

## **BIRTHDAY OF LOUIS PASTEUR CELEBRATED** by Carl L. Heifetz (December 27, 1996 to the Hounds of the Internet)

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On December 27 we celebrate the birthday of Louis Pasteur who lived from 1822-1895. During those years he set the stage for many advances in the study of microbiology and infectious diseases. How does this impact on the Canon? In the narratives that are the subject of these discussions are contained many reference to infectious diseases. Most noteworthy, which shall be our story to be studied on that date, is *The Adventure of the Dying Detective*. You will recall that in this case Holmes pretended to be dying from a rare tropical disease, possibly "the black formosa corruption" or "tapanuli fever." By virtue of Dr. Watson's intervention, Mr. Holmes is able to do a "gotcha" on Culverton Smith, a Sumatra planter and expert on this illness. Mr. Smith was the individual who thought that he had tricked Sherlock Holmes into contracting this dread and incurable illness by sending him a boxed booby-trapped injection device. According to Baring-Gould, Mr. Hugh L'Tang's researches have identified this disease as a condition known as tsutsugamushi fever or scrub typhus. Effective antibiotic therapies for this rickettsial infection has been available for roughly 50 years. Thus, this disease is not incurable today; however, in the golden era of the Victorian age it was associated with a high degree of morbidity and mortality.

No doubt, the life of The Literary Agent had a great impact on Mr. Holmes' and Dr. Watson's interest in this subject. First of all, Arthur Conan Doyle received his Doctorate of Medicine with a thesis concerning the bacterial infection syphilis. His wife "Touie" died of tuberculosis after a lingering illness. Further, in May, 1892, a letter from Dr. Joseph Bell suggested a story idea for a "bacteriological criminal." In addition, it has often been suggested that Dr. Watson's first(?) wife, Mary, also died of tuberculosis. This was a century of great advances in the knowledge of infectious disease and microbiology in general: Jacob Lister led the way to aseptic surgery; Pasteur developed vaccines for anthrax and rabies; Koch worked out the pathogenesis of tuberculosis; and a discussion between Mr. Sherlock Holmes and Professor Paul Ehrlich in Montpellier in 1894 led to the latter's discovery of arsphenamine, the first antibacterial drug.

Also, 1899 was the year that the American Society for Microbiology (once known as the Society of American Bacteriologists), the largest single biological society in the U.S., was founded.

The Canon abounds with bacteriological references. Dr. Watson had been afflicted with enteric fever during his recuperation from a gunshot wound in *A Study in Scarlet*. Jonathan Small had been "racked with ague" during his imprisonment in the Andaman convict Barracks in *The Sign of Four*. In *The Stock Broker's Clerk*, Holmes deduced that Watson had been "unwell lately" with a summer cold. Consumption (tuberculosis) is mentioned in three accounts: *The Final Problem*, *The*

*Adventure of the Missing Third Quarter, The Hound of the Baskervilles.* Other infectious diseases in the Canon are as follows: diphtheria, *The "Gloria Scott"*; erysipelas, *The Adventure of the Illustrious Client*; suspected leprosy, *The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier*; suspected spinal meningitis, *The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire*; pneumonia, *The Adventure of the Three Gables*; rheumatic fever, *The Adventure of the Lion's Mane*; tetanus, *The Sign of Four*; and yellow fever, *The Yellow Face*.