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Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes (His Last Bow)

THE COMPLETE CLASSICS

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The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge and other stories

Read by **David Timson**

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Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

The Reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes – His Last Bow

Was Conan Doyle paranoid? Judging by the set of six stories first published in *The Strand* as *'Reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes,* one might think so. Intrigue, espionage, revenge, foreign agents, even the Mafia make their appearance within the British Isles, and provide a colourful backdrop to this collection that appeared between 1908 and 1913.

Times had changed in the five years since Conan Doyle had last entered the world of 221B Baker Street. Now in 1908, the height of the Edwardian age, technology was advancing – the motor-car, for instance, was becoming almost commonplace. Conan Doyle revelled in cars, and was one of the first drivers in the country to receive a fine for speeding. Indeed, some thought the world was moving too fast. In 1912, the best example of British engineering expertise resulted in tragedy. The liner *The Titanic* was defeated by nature, when a collision with an iceberg led to her sinking with a huge loss of life. In the blaming and name-calling that followed, Conan Doyle valiantly supported the man who stood most accused – the Captain.

The *Titanic* disaster shook British confidence, and with the growth of Germany's ambitions, the seemingly impregnable British Empire began to look as if it might be under threat. So Conan Doyle's stories, though set in the 1890s, the late years of the Victorian era, accurately reflect the fears and insecurities of the rapidly changing first decade of the twentieth century.

Since he had last written of Sherlock Holmes in 1903, there had been changes too in Conan Doyle's own life. His first wife having died in 1906, his affair with Jean Leckie that had continued to be platonic whilst he nursed his sick wife, was now at last able to be made public. Conan Doyle married Jean Leckie in 1907, and such was his celebrity that even as far afield as the *Buenos Aires Standard,* there was a headline: 'Sherlock Holmes quietly married.' Yes, the shadow of his greatest creation still fell across everything he attempted to do in life. But Conan Doyle seems, by 1908 to have finally come to terms with the situation; his new wife was more important

to him now. More at ease with his fictional sleuth, Doyle even seems to have tried to emulate him by turning his attention to real-life criminal cases, and offering his help to the defendants, whom he felt were the subjects of a miscarriage of justice. In 1906 he had helped an Asian solicitor, George Edalji, wrongfully accused of maiming animals and writing poison pen letters. Evidence of racism had led to his conviction. After his release he appealed for justice, and Conan Doyle taking up the challenge proved that Edalji's poor eyesight made his committing of the crime next to impossible.

Again in 1912 he metaphorically donned his deer-stalker and came to the aid of Oscar Slater, a young Jew imprisoned for the murder of an elderly spinster in Glasgow in 1908. Conan Doyle found the evidence against Slater extremely flimsy and thought it reflected the anti-semitic feelings prevalent in Britain before the First World War. He worked hard to get his conviction reversed, which did not in fact happen until 1927.

Both cases created a lot of publicity but were only a limited success. If he couldn't actually be Sherlock Holmes, as the public seemed to expect, he could at least continue to write about him, which after 1908, he did less reluctantly than in the past.

THE ADVENTURE OF WISTERIA LODGE

South American revolutionaries invade the quiet environs of Esher, Surrey, in this story, set in 1892. The Central American state of 'San Pedro' is fictitious – the colours of the flag too, green and white, do not correspond with any country or state in South America – but almost any of that continent's republics could have been Conan Doyle's model. Cruel tyrants overthrown by popular revolutions were only too frequent in Central America's history throughout the nineteenth century. There were heroes too; men such as Simon Bolivar are revered in South America as its great liberator, or San Martin and O'Higgins who liberated and reformed Chile and Argentina. But many South American governments were unstable and economically weak, which made them easy prey to bloody tyrants like Juan Manuel de Rosas who ruled Argentina from 1835 to 1852, and could well have been the inspiration for Don Murillo in this story. Furthering his own ambitions, though nominally supporting federalism (the linking of the Central American republics in a common policy), de Rosas assumed the dictatorship of most of Argentina in 1835. He was a ruthless tyrant. Assisted by spies, propagandists and the Mazorca (a secret political society that degenerated into a

band of assassins) he instituted a regime of terror. Many revolutions were organised against his rule. Secret revolutionary groups were formed – notably the Asociacion de Mayo, founded by Echeverria Esteban. Esteban, perhaps the model for Garcia in this story, was a romantic poet and political revolutionary, in the mode of Lord Byron.

After a successful revolution in1852, the dictator de Rosas fled to England, like Murillo, though not to Esher, and lived in England as an exile until his death.

Conan Doyle adds further spice to his story by including references to voodoo, though Holmes's textbook on the subject which sounds impressive: Eckermann's *Voodooism and the Negroid Religions* is entirely fictitious. This story may contain the earliest literary reference to voodoo.

This story only received its title, *The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge* when it was published in book form. In the original *Strand* publication the first part of the story was entitled, *The Singular Experience of Mr. Scott Eccles*; and the second part, *The Tiger of San Pedro.*

THE ADVENTURE OF THE BRUCE-PARTINGTON PLANS

Anti-German feelings were growing throughout the first decade of the Twentieth Century. In *The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans* set in 1895, but written in 1908, Conan Doyle focuses on the important role submarines might play in any forthcoming conflict. It was a far-seeing vision for the time; and Doyle went on to develop this theme in his short story *'Danger'* written in 1914 – on the eve of World War I. In that story he predicted that a foreign power's submarines would be capable of paralysing England's merchant ships supplying essential foods to the United Kingdom. The Admiralty considered the scenario to be ridiculous: 'I do not think that any civilised nation will torpedo unarmed and defenceless merchant ships,' said one Admiral. 'I do not think that territorial waters will be violated, or neutral vessels sunk…' said another. They had to eat their words when in 1915, the *Lusitania* was sunk by a German U-boat, only one of many less publicised victims of a fierce submarine warfare that developed rapidly once war was declared. There was a report that the German High Command had been inspired by Conan Doyle's story to attack merchant shipping, but this was more likely to be a clever piece of propaganda.

The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans, is popular amongst railway enthusiasts as a significant part of the investigation takes place among the subterranean tunnels of the London

Underground system. It is surprising to learn that the Underground system was in existence at such an early date – the first journey was made between Paddington and Farringdon in 1863. Baedeker's *Guide to London for 1883* eloquently states: 'An important artery of 'intramural' traffic is afforded by the *Metropolitan* and *Metropolitan and District Railways*. These lines which for the most part run under the houses and streets by means of tunnels, and partly also through cuttings between high walls, form an almost complete belt (the 'inner' circle) round the whole of the inner part of London, while various branch-lines diverge to the outlying suburbs…*The Metropolitan Railway Company* now conveys about 70 million passengers annually, or nearly one and a half million per week, at an average rate of about twopence per journey.' The Metropolitan line was the first to offer a regular service, and included Baker Street amongst its stations, opened in 1868. Though Holmes and Watson no doubt took advantage of its close proximity, the possibility of delays in a tunnel whilst pursuing a suspect made the swiftness of a hansom cab infinitely preferable. It makes one shudder also to remember that until the end of the nineteenth century underground trains were steam-driven. The smoke and airlessness must have been intolerable. The pollution was taken for granted, and only warrants a passing mention whilst Holmes and Watson are at 13 Caulfield Gardens: 'Holmes swept his light along the window sill. It was thickly coated with soot from the passing engines.'

In this story, once again we meet Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock's elder brother, for only the third time in the canon; previous encounters being in *The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter* and *The Adventure of the Final Problem.* In keeping with Conan Doyle's wish to raise the temperature of his stories, he allows Sherlock to reveal the true extent of Mycroft's involvement in the complicated foreign policy of the British government: 'He *is* the British government,' Holmes tells Watson, and with his knowledge too of every foreign agent living in London, it is not beyond the bounds of belief that Mycroft was responsible for setting up MI6!

The uncomfortable fact, that the spy Oberstein escapes the hangman, despite murdering in cold blood poor patriotic Cadogan West, and serves instead a 15 year sentence in a British prison smacks of a rotten deal being struck in the murky world of international espionage. Did Oberstein offer information on foreign plans and plots in exchange for his life? If so, it would not be a surprise if the deal had been brokered

by that arch-diplomat Mycroft Holmes!

Holmes states once again that as far as detective work goes he plays 'the game for the game's own sake,' but often, in lieu of a fee, he accepted a gift. In this case, 'a remarkably fine emerald tie-pin' from 'a certain gracious lady.' Sometimes Watson's discretion goes too far; it is obvious in lieu of the fact that Holmes has just done a great service to his country that the 'gracious lady' is Queen Victoria herself.

THE ADVENTURE OF THE DEVIL'S FOOT

This case dates from 1897, and it is shocking to find Holmes being told in no uncertain terms by a Harley Street specialist either to take a holiday or suffer the consequences! Holmes's collapse is caused by a combination of hard work and 'occasional indiscretions of his own', the faithful Watson informs us. Was it his repeated recourse to cocaine over the years that was now finally undermining his iron constitution? Watson had stated in *The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter* that 'the fiend was not dead but sleeping…and the waking near.' Twice in this collection of stories does Holmes refer to his mind as racing – 'tearing itself to pieces' *(The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge,* and *The Adventure of The Devil's Foot*) – could this be an indication of the effects of cocaine? By the period of this adventure, Holmes had been addicted to the drug for a number of years but it is also possible, in the light of events in this story, that the curious chemist in Holmes had led him to experiment with even more lethal substances, in the cause of scientific discovery. After Watson narrowly saves both their lives, during Holmes's experiment with the eponymous deadly drug, did he recall the words of his medical friend Stamford about Holmes's irrational behaviour, when he had introduced them to each other all those years ago? 'I could well imagine,' observed Stamford, 'his giving a friend a little pinch of the latest vegetable alkaloid, not out of malevolence, but simply out of a spirit of inquiry in order to have an accurate idea of the effects.' Little did Watson realise at that point the dangerous and exciting turn his life was to take.

Holmes is probably not yet fifty at the time of this collapse, but Conan Doyle is preparing the reader for the idea of Holmes's imminent retirement. Indeed, when published in book form in 1917, Watson included a preface in which he states that Holmes is enjoying a happy retirement on the Sussex Downs. No more dramatic disappearances over the edge of precipitous cliffs for his creation, instead Doyle allowed Holmes to slip quietly away to a well-earned rest.

In this story, Dr. Leon Sterndale, 'the

great lion hunter and explorer,' seems to be a blueprint for Conan Doyle's later more famous creation Professor Challenger, the irascible leader of the expedition to *The Lost World.* Sterndale has 'a huge body and deeply-seamed face. fierce eyes..hawk-like nose..grizzled hair and beard', and Challenger is similarly described. He made his first appearance in 1912, just two years after this story was first published. But eminent scientist and anthropologist though he is, why does Holmes allow him to walk away free after murdering a man with the most horrific tortures? Howsoever Sterndale's act may be justified as revenge, Holmes nevertheless flouts the law and decides to play judge and jury himself, as in *The Adventure of the Abbey Grange*. His nervous illness could be cited as affecting his judgement perhaps, but this is not an isolated incident in the canon, and what excuse is there for the other occasions?

The deadly poison Radix pedis diaboli obtained 'under very extraordinary circumstances in the Ubanghi country' by Dr. Sterndale still remains unknown to medical science – though research since 1897 has shown, with regard to its hallucinatory properties, that it has similarities with a more recent discovery, the drug LSD.

THE ADVENTURE OF THE RED CIRCLE

Despite being set in the heart of Bloomsbury, there is a distinctly American flavour to this story. The sinister shadow of the Italian Mafia looms over it, counteracted by a brief glimpse of the detective of the future, Mr.Leverton, of Pinkerton's American Agency. Here Conan Doyle is cleverly blending fact with fiction, Pinkerton's was just as real an institution as the Mafia. The Scottish-American Allan Pinkerton founded his National Detective Agency in Chicago in 1850. One of its earliest successes was the foiling of an assassination attempt on President Lincoln in 1861. The Agency's motto was 'we never sleep' and their logo was an open unblinking eye – hence the nickname for their agents, 'private eyes.' Pinkerton dreamed that one day his organisation would achieve world-wide control. Its efficiency inspired the founding of a similar body, the FBI, which eventually superseded it. Pinkerton invented the 'mug shot' and developed a file system on criminals that was the envy of the world's police forces. They were relentless in their pursuit of criminals, and Leverton in following Gorgiano across the Atlantic to London is typical. Pinkerton's Agency was eager to create links with European forces, such as Scotland Yard in this case, thus creating an international exchange of

information and assistance, anticipating Interpol. Holmes would have been very impressed with the efficiency of Pinkerton's as their methods so closely mirrored his own approach. He was always eager to keep ahead of developments in the science of detection, and it is impressive in this case that he shows he is familiar with the latest thinking with regard to fingerprints. It was Sir Francis Galton, in 1888, who whilst studying fingerprints as a key to race and heredity, noticed that prints remained constant throughout an individual's life and that no two prints were alike. His findings published in 1892 led to finger-printing being adopted by the CID, in 1901. This case takes place in 1902, which shows how up-to-date Holmes's information is, though as early as 1895, in *The Adventure of the Norwood Builder* he claimed to 'have heard something' about no two thumb-prints ever being alike.

In later life, Pinkerton took to writing detective stories – one wonders if he had heard of Sherlock Holmes and what he thought of him.

The history of 'The Red Circle' – a branch of the Mafia-is so graphically told by Signora Lucca that one is inevitably reminded of Mario Puzo's Mafia novel, and subsequent film, *The Godfather.*

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF LADY FRANCES CARFAX

In this story, Holmes gives Watson another chance, as he had done in *The Hound of the Baskervilles,* to polish his powers of detection and collect information about the case at first hand. As in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, it also gives Holmes the opportunity to criticise poor Watson's efforts and make a dramatic appearance, in disguise, to save Watson from getting a good hiding from his chief suspect. Holmes himself is not at his sparkling best in this story, a fact he admits himself when he tells Watson that should he chronicle these events, 'it can only be as an example of that temporary eclipse to which even the best-balanced mind may be exposed.' Perhaps it is his dislike of Lady Frances's type that hinders him: 'one of the most dangerous classes in the world is the drifting and friendless woman – an inciter of crime in others.' Holmes's renowned misogyny is certainly given full reign in this story.

Watson at least got a good holiday out of the case, Lausanne being a major centre for wealthy British tourists, with its own branch of Cook's travel office. Thomas Cook had developed his travel company, which had begun when he organised a humble train trip in Loughborough for a Temperance group in 1841, and grew to provide tickets

and hotels to virtually anywhere in the world for the Victorian traveller. The company exists to this day. On the subject of hotels, the Langham in Portland Place, London, which the Hon. Philip Green gives as his address, and was frequented by the Prince of Wales, is now fully restored to its Edwardian glory, and once more an hotel, after years of neglect while serving as offices for the BBC.

Lady Frances's ordeal calls to mind a story by Edgar Allan Poe, one of Conan Doyle's mentors, entitled *The Premature Burial* (1844).

Lady Frances seems to have been easy prey for the ruthless Dr. Shlessinger. For a woman who 'found her comfort and occupation in religion' she does not seem to be well-versed in the Bible, for Dr. Shlessinger claimed to be working on a map of the Holy Land, 'with special reference to the kingdom of the Midianites.' The Midianites were a nomadic tribe, with tribal chiefs, not kings, and no settled territory. Holmes and Watson too missed this vital piece of deception in the evidence or they too might have rumbled that the Doctor was a fraud more quickly. There is no evidence in the entire canon that Holmes and Watson were regular church-goers!

THE ADVENTURE OF THE DYING DETECTIVE

This is a surprisingly early case to be included in this collection, for Watson states categorically that it took place in the second year of his marriage, when he was no longer residing at Baker Street, which would make it 1888 or 1889. Judging by the appalling way Holmes treats his closest friend in this story, it is not perhaps surprising that Watson resisted writing the case up until 1913 – twenty five years later! It tells us a lot about the steadfastness of the Doctor's friendship for Holmes that it survived beyond this case, for Holmes appears to think so little of Watson's discretion that he feels he must deceive his old friend with a pretended illness. True, he pays the Doctor a handsome compliment to his medical expertise when the case is over: 'Could I fancy that your astute judgement would pass a dying man who, however weak, had no rise of pulse or temperature?' – but this is not an isolated example of his seeming lack of care for his friend's feelings. After Holmes's escape from the Reichenbach Falls, he made no attempt to get in touch with Watson who was left to mourn for 3 years convinced that his friend had perished. Holmes may have considered Watson incapable of dissimulation, as he explains in this case, and therefore wasn't prepared to

compromise his safety, but too often he plays fast and loose with his friend's feelings.

In *The Adventure of the Devil's Foot* he comes close to killing both himself and his friend (see notes above), and we are reminded once again how amazingly accurate Watson's friend Stamford is in assessing Holmes character: 'Holmes is a little too scientific for my tastes – it approaches to cold-bloodedness…'

If Watson is occasionally tetchy with Holmes, it is, in view of the cavalier treatment he has received, forgivable. Let us not forget too, the long-suffering Mrs.Hudson, who is also duped by Holmes in this story. Let's hope that the 'princely sum' paid by Holmes for the privilege of sharing her premises was subject to a substantial increase by way of compensation for housing the 'very worst tenant in London.'

In this story, Holmes indulges his histrionic skills and love of disguise. His realistic make-up as an invalid, and his flair for a melodramatic denouement to this and many another story, make one wonder if at any time he trod the boards professionally. It is no mean achievement to act convincingly off the stage, in real life.

Holmes blinds poor old Watson with his own science: the doctor is unlikely to have treated anyone in his Kensington practice for 'Tapanuli fever' or 'black Formosa corruption'. Although these diseases sound suspiciously fictitious, they are in fact a form of scrub typhus, found in tropical countries and caught from the bite of infected mites. The symptoms are very close to those assumed by Holmes: black encrusted lesions, fever, swollen glands, delirium etc. It would seem that Dr. Conan Doyle had been consulting his medical dictionary for inspiration.

After starving himself in a good cause, Holmes suggests that 'something nutritious at Simpson's would not be out of place.' This classic London restaurant is one of the few Sherlockian haunts that is happily still with us – now known as Simpson's–in-the-Strand, it is quite an exclusive establishment, but in Holmes's day was an economical choice. Dinner from the joint was 2s 6d (about 12p today), or a fishdinner 2s 9d (under 15p). Let us hope that Holmes footed the bill by way of compensation for his treatment of the faithful Doctor; and splashed out on a bottle of Liebfraumilch to celebrate the end of a successful case, which would have set him back a mere 12 shillings (approx. 60p.)

HIS LAST BOW

And so we come to the inevitable – the last case for Sherlock Holmes. It is set on August 2nd. 1914, the day World War I began. Conan Doyle's fear of foreign spies and

agents that is the constant theme of the stories published between 1908 and 1913 has proved to be real, and German spies are established on the South Coast of England. The story was written and published in *The Strand* in 1917, when England had been at war with Germany for 3 years, and the forces of both sides were locked in a seemingly endless stalemate. The German Secretary of War, in that same year, had paid an unwelcome tribute to Arthur Conan Doyle: 'The only prophet of the present economic war was the novelist Conan Doyle.'

Ever the optimist, Conan Doyle once again turned to his great creation, Sherlock Holmes as the only man who could inspire a dispirited nation. 'There's an east wind coming,' Holmes says to Watson at the end of this story, 'such a wind as never blew on England yet…a good many of us may wither before its blast. But it's God's own wind none the less, and a cleaner, better, stronger land will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared.' The rhetoric is positively Churchillian. We learn that since 1903, Holmes has been in retirement on the Sussex Downs, having exchanged the study of the criminal mind, for the study of bees. At the call however from his country's premier –Mr. Herbert Asquith, presumably – Holmes has responded, and for a period of two years has been building a credible identity for himself in the United States as a disenchanted Irish-American, willing to spy for the Kaiser.

Holmes's services are required not as a detective in this story, but as a spy. It would seem that since his retirement he has changed job description, which is no doubt due to the influence of his brother Mycroft who would surely have recruited Holmes into MI6 soon after its creation in 1909. This story is narrated in the third person, and some commentators believe it is the voice of Mycroft, whose intimate knowledge of the world of espionage would make him a suitable man to record these important world events. So, although Holmes may have officially retired (which may be just a blind for the curious), and this is his last *recorded* case, there would have been plenty of work for him in the secret service between the years 1914 to 1918, despite his advancing years.

This is the only story in the canon which mentions Holmes's age. Disguised as the Irish-American, he is described as 'a tall gaunt man of 60', whilst Watson is a 'heavily built, elderly man with a grey moustache.' The world has moved on since their days of glory in the 1890s, and Conan Doyle does not wish his heroes to be preserved in aspic, forever young. As if to emphasise this point, this story records

Holmes's only ride in a car, that symbol of the 20th. century, and Watson is the driver. Taking up driving so late in life has probably led to Watson being less active and consequently 'heavily built.' However, age apart, the two, despite being in their seventh decade, are able to deal physically with Von Bork, and Watson, according to Holmes is even considering offering his services again to the war department – there seems to be no sign of *his* retiring – good old Watson!

But for all its attempts to lead the reader forward into a 'changing world' for Holmes and Watson, there is also an air of nostalgia, as old cases are recalled (*The Adventure of the Scandal in Bohemia*) and old opponents (Professor Moriarty) – and is it too much to think that Conan Doyle was beginning to identify more closely with Sherlock after all the years of antagonism towards him? Why else would he choose his father's middle name 'Altamont' as the pseudonym Holmes assumes when a spy? It's as if he's become one of the family.

Conan Doyle wrote another Holmes novel, *The Valley of Fear* in 1915, and far from closing the file on Holmes and Watson after their War Service, he went on to write another twelve short stories, published as *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes* in 1927.

Notes by David Timson

David Timson has made over 1,000 broadcasts for BBC Radio Drama. For Naxos AudioBooks he wrote *The History of the Theatre,* which won an award for most original production from the Spoken Word Publishers Association in 2001. He has also directed for Naxos AudioBooks four Shakespeare plays, including *King Richard III* (with Kenneth Branagh), which won Best Drama Award from the SWPA in 2001. In 2002 he won the Audio of the Year Award for his reading of *A Study in Scarlet.* He also reads *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes I, II, III, IV, V* and *VI* and *The Return of Sherlock Holmes I, II* and *III*.

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Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes (His Last Bow)

THE COMPLETE CLASSICS

UNABRIDGED

The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge • The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans The Adventure of the Devil's Foot • The Adventure of the Red Circle The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax • The Adventure of the Dying Detective His Last Bow - The War Years of Sherlock Holmes

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