

The Adventures of Sheila Holmes

Pearl from the Past

A Collection of Stories

by

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A Plot Hatched in Hammersmith

Johnny Watson dreaded the periodic appointments at Charing Cross Hospital. The excursion to London's Hammersmith district ate up most of a day, and he invariably arrived back at 221B Baker Street hungry and in a foul mood.

That particular Tuesday, though, any lack of food would be negated by lunch at The River Café near the Thames, where Sheila Holmes planned to stop before navigating the Underground home.

She'd been rather circumspect about her reason for accompanying him on this trek. She hadn't left their flat in weeks, and the British Army veteran suspected she still regretted a recent conflagration with the Metropolitan Police over their mishandled apprehension of an international drug ring.

"I all but handcuffed the kingpin myself!" the great-great-niece of Sherlock Holmes lamented in the wake of the criminal's escape to the Continent. "Such consummate inefficiency..."

Watson endured the blood draw and inspection of his amputated left leg over the course of the morning, hoping the camaraderie the pair relished beneath a warm spring sun would lift her spirits, and his.

Settled at a linen-draped table on the terrace overlooking the river, the blond former medic gaped at prices on the menu. "Sheila, can we afford this?"

Sherlock's vintage black fedora on the chair beside her, brunette curls rustled by a pleasant breeze, she chuckled. "No worries, John."

He was surprised she'd bothered to don a dressy black skirt and frilled white blouse, especially since she preferred jeans and t-shirts. He felt rather underdressed in his blue shirt, red tie and khaki Dockers.

The waiter didn't seem to mind, taking their order for pasta and a bottle of wine.

"In the middle of the day?" Watson objected.

"It's five o'clock somewhere, John."

Blue orbs squinted at her. "All right, Sheila. What's going on? This isn't like you."

"Must do. We've shared a flat for nearly two years, yet neither of us has really divulged much of our respective histories..."

"So, this has something to do with your history?"

"No, I was merely making an observation."

His mood deteriorated from there. The type who demanded unembellished facts from her clients, for the detective to be so cryptic set his nerves on edge.

Not about to engage in a game of 20 questions with her, he focused on the scenery and, when it was placed before him, a plate of delectable ravioli.

Sheila devoured her spaghetti topped with clams and spices, draining goblets of wine in one gulp. She paid the bill while he excused himself to the washroom, and waited for him near the exit, leading him toward the Tube station.

“I thought we might buy Edith some flowers while we’re out,” she hinted.

“She’d appreciate that, after we’ve reneged on keeping the sitting room clean.”

Their long-suffering landlady, descendant of the Mrs. Hudson who had borne the eccentricities of the original Holmes and Watson, scolded them frequently for the state of the chamber situated between their two bedrooms.

Sheila, for her part, hadn’t disposed of one piece of her great-great-uncle’s possessions: the jack knife securing old letters to the mantle, his pipes, Persian slipper filled with tobacco, the antiquated lab equipment on a table in the corner. She had added stacks of unread letters, old newspapers and computer print-outs, along with half-eaten sandwiches and mugs of stale, moldy coffee.

Her promise to clean the smudged panes above Baker Street had gone unfulfilled these many months.

They detoured into a florist’s near Hammersmith Station, the window display of artistically arranged bouquets enticing.

“Good morning!” greeted a pink smocked middle-aged clerk behind a polished oak counter on which tissue paper and assorted blooms waited to be boxed. “How may I help you?”

“We’d like a dozen yellow roses, please,” Sheila instructed, at which Watson’s eyes bulged.

“Delivered?”

“We’d like to take them along.”

“It’ll be about an hour before I can...”

“No worries. It’s a beautiful day for a stroll around your neighborhood.”

As she tendered 50 pounds for the purchase, the red damask curtain blocking a view of the storeroom beyond rustled. Sheila’s head whipped in that direction, but whoever had intended to emerge had hastily withdrawn.

The pair departed the shop, bearing left along the busy street.

“Sheila, will we have enough to pay next month’s rent at the rate you’re...” Watson queried as they paused to admire ball gowns on mannequins.

“John, everything is fine.”

“Did someone die and leave you an unexpected inheritance?”

“No.”

“Then, why all the uncharacteristic largesse?”

She faced him. “We deserve a bit of a treat after... recent events, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And, it being Edith’s birthday, buying her a gift isn’t so out of the ordinary.”

Watson swallowed his shame. “Her birthday? How do you know?”

“She left some papers on the kitchen table a few weeks ago, and I happened to notice...”

He chuckled. “You mean, you were being nosy...”

“Uncle Sherlock has always encouraged me to be observant.” She slumped against the brick facade. “Which is why the incident while the florist made my change intrigues me so.”

“What incident?”

“You didn’t see him, did you?”

Watson stiffened. “Obviously.”

“A man, in his 40s perhaps, flecks of grey mixed with well-groomed chestnut hair, brown eyes and a Romanesque nose, thin lips cocked up at the right corner, a wide forehead, longish face and a full beard compensating for his narrow chin... He took one look past the drapes, caught sight of me, then vanished.”

“What do you think it means?”

“I don’t know.”

The disabled veteran sidled toward an adjacent book store. “You can’t afford to take on another non-paying case, just to satisfy your curiosity.”

“You’re absolutely right, John,” she concurred, slipping her hand through the crook of his arm. “We’ll forget it.”

Until that evening.

When the doorbell chimed at 221B, Watson gestured Edith Hudson-Thorne back on her chair at the sitting room table, where she’d been savoring a decadent chocolate layer cake after blowing out the candles. He hobbled down the stairs and signaled the caller into the foyer as he secured the door.

“Come on up,” he invited, ascending to the second level.

The trim, bearded gentleman in black three-piece Gucci suit and polished shoes halted on the threshold as his escort traversed the sitting room and wordlessly signaled to his flatmate.

Sheila Holmes diverted her attention from a plate of delicious crumbs, knocking over her chair as she leapt to her feet.

“Pearly White!” she cried.

Edith shifted toward the visitor, quickly using a paper napkin to blot icing from her lips before smoothing her russet waves.

Long strides propelled White across the wood, where he embraced Sheila and twirled her energetically. Once released, he assessed her purple flannel shirt, paint-stained jeans and bare feet.

“You look... well,” he remarked with an upper crust inflection to his baritone.

In lieu of returning the compliment, Sheila aimed him toward her companions. “John, Edith, this is Uncle Pearly... I mean, Mr. Peter White.”

“Uncle?” Watson sniffed.

“An honorary title, old china,” White quipped, lips slanting upward at the right corner, clasping the hesitantly outstretched hand.

“Pearly... Peter, that is, was a mate of my dad’s at the University of Birmingham, years ago.”

“Don’t remind me!” White scolded playfully. He scrutinized Edith’s freckled mien. “I got sent down, while Barry finished with honors.” Abruptly sensing his mistake, “I’m sorry, Sheila. I was up country when I heard about the accident...”

She patted his arm. “No worries, Pearly.” She drew him onto the red Victorian divan. “What are you doing here?”

“I heard you’re... following in ol’ Sherlock’s footsteps, and I want to hire you.”

Watson and Edith edged from the table to make a dignified exit.

“No, no!” White protested. “You’re having a celebration, and I won’t disrupt it with my problems. I can call again tomorrow, or the next day...”

“What about breakfast first thing?” Sheila proposed.

“Where?”

“You have offices in the city?”

“The Shard.”

“There’s a Farmer J north of London Bridge...”

He rose. “See you at the garden gate, old china?”

“Perfect.”

Sheila escorted the man to the street; her smirk as she resumed a place before the sliced cake puzzled the others.

“Old china?” Watson repeated.

“Pearly speaks in Cockney rhyming slang when the mood strikes. ‘China plate’ is a mate, shortened to ‘china’. And ‘garden gate’ is eight o’clock.”

“He got sent down from Birmingham?” Edith muttered.

Between bites of her second slice, Sheila replied, "I can still hear Pearly and my dad reminiscing about those days. They were both noted pranksters on campus, from switching music in chapel to misplacing the professors' grade books. One spring night - not unlike this, as a matter of fact - the two of them scaled Old Joe, the clock tower, and hung a rather... risque banner of a naked woman down the north face. Dad decided to flee via the inside stairs, but Pearly was caught shinnying down the rope."

"Typical college hijinks," Watson rumbled, yawning.

Edith prodded, "What did he do... after?"

"He hired on a freighter and traveled to the far corners of the globe. When he would visit my dad, he listed his jobs as street cleaner, window washer, and publican."

"He has to have some serious lolly to rent an office in the Shard," opined Watson.

"Added to the fact it was his face peering at us in the florist's today..." Sheila shuffled to the lab table, where a desk calendar lay open. A yellowed newspaper clipping was taped to the page. She detached it, sighing. "He's got something up his sleeve, coming here on the anniversary of his greatest achievement."

"What achievement?" wondered Edith.

"Before leaving Birmingham, Pearly spent the better part of a night flattening the tires on every police vehicle in the headquarters parking lot." Her fist slammed the cover. "He never got caught."

"It can't be on purpose..." Watson speculated.

"Oh, yes, it can. I've heard Pearly recite the plate numbers from every car he's ever driven. He has a phenomenal memory, and a vindictive streak."

"Why do you think he wants to engage you?"

"I haven't the foggiest, John, but I don't trust him."

Watson gathered the plates and silverware to carry them down to the kitchen. Ignoring his protests, Edith assisted him.

No more had they left the room, the odor of pungent tobacco swirled around the remaining occupant.

"Yes, Uncle Sherlock. I know. I ignored..."

"You let emotions cloud your vision," remonstrated the Great Detective, appearing in frayed cuffs and dark suit, black shaggy hair and stubbly beard belying artists' renderings.

She plopped onto the basket-chair. "I never imagined..."

“Sharpen your focus, child. Failure to recognize the simplest discoloration of a fingernail could cost you your life!”

Tucking her legs into a meditative pose, lids closed, she reflected on White’s demeanor and presence.

“He’s lost the Cockney intonation,” she verbalized.

The ghostly Holmes grunted. “He never had one to begin with.”

“Oh, yes, he did! I loved hearing him talk with that...”

“A put on, child.”

“How can you...”

“It’s easy enough to drop an ‘h’ here and there, throwing in the odd ‘cor, blimey.’”

She acceded the point. “He’s dyed his hair a darker shade.”

“He wore a wig.”

“No way!”

Sherlock clucked his tongue.

“Fingernails manicured within the last week,” she continued tartly. “No callouses on his palms.” She held her right hand to her nose. “He uses a custom-made lotion, though there’s an underlying scent of... of... whiskey.”

“Very good.”

“Neither his sclera nor his nose indicates excessive alcohol consumption.”

“What else?”

Watson reappeared at that moment, scowling at her. “I’m for bed.”

“Cheers, John.”

He proceeded to his room, leaving the door cracked in order to monitor her conversation with the spectral consultant.

Tempted to secure the latch, Sheila grasped Watson’s concern for her well being. She droned, “The shoes lacked scuff marks, no wear on his collar or sleeves, confirming the entire outfit is fresh from the tailor.”

“Significance?”

Sheila contemplated at length. “I’m... lost.”

“Think about those old tales...”

“You mean, about how he disguised himself as a officer during his brief stretch in the RAF to gain privileges?”

“Precisely.”

“But, this wasn’t a disguise. He...”

“Not in the literal sense, but he *was* disguising his true persona in order to lure you into his web.”

The young woman stretched her limbs. “What do you know, Uncle?”

“Don’t trust him.”

“Of that, I’m already aware. No honest man wears a shoulder holster on a casual visit.”

“But, do you understand the rationale behind the statement?”

Peter White, nicknamed Pearly because of a teardrop pearl stickpin he’d always worn on his lapel at university - she’d glimpsed it on his suit that very day - qualified as a loveable, right scoundrel in her father’s estimation, Sheila recalled. His sporadic visits usually concluded with the “loan” of a hundred pounds or so from the Holmes’ coffers. He’d lodged with the family for a month after his dishonorable discharge from the service; the girl’s eighth birthday had been spoiled by his outlandish antics.

He’d used Cockney in most exchanges yet, drawing from memory, she’d also heard Liverpudlian, York, Scots and Irish inflections at various points. Only with age and exposure to the broad range of students at Oxford did she begin to distinguish the differences.

She resolved to discover his game and put him in his place.

“Excellent, child,” Sherlock praised before dissipating in a cloud of acrid smoke.

Sheila trudged to the casements and raised the glass, though the stench of London didn’t aid in clearing the fumes. She retired to her oak four-poster double bed, exhaustion claiming her.

An early shower washed the last vestiges of smoke from her brunette mop; she selected a Beatles White Album t-shirt and relaxed fit jeans from her wardrobe, borrowing Watson’s red sweat jacket and smashing the black fedora atop her head as she left the flat.

The rush hour Tube no better than a sardine can, she rounded a corner onto Leadenhall Street minutes before the appointed hour. A bristle-chinned busker in gaudy, patched tail coat and floppy straw brim strummed a ukulele while singing a ditty about cigarettes, whiskey and wild, wild women as traffic inched toward London Bridge.

A lengthy queue to order breakfast at the Farmer J didn’t faze Sheila; the stink of the busker who fell in behind her did. Evidently, someone in a booth near the line complained; a supervisor shoved his way through the throngs to confront the man.

“You need to leave,” directed the burly figure. “You’re offending the trade.”

Sheila interspersed, “He’s with me.”

The manager's quizzical expression merited a grin. "Place yer order, then, and take it outside."

"Fine."

They were bumped to the counter, where Sheila paid for two coffees, her bacon and egg roll and a Full English Pot, with eggs, beans sausage and bacon.

"We'll bring it out," the cashier announced.

"Ta."

En route to the exit, she chuckled at the disgruntled comments from other patrons. Chill air didn't bother her as she slid onto the bench seat at a picnic table within a make-shift picket fence. Her companion shivered.

"You should've worn your thermals, Pearly."

He removed round, purple tinted wire rims. "'ow'd you recognize me?"

"Two things: your manicure and, even behind those cheesy shades, your eyes." She selected a paper napkin from a metal dispenser. "Besides, that uke is familiar."

"Only you would see frough this..."

"What'd you do, roll in cow dung?"

"I snatched a few rotten fish heads from a neighbor's wheelie bin."

"Why go to the trouble..."

White leaned toward her. "I got to be careful who sees me wiff you, innit I?"

"Why?"

"Me sister's husband is in trouble."

Sheila had to wait to pursue the conversation, as a clearly discomfited employee delivered their food. The lad didn't bother to serve them, just deposited the red plastic tray and retreated.

"I didn't know you had a sister."

"She... disowned me, along wiff the rest of the family, after me disgrace."

"Which one?"

Brown orbs narrowed. "No need for sarcasm."

"Oh, crawl off your pedestal, Pearly. You're no gent, to be sure. I've heard you use more four-letter words than some sailors."

"You weren't... Every time I showed up at the house, Barry banished you upstairs."

"Listening at keyholes was a very... profitable hobby."

"You sound like the git who's pressurin' Kyle for a hundred thousand quid."

"What's his racket?"

White sipped steaming brew from the insulated cup. “Kyle is a loan officer for Barclays bank.”

“He been dipping in the till?”

“Worse. This bloke is holdin’ evidence Kyle has been falsifyin’ loan documents for certain... businesses, lowerin’ the interest rates then pocketin’ the excess.”

“What does Kyle have to say about it?”

“Swears he’s innocent.”

“In front of your sister?” Sheila breathed.

“Of course.”

“In private, what does he say?”

“Nuffin’.”

Sheila shoved the last bite of bacon and biscuit in her mouth, chewing thoughtfully. “Can you arrange for him to meet us at 221B tonight?”

“What time?”

“Neves.” She dabbed her cheeks and extricated herself from the bench, homeward bound. “Clean yourself up, or someone will soak you in the Thames.”

As the manager watched through the dining room window, White gathered their detritus onto the tray and pitched the lot at his face before vaulting the white-washed barrier and jogging in the opposite direction.

Sheila heard the commotion, not glancing back.

No more did she pass beneath the lintel of the flat’s sitting room at 12:45 p.m. and pitch the black fedora on the hook beneath the infamous “V.R.” of bullet holes, than she bellowed, “John!”

Reading updates on veterans benefits, he lurched off the mattress. “What the devil!”

“Sorry,” she apologized, almost hitting him as she pushed wide the door.

“What bug’s up your breeches?”

She inhaled deeply to calm her excitement, having decided to best Pearly White at his own game. “Would you kindly poll your contacts at Barclays, inquiring to what branch a loan officer named Kyle is assigned?”

“Kyle? No last name?”

“I... don’t have it. It’s not a terribly common moniker, so we may get lucky...”

Watson positioned himself at the desk, switching on the computer. “What’s the urgency?”

“Pearly White is working a scheme...”

That, the veteran understood, skilled digits flying over the keyboard.

Three hours later, she waited in the Barclays lobby on Tottenham Court Road, clad in a mauve wool business suit and toe-pinching black pumps. A grey wig, styled in a bun, concealed her curls, and pink plastic frames did likewise for her violet orbs. Kyle Sellers welcomed her and led the way to his office, where he offered her a maroon leather armchair near his inlaid teak desk.

Uncle Sherlock would be proud at the list of distinctive traits she acquired from a scan of his person and surroundings. An ash blond mane combed straight off his furrowed brow thinned on the crown, his front teeth were capped. He'd broken his pug nose a decade earlier. The navy pinstripe suit - while old - remained well kept, the gold silk tie faded. Photos on the sideboard captured his three children at play, and his wife, Peter White's sister unmistakable from the resemblance, in a serious pose. Their home included an orange tabby and two buff spaniels.

Were Sellers to be found guilty of malfeasance, he would undoubtedly excuse his actions as being committed for the welfare of his family.

"How may I assist you today?" he asked politely.

"My name is Pamela Enright," Sheila bluffed. "I operate a small boutique near Regent's Park. I'm hoping for a loan to renovate the shop's interior and restock my inventory."

"We'll need to see your financial statements for the last five years."

"That's no problem."

"Do you own the building?"

"Yes. I inherited it from my grandfather."

Sellers considered. "No mortgage on the property?"

"No, sir."

"You're willing to use it as collateral?"

"I have other property, as well."

A strange flash in his green eyes. "Really?"

"In Surrey and Cornwall."

"It sounds like such a loan could be approved in short order, Miss Enright, once I have the proper documentation." The desk phone buzzed; he snatched the receiver. "Hello?" A pause. "I'm with a customer, can you take a message?" Another hesitation. "All right, I'll take it in my private office."

Sellers restored the instrument to its cradle and cleared his throat. "Would you excuse me for a moment? A minor emergency."

"Take your time," Sheila stated.

He disappeared through a side door. She took advantage of his absence to peruse the files open on his desk - careless of him to expose them so - and visually inspect the contents of his drawers.

Sellers saw nothing out of place when he strode into the chamber. "Sorry about that," he babbled, opening a day planner and scribbling an entry. "Never a dull moment, always another meeting."

"Life in the 21st century," Sheila concurred.

"Now, where were we?" He rifled a stack of papers. "How much would you be requesting?"

"Fifty thousand pounds."

"How soon can you deliver copies of the property deeds and financials?"

"Is Friday too late?"

"That's acceptable."

On their feet, they shook hands before Sellers guided Sheila to the revolving glass entrance. She debated the importance of a notation scratched on his blotter: "Peter, £20,000, Tuesday."

She would have the truth by end of day.

"John!"

In the kitchen helping Edith prepare dinner, Watson yelled up the servants' stairs, "What now?"

"I need details on all properties owned by Peter White, cash assets and liabilities."

"How soon?"

"Soonest, if you please."

The disabled medic limped on his prosthetic leg into the sitting room.

"Damn, Sheila! This need for instant information is a bit excessive!"

"Time is of the essence, John! I mean to rip the carpet from under him..."

"Very well." Attacking the computer, he connected with fellow veterans who had access to secure databases throughout Great Britain. "What's in it for them?" he queried, swiveling on the green upholstered chair.

"A percentage of any reward paid by the authorities."

"You mean, there's legitimate criminal activity..."

She nodded, scampering to shed the disguise.

Kyle Sellers would never recognize her, lounging on the divan in the t-shirt and jeans.

She, however, recognized Peter White long before he approached the threshold.

“Oy, Pearly!” she cursed as he pecked her cheek. “Even dousing yourself with aftershave, I can still smell the fish!”

Brushing his tweed sport coat, as if to dispel the funk, he signaled Sellers forward. “This is my brother-in-law, Kyle.”

Watson gripped the hand peremptorily. Then, he cleared the monitor screen before withdrawing to his room.

“Your... significant other?” White quizzed.

“No.”

She selected the basket-chair, with Sellers in the armchair near the dormant fireplace and White on the divan.

“I... don’t understand why I’m here,” Sellers admitted, trembling fingers drumming his thighs.

“It’s elementary, Kyle. You’re here to help me expose Pearly for a bleeding twister.”

That bombshell propelled the purportedly elegant gentleman off the red cushions. “You have no proof...”

She sneered at how anger exaggerated the natural slant of his mouth, framed by the restored mustache and beard.

“I have proof you’re so deep in debt, you can’t afford lodgings at the cheapest flophouse, much less an business suite in the Shard. You *do* own a vacant shopping center in Coventry, badly in need of repairs before any tenants can lease space, and a horse stable outside Manchester, where owners board nags who’ve never won a race.”

“How the devil...”

“A week ago, you went to Barclays, begging Kyle to push through a loan to finance some confidence scam and, when he refused, you threatened to expose his philandering to your sister, in whose name their holdings are listed.”

Sellers, towering over Sheila’s shoulder, glared at White. “You’re a right bastard, Peter, and I hope you’re prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

Legs suddenly gelatinous, White collapsed on the divan. His baritone lost its affectations. “You’re not... gonna... grass on me to the bottles?”

Sheila guffawed. “Now, *that’s* the voice I heard in those late-night chats with my dad!”

Befuddled, Sellers stared at her.

“Um, long story.” She recovered her composure quickly, yanking White up so they stood nose-to-Romanesque nose. “I leave it to Kyle. If he’s willing to forgive you...” She rotated toward the victim. “If your bosses at the bank and that handsome little family can withstand the publicity, I’ll ring the Yard...”

Head bowed, he considered. "I... guess it would upset Emily and the kids seeing the news in the scandal sheets and on the telly."

"Be on your way, then, both of you." Sheila swept to the door, propping it open with her foot.

White allowed Sellers to make his way to the ground floor. "You're just as cheeky now as you were as a kid."

"It's not cheek, Pearly. I don't abide criminals, moreso those who try to harm their own relatives. If I ever catch wind of your fingers in another con, I won't think twice about shopping you to the gavvers."

"I'll take that under advisement." He leaned in, kissing her in more than platonic fashion. "You're beautiful, kid."

Before she could slap him, he agilely ducked onto the landing and practically skipped down the stairs.

"That went well," came Watson's comment from where he leaned against his bedroom doorframe.

"Why the harsh critique? I saved an innocent man from a scoundrel's machinations..."

"I sense a 'but' in the offing..."

Sheila sobered. "You're right, John. Pearly's tale of a mysterious blackmailer was meant to divert me from his own transgressions. I thwarted him, and cost him a tidy sum. Somewhere along the line, he'll have his revenge."

Watson expressed his doubt.

"There are a lot of unresolved questions, John." She settled in the basket-chair. "Why he chose this particular anniversary to call on me, for instance. The sighting at the florist's. Your valuable research proved he doesn't own the shop..."

A familiar smell overpowered the pervasive stench of White's dead fish. "My compliments, child," boomed Sherlock's resonant bass. "You would be wise to start a file on this miscreant, noting every sighting, each disguise..." Ruminating quietly, he continued, "He might be a more intriguing nemesis than Moriarty!"

Watson sagged against the varnished wood; Sheila buried her head in her hands.

Long Shots

Sunday mornings at 221B Baker Street involved none of the family activity connected to church attendance or weekend outings. Sheila Holmes strummed her guitar in the sitting room's basket-chair; Johnny Watson munched toast and bacon at the cluttered round table, reading the *Times*.

It reminded the young brunette of scenes from her childhood, when her parents would sit at opposite ends of the breakfast nook, her father's face hidden behind the newspaper, her mother prattling, unheeded, about the neighbors.

"Have you been following this story?" Watson interrupted her reverie, folding the sport section into quarters and holding it at her eye level.

"Horse racing results aren't a high priority for me, John," she replied.

"These should be. Eight times in the past five weeks, at different tracks, odds-on favorites have lost flat races due to bizarre circumstances, leaving the long shots to win."

Sheila set aside the guitar. "What kind of circumstances?"

Her fellow tenant consulted the printed columns. "One saddle had been improperly secured and slipped, causing the jockey's fall, for another, the reins broke, one claimed to have swallowed a fly, choking, and so forth."

"Different jockeys each time?"

"Yes."

"Were the horses owned by the same stable?"

"No."

Nimble fingers relieved him of the paper. "Fascinating."

Watson returned to his coffee, a wry smile lighting his pale features as he waited for the detective's further reaction.

"Of course, we'll need more details than those included here," she finally remarked, glancing at the British Army veteran. "Who do you know with such expertise?"

His past associations with an illegal fight ring didn't prove as useful as she'd hoped.

"Sorry, Sheila. I bet on the horses occasionally, but what goes on behind the scenes..."

"Then, we'll start our investigation from scratch!" Tossing the section on the dormant fireplace grate, she stretched, securing her great-great-uncle Sherlock's tattered dressing gown at the waist.

"And how, pray tell, do we do that?" Watson queried.

“According to the reports, the latest incident took place at Bath Racecourse, so we’re to Paddington!”

“Now?”

“If we want to examine the evidence before it’s spoiled...”

“But, there’s no client to pay our expenses...”

She crossed to a faded still life painting, removing it from its hook and spinning the dial on an antiquated wall safe. “We’ve enough to last awhile, given the generous reward from locating the countess’ lost wedding ring.”

Watson scoffed, “Generous in a pig’s eye! A treasured heirloom, three centuries old, and she cuts a cheque for such a pittance!”

“Naturally, I could have... encouraged her to pay more, if I’d mentioned I’d found the ring snagged on the silk bed sheets in her lover’s boudoir.”

“But, your innate integrity...”

She shrugged, striding to her room and closing the door. Watson did likewise, his prosthetic left leg complicating the dressing process.

A humid June day greeted them beyond the front door, scented with a hint of smog. They hiked to the Baker Street Underground station, making connections with the train to Bath in good time.

“This isn’t a day trip,” Watson muttered, shifting his weight on the lumpy coach seat. “Where will we stop for the night?”

“There’s a late train back to London...”

“Ah, so you brought me along just to torture me.”

She patted his jacket sleeve. “No, John. Because I need you.”

Or, at least, the laptop computer tucked in the canvas backpack wedged on the rack above his blond head, he sneered silently.

They alighted from the crowded carriage in early afternoon, catching a bus from the platform to the racecourse. Rather than enter by the main gate, they skirted the perimeter to where rows of mud-encrusted trailers secured to pickup trucks or lorries were parked.

Watson seized her arm, halting her progress toward the gap in the fencing. “We need a pass of some sort to get in.”

“No, just a distraction.”

That distraction occurred in short order when a temperamental bay being unloaded decided to rear and bolt, dragging his trainer through a terrified throng of jockeys, grooms and patrons. Personnel guarding access to the stables abandoned their posts to join the pursuit.

Grasping Watson’s hand, Sheila jogged into the enclosure, snickering.

“What did you do?” he demanded, wrenching free.

“I merely flicked a pebble at his flank, John. No harm done.”

“What if one of the attendants breaks a bone? Won’t you feel any remorse...”

“Only if we can’t solve our little mystery.”

Concealed in a vacant stall, Watson squinted against the dimness. “What makes you think there’s a mystery to be solved?”

“You’re the one who brought the matter to my attention. You must agree with me.”

“At this moment, I’m not so sure. Accidents happen...”

“With the redundancy of security at these races, such a series of alleged accidents is highly unusual.” She peered through a crack in the wooden slats, watching the skittish mount being led to its assigned stall. “What was the name of the horse who threw his rider yesterday?”

“Enda’s Knight.”

“We’ll split up and see what we can find.”

“What if our presence is challenged?”

Sheila gripped his shoulders, violet orbs meeting his intense gaze. “Bluff, man, bluff!”

Bearing left as they separated, she glimpsed a clipboard suspended from a hefty spike at the far end of that structure. Flipping computer-generated pages, she discovered Enda’s Knight had been billeted in the third building over, as well as the owner’s, trainer’s and jockey’s names.

She would search them out, if the need arose.

Odd, she thought, how the horse’s stall hadn’t been secured against outsiders. The *Times* made no mention of an investigation, the presumption of racing officials that an animal or bird had spooked it, prompting the violent reaction and rider’s fall.

“Fools,” she murmured, latching the door behind her prior to assessing the space.

Enda’s Knight focused its left eye on this stranger, suspicious. She extended her hand, allowing the moist nose a sniff.

“It’s all right, my beauty,” Sheila whispered in a soothing tone. “We’re going to figure out who hurt you.”

First, she bent to the saddle stand, examining the tooled leather in minute detail. Flipping it, she ran her fingers along the surface before plucking a sliver from the material. The remnant of a burr pricked her skin, drawing blood.

Mentally measuring the saddle, she superimposed the image onto the horse's back. Just where the burr had been wedged, she located a corresponding irritation beneath the animal's dark coat.

Sheila didn't dare presume the burr had been deliberately placed beneath the saddle, but each jockey's equipment was inspected prior to a race...

From the spectator's viewpoint, nothing would look unusual were a rider to slap his horse's flanks during a full-speed gallop, a carefully placed object on his brightly colored cuff...

She stroked Enda's Knight's mane. "I'm sorry, you noble creature. Be at peace, because it won't happen again."

Her inconspicuous exit from the stall was due, in part, to a scuffle near the paddock. A petrified Watson argued with a group of much shorter, thinner men in street clothes, at a loss how to bluff his way out of the predicament.

The blaring loudspeaker announcing the next race rescued him, jockeys dispersing to their duties.

Sheila laughed at her friend's pinched mien as he joined her, brushing dirt from his jacket.

"It's not funny!" he protested. "They had me on the ground for a minute, and I was sure they'd lay into me with their fists."

"Which one of them was Frank Guilfoyle?"

"None of them. Even though he wasn't hurt in the fall, he didn't show up today, from what I overheard."

Had he been paid off for his part in this scheme, Sheila puzzled, and fled the region?

"What next?" Watson pressed.

"We need data."

"What sort?"

"How much the bookmakers paid out for each of the races where these incident happened, and who placed the largest wagers."

"Just *how* are we supposed to acquire such information?"

She grinned broadly. "A judicious use of your computer..."

"Here?"

"No, it can wait until we get home."

"Thanks for that, anyway."

They ascended the creaking stairs at 221B well after dark. The entire journey on the train, Watson had analyzed methods to obtain the figures Sheila sought, coming up empty. He'd established many contacts among the veterans

who attended PTSD counseling, but none affiliated with the racing circuit or betting venues.

Complicating matters: the proliferation of online betting. Compiling data from a myriad of sources would take time...

At the rate the accidents were transpiring, the time allotted to prevent the next tragedy could be limited.

"I understand the complexity of this challenge," Sheila assured him as she reclined on the red Victorian divan, rubbing her sore feet. "What about this for an alternative: don't the papers print the pay-outs for each race?"

"Yes."

"List those amounts for each of the long-shots who won. Then, we'll have an estimate of how much potentially unscrupulous sorts profited."

"That's doable."

Not at that hour, though. Watson retired to his room, his legs aching from the exertion of the day.

Sheila remained awake, melodies plucked from her guitar strings lulling him to sleep through the gap while facilitating her deductive reasoning.

Until the odor of lit tobacco irritated her nostrils.

"What have I missed, Uncle Sherlock?" she droned, setting aside the instrument.

The bass drawled, "Why is it you assume I only materialize to chastise you?"

"What, you just wanted a puff on your favorite pipe?"

The spectral detective contemplated the well-used briar. "Perhaps."

"You're not a very good liar."

"And you defy logic, child."

"Eh?"

"Do you so fear mental stagnation, you squander your energy on futile endeavors?"

"Uncle, you're wrong," Sheila chided. "There's a nefarious intellect behind these seemingly random acts. A far-reaching organization touching a broad assortment of individuals, exploiting their weaknesses."

Deep grey eyes framed by a shaggy dark mane scrutinized her delicate yet determined countenance. "If you bring this investigation to a successful conclusion, I'll..."

"Remember to open the windows when you smoke?" she chortled.

"Agreed."

As she trudged to her room, he vanished.

Watson woke her mid-morning Monday, a stack of sheets piled on the edge of her mattress.

“Thanks, John,” she rasped. “One more favor, if you please?”

“Your breakfast is already cold.”

“No, not that. Have your contacts at the banks see which - if any - of the jockeys have deposited considerable sums in their accounts.”

He sighed. “That makes more sense than this lot.”

“Sorry.”

She crawled from beneath the sheets, grabbing fresh towels en route to the shower. Emerging in a green tank top and cut-off shorts, she nearly collided with the Army veteran on the threshold.

“Where are you off to?”

“My PTSD group session.”

“Hope it goes well.”

“Thanks.” A final adjustment to his blue striped tie, he navigated the stairs to the front door.

Sidestepping Edith Hudson-Thorne, bearing a collection from the day’s post. Mostly adverts, Sheila tossed them on the sitting room table, ignoring the landlady’s frown.

“Yes, yes, I’ll clean,” Sheila promised half-heartedly.

“Yesterday would have been an ideal chance, if you hadn’t taken a bunk without telling me.”

“I didn’t think you’d relish joining us on what amounted to little more than a wild goose chase.”

“A waste of money, you mean,” the russet-haired widow clucked.

“You’ve been talking to John.”

“He’s worried, Sheila. The past few months, you’ve been spending freely, draining your reserves...”

The tenant glanced at the computer screen, where a new email from one of Watson’s contacts detailed 175,000 pound increases to the savings held by three of the jockeys implicated in the race fixing.

A drop in the bucket, compared to what the mastermind netted, based on the pay-out report she retrieved from her night stand.

Others might have tucked their take in a shoebox on the closet shelf, not trusting banks, she snorted.

“Well?” Edith persisted.

“Well, what?”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“I... don’t...” Concentrating on compiling facts in her brain, she’d ceased listening.

“Be advised, Sheila: I don’t have to renew your lease when it expires next month...” Edith declared, disgusted, as she withdrew from the sitting room.

Poised in the basket-chair, fingers steepled in a pose so similar to her famous forebear, Sheila didn’t blink until John appeared beneath the lintel prior to dinner being served.

She’d calculated the date of the next escapade, having visualized a calendar highlighting previous occurrences. Lacking a means to determine the racecourse, however, fouled her plan to apprehend the architect of the crime.

A possibility existed to narrow the field by performing background checks on all jockeys licensed in the British Isles. Those with financial or family issues would be prime fodder for substantial bribes...

Her flatmate would balk at such a request, she realized.

She could enlist his assistance in finding which courses were holding races on the date in question, and the roster of jockeys slated to ride the favorites...

His initial search, while chewing a hearty bite of fruit salad, took less than a minute. “They’re running at Brighton, Great Yarmouth, Leicester, Lingfield and Redcar that day,” he announced.

“Fantastic, John. Are the programmes available?”

“My steak is getting cold, Sheila,” he snarled.

She bit her lip as he resumed his meal.

Blue orbs sneaked a peek over his fork at her downtrodden face. “I need to teach you how to research information yourself.”

“You’d pull your hair out by the roots before I grasped the basic concepts,” she laughed. “Besides, your contacts are integral to our partnership. I can’t duplicate those.”

He flicked a roasted potato cube at her. “I guess I should be satisfied you’re not just using me for my body.”

“Your brains, John. Definitely, your brains.”

What had started as a sarcastic exchange grew serious, as it often did between the pair. Sheila had welcomed Watson to share the flat nearly two years earlier, knowing the disabled military medic couldn’t afford suitable accommodations on his small pension. That he’d lost his left leg below the knee when a roadside device exploded didn’t matter to her. His intellect, matched with his kindness and compassion for others, his wit and youthful good looks, made him a valuable asset in her life.

She often managed to insult him inadvertently, though, aggravating his post traumatic stress disorder.

Like now, when she recognized the anguish in his eyes. He'd grown emotionally attached to her, dependent upon her, and her unthinking bluntness confirmed for him she nurtured no affection for him.

Which wasn't true.

Reviewing the horses registered to run that Friday after Watson retreated to bed, Sheila kept scrolling back to one name: Mindy Sellers. She struggled to draw a vague memory from the recesses of her consciousness, resorting to tucking herself in a yoga position on the floor, breathing mindfully.

Female jockeys weren't unusual in modern British horse racing, she knew. She'd heard of this particular girl before, though, in a context other than sports.

"Shit!" escaped her lips well after midnight.

She stretched her limbs and hobbled to the corner, selecting a black binder from among older volumes on the shelf above the lab table.

Per Uncle Sherlock's advice, she'd started a file on Peter "Pearly" White, including his brother-in-law, Kyle Sellers. Mindy, 19, was the latter's eldest daughter.

A mate of Sheila's father from his years at the University of Birmingham, Pearly's elongated face filled her mind in that instant: chestnut mane and beard framing a Romanesque nose, thick brows, penetrating brown eyes, wide forehead.

That is, when he wasn't roaming the streets in ludicrous disguises.

Such as a scruffy, ukelele-playing busker.

Or, hiding behind curtains in a florist's shop.

That niggling conundrum had never been explained, for that matter.

She could afford a trek to Hammersmith come daylight, on the premise of buying a summer bouquet to brighten up the flat.

In the meantime, she jotted a note for Watson, laying it atop his keyboard: "Background check: Mindy Sellers."

Predawn congestion on the Tube almost nonexistent, Sheila lounged on a graffiti-covered seat, honing her observation skills on the varied occupants. One youth in ornately stitched jean jacket and black slacks toyed with a switchblade in his pocket; his gaze kept reverting to a girl with purple-streaked ponytail, hovering near the doors as he pondered prospective victims.

Sheila synchronized her movements with theirs. The cars stopped with a jerk; the girl leapt the gap and scurried toward the stairs. The boy pursued her, dogged by the detective.

She bumped him roughly into the white tile wall and, when he drew his weapon, she disarmed him with swift Wing Chun strikes. Handfuls of his clothes pinned him against the cold bulkhead as she hissed, "You'd best find another line of work, old china. Next time, it'll be the peelers hauling you to the boom."

His Adam's apple bobbed, terrified. "Yes, ma'am!"

One additional shove to emphasize her point, she released him and he bolted along the platform.

She strolled to street level, a blistering sun fully risen, creating a glare off the windscreens of parked vehicles along Fulham Palace Road. South of the flyover, she crossed the pavement to the block where the flower shop's window still displayed a "Closed" sign.

At that hour, nonetheless, activity at the rear of the building would be bustling, she surmised. An alley jammed with delivery lorries supported this notion. She maneuvered through the gridlock, pausing before painted bricks coinciding with her destination.

Door ajar, she crept inside a fluorescent-lit storeroom, lined with refrigerated glass cases holding roses, gladiolas, carnations, and more exotic flora.

Nothing unusual about that, per se, she confessed silently. Inching toward the red damask curtain dividing this section of the structure from the front, she heard raised voices originating from a small office.

"The supplier shorted us three dozen lilies again," a gruff contralto whined.

"So, ring 'em up."

That baritone Sheila recognized: Pearly White.

"I did. Our sales rep transferred me to the accounting department. They said we'll be cut off completely if they don't receive payment by week's end."

"Innit my fault you're skint."

The eavesdropper, pressed against the paneling, chuckled at the slang, being broke not a new dilemma for the man.

She detected a chair scraping the floor, then contented cooing. "Oh, Pearly, leave off! You know every time you do that..."

Behind Sheila, two burly, blue overall-clad couriers wheeled crates of crystal vases along the aisle. She shrunk into the shadows as the taller pounded on the office door.

The middle-aged, buxom woman - ebony tresses disheveled by however White had been pawing her - poked her head through the crack. "What is it?"

"The driver from the York warehouse won't offload your order without a word."

“Dammit!” Buttoning her pink smock, she accompanied them toward the exit.

A clean shaven, salt-and-pepper crested White made to follow; Sheila popped from her concealment, hustling him into the cramped cubicle and securing the door. He toppled against a wobbly, stained metal desk.

“Sheila! What the devil...”

“Up to your old tricks, eh, Pearly?” she greeted the wide-eyed drifter.

“You’re barmy, girl. Innit no doin’ of mine...” He spread his arms like a lord encompassing his estates.

“I get the distinct impression you’re bilking that fine woman out of a small fortune.”

“You’ve no proof!”

“Not at the present moment,” Sheila professed. “Give me a few days...”

White straightened to his full height, barely an inch above his accuser.

“You can’t! I’ve been tryin’ to help Geraldine make a go of fis.. fis...”

“She has a soft spot in her heart for you, poor thing,” the younger Holmes quipped. “More’s the pity.”

Anger flashed in his brown eyes, that quirky right upward slant to his lips exaggerated. “Why are you ‘ere, anyway? Not just to ‘arass me about some old debts...”

“Whatever Dad loaned you years ago, he never wrote it down, never expected to be repaid. He knew you too well.” She balanced herself on a rickety wooden stool, absorbing torn, discolored photos of floral arrangements tacked to the plaster, heaps of unprocessed vendor invoices scattered across the blotter, an out-of-date calendar. No business operated with such shoddy bookkeeping would long survive.

“Fen, what...”

“I’m here about Mindy Sellers.”

His bravado collapsed. “Is she ‘urt?”

“I’m impressed you’re so concerned about your niece,” Sheila drawled.

“She’s as well as can be expected, until the police arrest her.”

“Why would the scuffers go fer ‘er? She’s a sweet, honest child.”

“Or, was. Until you corrupted her, old china.”

“Me?” His expression of feigned innocence priceless, she couldn’t repress the guffaw.

“You succeeded in teaching her the twist, where you failed with me.”

“I never...”

“Think back, how you showed me three-card monte while Mom would cook you dinner, or get me to pick horses for you to bet the lolly Dad gave you.”

“She’s a jockey, for Christ’s sake!”

“She’s also a consummate con-artist. Luring male colleagues into compromising positions that could see them stripped of their licenses, so they do whatever she asks - whatever you dictate - while your confederates benefit from carefully placed wagers.”

“Other than ‘er bein’ me sister’s daughter, fere’s nuffin’ ‘tween us,” White growled, circling the desk and adding in an undertone, “that you have evidence to verify.”

Sheila clutched his arm, stunned at the defined musculature. “You’re really going to throw her under the bus on this?”

“You got nuffin’ on eiffer of us!”

He forced open a lop-sided drawer with elegant, uncalloused digits; she caught his wrist and wedged it against his spine before he could grab the pistol. He squealed in agony, writhing violently to break her hold.

“You’re not a killer, Pearly,” she whispered in his ear. “Your little game with Kyle wasn’t worth my time, but if I connect you to this lot, you won’t get off so lightly.”

He countered, “You’ll never grass on me to the bottles. It would be like throwin’ your own dad in the boom, innit?”

She thrust him forward; he crashed into the swivel chair and landed on the floor in a heap, unconscious.

She’d read him accurately, but he’d pinpointed her vulnerability. As a child, she’d called him “Uncle Pearly” and, though his presence caused difficulties between her parents - and awkward public situations - she’d maintained a misguided affection for him.

Uncle Sherlock, a real blood relative, would not approve how she’d let herself become emotionally compromised.

The shop’s owner filled the doorway when Sheila turned. “Who are you?” she squawked. “What ‘ave you done to Pearly?”

“He’ll be up and about within the hour.” Nudging the woman aside, she continued, “If he’s here the next time I call, you’ll be doing bird along with him.”

Chubby cheeks blanched. “Doin’ bird? Why?”

“If you don’t know, ask him. He’ll lie, like he always does, but maybe you’ll figure out he’s a bleedin’ scoundrel and send him packing.”

“Who *are* you?”

“Probably his oldest friend,” Sheila lamented, marching toward the service door. Then, she whirled, shouting, “Tell him to ring Mindy and warn her about the racket, if he wants to save her neck. She *is* family, after all.”

Pearly White did not heed that advice, Sheila learned on Friday when she and Watson traveled to Leicester Racecourse, east of Birmingham.

Information the former medic gathered on the young woman placed her at each of the courses where the racing accidents had occurred, also that she was actively involved in more than a professional relationship with the jockeys who engineered the mishaps.

Sheila felt no shame for violating the elder Holmes’ tenet against postulating theories before acquiring facts, revealing her suspicions to Pearly White. She couldn’t link him to the girl’s activities, unless she could trace the proceeds of his bets to a bank account or secure location.

Or, Mindy confessed.

Local constables well in evidence, the latest rider with whom Mindy consorted found himself detained seconds before he was to be hoisted into the saddle. Scheduled to be aboard the longshot for that run, the female sensed impending doom, gripped a hunk of her horse’s mane, straddled the bare back and set off at a gallop toward the parking lot.

In passing a lanky trainer - curly red-mop and handlebar mustache prominent - she plucked an envelope from his grasp, tucking it down her gold silk blouse.

Sheila herself not accustomed to horses, she climbed the slat fence to watch as mounted officials raced to catch the fugitive.

They reined their beasts when Mindy failed to clear a BMW that swerved in front of her. She pitched forward, slamming the bonnet. When she crumpled onto the gravel, no doctor was required to diagnose the broken neck.

The white sealed envelope had burst open beside her, 10,000 pounds scattered on the breeze.

So much for the young woman corroborating Sheila’s hypothesis regarding Pearly White.

The police superintendent interrupted her disappointment to congratulate her on squelching the fraud missed by so many. “I’m sure the racing commission will offer a substantial reward for your services,” he beamed.

“We can use it!” Watson muttered.

Neither spoke on the late train to London, delayed by the necessity of repeating the tale multiple times to different authorities. Hobbling to the kitchen at

the rear of 221B, Sheila filled a mug with stale coffee, while her companion browsed cabinets for a quick snack to satisfy his growling stomach.

The overhead fixture switched on when Edith came to investigate the noises. "I thought for a minute we had mice," she breathed.

"Sorry," Watson apologized, pouring cereal into a bowl. "Long day."

Edith cringed before retracing the path to her parlor. "Don't forget, the rent's due on Monday."

Sheila grinned as she drew the cheque from her flannel shirt pocket.

"We've got that covered, and more!"

Watson preceded her up the servants' stairs to the sitting room. "We'd have quite a tidy sum if you trusted banks." He had to steady himself to prevent milk and corn flakes from spraying the rug upon finding Pearly White dozing on the red Victorian divan. "Sheila, deal with this."

Unceremoniously slapped on the ear, White scrambled off the cushions, groggy.

"How'd you get in?" Sheila demanded.

"The landlady said I could wait. She didn't mention you'd gone to a Russell."

"Liar!" Sheila rifled the pockets of his leather jacket, silk shirt and trousers with lightning swiftness, extracting a false red mustache.

"Oy, old china! You've gotten some right practice as a finger-smith since I showed you the dip," White chuckled.

She'd lost her tolerance for his ploys. "How does it feel to be responsible for your niece's death?"

"There's nuffin' to legally place me at Leicester..."

Watson, between bites at the cluttered table, interspersed, "How'd you know we were at Leicester?"

"That's where Mindy..."

"You said you hadn't been in contact..." Sheila pressed.

"It's public knowledge. Pick up any racin' form at a newsstand..."

Watson exhaled. "He's got you there."

She threatened to kick White's backside as he retreated to the corridor.

"You'd best take a bunk from London, Pearly. The day will come when you won't be able to escape on a technicality."

"If that day comes, darlin'," he pledged with a cock-eyed grin, "I'll gladly let you snap the darbies on me yourself."

With a cheery wave, he bounced down the stairs and slammed into the night.

Watson licked his spoon. "That made no sense."

"Little does, when Pearly's at the heart of it."

"Is his influence why your vocabulary has been peppered with Cockney slang lately?"

Sheila skulked toward her bedroom. "Cheers, John."

Diamonds and Deceit

Kyle Sellers slumped on the red Victorian divan in the sitting room of 221B Baker Street. Elbows resting on his knees, he'd buried his ash blond head behind trembling fingers.

Johnny Watson observed the bank loan officer's turmoil from the armchair near the soot-encrusted fireplace. Sheila Holmes exerted every ounce of patience in the basket-chair.

"I want you to hunt down that bastard and make certain he's either six feet under or spends the rest of his life in prison," Sellers moaned.

"I share your feelings, Kyle," the young detective commiserated. "Pearly White is a bleedin' scoundrel. We both know he bears the guilt of Mindy's death, but he can't be placed in the dock unless there's evidence."

"Then, find it!"

"Your assistance could be invaluable to that end."

He raised green eyes, swollen from weeping. "How so?"

"How long have you known him?"

"We first met when Cindy and I started dating. He crashed her dad's fiftieth birthday party." He mentally calculated. "God, that was 23 years ago."

"So, he was *persona non grata* even then?"

"The day he was sent down from the University of Birmingham, the family disowned him."

"Sad," Watson muttered.

Sheila flashed a scowl at her flatmate before continuing. "What do you know of his activities?"

"Nothing, really," replied Sellers. "He'd call on us now and again, primarily to put the touch on Cindy."

"Would she comply?"

"Always, but no more. When he had the gall to show up at the funeral service, pretending ignorance, she laid into him right there before the minister and the pall bearers, promising to kill him if he ever showed his face at the house again."

"Good for her."

Sellers relaxed, sensing her empathy. "Will you be able to handle this for us?"

"Perhaps." Hesitant to commit herself, she steepled her fingers in a pose not unlike her great-great-uncle Sherlock. "Do you know anything about a florist shop Pearly frequents in Hammersmith?"

“No.”

“Is the name Geraldine Nelson familiar to you?”

“Should it be?”

“She and Pearly had... dealings. Prior to meeting him, she enjoyed a thriving business. His control of her funds has nearly bankrupted her.”

“She had the good sense to give him the boot, I hope,” Sellers stated. “Money runs through Pearly’s fingers like water.”

“An apt assessment, Kyle. Yet...”

He waited, and when she didn’t elaborate, he prompted, “What?”

“He must have a considerable sum stashed somewhere, given his ability to travel freely and finance these vile schemes.”

“That would be a bloody miracle.”

“Not if it’s possible to set up accounts with bogus names.”

“The security protocols in place make that highly unlikely. Depositors’ identities are verified through accredited agencies to ensure against... unsavory sources, for lack of a better term.”

Watson interspersed. “Terrorists, for instance?”

“Should do.”

“Obtaining false papers isn’t so difficult, as in the case of illegal immigrants,” Sheila speculated.

“Ah, but they don’t stand up to scrutiny. There’s no corroborating entries in government databases of such documents being issued...”

“Impressive.”

“So, if Pearly does have any money, it wouldn’t be held by any bank on Her Majesty’s soil - or any legitimate financial institution around the globe, for that matter.”

“Not necessarily a comforting thought,” Sheila sighed, deliberating. “What about safety deposit boxes?”

“The same standard applies. Applicants for boxes are subjected to stringent vetting.”

She rose, toying with Sherlock’s Persian slipper on the dusty mantle.

“Then, he’s got the lot stored in an attic somewhere.”

“Or, his confederates are holding it for him.” This from Watson.

“Eh?”

Rubbing his left thigh above the prosthetic leg, he explained, “Pearly can’t be connected to the racing scam because he wasn’t directly involved in engineering the accidents or placing the bets on the long shots, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then those who acted at his direction and collected the winnings must have the lolly.”

“Or, they did,” Sheila reasoned. “They would have made a drop, keeping only their percentage...”

Sellers burst that bubble. “Winnings over 500 quid are issued by cheque. The recipients would have to visit a bank where they owned an account in order to convert them into cash.”

“Damn!” Her fist slammed the wood. “Pearly’s good, I’ll say that much.”

Her client clenched his jaw expectantly. “Will you take the case?”

“Of course.”

“And, your fee?”

Watson shot off the cushion, barring the woman from responding. “One hundred pounds a day, plus expenses,” he supplied.

“It’ll be worth that sum to get Pearly off the streets.”

“Amen,” Sheila added.

Clasping his hand, the tenants watched Sellers depart from the landing atop the stairs.

Edith Hudson-Thorne, their landlady, appeared in the foyer to lock the door behind him and hail the pair. “Are you ready for dinner?”

“Indeed,” grinned Sheila. “I’m starved.”

Watson preceded her into the sitting room, grimacing.

“What’s wrong, John?” she asked.

“How can you take on a second case, when you’re still investigating the jewel thefts?”

“Lloyd’s only wants me to pick up any slack from Scotland Yard’s efforts. I have plenty of spare time...”

“You haven’t been getting enough sleep, as it is. Do you want to make yourself ill?”

“I’m... naturally a night owl.”

“Who suffers for it the next morning.”

She sank on a straight-backed chair at the round table as Edith delivered a silver tray bearing meatloaf, baked potatoes and corn on the cob. She grabbed the carafe of coffee, filling a china cup and slurping the contents.

“See what I mean?” Watson remarked.

“Caffeine is a blessing.”

“Especially when combined with coca leaves and tobacco, as you’ve mentioned?”

Her violet orbs flashed with guilt. “I gave that up long ago.”

“A crutch is a crutch, Sheila.”

“Sit and eat, while it’s hot.”

They devoured the meal *sans* conversation, then Watson retired to his room, leaving his companion to mull the day’s events from the basket-chair.

She’d grown bored with the case from Lloyd’s of London, and Kyle Sellers requesting her assistance in finding Pearly White eliminated the need to do so on her own without remuneration.

The rash of thefts from both private homes and prominent businesses - jewels scooped wholesale from safes into the black-clad culprits’ attache cases - initially intrigued her. They didn’t concern themselves with surveillance cameras, their appearance obscured by ski masks and bulky garments. They managed to disable alarms at the source, no matter which company provided the monitoring service.

A network of cooperation, cogs in a giant wheel, threads in a spiders’ web. She’d deduced the same about the horse racing scam earlier in the summer...

“Shit!” She bolted off the seat. “Shit! Shit!”

Bleary blue eyes peered through a crack in the bedroom door. “What’s up, Sheila?”

She whirled, triumph lighting slender features. “I didn’t mean to wake you, John, but my two cases just converged.”

“How...”

“Pearly White is behind the jewel thefts!”

The declaration might have served as a summons to the ethereal spectre of Sherlock Holmes, manifested amidst a cloud of pungent tobacco. “Tread warily, child,” boomed the cultured bass. “A misstep at this early stage could send you tumbling down the wrong path...”

“You were mistaken about Pearly in the past, Uncle,” she said. “There’s an exemplary logic to his organizational skills, adept at exploiting the weak and distressed to line his pockets.”

“These criminals are professionals...”

“I disagree. I will stake my reputation on the fact these are professionals being forced into the criminal realm. Pearly gleans his sordid information on their backgrounds much the same way John researches the information I need... He’s got some very adept hackers on his payroll...”

Her eyes widened as she gazed at the weary former Army medic.

“No, Sheila, no,” he protested. “I’m staying out of this one.”

“Why, John? You’d be the perfect plant.”

“You haven’t the slightest idea where to begin, how to contact whoever does Pearly’s recruiting...”

“True. True. It might take weeks to wade through the layers of protection he’s implemented...” Her lips curled in a knowing smile. “Or, I can chat up Geraldine Nelson.”

Watson exhaled in relief. He didn’t mind assisting Sheila by compiling data, but he had no intention of literally risking his neck against some underworld prodigy.

“Go to bed, both of you,” advised Sherlock, his shaggy black mane shaking side to side in disdain. “Clear your heads and start fresh tomorrow.”

Watson complied readily; Sheila lingered.

“What troubles you, child?” the elder Holmes prodded.

“Months ago, you predicted Pearly might be the equal of Moriarty.”

“I did.”

“What do you know that you’re not divulging?”

“Nothing you won’t discover on your own. Your willingness to wade into this morass is laudable, though you’re not mentally prepared for the challenge.”

“Not prepared?”

“I was far older when I confronted my Moriarty’s diversified nexus. I’d had more exposure to the psychology behind the criminal element. You are still a... neophyte, and I fear for you.”

Hesitant, Sheila studied his stubble-coated chin, aquiline nose and sunken brown orbs. “I appreciate that, Uncle. I think I can handle it, though.”

“Good luck to you, then, and be careful.”

A wreath of smoke enveloped him as he dissipated.

She trudged to her room, the mattress bestowing welcome rest, though only for a few short hours.

Catching the flower shop’s buxom owner early could be key to learning what she could about Pearly’s routine. After the Tube ride to Hammersmith, Sheila bore south under the flyover, around the storefronts to the alley where lorries idled in a haphazard configuration.

Within the fluorescent-lit structure, she noticed far more stock in the refrigerated cases than on her last visit. Novelty items lined metal shelves, as well. Trade must be thriving or, at least, Pearly’s absence had improved the cash flow.

At the metal desk in the tiny office, Geraldine’s ebony tresses obscured her face, bent over a columned ledger, pen scribbling furiously, her left arm tucked in a linen sling.

Sheila paused until the woman looked up, not wishing to startle her.

“What are you doing ‘ere?” Geraldine barked.

“Did Pearly do that?”

“No thanks to you.”

“Eh?”

“You’d barely left when ‘e came to, accusing me of grassin’ on ‘im. I told ‘im the truth, but ‘e didn’t believe me. Slapped me so ‘ard, I ‘it the shelves that then fell on me, breaking two bones.”

“I’m sorry.”

She choked back a sob. “I ‘aven’t seen ‘im since.”

“Why would you want to?”

“We’ve been together three years...”

“That’s three years too long,” Sheila opined.

“That’s rubbish!”

The detective yanked open the top desk drawer, revealing the pistol. “He would’ve *killed* me if I hadn’t stopped him.”

Large, dark eyes glared at the polished metal weapon. “I never could get that drawer open.”

“Good thing.” Sheila settled on the wobbly wooden stool. “I’ve known Pearly since I was four. He’s no good, from any angle.”

“If you think that, why did you come lookin’ for ‘im?”

“Last time, I thought he cared enough for his niece he’d be willing to save her. This time, I’m here to see you.”

“Bout what?”

“I need you to tell me everything you know about Pearly.”

“Why? So you can set the grasshoppers on ‘im?”

“No, so I can prevent a lot of people losing what rightfully belongs to them.”

Geraldine stiffened. “You mean...”

“Didn’t you notice the shortfalls in your own profits when Pearly did your books?”

“I...”

“You’d been handling the customers up front. You knew how much you took in any given day, yet the numbers on paper never seemed to match up, did they?”

An almost imperceptible nod.

“On top of that, you loaned him money.”

The affirmation might’ve been ripped from her soul. “Yes.”

“Did he live with you?”

“Oh, no. ‘e spent ‘alf the morning here, then disappeared. I ‘ave no idea where ‘e went, or ‘oo ‘e saw...”

“Including other women?” Sheila persisted.

“Oh, God, missy. ‘e had a dozen on the ‘ook at any given time.”

“Then, why let him...”

The chair rolled aside when she raised her bulk. “Look at me. ‘ow many men would give me a tumble?”

A right bastard, that Pearly, Sheila sniffed silently. He specialized in playing on the vulnerabilities of the wretched...

“You don’t have any names or addresses that might help me track him?”

“Not a-one.”

Sheila’s shoulders sagged. “Thanks, anyway.”

“Ta.”

Trekking toward the exit, the detective chided herself for not heeding Sherlock’s warning. Her hand on the knob, a shriek reverberated through the red damask curtain dividing the structure.

Sheila retraced her steps, finding Geraldine holding a crumpled newspaper. She extracted the sheets from plump digits and smoothed them on the stained counter. Nothing of note on the front page; Geraldine flipped it over.

A color photo of a smiling, thinly-mustached Pearly White in a posh tailcoat - teardrop pearl stick-pin fastened to the lapel - on his arm a demure ginger sporting an ornate diamond necklace, bore the caption, “Noted philanthropist Peter H. White escorted socialite Beatrice Ormond to the Old Vic on Saturday for the annual fundraiser benefitting theater renovations throughout the U.K.”

For Geraldine, another betrayal. For Sheila, another resource.

She found herself chuckling at odd intervals during the Tube ride to Baker Street, the phrase “noted philanthropist” coupled with Pearly’s name ironic in the extreme.

The only person White had ever cared about was himself.

If he’d snagged himself a wealthy widow, he might get sloppy supervising his other affairs.

“John!” she yelled, mounting the creaky stairs.

Blue eyes rolled ceilingward, a ceramic mug swiftly drained of coffee.

“What now?”

“Everything you can find on Beatrice Ormond.” She replaced the black fedora on its hook beneath the “V.R.” of bullet holes. “Please.”

Sprawling on the oak four-poster bed in her room, Sheila deliberated how White could insinuate himself with such a prominent woman. She recalled her

father's story of meeting Pearly on the Birmingham campus: they'd not shared any classes in common, nor friends. While purchasing texts at the bookstore, Pearly had wedged into the queue behind him, then used the excuse of forgetting his wallet to avoid paying his bill. Barry Holmes, possessing a kind heart, covered the expense - for which Pearly had never reimbursed him.

They'd remained inseparable for two years, until they'd scaled Old Joe, the clocktower, hung a risque banner, and Pearly had been apprehended during the escape.

Could Pearly be so devious that he wandered high-end stores, latching on to women who paid for extravagant purchases with 100 pound notes, or credit cards?

Sheila bolted upright. Or, were the cashiers and sales staff on the hook to screen potential targets for him?

That might be a theory worth testing.

Her disguise would need to be foolproof...

Unlike the simple wig, glasses and business suit she'd employed when sizing up Kyle Sellers at the Barclays bank branch on Tottenham Court Road.

A dignified, lovely specimen emerged from the chamber well after noon. Watson dozed on the armchair, the computer screen blinking with details of Beatrice Ormond's net worth and address.

Sheila hoped she wouldn't require a call on that source, jotting the house number on a scrap of paper and tucking it in the leather faux-Gucci handbag.

"What in hell..." Watson grumbled, eyelids fluttering.

"How do you like it?"

"If you want to impress the Bank of England's board, fine. Otherwise..."

"Very against my character?"

"Putting it lightly."

"Perfect!"

She inspected the unfamiliar reflection in the wall mirror near the sitting room door. A bleached blonde up-do, green contact lenses, muted rouge and lipstick, mascara and blue eyeshadow amply masked her real countenance. Fake designer sunglasses completed the ensemble, along with a trendy broom skirt, peasant blouse and heeled sandals.

"Where'd you get that outfit?" Watson inquired.

"I raided Edith's closet."

Next, she raided the safe concealed by a faded still life painting. What she bought today would likely be returned tomorrow, if her ruse drew Pearly White into her orbit.

“I’ll lay odds you’re mugged on the Tube,” the disabled veteran sneered.

“Five to one?”

“Sure.”

Reflexively, she reached for the black fedora, then retracted her hand. “I may be late.”

“I’ll be here.”

Remiss of her not to predict White or his confederates would be keeping tabs on her; he had bigger fish to fry, she mused. She breezed from 221B, then realized she needed to shorten her usually long stride to compensate for the shoes and to present a more ladylike demeanor.

No one gave her a second look when she boarded the Tube to Harrod’s. Men and women from every social strata used mass transit to avoid London traffic. She held onto the metal pole near the exit, clutching the handbag - a nuisance, in her estimation - close to her waist.

Sheila Holmes had never set foot in the high-end, massive department store located in Knightsbridge. She’d never been able to afford such luxuries - and, still, frankly couldn’t. Her confusion upon passing through the glass doors was genuine, and she felt a true idiot when she stopped to ask a cashier in the watch department where the women’s fashions were located.

“First floor, ma’am,” came the polite answer.

“Ta.”

She rode an escalator to the next level, awestruck at her surroundings, stupefied by the prices of the basic dresses, coats and shoes.

A prim, bespectacled sales woman in tweed suit greeted her between the racks of summer frocks. “May I help you?”

“This is... so... phenomenal!” Sheila gushed, part acting, part reality. “I’ve come to replenish my wardrobe before I travel to the Continent...”

“I see.” The customer detected this employee’s doubt of her financial status in the refined soprano.

She adopted a conspiratorial air. “I just inherited two hundred thousand pounds from my uncle’s estate, and I’m so excited to finally be able to buy pretty things...”

“What have you in mind?” Antagonism was swiftly replaced by anticipation of the hefty sales commission.

“Five dresses to start, a formal, and a mink.”

“Where would you like to begin?”

“The coat, please.”

She was led to a section of the floor where excessively expensive wraps were displayed in locked cabinets. Selecting a few, a team removed them and modeled them for Sheila, while the saleswoman absented herself for ten minutes.

She rejoined the group as Sheila was stroking the fur on a black tea-length cape. "It's so lovely!" she gushed.

"Would you like me to put it aside for you until we're finished?"

"Please!"

When the excursion concluded, Sheila swallowed her shock at the total: 12,000 pounds. The staff themselves were equally amazed when she pulled a wad of 100 pound notes from her purse and began counting them on the counter.

Knackered - and glad she'd never have to endure such a ritual ever again - Sheila stopped on the ground level to select a few treats from the vast array in the Food Hall.

No more had she slid onto a seat at a small table with a waxed paper bag and cappuccino, than a clumsy oaf stumbled into her, knocking the cup to the floor.

He had the good grace to retrieve the empty container with profuse apologies.

The familiar baritone - albeit with an upper crust edge - prompted Sheila to raise her eyes from dabbing the table with paper napkins.

Pearly White: trim, Errol Flynn-style mustache, wearing a grey pin-striped suit and vest.

"May I buy you another?" he oozed.

"Please."

He must've been monitoring her for some time, because he didn't ask what she'd ordered, yet delivered an identical replacement. He'd bought one for himself, as well, hinting he wished to join her.

She inclined her head slightly in affirmation.

Contrary to the posture and attitude she'd witnessed in years past, her father's old friend sat erect, his manners exquisite. He'd shaved, and had his pomaded salt-and-pepper mane combed from a left part. "Again, I'm sorry for the inconvenience. I'm Peter White." His mouth slanted upward at the right corner when he spoke, a trait he couldn't disguise.

Sheila gave the name used for the purchases: Rose Anderson.

He untangled her fingers from a napkin and gallantly kissed them. "A pleasure to meet you, Miss Anderson."

To refrain from either bursting into laughter or biting her lip until it bled, Sheila opted for a cough instead.

White's intense brown orbs squinted in concern; she waved off his scowl. "Seasonal allergies," she sniffed, snatching a linen handkerchief from her purse to cover her mouth so he wouldn't see her grin.

"Would fresh air help?" he suggested.

"In *London*?"

"If you'll allow me, we can drive to the country and enjoy dinner at some remote café..."

If she agreed too quickly, he'd suspect the ruse. "We've only just met, Mr. White. I know nothing about you."

The tale he concocted redoubled her amusement. From offices in the Shard near London Bridge, he boasted of controlling a myriad of business interests not only in Europe, but the United States and Asia. He funded medical research at various universities, supported educational initiatives and other charities. His family tree stretched as far as Mary, Queen of Scots, with a few lords and princes thrown in for good measure.

If the line worked on the likes of Beatrice Ormond, such women must be shallow fools.

"My chauffeur is waiting in the limousine..."

"I think not, Mr. White," she hedged, draining her cup and rising. "I've an engagement this evening..."

He had her arm in a firm grip immediately. "What time?"

"Eight."

"We'll be back by then, I promise. There'll be a fantastic sunset..."

"On your honor as a gentleman?" She couldn't meet his gaze, but couldn't repress the sarcasm.

"Indeed, dear Rose."

The black Rolls-Royce at the curb confirmed for Sheila that White qualified as no ordinary felon. Even if the vehicle had been leased, the fee exceeded a year's rent on her flat. A liveried driver held the rear door open, extending his hand to steady her across the gap.

"Ta," she muttered.

White's instructions stunned her. "Colne Valley, my man."

The park west of London, near Uxbridge, had been a favorite picnic destination in her youth. Sunsets over the lake relaxed her after the worst possible experiences...

White chatted quietly, trying to draw her out. He never mentioned money, but insinuated an interest in her wealth.

She obliged, prattling about her assumed identity as the daughter of a furniture-making family that, when the firm was purchased by an international conglomerate, wound up very, very rich.

His advances quite subtle, he soon had entwined his fingers with hers, lightly caressing her arm. Flipping a toggle switch, the divider between driver and passengers ascended; he leaned over and kissed her lips.

Arriving at the regional park an hour later, they strolled hand-in-hand though the evening glow toward the water line. White named the wildflowers they passed on the trail, even halting long enough to pluck a bouquet of tiny purple, yellow and pink blooms for her.

“They pale in comparison to your beauty, my dear,” he murmured.

Sheila beamed, “I’ve never met a man who’s so romantic.”

He squeezed her shoulders, then drew her into an embrace, smothering her lips with his. She responded as per her role, then shrunk from his grasp, timidly lowering her eyes.

“What’s wrong, Rose?”

“I... my entire body is tingling...”

He guided her onward, dusk increasing. On the crest of a hill near the lake, he stood behind her, stealthily reaching to drape a diamond pendant around her pale neck. She stroked the stones, estimating their size at five carats each, worth over 50,000 pounds. “Mr. White, I don’t... I can’t...”

“A modest token of my affection, darling.”

“How can you care for me so much after only a few hours...”

“Because, I’ve dreamed of you for years, my dear. When you walked into my life this afternoon, that dream was fulfilled. I’ll never let you go.”

Sheila’s head buzzed from the insanity of the affair. She had to guard her tongue against unwarranted profanity.

“What’s next for us?” she puzzled.

“The epitome of joy and happiness.”

“When? Where?”

“The future is an open book, Rose.”

Tears were forced from her eyes, not an easy feat for someone who had controlled her emotions since childhood. “Can we go?”

He spun her toward him, letting her cheek rest on his chest until the sobbing ceased. “I’ve frightened you. I’m sorry.”

Moist orbs met those brown eyes, flashing ambition and deceit. “Not fright, Mr. White. Confusion, nerves and, I admit, a bit of passion that I dare not let loose.”

“Ah, darling!” He kissed her again.

Not bad, really. She rated him in the upper ten percent, given her own experience.

They rode back to London in silence, his shoulder pillowing her head. She pondered how he could keep up the subterfuge so long without breaking character.

“Where can I drop you?” he asked as the city lights grew brighter.

“My Mercedes is in Harrod’s carpark.”

“Oh, no. We can arrange for it to be collected tomorrow. I’ll take you home...”

“I live in York.”

“Where are you stopping in London?”

“I... hadn’t thought about it. Once done with my shopping, I would’ve picked a hotel...”

White acquiesced to her request; she alighted near the store’s now-darkened facade. She strode toward the carpark until the limousine merged with traffic. Then, she reversed course and hiked to the Tube station.

Watson had lit a fire on the grate, the evening surprisingly cool. He sorted through papers scattered on the desk, leaving the report on Beatrice Ormond atop the keyboard.

When he twisted the swivel chair toward the threshold, his blue eyes popped at the sight of the gaudy necklace.

“Success?”

She unfastened the clasp and passed him the bauble. “Check this against the list of stolen jewels. If it’s a match, we’ve got him.”

“Is tomorrow soon enough?”

“Sure.” She plopped on the divan and kicked off the sandals. “These are definitely not suited for long distance walking!”

He presented her the dossier. If she hadn’t deduced as much, she might have been repeating the socialite’s own background to Pearly White, elements of naivete and wealth combining to serve as a magnet for his machinations.

When next he crossed her path, she would gift him with a set of shiny steel handcuffs.

Mastermind Foiled

Leave it to Scotland Yard - *aka* London's Metropolitan Police - to bollocks up another arrest.

Sheila Holmes had reprised Judas Iscariot's biblical betrayal, greeting Peter "Pearly" White that morning outside Harrod's with an enthusiastic kiss. Yet, when the constables converged, their suspect in a series of jewelry thefts had bolted.

Pressed against the department store's exterior, Sheila watched the cadre of uniforms scramble down side streets and alleys. She could only laugh at the similarity to a Keystone Kops silent film.

The plan's development had been nearly foolproof. Once Johnny Watson had matched an exquisite diamond necklace White had gifted her with the database of stolen goods, Sheila contacted Lloyd's of London, which had hired her to find the thieves. They, in turn, notified the Yard of the 10:00 assignation.

The young detective had regretted the ploy, preferring to prolong her impersonation of Rose Anderson, wealthy heiress, and get to the heart of White's operation. She'd already discovered, with Watson's assistance, that the criminal mastermind - posing among his friends and family as a shiftless vagabond - had amassed his own fortune by exploiting the weaknesses of laborers in various fields to execute horse racing scams and other nefarious schemes.

Confining White behind bars seemed the wiser course for the moment.

She'd consented to his request that they meet for breakfast after getting acquainted on a drive to Colne Valley Regional Park near Uxbridge. She'd donned the bleached blond wig, applied sufficient make-up, and opted for a modest floral-print dress selected from Edith Hudson-Thorne's wardrobe before boarding the Underground at the Baker Street station. She transferred to a taxi for the last few blocks to Harrod's, augmenting the impression of freely spending her wealth.

"You look marvelous, darling!" White greeted, his powerful arms embracing her, the false mustache tickling her skin.

"Ta."

Post-kiss, his brown eyes had darted left to right, sensing danger. He excused himself to chat with the liveried chauffeur poised beside the limousine's bonnet.

"Meet me two streets south in ten minutes," she'd overheard the cultured baritone, his mouth slanted upward at the right corner.

No more had the driver slid behind the Rolls-Royce's wheel and pulled into traffic, White dashed down Basil Street, vanishing among the throng of pedestrians.

Standing a mere two inches above her, taller heads bobbing along the sidewalk equated to a vast forest in which to hide.

Sheila could have shared her deduction with the sergeant frantically shouting into his hand-held radio; he wouldn't have heeded her.

The Yarders always believed they knew more than any private citizen where crime was concerned.

Idiots.

She meandered through the crowds in a southerly direction, rounding a corner near Cadogan Square in time to see the panting White - salt-and-pepper mop sweat soaked and disheveled, striped tie askew and black leather oxfords scuffed - crawl into the limousine's rear seat.

The hike to the Knightsbridge Tube station hurt her feet. Two days spent in uncomfortable shoes, when she usually wore sneakers, had raised blisters on her heels.

She never made it down the stairs to the underground platform. The constables might be chasing their tails; she could still glean a bit more information about Pearly White...

Near the fitting rooms of Harrod's women's department, Sheila located the same prim saleswoman who had helped her the previous day.

"Ah, Miss Anderson! I'll be with you as soon as I'm finished here..."

That employee found herself summarily shoved into the last cubicle on the row, creating a modicum of privacy for a chat.

"Who did you ring yesterday while I was browsing the minks?" Sheila growled.

Flustered, the soprano squeaked, "I... we're not allowed..."

"We have ways of tracing the call, but it will go easier for you if you simply write it on your sales pad and hand it over."

"Go easier? What do you..."

"You want to lose your very lucrative position here?"

The woman's crestfallen, pinched features answered without words. Her pen scribbled a series of numbers on the lined sheet, ripped it at the perforation and laid it on the open palm.

"Ta." Sheila didn't step aside to allow her captive's egress. "If you make any other calls - to warn your people, for instance - you'll not only be discharged, but serve a considerable stretch in the boom as an accessory to theft."

"Theft?" she gurgled. "All I did was let... certain parties know lovely young women, well off like yourself, might be needing some... companionship."

"What remuneration did you receive for supplying that service?"

“A thousand quid toward my father’s betting debts.”

Damn Pearly! Sheila swore inaudibly. “Well, don’t ever do it again. Your father’s debts will be cleared from the slate by the end of the week, I promise.”

“Oh, thank you! That will be such a burden off my shoulders...”

Sheila opened the door. “Now, get back to work.”

“Yes, Miss Anderson. Thank you!”

Limping to 221B after fighting the Tube’s lunch hour crush, Sheila ached to fall into bed and sleep. Instead, a vaguely familiar visitor waited on the red Victorian divan, chatting with Watson at the computer.

Beatrice Ormond held the necklace she’d been wearing in the photo Sheila had viewed in the *Times* days earlier.

“Miss Ormond,” the detective hailed from the threshold. “To what do I owe the honor?”

“Hello, Miss Holmes. I did come to consult you, but John, here, has been most helpful in tracing these diamonds...”

“He is most helpful, always,” Sheila concurred. “Stolen?”

Watson’s close-cropped blond mane nodded.

“A present from Peter White?”

Beatrice shuddered. “How do you know that?”

Skirting the furniture, Sheila settled in the basket-chair. “When a criminal targets a specific group, he develops a *modus operandi* and rarely strays from it.”

“You mean, he’s done this to others?”

“Most definitely. That trinket, if you will, is but one of many plucked from cases of gems stolen by Pearly’s confederates.”

“Pearly?”

“Mr. White’s long-standing nickname.”

“You know of him?” Beatrice pressed.

“I know him. Personally.”

The visitor straightened, her ebony tresses perfectly coiffed, tan frock, matching shoes and handbag proof of her attention to - albeit trivial, in Sheila’s mind - details. Tiger framed, oversized sunglasses obscured the disappointment in her hazel eyes. “I don’t envy you that, Miss Holmes.”

Sheila crossed the Persian carpet to her. “Please, be more discerning in your choice of escorts in future, Miss Ormond.”

“I will.”

Draping the necklace over Sheila’s fingers, the socialite departed.

“Wow,” the detective gasped.

“She’s some woman,” remarked Watson.

“Eh?”

The disabled army veteran swiveled toward her on the chair. “Beautiful, intelligent, sensitive...”

“John, you’re smitten!”

“She’d been here nearly an hour, Sheila. We covered a lot of ground.”

Sheila quipped, “So, you weren’t bored by her company, as you are with mine sometimes.”

“I...”

She squeezed his forearm. “I’m not jealous, John. I’ve no reason to be. It’s not... that way between us, as you well know. You’re free to do as you please.”

“She did invite me to a house party this weekend in Surrey,” he admitted sheepishly.

“Good for you!”

“I... didn’t accept... yet.”

“Do! It’ll be refreshing for you to get out of the city.”

“While you wrap things up with Pearly?”

Sheila averted her gaze. “Yes.”

“It didn’t go well today, did it?”

“Not through any fault of mine.”

“Remember, Pearly predicted you couldn’t shop him to the police because it’d be like putting your dad in prison...”

“I never should have told you about that.”

The aroma of pungent tobacco preceded the question: “Is it true?”

“No, Uncle. It’s not. He would be in custody now, if the constables had established a more stable perimeter.”

“You could have reported the circumstances of his escape.”

She slumped on the divan. “I suppose so.”

“At least, you have another piece of his stash to return to its rightful owners,” said Watson.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” she acknowledged, diamonds casting rainbows on the walls.

“What about the others?” rumbled the spectral Holmes.

“Ah, yes.” Sheila extracted a slip of paper from her purse. “John, please trace this phone number, then calls made from it in the past two months.”

“Pearly?” Watson speculated.

“The Harrod’s employee rang this number, initiating a complex telephone chain until Pearly was, indeed, notified.”

“And you’re hoping...”

“If we can track his phone, we can catch him.”

Sherlock interrupted, “You, or the Yard?”

“Does it matter?”

“The officials will take credit for it in the end, as they always do.”

“I don’t care about that, Uncle.”

“You should. A private consulting detective’s reputation...”

“Word of mouth has provided plenty of clients in the past couple years. I don’t need my name and face splashed all over the tabloids or telly.”

“There’ve been months we’re barely made the rent,” Watson chuckled.

“Oh, shut up.” Sheila kicked off her pumps, snatched the wig from her head and tossed it at her flatmate. She traversed the sitting room. “I’m getting out of these clothes.”

“Should do.”

She drew up short, the male timbre not Watson’s. Rotating on bare feet, she grimaced at Pearly White’s slanted grin, *sans* mustache, shirt collar unbuttoned, teardrop pearl stickpin gleaming on his black lapel.

Sherlock had, fortunately, dematerialized.

“How the devil...” she snapped.

He advanced from the threshold. “That glorious spring morning we met at Farmer J’s, you saw through the busker’s outfit by the color of my eyes.”

“And your nose,” she added.

“Indeed. During today’s... debacle, you forgot your contact lenses. Even topped by that bouffant Irish, those violet minces are quite... singular.” Before Watson could intervene, the intruder had Sheila pinned against the wall. “I realized I’d been set up the second you stepped from the taxi.”

“My bad.”

“That laxness means your death.”

“Not necessarily.” Her arms might have been immobilized, but her legs retained a lethality borne of Wing Chun training. Sheila side-stepped, left foot buckling White’s right knee, then swept both his legs.

When he crashed into the lab table, she hurdled the desk, jostling Watson into the corridor. “Protect Edith, John. Call the Yard.”

She secured the door, spinning to impact a glistening knife blade White had launched. Blood spurted from her left bicep, staining the ripped dress.

“Dammit! I’ll have to pay for this!” she snarled, assessing the damage.

His Romanesque proboscis twitched as he closed the distance between them, wrenching tempered steel from her flesh. “You’ll pay first for ravaging my livelihood.”

“Oh, go...” Searing pain robbed her of consciousness.

Upon Watson’s return to the flat, followed by a terrified Edith, Sheila was gone. A puddle of half-congealed blood brought an oath from the landlady’s throat.

“Shit!” muttered the veteran.

“Will the police be able to save her?” Edith wondered, fetching a wet rag to clean the boards.

“Only her corpse, if Pearly White has his way.”

“That handsome man who called...”

“That master of deceit.”

Sheila would have agreed with the appraisal. She awoke in what purported to be a janitor’s closet, shelves stocked with chemicals, buckets, mops and rags. Strips of mottled red cloth - hopefully clean - had been tied around her wound, which throbbed unmercifully.

“Never turn your back on the man,” she groaned, switching on the overhead fixture, augmenting the skylight. “I should have listened to you, Dad.”

Gripping the door frame against a wave of dizziness, she pitched outward when the panel was jerked wide.

Pearly White roared with laughter at his captive, sprawled on rutted cement.

She would not allow him to play upon her diminished physical state. Scrambling to her feet, she smoothed the dress and ran agitated fingers through tangled brunette curls.

“Have a good lie-down, my dear?” White mocked.

She retorted, “You’ve admirable aim with that pig sticker, Pearly. Had a lot of practice?”

“Not lately. Operations had been running at peak efficiency until you horned in.”

Over his shoulder, she glimpsed an assembly line in full swing, molding clay bricks. “I could have done without the exasperation. But, you couldn’t leave well enough alone, looking me up after you saw me in the florist’s.” She ducked his grasp, sauntering toward apron-clad laborers, young and old. “What’s all this, then?”

“The old cliché applies: if I tell you, I’ll have to kill you.”

“You’re planning on that, regardless.”

“To be sure, darlin’. Appropriate celebration of the anniversary of your hypocritical father’s death, sending you to join him.”

Rage boiled in her soul as she recalled the date. “You weasel! Let me die with my final mystery solved, to honor his memory.”

“How dare you speak of honor!” With deliberate malice, he applied pressure on her left bicep until she squirmed in anguish. “You know, I did enjoy kissing you,” he confessed, lips against her ear.

“When you thought I was your next victim.”

“At the lake, yes, and this morning, too. We could make quite a team, if we threw our lots in together.”

“Get off out of it, Pearly. Dad would roll over in his grave.” She subdued agonized pangs coursing through her torso, focused on the dense tannish substance being poured into metal forms on a conveyor belt. Prior to entering a drying oven, other hands inserted items into the rectangles - the stolen jewels. “Shipping construction materials to the Continent, are you?”

“Via undisclosed ports,” he confirmed.

“Where the lot is smashed, the contents fenced in Amsterdam or other convenient sites?”

“How perceptive of you, darling.” The Glock pistol drawn from within his Savile Row suit wedged between her ribs. “Now, walk.”

“Where?”

“The shipping dock.”

Had 20 kilo weights been tied to her ankles, she would have moved no slower. The amount of blood loss and crippling muscle spasms...

Before she crumpled in a heap, she would make one last stand...

Sucking a lungful of air, she bellowed, “If any of you are here against your will, flee at once!”

Five dozen sets of eyes darted around the complex, none budging.

The cacophony of an automatic rifle firing cartridges into the concrete from a catwalk suspended from the rafters explained their reluctance.

Fine, Sheila decided.

“I should kill you this instant,” White hissed, again clasping her injured arm.

She twirled inside, right elbow knocking the breath out of him. He staggered backward; she commandeered the pistol and thrust it at his chin.

“Clear your weapons and kick the magazines down the stairs!” she yelled to the guards.

The pair hesitated.

She gripped White’s wrist and pinned it to his shoulder blade, the pistol not flinching.

“Shoot her, fools!” he yowled.

“If they do me, Pearly, you die, too.”

“They’re Army-trained sharpshooters.”

“That may be, but I can’t miss at this range.”

Metal clattered on grated stairs, the firearms rendered impotent.

Driving White to his knees by augmenting pressure on his already twisted arm, she signaled the workers toward the dock. They switched off the equipment, shed thick, protective gloves and took off at a sprint.

“I don’t care about them,” White grunted. “Their like is easily recruited from the dregs of society.”

“I know, and shame on you for abusing their disadvantages.”

“Sheila…”

Her knee on his vertebrae, his nose neared the clay-splattered floor.

“Darling, hear me out!” he pleaded.

“Only if you speak in your real voice.”

White croaked, “I’ve adopted so many accents over the years, old china, I don’t know which is real anymore.”

“You’ve got 30 seconds.”

“If you had any idea of the scope of my empire, you’d give your eye teeth for one percent of the take!”

Not that she’d consider such an arrangement; her curiosity yearned for details. “For instance?”

His quavering baritone echoed around the largely empty warehouse. “Even with the horse racing and jewelry cooperatives incommoded, there’s still supplying weapons to third world countries, repurposing stolen cars, bootleg music, films and designer labels, to name a few.”

“Judas Priest!” she cursed, yanking him upright by the hair. “Where’s the fortune you’ve accumulated from these rackets?”

“You want to see?”

“Sure.”

Deft fingers abruptly relieved her of the pistol and locked her in a chokehold. “I might’ve obliged, if you hadn’t tried to get the upper hand on me.”

Sheila’s left heel scraped along White’s shin and stomped his toes. He reacted enough so she could spin and level a double strike to his groin.

He stumbled against the nearest vat of molten clay as she sagged on the ground, strength expended.

Steaming liquid sloshed from the upended iron tub. Brown orbs twinkled as it flowed toward Sheila’s limp form.

“Damn you, Pearly!” she shrieked. “Put me out of my misery before...”

White aimed the Glock at her heart, not seeing what she saw beyond stacked pallets of raw product. Clay bubbled within inches of her bare feet; the heat singed her soles.

She rolled right an instant before the retort.

Louder than the hissing of boiling adobe, 20 rifles chambered a round, positioned at every orifice. Fearing the police squad would open fire, Sheila plucked a ball of heavy twine off the assembly line and chucked a curve at White, toppling him like a cricket stump.

The bullet-proof vested team rushed the building, their superior summoning medics from an ambulance parked near the fence outside a nondescript factory in the industrial zone south of the Thames.

Two athletic types flipped White on his stomach, one unhooking handcuffs from his utility belt.

“Let me,” Sheila requested.

Paramedics attempting to ascertain the severity of her wounds restrained her; she slipped between them, accepting the shackles.

Her appendages trembled so violently as she clamped the bands around White’s wrists, she believed herself seconds from death. Surreptitiously, she freed the pearl stickpin from crushed lapel fabric. She thumped that salt-and-pepper crested cranium. “This is for all the turmoil you caused so many, Pearly, including my father’s heartbreak when you proved a false friend.”

Hoisted vertical, White glared at her. “I won’t be doin’ bird forever, darlin’. When I’m free...”

“If I have to weld the cell shut myself, I’ll make certain you never see daylight, except through iron bars!”

The squad practically dragged their prisoner toward double doors. He proclaimed, “I’ll ‘ave the best barristers money can buy!”

“Telling me where the money is might be the only way you’ll negotiate a lighter sentence!” A gurney bumped her legs.

Wood panels slammed on his panicked baritone. “It’s all about the roses, innit, old china?”

“What the hell does that mean?” mumbled the wiry paramedic who lowered her on the stiff mattress.

“I haven’t the foggiest... at the moment.”

“If I had to guess, I’d say you’re about a liter low,” opined his associate, taping gauze over the gaping wound. “Once you get a refill, and a few stitches, you’ll be able to think straight.”

Utterly depleted, Sheila chuckled, "I never think straight," before fainting, the stickpin clutched in her fist.

Edith Hudson-Thorne and Johnny Watson hovered beside the hospital bed when Sheila's eyelids fluttered the next morning.

"Where..." she rasped.

"Bart's," answered Watson.

Thick bandages encircled her bicep; her features constricted. "What..."

"Pearly's knife did considerable muscle and nerve damage. You were in surgery for five hours."

"If he'd caught me in the back, as he intended, I wouldn't be here at all."

"The doctor estimates a four week recovery, with plenty of physical therapy."

"Oh, blow that!"

Edith chided, "I told you she wouldn't go for it, John."

"Should do, or risk losing sixty percent of function in that arm."

"That's... for the future." Sheila's tongue flicked around her mouth.

"Water, please."

Edith retrieved a cup from the metal night stand; the patient sucked heartily on the straw.

"Better?" asked the russet-haired landlady.

"Yes, ta." She shifted toward Watson. "What about Pearly?"

"Safely incarcerated."

"Has he talked?"

Watson smirked. "I'm not taking bets."

Sheila's chest heaved, supplanted by a grimace of misery.

"The nurse can bring some meds..."

"No, John. I need a clear head. Did Pearly say anything..."

"He's supposedly waiting for his barristers, who are on a hunting trip in the Highlands."

"They'll paint him as a victim," Sheila predicted. "Witnesses like Kyle Sellers and Geraldine Nelson will testify he never had money or prospects. They'll push for reduced charges..."

"Unless you can find the money," Edith hinted.

"Precisely." Her cheeks paled; she sagged on the pillows.

Watson lurched toward the corridor to fetch help.

"No, John!" she called. "I'm fine... except for being a bit doltish."

He resumed his seat beside her. "How so?"

“The last thing Pearly implied is that the money is connected to the roses. He must’ve hidden it at the florist shop...”

“Well, you won’t be able to prove that hypothesis until you’ve rested for a week, minimum.”

“Balderdash!”

“Don’t even try to defy John or me,” Edith warned. “I’ll strap you to the bed myself if you get any ideas about wandering the streets.”

Feigning contrition, Sheila lowered her chin. “Yes, ma’am.”

A shrill tone via the intercom pronouncing the conclusion of visiting hours, their departure required, the pair could not stop her from sneaking into the nurses’ locker room after 9:00, commandeering a set of blue scrubs and exiting the institution unchallenged.

Fortunately, Watson had brought her wallet from Baker Street - after it most likely fell from the purse used as part of her disguise - tucking it in the night stand alongside Pearly’s stickpin. A slow pace brought her to the Underground; she boarded a sparsely populated car for Hammersmith.

Second thoughts about the wisdom of this adventure crammed her brain. Shadows beneath the flyover blinded her; ears listened for footsteps or other evidence of threats.

A lone bulb illuminated the display windows of Geraldine Nelson’s shop. Sheila presumed the owner lived above the business, not needing to disturb her.

Unless she was already up and about - loading caches of bills from false sides of refrigerated units into shipping crates.

“I’ll give you this, Mrs. Nelson. You and Pearly fooled a great many people with your innocent pretense.”

When the buxom matron spun toward the voice, Sheila perceived it wasn’t a female, at all.

“Oy, Pearly! How’d you skive off?”

He doffed the teased ebony wig and pink smock. “I told you: you haven’t a clue how deep the layers of my operation run.”

“Up to and including screws in the boom on the take?” she droned.

Tucking more bundles into wooden receptacles, he sneered in the dimness, that characteristic slant to his lips. “I’ve chartered a flight to South America. Care to join me?”

“Why should I?”

“You’re the only woman I’ve met who can match my cunning and intellect. I read how you thwarted Jim Moriarty’s efforts - he happened to be a contractor of

mine, by the by. He was a bright kid, but what *you* could accomplish with the proper resources...”

Mention of the strife she endured bringing down her former fiancé riled Sheila. Her uncle Sherlock had advised her of increased dangers when emotions compromised the art of detection...

“If you can’t be held accountable for your crimes by the British judicial system, I have one option,” she declared.

He caught the innuendo and, as she lumbered toward the office, he mirrored her pace.

In her present condition, she couldn’t outdistance him. A crystal vase tipped him like tenpins, though, and she tackled the supine form, despite him outweighing her by four stone.

The strenuous tussle landed them face-to-face, Sheila perched on his pelvis, right fist ready to disfigure that exquisite Romanesque nose.

“Now that the money has been recovered, I want names,” she huffed.

He wheezed, “No.”

Strong hands lifted her off the escaped criminal. She whirled on Watson, her punch missing his jaw by a centimeter.

“What the...”

“When the night shift supervisor rang from Bart’s to report you absent, it didn’t require a Holmes to deduce...”

“If I hadn’t come, he’d be clean away to the southern hemisphere...”

“Maybe, but his organization would be shattered beyond repair.”

“Eh?” Again handcuffed and upright, White doubted the former medic’s veracity.

“We’ve got a list of your confederates from here to Edinburgh,” Watson announced.

“From that one phone call?” Sheila postulated.

“Right.”

“Within the Yard?”

“Especially the Yard.”

He found himself the object of an enthusiastic embrace. “John, you are an absolute treasure!”

Extricating himself, he guided Sheila from the fray, so the constables could inspect the crates and the glass-encased units.

“Where’s Geraldine?” John queried.

“Bought out, I suspect, and on holiday in France, perhaps.”

“You mean...”

“When push comes to shove, Pearly’s no killer. To be rid of her, he decided he could afford to repay what he’d stolen from her, with interest.”

Watson exhaled loudly, crooking his arm toward Sheila. “Let’s go home.”

En route to the delivery door, a commotion at the front of the shop distracted them.

Pearly White had slipped from the manacles and bolted toward them. Readying a Wing Chun stance, Sheila would have taken him down, if an over-eager rookie hadn’t drawn his sidearm and fired from the hip.

White skidded to a stop at her feet, the bullet having passed through his right lung.

She knelt beside him. “Damn you, Pearly. Won’t you ever give up?”

“Should do, old china,” he choked. “But, it’s better this way.” He pressed his lips against convulsing fingers and stroked her cheek. “You’re beautiful, kid.”

Four constables gently raised him; as they transported him toward the street entrance, Sheila noticed his arm slide, lifeless, off his chest.

Watson repeated, “Let’s go home.”

Restricted to the oak four-poster double bed in her room at 221B, Sheila allowed herself to recuperate that week. Her meals delivered by a stern Edith, Watson would regale her with humorous tales from his youth and read ludicrous articles printed in the tabloids to alleviate her boredom.

An oversized envelope delivered by courier on Saturday morning brightened her spirits: the reward from Lloyd’s of London for recovering millions in stolen jewels.

“How does one celebrate receiving 157,000 pounds?” she inquired of her companions.

“Buy a mink coat?” suggested Watson.

“Oh, that got returned to Harrod’s already.”

“Don’t you want one?”

“Bloody hell, John! You know me better than that!”

“Yes, I suppose I do.” He adjusted his prosthetic leg on the mattress.

“Language lessons to purge the Cockney slang from your vocabulary?”

“Unnecessary, old china. Just as Pearly could employ accents at will, so can I.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Then, how would you like to mark this grand occasion?”

“Besides freeing you of your debt...”

“What debt?”

“The bet we made - at five to one odds - that I’d be mugged on the Tube.”
Watson smirked.

“What about dinner at a fine restaurant - the three of us - and a leisurely weekend on the Isle of Man?”

“That sounds delightful,” Edith concurred.

“Make the reservations, John, and I’ll start packing.” She reached for the tattered dressing gown - teardrop pearl stickpin fastened to the lapel - her left arm twinging with agony. “Maybe we’ll leave Monday week.”

He shook his head, crossing the threshold. “Wise decision.”