

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

The Return of Sherlock Holmes

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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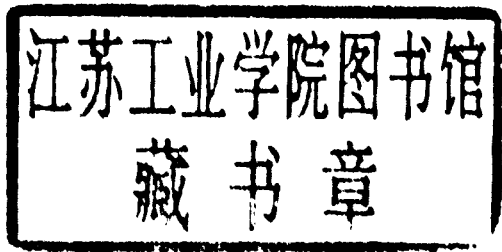
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SHERLOCK HOLMES



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Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

With Introduction and Notes by

JOHN S. WHITLEY

University of Sussex



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INTRODUCTION

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle once described his own life briefly and succinctly:

I have had a life which, for variety and romance, could, I think, hardly be exceeded. I have known what it was to be a poor man and I have known what it was to be fairly affluent. I have sampled every kind of human experience. I have known many of the most remarkable men of my time. I have had a long literary career after a medical training which gave me the M.D. of Edinburgh. I have tried my hand at very many sports, including boxing, cricket, billiards, motoring, football, aeronautics and ski-ing, having been the first to introduce the latter for long journeys into Switzerland. I have travelled as Doctor to a whaler for seven months in the Arctic and afterwards in the West Coast of Africa. I have seen something of three wars, the Sudanese, the South African and the German. My life has been dotted with adventures of all kinds.¹

Conan Doyle practised as a doctor in Southsea, was an excellent all-round sportsman, supported many good causes, and it is said that his detective stories had a profound influence on real-life criminal investigation procedures. Of course, he wrote far more widely than just the Holmes stories, and his other work includes *The White Company* (1891), *The Lost World* (1912) and *The Adventures of Brigadier Gerard* (1896).

Conan Doyle's detective novels and stories are among the most-often read and the best-loved in the history of the genre. I write this introduction as the fourteen Basil Rathbone/Nigel Bruce films are being given yet another airing on British television and am

1 Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, London 1928, p. 1

reminded that there have been at least eight film versions of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Taking the lead from a handful of stories by Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle developed the detective who is a combination of ascetic and sportsman; scientist and artist *manqué*; misogynist and courtly knight; moral arbiter and drug-user; agent of the law and a law unto himself. The unnamed narrator of Poe's Dupin stories is turned into Watson, a delightfully rounded character whose relationship with Holmes (wickedly parodied by Billy Wilder in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*)² adds great humour, social observation and even tenderness to the work. Since great detectives rarely seem to marry with impunity, the implicit homoerotic relationship of the two acts, as Leslie Fiedler has shown in classic American literature,³ as a balance against a world of lies and deceit, sometimes represented by the woman as an emissary of a fallen and serpentine world. If the relationship between Holmes and the police is occasionally absurd (Hopkins in 'The Golden Pince-Nez' gazes at Holmes 'in an ecstasy of admiration') both Holmes and Inspector Lestrade are, also, humanised by their relationship, and this humanisation, combined with Holmes's frequent decisions to allow highly justified 'criminals' to escape punishment (he is cautious on the subject of the intelligence of a British jury and is happy to let deserving culprits go as long as 'the ends of justice are served') mitigate somewhat Raymond Chandler's view that the detective story is about justice, not compassion.

The stories in this volume give full rein to detective-story devices which became staples of the genre, such as figures from the past, secret criminal organisations, cryptograms, missing corpses, state secrets and threats to national security. Conan Doyle's work, as a consequence, has been hugely influential on the development of this particular literary genre and its standing remains almost as high as ever. His detective-story writing becomes most interesting, however, if seen as a product and reflection of its time. The Sherlock Holmes stories stretch from the 1880s to the 1920s, but the two volumes here in one are quite close together in dates of composition, the *Hound* in 1902 and the *Return* in 1905. This places them right at the end of Victoria's reign and the tensions in the

2 Released in 1970 with Robert Stephens as Holmes and Colin Blakeley as Watson

3 Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, New York 1960

society and philosophies of that particular time can be discerned within the relatively narrow formulaic limits of the detective story. *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, for example, is dominated by Dartmoor and the forbidding presence of the Grimpen Mire, giving the reader a sense that, even though British society is progressing, it can never rid itself of its primitive elements. Writing to Holmes, a much-impressed Watson remarks about Dartmoor: 'When you are once upon its bosom you have left all traces of modern England behind you, but on the other hand you are conscious everywhere of the homes and the work of prehistoric people.' When Sir Henry and Watson come upon the convict, it is as though they have met one of the prehistoric people: ' . . . an evil yellow face, a terrible animal face, all seamed and scored with vile passions. Foul with mire, with a bristling beard, and hung with matted hair, it might have belonged to one of those old savages who dwelt in the burrows on the hillside.' *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* is, likewise, full of references to a jungle (what Angus Wilson once called a 'shadow world')⁴ within or underneath civilised society. In 'Black Peter', Watson, for by no means the first time, compares the vigils he and Holmes make to the cunning of big-game hunters: 'What savage creature was it that might steal upon us out of the darkness? Was it a fierce tiger of crime, which could only be taken fighting hard with flashing fang and claw, or would it prove to be some skulking jackal, dangerous only to the weak and unguarded?'

This imagery could be described as 'Darwinian'. By the turn of the century, the philosophy of *laissez faire*, of self-interest underpinning the benefits to society as a whole, was being seriously questioned and some of Conan Doyle's villains, repeatedly compared to hawks and other birds of prey, are seen as thrusting individualists who might, under different circumstances, have been captains of industry: Moran and Slaney come to mind. Stapleton, a man who can find his way to the heart of the Grimpen Mire, is described by Holmes as a 'foeman who is worthy of our steel'. Social Darwinism, the theory that the strongest survive and the weakest go to the wall, had often been used to support rampant capitalist competition, but it occurred to many writers in the late nineteenth century that if man had developed from apes the distance between them was not all that great and regression could easily occur: hence the close relationship between man and brute in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1885), H. G. Wells's *The*

4 Angus Wilson, Introduction to *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, London 1974

Island of Dr Moreau (1896) and, more metaphorically, in Frank Norris's *Vandover and the Brute* (1899, though not published until 1914). Colonel Moran carries within his physiognomy the alternatives of the Darwinian view:

With the brow of a philosopher above and the jaw of a sensualist below, the man must have started with great capacities for good or for evil. But one could not look upon his cruel blue eyes, with their drooping, cynical lids, or upon the fierce, aggressive nose and the threatening, deep-lined brow, without reading Nature's plainest danger-signals.

The above quotation might suggest that the real dangers to late-Victorian England came from within, a view somewhat bolstered by Holmes's recognition of a clear affinity between himself and the criminals he pursues ('... I have always had an idea that I would have made a highly efficient criminal') and the joy with which he gazes on a safe he has to 'crack'. Yet the detective story is nothing if not comforting to its readers, and Conan Doyle deflects the complexity of such potential doubling by relentlessly making the dangers external. Stapleton could be said to have come from within the Baskerville family, but it is noticeable that he is the scion of a 'black sheep' branch and hence comes from South America, complete with a passionate wife who was 'darker than any brunette whom I have seen in England'. The 'brute and bully' in 'The Solitary Cyclist' comes from South Africa; Reppo, in 'The Six Napoleons', is brutish and Italian, and hence linked to the Mafia and the Borgias; the villain in 'The Golden Pince-Nez' is Russian and therefore associated with a secret brotherhood of Nihilists. Such xenophobia naturally breeds jingoism. In 'The Dancing Men' Britain is favourably compared with America. Abe Slaney, again with an 'aggressive, hooked nose', belongs to a criminal organisation in Chicago, the place of the Haymarket riot of 1886 and the founding of the revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World in 1905 and an emblem of the tremendous growth of American cities in the late nineteenth century, with all their attendant problems of crime and corruption. Conan Doyle also uses to good effect, as criminal organisations, the Mormons (*A Study in Scarlet*) and the Molly Maguires (*The Valley of Fear*). Slaney is compared to Hilton Cubitt: '... a fine creature, this man of the old English soil, simple, straight and gentle, with his great, earnest, blue eyes and broad, comely face'. He was, insists Holmes to Slaney, 'an honourable gentleman in England' whom Elsie married after 'she fled from America to

avoid you'. Slaney represents the undesirability of 'strangers' in a part of England where 'enormous, square-towered churches . . . told of the glory and prosperity of old East Anglia'. Watson is driven into paroxysms of jingoism in this story:

'It is my duty to warn you that it will be used against you,' cried the inspector, with the magnificent fair-play of the British criminal law.

(It is too easy always to assert that 'Conan Doyle says . . .' The voice is almost always Watson's, that of a warm-hearted, brave, but gullible and limited man, and it is not inconceivable that, at times like this, Conan Doyle wore at least a small smile as he wrote.)

This devotion to all matters English is bolstered, both in the novel and the stories, by a kind of snobbery which lauds notional (and national) fixities in English life: signs, within the society, that change is being resisted. In *The Hound* Holmes tells Mortimer, as a clue, that ' . . . *The Times* is a paper which is seldom found in any hands but those of the highly educated' and that Lestrade is ' . . . the best of the professionals'. (We should remember that it was the 1960s before *Gentlemen v. Players* ceased to be a part of the first-class cricket season.) Holmes is persistently being called in because a high-ranking member of society is being blackmailed. (Would he have been able to stem the tide of today's tabloid reporters?) In 'The Priory School', Watson refers to a peat-cutter as 'a peasant' and the worst crime committed by James Wilder in that same story is that he 'deeply resented' the 'social laws'. In 'The Missing Three-Quarter' Holmes seeks to reinforce the eternal verities of Little England while at the same time indicating that changes are making inroads:

You live in a different world to me, Mr Overton, a sweeter and healthier one. My ramifications stretch out into many sections of society, but never, I am happy to say, into amateur sport, which is the best and soundest thing in England.

Recourse to a kind of Little Englandism might have seemed increasingly appropriate as old verities declined in importance or were challenged by new ideas. It is noticeable that there is little mention of religion in these pages, but a great deal about one kind of science or another. In 'The Golden Pince-Nez', Professor Coram, who is really an unnamed former Russian revolutionary, tells Holmes and Watson that his analysis of certain documents found in Coptic monasteries in Syria and Egypt will 'cut deep at the very foundation of revealed religion'. Danger from a foreign source

again, to be sure, but the reader does not see, in the society depicted in these stories, that religion was, for that time, in the words of J. F. C. Harrison, 'assumed to be relevant to all aspects of the national life'.⁵ Rather, Conan Doyle's England seems to be a place where, in part, we can hear echoing the words of Winwood Reade's 1872 well-read work, *The Martyrdom of Man*:

When we have ascertained, by means of science, the methods of Nature's operation, we shall be able to take her place to perform them for ourselves . . . men will master the forces of Nature; they will become themselves architects of systems, manufacturers of worlds.⁶

This claim is not entirely convincing, of course, because, as we have already seen, Conan Doyle was only too well aware of how close humans of his time were to the jungle, but Holmes is a tribute to the late-nineteenth-century determination to codify, calculate, graph and render statistical all human endeavour. Holmes, not possessing Dupin's distrust of the scientific habit of mind, codifies cigar ash, the impressions of bicycle tyres, coal-tar derivatives, disguises and, finally, bees. Holmes locks himself in a room at 'The Abbey Grange' and, for two hours, conducts 'one of those minute and laborious investigations which formed the solid basis on which his brilliant edifices of deduction were reared'.

However this adulation of science is tempered, even more so than in Poe's Dupin stories, by a needed addition of imagination. In 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', Dupin points out, to the unnamed narrator, that a person, in order to reason well, needs to be both a mathematician and a poet. Similarly, Holmes, in *The Hound*, insists on the necessity of the 'scientific use of the imagination'. Just as Dupin was a poet *manqué*, so Holmes is a musician not so much *manqué* as limited. His playing of the Stradivarius can be matched by his drug-taking. In *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* Watson draws attention to the danger this habit has presented to Holmes:

For years I had gradually weaned him from that drug mania which has threatened once to check his remarkable career. Now I knew that under ordinary conditions he no longer craved for this artificial stimulus; but I was well aware that the fiend was not dead but sleeping . . .

5 J. F. C. Harrison, *Late Victorian England 1873-1901*, London 1990, p. 101

6 J. F. C. Harrison, *op.cit.*, p. 97-8

But Holmes's taking of the seven-per-cent solution aligns him with a strong tradition in English Romanticism. Alethea Hayter, in her excellent book, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*, discusses the power of the drug to heighten perception in the manner of reverie or dream, but also to create indolence and absence of feeling, and 'a state in which the power to observe is detached from the power to sympathise with what is observed'.⁷ In *The Hound* we are told that Holmes 'had, in a very remarkable degree, the power of detaching his mind at will' and it seems, as I have already suggested, that one of Conan Doyle's masterstrokes was to create Watson, not simply as a foil for Holmes, but as an injection of genuine sympathy, accompanied by bewilderment, anger and rather rigid 'common sense', into a narrative which might otherwise be simply a wish-fulfilment of late Victorian desires for a scientific, aristocratic, patriotic superman who imposes a dream of order on a potentially chaotic society.

The Victorian adulation of the achievements of science can be paralleled by the need for pattern and claims on behalf of deductive (or, more often, inductive) logic. In *The Hound*, Holmes feels early that his opponent is creating a powerful 'design' and so (as a 'double' of the master criminal) seeks to counter this with a design of his own which will produce the 'truth':

I knew from his drawn brows and keen face that his mind, like my own, was busy in endeavouring to frame some scheme into which all these strange and apparently disconnected episodes could be fitted.

Similarly, this creation of a criminal mastermind emphasises plot and pattern. Moriarty is dead by the time of *The Return*, but he is remembered lovingly by Holmes at the beginning of 'The Norwood Builder', largely because he tied all criminal activities into one understandable entity:

Often it was only the smallest trace, Watson, the faintest indication, and yet it was enough to tell me that the great malignant brain was there, as the gentlest tremors of the edges of the web remind one of the foul spider which lurks in the centre. Petty thefts, wanton assaults, purposeless outrage – to the man who held the clue all could be worked into one connected whole. To the scientific student of the higher criminal world no capital in Europe offered the advantages which London then possessed.

7 Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*, London 1968, p. 335

Near the end of 'The Six Napoleons', when Holmes, with an appropriate flourish, produces the black pearl of the Borgias, Watson comments tellingly on the detective's command of theatricality:

Lestrade and I sat silent for a moment, and then, with a spontaneous impulse, we both broke out clapping as at the well-wrought crisis of a play. A flush of colour sprang to Holmes's pale cheeks, and he bowed to us like the master dramatist who receives the homage of his audience.

The term 'well-wrought' may remind the reader of the 'well-made play', a form of drama developed in France in the nineteenth century as an antidote to the lofty banalities of Romantic plays. This kind of play (with a heavy emphasis on plot machinations, including an initial exposition, a withheld secret, a battle of wits between two protagonists, the disclosing of the secret and a logical denouement) exercised considerable influence over the late-nineteenth- and very-early-twentieth-century plays that Conan Doyle knew well (those by Galsworthy, Pinero, Jones and Granville-Barker, not to mention Ibsen). It provides another way of emphasising the relation between the patterning perceived by the detective and the patterning created by the artist.

The stories of Conan Doyle, his contemporaries and his successors who developed the 'classic' detective novel (Christie, Sayers, Allingham *et al.*) joined forces with the social realist novels of the later nineteenth century (Gissing, Wells, Moore) through their basic trust in a world which can be known empirically if you put all the evidence together, a notion which the post-modern novel clearly rejects. Just as the realist application of the theory of determinism tends to fix characters within a known and predictable narrative grid, so the third-person narrative voice of much classic detective fiction remains firmly in control, diagramming the action, replacing the character types inside a predictable pattern involving unyielding chronology and linear development, waiting for a denouement where novelist and detective combine (as they literally do, for example, in 'Ellery Queen') to illustrate what Robbe-Grillet has called a 'confidence in a logic of things that was just and universal'.⁸

⁸ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel* (translated by Richard Howard), New York 1965, p. 32

Thus Sherlock Holmes, Dr Watson and their fascinating adventures tell us much about the condition of late-Victorian England, but, in their ingenuity, pace, style and control, they offer as much satisfaction to readers in our own troubled times as in theirs.

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