

Some Power of Selection

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Some Power of Selection

by [wordybirdy](#)

Summary

John Watson is a struggling doctor in recent practice on London's Upper Wimpole Street. One dreary Wednesday, an urgent telegram summons him to 221B Baker Street, where he meets a sombre and initially taciturn gentleman by the name of Sherlock Holmes. Sparks immediately fly – but not of the positive, life-affirming variety...

Chapter 1

It was a Wednesday, and Wednesdays were always slow, or seemed to be. I leaned back in my chair, and cast my eyes down to my desk. Set upon it: one foolscap notepad, a drying inkwell, a pewter pen-rack, and a shallow tray of mahogany where I filed all my loose papers. A glass paperweight, that served no useful function but to sit aside, neglected, caught the light from my sole window, only serving to remind me that life bloomed outside; yet here I sat, drilling my fingers, yawning.

One last item on my desk: a small year calendar, now showing the September of the year I set myself up in my practice as a medical professional. I had returned from war abroad a little earlier in the year of 1881, and spent some time in dawdling, distracted and quite miserable, until an opportunity presented its broad face. A Dr. Doyle, of Upper Wimpole Street, was selling on his practice, and as I had a little pension-pot and other savings of my own, I took the plunge. So, here I was, a few months on, starting to wonder if I had made the right decision. My new patients seemed quite few and far between; perhaps the summer months had found them hale and hearty, every one. Perhaps, the coming winter might land itself upon my doorstep with a racking cough, a touch of influenza, or a spot of gout. I sighed, and glanced up to the ticking clock upon the mantel. It was ten o'clock; too early yet for lunch, but late enough for my first patient – should I even have a chance of one!

There was a knock upon the door, and then around the edge of it appeared my coy receptionist.

“I am sorry to disturb you, Dr. Watson,” said the girl, “but there has been a telegram.”

“A telegram!” I said, and sitting up as an old hunting dog might at the scent of blood. “*Thank you*, Miss Marsh.”

I read the slip inside the envelope, and frowned. I rose and strode towards the door, poking my head around. “Miss Marsh,” I said, “it seems I must go out to see a patient. Might you look this lady up inside our records, please?” I hastened up into my rooms above the surgery, to collect my hat and coat. I checked inside my bag, threw in some items, and was just fastening my buttons when the receptionist delivered me the file. I read it quickly, nodding. “I will be an hour or two,” I said, “no more than that, I hope.”

I hailed a hansom and sat back inside the cab, in thoughtful mood. It was a pleasant day, despite persistent drizzle; warm, at least. We were held up for several minutes by an accident involving two large grocers' carts; the road had to be cleared, and we were on our way again. At length we came to stop; the driver tapped upon the roof, and I stepped out and paid my fare. The street that I was standing on was fairly well-to-do. I looked around and found my bearings, and as the hansom clattered off I walked up to the door of 221B Baker Street. I rang the bell. I waited patiently. There was some turbulence within; I heard the thud of boots upon the stair, and then a key turned in the lock, and the door pulled slowly inwards to reveal a stern-faced gentleman.

“And you are *late*,” said he, a scowl upon his face.

“There was an accident,” I said. I raised my hat. “I trust the lady is no worse?”

“No thanks to you,” the fellow said. “I sent the telegram at *nine o'clock*.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, feeling quite annoyed by now. “I came as quickly as I could. May I come in?”

The gentleman stood back, thereby allowing me to pass. I squinted up at him, my eyes adjusting slowly to the gloom within the hallway. He was tall – at least six feet – and in his mid-20s, I should say, and primly dressed, last and not least – I had to note – strikingly handsome. He fixed me with a cool grey stare. “Dr. John Watson,” he said slowly.

“Yes, I am he,” I said. I refrained from adding *Obviously*. My eyes fled down the hall in hope of rescue.

“My name is Sherlock Holmes,” said Sherlock Holmes. His gaze now narrowed. “Well, you had better follow me.” He took off, long loping strides, to leave me scuttling behind and feeling most discombobulated.

The hallway ended in a door, which Mr. Holmes now briskly opened and went through. I followed, meanwhile noting the quaint décor of the parlour: an older lady's sole abode, all lace and cushions, books, and sentimental gewgaws. A smaller bedroom to one side, which I was chivvied through.

“This is Mrs. Hudson,” said the strange fellow. “Please take care of her.” And turning on his heel, he left the room. The door clicked softly in his wake. I blinked, and only then did I return to earth to set about my duty for the lady in the bed.

Ten minutes later, I had written some instructions, left some powders and a tall carafe of water, and was back out in the hallway where Sherlock Holmes was standing, hovering.

“Well?” he snapped.

“It is a fever,” I replied, “but nothing serious. It is important that the lady rests in bed, and stays hydrated. I assume you are her carer?”

He reared up in indignation. “I am her *lodger*,” he replied. “My name is *Sherl--*”

“Yes, yes, I know,” I said, impatiently. What the devil was the matter with the man? I thrust the note into his hand. “Here are some things that must be done to keep the lady comfortable. She informs me that she has a friend – a Mrs. Turner, I believe? – but that friend is out of town and not returning 'til the weekend. Therefore, she asks if you might be so kind?”

“For goodness sake,” said Mr. Holmes. He stuffed the paper in his pocket. He regarded me more closely then. “I wish we still had Dr. Doyle.”

“No doubt you do,” I said, my lips pinched tight. “But you will have to suffer me instead.” Handsome, yes, perhaps, but I had never met a ruder man. “I will call round again tomorrow,

at the same time. I am on hand for all emergencies, so do not hesitate to contact me.” I offered him my hand with gritted teeth, and he accepted it. His palm was cool and smooth. We shook.

“Goodbye,” he said, with more than a degree of stern finality.

I stomped out to the street in a bad temper. A horse-drawn cart rolled by and splashed my trouser legs with mud. “Oh, dash and blast,” I muttered, cross. “Whatever next?”

It took some time to find a hansom that was free. At length, I managed to locate one, huffed myself inside and sat back against the cushions. I was not relishing the thought of meeting Mr. Holmes again, for he unsettled me. I pondered this predicament, and put a question to Miss Marsh on my return.

“Oh yes,” said she, “I know the gentleman. He is a patient here. He changed addresses fairly recently, I think.”

“Humpf,” I said. “More is the pity.” I filed my records and did a little paperwork. The afternoon was stultifying. By four o'clock I claimed defeat and retired upstairs to my rooms. I washed and changed, and took an early evening meal at a small restaurant nearby. I had made plans to meet up with an old friend for drinks, and therefore I made haste to not be late. At half-past six I knocked upon his door, and found myself within his cosy sitting-room not many minutes later.

“You will not believe the day I've had,” I said. “Stamford, I tell you, it's enough to drive a fellow mad.”

Stamford looked at me, all sympathy. “Well, once you've had a whisky soda, you'll feel better,” he replied. “But why not tell me all about it, if it helps?”

“I think I will,” I said. I told him of my day; of that infuriating man.

Stamford's shoulders shook in mirth. His tumbler quaked inside his grasp; I worried it might tip into his lap. “I do not wonder that you're stupefied,” said he. “Would you believe I know the man of whom you speak?”

“You are not serious?” I asked. I drained my glass. “How is that so?”

“Oh, he is often to be found at Bart's,” my friend replied, as he refilled me. “He does some research in the lab; well, you must know, that sort of thing. I have a wager with a pal that either one of us might nail him 'fore the year is out.”

I laughed. “I wish you luck with that,” I said. “He seems the toughest nut; I doubt that you will crack him.”

“That's half the fun,” said my companion. “He's ripe enough, you must admit.”

“Yes, but you'd be wise to be more careful, all the same,” I said. “What makes you think that he'd reciprocate?”

Stamford shrugged. "His eyes are everywhere. He doesn't talk, but lord, the man will look."

"Well, a man has to look *somewhere*," I replied. We set to chuckling again. "I wouldn't care a jot if I never set eyes on him again – and yet I must do so tomorrow. Pray for me, Stamford."

"That I will," my friend replied. And so our talk veered back to topics that excluded that fair gentleman, and by and by I felt myself relax, and conversation seemed a jolly thing, and whisky sodas better, and by the time the clock struck ten I felt my head begin to spin, and I bid Stamford a good night, my two feet reeling me from chair to door to street and, by some miracle, back home again. My rooms were cool; unwelcoming. I sighed, and hooked my coat onto its peg. I stretched and yawned.

"*Mr. Sherlock Holmes*," I said, in crude imitation of the man. "I had better go to bed, so I'm not *late* for you tomorrow." And I blew a solid raspberry, and made my way to slumber, to my tiny room, my single bed, on blasted Upper Wimpole Street.

Chapter 2

Thursday was the sunnier by far. I rose quite earlier than usual, took my breakfast, and descended to my office before eight o'clock. Whistling, I stacked my books and papers, straightened up my chairs and tables, and so prepared the day ahead of me. Presently, I heard Miss Marsh within the other room, and then there she was, to say *good morning*, and to present a cup of tea. I listened to the clatter of the typewriter; of a murmured conversation with our housekeeper, and the clicking of the boot heels as they tidied, swept and bustled round the house.

At nine o'clock, I eased myself into my coat and indicated to the girl that I was heading out, as yesterday. This time the streets were clearer and we made good speed, arriving before long at Baker Street. With my head high, and with a quiet sense of grim determination, I stood myself before the door and rang the bell.

There was a longer wait. I rang the bell again. I frowned, looked at my watch, and rang once more.

A rasping of the key, then, and a wrenching of the door.

"And you are *early*," complained Sherlock Holmes. His brows were drawn to knots. I could not help but notice that his waistcoat was unbuttoned, and his cuffs were loose and flapping at his wrists.

"I do apologise," I said, while stifling a smile. "But may I wish you a good morning, Mr. Holmes."

"How is it anything of the sort," said he, waving me inside, "when there's no coffee on the table, and when the fires have not been lit? It is intolerable, that's what it is."

I looked at him askance. "Can you not light a fire?" I asked.

He glared. "That's really not the point," he said. "The point is, there's no coffee. And I'd rather like some toast."

"Well, whatever can be done?" I said, trying my best to humour him. "Why, the empire will fall without coffee and toast."

"Don't be facetious," Sherlock Holmes replied. "It really doesn't suit your build." He shut the door behind me and then pointed down the hallway with a long and peevish forefinger. "Go on. Go through. You surely cannot need a guide this time. I've better things to do."

"Such as getting dressed," I said. I ignored his disbelieving snort, and made my way along and then inside the parlour, and so into the bedroom to my patient, who was sitting, smiling, propped against her pillows.

"I heard you teasing Mr. Holmes," said she. "He won't like that, you know."

“That's to his detriment,” I said. I winked. “How are you feeling, Mrs. Hudson?”

“Oh, I am feeling rather better,” said the lady. “Not quite there, but not far off. What do you have for me today? More of those powders, I suppose?”

We spent a while in consultation. By the end of it, I found myself professing admiration for the patience that this woman showed when dealing with the despot on the upper floor. I learned of his dark moods, his sharp impatience, and his lethargy – but also his sincerity, his honesty, his kindnesses. Might the two sides balance out? I could not say. All I knew was that I had to seek him out once more, to update him on his landlady's condition. I patted Mrs. Hudson's hand. “I'll see you once again,” I told her kindly, “and that should find you fully well again, no doubt.”

There was no sign of Mr. Holmes out in the hallway, so I climbed the stairs to reach the fellow's sitting-room. I heard no sound within. I knocked. To my great startlement, the door pulled in an inch immediately, and Sherlock Holmes's nose poked out. “What do you want?” said he.

“Were you just standing on the other side?” I asked, bemused.

The door pulled inwards, wider, and the form of that odd gentleman appeared in larger intricacy.

“Perhaps,” he said. And then, with a sharp eye: “That's to my *detriment*, no doubt.”

“Oh,” I said. “You heard.” I peered around him to the room behind, which seemed a pleasant space to live: tall windows, and mahogany, and tasselled rugs and sofas, dappled over with pale sunlight. My face must have been wistful, for Sherlock Holmes looked at me strangely.

“What are you doing?” he enquired.

“I like your sitting-room,” I said.

He rolled his eyes. “So did you climb a flight of stairs to tell me that? Or do you have more *notes*?” He lost his patience with me then. “Oh, do come in, for heaven's sake. Quite why you're standing with that look upon your face, I've no idea, but it's annoying me.”

I stepped into the room. The fellow moved towards the fireplace. “I lit a fire,” he said self-consciously, as if half seeking my approval.

“Well, so you did,” I said. “Well done.”

He scowled. “I have my doubts that you're a doctor,” he said, apropos of nothing.

We faced each other, stood our ground.

“I have *my* doubts that you know anything of chemistry,” I said.

He bristled; waved behind him to a table crammed with pipes and glass and bottles filled with acids. “I am an *expert*,” he said snappily.

“You are a student,” I said, smiling.

“I most certainly am *not*,” said he. “My word, I’ve never heard such rot.”

I shook my head, not wishing to engage in pointless arguments. “I thought you’d like to know of Mrs. Hudson,” I said tactfully. “The lady is much better. One more day in bed should do it.”

“One more day!” he wailed. He stopped abruptly then, seeing my face. “I mean to say, that’s very good. Thank you.”

“I’ll drop by again tomorrow,” I continued. “Perhaps a little later in the morning, if that suits you.”

He flushed. “That will be fine.”

I nodded; turned around to leave, my thoughts already elsewhere. Mr. Holmes’s voice recalled me.

“Dr. Watson,” he called out.

I stopped upon the threshold. “Yes?”

“You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive.”

“I... well... yes, but... however did you know that?”

The fellow tossed his head, concealed a smile behind his hand. “Never mind,” he said.

I left him standing there. I descended to the hallway in the strangest funk, which held until I regained Upper Wimpole Street and sanity. The day continued much the same as any other day. I sent a telegram to Stamford, and received one in return. The time dragged on until the later afternoon, when I retired to my rooms. I dined alone, a simple meal of baked vegetables with cheese, and once the dishes had been cleared away I sat in rumination. The doorbell rang at seven-thirty, and friend Stamford’s face appeared, and I was very glad to see him.

“So what’s all this,” said he, taking a chair, accepting a large whisky. “This is two days on the trot, I feel quite honoured. Oh I say, this is good stuff.” He took a second sip and beamed at me.

“I’ve had another day,” I said. I told him everything and more. He listened carefully.

“I think Holmes likes you,” said my friend.

I laughed aloud. “Oh, he does *not*. He is obnoxious. You should have seen the way he glared at me.”

“Well, he’s engaging, at the very least,” said Stamford with a grin. “He clams up tight at Bart’s. Ha! If he wasn’t so damned *pretty*...”

“Pretty obnoxious!”

We both laughed.

“Why are you obsessing, anyway?” my friend enquired. “After tomorrow, fair to say, you'll likely not cross paths again.” He watched my face. “Aha!”

“What do you mean, *Aha!*?”

Stamford shook his head. “It doesn't matter. Just don't dare sabotage my wager, or my pal and I'll be having words with you.”

“I've no intention,” I said, horrified. “I like an easy life, thank you.”

“You like a challenge,” said my friend. “You always have. Now pass that bottle, and we'll smoke a few cigars, and talk of Dickens for a while.”

That was the problem with old Stamford, I mused happily, much later, as I brushed my teeth and put myself to bed. He always was a chap to leap to all the wrong conclusions and then adhere to those beliefs, no matter what his friends might say. This speculation, now – what piffle! – and I chuckled at the thought of it. Sherlock Holmes was comely, yes, but gracious me, I could not tolerate the man. Tomorrow, then, we'd speak; no doubt the pair of us would barely remain civil; then we'd part, and I'd return to Upper Wimpole Street, and then in probability, the fellow would switch practices – quite quietly, without a fuss – and that would be the end of it.

I curled into my blankets, and I wondered why that notion did not fill me with a fraction of relief.

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I collided with the postman on the Friday at ten-thirty, in our joint attempt to access 221B Baker Street, albeit both for our own reasons. Mrs. Hudson was in evidence, the door already open, and she was smiling as she noticed me, and beckoned that I enter.

“There now, I've saved you ringing on the bell,” said she. “I'm feeling quite myself again today, I hardly think you need have visited.”

“I'll be the judge of that,” I said. We went through to her parlour, and I opened up my doctor's bag. “Your temperature is down, that is quite excellent,” I said. “I'd recommend you take things slowly for a day or two, but otherwise, I'm very pleased.”

“I have so many things to do,” said Mrs. Hudson, “that I can't stand sitting idle.” She leaned the closer to me then. “Mr. Holmes sat with me yesterday. He's been very good, you know. But goodness me, he talked my ear off about you.”

“Oh, did he really!”

“It was Dr. Watson this, and Dr. Watson that. How you tried to put him in his place!” The lady laughed, and tugged her chin. “I think you've thrown him for a loop.”

"I did not mean to," I replied. "He's rather difficult, I have to say."

"It's just his way," said Mrs. Hudson. "When you come to know him better, then you'll understand." She laughed again on seeing my expression. "Now, would you like a cup of tea, or have you other calls to make?"

"I'd best be off," I said, "but thank you all the same. No, no, you needn't rise, I'll see myself out of the house." And I took up my hat and bag, and bowed, and left the little parlour for the dim cool of the hall. I stood there hesitating for a moment. I looked up to the stairs, then to the front hall door, then up the stairs again.

I climbed the stairs.

I climbed them on my tip-toes, and I did not know quite why. The door to Holmes's sitting-room was open, and I paused there on the mat and peeped inside.

He was sitting at the window, looking down into the street, smoking a cigarette. His profile was extraordinary: angled, lean, intense; I sensed the grace within the coil. I watched him then, for half a minute, even longer, whereupon all of a sudden he exhaled a lengthy sigh, and turned his head.

We stared, both of us shocked, I think. He tumbled from his window seat and glared at me.

"And just how long have you been standing there?" he asked.

"Not very long," I managed to reply. "I am most sorry for the--"

"--*impertinence*," said Sherlock Holmes. He took two steps towards me. "I did not hear the bell."

"The door was open," I explained, "and Mrs. Hudson showed me in."

"Then I will show you out again," said he. "I cannot tolerate a snoop."

"I was *not* snooping," I said heatedly. "I came to say goodbye, and to update you as to--"

"Mrs. Hudson, yes, I know," he snapped. "You've done your job. She's well again."

"Yes, I am glad to say she is. There's nothing left for me to do." I hesitated. "I will go."

But the neither of us moved.

"Well, a good morning, then," I said.

And we stood there awkwardly.

"You're leaving?" Sherlock Holmes enquired. "You won't be back again?"

"Not unless the lady relapses."

“Oh,” said he, his mouth in a small moue. “Well, that's all right then, I suppose.” He strode towards me, and on reflex I took a hind step back in turn, which cast me out upon the landing.

“Good morning, Dr. Watson,” said Mr. Holmes, and we held to each other's gaze as the room door pushed to and clicked, leaving me cast out and alone.

## Chapter 3

I was in the dumps the weekend long. I could think of nothing that might please me, and I avoided company. On Sunday morning I ventured out to take a walk in Regents Park, where autumn's fingers were already reaching down to snag the frayed end of the summer, but still warm enough and genial, and I sat upon a bench to watch the world and all her gentlemen pass by. *I wonder if he ever walks and visits here?* I sighed and lit a cigarette. There was a bother in my brain which I was studiously avoiding, but which kept chasing me regardless. A cool wind turned and nipped me, and I rose, continued walking. In my lonely mood I visited a restaurant for luncheon, seeking out a corner table. I was glad to be alone and yet resentful of the fact; what should be done with me? I ordered a half-bottle of white wine, and soup, a main dish made with pumpkin, and I borrowed a newspaper from the rack to read. *Does he ever visit restaurants? Well, of course he must, you fool...*

The wine was light and fresh and flavourful. I drank it rather quickly, felt it buzz inside my head and exchange greetings with the bother that had taken up prior residence. *Intolerable man, don't forget.* Yes, I know, but... *Ill-tempered, impatient, impossible man.*

I jettisoned the paper. My soup was good; alas, the pumpkin dish was merely edible. I waved away dessert and paid my bill, and made for home. So that was Sunday, done and dusted. The lurching promise of another week ahead of me. Something had to happen. Anything at all. *I dare you*, I said silently. The words dropped mute and sullen, not revealing for whose benefit they were.

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Monday morning came around, and by some miracle with patients, a full morning's worth which I was pleased enough about. By midday I was writing notes and thinking that I might pop out to purchase some tobacco, when the doorbell rang once more. Resigned, I took my seat and waited for the rap upon the door. It came before too long; Miss Marsh announced herself and then the visitor.

"A Mr. Sherlock Holmes, sir. But it's not for an appointment. What should I say to him?"

I sprang up, upsetting not only my chair but a small paper pile. I hastened to the door where my receptionist was hovering. I motioned her away.

In the waiting-room outside was Mr. Holmes. Standing quite tall and still and serious.

"Come in," I said. "Come in."

I shut the door, and it was now the two of us alone.

"Not an appointment?" I said, garbling my consonants.

"Well, no," said Sherlock Holmes. He fretted with his coat lapel.

“Please take a seat,” I said.

“Thank you, I'd rather stand.”

“A cup of tea?”

He sighed. “Your hospitality is draining me. No *thank* you.”

I returned behind my desk, quite irritated. “Then you shall stand there and dehydrate,” I replied, “and that is all the same to me.”

We stared each other down. Then Sherlock Holmes drew breath.

“You left your gloves behind,” he said, and so produced a small tan pair from his coat pocket, which he now waved before my face.

“They are not mine,” I said, confused.

“I think they are,” said Sherlock Holmes.

“But I assure you, they are not. I've never owned tan gloves. I fear you are mista--”

“--Oh, well, never mind,” said my odd visitor, stuffing the gloves away. He peered around my neat consulting room. “So this is where you live.”

“I live above these rooms, yes.” A sudden thought occurred to me. “Mr. Holmes, when I first met you, you said something strange to me, and I would like it if you might elaborate?”

Sherlock Holmes shifted uneasily. “I say a great many things that people think are strange,” he said. “Could you be more specific?”

I laughed, long and loud. He looked fairly alarmed. “You informed me that I had been in Afghanistan,” I said, still chuckling. “That was quite true. Could you explain how you determined that?”

“Oh, *that*,” said Mr. Holmes. He sat upon the patient's chair before my desk, and straightened out his coat. “It was elementary, Dr. Watson. Listen *carefully*.”

He explained to me in detail, and I gawked at him, dumbfounded.

“How on earth?” I said.

He tutted softly. “I just explained. Must I repeat myself?” He paused then and took pity. “It is my business,” he said gently. “I am...” (and here, a longer pause) “... a consulting detective.”

“Oh! I see. That's very interesting.”

He looked at me. “I can never tell when you are poking fun,” he said in a complaining tone.

I leaned back in my chair and eyed the fellow in amusement. “I was sincere,” I said. “So you, er, observe things in that way, and you solve crimes?”

“Yee-eees.”

I never knew that one short syllable could stretch out so sarcastically.

“I'd like to see that,” I continued, resolute in my own madness.

“What?”

“I'd like to see you solve a crime,” I said. “Observing in that way.”

“Well, it isn't *all* I do,” said Mr. Holmes. He seemed a little agitated. “There is legwork, and there's chemistry,” (he cast a scowl in my direction) “and there's piecing clues together. It's complicated,” he finished proudly. “You really wouldn't understand.”

“Try me,” I said.

He gaped. “You wish to... accompany me... the next time?”

“Yes, please. An evening or a weekend would be best, if you don't mind.”

Sherlock Holmes opened his mouth as if he were about to snap, but thought the better of his rudeness and pulled the drawbridge tight again. He drummed his fingers on the chair arm.

“Very well,” said he, “I'll see what I can do.”

“I shall look forward.”

I shook his hand before he took his leave. He stared at me, as if I were a puzzle he was baffled by. I watched him from my window as he hurried down the street and turned the corner out of sight.

“I must be mad,” I said aloud. “I must be stark, staring insane.”

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The week passed by, as any other week might pass if one was hopping on a tenterhook. There was no further visitation; not a telegram, nor note. I felt my spirits sink and settle in an unset pool inside of me. By Friday I was miserable. I gave myself a talking-to. And then, at six o'clock – a telegram!

*MEET ME AT 3 LAURISTON GARDENS IF YOU ARE UP FOR IT STOP SH*

I flew with all my speed towards it, foregoing both my dinner and my dignity. I arrived in a small sweat to find a gaggle of policemen, and standing quite apart from them, the fellow Sherlock Holmes.

The house was one of four that huddled back from the main road, and was neglected to the point of tumbledown. A rancid garden at the front declared the property's abandonment. I picked my way through weeds and odd detritus to my man.

“I made it, Holmes,” I wheezed. “The driver took me to the wrong address, and he had gone before I realised, and so I had to hoof it...”

“Well, I am glad that you... hoofed it,” said Holmes.

“Are you really?” I puffed.

“You are somewhat unfit,” Holmes observed with a frown.

“And *you* are somewhat aggravating,” I replied. “But let's not hold these facts against us.”

For a moment I was fearful he might scuttle off in fury, for his brows converged, his eyes tightened to slits.

Then Sherlock Holmes burst into laughter.

“Touché, Watson,” he said, smiling. “Come on, let's not waste any more time than we already have. Oh, I had better introduce you, I suppose, or there'll be trouble.”

He pulled me over to the policemen, two of whom were in plain-clothes. I learned their names: Inspectors Gregson and Lestrade. The former was a friendly fellow who engaged me in discussion on my history and more, until my arm was tugged and Holmes led me away.

“Don't talk to Gregson,” he said crossly.

“Why ever not? He seems a decent sort.”

“I would just rather that you didn't. You needn't know the reason *why*.”

“But--”

My education seemed of far greater importance then, as Holmes explained the murder – for that it was – and the sad circumstance. I saw the crumpled, bloody body in the front room of the house, upon the dusty, broken boards, and I asked questions as appropriate, and watched Holmes as he scoured every inch, inside and out, with running commentary. I found the process fascinating. I made a brief examination of the corpse for Holmes's benefit, and some sixty minutes later we were outside once again, and Holmes was speaking with Lestrade. He joined me presently, and cosied me away.

“Well, how was that?” he asked me anxiously.

“Impressive,” I said honestly. “I'd say you have a genius for detail. It was wonderful to watch you.”

Sherlock Holmes pinkened with pleasure. “A simple case,” he murmured modestly. “The clues were there to find. Lestrade should have his man tomorrow if he has any sense at all.”

“Thank you so much for inviting me,” I said.



We looked into each other's eyes then, and the moment stuck – vibrated – and I found my heart was beating rather more quickly than it ought.

“You're very welcome,” he replied. He watched my mouth as it attempted to form words. What words? In panic, I invited him to dinner. It was late now in the evening; I'd eaten nothing since midday. From the corner of my eye I noticed Gregson and Lestrade both staring wide in our direction, and I wondered what a portrait we might paint, the two of us, so close and intimate this way inside the puddle of the street lamp.

“I ate just yesterday,” said Holmes. “But we can share a hansom home, if you would like.”

We headed off, and found a cab with little trouble. Inside, a silence fell, absorbing every breath and shift on fabric. I searched for words again.

“You have not lived at Baker Street for very long?”

Holmes turned his head. “Not very long. The rent is steeper than I'd like, but the location suits me well.”

“When you take a wife, she'll like it too, I have no doubt of that,” I said. (I was probing now, of course, in devilment.)

He snorted; curled his lip. “I shall not marry, Dr. Watson.”

“Oh, why is that?”

He fixed me with those steel grey eyes. “For the same reason, I suspect, that *you* will not.”

I wanted him.

A low ache in my abdomen; a throb of want.

“Come home with me,” I said.

Holmes smiled gently. “No,” he said.

“See me again, at least.”

“Perhaps.”

The hansom rattled to a halt at Upper Wimpole Street. I paid the driver my half-fare, and clambered down. Holmes raised his hand, and I raised mine, and I stood there on the kerb, transfixed, as the carriage rolled away.

## Chapter 4

All of Saturday, I waited. I was determined not to show my hand so quickly; although in truth I had already – and had been turned down! I smarted at the sore of that. I cursed myself for *feeling*, and I worried at the notion that he might not want me – after all, a fellow outs himself, that's very well, but it does not always mean the fellow likes *you* in that way.

I wondered just how long I'd have to wait to find that out.

I sulked 'til Sunday, when I shook myself; decided that my dignity be damned, I'd go to see him, invite him *somewhere*, because I could not stand this dreadful, wretched stasis.

Mrs. Hudson was at home. She drew me in with a kind motherly concern.

“Mr. Holmes is ill?” she questioned.

“No, no, it is a social call,” I said. “I wonder, might I speak with him?”

I may have been mistaken, but a knowing smile relayed across that lady's face. “I'll show you up,” said she, and did so without more ado.

Mr. Sherlock Holmes was sitting at the table with the bottles and the acids, and he sprang up as we entered after knocking on the door.

“*Watson*,” he said, haltingly.

The door clicked shut behind us.

“Holmes,” I said.

Now that I was here, with just an ash-stained rug between us, and four walls hemming us in, I was not sure quite what to say.

“Have you eaten yet?” I asked him.

“I had a sardine sandwich yesterday,” he said.

“You'll fade away.”

He came the closer to me then. “Did you come here just to scold me on my diet?”

“I *came* to ask you out,” I said, quite boldly then.

He blinked. “To ask me out?”

“To ask you out,” I reaffirmed. “Come out,” I added, lest he still not get the grasp of it.

“But where?”

“To Regents Park,” I said. “Let's walk. And we can talk.”

“All right,” said he. He took his coat up from the chair where he had thrown it at some point, and snatched his hat. In quiet obedience he followed me out of the room and down the stairs, and out into the street. We set off on our way to Regents Park, dodging the Sunday stragglers, and awkward both, the pair of us. I had never felt this way of any man before; the wanting, of a sudden, to be romantically engaged. All my encounters in the past had been so brutal; brief, and loveless. But with Holmes? My whole self *growled* for him; I could not understand it, and lesser still could I explain the way he made me feel *alive*.

We did not speak until we entered Regents Park.

We found a quiet bench, and sat. Holmes sighed, and turned his face towards the morning sun. “Watson,” he said, soft, “what do you want from me?”

“Nothing that you're not prepared to give me,” I replied.

“Oh, let's not talk around in circles,” he snapped, twisting around to face me. “I cannot bear this conversation. You want me as distraction, hmm? Your profession makes things difficult; you have to be discreet, I understand. It's hard to find like-souls. But now, you think you've found one, so you latch on like a limpet.”

“NO,” I said, my voice raised high. “That isn't how it is at all.”

“How is it, then?”

“I respect you. I admire you. And *yes*, I'm physically attracted to you, Holmes, do you expect me to deny it? Do you think so little of me that you'd assume I'd merely class you a *distraction*?”

Holmes had the decency to blush. He leaned to scrabble at his bootlace. “I don't know,” he said. “Watson, you're very bold.”

“It's how I am,” I said, “for better or for worse.” I plucked my courage with both hands. “What do you think of me?”

He looked at me. His face was almost pleading. “Watson, please.”

“I have to know. If I'm offending you, or making you uncomfortable, it's better that you tell me now. I'll go, and we need never speak again.”

His expression became panicked. “*Watson*.” He jerked his head around in agitation, as if in fear that we might yet be overheard. But our small patch of grass was quiet and isolated; we were safe. He inhaled deeply. Then: “I like you,” he said, frowning.

I was not sure quite what to make of that. I waited.

Holmes exhaled. “I feel the same,” he said at last – and this had cost him a great deal, for he was flushed; his hands were trembling.

“Holmes,” I said.

“Watson, I must tell you, if your next words are '*Come home with me*', I swear to god...”

I burst out into laughter, and he joined me, and we sat there on the bench in Regents Park, like two mad men with some strange secret, which – when you come to think of it – was precisely who we were.

“I am so glad,” I said.

Holmes sighed. “I still don't like this conversation,” he replied. “I've never been so 'on the spot'. Could we get off this bench, and walk, or have a pot of tea somewhere? I'm coming out in hives. Why are you *laughing*? Am I ridiculous?”

“You are, but I quite like that,” I said, smiling.

So we walked, once more in silence, but a *better* form of silence, and we wended our way back to Baker Street. We stood together on the step.

“I'm not going to ask you in,” said he.

“That's quite all right. When can I see you next?”

“Dinner tomorrow. I might have an appetite by then. Seven o'clock? Meet me here, and we'll go on.”

“That will be wonderful,” I said.

We said goodbye and parted ways. I whistled all the way to Upper Wimpole Street.

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My mood was buoyant, all of Monday, despite the time seeming to drag like minutes wading through molasses. I closed the surgery as promptly as I could, and hurried upstairs where I took a bath and changed into fresh clothes: a brand new suit, a crisp white shirt, black polished boots, and tie. I faced the mirror and surveyed myself. It still was early, but I'd no desire to sit twiddling my thumbs. I left the house and walked to Baker Street, thrumming with the need to see that fellow once again.

Once there, I hit a brick. I was informed by Mrs. Hudson that my friend had been called out to Bart's – an urgent case analysis. It should not take him very long, but if I could, perhaps, direct myself to meet him there instead...?

I took a hansom, unperturbed, and headed eastwards towards Bart's. When I arrived, the labs were thinning out; the students had gone home, save for a cluster round one table, deep in talk. I looked around for Holmes, but he was nowhere within sight.

“Ho', Watson! What are *you* doing here?”

Stamford peeled himself away from his small clique, and with his pal, the fellow Martineau, both joined me at the door.

"I might well ask the same of you," I said. "It's late for you, I thought you'd be long gone."

"Oh, Mondays always are a drag," said the young man. "There's always something that's last minute. Why *are* you here?"

I bit my lip. Should I be truthful, or evasive? "I'm here for Holmes," I said, deciding on the former.

Stamford stared at me. "Sherlock Holmes? Whatever for? I thought you couldn't stand the man."

"I changed my mind," I said. "So, have you seen him? Is he here?"

Stamford and Martineau exchanged a furtive glance.

"You pup," said Stamford, with his face curling to merriment. "*Sherlock Holmes!* Well, well! What of our wager, you old swine? Now it's a three horse race! Ha ha!"

"Shhh!" I said, now laughing too, for this was so absurd; "Oh, shhhh!" – for they were being very loud. I chanced to look behind me, and my heart dropped to my boots, for there was Holmes, stood in the hallway, frozen, rooted to the spot. His face was stricken as his eyes set on the three of us; the doltish pair beside me, and myself – now extricating from the madness and taking several steps towards him.

"Oh, don't you dare," said Sherlock Holmes. "Or would you take me for a bigger fool?"

He turned and fled down the long passageway, through double doors, away.

"Oh god," I said. "Oh god, what have I done?"

I was behind him in a second, but a second is occasionally too long. Beyond the door there was a further empty passageway. I reasoned that my friend could not have reached the other side in such a short expanse of time, therefore he must have darted in one of the offices. Methodically, I peeped in every one, growing more desperate with every puzzled face of every stranger who stared back at me.

I found him in a disused room, outlined with cardboard boxes, empty shelves. He'd picked his way through to the window, and was standing there, his tall frame cloaked in shadow, and the smoke from his lit cigarette in wreaths above his head. I shut the door for some small privacy.

"Watson, go away," said he. "I won't tell you again."

"What did you hear?" I gasped. "I tell you, it was nothing, it meant nothing, it was..."

"I know your friends," said Holmes. He turned and looked at me. "I know their *wager*." And he spat this word as if it were a poison. "You got the closest of the three of you. Well done."

“I’m *not* part of their wager,” I said, frantic and distraught.

“Oh, of *course* you’re not.”

“Holmes, I swear to you, I speak the truth. I’ll admit that Stamford is a friend, and, well, I knew of your acquaintance, and he mentioned... that... but, for heaven’s sake, I have no part in it.”

“A *three horse race*, he said. The three of you were laughing. That’s your part in it.”

Holmes stubbed his cigarette upon the window sill. He moved towards me, set me firmly to one side, made for the door.

“*Please*, Holmes,” I said. “You *must* believe me. Remember all the things we said in Regents Park?”

“I do,” said he. “I’m trying to forget them.”

He disappeared. I heard his heels upon the tile, fading to silence, and I stood there like a statue, mossed and obsolete in misery. I followed him, at length – or tried to, at the very least – but he was gone; the hall was empty, and the offices were locked.

I found my way out to the street, and looked around. The passers-by seemed like so many yelping dogs; the noise assaulted me. I hastened to a carriage, and I threw myself inside.

“Where to, then, guv?” the driver asked.

I debated for a moment.

“Upper Wimpole Street,” I said.

Chapter 5

I awoke on Tuesday morning feeling wretched. Or rather – for a few brief blissful seconds – I was yawning and incognisant; and *then* the memory, expostulations, feeling wretched. I knew whatever else might happen, that there'd be no means of functioning as usual today. I washed and dressed, and hastened down to find Miss Marsh, if she was in. Her desk was empty, so I penned a scribbled note that I was unavailable for practice, and if she might please ask Dr. Anstruther next door if he could deal with all my patients for the day. I drank a cup of tea. I left the surgery, and headed off to 221B Baker Street.

I arrived a little before nine. I rang the bell, and Mrs. Hudson came to answer it. Her face creased into worry when she saw me.

“Dr. Watson!” she exclaimed. “Whatever happened yesterday?”

“A dreadful mess,” I said. “Could I see him, if he's in?”

“I've orders not to let you through,” said she, wringing her hands, upset. “Oh, doctor, I'm so sorry, but I really can't.”

“I understand,” I said.

There was a coffee house a street away, just open, so I took an inside table, took my notebook and a pencil, and wrote a letter to my friend. I did not spare myself; I asked for his forgiveness, if he might give me a moment to explain... I fashioned a rough envelope, and stuffed the folded sheet inside. Thus far I'd barely taken breath, but now I sat and came to realise the full extent of damage that I'd wreaked. *Oh god*, I thought, *it's over, and I don't know what to do*. I was in love – I knew it now – and my heart ached for the sheer waste of it.

I returned to Baker Street, and once more rang the bell. “Please could you give this note to Mr. Holmes?” I asked.

I waited on the step. The air was cool today; the wind was brisk, and buffeting the awnings of the side street shops already in full throes of browsers; customers. I smoked a cigarette. It seemed an age, my standing waiting, and I wondered if the landlady might not return at all. I was almost prepared to cede, when the door opened and a hand beckoned me in.

“You can go up,” said Mrs. Hudson, “but I don't know how he'll be. I've never seen him in this state.”

I thanked her kindly for her trouble, and climbed the stairs in dread, for all the things that I might say and might be said to me in turn.

Holmes was standing in the centre of the room, arms hanging loosely at his sides, his head held high. He fixed me with a haughty stare that fooled me not even remotely, for he was shaken just as much as I, and fighting with quite everything he had to best conceal it.

“Holmes,” I said, “I have been desperate.” I dared not step into the room more than a fraction, so I hovered at the threshold, watching anxious for a sign.

“I read your note,” said he. “You have a pretty turn of phrase.” His tone was hard.

“I meant each word,” I said. “I’ve hurt you; I’m so sorry.” I took a breath. “Please can we talk?”

“Unless we’re both hallucinating, it seems we are already doing so?” Holmes motioned to the table by the window. We sat, facing the other, and my friend steepled his fingers, and my nerves jittered and jangled as he eyed me up and down. “I’ve not the energy to shout,” said he. “I was breaking things all night.” He gestured then to a small sweeping-brush and sack, where shards of pottery and glass were poking out. I flinched to see it, but it spurred me on to words. I spoke for several minutes, then. I told my side as plainly and as simply as I could, and when the words ran out I stopped, and felt around, as if I’d made it to a final destination, now in new terrain and lost without direction.

Sherlock Holmes released a lungful of held air; he may have held it for the length of my sad speech, I could not tell. He rose. I looked at him in fear.

“Would you like breakfast?” he enquired.

“Er, I, well, what? Yes please?”

“Wait here,” he said. He disappeared, but presently returned. “All right.” He took his seat. “I had a letter from old Stamford, do you know, before you came back with your silly note.”

“From *Stamford*?”

“Yes. He held your corner. You should thank him, later on.”

“Oh goodness me,” I said, astonished. “I had no idea.”

“Well, no.”

“Holmes, are we... have I... have I ruined everything?”

He looked at me. “My brain’s still *furious*,” he said. “But all the rest of me...” Holmes shook his head. “I’ve never had to answer to the rest of me before. It’s an odd feeling, and I’m not sure that I like it.” He held out his hand. I grasped it, and I held on for dear life. “Watson,” he said, screwing his eyes tight shut, “I want us to continue, but I’m telling you, if anything like this happens again, then I--”

“It won’t,” I said, my heart racing to fury in my chest. “Oh, Holmes, it absolutely won’t.”

“Then we’ll have breakfast,” he said, loosening my hand, smoothing the tablecloth. “But why aren’t you at *work*?”

“I’m playing hooky,” I said, laughing and relieved beyond belief. “Will you spend the day with me?”

He smiled and nodded. "Yes."

There was toast and eggs and coffee, and we ate well, and at some point we found ourselves sat on the sofa with a cigarette apiece. I yearned to touch him, yet I knew that I should not. We were too new to one another; still too raw and tentative.

"I love this room," I said, "I always have. It's so large, and light, and cheerful. My own's a tomb; perhaps you'll see it some day soon."

"I know I will," said he.

Somehow, we moved yet closer as we poured out the last coffee cups. And fast within each other's eyes, we locked our fingers tight.

"When I first met you, Holmes," I said, "I thought you were the rudest man I'd ever met."

"Well, so I am," he said, quite serious. "And I thought *you* a jumped-up 'scallion." He sighed. "But lord, you know, I liked that. I think that's why I was so blunt with you."

"You're all that I've been thinking of these past few weeks," I said. I closed my eyes. "If you just *knew* the thoughts I've had of you."

I heard his breathing stutter, quicken; regulate.

"What shall we do?" he whispered, soft.

My eyes flicked open, set upon him. "Today, or now?" I asked, feeling a subtle stirring at my groin.

"*Today*," said he, but his attention had been caught; his eyes grew wide, and wider yet.

"Do you like that, as well?" I asked.

He nodded mutely, then jumped up. "This is *too much*," he said. "You're making me feel... out of line."

"I'm sorry," I said, penitent.

He clutched his hair. "My god, we'd best go out. Let's take a walk. There are some things I need to buy. *Test tubes and flasks*," he said, directing a stern look at me.

"Oh, oops."

By the time we had completed all our shopping, the rain was falling from the sky. We sought out shelter in the coffee house I'd visited that morning, and we sat over a slice of cake for two. My heart was full of hope; our conversation flitted like a merry thing. I found that Holmes was humorous and thoughtful, quite delightful when distracted by a notion or surprise.

"We mesh together well," I said, and he looked back at me, a smile upon his face.

"I've never meshed with anyone," said he. "So you're the first."

"You can't mean that?" I said.

"I've built too many walls around me," he replied. "It's how I am."

"But to protect yourself from what?" I asked.

He grimaced. "Everything."

"Thank you for letting me climb over," I said gently.

And we were too aware, that moment, of the bustle and the voices all around us, and we both wanted a quiet place, to be alone, be intimate.

We dodged the rain; returned to Baker Street, to find the fire had been lit, the shards and mess tidied away.

"Bless Mrs. Hudson," said my friend. He locked the door. He came towards me, and he put his arms around me, and he thrust his nose behind my ear and held it there, just breathing, in and out. "You smell of ambergris," he murmured, and the body of me shook with want and need. I clasped his back, and ran my fingers down his spine.

"You are the world," I whispered to him, and I felt his lips, their fire, upon my neck. I tried to twist, to grasp his head, to kiss his mouth.

"Don't move," said he, against my skin. "Watson, don't move. I need you just like this."

I gulped for air, and I had never known a torture to be so fine or more exquisite, as we stood there on the rug, entwined and merging into one.

He drew away from me. His face, a transmutation: delicate, devout, divine.

"Thank you," he said.

"Good god." I reached a hand to stroke his cheek; he nestled into the soft touch. "I've never felt this way before."

"That's why you'd better go," said he. "And it's also why we'll see each other soon."

I understood, but oh, I did not want to leave him now, when I was aching, hot and trembling for more.

"*Promise me*," I said. "Promise me we'll see each other *sooner*."

"Sooner than soon."

I looked up at his window as I stood upon the street, and he was there, framed in the curtains, and he was still there as I turned the corner, taking one last peep.

Chapter 6

That same evening, I visited Stamford. He was, I think, a little nervous, although he hid it well and bluffed it through the whisky glass he offered me. We sat beside his fire and stalled; the neither of us sure of how to broach the conversation.

“I’d like to thank you for the letter that you sent to Holmes,” I said.

Stamford bared his teeth uncomfortably. “Ah, Watson, what a mess, eh? Did it do you any good?”

“In fact, it did,” I said. I sipped my glass of whisky. “We are a couple now, in fact.”

My old friend choked, lost all ability to breathe, and sat there spluttering for seconds while I clapped him on the back. When he’d recovered both his air and equilibrium, he looked at me in wonder and not a small amount of shame.

“Good god, old man,” said he, “it seems I’ve talent as a writer, eh! That didn’t take you long; what did you *say*? What did he *do*?”

“I told the truth,” I said, “and bless him, he forgave me.”

“I feel quite bad about that wager now,” said Stamford. “It started out as just a lark to pass the time. I didn’t mean for it to turn so bad. I wrote as much to Holmes, but I suppose he’ll never speak to me again.”

“I hope he won’t,” I said, and laughed.

“So, what’s he like?” my roguish friend asked with a wink.

“*Stamford...*”

“I mean, you’ve had him now, you must have done?”

I pursed my lips. I poured another dram and looked into its amber eye.

“Keeping mum, eh, I don’t blame you. No doubt he’s sweeter than a berry, you lucky rake. Oh, I’ll not mention it again, don’t glare like that. At least you’re happy now. You gave us both a heart-attack last night, when you ran off.”

I spent an hour there; we talked of other things, and played a game of cards. With promises to meet again some time, I left and returned home. I wondered, would we do so? – or if this was a catalyst; the axis which would find us fading from each other’s lives.

I thought of Holmes all of that night and the next day. I missed him fiercely; every fibre of me wanted to be near to him. I almost sent a telegram, but did not wish to pester, so I sat behind my desk and doodled daydreams on my pad.

But good things come to those who wait. At close of day, I filed the notes on my last patient, and I strode out to the waiting-room to find Miss Marsh and bid her a good night.

And Sherlock Holmes was there, perched on a chair, reading a book. He raised his head and smiled at me.

“How long have *you* been sitting there?” I asked.

“About an hour,” said he. “I brought a book.” He waved it high. “At last, you're out.”

“Good gracious, Holmes,” I said, my heart to bursting with the joy of it. I gabbled at Miss Marsh behind her desk, gave her instructions for the morning, and then tugged at my friend's elbow that he follow me upstairs. Inside my sitting-room, I locked the door and turned to him.

“My god, how I have missed you,” I said earnestly.

“You're right,” said Holmes, “it *is* a tomb.” He took a step towards me. “John,” he said. And then he paused. “You will allow me...?”

“Yes, please do,” I said. “And I may call you...?”

“Call me whatever you'd like.”

I pulled him close, inhaled the air of him. “Remove that coat,” I whispered, and he did so, barely caring where it landed on the floor. He shucked his jacket, too, as I did mine, and then, standing in shirt-sleeves, we embraced once more, the closer and the happier for that.

“You feel so good,” I said.

He hummed in my right ear. It made me shiver to my core.

I drew him over to the sofa, and we sat, he with his back against the arm. I leaned towards him, and he tensed, ever so slightly. Our faces stopped within an inch. His lips were parted, yes, but barely, and I heard a sharp intake of tremored breath.

“Please let me kiss you,” I said quietly.

“I never have before,” said he, “with anyone.”

I loved him all the more for that. I waited, and I did not press my want on him. He closed the gap, and touched his mouth to mine. It was the lightest of sensations, but the touch-paper was lit and my nerve endings were in flame. We exchanged kisses, dry and delicate, and nose bumps; our hands were in each other's hair. His tongue, then – questing! – searching for my own. We danced a pirouette, and drew apart. I watched him, as that brain of his began to whirr and analyse. He closed his eyes and settled back, and sighed.

“I think I'd like a little more,” he said. (He seemed surprised by this.)

“Are you quite sure of that?” I asked.

His eyes flicked open and he tutted, cross, perhaps, that I should question him. "I like it when you... talk," he said. "So, talk."

I regarded him a moment. He stared back, sweetly defiant.

"All the thoughts I've had of you?" I said, running my fingers down his arms.

His breathing quickened, slightly ragged. *So this is what you like, what turns you on, and you're just finding this out now, my god...*

I leaned and placed my mouth against his ear. *"I want to see you fully naked on my bed. I want to kiss you on your mouth, and on your throat; I want to taste and lick your skin, and graze your nipples with my teeth. I want to touch your prick, and place my mouth around it, give you pleasure, make you cry out, make you moan. I want to take you, and be taken. I--"*

It seemed from very far away I heard a helpless keening, felt a body writhe and wrestle, and I stopped and pulled myself back to investigate. Holmes's eyes were pooled and wide: grey flecks of light that burned and blinked at me. "John," he breathed, "oh, John..." His fingers clawed at me.

I had a cockstand now as hard as any flagpole.

He gasped and wriggled; seemed not to know what he might do with all his limbs.

"Was that too much?" I whispered to him. Good lord, the wriggling! It took all of the control I had to give him space and room.

"That was considerably *more* than a little. What have you *done* to me, John?" And he started to laugh. "I don't know where I am." His eyes dropped to my tenting. He inhaled and cast a sharp glance at my face.

"Perhaps we should talk about this," I said, very aware of the state we were in.

"No," he said, catching my chin with his thumb and forefinger. He kissed me, and angled his body to reel himself in. He manoeuvred astride me, with his hands on my shoulders and his lips still on mine. "You made me want it," he said softly. "But you're not getting it. Not yet."

I was beside myself with pleasure, now finding out that yes, I liked this, and that yes, this teasing turned me on as nothing had before.

I bucked a little; it made him whine. We clung together until eventually Holmes drew himself away. His cheeks were flushed; he rooted through his jacket pocket for his cigarettes. We smoked and stared, as the day darkened and the shadows filled the room.

"We should have dinner," I said lightly. "Would you like that?"

"If you want."

"Let's go to Simpson's. Do you know it?"

“Yes.” He smiled, and rose to pick his shedded clothes up from the floor. He brushed them down, and shrugged. He took my hand and helped me up. “Go fetch your coat, John, if we’re going out.”

We took a cab, discreetly holding hands the length of the short journey. Once at the restaurant, alas, the place was crowded and our privacy was limited. We made the best of this, enjoying a good dinner with red wine. I looked around at other tables, musing if say, perhaps, that *those* two gentlemen were lovers, or how about *those* two sat over there close by the wall: the bearded fellow, with his younger fair companion.

“Father and son,” said Holmes, reading my thoughts.

“Oh, you,” I said. “You’re at those tricks of yours again.”

“Observing, nothing more,” said he. “The *first* pair whom you were ogling, on the other hand, *are* courting.” He leaned back and smiled, an eyebrow fondly quirked.

“How can you tell?!” I said. I craned my neck to see. “Are *we* as obvious, do you suppose?”

“Perhaps. The way you look at me...”

“I cannot help it,” I replied, lowering my voice. “You are bewitching.”

Holmes sipped his wine. “John, please don’t start with all your *talk*.” He shook his head, began to laugh. “Look where that got us the first time.”

“I think the waiters would object if you were in my lap again,” I said. “The flowers would go flying, and the wine would all be spilled.”

We paid the bill, and travelled back to Baker Street. The hansom stopped outside the house.

“Invite me in,” I said.

“John, *no*.”

The street was empty. I was bold, and I leaned forward, kissed him tenderly. “Then goodnight, Sherlock. I hope to see you very soon.”

I watched him climb down from the cab. I saw him extricate his key, unlock the door, and step inside. Then his dark form was lost to twilight, and the carriage rolled away.

Chapter 7

Wouldn't you know, but the next day my friend was called away to Cambridge on a case. In rank dismay, I read the telegram in which Holmes indicated days, if not a week before he might return to London. I stomped around the house at Upper Wimpole Street. I did not want to be there, and if I did my best to hide that fact, I fear I did not do it very well. Miss Marsh adopted an expression that was pained quite early on, and my housekeeper steered well clear of me. I telegraphed to Holmes most every day, with declarations of an escalating fervour. He was distant in return, which only anguished me the more. On the sixth day, I got notice he'd be returning by the evening train, and heaven knows the other half of London must have heard my whoop of joy.

At the earliest, I hatched escape, to bathe and change my clothes before I swallowed a small supper and headed out to Baker Street. I timed it well; Holmes should be home. If he were not, then I would sit out on the doorstep, quite as stolid and as stoic as a brass bootscraper...

Mrs. Hudson waved me in and led me through. "It is so *very* nice to see you, Dr. Watson," she said, rustling her skirts as we both tramped our boots up seventeen steep steps to Sherlock Holmes.

And there he was! Sat by the fireside, a pipe clenched in his teeth, and plumes of smoke, and goodness me, I was so happy he was there I all but hustled Mrs. Hudson to one side.

He stood and waited while I tossed my coat, said thank-you to the landlady, and then shut the door and locked it, before turning round to face him.

"Will you *come here*," I said. "No teasing, now. I don't think that I can deal with it today."

He all but threw himself in my direction. He was in my arms, uncoiling like an octopus, his hands impatient, ardent, as my own clung on for dearest life.

"Six bloody days!" I said. I kissed him, and we teetered on the rug as if it were a rolling cart out of control. "Why were you so *polite* in those damned telegrams? Sherlock, you've no idea..."

"If I had said all that I wanted to," said he, "I would have been incarcerated. John, I've *missed* you."

We looked into each other's eyes.

"No more teasing, John. I'm ready now, I think," he said.

My blood pooled somewhere south. "Oh god, yes please," I said. "I mean, are you quite sure?"

"As sure as I *can* be. I've thought of very little else. It was a miracle I was *any* use in Cambridge."

He took my hand and led me to his bedroom door, which was ajar. He pushed it open, stepped inside, and watched my face as I stood looking all around. "I can't believe I'm here," I said. "I thought you'd keep me waiting until Christmas."

"Don't joke about it," he said warningly, "you know, or I just might." He sat down on the bed and looked at me. "Will you be standing there all night?"

I was beside him in a second. As we kissed, I threw my jacket and my waistcoat to one side. To my delight, I felt his fingers in my shirt, undoing buttons, then the coolness of his palms upon my skin. I pressed him down upon the counterpane, and, with some mutual wriggling, attained the middle of the bed. I lay on top of him, and gloried in the feel of tensing muscle, heaving chest, and curling limbs. Wrapped around me as he was, I whispered in his ear "Opossum!". His vivid face wreathed into smiles.

I stripped him slowly, and he squirmed and undulated, the colour rising in his cheeks. When he was bare, I knelt and looked at him in awe. "Every thing that I was dreaming of, and more," I said.

He hid his face beneath his arm. "I am too thin," he said.

"You're *perfect*," I said, stroking down his thigh, feeling the ripple of the hair and the goosebumping of the flesh.

Supple fingers pulled my shirt, undid my braces and my trousers, all the rest of it; then two grey eyes upon me, fair agog. "*John*," said he. He stopped, and swallowed. "I don't know if I can take that."

"You don't have to," I said gently.

"I bought lubricant," he whispered.

"Sherlock, *relax*."

We lay together, skin on skin, caressing slowly, kissing often. We cupped each other, stroked and played until we both were hard and wanting. I slithered down the bed and touched him with my tongue; he jerked and gasped, clutching my hair. "*John, more*." I took him in; I licked around him, and I teased him with light flicks and ministrations, and he arched and wailed and flexed. I arranged him with his legs tight to his chest, and his face puzzled, not yet fully understanding, and then "*Oh god, John, god, oh yes*," as my tongue pressed against his entrance, probing deftly, and he was writhing now, and groaning very freely, curses, pleas and declarations, as I brought him to the brink.

I took the lubricant, and coated just two fingers, and I leaned into his ear. "*Only my fingers*." And he nodded, quite beyond himself; a wanton idol still yet clinging to the pedestal I'd placed him on. And fingers now, first one, then two, a gentle breach and pistoning, and driving him to rattling the window with his craving. He came, then, shuddering; clenching around me, head thrown back, shouting my name. And I was with him, with my free hand fast around my own stiff member, with no control, just both in glory, making a dreadful row, and coming down but slowly, oh, so gradually.

I hauled myself, and plumped back down beside him on the pillows. We were both quite out of breath. He turned to look at me. "I think you turned me inside out," he said.

"I'm glad of that."

Holmes raised himself upon one elbow. "Well, I'm glad too." He touched my face. "To think, I might have lived my whole life through without knowing this."

"It's only the beginning," I said softly. "Think of all the years to come."

"John, really, do you mean that?"

"Well, of course. You think I'd give you up? You've got me now, for life, if you will have me."

Holmes sat up straight. He drew his knees up to his chin and contemplated for a while. I let him be; I didn't press him for an answer, or response. I knew his mind, a little, now, and how it worked. I knew he needed space to analyse the variables and process the result. Before too long he nestled down beside me once again. He burrowed in, and flung an arm around me.

"John, I love you," he said clearly. "I never thought I'd say those words, but here they are, and they're surprising me as much as they must you."

"I love you too," I said. I kissed him on the shoulder. "You will never know how much."

"I think I will," said he.

"Oh, *stop* that game."

He smiled.

We slept, a little; a few hours at least. And then, when we awoke, we did it all over again. In the small hours of the morning we were tucked into each other, sometimes asleep and often not, just breathing, waiting for the dawn for some strange reason, where we could proclaim at last, now, *We are lovers*, and face the world on just those terms.

The morning came. We proclaimed silently, and looked out at the street, where passers-by walked on, oblivious, and Mrs. Hudson clattered saucepans on the lower floor, oblivious.

Then breakfast came, at eight o'clock. Benevolent and beaming, Mrs. Hudson brought the dishes through and placed them on the table. "You'll be moving in, then Dr. Watson?" she enquired.

"Oh, I, er, well," I said.

"It will be so nice to have another face around," said she.

And then, when she had left, my friend and I looked at each other, mortified.

"John," said he, "I think she *heard*."

“Well, you were louder than a freight train, so I am not at all surprised...”

He rolled his eyes, pink-cheeked. “And will you, John?”

“And will I, what?”

“Will you be moving in?”

I paused, a little dumbstruck. “Do you want me to?”

“I'd like it very much.”

“Well, it could be arranged!”

“That's settled, then,” said he. “My head's a *mess* without you, John. I need you here, to keep me sane.” He dropped a wink. “I also need you in my bed, to keep the *rest* of me that way.”

“That's the decider,” I said, smiling.

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Some few days later, I had packed all my possessions in the rooms above my practice at Upper Wimpole Street. I'd still be working there, of course – at least, for the time being – but I was thrilled to think of 221B Baker Street as home.

Holmes came to help me move the boxes, and we loaded them upon a hansom carriage. We sat inside, the two of us, each contemplating just how far we'd come in such a little time.

“I've just one thing to say, John Watson,” said my friend.

“Oh-ho, what's that?” I asked.

And Sherlock Holmes leaned over, smiling, his lips pressed to my ear. “*Come home with me,*” he said.

- END -

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