

*Everyone knows how Sherlock Holmes has been depicted physically in the popular media; but getting to know the character behind the caricature reveals a level of profundity. . . .*

## SHERLOCK HOLMES—THE INNER MAN

by GEORGE SIMMONS

IT IS THE MIND, the character, and the philosophy of Sherlock Holmes that have made him one of the landmarks in English literature, and in his own day made him a world figure.

Perhaps the strongest feature of the Holmes legend is one which Watson passed on to us through his own somewhat foggy perception, for it is quite erroneous. Not entirely without reason, casual readers have come to think of Holmes as a thinking machine, a mind without a soul behind it. Watson once remarked, in connection with the almost impenetrable wall of reserve which the detective built around himself:

During my long and intimate acquaintance with Mr. Sherlock Holmes I had never heard him refer to his relations, and hardly ever to his own early life. This reticence upon his part had increased the somewhat inhuman effect which he produced upon me, until I sometimes found myself regarding him as an isolated phenomenon, a brain without a heart, as deficient in human sympathy as he was preeminent in intelligence. His aversion to women and his disinclination to form new friendships were both typical of his unemotional character, but not more so than his complete suppression of every reference to his own people.

This was, of course, nearly a half-dozen years after the fateful meeting of the two friends, and since Holmes had still failed to mention the fact that he had an elder brother living in London, Watson's conclusions were perhaps justified to a certain extent. In one of his rare gregarious moods, however, Holmes finally did get around to a few words about his early life, in his recital of the goings-on in the case of *The "Gloria Scott."* The circumstances of this, Holmes's first recorded case, began with a vacation invitation from one Victor Trevor, the only friend he made in his two years at college. Holmes himself comments:

I was never a very sociable fellow, Watson, always rather fond of moping in my rooms and working out my own little methods of thought, so that I never mixed much with the men of my year. Bar fencing and boxing I had few athletic tastes, and then my line of study was quite distinct from that of the other fellows, so that we had no points of contact at all.

"I was never a very sociable fellow," he says. What a classic understatement! What a bohemian soul he must have had, to make but one friend in college, where most men make so many! R. K. Leavitt, in his little study "*Nummi in Arca*; or, the Fiscal Holmes,"<sup>1</sup> observed that many youths, who are of introspective disposition, and who have a taste for solitude, develop astonishing powers. So it was with Holmes. Watson, at this stage of their friendship, still had not begun to plumb the depths of Holmes's extraordinary character.

T. S. Blakeney has made a very apt comparison between Holmes and the Iron Duke of Wellington. He says:

In both, despite an outwardly cold aspect, we are vouchsafed glimpses of an emotional (not sentimental) nature kept in strong control, repressed, perhaps, from a sense that any display was a sign of weakness. Both were keen musicians, and music is the most emotional of all the arts; both could be delightful with children, who instinctively know real from feigned affability. The Iron Duke broke down seldom, but those breaks were very complete; the other side of Holmes's nature peeps through even less thoroughly, but not less certainly.

Recall the experiment with *radix pedis diaboli*, in *The Devil's Foot*; recall the occasion when Watson was shot while apprehending Killer Evans, in *The Three Garridebs*. Watson, in the second instance, said:

It was worth a wound—it was worth many wounds—to know the depths of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask. The clear, hard eyes were dimmed for a moment, and the firm lips were shaking. For the one and only time I caught a glimpse of a great heart as well as a great brain. All my years of humble but single-minded service culminated in that moment of revelation.

Deficient in human sympathy, indeed! It seems that Watson was as poor a student of human nature as he was a logician. But "one and only" is again wide of the mark. There is another passage of this kind in *The Six Napoleons*. Holmes has just built a situation to a high pitch of dramatic excitement in one of those

masterful denouements of his, and he brings it off with a true artist's touch:

Lestrade and I sat silent for a moment, [said Watson,] and then, with a spontaneous impulse, we both broke out clapping, as at the well-wrought crisis of a play. A flush of color sprang to Holmes's pale cheeks, and he bowed to us like the master dramatist who receives the homage of his audience. It was at such moments that for an instant he ceased to be a reasoning machine, and betrayed his human love for admiration and applause. The same singularly proud and reserved nature which turned with disdain from popular notoriety was capable of being moved to its depths by spontaneous wonder and praise from a friend.

Watson says it admirably. Holmes, rather than being a mere machine, and something scarcely human, was a man even as you and I—but he had himself well in hand. He knew himself, and, like the old Greek, had attained the mastery of self and serenity of spirit which are the results of self-knowledge.

As a philosopher he was neither profound nor original, but he was a close observer of life; he drew conclusions, and he thought about them. His was neither optimism nor pessimism, cynicism nor fatalism, but a subtle blend of many traits, which varied with his mood. He was, however, notably free from external influences which so roughly use our own whims and caprices. His ability to concentrate was very great, and it took only an effort of will for his mind to be freed for a time of mundane matters.

His religious views, if any, are the most obscure parts of his makeup. On only one occasion did he speak definitely of religion, and that was a rather strange and incongruous one. In the midst of his cross-questionings in *The Naval Treaty*, he suddenly commented: "What a lovely thing a rose is!" Then he walked across the room, and held up a drooping moss-rose, saying,

There is nothing in which deduction is so necessary as in religion. It can be built up as an exact science by the reasoner. Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers. All other things, our powers, our desires, our food, are all really necessary for our existence in the first instance. But this rose is an extra. Its smell and colour are an embellishment of life, not a condition of it. It is only goodness which gives extras, and so I say again that we have much to hope from the flowers.

His listeners received this statement with astonishment, and Watson most of all. He well knew how small a part the appreciation of nature and its beauties played in his friend's mental processes. It is interesting to note that after almost a score of years of close association, Watson was still as much in the dark as ever as to what went on in that strange mind. Holmes seemed at one time to have a hope for another life; witness his comment to the Veiled Lodger: "The ways of fate are indeed hard to understand. If there is not some compensation hereafter, then the world is a cruel jest."

He inclined in his later years to the opinion that that very hope, which sustains so many in their constant strivings to ward off life's manifold sorrows and satisfy its endless needs, is but a hope and a dream, and contains no part of reality. In *The Retired Colourman*, Holmes put forth the dreary question: "But is not all life pathetic and futile? Is not his story a microcosm of the whole? We reach. We grasp. What is left in our hands in the end? A shadow. Or worse than a shadow—misery."

He maintained a partly humorous, partly cynical attitude through most of his life. His sense of humor was acid and dry, but strong. A vein of fatalism threaded persistently through the whole.

However active he might be in the heat of the chase, part of him was always the onlooker, reluctant to lapse out of a spectator's interest in what was going on. This, perhaps, is part of the secret of the inhuman composure with which he met every situation, and which he preserved without a marring wrinkle through the most trying circumstances.

He found great interest in the vagaries and paradoxes of human existence, and derived from it the slightly sardonic attitude which is so often that of those who are well aware of what "fools these mortals be." "My dear fellow," he once said to Watson, across their fireplace,

"life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent. We would not dare to conceive the things which are really mere commonplaces of existence. If we could fly out of that window, hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the planings, the cross-purposes, the wonderful chains of events, working

through generations, and leading to the most *outré* results, it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable."

When Holmes was at college he undoubtedly read very widely. Many of his pet methods of thought were picked up from the more brilliant among his proxy tutors, and the lessons stuck, which is really extraordinary among undergraduates, when you come to think about it. He made many remarks on the folly of prejudice. One—"I make a point of never having any prejudices and of following docilely wherever fact may lead me."—has an interesting phraseology. Compare it with that of Thomas Henry Huxley: "Sit down before fact as a little child, be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly and to whatever abysses nature leads, or you shall learn nothing."

Holmes keenly appreciated the great value of an open mind, and it seems that he was acquainted with Huxley's ideas on the subject. Again, he laid great stress on the importance of detail: "It has long been a maxim of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important." "It is of course a trifle, but there is nothing so important as trifles."

This phrase goes back even farther. It was the opinion of Michelangelo that "Trifles make perfection, but perfection is no trifle." Perhaps Holmes acquired some of that dilettante's knowledge of art, about which Watson ragged him, from reading of the great Italian master.

The credulous people of the world are sometimes deceived, but often they gain far more than they lose. This is a good attitude to take when reading the chronicles of the good Watson. Give yourself up to the magic of his pen, and you will be gently wafted into a different world, and a fascinating one. If you are the blunt realist who says "Holmes never lived, so why the fuss?" you are beyond hope; for he *did* live. His was and is a far more permanent reality than that of legions who have passed across the sands of life and have been forced to make their imprints with the transient flesh. His was the realm of subjective fancy, and many kings and warriors and statesmen may well envy him his immortality, he who shall never die. There is no reality too strong to blot out the vision of that pale, gaunt fig-

ure, curled in the chair by the fireplace, with his pipe sending forth its tenuous whorls.

Should the kind gods ever grant me a visit into some page of the past, there can be no doubt as to which I should choose. Some might prefer to sit by the side of Socrates in the market place of Athens, and discourse with him and with his small following. Others might like to visit the dinner table at Ferney, and listen to the blithe Voltaire, most intrepid and persistent of all the generals in the great perennial war upon intolerance and injustice. A large group would doubtless wend their way to the tavern in which Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare used to spend jolly evenings. You and I, fellow believer, would of a certainty choose to be in Baker Street some gloomy night, with the yellow London fog blotting out the houses across the way. We would sit in the light of the flickering fire, and gaze into it to the accompaniment of Holmes's violin, as it brings to him the peace for which he yearns; or as it lifts his great mind to new heights of power and clarity. Let us have the commissionaire bring in a note, one of those which have presaged so many a long chase. We shall then attain a clear glimpse of that iridescent bubble Adventure—beautiful, rich with tints of romance, and tinged with hints of happiness, finely shaded with heroism.

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#### NOTE

1. In *221B: Studies in Sherlock Holmes*.

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