Saint Peter's Confession

Sherlock Holmes - The Secret Letters

Alistair Croft

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Foreword

BY ALISTAIR CROFT

The documents presented in the preceding volume concern events that unfolded in Paris in the year 1891, and which at first glance might be regarded as a limited case of art forgery.

A closer examination, however, reveals that these were not merely isolated acts, but part of a structure of far greater scope, in which identity, origin, and value were subjected to systematic manipulation.

Several circumstances, only indirectly discernible within the Parisian sequence, suggested that certain connections extended beyond France and into circles characterized by a different form of institutional foundation.

In particular, a number of references—whose full significance could not be determined at the time—point toward environments in which historical documents and religious authority are administered with a degree of discretion that in itself renders any investigation difficult.

The material now at hand appears to confirm that these connections lead onward to Rome.

Introduction

BY DR. JOHN H. WATSON

Approximately a week passed before I once again took up the letters.

I had set them aside deliberately—not from any lack of interest, but because I felt a need to allow the events of Paris to settle within me. It seemed to me that they required not merely reading, but reflection, and that too hasty a continuation would constitute a kind of injustice to what I had already received. I have often since observed that a narrative which seizes one strongly may also demand a certain distance before one is able to enter its next section with a clear mind. It is as though the mind must be given time to readjust—not in order to forget, but in order to understand.

There was nothing in my circumstances that called for haste. Holmes's letters belonged to the past, and though they bore the marks of action and danger, they were no longer events unfolding before my eyes, but carefully recorded accounts, awaiting to be read with the attention they deserved.

Thus, I allowed the days to pass, occupied with minor affairs, yet with a persistent awareness of the box that stood upon my desk. Only when the impressions from Paris had found their proper place, and my own curiosity could once more be joined with calm, did I resolve to return to th em.

I sat in my study, where everything was as I preferred it when a task demanded both quiet and attention. The light fell in through the window

at a subdued angle, rendering the surface of the desk clear and orderly. The silence in the room was not empty, but full of expectation.

The box stood before me on the table.

I had already opened it and arranged the letters into two piles. To the left lay those from Paris, read through and once more gathered with a care that bordered on the meticulous. To the right lay the unopened letters—those bearing Rome as their place of origin, and which until now had been kept outside the sphere of my attention.

I let my hand pass lightly over the Parisian pile and adjusted it, as though by doing so I might ensure that nothing of what had already been experienced would be lost in what was to follow. The motion was without real necessity, yet it afforded me a brief sense of order. For a moment I remained seated thus—not hesitating, but pausing, like a reader who knows that the next page will lead into something not easily set aside again.

With the first letter in hand, I paused once more before breaking the seal.

My thoughts returned involuntarily to Paris—and to Holmes.

It still struck me as remarkable how swiftly he had overcome the effects of the encounter at Reichenbach Falls. I had, it is true, observed a certain weakness in him, particularly in one shoulder, yet never of such a kind as to impede his work. On the contrary, he seemed to bear it with a kind of reluctance, as though the body were an interfering factor that ought not to be accorded significance.

More noticeable was the change I believed I could discern in his state of mind. The first days in Paris had been marked by a distinct vigilance—indeed, almost a restlessness. Holmes would frequently halt, turn, and let his gaze pass over crowds and streets, as though he expected to discover something not yet visible to others. That this caution was not without cause became clear later, but at the time it appeared almost instinctive, like a residue of the danger he had only just escaped.

As the days passed, this altered. The restless attentiveness gave way to something else—a greater calm, though not a passive calm; rather, a form of concentrated control. His observations became fewer, yet all the more

precise, and his reasoning once again assumed that clarity and sharpness which I had, over the years, come to associate with him. It was as though he gradually found his way back to the firm ground from which his particular abilities arise.

I could not help but feel a certain admiration for this capacity. Where others would have required time and protection, Holmes appeared to regain his strength through the very act of work itself.

And yet there was one thing that could not be brought to rest.

I could not rid myself of the thought that nothing had yet been brought to a conclusion. On the contrary, it seemed to me that the events in Paris had opened the case rather than closed it. There were threads which not only remained untied, but which pointed onward—beyond the city and into something whose scope I could not yet discern.

One figure in particular pressed itself upon my reflections: the man whom Holmes had referred to as the Hat Man.

He had appeared on several occasions, always in the periphery, always present without stepping forward. He was neither an obvious enemy nor a clear ally, and it was precisely this indeterminacy that made him all the more unsettling. Holmes had chosen to confront him, yet without attaining any true clarification. I recalled especially one passage in which he—with a rare hint of uncertainty—had written that he could not determine who, in truth, was following whom; whether it was the Hat Man moving in his wake, or whether he himself was, unwittingly, being led onward.

This thought continued to occupy me.

I took up the paper knife and let its fine edge glide along the edge of the letter. The motion was steady, yet I was conscious that beneath this composure lay a curiosity that could not be entirely mastered—and perhaps also a faint unease.

What would follow?

Would the case proceed along the same course, or would it alter in character? Perhaps it would prove greater than it had first appeared. Perhaps it would lead into a domain where not only actions, but intentions themselves, must be examined with a different kind of attention.

I did not know.

I remained seated for a moment longer and let my gaze rise from the table to the chair that stood empty on the opposite side. It had once been his. There was nothing remarkable about it in itself, and yet in my eyes it carried a significance that no other object in the room could equal. I had often sat there across from him, listening to his reasoning and striving to follow his thoughts as far as I was able.

Now it stood empty.

I felt a slight pang of longing, but also a quiet pleasure at the thought that, through these letters, I would once again be permitted to follow him. Not in life, as before, but in his own words.

It seemed to me that the distance between us diminished, if only for a moment.

With that thought, I turned my attention once more to the letter, let my fingers find the seal—and broke it.

Letter I

ARRIVAL IN ROME

November 23, 1891
Rome

My dear Watson,□
I now find myself in the heart of Rome.

After some days' stay, during which I have allowed my impressions to settle and secured suitable lodgings, I have today begun what I must describe as my actual work. It is early in the forenoon, and I have just taken my place in St. Peter's Square.

It is a remarkable space to enter.

The square opens with such breadth that at first glance it appears almost empty, and yet it is far from deserted. Streams of people move in every direction, and the broad colonnades that encircle the square lend that movement a form that is at once fluid and ordered. One is here confronted with a monument, not merely in the architectural sense, but as the expression of a will to gather, direct, and retain.

I perceived at once that the atmosphere differs from the one I left behind in Paris. Where the French capital was marked by movement and variation, there rests here another kind of gravity—as though the place contains not only action, but also a long memory of it. It is not a stage for the unforeseen, but a space in which what is already known is repeated and confirmed.

I took a seat upon a bench and for some time allowed my gaze to rest upon the people who passed by. A pattern soon emerged. The pilgrims move freely, often in smaller groups, their steps unhurried and their attention directed toward the place itself rather than toward one another.

The priests move with a corresponding ease, but with a different awareness. Their motions are assured, and they do not appear to seek their way, but to know it beforehand.

More striking are the officials who cross the square with a distinct sense of purpose. Their pace is firm, and their dress—particularly the cut and length of the sleeves—sets them apart discreetly, yet unmistakably, from the others. They do not merely move through the space, but seem to serve a function within it.

And finally, there are those who pass without any visible form of scrutiny. They do not stop, are not addressed, and their movement provokes no reaction from those who otherwise seem to regulate the life of the square. It is not their appearance that grants them access, but something less conspicuous—a form of recognition that does not need to be confirmed.

It then became clear to me that this is not a place where power is concealed. It is present in the arrangement itself. Not as a force visibly enforced, but as a structure determining who may move freely and who must stop. It is not control in its most obvious form, but an organization of access so complete that it is seldom noticed.

In order to observe this more closely, I joined, without attracting any particular notice, a small party of visitors being shown about by a guide. They appeared to be ordinary tourists, and their presence afforded me the opportunity to move more freely and without presenting myself as an observer.

I caught only fragments of what was being said, nor did it interest me especially. My attention was fixed upon something else.

At first glance, there seemed to be only very few guards present in the square—one or two uniformed figures stationed at strategic points. But as I allowed my gaze to linger upon the surroundings, a different picture emerged.

One man stood by a fountain, apparently absorbed in watching the movement of the water, yet from time to time his glance turned discreetly toward those who passed. Another sat upon a bench not far from me, apparently resting, but with an alertness that could not be reconciled with relaxation. And a third—whom I had not noticed at first glance—had quietly joined our little party without anyone seeming to question his presence.

It gradually became clear to me that there were far more guards present than was immediately apparent. They had not been placed there to appear as control, but to merge with the crowd.

My attention was, in this connection, especially caught by one individual. He moved through the square with an ease that at once set him apart from the others. He was not stopped, not addressed, and his movements appeared to require no visible form of authorization. There was nothing in his appearance that plainly marked authority, and yet he seemed to have access to every part of the space. This circumstance occupied me. For if access was not granted through visible signs, it must depend upon something else.

I therefore arrived at the conclusion that it was not control in its usual form that ruled here, but recognition. Not who one was by virtue of one's dress or station, but who one was perceived to be by those observing one. It is a far more refined form of power—and one considerably more difficult to penetrate.

After some time among the crowds in the square, it became clear to me that further progress could not depend upon observation alone. What I had begun in Paris with Moreau would here have to be continued by another route.

If there was a connection—and at that time I had no reason to doubt it—it would not reveal itself in the open space, but in the systems behind it. I must therefore direct my attention toward the places where the work was actually done, and where traces might be preserved without necessarily being visible to the ordinary observer.

My first reflections quickly gathered around two areas. The first was the workshops of art.

From the beginning I had entertained the supposition that the kind of forgeries we had seen in Paris could not have come into being without access to materials and techniques of a certain quality. It was not merely a question of skill, but of knowledge of the particular pigments, their composition, and their aging—matters that could only be acquired through systematic work and experience.

In the workshops of the Vatican there must necessarily be restorations of older works underway, just as copies must be produced—whether for study or for replacement. It was there one would find the necessary knowledge, and possibly also the traces that might lead back to the pictures we had already seen.

It was my intention to investigate the use of the pigments, their distinctive properties, and the variations that might reveal a particular hand or a particular workshop. If there existed a parallel to the forgeries we had examined in Paris, it would most likely show itself here.

The second area was the archives. Not merely the official collections, but also the less accessible ones, where documents were preserved, arranged, and—when necessary—reinterpreted. For if there was a connection between what we had seen in the paintings and something more extensive, that connection must be recorded somewhere, though not necessarily in its original form. Archives represent not merely the preservation of the past but also control over how it is presented.

And it struck me that if something is truly concealed, it will rarely be entirely removed. It will either be hidden—inaccessible to most—or else reappear in another form, where its original meaning is obscured, though not wholly annulled.

I thus stood before a double task: to find that which had been preserved in the material, and that which had been reshaped in the documents. Only when both could be brought into relation with one another would it be possible to approach any genuine understanding.

Before taking any further step, I found it necessary to make clear to myself where, precisely, I stood.

The material I had brought with me from Paris was not extensive in quantity, but all the more interesting in character. There I had had

occasion to observe certain repetitions in the use of a particular pigment—not in itself unusual, but employed in a manner suggesting a common origin, or at the very least a common method. It was not the pigment as such that drew my attention, but its handling. There was a uniformity in the layers, a manner in which the color had been applied and afterward worked over, that pointed toward a hand—or rather a practice—that could not readily have arisen by chance. It was, if I may put it so, a trace within the material itself—one that could not be concealed by superficial alterations.

Alongside this stood the name *Montfaucon*. In Paris it had appeared in a context that did not immediately admit of explanation, and it had been repeated with such insistence that I could not regard it as accidental. Names of that kind seldom appear without cause; they are either keys or veils—and at times both at once.

I was therefore obliged to assume that *Montfaucon* was not merely a reference to a person, but possibly to something more extensive: a tradition, a method, or a system not yet fully uncovered.

It was clear to me that this name must occupy a particular place in my further investigations.

In the workshops I would seek traces of the practice suggested by the pigment—repetitions that might lead back to a particular source. But it was in the archives that I must truly hope to find a connection in which the name might take its place within a larger whole.

For if *Montfaucon* had roots, they must be preserved somewhere—not necessarily in the open, but in a form recognizable to the man who knew what he sought.

Thus, I had not much in hand. But what I had was sufficient to give direction.

After reaching these conclusions, it seemed natural to attempt a more direct approach. I left the small party among whom I had until then been moving and allowed myself to be carried forward toward one of the passages that appeared to give access to the inner parts of the complex. My method was deliberately simple: I assumed no particular role, made

no effort to conceal myself, but advanced as though my presence in itself were sufficient.

It has often been my experience that the most effective way to pass a boundary is to behave as though it does not exist.

I did not, however, get far.

A man whose appearance did not at once distinguish him from the other visitors stepped forward and stopped me with a politeness that in its form was unassailable. His gesture was discreet, almost apologetic, and his words even more so: that I was, of course, entirely welcome to continue my tour, but that access to the areas I seemed to have selected was reserved for others. I was directed either to remain with the party or to make use of another route. There was nothing in his tone that could be challenged, and nothing in his bearing to suggest suspicion. And yet it was perfectly clear that I should go no farther. I yielded without protest and withdrew with the same composure with which I had advanced. Any resistance at that stage would have been both useless and imprudent.

But the incident was in itself instructive. It confirmed what I had already begun to suspect: that the boundaries maintained here were not necessarily visible, but were all the more effective for that. One was not rejected by force, but by a kind of regulated movement, in which each person was guided in the direction intended for him.

It was then confirmed for me that the difference in my work here would have to be of another kind than in Paris.

"In Paris I followed traces, Watson... here I must first make myself visible to those who determine which traces exist."

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It was late in the afternoon, and the light had taken on a softer character, allowing the outlines of things to emerge with greater calm, though without losing their sharpness. Along the Tiber the movement was of another kind than that which I had earlier observed. Here there were

none of the same clear patterns, no groups being guided, no invisible boundaries regulating every step.

The water moved in a slow, unbroken current, seemingly indifferent to the structures that otherwise marked the city.

It struck me that this movement was at once entirely natural and entirely independent of the order I had earlier observed. Whereas the people in the square were subject to an invisible organization, the river seemed to follow another law—one that required no permission and could not be halted. It passed through walls and along buildings without anyone stopping it, without anyone seeming to regulate its progress. It was neither concealed nor controlled, and yet it formed part of the whole as a matter of course.

I could not help but take note of this contrast. For if everything else required access, there must be a reason why something could exist without it. Either because it could not be controlled—or because its presence was in itself necessary. This thought remained with me for some distance.

As I followed the course of the river, it became clear to me that my method must change if I wished to proceed further. It was not enough to observe from without.

If I were to penetrate the system now before me, I must find a way to move within it—not as a stranger seeking admission, but as part of the rhythm already present there. I must, if I may so express it, learn to flow with the current rather than place myself outside it.

This realization led me naturally to the question of identity. I had already assumed a name: Dr. Edward Harrington.

It was a name that neither attracted particular attention nor gave rise to questions. It accounted for my presence in a manner that seemed reasonable in most circumstances—an English scholar with an interest in art, history, and restoration. Such a motive is neither unusual nor suspicious in a city such as this.

And yet I was obliged to acknowledge that this name in itself carried me no farther. It opened no doors. It created no resistance, but neither did it create access. It allowed me to move freely in the outer sphere but

stopped me at the first real division. It was, if you will, a name that made my presence possible—but not justified.

Even so, it seemed to me that this first step had been necessary. For without an explanation for one's presence, no man may move freely. But without a justification, that movement will always cease at the first invisible boundary.

I therefore continued my walk along the river with a growing awareness that what I sought was not merely a new name, but a key that could make that name effective.

I had not gone many paces before a familiar sensation announced itself. It was not a sound or a movement that in itself might have attracted notice from a less attentive observer, but rather a repetition—a rhythm that did not belong to the surroundings. The same discreet presence I had earlier observed in Paris now made itself felt once more.

I continued my walk unchanged. There was nothing in my manner that ought to suggest that I had registered anything unusual. On the contrary, I allowed my gaze to travel along the river, paused briefly by the railing, and regarded the movement of the water, as any other stroller might have done. But it was clear to me that the situation was no longer the same as it had been in Paris. There it had been possible to be content with observation: to let the patterns unfold and only afterward intervene. Here that no longer seemed sufficient.

I therefore altered my method. Without haste, yet with a certain resolve, I allowed my route to take another direction. A narrow path led away from the open stretch of the river and into an area where the growth afforded the possibility of momentary cover. I followed it as though by casual impulse and paused for a moment by a great tree whose trunk was broad enough to break the line of sight from the direction from which I had just come.

There I remained standing. Not hidden in any strict sense but placed in such a way that the man who followed must step forward if he wished to continue his movement. I waited.

Only a few moments passed before I heard footsteps approaching—not hurried, not hesitant, but with the same even rhythm I had

already observed. When they reached the point at which my earlier position must have been visible, I stepped forth from the cover of the tree. My appearance was calm, but without hesitation.

He stopped at once. There was no surprise in his face, no obvious reaction by which I might determine whether he had expected this moment or not. He merely stood still and regarded me, as though our meeting were a natural consequence of the road we had both followed.

"You are following me," I said.

He did not answer.

For a brief moment we stood thus facing one another, without anything further being said. There was nothing in his appearance that could give me any fixed point—neither resistance nor assent. I therefore chose to carry the conversation farther.

"I require access." The words were spoken without emphasis, as a statement rather than a request.

He looked at me for another moment, and only then did he speak. "You already have what you need." There was nothing in his tone to suggest that further explanation would follow.

He made a slight motion, as though the conversation were at an end, and then continued on past me with the same undisturbed calm with which he had approached.

I did not turn after him.

There was nothing dramatic in his disappearance—and for that very reason it was all the more remarkable.

I remained standing for a moment after he had gone on. There was nothing in the situation that invited immediate action. On the contrary, it seemed to me that what I had just been given required another kind of attention—one directed not outward, but toward that which was already in my possession.

What, precisely, had I been given?

I reviewed what I knew. First and foremost, the pigment. Next, the system. Over the course of the day, I had gained a certain understanding of how movement was regulated, and how access was organized.

And finally, the name: *Montfaucon*.

It had appeared to me in Paris without explanation, repeated with an insistence that made it impossible to ignore. Until now I had treated it as a clue—a reference to be followed, a piece of information to be clarified. But in light of what had just been said, I was forced to revise that assumption.

If I already possessed what I needed, then its value could not lie in further information, but in understanding what had already been given.

It then occurred to me that *Montfaucon* was not necessarily a clue. Rather, an access. Not something that should lead me farther, but something that—applied in the proper manner—might admit me within.

I then turned away from the river and took the road back toward the city.

My steps were neither hurried nor hesitant. There was in my movement a calm that had not been present earlier in the day—not because I had achieved clarity in any true sense, but because the direction now lay before me.

It no longer seemed necessary to pause at every observation or to search out new clues. I had not been given further information, and yet my position was altered. That was my best judgment. I therefore continued with a certain resolve, borne not by certainty, but by a well-founded hope that the next step—when it was taken—would carry me within, where I had thus far been kept without.

Letter II

THE VATICAN WORKSHOPS

November 25, 1891
Rome

My dear Watson,□
With the plan I had formed, it seemed natural first to attempt the most obvious approach.

Under the name of Dr. Edward Harrington, I presented myself at the office where visitors and inquiries appeared to be received. The room bore the marks of order and routine; nothing seemed accidental, and every movement appeared to follow a prescribed procedure.

I stated my errand as clearly as possible. I explained that I had a particular interest in the restoration of older works of art, and that during my stay in Rome I wished to acquaint myself with the methods and materials employed in the Vatican workshops. My intention, as I expressed it, was purely professional.

I spoke in English. It was my impression that this was not in itself a difficulty—and yet I sensed a certain distance in the exchange. The man with whom I spoke replied politely, but with a reserve that could not be explained by language alone.

He nodded, asked one or two questions, and then referred me to another office, where my inquiry, as he put it, might be examined more closely.

I followed the direction given.

The next office differed only slightly from the first. There I repeated my explanation, with the same result. I was met with the same politeness, the same attentiveness—and the same lack of progress.

Here I was informed that any form of access to the areas I had described would necessarily have to proceed through an official application. It would be advisable, it was added, for such an application to be submitted through the English consulate, or possibly an academic institution that could confirm my affiliation and my intentions.

After repeated inquiries, I paused for a moment in one of the long corridors and allowed my impressions to gather. It was now clear to me, with a certain distinctness, that I had encountered no real opposition in the usual sense. No one had refused me anything, no one had rejected my errand, and no one had called my account into question. And yet the result was the same. I was getting nowhere.

This realization led me naturally back to the only element I had not yet tested: *Montfaucon*.

I had two letters in my possession. One was framed as a direct communication and bore the name as its signature. The other was more neutral, in which the name appeared only as a reference—as a matter, rather than a person. I had not yet determined which of these meanings was the correct one, and it therefore seemed advisable to begin with the most concrete form.

I sought out yet another office, this time in a place where the atmosphere seemed slightly different. There was a greater quiet there, a lesser flow of visitors, and the persons present in the room bore themselves in a manner suggesting a certain authority.

I stepped up to the counter and presented the letter.

The man who received it took it without visible reaction. He let his eyes pass over the paper as though it were merely another inquiry among many. Nothing in his face revealed that he attached any special significance to it.

But after a moment of silence, the situation changed. He rose, without saying anything, and went over to another person in the room—an older man whose position and bearing suggested that he occupied a higher

rank. The letter was handed on, and the two exchanged a few muted remarks. Several times during this brief exchange, their eyes were directed toward me.

There was nothing in their behavior that could be described as agitated, and yet it was clear that the letter was now being handled differently from anything I had thus far experienced. Some assessment was taking place, the criteria of which I did not yet know, but the outcome of which seemed to carry immediate importance.

After another moment, they parted.

The first man returned to the counter, laid the letter before me, and said, with the same calm politeness as before:

"You are requested to follow me." No explanation was added to these words. And yet the difference was complete.

Without comment I followed the man who had addressed me and who now led me farther into the building. Our way took us through a succession of corridors whose arrangement on the surface appeared uniform, but which upon closer observation revealed small differences of function and significance. Doors were opened for us, not all by the same person, but by different individuals who seemed to appear at precisely the proper moment and then vanish again.

We passed from one level to another, at times through narrow passages, at times through larger rooms where the work seemed to be of a different character from anything I had yet seen. The transition between these areas took place without explanation and without pause.

The atmosphere remained throughout the same: quiet and controlled. No one raised his voice, no one asked questions, and no one seemed surprised at my presence. And yet it was evident that I was not moving freely, but was being conducted through a system in which every movement had already been calculated. I took particular note of who opened the doors—and who did not.

After yet another passage through a narrow corridor, where the light fell in only sparsely from high-set windows, my guide stopped before a door that, in appearance, did not differ greatly from the many others we

had passed. It was opened without a word. And the instant I crossed the threshold, the character of the space changed completely.

Where the corridors had been marked by silence and restrained movement, there opened here a world of activity—not noisy, but alive in a way that made it immediately clear that I now found myself in a place where something was being made.

The room was large, high-ceilinged, and traversed by a soft, diffused light that seemed to gather itself around the places where work was being done. Along the walls and in rows across the space stood easels with paintings in various stages of restoration. Some were only faintly visible beneath layers of protection; others appeared in sections where the colors had just been brought forth again.

I approached one of these works and observed the labor.

An artist stood bent over the canvas with a concentration that excluded all else. With delicate instruments he worked upon the surface, removing layer by layer what time had laid upon it, and allowing the underlying colors to emerge with a caution that testified to an intimate knowledge of the nature of the material. Beside him stood small containers of pigments—carefully measured, arranged according to tone and composition—and I could not help but notice the manner in which they were being used, which was not without resemblance to what I had seen before.

In an adjoining room, the work was of another kind. There stood sculptures of varying sizes and materials—some in plaster, others in stone—surrounded by scaffolds and tools bearing the marks of frequent use. Artists moved among them with the same calm concentration I had observed among the paintings. Additions were made, material removed, adjustments carried out with a precision that left no doubt that every motion had been carefully considered.

At first glance, this might have appeared a kind of disorder—a jumble of works, tools, and materials, without visible connection. But as I allowed my eye to rest upon the room, another structure emerged.

There was a clear system to it. Each person worked exclusively upon his own piece. There was no interference, no disturbance, and no unnec-

essary movement between the different areas. What at a distance might have seemed a common enterprise was in reality a collection of carefully separated processes, all taking place within the same frame. Everyone knew what he was about. And no one appeared to have any need to ask.

I remained standing for a moment and allowed this impression to fix itself in my mind. Here there was not merely craftsmanship, but knowledge in practice—a continuity in which experience and method were being passed onward with such precision that even small deviations must be traceable.

My dear Watson,

I shall here summarize a few reflections which it seems necessary to preserve before I proceed further.

First, I must return to the name *Montfaucon*.

It has now proved to have an effect that I can no longer doubt. Without further explanation, without any form of formal approval, it has opened an access which, after repeated attempts, I have been unable to obtain by any other means. And yet I must acknowledge that I still do not understand what it is that has, in fact, worked.

I do not know whether *Montfaucon* denotes a person, a function, or a matter. I do not know who recognized it—or why it was recognized. And I am therefore equally unable to determine whether, in what follows, I shall find myself face to face with a particular person, or whether I have merely set in motion a mechanism the origin of which is still concealed from me.

This question therefore remains open.

Next, I must note something that appears to me of no small importance. Already in my first closer observation of the work in the workshops, I recognized traits which I have previously had occasion to study in Paris. It was not in the broader lines, but in the detail—in the way the pigments were applied, in the layering, and in the treatment of the surface. They were the same principles. Not necessarily executed by the same hand, but within the same practice.

I therefore venture to conclude that the technique which Moreau and I previously sought to identify not only has a connection to these

workshops but must have its origin here. This brings me nearer to an understanding of where I am. But not yet to an explanation of why I have been admitted.

I was led onward through yet another series of rooms, until we entered a chamber whose character at once distinguished it from the previous ones.

In the center of the room, raised upon a solid structure and surrounded by scaffolding, stood a painting which I immediately recognized as The Transfiguration. It occupied nearly the whole room, not merely in a physical sense, but also in the attention it commanded. Several restorers were at work upon it at the same time, each on his own portion of the piece, without their labor seeming to disturb the unity of the whole.

In the upper part, where the light gathers about Christ, a man worked with a calm and precision that testified to many years of experience. His movements were small, almost imperceptible, and yet each touch upon the surface had a distinct effect. Beside him stood containers of carefully measured pigments, whose shades appeared to have been selected with a care that went far beyond what was immediately visible.

Lower down, in the darker part of the composition, the work was of another character. Here the colors were heavier, deeper, and the transition between light and shadow far more complex. Two restorers worked side by side, bent over the sections where the possessed boy and the surrounding figures emerge in a state of unrest and tension. Their instruments were finer, their movements more hesitant, as though each layer required a particular attention before it could be touched.

None of them took any notice of my presence. It seemed to me that they were accustomed to working under observation. I was therefore able, without difficulty, to draw near and place myself so close that I could follow their work in detail.

It was here that my attention was especially caught. The technique employed in the darker passages was of a character I had not previously had occasion to study so directly. Layers were applied with such precision that the colors, despite their depth, did not appear heavy or dull. On the

contrary, they seemed to retain a kind of inner light—a radiance that did not lie upon the surface, but in the very structure of the material itself.

It was not darkness in its pure form. It was darkness that bore light.

I observed how the restorer worked with these layers, how he removed what had been added through time, and how he—almost imperceptibly—rebuilt what had once been there. Every movement seemed guided by a knowledge that was not merely technical, but also historical—as though he were working not only with color, but with an understanding of how the color had originally come into being.

It was then that I could no longer remain in doubt. The technique Moreau and I had observed in Paris—the particular structure of the pigments, their way of reflecting light in spite of their dark character—had its origin here.

From the quiet intensity of the painting, I was led onward into an adjoining room, where the work took on another, more tangible form. Here the air was heavier, marked by the fine dust of stone and plaster, and the sound of tools striking material broke the otherwise prevailing silence in brief, muted rhythms. Sculptures in various stages stood arranged about the room—some still rough in form, others nearly complete, but with small sections where time or earlier intervention had required correction.

It was, however, one particular corner that drew my attention. There a sculptor was at work on what at first glance appeared to be the Apollo Belvedere—the classical figure whose proportions and movement have for centuries been regarded as an ideal.

But it was not the figure itself that aroused my wonder. It was that there stood not one, but two.

Apparently identical versions, placed side by side. The sculptor moved between them with a quiet assurance, as though this arrangement were entirely natural. With his tools he worked alternately upon the one and then the other, adding, adjusting, removing with a precision that gave no immediate indication as to which of the two was the object of restoration—and which merely served as reference.

I drew closer still.

The differences, if any existed, were not easily discerned. The lines were the same, the proportions preserved with such exactness that even minor deviations must have required a special attention to be detected. And yet it was clear that active work was being carried out upon both.

This circumstance occupied me. For if one was the original, why then work upon two? And if both were subject to intervention, what was the purpose of this parallel process?

I observed the sculptor's movements. He paused at one, measured with his eye, made a minor adjustment—and then turned to the other, where a corresponding motion was repeated, not mechanically, but with a variation suggesting a kind of ongoing comparison. It was not a copy in the traditional sense, nor was it a simple restoration. It was a method. A way of preserving form, not merely by conserving what existed, but by simultaneously recreating it in another version—as though the understanding of the work lay not only in its original material, but in the ability to repeat it with such precision that the difference between the one and the other was abolished.

I was obliged to acknowledge that, at that moment, it was not possible for me to determine with certainty which of the two figures was the original. And it was precisely this that made an impression upon me. For where the difference can no longer be discerned through immediate observation, it must be sought in something other than the visible.

The next area through which I was conducted could scarcely be described as a workshop in the proper sense. Rather, it resembled a gallery.

A long hall with a row of columns along one side, where the light fell in from outside in an even, almost undisturbed glow. There was a calm in the room that set it apart from the others, not because the work was less intensive, but because it seemed to require a different kind of concentration.

Worktables had been set up here in rows, and at each table one or two persons sat bent over their task. There must have been fifteen to twenty in all, each engaged in the restoration of older writings—primarily parchments, which lay spread before them in various stages of treatment.

I approached without attracting any particular notice.

The work here was of a far finer character than what I had observed in the previous rooms. Where the paintings required a steady hand, and the sculptures a firm sense of form, this labor appeared to depend upon an almost microscopic precision. With small instruments, surfaces were cleaned, cracks stabilized, and fragments reunited with a care that scarcely allowed for the smallest error.

But it was not the material alone that held my attention. It was also the writing.

Several of the parchments bore evident marks of age, where the ink had lost its strength and the colors in certain sections had faded or partly disappeared. And yet the restorers were not concerned solely with preserving what remained; in certain cases, they also seemed to be rebuilding that which had survived only in part.

Colors were being mixed in small quantities beside them, and with a caution bordering upon the ceremonial, they were applied to strengthen or restore the original lines.

I stopped at one of the tables. A parchment lay spread before the restorer, and even at a distance I could recognize the character of the script. The heading, which still stood relatively clear, could be read without much difficulty. It bore the name of the Church Father Augustine of Hippo. This discovery was not in itself surprising—such texts must naturally be found in an archive such as this—but the manner in which they were being treated drew my attention. For here it was not merely a question of preservation, but also of restoring the text to a form in which it could be read—and thereby also interpreted.

I remained there for a moment and watched the work. For if color and form in paintings and sculptures could be recreated with such precision, then the same must be true of words. And where words are restored, their meaning too may be affected.

It was in this room, among parchments and muted light, that my attention was at last directed in earnest toward a figure who in one and the same instant both belonged to the surroundings—and rose above them.

She stood bent over a worktable where a restorer was at that very moment stabilizing a faintly preserved line of text. She spoke—quietly, but with a precision that immediately altered the character of the work being done. The restorer straightened slightly, not in subservience, but in a kind of sharpened attentiveness shown only to one whose judgment carries weight.

I stopped and observed her. Her posture was erect, even in the slight forward inclination. There was in her movements an economy that excluded every unnecessary gesture. Her hair was dark, arranged with a simplicity that emphasized the lines of her face. Her dress was of high quality, but without ostentation—a subdued elegance in which the material spoke more clearly than the adornment. On her hands I noticed a few pieces of jewelry, discreet, but executed with such precision that their value could not be mistaken.

Yet it was not these outward details in themselves that made an impression. It was the whole. The manner in which she was received, and the manner in which she spoke—and was listened to.

I therefore drew certain conclusions. She did not belong to the staff, and yet she had access on a level exceeding that of most. She moved with a certainty that can belong only to one who has not merely been granted access, but is accustomed to it. Her intervention in the work bore the marks of a professional insight that could not be attributed to a superficial interest. It had therefore to be assumed that her position rested upon a combination of influence and knowledge—and that her background must be rooted in one of the older Roman noble families, whose connections still afforded them no insignificant role.

It was at that moment that she raised her eyes. Our gazes met, and I had the immediate impression that my presence had not escaped her notice—rather the reverse. She had, like me, observed before choosing to act.

She straightened, said a few words to the restorer, and then came toward me.

Her movement through the room possessed a singular balance between the familiar and the elevated. There was nothing hurried in her

step, and yet her appearance drew immediate attention. Those whom she passed seemed instinctively to sharpen their focus, as though her presence in itself served as a kind of measure.

When she reached me, she stopped with a slight, controlled motion and allowed a measured smile to appear.

"Countess Vallevia Rossini," she introduced herself.

She regarded me for a moment. "And you must be Doctor... Harrington, was it not? Doctor Harrington of London."

There was no true question in her wording. She continued, "It is an honor to meet you."

She went on without pause. "I myself have had occasion to visit the galleries of London on several occasions and have always held in high regard the artistic tradition that has developed there. There is a particular discipline in the English approach—a restraint which often allows the detail to emerge more clearly."

I returned her greeting with a slight inclination. "The honor is mine, Countess."

"I must confess," I continued, "that the work carried out here exceeds even my broadest expectations. The precision with which both form and material are treated suggests an insight that cannot merely be learned—but must be handed down."

She regarded me with the same measured smile I had already observed. "You see correctly, Doctor," she replied.

Then she lowered her voice slightly. "And yet this is only the work of copies." She allowed the words to stand between us for a moment. "The truly interesting work," she continued calmly, "takes place elsewhere." There was nothing in her tone that invited further questions—and for that very reason the statement carried a particular weight.

I did not answer at once.

She observed me briefly, as though awaiting my reaction before continuing. "I should be most pleased to continue this conversation with you, Doctor. One does not often meet an observer who both sees and understands."

She produced the same small card and handed it to me. "If you wish to hear more about the originals... then meet me here tomorrow evening."

I took the card. "I shall be there," I replied.

She nodded lightly, as though this had already been reckoned upon, and then turned away.

My dear Watson,

My meeting with Countess Vallevia Rossini strikes me as exceedingly interesting. I have a distinct impression that she represents an access to which I otherwise would never have come anywhere nearby. It is even not impossible that she herself constitutes a significant part of the opening that has been granted me.

Her manner is marked by a courteous kindness and a remarkable professional insight. She does not speak as an outsider, but as one familiar with both the work and its principles. And yet there is something about her that eludes any unambiguous determination.

It is not unusual for persons in her position—where influence and knowledge meet—to carry an element of the enigmatic. This may assume several forms, and I find it still too early to determine which is present in her case.

But one thing now seems to me even more likely than before: She knows more than she has chosen to say. And it is my experience that such persons rarely speak without reason.

Letter III

THE MEETING WITH THE COUNTESS

November 27, 1891
Rome

My dear Watson,□
In these past few days, events have accelerated to such a degree that I can only with difficulty preserve their order in my account. From the access granted me through *Montfaucon*, through my observations in the workshops, and to my first meeting with the countess, I have had the sensation of once more standing in the midst of that game from which I had for a time believed myself removed. I again feel that sharpening of the senses which you will know from earlier accounts, and which always accompanies those cases in which the surface conceals an order not immediately visible.

This evening, which I shall now describe, was no exception.

The countess had left me a card, the contents of which were as precise as they were spare. An address was given—Palazzo Colonna—and with it an exact description of the entrance I was to use: the eastern wing, entrance number three. No name, no further explanation. An instruction, rather than an invitation.

I took a cab through the city's narrow streets, where the light of the lanterns fell unevenly across the old facades, and where the evening still retained a faint remnant of the day's warmth. As we approached the

palace, I had the carriage stop at a suitable distance and covered the last hundred yards on foot.

The entrance was easy to find. The description on the card had been sufficiently precise to exclude all doubt, and I had scarcely had time to orient myself before the door was opened from within. A porter stepped forward, without hesitation and without the slightest sign of uncertainty.

"Dr. Harrington, welcome," he said with a slight inclination of the head. "This way, if you please."

No questions were asked. No inspection was made. I had not been recognized—I had been expected.

I followed him through a succession of halls and corridors, where the light was subdued and the sounds of our footsteps were absorbed by the height of the rooms. We passed no one. Not a servant, not a guest. It was as though this part of the palace had been emptied of life for this very meeting.

We halted at last by an open loggia, where the last light of evening still rested upon the marble floor. A table had been laid with a simple precision that betrayed care. A glass stood ready, and beside it a decanter.

The porter bowed his head slightly and withdrew.

I was alone.

It was only then, when I let my gaze wander away from the table, that I noticed the small side table. Upon it lay an assortment of pipes and tobacco tins, arranged with a discretion that only made their presence the more remarkable. I opened one of the tins.

Its contents were unmistakable.

A strong, dark tobacco of precisely the sort I have preferred for many years. It was fresh and properly stored. Chosen, not by chance—but with knowledge.

I allowed myself a faint smile. This was not hospitality. It was preparation.

I sat down, took one of the pipes, and began calmly to pack it. When I had lit the tobacco, I rose again and let my eyes travel along the walls. The paintings had been placed with an apparent randomness, but with an

interval between them that allowed each to emerge without demanding attention.

It was a smaller painting that stopped me. A scene from a theater. Not large, not ostentatious, but rendered with an accuracy suggesting that the artist had known the place intimately. The construction of the stage, the slightly sloping floor, the close-set scenery—all pointed to a smaller, experimental theater.

I recognized it instantly. Théâtre des Murmures in Montmartre.

I had just resumed my seat when I felt the unmistakable change in the room and rose.

Countess Valeria Orsini stepped forward into the opening of the loggia.

Where at our first meeting she had worn a simplicity that almost concealed her position, she now appeared in full accord with it. Her dress was elegant without being showy, and her movements bore the stamp of a composure that had no need to proclaim itself.

She took her place opposite me.

"What am I to call you?" she asked. "Dr. Harrington? Harold Sigurdsson?" She allowed a brief pause to follow. "Or would you prefer Sherlock Holmes?" A faint smile accompanied her words.

I met her gaze. "You may call me whatever you find appropriate, madam," I replied. "So long as we understand one another."

"We do," she said simply.

I let a moment pass before adding, "And we appear, moreover, to have acquaintances in common."

She raised her eyebrows slightly, not in genuine surprise, but as a reflex that came a fraction too late.

"Do we?"

"A stage in Montmartre," I said calmly. "Of the more experimental variety. And an actress with a particular gift for moving between roles."

She allowed her eyes to rest upon me for a moment, as though weighing how much had already been said.

"I am not acquainted with—"

She stopped herself. An almost imperceptible pause followed, brief, but sufficient. "Camille Ardent," she said then.

"Precisely."

There was now another quality in her gaze. Not uncertainty, but a rapid adjustment—as when a move upon a board must be reconsidered. "She is a remarkable woman," she continued, this time without hesitation. "With a rare understanding of both illusion and precision."

"Qualities that would seem to be of value in certain circles," I observed.

She did not answer directly, but allowed the silence to carry the meaning.

"I have approached you," she continued after a moment, "because I have need of a particular kind of expertise."

"You have only to say so," I answered. "If the matter falls within my province, I am naturally at your disposal."

She regarded me for a moment. "There are substitutions taking place," she said.

I allowed her to continue.

"In several parts of the city. In churches. In private collections. And in institutions where one rightly assumes that what is kept there is under the strictest protection."

"Substitutions," I repeated. "Not thefts?"

"If they were thefts, they would be discovered," she replied calmly. "This is not discovered."

I nodded slightly. "And you wish me to investigate this more closely?"

"I wish," she said, "to see how you investigate it."

"A test, then."

I leaned back slightly. "It will give me pleasure to be of assistance to you."

"I shall send you the address of the first location," she said. "The rest will follow of itself."

She rose.

"You will discover, Mr. Holmes," she added, pausing briefly, "that not all substitutions are visible."

With these words she left the loggia.

I remained standing for a moment before allowing my gaze to return to the little painting from Montmartre. It then seemed to me that the connections in this case were not merely numerous, but deliberately arranged.

My dear Watson,

It now seems to me that the connections I first took to be accidental in fact outline the contours of a pattern which still eludes my full understanding. Paris and Rome no longer stand before me as separate stages, but as parts of a connection in which movements in one place cast shadows in another. I see the traces, but not yet the hand that has laid them.

It is further worth noting that in this case I seem to have assumed a position that does not entirely accord with my usual role. Where I have previously sought out the mystery, I now seem, to some extent, to have been sought out by it. The countess has approached me with a precision that suggests prior knowledge—not merely of my person, but of my movements.

And yet, if I consider our first meeting, I would at that time have sworn to its accidental nature.

Thus, I must once again remind myself that truth rarely presents itself as one continuous surface, but rather in layers, which only permit themselves to be recognized when one regards them in the proper light.

In my next letter I shall give an account of the first of the locations she has held out to me.

Yours devotedly,□
S. H.

Letter IV

SANTA MARIA IN ARACOELI

Watson remained seated for a moment with the letter before him, without at once allowing his eyes to move on to the next lines.

There was one figure who continued to come forward in his thoughts—the countess.

Her presence in the case was already difficult to place. She appeared neither as an adversary nor as an obvious ally, and for that very reason she was harder to assess than most.

Watson let his fingers pass lightly over the paper.

It was not the first time Holmes had stood before a woman whose role eluded any simple category. Watson recalled earlier encounters in which intelligence, independence, and a certain kind of discreet decisiveness had proved just as significant as any open resistance. Women who did not necessarily enter into conflict with Holmes—but who moved in the same sphere as he did, with aims and means of their own.

It was not distrust that he felt. Rather, a sharpened attentiveness. For if Holmes had taught him anything, it was that the greatest influence rarely came from those who marked themselves plainly, but from those who acted with precision without seeking attention.

Watson straightened again and let his gaze fall back upon the letter.

The countess was clearly playing a decisive role. The only question was—which.

He let the thought rest and broke the next seal.

November 28, 1891
Rome

My dear Watson,

The following morning, I took my place in the hotel restaurant, where—in the absence of anything better—I contented myself with a simple breakfast and a cup of black coffee. My thoughts were already directed toward the next step, which had not yet assumed a fixed form, but which I knew must require a certain decisiveness if progress was to continue.

It was in the midst of these reflections that the waiter approached my table.

Without saying a word, he placed a folded note before me and then withdrew with a discretion indistinguishable from that of the rest of the staff—and yet it seemed to me that the movement had served a definite purpose.

I waited until he had turned away. Only then did I open the note. There was but a single name upon it: Santa Maria in Aracoeli. Nothing further.

I was not immediately familiar with the place, but the wording left scarcely any doubt as to its character. It must be a church—and not a random one of its kind.

I folded the note again and let it disappear into my pocket.

There was no occasion for further deliberation.

I finished my meal without delay, summoned a cab, and gave the destination as though I already knew it. Only once the carriage had set itself in motion through the streets of the city did I allow the thought to take hold: I was being led.

The cab carried me through the city's narrow streets until we arrived at the foot of the Capitoline Hill, where it stopped before a broad yet steep marble staircase leading up to the church.

I stepped down and for a moment allowed my gaze to rest upon the ascent before me. The steps rose in an almost unbroken line, their surface smooth and uneven at once, worn by centuries of feet that had passed

along the same way. There were not many people to be seen, yet there were a few figures scattered along the staircase. Halfway up, a pair of persons moved at a pace suggesting ordinary visitors—perhaps tourists who had chosen, without much exertion, to follow the route.

Lower down, nearer to me, the movement was of another character. Two persons were in the act of ascending the stairs on their knees. Their progress was slow, almost ceremonial, and their attention appeared directed not toward their surroundings, but toward the act itself. I thought it likely that they were pilgrims, and that their ascent was not merely a movement through space, but an act with a definite purpose. I watched them for a moment. The staircase was not merely an approach to the holy place. It was a religious ordeal.

I began the ascent myself.

The steps proved, as expected, steeper than they had appeared from below, and their worn surface required a certain attention if one wished to move securely. There was no haste in my progress, and on the way I permitted myself to observe the traces time had left behind—not merely in the stone, but in the way people still made use of it.

When I reached the top, I paused for a moment. Behind me lay the city. Before me rose the wall of the church, plain and massive, without the splendor one might otherwise have expected. It appeared almost like a fortress—not directed against what lay without, but as a boundary enclosing what lay within.

The door stood open.

I entered.

The darkness at once enclosed me, and with it a silence that stood in sharp contrast to the city's continual movement. The light fell in muted patches, and it took a moment before the eye adjusted to the depth of the space.

I allowed my gaze to move through the church.

The first thing to emerge was the golden ceiling, whose surfaces caught even the faintest light and returned it with a calm, almost weighty gleam. Beneath me stretched a floor executed in the characteristic Cosmati

patterns, geometric figures inlaid in marble, whose precision stood in contrast to the otherwise organic wear of the room.

A little to one side stood a large wooden figure of the Christ Child—the Santo Bambino—surrounded by a quiet attentiveness that seemed to gather about it, though no one necessarily stood nearby.

I registered these features quickly. Not as objects of admiration, but as elements in a whole whose structure had not yet fully disclosed itself.

For a moment I permitted myself to let my gaze travel systematically through the space.

It became clear to me at once that certain elements excluded any reasonable notion of manipulation. The golden ceiling, with its extensive surfaces and integrated structure, could scarcely be falsified without leaving evident traces. The same applied to the floor beneath my feet; the inlaid Cosmati patterns were not merely decorative, but part of the construction itself.

If there was an intervention to be found, it must be sought in something more delimited.

My attention therefore gathered itself upon the wooden figure I had earlier noticed—the Santo Bambino.

I approached and, as though by a natural gesture, let my hand slip into my pocket for my magnifying glass. Without attracting undue notice, I examined the surface in closer detail. The grain of the wood stood out clearly, and its structure could not readily be imitated. There was a depth and irregularity in the pattern that only time itself can produce.

I was therefore obliged to conclude that the figure was in all probability of considerable age. Not necessarily so old as certain traditions might claim—that it should have been carved from olive wood from the Garden of Gethsemane struck me as less likely—but old enough, nevertheless, to appear convincing in its own right.

I let the glass slip back into my pocket.

It was at that moment that I noticed him.

An elderly monk sat in one corner of the room, apparently occupied with nothing beyond observing. His placement was not accidental; from that point he commanded a view of both the entrance and the

principal parts of the church. There was nothing in his appearance that drew attention, and yet it was clear that his function was to guard—not necessarily actively, but by his mere presence.

I approached him with the respect the situation required. "Excuse me," I said calmly, "have any of the church's works of art recently been under restoration?"

He looked at me without surprise, as though the question were not unexpected. Without speaking, he raised his hand and pointed up toward the altar.

I followed the motion with my eyes and let them rest upon the icon I had earlier registered, though not yet examined more closely—the Madonna Aracoeli, raised above the space in a position that rendered it at once visible and inaccessible.

I let a moment pass before putting my next question. "Do you know where it was restored?"

"In the Vatican," he answered briefly.

Nothing more was said. And yet it was enough.

I had no need to remain longer. The information I had obtained was sufficient to establish the direction, but not to lead me to a final conclusion. Further investigation was therefore required, and it was clear to me that this could not be undertaken without a certain preparation.

I still lacked the necessary tools.

I therefore resolved to devote the following forenoon to obtaining what might be required, and only then to return to the church later in the day—better equipped to continue the inquiry.

For the second time, I tested whether my key—*Montfaucon*—had the effect I must now, with some probability, attribute to it.

With that in mind, I had chosen to pay a visit to the Vatican Library.

As with my previous inquiry, I was at first met with a certain surprise. The man who received me at the desk allowed his gaze to rest upon me a moment longer than was necessary, as though my presence required an assessment not immediately capable of being made. As before, he was obliged to consult a superior, and only after a brief, muted exchange was I asked to follow.

I was led into the library.

The room—or rather the succession of rooms that opened before me—was in itself of such a character that it would have been natural to linger over it. The shelves, stretching in length and height, contained a mass of knowledge of which few places in the world can present an equal. And yet I did not permit my attention to disperse.

My errand was more limited.

I therefore directed my inquiry toward such information as might shed light upon the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli, and in particular upon the icon known there under the name Madonna Aracoeli.

The information I drew forth was not in itself decisive, but sufficient to confirm that the history of the work was the subject of several interpretations, and that its origin could not be established with complete certainty. This circumstance struck me as not without significance.

Having concluded my studies, I left the library without further delay.

There was now another matter that required my attention. I needed an instrument. This I found in a small hardware shop nearby, where I purchased a pair of opera glasses of the best quality—an instrument which, by virtue of its modest size, permits closer observation at a distance without attracting attention. With this in my possession, I once more directed my steps toward the church. My investigation could now continue.

After again ascending the staircase, I entered the familiar space.

This time the light was of another character. The afternoon sun fell in through the upper windows and gathered in soft fields that moved slowly across the walls and floor. When my gaze again turned toward the Madonna Aracoeli, the icon appeared with a clarity that had not been present at my first visit. The light was, if one will, ideal.

I nodded briefly to the monk, who sat in his place. He did not seem to have altered his position since the day before.

I then took out the opera glasses and directed them toward the icon. With a steady motion I adjusted the focus and began a systematic observation. I changed position several times, moved from side to side, and regarded the work from as many angles as the nature of the room allowed.

The light, falling differently across the surface, successively emphasized the individual sections and permitted an examination that would otherwise not have been possible.

I searched for the decisive thing. After sufficient time, however, I was obliged to acknowledge that it did not present itself. There was nothing that could in itself be described as proof.

I let the glasses fall, folded them, and returned them to my coat pocket. Without further delay I stepped over to the monk, laid a coin upon the table before him, and then left the church.

I made my way back toward my hotel.

At this point, nothing had been proven. And yet it seemed to me that neither had that which might have disproved my suspicion shown itself. What remained, therefore, was not a conclusion—but a confirmed suspicion.

Letter V

PERSONS OF CONSEQUENCE

Watson sat alone in his study, where the muted light of afternoon entered through the window and settled quietly across the writing desk. The box of letters stood before him, and beside it lay those already opened, neatly gathered in a pile that bore witness to the journey he had followed in recent days with growing attention.

He let his hand rest for a moment upon the paper.

Some time had passed since he had last broken a seal. Not for lack of interest—quite the contrary—but because he had found it necessary to allow the impressions to settle. Holmes's accounts from Paris, and now Rome, had opened a case whose scope seemed to expand with each new letter, and yet there was in them a clarity, a direction, that Watson could not help but admire.

He leaned back slightly in his chair.

It did not surprise him that Holmes had come so far. On the contrary. It seemed to him rather a natural resumption of something that had only been interrupted for a time. The sharpness, the calm, and the almost effortless manner in which Holmes moved through even the most complex relationships were not merely intact—they seemed to have been strengthened.

Watson felt a quiet pleasure in this realization. Not only as a reader of the letters, but as a friend.

There was something recognizable in Holmes's voice, something that had been absent for a period and that now stood forth clearly once

more. Not merely the analytical precision, but also that particular kind of presence which had always accompanied it whenever Holmes worked in full concentration.

He turned his gaze toward the box. The next letter lay on top.

With a steady movement he picked it up, let his fingers for a moment follow the edge of the sealed paper, and regarded it as though he wished, once again, to assure himself that the moment was the right one.

Then he brought the paper knife forward.

The seal was broken.

November 29, 1891
Rome

My dear Watson,□
I believe the first part of the task may now be regarded as solved.

On the very next morning, while I was still seated at the breakfast table, I was once again brought a folded note. As before, it was placed before me without remark and without any visible sender.

I opened it. The words were sparse: Vatican Restoration Workshop. Eleven o'clock. Nothing more. It was all that I required.

I made myself ready without delay and left the hotel in good time.

I arrived at the Vatican well before the appointed hour.

As on my earlier visits, I presented myself at the entrance without attracting undue attention. I let the name—*Montfaucon*—fall with the same naturalness, as though it were already known and accepted.

This time the reaction was different. The look directed toward me no longer bore the stamp of the reserved assessment I had earlier observed. There was no hesitation, no discreet appeal to a superior, no uncertainty as to whether my presence required further confirmation.

I was recognized.

The access that had previously needed to be established now seemed to form part of a structure in which my presence no longer required

explanation. I was therefore at once asked to follow, and as before I was led through the long corridors, whose quiet order now appeared less as a barrier and more as a passage.

This time my guide stopped already at the first room. She was there.

Countess Vallevia Rossini moved toward me with the same calm assurance I had noticed before. She stopped at a proper distance and looked at me as though awaiting an answer she had already foreseen.

I spared her preliminaries. "Madonna Aracoeli," I said.

She nodded, without surprise. "Come," she replied simply. "There is something you must see."

She turned without further explanation, and I followed her through the workshops. We passed the rooms I already knew, but continued farther on, deeper than before. The atmosphere changed gradually. There were fewer people, fewer movements, and the open activity that had marked the outer rooms gave way to a more controlled silence.

We stopped at a smaller, secluded room whose function did not immediately reveal itself. She opened the door without hesitation, and we entered.

In the middle of the room stood an object covered by a cloth. There was nothing in its shape to disclose what lay beneath, and yet it was clear that it had not been placed there by chance.

We approached.

The Countess laid her hand upon the fabric and removed it with a single movement.

Before us stood the Madonna Aracoeli.

I permitted myself to give my surprise no visible form. Instead, I brought my hand to my pocket, took out my lens, and stepped a pace nearer. Without saying a word, I began my examination.

My attention quickly gathered upon the section in which the Madonna's mantle had been rendered in blue.

I worked in silence. I let my eyes follow the surface, adjusted the angle, let the light fall differently upon it, and examined the individual passages with a precision only such an instrument allows. I paused at the slightest variations, returned, compared, continued.

The Countess said nothing. She watched me.

I allowed the examination to continue until every reasonable doubt had to be regarded as excluded. Only then did I let my hand lower slightly and step back.

"This is the original," I said.

The Countess looked at me—not surprised, but with an attentiveness suggesting that she wished the grounds to be stated.

I answered without raising my voice. "The blue color."

I let a brief moment pass. "It is built up of lapis. Not uniform but composed of natural fragments. Their shape varies—and so does their ability to absorb and cast the light back."

I let my gaze move across the surface of the mantle, where the light of the room broke into small, irregular gleams. "It is not the color itself," I continued calmly, "but the manner in which it responds to light. The individual fragments reflect differently. It gives the surface a living quality."

I turned toward her. "I observed the icon in the church from several angles. Nothing of the kind appeared there. The surface remained uniform, no matter from what direction the light fell."

There was silence for a moment.

The Countess nodded slowly. "That was my suspicion," she said. "And now it is confirmed."

She let her gaze rest upon the icon. "The consequences," she added in a low voice, "are almost beyond reckoning."

I let the silence remain between us for another moment before I spoke. "If this is the method," I said, "then it is scarcely an isolated instance."

I let my gaze move from the icon to her. "A work is sent for restoration. It leaves its place—legitimately. It is examined, treated... and in that process it can be reproduced." I paused briefly.

"A copy returns. The original does not."

There was no need to elaborate further.

She nodded slowly. "I had an inkling," she said. "But an inkling is not enough in matters of this kind."

She looked again toward the icon. "I needed it established."

She turned slightly toward me. "And now you have established it."

After a moment of silence, she turned to me again. "There are persons," she said, "whom you ought to meet."

No further explanation was given. I found it neither necessary nor advisable to ask for one. I accepted. It seemed to me that the case had now moved from objects to persons—and that the next step would no longer depend on observation alone, but on conversations.

The meeting took place at an informal luncheon in the Countess's palazzo.

The arrangement bore the appearance of a naturalness that can be achieved only through careful planning. Gathered about the table was a small circle of persons whose bearing and mutual conversation clearly testified that each of them occupied positions in which influence was not necessarily exercised openly but rather administered with a certain discretion.

Among them was Mariano Rampolla del Tindaro.

He greeted me with a politeness precisely measured—neither reserved nor welcoming in any true sense, but appropriate. His movements were calm, and his gaze possessed that particular quality I have often noticed in persons accustomed to listening more than they speak, and to weighing their words before giving them form.

The conversation developed without any obvious direction and yet seemed to move within familiar bounds.

It was the Countess who first brought the subject forward.

"Art," she said, letting her eyes pass around the table, "is not merely a question of beauty. It is an expression of what we choose to preserve."

There was a brief pause, which no one seemed to find occasion to fill.

"And what we choose to preserve," she continued, "is in the end what we assign value to."

Rampolla nodded lightly. "Tradition," he replied, "is often not a choice in the true sense, but a continuation." He let the words fall without emphasis, as though they required no further elaboration.

"And yet," the Countess interposed, "something must be chosen over something else. Preservation is not passive."

Rampolla looked briefly at her, and in his gaze, I sensed a slight shift—not contradiction, but registration.

"Preservation," he said, "requires balance."

He let his eyes rest for a moment upon her before adding, "And in that balance there often lies an understanding which does not necessarily need to be spoken."

The conversation moved onward, though without leaving its subject. There was talk of works, of restoration, of the necessity of preserving what had survived the wear of time—and of the difficulty involved in distinguishing between the original and the added.

Rampolla took part, but without seizing the initiative. His contributions were short, well chosen, and without concrete reference. He spoke in general terms that could bear several meanings without binding him to any of them. It seemed to me that he did not seek to shape the conversation, but rather to allow it to find its own form, while at the same time ensuring that nothing in it took a direction requiring a position to be declared.

The Countess, on the other hand, was more direct. She asked questions, held fast to certain points, and did not readily allow herself to be led away from what she wished illuminated. And yet their exchange did not seem marked by disagreement, but rather by a kind of attuned movement in which both parties knew their position.

I did not take part. It seemed to me more expedient to observe.

It was not the words themselves that were of importance, but the manner in which they were used—and the pauses that arose between them. In these I found a clearer understanding of the relations at the table than any direct statement could have given me.

I noted particularly that Rampolla's attention, several times—and without seeming intentional—returned to the Countess.

As though his participation in the conversation were directed less toward the subject and more toward her.

As the meal gradually drew toward its close, the guests rose one by one and took their leave with a politeness that seemed as measured as their

arrival had been. The conversations ebbed without truly ceasing, and the room gradually fell to quiet.

It seemed natural that I should remain.

The Countess had already made it clear that during my stay in Rome she would stand as hostess, and no one appeared to find my presence after the others' departure remarkable.

When the door had closed behind the last guest, she turned to me. "What do you think?" she asked.

I answered without hesitation. "He is a man of great knowledge. He knows the system—its movements, its limitations."

I let a brief moment pass. "But he is not a man who acts on his own behalf."

She did not speak at once. Her gaze moved away from me for a moment and fixed itself somewhere before her, as though she were considering the words not in their content, but in their reach.

"Take care not to underestimate him, Holmes," she said at last calmly. "He is a man with far-reaching connections."

A brief pause.

"And above all, a man who is aware of what is taking place."

On the following day, after a brief message from the Countess, I was led to a place whose significance in this city can scarcely be overstated.

She did not mention it with any particular emphasis. The name was put forward as a matter of course, not as a destination requiring explanation, but as a point one either knew—or had not yet learned to understand.

We moved through the inner areas of the Vatican, where the order of the corridors seemed firmer than any outward structure. Here movement was not accidental, but determined by access, and access in turn seemed determined by something that could not be expressed in ordinary terms.

At last, we halted before a door that did not differ markedly from the others and yet seemed different in its function.

"The Vatican Apostolic Archive," she said simply. There was no further explanation.

I entered.

The first thing that struck me was not the size of the room, but its character. This was not a library in the ordinary sense, where knowledge is presented and made accessible. It was a place where knowledge was kept—and where its accessibility seemed subject to a far stricter order.

Rows of documents, registers, and collections stretched in a system that testified not merely to organization, but to control.

The Countess led me through the inner rooms of the archive and stopped before a man whose presence seemed to gather the room rather than fill it.

"Archivist Valli, allow me to present Dr. Harrington," she said, "a connoisseur of art... and of that which resembles it."

The man turned. His gaze was calm, but attentive. "You seek something, monsieur?" he asked.

"The truth," I answered.

A moment passed. Then he laughed—not loudly, but with a slight motion, as though the answer had been expected. "The truth," he repeated. He raised his hand and let it move along the rows of archives. "It is here."

He looked at me. "Seek, and you shall find."

Valli smiled slyly.

"But first you must determine what it is you seek."

I did not answer.

He continued: "Is the moon bright... or dark, monsieur?" He answered for himself. "It depends upon the light." He let his hand fall. "So, it is here as well."

The Countess entered lightly into the conversation. "Dr. Harrington takes an interest in the difference between the genuine and the made."

Valli looked at me again with a faint smile. "Does he?"

He stepped a pace closer. "The difference is rarely as great as one believes."

A pause.

"Two different hands." He raised two fingers slightly. "That is all."

He lowered them again. "And at times... not even that."

Valli let his gaze move through the room for a moment before looking at me again. "And in the end," he said calmly, "the question is perhaps not what is true… but what is sufficient."

He continued, almost as a matter of fact: "The people do not want truth, monsieur. They want recognition."

A slight movement of the hand, as though he pointed toward an invisible crowd. "They wish to see what they already believe."

The Countess watched him without interrupting.

"Give them that," he said, "and they are satisfied."

A brief pause.

"Art," he continued, "is in that respect a singularly accommodating thing."

I let my gaze rest upon him. "A copy is sufficient?"

He gave the faintest shrug. "Sufficient for whom?" He let the question hang for a moment.

"For most," he said then. "Yes."

He turned slightly, as though considering something, and added, "And for the few… there are always other possibilities."

The Countess's gaze sharpened slightly. "You speak as though the difference were without consequence."

Valli smiled. "On the contrary." He looked at her. "The difference is decisive. But not for the same people."

I allowed the words to settle. "So the truth," I said, "is distributed."

Valli looked at me with an expression approaching satisfaction. "It is dispensed," he replied.

I let a moment pass before continuing. "Then it is not merely a question of perspective… but of means."

Valli looked at me without changing expression.

I continued: "He who has sufficient means may choose… which version is made to appear."

There was a brief silence.

He nodded faintly. "Choice," he said, "is always connected with possibility."

I let my gaze rest upon him. "And possibility," I said, "is seldom equally distributed."

An almost imperceptible smile appeared. "Of course not."

He let his hands come quietly together. "But neither is it necessary."

The Countess watched us both.

"So it is not the truth that circulates," I said, "but access to it."

Valli raised his eyes slightly. "Access," he repeated.

A brief pause.

"You are beginning to understand the connection, monsieur."

Thereafter the conversation found its natural conclusion without any true formal ending.

Valli inclined his head slightly, in a courteous gesture that might equally be interpreted as a farewell or as a continuation in another form. The Countess returned the motion, and without further words we made our way back through the corridors of the archive, whose silence now seemed to bear a different meaning than it had upon my arrival.

Only when we had gone some distance, and the door behind us had closed, did she pause for a moment.

"You have obtained what you came for?" she asked.

I did not answer. It seemed to me that the question had not yet been fully answered.

My dear Watson,

I shall permit myself here to summarize my preliminary reflections.

Monsieur Valli appears as a man of considerable insight. His knowledge of the system—its movements, its points of access, and its limitations—seems to me complete. Nothing of consequence appears to pass through the archives without his knowledge. He does not merely possess information. He administers it.

This alone would be sufficient to make him interesting in this case. But to this must be added the fact that he appears willing to adapt the truth to whatever needs may arise. Not through direct falsification, but through selection—through what is shown, and what remains concealed.

I cannot fail to observe that such a position affords him the ability to influence events to a degree far exceeding the visible.

He is not merely a keeper of the archives. He is a keeper of the truth—or rather: of its form, and perhaps also of its distribution.

It therefore does not strike me as improbable that a man in his position, with his knowledge and his access, would be capable of arranging a practice such as the one of which we now have indications. A practice in which originals may disappear without leaving traces, and in which copies may take their place without arousing suspicion.

If this is the case, then he is not merely a part of the system. He is its center. And should such a man find it purposeful, I do not doubt that he would be prepared to act accordingly.

I therefore permit myself—with reservation for further investigation—to regard him as a possible key figure in the case.

Letter VI

THE CONVERSATION

November 30, 1891
Rome

My dear Watson,□
I found it necessary to return to the place itself.

There are many who speak—and still more who imply—but in a case of this character one must constantly return to what actually lies before one. And what lay before me was not words, but an icon.

It therefore had to be subjected to renewed examination. Not because I doubted my earlier conclusion, but because any certainty not resting upon repeated observation is, at best, provisional. I wished to see again—and perhaps to see something I had not previously had occasion to notice.

I arrived at the entrance without stopping. The name—*Montfaucon*—was not spoken this time. It no longer seemed necessary. My presence was accepted without question, and I was greeted with the same discreet acknowledgment I had noted before.

I allowed myself to be conducted onward. Through the corridors, which now appeared less like a labyrinth and more like a structure whose logic I was beginning to discern, I was led down toward the workshops. Doors were opened without my needing to do anything for it, and the movement through the system took place with a calm that might almost have been mistaken for chance. At length we arrived.

The workshops lay before me as I remembered them—and yet with a different significance. The rooms were already in full activity. Artists worked at their tables, voices were exchanged in muted tones, and the air bore the mark of concentrated labor performed without need of outward display.

I was now a man with access. That fact could not be ignored. But access in itself is not equivalent to free movement, and I therefore found it advisable not to be recognizable in the form in which I had previously appeared. A minor adjustment had to suffice—not a disguise that would attract attention, but one that would allow me to pass unnoticed among the others.

I moved in among them. This time not as a guest, and for that reason I permitted myself to move without haste.

There was no reason to make directly for any one point. On the contrary, it seemed to me more advisable to let my gaze wander and allow the observations to gather of themselves, as is often the case when a pattern has not yet been fully disclosed.

I stopped at several of the works in progress.

Pigmentation was no longer foreign to me now. The blue in particular—produced from lapis lazuli—had already shown itself to be of decisive importance. It was a material whose value once exceeded even gold, and whose origin in the distant mountains to the east made it both costly and distinctive.

Its treatment required not merely skill, but understanding.

I let my gaze pass over a painting in which this very color had been used in generous quantity. The surface appeared convincing at first glance, and the work had been executed with a technical assurance that would satisfy most observers.

I stepped closer. By a simple examination—a change in angle, an adjustment of the light—the difference became clear. The structure was too uniform. There was no variation in the surface, none of the irregularities the natural material would inevitably produce. The crystalline reflection I had previously observed in the original was absent here. The

light was absorbed—but not broken. This was not lapis in its original form. It was an imitation. A skillful one—but still an imitation.

I allowed my hand to rest for a moment upon the edge of the frame and continued my examination with an attention that excluded the rest of the room. It was only after some time, therefore, that I became aware of voices behind me.

One I recognized at once. The Countess.

The other followed shortly after—and did not strike me as unknown.

I remained standing, without turning.

At that moment it seemed far more advisable to preserve my anonymity than to seek confirmation by a glance. The small adjustments I had made to my appearance would be of no value if I myself nullified their effect.

The voices drew nearer. It was the tone I noticed first. Not the words, but the manner in which they were exchanged. There was a lowering of their force that did not arise from distance, but from intention. Neither of them spoke softly by nature—it was a choice.

Their footsteps followed the same pattern.

Calm, but closer together than necessary. Not two persons in ordinary conversation, but two moving with a shared awareness directed toward their surroundings. None of the small variations was present that ordinarily marks informal movement. Everything seemed coordinated.

I had no need to turn. It was clear to me that their conversation was not intended for others. They passed close by me.

I registered without seeing: a slight change of pace, a brief pause in their exchange, and then a resumption, even lower than before. The direction was unmistakable. They were moving toward the inner room. The same room in which the icon had previously been shown.

The door was opened without delay. And closed again.

I allowed my attention to remain directed toward the work before me, but without losing awareness of the arrangement of the room.

It was then that I noticed the opening. A narrow ventilation shaft, discreetly fitted into the wall, precisely where the transition between the larger rooms and the inner chamber took place. It was not visible at first

glance, but its placement—and the faint difference in the movement of the air—made its function clear.

I moved slowly in its direction. Not as one seeking, but as one still examining.

A smaller sculpture stood upon a table at a suitable distance. I stopped beside it, bent slightly forward, and let my gaze rest upon its surface, as though it were this alone that occupied my full attention.

From there I could hear. Not everything—but enough.

One of the voices I recognized at once. Cardinal Mariano Rampolla del Tindaro. The other belonged to the countess.

There was a brief pause, and then the cardinal's voice sounded, subdued, yet without hesitation: "It cannot continue in this manner."

A pause.

"Measures must be taken."

The countess's answer came calmly. "It is continuing already."

She let the words fall without haste. "It would be… difficult to stop."

A moment of silence followed.

Then the cardinal again: "And the Englishman?"

A brief pause.

I did not hear her movement, but I registered the change in her voice. "He knows what he is to know."

The silence stretched a little longer this time.

Then, lower: "He must not come any nearer."

Nothing more was said.

The footsteps approached again.

I allowed myself to bend a little farther over the sculpture, as though some particular detail required my attention. I did not alter my position but let my presence fall wholly into the rest of the room's activity.

The door was opened. The footsteps passed. And were gone.

I remained by the sculpture for another moment before slowly straightening. There was nothing in my movement to suggest that anything unusual had taken place. Only when the silence had once more settled did I move toward the inner room.

The door no longer stood under observation, as I had expected it would not.

I entered.

The icon stood before me, unchanged in its appearance. I approached it and repeated my examination—not hurriedly, but with the same methodical precision that had earlier led me to my conclusion.

The structure of the lapis appeared with the same irregular clarity. The light was broken into small, living variations. There was no doubt. This was still the original.

I let my gaze rest upon it for a moment, as though to hold fast to this one certain point in a matter that increasingly seemed to shift beneath me. For my attention was no longer centered upon the icon alone. The conversation I had just overheard did not readily fit itself into the pattern I had thus far established. The pieces I had believed were on the point of falling into place now seemed capable of assuming other meanings—and possibly of belonging to an altogether different arrangement.

I had earlier had occasion to assume that the case could be bounded. It now seems to me less likely. Rather, it appears to be expanding. Not merely in scope, but in character.

I cannot exclude the possibility that the countess is playing a role I have not yet understood.

The game, which I had thought I understood in its basic form, is not concluded. It has been opened anew.

My dear Watson,□

I find it advisable to gather my observations before taking the next step.

The connection I had earlier only sensed between the events in Paris and what I have now had occasion to observe here in Rome no longer presents itself to me as accidental. On the contrary, it appears structural.

What we in Paris regarded as a series of isolated incidents has here assumed another character. It is no longer a question of individual works or isolated acts. It is an organization.

And like every system, it must have its point of departure—or at least a connection that can be followed backward.

It therefore does not strike me as improbable that the key to what is now unfolding in Rome is in fact to be found in what we have already seen in Paris.

Not in the obvious. But in what was overlooked. There must have been some detail to which we did not then attach sufficient importance. A repetition, a pattern, or a connection, which only now—in the light of the larger picture—can be recognized.

I therefore find myself compelled to return to that beginning. I have decided to communicate with Monsieur Moreau. Whether he is still in prison, I cannot say with certainty, but I have chosen to let the letter pass through our mutual acquaintance, Camille Ardent, whose discretion and resourcefulness I continue to regard as reliable.

It is my intention to have confirmed—or disproved—whether the traces we then had in hand follow a route we have not yet mapped.

Should this prove to be the case, the affair will not merely change direction. It will change in scope.

I give you here the letter in its full extent:

My dear Monsieur Moreau,

I take the liberty of addressing you once again, as the matter we began in Paris has now assumed a character far exceeding its original frame.

What we then regarded as a series of isolated forgeries now appears to me as parts of a far more extensive and coherent structure. The traces point not in one direction, but in several—and it is precisely this circumstance that makes it difficult to delimit the matter with the precision I should otherwise prefer.

There is, however, one element that still remains fixed.

The pigment.

The blue color produced from lapis, whose particular qualities we both had occasion to note in Paris, appears not merely to be an accidental choice, but rather a recurring mark. Here, in Rome, I have had the opportunity to study its use at the source—and I can now state with reasonable certainty

that the technique we observed has its origin in the restoration workshops operating under the highest artistic standards.

This, however, raises a question to which I did not at the time attach sufficient weight.

How does this pigment move in purely logistical terms?

I must therefore ask you to recall whether, in your investigations in Paris, there emerged any indication of its route. Were there signs of a particular supply chain, a repetition in the deliveries, or a connection that may have been overlooked as ordinary commerce?

I permit myself to offer a preliminary supposition.

It does not seem improbable to me that such a distribution could not take place without some form of institutional framework. The places where art is not merely kept, but also maintained and restored, must necessarily have access to precisely such materials—and on a scale exceeding the ordinary.

It would therefore be natural to assume that the connection is of a commercial kind.

I shall not at present draw hasty conclusions, but I find it necessary to examine whether, in Paris, there were traces that might point in this direction.

Any information you may be able to recall—a name, or even the smallest detail—may prove of decisive importance.

With highest esteem,
Sherlock Holmes

Letter VII

FATHER LORENZO BELLINI

December 7, 1891
Rome

My dear Watson,□
It gives me an unusual, though no less sincere, pleasure to begin these lines with an inquiry into your own well-being. I trust that you are in good health, and that your daily existence proceeds in a tranquility which you especially deserve. Allow me also to express the hope that you continue to look well after the household in Baker Street—and not least after Mrs. Hudson, to whose care and steadfastness we both owe more than we have perhaps ever fully acknowledged.

I still await a reply from Monsieur Moreau.

His situation makes it uncertain, however, when such a reply may reach me. Should he still be under detention, I must necessarily prepare myself for the likelihood that any communication will be delayed—if indeed it can be carried out at all.

I cannot permit the matter to remain at rest in the meantime. I must work in parallel.

It is now clear to me that this case cannot be followed through traces alone in the traditional sense. The individual findings—the pigment, the works, the seemingly isolated incidents—have proved insufficient when considered separately. What emerges instead is a network, in which

persons and positions appear to be of as great an importance as the physical evidence.

I have therefore decided to direct my attention toward those persons.

The first whom I wish to examine more closely is the archivist, Monsieur Valli.

His role in this system strikes me as significant. Not necessarily as an active force, but as the one who determines what may be known and what remains concealed. Such a point within the structure must necessarily be examined with the greatest care.

I therefore intend to pay a visit to the archive. Not in the character of an investigator, but under a pretext that will not attract undue attention.

It seems natural to me to choose a subject that may readily be associated with my origins. The English Crusades—and in particular the course of King Richard the First in the Holy Land—will scarcely give rise to suspicion. On the contrary, it will appear a fitting and expected area of interest for a visitor of British origin.

This will give me access to the documents. But more important still: it will give me the opportunity to observe the archivist in his own domain. There, where his function is not merely visible, but active.

On this day I chose to make my way to the archive on foot.

It seemed advisable to me not merely to move from one point to another, but to allow the city itself to emerge as part of the investigation. Rome does not permit itself to be reduced to places; it must be observed in its movement, in its transitions, in the rhythm with which its inhabitants and visitors glide through its spaces.

I therefore allowed my steps to follow the narrower streets, where the light breaks between the buildings, and where sounds are softened into a more concentrated form. Here the movement was less conspicuous, and observation the freer for it.

As always, I permitted myself to register without fastening upon anything. A priest who paused a moment too long at a gate. A tradesman whose attention seemed directed more toward the passersby than toward his wares. A group of pilgrims whose shared pace was determined by a

single member among them. None of this was in itself remarkable. But the whole was.

I turned a street corner. And there—at a distance which was neither accidental nor intrusive—I again observed the figure who had previously attracted my attention. The Hat Man.

He was not standing still. Neither was he moving visibly in my direction. Yet there was a relation between his position and my own that could not be explained away. No direct exchange took place; our eyes did not meet. And yet our movements were adjusted to one another with a precision that excluded chance. The distance was maintained. Without being visibly corrected.

I continued my walk without altering my pace.

He did the same.

It now seemed to me less likely that he wished to be noticed. Rather, his purpose appeared to be another. Not to be seen—but to be certain that I was.

I paused for a moment before the entrance to the archive. Not in hesitation, but in observation. It is my experience that the few seconds employed before an entry often yield more than what may later be deduced from within. I therefore let my gaze move discreetly over the square, without fixing it upon any one point.

After a short time, I saw him. Not close by but not placed at random either. By the fountain. The silhouette was recognizable even at that distance. He was doing nothing that might attract notice. Yet his presence was sufficient. He had taken up a position from which he could observe without himself appearing to be an observer. That was sufficient for me. I turned and went in.

The admission, which had previously required a name, now seemed to have become a habit. I was received without question and led onward through the inner rooms with a calm that can arise only in systems where the movement has already been accepted.

I was brought to the archive.

He stood where I expected him to be. Archivist Valli.

He regarded me for a moment, as though allowing recognition to settle into place before he spoke. "Dr. Harrington."

A brief pause.

"You are still seeking the truth." There was in his tone something that might be taken as dry—and at the same time a slight hint of irony.

I nodded. "Truth has many faces," I replied, "not least here in Rome."

I let my gaze rest upon him for a moment. "That must apply to the Vatican as well, Monsieur Valli."

He nodded slowly, almost thoughtfully. "Certainly... certainly, Dr. Harrington."

His gaze grew sharper. "And how may I be of assistance to you—more concretely?"

I stated my errand without further circumlocution. "As an Englishman, I have long entertained an interest in the Crusades. I should therefore be grateful to have access to documents concerning King Richard the First's course in the Holy Land—provided such materials are to be found here."

A slight shift in his expression. Almost a brightening. "You have come to the right place."

He turned. "Follow me."

I did as instructed.

We moved among the high shelves, where documents and rolls were arranged in a system that at first glance seemed impenetrable, but which bore the mark of a strict and deliberate order. Valli led me onward with assurance, without hesitation, without searching. Like a man who not only knew the archive—but mastered it.

Valli stopped at one of the deeper rows and let his hand move with certainty along the spines, as though he did not read them, but recognized them. Without hesitation he drew forth two volumes. Thick, dark in their binding, and with a weight that seemed equal to their contents. He laid them before me.

"Here," he said with a faint smile, "you will find the whole truth." There was a slight emphasis on the word that did not escape my notice.

"And should you, Dr. Harrington," he continued, "have need of assistance—whether with translation or other matters—I would recommend Father Lorenzo Bellini."

He made a brief, precise motion with his hand down the aisle. "He is a Jesuit priest and is of the greatest assistance to me here in the archive."

I followed the direction. A tall figure stood at one of the upper shelves, dressed in the simple Jesuit cassock. He was occupied with his work and did not appear to allow himself to be disturbed by his surroundings. His movement was calm, without haste, but with a precision that testified to familiarity with what he handled.

I nodded. "I am obliged to you."

Valli returned the gesture, already on his way elsewhere.

I seated myself at one of the smaller tables and opened the first volume. The paper bore the marks of age, but not of decay. The writing was dense, but orderly, and the first lines confirmed that I had indeed been given access to what I had requested.

I began to read. Not in order to find answers. But to observe what might present itself.

I had for some time been occupied with my examination of the first volume when a voice—without any prior sign of a presence—made itself heard at my side.

"The English history in the Holy Land."

I did not immediately raise my eyes.

"A most interesting—and, if I may say so, heroic chapter in the history of your country."

I pushed my chair back slightly and turned.

The man stood closer than I should have thought possible without having registered his approach. He was tall, dressed in the simple Jesuit habit, which fell in calm, orderly folds. A pair of small reading glasses rested upon his nose, and his hair, which bore the mark of age, was fair—almost white—without appearing neglected.

I let my gaze pass over him. Not as a whole, but in details.

The hands first. Long, slender fingers, without any sign of hard labor, yet not without activity either. The nails well kept, but not vain. The

skin thin, with that slight translucence that often attends a life spent indoors—but without weakness.

The glasses next. A discreet frame, not of a cheap sort. The make suggested continental origin—not Italian, but rather French or German.

The cassock. Well, cared for, but not new. It bore marks of use, not wear. A distinction that is seldom accidental.

On the whole, a man whose appearance did not seek to emphasize itself—but neither did it allow itself to be reduced to the surroundings. An intellectual.

And so, it seemed to me, a man possessed of a certain independence in his position—not merely part of the system, but one who moved within it without being wholly subject to it.

I inclined my head slightly.

He returned the movement.

"Father Bellini," he said. "Lorenzo Bellini. Jesuit."

He paused briefly, as though considering his phrasing.

"In all modesty, I have had occasion to travel through a good part of the known world. France, Germany, Denmark, Holland—and naturally the Holy Land. England, by contrast, I have not yet had the pleasure of seeing."

I allowed my head to incline slightly. "Then you will find it less sunny, though not necessarily less interesting."

A faint smile. "So, I have heard."

He let his gaze move briefly over the open volume before me. "Should you require assistance—linguistic, historical, or perhaps merely... of perspective—I should be glad to place myself at your disposal."

A slight motion of the hand, as though dismissing something unspoken. "As a more neutral observer. Not bound to any single tradition or doctrine but possessed of a certain familiarity with several."

I regarded him for a moment. His tone was effortless. His offer without weight. And for that very reason not without significance.

"I thank you," I replied. "It may prove useful."

He nodded again, as though this were already understood. And without further remark he allowed me to return to the text.□

My dear Watson,□
Permit me here to add a few remarks which concern not directly the documents I have had before me, but rather the man who unexpectedly entered into my investigation.

Father Lorenzo Bellini strikes me as being of a character one does not often encounter in such surroundings.

His knowledge is obvious, but not demonstrative. His bearing is modest but not subordinate. And what strikes me as most remarkable is that he appears to move within this system without being entirely bound by it.

It is a quality I do not readily overlook.

Perhaps I have—amidst this, which I can only describe as an empire of truth—found a man who understands that truth cannot be separated from a knowledge of differences. That it rests not upon documents alone, but upon insight into the cultures from which they arise. And above all, that it requires a certain independence from those who lay claim to administering it.

I am, naturally, fully aware of the need for reserve in judgments of this kind.

And yet I permit myself to note this much: this Lorenzo Bellini may prove of decisive assistance to me. Not least in a situation where I must otherwise seek my allies in an environment where all seems woven together by the finest—and most difficult to disentangle—threads.

Yours devotedly,□
Sherlock Holmes

Letter VIII

DE TRANSLATIO IMAGINIS

December 11, 1891
Rome

My dear Watson,□
I spent the following days, to a considerable extent, in the archive.

It seemed to me not merely advisable, but necessary, to allow time to work on my behalf in that room. I directed my attention in two directions.

The first was the archivist, Monsieur Valli.

It was clear to me that his position extended farther than his title immediately suggested. He was frequently sought out, not only by those who had some concrete business, but also by persons whose presence appeared to be of a more... informal character. Conversations were conducted in brief exchanges, glances were shared, and decisions at times seemed to be made without words.

He moved within all this with a naturalness that testified to both oversight and control.

The second direction was the documents themselves.

I continued my examination of texts concerning the Crusades, not with a view to their historical content, but to their construction. Their structure, their phrasing, the slight variations in the language, and—most important—the places where the hand changed, though the meaning apparently did not. Corrections that were not corrections.

Continuations that were not accidental. Not clearly enough for a conclusion—but sufficient to attract my attention.

And amid all this I must confess that I found a certain quiet in the company of Father Bellini. It is not often that I render myself dependent upon the presence of others in my work. And yet it seemed to me that here I had found a man whose understanding did not obstruct my own, but rather supplemented it.

Not since my association with Monsieur Moreau in Paris have, I had occasion to make a similar observation.

We exchanged few words. But the few that were spoken were sufficient.

The following day I presented myself once more at the archive.

Bellini had, it seemed, already anticipated my arrival. He had laid a document out upon the table.

"This," he said calmly as I approached, "will interest you."

I took my seat. And began to read.

The document bore the title De Translatio Imaginis and was composed by Francesco Aldrovani.

I turned through it with care. At first glance alone it was clear to me that this was no ordinary text. The handwriting was unusually beautiful—not merely in form, but in consistency. Every line was balanced, every transition carefully adjusted. In several places the text was accompanied by small sketches, executed with a sureness that testified to both technical skill and aesthetic understanding.

It was not hurried work. It was a work.

"This will interest you," Bellini had said. And after a brief pause had added: "And perhaps even more this." He had then placed an English translation beside the original.

I gave him a slight nod and allowed him to leave me without further words. Thereafter I directed my attention to the text.

Its contents were formulated in a language at once scholarly and remarkably sober. It did not describe forgery—a word evidently too coarse

and imprecise to be employed here—but rather an art. A discipline. The "translation" of an image.

I quickly observed that a more direct term would have been imitation—or even copying—but such words would not merely have been insufficient; they would have been inappropriate in relation to the work's own conception of itself. Here there was no question of deception. But of reproduction.

The document set forth in detail the technical aspects of this process. The selection of materials, the structure of pigments, the treatment of surfaces, and the various layers by which an image might be built up or—as it was phrased here—recreated. But it did not stop at craftsmanship.

As I read further, it became clear that the text moved into a more principled realm. It spoke of the application of such recreations. Of their role and function.

An image, according to Aldrovani, could maintain its significance even when its physical form was reproduced elsewhere—provided the reproduction was perfect in its execution and correct in its context. The original was not necessarily bound to a single place. In a certain sense, it could exist in multiple forms.

I paused for a moment in my reading. There was in this not merely a technical account. But an idea. And possibly—a justification. I continued.

Father Bellini had withdrawn slightly once I began my examination of the document. Not so far as to leave the room, but sufficiently that his presence did not make itself felt. He moved among the shelves with the same calm precision I had noticed before, and allowed me to immerse myself without interruption.

When after some time I let my eyes rise from the text, he was again near. He stood by the edge of the table. Like one who had already foreseen that a question might arise.

I let my gaze rest for a moment upon the document before me before I spoke. "This Francesco Aldrovani," I asked, without truly expecting an elaborate reply, "is he a known figure?"

A brief pause.

"Are his works... respected in the tradition you represent here?" I added, clarifying my inquiry.

Bellini answered without hesitation. "He is the most widely read."

I looked up.

There was no emphasis in his voice. No hint of exaggeration.

"This document is not unique," he continued calmly. "It is one among several." He let his gaze pass briefly over the volume. "And it belongs to a series of writings that, to a considerable degree, form the basis of the work carried out here."

A slight pause.

"In the workshops," he continued.

I laid my hand upon the page. There was in this answer an implication that could not easily be dismissed. "You mean," I said slowly, "that these principles are not merely theoretical."

Bellini nodded. "They are applied."

I let my hand pass quietly across the page, as though to gather the impression before closing the volume. There was no need for further questions. Not at that moment. I rose.

"You have been of considerable assistance to me, Father Bellini," I said. "I owe you my thanks."

He did not answer the words at once, but regarded me for a moment with the same calm presence I had gradually begun to associate with him.

"I assume," I continued, "that we shall have occasion to continue this conversation."

An almost imperceptible nod. "That would please me."

I made my papers ready to be put back but paused for a moment when he spoke again.

"I am, of course, at your disposal."

His voice was unchanged, but the words seemed to possess a wider scope than their immediate meaning suggested. "My knowledge is not limited to the documents here in the archive."

A brief pause.

"But includes what as well is otherwise undertaken in this place."

I looked at him.

He had already turned slightly away, as though the remark required no further attention.

I nodded. And left the archive.

My dear Watson,□

Permit me to continue these notes with a certain enthusiasm, which you may perhaps find unusual, but which I see no reason to conceal.

My visit to the archive has not merely confirmed my earlier suppositions—it has enlarged them.

Monsieur Valli continues to present himself as a central figure. His role does not seem to be executive, but directive. He moves with an assurance that bespeaks oversight, and his circle of association—which I have continued to have occasion to observe—confirms that his influence extends farther than his title at first suggests.

The archive itself deserves in this connection a separate remark. It is not merely a place where documents are kept. It is a place where knowledge is gathered—and, I must add, organized.

There are traces here of almost everything. And therefore, necessarily, also of that which I seek. I therefore attach no small importance to the fact that I now seem to have obtained a certain access—not merely to the rooms, but to the persons who move within them.

I must particularly emphasize Father Lorenzo Bellini. He may prove of inestimable assistance to me. This day confirmed that impression.

I presented myself earlier than on the preceding days, with the intention of spending as much time as possible in the archive. My access now seemed to be fully accepted—both at the entrance to the Vatican and with Monsieur Valli, who this time contented himself with a brief nod and a smile that required no further exchange.

I took my place at my customary table and resumed work with a document I had not yet examined to the end.

After some time, I noticed that Bellini was approaching.

He carried two sheets.

Without preamble, he laid them before me and then continued on his way, as though the act in itself were sufficient.

I turned my attention to the material, which proved to be newspaper clippings. One from Paris. The other from New York. Both written in English.

I began to read without any particular expectation. The contents seemed at first of limited significance: a notice of the opening of an art exhibition in Paris and, in the other case, the dedication of a church in New York. I continued reading.

Only some way into the text did I notice the coincidence. The same painting was mentioned in both places. In Paris as a donation to a museum and in New York as part of the decoration of the church in question.

I read both articles once more. This time with closer attention. There was no doubt. The descriptions were identical. The photograph—reproduced in both articles—confirmed it. The dates, however, differed by approximately one year.

I laid the sheets aside and let my gaze rest for a moment before me. It was a clear pattern. The workshops did not merely work with restoration. They worked with reproductions. And these reproductions—or possibly the originals—were distributed to places where their presence would not immediately be called into question. Museums. Churches. Institutions.

I was beginning to sense the full extent of the system.

Letter IX

AN ART AUCTION IN PARIS

December 13, 1891
Rome

My dear Watson,□
On the morning in question, I had intended to resume my work in the archive, when an occurrence intervened that made a change of plans necessary.

During breakfast—which otherwise was without any remarkable feature—a folded note was placed before me. The waiter did so without a word.

I let my hand rest for a moment upon the paper before opening it. The name of a place. A café. Eleven o'clock. Nothing further.

I examined the paper more closely. It was not unfamiliar to me. The texture was the same. The folding identical. The quality and thickness of the paper corresponded to what I had previously had in hand. And most important of all: the handwriting bore the same characteristics—a steady hand, without unnecessary variation. There was no doubt that the sender was the same.

I set the note down.

My original plan had been simple: a direct movement toward the archive and a continuation of the investigations I had begun there. I chose to depart from my plan, left the hotel, and made my way in the direction of the address indicated.

My thoughts did not gather around any single matter but moved among several. I returned in mind to the workshops. To the moment when I had observed the countess in conversation with Cardinal Mariano Rampolla del Tindaro. Their exchange had been brief, but not without significance. It had borne the mark of familiarity—and at the same time of a restrained tension that could not be explained by ordinary acquaintance.

I also allowed my thoughts to turn toward Father Lorenzo Bellini. The trust that had been shown to me—and which I must admit I had, to a certain extent, returned—did not seem to me without importance. It is rare for me to allow myself to lean upon another in such investigations. And yet his presence had proved to be... effective.

At last my reflections returned to Monsieur Moreau. His reply, which I still awaited, had lost none of its relevance. On the contrary. The questions now before me increasingly seemed to have their origin in what we had already touched upon in Paris.

I continued on my way. The city opened before me in its usual movements, but for my own part its direction had changed.

I paused for a moment at a corner where the street widened somewhat, and let my hand draw forth my pipe, packed it carefully, and lit it with the calm the occasion allowed. The smoke rose steadily, and with it my thoughts settled into place.

The countess did not summon me without purpose. Of that there was no doubt. I briefly reviewed the possible explanations.

She might wish for an account—a report of my observations. That seemed to me less likely. She had thus far shown a knowledge that reached farther than what I myself had yet put into words.

There remained another possibility.

That she wished to lead me onward. Not necessarily by giving me answers—but by placing me somewhere I might find them for myself.

I noted this as the most plausible reason for the meeting.

I arrived at the Antico Caffè Greco at the appointed hour.

Even at a distance the place declared itself. The tables were occupied by artists whose hands bore traces of their work, aristocrats with a certain distance from their surroundings, and persons of the better bourgeoisie for whom time was not a limitation, but a domain at their disposal.

The arrangement proved more extensive than the facade had first suggested. The café continued inward through a succession of rooms, where the light fell more dimly, and where the atmosphere assumed another character—less outward, more concentrated.

I let my gaze move slowly through the room. At a table somewhat farther inside sat two men and a woman in a conversation which—without being heated—bore the mark of a certain intensity. Their voices were raised just enough for the substance to be sensed. The tone suggested politics.

I allowed my gaze to continue.

In a corner, at a table meant for two, she sat. Alone.

I noticed at once that she had arrived before me.

She sat slightly reclined, with an attentiveness that was not directed toward any one point, yet nonetheless seemed to encompass the room as a whole. Not with any sign of impatience, but with a calm that clearly showed the interval of waiting had already been reckoned into her disposition.

My gaze had scarcely settled upon her before I observed the manner in which she belonged to her surroundings.

She was elegantly dressed, but without any kind of display. Nothing in her appearance sought to draw attention, and for that very reason it did so. Her style was attuned to the place—or perhaps, rather, the place was attuned to her.

As I approached the table, she lifted her hand in a brief, precise motion indicating that I might take my seat.

I nodded and sat down. Without beginning the conversation, I drew out my pipe and began to pack it. It is, as you know, an act that not only serves its practical purpose, but also gives a fitting rhythm to thought.

"I have taken the liberty of ordering coffee," she said.

I nodded again, without raising my eyes.

"You have had productive days, Mr. Holmes," the countess continued.

I allowed time to do its work for a moment.

Just then the waiter approached and set the service upon the table. A small porcelain pot, two cups, and a service whose simplicity testified to quality rather than ornament. The movement was calm, almost noiseless.

Only when he had withdrawn did I raise my eyes. "They have been eventful days," I said quietly. "And my observations have not been without result."

She took up the cup, sipped lightly at the coffee, and let her gaze rest upon me. "Is there anything in particular," she said, "that has contributed to this progress?" There was no sharpness in the question.

I brought the pipe to my lips and allowed the first smoke to spread in a calm, controlled motion. A thin veil settled between us—not as concealment, but as distance.

I had considered my answer on the way, but it did not seem advisable to give it too quickly.

"I have spent part of the time in the Vatican Archive," I said. "A place which must in itself be described as... remarkable."

I let my eyes rest upon her for a moment. "And not without profit."

She nodded slightly. "With assistance from the archivist, Monsieur Valli?"

I let the question hang for a moment.

"In part," I replied. "But to a greater degree through another... connection."

I took another quiet pull at the pipe. "A person whose insight has proved particularly useful."

I got no farther.

She leaned slightly forward. Not hastily—but with a clear alteration in her attention.

"Am I to understand you correctly, Mr. Holmes," she said, now in a sharper and more direct tone, "if I mention the name Lorenzo Bellini?"

She looked at me. Penetratingly. Like one who not only wanted an answer—but expected it.

I allowed myself no visible reaction to the name she had just uttered. That would have been premature. I brought the pipe once more to my lips, let the smoke gather, and nodded lightly.

"Yes," I said calmly. "Father Lorenzo Bellini has been of considerable assistance to me. A man of extensive knowledge—and of a remarkable ability to make it accessible."

She leaned slightly forward over the table. Her gaze now rested directly upon me, and her voice—low, yet without hesitation—carried a different weight than before.

"That man is dangerous."

I stopped and laid the pipe upon the table. I looked at her, without forming any immediate judgment.

"Will you elaborate?"

She leaned back again, as though the words had already been chosen and now had only to be given their proper form. Her tone was calm once more.

"That Jesuit priest was intended for a very high post." She kept her eyes upon me.

I waited.

"But he was moved," she continued. "Circumstances made it necessary."

"You imply a demotion, Countess."

"I imply," she answered without hesitation, "that he perhaps did not understand the task of mediation—and in particular not its limitations."

A brief pause.

"It requires both openness... and proper discretion... to administer a position of power."

I heard her words. But I did not allow them to find an answer at once.

We both drank our coffee in silence.

When she set her cup down, she did so with a calm that left no doubt the conversation had reached its conclusion.

"Beware of that man," she said.

I did not answer. But I took note of it.

After her final remark, she let her hand rise in a brief, almost imperceptible motion.

The waiter was at her side without hesitation.

She settled the account with the same discreet precision that had marked her entire bearing and then rose. No further words. No concluding gesture.

She left the café.

I remained seated.

The pipe found its way once more into my hand, and I let the smoke gather in a calm veil before me while I allowed the moment to settle into place.

There were more guests outside now. The voices had altered in character—not louder, but denser. The movement at the tables had grown more interwoven, and the earlier calm had taken on another intensity.

I let my gaze move toward the entrance. And stopped.

At a table with his back turned sat a man. The hat was tall.

I had no need to see his face. What I saw was sufficient. The room was not so large that any presence went unregistered.

I laid the pipe aside and rose. My next destination was the Vatican Archive.

Upon my arrival at the archive, I was received by Monsieur Valli. He came forward with his customary composure and let a slight smile accompany his words.

"You are most welcome, Dr. Harrington. I must confess to admiring your patience—and not least your perseverance in the search for truth. I hope my modest archive may be able to contribute the answers you seek."

I nodded briefly and did not permit the remark to occasion any further exchange. My steps led me directly toward the table that had by now become my regular place in the room. I had scarcely taken my seat before his voice reached me again—this time from behind, without his having followed me all the way there.

"Father Lorenzo Bellini is not present today, by the way," he said.

A brief pause.

"But he has left something for you."

I did not turn.

"One moment," he added.

I let my hands rest upon the table and waited.

Shortly afterward I heard his steps approaching.

He laid a letter before me. On the front was written: Dr. Harrington. I noticed the seal at once. The seal of the archive.

I took up the letter.

"Did you seal it, Monsieur Valli?" I asked calmly.

He shook his head slightly.

"No."

A faint smile.

"Father Bellini himself did so. He makes... frequent use of his privileges."

I let my gaze rest for a moment upon the seal. There was in this detail a significance that could not yet be fully determined. I nodded.

Valli withdrew without further remark.

I was alone again and could without hesitation break the seal and open the envelope.

It contained no letter. Instead I found a printed notice—a kind of announcement—concerning an impending art auction, which, according to the information given, was to take place the following Saturday in Paris. The material bore the character of a small brochure.

It listed a number of works that were to come under the hammer—titles, artists, and in certain cases only the indication of the place of origin, where the artist's name was either unknown or deliberately omitted.

I let my gaze move slowly down the list. Approximately twenty-five lots. Nothing immediately remarkable. And yet—three of the titles were marked. A single cross beside each.

I took out my lens and examined the markings more closely. The ink differed slightly from the print. The pressure of the line was different. The movement less mechanical. There was no doubt. The markings

had been added afterward. Not as part of the original printing, but as a subsequent intervention.

I laid the lens aside and looked again at the list. It did not seem likely to me that this was accidental. The most immediate explanation was that the markings had been made by Father Lorenzo Bellini. And that it was precisely these three works that held the greatest significance for me.

I then read the list once more. More slowly. With greater attention.

The three marked works now stood forth more clearly. Two paintings and one sculpture. I noted the titles.

I allowed the brochure to remain lying before me for a moment, without taking any further action. It seemed advisable not to give the impression of haste.

After some time I rose.

My next destination was clear to me: the Vatican workshops.

Admission to the workshops had by now become so effortless that it could almost be described as routine.

Half an hour after leaving the archive, I once more stood among the many works under restoration—and I permitted myself to note, under reproduction.

I made a slow circuit of the room. Not with haste, but with the necessary patience such places require.

The brochure from the auction still lay clearly in my memory, and I continually compared the works I passed with the titles I had just reviewed.

Suddenly I stopped. Before me hung a painting whose title I had no difficulty recalling from the list.

A landscape. The subject appeared to come from Liguria—the northern coast, where the light falls differently than farther south. The colors were balanced with a precision that testified not merely to technical skill, but to familiarity with the place.

I continued my progress through the room.

After some time, I found yet another work that could be connected with one of the marked titles in the brochure. Another subject.

I noted the coincidence, and it was now clear to me that a full understanding of this relationship could not be obtained through investigations in Rome alone. The auction in Paris must be included.

I was therefore obliged to consider how such a movement might in practice be carried out.

There is in this connection yet another matter I must take under advisement. My own presence would in every respect appear unrealistic.

I recalled that on previous occasions there had been reason to make use of a person whose abilities in such contexts have proved especially serviceable.

The woman of many faces.

Camille Ardent.

It therefore seems natural to me to seek her assistance once more.

Tomorrow, as my first act, I shall send her an express letter requesting that she present herself and attend the auction.

Letter X

THE LETTER FROM MOREAU

December 15, 1891
Rome

My dear Watson,□
After several eventful days, I had originally resolved to allow time to work on my behalf.

There are, as you know, moments when action is required—and others when it is far more fruitful to await the reactions that must necessarily follow.

My reflections in this regard gathered themselves around two matters.

First, my communication to Monsieur Moreau, whose reply I had not yet received, but whose importance had not diminished with the new connections that had come to light.

Second, the forthcoming art auction in Paris on the following Saturday.

As my first act that morning, I had sent an express letter to Madame Camille Ardent, with a request that she—should the letter reach her in time—be in a position to present herself at the auction.

Thereafter it had been my intention to let the days proceed in a quieter rhythm, with daily observations. A review of the newspapers.

And, I permitted myself to note, a certain attention to my pipe, which in recent days had not received the care it might justly expect.

Taken altogether, I had prepared myself to give my thoughts time to settle into their proper order.

But that was not how matters were to proceed.

After breakfast I had taken my place in the hotel foyer, where—in the company of my pipe—I allowed the moment to subside into calm.

It was there that one of the waiters approached me and informed me that a letter had arrived, which could be collected from the hotel office upon acknowledgment of receipt.

I rose without delay and followed him.

It proved to be the reply I had been awaiting. From Monsieur Moreau.

My dear Watson,

I enclose herewith the letter in its original form, so that you may yourself form an impression of it, without my own remarks beforehand coloring your reading.

I have, naturally, read it through several times myself.

And I permit myself only to observe that it contains information of no small significance.

***

Watson's gaze fell upon the smaller envelope, which now lay upon the desk.

Addressed to: Dr. Harold Harrington.

The seal had been broken. But its impression still stood out clearly in the wax. The signature: C.A.

Watson regarded it for a moment and then opened the letter.

My dear Dr. Harrington—or should I rather say Sigurdson... or perhaps simply my Norwegian friend with the English accent,

I write to you from my present lodgings, which, as you know, are not of a voluntary nature. I continue to await the hearing of my case. I still enter-

tain the hope that the matter in its essence rests upon a misunderstanding, but it must at the same time be acknowledged that Professor Delacroix has succeeded in compromising my person to a degree not easily dismissed.

I expect that the case will come on within the month, and that thereafter I shall once more be a free man.

Until then, however, I have not been without opportunities.

A prison is—as you may well imagine—a world unto itself. My fellow prisoners, if I may employ so imprecise a designation, represent to a great extent that stratum of society of which one in freedom gains only glimpses through fragments. Here it is gathered together. And here people speak.

It has therefore been of considerable use to me to be able to converse with persons possessed of an intimate knowledge of what I permit myself to call the domain of shadows in Paris.

You inquired specifically about the pigment—and the possible routes by which it might have been transported from Rome to Paris.

Several explanations exist.

But the traces gather—with remarkable consistency—around one particular circle: the Roman Jesuit order. One name appears repeatedly.

I cannot explain with complete certainty its precise significance. But it cannot be ignored.

The name is: Lorenzo Bellini.

The deliveries of pigment that have been the subject of our earlier reflections appear, with considerable probability, to be traceable back to this name.

I leave it to you to judge what weight should be attached to this.

There is one further matter that may be of interest to you.

A person with connections to the underworld in London has recently been observed in a number of different contexts here in Paris.

The name mentioned is Sebastian Moran.

I do not know whether it is known to you.

But when it is spoken here, it is rarely done without a certain lowering of the voice—and at times with something best described as fear. His connection to organized forgery appears to be real, though his precise role is not yet clear.

I therefore permit myself to recommend the necessary caution.

In all other respects, I hope that you are well, and that before long we may have occasion to resume our conversations under more fitting circumstances.

Yours devotedly,
Moreau

Watson read the letter once again. This time more slowly.

His gaze stopped at the two names—and remained there.

Lorenzo Bellini.

And Sebastian Moran.

Each bore a weight that could not be overlooked. But of a very different character.

The first name stirred a particular uneasiness in him. Not solely because of its content—but because of what it implied. That Holmes, his old friend, might possibly have been mistaken. That he had shown trust where caution had been required. That a man who appeared learned and helpful might in truth be something quite different.

The second name worked upon him in another way. More direct, and more threatening.

Watson leaned back slightly in his chair. He knew that name. And he knew its significance.

As heir to Professor Moriarty's network, Moran was not merely another criminal—but a man who acted where others planned.

A hunter. And a man one did not survive by underestimating.

Watson raised his hand to his brow and drew out his handkerchief. Only now did he feel the warmth in the room—or perhaps rather the tension the letter had left in him. He wiped the perspiration away. And read on in Holmes's letter:

My dear Watson,□
The information Monsieur Moreau has sent compels me to an acknowledgment I cannot readily evade.

The name Bellini—in the context in which it now appears—surprises me. Not because it is improbable. But because I have already had occasion to place trust in the man. I must therefore admit that I may, to some extent, have allowed myself to be led. This requires an adjustment in my assessment.

As for the name Moran, I can only associate it with India and a British colonel.

I have noted it. And shall keep it under close observation.

Yours devotedly,□
Sherlock Holmes

Letter XI

THE JESUIT PRIEST'S PALAZZO

December 17, 1891
Rome

My dear Watson,□
It was at the breakfast table that I made my decision.

The hotel salon appeared as it had on the preceding days, with a calm and order that seemed almost untouched by the movements that otherwise appeared to course through the city. The waiters moved noiselessly between the tables, and the conversations around me were subdued, almost as though they all belonged to another world than the one in which I myself found myself.

Before me stood the day's first meal, yet I was obliged to acknowledge that it served more as an occasion for reflection than for any true nourishment.

The information I had received, and the observations I had made in recent days, could no longer be fitted together with the same ease to which I had otherwise been accustomed. On the contrary, it seemed to me that each new detail not only contributed to the clarification but also enlarged the field within which the case must be understood.

The name Bellini pressed itself forward with steadily increasing weight.

His role had thus far appeared helpful, almost indispensable, and yet it was precisely this accessibility that now gave rise to my greatest doubt.

For in matters of this kind, it is seldom the man who hides himself that ought to attract the greatest attention—but rather the one who places himself at one's disposal without reserve.

I considered briefly the possibility of confronting him directly. It would have been the simplest course. But simplicity is rarely synonymous with clarity.

I therefore found it more advisable to seek him out once again and allow the meeting to develop without predetermined limits. A question asked too early may close more doors than it opens, and I did not wish to lose the access I had obtained with some effort.

I allowed my gaze to pass once more over the room, as though to assure myself that nothing there required my further attention.

Then I rose. My decision had been made. I would seek out Lorenzo Bellini.

In order not to let time slip from my grasp, I chose that morning to take a cab. It is not a habit to which I often surrender myself, since the rhythm of the city and the impressions one acquires on foot have often proved of greater value than speed itself. But this time it seemed to me that the matter had reached a point at which forward movement had to be accorded a certain priority.

I therefore allowed myself to be conveyed through the streets of Rome at an even but definite pace, and while the monotonous movement of the wheels beat out its rhythm against the cobblestones, I gathered my thoughts.

It was then that it struck me with a clarity I could no longer ignore: this case contained too many explanations—and too few answers.

Every connection seemed possible. Every explanation seemed, to a certain extent, capable of standing its ground. And for that very reason, one of them must necessarily be wrong.

When I arrived at the archive, I was received by Archivist Valli, whose expression bore the same faintly mischievous cast I had previously noticed in him. He greeted me with a friendliness that seemed as carefully measured as always and showed me in without further ado.

I wasted no time on introductory remarks but asked at once for Father Bellini.

Valli hesitated for a moment, as though the question were not unexpected, but still required a certain consideration.

"Father Bellini is not present today," he replied, still with the same faint smile. "He is a man occupied with many things."

There was nothing in the words that could be directly challenged, and yet there was a tone in them that did not escape my notice.

I chose not to press further. Instead, I took my seat at one of the smaller tables and behaved as though I resumed my studies, reviewing some of the documents already familiar to me. It seemed advisable not to let my errand appear too clearly, and so I spent some time in quiet occupation.

But my mind was no longer in the texts. It was directed toward the absence.

After a suitable interval, I rose and made as though to leave the archive.

As I passed Valli, he stopped me with a slight motion, as though he merely wished to mark my departure.

"Mr. Harrington," he said quietly, "some seek the truth… while others are overtaken by it."

I stopped. The words had been spoken without emphasis, almost as a simple observation, and yet they carried a weight that could not be explained away.

I turned halfway toward him but found nothing in his expression that might immediately deepen their meaning. The smile was still there, but it now seemed to rest upon a depth I could not readily penetrate.

For a moment I remained standing. Then I nodded briefly and continued on my way out.

But I could not rid myself of the impression that the words had not merely been spoken—but chosen deliberately.

I left the archive with a realization I no longer found reason to doubt: Valli knew more than he had said. His words had not been accidental, and his silence even less so. In matters of this kind, it is often not what is said that weighs most heavily, but what is omitted—and I could not free myself from the impression that I had just witnessed such a withholding.

I chose to continue on foot.

Bellini's residence was said to lie in the immediate vicinity of the Vatican, and I found it advisable to register for myself the surroundings in which he moved outside the confines of the archive.

It was not long before I sensed a distinct change in the city's character. The lively current of people that otherwise marks the streets of Rome seemed here to subside, and in its place another kind of order emerged. The streets were quieter, the movements more restrained, and the few persons I passed bore the mark of a certain self-possession in their way of moving—as though they belonged to the place rather than merely happened to be in it.

It was a district of another character. More aristocratic. Less popular.

I stopped before an iron gate. The address was correct. Through the wrought iron, my eye could easily travel over the property, and what I saw did not a little diverge from the picture I had formed beforehand.

I had expected a dwelling of a certain modesty—something whose appearance corresponded to the religious simplicity ordinarily associated with the orders to which Bellini belonged.

But what lay before me was a small palazzo. Even from my position at the gate, I could distinguish a fountain in the middle of the garden, surrounded by well-kept flowerbeds whose colors stood out clearly even in the muted morning light. Around them, statues and busts had been placed with a precision that did not seem accidental, but rather carefully considered in relation to the whole.

I noted this without allowing any immediate judgment to show itself, but I could not help registering that Bellini's interest in system and structure had here assumed a form that seemed no less governed by a sense of the beautiful. This Jesuit priest was certainly not a man without means.

I stood for a moment before the iron gate without making myself known.

It seemed advisable first to let my gaze rest upon the place, as though the impression itself might offer me some sense of the man I had come

to seek. There was an order in the garden, a quiet precision in the placing of every object, that could not be explained by chance alone.

I stepped closer and let my hand rest lightly against the cold iron before, with a firm motion, making my presence known.

After a short interval, a figure appeared farther inside the grounds. A servant, who moved toward the gate with a composure that seemed as well practiced as the rest of the place.

"You wish?" he asked, stopping on the other side of the ironwork.

"I hope to see Father Lorenzo Bellini," I replied. "I have previously had occasion to speak with him in the Vatican Archive and wish to continue a conversation which cannot yet be said to be concluded."

The servant regarded me for a moment, not with suspicion, but with an attentiveness clearly intended to weigh my words.

"Your name?"

"Dr. Harold Harrington."

He nodded faintly, turned without further remark, and disappeared along the path leading toward the house.

I remained standing.

It was not the waiting in itself that occupied me, but its character. It seemed determined not by necessity, but by will. As though the decision concerning my admission had already been made—only not yet communicated.

I let my gaze pass once more over the garden, over the fountain and the well-ordered beds, and found it difficult not to regard the whole as an expression of deliberate staging.

After some minutes the servant returned. He stopped at the gate, laid his hand on the latch, and opened it with a calm movement.

"Father Bellini is expecting you," he said.

I entered.

Without further words, Holmes was led along the narrow path that cut through the garden. He allowed his gaze to wander from one object to the next, without stopping, yet without losing sight of anything. There was in this garden the same spirit he had observed in the archive—an

ordered, almost systematic approach to the world—but here it had assumed another form. Where the archive had been marked by structure and classification, here it unfolded as aesthetics. Order had become beauty.

They continued along the path, and the house now emerged more distinctly. The servant led him in through a discreet side door and onward through a short passage before they stopped before a smaller room, whose door stood ajar.

"Father Bellini," said the servant in a subdued tone, and then withdrew.

Holmes entered.

The room was not large, but it bore the mark of the same well-considered simplicity as the garden. The furniture was sparse, but chosen, and the light fell in from the side through tall windows that gave the room a calm, almost secluded character. It was neither ostentatious nor austere, but balanced.

At a small table sat Lorenzo Bellini.

He rose when Holmes entered and received him with a friendliness that seemed as natural as it was controlled.

"Dr. Harrington," he said, bowing his head slightly. "You must forgive my not having been found in the archive these last few days. A slight stomach complaint has kept me back, though fortunately it now seems to be improving."

His voice was calm, and his appearance bore no evident signs of weakness, though there rested a faint dullness upon his face, which Holmes did not fail to note.

Bellini indicated a chair opposite him, and Holmes took his seat while, with measured motions, he drew out his pipe.

The conversation could begin.

Bellini let his hand rest lightly on the edge of the table and looked out into the room for a moment, as though contemplating it with a certain satisfaction, before turning his gaze back to Holmes.

"I have succeeded," he said calmly, "in uniting my two passions. My devotion to the religious... and my sense for the aesthetic."

Holmes nodded faintly, as though he had already reached the same conclusion during his passage through the garden. He brought the pipe to his lips, lit it with a calm movement, and let a moment pass while the smoke slowly settled like a light veil between them.

"When last we spoke," Holmes continued, "we were speaking of what you called dissemination… or perhaps rather distribution, depending upon which word you prefer, Father Bellini."

An almost imperceptible smile passed across Bellini's face.

"Yes," he replied. "The dissemination of art is among my specialties."

He leaned slightly forward, as though he now wished to bring the conversation nearer its true subject. "But tell me, Dr. Harrington… what interests you most? Is it the paintings? The sculptures? The icons?" He paused briefly and then continued with slightly sharper precision: "Or, if we are to speak even more concretely… do you prefer the original works… or their reproductions? Variations, if you will."

Holmes did not answer at once. He merely nodded thoughtfully, let the smoke drift out in a slow stream, and gave the impression of considering the question with the care it appeared to require.

Bellini observed him for a moment before himself speaking again. "You must understand one thing, Dr. Harrington: everything is, in its origin, accessible… to the man who possesses the proper will, the necessary abilities… and naturally the means required."

There was silence for a moment.

Holmes let the pipe rest in his hand and raised his eyes. There was nothing in Bellini's tone that could directly be described as insistent, and yet the meaning was unmistakable. It was an offer.

Holmes laid the pipe aside and rose. "I shall consider your words, Father Bellini," he said quietly. "And return to you with an answer."

Bellini nodded.

"By all means do so, Dr. Harrington," he replied. "But do not consider it too long."

Holmes inclined his head slightly. "I hope your health will soon be fully restored," he added. "Perhaps we might continue the conversation in the archive one of these coming days."

"That would please me," said Bellini, rising. "And I thank you for your visit."

The servant appeared once more in the doorway and led Holmes back by the same route he had come. Through the quiet salon, out into the garden, where the symmetry still lay undisturbed, and onward toward the iron gate.

When Holmes stepped out into the street again, the gate closed behind him with a muted, but definitive sound.

Holmes once more chose the cab. Not from convenience, but for the sake of time. The conversation he had just left required another kind of attention than the city's streets could offer, and he desired a space in which his thoughts might settle without interruption.

The carriage set itself in motion with an even rhythm, and while the sound of the wheels against the cobblestones repeated itself in an almost uniform pattern, Holmes let his gaze rest for a moment before once more turning it inward.

Bellini was not a man who lent himself to capture by any single explanation. His bearing had been calm, almost accommodating, and yet every word had seemed to carry a weight extending beyond what had been said. His reference to the religious, his obvious devotion to the aesthetic—and in addition to this, the undeniable presence of means—did not form a single portrait, but rather several layers that did not readily cohere.

There was a passion. Perhaps more than one. For the religious, without doubt. For beauty, just as clearly. And—though less openly expressed—for that which in more earthly circles is called mammon.

Holmes let the thought stand for a moment, as though wishing to test its weight. The man was not simple. Nor was his position. If he was part of the system Holmes had sought to uncover, it was not as a peripheral figure. And if he stood outside it, it was scarcely without influence.

The carriage turned into the street that led toward the hotel, and Holmes now allowed his gaze to drift out through the window. It was at that moment that he noticed a figure standing at a street corner. The hat—tall and dark—cut a sharp silhouette against the lighter facade of

the building. There was no direct movement, no obvious observation. And yet there was something in the manner in which the man stood that could not be mistaken for chance.

The carriage continued on.

When Holmes stepped out before the hotel, the figure had vanished.

Holmes was just making his way up the stairs to his room when one of the hotel servants discreetly stepped forward and, with a slight bow, handed him a small piece of paper. "For you, monsieur."

Holmes took it without coming fully to a stop, though he did pause on the next step, lowering his eyes to the paper. Even before unfolding it, he recognized its character. The folding was the same. The paper likewise. And when he opened it, the impression of the sparse handwriting was confirmed.

It contained only the words: The café at 2 o'clock

Holmes let his gaze rest upon the words for a moment before drawing out his watch. It was half past one. Without hesitation he turned, went back down the stairs, and continued directly through the hotel foyer and out into the street. Outside he paused only briefly, raised his hand, and hailed a cab, which at once carried him off.

A few minutes before the appointed time, he arrived at the café. The weather was unusually mild for the season, and the sun had drawn a considerable number of people out into the streets. The tables outside were occupied, and a lively hum of voices and movement lay as a constant backdrop around the place.

Holmes stopped for a moment outside and let his gaze pass through the window. She was already there. The countess sat at the same table as before, placed in a corner from which she seemed to command an unobstructed view of the room. Her posture was calm, almost expectant, and yet there was something in her bearing that suggested she was not merely waiting—but had already decided.

Holmes simultaneously took in the rest of the room. The sunshine had drawn many into and out of the café, and there was movement everywhere. Conversations beginning and breaking off, waiters crossing

the room, guests coming and going. He noted it without lingering upon it. Wherever he sat, he would not be alone. He entered.

The countess raised her eyes, nodded briefly, and indicated with a slight movement of the hand that he might take his seat. "I am glad you could come at such short notice," she said. "Things have developed." She added, almost in the same breath, that she had ordered coffee for them bot h.

Holmes sat down quietly, drew out his pipe, and began with familiar care to pack it. He said nothing. It was evident that this was not his conversation. He waited.

The countess let her gaze rest upon Holmes for a moment, as though she wished to judge how much needed to be said—and how much was already understood. "Allow me first," she began calmly, "to thank you, Mr. Holmes. Your efforts in this matter have been both precise and... remarkable in their attention to detail."

She paused briefly. "In every respect, you have lived up to the reputation that precedes you." The words were delivered with a kindness that could not be challenged. And yet there was in her tone something final, as though the assessment no longer belonged to the present, but had already been placed in the past. As a matter settled and concluded.

Holmes nodded slightly. "You are very kind," he replied, without further addition. His voice was calm, but without the sharpness that so often accompanied his remarks. There was no contradiction, no interest in expanding or challenging her judgment.

The countess regarded him for a moment before continuing. "I must, however, regret," she said, "that I have in some measure been obliged to anticipate the course of events." With these words, she lowered her hand into her bag and drew out a letter, which she laid before him on the table.

Holmes took it up. He noticed at once that the seal had been broken and let his gaze rest for a brief moment on its remains before turning the envelope and recognizing the signature, *C.A.*

The countess made a slight gesture with her hand, as a sign that he should read.

Holmes opened the letter and let his eyes move over the brief, precise text:

My dear Mr. Sigurdson,

I know that you are a man of few words and great decisiveness and shall therefore go directly to the point.

I attended the conduct of the auction, and the two works mentioned were indeed part of the collection. Both attracted considerable interest, and the prices appeared correspondingly high.

I do not, however, think that this alone will suffice for you, and I have therefore taken the trouble to follow the trail further.

Apparently, it was Americans who acquired the paintings. As for the seller, the name appears to be Signor Vittorio Albrisi, resident in Rome.

Should you require further assistance, I remain, naturally, at your disposal.

Yours devotedly,

C.A.

Holmes slowly lifted his gaze from the letter and looked at the countess. There was no direct question in his face, but an expectation—a quiet invitation that what had not yet been said ought now to be said.

The countess met his gaze without hesitation. "The name was, naturally, an alias," she said calmly. She allowed a brief pause to intervene, as though she wished to let the words settle before continuing. "But we followed it."

Another brief silence.

"It leads us to Lorenzo Bellini."

Holmes's brows drew together slightly. The reaction was immediate but controlled. There was nothing in his bearing that suggested confusion, and yet the surprise could not be entirely concealed. It was the same conclusion to which he himself had come—only by another route. He said nothing.

They finished their coffee in silence. The hum of the café continued around them, undisturbed by the conclusion that had just been laid

before their table. Voices rising and falling, silver against porcelain, a door opening and closing—all seemed to continue in their own rhythm.

The countess set down her cup. "Once again, Mr. Holmes," she said, "thank you for your efforts. At this point, the matter must be considered concluded."

She made a brief movement of the hand suggesting that the practical matters—including the financial one—would naturally be taken care of. It was said without further elaboration. She rose.

Holmes followed her with his eyes for a moment, as though considering whether anything further ought still to be added. As she turned to leave the table, he spoke.

"And as for Father Bellini?" The question was brief. Without circumlocution.

The countess did not stop. "The necessary measures have already been taken," she replied. There was no sharpness in her tone, no emotional coloring. She continued without looking back and left the café.

Holmes remained seated and drew out his pipe, packed it with familiar precision, and lit it. The smoke rose slowly before him while he allowed his gaze to rest somewhere in the room, without truly fastening it upon anything.

Something had shifted. A sense that time—which until now had been moving at a pace he could follow—was now suddenly running faster.

The letter still lay before him. He took it up again and read it once more, more slowly this time, as though each word might contain more than it immediately revealed. His thoughts gathered themselves into a pattern that had once again allowed itself to be confirmed. Thereafter he reviewed the conversation. Not the words alone, but the manner in which they had been spoken.

From the moment he had entered the café, the countess had held the initiative. Her calm, her decisiveness—not a hesitation, not a search for confirmation. Even her acknowledgment of his work had borne the character of a conclusion rather than a beginning. She had presented her results.

The letter… already opened. The apology… offered, but without any true weight. And finally—her words. Holmes let them repeat themselves in his mind, as though only now they found their proper weight.

The necessary measures have already been taken.

He slowly lowered the letter. There was no longer any doubt that something had been set in motion—something that could not readily be stopped.

"Time is running out," he said quietly to himself.

He stepped out into the street with a determination that no longer left room for hesitation. The pace around him seemed unchanged—people passing, conversations continuing, carriages rolling by—but for Holmes the rhythm had altered. What but a moment earlier had been an object of reflection had now become action.

He raised his hand and stopped a cab—almost in the same motion as another gentleman stepped forward with the same intention. "I beg your pardon," said Holmes briefly, having already opened the door. "It is urgent." There was no time for further explanations. He climbed in, leaned forward, and gave the address of Bellini's residence without circumlocution.

"Drive as fast as you can."

The driver looked at him for a moment, as though to gauge the seriousness of the request, but something in Holmes's tone left no room for doubt.

The reins were tightened. The horses sprang forward.

Holmes leaned back for a brief moment, but his gaze was fixed, and his thoughts already ahead of him. There was no more time to lose.

My dear Watson,□

What was now unfolding around Father Lorenzo Bellini's residence was of an altogether different character from what I had observed there only a few hours earlier. Everything seemed changed. Where before there had prevailed a quiet order and an almost artistic calm, there was now an underlying unrest that could not be concealed. The atmosphere was heavier, more serious—and above all marked by a nervousness that be-

longed not only to the place, but to its inhabitants as well. I noticed it at once.

The servants moved more quickly, but with an uncertainty in their movements, as though they did not quite know where their attention ought to be directed. From the kitchen came subdued voices that ceased as soon as I passed, and in the garden two gardeners exchanged a glance that was anything but accidental.

I was shown in without delay. This time not through the same quiet rooms, but directly to the sitting room, where Bellini had taken his place in a large armchair. I paused briefly in the doorway.

His condition had plainly worsened.

Sweat stood in fine beads upon his brow, and his face had taken on a grayish tone that made it appear almost lifeless. I let my gaze move down toward his hands and at once noticed signs of dehydration—the skin drawn taut, the movements weak. These were not the symptoms of an ordinary stomach complaint.

Bellini made a faint attempt to rise but abandoned the movement and contented himself with a slight gesture.

"As you can see, Dr. Harrington," he said calmly, "my condition has worsened considerably in only a few hours. I believe it is well that you came now." His voice bore no fear. Rather a kind of composure.

I stepped nearer. "Have you had visitors since last we met?" I asked.

"No," he replied without hesitation. "There has been no one."

"No one at all?"

He turned his head slightly and called to one of the servants, who at once stepped forward. "Have I had visitors?"

"No, Father," replied the servant. "No one... except the messenger from the apothecary."

I let my gaze remain upon him a moment longer than the question itself required.

"My medicine," said Bellini, gesturing faintly toward a small bottle on the table beside him. "The drops."

"Allow me." I took up the bottle, unscrewed the cap, and brought it to my nose. The smell was not strong. But it was sufficient. "Arsenic," I said.

Bellini nodded faintly. "So I have been poisoned," he observed.

I examined the bottle once more and then quietly set it down again. "It is likely."

"Then my time has evidently been fixed," he replied, without any trace of dramatics.

He looked before him for a moment, as though collecting his thoughts before continuing. "Our meeting now has another character, Dr. Harrington. I am no longer the seller... and you are no longer the buyer."

He turned his gaze upon me. "I am going to ask a favor of you. A great favor. Not for my sake alone... but for that of many others. Perhaps more than either of us can fully reckon."

I did not answer but indicated that he might continue.

"I shall not deny," he said, "that I have had my... business. My own manner of working with art." He drew his breath a little more heavily but continued. "But it did not begin there."

His gaze grew more distant.

"There was a time, many years ago, when I stood on the verge of considerable advancement within my order. My interest in writings and old documents was well known, and over the years I acquired a number of collections from private hands."

He paused briefly. "It was in one such collection that I found it." His voice changed almost imperceptibly. "The document."

I said nothing.

"It was sealed," he continued. "I did not break it. I had no need."

He looked directly at me. "For the title was sufficient."

He let the words fall slowly. "*Saint Peter's Confession.*"

For a moment there was silence.

"It was at once new to me... and yet not altogether so. The name had a resonance. I had heard it mentioned before—not openly, but in fragments, in hints, in the quieter corridors of the monastery and the Vatican."

He closed his eyes briefly. "There were rumors. Not of the contents—no one knew them—but of its existence."

He opened his eyes again. "And that was enough."

His voice grew slightly darker. "For what might it not contain?"

He raised his hand a little, as though trying to gather the many possibilities into a single motion. "Could it alter our understanding of Christianity? Could it shift the balance of power within the Vatican? Could it place Jews and Christians in another relation to one another? Could it... expose an error upon which the whole of the Christian faith rests?"

He let his hand fall. "All these thoughts... streamed through my mind merely at the sight of the title."

He looked at me and repeated, "*Saint Peter's Confession*."

"That document cast a curse over me," Bellini continued, his voice weakened, but still clear.

He drew his breath more heavily but continued with a calm that stood in sharp contrast to his condition. "I resolved to keep it hidden. Completely hidden. But there are eyes... and there are ears... everywhere. And in time the rumors began to spread."

He closed his eyes briefly, as though calling those years back to mind. "It became known—not publicly, but in the proper circles—that I possessed something... of significance. I was pressed from every side," he said softly. "And in the end placed in the archive—not as a reward, but as a form of house arrest.

Holmes raised his head slightly. "Valli?"

Bellini nodded faintly. "Yes. Valli." He drew his breath with difficulty before continuing. "You can scarcely imagine what means have been employed to make me speak, or what sums have been offered."

Holmes regarded him calmly. "Has anyone distinguished himself?"

"One," Bellini answered. "An American. A collector with connections to the Jewish quarter in New York. Persistent, relentless—and without scruple. He has not only made repeated offers but has also attempted to gain access to the document by less honorable means."

"A name."

"Many names," said Bellini faintly. "Never the same. But always the same pattern."

A faint, almost dry smile touched his face. "I kept it." He looked directly at Holmes. "Even in my situation it gave me a form of power—a protection. Men go only so far when they know that one carries something capable of destroying them."

His voice sank somewhat. "The document was like a bomb. A bomb I could detonate if I wished."

"But also, a bomb whose explosion would destroy you with it," Holmes remarked quietly.

"Precisely," whispered Bellini, letting his head fall back slightly. "And so, it remained where it was—as an insurance. It allowed me to continue my little business without too much interference."

He opened his eyes again and looked at Holmes. "Until now."

A moment of silence settled between them.

"Now time has overtaken me," he continued, and there was a perceptible strain in his voice. "My wish of you, Dr. Harrington—whom, for reasons I do not fully understand, I have come to trust—is that you do what I never did."

His gaze grew fixed. "Destroy the document."

Holmes said nothing.

Bellini drew his breath heavily. "Castel Sant'Angelo," he whispered. "The little chapel. Use the Passetto di Borgo." He made a faint movement with his hand, as though to indicate the direction. "There you will find it." He closed his eyes briefly and continued with visible effort: "But you must understand—as soon as the rumor of my death spreads, they will begin to search. The religious, the political... and not least the greedy."

Holmes nodded faintly. "It seems to me," he said quietly, "that they have already begun."

"Many eyes will turn toward you." He opened his eyes one last time. "I hope... you will be able to do... what I could not." His gaze drifted away. His breathing continued for another moment—heavy, labored—like a slow, ebbing rhythm.

Holmes judged the silence. It was a matter of hours. Perhaps less. He rose without haste, but without hesitation. One final look at the man in the chair—not now as an adversary, no longer as an actor, but as a human being who had played his last move.

Then he turned and left the room. It would not have been advisable to become too closely attached to the fate of the significant Jesuit priest.

Later that evening Holmes received a message from the countess:

"Father Lorenzo Bellini has passed away."

Letter XII

SAINT PETER'S CONFESSION

Watson sat alone in his study. The light from the window fell slantwise across the desk and touched the small stack of letters that lay before him—some already opened, others still sealed. He let his hand rest for a moment upon the paper, as though by that touch he might preserve a connection to the man whose voice spoke to him through the lines.

Lorenzo Bellini. The name had fixed itself in his mind.

Watson leaned back slightly and allowed his thoughts to gather. It still seemed difficult to him to place the Jesuit priest in any definite way. He had been of help to Holmes. Of that there could be no doubt. And yet... there was something in his role that could not be reconciled with any simple explanation.

Watson raised a hand to his brow and let his fingers pass over it, as though he might smooth away the uneasiness that had slowly taken shape within him.

His death. It had been too violent. Too swift. It was as though events had accelerated without warning, and Watson could not free himself from the feeling that something had been set in motion which could no longer be stopped.

He looked down at the letters again.

Holmes's tone was as it usually was—calm, precise, almost measured. Even in the face of the unexpected, he seemed to preserve a distance that enabled him to analyze where others would merely react.

Watson knew that calm. He had seen it before. But he also knew that it at times concealed a situation far more serious than Holmes himself allowed to appear.

"You are in greater danger than you yourself realize," he muttered softly, not fully aware that the words had left his lips.

He straightened.

His gaze fell upon the next letter in the sequence—still sealed.

There was a moment's hesitation. With every seal he broke, he stepped one pace farther into Holmes's world—and into what awaited him there.

He took up the letter. Turned it briefly in his hand. And broke the seal.

December 18, 1891
Rome

My dear Watson,□
Among the many possible directions this matter has opened, there is now only one that strikes me as urgent. I shall therefore begin my search for the oft-mentioned document—Saint Peter's Confession.

I have come to the conviction that this document is not merely an element in the case, but its true core. It is here that the darker connections seem to gather, and it is around this that attention—from widely different quarters—is increasingly concentrating itself. It is therefore no longer a question of whether the document is of significance, but rather of what significance it possesses.

I therefore intend to return to the archive. Not merely to continue my studies, but to find—if possible—maps, descriptions, or other indications that may lead me farther. My first objective must be to locate the passage of which Bellini spoke, and from there—if circumstances permit—to find the chapel where the document is said to be kept. I entertain no illusions that this will be a straightforward undertaking. But neither do I see any other course.

After breakfast I chose to make my way to the Vatican on foot. It seemed advisable to allow my thoughts to fall into rhythm with my steps, and at the same time it gave me the opportunity to observe my surroundings with the attention the situation now required. At this point I entertain no doubt that my access to the archive will continue to be maintained. There is a task that must be carried out, and I see no reason to suppose that this access should suddenly be denied me.

And yet something had changed. I noticed him again. The man with the dark hat. Earlier his presence had been sporadic—a figure appearing at a distance, at a street corner, in a reflection, without declaring itself as anything more than a possibility. This time it was otherwise. He did not merely stand still and wait. Now he followed me. Not closely, not obtrusively, but with a consistency that could not be explained away. Each time I let my gaze move back, he was there—at a proper distance, yet always within sight. His movements were measured, almost disciplinarily precise, as though he adjusted himself to my rhythm without allowing it to appear as imitation. There was an insistence in his presence that had not been there before. And with it—a sense that events had moved into a new phase.

Everything had become a shade more concentrated. I thought of the name Moreau had mentioned in his letter: Colonel Sebastian Moran. It could not be excluded that this was he.

I continued toward the Vatican without stopping. This time not as a visitor. But as a man who knew that time was working against him.

Without further hindrance I found myself shortly afterward at the entrance to the archive. At first glance everything seemed unchanged—the same halls, the same subdued lighting, the same order. And yet there was a difference that could not be overlooked.

Valli was already waiting. He greeted me as he usually did, but this time there was a gravity in his bearing that I had not noticed before. His gaze was firmer, his movements slightly slower, as though he had already decided what was to be said.

"Dr. Harrington," he began, "I must first and foremost express my regret."

He paused briefly. "The assistance from which you have so clearly benefited… is unfortunately no longer present."

I nodded. "I have heard," I replied quietly. "And I am grieved by it. Please accept my condolences."

Valli bowed his head slightly, but his answer came in a tone that bore the mark of something more than sorrow alone. "Great truths," he said, "are sometimes better left in shadow. When they are brought into the light… they do not always appear in the form one had imagined."

I allowed the words to stand for a moment. There was nothing in them that could be directly contradicted—and yet they seemed to contain more than was immediately said.

"I still seek the truth," I replied.

Valli looked at me for a brief moment before nodding. "That I have observed." He made a slight movement of the hand, as though indicating that I might continue my work.

I took my place at the table that had by now become familiar to me, and turned the conversation in another direction. "My interests have changed somewhat," I said. "I have had occasion to study both the workshops and the archive's collections, but I now wish to direct my attention toward the structure itself—the architecture. I should like to gain an overview of the Vatican's arrangement… and its connections."

Valli nodded slowly. "Naturally." He disappeared for a moment among the shelves and returned shortly thereafter with several maps, older works, and architectural drawings, which he laid out before me. "Here you will find what you seek—or at least the beginning of it."

I thanked him briefly and at once began to examine the material. The maps were detailed, but required a certain acclimatization. The older drawings bore the mark of several hands and several periods, and it was necessary to compare them in order to form an accurate picture. I worked systematically, laying maps side by side, comparing lines, noting discrepancies.

My objective was clear. The Passetto di Borgo. The passage that for centuries had connected the Vatican with Castel Sant'Angelo—a route

of escape, but also a connection whose significance could scarcely be confined to the merely practical.

After some time at the task, the pattern began to emerge. There were variations in the drawings, slight displacements, individual omissions—but one thing remained fixed: the passage still existed.

I devoted the afternoon to fixing the impressions I had formed in the archive into a more tangible shape. During my studies I had drawn up a sketch—not complete, but sufficient to give me a direction. I took this with me as I once more moved through the Vatican corridors, this time with a more purposeful eye for the structures that had earlier formed only a background. I paused in several places, compared my notes with what I saw, and corrected along the way the minor inaccuracies that only direct observation can reveal.

After some searching, I found it. Not as an obvious entrance, but as a deviation. A passage that did not quite fit into the rest of the sequence. A door that seemed rather to be part of the wall than an opening within it. Its position accorded with my calculations. I took the handle and opened it.

What lay beyond was not merely a corridor, but a space bearing the imprint of time to a far greater degree than the halls through which I had thus far moved. The air was cooler, the light more subdued, and the walls seemed to bear traces of use through several centuries. I stepped inside.

Through the centuries this passage must have served as a route of escape. I imagined the movements there—not as individual persons, but as streams of human beings. Prelates, officials, servants—all moving through this narrow corridor with a common aim: to reach safety, to escape, to preserve something that must not be lost.

But it was not only an escape route; it was also a hidden connection by which one might move between the centers of power without being seen. A corridor through which decisions might be carried as swiftly as the men who bore them. Powerful men had passed through here.

I stopped suddenly. At first without entirely knowing why. Perhaps a sound—not something that could immediately be identified—but rather a slight deviation in the silence. An almost imperceptible break, which in this space was amplified by the corridor's length and its many surfaces. The echo made it unclear whence it came. But it was there.

I stood perfectly still and let my gaze move forward into the darkness while I listened. There came another sound. No louder. No clearer. It did not come from the building, nor from some accidental meeting of stone and air. I drew my breath more slowly and allowed all my senses to gather upon that single point.

Again, a faint sound, and I understood that I was not alone.

The passage extended farther than I had at first supposed, but its character remained unchanged—narrow, muted, and marked by the wear of time. My footsteps sounded heavier here, not because I walked differently, but because the space amplified even the smallest movements.

After some time, I noticed a change. The air grew less stagnant. A slight movement, almost imperceptible, but enough to suggest that the passage was nearing an opening. At the same time the sound altered—the echo grew broader, less concentrated, as though the space before me were no longer confined in quite the same way.

The opening was not dramatic. No gate, no distinct transition. Merely an expansion, where the walls drew back, and the darkness assumed another character.

I stepped into Castel Sant'Angelo.

The space that opened before me was considerably larger than the passage, but no less oppressive. The walls bore the marks of several ages—smooth and worked in some places, raw and dark in others, as though they had witnessed another use. There rested over the place a particular atmosphere that could not be explained by architecture alone.

One sensed clearly that this place had served several purposes through time. As a fortress—where strength and control had been essential. As a prison—where men had been held not only physically, but also in silence. And now... something else.

Along the walls stood several chests and locked cabinets, unmarked, unexplained. A place where things might be kept without questions. A place where objects—or perhaps documents—could remain beyond the public eye.

I stood for a moment and allowed my gaze to move through the room.

There were people there. Not many, but enough to confirm my impression. One man in dark clothes moved along one wall and disappeared through a low opening without taking notice of my presence. Another stood for a moment at a door, which he locked behind him before disappearing farther into the complex.

And then—two monks. They emerged from one of the more distant passages and moved through the room with calm, almost routine steps. Their presence was not in itself remarkable, but their direction impressed itself upon me. To the left.

I let my gaze fall to my sketch and at once recognized the orientation. The chapel. I waited for a moment, allowed them the necessary distance, and then followed.

I entered the chapel with the calm appropriate to such a place, one that requires not only silence, but a kind of presence that does not attract notice. I lit a candle at the entrance and let it stand for a moment before moving onward and taking my place on one of the plain benches.

The two monks I had followed appeared to attach no special significance to my presence. They moved quietly about the room, occupied with their duties. One gathered up the small coins that had been laid in the bowl beside the altar, while the other removed burned-down candles and replaced them with new ones. There was no haste in their movements—only a routine that had evidently repeated itself many times before.

I let my gaze move through the chapel. If one wished to conceal something here—something of such significance that it must not be discovered—where would one choose to place it? Not in a spot that was regularly touched. Nor in a place requiring maintenance.

Not in a place where random hands might be tempted to examine more closely.

My reflections were interrupted by the monks' movement. They had evidently finished their tasks and, without giving me further attention, left the chapel and left me alone with the silence.

I remained seated for a moment longer, while the sound of their footsteps faded. Then I rose and followed the row of benches up toward the altar. It was then that I noticed it. A single candle, placed low—close to the floor, off to one side of the room. Its flame was steady, but its placement was unusual. I stepped nearer and saw what it illuminated. A stone slab over a grave.

The decoration was simple, but sufficient to suggest that this was no ordinary burial. A saint, I supposed.

Precisely such a place as no one would disturb. No one would lightly violate the peace of the grave—not without compelling reason. Not without particular authority.

I allowed myself a moment's reflection. Father Bellini had possessed precisely that special quality—the ability to unite the forms of faith with a more... pragmatic view of their use.

I looked around. The chapel was still empty. Then I drew out my knife and knelt beside the slab. With caution I began to work at the edge where the stone met the floor. It required time—and a certain patience—but gradually the material gave way somewhat, and a small gap opened.

I slipped my fingers in and lifted carefully. The slab yielded. Beneath it there revealed itself a cavity. Not large, but large enough. I let my right hand follow the edge down to the bottom and felt it come against something. Not a stone, but something softer and more pliable.

I drew my hand back and placed the candle nearer, so that its light might reveal what the hollow concealed.

Now I saw it clearly: a parchment roll. I took it up.

Carefully I blew the dust away and turned the roll about, to see, if possible, what it might reveal. The seal appeared untouched and intact. On the opposite side there appeared something resembling writing.

With my lens and the candle closer at hand, I succeeded in making out the words, which read:

Saint Peter's Confession.

I did not let my gaze rest upon it longer than necessary. The slab was replaced with the same care with which I had loosened it, and I made certain that nothing immediately betrayed what had just taken place. The roll I concealed within my coat. Then I left the chapel in haste.

Back in the larger room, I now noticed more people than before. More guards stood along the walls, and the atmosphere seemed a shade tighter—as though something were already in motion.

I chose the official exit. Not from convenience, but because at that moment it seemed the least conspicuous route.

It was at the door that I nearly collided with him. The man with the hat. He was on his way in. The distance between us was too short to pretend otherwise. Our eyes met for a moment that could not be avoided. I nodded slightly. He did not answer, but continued inward at a rapid pace.

Only when I stepped out into the light did I allow myself to increase my speed.

Back in my hotel room, I closed the door behind me with an awareness that had not previously accompanied my actions. I was no longer merely in possession of a clue. I now carried something that had itself been the object of centuries of searching.

I drew out the parchment roll and let it rest in my hands for a moment before once again allowing my eyes to fall upon its careful inscription: *Saint Peter's Confession.*

There was a weight in the words that could not be explained by their form alone. They seemed to contain a significance that had moved through generations—not as knowledge, but as a hidden possibility, sufficient in itself to awaken both hope and fear.

I allowed myself to consider who had sought this document. Religious authorities, without doubt—not necessarily to preserve it, but perhaps to prevent its contents from becoming known. Politicians, who might use it as an instrument of influence. And not least those circles that do not operate in the light, but in shadow—for whom any truth of this sort represents a value that can be converted. Some would seek it for power. Others out of fear. And yet others... for profit.

I set the roll down for a moment. It was now clear to me that my position had changed. So long as the document remained hidden, it had been an object of speculation. Now that it had been found, it had become a target.

And I was—temporarily—its bearer.

I had no doubt that there existed at least one person who had pursued this document for a considerable time. A person who had followed its trail from Paris to Rome... and who was now in all probability fully aware of where it was.

Colonel Sebastian Moran.

This was not a situation that permitted hesitation. I rose and began to move through the room while my thoughts gathered themselves into a decision that could not be postponed.

The document must not remain in my possession. Not because I doubted my ability to protect it—but because its very presence created a condition that would inevitably attract action. And action... would lead to disaster.

The only defensible course was to remove it from circulation. Not by hiding it anew. But by making it inaccessible to all.

I took up the parchment roll once more. The decision had been made. It must be destroyed. And it must be done before others arrived.

My dear Watson,□
Much has now taken shape. The systematic falsification that for so long has presented itself as a series of isolated incidents has proved to be

precisely that—a system—and I must, to the best of my conviction, attribute to Lorenzo Bellini the fact that he stood as its central figure.

The countess appears, in this connection, credible. Her intention has, so far as I can judge, been to restore order to matters and to ensure the preservation of the originals where these have been threatened.

At last, too, the shadow that has so long accompanied me has stepped into the light. The man with the hat may now, with reasonable certainty, be identified as Colonel Sebastian Moran—a name which I note with the utmost seriousness.

On this basis, one might be tempted to regard the matter as concluded.

But one point remains.

After careful consideration, I cannot remain passive with regard to the wish Bellini entrusted to me in his final hours. The document he carried with him through so many years—Saint Peter's Confession—is not only of historical significance, but of such a character that its mere existence appears to attract forces the reach of which has not yet been fully uncovered.

If the roles have truly been reversed, then the responsibility must also be reversed.

I shall therefore do my utmost to fulfill Bellini's final wish and determine for myself the fate of this document.

Yours devotedly,□
Sherlock Holmes

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I remained seated for a long time with the letter in my hand. It did not seem necessary to go through its contents once more; I knew Holmes's cast of mind well enough by now to understand what had been said—and perhaps even more, what had not been expressed directly.

I could not but once again acknowledge his rare abilities. His sharpness, his unparalleled power of joining even the smallest details into a

whole, stood before me with a clarity that only time and distance can give. And yet... it was precisely this clarity that gave me no peace.

For the more clearly his reasoning emerged, the more difficult I found it to free myself from a growing unease about the course he now seemed to have chosen.

It was not the mystery itself that troubled me.

It was Holmes.

I carefully laid the letter down on top of the others that had already been opened and read, and for a moment let my gaze rest upon the remaining stack—the sealed, still unopened letters that lay before me.

I knew that they contained the continuation. And perhaps the end as well.

I reached out my hand—but stopped. For the first time since I began opening them, I hesitated. Not from any doubt as to my duty. But from the realization that in these letters—layer by layer—lay my friend's fate, still hidden from me.

And that each broken seal brought me nearer to it.

Letter XIII

THE TRIAL OF STRENGTH ON THE BRIDGE

December 19, 1891
Rome

My dear Watson,□
It is not often that I permit myself to speak of mistakes, but what followed was marked by an underestimation I ought to have avoided. I ought to have made greater efforts to understand the man who had been following me—not merely as a figure at the periphery of my observations, but as an actor with a will of his own, motives of his own, and a discipline extending far beyond the ordinary. I had seen him.

For a long time, it seemed to me that he was merely one more among the many who move through the city's spaces without leaving behind anything more than a passing impression—a man in a dark hat, whose presence might be explained by chance or curiosity. An observer, perhaps even one who in certain situations had seemed to contribute to events taking a favorable turn for me.

That assumption was my error. For the man with whom I found myself confronted was not a casual bystander. He was dangerous. Not in the obvious manner, where violence or threats are employed without thought, but in a far more precise and therefore far more effective way. He possessed a hunter's instinct—the ability to observe, to wait, and to choose the proper moment without hesitation. And he combined this

with something rarer still: a soldier's ability to act. Not merely to decide. But to execute.

I must admit that my understanding of him had been blurred by the long period during which he had followed me without intervening, which had created a kind of familiarity—not in the true sense, but as a repetition that in time loses its sharpness. That on a few occasions he had seemed to act in a way that did not directly work against me had contributed further to this misjudgment. I had grown accustomed to his presence. And precisely there lay the error.

For I had not asked myself the decisive question: What was he waiting for?

That answer I was soon to receive.

I had made my decision with regard to the document.

And yet—a decision of such a nature does not execute itself without one final weighing. There were still matters that had to fall into place before I could take the final step toward its destruction. Not because I doubted the necessity, but because the consequences of the act extended farther than even I could at that point fully foresee.

I therefore chose to let my thoughts come to rest.

Not in stillness—but in movement.

A short walk along the Tiber seemed to me the most advisable course.

I was, however, fully aware that I scarcely moved unnoticed through the city. The attention I had previously observed I was now obliged to assume was both persistent and deliberate. For that reason, I did not choose the obvious route through the hotel foyer, but instead made use of the back staircase, which I had noticed on an earlier occasion. It led down through the building and out into a small courtyard. The place lay in shadow, screened from the street, and a narrow path led from it down toward the river.

I paused for a moment at the exit and considered whether it might be wiser to leave the parchment in my room. It was a possibility. But not a defensible one.

So long as it remained in my possession, the responsibility for its fate must also remain mine. I therefore decided to take it with me.

I went out carefully, without haste, but with an attention that excluded any unnecessary sound. Down one flight, through another passage, and from there out through the rear exit. I encountered no one. Everything proceeded unnoticed.

A few moments later I found myself on the narrow path that led me down toward the Tiber, where the afternoon light was beginning to fade, and where the city, despite its nearness, seemed to step a pace back. Here thought might find its form.

Or—as was soon to prove the case—its decision.

The path led me down to the river without difficulty, and I followed its course at a pace even enough to gather my thoughts, yet swift enough not to let them dissolve into needless care. There was no longer any need to review each detail individually. The essential lines stood clear.

Bellini had been the center. The forgeries, the workshops, the distribution—all pointed toward him. Madame Ardent's information from the auction had merely closed the circle. The name she had brought forth had made it possible for the countess to act with a certainty that had scarcely been accidental.

He had been skillful. And dangerous. Not by force of violence, but by his ability to unite what is rarely united: faith, aesthetics... and control.

I let my gaze move across the river for a moment as I continued my review.

The countess still appeared credible. She had acted purposefully, employed her connections, and—where it had been necessary—made use of my insight without hesitation. Her method had been direct. Perhaps even too direct. I thought briefly of Bellini's death. But let it lie. For the matter had already moved onward. It had changed level.

What had begun as an investigation into forgeries had revealed itself to be an entrance into something far larger. A network in which interests concerned not merely value, but influence.

And within this—Moran.

I did not stop, but felt the thought gather itself with a new precision.

He had been there from the beginning. Not as a chance shadow, but as a constant. Present, without being visible. Active, without being

exposed. On a few occasions his presence had even led me forward—not by helping, but by placing me where I was meant to be.

I had not been followed. I had been led.

I continued onward.

There was no longer any doubt as to the decision. The document must go. And the sooner the better.

Too much had already been set in motion. Too many interests were attached to its existence—and not all of them were visible. It seemed to me at that moment that the consequences of its continued existence extended far beyond the persons we had already identified. There were forces at work that could neither be bounded nor foreseen.

I stopped.

Yet there was one question that had still not found its answer. Whether I should read it.

I drew out the parchment roll and let my fingers rest upon the seal. It was intact. What Bellini had never done, I could now do with a single movement.

I could become the first—and perhaps the only—man to know its final wording. The truth lay within reach.

I stood for a moment.

It was not the temptation in itself that made an impression, but the recognition of what it might entail. For if the document truly contained what so many had feared—or hoped—my knowledge would not be without consequence. Not merely for the matter. But for my decision.

I let my hand fall.

No.

Precisely for that reason it must remain unread.

The decision had to be made without influence from its contents—and maintained without wavering. It was to be destroyed.

I looked up. Before me, raised above the river's quiet movement, lay the bridge—Ponte Sant'Angelo. Its lines were clear, its position unquestionable. A place where movement and transition met. In the middle of the bridge the fire would be able to do its work, and the river below would carry the remains away without trace.

It seemed fitting. Not symbolically—but practically. I turned toward the bridge and set myself in motion. The decision had been made. Only the act remained.

I took the first steps out upon the bridge with a calm more resolute than relaxed.

The place still seemed well chosen to me.

There were only very few people in motion, and the distance between them was sufficient that—with a little patience—one would be able to find a moment of solitude. In the middle of the bridge, I would be able to stop without attracting particular attention, and there complete what now remained as the sole necessary act.

It was not, in the true sense, a ceremony. But it bore the character of an ending. A final mark. Not merely for the matter as it had unfolded within my immediate horizon, but for something that seemed to extend far back—farther than I could at that moment fully oversee.

I continued.

The bridge rose gently in its first stretch, and my steps followed its incline without haste. To my left beneath me the Tiber moved with a force that stood in contrast to the calm resting upon the bridge itself. The current of the water was unbroken, indifferent to whatever actions might unfold above it.

I let my gaze follow the river for a moment. When I raised it again, I had reached a point where the arch of the bridge allowed a full view of its course.

It was then that I saw him. A solitary figure. Coming from the opposite side. He did not move quickly, but with a purpose that could not be misunderstood. His steps were even, measured, and his course led him directly toward the middle—the same point I myself had chosen.

I did not stop but lowered my pace slightly.

The distance between us slowly diminished. And with every step one thing became clearer: I was not alone.

For a brief moment there was still room for doubt—not much, but enough that I let my gaze rest a little longer upon the approaching

figure. His movement was even, his bearing untroubled. Nothing in his appearance sought to attract attention.

And yet there was something. Something familiar.

It was only when he raised his hand toward his head that the last uncertainty vanished. With a calm movement he placed the hat upon it—the dark hat I had over these past days observed at the edge of my perceptions. There was no longer any doubt. The Hat Man.

And thereby—inevitably—the man who had thus far moved in shadow.

Colonel Sebastian Moran.

The realization came not as a surprise, but as the conclusion to a series of observations now finding their proper place. I allowed my gaze to rest upon him for a moment as we continued toward one another and permitted myself a brief consideration.

Could it still be done? Could I carry out the act now—before our paths crossed? I felt the distance. Judged the time. And with that dismissed the thought. It would not be possible. Not without giving him the advantage to which he had so clearly already positioned himself.

I continued.

There was no longer any question of choice. Only of what must follow. I set my course. Toward him.

We stopped almost at the same time.

The distance between us was no more than a yard, and within that brief field of tension, where every movement had to be weighed against its consequence, time itself seemed to gather into a single instant.

"You have something that belongs to me," he said.

His voice was calm. Firm. Without the slightest trace of hesitation.

"It is seldom," I replied, "that truth belongs to anyone."

For a moment we stood thus.

Then his hand slipped into his coat and came forth again in a motion so precise that it left no room for misunderstanding. The pistol was raised and directed straight at my breast.

"You leave me no choice, Mr. Holmes," he said.

His gaze did not leave mine. "Whatever you may be considering, I shall leave this bridge with the document you carry in your inner pocket."

I measured the distance. Judged the angle.

"Give it to me now," he continued, "and we may avoid unnecessary complications."

I slowly drew my hand inside my coat. Took out the parchment roll. Extended it toward him.

He stretched out his left hand to receive it.

It was in that instant that I acted. In the same movement with which I let the document slip from my hand, I thrust my right hand forward and seized the barrel of the pistol. I got hold of it—and with a quick twist forced his arm aside, so that for a brief second the weapon no longer pointed at me.

But it was only a second.

His reaction was immediate. A hard, controlled downward jerk of the arm broke my grip, and before I could recover my balance the pistol was once more directed at my breast—this time closer, more precisely.

His expression did not change.

"You are quick, Mr. Holmes," he said calmly. "But not quick enough."

The parchment was already in his possession. He slipped it beneath his coat without lowering the weapon.

"My thanks. You have been of great assistance to me."

There was no triumph in his voice. Only statement.

"Turn around," he continued. "And get on your knees."

I did not hesitate this time.

"Do not move for the next five minutes," he added, "if you wish to leave this bridge alive."

I turned. Knelt.

I heard his footsteps behind me—firm, unhurried. Then fainter. And at last... nothing.

When I rose again, the bridge was unchanged.

But he was gone. And with him—the document.

I remained for a moment upon the bridge. Not as a man considering his next move—but as one who must acknowledge that a move had

already been made... and lost. What had just occurred could not be explained away.

He had acted faster. More consistently. And with a clarity of purpose to which, despite all my prior observations, I had not attached its full weight.

I turned slowly and began to walk back toward the opposite bank. My steps were calm, almost mechanical, as though the body continued before the thoughts had fully caught up with the situation. The bridge, which only moments earlier had been the setting for a decision, now appeared merely as a place where something had been concluded—not upon my terms.

I reached the bank and followed the river back toward the hotel. The city was unchanged. The sounds the same. The movements the same. And yet... not entirely.

For the first time in a long while I no longer sensed the presence I had earlier observed. No glance at the edge of my field of vision. No figure following at a distance. No suggestion that my movements were being watched. I was no longer the object of attention. I was... alone.

It seemed to me at that moment that my role in the matter had changed. Earlier, several interests had gathered around my person. I had been a center—not by my own will, but as the bearer of a knowledge others sought. Now that center had shifted. The document was gone. And with it—the immediate reason for following me.

I continued on in silence.

The feeling that accompanied me was not merely defeat, but something more precise: the realization that the initiative had been taken from me. The roles had changed.

I stopped briefly before reaching the hotel.

"It seems, Watson, as though the game has now been turned."

I lifted my eyes for a moment. "The question is only... whether I am willing to enter it again."

And if I do, it must be in another role. Not as the one who is followed. But as the one who hunts.

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Watson remained seated for a moment longer than he otherwise would have done.

The letters lay before him in an order that was not accidental but not entirely calm either. The opened ones lay to the left, the unopened to the right. He let his gaze pass from one stack to the other and stopped at the point where the weight seemed to shift.

Holmes had met his superior.

Not in the sense that his abilities had failed him—Watson knew that better than anyone—but in the concrete outcome. On the bridge another had acted faster. More decisively. And in that one moment, it had been enough.

Watson leaned back slightly and let his fingers rest against the edge of the desk.

There was something unfamiliar in the realization. Holmes had not been defeated in thought, but in timing. And yet...

He let his gaze fall upon the letters again. There were only two remaining with Roman dates. Two.

The rest—and they were not few—bore another origin. New York. The New World. A different tempo, a different stage. Watson had no need to open them to understand what that implied.

The story continued. There was a way forward. What now appeared as a defeat was not an ending, but a displacement.

He drew a quiet breath.

For the matter in Rome was, in its own right, concluded. The forgeries had been uncovered. The system laid bare. Bellini's role understood—and brought to an end, though in a manner that left more questions than answers.

But the central thing...

The document. Saint Peter's Confession. It was no longer in Holmes's possession. It was now in the hands of a man whose name itself bore a weight about which Watson had no doubt:

Colonel Sebastian Moran.

And with him—the immediate traces also vanished.

Watson let his hand rest for a moment upon the unopened stack. There was a silence in the room that was not empty, but charged. He broke off his reflection. Reached out and took the next-to-last letter.

The seal broke with a short, dry sound.

Letter XIV

ON THE TRACK OF SEBASTIAN MORAN

December 20, 1891
Rome

My dear Watson,□
I began the day in the hotel foyer, where I took my seat with my pipe, as I had done on several previous occasions. I allowed myself ample time—a decision which in itself stood in stark contrast to the situation in which I found myself. Around me, the morning unfolded with an almost demonstrative calm. The same guests I had observed over the preceding days moved toward the dining room with quiet steps, and the same messengers entered through the door with parcels for the reception desk. The conversations were subdued, the movements predictable, and nothing seemed to depart from the ordinary.

It was precisely this that made an impression.

I took a few slow draws upon the pipe and let my gaze pass through the room without fixing itself upon anything in particular. Everything was normal—on the surface. But not within me. There prevailed there a condition that was not unrest in the usual sense, but rather a sharpened attentiveness, in which every thought was at once weighed and judged. I was on alert, not as a reaction, but as a necessity.

It was clear to me that my role in the matter might change within a very short time. The next step—whoever took it—would be decisive. Moran might already have vanished, far beyond my reach. Or he might still be in

Rome, engaged in carrying out the next phase of his plan with the same precision he had displayed upon the bridge.

The question was not whether he would act. But where and when.

I let the pipe rest for a moment and regarded the glow. Where was he bound? That was the central question. For only when that direction stood clear would it become possible to follow him.

I did not conceal from myself that time was working against me. Observation was no longer sufficient. Action had become necessary.

My mind searched every corner, not in agitation, but in a disciplined review of what was already known. Experience has taught me that when a course of events seems to close itself without any evident exit, the cause is seldom a lack of traces, but rather that the decisive point has not yet been recognized. There had to be some place—a fragment, a word, an irregularity—which, detached from its original context, might point in the proper direction.

I let the events pass once more before my inward eye, not as a continuous narrative, but as separate parts, capable of being turned and viewed from new angles. And it was then that my thought fell upon Bellini—not upon his great confessions, but upon the more sober remarks which at the time had seemed subordinate, but which now emerged with another weight.s

He had spoken of those who had pursued the document. Not one, but several. And among them one who stood out—an American, persistent, returning again and again, changing identities as need required. Such an interest does not end with one defeat. It repeats itself, adapts, continues.

It therefore seemed unavoidable to me that he would try again.

And if that attempt this time had been more direct, more deliberate, then it must have been carried out through a person capable of precisely that. Moran appeared in this light not as a chance actor, but as a choice—a deliberate choice of a man who could not merely observe, but act swiftly, precisely, and without hesitation.

If this reasoning was correct, it altered not merely my understanding of Moran, but of the entire character of the case. It was no longer a question of ideology, nor of ecclesiastical interests, nor of the search for truth in

itself. It was a question of something far simpler—and therefore also far more predictable.

A buyer. One who wished to possess.

And it was precisely this simplicity of motive that caused the direction, which had previously been blurred, now to emerge with a clarity I could not ignore.

I allowed my thought to follow this track farther, no longer as a loose speculation, but as a structured analysis. The question was not merely who desired the document, but how it might most effectively be brought into safety with the proper recipient. Here logic had to be decisive—not human logic, but practical logic.

If the document was to be conveyed to America, it seemed to me, first of all, improbable that one would choose to hide it for any length of time. Time did not work for the man in possession of it, but against him. Every delay would increase the risk of interference, discovery, or unforeseen events. Likewise, transport by land had to be excluded. It would be slow, uncertain, and full of needless exposures.

No. The movement had to be direct. And it had to be swift.

In any event, a ship would be the necessary condition for the document ever to reach its destination. But not just any ship—one departing as soon as possible, and able without delay to carry its cargo westward.

If one follows this line of thought to its end, the conclusion becomes unavoidable.

The document was already on its way. Toward America. And it would go by sea.

I allowed the reasoning to proceed to its practical consequence. If the document was intended for America, and if its transport had to take place by sea, then the question was no longer whether it would leave Italy, but from what port this would most likely occur. In relation to Rome, the possibilities were in reality limited. Two ports might be considered, but among them Naples stood forth as by far the most probable. It was larger, better connected, more heavily trafficked, and offered more departures and faster ships.

I thought of Moran.

He was not a man who waited once the decision had been made. His earlier patience had been part of the hunt; his present speed was part of the flight. He had changed tempo, and that shift was in itself a piece of information. The man who for weeks had been content to observe and direct events from a distance had now passed over to swift and consistent execution.

He had changed tempo.

And so, must I.

I set the pipe aside and rose. The foyer lay almost empty around me, and the silence in the room made my own steps more audible than I had expected. I paced a few turns, not in agitation, but as part of the final testing of my reasoning. I let it pass once more through my mind, link by link, without finding any weakness that might cause me to hesitate.

When I stopped, the decision had been made. I must follow after him. At once. Without further hesitation.

The decision admitted of no further delay.

I left my place in the foyer, went directly to the desk, and settled my account without unnecessary remarks. There was no reason to attract attention, and nothing in my manner was to suggest the haste that in truth governed my thoughts. Yet I must admit that I scarcely appeared altogether as composed as I might have wished.

A few moments later I stepped out into the street.

The air seemed sharper—or else it was merely my own condition that made it so. I did not pause but raised my hand and hailed the first cab that passed. The driver hesitated for a moment, as though measuring me, before drawing in the horses.

"The station," I said briefly.

He nodded.

I climbed in. "As quickly as possible."

No further explanation was required.

The wheels set themselves in motion, first with a heavy sluggishness that was quickly replaced by a firmer rhythm as we found our way through the traffic. I leaned slightly forward in my seat, not in agitation,

but in a sharpened attentiveness in which every turn, every stop, and every delay was at once registered.

Time was no longer a background factor. It had become decisive.

I let my gaze move through the window. The movement of the city now seemed slower to me than I had experienced it before. Not because it had changed, but because my own tempo had done so.

Moran would not wait. He would act. And if my assumption was correct, he was already on his way—perhaps already arrived—in Naples.

It was no longer a question of following traces. It was a question of overtaking a man.

The cab took another turn, and I felt the pace increase.

For the first time since the bridge, I permitted myself a thought that was not analytical, but directed toward action.

If I was to reach him—I must catch the train.

I reached the station at that moment when the difference between calculation and chance becomes decisive.

The steam lay heavy over the platform, and the train that was to carry me toward Naples was already in motion. There was no time to stand in line, no possibility of weighing alternatives. I stepped out of the cab, cast a quick glance toward the ticket office—and dismissed the thought in the same instant that it arose. It would take too long.

I moved directly toward the platform. The train began slowly to pull out, the wheels starting to work themselves forward with a rhythm that still permitted a decision—but only for a few seconds. I ran alongside it, caught hold of the railing beside one of the cars, and pulled myself up with a motion that was scarcely elegant, but sufficient. I was aboard.

Only when the train had gathered speed did I permit myself to draw a quiet breath again. I moved inward through the corridor and found an empty seat in one of the compartments, where I sat down without attracting undue attention.

The problem presented itself only shortly afterward. The conductor. He moved methodically through the carriage, stopping at each compartment, checking tickets with a routine that left no room for improvisation. I had, of course, none.

When he entered, I raised my eyes with a composure I did not feel and brought my hand to my inner pocket as though I already knew where the ticket was to be found. It was not there.

I repeated the motion, this time more slowly, and allowed a suggestion of perplexity to show itself. I went through my other pockets, took out my bag, and opened it with a care intended to give the impression of system, but which in truth served only one purpose: time.

"One moment," I said.

The conductor looked at me with growing impatience.

I continued my search, turning through papers, pausing as though I had just found something—and then shaking my head faintly.

"This is most singular," I remarked. "I must have misplaced it."

He did not answer at once. Merely looked at me. "I shall return," he said at last shortly, and moved on.

I closed the bag. The situation was not tenable.

As the train continued its course, I moved discreetly through the carriage and found another compartment. Later still, a third. Each time for the same reason: to avoid a repetition of the same confrontation. It was not a method I should have recommended under other circumstances, but it served its purpose. Time passed.

The landscape changed gradually outside, but I allowed it to pass without truly registering it. My attention was directed elsewhere—toward the distance, which was either diminishing... or remaining too great.

After approximately four hours, the train began to slow. Naples.

I stepped down onto the platform without further incident. Only when my feet again struck firm ground did I permit myself a brief assessment. I had arrived.

But the question was no longer whether I was in the right city. It was whether I had come in time.

My haste did not end with my arrival.

I hailed the first cab I saw and stepped into it without further thought.

"The harbor," I said briefly. "The America steamer."

The driver turned halfway around, as though to judge my seriousness, and then nodded. To my good fortune he knew the place—not only the harbor, but the office where tickets were issued. I let him understand that time was not in my favor.

He understood the hint.

We set off at a pace that quickly carried us away from the broader streets and into a network of narrower lanes, where movement was less predictable. More than once pedestrians had to spring aside, and on one occasion a carriage was forced up against a wall to give way. The driver did not deviate from his course.

In less than half an hour we stopped before the ticket office. I stepped down and let my gaze pass over the gathering before me. I was far from alone.

People of widely differing character had assembled there with the same purpose. Businessmen with light baggage and fixed expressions. Couples who seemed to stand somewhere between expectation and uncertainty. And families—many families—with possessions extending far beyond the necessary, as though they were not merely traveling, but departing.

It was not difficult to understand their purpose. A new continent. A new beginning.

I briefly considered taking my place in the line. I dismissed the thought.

To my advantage, I noticed an open window where third-class tickets were being issued without much delay. I stepped there, not to purchase, but to obtain information.

"First class?" I asked.

The clerk cast a quick glance at me and pointed toward another counter farther inside.

I moved in that direction. There was no doubt in my mind. If Moran had acted as I supposed, he would not have chosen a solution that restricted his freedom of movement or exposed him to unnecessary attention. His background, his discipline, and his sense of himself excluded that.

He would travel comfortably. Discreetly. First class.

I allowed myself one further moment of reflection before proceeding. My decision to follow the trail toward America rested at its core upon a line of reasoning that—however logical it appeared—did not constitute any actual proof. It was possible that Moran had chosen the same route. It was also possible that I was already on my way in the wrong direction. Such uncertainty was not unfamiliar to me, but in this instance, it seemed less acceptable.

It was then that the idea arose. I stepped to the counter and framed my inquiry in a manner that would attract no attention. I gave out that I was traveling in company with another, and that I wished to inquire whether he had already checked in. If so, I should like to secure a cabin nearby. The man behind the window reacted routinely, nodded briefly, drew forward a list, and asked for the name.

I gave it without hesitation: Sebastian Moran. I thought it likely that he no longer had any need to conceal his identity. The phase in which he had moved in shadow was over; now it was a matter of execution, and in that role his name and rank would be more an advantage than a hindrance.

The clerk let his finger move down the list, once, then once more, before it stopped.

"Colonel Sebastian Moran," he said.

I nodded.

"He has checked in. Cabin forty-seven."

He examined the list a moment longer before adding that he could not immediately offer me a cabin nearby, though he could give me one on the same deck. I accepted without hesitation and stepped back.

I did not allow my reaction to show itself, but I was fully aware of the change that had just taken place. Uncertainty had been replaced by certainty. We were on the same ship. On the same voyage.

And for the first time since the bridge, the objective seemed to me not merely conceivable—but within reach.

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Watson remained seated for a long time after he had laid the letter aside.

The rooms around him lay in their usual calm, and nothing in their appearance suggested that anything had shifted. The desk was illuminated by the steady glow of the lamp, and the letters lay before him in the same orderly arrangement he himself had made—the ones already read to the left, the unopened to the right.

He let his gaze rest upon them without at once reaching out.

The rest bore another date.

New York.

The name stood repeated upon the envelopes with a regularity that in itself made an impression. Like a continuation not yet read but already present in the room.

Watson leaned back slightly and allowed the silence to settle fully into place. It was not an empty silence. It held something—an after-tone of the events he had just followed through the letters. The bridge. The meeting. The loss. And now the hope.

He let his hand pass over the surface of the desk and stopped at the edge of the unopened stack, without touching it.

Watson allowed his gaze to rest upon the letters for another moment before slowly gathering his thoughts.

Holmes had met his superior. Not in ability—of that he had no doubt—but in the one decisive moment when action had weighed more heavily than analysis. On the bridge another had acted first. Faster. More consistently. And that had been enough.

He drew a quiet breath. It was an unfamiliar realization. Not because Holmes was infallible—Watson had never believed that—but because it was seldom the outcome itself that turned against him. Here it was not the reasoning that had failed, but the timing. A shift of a single moment, and the entire balance had changed.

He leaned forward again and let his fingers rest lightly against the edge of the desk.

And yet...

There was something in the letters that did not point toward an ending. Quite the reverse.

Holmes had not withdrawn. He had not sought explanation in defeat. His tone had been clear, his thoughts collected. Even in acknowledging the loss, there had been no hint of surrender—rather a displacement, an adjustment.

Watson nodded faintly to himself.

This was not an ending. It was a transition. Another phase.

And if Holmes himself had accepted that—if he had taken the step from being followed to following in turn—then what now awaited must be of a character that had not yet revealed its full extent.

Watson let his gaze move toward the stack of unopened letters.

"I looked at the letters from New York and understood that the game was far from over. The journey west had begun."