

THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES

Arthur Conan Doyle

PREFACE

There are mysteries that ask merely to be solved, and there are others whose power survives their solution. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* belongs unmistakably to the latter kind. More than a century after its first appearance, the image remains vivid: a lonely house standing upon the edge of the moor; an ancient family burdened by an ancestral curse; a fugitive somewhere among the rocks; footsteps heard where no traveller ought to be; and, above all, the terrible suggestion of a gigantic hound moving through the darkness.

Into this landscape of fear Arthur Conan Doyle sends the most rational of men. That opposition lies at the heart of the novel.

Sherlock Holmes inhabits a universe in which effects must have causes, footprints can be interpreted, lies betray themselves through inconsistencies, and apparently inexplicable events become intelligible when subjected to sufficiently disciplined observation. The Baskerville legend belongs to another universe entirely: one of inherited guilt, supernatural vengeance, ancestral memory and primitive terror. When these two worlds meet upon Dartmoor, Conan Doyle creates something considerably richer than a conventional detective story.

He creates a struggle between reason and fear.

The Hound of the Baskervilles first appeared in *The Strand Magazine* between 1901 and 1902, before being published in book form in 1902. Its appearance possessed particular significance for contemporary readers. Sherlock Holmes had apparently died at the Reichenbach Falls in "The Final Problem," published in 1893. The new novel was therefore presented as an adventure belonging to an earlier period in Holmes's career. His eventual return to contemporary chronology would come later. The circumstances of publication matter because they remind us of something easily forgotten today: Holmes was already more than a fictional detective. He had become a cultural phenomenon. Readers had mourned him. They had protested his disappearance. His return to the pages of *The Strand*, even in an adventure situated before his supposed death, was therefore an event.

Yet Conan Doyle did not bring him back with an ordinary case.

He gave him a legend.

The story begins with a death. Sir Charles Baskerville has been found dead near his ancestral home in Devonshire. No obvious violence has been done to him,

and a medical explanation appears possible. But beside the body lies a detail sufficiently disturbing to destabilise every rational interpretation of the event.

There are footprints.

Not the footprints of a man.

The footprints, apparently, of an enormous hound.

Behind them stands an older story: the legend of Hugo Baskerville and the monstrous beast said to have pursued the family through generations. What might otherwise be an isolated death is therefore immediately absorbed into a narrative that existed long before the victim himself. Sir Charles has not simply died. According to the logic of the legend, the Baskerville curse has returned.

This is one of Conan Doyle's most effective devices. Fear rarely begins with the thing itself. It begins with the story we have been told about the thing.

Before the reader sees the moor, it has already acquired menace. Before the hound appears, its existence has already been imagined. Before Sir Henry Baskerville can confront any actual enemy, he inherits the fears of generations.

The legend precedes the evidence.

Holmes, naturally, distrusts legends.

His genius rests upon a refusal to grant mystery the privilege of remaining mysterious. Where others see supernatural intervention, he asks questions. Where others surrender to atmosphere, he examines details. The world may appear chaotic, but Holmes proceeds from the conviction that somewhere beneath the chaos lies a structure capable of being understood.

That conviction is not merely a method of detection. It is almost a philosophy.

And yet *The Hound of the Baskervilles* would be a far less memorable novel if Conan Doyle simply allowed Holmes to dismiss the supernatural from the beginning.

Instead, he gives fear its full dignity. The moor is not treated as an empty stage upon which a detective puzzle happens to unfold. It becomes one of the central presences of the book. Vast, ancient and difficult to read, it resists the ordered world represented by Baker Street. Paths disappear. Mist alters distances. Strange sounds travel through darkness. Prehistoric remains remind the characters that human civilisation occupies only a thin layer of time.

The landscape itself seems older than explanation.

Baskerville Hall participates in the same atmosphere. The house represents inheritance in its most oppressive form: family history transformed into

architecture. Its corridors, portraits and traditions surround Sir Henry with the accumulated weight of those who came before him.

The central question therefore becomes larger than the identity of a criminal.

Can the present escape the stories inherited from the past?

This question gives the novel much of its Gothic character. Conan Doyle draws upon traditions considerably older than detective fiction: the ancestral curse, the isolated mansion, the threatening landscape, the endangered heir, the unexplained cry in the night, the suggestion that ancient crimes may still demand payment from the living.

But he places within this Gothic machinery a detective trained to distrust precisely such explanations.

The result is a remarkable hybrid.

The reader is invited simultaneously to believe and disbelieve.

We know Sherlock Holmes. We know what his presence ordinarily promises: explanation. Yet Conan Doyle continually arranges the evidence so that rational confidence becomes uncomfortable. Each new incident seems capable of supporting the supernatural interpretation. The imagination begins to perform precisely the work against which Holmes warns.

This tension reveals an important truth about detective fiction. The solution to a mystery may be rational, but the experience of reading one need not be.

Conan Doyle understood this perfectly.

He does not merely conceal information. He creates atmosphere around its absence.

A footprint is frightening because we do not know what made it. A sound across the moor is frightening because we cannot see its source. A distant figure becomes threatening because distance prevents identification. The unknown is repeatedly given a shape just definite enough to stimulate the imagination and just indefinite enough to escape certainty.

The reader becomes, in effect, another inhabitant of the moor.

And here the role of Dr John Watson becomes indispensable.

Although Sherlock Holmes dominates the mythology surrounding these stories, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is in substantial measure Watson's novel.

It is Watson who travels to Baskerville Hall with Sir Henry. Watson who explores the moor. Watson who observes the inhabitants of the district, gathers

testimony, follows suspicions and attempts to construct a coherent explanation from fragmentary evidence.

This apparent displacement of Holmes is one of the novel's greatest structural strengths.

By removing the detective from the centre of the action for a considerable portion of the narrative, Conan Doyle deprives both Watson and the reader of intellectual security. Holmes normally functions as a guarantee that apparently chaotic details are already being organised by a superior mind. Without his constant presence, uncertainty expands.

Watson is intelligent, courageous and observant. He is not, as caricature sometimes suggests, a fool. But his intelligence is recognisably human. He sees much and understands less than Holmes. His conclusions can be plausible without being correct.

That makes him the ideal companion for the reader.

We investigate beside him.

We make mistakes beside him.

And when Holmes finally reveals the architecture hidden beneath apparently unrelated events, we experience not merely the discovery of a culprit but the restoration of order.

This relationship between Holmes and Watson is fundamental to Conan Doyle's achievement.

Holmes alone might be too remote. His mind moves with such speed and confidence that he risks becoming less a man than an instrument of deduction. Watson gives that brilliance scale. Through his incomprehension, we measure Holmes's intelligence; through his loyalty, we perceive Holmes's humanity; through his narration, the cold mechanics of detection become adventure.

Yet the novel also reminds us that Holmes's rationality has limits of another kind.

He can explain evidence, but explanation does not abolish terror.

A hound may possess a natural origin and remain terrifying. A murderer may employ rational methods and remain monstrous. A legend may be false as history and powerful as psychology.

This distinction is crucial.

The triumph of reason in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* does not mean that fear was foolish. On the contrary, fear is one of the instruments through which the crime

operates. The supernatural does not need to exist objectively in order to influence human behaviour. It needs only to be believed.

Here Conan Doyle approaches a surprisingly modern understanding of manipulation.

The most effective deception is not always the fabrication of an entirely new belief. Sometimes it is the exploitation of a belief already present.

The Baskerville legend supplies such a belief. It offers a ready-made explanation for otherwise inexplicable events. Once accepted, it changes the interpretation of every subsequent detail. The mind begins arranging evidence in accordance with the story it expects to be true.

Holmes's task is therefore not simply to identify a criminal.

He must liberate facts from the narrative imposed upon them.

In this respect, the novel becomes almost a study of the conflict between evidence and interpretation. The same footprint can be proof of a supernatural beast or evidence of human design. The same sound can belong to legend or to physical reality. The facts themselves do not necessarily change. What changes is the intellectual framework through which they are understood. This is why Holmes's famous method remains so compelling. He does not possess magical knowledge. He attempts to see without allowing expectation to dictate what must be seen.

His enemy is not mystery.

His enemy is premature certainty.

There is, however, another reason for the extraordinary durability of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Of all the Sherlock Holmes narratives, it is perhaps the one that most completely escapes the confines of the consulting room.

London and Baker Street represent civilisation organised into streets, timetables, newspapers, telegrams and identifiable social roles. Dartmoor offers the opposite. Space becomes uncertain. Isolation becomes possible. Ancient stone structures coexist with modern inhabitants. The landscape appears indifferent to the categories through which Victorian society understands itself.

Holmes carries the logic of Baker Street into a territory that seems determined to resist it. The encounter gives the novel its distinctive visual power.

One remembers not merely deductions but images: the hall in darkness, the mire, the lonely huts, the silhouettes upon the moor, the fog, the distant cries, the sense that something may at any moment emerge from a landscape whose boundaries cannot quite be seen.

Few detective novels have understood so well that setting can itself become evidence.

The moor conceals, isolates and deceives. It determines who can see whom, who can travel safely, who can disappear and who can observe without being observed. Geography becomes part of the mechanism of mystery.

For this reason, the novel's Gothic atmosphere is not ornamental.

It is structural.

Conan Doyle's great accomplishment is to make atmosphere and deduction cooperate rather than compete. The terror draws us into the mystery; reason eventually reorganises that terror into knowledge. Yet something of the darkness remains even after the explanation has been given.

That remainder matters.

If the final explanation destroyed the atmosphere completely, the novel would be ingenious but forgettable. Instead, the rational solution and the imaginative experience coexist. We may understand what happened and still remember the hound as though it had truly belonged to legend.

This is perhaps the deepest paradox of the book.

Sherlock Holmes defeats the supernatural explanation.

Arthur Conan Doyle preserves the supernatural sensation.

The detective tells us that the monster can be explained.

The novelist ensures that we shall continue to see it running through the fog.

And so *The Hound of the Baskervilles* endures not simply because it contains one of Sherlock Holmes's most celebrated investigations, but because it brings two ancient human impulses into confrontation: the desire to explain the darkness and the desire to fear what may be hiding within it.

Holmes belongs to the first.

The moor belongs to the second.

Between them stands the reader, holding a lamp whose circle of light is never quite wide enough.

That is where the novel begins.

And, more than a century later, it is where its hound still waits.

Georges Montiparti

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Chapter 1.

Mr. Sherlock Holmes

Mr. Sherlock Holmes, who was usually very late in the mornings, save upon those not infrequent occasions when he was up all night, was seated at the breakfast table. I stood upon the hearth-rug and picked up the stick which our visitor had left behind him the night before. It was a fine, thick piece of wood, bulbous-headed, of the sort which is known as a "Penang lawyer." Just under the head was a broad silver band nearly an inch across. "To James Mortimer, M.R.C.S., from his friends of the C.C.H.," was engraved upon it, with the date "1884." It was just such a stick as the old-fashioned family practitioner used to carry—dignified, solid, and reassuring.

"Well, Watson, what do you make of it?"

Holmes was sitting with his back to me, and I had given him no sign of my occupation.

"How did you know what I was doing? I believe you have eyes in the back of your head."

"I have, at least, a well-polished, silver-plated coffee-pot in front of me," said he. "But, tell me, Watson, what do you make of our visitor's stick? Since we have been so unfortunate as to miss him and have no notion of his errand, this accidental souvenir becomes of importance. Let me hear you reconstruct the man by an examination of it."

"I think," said I, following as far as I could the methods of my companion, "that Dr. Mortimer is a successful, elderly medical man, well-esteemed since those who know him give him this mark of their appreciation."

"Good!" said Holmes. "Excellent!"

"I think also that the probability is in favour of his being a country practitioner who does a great deal of his visiting on foot."

"Why so?"

"Because this stick, though originally a very handsome one has been so knocked about that I can hardly imagine a town practitioner carrying it. The thick-iron ferrule is worn down, so it is evident that he has done a great amount of walking with it."

"Perfectly sound!" said Holmes.

“And then again, there is the ‘friends of the C.C.H.’ I should guess that to be the Something Hunt, the local hunt to whose members he has possibly given some surgical assistance, and which has made him a small presentation in return.”

“Really, Watson, you excel yourself,” said Holmes, pushing back his chair and lighting a cigarette. “I am bound to say that in all the accounts which you have been so good as to give of my own small achievements you have habitually underrated your own abilities. It may be that you are not yourself luminous, but you are a conductor of light. Some people without possessing genius have a remarkable power of stimulating it. I confess, my dear fellow, that I am very much in your debt.”

He had never said as much before, and I must admit that his words gave me keen pleasure, for I had often been piqued by his indifference to my admiration and to the attempts which I had made to give publicity to his methods. I was proud, too, to think that I had so far mastered his system as to apply it in a way which earned his approval. He now took the stick from my hands and examined it for a few minutes with his naked eyes. Then with an expression of interest he laid down his cigarette, and carrying the cane to the window, he looked over it again with a convex lens.

“Interesting, though elementary,” said he as he returned to his favourite corner of the settee. “There are certainly one or two indications upon the stick. It gives us the basis for several deductions.”

“Has anything escaped me?” I asked with some self-importance. “I trust that there is nothing of consequence which I have overlooked?”

“I am afraid, my dear Watson, that most of your conclusions were erroneous. When I said that you stimulated me I meant, to be frank, that in noting your fallacies I was occasionally guided towards the truth. Not that you are entirely wrong in this instance. The man is certainly a country practitioner. And he walks a good deal.”

“Then I was right.”

“To that extent.”

“But that was all.”

“No, no, my dear Watson, not all—by no means all. I would suggest, for example, that a presentation to a doctor is more likely to come from a hospital than from a hunt, and that when the initials ‘C.C.’ are placed before that hospital the words ‘Charing Cross’ very naturally suggest themselves.”

“You may be right.”

“The probability lies in that direction. And if we take this as a working hypothesis we have a fresh basis from which to start our construction of this unknown visitor.”

“Well, then, supposing that ‘C.C.H.’ does stand for ‘Charing Cross Hospital,’ what further inferences may we draw?”

“Do none suggest themselves? You know my methods. Apply them!”

“I can only think of the obvious conclusion that the man has practised in town before going to the country.”

“I think that we might venture a little farther than this. Look at it in this light. On what occasion would it be most probable that such a presentation would be made? When would his friends unite to give him a pledge of their good will? Obviously at the moment when Dr. Mortimer withdrew from the service of the hospital in order to start a practice for himself. We know there has been a presentation. We believe there has been a change from a town hospital to a country practice. Is it, then, stretching our inference too far to say that the presentation was on the occasion of the change?”

“It certainly seems probable.”

“Now, you will observe that he could not have been on the *staff* of the hospital, since only a man well-established in a London practice could hold such a position, and such a one would not drift into the country. What was he, then? If he was in the hospital and yet not on the staff he could only have been a house-surgeon or a house-physician—little more than a senior student. And he left five years ago—the date is on the stick. So your grave, middle-aged family practitioner vanishes into thin air, my dear Watson, and there emerges a young fellow under thirty, amiable, unambitious, absent-minded, and the possessor of a favourite dog, which I should describe roughly as being larger than a terrier and smaller than a mastiff.” I laughed incredulously as Sherlock Holmes leaned back in his settee and blew little wavering rings of smoke up to the ceiling.

“As to the latter part, I have no means of checking you,” said I, “but at least it is not difficult to find out a few particulars about the man’s age and professional career.” From my small medical shelf I took down the Medical Directory and turned up the name. There were several Mortimers, but only one who could be our visitor. I read his record aloud.

“Mortimer, James, M.R.C.S., 1882, Grimpen, Dartmoor, Devon. House-surgeon, from 1882 to 1884, at Charing Cross Hospital. Winner of the Jackson prize for Comparative Pathology, with essay entitled ‘Is Disease a Reversion?’ Corresponding member of the Swedish Pathological Society. Author of ‘Some

Freaks of Atavism' (*Lancet* 1882). 'Do We Progress?' (*Journal of Psychology*, March, 1883). Medical Officer for the parishes of Grimpen, Thorsley, and High Barrow."

"No mention of that local hunt, Watson," said Holmes with a mischievous smile, "but a country doctor, as you very astutely observed. I think that I am fairly justified in my inferences. As to the adjectives, I said, if I remember right, amiable, unambitious, and absent-minded. It is my experience that it is only an amiable man in this world who receives testimonials, only an unambitious one who abandons a London career for the country, and only an absent-minded one who leaves his stick and not his visiting-card after waiting an hour in your room."

"And the dog?"

"Has been in the habit of carrying this stick behind his master. Being a heavy stick the dog has held it tightly by the middle, and the marks of his teeth are very plainly visible. The dog's jaw, as shown in the space between these marks, is too broad in my opinion for a terrier and not broad enough for a mastiff. It may have been—yes, by Jove, it *is* a curly-haired spaniel."

He had risen and paced the room as he spoke. Now he halted in the recess of the window. There was such a ring of conviction in his voice that I glanced up in surprise. "My dear fellow, how can you possibly be so sure of that?"

"For the very simple reason that I see the dog himself on our very door-step, and there is the ring of its owner. Don't move, I beg you, Watson. He is a professional brother of yours, and your presence may be of assistance to me. Now is the dramatic moment of fate, Watson, when you hear a step upon the stair which is walking into your life, and you know not whether for good or ill. What does Dr. James Mortimer, the man of science, ask of Sherlock Holmes, the specialist in crime? Come in!"

The appearance of our visitor was a surprise to me, since I had expected a typical country practitioner. He was a very tall, thin man, with a long nose like a beak, which jutted out between two keen, grey eyes, set closely together and sparkling brightly from behind a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. He was clad in a professional but rather slovenly fashion, for his frock-coat was dingy and his trousers frayed. Though young, his long back was already bowed, and he walked with a forward thrust of his head and a general air of peering benevolence. As he entered his eyes fell upon the stick in Holmes's hand, and he ran towards it with an exclamation of joy. "I am so very glad," said he. "I was not sure whether I had left it here or in the Shipping Office. I would not lose that stick for the world."

"A presentation, I see," said Holmes.

“Yes, sir.”

“From Charing Cross Hospital?”

“From one or two friends there on the occasion of my marriage.”

“Dear, dear, that’s bad!” said Holmes, shaking his head.

Dr. Mortimer blinked through his glasses in mild astonishment. “Why was it bad?”

“Only that you have disarranged our little deductions. Your marriage, you say?”

“Yes, sir. I married, and so left the hospital, and with it all hopes of a consulting practice. It was necessary to make a home of my own.”

“Come, come, we are not so far wrong, after all,” said Holmes. “And now, Dr. James Mortimer—”

“Mister, sir, Mister—a humble M.R.C.S.”

“And a man of precise mind, evidently.”

“A dabbler in science, Mr. Holmes, a picker up of shells on the shores of the great unknown ocean. I presume that it is Mr. Sherlock Holmes whom I am addressing and not—”

“No, this is my friend Dr. Watson.”

“Glad to meet you, sir. I have heard your name mentioned in connection with that of your friend. You interest me very much, Mr. Holmes. I had hardly expected so dolichocephalic a skull or such well-marked supra-orbital development. Would you have any objection to my running my finger along your parietal fissure? A cast of your skull, sir, until the original is available, would be an ornament to any anthropological museum. It is not my intention to be fulsome, but I confess that I covet your skull.”

Sherlock Holmes waved our strange visitor into a chair. “You are an enthusiast in your line of thought, I perceive, sir, as I am in mine,” said he. “I observe from your forefinger that you make your own cigarettes. Have no hesitation in lighting one.” The man drew out paper and tobacco and twirled the one up in the other with surprising dexterity. He had long, quivering fingers as agile and restless as the antennæ of an insect.

Holmes was silent, but his little darting glances showed me the interest which he took in our curious companion. “I presume, sir,” said he at last, “that it was not merely for the purpose of examining my skull that you have done me the honour to call here last night and again today?”

“No, sir, no; though I am happy to have had the opportunity of doing that as well. I came to you, Mr. Holmes, because I recognized that I am myself an unpractical man and because I am suddenly confronted with a most serious and extraordinary problem. Recognizing, as I do, that you are the second highest expert in Europe—”

“Indeed, sir! May I inquire who has the honour to be the first?” asked Holmes with some asperity.

“To the man of precisely scientific mind the work of Monsieur Bertillon must always appeal strongly.”

“Then had you not better consult him?”

“I said, sir, to the precisely scientific mind. But as a practical man of affairs it is acknowledged that you stand alone. I trust, sir, that I have not inadvertently—”

“Just a little,” said Holmes. “I think, Dr. Mortimer, you would do wisely if without more ado you would kindly tell me plainly what the exact nature of the problem is in which you demand my assistance.”