

The Curious Case of the Vicarage Ghost

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Sherlock Holmes and the Curious Case of the Vicarage Ghost

By
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Dear Prime Minister Gladstone,

I must thank you, again, for your insistence that I return to the drafts of some of the unpublished, early cases of our late friend and associate, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. "The Curious Case of the Vicarage Ghost," occurred the Spring of 1882, and I hastily cobbled together my notes on it sometime later.

The original adventure might, as Holmes was fond of saying, have one or two points of interest about the science of deduction. However, I had never thought to return to it, in concert with Holmes's wishes—and for the good of all parties involved—that I keep its details out of the public eye. As it has a bearing on the Savannah adventure in the Spring of '89 and the early days of my present role in L.S., it makes an interesting prequel to that complex case and my tasks hereafter. The account itself contains some personal matters for me, which with I ask you to bear with patience. However, I think it important enough to add to our history of Holmes's greatest foe and the means by which such criminals can be thwarted. And, as I reviewed the details of "Ghost," I arrived at the disturbing thought that the commission of a crime can, at times, serve the ends of justice in ways that we may not see, an idea at once abhorrent and compelling. I leave it to you to go over the details of the narrative here, read my summation, and determine if I am correct. Thank You.

Yours Dutifully,

Dr. John H. Watson.

"Watson, are you able to join me on a case this weekend?" Holmes asked as we sat at the breakfast table. Holmes had a letter in his hand that had just come by the morning post. Its contents he read and reread for some minutes. Our pipes were lit, and we shared a second pot of Mrs. Hudson's rich

tea. I had my newspaper in hand, reading with mixed emotions the progress of ongoing negotiations between General Gordon and the Mahdi in the Sudan. Dealing with native religious struggles was a touchy, dangerous business. I feared it would not end well for Great Britain. It was late spring, and the windows were open, allowing the rain-scoured breezes to waft through our sitting room at 221B, Baker Street.

“Yes, especially if it is a local matter,” I said. “My funds, at present, forbid me traveling far or for long.” My pension was enough to sustain a moderate lifestyle, but many evenings out at the Criterion of late had somewhat drained my coffers.

“Actually, this would involve us journeying to Oxford this weekend, though our fare, rooms, and meals would be provided by my client,” he returned. I knew that Holmes’ purse was rather light of late, too, for his recent case load consisted of missing objects or persons, matters he often settled without leaving our flat or even the mention of a fee. Word of his reputation began to circulate, at that time, but his clients remained of the poor or working class, and he had not the heart to let fees interfere with solving their problems.

“I certainly have no objection to travel, but I hope that my presence would not discommode our hosts, for likely they expect more of your services than mine,” I said, not wishing to make Holmes feel the need to take me solely for my benefit. Still, I quite looked forward to getting away, and a trip to Oxford as spring came into its own appealed mightily to me. I had my notes assembled to start drafting *A Study in Scarlet*, but like most writers, I balked at the start of a long narrative and its demands.

“No, not at all, for this letter mentions you by name, requesting your presence as a medical man—as well as a friend to my client. In short, you are summoned, old man,” Holmes said, smiling and handing me the letter.

Written in a firm script, the first paragraph showed me my name as a reason of sorts for its writer to be so bold as to request Holmes’ help. I looked to the signature and caught my breath, for it bore a name I knew only too well: Mrs. Christine Singleton, née Moore. Only four years had passed since I had

seen her last. A stunning, athletic girl, whose friends had dubbed her Christie, she won my heart while I struggled through medical school. Her looks alone garnered the attentions of many young men, but I was more fortunate to be able to walk out with her, with her happy consent.

However, I had lost her to a good man whose career has already begun. He offered her a future which I could not. So, I didn't, couldn't propose to her and decided, upon my graduation from medical school, to lose myself in the Army. I took my sorrows and dashed hopes into the Army College of Surgeons at Netley on the day she married a clergyman, Roger Singleton, a man some years my senior, whom I held in great respect. I had lived through Hell on earth since then, but reading her name then, I wondered if the pain of losing her hadn't been equal to or greater than the wounds I carried away from the ill-fated Battle of Maiwand. I'm sure the sad wonder on my face was something Holmes read with typical ease.

"I see by the set of your brow that she is 'the one who got away,' eh old fellow?" Holmes said, plucking the letter back from my numb fingers. "And, I would spare you the pain of seeing her again, but since she expressly asked for you, I wished you to have fair warning that I intend to take her case, and I think that your services, as well as your medical expertise, would be most helpful. She offers us a rather intriguing matter."

Nodding my acceptance of Mrs. Singleton's invitation, I asked him to reveal to me the particulars of the case that interested him. My own memories of loss I wished to keep to myself, for a time at least, until I saw her again. I sought to free my face of any reaction, as I did not wish to encourage Holmes's annoying practice of reading my deepest emotions in the twitch of an eyelash. In four years she would, perhaps, have changed so much that my memories of her would not plague me.

"She and her husband have settled in Oxford, at St. Michael at the North Gate, where he has recently been appointed vicar. I gather that this would be a singular accomplishment for a member of the Church of England clergy, yet his success is endangered by his current, mysterious malady. He is more than two weeks overdue to assume full charge of that pulpit."

“I am sorry to hear it, for both their sakes. Yes, St. Michael at the North Gate would be a real feather in his cap,” I said. “And from what I recall, Roger is well suited to it. Handsome fellow. Kind-hearted, generous, he’s also a vigorous man, a Rugby forward of considerable power and speed—or was, when last I saw him. He should have remarkable appeal to the more sporting undergraduates, a true ‘Muscular Christian,’ in the sense of both terms.”

“I think you will find him quite changed, from what Mrs. Singleton recounts in her letter. He seems to have been reduced to a stuporous state of late, with nothing to explain it. And, to make the matter of his illness worse, the vicarage appears to be haunted. I must ask you, is Mrs. Singleton a person to give herself over to flights of occult fancy?”

“What? Why, no, Holmes, Christi—Mrs. Singleton—is a most serious-minded woman, though her happy spirit and sweetness of personality were what drew me to her. She was a governess to a banker’s children when I knew her, and well regarded, quite a stable person. Her father ran a haberdashery and raised her in a modest way in the Harrow Lane neighborhood of the West End. Pray, let me see her letter again, Holmes.”

Passing me the missive, Holmes excused himself from the table mumbling about needing to affect a different look. Before he left the sitting room, he turned back to me and said, “Since Mrs. Singleton wishes me to arrive incognito and remain so for our stay in Oxford, it would be wise, I think, Watson, if you brought your Bull Pup along. Things look dark for Singleton and his bride, and due to the matter of a number of young men who have attached themselves to the Singleton household, I fear that this business might come to matters of force, before its end. It is singular in the combination of its details, but because of the supposed ghostly element, I suspect a cabal involving those young men, who will not let Singleton have a moment’s peace.”

I took up the letter, again, somewhat alarmed by the notion of a ghostly visitation, for Holmes approached every case with scientific rigor. I had never heard Holmes mention the occult in his other detective work. I read Christie’s letter with care, looking for some hint of the threat that Holmes had

detected. I read her requests for Holmes' secret assistance in solving the matter of her husband's malady, which she made with the support of the elder vicar, Rev. Darius Brandon, who yet remained at St. Michaels prior to his well-earned retirement. She did mention that the occurrence of Roger's illness coincided with a poltergeist visitation of sorts, where she would find furniture over-turned and items such as books or curios scattered about nearly every morning.

She didn't give it much credence, thinking it a prank of sorts played by one or more of Roger's five constant visitors, all young Rugby players who had grown close to Roger in his short tenure at St. Michaels. Further, in anticipation of Holmes' acceptance of her case, she had arranged for our accommodations in rooms above a pub called "The Eagle and Child," some minutes walk north of their church. Reverend Brandon was to reimburse us for our travel expenses and lodgings, as well, which I read with chagrin. I disliked the idea of running, still penniless, to Christie's aid. Brandon, however, also agreed to add a stipend of fifty pounds sterling, a princely sum, which would guarantee our rent for months, since Holmes typically shared his reward with me on those cases in which I aided him. A soldier's pension might sustain me, if only just, but it would still not allow me to set up a household of my own.

The letter's content, though, left me with a good deal of worry about Christine. At length, I stirred myself to pack a change of clothes, remembering, last, to take the short-barreled Webley revolver and extra cartridges with me. Though I had read nothing in her letter that spoke to me of a threat, I knew Holmes well enough to not doubt him.

Alighting from our second-class carriage at the Oxford train station, I wasted little time identifying Mrs. Singleton's face in the crowd awaiting arrivals from London. "There she is, Holmes," I said gesturing to Mrs. Christine Singleton, her golden hair catching the late afternoon sun. She stood some way off. The modest blue dress and buff colored bonnet she wore would not draw the eye of the fashion-conscious crowd, but it befitting a clergyman's wife. Still as lithe and trim as I remembered her,

her proud blue eyes sought my face in the crowd. Two young men, students, I surmised by their dress, stood at her back, each in a school blazer and tie, topped off with a straw boater.

“Those must be two of the five gentlemen who form the constant companions of her husband, as she mentioned in the letter,” Holmes suggested as we strode towards them. “They bear close watching, Watson.” Unlike Christine Singleton, Holmes’s mode of dress appeared likely to draw attention, for he wore a rather outlandish tweed suit of brown and white houndstooth, with a wide brimmed hat of dark felted wool, rather careworn. It was all part of his disguise, he said, designed to let him draw less notice than the manner of an Englishman’s travel dress, his usual Inverness cape and deerstalker cap.

“Their seeming charitable acts, Watson, might well cover a great fear of leaving Roger alone. And, where there is a fear that motivates five young men, Rugby players, known for their aggressiveness, I read the possibility of some threat. Beyond that, I cannot say, for it would be mere conjecture, and you know that I will not descend to guess work.”

I, who knew Roger to be always at home with young men of similar tastes, had little cause to believe Holmes’ admonition that the Singletons lived in any danger from these five friends. Roger, I assumed, had won the trust and admiration of these young men with his amiable ways and love of their Rugby. It seemed rather fitting to me that they would look to his well-being. In the next second, I forgot Roger Singleton and his small circle of friends, for Christine saw me and smiled.

“Christine!” I called to her, pulling Holmes along with me.

She waved at me and started through the crowd, lightly biting her lower lip, a habit that I always found quite endearing. When we neared, she smiled again, and it lit her face with pleasure and excitement, a look I remembered only too well. That smile often appeared in my dreams or during hours of training for combat and adapting to field surgery techniques. I had thought to never see that smile again and doing so nearly stopped my breath.

At that moment, the years between us dissolved. She owned, still, a beauty that I find hard to describe. I have known and loved women on three continents, many of whom possessed a beauty of

feature or glamor that surpassed those with which nature had endowed Christie, yet when I saw her again, it was not just the flash of blue eyes, sunny hair or even a vivacious figure—all of which she possessed—that made me catch my breath. Christie wore her life in her expressions, and when she looked at me, it was with that same light in her eyes that told me she loved and cared for me still.

How I could have doubted that her love for me, years ago, would not have made it through whatever hardships we would have encountered was beyond me, as I stood in the light of her eyes. I saw that I had simply lacked faith in her—myself, too. Now, it would be different for us, though. I had been the lucky man to whom she had opened her beauty, once. With withering clarity, I saw that doubts about my prospects, then, had fostered my lack of faith in her, and I had let her go to a man who could give her a life that I could not. And though my heart leapt at seeing her, it fell hard into the hole left when I had let her go.

Her feet barely made a sound, so light her steps, as she ran to me and caught my hands before her. The two male students followed her, several yards behind.

“John Watson,” she sighed, her voice, always breathy, reached my ears alone. “So, so good of you to come. You are much changed. Some of these last four years have not been kind to you.”

“That is quite true, my dear, but you are not changed, Christie,” I returned in quiet tones as her hands shook in my own. “You are the very embodiment of Spring.” I wondered if it was excitement at seeing me or fear for Roger’s well-being that made her hands shake. Still, I welcomed seeing her again and stood, for a moment, lost for more words to say. Nothing remained guarded in her when she spoke with me. I could see in the small lines of worry around her mouth the pain that Roger’s illness gave her, yet in her smile I saw the joy she knew in seeing me again. At length I added, as I knew I should, “You know that I would do anything in my power to aid you—and Roger.”

At my side, Holmes gave a gentle cough behind his hand, bidding me introduce him to this dazzling woman. However, in the excitement I knew in holding Christie’s hands in mine again, I simply forgot the name under which he travelled. I gave Holmes a hopeless glance before I said,

“Mrs. Christine Singleton, I wish to introduce to you my associate...”

“Dr. Charles Williams, ma’am,” Holmes said in a flat, nasal, American accent. It startled me to think that this vocal subterfuge was intended to help him blend in, for people around us searched for the sound of that voice. “I’d be much obliged if you just called me Charlie. Everybody does.”

“Thank you for that kindness, Charlie. And my friends all know me as Christie,” she replied, extending Holmes her hand and turning her enchanting gaze to him. “I trust that your travels were not too arduous?”

“Sick as a dog, on the boat over,” Holmes caroled in Charlie’s nasal twang. “But since then, I’m as right as the mail and ready to take on the tutoring job here.” I gaped for a second, trying to remember my part in this charade. Holmes/Williams elbowed me in the side.

“Yes. Yes, indeed. Since Mike Stamford introduced us at St. Barts, Charlie is quite adjusted to our climate and food. I should think him well adapted to England, now. It is fortunate that your request reached me at the same time that Charlie learned of his opportunity here. Thank you, again, for securing accommodations for us.”

“I can only hope that I get along well with the students here. I must remember to thank Reverend Brandon for his letter of introduction to Balliol. That should really help my chances of getting the job. It isn’t often that a fellow, like me, from Cincinnati, gets a chance to study and teach abroad.”

As Holmes said this, the two men shadowing Mrs. Singleton introduced themselves and one extended his hand, saying in pleasant tones, “An American tutor, come to Balliol? How delightful! My name is Billings, first name Reginald. I’m at Balliol myself.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Billings!” Holmes replied pumping the young man’s hand with typical American vigor. “Maybe we’ll get a chance to work together. And this other fellow?”

“Douglas, Ewan Douglas, Merton College,” the other said, also offering his hand and his name in a mellowed Scots brogue. I exchanged greetings with them, as well, searching their eyes and expressions for any threatening trait in these young scholars.

As we left the station and crossed the Castle Mill Stream on Hythe Bridge street, I noted that both young men were smiling, polite, well grown lads, in whom I saw none of the threat that Holmes thought might come from them. That they were Rugby players, I could see, for both possessed stout grips and were trim and wide of shoulder. Their well-cut coats stood as evidence that they came from wealthy families, which I knew to be common at Oxford, England's oldest university. Perhaps I gave them too much credit for good up-bringing, but time would tell more about that. Billings offered to take our bags and Christie said,

"Oh, do let them, John," Christie said as we made the turn towards the center of town, up Worcester Street. "It is not much of a walk to the vicarage, and we can let them go on ahead of us. I should like to take you to see Roger first, while they take your things to your rooms. That should give us time to catch up. They have rooms at the Bird and Baby, lads."

"I think I'd like to go on ahead with these two fellows," Holmes added with enthusiasm. "They can fill me in on the sights and show me around a bit, while you two old friends reminisce some."

Christie and I took a slower pace and let the Holmes/Williams faction go on ahead of us, though we could see them chatting back and forth, wearing smiles on their faces. Holmes did his best to look like an American tourist on his first visit to the City of the Dreaming Spires. I could not help but smile at the energy he poured into his charade.

"So that is Mr. Sherlock Holmes, is it?" Christie said softly, drawing her arm through mine, as she had once been accustomed to doing. Letting her set the pace, I noted that she still walked with the same, smooth, athletic stride that I remembered so fondly. Yellow cowslips and pink sea thrift put forth their first blooms in the small gardens past which we strolled, suggesting our summer walks through Kensington Gardens. It was as though I had returned to those days, yet to do so gave me a sort of ghostly chill, despite the pleasure of being near her again.

“Yes, and I’m sorry that I was so slow remembering the name he would use. I almost laughed when that American voice came from his mouth,” I said. “But that is the very man, the world’s only consulting detective. I’m sure that, if anyone can, Holmes can solve the mystery of Roger’s illness.”

“I pray he can, dear John, for I have never been so worried about Roger in all our time together. The other business, about the poltergeist, is tiresome, but I have never given credence to such things as ghosts and faeries. Dear Reverend Brandon, however, thought it necessary, at the time I wrote to Mr. Holmes, to inform him of it. These past two weeks, I often retire for the night leaving Roger with one or two of the lads, although they usually only stay until Roger is resting peacefully. The lads deny any knowledge of moving things about, and I’m quite willing to dismiss it all as a matter of having so many people through the house these days. Yet it is Roger who has me more worried, as I said in my letter. His condition appears to grow worse daily. Rarely will he leave his bed, now, which is not at all like him. He has had something like these episodes before but never one so severe as this. John, he will take nothing to eat, and though he asks for water as though he is dying of thirst, he drinks little of it, and he hasn’t uttered a syllable for days.”

Thinking of what I knew of Roger Singleton, I heard her report of previous ‘episodes’ with a physician’s concern and asked her to tell me about them.

“They do follow a pattern of sorts. I have learned that, first, he will grow distant or taciturn, which are not his usual moods. Roger is almost angelic, usually. Then, his appetite will suffer, and he will remove himself from all society, as though he bears a disease he fears to spread. Then, usually, he will right himself with an effort of good will and become himself again in a matter of hours or days—before this episode, anyway. Now, he has been down for two weeks, and I begin to fear that he will suffer lasting damage, to his health and his career. Dear Reverend Brandon was due to take up residence in his retirement cottage in Devonshire last week but has stayed on out of his love and concern for Roger.”

“Have these episodes happened very often, my dear? Have you any idea what brings them on?”

“He’s had them since before we met, before you and I walked out together, John, and he has never suggested anything about them, except that they stem from his time in the Army.”

“The Army? I never knew that Roger saw military service,” I said. “Pray, tell me, did he contract a sickness of some sort, a recurring fever, perhaps?” I thought back to the Afghan Campaign, which left me wounded and recovering from enteric fever before my discharge. Many men had succumbed to that awful illness, and it weakened me for months. Any British expedition to foreign parts exposed soldiers to a myriad of diseases. I gave thought to the time frame during which Roger must have seen service and what action he might have seen. Given the fact that he was nearly ten years my senior, I asked,

“Was he part of the Abyssinian Campaign by any chance?”

“Yes, John, but that is all he has ever told me, except that it marked a turning point in his life, the time which decided him on life in the Church,” Christie replied. “It is so strange to see the difference in him, when one of his ‘fits of despair,’ as he calls them, comes over him. Always so strong and so compassionate, when a fit is on him he is helpless, lost. I suppose that is why my heart went out to him. In the end, it was these bouts with sadness and anxiety that drew me to him, for he could not cope without me, he said, and when you didn’t...”

Christie blushed and turned her face away from me, but I recognized the substance of what she did not wish to say. I was quite unprepared for her sudden mention of our past together. She had as much as declared that she had wanted, waited, for me to ask for her hand. When I did not, she turned to Roger, who needed her. Hearing the matter put like that, I stopped in my tracks and turned her towards me.

“Christie, no matter how I felt about you, I had not the means to offer you anything but a vagabond life. I had only a degree and not even the promise of work. I, I...” For a moment, I saw in the clear openness of her honest, caring eyes the idea that she would have taken such a risk, for me. For the space of a few heartbeats, I stood on the brink of a dark inner ledge, seeing more clearly what I had lost.

“But it was honorable of you to not make me wait,” she said, blushing a little at my discomfiture, taking my hand, and squeezing it between hers. “As it turned out, it was a good decision for me. I do love

Roger. His work is now my work. Even if you were the one..." she stopped and looked away, blushing. After a pause, she went on, "Even if it all began in my great need to care for him for him, I've learned that Roger is a good, good man, with a heart that is true and giving."

I nodded and smiled, saying only, "I am glad for you, my dear," though I dropped my gaze to the cobbles beneath my feet. I stood, thus, more aware of my own idiocy than I wished to be, and I told myself that my only course of action was to aid her in any way I could. Roger Singleton had married her, and I turned my energies back to what plagued him. Taking her arm again in mine, I started us walking along. Clearly, my failure to propose had hurt her, and though she had not forgotten it, she forgave me. I never intended her hurt and had only inflicted it on myself. We would go on as friends and try to forget our hurts. Christie had done so, and I resolved to do so.

We passed along amidst undergraduates rushing about on bicycles and on foot, late for lectures or rushing back to their rooms, where college "scouts" would feed them a quick evening meal before a night of study. The Trinity term had begun only recently, and students were flushed with the excitement of the coming summer break in June. Christie knew some of them and introduced me to them as a dear old friend who had come to look in on her husband's case. Most of them wished me success, for they knew and cared for Roger as they did for Christie. I looked upon those young faces with a sort of envy, remembering with fondness the pressures of a scholar's life. They lived with constant reading and study, interminable lectures, and essay crises; Roger and Christie cared for their souls during all of this, offering respite between the long bouts of lonely work. Christie and Roger were both suited to this atmosphere, charged with the energy of discovery and hope. Perhaps helping them would give me the opportunity for some change in my situation. After all, I could not make a career out of being Holmes's chronicler. As we made our way up Cormarket street, I offered what consolation I could for the hurts I had caused her: "Well, my mistake is in the past now, and we both have made our choices. I will do all that I can for Roger, and Holmes will soon set things right." I pushed my thoughts back to the case before me: "But tell me of these lads who help you with Roger's care. Do you trust them?"

“Truthfully, I do not know them well enough to place total trust in them, but Roger does. I can see that they are devoted to him, and, really, they are a great help to me, for I have undertaken a good deal of work for the parish, with Roger ill, and am often called away. Reverend Brandon is such a dear, but he is getting on in years, and when Roger needs physical help, a strong young man is invaluable.” She looked ahead, and her eyes flashed with happiness again. “Look, there’s our tower, St. Michael at the North Gate, the oldest tower in Oxford,” she said, pointing ahead. “The poor Oxford Martyrs were imprisoned in the gatehouse that once stood adjacent to it.”

“Perhaps that is the source of any ghostly goings on in the vicarage!” I said, in jest, of course.

“That would be preferable to anything I can think of,” she replied in more serious tones. “But let us hurry to my Roger. The vicarage is just a short distance away from the church, just down Ship street.”

Late in the day as it was, the ancient stone tower took on the rosy hues of the spring sunset. Its heavy presence drew the eye above the trees and the half-timbered shops that leaned towards the street. I said to my beautiful companion, “Come. Take me to Roger,” patting my medical bag, “so that I might begin my work. Has he been seen by a physician yet?”

“Yes, by Reverend Brandon’s man, Dr. Dyson, a fine fellow, but he expresses himself out of his depth in this matter. I had hopes that with your time in the Army, you might bring fresh knowledge to Roger’s case. We will need to go a block or so east of the church to get to the vicarage. It is just there,” Christie claimed, pointing ahead to gate in a short hedge where two other young men stood, looking out for her return.

“See, there are two more of Roger’s young charges, Mr. Hastings and Mr. St. John-Smythe,” she said, letting the ‘Sinjin Smythe’ roll out with ease. She had adapted well to the family names that one finds amongst the well-heeled members of the student body. As we approached, those two men rushed to meet us. Hastings, a big fellow, fifteen stone at least, took my hand in an urgent grip, which I returned with enough energy to keep him from breaking my fingers.

“Good evening, Mrs. Singleton! This is your friend, the doctor, correct?” Hasting asked, breathless. “Sir, I beg you to come with me at once. Reverend Singleton is much agitated. We’ve never seen him like this. He, he appears to be talking to people we cannot see.” His voice, cultured by the best education, was stressed by fear for his friend, and he fairly dragged me along by the arm. Christie hurried at my side, her eyes alight with fresh worry. She rushed ahead of us and opened the door, mounting the steps that ran to the second floor of the old house. On the way, I exchanged a quick greeting with Mr. St. John-Smythe as we rushed through the door and mounted the stairs, Christie leading, calling Roger’s name in her sweet voice. At the next floor landing, she halted, holding onto the banister and exclaiming “Roger, dear, what is it!”

Looking at her face, a strange sensation struck me, as though the air of the home was charged with current. It stopped me in place, and the sense that someone or something watched me in secret stole over me as I stared at Christie. Forcing my feet to move, I pressed on, thinking that something, somehow, did haunt that place, an idea I dismissed immediately as foolish.

Moving to Christie’s side, I saw the reason for the look of horror on her face. For on the second-floor landing, his back pressed to a closed door across the hall, stood Roger Singleton, stripped to the waist, barefoot, clad only in his foundational garments, face and body dripping with sweat. His broad chest heaved with each ragged breath he drew. Roger, a man taller than Holmes, looked gaunter than I remembered seeing him. He had lost much flesh since I had known him, and given Christie’s account, I reasoned that much of this had occurred in the last two weeks. His pale skin quivered as he pressed his back against the door, from behind which came the patient voice of an elderly man, crying,

“Roger! I say, Singleton, let me out, dear boy,” in aggrieved tones. At each word, Singleton flinched. He saw things, I’d warrant, which only appeared to him, making his glance swivel and dart everywhere, as though this, his own home, was strange to him, as though he, too, was aware of some ghostly presence.

Christie, her hands held out to him, approached him with caution, whispering his name and coaxing, "We all love you, Roger. Look. John Watson has come to see you, all the way from London." Yet Singleton shook his head and said "Can't keep them out! Doors won't hold!" glaring at Christie and those of us who stood behind her. When he spoke, he did so to phantasms of his own thoughts, as though his body occupied the hallway of his home and some other place and time, simultaneously. We gathered behind Christie, ready to help her calm him, but he did not see us. He saw others, perhaps even his enemies, for he flailed his arms as though to push away people who sought to get to the door.

Christie reached for his trembling shoulder, but he flinched away, as though her touch was ghostly, and he cried out, "You, you, should never lay profane hands to that which is holy! God's judgement come upon you all!" Striking out, again, with one strongarm he swept Christie off her feet, but the blow was awkward, though powerful, falling on her left arm and shoulder. She would have pitched back down the stairs, had I not caught and held her. She turned her face toward my shoulder, dissolving in tears and murmuring his name in recurring lament. Singleton did not react to striking her, and I realized that the fit that was on him was one brought on by some compelling mania. The Roger Singleton I knew would rather be set afire than raise a hand in anger to a woman.

I fought back my unreasoning fear of some haunting, for I had seen this extremity of behavior before: he saw phantasms of his own mind. His constant sweating and tremors of irritability that caused him to shudder at every sound and touch, I had seen in soldiers reliving the nightmare of some awful battlefield event. He had not lost his mind but was trapped within it, within some action that wounded him worse than bullet or bayonet, and it became his present reality in that moment. Christie had been right that I could bring something to Roger's aid. I waged my own battle with the same sort of inner demons. Roger Singleton had descended to his own inner Hell and was lost to all who loved him, but it was a Hell I knew.

Placing Christie in the corner of the hall above the stairs, I groped in my medical bag for a hypodermic needle as I said to Hastings and St. John-Smythe, "One high, one low, lads. Take him down, but for the love of God try not to harm him!"

They sprang past me, alarmed faces set afresh in the assurance of something they knew how to do, and soon had Roger Singleton in their grasp and on the floor. Hastings caught Singleton's flailing arms in his own, while St. John-Smythe pinned the man's legs to the floor. Roger struggled with what might remained to him, but he was depleted by his malady. The two rugby players soon held him still beneath their combined weight. While he struggled, I heard him mutter the words 'temple' and 'Magdala' through clenched teeth. Before he succumbed to the oblivion of the sedative, Singleton cried, "You shall not have it!"

In my thoughts, which I kept to myself, I penned a mental note: nervous prostration, neurasthenia, as some named it, brought on by trauma, which I knew, too, as the cause for my own reaction to this house, the sense that it was haunted. The battlefield phantasms with which he fought, I'd wager, Roger had first experienced in the Battle of Magdala, in Ethiopia, the most violent conflict of the Abyssinian Campaign. As to who and what he referred to in his last comment, I could not guess, but it was uttered with much emotion. The shot of morphine soon had him limp on the floor, eyes closed, though he still twitched in agitation. Christie rose from her corner and ran to him to take him up in her arms, weeping and stroking Singleton's sweaty blonde mane.

The door he guarded opened to reveal a small, elderly man with shaggy gray hair and beard, Holy Bible in hand, still: Reverend Darius Brandon, I knew. "I was reading to him, from, from the book of Hebrews. He was sleeping, though restless. I had no idea that he'd—"

"I'm Dr. John Watson. Mrs. Singleton has asked me in on this case. What was the last thing you read to him, Reverend Brandon?" I asked,

“Oh, ah!” Brandon cried, perhaps just remembering that he had colluded with Christie to bring me here, with Sherlock Holmes, of course. He glanced beyond me but seeing only the two lads already known to him, he gave me his complete attention and wisely avoided mention of Holmes’ name.

“Why, let me think, Doctor. I believe,” he murmured, opening the holy book in his hand, “it was in the last chapter of Hebrews, chapter thirteen, verse, ten, which says, ‘We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.’ Does that help you, sir? For I am completely flummoxed as to the cause of this malady.”

“Perhaps, Reverend Brandon,” I said, making mental note of the chapter and verse to tell Holmes later, “we will need to gather all the evidence of his symptoms we can. It may have no impact, but we cannot ignore anything. Hastings, St. John-Smythe, do help me get him back to his bed. Christie dear, would you be so kind as to bring us all some tea, and perhaps a brandy for the Reverend. He looks a bit shaken.”

“Oh, just tea for me, too, my dear. Here, I shall help you,” Brandon said, taking Christie’s hand and leading her back down the stairs, while we lifted Singleton’s limp form. Her anxious eyes followed our actions as long as possible. Brandon led her downstairs.

Moving and arranging Singleton was no mean feat, for he was a large and strong man, but with Hastings’ strength, we managed quite well. I noted the gentle care with which both men responded to the difficult task and told myself that, no matter what Holmes might suspect, none of us had anything to fear from these lads. If they were part of a cabal, it was a loving one. I wondered if I could have managed at all without them, and I thanked them profusely as I began my examination. They moved to either side of the bed, and I began to ply them with questions.

“How long has he been like this? Did he tell you what plagues him so?”

Hastings and St. John-Smythe exchanged an anxious glance, and the first gave a small shake of his head, as if to warn the second about something. Were they indeed hiding something? Was Holmes correct?

Holmes's doubt stood in conflict with my immediate sense that I could trust them. St. John-Smythe responded,

"This is the first time that he has risen in two weeks. He has barely said a word to us these last seven days, and he has refused all food. These past two days, sometimes he would call out to someone, and stare as though he saw them. We saw nothing. Then, he would collapse again and ask for water, as though he was dying of thirst, but he barely drank it. I wondered if his condition wasn't related in some way to diabetes, though he moves from listlessness to agitation. However, his periods of extreme melancholy seemed to argue against diabetes."

I looked at him with raised brows, for before I saw Singleton's 'fit,' I entertained thoughts along those lines. "Medical man, are you, St. John-Smythe?" I asked, searching for Singleton's pulse. I had dismissed diabetes as Singleton's condition as soon as I saw him, for I had seen many instances of so-called neurasthenia before, though no good diagnostic term existed for the condition. His agitation, I'd warrant, was due to a mental condition, one that I called 'latent war trauma.' My military colleagues labelled it 'hypochondria' or simply 'malingering.' It was seen as a failing in a man, but I numbered it among my own failings. I was curious, however, about this St. John-Smythe's medical acumen.

"Well, we, all of us who are Singleton's friends, are somewhat in the medical way. Chemists, you know, so we all know a little about medicine from the chem side, though none of us aims at being a physician, do we, Bertie?" he added, turning to his big companion.

"Pure research in virology, a rather new field," Hastings added, returning to silence. One could almost forget he was present, though he loomed over us.

"Ah, well, I have been quite busy with the application of such research discoveries," I said between beats of Singleton's pulse, "for the most part in aid to her majesty's forces."

"Afghanistan, sir?" Hastings asked, and I looked up to see eyes sparkling with intellect reminiscent of my friend, Holmes, reading the evidence of my person.

"Indeed. I was wounded, sickened, and eventually sent home two years ago."

“Maiwand, sir?” Hastings added, yet again.

Singleton’s pulse had already returned to a near normal steadiness, but mine pounded a bit faster at Hasting’s excellent guess. I quelled my own inner ghosts, unwilling to let them control my responses to this man, this situation, and replied with a non-committal “Mm, hm,” adding “good guess. Did your family lose someone there?”

“Yes, sir. My uncle, Lt. Augustus Hastings,” he replied.

“Ah, I know that name. He oversaw a troop of riflemen. Lost him in the first artillery barrage. A fine soldier, and a credit to his country and the Berkshires.” My own agitation gave rise to that first shocking loss of men, and for a second or two, I was haunted by the smell of blood, filth, and gun powder, of men screaming and dying in the gap that had once been our front line. I took a deep, steadyng breath and dismissed the unwanted memories.

Truth be told, Lt. ‘Gus’ Hastings had been a hard, hard man, not much loved by those who served under him but always willing to carry out orders from his superiors. I decided to drop the matter and return to my patient, though I hoped that Gus Hastings attitudes were not a family trait my new acquaintance shared.

“Can either of you tell me what you observed as Roger’s first symptoms in this illness?”

“He was withdrawn and frustrated, the last time he came to the pitch for practice,” St. John-Smythe replied. “Had a hard time concentrating, was skittish at noises, too. Do you remember, Hastings, how he spoke to the referee about his constant whistling?” Hastings frowned and nodded his agreement, adding only,

“The damned fool referee couldn’t seem to stop that infernal whistling at imagined infractions. It got on my nerves as well.”

“Had Roger been in any, er, altercations? Any frightening or grievous news come to him?” I asked, checking Singleton’s pupils. I noted that St. John-Smythe shot another look of concern to his mate, but it was Hastings who replied,

“No sir. We can reveal nothing of the kind.” His was a careful use of words, I noted.

“Ah, well, it is all a matter of fitting the pieces of the puzzle together, and we will do it yet, my lads. As for the present, Roger will sleep through the night as the result of the injection I gave him. Soon, genuine, restful sleep should take him. I think he will be more lucid afterwards. We should see to our tea.”

Having heard the rattle of tea pot and cups on a tray coming from the stairs, I rose and went to the door. Hastings said, “I will stay with him, sir, if I may. We—my mates and I—can’t stand to see him like this and leave him alone.”

“Very well, Mr. Hastings, but he will be well and truly out of commission until that morphine injection wears off,” I said, and followed Christie into a room at the head of the stairs, which turned out to be Reverend Brandon’s study and temporary bed-sitter, as well as something of a parish office for Christie’s use. “Do go back in and see for yourself that Roger is sleeping peacefully,” I said to her. “Then, come and talk to me more about his condition.”

I learned little more from Christie over tea, though she was glad to repeat all that she recalled as many times as I needed to hear it. The cup of tea did much to restore my own equilibrium, but Christie scarcely touched hers. Her own color had gone pale. Red rimmed eyes spoke of her tears of inner turmoil, and I encouraged her to look in on Roger as often as she liked, for it would do her good to see him resting. She came and went from the room several times, as I spoke with Reverend Brandon.

“Christine suggested that you requested her mention of ghostly activity in this matter. I am curious as to why, sir.”

“Ah, perhaps I was overzealous in my insistence that she mention it, but I was convinced, and still am, that poor Roger is in the grip of some evil for which I have no name,” he confessed. “Isn’t a poltergeist an evil spirit of sorts? Perhaps I was grasping at straws.”

“Yes, perhaps, as we are all wont to do when a loved one is laid low by some mysterious malady. Have you, Reverend, had many experiences with men who have seen terrifying combat?” I asked.

“No, no more than with ghosts, really. Do you think that Roger’s military service caused his condition?”

“I might, among medical men, be alone in my theory, but if my suppositions are correct, Roger is suffering from some event or condition that he experienced in warfare, from which he is unable to escape. I have seen it too often in the soldiers under my care. He holds some secret which eats at his mind, like a cancer. I hope to know more about it when I can speak with him in the morning. I think he will be more lucid after a prolonged sleep. As I see it, his first step back to health will be to talk about the memory that holds him prisoner.”

“Yet that will be hard for him to do, for Roger holds a great deal inside, I fear,” Brandon said with a sigh. I nodded my agreement, even as I heard Christie step to my side and lay a trembling hand on my shoulder. St. John-Smythe left the room wearing a deep frown, just as she entered. I wondered if my findings were somehow a source of concern for these two young men. Still, their actions in caring for Roger stood in contrast to the notion that their shared secret veiled some threat.

“I pray you are right, John,” Christie said, squeezing my shoulder, “and I will help you any way I can, just as I will help him bear it,” she said, her lower lip atremble.

“My dear, he will never have help or medicine better than your love and support. However, Roger might never be rid of the memory that plagues him. I am sorry that you have seen him so far gone. I assure you, he would never lay a hand on you, were he in his right mind. We must reach him, somehow, so that he can deal with his ghosts.”

Christie turned a sad, knowing smile to me, as I kissed her hand and made ready to exit. I left them in a ponderous silence in the midst of that home, most truly haunted by the specter of past violence. I promised to return in the morning, for I wished to speak with Holmes about what I had learned. As far as I was concerned, Roger’s bout with ‘latent war trauma’ was to blame for his symptoms, having no few

experiences of it on my own. The one word I heard him say, "Magdala," told me that Roger carried with him yet some of the ghosts of the Abyssinian Campaign, particularly about the assault of the fortress at the Ethiopian city of Magdala, with General Napier's forces. The verse from Hebrews might have set him off, bringing up the matter of worthiness. Clearly, his condition was a matter of some guilt he carried and the trauma of having acquired it in such a horrific battle. As far as I was concerned, that was the ghost that Holmes and I would need to exorcise if this matter was to be cleared up. How it would happen, I could not tell.

After bidding my hosts good night, I went off in search of Holmes at the pub. I found him at a table in a parlor of The Eagle and Child with three young men, Billings, Douglas and a tall, raw boned fellow whom I had yet to meet. Their noise equaled that coming from the bar area, where dons and students mingled with their pipes and pints. Holmes/Williams and company appeared to be well into several rounds of ale, and all greeted my presence at the door of the parlor with enthusiasm. In fact, I have never, before or since, heard Holmes so jovial and boisterous, but then I had never seen him consume so many pots of beer.

The fellow I had yet to meet rose to his feet and extended a calloused hand: "Worthington's my handle, sir," he drawled in a rumbling American voice. He had a shock of black hair and bushy eyebrows to accompany a mustache that would have looked at home on the face of Mr. Samuel Clemens. I wondered immediately if Holmes had been able to sustain his charade in the presence of such an iconic sort of American as this Worthington fellow. Except for his Balliol jacket and tie, Worthington looked every inch a cowboy, from his western boots, to his tanned face, and his knob-knuckled hands.

"Call me Quincy," he added, pumping my hand as Holmes had done Billings earlier in the day. "I'm right pleased to make your acquaintance, Dr. Watson!"

“Ol’ Quincy here, hails from San Antonio, Texas, Dr. Watson,” Holmes/Williams added. “Can’t say as I’ve ever been to San Antone myself, but I’m thrilled to meet a fellow countryman here, as a Balliol man, too. Why, if I get this job, we’ll get along like a house afire!”

“I guess I shoulda expected that I’d be taught by a Yankee, once I left the Lone Star state,” Worthington added, lighting a fresh cheroot, “just never thought it’d be at Balliol!”

The table roared with laughter at this, and they lifted pots of ale in a salute to my friend, before moving on with some matter of chemical research they had been discussing. I wandered out to the bar and fetched an ale, returning to add my somber presence to their frivolities. The brush with my own ‘latent war trauma’ and worries about Christine darkened my countenance as well as my mood. Holmes, ever observant, noted it and asked if all was well with the Singletons. With an emphatic shake of my head, I gave them a précis of what I had encountered there, leaving out my diagnosis. It silenced Singleton’s young friends, except for the Texan, whose mustaches bristled with anger. He shook his head, as though to dispel a hated thought.

“I’ll not stand for this,” he rumbled, slamming a heavy fist onto the table, making the ale pots jump. Worthington lacked Hasting’s great size, but his wide, rangy frame spoke of power and potential for great energy. He was equally at home in a rugby scrum as any of the others. “That fine lady should not have to bear this burden by herself,” Worthington drawled, his dark eyes scanning the faces of Billings and Douglas, as though his words carried more meaning for them. I wondered at this, trying to fathom the message he intended in his glare. Holmes looked on, too, his keen eyes reading all the faces of our young friends. Douglas and Billings looked away from the Texan in discomfort. I decided to risk a throw of the dice, as it were, adding,

“And Reverend Brandon mentioned that he brought to my attention the matter of the poltergeist for that very reason: it is a further burden on Christine Singleton, as fine a woman as I have ever known.”

“Poltergeist?” Worthington asked, sitting up straight, bristling with indignation. “What do you mean, Doctor?”

I laid before them the matter of the misplaced books and the thumping sounds in the night that had plagued her rest. “I am sure that Brandon mentioned it only because it wears on Christine’s already frayed nerves, not that she would show it.”

“How do you come to be here, Dr. Watson?” Billings cried, agitated, desiring, I thought, to steer the conversation back to safer topics. Holmes gave me a slight nod, in support of my intent. He sat back, puffing on his old briar, watching their faces.

“I came at Mrs. Singleton’s request, to lend whatever help I can. I count her as a very dear friend and will do anything in my power to see Roger Singleton well again and Christine’s home restored to order, no matter what it costs me.”

“Quite right, too, sir,” Worthington said, rising to take my hand again, “for no good woman should have to bear the cost of a man’s errors, especially not that lady.” He glared at Billings and Douglas, who would not meet his fiery glance. I had hit upon a point of contention between these young men and knew that it was wound up in the matter of the vicarage ghost and the mystery of Roger Singleton’s neurasthenia, though I could not see how. A light was in Holmes’s eyes, though. He had seen something more clearly than I had. Worthington stubbed out his cigar and jammed his rough hands into his trouser pockets, his bold features a mask of anger. Douglas shifted in his seat, and Billings stared at the table, muttering, “Hastings. He said...” Douglas nudged him, and Billings did not finish his thought.

In the silence that held us all for a long moment, I could not think of anything else to say that would not constitute a breach of the secret Holmes and I shared with Christine and Reverend Brandon. I lifted my ale to them all and said, “Gentlemen, I must retire. I must be at the Singleton’s residence when he emerges from the effects of the sedative I gave him. To your health and to Mrs. Christine Singleton. May we all be worthy, someday, of the affections of such a woman.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Worthington said, snatching up his pot of ale and draining it. Billings rose, as though to leave, as did Douglas, claiming that he must return to Jesus college. Holmes, though, reached

out towards the Texan and said, “Stay for a bit, Quincy. I hear that San Antonio is growing as a rail town, these days. I want to bend your ear about that for a minute.” Worthington stayed, though impatiently, talking with Holmes about rail travel and the cattle trade, as the other two men exited the pub. I mounted the stairs to our rooms and prepared to get what sleep I could, though it would be slow in coming.

I stretched out on the bed, considering Roger Singleton’s malady, wondering what misadventure had turned his occasional melancholia into a full nervous collapse. Surely some momentous encounter or discovery he shared with them had propelled the man back into the horrors of the battle of Magdala. That battle had been a clear victory for the British forces, though the slaughter of Ethiopians had been horror deep enough to turn any victory into a man’s lasting defeat, if he were instrumental in it. I had once heard older officers talk about the looting of the Temple in Magdala and the theft of all the treasures there. They spoke of it with shame, and my patient carried a burden of guilt. Singleton had returned from that victory with a new direction, taking up a life of service, but it had not been enough to allay his guilt-induced ‘latent war trauma,’ I reasoned.

Holmes entered my room in a rush and went to my window that faced the street, peering out from behind the curtain. “And there he goes, back to the scene of the crime. Watson, are you ready to make a more surreptitious return to St. Michael’s vicarage? I can give that ghost a list of five possible names, I think. The game is afoot, old fellow, and we must be ready to scrum with these hardy young men, if we are to release Singleton from the burden he carries. Along the way, you must tell me everything you saw or observed in Hastings’ and St. John-Smythes’ behavior.”

“Certainly, Holmes,” I replied, rising and pulling on my coat. “I spoke truly about giving my all to help Mrs. Singleton.”

“I may require more patience than bravery, old fellow, but do make sure that your revolver is at hand. And Watson, I must say that I am relieved to hear you assert your willingness to help Mrs. Roger Singleton, although it will not cost you any more than it already has in losing Mrs. Singleton’s hand. For Singleton and his friends, the tariff might well be quite high, though I begin to suspect that more is at

work here than I first thought. Yet, freedom from turmoil is worth any cost, and I'm glad that we will have Quincy Worthington on our side, no matter the cost he must pay. Americans like him, though seeming uncouth to us, are motivated by honor in a way that many British gentlemen seem to have devalued, in the current age."

Having learned that Holmes would not speculate more until he had carried out his investigation, I had to content myself with trying patience, though I would have preferred to face whatever difficulty awaited us, as I intuited that Worthington meant to do. I saw nothing more to do than face whatever came my way, for such had become my lot since I became an associate of Sherlock Holmes.

Having crept through the back gate into the Singleton's garden, Holmes used his penknife to open the french doors. That put us in the dining area and sitting room, with the dark kitchen away to our left. Even as we made our way with stealth around the table and chairs, I could hear rustling and dull thumps coming from the room beyond us, the parlor that faced the street. The ghost stirred again, I thought, which raised the hair on the back of my neck. My efforts to explain the ghost in rational ways did nothing to keep the fear of the unknown from weakening my knees. Brandon's suggestion of a poltergeist haunting this simple, old house caused me to hold my breath. Nevertheless, I pushed on, ahead of Holmes, toward the central hallway that would give me a clear view of the parlor and its occupant. Light from the street shone through the mullioned bow windows. I saw no one, but I heard soft thumps from the darker corner of the room, which I could not see from my vantage point. I froze.

Holmes placed a hand on my shoulder and went to the parlor door, dropped to the floor, creeping on his stomach, to peer into the room. Even in a state of fear, I could see the intelligence of his low approach, since the parlor furniture along the inner wall would hide him and let him scan the room, without revealing himself to anyone there. Clearly, Holmes did not think to find a ghost in the parlor, though I could not shake my fear of the supernatural with such ease. Another thump on the wall and I

stifled an irrational groan of fear. I reached for the revolver in my pocket, for, according to my friend Holmes, that noise came from no incorporeal spirit. The Webley's wooden grips brought me a soldier's one comfort. The thumping noise moved on down the wall, away from me. It began to sound more like someone searching for something on the parlor's bookshelves. My heart leapt into my throat when the knob rattled on the home's front door. Holmes slid back across the floor to hide with me in the dark corner of the sitting room. Our 'ghost' ran on heavy feet to the front door. It was Hastings, much to my relief, though I should not have been surprised.

Hastings unlocked the door with little noise, and Worthington stood bristling with anger on the front step. Hastings pushed by him, taking the Texan by the arm and leading him down into the front garden, where the hedges hid them from the sight of any who might chance to be out at midnight.

Holmes and I crept into the parlor and eased opened one of the mullioned windows without so much as a groaning floorboard. From within, above the heads of the two men in the garden, we could hear their whispers.

"Are you insane, Worthington? Coming here at this time of night and rattling the doorknob could awaken the entire house!" Hastings said in an angry hiss.

"I don't give a damn about it all anymore, Bert," Worthington replied. "As far as I'm concerned, we've got to give up this business at once. I was against it from the start, and now that Roger has taken such a hard turn and Christine is so upset by it, I say we call a halt to this. Let him do his worst. It's nothing more than we deserve."

Holmes favored me with his raised eyebrows. Another party was behind the actions of these young men. I wondered if it could be that mysterious person to whom Singleton made his last remark earlier. Was Singleton keeping something from someone, from the five Rugby players?

"I dare say it is, Quincy, but think of the damage his knowledge will do to both Roger and Christine if we do not find it and spirit it away. You stand to lose as much or more than the rest of us, you know, but this could well end Roger's career. That damnable villain has the ear of one of the

University Proctors, and that Proctor's mere suspicions, once reported to Jowett, would have us all sent down."

"And what does all that matter, compared to the wrong we're doing—or have done?"

Worthington demanded, taking Hastings by the lapels of his coat. "We. Must. End. This. Tomorrow," the Texan growled. Worthington likely gave up some weight to Hastings, the bigger of the two, yet the Texan's strength and ferocity would make him a match for any man. I feared that they would come to blows over the matter, from what I could see of their faces. A fistfight in the garden would rouse the house and the neighbors, as well. Holmes stole back from the window, ready to make an escape back the way we had come.

When no sounds of a struggle ensued, we stole back to the window, where we heard Hastings say, "One more day, Quincy, and I feel sure I will find it. We must protect Roger from the harm that will come to him, though it cost us our careers. He cannot give it up himself. You know that, or else he would have listened to reason two weeks ago when we knew that villain had us in his grasp. Now, let me get on with my search, man. Give me just another day. I've managed to search just about the whole house. I'm sure to find it soon."

"Not an hour longer, Bert," Worthington replied, "for if Roger could see what is happening to his wife, he would blow the lid off this whole business, consequences be damned. That Doctor Watson fellow will return in the morning, and I hope to God Almighty that he gets the truth out of Singleton. I stand ready to deal with Wild, if need be." I could see Worthington clearly by the gas lamp as he drew from under his coat a long, heavy knife, one of a type associated with a legendary Texan, Colonel James Bowie. "I swear to you that I will kill that damnable villain with my own hands, though I swing for it." Sliding his knife away, Worthington turned and left. Holmes and I fled back to the sitting room.

When Hastings stood again in the doorway, his strained expression and shaking hands showed the effect of the murderous declaration Quincy Worthington had just made. Hastings shook his head and

stalked back into the parlor, where, under the cover of his furtive searching, Holmes and I stole out through the back garden and into the night.

On our walk back to our rooms, I shared with Holmes my knowledge and my suspicions, though I had no idea what sort of object Singleton had hidden or where it might be.

“Where that object is hidden should be obvious, though what it is remains to be seen. I might hazard a guess, but you know that such is not my method. However, someone named ‘Wild’ is our man, and we must ascertain what ‘it’ is that Singleton keeps hidden, Watson,” Holmes whispered to me in the back garden. “This business of the haunting is cleared up, but I think that something simpler and more human is at work: this Wild person works some sort of extortion. Come. We must not be noticed here if Hastings carries his search for this ‘thing’ in the sitting room.”

When we again entered my room above the now quiet pub, I asked Holmes what he thought of Singleton’s young friends now. We both had revised our opinions of Hastings and his friends, and my own estimation of Quincy Worthington was at its highest, though I grew more fearful of the violence that he might commit. I knew a fear, too, for someone named ‘Wild,’ who stood in imminent danger from Worthington.

“This ‘Wild’ villain wields some power over them. And you are right that he is in more danger than he realizes. This is a more sinister case than I thought at first, though I’m glad that we have removed the ghostly matter from our concern. Extortion can be dealt with logically by gathering clear facts. The occult cannot. Whatever happens, we must try to forestall Worthington’s murder of this man, though ‘Wild’ might well deserve it, whoever he is. Watson, what do you make of Singleton’s condition now?”

I told Holmes what I suspected of Singleton’s illness as a manifestation of the neurasthenia that often effects men who have seen the gravest of combats. “I feel sure that he was at the battle of Magdala, Holmes, although I can see no evidence of his having been wounded in his body. But Holmes, he is wounded, I would say, in his soul, in his heart, and I have no idea how. Could this thing he hides be the

source of his illness? I do know that it led him into the clergy. He was ranting about people desecrating the temple earlier. Surely, he vowed after that battle to give his life over to the keeper of the temple.”

“As I recall, old fellow, there were quite a few religious artifacts looted from Magdala, and I know that England will never be on peaceful terms with Ethiopia again, as long as those relics are held back by those who took them. I should think that such is what Hastings and the others search for in secrecy. You must see, of course, that Roger Singleton is still in possession of such a thing, implying his guilt as that which changed his life. After all, what were his words in that delusional state? ‘We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.’ If, as Hastings said, Roger Singleton ‘cannot’ give up the thing for which his friends conduct their ghostly visitations, then we must rid him of it. Clearly, that text from Hebrews was a catalyst of sorts for his delusion, taking him back to the looting of the temple at Magdala, in which he took part. I must say that it seems obvious where Roger keeps this treasure, given your description of his actions, or lack of same, rather. But in any event, we must do something to release Singleton from the guilt that has crippled him and these young men from the hand that holds them in its power.”

“I am in complete agreement, but how do we carry this all out?”

“Though the hour is late, I must waken a friend or two with a telegram. This will be a matter of some delicacy, for these young friends of Singleton are all students engaged in important chemical research, I have learned. If the ‘Wild’ fellow is connected to the university in some way, which I suspect, since Hastings claims that he has the ear of the Proctor, we must appeal to the university Vice Chancellor, who will wish this matter kept out of the hands of the authorities.

“And I must apologize, Watson, for, now, I must carry on my investigation in a more restricted and secretive manner that I cannot share with you at this time. I will, however, need a favor from you.”

“You have only to ask,” I said, my interests piqued. When Holmes asked for a favor without naming it first, there was usually some adventure about to transpire, and in my eagerness to do something more meaningful for Christie and Roger than just identify his malady, I agreed.

“Then wait for me here. I will be back within the hour, I trust.” And with that, he left.

I fretted for that hour, my mind in a fever of doubt, about ghosts, about these young men I had met, and about Christie. My concern for Roger only served to remind me that I could look for no favor from her more than thanks, but that would need to do.

When Holmes did return, I saw that he had been running for much of the time he was gone. There was a light of discovery in his eyes that electrified me, and I sprang up to do his bidding. He handed me a hastily scribbled note.

“I need you to go to this college and see the porter there. He will be reluctant to admit you, but you may say that ‘Siggy’ sent you ‘upon an errand of familial mercy.’ Stress that, Watson, ‘familial mercy.’”

I nodded my head and repeated the odd name and the phrase. “When,” Holmes went on, “he lets you in, go to the first building on your right, ascend the stairs and knock at the door of room 314. You will be answered immediately, for our young friends have been forced to tell this man that a new doctor has been in to see Singleton. The man in 314 will ask your business. Then, please read what is on this card. He will ask what you want, and you are to read the last sentence.”

I read over it and made sure that I could pronounce everything as Holmes wished, though I could make neither heads nor tails of it.

“Now, Watson, this man, is dangerous, but if he allows you to see him, please do your best to remember every fundamental feature of his face, width between his eyes, the set of his mouth, and the shape of his nostrils, even the contour of his outer ears. He will, I think, take similar stock of you. But after he gives you what you ask for, leave and come here and speak to no one. I will meet you here, briefly. Then, you should take what rest you can.”

Donning my coat and hat, I set off with him. Holmes left me before I approached the Porter’s alcove, though my lack of familiarity with Oxford made me unsure which college it was. I surmised,

though, that all the students and resident tutors and dons entered there and passed by the Porter's scrupulous gaze.

He rose upon my first knock and met me at the door in his trousers and undershirt. The width of the man's shoulders spoke of his ability to deal with rowdies of any stripe. Crossing arms across his deep chest, he stared down at me with the disdain that college porters cultivate to keep their young men in line. I repeated the request that Holmes gave me and stood back in awe at the change it wrought upon the man. At the name 'Siggy,' this fierce protector of Britain's youth let his icy countenance thaw to the degree that one manly tear rolled down his weathered cheek, and he bade me enter and be at liberty—so long as I did not disturb the quiet to this late hour. "And, please, sir, give my regards to that splendid young fellow who restored my family's honor."

Assuring him that I would, I wondered as I climbed the dim stairs, if Holmes was, somehow, identical with this 'Siggy,' but my knowledge of his past was as dim as my awareness of his present associates, with whom he could hold converse in the middle of the night.

The response I received from 314 was equally shocking in a singular way, and the room within lay in total darkness.

"What is it, and who, pray tell, are you?" a cultured voice asked. The very tone of the voice held menace, though I was at a loss to say how. I detected something of a continental accent from the speaker. However, I had never heard his voice before, as far as I knew, but I sensed that he hated me. Perhaps it was some scent that came around the edge of the door, for my nose told me that chemical experimentation went on in that room. It put me in mind of Holmes's frequently acrid mixtures. I stepped back from the door in alarm. There, the meager light could shine on the card Holmes gave me, but I also revealed more of my features to the man, though I saw nothing of his.

I lifted my card and read,

"Your financial endeavors here, have been brought to the attention of the Burnett Money-Coutts solicitors. Our knowledge has alerted that decent banking family to your hold over one of their less

trustworthy members. Your connection with the Royal Bank is over. The consortium that provides your capital will be dissolved by mid-morning, and the Secretary of the Home Office will seek to prosecute you, Bartlett Coutts, your associate in crime, and any others in league with you, once they hold sufficient evidence of your activities. You must desist, leave this college, and give up your attempts to manipulate the research of the students you have targeted. The artifact with which you blackmail Singleton will be handed over to responsible parties.”

Silence held the moment, broken only by a low, hissing laugh from the occupant of room 314. It was as vile a sound as I thought a man could make without raising his voice. And when he did speak, there was naked hatred in his words.

“You did not solve this puzzle,” he hissed, and I caught a furtive movement near the door. The muzzle of a revolver came from the darkness within, aimed at a point between my eyes. I froze on the spot, hoping that Holmes was nearby.

“I did not, sir,” I murmured. Beads of sweat had formed on my forehead and rolled down the side of my face. “I have been given this message to relate, and I do not even pretend to understand its contents. I assure you—”

“You, an overstuffed, sentimental physician, assure me?” The voice asked. The clacking of the revolver’s hammer almost made me jump, but at the same time, I grew angry enough that I thought I might push the door into that man’s face, even at the risk of being shot and killed. His rebuke was spoken in confidence and certainty. Nothing on my person revealed that I was a doctor, I thought, and it occurred to me that this man possessed something of the same observational skill as Holmes himself. I would not show my surprise any more than give in to the threat.

“Singleton’s artifact,” I said through gritted teeth. The barrel of the weapon extended another inch, but I would not move, though I was on the point of hurling myself at the door. “Where. Is. It.”

“Ha!” came his one bark of cruel laughter. “Beneath him, of course, where he rests in his broken, insipid faith.” The weapon did not waver. “I know now your face, buffoon, and I shall see you bleed, after I have ruined all that you love.” The door slammed shut.

“Wild was more desperate than I thought he would be,” Holmes said, “though his manner is more than enough proof of his guilt. I am sorry, Watson, that my gambit endangered you.”

“Gambit? You did not know he was guilty?” I replied.

“Logically, yes. What I gleaned from my evening with Worthington and his friends told me that I was right, in addition to what I learned from the return telegram from my...associates. The puzzle pieces were there, but you made them fit. I should have been the one to confront him, but I knew that I would not have gotten past the porter in a timely way.”

“So, you are—or were—Siggy,” I stated, “for that porter holds the name in reverence.”

“A mere trifle, Watson,” Holmes replied in a distant voice. “I will not bore you with the details.” Though I would not have found them boring, I could not quite stifle the yawn that came over me. It must have been approaching 4:00am, and my need for rest was pronounced, especially after the encounter I had with Wild. Holmes went on as if he never slept.

“Please, do go to Singleton and tend him before breakfast. I will meet you there by midday, but I must also seek the aid of Reverend Brandon, first thing, for I believe that he will have a better working relationship with that worthy, Benjamin Jowett, a remarkable clergyman himself, and now Vice Chancellor of Oxford. I must smoke on it a while.”

He left my room to give himself over to contemplation, leaving my understanding far from complete. However, having followed him in a few cases already, I knew that his plans, however secretive, were trustworthy. I began to have faith that he saw farther, more clearly, than other men. Still, sleep did not come easily to me, left alone with my thoughts so soon after seeing Christie again, and

knowing more about what I had missed in failing to win her hand. My brief interview with Wild had thrown me, as well, onto the shoals of my own 'latent war trauma.'

When I closed my eyes, all I saw was the muzzle of Wild's revolver, with flashes of all the other weapons of war that have threatened me. I recognized that the ghost I brought with me to Singleton's house haunted me still and was made more present, perhaps, by fresh knowledge of all that I had lost when Christie accepted Singleton's proposal. However, even in the muddle of my own thoughts, I recognized that if we identified that Singleton held a stolen sacred artifact in his possession, I hoped that we could remove it in some way that would not damage his chances for staying in the Church. That much, at least, I could give to her whom I had once hoped to call mine. But how could such a result be contrived?

Eventually, I dozed in a chair and woke at the sounds of the first traffic on St. Giles street and the early deliveries to the pub. Holmes was gone, I soon found, and all I could do was to go tend my patient and await, with a mix of anticipation and dread, Singleton's fate, as well as that of his young friends who rallied round his cause.

Roger was wakeful when I returned. Though still in bed, he sat up, and looked stronger, rested. Christine at his side, watched and listened as I tended to her husband and sought to engage him in some light banter about the years since our last meeting. His color and mood were much better, and he showed every sign of returning strength, though he explained that he was yet too weak to rise.

"Really, John, I am somewhat chastened to see you here, since the last time I heard of you was on my wedding day. I know why you did not come to the wedding, of course."

"My own weakness, Roger," I said. "I had been beaten by a better man, but that is something I wish I had dealt with more honorably." Roger smiled at that but shook his head, denying my compliment.

“You were at Maiwand, I heard,” Roger said in quiet tones, placing one of his large hands atop mine as I sat at his bedside. “I am glad to see you whole.”

“And I am glad to be here, whole, old fellow, for even in victories, harrowing combat and the chaos that ensues in its wake, can break a man in ways no doctor can treat.”

“You, you mean my malingering, of course,” he muttered, looking away from me. “I...I’m ashamed that I have fallen apart and called you away from your life in London.”

I had heard officers and physicians refer to cases like his as a matter of weakness of temperament, and I would not stand for it, though the whole medical community might stand against me. “There is no shame to it, and as for those men who could look upon your condition and call it malingering, I can only say that if they have fared better than you—or me—after such combat stress, that something essential is missing from their natural constitutions. You are no malingeringer, Roger. I know this because of your actions and the excellent company you keep. All that they have sought to do on your behalf, they do because they love you.”

St. John-Smythe stood in the room off to one side with Billings, and the two men shared a nervous glance at my implication.

“Do you think, John, that my Roger will be able to continue his work, soon?” Christie asked. “Is there a chance of healing for him?”

“There is, and it will come soon, I think and hope, with the return of my friend, Mr. Williams. You say was he here, earlier?”

“Just before first light,” Christie replied. “I heard his knock, for I was up putting—tidying the parlor quite early.” Still, she would not worry her husband with further talk of a ghost on the premises. “He and Reverend Brandon left as soon as the old fellow could get his trousers on, and they were in a desperate hurry.”

“I hope that it wasn’t on my account that Darius was out so early. I worry about how my, er, illness, has plagued him,” Roger murmured.

“Knowing my friend as I do, it was on a matter of truth that my friend begged the old man’s help, and as you preacher fellows are fond of saying from the pulpit, the truth shall make you free.”

“Sometimes, though, the truth can be a prison from which there is no release,” Roger sighed, as his eyes brimmed with tears.

“Not this day,” I replied, “and I order you, as your physician, to have a good breakfast, whether you wish to eat or not, Reverend Roger Singleton. I know that I could do with one, and I will sit here and eat mine, while I see you eat yours,” I said, as I rose to help the young woman who saw to their meals bring in the breakfast tray.

Christine afforded me the chance to try and address the matter of ‘Magdala’ to Roger when she bade Billings and St. John-Smythe to take some breakfast in the kitchen, while her husband took his. They obliged, casting what I thought were doubtful looks at me. I decided to reward their obvious distrust of my intent and press any advantage I could to get Singleton to open up. Seeing him get most of his breakfast down told me that Singleton had the strength of constitution necessary for whatever ordeal lay ahead of him. As he sipped his tea, I put it to him, man to man:

“Roger, I saw you yesterday in the throes of a condition that has plagued you too long. I saw you strike your wife in your addled state.” A look of horror came over him, and tears rolled down his face as he stared at Christine.

“You didn’t know me, Roger,” Christie explained, reaching out to caress Roger’s stricken face. “When your friends...subdued you, John gave you a sedative, and you slept. Now that you feel a little better, why not share with us the burden you carry. We would gladly help you bear it.”

“I, myself, still deal with fits of guilt that I did not give my life as so many lads did at Maiwand,” I confessed, hoping to lead him by my example. “I still struggle with the question, ‘why did I live, and why did they die?’ to this very day. I take some refuge in the notion that it was mere chance that spared me, and a faithful aide who sought me out amongst the wounded. It was all, in short, out of my control. Surely your situation was not so different.”

“Ah, but it is, my friend,” Roger said through his tears. “The secret I bear is of a sickness in my soul that I carry with me every waking moment, only to find it threatening me in my dreams. And now, my young friends and I have fallen afoul of a man who threatens us all with exposure. When I confronted the man who sought to manipulate my good young friends, I thought I could bear the pain of the world finding out my secret, though how that evil man gained his knowledge of our secrets is beyond me. Yet I cannot. I have not the strength of mind or will to expose my sin to the world and see it used to ruin others, especially you, my dear heart,” he cried, clutching Christie’s hands in his.

“You love her still, John,” Singleton pleaded with me, his eyes starting from his head as though he saw ruin coming into the room. “Won’t you take her away? Would you not spare her the horror of my final fall?”

“She would not go,” I answered, for Christie clung to him in an embrace that no man could break, even though she was lost in her own grief at seeing him driven to such a recommendation. The air of the room grew thick with tension. I knew that his request that I take her away was born of desperation, yet my own ghosts whispered to take that chance, correct the past, claim what was mine to take. But it was not mine. Christie clung to Roger, and he held onto her, as well, as though the idea of sending her away was something that would kill him. I dismissed my brief hope as despicable, at worst, foolish at best. Were they forced apart, it would ruin both of them, for they were bound, clearly, by a higher power than my love for Christie or her long ago feelings for me.

“And she need not go away,” Holmes’s voice came from the doorway. Holmes gave over his American accent. Calm and reasonable, Holmes added, “I have taken steps, good sir, madame, that will free you from your burden, but first, I must remove the source of the problem.” Before I could ask what he meant by that, Holmes lunged past me to the edge of the bed. With one hand, he lifted the mattress, nearly turning the couple onto the floor. With the other hand, he reached under where Singleton rested and withdrew an object. The process took no more than two seconds and with a six-inch square object

wrapped in dark canvas in his hands, Holmes said, "There! This, I think, is the very thorn in your flesh, sir."

Singleton cried, "No! It is proof! Proof rather than faith!" and lunged toward Holmes, who turned away from the man and thrust the odd tablet-shape inside his coat, holding it there and moving farther from Singleton's grasp. Singleton fell across the bed, and I moved in to help Christie hold her husband down, and it took our combined strength to do so. Holmes hid Singleton's physical object that he had seen as a prop for his doubts in faith. As Roger had said, the tablet was proof, tangible, concrete evidence of some central pillar of his belief. What it was, I did not dare to guess, but I knew that Singleton had come by it through violence, the desecration of a holy place by soldiers, of which he was one. And worse, he hid it, kept it secret, cherishing his proof while admonishing others to believe through faith alone. And then, when the truth stood ready to be made known by this blackmailer, the poor man's world fell apart.

Though Singleton was exposed, to his credit, he did not strike out at Holmes or anyone. The truth that Holmes had uncovered had freed him and for that I was thankful. Christie had, indeed, chosen the better man, one whose darkest secret was his dependency on actual proof of that which is mystical, faith. .

In seconds, he gave up his struggle and collapsed on the bed, given over to the grief of his secret exposed. He would have to struggle like the rest of us with faith. I could see nothing about the article itself that would mark it as sufficient in itself for Singleton's reaction. Yet Singleton wept and held Christie in his arms, crying, "I'm sorry," over and over. "My faith is weak and I thought, if I had a sign, some proof that God..."

"But Roger," Christie cried, "your faith is strong, and it is because of your faith, faith that comes from your heart, that people love you. Let it go, my love, and cling just to me and to God. Never fear the truth or doubt my love for you."

The noise of heavy footfalls and exclamations from worried young men came to me as Hastings, Billings, St. John-Smythe, Douglas, and Worthington pounded towards the room, two of them still

chewing their breakfasts. They crowded around the door, stricken faces peering at the grievous scene.

Hastings bellowed, "What have you done?"

"I have purchased your friend's freedom," Holmes replied, turning to face them.

"About damned time!" Worthington cried from the rear of the group. And Douglas echoed him with a "Hear, hear!" Holmes moved to the door and removed the object from his coat. Pulling away the layers of what appeared to my eyes as tent canvas, Holmes bore in his hand a tablet of sorts, made of ancient wood. One surface, smooth and enameled, was decorated with ornate script in an alphabet I could not identify.

"It rested in the only place that was not searched," Holmes murmured as if to himself. "And Wild knew of its presence there, even without sight of it, as surely as I did. Extraordinary."

"If you gentlemen would do me the honor of adjourning to the sitting room downstairs," Holmes announced, "I will reveal the matter of your freedom, as well." He covered the artifact once again. "We should leave this couple in what peace can be found in this moment."

Dutifully, the stalwart companions of Roger Singleton walked down the stairs, subdued. Before I left the room, I looked back to the couple. Christie held her husband's head to her breast and let him weep over the doubt that had tempted him and made him grasp at something concrete upon which to anchor his faith. He needed no more than what he held in his strong arms, though they shook with grief and sorrow. I looked at Christie, pouring her love and devotion onto this good, erring man, and my own battle scars ached. Had I not gone into the Army I would have had her love.

She turned her eyes to me and smiled through her own tears, and she reached one hand towards me and my own ghosts grew still. I took those fingers in mine, bent over them, and kissed them.

"Goodbye," I whispered, and she nodded and whispered back, "Thank you, my love." That was the last time I saw Christine Singleton, née Moore, and I can confess that my love for her, then, was as strong as it has ever been, though the distance between us had grown immeasurable.

Holmes bade his audience to take seats about the sitting room, and Quincy Worthington, with a wry smile, looked at Holmes, saying, "You ain't from Cincinnati at all."

"No, my name is Sherlock Holmes. I am a consulting detective, whom Mrs. Singleton called upon to solve the mystery of her husband's condition and the presence of a ghost in her home. Yet, the matter of the ghost, I knew, would be resolved when I ferreted out the reason that five rugby players, who were also sterling young chemists, should place themselves at the constant aid of their good friend and mentor, Roger Singleton."

"But you still don't see that we are all in the grip of something—" Hastings started, though Holmes stopped him with a raised hand.

"A confession is not needed, my young friend, for I can enumerate the details of the matters that your enemy held over you. I assume his primary desire was to gain a measure of control over your chemical studies. I must assume that this fellow, whom certain parties have asked me not to name, had some sort of speculations which were to be aided by stopping or slowing your research. And he did so by gaining possession of certain secrets concerning you gentlemen. They are, without getting into particulars, two cases of academic fraud, one case of gambling indebtedness, and one case of criminal trespass. There is only one case I have not been able to clarify," Holmes explained, and Hastings, St. John-Smythe, Douglas, and Billings dropped their gazes to the floor.

"That would be my case," Worthington said, fixing Holmes with his hard stare, "For you failed to mention attempted murder, for which I am still wanted in Texas."

"Ah, and I would suggest that it was in defense of a woman, a former fiancé, I think," Holmes replied.

"Yes, sir," Worthington replied, "And I would do it again, too. He won her hand but not the right to abuse her, and I beat him like the dog he is. That's why my father sent me as far away as he could. I just don't know how, Wild, that evil son of a—"

“His name is assuredly an alias, so you may forget that you ever heard it. And, I am glad, my Western friend, that you were not allowed to practice any frontier justice,” Holmes replied. He held up both hands to prevent any further confession, but one hand opened towards the Texan, and Holmes added, “I am asked to disarm you, sir. Will you comply?”

Quincy Worthington gave Holmes a devilish smile and removed the enormous Bowie knife from his jacket. “Take good care not to cut yourself with it, pard.”

“I ask only that you visit me at 221B, Baker Street after your time at Oxford is over. I would value extending the acquaintance of a man who recognizes the demands of both honor and justice,” Holmes said, earning a nod from Quincy Worthington.

“Further,” Holmes added, turning to the other young men, “I wish you all to know that your secrets will go to the grave with me, and that satisfies one condition I agreed to meet in resolving this matter with the help of someone who has the ultimate say, for Oxford, at least. I, for one, am willing to let it remain Oxford’s matter.”

At that moment, a voice came from the recesses of the kitchen. Its owner said in cultured tones, clear and precise,

“I would certainly prefer to keep the un-named man out of this matter, for he has left this school under a cloud of suspicion, and if I can, I will make sure that he does not return to any college in this land.” The speaker emerged from the kitchen doorway, with Reverend Darius Brandon at his side.

“Gentlemen, Reverend Brandon you know, and with him is Vice Chancellor Benjamin Jowett,” Holmes said. I watched those five young faces turn pale, as though this small, white-headed person was Judgement Day personified. They would not lift their eyes to meet the steady, paternal gaze that beheld them all, but as he passed among them, Jowett placed his hands upon their bowed shoulders and heads.

“Rest easy, lads, rest easy. Please, do go on, Mr. Holmes. You are doing splendidly.”

Holmes nodded to Jowett and said, “It became clear to me that you young gentlemen were equally joined in important research on virology, and as I spoke with Billings and Douglas, later

Worthington, too, I began to see that you had kept the research from developing at a certain point. As a chemist myself, I knew that once a body of scholars like yourselves begins to forge new ideas, nothing is likely to keep you from making headway, except for personal threat, which was made worse after you confessed the matter to Singleton. Something, or someone, had induced you to delay your work, which Professor Pasteur is doing even now. When Singleton confronted this extortionist, that man, through some devilishly clever means, succeeded in catching Singleton in his trap. All I needed to do was find the common elements that bound you five fellows together, and that man has been identified, by the Vice Chancellor, who has complete records of your involvement with this university at his beck and call. I took it upon myself to seek information about that man's banking connections as well as your pasts from other discrete sources I have. These men follow careers such as yours and have ways of finding out things that were hidden from common knowledge. Gentlemen, they will remain hidden, and I beg you to return to your work with renewed energy."

"I would second that motion," Jowett said, "for your youthful indiscretions have more than been corrected by your sterling work here, not least, in my eyes, your efforts to keep the secret of your mentor, a worthier man than I knew, it seems, with whom I must have a word in private now. In the meantime, my lads, I proclaim a year of the Lord's favor! Let the prisoners be released." And at that point, Holmes removed the tablet from beneath his coat and handed it to Jowett as he passed on his way to the door.

"For your safe-keeping and my client's health, I beg you to make this disappear."

Jowett smiled and nodded at Holmes, turning his eyes to the writing on the tablet. He perused it for a second and nodded, offering, "Any man for whom faith is primary would have been tempted by this artifact. Shall I tell you why?"

"Thank you, but no, Vice Chancellor," Holmes replied, "as long as you can use it to bring peace to that poor fellow upstairs. The less I know of his secret burden, the better I shall put this case behind me, for that is in keeping with our agreement, correct?"

Jowett smiled and passed the ancient piece of wood to Brandon, who placed it within a satchel at his side. They left the room, taking the stairs that led to Roger Singleton's bedside. Hastings stood and faced Holmes, and me, with a worried look upon his face. "Mr. Holmes, that man we are not to mention. You must never doubt that he is evil. Wherever he goes, he will take his corruption with him. You have attested to his unlikely abilities to acquire and control information and are correct in your description of how he learned to control us. When we confessed it all to Roger and told him about what was happening, Roger confronted him. We never dreamed that the villain would find some leverage against him, too. Isn't there something yet that we can do to help him?"

"You can go on being his friend," I said, earning Holmes's nod of approval, "and be the best chemist you know how to be."

"After a time," Holmes added, "you should make sure to get him back onto the rugby pitch. Roger still carries the source of his burden, as do all old soldiers," he said, turning his glance to me. "As to the artifact, I would ask, what artifact?"

Hastings gave us a smile, as did his friends, and they filed out of the house ahead of us. Holmes did not delay in leaving the Singleton's home, though he did stand me to a pint at the Bird and Baby before we left Oxford by the noon train.

"Watson, your help has been greater in this matter than I can express. I cannot help but conclude that this case of the vicarage ghost is your great victory."

"Nonsense, Holmes. This was no victory for me," I said.

"Poor old Watson, always leading with your heart," he said with a sad smile.

"I lack your detachment," I said.

"More a matter of what is missing in me, old friend."

"How ever did you get Jowett to hear you out and side with you?" I asked, to steer the discussion into safer waters, away from my own ghosts.

“Jowett’s powerful intellect and ambitions for this university might well make him a figure of fear for undergraduates, yet he is a caring and deeply moral man. Plus, I called upon a sometime ally of his, Prime Minister Gladstone, with who I have a connection that shall remain hidden, like those young men’s misdeeds.”

“Hmpf. I dare say you may keep your secrets for a time, but surely, if nothing else, Singleton’s need to rely on some quality of that tablet to shore up his faith shows us that all secrets will come out, in time. Still, I would give much to know what was on that tablet that Singleton thought he needed.”

“I do not care to know, myself,” Holmes replied, “though it isn’t likely, I think, that Roger Singleton knows, either. Remember the accounts in the news at the time about that tablet’s source? It came from something that resembles the Ark of the Covenant. The Ethiopians set great store by this Ark, you know, featuring it in a procession around their temple every Epiphany. So these ‘tabot,’ as Ethiopians refer to both the ark itself and the tablet artifacts it contains, are held by them as the holiest of holies. When the looting of that temple commenced, I suppose Singleton’s doubts outweighed his horror at the action of his comrades. Perhaps it was just a matter of his need to grasp something holy and preserve it. Poor devil. I hope he can stumble on without it, as the rest of us must. That is one secret I hope never comes out.”

“Holmes, do you mean that I should refrain from adding this case to my accounts of your work?”

“Indeed, Watson, I count on your discretion in this matter, as much as I count on the actions of the Vice Chancellor to guide the future of Singleton’s young friends.”

“All the same, I will write it down, for posterity,” I said.

“Very well, Watson, but you will do me the courtesy of not letting this story go before the public eye until after I am in my grave. We must count on Jowett’s discretion to take good care of a clergyman who takes such concerns for his undergraduates. My one regret is that I did not have the occasion to meet this tutor, Jonathan Wild, as he called himself. His actions were quite bold. He is a cunning man, and I should not be surprised if we have dealings with him in the future.”

“I hope he has retired from his criminal endeavors, having learned his lesson, but I suppose that I must remain grateful that Quincy Worthington did not send him on to a higher judge!”

“Indeed, Watson. Wild, or whoever he really is, is a fortunate fellow. No matter. We have a train to catch!”

So, Prime Minister, that is the original story as I penned it later in 1882. Holmes, of course, had applied to his brother as well as you, sir, for information on the past misdeeds of those young men, for I know that his records contain many matters of the most notable families in Britain. Holmes declared openly at the time that he contacted you in seeking Jowett’s aid. I thank you formally, now, for those actions.

Having drafted the story, I saw that its lack of clear resolution would not make it one in keeping with Holmes’ other, more stellar accomplishments, though it meant a great deal to me. Yet, its details stayed long in my memory, and when you asked for Holmes’s records to be made complete, I was only too glad to return to it and try to clear up one or two of its remaining mysteries.

We knew the name ‘Wild’ but nothing more on evidence of Worthington’s overheard statements. However, again, thanks to your influence, I secured an interview with that noble man, Benjamin Jowett. His health is now in decline, I am sorry to say, though he was glad enough to see me that he readily answered all my queries, except for the matter of the contents of the text written on the stolen ‘tabot,’ by which Singleton set such great store. Of the Singleton’s, he told me that Roger and Christie remain at St. Michael of the North Gate, and that they have three healthy children.

Of those young chemists, he described their dedication and success in the most glowing terms, though their studies in virology, they abandoned, to go on to other fields, where they excelled and won honor to their names. Only one has not pursued a career in pure research, that being Quincy Worthington, who returned to the United States and became a clergyman of some note.

As we soon learned after the fact, Jonathan Wild was an earlier alias of Professor James Moriarty, whose bones now rest at the bottom of the Reichenbach Falls, along with those of our beloved Sherlock Holmes. Jowett revealed to me that all of Wild's credentials were falsified but done with great skill and subterfuge. Wild never returned to Oxford during Jowett's tenure there.

Now, though, I contemplate the odd realization that had we let Worthington carry out his threat to cut Wild-Moriarty's throat, many evils would have been prevented, and Sherlock Holmes might not have had to make the ultimate sacrifice in removing that villain from our midst. His loss is the most severe I have ever encountered, and I know that you and the rest of the L.S. share that burden. I take consolation only in the knowledge that, no matter the harrowing labors we encountered in many of these Department Zed cases, Holmes would not have wished for any life to be given in sacrifice but his own. Moreover, because of preventing the earlier death of Moriarty, Holmes's actions have given me, as well as Worthington, chances to do more good than would have ever come by our own efforts. Surely, this is a speculation best left without definite resolution, other than the unofficial record that we leave behind us in our efforts to fight on the side of the angels.