

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

The Best of
Sherlock Holmes

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

Edited by David Stuart Davies



SELECTED STORIES

THE BEST OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Selected and introduced by
DAVID STUART DAVIES



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FOR
GWYNNETH *and* JOHN
WITH LOVE

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First published in 1998 by Wordsworth Editions Limited
8B East Street, Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9HJ

ISBN 978-1-85326-748-2

Text © Wordsworth Editions Limited 1998
Introduction © David Stuart Davies 1998

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Typeset in Great Britain by Antony Gray
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

INTRODUCTION

There is something magical about the character of Sherlock Holmes. He is known and loved all over the world. The image of the tall, thin man with a cape, carrying a magnifying glass and wearing a deerstalker is recognised immediately. He is the international icon for the detective, the crime-solver and the righter of wrongs. Since their publication, the stories of Sherlock Holmes have never been out of print; they are available in almost every language in the world and there are versions in Pitman's shorthand and Braille. Sherlock Holmes is the most filmed of all literary characters. He began his screen career as early as 1901, in a two-minute one-reeler called *Sherlock Holmes Baffled*, and has rarely been off the screen since. He has been featured in plays, musicals, cartoons, advertisements, a ballet and an oratorio. So clearly there is something magical about this ubiquitous fictional detective. But what is the nature of this magic? Can we explain it? I do not think we can – not fully anyway. After all, the essence of magic is that the mechanics of the brilliant, spellbinding effects are hidden and unexplained.

This collection presents you with twenty of the very best of the Sherlock Holmes stories, a rich concentration of that magic, and when you have read these tales perhaps you will come closer to understanding the reason for their continuing potency. Even if you don't, you will have had a jolly good time and joined that large international club of admirers. However, before you set off on your wonderful journey of discovery, you may like to learn a little about the character of Sherlock Holmes, his genesis, his creator and the stories themselves.

In 1886, the young Dr Arthur Conan Doyle, who was then in his middle twenties, set up in a medical practice in Southsea, Hampshire. During the *longueurs* between his ministrations to the few patients who made their way to his surgery, he scribbled down some ideas for a story involving a brilliant detective. His creation, whom he first christened Sherringford Holmes, was an eccentric fellow who lived

at 221B Upper Baker Street with his friend Ormond Sacker. Fate decreed that Sherringford would be changed to Sherlock and Ormond Sacker would become Dr John Watson.

Conan Doyle had already published some short stories and articles and had been working on two other novels before he became interested in writing a really original detective novel. In later life he explained his approach:

I was educated in a very severe and critical school of medical thought, especially coming under the influence of Dr Bell of Edinburgh, who had the most remarkable powers of observation. He prided himself that when he looked at a patient he could tell not only their disease but very often their occupation and place of residence. Reading some detective stories, I was struck by the fact that their results were obtained in nearly every case by chance. I thought I would try my hand at writing a story in which the hero would treat crime as Dr Bell treated disease and where science would take the place of chance.

In his endeavours to create this scientific detective, Conan Doyle wrote the novella *A Study in Scarlet* and set about trying to interest someone in publishing it. The book was rejected by several publishers before, in October 1886, Ward Lock and Company offered the author a mere twenty-five pounds for the copyright, although they said that they 'could not publish it this year as the market is flooded with cheap fiction'. The impoverished medic was compelled to accept their miserable offer. The story was eventually published in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* for 1887. In this first story Conan Doyle established those characteristics that were to make Sherlock Holmes so fascinating to the reading public – his strange habits, his brilliant analytical brain and his astounding deductions – but, despite this, the novella attracted little attention. However, John Marshall Stoddart, the managing editor of the American magazine *Lippincott's*, found the story interesting and he was perceptive enough to realise that the detective-story genre was about to blossom, prompted perhaps by the high sales of Fergus Hume's 'The Mystery of the Hansom Cab'. Conan Doyle was invited to attend a dinner at the Langham Hotel by Stoddart, who was in London to launch an English edition of the magazine. Also in attendance at this dinner was Oscar Wilde. Both Wilde and Conan Doyle were engaged to write books for the new magazine. Wilde's opus was *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, while Conan Doyle's was the second Holmes adventure, *The Sign of the Four*, which he managed to complete in six weeks.

By the time he came to write *The Sign of the Four*, Arthur Conan Doyle had developed as a writer. He now had greater control and confidence and was more daring. It was in this book that the author introduced Holmes's infamous drug habit:

Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantel-piece, and his hypodermic syringe from its neat morocco case. With his long white fingers he adjusted the delicate needle and rolled back his shirt cuff. For some little time his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the sinewy forearm and wrist all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture marks. Finally he thrust the sharp point home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined armchair with a long sigh of satisfaction.

'Which is it today,' I asked, 'morphine or cocaine?'

He raised his eyes languidly from the old black-letter volume which he had opened.

'It is cocaine,' he said, 'a seven-per-cent solution. Would you care to try it?'

By allowing Holmes to take drugs in this second story, Conan Doyle was adding to his character's bohemianism, his flamboyancy, adding further colour and depth to Holmes's persona, thus increasing his attraction for the Victorian middle class, who loved to flirt secretly with such vices. It certainly is more than likely that his meeting with the outrageous Oscar Wilde gave Conan Doyle the idea to add this decadent aspect to the detective's character.

Despite Conan Doyle's firmer control of both plot and character, *The Sign of the Four* met with mixed or indifferent reviews when it was first published in 1890. It raised little interest among the reading public. The main problem with both these early stories and, indeed, the later novel *The Valley of Fear*, is that they present two plots within one story, involving flashback segments which take up half the narrative and effectively remove Sherlock Holmes from the action for an inordinate length of time. While each segment holds the reader's interest, they do not seem to blend together as a whole.

When *The Sign of the Four* was published in book form in 1890 it again attracted only mixed reviews and certainly it did not generate much response from the reading public. It really was *The Strand Magazine* that made Sherlock Holmes and his creator household names. George Newnes, publisher of the popular *Tit-Bits*, was eager to move up-market with a new monthly illustrated magazine which would 'cost sixpence and be worth a shilling'. Newnes had studied the American market and seen that the publications in the States were

'smarter, livelier and more interesting'. He wanted his new magazine, originally called *The Burleigh Street Magazine*, to be 'organically complete every month, like a book'. Serials were out – in their place would be a selection of short stories. Arthur Conan Doyle saw this format as an ideal one for the hero of his two detective novels. Each Holmes adventure would be complete every month, but the element of suspense and interest in the character and his adventures would work like a serial, enticing readers to buy the following issue to find out what the eccentric sleuth was up to next. In his autobiography *Memories and Adventures* (1924), Conan Doyle wrote:

It had struck me that a single character running through a series, if it only engaged the reader, would bind that reader to that particular magazine. On the other hand, it had long seemed to me that the ordinary serial might be an impediment rather than a help to the magazine, since, sooner or later, one missed one number and afterwards it had lost all interest. Clearly the ideal compromise was a character which carried through, yet instalments were complete in themselves, so that the purchaser was always sure he could relish the whole contents of the magazine. I believe I was the first to realise this and *The Strand Magazine* the first to put it into practice.

The first issue of *The Strand* appeared on the bookstalls in January 1891. Very shortly afterwards the editor, H. Greenhough Smith, received two Sherlock Holmes short stories: 'A Scandal in Bohemia' and 'The Red-Headed League'. When they landed on his desk, he read them with growing excitement: 'I at once realised that here was the greatest short-story writer since Edgar Allan Poe. I remember rushing into Mr Newnes' room and thrusting the story before his eyes.' The first Sherlock Holmes short story appeared in the July issue of *The Strand* in 1891 and attracted considerable attention. The die was cast.

By the time that 'The Copper Beeches', the twelfth and final entry in the series, appeared in the issue of June 1892, the Holmes stories had become the mainstay of the magazine, while Conan Doyle's detective had scaled the heights of popularity. A legend had been created. The series was published in book form as *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* in October 1892.

However, even before the ink was dry on the manuscript of 'The Copper Beeches' its author had wearied of Sherlock Holmes. In fact, by the end of 1891 he had written to his mother, one of Sherlock's greatest admirers, stating that he was thinking of 'slaying Holmes in

the last [story]. He takes my mind from better things.' His mother prevailed upon him to change his mind, which for a time he did. The 'better things' to which Conan Doyle referred were his historical novels, which he considered to be 'serious literature' compared with his catchpenny detective stories. Also, on a practical level, churning out twelve ingenious plots in a year was hard, demanding labour. He noted this point in his autobiography: 'The difficulty of the Holmes work was that every story needed as clear-cut and original a plot as a longish book would do. One cannot without effort spin plots at such a rate.'

Conan Doyle's disenchantment was growing when he was approached by the editor of *The Strand* for a further twelve stories. In order to put him off he asked for what he considered to be the ridiculously high fee of fifty pounds a story, fully expecting to be turned down. *The Strand* accepted his request without question. It was clear that they knew how important the Holmes character was to the young magazine's fortunes and how incredibly popular this hawk-nosed sleuth had become.

The second series of stories, which became known as *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, commenced with the story 'Silver Blaze', which was published in the December issue for 1892. The weary task of creating these stories convinced the author that he had to rid himself of this literary shackle and, despite ardent pleas from his mother, in the last episode of the series, 'The Final Problem', he did just that.

Conan Doyle realised that the end of Sherlock Holmes had to be dramatic and had to be brought about by someone who was the detective's intellectual equal. So, in order to meet these requirements, he created a mastermind who was as brilliant at carrying out crimes as Holmes was at solving them. Enter Professor Moriarty, 'the Napoleon of Crime', whom Holmes described as 'the organiser of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city. He is a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker.' He was in essence Sherlock Holmes's dark *alter ego*.

The location for their final titanic struggle was the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland. Here these two giants faced each other for the last time on a narrow pathway overlooking the tremendous torrent of water. It seemed that, as they grappled, they fell and disappeared into the swirling foam at the base of the falls. Watson was beside himself with grief. So were the readers of *The Strand*. The offices of the magazine were besieged with messages of grief, condolence and, most of all, anger – anger at the publication and the author for allowing this terrible incident to occur. George Newnes, addressing

his shareholders, referred to Holmes's death as a 'dreadful event'. One irate lady wrote to Conan Doyle describing him as a 'brute' and it is reported that men in the city wore black armbands as a mark of respect for the death of Mr Sherlock Holmes, whom Watson described as 'the best and wisest man whom I have ever known'.

Conan Doyle's reaction was somewhat different. Maybe with the letter of abuse from that irate lady in mind, he expressed grim satisfaction: 'Thank God, I've killed the brute.' He expanded on this terse comment when speaking to the Authors' Club in 1896: 'I hold that it was not murder, but justifiable homicide in self-defence, since, if I had not killed him, he would certainly have killed me.'

For years he disregarded all pleas to resurrect Holmes, but in 1901 when he heard a friend's account of some legends of Dartmoor he conceived a mystery story about a family supposedly haunted by a spectral hound. He was very pleased with the idea of this story, which in a letter to his mother he described as 'a real creeper' – a phrase he was later to repeat when selling the story to Greenhough Smith of *The Strand*. In developing the plot, Conan Doyle realised that he would require a detective hero to be involved with the strange events and eventually to solve and explain the mystery. He was sensible enough to see that there was little point in creating a new character for this task when he already had one he'd made earlier: Sherlock Holmes. So, one suspects, with some reluctance, Conan Doyle converted his ghostly-dog saga into a Sherlock Holmes adventure and called it *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. However he was adamant that this story did not herald a permanent return – Sherlock Holmes was still dead – and that this investigation took place prior to Reichenbach. Nevertheless, there must have been the sound of champagne corks popping in the offices of *The Strand Magazine*. The publishers and the readers were ecstatic that Sherlock Holmes was back. The story was a tremendous success.

Arthur Conan Doyle was knighted in 1902 and it was felt by some – not entirely without reason – that this accolade was as much due to the reappearance of Holmes in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* as to the author's public service in rallying world opinion on British conduct during the Boer War.

Now that Sherlock Holmes had appeared in print once more, readers and publishers alike hoped that the author could be persuaded to relent and drag the fellow up from his watery grave for more adventures. Interestingly, Conan Doyle had never given the world a corpse and one wonders if some instinct had stayed his hand as he was about to provide one. By 1903 Conan Doyle was a much more relaxed

and confident man and the idea of writing further detective stories was no longer abhorrent to him, so when the New York publisher of *Collier's Magazine* offered him four thousand dollars per story he at last gave in. The first tale in the new collection which became known as *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* was 'The Empty House', which gave a rather unsatisfactory account, unconvincing as to detail, of how the Great Detective had escaped death. But readers were not concerned with the credibility of Holmes's explanation, they were just delighted that he was back in circulation again – back in London, back in Baker Street, back with Watson and back on the case. All was right with the world once more.

From this point on the canon of Holmes stories continued, although more sporadically than before. After *The Return* there were two further collections, *His Last Bow* and *The Casebook*, and a final novel, *The Valley of Fear*, which was similar to the first two in that the story had two separate strands that were only brought together in the closing pages. This construction leaves Holmes absent for nearly half the novel. The last Holmes story appeared in *The Strand* in July 1927.

It has often been said that the stories Conan Doyle wrote after his character's return were not as good as those he had penned earlier. This is not exactly true; but the really good stories were fewer and farther between. While the essential nature of the stories had not changed, other things had. The world of the twentieth century was one from which so many of the accoutrements of the Holmes adventures – the hansom cab, gaslight, limited communication facilities – were disappearing. Now there were motor cars, aeroplanes, the cinema and other modern wonders. By the time the last collection was published in 1927, the Holmes stories had already a growing element of nostalgic appeal.

In an introduction to the omnibus edition of the four long stories, published in 1927, three years before his death, Conan Doyle wrote: 'I trust that the younger public may find these romances of interest and that here and there one of the older generation may recapture an ancient thrill.'

Those ancient thrills are still felt and this collection is bursting with them because Sherlock Holmes remains a fascinating enigma. He dwarfs the reader by his brilliance, his wisdom and his wide reaching knowledge. He is both insufferable and likeable. He is a cerebral animal: 'I cannot live without brainwork, what else is there to live for?' His cognitive pursuits seem to cover many areas: 'He spoke on a quick succession of subjects – on miracle plays, on medieval pottery, on Stradivarius violins, on Buddhism of Ceylon and on the warships

of the future – handling each as though he had made a special study of it.' To add to this impressive list, I should also note Holmes's various monographs which cover such diverse topics as a hundred and forty different varieties of pipe, cigar and cigarette ash, the ear, the polyphonic motets of Lassus and an analysis of a hundred and sixty ciphers. He plays the violin – a Stradivarius, no less – has boxed, knows Baritsu, the Japanese art of self-defence, and has the ability to distinguish the typeface of any newspaper at a glance ('though I confess when I was very young I confused the *Leeds Mercury* with the *Western Morning News*'). Holmes also has a wonderful facility for disguise. Even in the first short story he plays two different parts – a drunken-looking groom and a simple-minded clergyman – to great effect. Quite simply, he is Renaissance man – plus.

Conan Doyle recognised the need for Holmes to be a man immune from ordinary human weaknesses and feelings. Therefore he rejects passion or indeed any strong emotions towards women. He does admire the adventuress Irene Adler who features in the story 'A Scandal in Bohemia'. Holmes refers to her as 'the woman', but only, we are assured, because she proved his equal in quickness of wit and decisiveness of action.

Stamford, the man who introduced Watson to Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet*, says of the detective: '[He] is a little too scientific for my tastes – it approaches to cold-bloodedness.' It is as a cool, detached and incisive reasoner that Holmes is found to be most fascinating. He expatiated on this trait in *The Sign of the Four*: 'Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science, and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner.'

Observation and deduction are his methods. Given a battered old felt hat in 'The Blue Carbuncle', he is able to present a detailed picture of the owner, even down to the fact that he has no gas laid on in his house and his wife has ceased to care for him.

But Sherlock Holmes is not merely an armchair detective like Poe's Dupin. He is also a man of action and it is through this aspect of the man that the potency of the stories reached its full power: the call in the night, the hansom-cab ride through the gaslit streets into danger. As Watson puts it: 'It was indeed like old times again when at that hour I found myself beside him in a hansom, my revolver in my pocket and the thrill of adventure in my heart.'

Watson is the reliable, sensible, stockier figure behind the lean silhouette of the Great Detective. He is Holmes's chronicler and as such is as necessary to the Holmes legend as Holmes himself. Watson was once described by Desmond MacCarthy as the most

representative Englishman of his period. He is always ready to neglect his health, his wife, his medical practice or his personal safety at Holmes's behest. 'Come at once – if convenient – if inconvenient come all the same,' wired Holmes peremptorily in a famous telegram. Watson's loyalty to Holmes is unquestionable and at times touching. Moreover, he accepts the brilliance of the man without trying to emulate him: 'I trust I am not more dense than my neighbours.' Holmes says of him: 'It may be that you are not yourself luminous but you are a conductor of light.' This succinctly sums up their relationship, one in which Watson is the foil to Holmes the hero.

However it must be remembered that all our knowledge of Holmes comes from Watson. He is the mirror through which we see the reflections of Baker Street. While Holmes, from time to time, criticises Watson for over-dramatising the investigations, 'looking at everything from the point of view of a story instead of as a scientific exercise', we know that we are being presented with a finely crafted version – the definitive version – of the career of the greatest consulting detective. And Watson is no fool. As an ex-army man, a doctor, a writer of considerable talent and a fellow with extraordinary patience and unswerving loyalty to his friend, he commands the ultimate respect from his readers. Watson is an essential part of the Sherlock Holmes magic.

How the stories were chosen

Choosing the best twenty Sherlock Holmes stories was not an easy task, but I had help from Arthur Conan Doyle, no less. In the March 1927 issue of *The Strand Magazine*, a competition was held to choose the twelve best Sherlock Holmes stories from the forty-four already published in book form. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had made his choice and placed the titles in a sealed envelope and readers were invited to match the great man's selection. A prize of a hundred pounds and a signed copy of Conan Doyle's autobiography, *Memories and Adventures*, were on offer as the prize to the reader who could replicate the author's list. It is fascinating to note that not one entrant chose the exact same titles. The winner, a Mr R. T. Norman, managed ten.

Conan Doyle explained in the June issue of *The Strand* how he had 'made his list':

I began by eliminating altogether the last twelve, which are scattered through *The Strand* for the last five years. They are to come out in volume form, under the title *The Casebook of Sherlock*

Holmes, but the public could not easily get at them. Had they been available, I should have put two of them in my team – namely ‘The Lion’s Mane’ and ‘The Illustrious Client’. The first of these is hampered by being told by Holmes himself, a method which I employed only twice as it certainly cramps the narrative. On the other hand, the actual plot is amongst the best of the whole series, and for that deserves a place. ‘The Illustrious Client’, on the other hand, is not remarkable for plot, but has a certain dramatic quality and moves adequately in lofty circles, so I should have also found a place for it.

However, these being ruled out, I am now faced with forty odd candidates to be weighed against each other. There is the grim snake story, ‘The Speckled Band’. I am sure that will be on every list. Next to that in popular favour and in my own esteem I would place ‘The Red-Headed League’ and ‘The Dancing Men’, on account in each case of the originality of plot. Then we could hardly leave out the story which deals with the only foe who ever really extended Holmes, and which deceived the public (and Watson) into the erroneous inferences of his death. Also, I think the first story of all should go in, as it opened the path for the others, and as it has more female interest than usual. Finally, I think the story which essays the difficult task of explaining away the alleged death of Holmes and which introduces such a villain as Colonel Sebastian Moran should have a place. This puts ‘The Final Problem’, ‘A Scandal in Bohemia’ and ‘The Empty House’ upon our list and we have got our first half-dozen.

But now comes the crux. There are a number of stories which are really hard to separate. On the whole I think I should place ‘The Five Orange Pips’, for though it is short it has a certain dramatic quality of its own. So now only five places are left. There are two stories which deal with high diplomacy and intrigue. They are among the very best of the series. One is ‘The Naval Treaty’ and the other is ‘The Second Stain’. There is not room for both of them in the team, and on the whole I regard the latter as the better. Therefore we will put it down for the eighth place.

And now which? ‘The Devil’s Foot’ has points. It is grim and new. We will give it ninth place. I think also that ‘The Priory School’ is worth a place if only for the dramatic moment when Holmes points the finger at the duke. I have only two places left. I hesitate between ‘Silver Blaze’, ‘The Bruce-Partington Plans’, ‘The Crooked Man’, ‘The Gloria Scott’, ‘The Greek Interpreter’, ‘The Reigate Squires’, ‘The Musgrave Ritual’ and ‘The

Resident Patient'. On what principle am I to choose two out of those? The racing detail in 'Silver Blaze' is very faulty, so we must disqualify him. There is little to choose between the others. A small thing would turn the scale. 'The Musgrave Ritual' has a historical touch which gives it a little added distinction. It is also a memory of Holmes's early life. So now we come to the very last. I might as well draw the name out of the bag, for I see no reason to put one before the other. Whatever their merit – and I make no claim for that – they are all as good as I could make them. On the whole Holmes shows perhaps most ingenuity in 'The Reigate Squires' and therefore this shall be twelfth man in my team.

It is proverbially a mistake for a judge to give his reasons, but I have analysed mine if only to show my competitors that I really have taken some trouble in the matter.

The list is therefore as follows:

'The Speckled Band'	'The Five Orange Pips'
'The Red-Headed League'	'The Second Stain'
'The Dancing Men'	'The Devil's Foot'
'The Final Problem'	'The Priory School'
'A Scandal in Bohemia'	'The Musgrave Ritual'
'The Empty House'	'The Reigate Squires'

All Sir Arthur's choices are included in this volume, but not only are there some surprising omissions from his list, we now have *The Casebook* to include – another twelve stories to consider in order to choose twenty of 'the best' of Sherlock Holmes. After much deliberation and consultation with Sherlockian *aficionados*, I have come up with my list of the extra eight. These are:

'The Man with the Twisted Lip'

This story gives us a glimpse into the darker side of London life and presents a memorable scene where Holmes sits up all night amid a scatter of cushions, smoking hard, until his brain hits upon the solution.

'The Blue Carbuncle'

How Conan Doyle could have left this off his list, I do not know. Not only is Holmes on sparkling form in this bizarre mystery, but also it is the only story set at Christmastime.

'The Copper Beeches'

Bizarre elements are mixed with an exciting denouement.

'Silver Blaze'

A story considered by Conan Doyle for his list but rejected because of the faulty racing detail. The story is so good and the solution so decidedly unique that any irregularities regarding turf law pale into insignificance. It also features the marvellous interchange about 'the dog in the night-time'.

'The Greek Interpreter'

Admittedly this is not one of Holmes's best cases, but we are introduced to Sherlock's brilliant brother Mycroft and the intriguing Diogenes Club.

'The Solitary Cyclist'

This story is a personal favourite. The central concept is fascinating and the plot allows Holmes to demonstrate his boxing talents.

'Charles Augustus Milverton'

What this tale lacks in detective activity it more than makes up for in the presentation of the most unpleasant villain in the whole Sherlockian canon.

'The Illustrious Client'

A story Conan Doyle discarded from his list because it was from the then unpublished collection, *The Casebook*. As the author stated, it has a 'certain dramatic quality' and, pleasingly, it places Dr Watson centre stage.

The stories in this collection are presented in the order of their original publication. While there will always be disagreements about which are the best Sherlock Holmes stories, I am convinced that this volume contains a distillation of the most fabulous of all literary creations. Enjoy the magic.

DAVID STUART DAVIES

**THE BEST OF
SHERLOCK HOLMES**

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