

MARTIN ALLISON BOOTH

THE
REICHENBACH
PROBLEM
A NOVEL



LION FICTION

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To Maggie, Emma and James with love

Author note: This is a work of fiction. While it uses certain facts about Conan Doyle's background, it does not purport to be an accurate historical record of all the events occurring in his life at the time this story is set.

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And finally, I am most particularly grateful to Arthur Conan Doyle, for the years of delight he has given me and countless others. Although this book is a work of fiction, I have attempted to include as many aspects of his life and work as possible. In doing so, I hope I have been faithful to the spirit and genius of the man, even if I have been forced to take liberties with the facts once in a while. Making the facts fit the case? I can hear Sherlock harrumph over my shoulder even now!

“Off abroad again, are we, doctor?”

“Yes, I’m visiting some friends in Vienna, then on Saturday I shall be travelling overnight to Zürich and on to a village near Interlaken.”

“Oh, very nice. Switzerland. I’ve heard it’s most invigorating.”

“So I understand. I have never been there before.”

“Nice little holiday for you, then, doctor. I’ll just pop the valise and the trunks on the four-wheeler and we’ll be off. Waterloo, is it, sir?”

“Waterloo, please, yes.”

ONE

I was still not quite sure when, exactly, my disinclination towards people began. I know, though, that it had a great deal to do with the bane of my life – the great Mr Sherlock Holmes.

I suppose, at mid-morning on a Sunday, if I had wanted to get away from people, Zürich Station was not the ideal place. It was teeming with humanity. The only good thing about it was that it was summer, so everybody was bustling about with less luggage and lighter clothing. A small benefit, but nevertheless evident, as it made my journey through this human torrent marginally less difficult.

I had spent the first three days in Vienna with the friends Touie and I had met when I was studying ophthalmology there. My family was unable to accompany me. Mary, our daughter, was still very young; it was Touie, though, who insisted I go. We were expecting our second child, and Touie herself was not in the best of health. Gentle, sweet, kind Touie, who endured my restlessness, coped with my bouts of depression, and watched me struggle with my preoccupations. Now I was on the way to reconnoitre Switzerland. It was our hope that we may come here for the summer next year. I had heard good things about the country, not least from our friends, yet was determined to ensure everything was satisfactory before I risked my very young family's health and well-being on a sojourn abroad.

I had other motives as well, however.

I waded the stream of humankind and followed the porter with his barrow, wheeling my trunks, onto the platform where the train for Interlaken stood steaming quietly to itself.

It was an indulgence, I know, but I had decided to travel First Class; after all, I had begun to harvest a semblance of an income from my stories. My need to avoid as much of humanity as possible on this occasion necessitated it. Rarely would the carriages I would

travel in be full. In addition, even if there were other occupants, we, as a class, would keep ourselves to ourselves. In the frame of mind I had, this was very much a mercy, and one I would jealously guard.

I was well aware that Sherlock Holmes had already brought me a degree of fame and fiscal comfort. It would be churlish of me to begrudge him the beneficial effect he'd had on my, and my family's, life. However, with that fame or, I would prefer, notoriety, I had lost any privacy I had ever had. I was no longer able to walk along the street in Norwood without one wag or other nudging his or her companion and crying out, "Ho – Conan Doyle! Elementary, my dear Watson!" or some such witticism. Of course, not everybody in the world recognized me. However, Norwood was a small suburban community and, even thus removed from London, people had seen my picture in the press, or on a fly-poster, or in a bookshop window.

It had been suggested to me that my splendid moustache was the primary identifying feature and that perhaps, if I were that concerned, I might shave it off. However, I resented the notion that public pressure of any sort might force me to change any aspect of my personality or appearance.

It would be rare, therefore, for me not to be accosted by someone or other at least twice a day, every day of the week – on the street, in a restaurant, on the train. This had gone on for a number of months. It was starting to affect Touie, too. After nearly a year of being pointed at, leered over and laughed behind, the novelty of celebrity had begun to pall in the Conan Doyle household.

Switzerland, at least, offered me respite. I didn't know it and, more importantly, it didn't know me. I pushed my valise up onto the leather webbing luggage rack above my head, and settled back onto the seat cushions. I turned off the lamp beside my left ear and, with a long, lingering sigh, closed my eyes. Less than five minutes later, I sensed that activity had increased outside. There was a sound of people bustling, one or two were running, and others were calling to one another. I opened my eyes. A porter hurried

past, followed by a large lady in a large hat in which appeared to nestle a complete pheasant. Then came the sound I was waiting to hear, the guard's whistle. Looking out of my compartment window across the corridor on the platform side, I was startled a moment later to discover a pair of grey eyes looking straight back in at me. These were lodged beneath a bowler hat and set in a lean, lightly tanned face that had a few days' stubble on the chin. It was a young man who, apparently, had been jogging along the platform and had hesitated for a moment outside my window. Just as quickly as our eyes had met, they separated; he had averted his, and had recommenced his pressing trot along the platform.

The guard blew his whistle again, this time with a degree more urgency, and the action of slamming doors and calling out became general. This was immediately followed by a familiar sequence. A long loud blast on the train's whistle, a great huff of pent-up energy being expressed by the locomotive, and a series of judders and clanks. About thirty yards ahead of me, great pistons were bearing down on huge wheels, forcing them to obtain purchase on the iron rails and overcome the inertia created by ton upon ton of, up until that moment, lifeless metal and wood; hopefully thereby dragging me and this whole miracle of man's ingenuity on towards Interlaken.

Good, I remember thinking, I have the carriage to myself. I looked again out onto the platform, only to discover my view interrupted by a charcoal grey woollen waistcoat. A man was standing in the corridor, blocking my view, lurching as the train lurched and gathered speed. Then he leaned back, clasped the handle of the compartment door and drew it open. I barely managed to conceal my irritation that, at the last moment, my splendid isolation was going to be ruined by a companion for at least part of the journey.

The man, who was the same as the one who had looked in at me, flung his travelling bag onto the luggage rack. He then flung himself onto the seat diagonally across from mine. He let out a long whistle, followed by a whoosh of air, suggesting that he was pleased

with himself and that he wanted me, for some reason, to know this. I had closed my eyes the moment I had realized the intruder was intent on settling in my compartment. The noises he made, which practically echoed the locomotive's on coming to life, caused me to open one eye and look across at him.

He was looking at me.

"Full," he said, and jerked his grizzled chin in the general direction of the rest of the train.

"First Class," I replied, and jerked my head at the golden numeral 1, painted on the window beside me.

"I know." He grinned and shrugged. "I'll have to pay extra, I imagine. Oh well, I suppose it will be worth it." There was a pause, and then, "English?"

"Irish," I growled, just to be difficult. It seemed to hold him. I could have said Scots if I'd preferred. I had spent most of my life in England, but was of Irish stock, and had been born in Edinburgh.

We sat in silence for a while, watching central Zürich pirouette away from us through our respective windows while drawing into view row upon row of the terraced cottages which comprised the city's immediate suburbs. I can think of no better experience than sitting on a comfortable train watching a grimy city loosen its grip on me, and allow its huddled suburbs usher me into the lush countryside.

I swam up and out of my thoughts and, once again, noticed those keen grey eyes contemplating me. I knew what was coming next.

"You're Doyle, aren't you? Sherlock Holmes and all that."

I tried to bluff it out.

"That's what a lot of people think," I replied.

He laughed. It was a nervous laugh. "Oh, very good. Yes. I wouldn't imagine you're very fond of people accosting you all the time. That's a very clever answer you have worked out there. To people who aren't sure, it can mean 'no – I'm not' and they back away; to those who are sure, and persist, well – you haven't lied to them, have you?" He paused and gave me a grin, which I supposed he intended to suggest complicity; to sympathize with what we celebrities had to

put up with; to let me know that he wasn't any common-or-garden member of the public. To reassure me that I could, even, rely on him to be a species of intimate. A friend, perhaps.

They were the worst type.

"I don't blame you for being coy," he continued. "It must be an awful bore to have people recognizing you wherever you go and making a fuss..."

"Yes, it is," I responded.

He didn't take the hint. He looked out across the row upon row of low roofs curling past the window and continued, "... no – I don't blame you. Utter wretches they must be." He considered my plight a moment longer and then spat out his conclusion: "Why don't they just leave you alone?"

There was, I felt, no answer to that.

A further silence held us, for which I was grateful. Eventually, assuming the conversation – if one could call it that – had ended, I reached down my newspaper from my valise, shook it into a readable shape, and began to scan the inside pages. It was a five-day-old *London Times*. I had bought it at Newhaven just before boarding the steamer to Dieppe, and had dipped into it ever since; savouring every paragraph as if it were my last. It would be some time before my Swiss hotel may supply me with an English newspaper – if they were able to – and, even then, it would most probably be a week out of date at the very least.

I found I was unable to concentrate on the words, however. Generally, I am a traveller who likes best of all just to sit and stare out of the window. Many hours can pass by satisfactorily in this way, I have found. I have even come to the conclusion that time itself takes on a different form when travelling. It is as though the faster one travels, the quicker it seems to pass. The main reason, though, for my sitting and staring at the scenery is that it allows me space to think. In the hurly-burly of my London and literary existence, I rarely get the opportunity to think. I imagine it is the reason I try to get away so often.

The newspaper, on this occasion, therefore, was simply a screen. I found, though, that it wasn't working. My companion's presence was distracting, and it was very galling. After a few minutes of trying to read and failing miserably, I lowered the broadsheet and laid it on the seat cushion beside me. Inadvertently, by doing so, I found myself glancing across at the young man again. He was observing me. How long he had been doing so, I could not estimate. There was one occasion, among many such incidents, in one of the dining rooms at the Langham, when a young woman at another table found that she could not take her eyes off me. I am not that fascinating. It was most disturbing to be scrutinized while eating, as though I were an exhibit. She at least had the courtesy to apologize on her way out at the end of her meal. I put it down, therefore, to the fascination of celebrity, which it was, of course. I wondered then, as I did now, whether I would not have been the same, as a younger man, should I have chanced across Stevenson or James or Poe in a restaurant. The thought of that young woman, and her flustered apology, to an extent gave me pause. I had hardened my heart towards someone I didn't even know. In truth, I had hardened it towards the general public as a whole of late. Yet it was not their fault. It was not his fault. It was Sherlock Holmes's fault.

"Beautiful day," I ventured, but not with any real warmth.

"Beautiful." He continued to look out of the window. I could see, even from the angle at which I was sitting, that he had allowed himself a smile. As if he were bucked that I had spoken to him of my own volition.

"Have you visited Switzerland before?"

"No, never." He turned to face me.

"Neither have I. Although I am led to understand it is all beautiful – once you get out of the cities."

He looked again out of the window. We were starting to break out and into a stretch of scenery that featured rising land, meadows and the occasional meandering burn. "Charming," he breathed.

This little exchange had enabled me to observe my travelling companion more closely. He was about ten years younger than me, in his early twenties, and reasonably presentable. His tan was new, like mine, and he was unshaven. He had an underlying nervous energy about him that reminded me of when I was his age; that fidgety, driving will to get on in the world, frustrated by lack of experience and opportunities for preferment. Most interesting, to my mind, were his clothes. The bowler hat, now perched on the cushion beside him, the waistcoat, the city boots and the grey worsted suit all spoke to me of a bank clerk or an office worker rather than a gentleman tourist. Young men of limited means rarely have sufficient funds for a truly comprehensive travelling wardrobe, but there was that in his whole aspect which told me that he was not in Switzerland for his health. Grudgingly, for I wished it were otherwise, I allowed my curiosity to get the better of me.

“Are you travelling far?” I asked.

“Don’t know,” he replied. His conversation had descended into the familiar rather too precipitously for my liking.

“Don’t know?” I echoed, despite myself. I had not intended to interrogate the fellow.

“Haven’t decided yet,” he explained. “Sort of spur of the moment thing, really.”

“Ah,” I responded.

Not married, then, perhaps. Certainly his outer clothes and his shirt were crumpled; his collar unstarched. What wife would allow a husband to journey in such a state? Not that that was any proof, either way, but it did not, at least, disprove my view.

“Where are you going?” he enquired.

I told him.

“Where’s that?”

“High in the mountains. In the middle of nowhere, really. The air is cleaner, the sun is brighter and the world is quieter. Fresh, green meadows all around, yet just a short march away, the snow

line and then the Eiger, the Mönch and the Jungfrau – among the highest peaks in Europe.”

He was impressed, possibly by the fact that I had been so expansive after having been so taciturn; some may say brusque. For my part, I was perturbed at my own talkativeness. It was not my habit to wax lyrical in the company of strangers. Yet there was an aspect about the man that had drawn it out of me.

I think it was loneliness.

Either his or mine, I couldn't be sure.

After a few moments he nodded, slapped his hands firmly down on his knees, as if he had just won an argument, and declared, “That's decided, then. That's where I'm going, too.”

I was appalled. To have this chap accompany me all the way, and then to have him bumping into me at every turn, to bore into me with his grey eyes across every restaurant, was too much. The village I was going to was tiny; we couldn't fail to encounter one another every day.

“You haven't the right clothing...” I blurted out. It was all I could think of.

“No, you're right. Thanks,” he replied gratefully, as if I had given him a traveller's exclusive insight. “I'll buy some when I get there.”

“So, what have you got in your luggage?” I asked, or rather demanded to know.

“Not much. Just a few bits. Thrown together. Left in a rush.” He shrugged and looked up at the luggage rack above his head. I glared up there as well, as if it were the bag's fault. The case appeared brand new and it wasn't English. Swiss, perhaps; possibly French. I couldn't quite establish the maker's name, embossed on the leather strap, from across the compartment, but there was a *de* or a *de la* in it.

This man was a conundrum. Was he running away from someone? If so, whom? And, more importantly, why?

“You do have a passport, don't you?” Again, I was unable to prevent my curiosity from getting the better of me. Or maybe I was

hoping he didn't have one, and would have to get off at the next station to return from whence he had come, and retrieve it.

"Oh yes," he replied, patting his breast pocket, "and money."

At least he wasn't going to try to touch me for a few francs. And that wasn't an idle concern of mine. Famous authors are not immune from the occasional begging letter.

At that moment, the guard arrived to examine our travel documents. I showed him mine and was saluted for my trouble. Negotiations were then entered into between the official and the young man, regarding his potentially unauthorized occupation of a First Class seat. Much to my further disappointment, a deal was struck. Monies changed hands, and a contract of travel or *billet de voyage* was written out and handed across.

The guard, a gaunt fellow with a bristling moustache, straight back and crisp, sharp creases to his uniform, advised us of the time at which lunch may be taken in the dining car. He spoke German, which I understood as I had spent two years in Austria, studying medicine and, a few years prior to that, at school in Vienna. He touched the peak of his claret and gold *käppi* with the tips of his fingers once more, backed out of the compartment, like a cuckoo returning into its clock, and slid the door shut.

A few moments passed as we both sat and listened to the steel wheels clattering on the rails. Then the young man began to fidget. He was building up to a further remark, I was sure of it.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" he ventured at last.

"Not at all," I replied. "In fact, I think I'll join you."

He had started to pat at his pockets, presumably looking for his smoking materials. "I suppose you enjoy the occasional pipe?" he said, while continuing to rummage.

"I do, yes," I returned, producing the item in question, followed by my sealskin tobacco pouch, a Vesta case and my pipe knife. "How did you guess?"

"I just imagined that since Holmes did, you did," he replied, eventually producing a packet of Three Castles.

“Ah – Holmes,” I remarked; primarily to myself.

The satisfaction on his face at having discovered the whereabouts of his cigarettes soon reverted to a frown as he revisited his pockets and, one by one, began to turn them inside out.

I embarked on the complex, painstaking, yet ultimately satisfying procedure of the cleaning, rubbing, filling and tamping that is an essential element in the pipe smoker’s ritual. Halfway through this process, filling the bowl with a mixture of Virginia, Burley and Black Cavendish in a medium loose cut, I noticed that he was just watching me with a rather forlorn look on his face. A moment later, I realized why. I tossed him the Vesta case.

“Thanks.” He popped a cigarette in his mouth, took out a match and scratched it along the red sandpaper glued to the side of the box. The little stick of wood fizzed and flared and, hidden momentarily behind a cloud of sulphur, he lit up.

He tossed the box back to me, which I was glad to catch neatly with my right hand. There is nothing more undignified than an allegedly proficient cricketer and goalkeeper scrabbling down on the carpet for a spilled box of Vestas.

Soon we were both puffing away in, for me, welcome silence; he edgily on his Three Castles, I leisurely on my Kapp & Peterson.

We journeyed in this fashion for some while, rattling across the immaculate Swiss countryside. In doing so, my travelling companion and I would occasionally exchange the odd remark. We took it in turns to comment upon any items of interest which hove into view through our respective windows, pointing; he with his finger, I with the glistening stem of my pipe.

“Sheep.”

“Burn.”

“Flowers.”

“Glen.”

“Trees. Pine trees.”

“Mountains.”

“Snow.”

The train tipped over the brow of this particular stretch of rolling Swiss upland, threaded its way through a long, steep embankment, and began its steady descent towards the valley; beyond it lay the chalky, turquoise waters of the Brienersee, or Lake Brienz.

It was lunchtime.

I knocked my pipe out and replaced it, with its accompanying articles, in my pocket. I stood up, stretched, stifled a yawn and made a move for the door. For a fleeting instant, I considered whether I should take my valise with me. I didn't know this fellow. There was, plainly, a degree of mystery surrounding his presence on this train. There was no one else in the compartment to protect my belongings or, at the very least, to shout "Hoi!" were this fellow to make a move towards my possessions. Reluctantly, I concluded that there was no other option. Until I had established my young acquaintance's credentials, I was obliged to keep him in sight for a while longer.

"Would you care to join me for lunch?" I asked, through gritted teeth.

"Rather!"

I was not at all comfortable with the next generation's mode of speech. And now I would have to endure it for another hour at least. I cursed my mistrust of human nature, and began to wonder whether the loss of a few nick-nacks from my valise were not a small price to pay for a few minutes of independence and a modicum of solitude over lunch.

As we staggered along to the dining car along the jolting corridors like sailors on shore leave, I reflected on what had actually grown this suspicious nature of mine. I hadn't always been like this. When I was a few years younger, I was carefree, always laughing and joking, and eager to grasp any opportunity to chat with each and every person I encountered. The thought that they were in any way possessed of a darker nature never even crossed my mind. It was only after I had begun to write the Holmes and Watson stories, only after I had begun to explore the underworld with which they

were obsessed, that my own gloomy outlook on human nature had begun to form itself. Once again, I was moved to acknowledge that there was much for which I had to be grateful to those two. However, whatever I had gained had come at a price.

There was a species or sub-genus of veal cutlet for lunch, with beans, accompanied by a full red wine from the Vaud region of Switzerland. I had been told about Swiss wine before. It was one of the world's best-kept secrets. Row upon row of lush vines, reaching up in terraces on the sunny slopes beside Lake Léman, produced a most agreeable wine. The Swiss do not export it, however; they keep it for themselves. Some may say that is uncommonly selfish but, having sampled a glass and begun to embark upon my second, I understood how wise they were. A return visit to introduce Touie to it was plainly to be considered.

Early on in our meal, I discovered what name my guest went by. I say "went by" as, apart from demanding to see his passport, I had no means of ascertaining that what he told me was actually the truth. Not that he should necessarily be gallivanting around Switzerland under an assumed name, of course. This was just my suspicious nature rising to the surface once more.

He called himself Richard Holloway but, he informed me, I may call him "Dick". I replied that, while I was honoured, naturally, that I should be allowed such a degree of intimacy, I would prefer to call him "Holloway". This seemed to gratify him. He had claimed, shortly before, that he was an Old Alleynian, from Dulwich College. So he was familiar with the courtesies and social niceties created by the juvenile hierarchies of the English public school system. When a senior chap wishes, through magnanimous condescension, to be on familiar terms with a junior chap, then the former will call the latter by his surname alone. It elicits a surprising degree of intimacy between the two, without the need for actual friendship, although this can follow. No matter how the relationship developed after this, the practice itself usually created a powerful bond between them that would last all their lives. To call Holloway this, therefore, to him,

probably appeared tantamount to me slapping him on the back, calling him “old boy”, introducing him to my gentleman’s club, and offering him my daughter’s hand in marriage.

The adverse side-effect of my gesture, on the other hand, was less satisfactory. He began to call me “Doyle”. I tried to correct him twice and suggest that “Conan Doyle” would be more acceptable. However, he, purposely or unconsciously, singularly failed to implement my suggestion. Doyle he had dubbed me, Doyle I remained.

I asked what few questions courtesy demanded of me about his background, but received very little specific in reply. He lived in south London (somewhere) in rooms. He was not married and disliked his landlady who, it appears, was far too pernickety about his social life, which was virtually non-existent, according to him. His personal cleanliness and living habits were also a subject for discussion between the two of them and were, Holloway insisted, none of her dashed business. I discovered that he was a sportsman and indeed played centre three-quarter for Blackheath Rugby Football Club. When I reminded him that my creation Watson had played for that illustrious team, he looked disappointed. Maybe he treasured playing for the world’s first open rugby club, and did not care to think of an old fuddy-duddy like Watson (albeit fictitious) having a prior claim on the club. Or maybe he felt he had given away more about himself than he had wished to.

Looking at him across the dining car table, I became aware of certain things about him I had not previously noted. While tanned, I could see that underneath his skin was pale, sallow. Although not exactly haggard, his features were drawn and those grey eyes were set so deep into their sockets, he had a haunted air about him. His nervousness had become more pronounced since we had sat down. Facing each other, I felt that he believed I was monitoring his every move, as if I were liable at any moment to criticize him. I have known people to twitch and to proffer a sweaty, tremulous hand for me to shake upon first encounter, as if I were a lofty

potentate or great historical figure. Perhaps I had a similar effect on my restive guest, though I suspected a more complicated reason for his demeanour. In fact, the doctor in me suspected an ailment or, perhaps, abuse. Alcohol or another substance. It was not, I felt, a nicotine addiction, as he had only had one cigarette all the time we had been associated. Unless, of course, his abstinence was enforced – due to a singular lack of matches. However, being a smoker myself, I knew that this was no great obstacle. If it were an important part of one’s psyche, an addiction on that scale was liable to mean you made sure you were always able to pander to it.

Luncheon completed, and I having paid the bill – an act for which he was unctuously grateful – Holloway and I returned to our compartment. Once back in our, by now, customary places, I explained that I always made a habit of taking a catnap after lunch and, if he would excuse me, I was not proposing to amend that habit that afternoon. He quite understood. In fact, I believe he was probably just as relieved not to have to struggle to make further conversation for the time being. I made myself comfortable underneath where my valise lay in the rack, so that anyone wishing to access it would have to clamber over me first. I put my handkerchief over my face and settled down to forty winks.

My plan was to remain incommunicado under my handkerchief for the most part of the remainder of the journey to Interlaken. When I awoke, consequently I remained concealed there for quite a while, until I realized how absurdly and curmudgeonly I was behaving. I pulled the linen square from my face and sat up.

He was gone.

My first action was to look above my head. My valise was still there. My second action – which I later realized should have been my first – was to look to see whether his bag was still there.

It was not.

All of a sudden, the entire train juddered, the brakes squealed and the locomotive let out a great expiring “whoosh” of steam. Close to panic, I leapt up. What was happening?

In an instant, the answer came. Not much. We had simply arrived at our destination. I could see the terminus sign and heard a basso-profundo intoning: "*Interlaken Ost!*"

I had slept longer than I had anticipated. To one extent, I could not have asked for more. To another extent, however, I remained concerned. Where was Holloway? Not that I was interested in his welfare. I simply wished to establish his whereabouts, since we were both destined, apparently, to continue on our journey together. I was particularly keen, also, on discovering why he had left me.

Still disconcerted, I prepared to leave the compartment. Folding my handkerchief so that I may replace it in my pocket, I began to take a more balanced view of the situation. A moment later, and a further sensation was sluicing the feelings of concern from my system. I was relieved. The young fellow had grown tired of me. Maybe the sound of my snoring had put him off. I always maintained that I did not snore, but Touie insisted that I did, and that it had the resonance and timbre of a highland stag calling to its mate across a misty glen. Whatever the reason for Holloway's departure, however, he had gone. To me, that was, naturally, the best outcome for the journey so far.

With optimism beginning to burgeon within me, I brought my valise down from the rack, and stepped out into the corridor. The door onto the platform was already open. I climbed down the steps and onto the cobbles.

"Ah, Doyle!" a voice called from behind me. I turned to see Holloway approaching with a porter. "I was coming to wake you – if you hadn't woken by now. You really should get your sinuses seen to, by the way. Thought you may like one of these." He gestured to the porter as if he were a mechanical implement like his barrow, rather than flesh and blood. "They can be the very devil to get hold of sometimes, and I'm sure you have luggage."

My heart returned to its customary place, lying disconsolate upon the diaphragm.

“I do; a couple of trunks. Thank you,” I said, and we walked down to the baggage car.

Holloway was remarkably cheerful and seemed more relaxed, less self-conscious, as we three proceeded across the station towards the platform from which our little mountain train was due to depart.

“Sleep well?” he asked.

“Thank you,” I replied. My manner was growing surly again. This was my trip. These were my trunks. This was my Switzerland. Yet this young fellow had practically commandeered all of it. I resented being “looked after” in this manner, as if I were an elderly colonel. I was perfectly capable of looking after myself. In fact, I wanted more than ever at that moment to be allowed to continue my journey alone again. Had I not two cumbersome brass-studded and leather-bound travelling trunks to take into account, I’m not sure I would not at that point have clamped my hat to my head, taken to my heels and fled this limpet of a man.

But, of course, such behaviour would have been unthinkable for a self-respecting, albeit tetchy, doctor–novelist.