

NAXOS
AudioBooks

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
The Poison Belt

THE
COMPLETE
CLASSICS

UNABRIDGED

Read by **Glen McCready**

CLASSIC
FICTION



NA393312D

1	Chapter 1: The Blurring of Lines	7:12
2	'We will suppose,' I read...	8:02
3	I was coming out from the news editor's room...	4:59
4	But our good humour was restored...	7:28
5	'That may be...'	6:53
6	He gave me the amused handshake...	6:39
7	Chapter 2: The Tide of Death	8:03
8	The explanation only brought uproarious...	7:30
9	'Later, when I descended to order the car...'	5:49
10	Summerlee had risen...	8:36
11	Lord John Roxton wiped his brow.	7:26
12	'Talkin' of death,' said Lord John...	4:48
13	Chapter 3: Submerged	8:54
14	At that instant, just as I took a step...	6:53
15	Challenger smiled and shook his head...	7:18
16	'There is a house on fire...'	6:39

17	'It strikes me nature's on top this time...'	6:32
18	'As to the body,' remarked Challenger...	4:41
19	Chapter 4: A Diary of the Dying	6:32
20	'Well, even now I don't feel inclined...'	6:23
21	We fall into silence again.	5:37
22	I look out at the sunrise...	5:07
23	'I cannot truthfully describe...'	5:57
24	Chapter 5: The Dead World	8:02
25	Summerlee craned his neck...	8:36
26	It was this grim hush...	7:01
27	It was here that we received...	6:49
28	A dozen motorbuses...	6:26
29	Chapter 6: The Great Awakening	8:35
30	I rushed downstairs...	8:57
31	Well, I seem to recollect...	6:58

Total time: 3:35:43

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

(1859–1930)

The Poison Belt

The Poison Belt (1913) is the second in the series of Conan Doyle's Professor Challenger books. The first, *The Lost World*, was published just a year earlier, but the others were not written until the First World War was over, and Conan Doyle had become even more convinced of the validity of spiritualism. It was to be more than enough for his literary immortality to have created Sherlock Holmes (his immortality or otherwise in the spiritual world is not within the remit of this introduction), but in Professor Challenger and his adventures he provided the reading public with not just a new hero but a pioneering development of a new genre.

Science fiction (or sci-fi as it has become known) is not new. Imagining unreachable landscapes and placing humans there to deal with what they find is essentially as

old as writing itself (Dante's *Inferno*, for example, or any vision of the afterlife). But Conan Doyle had read and loved some of the earliest and best exponents of it in its more immediately recognisable modern form – the work of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, for instance. These writers were doing what the best sci-fi always does – commenting on the present through a particular branch of the imaginative arts. The 'science' in science fiction is, naturally, crucial too.

As developments in technology changed the physical landscape (heavy industry, telecommunications, cars and aeroplanes), and the reach of the scientists moved into every aspect of human life (medicine, evolution, astronomy, philosophy), the potential was as terrifying as it was thrilling. Science fiction addresses these fears, in part through exciting the

reader's desire for thrills and danger, but also in allowing a broader comment on societal attitudes towards difference, change and humanity in general. Wells has become the great British well-spring for this – specifically with *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* – but Conan Doyle has more right than many to be given similar credit. In the Professor Challenger books he not only uses similar extra-terrestrial (or extra-temporal) threats to civilisation, he also offers readers a humanist, scientific and rational basis for hope; and manages to do so in characters that are as ebullient, active, individual and arresting as their creator.

Arthur Conan Doyle was born in Scotland in 1859 to a father who was a drunken epileptic, eventually incarcerated in a lunatic asylum – and a mother of great strength and imagination, whose story-telling enchanted Arthur. He became a doctor, but had always enjoyed writing, and when he finally decided to give up medicine he was so relieved and happy that he threw his handkerchief up to the ceiling in delight. But his training in the sciences proved a vital element

in his fiction, and one of his tutors at university, Dr Joseph Bell, even proved a model for Sherlock Holmes. But perhaps more importantly, Conan Doyle believed in science as a means of explaining the world. He was a disciple of rationalism, of observation, of experimentation and fact. This may not seem to tie in comfortably with his later beliefs in fairies and psychic phenomena, but as Professor Challenger himself points out:

'...none of us can predicate what opportunities of observation one may have from what we may call the spirit plane to the plane of matter. It surely must be evident to the most obtuse person [...] that it is while we are ourselves material that we are most fitted to watch and form a judgment upon material phenomena.'

And so Professor Challenger makes a point of challenging the hysteria of the press and the complacency of the establishment. In this he is assisted by three companions – a sceptical scientist, a professional adventurer and a somewhat

idealistic young journalist. Although they represent 'types', and offer the author a chance to discuss ideas through their differing perspectives, they are also appealing as people in their own right. Summerlee, the scientist, querulously irritated by Challenger's assumption of superiority; Roxton, the adventurer, rather languid in the face of danger; and Malone, the journalist, an Everyman of sorts – if, that is, Everyman were in the habit of taking life-threatening risks to prove his manliness.

In their first adventure, *The Lost World*, they had travelled to a remote plateau to record the existence of dinosaurs that had escaped the normal currents of evolution. In *The Poison Belt*, rather surprisingly most of the action takes place in Challenger's house in Sussex (the English county where Conan Doyle himself once lived). Here the four, together with Challenger's devoted wife, watch what appears to be the end of the world as a cloud of poison ether approaches. It's a remarkably compact novel, but despite its brevity it is full of compassion. Challenger for example – a huge, arrogant, but immensely likeable

figure – displays touching tenderness to his devoted wife. All of them show humility and humanity as they observe the encroaching poison.

Significantly, this humanity is the greater moral running through the story. The world is at the mercy of forces far more superior than Man can understand, far less oppose; the end could be just around the corner. But rather than see this as a cause for pessimism or nihilism, the book suggests that it should lead to a development of the more tender aspects of mankind's abilities – care for each other, disinterested investigation, a quest for understanding and a desire to make the best of what uncertain time one may have left.

The approaching apocalypse, despite the speed with which it envelops the Earth, has a dangerous impact on behaviour – there are riots, for example – but it does give people just enough time to try to repair their fractured relationship with whatever divinity there may be, driving them into churches. But they are helpless there; only the knowledgeable scientist with a vigorous imagination (and

a convenient combination of a boudoir, oxygen canisters and some varnished paper) can help himself. There is more than an element of pure good fortune in the final escape. *The Poison Belt* could easily have reflected despair at the way the world was going – it was written just a year before the Great War, after all – but instead it offers a positive, even glowing, element of justified hope.

Notes by Roy McMillan



Glen McCready trained at The Webber Douglas Academy. His stage credits include Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Son in *A Voyage Round My Father* and Walter Langer in *Five Finger Exercise*. Television credits include Arthur Symons in *Casanova's Lost Letters*. He has narrated numerous audio books including *The Finishing School* by Muriel Spark, *Chart Throb* by Ben Elton and *Seventy-Two Virgins* by Boris Johnson. He has also read *The Woman in White*, *The Children of the New Forest*, *The Visible World* and *The Lost World* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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South Jutland Symphony Orchestra; Niklas Willen	

Music programming by JD Evans

Credits

Produced by Roy McMillan

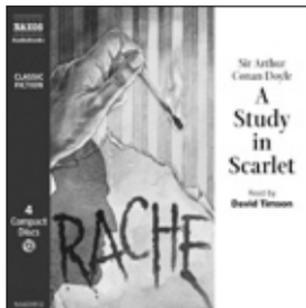
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Cover picture: *'Shooting stars' – the meteorite shower of November 1872, seen over hills,*
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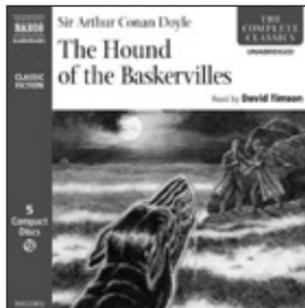
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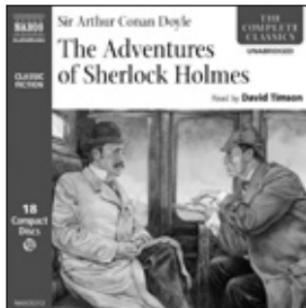
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read by Glen McCready

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

The Poison Belt

Read by **Glen McCready**

The world is on the brink of disaster: a cloud of poison is soon to envelop the planet, killing all mankind with it. There seems to be no way anyone can escape. But Professor Challenger is not one to let an approaching apocalypse stifle him. Calling together his three friends from their earlier adventure in *The Lost World*, he sets about ensuring that they can survive. But will it be enough?

In the tradition of H.G. Wells, *The Poison Belt* is a significant book in British science fiction history. It is also a fast-paced adventure story that is disarmingly touching.



Glen McCready trained at The Webber Douglas Academy. His stage credits include Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Son in *A Voyage Round My Father* and Walter Langer in *Five Finger Exercise*. He has narrated numerous audiobooks including *The Woman in White*, *The Children of the New Forest*, *The Visible World* and *The Lost World* for Naxos AudioBooks.

CD ISBN:

978-962-634-933-5

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Roy McMillan

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