

A century ago, Dr. Bell, the
“real” Sherlock Holmes,
had warm words
for the fictional Sherlock
and his creator.

In Praise of Dr. Doyle

By Joseph Bell

It is not entirely a bad sign of this weary, worn-out century that in this, its last decade, even the petty streetbred people are beginning, as the nurses say, to take notice. An insatiable and generally prurient curiosity as to the doings of the class immediately above us is pandered to by the society journals, and encouraged even by the daily newspapers. Such information is valueless intellectually, and tends to moral degradation; it exercises none of the senses, and pauperizes the imagination. Celebrities at home, illustrated interviews, society scandal on all levels merely titillate the itching ear of the gossip.

But in the last few years there has been a distinct demand for books which, to a certain poor extent, encourage thought and stimulate observation. . . . Every bookstall

JOSEPH BELL (1837–1911), a Scottish surgeon at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, also taught clinical surgery at the University of Edinburgh Medical School. This essay is reprinted from the December 1892 issue of *The Bookman*, a London journal.

has its shilling shocker, and every magazine which aims at a circulation must have its mystery of robbery or murder. Most of these are poor enough stuff: complicated plots, which can be discounted in the first chapter, extraordinary coincidences, preternaturally gifted detectives, who make discoveries more or less useless by flashes of insight which no one else can understand, become wearisome in their sameness, and the interest, such as it is, centres only in the results and not in the methods.

Dr. Conan Doyle has made a well-deserved success for his detective stories, and made the name of his hero beloved by the boys of this country by the marvelous cleverness of his method. He shows how easy it is, if only you can observe, to find out a great deal as to the works and ways of your innocent and unconscious friends, and by an extension of the same method to baffle the criminal and lay bare the manner of his crime. There is nothing new under the sun. Voltaire taught us the method of Zadig, and every good teacher of medicine or surgery exemplifies every day in his teaching and practice the method and its results.

The precise and intelligent recognition and appreciation of minor differences is the real essential factor in all successful medical diagnosis. Carried into ordinary life, granted the presence of an insatiable curiosity and acute senses, you have Sherlock Holmes as he astonishes his somewhat dense friend Watson; carried out in a specialised training, you have Sherlock Holmes, the skilled detective.

Medical Training and Doyle's Method

Dr. Conan Doyle's education as a student of medicine taught him how to observe, and his practice,

both as a general practitioner and a specialist, has been a splendid training for a man such as he is, gifted with eyes, memory, and imagination. Eyes and ears which can see and hear, memory to record at once and to recall at pleasure the impressions of the senses, and an imagination capable of weaving a theory or piecing together a broken chain or unraveling a tangled clue, such are implements of his trade to a successful diagnostician. If in addition the doctor is also a born story-teller, then it is a mere matter of choice whether he writes detective stories or keeps his strength for a great historical romance as is the "White Company."

Syme, one of the greatest teachers of surgical diagnosis that ever lived, had a favourite illustration which, as a tradition of his school, has made a mark on Dr. Conan Doyle's method, "Try to learn the features of a disease or injury as precisely as you know the features, the gait, the tricks of manner of your most intimate friend." Him, even in a crowd, you can recognise at once; it may be a crowd of men dressed alike, and each having his complement of eyes, nose, hair, and limbs; in every essential they resemble each other, only in trifles do they differ; and yet, by knowing these trifles well, you make your diagnosis or recognition with ease.

So it is with disease of mind or body or morals. Racial peculiarities, hereditary tricks of manner, accent, occupation or the want of it, education, environment of all kinds, by their little trivial impressions gradually mould or carve the individual, and leave finger marks or chisel scores which the expert can recognise. The great broad characteristics which at a glance can be recognised as indicative of heart disease or consumption, chronic drunkenness or long-continued loss of blood, are the common property

The "Real"

How the sleuthing style of Sherlock Holmes was shaped by Arthur Conan Doyle's medical training is the subject of Dr. Joseph Bell's 1892 essay, published in *The Bookman*, a London journal, and reprinted here. What the essay does not describe, however, is the powerful impact the author, a prominent Royal Infirmary surgeon, had on Doyle's life and fiction. The relationship began in 1878 when Bell selected Arthur Conan Doyle, then a 19-year-old student at the University of Edinburgh Medical School, as his outpatient clerk.

The stint as Bell's assistant stimulated far more than Doyle's interest in medicine. He would find in



Joseph Bell was noted for his deductive reasoning applied to clinical problems. He hired medical student Arthur Conan Doyle as his assistant in 1878.

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Doyle

the lean and craggy-featured Bell a real-life model for his most legendary fictional creation. (But the American writer and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes inspired the sleuth's surname, according to biographer Charles Higham.) Bell, who was fascinated with criminal psychology, possessed an astonishing talent for deduction. Doyle was, as Higham put it, Watson to Bell's Holmes.

In his memoirs, Doyle recounts an exchange between Bell and a patient that seems drawn directly from the pages of a Sherlock Holmes story: "Well, my man," says Bell. "You've served in the army."

"Aye, sir," the patient replied.

"Not long discharged?"

"No, sir."

"A Highland regiment?"

"Aye, sir."

"Stationed at Barbados?"

"Aye, sir."

Bell then explained: "You see, the man was a respectful man but did not remove his hat. They do not in the army, but he would have learned civilian ways had he been long discharged. He had an air of authority and is obviously Scottish. As to Barbados, his complaint is elephantiasis, which is West Indian and not British."

In an interview in 1892, one year after he left private practice, Doyle recalled, "The remarkable individuality and discriminating tact of my old master (Bell) made a deep and lasting impression on me though I had not the faintest idea that it would one day lead me to forsake medicine for story writing." That same year, Doyle dedi-

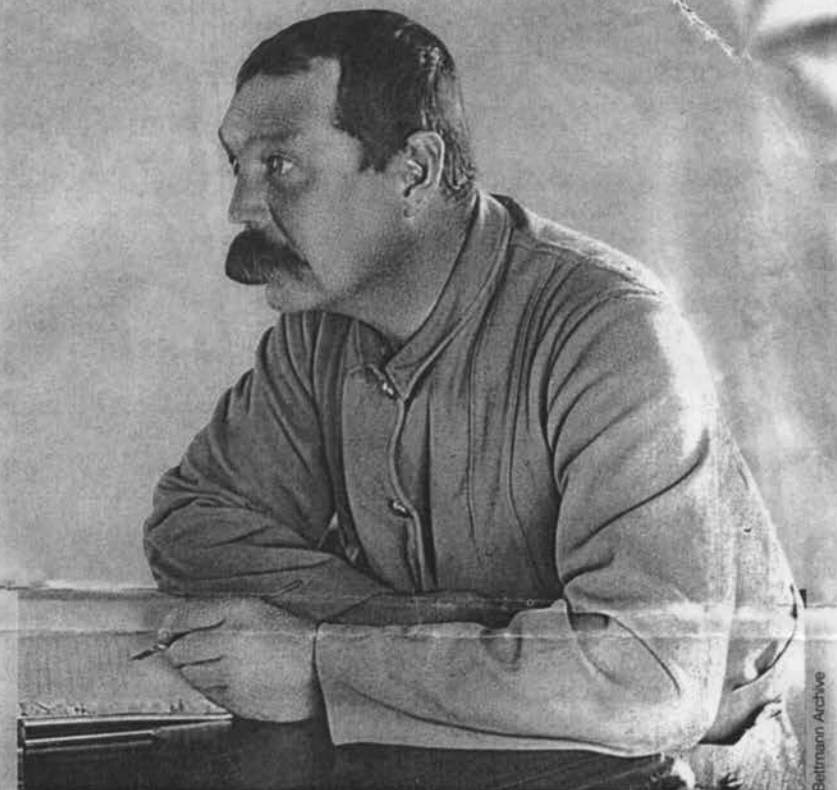
cated *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* to Dr. Joseph Bell.

Doyle had been Bell's student in a course on clinical surgery at the University of Edinburgh Medical School. While Doyle described himself as "a 60 percent man on examinations," Bell regarded the young man as one of his best students who "never tired of trying to discover those little details which one looks for."

As a medical student, Doyle published two short stories, and after graduation in 1881, he continued to write short fiction. In 1887, while still in private practice, he published his first Sherlock Holmes story, "A Study in Scarlet." Four years and several stories

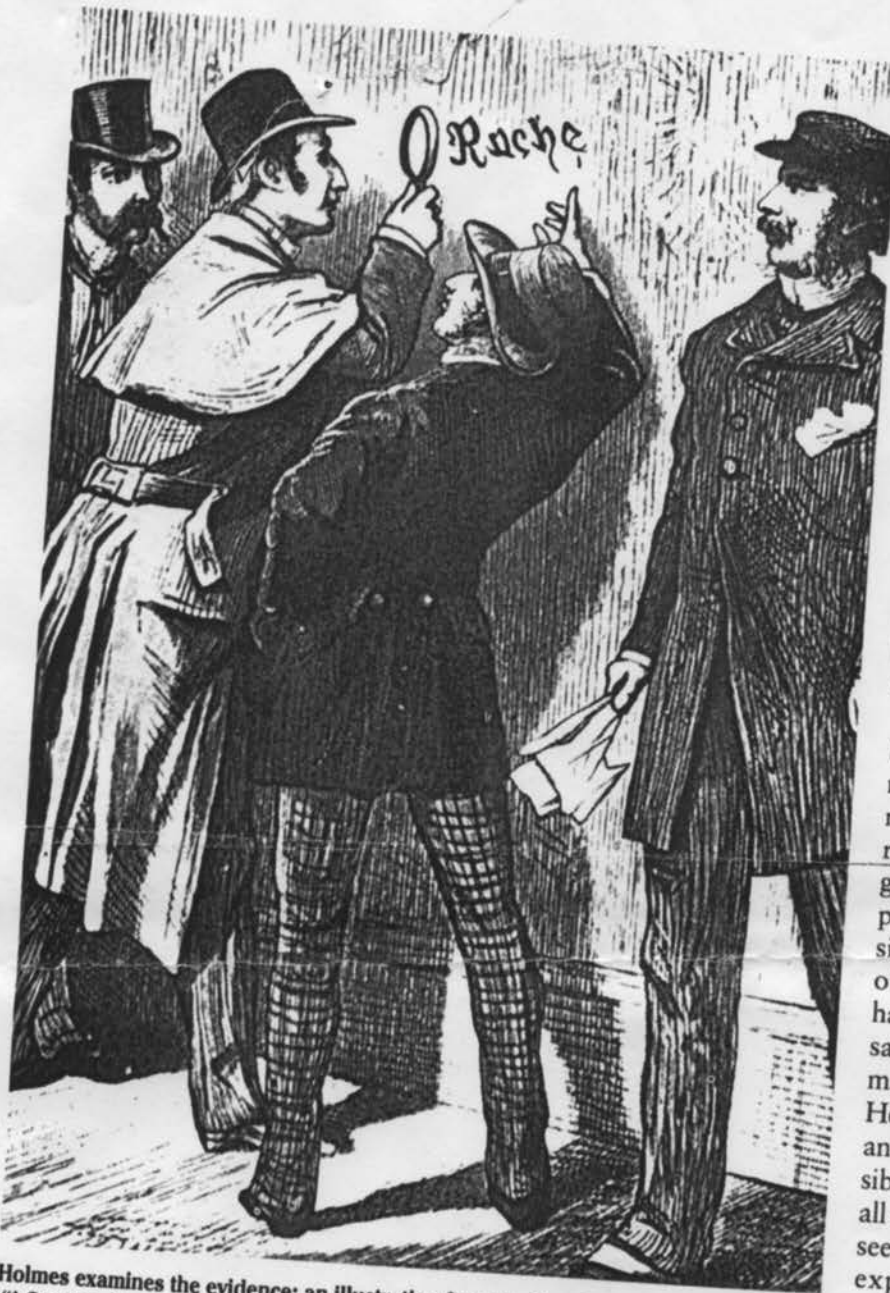
later, he quit private practice. Medicine, however, was never entirely abandoned; among his more than 150 fictional works are 18 short stories and two novels with medical themes.

Doyle's nonmedical detective fiction also reflected his clinical training. One Scotland Yard official credited Doyle with "pointing the way to the use of scientific methods in the solution of crimes." Among physicians, advances in bacteriology had demonstrated the crucial importance of the smallest details. As the lanky detective explains to Watson in one Holmes story, "You know my method. It is founded on the observance of trifles."



Bettmann Archive

"I had not the faintest idea," said Conan Doyle, "that one day Dr. Bell would lead me to forsake medicine for story writing."



Bettmann Archive

Holmes examines the evidence: an illustration from the first Sherlock Holmes story, "A Study in Scarlet," written in 1887 while Doyle was still in private practice.

of the veriest tyro in medicine, while to masters of their art there are myriads of signs eloquent and instructive, but which need the educated eye to detect. A fair-sized and valuable book has lately been written on the one symptom, the pulse; to anyone but a trained physician it seems as much an absurdity as is Sherlock Holmes's immortal treatise on the one hundred and fourteen varieties of tobacco ash.

Importance of the Infinitely Little

The greatest stride that has been made of late years in preventive and diagnostic medicine is the recognition and differentiation by bacteriological research of those minute organisms which disseminate cholera and fever, tubercle and anthrax. The importance of the infinitely little is incalculable. Poison a well at Mecca with the cholera bacillus,

and the holy water which the pilgrims carry off in their bottles will infect a continent, and the rags of the victims of the plague will terrify every seaport in Christendom.

Trained as he has been to appreciate minute detail, Dr. Doyle saw how he could interest his intelligent readers by taking them into his confidence, and showing his mode of working. He created a shrewd, quick-sighted, inquisitive man, half doctor, half virtuoso, with plenty of spare time, a retentive memory, and perhaps with the best gift of all—the power of unloading the mind of all the burden of trying to remember unnecessary details. Holmes tells Watson:

"A man should keep his little brain-attic stocked with all the furniture that he is likely to use, as the rest he can put away in the lumber-room of his library, where he can get it if he wants it." But to him the petty results of environment, the sign-manuals of labour, the stains of trade, the incidents of travel, have living interest, as they tend to satisfy an insatiable, almost inhuman, because impersonal curiosity. He puts the man in the position of an amateur, and therefore irresponsible, detective who is consulted in all sorts of cases, and then he lets us see how he works. He makes him explain to the good Watson the trivial, or apparently trivial, links in his chain of evidence. These are at once so obvious, when explained, and so easy, once you know them, that the ingenuous reader at once feels, and says to himself, I also could do this; life is not so dull after all; I will keep my eyes open, and find out things.

The gold watch, with its scratched keyhole and pawnbroker's marks, told such an easy tale about Watson's brother. The dusty old billycock hat revealed that its master had taken to drinking some years ago, and had got his ▶

DR. DOYLE

hair cut yesterday. The tiny thorn-prick and fearsome footmark of the thing that was neither a child nor a monkey enabled Holmes to identify and capture the Andaman Islander. Yet, after all you say, there is nothing wonderful; we could all do the same.

The experienced physician and the trained surgeon every day, in their examinations of the humblest patient, have to go through a similar process of reasoning, quick or slow according to the personal equations of each, almost automatic in the experienced man, laboured and often erratic in the tyro, yet requiring just the same simple requisites, senses to notice facts, and education and intelligence to apply them. Mere acuteness of the senses is not enough. Your Indian tracker will tell you that the footprint on the leaves was not a redskin's, but a paleface's, because it marked a shoe-print, but it needs an expert in shoe-leather to tell where that shoe was made. A sharp-eyed detective may notice the thumb-mark of a grimy or bloody hand on the velvet or the mirror, but it needs all the scientific knowledge of a Galton to render the ridges and furrows of the stain visible and permanent, and then to identify by their sign-manual the suspected thief or murderer.

Sherlock Homes has acute senses, and the special education and information that makes these valuable; and he can afford to let us into the secrets of his method. But in addition to the creation of his hero, Dr. Conan Doyle in this remarkable series of stories has proved himself a born story-teller. He has had the wit to devise excellent plots, interesting complications; he tells them in honest Saxon-English with directness and pith; and, above all his other merits, his stories are absolutely free from padding. He knows how delicious brevity is, how everything tends to be too long, and he has given us stories that we can read at a sitting between dinner and coffee, and we have not a chance to forget the beginning before we reach the end. The ordinary detective story really needs an effort of memory quite misplaced to keep the circumstances of the crimes and all the wrong scents of the various meddlers before the wearied reader. Dr. Doyle never gives you a chance to forget an incident or miss a point.

No wonder the stories have been successful. Of the twelve, some are much better than others. Not one of the twelve is a failure, and the handsome volume in which they have been collected will be a prize for all those young and old who are not ashamed to read good stories. Had the handsome volume been divided into two, it would not have been so heavy to hold. ■