

Problems with “The Final Problem”

I am certain that the majority of people will read “The Final Problem” and know that this is not the end of Sherlock Holmes. But when the story was written, Arthur Conan Doyle desperately wanted to be rid of the famous detective, and in doing so, he made some errors that a casual reading may not reveal. My great source of Holmesian research is William S. Baring-Gould’s “The Annotated Sherlock Holmes”, this fails to mention any of the problems I detail below.

The first is this:

“Is Mrs. Watson in?”

“She is away upon a visit.”

Holmes is being overly formal, he has known Mary (née Marston) for two and a half years, and she has been Mrs. Watson for two years. It is unlikely that he would not use her given name.

The second problem is regarding dating. Holmes visits Watson on the 24th of April 1891, and yet when Watson is recounting the tale, it is clearly *after two years...*

“It is with a heavy heart that I take up my pen to write these the last words in which I shall ever record the singular gifts by which my friend Mr. Sherlock Holmes was distinguished. ... and to have said nothing of that event which has created a void in my

life which the lapse of two years has done little to fill. My hand has been forced, however, by the recent letters in which Colonel James Moriarty defends the memory of his brother, and I have no choice but to lay the facts before the public exactly as they occurred. I alone know the absolute truth of the matter”

“By the recent letters” he indicates that the letters were published about two years after the incident at Reichenbach Falls. Forgetting that two years have elapsed, Watson then writes...

“As far as I know, there have been only three accounts in the public press: that in the Journal de Genève on May 6th, 1891, the Reuter’s despatch in the English papers on May 7th, and finally the recent letters to which I have alluded. Of these the first and second were extremely condensed, while the last is, as I shall now show, an absolute perversion of the facts. It lies with me to tell for the first time what really took place between Professor Moriarty and Mr. Sherlock Holmes.”

So the two elapsed years have disappeared! May 6th 1891 is only twelve days after Holmes visited Watson, for Watson then writes...

“and the early spring of 1891 ... It was with some surprise, therefore, that I saw him walk into my consulting-room upon the evening of April 24th.”

There is the curious naming issue of Prof. Moriarty's brother's name "James", previously the Professor's given name was not specified, but in "The Empty House" the professor is definitely also named "James".

Then there is the journey from London to Meiringen, there are problems with times, distances, and route taken...

"We shall get out at Canterbury."

"And then?"

"Well, then we must make a cross-country journey to Newhaven, and so over to Dieppe"

At Canterbury, therefore, we alighted, only to find that we should have to wait an hour before we could get a train to Newhaven.

...

make our way at our leisure into Switzerland, via Luxembourg and Basle

...

We made our way to Brussels that night and spent two days there, moving on upon the third day as far as Strasburg.

As we shall see, times and distances become a problem. It is 70 miles from Canterbury to Newhaven. That journey would take at least two hours. Holmes and Watson were unlikely to detrain and immediately board a ferry to Dieppe in Newhaven, so some time must be allowed for this transfer. Then the Channel crossing, it is 80 miles from Newhaven to Dieppe. Watson then states "*we made our way to Brussels that night*" - a distance of 220 miles.

This is an impossible feat! In “Silver Blaze” Holmes calculates the train speed to 53 mph, but with deceleration time, time for stops at stations, and then acceleration time, the average train speed would be more like 30 mph (in my story “The Lost Symphony” the Orient Express takes 11 or more hours to cover the distance of 310 miles from Paris to Strasbourg. This is based on published timetables). The channel crossing must have taken at least 4 or 5 hours. And remember to take into account the time spent in Dieppe before leaving for Brussels. It is also unlikely that there was a fast train (if any) from Dieppe to Brussels, Holmes and Watson most likely would have had to journey Dieppe to Paris, then Paris to Brussels. Conan Doyle’s geography is dubious, Brussels is in Belgium, and yet the route is described as being “*via Luxembourg*” and to “*Basle*”.

Watson then writes...

“the same night we had resumed our journey and were well on our way to Geneva.”

So we are now presented with contradictions: Dieppe to Brussels, then to Geneva, or Dieppe to Luxembourg, then to Basle. Obviously Holmes and Watson could go to Brussels, then to Luxembourg, then to Basle, and thence to Geneva. A circuitous route that would surely confound Moriarty.

But then Watson writes...

“For a charming week we wandered up the Valley of the Rhône, and then, branching off at Leuk, we made our

way over the Gemmi Pass, still deep in snow, and so, by way of Interlaken, to Meiringen.”

Now we face a major problem: a week is to elapse and yet Holmes is supposed to meet his end on May 4th. I was at first tempted to think that *Rhône* should read *Rhine*, since from Strasbourg south to Basle largely follows the Rhine, and Basle was an intended destination. However, this does not work. Geography shows that going from Leuk via the Gemmi Pass indicates Holmes and Watson were following the river Rhône, and that most likely implies that “*a charming week we wandered up the Valley of the Rhône*” is true, and that they did indeed go to Geneva.

Thus, from the account we can set dates and places as:

1891 April 24	Holmes visits Watson. 221B Baker St. is burnt.
April 25	H & W depart
April 26	Dieppe to Brussels
April 27	in Brussels
April 28	in Brussels
April 29	in Strasbourg
April 30	\ a charming week
May 1	/
May 2	in Geneva
May 3	in Meiringen
May 4	Reichenbach Falls incident
May 6	Col. Moriarty publishes his letters

If we ignore the dates given by Dr. Watson, except for the 4th May 1891, and follow what the text reads, a more plausible set of dates and places is:

1891 April 14	Holmes visits Watson. 221B Baker St. is burnt.	
April 15	H & W depart England	
April 16	Canterbury - Newhaven - Dieppe	
April 17	Dieppe to ?	
April 18	? to Brussels	
April 19	in Brussels	
April 20	in Brussels	
April 21	Brussels to Luxembourg	
April 22	Luxembourg to Strasbourg	
April 23	in Strasbourg	
April 24	Strasbourg to Basle	
April 25	Basle to Beaune	
April 26	Beaune to Lyon	
April 27	Lyon to Geneva	\
April 28		\
April 29	“a charming week”	\
April 30	in Geneva	/
May 1	Geneva to Lausanne	/
May 2	Lausanne to Leuk	/
May 3	in Meiringen	
1891 May 4	Reichenbach Falls incident	
1893 May 6	Col. Moriarty publishes his letters	
1893 May ?	Watson writes The Final Problem	

In this scenario Watson's April 24th becomes a simple transcription error from 14th to 24th. The journey times are more realistic, the “charming week” has six days. The journey from Dieppe to Brussels is broken in half, although the overnight point could be Paris, but it is unlikely and either Amiens or Arras is more probable.