

A book review by Aleister Crowley from the January 1918 edition of The International.

His Last Bow by Arthur Conan Doyle. George H. Doran Company.

Either Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is getting old, or I am. I do not find these last adventures of Sherlock Holmes nearly so good as those which gave me joy at the period of puberty. Even when I search my memory, it appears to me that some of them lack the point which really appealed to us. These stories are quite as melodramatic as the others, but they do not exhibit Holmes himself to such advantage. Dr. Joseph Bell is dead, and I think that Sir Arthur must have used him up a long while ago.

The only stories in the present volume which appeal to me are those that I remember reading when published in magazines years ago. In particular, the epilogue, the war story, which begs the whole question of detection. We are not interested in the adventures of Sherlock Holmes. We are interested in the quality of his mind, his power of deduction, and in a less degree in his special knowledge. A detective story is really very like a chess problem. There must be a complete correlation of cause and effect and a just balance between them. Absence of such qualities is not atoned for by grotesque situations or violent action. It is perfectly easy to multiply deaths. There is no more difficulty in killing a million people than a thousand. The essence of the art of the detective story is to exhibit the superior intelligence of a certain man. It is this which has made the stories of Poe and Gaboriau immortal. Du Boisgobey fails just where these others succeeded. The original Sherlock Holmes had some claim to share their eminence, for he introduced a new type of superior man, the scientific observer who increases knowledge by the observation of minute differences, just as Lord Rayleigh discovered the presence of some unknown element in atmospheric air

through observation of the infinitesimal differences in its specific weight with that of the nitrogen of the laboratory, and so led to the discovery of argon. These stories, therefore, were naturally popular at a moment when the general imagination was highly excited by the discoveries of physical science. Today that interest has been superseded by the new work in psychology, and we shall therefore expect that the great classical detective story of the period will be based upon minute observation of psychological facts. This, at least, strikes us as the most probable reason for the immense vogue of Simon Iff.