

An Intimate Study of Sherlock Holmes

Arthur Conan Doyle

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At the request of the editor, I have spent some days in looking over an old letter box in which, from time to time, I have placed letters referring directly or indirectly to the notorious Mr. Holmes. I wish now that I had been more careful in preserving the references to this gentleman and his little problems. A great many have been lost or mislaid. His biographer has been fortunate enough to find readers in many lands, and the reading has elicited the same sort of response, though in many cases that response has been in a tongue difficult to comprehend. Very often my distant correspondent could neither spell my own name or that of my imaginary hero, as in a recent instance which I here append.

Many such letters have been from Russians. Where the Russian letters have been in the vernacular, I have been compelled, I am afraid, to take them as read; but when they had been in English, they have been among the most curious in my collection.

There was one young lady who began all her epistles with the words "Good Lord." Another had a large amount of guile underlying her simplicity. Writing from Warsaw, she stated that she had been bedridden for two years, and that my novels had been her only *et cetera*, *et cetera*. So touched was I by this flattering statement that I at once prepared an autographed parcel of them to complete the fair invalid's collection. By good luck, however, I met a brother author upon the same day to whom I recounted the touching incident. With a cynical smile, he drew an identical letter from his pocket. His novels also had been for two years her only *et cetera*, *et cetera*. I do not know how many more the lady had written to; but if, as I imagine, her correspondence had extended to several countries, she must have amassed a rather interesting library.

The young Russian's habit of addressing me as "Good Lord" had an even stranger parallel at home, which links it up with the subject of this article. Shortly after I received a knighthood, I had a bill from a tradesman which was quite correct and businesslike in every detail save that it was made out to Sir Sherlock Holmes. I hope that I can stand a joke as well as my neighbors, but this particular piece of humor seemed rather misapplied, and I wrote sharply upon the subject.

In response to my letter there arrived at my hotel a very repentant clerk, who expressed his sorrow at the incident, but kept on repeating the phrase, "I assure you, sir, that it was *bona fide*."

"What do you mean by *bona fide*?" I asked.

"Well, sir," he replied, "my mates in the shop told me that you had been knighted, and that when a man was knighted he changed his name, and that you had taken that one." I need not say that my annoyance vanished, and that I laughed as heartily as his pals were probably doing round the corner.

There are certain problems which are continually recurring in these Sherlock Holmes letters. One of them has exercised men's minds in the most out-of-the-way places, from Labrador to Thibet; indeed, if a matter needs thought, it is just the men in these outlying stations who have the time and solitude for it. I daresay I have had twenty letters upon the one point alone. It arises in the "Adventure of the Priory School," where Holmes, glancing at the track of a bicycle, says: "It is evidently going from us, not toward us." He did not give his

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reasoning, which my correspondents resent, and all assert that the deduction is impossible. As a matter of fact, it is simple enough upon soft, undulating ground such as the moor in question. The weight of the rider falls most upon the hind wheel, and in soft soil it makes a perceptibly deeper track. Where the machine has wobbled a little one can see whether the deeper or more shallow track has crossed the other—and so the problem is solved.

I never realized what an actual living personality Mr. Holmes was to many people until I heard the very pleasing story of the *char-à-banc* of French schoolboys on a tour to London, who, when asked what they wanted to see first, replied unanimously that they wanted to see Mr. Holmes' lodgings in Baker Street.

Rather less pleasing, though flattering in their way, were the letters of abuse which showered upon me when it was thought that I had killed him. "You brute," was the promising opening of one lady's epistle.

The most trenchant criticism of the stories as a series came from a Cornish boatman who remarked to me: "When Mr. Holmes had that fall he may not have been killed, but he was certainly injured, for he was never the same man afterward." I hope the allegation is not true, and indeed those who have read the stories backward, from the latest to the first, assure me that it is not so; but it was a shrewd thrust none the less.

One of the quaintest proofs of his reality to many people is that I have frequently received autograph books through the mail, asking me to

procure his signature. When it was announced that he was retiring from practice and intended to keep bees on the South Downs, I had several letters offering to help him in his project. Two of them lie before me as I write. One says: "Will Mr. Sherlock Holmes require a housekeeper for his country cottage at Xmas? I know some one who loves a quiet country life, and bees especially—an old-fashioned, quiet woman." The other, which is addressed to Holmes himself, says: "I see by some of the morning papers that you are about to retire and take up bee keeping. If correct, I shall be pleased to render you service by giving any advice you may require. I trust you will read this letter in the same spirit in which it is written, for I make this offer in return for many pleasant hours." Many other letters have reached me in which I have been implored to put my correspondents in touch with Mr. Holmes in order that he might elucidate some point in their private affairs.

Occasionally I have been so far confused with my own character that I have been asked to take up professional work upon these lines. I had, I remember one offer, in the case of an aristocratic murder trial in Poland some years ago, to go across and look into the matter upon my own terms. I need not say that I would not do such a thing for money, since I am diffident as to how far my own services would be of any value; but I have several times, as an amateur, been happy to have been of some assistance to people in distress. I can say, though I touch wood as I say it, that I have never entirely failed in any attempt which I have made to reduce Holmes' methods to practical use,

In the case of Mr. Edalji I can claim little credit, for it did not take any elaborate deduction to come to the conclusion that a man who is practically blind did not make a journey at night which involved crossing a main line of railway, and would have tested a trained athlete had he been called upon to do it. The man was obviously innocent, and it is to be regretted, to say the least, that he has never received a penny of compensation for the three years which he spent in gaol.

A more complex case is that of Oscar Slater, who is still working out his sentence as a convict. I have examined the evidence carefully, including the supplementary evidence given at the very limited and unsatisfactory commission appointed to inquire into the matter, and I have not the faintest doubt that the man is innocent. When the judge asked him at the trial whether he had anything to say why the sentence of death for the murder of Miss Gilchrist should not be pronounced upon him, he cried aloud: "My Lord, I did not know there was such a woman in the world!" I am convinced that this was the literal truth. However, it is

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proverbially impossible to prove a negative, so there the matter must stand until the people of Scotland insist upon a real investigation into all the circumstances which surround this deplorable case.

A few of the problems which have come my way have been very similar to some which I had invented for the exhibition of the reasoning of Mr. Holmes. I might perhaps quote one in which that gentleman's method of thought was copied with complete success. The case was as follows: A gentleman had disappeared. He had drawn a bank balance of forty pounds, which was known to be on him. It was feared that he had been murdered for the sake of the money. He had last been heard of stopping at a large hotel in London, having come from the country that day. In the evening he went to a music-hall performance, came out of it about ten o'clock, returned to his hotel, changed his evening clothes, which were found in his room next day, and disappeared utterly. No one saw him leave the hotel, but a man occupying a neighboring room declared that he had heard him moving during the night. A week had elapsed at the time that I was consulted, but the police had discovered nothing. Where was the man?

These were the whole of the facts as communicated to me by his relatives in the country. Endeavoring to see the matter through the eyes of Mr. Holmes, I answered by return mail that he was evidently either in Glasgow or in Edinburgh. It proved later that he had, as a fact, gone to Edinburgh, though in the week that had passed he had moved to another part of Scotland.

There I should leave the matter, for, as Doctor Watson has often shown, a solution explained is a mystery spoiled. At this stage the reader can lay down the magazine and show how simple it all is by working out the problem for himself. He has all the data which were ever given to me. For the sake of those, however, who have no turn for such conundrums, I will try to indicate the links which make the chain. The one advantage which I possessed was that I was familiar with the routine of London hotels--though, I fancy, it differs little from that of hotels elsewhere.

The first thing was to look at the facts and separate what was certain from what was conjecture. It was *all* certain except the statement of the person who heard the missing man in the night. How could he tell such a sound from any other sound in a large hotel? That point could be disregarded, if it traversed the general conclusions.

The first clear deduction was that the man had meant to disappear. Why else should he draw all his money? He had got out of the hotel during the night. But there is a night porter in all hotels, and it is impossible to get out without his knowledge when the door is once shut. The door is shut after the theatergoers return--say at twelve o'clock. Therefore, the man left the hotel before twelve o'clock. He had come from the music hall at ten, had changed his clothes, and had departed with his bag. No one had seen him do so. The inference is that he had done it at the moment when the hall was full of the returning guests, which is from eleven to eleven-thirty. After that hour, even if the door were still open, there are few people coming and going, so that he, with his bag, would certainly have been seen.

Having got so far upon firm ground, we now ask ourselves why a man who desires to hide himself should go out at such an hour. If he intended to conceal himself in London, he need never have gone to the hotel at all. Clearly then he was going to catch a train which would carry him away. But a man who is deposited by a train in any provincial station during the night is likely to be noticed, and he might be sure that when the alarm was raised and his description given, some guard or porter would remember him. Therefore, his destination would be some large town which he would reach as a terminus, where all his fellow passengers would disembark and where he would lose himself in the crowd. When one turns up the time-table and sees that the great Scotch expresses bound for Edinburgh and Glasgow start about midnight, the goal is reached. As for his dress suit, the fact that he abandoned it proved that he intended to adopt a line of life where there were no social amenities. This deduction also proved to be correct.

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I quote such a case in order to show that the general lines of reasoning advocated by Holmes have a real practical application to life. In another case, where a girl had become engaged to a young foreigner who suddenly disappeared, I was able, by a similar process of deduction, to show her very clearly both whither he had gone and how unworthy he was of her affections.

On the other hand, these semiscientific methods are occasionally labored and slow as compared to the results of the rough-and-ready, practical man. Lest I should seem to have been throwing bouquets either to myself or to Mr. Holmes, let me state that on the occasion of a burglary of the village inn, within a stone throw of my house, the village constable, with no theories at all, had seized the culprit while I had got no further than that he was a left-handed man with nails in his boots.

The unusual or dramatic effects which lead to the invocation of Mr. Holmes in fiction are, of course, great aids to him in reaching a conclusion. It is the case where there is nothing to get hold of which is the deadly one. I heard of such a one in America which would certainly have presented a formidable problem. A gentleman of blameless life, starting off for a Sunday evening walk with his family, suddenly observed that he had forgotten his stick. He went back into the house, the door of which was still open, and he left his people waiting for him outside. He never reappeared, and from that day to this there has been no clew as to what befell him. This was certainly one of the strangest cases of which I have ever heard in real life.

Another very singular case came within my own observation. It was sent to me by an eminent London publisher. This gentleman had in his employment a head of department whose name we shall take as Musgrave. He was a hard-working person, with no special feature in his character. Mr. Musgrave died, and several years after his death a letter was received addressed to him, in care of his employers. It bore the postmark of a tourist resort in the west of Canada, and had the note "Conflfilms" upon the outside of the envelope, with the words "Report Sy" in one corner.

The publishers naturally opened the envelope, as they had no note of the dead man's relatives. Inside were two blank sheets of paper. The letter, I may add, was registered. The publisher, being unable to make anything of this, sent it on to me, and I submitted the blank sheets to every possible chemical and heat test, with no result whatever. Beyond the fact that the writing appeared to be that of a woman, there is nothing to add to this account. The matter was, and remains, an insoluble mystery. How the correspondent could have something so secret to say to Mr. Musgrave, and yet not be aware that this person had been dead for several years, is very hard to understand—or why, blank sheets should be so carefully registered through the mail. I may add that I did not trust the sheets to my own chemical tests, but had the best expert advice, without getting any result. Considered as a case, it was a failure—and a very tantalizing one.

Mr. Sherlock Holmes has always been a fair mark for practical jokers, and I have had numerous bogus cases of various degrees of ingenuity, marked cards, mysterious warnings, cipher messages, and other curious communications. It is astonishing the amount of trouble which some people will take with no object save a mystification. Upon one occasion, as I was entering the hall to take part in an amateur billiard competition, I was handed by the attendant a small packet which had been left for me. Upon opening it, I found a piece of ordinary green chalk such as is used in billiards. I was amused by the incident, and I put the chalk into my waistcoat pocket and used it during the game. Afterward, I continued to use it until one day, some months later, as I rubbed the lip of my cue, the face of the chalk crumpled in, and I found it was hollow. From the recess thus exposed I drew out a small slip of paper with the words "From Arsene Lupin to Sherlock Holmes." Imagine the state of mind of the joker who took such trouble to accomplish such a result.

One of the mysteries submitted to Mr. Holmes was rather upon the psychic plane and therefore beyond his powers. The facts as alleged are most remarkable, though I have no proof of their truth save that the lady wrote earnestly, and gave both her name and address. The person, whom we will call Mrs. Seagrave, had been given a curious secondhand ring, snake-shaped, and dull gold. This she took from her finger at night. One

night she slept with it on, and had a fearsome dream in which she seemed to be pushing off some furious creature which fastened its teeth into her arm. On awakening, the pain in the arm continued, and next day the imprint of a double set of teeth appeared upon the arm, with one tooth of the lower jaw missing. The marks were in the shape of blue-black bruises which had not broken the skin.

"I do not know," says my correspondent, "what made me think the ring had anything to do with the matter, but I took a dislike to the thing, and did not wear it for some months, when, being on a visit, I took to wearing it again." To make a long story short, the same thing happened, and the lady settled the matter forever by dropping her ring into the hottest corner of the kitchen range. This curious story, which I believe to be genuine, may not be as supernatural as it seems. It is well known that in some subjects a strong mental impression does produce a physical effect. Thus a very vivid nightmare dream with the impression of a bite might conceivably produce the mark of a bite. Such cases are well attested in medical annals. The second incident would, of course, arise by unconscious suggestion from the first. None the less, it is a very interesting little problem, whether psychic or material.

Buried treasures are naturally among the problems which have come to Mr. Holmes. One genuine case was accompanied by the diagram here reproduced. It refers to an Indiaman which was wrecked upon the South African coast in the year 1782. If I were a younger man, I should be seriously inclined to go personally and look into the matter.

The ship contained a remarkable treasure, including, I believe, the old crown regalia of Delhi. It is surmised that they buried these near the coast, and that this chart is a note of the spot. Each Indiaman in those days had its own semaphore code, and it is conjectured that the three marks upon the left are signals from a three-armed semaphore. Some record of their meaning might perhaps even now be found in the old papers of the India office. The circle upon the right gives the compass bearings. The larger semicircle may be the curved edge of a reef or of a rock. The figures above are the indications how to reach the X which marks the treasure. Possibly they may give the bearings as one hundred and eighty-six feet from the 4 upon the semicircle. The scene of the wreck is a lonely part of the country, but I shall be surprised if, sooner or later, some one does not seriously set to work to solve the mystery.

One last word before I close these jottings about my imaginary character. It is not given to every man to see the child of his brain endowed with life through the genius of a great sympathetic artist, but that was my good fortune when Mr. Gillette turned his mind and his great talents to putting Holmes upon the stage. I cannot end my remarks more fittingly than by my thanks to the man who changed a creature of thin air into an absolutely convincing human being.