

Book One
Apprenticeship

The Beekeeper's Apprentice

One

Two Shabby Figures

The discovery of a sign of true intellect outside ourselves procures us something of the emotion Robinson Crusoe felt when he saw the imprint of a human foot on the sandy beach of his island.¹

I was fifteen when I first met Sherlock Holmes, fifteen years old with my nose in a book as I walked the Sussex Downs, and nearly stepped on him. In my defence I must say it was an engrossing book, and it was very rare to come across another person in that particular part of the world in that war year of 1915.² In my seven weeks of peripatetic reading amongst the sheep (which tended to move out of my way) and the gorse bushes (to which I had painfully developed an instinctive awareness) I had never before stepped on a person.

It was a cool, sunny day in early April, and the book was by Virgil.³ I had set out at dawn from the silent farmhouse, chosen a different direction from my usual—in this case southeasterly, towards the sea—and had spent the intervening hours wrestling with Latin verbs, climbing unconsciously over stone walls, and unthinkingly circling hedge rows, and would probably not have noticed the sea until I stepped off one of the chalk cliffs into it.

As it was, my first awareness that there was another soul in the universe was when a male throat cleared itself loudly not four feet from me. The Latin text flew into the air, followed closely by an Anglo-Saxon oath.⁴ Heart pounding, I hastily pulled together what dignity I could and glared down

¹ *La Vie des abeilles* (The Life of the Bee) by Maurice Maeterlink (1901, translated by Alfred Sutro).

² The Great War, as it was known, commenced in August 1914 and ended with an armistice on 11 November 1918. In the early months, after hundreds of thousands of soldiers had died on both sides, a stalemate quickly developed along the Western Front, as the embattled nations became literally entrenched. In the spring of 1915, the Allied forces commenced the Gallipoli campaign, an undertaking to seize the Dardenelles strait and capture Constantinople. The land forces quickly became stalled. By the campaign's end in December 1915, with the ignominious withdrawal of the Allied invaders, over 100,000 men were dead, including 56,000–68,000 Turkish and around 53,000 British and French soldiers. In April 1915, the war was going poorly for England.

³ Publius Virgilius Maro, better known as Virgil, was probably the greatest Roman poet of his era, 70 to 19 B.C.E., and his epic poem, the *Aeneid*, is still read today. Following the adventures of the Trojan soldier Aeneas, from the Trojan War to his landing in Italy and the founding of Rome, the *Aeneid* has long been a staple of Latin literature. At 15, if Ms. Russell is still “wrestling with Latin verbs,” it is unlikely that she would be reading Virgil's other masterworks, the *Eclogues* or the *Georgics*.

⁴ Or perhaps an American oath. It is unlikely that Ms. Russell learned such language from her mother.

through my spectacles at this figure hunched up at my feet: a gaunt, greying man in his fifties wearing a cloth cap, ancient tweed greatcoat, and decent shoes, with a threadbare Army rucksack on the ground beside him. A tramp perhaps, who had left the rest of his possessions stashed beneath a bush. Or an Eccentric. Certainly no shepherd.

He said nothing. Very sarcastically. I snatched up my book and brushed it off.

“What on earth are you doing?” I demanded. “Lying in wait for someone?”

He raised one eyebrow at that, smiled in a singularly condescending and irritating manner, and opened his mouth to speak in that precise drawl which is the trademark of the overly educated upper-class English gentleman.⁵ A high voice; a biting one: definitely an Eccentric.

“I should think that I can hardly be accused of ‘lying’ anywhere,” he said, “as I am seated openly on an uncluttered hillside, minding my own business. When, that is, I am not having to fend off those who propose to crush me underfoot.” He rolled the penultimate r to put me in my place.

Had he said almost anything else, or even said the same words in another manner, I should merely have made a brusque apology and a purposeful exit, and my life would have been a very different thing. However, he had, all unknowing, hit squarely on a highly sensitive spot. My reason for leaving the house at first light had been to avoid my aunt, and the reason (the most recent of many reasons) for wishing to avoid my aunt was the violent row we’d had the night before, a row sparked by the undeniable fact that my feet had outgrown their shoes, for the second time since my arrival three months before. My aunt was small, neat, shrewish, sharp-tongued, quick-witted, and proud of her petite hands and feet. She invariably made me feel clumsy, uncouth, and unreasonably touchy about my height and the corresponding size of my feet. Worse, in the ensuing argument over finances, she had won.

His innocent words and his far-from-innocent manner hit my smouldering temper like a splash of petrol. My shoulders went back, my chin up, as I stiffened for combat. I had no idea where I was, or who this man was, whether I was standing on his land or he on mine, if he was a dangerous lunatic or an escaped convict or the lord of the manor, and I did not care. I was furious.

“You have not answered my question, sir,” I bit off.

He ignored my fury. Worse than that, he seemed unaware of it. He looked merely bored, as if he wished I might go away.

“What am I doing here, do you mean?”

⁵ The upper-class drawl is characterized by linguists as *non-rhotic* (that is, the “r” in words like “hard” is not pronounced). This form of speech became popular in southern England and the upper classes in the late 18th century and has remained the standard for differentiation from the “received speech” patterns of the classic BBC English accent.

“Exactly.”

“I am watching bees,” he said flatly, and turned back to his contemplation of the hillside.

Nothing in the man’s manner showed a madness to correspond with his words. Nonetheless I kept a wary eye on him as I thrust my book into my coat pocket and dropped to the ground—a safe distance away from him—and studied the movement in the flowers before me.

There were indeed bees, industriously working at stuffing pollen into those leg sacs of theirs, moving from flower to flower. I watched, and was just thinking that there was nothing particularly noteworthy about these bees when my eyes were caught by the arrival of a peculiarly marked specimen. It seemed an ordinary honeybee but had a small red spot on its back. How odd—perhaps what he had been watching? I glanced at the Eccentric, who was now staring intently off into space, and then looked more closely at the bees, interested in spite of myself. I quickly concluded that the spot was no natural phenomenon, but rather paint, for there was another bee, its spot slightly lopsided, and another, and then another odd thing: a bee with a blue spot as well. As I watched, two red spots flew off in a north westerly direction. I carefully observed the blue-and-red spot as it filled its pouches and saw it take off towards the northeast.

I thought for a minute, got up, and walked to the top of the hill, scattering ewes and lambs, and when I looked down at a village and river I knew instantly where I was. My house was less than two miles from here. I shook my head ruefully at my inattention, thought for a moment longer about this man and his red- and blue-spotted bees, and walked back down to take my leave of him. He did not look up, so I spoke to the back of his head.

“I’d say the blue spots are a better bet, if you’re trying for another hive,” I told him. “The ones you’ve only marked with red are probably from Mr. Warner’s orchard. The blue spots are farther away, but they’re almost sure to be wild ones.” I dug the book from my pocket, and when I looked up to wish him a good day he was looking back at me, and the expression on his face took all words from my lips—no mean accomplishment. He was, as the writers say but people seldom actually are, open-mouthed. He looked a bit like a fish, in fact, gaping at me as if I were growing another head. He slowly stood up, his mouth shutting as he rose, but still staring.

“What did you say?”

“I beg your pardon, are you hard of hearing?” I raised my voice somewhat and spoke slowly. “I said, if you want a new hive you’ll have to follow the blue spots, because the reds are sure to be Tom Warner’s.”

“I am not hard of hearing, although I am short of credulity. How do you come to know of my interests?”

“I should have thought it obvious,” I said impatiently, though even at that age I was aware that

such things were not obvious to the majority of people. “I see paint on your pocket-handkerchief, and traces on your fingers where you wiped it away. The only reason to mark bees that I can think of is to enable one to follow them to their hive. You are either interested in gathering honey or in the bees themselves, and it is not the time of year to harvest honey. Three months ago we had an unusual cold spell that killed many hives. Therefore I assume that you are tracking these in order to replenish your own stock.”

The face that looked down at me was no longer fishlike. In fact, it resembled amazingly a captive eagle I had once seen, perched aloof in splendour looking down the ridge of his nose at this lesser creature, cold disdain staring out from his hooded grey eyes.

“My God,” he said in a voice of mock wonder, “it can think.”

My anger had abated somewhat while watching the bees, but at this casual insult it erupted. Why was this tall, thin, infuriating old man so set on provoking an unoffending stranger? My chin went up again, only in part because he was taller than I, and I mocked him in return.

“My God, it can recognise another human being when it’s hit over the head with one.” For good measure I added, “And to think that I was raised to believe that old people had decent manners.”

I stood back to watch my blows strike home, and as I faced him squarely my mind’s eye finally linked him up with rumours I had heard and the reading I had done during my recent long convalescence, and I knew who he was, and I was appalled.

I had, I should mention, always assumed that a large part of Dr. Watson’s adulatory stories were a product of that gentleman’s inferior imagination. Certainly he always regarded the reader to be as slow as himself. Most irritating. Nonetheless, behind the stuff and nonsense of the biographer there towered a figure of pure genius, one of the great minds of his generation. A Legend.

And I was horrified: Here I was, standing before a Legend, flinging insults at him, yapping about his ankles like a small dog worrying a bear. I suppressed a cringe and braced myself for the casual swat that would send me flying.

To my amazement, however, and considerable dismay, instead of counterattacking he just smiled condescendingly and bent down to pick up his rucksack. I heard the faint rattle of the paint bottles within. He straightened, pushed his old-fashioned cap back on his greying hair, and looked at me with tired eyes.

“Young man, I—”

““Young man’!” That did it. Rage swept into my veins, filling me with power. Granted I was far from voluptuous, granted I was dressed in practical, that is, male, clothing—this was not to be borne. Fear aside, Legend aside, the yapping lapdog attacked with all the utter contempt only an

adolescent can muster. With a surge of glee I seized the weapon he had placed in my hands and drew back for the *coup de grâce*. ““Young man’?” I repeated. “It’s a damned good thing that you did retire, if that’s all that remains of the great detective’s mind!” With that I reached for the brim of my oversized cap and my long blonde plaits slithered down over my shoulders.

A series of emotions crossed his face, rich reward for my victory. Simple surprise was followed by a rueful admission of defeat, and then, as he reviewed the entire discussion, he surprised me. His face relaxed, his thin lips twitched, his grey eyes crinkled into unexpected lines, and at last he threw back his head and gave a great shout of delighted laughter. That was the first time I heard Sherlock Holmes laugh, and although it was far from the last, it never ceased to surprise me, seeing that proud, ascetic face dissolve into helpless laughter.⁶ His amusement was always at least partially at himself, and this time was no exception. I was totally disarmed.

He wiped his eyes with the handkerchief I had seen poking from his coat pocket; a slight smear of blue paint was transferred to the bridge of his angular nose. He looked at me then, seeing me for the first time. After a minute he gestured at the flowers.

“You know something about bees, then?”

⁶ In “The Mazarin Stone,” an unnamed narrator declares that “Holmes seldom laughed, but he got as near it as his old friend Watson could remember.” Clearly, that statement is disproved here. A. G. Cooper, in “Holmesian Humour,” claims to have counted 292 examples of the Master’s laughter, while Charles E. Lauterbach and Edward S. Lauterbach, in “The Man Who Seldom Laughed,” compiled the following table:

Frequency Table Showing the Number and Kind of Responses Sherlock Holmes Made to Humorous Situations and Comments in His 60 Recorded Adventures	
Smile	103
Laugh	65
Joke	58
Chuckle	31
Humor	10
Amusement	9
Cheer	7
Delight	7
Twinkle	7
Miscellaneous	19
Total	316

“Very little,” I admitted.

“But they interest you?” he suggested.

“No.” This time both eyebrows raised.

“And, pray tell, why such a firm opinion?”

“From what I know of them they are mindless creatures, little more than a tool for putting fruit on trees. The females do all the work; the males do...well, they do little. And the queen, the only one who might amount to something, is condemned for the sake of the hive to spend her days as an egg machine. And,” I said, warming to the topic, “what happens when her equal comes along, another queen with which she might have something in common? They are both forced—for the good of the hive—to fight to the death. Bees are great workers, it is true, but does not the production of each bee’s total lifetime amount to a single dessertspoonful of honey? Each hive puts up with having hundreds of thousands of bee-hours stolen regularly, to be spread on toast and formed into candles, instead of declaring war or going on strike as any sensible, self-respecting race would do. A bit too close to the human race for my taste.”

Mr. Holmes had sat down upon his heels during my tirade, watching a blue spot. When I had finished, he said nothing, but put out one long, thin finger and gently touched the fuzzy body, disturbing it not at all. There was silence for several minutes until the laden bee flew off—northeast, towards the copse two miles away, I was certain. He watched it disappear and murmured almost to himself, “Yes, they are very like *Homo sapiens*. Perhaps that is why they so interest me.”

“I don’t know how sapient you find most Homines, but I for one find the classification an optimistic misnomer.” I was on familiar ground now, that of the mind and opinions, a beloved ground I had not trod for many months. That some of the opinions were those of an obnoxious teenager made them none the less comfortable or easy to defend. To my pleasure he responded.

“*Homo* in general, or simply *vir*⁷?” he asked, with a solemnity that made me suspect that he was laughing at me. Well, at least I had taught him to be subtle with it.

“Oh, no. I am a feminist, but no man hater. A misanthrope in general, I suppose like yourself, sir.⁸ However, unlike you I find women to be the marginally more rational half of the race.”

He laughed again, a gentler version of the earlier outburst, and I realised that I had been trying to provoke it this time.

⁷ “Vir” is the Latin term for “husband,” used chiefly in the legal phrase “et vir” (“and husband”).

⁸ Ms. Russell did not yet know Holmes well. If she had read *The Martyrdom of Man* by Winwood Reade, that he recommends to Watson as “one of the most remarkable ever penned,” she might have learned that he had a more subtle and complex view of humanity, a worthy subject of study but not of scorn.

“Young lady,” he stressed the second word with gentle irony, “you have caused me amusement twice in one day, which is more than anyone else has done in some time. I have little humour to offer in return, but if you would care to accompany me home, I could at least give you a cup of tea.”

“I should be very pleased to do so, Mr. Holmes.” “Ah, you have the advantage over me. You obviously know my name, yet there is no one present of whom I might beg an introduction to yourself.” The formality of his speech was faintly ludicrous considering that we were two shabby figures facing each other on an otherwise deserted hillside.

“My name is Mary Russell.” I held out my hand, which he took in his thin, dry one. We shook as if cementing a peace pact, which I suppose we were.

“Mary,” he said, tasting it. He pronounced it in the Irish manner, his mouth caressing the long first syllable. “A suitably orthodox name for such a passive individual as yourself.”⁹

“I believe I was named after the Magdalene, rather than the Virgin.”

“Ah, that explains it then. Shall we go, Miss Russell? My housekeeper ought to have something to put in front of us.”

It was a lovely walk, that, nearly four miles over the downs. We thumbed over a variety of topics strung lightly on the common thread of apiculture. He gestured wildly atop a knoll when comparing the management of hives with Machiavellian theories of government, and cows ran snorting away. He paused in the middle of a stream to illustrate his theory juxtaposing the swarming of hives and the economic roots of war, using examples of the German invasion of France¹⁰ and the visceral patriotism of the English. Our boots squelched for the next mile. He reached the heights of his peroration at the top of a hill and launched himself down the other side at such a speed that he resembled some great flapping thing about to take off.

He stopped to look around for me, took in my stiffening gait and my inability to keep up with him, both literally and metaphorically, and shifted into a less manic mode. He did seem to have a good practical basis for his flights of fancy and, it turned out, had even written a book on the apiary

⁹ This is a joke. Mary, the Mother of God, according to Anglican tradition, is the sinless peacemaker; Mary Russell is feisty.

¹⁰ Germany’s aims in the Great War were the expansion of its empire (through the destruction of other empires and the conquest of the lands held by those empires). The French empire was a tempting target: The Germans perceived the French military forces as weak and expected a quick victory over France. The “Schlieffen Plan,” the idea of Count Alfred von Schlieffen, called for a rapid invasion of France, with the expectation that Russia would only slowly arm, allowing Germany to complete its conquest of France in the West, with ample time to turn to the East to face the Russian foe. These plans, like so many others in the War, miscalculated badly, and Germany was embroiled in the very two-front war that the Schlieffen Plan sought to avoid.

arts entitled *A Practical Handbook of Bee Culture*.¹¹ It had been well received, he said with pride (this from a man who, I remembered, had respectfully declined a knighthood from the late queen¹²), particularly his experimental but highly successful placement within the hive of what he called the Royal Quarters, which had given the book its provocative subtitle: *With Some Observations Upon the Segregation of the Queen*.

We walked, he talked, and under the sun and his soothing if occasionally incomprehensible monologue I began to feel something hard and tight within me relax slightly, and an urge I had thought killed began to make the first tentative stirrings towards life. When we arrived at his cottage we had known each other forever.

Other more immediate stirrings had begun to assert themselves as well, with increasing insistence. I had taught myself in recent months to ignore hunger, but a healthy young person after a long day in the open air with only a sandwich since morning is likely to find it difficult to concentrate on anything other than the thought of food. I prayed that the cup of tea would be a substantial one, and was considering the problem of how to suggest such a thing should it not be immediately offered, when we reached his house, and the housekeeper herself appeared at the door, and for a moment I forgot my preoccupation. It was none other than the long-suffering Mrs. Hudson, whom I had long considered the most underrated figure in all of Dr. Watson's stories. Yet another example of the man's obtuseness, this inability to know a gem unless it be set in gaudy gold.¹³

Dear Mrs. Hudson, who was to become such a friend to me. At that first meeting she was, as always, imperturbable. She saw in an instant what her employer did not, that I was desperately hungry, and proceeded to empty her stores of food to feed a vigorous appetite. Mr. Holmes protested as she appeared with plate after platter of bread, cheese, relishes, and cakes, but watched thoughtfully as I put large dents in every selection. I was grateful that he did not embarrass me by commenting on my appetite, as my aunt was wont to do, but to the contrary he made an effort to keep up the appearance of eating with me. By the time I sat back with my third cup of tea, the inner woman satisfied as she had not been for many weeks, his manner was respectful, and that of Mrs. Hudson contented as she cleared away the débris.

"I thank you very much, Madam," I told her.

¹¹ First mentioned in "His Last Bow." Holmes called it "the fruit of pensive nights and laborious days." Unfortunately, no copies are extant.

¹² In June 1902, according to Watson's account of "The Three Garridebs."

¹³ Watson had little complimentary to say about Mrs. Hudson, save that "she had as good an idea of breakfast as a Scotchwoman." ("The Naval Treaty"). However, he surely appreciated the high regard in which she held Holmes (in "The Dying Detective," he remarked that she "stood in the deepest awe of him and never dared to interfere with him, however outrageous his proceedings might seem. She was fond of him, too, for he had a remarkable gentleness and courtesy in his dealings with women.")

“I like to see my cooking appreciated, I do,” she said, not looking at Mr. Holmes. “I rarely have the chance to fuss, unless Dr. Watson comes. This one,” she inclined her head to the man opposite me, who had brought out a pipe from his coat pocket, “he doesn’t eat enough to keep a cat from starving. Doesn’t appreciate me at all, he doesn’t.”

“Now, Mrs. Hudson,” he protested, but gently, as at an old argument, “I eat as I always have; it is you who will cook as if there were a household of ten.”

“A cat would starve,” she repeated firmly. “But you have eaten something today, I’m glad to see. If you’ve finished, Will wants a word with you before he goes, something about the far hedge.”

“I care not a jot for the far hedge,” he complained. “I pay him a great deal to fret about the hedges and the walls and the rest of it for me.”

“He needs a word with you,” she said again. Firm repetition seemed her preferred method of dealing with him, I noted.

“Oh, blast! Why did I ever leave London? I ought to have put my hives in an allotment and stayed in Baker Street. Help yourself to the bookshelves, Miss Russell. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” He snatched up his tobacco and matches and stalked out, Mrs. Hudson rolled her eyes and disappeared into the kitchen, and I found myself alone in the quiet room.

Sherlock Holmes’ house was a typical ageless Sussex cottage, flint walls and red tile roof. This main room, on the ground floor, had once been two rooms, but was now a large square with a huge stone fireplace at one end, dark, high beams, an oak floor that gave way to slate through the kitchen door, and a surprising expanse of windows on the south side where the downs rolled on to the sea. A sofa, two wing chairs, and a frayed basket chair gathered around the fireplace, a round table and four chairs occupied the sunny south bay window (where I sat), and a work desk piled high with papers and objects stood beneath a leaded, diamond-paned window in the west: a room of many purposes. The walls were solid with bookshelves and cup boards.

Today I was more interested in my host than in his books, and I looked curiously at the titles (*Blood Flukes of Borneo* sat between *The Thought of Goethe* and *Crimes of Passion in Eighteenth-Century Italy*¹⁴) with him in mind rather than with an eye to borrowing. I made a circuit of the room (tobacco still in a Persian slipper at the fireplace, I smiled to see¹⁵; on one table a small crate stencilled LIMÓNES DE ESPAÑA and containing several disassembled revolvers; on another table three nearly identical pocket watches laid with great precision, chains and fobs stretched out in parallel lines, with a powerful magnifying glass, a set of calipers, and a paper and pad covered

¹⁴ Holmes the bibliophile seems to own books that are untraceable today.

¹⁵ First mentioned in “The Musgrave Ritual” and subsequently in “The Naval Treaty,” “The Empty House” and “The Illustrious Client.”

with figures to one side) before ending up in front of his desk.

I had no time for more than a cursory glance at his neat handwriting before his voice startled me from the door.

“Shall we sit out on the terrace?”

I quickly put down the sheet in my hand, which seemed to be a discourse on seven formulae for plaster and their relative effectiveness in recording tyre marks from different kinds of earth¹⁶, and agreed that it would be pleasant in the garden. We took up our cups, but as I followed him across the room towards the French doors my attention was drawn by an odd object fixed to the room’s south wall: a tall box, only a few inches wide but nearly three feet tall and protruding a good eighteen inches into the room. It appeared to be a solid block of wood but, pausing to examine it, I could see that both sides were sliding panels.

“My observation hive,” Mr. Holmes said. “Bees?” I exclaimed. “Inside the house?”

Instead of answering he reached past me and slid back one of the side panels, and revealed there a perfect, thin, glass-fronted beehive. I squatted before it, entranced. The comb was thick and even across the middle portion, trailed off at the edges, and was covered by a thick blanket of orange and black. The whole was vibrating with energy, though the individuals seemed to be simply milling about, without purpose.

I watched closely, trying to make sense of their apparently aimless motion. A tube led in at the bottom, with pollen-laden bees coming in and denuded bees going out; a smaller tube at the top, clouded with condensation, I assumed was for ventilation.

“Do you see the queen?” Mr. Holmes asked.

“She’s here? Let me see if I can find her.” I knew that the queen was the largest bee in the hive, and that wherever she went she had a fawning entourage, but it still took me an embarrassingly long time to pick her out from her two hundred or so daughters and sons. Finally I found her, and couldn’t imagine why she had not appeared instantly. Twice the size of the others and imbued with dumb, bristling purpose, she seemed a creature of another race from her hive mates. I asked their keeper a few questions—did they object to the light, was the population as steady here as in a larger hive—and then he slid the cover over the living painting and we went outside. I remembered belatedly that I was not interested in bees.

Outside the French doors lay an expanse of flagstones, sheltered from the wind by a glass

¹⁶ Holmes’s monograph upon the tracing of footsteps, first mentioned in *Sign of the Four*, included some remarks upon the uses of plaster of Paris as a preserver of impresses. Tyre-marks form an important part of Holmes’s reasoning in “The Priory School,” though there is no mention there of a monograph on the subject.

conservatory that grew off the kitchen wall and by an old stone wall with herbaceous border that curved around the remaining two sides. The terrace gathered in the heat until its air danced, and I was relieved when he continued down to a group of comfortable-looking wooden chairs in the shade of an enormous copper beech. I chose a chair that looked down to wards the Channel, over the head of a small orchard that lay in a hollow below us. There were tidy hive boxes arranged among the trees and bees working the early flowers of the border. A bird sang. Two men's voices came and receded along the other side of the wall. Dishes rattled distantly from the kitchen. A small fishing boat appeared on the horizon and gradually worked its way towards us. I suddenly came to myself with the realisation that I was neglecting my conversational responsibilities as a guest. I moved my cold tea from the arm of my chair to the table and turned to my host.

“Is this your handiwork?” I asked, indicating the garden. He smiled ironically, though whether at the doubt in my voice or at the social impulse that drove me to break the silence, I was not certain.

“No, it is a collaboration on the part of Mrs. Hudson and old Will Thompson, who used to be head gardener at the manor. I took an interest in gardening when I first came here, but my work tends to distract me for days on end. I would reappear to find whole beds dead of drought or buried in bramble. But Mrs. Hudson enjoys it, and it gives her something to do other than pester me to eat her concoctions. I find it a pleasant spot to sit and think. It also feeds my bees—most of the flowers are chosen because of the quality of honey they produce.”

“It is a very pleasant spot. It reminds me of a garden we once had when I was small.”

“Tell me about yourself, Miss Russell.”

I started to give him the obligatory response, first the demurral and then the reluctant flat autobiography, but some slight air of polite inattention in his manner stopped me. Instead, I found myself grinning at him.

“Why don't you tell me about myself, Mr. Holmes?”

“Aha, a challenge, eh?” There was a flare of interest in his eyes.

“Exactly.”

“Very well, on two conditions. First, that you forgive my old and much-abused brain if it is slow and creaking, for such thought patterns as I once lived by are a habit and become rusty without continual use. Daily life here with Mrs. Hudson and Will is a poor whetting stone for sharp wit.”

“I don't entirely believe that your brain is underused, but I grant the condition. And the other?”

“That you do the same for me when I have finished with you.”

“Oh. All right. I shall try, even if I lay myself open to your ridicule.” Perhaps I had not escaped the edge of his tongue after all.

“Good.” He rubbed his thin dry hands together, and suddenly I was fixed with the probing eye of an entomologist. “I see before me one Mary Russell, named after her paternal grandmother.”

I was taken aback for a moment, then reached up and fingered the antique locket, engraved MMR, that had slipped out from the buttons of my shirt. I nodded.

“She is, let us see, sixteen? fifteen, I think? Yes, fifteen years of age, and despite her youth and the fact that she is not at school she intends to pass the University entrance examinations.” I touched the book in my pocket and nodded appreciatively. “She is obviously left-handed, one of her parents was Jewish—her mother, I think? Yes, definitely the mother—and she reads and writes Hebrew. She is at present four inches shorter than her American father—that was his suit? All right so far?” he asked complacently.

I thought furiously. “The Hebrew?” I asked.

“The ink marks on your fingers could only come with writing right to left.”

“Of course.” I looked at the accumulation of smears near my left thumbnail. “That is very impressive.”

He waved it aside. “Parlour games. But the accents are not without interest.” He eyed me again, then sat back with his elbows on the chair’s armrests, steepled his fingers, rested them lightly on his lips for a moment, closed his eyes, and spoke.

“The accents. She has come recently from her father’s home in the western United States, most likely northern California. Her mother was one generation away from Cockney Jew, and Miss Russell herself grew up in the southwestern edges of London. She moved, as I said, to California, within the last, oh, two years. Say the word ‘martyr,’ please.” I did so. “Yes, two years. Sometime between then and December both parents died, very possibly in the same accident in which Miss Russell was involved last September or October, an accident which has left scar tissue on her throat, scalp, and right hand, a residual weakness in that same hand, and a slight stiffness in the left knee.”

The game had suddenly stopped being entertaining. I sat frozen, my heart ceasing to beat while I listened to the cool, dry recitation of his voice.

“After her recovery she was sent back home to her mother’s family, to a tight-fisted and unsympathetic relative who feeds her rather less than she needs. This last,” he added parenthetically, “is I admit largely conjecture, but as a working hypothesis serves to explain her well-nourished frame poorly covered by flesh, and the reason why she appears at a stranger’s table to consume somewhat more than she might if ruled strictly by her obvious good manners. I am willing to consider an

alternative explanation,” he offered, and opened his eyes, and saw my face.

“Oh, dear.” His voice was an odd mixture of sympathy and irritation. “I have been warned about this tendency of mine. I do apologise for any distress I have caused you.”¹⁷

I shook my head and reached for the cold dregs in my teacup. It was difficult to speak through the lump in my throat.

Mr. Holmes stood up and went into the house, where I heard his voice and that of the housekeeper trading a few unintelligible phrases before he returned, carrying two delicate glasses and an open bottle of the palest of wines. He poured it into the glasses and handed me one, identifying it as honey wine—his own, of course. He sat down and we both sipped the fragrant liquor. In a few minutes the lump faded, and I heard the birds again. I took a deep breath and shot him a glance.

“Two hundred years ago you would have been burnt.” I was trying for dry humour but was not entirely successful.

“I have been told that before today¹⁸,” he said, “though I cannot say I have ever fancied myself in the rôle of a witch, cackling over my pot.”

“Actually, the book of Leviticus calls not for burning, but for the stoning of a man or a woman who speaks with the spirits—*ioob*, a necromancer or medium—or who is a *yidooni*, from the verb ‘to know,’ a person who achieves knowledge and power other than through the grace of the Lord God of Israel, er, well, a sorcerer.” My voice trailed off as I realised that he was eyeing me with the apprehension normally reserved for mumbling strangers in one’s railway compartment or acquaintances with incomprehensible and tiresome passions. My recitation had been an automatic response, triggered by the entry of a theological point into our discussion. I smiled a weak reassurance. He cleared his throat.

“Er, shall I finish?” he asked.

“As you wish,” I said, with trepidation.

“This young lady’s parents were relatively well-to-do, and their daughter inherited, which, combined with her daunting intelligence, makes it impossible for this penurious relative to bring her to heel. Hence, she wanders the downs without a chaperone and remains away until all hours.” He seemed to be drawing to a close, so I gathered my tattered thoughts.

¹⁷ Most notably, Holmes thoughtlessly laid bare the history of Dr. Watson’s family, in *Sign of the Four*. After making a series of deductions evidently painful to Watson, he apologized: “Viewing the matter as an abstract problem, I had forgotten how personal and painful a thing it might be to you.

¹⁸ Watson himself made this remark, in “A Scandal in Bohemia,” on March 20, 1888.

“You are quite right, Mr. Holmes. I have inherited, and my aunt does find my actions contrary to her idea of how a young lady should act. And because she holds the keys to the pantry and tries to buy my obedience with food, I occasionally go with less than I would choose. Two minor flaws in your reasoning, however.”

“Oh?”

“First, I did not come to Sussex to live with my aunt. The house and farm belonged to my mother. We used to spend summers here when I was small—some of the happiest times of my life—and when I was sent back to England I made it a condition of accepting her as guardian that we live here. She had no house, so she reluctantly agreed. Although she will control the finances for another six years, strictly speaking she lives with me, not I with her.” Another might have missed the loathing in my voice, but not he. I dropped the subject quickly before I gave away any more of my life. “Second, I have been carefully judging the time by which I must depart in order to arrive home before dark, so the lateness of the hour does not really enter in. I shall have to take my leave soon, as it will be dark in slightly over two hours, and my home is two miles north of where we met.”

“Miss Russell, you may take your time with your half of our agreement,” he said calmly, allowing me to shelve the previous topic. “One of my neighbours subsidises his passion for automobiles by providing what he insists on calling a taxi service. Mrs. Hudson has gone to arrange for him to motor you home. You may rest for another hour and a quarter before he arrives to whisk you off to the arms of your dear aunt.”

I looked down, discomfited. “Mr. Holmes, I’m afraid my allowance is not large enough to allow for such luxuries. In fact, I have already spent this week’s monies on the Virgil.”

“Miss Russell, I am a man with considerable funds and very little to spend them on. Please allow me to indulge in a whim.”

“No, I cannot do that.” He looked at my face and gave in.

“Very well, then, I propose a compromise. I shall pay for this and any subsequent expenses of the sort, but as a loan. I assume that your future inheritance will be sufficient to absorb such an accumulation of sums?”

“Oh, yes.” I laughed as I recalled vividly the scene in the law office, my aunt’s eyes turning dark with greed. “There would be no problem.” He glanced at me sharply, hesitated, and spoke with some delicacy.

“Miss Russell, forgive my intrusion, but I tend towards a rather dim view of human nature. If I might enquire as to your will...?” A mind reader, with a solid grasp of the basics of life. I smiled grimly.

“In the event of my death my aunt would get only an adequate yearly amount. Hardly more than she gets now.” He looked relieved. “I see. Now, about the loan. Your feet will suffer if you insist on walking the distance home in those shoes. At least for today, use the taxi. I am even willing to charge you interest if you like.”

There was an odd air about his final, ironic offer that in another, less self-possessed person might have verged on a plea. We sat and studied each other, there in the quiet garden of early evening, and it occurred to me that he might have found this yapping dog an appealing companion. It could even be the beginnings of affection I saw in his face, and God knows that the joy of finding as quick and uncluttered a mind as his had begun to sing in me. We made an odd pair, a gangling, bespectacled girl and a tall, sardonic recluse, blessed or cursed with minds of hard brilliance that alienated all but the most tenacious. It never occurred to me that there might not be subsequent visits to this household. I spoke, and acknowledged his oblique offer of friendship. “Spending three or four hours a day in travel does leave little time for other things. I accept your offer of a loan. Shall Mrs. Hudson keep the record?”

“She is scrupulously careful with figures, unlike myself. Come, have another glass of my wine, and tell Sherlock Holmes about himself.”

“Are you finished, then?”

“Other than obvious things such as the shoes and reading late by inadequate light, that you have few bad habits, though your father smoked, and that unlike most Americans he preferred quality to fashion in his clothing—other than the obvious things, I will rest for the moment. It is your move. But mind you, I want to hear from you, not what you have picked up from my enthusiastic friend Watson.”

“I shall try to avoid borrowing his incisive observations,” I said drily, “though I have to wonder if using the stories to write your biography wouldn’t prove to be a two-edged sword. The illustrations are certainly deceptive; they make you look considerably older. I’m not very good at guessing ages, but you don’t look much more than, what, fifty? Oh, I’m sorry. Some people don’t like to talk about their age.”

“I am now fifty-four. Conan Doyle and his accomplices at *The Strand* thought to make me more dignified by exaggerating my age.¹⁹ Youth does not inspire confidence, in life or in stories, as I found to my annoyance when I set up residence in Baker Street. I was not yet twenty-one, and at first found the cases few and far between. Incidentally, I hope you do not make a habit of guessing. Guessing

¹⁹ In fact, Holmes’s age is not made explicit in any of Dr. Watson’s tales. In “His Last Bow,” which occurs in 1914, Holmes is said to have the *appearance* of a man of 60. However, he is disguised and could certainly have been only 54. If Holmes was born in 1861, as he states here, he would have been 20 years old when he first met Dr. Watson. It is difficult to pin down the exact date of his attendance at University, but it was probably about two years prior to the events of *A Study in Scarlet*. That Holmes went down to University as early as age 16 would surprise none of his biographers.

is a weakness brought on by indolence and should never be confused with intuition.”

“I will keep that in mind,” I said, and reached for my glass to take a swallow of wine while thinking about what I had seen in the room. I assembled my words with care. “To begin: You come from a moderately wealthy background, though your relationship with your parents was not entirely a happy one. To this day you wonder about them and try to come to grips with that part of your past.” To his raised eyebrow I explained, “That is why you keep the much-handled formal photograph of your family on the shelf close to your chair, slightly obscured to other eyes by books, rather than openly mounting it on the wall and for getting them.” Ah, how sweet was the pleasure of seeing the look of appreciation spread over his face and hearing his murmured phrase, “Very good, very good indeed.” It was like coming home.

“I could add that it explains why you never spoke to Dr. Watson about your childhood, as someone so solid and from such a blatantly normal background as he is would doubtless have difficulty understanding the special burdens of a gifted mind. However, that would be using his words, or rather lack of them, so it doesn’t count. Without being too prying, I should venture to say that it contributed to your early decision to distance yourself from women, for I suspect that someone such as yourself would find it impossible to have an other than all-inclusive relationship with a woman, one that totally integrated all parts of your lives, unlike the unequal and somewhat whimsical partnership you have had with Dr. Watson.” The expression on his face was indescribable, wandering between amusement and affront, with a touch each of anger and exasperation. It finally settled on the quizzical. I felt considerably better about the casual hurt he had done me, and plunged on.

“However, as I said, I don’t mean to intrude on your privacy. It was necessary to have the past as it contributes to the present. You are here to escape the disagreeable sensation of being surrounded by inferior minds, minds that can never understand because they are just not built that way. You took a remarkably early retirement twelve years ago, apparently in order to study the perfection and unity of bees and to work on your magnum opus on detection.²⁰ I see from the bookshelf near your writing desk that you have completed seven volumes to date, and I presume, from the boxes of notes under the completed books, that there are at least an equal number yet to be written up.” He nodded and poured us both more wine. The bottle was nearly empty. “Between yourself and Dr. Watson, however, you have left me with little to deduce. I could hardly assume that you would leave behind your chemical experiments, for example, though the state of your cuffs does indicate that you have been active recently—those acid burns are too fresh to have frayed much in the wash. You no longer smoke cigarettes, your fingers show, though obviously your pipe is used often, and the calluses on your fingertips indicate that you have kept up with the violin. You seem to be as unconcerned about bee stings as you are about finances and gardening, for your skin shows the marks of stings both old and new, and your suppleness indicates that the theories about bee stings as a therapy for rheumatism

²⁰ In “The Abbey Grange,” Holmes remarks to Watson, “I propose to devote my declining years to the composition of a textbook which shall focus the whole art of detection into one volume.” However, there is no mention of Holmes working on this as late as 1914 in “His Last Bow.”

have some basis. Or is it arthritis?”

“Rheumatism, in my case.²¹”

“Also, I think it possible that you have not entirely given up your former life, or perhaps it has not entirely given you up. I see a vague area of pale skin on your chin, which shows that some time last summer you had a goatee, since shaven off. There hasn’t been enough sun yet to erase the line completely. As you don’t normally wear a beard, and would, in my opinion, look unpleasant with one, I can assume it was for the purpose of a disguise, in a rôle which lasted some months. Probably it had to do with the early stages of the war. Spying against the Kaiser, I should venture to say.”

His face went blank, and he studied me without any trace of expression for a long minute. I squelched a self-conscious smile. At last he spoke.

“I did ask for it, did I not? Are you familiar with the work of Dr. Sigmund Freud?”

“Yes, although I find the work of the next, as it were, generation more helpful. Freud is overly obsessed with exceptional behavior: an aid to your line of work, perhaps, but not as useful for a generalist.”

There was a sudden commotion in the flower bed. Two orange cats shot out and raced along the lawn and disappeared through the opening in the garden wall. His eyes followed them, and he sat squinting into the low sun.

“Twenty years ago,” he murmured. “Even ten. But here? Now?”²² He shook his head and focussed again on me. “What will you read at University?”

I smiled. I couldn’t help it; I knew just how he was going to react, and I smiled, anticipating his dismay.

“Theology.”

His reaction was as violent as I had known it would be, but if I was sure of anything in my life, it was that. We took a walk through the gloaming to the cliffs, and I had my look at the sea while he wrestled with the idea, and by the time we returned he had decided that it was no worse than anything else, though he considered it a waste, and said so. I did not respond.

²¹ Dr. Watson in the preface to *The Case-Book*, published in 1927, confirms that Holmes was “somewhat crippled by occasional attacks of rheumatism” during his retirement years.

²² Holmes is evidently considering a relationship with Ms. Russell, although she later concludes that he was thinking only of a student-teacher arrangement. However, Holmes’s “omniscience” (with which he credits himself, according to Ms. Russell’s later remarks) may well have led him to foresee their more permanent relationship.

The automobile arrived shortly thereafter, and Mrs. Hudson came out to pay for it. Holmes explained our agreement, to her amusement, and she promised to make a note of it.

“I have an experiment to finish tonight, so you must pardon me,” he said, though it did not take many visits before I knew that he disliked saying good-bye. I put out my hand and nearly snatched it back when he raised it to his lips rather than shaking it as he had before. He held on to it, brushed it with his cool lips, and let it go.²³

“Please come to see us anytime you wish. We are on the telephone, by the way. Ask the exchange for Mrs. Hudson, though; the good ladies sometimes decide to protect me by pretending ignorance, but they will usually permit calls to go through to her.” With a nod he began to turn away, but I interrupted his exit.

“Mr. Holmes,” I said, feeling myself go pink, “may I ask you a question?”

“Certainly, Miss Russell.”

“How does *The Valley of Fear* end?” I blurted out. “The what?” He sounded astonished.

“*Valley of Fear*. In *The Strand*. I hate these serials, and next month is the end of it²⁴, but I just wondered if you could tell me, well, how it turned out.”

“This is one of Watson’s tales, I take it?”

“Of course. It’s the case of Birlstone and the Scowlers and John McMurdo and Professor Moriarty and—”

“Yes, I believe I can identify the case, although I have often wondered why, if Conan Doyle so likes pseudonyms, he couldn’t have given them to Watson and myself as well.”²⁵

“So how did it end?”

“I haven’t the faintest notion. You would have to ask Watson.”

“But surely you know how the case ended,” I said, amazed.

²³ There is no previous record of this Continental gesture in the Canon; indeed, as late as 1895, in “The Solitary Cyclist,” Holmes’s relationships with his female clients appears quite businesslike, and of course there is no record of any other female companionship.

²⁴ The final installment appeared in the May 1915 issue of *The Strand*.

²⁵ See this editor’s “What Do We Really Know About Sherlock Holmes and John H. Watson?,” *Baker Street Journal*, 54, No. 3 (Autumn 2004), 6-15.

“The case, certainly. But what Watson has made of it, I couldn’t begin to guess, except that there is bound to be gore and passion and secret handshakes. Oh, and some sort of love interest. I deduce, Miss Russell; Watson transforms. Good day.” He went back into the cottage.

Mrs. Hudson, who had stood listening to the exchange, did not comment, but pressed a package into my hands, “for the trip back,” although from the weight of it the eating would take longer than the driving, even if I were to find the interior space for it. However, if I could get it past my aunt’s eyes it would make a welcome supplement to my rations. I thanked her warmly.

“Thank you for coming here, dear child,” she said. “There’s more life in him than I’ve seen for a good many months. Please come again, and soon?” I promised, and climbed into the car. The driver spun off in a rattle of gravel, and so began my long association with Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

I find it necessary to interrupt my narrative and say a few words concerning an individual whom I had wanted to omit entirely. I find, however, that her total absence grants her undue emphasis by the vacuum it creates. I speak of my aunt.

For just under seven years, from the time my parents were killed until my twenty-first birthday, she lived in my house, spent my money, managed my life, limited my free dom, and tried her worst to control me. Twice during that time I had to appeal to the executors of my parents’ estate, and both times won both my case and her vindictive animosity. I do not know precisely how much of my parents’ money she took from me, but I do know that she purchased a terrace house in London after she left me, though she came to me nearly penniless. I let her know that I considered it payment for her years of service, and left it. I did not go to her funeral some years later and arranged for the house to go to a poor cousin.

Mostly I ignored her while she lived with me, which maddened her further. She was, I think, gifted enough herself to recognise greatness in others, but instead of rejoicing generously she tried to bring her superior down to her own level. A twisted person, very sad, really, but my sympathy for her has been taken from me by her actions. I shall, there fore, continue to ignore her by leaving her out of my account whenever possible. It is my revenge.

It was only in my association with Holmes that her interference troubled me. It became apparent in the following weeks that I had found something I valued and, what was worse in her eyes, it offered me a life and a freedom away from her. I freely used my loan privileges with Mrs. Hudson and had run up a considerable debt by the time I came into my majority. (Incidentally, my first act at the law offices was to draw up a cheque for the amount I owed the Holmes household, with five percent more for Mrs. Hudson. I don’t know if she gave it to charity or to the gardener, but she took it. Eventually.) My aunt’s chief weapon against my hours with Holmes was the threat to stir up talk and rumours in the community, which even I had to admit would have been inconvenient. About once a year this would come up, subtle threats would give way to blatant ones, until finally I would

have to counterattack, usually by blackmail or bribery. Once I was forced to ask Holmes to produce evidence that he was still too highly regarded, despite having been purportedly retired for over a decade, for any official to believe her low gossip. The letter that reached her, and particularly the address from which it had been written, silenced her for eighteen months. The entire campaign reached its head when I proposed to accompany Holmes to the Continent for six weeks. She would very likely have succeeded in, if not preventing my going, at least delaying me inconveniently. By that time, however, I had traced her bank account, and I had no further trouble from her before my twenty-first birthday.

So much for my mother's only sister. I shall leave her here, frustrated and unnamed, and hope she does not intrude further on my narrative.

Two

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

One came hither, to the school of the bees, to be taught the preoccupations of all-powerful nature...and the lesson of ardent and disinterested work; and another lesson too...to enjoy the almost unspeakable delights of those immaculate days that revolved on themselves in the fields of space, forming merely a transparent globe, as void of memory as the happiness without alloy.²⁶

Three months after my fifteenth birthday Sherlock Holmes entered my life, to become my foremost friend, tutor, substitute father, and eventually confidant. Never a week passed when I did not spend at least one day in his house, and often I would be there three or four days running when I was helping him with some experiment or project. Looking back, I can admit to myself that even with my parents I had never been so happy, and not even with my father, who had been a most brilliant man, had my mind found so comfortable a fit, so smooth a mesh. By our second meeting we had dropped “Mr.” and “Miss.” After some years we came to end the other’s sentences, even to answer an unasked question—but I get ahead of myself.

In those first weeks of spring I was like some tropical seed upon which was poured water and warmth. I blossomed, my body under the care of Mrs. Hudson and my mind under the care of this odd man, who had left behind the thrill of the chase in London and come to the quietest of country homes to raise bees, write his books, and, perhaps, to meet me. I do not know what fates put us less than ten miles from each other. I do know that I have never, in all my travels, met a mind like Holmes. Nor has he, he says, met my equal. Had I not found him, had my aunt’s authority been uncontested, I could easily have become twisted like her. I am fairly certain that my own influence on Holmes was also not inconsiderable. He was stagnating—yes, even he—and would probably have bored or drugged himself into an early death. My presence, my—I will say it—my love, gave him a purpose in life from that first day.

If Holmes slid into the niche my father had occupied, then I suppose one could say that dear Mrs. Hudson be came my new mother. Not, of course, that there was any thing between the two of them other than the strictest housekeeper-employer relationship, tempered by a long standing camaraderie. Nonetheless, mother she was and I a daughter to her. She had a son in Australia²⁷ who wrote dutifully every month, but I was her only daughter. She fed me until my frame filled out (I never did become voluptuous, but my shape was quite fashionable for the twenties.) and I went up another two inches that first year, one and one-half the second year, to a total of one inch short of six feet. I became comfortable with my height eventually, but for years I was incredibly clumsy and a real hazard around knick-knacks. It was not until I went away to Oxford that Holmes arranged for

²⁶ Maeterlinck.

²⁷ Evidently the offspring of Hudson, a blackmailer who was a member of the crew of “The Gloria Scott”—see “The ‘Gloria Scott’” and note xx, below.

lessons in an Oriental form of manual defence (most unladylike: at first only the teacher would work with me!), which brought my various limbs under control.²⁸ Mrs. Hudson, needless to say, would have preferred ballet lessons.

Mrs. Hudson's presence in the house made possible my visits to the solitary man who lived there, but she was considerably more than a mere nod to propriety. From her I learnt to garden, to sew on a button, to cook a simple meal. She also taught me that being womanly was not necessarily incompatible with being a mind. It was she, rather than my aunt, who taught me the workings of the female body (in words other than the anatomy textbooks I had previously depended upon, which concealed and obfuscated rather than clarified). It was she who took me to the London dressmakers and hairdressers so that when I came home from Oxford on my eighteenth birthday I could inflict on Holmes a case of apoplexy with my appearance. I was very glad for the presence of Dr. Watson on that occasion. Had I killed Holmes with my dressing up I should surely have thrown myself into the Isis by the end of term.

Which brings me to Watson, a sweet bumbly man whom I came to call, to his immense pleasure, Uncle John. I was quite prepared to detest him. How could anyone work so long with Holmes and learn so little? I thought. How could an apparently intelligent man so consistently fail to grasp the point? How could he be so stupid? my teenaged mind railed at him. Worst of all, he made it appear that Holmes, my Holmes, kept him near for one of two purposes: to carry a revolver (though Holmes himself was a crack shot) or to act dense and make the detective appear even more brilliant by contrast. What did Holmes see in this, this buffoon?²⁹ Oh, yes, I was ready to hate him, to destroy him with my scathing tongue. Only it didn't work out that way.

I arrived unannounced at Holmes' door one day in early September. The first storm of autumn had knocked out the telephone exchange in the village, so I could not ring ahead to say that I was coming, as I usually did. The road was a muddy mess, so rather than use the bicycle I had bought (with Mrs. Hudson's loan account, of course) I put on my high boots and set off across the downs. The sun came out as I walked the sodden hills, and the heat soared. As a result I left my muddy boots outside the door and let myself in through the kitchen, spattered with mud and dripping with sweat from the humidity and the wrong clothing. Mrs. Hudson was not in the kitchen, a bit odd for that early in the day, but I heard low voices from the main room. Not Holmes, another man, rural tones heavily overlaid with London. A neighbour, perhaps, or a house guest.

²⁸ This may have been "baritsu," more properly "bartitsu," a system of self-defence utilized by Holmes (and mentioned in "The Empty House") that was introduced from Japan into England by E. W. Barton-Wright in 1899.

²⁹ One must bristle at this preconception of Ms. Russell's. We know that it was not formed by the later portrayal of Dr. Watson by Nigel Bruce, in a series of films produced by Universal Pictures in the 1940's, and it is difficult to see what Canonical evidence there is for such "buffoonery." In fact, Dr. Watson, while self-effacing to a fault in his published stories, is nonetheless obviously observant, highly intelligent, courageous, and loyal. Holmes himself said of Watson, "[he] has some remarkable characteristics of his own to which in his modesty he has given small attention amid his exaggerated estimates of my own performances." ("The Blanched Soldier"). He was, above all, a man upon whom Holmes could "thoroughly rely." ("The Boscombe Valley Mystery")

“Good morning, Mrs. Hudson,” I called out softly, figuring that Holmes was still asleep. He often was in the mornings, as he kept odd hours—sleep was a concern of the body and of convenience, he declared, not of the clock. I went into the scullery and pumped water into the sink to wash my sweaty face and dirty hands and arms, but when my fingers groped for the towel they found the rail empty. As I patted about in blind irritation I heard a movement in the scullery doorway and the missing towel was pressed into my hand. I seized it and put my face into it.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson,” I said into the cloth. “I heard you talking with someone. Is this a bad time to come?” When no answer came I looked up and saw a portly, moustachioed figure in the doorway, smiling radiantly. Even without my spectacles I knew instantly who it was and concealed my wariness. “Dr. Watson, I perceive?” I dried my hands and we shook. He held on to mine for a moment, beaming into my face.

“He was right. You are lovely.”

This confused me no end. Who on earth was “he”? Surely not Holmes. And “lovely”? Stinking of sweat, in mismatched wool stockings with holes in both toes, hair straggling and one leg mud to the knee—lovely?

I extricated my hand, found my glasses on the sideboard, put them on, and his round face came into focus. He was looking at me with such complete, unaffected pleasure that I simply could not think what to do, so I just stood there. Stupidly.

“Miss Russell, I am so very happy to meet you at last. I will speak quickly because I think Holmes is about to arise. I wanted to thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for what you have done for my friend in the last few months. Had I read it in a casebook I would not have believed it, but I see and believe.”

“You see what?” I said. Stupidly. Like a buffoon.

“I’m sure you knew that he was ill, though not perhaps how ill. I watched him and despaired, for I knew that at that rate he would not see a second summer, possibly not even the new year. But since May he has put on half a stone, his heartbeat is strong, his colour good, and Mrs. Hudson says he sleeps—irregularly, as always, but he sleeps. He says he has even given up the cocaine to which he was rapidly becoming addicted—given it up.³⁰ I believe him. And I thank you, with all my soul, for you have done what my skills could not, and brought back my truest friend from the grave.” I stood there struck dumb with confusion. Holmes, ill? He had looked thin and grey when we first met, but dying? A sardonic voice from the next room made us both start guiltily.

³⁰ Watson had hopes that he had weaned Holmes from the habit, but in “The Missing Three-Quarter,” generally dated in 1896 or 1897, Watson admitted that “I was well aware that the fiend was not dead, but sleeping; and I have known that the sleep was a light one and the waking near when in periods of idleness I have seen the drawn look upon Holmes’s ascetic face, and the brooding of his deep-set and inscrutable eyes.”

“Oh come now, Watson, don’t frighten the child with your exaggerated worries.” Holmes came to the doorway in his mouse-coloured robe. “‘From the grave’ indeed. Overworked, perhaps, but one foot in the grave, hardly. I admit that Russell has helped me relax, and God knows I eat more when she is here, but it is little more than that. I’ll not have you worrying the child that she’s in any way responsible for me, do you hear, Watson?”

The face that turned towards me was so stricken with guilt that I felt the last of my wish to dislike him dissolve, and I began to laugh.

“But, I only wished to thank her—”

“Very well, you’ve thanked her. Now let us have our tea while Mrs. Hudson finds some breakfast for us. Death and resurrection,” he snorted. “Ridiculous!”³¹

I enjoyed that day, although at times it gave me the feeling of opening a book halfway through and trying to reconstruct what had gone before. Previously unknown characters meandered in and out of the conversation, placenames referred in shorthand to whole adventures, and, overall, the long years of a constructed relationship stood before me, an intricate edifice previously unseen. It was the sort of situation in which a third party, namely myself, could have easily felt awkward and outdistanced, but oddly enough I did not. I think it was because I was so very secure in my knowledge of the building Holmes and I had already begun. Even in the few weeks I had known him we had come far, and I no longer had any fear of Watson and what he represented. Watson, for his part, never feared or resented me. Before that day I would have scornfully said he was too dim-witted to see me as a threat. By the afternoon I knew that it was because his heart was too large to exclude anything concerning Holmes.

The day went quickly, and I enjoyed being an addition to the trio of old friends, Holmes, Watson, and Mrs. Hudson. When Watson went off after supper to gather his things for the evening train to London, I sat down beside Holmes, feeling a vague need to apologise to somebody.

“I suppose you know I was prepared to hate him,” I said finally.

“Oh yes.”

“I can see why you kept him near you. He’s so...good, somehow. Naïve, yes, and he doesn’t seem terribly bright³², but when I think of all the ugliness and evil and pain he’s known...It’s polished him, hasn’t it? Purified him.”

³¹ This theme was of course familiar Watson—many term “The Final Problem” and “The Empty House” as grand tales of death and resurrection.

³² Humph. See note xxx, above.

“Polished is a good image. Seeing myself reflected in Watson’s eyes was useful when contemplating a case that was giving me problems. He taught me a great deal about how humans function, what drives them. He keeps me humble, does Watson.” He caught my dubious look. “At any rate, as humble as I can be.”

Thus my life began again, in that summer of 1915. I was to spend the first years of the war under Holmes’s tutelage, although it was some time before I became aware that I was not just visiting a friend, that I was actually being taught by Holmes, that I was receiving, not casual lessons in a variety of odd and entertaining areas, but careful instruction by a professional in his area of considerable expertise. I did not think of myself as a detective; I was a student of theology, and I was to spend my life in exploration, not of the darker crannies of human misbehaviour, but of the heights of human speculation concerning the nature of the Divine. That the two were not unrelated did not occur to me for years. My apprenticeship began, on my part, without any conscious recognition of that state. I thought it was the same with Holmes, that he began by humouring this odd neighbour for lack of anything more demanding at hand, and ended up with a fully trained detective, until some years later I recalled that odd statement he had made in his garden on our very first day: “Twenty years ago,” he had muttered. “Even ten. But here? Now?” I did ask him, but of course he said that he had seen it within the first minutes. However, Holmes has always thought of himself as omniscient, so I cannot trust him on it.

On the face of things it would have been extremely unlikely for a proper gentleman such as Holmes to take on a young woman as pupil, much less apprentice her to his arcane trade. Twenty years before, with Victoria on the throne, an alliance such as Holmes and I forged—close, underchaperoned, and not even rendered safe by the bonds of blood—would have been unthinkable. Even ten years before, under Edward, ripples of shock would have run through the rural community and made our lives difficult.

This was, however, 1915, and if the better classes clasped to themselves a semblance of the old order, it did little more than obscure the chaos beneath their feet. During the war the very fabric of English society was picked apart and rewoven. Necessity dictated that women work outside the home, be it their own or that of their employers’, and so women put on men’s boots and took control of trams and breweries, factories and fields. Upper-class women signed on for long stretches nursing in the mud and gore of France or, for a lark, put on smocks and gaiters and became Land Girls during the harvest.³³ The harsh demands of king and country and the constant anxieties over the fighting men reduced the rules of chaperonage to a minimum; people simply had no energy to spare for the proprieties. Mrs. Hudson’s presence in the cottage made my long hours with Holmes possible. My

³³ The Board of Agriculture of England organised the “Land Army” in 1915, enlisting women to replace the agricultural manpower lost to enlistment in the military. By the end of 1917, there were over 250,000 women working as farm labourers, with 20,000 in the land army itself. The women who served in the “Land Army” were known as “Land Girls.”

parents being dead and my aunt caring little for my actions, as long as they did not intrude on hers: that too made it possible. Rural life conspired as well, for rural society, though rigid, recognises a true gentleman when it sees one, and the farmers trusted Holmes in a way that town-dwellers would never have done. There may have been gossip, but I rarely heard of it. Looking back, I think that the largest barrier to our association was Holmes himself, that inborn part of him that spoke the language of social customs, and particularly that portion of his makeup that saw women as some tribe of foreign and not-entirely-trustworthy exotics. Again, events conspired. Holmes was, after all, unconventional if not outright bohemian in his acquaintances and in his business dealings. His friendships ran the social spectrum, from the younger son of a duke through the staid and conventional Dr. Watson to a Whitechapel pawnbroker, and his profession brought him into contact with kings, and sewer-men, and ladies of uncertain virtue. He did not even consider lesser criminal activities any bar to social and professional relationships, as his ongoing fellowship with some of the shadier Irregulars of his Baker Street days would illustrate. Even Mrs. Hudson had originally come into his purview through a murder case (that written up by Dr. Watson as “Gloria Scott”).³⁴

Perhaps, too, there is some truth in the immutability of first impressions. I know that from that first day he tended to treat me more as a lad than as a girl and seemed in fact to solve any discomfort my sex might cause him by simply ignoring it: I was Russell, not some female, and if necessity required our spending time alone together, even spending the night without escort, then that is what we would do. First and foremost a pragmatist, he had no time for the interference of unnecessary standards.

As with Watson before me, we met by accident, and I too became a habit. My attitudes, my choice of clothing, even the shape of my body combined to protect him from having to acknowledge my nature. By the time I grew into womanhood, I was a part of his life, and it was too late for him to change.

In those early days, though, I had no inkling of what was to be. I simply adopted the habit of dropping by his cottage every few days on my walks, and we would talk. Or, he would show me an experiment he was working on, and we would both see that I lacked the background to comprehend fully the problem, so he would load me with books and I would take them home, returning when I had finished. Sometimes I would arrive to find him at his desk, pawing through stacks of notes and scribbles, and he would gratefully break off to read me what he had been writing. Questions would follow, and more books.

We spent much time touring the countryside, in sun, rain, or snow, following footprints, comparing samples of mud, noting how the type of soil affected the quality and longevity of a footprint or hoofmark. Every neighbour within ten miles was visited by us at least once, as we

³⁴ Biographers have long wondered whether there might be a connection between “Hudson,” the crew member of “The Gloria Scott” who becomes a blackmailer, and Holmes’s landlady. Others have noted another possible connection with Morse Hudson, the owner of a shop selling pictures and statuary in Kensington (“The Six Napoleons”). Then again, Hudson was a common name in 19th century London.

studied the hands of the dairy farmer and the woodsman, comparing their calluses and the musculature in their arms and, if they allowed it, their backs. We were a common sight on the roads, the tall, thin, grey man with his cloth cap beside the lanky blonde-plaited girl, heads together, deep in conversation or bent over some object. The farmers waved to us cheerily from their fields, and even the residents of the manor house hooted their horn as they flew past in their Rolls.

In the autumn Holmes began to devise puzzles for me. As the rain fell and the short hours of daylight cut into our time of walking the downs, as men died in the trenches in Europe and zeppelins dropped bombs on London, we played games. Chess was one of them, of course, but there were others as well, exercises in detecting and analysing material. He began by giving me descriptions of some of his cases and asking me to solve them from his collected facts. Once the case was not from his files but compiled from newspapers, a murder investigation currently under way in London. I found that one frustrating, as the facts presented were never complete or carefully enough gathered to be workable, but the man I chose as the best candidate for guilty party was eventually charged and confessed, so it turned out all right.

One day I came to his farm on a prearranged visit, to find a note pinned to the back door, which said merely:

R,
Find me.
—H.

I knew immediately that a random search was not what he had in mind, so I took the note to Mrs. Hudson, who shook her head as if at the play of children.

“Do you know what this is about?” I asked her.

“No, I don’t. If I ever understand that man, I’ll retire in glory. I’m down on my knees this morning, cleaning the floor, when up he comes and says can I have Will take his new shoes to the village today, there’s a nail coming loose. So Will gets ready to go, and is there any sign of Mr. Holmes or his shoes? None. I’ll never understand him.”

I stood and figuratively scratched my head for a few minutes before I realised that I had stumbled on his clue. I went out the door and found, of course, large numbers of footprints. However, it had rained the day before, and the soft ground around the cottage was relatively clear. I found a set of prints with a tiny scuff at the inside corner of the right heel, where the protruding nail dug a small hole at each step. They led me down to a part of the flower beds where I knew Holmes grew herbs for various potions and experiments. Here I found the shoes, but no Holmes. No footprints led off across the lawn. I puzzled at this for a few minutes until I noticed that some of the full seed pods had been recently cut off. I turned to the house, gave the shoes to a puzzled Mrs. Hudson, and found Holmes where I knew he would be, up in his laboratory, bent over the poppy seed pods, wearing carpet slippers. He looked up as I came in.

“No guesses?”

“No guesses.”

“Good. Then let me show you how opium is derived.” The training with Holmes served to sharpen my eyes and my mind, but it did little for the examinations I should have to pass to qualify for Oxford. Women were not at that time admitted to the University proper, but the women’s colleges were good, and I was free to attend lectures elsewhere. At first I had been disappointed that I would not be accepted at sixteen, due to wartime problems, my age, interest, and, it must be admitted, my sex. However, the time with Holmes was proving so engrossing, I hardly noticed the change in plans.

The examinations would be a problem if I continued this way, though, and I cast about for someone to fill in the large gaps in my education. I was most fortunate here, because I found a retired schoolmistress in the village who was willing to guide my reading. God bless Miss Sim and all like her, who gave me a love for English literature, force-fed me with poetry, and gently badgered me into a basic knowledge of the humanities. I owed my qualifying marks on the exams to her.

I was due to enter my college at Oxford in the autumn of 1917. I had been with Holmes for two years, and by the spring of 1917 could follow a footprint ten miles across country, tell a London accountant from a Bath schoolmaster by their clothing, give the physical description of an individual based on his shoe, disguise myself well enough to deceive Mrs. Hudson, and recognise the ashes from the 112 most common brands of cigarettes and cigars.³⁵ In addition, I could recite whole passages of the Greek and Latin classics, the Bible, and Shakespeare, describe the major archaeological sites in the Middle East, and, thanks to Mrs. Hudson, tell a phlox from a petunia.

And yet, beneath it all, underneath the games and the challenges, in the very air we all breathed in those days, lay death, death and horror and the growing awareness that life would never be the same, for anyone. While I grew and flexed the muscles of my mind, the bodies of strong young men were being poured ruthlessly into the 500-mile gutter that was the Western Front, an entire generation of men subjected to the grinding, body-rotting, mind-shattering impossibility of battle in thigh-deep mud and drifts of searing gas, under machine-gun fire and through tangles of wire.

Life was not normal during those years. Everyone did abnormal amounts of unusual work, children in the fields, women in the factories and behind the wheels. Everyone knew someone who had been killed, or blinded, or crippled. In one of the neighbouring villages the men had enlisted en masse in a “pals regiment.” Their position was overrun in October of 1916, and after the war there was not a single whole man in the village between the ages of fourteen and forty-six.

³⁵ In *A Study in Scarlet* and “The Boscombe Valley Mystery,” Holmes’s expertise regarding tobacco ash is mentioned, and in *The Sign of Four*, his monograph entitled *Upon the Distinction Between the Ashes of the Various Tobaccos* is specifically referenced. Holmes describes it in the course of the latter case as “enumerat[ing] a hundred and forty forms of cigar, cigarette, and pipe tobacco, with coloured plates illustrating the difference in the ash. “ Evidently the study was somewhat simplified for Ms. Russell by eliminating the last category of tobacco.

I was young enough to adapt to this schizophrenic life, flexible enough to find nothing inordinately strange in spending my morning at the nearby makeshift hospital, fetching bandages for blistering skin, trying not to gag on the putrid smell of gangrenous flesh, and wondering which man would not be there the next time, and then the afternoon with Holmes over Bunsen burner or microscope, and finally the evening at my desk deciphering a Greek text. It was a mad time, and looked at objectively was probably the worst possible situation for me, but somehow the madness around me and the turmoil I carried within myself acted as counterweights, and I survived in the centre.

I occasionally wondered that it did not seem to trouble Holmes more, watching his country being flayed alive on the fields of Somme and Ypres while he sat in Sussex, raising bees and carrying on abstruse experiments and long conversations with me. He did perform an advisory function at times, that I knew. Strange figures would appear at odd hours, closet themselves with him for much of the day, and skulk away into the night. Twice he went to London for week-long training courses, although when he reappeared from the second with a thin cut down the side of his face and a racking cough that lingered for months, I did wonder what kind of training it was. When I asked him he looked embarrassed and refused to tell me. I did not hear the answer for years.

Eventually the strain of it began to tell on me, and the momentum of normality faltered. For what, I began to wonder, did a University degree count? For that matter, what was the point of training to hunt down a criminal, even a murderer, when half a million Tommies were bleeding into the soil of Europe, when every man setting foot on a troop ship knew he held barely even odds of returning to England unmaimed?

The bitter hopelessness of it surged over me one bleak day in early 1917, when I sat on the bed of a young soldier and read him a letter from his wife, and a short time later watched him drown in the fluids from his blistered lungs. Most seventeen-year-old girls would have crept home and cried. I stormed into Holmes' cottage and vented my rage, threatening the beakers and instruments as I strode wildly up and down before the apprehensive detective.

“For God's sake, what are we doing here?” I shouted. “Can you think of nothing that we could do? Surely they must need spies or translators or something, but here we sit playing games and—” This went on for some time. When I began to run down, Holmes silently stood up and went to ask Mrs. Hudson to make some tea. He carried it back up himself, poured us each a cup, and sat down.

“What was behind that?” he asked calmly. I dropped into the other chair, suddenly exhausted, and told him. He drank his tea.

“You think we are doing nothing here, then. No, do not back down from your position, you are quite right. In the short view, with some minor exceptions, we are sitting this war out. We are leaving it to the buffoons in power and the faithful sloggers who march off to die. And afterwards, Russell? Are you able to take the long view, and envisage what will take place when this insanity comes to an end? There are two possibilities, are there not? One is, we will lose. That even if the

Americans do come in, we will run out of food and warm bodies to funnel into the trenches before the Germans do, and this small island will be overrun. The other possibility, one which I admit looks remote at present, is that we will succeed in pushing them back. What then will happen? The government will turn its face to rebuilding, the people who survive will limp home, and on the surface all will be happiness and prosperity. And beneath the surface there will be an unparalleled growth of the criminal class, feeding off the carrion and thriving under the inattentive eyes of authority. If we win this war, Russell, people with my skills—our skills—will be needed.”

“And if we don’t win?”

“If we lose? Can you imagine that a person skilled at assuming rôles and noticing details would not be of some use in an occupied Britain?”

There was little to say to that. I subsided and returned to my books with dogged determination, an attitude that persisted for the following year, until I was given the opportunity to do something concrete for the war effort. When the time came I chose two main areas of study to read at Oxford: chemistry and theology, the workings of the physical universe and the deepest stuff of the human mind.

That last spring and summer of undiluted Holmes was a time of great intensity. As the Allies, strengthened now by the economic aid and, eventually, armed entrance of the United States, slowly made headway, my tutorials with Holmes became increasingly strenuous and often left us both feeling drained. Our chemical experiments became ever more sophisticated, and the challenges and tests he devised for me sometimes took me days to resolve. I had grown to relish the quick, proud smile that very occasionally followed a noteworthy success, and I knew that these examinations I was passing with flying colours.

As summer drew to a close the examinations began to taper off, to be replaced by long conversations. Although massive bloodshed was being committed across the Channel, although the air throbbed and glass rattled for days on end with the July bombardment of the Somme, although I know I must have spent great numbers of hours in the emergency medical station, what I recall most about that summer of 1917 is how beautiful the sky was. The summer seemed mostly sky, sky and the hillsides on which we spent hours talking, talking. I had bought a lovely little chess set of ivory, inlaid wood, and leather to carry in my pocket, and we played games without number under the hot sky. He no longer had to handicap himself severely in order to work for his victories. I still have that set, and when I open it I can smell the ghost of the hay that was being cut in a field below us, the day I beat him evenly for the first time.

One warm, still evening just after dusk we walked back from an outing on the other side of Eastbourne. We were strolling towards the cottage from the Channel side, and as we neared the small fenced orchard that housed his hives Holmes stopped dead and stood with his head tipped to one

side. After a moment he gave a little grunt and strode rapidly across the turf to the orchard gate. I followed, and once among the trees I could hear the noise that his experienced ears had caught at the greater distance: a high, passionate sound, a tiny, endless cry of unmistakable rage coming from the hive in front of us. Holmes stood staring down at the otherwise peaceful white box, and clicked his tongue in exasperation.

“What is it?” I asked. “What’s that noise they’re making?”

“That is the sound of an angry queen. This hive has already swarmed twice, but it seems determined to swarm itself into exhaustion. The new queen had her nuptial flight last week, and she is now anxious to murder her rivals in their beds. Normally the workers would encourage her, but either they know she is going to lead another swarm, or they are somehow driving her to do so. In either case, they are keeping her from doing away with the unborn queens. They cover the royal cells with thick layers of wax, you see, so she cannot reach the princesses and they can’t chew their way out to answer her challenge. The noise is the queens, born and imprisoned, raging at each other through the prison walls.”

“What would happen if one of the unhatched queens escaped from her cell?”

“The first queen has the advantage, and would almost certainly kill it.”

“Even though she is going to abandon the hive anyway?”

“The lust for murder is not a rational thing. In queens, it is an instinctual response.”

I went up to Oxford a few weeks later. Both Holmes and Mrs. Hudson went on the train with me, to deliver me to my new home. We walked by the Cherwell and down to the Isis to feed the ill-tempered swans, and back by way of Mercury’s fountain and the silent, brooding bell named Tom to the station. I embraced Mrs. Hudson and turned to Holmes.

“Thank you,” was all I could come up with.

“Learn something here,” he said. “Find some teachers and learn something” was all he could say, and we shook hands and walked off to our separate lives.

The Oxford University I came up to in 1917 was a shadow of her normal, self-assured self, its population a tenth of that in 1914 before the war, a number lower even than in the years following

the Black Death.³⁶ The blue-coated wounded, wan and trembling beneath their tanned skins, outnumbered the black-robed academics, and several of the colleges, including my own, had been given over to housing them for the duration.

I expected great things of this University, many of which it gave me in abundance. I did find teachers, as Holmes had ordered, even before the remnant of male dons trickled back from France, having left parts of themselves behind. I found men and women who were not intimidated by my proud, rough-cut mind, who challenged and fought me and were not above reducing me sharply to size when criticism was due, and a couple of them were even better than Holmes at the delivery of a brief and devastating remark. Both for better and for worse, one received considerably more of their attentions during the war years than after the young men returned. I found that I did not miss Holmes as much as I had feared, and the intense pleasure of being away from my aunt went quite far to balance the irritation of the chaperonage rules (permission required for any outing, two women in any mixed party, mixed parties in cafés only between two o'clock and five-thirty in the afternoon, and then only with permission, *etc.*, *etc.*). Many girls found these rules infuriating; I found them less so, but perhaps that was only because I was more agile at climbing the walls or scrambling between hansom roof and upper window in the wee hours.

One thing I had not expected to find at University was fun. After all, Oxford was a small town composed of dirty, cold stone buildings filled with wounded soldiers. There were few male undergraduates, few male dons under the age of retirement, few men, period, who were not Blighty returns, fragile and preoccupied and often in pain. Food was scarce and uninteresting, heating was inadequate, the war was a constant presence, volunteer work intruded on our time, and to top it off, half the University societies and organizations were in abeyance, up to and including the dramatic society, OUDS.

Oddly enough, it was this last gap in the Oxford landscape that opened the door of *communitas* for me, and almost immediately I arrived. I was in my rooms on the first morning, investigating on all fours the possibility of repairing a bookshelf that had just collapsed under the combined weight of four tea chests of books, when there came a knock on my door.

“Come in,” I called.

“I say,” a voice began, and then changed from enquiry to concern. “I say, are you all right?”

I shoved my spectacles back onto my nose and dashed the hair out of my face with the back of my hand, and caught my first sight of Lady Veronica Beaconsfield, all plump five feet one inch of her, wrapped in an incredibly gaudy green-and-yellow silk dressing gown that did nothing for her complexion.

³⁶ A pandemic occurring in 1348 to 1350 C.E., killing between 75 to 200 million people in Europe. In England, it first appeared in Bristol, moving rapidly to Oxford and then to London. However, Ms. Russell's remark is undoubtedly hyperbolic rather than based on actual figures.

“All right? Of course. Oh, the books. No, they didn’t fall on me; I lay on them. I don’t suppose you have such a thing as a screwdriver?”

“No, I don’t believe I do.”

“Ah well, the porter may. Were you looking for someone?”

“You.”

“Then you have found her.”

“Petruccio,” she said, and seemed to pause in expectation. I sat back on my heels amongst the strewn volumes for a moment.

“Come on, and kiss me Kate?” I offered. “What, sweeting, all amourt?”³⁷

She clapped her hands together and squealed at the ceiling. “I knew it! The voice, the height, and she even knows the words. Can you do it à la vaudeville?”

“I, er—”

“Of course we can’t use real food in your scene where you throw it at the servants, not with all the shortages, it wouldn’t be nice.”

“May I ask...”

“Oh, sorry, how stupid of me. Veronica Beaconsfield. Call me Ronnie.”

“Mary Russell.”

“Yes, I know. Tonight then, Mary, nine o’clock, my rooms. First performance in two weeks.”

“But I—” I protested. But she was away.

I was simply the latest to discover the impossibility of refusing to cooperate in one of Ronnie Beaconsfield’s schemes. I was in her rooms that night with a dozen others, and three weeks later we performed *The Taming of the Shrew* for the entertainment of the Men of Somerville, as we called them, and I doubt that staid college of women had ever heard such an uproar before, or since. We gained several male converts to our society that night, and I was soon excused the rôle of Petruccio.

I was not, however, excused from participation in this amateur dramatic society, for it was soon

³⁷ *The Taming of the Shrew*, Act IV, Scene 2. The line means approximately, “Kate, are you feeling blue?”

discovered that I had a certain skill in make-up and even disguise, although I never let slip the name of Sherlock Holmes. I cannot now recall the process by which I, shy bluestocking intellectual Mary Russell, came to be the centre of the year's elaborate prank, but some weeks later in the madness of the summer term I was to find myself disguised as an Indian nobleman (Indian, for the turban to cover my hair) eating with the undergraduates of Baliol College. The breath of risk made it all the more delicious, for we should all have been sent down, or at the very least rusticated for the term, had we been caught out.

The career of Ratnakar Sanji in Oxford lasted for nearly the entire month of May. He was seen in three of the men's colleges; he spoke briefly (in bad English) in the Union; he attended a sherry party with the aesthetes of Christ Church (where he demonstrated exquisite manners) and a football game with the hearties of Brasenose (where he appeared to down a large quantity of beer and contributed two previously unknown verses to one of the rowdier songs); he even received a brief mention in one of the undergraduate newspapers, under the heading "Rajput Nobleman's Son Remarks on Oxford." The truth inevitably trickled out, and I only escaped the proctor's bulldogs by moments. Miss Mary Russell walked demurely away from the pub's back entrance, leaving Ratnakar Sanji in the dustbin behind the door. The proctors and the college authorities conducted a thorough search for the malefactors, and several of the young men who had been seen dining or at functions with Sanji received stern warnings, but scandal was averted, largely because no one ever found the woman who rumour said was involved. Of course the women's colleges received their close scrutiny. Ronnie was called in, as one of the most likely due to temperament, but when I followed her in the door—quiet and bookish, loping along at Ronnie's heels like a lugubrious wolf-hound—they discounted my height and the fact that I wore spectacles similar to Sanji's, and excused me irritably from the interrogation.

The conspiracy left me with two legacies, neither of which had been in my original expectations of University life: a coterie of lasting friends (Nothing binds like shared danger, however spurious.) and a distinct taste for the freedom that comes with assuming another's identity. All of which is not to say that I gave up work entirely. I revelled in the lectures and discussions. I took to the Bodleian library as to a lover and, particularly before Sanji's career began in May, would sit long hours in Bodley's arms, to emerge, blinking and dazed with the smell and feel of all those books. The chemistry laboratories were a revelation in modernity, compared to Holmes' equipment, at any rate. I blessed the war that had taken over the college rooms I might normally have been given, for the modernised quarters I found myself in had electrical lights, occasionally operating central heating radiators, and even—miracle of miracles—running water piped in for each resident. The hand-basin in the corner was an immense luxury (Even the young lords in Christchurch depended on the legs of the scouts for their supply of hot water.) and enabled me to set up a small laboratory in my sitting room. The gas ring, meant for heating cocoa, I converted into a Bunsen burner.

Between the joys of work and the demands of a burgeoning social life I found little time for sleep. At the end of the term in December I crept home, emptied by the passion of my first weeks in academia. Fortunately the conductor remembered my presence and woke me in time to change trains.

I turned eighteen on the second of January 1918. I arrived at Holmes' door with my hair elaborately piled on my head, wearing a dark-green velvet gown and my mother's diamond earrings. When Mrs. Hudson opened the door I was glad to see that she, Holmes, and Dr. Watson were also in formal dress, so we all glittered regally in that somewhat worn setting. When Watson had revived Holmes from the apopleptic seizure my appearance had caused, we ate and we drank champagne, and Mrs. Hudson produced a birthday cake with candles, and they sang to me and gave me presents. From Mrs. Hudson came a pair of silver hair combs. Watson produced an intricate little portable writing set, complete with pad, pen, and inkwell, that folded into a tooled leather case. The small box Holmes put before me contained a simple, delicate brooch made of silver set with tiny pearls.

"Holmes, it's beautiful."

"It belonged to my grandmother. Can you open it?" I searched for a clasp, my vision and dexterity hindered somewhat by the amount of champagne I had drunk. Finally he stretched out his fingers and manipulated two of the pearls, and it popped open in my hand. Inside was a miniature portrait of a young woman, with light hair but a clear gaze I recognised immediately as that of Holmes.

"Her brother, the French artist Vernet³⁸, painted it on her eighteenth birthday," said Holmes. "Her hair was a colour very similar to yours, even when she was old."

The portrait wavered in front of my eyes and tears spilt down my cheeks.

"Thank you. Thank you everybody," I choked out and dissolved into maudlin sobs, and Mrs. Hudson had to put me to bed in the guest room.

I woke once during the night, disorientated by the strange room and the remnants of alcohol in my blood-stream. I thought I had heard soft footsteps outside my door, but when I listened, there was only the quiet tick of the clock on the other side of the wall.

I returned to Oxford the following week-end, to a winter term that was much the same as the autumn weeks had been, only more so. My main passions were becoming theoretical mathematics and the complexities of Rabbinic Judaism, two topics that are dissimilar only on the surface. Again the dear old Bodleian opened its arms and pages to me, again I was dragged along in Ronnie Beaconsfield's wake (*Twelfth Night*³⁹ this time, and also a campaign to improve the conditions for cart horses plying the streets of the city). Ratnakar Sanji was conceived in the term's final weeks,

³⁸ Émile Jean Horace Vernet (1789-1863) was a French painter of marital pieces, reportedly the sister of Holmes's grandmother ("The Greek Interpreter").

³⁹ This play is reputedly Holmes's favorite of Shakespeare's work, quoted twice by him in Watson's accounts of their adventures. Many scholars argue that Holmes's birthday was "twelfth night" (January 6).

to be born in May following the spring holiday, and again I simply did without sleep, and occasionally meals. Again I emerged at the end of term, lethargic and spent. The lodgings house was looked after by a couple named Thomas, two old dears who retained their thick Oxfordshire country accents. Mr. Thomas helped me carry my things to the cab waiting on the street as I was leaving for home. He grunted at the weight of one case, laden with books, and I hurried to help him with it. He brushed off his hands, looked at the case critically, then at me.

“Now, Miss, not to be forward, but I hope you’ll not be spending the whole of the holiday at your desk. You came here with roses in your cheeks, and there’s not a hint of them there now. Get yourself some fresh air, now, y’hear? Your brain’ll work better when you come back if you do.”

I was surprised, as this was the longest speech I had ever heard him deliver, but assured him that I intended to spend many hours in the open air. At the train station I caught a glance of myself in a mirror and could see what he meant. I had not realised how drawn I was looking, and the purple smudges under my eyes troubled me.

The next morning the alien sounds of silence and bird song woke me early. I pulled on my oldest work clothes and a pair of new boots, added heavy gloves and a woolly hat against the chill March morning, and went to find Patrick. Patrick Mason was a large, slow-moving, phlegmatic Sussex farmer of fifty-two with hands like something grown from the earth and a nose that changed direction three times. He had managed the farm since before my parents had married, had in fact run with my mother as a child (he three years older) through the fields he now tended, had, I think, been more than half in love with her all his life. Certainly he worshipped her as his Lady. When his wife died and left him to finish raising their six children, only his salary as manager made it possible to keep the family intact. The day his youngest reached eighteen, Patrick divided his land and came to live on the farm I now owned. In most ways this was more his land than mine, an attitude both of us held and considered only right, and his loyalty to his adoptive home was absolute, if he was unwilling to suffer any nonsense from the legal owner.

Up until now my sporadic attempts to help out with the myriad farmyard tasks had been met with the same polite disbelief with which the peasants at Versailles must have greeted Marie Antoinette’s milkmaid fantasies.⁴⁰ I was the owner, and if I wanted to push matters he could not actually stop me from dirtying my hands, but other than the seasonal necessity of the wartime harvest (which obviously pained him) My Lady’s Daughter was taken to be above such things. He ran the farm to his liking, I lived there and occasionally wandered down from the main house to chat, but neither he nor I would have thought of giving me a say in how things were run. This morning that was about to change.

I trudged down the hill to the main barn, my breath smoking around my ears in the clear, weak

⁴⁰ The Hameau de la Reine, the “Queen’s Hamlet,” is a cluster of farm buildings on the grounds of the palace of Versailles. It was built for Marie Antoinette in 1783 and served as a private meeting place for the Queen and her closest friends, a place where they indulged fantasies of rural life.

winter sunshine, and called his name. The voice that answered led me through to the back, where I found him mucking out a stall.

“Morning, Patrick.”

“Welcome back, Miss Mary.” I had long ago forbidden greater formality, and he in turn refused greater familiarity, so the compromise was Miss and my first name.

“Thank you, it’s good to be back. Patrick, I need your help.”

“Surely, Miss Mary. Can it wait until I’ve finished this?”

“Oh, I don’t want to interrupt. I want you to give me something to do.”

“Something to do?” He looked puzzled.

“Yes. Patrick, I’ve spent the last six months sitting in a chair with a book in my hands, and if I don’t get back to using my muscles, they’ll forget how to function altogether. I need you to tell me what needs doing around here. Where can I start? Shall I finish that stall for you?”

Patrick hurriedly held the muck-rake out of my reach and blocked my entrance to the stall.

“No, Miss, I’ll finish this. What is it you’d like to do?”

“Whatever needs doing,” I said in no uncertain terms, to let him know I meant business.

“Well...” His eyes looked about desperately and lit on a broom. “Do you want to sweep? The wood shavings in the workshop want clearing up.”

“Right.” I seized the big broom, and ten minutes later he came into the workshop to find me furiously raising a cloud of dust and wood particles that settled softly onto every surface.

“Miss Mary, oh, well, that’s too fast. I mean, do you think you could get the stuff out the door before you fling it in the air?”

“What do you mean? Oh, I see, here, I’ll just sweep it off of there.”

I took the broom and made a wild sweep along the workbench, and an edge of the unwieldy head sent a tray of tools flying. Patrick picked up a chipped chisel and looked at me as if I had attacked his son.

“Have you never used a broom before?”

“Well, not often.”

“Perhaps you should carry firewood, then.”

I hauled barrow-cart after barrow-cart of split logs up to the house, saw that we needed kindling as well, and had just started using the double-bitted axe to split some logs on a big stone next to the back door when Patrick ran up and prevented me from cutting off my hand. He showed me the cutting block and the proper little hand axe and carefully demonstrated how not to use them. Two hours after I had walked down the hill I had a small pile of wood and a very trembly set of muscles to show for my work.

The road to Holmes’s cottage seemed to have lengthened since last I rode that way, or perhaps it was only the odd sensation of nervousness in the pit of my stomach. It was the same, but I was different, and I wondered for the first time if I was going to be able to carry it off, if I could join these two utterly disparate sides of my life. I pushed the bicycle harder than my out-of-condition legs cared for, but when I came over the last rise and saw the familiar cottage across the fields, faint smoke rising from the kitchen chimney, I began to relax, and when I opened the door and breathed in the essence of the place, I was home, safe.

“Mrs. Hudson?” I called, but the kitchen was empty. Market day, I thought, so I went to the stairs and started upwards. “Holmes?”

“That you, Russell?” he said, sounding mildly surprised, though I had written the week before to say what day I would be home. “Good. I was just glancing through those experiments on blood typology we were doing before you left in January. I believe I’ve discovered what the problem was. Here: Look at your notes. Now look at the slide I’ve put in the microscope...”

Good old Holmes, as effusive and demonstrative as ever. Obediently, I sat before the eyepieces of his machine, and it was as if I’d never been away. Life slid back into place, and I did not doubt again.

On the third week of my holiday I went to the cottage on a Wednesday, Mrs. Hudson’s usual day in town. Holmes and I had planned a rather smelly chemical reaction for that day, but as I let myself in the kitchen door I heard voices from the sitting room.

“Russell?” his voice called.

“Yes, Holmes.” I walked to the door and was surprised to see Holmes at the fire beside an elegantly dressed woman with a vaguely familiar face. I automatically began to reconstruct mentally the surroundings where I had seen her, but Holmes interrupted the process.

“Do come in, Russell. We were waiting for you. This is Mrs. Barker. You will remember, she and her husband live in the manor house. They bought it the year before you came here. Mrs. Barker,

this is the young lady I was mentioning—yes, she is a young lady inside that costume. Now that she is here, would you please review the problem for us? Russell, pour yourself a cup of tea and sit down.”

It was the partnership’s first case.