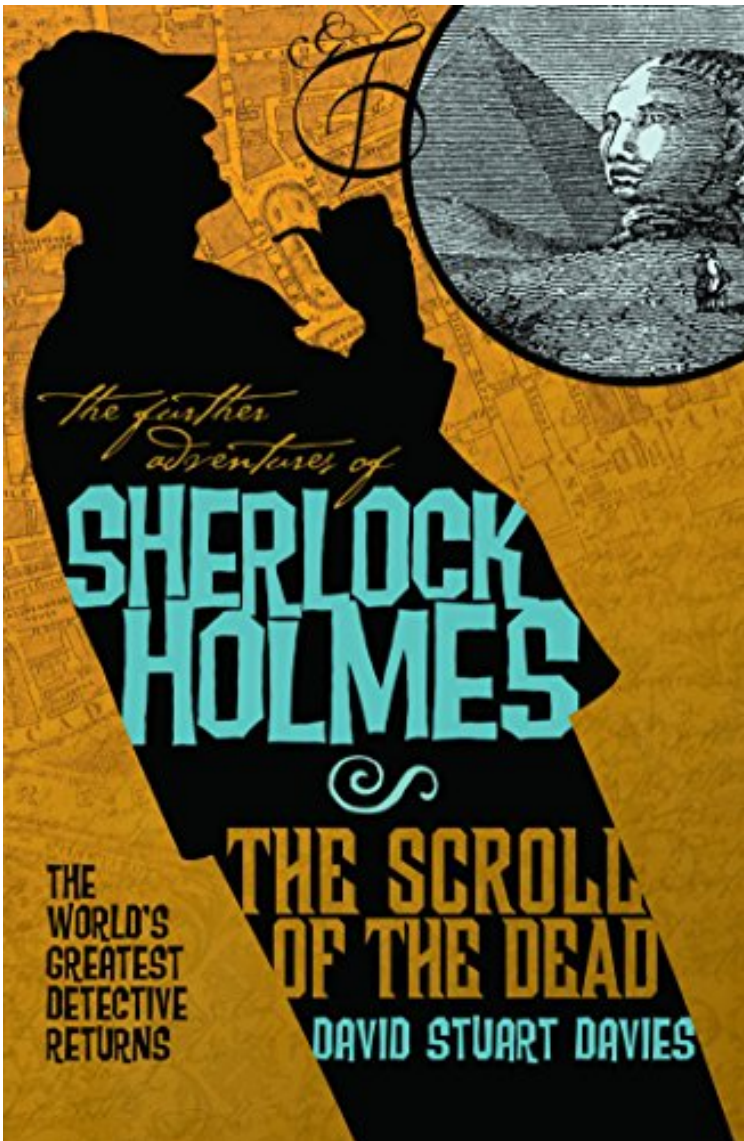


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The Scroll of the Dead



Par David Stuart Davies
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur Sherlock Holmes attends a seance to unmask an impostor posing as a medium: Sebastian Melmoth, a man hell-bent on obtaining immortality after the discovery of an ancient Egyptian papyrus. It is up to Holmes and Doctor Watson to stop him and avert disaster... The action moves from London to the picturesque Lake District as Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson once more battle with the forces of evil.ExtraitChapter I - An Inspector CallsIt has often been said - indeed, I have been one of those who have said it - that Sherlock Holmes, the famous consulting detective, was the champion of law and order of his age. However, on reflection, I can state that this is only partly true. Crime did indeed fascinate Holmes, but when it came to the solving of it, he was very selective. I have been present when he has rejected numerous pleas and entreaties to tackle a particular mystery solely on the basis that it was simply

not interesting enough. The misdemeanours that intrigued my capricious friend had to bear the hallmark of the recherche before he would contemplate involving himself in providing a solution. He loved detective work for its own sake, but the detective work had to pose an unusual conundrum or it presented no challenge. So it was in the spring of 1896 when, after a very fallow period, he devoured news of criminal activity reported in the daily press in the hope of spotting some intriguing puzzle to satisfy his needs. I would aid him every morning in this pursuit by pointing out what I regarded to be crimes of intellectual interest. What you may consider stimulating to the deductive brain, Watson, falls far short of my ideal, he would comment disparagingly. Music hall artiste strangled in dressing room poses no cerebral challenge whatsoever. A case of jealousy and intoxication. No doubt even the Scotland Yarders could cope with that one in a day! Have you seen the report in the Chronicle of the murder of Sir George Faversham, the noted archaeologist? Holmes took his pipe from his mouth and paused. Items stolen from the family home? Nothing of real value taken. Ah, he scoffed. Common burglary with homicidal consequences. I threw down the paper. I give up, I cried. There is obviously nothing that will satisfy you. Holmes gave me a weak grin. Well, at least we are agreed on that point. His eyes wandered to the drawer in his bureau where I knew he still kept the neat Morocco case containing the hypodermic syringe. And that is not the answer either, I snapped. For a moment Holmes looked surprised, and then a dreamy smile touched his countenance. He realised that I was playing him at his own game by reading his thoughts. The idea amused him so much that he burst out with a roar of laughter. His hilarity was so contagious that soon I was laughing along with him. So enraptured were we in our own amusement that we failed to take notice of the insistent knock at our sitting room door. Moments later, it opened hesitantly and Inspector Hardcastle of the Yard stood on our threshold. Holmes had worked with Hardcastle on a couple of investigations in the past, notably the disappearing Chinese laundry affair. He was a dour Yorkshireman who was methodical and thorough, rather than inspired, in his police work. He appeared most discomfited by our abandoned behaviour. If I have called at an inconvenient moment, gentlemen he said, bristling somewhat, unsure whether he was the cause of our amusement. Not at all, Hardcastle, cried my friend, still chortling. It is always a pleasure to receive a visit from one of my friends in the official force. He waved the Scotland Yarder to a chair. Sit down, my dear fellow, and don't look so disheartened. Weeks of inactivity have lightened my brain. You are indeed a sight for sore eyes, especially if you have a case for us. The inspector, uncertainly still clouding his features, did as he was bidden. He was a tall, beefy man whose great oval face was beset with large, grey, mournful eyes and a broken nose. His black hair, plastered with cream, looked as though it had just dropped on his head. Clutching his bowler tightly in his large hands, he sat awkwardly in the chair opposite us. You do have a case for us? enquired Holmes languidly, his mood changing rapidly. Something I thought might interest you, said Hardcastle, his equilibrium still not restored. I hope it's not something already reported in the papers, observed Holmes, relighting his pipe with a glowing cinder from the fire. It's not the strangled magician at Henty's Music Hall? It most certainly is not, snapped Hardcastle indignantly. Young Kingsley is on that case. I put my money on Roland Reilly, the 'Irish Vagabond with a Voice of Gold'. I am sure you are right. I have heard that when in drink he was a towering rage. In the confined world of the music hall artiste, the smallest slights and petty jealousy become magnified beyond all reason. I wonder that there isn't a blood bath every night. Hardcastle looked curiously at my friend, striving to ascertain whether Holmes was being serious or still gently teasing him. Come, come, said Holmes, spinning his hand as a conductor might to increase the speed of the music, let us hear about your case, Hardcastle. There has been a break-in at the British Museum. Is that all? groaned Holmes, slumping back in the chair. There's more to it than that. There had better be. What was stolen: some mediaeval pottery, or some gewgaws belonging to Henry VIII, perhaps? I'll come to that in a moment. It was a very professional job. A two man operation. How do you know? The Inspector's face lit up. Because they were foolish enough to leave clues behind, Mr Holmes. We found two sets of muddy footprints near the scene of the crime and, before you ask, they could not have been anyone else's because the floor is mopped clean after closing time. Holmes held his hands in mock surrender. Two men it is then, Hardcastle. The crib-cracker and the expert, I should guess. Expert? I asked. Yes, Doctor Watson. Whoever it was knew exactly what he wanted. He had the whole ruddy museum to go at and just the one thing was taken. Holmes leaned forward a little, interested now. What was that one thing? Some papyrus document - a scroll, I think. Ah, from the Egyptology room. That's right. Full of those old mummies and dog-headed statues and the like. And, said Holmes various gold trinkets and other very precious objets d'art which would have been far easier and more profitable to dispose of than a crumbling old document. Precisely, Mr. Holmes. Well, Watson, what does this suggest to you? A collector. The item to be

added to his private collection, for his own personal viewing. My friend beamed. A very determined collector. More determined than you'd think, said Hardcastle. Determined enough to kill for the booty. Who? The night security guard. How? Shot in the head at point blank range. Really. With a Derringer pistol. How can you be so sure? I asked. In answer, Hardcastle fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a dark velvet bag fastened with a draw-string at the top. Opening the bag, he allowed the contents to slip onto the small table by Holmes. It was a small silver Derringer pistol which sparkled in the firelight. The murderer dropped it while making his escape. Careless of him, said Holmes, taking a long-stemmed clay pipe from the rack on the mantelpiece. Slipping the stem through the trigger guard, he lifted up the pistol to examine it. An expensive weapon chased silver a recent purchase. He murmured these comments more to himself than to us. I remembered about your own system for checking fingerprints, Mr. Holmes, Mr. Holmes, said Hardcastle eagerly. That's how you managed to lay a trap for Fu Wong, but I reckon you won't find any on that gun. Of course not. This fellow would have worn gloves. He sniffed the weapon, which had a finely-tooled brown leather grip, and then examined the barrel. Fired just the once. Not the kind of firearm usually associated with burglary and the class of crib-crackers we've encountered before, eh, Watson? It's a ladies' gun, I sniffed. But it does a man's job. Holmes took it over to the window and, retrieving his lens from the bureau, scrutinised the Derringer closely. At length he returned to his chair. Slipping the pistol into the velvet bag, he handed it back to the inspector. Anything, Mr. Holmes? Holmes pursed his lips and shook his head. Very little. The owner is a youngish man with blond hair, has expensive tastes, is somewhat extravagant in nature, is arrogant, and extremely confident. And he is probably mentally unstable. The inspector's eyes widened. How on earth do you reach those conclusions? A fine blond hair caught in the trigger guard gives me the colouring and the age, and there is the faint aroma of gentlemen's eau de toilette still lingering about the leather grip. The owner obviously handled the weapon while his fingers were still moist with the perfume and it has soaked into the crevices of the tooled leather. For so persistent an aroma to remain, this particular fragrance could not have been purchased for less than fifty shillings a bottle, which indicates both the expensive taste and the extravagant nature. The fact that... Revue de presse' A thundering good yarn... I wholeheartedly recommend it to anyone who has an affection for Holmes and a good, old-fashioned page turner' --- Sleuthing the Shelves' All in all, this is dead good entertainment.' --- Sci-Fi Online