

MORIARTY

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From *The Times* of London
24th April 1891

HIGHGATE BODY FOUND

Police have no explanation for a peculiarly brutal murder that has come to light close by Merton Lane in the normally pleasant and quiet vicinity of Highgate. The deceased, a man in his twenties, had been shot in the head but of particular interest to the police was the fact that his hands had been tied prior to the killing. Inspector G. Lestrade, who is in charge of the enquiry, inclines to the belief that this dreadful act took the form of an execution and may be related to recent unrest in the streets of London. He has identified the victim as Jonathan Pilgrim, an American who had been staying at a private club in Mayfair and who may have been visiting the metropolis for reasons of business. Scotland Yard has been in contact with the American legation but so far no address has been found for the dead man and it may be some weeks before any relatives come forward. The investigation continues.

ONE

The Reichenbach Falls

Does anyone really believe what happened at the Reichenbach Falls? A great many accounts have been written but it seems to me that all of them have left something to be desired – which is to say, the truth. Take the *Journal de Genève* and Reuters, for example. I read them from start to finish, not an easy task for they're both written in that painfully dry manner of most European publications, as if they're reporting the news because they have to, not because it's something they want you to know. And what exactly did they tell me? That Sherlock Holmes and his foremost adversary, Professor James Moriarty, of whose existence the public were only now learning, had met and that both of them died. Well, it might as well have been an automobile accident for all the excitement those two authorities managed to put into their prose. Even the headlines were dull.

But what really puzzles me is the narrative of Dr John Watson. He describes the entire affair in *Strand Magazine*, starting with the knock on the door of his consulting room on the evening of April 24th 1891 and continuing with his journey to Switzerland. I yield to no one in my admiration for the chronicler of the adventures, exploits, memoirs, casebooks and so on of the great detective. As I sit at my Remington Number Two improved model typewriter (an American invention, of course) and begin this great labour, I know that I am likely to fall short of the standards of accuracy and

entertainment that he maintained to the end. But I have to ask myself – how could he have got it so wrong? How could he have failed to notice inconsistencies that would have struck even the most obtuse police commissioner as glaringly obvious? Robert Pinkerton used to say that a lie was like a dead coyote. The longer you leave it, the more it smells. He'd have been the first to say that everything about the Reichenbach Falls stank.

You must forgive me if I seem a touch overemphatic but my story – *this* story – begins with Reichenbach and what follows will make no sense without a close examination of the facts. And who am I? So that you may know whose company you keep, let me tell you that my name is Frederick Chase, that I am a senior investigator with the Pinkerton Detective Agency in New York and that I was in Europe for the first – and quite possibly the last – time in my life. My appearance? Well, it's never easy for any man to describe himself but I will be honest and say that I could not call myself handsome. My hair was black, my eyes an indifferent shade of brown. I was slender and though only in my forties, I was already too put-upon by the challenges life had thrown my way. I was unmarried and sometimes I worried that it showed in my wardrobe, which was perhaps a little too well worn. If there were a dozen men in the room I would be the last to speak. That was my nature.

I was at Reichenbach five days after the confrontation that the world has come to know as 'The Final Problem'. Well, there was nothing final about it, as we now know, and I guess that just leaves us with the problem.

So. Let's take it from the start.

Sherlock Holmes, the greatest consulting detective who ever lived, flees England in fear of his life. Dr Watson, who knows the man better than anyone and who would never hear a word said against him, is forced to admit that at this time Holmes

is at less than his best, utterly worn out by the predicament in which he finds himself and which he cannot control. Can we blame him? He has been attacked no fewer than three times in the space of just one morning. He has come within an inch of being crushed by a two-horse van that rushes past him on Welbeck Street; he has almost been hit by a brick that falls or is thrown from a roof on Vere Street – and, right outside Watson’s front door, he finds himself attacked by some good fellow who’s been waiting with a bludgeon. Does he have any choice but to flee?

Well, yes. There are so many other choices available to him that I have to wonder what exactly was in Mr Holmes’s mind. Not, of course, that he’s particularly forthcoming in the stories, all of which I’ve read (without ever once guessing the solution, for what it’s worth). To begin with, what makes him think he will be safer on the Continent than he will be closer to home? London itself is a densely knit, teeming city, which he knows intimately and, as he once confided, he has many rooms (‘five small refuges’, Watson says) scattered around the place, which are known only to him.

He could disguise himself. In fact he *does* disguise himself. Only the next day, after Watson has arrived at Victoria Station, he notices an aged Italian priest in discussion with a porter and even goes so far as to offer him his assistance. Later, the priest enters his carriage and the two of them sit together face to face for several minutes before Watson recognises his friend. Holmes’s disguises were so brilliant that he could have spent the next three years as a Catholic priest without anyone being the wiser. He could have entered an Italian monastery. *Padre Sherlock* ... that would have thrown his enemies. They might even have let him pursue some of his other interests – beekeeping, for example – on the side.

Instead, Holmes goes haring off on a journey that seems to have nothing that resembles an itinerary and he asks Watson

to accompany him. Why? The most incompetent criminal will surely work out that where one goes, the other will quite probably follow. And let's not forget that we are talking here about a criminal like no other, the master of his profession, a man who is equally feared and admired by Holmes himself. I don't believe for a minute that he could possibly have underestimated Moriarty. Common sense tells me that he must have been playing another game.

Sherlock Holmes travels to Canterbury, Newhaven, Brussels and Strasbourg, followed every step of the way. At Strasbourg, he receives a telegram from the London police informing him that all the members of Moriarty's gang have been captured. This is, as it turns out, quite false. One key player has slipped through the net – although I use the term ill-advisedly as the big fat fish that is Colonel Sebastian Moran has never been anywhere near it.

Colonel Moran, the finest sharpshooter in Europe, was well known to Pinkerton's, by the way. Indeed, by the end of his career, he was known to every law enforcement agency on the planet. He had been famous once for bringing down eleven tigers in a single week in Rajasthan, a feat that astonished his fellow hunters as much as it outraged the members of the Royal Geographical Society. Holmes called him the second most dangerous man in London – all the more so in that he was motivated entirely by money. The murder of Mrs Abigail Stewart, for example, an eminently respectable widow shot through the head as she played bridge in Lauder, was committed only so that he could pay off his gambling debts at the Bagatelle Card Club. It is strange to reflect that as Holmes sat reading the telegram, Moran was less than a hundred yards away, sipping herbal tea on a hotel terrace. Well, the two of them would meet soon enough.

From Strasbourg, Holmes continues to Geneva and spends a week exploring the snow-capped hills and pretty

villages of the Rhône Valley. Watson describes this interlude as ‘charming’, which is not the word I would have used in the circumstances but I suppose we can only admire the way these two men, such close friends, can relax in each other’s company even at such a time as this. Holmes is still in fear of his life, and there is another incident. Following a path close to the steel-grey water of the Daubensee, he is almost hit by a boulder that comes rolling down from the mountain above. His guide, a local man, assures him that such an event is quite commonplace and I am inclined to believe him. I’ve looked at the maps and I’ve worked out the distances. As far as I can see, Holmes’s enemy is already well ahead of him, waiting for him to arrive. Even so, Holmes is convinced that once again he has been attacked and spends the rest of the day in a state of extreme anxiety.

At last he reaches the village of Meiringen on the River Aar where he and Watson stay at the Englischer Hof, a guest house run by a former waiter from the Grosvenor Hotel in London. It is this man, Peter Steiler, who suggests that Holmes should visit the Reichenbach Falls, and for a brief time the Swiss police will suspect *him* of having been in Moriarty’s pay – which tells you everything you need to know about the investigative techniques of the Swiss police. If you want my view, they’d have been hard pressed to find a snowflake on an Alpine glacier. I stayed at the guest house and I interviewed Steiler myself. He wasn’t just innocent. He was simple, barely taking his nose out of his pots and pans (his wife actually ran the place). Until the world came knocking at his door, Steiler wasn’t even aware of his famous guest’s identity and his first response after the news of Holmes’s death had been revealed was to name a fondue after him.

Of course he recommended the Reichenbach Falls. It would have been suspicious if he hadn’t. They were already

a popular destination for tourists and romantics. In the summer months, you might find half a dozen artists dotted along the mossy path, trying to capture the meltwater of the Rosenloui Glacier as it plunged three hundred feet down into that ravine. Trying and failing. There was something almost supernatural about that grim place that would have defied the pastels and oils of all but the greatest painters. I've seen works by Charles Parsons and Emanuel Leutze in New York and maybe they would have been able to do something with it. It was as if the world were ending here in a perpetual apocalypse of thundering water and spray rising like steam, the birds frightened away and the sun blocked out. The walls that enclosed this raging deluge were jagged and harsh and as old as Rip van Winkle. Sherlock Holmes had often shown a certain fondness for melodrama but never more so than here. It was a stage like no other to act out a grand finale and one that would resonate, like the falls themselves, for centuries to come.

It's at this point that things begin to get a little murky.

Holmes and Watson stand together for a while and are about to continue on their way when they are surprised by the arrival of a slightly plump, fair-haired fourteen-year-old boy. And with good reason. He is dressed to the nines in traditional Swiss costume with close-fitting trousers tucked into socks that rise up almost to his knees, a white shirt and a loose-fitting red waistcoat. All this strikes me as a touch incongruous. This is Switzerland, not a Palace Theatre vaudeville. I feel the boy is trying too hard.

At any event, he claims to have come from the Englischer Hof. A woman has been taken ill but refuses for some reason to be seen by a Swiss physician. This is what he says. And what would you do if you were Watson? Would you refuse to believe this unlikely story and stay put or would you abandon your friend – at the worst possible time and in a truly infernal

place? That's all we ever hear about the Swiss boy, by the way – although you and I will meet him again soon enough. Watson suggests that he may have been working for Moriarty but does not mention him again. As for Watson, he takes his leave and hurries off to his non-existent patient; generous but wrong-headed to the last.

We must now wait three years for Holmes's reappearance – and it is important to remember that, to all intents and purposes, as far as this narrative is concerned, it is believed that he is dead. Only much later does he explain himself (Watson relates it all in 'The Adventure of the Empty House'), and although I have read many written statements in my line of work, few of them have managed to stack up quite so many improbabilities. This is his account, however, and we must, I suppose, take it at face value.

After Watson has left, according to Holmes, Professor James Moriarty makes his appearance, walking along the narrow path that curves halfway around the falls. This path comes to an abrupt end, so there can be no question of Holmes attempting to escape – not that such a course of action would ever have crossed his mind. Give him his due: this is a man who has always faced his fears square on, whether they be a deadly swamp adder, a hideous poison that might drive you to insanity or a hell-hound set loose on the moors. Holmes has done many things that are, frankly, baffling – but he has never run away.

The two men exchange words. Holmes asks permission to leave a note for his old companion and Professor Moriarty agrees. This much at least can be verified for those three sheets of paper are among the most prized possessions of the British Library Reading Room in London where I have seen them displayed. However, once these courtesies have been dispensed with, the two men rush at each other in what seems to be less a fight, more a suicide pact, each determined to drag the other

into the roaring torrent of water. And so it might have been. But Holmes still has one trick up his sleeve. He has learned *bartitsu*. I had never heard of it before but apparently it's a martial art invented by a British engineer, which combines boxing and judo, and he puts it to good use.

Moriarty is taken by surprise. He is propelled over the edge and, with a terrible scream, plunges into the abyss. Holmes sees him brush against a rock before he disappears into the water. He himself is safe ... Forgive me, but is there not something a little unsatisfactory about this encounter? You have to ask yourself why Moriarty allows himself to be challenged in this way. Old-school heroics are all very well (although I've never yet met a criminal who went in for them) but what possible purpose can it have served to endanger himself? To put it bluntly, why didn't he simply take out a revolver and shoot his opponent at close range?

If that is strange, Holmes's behaviour now becomes completely inexplicable. On the spur of the moment, he decides to use what has just occurred to feign his own death. He climbs up the rock face behind the path and hides there until Watson returns. In this way, of course, there will be no second set of footprints to show that he has survived. What's the point? Professor Moriarty is now dead and the British police have announced that the entire gang has been arrested so why does he still believe himself to be in danger? What exactly is there to be gained? If I had been Holmes, I would have hurried back to the Englischer Hof for a nice Wiener schnitzel and a celebratory glass of Neuchâtel.

Meanwhile, Dr Watson, realising he has been tricked, rushes back to the scene, where an abandoned alpenstock and a set of footprints tell their own tale. He summons help and investigates the scene with several men from the hotel and a local police officer by the name of Gessner. Holmes sees them but does not make himself known, even though he must be aware

of the distress it will cause his most trusted companion. They find the letter. They read it and, realising there is nothing more to be done, they all leave. Holmes begins to climb down again and it is now that the narrative takes another unexpected and wholly inexplicable turn. It appears that Professor Moriarty has not come to the Reichenbach Falls alone. As Holmes begins his descent – no easy task in itself – a man suddenly appears and attempts to knock him off his perch with a number of boulders. The man is Colonel Sebastian Moran.

What on earth is he doing there? Was he present when Holmes and Moriarty fought, and if so, why didn't he try to help? Where is his gun? Has the greatest marksman in the world accidentally left it on the train? Neither Holmes nor Watson, nor anyone else for that matter, has ever provided reasonable answers to questions which, even as I sit here hammering at the keys, seem inescapable. And once I start asking them, I can't stop. I feel as if I am in a runaway coach, tearing down Fifth Avenue, unable to stop at the lights.

That is about as much as we know of the Reichenbach Falls. The story that I must now tell begins five days later when three men come together in the crypt of St Michael's church in Meiringen. One is a detective inspector from Scotland Yard, the famous command centre of the British police. His name is Athelney Jones. I am the second.

The third man is tall and thin with a prominent forehead and sunken eyes which might view the world with a cold malevolence and cunning were there any life in them at all. But now they are glazed and empty. The man, formally dressed in a suit with a wing collar and a long frock coat, has been fished out of the Reichenbach Brook, some distance from the falls. His left leg is broken and there are other serious injuries to his shoulder and head, but death must surely have been caused by drowning. The local police have attached a label

to his wrist, which has been folded across his chest. On it is written the name: James Moriarty.

This is the reason I have come all the way to Switzerland. It appears that I have arrived too late.