

and stroked his thumb along my palm. My heart was pounding again and I was absolutely confounded by his behaviour. It was so unexpected, so unlike the Holmes I had thought to know. Greatly daring and in dire need of something that would assist me in understanding what was occurring between us, I looked up at Holmes. His expression was an odd mixture of diffidence, apology and tenderness. It was, in fact, an expression I had seen not a week since, when I had emerged from the hiding-place on the moor and discovered Holmes. Although I could scarce believe my eyes and ears, he was, indeed, still my friend, and I gazed at him as he continued speaking. "I was trying to be romantic, to wine and dine you. Then an excellent play, and perhaps, if neither of us was too exhausted, then I was going to take you on to a rather unusual club of which I am a member."

Abruptly, his movements as quick and spare as was his habit, he abandoned me, but for mere moments only. He had loosened one of the box curtains, as if to shield us from a draught.

"There," Holmes said, "that is a distinct improvement. Now, our box is visible only to the stage and to our sister box directly opposite. As that box is empty and the actors somewhat pre-occupied, I think I can safely say that we are in private here." He was beside me again, and took my hand in his.

"I don't know what to say," I told him, rather less than steadily, although at least my unmanly fit of weeping had not thickened my voice.

Holmes smiled at me in a singularly sweet manner. It seemed to me that I had perhaps had more smiles from him this evening than in all the months of our friendship. "You could, perhaps, say that you forgive me?"

"But why ever should I forgive you? You have done nothing! I am the one with the stain against my name, not you."

He canted his head as he looked at me. "Ah, but my dear Watson, your actions were innocent and restrained by your honour and basic decency. I, on the other hand..."

"What could you possibly have done to compare to my behaviours? Would you force me to admit to you, actually to state to you here and now, the terrible things I have thought and imagined? Would you have me confess my feelings, emotions that no gentleman should ever

have for another gentleman?"

He was smiling at me again, but there was less sweetness there and more than a hint of spice. "I would be very much interested in hearing such a confession from you, my dearest friend. You see, I do believe that your confession of such matters would prove a perfect match for mine."

This was more than I could comprehend in an instant. Words failed me, and I'm afraid I gaped like a stranded fish after Holmes' pronouncement. "You?"

"Yes," he answered softly, "me."

"You," I began, only to falter. How could I possibly put such a thing into words? I could not be sure that I was not being led astray by the wine I had consumed with dinner, nor could I be certain that I was not deluding myself with something I so fervently wished to be true. "Are you saying..." It was hopeless. Nothing in my life had prepared me for such a moment, and I was floundering.

Then, as he had done as many times for me as I had for him, Holmes came to my rescue. On this occasion, he saved me with words. "Yes, John, I do. I find myself caring about you far more than is either sensible or practical. I had intended to do nothing about it at all, simply ignore it until it went away. But I'm afraid you are too strong an influence upon me for that fate to befall us."

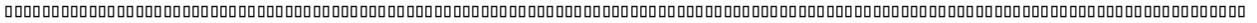
I understood his speech precisely, but I wanted to hear more. I needed time to come to terms with this singular change in my fortunes, and I also craved the reassurance Holmes' words were to me. There was a happiness beginning in me, and a hope for something I had long since given up as lost. "So you are saying that you feel for me as I do for you? Is this—" I broke off, not quite satisfied over which word to choose.

Holmes appeared to have no such doubts. "I desire you," he said.

Flustered, I hushed him and looked all around us for fear that someone had heard him. This was a foolishness on my part, for Holmes had chosen our box well. We were quite safe, fully as safe as in our own rooms, where Mrs. Hudson was never more than a few rooms distant.

"It's perfectly all right," Holmes soothed me. "I have taken every precaution, for I had intended to make love to you in this box as I had in the restaurant earlier this evening. I had planned this, dear chap, that I might whisper to you, touch you thus," he placed, once more, his hand upon my





intruded yourself upon my life..."

I spluttered then, too outraged to remind him of who had requested me to accompany whom on so many occasions. I subsided when he smiled at me once again and took my hand in his.

"I did not think to arm myself against you, and by the time I saw the danger you posed me, it was far too late to save myself. All that remained was to attempt to minimise the damage. Then, as time passed, and I observed how you comported yourself—for I had perceived your emotional attachment to me, I believe long before you yourself had recognised your affliction."

"Now, really, Holmes," I began, outraged.

It was not often that Holmes displayed such rank surprise, but I saw that I had shocked him. "You would deny having such feelings for me?" he asked me.

"No," I blustered. "I deny anyone but myself the right to call my feelings for you 'an affliction.'"

"Ah," he answered, smiling gently at me, and his hand upon mine was of an equal gentleness. "I should know better than to usurp a doctor's right of diagnosing."

I was no longer listening to what he was saying, my mind having finally caught up with what he had said before. "You are telling me," I asked, and my voice was as tremulous as a girl's, "that you know of my affections for you and also of my...carnal interest in you."

He answered me in the tone usually reserved for those occasions upon which it was necessary for him to elucidate a point that was, to him, all too patently clear. "Yes, that is precisely what I am telling you."

"And you are also informing me," I took a deep breath in the forlorn hope that it would steady my nerves somewhat, "that you share these carnal interests of mine?"

His eyes darkened, as men's do in the heat of passion. It was an unexpected sight, upon his face, looking at me, and a sight I had never taunted myself with hopes of. "Do not, I pray you, forget the companion of our carnal interests, that other aspect which you and I both share in what I hope will be equal measure."

This was surely too much. I stared at him, aghast. "You have affections for me?"

He threw his head back and gave a shout of laughter, and at a most inappropriate moment of the play. There were a few hissed calls for quiet,

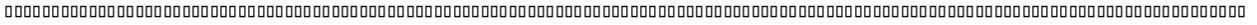
but it was most reassuring to note that none of the audience had but the vaguest idea from whence that shout of laughter had come. "Affections?" Holmes was saying, completely undisturbed by any consideration of what the masses, no matter their class or breeding, would think of him. "Affections? Oh, my dear fellow, surely affections is too banal a word. Affections are what one harbours for a pet or a house or even a favoured strumpet. Between you and me, surely, surely, there are better words?"

There was one word far better than affection, yet I was not certain he would willingly entertain its speaking. I was only too aware of the term appropriate to describe my emotions for my truest friend, but this was hardly a word Holmes had ever welcomed in the past.

"Have I swayed you so, that you will not even speak the word?" He was whispering once more, leaning in very closely towards me, his hands both strong and tender upon me. "Have I so convinced you that the emotion is valueless that you will not confess to it?" He kissed me then, a butterfly-wing against the corner of my mouth. The caress was utterly chaste in execution, but libidinous in effect. I trembled, and I believe he misunderstood the reasons for that physical response. "No, you would confess it, but never to me. You fear me too much. My damnable temper and my callous inconsideration. None of that will change, my dearest chap, but I promise you that you will no longer bear the brunt of my self-loathing for having failed to keep you at a suitable distance." He repeated the kiss, and as he did so, his hand slipped under my jacket and began unbuttoning my waistcoat. "Instead, I promise that you will know that my tempers are purely the result of some case, or of boredom. You will know," he had finished now with the buttons of my best white waistcoat and had started to undo the waistband of my trousers, "that my affections for you are of the deepest measure."

I gasped, not only from the impact of his words, but also because he was now spreading my flies open and his hand was searching out the opening to my drawers. His long fingers found the gap, and I felt, for the first time, his hand upon my private parts. I am afraid I made a sound then, but could spare only the smallest amount of concern over public reaction. I knew this to be insanity, but not even the prospect of the prisoner's dock, the





functioning once more, of the most vital importance to me that he should perform this act for me and that he should take my seed inside of himself. Of course, this was purely my need for him to prove his word to me, to give me evidence that my eyes and ears had not deceived me and that Holmes did indeed return my affections full fold.

He was stroking my testes, and I could feel them jump with his every caress. He knew, then, that I was close to *le petit mort*, but he did not hesitate. His mouth closed more firmly around me, his tongue pressed more firmly against me, and he made a sound in his throat, the vibration delightful against my glans. In that moment, I spent myself, and he swallowed me, taking everything I had to offer and not ceasing his ministrations until I was both drained dry and flaccid in his mouth. Then, and only then, when my pleasure was utterly complete, did he relinquish his physical hold on me, his emotional hold all the more firmly enshrined. I was sprawled inelegantly upon my chair, incapable of either movement or speech. He raised himself with a final, and very moving, kiss to my spent manhood. Then my clothing was rearranged, every button buttoned and every fold smoothed out.

"There," he said, "nothing at all to betray us." The he looked at my face, and my expression must have said more than any mere words ever could. "Well, nothing, if you keep your hat low and your face averted. No-one could look upon that countenance and not see you for a man in love."

I found my voice, and my boldness. "And a man who has recently been well loved. I wish to thank you..."

"For beginning reparation on a terrible debt? I think not."

"I wish to thank you in kind," I replied. Infected with his daring and made brave by the heedlessness of the rest of the audience, I reached for his trousers. Once again, he brushed my hands aside, but not before I had ascertained that he was in a state of some arousal.

"Allow me to do penance in my own way," he said, retreating back to his seat. "I feel myself to be dishonoured for having treated you so shabbily, and these few hours are all I can bear to redress the balance."

I heard my own words once again, as I had stood upon the moor and met him. "Then you use me, and yet you do not trust me!" I had cried with

some bitterness. 'I think that I have deserved better at your hands'. Holmes, it would seem, was in agreement with me. "It does not matter," I replied tenderly, my hand seeking his in the darkness. I found it, and clasped him tightly. He returned the gesture, and also smiled, a little shyly, a little ashamedly. "Yes, I confess that I have felt myself treated harshly in your hands, but what you have just done—" I lost the words, for the softness in his grey eyes brought a lump to my throat and I must needs swallow before I could hope to speak another word. "What you have confessed to me—"

His eyes were twinkling now, and upon his lips hovered that small, quirked smile of which I have always been so enamoured. "In fact, you did not know that I had it in me."

"There is more that you shall have in you shortly," I replied in haste, and then my cheeks flamed with heat as I realised the dreadful crudeness of my speech. Holmes, however, did not seem to find such roughness offensive. Rather, he took my hand that was yet clasped in his and pressed our entwined fingers against the burgeoning strength of his groin.

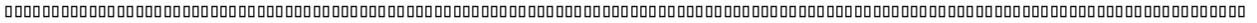
"I could not agree with you more," he said, and I was astonished to note that his voice was all aquiver. "However, as I have said, I must repay you for the dismay and anguish I have caused, to prove that I am sincere."

I began to protest, unwilling to either wait to know his body or to make him suffer one whit of what I had endured in my lonely achings for him.

"No, no," he said, "this is something I must do. There are no marriage certificates for our sort, nor is there a clergyman in the land who would bless our union. We must make our own bonds, John, and we must make our own covenants. This," and again he pressed our joined hands to the heated hardness of his manhood, "is my proof to you that I am sincere in my vows and honest in my devotion to you."

I did not know what to say to such a blatant display of love from a man I had once believed had no human weaknesses at all. "This is not necessary," I told him. "And worse, it leaves me in a deuced awkward position." He was withdrawing from me, untangling our hands and his eyes were shuttered and opaque. That hurt me more than I believed possible. "Don't," I murmured, "please, I beg you, do not shut me out. I love you, as you





country residence than a home in Town, but that was the only odd thing about the place. Holmes raised his stick and pounded in what was obviously a code. After a few moments, a small cache port opened and a shadowed face growled— “Yes? What d’you want and who are you?”

“We wish admittance and we are friends of Sir David and his cousin, Sir Jonathan.”

The door immediately opened to us, and we entered. The shadowy face belonged to a handsome, rough sort of man, of perhaps thirty summers. “Thought it were you, guv’nor,” he said, “but I ’ave ter be sure. Yer’ve picked a good night to come.”

“I’m delighted to hear that. For future reference, Jimmy, this is my very special friend, Dr. Watson, and you may admit him without fear.”

“Right yer are,” Jimmy replied, taking a good look at my face. I knew this man would recognise me again, even were I not to return for ten years.

“This way, John,” Holmes said, pointing along a white path that was bordered by weeping willows and a brooklet on one side and large rhododendron bushes on the other. I thought I could hear sounds coming from behind the vegetation, and my suspicion must have been obvious. “This is an extraordinarily special house,” Holmes whispered. “One can do anything one chooses here. Complete freedom, John, without having to once look over one’s shoulder. We are safe, within these walls, where none but our own kind ever enter.”

“I would still rather be home in Baker Street,” I replied somewhat churlishly. I had heard of houses of this sort, and I had no desire to share Holmes with any debauchery, nor did I wish to indulge in anything of that nature with anyone but the man at my side. I was in love, and newly told that my love was returned, and had no wish to dally in pleasures of the flesh that might be welcome once the first blush of love has worn into the comfort and ease of long-term companionship. I wanted Holmes, and I wanted him all to myself.

“Come, come,” he whispered to me, almost pushing me, reluctant, up the sweeping stairs to the front door. “Trust me in this, as you have trusted me so well in all other things.”

Had it not been for his open affection for me and how important it was to him that I trust him still, I should have left that house without setting foot over its threshold. Instead, still dizzy from

what Holmes had said and done to me this night, I followed him. A manservant took our coats and hats with a discreet murmur of welcome. Holmes asked him something, low-voiced, and I heard the servant reply, “In the main ballroom as always, sir.”

Someone else who knew Holmes well. I began to feel a fool for having thought him innocent and unaware of the demands of the male body. It would appear that Holmes had far more experience to call upon than my few paltry engagements with members of my own sex. Doubt began to settle upon me, as I contemplated how often Holmes must have frequented this house and how many men he must have known in a purely Biblical sense. Darkness weighed upon me, and I wondered if all his protestations were nothing more than a means to an end. Perhaps he was merely curious, or seeking the convenience of a partner he already shared rooms with. I did not truly believe any of that, but I was not certain that all my doubts were born of insecurity. I truly feared that he was doing this out of pity for me. My own words, my own voice came back to me as I had spoken to him on the moor. I had sounded pathetic to my own ears, ill-done by and melancholy. I knew that Holmes had intended to cheer me by dinner and an evening at the theatre, and despite his apparent sincerity, I could not relinquish the insidious fear that all this was done out of his sense of guilt at having used me so poorly.

A liveried servant opened another door to us and we stepped into a magnificent ballroom. The first impression one had was of immense size, and a huge crowd, and then one saw that it was an illusion created by mirrored walls and large chandeliers. There were sofas and chairs encircling the room, and a table laden with a cold supper. It took but a moment for the most uncommon aspect of the room to become clear. There was not a woman present. All the revellers were men, dressed primarily in black, as was proper, but some were dressed in gaudy clothes of a most improper sort. One man, I noted with some astonishment, was bedecked in a formally cut suit of the most livid green satin. Another was in peacock blue, yet another in brightest red. For the most part, the rest were dressed in the usual somber colour of Englishman at play. There were couples—two men, together!—dancing closely, and elsewhere men were discoursing with men. There was nothing

