

# The Problem with the Final Problem

By Robert Veld

On 6 April 1893, Arthur Conan Doyle wrote to his mother with the news that he was “in the middle of the last Holmes story, after which the gentleman vanishes, never to reappear.”<sup>1</sup> The author had grown weary of his most famous literary creation and wanted him gone – forever. After twenty-four short stories in *The Strand Magazine*, Sherlock Holmes had already survived well beyond Doyle’s originally intended six stories. In fact, the author considered “slaying Holmes” by the twelfth story because he believed that the writing of the Holmes stories took his “mind from better things.” The detective only survived on this occasion thanks to the intervention of Doyle’s mother.

However, the death of Sherlock Holmes when it eventually came was no straight forward affair and the “death” that Doyle originally had in mind for his detective wasn’t the one that confronted the readers of *The Strand Magazine* in 1893.

What was the story that Doyle was referring to when he wrote to his mother on 6 April 1893? It certainly wasn’t *The Final Problem* in its final form, involving the confrontation of Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland. Doyle wouldn’t visit Switzerland until August that year. How had the author originally envisaged the death of Sherlock Holmes?

It is inconceivable that Doyle would have started the story without having the ending in mind at least in some form. When he was interviewed by Harry How in June 1893 for *The Strand Magazine*, the process by which he wrote a Sherlock Holmes story was revealed:

I learnt a number of interesting facts regarding “The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.” Dr. Doyle invariably conceives the end of the story first, and writes up to it. He gets the climax, and his art lies in the ingenious way in which he conceals it from his readers.<sup>2</sup>



Doyle would have known where the story was headed when he started it. However, he was having second thoughts about how Holmes would die and this probably brought the writing of the story to a temporary and premature end. The author was still perplexed as to how to kill Holmes as late as 9 August, by which time both he and his wife were in Switzerland.

While staying at the Hôtel de l’Europe in Lucerne giving a number of lectures, talk concerning Sherlock Holmes’ death intensified according to Dr Lunn who, in the 8 August 1896 issue of *Tit-Bits*, made reference to the occasion:

It’s curious that you should mention that, for it was when Conan Doyle was lecturing for us at Lucerne that he turned to me and said: ‘I have made up my mind to kill Sherlock Holmes; he is becoming such a burden to me that it makes my life unendurable.’ It was the Rev. W. J. Dawson

<sup>1</sup> Jon Lellenberg, Daniel Stashower & Chris Foley, eds., *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*, New York, Penguin Press, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> George Newnes (Editor), *The Strand Magazine*, Volume IV, George Newnes Ltd. July-December, 1892

who suggested the spot, the Reichenbach Falls, near Meiringen, where Conan Doyle finished the great detective, so I was an accessory to the fact.<sup>3</sup>

The naming of Rev. W. J. Dawson as the man who suggested Sherlock Holmes' final resting place has some credibility. Dawson himself accompanied the Doyles part of the way on their journey that took in the Reichenbach Falls and he made reference to the occasion in an article that appeared in the *Young Man* in April 1894:

I took this route the reverse way last year with Dr Conan Doyle, and thus became an unintentional accomplice to the murder of the lamented Sherlock Holmes, whose last struggle occurs in this place of horrible beauty. The decree had gone forth that Sherlock Holmes must die, and it is a tribute to Dr Doyle's sense of artistic fitness that he finally selected this spot for the tragedy.<sup>4</sup>

So, upon deciding the place at which Holmes would die in August 1893, did Doyle then set about writing *The Final Problem* from scratch and abandon the story that he was "in the middle of" back in April? If we were to consider again the Harry How interview for the *Strand* the answer would be yes. However, what if this wasn't the case and Doyle did in fact retain a portion of his original story and use it in *The Final Problem*?

Initially, this proposition probably appears to be unlikely. However, what if I was to then also suggest that elements of Doyle's original story concerning Holmes' death could have survived and found their way into *The Empty House* in 1903?



"I CREEPT FORWARD AND LOOKED ACROSS AT THE FAMILIAR WINDOW."

*The Final Problem* is clearly a short story of two very distinct halves, however this is not the point to which I wish to draw your attention right now. The point of significance is the reference to air-guns by Holmes in an early exchange with Watson on page 1 of the story:

"You are afraid of something?" I asked.  
 "Well, I am."  
 "Of what?"  
 "Of air-guns."

Following this reference no more is seen or heard of air-guns for the remainder of *The Final Problem*. On its own it may be seen to have little significance. However, if we are to then raise the monumental importance that the air-gun played as a plot device in *The Empty House*, both as the weapon that killed Ronald Adair and in the attempted murder of Sherlock Holmes himself, the reference to the weapon so early on in *The Final Problem* should probably be given far more attention. Was the air-gun to have originally played a far greater role in the story that concerned the death of Holmes?

There was a ten year gap between the publication of *The Final Problem* and *The Empty House* and yet the two stories blend together more so as a single story than two separate ones, almost as if Doyle had always intended to write the second of the two stories at the outset. This, of course, was not the case as Doyle's original intention was always for Holmes to die. And yet, we have one remarkable element linking the two stories together over a ten year period – the air-gun.

3 Richard Lancelyn Green, *The Uncollected Sherlock Holmes*, London, Penguin, 1988.

4 *ibid*

In *The Final Problem* in 1893, the air-gun gets little more than a mere mention; however, in *The Empty House* in 1903, a remarkable reference is made to that original point in time:

You remember at that date, when I called upon you in your rooms, how I put up the shutters for fear of air-guns? No doubt you thought me fanciful. I knew exactly what I was doing, for I knew of the existence of this remarkable gun, and I knew also that one of the best shots in the world would be behind it.

The argument could be made that in reviewing *The Final Problem* and searching for plot elements for *The Empty House*, Doyle made use of the reference to the air-guns. This on its own is plausible but the abruptness of the reference to air-guns in *The Final Problem* is not, especially when it is linked with the significance of the air-gun in *The Empty House*. An additional point to this that must be noted is the attempted murder of Holmes by air-gun in *The Empty House*. The remark made by Holmes of his fear of air-guns, only to have his wax dummy shot by one ten years later, is suggestive of a much grander idea involving this weapon.

Looking at *The Final Problem* and removing any and all references to Holmes and Watson escaping to the continent and the struggle at the Reichenbach Falls, we are left with a London-centric story leading up to the ultimate confrontation between the evil ruler of the criminal underworld and in Watson's own words "the foremost champion of the law". The rounding up of Moriarty's gang is taken care of quickly and easily while Holmes and Watson are away and the only loose end is the criminal mastermind himself (we only learn of the "second most dangerous man in London" in 1903's sequel *The Empty House*). All that is missing is the ending. The second act of *The Final Problem*, as it was published, is a drastic departure from the first part and is a direct result of Doyle's own trip to Switzerland in August 1893.

*The Empty House* runs upon similar lines. If we were to remove the first act from it, involving the reappearance of Sherlock Holmes, we are left with the dramatic final act in which the bust of Holmes is shot using an air-gun. The solution to the murder of Ronald Adair is explained away quickly and the Holmes/Watson partnership is re-established in preparation for the remainder of the RETURN stories that were to follow.

Unfortunately, there is no real evidence to suggest what Doyle's original ideas may have been in regards to killing Holmes. The fact that he spent so long contemplating a fitting end for the detective shows that he realized the need for it to be both dramatic and heroic. However, does the first part of *The Final Problem* reflect how Doyle had originally started the story, and the second act of *The Empty House* possibly allude to one of the options Doyle was considering for Holmes' death?

At present there's no documented evidence for this but the evidence within the stories provides a tantalising clue to the evolution of Holmes "death".

### Bibliography

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