

**SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE ADVENTURE OF THE PAPER
JOURNAL**

A novel

By

Harrison Kitteridge



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“Populus me sibilat, at mihi plaudo. Ipse domi simul ac nummos contemplar in arca. ”

“Haters hate; ballers ball.”

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CHAPTER ONE: MR SHERLOCK HOLMES AND DR JOHN WATSON

It is difficult to know where to begin. There are so many moving parts to consider. I could start with the murder of Edwina May Lucas. That is what they call “The Inciting Incident”, isn’t it? Strictly speaking, though, the blackmailer, Charles Augustus Milverton, and his evil machinations were the jumping-off point chronologically. There is also a strong case to be made for starting with Mary Elisabeth Sutherland. After all, it is her paper journal that turned out to be the linchpin, providing answers to questions Sherlock hadn’t even thought to ask. Each of these characters provides a useful prism through which to view the events presented. It all begins with Sherlock, though, doesn’t it? And with me. So, I suppose that is as good a place to start as any: with us.

I met Sherlock Holmes not long after I was invalided home from service as an army surgeon in Afghanistan. The campaign had been a disaster for me. I was transferred from the R.A.M.C. hospital in Kandahar to a base in the interior of the country just as the fatal Battle of Maiwand kicked off. I was shot in the shoulder by a high-velocity round that shattered my clavicle and severed my sub-clavian artery. I should have bled out and died right there, but luckily a medic called Alethia Murray happened to be nearby, and she managed to pull me to safety and plug the bleeding with her finger. She kept me alive until we could safely evacuate the area. I underwent a series of surgeries and was healing well enough that my colleagues were optimistic I would recover fully, then my wound became infected, and I was back on death’s door. The infection ravaged my body, and, when I came out on the other side, I was a wraith, a shadow of my former robust self. When I improved enough to become ambulatory, I was honourably discharged and sent home to England.

I could live nowhere else but London and took up residence in a moderately-priced hotel in the Strand that welcomed returning officers with lowered rates but still managed to stretch my army pension and disability benefits past their limits. I spent most of the days I didn’t have physical therapy or appointments with my psychiatrist lying in bed unable to overcome the feeling that I was a lead weight sinking slowly to the floor of an oozing black bog. A large part of me longed for the metaphor to come to life. I yearned to be enveloped by the darkness. The void beckoned me ceaselessly, tempting me with its promise of eternal stillness and peace. I longed for the comfort of death, for it all to end, and it took all my strength to resist the seductive tranquillity of a perpetually silent grave. My stamina was virtually non-existent, and simple tasks like washing myself or preparing my meals sapped my energy almost completely. On the rare occasions I experienced bursts of energy and optimism, I spent more profligately than a man in my position should have. I gambled and was careless of whether I won or lost; I indulged in epicurean pleasures I scarcely tasted; I bought tickets to live entertainment where the crowds and noise only further shredded my tattered nerves, all in a desperate attempt to jump-start my ability to feel joy again. They were failed endeavours; I made no new acquaintances and rebuffed anyone who showed any interest in me. Soon I was living as a virtual hermit.

The solitude was a comfort. I was glad of having no family, of my military service having alienated me from my school and university friends. I was glad there was no one to see how

pitiful I had become. Thankfully, my psychiatrist's request for a Medical Exemption had been granted, and I was (at least temporarily) relieved of the burden of having to maintain my Personal Archive File to the Generally Accepted Standards of Sociability, so I wasn't being bombarded with well-meaning Sociability Reminders. While Sociability Enhancement is a necessary element of treating depressives and sufferers from Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome, Sociability Reminders are very often counter-productive, adding to the sense of failing to be "normal" and worsening thoughts of self-harm. Our Files are handled much more delicately, and Virtual Sociability Companions are often employed. My psychiatrist helped me design a Virtual Sociability Companion in the guise of a supportive elder brother called Harry. The progress I was making with Harry notwithstanding, I realised my self-imposed exile from the world would soon come to an end, if for no other reason than the teetering of my finances towards a catastrophic collapse. I would have to find new lodgings quickly. I was pondering my predicament in a dimly lit corner of the Criterion Bar when someone questioningly called my name.

"John Watson?"

I turned to see my old medical college classmate, Ian Stamford, smiling uncertainly. We hadn't been close, but I greeted him warmly and was genuinely surprised by how glad I was to see a friendly, familiar face. He invited me to lunch, and I happily accepted. I told him of my travails in Afghanistan, and he offered genuine sympathy and commiseration. He asked me what my plans were. I did not want to discuss any further having to give up my career as a surgeon (even if physical therapy strengthened my dominant arm enough for it to be steady again, I no longer had the temperament required to cut into another human being), so I mentioned that I was looking for reasonably priced accommodations and was considering a flat share.

"You're the second person today to mention that to me in nearly exactly the same terms?" he informed me.

"And who was the first?" I enquired, glad to have found a potential lead so fortuitously.

"Sherlock Holmes," he responded. "He said he found a nice little flat on Baker Street, but that he needed someone to go halves with him. He was in one of the labs at Barts when I left him. He'll probably still be there."

I couldn't believe my luck. "Do you think he would mind me going over to meet him now?"

Ian hesitated a bit before answering. "He seemed anxious to have his living situation settled quickly, but you should know that he's a bit... odd."

"Odd?" I asked.

"Yes," Ian replied. I could see him struggling to be fair-minded and tactful. "He has a brilliant mind, but he's not so good with people."

"Many scientists aren't," I responded. Thinking of my recent reclusiveness and how it might look from the outside made me defensive of this stranger.

"I get on with him quite well," Ian said a bit hurriedly. "But I see him infrequently..." His voice tapered off. "Perhaps meeting him yourself is best. He's difficult to describe."

Ian and I settled our bill and took a cab over to St. Bartholomew's Hospital (or Barts as everyone affectionately called it) where we had both trained and Ian now met his Professional Skills Utilisation Requirements as an anaesthetist. Barts was much the same as I remembered, and I found the happy memories of my time there were a salve to the dark thoughts that were never far from the forefront of my mind. Ian escorted me to the biochemical labs where I got my first glimpse of Sherlock Holmes. He was sitting at a lab bench, his long, thin frame hunched

into a comma as he pipetted a solution almost mechanically into a series of Petri dishes.

“Sherlock,” Ian said quietly, not wanting to startle him into spoiling his experiment. Sherlock finished his task then turned to face us. The first thing you notice about Sherlock is his eyes. They are an ethereal, luminescent grey that looked almost silver under the harsh lights of the lab. His penetrating gaze froze me in place, and I immediately understood why Ian thought I might have misgivings about living with the man. There was something very nearly feral in his intense expression. “This is my friend, John Watson,” Ian explained. “I told him about your needing a flatmate.”

Sherlock snapped his latex gloves off then ran his hands quickly through his dark hair. “John Watson,” he repeated without inflection. “A military doctor who suffered a severe injury to his right shoulder in Afghanistan and recently returned home to England.”

“You messaged ahead?” I asked Ian, surprised that I had been so distracted as to miss him doing so.

“No,” Ian replied, smiling a bit. Sherlock wasn’t quite smiling, but there was a distinct hint of amusement in his expression.

“I’m sorry, but have we met before?” I asked Sherlock.

“No,” he replied in that same disinterested manner – it was beginning to get my back up.

“You’ve seen my File, then?” It was the only explanation. It was all there in grisly detail, including my diagnosis of Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome and my suicidal ideation. Part of me wished they still called my shattered nerves soldier’s heart or even shell-shock – something more evocative, something that didn’t make the agony, the bleakness, the fear, the *reliving* of it all sound like you could fix the problem with a few tablets, a massage and ergonomic furniture. Sherlock had seen my File. The only remaining mystery was why he would have looked me up and taken the time to remember a thing about me. Maybe he came across my File by chance but has one of those freakishly prodigious memories, I thought. Without realising it, I had simultaneously almost hit the mark and missed it spectacularly.

Sherlock covered his Petri dishes and stowed them in a nearby incubator. “We’ve never met, and I’ve never perused your Personal Archive File,” he said as he fiddled with the machine’s settings.

“Then how do you know all that about me?” I was becoming angry and suspicious. I could feel my adrenalin spiking as my overactive nerves reacted to what I perceived as a threat. I clenched my fist to stop it trembling.

“It’s not what you think, John,” Ian interjected gently. “He can just tell those sorts of things about people. What was it this time, Sherlock?” Ian asked, his voice filled with good humour as he tried to defuse the tension. “His shoelaces and shirt cuffs? A spot on his jacket?”

“His manner and bearing,” Sherlock responded after a moment. His strange eyes were still fixed on me, and I was paralysed – like an actor who had forgotten his lines and was trapped under the spotlight, frozen on the proscenium. “He’s practically standing at parade rest,” Sherlock observed. His voice was cool and clinical, and I thought of the first time I’d held a scalpel and cut into the flesh of my gross anatomy cadaver. His dissection of me continued. “And look at that haircut. He couldn’t scream military any more if he were in his full dress uniform. There is a slight yellowish tint to the sclera of his eyes – mild jaundice – one of the more common side-effects of amillomoxifan, medication any Westerner travelling to certain areas of Southeast Asia must take prophylactically. He holds his right arm awkwardly, carrying it almost as if it were still in a sling, and it doesn’t swing freely from his shoulder. He also unconsciously favours his right side so much that it’s very nearly set his spine out of alignment and given him

an almost imperceptible limp. So, he was injured very severely in the right shoulder in the recent past. His demeanour communicates that the circumstances of his injury were deeply traumatic.” I could sense that he used eliding language to spare discussing my psychological shortcomings even though he was clearly observant enough to have discerned my likely diagnoses without having seen my Health & Well-being Sub-File. It softened me towards him immensely. He continued. “A military man posted to an area of Southeast Asia that required him to take amillomoxifan prophylactically who was severely injured under traumatic circumstances – it must have happened in Afghanistan.”

I was amazed. “How did you know I was a doctor?” I asked. His disposition shifted only slightly, but I could tell he was relieved I was no longer angry.

“You and Ian don’t keep in touch, otherwise when he posted to his File that he knew of someone looking for a flat share in London, you would have responded, and, by the same token, if he’d known of your needs, he would have mentioned you this morning. So you met by chance today, but you’re obviously familiar with Barts and feel comfortable here. And you’re approximately the same age as Ian. Old acquaintance who feels at home at Barts – probably another doctor he trained with.”

“That’s quite a trick,” I said, my admiration for his acuity evident in my awestruck tone. He flushed, and I welled with a sudden rush of pity for the strange, socially inept man standing in front of me. As Ian had said, he possessed a brilliant mind, but he was clearly unused to frank praise. I smiled and said, “So, what about this flat, then?” Sherlock smiled back hesitantly, briefly described the flat and suggested we meet there the following afternoon to see if it was to my liking. “The address?” I asked.

“221B Baker Street,” he responded.

Sherlock and I parted ways amicably, and Ian kindly accompanied me back to the street where he hailed me a cab. Once I was comfortably ensconced in the back seat after having given the virtual driver the address of my hotel, I pulled out my Life Management Device and searched for Sherlock Holmes’s Personal Archive File. I had known it would be anomalous (how could it not be?), but I was taken aback by the immense, update-free gaps in his Chronology. His File should have been littered with Sociability Reminders and Requests for Confirmation of Health & Well-being. They had got very serious about that sort of thing since that university student died alone in her flat while she was on break between terms. No one noticed her absence because the automated dispenser for her civet’s food and water kept updating her File, and she had set up a rather complicated personalised entertainment module that also kept updating her File automatically as the films, TV programmes and music she had selected played. As a result of similar incidents, if some sort of message indicating you were alive and well wasn’t posted to your File every forty-eight hours, the Office of Health & Well-being would send a Sociability Reminder, then another every six hours until someone posted something that confirmed your continued existence. If you failed to respond within an hour to the Request for Confirmation of Health & Well-being issued after ninety-six hours offline, burly Fire & Safety Officers would break your door down.

Desultory was the most generous characterisation of Sherlock’s updating habits I could muster. My immediate suspicion was that, like me, he must have had some sort of Medical Exemption. There were stretches of weeks at a time when he seemed to interact with no one. By comparison, my sparse updates were Proust-like in their effusiveness. My curiosity piqued, I’m ashamed to say I spent the rest of the day and most of the night poring over his File, beginning with his first ultrasound.

There was such an alien quality to Sherlock that I expected him to come from a singular sort of family – artists committed to scandalous bohemian excesses, Nobel laureates or even militant agrarianists who lived offline in a rural clan governed by radical Communist principles. His parents were fiercely intelligent – his father a civil engineer and his mother an economist – but they were more professorial than savant-like. Nevertheless, some strange combination of their genes produced Sherlock and his elder brothers, Algernon and Mycroft.

Algernon was the eldest, and his Personal Archive File halted around the time he turned twelve. I didn't even know such a thing was possible outside of the finality of death. Just prior to its abrupt termination, his File is filled with increasingly medicalised then near hysterical posts about his refusal to speak. His school reports show that he had been a star pupil, but he was introverted, as many bright children tend to be. It seems as if one day he simply decided to stop speaking and refused to cooperate in the maintenance of his File. He must have been granted some sort of blanket exemption into perpetuity. I confess to having harboured intense curiosity about Algernon and his "disappearance", and I have spent more hours than I am willing to own pondering how a *twelve year-old* had managed to pit his will against The Archive and the Ministry of Information and emerge victorious. I remained ignorant. Sherlock was so cool and detached, yet masterly, in manner – it was a combination that made me dare not take the liberty of making enquiries about his eldest brother.

Mycroft and Algernon are Irish twins, Mycroft having been born only fourteen months later. Of all the Holmes siblings, his Personal Archive File is the most conventional. It begins as Algernon's had with their parents' careful curation of the artefacts of his young life, and, as he learned to read and write, he began to contribute more. His lessons were always scrupulously neat, and there was a surprising level of careful detail in his drawings. That same cautious attentiveness lurked in his contributions to his File, which was almost *too* conventional. It was the sort of work you might expect a frightfully good Sociability Maintenance Engineer to produce – presenting accomplishments impressive enough to inspire confidence (like Algernon, Mycroft had been a star pupil) but tempered with enough human frailty to discourage envy and engender trust (as opposed to mere capitulation to a more masterful personality). How to manage a Personal Archive File well enough that it tells everything and nothing about you – Mycroft had worked out these subtleties of behaviour and communication by the time he was nine. He was a born politician. Had I not done a psychiatry rotation during my medical training, I may not have recognised the markers of an incredibly manipulative personality. His rotund corpulence, which persisted into adulthood, is the only sign that he may not have been as in control as he wished. Or perhaps it was some sort of elaborate double bluff, a carefully regulated over-consumption of cake to present himself as non-threatening.

Sherlock was born seven years after Mycroft. What must it have been like to be trapped between Algernon's impenetrable silence and Mycroft's machinations? It is no wonder Sherlock communicates so maladroitly.

Even as a baby Sherlock's fierce intelligence had been obvious. Once his eyes were able to focus, that sharp, feral quality entered his gaze, and he seemed to scan his surroundings automatically, greedily absorbing all the details. It was almost creepy watching a baby, then a toddler, think so hard. I believe he has an artist's temperament. His childhood drawings were bold and dark – all blues and blacks with strong, thick lines – and demonstrated an eye for unusual compositions. He would often draw only part of whatever object had caught his attention – half an apple, the bottom third of a face, a few petals of a flower. I suppose even then it was the details that had interested him. He was energetic, restless and easily bored. School must have

been a trial for him. His marks were inconsistent, and, while his teachers praised his obvious intelligence, there was something in the tone of their remarks regarding his “Areas in Need of Improvement” that got my back up. It made me think back to the set of Sherlock’s shoulders when we had met in the lab and the unconscious way he seemed to brace himself to be violently disliked. I felt belatedly ashamed of how quickly I had been willing to judge him harshly. I relived the rush of pity I felt for him several times as I continued to peruse his File, but, the more I learned, the more I came to admire the strange boy I was getting to know. I liked him. That night I fell asleep to the sound of him at ten years-old playing his violin beautifully.

The next morning, over very strong tea and buttered toast, I realised that I needed to check on Sherlock’s finances if we were going to be flatmates. His Personal Finance Sub-File showed no steady employment, but the balances were respectable, and he seemed to receive healthy infusions of funds at regular enough intervals that I felt assured he wouldn’t shirk his share of the rent. Having seen him hard at work in the lab, I had assumed he met his Professional Skills Utilisation Requirements at Barts, but his lack of a steady pay cheque made that unlikely. He was a bit old to be a student, but people re-trained all the time. I clicked into his Professional Skills Sub-File and saw that he had entered a unique Professional Skills Designation: Consulting Detective. He was an independent contractor with no links to any of the usual agencies that keep track of vacancies and potential candidates. He seemed to be well out on his own – his Virtual Business Storefront had only a few patrons. He discussed in minute detail his deductive reasoning process and gave examples that mirrored his analysis of my personal history. The sparse remarks all asked some version of the same unkind question: What possible use was Sherlock Holmes, Consulting Detective, in a world with Personal Archive Files? Of course, they were right. As impressive as Sherlock’s lightning-quick deductions about people were, they almost never revealed anything you couldn’t look up yourself in an instant. It didn’t seem quite so clever when cast in that light. There were actually a few requests for him to do his “trick” at parties. Even having met him only briefly, I knew how keenly that must have stung. I did feel a sense of commiseration with him, though. I could no longer practise my chosen profession, and his was very nearly obsolete. We were both relatively young men already set out to pasture. In hindsight, I should have guessed about the drugs, but it had been remiss of me not to check his Health & Well-being Sub-File.

I met with Sherlock later that day. We signed the lease to the flat immediately and moved in together the next day. He was mercurial and unpredictable – engaging and witty one moment and moody and aloof the next. There were moments (far too few) when he found some problem abstruse enough to occupy his mind. Those were the good times. I even found myself the object of his experimentation as he researched ways to help abate my night terrors. His cold, calculating manner as he converted my bedroom into a makeshift sleep clinic brought a fond smile to my face. I almost choked on my tea when he suggested hiring me a prostitute to see if sexual intercourse and orgasm would help relax me into a restful sleep. “Male or female, John?” he kept asking. “Both?” Needless to say, I declined the offer as gently as I could. How matter-of-fact he was about everything, how he disdained emotion could be off-putting, but I came to see quickly what a good and decent man of principle he was, and he earned my loyalty rather quickly. I assisted him with a few of his investigations, as much as my still poor health would allow, but he very often found himself unmoored and drifting into a dark abyss from which no distraction I could conjure up was strong enough to pull him back. I confess to feeling thoroughly inadequate for my inability to help. As a medical man, I found my failure even more disheartening because in those moments he turned to his only source of comfort, of escape: a morocco case tanned with

sumac to an autumnal reddish-orange.

The morocco case contained two vials and a hypodermic syringe. The vials contained cocaine (a 7% solution that Sherlock, a master chemist, prepared himself) and morphine, respectively. Unsurprisingly, both vials were made of glass. Astonishingly, the hypodermic syringe was glass as well. Like the morocco case that was its home, the syringe dates back to the Victorian era – a time to which Sherlock’s eccentric temperament may have been better suited. Both the morocco case and the glass syringe were well cared for. Sherlock had slovenly habits, but he was particular to near obsessive-compulsion about certain of his possessions, the morocco case and its contents being among the honoured group.

I loathed that morocco case with more feeling than it is sane to direct at an inanimate object.

On the day the adventure recounted here began, I watched without comment as Sherlock opened the case and began his ritual. As always, he carefully measured out his dose and expertly found a vein. I had shouted, cajoled, and reproached him bitterly about the drugs – all to no avail. I never had the courage to threaten to leave – not when I knew that taking the drastic step of decamping from the place I had come to consider my home would do nothing to curtail his drug use and that it would hurt me far more than it would him. So, three times a day for the past few months I had watched as Sherlock’s thin, spidery fingers reached for that hateful receptacle, and as much as I longed to, I was always unable to look away as he rolled back the left sleeve of his shirt to reveal a pale forearm littered with puncture marks. His beautiful skin... marred. As he depressed the plunger, I realised I might crush the mug of tea I was holding to shards were I to grip it any tighter. Relaxing my hand, I tried to keep my voice light as I enquired, “What is it this time?” Sherlock gave one of his vague non-committal hums in response. “The white horse or Bolivian marching powder?” I pressed.

“Cocaine,” he responded without inflection. He often used that detached tone with me, but I could never tell whether he was trying to placate me by being co-operative or enrage me with his impassive nonchalance. Perhaps my ensuing emotional paralysis was his ultimate goal.

“You know why I do it, John,” he said quietly. So, placation, then.

“I know why you *say* you do it.” I suddenly wanted to smash things and shout at him for making me remember what it was like when one of his black moods took hold of him. It was a place beyond despondence, past despair, devoid of hope, dark and teeming with the consciousness of one’s mortality. It was an abyss, and watching him fall into it without knowing if he would make his way back out was more painful than watching that needle slip into his vein. The war had taken me to the edge of that void, and better men and women than I had fallen in, never to return to themselves. The drugs made me afraid for him, but when the darkness dragged him under, I was afraid *of* him. So, I watched him poison himself because it was better than watching him *really* hurt himself or someone else.

When I looked over at him, his silver-grey eyes were shining almost feverishly, and there was a flush of colour on his prominent cheekbones. He was doing the thing where he looked inside my simple, chimpanzee-like mind and read my thoughts back to me. In those moments, I was like a moth under a lepidopterist’s straight pin. “You can’t save me, John,” he said, his gaze never wavering. I feel as if I am being autopsied alive, I thought. “Only The Work can help,” he reminded me.

The Work.

Whenever he said it, you could hear the capitalisation. Sherlock fancied himself the world’s only consulting detective, and claimed (rather self-aggrandisingly) to have invented the

job, never mind that police departments all over the world were stuffed to the gills with private contractors and consultants, many of whom met their Professional Skills Utilisation Requirements by working as investigators. That is not to say that if there were some sort of competition – an Olympiad of consulting detecting – Sherlock wouldn't have streaked like a comet past the best anyone could put forward. I would back Sherlock in arguing that he was the *most talented* consulting detective working (or even perhaps ever to have worked), but his uniqueness came from the superlative nature of his skills not the fact that he was a civilian – technically so was half the police force.

My dear friend was an addict, but his true drug of choice was his criminal investigations – The Work. For some unknowable reason, some mutation of his personality, no other occupation would satisfy him. And so, the morocco case and its contents were our constant companions – we lived in limbo, between the frying pan and the fire.

I watched Sherlock slip away into his high and tried to suppress the desperation brought on by my powerlessness. His Life Management Device trilled. He grunted and made a vague gesture indicating that I should check it. He had granted me access to his L.M.D. only days after we had moved in together. I had been shocked by his trust, but I soon learned that I had merely been absorbed into the buffer he put up to the rest of the world. The incoming message was from Mycroft, and it baptised me with relief. I shook Sherlock's shoulder. "Mycroft wants to meet later today," I told him. "He has a case."

CHAPTER TWO: THE ADVENTURE OF THE G.R.E.E.K. INTERPRETER

Were it not for Sherlock's Personal Archive File, I would have assumed that, like me, he had no family to speak of. He never mentioned his childhood home or his people – it was almost as if he had taken an *omerta* against doing so. I assumed there must have been some horrible estrangement even though Mycroft and his parents checked up on him at fairly regular intervals and kept him afloat financially. The overtures never came from the other direction, though, and his eldest brother, Algernon, remained mysteriously absent. Sherlock's self-imposed isolation seemed to be the product of some deeply-felt aversion to any sort of emotional connection. His File showed only one close relationship – a friendship he had struck up at university with a young man called Victor Trevor (or, more accurately, a friendship Victor Trevor had struck up with him). They met when Victor's dog bit Sherlock on the ankle, and Victor was rather insistent about looking after Sherlock while he recuperated. I often wondered if getting close to Sherlock was just that simple – a matter of persistence, pushing past his boundaries as carelessly as he would yours. Their friendship had ended badly following the death of the boy's father. It wasn't clear what had precipitated the falling out, but it is not difficult to imagine that turning to Sherlock in a time of grief might have been a recipe for disaster.

It should have bothered me more, Sherlock's nonchalant misanthropy, but the truth is that it enabled my own. I too craved alienation from the world and its demands to "be more sociable!" I appreciated being able to eschew many tedious social rituals when I was in his company. He abhorred "small talk" and would sometimes sit in absolute silence for days. At first, I found it strange, but then I gladly embraced those prolonged moments of quiet as peaceful respites for my febrile nerves. It also helped that my psychiatrist was so pleased I had found a friend I liked and esteemed that she encouraged my neglect of Harry and was optimistic that I could give up having a Virtual Sociability Companion far sooner than she had hoped. She was over the moon when I began to write up Sherlock's cases (thus far, *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, *The Hounds of Baskerville*, and *The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez*) in an Archive Journal I titled (somewhat grandly) *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. I never told her about the drugs, and she never took a close enough look at Sherlock's File to find out. She noted that forming my friendship with Sherlock was the turning point in my treatment. The marked improvement in my mood and outlook on life were evidence of the truth of her assessment, but "friendship" seemed like the wrong word for whatever it was Sherlock and I shared – it hints at a kind of intimacy neither of us was truly capable of. While I was hesitant to classify my relationship with Sherlock, I could freely admit that we were strangely well-suited companions, and I was curious to meet a member of his family in person.

"What is your brother like?" It was the sort of question one asked without thinking – a way to fill dead air.

"You've been through his File, haven't you?" Sherlock asked, one brow raised – a signal to remind me that he disliked redundant conversations.

"Of course," I replied, colouring for a reason I couldn't quite place. Examining the

Personal Archive File of anyone you had met or could expect to meet was commonplace and expected. In fact, it is often considered rude not to do so soon after making a new acquaintance. If at your next meeting you couldn't list all their high school sweethearts, you could find you had made an enemy instead of a friend. As usual, basic etiquette seemed not to apply to Sherlock, and, where he and his family were concerned, I felt as if I had been snooping.

"If you've been through his File, then you know what he's like," Sherlock said.

"I know who he presents himself to be," I replied. I could tell I had surprised Sherlock, a vanishingly rare occurrence.

He regarded me closely for a moment then said in that cryptic way of his, "You are more than a mere conductor of light, aren't you, John?"

"I don't know what that means," I replied in fond exasperation. "Is he anything like you?" I immediately regretted my question. Sherlock's face darkened noticeably. Comparing him to his brother had obviously struck a nerve.

"He's much cleverer than I am." I could see what it cost him to make that admission. He loathed false modesty, so I knew that even though "cleverness" is a somewhat slippery concept, by Sherlock's definition, Mycroft had the superior mind.

"Just because he did well in school, got better marks than you, doesn't mean he's cleverer." Sherlock's expression was absolutely *scathing*, but something made me press on. I desperately wanted his haughty insouciance to return. His defensiveness had to be quelled. "I'm sure he can't hold a candle to you when it comes to making deductions." I smiled confidently, knowing my statement to be true with my whole heart. Before that moment I don't think I had realised just how highly I esteemed him. It had never occurred to me that he wasn't unique.

Sherlock's answering smile was a near grimace, his expression marooned between reflecting appreciation for my faith in him and dejection at the truth my mistakenness had revealed. "He's better at it than I am."

"What?" I said stupidly. I felt as if I had been struck.

"He's better at it than I am." Sherlock enunciated each word viciously. He hated repeating himself. Coupled with the air of self-flagellation in his tone, I was beginning to think going to meet Mycroft was a *terrible* idea, a reprieve from the taking of synthetic stimulants be damned. "He is quite well-known for it in certain circles."

"Does he work with the police?" I was utterly confused. Mycroft's File indicated that he met his Professional Skills Utilisation Requirements as the Chief Technical Officer at The Archive Liaison Office – an obscure branch of the Ministry of Information. All government record-keeping was done by Alexandria, the parent company of The Archive, and things ran so seamlessly there were virtually no complaints. The Archive Liaison Office seemed to do little more than virtual ribbon-cutting whenever a new government-related feature was launched or updated on The Archive.

"The police work for Mycroft," Sherlock said.

"The police work for The Archive Liaison Office?" The conversation seemed to be happening in a foreign language – I could make neither head nor tail of it.

"No. The police work for *Mycroft*. Or at least they will soon." I could do nothing but stare stupidly. "Do you know what scarlet is?"

Scarlet, the police, The Archive Liaison Office – my mind began to put it together (not quite fast enough for Sherlock, though, who sighed impatiently). "Scarlet – that's the acronym for some new police database or something, isn't it?" I asked. "Special Crime Avoidance Something..."

I was relieved to see Sherlock grace me with a barely perceptible smile. “It was originally called the Serious Crime Abatement Rubric, but the acronym S.C.A.R. evoked too many associations with violent knife crime. Since its instalment on all Law Enforcement Technology Units will be mandatory, someone thought to massage it into the Serious Crime Abatement Rubric for Law Enforcement Technology or S.C.A.R.L.E.T. It rolls off the tongue much more pleasantly, don’t you think?”

“It makes me think of blood,” I said, wrinkling my nose.

“I suppose it does.”

“So this database —”

“It’s not a database,” Sherlock interrupted. “It is a highly advanced data analytics program that reviews unsolved crimes and queries The Archive for further clues. It is currently in the beta stage, but it has been a smashing success, and when it is rolled out in a few months’ time, its application will be the *first* step in criminal investigation not a stop-gap after the usual methods fail.”

“But that means...”

“It will be possible to solve very nearly any crime without ever having to leave your chair.” I heard the unspoken implication – detectives would go the way of the dinosaur.

“And your brother, he supervised all this?”

“The algorithms S.C.A.R.L.E.T. uses are based on his very particular method of deductive reasoning.”

It was like something out of a turn-of-the-millennium film: sentient computers taking over the world and destroying people’s lives. “So your brother’s mind has been copied into some sort of artificial intelligence that’s going to make every C.I.D. in the country irrelevant?” I very nearly said “make *you* irrelevant” but caught myself just in time.

“It’s not an A.I. – not strictly speaking. It can solve a specific subset of very complex problems faster than any human being could ever hope to, but it can’t learn or adapt; it can only take in more information and run it through its algorithms. It’s essentially still just a logic machine, but, yes, it will remove the necessity of employing human beings to investigate virtually all crimes.”

I felt as if I had been plunged into ice water. Once S.C.A.R.L.E.T. came online, the police officers who sometimes called Sherlock up to crib off of him would be made redundant, and his already meagre case load would shrink even more. In fact, S.C.A.R.L.E.T.’s beta testing was the likely cause of the drought Sherlock was currently experiencing. Things would get only worse. I willed myself not to grab the morocco case and hurl it out the window. Instead, I asked, “So, if Mycroft has S.C.A.R.L.E.T., what sort of case could he need solved?”

“There are always all sorts of intrigues in government agencies. He’s probably determined that someone somewhere is untrustworthy but doesn’t want to send up any flares by using S.C.A.R.L.E.T. in case the guilty party has access.”

It all sounded very cloak and dagger, and that gave me a thought. “The security services will probably want their own version of S.C.A.R.L.E.T., won’t they?”

“They’ve probably already seen the beta testing and put in a request. The spy masters will have to give Mycroft full access if they want similar results.” He hesitated a bit. “Once it’s fully deployed, S.C.A.R.L.E.T. will save *billions* of pounds. Mycroft always understood that whoever could balance the books was the most important person in the room. He’s made himself the most powerful man in England.”

Yes, I thought, going to meet Mycroft is the worst idea any person in the history of ideas

had ever had. I had half a mind to knock Sherlock out and lock him in a cupboard. His brother was a dangerous man. I was certain of it. A man of his superior intellect and vast ambition could very well have become Prime Minister. He was made for it. He probably could have obtained any posting he wanted after university, but, in a move that must have earned him the derision of his peers, he left the most coveted positions to others and joined what was essentially a joke department because he was the only person to recognise where the true locus of power was hidden. Mycroft didn't want the *trappings* of power; he wanted *actual* power. Vain men can be easily placated once you discover what flatters them. Mycroft, on the other hand, had ignored the demands of his ego for the better part of twenty years and was pleased to remain hidden in the shadows. I imagined him as a great spider, but the sort that was far too clever to do anything as unimaginative as build a web to trap its prey.

Sensing my worry, Sherlock said, "You're right to be wary of him, but he's of no danger to us."

"Not to you, maybe – you're his brother. What about me?" I was half-joking, but Sherlock's face became hard, and his eyes were positively lethal.

"He wouldn't dare." That was all he said, but behind the simple phrase lay a very real threat, some terrible consequence to be paid for an injury to me. The flare of emotion burned white-hot – like magnesium that had been set alight, but it was extinguished almost immediately. Some greedy part of me wanted more, and I thought that it would be worth being hurt (not too badly, mind you) so I could catch further glimpses of the generous heart he hid so ably. His sudden surge of protectiveness seemed to bring him back to himself, and his usual air of maddeningly unruffled calm enveloped him. We were due to meet Mycroft at his office in Whitehall, and he burst out the door throwing an imperious "Come along, John," behind him. As always, I followed.

The Archive Liaison Office was tucked away in the warren of Ministry of Information departments. It had been overlooked during the last round of renovations and was stuck in turn-of-the-millennium interior design. I found the almost aggressive minimalism and monochromatic paintings of nothing but lines and whorls deeply unsettling. That kind of deliberate attempt to create a space devoid of any context had always seemed prevaricating to me. Mycroft came out to greet us. He and Sherlock could not have been more opposite physically. Sherlock was very tall (about 190 cm) and whippet thin. His face was too severe to be considered truly handsome, but his strong, hawk-like features combined with his regal carriage gave him a potent physical charisma, which when joined with the force of his personality always threatened to overwhelm. Everything about Mycroft was... softer. His hair was fair and made up of fine, straight strands that were easy to groom. Sherlock sported a mane of raven curls that often resembled a nest constructed by a very angry, unworkmanlike bird. Mycroft was nearly the same height as Sherlock but much stouter, outweighing him by several stone. This difference in weight was clearest in their faces (the immaculate tailoring of Mycroft's suit did much to camouflage his considerable girth). Sherlock was almost gaunt, his cheekbones like knives edges, while Mycroft's plump visage was almost cherubic. They should have had the same eyes: light grey and shaped like almonds, but Sherlock's seemed brighter. Perhaps it was the contrast of his dark lashes. The family resemblance was all in the sharpness of their expressions. They conveyed that they were incredibly intelligent men without having to speak a word.

"Sherlock," Mycroft said warmly.

"Mycroft," Sherlock replied, shaking his brother's hand.

"And this must be your Dr Watson." He turned to me, and I could feel him analysing me

much the way Sherlock had at our first meeting.

“Mr Holmes,” I said, offering my hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Please call me Mycroft.” He shook my hand firmly.

“And you must call me John,” I responded. Sherlock sighed shortly, already impatient with the social ritual of making introductions. Mycroft smiled indulgently at him.

“Let’s step into my office and get down to brass tacks before Sherlock sets fire to something.”

Mycroft’s office was of a moderate size and was tastefully decorated – the dark wood and rich upholstery made it much warmer than all the cool glass, sharp edges and stainless steel in the reception area. We sat together at a small table where tea and cakes were already laid out. Mycroft set about serving us, pouring the tea with the skill of a Victorian maiden.

“Cake not biscuits, Mycroft,” Sherlock said, stirring a tooth-rotting amount of sugar into his tea. “It’s something serious, then – to do with your precious S.C.A.R.L.E.T.” Mycroft’s large hand grasped the preposterously small serving tongs with remarkable deftness, and he placed an assortment of delicate, lightly frosted cakes onto each of our small china plates. They were delicious and obviously expensive, as was the wonderfully fragrant tea.

“Beta testing hit a snag?” Sherlock needled through a mouthful of cake.

“Not a snag *per se*,” Mycroft responded, managing to devastate his serving of cake in short order while maintaining faultless table manners. “I know it is not the impression we give, but The Archive does not, cannot capture everything. Human beings are too inherently mendacious. The lies they tell themselves litter their Files. Nevertheless, between the psychological assessments in their Health & Well-being Sub-Files and the plethora of video and holograms we have of them to compare and analyse, S.C.A.R.L.E.T. can root out and even predict deception rather accurately. Nevertheless, there are certain... gaps we knew would prevent S.C.A.R.L.E.T. from closing 100% of the cases it analyses. The success rate is actually higher than our predic—”

Sherlock interrupted. “You deliberately down-sold the efficacy to make yourself look like a genius when it surpassed expectations.” Mycroft’s mouth curved into a small smile of confirmation.

“We always knew the need for human input would remain, that there would sometimes be *legwork*.” He said the word “legwork” the way one might refer to a suppurating boil.

“So, it turns out you can’t solve every mystery from your armchair, not even when you have the power to access all the data in The Archive.” Sherlock was gleefully smug. Mycroft ignored him.

“When S.C.A.R.L.E.T. lacks the data to formulate a conclusion, it returns a message depending on the nature of the failure: ‘Analysis Inconclusive’ or ‘Anomaly Detected’, etc., all under the umbrella of ‘Needs Human Interpretation’. We have recruited human interpreters from every branch of law enforcement – only the best, of course.”

“Of course,” Sherlock said, his smugness now so thick it was very nearly corporeal. If things carried on the way they were, we would have to name it, hire it a nanny, and choose a primary school for it to attend.

“With the detailed reports S.C.A.R.L.E.T. generates in hand, our interpreters usually have no trouble. It is all generally quite straightforward – a matter of a few interviews. There are, however, a category of cases that remain impenetrable even with S.C.A.R.L.E.T.’s analysis and our best interpreters burning the midnight oil.”

“I suppose you’ve had a go at them too,” Sherlock said, practically writhing in gloating

satisfaction.

“I have managed to close a few,” Mycroft said. “And I was able to suggest a few tweaks to the algorithms and the interpreters’ training that have narrowed the gap even further. However, my other duties preclude me from intervening on a regular basis. There remains a group of cases that the interpreters have taken to calling ‘greeks’.”

“Greeks?” Sherlock asked.

“Generating Rectal Engrossments of the Excruciating Kind. Colloquially, one would say enormous pains in the arse.” Mycroft sitting there in his bespoke dove-grey suit with his 19th century manners talking about rectal engrossments and arses was surrealistic. “Our Chief Interpreter, Gertrude Lestrade, keeps her finger on all the G.R.E.E.K. cases and keeps me apprised of the progress being made. There is a particularly sticky one that has them completely stymied. They have no idea where to even begin.” He paused a bit. “My suggestions on how to proceed have made no discernible impact.”

Mycroft did not seem to suffer the same acute sense of defeat Sherlock experienced when he failed to unravel a problem. It had happened only once that I had observed, and I had no desire to relive the aftermath. Thus far, I had found Mycroft pleasant and accommodating. He was the perfect host, and I appreciated the way he seemed to absorb Sherlock’s barbs without mustering any perfectly justifiable ill will. He put up no defences or hard edges of his own, and, while his desire to protect Sherlock (even from himself) was clear, he restrained the urge to interfere out of respect. In his demeanour was the admission that Sherlock was free to make his own choices. I quickly developed a grudging respect for Mycroft and his mature approach to sibling rivalry. I wasn’t sure I trusted him not to descend into the kind of knavery worthy of a Bond villain, but I trusted him to keep Sherlock’s best interest at heart. In spite of all this, I was worried that deputising Sherlock as some sort of “G.R.E.E.K. interpreter” was courting disaster. If S.C.A.R.L.E.T., Mycroft and his team of interpreters were at sixes and sevens over the case, it seemed likely that Sherlock would be stymied as well. As always, Sherlock could read my thoughts, and I caught a quickly disguised look of hurt disappointment flash across his face.

“I assure you, John,” Mycroft said, demonstrating his own clairvoyance. “I would not have sought my brother’s input were I not confident he would get as close to settling the matter as was possible. If he is unable to cut this Gordian knot, then we shall have to remain at a loss until further information is gathered. The Archive is always pulling new data, and S.C.A.R.L.E.T. re-assesses the G.R.E.E.K.s periodically, so a favourable resolution of the matter is possible.”

“But not probable.” Why was I speaking?

“Sherlock’s involvement shortens the odds considerably,” Mycroft said matter-of-factly.

“I know,” I said, looking over at Sherlock, hoping to convey that my concerns had nothing to do with lack of confidence in his abilities but the Matterhorn-sized problem itself.

There was a knock at the door.

“That will be Lestrade,” Mycroft said. “I’ll have her give you access to S.C.A.R.L.E.T. and take you through the case.”

“Off to Downing Street?” I asked in jest.

“Yes,” Mycroft answered, standing and buttoning his suit jacket.

Gertrude Lestrade, the Chief Interpreter, formerly of New Scotland Yard, was not pleased to have civilians poaching on her territory. That Sherlock’s relationship to Mycroft screamed nepotism put her in a state of slowly simmering rage. She kept mumbling about “protocol” and “proper security clearance” and “family connections”. As she logged into S.C.A.R.L.E.T. to grant Sherlock access as a Consulting Interpreter, “this is *most* irregular” was her near constant

refrain. In a fudge of my medical credentials, I was listed as a Forensic Science Associate. Lestrade continued her litany of disapproval as she introduced us to the software and used a few active cases as examples to show us how to use the interface. To Sherlock's credit, he ignored Lestrade (although I suppose that was down to his captivation with S.C.A.R.L.E.T.), and Lestrade soon changed her tune when Sherlock solved three of the "Needs Human Interpretation" cases after glancing over their S.C.A.R.L.E.T. reports. The G.R.E.E.K. cases were much murkier, but he did offer a few suggestions, of which Lestrade gladly made note. I saw (with some distaste) that, following each of Sherlock's revelations, Lestrade entered her own name into the field for "Current Interpreting Agent" before updating the case files, essentially taking all the credit for Sherlock's work. I disliked her intensely. Sherlock caught the stony glare I was directing at Lestrade and smiled. The dark and light in Sherlock expressed themselves so unpredictably: he was almost irretrievably arrogant, but he wasn't proud.

Once Lestrade had taken us through the basics of using S.C.A.R.L.E.T., she sent us secure links to the User Manual, which bore the somewhat esoteric title: *A Study in S.C.A.R.L.E.T.* "Mycroft does so love to indulge his little eccentricities," Sherlock remarked disdainfully. I laughed aloud at the notion that *Sherlock Holmes* of all people could have the temerity to deride anyone, much less *Mycroft* (who practically radiated steadfast reliability), as being too indulgent of their foibles. He at least had the good grace to look slightly chagrined when faced with the preposterousness of his position.

Our orientation complete, Lestrade pulled up the G.R.E.E.K. case on which Sherlock had been brought in to consult – the unsolved murder of a woman called Edwina Lucas. The facts of the case are as follows:

At 21:37 on the night in question, thirty-four year-old Edwina May Lucas posted to her File that she was making a night of it. Ninety-six hours later, after she failed to respond to a barrage of Sociability Reminders and a Request for Confirmation of Health & Well-being, Fire & Safety Officers entered her flat and found her lying dead from a stab wound to the heart. The wound had been expertly inflicted, the incredibly sharp knife having slid up between her ribs for the killing blow. The post-mortem revealed that she had died almost instantly and was killed not long after she had made her final Archive entry. The case had the clear markers of a professional hit.

"We can find no motive," Lestrade said. "There is no reason we can ascertain for anyone to have wanted Edwina Lucas dead, none at all. By all accounts she was shy, retiring and hard-working. Her psychological profile shows that she was almost preternaturally afraid of conflict – a classic people-pleaser."

"Maybe she saw something she shouldn't have," I suggested.

"Nothing in the geolocation data from her Life Management Device puts her near any suspicious activity. And S.C.A.R.L.E.T.'s examination of her Archive entries didn't show any of the behavioural changes one would expect from the stress of an experience like that, having to hide it," Lestrade countered.

"Maybe she didn't know what she saw, didn't understand that it was important," I replied. Sherlock beamed at me the way one might at a child who had demonstrated the ability to tie his own shoes for the first time. "Is that what you think it might be, Sherlock?" I asked, hoping for his explicit agreement and approval.

"One should never theorise ahead of the data," he replied. Some flicker of disappointment must have shown on my face because he went on to say, "But the notion that she somehow came to possess knowledge she didn't realise was dangerous to her must be considered." I couldn't

help a pleased smile.

“Was anything stolen?” I asked, buoyed by Sherlock’s acceptance of my contribution and overcome by the sudden urge to “detect”.

“That’s listed as one of the anomalies S.C.A.R.L.E.T. picked up,” Lestrade replied. “The only thing of any value that was missing was a book.”

“A book?” Sherlock asked sharply, his already piqued interest ratcheting up another notch. “A *paper* book?”

“Yes,” Lestrade replied. “A turn-of-the-millennium autographed hardcover copy of *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows*. It’s not very valuable, though – only worth a couple of hundred quid or so – no reason for some Carlos the Jackal type to get involved. We’re not sure when the book went missing. The last archived photo of her flat was from three days before her death. The book was there then but not when she was found. She could have lent it to someone, although they probably would have posted about it. Or maybe it was damaged somehow, and she didn’t want to own up to it because it was a gift from a group of childhood friends. And even if someone wanted the book, why not just steal it? Why kill her? We’re still left without a proper motive, even if we assume the book is relevant, which it doesn’t seem to be.”

Lestrade was clearly frustrated by the strange case and its impenetrable clues. For Sherlock, though, it was like Christmas. He was scrolling and clicking through the S.C.A.R.L.E.T. report faster than Lestrade or I could follow and was soon typing an Archive query for “confetti” linked first to Edwina Lucas and then to the serial number of the book. S.C.A.R.L.E.T. generated a Report Update. Sherlock had identified another anomaly. Lestrade was thunderstruck to see new information uncovered so quickly and read the short update greedily. “I don’t understand,” she said.

“When Edwina read the book bits of confetti would sometimes get stuck to her fingers or forearms. She posted photos of it.” He navigated to one of the relevant posts (now linked to the S.C.A.R.L.E.T. report) so Lestrade and I could see the photos. What looked like perfectly circular black moles littered Edwina’s hands and forearms. “Sticky book confetti!” she had captioned one of the photos. Sherlock continued, “The trace evidence log catalogued a few bits as well. Confetti is quite rare these days —”

“But it wasn’t at the turn of the millennium,” Lestrade argued. “It might have gotten into the book then.”

“The provenance of the book is quite clear,” Sherlock said impatiently. “It spent time at Coxon & Woodhouse’s before being bought by Edwina’s friends from Mawson & Williams.”

“The auction houses?” Lestrade asked, trying to put things together.

“Among the most reputable,” Sherlock replied. “All the items put up for auction are scrupulously examined and cleaned. They would have examined every page for damage, and they certainly wouldn’t have left oodles of confetti littering up one of their lots. One or two stray pieces may have survived, but certainly not the veritable colony Edwina found. The Archive shows nothing else in the book’s history or Edwina’s that can explain the presence of the confetti – it’s an anomaly. Her friends gave the book to Edwina the day after they bought it. It was still in the auction house packaging. She didn’t post about starting to read it or the confetti until a week later. Sometime in that week, the confetti was introduced. If she’d been to a party where they released confetti, she would have just said so. That means we’re missing something about her life – somewhere she went, someone she met perhaps. There is no indication of deception or concealment in her Archive entries, no discernible change in her behaviour, but *that book* and the unseen action involved in altering its pristine state will explain why it was taken and why she

was killed. The book is at the heart of the matter; I'm certain of it."

Lestrade looked as dubious as I felt. The addition of the new information to the problem seemed to make the solution only more opaque. A missing children's book and some confetti – it was an inauspicious beginning. Edwina was killed *months* after receiving the gift and posting about the confetti. If whatever was at stake was important enough to warrant a killing for hire, shouldn't the theft and murder have happened sooner? No; there were other events that had brought the matter to maturity, and they remained thoroughly hidden from us. Sensing our incertitude, Sherlock said, "I'm not saying the matter doesn't remain shrouded in mystery – much like poor Edwina. The motives of people who fear confrontation and so readily supplant their will to that of others are so inscrutable. Their most trivial actions may speak volumes or their most extraordinary conduct may depend upon their choice of beverage that morning."

Sherlock's admission that we were all grasping around in the dark together had the ironic effect of boosting my and Lestrade's morale. "So we've got to find out where the book came into contact with the confetti, then," I ventured.

"Precisely," Sherlock replied.

Sherlock and I spent the rest of the day reviewing the S.C.A.R.L.E.T. report and the evidence. We took a trip to the off-site S.C.A.R.L.E.T. Forensic Support Centre, which was located in a block of warehouses by the Thames. Everything was state-of-the-art, of course (Mycroft would have demanded nothing less for his pet project). The holographic projector was particularly impressive. A high-resolution 3-D scanner recorded a defined space and its contents in fine detail, accurate down to the nanometre. The holographic projector then reproduced the image to scale and projected it up from the floor into a giant room with unmarred white walls. The projected images were incredibly realistic, and, as we walked through the hologram of Edwina's apartment, I found myself skirting the furniture to avoid knocking my shins. The projection of her dead body was disconcerting, though, and not because it was a perfect reproduction of the corpse of a young woman who had been horribly murdered and died in fear – Lord knows I had seen far, far worse. It wasn't even the blood stains all down the front of the virginal, lace-trimmed white nightie she was wearing (although something about that did make me sad). It was something to do with knowing that the cadaver wasn't real even though it appeared to be. Its falsity was putting me off. It was like being in a room with a ghost, or a ghost of a ghost, to be more precise. When you take a cold wrist into your hand and feel no pulse, when you listen and there is no breath in the lungs, there is no doubt that life has gone. There in the hologram theatre, however, Edwina seemed trapped, unable to pass through the veil to whatever was on the other side. The medical man in me wished to examine the body itself.

"Anything?" I asked Sherlock.

"Several things," he replied making notes to himself on his L.M.D.

"Care to share?" Lestrade asked.

"In good time," Sherlock responded – code for "I'm not sure what any of this means, but I'll be damned if I let on". He continued his minute examination of the crime scene then swept out of the room, leaving me to bid our goodbyes to Lestrade.

When we returned to Baker Street, Sherlock immediately flung himself onto the sofa. As he reclined, his eyes became unfocused as his brain went into high gear, turning over the information he had learned that day. I knew this process could last an hour or two or stretch on until the next morning or even the following night. I regretted not having thought to stop for something to eat on the way home. Sherlock became positively ascetic when he was on a difficult case – fasting to sharpen his mental faculties even further. There was something about

the euphoria intense hunger can bring on that he could corral into keenness of thought. I tried not to mother-hen him, but medical training is not the sort of thing one can simply set aside at will, and watching him abuse his body was anathema to me. The few times I tried to intervene, he dismissed me, claiming he could not afford to divert any of his blood to something as trivial as digestion, not when his brain needed it so much more. I tried to argue that his brain also needed nutrients and hydration, but he would not budge an inch on the matter, going so far as to describe his body as vestigial. He saw himself as a brain in a jar. I worried that there was some sort of underlying psychological disorder at work, some condition marked by the need to demonstrate an iron will that manifested itself in extreme self-deprivation. Over time, I began to see it as more akin to a religious experience – mortification of the flesh to access higher realms. I dared not tell him so, though. His scornful attitude towards spiritualism was equalled only by his disdain for its practitioners, and he would have taken being labelled as such (even in a tangential manner) as the gravest insult. He deplored anything that undermined rationality and wished fervently that society would once and for all sweat out the fever of superstition and illogic.

“It halts the progress of humanity,” he would argue. “And isn’t the beauty of nature made more gratifying, the observation of the heavens made more inspiring of the numinous by your understanding of the processes underlying it all? Doesn’t knowing we can penetrate the mysteries of life fill you with hope? It is almost the 22nd century. Can we not cast off these shackles? Is it not time?” His eyes would shine and high colour would crest across his cheekbones. He always looked so well in those moments, so human, when he allowed his passionate nature to reveal itself, and he ceased being a cold reasoning machine. I would sometimes engage him in debating the issue, but my arguments were ill-formed and half-hearted. I knew virtually nothing of religious life, having been raised (as had he) in an entirely secular community. However, at the time of my devastating injury in Afghanistan, I had felt myself reaching across a great void and felt certain there was something on the other side, something much more powerful than I was, something that could help me, reaching back. When I told him so, his expression softened. “While I believe your experience was the result of all the neurochemicals surging through your brain as the blood loss sent your body into shock, I shan’t begrudge you your feelings on the matter, John. If it gave you the strength to survive, then I am glad for it.” This concession was monumental, and I felt he would have made it for no one else.

I watched Sherlock thinking on the couch for a few minutes then set about preparing a modest dinner of spaghetti bolognese with the help of our virtual housekeeper, which we had taken to calling Mrs Hudson for reasons (outside of the pleasant female voice interface) I can’t quite recall. I optimistically set some food aside for Sherlock and ate quietly, navigating through the G.R.E.E.K. case file on my L.M.D. When examining evidence, Sherlock tended to focus on things – like the bits of confetti. I, on the other hand, always took an interest in the people involved, and I spent most of my dinner scanning Edwina Lucas’s File. She had led a thoroughly conventional life, fulfilling her Professional Skills Utilisation Requirements as a receptionist at an old-fashioned law office whose partners found the virtual alternative vulgar. More curious about her personal life, I navigated to her Relationships Sub-File. She had a small group of old friends from secondary school, with whom she corresponded the most. They are the ones who had put together to buy her the Harry Potter book. One of them, a woman called Mary, had a sweet, pleasant face and showed a slightly ribald sense of humour in her postings. It’s exactly the sort of thing that would pique my interest but earn Sherlock’s disdain. I clicked into Mary’s File and saw that she was a Sociability Maintenance Engineer at the British Museum. I skimmed her Professional Skills Utilisation history and almost choked on my food when I saw the name of her

previous employer: Charles Augustus Milverton.

CHAPTER THREE: THE ADVENTURE OF CHARLES AUGUSTUS MILVERTON

Charles Augustus Milverton. I had first heard the name a few months earlier. From time to time, Sherlock would cajole me into taking exercise to help rebuild my shattered stamina. That evening, we were walking on Hampstead Heath when Sherlock's L.M.D. buzzed. He absently removed it from his pocket and handed it to me. "I'm not your personal assistant, Sherlock," I complained, taking the device, checking his messages and reading the short missive aloud. "'Will call on you tomorrow at 6:30 pm. Charles Augustus Milverton.'" That's a bit presumptuous," I commented with a frown, "not even asking if you're available. And what sort of twat signs his full name?" Sherlock had stopped walking, and when I looked over at him, I was taken aback by the expression of pure loathing on his face. "Who is Charles Augustus Milverton?" I asked with some trepidation.

"The most detestable, odious man in London," Sherlock replied, almost spitting in disgust. Sherlock rarely took enough note of anyone to form such a low opinion of them. I knew immediately that this Milverton person must have done something unspeakable.

"Has he killed someone?" I asked. "More than one person?" Sherlock's answering laugh was without humour.

"Were it only that simple, John," he replied. "He is the king of all the blackmailers. I can see by your expression that you, like many, think that shouldn't be of as much concern as murder, but at least a well-placed bullet or stab wound, an outright killing, puts an end to a thing. Charles Augustus Milverton torments his victims for years, decades even. He has driven some to near madness, others have worried themselves into ruined health, a few have even taken their own lives rather than suffer the disgrace he threatened to visit upon them. A clean death would have been a mercy to any of them. Believe me, the average bungling murderer has a more unsullied breast than Charles Augustus Milverton. He does not belong in society. The man possesses as antisocial a personality as one could imagine. His Majesty's prisons are not up to the task of rehabilitating him, so I say send him to Bedlam, and leave him to the forensic psychiatrists – perhaps they can find something of use to humanity in that foetid cesspit of a mind." I rarely heard Sherlock speak so strongly.

"How does he do it? How does he get the information?" I asked.

"He pays very, very well," Sherlock replied. "He has agents everywhere out looking for the disgruntled or disloyal and offering them fortunes to betray those who have taken them into confidence. It is quite an enterprise.

"I know The Archive makes it seem as if we live in a world of unfettered transparency, that we are somehow post-shame, but there are still activities that society deplures, still fragile alliances between the powerful that can be broken by indiscretion, still secrets to keep. So long as there is power or status to be had, there will always be those who covet it, and the Charles Augustus Milvertons of the world will always find a way to jam a foot in the door."

"Can't the police stop him? Can't someone sue?"

“Not unless they are willing to lay bare whatever terrible secret he has used to shackle them. The secrets *must* be kept, so he can’t be touched.”

“What does he want with you?” I had no desire to have that viper anywhere near Sherlock, much less in our home.

“He’s got his claws into someone I knew at university.”

“Victor Trevor?” I asked. Sherlock’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Yes.”

“He was your friend?”

“Yes.”

“And he’s asked you to deal with Milverton on his behalf?”

“Yes.” Sherlock hesitated a bit. “You don’t want me to.”

I sighed. “I don’t know, Sherlock. This Milverton sounds like the sort of prick we would do well to steer clear of. But Victor is your friend, so —”

“Victor *was* my friend. He hasn’t been for a long time now.”

“He obviously still trusts you.” Sherlock snorted in derision. “He *does*, Sherlock, or he wouldn’t have asked for your help.”

“I’m the only one he *could* ask for help,” Sherlock exclaimed, his agitation pouring off him in waves.

“Because he knew he could trust you with his secret.”

“Because I *already* knew his secret!” Sherlock didn’t quite look ashamed, but I could tell he deeply regretted whatever action he was recalling. “I deduced it,” he said. I imagined him back then: nineteen years-old, awkward and alienated, even more arrogant than he was now, wanting to show off for his new friend, letting his mind run ahead of his common sense. “It was something terrible... to do with his father. He idolised the man, and I knocked him off his plinth. His father had a heart condition, and when Victor confronted him, he collapsed. He died soon after. Victor never forgave me.”

“Not that you bothered to apologise,” I said fondly, careful to keep any hint of reproach out of my tone. Sherlock gave me the peculiar penetrating look he sometimes did whenever I would see something of him he thought he had secreted away.

“It wouldn’t have made a difference. He moved to the other side of the world to get away from me.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, suddenly wanting to hug him, but it seemed like a liberty. Instead I suggested, “Chinese for dinner?”

“All right,” he replied, smiling a bit.

I admit to having been devoured by curiosity about Victor Trevor, and as soon as Sherlock was distracted, I went straight to Victor’s Personal Archive File. Sherlock wasn’t exaggerating when he said Victor had moved to the other side of the world following his father’s death. He took his inheritance and moved to Alaska. He made a success of his business endeavours in the Great White North, but once his grief abated, the isolation and anonymity he experienced in Alaska were no longer to his liking. He cashed out and moved to Shanghai where he fortuitously met his fiancée, a British M.P. who was part of a trade delegation, and made the decision to move back to England. He had been back in the country only a few months, and he and his soon-to-be wife were the toast of the town. His fiancée was incredibly ambitious and was being groomed to challenge for her party’s leadership in a few years. If Victor’s father’s transgression had been as terrible as Sherlock had hinted, it could very well ruin all her well-laid plans. No wonder Milverton was salivating. If he played his cards right, he could have the spouse

of the future Prime Minister of England in his pocket.

“What advice have you given Victor?” I asked Sherlock.

“I told him to make a clean breast of it with his fiancée, that allowing that *vampire* into his life was not a viable option. Needless to say, he wishes to avoid alienating the affections of his fiancée, and I was unable to persuade him to see reason.”

“He thinks his fiancée will leave him.”

“Yes, I think so. The road to Number 10 is treacherous enough without adding the avalanche of an immense personal scandal into the mix.”

“Is what Victor’s father did really so terrible?” I asked. “I’m not asking you to break his confidence,” I clarified hurriedly. “It’s just that I think you’re right – Milverton will poison Victor, and his relationship will suffer anyway.”

“I fear, as does Victor, that she loves her career more.”

“How did Milverton find out about Victor’s father in the first place?” I asked.

“A letter Victor’s father’s accomplice wrote on her death-bed confessing the whole sordid affair. It apparently spared no detail, and Victor assures me that Milverton is fully apprised of the circumstances of his father’s crime.” Sherlock hesitated. “I’ve told Victor that your assistance is absolutely necessary to me, that you are my particular friend and partner, and that you could be trusted never to speak a word of his family’s shame.” I had never met anyone as disinclined to trust as Sherlock, and welled with pride at having earned his confidence. “I’ll tell you Victor’s secret, but only if you wish to know. It’s quite a burden to carry, and you owe Victor nothing,” he continued.

“If you think it will help you for me to know, then I want to know.”

Sherlock had met Victor’s father when, at Victor’s invitation, he went to stay at the family estate in Donnithorpe for a month in the summer before their final year at university. Victor had bragged to his father about Sherlock’s skill in deducing people, and one night at dinner old Mr Trevor, a good-humoured man who was always looking for new diversions, gamely volunteered to be a subject. And Sherlock – brilliant, careless Sherlock – leapt at the opportunity to dazzle Victor. During the few days he had been in residence he had observed Mr Trevor sufficiently to make quick work of presenting his conclusions (it used to take him a bit longer to work things out in those days). “No hints or corrections, Victor!” Mr Trevor had commanded after receiving Victor and Sherlock’s word that Sherlock hadn’t read his File. “Let’s see what your clever young friend can do.”

“I can tell by your accent that you spent your childhood in the north, Manchester, most likely,” Sherlock began. “However, there is a certain inflection that enters your voice from time to time and certain turns of phrase you sometimes use that hint at a Scottish influence.” Victor was smirking, but his father got paler with each word Sherlock uttered. “You are a well-travelled man. You speak Spanish quite proficiently for a non-native speaker.” Victor snorted aloud at this. “You likely learned it from poor Argentinians. You pepper your speech with the word ‘*che*’ – a term of endearment in the country, and your phrases lack the sophistication of an educated Spanish-speaker. I also noticed that you have undergone tattoo removal, but remnants of the ink remain on your forearm. The pattern is one generally associated with dockworkers in Indonesia. The injection of ink so far into the skin as to resist laser removal is indicative of non-Western techniques. As Victor can’t remember you having the tattoo during his childhood, you most likely had the work done as a very young man but had it removed for some reason.

“You have a fondness for exotic food and hired a chef who is capable of managing all the different flavours you might request. You are quite particular about your food, careful to ensure

that it is authentically prepared, be it English Shepherd's pie, Indonesian *mie goreng* or West African *fufu* – all places you've spent time living among the locals. It is interesting that, although your Spanish is Argentinian in inflection, you weren't as demanding about the *parallada* you asked the cook to prepare a few nights ago. There is a small, but vibrant, community of Argentinians in Indonesia, most of whom live and work near the port in Surabaya, and it is unlikely they would have been able to find all the ingredients used to make the dish the way they would in their home country. I think you spent some time by the docks in Surabaya as a young man before moving to West Africa, which is where Victor informed me you made your fortune." Sherlock's recitation of the facts of Mr Trevor's life as he had observed them was met with Victor's hearty laugh.

"I'm afraid you've missed the mark rather widely this time, Sherlock," he said. "Daddy learned to speak in Ecuador. He *is* a native Spanish speaker, aren't you Daddy?" Seeing his father's white face, his mirth left him. "Daddy?" His father gripped his chest and slid off his chair. Victor ran to him, rifled his father's pockets and found a pill bottle. He pried the lid off hastily, scattering pills everywhere. Unsteadily, he managed to feed his father the medicine, and the man swallowed it dry. After what seemed like an age, the colour began to return to Mr Trevor's face.

"I'm sorry to frighten you, lad," Mr Trevor said to Sherlock. "My heart is weak, and it sometimes acts up without warning."

"But usually only after there's been some excitement and you've had a shock," Victor said in worry, oblivious to what had just occurred. He and Sherlock guided Mr Trevor back to his seat.

Later that night, Sherlock reviewed Mr Trevor's Personal Archive File. According to his File, Victor's father, Herman Edward Trevor, had been born in Ecuador to a British father and an Ecuadorian mother and lived in the country until he was thirteen when the family moved to Australia. When he was twenty-two he struck out on his own, moving from country to country in West Africa trying to find a foothold in the film industry. Either the information in the File was false, or Sherlock's deductions had been wildly inaccurate. As Sherlock's visit stretched on (now seeming interminable), Mr Trevor, who had been perfectly amiable, now regarded Sherlock the way one might a malevolent voodoo priest. Victor began to cotton on that something was dreadfully wrong and that it had to do with the contradictory accounts of his father's past. Sherlock, sensing he had worn out his welcome, made his excuses and returned to London for the rest of the summer. Before he left, Victor asked, "You know more don't you? I know you've read his File. That means you know more." Sherlock, for once in his life, held his tongue. "Sherlock!" Victor shouted. "I have the right to know!"

Reluctantly, Sherlock said, "Ask him about Gloria Scott and James Armitage."

"Gloria? His first wife?" Victor asked incredulously. "What does she have to do with anything? And who is James Armitage?"

"Your father should be the one to tell you," Sherlock responded.

A month later, Sherlock received word that Mr Trevor had suffered a heart attack and died. When he tried to post his condolences to Victor's File, he found he had been barred. Victor didn't return to university that autumn, and Sherlock's only friendship came to a precipitous end.

Charles Augustus Milverton arrived at 221B Baker Street at 6:30 pm on the dot the day after Sherlock received his message. I was fidgeting with anxiety, unable to prevent myself from pacing in front of the window that looked down onto the street. Milverton arrived in a monstrously expensive, gleaming self-piloted luxury automobile, yet he still sprang for the

extravagance of a liveryman to open the door and help him out. The ostentation of it all spoke of a brazenness I couldn't help but abhor. He had no reservations about flaunting the proceeds of his evil undertaking. He was a squat, toad-like man in his early fifties who smiled ceaselessly, although it never showed itself in his hard, cruel eyes. The result was an iniquitous countenance that communicated his reptilian morals and the cold-blooded manner in which he loosed himself into the lives of others and set about systematically destroying their peace of mind. I loathed him on sight. He entered our flat with a practised (but still effortful) suavity and extended a hand to Sherlock. Sherlock regarded the offered appendage as one might the maggot-ridden corpse of a piece of roadkill. Milverton smiled only more, shrugging out of his preposterous shaggy overcoat (which I later learned was Astrakhan) and took a seat. He gesticulated at me and said, "This *person*, is it discreet?" I took great offence to being referred to as an "it" and glared at him coldly, already impatient for him to take his leave of us.

"Dr Watson can be trusted," Sherlock assured him. "Mr Trevor knows he assists me on all my cases."

"Ah, yes, your... cases," Milverton said maliciously. "That's how you refer to your little... *diversions*, isn't it? Well, I suppose we all need hobbies, some small entertainments to help us escape boredom." It was insupportable, listening to that loathsome vulgarian belittle Sherlock's intelligence and his achievements. I have never been a violent man, and even the horrors of war never incited much bloodlust in me (more feelings of abject desperation over the futile *waste* of it all), but, as I stood there watching that odious little fat man smirk while he sat in my chair, all I could think was how my steady surgeon's hands had surprised all the squaddies when they realised I, the unassuming doctor, was a *crack* shot. I would have liked to surprise Charles Augustus Milverton with that revelation as well. "Well, if Trevor has no objection, then who am I to complain," Milverton said pleasantly. "And he has permitted you to accept my terms?" It did not slip past me that he did not use the term "negotiate on his behalf" or its equivalent. This was a shakedown, and there was no pretending otherwise.

"I am Victor's agent in the matter, and I speak for him," Sherlock responded with remarkable calm. "What are your terms?"

"Nothing extravagant," Milverton replied, his reptilian smile widening. "Eighteen million pounds." The man was mad. *Eighteen million pounds!*

"And if he can't pay?" Sherlock asked, seeking confirmation of what he already knew.

"My dear, Mr Holmes," Milverton said in a voice that would have sounded kindly had I not been looking directly into his avaricious gaze. "You're far too clever for us to be beating around the bush like this. Mr Trevor and the minister make a handsome couple, and I'll allow them to marry. But if I'm not paid in full by the day after their marriage, then what I know will become headline news. Such nasty business, too... I mean, killing a man and stealing his identity, his wife, and his estate..." He made a tut-tutting sound of mock disapproval. "They say behind every great fortune there is a great crime. I suppose Herbert Trevor – sorry, James Armitage (it's so difficult to keep things straight with doppelgängers involved) – made the mistake of committing a small crime to gain a small fortune."

"It wasn't as simple as you make it out," Sherlock said.

"Oh, yes," Milverton agreed genially. "The real Herbert Trevor was quite the ogre. He drank to excess and regularly beat the stuffing out of his wife. Put her in hospital more than once."

"James Armitage saved her," Sherlock said.

"They could have just run away together. Instead, they plotted to kill him and did so

rather efficiently. The body's never been found. It makes one wonder if they'd had any prior experience." Milverton was demonstrating that he would cast the worst possible light on Victor's father's crime. By the time the gutter media were done, James Armitage and Gloria Scott would be the new Fred and Rosemary West, and poor Victor would be ruined by association.

"Victor had no knowledge of his father's misdeeds," Sherlock interjected. "It all happened well before he was born. Gloria Scott isn't even his mother."

"Do you think that matters?" Milverton exclaimed. "Come now, Mr Holmes. You have seen enough of the world to know how these things work. Your handsome young friend is set to snap up one of London's most eligible catches. The jackals will leap at the chance to rip his throat out." Milverton was a nasty, jumped-up little toe rag, but he did understand people, how they thought, and he was a master at manipulating them into colluding in his extortion. At least he got paid for it, though. At best, all the gossip-mongers got was the fleeting satisfaction of seeing a rival felled.

"Eighteen million pounds is not possible," Sherlock said. "Victor can raise fifteen at the most."

"I'll take what I've asked and not a penny less," Milverton replied, his smile becoming more oleaginous with each exchange. Sherlock shifted tactics.

"Surely, it would do you well to allow your investment to mature. In a few years Victor could be the Prime Minister's husband." Milverton made his condescending tutting noise again.

"Mr Holmes," he said as if speaking to a particularly stupid child. "Surely, you can see that *making an example* serves me better. I have several similar cases that are maturing as we speak. I think making a severe example of Mr Trevor and his fiancée will make the concerned parties more amenable to reason. That *I* prevented someone from becoming Prime Minister will make things run much more smoothly for me in the future. Surely, you can see that, Mr Holmes."

God, but I wanted to shoot him in the face. His comprehensive lack of empathy was more chilling to observe than any of the fevered killing I had seen during the war. The violence of war is like a fire burning out of control – it always eventually exhausts itself. But the void at the heart of men like Charles Augustus Milverton could scarcely be comprehended much less wrestled with. Sherlock was right: it was a kind of *folie sans délire*, a very real kind of mental disease, and it was best left to psychiatrists specialising in antisocial personalities. The rest of us were ill-equipped to deal with these people. Nevertheless, there we were, in our living room, watching that human reptile sun himself in the heat of our disgust.

Milverton stood up, communicating that our interview was over, and said, "Eighteen million pounds, Mr Holmes. Paid to me by the fourteenth or their married life will be destroyed at a time of my choosing and with no warning. It may happen in a day or a year or five years, but it *will* happen, and they will be devastated." He shrugged into his ridiculous coat and left.

"What a disgusting human being," I said with a shudder. I looked at Sherlock's set face and began to worry. "Can Victor really not pay?" I asked.

"It would ruin him financially. He would have to liquidate nearly everything or borrow recklessly."

"What will you do?"

"I see only one of two paths: I manage to convince Victor to tell his fiancée everything, or we somehow manage to stay Milverton's hand."

"Only a well-aimed bullet will stop that man," I observed. "I don't like vigilantism," I made sure to clarify, "but if Victor were my brother, I might see it fit to take matters into my

own hands. That man deserves a thorough thrashing if nothing else. Did you hear him call me ‘it’?” I asked incredulously, still in disbelief at the casual insult.

Sherlock laughed. “Yes, I did notice that. I thought for a moment you might actually slap his face and demand satisfaction. Pistols at dawn.”

“It was a near thing,” I said, laughing along.

I could see no clear way out for poor Victor who seemed hemmed in on all sides. I was by no means a cynic about romantic love (Sherlock, on the other hand, was almost violently vituperative on the subject), but even Victor’s fiancée declaring her love and setting aside her career to be with Victor did not seem like a favourable outcome to me. Looking at it from Victor’s point of view, how could anyone ever hope to live up to being worthy of that kind of sacrifice? And surely resentment would creep in down the line. No; there was no clean way out of the mess Milverton had dropped them in. I had expected Sherlock to spend the evening either in an extravagant sulk or working manically. When he suggested we watch *James Bond films* (which he *loathed*), I stared. “You hate James Bond,” I said in confusion.

“Come now, John,” he reproached me. “Why would I hate a fictional character?”

“The last time I suggested we watch a Bond film, you said he was the most repellent character an Englishman had ever created – nothing but life-support for an errant, perpetually erect penis.”

“You like the films.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then stop complaining,” he commanded as he put on *The Quick and the Dead*. The pre-title sequence began, and Sherlock not only paid attention but took copious notes on his L.M.D.

“Reginald Popper was a decent Bond,” I commented as I watched him stylishly punch out two baddies. “Too bad he never had a proper script to work with.” Sherlock grunted in response and kept fiddling with his L.M.D.

The next morning Sherlock left without so much as a word and returned with his hair dyed blond and cut shorter. He was also sporting brown contact lenses. When he burst in, for a moment I thought he was an intruder and very nearly tackled him to the ground.

“Sherlock?” I asked.

“Yes, John,” he responded, sweeping as imperiously as usual towards his room, as if it weren’t an absolutely incredible event for him to have turned up with different coloured hair and eyes. When he emerged, he was wearing a suit of moderate quality, and I wouldn’t have recognised him if I had passed him in the street. It wasn’t just the cosmetic and wardrobe changes that rendered him unrecognisable. The entire shape of his face seemed different – his jaw was somehow more square – and his eyes were less intelligent but sharper in a way that spoke of a familiarity with violence. His shoulders even seemed wider. But it was the small idiosyncrasies of movement and expression he adopted that made him into a new person. His demeanour was still confident, but it was more couched in physicality than intellect, and there was something of the military man about him – it was subtle but recognisable. Had I met this stranger, I may have asked him if he had served. I honestly believe that had Sherlock trained as a Thespian he could have been among the greatest actors of his generation. His ability to *become* another person was uncanny.

“Who are you supposed to be?” I enquired.

“The name’s Peter Escott,” he replied jovially, his voice a shade deeper but less mellifluous, his accent a bit rougher than usual. “I’m a paper courier with Latimer’s,” he continued, giving me a roguish smile and looking so unlike Sherlock I shivered. Watching him

like that really was quite unsettling. I couldn't help wondering how much of the Sherlock I knew might be some sort of elaborate performance. It was all so dramatic, after all.

Sherlock's mention of Latimer's gave me the most insight into the character of Peter Escott. The company provided courier services to the wealthy and powerful all over the world. They were the sort of outfit one hired to transport expensive jewellery and other items that required discretion. In the post-Archive world, they had also drummed up an immense business in the delivery of documents too sensitive to be transmitted electronically. If data travelled across a network, someone somewhere who wasn't meant to see it was having a look. Usually, it was government intelligence agencies, but sometimes it was activist hackers or corporate rivals. No encryption stayed un-cracked forever. Any information so discreet it had to be kept on paper was likely incredibly valuable or potentially ruinous, and there was a high likelihood it was both. As a result, paper couriers were carefully vetted and many were former military intelligence. I remember reading a feature in a magazine about the industry, and while some of it could devolve into *Spy vs. Spy* preposterousness (the exertions taken to protect the formula for Coca-Cola as it was moved from one undisclosed location to another were almost hysterical in their excess), paper couriers had become a kind of status symbol, an accessory of wealth. Men and women who could organise the transport and protection of a lorry full of gold bullion and efficiently disable or kill anyone who dared interfere were often sent to hand-deliver birthday cards and love notes. This development was soon absorbed into the paper couriers' strategy, and what seemed like innocuous deliveries could be the most important. Milverton was just the sort of *nouveau riche* grasper who would have paper couriers running around all over town delivering frivolous nonsense – it was the perfect logistical support for his blackmail venture.

Paper couriering was a bizarre, secretive industry that was nearly impossible to infiltrate. Not even Sherlock could sham his way into Latimer's. But The Archive Liaison Office would have the contacts necessary to create a believable back story. I suspected that Mycroft had called in an extremely valuable marker to create Peter Escott.

“Catch you later, John,” Sherlock said as he bounded out the door.

Over the next several weeks I saw little of Sherlock. He returned to 221B intermittently, usually only for a change of clothes, never really dropping the new persona he had adopted. One night, however, he threw himself onto the sofa and laughed.

“What's so funny?” I asked, a bit testy after having been left out for so long.

“What would you say if I told you I was engaged?” It was one of those moments where everything seems to stop, and you wonder if you're hallucinating.

“Did you just say you're engaged?”

“Does it really surprise you so much?” Sherlock asked in a mocking tone; his blond hair and mud-brown eyes were putting me off.

“Yes, it does, Sherlock,” I responded. “When I mentioned starting to date again now that my health has improved, you compared romantic love to an opportunistic infection.”

“I did, didn't I?” Sherlock said, laughing even harder. “But who said anything about love?”

“When you said ‘engaged’, you meant engaged to be married, didn't you?”

“Yes.”

“So, you're engaged to someone you're not in love with?” I felt a strange fear, a premonition that the forthcoming explanation would be worse than objectionable. The very air itself seemed to sharpen and become charged as I waited for Sherlock to enlighten me.

“Well, I suppose I should have said that *Peter Escott* is engaged to be married.” He

looked so pleased with himself.

“Who are you engaged to?” I asked, my gut twisting uneasily.

“Milverton’s Sociability Maintenance Engineer.”

“Sherlock... Please tell me you didn’t make some poor, unsuspecting soul fall in love with your cover identity then propose to them?” His pleased countenance shifted, like a cat discovering the cream had curdled.

“I needed to gain her trust, and *she’s* the one who proposed to me.”

“So, it’s a woman, then,” I said, staring at him like he was a stranger. And in that moment he was. How could he have done something so cruel? And *for a case*?

“Yes. Her name is Mary.”

“And she thinks you’re in love with her.”

“Madly.”

“Because you told her so.”

“Yes.”

“And she’s in love with you.”

“Yes.”

“But in her case, it’s real, not part of some elaborate plot to entrap an extortionist.”

“Yes.”

“Jesus Christ, Sherlock!” I was livid. “Did you stop and think for even one moment how much this scheme of yours would hurt her?” I shouted. “Do you even realise there is another human being involved? A person with *feelings* is involved, Sherlock!” We had quarrelled and raised our voices to each other before, but this was different. This was about him not being the man I thought he was. Underlying every word I spoke was a sense of keenly felt disappointment. My head was suddenly splitting.

“John,” Sherlock said uncertainly.

“How could you?” I asked, speaking mostly to myself. “What sort of person thinks that’s all right?” I put my spinning head in my hands. The situation was nauseating. “Will you marry her if that’s what it takes to get Milverton?”

“Of course not!”

“So, there are some limits, then. I suppose that’s good to know.”

“I thought you’d be pleased.”

“You thought I’d be pleased that you’ve premeditated lying your way into some poor woman’s affections and breaking her heart?”

“I thought you’d be pleased that I figured out how to help Victor, how to thwart Milverton.” I looked at the injured indignation on Sherlock’s face, the high colour on his cheeks, the ridiculous blond hair, and observed his *certainty* that what he had done was justified, proportional – more akin to a minor breach in etiquette than hurling an emotional Molotov cocktail into someone else’s life. I understood who and what he truly was for the first time, or, more accurately, I accepted the truth I had been denying.

“You really are an addict, aren’t you?” I said sadly. He flinched as if I had struck him. “You would do *anything*, anything at all, to maintain this high you’re on, wouldn’t you? You slept with that poor woman – you must have. You told her you loved her...” As the details of what must have occurred became clearer to me, I began to feel a wave of immense fatigue come over me. It was worse than all the anger, that sense of profound defeat. “You’ve even convinced yourself it’s about helping Victor and stopping Milverton, but it’s not. It’s about that gaping hole inside you and what it takes to fill it.” I met his eye and saw the shock there but pressed on

because I realised my part in the debacle. “I’ve been enabling you. I’ve been enabling you because I didn’t realise that nothing else, no one else matters to you. Not really.” I was suddenly so exhausted I felt I might faint. “I’m going to bed,” I said. I got up to head to my room.

“John...” Sherlock sounded as shell-shocked as I felt. On any other occasion, I would have tried to lift his mood out of fear that he would turn to the morocco case, but his business with Milverton wasn’t settled, and, so long as that game was being played, he would be getting his fix.

“I really am very tired,” I commented absently as I made my way towards the stairs. It was the truth, nevertheless, my sleep was restless and plagued by nightmares. I woke up screaming for the first time in months. I realised then just how much the improvement in my mood, how much the progress I had made was down to having moved to Baker Street and formed my strange connection to Sherlock. Something about the sense of betrayal I felt had me backsliding. But leaving and heading to some cheap hotel was not an option. Baker Street was my home, and Sherlock was a part of that home. I knew that despite the events of the previous night Sherlock felt the same way. That day at Barts we had chosen each other.

I rolled out of bed, exited my room and tripped over Sherlock who was sitting in the hallway outside my door.

“Sherlock! You almost gave me a heart attack!” I exclaimed.

“I heard you shouting. Sometimes you... I didn’t want you to hurt yourself. I’m sorry.” He got up to head down the stairs. I hated the contrite tone of his voice, his defeated posture. For a moment, though, I wondered if it was all an act, part of some manipulation. Even if it was, I certainly wasn’t clever enough to suss it out.

“I’m not leaving,” I said, needing to cut through all the doubt and uncertainty thickening the air around us and get right to the heart of things. Sherlock stopped so suddenly it was almost cartoonish.

“You’re not?” he asked in disbelief, spinning around to face me.

“No,” I replied.

“But I thought you hated me now.” I could hear the unspoken “like everyone else”. During the night he had shaved off the silly blond hair and removed the brown contact lenses. While the close-cropped hair was a novelty, and his eyebrows were still lighter than usual, being able to see his bright grey eyes filled me with relief. He looked like Sherlock again.

“I don’t hate you, Sherlock,” I said. “But what you did to that woman... I won’t lie; it frightens me that you can’t see what’s wrong about it.”

“I can now,” he replied thoughtfully. “I thought all last night about why it upset you so much when you don’t even know her, when you know what is at stake with Milverton, how many people he’s destroyed.”

“Did you put yourself in her place?” Sherlock gave me his “why would I ever do something so absurd?” look, and I almost laughed aloud. Of course he wouldn’t have done that. Sherlock had managed to convince himself he didn’t have emotions – especially not the type that would let him do anything as pedestrian as fall in love with anyone.

“No,” he replied. “I put *you* in her place, and I thought about how much I would despise anyone who hurt you like that, what I would do to punish them.” I was afraid to think of what that meant – Sherlock being unable to use himself as the subject in an exercise in empathy and employing me as a replacement for his conscience. I didn’t want to become his Jiminy Cricket, the voice in his head telling him right from wrong. But even I could see that it really wasn’t much different from the way he helped to keep the edge off my post-traumatic stress, how so

much of what animated me and kept me moving forward seemed to come from him. Good Lord, I thought, were we co-dependent?

“It’s good that you understand now,” I finally said. “Promise me you won’t do anything like that again.” Sherlock hesitated.

“When you say ‘anything like that’ what exactly do you mean?” he asked carefully.

“You’ve got something else morally reprehensible planned, haven’t you?” Sherlock nodded reluctantly. “What?” I demanded.

“Burgling Milverton’s house.”

I discovered I was a terrible substitute conscience because instead of gainsaying the illegal act, I smiled and asked, “Can I come along?”

That is how that night I came to be with Sherlock in Milverton’s study when a series of incredible events took place.

Through his betrothed and his role as a Latimer’s courier, Sherlock had learned a great deal about Milverton’s habits. Mary reported that Milverton stored his important paper files in a safe in the study outside his bedroom. He was a demanding employer who often kept her working late, and she came to learn that he was a heavy sleeper who was very nearly impossible to wake. He also kept regular hours, going to bed at just after ten o’clock each night unless he had specific plans to do otherwise. Milverton’s desire for privacy and fear of break-ins were connected to a fondness for the arcane. Most thieves had never seen a purely mechanical lock. They had stopped being manufactured decades ago. Decryption algorithms or biometric circumventions were the lock picks of contemporary burglars. Milverton used thoroughly outdated technology from the second half of the twentieth century to secure his home, and its obsolescence was surprisingly effective in stymieing the criminal elements. Unluckily for him, Sherlock had been the president (and sole member) of an amateur mechanical safe-cracking club he founded when he was thirteen, and he was quite adept at getting past complicated tumblers and the like. We broke in through the garden door and quietly made our way upstairs to the study. Sherlock worked on the safe using an intricate process that required a stethoscope and graphs while I kept watch. After about half-an-hour of listening carefully as he rotated the dial and made notations on his graphs, Sherlock had the combination and opened the safe. We rifled the contents which all seemed to be legal documents and financial instruments. Paper bearer bonds were becoming rare, but there was still a demand from a class of people who wanted to trade without much scrutiny.

“It’s not here,” Sherlock hissed in frustration.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Maybe there’s some sort of code, or information on a safe deposit box or something.”

“Maybe,” Sherlock said, taking out his L.M.D. and beginning to scan a sheaf of documents. I took a stack and started doing the same. Sherlock had installed a security patch often used by undercover police officers on their cover L.M.D.s. It allowed us to archive geolocation information we had pre-programmed. If anyone checked our alibis, it would seem we were at Baker Street watching a personalised entertainment module I had selected. We had been working on scanning the documents for about ten minutes when Sherlock went very still then whispered urgently, “Someone’s coming.” He quickly thrust the documents back into the safe and closed it quietly. I hadn’t heard anyone approaching, but my hearing had been damaged from all the gunfire and explosions during the war, and I knew Sherlock had ears like a wolfhound. Sherlock grabbed my arm and dragged me behind one of the floor-length drapes moments before a man, dressed much as we were in comfortable black clothes and a balaclava,

entered. He had a strong, athletic build and moved with a predatory grace. I somehow knew that if he discovered me and Sherlock, it would be a near thing to fight him off even with both of us using all of our combined skill and every dirty trick we knew. He headed right for the safe and stuck some kind of contraption to the door next to the dial. The dial began to spin, and soon his gadget had unlocked the safe. He rifled the papers and cursed, it seems he met the same disappointment we did.

“There’s nothing here but legal contracts and bearer bonds,” he whispered. “How should I proceed?” He was on a communication device with a confederate. He began flipping through the papers, and said, “Scanning now,” and after a brief pause, “Are you receiving?” He wasn’t using an L.M.D., no other device was evident, and his eyes weren’t emitting the low-level glow of digital contact lenses, which would have been obvious in the dim light.

“Micro-camera grafted to his cornea,” Sherlock whispered directly into my ear. The man was probably some sort of spy, then. Christ, what was Milverton involved in? After a few minutes of scanning Milverton’s documents, the man looked up suddenly. “I thought you said no-one else would be here,” he hissed. I thought we had been found out, and I confess I lost my head a bit and almost rushed out to fight him, but Sherlock caught me in an iron grip and restrained me. The man replaced the documents hastily, pushed the door to the safe closed and quickly but almost silently made his way to conceal himself behind a tapestry on the other side of the room from our hiding place.

Milverton entered wearing a wine-coloured dressing gown, and I almost gasped aloud. We had been working under the assumption that he was in his bedchamber asleep. He sat at his desk and switched on the banker’s lamp. The room was still poorly lit, and the shadows being cast across Milverton’s face made him seem even uglier than usual. Soon a well-dressed man and an elegant woman entered still wearing their overcoats and gloves. Good Lord! How many more people were going to turn up tonight? Had invitations been sent out without our knowledge? Would a clown car pull up and unload a baker’s dozen of guests? Sherlock’s grip on my arm tightened suddenly. He recognised the couple. It took me a moment longer in the bad lighting, but I did too, and I knew with certainty that things were about to go horribly awry.

“Mr Trevor,” Milverton said brightly, his unpleasant smile looking even more like a sneer in the unflattering light. It was Victor and his fiancée, both looking very resolute indeed. “I didn’t expect you to bring company.” He turned to Victor’s companion. “Minister, may I offer you a brandy?” There was a *faux* deference intended to mock in his tone, and for the first time I wondered if Milverton was really as clever as we all had assumed. I had seen the look in the minister’s eye before, and it was usually accompanied by the adjustments of the fastenings on body armour and a final check of ammunition. Milverton had probably dealt with people desperate enough to lash out violently, but he seemed genuinely unable to recognise the danger he was in.

“I think it’s best if we get down to business,” the minister said calmly, pulling a revolver out of her pocket. It was an antique, but it was gleaming and looked as if it had recently been cleaned. It would almost certainly fire if the need arose. “I think you know why we’re here.” She gestured to the safe with the pistol. “Open it,” she commanded.

“I most certainly will not,” Milverton blustered.

“Pet,” the minister said to Victor.

“Yes, dear,” Victor replied.

“Cover him.” Victor pulled out his own revolver. The pistols looked to be part of a matching set. It was sort of sweet, their Bonnie and Clyde routine. The minister slipped her pistol

back into her pocket and walked over to the safe and knelt to examine it.

“It’s already open,” she said in confusion. Our friend across the room hadn’t made sure the heavy door had swung all the way shut and engaged the locking mechanism.

Milverton shouted, “What?”

“Shut up!” Victor commanded. The minister pulled everything out of the safe, making a dreadful mess as she tore through the papers.

“It’s not here,” she said. “I was certain it would be here.” She turned to look at Milverton who was smirking smugly. The minister’s answering smile was lethal.

“These bearer bonds certainly look valuable,” the minister commented casually, walking over to the fireplace, tossing them on the hearth, and calmly setting them alight. Milverton jumped out of his seat ready to shout in protest, and Victor took a menacing step closer, pushing the gun right into his face.

“I will fucking shoot you,” Victor swore. “Sit down!” Milverton obeyed. We all watched as the minister burned the entire contents of the safe, including millions of pounds worth of bearer bonds.

“I will ruin you,” Milverton hissed malevolently.

The minister laughed. “I think not.” She paused and observed him contemplatively. “You really don’t know why we’re here, do you?”

“You’re here for the letter... Aren’t you?” Milverton was legitimately confused. As was I.

“The guns aren’t for show,” the minister replied, pulling the revolver from her pocket and cocking the hammer.

“You wouldn’t dare!” Milverton exclaimed. “If you do, you’ll never find out where that letter is. I can still ruin you from beyond the grave. I have a partner who knows —”

“You have no one,” the minister interrupted firmly. Her calm, commanding demeanour was something to behold. “I know your sort. You don’t trust anyone. No one but you knows where any of the evidence is, and you’ll have hidden it so well that we could tear this house to pieces and dig up the entire garden and not find it or any hint of where else to look.”

“Are you willing to take that risk?” Milverton asked.

“Absolutely,” the minister said. “I won’t be beholden to a man like you.” She took aim and pulled the trigger. She shot Milverton in the face. Victor followed suit. The couple stowed their guns in their pockets, clasped hands and ran out the door. The doctor in me wanted to rush to Milverton’s aid, undeserving though he was, but I knew the gunfire would have raised the household. The man from behind the tapestry emerged and tore across the room. “A Member of Parliament just shot Milverton! In the face!” he exclaimed and leapt out a window, probably doing some frightfully difficult parkour to make his escape.

Sherlock raced across the room to lock the door to the study from the inside then led us to Milverton’s bedchamber (ostentatiously decorated in a Turkish theme that must have been retina-scorching in daylight) and down the back stairs. Sherlock had memorised the layout of the house and took us on a circuitous route to a back entrance where we engaged in some deft urban camouflage to avoid the gardener before making it over the wall.

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