

The Double Heart

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The Double Heart

by [plumedy](#).

Summary

My meeting with John Watson was always, I'm convinced, meant to be. I mean that not in any vulgar superstitious way, but the way true fate works - through the workings of our own souls.

Notes

Dear recipient,

I wish to thank you warmly for this prompt <3 ASiE is one of my favourite Holmesian pastiches and I've wanted to do something with it for ages! I hope you enjoy my take on the backstory and my goofy illustrations :D

Have yourself a very merry Yuletide :>

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The Voice of Restoration

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1.

When I came back, it was like coming home after a burglary. All the fine china smashed, little cups lying on the floor in shards; prints of strange, coarse hands on the cherished gift they examined and declared worthless; every corner breathing with rot and desecration.

As a student enters his medical school out of appreciation for the beauty of the human body and comes out of there seeing only the blights and deformities upon it, so I, too, now saw only the flaws.

I didn't have anywhere to live at first. Truth is, I barely cared. As I wandered the streets of the East End in search of a place to crawl into for the night, I looked at all the other people who had nowhere to go and asked myself if it was I, John Watson of the 66th Regiment, who was responsible for their plight.

That flower-girl whose landlord evicted her last Friday for failure to pay her weekly pound - how much of her rent could've been paid with the money that had bought me revolvers, bullets, powder? This beggar with his legs green and yellow from gangrene - would he have had to lose them if I hadn't been busy treating enteric fever and bullet-wounds inflicted for the sake of conquering some godforsaken country he'd never see in his life?

At the end of November, when the city turned a shade darker with coal soot, an army friend of mine, S---, found me and offered me lodgings. It was a small enough wreck of a room, with, somewhat amusingly, a brothel next door. Yet it gave me something I had not had for a long time. Slowly, spurred by word of mouth, the population of St Giles began flowing to me for medical assistance.

Not all of them had money; and some of them had rather too much inclination for slicing people's throats in stead of payment. And yet, as my hands grew redder and more blistered every day from having to wash my instruments in boiling water, I felt ever so slightly better.

I would've laughed then if anyone had told me I'd come to love him. He came to me for medical assistance first in December, then twice in January; and from the moment I clapped my eyes on him, I mistrusted him bitterly.

He was very young - barely in his twenties. Though his black frock coat was suitably splattered with mud, I noticed the cleanliness of his collars - the starched shade of white that felt entirely out of place in that squalid part of London. The wounds he wanted my help with were always on his

upper limbs; deep knife slashes and ugly bullet caverns made his sinewy arms seem caught in a kind of monstrous cobweb. These were not injuries one got in a street brawl.

"You have been to Afghanistan, I perceive," he said to me the second time we met.

I looked at him carefully then. He had an extraordinary kind of face, with angular, precise features. His dark eyes were clear as a cloudless night in the Registan desert.

I curled my lip. "And you, I perceive, are the sort to know things that are none of your concern."

He understood my insinuation well enough and had the grace to look flustered.

"You think that I'm a- *no*! I assure you, Doctor, that I have no prior knowledge of you, through these means or... any other."

"Your assurance isn't worth much to me," remarked I, shrugging and stuffing my short briar with Latakia.

"I shall prove it," he said hotly. "You've spent a lot of time in the East lately; that much is obvious from the deep tan on your skin, diminished but not yet extinguished by the Albion climes.

"Take then your heavy limp. Clearly it is a recent injury, but the extent of muscle atrophy is remarkable. I have seen the likes of it before."

I stopped dead with a burning match forgotten in my hand. It scorched my fingers, but I hardly noticed.

"That is brilliant," I said, sincerely and unexpectedly for myself. And the strange man before me offered a touched smile, almost as though he found my approval a pleasing and worthwhile thing.

"You've been tortured," he said, quieter.

"I don't blame them too much," responded I, lighting another match. Warm gleams danced over the blackened wooden table dividing us. "I was not there to offer them a cup of tea and a gentlemanly chat."

"No."

I blame myself, I wanted to say. *I blame myself and those who sent me there*. But one must be careful with giving voice to such things, and so I merely gave a polite nod.

"What is your name?" I asked of him.

"Oh," he said, retrieving his tattered deerstalker hat and his gloves. "One has to be careful these days. Perhaps another time. I hope we shall meet again."

"I hope not," I laughed, gesturing at his bandaged arm. And in a moment he was out of the door and away into the grey December evening. All he left behind was a sharp smell of fresh snow.

I had lied. I hoped desperately that he would return.

But January passed and gave way to February, and still he didn't come. Perhaps I'd imagined his interest in me, I thought to myself. Perhaps I'd imagined *him*. I was never quite well after I came back; my memories were in the habit of lying to me.

That day I returned to my rooms wet through and through from the snow. I pulled one of my gloves off with my teeth and tried awkwardly to light a match. The dampened phosphorus broke off in large chunks. I swore.

"Doctor," someone said behind me. My nerves were already overstrung, and that was the last straw. I whirled around, raising my Webley to shoulder-level.

"You," I breathed.

The extraordinary stranger stood still, quite unperturbed by the revolver muzzle trained on his breast.

"Are you injured?" I hastily lowered the revolver and groped for my Gladstone bag. Happily, my medical instincts were quick to take over; otherwise I would've hardly known what to do. My mind was numb.

"Barely," he responded, shrugging off his shabby brown frock and revealing an impeccable beige waistcoat. A spot of red about the size of a crown coin marred the left shoulder.

I took some petty pleasure in slicing through the expensive fabric with my scalpel. A part of me smarted badly over the fact that he only wanted my services as a doctor, and at such an inopportune time.

It was, indeed, a shallow enough cut: evidently the assailant aimed for the great vessels of the neck but was effectively thwarted. I mopped the wound with a ball of carbolic-soaked gauze. His hunched shoulders twitched a little.

"There's more than that to my visit," he said abruptly without turning to me. I paused and reached for the lamp on the wall to turn the gas up.

"Indeed?" My hands were impeccably steady as I wrapped a length of gauze around his exposed shoulder and tied it into a reef knot. But the damned leg trembled as if someone had sliced it open all over again. As furtively as I could, I leaned against the desk.

"Yes." He looked at me this time, warmly almost. "I feel that you could use my help, Doctor."

I slowly screwed the lid of my bottle of carbolic back on and cleaned the bloody gauze off the desk, swallowing the bile that rose at the back of my throat. Then I deliberately clicked my Gladstone shut.

"It seems to me," I said, "that *you* came to *me* for help."

"In more ways than one."

Certainly he knew how to flatter.

"And what is it that you do, Mr Incognito?"

"Sherlock Holmes," he said, and offered me a disarming smile. I believe it was then that my fate was sealed. Even then I had an inkling of how much I'd come to treasure this generous little gift of a name in a place where names weren't easily spoken.

"You were in part correct in your suspicions," said he, "if not wholly accurate. I do investigate crime: the kind Scotland Yard will not touch. To them, the East End's existence is in itself a crime every denizen of the place is guilty of. And so, when someone here has nowhere to go, he comes to me.

"Of course, this also means I *commit* crime," he added, unsmiling. There was a pause.

"I have committed plenty of my own," I said quietly. "I scream in the night when I remember."

A long pale hand reached out and touched my arm.

"Sometimes when I can't sleep," he said gently, "I play the violin. Perhaps that will be agreeable to you."

"What...?"

"Although I have to warn you that occasionally I like to play badly."

I blinked in amazement and shook my head. Then I blurted out the first question that came to mind.

"Why would you want to play badly?"

"There's something about the emotional discord," he informed me, "that I find pleasing."

Later I'd think back on that remark and reflect that perhaps there was something in it that was true of more than just his musical preferences. Perhaps there was something in it that was true of me also.

"Are we entering some sort of contract?" I asked. "I do not recall hearing the terms."

"We shall discuss them tomorrow," he deadpanned. "For now, Doctor, I merely wish to enter into a temporary rental contract of your chaise longue."

The tattered green chaise longue was there for my patients, such as they were; it had been kindly lent to me by S----. It not being my property, I could hardly rent it out to anyone. Tomorrow would be Sunday, always a busy day for my practice on account of people misusing their leisure time; and anyway, the whole thing was preposterous. Any reasonable man would've laughed in his face.

"Very well," I said instead, and found myself pleased with my decision.

And so that incomprehensible man spent that night in my room just as if he'd always belonged there.

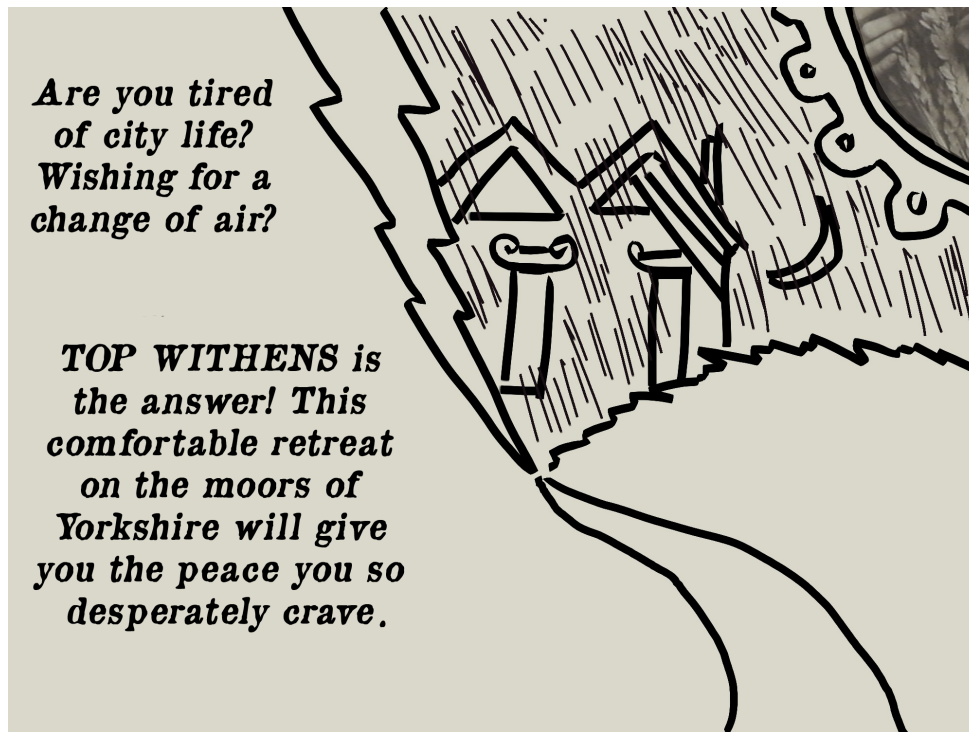
The East End is a land of dark marvels. The circumstances under which one meets people and forms relationships there are like no other. As I drifted off to sleep, a wild fantasy struck me of

meeting Sherlock Holmes in a different world; the world of unshattered teacups and clean clothes.

He would wear a gleaming top hat like a gentleman should; I would carry a cane presented to me by the local Veterans' Society and salute fellow military officers as I passed them in the street. On our first meeting we would be introduced to each other and, rather than hurrying to stop his arterial blood from fountaining out of his wrist, I'd shake his thin hand in an expensive soft glove.

I laughed soundlessly at this bizarre fancy. It's poor fare to be a writer; one tends to be carried too far away by one's own imagination.

As I drifted off to sleep, I saw strange dreams full of green clear gloom.



2.

It was around five o'clock in the morning. For a while I sat on the edge of the chaise longue I'd so unceremoniously claimed as mine and observed his sleeping form, not wishing to disturb him.

He slept uneasily. I could see his eyelids twitch and the muscles of his jaw tense every now and then. Once his left hand moved to touch his bad hip. In the dull starlight his coarse copper hair looked grey; his face seemed strangely faded, almost ashen, like the faces of people in old daguerreotypes.

What happens after a crime?

I'd first asked myself that question as a young child, and never ceased to wonder at it since then. What is, to the general public, an effective resolution of a criminal case, is in truth only its beginning. Once caught, a criminal must be sentenced; once he's sentenced, the sentence must be

executed; and after all of that is done - what then? Another criminal simply takes the place of the first and commits that same crime. This seemed to me always dreadfully pointless.

After enrolling for a degree in Chemistry, I applied myself to amateur forensics and found myself capable. But in truth pure forensics interested me little. Solving an individual case only brought temporary satisfaction.

When my financial situation deteriorated and I had to abandon my degree unfinished, I was hardly bothered. By then I saw that below individual forensic breakthroughs, below individual crimes, below even whole criminal networks lay something far larger, of which I was only scraping the surface. I'd felt like a diver straining to reach the dark and distant sands of a boundless seabed.

A crime had been done to John Watson. The instance I'd met him I knew he was looking at me from the bottom of that sea I was trying so cluelessly to navigate. There was something in his eyes, the slowly smouldering remains of a fire. And there was something in me that desperately wanted to burn.

"Doctor," I said, and touched his shoulder with my fingertips.

Instantly his eyes were wide open, and he contemplated me for a few confused seconds in a mixture of recollection and disbelief.

"Holmes," said he. It pleased me that he remembered my name.

"We have to go," I informed him. "A man has been killed."

He raised an eyebrow and groped for the matchbox on the bedside table. His other hand was already on his worn black cane.

"Have you been out?"

"The East End has its ways of letting me know." Street Arabs with pockets full of gravel can be a surprisingly efficient system of communication when one hasn't other means.

Watson was already out of the bed and shrugging on his coat. In a minute we were outside, in the brilliant morning darkness. Though he limped heavily, he used his cane in conjunction with his good leg with such deftness that he easily kept up with me. In the light of the London cabbies' unfortunate terror of St Giles, I imagined many lives had been saved by that swiftness.

We turned a few times, walked through a maple alley, and found ourselves on Francis Street, St Giles' southern boundary with St Pancras. There, the streetlamps were better kept and I could see the place clearly - it was a broad, arrow straight street at the end of which I could just make out the bulk of Murray's Steel Factory.

Branching off Francis Street in the direction of St Pancras were a multitude of tidy inconsequential little lanes. On the other side, like a lesion that disfigured the dark maze of St Giles, lay a single large crescent. I couldn't see into it for the lack of light, but I knew that it opened onto the quay of Albert's Canal.

"You know, Holmes," came a voice from behind me, "there haven't always been this many canals in London."

"No?" I muttered, peering into the darkness ahead.

"You should take a look at some Roman maps when you can. Londinium had no canals at all."

I looked at him with interest. His face was changed. His eyes were narrowed, and long shadows the colour of gunmetal stretched around his mouth.

"You take much interest in history?" I asked him, as we turned and walked into the crescent. In the receding gaslight I still caught his quick thin smile.

"When it is relevant."

The dark, distant sands below my feet.

The air around us smelled like ooze and rotting hemp. Ahead, at the end of a short pier, a small light swung back and forth in the wind.

"Sherman!" I called out.

"Mr Vernet."

The light of Sherman's lantern fell onto a small patch of glistening stone. A dead man lay sprawled over the end of the pier, his tattered coat covered in salt crystals.

Unfortunately, the head was missing; but I estimated his height to be around six feet.

I glanced over the remains. The left hand was gripping a large butcher's knife; something on the blade caught my attention. I lowered myself on one knee and inspected it. The blade, too, was covered in salt; and closer to the hilt, the crystals were stained a dark grassy green. At first I took the stain to be some sort of small beetle. But when I touched it with my fingertip, it proved to be sticky like molasses and icy cold, so cold I flinched at the sensation.

I used my other hand to rummage through the man's pockets. There was nothing in them but a scrap of yellowed paper. I glanced at it briefly; it read *2nd floor, room no 5*.

"Is this how you found him?" I asked of Sherman.

"Yes, sir. I came out after I heard a scream, sir, a horrible scream. I thought at first it must've been the wind howling, but there he was lying on the pier, the poor bastard."

"Do you know him, Sherman?"

"I might know his face, sir," he said, in an apologetic tone of voice, "if, that is, he had any face left at all."

I stood up slowly and turned to my companion. My eyes were still on the dully glistening cobalt drop on the tip of my index finger.

"And what is your opinion, Doctor?"

"That clearly the killer possessed incredible strength," said Watson. "I would perhaps even say - inhuman strength."

Something in his voice made me raise my gaze. That look on his face was almost frighteningly intense; the look of the hunter and the hunted.

He was an excellent medical specialist, I'd known that from the first time he so patiently treated my own injuries. It was no wonder he'd spotted the ragged edges of the wound and came to the correct conclusion that it had not been inflicted with a cutting tool of any kind.

But it had long ago occurred to me that he would be a useful source of knowledge in an entirely different regard.

"Are you familiar with this substance?" I asked him, nodding slightly at the green drop.

"It takes around a thousand pounds of force to fracture the vertebral pedicles of the neck," said he.

"Doctor," I said gently. I wished I could use his name but naturally it was out of the question in front of Sherman. Nevertheless, he responded to the tone and I saw the shadows of unwelcome memories retreat from him and the grip of his fingers on the silver-top relax.

It gave me a strange kind of satisfaction then, one I was not accustomed to experiencing.

"Oh yes," answered he, looking me in the eye. "I know very well what this is, Mr *Vernet*. The question is, do you?"

"I have my guesses," I said.

He looked a challenge at me.

"And do you know where these guesses of yours will lead you?"

"According to the note I found on the deceased," I replied, "and to the brick dust on his shoes, they will lead me to the Royal Lunatic Asylum in West London, room 5, second floor."

He looked at me in confusion.

"But don't you want to clarify the circumstances of the murder first?"

"Murder? Who said anything about murder?" I walked briskly to the body and looked out at the lazily splashing canal. "This was manslaughter at worst, or perhaps even an accident. The wounds were clearly inflicted in self-defense. This man came here looking for an altercation; perhaps he sought revenge."

"But how..?"

"My dear Doctor," I said - as I would address him countless times over the years to come. "Who, pray tell, would willingly abandon that nice well-lit public road and walk into this cul-de-sac at night for any reason other than to meet someone? And the butcher's knife speaks, I think, for itself. Look, further, how close to the water the body is lying. The man's coat is covered in sea

salt. At the same time, he walked there willingly; there are no traces of struggle in the dirt. Either he had a death wish or he wished death upon someone else.

At that I turned on my heels and walked back into the crescent.

"Sherman," I cried, "would you be so kind as to take us to Chiswick?"

In ten minutes Sherman got his unimpressive little carriage out of its place beneath a dark portico and harnessed his ugly Shropshire mare. We must've presented a strange picture as our steed trotted through Francis Street, now awash with first mild rays of the rising sun, and into the better parts of New Albion's capital.

Thankfully, just for occasions like this I had my unobtrusive little trick. Of course, I couldn't have failed to notice how suspiciously Watson had looked at my expensive shirts and waistcoats; truth was, these were as much of a disguise as my shabby brown coat. As soon as I took the coat off, I turned into a gentleman no one in the West End would look twice at, except perhaps to wonder why he's dressed so lightly for the weather.

"You present a somewhat blackguardly appearance in these parts, Watson," I said to him when we walked away from Sherman into the idyllic cozy streets of Chiswick. He looked daggers at me for a second, but I could see his lips beneath the copper moustaches curl in a lopsided smile.

"Perhaps I am blackguardly," he said. "Who's to say I shouldn't give up on this whole strange mission and run for it with your nice clothes and your money? You didn't meet me in the most salubrious of places."

"We'd have to see who'd rob whom," I said to that, and he laughed, a hoarse, rumbling laugh with a surprising undertone of geniality.

The Royal Asylum was a stately blood red building with large windows. The solid oak front door was unlocked; we entered the murky spacious vestibule, and it took me a moment to notice the bored clerk reading yesterday's copy of Times in the corner.

We approached him, and I offered a greeting. He looked up and appraised my appearance with little interest; Watson, of course, provoked more of a reaction. The clerk's small eyes lit up with curiosity and pleasure. No doubt we'd be the subject of much gossip later on; but that could hardly be helped. I had my ideas about the identity of the inhabitant of room number 5, and I rather suspected our interest in her would overshadow even Watson's eccentric appearance.

"Room five, sir?" the clerk's expression couldn't have been a better confirmation of my theories. The West End may look idyllic and its inhabitants may at times strike one as an entirely separate human breed; but in some respects, it is a viler and more sordid place than even St Giles. Thus a healthy girl, made by her family to avoid sunlight and wear suffocating corsets for men's viewing pleasure, becomes progressively disfigured beneath her beautiful clothes.

"This is confidential information, sir," said the clerk, but in a kind of mild, suggestive tone.

"And we're very confidential men," said I, and proved my point immediately with a silver guinea.

"We don't know her name, nor where she comes from." The clerk took out a large copper key and motioned for us to follow him up the stairs. "A wealthy philanthropist gentleman brought her in. He said he represents the Charitable Society of the Royal Emerald."

Watson hmphed, obviously unimpressed. He had a general contempt for charitable societies of any sort. "None of them risk helping the truly desperate, have you noticed," he'd said to me once as he bandaged a knife wound on my lower arm. "It's always the slightly impoverished, the lightly diseased, the half-orphaned. It's like putting a dressing on a festering ulcer so that you can no longer see it rot."

"That wealthy gentleman," I asked, "did he give you his name or address?"

"No, sir. But he gave me the address of the Society, if you're interested."

I was, and hence had to sacrifice another guinea. Watson said nothing, but he was perceptibly pained by my spending habits. I'd have to explain to him once we left that I made it a principle to only ever pay bribes in forged money.

Room five had a small door painted a light cold grey. Some of the paint ended up on the faux gold-plated handle. This place had flourished once, as a manor or a hotel, perhaps.

It was as far from a hotel now as one could imagine. When we entered, I observed that the walls had padded cloth stretched over them up to my full height. A tall window was barred with deceptively thin steel railings. Behind them was a flower pot, and delicate saplings curled around the unforgiving steel in a feeble illusion of homeliness.

Still, it was more than most asylums in the country could boast. The Royal Lunatic Asylum in Chiswick was evidently one of the more humane institutions of this sort.

The occupant of the room sat on her bed in the far corner; her features, illuminated by the pale winter light, were unmoving. Watson had approached her and was speaking to her in soft, calming tones.

I came closer and offered her a greeting. This had very little effect; though her light grey eyes flickered over me for a moment with a kind of detached curiosity.

"She's catatonic," said Watson quietly. "I wouldn't hold out much hope."

Her whole body seemed strangely devoid of both life and colour. Even the eyes seemed faded, as though from an old painting.

Something struck me as very familiar about her expression, her pose; what little movement she exhibited. I'd seen these mannerisms before, and suddenly, with a chilling certainty, I knew where. This fading, the lifeless grey strands of hair, those jerky, unsure movements were what I'd seen in Watson as he slept before me that night. And like his bad leg, her limbs too seemed bony, robbed of their living tissue.

She moved, leaning towards him a little, as though half-awoken. Her fingers closed upon Watson's cane and felt it blindly and uncertainly. Then her lips parted, and she breathed out a sound. We both of us leaned closer, eager to catch the words.

"James," she managed finally. "James Avonlea."

"Is he your brother?" I asked.

"Brother," repeated she weakly. "Brother."

"Who did this to you?"

"You." She raised her eyes at me, but there was no expression in them now. Her fingers unclasped and her hand fell away from Watson's silver-top. "You."

Watson shook his head. "Echolalia," he said. "I doubt she understands anything you're saying."

"Perhaps not." I straightened and turned away from them, surveying the room. Through the window I could see the figure of the clerk hurriedly crossing the outer yard. He left black wet footprints in the fresh snow. "But she said that name of her own volition, Doctor."

"He might be a warden or one of the doctors here."

"Then why not 'Mr Avonlea' or 'Dr Avonlea'? No, no, it's not that simple. We must go now."

The telegraph office was only a street away, and I had very little doubt as to the clerk's intentions. And while I could perhaps escape or hide on the grounds, Watson with his limp was in considerably more danger of being seized. The wealthy gentleman's capacity for philanthropy was, I suspected, a somewhat limited one.

Watson lingered there for a moment, his eyes on the room's occupant. She looked back at him, and once again I almost seemed to glimpse a sense of agitation, of purpose in her eyes. There was a communication, a kinship between them deeper than any language, deeper perhaps than even human consciousness itself.

We stepped out of the room and onto the main staircase. I could hear a carriage clatter by through one of the nearby lanes; a large four-wheeler, if I heard it correctly, with at least two horses going at a healthy trot.

We crossed the empty vestibule and I very nearly walked into the clerk, who appeared on the doorstep just as we were about to cross it and stood there, smiling nervously.

"Was everything to the gentlemen's satisfaction?" asked he. "Perhaps I could offer some coffee before you go?"

"Or perhaps you could step away from the door," Watson said flatly, in a voice I'd never heard from him before. It was a hissing, leering tone, an unmistakeable promise and an imminent threat. I could see something flash silver in his gloved hand; his wrist jerked slightly, as if he were shaking invisible water off his fingers.

The clerk ran. We could not, unfortunately, follow suit lest we should attract the attention of every person in Chiswick, and so we limited ourselves to briskly rounding the nearest corner in the direction opposite from the sound of the four-wheeler. It was closer now; I could see it as I surveyed the street from behind the corner. Clouds of dry snow curled and sparkled under the hooves of two large black steeds.

"What shall we do, Holmes?" Watson asked.

I knew exactly what I wanted *him* to do. Perhaps it was time.

"And why did you say he was her brother?"

"Her wrists," I said. "Very smooth and rounded, just like his. Neither of them had a palmaris longus*."

The carriage came to an abrupt stop in front of the Asylum. Someone lean and tall, dressed in a glass green frock and a fur coat, descended the steps with a calculated slowness and walked over the hardened snow towards the front door. The door opened, and our mysterious philanthropist disappeared inside.

"We haven't much time," said Watson.

I could feel it bubbling deep within him, ready to boil, to explode. Hatred.

"As I have said," I began in a deliberately reluctant tone, "the dead man - whose name I think we'll find was James Avonlea - had approached the canal of his own volition. I have no doubt the creature that lurks in there had once lured his sister into the cul-de-sac and made its use of her; the sad results of that we have just seen with our own eyes."

"The creature defended itself against Avonlea, who, before dying, managed to draw some of its blood and provide me with a vital clue."

Now to throw some ether onto those flames.

"But that is as much as we can prove. There's no court of law would follow us. Nor court of public opinion. The Criminal Code of the New Albion Empire does not prohibit driving young ladies to insanity by supernatural means.

"Legally, there's been no crime; and I fear we're in the kind of waters even the peace-keepers of the St Giles rookery will find a tad too deep for their liking."

"No crime!" he said. "No crime!"

When I glanced at him, his face was contorted in the same intense grimace I had seen on the pier of the Albert Canal. He was pale, and now, in the shimmering daylight, I saw all the clearer the odd greyish tint to his skin; the silver hairs in his moustache and sideburns; the faded colour of his green eyes. His hands atop his cane were trembling with tension.

I had expected this and I had hoped for it. And yet I was afraid.

"I," he growled, "am my own jury and my own court of law. And if you don't follow the evidence, Holmes, then I shall."

Perhaps he sensed my uncertainty, because he smiled a kind of crooked smile at me and raised his silver-top off the ground. There was a slight click, and six inches of dull steel pierced the snow before the tips of my shoes.

There was such darkness and such pure, unadulterated hatred in his expression that I stepped back.

"Don't worry," he said, very coolly. "I shan't hurt you."

The door of the Asylum opened then. The man in the fur coat stepped out and walked, unhurried, towards his four-wheeler; and Watson, equally unhurried, walked out from behind the corner and called after him - "sir, sir, I think you forgot something" - in the kind of genial, gentle voice I'd often heard from him when he chatted to me of all manners of nonsense to distract me from the sting of carbolic on my wounds.

That respectable member of society might've forgotten many things since the events of this story, but I would wager that day is not one of them. I doubt that even Watson's excellent bedside manner sufficed to distract him from the sting of a large blade against his abdomen.

Watson turned to look in my direction then. And, stepping out of my concealment, I followed him silently to the carriage.

I've often wondered since then if I could've turned away, refused to follow, decided to return to the surface and never look at the dark sea bottom again. But I suspect there was something at work that was greater than my momentary desires. My meeting with John Watson was always, I'm convinced, meant to be. I mean that not in any vulgar superstitious way, but the way true fate works - through the workings of our own souls.

The inside of the carriage smelled like expensive eau de cologne, with perhaps a whiff of a more feminine perfume. Watson seemed perfectly at ease sitting across from me on a seat padded with lush turquoise velvet. He carefully stretched out his bad leg to give the muscles a rest and glanced with curiosity at the frosted window; but his left hand confidently held the shaft of the silvertop, pressing the long engraved blade into the ribs of our unwilling host.

"A very interesting charitable organization you have here," Watson said conversationally. "You seem to do a great deal of good."

"We do," spluttered the man. "You have no idea whom you've slighted. If you wish to rob me, you should know you will never escape justice."

"We are no robbers," answered Watson, and smiled very coldly. "We are fully in favour of justice being served to those who deserve it."

"Now, order your driver to get a move on."

His victim's face tightened with indignation. Despite being overpowered, he was clearly not a cowardly man, and I took a moment to look him over to ensure he had no hidden weapons on him.

"Where is it that you wish to be taken?" asked he, compressing his lips.

"The house of Sir Charles Locock by Albert's Canal will do," said I, and saw from his expression that I was right.

"Oh, I assure you I arrived at this conclusion before we met. Sir Charles, the son of the Queen's gynaecologist, famously stopped keeping in contact with his fellow physicians once he adopted a mysterious boy twenty years ago. It was a widely discussed affair; a great loss to the whole of medical profession. Was it not, Doctor?"

Watson nodded slowly. I wondered how his hand holding the blade wasn't cramping. He hardly had to make a conscious effort to maintain the subtle warning pressure against the man's flesh.

"I remember," he said. "There was still gossip about it when I was going through medical school."

"And if I'm not very much mistaken, this strange urge for seclusion coincided with Sir Charles moving to the Albert Canal, a good five miles away from the New Albion Medical School where he used to teach."

"Let's pay a visit to Sir Charles and this mysterious stepson of his, then," said Watson, and gave the owner of the carriage an encouraging poke to the ribs. "If you would be so kind."

His blade slid a little lower, biting into the soft unprotected flesh of the kidney region, and he looked rather like he would take great pleasure in performing an emergency nephrectomy right then and there if his request were not satisfied. Our nameless gentleman chose to make the wise decision.

"James!" he shouted, banging his cane against the roof. "Albert's Canal in Mayfair!"

I had a fairly clear idea of Watson's plan. It was madness, of course. Our chances of success were slim and our chances of escape even slimmer. But I found myself inexorably drawn into this madness, enamoured with this scheme. For once in my life I calculated nothing and made no predictions. At the bottom of the sea, divine pale fire consumed me and illuminated the dark depths.

When we got out of the carriage at the front steps of Locock's mansion, Mayfair itself was like the sea. Among those busy crowds we were blessedly invisible; but we had to hurry before the unconscious city turned its eyes upon us.

Watson turned around and used his knife to cut the harness. Then he looked up, at the carriage driver. It was a young boy, wrapped in an over-large warm coat and wearing a green cap. He stared at us with large scared eyes, still holding bits of the slashed reins in his fingers.

"You may go, lad," Watson said softly. "You'll be left alone, as long as you don't bring the bobbies."

I rather thought he might, but it mattered little now. The police would be alerted sooner or later. Our one chance was speed.

Watson seemed to realize that, too, because he turned his attention back to the owner of the carriage.

"Now," he said, "up the stairs and knock on that door."

That man's face grew ghastly white.

"You don't know what you're doing. You don't know what's behind that door."

"I know exactly what's there," said Watson. And then he opened his mouth and made a gargling, hissing sound that in my heart of hearts I knew somehow to be a word. The language was inhuman; and at the same time, it was one every living being understands even before it's learned how to make sounds. My blood ran cold, and when I looked at Watson, I saw that his own face seemed distorted and lifeless, as if having uttered that word had sapped something from him.

Our hostage clearly lost all taste for objections. He mechanically ascended the stairs and lingered for a moment, as if trying to remember what it was he wanted to do. Then he raised his polished walnut cane and knocked, feebly and irregularly. His own actions seemed to bewilder him, and he turned to us, looking from my face to Watson's.

Unfortunately for him, behind his back Locock's maid opened the door, and Watson shoved him aside and rushed into the house. I followed suit.

The vestibule was dark, with the high-rise windows draped shut. A few lazy morning sunrays had found their way through the drapes and stretched out high above our heads like phantom tightropes.

"Where to?" asked Watson from me. The place was vast, and our time was running out. I could hear the door shut behind our backs; a commotion was starting outside.

Two large staircases of Swedish green marble led to the second floor. Between them was a large seemingly empty gap. It was so dark I could not make out the opposite wall. But I could hear a sound coming from there, a cold unending murmur of water against stone.

"There must be a room over there," I told him, and, indeed, when he walked into that darkness and struck a match, we were confronted with a large iron door. Though we lingered in front of it but an instance, to this day I remember how struck I was by its design; it was a series of runes and patterns, and every one of the elements was connected to all the others by coils of what I at first took to be a depiction of a snake nest. But the more I recalled the design later, the surer I became that these were not snakes at all, but limbs belonging to a giant creature hidden deep in the decorations.

Behind the door lay an open alcove – not so much a room as a cave. Wet harsh wind hit me in the face and took away my breath.

Splashing, hissing, foaming in front of us were the fast-flowing waters of the Albert Canal.

Watson walked forward and stopped perilously close to the edge. His coat glistened with water drops that, exposed to the wind, were rapidly turning to ice. Then he said something else in that language – language of monsters and gods.

It was as if the water itself responded to his call. A violent wave splashed high and licked his boots; trickles of seawater spread over the marble-encrusted floor.

Then something lunged out of the water in one slick, predatory motion, and I quickly raised my hand with the revolver. But Watson was quite ready. Up went his cane; and his other hand emerged from the pocket of his coat holding a long surgical scalpel. I watched, mesmerized, as

both blades sunk deep into the slimy flesh and ripped it apart like a giant pair of lopsided scissors. A fountain of lush emerald liquid exploded into the air. It was all over the floor, all over me; drops of it coated the revolver muzzle and my gloved hand. It was cold, so cold I felt at once as if I had been submerged into the icy waves of the canal before me.

Between the two slabs of flesh held apart by Watson's weapons I saw something beautiful and terrifying. It was just like in the diagrams I had procured from the Admiralty, but much larger, enveloped in a brown and gold sack of connective tissue.

An enormous double heart pulsated slowly in the chest of Sir Charles Locock's adopted son.

Watson slashed at one half with his scalpel. I had seen him sharpen those scalpels myself; every evening he'd stayed up and worked away with a whetting stone, until it seemed that the blade should be able to cut air itself. And now it went through that large heart like a hot knife goes through butter.

But the creature wasn't quite dead. It screamed in its terrible language and wept black greasy tears. Its limbs thrashed all over the floor of the alcove; one caught Watson's bad leg and clung to it. Pulsating in agony, the creature began to retreat into the water, and with every convulsive effort it brought Watson closer to the edge.

What I felt then is hard to describe. Locock touching him, touching his war wound was to me an unbearable sacrilege. In that moment I would've rather the thing maimed me. At once I shot at the beast, aiming for the remaining half of the heart; then again. For a moment the dark mass of flesh was very still. Then, in a last dying effort, it shot out another limb, and all three of us plunged deep into the wintry cold of the Canal.



***"Ah, linger on, thou
art so fair!" Stopping
the flight of time is
now a reality. Come
today to 18 Gray
Street and order a
PERSONAL
PORTRAIT of the
highest quality!***

A few days after these events we stood on the corner of a small nameless lane in St Pancras. I was leaning against the cold brick wall of one of the buildings of Murray's Factory and smoking my briar. It was one of the few things I'd taken with me when we left my lodgings in St Giles; Holmes thought the pipe "dangerously identifiable". I wasn't sure if it was a genuine concern or a thinly veiled insult to my sense of fashion, but I was fond of the thing and needed little convincing.

The weather was calm and the neighbourhood looked idyllic. Across the street, mere yards away from us, I could see the large glowing windows of some local cafe. The gaudily painted wooden plaque read "Mary's Cakes".

"How are you feeling, Watson?" he asked me. And I said, truthfully, "I am well."

Killing Charles Locock's son had felt like the break of a bad fever to me. It had pierced my heart and drained something black and deadly out of it. And, indeed, I had spent the day after the killing in a state akin to recovery from a long illness, feeble and confused. Perhaps my use of the language of the Old Ones was in part to blame; perhaps, too, I had been poisoned by the divine blood. Or maybe something deeper, less material had been at work within me.

Holmes, I think, believes still that I do not remember that day. He's a brilliant man and a master of manipulation, but in some ways he's wonderfully innocent. I let him keep his illusion. I pretend I don't recall that he'd spent hours mopping cold sweat off my forehead and my limbs; that, after having lost his frock to the fierce currents of the Albert Canal, he went out in the cold to bring me water; that he'd held and cradled me as I wept my heart out with hatred and relief.

He need not know.

The door of Mary's Cakes swung open and a burst of laughter and warmth washed over us. The couple sitting near the window looked in our direction; for a moment I felt almost like they were looking at me. But no, they could hardly make our silhouettes out in the shadows.

They were about my age but struck me as immeasurably younger. Their skin was fresh and smooth; and from how they moved I could see how blissfully pain- and disease-free their bodies were. The girl, who wore a large blue bonnet, puffed her cheeks in an endearing manner as she drunk from her little china cup with a floral pattern. The boy held an identical cup in his white hands, but at the moment his attention was on the large painting hanging on the wall of the cafe; like most paintings publicly displayed in this city, it depicted the glorious vision of our Queen. Her limbs holding the sceptres and the Sovereign's Orb were held high and wide, almost as if she were about to draw us all into her regal embrace.

A newspaper boy ran past us towards Francis Street. "Murder!" he shouted, "murder! A blackguardly act of treason against the great gods! Nation in mourning!"

Oh, you haven't seen mourning yet, thought I. Wait until we come after someone more important than Princess Louise's hidden bastard.

"What now?" I asked of Holmes.

"We need to see to the wellbeing of Miss Avonlea, of course," said he, and took something out of his pocket. It was a small card of thick yellow paper, and I could see an image of a gemstone and an unnervingly watchful eye printed in the middle of it.

Holmes read the information on the card.

"A certain Professor James Moriarty - secretary of the Society of the Royal Emerald - apparently needs to be looked after, as well," hmphed he. "If in an entirely different sense."

I looked again at the couple in the cafe.

"Do you think, Holmes," I called quietly, and nodded at the illuminated windows, "that we are bringing about their ruin?"

He glanced in the direction at the cafe, then shifted his gaze to me. His thin lips stretched in a smile of cold amusement.

"You're too conscientious for your own good, my dear Watson," said he, putting a hand on my lower arm. "Look at it thus.

"Suppose I wish to right a great wrong that's been done to you." He looked me straight in the eye, and the smile slowly vanished from his lips. When he continued, his tone was strangely gentle. "And perhaps for that to happen someone else will inadvertently be hurt. How could I refuse my task and reconcile myself with your suffering? You have taught me yourself that there's but one choice."

He drew me closer and stood by my side, pointing at the building that housed the cafe.

"Their lives," he murmured into my ear, "are rotten already and waiting to collapse. Those wooden beams are too damp and there's moss and black mould eating at them from below. What we're doing, Doctor, is but a strike of a misericorde.

"Like that creature whose life we ended, our Empire has a double heart. One half of it beats with emerald blood, and the other half is human.

"And you and I, we are the unforgiving double knife for that heart."

End Notes

*Palmaris longus is a muscle of the anterior forearm that runs from the humerus to the palm. You can see it as a small tendon in the middle of your wrist, especially when you tense the hand. It's largely useless, though it may sometimes assist grip. Around 10% of the population lack it, and its absence is genetic. Not that Holmes would know that, but I think he'd be capable of observing that the trait is rare and heritable!

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