

THE MORIARTY CHALLENGE

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"And what do you make of this, my dear fellow?" asked Holmes one morning after breakfast, as I stood in the bow window of our rooms staring out at the passing show in Baker Street. He handed me a single sheet of paper on which the following 78 different words were scrawled:

ACT AGE AN ARCA AVENGED BREAKFAST BUT CAN CAREER
CONSCIENCE DAY DOCK DOOR DURING EMBASSY EMERGED ESTATE
EVENINGS EVER EXISTENCE FEATURE FROM HANDS HOLMES HORRIBLE
I IN ISA IT JUSTICE KNOWN LATER MR MRS MY NIGHT OF ON ONE
PAST PLACE PLANS POCKET POLICE POSSIBLE PRESENTS PRINT
PUNISHMENT RISE SAMUEL SAND SEAS SERVICE SHERLOCK SHOCK
SHORTLY SOLUTION SOMEWHERE SPEECH STAR SUCCESS TAUGHT
THE TO TOLD TOMORROW TRUST TURN VEIL WAY WE WELL WHEN
WINDOW WOMAN WORLD YARD YOU

"But ... this is nonsense, Holmes!" I protested. "Were it not for your name occurring in plain sight, I would say it was some form of infantile code!"

"Exactly!" he smiled thinly, "it would take me all of seventy seconds to decipher its contents by merely glancing through your chronicles of all our cases and ascertaining that what we have before us is no more than the first and last words of all those selfsame chronicles!" He ran his fingers over his violin but, mercifully, did not take it up.

"But, who ---?"

"Ah ..." he gestured out of the window, "who, indeed?"

"Moriarty?" I ventured. "Lestrade? Mycroft? Mrs Hudson??"

"Not quite!" He took a pinch of snuff. "In fact -- I myself penned this ... pastiche!"

"But ... whatever for, Holmes?"

"Simple! I wanted to challenge our worthy adversary Professor Moriarty to a real test of his not-inconsiderable powers of deduction and composition. If he can turn this ... ragout of words into a viable narrative ..."

"I see! An intellectual exercise! He ---"

"Enough!" Holmes flung off his dressing-gown. "The game's afoot! See to it that the good professor gets this forthwith! I have more important matters to address! A certain giant rat--"

Having engineered the delivery of the puzzle to Moriarty through a network of red-headed intermediaries, and after a brief hiatus in which we dealt with an extremely melodramatic West Country affair concerning a large phosphorescent canine, the reply to our challenge was delivered one gloomy evening by the Sussex Vampire. It read:

SHERLOCK, WORLD SUCCESS (STAR CAREER WELL KNOWN TO YARD POLICE SERVICE) EMERGED FROM DOOR ON ARCA DOCK (SEAS RISE) ONE NIGHT, TOLD MRS ISA DAY, EMBASSY WOMAN (VEIL HORRIBLE HANDS!):

"POSSIBLE SOLUTION! TOMORROW, 1 POCKET ESTATE PLANS, PLACE PRESENTS SOMEWHERE IN WINDOW." [LATER, DURING BREAKFAST]
 "PUNISHMENT! SAMUEL SANDS AVENGED!"

"BUT, MR HOLMES, YOU FEATURE AN ACT OF JUSTICE ... WE TURN SHORTLY ... EVENINGS? WHEN?"

"CAN SPEECH EVER SHOCK? PRINT IT? TRUST AGE, PAST EXISTENCE ... MY CONSCIENCE TAUGHT THE WAY ..."

"Capital!" exclaimed Holmes. "He has fully earned his reward!"

"Which is ---?"

A tiny rictus of amusement appeared briefly on my friend's face. "A one-way ticket to the Reichenbach Falls?"