

SHRABANI BASU



'Compulsive reading'
A. N. Wilson

THE MYSTERY OF THE PARSEE LAWYER



ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, GEORGE EDALJI AND
THE CASE OF THE FOREIGNER IN THE
ENGLISH VILLAGE

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SHRABANI BASU is a journalist and author. Her books include *Victoria & Abdul: The Extraordinary True Story of the Queen's Closest Confidant*, now a major motion picture, *Spy Princess: The Life of Noor Inayat Khan* and *For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the Western Front, 1914–18*. In 2010, she set up the Noor Inayat Khan Memorial Trust and campaigned for a memorial for the Second World War heroine, which was unveiled by Princess Anne in London in November 2012. In August 2020 she was invited by English Heritage to unveil the Blue Plaque for Noor Inayat Khan in London.

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Curry: The Story of the Nation's Favourite Dish

Spy Princess: The Life of Noor Inayat Khan

*Victoria & Abdul: The Extraordinary True Story of
the Queen's Closest Confidant*

*For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the
Western Front, 1914–18*

THE MYSTERY OF THE
PARSEE LAWYER

*Arthur Conan Doyle, George Edalji
and the Case of the Foreigner in the
English Village*

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For my late father,
Chitta Ranjan Basu

Contents

| | |
|--|------|
| <i>Map of Great Wyrley and the surrounding areas</i> | x |
| <i>Dramatis Personae</i> | xiii |
| <i>Author's Note</i> | xv |
| Introduction | i |
| Prologue | 9 |
| | |
| PART I | 15 |
| 1 A Baptism in Bombay | 17 |
| 2 Great Wyrley | 29 |
| 3 Letters | 37 |
| 4 A Key at the Doorstep | 47 |
| 5 The Vicarage Under Siege | 59 |
| 6 A Period of Silence | 71 |
| 7 The Killing Fields | 81 |
| 8 A Public Spectacle | 93 |
| 9 A Trial in Staffordshire | 101 |
| 10 The Case for the Defence | 115 |
| 11 Prisons and Campaigns | 127 |
| 12 A Meeting with George | 147 |
| | |
| PART II | 155 |
| 13 Elementary! | 157 |
| 14 Martin Molton | 177 |
| 15 A Flawed Pardon | 183 |
| 16 Who Wrote the Letters? | 191 |

CONTENTS

| | | |
|----|-----------------------------|-----|
| 17 | Royden Sharp | 199 |
| 18 | Conan Doyle v Anson | 213 |
| 19 | The Baker Street Irregulars | 225 |
| 20 | Frank Sharp | 237 |
| 21 | Endgame | 251 |
| 22 | Aftermath | 263 |
| | Epilogue | 279 |
| | <i>Notes and References</i> | 283 |
| | <i>Further Reading</i> | 295 |
| | <i>Acknowledgements</i> | 297 |
| | <i>Picture Credits</i> | 299 |

But look at these lonely houses, each in its own fields, filled for the most part with poor ignorant folk who know little of the law. 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 in *The Adventure of the Copper Beeches* (1892)

The police should get rid of the notion that anyone whose name they were unable to spell or pronounce is a foreigner, or that foreigners are most likely to commit such ferocious crimes.

George Edalji, September 1912,
in the *Daily Mail*

I am an English woman, and I feel that there is among many people a prejudice against those who are not English, and I cannot help feeling that it is owing to that prejudice that my son has been falsely accused.

Charlotte Edalji to Sir George Lewis,
25 January 1904



Map of Great Wyrley and the surrounding areas, showing the crime locations



Dramatis Personae

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle – author, creator of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries

Jean Leckie – Sir Arthur's second wife

The Edalji household

Shapurji Edalji – Vicar of Great Wyrley

Charlotte Edalji – the vicar's wife

George Edalji – eldest son of the vicar

Horace Edalji – second son of the vicar

Maud Edalji – daughter of the vicar

Elizabeth Foster – maid

Dora Earp – maid

The Staffordshire police

Captain Hon. G. A. Anson – chief constable

Sergeant Upton

Inspector Campbell

Sergeant Robinson

Village locals

Royden Sharp

Fred Brookes

Fred Wynne

Wilfred Greatorex

Harry Green

Frank Arrowsmith

R. Beaumont

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Campaigners

Justice Roger Dawson Yelverton, retired Chief Justice of the
Bahamas

Sir George Lewis, leading criminal lawyer

Henry Labouchère, MP

Author's Note

In keeping with the period of the book, I have used the old spellings for city names (Bombay instead of Mumbai, Cawnpore instead of Kanpur etc.).

Parsee can also be spelt as 'Parsi'. I have chosen to use the old spelling.

'Hindoo' was used generically by the British to describe all Indians, and not necessarily those persons who practised the Hindu religion.

Warning: animals are hurt in this story

Introduction

The train pulling out of Birmingham New Street at 12.12 p.m. was not very crowded: a middle-aged couple, a young Japanese girl anxious to know if it would stop at Walsall, a group of young boys in their teens. The train was going to Rugeley, a small town in Staffordshire, an hour away. To the other passengers, busy on their phones, there was nothing remarkable about the train which would go past eight small stations in the Midlands. I was trying to trace the journey that would have been made by George Edalji, first as a schoolboy, then as an adult, on the same branch line over a hundred years ago.

George lived with his Indian father and English mother in the small village of Great Wyrley. His father, Shapurji Edalji, was the Vicar of Great Wyrley. George's mother, Charlotte Stoneham, had taken the daring step of marrying an Indian man at a time when interracial marriages were frowned upon. Shapurji, a Parsee from India who had converted to Christianity, had become the first South Asian to be appointed a vicar in Britain in 1876. George was born the same year. I was heading to St Mark's Church and the Old Vicarage, once the home of the Edalji family.

The rain slashed against my window as the train chugged through the semi-industrial town of Walsall, passing behind the backs of houses, car-repair workshops, garages, tyre shops and small industrial units. Soon we were out in open fields with sheep and horses standing patiently in the rain, as if watching the train go by. Once there were mines and collieries on this land. Shafts rumbled through the night bringing up coal from the depths. Boys as young as twelve would go down the pits following in the footsteps of their fathers and grandfathers. Horses and pit ponies were the mainstay of the area, pulling the cartloads of coal to the canals and railway wagons

INTRODUCTION

for transport to the industrial centres in the north. Sheep dotted the countryside, then, as they did now.

I was passing through a region that had provided the most sensational crime and subsequent trial in Edwardian Britain. The branch line running between Walsall, Bloxwich, Landywood, Cannock, Hednesford and Rugeley was the link to a series of brutal animal mutilations committed over a century ago. Every village had a connection with the story. Beneath the normality of my present commute, I felt I was entering what would have been the heart of darkness.

Looking out of the train window in June 1903, George would have seen two horses lying savagely attacked in the fields, their entrails hanging out. It would be on the platform at Wyrley and Cheslyn Hay station on that fateful day in August 1903 that he would be told that the inspector wanted to see him.

The arrest and trial of George Edalji for the alleged mutilation of a horse and the threat to kill a policeman attracted huge media attention. The dark-skinned prisoner, son of a 'Hindoo vicar' provided fodder for scribes to focus on the 'mysterious Orient'. George was sentenced to seven years' penal servitude. He was released three years later on parole.

However, he still remained convicted of the crime and was disbarred from working as a solicitor. It was then that he wrote to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to help him clear his name. The creator of Sherlock Holmes swung into action. He took upon himself to be the conscience of the nation, and set out to point out in detail why the case against George Edalji was racially motivated, and that there had been a gross miscarriage of justice. He compared it to the 'squalid Dreyfus affair' in France, which revealed anti-Semitism at the heart of French society, saying there were parallels in both cases. In France, the miscarriage of justice happened with a Jew; in England it happened to a Parsee. His articles in the *Daily Telegraph* in January 1907 led to the case attracting international publicity. Conan Doyle had insisted that the articles be non-copyright so they could be used by other papers. Sold for a penny at street kerbs, the story was widely read, so much so that in Conan Doyle's own words: 'England soon rang with the wrongs of George Edalji.'¹ Eminent authors like J. M. Barrie and George Bernard Shaw backed George Edalji and lauded Conan Doyle's efforts to clear him of blame.

INTRODUCTION

Letters of support poured in from around the world. Even Jawaharlal Nehru, an eighteen-year-old student at Harrow School at the time, read with interest the reports about Conan Doyle and George Edalji and wrote to his father, Motilal Nehru: 'I suppose you have heard about the Edalji case and the new phase it has taken here. Whole pages are devoted to it in some of the papers and you know what a page of a newspaper is here. The poor chap must have been quite innocent and I am sure he was convicted simply and solely because he was an Indian.'²

Conan Doyle's campaign eventually led to a pardon for George and the formation of the Court of Criminal Appeal in Britain.

I had always been fascinated by the case of George Edalji, and Arthur Conan Doyle's involvement in it. I had read about George briefly in books about Asians in Britain, but always wanted to know more. I wanted to know how Shapurji arrived in Britain, what made him convert to Christianity and how he became the first Asian vicar of a small village in the coal-mining area of Staffordshire. As they were the only mixed-race family in the area, I wanted to know about the racism the Edaljis suffered and how it had all impacted on George's trial. Conan Doyle had compared it to the Dreyfus affair, but unlike that famous case, captured in history and literature by Emile Zola's letter titled 'J'Accuse', and the subject of books and films, few today have heard of the Edalji affair. The story of the Indian man targeted for his race and religion in England was soon buried and forgotten, just another casualty of Empire.

I often thought about the family at the vicarage even as I worked on another book set in Victorian Britain.³ It was the true story of Queen Victoria and her Indian servant, Abdul Karim, who quickly became a firm favourite and caused a storm in the royal court. She gave him land and titles. He introduced her to curries and taught her Urdu. The lonely widowed queen lived the last years of her life in an Indian dream with the handsome turbaned youth by her side. It was more than the establishment could take. Victoria's household and family closed ranks against Karim and conspired to defame him. Unable to destroy him while the Queen was alive, they swooped on him within hours of her funeral, and burnt all the letters that Victoria had written to him (often several in a single day). He was unceremoniously asked to return to India, and every attempt was

INTRODUCTION

made to erase him from history. Though their circumstances were completely different (Abdul worked in the royal palaces, and George lived in a mining village), and their personalities were a world apart, there was one parallel between George and Abdul. Both were victims of racism in a society that was ready to believe the worst of a foreigner.

At the time I was writing, Julian Barnes published *Arthur & George*, a fictional account of the Edalji story. It was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and I felt there was no point in trying to write anything more on the subject. Yet, every time I watched a repeat of a Sherlock Holmes drama on television, I would think of George Edalji and Arthur Conan Doyle. There is nothing quite like the calling of an unsolved mystery, a dark crime set in the English countryside over a hundred years ago.

In 2015 a small article in *The Times* newspaper caught my attention. It said that a collection of letters written by Arthur Conan Doyle dealing with the George Edalji case were to be auctioned. These were letters written by Conan Doyle to Chief Constable G. A. Anson, head of the Staffordshire police. The correspondence had never been published. It was a sign. There was hope of new material. I called up Bonhams auctioneers to look at the letters and made my way to their offices in Kensington. As I held the letters written in Conan Doyle's neat handwriting from Undershaw, his house in Surrey, and from hotels across Europe, I could feel the obsession he had had with the case. Here was Conan Doyle wearing the deerstalker of his fictional detective, trying to solve the only mystery that he ever investigated himself. It coincided with a period in his life when he was coping with grief and emotional turmoil. His wife, Louise, had passed away and he was going to marry the love of his life, Jean Leckie. There was guilt about having loved Jean for nine years while his wife was ill and dying. In a way, the case of George Edalji lifted Conan Doyle from his melancholy.

'In 1906 my wife passed away after the long illness which she had borne with such exemplary patience,' he wrote later. '... For some time after these days of darkness I was unable to settle to work, until the Edalji case came suddenly to turn my energies into an entirely unexpected channel.'⁴

INTRODUCTION

Conan Doyle threw himself into the investigation, travelling to Staffordshire to meet the Edaljis and revisit the scene of the crime. His correspondence with Anson was combative. The chief constable was scornful of the famous crime writer trying to do the work of the police. Conan Doyle was convinced that the police evidence had been shoddy and that Anson was a racist. Anson's personal notes revealed his character.

I must have been lost in the letters when the staff at Bonhams reminded me – as politely as possible – that they were not a library. I felt a sense of panic as I saw all the other unopened boxes that I had not had time to look at. What if they went into the hands of a private collector, and I never saw them again. I had come so close to George Edalji. But luck was on my side. The papers were bought by Portsmouth Library, and few months later I was able to make an appointment to see them.

Within the boxes lay a story, not just of the trial of George Edalji and the investigation by Arthur Conan Doyle; it was a story that went back to when George was just a young schoolboy in Great Wyrley, targeted for being the son of an Indian. Page after page of hate-filled anonymous letters lay in the boxes, directed at the family in the vicarage.

From Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech to Theresa May's 'hostile environment', immigrants and outsiders have always been identified as the villains of society. British tabloids cranked up the public fear of thousands of potential migrants arriving on British shores during the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign, creating a toxic atmosphere. The Windrush scandal of 2018 saw the systematic detention and deportation of numerous black British citizens from the UK, many of whom had arrived as children from the Caribbean and lived in the UK all their lives. The leaked report into the Windrush scandal in Britain, published in 2020, concluded that the Home Office was 'institutionally racist', but the line was later deleted from the published report. Facts are still being rewired to hide an uncomfortable truth.

In 2016, the British prime minister, David Cameron, authorised Labour MP David Lammy to look into discrimination against black and ethnic minorities in the criminal justice system. The report, published in 2017, was severely critical. The Lammy report

INTRODUCTION

concluded that ethnic minorities still faced a bias, ‘including overt discrimination’ in parts of the justice system.⁵ Even worse, where overt racial prejudice was declining, it was being replaced by problems of covert and unconscious bias, which was on the rise.

Black people made up 3 per cent of the population in England and Wales, but were 12 per cent of the prison population. Young black people were nine times more likely to be locked up in England and Wales than their white peers, according to the Ministry of Justice analysis.

In May 2020, as the world reeled under the coronavirus pandemic, the killing of George Floyd in the US city of Minneapolis brought ‘Black Lives Matter’ protesters on to the streets. The videos of the eight minutes of brutality led to a volcanic outpouring of rage and frustration. In the English city of Bristol, where slaves from Africa were historically shackled and shipped to work in the US, protesters dragged down the statue of the seventeenth-century slave trader Edward Colston and threw it in the harbour. Colston had been responsible for transporting 84,000 men, women and children from Africa to the Americas between 1672 and 1689. It was from the docks of Bristol that the slaves from West Africa were branded with the letters ‘RAC’ (Royal African Company), and herded on to ships for America. As many as 19,000 slaves died on the treacherous six-week voyage, their bodies cast into the sea to be devoured by sharks. The historical chain of oppression and exploitation that joined the dots between countries and continents over centuries was highlighted once again. With Colston lying in the same waters from where his slave ships had sailed, there were demands for other statues glorifying Empire and imperial power to be torn down. However, as the statues toppled, the culture clash began. ‘Defenders of statues’ arrived in London with swastikas tattooed on their chests to allegedly preserve British history.

The events of over a hundred years ago in Great Wyrley could have been taking place in the present. Miscarriages of justice in Britain have happened before – the Guildford Four, the Birmingham Six – to name a couple. Prejudice, doctored evidence and decisions made on circumstantial evidence have also occurred in the recent past. In 1998, the Macpherson Report into the murder of black teenager

INTRODUCTION

Stephen Lawrence revealed there was institutional racism in the police force. In 1903, George Edalji was virtually sentenced before he had even walked into the dock.



The train pulled up at Landywood, waking me up from my reverie. The small station was nothing more than a bare platform directly connected to the road. St Mark's Church was a mile away. My Pakistani cab driver was curious as to why I wanted to go there. 'Are you going for a funeral?' he asked me, wondering why an Asian woman wanted to head to the church in the middle of a weekday. As we passed a curry house, I asked him if there were any Asians in the area. 'No,' he said. 'It's all white. The only Asian faces you'll see here are the taxi drivers.'

It would have been the same for the Edalji family all those years ago. Taking the service from the pulpit of the church, Shapurji Edalji would have looked down at a sea of white faces. As I stood outside the red door of St Mark's Church in Great Wyrley, I could visualise Shapurji in his priest's robes, greeting his parishioners after Sunday service. He remained Vicar of Great Wyrley for forty-two years. It was here that he died in 1918, months before the Great War ended. The last years of his life, he would have watched the young men of the village go out to fight in the trenches, many never to return. He never gave up the campaign to clear George's name.

I walked in the drizzle in the church grounds, searching for Shapurji's name among the gravestones. Finally, I found it. It was at the far end of the churchyard, in a corner under the trees; a humble grave without any large headstone. A plaque on the grave said: 'Sacred to the Memory of Reverend Shapurji Edalji, 42 years Vicar of this Parish. Died 23rd May 1918, Aged 76 years.' No other family member was buried near him. George had never returned to live in the village after his arrest.

The vicarage was just behind the church. I walked to the house where George had been born. His bedroom was on the first floor. He would have looked out from there over the churchyard and fields for twenty-nine years of his life. Next door were the church hall and the schoolroom, venues for many of the meetings held by his father, to rally support for his cause.

INTRODUCTION

The church was preparing for Easter service a few days away, and the usual notices were up. I was reminded of a photograph of the young Edalji family standing outside the vicarage taken just before Easter in 1892. Shapurji is wearing a dark overcoat over his clergyman's robes; his wife Charlotte is standing beside him in a long checked dress, with a shawl around her shoulders and a small hat on her head. They are surrounded by their three children: sixteen-year-old George, wearing a jacket and a cap, standing next to his younger sister Maud, ten, who is perched on the steps. Next to Shapurji stands his second son, Horace, thirteen, dressed in the same style as George. They look happy, if a bit awkward, like any well-turned-out Victorian family of the day. But the dark clouds had already begun to descend on the Edaljis of Great Wyrley. The following decades would only get worse.



A few months after my visit, I found myself in the secure room of the National Archives in Kew, going through the Home Office files on the George Edalji case. Among the numerous documents in a box, was a small white envelope. Written on it were the words: 'Horse skin'. I gingerly opened the envelope. Inside was a strip of horse hide, the chestnut hairs perfectly preserved. It felt almost surreal. Once, a pony with this beautiful rich colouring would have pranced around the fields of the Great Wyrley Colliery. When it was attacked on that fateful August night, it would change the life of George Edalji for ever. I looked again at the piece of hide that lay in front of me. This is where it all began.

Prologue

Great Wyrley, 1903

The sound of a horse neighing loudly in pain and distress rang out over the deserted fields of Great Wyrley Colliery. It was a wild and windy night with the rain beating down in heavy squalls. A pony with a beautiful chestnut coat limped around the field in agitation. His stomach had been ripped open and a portion of his gut was hanging out. Someone had crept up in the dead of night, grasped the animal and slashed its stomach, leaving it in agony. Almost as silently as the assailant had come, he left again.

It was at 5.45 a.m. on 18 August that young Henry Garrett, on his way to work at the colliery, saw the wounded pony in the field, still alive at the time. Garrett saw it walk into the shed. It was collapsing quickly. He did not follow it in, but raised the alarm immediately. The police soon appeared on the scene. By 8.30 a.m. the veterinary surgeon, Mr Lewis, reached the spot. The wounds had been inflicted in the last six hours, he said, placing the attack between well past midnight and early morning. The pony was shot to put it out of its misery. Police removed a section of the hide near the gash and took it away for examination, and soon the little mining village of Great Wyrley was in turmoil. The news of the horse mutilation spread rapidly. The incident was not a one-off. For months, the village and surrounding areas had been living in terror as horses and cows were slashed at night.

The first of the killings had happened on 1 February 1903. A two-year-old colt was killed in Cheslyn Hay. Its stomach had been slashed. Within months there occurred another attack: a second horse was killed on 10 April.

PROLOGUE

With deadly intent, the killer struck again. In the month of May, a cow was mutilated. This was followed by the killing of a sheep and a horse. The police seemed to be making no headway in the case. The villagers felt under siege. Farmers locked their cattle at night and women and children were told not to walk alone after dark. The police patrolled the empty streets. It felt as if a curfew had been declared in the village.

And yet the killings continued. On 6 June, two cows belonging to Captain Harrison were killed. On 29 June, a horse belonging to Blewitt and Company was killed and another mutilated. In every case the animal seemed to have been attacked in the same way, and with a similar instrument. Newspapers covered the story of the ‘Wyrley Ripper’, the man who crept out on full moon nights to fields where horses and cattle were peacefully grazing, and slashed them with a sharp blade, leaving them to die a torturous death.

The summer of terror continued. Hundreds of pounds’ worth of livestock was lost and farmers were in despair. Rumours were spreading around the village. Names of likely killers were whispered in shops and ale houses. No one felt safe. The Staffordshire police received anonymous letters saying there was a gang at work. The letters named members of the gang. They mentioned the name of George Edalji. The police urgently needed to make an arrest. A newspaper described Great Wyrley as the ‘Village of Fear’.¹

London, 1903

In his first-floor office on Paternoster Square in the shadow of St Paul’s Cathedral, London’s top literary agent, Alexander Pollock Watt, adjusted his glasses and reread the telegram he had just been handed. A broad smile spread across his face. The elderly Scotsman banged on his desk in delight and let out a chuckle. The reason for his merriment was the sentence: ‘Very well, ACD.’

Watt was a formidable force in literary circles, the first agent to work professionally on commission, charging his authors 15 per cent to negotiate deals for them. Many of the famous writers of the nineteenth century – H. G. Wells, Lewis Carroll, Wilkie Collins and Rudyard Kipling – had walked through his door. He was used

to receiving letters from his clients either discussing forthcoming books, or thanking him for having one published. The shelves of his office were lined with signed and dedicated first editions that he had helped to publish. But not all authors are created equal.

Conan Doyle was one of Watt's most commercially successful authors. His fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes, had collected fans on both sides of the Atlantic, racking up a considerable fortune for both agent and author. The public, it seemed, could not get enough of the pipe-smoking, cocaine-addicted, dry-humoured detective, who could deduce at least twenty facts about a person within minutes of meeting him. They believed Holmes was real, they wrote to him to solve their problems, they walked around Marylebone looking for 221b Baker Street. Some claimed to have seen Dr Watson.

Yet, the global success of Holmes had begun to irk Conan Doyle. When a delivery of shirts he had ordered arrived marked to 'Sherlock Holmes', it was the last straw. Fed up of having his life hijacked by the character he had created, the author decided to end it all. To the shock of his fans, he killed off Holmes in 1893, sending his hero over the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland along with his arch-rival Moriarty in *The Adventure of the Final Problem*. He wanted instead to focus on writing historical novels. But his readers would not have it. As his fans protested in disbelief and clamoured for more – it was said that City of London clerks donned black armbands to mourn their favourite detective's death – Conan Doyle was forced to bring Holmes back for another adventure. He published *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in 1902. He cleverly set it in 1889, before the fatal incident at the falls, keeping the Holmes timeline faultless.

It was an instant bestseller. American publishers were hungry for more. Fifty thousand copies of the *Strand Magazine*, where the mystery was published, sold in the first ten days in the United States. In the spring of 1903 he received an offer from American publishers. If he could bring Sherlock Holmes to life in some way, explaining the event at the Reichenbach Falls, they were prepared to pay \$5,000 a story for six short stories or more. In Britain, his publisher, George Newnes of the *Strand Magazine*, would match that figure: It was a tempting offer, and Watt urged Conan Doyle to consider it positively. As the letters demanding the return of Holmes

continued, Conan Doyle sent his brief telegram to Watt accepting the inevitable. Sherlock Holmes was alive and would return.

To the delight of readers, Conan Doyle penned the first of the thirteen stories that would bring Holmes back for more adventures. With characteristic verve, he wove the story to cover the missing years. In *The Adventure of the Empty House*, Holmes reappeared from the dead and told a stunned Watson that he had not died when he plunged down the Reichenbach Falls. Instead, the detective had saved himself. As he had watched Moriarty plunge to his death, Holmes had had an idea: he would pretend to be dead and use the time to track down Moriarty's partners in crime. Only Holmes's brother, Mycroft, knew the secret. With that, Holmes and Watson were back in action, as was Conan Doyle.

His readers around the world were ecstatic. The queues at railway bookstalls to buy copies of the *Strand Magazine* resembled the last day of the sales. 'It was as we suspected,' declared the *Westminster Gazette*. 'The fall over the cliff did not kill Holmes. In fact he never fell at all. He climbed up the other side of the cliff to escape his enemies, and churlishly left poor Watson in ignorance. We call this mean. All the same, who can complain?'

Sherlock Holmes had returned and that was all that mattered. Conan Doyle celebrated his comeback. Elite London clubs like the Athenaeum toasted his success. The champagne flowed freely and he was invited to join the Crimes Club.

The book was published in 1903, the same year that the quiet, hitherto unremarkable life of George Edalji would change for ever.



They arrested him on the morning of 18 August.

George Edalji had been on his way to work as usual, wearing a light three-piece check suit and a smart straw boater. He was waiting to catch the 8.45 train to Birmingham, when a local police constable came up to him and said he was wanted at Cannock police station. Inspector Campbell had asked to see him. He asked what it was about. The policeman said he did not know. Somewhere on the platform George heard a man say that a horse had been killed. He told the constable that he had important work in his office and would call on the inspector later. The constable asked him if he could not take a

holiday for a day. He shook his head and turned his face away. Later, they said he had been smiling. He said he had smiled at something else.

That morning the police called at his house in the village of Wyrley and interviewed his father, the Reverend Shapurji Edalji, and his mother, Charlotte. They removed a coat, a waistcoat and a pair of shoes.

Then they called at George's office in Birmingham. The coat had bloodstains they told him, the shoes were muddy. Could he see the coat, he asked. No, they said. They had left it at the police station as they 'could not carry it so far'. They described the coat and asked him if he had worn it the night before. He said he had not. It was an old coat that he used only in the house and in the grounds. They told him they had found horse hairs on it. He said he may have picked them up while leaning on a fence. 'You must let me have your pistol,' the inspector demanded. 'I have no pistol,' he replied.² 'What's that? That's a pistol, isn't it?' said the sergeant pointing to a large railway-carriage door-key that was lying on his desk. Afterwards they said they were 'only joking'. Soon after, they arrested him on the charge of mutilating and killing a horse in Great Wyrley in fields half a mile from the vicarage. He denied the charge, saying he had not left the house that night.

On the way to the police station at Birmingham, the detective said: 'I know you very well, and you don't look like one who would do this sort of thing.'

He replied, 'I did not, but I am not surprised at this, as I had had warning.' By afternoon he was in a cold, white-tiled cell in the lock-up in Steelhouse Lane, where members of the notorious Birmingham gang the Peaky Blinders would soon be imprisoned. He, George Edward Thompson Edalji, twenty-eight, a solicitor of Newhall Street, Birmingham, the son of an Indian vicar and an English mother, was a prisoner of His Majesty's government.



In his book-lined study in Undershaw in the Surrey town of Haslemere, Arthur Conan Doyle was going through the morning papers. It was a fine day and the fir trees on his estate were glistening in the August sunlight. An item in the papers caught his eye. It said the son of the Vicar of Great Wyrley had been arrested on the charge of cattle-maiming. The vicar, said the newspaper, was a Parsee. Conan Doyle was intrigued.

