



ISLAND OF THE MAD

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CHAPTER ONE

SHERLOCK HOLMES AND I stood shoulder to shoulder, gazing down sadly at the tiny charred corpse.

‘She should never have left us alone,’ I told him.

‘She had no great choice in the matter.’

‘There’s always a choice.’

‘Strictly speaking, perhaps. But it’s best that she disappear, at least for a time. Even putting aside the death penalty, I cannot see her thriving in prison.’

I had to agree. ‘She is probably better off in Monte Carlo.’ And so saying, I snatched up the smouldering pan and tipped my attempt at a chicken dinner into the rubbish bin. Our long-time housekeeper, Mrs Hudson, had recently abandoned us, selfishly choosing freedom over being tried for murder – and thereby risking our lives to my

poisonous culinary skills. ‘Cheese sandwiches, then? Or shall we walk up to the Tiger?’

He glanced at the kitchen clock. ‘Do you suppose Tillie might have a table, up at the Monk’s Tun?’

Three hours later, we were making our leisurely way towards the gate in the stone wall encircling our house. I had pocketed a torch as we left, but the midsummer sky held enough lingering brightness that we did not need it as we returned across the Sussex Downs. Tillie had outdone herself, with a perfection of cool dishes on a warm afternoon: subtle lettuces, an iced soup, cold meats, hot rolls, and a strawberry tart the likes of none in the land.

The one drawback was the Monk’s Tun had begun to collect a reputation. Not that I begrudged Tillie her success – although I might wish we had not chosen to stop in the same night as a carload of Young Things on their way up from Dover.

Not that they were drunk, merely festive; nor were they loud, exactly, merely difficult to ignore. They were my age – in fact, two of them I dimly recognised: a young man with dark Byronic curls who had been the year before me at Oxford, and a girl whose face appeared in the illustrated society pages of the newspapers. My eyes kept going to them: two sleek girls in Paris frocks, two clean, tanned lads in casually worn suits that would have cost Tillie’s barman a year of his salary.

The second time Holmes had needed to repeat something, he craned around to look at the table of merrymakers on the other side of the old room.

‘Friends of yours?’

‘Good heavens, no.’

‘Then why are you watching them so closely?’

‘I wasn’t. Not really. Just – they seem like an alien race, down here in Sussex. Don’t you think?’

His grey eyes fixed on me, but before he could speak, Tillie came up to greet us, the next course arrived, and the moment was lost.

However, Holmes never forgot anything. When he pushed open the gate an hour later, he said, ‘Russell, do you regret the choices you made?’

There was little point in pretending I didn’t understand. ‘Regret? Never. I might occasionally wonder what life would have been, had things been different, but it’s mere speculation. Like . . . like trying on a dress I’d never actually wear, just to see what it feels like.’

He closed the gate and worked the latch. We picked our way through the grassy orchard, hearing the faint texture of sound from the hives – drones cooling their homes from the day’s heat. Near the house, the sweet odour from the old-fashioned climbing rose drew us forward. Mrs Hudson had planted the flower, long before I knew her. Mrs Hudson, now gone away, to . . . But before yearning could overcome me, the night was broken by the jangle of the telephone bell.

Neither of us hurried to catch it.

And neither of us suggested, when the machine ceased its clamour before we were halfway through the kitchen, that we ask the exchange to restore the connection.

Instead, Holmes pulled a corkscrew from the drawer and a bottle of chilled honey wine from the cooler. I fetched a pair of glasses from the cupboard. We left the door open, to chase away the aroma of cremated chicken, and settled into our garden chairs. The night smelt of blossoms and honey. The low pulse of waves against the Sussex cliffs obscured the sound from the hives. The wine was cool, but faintly sad as its summer freshness had faded, giving a hint of the bitterness to come.

And the telephone rang again. At this time of night, the sound was ominous.

With a sigh, I put my half-empty glass onto the stones and went through the terrace doors.

I spoke our number by way of greeting, to be answered by a voice from the local exchange. 'Evening, Mrs Holmes, sorry to ring so late, but the lady said it was an emergency, so I told her I'd keep trying you. And the girl at the Monk's Tun said you'd left there. Do you want me to connect you again?'

Life in a rural area is rich in many things, but privacy is not one of them. 'Hold on a moment, I'll get Holmes.' The word 'emergency' generally summoned Sherlock Holmes.

But to my surprise, she said the woman had asked for me.

'Did she leave a name?'

'She said to tell you it was Veronica Fitzwarren.' *Ronnie*. Oh dear.

I pulled up the chair we kept near the telephone and sat. 'Yes, you'd better put me through.'

Ronnie Fitzwarren – she'd been the Lady Veronica Anne Beaconsfield when we met in 1917 – was my oldest friend on this side of the Atlantic. My very first morning at Oxford University, she stepped into my rooms and took charge of my life, turning what might have been three years of solitary academic pursuit into a time of exploration, community and, occasionally, fun.

On the surface, we had little in common: Ronnie was short, round, vivacious, an English aristocrat down to her Norman bones, not greatly interested in her books, and dedicated to a series of Good Works. I, on the other hand, was tall, thin, aloof, of mongrel blood, and far more interested in the academic elements of human beings than the personal.

Ronnie taught me the meaning of friendship; once she'd laid claim to me, we were bound together. After university, however, our lives had drifted apart until, on the eve of my twenty-first birthday, we

happened to meet. At the time, I had just begun to realise how torn I was between a life of independence and a life with Sherlock Holmes. The conundrum was brought into greater focus in the time that followed by Ronnie's interest in a woman religious leader with some dubious connections – and, by Ronnie's attachment to a troubled, young, demobbed officer with a weakness for hard drugs.

I'd dragged Holmes into the case, a mutual involvement that brought us together in unforeseen ways, revealing a surprisingly generous side to the man who had been my informal tutor since I met him at the age of fifteen.¹

Holmes coaxed, cajoled, and bullied Miles Fitzwarren into sobriety, turning him from a man so befuddled he'd mistaken Ronnie's dead father for her sciatic uncle to a man serving His Majesty's government with honour and distinction.

Ronnie married Miles in 1921. Their son was born the following year. Two years after that, an Irish sniper's bullet left her a young widow with a small child and a complicated financial situation – and yet, far from my stepping up to be a faithful friend in her time of need, the past year had found me mostly absent from England, and from her life.

Letters, quick visits, and presents to the child did not assuage my guilt: she'd rescued me; I'd abandoned her.

The word 'emergency' in Ronnie's situation could mean nothing good.

But my friend seemed in no hurry to tell me about it. Instead, the familiar voice launched into cheery exclamations over how long it had been and was it as warm in Sussex as in London. Then she asked, rather pointedly, if I thought the exchange had left the line. Following the giveaway clicks, Ronnie's voice became more sober.

¹ The Beaconsfield case is described in *A Monstrous Regiment of Women*; the meeting and apprenticeship of Russell and Holmes are found in *The Beekeeper's Apprentice* and *Mary Russell's War*.

‘Mary, I actually phoned you a couple of hours ago – I didn’t know the woman would continue to try you. It could wait till morning . . .’

‘I’m glad to hear it’s not drop-everything urgent, but since you’ve reached me, why don’t you go ahead and tell me about it? Is it Simon?’ The child was occasionally sickly, but in summer?

‘Simon? No, he’s great, why? Oh, I mean, I know why, but no, he’s doing marvellously. I’m sorry you missed his birthday party last month. Mother hired a pony ride – she found this funny little man with ponies down in Brighton and Simon climbed right up, never a hesitation, you should have seen it . . .’

I waited through a proud mother’s recitation of genius, studying the room, wondering if Holmes might rid it of Mrs Hudson’s homely touches, wondering if Ronnie would notice if I gently laid down the earpiece to go and fetch my wine glass – which was no doubt serving as a swimming pool for midges. When Ronnie paused for a breath, I hastened to interrupt. ‘That all sounds perfectly fine. So, if not Simon, what’s the trouble?’

‘Do you remember my Aunt Vivian?’

‘The one who is—’ I stopped to reach around for a diplomatic word, but Ronnie wasn’t bothered.

‘In the loony bin, yes.’

‘I only met her the once, but it was . . .’

‘Terrifying?’

‘Memorable.’

My old friend laughed sadly at the understatement. ‘I know. Well, she’s vanished, into thin air.’

A full twenty minutes later, I removed the telephone receiver from my numb ear. Five more minutes passed before I stood and went back through the terrace doors.

As I approached, Holmes stretched out an arm and removed his clean handkerchief from the top of my wine glass: no drowned midges.

‘That was Ronnie Beaconsfield—Fitzwarren, rather,’ I told him. ‘Her aunt has disappeared.’

‘The mad one?’

‘Yes.’

‘Wasn’t she in Bedlam? Escape from there is not an easy matter.’

I glanced over at him, but his face was in shadow. ‘Holmes, that sounds oddly like the voice of experience speaking.’ He did not reply, which meant that here was yet another episode in his life he had neglected to mention – probably because there was something embarrassing about it. ‘No, in fact, she’d been given a week’s home leave, with a nurse in charge, in order to celebrate her brother’s – her *half-brother’s* – fiftieth birthday. The Marquess of Selwick? Lady Vivian and the nurse were headed back to the asylum on Friday, but they never arrived.’

‘And your friend wishes you . . . ?’

‘To look into it, yes. She has a young child, so her movements are somewhat restricted.’

‘The child hasn’t a governess?’

‘Only a few days a week. The widow’s pension Ronnie gets doesn’t leave her with many luxuries.’

‘Lady Veronica Beaconsfield is living on an army pension?’

‘Ridiculous, I know. But I suspect that her uncle, the Marquess, made some bad investments, since he’s never moved back to the London house since the War – ironic, considering that Ronnie’s father was something of a financial genius – and the other uncle, on the mother’s side, married an American who’s rather tighter with her dollars than he anticipated. Neither are keen on providing Ronnie with an allowance to live in her own place in London. I’m sure it’ll be sorted out in the end, but until then . . .’

He grunted. I took another sip from the too-warm wine.

Peace returned. As did the midges. Holmes gathered the near-empty bottle and the glasses and took them into the house, leaving me to listen to the sea and think about beehives, carefree Young Things, and Ronnie's mad aunt.

As I remembered it, Lady Vivian Beaconsfield had always demonstrated a particular antipathy for her half-brother Edward, Lord Selwick. I was pretty sure that most of her overt violence had been aimed at him. Perhaps her willingness to celebrate the anniversary of the Marquess's birth had been a sign of healing.

Or had it been something else?