Opening extract from

The Baker Street Mysteries: The Dragon Tattoo

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To My Family.
And Arthur Conan Doyle, without whom . . .

PROLOGUE

LONDON - 1891
THE ISLE OF DOGS

Dusk. Dank and misty. Street urchin, Sam Wiggins, runs for his life – the small bag of stolen chestnuts still warm in his hand . . .

Sam has shaken off all but one of his pursuers. With a rapid glance over his shoulder – almost losing his footing – he nips between two buildings, into a narrow gap that he hopes the man behind him does not know about. But when he emerges at the other end, and pauses to catch his breath, he can still hear the flat thump of heavy leather boots coming down the passage behind him. He sets off again, shooting in through the doorway of a slaughterhouse.

He darts between hanging carcasses of meat, his worn shoes slipping on the blood-soaked floor. A beam of light catches the blade of a huge cleaver, splits the gloom and temporarily blinds him. A man, armed with

a giant meat-saw, blocks his path, but he dodges round him and plunges outside, into the lane that runs between the backs of all the warehouses. Now, at last, he can hear nothing behind him, but still, he dares not stop running.

Ahead of him Sam suddenly sees a large figure. His pursuer has anticipated his short cut through the slaughterhouse and now stands barring his way. Sam screeches to a standstill and sets off in the opposite direction as fast as he can, with his adversary close behind, closer now than ever. He has got to know these streets well, but this sudden change of direction disorientates him and he takes a wrong turn. To his horror, he finds himself in a dead-end. The unrelenting boots echo behind him. Shoving the bag of chestnuts into his jacket pocket, Sam runs, leaps and grabs the top of the alley wall. He loses precious seconds trying to haul himself up. He can think of nothing but his pursuer, whose enormous hand now grabs his calf, and he is not aware that the stolen chestnuts are spilling out below him. Sam just manages to shake free, kicking and scrabbling over the wall, dropping down into a builder's yard. Landing on a mountain of sand, he finds it hard to move fast. His feet glue down in the shifting sand, but he ploughs on, ducking and diving between

piles of cement sacks and a stack of bricks that wobble precariously as he swings round them. He tears out of the yard, as the night-watchman emerges from his hut, brandishing a stick and cursing.

Sam knows that just ahead there is a long, narrow alley. He reaches the corner and plunges down it. The sound of his feet echoes louder and louder and the downward slope gives him an extra turn of speed. He reaches the bottom flat out and, half looking back over his shoulder, he rounds the corner, running headlong into a tall, thin gentleman, wearing a large cape and a deerstalker hat. Although Sam thunders into him at full pelt, the man does not budge an inch; it is Sam – who is much smaller, and thin from lack of food – who is thrown off balance and sent sprawling in to the gutter.

'Foolish boy,' says the gentleman, contemptuously. As Sam scrabbles to his feet, the man seizes him by the collar. 'Stop wriggling, boy!'

'Let go of me!' cries Sam. 'There's someone after me.'

'Nonsense.' Holding Sam by the scruff of the neck, the gentleman drags him, struggling, back to the corner at the bottom of the alley. 'Look,' he says sharply. Reluctantly, Sam looks. There is nothing. No one. He cannot believe it. His pursuer has disappeared. He relaxes a little, and as a consequence, so does the

gentleman's iron grip. His tone, however, is still condescending. 'A quite unnecessary panic, I suspect.'

Staring up the deserted alley, Sam protests, 'He was there.'

'A figment of your imagination.'

'He was there!' Beginning to get his breath back, Sam looks at the stranger properly for the first time. His face is white, his eyes piercing, and his long, pointed nose, haughty. He looks down it at Sam and speaks coolly.

'If you had, for one moment, resisted your childish fear and paused in your flight to listen, you would have heard, as I did, only one set of footsteps – your own.'

Sam is proud, and he doesn't like being talked down to in this way. He is on the point of answering back, when a much shorter, stockier man, whom he has not noticed before, catches his eye. This man, who sports a well-clipped moustache, is warm and friendly.

'I think you're being rather hard on the boy, Holmes. I could hear at least two lots of feet. Maybe more.'

'The echo, Watson,' says the gentleman in the deerstalker dismissively, 'the echo.'

'What?'

'There was no one but the boy himself. *His* imagination and *your* ears are equally at fault, Watson.

He was frightened by the sound of his own feet.'

'The echo! Of course,' replies Watson. 'How foolish of me.'

'I wasn't making it up,' Sam insists.

'If you were not making it up, then where is your pursuer?' enquires the white-faced gentleman with disdain. Sam is choked. He knows only too well that he was being chased. He knows why, but his pursuer is nowhere to be seen. He can't speak. Because he is unable to reply, the gentleman mutters under his breath, 'The boy is safe, and we have business to attend to,' and moves briskly away. 'Come along, Watson.'

'I wasn't making it up, Mr Watson,' pleads Sam.

'I believe you,' says Watson kindly. 'But unfortunately, you have no *evidence*.'

'Watson! We have not a moment to lose.'

'Coming, Holmes,' says Watson cheerily. Then to Sam, 'Will you be all right now?'

'I *have* got evidence though, sir,' says Sam, putting his hand in his pocket for the little bag of chestnuts. But his pocket is empty. The chestnuts are not there. Watson is looking expectantly at the lad, but it will take too long for Sam to explain. 'Nothing, sir,' he says quietly, 'it don't matter.'

Sam falls sullen and silent. His pride is dented again.

He is cross with himself because it looks as though he is lying. He feels sick with shame, and loses his balance for a moment. He sways suddenly as if he is going to pass out.

Watson puts his hand out to steady the boy. 'When did you last eat?' he asks.

'Nearly two days ago. I stole some food,' Sam confesses. 'That's why I was running away. But I've dropped it.' Sam is certain that Watson will be cross with him, and he stands, feeling dizzy, weak and stupid, waiting for even more humiliation. To his surprise, Watson is sympathetic.

'Poor boy, poor boy. Here. Take this.' From the pocket of his waistcoat, Watson produces two pennies, which he places in Sam's hand. 'It's not a lot, but it will buy you something to eat, and you won't have to steal. Spend this one, and if at all possible, save the other, as my dear mother used to say.'

'Watson! I am waiting,' calls the gentleman in the deerstalker.

'Coming, Holmes. I am sorry, boy. I must go.'

'It's not your fault, sir,' says Sam. 'You've been really decent. Thank you, Mr Watson.'

Sam watches as Watson moves away. His benefactor, who has a distinctly military air about him, turns back,

smiling, and says, 'By the way, it's not Mister.'

'Sorry?'

'I am not Mister Watson, I am *Doctor* Watson. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye, sir. And thank you.'

It was not until some hours later, when he had finally eaten something, that Sam pieced it together. When he had decided to try and live in dockland, there had been talk of a series of gruesome murders – indeed people talked of little else. The villain – a serial murderer whose grisly exploits with a meat-axe had terrorized the dockland community for nearly a year – had just been apprehended, but fear still gripped that whole sweep of the river known as the Isle of Dogs. The crime had finally been solved by the famous detective, Sherlock Holmes. Holmes was notorious for wearing an Aberdeen cape and a deerstalker hat. Watson – *Doctor* Watson – had addressed the haughty man with the pale face and the long, thin nose as Holmes, and this man had been wearing a cape and deerstalker. Sam was obliged to conclude that the person he had barged into – the man with the disdainful air and iron grip – was *Sherlock* Holmes, the celebrated consulting detective. In which case, the nice man, Dr Watson, had to be the

well-known writer, who recorded all Holmes's adventures. How Sam wished he could read them, but of course, he had no skill with letters, although he was determined to learn.

Sam's life was difficult. Every minute of it was a struggle. He found it hard to believe that, even for a moment, he had so much as spoken with two people from the other side of the tracks, two wealthy people, two well-known people. It was even harder to believe that one of them had been so nice to him; the whole incident seemed like some figment of his imagination – the theft, the chase, the encounter in the half-light of dusk. However, unlike the futile theft of chestnuts, unlike the nightmare chase, Sam had evidence of the encounter – two pennies. *They* were real enough.

Sam followed Watson's advice to the letter. With one of the pennies he bought food, and with the other, he began to save. He was determined that somehow he would make his way out of the poverty and homelessness that he so hated, and in which he felt trapped. And he dreamed. He dreamed about becoming a doctor, like his benefactor Dr Watson. And he saved, to try and make the dream come true.

TWO YEARS LATER . . .

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THE HOWLING DOG

A greeny-yellow fog swirled up from the River Thames. It clung to the walls, it smeared the paving stones, it crept under doors. A 'pea-souper' was what the rivermen called these foul-smelling vapours. They were enough to keep all but the desperate or determined in their homes: thirteen-year-old Sam Wiggins was a bit of both. When he'd run away from home, Sam had deliberately chosen a remote corner of London in which to hide – Limehouse, near the docks. He could easily lose himself there, so he stayed, even though he didn't like it. It was as though something terrible had happened there – a plague, or a murder. He heard a rumour that over three hundred years before, old King Henry, in his palace down at Hampton, was disturbed by the

barking of his dogs. To get a good night's sleep, he moved them to kennels on the other side of London. Which was how the spot where Sam had his hideout got its name – the Isle of Dogs. After two years, he was settled – stuck, you might say.

The East End of Victorian London was a lethal place. If you were homeless, it was hell. Sam was always tempted to steal just to survive. He still took dreadful risks occasionally, just to eat, and in order to protect his puny savings. He had managed to teach himself to read, he dreamed of being a doctor, and he was desperate not to get on the wrong side of the law. The places where they sent kids who were caught pilfering were even more terrifying than being homeless. Sam knew the horrors first-hand. He'd been living in the parish workhouse with his mum when she took the beadle, who ran it, for her second husband. Sam had adored his real dad, so when his new dad – the beadle – took his belt to Sam's back, he decided it was time to leave. He was frightened out on the street, but he felt more his own master. He'd been starving, he'd been ill, he'd even been beaten up, but he'd survived. He had learned who and what his enemies were, although there was one enemy over which he had no control – the weather. And it didn't get worse than this fog.

Only someone who knew the streets blindfolded would have risked going out at all in such filthy weather with darkness approaching, but Sam had business. He was slowly making his way towards the docks, feeling for a narrow passage that ran between two warehouses. He couldn't see it, he just knew it was there. He found it, slipped into it, and moved cautiously forward, sliding his hand along the mouldy wall to help him keep his bearings. Sam knew every stinking alley and vile corner of the Isle of Dogs. He had also got to know the locals – the boatmen, the carters, the ladies of the street, the law. And he'd survived by making sure *they* knew *him*, by doing them the odd favour, by making himself indispensable. He knew the rogues too, the local gangs. He knew where they hung out, the pubs, the gambling rooms, the opium dens. As he edged his way out of the passage and on to the greasy cobblestones of Black Lane, he could hear a dog howling, not far away. A dog? It was ghostly, almost human: long cries of pain that made his flesh creep. 'Blasted fog,' he said to himself. 'It plays tricks on you.'

Sam was a loner. Always had been. He was tall for his age, thin, pallid, with sharp features and dark hair swept back from his forehead, tied off in a ponytail.

Tonight, with a ragged strip of cotton round his nose and mouth to protect his lungs, he looked like a right villain, but the fog was so dense, no one could see him. The acrid reek of chlorine cut through his meagre protection and caught the back of his throat. He turned up the collar of his battered tweed jacket and moved on down towards the river, where the fog was likely to be even thicker. Sam's destination was an old Thames wherry – a big, light barge with a sail – moored in a nearby wharf. The captain of the wherry had a job for him. Dockland was deserted. No one else would have bothered to keep an appointment on an evening like this, but letting people down wasn't Sam's style. The Captain wanted Sam's help. Sam had told him he would be there, and not even this fog was going to stop him.

On the wealthier, west side of London, it was almost as bad. Fog has no respect for money, as Billy Chizzell, the page-boy at 221b Baker Street, discovered when he popped out to buy a newspaper for his employer. He could hear the street vendor's cry – 'Evenin' papers! Get your evenin' papers!' – but couldn't *see* the paper seller from ten yards away. Back at 221b, as he trudged upstairs to the study, Billy noticed the

headlines, which suggested that burning less coal might reduce the smog. He shrugged. Most people's fireplaces, like the furnaces and factory chimneys, were still belching smoke.

One man, however, was prepared to endure the cold for the sake of his fellow men, and this was the gentleman to whom Billy handed the paper – John Watson. As a doctor in general practice, Watson had seen the effects of these fogs on his patients; he had watched too many of the children die, coughing blood.

This evening, quiet and preoccupied, Watson barely noticed Billy's arrival, which was unlike him. Billy was pretty sure he knew why Watson was behaving so out of character. More than a week ago, Billy's other employer, Sherlock Holmes, with whom Dr Watson shared rooms, had gone out late one afternoon and had not returned. Holmes was Billy's hero, the man that more than any other in the world he wanted to be like. Holmes's ability to solve mysteries, using nothing more than his powers of observation and deduction, brought pleas for his help from all over the world. It was common for Holmes to be called away suddenly, but it was uncommon for him to leave no explanation.

His early-evening surgery over, the troubled doctor

sat wrapped in a heavy tartan rug. And that was how he remained after Billy delivered the paper – staring at the unlit fire, the newspaper unopened on his knee. Watson was indeed thinking about his missing friend – Sherlock Holmes. He could draw only two conclusions from Holmes's long silence: either the detective was *unable* to communicate with him or he *did not wish* to. Both possibilities were distressing.

Through the tall windows that usually looked out on to the bustle of Baker Street, Watson watched the clouds of sulphurous fog turning black with the December night. Unsettled, he rose and rang the bell to summon the housekeeper, Mrs Hudson. Moments later, as he was drawing the heavy velvet curtains to shut out the loathsome mists and vapours, he heard her sharp knock at the door.

'Come in, Mrs Hudson!' he called. The door was opened by a short, plumpish woman, impeccably uniformed in her apron and starched white cap. Behind her, on the landing, Watson caught a glimpse of Billy Chizzell, equally smart in his green page-boy uniform with its rows of silver buttons and pill-box hat. As Mrs Hudson entered the room, Watson added in a whisper, 'And, Mrs H, please shut the door. I do not wish Billy to hear.' Mrs Hudson did as she was asked.

'Mrs Hudson, I am most deeply concerned about Mr Holmes. Nine days, and still no word.'

The door may have been firmly closed, but Billy's ears were equally firmly glued to the keyhole. He heard all the fears for Holmes's safety that Dr Watson confided to Mrs Hudson, and decided that if his master and hero was missing, he, Billy Chizzell, was going to do something about it.

Even in the candlelit glow of the Captain's cabin, Sam fancied he could still hear a dog howling. If the Captain could hear it, he didn't appear to. He heated a fishy broth on his little galley stove, placed a brimming bowl on the table in front of Sam, sat down opposite, and watched him eat. The Captain had a ruddy, carbuncled face. When he spoke, it was with a rich West Country drawl.

'If ye turn up early next Friday, moi lad, then this silver sixpence . . .' he placed a coin on the table between them, 'is yours. Take good 'n' proper care o' moi little boat, and when oi gets back from settling moi affairs, then this . . .' and he placed another gleaming sixpence in front of Sam, 'will go with it.'

Sam couldn't take his eyes off the money. He could live off one sixpence for a week, and put the other in

the sock where he hid his savings. He sipped at the thick soup – the first warm food he had tasted that day. Apart from the Captain's patient breathing, and the occasional creak of the wherry, there was no other sound in the cabin until Sam's spoon scraped the bottom of the steel bowl.

'Well?' said the Captain.

'Friday, sir,' replied Sam. 'I'll be here. What you got on board?'

'Cargo of sugar for 'ee to take care of.'

Sam himself had been tempted to steal sugar from barges: when the tide was out, and the boats lay grounded on the river-bed, you just jumped on board, cut holes in the sugar sacks and scooped the sugar into every pocket, hat or bag you could carry. Lots of kids that Sam knew, who were hard up, used to practise this simple theft, and the right dealer would pay a halfpenny a pound.

'Sugar. Right,' said Sam and rose, ready to go. 'And thanks for the grub.'

Fog was seeping ominously round the edges of the cabin door. It seemed to get everywhere, even inside, contaminating everything with a thin grey film.

'Would ye like to bed down 'ere tonight?' asked the Captain. 'Ye can have the other bunk.'

Sam shook his head. 'No thanks, sir. I got to be somewhere else.' The Captain knew he was lying, and admired his pride. 'Bye, sir,' said Sam. 'And thanks again.'

'Ye be a good lad, Sam Wiggins. Older than your years.'

'I'll see you Friday, sir,' said Sam.

As the Captain opened the cabin door, the night was pierced by another chilling howl, more human than ever. Neither spoke, but they both sensed that some crime was being committed, some act of evil, hidden from the eyes of the world by this repellent fog. Sam hesitated.

'Just a dog,' he said.

The Captain didn't look convinced. 'It's a bad noight to be abroad, young Sam. Do ye know what they say about a dog, howling in the noight?'

'No, sir.'

'Well, they do say it means a death.' Sam looked very pale. 'Ye want to change your moind and stay?'

'No thank you, sir. I'll be all right, sir,' said Sam, edging nervously outside.

'Go careful then, lad.' The Captain closed the door and returned to his cosy cabin. Sam covered his mouth, hunched his shoulders and set off bravely down the

gangplank. He feared another howl would split the night, but instead there was a brooding silence, which was just as eery.

Sam set off slowly through the fogbound wastes of dockland. During the two dark and lonely years since he first came here, Sam had been befriended by Ann-li, a young Chinese girl. The Chinese were often disliked and distrusted, just because they were Chinese, and Ann-li was, in her way, as much of an outsider as Sam. One night, Sam had rescued her from some hooligans. Mr and Mrs Chang – Ann-li's mum and dad – were thankful; they fed Sam, and took care of him. There weren't many people in this part of the world who were charitable to strangers, and Sam felt real gratitude to the close-knit Chang family.

Sam was heading back to his hideout. He edged his way along the waterfront and turned by the water pump, up into Skittle Alley. As Chang's Seamen's Hostel was on his way, Sam intended to drop in. The last time he'd seen Ann-li, she had said she needed to talk to him, and Sam had the impression that it was about something pretty troubling. But then he'd had a job out of London, breaking coal for a coalmonger, and he'd not had time to catch up with his friend.

It was Ann-li's uncle Fu who let him in. Sam knew

immediately that something was wrong. Uncle Fu – everyone called him Uncle Fu – was normally friendly and welcoming, but this evening, as he ushered Sam past the pipe smokers in the crowded, gloomy front room, he was quiet and withdrawn. Sam had grown used to the strangeness of this place. He knew that these dreamy-looking people, puffing at their hookahs, had no idea he was there, no notion that the building in which they lay, cocooned in sweet-smelling warmth, was besieged by fog. They were beyond caring. Fu, in padded slippers, small square black cap and pigtail, glided between them, his silken robes brushing them softly as he led Sam to the stairs. He ushered him up without a word, and turned back to tend the pipes.

Upstairs, Mrs Chang was feeding Ann-li's baby brother. She acknowledged Sam but, unusually, didn't smile. In answer to Sam's question, she merely pointed upwards. Sam found Ann-li in her tiny attic room.

'Sam! You shouldn't be here.'

'Why not? What's wrong?'

'Some men are with my father.'

'Who?'

'I don't know.'

'Who are they, Ann-li? What's wrong?'

'They won't tell me,' said Ann-li, then added sadly,

'but soon, I guess, we shall be moving on.'

'What d'you mean?'

'Always we settle. Make home. For a while things go well. Then men come for my father. I don't understand. They don't tell.'

'Who are these men?' Ann-li looked as if she wanted to answer but couldn't. 'Who are they, Ann-li?' Still Ann-li did not respond. Sam realised it was because she was listening. '*Where* are they?'

Ann-li sat motionless for a moment, then said, 'Come. I show. But no sound. Or we make worse. These men I hate. One of them – a big man – is just big and stupid, I think. His name is Dooley. The other – I can't think of him without feeling scared – he is so creepy. And he is *not* stupid.'

'Do you know his name?'

'He is a colonel. He was in the army, I guess, and he calls himself Colonel still, although he is now working for very different people.'

'What?' said Sam, mystified. 'Who?'

'A Chinese gang. They call themselves the Dragons. But I am just guessing. I don't really know. They not tell me. This is what I overhear.'

'Do you know his name?'

'Maltravers. Colonel Maltravers. You still want

to go see?' Ann-li clearly did *not* want to go and see at all. Sam was a bit frightened, but he was curious. He nodded.

They crept down the narrow ladder from Ann-li's attic and then out through a window, on to the flat roof of the soot-blackened outbuildings at the rear. Ann-li paused. She held her fingers to her lips and pointed. The swirling fog was lit up by the dull yellow glow coming through a dirt-engrained skylight. Too frightened to look herself, Ann-li ushered Sam forward. Creeping closer, Sam looked down through the cloudy glass.

In the small room below, Sam could see two men with Ann-li's father, Chang, who was white with fear. Towering over him was the biggest man Sam had ever seen. From this giant's right ear, a jagged scar ran across his face, into the corner of his mouth. The knife which had slashed his cheek in a gang brawl had taken the tip of his tongue off. Dooley had never been handsome or talkative; now he was disfigured, and at this moment silent. It was the other man – Colonel Edmund Maltravers – who was doing the talking. Sam laid his ear close to the corner of the window, trying to hear what was being said. Maltravers – a bald, mean-faced man, with lidless eyes –

hissed at Ann-li's father. 'Do as I ask, Chang.'

Sam could only just hear Chang's mumbled reply. 'I a-am sorry, Colonel. I cannot.'

Sam looked back at Ann-li and beckoned her forward. Ann-li shook her head. Suddenly, Maltravers's voice rose loud, spitting with fury. 'Answer me, Chang, you little fool. Are you not aware of how small a thing you are being asked to do?' Sam was hypnotized by the sheer sense of evil emanating from the man.

'It is not how small a thing, Colonel, but how bad,' Chang replied. 'I will not take children from their parents, from those who love them. Other things I have done for you, bad things, but this I cannot do.'

Sam's mind reeled. What did Maltravers mean? Take children away from their parents? Chang was a kind man. What bad things had he *already* done? Afraid, Sam watched as Maltravers turned his back on Chang and picked up a pair of hand bellows that he applied to the small fire that was smouldering in the grate. Nothing was said as Maltravers heated the embers. What was he going to do? For one moment Sam suspected that Maltravers had caught sight of him through the dirty skylight, but Maltravers did not interrupt what he was doing. With a pair of tongs, he picked up one burning coal and held it close to

Chang's face, at the same time pinning him with an evil smile.

'Are you sure you don't want to change your mind, my dear fellow?'

Sam glanced hurriedly at Ann-li. He didn't want his friend to see her father being humiliated, or perhaps even tortured. But Ann-li was hunched in a corner of the roof, with her back to Sam.

Chang was staring at the red-hot coal and stammering with fear.

'I would like to, C-Colonel, because I am afraid, but I – I ca-cannot.'

Then Maltravers spoke words that filled Sam with horror.

'Chang, if you refuse to do what I am asking, you will oblige me to take your *own* daughter from you.' Blowing on the coal, he smiled at Chang. 'Yes. To help you see reason . . . we shall have to take your daughter away . . .'

Chang was shivering with fear. He darted for the door, but Dooley was too quick. He seized Chang by the neck, jerked him off the floor and held him, dangling like a puppet.

'Do not make me hurt you,' said Maltravers, ripping open Chang's robe and exposing his chest. He