SHERLOCK’S CHALLENGE

 It was a cold and drizzly November day in London in 1898. The world’s most famous consulting detective, Sherlock Holmes, was seated in a burgundy velour armchair, smoking his favorite pipe while staring into the dancing flames of his fireplace at his lodgings at 221-B Baker Street. As usual, he was deep in thought. He was wearing a loose, dark green, quilted silk smoking robe with a wide curled-back collar.

 At age 44, under the strict urgings of his colleague, friend, and medical doctor, John Watson, Holmes had given up occasionally injecting himself intravenously with a 7% solution of cocaine whenever he was overwhelmed with despair and ennui. This nasty habit was born out of a need for mental stimulation, for above all things, Sherlock loathed boredom. Nowadays, Holmes only satisfied his bodily cravings with tobacco, which he kept loose in the toe of a Persian slipper on his mantelpiece.

 The man himself was a bachelor, tall and thin, clean-shaven, with piercing dark eyes, a prominent nose, a sharp jawline, and a handsome head of dark hair swept backward away from his brow and ears. For relaxation, he enjoyed playing the violin. He was still quite strong and fit, and was proficient in several of the Eastern martial arts, as well as in boxing, sword-fighting, and marksmanship. Sherlock Holmes always carried himself with supreme confidence and fearlessness. His legendary mind was an international marvel – keen and sharp as a Sheffield saber. Yet he was not a pursuer of publicity or accolades, preferring only the personal pleasure of solving complex and challenging crimes when others had failed.

 Sherlock’s Baker Street apartment was on the first floor up. It was filled with the usual crowded Victorian furnishings – Oriental carpeting, potted ferns, thick velvet curtains, two sofas and three padded armchairs, some painted nature scenes framed and hanging on the walls, and an impressive marble fireplace. Lighting was provided by gas lamps. But Holmes’ lodgings was also cluttered with a prominent laboratory table (burdened with glass beakers, test tubes, an alcohol burner, various pungent chemicals, and a microscope), stacks of old The Times newspapers, bookshelves groaning to overflowing, and even a jackknife stuck into a wall, holding up papers and correspondence that the great detective was reluctant to discard. Tossed upon a desktop near one of two large windows was Holmes’ deerstalker cap and his magnifying glass. Inside a drawer of the same desk was a lethal pistol with a box of cartridges. In the adjoining bedroom, Sherlock kept a portrait of Irene Adler on his bed stand. She had been the only woman that he admired and felt tenderly towards.

 Mrs. Hudson, a widow, was Sherlock’s long-time matronly Scottish landlady and housekeeper. She tried, often in vain, to keep his rather messy living quarters tidy, but she was treasured by Holmes as a splendid cook and manager, and she knew when to stay quiet and how to be discreet and unobtrusive.

 Now, she knocked loudly on Holmes’ door and announced that a messenger had left an important note. “Something assuredly of interest, I presume Mr. Holmes,” she offered, eyes twinkling, holding out to her lodger a silver tray with a wax-sealed letter upon it.

 “Thank you, Mrs. Hudson. We can only hope. Please bring the morning post when it arrives. That will be all,” Holmes curtly dismissed her.

 He took the letter over near a gaslight and broke the red seal. He read the letter once quickly, then a second time slowly and carefully. It was from his arch-enemy, Professor James Moriarty, the evil villain Sherlock had once dubbed The Napoleon of Crime!

 Moriarty was a criminal genius, starkly feared throughout Europe. Once an esteemed professor of mathematics at a major German university, he had instead twisted his formidable intellect away from academia and towards the development of the most elaborate and diabolical crime syndicate that both the Continent and the British Isles had ever seen. He, like Sherlock, had never married. Holmes had oblique confrontations with this singularly dangerous foe and his minions throughout the course of his detective career, but had never met Moriarty face-to-face. Sherlock knew in all seriousness that one day, the two opposites must meet and battle, and only one man would ultimately survive. Would this be the day? Here is what the letter said:

 “Dear Mr. Holmes,

 I wish to invite you to dinner at one of my rented residences here in London this coming Sunday, 13 November, at 1:00 p.m. I will arrange a hansom cab for your convenience at half-past noon, so my specific address need not be of your concern.

 Please come alone and unarmed. I pledge my honor as an English gentleman that you will be safe and unharmed while in my company at this particular meeting. After our meal and chat, you will promptly be returned to your Baker Street flat.

 I felt it was time that we met in person. I have some important information which should interest your ‘particular talents’.

 I am, sir, your obedient servant --

 (signed) J. Moriarty”

 The following day, a Thursday, Dr. Watson arrived for a short, casual visit. The two friends saw each other less frequently since Watson took a wife, Mary, nine years earlier. Watson was still powerfully built, with a square jaw, muscular neck and a thick, tawny mustache. A medical doctor, he had served Her Majesty in both India and Afghanistan, and had been wounded once in his right leg, which caused him to limp slightly. Holmes discussed Moriarty’s invitation at length with his trusted companion. Both men agreed that Sherlock should be extra cautious, but that he should go, if only to find out more information regarding this mysterious and foul criminal mastermind.

 Sunday arrived cloudy and blustery cool, but dry. The detective dressed in his brown suit for the occasion. A cab picked Holmes up at 12:30 p.m. as promised. After a half-hour negotiating the crowded and noisy streets of the city, Sherlock found himself deposited in front of a typical non-descript white apartment block behind black-painted wrought iron fencing. He noticed that a busy, fancy restaurant was across the street at the corner, filled with families and couples who had recently exited church services and were now about to partake in the traditional British Sunday dinner. His keen eye also noted three, tough-looking chaps scattered at random down the block, watching him intently. Probably his host's henchmen, should their services be needed, Holmes suspected.

 Moriarty greeted Holmes at his apartment door. He was wearing a somber black suit over a white shirt, resembling nothing less than a mortician assessing a corpse. He was thin, about three inches shorter than Sherlock, with a pale complexion. His cheeks also suffered some pock-marking, probably from childhood smallpox. The man standing before him was a few years older than Holmes, perhaps near the same age as my brother Mycroft, the detective surmised. But the most striking physical feature of the professor was his large head with its thinning hair and its enormous, domineering forehead. Moriarty’s dark eyes were dull and reptilian, however, their lizard-like components reinforced by the man’s anxious habit of licking his thin lips as would an iguana. His facial expression was oddly blank, neither welcoming nor hostile. Holmes was on his highest guard.

 “Forgive me if I decline shaking hands, Mr. Holmes, but I have a peculiar aversion to germs which I fear touching my fellow humans helps promote. But please, sir, do come in and make yourself comfortable. I have a fine meal which was just delivered from the establishment across the street, which I’m sure your sharp eye already noticed. As a result, we are assured complete privacy, without the annoying possibility of eavesdropping by any in-house cooks or servants,” the host announced.

 The spacious apartment itself was rather drab and sterile. ‘Utilitarian,’ was Sherlock’s one word first impression. He doubted Moriarty spent much time here, for it was uninviting and looked little lived-in. The dining room, however, was immaculately set up, the table sparkling with fine china and crystal and silverware, with even a simple floral bouquet of young ferns as a centerpiece. He had really made an effort to be gracious, Holmes deduced, but what is his ultimate game here, he wondered? On the sideboard, expensive covered silver serving dishes held a generous sliced roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, roasted potatoes, a medley of peas and carrots, and a glass dish with celery stalks and sliced radishes. A fine ruby claret in an elaborate decanter was offered, along with some bottled mineral water from Baden-Baden.

 “Thank you for coming today, Mr. Holmes. Please help yourself. I assure you that the food is excellent, though I think that neither you nor I care much about what we consume in regards to nutrition. It is simply fuel for the body and, more importantly, the mind -- don’t you agree?”

 The two rivals slowly and quietly ate without resorting to any banal conversation. They watched each others’ eyes intently, however. Sherlock was struck by a cold reality, that across this table sat a living monster who personally arranged the murders of dozens of mostly innocent human beings that opposed his vile designs -- a man given to extortion, bribery, robbery, kidnapping, torture, and worse. A man without guilt. A man without normal emotions. A man without mercy. A misanthrope and sociopath.

 Dessert was treacle tart, offered with silver tips Chinese tea. Brandy and cigars concluded the meal.

 The two men finally sat in opposing comfortable armchairs near the fireplace while they smoked. Then Moriarty spoke.

 “We are the last titans in this weary world, Mr. Holmes. You represent the forces of light, and justice, and redemption – whereas I embrace the darkness. I am one who lives off misery and greed and betrayal and hatred. I see the world as it is, not as it pretends to be. I use my power and money to ascend to the heights of my chosen profession. You may see me as evil, a madman, a kind of wicked demon. But I and others like me are those who are secretly admired by most people for our fearlessness and bold cunning, not you and your sense of law and morality and virtue. The world is a violent place, Mr. Holmes. Evolution has bred us for war and mischief, not flowers and mercy! Darwin knew the facts. All religions are absurd, a mockery of our essential nature, don’t you see? Police forces around the world and detectives like yourself represent the last gasp of a soon-to-be extinct species, Mr. Holmes. Did you know that I run a vast international network of spies, traitors, bankers, politicians, and newspapermen who all do my bidding without question? I manipulate national elections and stock markets, direct specific assassinations, and steal gold and many currencies across Europe to finance my ever-expanding empire. I ‘own’ quite a few judges, lawmakers, and even clergy and police when necessary. My sinister cohorts sit undetected on the boards of important and influential businesses and corporations. You have heard of the Freemasons, the Illuminati, the Priory of Sion, no doubt? My reach goes even further. My grasp is tighter, and my goals are even more ambitious!”

 Moriarty paused to lick his lips like a demented lizard, his dull eyes suddenly animated with pure hate and greed. Sherlock listened intently without interrupting, and was certain the deranged former professor was mad, and had to be locked up in an asylum, or -- preferably -- destroyed, sooner rather than later.

 “Did you know that I have had you watched every moment, both day and night, Mr. Holmes, for years? I could of had you killed anytime with a mere wave of my hand on a dozen different occasions, or eliminated forever your beloved brother Mycroft, or your closest dear friend Dr. Watson. I could have easily poisoned this meal which you just enjoyed – but don’t worry, I didn’t. Truly, one of us must die someday so that the other can go on. But the time is not right yet. We must still grapple with our wits, tooth and claw, like it is an enormous game of fate. You see, Mr. Holmes, you alone are my only true equal, in both intellect and determination. But it remains to be seen who will be the winner in our little contest – who will be the final survivor. It might take years, or it might end tomorrow – who can say?"

 Moriarty paused as he tossed the remains of his cigar into the fireplace, then clapped his hands together in a gesture of transition. His eyes reflected the flickering log flames, and resembled those of a deadly viper or cobra.

 “Now, my esteemed guest, I would like to share some fascinating information with you. Do forgive my bragging about my newest project, Mr. Holmes, but perhaps only you and I can appreciate its unique brilliance? I aim to tease or perhaps actually trigger a war between France and England, the eternal rival nations. Only this time, the conflict will become more global, due to various interrelated alliances with other European nations. I have used forgery, blackmail, and bribery to accomplish my mission. In an effort to recompense French honor for their humiliating defeat to the English at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, the French government will demand that the British government pay them the amount of 1 million pounds sterling in gold bullion. If the British fail to pay the bounty by the prescribed deadline, the French will be forced to pour large quantities of fatal arsenic into the River Thames, killing thousands of hapless citizens. This act of aggression will thus trigger a new Great War in retaliation. It will be in the British self-interest to pay, as the lesser of two evils. Rest assured, I already have the massive arsenic supply if they don’t comply. And even if a large-scale war does break out, I will still make a fortune selling armaments -- to both sides, of course! Here, Mr. Holmes, let me show you the carefully forged French ransom document.”

 Sherlock knew of the dangers involved here from reading the recent news, because a mere ten days ago, the Fashoda Incident between the two world powers was resolved in southern Sudan. But it was a humiliating defeat for France, forcing them from the region, and leaving the British in sole control of the area, including the important colonial prize of Egypt. Tensions were high, and any provocation, such as Moriarty was planning, could easily spiral out of international control. British-German relations were also strained at this time, over who would have world naval supremacy on the high seas.

 Holmes was then offered the document, and he read the explicit demands.

 "I would give you a copy for your files, sir, but I'm afraid this is the sole copy. My skillful master forger -- who must remain unnamed -- is unfortunately serving time in a French prison at the moment. You are looking at a letter purportedly written by the French Minister of Finance, Paul Peytral, under the auspices of current French President Felix Faure. Peytral will take the Channel ferry soon to England, then proceed by train to London, and personally deliver this document to Queen Victoria's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Michael Hicks Beach. Both men are under my considerable influence, one through blackmail, the other through bribery. One man will be paid 5,000 pounds sterling, and the other 25,000 pounds sterling for their roles in the plot. President Faure will never know about my extortion plan, unless the British foolishly refuse to pay and actual war is declared on France after my arsenic is released. Sir Beach will need to inform Her Majesty, of course, but with the understanding that the press and the public never learn of the one million pound secret gold payment."

 Holmes then spoke up, after carefully rubbing the paper between his fingers and minutely inspecting it for a few moments. "This document forgery is quite good, but two significant errors were made. First, the paper weight feels to be a Bond 28, whereas I happen to know that all official French documents utilize the thicker and thus heavier Bond 36. And secondly, the female Liberty headdress on the Great Seal of France at the top of the letterhead has only six projecting rays, whereas the actual Seal has seven. However, the average recipient of such a document would probably neglect to notice either mistake.”

 Moriarty drew in a deep breath and frowned, and appeared disappointed with the minor flaws in his precious, pivotal document. But he simultaneously gave Sherlock some offhand praise when he said, “I see your reputation as a master sleuth is rightly deserved, Mr. Holmes. Your training and experience is indeed commendable. I would expect no less of you.”

 In the distance, Big Ben tolled the four o’clock hour. Seconds later, the rather plain clock on Moriarty’s mantelpiece likewise struck the hour. The professor instinctively reached with his left hand for his own vest pocket watch and popped it open, while also licking his lips again. Sherlock noticed a small, dark, rounded mole on Moriarty’s left wrist past his thumb when his white shirt cuff lifted up in the movement. Then his host announced, “I fear our visit must conclude now, Mr. Holmes, for I have other pressing business to attend to. Your hansom cab is waiting outside as I speak. Surely, we will meet again, but be aware that I have many residences throughout the British Isles and Europe. I rarely sleep in the same bed twice in a row. Should you find your way back to this apartment, for example with the police to arrest me, you will find me already long gone. I also employ several ‘doubles’ who resemble me. They do my bidding precisely as I dictate. These measures are for my personal safety and freedom, for as you know, I have never spent even a minute behind bars in any prison.”

 The detective grabbed his formal hat and silver-capped black walking stick (which concealed a thin, razor-sharp sword), and turned to leave. “Common courtesy requires me to thank you for this afternoon’s invitation and meal, Professor. Therefore I do. But I would be less than honest if I did not tell you outright that I consider you a twisted, poisonous blight on the whole of humanity, and that I will fervently dedicate myself to thwarting all of your dastardly designs until you are either permanently institutionalized or in your grave. That is my blunt and solemn pledge, sir. I bid you farewell.” Outside, a light rain began to fall on the world’s largest city.

 Through his open front door as Sherlock stepped out, Moriarty replied, “All will be as it should be, sir. I have the substantial resources and the manpower. You are alone, and have only your wits. That will be your challenge. As they say in the sporting arena: may the best man win! Good bye, Mr. Holmes, until we meet again.”

 Sitting in his cab as it trotted back to Baker Street, Holmes replayed the entire afternoon encounter in his mind, committing to memory every detail. Certainly, his first task was to ascertain exactly which day Paul Peytral intended leaving Paris for London to deliver the forged ransom demand.

 Three days later, Sherlock learned through his police connections in France that all foreign diplomatic courier deliveries were done on the last business day of each month. That would be Wednesday, November 30, he noted. Holmes got a physical description of Peytral and some other details -- the Minister had a trimmed white beard with mustache, was fluent in English, and counted bird-watching as his favorite hobby -- and waited. Sherlock had to intercept and destroy the sinister forged demand. Meanwhile on Sunday, the detective was invited to Dr. Watson’s house for afternoon tea.

 Mary put on a grand spread of Darjeeling and Earl Grey -- and the traditional tiny sandwiches and dainty cakes -- and soon left the two friends to their privacy. Holmes relayed to Watson every aspect of his dramatic, three-hour encounter with the infamous Napoleon of Crime.

 “Nothing short of amazing, Holmes,” Watson snorted as he lit a cigar. “The man is clearly insane. A vile menace to all that is civilized. Have you thought of how to stop him? And may I be of any assistance?”

 Sherlock told his good friend that, while he truly appreciated the offer, the fact that Watson was now a married man precluded him from sharing in any situations which might jeopardize his safety. “Best to stick with your medical practice and stay by your dear wife, old chum,” Holmes gently declared. Then he shared his detailed plans with the doctor. "One thing I will require of you, Watson. A small vial of liquid chloral hydrate. I need to secretly sedate the French Minister, aged 54, for about three hours. He is of average weight and build, for purposes of the dosage." The good doctor said he would have it delivered by courier to Holmes' flat within twenty-four hours.

 On Monday morning, November 28, the great detective received a hastily scribbled note from a woman he had never met before named Christine Beryl. She gave her address in Kensington, and said that she had been blackmailed and urgently needed help. She pleaded for Sherlock to come. Seeing as it appeared to be an uncomplicated domestic request and that he had some unscheduled time until Wednesday, Holmes decided to take the case.

 When he arrived at the indicated address a few hours later, Sherlock was met at the second floor apartment door by a striking young woman in her late 20’s. Her hair was honey-colored and fashionably swept up, her eyes were emerald green, and her face and complexion was exquisite. Her lavender silk gown was sumptuous and flattering. The only feature which was off-putting was her runny nose, which had turned red from recent crying, as she clutched a white lace handkerchief after dabbing it in embarrassment. Holmes introduced himself and was invited into the flat, which was finely arranged and richly decorated. “Christine Beryl, Mr. Holmes,” she spoke, offering her hand. "Thank you for arriving on such short notice. Please forgive my appearance, but I have suffered some disturbing news and my emotions have been shaken.” Sherlock was invited to make himself comfortable while Miss Beryl (for the woman was not wearing a wedding ring) retired to an adjoining room to bring back what she claimed was a blackmail demand regarding her brother in Cardiff, Wales.

 After more than a few minutes, however, Holmes was called aloud by Miss Beryl from her bedroom to please come in and assist her. But when the detective walked over and through the bedroom doorway, he was totally surprised to see Miss Beryl in a state of near nakedness. She had removed her formal lavender gown and was now wearing an open, floor-length, pink French silk negligee. Her flawless flesh was like alabaster, and Sherlock thought that he felt the soft warmth emanating from her body, even from three feet away. He was momentarily speechless.

 “Come now, Mr. Holmes. Surely you have seen an eager young female in a state of desire and undress? I have asked you here for an hour at least, strictly for our mutual pleasure. Or perhaps you have never had a woman before, being so cerebral and always busy with your many detective chores?” Christine appraised him seductively, showing her fine white teeth as she smiled.

 Sherlock’s disciplined mind, however, directed his eyes to sweep the room instead, until they fell upon the toe of a single brown boot slightly protruding from the bottom of a thick blue bedroom window curtain.

 “Ah, yes…the old entrapment game…well, well…what have we here?” Holmes leaped toward the curtain and pulled it back with a jerk. A frightened middle-aged man, holding a Kodak No. 1 Box Camera, was caught there, hiding. “You are certainly no Irene Adler, Miss Beryl…nor are you a lady!” Holmes spat out with disgust. “Trying to smear my reputation with a scandal photo for the lurid London tabloids? How dare you! Did Professor Moriarty put you up to this tawdry farce?” Sherlock hotly demanded. The man with the camera quickly rushed past Holmes and fled out of the apartment, having failed in his assignment. Holmes ordered the woman to get dressed as he stormed out of the flat and hailed a cab.

 The very next morning, Mrs. Hudson informed the detective that a Miss Christine Beryl was downstairs and pleaded to see him. Surprised yet still annoyed from yesterday, Holmes nonetheless ordered her sent up. Now what does she want? he wondered with distain.

 "Do forgive this intrusion, Mr. Holmes, but I just had to see you in person, and humbly beg your pardon for yesterday's pathetic charade. I need to explain everything," Miss Beryl cast her emerald-green eyes downward and her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. Holmes offered the distraught woman a chair. "I am truly no strumpet, sir. My brother, Miles, in Cardiff, was indeed being blackmailed by James Moriarty, who had damning evidence of financial misfeasance regarding my brother's business dealings in Wales. Moriarty approached me and offered Miles a reversal of fortune if I cooperated by attempting to seduce you, then be caught and photographed in a compromising posture. I am so very sorry, Mr. Holmes. Please believe me!" Christine pleaded.

 Sherlock was struck by the female's sincerity. "You have verified my suspicions, dear lady, that Moriarty was behind this play. I will contact the Welsh authorities at once and have your brother's safety guaranteed, although he must of course make any fiscal recompense to his business associates. In the meantime, I suggest that you stay here for the next forty-eight hours, so as to be unavailable to Professor Moriarty's wrath for having failed in your role as my seductress. Mrs. Hudson will see to your needs and comfort, and provide you with a spare room, until I return from abroad." Miss Beryl agreed, and thanked the great detective profusely with tearful eyes as she was ushered out by the matronly landlady.

 Next, Sherlock Holmes packed his leather Gladstone bag (including Dr. Watson's chloral hydrate vial) and took the night train to Dover, the Channel ferry then to Calais, and from there, on to Paris. He had a fitful sleep for a substantial portion of the journey, but it was enough to sustain him for the important tasks which now lay ahead. It was Wednesday, November 30. Holmes stayed watchful at the Gare du Nord until he spied the French Minister of Finance with an overnight bag and a briefcase boarding the 7 a.m. train to Calais. The 236 km. trip usually took just under four hours. The detective was currently in disguise, costumed as an elderly white-haired pensioner returning to London from a pleasant fortnight's bird-watching holiday in France. Naturally, he was ever-vigilant for any of Moriarty's possible henchmen lurking about.

 Both Sherlock and his prey boarded the First Class carriage. An hour into the trip, breakfast was just being served in the dining car. The detective nimbly followed directly behind the Minister, who kept his briefcase by his side. Holmes was thus seated with Peytral, as was his intention, and they were soon joined by two other strangers, both French, both going only as far as Lille. Sherlock made a show out of shuffling his birding guidebook and his worn binocular case after placing his order of croissants with quince jam and milky coffee with sugar. "Forgive me, gentlemen, but I'm afraid my French is quite poor. *Parlez-vous Anglais*? My name is Reginald Fitzhugh, from Dorchester," Holmes offered sweetly and innocently.

 The two Frenchmen ignored Sherlock with a negative shake of their heads, but Paul Peytral spoke up, saying, "Yes, I speak English. And I notice you are interested in bird-watching? By coincidence, it is also a fine hobby of mine," the Minister revealed. He then introduced himself -- by first name only, not revealing his official government title. The other two diners at the table did not recognize Peytral, regardless.

 As the men ate, Holmes made casual conversation about the train, the food, his home in Dorchester, and even mentioned his late wife (no children). But Sherlock became quite animated when discussing the new birds he had seen on his French holiday. "Amazing! So many species not common in England: Caspian tern. Alpine swift. Sardinian warbler. Spotless starling. Even some coming in from North Africa, assuredly. Tell me, Paul, what are your favorite bird-watching spots? And where are the best migration flyways in France? I would really like to know, from your experience."

 The two men talked excitedly for another thirty minutes or so after the silent French pair left the dining car. Holmes then gently apologized for taking up so much of Peytral’s time, adding, "But if you happen to be taking the Calais to Dover ferry, Paul, I would enjoy inviting you for a drink in their lounge." Peytral admitted that he was indeed on his way to London, so he would welcome talking more about birding with Reginald again. “You know, the Languedoc region in southern France offers the finest birding in western Europe, home to over 40% of its species. England is smaller and more densely populated than France, so it has much less open lands for bird populations. But we can continue our delightful talk once aboard ship. I will find you in the lounge once I get settled,” Paul promised.

 At 10:44 a.m., the train pulled into Calais station, near the Channel ferry dock. All ongoing passengers boarded “Le Nord,” a large, paddle-wheeled French Channel steamer which held up to 500 passengers. There were 140 private, two-bed cabins, for those who wished to pay extra for privacy on the typical four-hour and forty-five minute crossing. Holmes had earlier booked a cabin for himself. When he approached the steward on the gangplank checking all the passengers in, Sherlock carefully glanced at the manifest as his own name was being verified, and saw that Paul Peytral was going to be staying in Cabin #117. Sherlock would be in Cabin #92.

 The ship cast off promptly at 11:15 a.m. Holmes went directly to his cabin and freshened up, also checking his white-wigged disguise in the room mirror. Satisfied, he then removed the vial of liquid chloral hydrate from his Gladstone bag and slipped it into his vest pocket. He headed down to the lounge and waited. Fortunately, although the weather was cold and cloudy, at least the Channel was not rough, for the winds had not whipped the waves up as they were sometimes apt to do.

 Just past noon, Paul showed up in the lounge and greeted Holmes, who was seated in a discreet corner near a window. Sherlock ordered two large Bristol Milk sherrys, with Peytral’s approval. They settled back into easy, even more friendly conversation, except that when Paul was asked if he had any children, he allowed that he had a son, Victor, age twenty-four. As the Minister of Finance confessed this fact, however, Holmes noticed that Peytral’s eyes looked away, in an expression of sadness or perhaps worry. The canny detective surmised that Moriarty had blackmailed Peytral, and that Victor was somehow involved. The Minister did not appear in any way to be a dastardly, evil man eager to tease a war between England and France. Sherlock artfully turned their conversation back to their mutual fascination with birding, and he saw Paul visibly relax. They settled on the topic of flamingos, and how these birds could be found, improbably, even in Chilean Patagonia!

 Holmes casually put his fingers in his vest pocket and uncapped the hidden chloral hydrate vial and waited until the right moment to slip the sedative into Peytral’s sherry. The barkeep was occupied with another customer. The lounge was sparsely populated. No one appeared to notice the two men in the corner.

 Suddenly, Sherlock exclaimed, "I say, Paul, I do believe I just spied a male Rutland Osprey catching a fish! Look there!” Holmes pointed out the window. As Peytral obliged the command, the detective deftly poured the sparse contents of the vial with his left hand into the other man’s drink. His motion was undetected. Holmes knew the tasteless sedative would react about ten minutes after ingestion, and would be good for three or so hours of deeply drugged sleep.

 “Sorry, Reginald…I’m afraid I must have missed it,” Paul replied. “Such a magnificent breed. I know it…dark brown top with a cream underbelly…and a distinctive ‘highwayman’s mask,’ like a bandit, across the eyes. Perhaps we’ll see another, though they seldom travel in flocks, being a more solitary fowl.” Peytral took a long quaff from his sherry tumbler.

 “If you ever get to Dorchester, do look me up, Paul. Ask for me at the Red Stag Inn. They’ll direct you to my house. You know, there is some good coastal birding nearby if you have a free afternoon, especially in the spring.” Paul said he would remember, then excused himself, saying that he felt very tired and would retire to his cabin for a nap, and rest up for the final leg of his journey – the 68-mile train trip from Dover to London, which took just under two hours. “If we don’t see each other again before England, it was a pleasure to have met you, Paul. Pleasant journey,” Holmes offered, and the men shook hands, with a now exhausted-looking Peytral thanking Reginald for the drink as he drained his glass, then walked with heavy legs out of the lounge.

 Holmes waited a half-hour for the drug to fully take effect before slipping off to Cabin #117. Casually looking both ways in the hallway so as not to be seen, the detective removed a lock-picking tool from his inner coat pocket and noiselessly entered Peytral’s room. The curtains were drawn so the room was quite dim, but there was enough light for Sherlock to accomplish his mission. Paul was in bed, loudly snoring, his face turned toward the wall. Holmes spied the Minister’s briefcase in an overhead luggage rack, so he slowly brought it down and quietly opened it. He quickly found the crucial forged French ransom document that Moriarty had previously shown him. Slipping it into his inside jacket pocket, Holmes replaced the briefcase and tip-toed to the door. Peering out, he saw the back of a ship’s steward walking away down the hallway. Sherlock waited a few seconds, then checked the hallway again. It was empty, so the detective was safe to exit the cabin and return to his own room #92, which was on a different deck.

 Once inside his cabin, Holmes removed the document and studied it one last time before lighting a match and burning the letter to cinders, dropping it in his room ashtray. Then Sherlock relaxed and had a smoke. About an hour later, he headed downstairs to the dining room and ate a light lunch before returning to his room for a much-needed but brief nap. The ferry Le Nord would later arrive on schedule in Dover at 4:00 p.m.

 Holmes noticed Paul Peytral eventually exit down the ship’s gangplank, but kept out of sight by blending in with the milling, departing crowd. Sherlock deliberately missed the next train to London’s St. Pancras Station so as not to encounter the French Minister again. Instead, he took the following train, which arrived fifty minutes later. While he waited, in the Gents Toilet at the ferry terminal, the detective skillfully removed his effective white-wigged disguise and clothing costume. So far, all had gone well, he felt, with ample relief.

 But Holmes' train to London suffered some unexpected mechanical difficulties, and was forced to stop at Ashford for two and one-half hours of repairs. The passengers were allowed to exit their carriages in the town while waiting, so Sherlock took advantage of the delay and had a much-needed hearty evening meal, and purchased a newspaper to read afterwards.

 Taking a hansom once he arrived at St. Pancras at 8:50 p.m., Sherlock Holmes was back at 221-B Baker Street by 9:15. But he was met by a frantic Mrs. Hudson, with Christine Beryl standing behind her, also looking tense and disturbed. Mrs. Hudson relayed that Holmes’ older brother, Mycroft, had just come from the Diogenes Club and then departed, but left alarming and dire news that Dr. Watson had been abducted nearly three hours ago! She pressed the terse note that Mycroft had left into her famous lodger’s hand. Sherlock read it with shock, and was crestfallen. Here is what it said:

 “To Mycroft Holmes --

 Please inform your meddlesome detective brother that I have kidnapped his dear friend, Dr. Watson, and will hold him for twenty-four hours until my valuable document, which was stolen, is returned intact.

If my demands are unmet by then, Watson will die.

 (signed) M”

 “Should we inform Mary at once, Mr. Holmes?” Mrs. Hudson asked, with a somber and unsteady voice.

 Sherlock thought deeply for a moment, still clearly shaken, then replied after taking a deep breath and exhaling while rubbing his chin, ”Not yet, Mrs. Hudson. I must formulate an effective plan of safe rescue for our good doctor. We have roughly twenty-one hours left. I believe that both my brother and Scotland Yard can be mustered to help me deal with this dastardly and heinous development.”

 But just then, a large man, red-faced, obviously struggling to catch his breath from running, and with a bleeding right hand wrapped hastily in a red-soaked handkerchief, burst into the room.

 It was none other than Dr. Watson himself!

 “My friends, quick, a stiff brandy, if you please!” Watson ordered. In an instant, Mrs. Hudson stepped to a sideboard and complied, pouring a generous draught of the restorative liquor from its decanter into a glass.

 “My good fellow! Are you injured? Your hand…you must tell me what happened,” the detective cried. “But first you must sit and recover yourself,” Holmes urged. Watson did as he was directed, clearly exhausted. He drank the brandy with care but with eagerness and gratitude. “Mrs. Hudson, please send word to Mary that her husband is well and is here with us, and that we will explain the complete details later,” Holmes directed.

 “Oh...forgive my manners, Watson. This is Miss Beryl, whom you have not yet met. She is staying with us here for the moment, for she has also suffered some unsavory dealings with Professor Moriarty,” Holmes explained. Watson nodded in greeting to the woman, for he was asked by her not to formally rise for the introduction, given his condition.

 “Please, doctor, do let me attend to your injured hand. Allow me first to loosen your collar and unbutton your waistcoat,” Christine suggested. She then darted away, and returned carefully with a basin of warm water, a small towel, a cake of carbolic soap, and some fresh bandaging which Mrs. Hudson helped her assemble. “Now, doctor, it is your turn to play the patient, so please relax…umm…yes…your bloodied knuckles were badly scraped, sir, but no bones appear to be broken,” Miss Beryl announced, after examining, then cleaning, disinfecting, and expertly bandaging his injured right hand. She also wiped some of the sweat and grime that had accumulated on Watson’s face during his ordeal. “My mother was a nurse, you know, so I learned a few first aid tricks from her,” Christine acknowledged.

 Having mostly recovered by now, Dr. John Watson next dropped a bombshell.

 “Holmes, I have shot and killed Professor Moriarty…” the doctor confessed. “With his own pistol, in a life or death struggle, within the past hour or so. First man I ever had to kill who was not an Indian or Afghani rebel soldier. We need to go to Scotland Yard immediately and identify his body.”

 It was almost December and biting cold outside as the two men hailed a cab. During the ride, Watson explained to his friend how he was grabbed from behind by two thugs and chloroformed into unconsciousness by a third as he left his medical office after hours.

 “When I awoke, I was tied to a wooden chair in the middle of a freezing, derelict warehouse somewhere near the Thames, for I could smell the foul odors of the river through the broken windows where I was imprisoned. Two unsavory characters were guarding me. But one of the scoundrels left to purchase a pint at a nearby alehouse. The remaining man told me how Professor Moriarty would be arriving within the hour, and that he was very angry, and that he would first torture and then probably kill me on account of your actions, dear fellow. Fortunately, the ropes restraining me in the chair were crudely tied, so as I listened, I covertly loosened my bindings. When the guard came close with a cup of water that I requested, I broke free and we struggled, fists to face, boots to body, blow by blow. That is how my hand became injured. Then I got a lucky punch in, and knocked the loathsome rascal unconscious. When I got up to flee, however, Moriarty had arrived alone, with surprise on his face. I knew it was him by your recent description, Holmes. He reached inside his coat to withdraw his revolver, but it dropped to the ground in his haste. We both dove for it. We reached the gun at the same time and struggled. The pistol went off right in Moriarty’s stomach. A fatal arterial wound. He bled to death rapidly, right in front of me. I fled for fear that the other henchman would return from the alehouse, and perhaps likewise be armed. I ran as far away as I could, then hailed a hansom. In the distance, I could hear alarmed police whistles, for someone had heard the gunshot and alerted the proper authorities.” Watson paused and looked at Holmes. “I had the cab drop me off two blocks away in case I was being followed, and then ran here -- my old leg war wound aching with every step. The whole incident was nightmarish, Holmes. I feel I will never be able to write it up for publication, as I have dutifully done for most of your other criminal cases and adventures, which have brought you such deserved recognition and acclaim.”

 Sherlock marked his dear companion with renewed regard in his eyes. “I say, well done, Watson! And thank heaven that you are again safe and sound after such a harrowing encounter and escape. Your wits and skills are truly commendable, old chum. Do you realize that you have just rid the world of one of its worst villains? Outstanding! And rest assured that you had no other choice in killing him, my friend. Your conscience can be quite clear in such a circumstance.”

 When the cab dropped them off at Scotland Yard, Holmes and Watson were met by Inspector Lestrade, a long-time police colleague in the seemingly endless fight against crime. However, the inspector had always been both jealous and in awe of the great detective, for Sherlock had the remarkable knack of cracking many of the tough cases that Lestrade and his department had failed to solve. He took the pair directly to the basement morgue, where fresh or unclaimed crime victim corpses were stored.

 “Looks like Dr. Watson has impressively beaten you this time, Holmes!” Lestrade crowed. “Moriarty himself dead at last. All of England and the rest of Europe will sing your praises and sigh with relief, Doctor, once the press hears about this one. Could well be the ‘victory-over-crime’ story of the year!”

 Sherlock easily ignored most of the inspector’s ramblings, and instead ordered with a tired sigh, “Let’s just identify the body now, can we, gentlemen?”

 The new corpse had just arrived and was waiting for them, laid out on a wheeled metal cart and covered with a fresh white sheet. The stark, clinical room smelled of antiseptics, formaldehyde and finality.

 Holmes was the first to peel back the sheet. Watson and Lestrade peered closely over Sherlock's shoulder. Moriarty lay there -- pale, cold, and lifeless. There was the formidable brow, the cruel, thin lips, and the pock-marked cheeks. The dark, reptilian eyes were now closed forever.

 But Holmes continued to peel back the shroud until his gaze halted abruptly upon the left wrist of the dead body. The great detective slowly frowned in bitter realization. Where there should have been a small, dark, rounded mole near the base of the thumb, there was none!

 Shaking off his shock and disappointment, Sherlock announced with a saddened voice, “I’m afraid, gentlemen, that we are examining nothing more than the remains of one of Moriarty’s many ‘doubles’, or lookalikes.” He then explained the specific detail. “Our man is still at large, somewhere, maybe even laughing at us this very minute. He has once again outwitted us and given us the slip. But I swear to you both on my honor that I will pursue this evil villain Moriarty and bring him to justice if it is the last thing I do on this earth.”

 “Come, Watson! The game is still afoot!” Holmes cried as he strode, with renewed confidence and singular purpose, out the door, the good doctor, forever faithful, close by his side…

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 June 30, 2019