

The Hound of the Baskervilles

Arthur Conan Doyle, 1902

The Hound of the Baskervilles is the most famous of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes novels. Read the passage below.

'I have in my pocket a manuscript,' said Dr. James Mortimer.

'I observed it as you entered the room,' said Holmes. 'It is an old manuscript. The exact date is 1742.'

Dr. Mortimer drew it from his pocket. 'This paper was given to me by Sir Charles Baskerville, whose sudden death created much excitement in Devonshire. I was his personal friend as well as his medical attendant. He was a strong-minded man, sir, shrewd and practical, and yet he took this document very seriously, and his mind was prepared for just such an end as did eventually overtake him.'

I looked over his shoulder at the yellow paper and the faded script. At the top was written: 'Baskerville Hall,' and below in large, scrawling figures: '1742.'

'It appears to be a statement of some sort.'

'Yes, it is about legend which runs in the Baskerville family.'

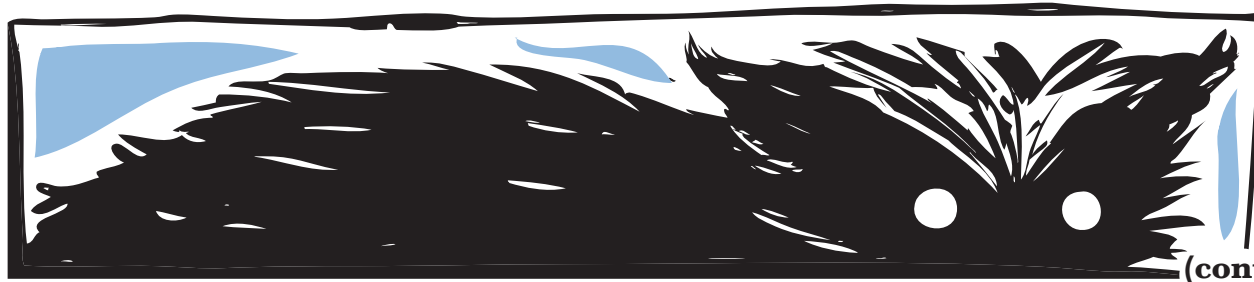
'But I understand that it is something more modern and practical upon which you wish to consult me?'

'Most modern. A pressing matter, which must be decided within twenty-four hours. The manuscript is short and is intimately connected with the affair. With your permission I will read it to you.'

Holmes leaned back in his chair, placed his fingertips together, and closed his eyes, with an air of resignation. Dr. Mortimer turned the manuscript to the light and in a high, cracking voice read the curious, old narrative:

'In the time of the Great Rebellion, Baskerville Manor was held by a man named Hugo. Now, saints have never flourished in these parts, but there was in him a certain cruelty which made his name known through the West. Hugo fell in love (if it could be called that) with the daughter of a yeoman who held lands near the Baskerville estate. But the young maiden rejected him, for she feared his evil name.

'One day, Hugo, with five or six of his wicked companions, went down to the farm and carried off the maiden. When they brought her back, the maiden was placed in an upper chamber, while Hugo and his friends sat down to a long carouse. Now, the poor lass was terrified by the shouting and terrible oaths she heard below. At last, in the stress of her fear, she snuck down under the eaves and ran homeward across the moor.



(continued)

‘Some time later Hugo went upstairs to take food and drink to his captive, and found the chamber empty. Filled with anger, he ran downstairs and sprang upon the great table, crying aloud that he would give over his body and soul to the Powers of Evil if he could find her.

‘While the revellers stood aghast at his fury, they cried out that they should put the hounds upon her. Hugo ran from the house, shouting to his friends to saddle his mare and unkennel the hounds, and giving the hounds one of the maid’s handkerchiefs, he sent them off full cry in the moonlight over the moor. Then the whole of them took horse and started in pursuit. They rode swiftly, following the road back towards the maiden’s home.

‘They had gone a mile or two when they passed a night shepherd of the moorlands, and they cried to him to know if he had seen her. The man was so crazed with fear that he could hardly speak, but at last he said that he had indeed seen the unhappy maiden, with the hounds upon her track. ‘I have seen more than that,’ said he, ‘for Hugo Baskerville passed me upon his black mare, and there ran behind him such a black dog as God forbid should ever be at my heels.’ The squires cursed the shepherd and rode onward. But soon their skins turned cold, for there came a-galloping across the moor Hugo’s black mare, an empty saddle trailing behind him. The revellers rode close together, for a great fear was on them, but they still followed over the moor.

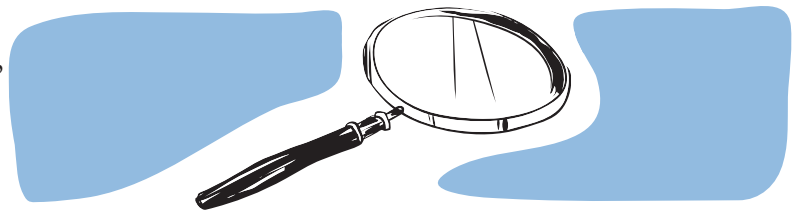
‘At last they came upon the hounds. These dogs, though known for their valour, were whimpering in a cluster at the head of a deep valley, some slinking away and some gazing down the narrow valley before them. Most of them would by no means advance, but the boldest three rode forward down the hill. At the bottom stood two great stones, still to be seen there, which were set by forgotten peoples in the days of old. The moon was shining bright upon the clearing, and there in the centre lay the unhappy maid. But it was not the sight of her body, nor was it the body of Hugo Baskerville lying near her, which raised the hair upon the heads of these three daredevils, but it was that standing over Hugo was a foul thing, a great, black beast, shaped like a hound, yet larger than any hound any mortal eye has rested upon. As they looked the thing tore at Hugo Baskerville, and as it turned its blazing eyes and dripping jaws upon them, the three shrieked with fear and rode for dear life, still screaming, across the moor. One, it is said, died that very night of what he had seen, and the other two were but broken men for the rest of their days.

‘Such is the tale of the hound which is said to have plagued the family ever since. I hereby ask that you refrain from crossing the moor in those dark hours when the powers of evil are exalted.’

When Dr. Mortimer had finished reading, he pushed his spectacles up on his forehead and stared across at Sherlock Holmes. Holmes yawned.

‘Well?’ said he. ‘Do you not find it interesting?’

‘To a collector of fairy tales.’



Dr. Mortimer drew a folded newspaper out of his pocket. ‘Now, Mr. Holmes, here’s something a little more recent. This is the Devon County Chronicle of May 14th of this year. It is an account of the death of Sir Charles Baskerville which occurred a few days ago.’

Holmes leaned a little forward and his expression became intent. Dr. Motimer readjusted his glasses and began:

(continued)

‘The recent death of Sir Charles Baskerville has cast a gloom over the county. Though Sir Charles had resided at Baskerville Hall for a only a short time, his amiability of character and extreme generosity won the affection and respect of all who had met him.

‘Sir Charles, as is well known, made large sums of money in South African speculation, returning to England with his gains. It was his desire that the whole country-side should profit by his good fortune. His generous donations to local and county charities have been frequently chronicled in these columns.

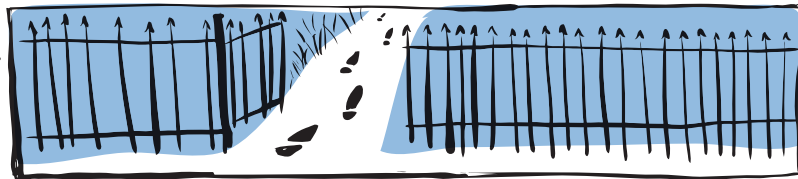
‘The circumstances of Sir Charles’ death are not entirely clear, but enough has been done to dispose of those rumours to which local superstition has given rise. There is no reason to suspect foul play, or to imagine that death could be from anything but natural causes.

‘The facts of the case are simple: Sir Charles Baskerville was in the habit of walking down the famous Yew Alley of Baskerville Hall every night before going to bed. On the 14th of May he went out as usual for his evening walk. At twelve o’clock the butler, finding the hall door still open, became alarmed, and went in search of his master. The day had been wet, and Sir Charles’s footmarks were easily traced down the alley and out a gate which leads out on to the moor. It was at the far end of it that his body was discovered.’

Dr. Mortimer refolded his paper and replaced it in his pocket.

‘Those are the public facts, Mr. Holmes, in connection with the death of Sir Charles Baskerville.’

‘These are the public facts?’ said Holmes.



‘They are.’

‘Then let me have the private ones.’ Holmes leaned back and put his fingertips together.

‘In doing so,’ said Dr. Mortimer, who had begun to show signs of some strong emotion, ‘I am telling things which I have not confided to anyone. My motive for withholding it from the coroner’s inquiry is that a man of science like myself must shy away from superstition. For this reason, I thought that I was justified in telling less than I knew, since no practical good could result from it, but with you there is no reason why I should not be perfectly frank.

‘The moor is very sparsely inhabited, and those who live near each other are thrown very much together. For this reason I saw a good deal of Sir Charles Baskerville. Sir Charles was a quiet man, but a shared interest in science kept us together. He had brought back much scientific information from South Africa, and many an evening we spent together discussing it.

‘Within the last few months it became increasingly plain to me that Sir Charles was strained to the breaking point. He had taken this legend of the hound to heart—so much so that, although he would walk in his own grounds, he would not go out upon the moor at night. Incredible as it may appear to you, Mr. Holmes, he was honestly convinced that a dreadful fate overhung his family, and certainly the fates of his ancestors were not encouraging. The idea of some ghastly presence haunted him, and on more than one occasion he asked me whether I had on my medical journeys at night ever seen any strange creature or heard the baying of a hound.

(continued)

'I can remember driving up to his house in the evening some three weeks before he died. He happened to be at his hall door. I had descended from my gig and was standing in front of him, when I saw his eyes fix themselves over my shoulder, and stare past me with an expression of the most dreadful horror. I whisked round and had just time to catch a glimpse of something which I took to be a large black calf passing at the head of the drive. So excited and alarmed was he that I was compelled to go down to the spot where the animal had been and look around for it. It was gone. I stayed with him all evening, and he showed me the narrative which I read to you. I mention this small episode because it assumes some importance in view of the tragedy which followed, but I was convinced at the time that the matter was entirely trivial and that his excitement had no justification.

'I suggested he go to London. His heart was, I knew, affected, and the constant anxiety in which he lived was having a serious effect upon his health. I thought that a few months of distraction would send him back a new man. On the night of Sir Charles's death the butler, who made the discovery, sent for me. I was able to reach Baskerville Hall within an hour of the event. I checked and corroborated all the facts which were mentioned: I followed the footsteps down the alley, I saw the spot at the gate where he seemed to have waited, I remarked the change in the shape of the prints after that point, I noted that there were no other footsteps save those of the butler, and finally I examined the body, which had not been touched until my arrival. Sir Charles lay on his face, his arms out, his fingers dug into the ground, and his features convulsed with some strong emotion to such an extent I could hardly recognize him. There was certainly no physical injury of any kind.

But one false statement was made by the butler. He said that there were no traces on the ground near the body. He did not observe any. But I did—some little distance off, but fresh and clear.'

'Footprints?'

'Footprints.'

'A man's?'



Dr. Mortimer looked strangely at us for an instant, and his voice sank almost to a whisper as he answered:

'Mr. Holmes, they were the footprints of a gigantic hound!'

COMPARE AND CONTRAST CHARACTERS

Write four personality traits of each character in the chart below.

<i>Sherlock Holmes</i>				
<i>Dr. Mortimer</i>				
<i>Sir Charles Baskerville</i>				
<i>Hugo Baskerville</i>				

What two characters are the most alike?

What two characters are the most different?
