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## Sherlock Holmes e il giallo inglese

*a cura di J.M. Ivo Klaver*

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Antonella Negri

#### Comitato scientifico

Lo staff della Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere  
dell'Università degli Studi di Urbino "Carlo Bo"

#### E-mail

[linguae@uniurb.it](mailto:linguae@uniurb.it)

Stephen Knight – *University of Cardiff*

## Watson's Wound and the Speckled Band: Imperial Threats and English Crimes in Conan Doyle

knights2@Cardiff.ac.uk

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### CRIME AND IMPERIALISM

The world of Sherlock Holmes is suffused with an awareness of Britain's sea-based international contacts. Sometimes the imperial connections seem casual or innocent, like the Chinese tattoo borne by Jabez Wilson in "The Red Headed League" or the lascar landlord who is wrongly suspected of murder in "The Man with the Twisted Lip". But it is much more usual for there to be something threatening in the influence of the world across the oceans – not only in the British political empire itself, but the wider capitalist empire, everywhere that British business has gone, notably including China and Central and South America. Sometimes the products of empire are just causes for crime, not motives, nor criminals. In "A Case of Identity" Mary Sutherland's money comes from an uncle who became rich on the New Zealand goldfields, and that is what her stepfather is primarily after when he humiliates – and also in a way violates – her, by pretending to be her fiancé. In the same mode, the much-desired "Blue Carbuncle" derives from the Amoy River in South China. A loss of international wealth can also trigger crime: the trouble for "The Stockbroker's Clerk" starts with the failure of a Venezuelan loan. That is in the second series, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894)<sup>1</sup>: all the other stories mentioned so far are in the first series, *The Adventures* (1892).

However, this kind of overseas material stimulus for London-based, London-derived crime is not itself very common. It is much more usual for the international impact to be itself humanly focussed, and negative, operating either upon a victim such as Watson and his wound, or through a villain, as in

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<sup>1</sup> Dates given are of publication in book format; the stories had appeared in *The Strand* up to two years before being anthologised.

a striking series of travellers who return to Britain and bring with them the *sturm und drang* of the imperial project. Through their impact London can be characterised in *The Sign of Four* (1890) as a kind of jungle, an “eerie city” “with monster tentacles” that can be home to a “wild, dark business” (Doyle 1929a:140,142,170) in which the ferocities of imperial behaviour are imported.

This alarming return of empire to terrorise its point of origin, this suggestion of the dark side of the imperial project, is a striking feature of Conan Doyle’s work. McLaughlin talks of London as “the most dynamic frontier of the empire” (McLaughlin 2000:51), but does not trace the idea before Doyle: this appears to be an area in which he is strikingly progressive, at least in the early work. But it is not a uniform or simple pattern in his fiction and deserves to be looked at both in terms of its own inherent complexity in the Sherlock Holmes stories, and also in the wider context of contemporary ideas of crime and internationalism.

Before Doyle, there had been some associations of empire and crime. The imperial returnee was either rich, foolish and vulgar like Jos Sedley in *Vanity Fair* (1848) or a threatening low-level returned convict like Magwitch in *Great Expectations* (1866). There are also some less complex imperial villains: a few returned-officer criminals lurk in the undergrowth of mid-century periodical crime fiction, and ticket-of-leave men were held to be the leaders in the garrotting panics of the 1850s<sup>2</sup>. There is also, as Brantlinger (1988) outlines, some imperial fiction which represents native people, especially Indians, as villains: an early version is P.M. Taylor’s *The Confessions of a Thug* (1839) but the sub-genre became prolific after the violence of 1857, seen either as a Mutiny or a War of Independence, depending on viewpoint. Among this range of imperial crime, two authors seem key in Doyle’s construction of imperial aggression. One is Wilkie Collins. In *The Moonstone* (1868) the initial crime is theft and murder by a greedy white officer, Herncastle; after the great yellow diamond is stolen, it is brought to England and again stolen, this time by a hypocritical *haut bourgeois* called Ablewhite – a deeply ironical surname. Neither the reticent heroine, nor the lower-class servant, nor, especially, the three Brahmins who follow the stone – to restore it to its rightful home – are guilty, even though they are all widely suspected. This complex and deeply interrogative novel finds greed and guilt at the heart of the English national enterprise, both international and domestic. Doyle will repeat many of these strands of scepticism.

Closer to Doyle in time and place, though they never met, was Robert

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<sup>2</sup> Villains whose service in the imperial military seems part of their threat are found in “Circumstantial Evidence” one of the “Experiences of a Barrister” stories in *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* 1850 and in “The Three Widows” in the second series of William Russell’s “Waters” police detective stories (1856), there appears Captain Burt, “a grim Indian sun-bronzed villain” (p.247). But these do seem rare instances among many stories.

Louis Stevenson. He offered much: the new idea of the degenerate beast at the heart of respectable urban man (*The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, 1886) and also the exotic all-knowing master of narrative ceremonies in modern London (Prince Florizel of the multi-novella series *New Arabian Nights* 1882). These provide both the villains and the hero for the Holmes saga. Stevenson also offered the core idea of Doyle's first two Holmes novellas: American animosities causing chaos in London in *The Dynamiter* (1885) led to *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and when Stevenson refocused the *Moonstone* concept as an Indian jewel-theft with its eventful aftermath in London in the *New Arabian Nights* story "The Rajah's Diamond", he provided the key to *The Sign of Four*.

The well-known nineteenth-century anxiety about degeneration lies behind Doyle's imperial monsters. While Utilitarians and Darwinists both imagined a steady improvement of species, human among them, other thinkers, especially in the context of urban crisis, speculated that humanity might go in the opposite direction – reverse evolution, or as Tennyson called it "Reels back into the beast" (*Idylls of the King*, "The Passing of Arthur", 1869). This is already a powerful motif in the series of *Mysteries* – of Paris, London, New York and Philadelphia – that thrived in the 1840s, and a criminal character who ignores the conventions or the need for morality and good works is a basis of the sensational novel (Sir Percival Glyde, Lady Audley, Felix Levinson and Geoffrey Ablewhite, for examples). The slide into the abyss of selfish crime is central to criminal motivation in mystery stories and novels as they develop. Many of Doyle's stories, especially the early ones, follow the same path, showing bourgeois morality to be feeble and self-interest easily enhanced into cunning aggression.

It could be argued that Doyle uses imperial monsters as a way of morally simplifying the challenge to English bourgeois morality, as a form of euphemising displacement, just as he begins to use Moriarty as an all-purpose villain by the end of his second series of Holmes stories. Yet even if the empire does to some degree act as a euphemising displacement of domestic villainy, the amount and variety of overseas trouble and imperial monstrosities is so substantial, at least in Doyle's earlier work, that a real cloud of doubt must be cast by them over the imperial adventure. The stories often reveal what Mukherjee calls "the murderous contradictions of imperial ideology" (Mukherjee 2003:190) as people trained to use violence for imperial control turn their dangerous skills against their own people – or, to put it from a different evaluative position, still with Mukherjee, the texts realise an "awareness of the 'manufactured' nature of civilized norms" (Mukherjee 2003:22).

## 1. IMPERIAL CRIME AND DOYLE

In the Sherlock Holmes saga, the first we hear of empire is negative. As *A Study in Scarlet* begins, Watson has been wounded, and has been ill. His imperial service has left him shattered, poor, with no discernible future: Holmes resolves his problem just like that of so many others. But Watson's past is the only precisely imperial connection of *A Study in Scarlet*: its international negative force is from America, which for Doyle, with some evaluative distinction between North and South, is a major part of the overseas world that enriches his fiction and can overshadow his London. Doyle was always fascinated by America: Mayne Reade and Bret Harte, yarn-spinners of masculine American adventure, were his early models, even bibles, and he always believed in the link between Britain and America, hopefully a political reunion. In 1891 he dedicated *The White Company* to "the Hope of the Future, the Reunion of the English Speaking Peoples"; he described the bond between America and England (in a proleptically fascist tone) as "that deep-lying race feeling in the development of both countries" (Higham 1976:79).

Like Stevenson's *The Dynamiter* – embarrassingly like it in fact – *A Study in Scarlet* explains contemporary disruption in London by a substantial digression into American history. In fact it is so much an American book that an early stage version in the US managed without Sherlock Holmes (McLaughlin 2000:39). We learn of the brutal violence which has made, here in London, a cunning vengeful murderer out of Jefferson Hope – such a positive-sounding American name. But this, like the later *The Valley of Fear* (1914), is not in fact a critique of America as such, just of a doubtful and damaging element in America – in *A Study in Scarlet* the Mormons, in *The Valley of Fear* workers' unions. The Mormons are represented as if they are themselves savages, in need of being imperially civilised, with their polygamy, their secrecy, their cruelty. The story basically absolves Jefferson Hope of crime, and he is permitted by the narrative to die in peace, having brought rough and ready justice to those who have destroyed his own happiness, traduced the name of America and so damaged the "deep-lying race feeling" for America that Doyle felt existed with Britain.

A British-focused version of the same pattern, inspired both by "The Rajah's Diamond" and *The Moonstone* was Doyle's response to the commission offered – by the American firm of Lippincott's – for what would be *The Sign of Four*. Here Doyle switches firmly to the context of imperial violence. As in *The Moonstone*, native riches are stolen, but the tone and ambience are less grand than in the source. Here it is treasure, not a stone of great religious meaning, and the white officers dishonestly, disgracefully, hijack the treasure from its original stealers, where Herncastle was, if a thief, at least a real fighting man.

And rather than noble Indians pursuing the treasure, Doyle has a disabled soldier, along with a savage pygmy, seek it in England. The imperial context, that is, is itself recurrently degraded, and that negativity is emphasised by the secretive, obsessive nature of Major Sholto, the thief who brought the treasure to England, and also by the feeble eccentricity of his son, who dies in the story. There is a challenging hybridity about this relocation: the Sholtos are heavily orientalised, and yet they and the treasure have come to rest in petit bourgeois suburban London. Their address, Pondicherry Lodge, Upper Norwood, bespeaks this strange world, ambivalent in both cultural and moral terms.

The action follows suite. Holmes's rational deduction is, as so often, a set of show pieces rather than a structural part of the narrative<sup>3</sup>. The real tracking is physical and quasi-imperial, as men with dogs hunt a savage through the streets. Then, even more imperial and military, comes a hectic armed river chase: through the centre of hyperurban London it is as if we are among wild nature, and the adventure ends with an exchange of fire, and death in the water. The images quoted above of the city's "tentacles", its "eerie" quality and this as a "wild, dark business" all suggest that a world of savage natural violence has come to London – and attracted there by the ferocious reflex of empire. Where Watson was just wounded and alienated by his imperial adventure, now it is suggested that the far-flung world of savage conflict can rebound back to the centre that stimulated it. The chase down the Thames is especially potent; Conrad in the opening of *Heart of Darkness* will deploy the same image of the river as the other heart, itself potentially dark, from which English maritime adventure began, but Conrad's image is more displaced and symbolic than Doyle's direct realisation of actual imperial violence up-river in darkest London.

Brantlinger calls this theme "Imperial Gothic" (Brantlinger 1988:230) and while he traces some historical intellectual connections – including J.S. Mill's scepticism about the imperial adventure – he sees this element of "cultural regression and social atavism" (37), usually called "going native" (230), as typified by the "white savages" of Conrad's Kurtz and Stevenson's late, post-Holmes stories *The Beach at Falesa* (1892) and *The Ebb-Tide* (1895). Doyle, it seems, has not been given adequate credit for innovative percipience. The theme of imperial regression, located across the world of imperial capitalism, is recurrent among the short stories of the first period – those reprinted in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, before in 1893 Doyle decided to free himself from his detective albatross and, in the last of the *Memoirs* stories, killed Holmes off in conflict with Professor Moriarty. There are other themes: moral degeneration among the English bourgeoisie is

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of this illusion, see Knight 1980:86-7.

recurrent and there are a few thrusts at the degenerate aristocracy, including in the first story, “A Scandal in Bohemia” where the Prince of Wales is plainly in the dock; there are also a few strands of the ‘Eurocriminal’ theme that will engage Holmes increasingly in the later stories. But the empire, international capital, and their impact at home is also a significant theme in the first twenty-four short stories.

## 2. DOYLE’S IMPERIAL CRITIQUE

A classic example is the fourth story in the first series, “The Boscombe Valley Mystery”. Imperial connections seem normal in the English countryside: the wealthy landowner John Turner “made his money in Australia” and his neighbour Charles McCarthy is also an “ex-Australian”; Turner’s son even wants to marry a barmaid who has a husband in the Bermuda dockyard. But this imperial domesticity can also bring poison into the locale: McCarthy’s body is found, and a verbal play links crime enigmatically to the colonies. As he dies, he says “a rat” and only Holmes locates this apparently ethical critique to imperial geography: McCarthy and Turner fell out over events on the Victorian goldfield at Ballarat. The distinctive bush cry of “Cooee” is also used. Doyle had not visited Australia at this time, though he had already written a crime adventure story set in the bush beyond Melbourne<sup>4</sup>. and this new story suggests that the kind of men who are tough enough for success in the empire may well have done things and have personalities that are disturbing too the domestic English peacefulness.

A different international threat is central to ‘The Five Orange Pips’, which is imbued with the British sense of a naval empire – Doyle had already made great voyages himself – and finds ferocity stemming from the American south – formerly of course a prosperous part of the empire, closely linked to England. The mild-mannered client has an uncle who was “a singular man, fierce and quick-tempered, very foul-mouthed when he was angry” (Doyle 1928:106). He became a fierce anti-negro and the story involves Ku Klux Klan activities around the world including, it seems in the continuing British empire – the Klan letter comes from Pondicherry in India. The melodramatic story opens with terrible London weather as if the storm that will swallow the *Lone Star* are, like the dark side of empire, coming home to roost. This story is a much more potent emotional experience than “The Boscombe Valley Mystery”, and this process of intensifying emotion and drama is continued in

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<sup>4</sup> “The Gully of Bluemansdyke”, reprinted in *Dead Witness*, ed. Stephen Knight, Melbourne, Penguin, 1999.



“The Speckled Band”, the most trenchant, though not the most subtle, of Doyle’s stories about the dark side of empire.

Dr Roylott has, like Watson, returned from India, but he bears no visible wound. As so often a pale pretty girl is the focus for threat. Her step-father suffers “violence of temper approaching to mania” and this has been “intensified by his long residence in the tropics”. This curious *non sequitur* – how could heat alone invoke mania? – and the Doctor’s interest in tropical animals suggest the form of degeneracy that he will reveal. The story toys with other possible threats – there are gypsies near the house, and more than a suggestion of the contemporary ghost story in the whistling at night. But as we discover in a well-managed piece of violent final action, Roylott represents the id rampant, forcing a snake through a hole in his step-daughter’s bedroom wall, and it is clear that he is a figure of taboo-ignoring desocialised male sexual violence – financial violence too, as he keeps the snake in a safe. There are resemblances to the plot of “A Case of Identity”, but this is much more extreme: empire has driven a fierce man totally wild.

These, as Holmes says, are “very deep waters” (Doyle 1928:182) and the story appears to suggest that the old noble house symbolises English antiquity, which is at risk from these new forces liberated by empire, in a world where “a clever and ruthless man had an Eastern training” (200). Unlike the murderous pygmy of *The Sign of Four* who represented Eastern danger, if in a loyal pro-Englishman way, Roylott with his massive strength and uncontrollability, is a monster of degeneracy, and finally the swamp adder that was his phallic agent is wrapped around his head in a sign of the self-destroying poison that Doyle seems to detect in the imperial experience. Where Watson’s wound was sudden and debilitating, a return for courage in a harsh context, Dr Roylott’s mania and wickedness are like a combination of the subhuman ferocity in “The Five Orange Pips” and the sense of inhuman behaviour of “The Boscombe Valley Mystery”.

Early stories like “J. Habbakuk Jephson’s Statement” (1883) and the novel *The Mystery of Cloomber* (1889) had already worked on the material of international racism, irrationalism and cruelty. The potential dangers of racial mixing and the ravages of empire are strong in these two stories “J. Habbakuk Jephson’s Statement” deals nervously with a violent pro-negro return to African movement as an explanation of the mystery of the Mary Celeste – here, as usual, misspelt as Marie Celeste.

The even less discussed *The Mystery of Cloomber* focuses on a British army officer returned from India with a criminal secret: the results of this combine mystery, Gothicism and sado-masochism, an early study, at some length, for

“The Speckled Band”<sup>5</sup>. In the Holmes stories Doyle brings the somewhat under-managed and alarming material of those two early narratives into the controlling ambience of Holmes’s rationality, though both cerebral order and his own powers are put under real pressure by these imperial challenges: he connives at an equitable injustice in “The Boscombe Valley Mystery”, he is actually defeated in “The Five Orange Pips” and has to resort to desperate and very dangerous violence in “The Speckled Band”.

This is not Doyle’s only area of alarm, nor is empire always hostile. It is notable that North Americans in particular are often admirable – as in “The Noble Bachelor” and “The Copper Beeches”, and to them will be added a noble black American, at least in the past, in “The Yellow Face” in the second series. Criminal degeneracy can derive literally at home (as in “The Beryl Coronet” or, in the second series, “Silver Blaze”). Though this domestic treason may lack the high melodrama of the imperial stories, it can increasingly have a European dimension – or displacement – as with the German scientist criminal Dr Stark in ‘The Engineer’s Thumb’ in the first series or, in the second series, “The Greek Interpreter”. Such foreign menace is however, not fully identified or deplored as such: European enemies are not yet as clear as they will be in the approach to the First World War. In the early “The Naval Treaty” the threat of grave espionage is strikingly dissolved into the familiar theme of domestic treachery for money. But the image of international danger is still present in the second series: “The Gloria Scott” is a curious melange of “The Boscombe Valley Mystery” and “The Five Orange Pips”, as the memory of a the wicked past of “rich colonials”, this time at sea, is visited on a now respectable landed gentleman .

If that story has an air of routine repetition about it, another has the highly-strung emotive grotesquerie of “The Speckled Band”. In “The Crooked Man” the dark aftermath of military empire appears, again in suggestively degenerate form: a crooked man with a monkey. But the real degeneracy is in fact moral, and resides in the honoured colonel who sent his rival in love on an impossible mission. Where Dr Roylott’s focal image was of a villain united with his degenerate selfishness, here the innocent is deeply marked by cruelty: “The man sat all twisted and huddled in his chair in a way which gave an indescribable impression of deformity, but the face which he turned towards us, though worn and swarthy, must at some time have been remarkable for its beauty”. (Doyle 1928:453) Here sits a victim of imperial rage, the male version of Miss Roylott’s dead sister.

Although the main thrust of Doyle’s concern in these first two series is how easily the respectable English bourgeoisie, both *grand* and *petit*, can turn

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<sup>5</sup> For a rare discussion of *The Mystery of Cloomber* see Barsham 2000:68-76.

to selfish crime, he reserves a substantial place for its imperial variant, and the exotic force of empire seems to combine with this anxiety of power to create some of Doyle's most remarkable and unforgettable effects, as respectable humans exhibit new forms of degeneracy. This awareness may be a result of Doyle's Scottishness, of his having that British semi-colonial marginality; or it may be a lesson learnt in his early sailing days as he saw the veterans of empire in raw close-up.

His vision of a dialectically negative impact of the skills and practices of imperial authority, when brought home, seems rather more searching than the common practice of Western writers describing the underclasses of their society in terms of imperial natives. That would merely be an imperialist or indeed orientalist rationalisation of disorder at home, an unsubtle and racist way of displacing degeneracy onto foreigners. Degeneration itself, well explored by Daniel Pick in *Faces of Degeneracy*, was itself a simplistic idea that seems to have arisen as a Manichean reflex of utilitarian reform. As liberal people by the mid nineteenth century saw that not all their reforming plans and ideas were working very well, some blamed it not on their own plans and ideas but the recipients, suggesting that some people did not deserve reform and were stubbornly degenerate.

Doyle's view of structurally imperial violence and malice is more subtle and searching. His criminals are officers retaining their rank, not outcasts, and their rank and their legitimised authoritarian practices are part of the problem. The Colonel in "The Crooked Man" had the military power to murder his rival in love and used it as he would on a legitimate enemy. Dr Roylott mobilised his sexual obsessions with scientific precision. After Doyle, others will envisage the same figures, up to Conrad's partly benign Lord Jim and his wholly malign Mr Kurtz. I do not see this reversed imperial figure being realised before Doyle to any degree: Collins's Herncastle is at most a partial exception.

### 3. DOYLE ACCEPTS EMPIRE

But Doyle did not keep up this critique. Towards the end of the second series these anxious self-representations of criminality domestic and imperial were displaced and euphemised by the simplicity of an external master criminal in Moriarty. After Holmes was killed off by the same anxiety-resolving force in 1893, Doyle himself turned to other empires, the medieval English, the Napoleonic, and that of emergent science fiction. When he returned to a contemporary imperial topic, it was in a fully approbatory tone. He defended English

practices in the Boer War, which had been much criticised, especially at home, where the criticism included charges of cruel degeneracy inculcated by the exigencies of imperial rule – just what Doyle had himself previously outlined. But he defended the empire against his own kind of charges in the very well-known book *The Great Boer War* (1900), and for this he received a knighthood.

Another major event was that in 1901 Doyle agreed, for the then massive sum of £100 a thousand words (perhaps today five hundred times as much), to write a new Holmes story. Protecting his position, he set it back before Holmes died, but *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) effectively initiated the second phase of Holmes stories. With a gothic set-up in the alleged ghostly hound roaming the darkly romantic wastes of south-western Dartmoor, the novella also exposed two quite differing views of criminality. Real London brutish crime was represented in the escaped convict, Selden, a savage murderer – a representative of simple British bestiality. Yet he is hardly demonised: hiding among the stone-age huts, seen only at night, sympathised with by his respectable sister, he seems a sadly lost part of the human family, and the plot make him in fact a victim of the real criminal, Mr Stapleton the former school-master with his distant but obsessive claim to the Baskerville estate.

This rogue bourgeois is familiar in Doyle's own stories from the past and is key to the clue-puzzle of the so-called "Golden Age". But Doyle still provides a striking set of overseas features. The Baskerville wealth is of recent South African origin (like Doyle's own new dignities); Sir Henry, who inherits it, has spent most of his life in America, mostly north. As a result of this bracing location, it seems, he is an "alert, dark-eyed man", "very sturdily built, with thick, black eyebrows and a strong, pugnacious face" and is morally strong as well with "a steady eye and the quiet assurance of his bearing which indicated the gentleman" (Doyle 1929a:267). Doyle has Sir Henry bring Yankee vigour to the English aristocracy: he belongs to it, strengthens it, is in no way foreign: that old race-feeling again.

But other characters are truly foreign, in origin and behaviour: Stapleton, it turns out, is an overlooked Baskerville cousin brought up in Costa Rica, part of non-English speaking and so threatening Central America, and he has married a Costa Rican, "darker than any brunette whom I have seen in England", as Watson notes, again with a racist undertone (307). Stapleton treats her badly, and he elaborates the whole fiendish plot with its Gothic overtones and degenerate brutalities. Symbolised elsewhere by Dr Roylott's swamp adder, here these are finally focused in the fearful marsh that both protects Stapleton's hound and finally swallows the aberrant regressive criminal in English chthonic vengeance.

This finely-paced novella, the height of Doyle's fictional craft, is also the

last complex hurrah of his anxiety about degeneracy, now carefully pushed outside the British empire. When he agreed to bring Holmes back to life in the third series of stories, *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1904), there are some flickers of the earlier “white savage” excitements but they tend to be contained or redirected. The first villain, assistant to the apparently dead Moriarty, is the brutal Colonel Moran, tiger hunter and human beast, who cheated at cards and “made India too hot to hold him” (Doyle 1928:581) but there is nothing more than his past to upbraid in imperial terms. It is true that he contributes to the “dark jungle of criminal London” (570), but his acts are London-located, not in any way imported from empire: he stalks Holmes with a western weapon, a high-powered airgun. The beasts, obsessions and degenerate narratives of the east are left behind: indeed the idea of using dum-dum bullets in an airgun has such a strained improbability that it seems imperial features are now used as inauthentic cranking-up of brief horror, not a structural source of degeneracy.

Similarly reduced and strained is the effect of the action and reference of “The Solitary Cyclist” in the third series. The usual pleasant maiden is harassed in the familiar false-lover way. The motive is, harking back to Boscombe Valley, colonial hostilities but in South Africa this time – after the Boer War this country becomes Doyle’s favoured and, if challenging, usually positive location. But here the crime is fully local in effect and impact. Woodley, the master-mind of the appropriation plot, may be like “a savage wild animal” (651) but nothing in the action has the melodrama or the excited perversity of the earlier imperial degeneracy stories. In a later story in this third series, “Black Peter”, the hero himself is an improbably extreme figure of violence: a South American whaler by experience, and while certainly savage he is doubly displaced – he has not practised his evil in England and in any case he is now dead, and Holmes solves and forgives his murder. This is far indeed from a deadly pygmy on the Thames or a maddened major assaulting young ladies with a deadly snake in the home counties.

Empire gains value in positive ways as well as by being displaced as the impetus of degeneracy. At the end of “The Adventure of the Three Students” the athletic young hero goes off to join the Rhodesian police, while in “The Abbey Grange” the South Australian beauty is the truest of all the characters and survives English malpractice. Villainy in this third series may derive from American criminals (“The Dancing Men”) and European threats (“The Golden-Pince Nez” and “The Six Napoleons”), or, mostly, from native British sources. Overall, empire is fading as a danger.

In the fourth series, *His Last Bow* (1917) some stories seem consciously to reverse the old imperial degeneracy theme. There are American professional criminals (“Lady Frances Carfax”) and displaced imperials (“Wisteria

Lodge” with its “Tiger of San Pedro” (Doyle 1928:917), and Euro-villains are more common (Italians in “The Three Napoleons” and in part at least “The Red Circle”), but the only real imperial drama is “The Devil’s Foot” where an apparently fiendish South African poison is actually used, by an explorer, to avenge a crime, not to commit it. This tone of reversal is strong in “The Blanched Soldier”, where it sounds as if, as in “The Creeping Man”, some terrible imperial crime is being covered up. In fact what Holmes eventually, and with some tact, reveals is that this family’s son contacted leprosy through his soldierly courage and he is now being lovingly and secretly tended at home. This reversal of the degeneracy theme is compounded when Holmes brings in an expert who shows it is not in fact true leprosy: the implication is that imperialism itself was never the disabling sickness that many adventures made us think, but just a serious challenge to brave young men and their families. The blanched soldier himself is a memory of the pale, decrepit isolated Watson with his wound, not an avatar of the maddened criminals with their imperially trained violences now let loose on their own fellow citizens.

#### 4. GOODBYE TO ALL THAT IMPERIAL CRIME

The stories move on with increasing emphasis on European villainy and even the central Americans are redeemed when, in “The Sussex Vampire”, a melodramatically pitched and apparently heavily anti-foreigner story goes into reverse: the Peruvian wife is shown to be the long-suffering protector of the child she shares with a true Briton – against her brutal and equally British stepson. In “Thor Bridge” there is a surviving South American fiend in the jealous Brazilian wife, but the worst she can do is commit suicide in an unsuccessful attempt to frame the beautiful English governess of whom she is jealous for her own murder. This strained improbability, a knee-jerk memory of foreign onslaught on English maidens, and failed at that, is a long way from the well-sustained pirates, killers and perverts of Doyle’s old vision of imperial degeneracy.

From 1901 on Doyle revisits his old imperial theme basically to vary and dilute it, and to disavow the doubts about empire he communicated before. He has plenty of new enemies: mostly from the continent of Europe as the arms race grows – though never with France. Himself named Conan after a Breton relative, and awarding Holmes a French grandmother, Doyle was *avant la lettre* an emblem of the *entente cordiale*. But Italians and increasingly Germans are seen as degenerates without any of the tragic misdirection of the English imperial renegades of the early stories. American professional criminals con-

tinue to be a recurring theme, going back it would seem to his earliest reading among the tough adventures of the American cheap press. But they too can be varied. In the late novella, *The Valley of Fear* Doyle appears to return to the late nineteenth century in a story based on the “Molly Maguires”, a violent labour gang operating in the 1880s. But his account makes it clear that he is in fact responding with hostility to the new organisation of the anarcho-syndicalist “Wobblies”, the International Workers of the World who were infiltrated and opposed by the Pinkertons above all others. No doubt the novel was read by Dashiell Hammett, who in his first novel, *Red Harvest* (1929) opens with the detective moving on from just this kind of anti-Wobblic action, a neatly ironic link between Doyle and American political reality.

The American material was always for Doyle in part a fantasy world of freedom – and also of fine sales and good commissions, going back to *The Sign of Four* – but it was also a para-empire, a sadly lost land where white English culture could thrive and, alarmingly, sometimes go askew. In that way America was a benignly unforeign version of that wider world of empire and foreignness where Doyle was one of the first to note, violence and cruelty were instruments of government, and the negative impact on those who wielded those instruments could be substantial.

Doyle and imperial crime travel a long journey from early excitements, through mature anxieties to senescent complacency. Watson's wound was loyal English painful suffering, part of the white man's imperial burden. But the swamp adder that delivered to another English doctor returned from the tropics a wound both fatal and fatally symbolic was of a much higher order of imagination. It showed that Doyle could offer a strikingly powerful critique of some aspects of his society, in advance of writers thought more searching, notably Stevenson, Doyle, Morris, Shaw and, especially, Conrad. It makes you wonder just what he had in mind by giving his hero the domestic surname Holmes, just what he was suggesting were the disturbing forces at work, in the homes of English bourgeois, post-imperial society through the equally contemporary, equally complex, equally complicit, empire of crime fiction.

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