

The Shadow Over the Seine

Sherlock Holmes - The Secret Letters

Alistair Croft



Copyright © 2026 by Alistair Croft

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Contents

1. Foreword	1
2. Introduction	2
3. Letter II	11
4. Letter III	24
5. Letter IV	31
6. Letter V	44
7. Letter VI	52
8. Letter VII	74
9. Letter VIII	86
10. Letter IX	99
11. Letter X	112
12. Letter XI	123
13. Letter XII	136
14. Letter XIII	147
15. Letter XIV	156

16. Letter XV	170
17. Letter XVI and XVII	176
18. Epilogue	188

Foreword

By Alistair Croft

The period which followed the events at Reichenbach in 1891 has, over the years, given rise to no small amount of speculation. Sherlock Holmes's absence from the known records during those years has prompted many to attempt to fill the void left by his disappearance.

Those attempts have taken many different forms. Some have sought to reconstruct a plausible sequence of events, while others have allowed themselves a freer interpretation of the few traces that remain.

The material presented here makes no claim to bring those efforts to an end. It does, however, appear in a form that distinguishes it from most previous accounts. As the following pages will reveal, it consists of a series of letters, dated and arranged so that the events may be followed in their proper order. They bear every indication of having been written without any thought of future publication, and it is precisely this quality that lends them an authenticity which would be difficult to imitate.

The origin of the material is, in its essentials, not uncertain. The letters were entrusted to Dr. Watson under exceptional circumstances, accompanied by instructions that permitted their reading only at a later date. The form in which they are now presented is, however, the result of Dr. Watson's subsequent arrangement of the correspondence, accompanied by his own personal observations.

Introduction

By Dr. John H. Watson

It is one of those evenings when London itself seems to breathe more slowly than usual. The rain does not fall in showers, but as a constant, delicate veil. The glow of the street lamps is broken by the mist and dissolves into muted halos, which find their way only with difficulty through the narrow window of my study.

The room is not large, yet over the years it has acquired that peculiar character which can be produced only by the quiet tyranny of habit. The bookshelves bear the marks of frequent use; here and there a volume leans slightly, like elderly gentlemen engaged in conversation. Upon my desk stands the green-shaded lamp, whose concentrated light falls upon papers and instruments, while the remainder of the room rests in a gentle half-shadow. The fire in the grate has burned down to glowing embers, from which there comes, at intervals, a soft crackling.

I sit alone, yet it is not the sort of solitude that weighs upon a man, but rather one that has long since found its proper place. Advancing age does not necessarily bring resignation; it brings instead a certain order to one's memories. One learns to regard events as chapters of the same volume rather than as disconnected episodes. And there are evenings such as this, when time itself seems to enter the room and quietly make its presence known.

The world has changed. A war, the scale and savagery of which surpassed every previous conception, has swept across Europe like an unrelenting storm. Young men whom I watched step into adulthood with hope and eagerness now lie in churchyards in Flanders and along the Somme. Names that once formed part of my daily life now exist only in official lists and within the more private archives of memory. Even the sound of the city has altered; there rests upon it a note of caution, as though London has not yet fully accustomed itself to the silence that followed the war.

I, too, have grown older; there can be no denying it. My movements are no longer as swift as they were in those years when I followed clues without hesitation through dark alleys or across distant continents. My hands, which now rest upon the edge of the desk, bear the discreet marks left by time's patient labour. Yet my mind remains capable of gathering, arranging, and committing events to paper.

It is in that capacity that I most often find my role. As the chronicler. I have been witness to events which, in their own day, appeared extraordinary, but which have since found their place within a far greater narrative. My task has never been to dominate the story, but to preserve and convey it—to give it form without imposing upon it an interpretation of my own. I have learned, sometimes through experiences I would gladly have been spared, that the truth does not always reveal itself in its entirety at the moment when it first comes into view.

There is much that I have learned to accept. That people disappear. That cases which once seemed of the utmost urgency are eventually reduced to footnotes. That even the keenest intellect must in time yield to the inevitable passage of the years. Yet there remain certain things that have never been opened.

My gaze passes over the objects arranged before me. There are letters, journals, and notebooks—all remnants of a lifetime's work. My hand comes to rest for a moment above a small box standing discreetly to one side, as though it has deliberately withdrawn itself from my daily attention. For many years I have allowed it to remain untouched. Not out of fear.

That emotion I learned long ago to keep firmly in its proper place. Rather from a certain reluctance, understandable only to one who knows that a single breach of silence may set an entire chain of events into motion once more—not in the world itself, but within the mind.

It occurs to me suddenly that time can no longer be invoked as an excuse.

The clock upon the mantel strikes the hour with a muted yet resolute tone. I settle myself more comfortably, draw the lamp a little closer, and allow my fingers to rest upon the lid of the box. The wood is smooth from years of handling, yet the dust gathered along its edges bears witness to how long it has remained unopened.

Outside, the rain continues its patient labour. Within the room there is only silence—and the realisation that the world, despite all its changes, still contains events that have not yet found their proper place in the written word.

I draw the box fully into the circle of the lamp's light and allow it to rest before me for a moment, as though it still requires some formal permission. The wood is dark and without ornament; the lock simple, yet sturdy. I placed it there myself one evening many years ago, firmly resolved that its contents should remain undisturbed until the proper time had come.

I raise the lid. There is nothing theatrical in the sight that greets me, yet I feel a faint tightening in my chest. Inside lies a bundle of envelopes, carefully tied together with a narrow cord. They are all of the same quality: heavy, yellowed paper, somewhat thicker than that ordinarily used. Each is sealed with a familiar mark—a discreet yet unmistakable impression pressed firmly into the dark wax by a steady hand.

I loosen the cord and set it aside. The envelopes are numbered—not boldly upon the front, but in a smaller, precise hand placed in the upper right-hand corner. The numbers follow one another without interruption. Even here there is a suggestion of order—not merely in the contents, but in the intention behind them.

I take the uppermost envelope and slowly turn it over. The date has been entered with the precision I know so well. Beneath it—the name of the city,

Paris. I lay it gently aside and take up the next. Once again a date. Once again *Paris.*

An almost imperceptible nod passes through me, as though I am only now beginning to appreciate what, at the time, I merely observed in passing. Naturally I received the letters; I was fully aware of their existence. Yet I never paused to consider the testimony of their outward appearance.

I continue. After the first letters, the name of the city changes, *Rome.* The ink is the same, the handwriting unchanged, but the surroundings—hinted at only by a single word—have shifted. The dates follow one another with a regularity that speaks of movement; not haste, but steady progress. A journey continued with the same determination with which it had begun.

I arrange the letters before me so that their headings form a line across the desk. *Paris. Rome.* A pause. Then—and here I hesitate for a moment—a name which, in its own way, marks the beginning of another continent, *New York.*

I hold the envelope a little longer in my hand, not to open it, but simply to weigh it. The paper is slightly more worn at the edges, as though it has endured a longer passage. The postal markings, faint yet distinct, bear witness to a voyage across the ocean. There are traces of customs inspection—small marks which, at the time, I scarcely noticed.

It becomes clear to me that the journey which began in Paris carried him far beyond anything I had imagined. There is nothing dramatic in the realisation. No sudden revelation. No discovery of hidden dangers. Merely the quiet recognition that what I had assumed to be a temporary movement developed into something far greater. The names of continents now lie before me like milestones, and I understand that each letter contains not merely an event, but another step in a larger design which I have not yet fully perceived.

I gather the envelopes together once more, though this time I leave them untied. Outside, a hansom cab passes through the rain, its wheels sending a subdued murmur into the night. Within the room there is only the steady

glow of the lamp and the quiet row of letters, which seem to await my decision. I know that once the first seal is broken, the sequence will become inevitable.

I take up the uppermost envelope again. This one is different. The seal has already been broken, and the edge bears unmistakable signs that it was opened long ago. The paper has softened slightly along the fold, as though it has been unfolded and then carefully closed again.

I recognise my own handwriting immediately upon the inside of the flap. At the time, I noted the date on which it had been received. I withdraw the sheet and allow it to rest beneath the lamp. The ink has faded, yet it remains perfectly legible. The handwriting is the same precise, economical script that never wasted a stroke of the pen. The letter is brief.

October 12, 1891

Paris

My dear Watson,

Should this reach you, you will know that I remain beyond the borders of England. In the coming months you will receive further dispatches from me. I urge you most earnestly—and without reservation—not to open any of them until you receive my explicit permission to do so in my own hand.

Yours faithfully,

S. H.

Nothing more. No further explanation. No account of the circumstances in which he found himself, nor the slightest hint of the situation that surrounded him.

I remember well the day on which the letter reached me. It was the year following the events at the Falls. By then I had reconciled myself—as far as any man truly can—to the belief that I had lost him. The struggle at Reichenbach had left a deeper mark upon me than I was, at that time,

capable of expressing. I had stood upon the edge of the roaring waters, studying the signs that pointed unmistakably to a desperate conflict, and I had reached the conclusion that any rational observer must have reached: I had lost a friend.

The arrival of this first letter was therefore not merely a surprise, but a relief so profound that for several moments I found myself incapable of reading any further. The hand that had guided the pen belonged to a living man. That thought alone was enough.

I did not see him again until 1894. Our reunion—as I have described elsewhere—remains one of the most extraordinary moments of my life. To see him walk once more into my room at Baker Street, as calm as though nothing whatsoever had occurred, and to hear him explain the necessity of his withdrawal from the world, was an experience that both demanded and strengthened my loyalty.

But this letter—this very first one—arrived before that reunion. It came at a time when I still believed that his story at the Falls had ended forever. It came without explanation, without any promise that we should meet again, without even the faintest suggestion of a future reunion. There was only an instruction.

That I obeyed it without asking questions will scarcely surprise anyone acquainted with the nature of my relationship with him. It was not blind submission; it was a trust that had been tested over many years. If he found it necessary to impose silence upon me, then there must have existed reasons which I was not yet in a position to comprehend.

The letter contained no indication of how long that silence would be required. Nevertheless, more letters followed. At first they arrived at intervals, and later with greater regularity. Each bore the same hand. Each remained subject to the same uncompromising instruction: that I was not to break the seal.

I shall not deny that I found the task a difficult one. I was a physician; I had been trained to examine, to analyse, and to dispel uncertainty. To leave a succession of sealed documents lying untouched upon my desk

demanding a discipline that did not come naturally to me. Yet I had watched Holmes at work in circumstances where a single premature action might have placed everything in jeopardy. If he believed that my ignorance was necessary, then I was bound to accept it.

Now, many years later, they lie gathered before me. What was then uncertainty has become history. The instruction which I obeyed out of loyalty now rests openly in my hands—a testimony to the fact that silence itself may form part of a greater design.

I return the sheet to its envelope and allow it to rest once more upon the top of the pile.

It would be wrong to claim that I am only this evening becoming aware of the significance of what lies before me. On the contrary, I have for many years been fully conscious of the letters' existence. They have not been hidden away in some forgotten drawer, but kept where I might have reached them at any moment with the greatest ease. And yet they have remained unopened.

I have often asked myself why. It was not fear of the truth. I have faced enough harsh realities in the course of my life to know that truth seldom shows mercy. No. It was something else. A certain reluctance, which can be understood only by one who knows that a single breach of silence may make it forever impossible to return to it.

More than once I have taken the box from its place, only to return it again unopened. A particularly demanding period in my practice. An elderly patient requiring my full attention. An article that had to be completed. All were perfectly valid reasons, and yet I know now that none of them was the true explanation. I was avoiding the moment itself. For what happens once the first seal is broken?

The letters cease to be possibilities and become events. They establish a sequence which memory itself can no longer reinterpret. They lead me back to a time which, despite all the respect I bear it, I do not readily wish to enter again.

Memory is a pliable thing. It permits us to preserve what is essential while allowing the more painful elements to recede into the background. The written word, however, is inexorable. It preserves tones of voice, decisions, and silences that cannot be rearranged. I know that once I read the letters in the order in which they have been numbered, the past will assume a form that is no longer open to discussion. There will be no room for those gentle adjustments that time so kindly offers.

It is not merely his words that I have avoided. It is my own place within them. As a chronicler, I have at times permitted myself to arrange events in such a manner that the reader might more readily follow their inner logic. I have omitted, abbreviated, or reshaped certain details whenever it appeared necessary—not to distort the truth, but to clarify it.

Here no such liberty exists.

He numbered the letters. He determined their order. And he imposed silence upon me until the proper time had come. To open them now is not merely to read them. It is to accept that I can no longer choose when the past shall speak.

The rain outside has eased somewhat. The fire in the grate has almost burned itself out, and the room lies in a deeper darkness than before. I stretch out my hand and allow my fingertips to pass slowly over the edges of the envelopes, one after another. They have waited a long time. Perhaps too long.

I draw a slow breath, as I have done before many a difficult operation, and know that there no longer remains any valid excuse. The moment which I have avoided for so many years has not diminished through postponement. It has merely become inevitable.

I fold my hands upon the desk and look once more at the row of envelopes before me. It is clear to me that what now lies ahead is not merely an act of reading, but the fulfilment of an obligation.

I take up the next envelope. It remains intact. In the upper left-hand corner the date has been entered in a neat hand: **October 12, 1891**. Beneath it, in the same firm script, appears the name of the city: **Paris**.

The postmark, faint yet perfectly legible, confirms its place of origin. The oval French cancellation lies across the stamp, and although the passing years have caused the ink to fade somewhat, I can still distinguish every letter with ease. I observe these details with quiet attention. Only now, beneath the light of the lamp, does it seem to me that I am truly examining these outward signs for the first time.

I slip the letter knife beneath the flap. The paper offers the slightest resistance as the wax seal yields with a muted, brittle sound in the silence. I open it slowly, almost ceremoniously, as though the act itself demands a certain dignity.

The sheet slides out in a single piece. The handwriting greets me at once, unmistakable in every respect. The same firm inclination of the script. The same disciplined lines, in which not a single stroke of the pen is wasted. The letters stand clear and orderly, precisely as I have known them through so many years.

I straighten the page beneath the lamp and allow my eyes to fall upon the opening words. The voice that emerges from the paper is his. Clear. Precise. Without unnecessary introduction.

Outside, the rain continues its quiet descent upon London.

Within my study, however, it is another city that now begins to take shape. I begin to read.

Letter II

The Meeting with Moreau

October 12, 1891

Paris

My dear Watson,

The crossing from Dover passed without incident of any remarkable character, which is in itself a rarity when one considers the amount of disorder that may arise in a confined space containing six strangers and a limited allowance of luggage room.

My compartment contained a commercial traveller from Rouen, an elderly lady with three hatboxes, a young man who wished to appear an artist, and a civil servant whose boots revealed that he was only occasionally in Paris, whatever his remarks may have suggested. The first spoke too loudly and too often. The second was in constant conflict with the luggage rack. The third had paint upon his fingers, but no wear upon his clothes. The fourth carried a Lyon newspaper printed that very morning, yet held a ticket issued in Calais. The train stopped twice outside the timetable. None of the other passengers seemed to find any reason for surprise.

Upon my arrival at the Gare du Nord, the crowd was considerable, though not restless. Carriages and tramcars moved forward in a rhythm which, to a stranger, might have seemed disorderly, but which appeared to rest upon some tacit understanding between drivers and pedestrians. Men

in dark coats stood in small circles and spoke with their hands. A newspaper boy shouted the news with greater zeal than its contents justified. I recognised Paris, and the characteristic movement of the city.

I paused for a moment upon the pavement. A gendarme leaned against a lamppost and watched the stream of people without visible interest. A cabman offered transport in a voice one degree louder than necessity required. A woman crossed the street without looking back, and yet the traffic stopped. The city did not move forward. It shifted.

I followed the broad pavement of the boulevard, where the café chairs already stood facing the street like a permanent audience. Everywhere there was that same mixture of conversation and observation which marks the city: one speaks, and one watches.

I stopped briefly before a shop window displaying watches and small mechanical instruments—not for the sake of the goods, but for what the glass offered me. In its slightly distorted reflection, the flow of people behind me appeared reduced, and therefore more truthful.

A dark hat. Not remarkable in itself. Quite the contrary. The felt was of the kind one sees everywhere in Paris; neither new nor neglected. It was worn at a slight angle which seemed accidental. I walked on. At the next crossing I stopped to let a cab pass. The same hat appeared in the crowd, now apparently occupied with studying a poster for a play. Its wearer lit a cigarette with careful composure. The flame was properly shielded from the wind. The cigarette was raised to the mouth. But no smoke followed.

I turned without haste into a narrower side street, where the traffic was lighter and the shop windows lay closer together. I allowed my pace to slacken a little, as though I were studying the façades of the buildings. In a barber's mirror I again saw the dark silhouette. This time the hat had been removed. The man stood half-turned away, as though examining something in his pocket. The cigar—or whatever it may have been—had gone out. He lit it again. No smoke.

I continued, now with a deliberate randomness in my choices. I crossed the street without looking back, paused at a newspaper placard, and stud-

ied a bookseller's display with an interest that was not assumed, though neither was it necessary.

When I reached my hotel—a modest but proper establishment near the Seine—I noticed once more the same dark hat. It was now upon the head of a man who seemed to be studying the façade of the building with the mildly confused gaze of a tourist. The cigarette was lit for the third time. I passed him without allowing my eyes to rest upon him.

I made the following note:

“Certain repetitions within my field of vision do not appear accidental. A hat may be a hat. A cigarette may be a cigarette. But when the same hand lights it without smoking, and when the same silhouette takes up different positions at a consistent distance, chance ceases to be probable.”

I entered the hotel vestibule, where the light was subdued and where the receptionist moved his pen with the methodical care found only in houses that value discretion. I wrote my name in the register: Harald Sigurdson. The ink lay dark and clear upon the paper. When, a moment later, I let the door close behind me and ascended the stairs, the street was once again full of movement. The dark hat remained in place for a moment before slowly turning away.

I left the hotel after doing no more than setting down my luggage and changing my gloves. The evening was still young, and Paris had assumed that particular tone in which conversations grow a little softer without the city becoming quiet. The glow of the gas lamps rested like dull crowns above the pavements, and the interiors of the cafés were lit with a warm, almost golden radiance.

The café at the corner suited me admirably, not because it was the most esteemed, but because it offered a suitable balance between movement and visibility. The door opened inward, and I entered without haste.

The room was rectangular, with tables along the walls and a broad passage through the middle. A long mirror covered the rear wall and doubled the room in a slightly distorted reflection. The bar lay to the left; behind it

stood a man in a white apron whose movements were quick, though never hurried.

I paused for a moment, as though absorbed by the menu posted near the entrance. No rear door was visible. The kitchen seemed to be reached through a single swinging door beside the bar. The windows faced the street and were broad enough to permit observation, but not so low that a hurried passage would go unnoticed. I chose a table against the wall, a little to the right of the entrance. From there I had a clear view of the door and most of the room, while the mirror upon the rear wall enabled me to register movement behind me without turning my head. The light from the lamp above the table fell at an angle, so that my own face lay partly in shadow. I took my seat with my back to the wall. I placed my gloves to the left of the plate. I set my stick where it could be reached without moving the chair. I laid my hat upon the edge of the table, not quite parallel with its surface.

The waiter approached, and I gave my order in a voice that neither sought attention nor avoided it. I chose a simple dish and a glass of wine, which I allowed to be filled only halfway.

When the waiter had gone, I let my eyes move across the room. A group of students sat near the window and spoke with greater enthusiasm than was necessary. An elderly gentleman read a newspaper at a table in the centre, though his eyes left the text more often than his hand turned the page. At the bar stood a man with his back to me, apparently occupied with his glass. I did not turn my head. The mirror upon the rear wall offered all that was required.

The door opened, and for a brief moment the cold evening air slipped into the room. I did not raise my eyes at once. I waited. The door closed with a muted pressure. The man who had entered did not pause in the doorway, as many do when seeking to orient themselves. He took two steps into the room, allowed the door to fall into place behind him, and only then stopped, as though his pause had been decided in advance. He wore a dark coat of good quality, cut with French precision. The beret, which

he had not yet removed, sat correctly and without pretension. There was nothing in his dress that sought to attract attention, and for precisely that reason it did not. His gaze moved over the room with a calm that was not curious, but appraising.

I saw him in the mirror before I saw him directly. He slowly removed his hat and passed a hand through his hair, not as a vain gesture, but as a brief interruption in the movement. He handed the hat to the waiter without looking at him, and then crossed toward the centre of the room as though considering his possibilities. He did not choose the nearest table. Nor did he choose the most secluded. He chose a place from which he could see the entrance and, at the same time, observe the room at an oblique angle. Only then did his gaze fall to the right—toward the wall. Toward me.

There was no surprise in his face. No hint of recognition. Only a slight, almost imperceptible adjustment in the direction of his steps. He approached without haste. When he stopped beside my table, he did not speak at once.

Only then did I raise my eyes. For a brief moment our gazes met. In the stranger's eyes there was a firmness that was not challenging, but neither was it submissive. He was a man accustomed to speaking with men who considered themselves superior—and to remaining unimpressed by them.

The man sat down without being invited. He positioned his chair with a precision corresponding to my own. His back was not entirely to the room, but neither was it wholly to the wall. His hands rested loosely upon the table, his thumbs lightly touching.

The waiter approached again, and the man ordered without looking at the menu. When we were once more alone, a moment of silence settled between us. It was not the awkward silence of strangers, but the measuring silence of two men who both know that the first sentence may prove decisive.

I spoke first.

"I hope you will forgive my delay."

The stranger's gaze moved for an instant toward the mirror behind me.

"I have not waited long," he said. "And you have not been alone."

My hand moved slightly toward the glass.

"Paris is an attentive city."

"Yes," replied the stranger. "And it seldom forgets a new face."

Our eyes met again. Neither of us smiled.

The conversation remained upon the surface—the weather, the mood of the city, the difficulty of finding decent wine without paying for the name. Neither of us attempted to approach the real matter.

After a quarter of an hour, the stranger rose.

"Paris rewards the man who moves," he said. "It punishes the man who remains seated."

I inclined my head slightly, though I remained at the table a moment longer while he left the room without looking back. Only when the door had closed did I place a few coins upon the table and follow him.

The boulevard had grown darker. The lights from the shops threw long reflections upon the wet pavement.

The man stopped before the window of a bookseller. I reduced the distance between us by two paces and stopped beside him, without giving the impression that I had followed him deliberately.

Engravings lay displayed behind the glass. Landscapes, city scenes, a few religious subjects. I allowed my gaze to rest upon a landscape from Auvergne.

"The paper is newer than the print," I said quietly.

The other man did not react at once.

"I beg your pardon, monsieur?"

"The paper," I repeated. "It belongs to this century. The copper plate is older. A discrepancy of at least sixty years."

The stranger turned his head slowly. His eyes searched my face—not to recognize, but to judge.

"You appear to have an unusual interest in details."

"Details are less dangerous than people," I answered calmly.

There was a pause.

"You are not an art dealer."

"No."

"Police?"

"Nor that."

A faint, almost involuntary smile appeared.

"Then what are you, monsieur?"

I allowed my gaze to pass over his hands. The discolouration near the nail. The fine, almost invisible groove in the skin.

"A traveller," I said. "With a certain interest in chemistry."

"And what does chemistry tell you about me?"

I hesitated deliberately.

"It tells me," I said quietly, "that this morning you were working upon a canvas which did not wish to be as old as it was being compelled to appear."

The man's hand tightened upon his stick.

"You speak in riddles."

"So do you. But your riddles smell faintly of nitric acid."

A long moment passed. The man did not look angry. Rather, he seemed interested.

"Jean-Luc Moreau," he said.

"Harald Sigurdson," I replied.

Moreau repeated the name, placing a slight emphasis upon the first syllable.

"Scandinavian?"

I nodded. The answer brought a sharp look—but no further question. We began to walk side by side, and something between us had plainly already changed.

"You understand," Moreau said after a few steps, "Paris is the Mecca of forgeries."

I nodded.

"Most of it is small. Some of it is larger."

"It is always so."

Moreau stopped abruptly.

“This is very large.”

I looked at him questioningly.

“The pigment is rare. It comes from a workshop that does not supply bohemians.”

Moreau’s face tightened slightly.

In the reflection of a shop window I saw a dark hat pause a moment too long at a corner.

“If I am wrong,” Moreau continued calmly, “you have nothing to fear.”

“And if you are right?”

“Then we both have.”

“Come,” said Moreau. “There is a place where we may speak without mirrors.”

I followed him—after first noting that the dark hat had once again changed position.

We walked for some time in silence, until Moreau turned into a narrower street where the light from the boulevard’s gas lamps gave way to more scattered sources of illumination. There stood a small wine shop with a rear room whose windows were frosted and whose doorbell gave only a muted sound as we entered. The room was modest, but clean. A single table stood near the wall, and an oil lamp cast a concentrated glow upon the surface of the wood. The proprietor nodded briefly to Moreau without asking questions and withdrew behind the counter.

We sat opposite one another. There was no formal preamble. Moreau placed his hat upon the table, turned it a quarter of the way around, and spoke in a low voice.

“It began with a single canvas.”

I listened.

“A landscape, attributed to a pupil of Corot. Not a masterpiece, but sufficient to find its way into a private collection.” He let his fingers rest against the edge of the table. “The paper in the provenance document was correct. The signature convincing. The varnish had the proper patina.”

“And yet,” I said quietly.

“And yet,” Moreau repeated. “There was an inconsistency.”

He drew out a small notebook, opened it, and pushed it toward me. Not pictures—only brief technical notes.

“The pigment in the sky,” said Moreau. “It contained traces of a binding agent that did not come into common use until several decades later.”

I let my eyes move over the notes without touching them.

“An error by a less experienced hand?”

Moreau shook his head slightly.

“No. A deliberate adjustment. The forger understood aging techniques. He understood acid treatment, smoke, mechanical wear. He knew how to induce cracking in varnish.” He looked up. “But he chose a pigment which did not yet exist at the time from which the canvas claims to originate.”

“Overconfidence,” I said.

“Or access,” Moreau replied.

My gaze sharpened a little.

“Access?”

“To materials that are not freely sold. To workshops that restore older works. To laboratories.”

There was a brief pause.

“One canvas may be an error,” Moreau continued. “Two may be a pattern. I have now seen four.”

“By the same hand?”

“Of the same type,” said Moreau.

I allowed the silence to extend for a moment.

“Am I to understand that this is not merely a matter of minor forgeries?”

“Yes.” Moreau leaned forward a little. “Montmartre is full of men who paint copies for tourists and collectors of limited judgment. That is craftsmanship. Profitable, but limited.”

“And this?”

“This is an operation.”

The word hung between us.

"The canvases move through recognized channels," Moreau continued. "They are accompanied by documents that would survive a superficial examination. They do not end in back rooms. They end in private collections, in smaller museums—in circles where scandal is not desired."

My fingers rested quietly upon the tabletop.

"And you believe the trail leads out of Paris?"

"Some of it does."

"To Italy?"

Moreau looked at me without nodding.

"There are workshops in Rome," he continued slowly, "where pigments and varnishes are handled of a quality not commonly available. Officially, they are engaged in restoration. That is where it began. Now some of the work is being done here; only one place can be considered, and there, I suspect, our trail begins."

My gaze moved for a moment toward the door.

"You have tried to follow the money?"

"I have tried," said Moreau. "And I have received discreet warnings."

"From whom?"

Moreau hesitated.

"That is precisely the matter," he said. "Warnings without a sender."

I studied him closely.

"You have chosen to involve a foreign Norwegian."

"A foreigner," said Moreau, "can ask questions which I cannot."

"Because you are known?"

"Because I am recorded," Moreau corrected.

There was a faint movement at the corner of my mouth—not a smile, but an acknowledgment.

"You mean," I said calmly, "that there is a system behind it."

"I mean," Moreau replied, "that this is not the overconfidence of an artist, but institutional protection."

I said nothing.

The lamp flame stirred slightly as the door to the front room was opened and closed again. A voice sounded briefly and low, after which the silence returned.

"You have been followed since you arrived," said Moreau suddenly.

I did not raise my eyes.

"I have observed it."

"A dark hat?"

"Yes."

Moreau placed both hands flat upon the table.

"Then you understand that this is already larger than you were promised."

I met his gaze.

"I was promised nothing."

Again there was silence.

"Will you continue?" asked Moreau.

I did not answer at once. I let my fingers pass over the surface of the table, as though feeling the grain of the wood.

"Tell me," I said at last, "who first brought you into contact with the first canvas."

Moreau looked at me now without reserve.

"A collector," he said. "Not just anyone."

I nodded slowly.

Outside, there came the distant echo of horses' hooves upon the paving stones.

Moreau leaned back slightly, as though the conversation had reached a point at which it must either alter its course or cease.

"The first canvas appeared in March of 1884," he said in a tone that seemed casual. "A modest piece. Insignificant in itself."

My gaze still rested upon the surface of the table.

"March," I repeated calmly. "It was a cold month that year."

"You remember it?"

"I remember," I said, "that transport across the Alps was difficult that spring, particularly for goods that do not tolerate damp."

Moreau looked at me.

"That canvas was not transported across the Alps."

"Naturally not," I replied without changing my tone. "Not in March."

A silence followed, and it was not empty.

Moreau's eyes remained upon my face a moment longer than courtesy required. There was nothing triumphant in his expression, but rather a measured interest.

"I must have confused the date," he said lightly.

"It happens," I replied.

Neither of us corrected it.

The lamp flame moved faintly, and in that brief flicker the room seemed to draw a little closer around us.

Moreau closed the notebook without looking down.

"You notice small displacements," he said.

I gave a slight shrug.

"One should not place too much trust in dates," I said. "They are often the only things that can be changed with certainty."

Moreau nodded slowly.

"So we are agreed," he said, "that March was not the month."

I looked at him for the first time since the remark.

"We are agreed that you wished to know whether I was attentive."

An almost imperceptible smile appeared upon Moreau's face.

"You were."

"I always am," I replied.

The silent acknowledgment that arose between us was not a declaration of trust, but an alignment. We both now knew that the other did not speak without purpose—and did not listen without registering.

Moreau rose.

"It is late," he said. "And Paris is less discreet after midnight."

We stepped out into the cool night. The street was quieter than before, though not empty. A carriage passed slowly, and the light from its lanterns slid across the cobblestones in short, moving patches. A window opposite stood half open; voices sounded faintly from above and then disappeared again.

Moreau did not stop, but slackened his pace a little. In the reflection upon a dark pane of glass—a shop long since closed—a familiar silhouette appeared.

The dark hat.

Moreau noticed it without turning his head.

“Paris,” he said quietly, almost as a casual observation, “is a city with many eyes.”

I followed his gaze in the reflection. The man stood motionless at the corner. He did nothing, spoke to no one, and seemed to be waiting for no one. He was merely part of the structure of the night, like a lamppost or a closed door.

“Eyes,” I answered calmly, “have the disadvantage that they may also be seen.”

Moreau offered no further comment. We parted without any formal agreement. A brief nod. No handshake.

I walked in the direction of the hotel, my steps neither quicker nor slower than before. When I once more passed a shop window, I registered that the man had altered his position—not nearer, not farther away. The distance had been preserved, and there was no immediate danger in it.

Letter III

Observations by the Seine

The rain has eased.

I lay the first letter aside and remain seated for a moment without moving. It seems unreasonable to proceed at once, as though its contents required no brief consideration. I rise and place a few smaller pieces of wood upon the fire. The flames slowly take hold and cast a new, warmer glow across the panels of the room.

Upon the desk stands a pot which I have previously left untouched. I pour coffee into the cup without haste and observe that my hand is perfectly steady. It is merely a sober observation.

I must admit that the letter leaves me with more questions than answers. It seems clear to me that Holmes had already made arrangements with this French expert in art, Monsieur Moreau. Their meeting bears every sign of having been planned long before Holmes arrived in Paris, and their conversation shows that both of them already knew the general nature of the affair. It appears to concern art forgeries on a scale far beyond ordinary fraud. But there my understanding ends. Who Moreau truly is, how Holmes came into contact with him, and why the matter has brought my friend to France at all, I can as yet only guess.

The letters still lie in the order in which Holmes numbered them. I let my gaze rest upon the next. This time I do not hesitate. I break the seal with a surer movement, and the sheet unfolds in the light of the lamp.

*October, 1891**Paris*

My dear Watson,

After spending part of the day on foot through the streets of the city, I found it useful to pause in a place where movement might be observed without myself becoming part of it. My choice fell upon a small café overlooking the river, its tables arranged toward the street in such a way that the passing stream of people and vehicles could be followed without interruption.

It was toward evening. The light had not yet left the city, but it had lost its sharpness and now lay like a muted layer over the façades and the water, where the reflections broke into slow movements. The Seine slipped past with a calm that stood in contrast to the activity unfolding along its banks, yet was not without its own form of order.

I took a place at a table near the edge and allowed myself, for a time, to become part of the surroundings.

The sounds did not gather into one, but arranged themselves in layers. Wheels upon stone. The metallic cut of a tramcar through the street. Hooves repeating themselves in a rhythm that seemed independent of the surrounding movement. Voices that did not seek to break through, yet were nevertheless present—in brief exchanges, in laughter, in negotiations that never rose above necessity. A newspaper seller moved through the current with an insistence as regular as the river's own. From the nearby tables, smoke rose in slow, dissolving spirals and lingered for a moment in the air before disappearing into the cooler evening. None of this was remarkable in itself. And yet it was precisely in the undisturbed that the whole could be observed.

I let my gaze move along the riverbank and then across to the opposite side, where the movements repeated themselves at another tempo, but with the same underlying structure. There was no stillness, only variations in speed and direction, and even that which appeared accidental seemed to form part of a larger coherence.

It is a quality of such places, Watson, that they permit observation without demanding participation. One may sit undisturbed and allow the particular to appear as part of the whole, and the whole as something that can be understood only through the particular.

I ordered a cup of coffee, which was served without comment, and allowed time to pass without attaching any special significance to it. There are moments when action brings one no closer to understanding, and when it is instead necessary to let things reveal themselves in their own order.

After a while I put my hand to my pocket and drew out my pipe. The tobacco I had acquired earlier in the day was dark and dry, with a strength that did not conceal itself, though neither did it make itself felt without first being treated with a certain care. I let it rest for a moment in my hand before I began to fill the pipe.

There is, Watson, a tendency among many people to regard such actions as insignificant, as something that merely accompanies thought without contributing to it. My experience is otherwise. The time one gives to an action is not wasted, but becomes part of the process by which thought takes shape. A pipe packed too hastily burns unevenly. A thought forced into being does the same.

I distributed the tobacco evenly, pressed it lightly into place, adjusted it with my fingertips, and repeated the movement until the resistance was right. Only then did I bring the flame to the bowl and allow it to take hold without forcing it. The smoke rose slowly and mingled with the surrounding air, which was already saturated with similar traces from the nearby tables. The first draw was milder than the tobacco had promised. The second more persistent.

I allowed my gaze to rest before me without fixing it upon any particular person. It is seldom the individual people who first give rise to insight, Watson. It is the movement between them.

A woman stepped from the pavement without turning her head. Her steps were not hesitant, and yet a driver stopped his carriage an instant before she reached the roadway, as though her movement had already been read before it was completed. Two men stood in conversation near a corner. They spoke in low voices, but without looking at one another. Their attention seemed directed each in a different direction, and yet the exchange continued without interruption, as though the words were not the essential thing. A boy moved through the stream of people in the opposite direction—not quickly, but with a persistence that compelled the others to adjust themselves to him without causing irritation.

I took another draw from the pipe and allowed the smoke to linger for a moment before dissolving into the cool air. It seemed to me that what at first glance appeared to be disorder was in truth a form of coordination that required no visible direction. The movement in the street was not chaotic, but neither was it strictly regulated. It arose from individual actions, and yet with a coherence that could be recognised only when one stepped back from it.

I let my gaze move further along the street and across toward the river, where the current continued without cease. There was no stillness. Only movement adapting itself to movement. And in that adaptation lay order.

I was still seated with my pipe raised when my attention fixed upon a figure in the stream of passers-by. The man wore a dark coat of the kind seen in every part of the city, and nothing in his appearance immediately distinguished him from the others. He moved at an even pace, neither quickly nor slowly, and kept a distance from those around him that seemed natural without being conspicuous. He slipped into the movement as though he were part of it. And yet my eye fixed upon him. It was no single feature that drew my attention, but rather the absence of irregularity. The

movement was correct, the distance well measured, and for that very reason almost too precise.

I kept the pipe at my lips without taking another draw and followed him with my eyes until he disappeared into the current. I did not turn my head after him, but merely continued my observations.

Some time later he passed again, this time from the opposite direction. The pace was the same. The distance from the others unchanged. His placement within the stream repeated with a precision that could not be explained by chance alone. I slowly lowered the pipe while my gaze continued to follow him.

When the figure entered my field of vision for the third time, it was no longer a matter of observation, but of conclusion. The repetition was not spontaneous. It was systematic.

I stopped in the middle of the movement, the pipe still slightly raised, as though I had for a moment forgotten to complete the action I had begun. Smoke still rose faintly from the bowl, but I paid it no attention.

The decision had already been made. I set the pipe down, let my hand move to the table, and discreetly indicated to the waiter that I wished to pay. The coin was placed with the same calm with which I had been sitting, and without waiting for any further exchange I rose. No one nearby appeared to notice. I stepped into the stream with a movement that did not differ from that of the others.

When the man passed for the fourth time, I was already in motion. I did not follow him closely, yet neither did I remain so far behind that the connection was lost. The distance was kept with a precision that attracted no attention, and my gaze was only rarely directed straight at the man I followed. Instead I allowed reflections to do the work. Windows, panes of glass, and polished surfaces in doors and carriages gave me the necessary overview without betraying my purpose.

At crossings I stopped briefly, as though merely orienting myself, and continued only when the movement before me was again secure. The man did not alter his pace. He proceeded through the streets with the same

even steps and without once looking back. As we moved away from the river, the surroundings changed in character. The streets grew narrower, the light more sparse, and the stream of people thinner. The voices that had earlier lain in layers now fell away one by one, until only single sounds remained—a closing door, a distant wheel upon the cobblestones, a muted conversation behind a wall. I continued.

Without warning, the man stopped. The façade before him was discreet, almost anonymous, and might easily have been overlooked among the other buildings in the street. A narrow window, a subdued door, and behind the glass the outlines of frames and canvases. It was what one might call an art dealership, but not the sort that sought attention. He did not hesitate. He simply put his hand to the door and entered with the same undisturbed calm that had marked his entire passage through the streets.

I stopped on the opposite side of the window. With a slight turn, I allowed my gaze to fall through the glass without appearing to be directed toward anything in particular. To a passer-by I must have seemed absorbed by the works on display, and that was precisely the assumption I wished to leave behind.

Inside, a brief and precise exchange took place. The man had not altered his manner. He spoke little—if indeed he spoke at all—but simply brought forward a package that had until then been concealed beneath his coat. It was received without question.

The recipient—a man with narrow, sharply defined features—accepted the package with a calm that was not without attention. His hands moved surely, almost mechanically, as though their function had been learned through repeated actions of the same kind. He turned the package briefly, not to examine it in the ordinary sense, but to confirm something already known.

I noted the details. The way the fingers gripped the paper. The precise placement of the package upon the counter. The brief nod that followed, and which appeared to conclude the exchange without any need for words.

It was not a transaction. It was a delivery. And it bore every sign of being part of a routine.

I let my gaze move along the reflection in the window, but I had already imprinted the man's face upon my memory. There was something in its composition—not only in the features, but in the way they were assembled—that made it well suited to being remembered.

The door opened again. I kept my eyes upon the window, as though I were still studying the works on display, while the man stepped out and passed me at the same calm pace with which he had arrived.

It was at that moment that I noticed it. A small, faded tattoo at his left wrist, just visible as the sleeve shifted for an instant with the movement. It had not been made to be seen, and time had diminished its clarity, but its presence was nevertheless beyond question. I did not let my eyes follow it. But I registered it.

The man continued without looking back and disappeared into the street. I remained where I was for a moment longer, as though my interest were still attached to the contents of the shop, before slowly turning away. I had no reason to remain any longer. The essential thing had already been observed. I put my hand to my pocket, took out my pipe, and lit it with a calm that did not differ from my earlier movements. The smoke rose into the cool air as I once more set myself in motion, this time in the direction of my hotel.

The streets now lay in another light. Not because they had changed, but because I had seen how they were connected. I walked without haste, without seeking any particular route, and allowed the movement to carry me back through the city. There was no need for further action that evening. The observation was sufficient. And what had first appeared as an irregularity had already shown itself to be part of the system.

Letter IV

The Market at Saint-Ouen

October 15, 1891

Paris

My dear Watson,

I left the hotel before dawn. Paris at that hour has a different character from the city you know from our earlier visits. It is not silent, but its voice is lower; it does not yet speak to its audience, but to itself. I took a fiacre at the Quai de la Tournelle. The driver was the sort of man who speaks without expecting an answer. His coat bore the traces of the night, and his horse moved with that patience which is acquired only through many years of repetition. We drove north.

The cobblestones were dark with dew, and the movement of the wheels left brief, dull tracks in the damp light. At the Porte de Clignancourt the city began to open out; here the order of the boulevard ceases, and something less planned takes over. My destination was the Marché aux Puces de Saint-Ouen.

You may possibly have heard the name, but scarcely imagined the extent of the place. What began as a gathering of traders on the edge of the city has developed into a labyrinth of stalls, tents, and improvised structures, where everything may be found—and most of it should be avoided.

I arrived while the first dealers were still unpacking their wares. Canvases were being raised. Wooden crates opened. Dusty mirrors set out toward the dull light of morning. There was a smell of wet wood, old textiles, and metal that had survived several owners.

One man carried a clockwork mechanism without its case beneath his arm as though it were a child. A woman arranged a pile of porcelain with the care one usually reserves for an inheritance.

There were objects of genuine age—and objects that pretended to it. A commode with worn edges, where the wear was too regularly distributed. A frame with gilding that had been aged with acid, though the inner corners remained untouched. A crucifix whose patina seemed applied rather than acquired.

The place possesses, as you will understand, a certain poetry. One may find the unexpected there. But one must wade through considerable quantities of refuse to reach it.

I moved slowly through the rows without allowing my eyes to linger too long upon anything. The man who searches too openly finds only what is offered deliberately.

An elderly gentleman offered me a pocket watch with an engraved coat of arms. The engraving was correct for the period, but the metal itself had not yet had time to learn the humility that true age imposes upon it.

“Napoléon,” he said, in a voice that betrayed neither belief nor doubt.

“Undoubtedly,” I replied, and laid the watch back.

The morning light slowly strengthened. More dealers arrived. The voices rose. A group of younger men debated a pile of engravings whose authenticity seemed to inspire more lively discussion than they deserved.

I stopped at a stall where frames were stacked in layers. Not pictures—only frames. Gilded. Black. Some with remnants of canvas still attached. Frames are often more honest than pictures, Watson. They bear witness to what once was. I noticed one frame whose inner edge showed signs of recent alteration. The wood was old, but the cut along the edge

was fresh. A remnant of canvas still clung to a nail. I asked the proprietor where it had come from.

"A collection in the Sixteenth Arrondissement," he said without hesitation.

"Naturally," I replied.

He looked at me as though trying to decide whether I was joking. I did not buy it. But I noted its dimensions. I left it where it stood and continued along the narrow passage between the stalls.

The market was now in full motion. A group of dealers loudly discussed the price of a mirror whose glass was older than its frame. A boy ran past with a stack of newspapers beneath his arm. A man with a scarf around his neck carried two paintings that clearly did not belong together.

I stopped abruptly. Not because something had called for my attention—but because someone had.

Three stalls ahead, a man stood bent over a small canvas. His coat was the same as on the previous evening. His hat lay upon the table before him. He held the painting up toward the light, not to admire the subject, but to examine the back. He spoke with the seller without looking at him.

I approached without haste.

"You should be careful," I said.

He did not react at once.

"The canvas," I continued. "If you hold it in that manner, you will overlook the most important irregularity."

Moreau slowly lowered the painting. He did not turn it toward me.

"And what is it that I am overlooking, monsieur?" he asked calmly.

"The frame," I replied. "It is older than the painting."

Now he turned his head. He was not surprised.

"You rise early," he said.

"The market rewards the man who arrives before history has been fully packed," I replied.

The seller looked from one of us to the other without understanding what he was witnessing.

Moreau turned the canvas over and studied it again.

"You suggest," he said, "that this picture has been placed in a frame that does not belong to it."

"I suggest," I answered, "that someone has wished to lend the painting a past it has not yet had time to live."

Moreau laid the painting aside.

"And you came here," he said, "without informing me."

"I wished to see who inspects goods before they are officially for sale."

An almost invisible smile.

"So you are inspecting me."

"Naturally."

There was a brief silence.

Moreau turned to the seller.

"I shall not take it," he said.

The seller shrugged and reached toward another customer.

Moreau stepped aside, and I followed without giving the impression that we were now moving together.

"You are bold," he said quietly.

"No," I replied. "I am early."

He looked sharply at me.

"You believe this market is part of the affair."

"No," I said. "But someone wishes it to appear so."

Moreau's expression changed slightly.

"Explain."

"If one wishes to obscure the origin of a canvas," I said, "one may let it pass through a place where origin is a fluid concept."

Moreau nodded slowly.

"A place," he said, "where forgery is expected."

"Precisely."

He looked again at the painting, which the seller was now offering to a young collector.

"You mean," he said, "that this is not the beginning."

“No,” I replied. “This is cover.”

Moreau turned fully toward me.

“You have been here less than a week.”

“And you have been here all your life,” I answered calmly. “That gives us different advantages.”

Again that brief, measuring silence arose between us. This time it was less a test.

“Come,” said Moreau. “There is another stall.”

“Naturally,” I replied.

We moved in among the rows, side by side, without anyone being able to determine which of us was following the other. In a mirror hanging crookedly between two rusted chandeliers, I noticed once more the dark hat pause at the entrance to the passage.

Moreau stopped before a stall that immediately distinguished itself from the others by its order. The goods had not been thrown forward in heaps, but arranged with a certain discretion. Three small landscapes stood against a wooden crate. The subjects were modest—wooded places, a riverbank, a village at dusk. He lifted the middle one.

“This,” he said, “was seen here six months ago.”

He turned it toward me.

The signature bore the name of a lesser-known pupil of the Barbizon school. Not a name that would create a sensation, but sufficient to arouse interest in the proper circles.

I took the canvas in my hand. The weight was correct. The tension of the canvas against the frame seemed appropriate. I passed my fingers over the surface without touching it directly.

“You have seen it before?” I asked.

“Yes,” Moreau replied. “Under another name.”

“On the painting?”

“On the seller.”

I looked at him.

“The same face?”

“The same hands.”

I turned the canvas over.

The back bore a stamp—faint, but legible. A Parisian wholesaler known to supply materials to both restorers and smaller studios.

“He uses different names?” I asked.

“Three names that I have noted.”

“And you are certain it is the same man?”

“As certain as one can be,” replied Moreau.

I let my gaze move across the frame. It was old. Not only in surface, but in structure. The wood had drawn slightly apart at the joints, as happens only with time. The gilding bore microscopic cracks that cannot be forced without risking damage to the ground beneath.

“The frame was not made recently,” I said, and brought my attention back to the subject. The brushstrokes were controlled—not virtuosic, but assured. The sky bore traces of several layers, the paint worked into the canvas with deliberate control.

I took out my magnifying glass. Moreau observed it without comment.

“The strokes,” I continued, “imitate the rhythm of the school in question. But they are too consistent.”

“Explain.”

“A pupil,” I said, “will waver between influence and personal uncertainty. Here there is no hesitation.”

Moreau nodded.

“That was also my impression.”

I examined the pigment in the blue section. The colour was correct in tone, but its binding agent revealed a more recent composition. The dried surface lacked the deeper dullness which older oil develops over time.

“The pigment,” I observed, “was not produced until much later.”

“Exactly.”

I put the glass aside.

“And you have seen others?”

"Four," said Moreau. "All with the same discipline. The same discreet improvements. The same type of frames."

"And the same seller?"

"Under changing names."

I looked once more at the canvas. There was no haste in the work. No clumsiness.

"This," I said calmly, "is not a single forger."

Moreau said nothing.

"It is a method."

"Systematic?" he asked.

I did not answer at once. I let one finger follow the edge of the canvas without touching the paint.

"Yes," I said at last. "Systematic."

A brief silence arose between us.

"You will also notice," Moreau continued, "that the subjects are not accidental."

"Landscapes," I replied. "Less controversial. Easier to place in private collections."

"And less likely to become the object of intensive examination."

I nodded.

"You have followed the chain?"

"As far as I could," said Moreau. "It leads through Paris. But the materials..." He paused for a moment. "The materials lead farther."

I looked up.

"To Italy?"

"Yes."

He let the canvas rest once more against the crate.

"The most interesting thing," he continued, "is not the painting."

"What, then?"

"The uniformity."

He allowed the word to hang for a moment between us. Just then there came a clatter from the other side of the stall. A crate had fallen, and a voice

offered an apology. I did not immediately raise my eyes. In the reflection of a metal tray hanging behind the seller, I again saw the dark hat—this time considerably nearer.

The fallen crate contained a mixture of old frames and loose canvases. The seller—a man in his forties, with an uneasy eye and hands that bore traces of both resin and tobacco—bent quickly to gather up its contents.

“Forgive me, messieurs,” he said, without looking up.

Moreau did not answer.

I let my gaze rest upon the man’s hands. They were not the hands of a painter. They were those of a craftsman—and yet not quite.

“You handle them carefully,” I observed calmly.

“They are old,” he replied. “One never knows with such things.”

I lifted the canvas we had just examined.

“Did this also come from the same source?” I asked.

The proprietor hesitated. Only half a second. But amid the noise of the market, it was enough.

“I get goods from many places,” he said. “It is a market.”

“Naturally,” I replied.

I turned the canvas and let my finger move along the edge of the back.

“Interesting,” I continued. “The same type of canvas. The same wholesaler’s stamp.”

“That is common,” said the proprietor quickly. “Everyone buys there.”

“Everyone?” I asked mildly.

He shrugged.

“I merely sell what comes to me.”

Moreau watched him without intervening.

“And what comes to you?” I asked.

“Paintings.”

“From whom?”

Again came the small hesitation.

“A man,” he said. “An intermediary.”

“Name?”

The seller now looked directly at me.

"You ask many questions for a buyer."

"I am not a buyer."

"No," he said slowly. "You are not."

I laid the canvas down.

"This intermediary," I asked, "does he come here himself?"

"Yes," replied the seller.

"Always?"

"Usually."

"Early?"

"Before opening."

I nodded.

"So you have already spoken with him today."

The man stiffened slightly.

"No."

"But you expect him."

Silence followed.

Moreau said quietly:

"You have a mark on your jacket."

The seller raised his hand to his chest. A faint, darker streak showed in the fabric, scarcely visible at first glance.

Moreau stepped a pace nearer.

"Wet paint," he said calmly. "No more than an hour old."

"It is from a frame," the seller replied quickly.

"Frames do not smell of linseed oil," I observed.

His eyes flickered.

"He no longer comes here," said the seller suddenly.

"Interesting," I replied.

"He said he was finished."

"Finished with what?"

"With Paris."

A brief pause followed.

“He said,” the seller continued, “that there were better places.”

“Better?” asked Moreau.

The man hesitated once more.

“Places,” he said unwillingly, “where people do not ask so many questions.”

Neither Moreau nor I commented upon this.

The seller bent down and began once again to gather up his wares, as though the conversation had ended.

Before I turned away, I asked calmly:

“He was here this morning.”

The seller did not answer. His silence was sufficient. I saw no reason to press him further. I had already seen enough to know that additional questions would merely cause him to withdraw completely. A system does not reveal itself under pressure; it merely changes direction. I stepped away from the stall without haste. Moreau followed.

A short distance farther on, I paused at a smaller stand where various objects lay scattered without order. Among cutlery, frames, and faded sheets of music lay a violin. I picked it up. The instrument was not ostentatious, yet the wood had darkened evenly with age. The varnish possessed that muted glow which only many years of handling can produce. I turned it slowly in my hands, studying the grain in the back. The maple was richly flamed, though not Italian. The workmanship was sound, without excessive refinement. I passed my fingers over the fingerboard. The wear lay high upon it—not from practice, but from use.

I lifted the bow, adjusted my grip, and drew it across the strings. A brief phrase. Two subdued measures. The tone was clear, although the bow itself was uneven. The voices around us diminished almost involuntarily. One dealer halted in the middle of a movement. A boy remained standing with a crate in his hands. I allowed the notes to fade of their own accord. For a moment I rested the edge of the violin against my cheek in order to judge its resonance through the wood. An almost imperceptible tension passed

through my right shoulder. It lasted no more than a second. I lowered the instrument a fraction more slowly than I otherwise would have done.

Moreau noticed it. Not because the movement itself was obvious, but because it did not entirely accord with the rest of me. I straightened and returned the violin to precisely the place where I had found it.

"He was here this morning," I said, without looking at Moreau.

"Yes."

"He will not return."

Moreau made no reply. I noticed that he studied me for a moment longer than the conversation itself required. We continued between the stalls.

I remain seated for a moment with the letter in my hands, gazing into the empty air. The wood in the fireplace has settled once more and casts a subdued glow toward the ceiling.

In earlier years I should not have attached any significance to this passage. A violin at a market. A brief examination and a few notes. Yet I read it differently now.

Holmes makes no mention of pain. He speaks of no weakness. He merely describes a movement, a slight hesitation, an instrument returned a little more slowly than it had been lifted. That is all. And yet it is not nothing.

I have often reflected that the world regarded him as untouched—unaffected—as though the struggle at the falls had left no mark upon him beyond a temporary disappearance. But I saw him that night before he departed. I saw what no one else saw. Now, as I read these lines, it occurs to me that this small episode—this seemingly insignificant violin in a Parisian market—may well be the first place where the traces become discernible. That he himself bore a mark. Not one visible to the world, but only to one who knew him.

I let the paper sink slightly. Outside, the rain beats against the window in irregular rhythms, and I remain seated a moment longer than the text itself requires. Then I straighten, place another piece of wood upon the fire, and return to the letter.

Moreau stopped beside a low stack of frames piled next to a wooden crate. They were not gilded, but dark and plain, bearing the kind of patina that renders them useful without attracting unnecessary attention.

He lifted one and turned it in his hands.

"These," he said quietly, "often arrive together with the canvases."

I took the frame from him. The wood was old, though not valuable. The joints were solid and undecorated. I ran one finger along the inner edge, where the canvas would ordinarily rest.

"Look here," I said.

On the inside, close to one corner, a small mark had been scratched into the wood. It had neither been stamped nor branded, but incised with a sharp tool before the varnish had fully hardened. It was easily overlooked.

Moreau stepped closer.

I took another frame from the same pile. It too bore a similar scratched figure, in almost the same position and cut to the same depth. A third frame displayed the same mark. I studied the incision in silence. It consisted of two lines crossing a third at an angle. The shape was ambiguous. Not immediately recognisable as a letter, yet not random either.

"You have seen this before?" I asked.

Moreau nodded faintly.

"It is an old mark," he said. "One occasionally finds it on older frames."

I looked at him.

"Occasionally," I repeated.

He shrugged slightly.

"It may be a workshop mark."

For another moment I allowed my gaze to rest upon the symbol. Then I took out my pocketknife. Not hurriedly, but with the calm that every precise action requires. From the innermost edge of one frame I detached a small damaged splinter, upon which part of the scratched mark was still visible.

The movement was discreet, and the seller was occupied with another customer. I let the small piece of wood slip into my pocket. The noise of the market continued around us as though nothing had occurred. For me, however, it was no longer a matter of conjecture. I now possessed my first tangible clue.

My eyes travel over the final lines. The letter ends without further explanation. No dramatic conclusion. No declaration of danger. Only the sober observation that the market is a place of transit, and that the hand which guides the brush does not itself determine the subject.

I remain seated for a moment before laying the paper flat upon the desk and taking up my pen. In the margin Holmes has added a small sketch—swift, precise, and without artistic intention. A pair of lines crossing one another at an angle, and a short diagonal stroke connecting them. I study the drawing carefully. It is simple. I contemplate the figure for some time. It may be nothing. It may be a craftsman's mark. It may be two letters joined together in a manner that has meaning only for the one who already knows them.

I lay down my pen. It occurs to me that Holmes already understood more at this stage than he chose to commit to paper. Not because he wished to conceal the truth from me, but because he had not yet grasped its full extent. The first clue had been recorded.

I fold the letter, place it carefully beside the box, and reach for the next envelope.

Letter V

An Appraisal

I have learned to recognise Holmes's handwriting not merely by its precision, but also by the manner in which every word appears to have been placed with an intention extending beyond the written page itself. The letter before me bears that same unmistakable character, yet there is something in the weight of the paper and in the way it has been folded that causes me to hesitate for a moment.

It was not the first time Holmes had written to me from abroad, and yet there was a difference. Not in its appearance—which remained as restrained as ever, free of unnecessary detail—but in the impression it conveyed even before it had been opened.

I broke the seal, and Holmes's voice emerged at once, clear and without preamble.

October 17, 1891

Paris

My dear Watson,

There are moments when an investigation ceases to be merely a sequence of observations and instead becomes an act of mutual observation. For the first time I found myself confronted not merely with a clue, but with an appraisal. I must confess that I found the experience not without a certain interest.

That afternoon I had taken my place in a café whose location made it particularly well suited for observation without attracting attention to oneself. The tables stood close together, though not so close that one inevitably became part of one's neighbour conversations. The light entered through the windows at an angle, leaving the tables toward the rear in subdued shadow, an arrangement which I found entirely satisfactory.

I ordered coffee and took out my pipe. I filled it with my customary deliberation while at the same time making a few notes concerning the day's observations—brief entries which explained nothing in themselves, yet served to preserve the patterns whose full significance I had not yet discerned.

When I asked for the bill, it was placed before me without comment. The waiter withdrew from the table with the same neutral manner that had characterised him throughout the afternoon.

I allowed my gaze to rest upon the paper for a moment before picking it up. It was then that my attention sharpened. Not because there was anything visibly unusual about the bill itself, but because the paper had been handled one time too many.

I turned it over.

Upon the reverse appeared the following words, written in ink that was still wet:

What once you found in silence, you will find again where no voice may be heard. Seek not what is displayed. Find that which does not belong.

I read the message a second time, more slowly. There was nothing theatrical in its wording. No threat. No overt triumph. Whoever had written it sought not to impress me, but to be understood. That in itself was remarkable.

I let my thumb glide along the edge of the paper and remained seated without touching my coffee.

"...where no voice may be heard."

A grave might satisfy that condition, I reflected. So too might a library, although silence there is a practical necessity rather than a principle. Yet the wording bore no trace of practicality. It had not been written by a man who merely desired quiet, but by one who thought in terms of places where the voice is restrained out of respect for something greater than conversation itself.

A church therefore seemed the more likely possibility. Not because silence is always observed there—it is very far from being so—but because silence in such a place is not accidental. It forms part of the purpose of the place itself.

I picked up my pipe, though I did not light it. Instead I turned it slowly between my fingers while once again allowing my eyes to pass over the final line.

Seek not what is displayed. Find that which does not belong.

It was better written than most anonymous messages I had received over the years. The author knew not only of my presence in Paris, but also of the method by which I worked. Not the object itself, but the anomaly. Not what is emphasised, but the disturbing element within the whole. It did not amuse me. It interested me.

I laid the bill aside, paid without showing any particular attention toward the waiter, and rose with the quiet movement that is remarkable chiefly because it attracts no notice. If the riddle had been devised in order to lead me, I was obliged to follow it. If it had been devised in order to measure me, I could not afford to arrive too late.

When I stepped out of the café, the air had grown cooler. Paris continued to move around me, yet within my own mind the city had already contracted into a much smaller circle of possibilities.

A grave. A library. A church.

Of these three, only the last possessed both silence and visible splendour in a form that rendered the line concerning that which does not belong fully meaningful. My destination therefore required little deliberation.

Notre-Dame.

I made my way through the streets without haste, though certainly not without purpose. Paris had entered that portion of the day when the light begins to lose its sharpness and the outlines of the buildings emerge more distinctly, as though the city itself wished, for a brief interval, to be observed.

I reached the square before Notre-Dame. The cathedral rose before me with a weight that was not merely architectural but historical. It bore the marks not of a single intention, but of many. Centuries had left their traces upon its stone, not as fractures but as layers. The façade appeared at once symmetrical and restless; the figures above the portals seemed to observe the square with an expression that was neither welcoming nor forbidding, but simply enduring.

People moved before the entrance at an unhurried pace—a few tourists, several local residents, a priest in dark attire. None appeared inclined to linger. It was not a place before which one remained. It was a place through which one passed.

I allowed my gaze to travel upward along the façade before entering. At once the light was transformed. What outside had been diffuse and shifting dissolved here into colours, refracted through glass. The air was cooler, heavier, carrying the faint scent of wax and stone. The sounds from the square did not disappear entirely, but were reduced to something distant and inconsequential, as though they belonged to another world.

The columns rose around me in a rhythm repeated with such precision that even the slightest deviation would become apparent—provided one knew where to look. The figures lining the walls and occupying the niches seemed a continuation of that same order. Nothing appeared to have been placed by chance, and for that very reason any irregularity must necessarily have been intentional.

I moved forward slowly. Not toward any particular destination, but through the space as a whole. My attention did not rest upon the most prominent features—not upon the altar, nor the light, nor the visitors—but upon transitions, connections, and repetitions. Where one form interrupted another. Where a line failed to continue as expected: *Seek not what is displayed.*

I followed the row of statues along one of the side aisles. They were uniform in their diversity. Each figure possessed its own distinguishing features, yet all remained within a framework that rendered the whole coherent. Hands, faces, symbols—everything was governed by an order that was not merely aesthetic but expressive of meaning.

I did not stop. Not yet. Yet the pace of my movement altered ever so slightly. Something was near. I did not halt abruptly, for there was no reason to do so. The irregularity had already fixed itself in my attention long before my steps had time to respond. It was not the figure as a whole that distinguished itself, but a subtle displacement in its expression, so discreet that it could only be perceived in relation to those surrounding it.

I continued for another few steps, as though my attention remained directed ahead, and only when I paused before the next statue in the row did I allow my gaze to drift back. It was the hands. Along the wall the figures repeated a series of familiar gestures—hands turned upward, folded in repose, resting upon the breast—variations upon an established pattern in which every deviation still belonged to a recognisable order. Here, however, was something that resisted such classification. One hand was precisely as expected. The other held something. Not emphasised, not clearly distinguished from the stone, yet sufficient to disrupt the harmony once it had been perceived.

I stepped a little closer, as the natural continuation of my slow progress through the cathedral. The distance was now sufficient to confirm what I had already suspected. The object was not part of the sculpture. It had been added. A small, flat piece of metal, dark and without reflection, positioned with such precision that at first glance it might easily have appeared

original, yet upon closer inspection could be explained only as a foreign addition.

I allowed my hand to follow my gaze, though without haste. The movement was so slight that it might have been mistaken for a casual touch, and when my fingers reached it, the object yielded without resistance. It had not been fastened.

Only after I had stepped back once more and stood at the same distance as before did I lower my eyes to what I now held. A small metal plate bearing an engraved circle. There was no ornamentation, no variation—only a precise and measured marking, executed without regard for aesthetics, though certainly not without intention. I let the object rest in my hand for a moment before examining it more closely. The circle was not complete. It possessed a small break, a narrow opening. There was nothing more. No inscription, no instruction, no indication of what should follow. Only this single sign, which neither explained nor concealed anything, but perhaps merely signalled that I had arrived. That I was now within... and yet not entirely.

I remained standing for another moment, not before the statue itself but within the space as a whole, as though allowing the impression to settle before moving on. It was no longer the riddle that occupied my thoughts, but the mind that must have conceived it. When I turned, it was not directly toward the exit, but slightly to one side, as though my attention had been momentarily drawn by something in the stillness at the edge of my vision.

A figure stood near one of the distant columns. There was nothing in its posture that demanded notice, and yet a certain immobility distinguished it from the other visitors. The distance rendered the face indistinct, but the silhouette was sufficient. The hat was the only feature that stood out clearly.

I allowed my gaze to move on without pause, as though I had observed nothing, and continued through the cathedral with the same unhurried pace as before. Only a moment later, when without stopping I allowed my

eyes to return in that direction, the figure was no longer there. I did not alter my course.

And when, shortly afterward, I stepped out of the church, my pace was neither quicker nor slower than it had been before.

Watson allows his hand to rest for a moment upon the paper, as though he is not yet prepared to relinquish it entirely.

There is nothing in the account that immediately suggests danger. No threat. No open confrontation. None of the signs he has otherwise learned to associate with those occasions when Holmes finds himself upon uncertain ground. And it is precisely this absence that makes the impression all the stronger. It is not an event that has happened to Holmes. It is an action deliberately directed toward him.

Watson rises slowly and takes a few steps about the room before returning to his chair and the writing desk. The letter still lies open before him, and his eyes once more settle upon its opening lines. *An appraisal?* It is not a word he has often seen Holmes apply to himself.

Throughout the years he has encountered opponents of many kinds—some brutal, others cunning, a few even gifted—but rarely, if ever, has anyone attempted to approach him in this fashion. Not by concealing himself, but by making himself known through a test that presupposes Holmes's ability both to understand and to accept its premises.

Watson cannot determine whether this is an expression of a peculiar form of respect or of something far more troubling. There is in Holmes's account a composure which, upon first reading, may appear reassuring, yet upon closer reflection contains something altogether different—not anxiety, but a heightened awareness unlike any previously directed toward his own person. It is as though he is no longer merely the observer. He is himself being observed.

Watson lets his gaze drift toward the empty chair opposite him, where Holmes so often sat, leaning slightly forward, his hands loosely joined, his eyes fixed upon that invisible point where thought first begins to take shape. He imagines him there, in that unfamiliar place, standing among statues and shadows, holding a strange object in his hand while knowing that someone, somewhere nearby, has followed his every movement with a precision that leaves little to chance. It does not strike him as the beginning of an ordinary investigation. Rather, it seems the opening move in a game whose rules have not yet been fully revealed.

He cannot know what significance this first trial will ultimately assume. Yet he senses that it is not Holmes who has sought out the case. It is the case that has sought out Holmes.

Watson folds the letter with a care that borders upon the ceremonial and lays it gently aside.

Letter VI

The Academy

October 19th, 1891

Paris

My dear Watson,

The morning was clearer than the day before. Sunlight fell obliquely across the façade and emphasised the building's classical lines. Students passed through the gate with portfolios under their arms, their voices subdued and their steps hurried.

I had taken a seat upon the bench before the École des Beaux-Arts when the cab drew up.

Its door was opened with a brief, impatient movement. Moreau stepped out. He paid the driver without bargaining, as a man does who does not wish to waste time, and then turned toward the square before the school. Then his eyes found me. A visible tension passed through his face before he mastered himself and made his way toward the bench.

I looked up.

"You came quickly."

"You gave me no choice," replied Moreau, sitting down.

"I have never given you my address," he continued. "And yet this morning I received a message, signed Sigurdson, requesting that I meet you here."

I folded my hands calmly in my lap.

"It was necessary."

Moreau regarded me sharply.

"How?"

For a moment I let my gaze move across the square, where a group of students were arguing before the gate.

"You mentioned," I said, "that you preferred northern light in your studio."

Moreau did not answer.

"At the market you carried dust from limestone—not from Montmartre, but from the lighter kind found in the newer buildings toward the Seine."

Moreau's expression altered slightly.

"Your cuffs," I continued, "bore traces of ultramarine of a quality not sold in small quantities."

There was a brief pause.

"And you pay your cabs with new coins."

Moreau turned his head toward me.

"That does not explain my address."

"No," I said. "But it narrows the district."

I rose slowly and took a few steps across the square, as though our conversation were merely a casual exchange.

Moreau followed.

"You have a studio," I continued quietly, "in a building facing north. It is not old enough to possess uneven lime. It lies not far from the river. And you travel from there to the market without taking a tram."

Moreau stopped.

"You followed me?"

"No."

I looked at him.

"I listened."

Moreau remained standing for a moment before sitting down again.

"You left more behind than you realised," I said. There was no triumph in my voice. Only a statement of fact.

Moreau leaned back and looked at the building before him.

"It seems to me," he said slowly, "that I ought to be more cautious."

"That is unlikely to change very much," I replied.

A short silence arose between us.

Then Moreau continued:

"If you can find me, others can as well."

My gaze rested for a moment upon the gate of the art school.

"That," I said, "is precisely why we must speak here."

For a little while we both sat without speaking. Students passed us by. A bell sounded from within the building. The square was alive, yet the conversation upon the bench seemed cut off from the rest of life.

"I have noticed it too," Moreau said at last.

I did not turn my head.

"Noticed what?"

"That we are being watched," he replied, without nervousness in his voice.

I did not answer immediately.

"The market," Moreau continued, "was not accidental. Nor is this place."

I let my gaze pass over the square.

"Observation is often more effective than intervention," I said.

Moreau looked at me.

"If you can find my address," he said calmly, "then I suppose I need hardly introduce myself further."

"It is not certain," I replied, "that it would help."

There was a faint suggestion of something in my tone which Moreau caught. He nodded slowly.

"Jean-Luc Moreau is my full name," he said nevertheless. "Trained at this school. Specialised in restoration."

I listened.

"I have worked for private collectors. Museums. And—for a time—for the police."

"As a consultant?" I asked.

"As a detective." The word was spoken soberly. "A special department," Moreau continued, "responsible for art fraud and irregularities in private transactions."

I still said nothing.

"I was working on a case," Moreau went on, "which extended over several years. It began modestly. A few paintings of doubtful provenance. Small discrepancies."

"But it grew," I said.

"Yes."

Moreau turned his eyes toward the building's façade.

"I was removed from the case."

"For what reasons?"

"Administrative."

My gaze rested upon him for a moment.

"You accepted the explanation?"

Moreau did not answer at once.

"No," he said at last. "By that time I had worked on a number of works which seemed to be connected. Not merely through style, but through materials. Pigments. Frames."

I nodded faintly.

"And?"

"I had come closer to a name."

I looked at him.

"A name?"

"Or rather," said Moreau, "a structure."

There was a pause.

"I began receiving recommendations that I should give priority to other cases. Smaller cases. Less sensitive ones."

"And you did not follow the recommendation."

Moreau turned his head.

"I followed the trail."

A group of students passed us. One of them cast a fleeting glance at the two men and continued on.

"I was then informed," said Moreau, "that my services were no longer required."

I folded my hands.

"You believe it was not an administrative decision."

"I believe," said Moreau calmly, "that someone judged I had come too close."

My face did not change.

"And you continued alone."

"Yes."

I studied him for a moment longer than the conversation required.

"It seems to me," I said, "that you were not merely removed from the case."

Moreau met my eyes.

"No."

"You were warned."

Moreau did not reply. But the silence was confirmation. I let it stand between us for a moment.

"Your knowledge of this institution," I said calmly, "may be of considerable use to us."

Moreau did not answer, but his gaze sharpened.

I put my hand into my pocket and drew out the small splinter of wood I had detached from the frame at the market. I held it between my fingers without display.

"This," I said, "is not merely a mark."

Moreau leaned slightly forward.

I turned the piece of wood in the light.

"The incision is secondary," I continued. "It was added after the frame was assembled. Not by the frame-maker."

“How can you be certain?”

“The cut passes through the varnish layer, but not into the older stress cracks in the wood. It is younger than the frame itself.”

Moreau nodded slowly.

I ran one finger over the rough edge.

“Furthermore,” I said, “the wood is not local.”

Moreau looked quickly at me.

“The frame was assembled here,” I continued, “but the density and grain of the wood do not correspond to the Parisian workshops. It was probably imported.”

“From Italy?” asked Moreau.

I did not raise my eyes.

“Possibly.”

I continued:

“In addition, the frame—and the canvas—bore traces of the same type of ultramarine which you yourself use.”

Moreau did not answer at once.

“That pigment,” I continued, “is not sold in small quantities. It is distributed in larger batches, principally to academic workshops.”

I let my gaze drift toward the building behind us.

“This place.”

Moreau looked toward the façade.

“You suggest that the forgery is being carried out here?”

“No,” I said. “I observe that the materials point here.”

There was no accusation in my voice. Only connection.

“The ultramarine. The structure of the canvas. The frame wood. The incision.”

I turned the piece of wood once more.

“The market is the distribution link,” I said. “But the work—the precise, systematic work—requires access to materials, rooms, and discipline.”

Moreau remained silent.

"Such access," I continued, "exists here. Or in immediate connection with it."

Moreau drew a slow breath.

"If you are right," he said, "then it is not merely a network."

"No," I replied. "It is organised."

"And protected."

I returned the piece of wood to my pocket.

"The hand that guides the brush," I said dryly, "is hardly the same one that makes the decisions."

Moreau looked at me.

"You mean that the workshop is merely executing the work."

"Yes."

"And who determines the subject?"

I let the question hang.

"That," I said, "has not yet been sufficiently illuminated."

There was a short pause.

Then I added:

"But I am convinced that the person you came too close to is not working alone."

Moreau sat for a long time without answering. A group of students passed us with rolls of canvas under their arms. Their conversation was swallowed by the ordinary movement of the square.

"There is something," he said at last, "which I have not told you."

I did not turn my head.

"I assumed as much."

Moreau looked straight ahead.

"I got farther with the case than I have led you to believe."

I said nothing.

"I did not merely follow the works," Moreau continued. "I followed the payments."

My gaze sharpened slightly.

"You found a connection."

“Yes.”

Moreau folded his hands.

“The sums passed through several hands. Private accounts. Middlemen. Donations.”

“Donations?” I repeated calmly.

“To institutions. Restoration funds. Academic projects.”

I let the words settle.

“And these funds crossed borders.”

“Yes.”

Moreau now looked directly at me.

“France was not the endpoint. Not even the center.”

“Rome,” I said.

Moreau hesitated.

“There were transactions,” he said slowly, “which led through Italy.”

“And farther.”

“Possibly.”

There was a pause.

“It was there,” Moreau continued, “that my case changed its character.”

“How?”

“I received a recommendation that I discontinue the investigation. Not from my immediate superior, but through another office.”

I nodded faintly.

“A higher authority.”

“Yes.”

Moreau drew a slow breath.

“I was informed that my observations had political sensitivity.”

I looked at him.

“And you did not accept that assessment.”

“No.”

Moreau allowed his gaze to pass once more across the square.

“It was shortly afterward that I was removed.”

My voice was calm.

"You were not removed because you were wrong."

Moreau did not answer.

"You were removed," I continued, "because you were right."

Moreau met my eyes.

"That is also my view."

There was a brief silence.

"You must understand," said Moreau at last, "that this is no longer a matter of false canvases."

I waited.

"It is a matter of protection. Of reputation. Of institutions that do not wish to be examined."

I did not answer immediately.

"You are now moving," Moreau continued, "in a field where the consequences are not necessarily legal."

My face remained unchanged.

"You mean," I said calmly, "that it may become dangerous."

"Yes."

"Physically?"

Moreau looked at me.

"That is a possibility."

I inclined my head slightly.

"It is noted."

Moreau regarded me.

"You take it with remarkable composure."

"Composure," I said, "is a function of clarity."

I rose.

"If your information is correct, we now have movement across borders. Financing. Protection."

I looked toward the building. Moreau rose more slowly.

"You do not intend to stop."

"No."

Moreau stood still for a moment.

"Then you must understand," he said, "that you are no longer merely investigating forgery."

I looked at him.

"I never was."

I remained standing for a moment before turning toward Moreau.

"I did not send for you," I said calmly, "so that we might sit and converse upon a bench."

Moreau raised an eyebrow.

"No?"

"We are going inside."

Moreau looked toward the gate.

"That may be risky."

"It may," I said, looking directly at him. "Will it be more dangerous for you than for me?"

Moreau hesitated.

"Someone will undoubtedly recognise me, and that will raise questions."

I nodded.

"Therefore," I said, and took something from my bag.

It was not a mask, nor a wig, but a discreet dark coat of a different cut from the one Moreau wore, together with a pair of round spectacles with lightly tinted lenses.

"Put this on."

Moreau looked at the coat.

"You came prepared."

"One should always bring two possibilities," I replied.

Moreau put on the coat. It altered his silhouette slightly and made his appearance less readily recognisable. The spectacles placed a faint reflection over his eyes.

I studied him for a moment.

"Sufficient."

"And you?" asked Moreau.

I looked down at myself.

"I am a foreigner," I said dryly. "That is explanation enough."

We began to walk toward the gate.

"The professor," I said quietly. "What is his name? I assume it was he to whom the trail led you."

Moreau hesitated a moment and then nodded.

"Professor Armand Delacroix."

"Position?"

"Overall responsibility for restoration and technical studies."

"Ambitions?"

Moreau glanced briefly at me.

"Considerable."

I nodded.

"Then we shall give him something to be ambitious about."

"An accusation?"

"No," I said. "An opportunity."

Moreau did not look convinced.

"We are two men," I continued, "with an interest in technical authenticity. We have observed a system in certain works. We seek an academic opinion."

"And if he sees through you?"

"Then he will reveal more than he wishes."

We passed through the gate.

The courtyard within was cooler. The sound of footsteps upon stone became sharper. Students moved between the studios, and the smell of oil and turpentine hung heavily in the air.

Professor Armand Delacroix received us standing.

His office was high-ceilinged, the walls covered with sketches, restoration diagrams, and reproductions of Renaissance works. A large window facing north allowed an even light to fall across the desk, where brushes and glass jars of pigments stood arranged with almost military precision.

He was a man in his early fifties. His beard was well kept. His gaze was sharp, but controlled.

"Messieurs," he said. "How may I assist you?"

Moreau stepped forward first. He had removed the spectacles.

"Professor, this is Monsieur Sigurdson. He has an interest in technical inconsistencies in certain landscape paintings which have recently circulated upon the market."

Delacroix's gaze passed over me.

"Ah. Another skeptic."

"Rather an observer," I said calmly.

Delacroix smiled faintly.

"And what is it that you believe you have observed?"

I took out the small splinter of wood and laid it discreetly upon the desk.

"A frame. Not new. But with a more recent incision."

The professor picked up the piece without hesitation. His eyes rested upon the mark for one second too long.

"A workshop mark," he said at once. "Old. Common."

"Too common?" I asked mildly.

"There are dozens of such marks."

I nodded.

"Indeed."

I allowed a pause to fall.

"Interestingly," I continued, "we have found the same mark upon several frames accompanying works with identical pigment conditions. In particular, a variant of ultramarine mixed with a small quantity of zinc white to achieve a cooler tone."

Delacroix's hand stopped for a moment.

"That would be an anachronism," he said quickly. "Zinc white was not used in the period you imply."

I looked at him.

"Precisely."

There was silence.

Moreau said nothing.

Delacroix laid the piece of wood back down.

"If someone is attempting to imitate older works," he continued, "he will inevitably make such mistakes."

"You mean," I said, "that the error is that of an amateur."

"Without question."

I let my gaze move across the desk.

"And yet the brushwork is disciplined. The frame older. The canvas correctly stretched. The errors are... selective."

Delacroix shrugged slightly.

"Even the most skilled forger may stumble."

"Yes," I said. "But only if he is working alone."

The professor's eyes sharpened a little.

"I do not understand your insinuation."

"There is no insinuation," I replied calmly. "Only interest."

Delacroix leaned back.

"You must understand that this institution has no connection with marketplaces."

"I have not claimed that it has."

"And ultramarine of the kind you mention is widely used in academic instruction."

"Of course."

My voice was unchanged.

"We have, however, observed that the works bearing this combination of frame and pigment appear to have passed through the same hands."

"A coincidence," said Delacroix, too quickly.

I looked at him.

"Possibly."

The professor folded his hands.

"You speak as though there were an organized structure behind these works."

I did not answer at once.

"Is there not?" I asked quietly.

Delacroix's eyes met mine.

One second too long.

"Messieurs," said the professor, now a little more firmly, "I would advise you not to confuse technical similarity with conspiracy."

I rose.

"I shall take that under advisement."

Moreau did the same. At the door I paused.

"Professor," I said, without quite turning round, "you dismissed my remark about zinc white with remarkable certainty."

Delacroix replied coolly:

"It is my field."

I nodded.

"Naturally."

We left the office and did not speak until we had reached the courtyard. The air outside felt clearer, though neither of us looked back toward the building.

I stopped only when we had gone some distance from the gate.

"We need reflection," I said calmly.

Moreau nodded.

"There are several matters," I continued, "which should be considered beyond academic walls."

Moreau looked at me.

"And without listeners."

"Precisely."

I regarded him for a moment.

"Your story," I said, "is not yet complete."

Moreau hesitated slightly.

"No."

"I am interested in the part you have not yet told."

There was no accusation in my voice. Only a statement.

Moreau let his gaze move across the square.

"There is a place," he said. "Not far from here. A private studio to which I have access. No one will disturb us there."

"Good."

Moreau looked at me.

"I shall have you collected this evening."

"At what hour?"

"Eight o'clock."

I nodded.

"At your hotel."

An almost imperceptible smile crossed my face.

"Do you require the address?"

Moreau returned the smile.

"I do not."

For a moment we merely stood and looked at one another. Not as adversaries. Not yet as allies. But as two men who both understood that the case had grown. Then we each went our separate ways.

I left my hotel at precisely eight o'clock.

I had expected Moreau to arrive himself, but the carriage which stopped before the entrance carried no passenger. The driver was already waiting, the promise of transport given without words.

"Monsieur Sigurdson?" he asked briefly.

I nodded and stepped inside. The carriage set off at once. Through the window I watched the streets glide past. First the broader boulevards, lit by gas lamps and with tramcars still rumbling in the distance; then narrower lanes, where the light was sparse and the shadows between the buildings seemed denser. I noted the direction. First east. Then south. I did not recognise the district. The rhythm of the city changed its character. Fewer pedestrians. More closed gates. The smell of water in the air. The Seine.

The carriage turned again. I leaned slightly forward and observed the faint reflection of the stars between the rooftops. The direction was now clear. Toward the river. For a moment I had assumed that Moreau intended

to take me to the studio he had mentioned. It appeared I had been mistaken.

The carriage stopped abruptly beside a low bridge. The driver climbed down, opened the door, and said only:

"They are waiting."

I stepped out. There were no visible buildings in the immediate vicinity. Only the arch of the bridge over the dark water and the sound of the current striking softly against the stones.

A figure emerged from the shadow beneath one side of the bridge. Not Moreau. A younger man, wearing a plain coat and a hat drawn low over his brow.

"Follow me," he said.

I made no objection. We went down a narrow path leading to the river-bank. The water lay dark and heavy in the night. A small rowing boat was moored between two posts, almost hidden by the shadow of the bridge. The man loosened the rope without another word. I stepped aboard. The boat slipped from the bank without sound. The current carried us a short distance before the oarsman set the blades into the water and guided us obliquely toward the opposite shore.

I looked up toward the underside of the bridge, where the light from the street above drew faint patterns upon the stone. I said nothing. But I noted. Moreau had not wished me to know the destination in advance. The boat reached the other side. There was no quay, only a low stone ledge and a dark gate in the wall behind it. The oarsman sprang up and secured the boat.

"You are expected," he said.

I stepped ashore and found myself before an unremarkable building. The gate opened from within and led into a narrow courtyard. A single lamp burned in a window on the first floor.

Moreau stood there.

"You found your way," he said.

"I did."

Moreau nodded toward the stairs.

"Come."

The studio was large. Not ostentatious, but orderly. Canvases stood along the walls, some covered with cloths. A long table in the center of the room held jars of pigment, small scales, brushes, pieces of wood, and sheets of notes. The air smelled of oil and turpentine. Moreau closed the door behind us and turned the key.

"This," he said, "is why I do not speak openly."

He drew a cloth aside from one of the canvases. I stepped nearer. It was a landscape. Not one I had seen at the market, but of the same type. The same discipline in the brushwork. The same controlled sky.

"The original," said Moreau.

He pointed to another canvas standing beside it. It was almost identical.

"And this," he continued, "is the copy."

I moved closer. I said nothing.

Moreau took a small magnifying lens from the table and handed it to me.

"I found the first set three years ago," he said. "Not two paintings. Six."

I examined the copy.

"The pigment," I said quietly.

"Supplied through academic channels," replied Moreau. "Ordered in larger batches. Registered as teaching material."

I nodded faintly.

Moreau went to the table and drew out a folder. Inside lay receipts, bank statements, and correspondence.

"These payments," he said, "passed through Paris. But the funds did not originate here."

I looked through the papers.

"Rome?"

"Yes."

Moreau took out another document. A letter. Unsigned, but stamped.

My gaze rested upon the stamp for a second longer.

"This," said Moreau, "is one of the reasons I was removed."

I laid the paper back.

"You came too close to a structure that does not merely protect itself."

"It protects its reputation," said Moreau.

I went to the wall, where several frames hung without canvases. I took one down and turned it over. The same incision.

"You have known this mark for some time," I said.

"Yes."

"And you have not acted."

Moreau looked at me.

"I have acted."

I turned.

Moreau pointed toward the canvases.

"I have collected."

There was no drama in his voice.

I walked slowly back toward the table.

"You said earlier," I observed, "that you had come close to a name."

Moreau hesitated.

"I found the connection between Paris and Rome," he said. "Not merely through money. Through people."

I looked up.

"Professor Delacroix?"

Moreau nodded.

"He is not alone."

My gaze was calm.

"I assumed as much."

Moreau drew a deeper breath.

"You must understand," he said, "that this is not merely forgery. It is a chain of financing. The works are sold, the funds are moved, and legitimate restorations are financed by illegitimate copies."

I stood still.

There was no surprise in my face. Only the quiet assembling of pieces.

"I have for some time," said Moreau calmly, "been looking for proof that the paintings were not merely isolated cases."

I looked at him.

"You have found it."

Moreau laid his hand flat upon the table.

"Yes."

I let my gaze move around the studio.

"You have been more persistent than you allowed me to understand."

Moreau made no reply.

"The question now," I continued, "is not whether the structure exists."

I looked at the documents.

"But who stands above it."

A heavier silence fell in the room.

Moreau said quietly:

"That is where it becomes dangerous."

My eyes met his.

"That," I said, "is where it begins."

I remained standing for a long time beside the table, my gaze resting upon the papers. I no longer touched them.

"The professor is a cautious man," I said at last. "He will not respond to an accusation."

Moreau nodded.

"He will deny everything."

"Naturally."

I went to the window and looked out into the darkness over the river.

"But he will respond to uncertainty."

Moreau looked at me.

"Uncertainty?"

"Yes. If he believes that someone possesses a fragment of the truth—but not the whole—he will try to control the situation."

Moreau understood slowly.

"You want to make him come of his own accord."

I turned.

"We must not threaten him. We must make him curious."

Moreau breathed heavily.

"How?"

"He will wish to know how much we know."

"Precisely."

I walked a few steps back and forth.

"We choose a place where he does not feel himself upon his own ground.
Not the academy. Not his home."

Moreau thought for a moment.

"Champ de Mars. Open. But with many people."

My eyes lifted.

"Beneath the tower."

Moreau nodded.

"There are benches facing the river. One may speak without being
watched too long."

I stopped.

"Good."

Moreau looked at me.

"What is he to bring?"

I answered without hesitation:

"The most recent shipping ledger."

Moreau stiffened.

"He will never bring it."

"If he believes it has already been compromised," I said calmly, "he will
bring it in order to assess the damage."

Moreau stared at me.

"You are gambling."

My voice was dry.

"No. I am predicting."

Moreau went slowly back to the table.

"And if he does not come?"

I replied:

"Then we shall know that he does not act alone."

Moreau looked at me for a long time.

"You understand," he said quietly, "that this may place you in greater danger than you realize."

My face did not change.

"That is possible."

I picked up my hat.

"But I prefer movement to stagnation."

Moreau drew a deep breath.

"When?"

"In two days," I said. "At dusk."

"And the message?"

I looked at him.

"It must not sound like a threat."

I took a piece of paper and wrote a few words. Moreau read them. His expression darkened.

"You imply that we have already identified the connection to Rome."

I laid down the pen.

"I merely imply that certain repetitions no longer appear accidental."

Moreau looked up.

"He will understand."

"Yes."

I took up the splinter of wood and placed it in my pocket.

"And if he brings the ledger," I said quietly, "we shall have the proof we lack."

Moreau said nothing.

I went toward the door.

"Professor Delacroix is a man who has long lived with control," I said, without turning round. "Let us see how he reacts when control begins to slip."

I picked up the paper bearing the brief message and folded it once.

“He will come.”

Moreau looked at me without answering.

I put on my coat.

“And if he does not,” I added calmly, “his absence will be even more telling than his presence.”

Moreau followed me to the door.

“You are playing a high game.”

I paused for a moment.

“No,” I said. “I am merely observing how others play.”

I left the studio without another word.

Watson draws the desk lamp closer and reads the final lines:

If the professor chooses to react, he will do so quickly. I have the impression that the forces behind these arrangements do not care for uncertainty. In two days, at dusk, a small clarification will take place at the Champ de Mars. I shall inform you further when the outcome is known.
—S.

Watson lays the letter aside and remains seated for a moment without moving. The rain against the window has grown heavier.

Holmes’s tone in these lines seems to me remarkably calm. There is no trace of excitement, no suggestion of drama. Only a statement. Yet I must admit that as I read, I feel an unease to which Holmes himself gave no expression. Champ de Mars. I know the place. And I knew him. When Holmes spoke of a “small clarification,” it was rarely without consequence.

Watson takes up the next letter. The envelope bears the same hand, the same sealed precision. The date is two days later. He breaks the seal.

Letter VII

The Police Theory

October 21, 1891

Paris

Moreau explained that there was a man within the police who had been connected with the case from an early stage. Not one of those who spoke publicly or allowed himself to be quoted in the newspapers, but rather a man who worked with a certain degree of discretion and who, as Moreau put it, possessed the advantage of never speaking more than was necessary.

He was, Moreau added, a man of considerable experience and sound judgment, and although he was not inclined to share his conclusions without good reason, it might nevertheless be of value to hear how the matter appeared from the police perspective.

There were details which had not yet been made public. And perhaps others which had not yet been given the importance they deserved.

Moreau therefore proposed that we should meet him. Not at an office, where the conversation would become formal and perhaps constrained by official considerations, but somewhere one might speak without attracting attention. A park, he suggested, where one could remain without anyone finding it remarkable.

I listened without interrupting and asked no questions regarding the man's name, rank, or precise role in the investigation. My interest was

directed not toward the man himself, but rather toward the single point Moreau had mentioned almost in passing: that there were details which had not yet been disclosed.

"If he is as discreet as you suggest," I said calmly, "we must assume that whatever he chooses to say has been selected with care."

Moreau nodded faintly.

"That is precisely why I propose the meeting."

I picked up my hat from the table without further comment.

"Then let us not waste time discussing it any longer."

There was nothing in my tone to suggest reluctance, yet neither was there any particular interest in the formalities that ordinarily accompanied such a meeting. To my mind, the matter had already advanced another step, and this was merely one more opportunity to confirm—or dismiss—that which I had already begun to suspect.

Moreau regarded me for a moment, as though considering whether to add something further, but decided against it. We left shortly afterward.

The park was public, a place where the paths ran in quiet lines between trees that still held the day's light in their leaves. It was early afternoon, and the grounds had not yet filled with those who later in the day sought the open air. A few people passed with dogs upon leashes, while others sat scattered upon the benches without seeming to have any particular purpose in remaining there.

The sounds of the city reached us only in muted fragments—a distant carriage, a voice indistinguishable from the others—and from one end of the park there came at intervals the voices of children from a playground hidden from view. It lent the place a feeling of openness, but also of a certain anonymity, as though any individual presence might easily dissolve into the whole.

Moreau had chosen a bench overlooking one of the broader paths, though not one situated in a central position. We seated ourselves without further remark.

I allowed my gaze to pass over the few people nearby. Not searching in the strict sense, but observing. An elderly gentleman with a newspaper that remained unread. A woman with a small dog whose movements she followed more attentively than seemed necessary. A young man walking with his hands in his pockets and no apparent destination. None of them possessed the quality of restrained attention which the situation required.

I leaned back slightly and let my eyes rest upon the path before us.

"He will not come directly," I said quietly, more as a statement than as a remark addressed to Moreau.

Moreau did not reply.

Another moment passed during which nothing appeared to change, and it was precisely for that reason that the movement became so distinct when it came. A man approached from the side, not by the path leading directly toward us, but along one of the narrower walks that wound between the trees. His pace was neither hurried nor slow, but measured, as though chosen with regard to his surroundings rather than his destination. My attention settled upon him immediately.

"There," I said quietly.

Moreau followed my gaze.

The man was well dressed, yet without any ostentatious detail. The cut was correct, the colors subdued, and nothing in his appearance sought to attract attention. It was not an anonymity born of chance, but one that appeared deliberately maintained.

My gaze moved downward. His shoes were well cared for, though not new. They bore the marks of regular use, neither neglected nor vainly preserved. His hands, briefly visible as he adjusted his coat, were steady and free of unnecessary movement, possessing a firmness that required no effort.

When the man raised his eyes, it was not to seek us, but to take in the surroundings as a whole. Only afterward did his gaze come to rest in our direction. My attention lingered a moment longer.

"A man accustomed to working within rules," I said quietly. "And to following them."

Moreau nodded almost imperceptibly.

The man altered his course without stopping and now came directly toward the bench. He halted with a brief, precise movement, as though he had already determined how near he ought to come before offering his greeting.

"Moreau."

"Dupont."

They shook hands without further formality. There was in the gesture neither warmth nor distance, but a mutual recognition that suggested they had met before and that neither found it necessary to enlarge upon the fact. Moreau turned slightly toward me.

"Sigurdson."

The police officer gave a brief nod, and although his gaze rested upon me for only a moment, it was long enough to show that he was not merely noting my presence, but attempting to place me.

"I do not believe I have heard your name before," he said.

"That may be an advantage," I replied calmly.

The remark passed without further comment.

Dupont seated himself beside Moreau, though slightly offset, so that his gaze could naturally fall both upon us and upon the path before us. It was a position that permitted conversation without excluding attention to the surroundings.

"Moreau has suggested," he began, "that you have an interest in the matter."

"I have an interest in that which has not yet been explained," I said.

Dupont nodded faintly, as though the wording suited him.

"Then you will probably find our approach inadequate," he said without irony. "Nevertheless, I should like to explain it."

I made a slight movement with my hand which might have been taken as an invitation to continue.

Dupont gathered his thoughts briefly, not because he hesitated, but because he appeared to choose his words with care.

"We are dealing with a series of forged works of art," he said. "Not of the sort one ordinarily encounters in minor circles, but works of such quality as to require both considerable technical skill and access to materials that are not readily available."

He allowed his gaze to rest upon me for a moment before continuing.

"These works circulate through a number of intermediaries—couriers, smaller dealers, the occasional auction—without there ever appearing to be a central point from which they originate. That makes the investigation difficult, though not unusual."

I nodded slightly.

"So you assume that this is the work of a group?"

"At the very least," replied Dupont. "Possibly several. But as yet there is nothing to suggest a single organisation. Rather, a network of individuals cooperating to the extent that necessity requires."

"And the motive?"

"Financial."

I allowed the question to linger for a moment before continuing.

"You mention the quality. Have you had an opportunity to examine the works more closely?"

"A limited number," replied Dupont. "Enough to establish that they are not simple copies. Methods have been employed that indicate considerable knowledge of both technique and history."

"And yet," I said quietly, "they have been passed onward through channels that are not exactly... discreet."

Dupont shrugged very slightly.

"Discretion is relative. In the circles through which these works move, it is not uncommon for their origin to remain uncertain."

I turned my gaze toward the path for a moment, as though the question did not require a direct reply.

“Have you noticed repetitions?” I asked after a moment. “Not in the works themselves, but in their movement?”

Dupont glanced briefly at Moreau before answering.

“Repetitions do occur. But not in a form that points to any underlying system. Rather, they appear to be the consequence of the same routes and contacts being used time and again.”

I nodded, though without giving any indication that the answer satisfied me.

“And markings? Symbols. Signs that do not naturally belong to the works themselves?”

There was a brief pause.

“We have seen a few such instances,” said Dupont. “But they can be explained as individual variations. Nothing that necessarily links the works to one another.”

I lowered my eyes for a moment.

“Of course.”

There was nothing in my tone to suggest disagreement, yet neither did it convey genuine assent.

The conversation continued for several minutes more, during which Dupont outlined the steps the police had already taken—interviews, seizures, the surveillance of certain known individuals—all presented with a precision that testified to experience, yet also with a certain restraint, as though each element had been carefully weighed before it was mentioned.

I asked a few questions as we proceeded, though without pressing the matter. I was not searching for errors, but rather for that which remained unsaid.

At length there came a brief silence.

Dupont allowed his gaze to rest upon me.

“You hold a different opinion,” he said.

It was not a question.

I did not answer at once. Instead, I watched a movement farther down the path, where a dog tugged briefly at its leash before settling once again.

"I would not dismiss yours," I said calmly. "But I am not convinced that it is sufficient."

Dupont nodded, as though he had expected precisely that answer.

"It seldom is."

I turned my eyes back to him.

"And yet you proceed upon it as though it were."

There was no sharpness in the words. Only an observation.

Dupont did not reply immediately. He let his hands rest quietly before him before at last saying,

"We proceed upon what can be proved."

My expression did not change.

"Of course."

Yet this time there was the slightest inflection in my voice, as though the words concealed something that had not yet fully taken shape.

We rose without further remark, and our leave-taking of Dupont was as brief and precise as our first greeting. He walked away in the opposite direction without once looking back, and before long he had been absorbed into the quiet movement of the park.

Moreau and I followed the path for some distance without speaking. The gravel crunched softly beneath our feet, while a light breeze stirred the leaves above us, causing the light to shift across the path in brief, irregular patterns. From the distant playground came a sudden burst of laughter, which quickly faded once again.

Moreau glanced sideways at me.

"You found him exactly as you expected."

"Yes," I replied. "He is a man who overlooks nothing that he has learned to see."

"And yet," said Moreau, "you do not appear convinced."

I allowed my gaze to rest ahead of me for a moment before replying.

"He works within a framework that is both necessary and limiting. *What can be proved*, as he himself expressed it."

Moreau nodded.

"That is hardly unreasonable."

"No," I said quietly. "But neither is it sufficient."

We continued a few more steps in silence.

"If one regards the matter as a series of isolated forgeries," I continued, "his explanation is entirely coherent. Even the quality can be accounted for, provided one assumes sufficient skill and the proper connections."

"And you assume something different?"

I shrugged slightly.

"Nothing that can yet be expressed with precision. But the repetitions are too clean."

Moreau looked at me.

"You mentioned that to him as well."

"Yes."

"He did not seem to attach any importance to it."

"He cannot," I said. "For once one accepts that there is a pattern," I continued, "one must also accept that it has been created. And if it has been created, there must be an intention extending beyond the immediate profit."

Moreau let that thought remain between us for a moment.

"So you believe it is not merely financial."

I stopped briefly, not because anything had attracted my attention, but as though the thought itself required a pause.

"Money is an explanation," I said. "But it is seldom the only one."

I resumed walking.

"The police officer proceeds exactly as he ought," I added after a moment. "He gathers what can be gathered and dismisses that which cannot immediately be secured."

"And you?"

I allowed my gaze to pass over the few people who still remained in the park.

"I prefer to linger a little longer over that which does not fit."

Moreau smiled faintly.

“That can be a dangerous method.”

“Yes,” I replied. “But in this instance, it would be even more dangerous not to employ it.”

We reached the edge of the park, where the sounds of the city once again became more distinct and the flow of pedestrians somewhat denser.

I did not stop. Yet there had been a subtle change in my expression.

“He is not wearing shoes that are too small for him,” Moreau observed thoughtfully. “He merely walks in the shoes he has been given.”

I turned briefly toward him.

“Perhaps,” I said. “But if one continues to walk in them, one never discovers that the road itself has changed.”

Dusk had settled quietly over the Champ de Mars. I was seated upon the bench overlooking the river when the expected figure approached. The man was tall, clad in a dark coat, with his hat drawn low over his brow. His stride was measured, neither hurried nor cautious. He halted a few paces from me.

“You wished to speak,” he said.

His voice was subdued and neutral.

I rose slowly.

“I merely wished to prevent a misunderstanding,” I replied calmly.

The man did not come any nearer.

“You overestimate your own importance.”

“That is entirely possible,” I said. “Yet certain repetitions in the frames and pigments are difficult to explain away.”

A brief silence followed.

The man replied,

“You have no proof.”

I looked steadily at him.

“Perhaps.”

It appeared to be the answer he had been expecting.

He removed one of his gloves and allowed his gaze to wander toward the structure of the tower, as though our conversation held no particular interest for him.

"One," he said without looking at me, "does not regard speculation as a threat."

I noted the choice of words. Not *I*. Not *we*. But *one*.

"Then we are agreed," I said. "This is merely speculation."

The man inclined his head slightly.

"And speculations have a way of disappearing of their own accord."

He drew the glove on again.

"Good evening."

I did not attempt to stop him.

The man turned and walked calmly toward the avenue. There was no haste. No flight. Only a measured withdrawal.

Moreau stepped out from the shadows a moment later.

"It was him," he said quietly.

"Possibly," I replied. "He was carrying nothing."

"No."

Moreau looked frustrated.

"We have achieved nothing."

I looked toward the path along which the man had disappeared.

"That is not correct."

I bent down and picked up something from the gravel beside the bench.

A small button. Black. Unremarkable.

Moreau looked at it.

"A button?"

I turned it over in my hand. It was heavier than it ought to have been. Not mass-produced. On the reverse—almost concealed within the metal—was an engraved mark. A small *M*. Not *MF*. A single *M*, crossed by a fine diagonal scratch.

Moreau fell silent.

"Montmartre," he said.

I made no reply. Instead, I ran my thumb across the metal.

"A theatrical button," I said quietly. "Hand-cast."

I slipped the button into my pocket and continued.

"And one belonging to a man who is unaccustomed to being observed."

Moreau looked after the vanished figure.

"He spoke as though we were of no consequence."

My expression remained cool.

"It is entirely possible that he wished us to believe precisely that."

We walked on without another word.

My dear Watson,

Our conversation produced no immediate result. It nevertheless seems to me that certain details—even when they pretend to be without significance—may ultimately prove more eloquent than their owners intend. Tomorrow I shall examine a district where craftsmanship and disguise go hand in hand.

— S.

Watson let the letter sink slightly in his hands, though he did not fold it.

There was something in Holmes's account that would not release its hold upon him. Not the meeting with Dupont itself, though the police officer's sober limitations stood plainly before his mind. Not even the unknown man at the Champ de Mars, whose words conveyed more distance than denial. It was rather the tension between the two: the police's need for proof and Holmes's ability to linger over that which could not yet be proved, yet could no more be dismissed.

Watson looked toward the glow of the lamp upon his writing desk. He knew this aspect of Holmes better than most. That patience which, to an outside observer, might appear almost like coldness. That quiet insistence

upon a detail which others abandoned because it had not yet found its proper place within the whole.

A button. A small *M*. A diagonal scratch. It was almost nothing. And yet Watson knew that such almost-nothings were very often the beginning of everything.

He read the final lines once more.

Craftsmanship and disguise. Montmartre. The theatre.

It seemed to him that the affair was now moving away from canvases and frames and into a darker realm, where men concealed not merely works of art, but themselves.

Watson laid the letter aside with a slow and deliberate movement.

Holmes wrote that the conversation had produced no immediate result. Yet Watson knew that this was Holmes's own manner of describing progress at a stage when others would not yet have recognised it.

He remained seated for a moment in his study.

Outside, evening had fallen. Within the room, the letter lay open before him, and for an instant the empty chair opposite seemed rather less empty than before.

For in these few lines Watson heard once again the voice of his friend: calm, dry, almost measured—and yet already moving toward the place where the case would begin to reveal its true face.

He picked up the next envelope. It was dated the day after the meeting and bore the Paris postmark. With a resolute movement, he broke the seal.

Letter VIII

Montmartre

October 22, 1891

Paris

My dear Watson,

Do you remember the atmosphere of Montmartre? In the quiet hours of the morning, the district presents itself as another Paris altogether. The broad boulevards have given way to narrow, sloping streets, where the cobblestones still bear the traces of the night. Small ateliers stand close together, their tall windows clouded with paint and dust. Apprentices, models, and craftsmen move about in a rhythm that is less orderly, yet no less disciplined.

I walked slowly up the Rue Lepic. The air carried the scent of coffee, damp limestone, and linseed oil. The stairways between the streets were steep, and the buildings seemed to lean ever so slightly over the pavements, as though observing those who passed beneath them. I paused briefly before a window in which mannequins wore half-finished costumes. The fabrics were heavy, the colors subdued. A theatrical quarter. I continued on.

It was no coincidence that craftsmanship and disguise had found one another here. Within these narrow streets, a man might alter his appearance without attracting notice. I turned into a narrower passage.

There I saw him again.

Not in a mirror. Not reflected in a shop window. But directly.

A tall figure in a dark coat, with his hat drawn low over his brow. The same hat. The same discreet distance. The same habit of stopping whenever I paused. The familiar silhouette no longer required the intermediary of a reflection to be recognised.

I continued without altering my pace. It was no longer a matter of conjecture, but of sober observation.

I was being followed.

Not closely. Nor in a threatening manner. But persistently.

I passed a group of apprentices carrying bolts of cloth into a workshop. I allowed my hand to glide along the railing of a staircase, as though considering which direction to take. When I turned into the next alley, the man was still there. The distance between us remained precisely the same.

I stopped before a small brass sign: **Maison L. Vautrin — Costumes & Confections Théâtrales**. I glanced briefly toward the window, where dark jackets and military uniforms hung side by side. Behind me, the dark figure also came to a halt. I raised my hand and knocked upon the door.

The door opened with the faint ringing of a bell.

The workshop was narrow but deep. Fabrics hung in dense rows along the walls. An elderly man stood at a worktable, where he was fastening a cuff to a dark jacket. He looked up.

“Good morning, monsieur.”

I stepped inside and allowed my gaze to travel through the room.

“Good morning,” I replied. “I am in need of a minor repair.”

The tailor smiled politely.

“Certainly.”

I removed my glove and laid it upon the table. I said nothing further. Instead, my eyes settled upon a row of buttons lying in an open box beside the sewing machine. Black metal, and unquestionably cast in a single piece. I recognised the pattern without touching it.

The tailor noticed where I was looking.

"They are not ordinary," he remarked lightly. "Made to order."

I nodded.

"For theatrical use?"

"Yes, precisely."

I looked up.

"Montmartre lives by transformation."

The tailor laughed softly.

"Yes, monsieur. We supply several theatres."

I slowly took out the button I had found beside the bench the previous evening and laid it upon the table.

"One like this."

The tailor's hand paused for a moment.

Only for a moment.

"Ah," he said. "One of ours."

I looked at him.

"So, you recognise it."

"Certainly. We cast them ourselves."

I nodded slowly.

"Interesting."

The tailor straightened.

"Did you lose it, monsieur?"

"No," I replied. "I found it."

The tailor shrugged slightly.

"Then you have been fortunate. They seldom come off."

My gaze drifted to the jacket lying upon the table. It was dark. The lining was heavy. The seam had been sewn by hand. I let my hand pass lightly over its edge.

"This lining is remarkably durable," I observed.

"It must be," replied the tailor. "Some clients require durability."

I looked briefly at his hands. His fingernails were clean. Yet beneath the edge of his thumb remained a thin, almost invisible trace of black pigment. Not dye from cloth. Pigment from metal.

"You take part in the casting yourself," I said.

"Yes."

I nodded.

"And you also supply private customers?"

The tailor smiled.

"The theatre only."

I allowed my gaze to linger upon him for another second.

"Of course."

I picked up the button once more.

"Your workmanship is exquisite."

The tailor inclined his head slightly.

"Thank you, monsieur."

I turned toward the door.

"Montmartre is a place where many men wish to disappear into a role," I said without looking back.

The tailor made no reply.

I stepped out into the street once more.

The worthy Vautrin struck me as sincere in his craftsmanship, but rather less so in his denials. His professed limitation to the theatre accords poorly with the discreet manufacture of buttons that seldom lose their fastening. It seems to me entirely probable that certain costumes in Montmartre perform roles never intended for the public eye.

I left Montmartre without seeking a confrontation and informed Moreau that same afternoon.

"We shall return this evening," I said simply.

"To Vautrin?"

"Yes."

Moreau nodded.

"Do you believe he will speak more openly?"

"I believe he will be less prepared."

Evening had fallen by the time we reached the narrow alley once again.

We saw it from a distance.

Two uniformed policemen stood before the door. A lantern had been hung beside the entrance, and a small crowd of curious onlookers had gathered on the opposite side of the street.

Moreau stopped.

I took a few steps farther.

One of the policemen raised a hand.

"No entry."

I looked at him.

"Is Monsieur Vautrin indisposed?"

The officer hesitated.

"He is dead."

Moreau drew a quick breath.

My expression did not change.

"From what cause?"

"A knife wound," the policeman replied curtly. "He was found behind the workshop."

I looked toward the door.

"When?"

"Late this afternoon."

I nodded slowly.

"Were there any signs of a break-in?"

"No."

"Of a struggle?"

The policeman shrugged.

"A little disorder. Not much."

Moreau stepped forward.

"He had no enemies."

The policeman looked at him without interest.

"They all say that."

My gaze drifted upward toward the window on the first floor. The lamp was extinguished.

"Did you find anything unusual?" I asked calmly.

The policeman shook his head.

"We shall leave that to the investigation."

I nodded and turned to Moreau.

"That was swift," Moreau said in a subdued voice.

"Yes."

"Do you think—"

I did not interrupt him, but simply said,

"It seems to me highly improbable that this is a coincidence."

Moreau looked toward the policemen.

"Then they have silenced him."

My eyes remained fixed upon the door.

"Or else he spoke."

Moreau fell silent.

I took a step backward and surveyed the alley. It seemed narrower in the evening. Darker.

"You understand," said Moreau quietly, "that we are now in direct opposition."

I did not answer at once. My eyes rested upon the cobblestones before the workshop. The rain from the previous night had left a thin layer of moisture in the cracks. There were footprints. Not distinct. But several.

"We have lost an intermediary," I said at last.

"Yes."

"But someone considered it necessary to remove him."

Moreau looked at me.

"That means—"

"—that he mattered."

I added,

"And it also means that our presence in Montmartre has not gone unnoticed."

Moreau said,

"Then we are back where we started."

I shook my head slightly.

“No.”

I looked toward the dark alley behind the building.

“We have confirmed that Vautrin did not sew solely for the theater.”

Evening was well advanced by the time Moreau and I once again made our way through the sloping streets of Montmartre.

The alley lay almost deserted. The police lantern had been removed. The door to the workshop had been sealed with an official strip of paper.

Moreau led us through a narrow passage beside the building. The courtyard behind it was dark, though by no means inaccessible. A single door led into the storeroom.

I examined the lock with my hand.

“It has been forced before,” I said quietly.

Moreau looked at me in surprise.

I merely pointed to the wear upon the metal. Taking a small instrument from my pocket, I applied it to the lock. There came a brief, dry click. The door yielded.

We stepped inside.

The room was unlit. I switched on a small pocket lantern whose beam was carefully subdued. Dust motes drifted through the light.

We searched without speaking. The shelves contained bolts of cloth, half-finished jackets, hats, and boxes filled with buttons. Nothing in itself appeared unusual. Moreau opened drawers. I carefully lifted false bottoms and loose boards. My eye measured what was missing rather than what remained.

“The police searched quickly,” said Moreau.

“Yes,” I replied. “They were looking for a weapon.”

We continued.

An hour passed.

I stopped before a small writing desk in the back room. The drawer was empty.

Too empty.

I ran my finger along the inside.

"Look here," I said quietly.

Moreau stepped closer.

A thin line in the wood—almost invisible.

I pressed gently against the back panel.

It gave way.

A false bottom slid aside.

Behind it lay a small book, bound in dark leather and without a title.

I picked it up.

"It would appear," I said, "that Monsieur Vautrin kept two sets of accounts."

Moreau took a step backward.

I opened the book. Its pages were crowded with small, precise entries. Dates. Names. Initials. Deliveries.

Not costumes.

Instead, descriptions such as:

Uniforme sombre — delivered.

Manteau noir — modified.

Commande spéciale.

Again and again the same designation appeared:

Théâtre des Murmures.

Moreau pointed.

"There."

A name.

Not written in full.

Only: **A. D.**

I closed the book for a moment.

"Delacroix," said Moreau.

I nodded slightly.

Turning the pages once more, I found several entries marked with the same symbol we had seen carved into the frame.

Moreau sank slowly into the chair.

"He supplied disguises," he said quietly.

"Yes," I replied.

"But not for the stage."

I swept the light across the final pages. The most recent entries had been crossed out.

Not erased.

Merely crossed through.

The date was that of the day before the murder.

I closed the book and slipped it into my inner pocket.

"This," I said calmly, "is the reason he was killed."

Moreau looked up.

"We ought to hand it over to the police."

I looked at him.

"Not yet."

"But—"

"The police will see a tailor," I said. "We see a distribution channel."

There was no excitement in my voice. Only a statement of fact.

I extinguished the lantern.

"We now possess," I said, "proof that Montmartre does not merely produce costumes, but identities."

Moreau rose slowly.

"And Delacroix?"

I opened the door once more and looked out into the dark courtyard beyond.

"He is not at the top."

My dear Watson, I must observe here that Vautrin's ledger appears to me a far more significant discovery than his workshop itself. When a man keeps concealed accounts of deliveries that bear no relation to his declared trade, one must assume that he serves another master than the one he presents to the world.

We then stepped back into the narrow passage. Montmartre had grown almost silent. Only the occasional voice drifted faintly from a café farther down the street. I paused for a moment to listen.

Moreau spoke quietly.

“We should not remain here long.”

I nodded.

We had entered a narrower street where the light from the high-mounted lamps fell unevenly between the façades, leaving patches of shadow that could not entirely be penetrated. The sounds of the city had not vanished, but were subdued—as though they reached this place only in a weakened form. A carriage passed in the distance. A solitary footstep echoed against the stones farther down the street. Otherwise, silence.

I moved forward with the same measured stride as before, neither hurried nor hesitant. Moreau followed a little behind me, still absorbed in the reflections we had exchanged, which seemed to linger in the air between us.

It was at the very moment I stepped beneath the light of a street lamp that the sound came.

Brief and muffled. Not loud enough to attract attention at a distance, yet possessing a sharpness that could not be mistaken for anything else.

A small splinter of plaster broke away from the wall beside me and fell to the ground.

Moreau stopped abruptly.

I did not.

I turned slowly, as though wishing merely to establish what was already evident.

“A pistol fitted with a suppressor,” I said, almost as a matter of observation.

The words had scarcely left my lips before a sudden force seized the collar of my coat and pulled me half a step backward into the shadow beside the doorway. The movement was precise and without hesitation, the action of a man who had acted before thought itself had intervened.

The second shot followed instantly.

This time the projectile struck the woodwork where I had been standing scarcely a second before. Once again the report was muffled, yet distinct enough to confirm that there had been nothing accidental about it.

I straightened myself only halfway, still within the shelter of the shadows. My eyes immediately found the figure who had intervened.

The dark hat.

The same coat.

The same restrained bearing.

There was nothing in his manner that sought to emphasise what he had done. Nothing dramatic. Nothing superfluous. He had merely done what was necessary—and nothing more.

The man did not utter a single word.

His grip was released with the same economy with which it had been taken, and without lingering he turned away. I caught only the briefest profile, little more than an outline rather than a face, before the figure disappeared down the alley.

He neither ran nor betrayed the slightest trace of panic.

Instead, he departed with a composure that stood in striking contrast to the circumstances.

Within moments he had vanished into the darkness, as though he had never been there at all.

Moreau stared after him, unable at first to gather his thoughts.

“He—”

I raised a hand slightly.

“Yes.”

No further shots were fired.

The street settled once more into its former silence, as though the incident had been nothing more than a brief interruption of an otherwise undisturbed order. A window rattled softly somewhere above us. A distant wheel rolled over the stones.

Nothing answered what had just taken place.

I stepped once more into the light and examined the masonry.

Two small marks.

Both precisely placed.

Neither accidental.

Moreau came nearer, his eyes still fixed upon the direction in which the figure had disappeared.

"A warning," he said quietly.

I shook my head faintly.

"No."

My gaze lingered upon the marks for a moment before rising slowly.

"An unmistakable attempt upon my life."

Moreau turned toward me.

"He saved you."

I straightened fully, as though only now assuming my proper place within the scene.

"That appears to be the most probable conclusion."

"But why?"

My expression remained calm, though not indifferent.

"Because my continued activities serve a purpose."

Moreau hesitated for a moment.

"Then you believe—"

"—that he has not been following me in order to stop me," I continued, "but to observe me."

Moreau looked once again toward the alley.

"And now to protect you?"

I did not answer immediately. Instead, I allowed my eyes to pass once more over our surroundings, as though wishing to assure myself that nothing further remained concealed within the visible.

"That has not yet been proved," I said at last.

I turned slightly and looked again at the two marks in the masonry.

"But he quite clearly had no desire for me to be removed this evening."

Moreau drew a slow breath.

"Then we are not merely being hunted."

I nodded.

"No."

I took a step forward.

"We are also the subject of an evaluation."

Moreau nodded.

"Let us find a more secluded place. Come."

Without another word he continued down the street, and I followed close behind.

My dear Watson, the intervention that occurred in the alley behind Montmartre appears to me to have been both precise and deliberate. Two shots were fired with sufficient skill to indicate intention, yet without the complete resolve to carry the act through. My position at that moment was not accidental, and my removal from it was still less so.

The figure whom I have previously observed in the streets of Paris, and who has now, for the first time, acted in my presence, has thereby excluded himself from one of the more obvious categories. He can scarcely be counted among those employed to silence me.

His identity remains unknown to me. His allegiance likewise. Yet it appears that his continuing interest in my movements is not intended to bring them to an end. For the present, therefore, he must be regarded as an unknown factor—not an enemy.

Letter IX

The First Irregularity

23 October, 1891

Paris

Paris had laid aside the bustle of the day. The streets around the boulevards were not yet deserted, but the sounds had become subdued, as though the city spoke more softly after darkness had fallen. Moreau and I walked without haste through the narrow passages, where the gas lamps cast their muted glow upon the cobblestones. Rain from earlier in the day had left a faint sheen upon the pavement, and in the shallow pools there were reflected fragments of windows and passing shadows.

Moreau's gallery stood discreetly withdrawn from the main thoroughfare. My first entrance had been accomplished under far more secretive circumstances, by way of the Seine and the rear entrance. The sign above the door was restrained; it was not a place for tourists, but for those who already knew what they were seeking.

Moreau produced his ring of keys, and the lock yielded without difficulty. He stepped aside and allowed me to enter first.

The gallery possessed a different atmosphere in the evening. The paintings upon the walls appeared less official, less protected by their frames. Shadows fell unevenly across the canvases, while a few easels still stood in place, as though the work had been interrupted in mid-motion. A faint

scent of turpentine and old varnish lingered in the room—not unpleasant, but persistent. It bore witness to hands that had laboured there for many years.

Moreau closed the door behind us and drew the curtains.

“I have been wondering,” he said after a moment, “whether you have already seen enough.”

I did not answer immediately. Instead, I allowed my gaze to travel over the walls, over the carefully selected paintings, and finally to the small writing desk by the window, where papers lay arranged with an order that did not entirely conceal a deeper unrest.

“One often sees the most,” I said quietly, “when one believes one has already seen everything.”

Moreau nodded, though he did not smile. There was a weariness about him that did not arise merely from the events of the day. It lay deeper than that. Not in his body, but in his eyes—the expression of a man who had carried a realisation alone for a very long time.

He crossed to a small table in the corner and poured two glasses of wine without asking. One he handed to me.

“So far,” he said quietly, “you have seen the ending. The professor. The workshop. The frames.”

He lowered himself slowly into a chair, as though even the movement deserved deliberation.

“But you have not yet seen the beginning.”

I did not sit down at once. For a moment I remained standing, studying Moreau, as though measuring the difference between the art dealer I had first encountered and the man who now sat before me.

“The beginning,” I said, “is seldom where one first notices it.”

Moreau passed a hand across his forehead.

“It did not begin with the professor,” he said. “Nor did it begin with Paris.”

A brief silence followed.

Outside, a carriage rolled past. The sound quickly faded again.

Moreau remained seated for another moment, as though arranging the precise sequence of events in his own mind before continuing.

"Five years ago," he said slowly, "a small painting was submitted for evaluation. Nothing that would ordinarily attract attention. A landscape. Provincial. Unsigned, yet executed in a style that might readily have been attributed to a lesser-known pupil of the late eighteenth century."

He extended a hand toward one of the paintings hanging upon the wall, as though unconsciously comparing it with the work he was describing.

"It was not the subject that caught my attention. Even then, it was the pigmentation."

I seated myself now, though I did not take my eyes from him.

"A particular colour?" I asked.

"Yes." Moreau nodded. "A shade of blue. Not striking. Not dominant—merely in the shadows beneath the trees. It had been applied with restraint, yet consistently. I did not recognise it as belonging to the period."

I inclined my head slightly.

"Ultramarine?"

"No. Too matte."

"Prussian blue?"

"No. Too stable."

I folded my hands.

"A synthetic cobalt compound?"

Moreau looked at me with a faint expression that was almost one of approval.

"Precisely. A shade that did not become generally available until much later. It could not possibly have been accessible to the painter who was alleged to have created the work."

"And the binding medium?" I asked without raising my voice.

"That was the second point," said Moreau. "The varnish had been artificially aged, yet the ground beneath it bore traces of a binding medium I had previously encountered only in modern restoration work. Not in forgery—in restoration."

I leaned forward slightly.

“Applied deliberately?”

“Yes. Far too precisely to have been an accident.”

Silence settled between us for a moment.

“You concluded, then,” I said quietly, “that the painter had not himself chosen the technique.”

“I concluded,” Moreau replied, “that the painter may not even have understood it.”

He rose and crossed to the writing desk. From one of the drawers he withdrew an old sheet of paper—not the original document itself, but a copy of the notes he had made at the time.

“I began modestly,” he continued. “The archives of the École des Beaux-Arts. Exhibition catalogues. Student registers. Shipping documents.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Shipping documents?”

“The painting had been submitted through an intermediary,” Moreau said. “But the frame bore evidence of having been transferred. A discreet marking on the reverse suggested that it was not the first time it had crossed a border.”

My attention sharpened.

“Marseille?”

“Later,” Moreau replied. “Lyon first.”

I said nothing.

He continued.

“I followed records that proved to be incomplete. Names with altered spellings. Receipts without corresponding documentation. A painting that had apparently arrived in Paris without ever having left Lyon—or so the official records would have one believe.”

“Interesting,” I said quietly.

“Yes,” Moreau replied. “But at the time I still believed I was pursuing a single forger. A gifted one. Someone who liked to experiment.”

He looked up.

"It was only when I found her name in the student register that the affair changed its character."

My voice remained even.

"A woman."

Moreau nodded slowly.

"Yes."

He stood for a moment with the notes in his hand before laying them down once more.

"Her name was Claire Delatour."

He spoke it without hesitation, yet there was an almost imperceptible change in his voice as he did so.

"She was in her final years at the École des Beaux-Arts. Not a student of whom people spoke loudly—but one whom they noticed."

I remained silent.

"She possessed an extraordinary command of materials," Moreau continued. "Not merely of color, but of surface. She understood the process of aging. She could make a new canvas appear as though it had hung for a century in a provincial church. That is a skill which is not, in itself, criminal—but it is an uncommon one."

"And she employed it," I said quietly.

"Yes."

Moreau drew a slow breath.

"I first sought her out under the pretext of taking an interest in her studies. She received me in a small studio behind the school's main building. It was untidy, though by no means careless. There was discipline within the disorder."

My attention sharpened slightly at the phrasing.

"She did not appear nervous," said Moreau. "On the contrary, she seemed curious. She knew that I had noticed something. And she knew that I knew it."

"She denied it?"

"She denied nothing."

A brief silence followed.

"That was what unsettled me."

I folded my hands.

"A forger denies," I said.

"Precisely."

Moreau continued.

"She spoke of pigments as though they were living beings. She knew their chemical history, their geographical origins. It was not merely talent—it was education."

"Educated by whom?" I asked.

Moreau shook his head slightly.

"That was what I was trying to discover."

He crossed to the window and looked out into the darkness before continuing.

"I asked her directly whether she worked in restoration. She replied that she worked with relative truth."

I raised an eyebrow.

"An interesting expression."

"She said that authenticity is often nothing more than a question of who can afford to define it."

For a moment neither of us spoke.

Moreau turned back toward me.

"She was... attractive," he said without circumlocution. "Not merely in appearance—though that was certainly true—but in her confidence. She spoke without evasion. She looked directly into my eyes, as though she wished to be judged."

I noted the remark, but made no comment.

"I gained the impression," he continued, "that she was not the originator. That she was working for someone else. A technician. An organiser. She possessed knowledge—but not control."

Moreau drew out his chair and seated himself once more.

"I suggested that we meet away from the school. Unofficially. At a café near the Seine. She accepted without hesitation."

My voice remained even.

"She was not afraid of you."

"No."

Moreau lowered his eyes for a moment.

"Perhaps I should have been afraid of her."

His gaze drifted across the floor of the gallery, as though the café table still stood before him.

"It was early in the morning," he said. "Not to avoid attention, but because she herself proposed the hour. 'The morning is more honest,' she said."

I took note of the expression without comment.

"The café stood close to the river," he continued. "Not one of the fashionable establishments. One of those places where the waiter knows his regular patrons by the length of their stride. There was dew upon the chairs outside, and the first deliveries were being carried in as I arrived."

He paused for a moment.

"I was there before her."

"Naturally," I said quietly.

"I ordered coffee. The first of the morning. It was good."

The faintest trace of a smile touched his words, though it vanished almost at once.

"I had... looked forward to the conversation," Moreau said more directly. "Not merely because she possessed knowledge that might have led me further. She had a clarity one rarely encounters. She spoke of technique as though it were poetry. That is an uncommon combination."

My expression remained composed.

"And you believed she could be persuaded to speak?"

"I believed she wanted to."

Moreau folded his hands.

“Half past seven came and went. Two students passed by, loud and entirely uninterested in anything beyond their own conversation. An elderly gentleman seated himself at the neighbouring table and unfolded a newspaper.”

My eyes shifted slightly.

“He was not reading it,” said Moreau.

“No?”

“He held the newspaper too high.”

Silence fell once more.

“And?” I asked.

“He never turned a page.”

I nodded almost imperceptibly.

“I noticed it. But I dismissed it.”

Moreau continued.

“Eight o'clock came. My coffee had grown cold. I ordered another.”

He drew a slow breath.

“She never appeared.”

A brief pause followed.

“I remained there for another twenty minutes. Not because I expected her to come, but because I wished to be certain.”

“Certain of what?” I asked.

“Whether I myself was being observed.”

My voice did not change.

“And were you?”

Moreau looked directly at me.

“Yes.”

There was no trace of drama in the answer.

“The elderly gentleman left the café without paying. The waiter did not even notice. When I finally rose myself, I saw another figure standing at the corner of the street. A hat. Nothing remarkable in itself. But the position was too perfectly chosen.”

I said nothing.

"I went to the school that same afternoon in search of her," Moreau continued. "The studio had been emptied."

"The official explanation?" I asked.

"Personal reasons. Departure. No further information."

"Documented?"

"No."

The gallery fell silent.

"That," Moreau said slowly, "was when I understood that I was not pursuing a student. I had brushed against something that moved more quickly than I did."

I studied him for a moment.

"And you continued."

Moreau nodded.

"Yes."

He remained standing by the window for another moment before speaking again.

"After her disappearance, I did what I ought to have done from the very beginning," he said. "I stopped following the person. I began following the movement."

I nodded slightly.

"The frame?" I asked.

"Yes."

Moreau turned back toward me.

"The frame in which the first painting was mounted was not local. The wood had been treated in a manner I had seen in restoration workshops in Lyon. Not identical—but related."

He crossed to the desk and produced a map—not a large one, but marked with handwritten annotations.

"I found two similar works in Lyon. Neither bore a signature. Both contained inconsistent pigments. Both had been transported through Marseille."

He continued.

"The shipping documents were not forged. They were fragmented. Each individual shipment was entirely legitimate. But when they were compared, a pattern emerged."

My voice remained calm.

"A rhythm."

"Yes."

Moreau drew out a chair and sat down, more heavily this time.

"Small paintings. Never the important ones. Never those that attract international attention. They were distributed to smaller galleries, private collectors, and the occasional provincial estate."

"Until someone wished to increase their value," I said.

Moreau looked at me.

"Precisely."

Silence settled between us.

"I began searching for a single common factor," Moreau continued. "Not the artist. Not the intermediary. Not the gallery. But the technique."

My eyes narrowed slightly.

"And what did you find?"

"The binding medium. The aging process. A particular method of producing craquelure upon the surface without compromising the stability of the pigment."

I spoke quietly.

"That requires chemical precision."

"Yes."

Moreau laid both hands flat upon the table.

"It is not something one improvises in a studio. It is developed. Tested. Standardised."

My voice was low.

"A laboratory."

"Yes."

A longer silence followed.

"I sent an inquiry to Marseille," said Moreau. "Not officially. Through an acquaintance. There were records of small consignments of specialised chemicals. Never in quantities large enough to attract the attention of Customs. But they arrived regularly."

"From where?"

Moreau looked directly at me.

"Rome."

The silence in the gallery grew heavier still.

For several seconds I said nothing.

"A name?" I asked at last.

Moreau hesitated.

"Only once," he said.

He withdrew an old folded sheet from a folder. It was not the original document, but his own copy.

"In the margin of a shipping list. Not as the sender. Not as the recipient. Merely as a reference."

My eyes moved slowly over the paper.

Moreau pronounced it deliberately.

"Montfaucon."

I repeated the name almost inaudibly.

"Montfaucon."

"It appeared only that one time," said Moreau. "And when I later attempted to gain access to the remaining documents, they had already been archived—and placed beyond my reach."

I raised my head.

"When were you removed from the case?"

Moreau answered without bitterness.

"Shortly thereafter."

I remained standing beside the table and slowly took the small splinter of wood from my pocket. It had acquired a slightly darker hue from its time in my waistcoat pocket, yet the incision remained perfectly distinct.

I laid it beside Moreau's copy of the shipping list.

"Montfaucon," I repeated. "M and F."

After a pause, Moreau said,

"If Montfaucon exists, he is not in Paris."

"No," I replied.

I looked through the window toward the darkening street.

"And if he exists, he is not the one who holds the brush."

Moreau raised his eyes.

"But the one who determines the subject."

I inclined my head slightly.

"That appears to me the more probable conclusion."

For a moment we remained standing in silence, as though the room itself required time to absorb the names and fragments that had been laid before it.

Outside, Paris had grown darker still. The last carriages rolled past in muted rhythm, while the light from the street lamps cast long, slanting shadows through the windows of the gallery.

Moreau gathered up the map and returned it to the folder with a movement that bore equal traces of weariness and determination.

"It was then," he said quietly, "that I understood the affair could not be concluded in France."

I took my hat from the table.

"And yet you continued."

"Yes."

I looked at him for a moment.

"That was wise."

One of Moreau's eyebrows rose almost imperceptibly.

"I have not always been told so."

"That depends," I said, "upon who is offering the opinion."

The faintest glimmer touched my expression before disappearing once more. I drew my coat more closely about me and moved toward the door.

“We now have three elements,” I said, almost as though I were speaking to myself rather than to my companion. “The technique. The distribution. And the name.”

“And the mark,” Moreau added.

I paused for a moment.

“Yes,” I said quietly. “The mark.”

I opened the door. The cool evening air drifted into the room, bringing with it the sense that the city beyond was larger than either of us had wished to believe. Moreau remained where he was as I stepped out into the street. The door closed behind me with a muted sound. In the faint reflection upon the window, Moreau stood alone for a moment among his paintings.

Then he extinguished the light.

Letter X

The Théâtre des Murmures

October 24, 1891

Paris

My dear Watson,

For the present, I regard the discovery of the tailor's ledger as the most significant development of the investigation. Besides the curious notation, **L.D.**, which naturally directs one's thoughts toward Delacroix, the designation *Théâtre des Murmures* appears repeatedly in connection with the entries. I consider it highly improbable that this detail is either accidental or without significance.

I made inquiries of a passing cabman regarding the supposed theatre. He informed me that it belonged to one of the smaller and more experimental stages, though it nevertheless enjoyed a respectable reputation among the theatres of Montmartre.

I therefore considered it necessary to visit the establishment without delay and at once sent word to Monsieur Moreau, requesting that he meet me there that very afternoon.

The street upon which the theatre stood was narrow and lacked the liveliness one ordinarily associates with Paris. The façades pressed closely together, while the windows were either veiled or dark, as though the place possessed any true importance only after nightfall.

The entrance itself was modest. A faded sign hung above the door, its lettering worn soft by weather and by countless hands.

I paused for a moment and allowed my eyes to travel upward over the building before, without further comment, placing my hand upon the door handle. The door yielded with a dry sound.

Moreau and I entered a dim vestibule where the air bore the unmistakable character of an enclosed place—a mingling of dust, old fabric, and that peculiar, faintly metallic scent left behind by stage lighting. No one came to receive us.

I moved forward without hesitation, as though I were already familiar with the premises, and Moreau followed me through a narrow passage leading into the auditorium itself. The room opened suddenly before us. Rows of plain seats stood in silence facing the stage, and a thin layer of dust appeared to have settled upon both the floor and the armrests. Light fell obliquely through a single opening high above, tracing long, motionless shafts through the air.

A woman stood upon the stage. She was alone. She moved very little, yet her presence filled the room. Her voice was not loud, but precise, as though every word occupied its own appointed place.

"...and yet, even in this silence, I am not free."

She allowed the words to fall, not as a declaration, but as something already lived. After a brief pause she repeated the sentence, though now with the slightest alteration in tone, as if its meaning had shifted in the interval.

I took a seat a few rows into the auditorium without speaking.

She continued, though not like one struggling with her lines. Rather, she seemed to be exploring different paths into them. The same sentence was spoken three times, and on each occasion it seemed to come from an entirely different person. After another repetition she remained perfectly still—not to rest, but as though listening to something that had not yet been spoken.

I rose quietly.

"It is rare," I said, "to encounter someone who does not merely recite the words, but transforms them in the speaking."

She turned. There was no surprise in her expression. Only a calm attentiveness, as though she had known all along that we were there. She allowed her gaze to rest upon me for a moment before taking a single step forward.

"The words do not change," she said quietly. "It is the person who speaks them who does."

I inclined my head slightly.

"Precisely."

She left the stage without haste, yet without hesitation, and came down toward us. Upon reaching the edge of the stage, she briefly rested one hand upon the wood, as though concluding something before stepping down.

"You are not from the theatre," she said.

It was not a question.

"We are merely observers," I replied. "With a particular interest in the means by which a role comes into being."

She regarded me for a moment longer, and the faintest, almost imperceptible smile appeared.

"Very few concern themselves with the means," she said. "Most are content with the result."

Turning half away, she picked up a piece of costume from a nearby chair and adjusted it with a precision that seemed almost ritualistic.

"Camille Ardent," she said without looking up. "My stage name."

She laid the garment aside and only then turned fully toward me. Nothing in her expression revealed whether she had offered us the truth—or merely another role.

My gaze wandered briefly across the stage before shifting toward the side passage.

"I imagine," I said, "that the wardrobe must be at least as interesting as the stage itself."

This time a clearer light entered her eyes.

"The stage is merely what one chooses to show," she replied. "The wardrobe is what one chooses from."

For a moment she stood motionless, as though considering something left unsaid. Then she gave a slight nod.

"Come."

She turned and walked toward the door at the side of the stage without troubling to see whether we followed.

The door behind the stage opened into a narrower room where the light was dimmer and more uneven. A single lamp hung crookedly from the ceiling, casting a yellowish glow over rows of costumes suspended closely side by side. The air was heavier here. The fabric seemed to retain the scent of earlier performances—perspiration, powder, and the dry character of dust that had long ceased to be regularly removed.

Camille Ardent paused for a moment in the doorway, as though allowing the room to present itself before she entered.

"We do not possess very much," she said quietly. "But it is seldom the quantity that determines a role."

There was nothing apologetic in her tone. It was simply a matter-of-fact observation. I gave no indication of having noticed her remark. Instead, I moved slowly along the racks, allowing my fingertips to brush lightly over certain fabrics. I paused briefly beside a coat and straightened one of its folds, as though from habit alone.

"You change costumes frequently?" I asked without turning.

Camille gave the slightest shrug.

"As often as necessary," she replied. "Sometimes several times in the same scene. At other times not at all."

Her eyes wandered over the garments.

"It does not depend upon the play. It depends upon whom one chooses to be."

I nodded faintly. Continuing to the end of the rack, I paused and slowly turned back, this time with a more measured gaze. There was no haste in my movements.

The costumes hung exactly as one might expect: worn, occasionally mended, lacking any obvious order, yet arranged with a certain practical system.

And yet—

Something was missing. I stopped before an empty space. It was not large. But it was unmistakable. A hanger was missing. No—not one. Several. The gap between two groups of costumes was just slightly too wide to be accidental.

I tilted my head almost imperceptibly.

“You have recently received a delivery of new costumes,” I said quietly.

Camille did not appear surprised. She followed my gaze, and a faint smile appeared—not one of amusement, but of recognition.

“Have we?” she said thoughtfully.

“From a tailor,” I continued, still without emphasis. “One who appears to have been unusually active of late.”

She allowed her fingers to glide over a dress, paused at the seam, and carefully drew loose a single thread with almost affectionate precision.

“There is always something coming and going,” she said. “Fabric... roles... people.”

A brief silence followed.

“You would remember them,” I said gently, “if they had been put into use.”

She turned her gaze toward me.

“Yes,” she said. “I most certainly would.”

I nodded, as though that were answer enough. Taking a single step backward, I allowed my eyes to sweep through the room one final time.

“It is always interesting,” I remarked, almost as a concluding observation, “how a role becomes real only when someone wears it.”

This time it was Camille who smiled.

“Or,” she said quietly, “when someone believes they are wearing it.”

For a moment silence stood between us. I turned toward the door. Moreau followed me. Camille Ardent was once more upon the stage,

though no longer where she had stood before. She had shifted almost imperceptibly and now stood in a different light, where the shadows shaped her features in another fashion. She stopped in the middle of a sentence and looked toward us as we made our way out.

"You should return this evening," she said. "For it is then," she continued, "that one discovers what a face is truly capable of bearing."

She stepped forward, picked up something from the edge of the stage, and came down toward the door.

"In here," she said, allowing her gaze to travel briefly through the auditorium, "one chooses among possibilities."

A brief pause followed.

"Out there... one wears them."

She stopped before me and held out a small card. The paper was plain, though of good quality. A name was printed upon the front together with a time.

I calmly extended my hand and accepted it.

"You will see many faces in the course of an evening," she said. "Some of them may even convince you."

A faint smile.

"And perhaps," she added, "you will discover that a costume is not always something one puts on."

I slipped the card into my inner pocket.

"If time permits," I said, "I shall be there."

She inclined her head slightly.

"I sincerely hope it does," she replied.

I bowed very slightly, turned, and made my way toward the exit. Moreau followed close behind.

The street before the theatre had now changed. Where there had earlier been silence, there was now a low murmur of voices, carriages, and footsteps upon the cobblestones. The light from the entrance fell across the

pavement in a warm tone, and people passed in and out with a natural ease, as though the place had only now assumed its proper form. I did not stop, but merely allowed my gaze to pass briefly over the gathering before stepping inside, with Moreau at my side.

Within, the air had altered. The same smell of fabric and dust remained, but it was now mingled with perfume, smoke, and that faint electricity which arises when many people are gathered in a state of shared expectation.

We did not take our seats at once. I allowed the audience to pass before me for a moment, as though I were listening to it, before selecting my position. Only then did I move into the auditorium and choose a row neither too close to the stage nor too far back. A place from which one could see—and at the same time remain unseen.

Moreau seated himself without comment. I leaned back slightly and let my eyes travel through the room. The audience was mixed. There were the assured movements of the bourgeoisie, discreet conversations, hands resting correctly upon the armrests. There were artists too—one could see it in the informal cut of their clothes, in the gaze already fixed upon the stage before the performance had begun. And there were a few who did not entirely belong to either category.

The lights dimmed. A silence spread, not suddenly, but as a slow gathering of attention. The performance began. The play did not advance as a continuous narrative, but as a series of images—tableaux that passed into one another without explanation.

Montmartre. A narrow street at dusk. A woman bent over her work. Voices not quite heard. The poverty was not exaggerated. But it was there. Then a shift. Light. Music. A cabaret. And there—Camille Ardent.

She entered without emphasis, and yet it was immediately clear that the space around her had changed. She was no longer the same woman. Her voice had taken on another resonance. Her body another weight. Her movements possessed a lightness that had not belonged to the preceding scene.

I took out my opera glasses and watched her in silence for a moment.

"Convincing," I said quietly.

Moreau did not answer. He sat calmly, his hands lightly folded, his eyes fixed upon the stage. There was nothing in his posture to reveal surprise. But he registered my voice.

The scene changed again. Decadence. The colors deepened, the movements slowed. Another figure stepped forward—again, it was she. But this time nothing remained of the cabaret. Her gaze was heavier, almost saturated. She did not move through the room; she possessed it.

I adjusted the opera glasses slightly.

"Her shoulders," I said after a moment. "They do not belong to the same woman."

Moreau nodded faintly.

Another change. An aristocratic salon. Brighter now. Measured. Voices carrying a different weight. She appeared again—and now she was almost unrecognisable. Her posture was erect, but without effort. Her hands moved less, yet with greater precision. Even the pause before an answer had changed. I lowered the opera glasses for a moment. Moreau turned his eyes briefly toward me.

"You are impressed."

I did not answer at once. I raised the glasses again.

"She defines the role," I said at last. "Not the reverse."

The performance ebbed away without any true rupture. The applause began only in scattered places, as though the audience required a moment to find itself again, before it gathered and increased in strength. Voices broke forth, conversations took shape even before the curtain had fully fallen, and the shared silence that had bound the room together dissolved into movement.

The lights were slowly raised. The rows released themselves from their stillness, and the audience began to move toward the exit—some quickly, as though wishing to preserve the impression, others more slowly, ab-

sorbed in exchanging judgments, small bursts of laughter, and brief analyses.

I rose without haste. Moreau followed. We allowed the current to carry us out into the foyer, but did not stop in the middle of it. Instead, I drew a little to one side, where the movement could still be observed without pressing upon us. A place where one might wait. People passed us in small groups. Voices drifted by in fragments—praise, criticism, half-finished sentences that were never completed. We waited. But not for long.

Camille Ardent moved through the foyer without seeking attention, and yet the room seemed to shift slightly around her. She no longer bore the obvious marks of the stage, yet something of it remained—a precision in her movements, a way of stopping before she changed direction. She paused before us. I bowed my head very slightly.

“You gave the audience more than they expected,” I said, “and less than they understood.”

For a brief moment she looked at me.

“That is a rare observation,” she said.

I did not reply.

A short silence passed between us; not empty, but measured.

“You mentioned earlier,” I then said, “that the stage becomes real only when someone wears it.”

She nodded slightly.

“It does.”

I let my gaze pass briefly toward the door, where the audience was still streaming out.

“It seems to me,” I continued, “that it can also continue outside.”

She followed my gaze for a moment, then turned her eyes back to me.

“At times.”

I inclined my head slightly.

“Would you be willing to continue it a little longer?”

A brief pause.

“A glass of wine. The café opposite.”

There was no insistence in my voice. Only a natural continuation, as though the conversation had not yet found its final form.

"Yes, gladly," she replied.

She turned slightly, as though the direction had already been decided, and we moved toward the exit.

When we stepped out into the street, the air was cooler. The voices from the foyer were muted behind us, and the light from the theatre fell in a narrow strip across the pavement. Halfway across the street, I allowed my gaze to return to the entrance of the theatre. There was still movement there. A figure stepped out. A dark hat. It paused for a moment, as though orienting itself, before continuing in a direction apart from the crowd.

The café was neither large nor splendid. The tables stood close together, though not without purpose, and the light was subdued without being dark. There was a calm in the room that did not arise from silence, but from a kind of shared understanding—as though those seated there had already seen something and did not need to raise their voices in order to discuss it.

We found a table a little withdrawn from the room. A waiter came without haste, and I ordered without consulting the others: a bottle of sparkling wine, three glasses, and a simple serving that was quickly set before us—bread, a little cheese, something that demanded no attention. We sat down. For a moment none of us spoke. Camille let her gaze move through the room, not searching, but as one registering its boundaries. She took the glass, though she did not drink at once. I observed her without staring.

"I am to attend an auction tomorrow," I said. "A private one."

She did not react immediately. She waited.

"It will be a situation," I continued, "in which discretion is an advantage. And where it may be... expedient not to be recognised."

She allowed her eyes to rest upon me for a moment.

"You want a role."

"I want credibility," I said quietly. "The rest you can provide."

There was an almost imperceptible lift of her eyebrow.

"And you yourself?"

"Will be somewhat altered."

A brief pause.

"Enough not to attract attention."

"And what world are we moving in?"

"The upper class," I said. "Elegance. And that particular form of assurance which does not need to be spoken aloud."

She nodded faintly, as though she could already see it.

"It is a simple role," she said. "But it tolerates no mistakes."

"That is precisely why I ask you."

She set down her glass.

"Yes," she said.

I inclined my head slightly.

"I shall see that you are collected."

She rose.

"It is rare," she said, "that anyone knows what he is asking for."

She looked briefly at me.

"You do."

A faint smile.

"Then let us see whom you choose to be tomorrow."

I rose. Moreau followed.

Letter XI

The Silent Auction

The firewood had collapsed into glowing embers, and the room had taken on that subdued silence which settles only when one's thoughts are occupied elsewhere. The letters lay before Watson in two neat piles: those he had read and those that remained unopened.

He remained seated a moment longer with Holmes's latest account before him. It was not merely the contents that occupied his mind. It was the tone. Over the years Watson had watched Holmes observe people with sharpness, patience, and at times with an almost merciless precision. He had seen him expose impostors, see through witnesses, and strip criminals of the carefully constructed masks they wore. Yet in his description of Camille Ardent he sensed something different. Not weakness. Not sentimentality. Rather, a particular kind of attentiveness.

Holmes wrote of her as he might write of a rare phenomenon. Not because she was beautiful, though Watson had no reason to doubt that she was. Not because she played different roles. But because she mastered the transition between them. To Holmes, she seemed not merely an actress, but a living study in the art of disguise—not as outward ornament, but as the precise transformation of posture, voice, rhythm, and presence.

Watson's eyes fell upon the line concerning her shoulders. *They do not belong to the same woman.* He could almost hear Holmes saying it. Quietly. Dryly. Without praise in the ordinary sense, yet with that rare acknowledg-

ment he reserved only for occasions when he encountered a skill approaching his own. And it was precisely that which disturbed Watson a little.

For Holmes was seldom fascinated by people. He was fascinated by abilities, by patterns, by anomalies, and by those rare individuals capable of moving effortlessly between the visible and the concealed. Camille Ardent entered the story as an actress, but in Watson's eyes she immediately became something more. She was a mirror in which Holmes perceived a kindred art: the ability to become another person without ever entirely ceasing to be oneself.

Watson rose and crossed the room, stopping beside the window to look out into the darkness. The street lay almost deserted. A single carriage passed slowly, and the sound of its wheels upon the cobblestones gradually faded into the distance.

He found himself thinking of Irene Adler. Not because Camille Ardent resembled her in any outward respect, but because, in Holmes's voice, Watson recognised that same almost reluctant respect for a woman who refused to be reduced to a mere piece upon the board. Camille entered the narrative not simply as an ally, a witness, or a suspect. She altered the character of the room itself. She introduced a new element: the human face as a mask, and the mask as truth.

Watson turned and returned to the table. It occurred to him that this was perhaps precisely why Holmes sought her assistance. Not merely because he required a disguise for the auction, but because she understood something that even the cleverest criminals so often overlooked: a role does not begin with clothing. It begins with the gaze with which one meets the world.

Once more he looked down at the letter. There was nothing in Holmes's measured language that could properly be called romantic. And yet Watson sensed an undercurrent beneath the words—an intellectual attraction, perhaps even a danger. Not the danger of falling in love, but the danger of encountering another person whose art so closely resembles one's own that

the boundary between admiration and trust becomes increasingly difficult to define.

The envelope lying atop the unopened pile bore the same handwriting as the others. Watson picked it up, studied it for a moment, and then broke the seal. He did so with the feeling that Camille Ardent was no longer merely an episode in Holmes's Parisian investigations. She had stepped onto the stage. And Watson suspected that she would not leave it again so easily.

October 25, 1891

Paris

My dear Watson,

I have been informed that, within certain circles of this city, auctions are conducted of a nature not easily reconciled with the official art trade. These gatherings are never publicly announced. The circle of participants is strictly limited, and the works offered for sale are frequently described as newly discovered or newly attributed, their provenance being spared the customary scrutiny. Still more remarkable is the circumstance that the purchasers seldom appear under their true names.

Monsieur Moreau drew my attention to one such auction, which was to take place on the day following our meeting with Madame Camille Ardent. He added—in a tone that could scarcely be described as anything but cautious—that in certain circumstances it may prove advantageous not to appear as the person one truly is.

Paris, he observed, is a city where one is quickly recognised, even when one has given no cause for recognition. I considered the observation worthy of attention. I therefore chose to attend the auction under a less conspicuous identity, and in suitable female company.

The address Monsieur Moreau had provided led me to a street which, in itself, gave no cause for particular notice. The buildings stood close together, uniform in appearance, and nothing in their façades suggested that behind one of them there should exist an establishment of the sort I had been led to expect.

I paused for a moment on the opposite side of the street and allowed my gaze to pass over the entrances. There was no signboard. No indication of commerce. Only a single door whose frosted glass permitted a muted light to seep into the cool evening air.

At my side stood Camille Ardent. She wore nothing that sought attention—and for that very reason attracted none. Her gown was simple in cut, yet of a quality requiring no explanation. Her posture was composed, entirely free from tension, and her movements were adapted to her surroundings with a precision that was difficult even to perceive.

We crossed the street without haste.

A man stood at the entrance who, at first glance, might easily have been taken for an ordinary porter. His attire was discreet, his bearing untroubled, and his eyes passed over us with a calm that was by no means devoid of judgment. I stopped before him and produced the invitation. It was, as you know, Watson, not of the origin it purported to possess. Yet it had been executed with such precision that its credibility depended less upon its material than upon the manner in which it was presented.

The man accepted it without a word. His gaze rested upon the paper for a brief moment—not long enough for any genuine reading, yet sufficiently long for an assessment. For an instant his eyes moved on, not toward me alone, but toward Camille. The man gave the slightest of nods and stepped aside. We were admitted.

The moment the door closed behind us, it became immediately apparent that the impression conveyed by the building's exterior had been deliberately misleading.

The first room was narrow and dimly lit. A cloakroom had been discreetly arranged along one wall, and a young man received coats and hats

with an efficiency that left no occasion for conversation. Camille slipped off one glove with an unhurried movement and handed over her cloak without attempting to engage him. Not one gesture too many.

Nothing in this entrance hall revealed the true character of the establishment. Yet through an opening farther within one caught sight of another room. The light there was warmer. The space itself was larger. And the life unfolding within bore the character of an altogether different order.

I allowed my gaze to rest for a moment upon the transition between the two rooms before we proceeded. The difference was not merely architectural. It was social.

Those present in the inner room all bore the unmistakable stamp of position—not necessarily by outward appearance alone, but by the manner in which they moved, paused, and observed one another. There was nothing accidental about their presence. No curious glances, no idle conversations. Only a subdued attentiveness that seemed directed as much toward the other guests as toward the works displayed along the walls.

We entered without attracting attention. That is a quality, Watson, which depends less upon the excellence of one's disguise than upon the ability not to seek to be seen. Even so, I could not fail to notice that several of those present allowed their gaze to rest briefly upon us as we passed.

I paused before the first painting, a landscape executed in a style readily attributable to the later period of French Romanticism. The brushwork was assured, and the choice of colours balanced with such care that, at first glance, the work presented itself as a convincing representative of its purported period.

"It is beautiful," she said quietly.

"Yes," I replied. "And perhaps for that very reason, insufficient."

She made no answer. Yet I observed that she remained before the canvas a moment longer, as though she were studying not the subject itself, but its surface. I allowed my attention to pass to the next work, a portrait of a young woman, which bore the same character. The handling of light was remarkably precise, the flesh tones built up in delicate layers, and the

eyes possessed that particular brilliance so often employed to create the impression of life. Yet here again, something was lacking. I stepped back a pace and allowed both paintings to occupy the same field of vision.

She turned her gaze once more toward the first landscape.

"It is not the role," she said.

"It is the way in which it is performed."

I nodded.

"The method."

We continued along the line of paintings.

It occurred to me that we were not standing before a collection of unrelated works, but before the results of a process. A production, rather than a creation.

I stopped before a smaller canvas and inclined myself slightly forward. The light fell obliquely across its surface, and in that angle the texture became more readily apparent.

The varnish was even.

Too even.

"It is like a role that has been rehearsed for too long," she said softly.

"It is perfect... but it no longer lives."

I straightened myself and nodded.

The other guests continued to move about with the same subdued composure. A few paused before the same works that had attracted our attention, yet none displayed the sort of critical examination one would ordinarily expect in a room where works of art were being traded. It seemed to me that their interest was directed not toward the paintings themselves, but toward their presence.

I paused once more before the first landscape. There could now be no doubt. If these works possessed an origin, it did not lie with the artists whom they purported to represent, but within a structure designed to produce them. And where there is structure, Watson, there is also organisation.

I allowed my gaze to travel once more around the room. The other guests had assumed their positions, not in assigned places, but in a kind of informal order that seemed perfectly understood without ever having been expressed.

The auction began without any formal announcement. No hammer was employed, nor was a voice raised; the first work was merely introduced with a brief and subdued remark that scarcely carried beyond those nearest at hand, and yet everyone appeared to have understood it. The opening bid was offered with the slightest inclination of the head; another participant raised his hand almost imperceptibly—not as a gesture, but as a signal—and the response came in precisely the same manner. Not in words, but through the repetition of that discreet sign. I observed the proceedings without taking part in them myself.

Camille stood beside me and had assumed her role without any visible transition. She no longer appeared as an actress, but as a perfectly natural member of the gathering. Her gaze rested upon the paintings with a calm discernment entirely suited to the surroundings, and she made no effort whatsoever to attract notice—which was, in itself, the very reason she escaped it.

It soon became clear to me that the bidding bore none of the character of spontaneous competition. There was no haste, no attempt to outbid one another at the final moment. The offers followed rather a rhythm, almost as though they had been agreed upon beforehand.

I let my eyes pass over the participants. An elderly gentleman submitted a single bid and then withdrew completely, as though his part in the proceedings had been concluded. A younger man followed the process with an attentiveness that seemed more educational than participatory, making his first offer only after another bidder had established a limit. Toward the rear of the room stood a man who submitted no bids at all, yet on several occasions received brief nods from others present. His appearance was unremarkable, but his importance clearly was not, and I made careful note of him.

When the next work was brought forward, the price rose rapidly—not by degrees, but in sudden leaps. Two participants bid alternately, though without the sharpness that ordinarily accompanies genuine rivalry. One withdrew at a point that appeared entirely unjustified by the quality of the work, and a third immediately assumed his place, as though the succession had been expected all along.

I began to discern a pattern. The same individuals were not bidding against one another by chance, but appeared to occupy a sequence in which each had his appointed function. The prices confirmed the impression. Works of lesser significance sold for extravagantly inflated sums, while technically superior examples passed with scarcely any resistance. It was not quality that determined the outcome. It was something else.

I moved slightly aside in order to command a broader view of the room, and Camille followed my movement, though she stopped a little before I did. Her attention did not settle upon the participants, but upon the next painting that was brought forward—a modest canvas which, at first glance, appeared entirely insignificant, yet nevertheless seemed to gather a subtle tension throughout the room.

"Interesting," she said quietly.

The opening bid was made, then answered, and answered again.

Then she raised her hand. The movement was calm, without hesitation, and so perfectly in keeping with the atmosphere of the room that it attracted no immediate notice. I turned toward her.

"Miss Ardent—" I said in a subdued voice.

She did not look at me. Her bid was acknowledged, and she answered once more, precisely and without variation. It was no impulsive whim, but a deliberate and controlled act. I inclined myself slightly nearer.

"It is not a work of any particular importance," I said quietly.

"It is here," she replied.

The room had noticed her now—not as a disturbance, but as a participant.

The price continued to rise. One of the other bidders withdrew, then another. She remained where she was, motionless, almost indifferent. The first call was made, followed by a brief pause, and then a second. I experienced a rare uncertainty—not concerning the situation itself, but concerning the role she occupied within it. Just as the conclusion appeared inevitable, another bid was made—modest, yet sufficient. A new participant had entered the contest, and the proceedings came to their end. The painting went to another buyer.

I slowly released my breath. Camille lowered her hand without displaying the slightest visible reaction and merely followed the painting with her eyes as it was carried away.

"It would seem we have been fortunate," I said quietly.

She turned toward me with the faintest, almost casual smile.

"Indeed?" she said. "It would have suited my home rather well."

There was no trace of irony in her voice, and for that very reason it was impossible to determine whether she meant what she said. I allowed my gaze to wander once more through the room, though now with a revised judgment. I had believed that I was the one who had brought her into the game. It seemed to me, at that moment, that she had already known its rules.

We entered without attracting attention. That is a quality, Watson, which depends less upon the excellence of one's disguise than upon the ability not to seek to be seen. Even so, I could not fail to notice that several of those present allowed their gaze to rest briefly upon us as we passed.

I paused before the first painting, a landscape executed in a style readily attributable to the later period of French Romanticism. The brushwork was assured, and the choice of colours balanced with such care that, at first glance, the work presented itself as a convincing representative of its purported period.

"It is beautiful," she said quietly.

"Yes," I replied. "And perhaps for that very reason, insufficient."

She made no answer. Yet I observed that she remained before the canvas a moment longer, as though she were studying not the subject itself, but its surface. I allowed my attention to pass to the next work, a portrait of a young woman, which bore the same character. The handling of light was remarkably precise, the flesh tones built up in delicate layers, and the eyes possessed that particular brilliance so often employed to create the impression of life. Yet here again, something was lacking. I stepped back a pace and allowed both paintings to occupy the same field of vision.

She turned her gaze once more toward the first landscape.

"It is not the role," she said.

"It is the way in which it is performed."

I nodded.

"The method."

We continued along the line of paintings.

It occurred to me that we were not standing before a collection of unrelated works, but before the results of a process. A production, rather than a creation.

I stopped before a smaller canvas and inclined myself slightly forward. The light fell obliquely across its surface, and in that angle the texture became more readily apparent.

The varnish was even.

Too even.

"It is like a role that has been rehearsed for too long," she said softly.

"It is perfect... but it no longer lives."

I straightened myself and nodded.

The other guests continued to move about with the same subdued composure. A few paused before the same works that had attracted our attention, yet none displayed the sort of critical examination one would ordinarily expect in a room where works of art were being traded. It seemed to me that their interest was directed not toward the paintings themselves, but toward their presence.

I paused once more before the first landscape. There could now be no doubt. If these works possessed an origin, it did not lie with the artists whom they purported to represent, but within a structure designed to produce them. And where there is structure, Watson, there is also organisation.

I allowed my gaze to travel once more around the room. The other guests had assumed their positions, not in assigned places, but in a kind of informal order that seemed perfectly understood without ever having been expressed.

The auction began without any formal announcement. No hammer was employed, nor was a voice raised; the first work was merely introduced with a brief and subdued remark that scarcely carried beyond those nearest at hand, and yet everyone appeared to have understood it. The opening bid was offered with the slightest inclination of the head; another participant raised his hand almost imperceptibly—not as a gesture, but as a signal—and the response came in precisely the same manner. Not in words, but through the repetition of that discreet sign.

I observed the proceedings without taking part in them myself.

Camille stood beside me and had assumed her role without any visible transition. She no longer appeared as an actress, but as a perfectly natural member of the gathering. Her gaze rested upon the paintings with a calm discernment entirely suited to the surroundings, and she made no effort whatsoever to attract notice—which was, in itself, the very reason she escaped it.

It soon became clear to me that the bidding bore none of the character of spontaneous competition. There was no haste, no attempt to outbid one another at the final moment. The offers followed rather a rhythm, almost as though they had been agreed upon beforehand.

I let my eyes pass over the participants. An elderly gentleman submitted a single bid and then withdrew completely, as though his part in the proceedings had been concluded. A younger man followed the process with an attentiveness that seemed more educational than participatory, making

his first offer only after another bidder had established a limit. Toward the rear of the room stood a man who submitted no bids at all, yet on several occasions received brief nods from others present. His appearance was unremarkable, but his importance clearly was not, and I made careful note of him.

When the next work was brought forward, the price rose rapidly—not by degrees, but in sudden leaps. Two participants bid alternately, though without the sharpness that ordinarily accompanies genuine rivalry. One withdrew at a point that appeared entirely unjustified by the quality of the work, and a third immediately assumed his place, as though the succession had been expected all along.

I began to discern a pattern. The same individuals were not bidding against one another by chance, but appeared to occupy a sequence in which each had his appointed function. The prices confirmed the impression. Works of lesser significance sold for extravagantly inflated sums, while technically superior examples passed with scarcely any resistance.

It was not quality that determined the outcome.

It was something else.

I moved slightly aside in order to command a broader view of the room, and Camille followed my movement, though she stopped a little before I did. Her attention did not settle upon the participants, but upon the next painting that was brought forward—a modest canvas which, at first glance, appeared entirely insignificant, yet nevertheless seemed to gather a subtle tension throughout the room.

"Interesting," she said quietly.

The opening bid was made, then answered, and answered again.

Then she raised her hand.

The movement was calm, without hesitation, and so perfectly in keeping with the atmosphere of the room that it attracted no immediate notice. I turned toward her.

"Miss Ardent—" I said in a subdued voice.

She did not look at me.

Her bid was acknowledged, and she answered once more, precisely and without variation. It was no impulsive whim, but a deliberate and controlled act. I inclined myself slightly nearer.

"It is not a work of any particular importance," I said quietly.

"It is here," she replied.

The room had noticed her now—not as a disturbance, but as a participant.

The price continued to rise. One of the other bidders withdrew, then another. She remained where she was, motionless, almost indifferent. The first call was made, followed by a brief pause, and then a second. I experienced a rare uncertainty—not concerning the situation itself, but concerning the role she occupied within it.

Just as the conclusion appeared inevitable, another bid was made—modest, yet sufficient. A new participant had entered the contest, and the proceedings came to their end.

The painting went to another buyer.

I slowly released my breath.

Camille lowered her hand without displaying the slightest visible reaction and merely followed the painting with her eyes as it was carried away.

"It would seem we have been fortunate," I said quietly.

She turned toward me with the faintest, almost casual smile.

"Indeed?" she said. "It would have suited my home rather well."

There was no trace of irony in her voice, and for that very reason it was impossible to determine whether she meant what she said.

I allowed my gaze to wander once more through the room, though now with a revised judgment.

I had believed that I was the one who had brought her into the game.

It seemed to me, at that moment, that she had already known its rules.

Letter XII

The Dead Courier

Watson took the next letter from the pile and allowed the knife to glide along its edge before unfolding the paper with the same composed movement that had accompanied the preceding ones.

His eyes ran quickly over the lines. The first page was considerably shorter than the others. An address in Paris was written at the top, followed by a single remark:

"A man has been found dead. Possibly connected with the case."

Watson paused for a moment, as though to assure himself that he had read correctly, and then drew the paper a little nearer to the light. There was no further explanation, he observed.

He laid the first sheet aside and, with considerable curiosity, began to read the next.

October 30, 1891

Paris

It was still early in the day when Moreau had himself announced at my hotel. I was seated by the window with my pipe, allowing my gaze to wan-

der over the street, when Moreau entered and, without further preamble, placed a folded newspaper upon the table.

"This will interest you," he said.

I drew the paper toward me and unfolded it. On the front page was a photograph, printed in coarse tones: a narrow street, partly cordoned off, with a small crowd gathered behind a row of barriers. I read the article through without haste.

After a moment I turned farther into the paper, where a shorter follow-up had been printed with additional details. There was also a small portrait of the deceased. I stopped abruptly and leaned slightly forward, as if to bring the image closer to the light.

Moreau sat down without saying anything.

"Interesting," I remarked quietly, taking the pipe from my mouth. "I have seen this man before."

Moreau looked up. "Here in Paris?"

I nodded, recalling my observations by the Seine and in the surrounding district.

"Several times. In different quarters. At first glance without any connection between them."

Moreau leaned a little forward. "A coincidence?"

"No," I replied, with certainty in my voice. "He was the man who moved between the art dealers."

Moreau said nothing.

"There is no time to waste." I rose and took my coat. "Let us take a closer look at the place."

When we reached the address, the barriers had already been removed. At first glance the street appeared like any other: a few passersby, a carriage moving slowly past, and a shopkeeper just then opening his shutters. Nothing suggested that only a few hours earlier the place had been the center of an accident.

I stopped in the middle of the cobblestones and let my eyes travel along the façade.

"Here," I said quietly, stepping a pace to one side.

Moreau followed without asking any questions.

I bent slightly forward and examined a darker patch between the stones. The colour was muted, almost absorbed into the surface beneath it, but not entirely gone. I did not touch it.

"Blood," I said calmly.

Moreau looked more closely.

"From the fall?"

I shook my head faintly.

"It is not distributed as it would be after an impact. No spatter, no spread. It has collected... and congealed."

I straightened myself and once more allowed my gaze to rise along the building.

"He was not alive when he struck the ground."

"You mean..." Moreau began.

I did not interrupt him, but answered without turning.

"I mean that it was not necessarily the fall that killed him."

Moreau folded his arms.

"Then we are dealing with murder?"

I glanced briefly at him.

"That we cannot yet know," I said soberly. "But everything suggests that he was already dead before he reached the street."

My eyes paused for a moment upon one of the windows.

"If that is so," I continued, "he was not alone."

Moreau nodded slowly.

"Then we must go up."

I took a step back from the spot.

"We must gain access to the apartment. We must get inside."

Moreau shook his head slightly.

"Give me half an hour," he replied. "I shall see what can be done."

Without further explanation he turned and disappeared down the street.

I remained where I was for a moment before calmly crossing over and taking a seat at a café with a view of the building. I ordered nothing, but sat with my hands folded before me and kept my eyes upon the entrance. Nothing happened.

After roughly half an hour Moreau returned. He came directly to the table and placed a document before me.

"It was the best I could obtain."

I cast a quick glance at the paper, nodded, and rose.

Together we crossed the street and entered through the gateway. In the dim entrance hall we found the concierge at his desk. Moreau laid the document before him.

"We require access to the apartment."

The concierge looked at the paper without much interest and gave a slight shrug.

"The key has already been handed out."

Moreau looked at him.

"To whom?"

"A man," replied the concierge. "He came with an authorisation... not unlike yours."

"From the police?" asked Moreau.

The concierge shook his head.

"He did not look like that to me. More like a gentleman. One of those who gives orders."

I took a step forward.

"How long ago?"

The concierge shrugged.

"An hour or so, I should think."

I took out my watch and cast a quick glance at it.

"And you are certain it was not the police?"

"I would say so," said the concierge. "He was... different. Very well dressed. Calm."

"Was he wearing a hat?" I asked.

The concierge considered.

"Yes. A top hat."

I extended my hand.

"The key."

The concierge nodded and produced a ring of keys.

"This one is for the apartment. And this one is for the store-room behind."

I took the keys without examining them further.

"There is no time to lose."

I turned to Moreau.

"He has been here since we arrived."

We hurried up the stairs.

I inserted the key in the door, and a moment later the lock yielded with a short, dry sound. I opened it slowly.

It was quiet.

Completely quiet.

We remained for a moment in the doorway, listening, before stepping inside.

I went first. I moved without haste, but with an attention that left nothing to chance. Moreau followed close behind. We paused at each door, opened it carefully, looked in, and then continued. One cupboard was opened. Then another. Nothing. No sign that anyone had been there. No disorder. The apartment appeared almost impersonal in its neatness.

I went to the window and looked down into the street.

"Here," I said quietly. "It must have been from here."

Moreau stood beside me and followed my gaze. The cobblestones lay plain and undisturbed below.

"Nothing?" he asked.

I shook my head faintly.

"Nothing visible."

Once more I allowed my gaze to move through the room, as though searching for some inconsistency that had not yet revealed itself.

"Strange," I said.

Moreau hesitated for a moment.

"But... was there not also a store-room?"

I turned at once.

"Of course."

I went toward the door without further explanation. We descended through the stairwell and out into the courtyard. It was narrow and disorderly. Dustbins stood about without any apparent arrangement, and along one of the walls lay a pile of wood, as though abandoned in the middle of some unfinished task. There was only one building in the rear courtyard: a low, closed structure with a broad door.

"There," said Moreau.

I did not answer, but went directly toward it. I found the larger key. The lock resisted for a moment before yielding with a heavy sound. Together we pushed the gate aside. Within, it was dark. I took out a match and struck it. The faint light flickered for a moment before settling and casting long shadows into the room. I stepped inside. A lamp hung from the ceiling. I lit it. The light spread slowly.

At first glance, the room appeared almost empty. Bare walls. A few crates. Nothing that immediately attracted attention.

I remained standing.

I looked up at the lamp. Then I reached up and allowed my fingertips to brush the metal. I drew my hand back again.

"Warm," I said quietly.

Moreau looked at me.

"It was extinguished."

I nodded.

"But not long ago."

I let my gaze move through the room.

"Someone has been here."

A brief pause followed.

"Very recently."

We began to examine the room more closely. What had first appeared empty now proved to be something else.

I moved slowly forward. I stopped beside a chair. It lay overturned upon its side, though not broken. The upholstery had been torn along the edge, as though someone had seized it with force. Beside it stood a crate. The lid hung askew, and the wood around the lock was splintered. I bent down. A moment later I picked something up between my fingers. A single hair. I examined it briefly in the light before allowing it to fall again.

"There has been a struggle," I said dryly.

Moreau looked at me.

"Two persons."

I pointed lightly toward the floor.

"Short, dark hair."

A brief pause followed.

"Perhaps our friend with the hat."

I allowed my gaze to move on.

"And another. Longer, fair hair."

Moreau drew a deeper breath.

"The courier?"

I nodded thoughtfully as I straightened.

"Ask the concierge whether he has seen anything. And ask also whether the dead man had a tattoo above his left wrist."

Moreau nodded and left the room.

I remained where I was and continued my examination. My eyes moved from object to object without haste, yet without overlooking anything.

After a few minutes Moreau returned.

"He is not certain, but he believes he saw the man who received the key leave through the gate. And as for the tattoo... you were right. He had been a sailor in his younger days."

I nodded while my gaze moved along the rear wall. My eyes stopped. Something about the panels was not quite right. I ran my hand over the wood, felt along the joins, and pressed lightly at a particular point. A

moment later the panel yielded with a muted sound. A door opened. I loosened the lamp from its hook, lowered it, and carried it before me as I stepped inside. Moreau followed.

We now stood in a long, narrow passage that stretched into the darkness like an oversized wardrobe. The light fell ahead of us and revealed rows of costumes hanging close together on hangers along both walls. Fabrics of different colours and qualities, some dark and simple, others more striking, yet all executed with a precision scarcely intended for ordinary theatrical use.

Between them stood crates, some open and some closed, filled with hats, gloves, and other articles. Above them shelves had been fixed, where further equipment had been arranged in careful order. I stood still for a moment and let my eyes travel through the room.

"A wardrobe," I said quietly.

Moreau took a step forward and allowed his gaze to pass over the rows.

"Theatrical costumes. Here they are."

He drew a coat from a hanger and held it up to the light. The fabric was heavy and well worked, without the wear one might otherwise have expected.

"It agrees with the tailor," he said.

I did not answer at once. I walked slowly down the passage and let my fingertips brush the fabric of one of the hanging garments.

"But not for the theatre," I said calmly.

"Couriers... servants... perhaps officials?"

I nodded faintly.

"Roles."

I went a few steps farther.

"They do not work like an ordinary organisation," I said. "They work like a theatre."

Moreau folded his arms.

"A theatre?"

I turned half toward him.

“A stage upon which each actor enters, performs his part, and disappears again. No repetitions. No recognition.”

My eyes passed once more over the rows of costumes.

“New clothing each time. A new identity. The same function.”

Moreau looked more slowly around the room.

“So no one can be followed.”

“Precisely.”

I allowed a short silence to fall.

“They are not hiding.”

I looked at him.

“They are performing.”

My dear Watson, I found that several of the circumstances which until then had stood apart now began to gather into a pattern that was increasingly difficult to explain away as accidental.

It would have been natural to assume that the sack mentioned by the concierge contained one of these costumes—a single item among many, which for one reason or another had to be removed from circulation.

Such an explanation, however, seemed to me insufficient.

The costumes were numerous. Their replacement appeared to be part of the system itself, and nothing suggested that one single garment should have possessed such importance as to account for the haste with which the place had been searched.

The struggle whose traces we had just examined bore no sign of random violence. It had been brief, purposeful, and without any indication of hesitation.

That one of the parties was no longer present did not, therefore, surprise me.

What did require closer consideration was not merely that he had been removed—but why it had happened precisely then.

Watson reads the final lines once more and recognises a clear pattern. The tone of these lines usually heralds a change in the character of the case. Holmes's information is precise and without superfluous comment, yet beneath it lies a particular gravity—the silence that descends when a matter moves away from the purely intellectual and into something else. Something that cannot be solved by observation and deduction alone. A kind of sharpened calm. As though Holmes, without saying so directly, now acknowledges that more is at stake. Death no longer stands at the edge of the case. It has stepped onto the stage.

Watson lets the letter rest against the tabletop and remains seated for a moment without moving. What fixes itself most strongly in his mind is not only the dead courier, but the room Holmes finds behind the panels. A wardrobe. Not for the theatre, but for reality. Costumes, hats, coats, gloves—all the outward things by which a man may enter a world, perform his task, and vanish again without leaving behind anything but a role.

He thinks of Camille Ardent, and of Holmes's remark that they are not hiding, but performing. It now seems to him that the whole case has begun to assume the character of a play, but a play without an audience, where every face may have been chosen with the same care as a line of dialogue.

And yet there is something in this that differs from ordinary disguise. Holmes himself has often worn masks. Watson knows that better than anyone. He has seen him become an old sailor, a clergyman, an unemployed clerk, an Italian priest, a bent-backed book collector, and many other figures. But with Holmes, disguise has always been a means of reaching the truth. Here, disguise appears to be the system itself.

Watson looks toward the empty chair opposite him. He senses that, in this moment, Holmes is no longer merely investigating a crime, but an entire method. An organisation that does not merely conceal its tracks but dissolves its agents into shifting identities. No repetitions. No recognition. The same function.

It is precisely the kind of construction that would awaken Holmes's deepest interest—and perhaps also his caution. For if all are playing roles,

who is the first actor? Who writes the play? Who decides when a courier must disappear, when a costume must be removed, and when a human being becomes expendable?

Watson slowly folds the letter together. The dead man may have been an intermediary. But to Watson it is clear that he is also a warning. Not merely of danger, but of proximity. Holmes is no longer outside the case, observing its pattern from without. He has stepped into it.

And somewhere behind the scenes, someone has already noticed.

Letter XIII

The Confrontation

November 5, 1891

Paris

It was late in the day when I once more reviewed the circumstances that now gathered themselves around a single name.

There was no single decisive proof, but rather a series of observations all pointing in the same direction. The shipments, the mark, the auction—and above all the tailor's ledger, in which the name Delacroix appeared with a regularity that could not be explained away.

Moreau observed that the evidence was not yet complete. I dismissed this with a slight movement of the hand.

"It is sufficient," I said calmly. "Not to conclude the case—but to act upon it."

I let my gaze rest for a moment upon the ledger.

"Too much has already happened."

The two deaths had changed the conditions of the matter. It was no longer merely a question of building a complete chain of evidence, but of preventing the case from developing further. Moreau said no more. The decision was made without further discussion. I took up my hat.

"We shall call upon him," I said.

"Tomorrow at ten."

Moreau and I met before the Academy and proceeded together to Professor Delacroix's office. We had no prior appointment, yet we were admitted by the porter without difficulty. Moreau was a familiar face there.

Professor Delacroix rose from his desk as the door closed behind us. His movement was well measured, neither too quick nor too slow, as if he wished to demonstrate that he did not feel disturbed—only visited.

"Monsieur Moreau," he said, with a slight inclination of the head. "A pleasure to see you again. Your persistence becomes you."

His gaze moved on to me. A faint smile touched the corner of his mouth.

"I am sincerely pleased that Scandinavia takes so lively an interest in our modest institution."

I bowed my head slightly.

"We try to keep ourselves informed," I said calmly. "Even in smaller matters."

"Smaller matters?" repeated the professor, with a suggestion of amusement. "Here we merely instruct young talents in the discipline of the brush and the respect due to color. If the world chooses to attach greater significance to us, I can only be grateful for the attention."

Moreau answered in a polite, though more guarded tone.

"Your institution has produced many notable names over the years. It is difficult not to notice its influence."

"You are generous, as always," said Delacroix. "I have often admired your eye for authenticity, Monsieur Moreau. It is a rare virtue in our age."

My eyes rested for a moment upon the professor's hands, which lay relaxed upon the edge of the desk. The fingers were long and well kept—those of an artist rather than an administrator.

"We hope only," I said briefly, "to profit from your expertise."

"Naturally," Delacroix replied without hesitation. "That is precisely why we exist."

He made an inviting gesture toward the two chairs before the desk.

"Tell me—what may I contribute this time?"

The atmosphere was correct. The light from the tall windows fell obliquely across the plaster casts along the wall and laid an almost academic calm over the room. Nothing in the professor's bearing suggested unease. On the contrary, he seemed faintly amused, as if he regarded the situation as an intellectual exercise rather than a confrontation.

I sat down without haste. Moreau followed.

"Today our occasion concerns neither frames nor pigments," I said. "We are here because of a crime."

The room became entirely still. The professor's smile did not disappear, but it narrowed.

"You employ strong words."

"They have been chosen with care."

For a moment the three of us sat facing one another in a balance that was no longer academic, but exact.

Delacroix slowly straightened his back.

"If you wish to carry the conversation into the legal sphere," he said, "then we must ensure that our terms are as precise as your accusations."

And the tone in the room was no longer merely courteous. I allowed a brief silence to fall, as though considering whether the conversation should continue along the technical line. Instead, I changed direction.

"It is regrettable," I said soberly, "that a minor craftsman lost his life in connection with this matter."

The words were spoken without pathos. Without accusation. Merely as a statement.

Professor Delacroix's gaze rested upon me for a moment before moving toward the window.

"The tailor?" he said calmly.

"Yes."

"A tragic occurrence."

He folded his hands and gave a slight shrug.

"People who interfere in the work of others sometimes risk consequences."

The sentence was delivered with the same academic distance, as though he were speaking of an experiment that had failed. Moreau stiffened faintly. I did not, but merely looked at the professor a moment longer than courtesy required.

"Consequences," I repeated quietly.

"The world," said Delacroix, "is not without friction, Monsieur Sigurdson. Especially not when one moves into areas one does not fully understand."

There was no raised voice. No open threat. But there was also no regret. I nodded slowly.

"You did not know him personally?"

"Only by reputation."

"Naturally."

I allowed the question to drop.

"You must understand," he said, adjusting a folder upon the desk, "that we work here with young people. Talented, but fragile. An institution such as this lives by its reputation."

He looked first at Moreau.

"A scandal can destroy careers before they have even begun."

Then his gaze moved toward me.

"Truth," he continued calmly, "can be a brutal thing, Monsieur Sigurdson. Monsieur Moreau. It seldom strikes only the intended target."

There was no raised voice. No dramatic pause. Only a statement that lay close to a warning. Delacroix lowered his eyes for a moment, as if deciding how far he wished to go.

"I should dislike seeing a man of your reputation," he said, addressing Moreau, "drawn into misunderstandings."

Moreau met his gaze.

"I should dislike seeing young talents used as a shield."

The professor smiled faintly. I made no comment. But the threat had been registered—and it had not had the intended effect.

I gathered the papers, this time with a calm that had the quality of a conclusion. I slid the transport list across the desk.

"We have not merely found a pattern," I said calmly. "Your name appears here."

The professor did not answer. I placed another document on top of the first.

"And here."

Then another.

"And here."

There was no need for drama. The repetition was sufficient in itself. Moreau pointed to one of the sheets.

"The authorisation column for access to the old restoration workshop. Your signature."

The professor's eyes moved over the papers. There was nothing in them that could be dismissed as forgery.

"The shipments from Marseille," I continued, "are registered as study objects for internal analysis. Approved by you."

I let a finger follow the dates.

"Over eighteen months."

The professor's fingers contracted almost imperceptibly.

"Academic formalities," he said in a low voice.

"Three deposits," I continued, producing a smaller bank notice. "Paid into an account that can be traced to you. Not considerable sums. But remarkably regular."

The silence grew heavier.

"You do not appear as the artist. Not as the sender. Not as the recipient."

I lifted my eyes.

"But as the guarantor."

The word hung between us.

Moreau said quietly:

"Without your name, these works would never have passed."

Professor Delacroix slowly leaned back. The smile that had accompanied him until then disappeared at last.

"You have been thorough," he said. "And fortunate."

"Perhaps," I replied. "But fortune scarcely accounts for your signatures."

I allowed my hand to rest upon the documents.

"You placed the workshop at their disposal. You approved the materials. You authorised the shipments. And you received payment."

A brief silence followed. I then took a folded letter from my inner pocket and placed it before the professor.

"I would advise you to read this."

He hesitated for a moment, as though considering whether to leave it where it lay. But curiosity proved stronger. He picked up the letter.

At first he read quickly. Then more slowly. I observed how the academic composure gradually left his face. It was not doubt I saw, but recognition. His hand stopped at the final lines. When he raised his eyes, his first question was not directed at the letter, but at me.

"... Where did you find Claire Delatour?"

I permitted myself a faint smile.

"That is, of course, information I must reserve to myself."

I made a short pause.

"It is sufficient, however, that you yourself consider her explanation possible."

The professor fell silent. He closed his eyes for a moment.

"I facilitated," he said at last. "I did not think..."

I allowed him to finish.

"I thought they were limited reconstructions. Private collections. No museums."

"You knew," I said calmly, "that fraud was being committed."

He did not answer.

"The question, therefore, is not whether you knew."

I looked at him.

"But how much you knew."

The professor lowered his head.

"The system was larger," he said quietly.

"It was."

"But I was not the architect."

"I have not assumed that you were."

He looked up.

"I received instructions."

"From whom?"

He hesitated.

"I never knew the face. Only the messages."

"A name?"

"Only a reference. Never a meeting."

I let a moment pass.

"There is another name, Professor."

He looked at me expectantly.

"Montfaucon."

He slowly shook his head.

The denial seemed to me less convincing than silence would have been. The almost imperceptible tension around his eyes, and the brief delay with which the answer came, were more revealing than the words themselves.

Just then there came a knock at the door. The professor straightened his back, but remained seated. The knock came again, firmer this time. His eyes moved toward the door.

"You should open it," I said calmly.

He remained seated for another moment, as though still searching for some theoretical escape. But the documents before him allowed no further academic interpretations. His signatures. His authorisations. The regular payments. And the letter.

At last he rose and opened the door. Two officials from the Sûreté entered with that discreet dignity so often possessed by men who are certain of their authority. The foremost stepped forward.

"Professor Armand Delacroix?"

“Yes.”

“You are hereby under arrest on suspicion of complicity in systematic art forgery, financial gain, and misuse of academic facilities.”

The professor instinctively adjusted his cuffs.

“Naturally,” he said.

He did not protest.

He merely turned his eyes toward me.

“You have been... thorough.”

I found no reason to answer the remark. Moreau stood silently beside me. There was no triumph in his face. The professor took his jacket from the back of the chair. For a moment he seemed about to arrange the papers upon the desk, but then left them where they lay.

“The school?” he asked.

“Will be closed temporarily until the matter has been investigated.”

It was only then that I saw the first true change in his face. It was not the loss of freedom, but the loss of the name that seemed to strike him. He nodded slowly.

“Very well.”

He moved toward the door between the two officials.

At the threshold he stopped.

“Truth,” he said, without turning, “can be a brutal thing.”

“Only,” I replied calmly, “when it has long been postponed.”

The door closed behind them. The office became still. The fragment of wooden frame, the transport lists, and the empty chair were the only witnesses to the conversation that had just ended.

I slowly gathered the documents together. Moreau watched me for a moment.

“It seems almost unbelievable to me that you found Claire Delatour so quickly.”

I looked out through the window before I answered.

“My dear Moreau, one seldom finds the truth directly.”

I folded the letter and returned it to my inner pocket.

“One merely follows the lies that do not hold.”

Watson, I must observe to you that the Parisian branch of this enterprise now appears to have been brought to an end. Professor Delacroix acknowledged his role as intermediary and recipient of payment, but maintained that he did not know the true leadership of the organisation.

This explanation seems to me only partially satisfactory. A man of the professor's caution would hardly involve himself in an enterprise of this sort without some assurance of protection. He must therefore be regarded as a link in the chain, but scarcely as its origin.

Although his confession satisfies the legal requirements of responsibility, there remains a technical inconsistency which his explanation does not illuminate. The method by which the canvases were treated—particularly the use of the chemical preparations that made artificial aging possible—does not, in my view, point toward Paris.

The professor may have supplied rooms, materials, and academic authority. He may have received payment for doing so. But the hand that developed, refined, and standardised the technique itself is another. So long as that technical source remains unidentified, the case cannot, in my opinion, be regarded as concluded.

— S.

Letter XIV

Moreau's Arrest

November 17, 1891

Paris

It had been my intention to leave Paris before the end of the week.

Following Professor Delacroix's arrest, the matter appeared at first sight to have reached its natural conclusion. The connections that had led to the local workshops had been severed, the tailor's enterprise had ceased to exist, and the Academy's restoration department had been closed until the authorities had completed their investigations. The police appeared satisfied with the result. In their view, the organisation that had operated in Paris had been brought to an end.

I had arranged to meet Monsieur Moreau at his gallery the following morning. There remained a few practical matters that ought to be settled before I continued my journey, and I also wished to review, one final time, the material we had assembled.

The gallery was unusually quiet that morning. The sunlight fell obliquely through the tall windows and rested upon the canvases with a serenity that stood in curious contrast to the events that had unfolded around them only a few days before. Order had returned to the room. The documents lay neatly arranged upon the desk, and the works that had been

moved about during the course of our investigation had been restored to their customary places.

Moreau was standing by the window when I entered. He turned and greeted me with a slight nod.

"You are leaving," he said.

"Yes."

"For Rome?"

"It appears necessary."

He studied me for a moment before replying.

"I had hoped the matter might end here."

"So had I."

He allowed his gaze to travel across the gallery.

"Professor Delacroix is in prison. Vautrin's workshop exists no longer. The Academy has been closed. The police appear convinced that they have put an end to the operation."

"They probably are," I replied.

A brief silence followed.

Moreau picked up a folder from the desk, only to set it down again slowly.

"Then I suppose we have been fortunate."

"We have made progress," I said. "That is not necessarily the same thing."

He looked at me searchingly.

"You do not sound like a man who has just concluded a difficult case."

"That is because," I replied, "I have seldom cared for cases that conclude too quickly."

He raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Why not?"

I allowed my gaze to rest for a moment upon the folders lying before us.

"Because the side that loses," I said calmly, "is seldom the first to surrender."

Moreau said nothing. He followed my gaze toward the window, where the street outside lay peaceful beneath the morning sun. A carriage rolled slowly past, and for a moment nothing seemed capable of disturbing the stillness that rested over the neighbourhood.

It seemed to me, however, that the silence was less an ending than an interval. During the preceding days I had formed the distinct impression that we had not defeated the organisation, but merely compelled it to change its form. Professor Delacroix had been an important link, but scarcely an irreplaceable one. The forces that had held the enterprise together still appeared to me to lie beyond Paris. It was precisely for that reason that I found it necessary to continue my journey.

I opened the folder that lay uppermost upon the desk and slowly divided its contents between us. By now there were few loose ends remaining in Paris. The transport lists had been gathered together. The chemical analyses of pigments and binding media had been arranged by date, and the notes I had kept during the preceding weeks concerning the individual paintings now formed a far more coherent picture than they had when the case began.

Moreau sat opposite me and reviewed the papers without haste. He already knew them well, yet read them with the same care that had characterised his work throughout.

I placed a smaller sheet on top.

"It is the binding medium," I said. "The same composition appears again and again. Not only in Paris, but also in Lyon and Marseille."

Moreau nodded.

"And none of the workshops appears to have developed the method themselves."

"Precisely."

I brought forward the transport lists.

"The shipments follow the same pattern. Small consignments. Different intermediaries. No direct connection between sender and recipient."

"And yet the same rhythm," Moreau observed.

“Yes.”

I let a finger travel down the final notes.

“In the end, Rome remains.”

Moreau looked at me for a moment.

“Not Paris.”

“No.”

I took out the small wood splinter that had by now accompanied me through a considerable portion of the investigation and laid it beside the transport list.

The letters were still clearly visible: M. F.

“Montfaucon,” Moreau said quietly.

“It still seems to me the most likely name.”

“A man?”

“Possibly.”

“An organisation?”

“That cannot be ruled out either.”

For a moment neither of us spoke.

I then placed Claire Delatour's letter upon the other documents.

“She confirms,” I said, “that the technique was not developed in Paris. Professor Delacroix administered it. He did not create it.”

Moreau nodded slowly.

“Then all the traces now point in the same direction.”

“Yes.”

He let his hands rest for a moment upon the arms of his chair.

“Then allow me to accompany you.”

I looked up and slowly shook my head.

“No.”

He said nothing.

“You have already sacrificed more, Monsieur Moreau,” I continued calmly, “than this case could reasonably demand.”

He attempted a faint smile.

“I am not certain that I agree.”

“Nor need you.”

I gathered the papers into a single stack.

“You have placed your name, your gallery, and your reputation at the disposal of a man you scarcely knew. Few would have done the same.”

He lowered his eyes for a moment.

“I merely did what I believed to be right.”

“Precisely for that reason,” I replied, “you ought not to accompany me any farther.”

A silence settled between us, one which neither of us felt inclined to disturb. Looking back upon that conversation, it strikes me as remarkable how entirely natural it seemed. There was nothing in Monsieur Moreau's manner to suggest uneasiness, and nothing in the quiet order of the gallery foreshadowed the event that, only a few minutes later, would alter our plans completely.

We spoke no further. In truth, there was little left to add. The essential things had already been said, and our thoughts appeared to have turned instead toward the journeys and investigations that still lay ahead.

At that very moment, there came a knock upon the door. I raised my head. The knock came again. Three short raps. Neither hesitant nor impatient. Merely precise.

Moreau made as though to go to the door, but I raised a hand ever so slightly.

“One moment.”

He stopped and looked at me questioningly. I remained where I was without speaking. The gallery was otherwise perfectly still. Yet when the knocking had sounded, I had perceived something else at the same instant. Not a single movement, but several. Footsteps that had almost immediately fallen silent again.

My gaze shifted toward the door. Beneath the narrow gap at its base, the light from the street filtered into the room. For an instant, shadows appeared to interrupt the slender band of light. Not one figure, but several,

standing so close to the door that their movements almost merged into one another.

An ordinary customer would have knocked once and then waited. I found it difficult to imagine an art collector accompanied by two or three other men.

"They are not alone," I said quietly.

Moreau turned toward the door.

"Who?"

"That I do not yet know."

I listened for another moment. No one spoke outside, nor did anyone move. It struck me as peculiar. Those who wish to enter a gallery generally make known who they are. Those who already know why they have come seldom find it necessary to do so.

An unpleasant thought presented itself—not as a sudden inspiration, but as the natural consequence of the small observations that had already begun to gather together.

"It seems to me," I said slowly, "that they have not come for the paintings."

Moreau regarded me in silence. I met his gaze.

"And I fear," I continued, "that they have come for one of us."

The knocking sounded for a third time.

This time it was slightly more forceful.

Moreau drew a deep breath. Without a word, he walked toward the door. He laid his hand upon the handle and glanced briefly back at me. I nodded. He opened the door.

Three men entered. None of them wore a uniform, yet there could be no doubt that they represented a public authority. Their clothing was plain, their movements measured, and none displayed the uncertainty that so often accompanies those required to perform an unpleasant duty.

The eldest stepped forward.

"Monsieur Moreau?"

"Yes."

He produced a folded document.

"We must ask you to accompany us."

Moreau accepted the paper without comment and read it through slowly.

"The charge?"

"Complicity in systematic art forgery and collaboration with Professor Delacroix."

A silence followed.

No one raised his voice. No one made any movement to lay a hand upon him.

I stepped calmly forward.

"May I?"

The official handed me the document without objection. I read it through once. Then again. It had been correctly drafted. The references to the applicable law were precise, the wording entirely conventional, and its legal construction gave no immediate cause for comment. I looked up.

"Who issued the warrant?"

The official answered without hesitation.

"It was transmitted to us through the Sûreté."

"By whom?"

"We were not informed."

"When did you receive it?"

"Early this morning."

"And when were you assigned to the case?"

"Less than an hour later."

I nodded.

"Had you any previous knowledge of Monsieur Moreau?"

"No."

"Of Professor Delacroix?"

"Only through the order."

I allowed a brief silence to intervene.

"So you did not yourself participate in the investigation?"

“No.”

“Have you read the case file?”

For the first time, the official hesitated.

“That has not been necessary.”

“Of course.”

I allowed my eyes to pass over the document once more. Only then did they come to rest upon the signature. It had not been signed by the examining magistrate who would ordinarily have dealt with a case of this nature. Nor was it signed by the official who had until then been responsible for the investigation. The signature belonged to a considerably higher administrative authority. That struck me as unusual. Not because such a procedure was impossible, but because it was unnecessary. A case which only the previous day had been confined to Professor Delacroix and a handful of local workshops had suddenly been elevated to a level at which the ordinary course of legal procedure had been set aside.

I returned the document.

“You are merely carrying out your orders.”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“And you do not know who initiated them.”

“No.”

I nodded slowly. There was no reason to ask further questions. These men had not come to investigate the case. They had come to execute a decision already taken elsewhere. It was there, it seemed to me, that the true danger lay. An organisation capable of removing witnesses is a serious matter. But an organisation capable of accelerating the machinery of authority and bringing innocent men under suspicion with such speed possesses an influence far more far-reaching.

It was the first time during my stay in Paris that it became clear to me we were no longer confronting criminals alone. We were confronting a system.

Moreau allowed his gaze to rest upon the document for a moment before folding it with the same care he might have devoted to one of his own exhibition catalogues.

"It would appear, then," he said quietly, "that I must accompany you."

No one replied.

He laid the paper aside, took his hat from the rack, and absentmindedly brushed an invisible speck of dust from the brim. There was nothing hurried about his movements. On the contrary, they seemed to me almost more deliberate than usual.

I watched him without interruption.

"Monsieur Moreau," I said, "this rests upon a mistake."

He looked at me and slowly shook his head.

"No."

A faint smile touched his face.

"Not a mistake."

His eyes moved toward the three officials.

"A disposition."

The words were spoken without bitterness. Merely as a statement of fact.

He put on his coat and then turned toward me.

"I assume," he said, "that you will continue."

"Most certainly."

"Then that is well."

He crossed to the desk, pulled open the top drawer, and took out a ring of keys, which he placed in my hand.

"The key to the gallery."

He laid a second, smaller key beside it.

"And this one opens the archive."

I looked at him questioningly.

"All my notes," he continued. "The correspondence. The catalogues. The letters. Everything I have gathered over the years."

"You will need them yourself."

He smiled almost imperceptibly.

"I rather doubt that."

For a moment, he let his hand rest upon the edge of the desk. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter.

“I have spent most of my adult life among paintings.”

His gaze moved slowly about the gallery.

“One is sometimes inclined to believe that the most important thing is who painted them.”

He shook his head slightly.

“But what matters most is that the truth about them survives.”

He turned toward me once more.

“If you reach the man behind all this...”

He allowed the sentence to remain unfinished for a moment.

“... then do not let my name be remembered.”

A silence followed.

“Let the truth be remembered.”

I met his eyes.

“I give you my word.”

For the first time since our acquaintance began, the customary distance between us disappeared. He held out his hand, and I took it. There were no lengthy speeches between us. No solemn assurances. Only the firm clasp between two men who had labored toward the same purpose and now found themselves compelled to part, without knowing whether they would ever meet again.

The eldest of the officials stepped forward.

“Monsieur.”

Moreau nodded.

“I am ready.”

He cast one final glance around the gallery. Not at the paintings, but at the light falling through the tall windows. Then, without hesitation, he turned and walked away between the three men. The door closed slowly behind them.

The sound struck me as curiously final. I remained standing with the keys in my hand. Only then did it occur to me that Monsieur Moreau had

entrusted me with more than his gallery. He had entrusted me with his entire part of the case.

Later that same day, I presented myself at the offices of the Sûreté. I was received courteously, though with a certain reserve. It was explained that Monsieur Moreau, by reason of his professional association with Professor Delacroix, had possessed knowledge of, and possibly participated in, the forgery enterprise that had now been uncovered.

Reference was made to earlier collaborations. To joint exhibitions. To financial connections. Upon a first examination, the documentation appeared plausible. Moreau had maintained an acknowledged professional relationship with the professor for several years. He had publicly criticised him. Yet he had also worked alongside him. It was a construction that could readily be presented as complicity.

I could not fail to observe, however, that the timing struck me as unusually precise. The arrest had taken place less than twenty-four hours after the professor's detention. I was not permitted to see Monsieur Moreau. The investigation, I was informed, was "ongoing."

In conclusion, my dear Watson, it appears probable to me that this measure has been designed less to solve a crime than to isolate me from a well-informed ally. The accusation against Monsieur Moreau is formally coherent, yet methodologically convenient.

I find it difficult to imagine that Professor Delacroix, from his present position, possessed the influence necessary to set such a countermeasure in motion. It therefore strengthens my belief that the structure we have thus far touched only in part operates on a far broader scale than I had at first supposed.

— S.

A small stack of envelopes now lies upon the table before me, each bearing Holmes's familiar, sharply defined handwriting, each carrying the traces of his passage through Paris. At first, I read them with a certain uneasiness.

Holmes's decision to operate under the name of Sigurdson, his constant awareness of repetitions within his field of vision, his attention to glances, to distances, and to the slightest shifts in human behaviour lent the earlier letters a tone that might easily have been mistaken for suspicion. As the case unfolds, however, it becomes clear to me that it is not suspicion at all. It is vigilance.

The distinction is one that only those who have watched Holmes at work from close quarters can fully appreciate. Suspicion seeks confirmation of danger. Vigilance merely records patterns. And in Paris I recognise, once again, the latter.

The Holmes I knew before his long absence was never a man who hunted shadows. He was a man who gathered them. It is for that very reason that Moreau's arrest makes so profound an impression upon me.

Only a few hours earlier, Holmes and his French ally had appeared to have brought the Parisian portion of the affair to its conclusion. Professor Delacroix had been arrested. The workshop had been closed. The Academy had passed under the control of the authorities, and everything outwardly suggested that the matter was drawing to its close.

Yet at the very moment when an ordinary investigator might have allowed himself a measure of satisfaction, Moreau was led away. It seems to me that Holmes immediately understood what this signified. It was not merely an innocent man who had been arrested. It was his only confidant in Paris, the man who had opened doors for him, interpreted the unwritten rules of the art world, and guided him through a society in which a foreigner could scarcely have moved unaided. Holmes was left behind without his local anchor.

I also cannot fail to notice how swiftly it all occurred—more swiftly than ordinary police procedure would normally permit. It leaves me with precisely the same thought that so evidently occurred to Holmes himself:

that someone was not merely reacting to the investigation, but was actively seeking to direct its future course.

That the affair of the forged paintings appeared to have been solved was confirmed in the following weeks from another source. In an issue of *The Times* from the middle of June of that year, I found a brief notice reporting that a considerable number of art dealers and intermediaries in Paris had been questioned in connection with an extensive forgery operation. Professor Delacroix's name was mentioned in passing, together with a reference to "an international connection."

A French newspaper, a clipping of which Holmes later enclosed, spoke of "a coordinated campaign against organised art fraud." Its language was triumphant, as official language so often is when the authorities wish to convey an impression of finality. But I know now that Holmes shared no such sentiment. His letters bear no mark of victory. They bear the mark of a man who has only just realised that his opponent has, at last, begun to answer in earnest.

There is in his tone a clarity I have not encountered since before that dreadful confrontation at the Falls. Not youthful confidence—he never possessed that—but a precise and measured sharpness. He is no longer the man who has only just escaped death. He is once again the man who analyses it.

I cannot deny that this brings me a certain measure of relief. For although Holmes has often been accused of coldness, I have always known that his sharpness is his safeguard. When it is dulled, he becomes vulnerable. When it returns, it is the world that ought to be on its guard.

The Paris affair may therefore appear, outwardly, to have reached its conclusion. Yet Moreau's arrest—and the technical connection to which Holmes returns with such persistence—do not allow me to believe that the case has been exhausted.

I gather the letters together. Three still remain unopened. I must confess that I hesitate for a moment before reaching for the next. For I am beginning to understand that Holmes is no longer merely following the clues.

He is now following the hand that lays them.

Letter XV

The Hotel Room

November 21, 1891

Paris

I had only just laid the wood splinter upon the table and was gathering together my notes when a discreet knock sounded at the door. The sound was so light that it might have been accidental, yet its precision excluded chance. I remained standing for a moment without replying. No voice followed, nor was the knock repeated. Instead, I heard the faint rustle of paper being pushed across the floorboards.

I crossed to the door and picked up the folded slip. It bore neither envelope nor any handwriting that I immediately recognised. Before I had finished reading its contents, I took two quick strides toward the window and drew back the curtain.

The street below lay subdued in the late afternoon light. A solitary figure was just rounding the corner. The silhouette was familiar: the tall hat, the calm and measured gait, the discreet distance maintained from those passing by. There was nothing in his movements to suggest haste or nervousness. He walked like a man who knew he was not being followed. I allowed the curtain to fall once more and returned to the table.

Upon the slip were written only a few words: *Gare de Lyon. 6:40. Rome. Montfaucon.*

There was no signature, nor any further explanation. I read the name once again, this time more slowly. *Montfaucon*. It possessed neither the sound one ordinarily associates with France nor entirely that of Italy, but rather carried a foreign, almost eastern quality. I picked up the fragment of wood and examined the carved mark once more. The two letters I had noted earlier could, without difficulty, be read as **M** and **F**.

Taking up my pen, I wrote the name beside my sketch of the mark, comparing the proportions, the inclination of the letters, and the manner in which the cut in the wood had begun and ended. A hand that carves its own mark leaves behind a different movement from one that merely copies another's.

I then folded the slip and placed it carefully in my inner pocket.

The fact that a specific train departure had been given struck me as more significant than the destination itself.

Rome was no longer a supposition. It was the next step.

Before morning had fully broken, I left the hotel. The streets were cool and almost deserted, while the dampness of the night rested like a thin veil upon the cobblestones. At such an hour the city seemed less insistent, as though it had not yet decided what form it would assume for the day.

I covered the first part of the journey on foot. Not from necessity, but because a decision, once made, often acquires greater clarity through movement.

The prison lay to the east, a solid building devoid of architectural ambition. Its walls were neither old enough to appear historic nor new enough to impress. They served their purpose, and nothing more.

At the gate I gave my name. "Harald Sigurdson."

The guard studied me for a moment before sending word inside. Some time passed before an officer received me in a sparsely furnished office, where the air carried that distinctive scent of paper, ink, and disinfectant which seems to characterise such institutions throughout Europe.

I presented my request for a brief meeting with Monsieur Moreau.

It was refused.

The refusal was courteous, but absolute. The investigation had commenced. Access was restricted. No exceptions would be made.

I saw no reason to raise my voice. Instead, I pointed out that I had assisted in exposing Professor Delacroix's operations and that I might be able to provide information of significance in assessing Monsieur Moreau's role. I further allowed myself to suggest that his position might easily be misunderstood if the events were viewed apart from their proper context.

The officer's reply remained unchanged. The charges against Monsieur Moreau were serious and rested upon documentation that could not yet be disclosed to unauthorised persons.

I noted, in particular, the words *documentation* and *not yet*. Both appeared to me to have been chosen with considerable care.

Since further argument was unlikely to produce any result, I merely requested confirmation that Monsieur Moreau was in good health. This was given without hesitation. The officer then handed me a brief statement which, according to him, had been signed by Moreau himself. It was composed in the restrained language of legal formalities and contained neither protest nor explanation, but merely a formal declaration of his willingness to cooperate with the authorities.

I read it slowly.

The handwriting was steady. The strokes were firm and without the slightest indication of uncertainty. Nothing suggested that the statement had been signed under excitement or fear.

I folded the paper and handed it back.

"You expect the matter to be concluded quickly?" I asked.

"We hope so," replied the officer.

I nodded. There were no further questions that could profitably be asked.

Before leaving the building, I requested writing paper.

The officer hesitated for a moment, then pushed a writing pad and a pen across the desk. I wrote without haste, yet without pause. When the letter was finished, I folded the sheet once and sealed it with a drop of dark wax from the small stick I invariably carry while traveling.

I handed the letter across the desk.

"For Monsieur Moreau," I said. "Personally, if you would be so kind."

The officer regarded the seal for a moment, nodded, and laid the letter aside.

I added nothing further.

It has often been my experience, Watson, that words exchanged in a corridor are quickly lost. Words committed to paper, however, possess a far greater capacity to survive distance, time, and the uncertain memory of men.

*My dear Monsieur Moreau,
Since circumstances prevent us from meeting in person, I take the liberty of setting down these lines in order to make my intentions clear.*

The circumstances we have investigated together in Paris have, despite their local manifestation, consistently pointed toward a technical and logistical origin beyond the borders of France. The composition of the chemical preparations in particular, the provenance of the timber, and certain financial connections all suggest that the true structure exists elsewhere.

I therefore consider it necessary to follow these traces to Rome.

I have no doubt that your involvement in this affair will be represented as being more active than it has in fact been. The documentation that will be presented will, in all likelihood, appear coherent; nevertheless, I am convinced that it will not withstand a thorough technical examination.

I shall keep you informed, insofar as circumstances permit.

Since direct correspondence is unlikely to be advisable under your present conditions, I have taken the necessary precaution of arranging for certain communications to be conveyed through a person whom you have already

had occasion to observe under varying circumstances. Should you find it necessary to let me know anything, or should circumstances change, it will be sufficient for you to place your confidence in her, whatever guise she may deem appropriate to assume. She will understand what ought to be understood.

In that connection, allow me to observe that not every role performed with conviction is intended for the stage alone.

Should your present situation have been brought about by the same structure which we have thus far only partially uncovered, it may prove that your temporary absence from public view is not merely a burden, but also a measure of protection.

I trust that the matter will ultimately be decided in your favour.

With my unchanged esteem,

H. S.

When I stepped outside once more, the light had grown brighter. Paris was awakening.

I paused for a moment before the prison walls. Moreau had not protested. That could signify one of two things. Either he was convinced that the truth would reveal itself in due course. Or he did not yet wish it to do so.

Before breaking the seal upon the penultimate letter from Paris, I notice that its date lies very close to the time of Moreau's arrest. There is a weight in that coincidence which I cannot ignore. I place another log upon the fire and resume my seat at the table.

For a moment my thoughts linger upon the letter Holmes left for Monsieur Moreau. I know him well enough to understand that he rarely writes when a few spoken words would have sufficed. Whenever he chooses the

pen over the voice, it is almost invariably because he intends those words to endure, even when he himself is no longer present.

It seems to me that his farewell to Paris possesses precisely this character. He leaves the city not because the case has been concluded, but because it can no longer be pursued there. Moreau has been imprisoned, and the only man who possessed both local knowledge and Holmes's confidence has been removed. Holmes is left alone with the clues that point toward Rome.

I have often reflected that Holmes seldom becomes attached to people. He becomes attached to their abilities. When he makes an exception, he is rarely aware of it himself. Yet I believe he held a genuine respect for Monsieur Moreau—not merely for his knowledge, but for his unwavering determination to follow the truth, even after it had begun to exact a heavy price from him.

Perhaps it is for that very reason that Holmes chooses, on this single occasion, to leave behind a letter. He knows that they will, in all probability, never meet again.

For a moment I look at the envelope in my hands.

Paris now lies behind him.

Ahead await Rome, Montfaucon, and the unseen hand that still appears to direct events from afar.

I cannot rid myself of the thought that, as Holmes departs from the Gare de Lyon, he stands truly alone for the first time since his arrival in France.

I break the seal.

Letter XVI and XVII

Departure

November 18, 1891

Gare de Lyon, Paris

My dear Watson,

I write these lines in the waiting room, where the morning traffic is only just beginning to gather into its daily crescendo. Railway stations have always interested me, not for their architecture, but for their concentration of purpose. Here one finds people who are either fleeing, searching, or transporting something they have no wish to leave behind.

The Gare de Lyon is no exception. Its roof is supported by ironwork whose geometry is only partially obscured by steam and movement. The platform lies bathed in a grey light that has not yet decided to become day. The luggage is piled in uneven formations; the wear upon a suitcase often reveals more about its owner than the name upon its label. It has often seemed to me that a man might disappear here without making any effort to conceal himself.

The ticket office was already surrounded by a small circle of travellers whose destinations could be read from their footwear and their hand luggage. Those bound for the south prepare themselves differently from those merely journeying between the provinces.

My train was due to depart at 6:40. I had chosen to arrive well in advance, not from any fear of being followed, but because departures require observation. He who wishes to guard himself against interference should first determine whether any interference exists at all. Thus far, nothing has caused me to revise my assessment. Paris has yielded all that the city was capable of yielding. Its role in the affair has been, as I have previously observed, structural rather than original. I leave it without regret.

The platform was opened a few minutes before departure, and the movement of the passengers gathered itself into a calm advance toward the carriages. I selected a compartment near the middle of the train, neither at the front nor at the rear, and placed my luggage upon the rack above the seat without attracting any particular notice.

The interior was of the customary southbound variety: upholstered seats, a light accumulation of dust in the corners, and the characteristic scent of timber and coal that had already crossed more frontiers than the passengers themselves had yet done.

As the train began to move, I allowed my gaze to rest upon the platform as it slowly receded. The structure of the station passed by in fragments—iron, glass, uniforms, hats. Among them I noticed a familiar silhouette. The individual in question moved unhurriedly along the length of the train and boarded a carriage farther ahead without once turning his head. I saw no reason to alter my plans. It is, on occasion, useful to know that one is not traveling alone. Whether that presence is accidental or deliberate remains to be seen.

The train departed Paris at 6:40.

— S.

Watson now holds the final letter in his hands. He has already skimmed several of the earlier ones more than once, not from doubt, but because

of that peculiar uneasiness which arises when a case appears to have been concluded without yet being fully understood. Now only this single letter remains.

The envelope differs from the others in several respects. The fold is slightly uneven, the paper more worn, and the postmark comes from a small French station whose name has been almost obliterated by the many hands through which it has passed during its journey.

Outside Baker Street, the evening lies heavy beneath a veil of mist. A carriage rolls past with a muted rattle, while behind him the fire crackles with the steady regularity that only a well-fed hearth can produce. The study, which has so often served as the setting for Holmes's keenest analyses, seems to him larger and quieter than usual.

He slowly turns the envelope between his fingers.

According to the newspapers, the Paris affair has been concluded. Professor Delacroix has been arrested. The art forgeries are reported as having been solved. Yet Moreau has been taken away under accusation, and Holmes has continued his journey alone.

Watson leans back for a moment and lets his gaze rest upon the flames.

Moreau's arrest has been mentioned only in a few terse lines in the press. An accomplice. A possible intermediary. Nothing in the official reports resembles the man Holmes has described throughout these letters. There is something unjust in that dry wording, something unfinished.

Holmes's own letters carry a different tone in their closing pages. The light irony has receded into the background. In its place remains a deeper concentration, as though his attention is no longer directed toward what is visible, but toward that which still lies concealed behind events.

Once more Watson looks at the envelope.

The date falls only a short time after Moreau's arrest. The station postmark tells him that Holmes has already left Paris. He is on his way to Rome, alone, armed only with his observations and with the conviction that the affair is very far from finished.

Watson breaks the seal. The paper unfolds with a gentle rustle.

At the top stands a date and the name of a small intermediate station, one he recognises only faintly from the map of France. An insignificant point upon the railway line between Paris and the southern frontier.

He draws a quiet breath. This is the last letter from France. And even before he reads the opening line, he senses that it marks not merely the conclusion of one part of Holmes's narrative. It is the beginning of the next.

November 18, 1891

Gare de Valence

Part One — Departure

The station from which I now write is neither large enough to attract attention nor small enough to escape it. Valence lies as a discreet link in the chain between north and south, a necessary halt rather than a destination. The train stops here not from inclination, but from obligation.

The platform is narrow and unadorned. A canopy of iron and glass casts a pale light upon the few travellers who have left their compartments to stretch their legs. Steam drifts heavily across the tracks in slow clouds, as though the engine itself hesitates before continuing its journey southward. The metallic rhythm of the wheels, as the brakes are released and tightened once more, provides a monotonous accompaniment to this brief interruption in the journey.

There is something temporary about such places. One remains there without truly arriving. Faces appear for a moment and disappear again into the corridors of the coaches. Suitcases are set down and lifted again with the same absence of attachment that characterises conversations between strangers who know they shall never meet again.

I am now traveling south, and with every stop the landscape alters its character. The crowded streets of Paris have already given way to open

fields and lower buildings, and here in Valence one senses unmistakably that the direction has been settled.

The rails lead onward. Not back.

The locomotive releases a short, sharp burst of steam. A station official walks methodically along the line of carriages with a lantern in his hand, inspecting them with quiet precision. Everything proceeds with the same impersonal exactitude that accompanies every transition.

It is an appropriate place at which to gather together the threads.

Paris is, in the official sense, concluded. But I have learned that endings are often geographical. Not structural.

Professor Delacroix has been arrested. The machinery of the law has played its part with an efficiency that leaves little room for interpretation. The documents spoke for themselves, and the gates of the institution have been closed for the time being. Paris will discuss the affair for a while before turning its attention, as cities invariably do, to the next phenomenon.

Moreau, however, remains in custody. His position is less clear in the public eye, and in a system where associations carry greater weight than intentions, clarity is not always the first thing to be established. I have done what I could, but that part of the affair must, for the present, remain in French hands.

Formally, the affair has ended in Paris. Structurally, it has not.

The fragment of the frame rests within my inner pocket. The small splinter of wood bearing its incised mark, whose very simplicity is its strength. The button, dropped during a flight whose owner has yet to identify himself. The note that was slipped beneath my door with a precision that leaves little to chance. And the name. The name remains there as a reference without a face.

I now possess the pieces, but not the connection capable of assembling them without resorting to speculation. It is too early to draw conclusions. Any premature synthesis would constitute a weakness rather than an insight.

The train has once more resumed its journey. The compartment is upholstered in dark fabric that has absorbed the conversations of decades. The wooden panels bear the marks of hands and the dust of travellers who have passed through the same space without leaving behind anything save impressions. An elderly gentleman opposite me holds his newspaper too close to his face. Two seats farther along, a merchant and a younger student discuss prices and provinces in subdued voices. A woman dressed in black sits with her hands folded about a small handbag, as though the journey itself were an ordeal. Suitcases have been arranged upon the luggage racks with varying degrees of order. Leather, canvas, metal fittings.

And hats. Hats upon the racks. Hats upon empty seats. A dark felt hat resting by itself, as though its owner had only temporarily stepped away. A taller model farther ahead, doubtless belonging to a government official. A softer variety that might suit any traveler wishing to preserve his anonymity. It is a curious feature of railway compartments that hats are often seen before faces. I observe them all. Not because I expect to discover what I seek, but because repetition is seldom accidental.

The rhythm of the compartment became steadier as the train gathered speed. The conversations diminished, and the monotonous sound of the wheels upon the rails settled into the background, making it possible to think with clarity.

It seems to me that every investigation reaches a point at which one must choose between waiting and acting. In Paris I have, to some extent, allowed myself to be observed, much as one permits a shadow to move until its direction can be determined. Such a method has its justification. But it also has its limits.

Part Two — What Then Occurred

I let my gaze pass once more over the compartment and rose without haste, as though I merely wished to stretch my legs.

The corridor was narrow, but sufficient. I passed compartment after compartment, allowing my eyes to rest upon hands holding books or cigarettes, upon the distribution of dust along the edges of sleeves, and upon the small metal labels which certain travellers allow to remain upon their luggage long after arrival.

A hat that seemed familiar proved to belong to a merchant from Lyon, whose conversation with a fellow passenger revealed an accent that did not accord with my interest. Another man, who wore his felt hat rather too low upon his brow, had hands bearing the characteristic traces of ink and coal—more likely a clerk than an observer.

I stopped at the passage between the carriages and allowed the movement of the train to pass through the handle in my hand. Observation has always been my most reliable instrument. Not in its dramatic form, but in the persistent, almost trivial registration of what others overlook. It is possible that, in Paris, I allowed myself for a moment to be guided more by the movements of others than by my own. I have no intention of repeating that error.

I continued through the train. If a man chooses to follow, he must also choose to be seen. I found him in the foremost carriage, where the light was a little weaker and the conversations fewer. He sat alone by the window, his hat placed upon his knee rather than upon the rack—as an object not readily abandoned. His coat was dark, but not new. His shoes bore traces of cobblestones, not country roads. His hands were calm. I sat down opposite him without asking. He raised his eyes, nodded briefly, and looked once more out at the passing landscape.

“The train moves steadily this evening,” I said.

“Yes,” he replied. “It does so once the direction has been fixed.”

His voice was neither deep nor sharp. It was sober.

“South?” I said.

“That depends,” he answered. “For some, the south is a destination. For others, merely a passage.”

"One may follow the current," he continued, "or move a little ahead of it. It is a question of timing."

"Or of knowledge," I said.

For the first time he looked at me with a little more attention.

"Knowledge," he repeated, "is seldom complete."

The train trembled slightly as it passed a junction.

"You are traveling to Rome?" he asked, without looking directly at me.

"I am."

"It is a city of many layers."

"Like Paris," I said.

"Like any city where structures age, but do not disappear."

I allowed a brief pause to fall.

"Have you ever heard the name Montfaucon?" I asked, as though it were merely a stray recollection.

His hand moved slightly upon the hat. Not much. But enough.

"Names," he said calmly, "are often less interesting than what lies behind them."

"Then you do not know it?"

"I know many names."

"But not this one?"

He looked at me now, directly.

"If I did," he said, "it would scarcely alter the direction."

There was no hostility in his gaze.

"You are following me," I said, stating the fact. "You have done so since I arrived in Paris. And now also as I leave it."

He neither confirmed nor denied it.

"And it seems likely that, on one occasion, you also saved me from a bullet."

Still no answer, though there was the faintest smile.

After this, I rose and returned to my compartment without asking further questions. The conversation had produced no admission, but neither

had it produced any denial. In that respect it was satisfactory. In other respects, insufficient.

The train had now settled into a steadier rhythm. The darkness outside had grown denser, broken only now and then by distant lights from small towns that slipped past like brief memories. I sat by the window and allowed my gaze to follow the reflection of the compartment's interior in the glass.

At the next station I saw him again. He passed along the platform without haste, his coat scarcely moving, his hat now correctly placed upon his head. He did not look in. He did not stop. I registered the movement in the glass rather than directly. The silhouette was the same as the one I had earlier seen in mirror reflections. He entered a carriage farther forward. It was enough for me to know. We now share the journey to Rome, I presume. His identity remains unknown to me, and his position unresolved. He has acted neither as an enemy nor as an open ally. Yet his presence has been constant, and constancy is seldom without purpose.

I have not yet decided whether he follows me—or leads me.

Watson lets the letter rest for a moment between his hands before slowly folding it together.

The fire in the grate has almost burned out, and the shadows in the room have changed since he began to read. It has grown late; that particular silence has fallen which comes to London only when even the most persistent cabs have left the streets, and Baker Street lies muted beneath a thin veil of mist.

He lays the letter upon the others and lets his hand remain for a moment upon the stack, as though the weight of the papers has altered during the reading.

Paris now lies behind Holmes.

Rome does not.

Formally, the matter appears concluded. Professor Delacroix has been arrested. The workshop has been closed. The authorities speak of the affair as solved, and the newspapers write of a successful effort against organised art fraud.

Yet Watson cannot rid himself of the sense that something has shifted.

Holmes's first letters from Paris bear the mark of a man searching unknown ground. He registers faces, repetitions, and small displacements around him with the vigilance Watson knows so well. But in the final letters the tone changes. Not because the danger has vanished, but because Holmes seems to have found its direction.

He leans back and lets his gaze rest upon the empty chair beside the desk. There is something particular about reading Holmes's words without hearing his voice at the same time. The letters convey his clarity and the precision with which he sets down his conclusions, but they cannot entirely contain the almost imperceptible intensity Watson has observed so many times in Baker Street. It always appears at the moment when Holmes ceases merely to suspect and begins to see a pattern.

Outside, a late pedestrian passes. The footsteps vanish again into the silence of the night.

Watson gathers the letters into a careful stack and lets his eyes rest upon the uppermost one. The last from France. He remains seated for another moment without moving.

It is now clear to him that the art forgery in Paris is only one branch of something far greater. The documents have revealed the method. They have revealed the distribution. But not the hand that conceived the system.

Holmes is not traveling to Rome to prove what he already knows. He is traveling to find the man who still exists only as a name.

Watson slowly returns to the final line of the letter:

"I have not yet decided whether he follows me—or leads me."

It is a curious formulation. Holmes rarely allows himself to be led. In all the

years Watson has known him, he has seen him receive information, cooperate with police authorities, and even accept assistance from unexpected sources—but never passively. Holmes moves forward by his own will, and when he appears to follow another's trail, it is usually to understand its direction, not to let himself be guided by it.

And yet ...

Watson cannot entirely dismiss the thought. There have been moments when Holmes has openly acknowledged the value of a hidden hand. An informant who wished to remain anonymous. A discreet message. An unexpected warning whose source was never known.

The man in the hat. That persistent silhouette which appears again and again in the letters. He acts neither as an obvious enemy nor as a declared ally. He intervenes, but asks for no thanks. He sends a note, but no explanation. He saves Holmes's life in the back alley of Montmartre, and now he appears to be taking the same journey south.

Watson slowly folds his hands before him. If Holmes is truly uncertain whether he is being followed or led, the matter must be far more complex than the letters immediately reveal. The thought troubles him more than he cares to admit—not because he doubts Holmes's judgment, but because he knows that Holmes rarely leaves a question unanswered unless the answer cannot yet be found.

He cannot decide whether the man in the hat represents danger or protection. And he senses that Holmes cannot yet decide either.

Watson gathers the letters with care and lays them in a straight stack upon the desk. It is a movement he often makes when he is trying to create order in more than merely papers. He lets his gaze rest upon the envelopes for a moment, as though the distance between the city names itself tells a story not yet fully unfolded. Paris has had its own logic. Its own structure. Its own revelation. Rome feels different.

He rises and crosses to the fireplace. It still gives off a faint warmth, though the flames have long since died. Beside the empty armchair stands Holmes's violin, exactly where it was left before his departure. The strings

catch a faint reflection from the lamp. Watson stops. His gaze rests for a moment upon the chair.

The room is not empty. It is filled with Holmes's absence.

He places the letters in the little box, slides it into the desk drawer, and closes it slowly. For a moment his hand remains upon the drawer handle. Then he turns toward the window.

The darkness outside is the same.

But Holmes is now on his way to Rome.

Epilogue

Dear Reader,

Thank you for accompanying Sherlock Holmes through the streets of Paris.

What first appeared to be an investigation into forged paintings gradually revealed something far more complex. Behind the galleries, workshops, and auction rooms lay an organisation built not merely upon deception, but upon carefully constructed identities, hidden networks, and a discipline that extended well beyond the borders of France.

As Dr. Watson observes in the closing pages, the Paris affair has not truly been concluded. Professor Delacroix has fallen, yet those who designed the system remain unseen. Moreau has been taken into custody, the mysterious man in the hat continues to appear at unexpected moments, and the name Montfaucon has emerged as little more than a shadow pointing toward a greater truth.

Holmes now leaves Paris for Rome, convinced that the source of the conspiracy lies elsewhere. There, among ancient streets, forgotten archives, and the hidden corridors of the Eternal City, the investigation will continue in the next volume of *The Secret Letters*, *Saint Peter's Confession*. What began as a case of art forgery will soon uncover secrets that reach far beyond the world of paintings alone.

If you have enjoyed this journey, you may also wish to explore Holmes's shorter investigations in *The Curious Cases* and *The Animal Cases*, where

each volume presents a collection of independent mysteries inspired by the spirit of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, blending careful deduction, historical atmosphere, and the enduring friendship between Holmes and Dr. Watson.

Until our next adventure, thank you for reading.

Warm regards,
Alistair Croft