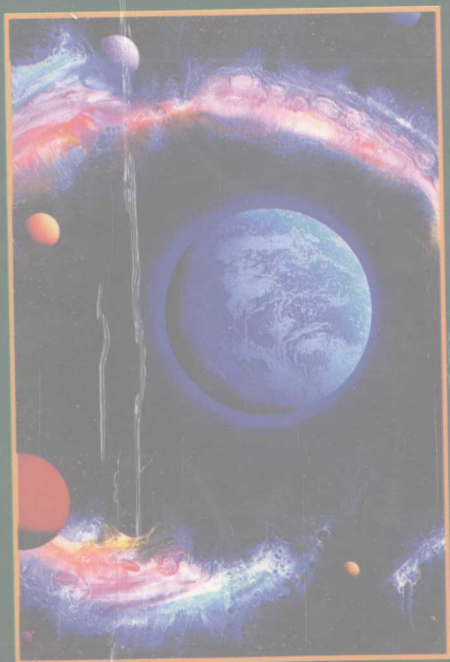


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The Poison Belt

Arthur Conan Doyle



中國對外經濟貿易出版社

《天品》

《天品》

The Poison Hole

A Novel of Chinese History



中國國際廣播電台出版

5元丛书第六辑 福尔摩斯探案故事丛书

丛书主编 马德高 范希春

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总 序

福尔摩斯在中国,是一个家喻户晓、妇孺皆知的人物。而创造这一形象的作家柯南·道尔(Arthur Conan Doyle 1859—1930)却反而为人们所忽视了。柯南·道尔,1859年出生,青年时期学习医学,1885年获医学博士学位,但对文学情有独钟。从1887年始,柯南·道尔以福尔摩斯这一人物形象为主人公,创作出版了一系列的侦探故事。1887年,《血字的研究》出版;1890年,《四签名》出版。1891年,柯南·道尔不再从事医生的工作,专心于文学创作,先后发表了《波希米亚丑闻》等24个探案故事,在《海滨》杂志上发表。后又汇编成册,以《冒险史》(1892)和《回忆录》(1894)的书名出版。

1894年,柯南·道尔迫于创作的压力,让福尔摩斯堕入深渊淹死,结束了福尔摩斯的探案故事系列的创作。但是,广大读者不希望福尔摩斯死去,恳求、抗议,甚至人身威胁接连不断。柯南·道尔不得不让福尔摩斯复活——1901年,创作了《巴斯克维尔猎犬》;1903年,创作了《空屋》;1915年,创作了《恐怖谷》;1917年,创作了《最后的致意》;1927年,创作了《新探案》。

1928—1929年,《福尔摩斯探案全集》在英国出版,从此,福尔摩斯这一形象走向了世界——欧美国家乃至世界其它国家纷纷出版福尔摩斯探案系列故事。福尔摩斯成为读者心目中的偶像。

福尔摩斯之所以受到读者的喜爱是因为他总能在头绪繁

多、扑朔迷离的案件中探知真情,表现出他的睿智,当然还有他那乐观、正直、热情、勇敢甚而有点孤傲和自以为是的性格特点。同时,柯南·道尔还把每一个案件故事写得惊险刺激,富有悬念,使得读者不忍释手,不到故事结束不能尽兴。

本丛书选取了《失去的世界》、《毒带》、《血字的研究》、《恐怖谷》、《巴斯克维尔猎犬》、《四签名》、《福尔摩斯探案故事集》(I、II)、《福尔摩斯归来》。大抵都是柯南·道尔的代表作,基本上囊括了福尔摩斯探案故事的精华,使读者得以窥见福尔摩斯系列探案故事的风貌。

范希春

2000年7月18日

于中国社会科学院研究生院

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Chapter 1

The Blurring of Lines

It is imperative that now at once, while these stupendous events are still clear in my mind, I should set them down with that exactness of detail which time may blur. But even as I do so, I am overwhelmed by the wonder of the fact that it should be our little group of the "Lost World"—Professor Challenger, Professor Summerlee, Lord John Roxton, and myself—who have passed through this amazing experience.

When, some years ago, I chronicled in the Daily Gazette our epoch-making journey in South America, I little thought that it should ever fall to my lot to tell an even stranger personal experience, one which is unique in all human annals and must stand out in the records of history as a great peak among the humble foothills which surround it. The event itself will always be marvellous, but the circumstances that we four were together at the time of this extraordinary episode came about in a most natural and, indeed, inevitable fashion. I will explain the events which led up to it as shortly and as clearly as I can, though I am well aware that the fuller the detail upon such a subject the more welcome it will be to the reader, for the public curiosity has been

and still is insatiable.

It was upon Friday, the twenty-seventh of August—a date forever memorable in the history of the world—that I went down to the office of my paper and asked for three days' leave of absence from Mr. McArdle, who still presided over our news department. The good old Scotchman shook his head, scratched his dwindling fringe of ruddy fluff, and finally put his reluctance into words.

"I was thinking, Mr. Malone, that we could employ you to advantage these days. I was thinking there was a story that you are the only man that could handle as it should be handled."

"I am sorry for that," said I, trying to hide my disappointment. "Of course if I am needed, there is an end of the matter. But the engagement was important and intimate. If I could be spared—"

"Well, I don't see that you can."

It was bitter, but I had to put the best face I could upon it. After all, it was my own fault, for I should have known by this time that a journalist has no right to make plans of his own.

"Then I'll think no more of it," said I with as much cheerfulness as I could assume at so short a notice. "What was it that you wanted me to do?"

"Well, it was just to interview that deevil of a man down at Rotherfield."

"You don't mean Professor Challenger?" I cried.

"Aye, it's just him that I do mean. He ran young Alec Simpson of the Courier a mile down the high road last week by the collar of his coat and the slack of his breeches. You'll have read of it, likely, in the police report. Our boys would as soon interview a loose alligator in the zoo. But you could do it, I'm thinking—an old friend like you."

"Why," said I, greatly relieved, "this makes it all easy. It so happens that it was to visit Professor Challenger at Rotherfield that I was asking for leave of absence. The fact is, that it is the anniversary of our main adventure on the plateau three years ago, and he has asked our whole party down to his house to see him and celebrate the occasion."

"Capital!" cried McArdle, rubbing his hands and beaming through his glasses. "Then you will be able to get his opeenions out of him. In any other man I would say it was all moonshine, but the fellow has made good once, and who knows but he may again!"

"Get what out of him?" I asked. "What has he been doing?"

"Haven't you seen his letter on 'Scientific Possibeelities' in to-day's Times?"

"No."

McArdle dived down and picked a copy from the floor.

“Read it aloud,” said he, indicating a column with his finger. “I’d be glad to hear it again, for I am not sure now that I have the man’s meaning clear in my head.”

This was the letter which I read to the news editor of the Gazette:—

“SCIENTIFIC POSSIBILITIES”

“Sir,—I have read with amusement, not wholly unmixed with some less complimentary emotion, the complacent and wholly fatuous letter of James Wilson MacPhail which has lately appeared in your columns upon the subject of the blurring of Fraunhofer’s lines in the spectra both of the planets and of the fixed stars. He dismisses the matter as of no significance. To a wider intelligence it may well seem of very great possible importance—so great as to involve the ultimate welfare of every man, woman, and child upon this planet. I can hardly hope, by the use of scientific language, to convey any sense of my meaning to those ineffectual people who gather their ideas from the columns of a daily newspaper. I will endeavour, therefore, to condescend to their limitation and to indicate the situation by the use of a homely analogy which will be within the limits of the intelligence of your readers.”

“Man, he’s a wonder—a living wonder!” said McArdle, shaking his head reflectively. “He’d put up the feathers of a sucking-dove and set up a riot in a

Quakers' meeting. No wonder he has made London too hot for him. It's a peety, Mr. Malone, for it's a grand brain! We'll let's have the analogy."

"We will suppose," I read, "that a small bundle of connected corks was launched in a sluggish current upon a voyage across the Atlantic. The corks drift slowly on from day to day with the same conditions all round them. If the corks were sentient we could imagine that they would consider these conditions to be permanent and assured. But we, with our superior knowledge, know that many things might happen to surprise the corks. They might possibly float up against a ship, or a sleeping whale, or become entangled in seaweed. In any case, their voyage would probably end by their being thrown up on the rocky coast of Labrador. But what could they know of all this while they drifted so gently day by day in what they thought was a limitless and homogeneous ocean?"

Your readers will possibly comprehend that the Atlantic, in this parable, stands for the mighty ocean of ether through which we drift and that the bunch of corks represents the little and obscure planetary system to which we belong. A third-rate sun, with its rag tag and bobtail of insignificant satellites, we float under the same daily conditions towards some unknown end, some squalid catastrophe which will overwhelm us at the ultimate confines of space, where we are swept over an

etheric Niagara or dashed upon some unthinkable Labrador. I see no room here for the shallow and ignorant optimism of your correspondent, Mr. James Wilson MacPhail, but many reasons why we should watch with a very close and interested attention every indication of change in those cosmic surroundings upon which our own ultimate fate may depend."

"Man, he'd have made a grand meenister," said McArdle. "It just booms like an organ. Let's get down to what it is that's troubling him."

The general blurring and shifting of Fraunhofer's lines of the spectrum point, in my opinion, to a widespread cosmic change of a subtle and singular character. Light from a planet is the reflected light of the sun. Light from a star is a self-produced light. But the spectra both from planets and stars have, in this instance, all undergone the same change. Is it, then, a change in those planets and stars? To me such an idea is inconceivable. What common change could simultaneously come upon them all? Is it a change in our own atmosphere? It is possible, but in the highest degree improbable, since we see no signs of it around us, and chemical analysis has failed to reveal it. What, then, is the third possibility? That it may be a change in the conducting medium, in that infinitely fine ether which extends from star to star and pervades the whole universe. Deep in that ocean we are floating upon a slow

current. Might that current not drift us into belts of ether which are novel and have properties of which we have never conceived? There is a change somewhere. This cosmic disturbance of the spectrum proves it. It may be a good change. It may be an evil one. It may be a neutral one. We do not know. Shallow observers may treat the matter as one which can be disregarded, but one who like myself is possessed of the deeper intelligence of the true philosopher will understand that the possibilities of the universe are incalculable and that the wisest man is he who holds himself ready for the unexpected. To take an obvious example, who would undertake to say that the mysterious and universal outbreak of illness, recorded in your columns this very morning as having broken out among the indigenous races of Sumatra, has no connection with some cosmic change to which they may respond more quickly than the more complex peoples of Europe? I throw out the idea for what it is worth. To assert it is, in the present stage, as unprofitable as to deny it, but it is an unimaginative numskull who is too dense to perceive that it is well within the bounds of scientific possibility.

“Yours faithfully,

“George Edward Challenger.

“The Briars, Rortherfield.”

“It’s a fine, steemulating letter,” said McArdle thoughtfully, fitting a cigarette into the long glass tube

which he used as a holder. "What's your opeenion of it, Mr. Malone?"

I had to confess my total and humiliating ignorance of the subject at issue. What, for example, were Fraunhofer's lines? McArdle had just been studying the matter with the aid of our tame scientist at the office, and he picked from his desk two of those many-coloured spectral bands which bear a general resemblance to the hat-ribbons of some young and ambitious cricket club. He pointed out to me that there were certain black lines which formed crossbars upon the series of brilliant colours extending from the red at one end through gradations of orange, yellow, green, blue, and indigo to the violet at the other.

"Those dark bands are Fraunhofer's lines," said he. "The colours are just light itself. Every light, if you can split it up with a prism, gives the same colours. They tell us nothing. It is the lines that count, because they vary according to what it may be that produces the light. It is these lines that have been blurred instead of clear this last week, and all the astronomers have been quarreling over the reason. Here's a photograph of the blurred lines for our issue to-morrow. The public have taken no interest in the matter up to now, but this letter of Challenger's in the Times will make them wake up, I'm thinking."

"And this about Sumatra?"

“Well, it’s a long cry from a blurred line in a spectrum to a sick nigger in Sumatra. And yet the chiel has shown us once before that he knows what he’s talking about. There is some queer illness down yonder, that’s beyond all doubt, and to-day there’s a cable just come in from Singapore that the lighthouses are out of action in the Straits of Sundan, and two ships on the beach in consequence. Anyhow, it’s good enough for you to interview Challenger upon. If you get anything definite, let us have a column by Monday.”

I was coming out from the news editor’s room, turning over my new mission in my mind, when I heard my name called from the waiting-room below. It was a telegraph-boy with a wire which had been forwarded from my lodgings at Streatham. The message was from the very man we had been discussing, and ran thus:—

Malone, 17, Hill Street, Streatham.—Bring oxygen.—Challenger.

“Bring oxygen!” The Professor, as I remembered him, had an elephantine sense of humour capable of the most clumsy and unwieldy gambollings. Was this one of those jokes which used to reduce him to uproarious laughter, when his eyes would disappear and he was all gaping mouth and wagging beard, supremely indifferent to the gravity of all around him? I turned the words over, but could make nothing even remotely jocose out of them. Then surely it was a concise order—though a

very strange one. He was the last man in the world whose deliberate command I should care to disobey. Possibly some chemical experiment was afoot; possibly—Well, it was no business of mine to speculate upon why he wanted it. I must get it. There was nearly an hour before I should catch the train at Victoria. I took a taxi, and having ascertained the address from the telephone book, I made for the Oxygen Tube Supply Company in Oxford Street.

As I alighted on the pavement at my destination, two youths emerged from the door of the establishment carrying an iron cylinder, which, with some trouble, they hoisted into a waiting motor-car. An elderly man was at their heels scolding and directing in a creaky, sardonic voice. He turned towards me. There was no mistaking those austere features and that goatee beard. It was my old cross-grained companion, Professor Summerlee.

“What!” he cried. “Don’t tell me that YOU have had one of these preposterous telegrams for oxygen?”

I exhibited it.

“Well, well! I have had one too, and, as you see, very much against the grain, I have acted upon it. Our good friend is as impossible as ever. The need for oxygen could not have been so urgent that he must desert the usual means of supply and encroach upon the time of those who are really busier than himself. Why