

A SCANDAL IN ACADEMIA

A New England Holiday Adventure

WILL BRANDON



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A SCANDAL IN ACADEMIA

{*Being an extract from the journal of*
FRANKLIN C. HOOPER, M.D., A.F.&A.M.}

MILES AND I HAD NOT YET BEEN BACK IN TEXAS for a fortnight after a sensational chase across the country that resulted in the apprehension of a widely sought killer, when a curt telegram had summoned us to a fresh matter of urgency in the region we'd just left.

"Come soon," the closing had read. The cryptic signature, *Alter Ego*.

Miles's reaction upon perusing those four short words had been a mixture of incredulity and amusement. But I knew he would take the message quite seriously. For one apparently resistant to affairs of the heart, the nearest thing to emotion I had previously seen cross his countenance was the flush on his brow and the steel in his eye.

I recognized the deeper symptoms well, however, and had diagnosed his condition upon his first encounter with the woman, who'd demonstrated both grace and grit in the face of mortal danger. Miss Eileen Alter, a contralto in the opera, had, like ourselves, spent time in Texas but was some years younger than Miles and of a social class closer to that of my own family line than to his; the best of Eastern schooling and musical training had been afforded her, and later she'd toured through Europe, the British Isles and South America with a top company. She now maintained residences in Newport and New England, according to the gossip pages, where her likeness was often captured in engravings. Though he'd be loath to admit it, Derrick Miles was smitten.

I read the Western Union sheet again, with its cryptic plea for aid. "Your

presence will be needed in Boston even sooner than you might've thought, it appears," I said aloud.

"Our presence, my friend," he responded. I could already discern the wheels turning. "*Our* presence."

Bags repacked and mail set to forward, the next morning—the first Friday of December—we hailed a cab for the train station and booked a through compartment on the Missouri Pacific line for Boston. No, *not* Boston, Texas, I explained to the ticket clerk, but the one in New England, which would require a transfer at St. Louis.

This time I brought the new type-writer device along with me, as well as the handy ABC copier Miles had obtained in the course of his previous case. Without certainty how long this stay might be, I prepared thoroughly for catching up on my journal and my reading.

We arrived back on the darkening afternoon of the twelfth, with little difficulty, in the city we'd so recently departed. Our lodgings, this time, were at the fashionable Adams House rather than the bare-bones walkup where we'd resided undercover a few weeks before. We'd arranged for a Pinkerton agent to keep watch in the lobby on our behalf.

Miles made a show this time around, in fact, of paying a visit to police headquarters, letting the word be bruited about that he had returned to assist the Boston police and the indefatigable Geyer of Philadelphia in an extended mission to trace more background on the H. H. Holmes case and that of the still-missing Minnie Williams.

The papers would pick it up in no time, I was sure.

In our suite I set up the typing and copying apparatus at the elegant writing desk, then stepped out to the grog shop for a packet of shag tobacco for my companion and a top-shelf brandy for myself. In addition I patronized the Old Corner Book Store, where I added the latest Conan Doyle production along with an issue of *The Philadelphia Press*, as the proprietor had recommended I might enjoy the serialization of a Civil War tale by a newcomer named Stephen Crane. I exulted in being fully prepared for the coming winter's sojourn, whatever the weather—and the case that had lured us here—might bring.

Upon my return I found Miles ensconced in the sitting area, occupying one of the two upholstered wingback chairs flanking the fireplace—in a close replica of our arrangement back home at Houston Street. The oriental rug was of higher quality here and the mantel uncluttered save for a framed Currier & Ives and a pair of Revere-style pewter candlesticks. A nice blaze crackled in the hearth, adding its comforts to the efficient steam heat provided throughout the suite. The window shades had been drawn down and the gaslights turned up.

I set down my parcels, retrieved two tumblers from the sideboard, and poured us brandies, neat, from the new bottle.

I had just settled my travel-weary frame into the soft chair and picked up the newspaper when a rapping came at the door. A cream-colored envelope made a swift appearance on the floor underneath it. Miles went quickly to retrieve it, pulling from it a single sheet of paper that he examined next to the desk lamp.

Our unidentified visitor would soon arrive, he said, and here were the details.

“There will call upon you to-night, at a quarter of eight,” he read aloud, “an inquirer who desires to consult you on an urgent situation of great moment in which much honor is at stake. Your discernment and discretion of late regarding the well-being of a dear and celebrated friend have shown you to be the only man who may safely be trusted in this matter. Await a knock at the door of your hotel suite at that hour, and do not take offense if your visitor should arrive masked and disguised.”

I laid a forefinger aside my lips in thought. “What do you make of this ‘inquirer,’ Miles?”

“Well, it is prudent that we have already made arrangements for the Pinkerton man to escort any caller up via the back stairs. Inconvenient, to be sure, but best for the purpose of discretion.” He held the note closer to the lamp.

“So you’ve already deduced the anticipated visitor will not be our Miss Alter, then. How?”

“The Crane’s watermark in this paper is a particular design dating back almost two decades. The dandy roll used to fashion it featured a Japanese crane with its beak bent to the ground, a rare one today—though said to have been put to use as a coded signal in the service letters issued to recent railroad strikebreakers to prevent their rehire. Someone—perhaps local to the paper’s New England origin—had a sheet of this on hand. An American, as well, by the spelling of “honor” and “inquirer,” and perhaps older, given the out-of-vogue hyphenation of “to-night.” There lingers, too, a faint scent of—hmm, Hoyt’s German Cologne—and the particular cant of the script and this one blurring of ink indicates a sinistral rather than dextral hand.”

“I do recall when Miss Alter used a pistol with such effectiveness in her right,” I mused, nodding in agreement as I withdrew my pocket watch and noted it was nearly 7:45 already. “Then why is she sending an emissary?”

Before Miles could venture a response, there came a knock at the door of the suite. Stepping over to open it, I encountered the private eye, who implied via a nod his vetting of our visitor.

Tallish and thin, the figure was dressed in a high-collared frock coat of a slightly out-of-date style, fashioned in an expensive-looking black brocade that caught the light and shadow at angles. He sported side whiskers, also of an earlier vogue, that obscured much of his ears and jawline. He also wore a domino-style mask that prevented me from ascertaining the color of his irises, though I stood only a forearm’s-length away. My gaze drifted downward to take in gloved hands, the left one of which rested upon a walking cane, and a pair of narrow, delicate shoes that had obviously not come into contact with any muddy street.

“Welcome, sir,” said Miles as I swiftly shut the door. “You had no difficulty evading detection in arriving here, we trust?”

“None, thanks to your agent,” he replied in a foreign accent hard to place beneath the mask. “I am here on a matter of great delicacy, and my presence must at all costs go as unnoticed as a single barque among all the varied craft in the harbor.”

Miles was quick to offer up the brandy he’d poured into one of the serviceable glasses on the drinks cart. The guest demurred politely and asked instead for water, which I fetched.

“Let us take our seats by the hearth,” said Miles, as he pulled a side chair into its circle. The visitor opted to remain standing as he shook Miles’s bony

hand. "This is my friend and colleague, Dr. Hooper, who has proved an able assistant in my cases," said Miles. "Now, whom have we the honor to welcome?"

"You may address me as Herr Rechtsanwalt Schmidt," the visitor said in a decided Continental cant.

"You're a lawyer," said Miles, who, not surprising to me, knew the German term.

"Yes. I am given to understand from my client, Professor Doktor Kreuzenganger, and our mutual friend Miss Alter, that this gentleman, your associate, is a man of principle and discretion, whom I may trust with a matter of the most extreme gravity," he said, nodding in my direction. "If not, I should much prefer to communicate with you alone."

"I can retire to my chamber—" I began, rising to go, but Miles waved me back down.

"It is both, or none," said he. "If it should transpire that we may be of service, you will find the whole of our effectiveness far greater than the sum of our individual abilities." Reader, I took this vote of confidence as a high compliment indeed, and I prayed I might live up to the billing.

"Very well, if you insist," said the attorney as he paced about. "But on one thing I must insist as well. Your pledge of absolute secrecy. By the time I finish telling the whole unsavory tale I am about to reveal, there will be five of us alive who know it. And that is four too many for my comfort."

Miles nodded. "Then let us agree that while our circumspection, as a matter of honor, is in no way dependent upon any fee, a generous figure would, ah, ensure our exclusive focus on the matter at hand and thus minimize any risk of discovery."

Lawyer Schmidt nodded. "Then you shall have it. Will a thousand suffice?"

The terms thus settled, Miles and I awaited the details.

The visitor drew in a deep breath, sipped his water, adjusted his face covering, and laid out the mission. "You will excuse this mask," he said. "The august person who employs me wishes his agent to be unknown to you, and I might as well confess that the title by which I have just called myself is not exactly my own."

"You don't say," Miles replied drily.

"Some years ago," the visitor continued in his Hochdeutscher accent,

“when my client had first arrived in this country as a young and struggling instructor, and photography was emerging as an art form, models were in demand, just as they were for the painters and sculptors. Studios were popping up in certain quarters of this city that would pay a few pennies.”

I interposed a fact from my own background that I deemed to be helpful. “Herr Schmidt, as an amateur photographer myself, I claim some familiarity with the business,” I offered. “I’ve done my time in the darkroom.”

He nodded. “Then, Doctor Hooper, you are also aware that for nudes, there were studios that paid *more* than a few pennies.” He waited to gauge my reaction, and I hoped the warmth I felt rise in my cheeks was not apparent in the flickering firelight.

“Several exposures were made that would doubtless compromise my client’s standing in the academy today,” he continued. “Daguerreotypes, created during a time when the technique was already falling out of fashion; this particular photographer felt their tonality and depth lent a strongly sensual element to the art.”

“I think I can see where this is headed,” said Miles.

“My client’s professional standing would suffer irreversible harm should these facts come to light, and worse should the photographs themselves be revealed,” the visitor said in a mixture of anxiety and arrogance. “Given my client’s widespread public recognition and high scholarly rank, it is not too great a claim to say that a scandal of this magnitude might well undermine the entire fledgling academic enterprise on this side of the Atlantic.”

Miles jumped in. “But your concern, as I understand it, is as much for Miss Alter as for this man. How does she figure in?”

“She was a young and struggling artist as well. An unknown in the gilded seventies with naught but promising vocal talent and an elegant figure.”

“Still, wasn’t modeling an honorable enough undertaking?” asked Miles.

“You don’t know upright Boston,” the visitor said. “And besides, some of the poses were not ... solo.”

“I see.”

The visitor withdrew a linen handkerchief from the laced cuff underneath his coat sleeve. He dabbed at his cheeks, which had grown flushed in the fireplace’s heat, and downed the rest of the water.

Miles leaned in. “If you would condescend to state your case more directly, Herr Professor,” he said, “I should be better able to advise you.”

The man wheeled about, leaving his back to us. He stood still and resolute for a long moment before admitting, over his shoulder, "You are right—I am myself the professor in question. Why should I attempt to hide the fact?"

"Why indeed. But you continue to disguise other truths behind that mask. Let us leave all that aside for the moment and focus on the risk to Miss Alter, who has so recently impressed both myself and Dr. Hooper with her considerable wit, bravery, and, ah, other attributes. Does she also fear discovery?"

"I came at Eileen's urging," said the visitor, and I thought I perceived some relaxing of the German accent. "In my line of work I am not accustomed to such 'cloak-and-dagger,' as Mr. Dickens would call it."

"*Not* a lawyer then?"

"A professor in any case. A master of the classics. A mentor and adviser. Of my own life I shall leave off the other details. But let me tell you more about her." Our guest sat down, at last, in the extra chair but did not remove the mask. He crossed his wiry legs. "She was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1858, the daughter of a manufacturer of firearms for the private sector. Amid growing tensions at the onset of the war, she was boarded with a family in New York City, where her precocious talents for the stage were discovered. When Mr. Alter later took the rest of the family to Texas, during the buffalo hunting era, young Eileen remained behind for much of the time to complete her training on scholarship at the Academy of Music before touring abroad. While her career in time took her to places like Milan, Warsaw, and London, her student years were not always luxurious, and I think it fair to say she gained considerable street smarts and self-sufficiency." Our guest appeared to choke up somewhat and dabbed his masked and bewhiskered face once more, struggling to finish his account.

Miles did the task for him. "A certain mentor became entangled with this young woman, participated in certain scenes of a bohemian nature that were duly memorialized upon silver plates, and is now desirous of getting back said images."

"Precisely so. But how—"

"Was there a secret marriage?"

"It would have been quite impossible."

"No compromising letters?"

"We lost contact entirely until... Leipzig in '86."

"And were prints distributed? Sold?"

"The images were positives, and unique, so no prints were made; and the photographer in question—well, I have reason to believe he has kept them under lock and key until the right opportunity should arise."

"Wouldn't it have been possible to simply re-photograph the positives, as insurance copies?"

"Yes, and that is precisely why time is of the essence; the story may come to light in the papers at any day. The fuel for blackmail must be retrieved before he realizes there is profit to be made from it."

By now our guest was experiencing some difficulty retaining a cool composure. Worrying that he might indeed faint, perspiring behind that mask, I slipped away to my room to retrieve the smelling salts from my medical bag.

I overheard his continued explanation to Miles. "The opportunity has arisen so recently—and during the busy Christmas shopping season—that I shall hope he has not had time to make copies," he said. "His is a busy studio, with assistants working night and day. I doubt he would have had the privacy to make prints under these circumstances."

I returned with the small cloth bag containing the glass vial protected in its cotton wrappings and stepped toward our guest. But Miles casually swiped it from me and instead tossed it over to him. The lawyer, with quick instinct, spread his legs to catch the item as though in an apron that wasn't there. By equally quick instinct he managed to palm it in both hands before it hit the floor.

"But here is the crux of the matter," he said with a long, in-drawn breath as he opened the bag and uncapped the reviving salts. By now all traces of the German had disappeared. "You gentlemen may be aware that the top position at a well-regarded nearby institution of higher learning is at stake. The board is set to vote on Monday."

"I kept up with the *Globe* and the *Herald* before we departed here last month," I offered. "But I wasn't aware that Dr. Eliot was stepping down?"

"Not *that* nearby institution," the visitor said quietly.

I let this sink in. The list of other colleges in the area was short—including a single renowned one whose presidents, since inception, had solely been *female*.

"Exposure would bring Miss Alter's brilliant career to ruin," our fake Dr. Schmidt said quietly. "Mine would simply be a collateral consequence."

Miles brought his hands to his lips, allowing the bony tips of his thin

fingers to touch. "If any of this were to be offered up for Sunday's editions, then our time is brief indeed. We shall be ready with a plan on the morrow. Now, the address of that studio, if you don't mind, Frau Professor?"

By the time our breakfast trays arrived at sunup—just after eight on the lengthening northern winter day—Miles was dressed and seated where I'd left him, a Walker map and the remnants of yesterday's newspaper now spread open across the tea table.

I paused at the mirror to adjust my new linen collar. "Ready for action, I take it? Ingenious of you, by the way, to pull that stunt in reverse last night," I remarked. "I didn't realize you were such a devotee of Mr. Twain's novels."

Miles shot me a smirk worthy of Tom Sawyer himself. "One can never predict what scrap of knowledge, classical or popular, might prove useful in the patchwork of a solution, Hooper. Now, our foray might be more successful on full stomachs—come enjoy some of this kedgeree with your coffee and crumpets and I shall lay out the day's objectives for you."

"Kedgeree?"

"Curried haddock with rice and eggs," Miles explained. "I developed a taste for it during my London sojourn. What wonders they make available on the menu here!"

I took my seat and tucked into the dish. Miles lifted a sheet of newsprint from the pile and folded it down to a schedule of upcoming leisure events. The staid Bostonians had a rich array of amusements from which to choose, it appeared.

"See there, this evening in Copley Square?" he said between bites.

My eye went to the item. "Artists' Festival. Galleries Open Thursday Evening 4 to 8 p.m. Free Admittance. Visit Two Dozen Practicing Studios And Enjoy A Variety of Refreshments and Brief Entertainments," I read aloud. "It also advises patrons take the newly electrified Huntington Avenue trolley line. A progressive city, indeed!"

"Might you be inclined toward an exploratory visit to a certain photographer's studio in that very same square this morning, to inspect the arrangements and schedule a sitting?"

"Why, I could be persuaded," I said, between bites of the delicious curried fish.

“We shall need to procure sufficient disguise. I fear our recent case has rendered both of us recognizable far and wide. Eyeglasses, gummed beards, and a change of headgear ought to do the trick. I believe the haberdasheries open at nine.”

By the time I called at the Wickham Photography Studio, situated a door down from Huntington at Claremont, I was sufficiently convinced that my new Homburg and a darker complexion would obscure my identity. Miles, taller than I and much more a celebrity since his apparently miraculous return from the grave earlier this year, took the opportunity to stroll the sidewalks of the quarter in his own disguise as a stooped-over mendicant. In this way, he'd explained, he would also be able to familiarize himself with the neighborhood's alleyways and service entrances.

I rang the front bell and prepared to play my part.

“I have heard your shop's work is of the best artistic and technical quality, my boy,” I informed the young clerk at the desk, in my best attempt at a British accent.

“Oh, you've got that right, sir! And how may we be of service today?”

“I would like to arrange for a portrait session,” I explained. “Henry Wadsworth's the name.”

“Aha! One you partly share with one of my favorite poets.” Well, so much for pulling last-minute inspiration out of the air, I thought. I hadn't intended to be memorable.

“I hardly claim any literary fame myself,” I replied. “I simply need a professionally rendered portrait as a Christmas gift for my mother. Time is of the essence, as I must sail for home on Monday.”

“That is a tight request during the holiday season, sir, and Mr. Wickham is out on location until the festival this evening. Let us see.” He reached under the desk and pulled out a leather binder, then moistened his finger and flicked back a page.

“I shall also want to examine the studio setting and backdrops in any case. Might that be possible right now, if they are not engaged?”

“Why ... I think it would be,” he said, running his finger down the schedule.

A telephone rang, somewhere behind a curtain that separated the entry

parlor from the studio proper, and the clerk excused himself to go answer it. I rotated the appointment book to take a peek. The establishment did seem to stay busy—though a line was penciled through the current hours with a note indicating “FOSTER WEDDING” and the block starting at four p.m. was also crossed through. I took it as a good sign that Mr. Wickham might have his hands full for the evening—while keeping his doors open after the usual closing time, for a crush of visitors.

The appointments went back only as far as January of the same year. It was clear that Mr. Wickham had built up a popular following since his origins as a pornographer.

The young assistant put the receiver back in its cradle and returned to the front desk.

“You are in prime luck,” he said, “as we have just had a cancellation for this very afternoon at three-thirty. Shall I put your name down, Mr. Wadsworth?”

I nodded and reached for my beard—surreptitiously, I hoped—to ascertain that my subterfuge was working. As I peeked downward to ensure there’d been no disarray in my costume, the host asked another question.

“Will you be posing alone, or in company?”

“In company? Oh, ah, I had planned only for a solo portrait. Something to take home to the family.”

“Yes, certainly. And do you have a preference of scenery? So that we may have everything in preparation? Props?”

“Ah, props?”

“A Grecian column, a potted palm, a wicker chair, for example? A velvet settee? And is there a backdrop you might prefer?”

“Backdrop, ah, yes. Perhaps you’d be so kind as to show me what you have available?”

“Why, certainly, as Mr. Wickham is out at the moment, I would be happy to show you some options.” He ushered me past the curtain, on his way turning the CLOSED sign around on its chain to face outward.

Behind the separating wall was an impressive studio area featuring a skylight and three different backdrop walls, to admit light at different times of day. The assistant showed me how quickly a backcloth could be pulled down against any of them. A *trompe l’oeil* solarium was quickly swapped for a rustic country scene. A garden à la the Tuileries gave way swiftly to a

wood-paneled parlor. A portrait gallery on the fourth wall commanded my attention for a long moment, until I detected the sound of throat-clearing.

"Yes, thank you," I responded, hastily assuring the clerk, "I shall give prompt consideration to the option that would prove most pleasing to my dear mother. And might I inquire—"

I was on the verge of asking the price for a basic package when the telephone rang again and the clerk dashed to answer it. I shouted out a hearty "Good day!", made a motion of opening and shutting the door, then slipped around behind the scenery in search of one area not on public display: the laboratory.

It was a well-organized work space. Clearly, years of dedication had gone into making this backshop into a technical and artistic marvel. This man was no slovenly practitioner; no, he knew his craft and had invested in the highest-quality equipment. Every drawer was labeled, every countertop neatly arranged; prints were pinned above on a line just so. The darkroom, with its ruby safelight, boasted properly labeled chemicals, and lab aprons hung beside a door that was surrounded by a tight rubber seal. A timer clock of fine manufacture was mounted within easy view. If this photographer had ever exposed the female figure naked to his lenses, I understood one thing for certain: he knew precisely where his precious plates were preserved for safekeeping. If the incriminating materials were here on the premises, in the event of any danger he would no doubt speed directly for them.

I showed myself out as furtively as I had entered, and went to meet Miles at our assigned spot on the steps of the Museum of Fine Arts.

"Capital work," Miles exclaimed as I described the shop's layout, my subterfuge, and the afternoon's arrangements. We stepped inside a café to order the lunch special, and as I sketched the floor plan for him on a napkin, I could practically see the gears turning inside his agile mind.

"We shall require a distraction during the busiest phase of the festival tonight, Henry," he noted, leaning in close. "How long do you expect your sitting to take, and how much do you know about the properties of flash powder?"

"Right this way, Mr. Wadsworth," directed the effusive Mr. Wickham, whose solicitous manner I could see had served him well over years of

building a loyal clientele. The photographer was not as I had pictured him in my imagining, though. His chin was clean-shaven and fleshy and his moustache flecked with whites and grays like an artist's brush, betraying an age past middle. His tan smocked twill jacket, that could've covered a multitude of sins, reeked faintly of sulfur and ether, and he wore no head covering over his balding pate. His fingertips bore yellowed stains from the daily handling of chemicals. A single gold loop dangling from his left earlobe signaled, to me, an unusual concession to vanity or debauchery among most of what I knew of prim Boston—but I could have been predisposed to judge, given the woman's accusations against him. Now came the time to deftly set the trap and put that information to the test. As for springing it, that would be Miles's department. He'd shared few details, as usual.

The photographer showed me to a stiff-backed chair around the corner where I'd earlier examined the backdrops. I let him take all the time he needed to show me the options before choosing the Italian villa. I settled into my place for the long haul, for it was my job to draw the man out and keep him occupied until dark, when Miles would arrange a distraction. Just what the distraction would be, he hadn't revealed lest I give anything away.

As Mr. Wickham situated me in the chair and posed my head in the clamp—a device he claimed would yield better results in the winter afternoon light, though many photographers had abandoned it by now—I quizzed him about his business, its history, its clientele. I got quite the education about Boston doings, as he seemed to relish the chance to regale a newcomer. Statesmen, scholars, society matrons, all had done their time in front of his lens. All the while, the polite clatter of folding chairs being set up out front, the arrival of flowers and catered dishes, and the ringing of the telephone continued, under the care of Mr. Wickham's able assistant, I presumed.

By dusk my session had concluded and I had joined the guests mingling around the punch and holiday hors d'oeuvre. A week before the solstice the light faded quickly, but the gas lamps lent a festive atmosphere to the street scene outside. An enormous Christmas tree in the shop's entry, embellished with hundreds of glinting glass ornaments, I deduced to be one of the new artificial ones I'd seen in the Sears catalog, decked out to the ceiling in fake

snow and beribboned with aluminum tinsel. What a show it was, compared to our homespun customs out West!

Sipping the host's tasty wassail punch and circulating quietly to view the portraits on display, I had almost forgotten my role in the pageant when a claxon horn sounded from somewhere in the distance. It seemed to come from behind us, in the alley. I snapped back to the true job at hand, recognizing it as Miles's stage-direction for alarums and excursions that would set our mission in place. Flash-powder bursts went off throughout the back room, diverting attention to uncertain sources. As the chatter rose among patrons and the clang of a fire-truck's bell began to ring, I caught sight of the photographer slipping away to his backshop. I followed quietly.

Mr. Wickham flung open the rear door of the studio and looked both ways in the alley. Though this was clearly the source of all the commotion and smoke, he did not dash toward it, but rather back inside, to a wall near the film storage cabinet that I had observed earlier. There, as his staff had all deserted to the front to see to patrons' safety, I watched him remove a heavy framed landscape from its hooks, set it delicately on the floor, and begin turning the dial to what appeared to be an iron safe embedded in the wall.

Another noise, more sudden and loud this time, came at the back door, as the figure of a beggar crashed inside as though in flight, knocking over a flaming trash bin into the studio's rear corridor. A stack of rolled-up scrim cloths caught the blaze, and Mr. Wickham was forced to shift his attention to locating his large fire extinguisher.

I seized my chance. The safe stood open, its contents recognizable to me as the standard six-and-a-half by eight-and-a-half full plates of glass daguerreotypes. There would be but seconds to secure them—before either the fire reached the shop walls in earnest or the photographer returned to take them away.

I leapt over a potted palm that had been knocked over by one of the young assistants fleeing toward the guests, grabbed a cardboard box and dumped its contents as I ran, and handed the empty carton to the dirty pan-handler who had certainly been the one to set the fire. He slid the purloined plates inside it, hid the container under his ragged coat, and motioned for us both to exit out the back. We did not stop running, in a zigzag pattern through Back Bay alleys, until we had reached the river and spotted a hiding place beneath a deserted wharf.

Breathless but mirthful, a filthy Derrick Miles leaned against a piling in the light of a half moon. "Now"—he spoke between gulps of freezing air—"let us ascertain that our mission has been a success worthy of our fee."

He withdrew the first of the plates, veritable antiques by now in the short history of photography. I saw the eagerness on his face fade to incredulity and then sharpen to something like shock.

"What?!" I hissed.

"Blank. As is the next one ... and the next...." I saw what was happening: as he unwrapped each plate, even the dim moonlight shining off the water turned its unexposed emulsion completely black. These were not the developed images we'd been paid to retrieve, at all. They were worthless substitutes.

Miles hung his head in disbelief. Silently we placed each plate—a dozen in all—back into the box. We spoke not as we departed, empty evidence in hand, returning to our hotel via the most shadowed route we could find. As we turned the corner toward the establishment's back door, a lone figure, a slim youth in an overcoat with collar turned up against the chill, passed us in the opposite direction.

"Good-night, Mister Derrick Miles."

We stopped at the same moment and turned about, but the person who'd spoken was nowhere in evidence, among the servants and hostlers tending to the needs of late-arriving guests.

"I've heard that voice before," said Miles, staring down the shadowed mews. "Now, I wonder who the deuce that could have been."

Neither Miles nor I slept well in our luxurious accommodations that night, I could tell as my companion slumped into his chair opposite me. He was dressed but hardly fit for company when our visitor, the cross-dressing professor, came calling and was admitted by the Pinkerton agent.

"You have really got them?" our client cried eagerly, maintaining her disguise while standing over Miles's seated figure and shaking his shoulder vigorously.

"Not yet," he responded in monotone.

"But you have hopes?"

"I have hopes."

"Then, come. I am all impatience to be assured."

"We must have a cab."

"No, my brougham is waiting. I read about the fire in this morning's *Globe*. I'm anxious that Mr. Wickham may have fled."

"I think not," Miles said. "But let us see what we can learn. Doctor Hooper, I believe you may have some portraits to pick up?" He dabbed at his weary face with his napkin, leaving upon it remnants of last night's greasepaint and ash.

As we rode the distance to the Arts District, Miles outlined the bare bones of our scheme to Frau Professor Doctor Schmidt, whose true name she had still not revealed to us but whose identity I was certain Miles had by now guessed.

"Did Wickham give away any other hiding place once you'd emptied the safe?" she pressed him.

"We used the cover of the fire to flee immediately," he responded.

"Then I must judge you guilty of a fallacy of weak induction," she reprimanded him. "It seems you have fallen prey to hasty generalization, drawing a conclusion based on insufficient evidence."

"It will not happen again," he replied archly. I'd never before heard him admit to such a failure. Something more was vexing him.



At the Wickham Studio by nine Friday morning, when I'd expected the photographer to be open for business again, the front door was locked, and in its window a handwritten note was taped informing clients that the establishment was closed due to an emergency and all appointments for the day were canceled.

"Why, I didn't think the damage was *that* extensive," I commented. "I don't believe we intended to put him out of business..."

"It would serve him right, the smut-peddler," said the professor, who directed her driver to go around through the alley.

There, Miles alighted and tried the back door. It yielded to his turn of the knob, and he waved us in, a finger to his lips. Inside, all was silent. Any disarray we'd noted from the evening before, including the broken plant and its pot, had been cleared away. Curtains and backdrops hung in their proper places. The door to the darkroom was closed. A faint hint of smoke hung in the air.

The telephone rang, startling us all, but continued in its jangle, unanswered, until it fell silent again.

Miles waved us over to where a large framed landscape hung on the wall, the same one we'd watched Mr. Wickham remove before to gain access to the safe. He took it down, to find the door of the safe slightly ajar. I used my gloved hand to nudge it all the way open, and within stood a white paper envelope of the kind used for social correspondence, rather than the kraft sleeves employed for photographs or negatives. Miles retrieved his flashlight and shone it into the chamber's depth, then retrieved the envelope—which was, to my surprise at least, addressed to *him*.

He opened it and read the enclosed letter silently, a rueful smile crossing his lips before he shared its contents aloud with us.

“MY DEAR CAPTAIN MILES—You really did it very well. You and your partner led me straight to the items my friend and I have long sought. You may assure her, when she comes calling, that the images which would have compromised both her integrity and mine—not to mention Mr. Wickham’s—are safely in my possession now. I have the ocular proof and will never let it out of my safekeeping except it be to return it to her in confidence.

You may assure my dear friend Julia, when you read these contents to her, that you and Dr. Hooper succeeded perfectly in crafting and carrying out a ploy that would force Mr. Wickham’s hand. Her academic career should now remain as uncompromised as her principles of teaching and learning have ever been, and my own admiration for her character endures as strongly as ever.

As you know, Captain, I have been trained for the stage myself. Male costume is nothing new to me. I often take advantage of the freedom which it gives. I have been able to track your movements throughout your present sojourn in Boston, and I applaud your superb ingenuity, impressive talents for concealment, and masterly methods of deduction. Well, regarding absent company excepted, of course.

By the time you read this I shall be crossing the Channel for the continent, where it is time again to pick up my schedule on the stage. I leave a photograph which you might care to possess, Julia;

and I remain, dear Miles,
 Very truly yours,
 Eileen Alter.”

A string of characters was inked after, in a foreign alphabet: Πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἡ γυνή.

His admiring laughter resonated throughout the empty chamber.

Our client—the erstwhile Herr Rechtsanwalt Schmidt—then silently bowed her head and let slip a single tear. “Did I not tell you how quick and resolute she was? Would she not have made an admirable partner in any endeavor?” she cried. “She deserves every accolade, and every happiness—I know that her word is inviolate. The photographs are now as safe as if they had been consumed in the fire.”

“We are pleased to know that you consider the outcome a satisfactory one,” Miles responded.

“But what is the meaning of that phrase at the end?” I asked.

Miles was quick to jump in. “Oh, but we would need a Greek interpreter for that,” he said inscrutably.

“Good grief,” replied the college professor and soon-to-be president. “Have you no appreciation for the classics? *Woman*,” she translated in a condescending tone, “*is the measure of all things*. And with this sentiment I could not agree more.”

A NOTE ON THE STORY

THIS SHORT WORK OF FICTION owes its inspiration to the Conan Doyle short story alluded to in its title, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” in which the woman Irene Adler makes her first and only appearance in the Sherlock Holmes canon. Holmes aficionados will pick up clues from other celebrated works; fans of the Derrick Miles series of Texas tales may want to read more of Eileen Alter’s adventures in *The Castle of Fear; Or, a Devil in the Panther City* (forthcoming early 2026). BARBARA BRANNON, DECEMBER 2025