad,” said he, “yo're but a young man, but don't yo' think I can keep even Janine and myself on sixteen shilling a week? Do yo think it's for mysel' I'm striking work at this time? It's just as much in the cause of others as yo soldier—only the cause he dies for is just that of somebody he never seen, while I take up Philip Anderson’s cause, as lives next door but one, wi’ a sickly wife, and eight childer, none on 'em factory age; and I don't take up his cause only, though he's a poor good-for-nought, as can only manage two looms at a time, but I take up th' cause o' justice. Why are we to have less wage now, I ask, than two year ago?”

“Don't ask me,” said John. “I am very ignorant of this. Ask some of your masters. Surely they will give you a reason for it. Could not,” and here he paused, almost unwilling to say the name, “Sherlock Holmes, your own master, tell you something of why he has chosen to do this?”

“Yo’re just a foreigner, and nothing more,” said Lestrade, contemptuously. “Much yo’ know about it. Ask th’ masters! They’d tell us to mind our own business, and they’d mind theirs. Master Holmes, he don’t believe in telling us one thing, our business being, yo' understand, to take the lower wage, and be thankful, and their business to beat us down to starving point, to swell their profits. That's what it is.”

‘But said John, determined not to give way, although he saw he was irritating him, 'the state of trade may be such as not to enable them to give you the same remuneration.

'State o' trade! That's just a piece o' masters' humbug. It's rate o' wages I was talking of. Th' masters keep th' state o' trade in their own hands; and just walk it forward like a black bug-a-boo, to frighten naughty children with into being good. I'll tell yo' it's their part to beat us down, to swell their fortunes; and it's ours to stand up and fight hard,—not for ourselves alone, but for them round about us—for justice and fair play. We'n getten money laid by; and we're resolved to stand and fall together; not a man on us will go in for less wage than th' Union says is our due. So I say, "hooray for the strike,," and let Holmes, and Milverton, and Wilkes and their set look to it!”

“Do you truly think Sherlock Holmes so dishonest and cruel?” John was a little afraid to ask this question, as he knew of Sherlock’s harsh opinion of those not so advanced in life or in intelligence as himself, but he hungered somehow to hear talk of the man, under nearly any circumstances.

“He’s honest as can be, and fights fair, but he still won’t tell us a thing. Milverton, now, he's as slippery as an eel, he is. He's like a cat,—as sleek, and cunning, and fierce. It'll never be an honest
up and down fight wi’ him, as it will be wi’ Holmes.”

'Poor Janine!' said John, turning round to her. 'You sigh over it all. You don't like struggling and fighting as your father does, do you?'

'No!' said she, heavily. 'I'm sick on it. I could have wished to have had other talk about me in my latter days, than just the clashing and clanging and clattering that has wearied a' my life long, about work and wages, and masters, and hands, and knobsticks.'

'Poor wench!’ exclaimed her father, stroking her hair, then went out of doors, evidently to finish his pipe.

Janine said passionately,

'Now am not I a fool,—am I not?—there, I knew I ought for to keep father at home, and away fro' the folk that are always ready for to tempt a man, in time o’ strike, to go drink. He'll go off, I know he will,—as often as he wants to smoke—and nobody knows where it'll end. I wish I'd letten myself be choked first.'

'But does your father drink?' asked John.

'No—not to say drink. But in times o' strike there's much to knock a man down, for all they start so hopefully; and where's the comfort to come fro'? He'll get angry and mad—they all do—and then they get tired out wi' being angry and mad, and maybe ha' done things in their passion they'd be glad to forget. Bless yo' sweet pitiful face! but yo' dunnot know what a strike is yet.'

'Come, Janine,' said John, 'I won't say you're exaggerating, because I don't know enough about it: but, perhaps, as you're not well, you're only looking on one side, and there is another and a brighter to be looked to.'

'It's all well enough for yo' to say so, who have lived in pleasant green places all your life long, and never known want or care, or wickedness either, for that matter.'

'Take care,' said John, his cheek flushing, 'how you judge, Janine. I shall go home to my mother, who is so ill—so ill, Janine, that there's no outlet but death for her out of the prison of her great suffering; and yet I must speak cheerfully to my father, who has no notion of her real state. The only person—the only one who could sympathise with me and help me—whose presence could comfort my mother more than any other earthly thing would run the risk of death if he came to see his dying mother. This I tell you—only you, Janine. You must not mention it. No other person in Milton—hardly any other person in England knows. Have I not care? Do I not know anxiety, though I go about well-dressed, and have food enough?''

“I ask your pardon,” replied Janine, humbly.

“It is nothing, Janine,” John said, suddenly regretting his outburst. He was about to change the subject when raised voices outside caught his attention, and, before he could get up to see, Lestrade came back in, followed by Anderson, the neighbour of whom he had frequently heard mention, as by turns exciting Lestrade's compassion, as an unskilful workman with a large family depending upon him for support, and at other times enraging his more energetic and sanguine neighbour by his want of what the latter called spirit.

It was very evident that Lestrade was in a passion now, and Anderson as well. Janine began to rock herself violently backwards and forwards, as was her wont (John knew by this time) when she was agitated. Anderson was saying, loudly and angrily:

“It's no use, Lestrade. We cannot live long- my wife’s just Yo's just sinking away—cannot stand
th' sight o' the little ones starving. Ay, starving! Five shilling a week may do well enough for thee, wi' but two mouths to fill. But it's starving to us. If she dies as I'm 'feard she will afore we've gotten th' five per cent, I'll fling th' money back i' th' master's face, I'll hate thee, and th' whole pack o' th' Union. Ay, an' chase yo' through heaven wi' my hatred,—I will, lad! I will,—if yo're leading me astray i' this matter. Thou saidst, Gregory, on Wednesday sennight—and it's now Tuesday i' th' second week—that afore a fortnight we'd ha' the masters coming a-begging to us to take back our' work, at our own wage—and time's nearly up,—and there's our lile Jack lying a-bed, too weak to cry, but just every now and then sobbing up his heart for want o' food,—our lile Jack, who wakened me each mom wi' putting his sweet little lips to my great rough fou' face, a-seeking a smooth place to kiss,—an' he lies starving.' Here the deep sobs choked the poor man, and Gregory looked up, with eyes brimful of tears, to John, before he could gain courage to speak.

'Hou'd up, man. Thy lile Jack shall na' starve. We'll go buy the chap a sup o' milk an' a loaf of bread this very minute. What's mine's thine, sure enough. Only, dunnot lose heart, man!' continued he, as he fumbled in a tea-pot for what money he had. 'I lay yo' my heart and soul we'll win for a' this: it's but bearing on one more week, and yo just see th' way th' masters 'll come round, praying on us to come back to our mills. An' th' Union,—that's to say, I—will take care yo're family has enough. So dunnot turn faint-heart, and go to th' tyrants a-seeking work.'

Anderson turned round at these words,—turned round a face so white, and gaunt, and tear-furrowed, and hopeless that it chilled John to the bone, "Yo' know well, that a worser tyrant than e'er th' masters were says "Starve to death, and see 'em a' starve to death, ere yo' dare go again th' Union." Yo' know it well, Gregory, for a' yo're one on 'em. Yo' may be kind hearts, each separate; but once banded together, yo've no more pity for a man than a wild hunger-maddened wolf."

Lestrade had his hand on the lock of the door—he stopped and turned round on Anderson:

'So help me God! man alive—if I think not I'm doing best for thee, and for all on us. If I'm going wrong when I think I'm going right, it's their sin, who ha' left me where I am, in my ignorance. I ha' thought till my brains ached,—Beli' me, Philip, I have. An' I say again, there's no help for us but having faith i' th' Union. They'll win the day, see if they dunnot!' And with this, they departed.

Not one word had John or Janine spoken. At last John said, shocked to the bone with what he had heard, "Let me bring you what money I can spare,—let me bring you a little food for that poor man's children. Don't let them know it comes from any one but your father. It will be but little."

Janine lay back without taking any notice of what John said. She did not cry—she only quivered up her breath,

'My heart's drained dry o' tears,' she said. 'Anderson's been in these days past, a telling me of his fears and his troubles. He's but a weak kind o' chap, I know, but he's a man for a' that; and tho' I've been angry, many a time afore now, wi' him an' his wife, as knew no more nor him how to manage, yet, yo' see, all folks isn't wise, yet God lets 'em live—ay, an' gives 'em some one to love, and be loved by, just as good as Solomon. An', if sorrow comes to them they love, it hurts 'em as sore as e'er it did Solomon. I can't make it out. Perhaps it's as well such a one as Anderson has th' Union to see after him. But I'd just like for to see th' mean as make th' Union, and put 'em one by one face to face wi' Anderson. I reckon, if they heard him, they'd tell him (if I cotched 'em one by one), he might go back and get what he could for his work, even if it weren't so much as they ordered.'

John sat utterly silent. How was he ever to go away into comfort and forget that man's voice, with the tone of unutterable agony, telling more by far than his words of what he had to suffer? He put the few coins of his own he had into Janine's hand without speaking.
“Thank yo’. There's many on 'em gets no more, and is not so bad off,—leastways does not show it as he does. But father won't let 'em want, now he knows. Yo' see, Anderson's been pulled down wi' his childer. Yo're not to think we'd ha' letten 'em starve, for all we're a bit pressed oursel'; if neighbours doesn't see after neighbours, I dunno who will.” Janine seemed almost afraid lest John should think they had not the will, and, to a certain degree, the power of helping one whom she evidently regarded as having a claim upon them. ‘Besides,’ she went on, ‘father is sure and positive the masters must give in within these next few days,—that they canna hould on much longer. But I thank yo’ all the same,—I thank yo’ for mysel’, as much as for Anderson, for it just makes my heart warm to yo’ more and more.’

John took her hand and squeezed it, and, making her comfortable, he departed.

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On John's return home he found two letters on the table: one was a note for his mother,—the other, which had come by the post, was evidently from Aunt Shaw—covered with foreign post-marks—thin, silvery, and rustling. He took up the other, and was examining it, when his father came in suddenly:

“So your mother is tired, and gone to bed early! I'm afraid, such a thundery day was not the best in the world for the doctor to see her. What did he say? Do you agree, John? Hudson tells me he spoke to you about her.”

John hesitated. His father's looks became more grave and anxious.

“He did not say she was seriously ill, did he?”

John made a noncommittal noise, not wishing to tell a falsehood and not yet certain that his father should be able to bear the news.

“What did he say she needed?—he did not recommend change of air?—he did not say this smoky town was doing her any harm, did he, John?”

“Oh, only rest, and a nourishing diet, Father, that is all. It is just what I would have said myself” John said firmly, hoping to allay Mr. Watson’s fears.

And yet, John saw, in his father’s nervous ways, that the first impression of possible danger was made upon his mind. Mr Watson could not forget the subject,—he could not settle to anything that evening. He was continually going backwards and forwards, on laborious tiptoe, to see if his wife was still asleep. John's heart ached at his restlessness—his trying to stifle and strangle the hideous fear that was looming out of the dark places of his heart. He came back at last, somewhat comforted.

'She's awake now, John. She quite smiled as she saw me standing by her. Just her old smile. And she says she feels refreshed, and ready for tea. Where's the note for her? She wants to see it. I'll read it to her while you make tea.'

The note proved to be a formal invitation from Miss Myfanwy Holmes, to the Watsons to dinner on the twenty-first. John was surprised to find an acceptance contemplated, after all he had learnt of sad probabilities during the day. But so it was. The idea of her husband's and son’s going to this dinner had quite captivated Mrs. Watson's fancy, even before John had heard the contents of the note. It was an event to diversify the monotony of the invalid's life; and she clung to the idea of their going, with even fretful pertinacity when John objected.

“Nay, John? if she wishes it, I'm sure we'll both go willingly. She never would wish it unless she
felt herself really stronger—really better than we thought she was, eh, John?’ said Mr. Watson, anxiously, as she prepared to write the note of acceptance, the next day.

“I do think she is better since last night,” said he. ‘Her eyes look brighter, and her complexion clearer.’

‘God bless you,’ said his father, earnestly. ‘But is it true? Yesterday was so sultry every one felt ill. It was a most unlucky day for Dr. Stapleton to see her.”

John’s assurance cheered Mr. Watson, who went almost happily away to his day’s duties, now increased by the preparation of some lectures he had promised to deliver to the working people at a neighbouring Lyceum. John, much upset by what he had witnessed and learned, sat down with tea and the lightest, most recent novel he could find, but flipped the pages aimlessly until the time came for bed.

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‘Well, Myfanwy,’ asked Sherlock that same night, ‘who have accepted your invitations for the twenty-first?’

‘Anthea, where are the notes? The Milvertons accept, Wilkses accept, Stephenses accept, Browns decline. Watsons—father and son come,—mother too great an invalid—Macphersons come, and Mr. Horsfall, and Mr. Young. I was thinking of asking the Porters, as the Browns can't come.’

‘Very good. Mrs. Watson really is very far from well, from what Dr. Stapleton’s face told me when we last met.”

‘It's strange of them to accept a dinner-invitation if she's very ill,’ said Anthea.

‘I didn’t say very ill,’ said Sherlock, rather sharply. ‘I only said very far from well.”

‘Very probably they are quite aware of what you said yesterday, Sherlock—of the great advantage it would be to them—to Mr. Watson, I mean, to be introduced to such people as the Milvertons and the Wilkses.”

‘I'm sure that motive would not influence them. No! I think I understand how it is.’

‘Sherlock!’ said Anthea, ‘How you profess to understand these Watsons, and how you never will allow that we can know anything about them. Are they really so very different to most people one meets with?”

She did not mean to vex him; but if she had intended it, she could not have done it more thoroughly. He chafed in silence, however, not deigning to reply to her question.

“They do not seem to me out of the common way,” said Myfanwy. ‘He appears a worthy kind of man enough; rather too simple for trade—so it's perhaps as well he should have been a clergyman first, and now a teacher. She's a bit of a fine lady, with her invalidism; and as for Mr. John Watson” here she glanced sidelong at Sherlock—“he’s the only one who puzzles me when I think about him, which I don't often do.”

“Unlike Sherlock,” Anthea muttered, making Myfanwy’s lip twitch.

“I have construed, however,” Myfanwy continued, “that while he is outwardly so calm and weak, inwardly he is as a ravening beast.”

Sherlock heard, but did not deign to reply. He was walking up and down the dining-room,
wishing that his sister would order candles, and allow him to set to work at either reading or writing, and so put a stop to the conversation. But to ask would be to concede defeat, and so he made an attack of his own.

“He doesn’t puzzle you a bit, Myfanwy. And “beast” is a gratuitously ridiculous statement; he may seek out fights in the streets, but it is only to allay the boredom that the abominable domesticity that his present life inflicts upon him. He has a cool head in a crisis and yet he is as gentle as a woman—more gentle than some—when it is necessary. A fine doctor and a fine man…” And there he stopped, conscious that he had fallen into his sister’s trap, though he had seen it clearly laid for him.

“My goodness, Sherlock. Should we expect a happy announcement soon?”

“He is not like me,” Sherlock said, shortly.

“And we should all be grateful,” Myfanwy’s tartness concealed great tenderness. “As it is, he will make you a hundred times worse than you are.”

“He would never have me,” said he, with a short laugh.

“He would, and he will. That man will master you, Sherlock, and you will enjoy it.”

At this, Sherlock’s ears crimsoned, and for once in his life speechless, he fled the field, only returning when candles had been brought, and Anthea had taken up her translation work.

“How nice to see you, Sherlock,” said Anthea dryly, looking up, “Suppose we find some more agreeable subject to you than John Watson.”

“What do you say to a strike, by way of something pleasant to talk about?” Sherlock said, with a shade of bitterness.

'Have the hands actually turned out?' asked Myfanwy, by way of succouring Sherlock a little, though they both knew the answer.

'Hamper's men are actually out. Mine are working out their week, through fear of being prosecuted for breach of contract. I'd have had every one of them up and punished for it, that left his work before his time was out.'

'The law expenses would have been more than the hands themselves were worth—a set of ungrateful naughts!' said his sister.

'To be sure. But I'd have shown them how I keep my word, and how I mean them to keep theirs. They know me by this time. Milverton's men are off—pretty certain he won't spend money in getting them punished. We're in for a turn-out.'

'I hope there are not many orders in hand?'

'Of course there are. They know that well enough. But they don't quite understand all, though they think they do.'

“Will it be Irish hands, then?” Myfanwy asked.

'Yes! to be sure. It will be trouble and expense, and I fear there will be some danger; but I will do it, rather than give in.'

‘With the extra expense I'm sorry we're giving a dinner just now.’
'So am I,—you know how people go on, and that maggot Wilkes tests my civility to the utmost. But Horsfall does not stay in Milton long, and as for the others, we owe them dinners, and it's all one trouble.'

He kept on with his restless walk—not speaking any more, but drawing a deep breath from time to time, as if endeavouring to throw off some annoying thought. When Myfanwy wished him goodnight, with that long steady look of hers which conveyed no expression of the tenderness that was in her heart, but yet had the intensity of a blessing, Sherlock continued his walk. All his business plans had received a check, a sudden pull-up, from this approaching turn-out. He paced up and down, setting his teeth a little now and then. At last it struck two. The candles were flickering in their sockets. He lighted his own, muttering to himself:

'Once for all, they shall know whom they have got to deal with. I can give them a fortnight,—no more. If they don't see their madness before the end of that time, I must have hands from Ireland. I believe it's Milverton's doing,—confound him and his dodges! He thought he was overstocked; so he seemed to yield at first, when the deputation came to him,—and of course, he only confirmed them in their folly, as he meant to do. That's where it spread from.'

And yet Sherlock could not risk a confrontation with Milverton; he knew, and Sherlock knew he knew, about the affair with Victor Trevor. Milverton was a shark, he thought, bloodless and heavy himself, but quick enough to exploit any weakness when it meant his own advantage. A scandal surrounding Sherlock would make customers much more leery of buying from him, and Milverton would scoop up these orders hand over fist.

When he finally went to bed, Sherlock dreamt that Charles Milverton had captured John and was striking his face, and he, Sherlock, could not make him stop. His limbs were bound, and John, though he stood as straight as he could as the blows rained upon him, was asking Sherlock to help him. Sherlock struggled against the invisible bonds but only succeeded in making them tighter, and he woke, panting and angry. He did not sleep again that night.

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The medicines and treatment which Dr. Stapleton had ordered for Mrs. Watson, did her so much good at first that both she and Hudson felt that she could perhaps not only get better, but recover. John shook his head sadly, but left them to their hope, for out-of-doors, even to their uninstructed eyes, there was a gloomy brooding appearance of discontent.

Mr. Watson had his own acquaintances among the working men, and was depressed with their earnestly told tales of suffering and long-endurance. They would have scorned to speak of what they had to bear to any one who might, from his position, have understood it without their words. But here was this man, from a distant county, who was perplexed by the workings of the system into the midst of which he was thrown, and each was eager to make him a judge, and to bring witness of his own causes for irritation. Then Mr. Watson brought all his budget of grievances, and laid it before Mr. Holmes, for him, with his experience as a master, to arrange them, and explain their origin; which he always did, on sound economical principles; showing that, as trade was conducted, there must always be a waxing and waning of commercial prosperity; and that in the waning a certain number of masters, as well as of men, must go down into ruin, and be no more seen among the ranks of the happy and prosperous. He spoke as if this consequence were so entirely logical, that neither employers nor employed had any right to complain if it became their fate: the employer to turn aside from the race he could no longer run, with a bitter sense of incompetency and failure—wounded in the struggle—trampled down by his fellows in their haste to get rich—slighted where he once was honoured—humbly asking for, instead of bestowing, employment with a lordly hand. Of course, speaking so of the fate that, as a master, might be his own in the fluctuations of commerce, he was not likely to have more sympathy with that of the
workmen, who were passed by in the swift merciless improvement or alteration who would fain lie down and quietly die out of the world that needed them not, but felt as if they could never rest in their graves for the clinging cries of the beloved and helpless they would leave behind; who envied the power of the wild bird, that can feed her young with her very heart's blood.

John's whole soul rose up against Sherlock while he reasoned in this way—as if commerce were everything and humanity nothing. He could hardly, thank him for the individual kindness, which brought him that very evening to offer him—for the delicacy which made him understand that he must offer it privately—every convenience for illness that his own wealth or his sister's foresight had caused them to accumulate in their household, and which, as he learnt from Dr. Stapleton, Mrs. Watson might possibly require. His presence, after the way he had spoken—his bringing before him the doom, which she was vainly trying to persuade herself might yet be averted from her mother—all conspired to set John's teeth on edge, as he looked at him, and listened to him. What business had he to be the only person, except Dr. Stapleton and Hudson, admitted to the awful secret, which he held shut up in the most dark and sacred recess of his heart. Yet Sherlock knew all. John saw it in his pitying eyes. She heard it in his grave and tremulous voice. How reconcile those eyes, that voice, with the hard-reasoning, dry, merciless way in which he laid down axioms of trade, and serenely followed them out to their full consequences? The discord jarred upon him inexpressibly, the more because of the gathering woe of which he heard at the Lestrade's, and yet he could not find a balance.

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The next day, John visited the baths. Once in the cooling room, he felt clean, finally, after weeks of grittiness that no hip bath could scrub away, and at leisure to think through his current situation. The solitude of the baths—for they were largely unoccupied—was a luxury he had missed. Rare were the moments in the Crampton house when his time was not required by either his mother, his father, or Dixon.

A small, grubby boy had delivered a note to the house. It was in what John recognized as Sherlock’s large, spiky hand, asking him to return to the mill on the following day. There was no further explanation.

The devil of it was that he wished to go, but felt uneasy in his ability to be master of the situation. He felt the pull of Sherlock’s undoubted brilliance and charisma and was fascinated, yet he knew that to succumb would pull him into a vortex that he would not be able to control. The man stirred him—body and mind, he thought grimly, as he pulled the towel over his lap to hide the insistent evidence of his train of thought.

“Comfortable, Mr. Watson?” came a dry voice behind him. John jumped as if burnt; there was only one person that that voice could belong to. He turned, reluctantly, to see Sherlock Holmes, barely decent, looking at him with an amused expression.

“I see you found this place. It is a wonderful convenience, as well as being very necessary in a city like ours.”

John nodded stiffly, and though he wanted to avert his eyes from the long slim expanse of man before him, he could not. Sherlock was taller than he, and lean, though his muscles could have adorned an anatomy textbook. He gave it up and looked, as calmly as he could, willing a mastery over himself that he only partly wanted to have.

Sherlock, who had come to the baths because he was feeling rather at odds with himself, found being under John Watson’s assessing gaze quite disturbing. It was both quiet and yet unquiet, ranging over his body as though committing it to memory. Sherlock wished he could do the same, but he could only hold still under the scrutiny and wait for the judgement to fall.
“I could have knocked you down this week, you know.” John said, softly, as he tore his gaze from Sherlock’s pale, elegant feet and looked him in the eye.

“I cannot save every man, John.” Sherlock answered.

“But when there are children suffering by your choices?”

“I can be clement to idiots while they are in my factory, as long as they do not interfere excessively with the work. The work must come first, though some perish, or there will be work for none. Without work, they all starve, and I waste away.”

John was trying to formulate an answer to this that did not involve his fists—or his lips—when he perceived that Sherlock had come closer. In fact, he was dangerously close, and John could smell his clean skin and his warm breath, as the other man said, in a way that was almost detached,

“Is this why you do not ask me to call you John, Mr. Watson? Because you do not know exactly what I am, and what you do know puzzles or offends you?”

“I…” John said, but Sherlock had gone.

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At home, Mrs. Watson was endlessly amused and interested by the idea of the Holmes dinner party. She kept wondering about the details, with something of the simplicity of a little child, who wants to have all its anticipated pleasures described beforehand. But the monotonous life led by invalids often makes them like children, inasmuch as they have neither of them any sense of proportion in events, and seem each to believe that the walls and curtains which shut in their world, and shut out everything else, must of necessity be larger than anything hidden beyond.

John had come home so painfully occupied with his conversation with Sherlock that he hardly knew how to rouse himself up to the necessity for keeping up a constant flow of cheerful conversation for her.

“And how is your patient?” she asked, quite excited at the thought of John having a patient at last, be he qualified or no.

“Really unwell, Mother, and her condition is worsened through worry.”

“Dear! Everybody is ill now, I think,” said Mrs. Watson, with a little of the jealousy which one invalid is apt to feel of another. “But it must be very sad to be ill in one of those little back streets. It’s bad enough here. What could you do for her, John? Mr. Holmes has sent me some of his old port wine since you went out. Would a bottle of that do her good, think you?”

“No, Mother! I don't believe they are very poor,—at least, they don't speak as if they were; and, at any rate, Janine's illness is consumption—she won't want wine. Oh, Mother,” exclaimed John, bursting the bounds he had preordained for himself before she came in, and telling his mother of what he had seen and heard at Lestrade's cottage.

It distressed Mrs. Watson excessively. It made her restlessly irritated till she could do something. She directed John to pack up a basket in the very drawing-room, to be sent there and then to the family; and was almost angry with him for saying, that it would not signify if it did not go till morning, as she knew Lestrade had provided for their immediate wants, and John himself had left money with Janine. Mrs. Watson called him unfeeling for saying this; and never gave herself breathing-time till the basket was sent out of the house. Then she said:
“After all, we may have been doing wrong. It was only the last time Mr. Holmes was here that he said, those were no true friends who helped to prolong the struggle by assisting the turn outs. And this Anderson-man was a turn-out, was he not?”

The question was referred to Mr. Watson by his wife, when he came up-stairs, fresh from giving a lesson to Mr. Holmes, which had ended in conversation, as was their wont. John did not care if their gifts had prolonged the strike; he felt that he could not go without relieving immediate human suffering as he saw it.

From this discussion to dressing for the party was a jar on John’s sensibilities, but the invitation had been accepted, and go they must. John shaved, and struggled into his evening costume, then went down to kiss his mother good night.

“Oh, John! how I should like to be going with you.” John kissed his mother for, but he could hardly smile for nerves.

“I would rather stay at home with you,—much rather, Mother.’

‘Nonsense, darling! Be sure you notice the dinner well. I shall like to hear how they manage these things in Milton. Particularly the second course, dear. Look what they have instead of game.’

Mrs. Watson would have been more than interested,—she would have been astonished, if she had seen the sumptuousness of the dinner-table and its appointments. John, with his cultivated taste, felt the number of delicacies to be oppressive one half of the quantity would have been enough, and the effect lighter and more elegant.

John and his father were the first to arrive. Mr. Watson was anxiously punctual to the time specified. There was no one up-stairs in the drawing-room but Myfanwy and Anthea. Every cover was taken off, and the apartment blazed forth in yellow silk damask and a brilliantly-flowered carpet. Every corner seemed filled up with ornament, until it became a weariness to the eye, and presented a strange contrast to the bald ugliness of the look-out into the great mill-yard, where wide folding gates were thrown open for the admission of carriages. The mill loomed high on the left-hand side of the windows, casting a shadow down from its many stories, which darkened the summer evening before its time.

“My brother was engaged up to the last moment on business. He will be here directly, Mr. Watson. May I beg you to take a seat?’

“Certainly.” And, though Mr. Watson sat by Myfanwy, he had no sooner finished the polite niceties than he was deep into discussion with Anthea on a point of Scripture.

This left John next to Myfanwy, and though John was careful to be both as attentive and as bland as possible, he saw that she was watching him more closely than ever, and yet keeping an ear attuned for her brother’s arrival.

When Sherlock entered the room, both of them, then perceived the weight of care and anxiety which he could not shake off, although his guests received from him a greeting that appeared both cheerful and cordial. He shook hands with John, and though his long fingers trailed along the shorter man’s wrist, they both seemed quite unconscious of it. Sherlock then inquired after Mrs. Watson, and heard Mr. Watson’s sanguine, hopeful account; and glancing at John, to understand how far he agreed with his father, he saw that a brief, dissenting shadow crossed his face. Though he was saddened to see it, Sherlock was struck anew at the beauty and mobility of John’s face, and the solid grace of his figure. He did not, however, allow himself or his glance to linger, but, as John turned to greet Anthea, a brief flash of John’s towelled form rose before his eyes, and, with an effort, Sherlock threw himself into a conversation with the Misses Wilkes.
More people came—more and more. Anthea left John's side, and helped Myfanwy to receive her guests. Sherlock felt that in this influx no one was speaking to John, and was restless under this apparent neglect. But he never went near him himself; he did not look at him. Only, he knew what John was doing—or not doing—better than he knew the movements of any one else in the room. John was so unconscious of himself, and so much amused by watching other people, that he never thought whether he was left unnoticed or not.

He took some unnamed damsel in very bright cerise into dinner, but then caught the clue to the general conversation, grew interested and listened attentively. Mr. Horsfall, the stranger, whose visit to the town was the original germ of the party, was asking questions relative to the trade and manufactures of the place; and the rest of the gentlemen—all Milton men,—were giving him answers and explanations. Some dispute arose, which was warmly contested; it was referred to Sherlock, who had hardly spoken before; but who now gave an opinion, the grounds of which were so clearly stated that even the opponents yielded.

John's attention was thus called to his host; his whole manner as master of the house, and entertainer of his friends, was so straightforward, yet simple and modest, as to be thoroughly dignified. John thought he had never seen him to so much advantage. When he had come to their house, there had been always something, either of over-eagerness or of that kind of vexed annoyance which seemed ready to pre-suppose that he was unjustly judged, and yet felt too proud to try and make himself better understood. But now, among his fellows, there was no uncertainty as to his position. He was regarded by them as a man of great force of character; of power in many ways. There was no need to struggle for their respect. He had it, and he knew it; and the security of this gave a fine grand quietness to his voice and ways, which John had missed before.

John also noticed that Sherlock was not in the habit of talking to ladies; and what he did say was a little formal. John was surprised to think how much this increased his enjoyment of the dinner; he had wondered how the man interacted with women he considered of his own social class, and now that the answer appeared to be “as little as possible”, he felt an inexpressible relief.

The men talked in desperate earnest,—not in the used-up style that wearied him so in the old London parties. He wondered that with all this dwelling on the manufactures and trade of the place, no allusion was made to the strike then pending. He did not yet know how coolly such things were taken by the masters, as having only one possible end. To be sure, the men were cutting their own throats, as they had done many a time before; but if they would be fools, and put themselves into the hands of a rascally set of paid delegates, they must take the consequence. One or two thought Holmes looked out of spirits; and, of course, he must lose by this turn-out. But it was an accident that might happen to themselves any day; and Holmes was as good to manage a strike as any one; for he was as iron a chap as any in Milton. The hands had mistaken their man in trying that dodge on him. And they chuckled inwardly at the idea of the workmen's discomfiture and defeat, in their attempt to alter one iota of what Holmes had decreed.

When dinner ended, John was rather startled when Sherlock spoke to her, close at her elbow:

'I could see you were on our side in our discussion at dinner,—were you not, John Watson?'

'Certainly. But then I know so little about it. I was surprised, however, to find from what Mr. Horsfall said, that there were others who thought in so diametrically opposite a manner, as the Mr. Morison he spoke about. He cannot be a gentleman—is he?'

'I am not quite the person to decide on another's gentlemanliness, Mr. Watson. I mean, I don't quite understand your application of the word. But I should say that this Morison is no true man. I don't know who he is; I merely judge him from Mr. Horsfall's account.'
'I suspect my "gentleman" includes your "true man."

'And a great deal more, you would imply. I differ from you. A man is to me a higher and a completer being than a gentleman.'

'What do you mean?' asked John. 'We must understand the words differently.'

'I take it that "gentleman" is a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as "a man," we consider him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself,—to life,—to time,—to eternity. A cast-away lonely as Robinson Crusoe—a prisoner immured in a dungeon for life—nay, even a saint in Patmos, has his endurance, his strength, his faith, best described by being spoken of as "a man." I am rather weary of this word "gentlemanly," which seems to me to be often inappropriately used, and often, too, with such exaggerated distortion of meaning, while the full simplicity of the noun "man," and the adjective "manly" are unacknowledged—that I am induced to class it with the cant of the day.'

John thought a moment,—but before he could speak his slow conviction, he was called away by some of the eager manufacturers, whose speeches John could not hear, though he could guess at their import by the short clear answers Sherlock gave, which came steady and firm as the boom of a distant minute gun. They were evidently talking of the turn-out, and suggesting what course had best be pursued. He heard Sherlock say:

'That has been done.' Then came a hurried murmur, in which two or three joined.

'All those arrangements have been made.'

Some doubts were implied, some difficulties named by Mr. Milverton, who took hold of Sherlock's arm, the better to impress his words. Sherlock moved slightly away, lifted his eyebrows a very little, and then replied:

'I take the risk. You need not join in it unless you choose.' Still some more fears were urged.

'I'm not afraid of anything so dastardly as incendiarism. We are open enemies; and I can protect myself from any violence that I apprehend. And I will assuredly protect all others who come to me for work. They know my determination by this time, as well and as fully as you do.”

At this interesting moment, Mr. Watson came up to tell John that they should be thinking of going. John nodded, and was about to follow his father into the hall for their coats, when Sherlock once again appeared at his elbow. Without a word, he drew John into a small, half-lit anteroom.

John stood, surprised, and looked at him. The light glanced off Sherlock's angular face and made him both beautiful and terrible.

Sherlock saw his glance, and, very much despite himself, bent forward and brushed John's lips with his own.

John froze. He could not think of one thing to say that would not break the spell of this moment.

Sherlock, thinking John repulsed, straightened up and said, rather stiffly.

“Mr. Watson, you are a brave man, and brave men are rarer than you may think. I do need your help. Please consider my proposal.”

“John, please,” John whispered, and fled after his father, all his much-vaunted bravery in tatters.
Note: This is not beta'ed because I have problems with doing things on time. I need to fix the double/single quote issue, and I would be happy if you all pointed out any errors you might see.

About the Turkish baths; the baths I refer to here were established in 1859, and the story is set in the early eighteen-fifties, so I am taking a little liberty with the time. Also, historical accounts of homosexual practices occurring in such baths tend to talk about slightly later times, as well as specific London locations (see http://www.victorianturkishbath.org/6directory/AtoZEstab/London/HarrowSF.htm for example), but I am going to pretend there are private spaces in my nonexistent bath in which people can Do Things.
A Blow and Its Consequences

Chapter Summary

"When one tries to rise above Nature one is liable to fall below it."
Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Creeping Man”

Sherlock’s actions during the mill strike provoke a riot; an injury to John provokes a passionate (and very improper) encounter in the mill office.

“There you are, John,” Mr. Watson said, as John, still trembling, came out of the Holmes’ house into the cool night air. John rubbed his lips ruefully, as if that would remove any traces of Sherlock’s kiss. He was struck with the sudden fanciful thought that his father’s disapproval at such contact would not be so very different than of the kiss with Miss Morstan-Lennox, but then shoved the unwelcome idea from his mind.

“I rather think Holmes is not quite easy in his mind about this strike. He seemed very anxious tonight,” his father said.

“I should wonder if he were not,” John said, as calmly as he could, “But he spoke with his usual coolness to the others, when they suggested different things, just before we came away.”

“So he did after dinner as well. It would take a good deal to stir him from his cool manner of speaking; but his face strikes me as anxious.”

“I should be, if I were he. He must know of the growing anger and hardly smothered hatred of his workpeople, who all look upon him as what the Bible calls a "hard man,"—not so much unjust as unfeeling; clear in judgment, standing upon his "rights" as no human being ought to stand, considering what we and all our petty rights are in the sight of the Almighty. I am glad you think he looks anxious. When I remember Anderson's half mad words and ways, I cannot bear to think how coolly Mr. Holmes spoke.”

“In the first place, I am not so convinced as you are about that man Anderson's utter distress; for the moment, he was badly off, I don't doubt. But there is always a mysterious supply of money from these Unions; and, from what you said, it was evident the man was of a passionate, demonstrative nature, and gave strong expression to all he felt.”

“Father, his children are starving and his wife is ill with it. I am sure you would feel the same.”

“Well! I only want you to do justice to Mr. Holmes, who is, I suspect, of an exactly opposite nature,—a man who is far too proud to show his feelings. Just the character I should have thought beforehand, you would have admired, John.”

“So I do,” and here John paused, gathering his composure to speak of Sherlock in as detached a way as possible, “He is a man of great strength of character,—of unusual intellect, considering the few advantages he has had.”

“Not so few. He has led a practical life from a very early age; has been called upon to exercise
judgment and self-control. All that develops one part of the intellect. To be sure, he needs some of
the knowledge of the past, which gives the truest basis for conjecture as to the future; but he
knows this need,—he perceives it, and that is something. You are quite prejudiced against Mr.
Holmes, John.”

’He is the first specimen of a manufacturer—of a person engaged in trade—that I had ever the
opportunity of studying, Father. He is my first olive: let me make a face while I swallow it.” At
this, John suddenly flushed hot, but thankfully Mr. Watson chuckled; they continued home in
companionable, for John, welcome silence.

But when they saw Hudson's face, as she opened the door, they were calm no more.

“Oh! Thank God you are come! Dr. Stapleton is here. The servant next door went for him, for the
charwoman is gone home. She's better now; but, oh, sir! I thought she'd have died an hour ago.”

Mr. Watson caught John's arm to steady himself from falling. He looked at his son’s face, and saw
an expression upon it of surprise and extremest sorrow, but not the agony of terror that contracted
his own unprepared heart. John knew more than he did.

“Oh! I should not have left her,” exclaimed John, as he supported his trembling father's hasty steps
up-stairs. Dr. Stapleton met them on the landing.

“She is better now,” he whispered. 'The opiate has taken effect. The spasms were very bad: no
wonder they frightened your maid; but she'll rally this time”

“This time! Let me go to her!” Mr. Watson exclaimed.

Dr. Stapleton took his arm, and led him into the bedroom. John followed close. There lay his
mother, with an unmistakable look on her face. She might be better now; she was sleeping, but
Death had signed her for his own, and it was clear that ere long he would return to take
possession.

Mr. Watson looked at her for some time without a word. Then he began to shake all
over. He staggered into the drawing-room, and felt about for a chair and sat, heavily.

“You knew, John.”

“I did, Father.”

“He is a colleague, Mr. Watson, and a good one, if I'm not mistaken. He has done quite rightly in
all her care.” Here the doctor handed the stricken man the brandy that John had poured. “Your
wife will be a different creature to-morrow, I trust. She has had spasms, as I anticipated; she will
have a good long sleep; and to-morrow, that look which has alarmed you so much will have
passed away.”

“But not the disease?”

“Not the disease. We cannot touch the disease, with all our poor vaunted skill. We can only delay
its progress—alleviate the pain it causes.”

Then, Dr. Stapleton advised Mr. Watson to go to bed, and leave only one to watch the slumber,
which he hoped would be undisturbed, and promised to come again early in the morning.

Mr. Watson was resolved to sit up through the night, and all that John could do was to prevail
upon him to rest on the drawing-room sofa. Hudson stoutly and bluntly refused to go to bed, and
John, too, could not leave his mother.

He sat behind the curtain thinking. Far away in time, far away in space, seemed all the interests of
past days. Helstone, itself, was in the dim past. The dull gray days of the preceding winter and spring, so monotonous, seemed more associated with what he cared for now above all price, his contact with Sherlock Holmes bright crimson spots in the grayness. And when the morning dawned, cool and gray, like many a happier morning before—when John looked one by one at the sleepers, it seemed as if the terrible night were unreal as a dream; it, too, was a shadow. It, too, was past.

Mrs. Watson herself was not aware when she awoke, how ill she had been the night before. She was rather surprised at Dr. Stapleton's early visit, and perplexed by the anxious faces of husband and child. She consented to remain in bed that day, saying she certainly was tired; but, the next, she insisted on getting up; and Dr. Stapleton gave his consent to her returning into the drawing-room. She was restless and uncomfortable in every position, and before night she became very feverish. Mr. Watson paced.

“It is, I think, the natural reaction after the powerful opiates Dr. Stapleton has used, is it not, Doctor?” John asked.

“It is. It will pass. But, I think, if we could get a water-bed it might be a good thing. Miss Holmes has one, I know. I'll try and call there this afternoon. Stay,” said the doctor, his eye catching on John's face, blanched with watching in a sick room, “I'm not sure whether I can go; I've a long round to take. It would do you no harm to have a brisk walk to Marlborough Street, and ask Miss Holmes if she can spare it.”

“Certainly,” said John, a thrill running through him despite himself. To go back into the den of the lion…no, Sherlock was no lion. A panther, perhaps, or a wild wolf, he thought, Sherlock’s glass-green eyes springing to his mind. “I could go while Mother is asleep this afternoon.”

Dr. Stapleton's experience told them rightly. Mrs. Watson seemed to shake off the consequences of her attack, and looked brighter and better, and John felt only eagerness to be away.

It was about two miles from their house in Crampton Crescent to Marlborough Street. John went along, without noticing anything very different from usual in the first mile and a half of his journey; he was absorbed in his own thoughts, and had learnt by this time to thread his way through the irregular stream of human beings that flowed through Milton streets. But, by and by, he was struck with an unusual heaving among the mass of people in the crowded road on which he was entering. They did not appear to be moving on, so much as talking, and listening, and buzzing with excitement, without much stirring from the spot where they might happen to be. John felt the barely repressed danger of the moment, but, wrapt up in the purpose of his errand, he had got into Marlborough Street before the full conviction forced itself upon him, that there was a restless, oppressive sense of irritation abroad among the people, a thunderous atmosphere.

Marlborough Street itself was the focus of all those human eyes, that betrayed intense interest of various kinds; some fierce with anger, some lowering with relentless threats, some dilated with fear, or imploring entreaty; and, as John reached the small side-entrance by the folding doors, in the great dead wall of Marlborough mill-yard and waited the porter's answer to the bell, he looked round and heard the first long far-off roll of the tempest;—saw the first slow-surging wave of the dark crowd come.

The porter opened the door cautiously, not nearly wide enough to admit him.

“Young Mr. Watson?” said he, drawing a long breath, and widening the entrance for John to slip in, then bolting the door.

“Th' folk are all coming up here I reckon?” asked the porter.
“I don’t know. Something unusual seemed going on; but this street is quite empty, I think.”

John went across the yard and up the steps to the house door. There was no near sound,—no steam-engine at work with beat and pant,—no click of machinery, or mingling and clashing of many sharp voices; but far away, the ominous gathering roar, deep-clamouring.

John was shown into the drawing-room. The windows were half open because of the heat, and the Venetian blinds covered the glass. He sat and waited; no one came. Every now and then, the wind seemed to bear the distant multitudinous sound nearer; and yet there was no wind! It died away into profound stillness between whiles.

Anthea came in at last.

“Miss Holmes will be in directly, Mr. Holmes. She desired me to apologise to you as it is. Perhaps you know that Sherlock has imported hands from Ireland, and it has irritated the Milton people excessively—now the poor Irish starvelings are so terrified that we daren’t let them out. Miss Holmes is seeing about their food, and Sherlock is speaking to them, for some of the women are crying to go back.”

At this moment Myfanwy came in, a look of black sternness on her face, which made John feel that he had arrived at a bad time to trouble her with his request, and, perhaps, that she knew of the fleeting kiss of two days previous. Nonetheless, he spoke quietly of the water-bed, and Dr. Stapleton’s prescription.

Myfanwy did not answer, and John was certain, then, that he had offended her until she started up and exclaimed—

“They’re at the gates! Call Sherlock, Anthea,—call him in from the mill! They’re at the gates! They’ll batter them in! Call Sherlock immediately!”

And simultaneously, the gathering tramp—to which she had been listening, instead of heeding John’s words—was heard just right outside the wall, and an increasing din of angry voices raged behind the wooden barrier, which shook as if the unseen maddened crowd made battering-rams of their bodies. Myfanwy, Anthea, John, and the servants gathered round the windows, fascinated to look on the scene which terrified them.

As they watched the empty yard and the bending gates, Sherlock came out of the mill, and looked up at them, his face grim but not agitated. Then he called to one of the women to come down and undo his own door. As Myfanwy went herself, it became clear that the sound of Sherlock’s well-known and commanding voice, seemed to have been like the taste of blood to the infuriated multitude outside. Hitherto they had been voiceless, wordless, needing all their breath for their hard-labouring efforts to break down the gates. But now, hearing him speak inside, they set up such a fierce unearthly groan, that even Myfanwy was paler as she preceded him into the room. Sherlock himself came in a little flushed, but his eyes gleaming, as in answer to the trumpet-call of danger, and with a proud look of defiance on his face, that made his beauty even more unearthly than usual.

John felt actual pain when he tore his eyes from Sherlock, but even in her fear and anger Myfanwy was formidably observant, and so John turned his face outdoors again.

Sherlock strode towards John, hand extended.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and here he hesitated. It was only as he withdrew his hand from John’s brief handshake that he continued, “John, that you have visited us at this unfortunate moment, when, I fear, you may be involved in whatever risk we have to bear.”
“It is nothing,” John replied. He cleared his throat, not quite composed at Sherlock’s use of his Christian name. “I am sure we are safe enough.”

Neither man had looked at Myfanwy, nor had she looked away from the window, but as if he sensed the slight stiffening of her back, Sherlock said, “Myfanwy! Anthea! hadn't you better go into the back rooms? I'm not sure whether they may not have made their way from Pinner's Lane into the stable-yard; but if not, you will be safer there than here. Go Jane!” continued he, addressing the upper-servant. And she went, followed by the others.

“Where you are, there we stay,” Myfanwy said, and Anthea nodded her agreement. And indeed, retreat into the back rooms was of no avail; the crowd had surrounded the outbuildings at the rear, and were sending forth their awful threatening roar behind. The servants retreated into the garrets, with many a cry and shriek. Sherlock smiled scornfully as he heard them. He glanced at John, who had moved to stand all by himself at the window nearest the factory. His eyes glittered, and his hand flexed, and, as he felt Sherlock’s look, he turned to him and asked:

“Where are your poor imported work-people? In the factory there?”

“Yes! I left them cowered up in a small room, at the head of a back flight of stairs; bidding them run all risks, and escape down there, if they heard any attack made on the mill-doors. But it is not them—it is me the mob wants.”

“When can the soldiers be here?” asked Myfanwy, in a low but not unsteady voice.

Sherlock took out his watch and made some little calculation:

“Supposing Lyons got straight off when I told him, and hadn't to dodge about amongst them—it must be twenty minutes yet.”

“Twenty minutes.” Myfanwy said, and John thought he heard a slight crack in the iron composure.

“Shut down the windows instantly, Myfanwy, John,” said Sherlock “the gates won't bear such another shock. Listen!”

They fell silent, and then they heard the creak of wood slowly yielding; the wrench of iron; the mighty fall of the ponderous gates. Anthea stood up tottering, saying “I must...”, made a step or two, and fell forwards in a fainting fit. Myfanwy rushed to her side, and, brushing back her hair with a tenderness John would not have supposed her capable of, lifted Anthea up with a strength that was as much that of the will as of the body, and carried her away.

“Thank God!” said Sherlock, as he watched them go. “So what shall we do now, John? This is very,” and here he paused. John could feel the tension thrumming through and between their bodies, “dangerous. We may never speak again, if that mob has its way.”

“Why?” John asked, but Sherlock could not hear it due to the tramp of innumerable steps right under the very wall of the house, and the fierce growl of low deep angry voices that had a ferocious murmur of satisfaction in them, more dreadful than their baffled cries not many minutes before.

They both looked out at the noise.

“Oh, God!’ cried John, suddenly; ‘there is Anderson. I know his face, though he is livid with rage,—he is fighting to get to the front—look! look’

“Who is Anderson?” asked Sherlock, coolly, and coming close to the window to discover the man
in whom John took such an interest. As soon as they saw Sherlock, they set up a yell,—to call it not human is nothing,—it was as the demoniac desire of some terrible wild beast for the food that is withheld from his ravening. Even he drew back for a moment, dismayed at the intensity of hatred he had provoked.

“Let them yell!” said he. 'In five minutes more—. I only hope my poor Irishmen are not terrified out of their wits by such a fiendlike noise”.

“Can you do nothing, Sherlock? It is awful to see them”

“The soldiers will be here directly, and that will bring them to reason”’

“To reason!” said John, quickly. “What kind of reason”’

“The only reason that does with men that make themselves into wild beasts. By heaven! they've turned to the mill-door!”

“Sherlock,” said John, still and furious, “go down this instant, if you are not a coward. Go down and face them like a man. Save these poor strangers, whom you have decoyed here. Speak to your workmen as if they were human beings. Speak to them kindly. Don't let the soldiers come in and cut down poor creatures who are driven mad. I see one there who is. If you have any courage or noble quality in you, go out and speak to them, man to man.”

Sherlock turned and looked at him while he spoke, and set his teeth as he heard John's words. Something in him responded to the ring of command in John Watson’s voice; he pushed away the echo of Myfanwy and Anthea's laughter as he mustered his composure.

“I will go. Perhaps I may ask you to accompany me downstairs, and bar the door behind me; my sister and ward will need that protection.”

John nodded, and followed him quickly down the stairs. When he had fastened the door behind Sherlock, he climbed the stairs again and took his place by the window.

Sherlock stepped out side to a rolling angry murmur. Many in the crowd were mere boys; cruel and thoughtless,—cruel because they were thoughtless; some were men, gaunt as wolves, and mad for prey. John knew how it was; they were like Anderson, with starving children at home—relying on ultimate success in their efforts to get higher wages, and enraged beyond measure at discovering that Irishmen were to be brought in to rob their little ones of bread. John knew it all; he read it in Anderson's face, forlornly desperate and livid with rage. If Sherlock would but say something to them—let them hear his voice only—it seemed as if it would be better than this wild beating and raging against the stony silence that vouchsafed them no word, even of anger or reproach.

But no, there was no word. He stood with his arms folded; still as a statue; his face pale with repressed excitement. They were trying to intimidate him—to make him flinch; each was urging the other on to some immediate act of personal violence. John felt intuitively, that in an instant all would be uproar; the first touch would cause an explosion, in which, among such hundreds of infuriated men and reckless boys, even Sherlock’s very life would be unsafe,—that in another instant the stormy passions would have passed their bounds, and swept away all barriers of reason, or apprehension of consequence. Even while he looked, he saw lads in the back-ground stooping to take off their heavy wooden clogs—the readiest missile they could find; he saw it was the spark to the gunpowder, and, with a sudden burst of anger, he rushed out of the room, down stairs, lifted the great iron bar of the door and threw the door open wide.

Then he was there, in face of that angry sea of men, his eyes smiting them with flaming arrows of
reproach. The clogs were arrested in the hands that held them—the countenances, so fell not a moment before, now looked irresolute, and as if asking what this meant. For he stood between them and their enemy, and had only words to help them all.

“Do not use violence. He is one man, and you are many!” he began, but then his words died away, for his voice was not strong enough.

Sherlock stood a little on one side now, as if jealous of anything that should come between himself and danger.

“Go!” John said, once more (and now his voice carried over the crowd). “The soldiers are sent for—are coming. Go peaceably. Go away. You shall have relief from your complaints, whatever they are.”

“Shall them Irish blackguards be packed back again?” asked one from out the crowd, with fierce threatening in his voice.

“Never, for your bidding!” exclaimed Sherlock. And instantly the storm broke. The hootings rose and filled the air,—but John did not hear them. His eye was on the group of lads who had armed themselves with their clogs some time before. He saw their gesture—he knew its meaning,—he read their aim. Another moment, and Sherlock might be smitten down,—he whom John had urged and goaded to come to this perilous place.

At that, John only thought how he could save him, and threw his arms around Sherlock, his smaller body a shield from the fierce people beyond. Sherlock tried to shake him off, but could not.

“John, go away,” he said, his deep voice rumbling against John’s cheek. “This is no place for you’”

“It is. You did not see what I saw,” John said, low and urgent against Sherlock’s neck, “And I am a stranger, and not part of the quarrel. They may not turn against you if I am here.”

He was wrong. The workers’ reckless passion had carried them too far to stop—at least had carried some of them too far; for it is always the savage lads, with their love of cruel excitement, who head the riot—reckless to what bloodshed it may lead. A clog whizzed through the air, and John turned and spoke again, striving to make his words distinct:

“For God’s sake! do not damage your cause by this violence. You do not know what you are doing.”

A sharp pebble flew by him, grazing his forehead and cheek. John jumped back, and Sherlock shouted, hoarsely, unfolding his arms and holding John encircled in one for an instant:

“You do well!” said he. “You come to oust the innocent stranger. You fall—you hundreds—on one man; and when another, better man comes before you, to ask you for your own sakes to be reasonable creatures, your cowardly wrath falls upon him! You do well!” They were silent while he spoke. They were watching, open-eyed and open-mouthed, the thread of dark-red blood which wakened them up from their trance of passion. Those nearest the gate stole out ashamed; there was a movement through all the crowd—a retreating movement. Only one voice cried out:

“Th’ stone were meant for thee; but thou wert sheltered behind yon Southron catamite!”

Sherlock quivered with rage. The blood-flowing had made John a little dizzy, but not so dizzy as to see that Sherlock was also injured, a bruise rising on his pale temple like an angry cloud.
“Stay here,” Sherlock muttered, as John reached out to him. He went slowly down the steps right into the middle of the crowd. “Now kill me, if it is your brutal will. There is nobody to shield me here. You may beat me to death—you will never move me from what I have determined upon—not you!” He stood amongst them, with his arms folded, in precisely the same attitude as he had been in on the steps.

But the retrograde movement towards the gate had begun—as unreasoningly, perhaps as blindly, as the simultaneous anger. Or, perhaps, the idea of the approach of the soldiers, and the sight of John’s strange, pale face, dripping with the blood from his wound. Even the most desperate—Anderson himself—drew back, faltered away, scowled, and finally went off, muttering curses on the master, who stood in his unchanging attitude, looking after their retreat with defiant eyes. The moment that retreat had changed into a flight (as it was sure from its very character to do), he darted up the steps to John, whose knees buckled suddenly.

“It is nothing,” he said, willing his voice steady, “The skin is grazed, and I was stunned at the moment. You too, are hurt; let me see.”

But Sherlock, not unkindly, pushed his hand away and took John by the arm. He led him not back into the drawing room, but into the mill office, steering John into a hard chair and reaching for a cut-glass bottle.

“No, best not,” John said, standing, “Some water would be more restorative and a mirror and perhaps some liniment for your bruise more useful.”

Sherlock poured nonetheless and held the glass out, wordlessly.

“Very well,” John said, taking it.

Their fingers brushed, as they had when Sherlock had first said John’s name in the drawing room. Had it only been moments ago? It had, though John could not quite believe it.

He swallowed a mouthful of spirits. Their near-miss this morning, and the conscience brought to him by his mother’s illness, that life did not last so very long, made him rash. He looked frankly at Sherlock, taking in that already-familiar face piece by piece, memorizing the sweep of cheekbone, the perfection of lip, the sweet arch of dark brow against pale skin. Sherlock’s curls were tousled over the livid bruise, and John stepped forward to touch.

Sherlock stood without moving as John examined him. Agitated as he was, he breathed in John’s closeness. He could smell the heat of John’s body and the sunshiny scent of his light hair, and though he laughed at his own besottedness, he bent slightly forward to smell it again.

John paused in his examination at the movement. Then, very deliberately, he turned his head, chin tilted, so that his lips were against Sherlock’s.

Sherlock could not move at all, now, so surprised was he by the caress. He closed his eyes, rather overwhelmed by both John’s audacity and nearness, and savoured the feel of the small, mobile mouth against his.

They stood thus for a moment; Sherlock had not been aware he was holding his breath until John’s hands came up and tangled themselves through his hair. At the slight tugging, Sherlock exhaled and relaxed into John’s embrace more freely.

As Sherlock breathed out, John breathed in, the air between them laden with brandy and fear and heat; the light embrace became a kiss. Sherlock brought his hands up to John’s shoulders, and they melted together. In the mote-filled air of the office all was sweetness for a brief second.
Then, as their bodies pressed closer, the intertwining of their mouths became more desperate, and their desire was suddenly urgent upon them. John grasped Sherlock’s waist and pulled him close, the better to feel the outline of his cock against John’s hip. Sherlock, startled by the flood of passion that engulfed him, stilled, then succumbed, drinking in the pleasure of the increased friction as John’s body rocked against his. He felt John’s tool hard against his own thigh; from far off, his rational mind sorted information about its unusual size and, if it measured correctly, girth.

When John stepped back, though, and replaced his thigh with his hand, Sherlock’s rational mind disappeared and a ravening animal took its place. He growled, grasping John through his trousers as well and pinned John against the wall. John bit Sherlock’s lower lip in return, and they struggled, against and towards each other, until Sherlock stepped back and reached for John’s flies. He took in John’s straight back, flushed face, and heaving breath, but could not allow more than a few seconds without touching. His long, nimble fingers worked at the buttons, brushing the rigidity beneath the smallclothes at every turn. When Sherlock actually had John’s smooth length in his hand he marveled at it, and at the sound of John’s harsh breathing as he touched.

John, when Sherlock’s large hand closed around him, thought his knees would buckle, but he remained standing as Sherlock stroked him once, twice, tentatively, and then more demandingly, using his body to pin John in place and feel. John felt, certainly, but he knew, that though this was something that he earnestly desired, that they could not continue.

He knew it, that is, but his body did not, and, as if of its own volition, his hand strayed out and cupped Sherlock’s cock. Sherlock gripped John’s spasmodically, and they embraced once more. Then, his hand on Sherlock’s flies, John suddenly looked up.

“Stop,” he said, low and firm, and though Sherlock thought he might be driven to ecstasy by that voice alone, he pulled his hand away.

“I must go,” John whispered against Sherlock’s neck, hating to stop. “This is no right way to do this.”

“I know,” Sherlock whispered back, and, with a strange tenderness glowing in his face, kissed John softly, a faint cousin to their first embrace in the anteroom. He gave John one last caress, and let go.

The smile on John’s face as he made himself decent squeezed Sherlock’s heart.

Sherlock watched John leave, dashing through the now-quiet streets like quicksilver, then, composing himself, walked slowly upstairs to the drawing room. Myfanwy was there with Anthea; they had ordered tea but had not yet poured, and Myfanwy’s back was rigid now.

“So you are safe, for now,” she said, pale and stern.

“Thanks to John Watson.”

“He also endangered you, with his ideas of honour and bravery. Bravery,” she said, with a curl to her lip, “is much the kindest word for stupidity.”

“Do not you dare, Myfanwy Holmes, speak of John Watson in that way. I will not warn you again.” Sherlock was suddenly incandescent, the flush of passion back on his cheek. Every pulse beat in him as he remembered how John had come down and placed himself in danger.

“And do you not,” she replied, “take that high tone with me, Sherlock. Do you not see what this will do?”
“John is only slightly hurt, Myfanway, so cease your fussing. And I am safe, and, I daresay, the strike is broken.” He stopped, thinking with secret glee of his new intimacy with John, “A very satisfactory day, though it must have worn on your nerves.”

“Damn my nerves!” Myfanwy raised her voice. “Sherlock, you lovestruck baboon, think! What happened today, during the riot? Tell me, as clearly as you can.”

Sherlock shook his head, but complied.

“I told him to bar the door, and then he challenged me to go down, to calm them. I did; he barred the door behind me when I went out. I was in front of the crowd when he came back through the door; he spoke to them, but it did not calm them. They only stopped when they hurt him with a rock, though they did not disperse. It was only when I went down into the crowd to call their bluff that they departed. Then I helped John back to the office and saw to his wound before coming here.”

Myfanwy snorted.

“As ever, Sherlock, you do not observe the most important point. Did you hear nothing that anyone said during this time?”

“I heard John’s speech, and yelling from the crowd. I do not concern myself with their stupidities.”

“One person called John ‘yon Southron catamite,’ Sherlock. What do you think of that?”

“Idiocy, no more.”

“Can you afford to dismiss it, then, Sherlock, with Milverton seeking your downfall at every turn?”

Sherlock wheeled away from her and paced the long of the room.

“He has eyes everywhere and my reach is limited. You are foolish in love, Sherlock,”--here she held up her hand to forestall his protests, “Yes, love. And neither your brains or John Watson’s bravery can fight insidious rumours, especially when they are true.”

“I will go round to Crampton this evening after I’ve arranged with the police and seen Hamper and Clarkson.” Their eyes met; they looked at each other intently for a minute. Then she asked:

“Why are you going round by Crampton?”

“To ask after John, of course.”

“Lyons must take the water-bed he came to ask for. Do you not think it’s better that someone else should inquire how he is?”

“I must go myself. I will explain, and secure his promise of silence.” And a kiss, Sherlock thought.

Myfanwy primmed up her mouth at this as though she had heard his thoughts, but spoke no further. The tea would have been very silent, but for Anthea’s occasional musings about descriptions of mob behaviour in papers from various witch trials.

“There, that’s enough, Anthea,” Sherlock said, rising from the table. "The reality was enough for me.” He was going to leave the room, when Myfanwy stopped him with her hand upon his arm.
“Stay tonight, Sherlock. It will be late for Mrs. Watson. But that is not it. To-morrow, you will—— Come back to-night, Sherlock!” Sherlock looked at her—Myfanwy had seldom pleaded with her brother at all—she was too proud and capable for that: but she had never pleaded in vain.

“I will return straight here after I have done my business, then, since you insist.”

Myfanwy was by no means a talkative companion to Anthea, nor yet a good listener while Sherlock was absent. But on his return, her eyes and ears were keen to see and to listen to all the details which he could give, as to the steps he had taken to secure himself, and those whom he chose to employ, from any repetition of the day’s outrages. He clearly saw his object. Punishment and suffering, were the natural consequences to those who had taken part in the riot. All that was necessary, in order that property should be protected, and that the will of the proprietor might cut to his end, clean and sharp as a sword.

“Myfanwy! What can I say, then, to John Watson, to-morrow? The question came upon her suddenly, during a pause in which she, at least, had forgotten John. “I never was fainthearted before; but I cannot believe such a creature cares for me.” He looked vaguely taken aback at this admission.

“Goodness, Sherlock!” Anthea looked at him over her glasses, shocked.

“Don't be foolish, Sherlock,” said Myfanwy tartly. “Such a creature! Why, he might be the heir to a dukedom, to hear you speak.”

“But I cannot ask for his hand in marriage, and yet…” Sherlock trailed off.

“I cannot tell you, Sherlock. Only know that our whole house will come crashing down if you are wrong. As far as love may go he may be worthy of you. But make sure he is so in silence and discretion as well.” said Myfanwy, as she went slowly and majestically out of the room. But when she got into her own, she sat down to cry unwonted tears, and even Anthea, who came up shortly after, could not console her entirely.

About this same time, in the street behind the Holmes’ house, Jane, the upper servant was hanging in a doorway, speaking to a small, slender man. “He were just before the front door—with master!’ said Jane, significantly.

“With your master?” The man, in shabby workman’s dress, was holding Jane’s hand and hanging on her every word. “How did he get there?’

'Nay, Jim, that's not for me to say,' answered Jane, with a slight toss of her head.

“Come, now, please, Jane? I was fustian-cuttin’ all today, and yo’ saw it and I did not.” He made as if to kiss her, but she slapped him—playfully, it must be said—and then relented.

“Well, Jim, since you will have it—Sarah, yo’ see, was in the best place for seeing, being at the right-hand window; and she says, and said at the very time too, that she saw young Mr. Watson with his arms about master's neck, hugging him before all the people.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Jim. “I know your master has an eye for the lads—Lyons, for one—but the new young Southron boy? That’s dangerous, that is, dabbling with the gentry. And I don't believe he has enough spirit in him as to put his arms round Holmes’ neck.”

“That’s what Sarah said, and though she’s mortal lazy she never lies,” Jane insisted, pouting somewhat.

“Show me then,” Jim said with a smile, “What was he doing?” He reached for Jane’s lovely arm
and pulled her in, and though she showed him the position Sherlock and John had been in, he got no further intelligence from her that night.

John dashed through the streets, his heart light. Back in Crampton, though, he came back to reality with a crash, knowing that his mother would see the cut and that it would distress her. He entered the room where his mother was and sat, willing his heart to beat more slowly.

“Miss Holmes will send the water-bed, Mother,” he said.

“Dear, how tired you look! Is it very hot, John?”

“Very hot, and the streets are rather rough with the strike.”

John's colour came back vivid and bright as ever; but it faded away instantly. His mother exclaimed,

“Your face! John!”

“It is nothing. I was jostled against something in the street, and Sherlock Holmes gave me something to clean it at the mill.”

“But your nerves- your chest? Should you not have some gruel? The doctor?”

“Mother, please. It is the smallest of scratches, and, as for my nerves and chest, I have not coughed once since we came here, though it’s been very hot and dusty. I believe I am perfectly well, though perhaps tired.”

“Here has been a message from Janine Lestrade, asking you to go to her,” said Mrs. Watson. ‘But I'm sure you must not.”

“Yes!” said John. “I will not go tonight”

He was very silent while he made tea, and thankful for his father’s absence. His mother was also quiet until her bedtime, when she kissed him fondly and went up without further comment on his health.

When his mother was settled, there came a knock at the door, and, in a moment, Hudson came in:

“If you please, Master John, here's the water-bed from Miss Holmes's. It's too late for to-night, I'm afraid, for missus is nearly asleep: but it will do nicely for to-morrow.”

“Very,” said John. “You must send our best thanks”

Hudson hovered for a minute.

“If you please, he says he's to ask particular how you are.”

“Me!” said John. “I am quite well. Tell him I am perfectly well.” He was, he supposed, though he felt slightly dizzy with the aftereffects of such intense emotion, and hot with the knowledge that Sherlock, whom he had so lately left, was thinking of him.

Mr. Watson now came in. He had had a long day and wanted, as John saw, to be amused and interested by something that his son was to tell him. Though he longed to be alone, John rummaged up numberless small subjects for conversation—all except the riot, and the aftermath, which he did not mention once. He kept the side of his face towards the window, and was thankful that his father did not see.
“Good-night, John. I have every chance of a good night myself, and you are looking very pale with your watching. I shall call Hudson if your mother needs anything. Do you go to bed and sleep like a top; for I'm sure you need it.”

“Good-night, Father.”

He went up the stairs slowly, so anxious to be alone and yet dreading a deeper rummage into the recesses of his heart and mind, but he had no sooner undressed—running his hand wonderingly over his cock, as though unable to believe Sherlock Holmes had done the same not half an hour past—than he was asleep, the tide of his desire having ebbed into a warm remembrance of the tenderness in Sherlock’s heretofore stern face.
Chapter Summary

“It is stupidity rather than courage to refuse to recognize danger when it is close upon you.”
— Arthur Conan Doyle, The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

John Watson receives two propositions from the Holmes family, one decent, and one indecent. Both, in their way, are dangerous.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The morning after the riots, John woke refreshed, having never moved from the position he had lain down in.

He rose and breakfasted, then sat reading in the drawing room while his mother slept. After he had tea with her he would go and see Janine Lestrade. She would take his mind from Sherlock—no need to think of him till he absolutely stood before him in flesh and blood once again. But, of course, the effort not to think of Sherlock brought him only the more strongly before John; and from time to time, a hot flush came over his pale face sweeping it into colour, as a sunbeam from between watery clouds comes swiftly moving over the sea.

Hudson opened the door very softly, and stole on tiptoe up to John, sitting by the shaded window.

“Sherlock Holmes, Master John. He is in the drawing-room.”

John dropped his book.

“Here? Now?”

“Here and now.”

“Very well, I will come,” said John. But he lingered strangely, suddenly shy.

When he did finally enter the room, Sherlock stood by one of the windows, with his back to the door, apparently absorbed in watching something in the street. But, in truth, he was afraid of himself; he could not forget the feel of John in his arms, on his skin, on his lips. John’s bravery in his defence seemed to thrill him through and through,—to melt away every resolution, all power of self-control, as if it were wax before a fire. Sherlock dreaded lest he should go forwards to meet John and gather him into his arms as naturally as breathing.

As such, Sherlock was a little stiff in his greeting, and he watched John’s back straighten in surprise. Both hearts, unbeknownst to the other, sank a very little, and they were in a fair way to be cold with one another until they shook hands. The touch steadied them both, and John looked up at Sherlock through his pale eyelashes, which brought out Sherlock’s sweet smile. And then, despite the door being not quite closed, despite the possibility of Hudson coming in on an unspecified errand, they were in each other’s arms. Their embrace was a little uncertain, at first, but before long they flowed into each other, lips close, each drawing strength from the other’s...
proximity.

“Tonight.” Sherlock panted, when they broke apart. “Meet me at the back door of the baths after eleven. Stay with me then.”

John agreed, and it was not only his standing cock that made him do so. It was terrible, now they had started, to break apart, to be separated by layers of clothing, but it was also terrible to be so close and to not hear him speak, to see him only in circumstances where they could not converse freely. John longed for greater access to Sherlock’s world of machines and men, danger and fierce ambition, so much so that it frightened him. However, his fear was no match for his desire, and so he agreed.

Sherlock really had meant to moderate his pace before arriving at home, but he was too buoyant with the prospect of having John to himself for hours, alone, to do so. Therefore, when he came back into the drawing room where Myfanwy sat, he was still in light, ecstatic motion. A dangerous glint came into his sister’s eye.

“Will young John Watson hold his tongue, then, Sherlock?”

Sherlock stared at her, momentarily and uncharacteristically dumbfounded.

“You didn’t ask him. Instead, now the bath attendant will know about you both as well.”

“He will not. We will enter the baths by my own way, Myfanwy. I would not endanger anyone.”

“I will go and see him, Sherlock, for you have grown careless now that you go in for this kind of,” and here she paused, and curled her lip, “adventure.”

Sherlock stiffened.

“Leave John Watson alone, Myfanwy. Do not interfere,” he said curtly, and left the room.

Myfanwy picked up the letter she had in her hands and reread it meditatively. Then, tucking it into her capacious pocket, she called for her bonnet and set out toward Crampton.

John had, after a short period of dreaming on the settee, set himself to write a letter to Ella. He was trying to relate some aspects of their life that would be entertaining without revealing the extreme changes in their lives—his mother’s illness, Sherlock Holmes—and at first, did not quite realize that another Holmes was being announced.

Hudson, always reluctant when she had to answer the door, showed Myfanwy Holmes into the drawing room with an air of untouchable superiority. Myfanwy appeared to be entirely unaware of this, and carried herself with her usual massive calm.

“Good afternoon, Miss Holmes,” John said, as he closed his letter. “Thank you very much for the water bed. Mother has rested very well since it came.”

Myfanwy nodded sharply, but did not reply. Instead, she faced him and, pulling out the letter she had been perusing so carefully earlier. The silence that fell across the room was thick, but John was reluctant to break it. Instead, he sat, back straight and face outwardly calm, and waited for her to begin.
Myfanwy was not displeased at this act of defiance—for defiance it was, to her—and so allowed John the minor victory by speaking first.

“Doyle, who diagnosed you, is nothing but a quack, Mr. Watson, and I suspect you know it.”

“I have become aware of it,” John said, and indeed he had. His lungs had not been at all strained, even in the unhealthy air of Milton, and he had been able to exert himself without pain. He did not quite see, however, what concern it was of Myfanwy Holmes’, but he was too well-bred to say so.

“And your nervous trouble is sheer bunk as well,” she added, and, before he could say a single thing, she continued, “though I daresay you are wondering both how and why I came to that conclusion.”

“I cannot see, Miss Holmes, how it is any concern of yours.”

“Then you are a great deal stupider than I have thought, Mr. Watson.”

“I also cannot see how that is any concern of mine.”

“Nonetheless, so it must be,” said Myfanwy. “My reckless younger brother has made it thus.”

“I can only imagine what Sherlock does is his own affair.” John said.

“In a perfect world that would be the case, but unfortunately, for people such as us,” —and here John started violently— “that cannot be, and so I propose a solution to you. You will return to Edinburgh to take your qualifying exams, and I will pay the expenses you incur. Subsequently, I will write a letter that will allow you to choose your place of practice. Yes, even in that sleepy hamlet of yours.”

“Miss Holmes, I will not take your charity, if charity it is,” John said coldly, “nor your patronage.”

“Would it interest you to know, then, though it is a subordinate concern, that you have been victim of an injustice?”

John’s curiosity was sorely tried by this, but he remained adamant in his refusal to allow her any advantage.

“I do not believe we have anything further to say to each other, Miss Holmes, though I thank you for your concern. Please do give my best wishes to Miss Aldridge.”

Myfanwy nodded stiffly.

“Mark my words, John Watson, there will be a day when you wish you’d heard me out, and many more when you wish you’d taken this offer.”

John could not bring himself to respond politely, and so he nodded in his turn and saw her out. Upon his return to the drawing room, he went to the window, and threw it open, to dispel the oppression which hung around him. Then he went and opened the door, with a sort of impetuous wish to shake off the recollection of the past hour in the company of others, or in active exertion. But all was profoundly hushed in the noontday stillness of a house, where an invalid catches the unrefreshing sleep that is denied to the night-hours. John would not be alone. What should he do? “Go and see Janine Lestrade, of course,” he thought, as the recollection of the message sent the night before flashed into his mind.

And away he went. It was strange, he thought, that now he seemed to see Holmases everywhere. As he rounded the corner to the Lestrades’, he thought he spied Sherlock, tall and straight, go
down the street in a swirl of coat and disappear past a group of workmen. It could not have been, though, he thought, and shook his head.

When he got there, he found Greg Lestrade standing in front of his mantelpiece, looking ruffled and angry and greeting John only with a curt nod. Janine was lying on the settle, moved close to the fire, though the day was sultry and oppressive. She was laid down quite flat, as if resting languidly after some paroxysm of pain. John knew she ought to have the greater freedom of breathing which a more sitting posture would procure; and so he raised her up, and so arranged the pillows, that Janine was more at ease, though very languid.

“I thought I should not ha' seen yo' again,” said she, at last, looking wistfully in John's face.

“I'm afraid you're much worse. But I could not have come yesterday, my mother was so ill, and I had to call on the Holmases,” said John, feeling a blush steal over his face.

“Yo'd maybe think I went beyond my place in sending Mary for yo'. But the wranglin' and the loud voices had just torn me to pieces, and I thought …oh!” At this, Lestrade rose and, spitting into the fireplace, left, slamming the door as he went. John saw him step into the street, and halt, abruptly, as their neighbour, Molly, passed. Janine sighed, and went on, “I thought…if I could just hear your voice I’d ha’ slept like a baby.”

“Shall I read you a chapter, now?”

“Ay, do!”

John began. Janine tossed to and fro. If, by an effort, she attended for one moment, it seemed as though she were convulsed into double restlessness the next. At last, she burst out “Don't go on reading. It's no use. I'm blaspheming all the time in my mind, wi' thinking angrily on what canna be helped.—Yo'd hear of th' riot, m'appen, yesterday at Marlborough Mills? Holmes's factory, yo' know.”

“Your father was not there, was he?” said John, colouring deeper than before.

“Not he. He'd ha' given his right hand if it had never come to pass. It's that that's fretting me. He's fairly knocked down in his mind by it. It's no use telling him, fools will always break out o' bounds. Yo' never saw a man so down-hearted as he is.”

'But why?' asked John. 'I don't understand.'

'Why yo' see, he's a committee-man on this special strike, and the union laid their plans, to hold together through thick and thin; above all there was to be no going again the law of the land. Folk would go with them if they saw them striving and starving wi' dumb patience; but if there was once any noise o' fighting and struggling—even wi' knobsticks—all was up, as they knew by th' experience of many, and many a time before. Yo' just think for yo'rself, what it must be for father to have a' his work undone, and by such a fool as Anderson. Eh! but father giv'd it him last night! He'd show the world that th' real leaders o' the strike were not such as Anderson, but steady thoughtful men; good hands, and good citizens, who were friendly to law and judgment, and would uphold order; who only wanted their right wage, and wouldn't work, even though they starved, till they got 'em; but who would ne'er injure property or life: For,' dropping her voice, 'they do say, that Anderson threw a stone at Holmes's sister, that welly killed her.”

'That's not true,' said John. 'It was not Anderson that threw the stone'—he went first red, then white.

“Were yo' there, then?” asked Janine languidly for indeed, she had spoken with many pauses, as if
speech was unusually difficult to her.

"Yes. Never mind. Go on. Only it was not Anderson that threw the stone. But what did he answer to your father?"

"He did na' speak words. He were all in such a tremble wi' spent passion, I could na' bear to look at him. He struck father on th' face wi' his closed fist, and Father were stunned wi' the blow at first, for all Anderson were weak wi' passion and hunger. He sat down a bit, and put his hand afore his eyes; and then made for th' door. Father was right shocked by it, and pities him the more, but it were hard for him. And now dunnot talk to me, but just read out th' chapter. I'm easier in my mind for having spit it out; but I want some thoughts of the world that's far away to take the weary taste of it out o' my mouth. Read me—not a sermon chapter, but a story chapter; they've pictures in them, which I see when my eyes are shut, so I can forget."

John read in his clear, low voice. Though Janine's eyes were shut, she was listening for some time. At last she slept; with many starts, and muttered pleadings. John covered her up, and left her, for he had an uneasy consciousness that he might be wanted at home, and yet, until now, it seemed cruel to leave the dying girl.

Mrs. Watson was in the drawing-room upon his return. It was one of her better days, and she was full of praises of the water-bed. It was more like the beds of her childhood than any other bed she had ever slept in.

"It is, darling. You must remember; I took you back to Beresford Hall with me when you were just small."

"I do not think so, Mother, for I was not yet born when your father died, and since Beresford Hall went to a cousin, I never was there."

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, "to be sure. It was poor darling Harry I took with me, I remember. I only went to Oxenham once after I was married,—to your Aunt Shaw's wedding; and poor little Harry was the baby then. Poor Harry! Everybody loved him. He was born with the gift of winning hearts. It makes me think very badly of Captain Moran when I know that he disliked my own dear boy. I think it a certain proof he had a bad heart. Ah! Your poor father, John. He has left the room. He can't bear to hear Harry spoken of."

'I will hear about him, Mother. Tell me all you like.'

"Why, John, you must not be hurt, but he was much prettier than you were. I remember, when I first saw you in Hudson's arms, I said, "Dear, what an ugly little thing!" And she said, "It's not every child that's like Master Harry, bless him!" Dear! how well I remember it. Then I could have had Harry in my arms every minute of the day, and his cot was close by my bed; and now, now—John—I don't know where my boy is, and sometimes I think I shall never see him again."

John softly took hold of his mother's hand, while Mrs. Watson cried without restraint. At last, she sat straight, stiff up on the sofa, and turning round to him, she said with tearful, almost solemn earnestness, "John, if I can get better,—if God lets me have a chance of recovery, it must be through seeing my son Harry once more. It will waken up all the poor springs of health left in me."

She paused, and seemed to try and gather strength for something more yet to be said. Her voice was choked as she went on—was quavering as with the contemplation of some strange, yet closely-present idea.
“And, John, if I am to die—if I am one of those appointed to die before many weeks are over—I
must see my child first. I cannot think how it must be managed; but I charge you, John, as you
yourself hope for comfort in your last illness, bring him to me that I may bless him. Only for five
minutes, John. There could be no danger in five minutes. Oh, John, let me see him before I die!”

John did not think of anything that might be utterly unreasonable in this speech: we do not look
for reason or logic in the passionate entreaties of those who are sick unto death. This wish of Mrs.
Watson’s was so natural, so just, so right to both parties, that John felt as if, on Harry’s account as
well as on his mother’s, he ought to overlook all intermediate chances of danger, and pledge
herself to do everything in his power for its realisation.

“Mother, I will write to-night, and tell Harry what you say. I am as sure that he will come directly
to us, as I am sure of my life. Be easy, Mother, you shall see him as far as anything earthly can be
promised.”

“You will write to-night? Oh, John! the post goes out at five—you will write by it, won’t you? I
have so few hours left—I feel, dear, as if I should not recover, though sometimes your father over-
persuades me into hoping; you will write directly, won’t you? Don’t lose a single post; for just by
that very post I may miss him. And, indeed, John, the longing to see Harry stands between me and
God. I cannot pray till I have this one thing; indeed, I cannot. Don’t lose time, dear, dear John.
Write by this very next post. Then he may be here—here in twenty-two days! For he is sure to
come. No cords or chains can keep him. In twenty-two days I shall see my boy.”

“I’ll write here, now,—you shall see me write,—and it shall go by this very post; and if Father
thinks fit, he can write again when he comes in,—it is only a day’s delay. Oh, Mother, don’t cry so
pitifully,—it will make you ill.”

Mrs. Watson could not stop her tears; they came hysterically; and, in truth, she made no effort to
control them, but rather called up all the pictures of the happy past, and the probable future—
painting the scene when she should lie a corpse, with the son she had longed to see in life weeping
over her, and she unconscious of his presence—till she was melted by self-pity into a state of
sobbing and exhaustion that made John’s heart ache. But at last she was calm, and greedily
watched her second son, as he began his letter; wrote it with swift urgent entreaty; sealed it up
hurriedly, for fear his mother should ask to see it: and then, to make security most sure, at Mrs.
Watson’s own bidding, took it himself to the post-office. He was coming home when his father
overtook him.

“And where have you been, my boy?” asked he.

“To the post-office,—with a letter; a letter to Harry. Oh, Father, perhaps I have done wrong: but
Mother was seized with such a passionate yearning to see him—she said it would make her well
again,—and then she said that she must see him before she died,—I cannot tell you how urgent
she was! I would say to any other patient that this wish should indeed be gratified, but for Mother
I have to ask myself: did I do wrong?”

Mr. Watson did not reply at first. Then he said:

‘I don’t know,’ said Mr. Watson, after a pause. “I believe it would do her much more good than all
the doctor’s medicine,—and, perhaps, set her up altogether; but the danger to him, I’m afraid, is
very great.”

“All these years since the mutiny, Father?”

“Yes; it is necessary, of course, for government to take very stringent measures for the repression
of offences against authority, more particularly in the navy, where a commanding officer needs to
be surrounded in his men's eyes with a vivid consciousness of all the power there is at home to back him, and take up his cause, and avenge any injuries offered to him, if need be. Ah! it's no matter to them how far their authorities have tyrannised,—it is a fresh and vivid crime on the Admiralty books till it is blotted out by blood.'

'Oh, Father, what have I done! And yet it seemed so right at the time. I'm sure Harry himself, would run the risk.'

'So he would; so he should! Nay, John, I'm glad it is done, though I durst not have done it myself. I'm thankful it is as it is; I should have hesitated till, perhaps, it might have been too late to do any good. Dear John, you have done what is right about it; and the end is beyond our control.'

It was all very well; but his father's account of the relentless manner in which mutinies were punished made John shiver and creep. If he had decoyed her brother home to blot out the memory of his error by his blood! He saw his father's anxiety lay deeper than the source of his latter cheering words, and could do nothing but take his arm and walk home pensively by his side.

Chapter End Notes

This is a bit of a truncated chapter, because vacation, sun, relatives, cold white wine, etc, but I will get the even juicier bits to you soon, I promise.
Chapter Summary

"Come at once if convenient — if inconvenient come all the same."
Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Creeping Man”

In which Sherlock and John meet in the baths at midnight, many things are revealed, and an unexpected threat is discovered.

Chapter Notes

This was originally the second part of the prior chapter, "Proposals, Both Modest and Immodest", which was originally Chapter 7. It's entirely original material, which accounts for the length in producing it (well I also blame summer vacation and hard cider, not necessarily in that order). Also, this is where the story earns its E rating, so if you don't want to read about John and Sherlock doing very smutty things to each other in a Turkish bath at midnight, you might want to skip part or all of the chapter.

The talk at the Watson tea-table that evening was of nothing but Harry, and though John attended, and took in every detail he could, his thoughts wandered nonetheless to his meeting with Sherlock. He had had no time—or inclination—for sober consideration, and, despite his brushes with mortality that day, his mind ran agreeably towards images of Sherlock.

It was another thing altogether when he was alone in his room, having ostensibly gone up to bed. He sat by the window, watching the daylight fade through the Milton smoke, and gave deeper thought to what he was about to do—deceive his parents, though he was a man grown, and deliberately commit a sin of the flesh. It was not the first sin of that type he had committed, of course, but the other sins had not been so very planned. Somehow, this assignation was much more than the others; he had only just met Sherlock Holmes, and yet he was prepared to dare anything, do anything for him, even in the teeth of what was right. Or seemed to be right, John thought, for though he believed devoutly in God and in the Church his father had rejected, he felt that love was love.

This stopped him slightly. Love? He had known, since before Sholto, even, that he was drawn to men and women, but Sherlock was unlike anyone he had ever known, and this liaison, then, was doubly dangerous. It frightened John slightly to realize that, if he went tonight, his passion might tumble over into love, and he would be lost to respectable society forever.

But then, he puzzled, love was love, and he could not feel badly about it. He had found Miss Mary Morstan-Lennox lovely, and pleasing, and congenial, but, he felt, he could not love her. It would be more wrong to make her an offer and have her depend upon him than it would to go to Sherlock, equal to equal, at least for today.

When the clock struck eleven, then, John rose and prepared to go, even taking special care over
his tie to draw out the minutes. He was still, however, ready in less than a quarter of an hour. He could not move around the room as he wished, restlessly, for fear of waking someone, so he sat for a short time in his chair. Finally, however, he could no longer manage to wait, and so eased his way out of his room and down the stairs. He stopped, breathless, on the landing to listen for any noise from Hudson’s room, but he only heard the ambient sounds of the house. Easing his way out the door, he ran off through the quiet of the street towards the baths, alive in every limb and resolute in his purpose.

Sherlock was not there, and so John tucked himself quite into a corner of the entry so he would not be seen. It was, however, only several minutes before Sherlock appeared, winding round the corner of the building like a large cat in his long coat and muffler. Silently, he winked at John and held out his hand; John took it and followed Sherlock to a side door, where Sherlock pulled out a slim metal rod and picked the lock with a swiftness and accuracy that left John amazed and even more yearning towards Sherlock than he had been.

“This is not illegal as such, as I am a member and can use these premises as I choose,” Sherlock said, once they were inside with the doors locked behind them. He shrugged out of his coat and hung it up, motioning at John to do the same. “It is just that I prefer that we are not seen, for, unfortunately, it would mean my business if it were.”

John gaped.

“Young business?”

“Milverton.” Sherlock spat, and the change on his face was horrible. “He knows how…what I am, though only by rumour, and he is looking for proof of any kind to discredit me. He preys on the different and on the weak. I would do anything in my power to bring him down, but now, with the strike, I can only watch and wait.”

“What you are?” John asked, brow furrowed. Sherlock tsk’ed impatiently.

“Ainvert, John. Although frankly,” he said, moving closer, “I would have thought you’d noticed.”

John laughed, though his laugh was tinged with nerves and excitement.

“Ah. I just thought perhaps it might be something terrible.”

“A murderer, perhaps? I promise, I am not a murderer.” Here, Sherlock reached out and caressed John’s cheek.

“But how… how does he know that you are…what you are?”

Sherlock frowned and took his hand away, turning to shrug off his coat. He held his hand out for John’s.

“I would prefer not to say, I think. There was a…scandal of sorts when I was still an apprentice, and somehow, someone told him of it. Since the other party in the scandal has now died, Milverton has no substantial way of verifying it, and thus he needs further proof. You came along at a very convenient time, John, for Milverton.”

“Do you suspect me, then?” John stepped back, surprised. Sherlock laughed, and shook his head.

“I can read who you are in a thousand things, John Watson, and you are no lackey of Milverton’s. You say exactly what you think you are, and any discrepancy between what you think you are and what you are is a function of your lack of self-confidence rather than any untruthfulness on
your part.”

John laughed again, despite himself.

“And so I am an open book to you, Sherlock Holmes, while you are a new, puzzling thing to me.”

Sherlock shook his head.

“You should be an open book to me, but you are not. You are surprising, and to me that is a great deal.”

“I, surprise you?” John asked, flattered and unsure.

“You do. Today, my sister offered you something you want very much, and yet you did not take it. Many men would have. Victor Trevor did. Why not you?”

It was John’s turn for surprise.

“Did your sister tell you, then, that she was coming?” It seemed unlikely but he could not fathom how Sherlock would have known, otherwise.

“Myfanwy wouldn’t stoop to tell me. No, I knew. Your tie is much more elaborate than usual—you would never indulge in anything that smacks of dandyism, but you hesitated over coming—and Myfanwy was absent from the tea-table this afternoon. I also noticed that the records of our personal finances had been consulted, unusual for the tenth of the month, and that, combined with confusion in your eyes and determination in hers, made it child’s play to confirm.”

“But that’s marvelous, Sherlock!” John exclaimed, eyes wide with admiration.

“Do you think so?”

“Oh course. It’s brilliant! You’re brilliant.”

“That’s not what people usually say.” Sherlock said, a smile beginning to appear at the corner of his mouth.

“What do people usually say?” John asked.

“’Piss off’, if they can afford to, and ‘Yes, Mr. Holmes’ if they can’t.”

For this, John stepped closer again, and breathed in the scent of Sherlock’s body. His hands went to Sherlock’s waist, and, very carefully, he laid his head on Sherlock’s neck.

This act of tenderness made a statue of Sherlock, who, despite his vast knowledge of men in general, had much less experience than anyone could have suspected of the specific knowledge of men. His experiences to date, other than his youthful dalliance with Victor Trevor, had been brief, animalistic, and often brutal; this tender gesture of John’s left him at sea.

John waited until the tension in Sherlock’s muscles ebbed, and then began to press small kisses along his neck and collarbones. Sherlock sighed as John reached up and opened the top button of his shirt to continue his attentions, though he still did not move. He felt rather as if John would flee if there was any sudden movement, and so—with an effort now, as John had also freed his shirt from the waist of his trousers and had placed his hand on the warm skin of Sherlock’s back—he stayed as still as possible. He tried to record every gesture John made, accumulating each caress as data, so that if ever John did shy away from him, that he would always have it.
John himself could not have said what made him take over in so definitive a fashion, but he knew, from the feel of the body under his hands, that it was right. He kept touching, now with both hands along the muscular planes of Sherlock’s back and his mouth, butterfly-soft, along the white skin of Sherlock’s chest. When he glanced up, he saw, through his lashes, that Sherlock was watching him dreamily; his clear green eyes softer than John had ever seen them but still intelligent, taking in John’s movements.

John took that as a challenge, then, pulling Sherlock in closer and aligning their hips. He bit at the long white column of Sherlock’s neck and felt Sherlock’s hips buck against him, a satisfying gasp in his ear. He continued, nipping here and there, rough and tender, but never marking, until Sherlock had lost the cataloguing look in his eyes and was breathing hard and raspy. Then and only then did John step away to unbutton his own shirt and take in the sight before him.

It was well worth it; Sherlock stood tall still, but his hair was disarranged and his eyes were bright. His shirt, fully unbuttoned, showed a swath of pale, lightly furred chest rosy with small bites, and his lips, though still un kissed, were already a delicious pink. His cock stood out, pushing at his trousers. Altogether, he looked like a debauched angel, the planes of his face half-hidden in the dim light.

“You are beautiful,” John had to say, and the sound of his voice fell into the silence.

“You have not seen yourself,” Sherlock replied, and reached up to help John remove his shirt.

In the haze that followed, John would always remember the swift, trembling movements of Sherlock’s hands as he tried to strip them both naked. He failed, ultimately, but it was a delicious failure: Sherlock overcome, hands shaking, and John coming to his rescue, firmly and competently removing each piece of clothing until they were naked in each other’s arms.

For Sherlock, the slide of skin against skin was nearly too much; he clung to John dizzily for a moment before he recovered his composure enough to guide them both to the hot bath itself. Though the furnace had been shut down some hours earlier, it was still warm enough to be comforting, and they slid into the water together. Their lips met, and their chests, and their thighs, their bodies fitted one against the other in the silk of the water. Their kisses came slow and urgent now, John still the master of the dance, Sherlock following.

Only when Sherlock was pliant under the gentle insistence of John’s caresses did John reach for their cocks, holding them in one hand and stroking. After a moment, as their hips fell into the same rhythm, Sherlock’s large hand engulfed the whole, and, in very little time, they both reached their crisis, falling towards each other with soft breaths of pleasure.

Luxuriating in the warm afterglow, John admired the length of Sherlock’s body stretched underwater. Sherlock, his face so soft as to be nearly unrecognizable, touched John in every place he could; his head was on John’s shoulder and his hands skimmed lightly over John’s knees, shoulders, belly, chin, and hair, taking in the texture of each as he went. There seemed to be nothing to say, then, and so they sat for a long time, heedless of anything but the warmth between them.

It was only when they heard the bells strike two o’clock that they stirred. John’s fingers twined into Sherlock’s curls and tugged lightly, as his eyes had been closed.

“It’s late,” he said, “Sherlock, should we not go?” Sherlock tensed against him.

“Of course,” he answered, in a tone that approached his usual curtness, “If you wish it.”
“I do not wish it,” John said hastily. “It is only that you have much to do and I would not have you exhausted.”

“I do not sleep a great deal, and even if I were to do so, I would always choose exhaustion if you were the cause.”

“I will be honoured to exhaust you,” John laughed.

“Well, then, I would…” Sherlock hesitated, then stopped. His uncertain expression made John stroke his hair and pull him back into his arms.

“I would like,” Sherlock said, softly but decisively against John’s chest, “to see your face as you feel your pleasure.”

John’s stomach leaped at the words; he had heard more obscene things uttered in his ear, but never anything that made his cock react so insistently. The depth of conviction and the uncertainty brought him to full hardness in a moment, and, suddenly, he could not bring himself to answer.

“I…” Sherlock said, then stopped again.

“Please.” John stammered out, and then, “Any way, Sherlock, that you wish.”

“Like this.” Sherlock pulled himself loose and, kneeling on the bathing ledge, lifted John bodily to sit on the tiled edge of the bath itself so that his feet were in the water.

“Comfortable?”

The tables had turned so suddenly that John was still at a loss for words. Sherlock’s face, now bright and expectant, was placed such that his breath was already hot on John’s cooling stomach. John closed his eyes for a moment to steady himself; when he opened them, Sherlock had not moved, but was simply watching and waiting.

“All right?” he whispered.

“Yes,” John mouthed, and then, Sherlock’s mouth was soft against John’s belly and then his thighs. John could not tear his eyes away, though the sensation threatened to overwhelm him, and so he both saw and felt the moment that Sherlock stopped kissing him and hovered over the head of his cock. Their eyes met and locked, and then John felt the sweet and yet unbearable sensation of Sherlock’s mouth engulfing him. He closed his eyes then, but was conscious of Sherlock’s continued gaze as he sucked, almost hesitantly. John threaded his hands into Sherlock’s curls and lost himself in the gentle ebb of pleasure.

Sherlock looked up at John now. His back was still as straight as it had been that first day they had met, in the hotel, but Sherlock knew now, for certain, that this uprightness was part of him rather than a stiff, put-upon standoffishness. How many corners this slim, beautiful man had, and he would discover all of them, slowly.

He bit, now, wondering what would happen, and John shivered in a most gratifying way. Then, Sherlock spanned John’s thighs with his hands, running his thumbs along the crease of leg and body before reaching back to cup his arse and pull more of John’s rigid tool into his mouth. John sighed again, and Sherlock redoubled his efforts. He could feel John’s body tensing, muscles rigid, holding himself back, but it was too much, and, with a cry, he spent into Sherlock’s mouth.

Afterwards, Sherlock tried to gather John back into the water, but John was too aware of Sherlock’s hardness, insistent against his arse, to allow it. It was the work of a moment for him to
grasp Sherlock’s cock and, with a sudden mischievous smile, slip below the water and take the head in his mouth. He came up again almost immediately, spluttering and laughing, both at his own temerity and Sherlock’s scandalized look; then, he made good his promise by placing Sherlock in the same position as he himself had been in earlier and bringing him to such a peak of pleasure as Sherlock had never experienced before.

“Come now,” Sherlock said, after they had recovered and, taking John by the hand, led him to the tub room. He pointed to the floor, and John smiled, seeing that Sherlock had pulled down two pallets from the massage tables and put them side by side on the floor. They laid down together, in each other’s arms, their bodies dappled with colour from the moonlight streaming through the stained glass of the windows.

“We mustn’t fall asleep,” John said.

“No. Tomorrow we have things to do.”

“Do we?” John could not think what Sherlock meant.

“Yes. Preparing the infirmary.” Sherlock stated, his usual air of command back upon him, though he wore it with a greater softness than he had before. “Tomorrow, come to my mill office at the start of business. Lyons will assist you.”

“But...” John felt a flush of anger rise in his face at this peremptory summons. “I cannot, Sherlock. I am neither qualified nor disposed, and my mother is ill enough to need me at home.”

“Nonsense. You are as good as qualified; your knowledge is entirely adequate for such illnesses and injuries as affect my workers, and,” here his voice softened, “It will give us the reason we need to be as much together as I would like, John.”

“I am not a doctor,” John replied stoutly, although his heart wrung in his chest at Sherlock’s confession.

“You would have passed your examinations, you know that full well.”

“But I could not...I did not...” and here, John was unable to continue.

“You did not act as a doctor should, you think, in circumstances that required it, correct?”

John nodded. He flexed his fingers, staring at the tile mosaic on the floor of the baths and willing himself to remain calm.

“What happened?” Sherlock’s voice was light.

“Can you not deduce it?” John snapped, though he regretted his bitter tone almost immediately. Sherlock, however, seemed unaffected by his sharpness.

“I can, and I have, but if you would give me your account of what happened, I would be more likely to be of use to you.”

John shook his head mutely; Sherlock placed a large hand at the base of John’s skull and caressed him.

“Please?”
John knew, already, how rare this word was coming from Sherlock, and he steeled himself to give a bare account of the facts as he remembered them.

“I came across an accident in the street. People were hurt; one woman was already dead. I was running to the nearest casualty, to stop his bleeding, and suddenly a weakness overtook me. I was afraid—I have never been so afraid—and I fell to the ground. I had to be helped myself.”

“That is unlike you,” Sherlock’s voice was soft. “Had you been ill?”

“A cough, no more; it was winter, in Edinburgh, and all my patients had had catarrh. Otherwise I was quite well.”

“And it was only afterwards that you were diagnosed with consumption—falsely, I might add.”

“Correct, on both accounts, I believe.”

“And yet you left Edinburgh and spent quite some time recovering from this so-called nervous collapse. Curious.”

“I have only ever wanted to be a doctor,” John said, “and yet, at the very end of my training, when I should have been competent, I failed. How can I take my qualifying exams—and pass them, you were quite right—and yet be unable to alleviate suffering as I find it? It would be dishonest.” He was angry now.

“So you were in low spirits. Depressed, if you will. Perfectly understandable. And yet this weakness is not quite what it seems, I think.”

“What could it be but weakness?”

“You came to Anderson’s aid and had no such symptoms.”

“But you were there,” John said, “and I had no time to think.”

“Nor did you when you came across the accident. No, John Watson, it was an act of infamy, though I cannot tell you yet why.”

“Wait! Is this what she meant, your sister, yesterday, when she said that I had been the victim of some injustice.”

Sherlock snorted.

“Of course. It is perfectly aggravating how she knows more than I am likely to do, though I move throughout the city every day and she so rarely stirs from the house.”

“It is perfectly aggravating that you know and I do not,” John exclaimed.

“You were drugged, John,” Sherlock said, “with a compound of barbiturates, I presume. They depress the…”

“I know what they do.” John interrupted, though he was wondering rather than angry.

“Of course. Because you are a doctor.”

“Who would do such a thing? And why?”

“That is the question. We will find it out, but come to the mill, John, and help me.” Sherlock took John’s face in his hand and caressed it.
John was just about to kiss Sherlock again, in lieu of words, when a dark shadow fell across their bodies. Sherlock leaped up, just in time to see a face, horribly distorted in a blue pane of glass.

“I know that face,” Sherlock said, his own settled into hard lines.

“Is it not just some tramp, some passerby?” John asked.

“It would be coincidence, John, and the universe is rarely so lazy. No, we are in grave danger now. Get dressed,” Sherlock said, “but stay here, out of sight.” He leaped up and strode towards the door. He turned, though, before he reached it, and, sweeping John into his arms, kissed him with a fervour that left John dizzy once more.

“I will make us safe. The baths open only at ten; will you be missed if you leave once the streets are busy again, at seven?”

John nodded.

“Leave just before dawn if you must, then, though the other would have been better. I will see you at the mill.”

They dressed in silence. When Sherlock left, sliding out of the door as if he had no bones at all, John sat, waiting. His mind was consumed with all he had done, heard, and felt that night, and though he tried to make head or tail of the whole, when he slipped out to run home through the dawn, he was no closer to a resolution than he had been. All he knew was that his fate was linked with Sherlock now, for good or for ill, and he would do what he must for that to remain so.

Chapter End Notes

In the Victoria Baths in Manchester (built in 1859, as I mentioned in prior notes, but I’m pretending they were built in 1855), there is a tub room with stained glass windows, which is where John and Sherlock find themselves for the final conversation.

There’s a bit of a nod to ACD Canon!Mycroft here; Myfanwy, as a woman, must necessarily spend more time at home than a male Mycroft would, so I’ve shown her as someone who sits at the middle of a web, as ACD Canon!Mycroft does at his club, and solves problems and sets things going.
To See Your Face Again

Chapter Summary

"Everything in this world is relative, my dear Watson."
-Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Dying Detective”

In which some people see each other for the first time, some for the last time, and others not at all.

When Sherlock left the baths—by one of the roof windows rather than the door by which he had entered with John—the familiar, smoke-heavy air hit him like a wall, and he breathed it in. He would find this man and he would end the threat to John and to himself, and keep his rightful place in Milton.

On careful feet he made his way to the edge of the roof. There was nothing below, of course, and the spy was long gone, but from his high perch Sherlock could see the possible routes the man could have taken: the long street behind the baths, and then one street branching off into the middle-class residences behind the main street. No traces were visible, as it had been a dry day and evening, so, careful to avoid the place where the man had stood, Sherlock dropped lightly to the ground. He scanned the dirt under the window; there were traces of a smallish shoe, of the kind worn by mill hands, but nothing else. He turned to follow the traces, but they only went a short way before being confounded with other tracks in the dust.

He was looking, then, for a slight millhand, perhaps only a little taller than John, with dark hair. A needle in a haystack, he thought with disgust, and turned down the first potential route. He paced along the road, methodically scanning the litter in the street for anything out of the ordinary, but saw little.

On his way back towards the second road, however, he glimpsed a scrap of paper, of much greater quality than the other bits about—thus, out of place. Bending to pick it up, he saw that it was from Milverton’s personal supply. So that oily bastard had set someone on them!

The question, then, was how he had known where they were. Sherlock had told no-one, save John, though Myfanwy must certainly have known. He was sure he had not been followed, either on his way to the baths or in the weeks preceding, but since there was nothing Milverton would not do and nobody Milverton would not betray, there were certainly other ways for him to obtain information that would be damaging to Sherlock.

He went down the second road, past the houses still shut up for the night, but he found nothing else, nor did he expect to. He turned homewards with a frown on his face and a hard determination to bring Milverton down before he himself was destroyed.

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John had only meant to lie down on his bed for a moment upon returning from his assignation with Sherlock, but he fell into a deep sleep and was woken by Hudson knocking on his door. He saw that it was already nine o’clock, and rushed to dress, and, refusing a cup of tea, ran down the stairs. However, he was not destined to arrive at the mill that day. Hudson came to him, and said,
“There’s something you should know.” Her mien was so solemn that John was alarmed.

“What is the matter? Tell me, Hudson, at once!”

“That young woman you go to see—Lestrade, I mean.”

“Well?”

‘Well! she died this morning, and her neighbour is here—come to beg a strange thing. It seems, the young woman who died had a fancy for being buried with something of yours, and so the neighbour’s come to ask for it, —and I was looking for a handkerchief that wasn’t too good to give away. And another thing, this woman—Molly?—downstairs wanted me to ask you if you would like to see her.”

The neighbour, Molly indeed, stood shyly in the door.

“She loved yo’ dearly,” she said, softly, “Her last words were, ‘Give her my affectionate respects; and keep father from drink.’ Yo’ll come and see her, sir. She would ha’ thought it a great compliment, I know.”

“I will. I’ll come right away.”

Seemingly frightened by John’s decision, Molly shook her head, and turned to be going.

“Master John,” said Hudson, in a low voice, “where’s the use o’ your going to see the poor thing laid out? I’d never say a word against it, if it could do the girl any good, but your mother…”

“No, Hudson!” said John firmly. “I will go. Molly, you shall see me shortly.”

John walked swiftly to the Lestrade's house. Molly, having arrived only moments before, showed him through the house-place, upstairs, and into the quiet presence of the dead. Janine’s face, often so weary with pain, so restless with troublous thoughts, had now the faint soft smile of eternal rest upon it. A deep calm entered into John’s soul, though sadness was upon him, and he turned away from the bed and went downstairs without a word, Molly’s soft steps behind him.

The silence of John’s thoughts was broken by a sudden shouting from outdoors. He saw Gregory Lestrade’s back in the doorway; Lestrade’s fist was raised, and he was shouting,

“...and yo’ll not come in and disturb her rest, as yo say such things to me!”

A low voice came from out of doors; with a start, John recognized it as Sherlock’s.

“Yo’ think yo’ can govern’ me in my own home, and yo’re wrong. Yo’ don’t know the half of it, Holmes, and I’ll thank yo’ to leave!”

“Janine…” John heard, but not the rest, as Lestrade stepped in to slam the door before John could advance to mediate the struggle. Once shut, John didn’t quite dare leave; Lestrade’s eyes were dry and fierce; studying the reality of Janine’s death; bringing himself to understand that her place should know her no more. For she had been sickly, dying so long, that he had persuaded himself she would not die; that she would 'pull through.'

John felt now as if he had no business to be there, and, nodding to Molly, began to make his way out, when Lestrade took sudden hold of John’s arm, and held it till he could gather words to speak seemed dry; they came up thick, and choked, and hoarse:

“Were yo' with her? Did yo' see her die?”
“No!’ replied John. It was some time before Lestrade spoke again, but he kept his hold on her arm.

“Did Holmes see her before she went?”

“I do not know.” John said, though he wondered desperately whether this was true.

“All men must die,” said Lestrade at last, with a strange sort of gravity, which first suggested to John the idea that the man had been drinking—not enough to intoxicate himself, but enough to make his thoughts bewildered. 'But she were younger than me.’ Suddenly, he looked up at her with a wild searching inquiry in his glance. 'Yo' re sure and certain she's dead—not in a dwam, a faint?—she's been so before, often.'

'She is dead,' replied John. Lestrade’s wild eyes focused on him for a moment, looking at John with that searching look, which seemed to fade out of his eyes as he gazed. Then he suddenly threw his body half across the table, and shook it and every piece of furniture in the room with his violent sobs. Molly came trembling towards him, and laid her small hand on his arm.

'Get thee gone!—get thee gone!' Lestrade cried, striking wildly and blindly at her. 'What do I care for thee?’ Molly, though she trembled still, stood firm, and waited beside John.

At last—it might have been a quarter of an hour, it might have been an hour—Lestrade lifted himself up. His eyes were swollen and bloodshot, and he seemed to have forgotten that any one was by; he scowled at the watchers when he saw them. He shook himself heavily, gave them one more sullen look, spoke never a word, but made for the door.

“No, Greg,” Molly said, “Not to-night! Any night but to-night. I'll not leave yo'. Yo' may strike, but I'll not leave yo'. She told me last of all to keep yo' fro' drink!”

“It's my own house. Stand out o' the way, wench, or I'll make yo!'” He raised his hand to push Molly away—he looked ready to strike John. But Molly never moved a feature—never took her deep, serious eyes off him. He stared back on her with gloomy fierceness. If she had stirred hand or foot, he would have thrust her aside with violence, but her motionless face arrested his impulses.

“What are yo' looking at me in that way for?’ asked he at last, daunted and awed by her severe calm. 'If yo' think for to keep me from going what gait I choose, because she loved yo’—and in my own house, too, where I never asked yo' to come, yo're mista'en. It's very hard upon a man that he can't go to the only comfort left.”

“You are sorely tired,” John said, hoping to distract him, “Where have you been all day—not at work?”

“Not at work, sure enough,” said Lestrade, with a short, grim laugh. “Not at what you call work. I were at the Committee, till I were sickened out wi' trying to make fools hear reason. I were fetched to Anderson's wife afore seven this morning. She's bed-fast, but she were raving and raging to know where her dunder-headed brute of a chap was, as if I'd to keep him—as if he were fit to be ruled by me. The d—— d fool, who has put his foot in all our plans! And I've walked my feet sore wi' going about for to see men who wouldn't be seen, now the law is raised again us. And I were sore-hearted, too, which is worse than sore-footed; and if I did see a friend who ossed to treat me, I never knew Janine lay a-dying here.”

“I am sure,” said John, “I am sure you did not know: it was quite sudden.”

Lestrade shook his head, and suddenly turned, and, before John could stop him, struck the wall. Fragments of whitewash fell to the floor again and again, and just as John stepped forward, Molly
held her arms out, wordlessly, and Lestrade sank into them. The wave of tears hit him as he dropped his head to her shoulder, and she embraced him as he sobbed.

John watched from the fireplace. He had seen this before, a sudden shift in humours; he hoped that this would bring Lestrade back to his senses. Catching Molly’s eye, he nodded before letting himself out; there was no danger for Lestrade tonight.

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Though Sherlock had not seen John that morning—he knew, as soon as he had heard that Janine Lestrade was dead, that he would not—and his mind was deeply absorbed with both the Milverton problem, Sherlock sailed straight and clear into all the interests of the day. There was a slight demand for finished goods; and as it affected his branch of the trade, he took advantage of it, and drove hard bargains. He was sharp to the hour at the meeting of his brother magistrates,—though he was not conciliatory, his strong sense, and his power of seeing consequences at a glance and so coming to a rapid decision was valued. Older men, men of long standing in the town, men of far greater wealth looked to him for prompt, ready wisdom. He was the one deputed to see and arrange with the police—to lead in all the requisite steps. And he cared for their unconscious deference no more than for the soft west wind, that scarcely made the smoke from the great tall chimneys swerve in its straight upward course. He was not aware of the silent respect paid to him, though, after yesterday, and the sweetness of John’s admiration, he felt his power and revelled in it.

The evidence against Anderson, and other ringleaders of the riot, was taken before him; that against the three others, for conspiracy, failed. But he sternly charged the police to be on the watch; for the swift right arm of the law should be in readiness to strike, as soon as they could prove a fault. And then he left the hot reeking room in the borough court, and went out into the fresher, but still sultry street. It seemed as though he gave way all at once; he was so languid that he could not control his thoughts; they would wander to her; they would bring back the scene,—not of his repulse and rejection the day before but the looks, the actions of the day before that. He went along the crowded streets mechanically, winding in and out among the people, but never seeing them,—almost sick with longing for the feeling of John touching him with love in every movement—to come once again.

“Why, Holmes, you're cutting me very coolly, I must say. And how is Miss Holmes?”

The voice, smooth and nearly expressionless, penetrated Sherlock’s consciousness most disagreeably. Charles Milverton stood before him, his face so bland and plausible that Sherlock’s lip curled. He wished he could deliberately cut the man, but the fragment of paper he had found in the street precluded it.

“I beg your pardon, Milverton. I really didn't see you. My sister is quite well, thank you.”

“Indeed. And what of your Irish hands? Not much use, I'd venture to guess.”

“They do what they can,” Sherlock said curtly, though their inexperienced use of his machinery infuriated him a great deal.

“Not feeling the pinch of the strike much, are you?” This was rank meddling, Sherlock thought, as Milverton knew quite well that he had gained a contract over Sherlock the prior week simply by allowing some of the weaker Milton men to come in through the back doors. He’d sell them out to the Union when it served him, and then where would the men be? Better to import Irish hands, who could then go home better off than when they came.
“We all have work before us to do.” Would the man never leave him be?

Milverton smiled again.

“I hear you’re putting in an infirmary, Holmes. Foolish, I say. Let them take care of themselves, the men, or they’ll be begging us for every little thing before you know it.”

“The infirmary,” Sherlock said, “is for treating men that are injured at work. I would prefer not to lose good hands, once I have found them and trained them.”

“Well, how very public-spirited. Wouldn’t have done it myself, but of course you do have the time.”

Sherlock did not respond. He would bide his time. Though he could have used Milverton’s sneaking use of the Milton workingmen as a part of it, the men and their families would have suffered, and, though Sherlock felt their actions foolish, he could not quite stomach such a cruel stroke.

“You also have the inclination.” Milverton’s voice was knowing.

The vaunted steadiness of Sherlock’s pulse failed him for an instant, and he was unsure he could keep his temper if Milverton began to talk about John and himself. But Milverton did not provoke him with innuendo, simply saying,

“I hear young Watson’s mother—that lady in Crampton, you know—hasn’t many weeks to live.”

“Ah?” Sherlock said, as politely as he could muster, “I have heard the same.”

At this, to Sherlock’s great relief, Milverton was hailed by Wilkes, another mill-owner, and left him with a nod.

Then, as though in rebellion against his better sense, Sherlock went straight to the best fruit-shop in Milton, and chose out the bunch of purple grapes with the most delicate bloom upon them,—the richest-coloured peaches,—the freshest vine-leaves. They were packed into a basket, and the shopman awaited the answer to his inquiry, 'Where shall we send them to, sir?'

There was no reply. 'To Marlborough Mills, I suppose, sir?'

'No!' Sherlock said. 'Give the basket to me,—I'll take it.'

It took up both his hands to carry it; and he had to pass through the busiest part of the town for feminine shopping. Many a young lady of his acquaintance turned to look after him, and thought it strange to see him occupied just like a porter or an errand-boy.

He went at an unusual pace, and was soon at Crampton. He went upstairs two steps at a time, and entered the drawing-room before Hudson could announce him,—his face flushed, his eyes shining with kindly earnestness. Mrs. Watson lay on the sofa, heated with fever. Mr. Watson was reading aloud. John reading quietly, but his face as Sherlock came in, his quick upward glance, warm and yearning, made Sherlock’s errand worthwhile.

He took no notice of John, hardly of Mr. Watson himself; he went up straight with his basket to Mrs. Watson, and said, in a tone that was subdued and gentle for him, ‘I have taken the liberty—the great liberty of bringing you some fruit that seemed to me fine.’ Mrs. Watson was excessively surprised; excessively pleased; quite in a tremble of eagerness. Mr. Watson with fewer words expressed a deeper gratitude.
'Fetch a plate, John—a basket—anything.' John stood up by the table, and made his way past Sherlock, brushing against his coat. Their eyes met, and Sherlock’s smile started; then, catching himself, he said,

'I must go,' said he, 'I cannot stay. If you will forgive this liberty—too abrupt, I fear—you will allow me the pleasure of bringing you some fruit again, if I should see any that is tempting. Good afternoon, Mr. Watson. Good-bye, ma'am.'

He was gone. John could not have followed him without giving all away, so he turned to his mother.

'Oh! it is so delicious!' said Mrs. Watson, in a feeble voice. 'How kind of him to think of me! John love, only taste these grapes! Was it not good of him?'

'Yes!' said John, quietly.

'John!' said Mrs. Watson, rather querulously, 'you won't like anything Mr. Holmes does. I never saw anybody so prejudiced.'

At this, John pinched his lips, thinking of how he had liked what Sherlock had done only a short time previous. He was suddenly glad of his mother’s blindness, her absorption in her small world, and he caressed her hand.

“It’s not so, Mother. What he did today was very kind.”

Mr. Watson had been peeling a peach for his wife; and, cutting off a small piece for himself, he said:

'If I had any prejudices, the gift of such delicious fruit as this would melt them all away. I have not tasted such fruit—no! not even in Hampshire—since I was a boy; and to boys, I fancy, all fruit is good. I remember eating sloes and crabs with a relish. Do you remember the matted-up currant bushes, John, at the corner of the west-wall in the garden at home?'

Did he not? Did he not remember every thing about Helstone? And yet it seemed so far away, part of another time.

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The next morning brought John another piece of the past: a letter from Ella. It was affectionate, so affectionate, which was charming to John's own affectionate nature. It was as follows:—

“Oh, John, it is worth a journey to see my boy! He is a superb little fellow. Having made all the mothers here envious, I want to show him to somebody new, and hear a fresh set of admiring expressions; perhaps, that's all the reason; perhaps it is not—nay, possibly, there is just a little cousinly love mixed with it; but I do want you so much to come here, John! I am constantly wanting you to draw my baby for me, John. It does not signify what he is doing; that very thing is prettiest, gracefulest, best. I think I love him a great deal better than my husband, who is getting stout, and grumpy,—what he calls "busy." No! he is not. He has just come in with news of such a charming pic-nic, given by the officers. Because he has brought in such a pleasant piece of news, I retract all I said just now. Sholto is quite as great a darling as baby, and not a bit stout, and as un-grumpy as ever husband was; only, sometimes he is very, very busy. I may say that without love—wifely duty—where was I?—I had something very particular to say, I know, once. Oh, it is this—Dearest John!—you must come and see me; it would do Aunt Watson good, as I said before. Get the doctor to order it for her. Tell him that it's the smoke of Milton that does her harm. I have no doubt it is that, really. I don't ask my uncle'—(Here the letter became more constrained, and
better written; Mr. Watson was in the corner, like a naughty child, for having given up his living.)—because, I dare say, he disapproves of war, and soldiers, and bands of music; at least, I know that many Dissenters are members of the Peace Society, and I am afraid he would not like to come; but, if he would, dear, pray say that Sholto and I will do our best to make him happy.”

John did long for a day of Ella's life—her freedom from care, her cheerful home, her sunny skies. If a wish could have transported him, he would have gone off, just for one day. He felt that even one golden day would give him strength for what he knew must come: his mother's illness, his work with Sherlock, his life in Milton. That was her first feeling after reading Ella's letter. Then he read it again, and, forgetting himself, was amused at its likeness to Ella's self, and was chuckling over it when Mrs. Watson came into the drawing-room, leaning on Hudson's arm. John flew to adjust the pillows, as his mother seemed more than usually feeble.

'What were you laughing at, John?' asked she, as soon as she had recovered from the exertion of settling herself on the sofa.

'A letter I have had this morning from Ella. Shall I read it you, Mother?'

She read it aloud, and for a time it seemed to interest her mother, who kept wondering what name Ella had given to her boy, and suggesting all probable names, and all possible reasons why each and all of these names should be given. Into the very midst of these wonders Sherlock came, bringing another offering of fruit for Mrs. Watson. He could not—say rather, he would not—deny himself the chance of the pleasure of seeing John. He had no end in this but the present gratification. It was the sturdy wilfulness of a man usually most reasonable and self-controlled. He entered the room, taking in at a glance the fact of John's presence; but after the first cold distant bow, he never seemed to let his eyes fall on her again. He only stayed to present his peaches—to speak some gentle kindly words—and then his eyes met John's with a hot farewell, as he left the room. John himself sat down silent and pale, and his mother said, startling him,

'Do you know, John, I really begin quite to like Mr. Holmes.'

No answer at first. Then John forced out a 'Do you?'

'Yes! I think he is really getting quite polished in his manners.'

John's voice was more in order now. He replied,

'He is very kind and attentive,—there is no doubt of that.'

'I wonder Miss Holmes never calls. She must know I am ill, because of the water-bed.'

'I dare say, she hears how you are from her brother.'

'Still, I should like to see her. You have so few friends here, John.'

John felt what was in her mother's thoughts,—a tender craving to bespeak the kindness of some woman towards the son that might be so soon left motherless.

'Do you think,' said Mrs. Watson, after a pause, 'that you could go and ask Mrs. Holmes to come and see me? Only once,—I don't want to be troublesome.'

'I will do anything, if you wish it, Mother,—but if—but when Harry comes——'

'Ah, to be sure! we must keep our doors shut,—we must let no one in. I hardly know whether I dare wish him to come or not. Sometimes I think I would rather not. Sometimes I have such frightful dreams about him.'
'Oh, Mother! we'll take good care. I will put my arm in the bolt sooner than he should come to the slightest harm. Trust the care of him to me, Mother.'

At this, Mrs. Watson subsided, and John turned his thoughts Sherlock-ward.

It was under duress that Myfanwy Holmes came to see the Watsons the next morning. Mrs. Watson was much worse. One of those sudden changes—those great visible strides towards death, had been taken in the night, and her own family were startled by the gray sunken look her features had assumed in that one twelve hours of suffering. Myfanwy, who had not seen her for weeks, was softened all at once. She had come because her brother asked it from her as a personal favour, but with all the proud bitter feelings of her nature in arms against that family of which John formed one. She doubted the reality of Mrs. Watson's illness; she doubted any want beyond a momentary fancy on that lady's part, which should take her out of her own home and away from her previously settled course of employment for the day. Sherlock’s weakness for John and his family, and Myfanwy’s own contempt for Mr. and Mrs. Watson, were the ideas which occupied Mrs. Holmes, till she was struck into nothingness before the dark shadow of the wings of the angel of death.

When Myfanwy, strong and prosperous with life, came in, Mrs. Watson lay still, although from the look on her face she was evidently conscious of who it was. But she did not even open her eyes for a minute or two. The heavy moisture of tears stood on the eye-lashes before she looked up, then with her hand groping feebly over the bed-clothes, for the touch of Myfanwy’s large firm fingers, she said, scarcely above her breath—Myfanwy had to stoop to listen,—

'John—you have raised your brother—my sister is in Italy. My child will be without a mother;—in a strange place,—if I die—will you'——

And her filmy wandering eyes fixed themselves with an intensity of wistfulness on Myfanwy’s face. For a minute, there was no change in its rigidness; it was stern and unmoved;—nay, but that the eyes of the sick woman were growing dim with the slow-gathering tears, she might have seen a dark cloud cross the cold features. And it was, finally, the thought of the two people she truly loved, Sherlock and Anthea, that stirred her heart at last.

“You wish me to be a friend to young Mr. Watson.” Her measured voice came out distinct and clear.

Mrs. Watson, her eyes still fixed on Myfanwy’s face, pressed the hand that lay below hers on the coverlet. She could not speak. Myfanwy sighed, “I will be a true friend, if circumstances require it. Not a tender friend. That I cannot be,”—(‘to him,’ she was on the point of adding, but she relented at the sight of that poor, anxious face.)—“It is not my nature to show affection even where I feel it, nor do I volunteer advice in general. Still, at your request,—if it will be any comfort to you, I will promise you.” Then came a pause. Myfanwy would not promise what she did not mean to perform; and to perform any-thing in the way of kindness on behalf of John, more disliked at this moment than ever, was difficult; almost impossible.

“I promise,” she did say, with grave severity; which, after all, inspired the dying woman with faith as in something more stable than life itself, “I promise that in any difficulty in which your son”——

“Call him John!” gasped Mrs. Watson.

“In which he comes to me for help, I will help him with every power I have, as if he were my own brother. I also promise that if ever I see him going down a wrong path”——
“John will never go wrong, not wilfully,” pleaded Mrs. Watson. Myfanwy went on as before; as if she had not heard:

“If ever I see him going down a wrong path — such wrong not touching me or mine, in which case I might be supposed to have an interested motive — I will tell him of it, faithfully and plainly, as I should wish my own brother to hear it.”

There was a long pause. Mrs. Watson felt that this promise did not include all; and yet it was much. It had reservations in it which she did not understand; but then she was weak, dizzy, and tired. Myfanwy was reviewing all the probable cases in which she had pledged herself to act. She had a fierce pleasure in the idea of telling John unwelcome truths, in the shape of performance of duty. Mrs. Watson began to speak:

“I thank you. I pray God to bless you. I shall never see you again in this world. But my last words are, I thank you for your promise of kindness to my child.”

“Not kindness!” testified Myfanwy, ungraciously truthful to the last. But having eased her conscience by saying these words, she was not sorry that they were not heard. She pressed Mrs. Watson's soft languid hand; and rose up and went her way out of the house without seeing a creature.

During this interview, John and Hudson were laying their heads together, and consulting how they should keep Harry's coming a profound secret to all out of the house. A letter from him might now be expected any day; and he would assuredly follow quickly on its heels. Martha must be sent away on her holiday; Hudson must keep stern guard on the front door, only admitting the few visitors that ever came to the house into Mr. Watson's room down-stairs—Mrs. Watson's extreme illness giving her a good excuse for this.

They resolved that Martha should leave them that very afternoon for this visit to her mother. John wished that she had been sent away on the previous day, as he fancied it might be thought strange to give a servant a holiday when her mistress's state required so much attendance.

Poor John! All that afternoon he had to be both son and doctor, giving strength out of his own scanty stock to his father. Mr. Watson would hope, would not despair, between the attacks of his wife's malady; he buoyed himself up in every respite from her pain, and believed that it was the beginning of ultimate recovery. And so, when the paroxysms came on, each more severe than the last, they were fresh agonies, and greater disappointments to him. This afternoon, he sat in the drawing-room, unable to bear the solitude of his study, or to employ himself in any way. He buried his head in his arms, which lay folded on the table. John's heart ached to see him; yet, as his father did not speak, John did not like to volunteer any attempt at comfort. Martha was gone. Hudson sat with Mrs. Watson while she slept.

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The house was very still and quiet, and darkness came on, without any movement to procure candles. John sat at the window, looking out at the lamps and the street, but seeing nothing,—only alive to his father's heavy sighs,—when he heard the muffled door-ring with so violent a pull, that the wires jingled all through the house, though the positive sound was not great. He started up, passed his father, and went down softly, through the dark, to the door. A man's tall figure stood between John and the luminous street. He was looking away; but at the sound of the latch he turned quickly round.
'Is this Mr. Watson's?' said he, in a clear, full, delicate voice.

'Harry!' John exclaimed, gratefully, and stretched out his hands to catch Harry’s, and draw him in before he was seen.

“John!” said he, “My mother! is she alive?”

“Yes, she is alive, dear, dear brother! She—as ill as she can be she is; but alive! She is alive!”

'Thank God!' Harry breathed.

'Father is utterly prostrate with this great grief.'

'You expect me, don't you?'

'No, we have had no letter.'

'Then I have come before it. But my mother knows I am coming?'

'Oh! we all knew you would come. But wait a little! Step in here. Give me your hand. What is this? Oh! your carpet-bag. Hudson has shut the shutters; but this is Father's study, and I can take you to a chair to rest yourself for a few minutes; while I go and tell him.'

John groped his way to the taper and the lucifer matches. He felt a certain reserve, when the little feeble light made them visible. All he could see was, that his brother's face was unusually dark in complexion, and he caught the stealthy look of a pair of remarkably long-cut blue eyes, that suddenly twinkled up with a droll consciousness of their mutual purpose of inspecting each other. But though the brothers had an instant of sympathy in their reciprocal glances, they did not exchange a word; only, John felt sure that he should like his brother as a companion as much as he already loved him as a near relation. His heart was already lighter as he went up-stairs; the sorrow was no less in reality, but it became less oppressive from having some one in precisely the same relation to it as that in which he stood. Not his father's desponding attitude had power to damp him now.

“Father! guess who is here!” John said, as he entered the room where his father lay still.

Mr. Watson looked at him; John saw the idea of the truth glimmer into their filmy sadness, and be dismissed thence as a wild imagination.

Throwing himself forward, and hiding his face once more in his stretched-out arms, Mr. Watson whispered, “I don't know. Don't tell me it is Harry—not Harry. I cannot bear it,—I am too weak. And his mother is dying!” He began to cry and wail like a child. It was so different to all which John had hoped and expected, that he turned sick with disappointment, and was silent for an instant. Then he spoke again, far more tenderly and carefully.

'Father, it is Harry! Think of Mother, how glad she will be! And oh, for her sake, how glad we ought to be! For his sake, too,—our poor, poor boy!'

Her father did not change his attitude, but he seemed to be trying to understand the fact.

'Where is he?' asked he at last, his face still hidden in his prostrate arms.

'In your study, quite alone. I lighted the taper, and came up to tell you. He is quite alone, and will be wondering why—'

'I will go to him.” Mr. Watson said.
John led his father to the study door, but his own spirits were so agitated that he felt he could not bear to see the meeting. Instead, he went into the kitchen, and stirred up the fire, and lighted the house, and prepared for the wanderer's refreshment. How fortunate it was that his mother slept! The traveller could be refreshed and bright, and the first excitement of the meeting with his father all be over, before Mother became aware of anything unusual.

When all was ready, John opened the study door, and went in like a serving-maiden, with a heavy tray in his arms. Harry took it from him, and, since the fire had gone out, John applied himself to light it, for the evenings had begun to be chilly; and yet it was desirable to make all noises as distant as possible from Mrs. Watson's room.

'Hudson says it is a gift to light a fire; not an art to be acquired.'

'Poeta nascitur, non fit,' murmured Mr. Watson; and John was glad to hear a quotation once more, however languidly given.

'Dear old Hudson! How we shall kiss each other!' said Harry. 'She used to kiss me, and then look in my face to be sure I was the right person, and then set to again! But, John, what a bungler you are! Run away, and wash them, ready to cut bread-and-butter for me since I have no wounds for you to stitch, and leave the fire. I'll manage it. Lighting fires is one of my natural accomplishments.'

John grinned at this, remembering the one time Harry had allowed him to stitch a wound—long before he had gone to Edinburgh—and sat to prepare the food as requested. The more wants Harry had, the better he was pleased. It was a joy snatched in the house of mourning, and the zest of it was all the more pungent, because they knew in the depths of their hearts what irremediable sorrow awaited them.

In the middle, they heard Hudson's foot on the stairs. Mr. Watson started from his languid posture in his great armchair, from which he had been watching his children in a dreamy way, as if they were acting some drama of happiness, which it was pretty to look at, but which was distinct from reality, and in which he had no part. He stood up, and faced the door, showing such a strange, sudden anxiety to conceal Harry from the sight of any person entering, even though it were the faithful Hudson, that a shiver came over John's heart: it reminded him of the new fear in their lives. He caught at Harry's arm, their bodies both tensed in readiness, though they knew it was only Hudson's measured tread. They heard her walk the length of the passage, into the kitchen. John rose up.

'I will go to her, and tell her. And I shall hear how Mother is.' Mrs. Watson was awake. She rambled at first; but after they had given her some tea she was refreshed, though not disposed to talk. It was better that the night should pass over before she was told of her son's arrival. Dr. Stapleton's appointed visit would bring nervous excitement enough for the evening.

John himself could not sit still. It was such a relief to him to aid Hudson in all her preparations for "Master Harry" that it seemed as though he never could be tired again. As he went to and fro, he looked into the parlour at Harry talking to Mr. Watson, taking in his brother's appearance and liking it. He had delicate features, much more so than John's own, redeemed from effeminacy by the swarthiness of his complexion, and his quick intensity of expression. His hair was a shade darker and his eyes were of a warmer blue than Johns, and his face was oval rather than square; if it had not been for certain twists of the mouth, or a quick winging of the brow upwards when surprised, they would scarcely have been said to be siblings at all.

However, as that first week elapsed, their interaction was easy and charming to John from the very first. He knew then how much responsibility he had had to bear, from the exquisite sensation of relief which he felt in Harry's presence. Harry too understood his father and mother—their
characters and their weaknesses, and went along with a careless freedom, which was yet most
delicately careful not to hurt or wound any of their feelings. He seemed to know instinctively
when a little of the natural brilliancy of his manner and conversation would not jar on the deep
depression of his father, or might relieve his mother's pain. Whenever it would have been out of
tune, and out of time, his patient devotion and watchfulness came into play, and made him an
admirable nurse.

John had been afraid before Harry came, even while he had longed for his coming; seven or eight
years had, he felt, produced such great changes in himself that, forgetting how much of the
original John was left, he had reasoned that if his tastes and feelings had so materially altered, even
in his more sedate, stay-at-home life, Harry’s wild career, with which John was but imperfectly
acquainted, must have almost substituted another Harry for the tall stripling in his middy's uniform,
whom John remembered looking up to with such admiring awe. But in their absence they had
grown nearer to each other in age, as well as in many other things. And so it was that the weight,
this sorrowful time, was lightened to John.

The only blight was that he could not allow very much time to Sherlock, now; they could not
meet. John missed Sherlock dreadfully; the lack of his presence, his touch, was a blankness John
could not fill. He wished that he could make Harry known to Sherlock but knew that, because of
Sherlock’s status as a magistrate, it was impossible.

He was thinking of this very thing one night, about a week after Harry’s arrival, as well as the
likelihood that, since Sherlock was much absorbed in the intricacies of trade he was almost
certainly neither eating nor sleeping, when a face popped up at his bedroom window. For one
horrible moment, John was reminded of the wave of fear he had felt when they were discovered in
the baths, but then he realized the face was Sherlock’s, and rushed to open the sash. Sherlock
tumbled in, somewhat ungracefully, but John seized him and, before Sherlock was quite recovered
in his dignity, John’s lips were upon his.

“You must be silent,” John gasped, breaking the kiss.

“Must I?” Sherlock grinned lazily.

“You must.” John was paralyzed by what the consequences might be should Harry come into the
room without knocking, as he was wont to do once their parents had both gone to bed. They had
had many confidential chats at these times, but John felt he would be hard-pressed to explain to
either side what was happening, and so he felt an urgency for Sherlock to be gone that warred
with his desire to be pressed close.

“My mother is so ill, Sherlock,” he said, somewhat faintly. “I cannot destroy her rest, and she is so
susceptible to noises out of the ordinary. You must go.”

“Very well,” Sherlock said. The stress in John’s voice and body showed to what point his
impromptu visit was unwelcome, and, especially with the abrupt volte-face of his behaviour, any
happiness drained from him. He could not quite fathom being so unwanted, and, so, giving a
brusque nod, he eluded John’s propitiating grasp and fled.
Chapter Summary

"When one tries to rise above Nature one is liable to fall below it."

Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Creeping Man”

Mrs. Watson has died, and John seeks comfort in the only place he can.

Chapter Notes

There is a great deal of explicit material here, so if, once again, you don't want to read about sexy passionate embraces involving historically accurate lubricant, you might want to wait until next week. Er, Sunday.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Sherlock disappeared out of the window, John’s first impulse was to follow him, to take him in his arms, to tell him he was wanted, loved, but Harry's tread was audible outside the door, and so he must stand, and open, and speak of various things, while his face must betray no agitation greater than could be attributed to the strain of his mother's illness and the secrecy of Harry’s presence in the house.

There was, however, a greater strain in store. Though, for a few hours, the mother had rallied on seeing Harry, never leaving go of his hand for a moment, she faded fast. That very night, convulsions came on; and when they ceased, Mrs. Watson was unconscious. Her husband might lie by her shaking the bed with his sobs; her elder son's strong arms might lift her tenderly up into a comfortable position; her younger son’s hands might bathe her face; but she knew them not. She would never recognise them again, till they met in Heaven.

Before the morning came all was over.

Then John had to become as a strong angel of comfort to his father and brother. For Harry had broken down now, and all his theories were of no use to him. He cried so violently when shut up alone in his little room at night, that John and Hudson came down in affright to warn him to be quiet: for the house partitions were but thin, and the next-door neighbours might easily hear his youthful passionate sobs, so different from the slower trembling agony of after-life, when we become inured to grief, and dare not be rebellious against the inexorable doom, knowing who it is that decrees.

John sat with his father in the room with the dead. If Mr. Watson had cried, John would have been thankful. But he sat by the bed quite quietly; only, from time to time, he uncovered the face, and stroked it gently, making a kind of soft inarticulate noise, like that of some mother-animal caressing her young. He took no notice of John's presence. Faced with Harry’s grief, he only shook his head:—'Poor boy! poor boy!' he said, and took no more notice.
John's heart ached within him, and he could not think of his own loss in thinking of his father's case, or his brother's. The only relief he had was making funeral arrangements, as Hudson insisted on preparing Mrs. Watson's wasted body for burial with her own hands. The father and brother depended upon him; while they were giving way to grief, he must be working, planning, considering.

When the fire was bright and crackling—when everything was ready for breakfast, and the tea-kettle was singing away, John gave a last look round the room before going to summon Mr. Watson and Harry. He wanted everything to look as cheerful as possible; and yet, when it did so, the contrast between it and his own thoughts brought tears to his eyes. He was slumped in a chair, face in his hands, when he was touched on the shoulder by Hudson.

'Come, Master John—come! You must not give way, or where shall we all be? There is not another person in the house fit to give a direction of any kind, and there is so much to be done. There's who's to manage the funeral; and who's to come to it; and where it's to be; and all to be settled; and Master Harry's like one crazed with crying, and master never was a good one for settling; and, poor gentleman, he goes about now as if he was lost. It's bad enough, my dear, I know; but death comes to us all; and you're well off never to have lost any friend till now.' Perhaps so. But this seemed a loss by itself; not to bear comparison with any other event in the world. John did not take any comfort from what Hudson said, but the unusual tenderness of the prim old servant's manner touched him to the heart; and, more from a desire to show his gratitude for this than for any other reason, he roused himself up, and smiled in answer to Hudson's anxious look; and went to tell his father and brother that breakfast was ready.

Mr. Watson came—as if in a dream, or rather with the unconscious motion of a sleep-walker, whose eyes and mind perceive other things than what are present. Harry came briskly in, with a forced cheerfulness, grasped John's hand, looked into his eyes, and burst into tears. John felt, though it was in direct contradiction to his feelings, had to try and think of little nothings to say all breakfast-time, in order to prevent the recurrence of his companions' thoughts too strongly to the last meal they had taken together, when there had been a continual strained listening for some sound or signal from the sick-room.

After breakfast, he resolved to speak to his father about the funeral. Mr. Watson shook his head, and assented to all John proposed, but John gained no real decision from him; and was leaving the room to have a consultation with Hudson, when Mr. Watson motioned her back to his side.

'Ask Mr. Stamford,' said he in a hollow voice.

'Mr. Stamford!' said he, a little surprised. 'Mr. Stamford of Oxford?'

'Mr. Stamford,' he repeated. 'Yes. He was my groom's-man.'

John understood the association.

'I will write to-day,' said he, and all morning he toiled on, longing for rest, but in a continual whirl of melancholy business. He wished he could send for Sherlock, wished for his presence, but could not bear the thought of asking for something when he himself had been so brusque the night before.

Towards evening, Hudson said to him,

'I've done it. I was really afraid for master, that he'd have a stroke with grief. I've heard him talking to mistress, and talking to her, as if she was alive. When I went in he would be quite quiet, but all in a maze like. So I thought to myself, he ought to be roused; and if it gives him a shock at first, it will, maybe, be the better afterwards. So I've been and told him, that I don't think it's safe for
Master Harry to be here. And I don't. It was only on Tuesday, when I was out, that I met a Southampton man—the first I've seen since I came to Milton; they don't make their way much up here, I think. Well, it was young Moriarty, old Moriarty the draper's son, as great a scamp as ever lived—who plagued his father almost to death, and then ran off, first to sea, then goodness knows where. I never could abide him. He was in the Orion at the same time as Master Harry, I know; though I don't recollect if he was there at the mutiny.'

'Did he know you?' said John, eagerly.

'Why, that's the worst of it. I don't believe he would have known me but for my being such a fool as to call out his name. He were a Southampton man, in a strange place, or else I should never have been so ready to speak to him, a nasty, good-for-nothing fellow. Says he, "Miss Hudson! who would ha' thought of seeing you here?" He asked after you, first, saying as he'd heard you was down from Edinburgh, and had been ill, and were you very well or were you still...he used a long word here... what was it, languiting?"

“Languishing,” John said, cold. Hudson continued,

“Then, he began to inquire after Master Harry, and said, what a scrape he'd got into (as if Master Harry's scrapes would ever wash Jim Moriarty's white, or make 'em look otherwise than nasty, dirty black), and how he'd be hung for mutiny if ever he were caught, and how a hundred pound reward had been offered for catching him, and what a disgrace he had been to his family—all to spite me, you see, my dear, because before now I've helped old Mr. Moriarty to give Jim a good scolding, down in Southampton. So I said, there were other families be thankful if they could think they were earning an honest living as I knew, who had far more cause to blush for their sons. To which he made answer, like the impudent chap he is, that he were in a confidential situation, and if I knew of any young man who had been so unfortunate as to fall afool of the law, or take a vicious path, and wanted to turn steady, he'd have no objection to lend him his patronage. He, indeed! Why, he'd corrupt a saint.'

'But you did not tell him anything about us—about Harry?'

'Not I,' said Hudson. 'He had never the grace to ask where I was staying; and I shouldn't have told him if he had asked. Nor did I ask him what his precious situation was. He was waiting for a bus, and just then it drove up, and he hailed it. But, to plague me to the last, he turned back before he got in, and said, "If you can help me to trap Lieutenant Watson, Miss Hudson, we'll go partners in the reward. I know you'd like to be my partner, now wouldn't you? Don't be shy, but say yes." And he jumped on the bus, and I saw his ugly face leering at me with a wicked smile to think how he'd had the last word of plaguing.'

John was made very uncomfortable by this account of Hudson's.

'Have you told Harry?' asked she.

'No,' said Hudson. 'I were uneasy in my mind at knowing that bad Moriarty was in town; but there was so much else to think about that I did not dwell on it at all. But when I saw master sitting so stiff, and with his eyes so glazed and sad, I thought it might rouse him to have to think of Master Harry's safety a bit. So I told him all, though I blushed to say how a young man had been speaking to me. And it has done master good. And if we're to keep Master Harry in hiding, he would have to go, poor fellow, before Mr. Stamford came.'

'Oh, I'm not afraid of Mr. Stamford; but I am afraid of this Moriarty. I must tell Harry. What did Moriarty look like?'

'A bad-looking fellow, I can assure you. Small, and dark, and his face all in a sneer. And for all he
said he'd got a confidential situation, he was dressed in fustian just like a working-man.'

It was evident that Harry must go. Go, too, when he had so completely vaulted into his place in the family. Go, when his cares for the living mother, and sorrow for the dead, seemed to make him indispensable. John went to bed that night with a heavy heart, and toiled dreamlike through the days before the funeral, his only object survival.

The post, the day before the funeral, nearly prevented him from achieving it. Mr. Stamford could not come. He had the gout, as he explained in a most affectionate letter. He hoped to come and pay them a visit soon, if they would have him; his Milton property required some looking after, and his agent had written to him to say that his presence was absolutely necessary. And yet, he would not be there on the day of the burial, and Mr. Watson’s distress was great.

Furthermore, the same post brought a stately note from Miss Holmes to Mr. Watson, saying that, at her brother's desire, their carriage should attend the funeral, if it would not be disagreeable to the family. John tossed the note to his father.

‘Let us go alone—you and me, Father. They don't care for us, or else he would have offered to go himself, and not have proposed this sending an empty carriage.’ He shrank back in his chair, knowing, thinking, that he had only himself to blame. It seemed such a mockery of mourning, though, that John would not have expected of Sherlock, that he startled his father by turning away, tears in his eyes, and hitting a wall until the plaster rained down. He had been so subdued in his grief, so thoughtful for others, so gentle and patient in all things, that neither Mr. Watson nor Harry could understand him, and though they tried to soothe him, the only thing to be done was for him to go to bed, under threat of having Dr. Stapleton summoned if he was not calm.

The day of the funeral itself dawned misty, but by the time they had breakfasted—or rather, pretended to breakfast—it was bright and clear. Even the habitual Milton smoke had dissipated in the brilliance of the fall sunshine. John resented the beauty of the day; he would have wished it raining, or foggy instead, had he had time to dwell on it at length, but he was too busy helping his father. Mr. Watson was absorbed in one idea—that the last visible token of the presence of his wife was to be carried away from him, and hidden from his sight. He trembled pitifully as the undertaker's man was arranging his crape draperies around him. He looked wistfully at John and Harry; and, when released, he tottered towards them, murmuring, 'Pray for me, boys. I have no strength left in me. I cannot pray. I give her up because I must. I try to bear it: indeed I do. I know it is God's will. But I cannot see why she died. Pray for me, my children.'

After a moment together, they left the drawing room in silence, Harry to watch from the upstairs window, and John, Mr. Watson, and Hudson in the coach.

John sat by his father in the coach, almost supporting him in his arms; and repeating all the words expressive of faithful resignation that he could remember. His voice never faltered; and he himself gained strength by doing this. His father's lips moved after him, repeating the well-known texts as the words suggested them; it was terrible to see the patient struggling effort to obtain the resignation which he had not strength to take into his heart as a part of himself.

John's fortitude nearly gave way as Hudson, with a slight motion of her hand, directed his notice to Gregory Lestrade and Molly Hooper, standing a little aloof, but deeply attentive to the ceremonial. Lestrade wore his usual fustian clothes, but had a bit of black stuff sewn round his hat—a mark of mourning which he had never shown to his daughter Janine's memory. Molly was pale and stood straight, her arm—John blinked to make sure his tears had not deceived his sight—linked in Lestrade’s. Hudson sobbed aloud; she covered her face with her handkerchief, and was
so absorbed in her own grief. John looked straight forward, after that, afraid that he would see Sherlock, and afraid that he would not.

Mr. Watson saw nothing. He went on repeating to himself, mechanically as it were, all the funeral service as it was read by the officiating clergyman; he sighed twice or thrice when all was ended; and then, putting his hand on John's arm, he mutely entreated to be led away, as if he were blind. John directed him towards the coach, but as he turned, there was Sherlock, dressed in somber clothes and wearing an expression that was deceptive in its sternness. John froze as those clear eyes swept over him, willing himself to retain his composure.

There was part of Sherlock that thrilled to see the breaking point in John’s eyes; there was selfishness enough in him to have taken pleasure in the idea that his great love might come in to comfort and console John. But this delicious vision of what might have been—in which, in spite of all John's repulse, he would have indulged only a few days ago—was disturbed by the memory of the coldness in John’s face, and, more worrisome perhaps, the masculine tread outside the door of his room that belonged neither to Dr. Stapleton nor Mr. Watson. It seemed impossible to him that John could or should deceive him, but he could not explain it away.

“Mr. Watson,” Sherlock said, turning to face his friend and gripping him by the hand. “I am so very sorry. May I call on you tomorrow?” Mr. Watson gripped his hand, wordlessly; John jumped, as if shot.

“You cannot,” he gasped, and watched as the curtain of indifference fell across Sherlock’s face again.

“What young Mr. Watson means,” Hudson interjected, “begging your pardon, sir, is that visitors will be welcome the day after to-morrow. We were sorry to have to deny you the other day; but circumstances was not agreeable just then.”

For a moment, Sherlock was stunned. Had John confided in his servant, then? But John’s expression showed that he had had the same moment of confusion, and relief swept through him. It was fleeting, though, as now he had to turn to John and condole with him, a brief, seemly greeting befitting their positions. He extended his hand, expecting hesitation, but there was none. John’s hand slipped into his and they paused for a moment, then shook.

“I am so very sorry.” Sherlock said softly.

“Thank you.” John did not let go.

“I will call when it is convenient.” This was more stiffly said.

“The day after tomorrow,” John said, then, made brave by desperate feeling, added “I will come by the infirmary after I have seen my father home.” Hudson looked slightly askance at this, but made no comment, and Mr. Watson was no more aware of what was happening next to him than what was happening in London.

“Yes,” was all Sherlock managed to say before John released his hand, and then they were gone.

As soon as his father and Hudson were inside, John departed through the dusk, careful not to run or to attract attention. Before he entered the mill, he looked around carefully, though he was not sure what sort of threat he was looking for. The face at the window seemed to belong to another lifetime, so much had occurred, and yet he would not take another step towards danger if he could help it.

Slipping through the door, he found himself immediately in Sherlock’s arms.
“You’re here.” John said, his face muffled in Sherlock’s coat, “Forgive me for.. for my forwardness—I know it is not safe—and for the other day. I was.. not myself, and I was unkind.”

“It was impulsive…foolish. Forgive me,” Sherlock said, inhaling the scent of John’s hair, “and I am more glad than I can say that you are here.”

John looked up, and, without hesitation, kissed Sherlock hard on the mouth. Sherlock, who had been expecting John to be pliant in his grief, felt the accumulated tension of that straight, compact body flow towards the embrace. He tried to take it in and still retain a sense of his own edges, but the power of John’s mouth, hot and seeking, was too much, and his knees buckled. John manoeuvred him towards the wall, and pressed him against it, maintaining his devastatingly thorough kiss all the while. Sherlock sank back, now, present in all his body, and let John’s hands unbutton his coat, his waistcoat, and then, mercifully, his shirt. Those hands were now insistent against his skin, first at his chest and his back, before they dipped to cup his arse. Sherlock sighed his approval into John’s mouth, giving himself up; John accepted his surrender by pulling him closer. Sherlock’s cock was lodged against John’s thigh, now, and John’s against Sherlock’s, and they rocked together, gasping.

When John broke the embrace, Sherlock protested, but was forestalled by hands at his thighs. John unbuttoned determinedly, catching at the fastenings in his haste. Sherlock tried to help him, to expedite the process, to expose John’s skin, but John pushed his help away. Sherlock tipped his head back against the wall, willing himself to be patient with the fluctuating pressure against the front of his trousers. He was dizzy with the intensity of John’s caresses, and his cock pressed uncomfortably against his drawers.

As John stood back to divest himself of his own clothes, Sherlock watched the economical movements that bared that slender frame. In the gaslight, John was pale ivory, the dip and curve of each muscle thrown into light or shadow. His cock stood out from his body, and Sherlock reached for it. John shook his head and dropped to his knees. His hands were steadier now, and in short order Sherlock’s tool was freed and, in no time at all, between John’s lips. Sherlock felt he should reach down and pull John up, serve him rather than be served, but John clearly felt otherwise, and so Sherlock steeled himself and watched, this time, though the sight and sensation together were almost his undoing. John sucked fiercely, every movement speaking of his passion. He gloried in the smooth hardness and the salt taste under his tongue that came with every throb of sensation that Sherlock felt.

He stopped reluctantly, when Sherlock’s stones were so tight against his body and the salt taste intensified, and rose. Pinning Sherlock to the wall anew with his hips, John kissed him until they were both whimpering.

Sherlock himself ran his hands all over John’s body, feeling each muscle under the richness of that ivory skin. John smelled of some light soap, of sweat, of arousal, and Sherlock breathed it in from his mouth, his hair, his neck, each scented breath going straight to the heavy warmth in his belly. John bit Sherlock’s neck, burying his face in the crook of the shoulder and letting Sherlock’s large hands leach the pain from him. Their cocks were aligned, but John didn’t thrust; the merest whisper would bring them to spend, and he wanted everything Sherlock could give him.

“Take off your clothes,” he growled, and Sherlock shivered. It pained him to tear his hands away, but he did, and reached for his shirt. John waited, none too patiently, and the moment they were both bare, he pounced, pulling all of Sherlock against him and bearing him to the floor with such force that Sherlock went, unresisting. John set his knee between Sherlock’s thighs and, pinned his hands to the floor. He kissed his way down Sherlock’s body, tonguing each nipple and tasting the flat planes of his chest.

Then, he sat back again, and surveyed the helpless, responsive man beneath him. Sherlock was
watching him still, but there was no trace of sternness or composure in his face. His cheeks were flushed, and his pupils dilated; his mouth was open and his breath came hard. John grinned, feeling as though he had triumphed over something very great—not a destructive triumph, but a victory that came with only good things—and suddenly, he knew he could ask for what he desired for them both.

“Please,” Sherlock said, seeing the flash in his eyes.

“I would have you, Sherlock, if you would let me,” John said.

Sherlock felt a shiver through his whole body. John to possess him! It seemed unthinkable and yet something he had wanted desperately without knowing it.

John held back, waiting for acquiescence, and, after one moment, Sherlock sat up on his elbows and nodded. They didn’t yet touch, though, and their longing hung in the air until Sherlock reached out his hand to John. John took it, kissed it, and then, teasingly, put one of his own fingers in his mouth and sucked.

Sherlock closed his eyes for a moment, knowing, wanting what John would do next. He held perfectly still as John’s damp finger trailed along the underside of his cock, down the crease of his thigh, and then, shockingly, up the other.

“Please,” he said again, and he closed his eyes. A pause, and then, mercifully, John’s finger was back at the crux of his thighs, soft against the sensitive skin. He opened his legs and felt the lightest touch at his arsehole, and heard John’s shuddering breath.

John, in fact, was in no condition to tease Sherlock any further. He was increasingly desperate, consumed by a need to lose himself in Sherlock’s body, and yet he knew he must have a modicum of control if Sherlock were to find pleasure in this. And so he counted his breaths, and eased his finger in; first one, then two, watching Sherlock stiffen at first, then open. He bent to suck his cock again, and Sherlock arched up, driving himself further on to John’s fingers.

“John,” he begged, and John withdrew his hand. He bent forward to kiss Sherlock again, and they melted into each other, breath mingling. It was then, as his cock dragged over Sherlock’s thigh, that John realized just how badly he needed to be inside this man.

“It may hurt, Sherlock; tell me to stop if you must,” he said.

“Anything, John,” Sherlock panted, and John resolved to go as carefully as he could. He had seen, from the corner of his eye, a jar of whale oil on the neat equipment shelf. He tore himself away from Sherlock’s body to fetch it now. Sherlock lay waiting for him, in an attitude of perfect trust. He knelt down again, and, with a slippery hand, grasped Sherlock’s tool, eliciting a deep sigh.

Sherlock nearly fainted when John’s hand came upon him, especially as, at nearly the same time, John placed his slicked cock slicked against Sherlock’s opening. Sherlock pushed down eagerly, but John held back a moment, afraid he would go too fast.

“Tell me, now,” he breathed, “if it hurts.”

“It won’t,” Sherlock said, his voice low. John began to enter, and felt Sherlock’s body close around him. Sherlock gasped at the first contact, then arched towards him greedily. John felt his consciousness become heightened; the pleasure seemed to sharpen his perceptions, and he felt every thing around him: the warm slickness around his cock, the roughness of Sherlock’s thighs, the scent of arousal in the room, the far-off sound of shouting in the street. He took it all in,
feeling alive and whole.

Sherlock watched John’s face, smooth and joyous with pleasure, as they joined together. How miraculous it was to feel John’s living body in his, the pulse of his cock, the strain of Sherlock’s own flesh. John was fully seated now, and Sherlock lifted his hips to be yet closer. John took this as a signal to begin moving; Sherlock tried to follow the rhythm, but could not quite. He got lost time after time in the to-and-fro of their bodies, each thrust of John’s a further wave of pleasure, gently pushing him on towards the apex.

The pace John set had been slow, but his desire was great, and his pleasure rose rapidly. Again and again he buried himself in Sherlock’s body, and miraculously, Sherlock rose to meet him. When he lost himself at last, Sherlock was there, taking him in, caressing his back, showering him with small kisses as he drove in for the last time and collapsed, panting. Sherlock gave two, three pushes against his belly and convulsed as well, as John kissed his neck.

They lay like that, one flesh, for a long silent stretch, before John felt the cold core of grief inside himself thaw, loosing many days’ worth of unshed tears overflowed on to Sherlock’s chest.

“She is gone, and I am sorry for it, John,” Sherlock was less at ease with comforting words than he had been with the actions that had soothed John before. John did not answer, only sobbed out his relief, grateful beyond everything for Sherlock’s presence now, he hoped, and always.

Chapter End Notes

I am sorry this is so late. My busy summer finally caught up with me. I will be back on track this Sunday. There are some exciting plot points coming up!

I’m also sorry about the whale oil (kind of), but it was legitimately used as machine lubricant and would have been on hand.
A Truth, Once Revealed

Chapter Summary

"There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact."
Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Boscombe Valley Mystery”

Moriarty becomes a genuine threat to John and Sherlock...but so does Harry Watson.

John crept in, hoping to be unnoticed; he wanted desperately to cradle his grief and his love to himself, just for an hour, to feel the scent of Sherlock on his skin. However, his father, who had been restless and uneasy under the pressure of his newly-aroused fear for Harry, heard him and called him into the drawing room. Harry, too, came in, his brightness dimmed, but the extreme violence of his grief passed away. He came up to John, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

'How wan you look, John!' said he in a low voice. 'You have been thinking of everybody, and no one has thought of you.'

"I'm well enough, Harry," he said, then, thinking it as well that they know, told him all that Hudson had related of her interview with young Moriarty. Harry's lips closed with a long whew of dismay.

'I should just like to have it out with that young fellow. A worse sailor was never on board ship—nor a much worse man either. When all the sailors who were good for anything were indignant with our captain, this fellow, to curry favour—pah! And to think of his being here! Oh, if he'd a notion I was within twenty miles of him, he'd ferret me out to pay off old grudges. You, too, John; I don’t think he has any grace for any member of our family, and he will do you a bad turn if he can.'

'Oh, Harry, hush! Don't talk so.'

Mr. Watson came towards them, eager and trembling. He had overheard what they were saying. He took Harry's hand in both of his:

'My boy, you must go. It is very bad—but I see you must. You have done all you could—you have been a comfort to her.'

'Oh, Father, must he go?' said John, pleading against his own conviction of necessity.

'I declare, I've a good mind to face it out, and stand my trial. If I could only pick up my evidence! I cannot endure the thought of being in the power of such a blackguard as Moriarty. I could almost have enjoyed—in other circumstances—this stolen visit: it has had all the charm which the French-woman attributed to forbidden pleasures.'

John started. 'Forbidden pleasures'—that is what he and Sherlock had indulged in. Was it always to be thus for them?

'Yes—you must go,' repeated Mr. Watson, breaking John’s train of thought.

John and Harry looked at each other. That quick momentary sympathy would be theirs no longer if he went away.

'Do you know, John,' Harry said, "I was very nearly giving both Hudson and myself a good fright this afternoon. I was in my bedroom; I had heard a ring at the front door, but I thought the ringer must have done his business and gone away long ago; so I was on the point of making my appearance in the passage, when, as I opened my room door, I saw Hudson coming downstairs; and she frowned and kicked me into hiding again. I kept the door open, and heard a message given to some man that was in my father's study, and that then went away. Who could it have been? Some of the shopmen?'

'Very likely,' said John, indifferently. 'There was a little quiet man who came up for orders about two o'clock.'
'But this was not a little man—a great powerful fellow; and it was past four when he was here.'
'It was Mr. Holmes,' said Mr. Watson. They were glad to have drawn him into the conversation. 'Sherlock Holmes!' said John, a little surprised. 'I thought——'
'What did you think?' asked Harry, as John did not finish his sentence.
'Oh, only,' said he, reddening, but looking straight at him, 'I thought you meant some one of a different class, not a gentleman; somebody come on an errand.'
'He looked like some one of that kind,' said Harry, carelessly. 'I took him for a shopman, and he turns out a manufacturer.'

John was silent. He remembered how at first, before he knew Sherlock’s character, she had spoken and thought of him just as Harry was doing. Though he was a little annoyed by it, he was unwilling to speak; he wanted to make Harry understand what kind of person Sherlock was—but he was tongue-tied.

Mr. Watson went on. 'He came to offer any assistance in his power, I believe. But I could not see him. I told Hudson to ask him if he would like to see you—I think I asked her to find you, and you would go to him. I don't know what I said.'

'He has been a very agreeable acquaintance, has he not?' asked Harry, throwing the question like a ball for any one to catch who chose.

'A very kind friend,' said John, when his father did not answer.

Harry was silent for a time. At last he spoke:

'John, it is painful to think I can never thank those who have shown you kindness. Your acquaintances and mine must be separate. Unless, indeed, I run the chances of a court-martial, or unless you and my father would come to Spain. I would so like to have you near me. I have a good place, and a chance of a better, and I am sure the climate would agree with you both.'

'No—no more removals for me,' said Mr. Watson. 'One removal has cost me my wife. No more removals in this life. She will be here; and here will I stay out my appointed time.'

'We cannot,' John agreed, thinking of Sherlock, 'Harry, won’t you try and clear yourself of the exaggerated charges brought against you, even if the charge of mutiny itself be true. If there were to be a court-martial, and you could find your witnesses, you might, at any rate, show how your disobedience to authority was because that authority was unworthily exercised.'

Mr. Watson roused himself up to listen to his son's answer.

'In the first place, John, who is to hunt up my witnesses? All of them are sailors, drafted off to other ships, except those whose evidence would go for very little, as they took part, or sympathised in the affair. In the next place, allow me to tell you, you don't know what a court-martial is, and consider it as an assembly where justice is administered, instead of what it really is—a court where authority weighs nine-tenths in the balance, and evidence forms only the other tenth. In such cases, evidence itself can hardly escape being influenced by the prestige of authority.'

'But is it not worth trying, to see how much evidence might be discovered and arrayed on your behalf? At present, all those who knew you formerly, believe you guilty without any shadow of excuse. You have never tried to justify yourself, and we have never known where to seek for proofs of your justification. Now, make your conduct as clear as you can in the eye of the world. You disobeyed authority—that was bad; but to have stood by, without word or act, while the authority was brutally used, would have been infinitely worse. People know what you did; but not the motives that elevate it out of a crime into a heroic protection of the weak.'

'But how must I make them know? I am not sufficiently sure of the purity and justice of those who would be my judges, to give myself up to a court-martial, even if I could bring a whole array of truth-speaking witnesses.”'

'Will you consult a lawyer as to your chances of exculpation?' asked John, looking up, and turning very red.

'I must first catch my lawyer, and have a look at him, and see how I like him, before I make him into my confidant.'

'Nonsense, Harry!—because I know a lawyer on whose honour I can rely; of whose cleverness in his profession people speak very highly; and who would, I think, take a good deal of trouble for
'I think it is a good idea,' said Mr. Watson. 'But don't propose anything which will detain Harry in England. Don't, for your mother's sake.'

'You could go to London to-morrow evening by a night-train,' continued John, warming up into his plan. 'He must go to-morrow, I'm afraid, Father; we fixed that, because of Mr. Stamford, and Hudson's disagreeable acquaintance.'

'Yes; I must go to-morrow,' said Harry decidedly.

Mr. Watson groaned. 'I can't bear to part with you, and yet I am miserable with anxiety as long as you stop here.'

'Well then,' said John, 'listen to my plan. He gets to London on Friday morning. I will—you might—no! it would be better for me to give him a note to Mr. Lennox. You will find him at his chambers in the Temple.'

'I will write down a list of all the names I can remember on board the Orion. I could leave it with him to ferret them out.'

'Do,' said John, 'And it will be a risk only it is worth trying. You can sail from London as well as from Liverpool?'

'To be sure.'

John wrote to Sholto by the next post. He did rather wonder whether Mary would see the letter, but pushed the idea from his mind.

All the next day they sat together—they three. Mr. Watson hardly ever spoke but when his children asked him questions, and forced him, as it were, into the present. The anxious terror in which Mr. Watson lived lest his son should be detected and captured, far out-weighed the pleasure he derived from his presence. The nervousness had increased since Mrs. Watson's death, probably because he dwelt upon it more exclusively. He started at every unusual sound; and was never comfortable unless Harry sate out of the immediate view of any one entering the room. Towards evening he said:

'You will go with Harry to the station, John? I shall want to know he is safely off. You will bring me word that he is clear of Milton, at any rate?'

'Certainly,' said John. 'I shall like it, if you won't be lonely without me, Father.'

'No, no! I should always be fancying some one had known him, and that he had been stopped, unless you could tell me you had seen him off. And go to the Outwood station. It is quite as near, and not so many people about. Take a cab there. There is less risk of his being seen. What time is your train, Harry?'

'Ten minutes past six; very nearly dark.'

"All the better, then," said Mr. Watson, and they lapsed into silence.

John was thankful when the parting was over—the parting from the dead mother and the living father. He hurried Harry into the cab, in order to shorten a scene which he saw was so bitterly painful to his father. Partly in consequence of this, and partly owing to one of the very common mistakes in the 'Railway Guide' as to the times when trains arrive at the smaller stations, they found, on reaching Outwood, that they had nearly twenty minutes to spare. The booking-office was not open, so they could not even take the ticket. They accordingly went down the flight of steps that led to the level of the ground below the railway. There was a broad cinder-path diagonally crossing a field which lay along-side of the carriage-road, and they went there to walk backwards and forwards, companionably close, for the few minutes they had to spare.

'John!' said Harry, "I am going to consult Mr. Lennox as to the chance of exculpating myself, so that I may return to England whenever I choose, more for your sake than for the sake of any one else. I can't bear to think of your lonely position if anything should happen to my father. He looks sadly changed."

"He is, very much. I do not know what will become of him—he is very susceptible to illness, just now."  

"What will become of you, then, John, if he should go as well." They were standing still for a moment, close on the field side of the stile leading into the road; the setting sun fell on their faces.
Harry grasped John’s arm, and looked with wistful anxiety into his face, reading there more care and trouble than John would betray by words. John said:

'We shall write often to one another, and I will promise—for I see it will set your mind at ease—to tell you every worry I have. Father is'—she started a little, a hardly visible start—but Harry felt the sudden motion of the hand he held, and turned his full face to the road, along which a horseman was slowly riding, just passing the very stile where they stood. John bowed; his bow was stiffly returned.

'Who is that?' said Harry, almost before he was out of hearing. John felt a lump of ice form in his belly as he replied:

'Sherlock Holmes; you saw him before, you know.'

'Only his back. He is an unprepossessing-looking fellow. What a scowl he has!'

'Something has happened to vex him,' said John, apologetically. 'You would not have thought him unprepossessing if you had seen him with Mother.'

'I fancy it must be time to go and take my ticket. If I had known how dark it would be, we wouldn't have sent back the cab, John.'

'Oh, don't fidget about that. I can take a cab here, if I like; or go back by the rail-road, when I should have shops and people and lamps all the way from the Milton station-house. Don't think of me; take care of yourself. I am sick with the thought that Moriarty may be in the same train with you. Look well into the carriage before you get in.'

They went back to the station. John insisted upon going into the full light of the flaring gas inside to take the ticket. Some idle-looking young men were lounging about with the stationmaster. John, made nervous by this group, went hastily to his brother, who was standing outside, and took hold of his arm.

'Have you got your bag? Let us walk about here on the platform.' It was too late; they heard a step following them along the flags; it stopped when they stopped, looking out along the line and hearing the whizz of the coming train. They did not speak; their hearts were too full. Another moment, and the train would be here; a minute more, and he would be gone. John almost repented the urgency with which he had entreated Harry to go to London; it was throwing more chances of detection in his way. If he had sailed for Spain by Liverpool, he might have been off in two or three hours.

Harry turned round, right facing the lamp, where the gas darted up in vivid anticipation of the train. A man in the dress of a railway porter started forward, a bad-looking man, whose eyes seemed to see every thing.

"Well hello, my little catamite," said he, pushing John rudely on one side, and seizing Harry by the collar.

"Your name is Watson, I believe?"

Moriarty! John reached for him, but, already, by some sleight of wrestling, Harry had tripped him up, and he fell from the height of three or four feet, which the platform was elevated above the space of soft ground, by the side of the railroad. There he lay, unmoving.

"Run, run!" gasped John. "The train is here. Oh, run! I will carry your bag." And he took Harry by the arm to push him along. A door was opened in a carriage—he jumped in; and though he leant out to wave, the expression on his face was blank; then, the train rushed past, and John was left standing alone.

His immediate impulse was to go back and give Moriarty a drubbing; his insolence, coupled with his very real ability to have Harry killed—and, John suspected, damage both Sherlock and himself—was the last straw. He attempted to compose himself, though, and as he was doing so, he heard some railway officials talking loudly to one another.

'So Moriarty has been drinking again!' said one, seemingly in authority. 'He'll need all his boasted influence to keep his place this time.'

'Where is he?' asked another, while John, her back towards them, was counting her change with trembling fingers, not daring to turn round until she heard the answer to this question.

'I don't know. He came in not five minutes ago, with some long story or other about a fall he'd
had, swearing awfully; and wanted to borrow some money from me to go to London by the next up-train. I told him to go about his business; and he went off at the front door.'

'He's at the nearest vaults, I'll be bound,' said the first speaker. 'Your money would have gone there too, if you'd been such a fool as to lend it.'

'Catch me! I knew better what his London meant. Why, he has never paid me off that five shillings'—and so they went on.

So, John thought, he has gone already. He should go to Sherlock, he knew, but he would then have to explain about Harry, and any communication now would jeopardize Harry’s safety. Though he longed to be with Sherlock again, to find security and relief in his body and presence, Sherlock’s face as he saw him with Harry gave John pause. He would go home, he thought, home. A day or two, just to help his father, and then he would go to Sherlock at the infirmary and explain everything.

Home seemed unnaturally quiet after all this terror and noisy commotion. His father had seen all due preparation made for his refreshment and then sat down again in his accustomed chair, to fall into one of his sad waking dreams. John had resolved not to mention the crowning and closing affright to his father. There was no use in speaking about it; it had ended well; the only thing to be feared was lest Moriarty should in some way borrow money enough to effect his purpose of following Harry to London, and hunting him out there. But there were immense chances against the success of any such plan; and John determined not to torment himself by thinking of what he could do nothing to prevent. Harry would already be on his guard, and in a day or two at most he would be safely out of England.

The next day, he received a letter that made things yet more precarious. Mr. Lennox was out of town; his clerk said that he would return by the following Tuesday at the latest; that he might possibly be at home on Monday. Consequently, after some consideration, Harry had determined upon remaining in London a day or two longer. He had thought of coming down to Milton again; the temptation had been very strong; but the idea of Mr. Stamford domesticated in his father's house, and the alarm he had received at the last moment at the railway station, had made him resolve to stay in London. John might be assured he would take every precaution against being tracked by Moriarty. John was thankful that he received this letter while his father was absent; had been present, he would have been expected to read it aloud, and it would have raised in Mr. Watson a state of nervous alarm.

John, too, in fact, as it entailed both deceiving his father and concealing things from Sherlock. Many a time did John repent of having suggested and urged on the plan of consulting Mr. Lennox. At the moment, it had seemed as if it would occasion so little delay—add so little to the apparently small chances of detection; and yet everything that had since occurred had tended to make it so undesirable. So he gathered all his internal resources and used them to make his father’s day calm but amusing, while inwardly he chafed at the restraint and inaction.

Sherlock, meanwhile, rode home in a state of shock. He was haunted by the remembrance of the handsome young man, with whom John had stood in an attitude of such familiar confidence; and the remembrance shot through him like an agony, till it made him clench his hands tight in order to subdue the pain. At that late hour, so far from home! It took a great moral effort to galvanise his trust—erewhile so perfect—in John's attachment, into life; as soon as the effort ceased, his trust dropped down dead and powerless: and all sorts of wild fancies chased each other like dreams through his mind. There, then was the man in John's home, an interloper, he who had caused John to retreat from him.

This was the tenor of Sherlock’s mind. Perspicacious as he was in discerning the affairs of other men, in his own he was curiously blind. It seemed so unlikely that John loved him as truly as he said, that he accepted the presence of another man in John’s life, and only grieved for his own mistake.

And grief it was. After passing John and the other man, he was almost blinded by his baffled passion. He was as dizzy as if John had beaten him, in positive bodily pain, with a violent headache, and a throbbing intermittent pulse. He could not bear the noise, the garish light, the continued rumble and movement of the street. He called himself a fool for suffering so; and yet he
could not, at the moment, recollect the cause of his suffering, and whether it was adequate to the consequences it had produced. It would have been a relief to him, if he could have sat down and cried on a door-step by a little child, who was raging and storming, through his passionate tears, at some injury he had received. He said to himself, that he hated John, but a wild, sharp sensation of love cleft his dull, thunderous feeling like lightning, even as he shaped the words expressive of hatred. He loved John, and would love him, despite his inconstancy.

Sherlock stood still for a moment, to make this resolution firm and clear. He paced through the streets, walking briskly, because the sharp motion relieved his mind. He could remember all about it now; the pitiful figure he must have cut; the absurd way in which he had gone and done the very thing he had so often agreed with himself in thinking would be the most foolish thing in the world: falling in love. He had met with exactly the consequences which, in these wise moods, he had always fore-told were certain to follow, if he ever did make such a fool of himself. Was he bewitched by those beautiful eyes, that straight body, that quick mind? He could not say, but only remain convinced that there never was, never could be, any one like John; though his love would never be returned, neither John nor the whole world—should ever hinder him from loving. And so Sherlock returned home, in the silence of the night.

‘Deceived you, has he?’ said Myfanwy, from the dark of the stair.

‘If you are behind this, Myfanwy Holmes, I will set you out on the street,’ said Sherlock.

Myfanwy said no more, much perturbed by the weariness in his voice, and Sherlock went upstairs to his room without another word, to sit sleepless at his window until the daylight came.
Knowledge

Chapter Summary

“What you do in this world is a matter of no consequence. The question is what can
you make people believe you have done.”
— Arthur Conan Doyle, A Study in Scarlet

In which secrecy proves to have been futile, and knowledge proves to be just true
enough to keep John and Sherlock apart.

For John, to go about his business was a terrible strain. About Harry, there was great uneasiness. The Sunday post intervened, and interfered with their London letters; and on Tuesday John was surprised and disheartened to find that there was still no letter. He was quite in the dark as to Harry’s plans, and their father was miserable at all this uncertainty. It broke in upon his lately acquired habit of sitting still in one easy chair for half a day together. He kept pacing up and down the room; then out of it, and John heard him upon the landing opening and shutting the bed-room doors, without any apparent object. He tried to tranquillise him by reading aloud; but it was evident he could not listen for long together. How thankful John was then, that he had kept to himself the additional cause for anxiety produced by their encounter with Moriarty.

As he was laying down his book, Hudson came to the door and said, 'Master John, you are wanted.'

Hudson’s manner was so flurried that John turned sick at heart. Something had happened to Harry. Je had no doubt of that. It was well that his father was lost in his own world.

'What is it, Hudson?' asked John, the moment he had shut the drawing-room door.

'Come this way,' said Hudson, opening the door of what had been Mrs. Watson's bed-chamber, now John's, for his father refused to sleep there again after his wife's death. 'It's nothing,' said Hudson, choking a little. 'Only a police-inspector. He wants to see you. But I dare say, it's about nothing at all.'

'Did he name——' asked John, almost inaudibly.

'No, he named nothing. He only asked if you lived here, and if he could speak to you. I showed him into master’s study, and asked him if I would do; but no—it's you he wants.'

John did not speak again till his hand was on the lock of the study door. Here she turned round and said, 'Take care Father does not come down.'

The inspector was almost daunted by the haughtiness of John’s manner as he entered. There was no surprise, no curiosity, only a brief nod, then silence as he awaited the inspector’s questions.

'I beg your pardon, sir, but my duty obliges me to ask you a few plain questions. A man lies very ill at the Infirmary, in consequence of a fall, received at Outwood station, between the hours of five and six on Thursday evening, the twenty-sixth instant. At the time, this fall did not seem of much consequence; but it has gotten much worse, and looks likely to be fatal. He swears, sir, that you were responsible.'
Inwardly, John started. Moriarty! And yet Moriarty knew that John had not pushed him. What was he playing at?

Yet from the outside, there was no motion perceptible to the inspector’s experienced observation.

‘There was another man with you, according to Moriarty,’” the inspector added. John was expecting this, and so his lips did not thin, and his hands remained steady, so determined was he to protect Harry’s life and liberty.

‘I was not there,’” said John, fixing the inspector with a clear blue gaze.

The inspector bowed but did not speak. The gentleman standing before him showed no emotion, no fluttering fear, no anxiety, no desire to end the interview. The information he had received was very vague; one of the porters, rushing out to be in readiness for the train, had seen a scuffle, at the other end of the platform, between Moriarty and two gentlemen, but heard no noise; and before the train had got to its full speed after starting, he had been almost knocked down by the headlong run of the enraged Moriarty, swearing and cursing awfully. He had not thought any more about it, till his evidence was routed out by the inspector, who, on making some farther inquiry at the railroad station, had heard from the station-master that two young gentlemen had been there at about that hour. One, some grocer's assistant present at the time, said to be a Mr. Watson, living at Crampton, whose family dealt at his shop.

Moriarty himself had gone, half-mad with rage and pain, to the nearest gin-palace for comfort; and his tipsy words had not been attended to by the busy waiters there; they, however, remembered his starting up and cursing himself for not having sooner thought of the electric telegraph, for some purpose unknown; and they believed that he left with the idea of going there. On his way, overcome by pain or drink, he had lain down in the road, where the police had found him and taken him to the Infirmary. Once he had had glimmerings of sense sufficient to make the authorities send for the nearest magistrate, but when the magistrate had come, he was rambling about being at sea, and mixing up names of captains and lieutenants in an indistinct manner with those of his fellow porters at the railway. It was only later, when the magistrate had left, that Moriarty’s mind had seemed to clear and he had accused John Watson.

The inspector ran all this over in his mind: the vagueness of the evidence to prove that John had been at the station, the unflinching, calm denial which he gave to such a supposition, the mad ravings of Moriarty.

‘Then, sir, I have your denial that you struck the blow, or gave the push, which caused the injury of this poor man?’

A quick, sharp pain went through John's brain. 'Oh God! that I knew Harry were safe!' A deep observer of human countenances might have seen the momentary agony shoot out of her great gloomy eyes, like the torture of some creature brought to bay. But the inspector though a very keen, was not a very deep observer. He was a little struck, notwithstanding, by the form of the answer, which sounded like a mechanical repetition of John’s first reply—not changed and modified in shape so as to meet his last question.

‘I was not there,’” said he, slowly and heavily. The inspector’s quick suspicions were aroused by this dull echo of John’s former denial. It was as if he had forced himself to one untruth, and had been stunned out of all power of varying it.

Inspector Mark put up his book of notes in a very deliberate manner. Then he looked up; John had not moved any more than if he had been a statue.

‘I hope you will not think me impertinent when I say, that I may have to call on you again. I may
have to summon you to appear on the inquest, and prove an alibi, if my witnesses' (it was but one who had recognised her) 'persist in deposing to your presence at the unfortunate event.' A sharp look showed that John was still perfectly quiet—no change of colour, or darker shadow of guilt, on his proud face, and the inspector was a little abashed by such regal composure. It must have been a mistake of identity. He went on:

'It is very unlikely, sir, that I shall have to do anything of the kind. I hope you will excuse me for doing what is only my duty, although it may appear impertinent.'

John bowed as the inspector went towards the door. His jaw was set and he could not speak even the common words of farewell, but he saw the man out and watched him go, outwardly calm. Then, once he had turned the corner down to Elsevier Lane, John went quietly into the study, shut the door, and put his head into his hands. He did not move for a long, long time.

There were two incontrovertible facts: that Harry had been in danger of being pursued and detected in London, as not only guilty of manslaughter, but as the more unpardonable leader of the mutiny, and that John had lied to save him. There was one comfort; her lie had saved him, if only by gaining some additional time. If the inspector came again to-morrow, after John had received the letter he longed for to assure him of his brother's safety, he would take his medicine, acknowledging before a crowded justice-room, if need were, that he had been as 'a dog, and done this thing.' But if the inspector came before he heard from Harry; if he returned, as he had half threatened, in a few hours, why! John would tell that lie again; though how the words would come out, after all this terrible pause for reflection and self-reproach, without betraying his falsehood, he did not know. But his repetition of it would gain time—time for Harry.

Sherlock himself was in Crampton that day, on some piece of business intent, when a passing omnibus stopped close by him, and a man got down, and came up to him, touching his hat as he did so. It was the police-inspector.

Sherlock had obtained for him his first situation in the police, but they had not often met, and at first Mr. Holmes did not remember him.

'My name is Mark—Steven Mark, sir, that you got——'

'Ah, yes! I recollect. Why you are getting on famously, I hear.'

'Yes, sir. I ought to thank you, sir. But it is on a little matter of business I made so bold as to speak to you now. There’s a poor man in the Infirmary who’s deathly ill, sir, and he’s accused a young Mr. Watson of causing the fall that hurt him.'

'His name?' Sherlock asked, as if made of stone.

'Moriarty, sir.'

'Moriarty? One of my mother's servants is engaged to him, I believe, and she was in great distress earlier to-day. Where is he now?'

'Why, sir, his death is oddly mixed up with somebody in the house I saw you coming out of just now; it was a Mr. Watson's, I believe.'

'Yes!' said Mr. Holmes, turning sharp round and looking into the inspector's face with sudden interest. 'What about it?'

'Why, sir, it seems to me that I have got a pretty distinct chain of evidence, inculpating Mr. Watson
and another gentlemen that night at the Outwood station. Moriarty states that the former pushed him off the platform and so caused his injury. But Mr. Watson denies that he was there at the time.'

'Mr. Watson denies he was there!' repeated Mr. Holmes, in an altered voice. 'Tell me, what evening was it? What time?'

'About six o'clock, on the evening of Thursday, the twenty-sixth.'

They walked on, side by side, in silence for a minute or two. The inspector was the first to speak.

'You see, sir, there is like to be a coroner's inquest; and I've got a young shopman who is pretty positive,—at least he was at first;—since he has heard of the gentleman’s denial, he says he should not like to swear; but still he's pretty positive that he saw young Mr. Watson at the station, walking about with another gentleman, not five minutes before the time, when one of the porters saw a scuffle, which he set down to some of Moriarty' impudence—but which led to the fall which injured him. And, sir, I thought I might make bold to ask if—you see, it's always awkward having to do with cases of disputed identity, and one doesn't like to doubt the word of a respectable man unless one has strong proof to the contrary.'

'And he denied having been at the station that evening!' repeated Mr. Holmes, in a low, brooding tone.

'Yes, sir, twice over, as distinct as could be. I told him I should call again, but seeing you just as I was on my way back from questioning the young shopman who said it was Watson, I thought I would ask your advice.'

'You were quite right,' said Sherlock. 'Don't take any steps till you have seen me again.'

'Mr. Watson will expect me to call, from what I said.'

'I only want to delay you an hour. It's now three. Come to my warehouse at four.'

'Very well, sir!'

And they parted company. Sherlock hurried to his warehouse, and, sternly forbidding his clerks to allow any one to interrupt him, he went his way to his own private room, and locked the door. Then he indulged himself in the torture of thinking it all over, and realising every detail. How could he have let John’s desperate lovemaking persuade him to forget the suspicious masculine tread in the Watson house? And yet how could such a pure man, so noble and selfless, so proper in his way—but was he, now? This falsehood seemed so very out of character, and yet it had been told. How terrible must be some dread of shame to be revealed—for, after all, the provocation given by such a man as Moriarty was, when excited by drinking, might, in all probability, be more than enough to justify any one who came forward to state the circumstances openly and without reserve! How creeping and deadly that fear which could bow down the truthful John to falsehood! He could almost pity him, and did, though his own heart was breaking.

Suddenly Sherlock started up. He would take the responsibility of preventing this lie from being heard in open court, the issue of which, from the uncertainty of the medical testimony (which he had vaguely heard the night before, from the surgeon in attendance), could be but doubtful. Oh! If he had but known how John would have become involved in the affair—if he had but foreseen this, he could have saved him by a word. John might love another—was false to him—but Sherlock would yet do him faithful acts of service of which he should never know.

Very pale and stern did Sherlock look, as he passed out through his wondering clerks. He was
away about half an hour; and scarcely less stern did he look when he returned, although his errand had been successful.

He wrote two lines on a slip of paper, put it in an envelope, and sealed it up. This he gave to one of the clerks, saying:—

'I appointed Mark—he who was a packer in the warehouse, and who went into the police—to call on me at four o'clock, but I will be out on business. Take care to give this note to him.'

The note contained these words:

'There will be no inquest. Medical evidence not sufficient to justify it. Take no further steps. I have not seen the coroner; but I will take the responsibility.'

'Well,' thought Mark, 'it relieves me from an awkward job. None of my witnesses seemed certain of anything except the young man. He was clear and distinct enough; the porter at the rail-road had seen a scuffle; or when he found it was likely to bring him in as a witness, then it might not have been a scuffle, only a little larking, and Moriarty might have jumped off the platform himself; —he would not stick firm to anything. And Jennings, the grocer's shopman,—well, he was not quite so bad, but I doubt if I could have got him up to an oath after he heard that Mr. Watson flatly denied it. It would have been a troublesome job and no satisfaction. And now I must go and tell them they won't be wanted.'

He accordingly presented himself again at Mr. Watson's that evening. John, who had seen his father off to bed with a calming drink, answered the door, placing the candle on the table, and snuffed it carefully, before he turned round and faced the inspector.

'You are late!' He held his breath for the answer.

'I'm sorry to have given any unnecessary trouble, for, after all, they've given up all thoughts of trying the case. I have had other work to do and other people to see, or I should have been here before now.'

'Then it is ended,' said John. 'There is to be no further enquiry.'

'I believe I've got Mr. Holmes's note about me,' said the Inspector, fumbling in his pocket-book.

'Mr. Holmes's!' said John, his insides plummeting sharply. 'Yes! he's a magistrate—ah! here it is.' John could not see to read it—no, not although he was close to the candle. The words swam before him. But he held it in his hand, and looked at it as if he were intently studying it.

'I'm sure, sir, it's a great weight off my mind; for the evidence was so uncertain, you see, that the man had received any blow at all,—and if any question of identity came in, it so complicated the case, as I told Mr. Holmes—'

'Holmes!' said John, again.

'I met him this morning, and, as he's an old friend of mine, I made bold to tell him of my difficulty.'

John sighed deeply. He did not want to hear any more; he was afraid alike of what he had heard, and of what he might hear. He wished that the man would go. He forced himself to speak.

'Thank you for calling. It is very late. I dare say it is past ten o'clock. Oh! here is the note!' he
continued, suddenly interpreting the meaning of the hand held out to receive it. He was putting it up, when John said, 'I think it is a cramped, dazzling sort of writing. I could not read it; will you just read it to me?'

The inspector read it aloud.

'Thank you. You told Mr. Holmes that I was not there?'

'Oh, of course. I'm sorry now that I acted upon information, which seems to have been so erroneous. At first the young man was so positive; and now he says that he doubted all along, and hopes that his mistake won't have occasioned you such annoyance as to lose their shop your custom. Good night, ma'am.'

'Good night.' John showed him out, then sped up-stairs, entered his bed-chamber, and bolted the door.

The first idea that presented itself to him was, that all this sickening alarm on Harry's behalf was over; that the strain was past. The next was a wish to remember every word of the Inspector's which related to Sherlock. When had he seen him? What had he said? What had Sherlock done? What were the exact words of his note? And until John could recollect, even to the placing or omitting an article, the very expressions which Sherlock had used in the note, his mind refused to go on with its progress. But the next conviction he came to was clear enough;—Sherlock had seen him close to Outwood station on the fatal Thursday night, and had been told of his denial that he was there. He stood as a liar in Sherlock’s eyes, his integrity and newfound sense of purpose in tatters.

He thought he would never sleep, but he did, and dreamed heavily, as he had not done since that first miraculous night with Sherlock in the baths. He was naked on that damned Edinburgh pavement, and Sherlock stood over him, looking sorrowful. There was a mouth on his cock, but when he looked up it was Moriarty, teeth bared around him, his hand held upright, showing a long leather leash. At the end of the leash was Harry, broken and bleeding.

When John awoke, dizzy, a new idea flashed upon him. Sherlock had learnt his falsehood before he went to any other magistrate- could he have done it to protect him? Impossible. Sherlock cared much for the truth, he knew, but his business was more important. Besides, John would have gone through the whole—he would have perjured himself to save Harry, rather—far rather—than Sherlock should have had the knowledge that prompted him to interfere to save him.

At that moment, Hudson knocked, bringing with her the long-awaited letter from Harry.

'Thank you, Hudson. How late it is!'

As Hudson left, the first thing that caught John’s eye—two days earlier than today. Harry had then written when he had promised, and their alarm might have been spared. But he would read the letter and see. It was hasty enough, but perfectly satisfactory. Harry had seen Sholto Lennox, who knew enough of the case to shake his head over it, in the first instance, and tell him he had done a very daring thing in returning to England, with such an accusation, backed by such powerful influence, hanging over him. But when they had come to talk it over, Mr. Lennox had acknowledged that there might be some chance of his acquittal, if he could but prove his statements by credible witnesses—that in such case it might be worth while to stand his trial, otherwise it would be a great risk. He would examine—he would take every pains.

'It struck me' wrote Harry, 'that your introduction, little brother of mine, went a long way. Is it so? He made many inquiries, I can assure you. He seemed a sharp, intelligent fellow, and in good practice too. I have just caught a packet on the point of sailing—I am off in five minutes. I may
have to come back to England again on this business, so keep my visit secret. P.S.—What an escape that was! Take care you don't breathe of my having been—not even to the Shaws.'

John turned to the envelope; it was marked 'Too late.' The letter had probably been trusted to some careless waiter, who had forgotten to post it. Oh! what slight cobwebs of chances stand between us and Temptation! Harry had been safe, and out of England twenty, nay, thirty hours ago; and it was only about seventeen hours since he had told a falsehood to baffle pursuit, which even then would have been vain. How faithless she had been! Where now was his proud motto, 'Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra?' If he had but dared to bravely tell the truth as regarded himself, how light of heart he would now have felt, rather than faithless and abased in Sherlock’s sight. Did he dare, now, go to Sherlock and tell him, beg his forgiveness?

Getting up abruptly, unable to think any further, he took the letter in to his father. There was so slight an allusion to their alarm at the rail-road station, that Mr. Watson passed over it without paying any attention to it. Indeed, beyond the mere fact of Harry having sailed undiscovered and unsuspected, he did not gather much from the letter at the time. He looked very pale, John thought, and so he would keep his secret, and bear the burden alone. Alone he would endure her disgraced position in Sherlock’s eyes.

Mr. Watson sensed John’s downcastness, and sought to distract him with a snippet of Hesiod, but John could not enjoy the brief excerpt, though it breathed of the south and of home. He interrupted his father to say,

‘Did you see Gregory Lestrade at the funeral? He was there, and Molly Hooper too. Poor fellow! it was his way of showing sympathy. He has a good warm heart under his bluff abrupt ways.'

'I am sure of it,' replied Mr. Watson. 'I saw it all along, even while you tried to persuade me that he was all sorts of bad things. We will go and see them to-morrow, shall we?'

'Oh yes. I want to see them. We did not pay Molly—or rather she refused to take it, Hudson says. We will go so as to catch him just after his dinner, and before he goes to his work.'

Towards evening Mr. Watson said:

'I half expected Mr. Holmes would have called. He spoke of a book yesterday which he had, and which I wanted to see. He said he would try and bring it to-day.'

John sighed, knowing he would not come. He would be too delicate to run the chance of meeting, not while this misunderstanding, and the terrible falsehood it had engendered, stood between them.

That night, he did not dream.
Harsh Words

Chapter Summary

"Anything is better than stagnation."
-Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Case-book of Sherlock Holmes"

In which Lestrade regrets his harsh words, Myfanwy and John have words, and Sherlock says nothing at all.

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry about the delay for this. The beginning of term hit me like a ton of bricks, and so I failed to update. I've got a little more buffer now, though, so I should be able to finish this up soon.

At the time arranged the previous day, John and his father set out on their walk to see Gregory Lestrade and Molly Hooper. They both were reminded of their recent loss, by a strange kind of shyness in their new habiliments, and in the fact that it was the first time, for many weeks, that they had deliberately gone out together. They drew very close to each other in unspoken sympathy.

Gregory was sitting by the fire-side in his accustomed corner: but he had not his accustomed pipe. He was leaning his head upon his hand, his arm resting on his knee. He did not get up when he saw them, though John could read the welcome in his eye.

'Sit ye down, sit ye down. Fire's welly out,' said he, giving it a vigorous poke, as if to turn attention away from himself. He was rather disorderly, to be sure, with a black unshaven beard of several days' growth, making his pale face look yet paler, and a jacket which would have been all the better for patching.

'We thought we should have a good chance of finding you, just after dinner-time,' said John.

'We have had our sorrow too, since we saw you,' said Mr. Watson.

'Ay, ay. Sorrows is more plentiful than dinners just now; I reckon, my dinner hour stretches all o'er the day; yo're pretty sure of finding me.'

'Are you out of work?' asked John.

'Ay,' he replied shortly. Then, after a moment's silence, he added, looking up for the first time: 'I'm not wanting brass. Dunno yo' think it. Janine, poor lass, had a little stock under her pillow, ready to slip into my hand, last moment, but I'm out o' work a' the same.'

'Is it because of the strike you're out of work?' asked John gently.

'Stike's ended. It's o'er for this time. I'm out o' work because I ne'er asked for it.'
He was in a mood to take a surly pleasure in giving answers that were like riddles. But John saw that he would like to be asked for the explanation.

'And good words are—?'

'Asking for work. I reckon them's almost the best words that men can say. "Gi' me work" means "and I'll do it like a man."

'And bad words are refusing you work when you ask for it.'

'Ay. Bad words is saying "Aha, my fine chap! Yo've been true to yo'r order, and I'll be true to mine. So go and be d—— d to yo'. There's no work for yo' here." Them's bad words.'

'Would it not be worth while,' said Mr. Watson, 'to ask Mr. Holmes if he would take you back again? It might be a poor chance, but it would be a chance.'

He looked up again, with a sharp glance at the questioner; and then laughed a low and bitter laugh.

'There's not the pressure on all the broad earth that would make me, said Gregory Lestrade. 'Now yo've got it. Yo've hit the bull's eye. Holmes is a stubborn bastard, but so'm I, and I'll ne'er forswear mysel' for a' the work the king could gi'e me.'

'Is it because of the Union?' John asked, a little hesitantly. 'I recall the Union being very hard on their own, you know.'

'It was a long while before he spoke.

'I'll not deny but what th' Union finds it necessary to force a man into his own good. I'll speak truth. A man leads a dree life who's not i' th' Union. It's the only way working men can get their rights, by all joining together. Anderson, rejectin' it, were a fool all along, and ne'er a worse fool than at th' last.'

'He did you harm?' asked John.

'Ay, that did he. We had public opinion on our side, till he and his sort began rioting and breaking laws. It were all o'er wi' the strike then.'

'Then would it not have been far better to have left him alone, and not forced him to join the Union? He did you no good; and you drove him mad.'

'John,' said his father, in a low and warning tone, for he saw the cloud gathering on Lestrade's face.

'I like him,' said Lestrade, suddenly. 'He speaks plain out what's in his mind, though he doesn't comprehend th' Union for all that. It's a great power: it's our only power. Anderson hurt that power and he paid for it. I'm sore vexed wi' him just now. So, mappen, I dunnot speak him fair. I could knock him down now wi' a' the pleasure in life.'

'Why? What has he been doing? Anything fresh?'

'Ay, to be sure. He's ne'er out o' mischief, that man. First of a' he must go raging like a mad fool, and kick up yon riot. Then he'd to go into hiding, where he'd a been yet, if Holmes had followed him out as I'd hoped he would ha' done. But Holmes, having got his own purpose, didn't care to go on wi' the prosecution for the riot. So Anderson slunk back again to his house. He ne'er showed himself abroad for a day or two. He had that grace. And then, where think ye that he
went? Why, to Wilkes's. Damn him! He went wi' his mealy-mouthed face, that turns me sick to look at, a-asking for work, though he knowed well enough the new rule, o' pledging themselves to give nothing to th'Union to help the starving turn-out! Why he'd have starved to death, if th' Union had not helped him in his pinch. There he went, ossing to promise aught, and pledge himself to aught—to tell a' he know'd on our proceedings, the good-for-nothing Judas! But I'll say this for Wilkes, and thank him for it at my dying day—it's a good thing Anderson didn't go to Milverton, he'd ha taken him—he drove Anderson away, and would not listen to him—ne'er a word—though folk standing by, says the traitor cried like a baby!'

'Shocking!' exclaimed John. 'Lestrade, I don't know you to-day. Don't you see how you've made Anderson what he is, by driving him into the Union against his will—without his heart going with it. You have made him what he is!'

"Made him what he is! What is he?" Lestrade barked.

Gathering, gathering along the narrow street, came a hollow, measured sound; now forcing itself on their attention. Many voices were hushed and low: many steps were heard not moving onwards, at least not with any rapidity or steadiness of motion, but as if circling round one spot. Yes, there was one distinct, slow tramp of feet, which made itself a clear path through the air, and reached their ears; the measured laboured walk of men carrying a heavy burden. They were all drawn towards the house-door by some irresistible impulse; impelled thither—not by a poor curiosity, but as if by some solemn blast.

Six men walked in the middle of the road, three of them being policemen. They carried a door, taken off its hinges, upon their shoulders, on which lay some dead human creature; and from each side of the door there were constant droppings. All the street turned out to see, and, seeing, to accompany the procession, each one questioning the bearers, who answered almost reluctantly at last, so often had they told the tale.

'We found him i' th' brook in the field beyond there.'

'Th' brook!—why there's not water enough to drown him!'

'He was a determined chap. He lay with his face downwards. He was sick enough o' living, choose what cause he had for it.'

Lestrade crept up to John's side, and said in a weak piping kind of voice: 'It's not Phillip Anderson? He had na spunk enough. Sure! It's not Phillip Anderson! Why, they are a' looking this way! Listen! I've a singing in my head, and I cannot hear.'

'It is him, Gregory Lestrade,' said a low voice from behind the group of men. Molly Hooper pushed her way into the house and stood face-to-face with Lestrade. As John watched, horrified, she slapped him three times, hard. Lestrade stood unmoving, accepting each blow as it fell. When Molly dropped her hand and burst into tears, Lestrade took her into his arms.

'Yo're right, woman, yo're right. Hush now.'

The men carrying Anderson, who had stood, arrested, by the sight, now put the door down carefully upon the stones, and all might see the poor drowned wretch—his glassy eyes, one half-open, staring right upwards to the sky. Owing to the position in which he had been found lying, his face was swollen and discoloured besides, his skin was stained by the water in the brook, which had been used for dyeing purposes. The fore part of his head was bald; but the hair grew thin and long behind, and every separate lock was a conduit for water. Through all these disfigurements, John recognised Phillip Anderson. It seemed to him so sacrilegious to be peering into that poor distorted, agonised face, that he went forwards and softly covered the dead man's
countenance with his handkerchief. The men spoke together, and then one of them came up to Lestrade and Molly.

'Lestrade, thou knowed him! Thou mun go tell the wife. Do it gently, man, but do it quick, for we canna leave him here long.'

'I canna go,' said Lestrade. 'Dunnot ask me. I canna face her.'

'Thou knows her best,' said the man. 'We'n done a deal in bringing him here—thou take thy share.'

'I canna do it,' said Lestrade. 'I'm welly felled wi' seeing him. We wasn't friends; and now he's dead.'

'Well, if thou wunnot thou wunnot. Some one mun, though. It's a dree task; but it's a chance, every minute, as she doesn't hear on it in some rougher way nor a person going to make her let on by degrees, as it were.'

'Father, do you go,' said John, in a low voice.

'If I could—if I had time to think of what I had better say; but all at once—— ' John saw that his father was indeed unable. He was trembling from head to foot.

'I will go,' said Molly, firmly.

'Bless yo', miss, it will be a kind act; for she's been but a sickly sort of body, I hear, and few hereabouts know much on her.'

This was a great relief to John, as Molly was most sensible and would see to the children as well as the mother. He smiled gratefully at her as she disappeared, realizing suddenly how lovely she was in her quiet way. He glanced over and saw that Lestrade must feel the same; his deepset brown eyes were on her, watching her go.

‘She’s a good’un,’ Lestrade said, as if reading John’s thoughts.

‘She is that.’

‘Too good fra’ the likes of me.’

John was startled by this confession, but only for a moment. He laughed.

‘You may think so, but I can’t think that she does.’

‘Aye,’ and Lestrade was silent once more.

‘Can you give all these people a hint that they had better leave in quietness?’ John said, by way of changing the subject.

‘Aye,’ said Lestrade again, on a different tone, and he went to speak to them. John went into the house where Molly had gone.

She was on the floor, and had Mrs. Anderson's head and shoulders on her lap.

'Neighbour,' said she, 'your man is dead. Guess yo' how he died?'

'He were drowned,' said Mrs. Anderson, feebly, beginning to cry for the first time, at this rough probing of her sorrows.
'He were found drowned. He were coming home very hopeless o' aught on earth. He thought God could na be harder than men; mappen not so hard; mappen as tender as a mother; mappen tenderer. I'm not saying he did right, and I'm not saying he did wrong. All I say is, may neither me nor mine ever have his sore heart, or we may do like things.'

'The widow moaned, less distressed at the manner of the death than John expected; but it was of a piece with her helpless character to feel his loss as principally affecting herself and her children.

'Who has promised to be a father to the fatherless?' continued he.

'But I've getten six children, sir, and the eldest not eight years of age. I'm not meaning for to doubt His power, sir,—only it needs a deal o' trust;' and she began to cry afresh.

'She'll be better able to talk to-morrow, sir,' said Molly. 'Best comfort now would be the feel of a child at her heart. I'm sorry they took the baby.'

'I'll go for it,' said John. And in a few minutes he returned, carrying Sammy, his face all smeared with eating, and placed him in his mother's arms.

'There!' said Molly, 'now you go. They'll cry together, and comfort together, better nor any one but a child can do. I'll stop with her as long as I'm needed, and if yo' come to-morrow, yo' can have a deal o' wise talk with her, that she's not up to to-day.'

John and his father left quietly, remembering their own sorrow.

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Lestrade's door was locked the next day, when they went to pay their call on the widow Anderson. He had, however, been in to see Mrs. Anderson, before starting on his day's business, whatever that was. It was but an unsatisfactory visit to Mrs. Anderson; she considered herself as an ill-used woman by her poor husband's suicide; and there was quite germ of truth enough in this idea to make it a very difficult one to refute. She was secretly blaming her husband for having fallen into such drear despair, but also inveterate in her abuse of all who could by any possibility be supposed to have driven him to such desperation. The masters—Mr. Holmes in particular, whose mill had been attacked by Anderson, and who, after the warrant had been issued for his apprehension on the charge of rioting, had caused it to be withdrawn,—the Union, of which Lestrade was the representative to the poor woman,—the children so numerous, so hungry, and so noisy—all made up one great army of personal enemies, whose fault it was that she was now a helpless widow.

John heard enough of this unreasonableness to dishearten him; and when they came away he found it impossible to cheer his father.

'This poor Mrs. Anderson! how little we can do for her.' Mr. Watson sighed.

'And yet we dare not leave her without our efforts, although they may seem so useless. It's a hard world to live in!'
'Yes, that it was,' said John, 'It was such a charming, snatched, forbidden thing.' But he suddenly stopped speaking. He had spoiled the remembrance of Harry's visit to himself by his own cowardice. Then came the thought of Sherlock's cognisance of it—he wondered if he should have minded detection half so much from any one else. He tried himself in imagination with Aunt Shaw and Ella; with his father; with Sholto Lennox or Mary Morstan-Lennox; with Harry. The thought of the last knowing what he had done, even in his own behalf, was the most painful, but even any fall in Harry's opinion was as nothing to the shame, the shrinking shame he felt at the thought of what the situation must be doing to Sherlock. And yet John longed to see him, to get it over; to understand where he stood in his opinion. John's cheeks burnt as he recollected how proudly he had implied an objection to trade (in the early days of their acquaintance), because it too often led to the deceit of passing off inferior for superior goods, in the one branch; of assuming credit for wealth and resources not possessed, in the other. She remembered Sherlock's look of calm disdain, as in few words he gave John to understand that, in the great scheme of commerce, all dishonourable ways of acting were sure to prove injurious in the long run, and that, testing such actions simply according to the poor standard of success, there was folly and not wisdom in all such, and every kind of deceit in trade, as well as in other things, and yet John had not believed him.

No more contempt for him, though!—no more talk about the chivalric! Henceforward he must feel humiliated and disgraced in Sherlock's sight. But when should they see each other? His heart leaped up in apprehension at every ring of the door-bell; and yet when it fell down to calmness, he felt strangely saddened and sick at heart at each disappointment. It was very evident that Mr. Watson expected to see him, and was surprised that he did not come. He kept saying, 'I quite expected to have seen Mr. Holmes. I think the messenger who brought the book last night must have had some note, and forgot to deliver it. Do you think there has been any message left today?'

'I will go and inquire, Father,' said John. 'Stay, there's a ring!' He sat down instantly with a book and bent his head attentively over it, only to be disappointed when Hudson entered the room.

'It's that Lestrade, sir. He wants to see you, or else Master John.'

'He had better come up here, Hudson; and then he can see us both, and choose which he likes for his listener.'

'Oh! very well, sir. I've no wish to hear what he's got to say, I'm sure; only, if you could see his shoes, I'm sure you'd say the kitchen was the fitter place.

'He can wipe them, I suppose, said Mr. Watson. So Hudson flung off, to bid him walk upstairs. She was a little mollified, however, when he looked at his feet with a hesitating air; and then, sitting down on the bottom stair, he took off the offending shoes, and without a word walked upstairs, coming into the drawing room with an uncomfortable look on his drawn face.

Mr. Watson's ever-ready sympathy with anything of shyness or hesitation, or want of self-possession, made him come to Lestrade's aid.

'We shall have tea up directly, and then you'll take a cup with us, Mr. Lestrade. I am sure you are tired, if you've been out much this wet relaxing day.'

'Master,' said he, 'yo'd not guess easy what I've been trampling after to-day. Special if yo' remember my manner o' talk yesterday. I've been a seeking work. I have. I said to mysel', I'd keep a civil tongue in my head, let who would say what 'em would. I'd set my teeth into my tongue sooner nor speak i' haste. For that man's sake—him as went and drowned himself, poor chap! I did na' think he'd got it in him to lie still and let th' water creep o'er him till he died. Anderson, yo' know.'
‘Yes, go on,’ said Mr. Watson.

‘For his sake,’ Lestrade continued, ‘Yet not for his sake; for where’er he is, and whate’er, he’ll ne’er know hunger or cold again; but for the wife’s sake, and the bits o’ childer.’

‘God bless you!’ said Mr. Watson, starting up; then, calming down, he said breathlessly, ‘What do you mean? Tell me out.’

‘I have telled yo’,’ said Lestrade, a little surprised at Mr. Watson’s agitation. ‘I would na ask for work for mysel’; but them’s left as a charge on me. I reckon, I would ha guided Anderson to a better end; but I set him off o’ th’ road, and so I mun answer for him.’

Mr. Watson got hold of Lestrade’s hand and shook it heartily, without speaking. Lestrade looked awkward and ashamed.

‘There, there, master! There’s ne’er a man, to call a man, amongst us, but what would do th’ same; ay, and better too; for, believe me, I se ne’er got a stroke o’ work, nor yet a sight of any. For all I telled Wilkes that he’d ne’er ha’ such a worker on his mill as I would be—he’d ha’ none o’ me—no more would none o’ th’ others. I’m a poor black feckless sheep—childer may starve for aught I can do, unless, parson, yo’d help me?’

‘Help you! How? I would do anything,—but what can I do?’

‘Master there’—for John had re-entered the room, and stood silent, listening—’has often talked grand o’ the South, and the ways down there. Now I dunnot know how far off it is, but I’ve been thinking if I could get ’em down there, where food is cheap and wages good, and all the folk, rich and poor, master and man, friendly like; yo’ could, may be, help me to work. I’m not forty-five, and I’ve a deal o’ strength in me, measter.’

‘But what kind of work could you do, my man?’

‘Well, I reckon I could spade a bit——’

‘And for that,’ said John, stepping forwards, ‘for anything you could do, Lestrade, with the best will in the world, you would, may be, get nine shillings a week; maybe ten, at the outside. You must not go to the South,’ said John, ‘I owe it to you—since it’s my way of talking that has set you off on this idea—to put it all clear before you. You would not bear the dulness of the life. What would be peace to them would be eternal fretting to you. Think no more of it, Gregory, I beg. Besides, you could never pay to get mother and children all there—that’s one good thing.’

‘I’ve reckoned for that. One house mun do for us a’, and the furniture o’ t’other would go a good way. And…’ here, he hesitated, ‘Missus Hooper ha’ said she’ll come… but as you say, North an’ South have each getten their own troubles. If work’s sure and steady there, labour’s paid at starvation prices; while here we’n rucks o’ money coming in one quarter, and ne’er a farthing th’ next. For sure, th’ world is in a confusion.’

Mr. Watson was busy cutting bread and butter; John was glad of this, for he saw that Lestrade was better left to himself: that if his father began to speak ever so mildly on the subject of Lestrade’s thoughts, the latter would consider himself challenged to an argument, and would feel himself bound to maintain his own ground. He and his father kept up an indifferent conversation until Lestrade, scarcely aware whether he ate or not, had made a very substantial meal. Then he pushed his chair away from the table, and tried to take an interest in what they were saying; but it was of no use; and he fell back into dreamy gloom. Suddenly, John said (he had been thinking of it for some time, but the words had stuck in his throat), ‘Lestrade, have you been to Marlborough Mills to seek for work?’
'Holmes's?' asked he. 'Ay, I've been at Holmes's.'

'And what did he say?'

'Such a chap as me is not like to see the measter. Th' o'erlooker bid me go and be d—— d.'

'I wish you had seen Mr. Holmes,' said Mr. Watson. 'He might not have given you work, but he would not have used such language.'

'As to th' language, I'm welly used to it; it dunnot matter to me. I'm not nesh mysel' when I'm put out. It were th' fact that I were na wanted there, no more nor any other place, as I minded.'

'But I wish you had seen Mr. Holmes,' repeated John. 'Would you go again—it's a good deal to ask, I know—but would you go to-morrow and try him? I should be so glad if you would.'

'I'm afraid it would be of no use,' said Mr. Watson, in a low voice. 'It would be better to let me speak to him.' John still looked at Lestrade for his answer.

'It would tax my pride above a bit; if it were for mysel', I could stand a deal o' starving first; I'd sooner knock him down than ask a favour from him. I'd a deal sooner be flogged mysel'; but for yo, I'll e'en make a wry face, and go at it to-morrow. Dunna yo' think that he'll do it. That man has it in him to be burnt at the stake afore he'll give in.'

'All the more do I thank you,' said John, gravely. If he himself could not go to Sherlock, perhaps he could bring Sherlock and Lestrade—who he knew Sherlock valued much—back together as working partners.

'I'll stand guard at the lodge door. I'll stand there fro' six in the morning till I get speech on him. But I'd liefer sweep th' streets, if paupers had na' got hold on that work. Dunna yo' hope, miss. There'll be more chance o' getting milk out of a flint. I wish yo' a very good night, and many thanks to yo'.'

'You'll find your shoes by the kitchen fire; I took them there to dry,' said John.

Lestrade turned round and looked at him steadily, and then he brushed his lean hand across his eyes and went his way.

'How proud that man is!' said her father, who was a little annoyed at the manner in which Lestrade had declined his intercession with Mr. Holmes.

'He is,' said John.

'It's amusing to see how he evidently respects the part in Mr. Holmes's character which is like his own.'

'I wonder what success he'll have to-morrow. If he and Mr. Holmes would speak out together as man to man—if Lestrade would forget that Mr. Holmes was a master, and speak to him as he does to us—and if Mr. Holmes would be patient enough to listen to him with his human heart, not with his master's ears—'

'You are getting to do Mr. Holmes justice at last, John,' said his father, pinching his ear.

John had a strange choking at his heart, which made him unable to answer. He wished so much that he could go, and force Sherlock to express his disapprobation, and tell him honestly what had occurred. Yet he was reticent to come before Sherlock; he was sure his own face would cause
Sherlock pain, and so he stopped at home, with no courage and no love.

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It was not merely that Sherlock knew John had spoken falsely, but that this falsehood of his bore a distinct reference in his mind to some other lover. Sherlock could not forget the fond and earnest look that had passed between John and some other man—the attitude of familiar confidence, if not of positive endearment. The thought of this perpetually stung him; it was a picture before his eyes, wherever he went and whatever he was doing. In addition to this (and he ground his teeth as he remembered it), was the hour, dusky twilight; the place, so far away from home, and comparatively unfrequented. His nobler self had said at first, that all this last might be accidental, innocent, justifiable; but once allow John’s right to love and be beloved (and had Sherlock any reason to deny this right?) But that falsehood! which showed a fatal consciousness of something wrong, and to be concealed, which was unlike John in the extreme. Sherlock did John that justice, though all the time it would have been a relief to believe him utterly unworthy of his esteem. It was this that made the misery—that he passionately loved John, and thought him, even with all his faults, more surprising and wonderful than any other person; yet he deemed him so attached to some other man, so led away by his affection as to violate his own truthful nature. The very falsehood that stained him, was a proof how blindly he loved another, so different from Sherlock himself.

Under the strain of imagining John in someone else’s arms, Sherlock was conscious that he had never been so irritable as he was now, in all his life long. He was more than usually silent at home; employing his evenings in a continual pace backwards and forwards, which annoyed his sister exceedingly.

’Can you stop—can you sit down for a moment? I have something to say to you, if you would give up that everlasting walk, walk, walk.’

He sat down instantly, on a chair against the wall.

’The maid tells me that her lover is in the infirmary.’

’Moriarty. He is.’

’And you are going to speak to him, I suppose, in order to confirm, in a way that will give you the most pain possible, that John Watson was out with another man on that night.’

’I will be able to tell whether or not he is lying if I see him.’

’You already know that he is not.’

Sherlock was silent. Myfanwy continued.

’He drugged John in Edinburgh, you know.’

’I know.’ Sherlock said curtly.

’It’s better left alone, Sherlock.’

’That man has the power to cause a great deal of hurt.’

’John or Moriarty?’ Myfanwy asked, unsmiling. Sherlock did not answer.

When he left the room, moments later, Myfanwy nodded grimly to herself, and, collecting her hat and umbrella, set off to Crampton.
Once arrived, Myfanwy knocked briefly, but swept into the little hall before Hudson had fairly opened the door.

‘Is young Mr. Watson within?’ Myfanwy asked, though she knew he was, for she had seen him at the window.

John was sitting alone, writing to Ella, and giving her many particulars of his mother's last days. It was a softening employment, and he was very grave and melancholy when he received Myfanwy. His voice was softer than usual and his manner more gracious, because in her heart he was feeling both very grateful to Myfanwy for the courteous attention of her call and for the simple sight of a Holmes, though she was no Sherlock.

Myfanwy was somewhat daunted at this, and it became impossible to utter the speech she had prepared. Her sharp Damascus blade seemed out of place, and useless among rose-leaves. She was silent, because she was trying to task herself up to her duty. At last, she stung herself into its performance by a suspicion which, in spite of all probability, she allowed to cross her mind, that all this sweetness was put on with a view of propitiating Sherlock. She cleared her throat and began:

‘Mr. Watson, I promised your poor mother that, as far as my poor judgment went, I would not allow you to act in any way wrongly without remonstrating; at least, without offering advice, whether you took it or not.’

John stood before her, blushing like any culprit as he gazed at Myfanwy. He thought she had come to speak to him about the falsehood he had told—that Sherlock had employed his sister to explain the danger John had exposed himself to, of being confuted in full court! and although his heart sank to think Sherlock had not rather chosen to come himself, and upbraid him, and receive his penitence, and restore him again to his good opinion, yet he was too much humbled not to bear any blame on this subject patiently and meekly.

Myfanwy went on:

‘At first, when I heard from one of my servants, that you had been seen, arms entwined, with a gentleman, I could hardly believe it. But Sherlock, I am sorry to say, confirmed her story. It was indiscreet, to say the least, and may I remind you that if you are seen to keep company with men, Sherlock will suffer as well as yourself.’

John's eyes flashed fire. This was a new idea—this was too insulting. If Myfanwy had spoken to him about the lie he had told, well and good—he would have owned it, and humiliated himself. But to interfere with his conduct—to suppose that he, John, would hurt Sherlock in any way—it was too impertinent! He would not answer her—not one word. Myfanwy saw the battle-spirit in John's eyes, and it called up her combativeness also.

‘For your mother's sake, I have thought it right to warn you against such unkind things. She may not know about your true proclivities, but she would have warned you against hurting those you love.’

‘For my mother's sake,’ said John, voice taut with anger, 'I will bear much; but I cannot bear everything. She never meant me to be exposed to insult, I am sure.'

‘Insult, Mr. Watson!’

‘Yes, madam,’ said John more steadily, 'it is insult. What do you know of me that should lead you
to suspect that I would deliberately do anything--any act--that would cause Sherlock any pain at all?

‘Everyone hurts Sherlock in the end, Mr. Watson.’

‘I would never. And damn you—yes, damn you for thinking it!’

‘I do not think it. I see it. Undoubtedly you would too, had you come to explain yourself.’

‘I could not. It is not my secret to reveal.’

‘You lie.’

‘I do not. So help me, Miss Holmes,’ John caught himself and wheeled away from her, suddenly afraid he would strike her.

Silence seized the room. Myfanwy watched John’s jaw work for a moment, then said, quietly,

‘I believe you.’

‘What did you say?’

‘You heard me, Mr. Watson.’

‘If this is some kind of joke…’

‘It isn’t. And now, tell me who that man is.’

‘It is none of your affair.’

‘Oh, it certainly is.’

'I can give you no explanation,’ said John, in a low voice. 'I have done wrong, but not in the way you think or know about. And I will not explain.’

‘Very well, Mr. Watson, but know this. Sherlock intends to interview Moriarty tonight, at the infirmary.’ She elaborated no further, and, perfunctory good-byes said, returned home.
Chapter Summary

“The unexpected has happened so continually in my life that it has ceased to deserve the name.”
—Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Stark Munro Letters"

In which one conversation and two deaths place John and Sherlock farther apart than they have ever been.

After Myfanwy’s departure, John stood, frozen for a moment. Sherlock going to see Moriarty? It did not, in any way, bode well for Harry’s secret, or, he thought, for Sherlock’s safety.

Mr. Watson came in, breaking John’s reverie and asked,

“You’ve been to Mrs. Anderson’s? I was just meaning to go there, if I had time, before dinner.’

“No, Father; I have not,’ said John, reddening. ‘I never thought about her. But I will go directly after tea.’

Accordingly John went. Molly had taken charge of everything. Some of the children were gone to the neighbours. Mrs. Anderson was very ill; really ill—not merely ailing, as John discovered after an examination. He made her as comfortable as he could, and left out into the dark. He wished he could have asked Lestrade about his visit to Sherlock’s mill, but Lestrade was not home, Molly said, nor would he be for some time.

John turned his steps homeward reluctantly, and so lost was he in his own thoughts that he did not see Sherlock—who had come to speak to Lestrade about the Anderson children—behind him.

Sherlock followed John for several yards, admiring his light and easy walk, and his slender, graceful figure in the dying light. But, suddenly, this simple emotion of pleasure was tainted, poisoned by jealousy. He wished to overtake him, and speak to him, to see how he would receive him, now that John must know he was aware of some other attachment. Sherlock wished too, but of this wish he was rather ashamed, that John should know that Sherlock had justified his wisdom in sending Lestrade to him to ask for work.

He hesitated, then accelerated his steps.

‘John.’

John whirled with flattering rapidity towards the sound of Sherlock’s voice.

‘Sherlock!’ he exclaimed, and strode towards him, stopping just short of reaching for Sherlock’s hands and pulling him in. He remembered, as he came into the shadow cast by Sherlock’s long body, that he was at fault, and that he could, by his mere presence, cause Sherlock pain. He stopped, ill at ease, and said no more.

Sherlock at first was puzzled to account for his silence; and then he remembered the lie John had
told, and all that was foregone.

‘John, have you no explanation to give me? You must perceive what I cannot but think.’

John was silent. He was wondering whether an explanation of any kind would be consistent with his loyalty to Frederick.

‘Nay,’ said he, ‘I will ask no farther. I may be putting temptation in your way. At present, believe me, your secret is safe with me. But you run great risks, allow me to say, in being so indiscreet. I am now only speaking as a friend of your father's: if I had any other thought or hope, of course that is at an end. I am quite disinterested.’

‘I am aware of that,’ said John, forcing himself to speak in an indifferent, careless way. ‘I am aware of what I must appear to you, but the secret is another person's, and I cannot explain it without doing him harm.’

‘I have not the slightest wish to pry into the gentleman's secrets,’ Sherlock said, with growing anger. ‘My own interest in you is—simply that of a friend. You may not believe me, John, but it is—in spite of what we have shared—but that is all given up; all passed away. You believe me, John?’

‘Yes,’ said John, quietly and sadly.

‘Then, really, I don't see any occasion for us to go on walking together. I thought, perhaps you might have had something to say, but I see we are nothing to each other. If you're quite convinced, that any foolish passion on my part is entirely over, I will wish you good afternoon.’ He walked off very hastily.

‘What can he mean?’ thought John,—‘what could he mean by speaking so, as if I were always thinking that he cared for me, when I know he does not; he cannot. I surely am master enough of myself to control this wild, strange, miserable feeling, which tempted me even to betray my own dear Harry, so that I might but regain his good opinion—the good opinion of a man who takes such pains to tell me that I am nothing to him.’ He turned away, then, and walked home, feeling his heart pound at every step.

Sherlock, too, was deeply discountenanced by that brief face-to-face encounter with John. How straight John had stood, despite his falsehood, despite his heartless betrayal. Sherlock had thought to see something telltale in John's eyes, but the pain he had seen was only that, he believed, of someone who had betrayed his principles and regretted it deeply.

From one such person to another, he thought, as he turned in to the quiet reek of the infirmary. It was nearly deserted today; one nursing sister nodded to him as he searched for Moriarty among the beds.

‘Come to see me, have you?’ came a faint, mocking voice through a curtain. Sherlock held steady, with an effort.

‘You. You're Milverton’s informant.’

‘Oh, well guessed, handsome.’ Sherlock could not stop himself from wincing away from that. ‘But you’re wrong. It’s more of an… equal partnership.’

‘Bollocks.’

‘Well, worth a try.’ Moriarty coughed, a hollow, rattling sound, ‘But yes. And he’ll know everything I know… including that your delicious little soldier has a bit on the side. A little
personal pain with your downfall, isn’t that nice?’

‘He’ll never find out.’

‘How? Will you kill me? Because that’s what you’ll have to do, Sherlock. And you’re no murderer.’

‘You have not got the faintest idea of what I am. I suggest you stop speculating.’

‘Well, where’s the fun in that?’

Sherlock said nothing.

‘Playing hard to get, are we, Sherlock?’

‘There is nothing of me that you could... get.’

‘Oh, I beg to differ. I think you want something, something very specific: information about the other man. I’m right,’ he said, wheezing. Sherlock fixed his eyes on the blood at the corner of Moriarty’s mouth, hoping suddenly that the injury would carry him off, now, at this moment. He wished John were here, to assess how long it would be, how much longer Moriarty would live, with Sherlock’s secret living and festering in his belly.

‘Tall, dark, and handsome he was,’ Moriarty said, ‘Such a coincidence, isn’t it? But of course you know that already.’

‘I care nothing for John Watson. My concern is my work, my professional reputation, and you wish to sully that.’

‘Oh, Sherlock. If only I believed you.’

‘I care not a whit if you do. I only care that you keep your slanderous comments to yourself.’

‘It’s not slander if it’s true.’

‘I could kill you right here.’

‘You could.’

Sherlock reached for Moriarty. He saw his own hand, as if from another body, extend towards the other man’s throat, saw its fingers begin to bend. One short moment would be enough to extinguish what little life was left in him; he was coughing blood already, and his belly was bloated. Surely he was bleeding inside himself, and such injuries inevitably meant death.

‘Do it, Sherlock, and I’ll go to my grave carrying the information to make you a happy man.’

‘I won’t be swayed by your lies.’

‘Be swayed by this, then,’ Moriarty said, and, pulling a knife from under the blankets, jammed it into his own heart.

‘It’s too late, Sherlock,’ he croaked, as he jerked and gasped in his death throes, ‘Milverton knows. There are letters.’

‘Liar!’ Sherlock hissed. He ran, then, as though the hounds of hell were at his heels, and he didn’t stop until he was safely locked in his office.
For some days after the incident in the infirmary, John’s spirits varied strangely, and his father was beginning to be anxious about him when news arrived from one or two quarters that promised some change and variety for him. Mr. Watson received a letter from Mr. Stamford, in which that gentleman volunteered a visit to them; and Mr. Watson imagined that the promised society of his old Oxford friend would give as agreeable a turn to John's ideas as it did to his own.

John tried to take an interest in what pleased his father, but, to him, it seemed as though at present all subjects tended towards Sherlock; he could not forget him.

Mr. Stamford's visit brought Sherlock’s name upon the tapis even further; for he wrote word that he believed he must be occupied some great part of his time with Mr. Holmes, as a new lease was in preparation, and the terms of it must be agreed upon.

John had not expected much pleasure to himself from Mr. Stamford's visit—he had only looked forward to it on his father's account, but when his godfather came, they at once fell into the most natural position of friendship in the world. Stamford said that John had no merit in being what he was, a youth so entirely after his own heart; it was an hereditary power which he had, to walk in and take possession of his regard; while John, in reply, gave him much credit for being so fresh and young under his Fellow's cap and gown.

'It is not every one who can sit comfortably in a set of college rooms, and let his riches grow without any exertion of his own. No doubt there is many a man here who would be thankful if his property would increase as yours has done, without his taking any trouble about it,' said John.

'I don't believe they would. It's the bustle and the struggle they like. As for sitting still, and learning from the past, or shaping out the future by faithful work done in a prophetic spirit—Why! Pooh! I don't believe there's a man in Milton who knows how to sit still; and it is a great art.'

'Milton people, I suspect, think Oxford men don't know how to move. It would be a very good thing if they mixed a little more.'

'It might be good for the Miltoners. Many things might be good for them which would be very disagreeable for other people.'

'Are you not a Milton man yourself?' asked John. 'I should have thought you would have been proud of your town.'

'I confess, I don't see what there is to be proud of. If you'll only come to Oxford, John, I will show you a place to glory in.'

'Well!' said Mr. Watson, 'Mr. Holmes is coming to drink tea with us to-night, and he is as proud of Milton as you of Oxford. You two must try and make each other a little more liberal-minded.'

'I don't want to be more liberal-minded, thank you,' said Mr. Stamford.

'Is Mr. Holmes coming to tea, Father?' asked John in a low voice.

'Either to tea or soon after. He could not tell. He told us not to wait.'

Sherlock had determined that he would make no inquiry of Myfanwy as to how far she had put her project into execution of speaking to John. He felt pretty sure that, if this interview took place, his sister's account of what passed at it would only annoy and chagrin him. He shrank from hearing John's very name mentioned; Sherlock, while he blamed him—while he was jealous—while he renounced him—loved John sorely, in spite of himself. He dreamt of him; he dreamt
John came running towards him with outspread arms, and kissed him deeply as they lay down together.

Yet Sherlock was too proud to acknowledge his weakness by avoiding the sight of John. He would neither seek an opportunity of being in his company nor avoid it. To convince himself of his power of self-control, before going to the Watson's for his accustomed lesson, he lingered over every piece of business that afternoon; he forced every movement into unnatural slowness and deliberation; and it was consequently past eight o'clock before he reached Mr. Watson's. Then there were business arrangements to be transacted in the study with Stamford; and the latter kept on, sitting over the fire, and talking wearily, long after all business was transacted, and when they might just as well have gone upstairs. But Sherlock would not say a word about moving their quarters; he chafed and chafed, and thought Stamford a most prosy companion; while Mr. Stamford returned the compliment in secret, by considering Sherlock about as brusque and curt a fellow as he had ever met with, and terribly gone off both in intelligence and manner. At last, some slight noise in the room above suggested the desirableness of moving there. They found John with a letter open before him, discussing its contents with his father. On the entrance of the gentlemen, it was immediately put aside; but Sherlock’s eager senses caught some few words of Mr. Watson’s to Stamford.

'A letter from Mr. Sholto Lennox. It makes John very hopeful.'

Mr. Stamford nodded. The tips of John’s ears were red when Sherlock looked at him, and Sherlock had the greatest mind in the world to get up and go out of the room that very instant, and never set foot in the house again.

'We were thinking,' said Mr. Watson, 'that you and Mr. Holmes had taken John's advice, and were each trying to convert the other, you were so long in the study.'

'And you thought there would be nothing left of us but an opinion, like the Kilkenny cat's tail. Pray whose opinion did you think would have the most obstinate vitality?'

Mr. Holmes had not a notion what they were talking about, and disdained to inquire. Mr. Watson politely enlightened him.

'Mr. Holmes, we were accusing Mr. Stamford this morning of a kind of Oxonian mediaeval bigotry against his native town; and we—John, I believe—suggested that it would do him good to associate a little with Milton manufacturers.'

'I beg your pardon. John thought it would do the Milton manufacturers good to associate a little more with Oxford men. Now wasn't it so, John?'

'I believe I thought it would do both good to see a little more of the other,—I did not know it was my idea any more than Father's.'

'And so you see, Mr. Holmes, we ought to have been improving each other down-stairs, instead of talking over vanished families of Smiths and Harrisons. However, I am willing to do my part now.'

At this, Sherlock’s face changed slightly. John felt, rather than saw, that he was chagrined by the repeated turning into jest of what Sherlock was feeling as very serious, and tried to change the conversation from a subject about which one party cared little, while, to the other, it was deeply, because personally, interesting. He forced himself to say something.

'Ella says she finds life in Harley Street eternally dull after their honeymoon in Scotland.'
'Does she?' said his father. 'I think that must be one of Ella's exaggerations. Are you sure of it, John?'

'I am sure she says so, Father.'

'Then I am sure of the fact,' said Mr. Stamford. 'John, I go so far in my idea of your truthfulness, that it shall cover your cousin's character. I don't believe a cousin of yours could exaggerate.'

'Is John so remarkable for truth?' said Sherlock, bitterly. The moment he had done so, he could have bitten his tongue out. What was he? And why should he stab John with his shame in this way? How evil he was to-night; possessed by ill-humour at being detained so long from him; irritated by the mention of some name, because he thought it belonged to a more successful lover. And then to speak to John as he had done!

John himself did not get up and leave the room. He sat quite still, after the first momentary glance of grieved surprise that slowly dilated into mournful, reproachful sadness; and then they fell and he did not speak again. But Sherlock could not help looking at him as the conversation flowed on, and he saw the flex of John's left hand. He gave short sharp answers, then, knowing that that flex bespoke anger, and for the rest of the evening Sherlock was uneasy and cross, unable to discern between jest and earnest; anxious only for a look, a word of John's, before which to prostrate himself in penitent humility. But John neither looked nor spoke, and, thus, Sherlock's uneasiness coalesced into fury.

In fact, Sherlock was so angry he could have struck John before he left, in order that by some strange overt act of rudeness, he might earn the privilege of telling him the remorse that gnawed at his heart. It was well that the long walk in the open air wound up this evening for him. It sobered him back into grave resolution, that henceforth he would see as little of John as possible,—since the very sight of that face and form, the very sounds of that voice had such power to move him from his balance. Well! He had known what love was—a sharp pang, a fierce experience, in the midst of whose flames he was struggling! but, through that furnace he would fight his way out towards his work, and the solid provability that was so reassuring.

When Sherlock had somewhat abruptly left the room, John rose from his seat and began to put the tea things on a tray, his gentleness belying his inner turmoil. His face was set, and he remained as silent as he had been when Sherlock was in the room. As the three prepared for bed, Mr. Stamford muttered forth a little condemnation of Sherlock.

'I never saw a fellow so spoiled by success. He can't bear a word; a jest of any kind. Everything seems to touch on the soreness of his high dignity. Formerly, he was as simple and noble as the open day; you could not offend him, because he had no vanity.'

'He is not vain now,' said John, turning round from the table, and speaking with quiet distinctness. 'To-night he has not been like himself. Something must have annoyed him before he came here.'

Mr. Stamford gave John one of his sharp glances from above his spectacles. John stood it quite calmly; but, after he had left the room, Stamford suddenly asked,—

'Watson! did it ever strike you that Holmes and John have what the French call a tendresse for each other?'

'Never!' said Mr. Watson, first startled and then flurried by the new idea. 'No, I am sure you are wrong. I am almost certain you are mistaken. John—John would not—and Holmes, well, Holmes I could not say. He certainly is no …invert, as far as I know.'

'It is silly to say 'invert' as though there are specific characteristics, Watson. You have seen a
thousand passionate friendships between men, and you know no two are exactly alike. There is something in the way they look at each other, the way they speak of each other, that makes me think there is something deep between them.’

‘But they see so little of each other.’

‘That’s as far as you know. And even if they do only see each other here, like calls to like in some cases, a deep and instantaneous connection.’

‘What you say troubles me, Stamford, and I will think on it. But what can I say to John if it is true? He would never countenance such a discussion.’

‘You may be surprised, my friend. He has a deep, tender current in him, and he may be able to speak of it.’

‘Tomorrow, I suppose,’ Mr. Watson sighed. ‘My friend, sometimes I wonder how much longer I shall live.’

‘You’re suffering now from having lived so long in that Milton air.

‘I am tired,’ said Mr. Watson. ‘But it is not Milton air. I'm fifty-five years of age, and that little fact of itself accounts for any loss of strength.’

‘Nonsense! I'm upwards of sixty, and feel no loss of strength, either bodily or mental. Don't let me hear you talking so. Fifty-five! why, you're quite a young man.’

Mr. Watson shook his head. ‘These last few years!’ said he. But after a minute’s pause, he raised himself from his half recumbent position, and said with a kind of trembling earnestness:

‘Stamford! you're not to think, that if I could have foreseen all that would come of my change of opinion, and my resignation of my living—even if I could have known how John would have suffered,—that I would undo it—the act of open acknowledgment that I no longer held the same faith as the church in which I was a priest. I might have done differently, and acted more wisely, in all that I subsequently did for my family. But I don't think God endued me with overmuch wisdom or strength,’ he added, falling back into his old position.

Mr. Stamford blew his nose ostentatiously before answering. Then he said:

‘He gave you strength to do what your conscience told you was right; and I don't see that we need any higher or holier strength than that; or wisdom either.’

There was a pause. Mr. Watson spoke first, in continuation of his thought:

‘About John.’

‘Well! about John. What then?’

‘If I die——’

‘Nonsense!’

‘What will become of him—I often think? He will do well enough for himself in the world—he has healed amazingly well since we have been here, and I am sure he will get his qualifications. I worry about the life of his heart, and even more so if you tell me that there is a risk that he and Holmes have formed a bond.’
‘Seriously, old friend, your son shall be my principal charge in life, and all the help that either my wit or my wisdom or my willing heart can give, shall be his. I don't choose him out as a subject for fretting. But you're going to outlive me by many a long year. You spare, thin men are always tempting and always cheating Death! It's the stout, florid fellows like me, that always go off first.’

If Mr. Stamford had had a prophetic eye he might have seen the torch all but inverted, and the angel with the grave and composed face standing very nigh, beckoning to his friend. That night Mr. Watson laid his head down on the pillow on which it never more should stir with life. When Hudson knocked at his room in the morning, she received no answer; she drew near the bed, and saw the calm, beautiful face lying white and cold under the ineffaceable seal of death. The attitude was exquisitely easy; there had been no pain—no struggle. The action of the heart must have ceased as he lay down.

John, as he came into the room at Hudson’s frantic behest, could not comprehend it. Later, he would admit to himself, some part of him had expected it; his father had never been the same from the time they had left Helstone, and his mother’s death had only shortened Mr. Watson’s life on this earth, but for the moment he could only think of his great loss. By dinnertime, he was insensate with fever.
Cupid's Arrow

Chapter Summary

“There are heroisms all round us waiting to be done.”
― Arthur Conan Doyle

Stamford plays Cupid, and Myfanwy knits and plots the destruction of the universe.

Doctor Stapleton was called to the Watson’s; after examining John, he held a brief, grave conference with Stamford.

“That boy is reasonably healthy and he should pull through; his mother told me some nonsense about his lungs being weak before she died, but his breathing is well enough. It is his heart that concerns me. No,” he said, forestalling Stamford’s concerned questions, “by his heart, I mean his soul, I suppose. He has lost so much.”

“He has me,” Stamford replied. “I will be as a father to him, if he’ll let me.”

“Begging your pardon,” Stapleton said, “but he is of the type to need a deep attachment, or I’m much mistaken. I suppose there’s no girl he’s fond of? Boyhood friend? Someone you could summon that would cheer him?”

“His brother is abroad, and unable to return for the moment. I will think on it.”

“Do as best you can. I’ll leave these powders and he’ll be right as rain in body.” Stapleton nodded. “I’ll come to the funeral if I can.”

“I’ll send a boy with the details,” Stamford said, and showed him out, Hudson being quite occupied with John.

Deep attachment, Stamford thought. Well, well. He would have liked to make sure of John’s happiness himself, as he had no sons, but if it was a deep attachment Stapleton prescribed, it was quite likely that he could arrange that.

He left the house at Crampton with a thoughtful expression, ostensibly to make the funeral
arrangements, but he went straight to Sherlock Holmes’ warehouse. Sherlock was busy when he arrived, but no matter; it gave him time to think about how best to manage the situation. He was not wrong, he knew, but since both parties were proud, and the situation delicate, there would be some tricky maneuvering to be done.

Alas, dear reader, though Michael Stamford is a model Oxford man, it must be admitted that he suffered from a vice that is commonly ascribed only to women: matchmaking. That his targets were men he cared not; for Stamford, it was the joy of meddling successfully that thrilled him, as well, of course, as the happiness of those couples that benefited from his attention.

“Stamford.” Sherlock Holmes’ curt voice interrupted his reverie. “Was there something else? I thought we’d settled our business yesterday, though perhaps you’d wish to visit the mill?” His tone was curt, and Stamford knew he had mere seconds.

“Not for business, Holmes, but I have some dashed bad news, and a question. Who is the best undertaker here now? Has old Moffat gone on to his own final reward, or is he still doing his job?”

“It’s Moffat still.” Sherlock said. “But why an undertaker, Stamford?” His eyes had narrowed, and Stamford knew he had his attention.

“Richard Watson has died, suddenly.” Stamford gave a melancholy sigh, as though his own mortality was heavy upon him, “Poor fellow! how full his thoughts were of his son all last night! Good God! Last night only.”

“But...John.” Sherlock said, his voice low, and stopped full short.

“Yes, poor fellow. It seems hard for him, losing both parents and—well, never mind—so quickly. He is quite ill.”

“Ill!” Sherlock made one or two fruitless attempts to speak, before he could get out the words:

“What will become of him!”

Stamford looked at him—an odd look, Sherlock thought.

“Stapleton says he’ll rally, if he wants to. He mustn’t feel like he has much to live for right now,
though I rather fancy there will be at least two people waiting for him: myself for one. I could make my old age happy with having John as a son, and he could finish his studies in Oxford, for all he is so devoted to the idea of Edinburgh still.”

“Who is the other?” asked Sherlock with trembling interest.

“Oh, his mother’s family. Smart London people, who very likely will think they’ve the best right to him. Captain Lennox married his cousin. Good enough people, I dare say. And then there’s the Captain’s sister, who I am sure would be glad enough to see him in London for good.”

“What sister?”

“Miss Morstan-Lennox, a bright young thing, likely to be setting her cap at John. I know she thought a great deal of him these five years or more: the captain told me as much, though he made quite a grimace as he did so. Probably due to John’s want of fortune, but now that will be done away with.”

“How?” asked Sherlock, too earnestly curious now to be aware of the impertinence of his question.

“Why, John will have my money at my death. And if this Miss Morstan-Lennox is half good enough for him, and she likes him—well! It will all be made easy.” Stamford smiled at Holmes easily; that should fetch him, then, if he did care for John.

Sherlock’s face shifted slightly, but he did not betray any great emotion. Stamford played the last shot in his locker.

“Of course, John may choose to go to Harry.”


“Harry,” said Stamford, affecting mild surprise. “Why don’t you know? He's John’s brother. Have you not heard—”

“I never heard his name before. Where is he? Who is he?”
“Surely I told you about him, when the family first came to Milton—the son who was concerned in that mutiny.”

“I never heard of him till this moment. Where does he live?”

“In Spain. He's liable to be arrested the moment he sets foot on English ground. Poor fellow! he will grieve at not being able to attend his father's funeral.”

“I hope I may be allowed to go?” Sherlock remembered his manners, suddenly, although soon enough his primary concern triumphed, and he asked, “Will John be well?”

“Certainly; thankfully. You're a good fellow, after all, Sherlock. Watson liked you. He spoke to me, only the other day, about you. He regretted he had seen so little of you lately. I am obliged to you for wishing to show him respect.”

“But about Harry,” Sherlock could not leave the point. “Does he never come to England?”

“Never.”

“He was not over here about the time of Mrs. Watson's death?”

“No, impossible. What made you think he was?”

“I saw a young man walking with Miss Watson one day,' replied Mr. Holmes, 'and I think it was about that time.”

“Oh, that would have been Sholto Lennox, Miss Morstan-Lennox’s brother.” Stamford said, quite omitting Lennox’s marital status. “He's a lawyer, and they were in pretty constant correspondence with him; and I remember Mr. Watson told me he thought he would come down. Everyone does so admire John, and of course poor Richard was great company.”

No answer. No change of countenance.
“I admire John as well, of course,” Sherlock said, driven to bay by Mr. Stamford's pertinacious questioning, “he is a fine specimen of the English gentleman.”

“Is that all?” said Stamford.

Sherlock stared at him, as if reading his soul, but there was nothing but mild innocence in Stamford’s eyes.

“Stamford,” said he, 'before you speak so, you should remember that all men are not as free to express what they feel as you are.’

“My apologies, old man,” Stamford said, and, knowing that his arrow had found its mark, and so took his leave.

As for Sherlock, though he had had important business on his mind before meeting Stamford—the price of cotton had greatly increased, and it would cause him quite serious problems with the contracts he had in hand—he could only think of John, now. It took all of his considerable pride not to run to John, prostrate himself before him, and offer any help and comfort he could. He imagined John alone in the world for a moment, before the uncomfortable reality of John’s pre-existing attachment—could it have been Captain Lennox at the train station?—struck once more and brought him to earth. John did not want him, could not want him, and he must therefore possess his misery in patience. Gritting his teeth, he headed for the railyard, and did business all the day with a scowl on his face that made many men quail.

He did not, however, make any great impression on Myfanwy and Anthea as he came in to tea. Rather, it was he that was brought up short, however, when he noticed that Myfanwy was knitting. A chill slid down his spine; Myfanwy was never so dangerous as when she was knitting. It freed her mind, she said, and this meant trouble for her enemies.

Or John, he thought.

“Anthea?” he said, giving up on hiding his worry.

“Milverton,” she replied, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Sherlock, I have not forgotten young Mr. Watson and his perfidy,” Myfanwy said, without looking up, “but there are greater concerns in this world than your tender heart.”
It was a sign of Sherlock’s perturbation that he did not refute this statement.

“His father is dead.”

“I know, and the young man lies ill. Stamford is waiting for you to speak, you know, before he summons the London relations.”

“Speak?”

“Oh, Sherlock, do not be more of a fool than necessary.”

“I cannot… John does not…”

Myfanwy set down her knitting in so decided a fashion that the tea table shook.

“Sherlock, I will say this once: you observe, but you do not observe clearly where John Watson is concerned. There is a very obvious thing that you are missing.”

“Then why, for all the gods in the pantheon, will you not tell me, Myfanwy?” Sherlock roared. “Sometimes I think you wish me to suffer.”

“I wish you to think, Sherlock, and I wish you to survive.”

“It is easy for you to say, with your heart safe here in our home,” Sherlock continued, “I must…”

“Sherlock, I cannot. For your safety and for ours. Attend the funeral. Keep your eyes open, and help Stamford if you can…he’s certainly trying to help you,” she said, picking up her knitting again. “As for me, I will do what I can. Now go.”

Sherlock looked to Anthea, who shrugged. He left for tea in the workers’ hall, thinking that one day, he would cut Myfanwy’s dress allowance—and Anthea’s book allowance—and let them shift as they would. It seemed a rather petty return for the misery she was causing him, he thought, and
turned his brain towards the problem, and John.

John had indeed, by the next day, rallied under Stapleton’s care and his own youthful vigour. He lay in bed, knowing that he had arrangements to make, and further on, decisions, but while his father lay unburied he could not bestir himself to do anything but mourn. There was nobody to care for now, since Sherlock was out of reach, though he had people who would care for him. As he thought, and coughed, he felt as useless as he had done after the Edinburgh accident. Though he knew now it had been some cruel plot, he still could not quite forgive himself for becoming embroiled in it, and now, he fell to the lowest point that he could remember. Letters from Harry and Sholto made things no better.

When he finished the last from Sholto, it became clear that Harry would be an outcast all his days, and John himself would either have to leave England or resign himself to an orphan existence. Harry had declared, vehemently, that he would not take his pardon if it were offered him, nor live in the country if he had permission to do so. John understood that, but his melancholy was deepened by the sweet hopefulness he glimpsed in the pretty, timid, girlish letters of Dolores, Harry’s intended. For him, though, there could be no such hopefulness; were he and Sherlock ever to make things up, they would still have obstacles in their way. John sighed, folding away the paper. It seemed as though what was left of the light in the world went with it as he tucked it into his mother’s dressing case.

The next day was the funeral, and it dawned as grey this time, as grey as John could have wished it, had he felt the desire to wish anything at all. Without tears or an outward show of care—a state which Stamford found quite worrisome, as well as an absence of attention from Sherlock, but did not dare mention—John prepared for the funeral.

As John and Stamford made their way to the chapel, John was glad that the funeral was not in the same place as that of his mother, sad as he was to see his father refuse the Church even in death. He could not have borne, he thought, to stand in the same place and hear the same service, twice in one year, for two people so beloved. Moreover, he could not have faced the memory of the scene with Sherlock; he could not have looked at the corner where Sherlock had stood, or the spot where they had grasped hands and John had whispered his bold invitation. He shook his head to clear it, and turned his attention back to the funeral address.

Sherlock himself arrived as planned, just as the address was starting. He slipped in at the back, behind a pillar, where he could see John but not be seen. Then, oh, then he regretted it, though; John’s face was white and drawn, the lines around his mouth pronounced in the harsh side light. He wished, despite the gnawing knowledge of John’s other attachment, that he could take John into his arms and comfort him. Impossible, he thought, but the ghost of John’s scent rose up before him and he breathed it in.

“Miss your little mollyboy, do you?” came an unpleasant hiss from behind him. Milverton. Sherlock flinched, but did not turn. He would not acknowledge that worm in a public place unless
absolutely pressed, and the damage even Milverton could do was limited at a funeral.

“He is quite a morsel, isn’t he? I’ve heard he’s quite…well-equipped, too, if what Moriarty has told me is right. You never know, of course” –here, Sherlock suppressed a shudder—“Moriarty is a nice boy but he does lie.”

Then, thankfully, the music rose, and Milverton subsided. Sherlock tried to shake off the blanket of unease that had settled over him. John’s white face was graven into his mind. Whatever he was missing about John’s behaviour must be discovered; neither of them should suffer another day if he could help it. Milverton must be stopped, and soon.
The service finally ended, and Mr. Watson was carried out of the church and towards his final resting place. John followed the coffin, a somber conscience of his new position as orphan weighing upon him.

He took a handful of dirt into his hand and tossed it to cover his father. Poor Father! He had been so lost after leaving Helstone, and worse again after losing Mother; was it a mercy that he was gone so quietly? John, though his heart was sore, thought perhaps it had been, as he watched the last evidence of his father’s physical presence be consigned to the earth.

The evening was drawing in when this had finished. John was profoundly grateful that they would not have a reception after the funeral; he had only to run the gauntlet of condolences, and then he would be at liberty.

When Sherlock stepped into the line, John was quite aware that he had done so. He felt a swell of gratitude, knowing that Sherlock had come, despite everything, to see him; how he wished for some quiet moments to make a clean breast of everything. Now, to have secrets from Sherlock was even more unbearable than it had been before his father’s death; it seemed to him that he truly was alone, despite Mr. Stamford’s best efforts. John resolved, then, to tell Sherlock everything, despite any lingering danger to Harry; after all, he was gone, now, to Spain for good, and an unsubstantiated story of his presence in England would do nobody any harm, particularly since Moriarty was dead.

Moriarty! The very name brought gooseflesh to his skin, though since his death both he and Sherlock were safer. Milverton could not have further proof of their liaison, since there were no letters, but John still felt unease.

“Young Mr. Watson—I suppose just Mr. Watson now?—my condolences,” Wilkes’ voice surprised him, and John turned to shake his hand. John felt an even greater unease when he saw Milverton behind him, with in the group of mill owners that had sent their sons to be tutored by Mr. Watson. Surely the man had no reason to be here—had not known his father except to nod to in the street. Then, he turned and saw Sherlock’s face, and knew, immediately, that something was very wrong. Sherlock’s lips were folded firmly, in a way that spoke not just of grief.

He looked again at Milverton, and shuddered when their eyes met. Milverton winked at him, one cold, grey eye disappearing behind almost invisible lashes, and a thrill of revulsion skittered down
John’s neck. He wished Sherlock were closer; he would have gone to him, but was hindered by his position as chief mourner. He saw Sherlock incline his head, and the tension in his body ebbed slightly. Sherlock moved closer to him, again, and John was suddenly grateful.

Gregson was next, and then Milverton was close to him. Though Sherlock was nearby, John still felt a desire to cover his neck; surely Milverton’s teeth were more than usually pointed? “Holmes!” he heard someone exclaim, just as Milverton’s damp hand slid into his.

“Mr. Watson. How very nice to see you again. I haven’t seen your--and here he paused--face, since the Holmeses’ party.”

“Indeed,” John said, and smiled noncomittally. He gripped Milverton’s flesh firmly, shook, and attempted to withdraw his hand.

“Oh, no rush, is there, Mr. Watson? After all, we are all the same.”

John raised his eyes. There was a flicker of something across Milverton’s face, and it was just as suddenly gone. John squeezed his hand tightly, and looked him in the eye.

“We are all men under God, Mr. Milverton,” he said, and removed his hand from Milverton’s grasp, “Excuse me, I believe I must speak to Mr. Stamford.”

“Temper, temper,” Milverton chided, and continued, so softly that John was forced to bend to hear him.

“I believe I have some information you might like, Mr. Watson, about your… friend, Mr. Holmes.”

“Mr. Holmes will tell me anything about himself that I might need to know,” John said, straightening his back, “I really must go.”

“I think you’ll find you will not. I have some documents that I believe you would find most interesting, should you take a look at them closely.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Why, to exonerate your friend from any wrongdoing that might result in him losing his business, I imagine. That, or to gain his approval, though, I must say, the documents show that you have that.”

“You don’t have a thing,” John blurted, and then stopped, horrified, at the smile that spread across Milverton’s face.

“Now I do. My office, in one hour. Be alone, John,—John recoiled at the intimate address—or Mr. Holmes will suffer for it.” He withdrew his hand from John’s and John wiped it on his trousers despite himself.

He shook hands with Dimmock next, and then Sherlock was facing him.

“What happened,” Sherlock hissed, though his countenance was perfectly smooth. John took a deep breath and composed himself.

“Can’t say.”

Sherlock stood perfectly still, then took John’s hand to shake. The contact fizzed along John’s
body, and the world fell into place.

"We need to talk," he said, and Sherlock’s eyes lit.

“Lestrade’s. Separately. Tell Stamford you’re dining with me. And walk there, don’t run like a fool.“Our

John nodded, and turned to speak to one of his father’s pupils. By the time the graveyard was empty and Stamford was beside him, it was nearly dark and Sherlock had gone.

“How are you, John?” Stamford asked. “Bit of a rough time; more people than I expected, though not all of them saw how good he really was, your poor father.”

“Well enough,” John said, “Listen, Mr. Stamford, would you mind very much being alone at tea? Sherlock Holmes has invited me to speak to him about a… a business opportunity, and I feel I should go.”

“Hmph. Some cheek, that boy, on the day of your father’s funeral, but I suppose you know what you’re about. Away with you, then, and I’ll have a hot drink for you when you return.”

As John sped away, looking left and right for any sign that he was being followed, Stamford smiled.

“That’ll be comforting for them both, I can imagine. Holmes has been looking a little peaky himself. And now, to a quiet tea; I don’t expect John to be home before I retire.” And he left, quite secure that his words to Sherlock had caused this sudden rapprochement.

Neither John nor Sherlock were feeling quite so sanguine. Sherlock, having changed into workmen’s clothes, was slouching about in a close near Lestrade’s, while John, having recalled Sherlock’s instructions, was walking in what seemed to him the slowest possible gait—it was, in fact, very near a jog—towards the same street. Adrenaline coursed through him like a drug; as he turned into the right street, a strong forearm reached out to pull him into a secluded corner and he loosed a punch that nearly knocked his assailant to the ground.

“John!” a well-known voice gasped, and in an instant John was pulling Sherlock to his feet.

“Sherlock! Forgive me! I was prepared for danger, as you see,” he said. He brushed Sherlock’s rough linen shirt clean, then stopped, suddenly, as Sherlock reached for his hand. They both spoke at once.

“John, I am sorry I did not—”
“—it was I, I could not tell you that—”
“—you are more than truthful, I know, and when Stamford—”
“—Harry is my brother—”
“—said you had a brother, I knew it must be—”
“—I would never have betrayed—”
“—I was foolish not to see—”

Sounds of footsteps stopped their voices. Sherlock cocked his head to listen, and John watched him, unearthly and beautiful; when he did not blanch, or suddenly spring to action, John felt he could breathe again.

“John,” Sherlock said, “This will be most dangerous.”

“I know. But it must be done.”
“Before we go, I would...I must...John, I am so sorry. For your father, and for doubting you.” His face was earnest in the half-light.

“You could not have known,” John said, and reached out to touch his face. Sherlock bent, and, for a brief, shining moment, their lips met. Sherlock’s mouth was warm, and John lingered on it with longing; he felt he could have stayed there for hours.

Sherlock had him as close as he dared, but it seemed like in no time at all he had to break the kiss.

“It is almost the hour, John. You go in, and I will find you. Remember, we only need the papers, if in fact he has such a thing. Do not” he said, grasping John’s face in his hands, “Do not play the hero for me, John. I am not worth your life.”

“I will do as I please, Sherlock Holmes,” John said stoutly. A swift smile came to Sherlock’s face at this, and together they set off.

Milverton’s was a large mill at the outskirts of the industrial district, much less compact than Sherlock’s and yet less prosperous. The counting house, however, was lavish, and John felt a twinge as he walked through the doors. He had never seen such ostentatious luxury; he felt quite overcome by the tapestries and gilding. He childishly wished for Ella’s pet lapdog, that it might come and piddle on the rich rug; Milverton certainly deserved no less.

In no time at all, a young clerk had escorted John to Milverton’s inner office, and, with a very brief bow, left him. John waited several minutes in the middle of the room before realizing Milverton would undoubtedly let him wait some time before entering and, with that in mind, bent to examine a particularly hideous lamp.

He had moved on to the third bookshelf--entirely false spines, as he suspected--when the door flew open.

“Well. You found me, John.”

“Mr. Milverton. What do you have to show me?”

“Ah, you are in a hurry? Goodness, and I thought we Northern men knew how to do business. You’re but a small Southron gentleman and you rush me! Me! What is the world coming to?” He winked at John, but John remained silent.

“What loyalty you have shown in coming here. I do hope your young gentleman appreciates it. Brandy?”

John shook his head.

“Silence, I see. Yet why should we conclude our affairs so quickly? I’m sure we would have,” Milverton paused, pouring himself a finger of amber liquor, “a great deal in common, John.”

“The letters, Mr. Milverton, are all that interest me.”

Milverton raised an eyebrow and began to cross the room.

“Indeed. Most interesting.” he said. With each step he was coming closer, and John had to fight his revulsion. “This tells me, dear John, that your interest in men of the manufacturing class is very--John could smell the brandy now--specific.”

“The letters.”
“You are most stubborn. Are all small gentlemen so stubborn as you?”

“I am here for business, no more.”

“Really,” Milverton said, pacing in a tight circle around him, “Are you certain? After all, perhaps we have more in common than you think.” His breath was hot on John’s neck.

“We do not. Step away from me.”

“And what will you do,” Milverton’s finger trailed along John’s neck, and John stepped away and wheeled to face him. Milverton stepped forward, “What will you do if I do not? I have something you want and if you upset me you won’t have it. How far will you go, John Watson?”

“He won’t.” Sherlock’s voice cut through the room. Milverton straightened, taking in the sight of Sherlock in his linen shirt and loose trousers.

“Ah!” Milverton exclaimed, in a gross parody of paternal joviality, “Naughty! What did I say, John, when I told you to come? Come alone, I said, or dear Sherlock will suffer—and so he must.” He stood and, going to the drinks cupboard, opened a door and produced a Lancaster pistol.

“Now. Where were we?” he asked, pointing the weapon at Sherlock and leaning in so that John could feel his breath. “I believe, John dear, you were going to give me a demonstration of just how that little mouth works.”

“I was not.” John said, steadily.

“Oh, I think you were,” Milverton said, “Or you lose your lover. Not only that, I’ll have you take the blame for it.”

“Very well,” John said. He made his frame as limp as possible, slumping his shoulders in the softest pose he could manage. Milverton breathed heavily at this submission, and bent to capture John’s lips.

They were millimeters apart when John whipped up his elbow, catching Milverton in the windpipe. Milverton gasped and stumbled against the chesterfield, and Sherlock dived forward to grab the pistol as it fell.

“John!”

“Fine. I’m fine” John said. “Make sure he can’t move.”

“He won’t,” Sherlock said, pointing the gun at Milverton’s head.

“Oh, I see,” Milverton gasped, standing. He was shaking, but vertical. He took a step forward.

“The letters if you please, Charles,” Sherlock’s voice was as venomous as John has ever heard it.

“Letters?” Milverton grinned.

“Letters. Proof. Whatever you have about John and I, give it to me, and I won’t have you jailed.”

Milverton’s face worked, and for a moment John was afraid he was having an apoplectic fit.
Then, he realized Milverton was laughing, and he was truly afraid for the first time that day.

“Letters. Letters!” Milverton wheezed. “Oh, poor, dear soul. Dear, naive Sherlock Holmes. You know as well as I do—or you would if you had any sense—there are no letters. No sketches either, though I’m sorry about that, let me tell you. I wanted confirmation that you were lovers, and now I
though I’m sorry about that, let me tell you. I wanted confirmation that you were lovers, and now I
have it, thank you very much. I’m afraid you’re finished, Holmes.”

“But,” Sherlock struggled to articulate, “But you have no proof, Milverton. None.”

“I don’t need proof, Holmes, in the court of public opinion. Once the rumour–or should I say the
news–is spread, the judgment will be made, and you will be finished.”

“I see.”

“It’s been a pleasure, I must say. But you are too successful now, Sherlock, and you have to go.”

“I have done nothing to you, Milverton. It is your own foolishness that has cost you so much.”

“Well, then,” Milverton said, “Now we are even. I suggest you pack your things and leave, if you
wish to start again elsewhere. How convenient it is that that lump Stamford is in town; it will make
business transactions so much more efficient.”

“You have no letters.” Sherlock stated flatly.

“None. My goodness, Sherlock, has the shock ruined your much-vaunted brains?”

“No.” Sherlock said. “John, draw the curtains.”

John obeyed, numbly crossing the room to pull first one, then the other. He remembered, later, that
they were some flowered brocade, but at the moment he could only feel the leaden disappointment
in his veins.

The shot took him by surprise.

“Sherlock!”

The blood spattered wide. Sherlock lowered his gun and stared, surprise on his face, as Milverton
topped slowly to the ground. For a long moment, all was still.
It was the flurry of shouts and footsteps that spurred John to action. Pushing Sherlock into the lee
of Milverton’s desk, out of sight of the body, was the work of a moment. Sherlock was trembling
—shock, no doubt—and John loosened his collar and made him take a draught of brandy; then, he
gathered him into his arms for a moment to still him.

He had a curious blank, then, Sherlock’s curls tickling his nose and his stertorous breathing filling
his ears, and thus did not immediately notice that everything had fallen quiet. It was only when he
heard a single, heavy tread in the hall that he became aware of the absence of all other noise. His
mind spun; they had few options, and none he could see that would exonerate them both.
The step was at the office door. There was no more time. John made his decision. He would bluff
his way out, and Sherlock would be safe. He hoped he would not have to shoot, but he would.
Oh, he would.

He sprang up, the pistol in his hand pointed at the intruder, then stopped short.

The massive form of Myfanwy Holmes stood in the doorway.

“Oh, Sherlock,” she said, shaking her head. “What have you done?”
A Bittersweet Independance, Part 1

Chapter Summary

“I am a brain, Watson. The rest of me is a mere appendix.”
— Arthur Conan Doyle, The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone

In which a greater extent of Myfanwy Holmes' plans are revealed and John Watson becomes a fugitive of sorts.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for some blood at the very beginning as well as non-consensual drugging for non-sexual purposes.

Also, I seem to have fallen back into Elizabeth Gaskell-style chapters, which were often four to six pages. To be fair, it's mainly because I had a really busy week, but at least there's a precedent. The second half of this chapter should be up next week, I hope.

“Oh, Sherlock,” Myfanwy said, shaking her head. “What have you done?”

John, suddenly outside himself, surveyed the scene. He himself could see only half of Milverton’s body, the head a mangled thing in its pool of blood, but Myfanwy could see it all, even Sherlock in his arms. John could only imagine what she must think.

“Sherlock!” Myfanwy said, sharply. Sherlock looked towards her, but did not speak.

“Sherlock! Gather your wits!” she said, more sharply still. She moved towards him. John, afraid she would slap him, glared at her and held Sherlock closer to himself.

“He is in shock, Myfanwy. Let him be.”

“Let him be! Pah!” she said, kneeling in front of them and holding a flask to his lips. “I never imagined he would do such a ridiculous thing, and now he must face the consequences. Drink, Sherlock.”

Sherlock opened his mouth and took a pull from the bottle obediently.

John watched Sherlock’s still-vague expression him with growing concern, then turned his eyes to Myfanwy’s expressionless face. There was something in her eyes that made him shiver. Steeling himself, he said,

“He did nothing, Myfanwy. I shot Milverton.”

Myfanwy looked at John consideringly, then back at Milverton’s body.
“Did you indeed?” she said, and walked around behind the desk. Her measured tread was not, John thought, the most reassuring noise he had ever heard.

Sherlock tilted his head back, and John risked a quick kiss, just a brush of lips over Sherlock’s ear. He tasted a brief tang of blood, then turned away.

“John,” Sherlock said, voice low.

“Shh. It’s all right,” John said.

“No, John. Not…” And he coughed; John had just time to catch a whiff of laudanum before Sherlock collapsed, truly insensate, in his arms.

“Myfanwy!” John knew he should be quiet, but he could not understand what she had just done. “Laudanum is the worst thing for shock! Even you should know that! How dare you?” As he said this, he was laying Sherlock on the floor and loosening his collar.

“Why did you shoot Milverton, John?” came Myfanwy’s voice from behind them.

“He was threatening Sherlock,” John said, “Who has just been drugged. By you. Why, Myfanwy?”

Myfanwy came back into view.

“Because he would have sacrificed himself for you. Because he would have said he had done it,” she said, and John, with a frisson, saw the love and concern in her eyes. John was suddenly conscious that nobody but Sherlock now felt that for him, not even Harry, who loved intensely, yes, but not consistently.

“He--we would have lost everything there was to lose, John Watson, and I cannot allow that.”

“I see,” John said. And he did.

“Miss Holmes, I did shoot Milverton. Call for the police,” John said, “and I will go with them.”

For a moment all was silent. Myfanwy was looking once again at John, unblinking.

“No. The police do not enter into it; I promised your mother that I would protect you. But I cannot protect you completely, so you must go.”

“Where?” he said, not looking at Sherlock’s face, beautiful even under the spatters of blood that marked his pale skin.

“Edinburgh. Finish your course.”

John stared at her but her expression did not change.

“But will I not be easily traceable?” he asked, “It will seem the natural order of things. Your time in Milton has come to a tragic, but understandable end, and you will simply begin your life anew.”

“I suppose,” he said, for at that moment the years seemed to stretch before him, blank and without aim.

“You had better go, John Watson. I will see to Sherlock, as I always have done.” John rose reluctantly, relinquishing Sherlock to the floor.
“But if he should choke while he is insensible…”

“I am,” she said, “perfectly capable of caring for him. Besides, he must be unconscious for me to set the stage for what the police will see. Go, now. Pack your things, set your servant to close your house, and take the early train tomorrow. There will be a letter for you at the station; do not forget to collect it.”

“And what of Stamford?” John said, somewhat awed by Myfanwy’s coolness and forethought.

“You told him this night that you had to speak to Sherlock about a,” here she paused, suppressing a small smile. It was not a pleasant expression, “‘business opportunity’. I suggest you tell him that it requires your certification, and that since the term begins in ten days’ time, you had better leave immediately. I am sure he will be glad to hear you have future plans.”

“May I,” John asked, unwilling to mention that he had neither money nor lodgings. He would swallow his pride, and ask Stamford for the fare, and, if once in Edinburgh he had to sleep in the medical library, he would, “May I write him a letter? Sherlock?”

Myfanwy’s expression wavered for a moment, but her features did not settle into anything like pity. She said, stonefaced, “You must. But you must tell him not to follow you.”

“You will not read it.”

“I will if I must.”

“Then there will be no letter.”

“You will not disobey me.”

“I will act, as far as I can, within the dictates of my own conscience. And I will not write anything for Sherlock that you will see, because it is none of your affair.”

There was silence, then Myfanwy barked a short laugh.

“Piffle.” she said. “You’ll write one and like it, and if I read it who’s to know.”

John stood back, stung.

“Now,” she added, ignoring him, “Go. Crampton, then the train station. Write a note to Sherlock and leave it at the station when you pick up the letter that’s waiting.”

John looked at her, but she had turned her back on him. Very well, he thought. He reached out to Sherlock’s immobile form, checking his breathing automatically. Steady. He watched Sherlock’s pale neck rise and fall and felt the warmth of Sherlock’s breath on his cheek. Swiftly, he risked a kiss, inhaling the sweet familiar scent. Then, turning Sherlock to his side, he nodded curtly to Myfanwy.

“The window,” she said, without looking up from Milverton’s body, and John went, with one last glance at Sherlock’s prone form, out the window and into the dark, noisy streets.

John arrived breathless at the house in Crampton. He slipped in, intending to go to his room, but Hudson caught him on the landing.

“Master John!” she exclaimed. “Wherever have you been? It’s very late, and you have your
funeral clothes on still. You must be famished!”

“Hudson,” he whispered, casting a nervous eye at the study door, “I must leave.”

“Leave?” she asked, “And your poor father only interred today? Is it trouble, Master John? Or is it that Sherlock Holmes.” She fixed him with a gimlet eye that was suddenly horribly reminiscent of Myfanwy Holmes.

“I must leave, Hudson. Tonight. I will speak to Stamford, if you will only agree to manage closing the house here.”

“Alone, I suppose, since you are in trouble.” John stared, but she continued, “Very well. I’ll speak to Mr. Stamford; at least he’s easy enough to manage as long as he’s well fed and has a bottle of brandy. The things go to London, I suppose, and I with them?”

“Yes. I’ll write to Aunt by the first post from… from where I’m going, and ask her to take you on. Once I am in a position to set up my own establishment, I’ll write for you.”

“You don’t have to, you know.” Hudson said, patting his shoulder. To his horror, John felt tears come to his eyes. “I can always go to my brother’s, though goodness knows I’d prefer to stay with you. You’ve your mother’s spirit and more, and Sir John isn’t dead while you’re with us.”

“Thank you, Hudson.” John wrung her hand.

When he descended a short time later, in a fresh suit with grip in hand, Stamford was rattling around in the study, preparing to retire. John took his courage in both hands and went in.

“John, my boy! You’ve been gone quite long enough to have made your fortune, never mind talked about making it!” he exclaimed, then, catching sight of John’s traveling clothes, asked “But surely you’re not leaving!”

“I must. It’s imperative that I catch the last train. I’ve just come in to bid you farewell, sir, and thank you.”

“Bid me farewell, sir, just like that? Cool, you are!”

John bristled a bit at Stamford’s jovial tone, and Stamford, being by no means imperceptive, moderated his voice.

“I suppose you must go, my boy; you wouldn’t if duty didn’t compel it. Is there anything I can do?”

“If you could sign the papers necessary to help Hudson close the house, sir, and see her safely to London? That would be a great relief.”

“I will, and with pleasure.”

“Also, if you would take what books of Father’s you would like, in remembrance. There is one, though,” John said, taking his father’s Homer from the shelf, “that should go to Sherlock Holmes.” His hand shook as he wrote a brief message on the flyleaf, but he tamed it before he gave the book to Stamford.

“Of course. Tomorrow; that sister of his has invited me to tea. Bit of a dragon, that one, and no mistake.”

John did not comment. He held out his hand to shake Stamford’s but found himself engulfed in a
“John!” Stamford’s voice was even more booming close up. “You must tell me where you are once you get settled, and what you’re doing.”

“I will,” John said, a sick feeling blooming in his stomach. “I’ll send you my direction when I can.”

Stamford stepped back, and surveyed him.

“You quite well?” he asked.

“Yes, only I must go. Hudson will see to you. Thank you.” This all came out in a hurried jumble, but John was suddenly desperate to go.

“Very well, my boy, I suppose the train won’t wait.”

“Goodbye,” John said, real sadness in his voice.

“Goodbye, John. You’ll do.” Stamford said, and let him leave.

It was only when John was halfway to the station that he realized he had very little money. He could not have borne, he thought, to ask Stamford for anything other than his help; he would simply have to go as far as his money would take him and then do what he could.

He was all the more surprised, then, when he knocked at the ticket window for the letter and got quite a fat envelope. Leaving his own sad, slim missive in the hands of the sleepy agent, John stepped towards the platform and opened the letter to discover not only the address of quite good lodgings, but a letter to his former tutor, a train ticket, and twenty pounds.

A sudden surge of anger filled him. Only years of financial restraint kept him from flinging the notes to the ground.

Damn Myfanwy Holmes. Damn her and her prescience, and her forethought, and her plotting.

John looked at the letters again, written in her slanting, careful hand. He folded each one precisely, placing them into his breast pocket, and stepped onto the train.
A Bittersweet Independance, Part 2

Chapter Summary

In which Sherlock discovers Myfanwy's plan, and Myfanwy's balancing act is exposed.

“John!” Sherlock shouted.

“Of course,” Myfanwy said, getting to her feet. Sherlock scrambled into a sitting position, then realized he was in his own bedroom.

“Where is John?” he shouted again, pushing his confusion away.

“Gone, last night.” Myfanwy said, and to her credit, only looked a little self-satisfied.

“You! Myfanwy, I will have you out on the streets this hour.”

“You most certainly will not. Think of the scandal.”

“I would live on the streets for him.”

“Pish tosh. Now stay in bed.”

“Myfanwy!”

“The work will never betray you.”

“Nor would he.”

“We shall see about that.” Myfanwy’s mouth primmed up.

“Where is he?”

“Edinburgh.”

“Of course. I wonder if you will ever be able to resist a dig.”

Myfanwy raised her eyebrows.

“No, that’s not all. Make no mistake, Myfanwy. I will follow him, and I will bring him back.” Sherlock tried to step out of bed and nearly fell.

“You cannot. If you want your work, and your man, then you must play the part, Sherlock.”

“Arranged it all, have you?” Sherlock flung himself back on the bed, “I warn you, Myfanwy, you overstep.”

“I do not. Sherlock, John Watson, from the sunny, idyllic South, has no idea at all what is necessary to live as we do. He’s wrapped in the privilege of the educated; he does not know what we would be reduced to should you lose your business.”

“He is no Victor Trevor, Myfanwy.”
“That, at least, I know, Sherlock. He is of better stuff. But he is still gone.”

“He would come back.”

“He was not held here by anything--Sherlock opened his mouth but Myfanwy cut him off--anything, Sherlock. Let him go.”

“This is a test, Myfanwy. I know you.”

Myfanwy smiled again.

“Maybe so. If he resists the fat purse he’ll be offered when he completes his work, he will be yours.”

“He’s mine already.”

“That remains to be seen.”

Sherlock’s face hardened.

“I suppose there is some compelling reason I cannot be away on the next train to Edinburgh?”

“Besides the expense and trouble? Of course there is. You were found, insensible, beside the corpse of Charles Milverton. While preliminary evidence,” here, Myfanwy permitted herself a small smile, “shows that you were hurt trying to defend him--a grand gesture, Sherlock, given your professional differences--you are still required to be present at the inquest, and may not leave Milton before then.”

“Very neat. I see your knitting has been most stimulating. Now leave me, Myfanwy, with the last piece of the puzzle; I see a letter on that tray, which I suppose to be a stilted composition written by John at your behest. You may as well give it to me, along with a cup of tea. I will be suitably moved by the letter, and then I will go and speak to the police and act the heroic part.”

“Dramatics, Sherlock, such dramatics.” Myfanwy said, placing the tray on his lap. “It is for the best.”

“As you say, Myfanwy,” he said quietly, the letter already in his hand. He glanced up at her for a moment, and though she could tell, by the movement of his features, that he was attempting impassivity, there was a soft, lost look on his face that she had not seen since their parents had died.

Myfanwy left the room, her head high, but the threatening sting of tears in her eyes.

Sherlock did not watch her go. Instead, he looked at the letter again. Such a small thing. Meaningless, too, he knew. The words John would write when he knew Myfanwy would read them had nothing to do with what lay between them; the one short kiss in a dark alley outside Milverton’s told all the truth.

It would be best to put the letter aside; reading it would only cause him pain. And yet, as he thought of it, his fingers worked the paper open and he had John’s words, such as they were, in front of him.

Dear Sherlock,
I have gone. It is safer for us both. I will finish my medical training, and will take up practice in Helstone, or somewhere near. Somewhere where I can do some good.

Thank you. For everything.

John

Sherlock flung the letter to the ground. It was worse, he thought, worse than he could have imagined. The tight, cold sound of John folded in upon himself, doing the noble thing, was infinitely painful. And yet, as truly Sherlock knew John’s words were false, so did he begin to question whether he had read their last kiss rightly. This, this was why he stayed away from affairs of the heart; it was impossible to parse out actual fact.

He reached for the very factual sales figures Myfanwy-curse her!-had placed beside his bed, but they sat unexamined for a long while.
Exile

Chapter Summary

"My life is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence."
- Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Red-Headed League"

As they are separated, John must confront his fears, and Sherlock must confront his loneliness. Myfanwy, on the other hand, must confront the unexpected: a mistake.

In Edinburgh, it was raining as John left the station. Though it pained him to do so, he turned his steps towards the address Myfanwy had given him. The lodgings, in an irritatingly convenient street, were comfortable without being unusually luxurious, and the landlady was welcoming.

Perhaps too much, he thought, sipping his third cup of tea and nodding as she told him story after story of her former lodgers, acclimating himself to the Scots cadence once more. When she did finally leave, John stayed where he was, on the soft red chair in the sitting room. The relative quiet echoed in his ears after the chatter of Mrs. Beaton and the noise of Milton, and he felt short of breath. The very thought that Sherlock was so many miles absent weighed on him, and he did not move to eat, or to unpack. It was only when darkness fell and the lamplighter came round that he lay out on his bed, still fully dressed. The bedspread was rough under his hands.

He didn’t notice he had fallen asleep until he began to dream, this time of Moriarty’s face superimposed over his beloved Helstone. Moriarty’s teeth were the windows of the vicarage, huge and grinning, and he could see Myfanwy Holmes looking out from them, smiling as she closed the curtains. Moriarty’s fingers reached out, breaking down the trees in the garden, and tightened around his neck. John fought back viciously, kicking and choking, but could not get away. He thought he heard Myfanwy laugh.

He woke gasping for breath and clawing at his neck; his necktie, he realized ruefully, had tightened as he thrashed. The laugh came again, and he started; looking out the window he saw it was simply revellers in the street.

“Fool,” he said to himself, and got up, hands shaking. He took a long drink of water, then gritted his teeth and went to bed properly. It took him ages to sleep, and when he did, it was with his head under the pillow to hide himself from the the unfamiliar shadows of the room.

The papers Myfanwy’s man had given him said that John’s tutor would meet with him in two days’ time, and John spent those days hiding from his landlady, starting letters to Sherlock, and looking at his new books. Eventually, driven by the desperation of so many piles of crumpled parchment, he opened them, and found some small solace in rediscovering the principles of medicine. After two years away, his fingers itched to diagnose and heal, and he felt some purpose flood into his veins.

A letter from Stamford, both genial and peevish, settled it for him.

Dear John,
I cannot imagine what possessed you to run off in that way, and before you heard of the great scandal we have had here. Only imagine, someone has shot Milverton, and nobody knows quite who—and! Sherlock Holmes, of all people, failed to stop it. They found him quite bloody and insensate in Milverton’s office. Of course, tongues will wag—everyone knew the both of them rarely saw eye-to-eye—but I can’t see that boy doing anything quite so violent. Not of the criminal classes, indeed.

Any way, since you have quite abandoned me to the mercy of Hudson, who is doing her best though she thinks me quite a poor stick, I am only staying another day, just the time to do what she cannot (may not, I should say, because she’s capable of anything), and send you what you need.

I hope you will qualify quickly, and then come to me at Oxford. I understand there are other relations in London that may lay claim to you, but I am the nearest thing you have to a father now, and so you must spend this next Christmas with me at least. I am crabbed, certainly, but my cook is a cook of the best kind, and we shall feast on fat things and argue about the state of the world. I do long to see if your republican tendencies remain in place after three months back in Edinburgh, but I suspect, you being of fine moral character, that you will retain these worrisome principles.

Forgive my foolery, dear boy, I am old and flippant. Do write to tell me how you are.

Michael Stamford

That night, late, John burned the crumpled letters.

* * *

The day after John’s departure, despite Anthea’s gently puzzled expression at breakfast, Sherlock went back to work. He made his way to the office, and sat at his desk, looking at the smallish pile of orders, for a long while.

Lyons came in with tea. He smiled briefly and nodded his head as he set the tray on the desk, and Sherlock was suddenly aware just how handsome the boy was. A frightening desire seized him, just for a moment, to place his hand on that golden skin at Lyons’ neck. Would it feel like John’s? What would Lyons do?

He shook his head, jammed his hands in his pockets, and dismissed the boy curtly enough to earn himself a surprised glance.

Had he become another Milverton, now? Surely not. And yet the absence of John’s touch was as a massive void in his soul. What would he not do to regain that?

Work, he supposed, was the only thing that he could do now, and goodness knew he had enough of that before him if he were to manage through this crisis. He turned to his papers, drew an order sheet towards him, and began to write, deliberately unthinking. He did not leave his office until dark settled over Milton and his hands had long gone home.

The next day was the inquest. As crowded as it was—for the murder of a well-known millowner was sensational enough—Sherlock found the thing brief and mundane. Trust Myfanwy, he thought bitterly, to have managed to get the second-least inquiring magistrate in Milton. Philip Trenoweth was a young man, but already slow and plodding; Sherlock answered the pedestrian questions as
patiently as he could, aware that his words would affect his business. Utter rubbish, clearly, but he curbed his tongue nonetheless. He needed no breath of scandal now, with prices dropping and orders shrinking; if only the damned Americans would solve their problems.

“Holmes?” Trenoweth’s voice broke into his consciousness, “I’d like to reiterate. You arrived at Milverton’s office, saw him being attacked, and tried to save him but you were too late. The murderer hit you with the gun and you fell unconscious. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. Two last questions: Did you recognize the assailant?”

“I have never seen him.” Technically true, at least. But what of the next question? Myfanwy would not have dared...

“Last month, a young labourer named Moriarty died an unexplained death in the city infirmary. He said he was pushed by a man named John Watson. Could it have been the same man?”

And there it was. The poison arrow. Myfanwy had sown those seeds of doubt, sure as he was standing here.

Sherlock surveyed the room again. He was on dangerous ground, for it was he that had refused an inquest for Moriarty, of course—and certainly Trenoweth would have come up with it in his plodding thoroughness, if Myfanwy hadn’t fed it to him. What the hell was she playing at?

He saw a familiar flash of silver in the back: Lestrade. Of course he was there—and, not for the first time, Sherlock found his presence comforting, and while hiring the man was a decision that had served him well at the mill, Lestrade had also provided a leaven of rough warmth in Sherlock’s life that Sherlock had rarely experienced. A gift, Sherlock thought, from John.

After the inquest, Sherlock did not return to the house. Instead, he sat in his office, papers stacked before him, staring at the jar of lamp oil until his eyes ached.

*        *        *

When Myfanwy found him, he was sprawled, insensible, on the stone floor, pale as milk and quite as liquid. An empty bottle of the cheapest whiskey was beside him.

She could not rouse him, though he was breathing; even Anthea’s sal volatile would not shift him. It took all her considerable strength to roll him to the side so he would not choke on his own vomit, but she did, and while he slept, she sat in his chair, rigid.

It was not like Myfanwy Holmes to err, and yet she knew she had. Years of deprivation at the hands of her drunkard father and her absent mother had hardened and sharpened her. Years of knowing she was not like other women and would never marry had made her chary of her words and gestures. The result was something very like an all-seeing, all-knowing automaton; the extent of her knowledge mystified Sherlock himself, and would have terrified many a lesser man.

But with her beloved younger brother before her, insensible of drink for the first time in his life because of what she had wrought, she knew her error. To see the expression of doubt crossing her face now would have confused into all that knew her.
Sherlock drunk! He had never touched a drop, and had he been even a little younger, she would have beaten him for even a taste. But he had done it now, in his pain and fear, and she knew she could do nothing, not for a year, to help him.

She bent over to smooth Sherlock’s fine, dark curls, something she had not done since their mother had died. If a tear dropped on them, there was no-one but her to say it had.

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