

B A N T A M C L A S S I C

SHERLOCK HOLMES

The Complete Novels and Stories

Volume I

SIR ARTHUR
CONAN DOYLE

With an Introduction by Loren D. Estleman

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ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BOSWELLS

by Loren D. Estleman

I SUBMIT for your inspection one John H. Watson: medical man, late British Army surgeon, raconteur, journalist, connoisseur of women, Knight of the Battered Tin Dispatch-Box, valiant and loyal friend.

He has suffered mightily at the hands of scholars and the public since the 1887 appearance of *A Study in Scarlet* in Beeton's Christmas Annual, calumniated on the one hand as a tanglefooted incompetent and on the other as a boozy Bluebeard, to say nothing of sundry slanderous impostures his admirers have had to endure, beginning in 1905, when Sherlock Holmes and his indispensable biographer made their silent-screen debut. (We will ignore the 1900 vignette *Sherlock Holmes Baffled*, in which Watson was ungraciously not invited to appear.) Chief among these poseurs was the otherwise distinguished character actor Nigel Bruce, whose corpulent and ineffectual bumbler in thirteen Universal features starring Basil Rathbone in the 1940s fixed Watson in the public mind for decades as a comic foil. If a mop bucket appeared in a scene, his foot would be inside it, and if by some sardonic twist of fate and the whim of director Roy William Neill he managed to stumble upon an important clue, he could be depended upon to blow his nose in it and throw it away. I am convinced that this lampoon of Holmes's trusty right bower has colored much of the pseudoscholarship undertaken during the past forty years regarding the good doctor's life and habits.

Moriarty is not involved in this misconception; it is without malice. Directors simply don't know what to do with Watson. His presence in fifty-six of the sixty published adventures (two

are told by a third-person narrator, and Holmes himself relates “The Adventure of the Lion’s Mane” and “The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier”) is crucial, for he is both the storyteller and the buffer between the cold, blinding light of Holmes’s intellect and the reader. On stage and screen he is a fixture, and directors abhor characters who don’t appear to be doing anything. Since much of the action—and, despite the claims of some proponents of the American school of detective fiction, there is plenty of action in the Sherlock Holmes stories—takes place in the final scenes, the simplest solution is to provide a number of banana skins for Watson to take a Brodie on until his brawn is required. Besides, it makes Holmes look that much smarter and pleases the groundlings.

Watson was the first to confess that his friend’s analytical mind worked on a plane he himself could scarcely conceive, and although in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* he poked some good-natured fun at himself for fancying he had mastered the science of deduction in the matter of Dr. Mortimer’s stick, he never pretended to skills beyond his own considerable ones. Unlike most of his antecedents in the ape world of mystery fiction, he never prolonged or spoiled a case by bungling. Indeed, time and again, in such tight situations as the long-awaited encounter with the spectral hound on the Baskerville common and that magnificently suspenseful chase down the Thames in *The Sign of Four*, he quite saved the day for the often impetuous Holmes with his courage and propensity toward action at the precise moment it was needed. “‘I am lost without my Boswell,’” declares Holmes in “A Scandal in Bohemia”; and it is probable that, in his supreme egocentricity, he is not fully aware of the statement’s truth.

Holmes, of course, was the star, and disregarding Watson’s close physical and spiritual resemblance to the dashing Richard Harding Davis of Hearst’s *New York Journal*, Watson was not the sort of journalist who makes himself the hero in his dispatches. Yet, guileless chronicler and respecter of privacy that he was, we know rather more about him than we do about Holmes. In *Scarlet* he refers modestly to his service with the Berkshires at Maiwand, touching almost apologetically upon

the severe wound he received there that troubled him throughout his life—and not just physically, for we may infer from his inability in later years to recall whether the jezail bullet passed through his leg or his shoulder that his conscious mind attempted to wipe out all memory of the incident. We learn of his near-fatal bout with enteric dysentery, his lack of family, and the alarming state of his finances, and all before he makes contact with Sherlock Holmes. (On what became of the bull pup that he told Holmes he kept, we can only speculate, and various conjectures about colonial slang for “bad temper” and the existence somewhere of a bastard son seem both unsatisfying and actionable.) We become aware also, counter to the Oliver Hardy image projected by Hollywood, that at this time Watson is “as thin as a lath and as brown as a nut,” and although by the time of the morally unsettling “The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton” he will be described as “a middle-sized, strongly built man—square jaw, thick neck, a moustache,” this early picture certainly challenges the common conception.

What emerges then, be he lean and brown or square and muscular, is a figure both distinctive and arresting, more Bulldog Drummond than Sancho Panza, and strongly attracted to women, who in turn find him attractive. Holmes makes note in “The Resident Patient” of his friend’s “natural advantages” in that department, and in *The Sign of Four* Watson himself uncharacteristically boasts of “an experience of women which extends over many nations and three separate continents”—driving subsequent scholars into frenzied debate over which was the third continent. He is often observed admiring a clean profile or a trim ankle, and his memory for the details of a handsome female client’s dress rivals Holmes’s more practical one. But he is no callous swordsman and commits himself willingly to the chains of matrimony when the lovely Mary Morstan beckons in *Four*.

Which brings us to the other extreme: that brand of canard, born of supposition and sexual frustration masquerading as scholarship, concerning Watson’s marriage(s). We hear first of his bereavement in “The Adventure of the Empty House”; then, in “The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier,” dated nine

years later, Holmes alludes querulously to his friend's desertion of him for a wife. The obvious conclusion is that he remarried; but this is not sufficient for some trash pickers who have published learned treatises in distinguished periodicals attesting to a third, fourth, and even a *fifth* marriage, including one before the seminal events described in *Scarlet*. I relegate all this into the same bin with the speculations regarding Watson's drinking habits because he mixed up a few dates and references in a forty-year chronicle and wonder that the man who applauded his friend Sherlock Holmes for his intention to horsewhip a cad in "A Case of Identity" has not come out of seclusion before this to defend his name before a magistrate.

Considerable sanctimony has been employed as well in denigrating his skills as a doctor. This is based on the evidence of emergency first-aid procedures that were quite rightly presented in layman's terms to avoid overloading the narrative with scientific jargon and a reference in "The Red-headed League" to a practice that was "never very absorbing." To this we need only respond that he never lost a patient in our presence who was not already beyond the reach of medicine. "Do you imagine," says Holmes, in "The Adventure of the Dying Detective," "that I have no respect for your medical talents?" His ethics have been called into question for his readiness to abandon his patients on the slightest notice and run off with Holmes on some new quest. Admittedly, the energetic veteran of the bloody Afghanistan campaign was too adventurous for the staid life of office hours and regular rounds. But Drs. Anstruther and Jackson were close by and ever eager to assume his practice while he was away.

Watson was a swashbuckler, no use denying it even if denial were necessary. He braved poisoned darts in *The Sign of Four*, dispatched the devil-dog to save Sir Henry's life in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, scaled a wall with the police hard on his heels in "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton," and at the time of "His Last Bow," when he was well past sixty, offered his surgical skills to his country on the eve of World War I. (That they were accepted should lay to rest once and for all any questions about their merit.) Notwithstanding his friend's

mastery of boxing and fencing, and sitting-room marksman-ship that would quicken the heart of an Annie Oakley, when a pistol was necessary it was Watson who carried it, at Holmes's request. A modern-day police officer could do far worse in a partner, and often does.

Mind, Watson had faults. Along with the standard Victorian irritability and a tendency, displayed as early as *Scarlet*, to dismiss those things about which he knew nothing as "ineffable twaddle," the most destructive of these seems to have been his gambling. He confesses ruefully to Holmes in "The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place" that he has paid for his knowledge of racing with "about half my wound pension," and in "The Adventure of the Dancing Men" we learn that his checkbook is locked safely away in Holmes's desk, a self-protective measure familiar to compulsive gamblers who recognize their weakness. "Eureka," exclaim supporters of the many-times-wedded theory; a clue at last to the cause of the dissolution of his marriages. Yet it should be noted that in that same adventure he has resisted the urge to invest in the "sure thing" of South African securities and that by "His Last Bow" he has sufficiently conquered his problem to engage in the rich man's sport, in 1914, of driving an automobile. The daily double, perhaps. At its worst the lure of games of chance appears to be a placebo for his adventurous soul, a substitute in quieter times, like Holmes's own darker habit, for the adrenaline rush of hansom-cab chases through Soho and midnight stakeouts in Dartmoor. The vice is less insidious than cocaine addiction—and let us not forget that if Holmes helped out Watson by withholding his funds, Watson succeeded singlehandedly in weaning his friend away from the needle.

And Watson grew. While Holmes the rheumatic beekeeper on the South Downs is not significantly less idiosyncratic than Holmes the young criminologist at Bart's, Watson is not the same person when we leave him as when we make his acquaintance. The roommate who scores verbally off a more than usually truculent Holmes at the beginning of *The Valley of Fear* could not have done so as recently as "The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist," when a withering evaluation of his research

efforts near Surrey renders him piqued and quarrelsome. Although several of his conclusions regarding the identity and character of Dr. Mortimer based upon his stick in *Hound* are erroneous, as many are correct, and the invalided surgeon in *Scarlet* who threw down "The Book of Life" because he found deduction based on analysis unacceptable would not have been capable of that. Watson at the end of the canon is a father confessor, tolerant of human frailty and well aware of his limitations, while Holmes's consistent refusal to acknowledge his own reduces him to an oddity, albeit a fascinating and brilliant one. Which man you will invite for dinner depends upon the personality and temperament of the other guests.

From the outset a man who walked with kings—the late Bohemian monarch springs to mind—yet never lost the common touch—yellow-backed novels and the sea stories of William Clark Russell remained among his favorite reading—Watson was the ballast upon whose reassuring weight Holmes came to rely more and more as the gaslight era drew to a close. That was the basis of the partnership from March 1881 to August 1914, and those who suggest homosexuality, as they have of every other famous male team from Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday to Batman and Robin, either are ignorant of the largely masculine character of late nineteenth-century English society or stubbornly refuse to accept Holmes's much-discussed misogyny at face value.

The stories without Watson, or in which he plays a minor role, are arid and disappointing, lack humanity, and embarrass one with Holmes's shameless narcissism. They are self-conscious and help to propagate the disturbing rumor that Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson never existed and that they were the creations of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a doctor of English and Irish descent who wrote about the Boer War and Professor Challenger, introduced the sport of skiing to Switzerland, and conducted séances with Houdini's ghost. This is never the case when Holmes and Watson are in their proper places as detective and biographer, or even during Holmes's absences, as when Watson gets his chance to play the bully hero in chapters 6 through 11 of *Hound*. He has the endearing

ability to appear less astute than the reader, rendering himself more approachable than the aloof and awesome Holmes, without sacrificing respect for his native intelligence. The thinness of this particular highwire is best appreciated when someone falls off, a frequent occurrence among those who have attempted to duplicate the stunt. Said the detective, sorely missing his friend's assistance in "The Blanched Soldier": "A confederate who foresees your conclusions and course of action is always dangerous, but one to whom each development comes as a perpetual surprise, and to whom the future is always a closed book, is indeed an ideal helpmate."

The reader who holds this volume in his hands, and who also is about to experience for the first time the adventures contained herein, occupies an enviable position. In *A Study in Scarlet* he will discover Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson in the flush of youth, shyly and curiously learning each other's secrets like a honeymooning couple as they embark upon a lifetime of intrigue and danger. He will learn the stark details of Holmes's drug habit in *The Sign of Four*, experience his death and resurrection in "The Final Problem" and "The Adventure of the Empty House," and watch him solve his very first mystery as a callow student in "The 'Gloria Scott'" and commit his first felony as a world-famous detective in "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton." Along the way this fortunate pilgrim will append to his gallery of unforgettable acquaintances the wily Irene Adler, the gullible Jabez Wilson, the sinister Dr. Grimesby Roylott, the redoubtable Mycroft Holmes (living proof, if any were required, that genius is chromosomal), and, at his peril, the reptilian Professor James Moriarty and his cunning, cunning henchman, Colonel Sebastian Moran. Vampires and tigers and severed ears await him should he choose to proceed to the second volume. There *The Hound of the Baskervilles* will introduce him to the elemental struggle between the forces of darkness on the one hand and Victorian pragmatism and bluff heroics on the other. Finally, he will know the tyranny of a secret society in *The Valley of Fear*;

wonder about the circumstances attending the bizarre death of Isadora Persano and the disappearances of James Phillimore and the cutter *Alicia*, the records of which, we are told in "The Problem of Thor Bridge," are socked away in Watson's battered tin dispatch-box, and find out in "His Last Bow" how Sherlock Holmes came out of retirement to rescue England from defeat even before the First World War began. Once met, these tales are never banished, and the reader will come away changed.

A word about background. When *Scarlet* appeared in London in December 1887, its author received a flat fee of twenty-five pounds—about \$120 on the fluctuating contemporary exchange. (At an auction at Sotheby's in the 1970s a copy of the magazine brought twenty times that figure.) The magazine did not sell out its run and harvested a discouraging crop of reviews in obscure publications, noting Holmes's debt to Poe's C. Auguste Dupin. At the time, *Scarlet's* implied condemnation of the Mormon faith received little criticism, probably because of that church's small membership and because the Mountain Meadows Massacre, in which a band of Brigham Young's Destroying Angels ambushed and slaughtered 140 gentiles passing by wagon train through southern Utah, was only thirty years in the past. Today the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is one of the world's richest churches, and this view is disparaged (along with the similar ones expressed in Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* and Vardis Fisher's *Mountain Man*), just as at the height of the Ku Klux Klan's power in the 1920s it was fashionable to indict Holmes's opposition to the secret organization in "The Five Orange Pips." For those who prefer their Sherlock Holmes served up pure and without digression (and I am one), it is possible to skip over the long omniscient passage entitled "The Country of the Saints" without losing "the scarlet thread of murder." Indeed, rare is the reader who can resist the temptation to leapfrog the Great Alkali Plain and learn the fate of the person responsible for the singular expression of horror and hatred on the dead man's face at No. 3 Lauriston Gardens and the incarnadine "RACHE" scratched on the wall.

Encouraged by the popularity of *Scarlet's* first publication in book form in 1888, *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1890 brought out *The Sign of Four*, in which the fetching Mary Morstan engages Holmes's services in the disappearance of her father and turns Watson's head. Its most conspicuous feature, beyond a rousing Grand Guignol of a mystery involving lost treasure, grotesque twins, a peg-legged pirate, and a stunted aborigine with a blowpipe—not to mention one of the most breathtaking chase sequences to be found anywhere in suspense literature—was and is the exposure of Holmes's cocaine dependency. In his objection to this habit Watson was ahead of his time, for with the drug only six years on the market the advertising industry stressed widely the curative properties of a substance then obtainable over the counter in everything from its pure uncut state to Coca-Cola. Here Watson anticipates later findings concerning its effect on brain tissue and threat of addiction, and at a time when conservatives in the medical community merely counseled caution, he is observed urging his friend to abandon the practice. By the time of "The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter" he will succeed, but at this point, disturbingly, the needle represents Holmes's refuge from the loneliness of his condition. Today, when narcotics appear to threaten every aspect of our society, these passages are often deleted from children's editions of *Four*—a mistake, in view of Watson's strong arguments against indulgence.

In January 1891 *The Strand Magazine* began to appear in parlors throughout the Empire and quickly established itself as the *Life* of its era, offering copious illustrations, sketches, and fiction of interest to late Victorians. "A Scandal in Bohemia," recounting the singular events in the affair of the American actress Irene Adler and His Teutonic Majesty, found its way into its pages in June, and a literary marriage was consummated that would last well into the new century. Issues containing new Sherlock Holmes stories sold out quickly. Today it is impossible to think of *The Strand* without thinking of Sherlock Holmes, and difficult to think of Sherlock Holmes without thinking of *The Strand*. When the magazine changed owners in

1951 and was revamped into a men's periodical to boost flagging circulation, the premiere issue of *Men Only* featured a cartoon of a blue-chinned Holmes contemplating a bloody dagger on the cover.

Following the appearance between hard covers of the first dozen short stories as *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, the editors of *The Strand* commissioned eleven more, which were collected eventually as *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, at the end of which Holmes was believed dead in the white waters at the base of the Reichenbach Falls outside Meiringen, Switzerland. This revelation touched off a display of public emotion not to be duplicated until 1938, when a dramatic Halloween presentation on American radio of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* convinced thousands of listeners that the country was under invasion by Martians. More than twenty thousand *Strand* readers canceled their subscriptions immediately, and young men and women appeared on the streets in, respectively, black armbands and veils. They were in mourning, not for the demise of a popular serial character, but for the collapse of a dam of justice and reason in a rising tide of incompetence and evil.

Public pressure made a Lazarus of Holmes. After an absence of eight years, he returned to *The Strand* in August 1901 in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, a novel-length adventure dated before Reichenbach that ran in monthly installments through the following April. It remains the most popular of his published exploits, and sales statistics regarding the English manor-house mysteries of Dame Agatha Christie notwithstanding, allusions to Grimpen Mire, the sinister Mr. and Mrs. Barrymore, and the canine curse of Black Hugo Baskerville spark quicker responses from readers polled than either the china-blue eyes of Miss Marple or Monsieur Poirot's Little Gray Cells. People who "never read mysteries" have read *Hound*.

Appetites having been whetted, "The Empty House" restored Holmes to life the next year (Watson's reaction to his friend's sudden rematerialization is not to be missed), and from then until 1927, when Watson closed *The Case Book of*

Sherlock Holmes, the ascetic detective and his stolid amanuensis remained on public display, despite Holmes's retirement in 1903 or 1904 to tend bees on the Sussex Downs and devote time to his magnum opus, *The Whole Art of Detection*—upon which, since it is not yet in print, he is presumably still working. However, the example of "His Last Bow" is cause for hope that should the stability of the order he did so much to establish and maintain be significantly threatened, he will once again don the ear-flapped traveling cap, look up his old friend and biographer, and consult his Bradshaw's for the next train to "that great cesspool," London.

The Sherlockian newcomer accustomed to today's sanguinary standards of what constitutes a good mystery may be surprised to learn how few of these adventures deal with murder. (Several, including "A Case of Identity" and "The Man with the Twisted Lip," do not even involve crime.) But those that do are sufficiently bone rattling. The tableau at Riding Thorpe Manor in "The Adventure of the Dancing Men," the marrow-freezing denouement of "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," and the hideous fate of the victims in "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot" must satisfy the most bloodthirsty among us. And some in which murder does not occur are grotesque enough. "The Adventure of the Engineer's Thumb" and "The Crooked Man" contain all the ingredients for healthy nightmares without a drop of mortal blood spilled. These tales and others serve to remind us that the London scene of parasols and white linen was also home to Jack the Ripper. "The most winning woman I ever knew," relates Holmes in *Sign*, "was hanged for poisoning three little children for their insurance money."

A man for his time, then; for the detective himself was not above bludgeoning cadavers in dissecting rooms or attempting for no little time to transfix a dead pig with a harpoon in a butcher's shop, all in the pursuit of criminal knowledge. But to his credit, a cipher without a key or a pair of spectacles abandoned at the scene of a crime were of infinitely more interest to him than an unimaginative corpse. So they are to us, and hence the reason for this collection.

If there is a Valhalla for superhuman sleuths and their all-too-human compatriots, it will allow them freedom at night to catch the racing hansom cab in the mustard fog and provide them a cozy cluttered place by day to feast upon cold pheasant and tales from the tin box. If the detective should suffer overmuch from the artistic temperament, and his fellow lodger should dwell overlong upon the fairness of a wrist or the timbre of a feminine voice, so much the better, for us and them. Literature never produced a relationship more symbiotic nor a warmer and more timeless friendship.

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