

THE ADVENTURE OF THE PEARLY GATES

by Mike Resnick

_"...An examination by experts leaves little doubt that a personal contest between the two men ended, as it could hardly fail to end in such a situation, in their reeling over, locked in each other's arms. Any attempt at recovering the bodies was absolutely hopeless, and there, deep down in that dreadful cauldron of swirling water and seething foam, will lie for all time the most dangerous criminal and the foremost champion of the law of their generation..."

-- The Final Problem_

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It was most disconcerting. One moment I was tumbling over the falls at Reichenbach, my arms locked around Professor Moriarty, and the next moment I seemed to be standing by myself in a bleak, gray, featureless landscape.

I was completely dry, which seemed not at all surprising, though there was no reason why it should not have been. Also, I had felt my leg shatter against the rocks as we began our plunge, and yet I felt no pain whatsoever.

Suddenly I remembered Moriarty. I looked around for him, but he was nowhere to be seen. There was an incredibly bright light up ahead, and I found myself drawn to it. What happened next I can remember but hazily; the gist of it is that I found myself in, of all places, Heaven. (No one told me that I was in Heaven, but when one eliminates the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth...and Professor Moriarty's absence was quite enough to convince me that I was not in Hell.)

How long I remained there I do not know, for there is no means by which one can measure duration there. I only know that I felt I might as well have been in the Other Place, so bored was I with the eternal peace and perfection of my surroundings. It is an admission that would certainly offend all churchmen, but if there is one place in all the cosmos for which I am uniquely unsuited, it is Heaven.

In fact, I soon began to suspect that I was indeed in Hell, for if each of us makes his own Heaven and his own Hell, then my Hell must surely be a place where all my training and all my powers are of no use whatsoever. A place where the game is never afoot, indeed where there is no game at all, cannot possibly qualify as a Paradise for a man such as myself.

When I was bored beyond endurance back on Earth, I had discovered a method of relief, but this was denied me in my current circumstances. Still, it was a craving for cerebral stimulation, not for a seven percent solution of cocaine, that consumed me.

And then, when I was sure that I was facing an eternity of boredom, and was regretting all the chances I had foresaken to commit such sins as might have placed me in a situation where at least I would have had the challenge of escaping, I found myself confronted by a glowing entity that soon manifested itself in the outward form of a man with pale blue eyes and a massive white beard. He wore a robe of white, and above his head floated a golden halo.

Suddenly I, too, took on human shape, and I was amazed to discover that I had not until this very moment realized that I had no longer possessed a body.

"Hello, Mr. Holmes," said my visitor.

"Welcome, Saint Peter," I replied with my newfound voice.

"You know who I am?" he said, surprised. "Your indoctrination period is supposed to be instantly forgotten."

"I remember nothing of my indoctrination period," I assured him.

"Then how could you possibly know who I am?"

"Observation, analysis and deduction," I explained. "You have obviously sought me out, for you addressed me by my name, and since I have evidently been a discorporate being, one of many billions, I assume you have the ability to distinguish between us all. That implies a certain authority. You have taken the body you used when you were alive, and I perceive that the slight indentations on the fingers of your right hand were made by a crude fishing line. You possess a halo while I do not, which therefore implies that you are a saint. Now, who among the many saints was a fisherman and would have some authority in Heaven?"

Saint Peter smiled. "You are quite amazing, Mr. Holmes."

"I am quite bored, Saint Peter."

"I know," he said, "and for this I am sorry. You are unique among all the souls in Heaven in your discontent."

"That is no longer true," I said, "for do I not perceive a certain lack of content upon your own features?"

"That is correct, Mr. Holmes," he agreed. "We have a problem here—a problem of my own making—and I have elected to solicit your aid in solving it. It seems the very least I can do to make your stay here more tolerable to you." He paused awkwardly. "Also, it may well be that you are the one soul in my domain who is capable of solving it."

"Cannot God instantly solve any problem that arises?" I asked.

"He can, and eventually He will. But since I have created this problem, I requested that I be allowed to solve it—or attempt to solve it—first."

"How much time has He given you?"

"Time has no meaning here, Mr. Holmes. If He determines that I will fail, He will correct the problem Himself." He paused again. "I hope you will be able to assist me to redeem myself in His eyes."

"I shall certainly do my best," I assured him. "Please state the nature of the problem."

"It is most humiliating, Mr. Holmes," he began. "For time beyond memory I have been the Keeper of the Pearly Gates. No one can enter Heaven without my approval, and until recently I had never made a mistake."

"And now you have?"

He nodded his head wearily. "Now I have. A huge mistake."

"Can't you simply seek out the soul, as you have sought me out, and cast it out?"

"I wish it were that simple, Mr. Holmes," he replied. "A Caligula, a Tamerlaine, an Attila I could find with no difficulty. But this soul, though it is blackened beyond belief, has thus far managed to elude me."

"I see," I said. "I am surprised that five such hideous murders do not make it instantly discernable."

"Then you know?" he exclaimed.

"That you seek Jack the Ripper?" I replied. "Elementary. All of the others you mentioned were identified with their crimes, but the Ripper's identity was never discovered. Further, since the man was mentally unbalanced, it seems possible to me, based on my admittedly limited knowledge of Heaven, that if he feels no guilt, his soul displays no guilt."

"You are everything I had hoped you would be, Mr. Holmes," said Saint Peter.

"Not quite everything," I said. "For I do not understand your concern. If the Ripper's soul displays no taint, why bother seeking him out? After all, the man was obviously insane and not responsible for his actions. On Earth, yes, I would not hesitate to lock him away where he could do no further damage—but here in Heaven, what possible harm can he do?"

"Things are not as simple as you believe them to be, Mr. Holmes," replied Saint Peter. "Here we exist on a spiritual plane, but the same is not true of Purgatory or Hell. Recently, an unseen soul has been attempting to open the Pearly Gates from this side." He frowned. "They were made to withstand efforts from without, but not within. Another attempt or two, and the soul may actually succeed. Once possessed of ectoplasmic attributes, there is no limit to the damage he could do in Purgatory."

"Then why not simply let him out?"

"If I leave the gates open for him, we could be overwhelmed by even more unfit souls attempting to enter."

"I see," I said. "What leads you to believe that it is the Ripper?"

"Just as there is no duration in Heaven, neither is there location. The Pearly Gates, though quite small themselves, exist in all locations."

"Ah!" I said, finally comprehending the nature of the problem. "Would I be correct in assuming that the attempt to break out was made in the vicinity of the souls of Elizabeth Stride, Annie Chapman, Catherine Eddowes, Mary Kelly and Mary Ann Nicholls?"

"His five victims," said Saint Peter, nodding. "Actually, two of them are beyond even his reach, but Stride, Chapman and Kelly are in Purgatory."

"Can you bring those three to Heaven?" I asked.

"As bait?" asked Saint Peter. "I am afraid not. No one may enter Heaven before his or her time. Besides," he added, "there is nothing he can do to them in spiritual form. As you yourself know, one cannot even communicate with other souls here. One spends all eternity reveling in the glory of God."

"So that is what one does here," I said wryly.

"Please, Mr. Holmes!" he said severely.

"I apologize," I said. "Well, it seems we must set a trap for the Ripper on his next escape attempt."

"Can we be sure he will continue his attempts to escape?"

"He is perhaps the one soul less suited to Heaven than I myself," I assured him.

"It seems an impossible undertaking," said Saint Peter morosely. "He could try to leave at any point."

"He will attempt to leave in the vicinity of his victims," I answered.

"How can you be certain of that?" asked Saint Peter.

"Because those slayings were without motive."

"I do not understand."

"Where there is no motive," I explained, "there is no reason to stop. You may rest assured that he will attempt to reach them again."

"Even so, how am I to apprehend him—or even identify him?" asked Saint Peter.

"Is location necessarily meaningless in Heaven?" I asked.

He stared at me uncomprehendingly.

"Let me restate that," I said. "Can you direct the Pearly Gates to remain in the vicinity of the souls in question?"

He shook his head. "You do not comprehend, Mr. Holmes. They exist in all times and places at once."

"I see," I said, wishing I had my pipe to draw upon now that I was in human form. "Can you create a second gate?"

"It would not be the same," said Saint Peter.

"It needn't be the same, as long as it similar to the perception of a soul."

"He would know instantly."

I shook my head. "He is quite insane. His thought processes, such as they are, are aberrant. If you do as I suggest, and place a false gate near the souls of his victims, my guess is that he will not pause to notice the difference. He is somehow drawn to them, and this will be a barrier to his desires. He will be more interested in attacking it than in analyzing it, even if he were capable of the latter, which I am inclined to doubt."

"You're quite sure?" asked Saint Peter doubtfully.

"He is compelled to perform his carnage upon prostitutes. For whatever reason, these seem to be the only souls he can identify as prostitutes. Therefore, it is these that he wishes to attack." I paused again. "Create the false gates. The soul that goes through them will be the one you seek."

"I hope you are correct, Mr. Holmes," he said. "Pride is a sin, but even I have a modicum of it, and I should hate to be shamed before my Lord."

And with that, he was gone.

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He returned after an indeterminate length of time, a triumphant smile upon his face.

"I assume that our little ruse worked?" I said.

"Exactly as you said it would!" replied Saint Peter. "Jack the Ripper is now where he belongs, and shall never desecrate Heaven with his presence again." He stared at me. "You should be thrilled, Mr. Holmes, and yet you look unhappy."

"I envy him in a way," I said. "For at least he now has a challenge."

"Do not envy him," said Saint Peter. "Far from having a challenge, he can look forward to nothing but eternal suffering."

"I have that in common with him," I replied bitterly.

"Perhaps not," said Saint Peter.

I was instantly alert. "Oh?"

"You have saved me from shame and embarrassment," he said.

"The very least I can do is reward you."

"How?"

"I rather thought you might have a suggestion."

"This may be Heaven to you," I said, "but it is Hell to me. If you truly wish to reward me, send me to where I can put my abilities to use. There is evil abroad in the world; I am uniquely qualified to combat it."

"You would really turn your back on Heaven to continue your pursuit of injustice, to put yourself at risk on almost a daily basis?" asked Saint Peter.

"I would."

"Even knowing that, should you fall from the path of righteousness—and it is a trickier path than your churches would have you believe—this might not be your ultimate destination?"

"Even so." And privately I thought: especially so.

"Then I see no reason why I should not grant your request," said Saint Peter.

"Thank God!" I muttered.

Saint Peter smiled again. "Thank Him yourself—when you think of it. He does listen, you know."

Suddenly I found myself back in that infinite gray landscape I had encountered after going over the falls at Reichenbach, only this time, instead of a shining light, I thought I could see a city in the distance...

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"Holmes!" I cried. "Is it really you? Can it indeed be that you are alive? Is it possible that you succeeded in climbing out of that awful abyss?"

-- The Adventure of the Empty House --

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