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THE IMPLICIT HOLMES

by EDGAR W. SMITH

WHAT IS IT that we love in Sherlock Holmes?

We love the times in which he lived, of course: the half-remembered, half-forgotten times of snug Victorian illusion, of gaslit comfort and contentment, of perfect dignity and grace. The world was poised precariously in balance, and rude disturbances were coming with the years; but those who moved upon the scene were very sure that all was well: that nothing ever would be any worse nor ever could be any better. There was no threat to righteousness and justice and the cause of peace on earth except from such as Moriarty and the lesser villains in his train. The cycle of events had come full turn, and the times were ripe for living—and for being lost. It is because their loss was suffered before they had been fully lived that they are times to which our hearts and longings cling.

And we love the place in which the master moved and had his being: the England of those times, fat with the fruits of her achievements, but strong and daring still with the spirit of imperial adventure. The seas were pounding, then as now, upon her coasts; the winds swept in across the moors, and fog came down on London. It was a stout and pleasant land, full of the flavor of the age; and it is small wonder that we who claim it in our thoughts should look to Baker Street as its epitome. For there the cabs rolled up before a certain door, and hurried steps were heard upon the stair, and England and her times had rendezvous within a hallowed room, at once familiar and mysterious. . . .

But there is more than time and space and the yearning for things gone by to account for what we feel toward Sherlock Holmes. Not only there and then, but here and now, he stands before us as a symbol—a symbol, if you please, of all that we are

not, but ever would be. His figure is sufficiently remote to make our secret aspirations for transference seem unshameful, yet close enough to give them plausibility. We see him as the fine expression of our urge to trample evil and to set aright the wrongs with which the world is plagued. He is Galahad and Socrates, bringing high adventure to our dull existences and calm, judicial logic to our biased minds. He is the success of all our failures; the bold escape from our imprisonment.

Or, if this be too complex a psychological basis to account for our devotion, let it be said, more simply, that he is the personification of something in us that we have lost, or never had. For it is not Sherlock Holmes who sits in Baker Street, comfortable, competent and self-assured; it is we ourselves who are there, full of a tremendous capacity for wisdom, complacent in the presence of our humble Watson, conscious of a warm well-being and a timeless, imperishable content. The easy chair in the room is drawn up to the hearthstone of our very hearts—it is *our* tobacco in the Persian slipper, and *our* violin lying so carelessly across the knee—it is *we* who hear the pounding on the stairs and the knock upon the door. The swirling fog without and the acrid smoke within bite deep indeed, for we taste them even now. And the time and place and all the great events are near and dear to us not because our memories call them forth in pure nostalgia, but because they are a part of us today.

That is the Sherlock Holmes we love—the Holmes implicit and eternal in ourselves.

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