

Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle and the “ Iron Pills ”

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Harold Weiss has been a member of the iron game fraternity for over 50 years. In his prime, he was exceptionally strong and over many years he has assembled one of the finest collections of physical culture material in the world. He is a very successful attorney and his hobbies include the study of fiction's most famous detective.

In the vernacular of the gymnasium, “iron pills” are weights (barbells and dumbbells), and it seems clear that Sherlock Holmes, through the medium of “the agent”, Arthur Conan Doyle, was very familiar with their use and value. Much has been written about the cerebral and acerbic sides of Holmes, but little has been written about his physical side. This brief effort is intended as a partial remedy to that situation.

As most readers of *Iron Game History* know, Eugen Sandow was a renowned professional strongman and bodybuilder whose career spanned the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of this one. He settled in England and lived there during most of the 25 years before he died in 1925 at the age of 55. Wealthy as a result of his stage appearances and the sale of his books and exercise equipment, he had a wide circle of acquaintances throughout his adopted land. One of those acquaintances was Arthur Conan Doyle.

Evidence of their association is easy to find. In Sandow's profusely illustrated book, *Construction and Reconstruction of the Human Body* (John Bale and Sons and Danielson, Ltd. 1907), one can find on page 22 a photograph of “the agent” and Sandow, taken at the Royal Albert Hall. Even more significant is the fact that the foreword for the book was written by the hugely successful Doyle. One of Sandow's other well-known books, *Life is Movement*, which was published circa 1918 by National Health Press in London, also contains a foreword by Sir Arthur. Doyle was not a devotee of competitive weightlifting, but he was apparently a worshipper of physical strength. He used and recommended Sandow's spring dumbbells for the purpose of improving strength, circulation and muscle tone. He was, himself, a huge man—approximately 6'4” and weighing, according to one of his biographers, “over 230 pounds.”

Throughout the Holmes canon, there are various allusions to the subject of physical strength, perhaps the most noteworthy being the straightening of an iron poker by Holmes after it had been bent double by Dr. Grimsby Rowlett, a giant who was trying, without success, to intimidate the master detective in *The Speckled Band*. Dr. Rowlett was a formidable adversary and was described by Doyle



as being “so tall his top-hat busted the door cross-beam and was huge in his extremities.”

It is obvious from reading the canon as a whole that Holmes, physically, would no doubt have been more than a match for any of his adversaries. He was tall, over six feet, and he had the sort of wiry, ligamentous strength associated with Thomas Topham, Charles Vansittart and Adrian Schmidt. We learned in *Adventure of the Empty House*, for instance, that Holmes was also an expert in “Baritsu”, a Japanese form of self-defense. And in Dr. Watson's *Study in Scarlet* we are told that Watson considered his friend to be a truly superior pugilist.

Also, the canon is filled with references to physical strength and the stature which symbolized it. For instance, in *A Scandal in*

Bohemia, Wilhelm Gottsreich Siegsmond Von Amstein, the hereditary king of Bohemia, was said to be six and a half feet tall and “possessed of a chest and limbs of a Hercules, a man of huge size and strength.” And there was Boss McGinty, who was described in *The Valley of Fear* as being “a tall, strong, heavily built man, a black-maned giant whose face and courage showed strength behind it.”

Even more important is the personal knowledge of strength and physical culture Holmes sometimes used to solve the mysteries with which he was faced, *In The Adventure of Black Peter*, for instance, Holmes practiced driving a harpoon through a side of beef and then concluded that it would have taken a man of immense strength to drive a harpoon through Black Peter, a fact which led to the murderer. Similarly, in *The Valley of Fear*, Holmes solved the crime by realizing that the missing clothing and disguise had been wrapped into a bundle and weighted by a dumbbell and then tossed into the water surrounding the premises. Holmes astounded Inspector MacDonald by pointing out that there was only one dumbbell in a certain room and that dumbbells of that type were almost always found in pairs.

Because of all these references, it seems clear that Doyle was fascinated by and knowledgeable about physical culture and strength and that he imbued his marvelous hero with the very traits he so admired.