EMMA SCOT

IF I NEEDED SOMEONE

And now to take two on Holmes/Watson. Where Jane Mailander’s A Thrice-Daily Injection follows the optimistic high road, Emma Scot, as is her nature, has chosen to slide along the pessimistic low one. We faithful readers are not surprised. The title, of course, is taken from the Beatles’ song.

The room’s sole occupant was crumpled untidily into his chair, an opened book balanced precariously upon his knees, his head nodding as he dozed. A hansom traekled past outside, each clip-clop of horse’s hoof loud in the stillness of the small hours of the night. The man did not stir, until the clock on the mantel struck three, the last striking of the bell rousing him from uncomfortable slumber. Rubbing at his eyes, he then examined his pocket-watch as if he could not trust the time kept by the mantel clock.

It was obvious that Dr. John Watson was keeping vigil, sitting up waiting, as had become his habit of late. In the early months when first he had shared these apartments with Mr. Sherlock Holmes, the two men had had little contact with each other, each being of differing habits and tastes. However, as Dr. Watson’s health had slowly recovered from the Jaizal bullet and the enteric fever he had suffered whilst an Army doctor in the second Afghan war, his bored and restless mind had turned more and more to the oddities and eccentricities of the man with whom he shared lodgings. With the passing of time, this had grown from mere curiosity to be satisfied, to active participation in the mysteries at which Holmes was so gifted in solving. This fortnight past, Watson’s current involvement had dwindled as the case neared fruition and Holmes insisted that only he, and he himself, could safely bring the matter to a satisfactory close. Tonight, if Holmes’ deductions were correct, and Dr. Watson had come to doubt that his friend could ever err in matters of logic and investigation, then Holmes would bring to justice a particularly loathsome creature who had been preying upon widows and spinsters, ruining both their good names and their fortunes.

Stretching mightily, as a man must after so many hours in a chair designed for sitting and not for sleeping, Watson roused himself enough to stand by the window, staying there for many minutes until the sight of driving rain and his chilled distance from the hearth ushered him to resume his impatient waiting in the relative comfort and cosiness of his chair. It was nigh on four o’clock when finally he heard the muted click of the outer door, and the weary tromp of Holmes’ feet on the stair treads.

“Good God, man,” Dr. Watson exclaimed from his warm place in front of the fire, his friend coming damp and morose through the door, “you must be absolutely chilled to the bone. Here,” he continued, rising rapidly to his feet, hurriedly taking the shawl from the back of the sofa and wrapping it around the wet and bedraggled figure now shivering and dripping on the oriental rug, “wrap this around you, and let us get you immediately into a hot bath, else I fear for your lungs in such inclement weather. Especially,” he added with that stern tone he had taken to of late in addressing Holmes, “after you have been taking such ill-care of yourself these last several days.”

“Oh, don’t fuss so,” Holmes told him, with such an irritable snap in his voice that one would expect...
Watson to look at him sharply, but the other man had quickly reconciled himself to his companion’s irascible nature and sharp tongue and thus paid little heed to Holmes’ protests, which it must be admitted, were nothing more than tokens of pride, as proved by his speedy acquiescence to Watson’s ministrations.

“I hardly call preventing pneumonia to be fussing, Holmes. If it troubles you, then remind yourself that I have taken the Hippocratic oath and may not deny succour to a man in need.” So saying, he bustled Holmes into the bathroom, where he had earlier had the foresight to lay hot water bottles in the folds of the Turkish towels. It was the work of moments to have steaming water pouring into the bathtub, and to it, Watson added several handfuls of mineral salts, mindful as he was of the aches and pains that were the usual result of being out in such weather.

Turning from preparing the bath, Watson was confronted with the sight of Holmes not yet fully disrobed. “Come, come, Holmes,” he tut-tutted, irritated at Holmes’ behaviour over such a trifle, and surprised at such prudery from a mind that was usually so logical and cold, “surely you cannot feel constrained to modesty in front of me? For Heaven’s sake, I’m a doctor, and I have seen many more men in their natural state than you could even begin to count. Hurry up, there’s a good fellow, and into the bath with you.”

It was with an odd cast to his countenance that Holmes did as he was bid, contriving a degree of modesty even then, turning, as he did, so that his back was almost all that was presented to his colleague. Silently, he began bathing, and it was not lost upon Dr. Watson that a flannel was dropped, to conceal that most private of parts.

As he had become adept at doing, Watson refrained from comment, assuming that this was yet another in a long list of Holmes’ peculiarities, and not wishing to seem himself to harbour any untoward interests in his friend’s anatomy. “You haven’t said a word since your return. Am I to assume the evening a success?”

Leaning back until he was all but hidden by the cabinet of the bath, Holmes closed his eyes in utter weariness, but his mouth hardened. “It was an unqualified success.”

“Then this rake has been stopped.”

“The rake, as you so colourfully call him, has not only been stopped, but sent to his Judgement.”

“Holmes! Surely you cannot possibly mean—”

“No, no, do not distress yourself. I did not kill him. But I did see him stumble and fall over the edge of the canal. And I confess, Doctor,” he went on, with a slight emphasis on Watson’s humane vocation, marking it in contrast to his own actions, “that I did nothing to assist him regain the bank.”

For several moments, neither man spoke, and then Watson, with gaze softened to compassion, said: “It is in God’s Hands now, Holmes, and I dare say, by not risking your own life to save his, you have saved several decent women from public humiliation in the witness stand. And we cannot calculate how many more women you have saved from abasement and ruin at that swine’s hands.”

“That was surely a part of my decision. But I must also confess to a degree of revenge.”

“And for that, I cannot condemn you for what I feel myself.” With that, Watson took up the sea-sponge from the bath rack, and began washing Holmes’ back. “We had best be thorough,” he said, rubbing more soap into pale skin, “for I dread to think what creatures were living in those clothes you wore tonight.”

“Whatever they were, I vouch they were carnivorous.”

“In that case, we must resort to the carbolic.”

With the quick movement that had only recently returned, Watson gathered the unpleasant soap from the wash-stand, and immediately began lathering Holmes’ back. “We had best be thorough,” he said, thinking of the men he had seen dying, not because he had chosen not to help, but because he himself had been helpless. “It does you no good and much harm to knot your muscles so. Allow them to relax, so that the blood can flow unimpeded. Yes, that’s better…” With even, smooth and calming strokes, he worked the soap into Holmes’ skin, rinsing it carefully with the sponge. As he worked, he could not help but notice the flawlessness of Holmes’ complexion, skin as clear and unblemished as if he had never lived anywhere but in the deepest countryside. The muscles, too, while lean and evocative of the whipcord strength and stamina that was such a characteristic of the other man, were of great interest to the physician, but not as a result of his profession.

“This mark,” he said, gently swabbing round the darkening of a bruise, “how did you come by it?”
“A cudgel which I failed to dodge. It is of no importance, Watson.”

“It’s not a serious wound, I’ll grant you, for while there is some swelling, the skin is not broken, but any hurt to you is important,” Watson replied. “I shall apply liniment to it when you are bathed.”

“Do not trouble yourself.”

“Nonsense,” Watson replied heartily, entirely failing to hear the tone of warning in his friend’s voice, “it is no trouble whatsoever.”

“I fear it will be more trouble than our friendship can bear.”

“What in Heaven makes you say such a thing?” Watson demanded, carefully rinsing the area around the bruising. “The world has come to a sorry pass if the need of a common courtesy from a friend is deemed a demand greater than friendship can bear.”

To this, Holmes did not reply, hunching forward instead, away from the touch of Watson’s hands.

It seemed to Watson, spurred no doubt by the guiltiest of consciences, that Holmes’ withdrawal was an answer to Watson’s thoughts rather than his words. “Holmes,” he said, pained, grasping his friend by the shoulder, the damp softness of skin a temptation upon which he did not act, “please do not do this. You must surely know that I would never step beyond what is proper.”

“My dear fellow,” Holmes murmured, his own hand rising to grasp Watson’s, “don’t.”

“I was doing nothing, absolutely nothing one man might do in perfect innocence to comfort a friend, Holmes,” Watson snapped, snatching his hand away from any contact, fired by Holmes’ cruel misjudgement of him. “You have no need to fear any action from me—”

“And indeed, I do not,” Holmes replied quietly. The statement gave Watson pause, the implications of it slow to make themselves conceivable. “Does this mean…? Do you imply that…?”

“Apply my own methods, but only if you must,” Holmes said harshly, erupting from the bathtub like Poseidon, water spilling and splashing everywhere. Almost before Watson had time to realise that his friend was making an escape, Holmes had enveloped himself in a voluminous bath-towel and was hurrying from the bathroom itself.

His first impulse was to follow at all speed, but common sense asserted itself, and Watson remained where he was, lost in thought. It could not be denied: Holmes’ words implied that it was his own reaction, his own weakness that he feared, which could only mean that Holmes suffered from the same unnatural desires which so beset Watson. Applying, as Holmes must surely have known he must, Holmes’ own deductive reasonings to the problem, Watson re-examined his friend’s behaviour, looking at Holmes’ amiety in a new light. There was no-one else in Holmes’ life who was accorded the companionship, friendship and intimacy that Watson received. There was none other referred to as a dear friend, or introduced as an intimate associate, nor yet anyone else with whom Holmes spent his time, unless that person were germane to some investigation or study.

Who else, Watson wondered for the first time, had Holmes ever attended a concert with? For whom had Holmes ever played his violin—and for whom had he composed those haunting harmonies that spoke directly to the heart and were such contrast to the man’s cold and calculating intellect? In truth, who else had ever been permitted to see the heart at the core of the great mind?

His own person was the only answer that such questions supplied. Holmes, Watson decided, most definitely had the right of it when he said that Watson saw but failed to observe. It seemed that he had failed to observe far more important matters than how many stairs led up to their sitting-room. Now, Watson mused, he had to decide what to do now that he had finally observed, now that he had enough information to eliminate all other possibilities and arrive at the correct conclusion, no matter how absurd it might seem. After all, who ever would have thought that Sherlock Holmes would harbour affections for another person, in light of that gentleman’s oft-repeated insistence that emotions served no purpose but to cloud the intellect and distract the mind? Perhaps, anyone who had troubled to observe him, anyone who had noted the way Holmes was slowly coming out from behind the protection of his sere armour.

Watson returned to the sitting-room, pouring himself a stiff measure of malt whisky, and reseated himself in the chair which he had already occupied for so protracted a period this night. He could hear, only faintly, and then not at all, the small sounds of a man readying himself for bed, and as the noises stopped completely, he could safely assume that Holmes was finally abed. Thereby truly solitary, Watson nursed both his glass of spirits and his thoughts. Even if Holmes’
intentions were reciprocal to his own, this did not give him true cause to go to his friend and engage in that which others might call sins of the flesh and which God called an abomination.

Yet, the appetite was an imperative, and it seemed to him, in those moments when the hunger was upon him, that this taste for men was no less natural than any other hunger. Indeed, when it seemed that the need would consume his very soul, Watson could no more conceive of starving that hunger than he could of starving his body of food, so basic a need was it to him. That is, when the hunger was upon him. Rationality never failed to re-establish itself once the demands of the body had been sated, and in the aftermath, the waste of his seed in such rites of infertility and the guilt of his sin would weigh upon him, and it was that which he did not know if he could visit upon Holmes.

For all the man’s incredible knowledge, there was yet a terrible vulnerability to him, an innocence of ignorance, and what would the result be if Watson were to awaken the beast of carnality in Holmes? What price pure intellect then?

Light was seeping through the windows, where Watson had left the curtains undrawn that he might see Holmes the moment of his return. The fire had fallen to smouldering ashes, and the odour from Holmes’ disreputable disguise had disappeared. Downstairs, the scullery maid could be heard drawing water, and the tweeny was clattering around with the coal scuttle: it would not be long, with such carelessness and such noise, that the girl would be replaced, Mrs. Hudson proud of her method.

If the silence from his room were any guide, then Holmes would be asleep, or lying there still, awake, and worrying over Watson’s reaction to his earlier statement. It was not time, though, for Watson to take his decision, not when the end results would have such import. Rather than face his friend over the breakfast table, Watson took up his hat and his cane and withdrew to the outside world, where he could think in peace.

IT WAS many hours, and many more miles, later, when Watson returned to his lodgings at 221B Baker Street.

“Oh, good afternoon to you, Dr. Watson,” Mrs. Hudson said as he came in, damp from the heavy fog that had fallen and precipitated his return. “Mr. Holmes has just gone out. He said you weren’t to wait dinner for him, so I shall bring you up a nice piece of fowl at the usual time, shall I?”

“Yes, yes, that will be perfectly all right,” Watson replied with an air of distraction Mrs. Hudson more usually associated with Mr. Holmes.

It was the second night in a row that Watson had kept vigil for his friend, but on this occasion, the clock had not yet struck eleven when the weariness of his sleepless night took its toll and sent him nodding. When midnight chimed, he roused himself, checked Holmes’ room, and finding it empty, retired himself. Dreams troubled him, and his sleep was exceedingly restless, his nightshirt a tangle around his legs and the bed-clothes a tumbled heap on the floor when he awoke with a start. He could not tell what had awakened him, but it seemed to his sleep-befuddled mind that he had heard the door to his own bedroom closing, and that could mean only that Holmes had opened it to look in upon his sleeping friend, and had intended to slip away quite unnoticed.

With more silence and skill than Holmes was yet willing to credit him, Watson donned his dressing gown and tiptoed down the stairs, carefully avoiding stepping on the two treads that creaked so abominably. Thus was he able to come upon his friend all unawares, and saw as Holmes stood melancholy in front of the fire. He watched, driven by both curiosity and an unvoiced need for reassurance, as Holmes first touched his fiddle as if contemplating playing the instrument, to turn from that to an instrument of a different sort, the syringe and glass jar that sat on the mantelpiece like a malevolent god of old.

“No!” Watson exclaimed at the very moment Holmes’ fingers touched the gleaming glass. “Do not, I pray, inject yourself with that evil potion.”

“I will inject myself with whatsoever I choose,” Holmes said coldly, his voice and his demeanour unfriendly.

“But you know what that solution will do to your mind—”

“I know what the medical profession claims it will do to me. Better yet do I know what the lack of this ‘evil potion’ will do to my brain.”

“Ennui is no excuse to abuse your body and risk your mind.”

Holmes smiled condescendingly, and the disappearance of affection from his gaze wounded Watson to the quick. “Thus speaks the man who is
easily and readily amused, who can occupy his mind with trivialities and inane scribblings.”

“Thus speaks the man who cannot face himself and must hide behind the false excitement of a drug.”

“How can you know it is false? Is something less true for coming from an unexpected source?”

“That is not what I mean, Holmes, and well you know that.”

“I know nothing of such things,” Holmes replied, turning back towards the fireplace, his hand resting beside, but no longer touching, the syringe. “I can tell you the maker of the cigar that left behind ash at the site of a murder, I can deduce the height and weight of a man from the impression left by his shoe. But of these things, the meanings behind a man’s words when he speaks of anything other than crime or a mystery—of these things, I am profoundly ignorant.”

“I am not,” Watson said, stepping more fully into the room, approaching his friend until they were a scant measure apart. He could scarcely imagine what it had cost so proud a man to make such an admittance to him, and could only hope to equal such bravery. “In these things, I am something of an expert, albeit an unwilling expert. I have tried,” he went on, as Holmes stilled, listening to him, “to gain no further knowledge in this field, but no matter how I struggle with the demon of my nature, I am compelled to accede to the part of me that controls the direction of my heart.”

“And where do your affections lead you now?” Holmes asked very quietly.

“My affections lead me to you. Where else could they possibly take me?”

“To a woman, marriage, home, a family—”

“I have all but given up hope of such things. I feel great affection for the fairer sex, and there have been no small number of whom I have had knowledge, but I have long since feared that the darker side of my nature will forever deny me the joys of a home and a family of my own. Perhaps, together, you and I could…” Even in an atmosphere of honesty, Watson could not actually bring himself to put such a matter into words. At a loss of what to say, he looked to Holmes, and found no easy pathway there, Holmes at a greater loss than Watson himself was. If words would not suffice, or could not be spoken, then action must needs speak for him. Reticently, Watson took Holmes by the hand, and led him towards Holmes’ bedroom, for that room was the farthest from any other habited bedroom in the house. There was hesitancy, but no degree of reluctance in his companion, Holmes content to be led in this. Together, they entered the bedroom, gaslight burning low, and while Holmes disrobed, Watson lit the candle and closed the door, shutting the world and its disapproval outside.

Careful of his companion’s lack of experience, and wary of giving Holmes any cause for concern, Watson disrobed with his back to Holmes, contriving to be half-way under the covers before he took his drawers off. Naked, he lay down beside Holmes, the two of them made to lie close together due to the smallness of the bed. The feather pillow was soft under Watson’s cheek, and carried a faint hint of Holmes’ hairdressing, and the feather bed cradled him in softness and the heat reflected by Holmes’ lean body. “All I ask,” he murmured quietly, stroking his hand across Holmes’ dark hair, “is that you relax and permit me to do this for you. You need do nothing, nothing at all, for I know how to please a man, and I will teach you, in good time. This night is for you, and what you need—”

Watson’s words stopped there, halted by the frantic pressure of Holmes’ lips upon his, and the grinding need of Holmes’ body pressing the two of them so tightly together. Watson opened his mouth, and he did not know if it were experience or instinct that drove Holmes’ tongue inside it, the limber muscle caressing him, tracing across the smoothness of his teeth, exploring every minute detail of him. Watson surrendered to the sensation, luxuriating in the absolute hedonism of being here, naked and aroused, with his dearest friend, that most special of friends that all men of his nature sought, even while they dreaded the final loss of redemption. With Holmes enveloping him in affection and nurturing him with the most tender of passions, Watson could not hold on to any thought save those which centred on what Holmes was doing to him, on the exquisite sensations those fine hands were bringing him. His manhood was taken firmly in hand, every caress perfect, every move an expression of utter delight.

“You are not the innocent I thought you to be,” Watson whispered into Holmes’ ear, before his tongue traced the delicate aural outline.

“I am innocent only in affairs of the heart,” Holmes replied, and he was gratifyingly breathless,
his eyes intent. “In matters carnal, I have had experience but, my dearest friend,” he leaned down and kissed Watson once more, with such passion and affection Watson was moved close to tears, “nothing has prepared me for the joy of knowing you.”

It was not a protestation Watson had ever expected to hear from Holmes’ lips, and it did his heart good to hear not only the words, but the sincerity in that hoarsened voice. He would warrant that no-one else had ever been loved by Holmes, and that no-one had ever been given the opportunity to return the love of this solitary man. Once more, words failed him, and he allowed his body to express his affections, his hands touching Holmes everywhere, and with passion, and affection, and adoration. Soon, he filled his palm with the heat and heaviness of Holmes’ arousal, and his mouth watered with the desire to taste this man’s flesh. With some difficulty, Holmes reluctant to yield an inch of him, Watson lowered himself down the bed, stopping and rolling Holmes on to his back, so that his manhood stood straight and proud, an invitation to a feast. First, Watson gently rubbed his face with his friend’s manhood, his mustache tantalising on the rigid flesh. With a groan of pleasure, Watson sank his mouth down upon Holmes, taking him within, filling his empty maw with another man, with this most cherished of men. Under his jaw, he could feel the press of Holmes’ testicles, the thin skin and firm ovals touching him as he swallowed his friend down as deeply as he could manage. Holmes’ hands were in his hair, stroking endlessly through the brown locks, his fingers straying round to touch the bob of Adam’s apple as Watson swallowed, and swallowed again, the sensation singing through both of them. The moment approached, and Holmes, with the utmost reluctance, withdrew himself from Watson’s mouth.

“I would not limit us to that,” he whispered, kissing the mouth that had taken him inside. “If we are to do this,” and they both knew that Holmes was referring to that most difficult of things, his own emotions that were more than mere lust, “then I would have us consummate our affaire de cœur fully. Come within me, my dearest John, join us, flesh to my flesh....”

Watson’s heart was suffused with love, and his body surged with such passion as only those words could inspire. “Gladly,” he replied, already reaching down to explore between Holmes’ legs, caressing his testes and then going farther, until his fingers found the tight pucker that led to the dark depths of Holmes’ body. “Are you certain you want this?” he was compelled to ask, even as his fingertip sank into satin heat.

“I’m sure I want this,” Holmes said, lifting his hips so that Watson’s finger sank a little more deeply into him. “It is the other aspects of all this that give me pause. But do not, I beg you, waste time talking. I can feel you within me, and my body craves more. I need to feel all of you within me, completely inside of me.”

“And you shall,” Watson whispered, his mouth round one erect nipple, his finger thrusting inwards and outwards of Holmes’ body. Such openness of the flesh augured well, but Watson was doctor enough to be reluctant to rely on the body’s natural resources which, in their haste, might not prove sufficient. Fumbling, he snuffed out the candle, and gripped it, the hot wax burning tantalisingly against his palm. Pulling it free from its holder, his thumb ran along the candle, making sure that there were no hot drips to burn Holmes internally. Satisfied of that even as his body ached with its own need to be satisfied, and with Holmes assisting by lifting his legs up so that his calf muscles rested on Watson’s shoulders, Watson slowly pressed the tallow candle against the entrance to Holmes’ body, his own body shivering with pleasure as he saw the whiteness disappear into the darkness, a faint sheen appearing where traces of tallow were melted by the heat of Holmes’ anus. Holmes’ rectum was opening and closing around the invading candle, and allowing his legs to fall, splayed wide, on the bed, Holmes leaned up on his elbows so that he could, with Watson, watch the false phallus penetrate him.

“Enough!” he gasped suddenly, one trembling hand alighting on top of Watson’s, stilling the motion of the candle. “I want you. Now. Do not torment me any longer, John. Join with me...”

Carelessly, Watson tossed the candle aside, unknowing of where it landed, interesting in nothing but Holmes spread open and submissive in front of him. He had never expected his friend to be his catamite, but even with Holmes lying there, naked, in such wanton display, Watson could not find an ounce of disrespect within him for his friend. Indeed, all he saw, when he looked at Holmes lying there shamelessly, was a man who
loved him, a man in love for the first time, and all that love and passion was for him. Struggling for some control, he took his penis in his hand, and pressed it home against the opening of Holmes’ body. The breath hissed from him, his sighs matching those of Holmes as their bodies became no longer islands, but were joined, ever more deeply, until Watson was belly to belly with Holmes, his manhood completely within the satin heat of his friend’s body, Holmes’ legs wrapped round Watson’s waist. In this manner, they moved together in the ancient rhythm, every movement a joy and a pleasure, Holmes shifting until Watson was penetrating him in such a manner that the secret spot that is within all men was stimulated by the thrust and slide of Watson’s manhood. In the quiet of the bedroom, the sound of their lovemaking was loud, and this casting aside of daily circumspection excited them even more.

The pleasure between them fed upon itself, a banquet of sensation. Passion built itself up into a crescendo, until Watson helplessly spilled his seed deep inside his friend’s body, Holmes holding him tightly, cradling Watson to his bosom until the paroxysms of the flesh had ceased. As coherent thought replaced the mindless needs of the body, Watson was acutely aware of the rigidity pressed into his belly even while his own limpness slipped free from inner darkness. “Let me do this for you now, my dearest friend,” he murmured, such an act the least he could do to declare a passion and a devotion that matched Holmes’. Once again, he lowered himself down Holmes’ body, and with Holmes’ passion-filled cries lapping his ears, Watson felt the tide of fluid that heralded Holmes’ release. He did not immediately yield his possession of his friend’s body, suckling like a babe at breast until Holmes was helpless and limp, inarticulate with satiation.

Only then did Holmes withdraw from Watson’s mouth, shaking hands urging Watson to rise up so that Holmes could encircle Watson with his arms, enveloping him with more affection than either man had thought him capable. “This is more—far more than I had anticipated.”

“I shall take that as a compliment, paltry though it surely is,” Watson replied to that, in the manner of one man feeling secure enough to tease another.

“If you expect more…” Holmes broke off abruptly, sitting up even more rapidly, all but throwing both Watson and the bedclothes to the floor. “If you expect the language of lovers, poetry and love tokens, then it would be best were you to leave now. Such protestations are not in my nature—”

“And rank stupidity is not in mine. I confess to seeing yet not observing, as you have so often criticised me. But I do not see any purpose in expecting a leopard to change its spots simply because its situation has changed.”

“That is as well, my dearest fellow. For I will not become a simpering beau throwing myself at your feet.” He ceased speaking, but only for a moment. “Not, that is to say, now that I have thrown myself upon your mercy.”

“And I upon yours. We neither one of us could expose the other without also exposing ourselves. We have entered into a partnership this night, Sherlock, one that is of mutual benefit and mutual protection. You need have no fear of me in this, or in any other matter.”

“Need I not? To confess such weakness before another—it is a terrible thing, John.”

Watson was coming to realise that the only way to defeat Holmes’ cold and callous intellect was to suborn it with feeling, and so he knelt behind his friend, and put his arms around him, and kissed him, lovingly, on the nape of his neck. “Only if such a weakness is not shared. And you and I share this in equal measure. Now,” he continued, his hands roving freely over Holmes’ chest, taking the greatest of delights in pert and reactive nipples, “come back to bed with me.”

“As a physician,” good humour laced the melodious voice, and that engendered more hope in Watson than almost anything else had, “you should be most acutely aware of the limitations of the male of the species in matters procreational.”

“And as an intelligent man, you should be aware that when two men share the joys of the flesh, procreation is the farthest thing from their minds. No, I wish only to hold you, and kiss you, and say all the foolish things that you would never say.”

Holmes permitted himself to be manœuvred down onto the bed, lying still and gazing at his
friend as Watson covered them both with sheet and blankets. “What if I were to declare that I had no desire to hear such nonsense?”

“Why then,” Watson murmured, dropping brief, loving kisses on a visage that softened only for him, “I should stop saying them of course. But I would not cease to think them.”

IT WAS the slovenly tweeny with the coal scuttle that gave them warning enough that they were able to arise and hurry themselves to the sitting room, where they carried on with every evidence of proper deportment. The tweeny curtseyed as she came in, the heavy scuttle banging against the door.

“Ever so sorry, sirs,” she said quite shyly, eyes darting from one dressing-gowned gentleman to the other, the colour rising in her cheeks. “I’ll come back later,” she mumbled, coal abandoned by the fire as she scurried from the room.

“A problem we should have considered,” Holmes said from where he stood by the fireplace. “If I remember correctly,” Watson replied rather drily, not at all amused by Holmes’ distant and supercilious manner, “we were both somewhat distracted yesternight. Such practicalities were, I think, of no great importance to either one of us in the face of such...passionate discourse.”

“Quite,” was the full extent of Holmes’ reply. Turning his back to Watson, he began tamping tobacco into his favourite pipe, using a spill to light it, a cloud of smoke wreathing his head and hiding his eyes before he once more turned in the direction of his friend. “However, we shall not have the excuse of ignorance a second time.”

“What do you suggest?”

“There are a few possibilities, primarily that we find lodgings in a house run to less stellar sensibilities, or that we take Mrs. Hudson into our confidence and pray that she will not be horrified, or that we are simply careful in future to always return each one to his own bed.”

“Thank God! For a moment there, Holmes, I feared you were about to suggest that we desist from such expressions as those we employed last night.”

“I am not prone to effusiveness of words or empty gesture, Watson, my dear chap, but I am a man of exceeding loyalty and honesty.”

Watson positively beamed at such a declaration. “And to think that yesterday, I had no hope of any such reciprocation at all! The world is a wonderful and marvellous place, Holmes.”

“And here comes one of them at this very moment,” Holmes replied, his tone that of a stern warning, “in the form of one of Mrs. Hudson’s excellent breakfasts.”

“I could hardly believe it when Mavis said that both of my gentlemen were already up and about.” She put a heavy tray upon the table, her deft hands setting plates, food and accoutrements in place. “Although I must remind you both, while I am a widow and used to the ways of men, we have mere girls in the house, and if you are going to rise so early, I’ll thank you to keep the doors to all your rooms locked until you are presentable.”

“Oh, we shall,” Holmes said, bending his not inconsiderable charm upon his landlady. “In fact, we shall make a point of keeping our doors locked from this very moment onwards.” With a gracious, if ineluctable gesture, he hastened her through the door, turning the lock and brandishing the key with a flourish.

Watson could scarce control his laughter. “And that, unless I’m very much mistaken,” he said, attacking his breakfast with all the enthusiasm of a man who has exercised thoroughly, “is the final solution to our little problem of discretion.”

“Yes, I believe it is,” Holmes said more slowly, toying with the buttered kipper on his plate, his attention more fully upon his table companion. “Yet I see that you are still troubled.”

“Are you not troubled also?”

“Well, of course I am. But I am only lately returned from India, and equally, I am of limited means, and you are an eccentric. No-one would suspect anything of a criminal nature from either of us.”

“All of that is true enough, but you neglect the fact that you are a physician, more than capable of earning an excellent income, and I am a ‘confirmed bachelor’, a statement that arouses suspicion in petty minds.”

“Easily taken care of. You shall give me details of your cases, I shall print them, and carefully include references to romances—”

“I will not be turned into some Lothario, Watson.”

“An engagement, then, tragically ended—” Holmes’ expression was lyrical.

“No? Then a wife died painfully young, in childbirth, that would be best—”

“All of which would be difficult, if not impos-
sible, to explain to my brother.”

“Then I, who have no family, will write a wife for myself—”

“And no doubt kill her in a suitably melodramatic illness which left you determined to become a doctor.”

“Ah-ha! I’ll make a novelist of you yet, Holmes!”

The glare that greeted that was inimical, and Watson subsided into a more decorous demeanour. “Very well, I shall show some restraint. However, I am perfectly able to create some ruse that will protect us from suspicion.”

“Do you think,” Holmes said wearily, “that Mrs. Hudson does not read your accounts?”

“Then what do you suggest we do?”

“I suggest,” Holmes said quietly, and then greatly surprised Watson by reaching out and briefly clasping his hand, “that we wait. We are panicking because you and I know how our situation has changed, and we are guiltily assuming that the entire world must surely know also.”

“When in truth, it is only you and I.”

“Precisely.”

“Then by all means,” Watson rose to his feet, came to stand behind this most precious of friends, one hand resting as if casually upon Holmes’ shoulder, Watson’s thumb sweetly touching the skin exposed by the gaping neck of Holmes’ nightshirt, “let us wait. Let us enjoy all of this while it is new, and worry about clouding the trail at a later date.”

“Which leaves us with but one question, John.”

Watson bent down as if to hear more clearly what his companion was saying, and used that as excuse to touch his lips to Holmes’ ear-lobe, an area that he had discovered was of extraordinary sensitivity. “And that question can only be how I shall ever succeed in restraining myself when simply looking at you sets my blood on fire.”

It was probably the closest anyone had ever seen to a blush upon Holmes’ pallid cheeks. “I believe that I should dress now,” he murmured, slipping out of his chair, breakfast abandoned on the table.

“No,” Watson said gently, taking him firmly by the arm and reseating him. “You need to eat, and I,” he smiled self-deprecatingly, “I need to remember that this is all quite new to you, and quite alien to your manner.” He saw Holmes’ discomfort, cursed himself for being so insensitive to his friend’s needs. “Go on,” he urged, returning to his own chair, tucking into his breakfast and doing his best to make this morning seem like all others. “Eat some of this fine feast Mrs. Hudson has gone to the trouble of cooking for us. I’ll send the maid out to purchase the newspapers, shall I?”

And thus were the comforts of familiar routine established, to be maintained throughout the day when discretion was of the greatest import and to be dropped when Mrs. Hudson had retired to the distant recesses of the house, and they were behind the closed and locked doors of their bedrooms.

**LIFE CONTINUED** in this pleasant manner, their friendship growing ever deeper than before. The subject of an artifice to conceal their secret was never once raised between them, and indeed, their actions of the night-time were never discussed.

All of this changed, however, on the day when into their life came a Miss Mary Morstan.

“But surely you must see that she is perfect for our needs?” Watson demanded as they sat in their sitting room waiting for certain developments.

“I see no such thing, as my mind is firmly fixed on the case and—”

“And you are using this concentration as an excuse to hide from those matters that require our attention. I have told you—”

“Yes, yes, I remember perfectly well what you have told me. Of how the gentleman at *The Strand Magazine* had a certain cast to his features when he referred to me as a confirmed bachelor and enquired how so healthy and vital a man as yourself could share rooms with someone of my singular nature.”

“You do see what that means, do you not?”

“Of course I see! What I do not see is why you feel compelled to bring the subject up at this very moment, when am I deeply involved in a case.”

“Now is the perfect time because Miss Morstan is exactly the sort of woman we need.”

“I have never,” Holmes replied with considerable dignity, “needed a woman in my life, save for birth itself.”

“But we have need of one now if we do not wish to become the subject of gossip, and worse.”

“There is no evidence with which to prosecute us—”

“There was precious little with which to prosecute the Hon. Edward Falsham. Yet he was ruined, Holmes, absolutely ruined, and where would such a scandal leave a civil physician and a consulting detective? Who would so much as pass
the time of day with us?”
“But why this Miss Morstan?”
“Because she has led a retired life, and thus will have little or no expectations from a husband. She has no friends, and no family, therefore there will be no-one to examine her marriage, and no relatives coming for long visits.”
“Are you proposing that I come to live in your married residence? Don’t be so preposterous.”
“It is common sense. Everyone knows that we are friends. If I am married, and have a relatively large establishment, what is to prevent you from eventually coming to stay with your old friend and his family?”
“Surely,” Holmes said with silken venom, “even a naïve wife would notice if her husband chose to spend his nights in his friend’s bed and not hers.”
Watson poured himself another glass of port, drinking it rather faster than a gentleman ought.
“In which case, you should stay on here, and I shall come to you as often as I may.”
“I dislike this intensely,” Holmes said harshly, flinging himself down in his chair and taking up his pipe. “I dislike it all the more for I cannot see a way round it without encountering unacceptable risks.”
“That is my opinion. If we were simply two discreet gentlemen, perhaps we could continue as we are. Your position, however, precludes that. As does your acquaintance with the criminal class.”
“I can name,” Holmes paused to take a long breath from his pipe, “at least twelve criminals who would pay a king’s ransom to ruin me. One careless whisper, one idle suspicion, one corrupted maid scared or bribed into lying on the witness stand…”
“Miss Mary Morstan it will be, then.”
The atmosphere was heavy between them, and the silence dragged on.
“When will you ask for her hand?” Holmes asked, and already Watson could hear the coldness coming back into his voice. That he knew the reason for this wintriness did not ease him in the slightest.
“As soon as is convincing. I will needs must be most careful in this, Holmes, lest I scare her off. Or indeed, in case I cause her hurt.”
Holmes looked at him sharply then, the brilliant eyes piercing.
“Would you have me make her miserable, Holmes?” Watson asked softly.
“No. No, of course not. Just do not make her too happy.”
“You need have no fear of losing my affections,” Watson cried, coming to Holmes’ side, grasping him by the arm. “You will always be at the core of my very being.”
“For those hours when you can escape from married life.” He raised his hand in a silencing gesture as Watson would have rushed into speech. “No, no, there is nothing more to be said. You are doing what must be done, and I must be more gracious about this matter. Holmes smiled bitterly, a surprising degree of hurt showing on his face. ‘I should in fact be thanking you for doing this. However, I’m sure you will forgive me if I do not hurry to offer you my congratulations?’
“Oh, Holmes, Holmes, there is no need for you to be so jealous—”
“I can assure you, my dear doctor, that I am not prey to so irrational an emotion as jealousy. Now, let us put this discussion behind us, and turn our minds to the intricacies of this mystery brought before us…”

“I SHALL BE in Scotland the last few days of this month,” Holmes announced over luncheon some weeks later.
“The last few days? But Holmes, the last day of this month is when Mary and I—”
“Precisely,” Holmes interrupted icily. “I shall be in Scotland at that time.”
“How many times,” Watson replied with some display of temper, “must I remind you that I am marrying Mary for your protection and for mine? This is a marriage of convenience only, one designed to free us from the dangers of speculation and to free Mary from being dependent upon the kindness of strangers and the whims of employers.”
“Do you remember,” Holmes said disingenuously, “when first we discussed this thorny subject? In those days, this marriage was purely for your and my convenience. Now it is for Mary also, and I have heard the way in which you speak to her, and I have seen the delicacy of your dealings with her.”
“I do not care for your implications,” Holmes. Are you trying to infer that I am not constant in my affections?”
“You, of all people, know my methods.”
“Then you may think you have eliminated the impossible to arrive at the improbable, but I assure you, you have arrived at an absolute impossibility!”
“My methods never fail me.”

“In matters of the intellect and criminal mysteries, I cannot deny your boast. In matters of the heart, however,” Watson’s voice was raised in ire, “you are ignorant, willful and blind. You insult me, Holmes, to even suggest that my affections for Mary are greater than my affections for you.”

“And now you have affections for her. How long, pray tell, will you have such strong affections for her that you forget all about this…aberration you have had with me?”

“In God’s name, why are you doing this, Holmes? We both agreed that I must do this, for both our sakes. Why are you now proving so intractable and unhelpful?”

With a disturbing glint to his eyes, Holmes rose elegantly to his feet, and threw a pamphlet down upon the wreckage of their luncheon. “Another fanciful title, I see,” Holmes said coldly, his face impassive as an Egyptian statue. “If you question my behaviour, then perhaps it would serve you well to reread this elaborate exaggeration, and compare it to the tale you told me of your conversations with Miss Morstan. I draw your particular attention to the last page each of Chapters 11 and 12, respectively.”

With that biting, bitter comment, Holmes turned on his heels and left Watson behind to read the doctor’s own words: “Because I love you, Mary, as truly as ever a man loved a woman.”

Then, the pages recalcitrant in his trembling fingers: “The division seems rather unfair,” I remarked. “You have done all the work in this business. I get a wife out of it, Jones gets the credit, pray what remains for you?”

“For me,” said Sherlock Holmes, “there still remains the cocaine-bottle.” And he stretched his long white hand up for it.

Far from his fictional creation, in the real world of his own sitting-room, Dr. John Watson fully understood his friend’s feeling of betrayal, and understood even better the woes of self-hatred.

NEW, ALMOST UNMARKED luggage littered the room, and the once-laden hamper lay empty upon the table, its treasures of salmon, honey, butter, grouse, venison and shortbread long since disappeared with a delighted Mrs. Hudson to the kitchen. There would be a feast tonight, although Sherlock Holmes himself had more the look of famine. Always a lean individual, his body now verged on gauntness, and his pale skin had become grey-tinged and unhealthy, hardly the physiognomy of a man just returned from a season in the bracing air of Scotland, even if the trip had begun so precipitously that the gentleman had left with nothing but the clothes he wore.

A discarded telegramme lay crumpled in the unlit hearth, another message from his brother to confirm the transfer of funds from one bank to another. Beside it lay a small mountain of bills and letters, notes from people admiring his adventures as chronicled in The Strand, and invitations to dine and play raconteur to socialites whose very names bored him.

Only one item appeared to hold interest for him, and his gaze strayed to it time and time again. After some moments, Holmes left his languid pose by the window, and taking the letter from the mantel-piece, re-read what was obviously the latest in a long list of missives.

The handwriting was strong and firm, the letters large and well-formed, the pen with which it was written had a tiny crack in the nib, and the paper was the printed paper from a doctor’s surgery. It would not take a detective to deduce the anger of the man writing this letter, nor his haste, nor his need for discretion if not outright secrecy. The body of the letter was a repetition of letters and conversations that had gone before, and Holmes did not read those lines. You must see me, he read. You must. You must listen to me, so that I might explain my actions and my words. See me, my dearest friend. I will call upon you at a moment’s notice.

Holmes suspected that the moment’s notice would take place as soon as Mrs. Hudson returned from an errand so sudden and so urgent that she had not even taken the time to light a fire for him. No doubt, when she returned, there would be traces of reddish mud on her shoes and clinging to the hem of her dress, from the road-workings taking place outside of the post office. How long it would take Watson to come here upon receipt of her telegramme would depend on whether the doctor were out on a call at the time, or if he had guests for dinner, or any number of commitments.

Including, no doubt, his beloved wife. After all, Holmes thought with the considerable bitterness of someone who has already suffered, Watson would not want to hurt his Mary.

Mrs. Hudson returned, and was soon hurrying up the stairs to light a fire, the tell-tale mud giving
her away completely. For a moment, Holmes wondered what Watson had told Mrs. Hudson that she would so hurry to send a telegramme with such an attempt at secrecy, but all it would have taken to persuade her was a simple request, an appeal to remind her of Mr. Holmes’ odd ways, and a mention of how anxious Watson would be to discover all the details of the urgent case that had forced Holmes to leave London so precipitously and to miss Watson’s wedding itself. No, there was no mystery there, and Holmes waved her away with annoyance. He preferred to await his former friend in solitude, and away from curious eyes.

“So there you are at last,” Watson said from the doorway, his figure dim and indistinct in the dusk. “I have missed you, my dear fellow, more than I can say.”

Holmes did not turn to greet his guest. “How is Mrs. Watson?”

“Mary is well.”

“Surely, a man newly married is to be forgiven a trifle more enthusiasm than that.” Holmes left his chair, turned the gas up high that he might better see Watson. “Wedlock suits you. You have put on seven and a half pounds since last I saw you. Your little woman must be gifted indeed in culinary matters if you have gained so much in a mere three months.”

“Mary’s skills as a cook cannot be overrated. She is a good wife, Holmes, and one that suits me well.”

“I am so very glad to hear that,” Sherlock Holmes replied with a glitteringly bright smile. “It always does one good to hear of a friend saved from a life of debauchery and sin.”

“Don’t say such things!” Watson exclaimed, hastily closing and locking the door behind him. He crossed the room quickly, his temper evident. “Our life together had not the slightest trace of debauchery, and I am now inclined to believe that the only sin is that of others who would blackmail or ruin men such as you and I.”

“We are not in Greece, Watson. We are in London, where vice is rife but only in the sewers and behind the lace curtains of respectable matrons. Do not confuse yourself with such foolish ideas.”

“The only foolish idea I have had, Holmes, is that you would understand why I married Mary. Instead, you have wilfully turned it against us both, even when such an idea occurred to you first!”

“My idea, Watson,” Holmes replied with quiet venom, “did not involve you making heart-felt declarations of love for all the world to read, and to a woman who was intended to be nothing more than a useful screen behind which we could continue our lives.”

“It is you who have prevented us from doing so, not I—and not Mary. She is a good and decent woman, Holmes, and one who asks almost nothing from her husband save kindness, an income and a name. Those things I can provide in full measure, whilst still having all my love and passion for you.”

“I find that I cannot believe you,” Holmes replied almost lazily, returning to his chair, draping himself there as he had done during so many unimportant chats, his every action an underscoring of how meaningless this meeting was.

Watson, however, was no fool. He knew this man, had shared passion and tenderness with him, had been permitted to enter the sanctity of his mind and his body. Watson had been accorded privileges given no other, and knew that Holmes felt his every vulnerability and secret betrayed.

“What I wrote in that story was for the benefit of others, not for you and I, nor was it a reflection on the truth.”

“I do not believe you.”

So simply said, and so complex in its implications. “Holmes, I understand that you are terribly hurt by what you see as betrayal from someone you love—”

“Do you honestly believe that a man so devoted to pure thought and the highest intellect would succumb to the baseness and irrationality of love?”

Watson stared at him with the profoundest discredit.

“Oh, I admit,” Holmes said easily, although Watson knew what to look for, searched for and found the minute flicker at the corner of Holmes’ eye that revealed Holmes’ distress, “that if I needed someone to love, you are the one that I would be thinking of.”

“Then you admit—”

“If,” Holmes repeated, “if I needed someone. However, I find that my researches and my investigations go all the better if I am free of the distractions and hampering incompetence of a would-be assistant.”

“You must be careful if you wish me to believe all this and leave quietly,” Watson replied forcefully, “for if you continue as you are, then I
shall think that you protest too much.”

“Really, Watson—”

“If all this is true, that you do not and have never loved me, then prove it. Come away with me for a few days. I have a colleague who has offered me the use of his country cottage whenever I wish a few days’ rest. Come with me. Prove that you no longer love me.”

“I’m afraid I’m far too busy to go off into the countryside. As you can see, I have only just returned from Scotland as it is. If I had some more time to spend, then perhaps I would be with you, but it would be a complete waste of time for both of us. And surely Mary would miss you terribly.”

“Holmes, my dear friend—”

“Of course,” Holmes was continuing over Watson’s protest, “had you called some other day, then it might not have been this way.” The mask slipped for a moment, Holmes struggling to hide behind it once more. “You did not have to say what you did to her, nor did you have to write the cruel things that you did.”

“I do apologise, Holmes, most particularly for making so much of your fondness for cocaine, but I was simply trying to make any untoward feelings between us seem that much more unlikely.”

“Portraying me as a pathetic cocaine fiend was the only way your fertile imagination could provide?”

“I was rushing too quickly, in an attempt to see the tale into print.”

“You should be careful of what you sow,” Holmes said quietly, going to the mantelpiece and taking down the bottle and syringe that was lying there precisely as Watson had so unfortunately described them in his story. “For you might reap far more than you would ever want to.”

With the same deliberation of intent that had been so much a part of the narrative horror of that last printed tale, Holmes prepared himself for an injection, his eyes glinting with both pain and cruelty. “Don’t look so worried, Watson. It is still only an occasional habit of mine, and despite what you have declaimed to the world, I am far from addiction. But you see,” and as he rolled up his shirtcuff, his sinewy forearm and wrist were still half as pocked with needlemarks as Watson had described them in *The Strand*, “I have found that I love what is in this needle far more than anything I once mistakenly thought I felt for you.”

Finally, he thrust the sharp point of the needle home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined armchair with a long sigh of satisfaction. “This,” he waved the glass syringe in the air, the newly lit fire glinting redly on it, “I find to be much more constant than human lovers.”

“I am trying to explain to you! Yes, I am guilty of a terrible lack of judgement in writing of you as I did, and I most willingly admit that it was very wrong of me to do so. But are you really so glad to throw away all that we shared because I have proved myself to be a mere mortal and given to human frailty?”

Holmes did not immediately reply, simply reclined, smiling, in his chair. Dreamily, with a lackadaisical gesture towards the wall with its loyal pockmarking of bullets, he said: “Carve your house-number and street upon my wall, and perhaps I will call on you.” He giggled then, a sound unfamiliar from Holmes, carrying equal parts humour and pain and the thin edge of the drug’s effect. “Carve. Appropriate instructions for a doctor with a bag full of scalpels, don’t you think?”

“I think the cocaine has impaired your mind. I also think that you are reacting emotionally, and without thought, or reason—”

“Then we shall simply have to mark that as my Christian fellowship. Are we not enjoined to do unto others as we would have them do unto us? Think, for a moment, of what you have done to me, and then consider whether or not I should do this to you. My friend.”

The bitterness and hurt contained in those last two words cut Watson to the quick. “I’m sorry,” he said sincerely, kneeling beside Holmes’ chair, attempting to take his friend’s hand in his own, “I am so terribly sorry. It was never my intention to hurt you.”

“No,” Holmes corrected coldly, snatching his hand free of Watson’s grip, “it was never your intention to hurt Mary. That is what you said.”

“At the time, I did not think I had to repeat that I had no intention of ever causing you the slightest hurt.”

Holmes turned away from him, curling inward upon himself, in a manner Watson had not seen since the very earliest days of their acquaintance. “At the time,” Watson said softly, gently stroking Holmes’ dark hair from the high, intelligent forehead, “I did not think at all. I have apologised, Holmes, and I will continue to apologise as many times as are required to make you understand. I
will do any penance you ask of me, although I beg that you do not disappear from me for so long ever again. I do not think I could bear that a second time.”

“Go away, Watson.”

“I will, but only for now. I will come back here tomorrow, and the day after, and every day until you forgive me, and embrace me once again.” Reluctantly, Watson rose to his feet, and gathered together his bag and the gloves he had thrown off without even being aware of his actions. He stood, once more, in the doorway for a moment, gazing at this man whom he loved so much and had so carelessly hurt so badly. “You know where I am, if you need me.”

“For what reason could I possibly need anyone?” Holmes sneered.

Watson did not reply, did not think it fair to remind Holmes of things said in the safety of darkness, nor of love confessed. “I will be here tomorrow,” he said instead. “Remember that.” The door clicked shut, and then after the muted sound of footsteps on the stairs, the front door was opened, and then closed. The man Holmes loved beyond all reason was gone, for the moment at least.

Watson would be back, again and again, and Mary would be left behind. Perhaps, in time, trust could be reborn. Perhaps, in time, love could once more be permitted. But for now, as Watson himself had written, there still remained the cocaine-bottle, and Holmes cradled it tenderly to his chest.

“If I needed someone,” he said from the chair, “then it would be you.”