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Tales of Unease

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

Selected by David Stuart Davies



SELECTED STORIES

TALES OF UNEASE

— ◆ —
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Selected and introduced by
DAVID STUART DAVIE

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藏书章



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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TALES OF UNEASE

To
PAT and JIM
and their darling daughter
KATHRYN

David Stuart Davies is the editor of *Sherlock Holmes – The Detective Magazine*. He has written several books about or featuring Sherlock Holmes. He is also a playwright. His other titles for Wordsworth are: *The Best of Sherlock Holmes*, *Shadows of Sherlock Holmes* (a collection of stories featuring detectives, criminal agents and debonair crooks from the golden age of crime fiction) and *Short Stories from the Nineteenth Century*.

INTRODUCTION

The Art of Raising Goosepimples

Arthur Conan Doyle possessed the storyteller's art: the ability to take a series of moments from characters' lives and turn them into an engrossing tale, often with a surprise at the end, and sometimes encapsulating a moral. That is why Doyle's literary snapshots still remain fine examples of the short-story format. If he had restricted himself to writing short stories only, perhaps today he would be more highly regarded as a writer. However, Doyle had an irrepressible urge to dabble not only in all forms of literature but also in many diverse avenues of life.

John Vansittart Smith, one of the principal characters in 'The Ring of Thoth', the first story in this collection, is described as being 'the victim . . . of a universal ambition which prompted him to aim at distinction in many subjects rather than pre-eminence in one'. In certain ways this description could be aimed at the author, Arthur Conan Doyle, himself. He was such a brilliant, energetic man with strong personal visions, attitudes and ideas – a Victorian with a twentieth-century outlook – that his passions drove him to pursue many causes. He ran for Parliament (unsuccessfully), he played cricket for the MCC; he enlisted, at the age of forty, to serve in the Boer War; he evolved a scheme of turning a rifle into 'a sort of portable howitzer'; he took up the causes of individuals whom he considered to have been unfairly treated by the law, most notably Sir Roger Casement, George Edalji and Oscar Slater; he conceived the practice of cross-country skiing; and in later life he devoted much of his time and energies to the study and promotion of Spiritualism.

Evidence of similar diverse passions and eclectic interests is also to be found in Doyle's writing. His fiction covers perhaps a wider range than any other writer of the nineteenth century. He wrote sea stories, domestic dramas, historical romances, science fiction, poetry, plays, medical tales and crime fiction. This spread of topics and styles demonstrates, as does John Vansittart's range of studies

in 'The Ring of Thoth', examples of the man's 'versatility and of his inconstancy'. In other words, the sheer spread and volume of Conan Doyle's fiction weakens rather than consolidates his ranking as a writer.

Arthur Conan Doyle is famous today for being the creator of Sherlock Holmes and little else. If he could return to us now and see how incredibly popular and revered his detective character remains, he would be amazed. Doyle grew tired of Holmes very early in the sleuth's career. After two novels and twelve stories, he wanted to have done with him because, as he told his mother, 'he takes my mind from better things'. The term 'better things' referred to his historical fiction, such as *The White Company*, concerning the French wars of the fourteenth century, *The Great Shadow*, about Napoleon, and *Micab Clarke*, a story involving the Monmouth Rebellion of 1685. It is true to say that these novels, many now out of print, vary in quality and appeal, while the hero whom he rejected remains the world's favourite detective character. It would seem that Doyle, having satisfied himself that he had been successful with the Holmes tales, strained for pastures new. There was no exciting challenge in reproducing the same brilliance, but it was within the Sherlock Holmes short stories that his genius lay. What Conan Doyle never appeared to realise was that when he moved from the short-story format to the broader canvas of the novel, his writing and his plotting were often less assured and his central characters lacked the depth and roundness necessary to carry a two-hundred-page book. In this respect, even the Holmes novels are less successful when compared with the short stories.

As I intimated earlier, in the strict sense of the phrase, Conan Doyle was a storyteller. He could create stories brilliantly: rich vignettes of life which contain drama, ideas and a telling finale. When he stretched these stories out to novel length, the butter was perhaps spread too thinly and unevenly.

On a par with the Holmes stories are his tales of the unusual, the supernatural – his tales of unease. In these twilight excursions, Doyle's vivid imaginings of the strange, the grotesque and the frightening are given full rein. They are nightmares or bizarre dreams captured in miniature and have an immediacy and vibrancy which is often lacking in his novels. One must look to Edgar Allan Poe or Jules Verne to find fiction of the same scope, inventiveness and creativity. And yet Doyle's work is more readable. His stories are almost cinematic in their depiction of scenes and images, thus increasing the reader's involvement. As a result the tales are more

intense and gripping. These short 'entertainments' still speak to us today, still create a sense of unease as was the author's intention. This collection contains fifteen splendid examples of the art of raising goosepimples.

The Stories

The first story, 'The Ring of Thoth' (1890), is particularly fascinating, featuring, as it does, the idea of immortality. By magical means, the ancient Egyptian, Sosra, has achieved everlasting life. For him it is a curse, preventing him from dying and becoming reunited with his loved one, Atma. These elements and the setting of a museum after closing time became the essential ingredients in the 1932 film *The Mummy*, featuring a desiccated Boris Karloff. This Universal production was a great success and spawned numerous mummy pictures from the same studio. Hammer House of Horror continued to produce similar sagas in the fifties and sixties. Doyle was never credited with being the inspiration for this horror cycle, but one only needs to read his tale of Egyptian treachery to note the startling similarities. The point is that while the tale was written before the motion pictures had achieved any level of sophisticated storytelling, Doyle was creating plots that were ideally suited for this new medium. Interestingly, the last story in this collection, 'The Nightmare Room' (1921), actually uses the world of the early cinema to achieve its effect, which is a kind of poetic justice.

Retribution provides the theme of several of the stories in the collection. Being a true gentleman, Doyle was always keen to see that real justice was carried out. This concern occasionally put him at odds with the law. The idea that what is fair and just is not always possible within legal constraints finds its way into his writing. The most brutal case of revenge is to be found in 'The Lord of Château Noir' (1894). The writing here is both very modern and quite shocking and yet Doyle cleverly persuades the reader to sympathise with the perpetrator of the violence. A more sinister form of revenge is meted out in 'The New Catacomb' (1898). It is a delicious tale in which the author signals about halfway through what is going to happen and then keeps the reader in thrall while he slowly unfolds the terrible denouement.

Revenge is presented at its cruellest in 'The Case of Lady Sannox' (1893), which involves the cold, calculated mutilation of a young woman, Lady Sannox, who is described as 'the loveliest woman in London'. It is a story of adultery, greed and scandal of the sort that one finds filling the pages of the tabloid newspapers of today. Again,

as in so many of these stories, Doyle builds up the suspense by allowing readers to guess what is going to happen at the end, thus increasing the hope that we are wrong, fearfully wrong. Douglas Stone is lured by the promise of money to commit unwittingly an act that will not only destroy his own life but also that of the woman he desires. Below the surface of this chilling tale is an unsettling undercurrent of violence and horror which is far more disturbing than Poe. It reveals a dark and uncompromising side to the author's imagination, of which he only allows us to catch a fleeting glimpse in a story such as this or 'The Brazilian Cat' (1908), in which the naked terror experienced by the central character trapped in a cage with a ferocious 'monstrous cat' is described with a kind of gleeful, detailed clarity. The motive for the cruelty in 'The Brazilian Cat' is greed rather than revenge, but the focused cold-bloodedness of the malefactor is as powerful and as unnerving as that of his counterpart in 'The Case of Lady Sannox'. Stories like these seem to have a greater function than mere entertainment; it is as though the author is pouring all his repressed hatred, frustration and anger into the prose, wreaking havoc on the lives of fictional characters as a kind of releasing therapy. The effect is most unsettling.

'The Brown Hand' (1899) is a ghost story featuring a less harsh form of retribution, with the dead spirit seeking to be reunited with his severed hand as he had been promised in life. However, when we see the predictable end in sight, Doyle shakes our certainty with a clever twist.

Some of these stories could be regarded as resting on the borders of horror and science fiction. In essence, the author blends both genres in attempting to explore new worlds – worlds which lie outside normal human exploration. In 'The Horror of the Heights' (1913), tantalisingly presented as an incomplete fragment from a manuscript penned by Joyce-Armstrong, the author takes to the unseen and dangerous world that lies out of sight high in the air. The 'blood-soaked note-book' tells of strange aerial monsters lurking in the clouds at forty-one thousand feet – a height unattainable by any aircraft in 1913 when the story was written. Joyce-Armstrong (Doyle calls him an aeronaut) takes his aeroplane to 'the edge of the earth's envelope' to do battle in the aerial 'jungle'. This story contains one of the most gruesome lines in this collection:

At every gathering of airmen, Joyce-Armstrong, according to Dangerfield, would ask, with an enigmatic smile: 'And where, pray, is Myrtle's head?'

'The Terror of the Blue John Gap' (1910) presents a terrestrial monster but, in very much the same way as the previous story explored the idea of weird life forms above our heads, this tale considers the possibility of an undiscovered creature beneath the earth. A strange footprint is found in a Roman tunnel where a monstrous creature reputedly lives. Here Doyle is playing on our fascination with and fear of large, legendary beasts. The twentieth century is full of stories about such creatures as Big Foot, the Abominable Snowman and the Loch Ness Monster.

Arthur Conan Doyle was only twenty-three when he wrote 'The Captain of the *Polestar*' (1883). There is a thin thread of autobiography to be found in this tale for the author was recalling details from his own experiences on a whale-hunting journey to the Arctic in 1880 when he served as surgeon on the good ship *Hope*. The experience of seven months at sea in the cold waters of the Arctic remained a vivid memory all his life. In his autobiography, *Memories and Adventures*, Doyle observed: 'The peculiar other-world feeling of the Arctic regions – a feeling so singular that if you have once been there the thought of it haunts you all your life – is due largely to perpetual daylight. Your sense of loneliness also heightens the effect of the Arctic Seas.'

'The Captain of the *Polestar*' is a ghost story told in a neutral, non-involved fashion that cleverly enhances the creeping horror we experience as events slowly unfold. The narrator is John McAllister Ray, a young student of medicine, as Doyle was himself. The beauty of this tale lies in what Doyle referred to as the 'other-world feeling' of the setting and the gradual atmospheric build-up which leads to the inevitable climax – a climax that still renders the tale eerily incomplete. There is a strong sense of poetry about 'The Captain of the *Polestar*'. Indeed it shares its poetic tension and uncertainty with Coleridge's poem *The Ancient Mariner*:

The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around:
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,
Like noises in a swound!

While Doyle was on his voyage, the absence of a woman was keenly felt by all on board. Not, I think, for any sexual reason but for the softer charms and beauty of the female gender. The author refers to Jack Lamb, one of the sailors on board, who had 'a beautiful and sympathetic tenor voice'. His sentimental songs reminded the men that they hadn't seen a woman's face for six

months and this notion filled Doyle with a feeling of 'vague sweet discontent'. 'The Captain of the *Polestar*' is imbued with the same strange sense of isolation and longing, and when Captain Craigie sees a female out on the distant ice we are thrown into confusion: is this an hallucination brought on by many months staring out at the weird landscape and that 'vague sweet discontent' or is there more to it? The denouement, which echoes images from the climax of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818), is as chilling as its Arctic backdrop.

The idea of ghosts, of course, comes close to Conan Doyle's unswerving belief in Spiritualism and of the existence of a shadowy realm beyond death. His early years seem to have been a search for a faith, a spiritual well from which he felt at ease to drink. That well was Spiritualism. In this collection several stories deal in different ways with the world of the Spiritualist.

In 'How It Happened' (1913) we have a tantalising account recorded by 'a writing medium', one who is able to record in a written form messages from those who have passed over. With its surprise ending, it gives a strangely comforting view of what form of existence awaits us after we die.

Spiritualism is at the heart of the story 'Playing with Fire' (1900), which presents graphically the catastrophic events which ensue when a straightforward seance goes wrong. What begins as a comic and satirical tale darkens considerably towards the end and the lightly concealed warning about the inherent danger of meddling in a foolish, ignorant fashion with the unknown is strongly emphasised – a warning that is further underlined by the title. The premise that 'thoughts are things' is expounded in a most dramatic fashion when a mythical creature materialises in the chamber where the seance is being held:

Some huge thing hurtled against us in the darkness, rearing, stamping, smashing, springing, snorting. The table was splintered. We were scattered in every direction. It clattered and scrambled amongst us, rushing with horrible energy from one corner of the room to another.

Spiritualism and sadism are the concerns of 'The Leather Funnel' (1900), published the same year as 'Playing with Fire', suggesting that the former theme at least was very much on the author's mind at the time. This violent tale focuses on the belief in psychometry – the power of inanimate objects to retain and project 'vibrations' if these objects have been closely associated with highly emotional or painful

events. The funnel of the title had been used in the torture of a young woman. She was tied down and the narrow end of the funnel was pushed into her mouth and filled with water. The torture, called the 'Extraordinary Question', was used in seventeenth-century France on persons accused of extremely serious crimes. The scratches on the neck of the funnel were made by the teeth of the woman as she struggled in agony as more water was poured into her. Lionel Dacre, the owner of the funnel, persuades the unnamed narrator to sleep near it and to see whether its 'associations' will convey a message to him. The mere concept of such an experiment is nightmarish but when the object in question has such a cruel and diabolical history, the reader's sense of horror is increased. In his vivid dream that night, the narrator witnesses the preparations for the torture. Because the bestiality of the punishment is so vividly evoked some critics have noted the sadistic and even sexual overtones in the story. Certainly they are there, but only as a means to increase the potency of the narrative – to raise the hairs on the back of the neck.

The longest story in this collection is 'Lot 249' (1894). On reading it Rudyard Kipling said that it had given him a nightmare for the first time in years. In the early part of the story we are presented with all the elements of an M. R. James ghost story: a measured pace and intellectual characters involved in strange, inexplicable events, within a university setting. Of course, at this time M. R. James had not taken to writing seasonal treats. Doyle takes his time to create a growing sense of horror and unreality and, as with James, it is not what he describes that brings the reader's sense of unease but what he does not describe. At this stage, we are only given hints of the strange presence in one of students' rooms. Bellingham is an odd student who on one occasion suggests that noises in his room and footsteps on the stair derive from his dog – a creature no one has seen:

Smith knew that his neighbour had no dog. He knew, also, that the step, which he had heard upon the stairs, was not the step of an animal. But if it were not, then what could it be?

And again:

It moved in the shadow of the hedge, silently and furtively, a dark, crouching figure, dimly visible against the black background. Even as he gazed back at it, it had lessened its distance by twenty paces, and was fast closing upon him. Out of the darkness he had a glimpse of a scraggy neck and of two eyes that will ever haunt him in his dreams.

The subtlety of the writing here is superb. Doyle is carrying on the tradition of the great ghost-story writers (although this isn't strictly a ghost story) of allowing the reader's engaged imagination to enhance the misty picture that the writer presents. And our own imagination can be far worse than mere words on a page. The latter half of the story is more melodramatic, the action breaking out of its minimalist mould, and like 'The Ring of Thoth' it provides the film makers of the future with material for their mummy horrors.

The basic premise of 'The Los Amigos Fiasco' (1892) also found its way into a Hollywood horror movie with Boris Karloff. In 1936 Karloff starred in *The Walking Dead*, in which he played John Ellman, a character who was sent to the electric chair for a crime he did not commit. However, the charge did not kill him and he was later revived. Ellman then set about revenging himself upon those who were responsible for his conviction. The seeds of this plot are found in Doyle's tale concerning the power of electricity to bring about immortality. Using an excessively strong electrical charge to administer capital punishment to Duncan Warner, a despicable criminal, has the effect of prolonging his life and making him invulnerable to hanging and shooting. In this one story Doyle brings together the age-old theme of surviving death, as did Sosra in 'The Ring of Thoth', and the mystical properties of electricity, the vital force of the modern age. The yoking together of the old and the new, the past and the unknown future is one of Arthur Conan Doyle's greatest skills.

There can be no doubt that the fifteen stories in this collection are among the very best of their genre. The reasons that they may not have been recognised as such by the general reading public is probably because they have been lost in the welter of fiction created by Arthur Conan Doyle. Also, like everything else Doyle wrote, they have fallen under the dominating shadow of his most potent creation: Sherlock Holmes. Now is the time for them to emerge from that shadow and to sparkle and gain merit in their own right.

In all these stories, whatever the setting or theme, there is always a powerful sense of uncertainty for both the reader and the central characters. We are never quite sure what will or might happen next. Uncertainty by its very nature makes us edgy, nervous and filled with a sense of great unease – hence the title of this collection. In some of the tales, Conan Doyle adds a further *frisson* by not ending our uncertainty. In fact, he prolongs it and extends it beyond the confines of the fiction we have just read. You have been warned.

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The Ring of Thoth

MR JOHN VANSITTART SMITH FRS of 147a Gower Street was a man whose energy of purpose and clearness of thought might have placed him in the very first rank of scientific observers. He was the victim, however, of a universal ambition which prompted him to aim at distinction in many subjects rather than pre-eminence in one. In his early days he had shown an aptitude for zoology and for botany which caused his friends to look upon him as a second Darwin, but when a professorship was almost within his reach he had suddenly discontinued his studies and turned his whole attention to chemistry. Here his researches upon the spectra of the metals had won him his fellowship in the Royal Society; but again he played the coquette with his subject, and after a year's absence from the laboratory, he joined the Oriental Society, and delivered a paper on the hieroglyphic and demotic inscriptions of El Kab, thus giving a crowning example both of the versatility and of the inconstancy of his talents.

The most fickle of wooers, however, is apt to be caught at last, and so it was with John Vansittart Smith. The more he burrowed his way into Egyptology, the more impressed he became by the vast field which it opened to the enquirer and by the extreme importance of a subject which promised to throw a light upon the first germs of human civilisation and the origin of the greater part of our arts and sciences. So struck was Mr Smith that he straightway married an Egyptological young lady who had written upon the sixth dynasty, and having thus secured a sound base of operations he set himself to collect materials for a work which should unite the research of Lepsius and the ingenuity of Champollion. The preparation of this *magnum opus* entailed many hurried visits to the magnificent Egyptian collections of the Louvre, upon the last of which, no longer ago than the middle of last October, he became involved in a most strange and noteworthy adventure.

The trains had been slow and the Channel had been rough, so that the student arrived in Paris in a somewhat befogged and feverish condition. On reaching the Hôtel de France, in the Rue Laffitte, he had thrown himself upon a sofa for a couple of hours,

but finding that he was unable to sleep, he determined, in spite of his fatigue, to make his way to the Louvre, settle the point which he had come to decide, and take the evening train back to Dieppe. Having come to his conclusion, he donned his greatcoat, for it was a raw rainy day, and made his way across the Boulevard des Italiens and down the Avenue de l'Opéra. Once in the Louvre he was on familiar ground, and he speedily made his way to the collection of papyri which it was his intention to consult.

The warmest admirers of John Vansittart Smith could hardly claim for him that he was a handsome man. His high-beaked nose and prominent chin had something of the same acute and incisive character which distinguished his intellect. He held his head in a birdlike fashion, and birdlike, too, was the pecking motion with which, in conversation, he threw out his objections and retorts. As he stood, with the high collar of his greatcoat raised to his ears, he might have seen from the reflection in the glass case before him that his appearance was a singular one. Yet it came upon him as a sudden jar when an English voice behind him exclaimed in very audible tones, 'What a queer-looking mortal!'

The student had a large amount of petty vanity in his composition which manifested itself by an ostentatious and overdone disregard of all personal considerations. He straightened his lips and looked rigidly at the roll of papyrus, while his heart filled with bitterness against the whole race of travelling Britons.

'Yes,' said another voice, 'he really is an extraordinary fellow.'

'Do you know,' said the first speaker, 'one could almost believe that by the continual contemplation of mummies the chap has become half a mummy himself!'

'He has certainly an Egyptian cast of countenance,' said the other.

John Vansittart Smith spun round upon his heel with the intention of shaming his countrymen by a corrosive remark or two. To his surprise and relief, the two young fellows who had been conversing had their shoulders turned towards him and were gazing at one of the Louvre attendants who was polishing some brasswork at the other side of the room.

'Carter will be waiting for us at the Palais Royal,' said one tourist to the other, glancing at his watch, and they clattered away, leaving the student to his labours.

'I wonder what these chatterers call an Egyptian cast of countenance,' thought John Vansittart Smith, and he moved his position slightly in order to catch a glimpse of the man's face. He started as his eyes fell upon it. It was indeed the very face with which his