



# An Inquiry into: "The Final Problem"

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"The Final Problem" was first published in the December 1893 issue of *The Strand Magazine*; it is part of *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*.

Overwhelmingly, the vast majority of Canon scholars consider the date of this case as settled. Watson clearly

tells us that Holmes came to his house on April 24, 1891, and that the fatal encounter (for Professor Moriarty, that is) took place at the Reichenbach Falls on May 4 of that same year.

It is therefore no surprise that, as the table shows, 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 turned criminal mastermind—Holmes' arch-enemy and would-be nemesis. Mycroft Holmes, elder brother of the Great Detective. Peter Steiler, landlord of the *Englischer Hof* hotel in Meiringen, 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 a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker. He has a brain of the first order. He sits motionless, like a spider in the center of its web, but that web has a thousand radiations, and he knows well every quiver of each of them."

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

*Please note that Canon chronologists may differ on pivotal dates and comparative periods between cases, thus a simple majority is not necessarily correct. Most Canon scholars settle on a single chronologist's results for their research framework.*

“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.”

“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.”

### *A Canonical Factoid*

When “The Final Problem” hit the streets and Londoners learned about the supposed death of Sherlock Holmes, many wore mourning bands. In more than one instance, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was the target of vituperative remarks from his bereaved readers.

### *A Troublesome Anachronism*

At the offset it is useful to mention in passing a seeming anachronism in Doctor Watson’s version of this adventure.

When Holmes seeks refuge in Watson’s house and tells him about his travails in his struggle against Moriarty’s criminal organization, he inquires of his friend whether he has ever heard of Professor Moriarty and Watson replies, “Never.”

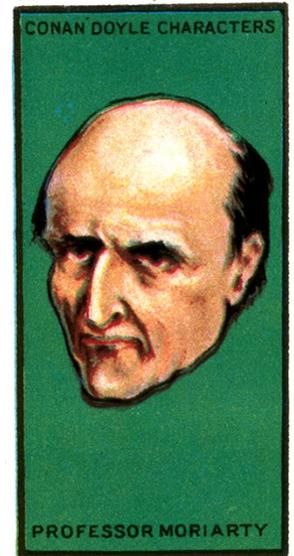


Courtesy of ITV Granada

VALL, that the Great Detective would have thought it necessary to refresh his friend’s memory by asking him whether he had heard of the professor.

For this to make any sense, one would have to be willing to accept that VALL in actuality took place *after*—and not before—the Great Hiatus.

Some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that the Moriarty referred to in VALL was not the professor, but rather his brother, Colonel Moriarty, and that the Professor later took over from his



brother and brought the former's criminal group to a new height of organization and perfidy. This is a somewhat shaky explanation as to why Watson, supposedly acquainted with *Colonel* Moriarty, knew nothing about *Professor* Moriarty. Unfortunately, this explanation is about as watertight as the *Titanic*, because the Moriarty in VALL is referred to as "professor," not "colonel."

The truth may be considerably simpler than all this. Canon scholar D. Martin Dakin posits that when Watson put pen to paper to write FINA in 1893, he had not expected to write anything further about Moriarty or Holmes.

However, the Good Doctor found himself forced to defend the Great Detective's character from the base insinuations made by the professor's brother, and therefore penned this account of their final encounter at the falls.

### *Some Unresolved Aspects*

There are some nebulous areas in Watson's telling of this adventure which, not unusually so, makes one wish that he would have been more forthcoming with details.

Holmes carried out a three-month duel with Moriarty and had his life threatened by his archrival and his minions. Then the two friends set off on a European tour which supposedly ends with the deaths of both Holmes and Moriarty.



Courtesy of ITV Granada

tion the roundup of the mob. Alas, none of this is made clear by Watson.

From the facts that we do have, it would seem that Holmes thought that it would be safer for him to leave England until everybody in the criminal organization was securely locked up. One gathers from all this that at that point Holmes planned to return to London and figure prominently in the historical trial that was expected to result.

Still, one must wonder, however, considering the criminal menace that was Professor Moriarty, why Holmes would not have acted expeditiously to put him behind bars. His explanation to Watson (who wondered the same thing) as to why he had decided not to proceed does not seem to make much sense: "We should get the big fish, but the smaller would dart right and left out of the net."

One's first reaction is "So what?" Why was the Great Detective so concerned about the lesser criminals making up the organization? Surely, without the evil genius to direct them they would have been easy pickings afterwards. Cutting off the head of the snake should have been our sleuth's main concern.

As if to add insult to injury, Holmes as much as tells Moriarty during their meeting that the curtain was scheduled to fall on the following Monday!

Why this Continental journey? According to Watson, Holmes told him that he had finally managed to work a solid case against Moriarty and his gang, to the point at which they would all find themselves in police custody within three days.

However, we are not given the reason behind that triad. It is possible that this dangerous and seemingly unjustifiable delay resulted from the parsimony of a legal system more interested in dotted *i*'s and crossed *l*'s than in quickly acting to detain these high-caliber evildoers. Or it may have been due to some yet missing but crucial evidence that was scheduled to reach the hands of the authorities and was needed to enable them to put in motion

## *A Peculiar (and Hazardous) Decision*

While it is understandable why, in view of the danger and threats to his life, Holmes decided to jump across the Channel, why would he have wanted Watson along? It is more than likely that, with his



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great talent for disguise, he could have made himself unrecognizable and disappeared among the European crowds without calling any attention to himself. However, he could not have done the same for Watson, because although the disguise might have been perfect, the Good Doctor's ability to dissimulate was not exactly great.

If Holmes was attempting to evade the killers he knew were searching for him



Courtesy of ITV Granada

why burden himself with Watson, of whose existence Moriarty was certainly aware? As the saying goes, "He who travels alone travels the fastest." For the gang Watson, on the other hand, would have been the equivalent of a Victorian GPS device: "If that is a venerable Italian priest, what is he doing with Doctor Watson?" Let's us not forget that Moriarty followed Watson to the train and almost boarded it with him.

## *Why the Reaction?*

We are told that Holmes was surprised and angered when he learned that although the police capture the whole gang Moriarty (and ostensibly



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Colonel Sebastian Moran) has escaped the dragnet.

However, by his own admission our detective expected the professor to wait for him two days in Paris. So why would he have been so taken

aback by the escape? He certainly could not have expected a criminal mind of the first water to meekly return to London to be captured!

It has been suggested that from the very beginning Holmes' intention was to have just Moriarty's gang captured by the official authorities. From the beginning he would have deduced that Moriarty would give them the slip and come after him, enabling Holmes to choose the time and place in which to deal with him in a more final, permanent manner. Holmes knew that the professor was far too intelligent to be rendered harmless



to society solely by the workings of the law. Holmes may have intended the exact outcome that took place at the falls. It would not have been the first or last instance in which he took unto himself the task of judge and jury.

The exchange between Holmes and Professor Moriarty is very revealing in this respect:

*“Well, well. It seems a pity, but I have done what I could. I know every move of your game. You can do nothing before Monday. It has been a duel between you and me, Mr. Holmes. You hope to place me in the dock. I tell you that I will never stand in the dock. You hope to beat me. I tell you that you will never beat me. If you are clever enough to bring destruction upon me, rest assured that I shall do as much to you.”*

*“You have paid me several compliments, Mr. Moriarty. Let me pay you one in return when I say that if I were assured of the former eventuality I would, in the interests of the public, cheerfully accept the latter.”*

To his credit, however, he was willing to risk—and surrender—his life to rid society of such a master criminal.

## *Standing on the Terrace*

*Susan M. Rice*

*(November 6, 1942 - September 28, 2020)*

We regret to note the passing of Susan M. Rice. Originally from the Detroit area, she spent most of her life in Greenwich Village in Manhattan with her partner, later wife, Mickey Fromkin. Rice worked as a teacher of ancient Greek studies and later as an arranger of high-end specialized tours for a Manhattan travel company. Rice was invested in The Adventuresses of Sherlock Holmes (*A Practical Handbook of Bee Culture, with Some Observations upon the Segregation of the Queen*) in 1981. She became part of the “Class of ’91,” when invested into the Baker Street Irregulars the first year in which women were regularly allowed into the organization—her invested name was “Beeswing.” She won the Morley-Montgomery Award for 1997, and took over the running of the William Gillette Memorial Luncheon from Lisa McGaw, which she ran for 30 years. She



was a well-loved mentor to many new Sherlockians. Her publications included *A Compound of Excelsior* (1991), and *The Somnambulist and the Detective: Vincent Starrett and Sherlock Holmes* (2000). She was the recipient of The Musgrave Crown, the award of The Northern Musgraves of Yorkshire, and received the Two-Shilling Award from the Baker Street Irregulars in 2002, making her only the second woman to receive the honor. Lisa McGaw was the first, in 1990, but her award was given posthumously, making Rice the first Sherlockian woman to receive the award while still alive to appreciate it.

If you would like to make a donation in memory of a Sherlockian who has crossed the Reichenbach, the Sherlock Holmes Collection at the University of Minnesota is always an appropriate place to give. Make checks out to “Sherlock Holmes Collection.” If you write the name of the person you are honoring on your check it will be mentioned in the newsletter. The mailing address is:



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Sherlock Holmes Collection  
Elmer L. Andersen Library  
University of Minnesota  
222 21st Avenue South  
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Please note that the people so honored do not have to be dead. The donation can be made “in honor of” anyone who is still alive or “in memory of” somebody who has crossed the Reichenbach.



### *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.

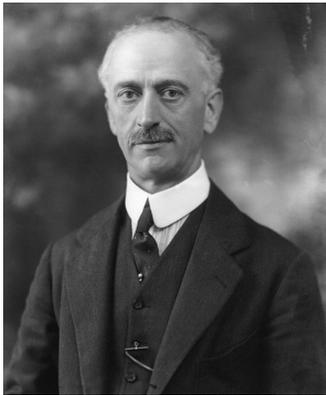
Anglo-Italian Agreement; spheres of influence defined in Northeast Africa.

Indian Mint closed to silver.

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

#### ***Britain***

Waterlow Park, gifted by Sir Sydney Waterlow, opens.



Palace Theatre, Cambridge Circus, opens.

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

Steam trams discontinued.

James Keir Hardie elected MP, first Independent Labour Party Member.

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.

Boulangier commits suicide in Brussels.

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.

◀ Maxim Gorky urges class war in Russia.

Plan to introduce universal military service in Holland Fails.

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.

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.

*The Light That Failed*, Kipling.

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

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

### *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..."

**If you would like to join the Hounds of the Internet, email us at [CourageousMurray@aol.com](mailto:CourageousMurray@aol.com).**

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