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‘... the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside ... Think of the deeds of hellish cruelty, the hidden wickedness which may go on, year in, year out, in such places, and none the wiser.’

Sherlock Holmes, ‘The Adventure of the Copper Beeches’

1

The Holmes Connection

‘The world is full of obvious things which nobody
by any chance ever observes.’

Sherlock Holmes, ‘The Boscombe Valley Mystery’

In 1893, Sherlock-Holmes-mania was in full swing. In fact, it seemed like the whole world was in thrall to the world’s first and greatest consulting detective, with one notable exception – his creator, Arthur Conan Doyle.

Doyle’s fractious relationship with his detective-son was rooted in the author’s hope to be regarded as something more than a scribbler of crime stories. His great desire was to create epics of historical fiction – a sort of Walter Scott for a new generation. The Holmes stories came almost too easily to him – well-paying trifles that distracted him from more serious works like *Micah Clarke* and *The White Company*. As he rattled off tale after tale of Holmes’s exploits for the avid readership of the *Strand Magazine*, his frustration at being pigeonholed grew. If only the damned magazine would not throw so much money at him to write more of the potboilers.

Like a deranged criminal, Doyle saw only one way to free himself from the tyranny of his fictional progeny. He planned to throw Sherlock to his death down an Alpine waterfall – an act he would execute before the year was out. Holmes was to plunge to his seeming

doom over Switzerland's Reichenbach Falls in the story 'The Final Problem'. It would be a literary event of extraordinary magnitude, rendering countless readers bereft. Indeed, when the story was published, crowds of young men gathered at the *Strand's* offices in London wearing black armbands as a symbol of their mourning.

Yet just as Doyle was preparing to consign his most famous son to history, the two men upon whom Holmes was most closely modelled were about to explode into the public consciousness as players in the most talked-about real-life murder trial for years, that of Alfred Monson. To add to the fevered interest, one of them – Joseph Bell – had recently been 'outed' as the primary inspiration for Baker Street's most beloved resident. That a similar connection had not been drawn with Henry Littlejohn is testament to the unfussy way in which Bell and Littlejohn joined forces to investigate their real-life cases. So how had the lives of Bell, Littlejohn and Doyle become interweaved?

Their combined story begins at Edinburgh University in 1876, when Doyle took up his medical studies there while Bell and Littlejohn were two of the most respected men on the faculty.

Bell had been born in Edinburgh in 1837 into an esteemed medical family. That he would pick up the professional mantle was all but inevitable, but his natural feel for medicine (as both a practitioner and teacher) was still breathtaking. He finished his formal studies at the university's Medical School in 1859 and subsequently served as house surgeon to Professor James Syme, the great pioneering surgeon of his generation. Then, at the age of just twenty-six, Bell was tasked with organizing classes in systematic and operative surgery at the university.

Remarkably, given this blistering start to his career, he kept up the pace for years to come. Mid-century Edinburgh was a hotbed of progressive medical practice and social reform, and, as the likes of Syme reached the end of their working lives, Bell became a leading figure in moving things on again. Not only were his students trained

to the highest levels, but he also sought to refine and improve the systems in which medical professionals worked. He was, for instance, a great mentor of nurses, recognizing their importance in the delivery of the best medical care rather than viewing them as lowly skivvies as had hitherto been their more usual fate. In his desire to elevate the professional standing of nursing, he became a friend and confidant of Florence Nightingale, even dedicating his book – *Some Notes on Surgery for Nurses* – to her in 1887. Among his many other achievements, he was elected president of the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh, campaigned to have women admitted to the city’s Medical School, was the first surgeon at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children (an institution that opened in 1860 after years of campaigning by Bell and a number of his colleagues, not least Littlejohn), and still found time to edit the *Edinburgh Medical Journal* for almost a quarter of a century. Away from medicine, he was a devout churchgoer, a justice of the peace and a deputy lieutenant (that is to say, the hand-picked assistant of the Queen’s personal representative in the local county). In short, he was a doer on a grand scale, driven by a genuine desire to improve the conditions of his fellow citizens.

Nor was Littlejohn any less energetic, despite being the older man by some eleven years. He, too, was an Edinburgh native, but his pathway into medicine was a much less obvious one. His father had been a master baker and Henry, the seventh of nine children, might have got lost in the crowd. But his passion for medical knowledge won through and he graduated from the city’s university in 1847. He then spent a year working on the continent before returning to his hometown as assistant pathologist at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary.

In this role, Littlejohn became intimately familiar with death in many, varied and often gruesome forms. It was a natural move, then, when he became Edinburgh’s police surgeon in 1854. This was a post that made many demands on his time. He was not only responsible