Classics and Commercials

A LITERARY CHRONICLE OF THE FORTIES

BY EDMUND WILSON

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"MR. HOLMES, THEY WERE THE FOOTPRINTS OF A GIGANTIC HOUND!"

My article of four weeks ago on detective stories has called forth a burst of correspondence even more overwhelming than that provoked by my earlier piece—well over a hundred letters. But in this case the people who write me mostly agree with my adverse attitude. Among the few letters from those who do not, some, however, are excessively bitter. One lady adds a postscript in which she declares that she has never liked men named Edmund, and another asks me jeeringly how much I have been paid by "the non-detective fiction publishers." The furious reaction of these readers confirms me in my conclusion that detective stories are actually a habit-forming drug for which its addicts will fight like tigers—an opinion that is explicitly corroborated by many of the approving letters. The evangelical note at the end of my piece was intended to have a burlesque flavor, but some of my correspondents seem to have taken it more seriously than it was meant, and write to tell me that, though they have long been addicts, they have made a vow, since reading my article, never to touch another detective story. An old friend, a classical scholar and archeologist, has rather horrified me by writing to confess that he, too, has been a victim of this form of narcotic

and that he had already had the intention of doing for it in literature what De Quincey has done for opium-eating.

I will now confess, in my turn, that, since my first looking into this subject last fall, I have myself become addicted, in spells, to reading myself to sleep with Sherlock Holmes, which I had gone back to, not having looked at it since childhood, in order to see how it compared with Conan Doyle's latest imitators. I propose, however, to justify my pleasure in rereading Sherlock Holmes on grounds entirely different from those on which the consumers of the current product ordinarily defend their taste. My contention is that Sherlock Holmes *is* literature on a humble but not ignoble level, whereas the mystery writers most in vogue now are not. The old stories are literature, not because of the conjuring tricks and the puzzles, not because of the lively melodrama, which they have in common with many other detective stories, but by virtue of imagination and style. These are fairy-tales, as Conan Doyle intimated in his preface to his last collection, and they are among the most amusing of fairy-tales and not among the least distinguished.

The Sherlock Holmes stories, almost as much as the Alice books or as Edward Lear's nonsense, were the casual products of a life the main purpose of which was something else, but creations that in some sense got detached from their author and flew away and had a life of their own. Conan Doyle, it seems, worked conscientiously to document his historical romances, which he considered his serious work, but he regarded Holmes and Watson as the paper dolls of rather ridiculous and undignified potboilers, and he paid so little attention to what he wrote about them that the stories are full of inconsistencies, which Doyle never bothered to cor-

rect. He forgot Watson's Christian name and later on gave him a new one; he shifted the location of his wound; he began by making an ignorance of literature an essential trait of Holmes's personality and then had him talk about Petrarch and Meredith; and he even, on one occasion, changed the season abruptly from July to September. (It is an odd evidence of Holmes's vitality that some of his admirers should have gone to the trouble of attempting to account for these discrepancies, as if Watson and Holmes had been real men, and that they should actually have published their conjectures in a volume called *Profile by Gaslight.*) Doyle had become so impatient with his hero by the end of the second series in the *Strand Magazine* that he got rid of him by killing him off, totally without preparation, in a manner that was little short of frivolous. But Sherlock Holmes was like a genie let out of a bottle; there was no way of getting him back and, once at large, he was always available to minister to his master's wants. Doyle eventually brought Holmes back to life and wrote five more volumes about him. For perhaps the only time in his life, he had hit upon a genuine spell.

Whence had he mustered this spell and what elements had been mixed to make it? Well, there was Poe, of course, and there was also unquestionably R. L. Stevenson's *New Arabian Nights. The Adventure of the Hansom Cab* and *The Adventure of the Superfluous Mansion* must have suggested both the Sherlock Holmes titles and the formula of taking people to unexpected places and having them witness mysterious happenings. But Doyle, though much less "literary" than Stevenson, somehow got solider results, which depended on quite different qualities from Stevenson's suave Oriental tone and the limpid iridescence of his fantasy. For one thing, Stevenson was weak on character, whereas Doyle had

produced two real personalities. And, for another, Conan Doyle had created his own vein of fantasy, which was vivider, if rather less fine, than Stevenson's. You see the force of his imagination exemplified in a curious way in some of those stories in which the dénouement is inadequate or disappointing. A young woman goes to work in a country house where she will be extravagantly overpaid if she will consent to have her hair cut short, to wear a dress of electric blue, to sit in certain places at certain times and to allow herself to be made to laugh uproariously at a succession of funny stories told by the master of the house; a professional interpreter of Greek finds himself suddenly shanghaied in a cab and taken to a stuffy London house with velvet furniture, a high white marble mantelpiece and a suit of Japanese armor, where a man who wears glasses and has a giggling laugh compels him to put questions in Greek to a pale and emaciated captive, whose face is all crisscrossed with sticking plaster. Neither of these stories—*The Copper Beeches* or *The Greek Interpreter*—quite lives up to its opening evocation. The way of accounting for the sticking plaster seems, indeed, entirely unsatisfactory, and since Watson tells us that this "singular case" is "still involved in some mystery," we are almost inclined to suspect that the affair concealed something else which the detective had failed to penetrate; but the images have exercised their power—a power that is partly due to their contrast with, their startling emergence from, the dull surface of Victorian London.

Here Doyle is exploiting a device quite remote from the suave story-spinning of Stevenson: he is working in the familiar tradition—in which the English art of fiction has excelled since the days of *Robinson Crusoe*—of the commonplace and common-sense narrative which arouses excitement and wonder. He can make us feel

the presence of the "sinister"—to use one of his favorite words—even in a situation which does not include any fantastic ingredient. Take the story of *The Naval Treaty*, which follows *The Greek Interpreter* in Doyle's carefully varied program. A young man in the Foreign Office has been entrusted with an important document, which he has been copying at night in his office. He is alone and there is no entrance to the room save by a corridor that leads to the street. No one except the Foreign Minister knows that he has the treaty. At last he rings for the doorman to bring him some coffee, but an unknown woman answers the bell, large and coarse-faced and wearing an apron. She says that she is the doorman's wife and promises to send the coffee, but some time passes and the coffee does not come, and he goes downstairs to see what is the matter. He finds the doorman asleep, but the man is immediately awakened by a bell that rings loudly overhead.

"'I was boiling the kettle when I fell asleep, sir.' He looked at me and then up at the still quivering bell with an ever-growing astonishment upon his face.

"'If you was here, sir, then who rang the bell?' he asked.

"'The bell!' I cried. 'What bell is it?'

"'It's the bell of the room you were working in.'"

Both these incidents, so soberly told, the appearance of the woman and the ringing of the bell, give us shocks that reverberate. Of course there is no one upstairs in the room and the naval treaty has been taken.

The stories have also both form and style of a kind very much superior to what one finds in our padded novels, though sometimes, it seems to me, the requirements of length for short stories in the *Strand Magazine* compelled Doyle somewhat to skimp his endings. There

is wit, not mere tricks, in the "deductions" of Holmes and wit in the dialogue, and not only in the interchanges between Watson and Holmes but even in some of the stagy lines which Doyle's very sure sense of point save from being merely absurd. Take for example, the conclusion of *The Second Stain*:

"'Come, sir,' said he. 'There is more in this than meets the eye. How came the letter back in the box?'
"Holmes turned away smiling from the keen scrutiny of those wonderful eyes.
"'We also have our diplomatic secrets,' said he and, picking up his hat, he turned to the door."

The writing, of course, is full of clichés, but these clichés are dealt out with a ring which gives them a kind of value, while the author makes speed and saves space so effectively that we are rarely in danger of getting bogged down in anything boring. And the clichés of situation and character are somehow made to function, too, for the success of the general effect. This effect owes its real originality not only to the queer collocations of elements, such as those I have mentioned above, but also to the admirable settings: the somber overcarpeted interiors or the musty empty houses of London, the remote old or new country places, always with shrubbery along the drives; and the characters—the choleric big-game hunters and the high-spirited noble ladies—have been imbued with the atmosphere of the settings and charged with an energy sufficient—like the fierce puppets of a Punch-and-Judy show—to make an impression in their simple roles.

But over the whole epic there hangs an air of irresponsible comedy, like that of some father's rigmarole for children, like that of, say, Albert Bigelow Paine in his stories about the Coon, the Possum and the Old Black

Crow who all lived together in a Hollow Tree. The story-teller can make anything happen that will entertain his nightly audience and that will admit some kind of break at bedtime. The invention of Professor Moriarty, that scientific master-mind of crime who was to checkmate the great scientific detective, is simply an improvisation to bring to an end an overlong story, and the duel in which each is straining to outthink and outtrick the other is exhilarating because totally impossible. I do not share the prejudice of some Holmes experts against the two latest series of stories. Inferior though these often are in plot, Doyle amuses himself here in a way which makes them extremely funny. I am delighted by *The Adventure of the Dying Detective*, in which Holmes feigns a tropical disease and refuses to let Watson treat him: "Facts are facts, Watson, and after all, you are only a general practitioner with very limited experience and mediocre qualifications. It is painful to have to say these things, but you leave me no choice." "I was bitterly hurt," says Watson. And it was a capital idea to have Watson himself sometimes undertake the inquiry and bungle it, or, conversely, in other cases, to have Holmes tell the stories instead of Watson, in an attempt to divest them of the fortuitous glamor which he insists that his friend has added. (I have discovered, by the way—though I see that it had already been hinted by Christopher Morley—that Rex Stout's great detective, Nero Wolfe, has the look of having been inspired by one of the most diverting of Doyle's variations: Sherlock's brother Mycroft, who is also a master-mind but who has grown so stout and inert that he is unable to work on a problem till all the data have been dug out and brought him.)

And it all takes place in the Hollow Tree—in that

atmosphere of "cozy peril," to quote a phrase from, I think, Mr. Morley, who, in his prefaces to the Sherlock Holmes omnibus and an anthology called *Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson*, has written so well on this subject. They will, of course, get safely back to Baker Street, after their vigils and raids and arrests, to discuss the case comfortably in their rooms and have their landlady bring them breakfast the next morning. Law and Order have not tottered a moment; the British police are well in control: they are the stoutest, most faithful fellows in the world if they can only be properly directed by Intellect in the form of a romantic personality possessed by the scientific spirit. All the loose ends of every episode are tidily picked up and tucked in, and even Holmes, though once addicted to cocaine, has been reformed by the excellent Watson. In this world, one can count on the client to arrive at the very moment when his case has just been explained, and Holmes and Watson always find it possible to get anywhere they want to go without a moment's delay or confusion. Here is an incident from *The Greek Interpreter* which illustrates this unfailing punctuality. The interpreter, after his visit to the mysterious house, has been driven away and dropped.

"The carriage which had brought me was already out of sight. I stood gazing round and wondering where on earth I might be, when I saw someone coming towards me in the darkness. As he came up to me I made out that he was a railway porter.

"'Can you tell me what place this is?' I asked.

"'Wandsworth Common,' said he.

"'Can I get a train into town?'

"'If you walk on a mile or so to Clapham Junction,' said he, 'you'll just be in time for the last to Victoria.'"

So, no matter what those queer Greeks do in London, there will always be a British porter and he will always help you to get your train. In the newer kind of mystery novel, this porter would not have been a real porter; he would have had some unintelligible connection with the men in the upholstered house, and, far from helping the poor interpreter to catch the train, he would have involved him in endless further trouble—just as the man who wanted a young woman in an electric blue dress to cut her hair and laugh at his jokes would have turned out to be suffering from some form of derangement suggested by Krafft-Ebing or Freud. One rarely finds the word "sinister" even in mystery fiction today; it implies that a spy or a murder, a piece of treachery or an insane neurosis, is something of exceptional occurrence.

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