



"I SAW HOLMES GAZING DOWN AT THE RUSH OF THE WATERS."

39 Sidney Paget's drawing from the Strand Magazine, 1893 (This and next reproduction: Swiss National Tourist Office)

Mr Sherlock Holmes as rock-climber and all-round mountaineer¹

Kevin FitzGerald

It is the greatest of pities that the most widely known among those who have written of the late Mr Sherlock Holmes, Dr John H. Watson, formerly of the Army Medical Department, should have been so careless in matters of fundamental importance. Almost as soon as we have been told that Holmes knew nothing of literature we have the Master quoting Flaubert or telling Watson that there is as much sense in Hafiz as in Horace. It is true that Mr Holmes knew nothing of the Copernican Theory and very properly showed some impatience when Dr Watson explained it to him; many of us have been maddened in our time by Watson's 'explanations'. But on that slender foundation Watson boldly states that the ignorance of Holmes in both astronomy and philosophy was complete. Yet, only moments before he made that absurd pencilled statement in his notebook, Watson had been treated by Holmes to as good a summary of what could be done with the human mind as would have drawn praise from Wittgenstein himself. Moreover it was quite early in their relationship that Holmes, in making a simple deduction, drew Watson's attention to, 'the personal equation, as the astronomers have it'.

These are perhaps trifling matters. But that a man like Watson, unable, from his own accounts to draw the simplest inferences from presented facts should calmly state that Holmes's athletic interests were confined to singlestick, boxing and swordplay is astounding. There can be no doubt whatsoever that Holmes was a skilled cragsman, the evidence is overwhelming, and that his first-hand knowledge of the Alps, the Himalaya, and numerous other mountain regions was profound. He could run over 'Easy ground' as fast and as surely as any 'Hard Man' of today, for example easily outpacing Watson in a wild dash through pitch dark fog over Dartmoor, and he made nothing of 'severe' ascents of moorland tors hitherto credited, in the main, to Mr A. D. M. Cox.

We know a great deal about Holmes's personal habits and all of them fit the rock-climber rather than the games player or mere athlete. His ability to walk endless miles of pavement is mentioned by Doctor Watson over and over again; his agility in springing in and out of moving vehicles and departing trains is legendary, as is his fondness for long periods of total idleness interrupted by sudden bursts of energy. He could move about on roofs with confidence and in the dark, hang for long periods from the backs of cabs, spring over 6ft walls, straighten twisted iron pokers (a commonplace evening sport among the climbing fraternity), and he was extremely good at 'patting the hands' of assorted distraught females, an essential accomplishment at all levels in the climbing world.

But of course we know a great deal more than that; we know that Holmes was fast on a hill. 'Once, I remember, as we passed over the Gemmi, and walked along the border of the melancholy Daubensee, a large rock which had been dislodged from a ridge upon our right clattered down and roared into the lake behind us. In an instant Holmes had *raced up on to the ridge and, standing upon a lofty pinnacle* craned his neck in every direction'. The italics are mine, racing up ridges, and standing upon lofty pinnacles, were run of the mill activities for Holmes.

¹ In *pian* memoriam, T. S. Blakeney, a committed 'Sherlockian'.

In the same sad record from Dr Watson's notebooks, *The Final Problem*, the friends were put up by Peter Seiler, in itself almost a guarantee of climbing ability. It was Seiler who told Holmes and Watson, who intended to walk over the Pass to Rosenlaui, 'on no account to miss the small détour to see the Falls of Reichenbach'. And everyone knows what apparently happened there.

But most happily we also know what *really* happened and we also know from Mr Sidney Paget's admirable sketches that Holmes in his subsequent astonishing adventure had the technique and nerve to overcome the unsuitability of his clothing. He had no need of the fal-lals of modern climbing, he had the quiet confidence of the expert.

We have an account from his own lips of his actions after hurling Prof Moriarty to his doom. He could see, he tells us, a few small footholds in the rocky wall behind him, and, with the characteristic truth and modesty of the real mountaineer, he corrected Watson's assertion that the wall was sheer. The cliff was, it is obvious, too high and too steep for a route to be worked out on the spot, but, 'there were some indications of a ledge', and Holmes tried for that. He made somewhat foolhardy use of tufts of grass, and the coming away of these scared that indomitable man a little, as did his unsuitable boots, 'slipping in the wet notches in the rocks'.

Later, it will be recalled, Holmes was attacked as he lay on his ledge with rocks hurled down on him by friends, or a paid agent, of Moriarty, and he was compelled to attempt the climb down to the path. As we know he slipped half-way down and arrived on the path severely hurt and bleeding, but, hard man that he was, he knew how to press on and he 'did ten miles over the mountains in the darkness', a magnificent piece of route finding, and, a week later, he was in Florence, the whole world thinking him dead.

He got safely out of Europe and, as the Norwegian, Sigerson, spent 2 years in Himalayan exploration, even penetrating into Tibet and spending a couple of days with the Dalai Lama. The Club Library has no record of any Sigerson in Tibet during the Presidency of Sir Martin Conway but Holmes may well have decided to commit nothing of his experiences to paper at that time. Dr Watson himself felt it quite unsafe to release any details of the Moran affair, so closely bound up with the long dead Moriarty, until 1904, 10 years after that terrifying day above the Reichenbach Falls.

Back in the world of deduction and detection, and with Col Moran, 'the second most dangerous man in England', at last rendered harmless Holmes resumed his favourite sport. But he was getting older and the high places and the long hard routes were no longer for him. He became, and this is almost certain, the first active practitioner of orienteering. It was to be many years before an official title and the rank of 'Sport' was bestowed on that strange business of going nowhere, fast, by dead reckoning. But Holmes shone at the game. Like Sam Weller he had a knowledge of London that was extensive and peculiar; he could, 'move like lightning through mazes of unknown streets and alleys', to emerge in unexpected places to baffle his companions and quarry alike. His tremendous dash from the house of Charles Augustus Milverton, 'threading his way swiftly among a plantation of small trees', 'springing to the top of a six foot, glass covered, wall and over', to be followed by an uninterrupted sprint of 2 miles in black darkness across Hampstead Heath demonstrates the complete mastery of the man in his chosen field.

It will not have been overlooked by serious students that even while Holmes was extolling his love of idleness, sitting about on cushions in a fog of shag tobacco



THE DEATH OF SHERLOCK HOLMES.

40 Sidney Paget's drawing from the Strand Magazine, 1893

smoke, or bending over his monograph on the *Polyphonic Motets of Lassus*, many of his thoughts were out in the open, striding about in hill country. As the moment of crisis approaches in *The Valley of Fear* we find Holmes recommending that Watson and Inspector MacDonald should, 'take a nice cheery country walk', and suggesting

that the view from Birlstone Ridge over the Weald was remarkable. On that occasion he added, with that typically English understatement of which every page of this Journal has carried examples for more than one hundred years, that 'his ignorance of the country prevented him from suggesting a hostelry where they might obtain lunch'. We are not deceived. The author of the *Practical Handbook of Bee Culture with Some Observations upon the Segregation of the Queen* (and he had 'watched the little working gangs as once I watched the criminal world of London') was never at a loss on any ridge, moor or pinnacle. He was, after all, as much at home with Vampires in Sussex as with *radix pedis diaboli* in Cornwall.

There was something else he knew; he knew England and the English. On his very last appearance, and as we part from him, he remarks to Watson, 'that a cleaner better stronger land will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared'. As it did, as it will again.

Across Zagros on skis

Guy Sheridan

It was very cold, we were 3080m up a snow-covered mountain, our skis were clogged and our rucksacks seemed to weigh a hundredweight. We had covered only 21km since 06.30 that morning and the thought of about another 580km to go did nothing for our morale. Still, we had only ourselves to thank. We had chosen to do the trip, we had put a lot of effort into its preparation and my Norwegian companion had come a long way to join me; so we had to push on.

At that moment the pain of it all was like a bad hangover. All we wanted were a long drink and another 6 hours sleep, but that was out of the question because we knew we must keep to our schedule if we were to complete the journey in the time we had available away from work.

I wondered if we had taken on more than we could manage. It was an ambitious plan, but why not? We were both experienced cross-country skiers and familiar with snow conditions like these. Even so I was getting little satisfaction from the trip and I envied my companion as he ploughed on, apparently effortlessly, in front of me. I wished that I had been working at 4500m and was fully acclimatized as he was. Perhaps I was not doing too badly considering that 12 hours earlier I had been working beside the Persian Gulf. Again it was brought home to me how remarkable it was to be in 4ft of snow and sub-zero temperatures only 180km from the Persian Gulf, but Iran is like that—a land of amazing climatic contrasts. I thought back to how it all began.

I was in an apartment in Askar, a suburb of Oslo, in 1974. Odd Eliassen, my host, had been one of the two Norwegians on the International expedition to Everest in 1971. He was showing some remarkable slides of a ski traverse of the Atlas mountains in Morocco. I mentioned that I had been appointed to spend 2 years in Iran and Odd immediately became interested. He spread an atlas on the floor and began muttering in Norwegian about skiing in the Zagros mountains. Half an hour later a plan had been conceived.

A momentary pause in our movement brought me back to reality and I saw with