

# SHERLOCK HOLMES and the POLICE

By Erin O'Neill

The first Sherlock Holmes adventure appeared in 1887 only a few months before Jack the Ripper claimed his first victim. Most of the Holmes canon was written after these murders, feeding off the interest aroused in shocking crimes and reflecting the attitudes and fears of the Victorian readership – fears exacerbated by the failure of the police to catch the Ripper. The feeling that the police were not competent permeated to the highest levels of society. Even Queen Victoria expressed the fear that the detective department was not as efficient as it might be, and *Punch* called it the 'defective department'.<sup>1</sup> It all suggested a need for some almost super human figure, able to step into the breach and solve any mystery.

Julian Symons proposes that the whole Holmes cycle plays on middle class fears of social disturbance, making use of Holmes and what he stands for to reassure them. The detective asserts the static nature of society and that wrongdoing will inevitably be punished.<sup>2</sup> Stephen Knight concurs that Holmes' success depended on the hero's power to assuage the anxieties of a respectable, London-based, middle-class readership. Holmes also reasserted faith in the modern system of scientific and rational inquiry to order an uncertain and troubling world. The public might feel they lacked these powers themselves, but were able to use Holmes to do the deed for them.<sup>3</sup>

As an extension of this, Holmes symbolises middle class fears about the inadequacy of the official police force in late nineteenth century England. Holmes is presented as being infinitely superior to the Scotland Yard detectives whom he frequently derided. A model detective, he picked up cases the police had failed to solve, reflecting the fears of the people that those assigned to protect them were failing in their task.

The Metropolitan Police Force was established in 1829, with a detective department added in 1842, and the Criminal Investigation Division in 1877. When the Holmes stories first appeared, the police were nevertheless still largely associated with 'keeping the peace' and it would be some time before there were any brilliant policemen in detective literature. Regardless of the skills of the real police, their fictional counterparts continued in the Holmesian tradition of thick-headed ineptitude, intellectually vulnerable, but morally impregnable.<sup>4</sup>

## 'The pick of a bad lot'

The Holmes stories present an image of the police as a gang of bungling incompetents. There are numerous examples that can be cited. In *A Study in Scarlet* Holmes refers to '...some bungling villainy with a motive so transparent that even a Scotland Yard official can see through it.' He later tells one of the detectives, 'I am afraid, Rance, that you will never rise in the force. That head of yours should be for use as well as ornament.' In private he adds, 'The blundering fool!'

<sup>1</sup> Hill, Reginald, *Holmes: the Hamlet of crime fiction*, *Crime Writers*, ed. by HRF Keating. Lond., BBC, 1978. pp.33-4

<sup>2</sup> Symons, Julian, *Bloody murder: from the detective story to the crime novel, a history*. Harmondsworth, M'sex, Viking, 1985. p.22

<sup>3</sup> Knight, Stephen, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*. Lond., Macmillan, 1980. p.67

<sup>4</sup> Routley, Erik, *The Puritan pleasures of the detective story: a personal monograph*. Lond., Gollancz, 1972. p.21

The best known of the Holmesian Scotland Yard detectives is Inspector Lestrade. Holmes tells him, in *The Empty House*, 'You handled the Molesy mystery with less than your usual - that is to say, you handled it fairly well.' A detective called Jones comes in for particularly damning praise in *The Red-Headed League*, 'He is not a bad fellow, though an absolute imbecile in his profession. He has one positive virtue. He is as brave as a bulldog, and as tenacious as a lobster if he gets his claws upon anyone.'

The only detective Holmes has any time for is Stanley Hopkins, who followed Holmes' methods. Watson tells us in *The Golden Pince-Nez* that he was 'a promising detective in whose career Holmes had several times shown a practical interest.' Yet even he suffers Holmes' criticism in *Black Peter*: 'I understand...from the inquest that there were some objects which you failed to overlook.'

Both Watson's narrative and Holmes' speeches present the police as not too bright, but with some compensating virtues. From *The Red Circle*: 'Our official detectives may blunder in the matter of intelligence, but never in that of courage.' Holmes comments, in *The Three Garridebs*, that at Scotland Yard 'There may be an occasional want of imaginative intuition...but they lead the world for thoroughness and method.'

Holmes is the ideal, the police rather ordinary. The conventional image of the English bobby permeates the adventures. He is capable, practical and useful for handling troublemakers, but intellectually average, at best. In *Thor Bridge* Sergeant Coventry is described as 'a decent, honest fellow who was not too proud to admit that he was out of his depth and would welcome any help.' *The Lion's Mane* introduces 'Anderson, the village constable...of the slow Sussex breed - a breed which covers much good sense under a heavy, silent exterior.' In *The Empty House* the prisoner has 'a stalwart constable' on each side of him.'

In *The Second Stain*, however, a constable allows a woman access to the scene of the crime merely because, as Lestrade comments, she had 'pretty, coaxing ways.' In an additional breach of duty, he leaves the scene to go and buy some brandy when he thinks she faints. When Holmes and Watson are breaking into a house in *The Bruce-Partington Plans* Holmes tells Watson, 'There is an excellent archway down yonder in case a *too zealous* policeman should intrude.' The implication here is that the police have no business being *too* efficient! In fact hardly had the pair 'reached the dark shadows before the step of the policeman was heard in the fog above.' This is the classic view of the Victorian police officer, pacing through the foggy streets on his beat - solid, capable and reassuring.

## 'It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data'

The impression is given that the police were prone to making unsound assumptions and wild guesses, which often led to wrong conclusions. Holmes, on the other hand, was wary of making premature judgements. The reader is led to believe, from the conduct of Scotland Yard at the scene of the crime, that Victorian textbook detection was a primitive affair. Holmes poked fun at the efforts of Lestrade and Gregson, and made sure he gathered all the facts before venturing a conclusion: 'It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit the theories instead of theories to suit facts.'<sup>5</sup>

The police are portrayed as well meaning, misguided bunglers.<sup>6</sup> Holmes' scientific research appeared to give him the advantage over the slow-witted men from the Yard. He studied handwriting and

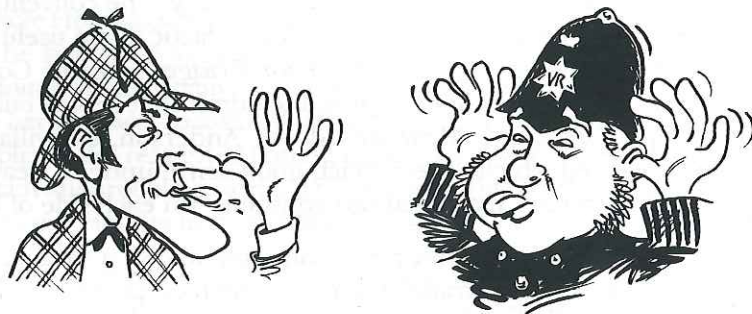
<sup>5</sup> Nown, Graham, *Elementary My Dear Watson: Sherlock Holmes Centenary, his life and Times*. Lond., Ward Lock, 1986. P 112

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p.115

typewriters and wrote monographs on cigar ash and footprints, which he believed was a neglected art. In fact this technique was in use in Scotland as early as 1786.<sup>7</sup> The living contemporaries of Gregson and Lestrade were trained in observation techniques and by the 1890s - Holmes' era - the system had become quite refined. Major Arthur Griffiths described procedure in 1896:

"An immediate systematic investigation of the theatre of the crime, the minute examination of premises, the careful search for tracks and traces, for any article left behind, however insignificant, such as the merest fragment of clothing, a scrap of paper, a harmless tool, a hat, half a button... all these are detailed for the guidance of the detective... Fingerprints and footmarks have again and again been cleverly worked into undeniable evidence. The impression of the first is personal and peculiar to the individual; by the latter the police have been able to fix beyond question the direction in which criminals have moved, their character and class, and the neighbourhood that owns them."<sup>8</sup>

It all sounds rather like Holmes' own method, yet in the stories factual detail is sacrificed for the art of storytelling. Holmes had to remain the popular hero, towering over those around him.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, in the view of the founder of the Metropolitan Police, Holmes would have made the ideal policeman. Sir Robert Peel wrote to a friend that he required "...a man of great energy, great activity both of body and mind, accustomed to strict discipline and with the power of enforcing it, and taking an interest in the duty to be assigned to him. Then he must be a gentleman and entirely trustworthy."<sup>10</sup> Holmes had great intellect and faculty for hoarding miscellaneous information. It would have been quite improper to represent him as being anything but physically tough, able to defend himself in combat and in first class physical condition.<sup>11</sup> He was also, in terms of class, a gentleman, unlike many of the police. Again, it comes down to a case of Victorian, middle-class ideals.



### *The world's first consulting detective*

Part of Holmes' charm to his middle-class audience would have been that he was an unofficial, independent agent. Holmes is the world's first 'consulting detective', an alternative both to the official Scotland Yard type and to the private detective. Avoiding the official force would mean avoiding the risk of scandal by going public, so to speak, and private detectives, even in this era, had a somewhat seedy reputation. The conventional image of the private detective (an 'ignoble profession' according to Colonel Emsworth in *The Blanched Soldier*) is probably best expressed in *The Missing Three-Quarter* when Dr Leslie Armstrong criticises Holmes, 'I have heard your name, Mr Sherlock Holmes, and I am aware of your profession, one of which I by no means approve.' He goes on: "So far as your efforts are directed towards suppression of crime, sir, they must have the support of every reasonable member of the community, though I cannot doubt

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p.120

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p.120

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p.120

<sup>10</sup> Eames, Hugh, *Sleuths inc.: Studies of Problem Solvers*. Phil., Lippincott, 1978. p.31

<sup>11</sup> Routley *op.cit.* p.27

that the official machinery is amply sufficient for the purpose. Where your call is more open to ridicule is where you pry into secrets of private individuals, where you incidentally waste the time of men who are more busy than yourself."

Holmes responds modestly 'You may look upon me simply as an irregular pioneer who goes in front of the regular force of the country.' Holmes claims his superiority to these other breeds by stating, 'No man lives or has ever lived who has brought the same amount of study and of natural talent to the detection of crime which I have done.' Note the focus on detection of crime, rather than solving private disputes. The term 'consulting detective' seems designed to avoid these connotations. Once the police became involved in a case, on the other hand, it ceased to be a private matter and became a public one. *The Three Gables* sees Holmes, in trying to obtain an interview, send up a note saying 'Shall it be the police then?' Privacy for family affairs, and avoiding scandal, was of great concern to the Victorians.

In *A Scandal in Bohemia*, the King of Bohemia turns to Holmes to retrieve a photograph of himself and a former flame, in the belief that Holmes will be discreet in the matter. In *A Case of Identity* a client's step-father states, 'I do not mind you so much as you are not connected with the official police' and in *The Three Students* Hilton Soames claims of Holmes, 'Your discretion is as well known as your powers.'

Part of Holmes' task is to take up cases 'which had been abandoned as hopeless by the official police.' Mary Sutherland, in *A Case of Identity*, goes to Holmes because he had cleared up a case for a friend 'whose husband [was] found so easy when everyone else had given him up for dead.' In other cases the police fail to see a crime at all. In *The Five Orange Pips* John Openshaw tells Holmes that the police, "...listened to my story with a smile. I am convinced the inspector has formed the opinion that the letters are all practical jokes, and that the deaths of my relatives were really accidents, as the jury states, and were not to be connected with the warnings."

'Incredible imbecility!' Holmes exclaims in reply. Holmes acts as the saviour of people whom the official machinery has failed. In addition to such 'delicate matters, there are also cases that do not come within the jurisdiction of the Yard, for example, in *The Illustrious Client* where a father is trying to free his daughter from the clutches of her evil fiancé.

In Holmes' view, part of the problem with the official police is that they are unimaginative and conventional. In *A Study in Scarlet* he declares, 'Gregson is the smartest of the Scotland Yarders...he and Lestrade are the pick of a bad lot. They are both quick and energetic, but conventional - shockingly so.' In *Silver Blaze* Holmes again describes Inspector Gregson, this time as 'an extremely competent officer. Were he gifted with imagination he might rise to great heights in his profession.' Later in the same story: "See the value of imagination," said Holmes, "It is the one quality which Gregson lacks. We imagined what might have happened, acted upon the supposition, and find ourselves justified."

### *The makings of a detective*

As well as assisting members of the public who were in need Holmes also helped the police. The police attitude to Holmes actually changes subtly from the early stories, when they are rather arrogant. In *The Red Headed League* Holmes, according to the Yard 'has the makings of a detective in him.' In *The Boscombe Valley Mystery* Watson describes Lestrade as being 'indifferent and contemptuous' of Holmes. When Holmes discovers something the official force has overlooked they are (understandably) annoyed. From *Silver Blaze*: "I cannot think how I came to overlook it," said the inspector, with an expression of annoyance."

Holmes and Watson get a particularly frosty greeting in *The Naval Treaty*. Forbes of the Yard had a manner 'decidedly frigid' to Holmes and Watson. "I've heard of your methods, Mr Holmes," said he tartly, "You are ready enough to use all the information that the police can lay at your disposal and then you try to finish the case yourself and bring discredit upon them." Likewise, Inspector McKinnon in *The Retired Colourman* states, 'We get there all the same, Mr Holmes...you will excuse us for feeling sore when you jump in with methods which we cannot use and so rob us of credit.' Notably, both of these officers quickly change their tune when they find that Holmes does not want to take any of the glory. After Holmes' staged 'death' and subsequent revival, Inspector Lestrade appears to have learnt some respect for his unofficial colleague, recognising his talents and using them to his advantage, even if his grudging acceptance of Holmes is not always mirrored in the attitude of his colleagues. In *The Norwood Builder* he keenly devours Holmes' analysis of a document.

However the Yard is still portrayed as being cocky and too sure of themselves. In the same story Lestrade comes in, 'his face flushed with victory, his manner grossly triumphant' saying, 'You don't like being beaten any more than the rest of us do.' Lestrade is proved wrong - of course. In *The Six Napoleons* however, Lestrade displays a remarkable change in attitude from the early days, even in fact from the previous pages: "We're not jealous of you at Scotland Yard, no, sir, we are very proud of you, and if you come down tomorrow there's not a man, from the oldest inspector to the youngest constable, who won't be glad to shake your hand." This still, of course, indicates a rather superior attitude on behalf of the force. Inspector Gregson concurs with his colleague in *The Red Circle*: 'I'll do you this justice, Mr Holmes, that I was never in a case yet that I didn't feel stronger for having you on my side.'



Dennis Lill as  
Inspector Bradstreet

If the police attitude to Holmes wavers over time, the great detective remains sure of *their* incompetence. Lestrade comes under fire in *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*. Holmes claims to have hit upon some rather obvious facts which may have been by no means obvious to Mr Lestrade...I shall either confirm or destroy his theory by means which he is quite incapable of employing or even of understanding'. In *The Norwood Builder* Lestrade arrests the wrong man - the implication about the

competence of the police is obvious. In *The Beryl Coronet* the police 'have openly confessed that they can make nothing of it.' Gregson is described in *Wisteria Lodge* as 'an energetic, gallant, and *within his limitations*, a capable officer.' That is, he is not outstanding, especially in comparison to Holmes.

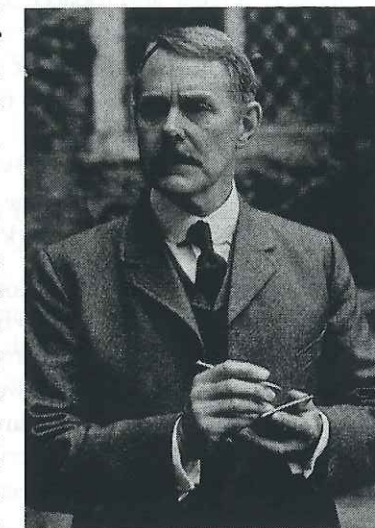
The local police are more likely to accept or ask for help than their London counterparts. In *The Reigate Squires* Inspector Forrester actively seeks out the holidaying Holmes. In *The Dancing Men* Watson claims the local inspector had at first 'shown some disposition to assert his own position, but now he was overcome with admiration, and ready to follow without question wherever Holmes led.' In *The Three Gables*, however, there is the telling line: 'Just a common, ordinary burglary and well within the capacity of the poor old police. No experts need apply.' The same inspector also dares to give advice to Holmes: 'I never pass anything, however trifling...that is my advice to you Mr Holmes.'

The only competent official detective to appear in the Holmes canon is Inspector Baynes of the Surrey constabulary in *Wisteria Lodge* yet he comes across as an annoying, pompous, self satisfied twit who it is impossible to like probably because he makes Holmes seem superfluous, using our hero's methods and, on the whole, reaching the same conclusions. He precipitates Holmes' usual study of detail and his deductions at the scene of the crime. It turns into a conflict between official and unofficial - a constant throughout detective fiction. The real force might be more credible, but this can be a literary disadvantage!<sup>12</sup>

### *Serving justice*

Holmes has a strange relationship with the law, often taking it into his own hands. For instance, in *The Abbey Grange*, Holmes and Watson jointly decide that they will not reveal to the police the identity of the murderer of Sir Eustace Brackenstall. In *Charles Augustus Milverton* they witness a woman kill a man, but take no action, and make no report. In *The Blue Carbuncle* Holmes conceals a felony in the hope he is saving a soul. When the law cannot dispense justice, Holmes dispenses it himself. He is the final court of appeal and the idea that such a court exists, personified by an individual, was comforting to readers.<sup>13</sup>

Holmes is not part of the official institution, so he can take certain steps not open to his Scotland Yard counterparts. Holmes represents justice rather than the law, represented here by the police. In *The Priory School* Holmes states, 'I am not in an official position, and there is no reason, so long as the ends of justice are served, why I should disclose all I know.' Holmes is seen to let criminals off if he considers there is a good reason, such as avoiding scandal. The presumption here is that the police will not stumble across the correct result. From *The Priory School* again: 'From the police point of view he will have kidnapped the boy for the purpose of ransom. If they do not themselves find it out I see no reason why I should prompt them to take a broader view.'



Paul Williamson as  
Inspector Hopkins

Holmes will also break the law in order to obtain proof. From *The Greek Interpreter*: "It is a mercy you are on the side of the force and not against it Mr Holmes," remarked the inspector [Gregson], as he noted the skilful way in which my friend had forced back the catch.' It is revealed in *Charles Augustus Milverton* that Holmes has a first class, up to date, burglary kit, containing a nickel plated jemmy, diamond tipped glass cutters, adaptable keys and a dark lantern. Watson goes on to remark, 'I knew that the opening of safes was a particular hobby with him.'

The justification for such activities is given in the same story from the mouth of Dr Watson: 'It is morally justifiable so long as our object is to take no articles save those which are used for an illegal purpose.' As Lestrade comments in *The Bruce-Partington Plans*, 'We can't do these things in the force, Mr Holmes...no wonder you get results that are beyond us.' In *The Illustrious Client* 'Sherlock Holmes was threatened with a prosecution for burglary, but when an object is good and the client is sufficiently illustrious, even the rigid British law becomes humane and elastic.' This thought must have been a comfort to the middle class Victorian or Edwardian reader.

<sup>12</sup> Hill op.cit. p.93

<sup>13</sup> Symons op.cit. pp.66-7

Holmes does everything in the name of justice as 'it is every man's business to see justice done'. In *Charles Augustus Milverton* Holmes decides, after their quarry has been shot by one of his victims, that 'there are certain cases which the law cannot touch, and which to some extent, justify private revenge.' In *The Abbey Grange* Watson gets to act as jury: 'Watson, you are the British jury, and I never met a man who was more qualified to represent one.' Watson, the ordinary citizen, confirms the reader's views on the natural justice of the matter, regardless of the law.

### 'Method in his madness'

The Holmes stories imply that the great detective's scientific and deductive methods are something new or different, even though, as mentioned earlier, some of Holmes' scientific methods were already in use. In *A Study in Scarlet*, at the first meeting of Holmes and Watson, Holmes has just come up with a new form of blood test. In the same story we are also introduced to Holmes using footprints and studying details such as cigar and tobacco ash. 'It is just in such details that the skilled detective differs from the Gregson and Lestrade type.' In *A Case of Identity* Holmes speaks of distinguishing between different typewriters and in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* of between different newspaper types. Holmes could distinguish between 140 varieties of tobacco and 160 ciphers and wrote monographs on these subjects. Holmes frequently analyses paper, envelopes and handwriting. Then there is Holmes' use of chemical analysis. Britain's first forensic lab was not set up until 1932, in Nottingham, though great advances had been made by 1900 so Holmes was perhaps ahead of his time here thus representing the application of scientific method to detective work.<sup>14</sup>

Holmes' methods of investigation do vary, however, and his abilities are flexible enough to make him a convincing respondent to the variety and difficulty of the problems he tackles. He can stay in his armchair in Baker Street, using his reference books or go out on inquiries, sometimes in disguise, sometimes with Watson.<sup>15</sup> Field work is just as important to him as scientific inquiry. In fact, Holmes maintains that detective work cannot be done without it, using the example of his brother Mycroft to prove his point. Holmes describes him to Watson: "I said he was my superior in observation and deduction. If the art of the detective began and ended in reasoning from an armchair, my brother would be the greatest criminal agent that ever lived. But he has no ambition and no energy. He would not even go out of his way to verify his own solutions, and would rather be considered wrong than take the trouble to prove himself right...he is absolutely incapable of working out the practical points which must be got into before a case could be put before a judge and jury.'

The difference between Holmes' methods and that of the police is presented as being the difference between the theoretical and the factual although even Holmes acknowledges that, 'It is a capital mistake to theorise before you have all the evidence. It biases the judgement.' Holmes is presented as being the brain whilst Scotland Yard uses *only* practical leg work. Holmes often makes his theories from the evidence gathered at the scene yet still fears that 'British juries have not yet attained that pitch of intelligence when they will give the preference to my theories over Lestrade's facts.' He sees Scotland Yard as looking only at the obvious.

Despite the obvious results of Holmes, Scotland Yard remains sceptical as to his methods. At the 'adverse reaction of an officer to Holmes' detailed examination in *The Reigate Squires*, Watson replies, 'I don't think you need alarm yourself. I have usually found that there was method in his madness.' The inspector mutters 'Some folk might say there was madness in his method.' Lestrade remains unconvinced of the value of the Holmes technique. From *The Six Napoleons*: 'You have

<sup>14</sup> Porter, Dennis, *The Pursuit of crime: art and ideology in detective fiction*. Newhaven, Yale U.P., 1981. p.224

<sup>15</sup> Knight on cit. p.76

your own methods, Mr Sherlock Holmes, and it is not for me to say a word against them, but I think I have done a better days work than you.' And again in *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*: 'Theories are all very well, but we have to deal with a hard-hearted British jury.' When Holmes then relates a description of the murderer, Lestrade grumbles, 'I am a practical man...and I really cannot undertake to go about the country looking for a left-handed gentleman with a game leg. I should become the laughing stock of Scotland Yard.' In other words, Holmes is theoretical, the Yard practical.

Regardless of Holmes' criticisms, the Yard does not actually do anything particularly wrong. Holmes might laugh when Lestrade drags the Serpentine for Lady St Simon's body in *The Noble Bachelor* but having found her clothes there, this is actually the logical thing to do. It does serve to show that given the same evidence, Holmes and the police will come to different conclusions. In *The Devil's Foot*, Holmes describes his policy, 'It is not for me, my dear Watson, to stand in the way of the official police. I leave them all the evidence which I found.'

Doyle deliberately portrays the official police force as somewhat inept in order to highlight the superiority of Holmes. This image reflects the attitude of the middle class readership for whom Holmes is a middles class Victorian hero. He filled a gap which was emerging between the ideals of law enforcement, the perception of justice and the practical reality. The Holmesian image set the standard for many future detectives, as did Doyle's portrayal of a somewhat incompetent police force.

As Stephen Knight comments, "No literary figure has a stronger hold on the public imagination than Sherlock Holmes. The name is a synonym for detective; he has been parodied, imitated and recreated in all media with great success."<sup>16</sup> One might add that the image of the police in the stories was also perpetuated. It is not until comparatively recently that the police have had some favourable fictional representation, often through the medium of television, though even there the portrayal is often flawed – but that is the subject for another essay!

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p.67

All canonical references from the Grafton editions: Lond., Grafton, 1987 & 1988.

#### Other References:

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## the RED LEECH the Unchronicled Cases.

The last issue of *The Log* announced the second round in our continuing "Unchronicled Cases" competition. This time Passengers were asked to write the opening to "The Repulsive Story of the Red Leech and the Terrible Death of Crosby the Banker" so tantalisingly referred to by Dr. Watson. Eight entries were received from David Lewis, Philip Cornell, Bill Barnes, Jacqui Butler, Neil P. Hillcrop, John Cameron, Sally & Philip Cornell, and an anonymous entry, written on white foolscap

lined paper with what could be a J pen, postmarked "Southern Suburbs Mail Exchange, with a neat little drawing of a red leech on the back of the envelope. The judges are Andrew Pardoe from Wollongong, Dennis Foran from Lismore, Sarah Byrne from Canberra and Edward Smith from New York, USA. The winning entries will be announced at the "Second Stain" dinner on Saturday 17th July. We may yet find out who that anonymous entrant is!