

# **THE SHERLOCK HOLMES CONSULTING DETECTIVE AGENCY: HOW MORIARTY WAS BROUGHT TO RUIN**

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When we think of Sherlock Holmes, we necessarily think of him in a certain time and place. The time? For Sherlockians, it is “always 1895” as Vincent Starrett has successfully indoctrinated us into believing. We think this, notwithstanding the World War II Holmes of Basil Rathbone, the gritty New York Holmes of Jonny Lee Miller, or the metrosexual modern-London Holmes of Benedict Cumberbatch. We can appreciate all of them for what they are and for what they are meant to be, but an authentic Sherlock Holmes in his authentic era they are not.

And the place? Well, Sherlock Holmes did go to Cornwall in “The Devil’s Foot” and off to Switzerland and Tibet and France during the Great Hiatus and to America to prepare for his face-off with Von Bork in “His Last Bow.” But London is where we visualize Sherlock Holmes, finding his way through the gas lit, fog-swirled streets. That is where his greatest battles against crime took place, and it was there that he—operating from his fortress at 221B Baker Street—plotted and maneuvered and masterminded his epic struggle against Moriarty, who operated from the center of his gigantic web of intrigue. But Holmes did not fight alone; in London, he assembled his own “agency” to help him win that struggle.

## **The Holmes Organization**

Sherlock Holmes did not have as large and intricate organization as did Moriarty, but he did have one. He tells us in “The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax” that he employed “a small, but very efficient organization” to assist him in his detective practice. And he specifically referred to his “agency” twice, first in “The Copper Beeches” and again in “The Sussex Vampire,” where he insisted that *his* agency “stands flatfooted upon the ground.” But who was a part of that “agency?”

Well, there was Dr. Watson, of course, but Watson is more properly thought of as an ally rather than as an actual functionary in the Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective Agency. There is no record in all of the Canon suggesting that Watson received any kind of payment for the huge amounts of time, effort, or personal danger he invested in Holmes’ cases. Watson was not motivated by anything as vulgar as money when he assisted Holmes. Instead, he was driven by the thrill of “tingling with that half-sporting, half-intellectual pleasure which I invariably experienced when I associated myself with him in his investigations”.<sup>1</sup>

Otherwise, only a few members of Holmes’ organization are mentioned by name. One was Mercer, whom Holmes described in “The Creeping Man” as “my general utility man, who looks up routine business.” Another was Shinwell Johnson (a.k.a. Porky Shinwell) of “The Illustrious Client,” a former criminal who nevertheless became an associate of Sherlock Holmes and provided him with information about the underworld. Finally, there was Langdale Pike of

“The Three Gables,” the “human book of reference...the receiving-station as well as the transmitter for all the gossip of the metropolis.” Pike sold his gossip to the scandal rags, and he traded information with Holmes on a regular basis. Other individuals could be called on when needed. For instance, an unnamed agent of Sherlock Holmes—perhaps Mercer, perhaps someone else—sent a wire to Josiah Amberley in “The Retired Colourman.”

So these are the actual members of the agency, and while they come from later in his career, they do illustrate how he did his business. And we know from *A Study in Scarlet* that he had a working relationship with other private inquiry agencies, many of which referred clients to him. However, even early on, Holmes clearly had other, less formal connections to the underworld, and he was able to tap into those connections to get the manpower and the resources he needed.

By far the most famous are Wiggins and the rest of the members of the Baker Street Irregulars, including Simpson, who helped Holmes in “The Crooked Man.” These boys apparently were on call and ready for any job Holmes might send their way. But they were street urchins after all, engaged in a desperate struggle to survive day by day. Despite what we might hope for them, there is no guarantee that they were not pickpocketing and shoplifting or doing worse things, even unthinkable things, with themselves between jobs for Sherlock Holmes.

Even in *The Sign of Four*, Holmes didn’t rely solely on the Baker Street Irregulars to help him track down Jonathan Small and the *Aurora*. “I have set other agencies at work, and used every means at my disposal,” he said. The whole river has been searched on either side.” Apparently, when circumstances warranted, Holmes was able to mobilize a pretty large force to help him in his work. He did so again in “A Scandal in Bohemia,” when Holmes employed “a gang, and a rough one, too” to create a diversion in front of Irene Adler’s house.

Individuals also could be called on when needed. For instance, there was Sherman, the cantankerous old bird-stuffer who loaned the dog Toby to Sherlock Holmes to follow the creosote trail left by Tonga.<sup>2</sup> As misanthropic as he was, he was still a collaborator for “Mr. Sherlock” as he called him—the only character in the canon other than Mycroft, incidentally, to address Holmes by his first name.

### **Holmes in the Underworld**

In “Black Peter,” Holmes revealed that he maintained “at least five small refuges in different parts of London,” making Mrs. Hudson only one of six trusted landlords connected to Sherlock Holmes. Yet, we should assume that those lodging houses were not in the same class as the upscale rooms of Baker Street. Lodging house managers in the more dangerous parts of London had a notorious reputation for harboring criminals and their nefarious operations. Some lodging houses “were literally thieves’ kitchens, chiefly frequented by pickpockets, house robbers and their confederates.”<sup>3</sup> Holmes may have had one room, but the next might be the hide-out of a forger or pimp.

Evidence of Sherlock Holmes' direct connection with the criminal underworld comes most convincingly when we consider his ability to engage in criminal activity himself. And the crime he knew best was burglary. In fact, Holmes remarked that burglary was an alternative profession at which he almost certainly would have excelled.<sup>4</sup> Watson's accounts support this: Holmes successfully burgled the homes of Hugo Oberstein in "The Bruce-Partington Plans," of Charles Augustus Milverton, of Baron Gruner in "The Illustrious Client," and of Josiah Amberley in "The Retired Colourman."

But his most daring burglaries were those in the personal quarters of none other than Professor James Moriarty. Holmes told Inspector MacDonald that he had been to Moriarty's rooms three times, twice in disguise and apparently without success. But the third time, he said, "I can hardly tell about it to an official detective." Obviously, it was another case of burglary. On that occasion, Holmes "took the liberty of running over [Moriarty's] papers."

Holmes didn't learn how to be a burglar by reading a book or studying it at university. He must have learned those skills from a real cracksman, or several of them—current or former criminals like Shinwell Johnson. He knew too well how to use those burglar's tools, and he wasn't afraid to use them either. "I'll do the criminal part. It's not time to stick at trifles," he told Watson. Of course, he was making Watson actually carry the tools, and he warned him not to drop them, creating a scene, and perhaps attracting the police. After all, it was a crime at the time just to be in possession of such tools.<sup>5</sup> So Holmes really wasn't running *all* the risks himself.

While Sherlock Holmes had friends, even criminal friends, and a functioning detective agency of his own, he did not have the formal, structured operation of Professor Moriarty. Therefore, he would not have been able to master the Victorian underworld through an organization that went head-to-head with the Moriarty gang. Instead, he had to find a way to undermine the professor's underworld empire. To do so, he became—sometimes—one of its citizens, its friend, its ally. He insinuated himself into the underworld, he understood it, he found a way to live in it. And he found a way to infiltrate it most often in disguise, in the character of an underworld familiar, or at least as a member of the "dangerous classes."

He was a "drunken-looking groom" in "A Scandal in Bohemia," a "common loafer" in "The Beryl Coronet," a flirtatious young plumber in "Charles Augustus Milverton," an "old sporting man" in "The Mazarin Stone," and a staggering opium smoker in "The Man with the Twisted Lip." It was in this last example that we see Holmes keeping a delicate balance. He revealed to Watson that he *had* to be in a foolproof disguise. Had he been recognized, it would have meant his death. After all, Holmes was still acting as an agent of law and order, of society in general. For most of the London underworld, despite what friends and allies he might have, Sherlock Holmes was about as welcome as a crow in a cornfield.

## Victory for Sherlock Holmes

Holmes used his agency, his contacts, his friends and allies, his disguises, and above all his intellectual skills—“my powers,” as he referred to them—to root out crime and solve mysteries generally and to prepare his case against Moriarty specifically. “I have woven my net around him until now it is all ready to close,” he told Watson. Holmes was not modest about it. He called the process “the most brilliant bit of thrust-and-parry work in the history of detection. Never have I risen to such a height.”<sup>6</sup> Obviously, Holmes never suffered from a lack of self-esteem.

As might be expected, if unfortunately so, Holmes did not really acknowledge those all-important allies who certainly, in the final analysis, made all the difference. As brilliant and gifted and tenacious as Sherlock Holmes was, he and his agents and allies in the underworld could never have defeated Moriarty without the help of both Mycroft Holmes—who at times *was* the British government—and the police—Scotland Yard and the London City Police. Holmes may have gathered the evidence about those 40 major crimes engineered by Moriarty, but it was the police after all who rounded up the gang, put them in jail, and allowed for the prosecution of the organization’s members.

Sherlock Holmes was able to continue to fight against crime long after Moriarty’s body fell into the Reichenbach Falls. And he was extremely effective, so much so that Marshall Berdan has called Sherlock Holmes “deterrence personified.” According to official police records, during the heart of his active practice, from 1883 to 1899, the number of indictable offenses in England and Wales declined by more than 24 percent, despite a population increase of about 20 percent over the same period.<sup>7</sup>

Now this wasn’t because Holmes himself investigated all the crime. After all, there were tens of thousands of crimes, and Holmes told Watson right before the Great Hiatus that he had been involved in a little more than a thousand cases himself. That’s quite a workload, but not nearly enough to personally decrease the crime rate. Instead, it must have been his influence, the fear of Sherlock Holmes, just knowing that he might be brought into a case, that made the difference. The smashing of the Moriarty gang and the imprisonment of much of its leadership and huge numbers of its operatives made a huge impact as well.

Holmes was not shy about taking credit for that drop in crime: “On general principles, it is best that I should not leave the country. Scotland Yard feels lonely without me, and it causes an unhealthy excitement among the criminal classes.”<sup>8</sup> He told Watson in “The Final Problem” that “the air of London is the sweeter for my presence.”

In the end, the winners of wars write history their way. Holmes was the winner of his battle with Moriarty, and he lived on to fight battles with lesser villains. He can legitimately lay claim to the title. Sherlock Holmes—not Professor James Moriarty—was, ultimately, the true master of the Victorian underworld.

## Notes

1 “The Crooked Man.”

2 *The Sign of Four* (Chapter 7).

3 Chesney, Kellow. *The Victorian Underworld* (London: Temple Smith, 1970), pp. 98-99.

4 “The Retired Colourman.”

5 Various English laws of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century made it illegal to possess burglary tools. These were codified nationally along with other common law offenses in the Larceny Act of 1916, which in turn was revised in The Theft Act of 1968: “A person shall be guilty of an offence if, when not at his place of abode, he has with him any article for use in the course of or in connection with any burglary or theft” (Section 25).

6 “The Final Problem.”

7 Berdan, Marshall S. “Deterrence Personified: Sherlock Holmes’s Effect on Crime in the Late Victorian Era.” *Baker Street Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (March 1992), pp. 8-15.

8 “The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax.”