



2012

# Communication No. 308

The Pleasant Places of Florida

THE DAILY  
BEAST

## How Sherlock Holmes Took on the Capitalists by Ian Klaus 12/20/2011

Harry Potter's gone, last seen grizzled and liver-spotted, tending to his own affairs at King's Cross Railway Station. Bella Swan is about to lose her virginity and maybe even become a vampire. Aren't we ever in need of hero. Fortunately for us, and just in time for the holiday season, Sherlock Holmes is on the case. The timing couldn't be better, comfortable as the great detective would be in a world of Bernie Madoffs, Raj Rajaratnams and the men and women who ran *MF Global* into the ground.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's most famous hero is suddenly everywhere. The eminent critic Michael Dirda has produced a lovely portrait of reading Conan Doyle, while the English novelist Andy Horowitz has given us the first new Holmes novel, *House of Silk*, ever sanctioned by Conan Doyle's estate. The BBC has produced a new series based on Holmes, *Sherlock*, that is set on Baker Street in today's London of misbehaving soccer players and Russian oligarchs. And, as if we could forget, Robert Downey Jr. and Jude Law are set to once again take Victorian Britain by storm, flexing their muscles, blowing things up, and bedding the ladies.

Amid some of the new versions of the great detective available, it would be easy to relegate the old Holmes, so popular in Conan Doyle's time, to the dustbin of boring history. Pipes, deerstalker hats, and walking sticks, they can all seem so antiquated now, charming at best, clichéd at worst. As with Holmes's gear, so too with the detective. His unease around women and with sexuality, his cold rationality, his certainty about truth, all seem relics of Victorian London better left underground in its sewers.

But all this is fantastically wrong. Conan Doyle made Holmes, and to a degree even Watson, much darker than they are remembered in the popular imagination. Yes, Holmes was the quintessence of the Victorian rationalism, "the most perfect and reasoning machine that the world had seen." But modernity, its machines, objectivity and industry, produced its counterfoil within Holmes as well. With a taut, shrunken face, a penchant for cocaine injections, and a fondness for disguise and deception, Holmes is his own Hyde. "He disappeared into his bedroom, and returned in a few minutes in the character of an amiable and simple-minded Non-conformist clergyman," described Watson in a "Scandal in Bohemia," one of the Conan Doyle's earliest stories. "It was not merely that Holmes had changed his costume. His expression, his manner, his very soul seemed to vary with every fresh part that he assumed." Such malleability and shiftiness hardly corresponds with the detective's famous eye for facts and material evidence. He carried with him the insecurities, foibles, and morose visions of *fin de siècle* Europe.

Perhaps even more important, the London and Britain in which the pair operated was far from the staid world of morality, fragility, and decorum that we now see on the stage at Wilde productions. A Sherlock Holmes is not necessary in a world of honest representation, restraint, and responsibility. But that was not the world in which he lived. Late Victorians may have been quickly shocked in the parlor, but at their markets, in their streets, and in their stock exchange and empire, they were rapacious capitalists.

Today's bulls are mere bullocks in comparison. The Victorians sold shares to fake mines and railways, duped investors with fraudulent prospectuses. In the 1880s there were at least three mining bubbles. Near century's end there was a bubble in bicycle shares (what one wit called the *fin de cycle*). Anthony Trollope did not invent such reckless capitalists, he merely brought real life to the page. Consider his contemporary description of one of Britain's great stock-promoters: "Everything was swagger, swagger directors, swagger offices, swagger bankers, a swagger house at the West End, a swagger palace down at Surrey, a swagger yacht down at Cowes, swagger entertainments—all matched each other. The whole thing was a gorgeous vulgarity—a magnificent burlesque of business." Sound familiar?

In 1884, a guide to the press of London listed 32 finance and investment papers in Britain and Ireland. By 1904 there were nearly one hundred papers covering the world of capitalism. The next year, one such journal, the *Financial Review of Reviews*, offered dividend results for more than 3,500 investments quoted on British stock exchanges, amounting to 132 pages of statistical records. This was complex, virtually unchecked capitalism, where falsehoods in prospectuses and newspapers were rarely prosecuted. It should come as no surprise that it was at the end of this period that Thorstein Veblen, the American economist and sociologist, would coin his famous phrase "conspicuous consumption."

He was a beacon of humility, virtuous behavior, and ethics amid one of the most shambolic and greed-filled free markets in the history of capitalism.

It was in this world that Holmes operated. Conan Doyle did not merely describe dogs that did not bark, but also the intense and fraud filled concern for money that defined his time. He treaded the avenues of the capital of global finance and pursued leads and represented clients overleveraged, overstretched in their mortgages, marrying for money, falsifying their sources of income, and misleading their employees. In "The Man With the Twisted Lip," Holmes discovers a man posing as a beggar to keep up his gentlemanly lifestyle, including his country home. In "The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet," a banker is nearly deceived by his own niece to the tune of £50,000 and his good name.

Holmes' answer to such malfeasance and deception is of course legendary. "You did not know where to look," he tells Watson, "and so you missed all that was important. I can never



bring you to realize the importance of sleeves, the suggestiveness of thumb-nails, or the great issues that may hang from a bootlace." This is Holmes the cold "thinking machine." Such attention to detail was not merely a display in logic, but an answer to the moral failures and excess of the day. Insurance firms hired medical examiners, of which Conan Doyle was briefly one. Imperial agents and London police began fingerprinting. Clerks and managers were instructed in how to examine checks and each other for fraud.

Holmes may not have typically concerned himself with commercial cases, but his was a heroism forged in many ways in contrast to the defining features of a period filled with fraud and greed. Connecting the dots between Conan Doyle's numerous heroes, Michael Dirda describes the author's concerns: "What counts is that books be thrilling lessons in heroism, sacrifice, and virtuous action." So we get a Holmes with a penchant for cocaine and costume, but possessing loyalty, reason, moderation, and a sense of duty.

So let's update Holmes—stripping him of totems of the past that remind us now of a supposedly staid yesteryear—to make sure he also gets a new audience. But that old Holmes, he was a beacon of humility, virtuous behavior, and ethics amid one of the most shambolic and greed-filled free markets in the history of capitalism. The old Sherlock Holmes is indeed a hero for our time.

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### The Game Is Always Afoot

From Arthur Conan Doyle's scant nine volumes sprang a vast library of Sherlock Holmes stories.

By **D.J. TAYLOR**

In his famous essay *Charles Dickens* (1939), George Orwell maintained that, 70 years after Dickens's death, a comedian who went on to a music-hall stage and imitated one of his major characters would stand a fair chance of having his imitation recognized. Another 70 years later this rule probably still applies: As recently as the late 1980s one of the U.K.'s senior anti-Conservative politicians could be found gamely comparing Mrs. Thatcher to Miss Havisham, on the grounds that the former doggedly presided over an economy that, like the latter's wedding cake, had long since crumbled to dust.

Yet it could be argued that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's position in modern folk memory is even stronger than the Inimitable Boz. Even now, more than 80 years since his death, and a century and a quarter since fiction's most celebrated consulting detective made his bow in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), any impressionist who ventures onto a television screen in a deerstalker hat with a murmur of "Elementary, my dear Watson" can be sure of having four-fifths of the audience instantly on his side.

And immediately one of the chief difficulties associated with a fictional character who transcends his pri-

mordial grounding and goes sailing off into the popular consciousness shifts inexorably into place. For just as Queen Victoria never spoke the words "We are not amused," so Holmes, according to the textual sleuths, never uttered his signature remark. Neither did he sport that trademark piece of headgear, a discrepancy that did not, alas, stop the British actor Rupert Everett from being roundly criticized by Holmes purists—that vast, tenacious, multinational ginger-group—for pointedly discarding it in the BBC's *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (2004). But as the list of highly distinguished actors who preceded Mr. Everett in this exacting role makes clear, Holmes is as protean as one of those shape-shifting Norse Gods.

The English gent Basil Rathbone, he of the phantom deerstalker, played him as an English gent. Peter Cushing, the cadaverous star of many a postwar British horror movie, reconceptualized Holmes as an enigmatic brooder. Jeremy Brett's Holmes—a great favorite with the critics—was a decidedly camp creation with a ballet dancer's gait and a range of baroque hand gestures. And all this is to ignore the traditionalist-baiting of Robert Downey Jr.'s imposture, currently on display again in



the film *A Game of Shadows*, and Benedict Cumberbatch's portrayal of Holmes as a "high functioning sociopath" in the BBC update *Sherlock*.



Some of this is the result of Holmes's gradual metamorphosis into a "brand" whose sponsors are concerned not with merit or accuracy but with keeping the franchise alive. Rather more is a consequence of the desire for relevance, a suspicion that fictive heroes keep their luster only by staying up to date. But at its heart lies Holmes's transformation, over time, into what a literary theorist would call a "floating signifier"—someone whose appeal is both universal and yet increasingly vague, who has traveled so far from his original moorings that he can take on any guise his enthusiasts choose for him, who can "mean," in the last resort, anything that his re-animators want him to. If this cultural tendency applies to film and television, it is even more marked in the world of print, where the bulk of ersatz Holmes now exceeds Conan Doyle's original productions (a modest nine volumes, concluding with *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes* (in 1927) by a ratio of around 20 to one. If nothing else, Holmes's posthumous adventures are a tribute to his versatility. No geographical boundary or personal inhibition can hold him. He has, of course, visited the



United States several times to reduce the crime rate on the Eastern seaboard and elsewhere. Queerly for a man who in his original state showed no interest whatever in women, he has taken a wife and established a professional partnership with her (see the series of novels by Laurie R. King). His so-called hidden years, after the arch-villain Professor Moriarty sent Holmes plunging over the cliff-edge into the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland, have been pitilessly re-imagined. Holmes has, inevitably, been set to work on solving some of the late Victorian era's most notorious cases, as in Michael Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* (1996), where he tries his strength against Jack the Ripper.

If Holmes has moved remorselessly on to confront the giant rat of Sumatra (numerous times, as more than one author has tried to fill this gap in Watson's records) and solve the mystery of the Indian star (in Carole Buggé's 1997 novel), then so have some of his satellites and indeed his previously unknown descendants. The novelist Quinn Fawcett has produced a series of *Mycroft Holmes Mysteries* in tribute to Holmes's hitherto sparingly co-opted elder brother. John Lescroart gave him a son, cut from the same tobacco-fixated cloth. ("Ah, the smell of pipes, I love them. They bring back memory of my childhood, of my father.") Holmes has unpicked escapologist crimes with Harry Houdini and refined some of his psychological deductions with the help of Sigmund Freud.

Most bizarre of all, perhaps, is Holmes's colonization of territory fenced off by other writers. In Michael Reaves and John Palen's *Shadows Over Baker Street* (2003), he can be found operating in the world of H.P. Lovecraft. "What would happen" the blurb demands, "if Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's peerless detective and his allies were to find themselves faced with Lovecraftian mysteries whose solution lay not only beyond the grasp of logic but beyond sanity itself?" The answer, perhaps, is that you would get a book that bore approximately as much resemblance to the fog-bound world of 221B Baker Street as the Disney version of *The Jungle Book* does to Kipling's India. But this is what happens to art when it gets diffused into an endless series of marketplaces and constituencies, put to serve a variety of interest groups and literary communities, like a pinch of dye thrown into an ever-expanding bathtub.

One unignorable mark of Holmes's allure is the number of relatively highbrow writers who have schemed to bring him back to life. In Caleb Carr's *The Italian Secretary* (2005), Holmes and Watson uncover a royal intrigue stretching back from Queen Victoria to Mary Queen of Scots. John Gardner's three

Moriarty novels imagine their titular hero surviving the struggle at the Reichenbach Falls. Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution* ambitiously attempts to prolong the detective's life into World War II. Kingsley Amis once produced an elaborate pastiche titled *The Darkwater Hall Mystery*, which opens with the alluring Lady Fairfax ("a blonde young woman of the most unusual beauty and distinction of feature") entreating Holmes to protect her husband from a revenge attack courtesy of the imprisoned poacher Black Ralph and ends with Doctor Watson in bed with a Spanish charmer named Dolores.

There are, of course, distinctions to be made here. Amis was simultaneously bent on several different literary tasks: paying homage, having fun, flexing his parodic muscles, all at the same time. It is no criticism of one or two of the later breed of Holmes imitators to say that they are simply hard-working professional authors lured by the far-off rumble of the cash register. If anything unites all these examples of second-, third- and fourth-generation Holmes, it is a quality that the original itself had in spades: stylization. But while ur-Holmes got by on a handful of procedural tics and gestures, his bastard descendants have moved this process a little further on, exaggerating each outward characteristic and settled habit to the point where it hovers close to outright burlesque.

Even Anthony Horowitz's *The House of Silk*—one of the highest-grade Holmes imitations for ages—betrays this weakness. Each of its characters talk just a little too much and reveal just a little more about themselves than the famously laconic originals would have thought plausible or desirable. The first five pages are given over to a display of Holmes's deductive techniques so gratuitous ("I can tell you that you have just returned from Holborn Viaduct. That you left your house in a hurry, but even so missed the train. Perhaps the fact that you are currently without a servant girl is to blame," etc.) that you wonder how the hero-worshiping Watson can bear to put up with it. Even Inspector Lestrade, the bumbling police detective, carries his pique too far. "This is all the merest moonshine," he crisply depose, when Holmes embarks on some labyrinthine chain of reasoning. "The trouble with you, Holmes, is that you have a way of complicating things. I sometimes wonder if you don't do it deliberately. It is as if you need the crime to rise to the challenge, as if it had to be unusual enough for it to be worth solving."

As a piece of psychology—a clue to what makes Holmes tick—this is highly acute, but it is far more than Conan Doyle would have ever allowed himself. On the other hand, it is this resolute over-egging of



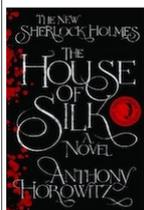
the pudding that gives *The House of Silk* its charm: a kind of constant creative exuberance, born of a suspicion that unless every single element of the Holmes legend can be brought to the feast, the story is bound to fall flat. There is a supporting role for Mycroft, a possible appearance by Moriarty (Watson isn't sure) and a plot of such dazzling complexity that diagrammatic summary wouldn't do it justice.

Set in 1890, composed by Watson for posterity to marvel at after his death, rife with tongue-in-cheek revelations of this stolid medical man's later career ("The Order of Merit awarded to me by His Majesty King Edward VII in 1908 might be considered achievement enough for anyone. But not for me"), *The House of Silk* follows Holmes from his engagement with an art dealer convinced that a vengeful New York gangster is on his trail through to the sinister organization of the title. He eventually unmasks it as a pedophile ring whose membership extends to the highest reaches of the establishment. The technical high point is a terrific scene in which Holmes, arrested for a murder he did not commit, escapes from Holloway Prison not, as is first supposed, in a dead prisoner's coffin but disguised as the orderly accompanying it.

Quite a lot of ersatz Holmes betrays itself in the field of idiom, but Mr. Horowitz turns out to be notably sure-footed. I had my doubts about Watson's use of a word like "paranoia," despite its mid-Victorian origins, never mind such 20th-century expressions as "security guard" or the suggestion that one character had "taken to alcohol" when the standard Victorian usage is "took to drink," but in general the linguistic detail is spot-on. Where the novel really succeeds is in Mr. Horowitz's understanding that, in extending the careers of these great fictional titans, the burlesque element is impossible to resist.

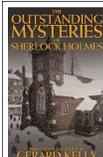
No matter how devious the mystery, and violent the detail, no alert reader of *The House of Silk* will be able to spend more than a half-dozen pages in its company without wanting to laugh. All this is a good sign, for it confirms the position in which a contemporary writer ought to stand toward another, greater, writer he is bent on imitating. Thirty years ago, when the British director Jonathan Miller turned his attention to Mozartian opera, the justification for his radical, composer-ignoring approach was that "we owe him nothing." On the contrary, we owe him everything, for there would be no opera without him. The great merit of *The House of Silk* is the enormous debt that Mr. Horowitz clearly thinks he owes Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

What next for Holmes? It hardly needs saying



that he will shortly be revealed as gay, or possibly a woman masquerading in man's attire. A feminist Holmes deserves a whole story cycle to herself. He will doubtless at some point in the troubled mid-2010s help President Obama to evade a Ku Klux Klan plot down in the wilds of Alabama or be of vital assistance to the U.S. Commerce Department in the matter of pilfered commercial blueprints on their way to China. The point about Holmes, here in his 125th year, is that he can do absolutely anything. Like the Expanding Man of the Marvel Comics, he can adapt himself to any contingency and re-position himself to suit any environment. If nothing else, his long and ever more successful career is a pattern demonstration of art's superiority to commerce. In his humble, professional storyteller's way, Conan Doyle fashioned something that an industrialist's marketing manager has always struggled to create: the everlasting brand.

—Mr. Taylor's latest novel, *Derby Day*, will be published in April by Pegasus.



### The Outstanding Mysteries of Sherlock Holmes

Softcover, MX Publications, 2011. By Gerard Kelly

This collection brought back a number of old friends and introduced me to a pair of new acquaintances. Eleven of these tales were published in pamphlet format in 1999. They have not been easy to find and several were later reprinted in a small, single volume collection. In any case, the sequence in which they were presented differs in a few details from the sequence they in appear here. I am sure the author took the opportunity to correct any of the trifling errors that may have appeared in the original publications when this new collection was produced. A cursory examination revealed no changes from pamphlet to Trade Paperback, however, I am sure there are some that I simply did not notice.

These stories take place at various times during Holmes' career and at a number of different locales. Most are well written and seem to echo the Canon, although they are, in general, more 'emotional' than the Canonical tales. Also, in common with the Canon, some of these tales are better or, at least, more satisfying than the others. There are a number of interesting characters introduced and several familiar faces grace these pages. Mycroft, Mrs. Hudson and Inspector Lestrade are the most frequently met characters other than Holmes and Watson, but several new faces are quite fascinating. I was particularly taken by the Spanish Ambassador who appears in one of the original tales.



The two new stories are *Catacuscus Ebriosus* and *The Peddler of Death*. *Catacuscus* was published earlier in *Curious Incidents II*, a collection edited by J. R. Campbell and Charles Prepolac. I do not record an earlier appearance of *The Peddler of Death*. Both are certainly worth including in any collection of Sherlockian fiction.

Most of these stories rate being classed as novellas, as they exceed twenty pages in length. This is, of course, an arbitrary definition, but I have found it useful for describing different sorts of tales. The point is that most of these stories are long enough to allow the author to develop characters and events in some detail. Usually, the short story format forces the author to concentrate on the action involved and has little time for complexities or character traits. In this collection, the author demonstrates that the true monsters in the World are all too human. Nothing is so truly frightening as the ability of humans to terrify and torture one another.

This is a pleasing book, whether the reader is a casual admirer of the Sherlockian Canon or a true aficionado. A few purists may take issue with the timing of several of the tales, but I suspect the author can justify his choices of time and place with little trouble. I am not sure that the occasional use of extra-natural events is truly justified; however, such forays are not germane to the solution of the crimes and only offer some explanation for otherwise unexplained external events.

**Reviewed by: Philip K. Jones, September 2011**

**HE'S EVERYWHERE...** Big Finish has released *The Reification of Hans Gerber* by George Mann, an original play done in audio format which starts out as a search for a will until Holmes determines that the dead man was murdered. go to [bigfinish.com/ranges/sherlock-holmes](http://bigfinish.com/ranges/sherlock-holmes) ... Be sure to check out Kindle e-books. They're beginning to offer several Sherlockian items ... You can go to [thebrowser.com/interviews/Michael-dirda-on-sherlock-holmes](http://thebrowser.com/interviews/Michael-dirda-on-sherlock-holmes) and find an interview with the author of *On Sherlock Holmes*, discuss-

ing five outstanding books by or about A.C. Doyle ... Ever heard of *Rifftrax*? Those boys from *MST 3000* have continued a lucrative career producing their own humorous soundtracks to movies which you can sync and play on your computer with the film. They've now done Downey's *Sherlock Holmes*. Go to [rifftrax.com/rifftrax-presents/sherlock-holmes](http://rifftrax.com/rifftrax-presents/sherlock-holmes) ... Mensa now has a newly formed *Sherlock Holmes Special Interest Group* ... the *Sherlocktron* website has relocated to [sherlocktron.hostoi.com/Sherlocktron.html](http://sherlocktron.hostoi.com/Sherlocktron.html) ...

**CALENDAR SHERLOCKIANA 2012**

**January 11-15** - *Sherlock Holmes Birthday Weekend* (extended) NY, NY 11th-ASH Wednesday, 12th-Distinguished Speaker Lecture, 13th-Wm. Gillette Memorial Luncheon, Gaslight Gala, BSI dinner, 14th-BSI Cocktail Party, Lost in NY event, 15th-ASH Brunch

**March 25** - *26th Annual Spring Gathering* of the Pleasant Places of Florida, Tarpon Springs, FL. Contact Carl Heifetz or Wanda Dow.

**March 30-April 1** - *STUD Watsonian Weekend*, STUD Sherlockian Society and The Watsonians, Chicago, IL. Contact Susan Diamond.

**April 27-29** - *Malice Domestic XXIV*

**June 9** - *A Scintillation of Scions V*, Watson's Tin Box. Contact Jacquelynn Morris [www.watsonstinbox.org](http://www.watsonstinbox.org)

**August 4** - *Silver Blaze*. Saratoga Springs, NY. The Baker Street Irregulars. Contact Lou & Candace Lewis [www.silverblazeny.homestead.com](http://www.silverblazeny.homestead.com)

**August 31-Sept. 3** - *Sherlock Holmes: Behind the Canonical Screen*. Los Angeles, CA. Contact Michael Kean.

**September 9-16** - *The Sherlock Holmes Society of London Swiss Pilgrimage*, Interlaken & Meiringen, Switzerland.

**October 4-7** - *Bouchercon XLIII*, Cleveland, OH . 2013

**January 9-13** - *Sherlock Holmes Birthday Weekend* (extended) NY, NY

**September 19-22** - *Bouchercon XLIV* Albany, NY



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SPECIAL GUEST: CHRIS REDMOND

Order off the Menu. Donations always accepted for the Marshall Wood Fund.

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**Carl Heifetz**, *Representative (both with the Servants and with the Tradespeople)*, (Correspondent)

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