

The First Two Pages of “The Murderer’s Paradox” by David Corbett
From *In League With Sherlock Holmes:*
Stories Inspired by the Sherlock Holmes Canon
Edited by Laurie R. King and Leslie S. Klinger (Pegasus Crime)

An Essay by David Corbett

Last fall, I was asked by Les Klinger and Laurie King if I would like to contribute something to their periodic anthology of stories based on Sherlock Holmes.

This is a plum assignment. Les Klinger is an internationally recognized Holmes authority, and Laurie King is the author of the bestselling and critically acclaimed series featuring Mary Russell, protégé and eventual wife of Sherlock Holmes. Who wouldn’t say yes to such an intriguing offer?

One problem. At the time I accepted this assignment, unlike many of my fellow writers in the crime genre, I knew next to nothing about Sherlock Holmes.

That, of course, didn’t stop me from saying yes, adding boldly that I intended to write my story from the perspective of Holmes’s arch-nemesis, Professor James Moriarty.

Second problem. I knew even less about Moriarty than I did about Holmes.

Fortunately, my lovely bride is not just a wonderful spouse, she is also an avid fan of the entire Holmesian oeuvre and proved invaluable in guiding me to the proper stories and novels to research. What I intended to write was a classic bit of

Holmesian fiction, just from a point of view I'd never seen attempted, that of his most famous adversary.

Ironically, for all his Machiavellian notoriety as “the Napoleon of crime,” Moriarty actually appears in scant few of Conan Doyle's stories, and the information concerning him is not just spotty, it's at times contradictory.

Good news—this meant I could let my imagination run free. Bad news—no, I really couldn't. Not if I wanted to remain true to the tone of classic Holmesian fiction.

But it did free me up to develop his voice as I saw fit, and since I intended to write the story in first person, that was no small matter. But I still needed to answer one key question: Who is this criminal genius? What seemed most intriguing about him was this:

- He is a mathematics professor at a small British college.
- A mastermind, he typically has others carry out his diabolical schemes.
- An Irishman, he has connections to Irish republican rebels in both America and Europe.

This gave me my what I needed to explore his voice: a man of singular if pathological brilliance, rigorous in thought and expression, but with an Irishman's gift for language. I wanted to open with that voice, like a sinister, introductory oratorio for the story.

I also imagined Moriarty possessing his countrymen's hatred for the great empire Holmes, as Conan Doyle's avatar, virtually embodied. And that led to perhaps the most original innovation I decided to employ: I would put Conan Doyle himself into the story, and that would play a key role in Moriarty's wicked plot—a plot so devious and destructive it never was told. Until now.

The Murderer's Paradox

I presume you were expecting Dr. Watson. Sorry to disappoint. This happens to be one of those tales, however, that the dull-witted doctor would never think to share. It casts far too damning a light on his beloved paragon, Sherlock Holmes.

Indeed, the faithful physician never committed this particular episode to paper at all, but kept it locked away in the darkest corner of his mind, to be guarded jealously by an agonized conscience every day for the rest of his miserable life.

I. THE CHOSEN PAIR

It began, naturally enough, by mere coincidence—to the extent anything in this life can be attributed to chance.

I had decided to investigate the protest outside a lecture hall where a preeminent doctor, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, intended to defend the representations made in a booklet he'd written: *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct*.

In that humble little screed, the good doctor had sought to counter the arrogance—or apathy—of the British people in making a case to the world in their own defense. Not only, he believed, was the British cause in the Boer conflict entirely just, but its execution by the British military had proven impeccable in every conceivable manner.

Typical pap. The English love to brag about their devotion to justice and fair play, while exhibiting neither, except by force.

Furthermore, as the increasingly volatile protests against his lectures proved, a growing number of his kinsmen proved neither apathetic nor arrogant at all; they simply exhibited that enthusiasm in service of the exact opposite cause he intended to advance.

Many were humble people, from the classes typically dragooned into military service. Others were simply smart enough to see through a lie when it's spat in their faces.

Regardless, whatever their reasons for showing up, they spared little effort vehemently opposing the good doctor's slander of the Boer populace as sub-literate primitives, his defense of starving women and children to death in concentration camps, and his laughable conviction the war was premised on anything but greed.

My interest in the matter, however, had nothing to do with who owned the truth. Nothing of the sort ever resides in politics, let alone war. Rather, I sought, in the continuing waves of anger against the conflict and its prattling advocates, an opportunity for mischief.

I found what I was looking for in a pair of particularly vocal protestors, one man, one woman, both young, struggling against a pair of bobbies dragging them toward a Black Maria. Several of my confederates, at my signal, fired pistol shots into the air, and in the ensuing chaos—protestors scattering in all directions, the police abandoning their prisoners to locate and subdue the gunmen—I managed to collect my young couple and get them to follow me down an alleyway to my waiting carriage.

#

David Corbett is the author of six novels, including *The Long-Lost Love Letters of Doc Holliday*, nominated for the Lefty Award for Best Historical Mystery. His work has been nominated for Edgar, Anthony, Barry, Shamus, and Spinetigler Awards as well. Corbett's short fiction has twice been selected for *Best American Mystery Stories*, and he has written two writing guides, *The Art of Character* ("A writer's bible"—Elizabeth Brundage) and *The Compass of Character*. For more, see www.davidcorbett.com.