

Preface

“The Roslin Mystery” by Professor Charles Cordiner

Since the successful conclusion of the affair of *The Dilatory Calvinist*, my promising young pupil, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, has been wont to correspond with me in many cases, some of which must forever remain protected from the public gaze, for they involve the very highest personages of the Realm. However, I understand that he is detained in Switzerland on important business, so I am unable to offer a full explanation for *The Roslin Mystery*, which I now lay before you as the Preface to a far less interesting work.

The facts, which will be familiar to readers of the police-reports in *The Scotsman*, are as follows: on the morning of Wednesday, the fifteenth of April, 189-, the Reverend Barnetson of Roslin in Mid-Lothian made a gruesome discovery in the policies of his Free Church Manse. You must know that his garden is a righteous one, being divided equally between: a variety of shrubs and restrained plants framing a considerable area of grass; and a utilitarian vegetable plot, which is tended faithfully by his wife. At each corner of the square of grass stands a solid pole to support a drying-line, each pole made of cast-iron, painted emerald-green against the weather, and shaped at the top in the form of pineapple. It must be observed that the famous Chapel of Rosslyn is visible from the front door of the Manse: some hold this proximity to have a bearing upon the Mystery. It goes without saying that I do not.

At around seven o'clock on this bright, but blustery, April morning, the general servant, Isabelle McLaggan, went out to the garden to hang out some clothes which she had just put through the mangle in the scullery. Distracted by a blackbird which was worrying worms in the shrubs, she did not lift her eyes until the very last moment. The sight, which she then beheld, robbed her of speech, and consciousness: hanging upon one of two diagonally-opposed drying-line-poles was a blood-stained cloak, a helmet, gloves and a curved sword; hanging on its opposite partner, a man's coat, stained with gore. Blood had coursed down the poles and discoloured the surrounding grass.

The maid, not unnaturally, fell to the ground in a swoon, as is not uncommon in females whose skull has an melonoid shape. About fifteen minutes later, Mrs. Barnetson, wondering where the girl had got to, and requiring her assistance for the stirring of the porridge, erupted into the garden, and came upon the grisly scene. Having the contours of her skull quite differently from the maid, she did not faint, but screamed loudly and long; at such a volume, indeed, that the local police-constable, Mr. Ross, who was passing down the road on his bicycle, in pursuit of a master-criminal from Roslin Glen, immediately rushed round the side of the house to investigate the disturbance.

Having rendered assistance to the maid, and to the outraged feelings of Mr. Barnetson, who had emerged from his study of the Book of Ezekiel, the constable examined the gory stage on which this melodrama had unfolded. Apart from the blood-stained clothes, the Constable observed, written on the back wall, in large letters incarnadine, the incomprehensible words **NI VENKOS ! OVIKOB** ! There were also sundry shattered pieces of wood, and two broken wooden wheels. And, in the centre of the grass, a tin box, such as a man might use to keep safe his important documents. This strong-box had evidently been hurled to the ground with some force, for it stood with one corner embedded some three inches in the damp

turf. Its lock had burst open, and the lid was twisted. A number of papers lay scattered about on the grass, some muddied, others bloodied, many more snared upon the thorns and branches of the surrounding bushes and trees.

Being himself an enthusiastic follower of my protégé Mr. Holmes, Constable Ross very correctly did not disturb the scene with his boots, and watched that no one else should destroy any evidence which might be contained in the slightest broken blade of grass. Standing on a spot which he judged would provide him with the widest panorama of the scene, he looked carefully about him. He noted down the words scrawled on the wall. He observed the prints of two pairs of boots, crossing to the back wall. Inspecting the wall more closely, he discovered, from various scrapes and marks, that two men, bleeding profusely, had climbed the wall and jumped over into the field behind it; there were two sets of foot-prints and two trails of blood leading across the field to the Railway Station, which lies barely one hundred yards distant.

And then, as he turned his attention once more to the drying-green, his eyes lighted upon a third figure, an ancient man, half-concealed in the upper part of a rosemary-bush at the side of the garden. The old man was alive; but neither then, nor since, did he utter a single sensible word, or react to any external stimulus.

On account of my reputation in the district as the sometime mentor of Mr. Holmes, a fact to which I may have alluded already, Ross immediately despatched a boy to Mavisbank House, where I had been commissioned to conduct a scientific survey of the relative skull-shapes of the Residents; he requested my urgent attendance at the scene. I was at my breakfast when the summons arrived, but, such was the gravity of Mr. Ross's message, that I stopped only to drink two last cups of tea, before Henry Smail, whom I retain here as my coachman, drove me in my carriage to Roslin. I have named my carriage *The Nemesis*; under my guidance, Mr. Smail has painted it in black with silver wheels, with silvered curtains to the windows, and a large pair of golden wings at the rear of the roof, by which we may fly faster to our destination. Mr. Smail has also done me the goodness of painting the likeness of flames bursting from above the wheels, to indicate our aspirations to swiftness. The whole effect is emphasised by a mechanism for low suspension, built for me by Mr. Cosworth of Penicuik, which gives the appearance of soaring above the surface of the roads. We travelled, therefore, at a smart pace, and came within barely twenty minutes to the Manse; by then, the entire population of Roslin had been alerted and was gathered around the gate. As is frequently the case with the more impressionable classes, a nonsensical rumour was already circulating that the mysterious forces centred on the Chapel had, once more, exacted human sacrifice. Ross had the whole thing under his control, however, and a passage was made for me so that I could examine the scene in more detail.

I found the back garden exactly as described above. I confess that, in my long and distinguished career as Professor of Phrenology at the Marischal College of the University of Fraserburgh, I have never seen, or heard tell of, a more macabre spectacle! Indeed, in my eighty-one years of life, I have never set eyes on, or had reported to me, a more grisly sight! It was abhorrent in the extreme. However, I gathered my powers of logic and, taking care not to disturb the ground, I made a careful examination of each of the drying-poles in turn. I could tell at once that the clothes belonged to men, one being around fifty years of age, with thinning red hair, the other being dark in appearance, aged perhaps twenty-five. From a close examination of the trousers, I determined that the younger one was probably a medical man from the Colonies, and a dedicated smoker of cheap cigarettes; while

the older man, owner of the cloak and helmet, had the gait of an artist, the skull of an artisan, and the digestion of a neglected bachelor.

Realising that the strewn papers could hold valuable information, I ordered Ross to gather together as many of them as could be found. He himself garnered those which were within the policies, meanwhile recruiting an eager band of by-standers to search the neighbouring church-yard, surrounding woodland and lanes for any which might have escaped. Having done this, Ross made it his business to pursue the trail to the Railway Station where, it was confirmed, two men of dishevelled appearance had indeed boarded the early train for Edinburgh; but no one had thought to apprehend them, despite their curious appearance: Mr. Lorimer, the Station-Master, had not wished to challenge two such desperate-looking men.

For my own part, I turned my attention to the many pieces of garishly-painted wood which were scattered about, and deduced that together they had once formed a small carriage, or perhaps a large hand-barrow. Some Oriental characters were painted upon the surfaces, and I determined that I should consult on the meaning of these, at the very next opportunity, with the gentleman who supplies me with opiates.

It is well that I have trained my mind over many decades to detect small items which are commonly over-looked by others, and most particularly the Police. For it was only thus that I observed, hanging from a dismal frame for the disciplining of beans, a bag which was found to contain a considerable amount of oats. Mrs. Barnetson denied hysterically that she had ever seen this bag before, and swooned. But my growing suspicions were confirmed not many minutes later, when I hit my foot upon a metallic object embedded in the lawn, which discomfited me for a moment. On closer examination of my badly-scraped leather over-shoes, however, my annoyance turned to pleasure when I found the impediment to be a brass horse-shoe; and, not far off, I quickly discovered three of its companions, two of brass, one of common iron.

I made my way to the bush in which the shrivelled old man was still perched, and tried to engage him in conversation: to no avail. The ancient stared steadfastly before him, dribbling slightly, his leathery hands clutching the handle of a stick. The size and shape of his skull interested me greatly, for his craniognomy spoke to me of a mighty mind and a courageous character. Reaching up, I probed his temples carefully, and examined the solid ridge at the back of the skull. I considered him to be Mediterranean in origin, owing to the extreme tanning of his skin. His poor dress, too, marked him out as a foreigner, being of a cut unknown to me; and my responsibility as a man in the public eye requires me to take note of the modern fashions, to be à-la-mode. Knowing a little French, Italian and Spanish from juvenile Tours of the Continent, I plied him with some phrases - largely, I confess, revolving around the quality of hotels in these parts and the potability of the waters - but obtained no reaction of any sort.

This was very frustrating! Here was one who may have seen the entire tragedy unfold before him, like a man in the front row of Her Majesty's Theatre; and yet he neither spoke, nor gave any sign that he was aware of my presence. It is my experience that, in such cases of shock, a lively dose of strychnine and brandy does the trick; but I had, alas, omitted to bring any along with me. I asked Mr. Barnetson to extricate the old gentleman from the bush, and place him on the bench which stood in the middle of the vegetable-patch. As he did so, we were both quite startled to find that the bush was alive with dozens of mice, which fled squeaking in all directions at the disturbance; there was great consternation among the female on-lookers, but all the mice escaped into the surrounding country-side, pursued by a

loud extemporised sermon from Mr. Barnetson, on the matter of Plagues and Vengeance; never to be seen again. When the old man was free, I tapped him firmly upon his chest in an attempt to force his attention; as I did so, I noticed a piece of paper protruding from a pocket of his top-coat. Gently, I prised it out, eliciting absolutely no reaction from the old man, save that he dribbled copiously upon my kid-glove.

On the piece of paper were written the following words or letters:

Ebo payagobs e pacödobs, ibo dels ebeigoloms kü äyagobs. Eketobs, ab esötobs libön. Elitobs adelaliti nabik su vegi nefinik kel dugos äl odelo; e sikod efalobs.

I have not been able to make much sense of these words, which seem in some way related to the curious exhortations painted on the wall. I present them to you simply as more details in this great mystery. Perhaps a Professor of Languages will find enough, in the pages which will follow my Prefatory Remarks, to de-cipher the code in which they are written. My colleague, Dr. Chartres, has been in telepathic contact with the world-renowned archaeologist, Herr Professor Sigismond Bugarschitz of Vienna, on this very matter, but so far without illumination. If any *academic* reader decrypts these words, then perhaps we can publish together a Paper in one of the Journals of the Institutes. Until then, much that is baffling will necessarily remain so.

After an hour of the most careful observation of the drying-green, I concluded that a horse and its cart were central to this whole mystery. I had discovered wheels, oats, horse-shoes. I had discovered three men apparently hurled some distance through the air, and suffering appalling injury as a result. My mind, prowling hither and thither like the wolf, had also noted the proximity of the Roslin Gun-Powder Works, those many Satanic Mills which lie along the banks of the River Esk, grinding innocent materials into the smokeless powder of War and Mutual Destruction. I recalled also that the horses used by the Gun-Powder Works were always shod in brass, to prevent sparks. Is it not probable, I propose, that a cart had left Roslin Glen to deliver the periculous wares to one of the near-lying coal-mines, to Bilston perhaps, and that, as they passed down the road outside, a spark from that single iron horse-shoe, over-looked by some careless stable-lad, had ignited the materials. The cart, its occupants, and the unfortunate horse, would thus have been blown high into the air, over the roof of the Manse, and into the back-garden. Two of the men, no doubt dazed and bleeding, had fled the scene; their older companion plunged into the rosemary-bush, which was as soft as the many cushions in my *equipage sportif*, and so survived unscathed. As for the horse, alas, all that remained were its four shoes and its nose-bag; doubtless, its mortal remains are even now being scavenged by hoodie crows and snarling dogs.

(I am obliged to pour ridicule over the tentative explanation of my ill-trained colleague, Dr. Lyon, who later reminded us that the Greek hooligan, Phaeton, had driven the chariot of the Sun, failed to control the horses, and had been struck from his carriage by a thunderbolt from Zeus, falling into the River Eridanus, afterwards to be mourned by his sisters, who were transformed into trees and their tears to amber. Lyon expects us to believe that something similar occurred in the air above Roslin, with the River Esk standing in for the Eridanus! The man is clearly an imbecile.)

The Reverend Barnetson argued stubbornly against my scientific deduction: he stated that not one of the residents of the Manse - being himself and his wife, their sombre sons, William and Horatius, and their friend and lodger, Miss Napier, a school-

teacher - had heard any explosion, noise or ill-mannered disturbance, such as would have been the inevitable accompaniment to such an accident as I have out-lined. But, as I have said and taught on many occasions: if we work solely from the facts, the one deduction at which we arrive, however improbable, must of course be the correct one. Upon my close and insistent questioning of young Master Horatius in a secluded spot, he admitted tearfully that his family are heavy sleepers. And so I rest my case.

Since the bright morning had by this time turned to a cold, overcast day, with the threat of drizzle, I decided to return home for more tea. I satisfied myself that the correct police authorities had been alerted, and were even then on their way from Edinburgh by the fastest possible transport. I then summoned Smail to return me to Mavisbank. The young man willingly came from the crowd of by-standers and loafers to find me. He seemed hardened enough to the sight of gore and horror: he is, after all, a native of Jedburgh, and I suppose they do things differently in those border-lands. However, he cried out with surprise, and turned to me: "Surely, sir, those belong to Mr. Justice and Mr. Bosman! Do you not remember?"

I confess I had little memory of the more recent events and visitors to Mavisbank, being wrapped up entirely in my measurements and craniological deductions. I am prey to periods of distraction, arising from my dedication to Science. It is a habit I have passed on to my very capable young student and Alumnus of Fraserburgh's Marischal College, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. It was therefore impossible for me to recall the two individuals of whom Smail evidently had strong memories. Without flinching, he stepped up close to the two garments in turn, as they creaked and dripped slowly in the gathering breeze. "Yes," he confirmed, examining the trousers of the darker and younger of the two missing men, "This is poor Dr. Bosman! And that is his friend, Mr. Justice. I wonder..." I observed my young friend's eyes wandering over the rest of the garden, until they lighted upon the Methuselah seated among the new potatoes. "God save us all!" he cried impropitiously, and to the icy disapprobation of Mr. Barnetson. He pointed in excitement, "And that is Sir Thomas himself, as lively as he ever was!"

After this moment of melo-drama, I persuaded Constable Ross that the old man be allowed to return with myself and Smail to the comfort of Mavisbank House. I surmised that, if I were permitted to trepan his skull, I might relieve pressure on the brain therein, and perhaps get some sense from him. I have found this treatment to be a remarkable cure for many ailments and vices, most successfully with the wayward youths of Inverallochy. And what a paper I could write on such a subject! My already illustrious career would be crowned in glory! I itched to approach him with my craniometer. Therefore, we wrapped him in a horse-blanket which Mrs. Barnetson was good enough to provide, and coursed homewards in our low-slung *Nemesis*.

Over the next few days, the Police Detectives considered the matter as best they could. They discussed the case amongst themselves; they trampled over the Reverend Barnetson's garden until it resembled - so I am told - a field of battle; they came to talk to the ancient man known as Sir Thomas. They did not consider my opinions of any value; and I offered them none in return. At last, they retreated to their temple on George the Fourth Bridge in Edinburgh, and considered the whole case "a mere local curiosity", quite outwith their narrow sphere of interest. If Constable Ross is to be believed, the detectives were far more excited by the

newspaper reports of an audacious robbery of the mails from the Dover to Calais ferry by a gang of ruffians led by a young gentleman of seventy-two years of age.

After the departure of the Detectives, Constable Ross was able to furnish me with all the papers which had been gathered up from the scene of the mystery; the Edinburgh Police having determined that they had little or no bearing upon the horrible events of the night of the fourteenth of April. Some of the papers were in shocking condition, being - as I have suggested - covered in blood and gore, or ripped to tatters by the hawthorn and the gorse, nibbled by squirrels, shredded by hedgehogs, or pecked by birds.

But, with the desultory assistance of my contemporary Dr. Felix R. Lyon and the young Irish cleric Dr. William Chartres, I was able to piece together a document of passing interest, written by the aforementioned Mr. Justice, which is now presented for public examination as ***A Hand-Book of Volapük and Elementary Manual***. Mr. Justice evidently had advanced plans for the publication of this work, having prepared title-page, a List of Contents and an extensive Appendix. It is my duty to publish Mr. Justice's work by proxy, although I have no great hopes of its success.

Several chapters are missing from the original schema for the work. It is clear that some of the more uncouth residents of the Esk Valley had used the paper as an unexpected windfall with which to replenish their supplies for out-houses or "cludgies"; that the local grocer, Mr. Glover, has found it convenient to wrap his carrots and cauliflowers in such papers as fluttered into his yard; that birds and other untamed beasts of the wood had found the material most suitable for lining their nests; and that peasants had found the paper useful for lighting their pipes and poisoning the airs with their tobacco fumes. By a strange and opportune chance, the papers which are missing relate principally to the proposed final three Chapters of Justice's *magnum opus* - to wit: **The Frequentative and Aorist Forms; The Prepositions and Derived Prepositions; Idiomatic Expressions, And Miscellania**. My colleague Dr. Lyon has taken it upon himself, therefore, to assemble all the relevant and incomplete papers into a single final Chapter: I cannot condone this liberty, but I do not feel responsible for it. A "Transaction", or discussion-paper, mentioned by the evasive Mr. Justice *à propos* "**Writing for the Blind**", has also gone astray: perhaps all the missing pages will turn up as linings in kitchen drawers!

In considering the papers of Mr. Justice which follow, let it not be forgotten that I am a Scientist, trained in the study of the Human Skull, and a master of my subject. I never considered myself to be a Literary Executor or Editor, and have neither the patience to undertake such a task, nor any pertinent training in the Art - or otherwise - of Language.

If there are mistakes in any of the papers which now follow, or if the work seems obscure, it is none of my doing. I have ceded full responsibility for examining the linguistic details in the papers to Dr. Chartres, being a self-proclaimed student of two European tongues. For his part, Dr. Lyon has been asked to furnish logical explanations for some of the gaps in the text; to this end, he has consulted with Dr. Iain Hutchison, the Chief Resident of Mallendo College in Musselburgh, whose several insights into the beneficial effects of ozone cannot have failed to escape the attention and admiration of every Rational Man in Scotland.

And now, I have my own interests to pursue. I have not yet had the opportunity to trepan the skull of the old gentleman, Sir Thomas; and I understand that a lady from Edinburgh is to come soon, for to return him to his lands in Cromarty. The only words he has uttered, repeatedly, and to my distraction, are:

Baltumlulsefol mugs ebinoms,
Glekalodik in sil esenoms.
Efidoms lieni,
Emekoms vamik bedi,
Obik vab e mugs efaloms.

Mr. Smail suggested that the doggerel resembled a “Limerickal”; I have no idea what he means by this, although Dr. Chartres, a native of Ireland, may find hidden signification. But if the opportunity for Phrenological Examination should slip, I will not be discomfited: my studies on a grander scale will be more revelatory. It is my belief that all the troubles of this present month can be traced back to villains of a certain craniological type. If we were to examine the skulls: of the natives who caused the recent Disaster at Manipur; of the agitators and fomenters of the General Strike in Belgium; of the organizers of the International Conference of Mine-Workers in Paris: then it is my premise that there would be but a single shape and size of skull common in all cases. I shall scrutinize all the newspaper reports for clues. My work is of the utmost importance to the survival of Western Civilization: I would therefore ask to be left alone in future.

Mavisbank,
May, 189-