

THE WICKED BEGINNINGS OF A BAKER STREET CLASSIC!

by RAY BETZNER

In the early 1930s, when pulps were the guilty pleasures of the American magazine business, *Real Detective* was just another bedsheet promising sex, sin, and sensationalism for a mere two bits. With a color cover that featured a sultry moll, a gun-toting cop, or a sneering mobster, it assured the reader that when he got the magazine back to his garage or basement, he would be entertained by the kind of delights not found in *The Bookman* or *The Atlantic Monthly*.

And yet, for a moment in December 1932, a single article featuring the world's first consulting detective elevated the standards of *Real Detective* to something approaching respectability. Starting on page 50, between "Manhattan News Flash" (featuring the kidnapping of little John Arthur Russell) and "Rah! Rah! Rah! Rotgut and Rotters of the '32 Campus" (by Densmore Dugan '33) is a three-quarter-page illustration by Frederic Dorr Steele showing Sherlock Holmes in his dressing gown, standing beneath the headline: "Mr. Holmes of Baker Street: The Discovery of the Great Detective's Home in London." Compared with "I am a 'Slave!' The Tragic Confession of a Girl who 'Went Wrong,'" the revelations behind an actual identification for 221B seems positively quaint.

How did Sherlock Holmes, the Victorian era's unemotional master detective, find his way into a magazine that promised titillation on every page? On the 75th anniversary of its publication, the true story can now be told. Or, as *Real Detective* might style it (in red type 48 points high): "We Unveil the Wicked Beginnings of a Baker Street Classic!"

THE CHICAGO CONNECTION AND THE MYSTERIOUS EDITOR

Holmes appeared in *Real Detective* via the work of two Chicago newspaper colleagues: Vincent Starrett and Edwin Baird. Starrett should need little introduction in these pages. A newspaper reporter with a passion for book collecting, Starrett was also a poet, occasional magazine editor, and popular mystery writer. His fascination with Holmes is well documented in many essays and his famous sonnet, "221B." After leaving his high school only a few months before graduation, Starrett soon became a fixture in the newspaper and literary world during the great "Chicago renaissance."

Starrett, whose extraordinary output in the 1920s and '30s is exhausting just to catalogue, knew dozens of editors and was constantly pitching story ideas.

Like many of those who lived by the word in those days, he had to cast a wide net, and the pulps were often a willing, if poorly paying, outlet.

Less is known about Edwin Baird's life, but the outlines show he and Starrett would have clearly known one another. Born in Chattanooga in 1886, Baird made his way to Chicago and was a feature reporter for the *Chicago Daily Journal* and the *Chicago Evening American*.¹ Like Starrett, Baird wrote detective stories, and their common background likely helped build a bond between the two men.

In the early 1920s, Baird was hired by Jacob C. Henneberg to edit two new publications for his company, Rural Publications. Baird oversaw the birth of *Detective Tales* and, later, *Weird Tales*.² The first issue of *Detective Tales* was published in October 1922, and it is worth noting that Starrett had a short story in that inaugural issue. The digest-sized magazine featured a broad range of mystery styles, from the two-fisted tough guy tales that were gaining popularity in the United States, to the more cerebral puzzles that were Starrett's stock in trade, particularly with series detective Jimmie Lavender. Baird liked Starrett's work, and Starrett became one of the magazine's regulars, contributing 22 stories for *Detective Tales* from 1922 to 1924.³ In his memoir, *Born in a Bookshop*, Starrett confirms the relationship by noting that Baird was one of three editors who "were particularly friendly to the Lavender stories."⁴

The magazine, along with its sister publication, *Weird Tales*, offered some writers regular work, but financial success didn't follow. A fiscal crisis in 1924 threatened the Rural Publications empire, and Baird decided (some claim he was forced by Henneberg) to give up editing both magazines in favor of overseeing *Detective Tales*.⁵ As part of an overhaul, Baird renamed the magazine *Real Detective Tales*. Most of the stories of detection in the publication continued to be "tales" and not "real" at all, but then, truth in advertising was never a strong point of the pulps. What didn't change was Starrett's success with the publication, and he continued to be a frequent contributor. By 1927, the magazine's name had shifted again, this time to *Real Detective Tales and Mystery Stories*. According to pulp historian Robert Sampson: "The stories emphasized amateur investigators of remarkable mental abilities and adventures among the gangsters of the Prohibition era. The action was brisk, the scene contemporary."⁶

Sherlock Holmes would have seemed a little old-fashioned between its pages, but he would not have been completely out of place for this incarnation. That would change by the end of the decade,

The pulp market in the late 1920s was flooded with mystery titles, and Baird needed more than a name change to stay current with readers. In the early 1930s, mystery fiction began fading from its pages, replaced by true tales of lurid murders, kidnappings, scandals, and the brave exploits of police officers fighting

lawlessness. Many articles carried the names of police commissioners or sheriffs who recounted their own exploits, in breathless prose that sounds as authentic as a football player's autobiography. Once again, the name was altered, this time to *Real Detective*, and the titillation value of the covers was pumped up.

HE SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN THERE

By the late 1920s, Vincent Starrett had one of the best Sherlock Holmes collections in private hands. His fascination with Holmes prompted him to make contact with such important Holmes-related figures as Frederic Dorr Steele, William Gillette, and Sir Arthur himself. After having invested many years and quite a bundle in building his Holmes library, Starrett believed the time was right to start showing off the collection in a series of articles that he would then gather up and sell as the single volume we now know as *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*. The first article appeared in December 1930, just six months after Conan Doyle's death. "The Real Sherlock Holmes" ran in *The Golden Book Magazine* and was popular enough to convince Starrett that he was on the right track. It would take him another two years to bring the book to fruition, but by late 1932 and early 1933, new chapters began appearing, with "Enter Mr. Sherlock Holmes" showing up in *The Atlantic Monthly* for July 1932, and *The Bookman* featuring two articles, "The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes" in December 1932 and "Sherlock Holmes: Notes for a Biography" (retitled "*Ave Sherlock Morituri et Cetera*" for the book version) in February 1933.⁷

One chapter particularly delighted its author. As John Nieminski and Jon Lellenberg show in their invaluable "*Dear Starrett—*" "*Dear Briggs—*", Starrett and fellow Holmes enthusiast Dr. Gray Chandler Briggs worked together to identify a single building on Baker Street as the likely model for 221B. Briggs had been to London a few years before and identified a flat on Baker Street as the likely home of the great detective by using Holmesian methods.⁸

The completed essay was titled "No. 221-B Baker Street" for the book edition, and evidently a more highbrow home could not be found for its magazine appearance than *Real Detective*. Looking at the publication today, one can't help but think that publishing an essay about Holmes in *Real Detective* was like introducing a love story or an elopement in the fifth proposition of Euclid.

The cover does not bode well for Holmes. Instead of the stately Dorr Steele covers that announced a Holmes tale in *Collier's*, *Real Detective* features a desperate convict clutching the bars of his cell as smoke begins curling around him. "14 Hours in Hell!" shouts the cover in blood red, with the helpful explanation in a separate line below: "Riot and Terror in a Flaming Prison! Told by One of the Convicts." Just in case that doesn't make you want to spend 25 cents, the

showing the relationship between Camden House and No. 111 Baker Street, the location Briggs proposed as the true 221B.

On the other hand, the magazine features a bonus bit of text in the aforementioned sidebar, “What is the World’s Most Interesting Street?” Starrett took a little of the brief piece he published in the book entitled “Epilogue” and re-wrote it for the magazine. It’s an engaging fantasy that conjures up the image of Holmes and others slipping through a foggy night on Baker Street—a preview of Starrett’s meditation on Baker Street as the living embodiment of that “romantic chamber of the heart; in a nostalgic country of the mind: where it is always 1895.”

of Baker Street

pedestrians, pervaded with a feeling of imminent danger.”

But Mr. Hansen was content with the impression, as was the present writer when he roamed the length of Baker Street upon a day in drear November. There was, indeed, a house at 66 which satisfied one’s occult sense of rightness; but the notion that it was the very place has long since passed in the light of the surprising research of another quester. It required, quite plainly, the genius of another sleuth, gifted as Holmes himself was gifted, to run its eye along the many pages of the record, and find the hidden clue. All other searchers paused, then retired in confusion, when Dr. Briggs announced his solution.

THE CLUE IS IN THAT ADMIRABLE ADVENTURE of *The Empty House*, first of the collection brought together in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*. One recalls the circumstances of that

What Is the World’s Most Interesting Street?



Surely it is Baker Street, in London, the erstwhile home of Sherlock and his Watson. A drab street, cold and inhospitable. A street of ghosts. A London fog done over into brick and stone, where stalks the spirits of these two departed great ones of the earth. And since there is nothing quite so real as the unreal, perhaps these ghosts walk there with more persuasive tread than those other ghosts we call the living. Who is the ragged wraith offering his papers, of an evening, at the Marylebone crossing, when the crowds are scurrying homeward from the Baker Street station of the Tube? May he not be that veritable Wiggins who was the leader of the “Baker Street Irregulars”? And the tall man, sharp of features, with the eagle glance, attended by the square-set, monocled military surgeon—who is he? Does anybody question the worldwide fame of Baker Street? Then let him write to the Central Post Office of London and ask how many letters have come through, in the last twenty-five or thirty years, addressed to Mr. Sherlock Holmes, 221-B Baker Street—a man who never lived and a house that never existed!



The Home of Sherlock Holmes

This is the house in Baker Street, London, that answers the description of Sherlock Holmes’ lodging.

adventure, growing out of the murder of the Honorable Ronald Adair—how, after a circuitous journey through silent, menacing streets, through networks of news and stables, Holmes passed at length through a wooden gate into a deserted yard, and opened the back door of the “Empty House.” The description of the place is definite—almost exact. Dark as was the house within, Watson followed his companion down the long, straight hall until he dimly saw the murky faintlight over the door, in front. The window panes were thick with dust; the room was only faintly illumined by the lamplights of the street beyond. Then Holmes’ lips were at the doctor’s ear.

“Do you know where we are?” he whispered.

“Surely that is Baker Street,” answered the puzzled Watson, staring through the dusty window.

“What Is the World’s Most Interesting Street?”

Real Detective also gave Starrett an explicit plug for the Holmes book in a brief editor’s note: “This article, published here for the first time, will form the chapter of a forthcoming book on Sherlock Holmes, written by Mr. Starrett.” Note the absence of a title. As “*Dear Starrett— Dear Briggs—*” illustrates, Starrett toyed with several titles before settling on *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*.

In the end, having the Baker Street chapter of his Holmes book published in *Real Detective* was probably useful for Starrett, despite its awkward juxtaposition among the lewd folderol. He would have gotten paid for the article, although not much, since a penny a word was a common rate. And the essay itself was a nice advertisement for the book, though one has to wonder if any of those who later purchased the book would admit to reading *Real Detective*. Whether it helped sales of the book when it was published in October 1933 is anyone's guess. It certainly did not hurt Starrett's reputation, since he went on to become dean of the first generation of Holmes devotees in the United States.

Starrett obviously had no problem with recognizing his debt to the pulps. In the acknowledgments to *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, he gives *Real Detective* the same due as the more respectable magazines that first featured his Holmes essays. And, since a writer's got to eat, Starrett continued selling more conventional pieces to *Real Detective*. Just a few months before *Private Life* was published, he was promoted on the cover of the April 1933 issue as "A Complete Novelette by Vincent Starrett." The story, "Formula for Murder," is a Jimmie Lavender tale (either the 37th or 38th; Starrett admitted he wasn't sure in his accompanying author's note). Even here, Starrett was thinking of his upcoming book and got in a veiled plug for *Private Life*. Noting that some critics called Lavender the "American Sherlock Holmes," Starrett goes on to say: "Holmes is an old favorite of mine—I am even now producing a book about him—and it was inevitable that I should adopt the Watsonian style of narration in some degree when I began to write detective fiction of my own. . . ."

But the editor of *Real Detective* by this time was not Starrett's old newspaper colleague, Edwin Baird. In early 1933, *Real Detective* moved its offices from Chicago to New York, and the new editor was West F. Peterson, an Illinois boy who stocked the latest incarnation of the magazine with semi-nude women, tough talking crooks, and valiant crime fighters. Baird was gone, faded from our story like a man in a gray overcoat who disappears into the cold, night fog.

NOTES

1. Robert E. Weinberg, *The Weird Tales Story*, West Linn, Oregon: FAX Collector's Editions, 1977. A detailed history of *Real Detective*'s more famous sister publication.
2. During his brief tenure at *Weird Tales*, Baird bought stories from soon to be legendary fantasist H. P. Lovecraft, not to mention Seabury Quinn, Clark Ashton Smith, and, every once in a while, Vincent Starrett. Indeed, Baird bought Starrett's story "Penelope" for *Weird Tales*' third issue. See Lin

- Carter, *Lovecraft: A Look Behind the Cthulhu Mythos* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972).
3. Tim Cottrill, *Bookery's Guide to Pulp & Related Magazines 1888–1969*, Fairborn, Ohio: Bookery Press, 2005.
 4. Vincent Starrett, *Born in a Bookshop: Chapters from the Chicago Renaissance*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965, p. 211.
 5. Henneberg offered the job to Lovecraft, who turned him down. Farnsworth Wright became *Weird Tales*' editor and while the magazine always struggled to turn a buck, it became infamous for its taboo-breaking stories of horror and the outré.
 6. Robert Sampson, "Detective Tales (Rural Publications)," in *Mystery, Detective, and Espionage Magazines*, Michael L. Cook, ed., Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983, pp. 157–158.
 7. Six chapters of the final book were not published separately. Starrett tried to interest Christopher Morley in a chapter for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, but Morley—surprisingly—didn't take the offer, or wasn't able to sell the idea to the editor.
 8. John Nieminski and Jon L. Lellenberg, eds., "Dear Starrett—" "Dear Briggs—", New York: Baker Street Irregulars, 1989. This work provides an invaluable look at the gestation of *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*.
 9. Some things never change.
 10. See above.
 11. The discerning reader will no doubt be comforted to know that Johnson Smith & Co. is still in business and now sells its invaluable stock online.



Drawn from life by Frederic Dorr Steele

William Gillette as Sherlock Holmes

William Gillette as Sherlock Holmes, drawn from life by Frederic Dorr Steele.