

THE ADVENTURE OF THE NORWOOD BUILDER

EXCERPTS FROM THE MANUSCRIPT (1903)

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A. Conan Doyle[†]

introduction by Jon Lellenberg^{*}

Arthur Conan Doyle was not the same person in 1903, as he began writing the *Return of Sherlock Holmes* stories, that he had been in 1886 when he invented the character and wrote the first tale, *A Study in Scarlet*. Then he had been a struggling young doctor in a suburb of Portsmouth, writing stories to eke out his slender income from medicine. He was far from established as an author, despite an early success or two, and had to sell the entire copyright to *A Study in Scarlet*, for a mere £25, in order to see it published in a pulp magazine at the end of 1887, to little notice and applause. It was not until he started writing short stories about Sherlock Holmes in 1891 that they suddenly took off, and lit up the firmament, and made him a famous man who could quit medicine in order to be a full-time writer. So popular were the Sherlock Holmes stories, appearing in the then-new *Strand Magazine*, that after two series of them, he sent Holmes and his arch-enemy Professor Moriarty, the Napoleon of Crime, to their deaths, in mortal combat at Switzerland's Reichenbach Falls, so Conan Doyle could get breathing space to write other things he valued more highly.

[†] See page 116, note †. See page 197 for information about the image above.

^{*} Jon Lellenberg is "Rodger Prescott (of evil memory)" in the Baker Street Irregulars, and the BSI's historian. Conan Doyle quotations above are from his Edgar Award-winning 2007 book *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*, co-edited with Daniel Stashower and Charles Foley. He is married to a lawyer who frequently reminds him not to try to practice law. Copyright © 2015 Jon Lellenberg.

By 1903, Conan Doyle had been transformed. He was justly famous for other things besides Sherlock Holmes that he'd written, literary efforts far removed from detective stories. He had become a man of public affairs as well, and been knighted for his volunteer medical service in the Boer War in South Africa, his history of the conflict, and his defense of the British cause. He had pursued his love of sports, especially cricket, and now was well-known as a sportsman, too. He had traveled to North America and Egypt as well as to South Africa.

At the same time, Sherlock Holmes was not entirely behind him. He had collaborated on a play about the great detective with the American playwright-actor William Gillette. It had proven immensely popular on Broadway, and would come to London's West End before long. And he'd turned an idea for a supernatural tale that he'd been given, upon returning to England from South Africa, into a posthumous Sherlock Holmes tale, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which became a bestseller in both Britain and America — indeed, around the world, one of the most famous pieces of British fiction ever.

It's often said that Conan Doyle was badgered into bringing Sherlock Holmes back to life in the *Return* stories by the character's incessant burning fans. What actually did the trick was instead what's been described as the largest offer for short stories in the history of literature at the time, coming in March 1903 from Norman Hapgood, editor of *Collier's Weekly* in America, who'd met Conan Doyle ten years before as a reporter when the writer visited Chicago during his U.S. speaking tour. "I have done no short Sherlock Holmes stories for seven or eight years," Conan Doyle told his mother, "and I don't see why I should not have another go at them and earn three times as much money as I can by any other form of work." The *Collier's Weekly* offer was for \$25,000 for six stories, \$30,000 for eight, or \$45,000 for thirteen, irrespective of length — for the U.S. rights — and on top of that, the *Strand Magazine's* burning desire to publish them in Britain. "Very well. A.C.D." Conan Doyle replied in a postcard.

"Good old Sherlock," Conan Doyle's younger brother Innes told him: "I think he has had quite a long enough rest."

"I don't think you need have any fears about Sherlock," Conan Doyle reassured his doting but anxious mother: "I am not conscious of any failing powers, and my work is not less conscientious than of old." He set to work quickly, composing the story "The Empty House" to explain what

really had happened at the Reichenbach Falls in “The Final Problem” — where Holmes had been the three years that Dr. Watson and the world thought him dead — and why he was returning to London now. Conan Doyle also thoughtfully killed off Mrs. Watson (Mary Morstan from the second Holmes novel, *The Sign of the Four*, in 1890), making it possible for Watson to rejoin Holmes in their old rooms at 221B Baker Street.

“The Adventure of the Norwood Builder” was the next *Return of Sherlock Holmes* story, and while the editor of *Collier’s Weekly* in America had no known issues with it, Conan Doyle’s longtime *Strand Magazine* editor H. Greenhough Smith did. He apparently expressed disappointment that the story lacked crime, or at any rate an outright murder. (“We shall have you on a charge of conspiracy, if not for attempted murder,” an incensed Inspector Lestrade tells Jonas Oldacre, for trying to create the impression that he had been killed by Holmes’s client, “the unhappy John Hector McFarlane,” attorney at law.) Compounding the problem for Greenhough Smith was a similar absence of crime (or corpses, anyway) in the third *Return* story Conan Doyle had sent him, “The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist.”

Conan Doyle had misgivings himself about “Solitary Cyclist,” but stood his auctorial ground on “Norwood Builder,” writing to Greenhough Smith on May 14, 1903: “I think I take a fairly sane view of my own work. I can never remember an instance in which I have been very far wrong. . . . ‘The Norwood Builder’ I would put in the very first rank of the whole series for subtlety and depth. Any feeling of disappointment at the end is due to the fact that no crime has been done & so the reader feels bluffed, but it is well for other reasons to have some of the stories crimeless.”

“Take the series of points,” he continued: “Holmes’ deductions from the will written in the train, the point of the bloody thumb mark, Holmes’ device for frightening the man [Oldacre] out of his hiding place &c. I know no Holmes story which has such a succession of bright points.”

Conan Doyle did not convince Greenhough Smith, and in a subsequent letter had to tell him: “I must say that I cannot agree with your estimate of the ‘Norwood Builder.’ I read it to a roomful of people and I was never more conscious of holding an audience absolutely spellbound.”

Posterity has not agreed with Conan Doyle that much. While other *Return* stories like “Charles Augustus Milverton,” “The Six Napoleons,”

and “The Second Stain” became Sherlock Holmes classics, “The Adventure of the Norwood Builder” has been consigned by its readers to a lower rank. But it was interesting in a legal as well as forensic sense, for making a fingerprint part of the plot. Fingerprints in forensic science were not unprecedented at the time; that went back to the 1860s, with classification becoming systematized in the 1890s, and fingerprint evidence was first accepted as evidence in a criminal trial in 1892 (though in Argentina, not Britain, thanks to its Croatian-born criminologist Juan Vucetich). Scotland Yard (*pace* Inspector Lestrade in “Norwood Builder,” written in 1903 but set in 1894) did not open its Fingerprint Branch until 1901, however, the year following the first use of fingerprints in British detective fiction: “The Clue of the Fingerprint” in Herbert Cadett’s *The Adventures of a Journalist*.¹

But as Ronald R. Thomas notes in *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (1999, p. 240), Conan Doyle’s “A Study in Scarlet [1887] and *The Sign of the Four* [1890] anticipated the principles underlying fingerprint technology and appropriated in advance its metaphors for treating the body as a text to be read.” Conan Doyle not only saw, but observed — having been trained to do so by his medical school mentor Dr. Joseph Bell, who alongside his colleague Dr. Patrick Heron Watson (no less) served as an expert witness in criminal trials in Edinburgh, as well as suggesting the Sherlock Holmes Method to young A. Conan Doyle.

So there we have it: Sherlock Holmes is back in town, the game is afoot, and this time he has a lawyer for a client, and he solves the mystery and unmasks the villain by use of forensic evidence only then becoming established in the British criminology and law of the day. Not bad for an M.D.; but Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was no ordinary one. He was a master storyteller and a keen observer of scientific developments. The curious should investigate also the ongoing Sherlock Holmes forensic sciences exhibition that opens at the Perot Museum of Nature and Science in Dallas, Texas, on February 12th, at the Discovery Science Center in Santa Ana, California on June 11th, and at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science in Denver, Colorado on October 15th. The game is very much afoot in this exhibition as well.

¹ Christopher Pittard, *Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction*, 2011, p. 130.