

# **The Adventures of Sheila Holmes**

*Organized Crimes*

**A Collection of Stories**

by

**Eugenia Lucas**

## Two Trials and a Sword

Violet eyes fluttered, unfocused. From a position tangled in the bedsheets after a restless night, Sheila Holmes stared through shafts of dust-augmented daylight at a face which had haunted her dreams for nearly three years.

“Tony?” she murmured.

The voice which replied rang deeper than Anthony Downton’s melodious baritone. The lean figure towered above her, longish, unkempt dark brown mane dangling past his angular jaw, smooth cheekbones marred by two days’ growth of stubble, nostrils flaring on his prominent nose. Thin lips were set in a hard line. “You ignored your alarm clock,” rumbled Sherlock Holmes.

His great-great-niece exhaled, “So I did.”

“You’re due at court in less than an hour.”

“So I am.” She rolled onto her left side. “Where’s John?”

“Your Watson is meeting with his veteran’s counselor this morning. He’ll catch you up at the Old Bailey.”

“He left you to wake me?”

“He trusted you to wake on your own.”

“I...”

“Had the nightmare again.”

“How’d you...”

“I’ve been inside your head, remember. Your... disjointed thought processes are very familiar to me.”

Groggy and unwilling, Sheila righted herself, fumbled for the tattered dressing gown she’d tossed on a chair - and missed - and staggered along the corridor of 221B Baker Street’s upper level to the bathroom.

Not even a cold shower roused her from acute exhaustion. In preparation for the simultaneous trials of former Metropolitan Police inspector Kevin D.K. Caruthers and Ivan “Bull” Lukaster - albeit in separate courtrooms - she’d been repeatedly grilled by the new Chief Crown Prosecutor, Franklin “Albie” Jones.

Placed in charge of these two prominent cases when his superiors were relieved of their duties as a result of the corruption investigation surrounding Caruthers, “Albie” - Jones bring a true albino - suffered from extreme agitation, fearful he would not present his evidence a manner appropriate to gain conviction by the jury. Thus, he kept summoning Sheila to review the facts.

She’d arrived at the flat from the latest session well past midnight. Glancing at red LED numbers on the bedside clock as she yanked a conservative yellow blouse from her wardrobe, she grunted at the time: half-ten.

“Uncle, I think I’m ill,” she sighed, slipping on black loafers.

“Indeed, you’ve been ailing for some months. You eat little, and partaking of that hidden supply of coca leaves does nothing to improve your physical condition.”

“You...”

“With age comes wisdom.”

“You mean, with death comes wisdom.”

The spectre bowed in agreement.

“Without the stimulant, I would crawl under the covers and sleep for weeks.”

“It might be the best thing for you.”

“There’s too much to do.”

The elder Holmes dissipated in a cloud of acrid tobacco smoke. “With more to come,” echoed around the sitting room.

Puzzled by this cryptic message, Sheila snatched a black fedora off the peg nailed beneath “V.R.” enshrined in bullet holes, smashed it atop her brunette mop, and hurried down the stairs.

At the front door, Edith Hudson-Thorne, owner of the Baker Street lodgings, chatted with a middle-aged, curl-crowned, robust individual.

“Good morning, George,” Sheila greeted as she whisked past.

A quick hand grasped her sleeve. “Miss Holmes, wait, please.”

The tenant paused, frustrated. “I’m... late.”

“This is important. Please.”

“I’ll stop by your shop as soon as I’m finished testifying. I promise.”

Dismayed, George Newley released the woman. As she hustled toward the Tube station, she squinted back at the music shop proprietor, who supplied strings, picks and capo for her Fender 12-string guitar - a birthday present from Johnny Watson that past January. He hadn’t come to sell her an electronic tuner. He’d brought her a case, which she didn’t need given her busy schedule.

Sunday next, she traveled to Leek for the Holmes Institute of Forensic Science dedication, which Oxford University was inaugurating at the former family estate. Wednesday fortnight, she and Watson would be named a Dame and Knight of the British Empire during a special ceremony at Buckingham Palace - after intense negotiations over tea with the Queen and Prime Minister in late August.

Though awed by the monarch’s opulent office, Sheila had violated established protocol and insisted Watson be honored alongside her, equally responsible for the successful apprehension of Cyber Vigilante Ivan Lukaster. The

aging royal had taken in her recitation with aplomb, while the Labor Party leader had itched to reprimand the 28-year-old detective.

“This is unheard of!” he objected.

“Perhaps,” stated the Queen, smoothing her skirt as she rose from a gold brocade-upholstered armchair. “Yet, admirable. Too many who are offered such honors claim all the credit for themselves. Miss Holmes, at least, has the dignity to admit it required a team to accomplish the desired end.”

Sheila curtsayed awkwardly in her green dress. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“You are most gracious, Your Majesty.” Accepting the proffered hand, Watson bent his close-cropped blond head to kiss arthritic fingers.

Descending crowded stairs at the Baker Street station, the young Holmes chuckled aloud at the recollection, simultaneously dreading the obligations placed upon her by the title “Dame”.

A variety of characters milled about the Old Bailey lobby: barristers, idle curiosity seekers, defendants and the constables guarding them. Sheila asked a harried clerk in which courtroom the Caruthers case would be heard, trying in vain to follow the vague arm pointing along a corridor.

“This way, my dear,” rang a Welsh-accented baritone behind her.

She spun upon a once-athletic but now dissipated figure: Burton Richards. The psychology instructor, presently at Cambridge, still maintained his straw-colored - and textured - hair in a military-style crew-cut.

“Professor!” she exclaimed cheerily. “You’re here for the Crown?”

“No one knows Deke Caruthers’ mental state as well as I,” the senior remarked.

“He’s pleading insanity?”

“A ploy of the defense, which will prove futile. In the Lukaster matter, they may fool the jury.”

“You’re here for that, too?”

Richards led Sheila to a bench along the wall. “Albie Jones called me in for both. I understand you contributed to their respective downfalls.”

“I did what Scotland Yard couldn’t.”

“Brava, my dear. Though,” he studied her drawn countenance at length, “you seem near to a nervous breakdown, if I’m any expert. Not sleeping or eating, just like when you used to prep for exams.”

Sheepishly, she lowered her chin.

He patted her shoulder. “We’d best go in, or risk the judge’s ire. Will you dine with me this evening?”

“Should do, if the proceedings don’t run over-long.”

“The estimate is two to three weeks, full days.”

“Damn!”

“Your testimony will only be a fraction of that...”

“I’m here for the duration, Professor. I want to see justice done.”

“My classes won’t permit me to see this to its logical conclusion, but we can enjoy our reunion, regardless.”

“Pick the restaurant and the time, and I’ll meet you there.”

“I’ll slip you a note later, just like you students used to do before mobiles became all the rage.” With a playful grin, Richards passed ahead of her into the witness waiting room.

Where they sat among dozens of others called for various cases, striking up random conversations to while away the hours.

Eventually, they ended up side by side near the exit. Much of the chatter Sheila had overheard centered on continuing economic turmoil caused by Ivan Lukaster’s intricate computer viruses wiping out much of Britain’s banking system, and London Stock Exchange. Worse than the Great Depression of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, politicians predicted no full recovery for a decade, at minimum.

“How’s enrollment at the university this term?” she asked the educator.

Richards replied, “Some days, I don’t know how they keep the doors open. Many staff members have left, because they weren’t being paid, so the course syllabi don’t get copied or distributed, textbooks aren’t ordered...”

“Haven’t the banks stepped up to reconstruct the records? Surely, the accounting department kept deposit slips, cheque stubs...”

“Aye, that’s true. Knowing there’s a specific sum available is different than being allowed to spend it, however.”

“Eh?” queried Sheila.

“The Trustees and the financial institutions agreed to make only essential disbursements until the crisis is over.” Richards scratched his head; it even sounded like rustling straw. “At least, my small private practice keeps me in chicken and bread.”

“Is that how patients pay you?”

He shrugged.

A surly bailiff called Sheila’s name from the threshold. She wrung Richards’ fleshy hand in parting, and strode a maze of corridors to the darkly paneled chamber where Kevin Caruthers sat in the dock.

Questioning by Albie Jones’ mustached, fastidious subordinate was, thankfully, brief. The defense, though, cross examined her thoroughly,

gesticulating wildly, sweat dampening his shirt collar. Throughout, she surveyed Caruthers' demeanor: salt-and-pepper head bowed, shoulders slumped, pale and thinner. As a public official, his bail had been set high, and his knighted father had refused aid. Life behind bars had not been kind to a man who had sent many innocent souls there through his twisted machinations.

Before the evening recess, the detective was informed her presence would not be required for the Lukaster case until Wednesday. She didn't see Burton Richards, but he had entrusted a folded scrap of paper to a portly matron, naming a West End pub for their 8:00 dinner.

The Tube to Baker Street - running every 15 minutes during rush hour, due to increased usage, up from hourly just a month prior - deposited her within a block of George Newley's emporium and, oddly, he awaited Sheila at the top of the stairs. "I didn't want to miss you," he greeted.

She bristled. "Sorry I'm so late."

They settled at the establishment's counter, guitars in all price ranges suspended from wall hooks, drum sets on display, brass and wind instruments in glass cases. Racks of sheet music occupied the center of the floor, from classical to rock 'n roll.

"How's business?" hinted Sheila.

She didn't expect Newley to blow his cork. "Intolerable, is how!"

She recoiled.

"Every week two geezers in Armani shoes pop in for a protection payment, Miss Holmes, and I'm bloody sick of it. They promise to keep me from being looted by those who still struggle from the... mess, but it's them what's looting me cash register, and making threats if I tell them I won't pay!"

This description reminded the woman of tactics used by bootleggers during the Prohibition period in America. She snorted a laugh, resigned to how some criminals would concoct any means to profit off others' misery.

"What day do they visit you, George?"

"They'll be here at 6:30."

She scanned the surroundings, and opted for the storeroom, a small window in its door. "I'll watch from there."

He squeezed her arm. "Thanks."

Dust from the box-lined, confined space might've made her sneeze, had not the racketeers appeared in short order. She presumed the typecast thugs enjoyed their role, attired in expensive suits, and over-confident to the extreme.

Newley's trembling digits hesitated to extract an envelope of currency from its drawer. When the darker of the pair pulled a pistol, Sheila didn't wait for diplomacy to diffuse the situation.

Both men lay on the boards within seconds, knocked unconscious with deft Wing Chun techniques. Fumbling for a bag of plastic ties used to secure price tags on his wares, Newley's brown eyes blinked in awe.

"Call the Yard," Sheila directed as she secured the culprits' wrists behind them.

The case would not end so easily. When a squad of constables appeared to take statements and transport the miscreants, no one present expected two dull thuds to end the suspects' lives as they skulked toward police vehicles. Sheila immediately calculated the bullets' trajectory, fired from a weapon fitted with a silencer. She sprinted over the road toward a row of white-washed residences, without thought to her own safety.

On the steps of the bed and breakfast, a hunched elder observed the excitement, a mobile phone to her ear.

"Who's in that room?" bellowed Sheila, pointing to an open casement on the second level.

Flustered at being interrupted spreading juicy gossip, the senior snapped, "No one, missy. Haven't had a reservation in weeks!"

The young Holmes brushed past, mounting an interior staircase by twos. She burst into tiny sleeping quarters, noting someone had left a definite impression on the bed quilt, sitting in wait of the perfect opportunity to eliminate a team who had failed in their unsavory duties.

By the width and depth of the markings, Sheila deduced the female had been serious about her task: not a strand of hair, nor any indication she'd paused to fix her make-up or eat a sandwich.

Not many superior marksmen of that gender, though, and it would've taken such skill to hit both targets in the skull within seconds. Add the fact a silencer attachment always skewed the aim...

She passed along that information to a sergeant who scribbled details in his notebook as the corpses were loaded into an ambulance.

"No identification, I suppose," ventured Sheila, as metal doors slammed.

"Just a roll of cash in each trouser pocket from their other collections."

She joined Newley, pacing the shop.

"It's over, George. At best, another pair will pay a call in the next day or two..."

He whirled on her, enraged. "It's not that simple, Miss Holmes. Those blokes warned me if anything happened, me livelihood would be reduced to ashes within 24 hours. Everything I own will be destroyed by morning!"

"If that's your fear, then I'll stay with you and keep vigil..."

Newley calmed slightly. "You will?"

She nodded, as her stomach grumbled. Remembering her dinner engagement with Burton Richards, she frowned. He hadn't included his phone number on the note, and she had no way to contact him and cancel.

Unless she rang the pub - and placed a delivery order.

Once their meal arrived, Sheila instructed Newley to go about his normal closing procedures. They retreated to the storeroom then, the owner playing solitaire on a folding table, and his companion attempting to tune a pricy mandolin.

Just shy of 10:00, a window shattered. Newley dialed the police and remained behind as Sheila rushed through the building, clutching a cricket bat.

The cadre of arsonists didn't expect a near madwoman to emerge from the structure and pummel them mercilessly before they could douse the premises with petrol and strike a match. Three put up a fight, but when sirens sounded in the distance, all dropped their gear and fled.

Newley didn't feel any relief at this turn of events. He explained to Sheila that the "boss" of this mob would send others to finish the job.

"Not if he realizes we're on to his tactics," she assured him. "The Yard isn't as dumb as many believe, and they'll be setting up a task force to combat these types of crimes - if they haven't already." Glimpsing the wall clock, she yawned. "Sorry, George, but I must excuse myself. I need a little lie-down before I have to get up!"

Trudging to 221B, she was stunned to find Edith Hudson-Thorne and John Watson huddled together in the sitting room. "What's wrong?"

Watson thumped a copy of the *London Times*, laid on the round table beside a tray of tea and scones. An artist had rendered her profile - badly - during her testimony that afternoon. "Did you really say that?" queried her flatmate.

"What? That the Yard couldn't investigate their way out of a paper bag?"

Edith droned, "The new superintendent phoned to express his displeasure..."

"So? I was asked my opinion of their personnel. I answered honestly, under oath."

"You could have... phrased it more politely," remarked Watson.

She snickered. "When have you ever known me to be polite?"

"Not even with the Queen."

“Get to bed, both of you. You must be as knackered as I.”

Tuesday, Sheila awoke well into the afternoon, her right knee swollen and painful. She'd long since given up attending physical therapy after surgery to repair a torn ACL, and yesterday's exertion had obviously aggravated the injury. Her forehead throbbed, too - the livid, jagged scar from a gash she sustained in the previous spring's Leek train wreck continuing to annoy her at inconvenient moments. She limped into the sitting room; Watson sat at the desk, intently staring at the flat-screen monitor of the recently installed computer.

“What's up?” she grumbled, pouring a cup of coffee.

“Both Caruthers' and Lukaster's trials are being streamed live.”

Closer inspection proved he had a split screen with both courtrooms in high definition view.

“Who's on the stand?” she prodded.

“The defense is browbeating one of Caruthers' flunkies, who's testifying in exchange for immunity from prosecution. Earlier, they had a couple of the pimps he used, and the jail warden.”

“And, Bull?”

“Burton Richards was in the witness box for an hour, and then the matter of Lukaster tampering with grades a few years ago came up, to establish a pattern of computer hacking. They called an unexpected recess, during which Albie Jones rang you.”

“Eh?”

“The voice mail is on your mobile.”

“How'd you know it was him?”

“The caller ID. You've got him saved in your contacts, remember?”

“Because he's such a nuisance.” She grabbed her phone off the untidy fireplace mantle and punched an access code, holding the device to her ear. Eventually, she muttered, “Damn!”

“Bad news?”

“The judge has received notification he has an aggressive form of cancer, and must begin treatment on Thursday. If Albie can't present his entire case by late today, giving the defense tomorrow to counter, they'll have to call a mistrial and start over.”

“He doesn't want to do that, I assume,” joked Watson.

“Of course not. He wants me at the Old Bailey by three.”

“It's half-two now.”

Yanking off her great-uncle's dressing gown, she quipped, “So, I'll be late.”

Jeans and a Tower Bridge polo shirt were the best Sheila could do at such short notice. Summoned from the waiting room as soon as she checked in with the clerk, the jury's collective expression didn't seem to approve of her sneakers and tousled brunette mop.

Their attitude changed, however, when Albie Jones, traditional white wig askew over his protruding forehead, and unfastened black robe augmenting his albino paleness, projected a magnified image of the Cyber Vigilantes' logo on a screen. He requested Sheila explain the significance of the caricatured man's face, his right hand raised in a bowfinger gesture. Lukaster's concealed algorithm and other clues to his identity were detailed at length, in terms easily understood by those with little or no knowledge of computers.

"Like myself," Sheila chuckled to herself as she paused to sip water from the glass handy. She felt Ivan Lukaster's grey orbs upon her, rage seething in his barrel chest, and not one bit contrite for having ruined the British economy.

Another message awaited her when she returned to Baker Street, the smell of sauerkraut permeating the dwelling. The Holmes Institute dedication was being postponed until Oxford's next term when, hopefully, enrollment in the forensic science program would increase.

She whirled from the desk, to discover Burton Richards seated on the red Victorian divan.

"Professor! I didn't see you!"

"Your friend, John, told me to wait when I called, knowing how much you dislike German fare."

Peering wistfully at the door, Sheila shook her head. "He deliberately had Edith cook that muck, so I'd be forced..."

"Forced?" echoed Richards.

"Nothing against you, sir," she apologized. "He does this periodically, when he wants me out of the house for some reason."

"Another woman, perhaps?"

"I... it's not like that between us..."

"He wishes it was, and is quite disappointed that you ignore him so much."

Her eyebrows arched. "Does John know you're a psychologist?"

"He didn't have to say a word. Just as you are very observant about criminal matters, I can assess a person's mental processes from his behavior and..." he plucked a partially eaten bowl of cereal off the table, "his lack of appetite."

"Come along, Professor," Sheila insisted, escorting the former athlete down the stairs. He moved much slower than she recalled from their days at Oxford. She also noticed the whiskey bottle bouncing in his jacket pocket.

She could not judge, however, with a box of coca leaves concealed in her night stand.

As Richards hailed a taxi, Sheila heard the tell-tale click. The pair hit the concrete face-first as a projectile whizzed over the braking black vehicle's roof and lodged in the bricks behind them.

"What on earth..." protested the older man.

Sheila didn't bother to respond, on her feet scrutinizing the block for their would-be assassin.

"You getting in, or not?" the driver barked through the window.

Assisting Richards to his feet, she directed him onto the rear seat, and slid in beside him.

"Where to?"

"Just get us out of here."

With any luck, the person who shot in the darkness would believe one of them injured and en route to hospital. The possibilities were endless as to a motive: one of Caruthers' disgruntled compatriots or a commission arranged by any of a dozen criminals Sheila had been instrumental in sending to prison. The attack's timing made it more likely to be the female who'd shot the thugs collecting protection money at George Newley's music shop.

Which meant there would be no clues.

The taxi paused at a congested intersection; Richards provided the address of his favorite London restaurant. Sheila settled on stained cloth upholstery for the ride across the city.

The dinner passed pleasantly enough, with the Cambridge instructor offering a professional opinion about his former student's career and relationships. Going their separate ways once the bill was paid, Sheila wondered if she'd see the man again, now his testimony had concluded and he was bound for the university.

Prior to entering 221B, she used her penknife to pry a misshapen lead lump from beside the steps. Submitting it to the Metropolitan Police ballistics lab would subject her to the new superintendent's continued ire, since she didn't summon their aid when the incident occurred. She retained the evidence in a plastic bag until rested sufficiently to make a logical decision.

Late news broadcasts reported Kevin D.K. Caruthers' conviction on all charges. His jury had deliberated less than ninety minutes. Watson had taped the note to her pillow; she crumpled the sheet, falling onto the double mattress fully clothed.

It would be the following Monday before a verdict came down against Lukaster. Legalities allowed for a substitute judge to handle that business, and

sentencing would be decided at a later date, after chemotherapy and radiation treatments had concluded for the original presider.

Cameras captured the out-of-control genius/art dealer hurling his guards into court benches and paneling, when they tried to take him into custody. Sheila watched the televised footage, grinning, aware that Edith - who had almost married the man - stood behind her.

“He got his just desserts,” murmured the landlady, coiling a lock of russet hair around her finger.

“Someday, you’ll find...”

“Don’t, Sheila. Never again will I let anyone play on my emotions.”

Watson emerged from his bedroom, attired in a black suit and polished shoes. “How do I look?”

Both women glared at him. “You going to a funeral?” quipped Sheila.

“It’s for the palace do.” He twirled like a model, despite his prosthetic left leg, then abruptly stopped. “You *have* bought a new outfit for the occasion, haven’t you?”

The young Holmes averted her gaze.

“Edith, we’ve got work to do!” the Army veteran growled. “I’m not going to let her spoil this for me!”

“Spoil it for you?” Sheila repeated. “I’m the one who made it possible for you to be knighted in the first place! How could I spoil it?”

“By showing up in jeans, t-shirt and sneakers, wearing that outlandish fedora!” chided Edith.

“I’m not that... that...”

Watson suggested, “Stupid?”

“I prefer ‘insensitive.’”

Her companions proved quite insensitive to her wishes, dragging her to the shower, and selecting grey slacks and a v-neck white blouse for the sojourn to the shopping district, where she argued away every frock presented as either too expensive or not suited to her taste.

“You have no taste!” commented Watson at one point.

Roughly, Sheila propelled him and Edith past the rack, shouting, “And she has a gun!”

In fact, a strawberry blonde garbed as a stock clerk had dropped her parcels and raised a Glock 9mm fitted with a silencer toward the trio. While the saleswomen shrieked and bolted, and a clamor ensued, the detective made use of this momentary distraction to roll beneath the luxurious skirts and sweep the assailant off her feet. The pistol skidded across the carpet into a fitting room.

Sheila knelt on the female's biceps, preventing any escape. "I'm getting sick of being shot at!" she stormed. "Who sent you?"

Blue orbs squinted angrily, but no answer was forthcoming. When three skittish constables rushed in, Sheila rose and let them perform their duties.

Watson and Edith joined her on the store's ground floor, where irate managers blamed lax security for the breach. They offered this customer the ensemble of her choice, gratis, as well as shoes and handbag.

She brusquely refused. When police led their disheveled prisoner outside, Sheila saw her head swivel, as if searching for a familiar face...

That dull pop, and the assassin collapsed between her captors.

"Damn!" spat Sheila, motionless. "This organization leaves nothing to chance, no loose ends."

Watson stated, "You mean, her own people killed her?"

"Just as she did the pair who tried to shake down George Newley."

"Efficient, albeit brutal."

"Indeed, John. And, no one's engaged my services to locate the mastermind behind such brutality, so I'm staying out of it."

"You're clearly in it," countered Edith. "You're their target..."

"It's difficult to hit a moving target. We'd best crack on."

"What about the dress?"

"I'll go wrapped in a bedsheet, if I must, but I'm going back to Baker Street and not stepping outside until I've been assured further arrests have been made."

Metropolitan Police superintendent, Dermot Vale - elevated to the post after his predecessor was relieved of duty for allowing Caruthers' corruption to exist nearly a decade - had other ideas. He and a squad of plain-clothes inspectors called at 221B that evening, to announce their surveillance plan. Sheila would be kept under 24-hour guard, whether or not she went into seclusion.

"Don't waste your manpower on me," she objected. "Find the person who orchestrated the protection racket and ordered me killed!"

"Even though we can't investigate our way out of a paper bag, Miss Holmes, we're diligently working every lead. We've identified the men who'd been extorting money from Mr. Newley and other shop owners in that district, and received reports of similar activities in other parts of the city. The woman carried no papers, and her fingerprints are not in our database. But, we *will* connect her with those who've put out a contract on you."

"If you think that eases my mind, sir, you're mistaken."

Shaved head glistening with perspiration, sunken eyes bloodshot, Vale flashed crooked teeth. "Be that as it may, I expect your cooperation in not attempting to elude my men."

"You have my word."

He glanced at Watson and Edith, positioned near the sitting room door.

"Please feel free to ring me if you notice anything suspicious in the neighborhood."

"Thank you, sir," Watson acknowledged.

Sheila remained in her bedroom most of that week, draperies closed, sucking coca leaves when Watson wasn't looking. Images of her great-great-uncle Sherlock and Tony Downton - almost identical and interchangeable in her bored state - swirled about the dim, stifling chamber, and she chatted with them on random topics.

Edith listened through the wood when she brought Watson his meals. "Has she finally gone mad?"

"She's safe. That's what concerns me."

"What about the palace?"

The former medic gestured toward a large box propped against the wall. "I had that lavender tea length sent over yesterday. She'll be ready when the limousine arrives."

"Limousine?"

"Complete with police escort."

"The Queen knows?"

"The Prime Minister has been informed of the situation - and not by me. Supposedly, he proclaimed Sheila a national treasure, and has vowed to protect her from harm."

Edith's green eyes rolled ceilingward.

Once more manipulated into the shower, then into proper underclothes and demure, sleeveless satin, Wednesday noon found Sheila struggling to clear her brain with coffee as she puzzled at the reflection in Edith's full-length mirror on street level.

"I'm a wreck!" she sighed.

Watson remarked, "You're quite lovely."

She noticed him for the first time in days, recalling Burton Richards' opinion. "And, you're the handsomest soldier I ever saw." She kissed his cheek lightly, straightening his tie. He blushed, and Edith giggled.

If nothing else, police vehicles preceding the silver Mercedes gave them quick passage through afternoon traffic. Whisked into a briefing, before parading

toward the ballroom, they were placed in line to receive their honors along with a two score others notable for acting prowess, military bravery and scientific research.

Side-by-side before the monarch, Watson was tapped on each shoulder with the flat blade of a sword, then both received their insignia. The Queen smiled sweetly and thanked them for their service to the British Empire.

By mutual agreement, the pair ducked out of the subsequent reception, stopping for an ice cream cone on the way home.

## The Irish Connection

On either side of the famous “V.R.” - etched with bullet holes in the sitting room wall at 221B Baker Street - insignia of a Knight of the British Empire and a Dame of the British Empire had been enshrined. Both Johnny Watson and Sheila Holmes had preferred to stick the velvet cases in a desk drawer, but Edith Hudson-Thorne surprised them at Christmas with distinctive teak shadow boxes.

This particular wintry morning, the flat’s tenants ate a sumptuous breakfast while reading in the London *Times* about the sentencing of former Metropolitan Police inspector Kevin D.K. Caruthers. Sheila had attended the hearing in person, having been instrumental in obtaining evidence which incarcerated him alongside many innocent people his corruption had wrongfully imprisoned.

Caruthers wore a sling into court, gauze bandages taped atop his salt-and-pepper mane. His solicitor explained to the judge that his client had been attacked in the prison dining room by an inmate gang, and pleaded for leniency based on the hostile atmosphere behind bars.

“Thirty years isn’t half enough, given the disgrace and inconvenience he caused so many,” grumbled Watson, in a cable-knit sweater and jeans, sipping his coffee.

“And fining him thousands of pounds is useless, when he’s broke,” Sheila concurred, clad in grey Oxford sweats. “It’s all symbolic.”

“What do you think Ivan Lukaster will get?”

The genius who’d murdered thousands and decimated the British economy with a series of intricate computer viruses aimed at the mobile phone network, train systems, banks and London Stock Exchange would learn his fate Monday week.

“I hope it’s the death penalty,” scoffed Edith, carrying in a fresh pot of steaming brew. Lukaster had courted her, and even proposed marriage, before the trio discovered his nefarious scheme.

“It will be life in prison, at minimum. The list of those who have submitted statements runs six pages, single-spaced, so Albie Jones told me.”

“How is the world’s worst comb-over?” Watson sniggered.

“Wouldn’t you try to conceal premature baldness if you were in your thirties?”

“I’d get a toupee.”

“Hard to match his hair, given the albinism.”

“True, true.”

Edith had withdrawn, but the pair was soon joined by robust, middle-aged George Newley, proprietor of a neighborhood music emporium. He was accompanied by three timid colleagues from the same block.

“Gentlemen, be seated,” Sheila directed, dabbing her lips with a napkin.

They settled in the armchair near the fireplace, on the red Victorian divan and the desk chair.

“What may I do for you?”

Newley cleared his throat. “We need your help, Miss Holmes.”

“Last we spoke, George, you hadn’t been coerced to pay protection money since...”

“Correct, Miss Holmes. We’ve come about a new caper.”

Sheila waited for him to continue.

The green grocer introduced as James Ruthven, elderly and arthritic, croaked, “The loan sharks are circling.”

“Eh?” interspersed Watson.

Newley explained, “What with the problems at the banks, we haven’t had to pay toward our outstanding balances much of the past year. A fortnight ago, however, we all received letters demanding payment in full.”

“From the bank?” Sheila prodded.

“No, from some sham outfit with a Birmingham postal address,” Ruthven supplied. “I made a few phone calls, and found out these blokes bought our notes for pennies on the pound, and are determined to make us pay what we owe, or... or...”

A younger merchant, Theo Johnson, added, “They’ve already tacked on penalties and raised the interest rate to where regular payments won’t even touch the principal. If we don’t comply with their demands, our goods will be confiscated and we’ll be booted from our shops.”

Sheila contemplated the scenario, another typical of old-style gangsters. Ruthven had rightly labeled them loan sharks. She pondered whether the collectors would be followed by enforcers with high-powered weapons, charged with terminating any minions arrested by the police before they could finger their superiors. Such had been the practice when the “protection racket” had been running. If the current scheme was being operated by the same boss...

“When is the first payment due?” she asked. Newley replied, “The blokes are coming Saturday.”

Sheila rose, brushing crumbs of toast from her lap. “Thank you, gentlemen. I’ll be in touch by Friday.”

Confused, the quartet made a hesitant exit. Last across the threshold, Newley squinted brown eyes at the detective. “We can’t afford to lose our livelihoods, Miss Holmes,” he pleaded.

She grinned her assurance, and he departed.

Watson drained his ceramic mug and scowled. “How on earth do you expect to make a dent in the operations of a vast and powerful criminal syndicate?”

“You picked up on that aspect of the matter?”

He rifled a pile of newspapers stacked near the fireplace, extracting a particular section. “You really should read the *Times* more than just Sundays.”

“Today’s Tuesday.”

“You know what I mean.”

Sheila perused columns of small print, scanning a letter to the editor decrying myriad forms of extortion rampant since the banking collapse, and how families and businesses were suffering because the police did nothing.

It reminded the woman of 1920s America.

“I kept out of it before, not being requested to do anything other than eliminate the threat to George’s shop.”

“And, two attempts were made on your life as a result. I’m just glad the police no longer watch our every move. It was embarrassing.”

“They may resume their surveillance, if things go as I speculate they will.”

“Which is?”

Her smirk proved the sole answer.

“Dammit, Sheila, why are you so reckless?”

A cloud of tobacco smoke announced Sherlock Holmes’ ghostly manifestation, his worn shirt sleeves, unkempt dark hair and stubbly chin presenting a different picture than those drawn by early artists. The briar pipe clenched between his teeth emitted an odor which caused Sheila to cross and raise the window, disregarding the chill outside.

“She is reckless, Watson, because she fears stagnation,” boomed the baritone.

The military veteran snorted, “I’ve stopped intercepting the packages of coca leaves, merely to keep the peace.”

“It’s not like I’m addicted...” Sheila remarked.

“Addictive tendencies are in your blood, child,” remonstrated her great-great-uncle. “When the brain is idle, it seeks relief from the boredom of ordinary life.”

“Next thing, you’ll be telling me to check into rehab!”

Watson noted, "All I'm asking is that you moderate your... consumption when you're not working and... be more careful about your safety when you *are* on a case."

"That's most reasonable," stated Sherlock.

Sheila recalled psychology professor Burton Richards' assessment of her Watson's mental condition: desiring a closer relationship with her. He wanted her to exercise more care, so she'd not suddenly leave him alone - as he'd been in the first days of his discharge from the British Army after being wounded in Afghanistan. Left to cope with a prosthetic left leg, post traumatic stress and a complicated veterans benefit system, it had taken months for him to regain a degree of equilibrium after moving into the flat with her.

Then, he'd dealt with cancer and debilitating chemotherapy.

She approached him, caressing his cheek tenderly. "All right, John. I promise not to take any more risks than absolutely necessary."

His blond eyebrows arched. "I don't know if that statement comforts me."

"It's as much as any Holmes can offer, dear boy." Sherlock chucked his shoulder.

"And, if you're willing to come along, you can protect me!" suggested Sheila.

Watson reached for his sneakers. "I won't take a bullet for you."

"That's not a requirement of the job."

As they toted dirty dishes down the servants stairs to Edith's kitchen, Sherlock dissipated, leaving only the aroma of tobacco.

New Scotland Yard proved an unusual stop on their investigation, in Watson's estimation. Sheila instructed the receptionist to ring Superintendent Dermot Vale's office.

"He's... unavailable at the moment," came the terse soprano.

"Nonsense, woman. His car is parked in its reserved space, and the schedule you're hiding with your arm shows he has no appointments until three PM."

Impressed, the prim female sputtered, "What name should I give?"

"Dame Sheila Holmes."

Watson masked his laugh, aware his flatmate enjoyed using her title in unusual circumstances, purely for its shock value. A deferential constable appeared to escort them to the official's chambers, bowing as low as if she'd been the Queen herself.

The ruddy, shaved-head Vale, not totally irked at this unexpected visit, offered them seats opposite his brass-trimmed walnut desk. "There's been no

repeat of the assassination attempts, I take it?" he began, focused on a tablet computer.

"Not yet, but there may be," Sheila replied.

Suddenly, she gained his undivided attention, proceeding to condense George Newley's current difficulties into a few sentences.

"If no actual crime has been committed, we can't get involved," explained Vale.

"You were involved in gathering information on the two extortionists, and their murderer who was, herself, murdered."

"Yes, and that case is still open."

"Should do, because this recent development is likely connected to it. I'd very much appreciate if you'd turn over the information you've gathered so far on the three deceased, and a list of their confederates."

"That's just it," Vale admitted, swiping his finger across the tablet screen, initializing a laser printer on the nearby credenza. "We have their names, but no addresses, and no associates with whom to link them."

"They're that well covered?"

"We know they came from County Wicklow, Ireland, but other than their school records and birth certificates, nothing."

"In other words, this organization is very thorough."

"Precisely."

Sheila exhaled audibly as she retrieved the sheet. "Thank you for your time."

Vale offered his right hand, which she clasped. "While I don't appreciate your... off-the-cuff remarks about my force, I'm willing to help you in any way possible, as long as you reciprocate, passing along pertinent details."

"Have no doubts, sir. Our goals are the same, only our methods vary."

Out once more in the blustery winter air, Watson peered at the list Vale had given Sheila. "What now?"

"We're to Ireland, John. When we get home, pack a bag, and pull up the train schedule to Liverpool. We'll take the ferry to Dublin, and rent a car for the drive to Wicklow."

"It'd be faster to fly."

"And more expensive."

"You can't possibly hope..."

"We've got to start somewhere. If we can find who recruited these youngsters..."

"Will we be back by Friday, to make your meeting with George?"

“Weather permitting.”

Weather played a huge role in their travels, in fact. The Irish Sea’s choppy waters delayed their ferry two hours, and an ice storm on Eire’s eastern coastline prevented them from doing more than taking a room in a modest Dublin bed and breakfast.

Wednesday morning, unseasonable warmth thawed the roads, and they motored through slush to the home address of the strawberry blonde who’d twice shot at Sheila before police apprehended her and she fell victim to a confederate’s bullet.

The sleepy village of Avoca lay well off the beaten path, and the pair quickly grasped why an ambitious girl would wish to escape its confines. Her parents weren’t anxious to discuss their daughter’s antics, despite recognizing the callers’ names.

“How long ago did Naeve leave for England?” queried Sheila as the conversation dragged interminably.

Her mother, clearly dissatisfied with her own life, muttered. “Nine months since. Ungrateful wretch.”

“She’d been dating this boy without my permission,” spat the father, a laborer with no specific goals other than to bring home enough money to keep his wife content. “He rambled on about adventures and travel, and she bought into his dream. Wanted me to finance a trip to France for them both. When I refused, she stole cash from my billfold and ran off one night.”

“Not a word from her,” the mother lamented.

Watson and Sheila glanced at each other.

The latter spoke. “Surely, you’ve been notified…”

“Oh, sure. She’s dead.” The father’s blunt proclamation. “They wanted us to pay to ship her home for burial. I refused.”

Shortly thereafter, the pair from London excused themselves.

“Lot of help, those,” breathed Watson.

“More than you think, John. How ‘bout a drink?”

He declined, not realizing Sheila had glimpsed a pub down the street where they could get coffee or tea, as well as alcohol, and eavesdrop on the local gossip.

Fitzgerald’s was populated by those seeking a hasty lunch or warming their bones near one of two peat-fueled fireplaces. At this hour, they were sober, which made for better listening.

Beyond the women carping about unfaithful husbands and high prices at the grocer’s, men boasting about their latest catch in area rivers, a single phrase

made Sheila prick up her ears as she nursed a ham sandwich and bowl of chicken soup.

“Kieran Fahey’s back again,” said a bespectacled oldster at a corner table. His companion grumbled an insult.

“He’s back and forth to London so often, I wonder how he earns the price.”

“Maybe he’s a traveling salesman,” quipped a haggard woman at an adjacent booth.

“What he’s selling, the girls seem to like.”

“The boys, too. Tales of wealth and power, adventure...”

“He should be barred from the town. Three of those who accepted his offer are already dead...”

Sheila paid the bill and signaled Watson toward the exit.

“Where to now?”

“The secondary school. Someone there should know where to find Kieran Fahey.”

They didn’t get that far. Less than 100 metres along Avoca’s main thoroughfare, near a quaint petrol station/garage, a tall youth sporting a shock of bright red hair, freckles, fur-trimmed camel-hair overcoat, gold chains and rings was surrounded by shivering teenaged girls and boys. He regaled his audience with tales of London’s glamour and easy jobs available for the asking, with generous salaries.

“You dunna need to finish your studies,” he advised. “Sign on with me, and all expenses will be paid.”

Sheila whispered that Watson should keep a sharp eye on the assembly, while she altered her appearance to fit the age group.

“How’re you going to achieve that?” he demanded.

“What are they wearing, John?”

“Jeans, coats, knit caps and sneakers.”

“What am I wearing?”

“Jeans, a coat, sneakers and a fedora.”

She jammed the fedora in her pocket, pulled her brunette mop into two pigtails and unbuttoned her peacoat. As Watson retreated into a doorway, she sidled along the lane and paused on the fringes of the gathering.

Fahey was concluding his pitch. “Any of you who’s game, meet me here at ten tonight, and we’ll drive to Dublin together.”

The crowd slowly dispersed, some of Fahey's old friends lingering to chat. Sheila inched closer and, when he flicked a lighter to ignite his cigarette, she pinned him to the garage wall.

"What the fuck?" shrieked the lad.

Sheila hissed, "You'll tell me right now who's financing your little scheme, or I'll break every bone in your body."

"None of your business!"

"It *is* my business, after Naeve Gilhooley shot at me."

Watery blue orbs widened. "Who... are you?"

"You know damned well who I am. Now, do I turn you over to the Garda and let you be killed, too, or do you talk to me and save your skin?"

Surveying the street, Fahey's shoulders sagged. "Okay, okay. Get me indoors, and I'll spill the lot."

Watson crossed from his concealment as Sheila yanked Fahey into the repair shop and jerked on an oil-stained rope secured to the overhead door.

"Can't we go somewhere warm?" the boy whined.

"It's going to get really warm for you if you don't cooperate."

He sank on a stack of crates. "I get a package containin' five thousand quid when the boss needs more crew."

"Who's the boss?" Watson inquired.

"I... don't know."

Sheila probed, "Who hired you to perform these... services?"

"A bloke I met in a Wicklow pub."

"You never asked his name?"

"Called himself Herbert Pocket. I didn't believe him."

"You know your Dickens," she praised, "but you took his money."

Fahey nodded.

Watson pressed, "Where do you take your... friends when you get to England?"

"I drop them in Liverpool."

"And, from there?"

"They go to a trainin' camp outside London."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

Sheila restrained Watson from further questioning. "This is a very efficient operation. The right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing, which ensures everyone's safety. And, if they do get caught, they are promptly eliminated."

“The kids I bring back are called ‘expendables,’” Fahey added. “Most wind up in unmarked graves within a month or two.”

“Yet, you keep recruiting more?” chided Watson.

“I have no choice. I’m in too deep, and if I try to get out, they’ll snuff me like a candle flame.”

“Mafia tactics,” Sheila concluded. She pulled Fahey up by his fur collar. “Here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to include me in your next shipment of expendables, and say nothing to your contacts about grassing on them.”

“But, Sheila,” admonished Watson. “Tomorrow’s Thursday, and you’re due in London on Friday...”

She squeezed his arm compassionately. “I’ll be there, have no fear. You catch the ferry tonight, and have Dermot Vale send a detachment of constables to the Liverpool docks tomorrow. That way, they’ll cut off this supply of manpower.”

“What about me?” squealed Fahey. “If I’m pinched...”

Digging in her jeans, Sheila pulled out two 100 pound notes. “Once we’re on the boat tomorrow, you’re on the next train to Galway, where you’ll hide out until we crack this case.”

“This ain’t enough to live on...”

“You’ve got plenty left from the five thousand, I’m sure. Use that, and keep your head low. Otherwise, you might lose it.”

No more had the garage door cleared the ground, than Kieran Fahey bolted like a rabbit chased by hounds.

Watson tugged Sheila’s sleeve, holding her in the dimly lit space. “Are you certain about this?”

“No, but it’s a real lead, and I must pursue it.”

“Why place yourself in unnecessary peril?”

“If you contact Vale, there’ll be no peril.” She pecked him on the cheek and strode into the brisk wind.

Johnny Watson knew better than to argue with the stubborn Holmes - either of them, for that matter. He trekked to the car park, leaving Sheila to take a room at Fitzgerald’s. Kieran Fahey welcomed her invitation to dinner, where she picked his brain for every tidbit of knowledge about the organization.

“For one, you’ve got to look more juvenile to get past the screeners,” he commented over a pint of Guinness.

“Screeners?”

“The gits who make sure no spies or undercover cops sneak through.”

“Ah!”

“You’re good lookin’ enough to pass for 18 - what are you, really?”

“I turned 29 a few weeks ago.”

“Too old, definitely. The cut off is 22. Older folks want to think for themselves, and bollocks up the whole business.”

“I can act 18, no problem.”

“Grand. What will you tell them on the receivin’ end about why I’m not with you?”

“You caught a flu, and couldn’t... leave the loo. They’ll believe it, this time of year.”

“Ace. How’d you get that scar on your noggin?”

“Train wreck, last spring.”

“When the works went bust?”

“Should do.”

“That’s when things got rollin’ for this dodge. Before that, it was drugs and random cons. Now, they’ve got the whole country by the throat.”

“And, their own people.”

“Must do. If I had it to do over, I woulda told Herbert Pocket where to get off.”

“That might’ve been wise. But, I’m willing to help you avoid prosecution and break free of these... criminals.”

Fahey drained his glass. “For that, I’m grateful. Cheers.”

Tranquil conditions on the water made the voyage to Liverpool less eventful than Sheila’s first crossing. She’d deposited a much-subdued Kieran Fahey at the Dublin train station before boarding the ferry with three other recruits. They stayed close to the railing, while she relaxed among the tourists and travelers in the main cabin.

Disembarking on British soil, five somber individuals in black wool coats and sunglasses - though the skies were overcast - corralled them away from the public into a storage building where two trucks idled, bearing the “Sabastiani Greenhouses” logo. The screeners relieved them of their photo IDs. Sheila reluctantly fingered her wallet in its pocket, claiming it was stuck. The police burst in as one of the men raised his fist to clout her for disobedience.

She decked him with a Wing Chun strike to his sternum, and told the sergeant leading the detachment that she would question him where he lay. The rest were escorted to waiting vans.

Right knee in his chest, she growled, “Where were you taking this lot?”

He clenched his teeth defiantly.

She drove knuckles into his throat. “You don’t have to talk, but I can guarantee: you’ll never talk again if you don’t cough up the truth.”

“They’ll kill me if I do.”

“I’ll kill you if you don’t. Your choice. Cooperate and be protected, or die now.”

Sweat congealing at his temples, the burly thug croaked, “There’s a villa two miles west of Windsor. Once they’re cleared, we train them to shoot, and run the scams.”

“What if they’re not cleared?”

“We... dispose of them.”

Sheila did not resist the urge to backhand his pockmarked, arrogant face. “Bastard!”

Surrendering him to the constable outside the door, she wasn’t surprised to hear ambulance sirens blaring. Three of the five thugs had been shot before being loaded in the transport, the fourth bolted and fell into the water.

“Keep this one alive, whatever you do,” Sheila warned the squad. “Inform Superintendent Vale I’ll ring him from Baker Street.”

Pulling up Watson’s number on her mobile, she discounted his profuse expressions of relief and urged him to research Sabastiani Greenhouses on the sitting room computer. “I’ll be home before dark.”

“Be careful.”

She chuckled, tucking the device in her peacoat. He’d become like a mother hen with an errant chick.

Sheila allowed Dermot Vale to coordinate a raid on the Windsor compound, and showed no surprise when the London *Times* featured photos and a critique of the botched operation on Friday afternoon’s front page. The Scotland Yard team had not taken into consideration the watchful eyes of those perched on nearby housetops, bearing high-powered rifles. Thirteen officers died in the line of duty, beside two score unidentified teenagers.

“You didn’t provide me with the necessary intelligence!” Vale raged, seated on the Victorian divan at 221B while his hosts ate dinner.

Sheila didn’t rise to the bait. “You had our friend from Liverpool. Didn’t you interrogate him?”

“He bonded out of jail and vanished like a puff of smoke.”

Speaking of which, the flatmates sniffed a singular aroma denoting Sherlock’s invisible presence.

“At your insistence, sir, I submitted a report containing everything I learned from both Kieran Fahey and the now absent - and possibly dead - screener. If you didn’t heed my words, I cannot be held responsible.”

“You failed to mention guards patrolling the roofs.”

“That, you should have recalled from the earlier murders of the extortionists and my would-be assassin.”

Vale ran twitching digits over his shaved cranium. “Naturally, you’re correct, Miss Holmes. Their blood is on my hands, because I wasn’t meticulous in my preparations.”

“I’m not laying blame, and I understand your grief. I, too, feel the loss of so many innocent children and good men. You’ve severed a vital link to the boss of this organization, though, and we’ll have to start over - with the alleged debt collectors who will be calling upon George Newley and his associates in less than in short order. To prevent them from being killed, you should replace the business owners with your own detectives, properly disguised. The miscreants should be apprehended inside the establishment of your choice, and not moved into any potential line of fire until you’ve wrung every drop of knowledge from them.”

Lips pursed in thought transformed into a weak smile, as Vale glanced at Watson, whose eyes radiated confirmation of Sheila’s plan.

“Will you be there to assist us?” the official queried prior to departing.

“If I am seen in the vicinity by those whose task it is to ensure their subordinates’ smooth functioning, they will pull out and wreak havoc on the debtors at a later date. Best I remain well away from the action until you have what you need, and my clients are assured of their own safety.”

Eight men and two women converged on Baker Street as the clock struck nine, to discuss the coming unpleasantness. Sheila had hastily typed an outline of the exchange with Vale, which she printed and passed to each proprietor. They read in silence, then glared collectively at her.

“Will this put an end to it?” inquired Newley.

“Perhaps not entirely, but soon.”

The owner of a flower stall squealed, “This is outrageous! We can’t live in fear indefinitely!”

“You won’t need to,” Sheila soothed. “If this is handled correctly, within less than a week, the entire network should be smashed, the key figures under lock and key.”

Newley ushered the others toward the stairs, spinning on Sheila at the last second. “You’d better be right, Miss Holmes. I can’t begin to guess how they’ll react if...”

Sheila tired of the confrontation. “Trust me, George. If you can’t trust the Yard, you can trust me.”

Unconvinced, Newley departed, voices of doubt ringing in his ears the entire length of Baker Street.

“Thank God, that’s done,” the young Holmes snorted as Edith locked the deadbolt below. “John, what have you discovered about the Sabastiani Greenhouses?”

“I left my notes on the basket-chair.”

Crossing the sitting room, she snatched up the papers. “Sorry. I’m beyond knackered after all this chaos...”

“A parcel came for you in today’s post,” Watson grumbled.

“And, you’ll be comforted knowing it hasn’t been opened.” She scanned his overview of the Southampton-based flower and vegetable warehouse. “Excellent, John. Superb.”

“Thanks, but how are they affiliated with the Liverpool, Windsor and Birmingham operations?”

“You’ve told me I should read the *Times* more frequently, yet you didn’t digest the entire article on the training facility debacle? Two trucks parked in the Liverpool warehouse were later impounded at Windsor, meaning another shipment of recruits got through late yesterday. The business provides a legitimate way to travel around the country without arousing suspicion.”

Watson grasped the implications. “Sounds like an American gangster film.”

“Indeed.” She switched off the desk lamp. “To bed now. Tomorrow, a trip to the British Museum is in order.”

“Any particular reason?”

“A: to get us out of the house. B: there’s a new exhibit on the pyramids.”

The Army veteran shuffled to his room, yawning.

While they were admiring the detail on recently unearthed sarcophaga that bitter Saturday afternoon, Sheila’s mobile buzzed with an incoming text. She drew it from her peacoat and burst into a broad grin.

“Good news?” Watson conjectured.

She angled the screen toward him.

“We got them - alive and safe.”

The caller ID displayed “Dermot Vale”.

## Of Tinkers and Classics

Among the stacks of mail arriving at 221B Baker Street in each post since mid-February, thanking Sheila Holmes and Johnny Watson for helping bring Ivan “Bull” Lukaster to justice - and three consecutive life sentences - Edith Hudson-Thorne noticed one envelope with a particularly childish handwriting. She passed it to her tenants for their perusal.

Violet eyes fatigued from reading poorly constructed paragraphs and misspelled words, Sheila nonetheless perked up when her fingertips contacted the stationery. As to its source, no return address supplied the information, the Ireland postmark badly smudged. An ivory-handled jack knife her great-great-uncle Sherlock had used to tack correspondence to the fireplace mantle carefully lifted the flap. Within, a scrap of paper read, “Beware the Tinkers,” below which the initials “K.F.” were scrawled.

Watson glanced up from his share of the tributes. “What is it, Sheila?”

“Good to know Kieran Fahey is still alive.”

“The... mob recruiter from Avoca in Wicklow?”

“Precisely. He’s been kind enough to inform us of the latest scheme: organizing the Irish travelers.”

“There’ve been more notices in the papers about trouble with that lot.”

Watson shook his close-cropped blond head. “Does he give any details?”

“For his own safety, no. Had this missive been intercepted, it could be taken as a tip *or* a threat. The possibility still exists I’ll be on the receiving end of a bullet any day.”

“Don’t remind me.”

Sheila mused briefly, then brightened. “It would all make sense.”

“What would?”

“The research you did on the Sabastiani Greenhouses. Their clients are fine restaurants and grocers from Southampton to Glasgow, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Knowing where such establishments are thriving would give roaming swindlers insights on prime targets with cash to spend or, in this case, lose.”

Dumping a pile of unopened letters on the roaring fire, Watson rose from the armchair. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Pay a visit to Maurice Sabastiani, of course!”

“Do you think that’s wise?”

“No, but necessary,” Sheila smirked. “In a suitable disguise...”

“We could be a young couple planning our wedding, if you want a bit of company.”

Through grit teeth, more and more aware of Watson’s increasing affection for her, Sheila agreed. “I’ll ring and make an appointment for this afternoon.”

To bolster the semblance of a happily engaged - and wealthy - couple, she burrowed into the recesses of her bedroom wardrobe for a mink coat: the last gift from actor/producer Tony Downton while they wrapped filming on his Sherlock Holmes movie in California. She felt a tear trickle down her cheek as she stroked the soft mottled fur, chiding herself for allowing the old wound caused by his untimely murder to reopen.

In lieu of the 16-carat diamond Downton had presented when he proposed to her - and later gave to the gold-digging harpy who shot him - she located a jeweler’s box in the night stand, preserving her mother’s much smaller engagement ring. It was enshrined opposite the black onyx signet ring she had slipped off Tony Downton’s finger as he lay dead on the Odeon Leicester Square red carpet.

Watson donned the suit he’d worn during his Investiture as a Knight of the British Empire.

When they departed, their russet-haired landlady’s jaw dropped. “What on earth...”

“We’re tracking criminals,” Sheila explained.

“High fashion ones?”

Watson shrugged, closing the door behind him.

The phrase, “Money is no object,” propelled the couple from dealing with a lowly sales clerk to Maurice Sebastiani himself - effeminate, with well-wrinkled features and a twitching left eye. “Welcome, welcome,” he gushed, seating them in a pastel-colored office scented with multiple crystal vases of pink carnations and roses. “How can I be of service?”

Sheila played the excited bride to the hilt, clasping Watson’s palsied hand and grinning broadly. “We’re getting married in June, at the Abbey. We’re going to need scads of flowers, and a wide assortment of vegetables for the dinner reception.”

Sabastiani queried, “Westminster Abbey?”

“Yes, sir,” came Watson’s best effort at enthusiasm.

“We can provide not only flowers, but trees and garlands. I can also ensure your caterer has the freshest, home-grown vegetables, to go with the meat courses...”

“There’ll be no meat courses,” Sheila stated. “We’re strict vegans, as are the friends on our guest list.”

Seeing an opportunity for an even larger sale, the business owner straightened his polka-dot silk cravat. “Most admirable, my dear. Come, I’ll show you our greenhouses...”

Led through sun-warmed, massive glass structures overlooking the English Channel, Sheila’s attention wasn’t on rows and rows of hot-house tomatoes, asparagus and 15 types of peppers. She listened to conversations between the workers, and paused at key moments to read the contents of clipboards left lying on racks and crates.

“How will our order be shipped to London, to guarantee it arrives in perfect condition?” she asked as they neared the exit.

“Our lorry drivers are required to abide by all laws. Furthermore, the packaging is padded, should the roads be... less than ideal, shall we say?”

Watson ventured, “The temperatures are often unbearable in June. How can we be certain the greens won’t wilt from the heat?”

As Sheila had hoped, they veered from their course toward the docks. A truck was open and being loaded. “Our vehicles are refrigerated, to maintain a constant temperature,” Sebastiani boasted. “And, should any mishap occur, we will be happy to refund the cost of replacing the damaged goods.”

Expressions reflecting a satisfaction their host would never grasp, Sheila and Watson effusively voiced their gratitude for his time and a glossy promotional packet, shook hands and departed for the train station. Only when she overheard his crass remark to an assistant - “These spoiled brats today, claiming to be vegans, while wearing fur!” - did she realize the enormity of her mistake, and burst into laughter at having pulled off the ruse.

“What’s so funny?” grunted a knackered Watson, flopping onto a bench until the next train.

“Nothing, and everything.” She paced beside him, unwilling to expose the mink to any dirt on weather-worn wooden slats. “What say you to a jaunt north tomorrow?”

“I’m traveled out, Sheila. If you want company, why not ask Edith?”

“You tired of me so quickly?” she scoffed.

“I’m curious: was that puerile behavior indicative of how you’d act if we were really engaged?”

“Should do.” She bent and caressed his cheek. “I’d deem being your bride-to-be a reason to be through the roof with glee!”

The military veteran squinted at her, puzzling over her sincerity. His ruminations were interrupted by the squealing brakes of their transportation to the city.

Darkness and fog enveloped the route to their flat, where Edith opened the door for them, brow furrowed beneath russet tresses.

“What’s wrong?” inquired Watson.

“After phoning repeatedly, Mr. Franklin Jones is waiting for you in the sitting room.”

The young man echoed, “Franklin...”

“Albie,” Sheila muttered, reluctantly mounting the stairs. She failed in her attempt to beam cheerfully at the Chief Court Prosecutor.

Comb-over askew above his protruding forehead, the albino barked, “Where in hell have you been?”

“To Southampton, why?”

“One of our lovely prisoners has died.”

Signaling him to a seat on the red Victorian divan, Sheila dropped onto the basket-chair. “What happened?”

“We kept them in separate wings of the jail, so they couldn’t collude on their stories. But, in actuality, there wasn’t any story. They wouldn’t talk. They had no visitors. We’ve been struggling to assemble enough evidence to proceed with a trial, without success. Then, this morning, poison found its way into one’s porridge.”

“Damn!”

“What of the other?” Watson interspersed.

“We’re monitoring him even more closely. All he’d tell us is his name: Bill Sykes.”

The flatmates exchanged glances.

“What do you want me to do?” asked Sheila.

“Since you seem to know so much about how this operation functions, pay him a call and see if he’ll confide in you.”

“If it’s been two months and he’s held out, I don’t see how...”

“If you refuse, we’ll have to release him.”

Watson commented, “And he’ll be dead, for sure.”

“Correct,” Jones concurred.

Straightening - with an agonizing twinge of her previously injured right knee - Sheila maintained her composure. “Will half-ten be early enough?”

“I’ll arrange it with the guards.” Emaciated from stress, the lawyer rose.

“Are you positive they’re trustworthy?”

“After the Caruthers’ debacle, we’ve swept the house clean, Miss Holmes. Not a hint of corruption on the force.”

Alone in the cluttered chamber, Watson gazed at Sheila. “Why do you insist on doing their job for them?”

“Because they don’t know how to do the job, John, and refuse to learn, while crime is rampant from shore to shore.”

He paused with his fingers on the knob to his bedroom. “Please remember to be careful.”

“I will.”

Lighting the fire on the grate, she remained awake past midnight, pondering the complexity of a case initially offered her by George Newley, the music shop proprietor down the block, who’d not visited her in weeks, since the two alleged debt collectors had been apprehended.

She decided to swing by his establishment on her way to the jail.

Not that she saw him. A sign on the glass entrance - obscured by drawn shades - proclaimed, “Gone on holiday,” as did similar placards in neighboring windows.

Something wasn’t right.

At Scotland Yard, she sailed through the security check, unlike her last experience in the building. She’d deliberately underdressed so as not to arouse Sykes’ suspicions - jeans, a bulky red wool sweater, dirty sneakers and an old parka. The twenty-something miscreant was escorted into the visitor’s room, where they could confer in private.

“How are you, boy-o?” Sheila greeted.

Hesitant, he sat opposite her at the small metal table. “Grand, thanks.”

“I’m just back from dispatching a load of Tinkers in the north country, and the boss wanted me to check on you.”

“I ain’t said nothin’ to no one.”

“We know, we know.”

“Brilliant, changing the crew’s names to characters from old books. Even if I tol’ them I reported to Phileas Fogg and Jim Hawkins, they wouldn’t know who I was talkin’ about!”

That cleared up the matter of his name: Bill Sykes, from Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*. Sheila’s admiration for the organizational prowess of this band’s leader increased considerably.

“Just one point, if I may. How many of the shops had you collected before the bobbies nabbed you?”

“We made it to the flower shop before they closed in. I managed to hide the scratch in an empty vase before they cuffed me, so Fogg could pick it up later.”

Which he obviously had, accounting for the closing of the shops when their owners were evicted for cooperating with the police... or worse.

"Time!" called the guard.

Sheila pushed back the uncomfortable plastic chair. "Buck up, Bill. You'll be getting out soon."

The degree of fear which twisted those youthful features amazed the woman. "No, please. No. I don't want to die. It wasn't my fault..."

"We know that, too. But, you're aware of the consequences for failing in your duties..."

His chin quivered. "Aye."

Albie Jones waited in the lobby. "Well?"

Sheila revealed what little Sykes had divulged.

"If he's in that great a fear of dying, why won't he cooperate?"

"Right now, in his mind, that cell is limbo. He can't be prosecuted, and his superiors can't kill him. He doesn't know about his confederate?"

"No."

"It would be advisable to tell him. Once he grasps that they *can* reach him, even here, he may crack."

"And you?"

"My original client in this matter has vanished. I intend to find him."

"Good luck."

"Should do."

They parted company, with Sheila trekking to the Tube station. She preferred to leave Bill Sykes' disposition for the officials, so as not to distract herself from muddling her way through the criminal organization's bizarre chain of command.

Staring into the fire from the basket-chair, which took the pre-spring chill off the sitting room, she assembled what fragmented data she had acquired. Swirls of acrid tobacco smoke announced the ghostly Sherlock Holmes' presence, his dark shaggy head and stubby whiskers hovering above her.

"Uncle," she drawled.

"You're in a quandary."

"Yes."

"What facts did you acquire at the greenhouses?"

"The Irish travelers are running their scams mostly in rural towns and villages."

"And, why is that?"

Sheila deliberated at length. “Because... the independent banks in those locales weren’t affected by the virus which decimated larger financial institutions, and the people still have money.”

“Excellent, my dear.”

“It doesn’t help much. The lad called Bill Sykes lives in fear of dying at any moment. All the youngsters recruited to these nefarious tasks exist in a constant state of terror.”

“Fear is a powerful tool, when used by the right sort,” boomed the spectre.

“The dilemma is: how to combat it and progress toward the true villain of the piece?”

“In your student days at Oxford, how did you deal with such difficulties?”

A pensive interval, then, brightly, “I would seek out Professor Richards.”

She scrambled to the desk, where the psychology instructor’s calling card was buried under piles of detritus. He’d slid it across the table to her while they shared a dinner during the Caruthers and Lukaster trials. His slanted scrawl read, “Ring me anytime,” on the reverse.

Just when she thought his unresponsive mobile would forward to voice mail, Burton Richards’ cultured baritone rumbled, “Hello, Sheila.”

They chatted for nearly a half-hour, before he invited her to tea that afternoon.

She declined, “It’s impossible for me to make the trip north...”

“No need. I’ve taken a house in London.”

“Eh?”

“The criminal court offered me a permanent retainer to perform assessments on every defendant set to stand in the dock. I saw no reason to continually commute, so I retired from Cambridge at the end of last term.”

“Congratulations,” praised his former pupil.

They arranged to meet at 3:00 at his fashionable West End address.

Watson arrived home from an oncologist’s appointment to strains of the Fender 12-string guitar he’d given Sheila for her birthday a year prior. They hadn’t spoken more than two words to each other since returning from Southampton.

“Good to know you’re relaxing for a change,” he stated.

“The lull before the storm, John. The lull before the storm.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She propped the instrument against the wall. “By this time tomorrow, our case may break.”

“How so?”

“The consulting detective is consulting an expert of her own.” She whisked into her bedroom.

The wounded veteran let the discussion lapse. He’d become accustomed to Sheila’s moods, even her use of coca leaves to stave off intellectual stagnation, but the way she hedged her activities in riddles aggravated him no end.

Edith carried in a tea tray as Sheila grabbed her uncle’s black fedora off the wall peg. “Best wear something warmer than that sweatshirt,” the landlady suggested. “The wind’s freezing.”

The tenant ignored her. She glanced at Watson, who scowled.

Burton Richards’ lodgings raised in Sheila Holmes an immediate question about the lucrative nature of his contract with the Court Prosecution Service. If he was leasing the dwelling, the rent must be astronomical. An outright purchase would have drained many a richer man’s account.

“Did you inherit a fortune from some deceased relative?” she quipped as he ushered her around the opulent ground floor and up marble stairs to a sumptuous parlor with heavy blue draperies over ceiling-high windows, a carved marble fireplace bearing cherubs and peacocks, antique furnishings and thick carpet.

Wearing a quilted purple smoking jacket, he chuckled, “None of my relatives could have afforded this in their lifetimes.”

“Then, why...”

He waved her toward a wing-back armchair. “I’ve labored these many decades to reward myself with a modicum of comfort. Finally, I have succeeded in my quest.”

“Not on a professor’s salary, you didn’t.”

“Between that, my meager private practice and this contract, yes, I have.”

“It’s a fine library you have down the hall,” she remarked. “Are those your books, or did they come with the house?”

“The previous occupant willingly parted with the majority, for a price. A few of the shelves contain my own collection.”

In her mind’s eye, Sheila envisioned that collection - formerly stacked willy-nilly behind the desk of his tiny office on the Oxford campus: encyclopaedia, psychology texts, and a plethora of first editions from what Richards’ referred to as “the great masters”. He took pride in writing his own doctoral dissertation on the mental aberrations of the main characters created by 19<sup>th</sup> century authors Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson and Oscar Wilde.

Sipping steaming Earl Grey tea from a china cup, Sheila choked involuntarily. Richards moved to aid her; but she managed to catch her breath before he could bring a pitcher of water.

“Sorry. Went down the wrong pipe.”

“I used to tell you not to drink so fast. Only, then, it was whiskey.”

The conversation diverted into reminiscences of outings they enjoyed - against university policy, mostly - into the pubs near Oxford on Saturday evenings. Richards ran thick digits through that hair, the color and consistency of straw, and sighed.

“Revel in your youth while you can, Sheila,” he admonished wistfully. “It’s gone too soon.”

“My friend, John Watson, believes it might be sooner than later, if I’m not vigilant.”

“Vigilant?”

She launched into her theories about the extortionists, the loan sharks, missing shopkeepers, the Tinkers, and their connection to Sebastiani Greenhouses. Richards’ round countenance remained expressionless as she talked.

“Where do you think it’ll lead you?” he pressed.

“As I said, John thinks I’ll be killed, like so many of the kids who’ve bought into the fantasy of jobs and good wages, winding up in unmarked graves.”

“How do you avoid that morbid result?”

Bristling, she leaned forward. “I won’t give it up, if that’s what you’re driving at.”

“Don’t you see? Whoever has devised this grand scheme is adept at secrecy. Imagine, if you will, a vast machine, with innumerable gears allowing it to function. The teeth of each come in contact with the nearest two or three cogs, but none others, yet the machine runs quite smoothly.”

“You’re implying I’ll never solve this mystery by relying on the cogs...”

“You’ll not solve the mystery, period. You mentioned the word ‘mob’ in your description of these people’s techniques, but you must reconsider that adjective. Organized crime featuring Italian families in America - from what I’ve watched on television - couldn’t hold a candle to what this chap is doing. In fact, I think I’d be safe to say your great-great-uncle’s Professor Moriarty would be impressed by the intricacy of this splendidly artistic spider’s web.”

At that precise moment, one of the windows blew open, allowing a strong odor of tobacco to permeate the chamber.

“Damn!” Sheila muttered, as Richards’ rose to secure the casement.

She plucked the fedora off the end table, shuffling to the exit.

“You don’t seem to have benefitted from our little visit,” Richards observed.

Sheila, in turn, chanced to observe a copy of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* open on the professor's French provincial desk. "You didn't exactly tell me what I was hoping to hear."

"That a solution is within your grasp?"

She nodded.

"I've always been honest with you, even when you were in danger of failing your last exam through lack of sleep, and that outrageous diet of coca leaves, tobacco and coffee. Some puzzles cannot be pieced together, no matter how hard you try to force them."

"Fine. I'll concentrate on locating George Newley, and let the rest drop."

"Good girl." He embraced her warmly. "Thanks for coming. This has been a treat for me."

"Me, too," she said, with a final scrutiny of the regal main hall.

She suffered for her failure to wear a coat, emerging onto the street to be chilled by the evening breeze. More than her bones grew cold, though. A sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach confirmed she could not accept Richards' advice, and would continue to pursue the mastermind behind this empire of crime.

Coming upon 221B Baker Street, she glimpsed a furtive shadow near the stoop, and paused - pretending to bend and tie her sneaker. If another attempt would be made on her life, she would not go quietly.

Fortunately, George Newley popped out from his concealment as she neared. "What the devil..." she exclaimed.

"Inside, quickly!" he insisted, yanking her by the arm, curly head swiveling to check if she'd been followed.

"Where've you been?" she demanded as they climbed creaking stairs to the deserted sitting room.

"My cousin's estate in Cornwall. Six of us fled there after... after..."

Sheila caught the robust Newley as he collapsed, hyperventilating. She eased him onto the desk chair, and hurried to fetch water from the bathroom.

Within five minutes, he calmed. "These past weeks have been horrendous, Miss Holmes," he began, narrating how the arrest of the two debt collectors that fateful Saturday led to threats and confiscations of goods in their shops.

"Why didn't you notify me?"

"They told us our phone lines would be monitored, and any unauthorized calls would merit... severe punishment. So, we packed what we could carry and boarded the train for safety."

A firm hand squeezed Newley's stooped shoulder. "I'm that sorry, George. If I'd been aware of the situation, I would've intervened."

"There's nothing you can do..."

When she didn't speak, his brown eyes gazed up at her.

"Miss Holmes?"

"There *is* something I can do," she gleamed. "I have it from a reliable source that your money was tucked into a vase at the florist's before the suspects were removed from the shop. Since no one else knows of this, it's doubtful their confederates have retrieved the cash..."

Head bowed in shame, Newley grumbled, "That's one reason I came to you. We have nothing... nowhere to go, and no funds to start over."

"I'll help in any way I can."

Unsteadily, he straightened. "I appreciate this, Miss Holmes." Moving toward the threshold, he stopped and turned. He rummaged in his winter jacket. "By the way, I thought you could use this." He passed her a battered, paperbound copy of Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*.

"Where'd you get this?"

"One of the blokes dropped it when the constables rushed him. It'd been tucked in his waistband with his pistol."

"Thanks, George." Sheila studied the volume closely, but unenthusiastically. Then, she crossed to the safe her great-great-uncle Sherlock had revealed to her, pulling a roll of bills from its interior. "Here, take this. Get rooms for yourselves near Russell Square, and I'll be in touch in a day or two."

Touching his forelock, Newley withdrew. Sheila closed the metal door and twirled the dial, whirling to find a boxer-clad Watson contemplating the scene from his bedroom door.

"You'll be broke before you're old enough to retire," he chuckled.

She ignored the humor. "Did I wake you? I'm sorry."

"I think I'm catching a cold. The veterans' clinic was full of coughing and sneezing gits today..."

"Best get some rest, John. I'll have Edith send up some of her delicious chicken soup and a tall glass of orange juice."

"She did that two hours ago." He sank on the divan. "Any leads?"

She thumped the book. "Just this."

"Not much to go on."

Rifling the pages, a folded sheet of linen stationery drifted to the floor. Sheila gingerly plucked it up by one corner and shook it.

Block lettering - albeit with definite strength and flare, given the thickness of the black ink - detailed Bill Sykes' and Sidney Carton's targets on the day they were apprehended. When their rounds were complete, they were to deliver their allotment to an address in the East End, where Jim Hawkins would be waiting.

The missive was signed, "Dorian Gray."

Sheila snatched up the phone and dialed Metropolitan Police superintendent Dermot Vale's mobile. He, too, must've gone to bed early. His groggy, "Hello?" did nothing to encourage the caller's forthrightness.

She spat out the latest, however - including the house number. His response: "That's the best news I've had in a week."

"Eh?"

"You don't read the papers, or watch telly, do you?"

Peering guiltily at Watson, she admitted, "Not very often."

"Mass protests were held during rush hour, outside the banks which sold loans to the phony Birmingham syndicate, as well as at our offices. Hundreds, if not thousands of people have been bullied, assaulted, their homes and businesses ransacked. The suspects in remote jurisdictions have vanished or been killed before they could be arrested." Sheila could hear Vale suck in his breath over the line. "Your bit of information may be the break we need."

"I'll leave you to it, then."

The connection broken, Sheila smirked at Watson. "Another crisis averted."

"You think so?"

Gently, she approached her flatmate and settled beside him on the worn velvet upholstery. "John, tell me what's bothering you."

He stared at her with brimming blue orbs for the better part of sixty seconds. "You're a cold fish, Sheila, you know that?"

"I'm... Sherlock's blood, to be sure. I never mean to offend you - or anyone, mostly - but... my brain works in inexplicable ways."

"The coca leaves don't help."

"John, you haven't the slightest notion what it's like to be me. If there's no intellectual challenge to occupy my mind, it feels like I'll go mad."

"You weren't like this when we first met," Watson asserted. "You were... eccentric, but basically normal. What with letting Sherlock inhabit your body, and sucking on those coca leaves... You've changed. I had hopes..."

She cradled his hands between hers. "I understand, and I apologize for being a total disappointment. I must disagree that the alteration in my habits has been caused by Uncle Sherlock and the... well... In those early days, I'd take a

punch - and give a few - nurse my bruises, even sneak into the Westminster Public Mortuary to study murdered corpses. James Moriarty's fatal motorcycle accident didn't faze me. I violated my own discipline, however, by letting Tony get close to me - and vice versa. His death... the constant knowledge that bullet was intended for me... I've hardened myself against any hint of emotion. You are the kindest, sweetest man in the world, but perhaps it would be better if you... found lodgings elsewhere."

Watson inhaled deeply, fortifying himself for the speech ahead. "What *you* don't realize, Sheila, is how much you *need* me. If nothing else, I'm a steadying influence, preventing you from losing your sense of reality. Besides, you rely on me to do the computer research when you're on a case, and wouldn't have exerted the effort to convince the Queen to knight me if you truly didn't care..."

"I *do* value you, John. I *do* need you. Now George Newley and his friends are safe, and Scotland Yard will act on what I told the superintendent, maybe a holiday is in order. Despite Oxford not yet opening the Holmes Institute for Forensic Science at the family estate, they've been paying rents for nearly a year. We have sufficient surplus to go away somewhere..."

"Must do!"

"We can take Edith along, too."

"Fantastic!" Watson kissed Sheila's cheek lightly.

She stroked the spot where his lips contacted her skin. "I'm sorry I said anything about you moving..."

"Go, have a lie-down, Sheila. Tomorrow, we'll decide whether we go to Paris, Rome, or the Greek Islands."

They rose simultaneously. "Cheers, John."

He closed his bedroom door, while she grabbed her guitar, sat down and strummed random chords.

## Up the Body Count

Shave-headed Metropolitan Police superintendent Dermot Vale and albino Chief Court Prosecutor Franklin Jones made an unusual pair, positioned at the round table opposite Johnny Watson and Sheila Holmes in the sitting room of 221B Baker Street.

“For the last month, we’ve been monitoring activities at the East End address you provided,” explained Vale, flipping through a file of notes. “Along with other rows of abandoned council homes. We’ve found random cigarette butts, too old to test for DNA, and that’s all.”

Sheila thumped the wood with her fist. “This Dorian Gray is teaching them well, to leave no trace of their presence. What of your prisoner, Bill Sykes?”

“When he found out his partner had been killed, he went into some sort of convulsion. He’s under guard at St. Bart’s Hospital.”

“You can color him dead, then,” muttered Watson. “They’ll inject a toxin in his intravenous tube, or sprinkle something on his food...”

Jones’ protruding brow furrowed, he squinted seemingly bloodshot eyes at the wounded Army veteran. “You think so little of our capabilities to protect a key source?”

“Honestly, yes. How many others have been murdered as part of this scheme, and you don’t know their names, or where they’re buried?”

“Gentlemen, please! We’ve better things to do than point fingers at each other,” Sheila chided. “Assistance is at hand.” She crossed and opened the door, yelling down the stairs, “Edith! Send up our guest.”

Watson’s blue orbs flashed in anger. “What guest?”

Sheila merely smiled.

Kieran Fahey made a solemn entrance, much subdued in appearance from their first encounter in Avoca, County Wicklow, Ireland. The gold rings were gone from his fingers, his bright red mop had grown to shoulder length, and he sported a scruffy beard indicative of his youth.

Wearing a green t-shirt and brown slacks, “You look like an overgrown leprechaun,” scoffed Jones.

Fahey bowed slightly in acknowledgment of the sarcasm. “You’d be astounded when people see me in this get-up, how they quiver in their boots. Superstitions about the wee folk are alive and well on the old sod.”

“How’d he get here?” Watson grumbled.

Sheila beamed, “Remember my little holiday last week?”

“How can he help?” wondered Vale.

“First, he wants a guarantee of immunity.”

A pregnant pause concluded with nods from the British officials.

“In writing, please,” Sheila prompted.

Jones promised, “He’ll have it first thing tomorrow.”

“Then, he talks tomorrow.”

“You don’t trust us, Miss Holmes?”

“I know what he has to tell you, and you’ll be sorely tempted to welsh on any verbal agreement.” She reached back to the desk, retrieving three sheets of paper bearing quasi-legal phraseology. “Sign these, if you please.”

Vale reluctantly accepted the ball-point pen she offered, passing the copies to his left. Jones snarled as he scribbled an illegible signature, “I’ll never forgive you for this.”

Watson added his scrawl to the documents as an impartial witness. Sheila then distributed one to Jones, one to Fahey, and tucked one in her jean pocket.

Vale punched buttons on his mobile. “I’m recording this.”

“The floor is yours, Kieran,” she announced.

Formalities over, the young Irishman settled on the fifth chair at the table. “I was recruited for this racket two years ago by a bloke named Herbert Pocket. He brought me and some mates from Dublin on the ferry to Liverpool. There, we were screened and driven out to Salisbury for trainin’.”

He continued for the better part of an hour, recounting how two youngsters were shot dead within five minutes of their arrival, just to prove the enterprise’s serious nature. They spent two weeks between the target range and a city street mock-up, learning to shoot high-powered rifles and pistols, and bully shopkeepers into paying exorbitant amounts for supposed protection.

“Those who failed were killed by the tails - the crew who tagged along on the runs - to ensure everythin’ went off without a hitch. In less than half a year, I was the only one of the original forty still alive.”

Jones traced a hasty Sign of the Cross, chin lowered.

“We quickly discovered there is no God,” Fahey responded to the gesture. “Pray as we might every night before crashin’ on stolen army cots, no one would come to rescue us.”

The tale of his advancement to becoming a recruiter included further contact with Herbert Pocket - now a senior lieutenant to the boss, who went by the name Dorian Gray. “After awhile, I’d been back and forth to Ireland so many times, I figured Pocket and Gray were dead, too. I just did me job, and forgot the rest.”

“Why tell us this now?” probed Vale, sunken eyes accusing.

“Miss Holmes convinced me to get out. I lived comfortably near Galway, but when I chanced upon a school chum from Wicklow, he told me the Tinkers were being rounded up, organized and shipped to England. I knew what I’d been doing and this scheme were connected. I... sent Miss Holmes word...”

Jones and Vale glowered at Sheila, who shrugged.

“The only member of me family I’d kept in contact with was me little sister. We would put ads in the personal column of the Dublin paper if we needed to meet. I saw her at Newgrange two weeks ago, and she told me Mum and Da were being pressured by a git called Franklin Blake to turn me in. For refusin’ to cooperate, they both were beaten and remain in hospital.”

“Which is why you’ve come to Miss Holmes?” hinted Jones.

“Oh, no, sir. She came to find *me*.”

Again, she was subjected to withering glances.

She leaned forward on the wooden chair. “I went north ten days ago in disguise to investigate the technique of these transplanted Irish travelers. They seemed no different from others of their ilk, except for their constant shadow, who always carried a concealed - and loaded - weapon with a silencer attached.

“By luck, or my wits - I won’t say which - I waylaid one of the latter, who believed me the Franklin Blake of Kieran’s story, come to punish him for an inexplicable error. A knife to his throat, he confessed a myriad of crimes, and the location of his superiors.”

“And you didn’t notify my office?” stormed Vale.

She countered, “So you could send your men on another wild goose chase?”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“Long before Sheila arrived at the address in question, the blokes had vanished,” Fahey supplied.

“Which leaves us where we started,” bemoaned Jones.

“No, it doesn’t,” Sheila corrected.

“How so?”

“There’s still the Sebastiani Greenhouses.”

Vale shuddered. “Not Maurice Sebastiani?”

“Precisely. His trucks haul Dorian Gray’s minions to the island’s furthest corners.”

“He’s a respectable pillar of society...” Jones quavered.

“He was, until his bank lost the company’s accounts because of Bull Lukaster’s computer viruses, and business dropped to nil. He saw an opportunity to restore his cash flow - albeit illegal - and bought in without regrets.”

“And you discovered this...”

“We called upon him some time ago.”

Jones’ pale countenance darkened. “That day I waited and waited for you...”

“Yes. I meant to pass along the information then, except you were concerned about the dead young man and Bill Sykes.”

“You say Sebastiani’s vehicles...” said Vale, refocusing the conversation. “His corporation is huge. There’d be too many to check each one...”

“The trucks which carry flowers and vegetables are refrigerated. The ones carrying human cargo would have seats, air vents and no compressors.” Sheila studied the officials’ faces, total blanks. “If you were to send a detective posing as a transportation inspector, he could place GPS tracking units on those with the alternative purpose.”

Vale barked, “I was just coming to that.”

“I’m sure you were, sir. When they are stopped by police for speeding, or some minor infraction, the drivers and cabs can be searched.”

The meeting ended shortly thereafter, with Dermot Vale and Albie Jones refusing an invitation to dinner. Kieran Fahey, however, parked himself at the table, anxious for Edith’s meal of roast chicken, baked potatoes, corn on the cob and chocolate cake to commence.

“A growing boy,” chuckled the landlady.

Watson remained aloof, occupying himself at the computer.

“Come, John. It’s delicious,” Sheila insisted.

“No, thanks. I’m not hungry.”

“Should do. You haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

He rotated the desk chair. “Even if your suggestion to those two... is successful, do you think they’ll be capable of arresting Dorian Gray?”

“Probably not,” admitted the young Holmes.

“Then, what are you going to do about it?”

“You have an idea?”

“They should search Sebastiani’s offices.”

Sheila chuckled. “I thought about that, but they wouldn’t be able to get a warrant without more concrete details.”

The veteran medic tilted his head slightly, blond hair flopping over his forehead.

“You want us to go?” queried Sheila.

“You, not me. And...” he wagged a digit at Fahey, devouring his food, “maybe our resident leprechaun.”

“I think not. If he were seen and recognized...” Sheila dabbed her lips with a napkin and tossed it atop her half-full plate. “I’d best go alone.”

Watson leapt to his feet. “What, now?”

“Of course, now. I wouldn’t go during the busiest part of the day, John. If I catch the last train to Southampton, I can accomplish the task and board the first inbound tomorrow.”

Fedora smashing her brunette curls, she grabbed her wallet off the fireplace mantle and strode toward the door.

“What about *him*?” Watson demanded.

“If he cares to stay, he can sleep in my bed. Edith changed the sheets today.” Impulsively, she kissed her flatmate’s cheek. “See you for breakfast.”

Watson and Fahey were left to stare at each other, muttering simultaneously, “Women!”

Sheila jogged to the Baker Street Tube station, where the evening schedule had yet to recover from the economic travesty of the previous year. Though more people had secured employment in recent months, they tended to save rather than spend their money on frivolities. Many of the West End theatres remained closed, because productions could not find backers, and those who could afford the ticket prices were few and far between. Restaurants opened three nights a week, instead of seven, catering to the pay schedules of their most loyal patrons.

Bouncing along the line, only eight others filled the car. She stepped off at Charing Cross, racing to the platform and jumping the gap as the doors of the south-bound train were closing.

She caught her breath slumped in a first class seat - which she hadn’t paid for. She passed the harried conductor a 50 pound note to preclude a row, and promptly fell asleep.

Southampton after dark could not be construed as anything other than eerie, in Sheila’s estimation. She remembered the route to the Sebastiani Greenhouses, with its fenced property. Fortunately, the homeward bound late shift of packers and loaders meant the main gates hung wide open, for her to creep through without the uniformed, sullen security guard noticing a breach.

She scolded herself for not changing clothes before departing 221B. She wore a bright yellow Olympic t-shirt and grubby jeans, when she would’ve been more inconspicuous clad in black. Too late to remedy the situation.

At least, she’d tucked a pair of thin, latex gloves in the fedora’s interior hat band, for just such an occasion.

Ducking between rows of empty crates, conveyor belts being disinfected by a skeleton cleaning crew, and stacks of pallets, Sheila slipped past the windowed receptionist's station. She squatted outside Maurice Sebastiani's door, a pick-lock tool - one of her great-great-uncle Sherlock's collection - working the tumblers.

The door barely cracked, allowing the slender intruder access. Ceiling lights illuminated the pastel chamber, either in anticipation of the housekeepers, or left on by accident.

Either way, she didn't have much time.

Not certain if she was surprised by the empty desk drawers, she had almost convinced herself of the uselessness of this errand, when she chanced upon a small, rectangular case fitted to the underside of the center panel. Freeing it, she discovered a mobile phone, only one number in the contact list: "Dorian".

Set on vibrate mode, Sebastiani could sense an incoming call against his leg while sitting at the desk.

Punching "Send" on the keypad, an image of Oscar Wilde's novel filled the tiny screen. A masculine voice mumbled groggily, "What is it, Jekyll?"

Maurice Sebastiani, known as Henry Jekyll?

Sheila didn't want to meet Mr. Hyde.

She disconnected and was in the process of replacing the phone when it buzzed in her palm.

Once the call went to voicemail, she changed her mind, and laid the device on the blotter. She jotted Dorian Gray's number from the contact list on a notepad, tore off the sheet and shoved it in her pocket. Then, she restored the phone to its concealment, gave the office a once-over to ensure it looked no different than when she'd arrived, and scrambled toward the door.

To hear multiple footsteps approaching through the wood panel.

"Damn!"

Dorian Gray hadn't relied upon voicemail. He'd alerted someone else...

Pressed against the plaster, Sheila barely avoided injury when the door burst open. Odds of seven to one - those seven outweighing her by five stone, at a minimum, and armed with pistols and clubs - did not bode well.

She bolted like a mouse chased by cats.

Hurdling corrugated boxes and trash bins, she outdistanced the guards, her hopes of escape dashed when she glimpsed the closed gates and razor wire topping the chain-link fence. She'd scaled upward six feet when powerful hands clamped on her ankles and dragged her to the ground.

Years of Wing Chun training at Oxford kicked in, and she became a blur of flying fists and feet. Two of the guards went down, unconscious, while the other

five received a generous share of bruises before managing to restrain her, two on each side.

“Sheila Holmes!” gulped the last, having confiscated her billfold.

Her struggling persisted as she glared at the 6'5" behemoth. “Franklin Blake, I presume.”

“No such luck, missy. But, we’ve orders to take you to him.”

An abrupt docility did not faze her captors. They believed her knackered from the scuffle, and towed her to a lorry bearing the Sebastiani logo, for the long drive into London.

She smelled the Thames River 30 minutes before the vehicle braked to a halt. Stumbling onto neglected bricks, she scrutinized the dim, dank surroundings of a South Bank slum.

“An abandoned warehouse. Really?” she scolded the men.

The senior guard replied, “Between the giant rats and the cobwebs, not even the homeless come ‘round.”

Made sense, though Sheila could not but find the melodramatic setting hysterical. The entire trek through the creaking plank door, past piles of mouldering detritus, scabbling rodents, dust motes illuminated by a pre-dawn glow through broken skylights, she stifled her laughter.

Triggered by a hidden switch, a secret panel swung outward, revealing not the cozy apartment she expected, but a circle of metal barstools with a single bulb dangling in their midst. A sullen figure, akin to a human battering ram, balanced on an unsteady seat at the far edge of the light. The guards remained in the warehouse, while a council of sorts assembled in what must’ve been assigned order, leaving Sheila to stand.

“What to do with you, Miss Holmes. What to do,” came the basso profundo, shaking rotten rafters.

“Consider, rather, what to do with yourselves,” she bluffed, swallowing her chuckles at the scene’s theatricality. “You’re hell-bound in the afterlife, to be sure. You’d best make amends in the present one, or wind up like those naive, nameless kids you’ve buried in mass graves.”

“We won’t be intimidated by some self-important bird who couldn’t hurt a fly,” snarled a nasal tenor from her left.

Two rapid steps and a well-aimed side kick propelled him off his perch into a pillar. She warned, “You may want to revise your estimate of my potential.”

Eight weapons were pointed at her; their director’s massive paw batted down those nearest. “Put them away, gents. If we kill her, the police will come

sniffing around like hounds on the scent. We can't hold her indefinitely, for fear of the same result."

Sheila grasped their dilemma with a combination of relief and triumph. "I've become a nasty thorn in your collective sides, eh?"

"Shut up, bitch!" a voice commanded on the right.

"Be polite, gents," chided the imposing bass. "Your assessment is spot-on, Miss Holmes. Thus, I have been directed to offer you a hundred thousand pounds per year to abandon your investigations into our diverse enterprises, and distance yourself from any association with the Metropolitan Police."

She sneered, "No."

"You could live quite extravagantly on that income."

"No."

"Not to prolong matters with absurd bargaining, I am authorized to raise the proposed salary to five hundred thousand per year."

"Salary? You would employ me, to what purpose?"

"We would, periodically, engage your services to... seek out our enemies or competitors."

"I am the worst enemy you could dream of. And, no amount of money will dissuade me from my goal to see your organization broken, and its leader behind bars for the rest of his life!"

She spun and marched toward the closed panel. Two sets of arms reached to stop her; her expression dared them to try.

Sheila Holmes had the upper hand, and she knew it, making her far more dangerous than the ten goons in the musty room could imagine. "Do you realize, I don't have to see your faces to know your identities?" she proclaimed, changing direction to make eye contact with each shady individual in turn. "And, I don't mean the false names given you by Dorian Gray. You are men of means, who suffered tremendous losses when Ivan Lukaster introduced his computer viruses in the banking systems you relied upon to protect your wealth. Rather than wait patiently for those records to be restored, you listened to a man who'd usurped the power and riches you'd once possessed. You've preyed upon innocent shopkeepers and others of modest income to amass new fortunes, using mere children to do your dirty work." She spat on dirt-encrusted boards. "I vow to do everything possible to see you all rot in prison."

Contrary to the earlier statement, she *had* intimidated the lot, and smelled their fear. "You lawyers, stock traders, gourmet restaurateurs, and doctors... you should be mortified." She confronted the battering ram at the gathering's head.

“And you can tell Dorian Gray for me, he’d best look over his shoulder for the high-powered rifle with a silencer, because he’s the next target.”

She exited the massive structure unimpeded, guards idling in the main warehouse having no instructions to detain her. Outdoors in the spring warmth, she trembled as bravado gave way to a severe case of nerves.

The walk to Tower Bridge took hours, after detouring briefly into a coffee shop to alleviate her hunger. If her captors hadn’t returned her wallet, she would’ve had no money to pay, but that gang of miscreants were, overall, quite respectful - after her defensive assault on their persons had been terminated, that is.

Johnny Watson and Edith Hudson-Thorne rushed her when she shuffled in the kitchen entrance, having noticed police patrolling Baker Street in force.

She fended off their questions, requesting a glass of water.

Watson filled a tumbler at the tap. “When I told Superintendent Vale what you’d done...”

“You didn’t!” she sighed.

“You weren’t home by noon, so I had no choice...”

“Damn!”

“Your lead about the Sebastiani trucks...” Edith nudged the veteran.

Watson inhaled slowly. “They sent an inspector ‘round there before the first deliveries, and what do you think they found?”

“A load of kids from Ireland?” Sheila guessed.

“How’d you know?”

“The route is fairly plain: from Dublin to Liverpool on the ferry, then a Sebastiani truck to the training facility - wherever it’s located now. When their training is finished, they load them up on another truck and drive them to Southampton, where they’re split up for distribution.”

“They arrested the drivers, the greenhouse managers, and caught Maurice Sebastiani cowering under a blanket in the back of his Bentley.”

“Damn.”

Edith puzzled, “Aren’t you happy?”

Sheila tugged a slip of paper from her grubby jeans, flattening it on the table. “Where’s my mobile?”

“Why?”

“I put it in your bedroom,” said Watson.

Succumbing to exhaustion, Sheila dropped on the nearest chair. “Fetch it for me, will you, John?”

Once in her hand, she dialed Dorian Gray's number, copied from Sebastiani's secret phone.

"Hello?" Fully awake, Gray's tone projected his apprehension.

"Hate to tell you, but I refused your most generous offer."

"Sheila?"

In that instant, the woman's violet orbs widened, her jaw gaped.

"Professor?"

The mobile landed on the floor, shattering into pieces.

"My God," she stammered. "I stood right in his parlor, saw the books, and didn't deduce the truth..."

"What truth?" prodded Watson.

"Burton Richards, suddenly wealthy due to a contract with the courts... In reality, the money came from this... this..." She lurched from the kitchen, up the servants' stairs, traversing the sitting room to where swirls of tobacco smoke rose from Sherlock Holmes' lit briar pipe. "Uncle, how could you allow this?"

"I have no power over your realm, child."

"But, you *knew*..."

"Observing what you should have observed, yes."

She flopped on the red Victorian divan. "So many innocent lives..."

Watson sank beside her, embracing her as she wept copiously. Sherlock vanished as Edith brought a tea tray, hovering near the desk, unable to assist in soothing her tenant's angst.

The scene was disrupted when a squad of constables bustled up the main staircase, Kieran Fahey in tow. "Miss Holmes, do you know this bloke?" the sergeant inquired.

"Should do."

The young Irishman wriggled from their grip after the handcuffs were unlocked. "Eejits!" he steamed. "While you were harassin' me..."

He didn't have the opportunity to finish his sentence; all hell broke loose.

Across the threshold rushed four black-clad assassins, rifles and pistols fitted with silencers, picking off the police like ducks in a pond. Fahey dove behind the basket-chair, groping for a dead corporal's sidearm, taking a bullet in the temple.

Edith fainted, essentially saving her life.

Watson and Sheila remained motionless. Two intruders positioned themselves behind the divan, two in front.

"The Professor wasted no time," Watson breathed.

Sheila concurred, "He doesn't."

"Silence!" grunted a diminutive lad.

"What plans has Dorian Gray for us?"

A red-wax sealed sheet of stationery was tossed on her lap. Not taking her gaze from the assailants, she unfolded the missive and absorbed its contents.

Watson wondered, "What is it?"

"I am to defer to his wishes and sever my alliance with Scotland Yard."

"Or, what?"

"Or, lose everything I hold dear."

"He can't be serious."

A dull thud preceded Johnny Watson crumpling to the floor, dead.

"Yes, love, he's serious," Sheila sobbed.

The quartet fled, leaving her to contemplate the carnage. Unsteadily, she staggered to the land-line phone, summoning ambulances.

Once Edith recovered consciousness, she huddled beside Sheila on the divan, as investigators and paramedics swarmed the premises. Flashes popped repeatedly, capturing the devastation for perpetuity. One news crew crept up the servants' stairs, broadcasting the mayhem live.

Until Dermot Vale signaled his men to eject them.

Sheila forced herself to rise and pursued them into the alley behind 221B.

"You want a story?" she began.

"Sure, if it'll get us ratings."

"Oh, it'll get you ratings." She scribbled an address on the videographer's shirt cuff. "Take me there, and you'll get an exclusive beyond your wildest dreams."

Congestion on Baker Street impeding their progress, 90 minutes elapsed before they reached Burton Richards' posh West End domicile. A single light burned in the first floor parlor and, as she expected, the deadbolt was unlocked.

The former Oxford and Cambridge psychology instructor had anticipated her visit, but not accompanied by a camera and microphone. He stood at the French provincial desk, arms folded across his quilted purple smoking jacket.

"What the hell..."

"You're broken, Professor. How apt your choice of Dorian Gray as your pseudonym, camouflaging your evil with a masque of respectability. You should've remained elusive, though, a turtle well hidden in its shell. You could have continued murdering vulnerable teenagers and robbing the poor indefinitely, but you couldn't resist taunting me... and killing Watson was the final straw."

Richards' drawled, "You've no proof..."

“This is all the proof I need.” Sheila yanked a pistol from the waistband of her jeans - pried from the grip of a dead constable before his comrades converged on the sitting room. She leveled it at Richards’ chest.

With lightning speed, the criminal displayed, aimed and fired his own weapon. The reporter and her crew gasped as Sheila Holmes tumbled over an armchair and landed on the carpet. They were sprinting from the dwelling before Richards’ could squeeze off his next round.

Not that he’d have a chance. The kevlar vest Sheila had also borrowed from one of the corpses - and wore under the sweatshirt she had donned while Edith lay among the fallen - did not prevent the bullet’s impact from sending her reeling. When Richards attempted to follow the SkyNews team, she hissed, “Professor!”

He spun, and the projectile lodged squarely between his eyes.

Dermot Vale marveled at the stunned expression frozen on Richards’ chalky mien when he and the coroner arrived three hours later. The video footage had already gone viral, and Sheila was being lauded as a hero.

Edith met her on the sidewalk outside 221B Baker Street the next morning, luggage and trunks piled at the curb. “You can have the place, if you want it,” she stated. “I’m going back to America and open a little café in a town where their idea of excitement is fireworks on the fourth of July.”

“Won’t you at least stay for John’s funeral?” objected Sheila.

“Didn’t you know? He doesn’t want one. I made arrangements with the crematorium first thing.”

“You paid for it yourself?”

“He had a bit put by, for just such an emergency. He didn’t only believe your life was in danger, but his, too, because of your foolishness. And, in the end, he was right.”

Understanding her landlady’s grief, the tenant ignored this outburst of rage. “I’ll gladly pay you the price we discussed for the building. Just have your lawyer send me the papers...”

“I don’t want your money. I don’t want to remember anything about the years I spent here. Not you, not Ivan, not the midnight knocking, the reporters, the police, the gore... Nothing.”

A black taxi pulled up behind her; the squirrelish driver loaded her bags in the boot. The trunks, however, wouldn’t fit. “Leave them!” Edith choked, slamming the rear door and ordering the man to Heathrow Airport.

Oversized cases abandoned to looters, Sheila mounted cement steps. She halted when George Newley shouted her name from the corner. Rushing past pedestrians, he laid a bouquet of red roses and babies-breath in her arms.

“Just a thank you from those of us who’ve been able to resume normal business,” he panted.

With forced solicitude, she accepted the tribute, quickly excusing herself and slipping indoors. The flowers were pitched in the shadows.

She scaled 17 creaking stairs to the sitting room, which reeked of death. Dried blood stained the floor and walls. Sticky droplets coated her prized Fender 12-string guitar. She retrieved the latest box of coca leaves from her bedroom night stand, donned her uncle’s tattered dressing gown, parked herself in the basket-chair and shred the brown wrapper.

Dermot Vale - after repeated attempts to contact her, arranging for her official statement - discovered the body three days later. An empty parcel lay at her feet, her violet eyes wide open, a slight smile curling her lips. The black onyx signet ring lay amongst the clutter on the fireplace mantle, atop a scrap of paper which read, “Perhaps the next Holmes will not fail.”

Sherlock Holmes had escorted his great-great-niece to the ethereal plane, leaving behind only the distinctive odor of tobacco.