

THE ORIGINAL OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

BY DR. HAROLD EMERY JONES

The writer was a fellow-student of Conan Doyle. Together they attended the surgical demonstrations of Joseph Bell, at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. This man exhibited incredibly acute and sure deductive powers in diagnosis and in guessing the vocation of patients from external signs. Sir Henry Littlejohn, another medical lecturer heard by the two students, was remarkable for his sagacious expert testimony, leading to the conviction of many a criminal. Thus is the character of Sherlock Holmes easily and naturally accounted for, and the absurd fiction that Conan Doyle drew upon Poe for his ideas is silenced forever.

WHEN it was known that Dr. Conan Doyle had decided on bringing Sherlock Holmes back to the land of the living, a number of his admirers were fearful lest the author wreck his own reputation and destroy the interesting and unique character of Sherlock Holmes, by attempting what was seemingly an impossibility or, at any rate, an absurdity. Conan Doyle's friends, however, had supreme confidence in his ability to revivify Sherlock Holmes in an artistic and natural manner. After "The Adventure of the Empty House," admirers and friends could not but exclaim in unison: "How simple! How plausible! How clever!"

The great mystery, which has as yet never been cleared up, is whether Holmes ever really existed. Is Holmes merely the creation of Doyle's ingenious

brain? Or is there really an individual who is the living embodiment of Sherlock Holmes?

Conan Doyle is essentially an Edinburgh product. He was born there. His medical studies were pursued in that ancient city of medical lore. His father was a well-known artist. He himself was the nephew of the famous Dicky Doyle, and his grandfather was the celebrated caricaturist John Doyle, known to the public as H. B. So the author had, to say the least, a heritage of promise. His first literary venture was as editor of a school magazine in Germany, where he was sent to receive his early education. Prior to that he had attended a private school in England. Leaving Germany, he returned to Edinburgh, where he entered the University for the purpose of studying medicine.

To a man of Doyle's alertness, memory, and imagination, this training was invaluable. It was in the infirmary wards at Edinburgh, in the dispensaries, and in the out-patient department that he first encountered that subtle and wonderful character who is now world-renowned, the original of the great detective, Sherlock Holmes.

All Edinburgh medical students remember Joseph Bell—Joe Bell—as they called him. Always alert, always up and doing, nothing ever escaped that keen eye of his. He read both patients and students like so many open books. His diagnosis was almost never at fault.

One would never dream, by looking through "Who's Who" (in England), that the person described as follows is the original of the great detective, Sherlock Holmes:

"Joseph Bell, M.D., F.R.C.S., Edinburgh; consulting Surgeon to the Royal Infirmary and Royal Hospital for Sick Children. Member of University Court, Edinburgh University; born in Edinburgh in the year 1837. The eldest son of Benjamin Bell, Surgeon, and of Cecilia Craigie. Married to Edith Katherine, daughter of the Honorable James Erskine Murray. Went through the ordinary course of a Hospital Surgeon at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, from Dresser to Senior Surgeon and Consulting Surgeon. Twenty-three years (1873-96) editor of the 'Edinburgh Medical Journal.'"

Yet he is the original Sherlock Holmes—the Edinburgh medical students' ideal—who could tell patients their habits, their occupations, nationality, and often their names, and who rarely, if ever, made a mistake. Oftentimes he would call upon one of the students to diagnose the cases for him. Telling the House Surgeon to usher in a new patient, he delighted in putting the deductive powers of the student to the test, with results generally amusing, except to the poor student victim himself.

This is Conan Doyle's description of Joseph Bell: "He would sit in the patients' waiting-room, with a face like a Red Indian, and diagnose the people as

they came in, before even they opened their mouths. He would tell them their symptoms, and would even give them details of their past life, and he would hardly ever make a mistake."

What Edinburgh student of Conan Doyle's student years can fail to recognize in the stoic-faced professor, Joe Bell, the "king of deduction"?

"What is the matter with this man, sir?" he suddenly inquired of a trembling student. "Come down, sir, and look at him! No! You mustn't touch him. Use your eyes, sir! Use your ears, use your brain, your bump of perception, and use your powers of deduction."

After looking at the patient, the embryonic Holmes blurted out: "Hip-joint disease, sir!"

"Hip-nothing!" Bell retorted. "The man's limp is not from his hip, but from his foot, or rather from his feet. Were you to observe closely, you would see that there are slits, cut by a knife, in those parts of the shoes where the pressure of the shoe is greatest against the foot. The man is a sufferer from corns, gentlemen, and has no hip trouble at all. He has not come here to be treated for corns, gentlemen. We are not chiropodists. His trouble is of a much more serious nature. This is a case of chronic alcoholism, gentlemen. The rubicund nose, the puffed, bloated face, the bloodshot eyes, the tremulous hands and twitching face muscles, with the quick, pulsating temporal arteries, all show this. These deductions,

gentlemen, must, however, be confirmed by absolute and concrete evidence. In this instance my diagnosis is confirmed by the fact of my seeing the neck of a whiskey-bottle protruding from the patient's right-hand coat pocket.

"From close observation and deduction, gentlemen, you can make a correct diagnosis of any and every case. However, never neglect to ratify your deductions, to substantiate your diagnosis with the stethoscope, and by other recognized and every-day methods of diagnosis."

Of another patient he would say: "Gentlemen, we have here a man who is either a cork-cutter or a slater. If you will only use your eyes a moment you will be able to define a slight hardening—a regular callous, gentlemen—on one side of his forefinger, and a thickening on the outside of his thumb, a sure sign that he follows the one occupation or the other."

Or again: "Gentlemen, a fisherman! You will notice that, though this is a very hot summer's day, the patient is wearing top-boots. When he sat on the chair they were plainly visible. No one but a sailor would wear top-boots at this season of the year. The shade of tan on his face shows him to be a coast-sailor, and not a deep-sea sailor—a sailor who makes foreign lands. His tan is that produced by one climate, a 'local tan,' so to speak. A knife scabbard shows beneath his coat, the kind used by fishermen in this part of the world. He is concealing a quid of tobacco in

the furthest corner of his mouth and manages it very adroitly indeed, gentlemen. The summary of these deductions shows that this man is a fisherman. Further, to prove the correctness of these deductions, I notice several fish-scales adhering to his clothes and hands, while the odor of fish announced his arrival in a most marked and striking manner."

On one occasion he called upon a student to diagnose a case. The student made a miserable failure of it.

"Get out your notebook, man," said Bell, "and see whether you can't express your thoughts that way." Then, turning to the class, the Professor continued: "The gentleman has ears and he hears not, eyes and he sees not! You come from Wales, don't you, sir?"—again turning to the poor victim—"I thought so! A man who says 'silling' for shilling, who rattles his R's, who has a peculiar, rough, broad accent like yours, sir, is not a Scotchman. You are not an Irishman! You are not an Englishman! Your speech 'smacks of Wales.' And to clinch the matter, gentlemen"—once more addressing the class—"when I asked Mr. Edward Jones—that is his name, gentlemen—to transfer his thoughts to paper, he nervously pulled out his notebook, and, to his chagrin, with it a letter. Mr. Jones endeavored to palm the letter, gentlemen; but he is evidently a little out of training at present, as he blundered most beautifully. The post-mark shows that the letter was posted yesterday morn-

ing at Cardiff. The address was written by a female—undoubtedly Mr. Jones's sweetheart—for the very sight of it caused our friend to blush furiously. It was addressed to Mr. Edward Jones! Now, gentlemen! Cardiff is in South Wales, and the name Jones proclaims our friend a Welshman."

According to Doyle, Bell's faculty of deduction was at times highly dramatic. "Ah," he would say to one of the patients, "you are a soldier, and a non-commissioned officer at that. You have served in Bermuda. Now how do I know that, gentlemen? Because he came into the room without even taking his hat off, as he would go into an orderly room. He was a soldier. A slight, authoritative air, combined with his age, shows that he was a non-commissioned officer. A rash on his forehead tells me he was in Bermuda and subject to a certain rash known only there."

Bell was as full of dry humor and satire, and he was as jealous of his reputation, as the detective Sherlock Holmes ever thought of being.

One day, in the lecture theatre, he gave the students a long talk on the necessity for the members of the medical profession cultivating their senses—sight, smell, taste, and hearing. Before him on a table stood a large tumbler filled with a dark, amber-colored liquid.

"This, gentlemen," announced the Professor, "contains a very potent drug. To the taste it is intensely bitter. It is most offensive to the sense of smell.

Yet, as far as the sense of sight is concerned—that is, in color—it is no different from dozens of other liquids.

“Now I want to see how many of you gentlemen have educated your powers of perception. Of course, we might easily analyze this chemically, and find out what it is. But I want you to test it by smell and taste; and, as I don’t ask anything of my students which I wouldn’t be willing to do myself, I will taste it before passing it round.”

Here he dipped his finger in the liquid, and placed it in his mouth. The tumbler was passed round. With wry and sour faces the students followed the Professor’s lead. One after another tasted the vile decoction; varied and amusing were the grimaces made. The tumbler, having gone the round, was returned to the Professor.

“Gentlemen,” said he, with a laugh, “I am deeply grieved to find that not one of you has developed this power of perception, which I so often speak about; for if you had watched me closely, you would have found that, while I placed my forefinger in the medicine, it was the middle finger which found its way into my mouth.”

These methods of Bell impressed Doyle greatly at the time. The impression made was a lasting one.

But, while Joseph Bell is the original Sherlock Holmes, another Edinburgh professor “had a finger in the pie,” so to speak.

While Joseph Bell gave Doyle the idea of the character Holmes, the man who, unknowingly perhaps, influenced Doyle in adapting that character to the detection of crime, was Sir Henry Littlejohn.

“Little-John,” as the students called him, was the Police Surgeon and the Medical Officer of Health to the City of Edinburgh. He was also Lecturer on Forensic Medicine and Public Health at the Royal College of Surgeons.

No teacher ever took a greater interest in his students than did Sir Henry. He not only lectured to “his boys”—as he always spoke of them—in the lecture-room, but he took them to the city slaughterhouses, and to the reservoirs which supply Edinburgh with water. Here he would explain the why and the wherefore of hygiene. As Police Surgeon he had unlimited liberties and unequalled facilities for the study of crime and criminals. It was a common but interesting sight to see the dapper Sir Henry Littlejohn, little both in stature and name, walking along the street with a crowd of medical students trailing along behind. His lectures on crime and criminals were always entertaining and instructive, as they were generally straightforward statements of personal experiences.

While Bell was lecturing deduction and perception into Doyle’s receptive and imaginative brain, Sir Henry Littlejohn was giving Doyle material for his detective stories.

Whenever a mysterious or suspected murder was perpetrated, Sir Henry loved to ferret out the criminals and clear up the crime. He always gave expert medical evidence in the law courts, and, being Police Surgeon, of necessity testified for the Crown on behalf of the prosecution.

It was a red-letter day for Edinburgh medical students when Sir Henry was due in the witness-box. How they flocked around the courthouse, and how they fought to gain an entrance! Even standing-room was at a premium on these occasions; one and all were anxious to hear their "Little-John" testify. For Sir Henry never got the worst of the argument. He was never entrapped by the smartest of lawyers, and never disconcerted by the severest of cross-examinations.

One case, out of hundreds of a similar kind, will exemplify his knowledge of criminals and crime, and show his readiness of repartee.

A woman was charged with the poisoning of her husband. Arsenic had been found in the stomach of the dead man. The prosecution failed, however, to prove that the woman had purchased arsenic. As the law in the British Isles is very explicit and severe in its restriction of the sale of poisons, and at all times is strictly enforced, the defence made much of the failure of the prosecution to prove the purchasing of the arsenic. No poison in class A—in which class arsenic is placed—can be bought at

any chemist's shop unless the sale is entered in the Government Poison Book—a book kept specially for that purpose. The signatures of vender, buyer, and a witness, known to both parties, must be attached. No record of the sale of arsenic could be found in any of the city druggists' establishments. Sir Henry's attention was called to this fact by the attorney for the defence.

“So you found arsenic in the stomach of the deceased?” inquired the lawyer.

“I did,” answered Sir Henry, in his usual quick and decided manner.

“But where could the arsenic have been procured?” questioned the attorney. “We have no record of the sale!”

“Why,” retorted Littlejohn scornfully, “there is enough arsenic in the room where the man slept to poison a small army, right at hand, on the very walls of the room itself. The green wall-paper, with which the walls of the room are covered, is saturated with arsenic.”

“True, perhaps,” replied the man of law, “but surely the defendant is not sufficiently versed in chemistry—she is certainly not well enough educated—to understand the very difficult and complicated process of extracting arsenic from wall-paper, even if the wall-paper contains arsenic—which is very, very doubtful.”

“Some women's intuition is greater than certain

men's knowledge," answered Sir Henry, pointedly and dryly.

The cross-examining lawyer immediately ceased his questioning. The woman later admitted her crime, and Little-John again scored.

The University, with its associations, with its antiquity, with the respect and affection shown professors by students, with the unlimited trouble taken by professors with the students, and the general atmosphere and environments of both the University and Edinburgh itself, had undoubtedly an influence upon Conan Doyle's literary work, and a potent influence at that.