

# Arthur Conan Doyle.

A STUDY OF THE MAN AND HIS BOOKS.

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I.



IF Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had been more of a conventional man of letters—if he had been just “a book in breeches,” as Sydney Smith said Macaulay was—it would not be so difficult to know where to make a beginning when one sits down to write of him. But no author could be farther from being “all author” than he is; he is much too keenly interested in life to do nothing but write about it, and would, I am convinced, more than half agree with Byron in his scorn of “the mighty stir made about scribbling and scribes,” and in his preference of doers to writers. He has read much, but he has lived more, as a novelist ought to, and has found the world a good and wholesome place because he has gone far enough out into it and has given so freely of his time and thought and sympathy to lives outside his own. Morbidity, cynicism, pessimism—these fretful little moods have no place in his books because they have none in his life; he is essentially a big man and writes always like himself, with a complete freedom from affectation, a naturalness, a vigour and breadth of outlook that cannot be developed within the four walls of any study.

“One of the singular characteristics of the present age,” he remarked to me recently, “is a wave of artistic and intellectual insanity breaking out in various forms in various places. If it stops where it is it will be merely a curious phenomenon. If it is a spreading movement it may be the beginning of vast human changes. It attracted Max Nordau’s attention twenty years ago, when he wrote ‘Degeneration.’ But look at the strides it has taken since then! It is the difference between queerness and madness, between Pre-Raphaelites and Post-Impressionists, between Wagner’s operas and Elektra, between the French Symbolists and the Italian Futurists. One should put one’s shoulder to the door to keep out insanity, for it threatens to submerge us. It is something akin to the

grotesque Byzantine art which pushed out the splendid Classical styles, but it is more insane than anything Byzantine. Perhaps in Art, as in History, a sort of French Revolution is due from time to time, odious in itself, and yet inaugurating a new and better era formed rather as a reaction against it than as a direct consequence of it. There is no need for this extravagance, for surely there is plenty of scope for originality without going over the borders of reason. That is why Tennyson seems to me so great. His head was among the stars, but his feet were always firm planted on the ground.”

This is the masculine, courageous, healthful spirit which breathes through all that Conan Doyle has written. He does not shrink from facing the darker facts of existence, but he has known them too nearly to take them at their surface value, and he has none of the fussy, self-important, warped views or little eccentricities and posturings of the little literary man who is merely literary. Very characteristic of him is this reflection in “The Tragedy of the Korosko”: “When you see the veil of cruelty which Nature wears, try and peer through it, and you will sometimes catch a glimpse of a very homely, kindly face behind.” And equally so are the words put into the mouth of Lord John Roxton, in “The Lost World”: “There are times, young fellah, when every one of us must make a stand for human right and justice, or you never feel clean again.”

Such a time came to himself, you may depend, when, convinced that George Edalji had been unjustly convicted, he published the results of his own inquiry into his case, and would not rest or be silenced until it was reopened and Mr. Edalji proved innocent and set at liberty; it came again when he threw everything else aside and went out to the Boer War as Honorary Senior Physician of the Langman Field Hospital, and wrote that striking pamphlet which was distributed in hundreds of thousands all over the world in defence of the British cause; it came again when his passionate hatred of tyranny and wrong moved him to champion the martyred

natives of the Congo ; and now again when he has taken up the case of Oscar Slater and is pleading for a re-trial of the man who is serving a life-sentence for a murder that Sir Arthur demonstrates by a masterly review of the evidence was never brought home to him.

There is no need to say more at this time

My view counts, of course, for nothing on such a subject, so I have gone to one who is better qualified to speak of it than almost anyone living, and Mr. E. D. Morel has been kind enough to send me this authoritative note,

"In the spring of 1909," says Mr. Morel, "the Congo reform movement found itself



SIR A. CONAN DOYLE.

A portrait specially taken in a corner of the billiard-room at Windlesham, Crowborough.

From a Photograph by E. O. Hoppé.

of his patriotic services in South Africa that were to some extent recognized by the accolade ; nor of his strenuous fights in the interests of justice at home. These things are within the knowledge of nearly all of us ; but I doubt if many of us realize yet what humanity owes him for the noble, disinterested work he has done in the Congo.

confronted with considerable difficulties. It had succeeded after eight years' efforts in wiping the 'Congo Free State' from the map of Africa, and in suppressing the more odious of the abuses inflicted for so long upon the unhappy Congolese. But the British Government, with all the trumps in its hand, had committed the grave mistake of permitting



AT THE AGE OF FOUR.

the Belgian annexation to go through on terms which ensured the perpetuation, under the Belgian flag, of the same evil system of administration which had flourished under King Leopold's personal rule. The policy which laid an embargo upon the soil's products and compelled the natives to pass their lives in collecting those products—chiefly rubber—for the benefit of the Administration, or of financial groups allied with it, remained. Moreover, the British Government, which, three months after annexation took place, had seemed to recognize its error and had indited an admirable despatch to Belgium demanding 'immediate' changes, had suddenly and unaccountably weakened. Its demand had been treated with something like open derision by the Belgian Government, and this, far from having a stiffening effect, had apparently resulted in producing vacillation and timidity. For months appeals to the Foreign Office from all quarters had fallen on deaf ears, and when an irritated House of Commons had interpreted the views of an astonished and irritated public, the Foreign Secretary had delivered an alarmist speech plainly intended to damp down the movement. This the Congo Reform Association had not the least intention of permitting, if it could help it, and it set to work to remove the fears which Sir Edward Grey's speech had created. But some people had become frightened; others whose views were superficial were inclined to quiet themselves with the illusion that everything was bound to

come right now that the Belgian Parliament had replaced King Leopold as arbiter of the fate of the Congo peoples; while hostile elements were proportionately gratified. It was at this critical juncture that one day the post brought me a warm letter from Conan Doyle. We met for the first time shortly afterwards in the smoking-room of a London hotel. I talked. He listened—mostly. Before we parted he had offered to write a short popular booklet summarizing once more the most piteous tragedy of modern times, to hand any profits he might make out of its sale to the Association, and to respond to my call, when I made it, to address a number of large meetings we were organizing for the autumn. I came away deeply stirred by the magnetism of his personality; touched and grateful. Here was a friend, indeed! And right well did he prove it in the days that were to come. I pitched all my voluminous scribblings at his head, and he set himself to master every detail of a most complicated and protracted struggle. For a couple of weeks hardly a day passed without a letter from him. Then, when he had probed the whole thing to the bottom, he shut himself up in his study and worked like a demon, hardly giving himself time to shave, as he put it. He wrote the book right off in a week. 'I finished my book to-day—forty-five thousand words in eight days, one



AT THE AGE OF FOURTEEN.

of which I spent in London. I think it is about a record.' 'The Crime of the Congo' he called it. I shall always be proud to think he dedicated it to me. It was just what was wanted, had a tremendous sale, was widely reviewed, and was translated into German and French. The closing words of the Introduction breathed the spirit of the man: 'If all Europe frowned upon our enterprise, we should not be worthy to be the sons of our fathers if we did not go forward on the plain path of national duty.' The book came out in September. On the 7th November we faced together an audience of three thousand people in the Town Hall at Newcastle. On the 18th we spoke at Plymouth at the Guildhall, which was packed, hundreds being shut out. On the 19th we attended the wonderful demonstration at the Albert Hall, over which the Archbishop of Canterbury presided. On the 23rd we were speaking in the Artillery Hall at Hull, on the 24th at the Sun Hall in Liverpool, on the 25th in the



AT THE AGE OF SIX, WITH HIS FATHER, THE LATE CHARLES DOYLE.

Synod Hall at Edinburgh — where Doyle received an ovation — and on the 26th in the Town Hall at Manchester. A week crowded with glorious life. I can feel the thrill of it now. In every case the audience was very large, going up to five thousand in Liverpool. Doyle's intervention at that time exercised a decisive

influence on the course of events. It provided the best antidote possible to the reactionary influences at work against us. It effectually prevented that most fatal of all diseases to a movement of this sort, public lassitude. Yet it was not his book—excellent as it was—nor his manly eloquence on the platform, nor the influence he wielded in rallying influential men to our cause, which helped us most. It was just the fact that he was—Doyle; and

that he was with us. I do not think any other man but Doyle could have done for the cause just what Doyle did at that time. His whole personality appeals to some of the finest and most robust qualities in the race. And the mere fact that he had flung himself so whole-heartedly into this great human cause was in itself a tremendous uplift for that cause, an immeasurable asset. From that day to this his interest has never flagged. Whenever he has felt that he could put in a useful word he has done so effectively, going to the root of the particular situa-

tion which required elucidating with his simple, straightforward diction. Now that we are nearing the end of a long fight, he shares in our satisfaction and makes light of his own efforts in those critical years, 1909-10. Of his generous friendship to myself I can only say that the memory of it will never fade."

These and other such activities may seem

outside a consideration of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's work in literature, but they are not, any more than his enthusiastic love of sport is, for you find their bracing influence everywhere in his books—in the details of some of his stories, the vigour and directness of his style, his healthful, broad outlook, and his genial, charitable, sane philosophy of life. He is a man of action, a lover of the open air, and the qualities that keep a writer's blood sound prevent his ink from getting muddy and slow. Sir Arthur plays as strenuously as he works: he has tasted the delights of battle with his peers at football, cricket, golf; he has made a balloon journey and an aeroplane ascent, introduced ski-ing into the Grisons division of Switzerland, did excellent work in the opening up of miniature rifle-ranges when that idea was still young in this country; he can hold his own with the foils, and is a formidable boxer; he is a fisherman in the largest sense, for he has been

whaling in the Arctic Seas; he used not long ago to ride to hounds, and is a good shot. But he denies that horse-racing is sport, and says in "Some Recollections of Sport," that he contributed to this magazine, "I cannot persuade myself that we are justified in taking life as a pleasure. To shoot for the pot must be right, since man must feed, and to kill creatures which live upon others (the hunting of foxes, for example) must be right, since to slay one is to save many; but the rearing of birds in order to

kill them, and the shooting for amusement of such sensitive and inoffensive animals as hares and deer cannot, I think, be justified." Boxing he ranks as the finest single-man sport, and Rugby football as the best collective one. He regards the old prize-ring as "an excellent thing from a national point of view, exactly as glove-fighting is now. Better that our sports should be a little too rough than that we should run a risk of effeminacy."

And it is certainly to his personal experience of boxing and his large acquaintance with the history of the prize-ring that we owe his novel of "Rodney Stone" and his play of "The House of Temperley."

Just as you find Sir Arthur's everyday doings reflected in his books, so you find them reflected in and about his pleasant house at Crowborough, in Sussex. In the hall hangs the mud-encrusted cricket-bat, with which he made a century, on a wet wicket, in the very first match he played at Lord's; in one room is a beautiful

silver statuette of Lord Roberts, presented to him by the members of the Langman Hospital staff in recognition of the work he did during the Boer War; and in another, again in spontaneous recognition of his national services in South Africa, is the silver bowl subscribed for by Sir Arthur's neighbours (and the grooms and gardeners of his neighbours), when he was living at Hindhead. Here hangs a blood-smearred bandolier taken from a soldier who was killed in battle on the veldt; there a haversack containing a set of



SIR A. CONAN DOYLE AND HIS YOUNGEST SON.

*From a Photograph taken at Bournemouth.*

cheap chess-men. This, too, is a relic of the Boer War. As Sir Arthur was riding with a small party across country they were stopped by a native, who told them a dead or dying Englishman lay some little distance aside, and they found a soldier, dead of his wounds, with one of the pawns out of this haversack of his clasped between a finger and thumb. Trophies of sport are on many of the walls, and pictures of famous prize-fighters and prize-fighting; in one of the windows is a large bust of Sherlock Holmes, modelled in clay and sent to the author by an unknown admirer from Manchester; on the floor of the billiard-room stand two huge fossil-feet of the prehistoric iguanodon, and on the table above them is the flint head of an arrow that has survived from the Stone Age. It was the discovery of these relics on the downs that stretch for miles before his own door that set Sir Arthur's imagination at work on the period to which they belong, and resulted in the creation of the astonishing Professor Challenger, the sending of him and his search-party to that almost inaccessible plateau in the wilds of South America which they find still inhabited by men and animals of the prehistoric type, and, in a word, in the writing of "The Lost World," which is at once one of the most realistic and one of the most romantic of his books—its wildest imaginings wearing an air of sheer reality from the Defoe-like, matter-of-fact manner of their narration.

The character of Professor Challenger has greatly tickled Sir Arthur's own fancy, and he has been tempted to trace some further adventures which befell that formidable scientist and his companions after their return from "The Lost World." Readers of his exciting new story, which commences in this number of *THE STRAND*, will find that Professor Challenger and his friends, during their experience of "The Poison Belt," encountered far greater dangers, and of a more unprecedented kind, than any which they experienced in South America.

## II.

BORN at Edinburgh, in 1859, Conan Doyle had commenced writing stories of adventure by the time he was six, and it was natural that he should illustrate these productions with pen-and-ink drawings of his own, for he was born into a very atmosphere and world of art. His grandfather, John Doyle, was the well-known political caricaturist who for over thirty years concealed his identity from the public under the initials "H.B." His father, Charles Doyle, and three of his uncles were artists, one of them being that Richard Doyle whose name is inseparably

associated with the early years of *Punch*. But anyone who has seen the remarkable water-colour paintings of Charles Doyle will wonder that he should have remained so little known to the world at large. They have a fantasy and grace that at times remind one of the work of Richard Doyle, but they have at times, too, an imaginative grimness, a sense of the eerie and the terrible that lift them beyond anything Richard Doyle ever attempted; and you find this same imaginative force, this same bizarre sense of the weird and terrible in certain of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories—in "The Hound of the



*Licensed to kill*

A ROUGH SKETCH OF HIMSELF MADE BY SIR A. CONAN DOYLE IN 1881 ON LEARNING THAT HE HAD OBTAINED HIS DIPLOMA AS A BACHELOR OF MEDICINE.

Baskervilles," in some of the shorter Sherlock Holmes tales, in many of the "Round the Fire Stories," and some of those in "Round the Red Lamp."

In 1881, after five years of medical student-ship at Edinburgh University, Conan Doyle secured his diploma, and a year later, after a voyage to West Africa, he started as a medical practitioner at Southsea. But all through his student days he was giving his leisure to literary work, and in one of the professors at Edinburgh, Dr. Joseph Bell, a man of astonishing analytical and deductive powers, he found the original from whom, in due course, Sherlock Holmes was to be largely drawn. His first published story, a romance based on an old Kaffir superstition, appeared in *Chambers's Journal* in 1878 and brought him three guineas; but it was not

until nine years later, when "A Study in Scarlet" came out in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* for 1887, that Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson made their first appearance in print. During ten years of hard work as medical student and practitioner Conan Doyle had been going through the usual experience of the beginner in literature; he had suffered innumerable rejections, had contributed short stories to the *Cornhill*, *Temple Bar*, *Belgravia*, and other of the magazines, and never in any year had his literary earnings exceeded fifty pounds. His first long novel, that great romance of the Mon-

mouth rebellion, "Micah Clarke," after being rejected on all hands, was sent to Messrs. Longmans and accepted for them by Andrew Lang, whom Sir Arthur looks upon as one of his literary godfathers, James Payn being the other. "I used to send all my short stories to Payn," he says, "but not more than one in six found favour. As his writing was absolutely illegible, each answer of his gave rise to a long period of horrible anxiety, trying to discover if it was acceptance or rejection. In one letter I could only make out three words, which were 'infringement of copyright,' and to this day I do not know what that particular letter was about."

"Micah Clarke" appeared in 1889, and was followed in the same year by another Sherlock Holmes story, "The Sign of Four." In 1890 Messrs. Chatto and Windus published "The Firm of Girdlestone," and "The White Company" began its serial appearance in the *Cornhill*. Shortly afterwards, taking his courage in both hands, Sir Arthur resigned his practice at Southsea and came to London. Presently, after practising for a while as an eye specialist, the success, in their widely

differing kinds, of "The White Company" and "Sherlock Holmes" decided him to abandon medicine and devote himself wholly to literature. He had endured the usual

weariness and un-lucrative waiting of the youthful specialist, and often declared, in after days, that he had not deserted his profession until it had deserted him.

I am not attempting any detailed criticism here, but shall content myself with a summary of the work Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has accomplished in the twenty-five years since he wrote his first book and an indication of the wide scope and variety of that



LADY CONAN DOYLE.

From a Photograph by Lallie Charles.

work by ranging it in the separate series into which it naturally falls, as thus:—

*Police or sensational romances.*—"A Study in Scarlet," "The Sign of Four," "The Hound of the Baskervilles," "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes," "The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes," "The Return of Sherlock Holmes," "The Firm of Girdlestone."

*Historical novels.*—"Sir Nigel," and its sequel (though it was written first), "The White Company," these two covering the period between 1340 and 1360; "Micah Clarke" (1679), "The Refugees" (1670), "Rodney Stone" (1804). Then come four novels fashioned round the glamorous figure of Napoleon, "The Great Shadow," "Uncle Bernac," "The Adventures of Brigadier Gerard," "The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard," and a romance of modern Egypt, "The Tragedy of the Korosko."

Then there are short novels of modern life, and books of short stories, such as "The Doings of Raffles Haw" and "The Parasite"; "A Duet, and an Occasional Chorus," dealing with the domestic humours and emotions of average lives; "The Green Flag," "Round the Fire Stories," "The Lost Galley," the

collection of medical stories in "Round the Red Lamp," "The Stark Munro Letters," again reminiscent of their author's medical experiences, and vividly and realistically revealing the thoughts and opinions of a young man on life and the world in which he is living; one book of literary criticisms, "The Magic Door"; two of poetry, "Songs of Action" and "Songs of the Road"; and one notable volume of history, "The Great Boer War." Also, besides the books and pamphlets on "The Crime of the Congo," the Edalji and Slater cases, and the Boer War, there are the plays: "Halves," "A Story of Waterloo," in which Irving made one of his great successes as Corporal Brewster, "The Fires of Fate" (a dramatic version of "The Tragedy of the Korosko"), "The House of Temperley," "The Speckled Band" (a Sherlock Holmes adventure), and "Sherlock Holmes," which was dramatized by Mr. William Gillette, who himself played the title-rôle.

When Mr. Gillette was constructing his drama he had thoughts of introducing a love element into it, and cabled over to Sir Arthur, asking: "May I marry Sherlock Holmes?" And, though the notion must

have come as something of a shock to Holmes's creator, he promptly cabled back: "You may marry him, or murder him, or do what you like with him." So far from sharing Dickens's horror of seeing his stories on the stage, Sir Arthur confesses that when he saw Sherlock Holmes before the footlights he was interested and delighted with what Mr. Gillette made of him.

But then his Sherlock Holmes stories are not those that are nearest to their author's heart; his own preference is for "Sir Nigel" and "The White Company." These, in his regard, are "the least unsatisfactory" of his books; and many of us share his preference, and some of us do not hesitate to place these two beside the great English historical romances—not far, indeed, from "The Cloister and the Hearth," which Sir Arthur names as the greatest historical romance in the language. Howbeit, there is no getting away from Sherlock Holmes; he has won the suffrages of the million, and in point of popularity at least leads all the rest. He has had scores of imitators—but where are they now? Not since Pickwick was born has any character in fiction taken such a hold on the popular imagination and so impressed the world in



FRONT VIEW OF SIR A. CONAN DOYLE'S HOUSE—WINDLESHAM, CROWBOROUGH, SUSSEX—SIR ARTHUR  
*From a Photograph by* WILL BE SEEN STANDING IN THE PORCH, *(E. O. Hoppé)*



general with a sense of his reality. He is commonly spoken of as if he were a living person. There are tales of how actual detectives have made a study of his methods; and when, in 1904, it was announced that he was about to retire into private life and devote himself to bee-keeping, letters poured in, some addressed to "Sir Arthur Doyle," but most of them directed to "Sherlock Holmes, Esq.," care of the author, at Hindhead, expressing regret at this decision, and several applying for employment in his service. One of those to Sir Arthur ran:—

"Will Mr. Sherlock Holmes require a housekeeper for his country cottage at Xmas? I know some one who loves a quiet country life, and bees especially—an old-fashioned, quiet woman.—Yours faithfully, etc."

And here are two of those, evidently written in all seriousness, to "Sherlock Holmes, Esq.," himself:—

"DEAR SIR,—I trust I am not trespassing too much on your time and kindness by asking for the favour of your autograph to add to my collection. I have derived much pleasure from reading your Memoirs, and should very highly value your famous signature. Trusting you will see your way to thus honour me, and venturing to thank you very much in anticipation, I am, Sir, your obedient servant, etc.

"P.S.—Not being aware of your present address, I am taking the liberty of sending this letter to Sir A. Conan Doyle, asking him to be good enough to forward it to you."

The other is from a professional lecturer and apiarian specialist:—

"DEAR SIR,—I see by some of the morning papers that you are about to retire and take up bee-keeping. I know not if this be correct or otherwise, but if correct I shall be pleased to render you service by giving any advice you may require. I make this offer in return for the pleasure your writings gave me as a youngster; they enabled me to spend many and many a happy hour. Therefore I trust you will read this letter in the same spirit that it is written."

There is something curiously charming in that letter; its sincere, spontaneous gratitude is an infinitely better thing than the most laudatory criticisms written by those who sit in the judgment seats. I forgot to ask Sir Arthur whether, in replying to this and others, he made it clear that Sherlock Holmes could not oblige them, because, in the words of Mrs. Gamp, "there ain't no sich person"; but I hope he did not. The story is told of

a number of French schoolboys who were brought over to London upon a sight-seeing expedition. On being asked what they would like to see first—Westminster Abbey or the Tower—they unanimously declared that they would prefer to go to Baker Street and see the rooms of Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

### III.

"THROUGH THE MAGIC DOOR" gives you glimpses of the days when Conan Doyle was a struggling beginner in literature. Discussing the books on his library-shelves, he picks out certain of them, each one of which, bought in student days when he was not affluent, it had cost him a lunch to buy, and he selects Macaulay's "Essays" as the one that had given him "most pleasure and most profit." Next to this, among books that have influenced his life, he puts the work of Poe, "the world's supreme short-story writer"—"the inventor of the detective story." He was fascinated, too, by Marbot's "Memoirs," and later has found hints in him and them towards the character and dashing, dare-devil exploits of his own Brigadier Gerard. He has a fine enthusiasm for the "glorious brotherhood of Scott's novels," and delights alike in the "Border Ballads" and Macaulay's "Lays," because of their swing and dash, their strength and simplicity, their love of all that is manly and noble and martial. These and a good story are the qualities that appeal to him, especially in a work of fiction. He will never write a problem novel. If he is roused to denounce some injustice, to attempt the righting of some wrong, he takes the most direct and downright way of doing it, attacks it in the straightest possible fashion, and will not wait to build fictions about it and undermine it with a tale.

As a novelist, he is a novelist pure and simple, and no preacher or political or social reformer. "I have always envied the men who had definite views on art and messages for their age, and that sort of thing," he said the other day; "it must make for a tidy mind and a clean-cut life. I fear I never had any particular views or mission. I have had the one humble idea to have a story to tell, to tell it as clearly as I could, never to be redundant or to wander from the line, and to interest others by trying so far as possible to write about the things which interest myself. It is a simple rule of life, and I have had no other. I have been an omnivorous and rapid reader all my life, with a fairly retentive memory for general facts, though not a very good one for accurate detail.

This has given me a fair-sized quarry out of which to get my stones. Some authors have the enviable power of making the solid things in life the subjects of their novels without spoiling the novel. I have no such power. I only wish I had. It is true that in 'The Stark Munro Letters' I drew the solid side of a modern young man's mind. But that is an exception. I should only bore people if I wrote fiction about the things to which I have devoted most thought and work—the reform of the divorce laws, the Congo question, criminal reform, and the like. That was one of Charles Reade's great gifts—to make the actual interesting."

I recalled whilst he was speaking that preface to the collected edition of his works published a few years ago, in which Sir Arthur frankly sets forth his own conception of the art of fiction, and some extracts from it are a better commentary than any I could make on the whole of his work as a novelist, for he has all along carried his theory into practice. His conception of the art of fiction, then, is that "our treatment may be as wide as the heavens and as broad as the earth, if it does but attain the essential end of *interest*. All methods and schools, romance and realism, symbolism and naturalism, have the one object in view—to interest. They are all good so far as they attain that, and all useless when they cease to do so. . . . Within the bounds of morality all methods are legitimate. . . . You are right to make your book

adventurous, you are right to make it theological, you are right to make it informative or controversial or idyllic, or humorous or grave, or what you will, but you *must* make it interesting. That is essential—all the rest is detail. . . . But there comes the obvious retort, 'You say interesting—interesting to whom?' The difficulty is not a really great one. The higher and more permanent work has always been interesting to all. The work which is the cult of a clique, too precious for general use, must be wanting in some quality. . . . Take the most honoured names in our literature—Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, Reade, Poe, they do not interest one or other social stratum, but they appeal equally to all educated readers. If you were to make a list of the works of fiction which have proved their greatness by their permanence, and by the common consensus of mankind, you would find that no narrow formula would cover them. . . . the only point which they have in common is that each of them holds the attention of the reader. . . .

The life of a writer of fiction has its own troubles, the weary waiting for ideas, the blank reaction when they have been used, worst of all the despair when the thought which had seemed so bright and new goes dull and dark in the telling. But surely he has in return some claim to hope that if he can but interest his readers he fulfils the chief end of man in leaving others a little happier than he found them."



PROFESSOR CHALLENGER, THE CENTRAL FIGURE IN CONAN DOYLE'S NEW STORY, "THE POISON BELT."