

The Adventure of the Nebrodi Sapphire

Chapter I *The Cipher from Porlock*

In the spring of 1894, I returned to my old quarters at 221B Baker Street. I well remember the unalloyed joy I felt at being back once again in that sitting room with my friend, Sherlock Holmes, beneath the enormous shelves of reference books, amidst the detritus of our bohemian existence, amongst the old familiar landmarks: the violin case, the pipe rack, the coal scuttle and the stained table where he occasionally diverted his powerful intellect with abstruse and, to Mrs. Hudson's annoyance, invariably malodorous chemical experiments.

The year had been a singularly busy one for Holmes for, although the published accounts of his adventures amount to a mere four cases, in point of fact the calls upon him were many, constant and varied. Throughout the early summer of that year, a series of events occurred in Paris which kept him constantly occupied for two months on end. Although it ended with Holmes saving the life of the French President¹ (becoming one of the very few Englishmen ever to wear the *cordons rouges* of the *Légion d'Honneur* on account of his bravery), he came very close to complete physical and mental breakdown as a result of the exertions expended upon this, and upon his many other cases. His state of health on return from France at that time recalled to me a similar condition in which I found him at the conclusion of Baron Maupertuis affair some eight years previously. I am bound to record, with regret, and no small degree of irritation, that he remained completely deaf to my best and soundest advice offered to him at various junctures throughout most of that year, as both physician and friend, that he should take some form of rest, lest the overworking of his mind and body result in permanent detriment to his unique, magnificent, and celebrated powers. It was well into late autumn before I managed to prevail upon him to ease back upon his excruciating schedule, and I finally succeeded in persuading him to come with me for a fortnight's ramble in the fastness of the South Downs until the events at Yoxley Old Place² intruded upon us.

My friend's physical deterioration had been compounded by a grave professional disappointment: in September 1894, Colonel Sebastian Moran, lieutenant of the infamous Professor Moriarty—who was presumed to be dead at that juncture—was acquitted on the charge of murdering the Honorable Ronald Adair, a series of events which I recorded contemporaneously in *The Adventure of the Empty House*. The acquittal obtained by Colonel Moran's defense counsel was founded entirely upon a legal-procedural technicality, and not due to the lack of material evidence—for it was Holmes himself who brought to justice the person whom he had once described as "the second most dangerous man in London;" and although Moran had confounded the mediocre abilities of the official forces of law and order from the start, it was the Metropolitan Police, of course, who ultimately claimed the credit for the capture of Moran at the time, just as they had done for the resolution of many criminal cases of the period, something to which Holmes had become inured and upon which, at times, he waxed sardonic. In fairness it must be said that, at least through the persons of Inspector Lestrade and Inspector Gregson, who had both made several visits (perhaps pilgrimages is a better word) to 221B Baker Street to record their thanks, the gratitude of the official force towards Holmes was neither grudged nor feigned, albeit it was conveyed in the privacy of the sitting room rather than publicized in the columns of the Press.

Following Moran's acquittal and subsequent release from prison, it was a treat to the ears to hear Holmes damning and blasting with a very fine assortment of oaths the incompetent Crown officials

¹ Following Holmes's departure from Paris in June, Monsieur Sadi Carnot was assassinated, allegedly by Italian anarchists.

² Recorded as *The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez*.

responsible. He fairly shocked Inspector Lestrade, who had come to give him the unpalatable news of Moran's acquittal, with the robustness of his language. The fault lay entirely with the mandarins of the prosecution service, and it was neither from want of diligence, nor lack of competence by the Metropolitan Police in the preparation of their case, that enabled Colonel Moran to slip through the net and return to his criminal milieu. But worse was to come: during the autumn and winter of 1894, the steady rise in London crime was remarked upon intermittently by the leader columns of the Press. Of particular note was the occurrence of a spate of robberies committed by apparently well organized gangs of young men who, according to the Illustrated Police News of October 1894 were said to have "paid officials and who make a weekly contribution to defray the cost of the fines inflicted for assault and outrage; they are fined by the secretary if they were found without a belt or a stick." By the spring of 1895, the scale and subtlety of these operations, and the fact that they all remained unsolved, began not only to cause Holmes grave concern but also, as his tentacles stretched out into every nook and cranny of the city's teeming underworld to sense the merest whisper of organized crime, to give rise to a bizarre and unsettling suspicion. Following his investigation of the affair of the Cleveland Street Picture Gallery, in which low farce alternated with tragedy, and which culminated in the defenestration, and ultimate public disgrace, of a Privy Councillor, it became obvious that only one explanation, albeit a startling one, could possibly meet the facts—Professor Moriarty had returned!

Yet, how could Moriarty possibly have avoided death during that struggle between himself and Holmes was a deep mystery to both of us? Holmes had a clear recollection of his enemy plummeting to his death into that chasm of the Reichenbach Falls, and it seemed impossible that anyone could have survived such a fall. Nevertheless a tip-off from one of Holmes's criminal contacts in the East End finally cleared up the mystery: it transpired that, on the day of that fateful meeting, Moriarty had sent an accomplice who bore a more than passable resemblance to him on the errand to meet Holmes on that narrow deserted mountain pass. Holmes admitted to me privately, and much to his chagrin, that, in the fading light of the late afternoon, in the deep gorge, he may have misrecognized his old adversary under that darkening sky. In fact, Holmes's only proper recollection was of what he thought at the time to be the Professor's grey eyes under a hat which covered most of his face. It must be remembered that prior to their rendezvous at the Reichenbach Falls, Holmes had only met Moriarty in person once, and that was under circumstances where he had surprised Holmes in his sitting room, and so had had the advantage of him. Subsequent events seem to have confirmed suspicions that, as Holmes himself had done after their meeting, Moriarty had allowed the rumors of his apparent demise to circulate, until he determined the most propitious time for his eventual resurrection.

Looking back upon my notes of the period, I see that I have happily recorded that, by the spring of the following year, Holmes had recovered fully and had once again attained that peak of brilliance for which he had become renowned. From then until the turn of the century, he fairly threw himself into his work for there was never any of shortage of clients, and throughout the nineties, an abundance of cases followed in rapid succession, not all of which I have had the opportunity, or, in some cases, the inclination, to publish the accounts of in detail.

My records show that Holmes investigated the cause of the curious bouts of madness which afflicted the well-known philanthropist Count Dom Agostinho Mendoça of Braganza, and effected a most singular cure. There was the sad, but rather comical, case of the Whitechapel Contortionist which had vexed the Police for months, but perhaps most notable was the series of events surrounding the Bognor Prestidigitation Circle, beginning with an incident which had been brought to Holmes's attention by a Harley Street colleague of mine, Doctor Moore Agar.

In fact, it is another of these, as yet unchronicled, cases from 1895 which I now address in these pages. I had returned from my holiday on the Continent on the first day of the grouse season, and I clearly recall that it was rather more than two full calendar months later before I clapped eyes on Holmes. Save on those occasions when he had left London completely, I can scarcely recall his having been absent from Baker Street for such a long period in pursuit of his quarry. On this occasion, it seemed that he had once again descended, pseudonymous and incognito, into some stratum of the criminal fraternity and had been holed up in one of his many refuges in the East End.

It was a fine warm day in mid October and the streets were already hot and dusty from an unseasonably long dry spell. Although I had given up my own private practice the previous year, I had been looking after my old colleague Jackson's patients in his absence, and was returning to Baker Street at the end of a busy morning round, with the prospect of a pot of Mrs. Hudson's best Javanese,

followed by a leisurely perusal of the morning newspapers. In fact, as it happened, when I arrived in the sitting room, I was rather surprised to find Holmes there. He had evidently dispensed with his disguise and, having removed his seaman's clothes, had donned his normal apparel, and was now bustling around with the air of a man about to depart; a portmanteau in the corner by the door mutely proclaimed that his departure was both imminent and meant to be a lengthy one. He had that alert and eager look and his eyes a certain hard glitter which I had come to recognize: for all the impassivity of countenance which he cultivated, it was not difficult for me to read the signs. I was reminded of the problems with his constitution the previous year and felt a vague sense of unease at his slightly overwrought appearance. As Holmes grew older I was less inclined to be so indulgent with the games he played with his physical health. Although I had succeeded in prevailing upon him to desist from the dreadful cocaine habit, nevertheless there still lingered on his part a morbid tendency to deprive himself of food for long periods of time in order, as he once told me airily, that his brain should not be starved of the blood supply diverted to use by his digestive system. I am afraid that his understanding of the intricacies of the human anatomy was unsystematic to the point of absurdity.

"My dear Holmes," I began, "I really must warn you that if you overwork yourself again as you did..."

"Ah! The same old Watson, solicitous for my health as ever," he broke in, "and reproachful in equal quantity!" he added with a twinkle waving me to the armchair by the fire which, although set, remained unlit.

Indeed so warm was the morning that, although my constitution can rather better stand a rising than a falling thermometer, I had begun to regret donning the heavy overcoat inside which I was beginning to swelter uncomfortably. The yellow brick houses opposite seemed, even at that early hour, to be baking in the Indian summer which was the delight of all London, save those, like myself, whose duties compelled them to be abroad in formal attire. "Nevertheless, I am delighted to see that I am not the only person who has been busy. I assume Doctor Jackson has gone to Switzerland again?" he chuckled.

"How on Earth did you know? Why, you have been gone for several weeks and I have just..."

"Come, come, Watson, I know your methods as well as you ought to know mine. You have no regular practice. What would take you out on such a morning dressed so formally? It was obvious that you were covering your friend's practice in his absence. Look at the glossy sheen upon your boots, untainted by the dust and grit of our infernally hot and chokingly dusty London streets: further inference—that Doctor Watson is too busy to make his calls on foot, therefore he takes a cab. How many times used I to gauge the quantum of your calls by the state of your shoes?"

I perceived a small pile of papers on the coffee table, and I knew instantly that any homily I might deliver to him regarding overtaxing himself would be futile. I nodded towards the pile, "You do have another case in hand, then?" I inquired rather ruefully.

"Yes, I seem to have returned from my bolt hole in Ratcliff at exactly the right time. As you may or may not know, I had been exceedingly busy of late with the affair of the *Quatuor Coronati* which detained me rather longer than I expected."

"*The Quatuor Coronati!*" I repeated, "The Four Crowned Ones? Is that not the name of a Freemason's Lodge?"

"Yes, it is exactly that. It has been a most curious case, Watson; never before in any of my hundred odd weighty cases have I seen the interests of so many revered organizations of civil society inextricably entangled to such a degree. It is no exaggeration to say that were certain facts to be made public with unpropitious timing, it would shake the English Freemasonry establishment to its very foundations; unfortunately I suspect that, considering the many high ranking and august persons implicated in the matter, it will not suffer to be recounted to the general public for quite some time; indeed it will, rightly or wrongly, be questioned by some as to whether the facts should ever be exposed to public scrutiny."

"And your other case?" I asked.

"Cases," he corrected me. "I have in fact several others maturing at the moment, the effects of which upon my person were immediately apprehended by yourself upon your entry, and which aroused your professional concern. Amongst these, one concerns the Athanasian Scroll which has gone missing, presumably stolen, from Saint Mark's and his Holiness Pope Kyrillos has requested my urgent assistance in an attempt to retrieve it. However, if my theory is correct, no harm is likely to

arise to the document, and a few thousand piastres will not only guarantee its return, but will also keep the matter hushed up. Perhaps the most pressing case is one which may possibly entail a visit to France.”

“What could possibly take you there?” I asked.

“Perhaps the most intriguing moment of my career, Watson! You have heard the rumors of the return to England of Professor Moriarty—the signs are everywhere. If there were any doubts, they have almost been dispelled by the papers you observe on the table which arrived this morning by the second post after you had gone out on your round.”

“Well, Holmes, it is no more than you deserve,” I replied, “for only a year or so ago I recall, when investigating young McFarlane’s predicament,³ that you were lamenting the dreary monotony caused by the Professor’s supposed demise.”

“Yes, Watson I admit it,” Holmes smiled ruefully and continued. “The correspondence which you perceive on the table emanates from our old friend Porlock, whose enigmatic, yet prophetic, epistle you may recall, provoked a charge of witchcraft against me from your countryman MacDonald some years ago. Porlock seems to have been retained by our returned adversary, but his altruistic instincts remain the same.”

“What does it involve?”

“At present, it involves a slaughtered lamb, three kings and the ancient city of Jerusalem.”

“Upon my word, Holmes... but what...?”

“Come along with me and you shall find out.”

I glanced at the portmanteau by the door, “Come with you? *To Jerusalem?*”

“No, to Clerkenwell,” he replied impatiently, “I shall explain in the cab. As you have none of Jackson’s patients to see this afternoon...”

“*Dash it*, Holmes! How could you *possibly* know that I have no patients to see this afternoon?”

“Oh, that’s simple enough Watson, had you intended going back out after lunch, you would have simply left your wicker basket on the table by the door where I could see it, whereas it is presumably packed away in the hallway cupboard.”

“Well, it would be a pleasure to accompany you Holmes, for, as you suggest, I am anticipating quite a bit of a lull.”

“Excellent, Watson! Is this lull likely to extend as far as a week perhaps?”

“Very likely, I think, since my colleague returns to London tomorrow, after which I revert to my life as a leisured gentleman.”

“Then that’s settled! A week in Paris—first class tickets, all expenses paid, and the prospect of a substantial reward at the end. We shall leave Victoria station this evening on the ten o’clock boat train to Calais, and thence to Paris. I had already taken the liberty of sending young Cartwright⁴ down to reserve us a first class carriage, for I knew you would not fail me.”

“There must be something urgent or extraordinary about the case for you to leave so suddenly.”

“Quite urgent yes, but not, on the whole, unusual. Porlock merely warns of an impending jewel robbery in Paris, and we may arrive in time to avert it, rather than avenge it. Still, you may judge for yourself,” said Holmes, handing me two envelopes inside which the cipher and the cipher key had arrived. They were identical, printed in rough characters, no doubt with the object of disguising the sender’s original handwriting, and read as follows:

*Sherlock P. Holmes,
221B Baker Street,
Marylebone,
London W1*

“What does the middle initial ‘P’ stand for? I was not aware that you had a middle name, Holmes.”

“You are correct, Watson, I have no middle name, and therefore no middle initial. The P is purely a protocol between myself and Porlock, which we agreed to adopt after the events at Birlstone some

³ In *The Adventure of the Norwood Builder*.

⁴ Cartwright works for the District Messenger Service and makes only one other named appearance in the canon, in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, although Holmes makes use of an anonymous District Messenger service on other occasions.

time ago, which you recorded in a somewhat sensational and romanticized vein, if I may say so. I warned Porlock then of the dangers to his person should any message to me be intercepted, and it also occurred to me that certain parties might wish to usurp his pseudonym out of a desire to mislead me, so this, then, is Porlock's unique mark of authenticity; should any communication arrive at this address purporting to be from that quarter, which does not contain my fictional middle initial in the address, then I shall know it immediately to be a forgery. It is a simple but effective device, since the P may be seen by anyone, and yet be neither noticed, nor remarked upon, whereas only yourself and brother Mycroft would know for certain that I have no middle initial."

"Rather clever, Holmes."

"Oh, perfectly simple, Watson. I have also taken the trouble to refine my method of his remuneration, as well as increasing the quantum thereof; the ten pound note in a plain envelope to Camberwell Post Office was becoming rather too risky and, frankly, smacked of amateurism," Holmes continued. "Still, despite the rather crude attempt to disguise his handwriting, certain features of his, certain idiosyncrasies remain and the Camberwell postmark is unmistakable. There are one or two, admittedly exceedingly minor, indications of a departure from Porlock's normal methods, for he has employed a cipher which I hazard would scarcely trouble even the most dull-witted schoolboy."

"Perhaps the explanation is that he may have been forced to act in haste to avoid discovery of his treachery?" I replied.

"By Moriarty?"⁵ Indeed, Watson, very probable, and one would hardly blame him."

Holmes went to the table again and, picking out two slips of paper from the pile, handed them to me. The first was an inscription in cipher similar to that which we had received from Porlock eight years ago, warning us of the impending danger to Jack Douglas. It ran:

534 C2 43 27

"I assumed as usual that the solution to Porlock's conundrum is to be found in the *Almanac*," said Holmes, "on turning to page 534, column 2 thereof, the forty-third and twenty-seventh words are respectively 'Pig' and 'Pen.' Now, here is the actual cipher, the important part. Please tell me what you make of it..."

The paper contained several lines of strange-looking symbols printed in black ink on a plain unmarked sheet of writing paper. The pen had spluttered a few times during the printing.

The message ran as follows:

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I studied the cipher for some minutes whilst Holmes sat with an amused expression but, apart from detecting a vague resemblance to some of the letters of the Cyrillic alphabet, I was quite unable to make any sense of it. Holmes continued to smile across the table at my discomfiture. As for the words "Pig" and "Pen," I had absolutely no clue as to their possible meaning.

"My dear Holmes, I know you well enough to appreciate that you are not being facetious when you say this code can be broken by a schoolboy, and a dull-witted one at that. Yet, I confess I am forced to place myself intellectually rather below that level; it is completely impenetrable to me."

⁵ Incongruously, in *The Adventure of the Final Problem*, Watson states on 24 April 1891 that he had "never heard of Moriarty." We can accept that Watson may have decided to draw a discreet veil over previous cases which he was not ready, at that point, to publish. However one of the great unsolved canonical puzzles is how Watson can describe Moriarty as "the famous scientific criminal" in *The Valley of Fear*, generally regarded as having taken place in January 1888... three years earlier!

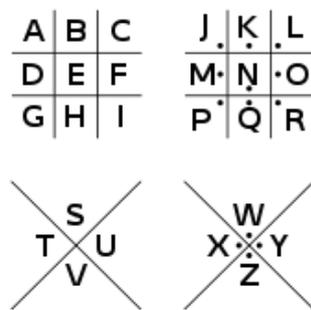
“As I have had occasion to remark before, Watson, I really ought to get you to write that down and sign it in the presence of witnesses, for in several moments from now, you will declare the solution to be perfectly obvious.”

“Well, I am at your mercy as usual, so please do explain,” I answered with some asperity.

“Porlock has sent two separate messages. The first message contained the key in essence: the words ‘pig’ and ‘pen.’ Initially, neither ‘pig’ nor ‘pen’ seemed to me to be leading me in anywhere like the right direction. In fact, I instantly recalled how in the Birlstone case, when we had made an initial attempt to decipher Porlock’s communication, our inquiries led us somewhat disappointingly, and erroneously as it turned out, to the term ‘Pig’s Bristles.’ Thus, I had begun to think that I had once again misread the key to the cipher in some similar way, but on opening the second envelope, and seeing the message which you have just read, I realized immediately that it represented a variant of what are called the *Pig-Pen* symbols derived from the Aik Bekar cipher, which has been used by various secret societies over the centuries, or at least societies who wished to keep their communications secret. It is many centuries old, and is thought to have been invented by the Knights Templar, though it fell out of favor until around the 17th century, when it was resurrected. It appears also to have been used by the Confederate forces in the American Civil War, and was very probably the mode of communication employed by those members of the evil society which persecuted the unfortunate John Openshaw⁶ in ’87.

“As you are aware”, Holmes continued, “I am presently engaged in the authorship of a short treatise⁷ upon analyses of ciphers and codes, having studied scores of specimens from various parts of the world, and from various historical epochs. As I stated, Porlock’s cipher is of such banality that I would have been able to crack it with little effort for, although considered useful in its day, the steady progress of mass literacy amongst all classes has rendered it more fit for the amusement of schoolboys than for serious cryptology. Essentially, each cipher represents a cell on a grid which corresponds to a letter of the alphabet. The dot in the cell, as in the first cipher in Porlock’s message, merely represents second series of letters, repeated in order to avoid unnecessarily lengthening or complicating the cipher. The *pig pen* is merely a fanciful description of the grid, which superficially resembles the pens in which those beasts are herded.”

Holmes handed me a slip of paper, “Here is the key to the message,” he remarked.



“You see, Watson, although there are a number of potential variations in the configuration of the code, it is really a very simple cipher.”

“Yes, you are correct Holmes; it does seem remarkably, almost childishly, simple. So what then does this message from Porlock actually convey?” I asked.

Holmes handed me yet another slip of paper, which contained a transcription of Porlock’s cipher into Holmes’ own writing. It read:

Hotel Paris—Nebrodi Sapphire — Larceny

⁶ John Openshaw, the nephew of a former Ku Klux Klan member, was harassed and finally assassinated by that organization in the autumn of the previous year, in the story of *The Adventure of the Five Orange Pips*. The KKK was known to have used the Pig Pen cipher.

⁷ One of the many topics upon which Holmes has produced a monograph or treatise. By the time that Holmes had come to investigate *The Dancing Men*, three years after the events recorded here, his treatise on cryptology had grown to encompass “one hundred and sixty separate ciphers.”

“Posted at 07:15 a.m., 21 October—today, postmarked SE 5. Unless some other arcane meaning can be attached to this, Watson, I assume that Porlock’s message is intended to warn us the Nebrodi Sapphire belonging—if my reference book is correct—to the Countess of Milazzo, presumably resident in Paris at this moment, is in danger of being removed by some nefarious person. The unmistakable inference, of course, is that Moriarty is behind this. Now, Watson, it is almost twelve o’clock, we must be off to Clerkenwell.”