



THE
Adventure
OF THE PURLOINED
PORTRAIT

THE EARLY CASE FILES OF
SHERLOCK HOLMES

CASE FOUR

LIESE
SHERWOOD-
FABRE
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

Ghosts from the past threaten
the Holmes family's future.

What They Are Saying About The Early Case Files of Sherlock Holmes

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THE ADVENTURE OF THE PURLOINED PORTRAIT

The Early Case Files of Sherlock Holmes

Case Four



Liese Sherwood-Fabre

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For our newest family member: Luis Raul Fabre IV

Chapter One

I stared over the ship's railing and spoke to my brother Mycroft without glancing at him. "I feel this trip may be a mistake."

I saw him turn toward me from the corner of my eye. "The crossing's almost over. You'll feel better when you get on dry land."

"That's not what I meant." I glared at him. "Mother hasn't been herself since Easter. Out of the blue, she announces we're going to Paris while you're still recovering from a gunshot wound. And she'd been distracted even before that."

Mother had always been the family rock. I'd rarely seen her rattled, but even granite can break under pressure. During our Easter holiday in London, she appeared preoccupied by matters she never explained to me or my brother. At the time, I'd put it down to concern over my father's efforts to invest in a business venture with an old school chum as well as Mycroft's wounding at the hands of our kidnappers. Both, however, were now behind us. The investment had produced a modest return, and

Liese Sherwood-Fabre

I saw no lingering problems related to Mycroft's injury. All the same, we'd barely arrived home from school before she'd packed our trunks and shuffled us all off to Newhaven for the steamship ride to Dieppe.

"I do believe bringing the entire family is a ruse," he said after his own inspection of the sea.

"Including Uncle Ernest in the trip did surprise me." Her brother rarely left the estate or his workshop. "Perhaps she thinks it will do him some good. They report being happy growing up there."

He glanced at the smoke trailing the ship. "If she was so happy there, why doesn't she show it?"

I ran through all the scenarios—from something as benign as a sudden bout of nostalgia to a fatal illness calling her back to see her French relatives one last time—and shook my head. "Without more information, I would only be speculating. You yourself have said that can be counterproductive. Whatever the reason, something has truly unnerved her." I turned back to the ocean, seeking any indication of the coastline. "And whatever it is lies in Paris."

Footsteps came toward us, and we both turned around. My mother's maid Constance approached us. "Your mother asked me to inform you there's tea in the cabin—if you want some."

"I would," Mycroft said. He turned to me one last time before he headed inside. "I suppose you'll get your answers soon enough."

My chest tightened at this prospect, but I didn't voice the concern accompanying the sensation—that the answer I sought might not be one I wanted to learn.

Constance stepped to the rail next to me and leaned her forearms against the top rung. We'd become friends when I'd returned home from school after my mother had been accused

The Adventure of the Purloined Portrait

of murder. She'd been a great help to me in various adventures, and Mother had taken her under her wing to develop her singing voice as well as her education. She was traveling with us as her lady's maid.

I took a similar pose to hers against the rail, enjoying the ocean's scent and letting the wind whip the hair from my face. Licking my lips, I savored the salt spray seasoning them.

Letting out a soft "ooh," she took in the white-foamed waves reaching as far as we could see under a clear, cerulean sky. I tried to see it from her point of view but couldn't shake the anxiety remaining in my core.

She turned to me, and a loose tendril of her red hair whipped across her face. As much as the untidy strand annoyed me, I resisted the urge to tuck it behind her ear. Social etiquette dictated a young man—even if only fourteen such as I—wasn't to have such contact with a young woman—especially one who was his mother's maid.

To my relief, she moved the hair herself. "How long until we can see France?"

"The trip is supposed to take several hours, depending on the weather. I'm not sure how long before we can see the coast."

"Will it be as hot there as in England?"

"I hope not."

The weather had been oppressive for more than a month now—with no rain to offer even temporary relief. The fields around Underbyrne, our family estate, held only dried, withered stalks, and the beehives my father had added to one back field hummed with a multitude of tiny wings fanning the hive to keep it cool.

"I can't believe we're goin' to Paris," she said, a joyful smile playing on her lips. "The farthest I've been from home was that trip to London with your family. Now Paris. What's it like?"

Liese Sherwood-Fabre

I shrugged. “I’ve only seen pictures, but I think it will be a lot like London in some ways.”

She shifted back around to face the ocean. “Well, I’m not goin’ to waste a minute not enjoyin’ it. Like this boat ride. I ain’t—er, haven’t—been on anything this big in my life. It’s like a floatin’ hotel. Goin’ to drink me some tea on a boat—”

“Ship.” She squinted a question at me. “It’s a ship. Don’t let the crew hear you call it a boat. Ships are bigger.”

“Well, I’m goin’ to get me some tea on this *ship* so’s I can tell my brothers and sisters I had me some.”

She flounced off, leaving me to ponder exactly what lay ahead.



While Mother and Uncle Ernest had been born in France and lived there until they were in their early twenties, my British grandfather had taken the whole family to England during growing tensions between the two countries. My French grandmother, the sister of the famous painter Horace Vernet, never returned to Paris. The entire family became British citizens to avoid problems remaining in England, and the relationship between the two countries had only improved in recent years.

Despite our fluency in the language, we were still subjected to the authorities’ preferences for all things French during our arrival in the country. Once through a rather arduous review of passports and luggage, we exited into the town of Dieppe, hardly more than a few streets deep behind the dock. Still, I had my introduction to French cuisine at a local restaurant not far from the shore. The fresh fish’s delicate sauce, seasoned with a white wine, lingered on my tongue, and my mother even

The Adventure of the Purloined Portrait

allowed me a few swallows of wine from the *blanc* ordered for the meal.

I wouldn't have minded passing a few days enjoying the seashore, but Mother insisted we catch the next possible train to Paris. She hustled us through the streets to the station and while waiting for the train alternated between tapping her foot as she sat on a bench and striding to the edge of the platform to check on the locomotive's arrival.

Constance's excitement continued unabated through the train ride. We had two compartments because of the size of our party. Mother, Father, Constance, and I took one, and I gave my friend the window seat with an unobstructed view of the countryside. She rode with her face pressed against the window. I knew she would have hung out the opened top had Mother not been there to restrain her enthusiasm.

Neither my mother nor uncle spoke much about their years in Paris, although they had spent their youth among the artists and elites of their time. Mother's Uncle Horace died when I was nine, only five years after he married for the second time. Mother had mentioned we would be meeting his second wife, Marie. Having never met either of my parents' parents (they passed away several years before I was born), this step-great-aunt was the closest I had to a *grand-mère*.

We arrived in Paris before sunset, although the streets were already dark and lighted by lamps. Throughout the drive from the railway station to the apartment we had rented for the summer, Mother gasped and shook her head. As we headed onto one wide boulevard, she gave a little cry.

"Such destruction." She turned away from the window and spoke to us. "I barely recognize the city. I'd heard of the changes Haussmann had been supervising, but to see it..."

She paused and clucked her tongue.

Liese Sherwood-Fabre

Father studied the passing scene. "Seems very pleasant to me."

"Do you know Haussmann's work has destroyed more than twenty thousand buildings? Forced the poor to move out of their homes? This area is unrecognizable. Even though Uncle Horace lived and worked here."

We turned one corner and a glowing building came into view.

"Oh my," said Constance and pressed herself so close to the window she almost leaned too far. Mother's cough pulled her back to her seat. "How's it shinin' like that?"

"I believe that's Printemps," I said, eager to show off my knowledge gleaned from a guidebook. "A store. It has electric lighting. Quite impressive, I have to say."

Mother's thoughts seemed to turn inward. I tried to imagine what it would be like to return to Underbyrne and find it completely changed. Returning home usually meant being surrounded with the familiar. The predictable. Losing that meant losing one's bearings. Perhaps that was what she was feeling. Confused by unanticipated changes in what had once been familiar.

The carriage pulled to a stop in front of a five-story building. Before we could open the door, a woman in a coarse skirt and shirt and carrying a broom approached. "*Bon soir*," she said in a rather guttural French. "I'm Madame Bardin. You must be the new tenants for number two. I'll make arrangements for your trunks to be taken up in a moment. If you'll follow me, please."

She waved us toward a passage beside a milliner's shop. The passage opened to a small courtyard. She pointed toward the back of the yard. "My husband and I live there. We are in charge

The Adventure of the Purloined Portrait

of the door to the street. For security. No one gets in or out without us.”

Leading us to another door, she revealed a stairwell. Mme Bardin reached into her pocket and handed a key to Father. “This is to enter the building.” Holding up a second key, she said, “This one is for the apartment.”

With a glance toward Constance, she produced a third key. “*Chambre de bonne*—servant’s quarters. Fifth floor.”

While this transaction had taken place, a man in a well-worn suit approached us through the still-open street entrance. With a nod to the woman, he pushed through our little group and headed up the stairs.

“Monsieur Delisle. Third floor.” The concierge provided as an explanation for the man’s entrance.

Father whispered to Mother. “Just how many people live here?”

She paused to consider the question. “Five stories. Two apartments per floor—although, as you can see, the ground floor is for commerce. So, eight apartments in all. Depending on the size of the family, in each, I would guess at least twenty-one, not including us or any servants.” She patted his arm. “A wonderful opportunity to practice one’s French with those from all walks of life, don’t you think?”

Father’s stony expression indicated he did not find the opportunity as grand as she did, but with a glance up the stairs, he stepped back to let Mother lead the way.

As he passed Mme Bardin, my uncle Ernest spoke to her. “Is À la Mère de Famille still on Rue du Faubourg?”

“*Bien sur.*” She gave him a wink. “If you go, a bon-bon from there will get you extra-special treatment here.”

He turned to me. “They have the most amazing sweets. You’ll see.”

Liese Sherwood-Fabre

Constance and I exchanged glances. We'd barely been in the city for an hour and yet its special offerings were already appearing.

A couple met us at the door when Father opened the apartment.

Mme Bardin waved her arm toward the two. "*Voila*. Monsieur and Madame Gagne—your butler and housekeeper. Mme Gagne also cooks."

Following introductions, she turned her attention to Constance. "I'll show your maid to her quarters and return shortly."

"Have you received word from Mme Vernet? I was hoping she would visit," Mother asked before the concierge could turn away.

"I was to send word to her when you arrived. I'll do so after the inventory."

The woman turned and stepped toward the door. In the open entrance, she glanced in Constance's direction when she didn't follow. Mother whispered to her. "She's taking you to your room. It's on an upper floor. Take your valise. After you have settled in, please come back down to help me unpack."

My friend glanced at the woman, who scowled at her—most likely displeased with Constance's inability to understand her. She picked up a small traveling bag and glared at the woman's back as they exited.

Once the door closed, we all shifted on our feet, as if afraid to move from the spot where we'd stopped. Mother was the first to break the silence by turning to our hired couple. "M Gagne, please assist in bringing our luggage upstairs. Mme Gagne, have you prepared anything for our arrival? Tea, perhaps? Sandwiches? Or another repast?"

The two bowed and took off to fulfill her directions.

The Adventure of the Purloined Portrait

Finally, alone for the present, we all relaxed and glanced around to study our new abode. The apartment offered more than adequate accommodations, but nothing along the lines of our townhouse in London. The main room, a sort of sitting or drawing room, had high ceilings with windows that opened to the street. The curtains billowed from the night air gusting in. At least it was cooler here. I stepped across the room to get a better view of the street and the city. A glow above the rooftops marked the store Printemps' location. In London, electric lighting was rare—most streets and homes in the city used gaslighting, and Underbyrne used candles and oil or gas lamps. How much more modern that fact made the city appear to me.

Behind me, Father asked, "What's this about an inventory?"

"A record of the condition of all items. There'll be a charge for any damages," Mother said.

"As if we're that destructive. Who do they think we are?"

"It's customary, Mr. Holmes. Don't worry. We're not being singled out."

"I'm going to check out the rooms," Mycroft said. "I want the one with the most solitude."

A knock on the door stopped him in his tracks. We exchanged glances, but before any of us could answer, Mme Gagne came running from the kitchen area and cracked the door. After a brief conversation, she took a note and passed it to my mother.

"It appears I've been summoned by Uncle Horace's wife. Apparently, she couldn't wait for Mme Bardin's message," she said after reading the note. "She has sent a carriage with the message. I wish she'd waited. At this hour, I shouldn't be out on the street alone. I can't believe she's so anxious to—"

Mother cut off her thought. Did her step-aunt lie at the

Liese Sherwood-Fabre

base of her anxiety? I burned to learn the truth. As if reading my mind, Father studied my brother, uncle, and me.

“I can’t go,” he said. “That inventory probably should be done before we get charged for every grease stain from every previous tenant.”

“May I go, too?” I asked as soon as Ernest noted his willingness to meet their step-aunt, “Mycroft, too. It’s good for us to meet Mother’s side of the family.”

Mycroft, taken a little off-guard, didn’t object, but added, “But I still get the room farthest from the street or other tenants.”

“I’ll be sure to pick out your rooms accordingly.” Father’s tone betrayed annoyance with my brother, but it might have stemmed from his concern with the whole rent process as well.

In the hallway, we met Constance and Mme Bardin. Both were slightly out of breath, having just climbed and descended several flights of stairs. My friend’s mouth was set in a grim line, and I wondered what had transpired between the two, given Constance’s very basic French. While she had practiced certain phrases and whole songs in the language, I knew her comprehension stopped at words such as “good day,” and “how are you?” Mother seemed in a great hurry to see her step-aunt, and so I had no time to ascertain what Constance may have been experiencing.

Mother gave the two only a cursory glance before she explained to Mme Bardin that Father was remaining to complete the inventory with her, and then she said to Constance, “We have to go...out. Squire Holmes is staying to complete an inventory with Mme Bardin. You can assist with unpacking my items when they bring up our luggage.”

The “summons” had swept Mother’s usual decorum and calm aside, and I wished I’d had time to explain her curt atti-

The Adventure of the Purloined Portrait

tude to Constance before we rushed off, but all I could manage was what I hoped was a sympathetic nod.



When Mother first explained that we would be staying in our own apartment in Paris and not with her step-aunt, the announcement had taken me aback. My father's family routinely visited Underbyrne for holidays and the like. Why her uncle's wife hadn't extended the same courtesy to us only became apparent when we arrived at her apartment. From what I'd gleaned from our own abode, the quality of the dwelling decreased with altitude—from the most opulent on the first floor to the servants' quarters on the fifth. Mme Vernet was on the second—with nice furnishings, but not at the level of the accommodations she had arranged for us. Lower ceilings and more cramped spaces denoted a lower status. The furniture, however, was as fine as in our own apartment, suggesting a move down for her after the death of her famous husband.

Mme Vernet—Mother had never referred to her as “*Tante Marie*,” only as Mme Vernet and so I felt compelled to do the same—greeted us herself at the door. I had expected a woman much older than my mother, similar in age to Grandmother Charlotte if she were still alive. Instead, a woman perhaps only a few years older than my mother, her skin smooth and with dark hair in ringlets about her face, invited us into her main room.

Following introductions, we all took seats. Mme Vernet pursed her lips and turned to my mother. “I had hoped we could speak in pri—”

Before she could finish her thought, a door opened on the far side of the room, and a man entered. A rather shabby suit hung awkwardly on his tall, thin frame. His wrinkled face and

Liese Sherwood-Fabre

hesitant manner suggested a rather hard existence. While he had made an attempt at shaving, he'd missed some spots. The gray-streaked stubble made the overall effect worse than had he not even tried. His movements were slow and timid, like those of a frightened animal unsure of the treatment he might receive.

And with good reason. The moment Mother's gaze rested on the man, she popped up from her seat and turned a furious face to her step-aunt. "How dare you. I made it clear I had no interest in seeing this-this-*man*. You tricked me." She spun about, heading toward the door. She addressed us three without even turning around. "Come along. We're leaving."

None of us had moved before the man raced across the room and grabbed my mother's arm. "Please, Violette, I've come to beg your forgiveness."

His sudden actions caught us by surprise, but Ernest was on the man before the rest of us took two steps. He grasped him by the shoulders and pulled him away from his sister. "Let go of her, Gaspard."

Mycroft and I positioned ourselves between the two men and our mother. I raised my fists, ready to fight if the man made a move. The small exertion to reach my mother, however, seemed to have drained the newcomer, and he swayed slightly in Ernest's grasp. "I'll go." He focused on Mother, gazing at her between my brother and me. "You have to understand I was desperate. No one will—"

He shook his head as if reading in Mother's expression he had no chance of persuading her to speak to him. "I'm truly sorry. Please, forgive me."

Shrugging off my uncle's hands, he stepped to the door and let himself out.

Mother's breaths came in short pants, and I led her back to a settee. My heart raced when I saw her pallor. Her color must

The Adventure of the Purloined Portrait

have disturbed the other two because Mycroft fanned her face while Ernest and I rubbed her wrists.

I turned to Mme Vernet. "Please, madame, she needs some tea with plenty of sugar. And maybe a drop of brandy if you have it."

Mme Vernet rang a bell and placed the order with the maid who answered her call. She rose and sat next to her niece. Taking her hand from mine, she rubbed it softly. "I'm so sorry, my dear. I had no idea his presence would affect you so. He *begged* me to let him see you. I thought it was just some sort of misunderstanding between you two."

Mother turned her head in her step-aunt's direction. Her hard squint was as effective as any words she might have said. The maid arrived with the tea. I took the proffered cup and stood between her and Mme Vernet to hold it to her lips. She took a few sips, and almost immediately the color returned to her cheeks.

Her eyes had a slight glaze, but her voice was strong when she said, "You can put the cup down now, Sherry dear. The sight of...that man was a shock, but I'm over the worst of it now." When I hesitated to move from my position as a barrier between her and the other woman, she said more forcefully, with a glance at each of us. "Please, I'm all right now. All of you, please sit down. It appears we have more to discuss with Mme Vernet."

The three of us exchanged quick glances. While I wasn't certain she was as well as she stated, no one seemed willing to suggest otherwise. With a shrug, Ernest returned to a chair as did my brother across from her. I hesitated an extra breath, reluctant to leave my post between the two women.

She turned to me and in her strongest tone yet, said, "Sherry dear, I must address Marie directly. Take a seat."

Liese Sherwood-Fabre

I stepped back but settled on the edge of the chair directly across from the settee, ready at a moment's notice to spring forward to her rescue. I couldn't help but recall an episode of almost catatonia she'd experienced less than a year ago when my father confronted her about her efforts to protect the health of the village women. The fear that engulfed me then now lurked in the back of my mind.

Mother straightened her back and raised her chin. "It's been a long journey, Marie. We'd barely arrived when your note came. And with this...deceit of yours, I only want to complete our transaction and enjoy the rest of our stay in Paris."

"I had no idea—" the woman sniffed. "As I said, he told me he wanted to beg your forgiveness."

"Forgiveness." Mother made a sound of derision in the back of her throat. "The man betrayed me in the most horrible of ways and then sought to exploit—. Do you have the sketch?"

Marie stepped to the door where Gaspard had entered and returned with a cracked leather portfolio in her hands. "He came to me a few months ago, begging me for money. When I refused, he showed me the sketch inside and said if I didn't pay five hundred francs, it would be shared with the British press. As I told you, in the sketch, you are..." She glanced at us males and lowered her voice to a whisper. "...disrobed."

Mother straightened her spine and studied each of us before she took up the narrative. "Marie's correspondence regarding this event arrived during our holiday in London. I'd been on very...familiar terms with Gaspard. He had been one of Uncle Horace's students when we lived in Paris, but I hadn't communicated with him since leaving France—even before that actually—and had no recollection of the sketch, but I certainly didn't want to cause yet another scandal for your father."

"Five hundred francs." Ernest's voice was a harsh whisper.

The Adventure of the Purloined Portrait

“That’s twenty pounds. Are you aware how long a man must work for such a sum?”

“About a year,” Mycroft said. “That is, given an average salary.”

“After I paid him, he came back, begging me to give him back the sketch. I had no idea what he would do with it and refused. He *bounded* me, my dear. I became afraid to leave my apartment because he would accost me the moment I stepped onto the street. Somehow, he learned you were coming to Paris and begged me to give him a chance to see you. He promised to leave you and me alone if he had just one opportunity to speak to you.” She ran her hands over her skirt. “He showed up again tonight, and I was afraid he might make a scene on the street when you arrived, so I let him in to wait for you. Forgive me.”

“What’s done is done. Let’s finish this disaster.”

Mother withdrew a packet from her reticule—the five hundred francs, I assumed—and placed it on Mme Vernet’s lap. She then opened the portfolio and removed a sheet of paper, yellowed with age. Only Mme Vernet and Mother could see the sketch itself, but my brother and I could clearly make out some markings on the reverse side. The name “Violette” was written in bold letters. Below it, a series of numbers. Why would the artist have need of a code?

After her review, Mother placed it back in its holder and turned to her uncle’s wife. “I suppose I should thank you. It’s definitely of me.”

Mother ran her hand over the leather. “Did the sketch come in this portfolio? There is something scratched into the corner here...” She held it closer to the light. “Numbers...” She passed it to my brother. “What do you make of this?”

“One, eight, six, seven. Twenty-eight. Ten. One thousand,

Liese Sherwood-Fabre

thirty-two.” Mycroft’s brow creased. “Any idea what it might mean?”

Mme Vernet shrugged. “No idea. As I said, do with it what you wish. The binder might be worth something. But not more than a few sou.”

Mother rose. “Again, I appreciate all the attention you afforded this matter. We have the sketch, and you have been reimbursed. I think we can consider the matter closed.”

“Violette,” her step-aunt stood as well and reached out to her. “Horace and I had no children of our own. And my first husband died only days after our marriage. I have little family left. I hope you will allow me time to spend with all of you.”

Mother tilted her head as if to assess her step-aunt’s sudden thaw. Perhaps she felt the same sympathy as I for this obviously lonely woman. Following a glance at the three of us, she said, “I think that’s...possible. You have to forgive me. Things were...unsettled during my last years in Paris, and I still don’t have full knowledge of all that transpired before our departure to England. Father and Mother never fully explained it all to us. But I would like to get to know the woman who meant so much to my uncle during his last years.”

“I’m sure you are aware I’m not that much older than you.”

That remark seemed to hit something in my mother. A pain or memory she preferred not to touch. I saw it in the briefest stiffening in her spine. She kept her voice gentle, but I could tell it wasn’t genuine and wondered if Mme Vernet could as well. “Yes. We are close in age. It’s been a very long day and journey. We’ll be in touch.”

Mme Vernet accompanied us down the three flights of stairs to the street and took her leave when the concierge arrived to let us out.

Once we were alone on the street, Uncle Ernest turned to

The Adventure of the Purloined Portrait

our mother and pointed to the portfolio in her hands. “What will you do with that?”

“Burn it, I suppose,” she said.

“Please, don’t,” a voice said from the shadows. Gaspard stepped into the light, and the three of us moved in front of Mother, forming a wall between her and the artist. “I was wrong to threaten Mme Vernet with it. I wouldn’t really have sold it to the press. I couldn’t do that to you. I’d buy it back, but I don’t have the money anymore. I...I can make a trade.”

He opened a satchel slung over his shoulder to retrieve a small canvas painting about the same size as the sketch he’d sold to Mme Vernet. Even in this dim light I could make out a portrait of a younger version of my mother. “I did it from memory. I hope you like it.” His voice had a pleading tone, and his eyes twitched about, as if he were on watch for something. “Please take it—in return for the sketch.”

Mother’s response came only after a brief silence, and her voice was hesitant. “How do I know you won’t go ahead with your plan to share the sketch?”

“Because I wouldn’t do that to you. Do you understand how desperate I am? I’m a broken man. I spent *years* in prison. By the time I got out, I’d been abandoned by all who knew me.”

The man appeared to be on the verge of tears. While his entreaty didn’t appear to move any of Mother’s protectors, it seemed to have touched her in some fashion. I could feel a movement behind my back as she raised the portfolio and passed it forward in the space between my brother and me.

“Go ahead, give it to him.”

Before either Mycroft or I could protest, Ernest spoke up. “Really, Violette, I don’t think that is wise. After all—”

“After all, I once meant something to him, and I believe I still do.”

Liese Sherwood-Fabre

Gaspard took a tentative step forward and stretched out his arm, offering the small canvas for the exchange. I stared first at the portfolio and then at the canvas, unable to bring myself to touch the leather pouch. Mycroft seemed reluctant as well.

“Sherry dear, it’s all right. I want him to have it.”

With a gulp, I grasped the top edge of the satchel and approached the man. We both appeared averse to touching the other, holding out our offering at arm’s length and advancing slowly. As soon as each could grasp the other’s item, the trade was completed. I withdrew to my place in a few quick strides backward.

Gaspard gave two short bows. “Thank you, Violette. I promise, this will never see the light of day again. I can’t destroy it, but—”

Running footfalls echoed on the street. We all turned in their direction as a black figure rushed toward us. Ernest and Mycroft stepped closer to Mother, shoving me forward toward the bulky man, his face covered by a scarf and now only a few strides from me and Gaspard. At the last moment, the man veered toward Gaspard, grabbed the portfolio from his grasp and continued up the street. The artist and I had the same reaction simultaneously. I dropped the canvas and set off in pursuit of the thief. Despite his protested ill health, Gaspard’s long legs assisted him in reaching the man first. His satchel flying behind him, he leapt onto the man’s back, pulling him down.

The two struggled, rolling about on the ground, with first one, then the other on top. At the next rotation, as the thief pinned Gaspard underneath him, I fell on the man, pulling him backward. As I did so, the portfolio fell from his grasp. The artist clutched the leather case to his chest and scrambled out from under his attacker.

With my attention directed toward the struggle, I failed to

The Adventure of the Purloined Portrait

hear the carriage approaching until it was almost upon us. The black-clad man shrugged me off and lunged for the portfolio. Gaspard spun about and ran into the street.

Mother's scream pierced the night as her former friend tripped on a loose paving stone and fell underneath the horses' hooves. A series of sickening thuds followed as horse and man connected, freezing me to my spot.

The thief took advantage of my immobility to rush into the street, grab the portfolio now lying a few feet from Gaspard, and ascend the carriage. I stared at its back as it turned a corner and sped away.

The sound of more running footsteps shook me from my temporary paralysis. I rushed to the injured man. The horses had missed his head, but hoof marks on his shirt indicated his chest had been crushed. Somehow, he was still breathing. Before I could check for additional injuries, Mother dropped to her knees beside him and cradled his head in her lap. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, staining her dress. When she called his name, his eyes fluttered open.

In a wheezing voice, he whispered, "Violette. Sorry."

"Don't talk," she said, a catch in her words. "We'll get you to hospital."

He shook his head. "Painting. Important. Keep."

"Yes, yes, of course I'll keep the portrait."

"*Bien*," he whispered, drawing out the vowel with his last breath.

More horses' hooves and running footsteps drowned out Mother's sobs as the man's head dropped against her skirt. I glanced about and found my uncle and brother surrounding her. Ernest placed his hands on her shoulders and patted them lightly. Behind them as well as farther up the street, French *gendarmes* ran in our direction. Residents, including Marie,

Liese Sherwood-Fabre

gathered on the pavement in response to Mother's piercing cry.

"Violette," Ernest whispered. "The police are here. There will be questions. You can't help him now."

Without speaking, she pulled back her shoulders, and my brother and I helped our uncle raise her to her feet. When Ernest cupped her elbow, she pulled away. "I'm perfectly all right. Marie is waiting for us by the door. I'm sure the police will want to question us. Mycroft, tell them we will be in her apartment."

Despite her assurances, I couldn't shake the feeling plaguing me since London. The brief spell she'd experienced not more than thirty minutes earlier was just one more crack along a fault line. If she didn't care for Gaspard as she'd said, why the tears? I hurried to catch up with them, promising myself I would protect her, if need be, from any and all stress threatening to open the fault any wider.

To my surprise, the police interrogation was brief. We all corroborated each other's description of events and after providing our address, we were soon on our way. Once in the carriage, Mother lay her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. We traveled in silence for several blocks, the three men holding a soundless conversation through glances at each other and Mother.

Without opening her eyes, she said, "Please stop staring at me. I'm over the shock of seeing Gaspard and his death. I'm not made of glass."

I faced my uncle to see if he would confirm her statement. He cleared his throat but said nothing. He was no more convinced than I. At the same time, I knew it was pointless to argue with her. Better to drop the topic for the moment. To that end, I changed the subject. Slightly.

The Adventure of the Purloined Portrait

“What will you do with the portrait he gave you?”

She opened her eyes and rested her gaze on the canvas propped up between Mycroft and me. “I promised to keep it, but I don’t have to display it. Ernest, can you store it in your room? Mr. Holmes might find its presence...disturbing.”

“Of course, Violette, dear.”

Before I could stop myself, I spoke my next thought out loud. “Why do you suppose they stole the sketch? What would anyone want with it?”

“Additional extortion?” asked Mycroft.

“If that’s the case, I assume we will be hearing from them soon. Should make it easier to identify them,” Ernest said.

“What if it isn’t about the sketch?” I asked. “After all, there was a code on the other side. Perhaps it was a message—”

Mother sat up and opened her eyes. “I saw the writing but didn’t have a chance to study it. I wish I had.”

“I believe I can help with that,” Mycroft said.



I hope you enjoyed this sample of *The Adventure of the Purloined Portrait*. If you are interested in the full book, it is available beginning April 19, 2022, but pre-orders are available on various bookseller sites. You can find links to it on my Website www.liesherwoodfabre.com. If you haven’t read the other books in *The Early Case Files of Sherlock Holmes* series, I would suggest the first *The Adventure of the Murdered Midwife*, which you can buy now from your favorite bookseller here.

