WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

A Study in Scarlet & The Sign of the Four

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

SELECTED STORIES

A STUDY IN SCAUDY
and
THE SIGN OF THE FOUR

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

With an Introduction by
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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe is generally regarded as the father of the detective story. This view is based on his creation of the ascetic reasoner Auguste Dupin who solves a series of baffling crimes in five of Poe's short stories, the most famous being *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* in which the murderer turns out to be an orang-utan. There is no doubt that in the Dupin tales Poe created the basic template for the detective stories of the future but it is equally true to say that they lack real drama, tension and richness of characterisation. Dupin is a mere cipher, not a fully rounded character, and his companion, the unnamed narrator, is featureless. While the puzzles in these tales intrigue the mind, they do not engage the emotions or generate strong enthusiasms – certainly not in the way that the Sherlock Holmes stories were destined to do. In essence it is the author of these detective yarns, Arthur Conan Doyle, who is the real begetter of the detective-fiction genre as we know it.

In 1886 Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle was an impoverished young doctor with a small practice in Southsea. Apart from his medical concerns, Arthur, then twenty-seven, had literary ambitions. He had already seen several stories of his published in various journals of the day such as *Temple Bar*, *The Cornhill Magazine* and *London Society*. However, just writing short stories did not satisfy him fully. He wanted his name on the cover of a whole book – a novel. It was the only way, he claimed in his autobiography *Memories and Adventures*, to 'assert your individuality'.

In the *longueurs* between the infrequent patients, Doyle considered writing a detective story, one in which the sleuth would reach his conclusions by deductive reasoning and not by accident or the carelessness of the criminal. It was during these musings that he began to pull together various threads from past influences. From boyhood Poe's Dupin had been one of his heroes. He had also admired 'the neat dovetailing' of the plots in Gaboriau's crime novels. And then there was Joseph Bell. Bell, who had been one of Doyle's tutors when

he was studying medicine at Edinburgh University, 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 also their occupation and place of residence. As these influences swirled around in Doyle's brain, mixing with that essential elixir of romance, the imagination, it is clear that his memories of Bell were uppermost:

> I thought of my teacher Joe Bell, of his eagle face, of his curious ways, of his eerie trick of spotting details. If he were a detective he would surely reduce this fascinating unorganised business [of detective work] to something nearer an exact science. I would try [to see] if I could get this effect. It was surely possible in real life, so why should I not make it plausible in fiction? It is all very well to say that a man is clever, but the reader wants to see examples of this – such examples as Bell gave us every day in the wards. The idea amused me. [*Memories and Adventures*]

Gradually this amusing idea began to take shape. At first Doyle considered naming his detective, who was to look a lot like Bell, Sherringford Holmes, but he finally settled on the name Sherlock Holmes. And so a legend was born.

But the creative process was not yet complete. Doyle felt that the detective could not recount his own exploits; he would need 'a commonplace comrade as a foil – an educated man of action who could both join in the exploits and narrate them'. Dr John H. Watson was created to fill this role. Now Arthur Conan Doyle had his puppets and he began work on his first detective novel, *A Study in Scarlet*.

Doyle's own satisfaction with the finished results was not matched by the various publishers he approached with the completed manuscript. After accumulating a pile of rejection slips, the young author had all but given up hope of seeing his detective novel in print when he received an unenthusiastic offer from Ward, Lock & Company, who said that they 'could not publish it this year as the market is flooded at present with cheap fiction, but if you do not object to its being held over till next year, we will give you £25 for the copyright'. What was a struggling writer to do but accept this miserable offer? The story duly appeared at the end of the following year in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* of 1887.

In this first story Conan Doyle created all the elements of the Sherlock Holmes world that are still familiar today. Apart from the main protagonists, Holmes and Watson, we are introduced to the

cosy sitting-room at 221B Baker Street where they take up lodgings. Then there is their landlady, Mrs Hudson, who was to feature intermittently through the rest of the three novels and fifty-six short stories, as were the comically plodding police officers, Lestrade and Gregson. And there is the rich world of Victorian London with its gaslit chambers, cobbled streets, thick fogs and hansom cabs. So expertly drawn is this milieu – contemporary then, of course – that readers were and are still easily drawn into the vivid reality of it. At the centre of this rich tapestry is the wonderful figure of Sherlock Holmes, the brilliant, enigmatic, ultimate crusader against crime and criminals. It is in *A Study in Scarlet* that Conan Doyle presents us with the fundamental elements that make up this magical character. He added various other characteristics in later yarns but in this novel you have the essential Sherlock Holmes.

Doyle establishes Holmes's mystifying detective brilliance in the early pages. When he and Watson first meet, Holmes announces in a Bell-like manner, 'You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive.' He later explains in detail the rapid train of thought that brought him to this water-tight conclusion. But Sherlock Holmes is more than just an armchair observer. He actively pursues clues in a dynamic manner which characterises all of his subsequent investigations. In addition to engaging in analytical reasoning, he studies the wheelmarks of a hansom cab, examines elaborate patterns of footprints, identifies cigar ash, flings himself to the ground in search of clues, and in the end engages in a step-by-step summary of his methods – a staged finale that became an indispensable element of the mystery format. In the novel, amongst his other habits and traits, we also learn of Holmes's violin playing – 'low melancholy wailings' – his chemical experiments and his love of strong tobacco. Through Watson's narrative, Doyle's detective creation leaps from the pages of *A Study in Scarlet* almost fully formed.

Having created his heroes and their world, the author had now to present them with a mystery and in doing so Doyle indulged his passion for stories of high drama and romance. The second half of the novel, which provides the background to the intrigue and murderous goings on investigated by Holmes and Watson, is set in America among the Mormon community. Doyle seems to have been fascinated by the idea of revenge arising from the activities of American sects and secret societies: he returned to this theme twenty-eight years later in his last Holmes novel, *The Valley of Fear*.

In essence, the search for the murderer and the real detective work has been completed halfway through *A Study in Scarlet*. Holmes only

appears briefly after this at the end of Part Two to tie up the loose ends. This uneven construction plagued Doyle in two of his other Holmes novels, *The Valley of Fear* and, as we shall see, *The Sign of the Four*. It is as though two plots have been dovetailed together with Sherlock Holmes acting as a kind of literary catalyst. While both parts are enjoyable, the American section is far more conventional than the ground-breaking first part and we miss the presence of the brilliant Mr Holmes. The real strength and unique quality of the novel lies in the introduction of Holmes and Watson to us and to each other and those dark early scenes when a corpse is discovered in a derelict house in the Brixton Road. Holmes's investigation of the murder room where the murderer has scrawled the word RACHE on the wall in his own blood has rarely if ever been bettered in crime-fiction writing.

The publication of *A Study in Scarlet* caused barely a ripple of interest with the reading public. This revolutionary new detective, it seemed, had not caught the collective imagination. It is possible that Sherlock Holmes could have remained a one-book novelty had it not been for a now famous lunch which Doyle attended.

John Marshall Stoddart, the managing editor of the American magazine *Lippincott's*, found *A Study in Scarlet* very 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 a Hansom Cab*. Arthur Conan Doyle was invited to attend a luncheon at the Langham Hotel by Stoddart who was in London to launch the English edition of his magazine. Also in attendance at this dinner was Oscar Wilde. During the course of the meal both Wilde and Doyle were engaged to write books for the new magazine. Wilde's opus was *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, while Conan Doyle's became the second Holmes adventure, *The Sign of the Four*. Shortly after the lunch, he wrote to Stoddart on 3 September 1889:

> As far as I can see my way at present my story will either be called *The Sign of the Six* or *The Problem of the Sholtos*. You said you wanted a spicy title. I shall give Sherlock Holmes of *A Study in Scarlet* something else to unravel.

Doyle completed the book in six weeks. By then the title had changed to *The Sign of the Four*. However the second indefinite article was dropped for some reason and the book was originally published as *The Sign of Four*, which in the context of the plot does not make complete sense. For this Wordsworth edition we have given the story its original title as designated by Arthur Conan Doyle.

By the time he came to write *The Sign of the Four* in 1889, three

years after *A Study in Scarlet*, Doyle had developed as an author. He now wrote with greater flair and confidence and he was more assured in handling the dramatic construction of the plot. What triggered his thoughts for this novel is not recorded. Maybe he had already some sketchy ideas about a revenge story involving Indian treasure and a one-legged man and, following a reasonably successful reprint of *A Study in Scarlet* earlier in the year, the two elements came together in his vivid imagination. It may have been, as it was with *The Hound of the Baskervilles* years later, that Doyle had conceived the elements of an intriguing mystery and realised that he needed a detective figure as a focus in order to create an effective, unified narrative. We shall never know for sure. However, embarking on a new Holmes novel, this wiser and more practised writer set about performing two tasks: re-establishing Holmes in the consciousness of the reading public and, while doing so, providing further embellishments to add more colour and depth to the character. We encounter one the most obvious embellishments on the first page:

> Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantelpiece and his hypodermic syringe from its neat morocco case. With his long, white, nervous 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. (p. 109)

This is a dramatic departure from the Holmes of the first novel. There was no hint of such an addiction in *A Study in Scarlet*. Or was there? In Chapter Two of *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson records:

> . . . I have noticed such a dreamy, vacant expression in his eyes that I might have suspected him of being addicted to the use of some narcotic had not the temperance and cleanliness of his whole life forbidden such a notion. (p. 10)

Daringly Doyle reverses this notion in his second Holmes novel:

> 'Which is it today,' I asked, 'morphine or cocaine?'
>
> He raised his eyes languidly from the old black-leather volume which he had opened.
>
> 'It is cocaine,' he said, ' a seven-per-cent solution. Would you care to try it?'

By making Holmes a drug user in his second outing, Doyle was increasing the detective's bohemianism, his flamboyancy making the character more alluring to the Victorian middle-class reader who loved to flirt secretly with such vices. Holmes does explain that he uses drugs only as a means to escape from boredom: 'my mind rebels against stagnation'. It may have been Doyle's meeting with the *outré* figure of Oscar Wilde at the Langham lunch that inspired him to add this colourful facet to Holmes's make-up. (Interestingly there are echoes of Wilde in the character of Thaddeus Sholto whose house is 'an oasis of art in the howling desert of South London' and who, in typical Wildean fashion, observes that 'there is nothing more unaesthetic than a policeman'.)

Watson has developed as a character also in *The Sign of the Four*. He is more outspoken and emotional than he was in the first book. He dares to rail at Holmes over his drug addiction and he displays an endearing passion for the novel's heroine, Mary Morstan. This is not the stiff and awkward Watson of the first novel whose only display of anger is relegated to being outraged by an article entitled 'The Book of Life' and throwing down the magazine in which it appeared (p.14). Watson's romance actually turns the novel into a love story as well as one of criminal detection.

The structure of *The Sign of the Four* is similar to that of the first novel in that there is a flashback section towards the end recounting the events leading up to Sherlock Holmes's involvement with the mystery, but this is considerably shorter than in *A Study in Scarlet* – allowing Holmes to stay centre stage for longer – and handled with greater skill. Unlike *A Study in Scarlet*, the flashback sequence is more of an integral part of the novel's unified construction.

As with *A Study in Scarlet*, the main plot deals with revenge but this time there are no women directly involved in the intrigue, which centres on the fabulous Agra treasure and the treachery surrounding those involved in its daring theft. Therefore, Doyle cleverly weaves a romantic subplot into the tale involving the narrator, Watson, and Holmes's client, Mary Morstan. Watson's emotional attachment to Mary gives rise to some of the book's most sensitive writing:

> As we drove away I stole a glance back, and I still seem to see that little group on the step – the two graceful, clinging figures, the half-opened door, the hall light shining through stained glass, the barometer and the bright stair-rods. It was soothing to catch even that passing glimpse of a tranquil English home in the midst of the wild, dark business which had absorbed us.

The character of Watson also provided some anomalies in the second novel. In *A Study in Scarlet* he revealed that he had neither kith nor kin, but miraculously the good doctor was in possession of his brother's watch in the opening chapter of *The Sign of the Four*. The watch was used to demonstrate Holmes's remarkable deductive powers for those readers who were new to the character. Similarly Watson's war wound had travelled from his shoulder to his leg. These minor blunders were typical of Doyle, who was loath to look back at his previous writings to check details. In the end these slips of the pen do not detract one iota from the pleasure one derives from reading these two novels.

In *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of the Four* we have the bedrock of all detective fiction – the baseline from which such characters as Lord Peter Wimsey, Hercule Poirot, Inspectors Wexford, Frost, Rebus and Morse and countless others have developed. We also have two entertaining and thrilling novels which have never lost their appeal and never will as long as the human heart can thrill to that summons in the night, the furious cab ride through the darkened cobbled streets to a scene of mystery and murder, accompanied by those mythical heroes Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson.

DAVID STUART DAVIES

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The Sign of the Four

A STUDY IN SCARLET

PART ONE

Being a reprint from the reminiscences of
JOHN H. WATSON MD
late of the Army Medical Department

I

Mr Sherlock Holmes

IN THE YEAR 1878 I took my degree of doctor of medicine of the University of London, and proceeded to Netley to go through the course prescribed for surgeons in the army. Having completed my studies there, I was duly attached to the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers as assistant surgeon. The regiment was stationed in India at the time, and before I could join it the Second Afghan War had broken out. On landing at Bombay, I learned that my corps had advanced through the passes and was already deep in the enemy's country. I followed, however, with many other officers who were in the same situation as myself, and succeeded in reaching Kandahar in safety, where I found my regiment and at once entered upon my new duties.

The campaign brought honours and promotion to many, but for me it had nothing but misfortune and disaster. I was removed from my brigade and attached to the Berkshires with whom I served at the fatal battle of Maiwand. There I was struck on the shoulder by a Jezail bullet, which shattered the bone and grazed the subclavian artery. I should have fallen into the hands of the murderous Ghazis had it not been for the devotion and courage shown by Murray, my orderly, who threw me across a packhorse and succeeded in bringing me safely to the British lines.

Worn with pain, and weak from the prolonged hardships which I had undergone, I was removed, with a great train of wounded sufferers, to the base hospital at Peshawar. Here I rallied, and had already improved so far as to be able to walk about the wards, and even to bask a little upon the verandah, when I was struck down by enteric fever, that curse of our Indian possessions. For months my life was despaired of, and when at last I came to myself and became convalescent, I was so weak and emaciated that a medical board determined that not a day should be lost in sending me back to England. I was despatched, accordingly, in the troopship *Orontes*, and landed a month later on Portsmouth jetty, with my health irretrievably ruined but with permission from a paternal government to spend the next nine months in attempting to improve it.

I had neither kith nor kin in England, and was therefore as free as air – or as free as an income of eleven shillings and sixpence a day will permit a man to be. Under such circumstances I naturally gravitated to London, that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained. There I stayed for some time at a private hotel in the Strand, leading a comfortless, meaningless existence, and spending such money as I had considerably more freely than I ought. So alarming did the state of my finances become that I soon realised that I must either leave the metropolis and rusticate somewhere in the country, or that I must make a complete alteration in my style of living. Choosing the latter alternative, I began by making up my mind to leave the hotel and to take up my quarters in some less pretentious and less expensive domicile.

On the very day that I had come to this conclusion, I was standing at the Criterion Bar when someone tapped me on the shoulder and, turning round, I recognised young Stamford, who had been a dresser under me at Barts. The sight of a friendly face in the great wilderness of London is a pleasant thing indeed to a lonely man. In old days Stamford had never been a particular crony of mine, but now I hailed him with enthusiasm, and he, in his turn, appeared to be delighted to see me. In the exuberance of my joy, I asked him to lunch with me at the Holborn, and we started off together in a hansom.

'Whatever have you been doing with yourself, Watson?' he asked in undisguised wonder, as we rattled through the crowded London streets. 'You are as thin as a lath and as brown as a nut.'

I gave him a short sketch of my adventures, and had hardly concluded it by the time that we reached our destination.

'Poor devil!' he said commiseratingly, after he had listened to my misfortunes. 'What are you up to now?'

'Looking for lodgings,' I answered. 'Trying to solve the problem as to whether it is possible to get comfortable rooms at a reasonable price.'

'That's a strange thing,' remarked my companion, 'you are the second man today that has used that expression to me.'

'And who was the first?' I asked.

'A fellow who is working at the chemical laboratory up at the hospital. He was bemoaning himself this morning because he could not get someone to go halves with him in some nice rooms which he had found but which were too much for his purse.'

'By Jove!' I cried; 'if he really wants someone to share the rooms and the expense, I am the very man for him. I should prefer having a partner to being alone.'

Young Stamford looked rather strangely at me over his wine-glass. 'You don't know Sherlock Holmes yet,' he said; 'perhaps you would not care for him as a constant companion.'

'Why, what is there against him?'

'Oh, I didn't say there was anything against him. He is a little queer in his ideas – an enthusiast in some branches of science. As far as I know he is a decent fellow enough.'

'A medical student, I suppose,' said I.

'No – I have no idea what he intends to go in for. I believe he is well up in anatomy, and he is a first-class chemist, but as far as I know he has never taken out any systematic medical classes. His studies are very desultory and eccentric, but he has amassed a lot of out-of-the-way knowledge which would astonish his professors.'

'Did you never ask him what he was going in for?' I asked.

'No; he is not a man that it is easy to draw out, though he can be communicative enough when the fancy seizes him.'

'I should like to meet him,' I said. 'If I am to lodge with anyone, I should prefer a man of studious and quiet habits. I am not strong enough yet to stand much noise or excitement. I had enough of both in Afghanistan to last me for the remainder of my natural existence. How could I meet this friend of yours?'

'He is sure to be at the laboratory,' returned my companion. 'He either avoids the place for weeks, or else he works there from morning till night. If you like, we will drive round together after luncheon.'

'Certainly,' I answered, and the conversation drifted away into other channels.

As we made our way to the hospital after leaving the Holborn, Stamford gave me a few more particulars about the gentleman whom I proposed to take as a fellow-lodger.

'You mustn't blame me if you don't get on with him,' he said; 'I know nothing more of him than I have learned from meeting him occasionally in the laboratory. You proposed this arrangement, so you must not hold me responsible.'

'If we don't get on it will be easy to part company,' I answered. 'It seems to me, Stamford,' I added, looking hard at my companion, 'that you have some reason for washing your hands of the matter. Is this fellow's temper so formidable, or what is it? Don't be mealy-mouthed about it.'

'It is not easy to express the inexpressible,' he answered with a laugh. 'Holmes is a little too scientific for my tastes – it approaches to cold-bloodedness. I could imagine his giving a friend a little pinch of