

RODOLFO MARTÍNEZ

THE WISDOM
OF THE DEAD
THE LOST FILES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES



RODOLFO MARTÍNEZ

THE WISDOM OF THE DEAD

THE LOST FILES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES



First edition: March, 2019

© 2019, Sportula for this edition

© 1996, 2019, Rodolfo Martínez

Originally published in 1996 in Spanish as *La sabiduría de los muertos*

English version by Rodolfo Martínez

with assistance from Rachel S. Cordasco

Cover Art: Johan Swanepoel

Cover Design: Sportula

SPORTULA

www.sportula.es

sportula@sportula.es

SPORTULA and its related logos are trademarks of Rodolfo Martínez

This is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places and events are products of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. For further information, please address the publisher at sportula@sportula.es

JUST A FEW WORDS BEFORE THE NOVEL...

The original version of this novel was published in Spain in 1996. It was, for me, a sort of caprice, something I enjoyed writing but was not sure other people enjoyed reading.

To my surprise it has become, after six Spanish editions with three different publishers, my most reprinted book over the past twenty-three years. And if we take into account its French, Polish, Turkish and Portuguese versions, it is, by far, my most popular international book.

All those years, though, the novel has been in a somewhat paradoxical situation. After all, it is an adventure story about one of the most famous British characters of all time, but the book was not available in English.

The fact that you are reading this means that the issue has been resolved at last. With the valuable assistance of my good friend Rachel S. Cordasco, I have made my Sherlock Holmes speak in his native language. As with my other English translations, it has been a fascinating process, almost as if I was writing the novel again.

All my thanks to Rachel; without her, the final result would have been much poorer, I am sure. If, nevertheless, you find some mistakes along the way, the blame is only on me.

But you are here to read a Sherlock Holmes novel, so go to the next page and find out what the good Dr. Watson is saying this time about his incredible and extraordinary friend.

The game is afoot.

R.M.

February, 2019

There is nothing in which deduction is so necessary as in religion. It can be built up as an exact science by the reasoner. Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers. All other things, our powers our desires, our food, are all really necessary for our existence in the first instance. But this rose is an extra. Its smell and its colour are an embellishment of life, not a condition of it.

Sherlock Holmes in "The Naval Treaty"

PROLOGUE

Until today, my pen has hesitated every time I have tried to write the case in which Mr. Sherlock Holmes and I were involved in early March, 1895. Although during my long association with Sherlock Holmes I have witnessed matters of a most extraordinary, bizarre and even unlikely nature, we seldom found ourselves involved in a mystery that further tested our conceptions of the universe. I fear that, in putting these events on paper, people of this century will take them as octogenarian ravings. I claim that it is not so, but would I not claim the same otherwise? Perhaps my memory may falter, but the detailed notes of the case I took at the time are still at my disposal (in fact, I have them in front of me as I write), and although the memories of the closest events fade away quickly, I keep a clear and precise picture of what happened during the last century. In spite of all this, it is quite possible that my pen would have remained silent had it not been for a recent event, apparently trivial but actually of enormous importance, as you will understand if you keep reading.

A few months ago, a young doctor with whom I had a strong bond of friendship (he had bought my practice in Kensington when I retired from medicine), returned from a holiday in the United States and brought with

him a few copies of a cheap magazine, printed on pulp paper and containing several stories of that genre called “supernatural horror,” clumsily written and crammed with adjectives. I am not very fond of that kind of storytelling, even though in my youth I may have been attracted, but never fascinated, by the feverish imaginations of Mr. Poe, or the primordial worms that emerged from Mr. Stoker’s pen. But in my final years, when I open a book, it is to travel through a familiar and affectionate territory, not to discover that what I thought I knew is full of unexpected corners. I am an old man, and my ultimate aspiration is to pass with tranquillity (even accepting the inevitable aftertaste of boredom this one carries with it) the years, few or many, I have left to live.

However, in several of the stories published in that horrible magazine, I found information that could only have been obtained one way. Their author disguised them as fiction, which did not prevent me from recognizing them, in horror, as the ultimate consequence of the events that took place in late February and early March, 1895. The author’s surname is not entirely unknown to me, nor has it been to Holmes, to whose Sussex residence I sent copies of those stories. His answer, characteristically brief and imperative, was not long in coming: *I think it is a good moment for the world to know, Watson*, in a handwriting that years have not made more hesitant or less peculiar. Yes, I too think the time has come.

Therefore, in this month of May, 1931, and even though my whole soul is asking me to stop, to forget, not to go back in time, I am

beginning what may be my last Sherlock Holmes chronicle. We are in a Century that is no longer ours: horse-drawn carriages have disappeared from the streets of London, airplanes and zeppelins cross the sky, a terrible war separates us from our time, and the world has changed in such a way that nothing is recognizable to me anymore. Sherlock Holmes and I belonged to the 19th Century and I think our readers did, too. It is therefore possible that there is no longer anyone interested in reading what I am about to write. It does not matter; the reward of the writer, the chronicler, the biographer is his own work. The rest is accessory.

I have long since become detached from the London literary world, and with the death of my agent the isolation has become almost complete. Maybe I will not find a publisher for this story. That, however, will not make my pen falter, as it never did in all the years I had the privilege of sharing the life of the most extraordinary, intelligent and kindest man I have ever known.

JOHN H. WATSON M. D.

(Formerly from the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers)

London, May 1931

I
THE EXPLORER THAT NEVER WAS

When I woke up that morning, Holmes had been standing for a while. His breakfast lay on the living room table, half-eaten, and my friend leaned against the window sill, the newspaper bent under his arm and an expression I knew very well on his sharp, dry face.

“Is there something wrong, Holmes?” I asked him as I sat down to breakfast.

“That is what I would like to know, Watson,” he said, stepping away from the window and giving me the newspaper. “Page three, second column.”

While I spread butter on my toast, I took a look at the news Holmes had pointed out to me. It was the announcement of a lecture on the tribal customs of African Bushmen by Norwegian explorer Sigurd Sigerson, who had been living in London for several months. I did not think it was a particularly worthy event for my friend to pay attention to, and I told him so.

“Really?” Holmes replied with a smile. “Your memory is not what it once was. Doesn’t that name Sigerson mean anything to you?”

I tried to remember. The issue came to my mind at once, and it would have done so immediately after reading the news if I had not been still on the threshold of sleep. It had been almost a year since Holmes had reappeared in my life after three years, during which I had believed him to be dead. When we met again, a moment I later detailed as ‘The Adventure of the Empty House,’ Holmes told me he had spent a good part of those three years under the supposed personality of Sigerson, a Norwegian explorer.

“So is there a real Sigerson whose identity you used?” I said aloud.

Holmes gave me a cold look of wounded dignity. As usual, he reacted like a spoiled child whenever someone, inadvertently or on purpose, hurt his vanity.

“My good Watson,” he said with all the solemnity he could muster, “never, as far as I know, has there been a Scandinavian explorer of that name. It was a disguise for me, one of many, and believe me if I tell you I would not have been so irresponsible as to disguise myself as someone already existing, with the consequent risk of my fraud being discovered.”

What my friend said made sense, and I cursed myself for not noticing it sooner.

“So?” I asked, pointing to the newspaper.

“That is the heart of the matter. If Sigerson has never existed, how does he now appear out of nowhere to give a lecture on Bushmen customs?”

I did not answer. The matter intrigued me as much as it intrigued him. Holmes picked up the newspaper and went over the news again, while a

faint danger signal began to light up in my head.

“The lecture will take place this evening at six o’clock. I don’t think it would be a bad thing if we were to make an appearance.”

“Do you think there may be danger?” I said, giving way to my fears.

“My dear friend, nothing is more dangerous than life itself. It will certainly be interesting, that is all I can tell you.”

After breakfast, I read the review more thoroughly. It stated that Sigerson was one of the few white men who had spoken to the Great Lama of Tibet and had managed, disguised as an Arab, to enter Mecca and contemplate the famous black stone of the Kaaba. All of this coincided point by point with what Holmes had told me a year ago about his adventures. It certainly could not be a coincidence. That man, whoever he was, had adopted Sigerson’s personality to attract Holmes’s attention.

“Indeed, Watson,” he said, as if he had read my thoughts. “It is more than likely a trap. If you don’t want to come, I will understand, of course.”

“Holmes, you offend me. I have never let you face danger alone and I am not going to do it now.”

My friend’s sharp face lit up briefly with a smile.

“I expected no less from you, Watson.”

Each of us spent the rest of the morning dedicated to their own affairs: while I was reading Mr. Machen’s last book, recommended by my literary agent, Holmes alternated a couple of chemical experiments with some improvisations on the violin. At the time, my friend had no case on

his hands, and more than once had told me of his boredom. With that thick irony that sometimes characterized him, he complained more than once of the lack of crimes in our city.

“Understand me well, Watson,” he used to say, “I am not advocating for an increase in our criminal population. Without a doubt it has grown more than enough in recent years. It is not so much about the number of crimes committed as it is about their quality, we might say.”

“But Holmes,” I replied, amused by the way my friend contemplated the issue. “Suppose your wishes are fulfilled and London is filled with clever, intelligent and mysterious crimes. What would happen when you retire?”

Invariably Holmes raised an eyebrow at my question:

“What makes you suppose I will retire, Watson?”

“Well,” I said, increasingly perplexed by the turn of the conversation. “Even if you are unwilling to, sooner or later you will have to surrender to the evidence of nature. After all, we are mortal creatures.”

“Really? Perhaps you should not rush to speak for others so quickly, my friend.”

Invariably I took his last words as a pun. And yet, there was always within me the embers of doubt. It is true that Holmes eventually retired from his activity as a consultant detective, but it is not difficult for me to imagine him in years to come, when I have already left this world, walking through his hives and smiling with a certain mischief every time he remembers my audacity in calling him a ‘mortal creature’.

In any case, none of this is relevant to what I am telling, and I apologize to the reader for that. I am afraid I cannot escape the characteristic vice of old age of embarking on endless remembrances. I will try to avoid them in the following pages, but I cannot promise success.

In the evening we called a Hansom and headed for the conference venue, in a little-known club in Pall Mall. Neither of us was a member, but in the newspaper it had been stated that entry would be free for everyone who was interested, so we did not expect that anyone would put the slightest hindrance on us.

At quarter to six we crossed the gates of the Anthropos Club. We expected a scarce attendance composed of rather eccentric people, given the place and the topic of the talk. It was really a surprise to find in the main hall a large audience that seemed very interested in the conference of the so-called Sigerson. I saw some familiar faces, members of the London literary community—I knew most of them, mainly through my literary agent. I also recognized Isadora Persano, the famous journalist and duellist, whose slender and pompous figure immediately made him unmistakable among the public. I was going to tell Holmes about him when he went ahead of me and said:

“Look, Watson. If I am not mistaken, your bulky literary agent is over here.”

I looked where he was pointing, and indeed, that fleshly figure whose back I beheld could only belong to Arthur Conan Doyle. He was speaking to a middle-aged man, somewhat bowed and slightly pompous,

who looked around as if everything in the room belonged to him. Next to him, as if he were in a subordinate place, almost subservient, there was a young man with an elusive look that I found unpleasant at first sight. There was in his ways something reptilian, sinuous and devious that made me feel disgusted just by looking at him.

“Aren’t you go to say hello, Watson?” Holmes asked me, a sly gleaming in his eyes.

I could not help smiling. Arthur Conan Doyle, although he indirectly owed a good portion of his income as a literary agent to my friend and his amazing skills, did not feel very comfortable in the presence of Holmes. I had seen on other occasions people unable to exchange more than half a dozen words with the detective without starting to stutter and get nervous, but that was not Arthur’s reaction. Although he always kept his shape and tried to appear cordial, I had more than once surprised in his eyes a gleam of resentment, of ill-disguised bitterness, when Holmes was present.

In any case, good manners forced me to approach him and make him notice our presence there.

However, such a meeting had to be postponed. At that moment, a door opened on one side of the room and three men entered. One of them, about fifty-something and dressed in ridiculous affectation, could not be other than the Club president or secretary. He exchanged a glance with the man who was talking to Arthur and, after a moment of hesitation, gave way to the other two men. The first one was tall and sturdy, with sharp features, pale face and dark blonde hair, with a small goatee and

two blue, inquisitive eyes; in his gaze there was a twitchy, jumpy glow, as if he was suspicious of what might happen the next moment. The resemblance with Holmes became evident to me at first sight: he had to be the alleged Sigerson. Finally, closing the march came a young man: he was no more than thirty years old, was slightly shorter than the Norwegian explorer, and had such blonde hair that it looked almost white. A smile between sad and biting seemed to be permanently installed at the left corner of his mouth.

The moment the three men walked through the door, a polite applause broke out from the crowd. The Club President swelled even more inside his affected suit and with a slight nod of the head asked for silence. Then he said:

“Gentlemen, I cannot tell you how pleased I am to see so many personalities from the intellectual, scientific and artistic London gathered in this room tonight. Our club, although modest, has always intended to promote the noblest of human activities, as it claims from its very name. It is not sheer vanity if I say that within these venerable walls have spoken musicians, poets and scientists. I know that at the time, many of our members regretted that Sir Richard Francis Burton declined to share with us his experiences in Middle East. I can tell you, not without some pride, that the man we present here today has nothing to envy Sir Richard and I can claim without fear of making a mistake that he has gone even further and been in places that our homeland scout dared not tread. I can only say it is a tremendous pleasure for me to introduce you to an exceptional man of proven courage and scholarship, the first

European to speak to the Great Lama, one of the few Westerners who has seen the black stone of the Kaaba, in short, the most daring and successful of the explorers. Gentlemen, welcome Sigurd Sigerson.”

A new round of applause and the so-called explorer moved forward a couple of steps as he bowed his head. Then we all took our seats, and the lecture on Bushmen customs began.

It would be useless for the reader to ask me for a summary of what that man of boisterous words and wavering manners let fall on us for almost an hour. I am afraid I dozed off a couple of times and only a timely elbow from Holmes saved me from falling out of the seat. I vaguely remember hearing something about Bushmen sleeping on the floor, on their side and leaning on their right elbow, with their heads resting on the same shoulder, apparently to prevent insects from entering the earpieces. It may well be true: I have never seen a Bushman and I have not had the opportunity to check it myself. It was evident, of course, that our speaker was not an Englishman: although he spoke our language fluently, certain turns were somewhat strange to me, and a very slight accent undoubtedly identified him as a foreigner. Of course, that was a must if the impostor wanted to carry out the deception successfully.

At the end of the conference, a brief question session began. I did not understand most of the questions, let alone the answers. Suddenly, to my surprise, Holmes rose and, in a clear voice, said:

“I am sure that Mr. Sigerson, during his travels through Tibet, has witnessed the famous ceremony of the lamas, where they rock the great

monastery incensory, making it reach vertiginous speeds, sometimes. I would like to hear, if you please, a description of the ceremony.”

I saw one of the faces in the audience turn towards us and frown slightly. It was, of course, Dr. Doyle, easily recognizable by his huge walrus moustache, which trembled ostensibly at that time. Almost immediately, perhaps fearful that Holmes would recognize him, he turned his gaze back toward the front. The man accompanying him turned his head slightly and for a few seconds two eyes halfway between interest and alarm were stuck in my friend. Next to him, the reptilian-looking young man (and I realized then he was little more than a boy, hardly in his twenties) stood still and did not even react when the other man leaned towards him and murmured something in his ear.

In the meantime, the lecturer had cleared his throat and began a somewhat muddled answer in which he claimed not to have been in the monastery at the time of the ceremony, but of course he had seen the censor, a true piece of the finest craftsmanship he went on to describe to the smallest of its filigrees and reliefs. The young blonde man sitting next to him widened his half-smile and a funny glare poked out of his gaze.

Shortly afterwards the conference came to an end and the Club secretary (or perhaps its president, I never knew which) sent us off with a pedantic speech of thanks. Then he went down the stage and headed toward Dr. Doyle’s companion. I saw some people from the audience approaching Sigerson, including my literary agent. I exchanged a glance with Holmes, asking him silently about what to do next. My friend shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the exit. However, he paused in

the middle of the movement and, for a few seconds, stood completely still, staring in front him, his eyes narrowed and his features immersed in concentration.

I followed the direction of his gaze. The young blonde man who had accompanied the fake Sigerson approached the boy whose presence had been disturbing me all night and exchanged with him a couple of sentences, always with a half-smile, slightly sardonic, twisting the left side of his mouth. His interlocutor did not react very well to what the other said, seemed for a few seconds on the verge of outrage and finally opted to turn around and approach the pompous man who accompanied Arthur. Apparently, the young man was a sort of secretary or assistant.

The blonde man was left alone and, without losing his half smile, returned to Sigerson's side. He seemed to notice us suddenly and bowed his head, it seemed to me, towards Holmes. My friend greeted him back and we both left the room. We quickly found a car and soon returned to Baker Street.

“What do you think, Watson?” asked my friend.

The bustling London night was unfolding around us. The most important clubs in Pall Mall were filling up, as well as the variety theatres, several streets away. Horse-drawn carriages rattled from one side to the other, taking travellers of all kinds and circumstances to their nightly appointments.

I knew what Holmes was asking me. However, I pretended to interpret his question differently and answered: