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“ELEMENTARY, MY DEAR STONE”

Our Swiss News Editor joins a Sherlock Holmes Society pilgrimage to Switzerland that turned 2012 into 1891 for a short while

In September 2012 the Sherlock Holmes Society of London, and friends from Societies in many other countries including the ‘Reichenbach Irregulars’ from Switzerland, visited the Bernese Oberland. Your correspondent was invited by President Guy Marriott, also an SRS member, to join the party, and a tough assignment it was. I must assume that SRS members will know at least of Holmes and Watson, and that ‘*The Final Problem*’, ridding the world of Moriarty, was resolved in Meiringen at the Reichenbach falls in 1891, where Holmes also was thought to have died. Holmes however, survived the precipitous fall and re-appeared later in ‘*The Empty House*’ to continue his work. These momentous events are sufficient to justify the periodic pilgrimages of the Society to Meiringen, each participant in appropriate costume of the 1890s, playing a character identified in the stories, which Watson faithfully recorded. Seventy of us thus took the 1891 Nordost-Bahn train from Zürich Airport(!) on a Sunday afternoon; and it is the first time I have been met at Interlaken by the Mayor, two bands, Wilhelm Tell, horses, carriages and others, to process along the Hohenweg. This, at the splendid Victoria-Jungfrau Hotel, was to be the first of many receptions.

Now, readers of Sherlock Holmes will know that at 221b, Baker Street, the faithful Bradshaw timetable was always close at hand. While I will spare you many hugely entertaining moments, a number of Apéros, alphorn players, choirs and yodelling and meals, all of the finest, the pilgrimage paid homage necessarily, to the railways of the region. So we took the train to Brienz, then ship to use the world’s oldest funicular to the Giessbach, and visit the splendid historic hotel, returning to Interlaken by ship. Next morning it was BOB train to Lauterbrunnen, WAB up to Kleine Scheidegg, and to Jungfraujoch as guests of the Jungfrauabahn to mark their 100th Anniversary. Inevitably the wily Moriarty could not let this pass without mischief. Effecting a very hostile takeover, he declared it the Moriarty Mountain Railway; however, order was restored by an ingenious Holmes and the Berner police, and so we continued in safe hands. It is a remarkable work and I vouched to the Society that this was perhaps the best weather I had ever seen up there, after an 1891 summer worse than many others. The return was via Grindelwald and the BOB.

There followed a day of rest with, by contrast, a 24 hour deluge; your correspondent was engaged to take some SHS members (not in costume) up the Brienzer Rothorn-Bahn. Above Oberstafel at 1800 m, the rain was heavy snow, a truly extraordinary summer experience. The weekly sausage train was my plan. Despite the weather, it was running, for a reserved



party, so we were in luck, with the 121 year old H2/3 No 5 to propel us as in the 1890s. Driver Amerbach served sausages from the boiler at Planalp, Ms Grossmann cheerfully issued bread and beer, and all was well, if damp. Next morning showed a cunning plan. The Ballenberg Dampfbahn had been retained to run its G3/4 tank engine No 208 with our private train from Interlaken Ost to Innertkirchen. This is a rare treat. Now, Holmes Watson, and we, were here in 1891, but the Zentralbahn (Brunig) line

Interlaken-Brienz was only built in 1916, and the MIB line from Meiringen only in 1926. We were running a steam special over two lines that did not even exist. Even Moriarty, we agreed, would never figure that out. This prefaced a bitterly cold day on the Grimsel (though 19th C clothes are excessively warm), and a visit to the Gellmerbahn, at 106 ‰ the world’s steepest public funicular.

Friday saw us again at Interlaken and Grindelwald, to descend through the Rosenloui valley to Meiringen. Once more under blue skies, with now the bonus of new snow, the valley lived up to its reputation. It was loved by the first Berner landscape painters 200 years ago, and my 1913 Baedeker proposes it as ‘arguably the finest view in the Swiss Alps’. They were right; it still is. Yet there could have been a railway through it, from Meiringen to Grindelwald; in 1899 and 1911 concessions were granted, but mercifully no-one offered the money. The Holmesians in full day-dress (some very elaborate and handsome) on the sunny terrace of the 120 year old Rosenloui Hotel, enjoying Herr Kehrl’s apricot tart, formed a superb period piece even without trains.

It was now Saturday, with earnest affairs in hand, to which the funicular to the Reichenbach falls was a necessary preface. What happened there you will read for yourself. Saddened, we returned to the valley but news of Holmes’ escape revived us for a last procession with band, carriages and horses, through Meiringen High Street. Sunday lunchtime saw us no longer costumed, taking the Brunig train to Luzern and back to Zürich airport. The ‘Continental Bradshaw’ will be put away for another day. They loved it all; Interlaken, the Jungfrauabahn, Meiringen, hotels, TV and other media, and all the rest had a great time, as did the many tourists in those places, some of whose costumes (normal to them) were just as eye-catching as ours. Your correspondent thanks the SHS for the welcome he was accorded, and was also pleased to discover several Holmesians whose love of Swiss trains ran our own members quite close. They were not disappointed - I recorded 700km of trains in a week. The next pilgrimage is provisionally in 2016. ☞