

The Affair of the Norwegian Sigerson

An excerpt from I.A Watson's novella in
Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective volume 10

“You can file it in our archives, Watson. Some day the true story may be told.”

Mr Sherlock Holmes' last published words,
from “The Adventure of the Retired Colourman”
in *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*

The account of Dr John Watson, 25th June 1891:

Holmes was dead.

The reality of it crept in slowly as we stood in Highgate Cemetery beside a grave that contained no corpse. Holmes was lost, fallen into the Reichenbach torrent in final struggle with the deadly Professor Moriarty. Neither body had been recovered from that terrible cataract. The locals of Meiringen were unsurprised; other men fallen to the cascade had been swept into hidden underwater channels and swallowed forever.

The vicar droned on, promising resurrection and eternal life. I was reminded of all too many military padres repeating the same words over all too many comrades lost to battle. Surely Sherlock Holmes had fallen nobly, to a struggle just as fierce and no less important than theirs?

Mary sensed my bleak mood. Her grip tightened on my arm in sympathetic support. She has as much to be grateful to Sherlock Holmes for as any person present; Holmes has recovered for her an inheritance of Agra treasure and saved her life. If not for Holmes I would never have met Mary. She would never have become my wife.¹

I controlled my emotions. My grief was too great to unleash, too vast to chronicle.

I was far from alone at the memorial ceremony. Three or four hundred mourners crowded the wet turf to offer their respects. Holmes' friends, allies, and clients gathered around the empty grave to pay tribute to that remarkable man. On my other side stood Mrs Hudson, stiff and pale, unwavering in her devotion to Holmes even after his death. She had already confided that because of the bequest he had left her in his will she had no need to let his rooms again. They would remain as he had quit them, a memorial to the great detective.

Beyond our bombazine-swathed housekeeper stood a long line of policemen, some uniformed, others in the strange cheap suits and long-coats that pass for plain clothes amongst the detective branch of Scotland Yard.

1 Governess Mary Morstan engaged Holmes' services to investigate *The Sign of the Four*, the second full-length Holmes novel, later often published as just *The Sign of Four*.

Gruff Tobias Gregson stood soberly shoulder to shoulder with his long-time rival Lestrade. Behind them gathered Bradstreet, Hopkins, Barton, Forrester, Brown, Forbes, Hill, MacDonald, Patterson and the rest, a contentious honour guard for a man who had variously helped and confounded them on countless cases.

Many of our clients were present. I had exchanged a brief word with Musgrave before the service and traded nods with Baskerville, Trevor, Phelps, Miss Violet Hunter, and a dozen other men and women who owed their safety, reputation, or sanity to my fallen friend.

I recognised many academics and professional men in the crowd, scholars who had exchanged correspondence on Holmes' many monographs, specialists to whom he had referred enquiries, allies in his investigations. My friend Lomax of the London Library was amongst those come to pay his respects.

Across the turf on the humbler side of the assembly a great press of cabbies, runner-boys, flower-girls and street toughs kept vigil in uncharacteristic silence, hats held between their fingers. Wiggins, erstwhile leader of that scrub of street-arabs that Holmes had dubbed his Baker Street Irregulars, attended with his new fiancée, failing to hold back tears for the man who had given him his chances in life. A girl I knew only as Martha, whom Holmes had employed as an undercover informant, looked as if she might faint. Cartwright of the Express Office had his eyes screwed shut. Even the scent-hound Toby sensed the sombreness of the occasion, crouched to the floor beside his master Sherman, his expression mournful.

Of all those gathered, only Holmes' family were conspicuous by their absence. Even Mycroft, Holmes' sedentary elder brother, had felt unable to bear attending the service. Surely the great press of mourners and their profound and earnest sorrow would have comforted him had he been able to come?

The vicar pronounced the benediction. Mary and Mrs Hudson laid flowers upon the grave. Holmes has always been fond of honeysuckle. A great swell of well-wishers filed past the memorial, which gave Holmes' name and dates and was subscribed, "The best and wisest of men".

I tried to avoid the crowd but it was natural that those who had known of my close friendship with Holmes would wish to seek me out and offer what solace they could. I nodded and muttered platitudes back at a multitude of kindly remarks, little heeding from whom they came. Mary held my sleeve close and supported me as I struggled to survive.

"Is it certain that he is dead?" That was asked of me time and again. It was a question I had wracked myself with night after night, awake in my bed.

Yes, it was certain. Holmes had met James Moriarty on the narrow unguarded path atop the deadly falls at Reichenbach. The great detective had finally broken that old schemer's empire. On 27th April a dozen trusted confidantes received sealed instructions and evidence to bring down Moriarty's forces in Britain and Europe. Within twenty four hours police on four continents had sprung into action, galvanised at last by the careful deductions and detailed plans my friend had dispatched.

Holmes had calculated that the destruction of the Professor's organisation would require a week. If Moriarty could eliminate Holmes within that time then that pervasive web of criminal endeavour might be saved, restored in time as great or better than before by the brooding black spider who dwelled at its centre. If Holmes retained his freedom for a mere seven days then no genius however dark might restore the painstaking felonious work of a decade.

We had fled, Holmes and I, scarcely ahead of the best assassins that the most dangerous man in the world could command. Moriarty's hellhounds pursued us without let from Victoria Station to Canterbury, cross-country to Newhaven, across the Channel to Dieppe. We avoided them for a while by flight to Brussels and Strasbourg, but there a telegram awaited us with news that Moriarty himself had avoided capture, had eluded Lestrade, Gregson, and the entire force of British law.

I see in retrospect that Holmes knew a final encounter with the escaped Professor was inevitable.

Our flight took us up the Rhône valley, then up the Leuk, over the snow-choked Gemmi Pass down to Interlaken, and thence to the village of Meiringen with its neat proper Englischer Hof. It was from there that we diverted to view the famous waterfall, and on that precarious ledge that the urgent note came, supposedly from the innkeeper summoning me to assist an English lady who had fallen seriously ill.

Holmes knew when I parted from him to hasten to her assistance that his enemies had closed upon us. Holmes sent me away to spare my life from Moriarty and his marksman.

Such a meeting it must have been, those dreadful implacable intelligences clashing in close proximity for only the second time. Moriarty allowed Holmes a short time to leave a farewell account for me of what had happened. I wonder if the Professor availed himself of the opportunity to leave a similar message for his second? And then, thwarted by each other's intellects, finally matched in schemes and insight, that awful rivalry had culminated in physical action, grappling atop that precarious ledge above the devastating drop.

I have previously diared, though I doubt I shall ever publish, my account of those terrible hours; my discovery of the ruse that had been perpetrated to separate me from my friend, my hastened journey with heaving chest and heavy heart back to Reichenbach; my discovery of Holmes' note weighted beneath his cigarette case. So passed Mr Sherlock Holmes in service of humanity, in ending the greatest evil of our modern age.

Of course I made sure he was gone.

I was there a week, assisting the police and representatives of the British Embassy dispatched by Mycroft. I watched as dragnets were cast across the basin pool and as hunters trekked along the river banks searching for the lost men. Hundreds of searchers, known and unknown, joined together to seek those fallen foes. All to no avail.

By the end, every expert on the scene was prepared to swear that no man who had plummeted from that height into the cauldron below the falls could have survived. A drowned man or one broken to destruction by such a terrible

fall might be carried away through the uncharted underwater channels that drained Reichenbach. His corpse might never be found.

With a heavy heart I braced myself to return to England with the worst of news for Holmes' friends and supporters.

All that remained was Highgate and a last farewell.

The sun was shadowed behind cloud as the funeral party dispersed. Many people did not depart immediately, as if retreating from the graveside would be an acceptance that Sherlock Holmes was truly gone.

Lestrade edged up to me whilst Mary was talking with Miss Hunter. "A private word?" he murmured.

I stepped aside with him. Stanley Hopkins followed us, evidently by arrangement.

"What is it?" I asked, keeping my voice low.

"We've acted on all Mr Holmes' instructions now," Lestrade reported to me, in the manner of a soldier reporting to a deputy commander when his superior officer was lost in the field. "We've taken almost all of them, those that survived to be taken. Only three or four of the top men have slipped the net for now."

"Three or four might still cause problems," I judged. "Moriarty chose his lieutenants well. How did they elude you?"

"There was a bungled arrest in Liverpool, a case of mistaken identity in Cardiff. At least one of the targets was out of Britain when we swooped on the rest: the Professor's assassin gunman."

"Ah, yes. Makes sense that he would have been on the Continent with his master in those final days of the hunt. Perhaps he was even close by at Meiringen, waiting for his chance?"

Lestrade grunted acknowledgement. He and Scotland Yard had failed to detain Moriarty. I knew that the Inspector somewhat blamed himself for Holmes' loss, although no man might have taken the Napoleon of Crime with any certainty of success save Holmes himself. "From what we can gather, operations in Europe, America, India, and Africa have met with success," the Inspector advised. "I've heard from Dubugue in Paris and Leverton of the Pinkertons, and I received a brief cable from Von Waldbaum in Danzig proclaiming victory. Others will follow."

"Then Holmes would adjudge his sacrifice well spent," I admitted.

The Scotland Yard men frowned. "There's something else," Hopkins confessed. "Have you heard anything, doctor, about new men entering the underworld?"

I had not. "There will inevitably be some changes in the hierarchies of the criminal classes," I considered. "Moriarty's entire command structure has been apprehended or set to flight, along with many of the malefactors who consulted him for aid in committing their misdeeds. Nature abhors a vacuum. I suppose that is true of felonious society too."

Lestrade nodded soberly. "That's true, Dr Watson. And I'll shed no tears over the throat-cuttings and back-stabbings amongst thieves and murderers that followed on from our Moriarty investigation. But Hopkins here believes there

might be a new attempt to organise, someone seeking to capitalise on Moriarty's downfall. I am tending to agree with him. We had hoped..."

"I am not Sherlock Holmes, gentlemen," I had to remind them.

"None of us is," sighed Hopkins. Of all the Scotland Yard men he was the one who most tried to emulate the great detective's methods, albeit with limited success. "Still..."

I beckoned across for Wiggins and Billy to come and join us. They trotted over, the Diogenes Club's newest steward and the likely young lad who had once been our house-page.

"Have either of you heard about some new criminal taking hold where Moriarty's men have so lately been uprooted?" I asked them.

Billy's irreverent grin flashed briefly across his face. "So we're *not* giving up! I knew we wouldn't, sir. 'E wouldn't want us to!"

Wiggins rolled his eyes at his eager fellow. "I can ask around for you, Dr Watson. There's a few whispers, that maybe not all the disappearances an' odd things were just score-settling or local disputes once Moriarty's restraining 'and was gone. There's an awful lot of Krauts in London all of a sudden, and none of 'em making 'emselves popular down the docks."

"The blokes what sorted out the Keeling Crew?" Billy speculated. "And come to think of it, there was that barney at Madge Cotter's Cockfight Pit."

"Where would that be, my lad?" Lestrade asked, reaching for his notebook.

"No clue, guv'ner," Billy answered. He somehow managed to keep his face straight.

"It's no matter what's already 'appened," Wiggins suggested. "It's what 'appens next, innit?" It occurred to me that in his new role as a liveried messenger to the reclusive members of the powerful and influential Diogenes Club, young Wiggins was in a position to hear everything, and to report what mattered to that institution's most prominent member, civil servant Mr Mycroft Holmes. "I'll ask the lads to keep an ear out."

"I'll see what can be done as well," Billy promised. I wasn't clear what our ex-page was doing these days. I determined to ask Mrs Hudson when opportunity allowed.

Lestrade addressed me, not the cheeky commoners who were denying him information. "If you happen to learn anything, doctor, it would be very much appreciated."

"And if you have time," chimed in Hopkins, "feel free to help us sort through the notes that Mr Holmes left us. There are crates of them, dossiers on hundreds of criminals great and small. If we can't assemble prosecutions from some of the material that Mr Holmes left us then I'll eat my hat."

I made vague promises to look over the files. The Scotland Yard men departed to their duties. The Baker Street boys shuffled away to cause trouble and hear secrets.

At last only Mary and I remained. "I'll take a short stroll," my wife told me. "Show Sherlock what you brought for him."

I felt ridiculous addressing a dead man at a grave he wasn't even in. Even so, I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out the flimsy magazine I had folded there.

"This came out today," I told the headstone. I held out the new edition of *The Strand Magazine*. "I have placed an account of you in here, Holmes. A memorial. Not a full book this time, just a short piece describing a case which seemed to especially affect you. I changed some names to protect illustrious identities, but it felt right to describe your encounter with Miss Adler."²

A photograph of the opera singer, given to her lover and claimed from him by Holmes, was ever present on my friend's desk. Irene Adler was, to Holmes, the epitome of her sex, and when he spoke of her he never felt the need to qualify her as anything other than The Woman.

"Anyway, I have released a number of stories for Doyle to print, couched as fiction," I went on. "I hope that is alright. I want the world to know who and what you were. You will not be forgotten. Never."

I turned away and returned to Mary, forced at last to believe that my dearest friend was gone and that our adventure was over.

² This would be "A Scandal in Bohemia", the first published Holmes short story and one of literary agent Arthur Conan Doyle's favourites. Originally released in *The Strand Magazine* dated July 1891 but circulated in late June, then collected in 1982 in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, the account of Holmes' brief encounter with and response to the American adventuress has elevated Miss Adler's significance in the Canon above any other female character. Like Moriarty, she shared only two brief scenes with the great detective in the accounts published by Doyle, and like him she has made her way into other media as an essential Holmesian cast member.

As early as William Gillette's 1899 stage adaptation *Sherlock Holmes* – the one that first established Holmes with hooked pipe and deerstalker hat – Irene Adler appeared as the detective's romantic interest, albeit under the pseudonym Alice Faulkner. That production ended with her marriage to Sherlock Holmes.

Mme. Adler is discussed further in the afterword to this story, "The Apocryphal Holmes".

A Private Memoir of Madame Irene Adler, 25th June 1891:

It was Thursday, which management assured me was always the quietest house of the week. Box office would improve on Friday, be substantial for Saturday's matinee, and all seats would be sold for that evening's grand finale. I had been told privately that Prince Nicolas would be in the royal box and that he had expressed a fervent desire to meet me.

A decade ago I would have been thrilled. A Trenton girl on an adventure across Europe, new to the operatic stage and just building a following, I was then still dazzled by the glitter from royal crowns. I no longer have any interest in dalliances with men of noble line. I thought I was done with matters of the heart.

That afternoon had been rehearsal. I insisted upon it. The orchestra at the Zetski Dom theatre-cum-opera house was enthusiastic but not entirely as versed in supporting vocal music as I might have wished. Our opening performance had been reasonable but lacking in true professionalism. *Rigoletto* requires precision. We would practice until we had it right. Cettigne³ in Montenegro might be as provincial a national capital as was possible in Europe but music and art must never be compromised.

I returned to my dressing room to rest my voice for a while and to catch up on my reading. I settled in a comfortable armchair away from my make-up desk and business escritoire and kicked off my shoes. I allowed myself a dip into a sinfully luxurious box of Swiss chocolates that I had bought for myself (not one from the pile of gifts from admirers that was stacked up by the door for other members of the company to help themselves) and allowed the heady liqueur to melt upon my tongue for the sheer sensual pleasure of it.

Well why not? It was the anniversary of my not-divorce.

Godfrey Norton and I exchanged our wedding vows under extraordinary circumstances on 21st May 1887, at St Monica's on Edgware Road, London, England. The notorious consulting detective Sherlock Holmes was present as our principal witness, albeit he was disguised as some kind of mendicant. Even then I was aware of certain irregularities in the ceremony but cared little about them. If I had been a woman to value the customs of society I would not have become mistress of the royal scion who styled himself 'the Prince of Bohemia', nor made Godfrey's acquaintance as my legal representative when that affair had reached its inevitable close.

I am not a fool. I knew that English marriage ceremonies no longer had to be performed before noon to be legal; that two witnesses are required to sign the parish register, not one disguised sleuth; that special licenses for marriage without banns require a bishop's signature. Since Godfrey did not insist upon those things I deemed it our nuptial vows that mattered and went ahead with a union joined by love and our oaths, not by the law.

Godfrey had other ideas, I discovered. When he learned that I no longer retained material which might blackmail a future monarch for a literal king's

³ This city is called Cetinje in the present day.

ransom he was furious in his disdain. His suggestions for the means of our future prosperity were vile. He had mistaken an adventurous spirit for a calculating courtesan. When I resisted his proposals things deteriorated between us. When evidence absolute was presented to annul our union I was pleased to escape and devote myself to restoring my interrupted operatic career.

Technically I was not divorced since technically I was never wed. I still allowed myself the liqueur to celebrate the anniversary of our parting.

When my luxury was consumed I reached for the newspaper that awaited my attention. *The Times* and *The New York Herald* are hard to get in a postage-stamp European country surrounded by peaks as yet unassailed by railway lines or decent roads. I had sailed in from Bari, Italy to the tiny port of Antivari, practically the only way to reach the Montevidean capital without hitching oneself to mountain goats. The London paper awaiting me had arrived that day, although its publication date was June 6th, more than two and a half weeks earlier.

I unfolded the broadsheet and froze as I saw the first item: MR SHERLOCK HOLMES BELIEVED DROWNED AT INTERLAKEN, SWITZERLAND.

I saw him so keenly then, that gaunt haunted face with those piercing eyes, those long sensitive hands that betrayed him as he spoke, the restless procession of expressions that played across his features as that unparalleled brain flitted from deduction to deduction. I had met him only thrice, passed less than two hours in his company, but I had not forgotten him.

There in my reading pile, confessing my interest, was a much-thumbed edition of his great friend's account, *A Study in Scarlet*.

And was he gone now, that massive personality, that endless intellect who had crossed me so briefly and haunted me so long? My hands shook on the paper.

It was as well that Thursday's house was only half full. I did not render my best performance.

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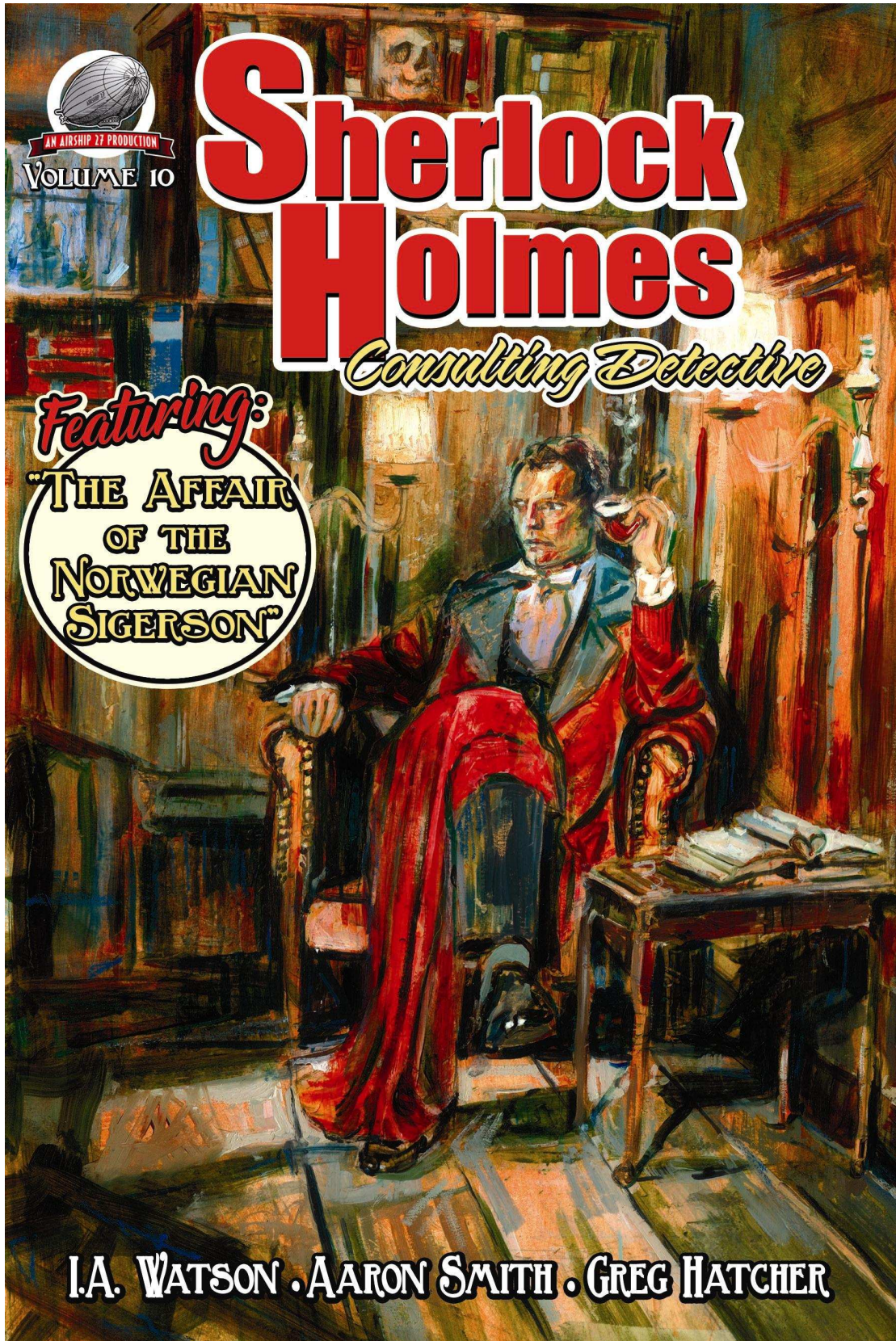
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"With this volume, our series reaches the same word-count as the original nine-book Canon," the author explains, "and so I assumed licence to delve somewhat into the missing years of the great detective's career. It turned out to be my favourite of all the Holmes tales I have penned."



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