

The Adventures of Sheila Holmes

Cry Havoc

A Collection of Stories

by

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Mass Disconnect

Sheila Holmes trekked to Baker Street from the Tube station, her toes sore from wearing uncomfortable silver pumps all afternoon. She yearned to remove not only her shoes, but the conservative, magenta patterned frock loaned her by her landlady. Such was the price of an invitation to Buckingham Palace.

The front door of 221B unlocked, the 28-year-old detective mounted uneven stairs to her flat. Within, the casually clad Johnny Watson, Edith Hudson-Thorne and a burly newcomer were engrossed in lively discussion about London's unpredictable January weather.

"Well, well, comfortable, are we?" Sheila grunted from the threshold.

The trio leapt up simultaneously. "Happy birthday!" they chorused.

With a magician's flourish, Watson revealed a special dinner prepared in his flatmate's honor. Edith lit candles on a rose-adorned chocolate layer cake, while the stranger hovered at her elbow.

"I've never told anyone when..." protested Sheila, inspecting the delicacies while kicking off her footwear. "How'd you find out?"

"I used your methods," the blond Army veteran chuckled. "Besides, you received a package and a card, which we couldn't mistake."

"A package?" The woman scrutinized the cluttered room. "Where?"

Edith retrieved the over-taped box from beneath the red Victorian divan. The return address mystified her tenant, who ran trembling fingers through short brunette curls.

"I don't think it's a bomb," Watson commented.

"I hope not. God knows I've dealt with enough..."

"How's the Queen?" queried Edith, preempting a litany of dangers Sheila had averted over the past 18 months.

"Well, for her age. We met in her office before the ceremony."

"Really? Did you get any pictures?"

"No. Cameras were limited to the throne room, with the knights and nobles." Sheila bristled, hesitant to speak freely in the presence of an unknown. His slicked down bronze hair shimmered red in the firelight. Thick mutton-chop style sideburns smacked of an earlier era, framing his round face. A slightly bulbous nose, indicating a love of alcohol, rested above thin lips and fleshy jowls. Broad shoulders seemed capable of bearing any burden, his barrel chest confirming prodigious strength. The host extended her hand, prompting, "And who's this gentleman?"

Edith blushed. "I'm sorry, Sheila. This is my... friend, Ivan Lukaster."

Squinting grey orbs at Watson as the latter choked back a laugh, Lukaster grasped Sheila's digits firmly in his massive paw. "Honored to meet you, Miss Holmes."

"Welcome to the party," she responded. "Or, were you in on its planning?"

"Not exactly. Edith and I had reservations for dinner, but John insisted we stay."

"By all means, you must not waste your reservations. I'm... not much on celebrating birthdays, and would - in all honesty - rather be alone."

"Aren't you feeling well?" wondered Edith.

"Just tired. The corridors of Buckingham Palace are long, the stairs a challenge."

Lukaster favored the landlady with a smile. "Edith? Shall we?"

"Are you sure, Sheila?"

"Positive," confirmed the younger woman. "I'll save you a slice of cake."

The pair made their exit, the wiry Edith obviously reluctant.

When the sitting room door closed, Sheila spun toward Watson, who supported an oversized, gaily wrapped parcel. "Who was *that*?"

"Edith's boyfriend."

"Ah!"

"You didn't know she'd been dating him these last six weeks?"

"Six weeks?"

"From what she told me, it's pretty serious."

"Good for her!" stated Sheila. "She's too long a widow."

"And you've no call not to celebrate your birthday." He offered her the present.

"John, you should've have..." Tearing striped paper, she found an oblong box, inside which rested a guitar case containing an expensive Fender 12-string.

"Oh, my..."

"You haven't played since you left your old one in California, and I thought it was about time."

She inhaled slowly, exhaling with closed violet eyes. "I will admit, I'm doing much better now than I was a year ago."

Indeed, the holiday season after Anthony Downton had been killed by a bullet meant for her, Sheila had been an emotional wreck. She'd buried the black onyx ring, the Holmes family crest, passed - for the most part - from eldest son to eldest son since long before her great-great-grandfather Sherrinford, in her bedroom night stand, breaking into tears at the mere sight of it. Downton had qualified to possess it; she'd confiscated it as he lay dead on the red carpet outside the Odeon Leicester Square.

“Is the reason you ignore your birthday because it falls on the same day as your great-great-uncle Sherlock’s?” prodded Watson.

“That has nothing to do with it. I’ve just never...” She raised the guitar and strummed, settling in the basket-chair to commence the intricate tuning process.

“But, thank you for this, with all my heart.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“You’re doing better this year, too, eh?”

“Still cancer-free, according to my doctor this morning.”

“I’m so glad.”

Watson hesitated, speaking again as he placed a folded newspaper on her lap. “You might not be, once you’ve read this.”

Sheila propped the instrument against the desk. Flattening the publication, she rifled pages until she discovered an enlarged photo of herself taken in Soho during a recent investigation.

“Holmes’ true lineage exposed!” screamed the headline in bold type. Perusing the article, she tossed the scandal sheet on the grate. “So?”

“I know you’re very protective about your private...”

“Anyone of a mind could research my ancestry with ease. Tony’s... father had done it long before we ever met.”

“How’d... you know that?” puzzled Watson.

“Uncle Sherlock.”

“Odd that Sherrinford only had one grandchild, and that a girl. Do you think your grandmother deliberately married a man with the surname Holmes, to... reestablish the line?”

Sheila resumed tuning the guitar. “Grandmum loved Granddad with a passion beyond description, from what I read in her diary. His name had no bearing on their relationship. He might’ve been a Smith or a Jones; she wouldn’t have cared.”

Watson crossed to the round table, where their dinner had cooled, the candles sputtered out. He poked at the pheasant with a fork, feigning nonchalance. “What did the Queen have to say?”

Coyly, his companion answered, “The Home Secretary and the Prime Minister did most of the talking.”

The cheap utensil clattered to the floor. “Both of them?”

“National security has been compromised. They can’t call in Scotland Yard, because of potential media interference. The intelligence services haven’t been successful in tracking the culprits...”

“What’s their crime?”

“Hacking the mobile phone network.”

“That’s not such a big deal. It happens all the time.”

“Not... at this level, John. This involves members of Parliament, military officials, on secure connections, which should be impervious to such tactics. Those responsible call themselves Cyber Vigilantes.”

“You’re no expert with computers.”

“Which is why I’ll need your valuable assistance.”

Watson bowed slightly. “I’d be pleased.”

“Good. First thing tomorrow, then.” A series of minor chords reverberated through the chamber; Sheila cringed. “I need to work up my callouses again.”

“How ‘bout a slice of cake?”

She caressed the Fender and set it aside. “Should do, and plenty thick.”

The dessert’s richness soothed her troubled stomach, and she lay awake hours later, craving more. They’d carried everything down to Edith’s kitchen, however, and washed the dishes...

And, the hastily-wrapped candy box remained unopened, with the unrecognized return address. Slipping on her uncle Sherlock’s ratty dressing gown, she shuffled across the sitting room and fumbled on the desk for scissors.

A folded set of documents, secured by a wide rubber band, rested among crumpled newspaper stuffing. Switching on the floor lamp, Sheila sank on the chair and perused the cover letter’s small type.

The bundle soon dropped from her grasp as if it had burned her flesh. While she had declined Tony Downton’s bequest of five percent gross profits from his last movie, redirecting it to a foundation which aids human trafficking victims, she could not refuse his gift of a country house in Staffordshire - the Holmes’ family estate. He’d made the purchase while filming in England and, due to delays in closing the deal, the deed to Sherrinford’s domicile had been finalized just prior to Christmas.

Overwhelmed, she rose and groped her way to the servants’ stairs. Before she could locate a knife in the dark kitchen, she heard the front door open and a pair of voices.

Sheila crept into the hall, hidden from view by the parlor door. She couldn’t help grinning at the sight of Edith trying to resist Ivan Lukaster’s charm.

A sudden whiff of tobacco made the eavesdropper shudder. The ghost of Sherlock Holmes materialized behind her, also witnessing the scene. She had rarely glanced in his direction since Tony Downton’s death - a uncanny resemblance between the darkly handsome duo too agonizing.

“What have you learned about him?” her great-great-uncle muttered.

“Nothing, as yet.”

“You failed to observe the most obvious details?”

“I... was distracted.”

“Distraction is the detective’s greatest enemy. You must be alert every moment, or you may miss the clue which could save your life.”

Sheila replied meekly, “Yes, Uncle.”

“Now, what can you tell me?”

She scanned Lukaster’s black wool winter coat, shoes, countenance and hands. “He’s a businessman, skin untainted by manual labor.” Self-consciously, she rubbed her own fingertips, still sore from the guitar strings. “He lives in the West End, and owns a spaniel.”

“What else?”

“Why, Uncle? What do you suspect?”

“I suspect you are shirking your duties.”

“I’m... upset.”

“About inheriting Sherrinford’s property? No need. You can turn it into a home for wayward women, or whatever you wish.”

His flippant attitude didn’t help her mood. “Thanks.”

When Lukaster did take Edith in his arms, though, and kissed her passionately, Sheila’s tension eased. She whispered a prayer that her friend and landlady might enjoy the happiness which had eluded her.

Retreating to the kitchen, the midnight wanderer finished cutting the cake, interrupted by a radiant Edith.

“I... was going to brew myself some coffee,” blustered the older woman.

“Don’t let me disturb you.”

“Did you... hear...”

“A little.”

Dropping onto the nearest wooden chair, Edith gushed, “I’ve never felt like this before, Sheila. Not even with my husband. Ivan... is so kind, so gentle...”

“Where did you two meet?” Sheila sat opposite. “I had no idea...”

“I bumped into him - literally - at the bookshop on the corner. I was looking for a cookbook and, well...” As demure as a schoolgirl, Edith averted her gaze.

“Good for you.”

“It doesn’t... bother you... I mean...”

“Not at all, not at all. You two enjoy yourselves to the full, and don’t give me a second thought.”

But, as she mounted the steps with plate in hand, Sheila *was* bothered, and not certain of the cause.

In fact, the rest of the night, she didn't sleep a wink.

She, thus, rushed to the phone when it rang just before dawn. A groggy Prime Minister instructed her to make all haste investigating a country-wide mobile outage.

"They've gone too far this time, Miss Holmes!" he concluded.

"I understand, sir."

"They're expecting you at the Bluestar Mobile headquarters within the hour."

"I'll be there."

Prior to showering and dressing in jeans and a tie-dyed hooded sweatshirt, Sheila roused an unwilling Watson. When he heard what had transpired, however, he set about attaching his prosthetic left leg and beginning the day.

Bluestar Mobile occupied the majority of space in a twisted glass spire near the Thames River. When she arrived, Sheila noticed official vehicles - and media trucks - double parked near the entrance, exactly what government representatives had wished to avoid.

With grit teeth, she and Watson approached the reception desk. They were met by a uniformed guard, who escorted them to the central computer complex, two levels below the street.

Sheila glanced at Watson, silently requesting an explanation.

"It's safer for the equipment," he complied. "Should a storm or other natural disaster occur, it's less likely to be damaged, and service interrupted."

"Except, the service *has* been interrupted."

"Through no fault of ours," remarked the guard. "We have the latest and most impenetrable firewalls..."

Sheila countered, "Yet, they *were* penetrated."

Emerging from the lift, she marveled at the image flickering on every status screen: a male caricature with right hand raised in a bowfinger gesture.

"The Cyber Vigilantes logo," hissed Watson.

"How do you know?"

"The group started small, hacking into university networks and changing students' grades. Some local newspapers published the facts..."

"How long ago?"

"Five, six years."

Sniffing the cool air of the temperature controlled room, Sheila moved toward the main console.

Blocking her path, Scotland Yard credentials reading, “Kevin D.K. Caruthers, detective inspector” a tall, spare, salt-and-pepper crowned individual in blue suit growled, “Well, well, Sheila Holmes.”

“Have we met?”

“No, but I’ve seen your photo in the papers.” His baritone dripped derision. “Who gave you security clearance to access this area?”

“The Prime Minister.”

Caruthers’ angular jaw dropped, though he recovered his composure instantly. “Prove it.”

From her pocket, she extracted the sealed authorization presented by the Queen.

Thwarted, he withdrew.

Sheila restrained him by his yellow polka-dot silk tie. “Who called you in on this case?”

“The Bluestar executive director.”

“Damn!”

“Why? Afraid we might steal your thunder?”

“No. Merely concerned you might bollocks up the works, and the culprits will get clean away.”

“They won’t, if I have anything to say about it.” Caruthers freed himself and sauntered toward the exit.

Watson sputtered, “Arrogant git.”

“The second son of a noble usually is,” replied Sheila. “His older brother gets the title and the land, and he’s lucky to get a small allowance. He lost even that years ago, when his father disinherited him after he was sent down from Oxford.”

“You deduced that from...”

“Heavens no, John. I’m not that good. He’s a legend at the university, though. Gambled away a small fortune, then couldn’t pay his debts. He took to writing papers for other students - for hefty fees - and, the cheating unearthed, justice prevailed.”

“How’d he get into the Yard with such a scandal on his record?”

“Political favoritism, I suspect.” Sheila leaned toward a flustered technician. “We’d best crack on.”

Their questions went mostly unanswered, because the Bluestar information technology experts had no notion how the Cyber Vigilantes breached their redundant security net. Watson marveled at the systems’ intricacy, and settled on a rolling chair beside a demure blonde to review the programming language.

Meanwhile, Sheila kept an eye on Caruthers, who'd returned with a retinue of subordinates, charged with interrogating every employee. She took in the underground chamber's colorless walls and stark decor. It would take a special sort to spend every day in that environment.

And, evidently, Caruthers knew precisely what sort. "Our psychologists have provided profiles of various criminal elements," he boasted to a pretty ebony-skinned female. "For this type of offense, we'll be looking for young men, with superior intelligence, but no social life of note. They're unemployed, bored and looking for a challenge."

"What you're saying," interspersed the younger Holmes, "is they're electronic graffiti artists?"

The Yard inspector flashed his scowl, saying nothing.

The Bluestar administrator excused herself. Sheila muffled a chuckle as Caruthers stormed into the lift.

Watson rejoined her, no trace of levity in his blue eyes. "Whoever they are, they're at the top of the game."

"How so?"

"Their I.P. address can't be traced. For lack of a better description, they remotely injected a complicated virus into Bluestar's main server - weeks ago, probably - which mutated over time until it crashed the entire network."

"Why can't the source be identified?"

"Unlike our case with the Dogz, when funds were being transferred from people's accounts using computers at different libraries - an amateur effort in comparison - this address is scrambled and, the longer the virus is allowed to infiltrate the programming, the more tracing it becomes futile."

Sheila considered. "So, if we'd been here the first day, we might've been able to..."

"Right. But now... forget it. They've cut off millions of mobile users, for at least a month until the server can be reconfigured to its original settings."

"Isn't it a common practice to save system backups?"

"Naturally," affirmed Watson. "Since they don't know when the virus was introduced, they can't be sure which backup is clean. Using the wrong one would reverse only a portion of the damage. And, it's likely the backups have been further compromised, the data rendered into nonsense."

"Damn!"

"There's no more we can do here. We're actually in the way."

"They're starting from scratch, in essence?"

"Working 'round the clock."

Dejected, they departed the corporate offices, shivering against a chill January wind whipping along the Thames.

“What’s next?” queried Watson.

“Lunch, I believe.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“I know.” Sheila strolled toward the intersection, where a coffee shop appeared most inviting. “Did you hear Caruthers’ proclamation of the criminal profile?”

Inside the trendy establishment, Watson pointed to a brown sofa near an electric fireplace. “Who didn’t? The girl I chatted up - Bessie Knox - cursed him roundly for such stupidity.”

“Did she offer her own opinion?”

“Of course.” A waitress in grey slacks and white blouse approached. They ordered tea and cakes. Watson resumed, “To create a virus this intricate, Bessie believes it will prove to be someone with advanced engineering degrees, meaning 30, at a minimum. He’s righting some perceived wrong, exposing corruption, something along that line.”

“If he truly is a vigilante, then many more viruses will compromise national security before this is done.”

Their food spread on a mahogany table, they ate and drank in silence. From habit, Sheila watched the comings and goings, people stopping in to warm their frozen bones, or meet friends. When Ivan Lukaster bustled through the door, she quickly lowered her chin.

“What?” puzzled her companion.

“Edith’s... friend.”

“There’s no need to hide from him. He’s a very nice chap, from what I gathered yesterday.”

“Be that as it may, would you want him thinking we’re checking on him?”

Watson’s close-cropped head dropped. “You’re right.”

Too late, though. Holding a large insulated cup of steaming coffee, Lukaster hailed them from the counter and, in four strides, towered above them.

“Hope you don’t mind,” he greeted. “It’s terribly crowded in here, and cold outdoors!”

“Not at all, Mr...”

“Ivan, please,” he corrected Sheila. “Or, my friends call me Bull.”

Watson echoed, “Bull?”

“A nickname from school days. Playing rugby, I tended to charge like a bull.”

“Ah!” Sheila decided to take advantage of the opportunity. “Is your office close?”

“A few blocks along. I had a meeting with a client this morning, as if you didn’t know.”

No need to feign innocence. “We were in the area on business, ourselves.”

“The business of approving me for dear Edith.”

“I assure you...”

“You’re a detective, Miss Holmes. I would expect no less, when you hold Edith in such high regard.” He drank the coffee in two gulps. “Come, I’ll make your task easier.”

Glancing at each other hesitantly, the pair followed Lukaster onto the bustling lane. He urged them into a taxi, which deposited them a mile away, at a cone-shaped structure, where they took a private lift to the summit.

“This is my domain,” boasted Lukaster of the pristine metal and glass decor, and exquisite view of London.

“What is your occupation, if I may ask?” Sheila wondered, absorbing the credenza loaded with half-empty liquor bottles.

“I’m an art dealer.”

Watson ventured, “Must be a lucrative field.”

“Without a doubt, Johnny, old chap. Statues, paintings... even the smallest objects can command high prices, if the demand is there. And, I get a commission on every transaction.”

“Impressive.” Sheila sank on a leather-upholstered sofa. “Tell us more.”

The sound emitted from Lukaster’s throat nearly knocked his visitors to the carpet. A laugh with the volume and depth of a lion’s roar reverberated around the walls. “Wait ‘til I tell Edith...”

“I assure you, Ivan...” protested Watson.

“Don’t try to sell me a bill of goods. I knew, the minute I saw you two...”

Sheila straightened, biting back a snide comment. “If you don’t believe us, check your mobile.”

Digging in his overcoat pocket, he studied the smart phone screen.

“There’s no signal.”

“Mobile service has been disrupted, and we’re investigating.”

“That explains why my associates haven’t rung me today.” Lukaster’s jovial expression faded. “I apologize most heartily.”

“Apology accepted,” said Sheila. “Just remember one thing: I don’t lie. I wish you and Edith the best and, if you know that much, we’ll get along quite well.”

“Agreed.” Shaking hands, Lukaster escorted the couple to the lift.

Descending, Watson stated, “A pleasant enough fellow.”

“Who conducts his business without a computer,” mumbled Sheila.

“Maybe he’s the old-fashioned type, who uses a phone and personal contact.”

“He’s also unduly suspicious.”

“Wouldn’t you be, if the person you were dating shared lodgings with a detective?”

“Are you saying, if you acquire a girlfriend some day, you’ll suspect me of the same?”

“Depends on the girl.”

Chuckling, they fought the elements, bound for the Tube station.

With a fire burning on the grate at 221B Baker Street, the tenants warmed themselves with tea and sandwiches, prepared by Edith prior to her evening’s outing. Watson balanced a cup in one hand, while typing on the computer keyboard with the other. A printout rested beside him.

“Who gave you that?” asked Sheila.

“Bessie, at the Bluestar office. Viewing it on her monitor, I noticed an encrypted algorithm embedded in the drawing...”

“So, you’re sending it to your friends?”

“Someone may recognize it, and be able to decipher it.”

“If, as you say, the Cyber Vigilantes are experts...”

“Expert, perhaps, but no Einstein. Existing algorithms could be combined to achieve the Vigilantes’ results, but nothing new has been created in quite some time.”

“I’m glad you studied computers, because that’s one field which totally baffles me.”

“This is baffling even to those who’ve been in the business for decades, if Bessie can be believed.”

Lukaster called for Edith at 7:00. Sheila had retired to her room for the night, and Watson concentrated his attention on the monitor, waiting for responses to his posts.

For naught, evidently. The London *Times* morning edition declared a triumphant arrest in the mobile service outage, thanks to Inspector Kevin Caruthers of the Metropolitan Police. The suspect, unnamed as yet, was identified as a subcontractor of Bluestar Mobile. Caruthers also assured the public mobile service would be restored within 24 hours.

Watson pitched the newspaper on the grate. “They’ve got it wrong.”

“Under pressure from his superiors, the dear inspector could do nothing but make an arrest, even a most unlikely candidate,” grunted Sheila.

“The court will never uphold the charges...”

“That depends on the amount of corruption behind the scenes.”

“You seriously think...”

“Caruthers owes many people large sums of money. His father will not cover his notes. If... those whose livelihood depends on their customers’ loyalty make it worth his while, he can present incontrovertible evidence to gain a conviction.”

“What do we do about it?”

“Do? We wait until the next virus decimates traffic signals, or the utility grid, and let Caruthers field the questions.”

“Is there no way to prevent such a disaster?”

“Have you heard from your contacts?”

“Only two. The code has them completely stumped.”

“Could it be a ruse, to divert pursuers from the real solution?”

“Far too easily,” Watson admitted, rubbing his eyes.

“You’d best have a lie-down.”

“Good idea.”

The Afghan war veteran shuffled to his bedroom as Edith appeared, bearing a breakfast tray loaded with rashers of bacon, fried eggs and cinnamon toast.

“Where’d you go for dinner last night?” inquired Sheila, purely as idle chatter.

“A quaint little inn south of the river. Very cozy and dark.”

“I wouldn’t imagine Bull Lukaster being the romantic type.”

Edith started. “How do you know his nickname?”

“He told us, when we chanced upon him yesterday.”

A cup and saucer shattered on the table. “He hinted that you might dig around in his past...”

Sheila tightened the belt on the tattered dressing gown. “I did no such thing. I wouldn’t... I trust you to make your own decisions.”

“This is the very reason I didn’t tell you about Ivan when we first met!”

“Calm down, Edith. I wouldn’t lie to you about this - or anything. He’s an exceptional chap, and I wish you all happiness.”

Knuckles white, resting on shards of china, the russet-haired landlady breathed slowly. “I’m... sorry,” she finally stammered.

The tenant embraced her affectionately. “There’s nothing to forgive.”

When Kevin Caruthers crossed the sitting room threshold, unannounced and uninvited, Sheila could have rescinded her statement.

“A fine day to be alive, eh, Miss Holmes?” he drawled, the scowl never leaving his face.

“You’re up for a promotion, I take it.”

“Possibly.”

“And subsequent demotion, when your alleged criminal is acquitted.”

“He won’t be.”

Sheila approached Caruthers, six inches shorter than he. Her violet orbs met his green eyes. “I swear this: I will find the real Cyber Vigilantes, and expose your depravity.”

“With your credibility in the toilet, I advise you to abandon your efforts. The Metropolitan Police, for their part, has sealed its records of the case.”

When she related the conversation to Watson that afternoon, he studied her determined features in awe.

“Are you prepared for the obstacles?”

“The wrong man may go to prison, mobiles may resume functioning by the thousands, and my reputation may be ruined, but this case is by no means closed.”

Throwing herself into the basket-chair, Sheila snatched up the Fender 12-string guitar and defiantly plucked random chords.

Creating Chaos

“Will you look at *that!*” Edith Hudson-Thorne halted in her tracks. Rounding the curve on an oak-lined drive, a mile east of Leek, Staffordshire, her companions nearly collided with her.

Johnny Watson removed his Manchester United ball cap, close-cropped blond hair matted. “Brilliant!”

The centerpiece of vast, well-manicured lawns, Sherrinford Holmes’ country estate didn’t qualify as a castle. Built of wood beams and brick, plaster-covered and whitewashed, with steep roof angles reminiscent of the Shakespearean era, Sheila imagined getting lost in its 19,000 square foot interior.

Wiping her brow with a kerchief before replacing her uncle Sherlock’s black fedora on her brunette mop, she urged the others forward. “Family legend has it that, during World War II, the house welcomed refugees from the London bombings. A torrid affair ensued between the master and a young widow, leading to a scandalous divorce. It’s been abandoned since then.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed,” breathed Watson. “Those flowers were recently planted in the gardens, and the fountain is running.”

Indeed, as they approached the freshly painted entrance that sunny Thursday, Sheila admired the cherubic statue pouring water into a dog’s bowl. Digging a key ring from her jean pocket, she reached for the knob.

Almost tripping when the door wrenched inward.

A portly gentleman in black morning coat blocked the threshold. “May I help you?”

Not feeling the least inadequate about their casual attire, Sheila countered, “Who are you?”

“I’m Amos Morgan.”

Edith whispered, “The lawyer didn’t say anything about *him.*”

“I’ve a feeling Mr. Lyndon omitted quite a few details, anxious to leave for his holiday.” Violet eyes assessed the scene. “I’m Sheila Holmes, the new owner.”

Morgan bowed a greeting. “I’m sorry, Miss Holmes. I wasn’t aware...”

The trio bustled into a high-ceilinged main hall, lit solely by daylight through sparkling windows. A curved staircase to the left led to the upper level, and six doors begged the visitors to explore chambers within.

“You two go ahead. I wish to chat with Mr. Morgan,” instructed Sheila.

“Oh, no!” Watson objected. “This ought to be good.”

Edith tugged his arm. “C’mon, John.”

Still, the pair idled near the parlor, eager to listen.

“What is your position here?” Sheila began.

“I was hired through an agency as caretaker, eventually to be butler when Mr. Downton brought his bride...”

Loud coughing interrupted Morgan’s narrative, and a glance at Watson gave warning not to mention the Hollywood actor’s name.

The young Holmes ignored the fracas. “And you supervised the renovations?”

“Yes, Miss. Things weren’t in bad shape, really, just needed sprucing up.”

“Your conscientiousness is much appreciated.”

“I was delighted to have the position, and very generous wages paid ten years in advance.”

Edith’s turn to react noisily.

“Good to know,” said Sheila. “Mr. Lyndon didn’t include any tax bills with the other paperwork...”

“Those, too, have been paid. You have full ownership, as I understand it, and no worries. When will you be moving in?”

“Not in the foreseeable future, unfortunately. I just came up from London to view the property...”

“With the intention of placing it back on the market?” stammered the caretaker

“No. I wasn’t aware of its present condition, and wanted to estimate repair costs.”

“Very good, Miss. There are rooms ready, if you and your friends...”

“We’re leaving on the noon train. I’ll trust you to stay on and continue your duties?”

“Definitely, Miss.”

“If you’d be so kind as to give us a tour...”

“Of course.”

Gathering Edith and Watson, the group wandered through the parlor, library, dining room, kitchens, morning room and music room on the ground floor, then eight bedrooms and baths above.

Edith gasped at intricate tiling on the ceilings, and carved bedposts. “I’d hate to have to dust those!”

“There’s a crew of women from the village who come in weekly for that very purpose,” explained Morgan, adding quickly, “Part of Mr. Downton’s arrangements.”

Watson cleared his throat brusquely.

“It’s all right, John,” Sheila chuckled. “I’m past falling apart.”

Morgan stopped short. “Miss?”

Edith interspersed, “She was...”

Watson’s attempt: “Tony Downton and Sheila...”

“Hush, both of you!” snapped the detective. “Mr. Morgan, when Tony Downton bought this house, he intended me to be his bride. We were engaged for a short time before he...”

“I see, Miss. You have my sympathy.”

“Thank you.”

Exiting through the mansion’s rear, Morgan recounted how the grounds had been used for farming after the war, but had lain fallow for decades. “Your neighbor to the north is willing to lease your land to graze his cattle, if you’re interested.”

“I’ll have Mr. Lyndon contact him.”

On the spring-scented road to Leek, Sheila scolded her associates for making such a fuss about Tony Downton. “It’s been nearly two years since his murder. I’ve many other things on my mind these days.”

“Like the unfinished algorithm?” hinted Watson.

“I thought your mathematician and scientific contacts would have come through by now.”

“I keep pressing them, but all they tell me is that they’re stumped. I think they’ve chucked in the towel.”

Sheila whirled on her flatmate. “John, they can’t. Offer a substantial cash reward to the first one who solves it. Caruthers’ false suspect comes to trial in two weeks, and I can’t let a man be sent to prison for a crime he didn’t commit!”

“I’ll do my best.”

She patted his shoulder, resuming their progress. “I know you will. You always have, and I value you for that.”

They arrived at the station five minutes before the train appeared in the distance. They mingled with a variety of women and children, on holiday from school, and suited businessmen bound for the city. Many distracted themselves with mobile phones and magazines.

Sheila, however, had taken Sherlock’s advice against letting herself be distracted. She sensed more than observed the train’s speed, increasing rather than slowing. Abruptly, she shouted, “Get off the platform!”

Heads popped up, people slow to realize their danger. Watson, Edith and Sheila grabbed the hands of unsuspecting youngsters, dragging them - screaming - into the parking lot. Their mothers angrily followed.

“Stay here!” directed Sheila, thrusting the fedora into Watson’s grip as she rushed toward the tracks.

Edith shrieked, “No!”

The train, racing along at 100 kilometers per hour, missed the crossover, and barreled into the rustic building, a few who’d not fled the waiting room killed instantly. Passengers in the six cars were thrown about like dolls, suffering fractured limbs, concussions, contusions and more fatal injuries.

“Where’s Sheila?” cried Watson, once the shock of the moment eased. His service as an Army medic in Afghanistan compelled him into the fray, searching for survivors.

Edith remained on the fringes, cradling the black fedora and comforting terrorized witnesses to the tragedy. Police vehicles and ambulances converged on the location, with more summoned from nearby locales.

The rest of the afternoon, two of the residents of 221B Baker Street waited for some word about the third. Once the station was structurally stabilized by a construction crew, bodies were carried out on stretchers and lain in rows like parked cars, waiting for identification. A total of 67 injured were removed from the twisted metal of the train cars, another 43 dead.

Mobiles emitting music and chimes became a constant, as loved ones rang to check on the well being of family and friends. When Watson’s own device, on silent mode, vibrated in his jacket, he snatched it with trembling fingers.

“John, where are you?”

Frantically, he signaled Edith. “Where are *you*?”

“Four cars back, with one of the conductors,” replied Sheila. “Have you seen the news?”

“No, of course not!”

“This wasn’t the only incident of its kind.”

“What?”

“A system-wide compromise of the computers disabled trains across the country. Thousands are dead.”

“The Cyber Vigilantes?” Watson ventured.

“Their logo was flashing on the driver’s console just before his brakes failed, according to this gentleman.”

“Well, this should be proof enough to free Caruther’s scapegoat.”

A pause, then, “Speak of the devil.”

The connection broken, Watson didn’t know what Sheila meant by that remark. He strode toward the derailed train, hoping to gain access...

Edith restrained him. “John, you can’t. Not with your leg...”

He complied. "I know. She's in there, and she sounds okay."

Sounding okay, perhaps. Being okay, not so much. Sheila had attempted to urge a clique of teenagers to discard their headphones and hand-held games prior to impact, without success. Their adulthood now uncertain, she had barely avoided decapitation by flying shards of glass, diving off the platform onto a concrete slab.

She'd tasted the blood trickling from a gash on her forehead, and deduced her left wrist was sprained, if not broken. Her right knee wouldn't support her weight; she'd found a sturdy branch and hobbled on with her investigation.

His tall frame imposing, salt-and-pepper mane tousled, Inspector Kevin D.K. Caruthers confronted her as she alighted from the tilted wreckage. "What in hell are you doing here?"

"I would've been back in London right now, if this train had stopped as scheduled," she scoffed. "What has the Yard to do with this?"

"We're the *Metropolitan Police*, Miss Holmes. Get that through your thick, bleeding skull. The only people who call us Scotland Yard anymore are out of touch with reality."

"Thanks for the compliment, considering I want no part of *your* reality. That still doesn't answer my question."

"An emergency of this magnitude..."

"You could've responded to any of a hundred such accidents. Why here?"

"It's my assignment. Now, get out of my way."

Caruthers brushed past her, stumbling as he mounted the steps, at a steep angle in their current position.

Sheila bit back a laugh and limped toward the staging area.

Her mobile chirped. Thinking it Watson, she juggled her makeshift cane and activated it without checking the incoming number.

"Mr. Home Secretary!" she burred. "I..."

"Where are you, Miss Holmes?"

"In Leek, sir."

When he inquired, she condensed her day into three sentences.

"You know the cause, then?" he pressed.

"Yes, sir."

"Get on it, Miss Holmes. You were right about the police arresting the wrong suspect in January. Between this and the banks..."

"The banks, sir?"

"This morning, the Bank of England and five others were hacked. Their funds - electronically, at any rate - have vanished."

“Did the Cyber Vigilantes logo manifest?”

“On every monitor in every branch. I fear the panic will spread...”

“I’ll get to the bottom of this, I assure you.”

“That’s good enough for me, and the Prime Minister.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Joining Watson and Edith in the parking lot, Sheila found herself on the receiving end of hugs and handshakes, hailed as a hero for saving the children and their parents. Cameras flashed as she pulled the fedora’s brim low and struggled to escape the crush, a paramedic eager to treat her wounds.

“I’ll... have my own doctor tend to it,” she begged off.

Hustling her companions into an idling taxi, she offered the driver 1,000 pounds if he would take them to London. He accepted the proposal and, as he weaved through the cluster of emergency vehicles, she passed out on the back seat.

“Do something!” Edith nudged Watson.

“Leave her. She’s knackered, overdoing it like usual.”

The pair settled on stained cloth upholstery for the long ride.

Dropped at a West End clinic, where Watson knew all the doctors by their first names, Edith proceeded home alone. Her excuse: “Ivan will be wondering why I didn’t keep our date this evening.”

Watson snickered at her devotion to this first boyfriend since her U.S. Army husband’s untimely death eight years hence. He escorted a very weak Sheila inside, to have seven sutures in her cranium, her left wrist x-rayed - fortunately, not broken - and her right knee examined.

“I think she’s torn her ACL,” an ex-military surgeon diagnosed. “We’ll need to schedule her for an MRI to be sure. She shouldn’t walk any more than necessary, and shouldn’t use her hand at all until the sprain heals.”

“You’ll have to strap her to a hospital bed to accomplish that feat,” commented Watson.

“We can, if we must.”

Sheila retorted groggily, “I’d like to see you try.”

Both men shook their heads.

Trading in the branch for a bona fide cane, Sheila limped out to the street, where Watson hailed a traditional black London taxi.

“The Tube station is on the corner,” the woman chided him.

He knew better than to argue, but by the time they mounted the dark steps on Baker Street, he feared Sheila would collapse outright. His prosthetic leg

precluding any real display of strength, he couldn't carry her up the stairs to their flat, instead enduring the agonized expletives as she climbed.

Edith met them in the corridor, tea tray laden with freshly-baked tarts. "I thought you'd need a little something."

"What about Ivan?" Watson inquired.

"He heard about the trains on the news, and knew we'd been to Leek... He's taking me to lunch tomorrow."

Sheila forced a smile. "Good for you." She eased herself onto the red Victorian divan in the cluttered sitting room, waving the landlady to pour a cup of steaming brew.

"You stay there, and I promise to fetch anything you need," vowed Watson.

"Kind of you, John. If you move my guitar within reach, you can jump on the computer and contact your friends about that algorithm. Tell them what happened here today, and beg them to work harder."

"I will, if you'll rest like the doctor ordered."

"Agreed, unless Caruthers shows his face."

In fact, the inspector - at that precise moment - had foregone knocking and ascended the creaking flight. Edith, bound for her kitchen, censured him for such rudeness.

Watson cursed under his breath. "How'd he get back so quickly?"

"Police helicopter, tasked with reporting to the superintendent," Caruthers replied, overhearing the question.

"Total dead?" prodded Sheila.

"Estimated 2,364."

"Injured?"

"Twice that number."

"Damn those vigilantes."

"For once, I concur."

"Will you be releasing your other suspect?"

Caruthers didn't miss a beat. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because, these crimes are not being committed by a lone culprit. There's a network of young men, bored with their lives..."

"Balderdash!" Sheila raged, straightening on the cushions. Watson sank beside her, to prevent her rising. She brushed him away. "The profile is flawed, you idiot. This is the work of one genius, leading a double life, possibly as a respectable laborer through the day, and devising deadly software viruses at night."

You've got to rethink this, man, and stop worrying about scrounging the money to pay your gambling debts!"

Caruthers bristled. "How *dare* you!"

"I dare, because I'm right. Now, get out."

"I'm here on official business."

"State it, then, and be gone."

"You were supposed to be interrogated at the scene..."

"I was... occupied saving lives."

"So the morning *Times* will report. And, for that, we are grateful. But, if you discovered any clues..."

"If you talked with the conductor - Damon Jansen - you know as much as I."

Fingering his smart phone, Caruthers sniffed. "Yes, we have his account of the matter. In that case..."

"Good evening," concluded Watson, escorting the uninvited guest to the exit. Rejoining his flatmate, he snorted, "I'll say it again: that's one right arrogant git."

Groping for her cane, which had tumbled to the floor, Sheila winced in pain. "Hello, Uncle."

Tobacco smoke from a lit briar pipe swirled around the manifested ghost of the shaggy-haired, stubble-chinned Sherlock Holmes, leaning on the fireplace mantle. "You've deduced you're dealing with a genius, yes?"

"Undeniably."

"Then, you must think like a genius. They all have an idiosyncrasy, some eccentricity, a weakness they will not acknowledge. You, for example, provided your Moriarty with a very debilitating weakness. His ego could not bear your rejection, and his obsession with that rejection ultimately caused errors, which led to his demise."

"True, true," noted Watson.

Sherlock smirked at the disabled veteran. "Therefore, you must determine this particular genius' Achilles' heel, and use it to expose him."

"I'll keep that in mind, Uncle. Thank you."

The spectre vanished in an aromatic haze.

Sheila coughed. "John, open a window."

"It's chilly tonight."

"I don't care. I've warned Uncle Sherlock about smoking in here."

"It's his way."

“That may be...” She shivered when the breeze hit her; the city air smelled little better than the tobacco. At her frown, Watson slid the glass shut.

“Best to sleep, Sheila,” he admonished. “Do you want me to help you to bed?”

“No, just take off my sneakers, and bring me a blanket.”

Emerging from his room late Friday morning, wearing only plaid cotton boxers, Watson fumbled with a carafe on the table, desperately craving a cup of coffee. Until he drained the contents of the ceramic mug, he didn’t notice Sheila, seated at the desk, typing in search parameters with one hand.

“What on earth?” he croaked, throat scratchy and hoarse. “You’re not supposed to be up.”

“There’s more to the Cyber Vigilantes’ logo than an encrypted algorithm, John. This genius of ours is a premiere artist, and has a gigantic ego, including signing his name to the piece.”

Sucked in by her words, Watson joined her at the monitor. “Really? Where?”

She tapped the screen vaguely with her bandaged left digits. She tried to manipulate the mouse to increase the image size, both her cane and the implement slipping away.

Watson retrieved them. “What do you want to do?”

“Zoom in on the bowfinger.”

A few clicks, and the lines increased to an inch in width.

Imbedded in the ink were bits of the mathematical formula Watson and his contacts had been trying to decipher for months. Also, other symbols.

“What if the genius didn’t actually draw this?” he suggested.

“Who would he trust to do it, if he wished to keep his identity secret?”

“He might’ve paid someone a huge sum for their talent, and their silence.”

“Not this sort. He sees himself superior in every aspect of life. As Uncle Sherlock said, though, he has a weakness, and I will find it.”

“Can you be so positive?”

Sheila spun the desk chair, gazing up at her flatmate’s fresh countenance. “Think about it, John. He’s meticulous to a fault, this one. He could’ve sketched this logo in five minutes, to serve his purpose. Rather, he took hours - maybe days - to create a virtual masterpiece of intricate messages. He’s obsessive. His present obsession: bringing the British people to their knees.”

“Could it be that he likes to wreak havoc and see it broadcast in the media?”

“His motives run far deeper, are far more devious.”

“Where do you think he’ll strike next?”

“He already has.”

“Eh?”

“The BBC reported on major glitches at the London Stock Exchange, which will have global economic repercussions.”

“My God!”

“Yell down to Edith for some toast and marmalade,” Sheila instructed, resuming her examination of the logo. “Then, we’ve got work to do.”

Ten minutes later, the sitting room door opened, granting admittance to both Edith and the barrel-chested Ivan Lukaster. Watson had, meanwhile, slipped on a grey sweatsuit.

“How are you today, Sheila?” queried the landlady.

“Barely tolerable. Do we have a supply of aspirin?”

“I thought the doctor prescribed more potent medications.”

“Which will either make me loopy or nauseous, neither state being conducive to solving this conundrum.” She contemplated Lukaster’s bronze head, full features, mutton-chop sideburns, brown turtleneck, light blue jacket and khaki slacks. “You going on a picnic?”

“To lunch, then a drive in the country to enjoy the spring flowers,” his bass rumbled.

“It’ll do Edith good, after yesterday.” Her focus shifted to the computer once more. “Enjoy yourselves.”

Edith flushed and tittered like a schoolgirl, arranging the platter of warm wheat bread, butter, assorted preserves and a large bottle of aspirin on the round table.

Watson assisted Sheila as best he could through the afternoon, at a loss when she spouted unintelligible inanities at the computer.

“What’s wrong?”

“Will you stop asking that?” she snapped toward dusk, scribbling notes on a pad. “I’m so close, and you’re disrupting my train of thought.”

“Sorry.” Disheartened, he withdrew to the divan, snatching up the day’s *London Times*.

As Kevin Caruthers had predicted, the entire lead section contained oversized photos of train collisions and panicked crowds outside the banks. A sidebar on page three proclaimed Sheila the “hero of Leek”. His aggravation escalating, Watson tossed the paper on the dormant grate.

“Where’s the phone?” Sheila suddenly erupted.

“Why?”

She pushed away from the desk. “The key to the next target is right here! First, the mobiles, then the trains, banks and stock exchange. Next, he plans to strike at the very heart of the government. I’ve got to warn the Prime Minister.”

“If that’s the case,” Watson opined, interest renewed, “the virus must’ve been introduced into the servers weeks ago. There’ll be no way to avoid...”

“Unless timing is key. Perhaps the day one calamity transpires is the same day the next virus is initiated.” She hoisted herself awkwardly off the seat, pitching forward across the desk.

Watson hurried to steady her, pressing her cane into her right hand. “Take it slow, Sheila. I’ll help you.”

Ten minutes holding the wire while belligerent staff members forwarded the call to the Prime Minister’s home, then a restaurant where he was enjoying a family dinner, drove Sheila to the brink. Standing beside her, Watson noticed blood seeping through gauze bandages taped to her forehead. He remained patient until she cautioned the British leader to have his computer experts randomize coding on the firewalls, to prevent infiltration by the next Cyber Vigilantes virus.

Once the receiver returned to its cradle, Watson steered her to bed. “You’ve done what you could. Now, you rest.”

“John, I...” What little adrenaline remained spent itself, and she slumped on the mattress.

Relaxing in the sitting room later, Watson heard the front door open, and voices below. He peered around the doorframe at Edith and Lukaster saying affectionate farewells. The widow kept glancing down at her fingers, where a sizable diamond rested.

“Dammit!” hissed the veteran, shuffling to his bedroom. “Sheila won’t be pleased.”

“Won’t be pleased about what?” Edith’s voice, stern and brittle.

Her tenant spun. “You’re engaged. That means either we move out, or you’ll be moving and selling the building.”

“Sheila offered two years ago to buy me out. I may take her up on it.”

“That was when she had extra money from the movie contract. It’s... pretty much gone.”

“What about the estate in Leek? If she’s so passionate about staying on Baker Street, she could sell that, and use the cash...”

“It’s her family’s heritage. You know how strongly she feels about that. She may turn it into a retirement home, but she’ll never sell it.”

Feverish and wobbly, Sheila appeared across the room. “Sell what?”

Both rushed to her, and eased her into the basket-chair. "Great Scot, Sheila, you look awful!" cried Edith.

"And you don't look as happy as someone newly engaged. What's happened?"

Startled, Edith recoiled. "How could you possibly..."

"Get on with it, woman!" Sheila barked irritably.

"Okay, okay! While Ivan and I were eating lunch at the restaurant, four men sat down at a table near our booth. Half-way through their meal, they got into an argument over something. One threw his plate across the room, another threw a couple punches. While the other patrons watched, they suddenly pulled pistols from their jackets and ordered everyone onto the floor. They took the money from the cash register, and two pizzas, and ran out."

"So, you never got your ride in the country, eh?"

"No. We've been giving statements to the police."

"Too bad. It was a glorious afternoon."

Watson interrupted. "What has that got to do..."

"Nothing, John. Nothing." Sheila leaned forward, as if dizzy. "Describe the men."

"All four were older," said Edith, straining to recollect. "One was short, stocky, Asian. Another was the same height, thin, Black, dropped his H's. The third was a few inches taller, glasses, beard, walked with a hunch. The tallest was Latino, though he didn't have that kind of an accent."

"Pensioners who've lost their life savings through the bank virus, needing ready cash and food," the detective mumbled. "There'll be far more of this kind of crime in the weeks to come."

"You mean, you won't..."

"The much-lauded Metropolitan Police can handle them... or not. I... I... must devote my energy to... to..."

Watson scurried down the hall to the bathroom, scrambling for a thermometer. The reading of 103 degrees set his nerves on edge. "We've got to get her to the hospital."

"No, no!" Sheila protested. "The case..."

"The case can wait," soothed Edith. "You're no good to anyone if you're ill." She ran to the stairs. "Ivan!"

Lukaster had waited for Edith's return in the foyer. He mounted the flight by twos, scooped Sheila in his powerful arms and transported her out to his Maserati.

At St. Bart's, Sheila was admitted and hooked up to multiple intravenous tubes, pumping her full of antibiotics, pain medicine and liquid nourishment. She didn't wake from her delirium for three days.

Watson kept constant vigil, with Edith and Lukaster checking in twice daily. The Home Secretary sent assistants on a rotating basis, and the Prime Minister visited in person.

When violet eyes finally opened, she scanned multiple faces hovering over her. "This isn't heaven," she muttered. "Too many devils."

A tense chuckle echoed around the antiseptic chamber. The only one who didn't laugh: Kevin Caruthers.

"How's Scotland Yard involved in this?" Sheila demanded.

"There are still unanswered questions about the trains, and since you witnessed..."

"Leave off!" warned Watson. "She nearly died, and you want to give her the third degree?"

"Did you go into the wreckage?" the inspector retorted. "Did you see what she saw? What no one else saw?"

Watson remained defiant.

Caruthers ordered, "Out, all of you."

Slowly, visitors filed into the corridor, Lukaster closing the metal door.

Dropping onto a stool beside the angled bed, Caruthers' salt-and-pepper head leaned toward Sheila's sweat-drenched, sallow face, his scowl prominent. "You have to help me, Miss Holmes. I'm in a real fix..."

"The judges welsh on their deal to convict your suspect?"

"No. The superintendent wants the entire Cyber Vigilantes network in custody by week's end. I have no clue..."

She wheezed, "All the clues are in the logo. You just have to know where to look..."

"How do you know..."

"You're a detective; I shouldn't have to explain my methods..."

A commotion outside preempted the conversation. In strode the Home Secretary, to whom Caruthers ceremoniously bowed.

"Miss Holmes, we want to thank you," the official greeted, patting her hand gently, so as not to disturb the I.V. port.

Caruthers snarled, "What for?"

"By notifying the Prime Minister about the next catastrophe, she has saved the government from disaster."

"You mean..." Sheila gasped.

“Yes. A virus was detected, and the crisis averted before the main servers sustained damage.”

“Then, it’s over?” Caruthers huffed.

The patient’s final words before slipping into unconsciousness: “No. There’s more to come.”

The Home Secretary led Caruthers from the room, allowing the others to resume their places at the bedside. Only a few nurses overheard raised voices as the men walked to the lift. The expression Caruthers wore when he entered the car barely masked his ire.

Two security officers met the Home Secretary in the hospital lobby, deviating briefly to instruct reception desk personnel that Kevin Caruthers was banned from the premises until Sheila Holmes was discharged by her physicians.

Despite her strenuous objections, which commenced the following morning, the woman was not released for two weeks: completely recovered from her infection, sutures removed from her head wound, swelling of her sprained wrist gone, and her ACL repaired through surgery.

She was welcomed back to 221B Baker Street by a letter from the Queen, multiple vases of flowers, and a terse note from Caruthers, requesting her presence at the New Scotland Yard offices “at your earliest convenience.”

“Next month,” she snickered feebly, en route to her bedroom. “If he’s going to chew me out, I want plenty of strength - and ammunition - to return fire!”

Of Computers and Corruption

Devastation.

Johnny Watson had saved daily newspapers for his flatmate, Sheila Holmes, during her convalescence in St. Bart's Hospital. Upon her return to 221B Baker Street, she spent days devouring every page, stomach in knots.

Since January, the Cyber Vigilantes' computer viruses had knocked out mobile phone service for nearly a month, then caused numerous train wrecks across the British Isles, with thousands dead or injured.

A national day of mourning for the victims had been held during her hospitalization.

Additionally, electronic bank records had been obliterated, and the ability for traders to access the London Stock Exchange led to the collapse of England's economy.

Poor and rich alike, accounts frozen in the wake of the crisis, had no funds to make purchases of any sort. Credit cards were declined by the millions, their issuers uncertain if clients could meet their debts. Wholesale looting ensued, hungry parents unable to buy food for their children. Schools closed when the utilities were cut off for nonpayment of bills.

Sheila, herself, had never bothered to contemplate the long-term ramifications of such crimes - until now. She had long since stashed substantial reserves in a safe revealed by her uncle Sherlock during one of his early, ghostly visits to his former sitting room.

One of the lucky minority in that regard, she continued to struggle with rehabilitation of her right knee, surgery for a torn ACL seemingly ineffective. Limping with a cane, on her feet for only short periods, she felt quite the cripple, when her country needed her most.

She'd ignored repeated summons from Scotland Yard inspector Kevin D.K. Caruthers to meet at his office, in fact. She would not face the incompetent, corrupt detective in less than perfect condition.

What did provide a small measure of comfort were nightly, cozy dinners at the round sitting room table, with Watson, Edith Hudson-Thorne and her fiancé, Ivan Lukaster. Conversation animated, companionship pleasant, the young Holmes could relax after a day's frustration, diligently working to discover the identity of the genius behind the notorious atrocities.

"John, what's cooking?" she shouted from the red Victorian divan, where she'd propped up her aching leg.

“According to Edith’s menu, it’s barbeque chicken, fried potatoes, corn on the cob, mixed green salad and chocolate cake.”

“Ah, that American flavor!”

Watson joined her, sitting at the desk. “What I wouldn’t give for a good steak and kidney pie, though.”

“You can get one at any decent restaurant,” Sheila chided. “There’s something to the way Edith prepares the meat...”

The barrel-chested Lukaster hailed the pair from the threshold. They waved him to an armchair near the soot-stained fireplace.

“Make any sales today?” queried Watson.

“I’m close to finalizing a deal on a rare Van Gogh, which will bring in a nice commission to put toward the wedding.”

Sheila perked up. “You’ve set the date?”

“September 15,” intoned Edith, carrying in dishes to set their places.

Relieving her of the burden, Lukaster performed the domestic task. The widowed landlady smiled sweetly at him, and his round face lit up like a beacon.

“What about some wine?” he ventured.

“None for me,” declined Sheila. “The medication...”

“Do you mind if the rest of us...”

“Not at all.”

Edith remarked, “There’s a bottle in the pantry, and a corkscrew in the second drawer.”

“I’ll go,” Watson volunteered.

Sheila plucked up the sports section of the previous day’s *London Times*, pretending to read about a soccer match, so the couple could share an intimate moment, presumably unobserved.

Eventually, speaking to no one in particular, she announced, “I’ve decided what to do with Great-great-granddad’s estate in Staffordshire. Oxford University is interested in the property as an auxiliary campus, calling it the ‘Holmes Institute of Forensic Science.’”

Relentless pounding on the front door shook window panes on the upper level, and refocused everyone’s attention. Watson could be heard arguing with the caller, then yelling after him as heavy boots mounted creaking stairs.

“Sheila Holmes?” barked a uniformed constable, entering the chamber uninvited.

“What is it?”

“I have here a warrant from Inspector Caruthers. If you refuse to accompany me, I am to place you under arrest and bring you in with whatever force necessary.”

Watson, reaching the landing, snarled, “Arrogant git.”

Outweighing the official by at least three stone, Lukaster squared his broad shoulders. “You’d better be careful, old chap. Touch one hair of her head, and you’ll be on the receiving end of more force than you can handle.”

The erstwhile rugby player, menacing though he be, could not match wits with a drawn sidearm.

Sheila rose, unsteady. She batted down the semi-automatic barrel. “Hold on, hold on. No need for this display of temper.” She signaled Edith to fetch her cane. “I’ll go willingly, as long as you move no faster than a turtle.”

The descent to street level took almost fifteen minutes, for that matter. Watson tucked her mobile in her jean pocket, whispering that he’d programmed it to send him a distress message if she punched the combination 6-1-1.

She squeezed his arm. “Thanks, John. You’re a treasure.”

The black police vehicle pulled into evening traffic, Sheila in the passenger seat, unable to maneuver into the rear. Another hour elapsed before they arrived at New Scotland Yard, where the tall, lean, salt-and-pepper haired Kevin Caruthers waited inside the main entrance.

“Have you an elevator?” Sheila inquired, smirking at his constant scowl.

“Not necessary. Interrogations take place on this floor.”

“You won’t be satisfied until you pick my brain clean about the Leek train wreck, eh?”

He ushered her through a metal door, into a tiny cubicle with a two-way mirror fit in one wall. Cameras were mounted in each corner, the sole furnishings a table bolted to the floor and two molded plastic chairs, likewise secured.

From his blue suit jacket, the inspector drew a folded sheet. Once Sheila had settled opposite him, he slid it across the scratched surface.

“I’d like your opinion of this,” he drawled.

She read the block lettering: “Holmes engineered the whole scheme.”

“Do you have the envelope from this?” she pressed.

“No envelope. It was hand delivered to the reception desk this morning.”

“By whom?”

Sarcastically: “He didn’t leave his name.”

“Did you review the security footage to attempt an identification?”

“No. The message is plain enough. This past six months, you’ve been deflecting attention from yourself, pointing fingers at some unknown ‘genius’, when it’s been you all along!”

“Balderdash!” Sheila stormed, fingering her mobile. “Aren’t you satisfied with sending an innocent man to prison, because you erroneously ‘profiled’ him? Now, you’ve devised this ruse to silence me.”

Caruthers leapt to his feet. “That’s the last time you’ll accuse me of corruption, Miss Holmes. I’m hereby placing you under arrest...”

“Should do.” The prisoner hoisted herself upright, leaning toward him to stroke his jaw. “And when you find yourself unemployed and disgraced, remember this moment.”

Relinquished to underlings, Sheila hobbled along the corridor, subsequently photographed, fingerprinted and confined in a stark cell. Her mobile had been surrendered, along with her wallet and house keys, but she’d successfully texted Watson.

Who, astoundingly, did not come to her aid. Suspecting deception on Caruthers’ part, she mustered her limited patience. When she came before the magistrate...

Which wouldn’t occur until Monday, this being Friday. She had to credit this nemesis for his cunning... It would, nonetheless, serve him ill.

Late Sunday, her tasteless meal of boiled beef and potatoes concluded, the door opened on Caruthers, a devious cast to his usual scowl. “Comfortable?” he mocked.

“Except for missing my pain pills,” she responded bluntly.

“Are you willing to confess your involvement in this debacle?”

“No.”

“If I swear you’ll remain in custody until you do?”

“That is a violation of the law, and you know it!”

“But, if no one knows you’re here - thinking, instead, you’re up-country on a top-secret investigation for your friend, the Prime Minister...”

“Bastard!”

Caruthers’ chance to caress Sheila’s cheek. “Treat me kindly, and I’ll get you out.”

“My cash reserves wouldn’t cover what you owe the bookmakers.”

“You misunderstand. In an unusual way, you’re quite lovely. You’ve got some curves, unlike those ultra-skinny models. Skipping the cosmetics gives your face a welcome freshness. I can see why Tony Downton...”

She recoiled. “You’ve got to be kidding!”

“Not at all. Clean you up, then a quiet dinner, soft music...”

Violet eyes blazing, she opened her mouth to roundly curse him. Then, an idea preempted the outburst. What better way to gain the advantage over this sanctimonious fool, to orchestrate his justly-deserved downfall?

“One night only?” she oozed coyly.

“To start. Then, we may come to an arrangement about your parole...”

Jammed into a red Fiat, Sheila pondered how many other female prisoners Caruthers had falsely arrested to treat them so.

She vowed to be the last.

She hadn't counted on his sado-masochistic proclivities. Turned loose in the privacy of his own house south of the Thames, he freed shackles and whips from display cabinets, requiring her to don a leather bra and motorcycle-style chaps.

Though he towered six inches above her, and she hadn't practiced her Wing Chun since her stay at St Bart's, she disabled him with a spinning sweep and a strike to his temple. Rendered unconscious, she used his mobile to ring Watson.

“Are you all right?” he gushed.

“Well enough. Send a taxi to this address...”

That time of night, her transportation did not arrive quickly. To prevent Caruthers from foiling her escape, she locked him to the king-sized brass headboard with his own cuffs, and stuffed a rolled up sock between his teeth.

When his green orbs fluttered open, she beamed from a position straddling his torso, clad in jeans and t-shirt. “I never would've suspected your penchant for kinky sex games. And, I apologize for misjudging you. Oxford rumors had you deeply indebted to the bookies, and disinherited by your father. Instead, you owe the pimps who supply your women.” She seized his crotch through summer blend cloth and squeezed, until he yowled in agony, volume muffled by the gag. “Must be quite a sum.”

Honking from the curb ended her diatribe. She shuffled out to the idling vehicle, chuckling under her breath the entire drive to Baker Street.

A stifling, muggy Monday commenced with a cold but tasty breakfast. “I didn't really appreciate your skills in the kitchen until I ate prison food,” Sheila praised Edith, who refilled her glass with orange juice a third time.

Both the landlady and Watson were horrified by her description of Caruthers' unethical tactics. “You should report him to his superiors!” snapped the former.

“He would only deny the charges, and be placed on paid suspension while the internal investigation dragged on. He’s got an elite crew paid to do his bidding and turn a blind eye, so they wouldn’t testify against him, for fear of their own jobs.”

Watson snorted, “Absolutely ludicrous!”

“I know, I know. But he’ll see justice in due course. For now, we’ve still to decipher that encrypted algorithm, to be sure no other tragedies are in the offing.”

“One of my contacts sent me this on Saturday,” announced her flatmate. “It’s not complete, but it’s something the others can build upon.”

Frankly, Sheila didn’t understand the formula on the printout, but she trusted Watson and the many experts he’d come to know while muddling his way through the system of veterans benefits.

“What, precisely, did you study at university?” he wondered.

“Philosophy, psychology and music.” She shrugged. “Keep them at it, John, and thank them for their work so far.”

A glance at the desk on her way to shed her uncle Sherlock’s tattered dressing gown and shower, merited a second look. “Something’s out of place,” she stated.

Edith responded, “I’m sorry, Sheila. Ivan used your computer yesterday. He received an attachment on his mobile, and couldn’t read it on the small screen...”

“That’s fine, fine.”

“I didn’t know you kept track of every scrap,” quipped Watson.

She grinned, “Not all, just specific ones.”

Pulsating water cleansing her body of jail odors and Caruthers’ lustful touch, the young Holmes couldn’t shake a sense of impending doom. She emerged from the tub and slipped into camouflage trousers and a yellow tank-top, wandering aimlessly until she settled at the windows overlooking Baker Street, neither the pedestrians nor the cars registering in her brain.

“My God!” bellowed Watson from his room.

“What is it?”

“Military jets were scrambled over the Middle East, and two entire cities were bombed to rubble.”

“What provoked such action?”

“That’s just it,” he moaned, signaling her toward the television beside his bed. “There was no provocation. There wasn’t even a verbal order to the pilots. The computers...”

“Shit!” Sheila’s fists clenched. “The government simply has too many servers, and they didn’t safeguard them all...”

“You mean, when you rang the Prime Minister, right before you fell ill...”

She nodded. “It took almost two months for the virus to mutate the software, and now we’ll be on the verge of full-scale war.”

“Have you thought any more about what Sherlock said, about the genius having an ego, a weakness...”

“Every second of the day, when I’m not coerced into bizarre situations by twisted Scotland Yarders. I never did find the signature on the logo...”

“Then, how do you know it’s embedded there?”

“Instinct, maybe. Or, a clue my subconscious recognized, which eludes me temporarily.”

“Would a different set of eyes help?”

“Or, a look through a microscope.”

“You can zoom in better with the computer...”

“The pixelation might be distorting hidden text.”

“True.”

Rolling the laboratory table from its corner, Sheila plugged in the high-end equipment she’d bought with proceeds from her contract as technical consultant on Tony Downton’s last film. The device owned by Sherlock had been functional, but not on a par with computerized apparatus. It sat beside its replacement, improvements well in evidence.

Just as she slid the 3200 dpi scan of the Cyber Vigilantes logo beneath the lens, five uniformed constables burst into the sitting room.

“What now?” she raged, whirling on the squad.

“Sheila Holmes, you’re under arrest for terrorism against the British Empire!” the sergeant proclaimed.

Watson hissed, “Caruthers again?”

“He wouldn’t dare,” murmured the detective.

“By order of the superintendent, you are to be taken into custody, and all electronic devices confiscated,” the troop leader continued.

“Shit!”

“Sheila?” Watson pressed.

“That damned genius foiled us, John. He knew he was being tracked and, instead of planting a virus, he’s made it look like the viruses originate from here.”

“We’re screwed.”

“Must do.”

“What do you want me to do?” the veteran queried, as handcuffs clamped around Sheila’s slender wrists.

“Ring Caruthers. Tell him I recorded our... tryst with a wireless microphone, and if the file falls into the wrong hands...”

“Will he believe me?”

“No doubt about it.”

Her cane propped against the fireplace, Sheila limped to the van where she was placed on a bench between two jaded corporals.

A trio of technicians, in lab coats rather than dark police garb, questioned her until well after midnight, much of their terminology sounding Greek. She could not provide answers, and was branded uncooperative.

During a change of shifts, Sheila glimpsed Caruthers peering into the interrogation room from the corridor. His scowling lips twitched in fear; she winked cryptically.

Processing her into the holding cell, a departmental supervisor brought the balding, harried superintendent’s attention to a match of fingerprints and photo ID from the previous weekend.

“What goes on here?” he demanded. “She was arrested before the court authorized...”

Caruthers had retreated and fled.

A hushed consultation preceded Sheila’s release. “Miss Holmes, you are not to leave London, and are requested to make yourself available, should the need arise - once we get to the bottom of this,” apologized a chief inspector of the cyber-crimes division.

“At your service.”

She sank, exhausted and shaky, on the red divan, deposited at Baker Street by a contrite constable. Watson felt her forehead for a fever; she swatted away his hand.

“I’m fine, just tired. This fiasco confirms my reluctance to collaborate with the Yard. They’re a bunch of idiots, from the top down.”

“Get some sleep. You have a conference call with the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the Foreign Minister at nine o’clock.”

“It’s half-three now.”

“It’s urgent.” He passed her a sheet of embossed letterhead.

She scanned typed contents beneath the Prime Minister’s crest. “They want me to explain to Middle East ambassadors the fighter jets’ malfunction?”

“You’re a neutral party, whose reputation evidently transcends national borders.”

“Meaning, they trust me?”

“Supposedly.”

“This, less than a day after being arrested for the second time in a week!”

Her chortle escalated into near-hysterical laughter, which flustered Watson.

Eventually calming, she grasped his wrist and pulled herself vertical. “This whole situation is absurd, John. I’m sorely tempted to drive to Leek and hide out until the Empire either implodes or this all blows over.”

“You can’t do that. You’ve got to find this bastard...”

“Yes, yes. A nice lie-down first, though. For both of us.”

At 8:55 AM, Sheila remained buried under her pillows, aching not to hear street noises through smudged windows. Edith and John stood in the doorway, coaxing her with muffins and juice, until she rolled off the double mattress, sheets tangled around her on the floor.

She didn’t bother to change from the previous day’s clothes, flopping into the basket-chair, land-line phone on her lap. Clearly a one-sided conversation, she repeatedly uttered, “Yes, sir,” and, “Of course, sir.” In conclusion, she promised, “I’ll be there, sir.”

“Be where?” Watson asked, relieving her of the instrument.

“I don’t just have to address a select group of ambassadors. They want me to make a presentation to both houses of Parliament.”

“What would you tell them?”

“I’ve got five hours to figure that out.” She reached for the laboratory table, picking up where she’d left off 24 hours earlier.

Mulling over the caricature of a male face, right hand flashing the bowfinger, Sheila Holmes envisioned herself its artist, the genius who had rocked Britain to its core. She’d already found the algorithm, and the list of targets: mobile phones, the trains, banks, stock exchange and the government itself. His name lay within, as well, though not visible on the computer monitor or under a microscope lens.

“Sheila.”

The woman started, not hearing Edith creep into the sitting room. A few deep breaths to recover, then, “What is it?”

“Am I disturbing you?” prodded the excited landlady.

“Yes, but you have something to tell me...”

The russet-haired widow might have burst with her secret, if she hadn’t let it out to someone. She opened a bridal magazine, pointing to a lace-trimmed gown. “I’ve found my dress!”

“I’m happy for you, truly, but...”

“Oh, I know. People will say I shouldn’t wear white, because it’s my second marriage. Al and I went through a brief ceremony in the Army base chapel the day before he deployed, him in his fatigues, me in jeans. Our families weren’t there...”

“You’ve invited them this time?”

Edith beamed, “They’ve already booked their flights.”

“Your mom, dad, and how many siblings?”

“Two sisters.”

Sheila’s jaw dropped, stunned. Her companion had displayed fingers raised in a peace sign, to reflect her count. The detective mimicked the gesture, then rotated her wrist.

“Damn, can it be that elementary?” she growled, snatching the Cyber Vigilantes logo. A minute later, ignoring Edith’s hurt expression, she bellowed, “John!”

He emerged from his room. “What’s the fuss?”

“Contact your team, and tell them to try decoding the algorithm using the key ‘two right’.”

“Eh?”

“They should begin at the left end of the series, and use every second symbol, proceeding right.”

“Do you really think...”

“Sometimes, genius conceals itself in simplicity.” Rising, Sheila embraced Edith with genuine affection. “Bless you, dear one. The dress is lovely, and you’ll be beautiful in it. And, thanks for your inestimable assistance.”

“You’re... welcome,” the bride-to-be stammered, as Sheila hobbled past, bound for the shower.

Selecting from her antique oak wardrobe a seldom-worn green business suit - bought by Tony Downton during her sojourn to California - Sheila brushed her brunette mop into a semblance of order, and slid her feet into uncomfortable tan patent leather pumps. “I look ridiculous,” she remarked to the mirror, shambling to the door and reaching for the black fedora on the coat rack, instead of her cane.

“Leave it,” hinted Watson, typing furiously on the keyboard.

Her digits retracted, and she descended the stairs to a waiting Rolls Royce limousine.

Recalling almost failing marks in public speaking courses at both secondary and university level, Sheila’s entire body shook as she sat in the most

dignified posture she could manage outside the House of Commons chamber. A south breeze delivered the smell of humidity and dead fish to her nostrils, adding to her nausea.

Tense silence enveloped the vast hall when she was escorted to the ornate podium. More than 700 faces glared at her, and she fastened white knuckles on the wood for support, inches from the microphone.

“My lords, ladies, gentlemen and honored guests,” she croaked, summing up the presence of elected and appointed representatives, ambassadors and their retinues, “I have been asked to confirm to you that recent bombings of two Middle Eastern cities were entirely accidental, the vile machinations of a criminal element calling itself the Cyber Vigilantes.”

Grumbles of disbelief circulated among the crowd.

“An ingenious virus was introduced months ago into the military computer network, and others operated by the British government. While most of these were successfully purged, one infiltrated the security firewall, and sent orders to the pilots simulating proper authorization which no live person, in fact, had granted.”

While she didn't bring a written script, she had remembered to tuck a copy of the logo in her trouser pocket. She extracted and unfolded it, holding it aloft for those closest, then allowing it to be passed among the gathering.

“This is the calling card of the fiend who has ruined the British economy, killed thousands and would hurl us into war. We are within hours of deciphering his identity and making an example of him, so others with similar notions will never forget!”

The beleaguered, athletically-built Prime Minister, in his robes of office, approached. “If you're not positive, do not lie...”

“I am positive, sir. We've uncovered the key, and experts are presently hard at work.”

He mounted the platform, which Sheila vacated, assuring his political allies and opponents of her veracity. “The next item on the agenda...”

Guards directed Sheila through a maze of corridors to huge double doors leading into hazy sunshine. The limousine gone, she'd have to find her own transportation to Baker Street.

She opted for the eerily deserted Tube, running hourly - rather than every five minutes - since the crisis which had thrown business into chaos. Only six others occupied the car, one being Ivan Lukaster.

“Where are you going?” she asked lightly, sitting next to the art dealer.

His bull neck swiveled, slightly bulbous nose bloodshot. Rheumy grey orbs studied her but showed no sign of recognition. At the next stop, he disembarked.

“Drunk,” she stated, to no one in particular.

At Baker Street, she shed the dignified clothes like an unwanted skin, crawling into bed to catch up on much-needed slumber. When Watson tapped on the closed door, she regretted not stealing a “Do Not Disturb” sign from one of the hotels where she and Tony Downton had stayed during location filming in the north country.

Rolling onto her spine, she puzzled why the murdered actor filled her thoughts to this day. The jealous would-be actress who'd pulled the trigger - and her father - were both confined to prison cells, two years had elapsed...

A louder knock.

“What is it?”

The close-cropped blond head poked through a narrow crack. “Caruthers.”
“Shit!”

Perusing pipes, tobacco dottles and old letters tacked to the fireplace mantle with an ivory-handled jack knife, Kevin Caruthers traced his name in the dust.

“If you moved anything, there’ll be hell to pay,” warned Sheila, bundled in the faded dressing gown.

“Asleep so early?” the inspector scoffed. “You must’ve had a busy night, sickening the dogs on me.”

From his vantage point on the Victorian divan, Watson’s eyebrows arched.

“John, please.”

Reluctantly, the wounded veteran excused himself. “I’ll see if Edith needs help with dinner.”

Alone, Sheila sank in the basket-chair, massaging her sore right leg.

“So, Internal Affairs is involved?”

“Not yet.” Caruthers avoided her gaze. “I’ve been able to smooth over the... discrepancies in what you told the chief inspector.”

“I said nothing.”

His lean frame turned, scowl intensified. “Then, why...”

“Your own suspicious behavior, no doubt. You show up at the Yard during an interrogation about which you’ve not been notified through official channels...”

“But, your loyal lap dog...”

Sheila shot off the seat, her knee almost buckling with the strain. “You talk of people as dogs, when they are far superior to you, Deke.”

Green eyes widened. “How’d you...”

“Oxford, our common roots, remember? The notorious Deke Caruthers. Your little sister hung that moniker on you, correct? A convenient way for you to dodge the university prefects, when your debtors came calling. The transcripts showed no one named Deke, only Kevin Delaney Kenneth Caruthers, the second son of the lauded Sir Miles.”

“You have me at a disadvantage, Miss Holmes. How much will it take...”

“Even if you had any money, I wouldn’t want it.”

“Then, what...”

She grunted, “Resign your post and become a celibate.”

“Never!”

“So be it. From this day forward, though, you’ll be checking over your shoulder with every step, to see when the cascade of lies will drown you.”

Caruthers sidled to the exit. “Very poetic.”

“Oh, one more thing.”

He paused, digits grasping the polished knob. “Yes?”

“You have a fine physique,” Sheila taunted. “Most women would welcome you to their beds, if you could... curb your vicious streak.”

“Not you?”

“No, not me.”

“Was Downton that good?”

“Above all, Tony was a gentleman. You, sir, are not.”

The slamming door rattled the window panes. Sheila gave her laughter voice. Dogs he considered them, so she’d decided to bite.

Watson tentatively carried in a stack of dishes. “The war over?”

“No, just the latest battle.”

He cleared his throat, and Sheila squinted violet eyes. “What’s happened, John?”

“The key - two right - doesn’t work.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve heard from six of the guys. Gibberish.”

“Damn!” She ruminated at length, before switching on the microscope.

“Be good enough to have Edith brew a large pot of coffee, eh, John?”

Watson knew better than to protest.

Traps Well Sprung

Edith Hudson-Thorne - wrapped in a bulky white terry robe, russet tresses disheveled, face pinched - paced the foyer of 221B Baker Street that Thursday afternoon, anticipating Johnny Watson's arrival. He'd been absent the past week, attending a military unit reunion, while things on the home front had seriously deteriorated.

The widowed landlady peered out the window when she heard his unbalanced gait, caused by his prosthetic left leg. Before he could unlock the door, she yanked it open, tears dampening her cheeks.

"Johnny, I'm so glad you're here!" she wept.

The young veteran embraced her trembling frame. "What's wrong?"

"It's... Sheila..."

Watson's blue eyes gazed up the staircase. "Is she..."

"She's been hunched over that damned microscope since you left. She doesn't sleep, won't eat. All she does is demand more coffee, and chew on some leaves delivered in the post Monday."

His foot on the bottom step, Edith restrained him. "It's like a sweat lodge in there - the stench of heat and perspiration..."

And tobacco, Watson discovered, pushing the humidity-swollen sitting room door inward. "Bloody hell, Sheila! What goes on here?"

"Welcome back, Watson." Not his flatmate's contralto. A deeper register.

"Sherlock?"

"Indeed." The countenance which spun toward him in the dim light barely resembled Sheila Holmes. "Have you news?"

Angered, he strode to the windows and raised smudged panes. The London weather wasn't much cooler, but air could circulate, at least. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Not at all. The game's afoot..."

"Get out of her!" commanded Watson, recalling how Sheila had allowed her uncle's ghost to inhabit her body in the early days of living in his old lodgings.

"Pray tell, why?" the masculine voice countered. "A solution to this conundrum must be found..."

"She's capable of doing it herself. Now, go!"

"As you wish." When the spectre vacated its temporary, corporeal form, his great-great-niece slumped to the floor. "See?" chided the ethereal entity.

"She's in no condition..."

Despite his handicap, Watson managed to lift Sheila by the waist and position her upright in the basket-chair. Fetching a first-aid kit from his bedroom, he cracked an ampule of smelling salts, jamming it beneath her nostrils to revive her.

“Eh? What?” she muttered groggily, raising unfocused violet orbs.

“Sheila, what have you been doing?”

“Ah, John! Good to see you!”

“I doubt you can see anything,” he scolded. “I’ll have Edith bring more coffee, and a plate of sandwiches.”

“I... couldn’t eat a thing.”

“You must. I’d guess you’ve lost at least a stone while I’ve been gone.”

“We have no scale to verify your deduction...”

He rifled the laboratory table’s contents, where a printout of the Cyber Vigilantes logo lay beneath the microscope. Sherlock’s pipe - still warm - rested in an ashtray, and a pile of moist leaves overflowed a small parcel, atop a manila envelope bearing an Oxford University return address.

Watson fingered the foliage, licked his skin, then spit. “Coca?”

“Forgive me, John. My weakness.”

He jerked Sheila to her feet, and shoved her toward the hall. Forcing her into the shower, still clothed in malodorous jeans and a drenched blue tank-top, he cranked the knobs to release a stream of icy water.

She shrieked in shock.

“Clean up, then we’ll discuss this... mess.”

By the time she returned to the sitting room, her uncle’s shabby dressing gown draped around her, a damp towel hanging from her neck, Edith had cleared away mold-encrusted ceramic mugs, and platters of untouched bacon and eggs. Watson had disposed of the coca leaves, much to Sheila’s chagrin.

“You don’t need it.”

She pounded her fist on the logo. “John, I can’t make sense of this...”

“You already have.”

“Eh?”

“The last lead you gave me was ‘two right’. Another interpretation could be two and the letter R, which might represent the radius of a circle.”

“What circle?”

“That’s a moot point. My team tried that configuration, but it still didn’t give us what we need. We may be missing an integer...”

“There’s nothing which fits...”

“I’m ordering you to eat, and get a minimum of eight hours’ sleep, before you take another look.”

Sheila opened her mouth, but Watson’s stern demeanor brooked no objections. Meekly, she shuffled to her room.

Down in the kitchen, Watson assisted Edith with the dishes. “Why didn’t you ring me at the conference?”

“I didn’t want to spoil your fun,” she said.

“I didn’t go to have fun. There were sessions on new veterans benefit models, and improved health care.”

“So, you didn’t enjoy yourself?”

“It was grand to see my old comrades.”

“Not so grand coming home to... this.”

“Should do.”

Edith concurred. “I had no idea how to deal...”

“You shouldn’t have to. You’ve a wedding to prepare for...”

“And still no resolution about... the property.”

A commotion above compelled the pair to abandon the sink and race up the servants’ stairs. Sheila stood in the midst of the sitting room, a triumphant grin skewing her sallow features. “I remembered my geometry!” she exclaimed. She presented Watson a scrap of paper. On it was written $2r^3$.

“By thunder, you may have it!” Dropping onto the desk chair, Watson emailed his contacts who’d been trying to decipher the encrypted algorithm for more than six months. “By the way, how’d you arrive at this?”

She covered the keyboard with the logo. “Two fingers up on the right hand, three down. Two-R-three.”

For a brief moment, Watson doubted her logic, but such a concept was better than none.

“Now, I’ve work to do,” Sheila announced, shedding the robe.

“What work?”

“Ah, you’ve not heard. Our dear Inspector Caruthers is being formally investigated by Scotland Yard. Unfortunately, the superintendent has little in the way of concrete evidence to prove the man guilty of anything beyond rank stupidity. Furthermore, the innocent suspect who’s languished in prison these past months has been released, both the judge and prosecutor suspended from their duties while the probe progresses. I’ve been enlisted...”

“Oh, no, you don’t! He’s an arrogant git, but...”

“Oh, yes, John.” She patted his arm. “Be a good chap and let me finish this. Once he’s behind bars, I promise to sleep for a month!”

Finishing off Kevin D.K. Caruthers' ignoble career as a Metropolitan Police official involved disguising herself as a prostitute of particular ilk. At his residence during a rather unpleasant episode, she'd searched phone numbers saved on his mobile and jotted in an address book on his desk. Judicious use of the information connected her with a pimp eager to earn immunity for himself.

Big Ben chiming ten that evening, Sheila waited on a designated South Bank street corner, not far from Caruthers' abode. Her costume included a black wig, false eyelashes, and heavy red lipstick. The frilled white bustier displayed ample cleavage not her own. A tight maroon leather mini-skirt, fishnet stockings and stiletto heels completed the ensemble.

She felt absurd, and Watson guffawed at the sight of her before she departed Baker Street. But, the police cameras and wireless microphone would serve their purpose.

From over the road, two sailors whistled in passing. In character, she waved at them. "Wanna drink, baby?" one of them hailed.

"No, thanks, love!"

Measured footsteps neared from behind, the sound of polished dress loafers many Yarders found comfortable for tracking criminals.

"Good evening, Miss," greeted Caruthers' baritone.

Sheila didn't turn, feigning a hint of Cockney accent. "Evenin'. Ernie says you're ripe for a go."

"The question is: how far will you go?"

"As far as you like, love."

"How much?"

"Five hundred. On your account."

He unceremoniously grabbed her backside, moaning in pleasure. "Perfect. Let me see the rest of you."

Sheila twirled like a model in slow motion, cautious on the extremely high heels.

"Nice. Very nice." With a nod of his salt-and-pepper mane, he led her west.

He didn't notice two plain clothesmen leave their vehicle to follow.

Inside what had previously served as Sir Miles Caruthers' townhome - the only inheritance his second son would ever receive - the inspector adroitly locked the door. His scowl had deepened, green eyes alight with combined evil and lust.

"Ooh, I got a pebble in me shoe," Sheila declared in almost a soprano pitch. "Gimme a tick."

Thanks to years of Wing Chun training, she bent double, knowing his attention would be on her stockings, garter and the rising hem. Thus, she surreptitiously unfastened the deadbolt, so the detectives could gain entry. Vertical once more, she flipped ebony tresses off her forehead.

“Upstairs with you, bitch,” Caruthers ordered, slapping her cheek.

Tempted to react with a healthy punch to his sternum, Sheila played along. “Don’t treat me mean, your lordship. I’m just a simple scullery maid.”

For, according to Ernie the pimp, Kevin Caruthers preferred role-playing as his father, or some nobleman who lured comely servants to his bed and treated them savagely, among other scenarios. Again, Sheila saw shackles and whips hung in a display cabinet, candles providing the only illumination. Without removing an article of his own suit, he ripped off her skirt as she pretended to beg for mercy.

“Kevin Caruthers, you’re under arrest for solicitation of a prostitute!” barked a staid official from the threshold.

Snatching a sheet off the king-sized brass bed, Sheila tied it toga-style and discarded the wig. “Surprise, Deke.”

In handcuffs not his own, he bellowed, “You... you...”

“My vow is fulfilled. You’re done.”

“It won’t stand up in court! You can’t...”

The captive propelled toward the street, Sheila lingered on the landing, kicking off her awkward stilettos. “Wait!” she called.

Caruthers’ escort paused. The young Holmes descended with queen-like bearing, seized a clump of his hair and bent him to her deliberately amorous kiss. She released him with a sneer. “Just so you know what you missed by not being a gentleman.”

The detectives’ eyes bulged as they backed from the structure. Sheila sank on the stoop, deciding whether to ring for a taxi or hike to the Tube station.

“It’s all over the news,” Watson praised when she stumbled into the sitting room, the sheet tangled around her ankles. “Congratulations.”

She sighed, “It doesn’t end the corruption, but makes a small dent.”

“We’ve made a dent in the algorithm.”

“Really?” She brightened.

“The next target is the National Air Traffic Service.”

“Oh, God. Can it be stopped?”

“One of the guys has created an antidote to the virus, if you will. If the damage isn’t too extensive, as yet, he can reverse it.”

“But, we still don’t know who’s responsible?”

“Yes, we do.”

She embraced her flatmate enthusiastically. “John, *you’re* the genius!”

“No, but I do tend to keep my brain clear when others... cloud theirs with coca leaves.”

“Who is it?”

Watson offered her the desk chair. “Find out for yourself.”

Confused, she glared at him, shifting to the blank monitor. To assist her, he switched on the tower. Rather than the customary graphics, the Cyber Vigilantes logo flickered and faded.

“How’d that get there?”

“Think about it.”

“I...”

“We usually leave the computer on. In your absence, it was acting sluggish, so I rebooted. That’s when...”

“You and I are the only ones who use...”

“Are we?”

Sheila mused at considerable length, Watson hovering over her shoulder. Finally, she groaned, “Oh, no. Oh, my God, no. Poor Edith.”

“Ivan has been able to keep abreast of your investigation every step of the way, and has been laughing up his sleeve at how he stumped the great Sheila Holmes...”

“Even planting the source code on this computer, so Scotland Yard would think I had a hand in it, and get me out of the way before I got too close...”

“But Caruthers’ foolishness foiled his plot.” Watson poured himself a fresh cup of coffee.

“Do you think he romanced Edith to get at me?”

“He’s a genius, as you’ve said. He had to know you were the only one who could unravel his egotistical code.”

“You and your friends...”

“*You* provided the key. Without that, we’d have been chasing our tails forever.”

“We can’t tell Edith.” Sheila scrutinized Watson’s solemn mien. “Or, have you already?”

“She’s desolate, naturally. She really loved that bastard.”

“We can notify the police...”

“Edith had a different idea.”

“Eh?”

“In the morning. You promised me you’d sleep, remember?”

“Until next spring, the way I feel.”

Noon had long passed before Sheila awoke. Watson reclined in the armchair, while Edith loitered at the window, agitated.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting,” her tenant apologized, noticing a valise near the door. “What’s up?”

“When... John told me about Ivan, I was crushed. He’d been so kind, so generous... I couldn’t have been happier.”

“I know, Edith. Nothing I can say...”

“You don’t have to say anything. I called him last night...”

“And broke the engagement?”

The landlady tittered. “No. I told him I don’t want to wait until September. I want to elope, this afternoon.”

“Edith!” gasped Sheila.

“I was counting on you to have the Home Secretary, or whoever wants the honor, arrest him just as the minister begins the ceremony...”

“Revenge?”

The widow shrugged noncommittally.

“What church have you reserved?”

“St. Mark’s, the other side of Regent’s Park, four o’clock.”

Sheila hugged her. “You’re a brave soul, Edith. For my part, I’m glad you won’t be leaving us...”

“Frankly, I wish I were,” said the would-be bride. “I was ready to begin a new adventure.”

Watson chuckled, “We’re never at a loss for adventures ‘round here.”

“Go, get dressed,” Sheila advised. “I’ll make the necessary arrangements.”

Ivan Lukaster had hired a limousine to collect Edith; Sheila and Watson rode along as maid of honor and best man, though casually attired. At the baroque stone church, the bride retired to a specially prepared room, while her companions observed a cadre of officials assemble around the building’s perimeter.

The unsuspecting groom arrived in a taxi, his tailcoat oddly mismatched to his mutton-chop sideburns and broad shoulders. He frowned at Sheila and Watson. “For Edith’s sake, I would’ve expected you to dress for the occasion...”

“She caught us at the last minute,” bluffed the latter. “We didn’t have time to change.”

With a disgusted snort, Lukaster whisked through the portal.

An organist intoned the requisite music; the minister - in purple stole, white lace-trimmed surplice and black cassock - positioned himself at the base of the sanctuary. The groom stood near the first pew, Watson to his right.

Sheila didn't precede Edith down the aisle, as per tradition. Edith glided in, her gown gorgeous, the veil over her face to conceal her anguish, a bouquet of white roses between nervous fingers.

The couple approached the presider, who welcomed them in the Lord's name.

"Bull Lukaster!" hailed Sheila from the choir loft. "You're under arrest for terrorism against the British Empire!"

He whirled on the pronouncement, retorting, "You have no authority!"

"She acts on orders from the Queen," declared the rotund Home Secretary, leading six uniformed constables to apprehend the criminal.

Despite being on sacred ground, Lukaster launched a mighty battle. Three constables flew across the pews, cracking their skulls on shattered wood. Those who tried to immobilize his arms were sent sprawling beneath the altar, into flower pots, and through a stained glass window. Edith and the minister fled to the sacristy, watching the ordeal from a safe distance.

Sheila, dismayed by the carnage, called a halt to the fracas from her perch. At a leisurely pace, she descended the stairs and strode up the aisle.

"Do you really want to do this?" she asked Lukaster.

"I'll kill every man-jack here, if I must. You all deserve to die."

"How so?"

"Humanity, by its very nature, mutilates and destroys everything beautiful."

Condescending, Sheila summarized, "So, the genius art dealer, in a drunken stupor one night, concocted an elaborate method to unravel the fabric of British society."

The punch he threw with his massive paw, she dodged easily. Putting a little space between them, she anticipated his next strike, then leveled him with a spinning roundhouse kick.

The jaws of a dozen men gaped at the feat.

"Sir," she addressed the stunned Home Secretary, "you should institute a program of martial arts training for your forces. It would... save a lot of headaches, literally."

"Only if you're willing to provide such training."

"Not me, sir. René Adler teaches Wing Chun in Oxford, but would love the opportunity to open a facility in London."

"I'll... see to it, immediately."

Not immediately, in fact. The immediate need was for ambulances to transport the injured men to hospital. Ivan “Bull” Lukaster was carried out on a stretcher, dumped in the rear of a police van, and driven to headquarters.

“Miss Holmes,” said the Home Secretary prior to vacating the premises. “Here’s a little something from Her Majesty.”

Suspecting another assignment, Sheila hesitated to accept the sealed envelope. She passed it to Watson, who held it gingerly, as if fragile.

Edith had shed her bridal gown, tossing it in a wheelie bin behind the church, wearing a house frock in the taxi to Baker Street.

“Are you okay?” ventured Watson.

“I will be, in a few months.”

Sheila soothed, “If there’d been any other way...”

“He’s responsible for what he did. He must face the consequences.”

“Good girl.”

Relaxing in the cluttered sitting room that evening, Sheila propped her sore right leg on the edge of the desk. “We’re going to need a new computer.”

“Already being customized to your... unique specifications,” affirmed Watson.

Edith brought her attention to a parcel from Oxford. “This was delivered last week. It might be important.”

Obligingly, she ripped one end. Inside, a packet detailed the agreement between Sheila Holmes, owner of property near Leek, Staffordshire, and the university, who would operate the Holmes Institute of Forensic Sciences on the site, paying generous rent for the privilege. They planned to start classes that August, if renovations could be performed according to the proposed schedule.

She signed the contracts and placed them in the return envelope. “There’s no time to get this into today’s post,” she muttered, then reconsidered. “I might take a jaunt to see the old place...”

“What about the Queen?” protested Watson.

“Must do.” She relieved him of an obvious burden, breaking the wax seal.

“Does she want to see you?”

Edith tried to read the calligraphy over Sheila’s head. “What *is* it?”

“I’ll have to buy a new dress, dammit.”

“Why?” pressed Watson.

Playfully, Sheila wrinkled her nose. “Soon, you’ll have to call me ‘Dame’ Sheila.”

The hilarity of the announcement robbed them of breath.

“No, really, what does the Queen ask?” Watson finally spoke.

She tossed the sheet to him. He held it upright, then flipped it sideways, the script unusual in its elegance. “Dame Sheila? You don’t act like nobility.”

“I guess I’ll have to learn.”

“That’ll take all the fun out of it,” remarked Edith.

“Out of what?”

“The midnight knocking, the media fighting for interviews, and you wearing jeans and Beatles t-shirts.”

Watson suggested, “You could refuse the honor.”

“A second time?”

The pair glared at her. “Second?” they echoed.

“On my birthday, last January, when I went to the palace... I was supposed to go through the rigamarole then, but the Queen settled on assigning me the task of finding the Cyber Vigilantes.”

“You best not refuse again,” reasoned Watson. “You might not have another opportunity.”

“Should do, John. Yet, I’m not the sort to attend high tea and fancy dress balls. I... wouldn’t fit.”

“Think about it,” Edith stated. “As a dame, you’ll have access to circles where the fees for your services would be much more... lucrative.”

Sheila thumped the Oxford paperwork with her index finger. “The rents from this agreement are sufficient to keep us warm and well fed. I don’t need...”

A whiff of tobacco smoke interrupted the debate. Edith excused herself to answer the downstairs phone before Sherlock Holmes materialized beside the fireplace, briar pipe clenched between his teeth, shirt cuffs frayed and dark mane tousled.

“Ignore the honor to your peril, child,” he predicted. “The Queen’s favor, and the respect of Parliament is difficult to achieve.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“I cannot compliment you on your performance in this matter, because you should have reached a solution after the first incident. However, preventing additional casualties is laudable. You must resolve to avoid future distractions.”

“Distractions?”

“Caruthers.”

“I wouldn’t consider his corruption a distraction...”

“He was one man plagued by sexual fetishes, when millions of lives and the very foundation of the Empire were at stake.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

With a puff of acrid smoke, the eerily handsome spectre vanished. Watson's knackered features wore a wry smile when Sheila glanced in his direction.

"What?"

"This calls for a celebration," he declared.

"I'm exhausted..."

"Nonsense. We'll fetch Edith and meander down to that little bistro I like so much in Soho."

It turned out to be a late supper, by the time they acquired a table in the busy restaurant. They shared a bottle of champagne, Sheila ordering Caesar salad, Edith a cheeseburger, and Watson steak and kidney pie.

Across the dining room, a ruckus broke out during their dessert of triple chocolate cake smothered with vanilla ice cream. Spinning on her chair, Sheila recalled Edith's erstwhile description of four pensioners who'd robbed another establishment: a short Asian; a thin, Black Cockney; a bespectacled, bearded gent with osteoporosis; and a tall Latino.

She rose and maneuvered through the crowd, distinguishing what must've been a scripted row about nothing in particular. As she approached, they drew weapons from inside lightweight jackets.

"old it, right there!" snapped the Cockney.

Sheila paused, raising her hands in a gesture of surrender.

"Oh, crikey!" the Latino muttered.

"What?" responded his comrades.

"That's Sheila Holmes."

Four sets of suddenly frightened orbs gazed at her.

"Put the pistols down, boys. You don't want to hurt anyone."

"No," the Asian grumbled. "But we need food, and money to survive."

"I know, I know. It's been months since the banks' computers crashed, and everyone is hurting, like you. Now we've caught the guy who caused it..."

Glasses caught the muted lights and flashed at her. "You did?"

"Just hours ago."

"Good for you," praised the Latino.

"I'm glad to hear you say that. Now, you've got two choices: be arrested and sent to prison, or let me give you a hundred pounds each, with the promise that - should you require more - you come to me rather than... petrifying unsuspecting families enjoying their meal."

The quartet consulted each other in silence, before nodding their acceptance of the deal.

Sheila took the firearms, passing them to the restaurant manager, poised at the entrance, waiting for the police.

She paid the bill for her own dinner, signaling to Edith and Watson. The group departed, going their separate ways after a brief stop at 221B Baker Street.

Profuse thanks resounded in Sheila's ears as the men trekked through thickening fog toward the Tube station. Watson and Edith, on the other hand, glared at her from the stairs.

"You can't be so generous to every down-and-out," chided her flatmate.

The landlady concurred. "You'll end up being robbed, yourself."

"What better use for the rents off Great-great-granddad's property? To help those most affected by my own lack of insight - which brought about the whole catastrophe in the first place?" She passed them en route to the sitting room. "If I'd solved this after the mobiles went dead in January, they wouldn't be in such a sad state."

Watson scoffed, "You can't possibly blame yourself..."

"John, think about it. The Queen wants to honor me for bringing this disaster to a delayed conclusion, but will things ever really return to normal? Millions of lives have been impacted because technology has been given too much control over society, and I couldn't stop one twisted genius."

"You did stop him. Imagine how many fatalities if the air traffic service had shut down?"

"I won't debate the point..."

"Like Sherlock said, to refuse the Queen..."

Edith blinked. "Sherlock?"

Sheila and Watson lowered their heads, smiling at the shared secret. The tension lightened, they retired to their respective bedrooms.

Watson had removed his prosthetic left leg and stripped to his boxer shorts when he heard a faint tapping on his door. "Sheila?"

Sheepishly, she peered inside.

"Are you all right?" he queried.

"I wanted to express my gratitude, John, for your assistance with... you know."

"We're a team, and that's what teamwork means."

"But, if more people were aware of your vital role, you'd be the one being knighted by the Queen..."

"I've been amply decorated for my... services." He thumped his amputated limb. "A knighthood wouldn't restore what I lost."

"Still..."

“Get some sleep, Sheila. We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”
“If you want me to get some sleep, I won’t take no for an answer,” she pledged. “What are you doing on August thirty-first?”