Toasts for Fatal Battle of Maiwand Commemoration, Roka, 23 July 2026

To Arthur Conan Doyle by Dean Clark/Dr. Leslie Armstrong

A man was born in the middle of the 19th century into less than ideal family circumstances.

Somehow he managed to be admitted to a prestigious medical school where he soon became the personal assistant to the most esteemed member of the faculty. He simultaneously became known for superior athletic ability and probably could have been a professional in more than one sport, should such opportunities have existed at the time.

However, his passion was writing and again he succeeded quickly. He was publishing stories while still in his teens and was named, along with none other than Oscar Wilde, as one of the most promising young authors in England. Then, while still in his twenties, he achieved the ultimate goal for a writer by creating the most popular character in literature.

But this somehow managed to diminish his reputation. At the many societies that meet to analyze the exploits of his creation, he is rarely mentioned. And when he is, it is usually to be demoted from author to literary agent or to be accused of clumsy craftsmanship because he didn't make it clear whether a character was wounded in the arm or the leg or an extremity.

But please consider this: If this man had decided to earn his living by being a doctor instead of a writer, we wouldn't be gathered here tonight.

So please join me in a toast to Arthur Conan Doyle.

To Sherlock Holmes by Laura Bottoms/Violet Hunter

Here's to the Master – master of many things, who never fails to astonish.

First, of course, he is master of observation and deduction, but, before that, master of imagination and chutzpah, who dares to prepare himself and to call himself the world's first consulting detective, who can solve a conundrum by gathering data and interpreting it correctly. For example: the observation of minute details, such as an old worn hat, which is originally well tailored and made of superior fabric. He also notices details that require specialized knowledge to understand, such as all the types of cigar ash, or the colors and qualities of all the muds in all the neighborhoods of London, or the effects of all probable (and improbable) poisons. To gain some of the most important data, he has to be a master of disguise to gain inconspicuous entry to all the places where a well-heeled observer would be all too obviously an outsider.

Then, he also needs to protect himself from violent responses to confrontation by being a master of the martial arts and boxing.

His success depends on keeping all the data within himself until he makes his deductions and produces the solutions. In all this, he is so far above the rest of us that we need John H. Watson to explain it all to us.

So here's to the Master – to Sherlock Holmes.

To John H. Watson by Christopher Rapp

Ladies and gentlemen, let us raise our glasses to Dr. John H. Watson and, perhaps even more importantly, to Watson's luck, without which we would have no Boswell, no Baker Street chronicles, and a consulting detective left entirely unsupervised, which scarcely bears thinking about.

At the Fatal Battle of Maiwand, Watson enjoys the remarkable good fortune to be wounded badly enough to leave the army but not so badly as to leave the Earth. This is the sort of medical outcome every soldier hopes for, and every doctor, after a grave pause and a professionally meaningful cough, would describe as "could have been worse."

That same inestimable luck carries him back to London, in need of modest lodgings, and leads him straight into the path of Mr. Sherlock Holmes. Thus we learn that Providence, when arranging great friendships, sometimes takes the simple route: a mutual acquaintance, a shared address, and a man who conducts chemical experiments with suspicious enthusiasm.

And Watson's luck does not stop there. Oh no, good friends, it does not. It sees him through poisons, pistols, hounds, villains, disguises, and clients whose judgment is so poor that one wonders how they survive long enough to hire a detective. Watson's luck endures Holmes's experiments, Holmes's silences, Holmes's deductions, and Holmes's violin, which, depending on the hour and the selection, might be the gravest peril of all.

So here's to Watson: brave, loyal, medically qualified, occasionally bewildered, and admirably prone to noticing when a lady is both charming and in distress.

And here's to Watson's luck: shot at, tested, overworked, under-consulted, and somehow still reporting for duty with a stiff upper lip and, depending on the year, a shoulder wound, a leg wound, or the general impression that Afghanistan has been distinctly unkind to him.

To Watson and his luck – may both continue to survive the case, the criminal, and the consulting detective!

To the Afghan sniper by Jane Langston/Lady Brackenstall/Mary Frasier

July 27, 1880.

Gaze upon a small village called Maiwand in the Kandahar province, Afghanistan. A terrible battle rages. One British soldier stands out to the Afghan warriors. He is Private Tommie Jones, a Welshman whose ancestors once stripped naked and painted their bodies blue to face overwhelming odds against Romans soldiers and other invaders of their homeland. They knew no fear as they went into battle, and Private Tommie, centuries later, is just as bold and just as terrifying to an enemy.

From afar, a sniper named Omar the Dimwitted fixes his sites on the magnificent heart of Private Tommie. He is a weasley, little man who fails to pray and often starves and beats his poor camel.

The bullet in his rifle with evil intent yearns to take the life of young Private Tommie, but that is not its destiny. Omar has private Tommie perfectly in his crosshairs. He takes a deep breath, slows his heart rate, and gently begins to pull the trigger.

At that exact second, the poor, thirsty camel notices Omar‘s butt cheeks covered in the bright yellow fabric of his tunban trousers and mistakes them for juicy melons. In his feverish thirst, the camel stretches his long neck and bites down hard on Omar's butt.

Turning to find the source of his pain, Omar inadvertently pulls the trigger, and the bullet flies in another direction and misses Private Tommie altogether. But it does hit my dearest, John H. Watson.

So let us raise our glasses and drink to the poor thirsty camel, and to the bullet he has sent flying off into the chaotic battle. Without it, Watson's records of Sherlock Holmes might not have happened.

To the Jezail bullet by Scott Wilson

There once was a bullet from a Jezail
That was usually fired with great zeal.
Its caliber was fifty,
Which made it quite nifty,
And when it hit Watson, it was a big deal.

To the orderly Murray and his pack-horse by Brandi Blankenship/Brandy

There once was a pack-horse named Ponder.
He never was one to wander.
With Murray his mate,
He carried a great weight,
And Watson had no need to maunder.

To Young Stamford by Brooks Williamson/Mr. Melas

Doctor John met, from Bart's, his old dresser,
Long apart, now his Father Confessor,
And through ev'ry complaint,
Stamford showed self-restraint;
Of the two speakers, he spoke the lesser …

Until John, of rents, echoed a line
Stamford heard Holmes that same day opine.
John was on this match hooked;
Stamford balked and just looked
Rather strangely at John o'er his wine.

Stamford's cautious words made Holmes sound crazed
(Would a beaten corpse bruise? John's unfazed),
So he them introduced.
Holmes perceived and deduced.
To young Stamford let glasses be raised.

To Young Stamford by Catherine Gatchell/Countess of Morcar

I stand to honor young Stamford, a mutual friend of Sherlock Holmes and John H. Watson. Young Stamford recognizes his old friend Watson, limping dejectedly through the streets of London, broke, with no job and only a paltry military pension on which to live.

Watson is a shadow of his former vigorous, athletic self, but, because knowing Sherlock needs a flatmate, Stamford steps forward to help Watson and makes the storied introduction of two people who would form the most significant partnership of crime fighters in Victorian literature.

Who else but John Watson has the patience to put up with the idiosyncrasies of Sherlock Holmes? Back him up and curb his dangerous addictions? Dr. John Watson.

Without this fateful introduction, we readers would neither know the thrilling, recorded tales of Holmes and Watson nor read of Holmes's keen powers of observation.

"You've been in Afghanistan, I perceive," says Holmes. Without Stamford's introduction of the two, neither would we have acquired our clever club's name, the Afghanistan Perceivers.

To Mrs. Hudson by Nancy Laughrey/Grace Dunbar

To Mrs. Hudson, the long suffering landlady, the keeper of order in a chaotic world and the woman who puts up with flying bullets, severed thumbs in the icebox and an eccentric genius – all without batting an eye.

Cheers to the true heartbeat of 221-B Baker Street!

To Bobbie the mongrel by Dena Shea

An AI impression of Bobbie shows him as the inspiration, not just the mascot, of the 66th Foot Regiment, especially for his handler, Sergeant Peter Kelly. Bobbie was a loyal member of his "pack" (as seen through canine eyes) and his tenacity single-pawedly helped to save the last 11 soldiers … excuse me, 12 (counting Watson), by barking, snarling, biting and never giving up.

Kandahar, Queen Victoria, the British Empire and those of us here through history salute you, Bobbie, a real-life hero at the Fatal Battle of Maiwand!

Let us lap our drinks like a doggie!

To Watson's Squat by Brian Wilson/Carlo the Mastiff

Last year, I toasted the Jezail bullet, which, according to three Sherlock Holmes stories, wounds John H. Watson in the shoulder, leg and/or extremity – remember those three body parts – during the Fatal Battle of Maiwand on 27th July 1880.

I praised that magical bullet for providing inspiration 84 years later to Arlen Specter, the doofus who came up with the Magic Bullet theory for the Warren Commission "investigating" the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Specter's theory, hilariously dismissed by hundreds, if not thousands, of experts, is what the commission adopted to legitimate its conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone gunman with no conspirators.

But after that toast, I learned that the Jezail bullet is not as magical as it might seem because a simple geometrical/physical explanation exists. There is a video on the interwebs illustrating this

theory, but it is far more gruesome than the Zapruder film of JFK's assassination, so, because I'm a sensitive, caring, sharing, reserved gentleman and gentle man, I will not show it.

However, I will describe the theory, courtesy of Dennis Simanaitis, who has a doctorate in mechanical engineering and was the longtime engineering editor at both *Road & Track* and *Automotive Engineering* magazines. More importantly, he's a fine Sherlockian.

He explains that Watson's decision to answer the call of nature during the Fatal Battle of Maiwand results in the three injuries but also saves his life. The Afghan sniper, roundly panned by Perceivers (including me) as a poor shot, actually does a pretty good job, according to Simanaitis. Firing from below a ridge at about an 80-degree angle, the sniper shoots just as Watson has dropped trow and squatted to poo. [Shall I jump on the table to illustrate?]

The Jezail bullet precisely enters the body's lowest orifice (the "extremity") and pierces "the leg" (probably a calf or thigh, depending upon whether Watson has been doing deep squats to keep his body buff) and "the shoulder." Geometry and physics explain everything. And you can certainly understand why I have practiced discretion in not showing the video illustrating this theory.

So, glasses up! Here's to … Watson's squat! Without his move to boldly go where no man has gone before (a ridge in Maiwand, Afghanistan, during the middle of a firefight), we would have no Sherlock Holmes because his biographer would be dead.

To Watson's squat!