



# The Case of the Dead Man's Fingers

## Lawrence Millman

Sherlock Holmes was identifying some of the specimens in his friend Dr. Watson's basket. "Ah, here's *Leucogyrophana mollusca*," he said.

"How do you know?" asked Watson. After all, he was little more than a weekend pothunter, while Holmes was an accomplished mycologist.

"Elementary, my dear Watson. It has a resupinate, slightly effused, easily separable and merulioid sporocarp. What's more, it's got a whitish margin and... hello, what's this?"

Holmes removed several blackish elongated entities from Watson's basket.

"Dead Man's Fingers, of course," declared Watson triumphantly. He wanted his friend to know that he wasn't a complete idiot when it came to making mushroom identifications.

"Can you take me to the spot where you found them?" Holmes said with a certain urgency.

Watson nodded. It was a drizzly October day, with mud-colored clouds in the sky and the maples already a gauche shade of red. They entered the woods, and at last came to a hemlock grove.

Holmes peered down at the dead man, who was missing several of his fingers. "Really, Watson," he said. "Don't you ever consider the substrate when you're collecting fungi? Here you're exhibiting a species of myopia such as

I've seldom seen before."

"A species of Myopia? Is it edible?"

Holmes, who was examining the body and the basket next to it, ignored his friend's questions. After a while, he declared: "Murder."

"You're sure?" asked Watson. He would have guessed suicide, as there were only a few *Russulas* in the dead man's basket.

"Smell the basket."

Watson sniffed at the basket. "It smells like old gym socks."

"Exactly ... and that smell will lead us to the murderer."

"The murderer is an old gym teacher?" On Watson's face was a look of total bafflement.

Holmes shook his head. "The basket would have been full of matsutakes, the only mushroom with that smell. And unless I'm greatly mistaken, the murderer is my old colleague Dr. Moriarty."

After they left the woods, Holmes got out his cellphone and made a call, then they drove to the local university—specifically, to the building that housed the Department of Organismic Biology. Down a long hallway they walked, until they were standing in front of Professor Moriarty's office.

"Moriarty has been sequencing *Tricholoma magnivelare*, aka matsutake, which he believes is at least forty or fifty different species," stated Holmes. "The problem is, he never can get enough specimens, since there are so many

pothunters scouring the woods. So he's now gone to an extreme that I would hardly have expected of him..."

All at once the door opened, and there was Professor Moriarty, his sharp, wizened face peering out from a frame of graying hair. "This is a surprise, Holmes," he said. "I thought your revision of the genus *Fibricium* in the most recent *Mycotaxon* was splendidly done."

"And your paper on endophyte-host associations in Flushing Meadows in *Mycologia* had me on the edge of my seat. But that's not why I'm here. I'm afraid the jig is up, Moriarty."

"What jig... what do you mean?"

"You know very well what I mean. You did away with that poor mushroom hunter so you could steal his specimens and sequence them."

As Moriarty was reaching for his revolver, several policemen appeared and grabbed, then handcuffed him. "Thanks for the tip, Holmes," one of them said. "We can always count on you for help with mycology-related crimes."

Moriarty himself did not seem pleased with the situation. "But my work is being sponsored by the NSF," he protested.

"Tell it to the judge, fella," another policeman remarked.

After they had escorted Moriarty to the waiting van, Holmes turned to Watson. "So let's see what else is in your collection basket, old chap," he said. ♣