

The Adventures of Sheila Holmes

Switched Up

A Collection of Stories

by

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Reunion

Johnny Watson, plaid boxer shorts exposing his prosthetic leg, limped up the narrow servants' staircase, bearing the day's post. His close-cropped blond hair was matted from sleep, though already well past noon. Overnight, he'd been repeatedly roused by banging on the front door of 221B Baker Street and, frankly, nurtured a modicum of surprise that the postman was able to penetrate the crowd of photographers and idly curious pedestrians congregating on the building's front steps.

This young veteran of the Afghan campaign had set Edith Hudson-Thorne's share of circulars and envelopes - bills, mostly - on the ground floor kitchen table. Then, he proceeded to the sitting room, where Sheila Holmes, his flatmate, had been pacing near the grimy windows for hours, wrapped in a tattered dressing gown.

"In the midst of all this turmoil," he greeted her, "did you order tickets to a West End show?"

"Of course not, John!" the brunette detective barked. "Where would I get the money?"

"Well, here's one from the Palace Theatre."

Sheila halted and extended her fingers, without glancing at the British Army amputee. He obligingly placed the missive in her hand.

She gently caressed the ivory paper's linen texture, muttering unintelligible noises. Gingerly prying open the flap, her pinched expression made it appear she expected a bomb to explode.

An embossed card slid from its confinement, and Sheila broke into a hearty guffaw as she read the pseudo-calligraphic text. "Well, I'll be damned!"

"What is it?" puzzled Watson, who'd observed the scene as he poured himself a cup of tepid coffee at the cluttered round table.

"An invitation."

He waited for further explanation and, when none was forthcoming, urged, "Well?"

"I quote," she began, "'Rikki Anthony requests the honor of Sheila Holmes' presence in the Dress Circle for the premiere of *Switched Up* at the Palace Theatre, Friday evening, March 3, at 8:00 PM.' There's a reception afterward, and I can bring a guest." Finally, she eyed Watson's unkempt form. "Would you like to go with me?"

Astonished, he stammered, "You're going?"

"Must do. Mac and I are old friends."

“Mac?”

Glaring at her companion, Sheila realized he’d not been privy to this part of her history. “Sit down, John.”

He left congealing brew beside the computer and settled on the red velvet Victorian divan.

Sheila assumed a grand narrator’s pose. “The star of this drama is Roderick Anthony Andrews, who I met in my first year at Oxford, while my parents were still alive, and before Moriarty came into my life. He was two years ahead of me, studying history. I.. really didn’t care about my classes at that point, so when he decided to form the Oxford Thespians and produce a play off-campus, I co-chaired those very unusual ranks.”

“Why unusual?”

“We cobbled together the first - and only - musical ourselves, on the premise that all the male roles would be played by females, and vice versa.”

Watson smirked, “Bloody hell!”

“The six shows sold out, and our efforts received rave reviews in local papers. But, afterwards, the more... socially prominent students dubbed our club ‘The Oxford Lesbians.’ We disbanded in short order.”

“What has this Andrews fellow to do with Rikki Anthony, or someone named Mac?”

“Roderick Andrews *is* Rikki Anthony. He had a knack for impersonating females, and dropped out of school to pursue an acting career. Last I’d heard, he was working in Paris.”

“And, Mac?”

“Is also Roderick Andrews. His mother came from Glasgow, a doctor who retained her maiden name when she set up practice north of Nottingham. Her patients called her ‘Doctor Mac’ and her son became known as Young Mac.”

“His father, Mr. Andrews?”

“Wasn’t in the picture. He abandoned his family shortly after Mac was born.”

“Now, it makes sense,” admitted Watson. “Sort of.”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

“Which one?”

“Will you go with me Friday night?”

“Sure.”

“Then, we’ll both need suitable attire.”

Watson’s brow furrowed. “Which costs money.”

“Our budget is tight, I know. I can probably borrow clothes from Edith, and we can rent you a tuxedo...”

“Tuxedo?”

Sheila breezed toward the sitting room door. “It’s the Dress Circle, John! Can’t go in t-shirt and jeans... as much as I’d prefer it!”

The crush of bodies on the Tube any given Friday evening preempted plans to use that mode of transportation during their outing. They opted for the necessary expense of a taxi. Clad in his hired formal garb, including black patent leather shoes, Johnny Watson impressed as the perfect escort. Sheila wore their landlady’s one and only formal gown - a few years out of style, but still glamorous. Its high-waisted, voluminous blue satin skirt gave the detective a delicate air which she would’ve normally eschewed.

She extracted the invitation from a beaded silver clutch and presented it to the haughty, rotund usher at the historic Palace Theatre. The couple were passed on to another attendant, who led them to a private elevator.

Their seats in the Dress Circle box were so close to the stage, they could’ve thrown popcorn at the actors, if decorum didn’t strongly discourage such behavior.

Switched Up turned out to be the off-campus musical produced years earlier by the Oxford Thespians. Throughout the series of songs and dances, Sheila pointed out to Watson which roles she had played in the original, distracting him from the action.

Not a theatre lover by any means, he appreciated the diversion.

The attendant returned after the final curtain - six bows by the cast - to escort Sheila and John backstage. A flurry of activity accompanied performers vacating the premises, and technicians clearing sets. The pair navigated this chaos, a stern professional dresser granting them access to the star’s domain.

Eight society types occupied the lavish chamber, watching platinum blonde Rikki Anthony resume the persona of tawny-maned Roderick Anthony Andrews. As he smeared cold cream over high cheekbones, he glimpsed Sheila in the lighted mirror, and let out a very feminine squeal. He rose and scurried to her, not stopping to wipe the grease from his face before planting a kiss on her lips which was much more than merely affectionate.

Watson repressed a chuckle at the seeming image of two women locked in an embrace.

When the duo separated, Andrews burst out laughing, seeing how the white muck had been imprinted on Sheila’s nose and chin. He grabbed a towel off an armchair and proceeded to roughly rub her skin clean.

Then, he kissed her again.

“God, I’m glad to see you, Sherlock!” he gushed. He spun her toward his other guests. “Everybody, this is my best mate, Sheila Holmes.”

From a position behind her left ear, Watson whispered, “Sherlock?”

“His nickname for me,” she responded furtively.

Sheila was caught shaking hands with people whose names bore no importance, but which she would remember, all the same. The cleansing agent removed, when Andrews’ true, sharpish features whirled toward Watson, the two sized each other up with critical eyes.

“Your husband, Sherlock?” queried the actor.

“There’s been no one since you, Mac,” Sheila countered, coyly pecking his cheek. “This is John Watson, who shares my Baker Street flat.”

Everyone chortled at that announcement. “Holmes and Watson on Baker Street!” howled Andrews.

Sheila didn’t try to explain. She’d encountered the same levity with each successive journalist who’d interviewed her since the demise of James Moriarty. Fortunately, the chatter soon turned to different topics, and the other guests gradually departed.

Andrews restrained Sheila, however. Signaling her to move a stack of costumes off the divan and sit, with Watson perched on the edge of the dressing table, the female impersonator chattered while he unfastened an old-style corset which secured his false bosoms, selecting a set of tails from the overflowing closet.

“You two make a darling couple,” he oozed, adjusting a white tie at his throat. “When are you going to be married?”

Sheila grumbled, “It’s... not like that, Mac.”

He whipped around, the perfect gentleman. “Good.”

“Why?” ventured Watson.

“Because I need a favor of you, Sherlock. And having... someone significant in your life might prompt you to decline.”

Bristling, Sheila rose. “I know that look, Mac. Last time, it nearly got us booted from Oxford...”

Well manicured digits closed around Sheila’s fingers, and Andrews lowered her onto the cushions. “It’s nothing like that, my dear. What did you think of the girl who’s partnered with me for the Astaire-Rogers dance number?”

“She’s good. I... had a different technique, back in the day...”

“A technique I can use now.”

“Huh?”

“Cassie came to me this morning with news she’s pregnant. Her doctor thinks it might be a high-risk affair, so she’s got to quit - immediately. I never thought we’d need understudies, so I don’t have anyone who can step into the part...”

The snort which emitted from Sheila echoed through the wings. “Except me?”

“You remember the routines, don’t you?”

“Of course, I do, but I haven’t danced in... ages!”

“It’ll only be for a week or two, while we break in a new girl.”

Sheila glanced at Watson, who shrugged. Then, she brightened. “How much does it pay?”

Andrews retrieved a perforated sheet from the dressing table’s top drawer. “Five thousand enough?”

Watson whistled.

“I’ll take that as yes,” snickered Andrews.

“I... guess so,” Sheila concurred.

“Rehearsal starts at nine in the morning.” Andrews presented the payment. “I suggest you go home and rest.”

Sheila straightened and kissed him lightly on the lips. “You’re a devil, Mac.”

“I know. That’s why you love me.”

With a nod to Watson, Sheila made her exit. Pausing near a cluster of props, she considered the dimly lit stage.

“Are you certain you want to do this?” prodded her companion.

“You know I don’t. It’s... for an old friend.”

“Close friends, if you ask me. All that snogging...”

“It’s... tradition, John. All theatre folk do it. They’re... a very demonstrative sort.”

“I’m aware of a kind of air-kissing both cheeks without really touching. Almost French. But, not you. He planted that first one on you as if you were...”

“John, I love Mac like the brother I never had. My... *gay* brother.”

The Army veteran’s jaw dropped, and Sheila tenderly closed his mouth, leading him toward the door.

Saturday morning, Sheila arrived at the Palace Theatre wearing a baggy yellow sweatsuit and stained white sneakers.

Andrews eyed her critically. “Don’t you have proper rehearsal clothes?”

“Not anymore, Mac. I never thought...”

In a heartbeat, the wardrobe mistress materialized, measuring Sheila top to bottom. “What size shoes?”

“Eight,” supplied the substitute dancer.

While Andrews led the male chorus - dressed in skirts and high heels - through a fast-paced routine, Sheila changed into black tights, leotard and masculine-style tap shoes. A small ensemble of strings, brass and percussion provided accompaniment, rather than the full orchestra. When she joined Andrews center stage, he immediately provided the tempo with his right foot, and the introduction to Act I’s main number began.

Sheila amazed herself at how readily her memory resurrected the dance sequences. From toe taps to time steps, to the buck-and-wing, then breaking into the foxtrot... the pair was convulsing with giggles as the melody crescendoed to a finale.

“Very good!” Andrews praised, as an assistant delivered a towel to absorb rivulets of perspiration. The star had a second brought for Sheila. “You ever think of going back into the business?”

“Never,” she confessed. “Too much has happened...”

“You’re still in good shape.”

“Wing Chun.”

“Ah!”

The six other routines Sheila had to recall took the rest of the morning. She had to be back at the theatre for costume fittings at 4:00, before the evening performance. Watson’s presence outside the stage door stunned her when she shuffled, exhausted, into the humid spring air.

“What are you... Is everything all right?” she puffed.

With unintentional roughness, the tank top and cut-off clad veteran slipped his arm through hers and propelled her down the block to a coffee shop. Seated at a corner table with two steaming mugs, he leaned in, confidentially. “Has your friend told you why he really asked for this favor?”

“What do you...”

“I sneaked in to watch you and, while I was between the curtains, I overheard the stage manager and some other guy talking about how Andrews received a threatening letter in the post three days ago. Words cut from magazines, that type of hokum. Something about if the show opened, he’d be a dead man. You’re here to protect him, not take some pregnant girl’s place.”

“That’s... that’s...” Sheila’s knuckles whitened around the handle of the ceramic mug. “That bastard. He’s done it to me again.”

“Stitched you up?”

She bit back a caustic remark. “Last time it happened, proceeds from the Oxford production - which were supposed to be donated to charity - vanished from the coffers. Mac planted evidence to make it look like the campus homophobes were the culprits, because of their disparaging comments about the troupe. When those students were cleared, Mac and I were almost expelled...”

“What will you do?”

“Kill him myself. Save whoever wants him dead the inconvenience.” Her serious contralto brought Watson’s blue eyes level with her violet orbs. Then, she cracked a wry smile. “I’ll have to find out who’s behind the threats, of course.”

“Between bows?”

“No. I’ll not play Mac’s game. I’ll let him know the truth is out, and demand answers.”

“Good for you.”

Sheila leaned back on the plastic chair. “Let’s go home, John. I need a lie-down.”

The Tube not so packed on a Saturday afternoon, the couple sat the distance to the Baker Street station, then trekked to where a widowed redhead in a pink house frock stood on the front stoop, watching for them.

“What’s wrong, Edith?” Sheila inquired, having rushed the last half-block.

“Two men are waiting in your sitting room. I told them I didn’t know when you’d return, but they refused to leave.”

“Scotland Yarders?”

“They... don’t have that look.”

Sheila hurried up the staircase, Watson following at a slower pace. She burst into the sitting room, where the uninvited guests loitered near the fireplace. Their dark hair slick with pomade, they wore black suits, white shirts and black ties, as if en route to a funeral. Bulges beneath their coats confirmed the presence of pistols in shoulder holsters.

“If it isn’t Lou and Theo, out of prison two weeks, and looking for trouble.”

This revelation flustered the men. Sputtered Leo, the taller, “How’d you...”

“My great-great-uncle Sherlock kept files on every known criminal. Today, it’s much easier to track a felon’s movements.” She tapped the computer in passing. “I would ask if current rehabilitation methods were effective, but I can see they’re not.”

Squat and barrel-chested, Theo growled, “We understand you’re a business associate of Roderick Anthony Andrews.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Our... informants tell us otherwise.”

“Your informants are wrong.”

“Mr. Andrews owes us two hundred thousand pounds.”

Sheila dropped onto the red velvet divan. “How nice.”

“He refuses to pay.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“What do you intend to do about it?” pressed Lou.

“Not a damned thing.”

“Do you realize...”

Watson appeared on the threshold, and the thugs fell silent. Solemnly, they marched from the sitting room, closing the door behind them.

“What was that all about?” queried Watson.

Sheila crossed to the window, watching a black sedan merge with traffic.

“Now I know who wants to kill Mac.”

“Why?”

“I’m sure, if I investigate, I’ll find he couldn’t secure legitimate backers for the show, and resorted to... less honorable sources, who are now itching to collect.”

“What will you do?”

Yawning, she sidled toward her bedroom. “Have that lie-down.”

Sheila Holmes dragged her aching limbs back to the Palace Theatre mid-afternoon. The wardrobe mistress, a buxom, white-haired, former music hall showgirl, accompanied her to the second dressing room, arranged to accommodate the quick changes required for Sheila’s role.

The brown turtleneck and khaki-clad star found her there, the hem on her tan slacks being adjusted as she studied her reflection in a full-length wall mirror.

“Will you excuse us, Mrs. Poole?” Andrews requested, drawing Sheila from the chamber to his own, simultaneously assessing her costume. “She’s a wonder with a needle, that one.” He moved toward a red-leather stool, lightly smacking her backside. “Same nice arse on you, which will make it easier to put over the illusion you’re a man.”

Deftly, Sheila whipped her right hand around, catching his left and twisting until his wrist was pinned to his spine. He struggled and uttered a curse. “Damned good Wing Chun.”

She ignored the off-hand compliment, tapping his third finger and hissing in his ear, “I forgot to congratulate you on the wedding ring. When’d you get married?”

“Fishing trip to Canada three summers ago. You met him this morning. Frank Bescombe.”

“The choreographer?”

Andrews nodded, pain contorting his features.

“The girl who quit because she’s pregnant. She your loan shark’s daughter?”

“How’d you...”

Abruptly released, he crashed into a rack of evening gowns. While he recovered his balance and composure, she explained. “I did a quick bit of research, after two stooges called at my flat. Their boss agreed to finance this production with the proviso you give his daughter a lead role. Since she’s no longer in the cast, he not only blames you for exposing her to the immoral world of the theatre, he wants his cash immediately, in full.”

“Good work, Sherlock,” Andrews chuckled, rubbing his sore wrist.

“You think I’m going to pack heat on stage, to prevent you from getting shot by an irate father?”

“No, but you *are* insurance against the rest of the cast abandoning ship. I promised them protection.”

Sheila unbuttoned her starched white shirt’s tab collar. “You want protection? Hire a security firm or spill the truth to Scotland Yard.”

Elegant digits grasped her arm. “No, Sherlock. Why do you think I contacted you? I’ve read what happened with you and Moriarty...”

“I saw the newspaper clippings on your dressing table last night. That answered how you got my current address.”

“I thought it quite ironic, you living at your great-great-uncle’s old digs.”

“With Watson and Mrs. Hudson?” she snapped sarcastically.

“He’s a nice kid, your Watson.”

“Yes, he is. And, I’ll be heading home to him, if you don’t mind.”

“I *do* mind. You’ve got me over a barrel if you bolt now.”

A heavy sigh escaped Sheila’s throat. “Mac, I love you. You’re a bloody fine song and dance man, but you’ve always been a liar and a... cheat. Whatever the terms of your loan with the mob, I can’t stop them from breaking your legs, or worse.”

“The terms of repayment require me to fork out ten thousand a week during the run of the show, with final payment after we close, if the entire amount hasn’t already been paid. I don’t remember any payment on demand clause.”

“Meaning, if you’re a success and this runs a year, at least, you’ll have more than covered the debt.”

“Precisely.” Andrews’ hold on Sheila eased.

“You want me to smooth things out with...”

“He’ll be here at seven.”

Sheila stiffened.

“How tough will it be? Reason with him. Convince him he’ll benefit more by abiding to the original terms than if he hurts the cast, destroys the sets or torches the costumes.”

“You do it.”

“I... tried. He’s one of those who... who...”

“Like the guys at Oxford who dumped pink paint on you after the show that night?”

Pale lips pursed in acknowledgment.

“You want me in costume?” Sheila wondered.

“If... you don’t mind.”

“You want me to play a male, going against a male?”

“I thought...”

The shirt came off, revealing Sheila’s Pink Floyd t-shirt beneath. “You thought wrong. If he’s a homophobe, don’t give him any reason to hate you more.” Calmer, she contemplated the jars and paraphernalia on Andrews’ dressing table. “You still do yours the same way?”

“I’ve streamlined things a great deal,” he replied, positioning himself before the mirror and removing the turtleneck. “It used to take an hour, now it’s less than half that.” Brushing excess powder off a large puff, he suggested, “Make yourself comfortable. You might learn something.”

The woman grabbed a cane-backed wooden chair, twirled it and straddled the seat. “Given I haven’t applied theatrical make-up in years, I’m sure I will.”

She watched as the actor applied shaving cream to his face, using a disposable razor to scrape off the stubble. He did likewise with his armpits, since he wore a sleeveless yellow gown as Rikki Anthony in the first act. Then, draping a towel over bare, willowy shoulders, he commenced the process of obliterating every trace of masculine features.

Atop a layer of pancake foundation, well-plucked, arched eyebrows were darkened. Blue eye shadow was applied after false eyelashes were glued in place. Andrews completely resculpted his mouth with bright red lipstick, creating an illusion of fullness most women would envy. Rouge accented high cheekbones, while a bit of smoky coloration enhanced his jawline.

A tight-fitting hair net flattened his tawny mop, allowing the rope-braid blonde updo wig a more secure fit. “Can’t have it flying off in a spin,” he

chuckled, adding a touch of spirit gum to the edges. Large silver loops slipped through holes in his ear lobes, and he swiveled toward his associate. “What do you think?”

“Bloody amazing,” she praised. “I’d never know you’re really a man.”

He rose and pointed to the stool. “Your turn.”

“I... I think... I’ll experiment privately, if you don’t mind,” she chuckled, retreating to the corridor. “Have the porter direct your... visitor to the green room when he arrives, and leave this to me.”

“Are you sure?”

“He’ll either walk out of here satisfied he’ll profit by his patience, or be in handcuffs on a myriad of racketeering charges.”

Andrews’ brown eyes glared at Sheila’s grinning mien as she edged the door shut. “I’ll... trust you.”

“Wise man.”

Lou, Theo and their boss, a beanpole in a lime green, floral print Hawaiian shirt beneath a tweed jacket and Dockers, entered the plush lounge an hour later.

Brunette curls hidden beneath an expertly coifed grey wig, violet eyes offset by gold-rimmed wire spectacles, wearing a conservative navy blue business suit and low heels, Sheila portrayed the ultimate corporate executive. She directed the trio to chairs arranged in a semi-circle, standing before them as if ready to give a lecture.

Which, in fact, she did.

“My name is Cynthia Mockridge, and I represent the majority investors in this production. I hear you’ve been pressuring Mr. Andrews for payment of a minor debt, and I can’t permit you to continue with these bully tactics, when so much is at stake.”

“What’s at stake, besides the money?” grunted the mobster, who she didn’t recognize from recent computer searches.

She countered, “The question should be: how much money is at stake?”

“All right, then,” drawled the oily boss. “How much?”

“For you, a pittance. For my father’s film company, millions.”

The trio’s shoulders squared simultaneously, their interest captured.

“My father agreed to loan a substantial amount to Mr. Andrews, with the understanding that, if the show is a success, the film rights will pass to him.”

“Why would any practical business man take such a chance?” scoffed Lou.

“Because Mr. Andrews is his nephew.”

Their erect posture melted at this information.

“So, knowing your identities, and your other... illegal activities, we’re asking you to cease and desist with your threats, so we can all reap the benefits.”

The boss rose. “What do I get out of it, if I agree?”

“I’ve been empowered to offer you a half-percentage point of the net receipts, if the film is made.”

In hushed tones, he consulted his comrades. Finally, he extended thick digits, which she briefly grasped.

Once the thugs withdrew, she sank on the nearest chair, trembling. Andrews rushed in, and knelt beside her, his countenance taut with concern.

“Are you all right?” he moaned.

“Perfectly fine.” She inhaled deeply and snickered. “I didn’t think I’d get stage fright.”

“Stage fright? We don’t go on until half-eight.”

“Maybe not, but the performance I just gave may have been the most important in my life - and yours.”

“Then...”

“They won’t be bothering you anymore.”

Andrews embraced her and smothered her with kisses. “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

She shoved him away. “Leave off, can’t you?”

“But, you don’t know...”

“I know, Mac. I know very well. Now, send out for sandwiches or fish and chips. I’m starved.”

“You sure you want to eat before the curtain? Remember at Oxford...”

“That was a long time ago.”

Hesitantly, he conceded.

Newspaper and internet reviewers having praised the opening night efforts, ticket sales had been brisk throughout the day, and the 1,400 seat venue was packed before the orchestra struck up the overture. Actually a music hall-esque series of skits and chorus numbers with a modern twist, *Switched Up* challenged the audience to figure out which male figures were played by males, and which women were really women.

Exceptional dance routines and powerful singing voices made those in the stalls and box seats forget they were being fooled by elaborate make-ups and lavish costumes, laughing at subtle jokes and applauding the entertainers over the course of two hours.

In addition to partnering with Andrews, Sheila panted her way through a Fred Astaire-ish solo in the first act, complete with top hat and tails. A more

relaxed, but equally vigorous combination of steps in the style of Gene Kelly included the dreaded coffee grinder, which set her muscles a-twitch.

Just before Act II, Andrews - in a glittering pink gown as Rikki Anthony - burst into her dressing room, after hearing her wretching through the walls. "I warned you about eating before the performance!" he scolded quietly, supporting her waist as she lurched forward.

Once her stomach stopped heaving, he practically carried her to the floral sofa, settling her tousled head on a down pillow. "Do you want some water?"

"It... won't stay down," she croaked.

"We're on again in ten minutes."

"I'll... be okay."

Andrews gently squeezed her shoulder. "That's the stuff, Sherlock."

An ensemble of 35 artists tapped in step during the encore, while Sheila and Rikki Anthony reprised a lively polka across the stage. The ovation penetrated heavy red curtains as they descended, to be raised and lowered another eight times.

Five vases of red roses scented Sheila's dressing room when she whisked in to rid herself of the pancake foundation, suit and scuffed shoes, which left blisters on both feet. Fifteen minutes saw her restored to a relative state of normalcy, and the theatre wings much quieter, facilitating a rapid escape.

Roderick Andrews almost collided with her as he exited his own chamber, smiling ear to ear. He noticed her slight limp and chuckled. "Looks like you need a ride home, and a good massage."

"Just like the old days?" Sheila hinted.

"Anything wrong with that?"

"Won't Frank be expecting you?"

"I told him you and I had a few things to discuss."

"I'm... not in the mood tonight, Mac."

"I know. I... lied." He scooped up her arm. "C'mon."

A valet had parked the female impersonator's grey Fiat at the stage door. Andrews helped Sheila onto the passenger seat, then twirled around the front to slide behind the wheel.

"You're in awfully high spirits," Sheila observed.

"You've saved the day, my dear. I can't thank you enough."

"I'll be well thanked when you get a replacement trained."

"We're holding auditions tomorrow morning."

"Good."

Feet throbbing within her sneakers, Sheila allowed Andrews to help her up the steps to 221B Baker Street, where he commandeered the key and unlocked the door. They mounted the stairs at a snail's pace, and he didn't release her until she collapsed on the double bed in her room.

He bent to remove her shoes, she flinched in pain. "Roll over," he instructed.

"What for?"

"I'll give you that massage."

"I'd object, but I think I need it."

On her stomach, Sheila closed her eyes as Andrews raised her t-shirt. Knowing him as she did, it didn't matter if he saw her underwear or, at that point, if Watson, wearing only plaid boxers, hovered on the threshold.

Before her co-star finished kneading the knots from her back, Sheila could be heard snoring. Andrews left her atop the quilt, turning to face her flatmate.

"How'd it go?" Watson asked.

"She's better now than she was at Oxford. If I ever could have loved a woman, it would've been her."

"I know what you mean."

Andrews' tawny head cocked sideways, displaying his puzzlement.

Watson recoiled, clarifying. "PTSD."

"Ah, well," responded Andrews, slipping past him. "Too bad."

Following the actor onto the landing, Watson watched him practically skip down the warped steps and into the night. Shuffling toward his own bed, he could smell the odor of pungent tobacco.

"A real debacle, eh?" he spoke to empty air. "Cheers, old man."

The Palace Murder

As per her usual, Edith Hudson-Thorne carried a silver tray loaded with bacon, fried eggs, toast and hash browns up the servants' stairs and into the sitting room at 221B Baker Street that Thursday morning. She waited, holding her burden, until Johnny Watson, his red flannel shirt unbuttoned atop grungy black track pants, scrambled to clear space on the round table in the center of the room.

"She's not awake yet?" queried the russet-haired American landlady.

A gruff reply emanated through the far door. "Yes, she's awake." Wrapped in Sherlock Holmes' tattered dressing gown, his great-great-niece shuffled groggily across the threshold, for all appearances an 80-year-old woman.

"Good thing you're no longer dancing at the Palace," Edith greeted.

"Why is that?"

A copy of the day's London *Times* clarified the statement. That historic West End theatre - where Sheila had recently helped her old friend, Roderick Anthony Andrews, out of a jam - could now add to its notoriety with a murder.

The young detective sank in her basket-chair beside the dormant fireplace, pouring over a full-page article. John settled at the table, devouring his breakfast, while Edith gave up hope of further conversation and slammed the door upon her exit.

"My God, John!" mumbled Sheila. "This is outlandish!"

Through a huge bite of potatoes, Watson responded, "What?"

She related how Jude Quimp, son of Bristol MP George Quimp, had attended the previous evening's performance of *Switched Up* at the theatre and - draining the pocket flask he'd concealed in his tuxedo jacket, besides imbibing three double whiskeys during the intermission - had gotten into his head that the individual listed as "Michelle Montclair" in the programme was, indeed, a female whom he wished to join for a late supper. His two companions tried to dissuade him, but he bet them each 100 pounds he would prove them mistaken.

After the final curtain, Quimp staggered back stage and burst into Montclair's dressing room, finding instead Mr. Michael Mahoney, removing his very feminine make-up. Quimp grew angry, and the ensuing rumpus was overheard by lead dancer Paula Dietz, who entered the room still in her white tie and tails.

Miss Dietz's presence only exacerbated Quimp's rage. He was determined to expose the sham and, with a pocket knife, proceeded to cut the buttons from her waistcoat. Panicked, Mahoney fled to fetch the security guard. When he returned, Quimp was gone and Paula lay dead on the floor.

“Jude Quimp’s fingerprints being the only ones on the knife’s hilt, he was later apprehended by Metropolitan Police officials at a pub near Hyde Park,” the account concluded.

“Another drunk who won’t be held responsible for his actions,” commented Watson between sips of coffee.

“Especially since he’s not the murderer.”

A spray of brown liquid splattered the table. “Eh?”

Sheila rose as the scent of tobacco filled the chamber, opening the window to ease the stench. Sherlock Holmes materialized, pipe sending swirls of smoke ceiling-ward, as his descendant gazed at the street below.

“George Quimp, Member of Parliament, has come to ask me to exonerate his son, if the limousine idling at the curb is any indication.”

A weary tread on the staircase preceded this balding politician’s entrance. Sherlock vanished without a word, while the tenants greeted their visitor and directed him to the red velvet Victorian divan.

“You’ve come about Jude,” announced Sheila, resuming her place in the basket-chair.

The frazzled father growled, “You’ve read the newspapers?”

“Enough to have a general idea of the events in question. I will need to interview him, however, to get the full picture...”

“I’ve already arranged for you to see him at Scotland Yard, at half-one this afternoon.”

“With or without an attorney present?”

“Without.”

“Very good, Mr. Quimp. What can you tell me about your son which might help me understand how his mind works?”

“His mind?” guffawed the older man. “What mind? The boy doesn’t think, isn’t that obvious?”

“Nothing is obvious until the facts are assembled.”

With a sigh, the man continued, “Jude came to town for a weekend holiday with two friends from Cambridge. They were drinking and whoring, on my money, no less. Next thing I know, I get a call from the jail...”

“That’s... sufficient, Mr. Quimp. A young man with a sense of entitlement...”

“Exactly, Miss Holmes. But, he wouldn’t kill anyone, even when intoxicated.”

“I believe you, sir.” Urging Quimp to his feet, she escorted him from the sitting room. “I’ll be in touch once I get to the truth of the matter.”

“Thank you, Miss Holmes.” Gnarled fingers reached for his wallet. “Is there any retainer?”

The door had already closed, providing the answer.

Watson had snatched up the receiver on the phone’s first ring; Sheila had anticipated the call, and didn’t want Quimp lingering to eavesdrop on what could be a tense conversation.

“Hello, Mac,” she spoke into the receiver, with Roderick Andrews on the other end of the line. “You want me to step in for Paula Dietz?”

“How’d you know?” the female impersonator - whom Sheila had met and worked with at Oxford years earlier - stammered.

“I’m psychic.”

The prolonged silence concerned her.

“I’ve read the *Times*,” she stated, and heard him exhale in relief.

“Will you do it? There’s another five thousand in it for you.”

“I’ve been hired to clear Jude Quimp of murder charges.”

“You can do both simultaneously, being the crime happened right in the next dressing room...”

“Which the Scotland Yarders will have contaminated by tromping around searching for non-existent evidence.”

“Non-existent?”

“Whoever slipped in after Mahoney fled and Quimp made his departure wouldn’t have had time to leave signs of his presence, if he was gone in a matter of seconds.”

“True, true.” Andrews paused before pleading, “Will you come?”

“My body is still sore from the last go-round.”

“I’ll arrange for a professional massage every night...”

“All right, all right,” Sheila chuckled. “Don’t beg. It’s demeaning.”

“Rehearsal at three?”

“Should do.”

“Thanks, Sherlock.”

“You’re welcome, Mac.”

Sheila replaced the instrument in its cradle, and smiled innocently at Watson’s facetious expression.

“I know, he’s an old friend,” muttered her flatmate.

“But, he makes you nervous.”

“There’s something not right about him.”

“That’s what a lot of straight people think of those who are gay.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Watson insisted. “He knows more than he lets on.”

“About what?”

“A lot of things.”

Sheila deliberated this idea. “You... may be right, John. I’ll keep an open mind.”

“Isn’t that a prerequisite for your kind of work?”

“Indeed.” Gliding toward her bedroom, she stripped off the dressing gown, with the door closing just as Watson glimpsed her rumpled Beatles White Album t-shirt and panties.

She emerged after a shower with brunette curls still damp, wearing a purple hooded sweatshirt, jeans and sneakers.

“You’re going to the Yard in that?” scolded Watson, replacing dishes on the silver tray.

“While I’ll be there on business, I want young Mr. Quimp to be comfortable.”

“In his shackles and jail togs?”

“You know what I mean.” Grabbing a black fedora off the coat rack, Sheila twirled it atop her head and breezed down the stairs.

Ushered into one of the mirror-lined interrogation rooms on the ground floor of the Scotland Yard offices, having survived multiple questions about the unorthodox nature of her visit, Sheila Holmes selected one of the molded plastic chairs and drummed her fingers on the rectangular metal table until a disheveled, ebony-haired Jude Quimp, in loose orange scrubs and ill-fitting slippers, shambled across the threshold, followed by a guard.

“Does he have to be cuffed?” Sheila queried.

“He’s a murder suspect,” barked the uniformed sergeant. “We’re not taking any chances.”

“Fine, fine. Now, scram.”

Though he vacated the premises, she knew he’d be listening behind the two-way glass. If what George Quimp professed held true, though, his son would say nothing self-incriminating.

Sheila introduced herself, and explained her presence.

“Dad’s pissed, isn’t he?” Jude began.

“That, and worried. You’re quite hung over, eh?”

“Oh, God, yes.”

“Do you remember what happened last night?”

“I’ll never forget it!”

“Tell me.”

For a moment, Jude buried his pale, youthful countenance behind swollen hands, as if to block out unpleasant visions before composing himself. Then, he launched into a narrative which coincided with the newspaper article, up to a point.

“Mahoney ran out while I was slicing off Miss Dietz’s buttons, and when her shirt fell open, she screamed. That sobered me for a second, because I dropped the knife and bolted. She was very much alive when I left her.”

“Were you sober enough to realize the entire cast isn’t what they appear?”

“What do you mean?”

“The female characters are played by men, and vice versa.”

“You mean, those guys are gay?”

“Mostly.”

“And the gals?”

“Does it matter?”

“Weird.”

Sheila persisted, “Did anyone see you leave?”

“The porter at the stage door.”

“Could he confirm this?”

“I... don’t know. There were a lot of people milling around...”

“As happens after any performance.” Sheila considered a moment. “Did the police confiscate your tuxedo?”

“Yes, after they photographed and fingerprinted me.”

“Has anyone, besides me, spoken to you since? Your attorney?”

“The solicitor Dad hired was here about an hour ago. He told me they found no blood on my skin or clothes.”

“Good, good.” Extending her hand, she let Jude Quimp wring it desperately. “I’ll let your father know what I find, and we should have you out of here in a day or so.”

“You really think...”

“I try not to bend facts to fit theories, so I’ll be searching for more facts, then create a theory. But, it shouldn’t take long.”

Longer than she planned, perhaps, because the homicide detectives were quite uncooperative when she stopped by their office. They were satisfied having a murder weapon, a witness and a suspect in custody.

“Even though the witness didn’t see your suspect kill the victim?” she prodded.

A snide, sandy-maned inspector asserted, "He was the last to see the two together, and was gone from the room for less than a minute."

"A lot can happen in sixty seconds," she countered.

She withdrew before they could eject her from the complex.

Having eaten no breakfast, Sheila returned to Baker Street in time for a bite of lunch: ham sandwiches, crisps and milk. She changed into the black leotard and tights Andrews had provided when she first joined the Palace Theatre production of *Switched Up* the previous March. Hidden beneath rumpled yellow sweats, she could ride the Tube without garnering undue attention.

Before she shed her street attire, she broke the crime scene tape across the entrance to Michael Mahoney's dressing room and found just what she expected: evidence violated beyond recognition.

A few waistcoat buttons, cut from the fabric, had bounced under the furnishings. On her knees, Sheila retrieved them. While at that level, she scanned for blood droplets: none. That confirmed for her the knife had remained in the fatal wound, acting as a plug, unlike the spray of liquid which occurs if the culprit had slit Paula Dietz's throat.

"Well?" snorted Roderick Andrews, high cheekbones accented by his smirk, towering above her as she rifled the carpet's nap for foreign objects.

"Jude Quimp didn't do it."

"That's what you said."

"I just have to prove it."

"Right now, you just have to get your tap shoes and start rehearsing."

Sheila straightened, flexing her knees. "If I put in a good hour's work, will you let me talk to Pop?"

"How can he help?"

"He was at the door last night, right?"

"Right."

"He might've seen someone."

"I can already tell you what he told the police, because I was there. People were coming and going, like after every show, and he didn't notice anything unusual."

Placatingly, Sheila patted her friend's sharp, stubbly jaw. "It might've been something very usual, someone who's been here every night, who's guilty." "Like me?"

"God, no, Mac. You don't kill flies. How could you kill a human being?"

Andrews playfully embraced Sheila and kissed her. "I did it because I missed dancing with you. No one is as good..."

She shoved him away, laughing. "Give me a tick, and I'll meet you on stage."

A grueling three-hour workout renewed the aches in Sheila's limbs, and she appreciated the bottle of pain relievers tied with a bow on her dressing table when she collapsed on the stool to begin the process of transforming herself into the semblance of a man. The card attached indicated they - and a small bouquet of daisies - had been sent by Johnny Watson.

"Limited budget," he'd scrawled on the card, "but I think you'll need them."

Pop, the stage door porter, knocked as she was smearing thick pancake make-up on her neck and cheeks. Like the traditional employee with those duties, he was a music hall veteran, performing in his blood, who couldn't stay away from the theatre, even on his days off.

"You wanted to see me, Miss?" he inquired, running nervous, arthritic fingers through a thinning white mop.

"Just a question, Pop," she hailed him pleasantly, to put him at ease. "Did anyone call for Paula Dietz after the nightly shows?"

"I... really don't know, Miss. So many people came in an' out, and they weren't required to check in..."

"Did anyone send her flowers on a regular basis?"

"If you mean, did she have a boyfriend, I'd have to say yes."

Sheila pressed, "You're positive?"

"A young man squired her to her dressing room each evening."

"You're sure?"

"They always came early, before the crush. It took Miss Dietz that long to get rid of him so she could dress."

"Get rid of him?"

"I could hear her tell him to leave, but he would... not let her go - in the most literal sense, if you know what I mean."

"You mean, hugging, snogging..."

"I suppose. I also heard him warn her about men in the theatre, but she assured him he had nothing to fear, because all the actors were gay."

"Did that reassure him?" Sheila wondered.

"I... don't think so. He was worried about the audience, what we used to call 'stage door johnnies,' who like to pick up girls and take them out..."

"What did this bloke look like?"

“Considering how pretty Miss Dietz was, he was kind of rough. Brown hair, big muscles. Worked a menial job, if callouses and dirty nails are any indication.”

“His clothes?”

“Casual, sometimes stained at the elbows.”

“What kind of stains? Oil? Dirt?”

Pop contemplated before answering. “Oil, I think. It looked wet, fresh, as if he rushed from his job to fetch Miss Dietz and drive her ‘round.”

“Thanks, Pop. That helps a lot.”

Confused, he backed from the dressing room. “It does?” he mumbled to himself.

“More than you know,” Sheila replied to empty air. After the final curtain, she would visit Paula Dietz’s North Gower Street flat, and begin to assemble the puzzle of her murder and her mysterious suitor.

She wasn’t about to abandon her plan simply because, by the closing number, she could barely drag herself off stage. Getting Jude Quimp out of jail was of primary importance, as was saving the Palace Theatre and its current production from further scandal.

Strangely, a light burned in the window of the second story dwelling when the black taxi deposited her near the front entrance. A last burst of adrenaline powering her muscles, the detective picked the first lock, then crept up pristine, carpeted stairs, rounding a corner to see the door of the murder victim’s apartment ajar.

Pretending to be unaware of the situation, she made considerable noise approaching, and knocked loudly. “Paula, you there?”

Receiving no response, she pushed wide the painted panel, which showed no signs of having been forced. The intruder, therefore, possessed a key.

“Paula?”

The poker from a set of fire irons swung at her head, but instincts nurtured through many years of Wing Chun training sent her into a roll across the polished wood floor. Ending in a crouch, she barely glimpsed the retreating form, and hadn’t the energy to give chase.

Instead, she woke the resident manager, who admitted her to his ground floor sitting room without bothering to cover his brown cotton pajamas.

“Why are you here at this ungodly hour?” the stooped elder snarled, reaching for a decanter of whiskey off the sideboard.

Sheila pretended to tear up, and sniffed loudly. "I'm... taking Paula's role in the show. There are a few pieces from the costumes missing, so I came over to see if I could find them in her room."

The man drained amber liquid from a tumbler, scowling. "I'll accompany you. The police really don't want anyone in there..."

This presented Sheila with the perfect alibi, for when the manager discovered the door to Paula's flat wide open, he let fly a series of expletives. "They'll blame me for this."

"It looks like a burglary."

"Probably Paula's damned brothers, come to collect their belongings."

"Paula's... brothers?" Sheila repeated, feigning innocence.

"Until three weeks ago, they lived here with her. Ben, the oldest, and the twins. When she booted them out, they took only what they could carry. Now she's dead, they probably want the rest."

"Was there bad blood between them?"

"As bad as it gets, I think," her companion spat. "With their parents deceased, Ben set himself up as the father figure. That meant Paula couldn't go anywhere, unless he was with her. She was a very pretty young thing, and he didn't want her to be... soiled."

"Sounds medieval."

"Oppressive for her, at any rate. He escorted her to her dance lessons; the rest of the time, she cleaned and cooked for him and a constant parade of friends."

"Friends?" Sheila asked flippantly, poking around the furniture as if searching for something.

"Ben worked as a mechanic, using what backyard there is as his garage. His friends would drive their junkers over, and he'd fix them, and see they were well fed."

So, Sheila mused, Ben would have oil on the elbows of his shirts. That he would've brought her to the Palace Theatre every day, and picked her up after the performances also fit with the manager's information.

"I was glad when they left," he admitted. "Things quieted down considerably. I did get a little upset, though, when she told me she was planning to move to a more... suitable flat, now she had a new job..."

"This is a very homey place. Why would she want to leave?"

"Bad memories is my guess. She wanted a fresh start, in every way."

"Had she picked out a place?"

“She’d been looking around Piccadilly, I believe. A safe distance from the East End digs her brothers could afford.” The man stared at Sheila, suspicious. “Have you found what you were looking for?”

“The wardrobe mistress must’ve been mistaken about Paula bringing home the cufflinks, because they don’t seem to be here.”

“Cufflinks? What would she be doing with such things?”

Sheila breezed past him into the corridor. “You haven’t seen the show, have you?”

“Lord, no, Missy. On a pensioner’s income, I can’t afford those West End tickets.”

“I’ll send you over a pair, free. You can bring a friend and enjoy yourselves.”

His deeply wrinkled countenance softened slightly. “That... would be most kind.” He led her down the stairs and conducted her onto the street. “Be safe, now, Missy. It’s awfully late for such a delightful creature to be out alone.”

“I’ll hail a taxi at the corner, thanks.”

She did, only because cramps in her calves prevented her from walking the distance to Baker Street. Stretched on the vehicle’s rear seat, she made plans to search for Ben Dietz and the twins once she slept a few hours.

Johnny Watson’s assistance simplified her task. The sitting room computer gave him access to various databases, and he rang contacts made through his navigation of the British veterans’ benefit system.

“Ben Dietz has a police record,” Watson announced as the clock struck eleven. “Served in the Royal Navy, receiving a hardship discharge when his parents died in an auto accident on the Continent. Tends toward bar fights, and once beat a teenage boy into a coma after he saw the lad snogging his sister.”

“So,” breathed Sheila from the basket-chair, “he was very possessive of Paula.” She cringed abruptly, and bent to rub her aching knee. “Have you a current address?”

“Scotland Yard jail.”

Forgetting her pain, Sheila leapt to her feet. “What?”

“He was picked up in the wee hours for public intoxication and vagrancy.”

“Call Mac, and have him bring Pop to the Yard. I’ll see if MP Quimp is available to transport his son back to university.” Hobbling toward her bedroom, she groaned in anguish.

“You think you’ve solved it?” ventured Watson.

“If I can arrange to have Ben Dietz put in the same cell with Jude Quimp, it’ll solve itself, and Paula’s brother will view daylight through bars for the rest of his life.”

Vastly different in demeanor from Rikki Anthony’s persona - exhibited eight shows a week at the Palace Theatre - Roderick Andrews paced the Scotland Yard lobby, hands clasped behind the back of his grey pinstripe suit. The stage door porter timidly hovered beside the reception desk, clutching a thin jacket around his waist, as if for comfort.

Sheila marched through the revolving door, Watson close behind. The desk sergeant waved her toward another uniformed individual; he escorted the quartet to a dusty antechamber.

“Where is the prisoner?” demanded the detective.

“In the next room. Two inspectors are questioning him about last night.” The round-faced rookie crossed to the adjoining wall and slid aside a small metal panel, allowing for a view of the proceedings. Sheila directed Pop to peer through the square.

“Is that the man who brought Paula to the theatre?” she whispered.

He nodded.

The panel closed, and the elder sank onto the nearest metal chair.

“You think he killed her?” asked Andrews.

Sheila replied, “There’s one definitive way to find out. If Ben was drunk, and lashed out in anger at Paula, because he thought she was being promiscuous...”

“According to Jude Quimp, he’d gone to Michael Mahoney’s dressing room, with no intention of seeing Miss Dietz...” interspersed the officer.

“She came in on impulse, to see who was arguing,” Sheila supplied. “It didn’t matter to her brother. He’d come to fetch her home, even though she’d told him she didn’t want him behaving like a bodyguard. He heard his sister scream, and saw Jude bolt from the dressing room. He rushed in and saw her... state of undress...”

“So, what now?” Mac wondered.

“Put Ben in with Jude. In less than five minutes, given that Ben should be terribly hung over...”

Filthy with remnants of his own liquored vomit, the stench horrendous, a ragged Ben Dietz was guided to a cell where Jude Quimp sat on the lumpy mattress and stared into empty space. He glanced up briefly when the iron barricade opened, but showed no sign of recognition when this new suspect was placed in the stark confines.

Five curious souls loitered a short distance along the row, listening intently.

“Who’re you?” drawled Dietz, slumping to the floor.

Quimp sniveled, “What does it matter?”

“I seen you somewheres.”

“I doubt it.”

“What you in for?”

“Murder.”

“Really?”

The desperation in Quimp’s baritone wrenched Sheila’s heart. “I didn’t do it! I was drunk, but the girl was alive when I left...”

“Yeah, people do stupid things when they’re drunk.” Dietz’s head rested on the edge of a cold steel bedframe. “Looka me.”

“What did you do?”

“Just tried to pr’tect me sister. Stupid slut, she didna appreciate I was tryin’ to keep ‘er pure for the right bloke...”

“What happened?”

Suddenly, Dietz reared back and gazed at Quimp with bloodshot green eyes. “You’re the dirty bastard who... who...”

The door retracted and guards forcibly restrained Dietz before he choked the life from Jude Quimp. The mechanic’s shouts of “If I ‘ad that knife, I’d gut you, too!” pursued the innocent man from the cell block.

Embracing his father in the chief inspector’s office, the younger Quimp blubbered into the MP’s chest about being sorry he’d ever come to London on holiday, or gotten drunk. With surprising dignity, the patriarch soothed his offspring, promising to make things right.

Sheila, Watson, Pop and Andrews absented themselves from the scene, their task complete. The authorities would handle both the release of the wrongly accused, and the prosecution of the guilty.

“You look knackered,” observed Andrews, ushering his companions into a taxi.

Sheila confirmed, “I *am*. When are you going to hold auditions for Paula’s replacement?”

The key turned in the ignition, and the vehicle merged with mid-day London traffic. “Oh, we’ve got her understudy already rehearsing...”

The brunette head, black fedora tilted back, whipped toward Andrews. “What the hell...”

He patted her thigh gently. “There, there, Sherlock. Can I help if I consider you the perfect partner? Ever since our Oxford days, your timing has so complemented mine, I feel the performances are far superior to those I do with anyone else. Any chance I have to take advantage of that...”

“You’re a devil, Mac!” she smoldered.

His sharp features broke into a sincere smile. “And you’re a damned good detective.” Brakes jolted them, horn blaring at a jaywalker. “Too bad, really. With a bit of persuasion, I might’ve convinced you to return to the stage.”

“Not in a million years.”

He chuckled. “One more go ’round tonight?”

“The last go ’round,” Sheila agreed. “Only because, in your make-up and that incredible pink gown, you’re such a lovely woman.”

Halting at Baker Street, Andrews hopped from the rear seat and gallantly held her door. With a bow as she passed, he snickered, “And you portray such an enticing young man.”

Inserting her key into the lock, Sheila smelled an overwhelming odor of tobacco. Sherlock Holmes awaited her in the foyer, displeased. “I think I shall be ill.”

His great-great-niece turned to wave at the female impersonator outside then, closing the door after Watson, retorted as she mounted the stairs, “And I *know* I’ll be ill, if you don’t open the window when you’re smoking that damned pipe!”

Watson shook his blond head, resigned, and followed her up to the sitting room.

Exposition

Phones jangling in the middle of the night bothered Sheila Holmes no end. Worse, when the instrument itself was not conveniently beside the double bed where she slept, but in the next room, requiring her to roust herself from beneath a warm quilt and stumble through the dark without upsetting any furniture.

“This better be good,” she grunted into the receiver, half-conscious.

A quavering tenor whimpered, “Sherlock? It’s Mac.” In fact, Roderick Anthony Andrews - a female impersonator whose well-known character, Rikki Anthony, was appearing in the popular West End production of *Switched Up* - had nicknamed Sheila “Sherlock” during their days at Oxford University, while she called him “Mac” because his mother, a Scottish physician, continued to use her maiden name in her Nottingham practice.

“Mac? What on God’s green earth...”

“I’m at Bart’s.”

“You hurt?”

“No, it’s Frank.”

Comprehending near hysterical words proved difficult for the young detective. Her question, “What happened?” elicited a stream of unintelligible blather, from which she grasped two words: “cancer” and “wife”.

“I’ll be there once I grab some clothes,” she assured her old friend, breaking the connection and turning to find Johnny Watson, clad in green plaid boxer shorts, glowering from his doorway.

“What is it this time?” the groggy Afghan army veteran muttered.

“I’m not quite sure. Sorry I woke you.”

“Want me to come along?”

“No need.”

“It’s half-three in the morning, Sheila, and there’s a fog. I don’t want to see you mugged.”

“I plan to ring for a taxi.”

“Can you afford it?”

“I’ve still got plenty left from the last five thousand Mac paid me.”

“Fine. As long as I know you’ll be safe, I can go back to sleep.”

“Should do.” Sheila waited until he crawled under the covers, then retired to grab a shirt, jeans, sneakers and denim jacket from her wardrobe. En route to the sitting room door, she snatched her great-great-uncle Sherlock’s black fedora off its hook beneath the “V.R.” torn in the wall by bullets more than a century earlier.

Until she saw her reflection in the glass of St. Bart's Hospital front entrance, she didn't realize that her t-shirt was purple, her trousers stained and the jacket's sleeve ripped.

No wonder the security guard refused her admittance.

"I'm here at the express invitation of Mr. Roderick Andrews," she explained. "He's in Frank Bescombe's room, if you wish to check."

The gruff hireling checked a clipboard, sneering his approval for her to continue toward the lift.

Emerging on the third level, she was ambushed by the waiting Andrews, who diverted her from rows of glass encased cubicles into a small lounge scented by rancid coffee.

The tawny-haired, sharp featured actor appeared on the edge of a breakdown. Sheila freed herself from his iron grip, gently grasping his shoulders and lowering him onto a striped sofa.

"Calm yourself, Mac." She located a box of tissues, and passed it to him. "Start at the beginning, and tell me what's happening."

Having dried his brown eyes, and blown his nose twice, he slowed his breathing, head bowed. "It's horrible, Sherlock. Just horrible."

"What is?"

"Frank's dying."

"Then, why aren't you in his room?"

"Because... because..."

A fresh wave of sobs precluded further conversation. Sheila settled next to Andrews, wrapping her arms around him, and letting him bury his head on her chest as his entire, painfully thin frame convulsed.

"There, there, Mac. You've got to buck up, and talk rationally, or I won't be able to help you." She stroked his uncombed mane. "How much weight have you lost recently?"

"About... about... two stone," he confessed, resting his cheek on her shoulder. "Ever since I found out, I haven't been able to hold down any food..."

"What about your performances? Without sufficient nourishment, you're liable to collapse..."

He reared back angrily. "I don't care about the show! My life is ruined, and I... just don't... give a damn!"

Cupping his face in her hands, she swiveled his face toward her. "How has your life been ruined? Every night, you play to a sold-out house..."

“That has nothing to do with it!” He rose and stormed toward the opposite side of the room. “Fifteen days ago, Frank came to me after the matinee and told me his pancreatic cancer had spread, and he had less than two months to live.”

“What?” exclaimed Sheila, stiffening.

“That was my reaction. I didn’t *know* he had pancreatic cancer, in the first place. He hadn’t told me, because he didn’t want me to worry, didn’t want it to affect the show...”

“You knew nothing about him seeing a doctor, or anything?”

“Or anything. We’ve always kept our finances separate, so I didn’t know he was writing checks for chemotherapy treatments, radiation, tests, and blackmail.”

The woman glared at her companion. “Blackmail?”

“He’s not aware I found out about that... aspect of our relationship.”

“Details, Mac! Details!”

“Nine years ago, while Frank was touring the States with the road company of *Wicked*, he married a woman from Louisville, Kentucky. They lived together long enough for her to bear him two children. Then, he came to London as a choreographer, and we...”

“He was being blackmailed because there was no divorce?” ventured Sheila.

“The blackmail went both ways. If he didn’t pay, she would be told about his illegal marriage to me and, also, I would be told about his other family.”

“The extortionist’s a clever git.” Sheila investigated the glass coffee pot, deciding against the scum-coated brew. “How did you discover his scheme?”

“Locked in a metal box with Frank’s other important papers was one letter from the... gentleman.”

“Maybe he’s not so smart, if he accepted checks.”

“He didn’t. That letter outlined how Frank should withdraw cash from his bank, and deliver it to a designated location on the first of each month.”

“Ah!”

“Thousands of dollars, gone to prevent me from learning something that wouldn’t have changed the way I feel about him...” Andrews sank on a worn blue recliner.

“If that’s the case, why aren’t you in his room?”

“Because... she’s in there.”

“She?” The realization chilled Sheila’s blood. “His wife?”

Andrews nodded, salty droplets cascading down his cheeks.

“And, the children?” she prodded.

“They... stayed in the States with their grandparents. Since they were so young when he left, they don’t remember him.”

“Did she never file for divorce?”

“Evidently not.”

“That’s... strange.” Sheila leaned on the sideboard, drumming slender digits on speckled laminate. “It sounds to me like the blackmailer and the wife might be one and the same, intent on tapping a steady source of income.”

Andrews’ brown orbs studied her. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I’ll not twist facts to fit theories, but if the woman did not secure a timely divorce after she was - essentially - abandoned, and thus had no legal documentation to compel Frank’s payment of support for his children, why would she not devise another way to obtain his money?”

“That’s... outrageous, Sherlock!”

“I know it is. And, to prove myself wrong, I’m going in right now to discuss the matter with her.”

“You can’t!”

“Not dressed like this, I can’t. But, disguised in a pair of surgical scrubs...”

Andrews got to his feet, unsteadily. “I... want to go, too.”

“No, and not because I don’t want you. You’re... too emotional at the moment, and you’d give away the ruse the first time you broke down.”

He resumed his place on the cushion. “You’ll come back and report to me?”

“Of course, Mac.” Sheila bent and kissed his furrowed brow before making her exit in search of a supply closet.

In the private room, one desk lamp burned, illuminating the patient’s feet and not much else. Other than their professional interaction, Frank Bescombe was an unknown to Sheila - as he’d also been to the man who believed himself closest to the choreographer.

Ashen skin framed by dark, dank locks, the occupant of the slightly raised bed boasted multiple tubes dripping nourishment and medication into his arms. A monitor blinked out his pulse and respiration rates. Dozing in an armchair near the window, a middle-aged, bloated female kept vigil.

The intruder made a quiet entrance, stopping to examine the intravenous needles, and momentarily watch the screen above his head.

“You’re not the regular nurse,” croaked Frank, his skeletal countenance swiveling toward her.

“She’s on break.”

“I... know you.”

Sheila laid a soothing hand on his forehead, not breaking character. "I've been around." She wanted to add, "So have you," but restrained herself.

The presumed Mrs. Bescombe roused at the hushed exchange, and squinted at Sheila. "Is everything all right?"

Definitely American, this.

"As well as can be expected, ma'am."

"The doctor mentioned it could be any time..."

Did Sheila detect a hint of welcome anticipation in that statement? "The same could be said for each of us."

The woman's double chin twitched unpleasantly. "That's an odd thing to say."

"Sorry, ma'am. Old philosophy classes."

"You'd best mind your tongue. I could file a complaint with your supervisor, and sue the hospital..."

The comment welling in Sheila's throat, she swallowed with extreme difficulty. She had no evidence this drudge of a woman would attempt to blackmail her husband for whatever cash she could squeeze from him.

A bit of research would be necessary.

Or, better, she could innocently start a major row...

"There's a gent been sitting in the lounge waiting to come in..." she stated.

"That fag? He's not to come anywhere near this room, do you hear me?" raged Mrs. Bescombe, her face flushing and blood pressure rising. "If our children ever found out how their father... betrayed them... The gall of the man! After all the love I gave him, taking up with a... a..."

Quite an actress, this one, Sheila decided.

Frank, however, exhibited clear distress at the outburst. He reached for his nurse's hand, and pressed it with his limited strength. "Tell him..." he murmured. "Tell him... I love him."

"You will do no such thing!" stormed his wife. "Get out, now!"

Whether or not this display noted genuine indignation, Sheila would not permit irrational outbursts to disturb a dying man. "Mrs. Bescombe, would you mind stepping outside, while I change your husband's sheets?"

"I..." Clamping fleshy lips closed, she stomped to the corridor.

"Frank, two quick questions. Just answer yes or no." She recognized confusion in his bloodshot eyes and patted his arm reassuringly. "Does that creature really care one iota about you?"

"No."

"Was your marriage legitimate?"

“No. I... found out... she’d never divorced... her first...” Out of breath, Frank completed the sentence with a feeble shrug.

So, who was the bigamist?

Sheila left the patient to rest, briefly blocking Mrs. Bescombe’s access. “The truth will out, ma’am,” she hissed. “The truth always will out.”

Corpulent arms raised, fists clenched to pummel the disguised female. Sheila ducked the blows and scurried past the nurse’s station, around the corner, where she shed the scrubs and popped her head into the lounge, plucking her fedora and jacket off the sideboard.

“Mac, meet me at Baker Street late afternoon.”

All he managed was, “What’s...” before his friend dashed off, the sound of an irate soprano echoing behind her.

A brilliant May dawn broke in the east as Sheila trekked up the steps to 221B Baker Street, inserting her key quietly into the lock, and climbing stairs with a mind to miss the tell-tale creaks. She strode into the sitting room, dumping her outerwear on the floor as she bellowed, “John, I’ve a project for you!”

Through his open door, the blond veteran snarled, “How can I get a decent night’s sleep, with you in and out at all hours?”

She halted at this reprimand, contrite. “Sorry, John. Enjoy your lie-in. I’ll wake you when Edith brings breakfast.”

It transpired, however, Watson woke her three hours later from her slumber on the red velvet divan, platters of French toast and steaming bowls of oatmeal a welcome repast.

“Now, what the devil were you hollering about some project?” he muttered, pouring maple syrup over the contents of his plate.

Sheila, stretching sore muscles, replied, “I need you to get in touch with marriage license bureaus in Kentucky, and find out all you can about the wedding of Frank - or Francis - Bescombe, nine years ago.”

“Who’d he marry?”

“Someone who wasn’t legally free to make such vows.”

Watson chewed his food meditatively, then grinned. “Blackmail?”

“Very good, John! You’re catching on!”

“Thanks.”

While Sheila showered and changed into clean, color-coordinated black t-shirt and jeans, her flatmate settled at the computer, and sent a few e-mails. Due to the time difference between Great Britain and the United States, they wouldn’t be answered for some time, but the news proved worth the wait.

News revealed as a ragged Roderick Andrews sat in the armchair near the dormant fireplace, sipping much-needed coffee.

“How’s Frank holding up?” queried Sheila.

“I have no idea, really. The nurses can’t - officially - tell me anything, since I’m not the next of kin, what with this... crap.”

“Oh, yes, you are,” Watson announced, presenting the actor with a sheaf of printouts.

Andrews managed a wry chuckle. “I haven’t closed my eyes in 48 hours, and you expect me to read?” He waved Watson away. “What do they say?”

“They are copies of marriage certificates between one Wendy Ann Horton and seven different men - Frank included.”

Adrenaline thrust Andrews to his feet. “What?” He grabbed the papers and rapidly scanned them. “What... does this mean?”

“It means,” Sheila began, signaling him onto the seat, “that Frank’s supposed wife is actually a professional bigamist, in the worst sense of the word. There are copies of articles Watson found in his searches, detailing how she worked a well honed system to trap a variety of respectably employed men into marriage, across Kentucky, Indiana, Ohio, Illinois and Missouri. Once these men learned about her failure to divorce her first husband through some technicality, they left, later being subjected to various blackmail tactics, while she lived comfortably off the payments.”

“You mean... you mean... Frank is being blackmailed by that... that...”

“No, the actual engineer of the extortion is the same first husband she never divorced,” Watson noted. “According to prosecution transcripts, he even borrowed a niece and nephew - too young to spoil the plot - to give the impression that Wendy was a single mother caring for the children on her own.”

“Despicable!”

“Both Wendy and her only legal husband, Clyde Carver, were convicted of numerous counts of fraud and so forth, along with Wendy’s additional bigamy charges. Free on bond, they fled the country. They were reported to be living in Bath, while the U.S. government works with British agencies to have them apprehended and extradited.”

Sheila added, “Frank was the only one they could blackmail without revealing their exact whereabouts, and they took advantage of the situation.”

She didn’t require deductive observation to predict Andrews’ explosion, an overwhelmed, emotional time bomb. She thanked Watson for his efforts and, once the young amputee withdrew to his room, she enclosed their visitor in a soothing embrace.

“Let it out, Mac,” she murmured. “Let it all out.”

Tears, curses, sobs, and oaths poured forth over the course of thirty minutes. The pair remained entwined on the divan until Andrews finally raised his tawny head, a slight grin curling thin lips.

“And now, retribution,” he swore.

“You take these articles to the hospital. Show them to the medical staff. They should be proof enough to have Wendy ejected from the building, if nothing else. I’m bound for Bath to find Clyde Carver.”

“You... don’t have to go through all that trouble, with the truth in hand...”

Sheila stroked his damp cheek. “Frank deserves a peaceful death, holding the hand of one he loves, with no worries. Go to him; tell him all is well. I’ll be back by morning.”

In thus consoling him, she realized it would be a long night, searching for a man who she would recognize solely through an old, grainy newspaper photo. She could, at least, sleep on the train.

Andrews and Watson dropped her at Paddington Station en route to St. Bart’s Hospital, where the latter would ensure the removal of Wendy Horton took place without too much uproar. The police would not be called, unless hospital administrators decided to take the initiative.

Track construction delayed progress toward the site of historic Roman baths; Sheila snored throughout. Storms passed, and she never heard the thunder. Emerging from the small station as the sunset’s last rays illumined the street, she literally bumped into a constable on foot patrol, and pulled him into the nearest pub.

“I’m on duty, Miss!” he vehemently objected.

“We’re not drinking, just borrowing a bit of light.” She showed him the clipping of Clyde Carver, but he claimed to be unfamiliar with the name or the pudgy face.

“Who’s taking my name in vain?” yelled a gravel-roughened voice from the bar.

Sheila spun, the object of her trip approaching with a pint of ale in his fist.

“Arrest him, constable,” she instructed the young official.

“On what charges?”

“Extortion, and fleeing justice.”

“I... can’t. Not without a warrant.”

“I guarantee, the warrant is on file at your office, or one phone call will confirm its existence.”

Reluctantly, the uniformed ginger unhooked a set of handcuffs from his belt. Carver retreated, eyes wide with fear. He threw the beer glass at the constable, who made to pursue him, but tripped over a stool Carver tossed in his path.

The fugitive meandered between tables toward a rear exit. Sheila anticipated his moves, circling the perimeter and preempting his escape. Knuckles aimed at her head slammed into hardwood paneling instead, and Carver recoiled, cradling bloody digits to his chest.

The detective slammed him onto a straight wooden chair. "I've just one question for you: why?"

"I ain't talkin'."

"Talk to me, or to the cops."

"You... you..."

"If government officials haven't caught you, when you've not hidden your presence in any way, they obviously don't give a damn about extraditing you back to the States. But, I need the story behind your blackmail racket."

Defeated, Carver's shoulders drooped. "Get me another beer."

Sheila signaled the barman, then focused on the hulking wreck before her.

"It's this way, see? Wendy and me went to high school together. She was gorgeous then. Wavy blonde hair, blue eyes, nice figure. We... did what came natural, she got pregnant, and her dad made me marry her. The baby died of complications two days after he was born."

"I'm... sorry," Sheila interspersed.

"We were both heartbroken. I'd quit school to get a job, so we could afford the rent on an apartment, and she suffered such depression, she dropped out, too. So, there we were, two ignorant kids, scratching out a living in a one room hole.

"After a few months, Wendy started complaining about the conditions. She thought if she could find a better man, he'd take proper care of her. So, in a fit of anger, I told her to go out and look for one. She took me at my word, and the next time I saw her, she was walking with another guy down Main Street, a huge diamond on her finger."

Sheila didn't interrupt.

"I confronted her when she went into the dress shop. She treated me like dirt, and said she'd married that dandy, and he was taking her to California. I was so mad, I hit her across the face and ran out the back door. I got drunk for three days, then decided to tell the guy the truth. Wendy begged me not to, claiming she loved him. She... isn't capable of love. I know that now."

Carver drained the pint in one gulp, wiping froth from his scowling mouth with his shirt sleeve.

“By chance, I was reading through old newspapers at the library, when I came across their wedding announcement. The guy came from a prominent St. Louis family. That’s when I hatched the idea of sending him an anonymous letter, threatening to tell his family about Wendy’s bigamy. The first thousand bucks paid a lot of my debts, and I learned to like having scratch in my wallet.

“Wendy came back to me after the guy left her cold, about a month later. When she saw I had money, she warmed up to me quite a bit, and wondered how we could get more. I joked that she should go and find another sucker to marry. She was dense enough to do just that! Every couple years, she’d drag some fool to the altar, and we’d up our income accordingly.”

“What about the children?”

“My little sister turned out to be almost as dense as Wendy. She liked to run off for months at a time, leaving her little ones with our ma. I’d take them off the old gal’s hands now and again, to give Wendy a boost, if her latest target seemed to be slipping away.”

Sheila stifled her opinion of these tactics. The constable, who’d recovered from his tumble, stood behind Carver, waiting for him to finish this narrative. As he reached to cuff the larger man, Carver reared back and slammed him into the next table.

“I thought you said I wouldn’t be arrested!” shouted the blackmailer.

“Not for anything you told me,” confirmed Sheila. “But, you have assaulted an officer, which is a separate offense, and I can’t help you there.”

“Bitch!” Carver lunged at her; she easily sidestepped the attack. Two laborers, whose drinks the angry American had spilled, seized his arms. He swung them around and propelled them into captivated patrons.

A full-scale brawl erupted, which Sheila watched from a position near the juke box, smiling broadly. The tumult reminded her of scenes from classic western movies.

Extracting Clyde Carver from the fray, as more bodies littered the floor than stood upright, the London detective escorted him into the dank night air.

“Where are you taking me?” he bumbled, spitting blood.

“To see your wife.”

Carver attempted to reverse his steps, unsuccessfully. “Oh, no! Have you seen her lately? My God, she’s disgusting...”

“You’re no rose, yourself.”

Rifling his trouser pockets for cash, she paid for his ticket as they boarded an overnight express. The return trip took longer than Sheila's initial journey, because construction crews labored under generator-powered lamps to expedite completion of the track upgrade project.

Carver grumbled and moaned the entire distance, to Sheila's dismay. His left eye swelled to a black lump; abrasions on his hands and chin did not augment his appearance. Hailing a taxi at Paddington Station, the driver cringed at the pair.

"You been in a war?" he wondered.

"Just get us to Bart's."

"Right-o."

Watson was emerging from the building when Sheila alighted on the sidewalk, Carver in tow. "She's not there," said the former.

Sheila asked, "The police take her?"

"When security came for her, she rattled something about getting a lawyer and filing charges against everyone and their brother."

"Good luck with that." Sheila sighed. "John, this is Clyde Carver."

The men did not shake hands.

"How's Frank?" she pressed.

"They intubated him last night. It's a matter of hours."

"Mac's with him?"

Watson nodded wearily.

"Thanks, mate."

"What about him?"

Sheila gazed at Carver. "He's confessed to everything, and added to his problems by inflicting violence on one of Bath's best and brightest."

"You're taking him to Scotland Yard?"

"I'll... notify them of his presence in the city, but I need to see Mac."

Released, Clyde Carver didn't know how to react. "I'm... free to go?"

"You'll never be free, until you pay your debt to society, and make amends to the men you duped," Sheila admonished. "Get out of my sight."

A series of tentative steps preceded Carver's ungainly flight into the morning chaos. The pair from Baker Street contemplated his disappearing form, then entered the hospital.

The only sounds in the patient room were beeps from the monitor, and the oxygen supply pump. Andrews sat where Wendy Horton had previously been ensconced, Frank's hand sandwiched between his.

Sheila rounded the bed and tenderly squeezed Andrews' shoulder. Frank's eyes blinked in quick succession, the thick tube inserted down his throat preventing speech.

"He wants to thank you for straightening this out," translated Andrews solemnly. "So do I."

"Do you... want me to stay?"

"You must be beyond knackered, and I know how grumpy you get when you're knackered." The female impersonator managed a feeble laugh.

"You'll... ring me?"

"You'll be the first."

The message awaited Sheila on her cell phone's voice mail when she reached Baker Street. She'd left the device beside the computer in her haste, and learned Frank Bescombe had breathed his last five minutes after she'd taken her leave.

She and Watson stared at each other in silence for a few seconds, before parting ways in favor of their respective beds.

The Palace Theatre hosted a grand memorial service for Frank the following Monday - the cast's one day off. His ashes, in a suitably theatrical urn shaped like a pair of tap shoes, were enshrined on a make-shift altar, and many of those with whom the choreographer had collaborated in the past decade paid him tribute, through words and music. A procession drove to the cemetery where he would be inurned high on a wall with other artists, prior to 200 people sharing a meal at the Savoy.

"Expensive, isn't it?" Sheila whispered to Andrews as they enjoyed the third of seven courses.

"Frank wanted it this way. Most theatre people know what it's like to rush from place to place, with never time for a really good meal. He wanted this last to be the best, so everyone would remember."

"Wise man."

"Yes, he was," Andrews hiccuped, suppressing a sob.

"What... will you do next?"

"The show must go on, as they say, Sherlock. I've moved to a different flat, though. I'll clean out the other before we leave on tour..."

"Tour?"

He chuckled. "Didn't you know? A selection of the original cast will be replaced at the end of August, and will embark upon a ten-city tour of the Continent in September."

"That's... fantastic."

“Frank and I finalized the plans right before... before...”

“And he’ll be with you every step of the way,” Sheila soothed.

“He’ll find a way to bless you, too, for what you did.”

Awkwardly, she mumbled, “I’m... blessed just having known him - and you.”

Waiters brought fresh plates, and other conversations distracted the pair. That evening, in the cluttered sitting room at Baker Street, Sheila kicked off her dress loafers and wiggled her aching toes.

“Nothing like that for me,” she remarked to Watson, lounging on the red velvet divan. “My funeral will be a small, quiet affair.”

He asserted, “And not take place for many, many years.”

“Amen.” She yawned. “Shall we make it an early night?”

“I could sleep for a week!”

“I promise not to wake you.”

Watson rose, adjusting his prosthetic. “I’ll hold you to that.”

A Matter of Espionage

Finding Roderick Anthony Andrews on the threshold of 221B Baker Street that August Thursday did not please Sheila Holmes as much as it should have, and she feared her facial expression reflected as much. After years of no contact whatsoever, her dealings with the renowned female impersonator had occurred too frequently in the past nine months.

His tawny hair perfectly parted on the left and combed across a smooth brow, high cheekbones accented by his pleasant smile - which softened his sharp features - Andrews wore a grey silk cravat, black suit and Armani shoes. He obviously didn't discern her displeasure, because he kissed her affectionately on the lips and breezed past, mounting the stairs by twos.

Hiking up the tattered dressing gown, she practically chased him into the gloomy sitting room, thanks to smudged windows she never bothered to wash. He brusquely reached to switch on the desk lamp and sighed his approval of the increased illumination.

"What's going on, Mac?" Sheila prodded, as he contemplated the pipe rack on the dusty fireplace mantle.

"I've come to personally invite you to be part of a special performance on the thirtieth."

Instantly, the woman's suspicions were aroused. "Special, how?"

"Members of the royal family will be in attendance that night - the final show for the original cast before our continental tour. We will be presented in their box and receive some honor or other, and I want you with me."

"In what capacity?"

"I want to dance the finale with you."

"But, you have a perfectly competent leading lady... if you can call her that."

Indeed, the concept of *Switched Up* involved male roles being played by females, and vice versa. The idea had been fleshed out when Sheila and Andrews were students at Oxford University years before, where they produced the musical off campus.

"She's excellent on the single numbers," Andrews clarified. "But 'competent' isn't good enough for this show. Please, Sherlock."

Just as Andrews had nicknamed her after her great-great-uncle, she called him "Mac" after his Scottish mother's maiden name. Nonetheless, she bristled when he uttered the name in this chamber.

Smelling the distinct odor of pungent tobacco immediately, confirming the ethereal presence of the real Sherlock Holmes.

"I've... seen the royal family on numerous occasions," Sheila objected. "I don't need..."

"Fact is: I need *you*. It's our last night at the Palace, after all. I've so wanted to ring you and take you dancing - not as professional collaborators, but just for fun - and I've been far too busy. Dancing with you is a true joy for me, and I'm begging you..."

Her brunette head bowed, she raised her hands in submission. "Don't beg, please. You're a major star now. You can get the best hoofers on the planet to be your partner."

"I *want* you." He grasped her biceps with firm hands. "It's not that you're the best, but you're the best with this routine. You originated it, and you have the right feel for it..."

"Okay, okay."

"Afterward, we'll go dancing, for fun."

"If my feet don't fall off!"

Planting thin lips on her forehead, Andrews released her and made his exit. Sheila watched him buck and wing down the creaking stairs, chuckling.

"What the hell..." muttered Johnny Watson, emerging from his room in white t-shirt and green jogging shorts. "Andrews, again?"

"We haven't seen him for three months."

"I could go three years, or three decades, without seeing him." Watson shuffled to the round table and filled a mug with steaming coffee. "He's a nuisance."

"Aren't most friends nuisances, at one point or another?"

Blue eyes widened. "Are you calling me..."

"No, John." Sheila caressed his unshaven cheek. "I fear I'm a nuisance to *you*."

He kissed her palm with a cheesy grin. "Correct."

She left him eating breakfast while she slipped into cut-off jeans and a U2 tank top. She considered the slovenly image in the mirror, pulling the shirt's cloth tight to reveal a trim, well-honed frame. Andrews honored her by requesting her participation in his final London appearance, and it would be a great thrill to meet the royals under less than tense circumstances.

In the weeks prior to the designated date, Sheila rehearsed periodically with Andrews and minimal orchestra. Then, she would return home and soak her feet, popping pain relievers with a tall glass of milk.

“I might think I’m fit,” she complained one evening. “These workouts prove me wrong.”

“It’s a different set of muscles,” stated Watson.

“But, they’ve been well used recently.”

“Not constantly, not everyday. If, instead of Wing Chun, you exercised by dancing, your body would soon become accustomed...”

“I barely have time for the Wing Chun. That’ll have to do...”

“Speaking of which, any new cases?”

“Much of the same. Small, insignificant matters which can be solved in a matter of minutes, with a bit of deductive reasoning. Keeps the bills paid.”

“Will Andrews be paying you for this gig?”

“I... didn’t ask.”

“We can’t eat whatever accolades you receive from some prince or duchess.”

“It’ll get my name in the papers. Attention is always good.”

“Not the wrong kind,” grumbled Sherlock Holmes, manifesting in a cloud of tobacco smoke.

“There is no ‘wrong kind’, Uncle.”

“Oh, indeed, there is! A prominent detective has no use for publicity which lauds her for being a superior dancer.”

“It shows I’m versatile.”

He snorted in derision, as she crossed to open a window, letting fumes from the ghost’s pipe mix with the heat of the day.

Arriving at the Palace Theatre well before the curtain that Sunday, Sheila wasn’t surprised by additional security measures meant to keep the royals safe, from actual danger and the general public. She peeked into Andrews’ dressing room, where his transformation into Rikki Anthony - blonde, voluptuous and energetic - was in progress.

“I... just had a thought,” Sheila ventured, glimpsing elegant gowns hung in the closet. “I don’t have anything suitable to wear for the presentation.”

“Feel free to borrow any of those. We’re about the same size.”

“If I wear flat heels, sure. When it comes to the bustline...”

“My falsies are twice as big as your God-given assets,” snickered Andrews. “There are one or two which hang freely from the shoulders, so it shouldn’t matter.”

He helped her select a mauve, beaded formal with spaghetti straps and flowing skirts. “Makes it easier to curtsy,” the actor commented.

“Just remember, you’ll need to bow.”

“When I wear a suit, I bow. In a dress, I curtsy. It comes naturally, these days.”

She withdrew to her assigned space, a spare cubicle along the corridor. Her last two stints in the production, she’d occupied the leading lady’s chamber, but this time, she was merely an extra.

An extra who took eight curtain calls to a standing ovation. Hastily wiping thick make-up from her face, she ditched white tie and tails in favor of the gown, and accompanied Andrews and select others to the Dress Circle.

The specialty artists were received first in the sumptuous sitting room behind the royal box, and tittered excitedly upon departing. When the usher signaled Andrews and Sheila inside, they were astonished when the door closed firmly behind them.

Not only were two gangly, teenaged princes and their cousin, a very pregnant princess, present, but the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. The couple were greeted enthusiastically, then offered gold-trimmed throne-like chairs.

“Miss Holmes,” began the dapper, middle-aged official charged with international relations, “we requested your presence this evening because the British government hopes you and Mr. Andrews will be able to assist us with a matter of some delicacy.”

Sheila glared at Andrews. “Requested... my presence?” she repeated. “You stitched me up, Mac?”

“I truly did wish to dance with you,” countered the female impersonator. “They simply asked me to bring you up here after the curtain calls.”

“Bastard.”

“I love you, too.”

“If you don’t mind!” the Prime Minister interjected, loosening his black bow tie.

“Sorry,” Sheila apologized.

The Foreign Secretary exhaled loudly. “Thank you. As I was saying: this is a matter of grave importance, highest security, and decided timeliness, given that many members of this exceptional cast will be leaving for the Continent in two days.”

“I’m not going,” clarified Sheila.

“We are positive you’ll change your mind.”

“I have plenty of obligations in the city...”

The Prime Minister stated, “Your greatest obligation is to your country.”

“Since when?”

“Since we have been informed there is a Russian spy among the cast, who will be making contact with agents during the forthcoming tour, and passing along sensitive information. That information could severely compromise our national interests abroad, as well as those of our allies.”

Sheila couldn't help but laugh. “Did you pull that speech from an old movie?”

“This is no time for levity, Miss Holmes,” remarked the Foreign Secretary. “Please do not underestimate the import of the situation.”

“Then, put MI6 on it.”

The Prime Minister squirmed in his seat. “We are... spread rather thin, thanks to budget cuts. Besides, you are familiar with theatrical operations, and are familiar with many of the cast members already. To bring in an agent at this late stage...”

“You've known about this for weeks, if not months?” Sheila pressed.

Both men nodded.

“But you wouldn't act upon the knowledge until the spy makes contact with his or her associates, so you could gut their entire network?”

“Precisely,” said the Foreign Secretary.

“You watch too many movies. It doesn't work that way in real life. What you should've done is compile a cast list, and run checks of their bank accounts. Sudden, unusual spikes in a balance could indicate payment for services rendered...”

“That is something we wish you to pursue.”

The woman rose, bowing slightly to the young royals. “Sorry, sir. I have to pass.”

“Sherlock, consider what's at stake!” warned Andrews, seizing folds of mauve fabric. “The reputation of the show, my reputation... and yours.”

“Mine? Don't dump that crap on me, Mac. There'd be no way any of this would make it into the papers, or even on the internet, if their security measures hold true. No one would ever know I'd been involved.”

Andrews' brown eyes flashed toward the politicians, who silently confirmed her assertion. He also relinquished his chair. “Then, I'm afraid you're on your own, Mr. Prime Minister.”

Backing across the threshold, door held by the usher, the pair trekked along the corridor toward elegant, curved stairs. They heard footsteps, and turned to find the Foreign Secretary, panting and stooped, behind them.

“Please, come back, and let us discuss this. Perhaps, in the forty-eight hours before the cast leaves for Stockholm, you can use your unique talents...”

“That’s a different story,” agreed Sheila. “Mac, get to the office and find the list of people traveling with you on tour.”

“You really think...” the actor stammered.

“You’d be surprised what I can accomplish with a tight deadline!”

The Prime Minister had approached at a more dignified pace. “You’ll be in contact?”

“What, I should just ring Number 10 Downing Street and tell your secretary I want a word?”

He extracted an embossed business card from the inside pocket of his tailcoat. “This is my direct, private line. I’m available 'round the clock.”

Sheila’s mouth twitched into a slight smile. “As soon as I know, you’ll know, too.”

A white-gloved hand wrung Sheila’s fingers. “You don’t know how much we appreciate this,” gushed the Foreign Secretary.

“A nice fat cheque when I’ve done the job will be proof enough,” she chuckled, watching the two dignitaries descend to the lobby.

Andrews restrained her when she made to do likewise. “Are you sure about this, Sherlock? There’s bound to be an element of danger.”

“For me, yes. For you, no.” She hiked up her skirts and felt with her foot for the first step. “Bring that list to my dressing room. I’ve got to change into some comfortable clothes!”

Ten minutes later, she reclined on a ragged divan, rubbing a cramp from her left calf.

Andrews found her there, and surrendered five sheets of computer paper. “Nearly three dozen cast and crew are making the trip. We’ll use local talent to fill the gaps.”

“You haven’t noticed anyone behaving oddly, have you?” Sheila puzzled.

He snickered, “Men walking around in dresses, and women in tuxedos isn’t odd enough for you?”

“What about passports? Everyone have theirs, and are they all issued by the British government?”

“I’d... have to check that. I had everyone turn theirs in to one of the production assistants to be sure they weren’t expired, and that their names matched the plane tickets.”

“There might be a spreadsheet, then. Have your people look into it, first thing tomorrow.”

“They’ll... be busy packing.”

“It’ll take less than five minutes, and save me hours.”

Unfortunately, those hours would not be saved. Andrews' call woke Sheila from her fitful sleep at 7:30 with news that the origins of the casts' passports had not been recorded.

Retrieving her great-great-uncle's worn dressing gown, Sheila stomped across the sitting room and threw open Watson's bedroom door. "I've got a job for you, John!"

He rolled toward her, blue orbs heavily lidded. "It better be urgent."

"Believe me, it is."

"Damn."

Two cups of coffee serving to rouse him from his stupor, Watson parked himself at the desk and began typing search parameters on the keyboard. He paused at one point and glared at Sheila in the basket-chair, fingertips steepled together in a meditative pose. "Why can't you do this yourself?" he inquired. "You're pretty good with computers."

"'Pretty good' isn't sufficient," she replied. "You have the skill of a hacker, and the personal contacts to get information otherwise unavailable online."

"Is that the only reason you keep me around?"

When she remained silent, he resumed his work, eventually printing out bank statements and passport data for her review.

"Three French, one Italian, and a Greek," Sheila mused, disappointed. "Each living from paycheck to paycheck."

"But, look at this," Watson suggested, folding the second page to highlight an astonishing figure.

A series of 50,000 pound deposits in the past eight weeks had vastly enriched one cast member. "That's Mac's bank account. He... should be relatively well off, given he's the producer and star..."

"Even though, not six months ago, he hadn't enough to pay his debt to the mob?"

Sheila's violet eyes scanned Watson's war-embittered countenance. "No, John. No."

"He's a master of disguise, given he can pass as male or female at the drop of a hat. He could go anywhere, do anything, and no one would ever know his real identity."

"No, John."

"Ring him. Get him over here."

"I..."

“If you won’t, I will. He’ll come, if I tell him you’re out running and will meet him.”

Documents slipped to the floor as Sheila hung her head. “I’ll do it.”

“It might turn out to be advance payments for the tour, coming from a foreign bank like that,” soothed Watson. “You have to ask him, if only to eliminate him as a suspect.”

“Should do.” She reached for the phone. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’ve been talking with Uncle Sherlock.”

“Who says I haven’t, you’ve been gone so much.”

While Watson took advantage of the hot breakfast Edith Hudson-Thorne delivered at 9:00, Sheila disappeared into her room and let emotions consume her. If it came to pass Roderick Andrews had engaged in espionage, after the British people had made him a star, she couldn’t predict how she would react.

Within an hour, the black turtleneck and jean clad guest lounged on the red velvet Victorian divan, sipping Oolong tea from a china cup. “You’re stalling, Sherlock,” he prompted. “I’ve a million things to do before we catch the plane tomorrow...”

“Mac, I...”

“Stop wasting time!” barked a baritone accompanied by the scent of pungent tobacco.

Andrews’ tawny head whipped around, searching for the unseen voice.

“What the hell...”

“You call her by my name, because you don’t really believe in her capacity to solve crimes, which is why you attempted to perpetrate one right under her nose, thinking she’d never discover the truth!”

Petrified brown orbs fastened onto Sheila’s mortified mien. “You auditioning to be a ventriloquist?”

A spectral Sherlock Holmes emerged from the shadows, knocking a spent plug of shag from his briar pipe on the fireplace mantle. “Don’t be a damned fool.”

“God, Uncle, I wish you hadn’t...” Sheila groaned.

“Then, get on with it!”

Andrews tried to rise, falling back onto the cushions in a swoon, his sharpish features blanched sickly white. “Get on... with what?”

“Where’d the money come from, Mac?” demanded Sheila.

“What... money?”

“Over two hundred thousand pounds, swelling your bank account since late June.”

Aching to laugh at the ridiculous accusation, Andrews nonetheless was stupefied by the sight of dark-haired, frayed-sleeved Sherlock Holmes hovering over his great-great-niece's shoulder, a pair of avenging angels. "My grandfather died in Switzerland, and I'm his sole heir."

"Bullshit," hissed Watson, protectively positioned near the door.

"Fine, then why don't you tell me how the money came into my hands?"

"The Russkies."

Gradually recovering his composure, Andrews shifted his gaze to the British Army veteran. "You've lost your bloody marbles, lad! What would I be doing spying for the Russians?"

"Making a good living, while the rest of the cast falls behind on their rent," Sheila proposed.

On his feet, the actor spoke through clenched teeth. "All right, all right! Truth is: the money came - in a roundabout fashion - from the British government itself. They... want me to spy for them while I'm on the Continent, by listening to the politicians and wealthy sorts who will be attending our performances, coming backstage, and enjoying the parties..."

Sheila didn't accept this explanation, either.

Until Andrews added, "And, if you blow my cover, I could end up dead."

Watson still didn't believe. "You could be a double agent..."

"Oh, shut up, Johnny!" raged the actor. "I only agreed to it in order to pay off the show's debts, which is required before we leave the country."

"Debts?" Sheila echoed. "Practically every performance has been sold out, how could there be debts?"

"Besides the mob financing? Oh, a lot of reasons. Particularly because a glut of complimentary tickets were distributed to random social organizations and clubs, to make it look like the show was doing well. We've been in the red since day one."

Sherlock stepped forward, glowering down at the suspect. "Your left hand, carefully concealed, has been repeatedly clenching and unclenching since this conversation started. There is much you aren't telling us..."

"If you're trying to make me admit I'm nervous - bloody hell, yes! Who expects to see a ghost at this hour of the day, and while stone cold sober?"

"That's not all."

Reluctantly, Andrews confessed, "I... wanted Sherl... er, Sheila to confirm my suspicions about the spy, without telling tales and possibly causing trouble where none existed."

"You know who it is?" demanded Sheila.

“A couple weeks ago, I arrived at the Palace early, and was flipping through unopened mail on Pop’s desk. You know how the slightest sound reverberates through that tomb. In the wings, I could hear two people talking, who probably thought they wouldn’t be overheard. I pretended to pay no heed, but noticed Yancy Edwards sneak from behind the curtains a few minutes later.”

“Who was the other person?”

“I... don’t know. I went to my dressing room.”

Sherlock wondered, “What were they discussing?”

“Our stops on the tour.”

“Which are?”

“Stockholm, Amsterdam, Brussels, Berlin, Warsaw, Prague, Moscow, Rome, Paris.”

“That’s only nine.”

“Eh?”

Sheila supplied, “You said it was a ten city tour.”

Andrews counted on his fingers. “I said ten.”

“No, only nine.”

“That’s because the tenth is Kiev, Ukraine,” noted Watson. “A perfect spot to make contact with your superiors.”

“Kiev is... tentative. The unrest in the region...”

“Then, why include Moscow? There’s political unrest there, too, and oppressive sanctions against...”

Clenched fists beat empty air. “Why are you haranguing me this way? I’m not the spy you’re after!”

“You know who is, because you’re protecting him,” drawled Sherlock.

“I... won’t. I won’t be dragged into this silly game...” Andrews stormed from the sitting room, slamming the door.

The tenants and their ethereal visitor stared at each other, dumbfounded.

“What now?” muttered Sheila, sinking on the basket-chair.

Sherlock advised, “Follow him.”

“He’ll be... expecting something like that.”

“He’ll slip into some disguise, and flee the country,” Watson offered.

“Then, you do likewise,” said Sherlock.

His great-great-niece gulped, “What, flee the country?”

“No, disguise yourself and go after him. He’s in a panic just now. He’ll try to make contact with whoever he’s protecting, to put them on guard.”

She considered this logic. “He’s seen me too often as a man. As a woman...”

“Come, I’ll help you.”

Watson didn’t recognize his flatmate when she emerged from her room, so dramatic the change. She’d aged fifty years, acquired osteoporosis, and wore a salt-and-pepper wig, pillbox hat, and thick spectacles above a frightful mole on her right cheek.

“Where do I start?” she speculated, studying her reflection in the full-length mirror.

Sherlock instructed, “His lodgings, naturally. If he’s not there, he’ll be at the theatre, supervising the packing, wouldn’t you say?”

Her uncle’s reasoning meshed with her own.

Watson tucked a folded sheet in her ill-fitting skirt pocket as she hobbled out the door. “Your friend may have told us the truth, after all,” he whispered.

On the landing, Sheila perused the text. Yancy Edwards was the stage name of Edward Yankowicz, whose mother still lived in Russia. A considerable sum of money recently wired directly to the matron would make it possible for her son to bring her back to London at the end of the theatrical tour.

That being the case, why had Andrews raised such a fuss? she pondered, determined to learn the whole truth.

Use of a silver-knobbed walking stick aggravating her spine, Sheila took a break from her excursion, veering into the small coffee shop near the Palace Theatre, to refresh herself and rest. Turning from the counter with her espresso, she saw a very dejected Roderick Andrews toying with a scone and staring out the window, passing pedestrian traffic invisible to his glazed orbs.

“I owe you an apology,” stated the detective, sliding onto the wooden chair opposite him.

Slowly, he considered this odd creature’s presence. “Excuse me?”

“If you’re free tonight, I’ll take you up on that invitation to go dancing.”

“Huh?”

“Mac, it’s me.”

Brown eyes widened so far, she thought they might pop from Andrews’ skull. “Damned incredible make-up, Sherl... I mean, Sheila.”

“Uncle Sherlock concocted it. I’m... sorry about that row at Baker Street.”

“Having a ghost get involved made things a bit... surreal, to be sure.”

Andrews sipped his tea. “How long has he been... haunting you?”

“Since shortly after I moved in. I’d assumed he might materialize, yet... the first time he did, I thought I’d gone mad.”

“Ditto. Does he really think I’m the spy? For that matter, do you?”

“I think you’re *protecting* the spy, which is still a prosecutable offense.”

“Why would I...”

“Because, I remember you telling me, back at Oxford when we’d stop in a little place quite like this after rehearsals, about your great-grandmother’s escape from Russia during the pogroms. She made it to Poland, then her daughter had to flee Poland when Hitler invaded...”

“What has that to do with...”

“Yancy Edwards’ mother is in the same spot - trapped in Russia. He came to you for help, which is why Moscow and Kiev were added to the tour. If the information he delivers to his contacts in Kiev proves valuable, his mother will be put on the plane in Moscow.”

“He’s a good kid, Sheila, who made a stupid choice. If he’d come to me earlier, I could’ve... managed something.”

“Like another loan from the mob?”

Andrews snorted. “At least, I got them paid off with the government cash.”

“So, you’ll really be spying for our side as you travel from city to city?”

“Not that I’ll hear any top secret information. People at first night parties don’t discuss such things.”

“At least, not in the main hall.”

He glanced at his wrist watch. “God, it’s getting late, and I’ve a million things to do!” He drained his cup and rose. “I’ll pick you up at eight.”

“What for?”

“We’re going dancing!”

Once Sheila had stripped off the latex appliances which had enlarged her nose and added wrinkles to her forehead and chin, replaced the clothes in her wardrobe and soaked away aches and stiffness with a warm bath, she rang the Prime Minister and explained the situation. Sadly, Yancy Edwards would be apprehended before boarding the plane the following day.

Andrews’ grey Fiat braked at the curb near 221B Baker Street, and he breezed into the dwelling without knocking. Edith Hudson-Thorne rushed from her ground level parlor, stunned. “If you and John wish to come dancing with us, you’re more than welcome,” the female impersonator invited.

“I... I’m not...” stammered the landlady.

Watson, also, had no intention of exposing his prosthetic leg to public scrutiny. So, attired in a cream colored satin blouse and black dress slacks, Sheila accompanied Andrews down the stairs.

In the car, he tugged a small, oblong parcel from his pinstripe vest pocket and laid it on her palm. “To show my appreciation for all you’ve done,” he choked, shifting the engine into gear and concentrating on traffic.

An emerald and diamond pendant hung from the braided silver chain.
“Mac, this is... too much...”

“You’re worth every penny, and more.”

When they alighted from the vehicle across from a swanky night club known for its 40s style big band music, she allowed Andrews to fasten the clasp around her neck. As he admired the adornment, he stepped away from the Fiat into the path of an oncoming delivery truck.

Sheila stood, frozen in horror, at the sight of Roderick Andrews lying in a puddle of blood on the dimly lit street. The lorry driver rushed to her, ranting that he hadn’t seen the victim in time to avoid the collision.

Emergency personnel treated her for shock, while their associates attempted to stabilize the injured man, the damage to his organs just too extensive.

Fastened to a backboard and loaded onto a gurney, Andrews gurgled unintelligible nonsense until Sheila was allowed to approach. With a final burst of energy, he gripped her hand and squeezed hard. Wrenched from the pain he must’ve been enduring, he uttered the last syllable: “Sherl...”

The *Switched Up* tour was canceled in light of this tragedy, and Sheila spent weeks dreaming of Andrews, dancing her around the stage, both of them grinning like idiots because they enjoyed the experience so intensely. The London show closed at the end of September, crowds finally dwindling because the complimentary tickets had dried up.

In the weeks which followed, Sheila received a note of thanks from the Prime Minister. The Foreign Minister’s missive contained a check for ten thousand pounds. Yancy Edwards’ quiet trial garnered no media attention, and his confinement in a prison outside York prevented him from attending his mother’s funeral the following spring.

Sheila split the money with Johnny Watson, whose invaluable computer skills made the successful conclusion to the case possible. While she sequestered herself in her bedroom - where he often heard her sobbing - he decided to take a vacation north to Scotland, to visit family.

He knew his flatmate would recover in her own time, just as she’d done when James Moriarty had died. Within her beat the heart of a valiant lion, who would continue to emulate her lauded ancestor and solve mysteries for many years to come.