

SEVEN-PER-CENT AT THIRTY: MEMORIES AND REFLECTIONS

by NICHOLAS MEYER

Artistic fashions come and go. Works we initially accept as deathless masterpieces weirdly wear out their welcomes while others, rejected at birth, prove surprisingly resilient, if not downright indestructible. If enough time passes, the positions may be reversed! How many times has the music of Tchaikovsky drifted in and out of favor? There is, in addition, an interesting contrast between public and critical acceptance. Oftentimes what the critics decry the public embraces and likewise, what the public ignores the critics extol. I remember arguing with my father during my adolescence, insisting that *Cyrano* was a great play and baffled by his reply, "It's too early to tell." When Nixon asked Cho En Lai his opinion of the French Revolution, he got the same response.

These and related thoughts sprang to mind when I was asked to look back on the 30th anniversary of my own creation, *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, initially published in August 1974. I must issue a disclaimer at the outset: Just because I'm the author doesn't give me any proprietary objectivity or insights into the book. On the contrary, it may be that I am less equipped than others are to evaluate my novel at this or any other juncture in its brief history.

When *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* came out, it was certainly a popular success. To the astonishment—not to say bewilderment—of its young author, the thing made it to the *New York Times*' best-seller list and lodged there for the better part of a year, completely changing his life. Folks who didn't know squat about Sherlock were introduced to him and to Conan Doyle via this kooky back door. Many readers, I'm happy to say, went on to discover the real Canon as a result. My vanity was, in addition, gratified to see the phrase "the (something) solution" find its way into common parlance (at least one Conan Doyle biography employs the phrase in its title), in ways that never caught on when Conan Doyle introduced it.

But it is also true that many Sherlockians, the aficionados and critics I had most hoped to please, disapproved of or were offended by the book, some so far incensed that at least one lawsuit resulted. This was in sharp and ironic contrast to the egomaniacal youthful conviction on my part that had prompted me to write the book in the first place, namely that I had never read a Holmes pastiche I didn't dislike and that I and I alone knew how one ought to read.

Chief among the Holmesian objections, as I recollect them, was my having depicted "their" hero as a drug addict. (I use quotation marks to question the possessive appropriation by fans that lay exclusive territorial claims to the ob-

jects of their adoration.) It didn't seem to matter much that it was not I who had characterized the Great Detective as a drug user, but Conan Doyle himself. While more extreme hero-worshippers went to torturous lengths to explain away Watson's unambiguous reportage ("Which is it to-day,' I asked, 'morphine or cocaine?' 'It is cocaine,' he said, a 'a seven-per-cent solution. Would you care to try it?'"), claiming that Holmes was pulling credulous Watson's leg, etc., a majority appeared to take another view, namely that Holmes probably *was* a user but that they preferred not to dwell on this aspect of his character. At best, I was considered indiscreet or tasteless for presuming to write about it.

With the passage of time, however, the sobering realities of drug addiction have altered the nature of the dialogue. We now recognize that addiction cannot be dealt with by sweeping it under the carpet. As we have become more exposed to this terrible malady, we have learned that its lethal grip embraces not only the poor and disadvantaged but the affluent, the intelligent, yea sometimes even the brilliant, as well. We have learned that addiction is a disease, that we do not help those who suffer from it by ignoring their problem or censuring their moral character. Drug users can be our friends, even ourselves. Silence is not the answer. Watson, whom we delight to patronize, had the right idea.

I believe that we have increasingly confused heroes with gods. Perhaps it is the influence of comic books and their so-called "super-heroes," but we no longer tolerate flaws in our great men and women. (To observe that Superman is weakened by exposure to Kryptonite doesn't count as a flaw in the Greek sense, referring to a defect of character.) Once we learn our idols have feet of clay, we waste no time in toppling their pedestals.

The ancients, I believe, better understood the distinction between gods and men. As I have noted on previous occasions, if a man leaps into a torrent to save a drowning child, he may be said to perform a heroic act. Should the same individual leap into the same torrent to save the same child—and *so do with a ball and chain attached to one leg*—he is, in my view, not less heroic, but more, since he performed his feat while severely handicapped.

Thus Holmes, functioning despite being trapped in the web of his addiction, presents himself (to my way of thinking) as more heroic, not less. With the passage of time since the book's publication, I am encouraged by what I now take to be a more widely adopted version of this view.

The book had been percolating inside me for about fifteen years before I got around to writing it. When I was a teenager, I'd attempted to write a Sherlock Holmes musical. *My Fair Lady* was then conquering Broadway and the resemblance between Higgins and Holmes was so great, I concluded Shaw must've co-opted Conan Doyle's creation. And if *Pygmalion* made a great musical, surely Conan Doyle's prototype would make an even better one? Alas, thirteen-year-old

kids do not write Broadway musicals, and when someone did seize on my idea, the results proved indifferent. This put me off Sherlock for a few years.

My interest was revived when, in high school, kids asked, “Oh, your old man’s a shrink; is he a Freudian?” to which I had no ready answer since—in detective parlance—I didn’t have a clue. I asked my father if he was. He replied:

“Look, you can’t discuss the history of psychoanalysis without starting with Freud, any more than you can discuss the history of America without starting with Columbus, or the Vikings—but to suppose that nothing has happened since the Vikings is to be pretty rigid, pretty doctrinaire, and the same goes for psychoanalysis. When a person comes to see me, I listen to what they say, how they say it and I am especially interested in what they do not say. I look at how they are dressed, how they comport themselves, whether they are punctual, etc. I am, in short, searching for clues—from them—as to why they are not happy, and against this I apply a background of some clinical expertise.”

“It sounds rather like detective work,” I observed, becoming excited for reasons I could not then identify.

“Very like detective work.”

It was at this point that I had my belated epiphany and realized who it was that Holmes had always reminded me of: my father. From there, I was off and running, but because I am not a fast thinker, “running” was more like “walking,” and it took years for the following steps to occur in the gestation of the book.

I began by wondering just how much—if anything—Conan Doyle knew of the life and writings of Freud. I was interested to spot eerie similarities and overlappings almost at once. Both men were doctors; both died in London—within nine years of one another. Freud’s narrative voice in describing his case histories had already been compared to Holmes’s (a comparison he at first decried, preferring an analogy to a detector of art forgeries, but subsequently invoked himself—“I followed the labyrinth of her mind, Sherlock Holmes-like”). Then there was the singular business of cocaine. I don’t know if Conan Doyle used the drug but he certainly wrote about it. Freud, too, began his association by writing about the drug. He wrote a paper in collaboration with two eye doctors, Koller and Königstein, on the use of cocaine as an anesthetic during eye surgery. By the time I learned that Conan Doyle spent six months studying ophthalmology in Vienna, these coincidences had begun to seem overwhelming. Freud, we have shown, certainly knew about Conan Doyle (and Sherlock!); but whether Arthur knew about Sigmund remains an open question. He probably didn’t need to: As

Freud remarked, psychoanalysis must throw up its hands in the face of art; what the artist knows by intuition, the psychoanalyst must achieve through the torturous scientific regimen of trial-and-error.

But what did it all mean? Or, in detective lingo, what did it all add up to? Damned if I knew. I figured I'd have to write a book about it to find out.

But as years passed I realized that the non-fiction study of Freud and Conan Doyle I originally contemplated was not playing to what I considered my strengths. I didn't have enough letters after my name to produce an academic study. For better or worse I am a story-teller, and a story is what all this would somehow have to become.

Yet, I procrastinated. I was trying to make my way in the world of film and had for the purpose moved to Los Angeles, where I was a stranger and knew not a soul. I was lucky, and a television movie or two of mine was produced. I didn't make a lot of money, but there was enough to indulge my fetish for acquiring books of Sherlockian "criticism." I didn't even know there were such books until I stumbled across one by Trevor Hall, published by St. Martin's Press. In short order I was gobbling up obscure monographs—Holmes on women, Holmes on music—to the consternation of my new friends, who couldn't understand why I was frittering away my time and income on such arcana. I certainly had no explanation. I was gluttonously pleasing myself with no end in view save the hazy notion that "one day" I would write *Holmes Meets Freud*.

It was only when the Writers Guild went on strike in 1973 and screenwriters were not allowed to write scripts that my girlfriend, Sally Connor, and my friend, Michael Scheff, urged me to commence. "Now you can write that book you're always yakking about," was how one of them put it.

Without having much of an idea what I was doing, I sat down and plunged in. I don't recall having an outline. I followed the King of Hearts' dictum to the White Rabbit and began at the beginning. I wrote on my Smith Corona portable electric but had to give that up after the Introduction. Once I started creating as Watson/Doyle, the typewriter didn't make it sound right. And sound was all-important to me. Doyle's Victorian straightforward simplicity (also to be found in much other writing of the period—Anthony Hope, Rider Haggard, etc.) was what I was aiming for. Writing in longhand on yellow legal pads seemed much more convincing. I could imagine Conan Doyle doing something similar, and that helped. If nothing else, it slowed me down, which was all to the good. I would scribble all day and read the results to Sally at night. Then when it was finished, I transcribed my pages onto the typewriter, making further revisions. Footnotes seemed amusing, so I dropped them in every now and again. I was, after all, supposed to be editing Watson's text.

When it was done I remember reading it to a houseful of cousins in Fresno, who seemed either terribly polite or most encouraging

Then I tried to get my agents to represent what I was convinced was a publishable book, but they declined to so much as read it. Holmes was passé. I wound up taking the book to New York where I planned on walking in on the only person I knew in publishing. He didn't work there any more—a fact a cleverer man might have ascertained before boarding a plane—but fortunately he was still in the business and I trudged across rain-drenched Manhattan to beard him at his latest lair. He offered to publish the book, and that news was sufficient to engage the attention of a Hollywood entertainment attorney, who had once rashly offered to be my lawyer if I ever needed one. I phoned him with my news, determined that the agency that had turned me down was to not make a commission on a book they had refused to represent.

It's a long story and the book bounced between a number of publishers without my seeing a dime until Juris Jurjevics at E. P. Dutton (my once-editor when I had written a paperback) started hounding me to acquire the rights.

I must say that until this moment in my life I had not particularly succeeded at anything, and there was no way I could imagine what was shortly to happen to my life as the result of this little book which I had so happily written for no one but myself. The rest, as they say, is history, albeit with a small h. It is pleasing to know that the book has not yet worn out its welcome and that successive generations have been pleased by it.

I am often asked to what I attribute the book's success and must answer honestly that I don't know. I fancy I see in it a sort of good-humored exuberance; the writer was clearly having himself a very fine time. Whether this accounts for the work's present popularity is anyone's guess, but I am especially pleased that with the elapse of years, the book and its author have managed to creep into Sherlockian favor. I can only be grateful, the more so as I lived to enjoy my rehabilitation. The world of art is, sad to say, filled with posthumous success stories.

And it may be that what is favorably viewed today may tomorrow once more subside into disrepute. This turn of aesthetic events I would be content to miss.