The Night Calls

David Pirie

Contents

About the Book
About the Author
Also by David Pirie
Title Page
Dedication
Author’s Note
Prologue

Part One: His Coming
- The Tune from Another World
- The Strange Student
- Hair and Knife
- The Coins in the Gutter

Part Two: His Game
- The Room of Blood
- The Anatomy Lesson
- The Riot and the Puzzle
- The Problem of Lady Carlisle
- The Sign in the Bedroom
- The Lair at Holy Well House
- The Red Cardboard Box

Part Three: His Move
- The House on the Waves
- The Nature of Infection
- The Quest for Agnes Walsh
- The Strange Medicine
- The Exhumation

The Carlisle Family Secret
The Figure in the Upstairs Room
The Writing on the Sand
The Dead Time
A Criminal Rectitude
The Gift from the Labyrinth

Part Four: His Hell
The Murder Room
The Den at Reheboth Chapel
The Body of Harriet Lowther
The Message from Hell
The League of Hope and Sorrow
The Night Calls
The Warehouse to Another World
The Head
The Pool of Will
The Uncle

A Historical Note
Copyright

About the Book

While a young medical student at Edinburgh Arthur Conan Doyle famously studied under the remarkable Dr Joseph Bell, who was a pioneer in criminal investigation. *The Night Calls* chronicles their most frightening and disturbing case – the encounter with the man who was later presented in expurgated form as Moriarty. Beginning with a series of bizarre and outlandish assaults on women in the brothels of Edinburgh, the story moves to the medical facility of the city's university, which is itself being disrupted by the violent struggle for women's educational rights. Here Doyle meets a fellow student, young Elizabeth Scott, who has many enemies, among them a crazed misogynist student called Crawford and the smiling hypocritical patron of the university, Henry Carlisle. Yet slowly Bell begins to realise that the increasingly freakish crimes they are investigating reflect an entirely new and terrifying kind of criminal who is not susceptible to the old methods. *The Night Calls* takes them from the evil heart of old Edinburgh into what Bell calls their 'fight against the future' and to London itself, where Doyle again faces his nemesis with terrifying results . . .

About the Author

David Pirie was a journalist and film critic before he became a screenwriter. His numerous credits include the BAFTA-nominated adaptation for the BBC of *The Woman in White* and he also collaborated with Lars Von Trier on the script of the Oscar-nominated film *Breaking the Waves*. David Pirie lives in Somerset. *The Night Calls* is his second novel.

Also by David Pirie

The Patient's Eyes
The Dark Water

The Night Calls

Murder Rooms: The Dark Beginnings of Sherlock Holmes

David Pirie

arrow books

For TW

Author's Note

This is the second in the 'Dark Beginnings of Sherlock Holmes' cycle of novels. As in the first novel, *The Patient's Eyes*, some parts of the story overlap with the very first film, in which Doyle met Joseph Bell, but most of it is original, chronicling their earliest dealings with the figure Doyle generally preferred to call 'him'.

PROLOGUE

10.07 a.m., 14 October 1898

I woke up early this morning and it was almost as if he stood there in the room. The feeling of fear and dread in me was so palpable.

A few feeble rays of early sunlight gleamed on the mantelpiece of the dressing room where I have slept since my wife became ill. My window was ajar and, as the curtains shifted slightly in a breeze, I kept telling myself there was nothing unusual. Yet I felt his presence so keenly that I almost expected him to be crouched on the sill behind them. It is strange to think that the reader of these words has no idea of who he is or what he has done. Of how many women have died in what vile circumstances. And of how I will be dead – yes, perhaps, if I am fortunate, long dead – before this is ever read. All I can tell you is that if Satan himself were behind those curtains, I do not believe I would have been more frightened.

Some weeks ago I received a parcel containing a picture from one of my stories. There was writing disguised in the picture and, though he had contrived a puzzle for me, it was effectively an announcement of his return. Last night another parcel came. This time the handwriting with its wild vowels and fanciful elongated consonants, was unmistakable. I can be absolutely sure now he is coming back. The man who destroyed so much of my young happiness and hope, and who stands for everything in the future that the Doctor fears and despises, has returned.

Of course in my heart I suppose I had known as soon as I deciphered the first puzzle, but I shrank from the knowledge. I thought he was dead; there could be no reason to think otherwise, but now I can be absolutely sure it was a deception. And his timing as always is lethal. There is a reason – to do with my personal life – why he might have chosen this time. Knowing the author of those parcels, I would be surprised by nothing, but I cannot allow myself to entertain such fears. They will only paralyse me.

As soon as I was certain of his return, my mind naturally turned to the Doctor. But the loss of his son affected him so badly that I have decided for the moment to deal with this on my own. The postmark on the second parcel was Dumfries in Scotland and, given my tormentor's propensity for games, I believe I may have a little time before he makes a firm move. And so I must leave word of my encounter with him. It is a strange unnerving story, set in many different places, which encompasses horrors I have always fervently wished to forget, horrors enough for several tales. Nothing about it was constant; lulls would be followed by a sudden descent into the blackest hell. Inevitably there were connections to my working life and I suppose it was no coincidence that I wrote the death of my own fictional detective just a few months after a black flag outside Newgate appeared to bring our ordeal to an end. Of course, I am aware that to describe all that took place is to break the Doctor's trust, for I swore confidentiality. But I do so now because I cannot be sure what will happen to me.

Therefore I got up, assured myself that my wife was untroubled – indeed she was still asleep – and came down to my study where I stared at the parcel before me. Then, like a diver not wishing to think before he plunges into an icy pool, I tore it open. Unlike the one before, there was fine tissue paper inside and I felt something within the paper.

At once I dreaded what I might find, for more than once he has sent human remains. But it was not like that. In many

ways it was far worse.

Inside the parcel was a pale blue silk scarf.

I did not flinch or cry out. I suppose a week or so earlier I would have, but not now. Partly because I was prepared for anything, but I also had to pause to take in the enormity of it. I could recall the garment below me so clearly. Once again I was back on a beach long ago. And I heard a song.

> And one could whistle
> And one could sing
> And one could play on the violin
> Such joy there was at my wedding
> On Christmas day in the morning

But that was enough. I thrust the garment aside, telling myself that only my own application of the Doctor's principles could have any hope of defeating the man. I am not someone who resents progress. In many ways the fabric of our lives has seen improvement in my time. But the idea of a murder for no reason – the idea of a man killing a series of women for nothing more than a minor thrill – was, when the Doctor and I first came together, as incomprehensible as it seemed impossible. There had been barbarism and bloodlust in the mid-century, of course, and plenty of it, just as there was in the last. But murder as a casual and sophisticated game had not yet been invented or even foreseen. *He* was one of the first to give us that, perhaps he was the first, which is why his shadow seems cast over the start of the next century.

And so it is that I put the parcel to one side and take up the box I have long dreaded to open. The first item I see is a map, though of a bizarre kind. Hand-drawn, it marks in a curious way the streets and byways and medical buildings of Edinburgh. Some of the streets are tinged with scarlet, others with black, some of the names are odd, others conventional. It is in fact a diagram marking the dark night-

world of the city and the scene of several of his crimes, starting in 1878.

Beside it there is a sketch of what seems to be a labyrinth – which indeed it was, though I reflected often enough that I would far rather face a monster in there than what I found. This drawing in fact follows the corridors and cupboards and staircases and roof-spaces – yes and the bedrooms – of a notorious Edinburgh establishment, a building long since shut down, called Madame Rose's.

It is unnerving to see these things again, for I know where they lead. I have placed them beside the scarf, which lies there mocking me as I go back to that time when I was just a young and somewhat disillusioned student in my second year of medical school. How aimlessly I walked the streets that winter. Until there came a night I shall never forget, when I heard that lilting, other-worldly music from a beggar's violin, and I am sure even then I sensed him somewhere. Waiting . . .

Part One: His Coming

The Tune from Another World

I always think of the beggar as the beginning. His name was Samuel and, with his ancient red shirt and sky-blue eyes, he stood there like some vision from heaven on the corner of one of the most colourful and depraved streets in the whole of Edinburgh. I never once heard him play a real tune, only a series of wild and rambling flights of musical fancy which sounded eerie enough in themselves but all the more so in that spot, only yards away from the town’s more notorious brothels and drinking dens.

The night I first heard him, I stood there for a long time, drinking in his music. To me it sounded a hundred times more spiritual than all the empty catechisms of the Jesuit boarding school I had just left. And the playing healed some of my anguish, for it so happened that evening had been particularly miserable at home.

My mother was away delivering some mending. And for some reason I never fathomed, my small brother Innes, then still a very young child, climbed the stairs and ran along the red corridor which led to my father’s study. For some years our house had been blighted by my father’s condition. Now he was barely able even to speak, his mind utterly fogged by drink and near-insanity. Yet, unusually for him, he happened on this occasion to hear the infant playing and opened his door.

Both of them undoubtedly had a shock as they faced each other. By this time my father, with his lank beard, unshaven pallor and stale clothes, was rarely sane or sober enough to

venture downstairs. No doubt my mother was relieved that her four younger children, Innes and his three sisters (for the two older girls were seldom at home), saw him so rarely. I am sure at times he would hardly have recognised them.

Even so, beyond a little fright for both of them, the incident might well have come to nothing. Except that someone else now appeared. Our so-called lodger Dr Waller, who was then in his mid-twenties and not so much older than myself, had come out of his room and witnessed this unlikely meeting. I say 'so-called' lodger for really it was more as if we were *his* lodgers. For some time, Waller had paid the entire rent for the house as a favour to my mother and, though he was careful to be civilised and even fawning with her, I knew quite well in my heart he felt an unspoken power over all of us. Nor was he by any description a kind man. I will acknowledge that he was cultured, and when I was away I had on occasions corresponded with him about literature. But by this time I knew that his mask of sensibility concealed much that was arrogant and inhumane, including a deep distaste for children, which ensured that they generally kept out of his way.

I can still see the little tableau in my mind's eye, framed in the dim light of the flickering corridor lamp. Innes was still, puzzled by these figures. My father was about to retire, the shadows playing over his whiskered head. But Waller stood upright beside them, a look of great irritation on his face. And then, quite suddenly, without the slightest provocation, he slapped Innes hard around the face and sent him, howling, away. After that, he gave my father a brutal shove that sent him back into his room and closed the door.

I am quite sure to this day Waller did not know he was observed, and the sight confirmed all my suspicions. I had always strongly suspected that my father's illness and our poverty suited the man admirably. It had allowed him to rule a roost of his own without all the tiresome effort of building

one for himself. As he slammed my father's door, he had never looked to me so much like a sadistic jailer.

And then he saw me and we faced each other with poor Innes's sobs still ringing in my ears from below.

Given Waller's arrogance, and his position of authority, you would think perhaps that I, then an eighteen-year-old student, would often have come into conflict with him. This was the opposite of the truth. My mother had enormous faith in the man, and never tired of reminding me of the unpleasant fact that he had kept us from the workhouse. So for her sake he and I both generally kept an uneasy peace. The night I describe was one of the few occasions our hostility erupted into the open.

I walked towards him in fury at what I had observed and told him he had absolutely no right to strike Innes. 'You are not even his father any more than you are—'

I could not go on for I knew at once that I had given him his opening. Waller was aware I had been about to challenge his position in our house, and he stared at me, his brown eyes gleaming. 'Any more than what? Would you like to consult your mother? I think you will find she enjoys my company here in this house.'

I wanted to strike him. He was, as I have said, only a few years my senior, yet he was not a physical man, and always dressed with the meticulous care of someone much older. Tonight, as ever, he was immaculately groomed and coiffured, not a whisker of his thick dark hair was out of place. I clenched my fists, longing to let fly with a punch that would have ruffled that fine appearance. But, as ever, the thought of my mother restrained me and I offered no answer.

'And where would you be? Where would that child be?' he continued. 'Where would your father and mother be if I were not here?'

Still I would not reply.

‘I will tell you, you would be in the workhouse. I wonder if you realise, Arthur, I am not exacting even a farthing for what I have done for you personally. I could, if I wished, insist it came out of any future earnings you make as a doctor – that is, if you make any at all.’ And with that he turned and walked away.

I am sure the exchange had only occurred because my mother was out of the house. Even Waller would never have dared to express his own sense of power and supremacy so crudely in her presence. Of course, I could have tried to tell her, but I knew from countless arguments on the subject she would not have listened. And the bitter truth was that, even if I could have persuaded her to see the dreadful hypocrisy of our arrangement, I would only have hurt her more deeply. What, after all, was the alternative?

So, as often before, I took to the streets. And it was this very night, with my emotions already stirred, that I first heard Samuel’s music and stood there on the pavement, quite overwhelmed by it.

After a little while, I offered the player a coin I could ill afford, but he only wished me to buy him a cup of something warm. Naturally I thought he meant strong drink but it turned out he was an abstainer, or near enough, and we went to a little stall, not far away, where he had a mug of some hot cordial, made from blackberries. As I handed him his cup, I told him his music sounded like it came from another world.

The large genial stallholder laughed at this. ‘That’s what I say, sir. Why can he not play an air like everyone else?’

He moved away as Samuel looked over the steaming mug at me with a twinkle in his faraway eyes. It was impossible to tell his age, twenty-three or sixty-three. ‘Another world? D’you believe in one, sir?’

The question was as unexpected as its speaker. I did believe in something, I knew that, but the discipline and

eagerness for hell that I had seen at Stonyhurst, my Catholic boarding school, had clouded my vision.

‘I do not know,’ I said simply. ‘Do you?’

He smiled. ‘Well, as for my music I was taught by a man who sailed wi’ me. And aye, I believe in something. Something else. But I hope to bide hereabouts in this world a wee while longer. For I like to watch all that goes on. Some strange things there are too, sir, but the police willna hear o’ them from me.’

With that he downed the drink and was soon back to his post where he raised his violin and took up an even sadder and more poignant form of that strange music. I walked on, trying to avoid the eyes of the women in the doorways as I reflected on his last remark. There was no doubt that any beggar on that street would see some odd sights, but his mention of the police inevitably brought my mind around to a subject I had been avoiding and to a person I had not seen for many weeks.

Dr Joseph Bell was the extraordinary teacher at the university, who had first asked me to be his medical clerk, and then in great confidence initiated me into his pioneering study of criminal investigation, or what he called his ‘method’. I was of course intrigued and flattered, all the more so after he allowed me to accompany the police on a highly confidential case. But, although I was impressed, I had never from the beginning quite been able to accept the vast claims Bell made for his system of deduction. And so it was that one afternoon in February, shortly after he took me into his confidence, I had been bold enough to try and test the man’s deductive powers.

Among the many claims Bell made for his precious method, one of the most outlandish was that a close study of any object could lay bare the character of its owner. I was highly dubious of this and had therefore offered him my father’s watch as a trial. It had been recently cleaned so I felt absolutely confident that he could get nowhere with it.

However, Dr Bell proceeded to use every mark and feature of that watch – certain indentations, some pawnbroker's notches, the tiny scratches around the key – to expose in unbearable detail its owner's mental condition. It was utterly horrifying to me to hear the secret my family had struggled to conceal being analysed and reviewed in so casual a fashion. To his credit, the Doctor saw my anguish and tried his best to make me aware he had been indulging in pure deduction. But even so, for some time after that day, I did my best to avoid him and pleaded my studies as an excuse.

Now, with the fiddler's melancholy notes still in my ears, I thought of that incident with the watch once again. And I found that I missed my jousts with Bell even if, despite my painful lesson, I still had doubts about the man's 'method'. Perhaps he had won that particular contest, but was there not, even here, some plain old-fashioned luck? After all, in his attempt to divine human character from an inanimate object, I had fed his ego by handing over a damaged artefact. But supposing that cursed watch had belonged to some fussy old solicitor rather than an artist whose mind was giving way? If the thing had been in utterly pristine condition, what could Dr Bell have had to say then beyond some vague and useless observation? Much of my old spirit returned as I remembered how disconcerted the Doctor had looked at first when he realised it had been cleaned. Supposing it had not only been cleaned, but bore no marks whatsoever? Bell's expression might well have remained just as unhappy for the whole test.

As the music faded behind me I smiled to think of that, and before the walk was over I had made up my mind that I was ready to see him again. Not that I would abandon my scepticism. Perhaps now a part of me wanted to challenge his method because it had inflicted such pain. But surely such challenges were good for him and for me, just as long as I took more care?

And so the next morning I made my way along the dark stone corridors to Bell's strange vault-like room in the university. As you entered it, you passed through a kind of tunnel between huge shelves of various compounds and chemicals until you arrived at an enormous tank which ran halfway to the ceiling. Today that tank was dry, rather to my surprise, for I was used to seeing strange things in its watery depths. Beyond it a huge bookcase towered to my left and I came past it to find his empty desk.

'Well,' said a familiar and sharp voice from somewhere below me.

I whirled round. At first I could see nothing at all in the shadows, but eventually I made out a shape lying down very flat between two low bookshelves. The space was so confined you could hardly see Bell's wiry body. But slowly I made out his features and saw he was staring at me. He was indeed quite horizontal, lying between two shelves that were so close together only the smallest volumes could possibly have fitted them, and yet Bell had somehow clambered in and managed to lie flat. He had a watch in one hand.

'Doctor?' I said in amazement.

He ignored me and looked at the watch. Then his legs moved and he wriggled out from under that tiny crevice and drew himself up to his full height, which was more than six foot. His expression was fierce. 'Your business?' he said.

'But what are you doing?'

'I am establishing whether a man called André Valère was truly able to lie in a chimney space much smaller than a grave in order to conceal himself from the constabulary of Rouen in 1780.'

'1780?'

'Nothing has been presented to me in months, but I do not wish to remain entirely inactive in the field. If I cannot obtain fresh material, I can at least occasionally exercise my powers with older cases, especially those unsolved. Perhaps

you are not aware of the Rouen matter? Valère was a suspected strangler, but they could not place him near the scene. I think he was in a chimney crevice no bigger than this when the third murder was discovered. He seemed to vanish into thin air and, though there was speculation, they thought the space was too small. This bookcase is a few inches smaller and I could have stayed longer; he only needed twenty-three minutes. So I am convinced.' He had taken up a brush and was removing some dust from his jacket lapels as his tone became more clipped, but his eyes never left me. 'Now, your business, please, I have a lecture to give.'

And he continued to stare at me with a somewhat pugnacious expression.

As I think back to this small reunion I sense again how energised and indefatigable the Doctor was in those days. Recalling his eager yet assertive gaze, I can see now that there was still almost an innocence in him for he had not as yet been fully tested. His most recent case at that time, involving a man called Canning, had proved a typical triumph, even if it had irritated the local constabulary. The Doctor was yet, in fact, to be seriously bloodied in any quest he had undertaken. That would come, and a good deal sooner than either of us might have wished.

'I merely came to tell you I could make myself available again for my duties.'

He looked at me with a certain amusement. 'Your letter said you were obliged to undertake intensive studies for another course. So in that at least you must now be accomplished?'

After the business with the watch I had written him a polite but vague letter, explaining that I had to take a leave of absence as his clerk to further my studies and his written reply did not press me though he must have guessed the real reason.

'I feel enough time has been devoted to them.'

‘Do you really, now? Well, you may assist me in my operating theatre today.’

Of course it was the lowliest task he could have offered, and an hour later I was running around like a madman, fetching instruments and dressings as he desperately tried to speed the progress of a woman patient having an emergency amputation. In those days patients survived in a fairly direct ratio to the speed with which their doctors worked, and I truly sensed the Doctor’s frustration for I had to mop his brow over thirty times as he cut and cleaned. I had rarely seen him so determined, but he managed to get the woman off the table alive.

Later, as I performed the mundane chore of sorting through his surgery papers, he sat in his workroom making a few notes and offering very little in the way of conversation. Then he got up, without even glancing in my direction, and disappeared through the locked door leading to the extraordinary room where he kept relics and other more private records of criminal cases. Clearly I was not to be admitted to this inner sanctum again for the moment.

It took me some time to finish my work and at last I walked home, deliberately extending my journey until I reached the street where the beggar Samuel played his violin. The night was cold yet clear, and the stars above made a perfect setting for the player, who seemed in a kind of trance and did not notice me. But I paused some minutes to listen and am glad that I did, for it was a sound I was destined never to hear again in this world.

The Strange Student

Next day I resumed my studies and found myself sitting mournfully alongside my friends in Macfarlane's pharmacology lecture hall. I say 'mournfully' because among the many dreary teachers in Edinburgh at that time, Macfarlane was without contest the dreariest of all. In fact he was probably the dullest lecturer I have ever known in my life.

The man's idea of teaching was to walk up and down reciting endless lists and formulae that several centuries ago he had learned by heart. A small, nervous, bespectacled figure with a trim white beard, he rarely looked at his audience, and sometimes the words themselves became entirely incomprehensible, little more than a mumble.

'I have in my time,' he was saying on this occasion, 'counted nineteen compounds which may be of use to help a patient suffering from the condition. And we list them for you in order of strength . . .'

On one side of me was Colin Stark, a cheerful student from Dundee. On the other was Neill, from the colonies, at that time my closest companion. He was a little older than me and his features generally bore an expression of amusement, but today he looked pained by Macfarlane's ramblings and leaned over to whisper in my ear, 'This is purgatory.'

'Far worse,' I said quite loudly, for I knew Macfarlane would never be distracted by noise from the floor. 'We have to pay for our torment.' Stark agreed with this equally loudly

and started to outline his hopes for the forthcoming medical society ball.

All of us were perfectly confident nothing would stop Macfarlane's flow, but on this day we were wrong. As he doddered up and down, murmuring his compounds, there was a sudden cry of excitement from behind us, followed by a screaming noise. I turned quickly and at first all I could see was the main door of the hall being flung open. Anything seemed a great relief from the tedium of the lecture hall and heads craned round.

Suddenly, to our general amazement, a dozen panic-stricken sheep raced into the room, frightened and bleating. The hall was flat rather than raked, with movable desks, so within a few seconds there was complete and utter chaos. People were jumping to their feet, scaring the animals further, desks and test tubes went flying. The sheep darted about the place like white billowy waves in the sea of dark jackets. Now I saw the students who herded them, a gang of young bloods I had observed often enough before, led by a wild, somewhat rebellious, scion of Scots nobility called Crawford.

To one side of me a chair went over and glass sprayed up from a broken beaker. Some people ran for the door, others tried with difficulty to hold their ground and discover the purpose of this latest madness. The whole place was in uproar, though as yet none of us could understand the purpose. Crawford dashed past me, his eyes dark and fiery, his jet-black hair falling over his forehead, screaming incoherent abuse. His eyes were fixed on the front of the hall. And now at last I saw why. His mob were heading straight for the women.

In that year the controversy about admitting women to medicine was reaching its height. Passions had been roused to a frenzy, and any women who braved our classes endured the grossest behaviour. During the worst disturbances, they had been spat upon and called

prostitutes and Jezebels. There had also been cases of assault.

Partly as a result, many staff refused to teach them though, to his credit, Macfarlane was not one of these and nor was Bell. Among the students, Crawford had a reputation as one of the women's fiercest opponents and often led the mob against them. Indeed he seemed to have all the prejudice and bile of a religious zealot.

'See, we have more students here for you.' He was shouting at the women now. 'If you insist on attending, we may as well make doctors out of mutton.'

His followers roared approval as they poured in behind him, no doubt seeing the whole thing as a splendid opportunity to indulge in insults and other abuse of a kind they would normally have kept to themselves. Fortunately several students, including my friends, took the opposite view, for we believed there was no serious reason to keep the women out. I was strongly of this belief and would love to ascribe this to my enlightened nature but, if I am being honest, I ought to admit there was another factor too. Our 'lodger' Dr Waller regularly expressed fierce opposition to the women in medical school, and this may well have spurred me to their defence as strongly as anything else.

But on the occasion I am describing, it is hard to see how any civilised person could possibly have sided with Crawford. The women before us looked terrified as he herded the sheep right at them, screaming incoherent biblical abuse.

In her hurry to get out, one girl tripped and Stark ran to help her up before a sheep trampled on her. 'Mothers of whores, the abomination of the earth,' Crawford screamed down at her as she backed away in terror. Another of his group, a pale Englishman with a little blonde moustache, had a more comprehensible cry. 'Go away and find yourselves husbands!' This was taken up by other men in Crawford's gang as the women were pinned against a side

wall, for the men were close and the sheep made it difficult to get away from them.

‘They have every right to be here,’ I cried above the din and one of the more forthright of the women with a bob of ginger hair, whose name I think was Sophia, took it up. ‘Yes we have every right to be in this building. There is an act of parliament now.’

I turned to appeal to Macfarlane, but need not have bothered. Crawford’s followers were quite aware of his timidity and had raced two of the sheep down close to the front so that even now he was moving quickly off through the wings of the hall without daring to turn around.

Stark, in his decent Dundonian way, had been arguing directly with Crawford, repeating the women’s rights, but Crawford just bellowed back at him. ‘Do you not read your Bible? They *have* no rights here. I did not come to a hallowed medical school to supervise a brothel.’

‘Since you seem to confuse women with sheep,’ said Neill, my friend from overseas, laughing, ‘I am glad of that. And you have no idea how to herd animals.’

An idea struck him, and he turned to me. ‘But why do we not show you? Doyle, drive them back from the left. Stark, come round the back, we’ll clear the beasts out of here directly and give these poor women some room to breathe.’

His idea was inspired for, once they saw what he was about, the rabble turned back from the women to rescue the sheep they had no doubt borrowed from a farmer. Meanwhile Neill, who had done some herding in Canada, grabbed a ruler from a bench and slapped a couple of the animals smartly on their flanks, turning them back towards the door.

I had little experience of sheep myself but I managed to get between the flock and the women and coerce them into following Neill, who turned back to help me. Soon, fired by his manic energy, we had got most of the animals out into the quadrangle where some sunlight was piercing the

clouds. I was even starting to feel a little cheerful, for Crawford and his gang had been forced to follow us out and were soon desperately trying to reassemble the scattered sheep before they disappeared into the streets of Edinburgh.

My friends and I stood there in the late winter sunshine, chuckling to observe their efforts. ‘The most lively lecture we’ve had yet,’ concluded Stark as he and Neill walked off, for they had another class which, thanks to my lack of funds, I had not yet paid to enter.

The women were now mostly dispersed, and I entered one of the corridors leading to the main entrance for I wanted to see if the university had yet selected a medical team to play rugby against the vets. Ahead of me, I was amused to observe a stray sheep trotting happily along, and then my attention was caught by a good-looking young man walking beside me. He wore a loose coat and a high collar and I recalled now that I had noticed him earlier in the lecture hall, observing the mêlée with furtive anxiety. For some reason I felt a sympathy for him. Evidently he disliked Crawford’s activities as much as I did, so I spoke to him, nodding at the sheep.

‘Well, this one seems to know where it is going. The sheep show greater intelligence than the shepherds.’

I expected some friendly reply, but my companion only nodded silently and distantly, turning his face away.

I was slightly surprised by this rudeness, and even more surprised when he moved away from me into a nearby doorway. Was this why I acted as I did? Mere curiosity?

I stopped. And then on an impulse I turned back and moved towards the entrance he had taken.

The door was ajar and I passed through it into an unused demonstration room. As soon as I entered, there was a sudden movement by the window. A figure whirled to face me.

Now that I could see him properly with the collar down, attempting to pin up the disobedient hair, I wondered how I could ever have been taken in by the disguise. For this was no man. Before me was a very beautiful, strong-boned woman, quite tall in height with long reddish fair hair and high cheekbones. Her eyes were particularly striking, brown-green eyes that were both soft and also defiant. They were certainly defiant now. ‘Yes,’ she said to me, ‘my preference is to attend without being assaulted. You know Latimer has excluded us completely.’

She was referring to the most virulent opponent of the women in the whole university. But I hardly took her words in. I was so startled by the sudden revelation of her sex that all I could manage was some foolish remark about my surprise.

She abandoned her attempts with her hair and stood there, her eyes flashing. ‘We merely wish to be taught. You think it is too much to expect?’

‘No,’ I replied quickly, ‘and it may sometimes occur, but it is not something I personally have experienced yet.’

The joke was feeble enough even if it were almost true, but its effect on her was striking, for her face was momentarily transformed by a luminescent smile. I started to introduce myself, learning that her name was Miss Elsbeth Scott, and perhaps we would even have walked out of the university together but it was not to be. For suddenly there was a great cry of outrage behind me.

I turned, and Crawford was there. He must have come after the stray sheep and heard our voices. But the sight of this woman in a jacket, with her hair down, acted as a terrible goad to his anger. ‘My God!’ he said. ‘So this one parades herself as a man to snare us. She is among the foulest.’

I think he would have attacked her, but I stepped in his way. ‘Leave her,’ I said.

He brought his face unpleasantly close to mine. His breath smelled of stale brandy and tobacco as he stared at me.

‘The knight errant. But she is no lady. Do you not see their aim, Doyle? Now they are among us, they seek to destroy this place.’

With this he made to walk past me, but I was so angry that I seized him by the collar and pushed him to the doorway. Rather to my surprise he did not offer any great resistance.

‘Much you have to learn, Doyle,’ he said with a smile. ‘We will deal with her in time.’ And then he was gone.

I was relieved to be rid of him and turned back to her. But there was no one in the room. Another door led to the quadrangle, and it was ajar. I moved over there and stared out but there was no sign of her or anyone else.

So I retraced my steps, moving back to the stone corridor, as I tried to come to terms with what had happened. The idea that Miss Scott felt so persecuted that she resorted to disguise had naturally made a profound impression on me. As did the woman herself. I could not forget her radiant smile, a smile as much of surprise, that a man could be human enough to make a joke, as of amusement. But the incident had also concentrated my mind on Crawford and his associates. How could it be right they should be allowed to continue this reign of terror?

There was only one man who might offer some help, and so I made my way to the Doctor’s room.

As I came through the tunnel of shelves, he was standing by the tank in his greatcoat, pulling on his gloves.

‘Doctor Bell, I wish to . . .’ I began.

He put out a hand for silence, securing the last glove and bending to pick up the silver-topped cane he always took with him. Then he turned. ‘If you come with me, there will be time to discuss whatever you wish to say on the journey.’

I knew his mood well enough: at last he had a case and at these times he hated to be interrupted. A hansom had been