

CHAPTER I

The Reichenbach Falls

*So please grip this fact with your cerebral tentacle
The doll and its maker are never identical.*

—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle,
London Opinion, December 12, 1912

August 9, 1893

Arthur Conan Doyle curled his brow tightly and thought only of murder.

“I’m going to kill him,” Conan Doyle said as he folded his arms across his broad frame. High in the Swiss Alps, the air tickled Arthur’s inch-thick mustache and seemed to blow straight through his ears. Set far back on his head, Arthur’s ears always appeared to be perking up, listening to something else, something distant and behind him. For such a stocky man, he had a nose that was remarkably sharp. His hair had only recently begun to gray, a process that Arthur couldn’t help but wish along. Though he was but thirty-three years of age, he was already a celebrated author. An internationally acclaimed man of letters with light ocher hair would not do so well as a wizened one, now, would he?

Arthur’s two traveling companions ascended to the ledge on which he stood, the highest climbable point of the Reichenbach Falls. Silas Hocking was a cleric and novelist well known as far away as Arthur’s London. His recent offering of religious literature, *Her Benny*, was a work Arthur held in high regard. Edward Benson was an acquaintance of Hocking’s and was much quieter than his gregarious friend. Though Arthur had met the two men only this morning, over breakfast at the

Rifel Alp Hotel in Zermatt, he felt that he could confide in them safely. He could tell them of his mind, and of his dark plans.

“The fact is, he has gotten to be a kind of ‘old man of the sea’ about my neck,” continued Arthur, “and I intend to make an end of him.” Hocking huffed as he stood beside Arthur, gazing at the vast expanse of the Alps before them. Tufts of snow melted yards beneath their feet into a mighty stream of water that had, millennia ago, driven a path through the mountain as it poured loudly into the frothing pool below. Benson silently pressed a mittenful of snow into a tight ball and dropped it whimsically into the chasm. The force of the wind tore bits off the snowball as it fell, until it disappeared in the air as a series of white puffs.

“If I don’t,” said Arthur, “he’ll make a death of me.”

“Don’t you think you’re being rather rough on an old friend?” asked Hocking. “He’s given you fame. Fortune. You two have made a handsome couple.”

“And in plastering his name across every penny dreadful in London, I’ve given him a reputation which far exceeds my own. You know I get letters. ‘My beloved cat has vanished into South Hampstead. Her name is Sherry-Ann. Can you find her?’ Or, ‘My mum had her purse snatched exiting a hansom in Piccadilly. Can you deduce the culprit?’ But the thing of it is, the letters aren’t addressed to me—they’re addressed to *him*. They think he’s real.”

“Yes, your poor, admiring readers,” pleaded Hocking. “Have you thought of them? People seem so terribly fond of the fellow.”

“More fond of him than of me! Do you know I received a letter from my own Mam? She asked—knowing I would of course do anything she ever required—she asked that I sign the name Sherlock Holmes to a book for her neighbor Beattie. Can you imagine? Sign his name rather than my own. My Mam speaks as if she’s *Holmes’s* mother, not mine. Gah!” Arthur tried to contain his sudden burst of anger.

“My greater work is ignored,” he continued. “*Micah Clarke? The White Company?* That charming little play I concocted with Mr. Barrie? Overlooked for a few morbid yarns. Worse still, he has become a

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waste of my time. If I have to concoct another of those tortuous plots—the bedroom door always locked from the inside, the dead man’s indecipherable final message, the whole thing told wrong end first so that no one can guess the obvious solution—it is a drain.” Arthur looked to his boots, showing his weariness in his bowed head. “To put it frankly, I hate him. And for my own sanity, I will soon see him dead.”

“How will you do it, then?” teased Hocking. “How does one go about killing the great Sherlock Holmes? Stab him in the heart? Slit his throat? Hang him by the neck?”

“A hanging! My, are those words a balm upon my mind. But no, no, it should be something grand—he is a hero, after all. I’ll give him one final case. And a villain. He’ll be in need of a proper villain this time around. A gentlemanly fight to the death; he sacrifices himself for the greater good, and both men perish. Something along those lines.” Benson pounded another snowball into being and lobbed it gently into the air. Arthur and Hocking watched its open-ended arc as it vanished into the sky.

“If you want to save on funeral expenses,” Hocking said with a chuckle, “you could always toss him off a cliff.” He looked to Arthur for a reaction but found no smile on his face. Instead Arthur curled his brow in the tight-faced frown he wore when he was in the midst of his deepest thinking.

He gazed at the jaws of the chasm below. He could hear the roar of the falling water and the violent crush it made at the mouth of the rock-speckled river. Arthur felt himself suddenly terrified. He imagined his own death on those stones. Being a medical man, Arthur was more than familiar with the frailty of the human body. A fall of this height... His corpse banging, slapping against the rocks all the way down... The dreadful cry caught in his mouth... Torn limb from limb on the crust of the earth, the wisps of grass stained with his blood... And now, in his thoughts, his own body vanished, replaced by someone leaner. Taller. A thin, underfed ribbon of a man, in a deerstalker cap and long coat. His hard face obliterated, once and for all, on a spike of gunmetal stone.

Murder.