



Out of the Abyss

A Facsimile of the Original Manuscript of
"The Empty House" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
with Annotations and Commentary on the Story

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"The Final Problem" Problem

by Ray Betzner

In all of the Canon, there is no more heartbreaking scene than this: Dr. Watson lying on his stomach in the wet, cold mud of the Reichenbach cliff, futilely calling out the name of his lost friend.

I lay upon my face and peered over, with the spray spouting up all around me. It had darkened since I had left, and now I could only see here and there the glistening of moisture upon the black walls, and far away down at the end of the shaft the gleam of the broken water. I shouted; but only that same half-human cry of the fall was borne back to my ears.

This image is burnished into the mind of anyone who knows and loves the original 60 stories. The valiant Sherlock Holmes has sacrificed himself so that all of London — indeed, knowing the ambitions of Professor James Moriarty, all the civilized world — would be safer.

And Sherlock Holmes was dead.

Reliving the grief of that moment, Watson would use some of the most powerful prose of his career. Can we not all speak in unison those chilling words that open "The Final Problem"?

It is with a heavy heart that I take up my pen to write these the last words in which I shall ever record the singular gifts by which my friend Mr. Sherlock Holmes was distinguished.

And, surely, we can all recall the counterbalancing phrase which closes the account, as Watson describes his lost friend as "the best and wisest man whom I have ever known."

The story's powerful emotional appeal, coupled with its seeming finality, have made "The Final Problem" one of the most commented upon stories among Holmes devotees. But it has also raised questions about Holmes's honesty and sanity that are unprecedented in all of the canonical literature. Those questions have broken free of the conversation that takes place among Holmes scholars and

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entered into the popular culture, forever warping our views of Holmes and Moriarty. I propose to review the literature on the subject and suggest why this heresy has been fostered by so many for so long.

These are deep waters indeed, my friends. Let us proceed with caution.

Professor Moriarty: Real or Fiction?

This was not the chapter I intended to write. I had planned a traditional review of the literature on “The Final Problem,” which examined the usual points of dating, locations, etc.¹ But in the course of the research, I was struck by the durability of a theory that questions everything we know and love about the Master Detective of Baker Street, to wit, Sherlock Holmes created one of the greatest hoaxes in the late-Victorian era by inventing Professor Moriarty, only to kill this phantom at the Reichenbach. Casting my original intentions aside, I set out to examine the history of this perfidy and ask why it has continued to gain currency throughout the decades.

The idea that Moriarty is an invention of the Great Detective is a theory that’s older than either the Baker Street Irregulars or the Sherlock Holmes Society of London. Indeed, it’s a little stunning to realize that long before Christopher Morley and Vincent Starrett jump-started the Sherlock Holmes movement in the United States, there was already a growing body of literature linked to the idea that Sherlock Holmes invented James Moriarty.

A.G. Macdonell,² a popular British journalist and author in the early 1900s, appears to have been the first to pursue this line of thought with any extensive detail. Macdonell’s essay, “The Truth about Professor Moriarty,” was first published in the October 5, 1929, issue of *The New Statesman*. In his paper, Macdonell traces Holmes’s emotional breakdowns and claims the great detective’s abilities were fading in the late 1880s. By 1891, Holmes’s powers were in “total eclipse,” forcing Holmes and Watson to create a series of reasons to explain why the great detective was unsuccessful. Macdonell then asks, if Holmes was in decline, how could he have battled the brilliant Moriarty? “[T]he solution of the dilemma flashed upon me, the only possible solution which covers all the facts: HOLMES INVENTED MORIARTY.” Says Macdonell:

The great Professor never existed. He represents the last flash of Holmes’s imagination before he departed on his rest-cure. It was characteristically brilliant. Instead of laboriously inventing a new excuse for each failure, he invented an excuse which would cover them all.³

Continuing his theory a few years later, Macdonell says that Holmes “selected a perfectly ordinary ex-professor and fastened on to the unfortunate man the fearful reputation which has dogged him ever since.” Later, Holmes “settled him [Moriarty] down with a comfortable income and a house in the suburbs, to remain there and carry on his work as a mathematical lecturer until such time as Holmes might have need of him again.” Holmes felt sorry for the deceit, which he had

¹ Such an article is not needed, since both William S. Baring-Gould and Leslie S. Klinger have done a fine job of it already. See their chapters on “The Final Problem” and “The Empty House” in *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes* and *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, respectively.

² Macdonell was also first president of the Sherlock Holmes Society, which should not be confused with the Sherlock Holmes Society of London, which came later.

³ Macdonell, A.G., “The Truth About Professor Moriarty,” *The New Statesman*, Vol. 33 (October 5, 1929), 776–778. Reprinted in *The Incunabular Sherlock Holmes*, ed. Edgar W. Smith (Morristown, NJ: The Baker Street Irregulars, Inc. 1958), 119–120.

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assigned to the old mathematician, and gave him a painting by Greuze. “The whole story throws a somewhat lurid light upon the character of the great detective,” concludes Macdonell.⁴

“A somewhat lurid light,” indeed.

The suggestion that Holmes invented Moriarty — or its far worse corollary, that Holmes *was* Moriarty — became so well established that when T.S. Blakeney published his seminal *Sherlock Holmes: Fact or Fiction?* in 1932, he dedicated a separate appendix to the theory. In “The Holmes–Moriarty Hypothesis,” Blakeney goes through the various justifications behind the Holmes–Moriarty theory, and, then, he not so subtly concludes “the objections to this view are considerable.”

In the first place we want to know, is Moriarty Holmes, or is Holmes Moriarty? That is, did Holmes adopt the role of criminal in order to break up London’s gangsters, much as Birdy Edwards broke up the Scowlers, or did the master-criminal Moriarty, with amazing impudence, adopt an alias as Sherlock Holmes, detective?⁵

After raising several other considerable difficulties, Blakeney concludes: “The more we reflect on this Holmes–Moriarty hypothesis the more we are convinced that it is adequately answered in Holmes’s own words: ‘it seems to have only one drawback, and that is that it is intrinsically impossible.’”

Despite Blakeney’s conclusion, the idea that Holmes invented Moriarty would not die. Indeed, by 1953, Edgar W. Smith felt he needed to address it directly in his booklet, *The Napoleon of Crime: Prolegomena to a Memoir of Professor James Moriarty*.

(Continued)

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⁴ Macdonell, A.G., “Mr. Moriarty,” *Baker Street Studies*, ed. H.W. Bell (London: Constable and Co., 1934), 159.

⁵ Eustace Portugal would pick up on this idea in the May 1934 issue of *The Bookman*, claiming (according to Ron B. DeWaal’s invaluable bibliography) “that Moriarty killed Holmes at the Reichenbach Falls and assumed the detective’s identity upon returning to London.”