

COURAGE CALLS TO COURAGE EVERYWHERE

The Case of Sherlock Holmes and the Suffragettes

I

When Sherlock Holmes was reported lost in that terrible incident with Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls I and all his friends and admirers thought he was gone forever. We should not, however, have doubted his immense powers of physical determination and mental resolution. He returned, no less emboldened than before, and I had the great satisfaction of accompanying him on several testing cases which, subsequently, I was able to describe in detail.

Now, however, I fear I have a sadder story to bring before you.

This is a tale that has no strict conclusion although I tremble to think that I know the ending that is only too probable. As war yet again rages on the continent of Europe, there in the maelstrom, an aging Englishman seeks to determine whether his old enemy also still exists and whether that enemy has become not just the enemy of all justice loving English men and women but now an implacable foe of all Britons; Peoples, State and Crown.

His last words to me and, later, those of his brother, Mycroft, spoke of their belief that Moriarty may still be with us and allied to a secret cabal, at the heart of the British establishment, who would go as far as to join with a terrible Teutonic enemy if it meant they could purge their country of what they regard as a Monstrous Regiment of Women.

II

Readers will take their minds back to the events of the months and years leading up to June 1913. You will know the details so well that I need only sketch in the salient points. From beginnings back in the previous century an organisation of women had arisen that comprised both suffragists and suffragettes. Those women who worked to attain the right to vote by means both peaceful and combative. Their names became very familiar to us all. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, a suffragist, the Pankhurst sisters, Emmeline and Christabel, and that most forceful of suffragettes, Emily Watson Davison, who plays such an important role in what follows.

III

I must, if only for a moment, digress to talk of Holmes's attitude toward women. You might think this a less than needful diversion but I believe it is fundamental to the situation that I am about to describe and all that has flowed from it thereafter.

Those who knew him less well than I sometimes opined to me that he seemed derived of feelings and desires for the female sex. I always, who knew him as well as I did, refused to accept that judgement of his character.

Yes, I would agree, he once said that 'Women's hearts and minds are insoluble puzzles to the male.' But I would add that he had, in his career, encountered women who had impressed him greatly. There had been Violet Hunter (The Adventure of the Copper Beech) and Irene Adler (the Scandal in Bohemia). These two ladies were formidable and had keen brains and powers he recognised as almost equal to his own. He did not look down upon them. Irene he once described to me as, 'The daintiest thing under a bonnet on the planet.'

Then there was Mary Elizabeth Morston (The Sign of the Four). My dear late Mary who became Mrs Watson. I think it was she of all women who converted him, if that is the right expression for a slow but sure progress of acceptance of the other sex's attributes, to the situation where it was conceivable to imagine that one day there might be a Mrs Holmes.

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Mary was an early supporter of the Women's Social and Political Union and a great believer in women's emancipation. Through her Holmes began to see the strengths of women as they truly are but, at that time, were not accepted to be by many men.

Many men, some of whom were in positions of great power, were adamant that women should never be allowed to occupy the great positions that men held. It became in their minds a terrible *idee fixe* to prevent this happening.

Holmes was always impressed by physical courage. Mention to him such as Joan of Arc or those many women, disguised as males, who followed their men to war and he would scoff at the possible inaccuracies of the historical record. When Mary pointed out to him the valour, however misplaced some might think it, of the actions suffragettes took he visibly held his tongue and thought hard on the matter. For these women were of the present day and their actions were plain for all to see.

So it is now time to relate what, later, Holmes told me of the visit paid to him by his brother Mycroft in the autumn of 1912.

IV

Mycroft was physically lazy. That he should venture out to see his brother on a cold, cloudy, drizzling evening when summer was a memory caused Holmes to be instantly attentive.

Mycroft was brilliant. A man so integrated into the very government of the country that sometimes he was regarded 'as the country' and even Prime Ministers were seen to listen carefully and then instruct their assistants to act immediately and to Mycroft's advised procedural instructions.

Mycroft could hold in his mind such a multitude of facts that even automatons could not manage. He could comprehend the range of knowledge and extent of its needful application of every department of government.

He knew those men who knew secrets of this state and every other state that mattered to Great Britain and its Empire. There were those who said that he was the head of those secret men and their office.

V

What he said to Holmes was, 'Brother, I have work for you. Your country has work for you. Are you willing?'

Of course Holmes said, 'Yes.'

Then Mycroft eased his massive frame into a chair and looking at Holmes with his deep set, steel blue eyes said, 'Even if this matter involves the care and ultimate advancement of the equality, in all respects vis-à-vis men, of the women of this country?'

'Yes,' said Holmes and Mycroft hesitated, where his brother had not, before saying, 'I am somewhat surprised to hear you say that with such alacrity but I am delighted.'

Sherlock, if for no other reason than that our dear mother was such an intelligent and forthright woman and not celebrated in her time by those who should have spoken for her, it behoves us to see that right is done to the woman folk of this country.'

Holmes and his brother conversed a little more on this topic and then Mycroft moved to the curtained window and gently pulling back the drapes peered through. 'I am sure I was not followed, Sherlock, but before proceeding further I ask you from now on to regard everything I say as top secret and to look about you when you move on the business I will now outline.'

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Holmes, who was usually so scrupulous in these matters of confidentiality, later trusted me to hold to those secrets he imparted. I consider myself released from my agreed vow by the disappearance of my friend and my great fear that he has taken it upon himself, the terrible war raging in France notwithstanding, to venture there and even, maybe into Germany itself. All to track down that mortal enemy who still might lurk in the shadowy corners where creatures of the dark thoughts of men lie maturing their vile plans.

Who knows but that the Kaiser is even now *tete-a tete* with Moriarty.

VI

'There is a coterie of men in the establishment circles of our country,' said Mycroft, 'Who are against anything and everything that they think this government may do to forward the case of women's emancipation. Sherlock, I mean anything. They have vowed they will not stop even at murder. They are so consumed with the feelings of their own masculine superiority that they see nothing in the human argument that no woman, whatever the brilliance of her mind or staunchness of her courage, can ever be the equal of them. They would wreck this country to satisfy their prejudicial views. They would even go so far as to help an enemy in wartime were that enemy, in success, to agree with them to enslave all our women for ever.'

Holmes stared at him intently. He had never seen his elder brother so serious or so convinced of his case.

Mycroft started to speak, hesitated, then said in a low voice, 'Sherlock, I have reason to believe that they have hired the services of an arch villain who you, and many others, might have been forgiven for thinking was no more....'

Holmes sprang to his feet and exclaimed, 'Not Moriarty!'

'The very same,' was the answer. 'My dear brother you escaped from your dreadful fight with the villain at the Falls of Reichenbach. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that so could he have execrated himself.'

Any further discussion was halted by a knock on the door and the entry of Holme's long standing landlady, Mrs Hudson. She brought in a tray with drinks and a selection of sandwiches and said, 'I thought it was about time you two gentlemen got some sustenance. Talking's all very well but if the body ain't nourish then the mind's goin' to go to sleep. Now ain't that true?'

'Quite right Mrs Hudson,' said Mycroft and before she could depart he asked her, 'Mrs Hudson, if I may, what are your thoughts on the emancipation of women?'

'Well..... I don't know so much about that....mancipit.....whatever it is but I'm all for us women having a bit more say in things.'

'What do you thing the late Mr Hudson would have had to say about it?' asked Mycroft.

'A lot more when he'd had one over the eight than when he was sober and that's for sure! He was a good hard working man was my Harold but beyond his work an' 'is pint I have to say, in all honesty, I did most of the thinkin' an' doin' in our house. An' I knows of a lot of women as 'ad the same experiences as what I've 'ad.'

'But isn't it a fact, Mrs. Hudson, that men do all the hard manual labour and all the thinking in the world?' said Mycroft.

Mrs.Hudson hesitated only momentarily before, arms akimbo and shoulders squared back, like a Sergeant Major on parade, she replied, 'The hardest manual labour? Where's the man that's ever there when that's ever done I'd like to know. When us women push all the kiddies into the world where's all them big muscled men? Down the pub a celebrating ain't they? Or in the House o' Commons pontificating! Fair bit they don't know about hard work!

An' when there's a cottage pie to make for a keeping body 'an soul together the kitchen's empty of all them thinkers and doers, now that's true, in it?

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An' when the soldiers have left the battlefield it's the women what bury the bodies in it? It's the women look after the orphans, right?

I'm sorry to be blunt Mr. Holmes's but that's the God's truth. An' there's this as well. You can go to whatever posh school you likes an' learn all about the law and Greek but there ain't no education better nor lasts you as well as what you learn at your mothers knee. What they says true. You educates a man you educates an individual you educates a woman you educates a family.'

There was silence in the room until Mrs. Hudson shook herself and said, 'Well...well, you did ask. I'll wish you goodnight gentlemen.'

Mycroft rose, picked up a sandwich, poured himself a malt and standing by the fire said, 'You know, Sherlock, I have yet to hear our Prime Minister, Mr. Asquith, any of his ministers or any MP give such a concise, reasoned, definitive or convincing speech as that. Does it not make the case for supporting action in their cause?'

'I agree,' said his brother.

'So,' said Mycroft, 'Here is what I want you to do to assists me in our task. You are the man of action and we need action right now to penetrate the web of deceit being spun against us.'

'What is your plan, Mycroft?'

'My plan is to catch and deliver to the police force one of those dastardly suffragettes who place incendiary devices in letterboxes and who are so difficult to apprehend in the act!!'

VII

'Please explain how you have proposed one line of thought and now seem to offer a totally opposite plan of action.'

Mycroft smile and returned to his chair. 'In order to delude our enemy we must dissemble and, therefore, confuse them. In so doing we may ingratiate ourselves with those I have mentioned. We need to have them think we are resolute in our pursuit of their enemy. Offering one sacrificial victim maybe enough and, remember, the suffragettes wear as a badge of honour a term of imprisonment. The individual I have in mind already has several terms of incarceration to her name and is a tough, formidable lady.'

'May I know her name?' asked Holmes.

'Emily Wilson Davison. I have reason to think that she plans some more arson attacks on letter boxes in the Knightsbridge area. I have a report of the temporary theft of a letterbox key from its supposedly safe overnight storage place. There are, significantly, some women working in clerical positions in that very office. It was back in place in the early morning but there had been time to copy and make a replica key.'

Holmes said, 'Well, Mycroft, I see you have your spies in strategic places.'

Then they set to work to device a scheme for the capture of Davison in flagrante bello.

VIII

Holmes's idea for surveillance was not to conceal himself in a closeted place but to hide himself in plain view. He became a sandwich board man! Dressed in rough clothes and wearing a shoddy slouch hat he had to his back and front boards on which were written "MRS.HUDSON'S Pies are DELICIOUS. Falafel Street."

Thus accoutred he was able to parade the streets of Knightsbridge observing all the comings and goings of postmen and those people who used or loitered around letterboxes. He soon realised how things were done. Two or three young ladies of definite physical charms would approach a real

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postman on his way to empty a box and engage him in banter for just a few moments. Just so long as he would approach his box seconds behind the time of the advertised collection.

At the box a little while before that time a figure would walk up boldly, open the box and pretend to take out the letters but would, instead, place inside and detonate a device for setting light to the letters. That person, disguised as a postman so as not to attract attention, would vanish just as the real postman approached, open the box and be greeted with a blaze.

It was but a short matter of time before the necessary persons were placed in position to apprehend the suffragette just after she committed her crime and to arrest her.

That person, unfortunately was not Emily Davison. However, the action of arresting a suffragette did enable Mycroft to further infiltrate the enemy's organisation.

The part that Holmes played in this was significant. He was first on the scene and his billboards, firmly pressed onto her prone figure, held the arsonist in check until the necessary constable arrived with his handcuffs.

I have rather glossed over the details of this case because they were the prelude to the tragic events that were to follow on the fourth of June of 1913.

IX

My time as an army doctor in various locations including Afghanistan had inclined me, when I was retired and put onto half pay, to have a keen interest in foreign affairs. In May London was awash with dignitaries from the Balkans. The Ottomans had again come up against a riotous group of opponents in Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria and Montenegro. They had lost in a most vicious and bloody campaign and now the Great Powers had told them what to do and what bits of territory to surrender.

It was obvious that the continent of Europe was being wracked by events in the Balkans. Sooner or later many thought that the powers of western Europe would become embroiled in a wider turmoil.

Eating breakfast on the Sunday of the first of June, just two days after the signing of the Treaty of London, I was surprised and not a little delighted to receive a telegram which read; "PLEASE COME 22B SOONEST. S & M HOLMES MUST SEE YOU STOP ENSURE YOUR JEZAIL IS IN ORDER STOP COURAGE MON BRAVE STOP SH"

My shoulder began to ache from that old bullet wound I got at the at the Battle of Maiwand –fired from one of those old Afghan blunderbuss weapons they called jezails . Obviously I would have to give my trusty .45 revolver a good clean. But my spirits were up as they were bound to be with those of any old soldier hearing the trumpet call to arms.

And so an old gentleman, which I confess I had to account myself by then, could be seen rushing across town to join the ranks again. Little did I know what part I was to take in the events of the next few days.

If I had would I have raced to that fateful meeting so quickly? Or, indeed, raced there at all?

X

It was Holmes who opened the door to me. This was an omen in itself. It would appear that Mrs. Hudson was out and probably not by chance. Before ascending the stairs Holmes rapidly sketch in the events I outlined above. The visit he had had from Mycroft and the matter of the letterboxes. By the time I entered his rooms to be cordially greeted by his brother, Mycroft, my head was spinning and I was bursting in anticipation to know what was to follow.

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Mycroft opened the proceedings. He said, 'I'm sure Sherlock has given you a resume of past events, Watson. I must give you both now an even quicker account of the last few days as they apply to meetings I have had with the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and certain gentleman who must be nameless but whom I rate very highly. You take my meaning?'

We both nodded in agreement and I noticed that Holmes, as well as myself, were sitting on the edge of our seats the air of expectation being palpable.

'The Foreign Secretary,' said Mycroft, 'Is of the opinion that the Serbs may be Orthodox in religion but in little else, that the Greeks have all their Glories behind them and that the Bulgars can be relied upon to be Bestly in any circumstance and all weathers. As to Montenegro he confesses that he calls in his private secretary to find the wretched place on the map whenever anybody bothers him with the need to think about it. The nameless gentlemen I have mentioned find they have so many of their trusted people monitoring the smouldering fires in Europe that they have no spare manpower to attend to what seems to be the Prime Ministers main concern of the moment.'

Mycroft eased back in his chair and sipped his drink.

'And that concern is Mycroft?' said Holmes.

'Women! His concern is what all these suffragettes are doing. He, like I believe we three and all good thinking men, thinks it an impossibility to turn our backs on them and their irrefutable case. His conclusion is that they will have emancipation. The only question is when.'

'What then is the problem?' I asked.

'This, said Mycroft. 'Seeing the situation in our country certain foreign powers – oh, let us not be coy I mean Germany – have decided to ferment trouble here by supporting those groups that oppose emancipation. Their agents are here and they have recruited certain personages as strike fear even into my heart.....'

'Moriarty!' cried Holmes. 'It is true then, he still lives?'

'There is no total certainty, brother, but the information I have leads me to believe so.' said Mycroft.

There was stillness in the room as we mulled over what his words implied.

'In just over three days' time,' said Mycroft, 'It is Derby Day at Epsom. We have reason to believe that something dastardly is planned and that might involve that woman Emily Wilson Davison. It is known she intends to go there. It maybe they intend her harm in order to stir up the anti-suffragettes to become belligerent to other women. It maybe they will act in collusion with her, whatever she plans, to stir up the same parties to increased anger. Or it maybe they intend something completely different. Remember the King and Queen will be attending and many other notable persons.

Those secret gentlemen I spoke of have ask me to recruit the best people I know, because as I have mentioned they are so low in numbers here at the moment, to attend the Derby and become the eyes and ears that Great Britain needs to prevent terrible things happening. I, you both, will have *carte blanche* to do whatever is necessary to stop the advancement of mischief.'

XI

Wednesday the fourth of June dawned bright and fair. A large crowd was expected at Epsom and so it proved to be.

Mycroft would take up his position close to the Royal Box. Holmes and I had been allocated the Tattenham Corner sector. None of Mycroft's 'helpers' were to be seen together lest a group might be more easily recognised than the disguised individuals we were to become. I sported a rather loud suit of clothes befitting the race occasion with a pair of binoculars round my neck and my revolver easy to hand in an inside pocket.

How Holmes was attired I did not know.

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As the time for the Derby approached large crowds surged to the rails in all part of the course including the Corner. I began to realise that the press of the crowd might well hinder any view we might get of nefarious individuals and might make difficulties in taking action were that necessary.

One thing was clear, however. Emily Davison was on the course and, indeed, was right there at the Corner. We had been given photographs of her and, although she was not carrying any banner to advertise herself she did have in her hand a furled flag where it was possible to notice the colours of violet, white and green. Those distinctive colours of the Women's League.

She was pushing determinedly toward the rail and as I watch her I began to realise the presence of certain men of a muscular and desperate mien moving to close in around her. In the distance the roar of the crowd and then the far distant noise of pounding hooves meant the race had started. Very soon the horses would reach the Tattenham Corner. I needed to get closer to her.

I began to thrust myself forward only to find great difficulty in doing so. A particularly large though stooping female was in front of me. She was dressed in a shabby coat and a dark dress with straggling long grey hair topped by a rather formidable and strange looking hat the brim of which almost looked as if it had an iron band in it. It was not the attire so much that made me think I knew the person as the way she walked.

At that instant matters started to move in spectacularly swift fashion. I can hardly do justice with my pen to all the interlocking pieces of action involved at the time nor the rapidity of how quickly they happened.

Glancing toward Emily Davison I saw a particularly strong figure move up right behind her with what looked like a heavy piece of metal bar in his hand. The noise of the crowd was rising to a crescendo and the sound of a pack of jostling horse was more like that of a charge of cavalry into battle.

Just as I saw the man raise his metal bar behind Davison's head I realised who the woman in front reminded me of and raised my hand to her shoulder, pulling her round toward me and shouting above the crowd, 'Holmes the man near Davison.....'

Before I could say more the figure whirled round and a face presented itself with heavily rouged lips, pallid skin and broken teeth.

'So sorry,' I yelled, 'I thought you were someone else.'

The flick of passing horses across the rail, the shrieks of encouragement from the press of people told of the race leaders passing.

The woman grabbed me by the arm and almost threw me across to her left. She commanded me decisively, 'Watson attend to the man on Emily's left I will disarm the one to her right.' So saying Holmes took off his hat and with a straight aim threw it like a cricket fielder aiming for the stumps and a run out. Even with all the noise the agonised shout of pain as it struck the wrist of the man who would otherwise have crashed her head in was clearly heard.

Emily Davison I saw beginning to duck under the rails obviously wanting to get onto the course. I lunged forward toward the man behind her for I could see his intent was to push her violently more forward than she intended. As I was about to grab him round the arms I tripped over someones shooting stick and plunged toward the ground. I saw the suffragette propelled so hard by the man's strong left hand and struck at the same time by his knuckle duster clad right hand that she was thrust right into the way of one of the lagging horses.

At the same time a voice hissed in my ear, 'Tell him Moriarty never fails.' Then a blow to my head rendered me unconscious.

ENVOI

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It is said that youth is an embarrassment, maturity a struggle, old age a regret. I cannot vouchsafe for Mycroft's youth but mine was passable. He had a career far more important and worthy of recognition than I although he refuse all overt recognition of it.

In our old age we meet once a year at his club and mull over the events of the passing twelve months. Latterly neither of us talk of his brother. It is beyond denial that somewhere on the battle fields of the Great War or more likely in the hinterlands of a disintegrating continent after the armistice that Sherlock Holmes came to rest from the toils of this mortal earth. Nothing has been heard of him in fact or in rumour. Nor has Moriarty's name been mentioned. What surprise is that when so many millions vanished without much ado other than their names on memorials in their places of birth.

Our first meeting was actually at my bedside as I lay recovering from that blow received on Derby day. Then Mycroft told me of Emily Davison's death killed, it was said, by the King's horse Anmer. The doctor who attended her first said there were no signs of her being kicked by a horse but she died four days later from a fracture to the skull. The coroner said it was not suicide.

Would her premature demise have happened had it not been for my touch on Holmes shoulder? I think not but Mycroft says that there were too many of our enemies about and he absolves me from guilt. But the thought ever lingers.

At another meeting four year later we discussed the Act of Parliament that gave the vote to some women. A start now doubt, we felt, on a longer journey to votes for all women

'Whatever we think of her methods in support of her cause,' said Mycroft, 'There can be no doubt of her courage. An Oxford graduate from a comfortable home became a thrower of stones at policemen, an incendiary, breaker of windows and a martyr. She was arrested nine times, went on hunger strike seven times and was force fed on no less than forty nine times.'

'An example that gave courage to others to follow her,' I said.

Mycroft was pensive for a few moments. Then he said, 'Think of all those young men who went to war and however dreadful the conditions and however afraid they were nevertheless carried on. Think of all those women who worked during the war in often dangerous factories with explosives and noxious fumes and materials. All showed courage.'

'Courage seems to call out to courage everywhere,' I said.

'Fine words indeed, Watson.'

'Not mine, Mycroft, but those of one of the women we have come to hold in great respect.'

THE END