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Opening extract from

Young Sherlock Holmes 6: Knife Edge

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CHAPTER ONE

Arms wrapped around the taut, sea-dampened ropes, the hemp fibres rough against his cheek, Sherlock Holmes watched from a position high up in the *Gloria Scott*'s rigging as the ship ploughed through the tumultuous ocean. Above him, seagulls cried like hungry babies. He could taste salt on his lips from the spray that filled the air. He'd lived with that taste for months now. He wondered what life would be like without it, without the constant pitching and tossing of the deck beneath his feet, without the regular *crack* of the sails suddenly filling with wind, without the constant shouts of the sailors and the orders barked by ship's First Mate, Mr Larchmont.

The sky above was grey and heavy with unshed rain. The sea was grey as well. For months he had been used to seeing blue skies above him during the day and black, star-splattered skies at night, of seeing jade waves sparkling like jewels all around the ship. But now everything seemed to have the vibrancy sucked out of it. The sky and the sea were both the colour of the smoke that poured out of factory chimneys in England's industrial areas.

He was nearly home.

Somewhere just over the horizon was the west coast of Ireland – the closest point to England that the ship was going to dock on this trip and the point at which he planned to get off and find his way home. He hadn't planned to leave England on the *Gloria Scott*, all that time ago. He had been ripped away from his family and friends, kidnapped and sedated and hidden away on the ship by a secretive organization known as the Paradol Chamber. He had crossed the Chamber by accident several times over the past two years, enough to make them want to get rid of him. Or perhaps they had done it because they wanted him to do some work for them in China, where the ship had been heading. Perhaps it was a bit of both. As far as he could tell, the Paradol Chamber never did anything for only one reason. They had plans nestled inside plans nestled inside yet more plans, like intricate clockwork mechanisms.

According to Mr Larchmont, the *Gloria Scott* would dock in Galway at the Spanish Arch and stay for a few days before heading to Antwerp. That was where the cargo that they had loaded in Shanghai would sell for the most money. Sherlock was going to disembark in Galway, take his pay like any regular member of the crew, and head across Ireland to Dublin. From there he could get a ferry to Liverpool, then travel down towards London on the train.

To what? That was the question he kept asking himself.

Back to Holmes Manor, in Hampshire? Back to his aunt and uncle as if he had never been away? Or maybe back to his close family, if his father had returned from India and his mother had recovered from her lingering illness. And what of his friends – would Matty still be there, or would he have set out along the canals for some other place where he could survive on his wits? Would Rufus Stone still be teaching violin and chasing girls in Farnham, or would Sherlock's brother, Mycroft, have sent him somewhere else to collect information for the British Government? What about Sherlock's teacher, Amyus Crowe? And what about Crowe's daughter Virginia?

His hand crept up to touch the outside of his shirt. Inside, in a leather pouch strung around his neck, folded up small, was the letter that Virginia had written to him, and given to brother Mycroft to pass on. He had read it on the quayside in Shanghai, and his world had caved in on him in a way that he wouldn't have believed possible.

Dear Sherlock,

This is the hardest letter that I have ever had to write, and probably the hardest letter that I ever will write. I attempted it so many times, and given up each time, but your brother is here visiting my father and he tells me that if I want this letter to get to you then this is my last

chance. I owe you some kind of explanation of what has happened, so here it is. I wish it were different.

You have been gone for a long time, and your brother tells me that you are likely not to return for a while – if you ever do return. I know the way your mind works, and I know that you like new and interesting things. I guess that going to China will show you lots of interesting things, and I wouldn't blame you for a moment if you decided to stay out there, in the Orient, and make a new life for yourself.

I may have been fooling myself, but I think that you and I had some kind of special connection, in that year we spent together. We certainly shared a lot of experiences. I felt about you in a way that I hadn't felt about anyone else in my life, and I could see from the way you looked at me that you felt the same way about me. The trouble is that time moves on. In your absence my father started tutoring the son of an American businessman who is living just outside Guildford. I met him one day, when he came to visit my father, and we ended up talking for hours. Since then we have been spending a lot of time together. He can ride as well, almost as well

as I can. He's tall and thin, like you, but his hair is fairer and his skin tans easily. He makes me laugh. His name is Travis — Travis Stebbins.

The thing I need to tell you is that he has made it plain that he wants me to be his fiancée one day, and then later on to be his wife. For a while I just laughed it off, thinking he was infatuated with the first American girl he'd met in England and that he would soon find someone else. But that didn't happen, and I've started to realize how much I like him. I wouldn't be unhappy with him, and I know that he would take care of me. If I said no, and waited for you to come back, I might be waiting for a long time.

And what if you've met someone else while you're away? What would I do if I waited three years for you and then you arrived back with a Chinese wife?

I've asked my father what to do, but he won't give me any advice. He thinks a lot of you, and I know that he wishes you were here. I think that's one of the main reasons he stays in England — so that one day he can see you again, and take up teaching you where he left off. But he wants me to be happy, and safe, and I think that part of him yearns to be free of any responsibilities and

able to ride off wherever he chooses, and camp out under the stars. He's not domesticated.

Neither are you, of course, and you never will be. That's probably the main difference between you and Travis – I can imagine him standing by a fireside, cradling a child in his arms, but I don't think that your future includes children, or domestic happiness. I hope you understand.

I still see Matty, from time to time. He pops up out of nowhere, stays for a few hours, then he vanishes again. I think life in Farnham suits him – he's put on some weight since you left. Albert, his horse, died, but he has another one now – a big thing with shaggy fetlocks called Harold. He (Matty, not Harold) keeps asking if I've heard from you.

Your brother says he will include my letter along with his, but what he will never tell you is that he misses you terribly. He is different now to the way he used to be – more restrained, more morose. Even Father has commented on it.

I wish there was more to tell you, but life continues pretty much the way it did before you left, with the major exception that you are not here. I wish you were. I wish things were different from the way they are, but life has put us on

different roads, and there's no turning around and going back.

I have written enough. If I keep on writing then I will start to cry, and my tears will blot the words so much that you won't be able to read them. Which might be a comfort for you.

With love,

Virginia

The ink was violet, Sherlock had noticed when he first read it. The colour of her eyes. He had never seen violet ink for sale in any stationer's shop. Perhaps she had brought a supply with her to England from America. The letter wasn't postmarked, of course, because it had been included with Mycroft's letter and hand-delivered. The envelope was of a stiff card with a noticeable weave to it, so tracing the maker would present little problem, if he ever needed to. Two small stains beside Sherlock's name on the front of the envelope indicated that Virginia had, indeed, begun to cry.

Travis Stebbins. He tried to picture a face to go along with the name, but it was futile. People's names rarely said anything about their appearance, or vice versa. Sherlock couldn't help but imagine a tall, muscular boy with an open, tanned face. Handsome. Strong.

He wished Virginia well in her life. He really did.

Everything she had said had been true – he *had* been gone a long time, and he *might* not have ever come back, and even if he had come back he *might* have met someone else while he had been away. He couldn't have expected her to wait for him.

But he wished she had.

The coast of Ireland appeared as a long smudge against the horizon. Mr Larchmont stomped across the deck shouting orders to the crew to trim the sails, adjust course and, of course, look lively. When he came to the side of the ship he stared up. Sherlock expected him to inquire, with assorted curses, what exactly Sherlock thought he was doing hanging there when there was work to be done, but his faded blue eyes just regarded the boy quizzically.

'Not the way you thought it would be, I warrant,' he said gruffly.

'Not the way *what* would be, sir?'

'Your return. It never is.' He paused, still gazing up at Sherlock. 'Let me tell you the great secret of a sailor's life, son. You can never go back. The reason is that the place you think you're going back to is not the way you remember it, partly because it has changed, partly because you have changed, but mostly because you aren't remembering the truth, just a shiny memory that masquerades as the truth. That's why most sailors stay on the high seas. It's the only thing they can go back to time and time again that doesn't

change.' He gazed out at the distant horizon. 'I remember when I first went to sea, I'd just got married. I was away for over a year. When I got back I didn't recognize my wife on the dockside, and she didn't recognize me as I came down the gangplank. We were strangers to each other.' He looked at Sherlock, then back at the horizon. 'If you want to stay, there's always a place for you,' he said, and then stomped away before Sherlock could respond.

Sherlock stayed in the rigging for a while longer, until a grey line appeared on the horizon. For a while it looked like a wave, bigger than usual, but gradually it resolved itself into low hills that rolled on into each other. Mr Larchmont shouted to the sailors on deck to trim the sails and change course five degrees to the south. Sherlock scrambled further up the rigging to where the spar crossed the mainmast, and set about helping to bring the sails under control. The damp wooden timbers of the ship creaked as it came gradually about, heading for where the navigator estimated Galway Bay was to be found.

The land got closer and closer: a grey-green counterpoint to the heavy grey clouds that hung over their heads. Eventually they were sailing past dark hills on the starboard side of the ship. Usually, when the *Gloria Scott* made port, the sailors were joyful, looking forward to a spell on land, but now they seemed to be morose. Maybe it was the weather, maybe it was the look of the countryside.

Far ahead Sherlock could see the quay and stone houses of Galway. He could see people moving around. Several other ships were already docked, but there were enough spaces left for the *Gloria Scott* to join them easily. Even so, it took over an hour for the ship to berth. People bustled around the quayside – dock workers, gawkers, tradesmen eager to replenish the ship's stores and men and women offering accommodation in the town. Lines were thrown from ship to land and tied to bollards and to stanchions.

And that was it. Sherlock was home – or as near to home as the *Gloria Scott* was going to carry him.

A covered carriage was waiting by the quayside. Sherlock could just about discern a figure inside wearing a top hat. Whoever it was was staring up at the ship. Maybe an official from the docks, waiting to board so that he could discuss official details with Captain Tollaway. The driver was sitting up on top and in front of the carriage, swathed in a blanket. He looked as if he might be asleep.

The next hour or so was taken up by making sure everything in the *Gloria Scott* was fastened down, tied up or covered with a tarpaulin. At some stage Sherlock caught sight of someone coming aboard via the gangplank. He glanced at the carriage but the door was still closed and the top-hatted figure was still visible inside. A shiver ran up Sherlock's back, and it took him a moment to trace the random thought that had triggered the feeling. Perhaps

the occupant of the carriage was someone working for the Paradol Chamber, sent to make sure that Sherlock hadn't got back from the South China Seas alive. Well, if it was, then there was little he could do apart from dive off the starboard side of the ship and try and swim to land unobserved, and what would that achieve? He got back to his work, but the crew were finishing their tasks, obviously eager to disembark and get on with whatever it was that sailors did in a fresh port. Mr Larchmont gave the queuing crew the latest instalment of their wages, and then they were allowed to disembark. As Sherlock took his pay the ship's master said: 'I'll hold off filling your position for a day, laddie. Just in case.'

'I appreciate that,' Sherlock said. 'Thanks.' In his heart he knew that he wouldn't be coming back to the *Gloria Scott*, but Mr Larchmont had been good to him, and he didn't want to reject the man's kindness out of hand.

Sherlock walked down the gangplank, already feeling that unsteadiness that came from using legs on land that were conditioned to the swaying of a ship's deck.

As Sherlock approached the covered carriage, a hand beckoned him from the carriage's window. He crossed to it warily. Surely the Paradol Chamber had punished him enough?

It wasn't anyone from the Paradol Chamber. In the watery sunlight that filtered into the carriage from outside,

Sherlock could just about make out a plump, jowly face staring down at him from out of the darkness.

'Hello, Sherlock,' a voice said. It was deep, resonant, and very familiar.

'Hello, Mycroft,' Sherlock said, trying to contain the emotions that roiled within his chest. 'You didn't have to meet me, you know?'

Mycroft Holmes shrugged: a rippling of his corpulent frame in the darkness. 'I felt it to be my brotherly duty. Despite the fact that leaving London makes me feel like a crab that has been somehow removed from its shell and is being allowed to run around unprotected while hungry gulls circle overhead, I wanted to save you the trouble of making your own way home.'

'And you wanted to check that I actually *was* coming home,' Sherlock added. 'Rather than staying aboard the *Gloria Scott* and making a life for myself on the open ocean.'

'You have a fine mind,' Mycroft rumbled. 'Or at least, you did have before you left. Devoting it to memorizing sea shanties and the various different types of knots that sailors must master would be a waste.'

Sherlock smiled. 'Actually, you would be surprised how many things you need to know in order to be a sailor. It's not just knots and sea shanties. There's being able to predict the weather from the look of the sky or the behaviour of the birds, there are the various languages

you need to be able to speak a smattering of in order to make the most of your time ashore, there's the ability to bargain over the buying and selling of your cargo, there's the medical knowledge you need to know so you can treat fungal infections, cuts, burns, digestive problems and scurvy . . .' He paused, thinking. 'But you're right – there *are* a lot of knots.'

'Could you climb inside?' Mycroft asked. 'I am getting a crick in my neck looking down at you like this.'

Sherlock walked around the front of the carriage to the other side. Sailors who were still leaving the *Gloria Scott* stared at him with undisguised curiosity, obviously wondering what made him so important that a carriage was waiting for him. The horses sniffed at him as he passed. They didn't seem over-exerted, which meant that they hadn't come far, pulling the carriage. Galway was in the West of Ireland, which meant that Mycroft had either sailed all the way around the coast from the other side or, more likely, he had taken a ferry from England to Dublin, on the east coast of the island, and travelled across via carriage. As the horses were still fresh, he obviously hadn't just arrived in Ireland. He must have been staying somewhere local. The entire thought process took less than a second. As he came to his conclusion Sherlock glanced up at the blanket-swaddled driver, but all he could see of the man's face was a pair of closed eyes. Reaching the

other side, he opened the door and climbed in.

Once he got used to the relative darkness of the interior, he glanced critically at his brother. Mycroft's face was as familiar to Sherlock as his own, but his brother had put on weight. Quite a lot of weight, from the look of it. His cheeks were almost invisible beneath layers of fat, and he seemed to have developed several more chins, none of which were defined by any underlying bone. He had a walking stick of black ebony, topped with silver, upon which he rested his hands. It was thicker than most such sticks Sherlock had seen. He supposed that it would have to be, to take his brother's weight without snapping, and that told him more than he wanted to know about the changes in his brother's health over the past year.

'You're looking well,' Sherlock said eventually.

'You are being too kind. Either that or your observational facility has withered in the time you have been away. I am neither looking well nor feeling well. I fear I have the beginnings of gout in my right foot, and I may need recourse to spectacles in the near future. Or a monocle, perhaps.' He looked Sherlock up and down. 'You, however, have developed muscles in places where I had no idea that muscles could develop. Your eyes are washed out by all the sun that you have experienced, and your hair is unfashionably long. I perceive that you haven't started shaving yet, which is a small blessing I

suppose, but I cannot believe that it will be long before you will be sporting an unappealing moustache and a small goatee beard.' He paused, considering. 'I see traces on you of various ports of call – Dakar, Borneo, Shanghai, of course, and, if I am not very much mistaken, Mombasa and the Seychelles as well. The rough skin on your hands indicates that the Captain has allowed you to work your passage on the *Gloria Scott*, which is what Amyus Crowe and I had assumed would happen. Your general muscular development suggests a great deal of climbing, but the change in your poise, the way you hold yourself, suggests a different form of activity.' He cocked his head to one side. 'Gymnastics? No, I think not. More likely to be an Eastern martial art along the lines of karate or judo.'

'*T'ai chi*,' Sherlock said softly.

'I have heard of it. I see from the calluses on the fingers of your left hand that you are still practising that abominable instrument, the violin, although I am unsure how, given that you left it at Holmes Manor.' He shuddered slightly, the rolls of fat around his neck shivering like a disturbed blancmange. 'I cannot tell, but I do hope that you have not picked up any tattoos on your travels. I find the idea of disfiguring one's skin with a design that can never be removed abhorrent in the extreme.'

'No, Mycroft – no tattoos. And, just to put your mind at rest, I have contracted no strange tropical diseases either.'

'I am relieved to hear it.' He suddenly reached out a hand and put it on Sherlock's knee. 'Are you . . . all right, Sherlock? Are you *well*?'

Sherlock took a moment before answering. 'What is the phrase that doctors use when conveying news to relatives? I am "as well as can be expected", I suppose.'

'You survived. That is what counts.'

'Not unchanged, Mycroft,' Sherlock said.

'If you had remained at home in England then you would have changed anyway. It is called "growing up".'

'If I had remained at home in England, then *some* things would not have changed. Or at least, they would have changed in a different way.'

'You mean Virginia, of course. Or at least, the burgeoning relationship between you and her. You obviously received at least one of the letters I sent.'

Sherlock glanced sideways, out of the window, before Mycroft could see the sudden gleam of tears in his eyes.

Instead of pressing Sherlock on the matter, Mycroft made a brief 'harrumph' sound, then said: 'Before you ask, Father is still in India with his regiment. I have received a series of letters from him, so I know that he is fit and well. Mother is . . . stable . . . but her health is still fragile. She sleeps a lot. As for our sister – well, what can one say?' He shrugged. 'She is as she always is. I am afraid to tell you, by the way, that Uncle Sherrinford has had a bad fall.

He broke an arm and several ribs. Aunt Jane is looking after him, but at his age a fall like that can accelerate the inevitable end that we all come to.'

Sherlock took a few moments to process the information. He felt a twinge of sadness. He hadn't got to know his uncle very well, but he had liked the man. Sherrinford had embodied a kindness, a Christian morality and an obsession with research that had impressed Sherlock in the time he had spent at Holmes Manor.

'What about you?' he asked eventually. 'Are you still living in Whitehall and working in the Foreign Office?'

'Sherlock, I suspect I shall be living in the one and working in the other until the day I die. When you add the Diogenes Club, where I spend most of my lunchtimes and evenings, the three locations form a triangle which defines my life.' He stared at Sherlock for a few moments in silence. 'We should have a discussion some time about your future, but I have a feeling that we will need a geometric figure with considerably more vertices than a triangle to describe it.'

'I'm not sure I like the idea of being *defined* by any shape, Mycroft. As far as I can see, my future is amorphous. Shapeless.'

'You will need to earn money somehow. You will need to live somewhere. Thought must be given to these things.'

'But not now,' Sherlock said.

‘I agree. Not now.’ Mycroft reached up with his walking stick and rapped it against the roof of the carriage. ‘Driver! You there! Take us back to the hotel.’ As the carriage lurched off he looked back to Sherlock. ‘I have taken rooms at the local tavern. The beds sag but the food is acceptable. I trust you do not object to spending a night or two here before we return to England?’ He paused for a second, and when he spoke again his voice was uncharacteristically hesitant. ‘You *are* coming back to England, aren’t you?’

Sherlock nodded. ‘I am,’ he confirmed. ‘I have been to sea and come back. I don’t want to make either a habit or a career out of it.’ Just to provoke his brother a little he added: ‘Maybe I’ll join the circus next – for the experience.’

‘There are some experiences that can be taken on trust,’ Mycroft said. ‘That is one of them.’

As the carriage clattered away from the harbour, and into the town, Sherlock asked: ‘How exactly did you know when the *Gloria Scott* would be arriving in Galway? And if it comes to that how did you know that it *would* be arriving in Galway? There are other ports where we might have docked.’

‘Ah.’ Mycroft shifted uncomfortably. ‘You have, as is your wont, arrived straight at the heart of the issue. There is a job here that I need to do, and I need your help to do it.’