



## An Inquiry into: "The Final Problem"

"The Final Problem" was first published in *The Strand Magazine* in December 1893, and in the *Detroit Sunday News-Tribune*, the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the *New York Sun* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on November 26, 1893. It appeared in *McClure's Magazine* in December 1893. It is part of *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*.

As it may be seen on the table below, this is one of those

rare instances in which all our chronologists agree on the year—if not the exact date—in which this case took place.

In 1891, Sherlock Holmes was 37 years old, and Doctor John H. Watson was 39.

### Main Characters:

Professor James Moriarty, former mathematics professor, now criminal mastermind, Holmes' archenemy and would-be nemesis; Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock Holmes' elder brother; Peter Steiler, landlord of the *Englischer Hof* hotel in Meringen, Switzerland.

### Notable Quotes:

"He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson. He is the organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city."

"He is extremely tall and thin, his forehead domes out in a white curve, and his two eyes are deeply sunken in his head. He is clean-shaven, pale, and ascetic-looking, retaining something of the professor in his features. His shoulders are rounded from much study, and his face protrudes forward, and is forever slowly oscillating from side to side in a curiously reptilian fashion."

"I think that I may go as far as to say, Watson, that I have not lived wholly in vain. If my record were closed to-night I could still survey it with equanimity. The air of London is the sweeter for my presence. In over a thousand cases I am not aware that I have ever used my powers upon the wrong side."

<i>The Final Problem</i>	
<i>Chronologist</i>	<i>Date of the Adventure</i>
<i>Canon</i>	<i>Friday, April 24, 1891</i>
<i>Baring-Gould</i>	<i>Friday, April 24, 1891</i>
<i>Bell</i>	<i>Friday, April 24, 1891</i>
<i>Blakeney</i>	<i>Spring of 1891</i>
<i>Brend</i>	<i>April 1891</i>
<i>Christ</i>	<i>Friday, April 24, 1891</i>
<i>Dakin</i>	<i>Friday, April 24, 1891</i>
<i>Folsom</i>	<i>Sunday, January 4, 1891</i>
<i>Hall</i>	<i>April 24, 1891</i>
<i>Keefauver</i>	<i>Friday, April 24, 1891</i>
<i>Klinger</i>	<i>1891</i>
<i>Zeisler</i>	<i>Friday, April 24, 1891</i>

“If I have now been compelled to make a clear statement of his career, it is due to those injudicious champions who have endeavoured to clear his memory by attacks upon him whom I shall ever regard as the best and wisest man whom I have ever known.”

### *The Professor's Brother*

One has to wonder what sort of a defense could have been put forth by Professor Moriarty's brother. Considering that Holmes brought down his entire criminal organization and had ample proof of the organization's criminal activities, particularly those of its leader, what defense could the professor's brother have offered? “Yes, but he loved puppies”?

Although Watson does not tell us, it appears that everyone—with the exceptions of Moriarty, Colonel Sebastian Moran and possibly one more person—were captured. As Holmes indicated, this should have led to a series of trials (perhaps now not so sensational), but there should have been convictions galore. Holmes had ample evidence of how Moriarty masterminded and executed sundry national and international illegal operations. His escape did not prove his innocence, only how skillful he was at his criminal craft.

Another puzzler is what Watson tells us about the trials that ensued: “Of their terrible chief few details came out during the proceeding.” Truly? Wouldn't Holmes' evidence against Moriarty (which was already in the hands of the authorities) have been of prime importance in the trials of his minions, even if the professor was already dead by the time things came to trial? After all, they were members of *his* criminal organization and did everything at *his* behest.

So even if Holmes was not there to testify at the time of the trials, how could *any* defense be offered in behalf of this criminal overlord after everything was exposed?

### *The Inconvenienced Mastermind*

Holmes himself tells us that Professor Moriarty was *the* criminal mind of the age. Not only that, but that he had also created “a mighty organization” which was at his beck and call. Which, of course, makes one wonder why Moriarty did not get rid of him well before the Great Detective had him, as the Professor put it, “absolutely hampered” in his plans.

By this time, Holmes was the leading criminal investigator of his age. It seems difficult to believe that Moriarty would not have been aware of this fact, taken full measure of Holmes' capabilities, and logically look upon him as a potential enemy. Why not do this before things came to a head? A sniper, the kidnapping of Mycroft, a threat against the Watsons—any such relatively minor measure like that would have kept Holmes at bay and prevent the downfall of his organization. Instead, he waits until the net begins to close around him.

True, as Moriarty himself said to Holmes, “I say, unaffectedly, that it would be a grief to me to be forced to take any extreme measure.” Just like our sleuth he, too, must have been thrilled by a struggle against someone who was his intellectual equal.



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But as Don Corleone, another notable criminal mastermind, would put it in a different century, “This is nothing personal—just business.”

## *The Imperiled Doctor*

What could Holmes' reasoning have been in asking Watson to travel to the Continent with him? Considering that Moriarty was now actively and desperately trying to kill him, why put Watson at risk? Why not disappear in some good hiding place until the time came to take give evidence at the various trials that he expected to ensue? Could it really be that he did not realized the true danger of their situation until he learned that Moriarty escaped the police before they closed in on his gang?

## *Netting the Big Fish*

When Watson suggests to Holmes on the train, after narrowly escaping Moriarty, that the professor be arrested, Holmes replies that it would ruin the work of three months: "We should get the big fish, but the smaller would dart right and left out of the net." He opts, instead for "having them all" on Monday. Shouldn't Holmes have gone for the organization's head? Surely, without it, the body would have collapsed. Those "smaller fish" would have been easier to trap afterward. Was our sleuth being arrogantly too sure of himself?

## *What about the Colonel?*

When Holmes tells Watson that the police "secured the whole gang" with the exception of Moriarty, he does not mention Moran, although it seems that he, too, escaped. Could he have been ignorant of Moran's existence?

## *A Parting Perspective*

If one dispassionately considers this record of Watson's, it is possible to argue that regardless of Holmes' Homeric and well-directed efforts to thwart Moriarty to bring him to justice, it wasn't Holmes who triumphed, but Moriarty. Consider that while Moriarty escaped Holmes, Holmes did not escape Moriarty. As the Great Detective himself wrote to Watson at Reichenbach, "[Moriarty] has been giving me a sketch of the methods by which he avoided the English police and kept himself informed of our movements.



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They certainly confirm the very high opinion which I had formed of his abilities."

Was Holmes too ambitious in this case, too sure of his mental powers? It would seem so. When Watson suggests that Moriarty be arrested at the destination of his special train, Holmes firmly refuses: "It would be to ruin the work of three months. We should get the big fish,

but the smaller would dart right and left out of the net. On Monday we should have them all. No, an arrest is inadmissible."

The result appears to have been exactly the opposite, because while the smaller fish were caught Moriarty and Colonel Sebastian Moran escaped the net. Logically, one would expect that if one was forced to choose between minnows or the shark, the shark should receive all the attention—deprived of the head, the body dies.

Did the thrill of the chase blur Holmes' reasoning?

## *The Hounds' Corner*

### *The Problem of "The Final Problem"*

*By Karen Murdock (May Blunder)*

Why is it "The Final Problem" and not "The Final Adventure"? Why is "The Final Problem" such a problem?

There is a group of Shakespearian plays which scholars call "The Problem Plays" because they do not fit well into any of the other three categories of his plays (Comedies, Tragedies, and Histories). *The Problem Plays are Troilus and Cressida, All's Well That Ends Well, and Measure for Measure.* (Some scholars include *Hamlet* in this category, too, although most consider *Hamlet* to fall in the "Tragedy" category.) These plays, sometimes called "dark comedies," are difficult to interpret, show a tragic-comic view of the human condition, and exhibit an ironic or cynical cast.

These Shakespearian characteristics certainly do not apply to "The Final Problem," which is relentlessly earnest and not at all ironic. Yet there is some sense in which FINA is a "problem tale" in its being hard to classify, lacking in expected characters and structural elements, and quite unusual in tone.

Only two tales in the Sherlockian Canon are titled as "problem" cases: THOR and FINA. Almost all of the other tales are called "The Adventure of Thus-and-So." Does this nomenclature mean anything? If so, I can't seem to discern it.

I can easily conceive of a division of the tales into "adventures" and "problems" (with a few remaining unclassifiable, as always). "Adventures" might be those tales involving a lot of action, trips in a hansom or train to and from the crime scene and the homes of various witnesses and affected parties, telegrams speeded off to all corners, Holmes throwing himself upon the ground with his magnifying glass to his eye, astonishing deductions, and a general air of hustle and bustle. "Problems," in contrast, might be those tales which are more cerebral, more rarified, with Holmes playing much less of a direct role in the action and making few deductions.

Were this division to hold sway, IDEN, FIVE, ENGR, YELL, GLOR, BLAN, SUSS, and VEIL might count as "Problem Tales," in contrast to such energetic stories as SIGN, SIXN, PRIO, BRUC and HOUN, which are definitely "Adventures." "The Problem of Thor Bridge" would be an "Adventure" tale in this scheme, and so certainly would be "The Final Problem," with its great geographical range and the gripping quality of its narrative (the most intense in the Canon).

Apparently, then, this arbitrary division of the stories into "Adventures" and "Problems" meant nothing to the Literary Agent, or whoever gave the tales their titles. A few of the early stories, for that matter, have neither "Adventure" nor "Problem" in their titles, but content themselves with terse and to-the-point titles such as "A Scandal in Bohemia" and "The Five Orange Pips."

Yet, undeniably, there is something most unusual about "The Final Problem." Consider the utter lack of the plot devices, characters, and structural elements we have come to expect in the stories of Sherlock Holmes: no light-hearted bantering between Holmes and Watson, no introductory "cozy" at 221B, no in-over-their-heads Scotland Yarders, no brilliant deductions, no crime scene (no crime, for





that matter, except the three “off stage” assaults upon Holmes and the arson at 221B), no long pauses about three-quarters of the way through the narrative where Holmes works off-stage to solve the problem while Watson remains at home or at the hotel, as befogged as before, no *ex machina* appearance of Holmes at the end to clear everything up. No appearance of Holmes at the end at all! This is a “mystery” story with no crime to solve and no clues with which to solve anything. This makes it a problem.

In his classic 1912 essay “Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes,” Ronald A. Knox identified 11 distinct parts of the ideal tale from the Canon, and he gave them scholarly names such as Proöimion and Anagnorisis. Knox wrote that “The Final Problem” contained only five of these elements. However, several of these take place “off stage” and are only described to Watson by Holmes, not observed and described by Watson himself as in more conventional stories. Most of the story is the back story.

Consider, too, the unique tone of FINA. No other tale in the Canon ends with anything approaching the utter tragedy of this tale. No final words of Watson are anything like as elegiac and lyrical as those with which he ends FINA. The entire story just feels very different from any other in the Canon, not excluding EMPT, which is also a very unusual story by the standards of the conventions of the tales.

Sherlock Holmes, himself, seems to be the only one in the story who knows what is going to happen, who knows this is really his “final” challenge. “Your memoirs will draw to an end, Watson,” he tells his friend, “upon the day that I crown my career by the capture or extinction of the most dangerous and capable criminal in Europe.” And in the final note he writes to Watson, Holmes reiterates this finality and acceptance: “my career had in any case reached its crisis, and that no possible conclusion to it could be more congenial to me than this.” “The Final Problem” is the greatest problem Holmes faces in his career, and he solves that problem at the end to his complete satisfaction, if



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to Watson’s great grief and distress. Holmes accepts the finality of “The Final Problem,” recognizes his engage-



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ment with Moriarty as the epic struggle that it is, and accepts his death in prospect with equanimity.

It is Watson who cannot accept the situation. The tension in the second half of FINA is not between Holmes and Moriarty. It is between Holmes and Watson. “The Final Problem” is a problem for Watson, not for Holmes. The twosome even have a half-hour-long argument in the Strasburg *salle-à-manger* on the question of whether Watson should remain with Holmes or return to England—one of the only arguments the two friends ever engage in. Watson wins the argument, but in the end he loses his friend. His presence at the side of Holmes proves ineffectual in staving off the inevitable end, and

Moriarty is able to decoy the doctor away at the crucial moment by the Reichenbach Falls.

If Shakespeare can have his “Problem Plays,” John H. Watson can have his “Problem Tales,” and “The Final Problem” stands first among them.

(I wonder, by the way, if Shakespearian scholars have handy little four-letter abbreviations for the plays, like the ones Jay Finley Christ gifted the Sherlockian world, such as TROI, ALLS, MEAS, HAML?)

### *What else happened in 1891:*

#### *Empire*

Australian demands for trade protection and unification.

Anglo-Portuguese Convention on East Africa.

Nyasaland becomes British Protectorate.

Behring Sea Arbitration Treaty signed.

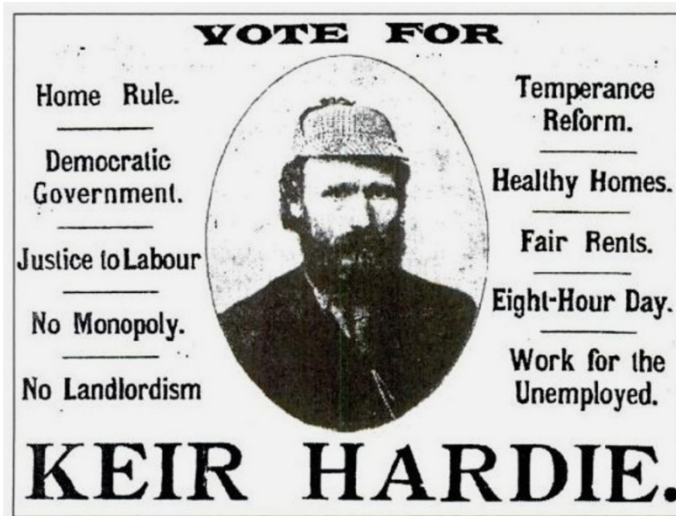
Anglo-Italian Agreement; spheres of influence defined in Northeast Africa.

Indian Mint closed to silver.

British South Africa Company granted use of port of Beira by Portugal.

#### *Britain*

First half-tone newspaper picture published in *Daily Graphic*: that of George Lambert, Liberal parliamentary candidate.



Waterlow Park, gifted by Sir Sydney Waterlow, opens.

Palace Theatre, Cambridge Circus, opens.

Steam trams discontinued.

◀ James Keir Hardie elected MP, first Independent Labour Party Member. (Note the hat!)

Brooklands Agreement. Basis for wage negotiations in cotton industry.

Independent Labour Party newspaper, *The Clarion*, published.

All elementary education to be free.

Factory Act: no child under 11 to work in factories.

Small Holdings Act, County Councils are empowered to purchase land for letting as small holdings under 50 acres.

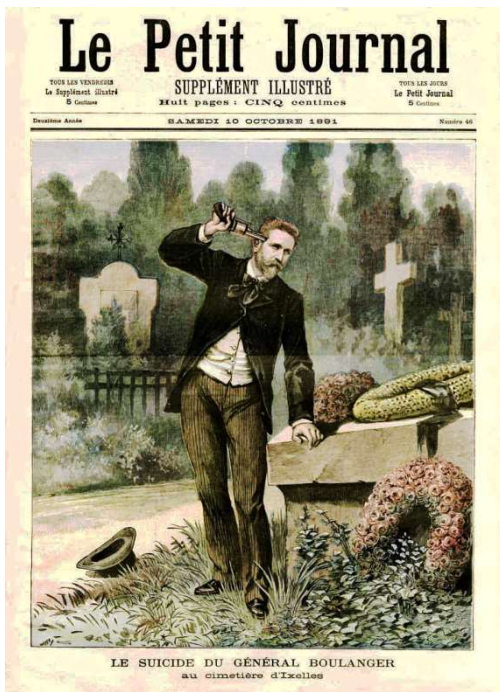
Serbastian Z. de Ferranti builds Deptford power station for the London Electricity Supply Corporation.

#### *World*

Germany develops first pension scheme.

French Labor Department formed; Labor Exchanges projected.

French fleet pays official visit to Kronstadt; Franco-Russian entente.



Massacre of Europeans following Arab revolt in Belgian Congo.

Plan to introduce universal military service in Holland fails.

◀ Boulanger commits suicide in Brussels.

Triple Alliance, Germany, Austria, Italy renewed to 1902.

Law for Protection of Workers, restricted hours for German workers.

Republican uprising in Oporto fails.

Formation of Young Turk Movement to secure liberal reforms. Committee established at Geneva.

Maxim Gorky urges class war in Russia.

Bank failures in the U.S.A. and Australia.

Bank of Portugal suspends payments for 60 days.

Widespread famine in Russia.

Building of Trans-Siberian Railway commenced.

## Art



Gauguin travels to Tahiti.

*The Little Minister*, Barrie.

*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Arthur Conan Doyle.

*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy.

*Lyra Heroica*, Henley.

*The Light That Failed*, Kipling.

*Quintessence of Ibsenism*, G. B. Shaw.

◀ *Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*, Oscar Wilde.

*Le Jardin de Bérenice*, Maurice Barrès.

*Les Cahiers d'Andre Walter*, André Gide.

*Là-bas*, Huysmans.

*Einsame Menschen*, *Frühlings*, Frank Wedekind.

*Gösta Berling*, Selma Lagerlöf.

*Man with Pipe*, *Card Players*, Cézanne.

*Women on the Beach*, *Vahini with Gardenia*, Paul Gauguin.

Caisse-Noisette, incidental music for *Snow-Maiden*, by Russian Peter

Tschaikowsky.

## Science and Technology

Dewar liquefies oxygen in quantity.

Beginnings of wireless telegraphy based on work of Clark Maxwell and Hertz.



René Panhard, French, produces his car chassis.

Tesla further develops his high-tension induction coil--one million volts.

◀ American astronomer George Hale and Deslandris independently invent the spectroheliograph.

Tuffier, of Paris, performs early lung operation for tuberculosis.

Eugene Dubois discovers *Pithecanthropus erectus*.

W.L. Hudson, American, invents zipper. First practical design in 1913.

*Next week's case: HOUN*

Respectfully submitted,

*Murray, the Courageous Orderly*

(a.k.a. Alexander E. Braun)

"I should have fallen into the hands of the murderous Ghazis had it not been for the devotion and courage shown by Murray, my orderly..."

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