

FOREWORD

It has been said – it was said to Conan Doyle – that although Sherlock Holmes escaped from the Reichenbach Falls he was never quite the same man again. This was a convenient witticism but is simply not true. The story in which he returns, *The Adventure of the Empty House*, is as good and as lively as any in the canon; and the first book to be written after his eight-year absence, the book which broke Conan Doyle's inhibition against reviving him, would be considered by many to be the finest of all – *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

The idea for what he called in a letter to his mother the 'little book' on which he was then working originated one raw Sunday afternoon in the Royal Links Hotel at Cromer during a brief golfing holiday with Bertram Fletcher Robinson, a young journalist whom he had met aboard ship coming back from South Africa. As they sat in a private room, in front of a blazing fire, Robinson, a Devonian, talked about Dartmoor, where he had grown up. The gothic bleakness of the scenery, with its mysterious reminders of a prehistoric age, struck a chord and they began to sketch the outline of a story. Doyle suggested that they might collaborate in writing it.

Robinson invited Doyle to stay with him in Devon, to absorb the atmosphere. They spent eight days together, divided between Robinson's home and a hotel close to the notorious prison. 'One of the most interesting weeks that I have ever spent was with Doyle on Dartmoor,' Robinson wrote some years later. 'The great wilderness of bog and rock that cuts Devonshire at this point appealed to his imagination. He listened eagerly to my stories of the ghost hounds, of the headless riders and of the devils that lurk in the hollows – legends upon which I had been reared, for my home lay on the borders of the moor.'

Wearing caps and knickerbockers, they would tramp fourteen miles a day across that wild country. Together they gazed at the

huge bog which would become the Great Grimpen Mire. Often they were driven to their starting point by Robinson's coachman. 'And I used to watch them in the billiards room of the old house,' he later recalled. 'Sometimes they stayed long into the night, writing and talking together.' The coachman's name was Harry Baskerville.

As first conceived, the story was not about Sherlock Holmes at all, but it needed a strong central character. 'Why should I invent such a character,' Doyle is reported to have said, 'when I have him already in the form of Holmes?' And he knew the value of this decision. Any revival of Holmes was sure to attract a great deal of public interest. 'Suppose,' he said to his editor at *The Strand* magazine, I gave the directors the alternative that the story should be without Holmes at my old figure or with Holmes at £100 per thou., which would they choose?' There was no further argument.

The Hound of the Baskervilles opens in the classic way, in Baker Street, with Watson making false deductions about a prospective client and Holmes then expounding the true ones. The client arrives and the problem is unfolded, with, for extra puzzlement, the very ingenious, apparently meaningless but highly significant clue of the stolen boot. After those opening scenes in London Sherlock Holmes himself is actually off-stage for the whole middle section of the book. But that doesn't matter. We have Watson and, just as the true brilliance and originality of PG Wodehouse's Jeeves and Bertie Wooster stories depend less on the character of Jeeves than on that of Bertie, so the key to the Sherlock Holmes stories always rested not so much with Holmes himself as with Dr Watson and Watson's relationship with Holmes. This truth has been demonstrated in literally hundreds of film and television versions, the success or failure of which depends largely on the actor playing Watson. Holmes can be stereotyped: Watson cannot.

When the first instalment of this new story appeared in *The Strand* the magazine's circulation exploded by an additional 30,000 copies. It was presented as an old case, written before the fatal conflict with Moriarty and now delved from Watson's archives. Holmes, Doyle still insisted, had not been and would not be resurrected: but his reluctance was in vain. The public demand had been unleashed, and offers came which he could scarcely refuse. *Collier's Weekly* in America offered him \$30,000 for a series of thirteen new short stories, boosted by more than half as much from *The Strand*. Conan Doyle sent a postcard to New York: 'Very well. A.C.D.'

'Sherlock Holmes returns!' cried the posters. Queues at the bookstalls were enormous. Holmes had been absent for a long while from the printed page but not from the theatre, where William Gillette's portrayal was hugely popular on both sides of the Atlantic. The appetite for a complete return, with Holmes's disappearance from the Reichenbach Falls explained, was just waiting to be fed. 'I don't think you need have any fears about Sherlock,' Doyle wrote to his mother. 'I am not conscious of any failing powers, and my work is not less conscientious than of old. I don't see why I should not have another go.' He was right. There were a few critical jibes, but not many, and for the public at large it was enough that 'Once again Mr Sherlock Holmes is free to devote his life to examining those interesting little problems which the complex life of London so plentifully presents.'

Although Holmes and Watson might not have changed, the world had. Holmes's fictional wanderings after the Reichenbach struggle occupied two years, so his return to London would still have been in the mid 1890s. In real time, however, the century had turned, the old Queen had died and the terrible Twentieth Century begun. This discrepancy had, and has, a curious effect. Holmes and Watson live forever in Victorian England, amid the swirling fog and the gas-lamps and the clip-clop of horses'

hooves. By a strange irony, the stories which Conan Doyle thought so much less important than his historical novels have become his most evocative historical writing.

In another way, of course, Holmes and Watson are timeless. They may have been invented, more than a hundred years ago, by a burly Scotsman with a walrus moustache, but they have become legendary figures, like Robin Hood or Dracula, D'Artagnan or Don Quixote, instantly recognisable everywhere, infinitely transferable in time and place. Never were they better presented than in this 'little book'. It would be a hard, indeed a foolish, critic who questioned whether its continued popularity was deserved. It is, within the limits of its ambition, a masterpiece. Apart from anything else, it contains probably the most famous, memorable and chilling sentence in all detective fiction: '*Mr Holmes, they were the footprints of a gigantic hound!*'

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