

## The Adventure of the French Deception



Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe \* – Édouard Manet  
1862 – 1863 - Musée d'Orsay, Paris  
[\* The Luncheon on the Grass]

**Authors note:** to fully appreciate the intricacies of the story's plot and the details in Manet's painting, which I have described, I recommend viewing the painting on-line.

One option is to look up the painting's Wikipedia page and left-button-click on the image of the painting so that it opens in another window and provides a tool for enlarging the image – a moment of patience is required. One then uses the bars at the bottom and to the right of one's computer/laptop screen to navigate back and forth and up and down the painting.

The frog can be seen in the bottom left-hand side of the painting and the bullfinch top and centre.

The doorbell rang again.

Dr Watson called for his housekeeper, but she didn't respond.

With great effort, he eased himself out of his chair. His complaining knees were particularly bad, suggesting rain was on its way and the weather forecast in his morning paper was not to be trusted.

"Who is it?" Watson asked as a precaution, gripping the door key.

“It’s Jack,” came the response.

Watson unlocked the door and found his great-nephew holding up a newspaper.

“How come we had to read about your impending demise in the papers? You didn’t think to tell your family first?” asked Jack. “Do we count as nought?”

“Manners maketh man. Good day to you too! You can ignore the newspaper report. I’ve engineered a mix up. Come in. You are just the person I wanted to see. You speak French fluently, don’t you?”

As Jack hung up his coat, then traded his hat for Holmes’s deerstalker, Watson peered out to see if he could see any members of the press still lurking about, then locked the door.

“My French is probably quite rusty. What’s going on?”

“I need someone to accompany me to Paris,” said Watson, leading the way to the living room.

A few years ago, Watson had invited Jack to help him pack up Holmes’s papers so they could be sent off to the British Museum. Any relics from his cases had been sent to Scotland Yard and his notes from his various chemistry experiments had been sent to the Royal Institute of Chemistry. There were a few items he had held back and kept for himself. Holmes’s favourite chair was one of them. Jack sped past him and claimed it for himself. Not that he minded. He missed his dear friend Holmes and wished he could see him but was pleased he no longer had to suffer the indignities of having little occupation and all too few distractions. Watson now learnt of incidents by reading the newspaper, the kind Lestrade used to brief them on and they had set to right. He found himself longing for Jack’s visits, for him to breeze in like a whirlwind, as Holmes had done.

Watson watched as Jack gave his framed photo of Holmes a quick salute, then reached for Holmes’s favourite meerschaum pipe and gripped it, unlit,

between his teeth. The first time Jack had helped himself to Holme's pipe and hat, Watson had opened his mouth so he might rebuke him but had thought better of it. The lad's actions had appeared brash but were borne out of respect and Watson had taken heart that Holmes's reputation had the power to impress his great-nephew's generation.

Watson rang the bell for his housekeeper and grabbed an illustrated book on French art from his bookcase.

"Afternoon, Mrs B.," said Jack when Mrs Brown appeared. "Any chance of a pot of tea and some cake?"

Mrs Brown's expression remained unaltered.

"Right you are, Master Jack," she said without complaint and disappeared again.

Despite appearances, Mrs Brown had always had a soft spot for Jack and he played on it. He had come of age, yet, she still referred to him as 'Master Jack' as though she didn't want him to change or break from them.

"I smell a rat, Dr Watson. Pray tell, what is going on?"

Jack referred to him as 'uncle' but rarely missed an opportunity to make an illusion to the published accounts of his adventures with Holmes. When Jack was younger, he could be kept quiet for hours on a rainy Sunday afternoon by giving him copies of The Strand Magazine to read. Watson had been canny enough to show Jack the edition which listed Holmes's favourite cases in order and had asked Jack if they were his too, ensuring the youngster read them over the course of several visits.

The phone started ringing. Watson didn't move.

"Aren't you going to answer it?" asked Jack.

"No," said Watson, lowering himself into his chair. "It's sure to be a journalist or biographer intent on seizing the last chance to get a scoop on Holmes. No matter how often I repeat that no literary devices were employed to heighten the excitement or tension in the accounts of our

adventures, and that every word was true, they repeatedly invite me to put the record straight.”

Turning the meerschaum pipe in his hand, Jack asked, “Why did you tell the press of your imminent death?”

“I didn’t tell them as such. If I’m guilty of anything, it’s of not correcting them when they got the wrong end of the stick.”

“In that case, how did the subject even come up?” asked Jack, not missing a trick.

“The ‘why’ is far more interesting than the ‘how’,” said Watson. “As a child, you would ask me what my favourite case was, or which one was the most difficult or which one had defeated us and so on. You once asked if Holmes had shared everything with me or whether he had held back any secrets. I lied. He had kept secrets from me.”

“You lied to me!” said Jack, sounding hurt and outraged.

“I didn’t want you to get your hopes up thinking there was a case you could solve. Besides, whenever Holmes buried something or obfuscated, it was invariably for good reason. However, there is one mystery I wish to clear up.”

Jack’s eyes lit up.

“What is it? Tell me!” he said.

Mrs Brown came in with the tea tray and set it down on the table. She served Jack first, placing a cup next to Holmes’s pipe rack, and gave him a generous slice of cake.

The two men had long suspected she had a sixth sense and came from a long line of witches as she typically made his favourite cake – lemon drizzle – on the days he visited. His nephew liked to tease his uncle on their walks saying he could never sack her lest she put a curse on him.

“Mrs Brown, you’re an angel!” said Jack.

As ever, Watson’s housekeeper remained inscrutable, but he knew she

enjoyed the flattery otherwise she would have used the opportunity to upbraid him over some small act of forgetfulness or other.

When she had left the room, Jack urged, "Don't keep me in suspense! Tell me!"

"It all started when I told Holmes that I no longer had the leisure to accompany him on his cases. To my astonishment, he advertised for a replacement."

Jack nodded and said, "That much I already know. You said he appeared to be looking for someone as clever as himself. Whereas what he really needed was someone whose expertise and experience would support his genius for deduction."

As Watson's hound padded into the room and settled at his feet, he continued, "It took him until the beginning of May that year to whittle down several bags of postal applications to just a handful, by means of a complicated selection process, which commenced with the last hundred candidates and involved several rounds of tests, all conducted by correspondence.

"The final test was designed to determine whether his remaining five candidates could pick out what was relevant at a crime scene and challenge any clues. As he was refused permission to take them to the location of an actual murder, he settled upon the painting 'Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe', the work of the French artist Édouard Manet.

"It struck me as a high-risk strategy to choose an image over which little was known, therefore, no one could conclusively say if any assumptions were right or wrong, not least because the artist had died, but our friend was not to be dissuaded.

"The remaining candidates were sent a print and a set of photographs of the painting, accompanied by notes. He then invited them to a retrospective of French 19<sup>th</sup> century art in Paris, where Manet's

masterpiece had been put on display, so they could relate their findings to the actual work.

“Given the amount of correspondence this undertaking required and that my old friend had no stomach for it, he had relied upon my assistance. Consequently, I got to know of the final test, that no one passed muster and a lady called Mrs Freya Northam withdrew her application just days before she was due to meet Holmes in Paris.”

Watson paused and looked at his nephew.

“Am I supposed to recognise the name?” asked Jack.

“Yes,” said Watson. Jack shrugged. “If you recall, the only woman to outwit Holmes was the celebrated opera singer Irene Adler. I’m sure I noted in my account that she married a gentleman called Godfrey Norton.”

“It’s been quite a few years since I read ‘A Scandal in Bohemia’.”

Watson picked up his cup. Jack alerted him that he could see steam curling up, therefore it was still too hot to drink, so he returned it to its saucer.

He continued, “At the time, I suspected that Freya Northam was a play on her husband’s name, but I couldn’t be certain. I received a letter from Mrs Northam yesterday. She suggested we meet Friday next in front of Manet’s painting.”

“Where’s the painting?” asked Jack, returning the pipe to its place on Holmes’s rack.

He ignored the sugar tongs and used his fingers to drop a lump of sugar into his teacup.

Watson sighed with exasperation.

“Fear not, uncle. I know how to behave when invited by my betters.”

“The painting is still in Paris,” said Watson, holding out his inverted hand.

“May I have the sugar bowl,” he added.

Instead, Jack picked up the sugar tongs and dropped a lump into his uncle's tea.

"Paris! You said yourself, your travelling days are behind you."

"If I had help with my luggage and packed strong pain killers, I'm sure I would manage."

Jack huffed, then complained, "Ah, so I'm not being invited along because you need my powers of deduction but a porter."

"If Holmes were here, he'd say that he worked best when he had a collaborator," Watson countered.

"What does Manet's painting look like?"

Watson pointed to his book on French art and reached for his glasses. Jack picked the book up and opened it at the page his uncle had marked.

"What a peculiar choice!" he exclaimed.

"Indeed," agreed Watson. "The work provoked outrage when it was first put on display. Manet submitted the painting to the Salon for selection, but it was rejected by the jury. His defenders included the journalist Émile Zola, who visited the Louvre and counted over fifty works which showed a combination of both clothed and nude figures, thereby undermining the jury's main argument.

"It's not just the nudity that provoked such a strong reaction. Many were offended by the naked model's brazen stare. Others considered the work amateurish. See how the lady in the river is at the wrong scale to the other figures, creating a jarring effect! I've looked and looked but I can't find a secret hidden in the painting," said Watson, stirring his tea.

"I doubt you'll find it in a black and white reproduction. You need to see the actual painting," said Jack.

"My thoughts exactly."

Watson took a sip of tea, then continued, "Turn to the next page! See how both Tissot's 'La Partie Carrée' and Monet's 'Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe'

were painted in response to Manet's work, yet they appear to mock Manet's scene by having table cloths spread on the grass, cutlery, glasses, bottles of wine, bread and a variety of prepared dishes, as though declaring 'Now this is a picnic!'

"If Manet's painting only superficially shows friends having a picnic, it begs the question: 'What is the painting's true narrative?'"

Jack flicked backwards and forwards between the pages, comparing the images.

He asked, "If the painting was rejected by the Salon, how come the public got to see it?"

"Emperor Napoleon III received so many complaints in respect of the jury's final selection, he organised an alternative exhibition called the 'Salon des refuses' to quieten the public, which, ironically, proved the greater attraction of the two."

Jack picked up Holmes's magnifying glass, which Watson kept handy for reading the newspaper, and began to look at 'Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe' more closely.

He mused, "What puzzles me is why the newspapers commenting on your impending demise would spur Mrs Northam to pick up pen and paper and write to you?"

"I didn't leave it to chance. I also wrote to her just to make certain. I sent letters to the Imperial Opera in Warsaw and La Scala in Milan and asked them to forward my correspondence. Her response is odd in so much as there was no expectation that we should meet. If she knows the secret hidden in Manet's painting, I suspect it would have cost her little effort to put it in writing, so why have the inconvenience and expense of travelling to Paris? Doesn't it strike you as peculiar?"

Jack said, "Alright, you've excited my curiosity. Leave the arrangements to me." With his next breath, he asked, "Can I pour you more tea and

would you like another slice of Mrs B.'s delicious cake?"

Watson looked at the photo of Holmes.

"Well, dear old friend, I hope you'll be joining us even if it's just in spirit."

Jack raised his cup to Holmes's image.

Dr Watson and Jack arrived at the gallery early to get their bearings. Shortly before two o'clock, they returned to Manet's vast picture. Neither the materials Watson had sent to his potential replacements, nor the reproduction in his art book, conveyed the size of the canvas. By Watson's reckoning, it was just over two spans of a man's arms in height and two and half in length. They studied it close-up so they might spot any details which would become lost when stepping back from the painting. Watson could see the artist had worked quickly as his thinned paint had been applied in loose strokes with little blending in.

Finally, they sat on the bench positioned in the middle of the gallery and tried, again, to see what it was in Manet's work that had jumped out at Holmes.

The two men agreed that Jack should pretend he was not acquainted with Watson as they didn't want Mrs Freya Northam to feel intimidated, so, at a quarter-to-three, he began looking at other paintings in the long gallery.

Manet's painting succeeded in drawing Watson in and he became lost in contemplation. He barely registered that someone else had joined him on the bench. A little cough attracted his attention.

"Mrs Freya Northam," she said, extending a gloved hand. "My given name was Irene Adler. 'Freya Northam' is the name I use when I travel incognito."

The lady spoke in captivating velvety tones. She had kept her figure but had adopted the grand air of a duchess. Her face was hidden behind a

bound swag of veil that extended down from her large-brimmed, feathered hat. If her jawline was anything to go by, she had fallen victim to the ravages of time, a cruel fate for one who had been so striking.

Even though she was seated, she gripped the top of her folded parasol. Watson was always pleased when he could let go of his wretched stick and had rested it against the bench. Checking it was still there, he noticed she had placed a book on art next to it. He was intrigued to see a couple of bookmarks standing proud of its binding.

“Of all the ladies whose path crossed ours, Mrs Northam, you were the most unforgettable. As for Holmes, you impressed him with your ingenuity like no other of your sex,” said Watson.

Looking straight ahead at the painting, Northam said, “I am not labouring under too many regrets but having to withdraw my application continues to pain me,” she said. “Perhaps I succumbed to vanity, but it seemed Holmes had devised the whole scheme to provoke me into revealing myself so he, in his vanity, might assess how his famed powers compared to mine when faced with a range of challenges. The final test required, not an encyclopedic knowledge of art, but a good understanding of the subject, which Mr Holmes must have known I possessed. I have been gifted orchids, jewels, furs, even an Arabian stallion, yet, no man has shown his admiration in such a thoughtful manner as Mr Holmes. The others only worshipped my beauty and my voice.”

“If I may be so bold, what of Mr Northam?” asked Watson.

“He proved to be no different from the others when my reflected glory had diminished. Only Mr Holmes acknowledged that I was so much more. I might have impressed scientific institutions. What a cruel world it is for women! We aspire to greatness and are just as curious as men but are limited by our sex.”

“Quite,” Watson said. “You had Holmes rattled after you prevented him

from taking a photo in your possession of a certain future king, one you couldn't be persuaded to relinquish by fair means or foul. He would have been the first to congratulate you on employing great cunning. Holmes was not prone to vanity in the conventional sense, but he enjoyed his status as London's leading consulting detective and guarded it jealously. I have long suspected that advertising for my replacement was, in part, a ruse to satisfy his curiosity as to who might outwit whom. To others it may be misconstrued as combative, but I can't think of Holmes paying anyone a greater compliment."

The lady turned and glanced at Watson, though not long enough for him to make out her face.

Northam said, "I was familiar with Manet's painting but had not discovered it carried a hidden meaning, so I was intrigued when Mr Holmes invited me to look again."

Watson scanned the painting. Still it would not yield to him.

She continued, "However, I would argue it wasn't a fair challenge and we shall never know if what I deduced concurred with Mr Holmes's findings."

Watson asked, "Mrs Northam, I would be much obliged if you would share the painting's secret with me."

"I shall once this person moves," she said, loudly, causing Jack to turn and look at them.

He had strayed between them and the painting.

He tipped his hat and moved on, allowing the main subject of Manet's painting, a naked lady, to stare out of the canvas at them. The naked lady was depicted with two male companions, who were attired in casual clothes and appeared to be engaged in conversation. The artist had painted them sitting in a tight group on dappled grass and framed by trees. Their meagre picnic of a large brioche and a selection of fruit remained

untouched. A short distance further back, was another lady, who was stripped down to her chemise and standing in the shallows of a river. She was shown holding up the hem of her garment with one hand and scooping water with the other. Above her, a small bird was frozen in flight. Lastly, there was the curious addition of a frog in the bottom left-hand corner. Being a timorous creature, it was unlikely to have landed so close to the revellers, suggesting the artist had added it in for a reason. Moreover, its colouring wasn't true to nature. It was slate grey with pale blue eyes.

"To think the work caused such outrage when it was first put on display," said Northam.

"The image still has the power to shock," Watson countered, realising that the pleasing floral smell, which he had been drawing in, was her perfume.

"In order to do justice to what Holmes must have discovered, please allow me to explain fully."

"I have travelled to Paris at your behest. If you stinted, I would feel cheated," said Watson.

His journey to Victoria Station and onwards to the coast had been without incident, but the strong gales had ensured a rough crossing. He felt this alone warranted some recompense.

Northam straightened her back.

"The reason why I insisted you meet me at the gallery is because I needed you to experience the painting's unsettling effect. Would you agree that it's something one can't quite put one's finger on, but it's as though the artist is inviting us to determine what it may be?"

"Indeed," said Watson, even though he wasn't convinced but he was prepared to be swayed by a strong case.

Northam pushed her book towards him.

"Open it at the last bookmark!"

He was surprised to find she wanted him to look at an over-populated illustration. Because it was linear, ensuring little differentiation, the imagery was hard to distinguish and took some unpicking. Watson took out Holmes's magnifying glass from his inside pocket. The legend under the reproduction said, 'Engraving entitled 'The Judgement of Paris' after a drawing by Raphael'.

"Look at the three figures at the bottom on the right-hand side! Now look at the painting! Manet has posed his three figures identically. He even has his slouching man pointing. If Manet's group of figures provide a superficial narrative, we have to ask ourselves: what is the painting's true narrative?"

"The painting was submitted to the Salon under the title 'Le Bain' ['The Bath']. Taking this as a guide to its meaning, others have pointed out that the two clothed men and the lady wading in the river echoes the bible story of 'Susanna and the elders', in which she suffers the unwanted attentions of two men, who watch her bathing."

"I believe Manet meant his peculiarly over-sized figure to compel us to revisit Rembrandt's painting 'A woman bathing in a stream'. Turn to the next page I have marked!" Watson obliged her. "See how the Dutch master painted his model similarly hoisting up her chemise, albeit with both hands, and standing in water. What isn't conveyed by the book's colourless reproduction is that the painting focuses on the subject and only hints at the background with one significant exception: standing out from his loosely worked umbers is a discarded hanging, woven with gold and blood-red threads. Its red edging is reflected, making it appear as though his model is standing in water that is inked with blood. By association, Manet's painting tells of murder."

Watson was still consulting Northam's book, when her words penetrated his thoughts.

“Murder?” he checked.

“Indeed,” Northam confirmed. “Now, whenever I see the painting, I hear the words from WB Yeats’s poem ‘The Second Coming’ in my mind: ‘...The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere...’”

Watson spoke the next line.

“‘...The ceremony of innocence is drowned...’.”

Northam lifted her folded umbrella and stabbed the air.

“See how above Manet’s bathing figure there’s a small bird, which he has placed at the top and centre of the painting. As we know, the Holy Spirit is commonly shown as a white bird at the top and centre of religious paintings such as those depicting the Pentecost and the Baptism of Christ.”

Northam took her book and opened it at another pre-selected page.

“I believe Manet is referencing Verrocchio’s ‘Baptism of Christ’, whose Holy Spirit is shown frightening off a bird of prey. Verrocchio also includes a member of the corvine family, another symbol of death.”

“Manet’s bird is a common bullfinch,” Watson pointed out. “If memory serves, there is no symbolism attached to it and its positioning may have been determined by other factors. Artists aim to achieve a balanced composition and it would fail to stand out if it had been painted against a dark tree trunk.”

“If the bullfinch carries no meaning and it is a troublesome addition, why include it?” said Northam. “Can’t you see, the bullfinch has a distinctive hangman’s black hood and red chest as though covered in blood?”

Watson got up and took a closer look.

“I bow to your superior powers of observation,” he conceded when he returned to their bench.

Northam continued, “Manet’s domineering father died in September 1862, probably as the picture was still being completed. His father was a judge. Whom do judges command?”

“The hangman,” answered Watson, meekly.

“Exactly,” said Northam. “Verrocchio’s painting holds another important significance which I will return to.”

“If you mean to tell me that Leonardo da Vinci painted one of the angels, it is a fact already known to me.”

“No. It’s not that. First, I need to discuss the naked lady who dominates Manet’s scene and caused so much offence. According to artistic tradition men are depicted as swarthy and women are given skin comparable to porcelain. Even by these standards, Manet’s naked lady is deathly pale, sickeningly so,” she said, pointing with her umbrella, thereby inviting Watson to look. “See how her skin is unblemished, and the sole of her exposed foot shows no evidence of having walked barefoot over the mud and grass!

“Manet embarked on the painting a year after the end of Martin Dumollard’s twelve-year reign of terror. It is no secret that Mr Holmes studied various murder cases. He may have discussed the French serial killer with you?” Watson shook his head. “No matter. He targeted a series of maids. He tricked them into following him, then savagely attacked them. His wife, who acted as his accomplice, took their belongings and sold them.

“Manet’s brazen lady reminds me of Dumollard’s victims, who were photographed naked at the behest of the police investigating his killings. They were cleaned but left naked so their identities might be discovered. The images heralded the shocking photos of Jack the Ripper’s victims only a few years later. Thereby, we can gauge the impact the photos had on Manet and the French newspaper reading public.

“See how Manet has shown his group sitting on dappled grass! Why aren’t parts of her flesh shaded? It shouldn’t be a uniform colour and it shouldn’t be glaringly pale. Compare her to the lady standing in the river in the bright sunshine, yet her skin and white chemise are not bleached by the

strong light. Manet wouldn't have made beginner's mistake, then what does it tell us about his artistic decisions?"

Watson shrugged.

"Given the size of the canvas, he had no choice but to paint his models in his studio. He simply didn't account for the fact that the lighting was completely different."

"Well, I see a living corpse," retorted Northam. "No matter. What perplexed me for quite some time was why Manet gave both his ladies garments that are identical in colour. Given their careless treatment – see how they are shown crumpled either in a heap, as if cast-off in wild abandon, or being sat on and twisted – it suggests that the style of the garments is of no import. Why, then, the abundance of sky-blue on the ground compared to the small patch of pale, murky sky and the muted red of the bullfinch's chest and even smaller splodges forming the cherries brought by the picnickers?"

Northam raised her left-hand and used it to block out the bottom left-hand side of the painting. "See how, without the blue, Manet has mostly used umbers and muted greens as one would find in a pastoral scene.

"When revisiting Verrocchio's painting in Florence, I noticed that the two angels at Christ's side are wearing garments of blue cloth, the same blue. I believe Manet replicated Verrocchio's lapis lazuli blues because of their association with angels and Holy figures in medieval religious paintings. Thereby, the artist is asserting the innocence of the ladies in his work.

"Another indication that a life or lives have been lost is the picnic basket which has toppled onto its side, allowing the ripe fruit to spill out, evoking funerary symbolism such as the broken columns one sees in cemeteries, representing a life cut short in its prime."

Watson laughed.

"Come now, Mrs Northam. The sheer scale of Manet's painting alone

suggests he used it as hoarding to advertise his artistic skills. All artists need patrons. He shows us he can paint nudes, the heads of the two men would make fine portraits, the way the basket and fruit are arranged demonstrates he can paint a delightful still life and, as you have already suggested, if the painting wasn't quite so shocking it might have been considered a pleasant pastoral scene. Moreover, the lady in the river harks back to Rembrandt for those whose tastes are more conventional. I would, therefore, argue the picnic basket is just a picnic basket, or are the cherries laden with meaning too?"

Mrs Northam stamped the parquet floor with her umbrella, showing her displeasure, just the once but it was enough for the alarming sound to echo all about.

"Alas, yes. Manet's first success in 1859 was with a painting called 'The Boy with Cherries'. It was a portrait of a young lad whom he paid to clean his brushes and palettes. He hung himself in Manet's studio after the artist had rebuked him. The incident must have preyed on Manet's mind as he moved studios three or four times in quick succession.

"If the painting was intended to reveal a murder or murders and the identity of the perpetrator was known to Manet, then one might suppose he would have encrypted their identity into his work.

"If you recall, the painting takes its three main figures from 'The Judgement of Paris', therefore, one might assume that the murders occurred in Paris and that's where the murderer might be found."

Watson gave a heavy sigh.

"Holmes may have solved one or two murders with scant evidence. However, even he would have required more leads before scouring an entire city, not least the identities of the victims."

"Please accept my apologies, Dr Watson. I was only able to find evidence of wrong-doing in the painting, not the wrong-doer. You may

succeed where I failed.”

After the briefest pause, she asked, “Do you suppose Mr Holmes would have asked me to become his wife?”

Watson spluttered, “Wife?”. Recovering himself, he said, “No, dear lady, despite your many estimable qualities. Your acquaintance was as unique as yourselves. Whenever Holmes disappeared, claiming he needed to buy cigars from some Portuguese sailors or some such, I always assumed he was off solving puzzles you created for him, thereby, you made love to each other’s brilliant minds.”

Mrs Northam made an odd noise, just a quick burst. Watson couldn’t be certain what it indicated. Was she choking back tears or emotion or laughter?

She stood up and made a theatrical performance of brushing down her skirt. Watson suspected it was to disguise the effort of getting to her feet and that she needed a moment before setting off. When she had finished, she offered her hand in farewell.

“I suspect we won’t see each other again. I wish you a safe journey home.”

Watson noted how, through the soft leather of her gloves, her once exquisite fingers were reduced to knobbly bone. She quickly withdrew her hand as if she knew it was an unwanted reminder that Death’s chill embrace beckoned.

Watson proffered the art book.

“You may keep it as a token of my esteem,” she said.

“Thank you, Mrs Northam. You find me embarrassed that I have nothing to give you in exchange, but it was a real pleasure to see you again.”

“Dr Watson, you came to Paris upon my suggestion. I could not have asked for a greater token of your esteem.”

He watched as she made her slow progress down the long gallery. Jack

joined him.

“She would have made a good subject for a John Singer Sargent portrait,” commented his great-nephew.

“She was.”

“Wasn’t Holmes painted by Sargent?”

“Indeed,” Watson said with a chuckle. “Sargent approached Holmes if he might sit for him, rather than the other way round. Holmes would not have tolerated being painted, unless he had a three-pipe problem, then, he would sit or lie perfectly still for hours. I tipped Sargent off and he came rushing round with all his sketchpad and watercolours. It was said that it was one of his best likenesses.”

“What happened to the painting?” asked Jack.

“Ironically, both the portrait of Holmes and the portrait of Northam were destroyed in the same fire.”

Watson felt Jack put his hand under his arm, ready to hoist him up onto his feet.

“You can tell me how the interview went at our hotel while we wait for supper.”

Watson wasn’t sure if he liked his nephew dictating what he was to do. On the other hand, he was more than ready for a stiff drink so agreed to the plan.

The stiff drink came in the form of a whisky for Watson and an absinthe for Jack.

“Drinks shouldn’t be an abhorrent shade of lurid green. On reflection, drinks shouldn’t be any shade of green,” Watson said.

“When in Rome...,” Jack retorted, putting his uncle’s and Northam’s art books on the table. “Well, what did Northam say?”

He opened his uncle’s book at the page with the image of Manet’s

painting.

“It’s to help jog your memory,” he explained.

He then got out his notebook and pencil, which he held poised to commence writing.

Between them, they managed to reconstruct the conversation. Jack was equally dismayed. They carried on talking. All the while, Jack looked over his notes and checked them against the painting.

After several minutes Jack asked, “What did Mrs Northam say was the meaning of the grey frog with the blue eyes?”

“She didn’t mention the frog,” Watson replied.

“She didn’t mention the frog!”

“No,” said Watson, shaking his head. “Maybe it’s just a frog.”

Jack laughed.

“Mrs Northam argued vociferously as to the importance of the seemingly incidental bullfinch, yet, I am to believe the small frog carries no meaning. Her omission must be significant. Consider how much time and effort she put into deciphering the rest of the painting,” said Jack, tapping his notebook with his pen.

“Maybe she simply forgot to mention it.” Jack shook his head. Watson glanced at his drink for inspiration, and said, “Don’t forget the painting was part of a challenge set by Holmes to determine whether she could outwit him! She might not have wanted to draw attention to a clue that she was unable to decipher.”

Jack shook his head again and said, “What if she knows the meaning and withheld it from you? What does that suggest?”

“I don’t think...”

“We have to entertain the possibility that the woman who tricked Holmes, not once but twice, invited you to meet her in Paris for some self-serving motive. There is nothing you have recounted that she couldn’t

have put down in a letter. Did she say why you had to meet her in person?"

Watson took another swig of his whisky before answering.

"Mrs Northam wanted me to see the painting so I could experience its 'unsettling effect'. She described it as 'something one can't quite put one's finger on', and 'as though the artist is inviting us to determine what it may be'."

"Granted, she made a good show of appearing to be helpful. What if she was really trying to determine what it is that *you* know about the painting?" said Jack, trading his pen for his drink.

"I made it perfectly clear in my letter I knew nothing," Watson said, unable to hide his exasperation.

"I know what you wrote but what if she didn't believe you and was suspicious of your motivation?"

"I was a physician!"

"Not everyone is as honest as you in their dealings, uncle. What if there is something in the painting that she wants kept hidden?" With his next breath, Jack asked, "Was there anything amongst Holmes's papers which mentioned the test?"

"As you know, there were so many documents that it was impossible for us to catalogue them. The best I could do was put the notes pertaining to his most significant or interesting cases into bundles, and anything else in bundles by year. There was no leisure to read them."

"Can you remember which year Holmes set the test?"

"Yes," Watson answered.

"In that case, when we get back, would you be willing to write to the British Museum requesting access to Holmes's documents? We need to plough through them to see if anything jumps out at us."

"Of course, my lad, anything," said Watson, closing his artbook.

Jack took them and placed them on the empty seat next to him.

Their conversation concluded just as a waiter came over with the menu.

Upon their arrival at the British Museum, Dr Watson and his great-nephew reported to reception. They were taken by one of the clerks to the Great Court where we were passed onto a tall, severe-looking gentleman, who had been waiting for them just outside the rotunda. Their new escort peered at them from over the top of his spectacles, and aside from his pocket watch, there was nothing which softened the greys and blacks of his attire.

“Good day, gentlemen,” he said, offering them his hand. “I trust it will meet with success. I was passed your letter therefore I understand what it is you hope to accomplish.”

The librarian’s appearance belied his charm and willingness to be of assistance.

“It was my privilege to be tasked with cataloguing the documents in the Sherlock Holmes Collection around my other duties. It’s still an on-going process. I am grateful to you, Dr Watson, for having put the documents into bundles and affixing references. It has made what would otherwise have been a daunting task so much easier.

“Gentlemen, we won’t be able to talk once we go into the Reading Room. Given that today is such a dull day, you’ll be pleased to know that I’ve managed to reserve a table for you directly under the oculus. You’ll find all the documents you’ve requested waiting for you and magnifying glasses at your disposal.”

They thanked the librarian and followed him inside. As soon as Watson stepped over the threshold, he was hit by the smell of paper mixed with leather and fusty cotton.

The inclement weather hadn’t deterred readers. They sat with their

heads bowed at the long tables, which fanned out from the centre of the room. When they reached their assigned table, it became apparent that it was theirs exclusively.

The librarian whispered where they might find him should they have any questions and departed with a quick nod of the head.

The bundles crowded one side of the table. Watson pulled a bundle towards him and considered Holmes's writing. His old friend had left him with plenty of examples, but these were more precious as they were no longer in his care, therefore, he no longer had easy access to them.

"Where to start?" said Jack.

Watson pushed the bundle over to his great-nephew's side of the table.

"You might as well start with this one," said Watson. "It's the right year and, if memory serves, contained lots of oddities."

Watson pulled out another random bundle of Holmes's notes and press cuttings for himself. He checked the label to make sure it contained material from the right year.

The two men had agreed that they would work in shifts of two hours, ensuring regular breaks.

As it turned out, at the end of their first shift, Jack said he was keen to keep going.

At the start of day three, Watson was aware that Jack's hope of finding something that would point to Holmes's discovery was on the wane. Moreover, they both felt under pressure as it was the last day Jack's employer would spare him for another month or so.

Watson was updating the list of the bundles they had trawled through the previous day to establish their progress against those he had noted as having submitted to the British Museum when Jack let out a cry.

"I have it! I know who the frog is!"

The heads of the other readers shot up and there was a chorus of shushing and tutting.

“We’re being scowled at,” murmured Jack.

“Surely not,” said Watson.

Jack stretched across the table and handed Watson the newspaper cutting. Watson, in turn, picked up one of the magnifying glasses and read:

‘The British Ambassador, Greyson Froggatt, died on Thursday last in Paris. His death was sudden and unexpected.

Froggatt served her Majesty in Bordeaux and Marseille before he was posted to Paris. He was due to retire at the end of September.

Just hours before his passing he hosted a celebration. The invited guests were regaled by burgeoning talent from the Paris Opera. Irene Adler gave her last performance before she takes up a position at La Scala in Milan, Italy.

Details of Ambassador Froggatt’s funeral have not been made public at the time of going to print.’

Watson shook his head in astonishment.

The two men checked the rest of the bundle together. There were more cuttings with small announcements of rapes and murders, which had been ringed. They were scant on details suggesting no real commitment on behalf of those undertaking the investigations.

The last document was a map of Paris onto which Holme’s had plotted the locations of the incidents with an ‘X’. He had also plotted the Ambassador’s residence on the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, highlighting its central position within the circle of the crimes he had ringed. Lastly, he had ringed the Place de l’Opéra, which Watson supposed was located within a mile or two of Froggatt’s residence and the Embassy.

Watson took his tag and marked it with a big cross on the blank side so, if need be, they’d be able to identify the bundle again. They then shared

out the cuttings and made notes.

In the Great Court, they discussed their next move.

Jack proposed, "I say we write to Mycroft Holmes's successor at White Hall and ask if there are any files pertaining to Greyson Froggatt during his time in Paris, and any information they hold on any unsolved murders in the French capital during his tenure."

"Well," began Watson, "as luck would have it, Mycroft's successor came up to me after Sherlock's memorial service and introduced himself. He said that, if I were ever working on a case again, I could approach him should I need assistance. Then again, he did say he couldn't guarantee that he would be able to help and he made it clear he wouldn't compromise his position by divulging any sensitive secrets, but, he would at least indicate whether I was on the right track."

Jack laughed.

"So, the gentleman would like to help but will be of no help whatsoever."

"What have we got to lose?" asked Watson. "Holmes's name works like a charm, so I say we write to him with Holmes's suspicions and see what he comes back with?"

Jack rubbed his forehead.

"More delay," he complained.

"Do you have a better suggestion?"

Jack shrugged and answered, "The obvious thing would be to contact the French police but, if Holmes's hunch is right, it would result in a diplomatic incident no matter that Froggatt died three and a half decades ago. It looks like I have no choice but to go with your idea. Staff at our hotel can supply us with writing paper and an envelope. We say in the letter that your contact will find us in the bar of the Charing Cross Hotel until seven this evening whereupon we will relocate to the dining room."

“Why that hotel?”

“It’s just a hop and a skip away from Whitehall.”

“Good thinking,” said Watson, doing up his coat buttons.

“And, we can cut out some delay if we deliver the letter to Whitehall ourselves.”

Watson smiled.

“What are we waiting for?” he asked.

“Nothing. I’ll go ahead and hail us a taxi. I’ll get him to park up just outside the museum gates.

Watson watched as his nephew strode off across the court.

At six o’clock, Jack asked the waiter in the bar at the Charing Cross Hotel if they might dine at seven. When asked how many would be dining, he answered, “Two.”

“No, make that three,” Watson added, spotting Mycroft’s replacement as he walked through the door.

Watson had been uncertain whether he would recognise him again, having only met him briefly, but, as the gentleman had looked about the room in a manner which belied his own uncertainty and had stared at Watson for a moment before a look of recognition had swept over his face, he was confident it was the very man they wanted to see and stood up. The man strode over to their table. His expression suggested he wasn’t steeling himself to disappoint them but had come bearing news.

“Mr Campbell, please may I introduce my great-nephew Mr Jack Watson,” said Watson.

Once they had exchanged pleasantries and talked of Holmes, which was inevitable and proper, and another round of drinks had been brought to their table, Watson enquired if Mr Campbell had found any information for them.

Mr Campbell looked about as if to see if anyone was in earshot.

Seemingly satisfied, he said, "Mr Holmes's hunch was right. The French police had come to the same conclusion and it had been decided between our two countries that the gentleman, whose name I shall not speak, was to retire to Australia. By 'retire', the conventional meaning might not have been the one that was intended.

"Your suspicions that the gentleman's 'unexpected' death was a euphemism for 'he had met with an unnatural death' are spot on. The investigators at Whitehall concluded that the gentleman had a compulsion to kill.

"As for the lady in question, at the time she had been the darling of the French Opera. The gentlemen had often invited up and coming actors and singers to perform at British Embassy functions and our darling was no exception. Dr Watson, your published account of our darling's adventures in London, concur with a report held at Whitehall, thereby, it isn't a stretch to understand how our darling escaped the gentleman's attack. One might go further and say the incident in Paris made her determined never to fall victim to men or the machinations of governments again, prompting her to learn the skills she might employ for her protection.

"Did Whitehall recognise that she had acted in self-defence?" asked Jack.

"Indeed," said Campbell.

"It would have been better for both the French and the British Governments if the gentleman hadn't been killed on British soil in France. They were terrified it would come to light that the spate of killings were linked and the perpetrator was connected to the British Embassy, so, for this reason alone, they decided not to convict our darling, confident that she was unlikely to kill again. They put the fear of God into her feared just to make certain. She is not one to live in fear of her life, prompting her to

acquire something which she could hold over them. I doubt the photo of her in the company of a certain king was all that was in her possession. A courtesan mixes in social circles which gives them access to numerous royals and eminent public figures.”

Watson felt his face light up.

“So, the compromising photo she had clung onto of a certain Bohemian King had been a deterrent aimed at the French and British Governments, knowing they wouldn’t want to draw other countries into a mess of their own making, thereby, she had strengthened her position,” Watson concluded.

“Yes,” said Campbell. “May I enquire as to how Holmes found out about the gentleman and his activities? And, more to the point, I need your assurance that you aren’t going to do anything about it.”

Watson nodded.

“In that case, I have some good news and some bad news. First the good news: one of the principles by which Holmes and I operated was to bring murderers to justice so the victim’s loved ones would know what had happened to them and have some small recompense in seeing justice served. However, in this case, given the murders happened such a long time ago there is no satisfaction to be had so our silence on the matter is assured.”

“And, the bad news?” asked Campbell, pausing before taking a swig of his drink.

“Holmes spotted that Manet’s famous, nay, infamous painting ‘Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe’ points to the murderer and his murders, so the gentleman and his activities have been writ large, as it were, since 1863.

“I suppose the embassy staff may have seen or heard things which gave them cause for concern, and, as we know, you can’t stop people talking. Or, the artist had worked it out for himself and decided that, if the

authorities weren't going to act, he would ensure the perpetrator's identity and his killing spree would eventually come to light. Sadly, Manet died in 1883 – he was only fifty-one years of age - therefore, a good number of years before Holmes worked out his clues.

“Poor Holmes! Can you imagine how conflicted he must have felt when he learnt that his darling had killed? Then, later, when she applied for the position as my replacement as I he had hoped, news of the woman he admired above all others would have been all at once intoxicating and devastating.

“There is another mystery I'd like to solve.”

Jack groaned, causing Campbell to laugh.

“You need to take a bit of time to enjoy your success before moving onto the next thing, uncle,” said Jack. “What we have achieved is extraordinary: we've decoded a secret that's remained undetected, save by Holmes, for decades. But, I suppose, if one has collaborated with the great Sherlock Holmes, it wouldn't seem at all remarkable.”

Campbell raised his glass.

“To your extraordinary success!” he said.

“Cheers,” said Jack, giving his uncle a wink.