



## **Sherlockian Saturdays at the Pratt**

Three Decades of Canonical Scholarship  
Papers given at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore

Edited by William Hyder

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### **Sherlock Holmes and the Press (1982)**

by William Hyder

“The Press, Watson, is a most valuable institution. . . .”

Sherlock Holmes said that in “The Six Napoleons.” But he said it in a mocking tone. He had just fed some false information to a reporter, and his complete statement was: “The Press, Watson, is a most valuable institution — if you only know how to use it.”

Of course, he had a reason for lying. He wanted a criminal to think that he and the police were on the wrong track. Still, as a newspaperman, I think that was rather bad of Holmes — especially since he had every reason to be grateful to the press.

We have records of sixty cases handled by Holmes, and newspapers are involved directly, indirectly or by implication in fully fifty of them. That’s more than 83 percent.

Newspapers figured in every phase of Holmes’s investigations — sometimes even before a case began. For example, in his regular scanning of the crime news, Holmes noticed articles about the theft of a jewel from the Hotel Cosmopolitan. Only later did he become involved in the case, later known as “The Blue Carbuncle,” by pure chance, when a commissionaire of his acquaintance found the missing stone in the crop of his family’s Christmas goose.

When Holmes was first called into a case he would often turn to the newspapers for background information. We all remember Holmes and Watson sitting in a railway carriage on their way to investigate “The Boscombe Valley Mystery.” Dr. Watson writes:

We had the carriage to ourselves, save for an immense litter of papers, which Holmes had brought with him. Among these he rummaged and read, with intervals of note-taking and of meditation, until we were past Reading. Then he suddenly rolled them up into a gigantic ball, and tossed them up on to the rack.

## Sherlockian Saturdays at the Pratt – Book Excerpt

When Holmes was in mid-case, the newspapers would occasionally supply him with fresh facts. Consider this dramatic scene in “The Second Stain”: Holmes has been asked to retrieve a document which both the Prime Minister and the European Secretary believe has been stolen by a spy. Holmes says to Watson:

“There are only those three capable of playing so bold a game; there are Oberstein, La Rothière, and Eduardo Lucas. I will see each of them.”  
I glanced at my morning paper. “Is that Eduardo Lucas of Godolphin Street?”  
“Yes.”  
“You will not see him.”  
“Why not?”  
“He was murdered in his house last night.”

We often find Sherlock Holmes making deductions from articles he reads in the newspapers, and occasionally we even find him deducing facts from the physical appearance of a newspaper. In “The Blue Carbuncle” Holmes is trying to get a name and address from a poultry dealer who has no interest in revealing it. He notices a newspaper in the man’s pocket — the *Sporting Times*. That was a journal widely read by horse-players. They called it “the Pink ‘Un’ — the pink one — because it was printed on pink paper. Immediately Holmes sees how he’s going to get his information. As he tells Watson, “When you see a man with whiskers of that cut, and the ‘Pink ‘Un’ protruding out of his pocket, you can always draw him by a bet.”

So we can see from all this that Sherlock Holmes’s investigations were filled with newspapers. And so was the sitting-room at 221B Baker Street. Holmes subscribed to all the major London dailies, which in those days amounted to more than a dozen. At first, he would throw them out after he had read them. For example, in *The Sign of Four*, one of his earlier cases, he looked through back numbers of *The Times* to find the date of Major Sholto’s death. He had to go out of the house to do it — whether to a library or to the *Times* office, Watson doesn’t tell us. Apparently it taught him a lesson, because in “The Six Napoleons,” some years later, Watson describes him as “rummaging among the files of the old daily papers with which one of our lumber rooms was packed.”

Holmes always claimed that he read nothing but the criminal news and the agony columns, or what we’d call the personal columns. This, I feel sure, was a pose. He was extremely well informed, so he obviously read a lot more than that. But certainly those two things were the greatest help to him professionally. Holmes read the agony columns thoroughly every day, and then he cut them out and pasted them into scrapbooks for future reference.

Consider, for example, “The Red Circle.” Holmes has been asked to investigate a mysterious lodger who is holed up in a boarding house. Since the *Daily Gazette* is delivered to the lodger every day, he decides to look through the recent agony columns:

“Here are the *Daily Gazette* extracts of the last fortnight. ‘Lady with a black boa at Prince’s Skating Club’ — that we may pass. ‘Surely Jimmy will not break his mother’s heart’ — that appears to be irrelevant. ‘If the lady who fainted on the Brixton bus’ — she does not interest me. ‘Every day my heart longs —’ Bleat, Watson — unmitigated bleat. Ah! This is a little more possible. Listen to this: ‘Be patient. Will find some sure means of communication. Meanwhile, this column. — G.’ That is two days after Mrs. Warren’s lodger arrived. It sounds plausible, does it not?”

## Sherlockian Saturdays at the Pratt – Book Excerpt

And of course it was not only plausible, it was right on the money.

From time to time Sherlock Holmes himself would be mentioned in the London newspapers. The feelings he expressed to Dr. Watson about this publicity are strangely contradictory. Watson never questioned them — not in print, anyway — but we should.

In the first case Watson ever chronicled, *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes feels bitter because he doesn't get any recognition for the cases he works on alongside the official police. When he's summoned to Lauriston Gardens by Inspector Gregson, he predicts to Watson, "Supposing I unravel the matter, you may be sure that Gregson, Lestrade and Co. will pocket the credit." And as it turned out, he's right. At the conclusion of the case, there's an article in the *Echo* which reads:

"It is an open secret that the credit of this smart capture belongs entirely to the well-known Scotland Yard officials, Messrs. Gregson and Lestrade. The man was apprehended, it appears, in the rooms of a certain Mr. Sherlock Holmes, who has himself, as an amateur, shown some talent in the detective line. . . ."

"Didn't I tell you so when we started?" cried Sherlock Holmes with a laugh — a bitter laugh, surely.

Yet six or seven years later, in *The Sign of Four*, we find Holmes feeling rather self-satisfied: "When Gregson, or Lestrade, or Athelney Jones are out of their depth — which, by the way, is their normal state — the matter is laid before me. . . . My name figures in no newspaper. The work itself . . . is my highest reward."

How can we explain this complete reversal?

Well, in *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes was a young man just starting in his career. He needed recognition, but he also needed money. Many years ago a great Sherlockian, Robert Keith Leavitt, suggested that Holmes collected fees, under the table, from Gregson and Lestrade and the other official detectives. In return, he let them take all the credit. In the speech just quoted, Holmes said, "The work itself . . . is my highest reward." You'll notice he did *not* say, "The work is my *only* reward."

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