Supporting Characters of Arthur Conan Doyle

By Steven T. Doyle, BSI

I have to say that it’s an intimidating thing to be the last person presenting a talk on the characters of Arthur Conan Doyle. I know Dr. Gray will be making a final bow, but nonetheless, following this illustrious (“illustrious” is a popular adjective around here) … this illustrious panel, it’s still a bit scary.

I’m here to talk about the “supporting” characters in the tales of Arthur Conan Doyle. After a lineup of George Challenger, Brigadier Gerard, Sir Nigel, the heroic and often tragic women of the Sherlockian Canon, and of course, Sherlock Holmes himself, my biggest fear was that it would come off as a kind of reverse Academy Awards ceremony … all the Best Actor and Actress awards are handed out early, and the show is then stuck with the likes of “Best Supporting Actress in a Short Comedy.” Televisions all across the country are clicking off simultaneously!

But as I began considering the topic, I felt a little more assured that it would be okay. But then I was confronted with another question: what and who do I discuss? Do I take the charge of my commission seriously? The “Supporting Characters” of Arthur Conan Doyle. Hmmmm…. Do I execute it to the letter of the law? Or do I, uh … interpret it?

Executing it to the letter of the law means that I stick to supporting characters of any given book or story, rather than its main character. This would, for instance, rule out Mr. Stark Munro of The Stark Munro Letters. But surely that’s not what Mike Whelan intended when he asked me to speak on this subject.

So, I’ve decided to do a little of both … sticking to the spirit of the law, so to speak, rather than its letter.

The biggest challenge was where to begin? With Conan Doyle it is always such an embarrassment of riches. I found myself drawn to half-a-dozen characters … personal favorites of mine, and also a couple of surprises thrown in at the end also.

Many of the best male characters Conan Doyle created were doctors. Many of the best female characters, especially in the Sherlockian Canon, are governesses. Of course, this is so because Doyle
was himself a doctor, and these experiences and his career as a physician greatly influence his work in countless ways. And as for the how he often portrayed women, it’s well known that Doyle’s own sisters were forced to work as governesses by dire family finances, making him keenly aware of the vulnerability of financially desperate women. Many examples of this show up in the stories. But of course, isn’t that what good writers do? They infuse their fiction with their own experience, with their own life.

The first character I’d like to talk about comes from Conan Doyle’s Round the Red Lamp: Being Facts and Fancies of Medical Life. (How many here have read it? Oh, well … I recommend it to your attention … you are in for a treat.) Round the Red Lamp is a collection of short stories published in book form in 1894. Doyle had begun writing them in 1893, just months after his summary execution of Sherlock Holmes at the Reichenbach Falls. The tales had originally been published serially in The Strand Magazine. Doyle was, of course, the star of the Strand by the time he was writing these stories, and was at the top of his game.

Doyle had, of course, decided to abandon Holmes in order to pursue more important, serious work. In the preface to Round the Red Lamp he characterizes the book as a series of “stories which attempt to treat some features of medical life with a certain amount of realism.” Perhaps these stories were written with the goal of writing more important work in mind, as he adds, “The story which wiles away a weary hour fulfils an obviously good purpose, but not more so, I hold, than that which helps to emphasize the graver side of life.”

So, from Round the Red Lamp I’d like to introduce you to Dr. Horace Selby of Scudamore Lane. He resides in the story entitled “The Third Generation.”

Doyle tells us that, “Dr. Horace Selby was a large, portly man with an imposing presence. His nose and chin were bold and pronounced, yet his features were puffy, a combination which would blend more freely with the wig and cravat of the early Georges than with the close-cropped hair and black frock-coat of the end of the nineteenth century.” Doyle goes on to say he has a mouth “with a kindly human softening at either corner which with his brown sympathetic eyes had drawn out many a shame-struck sinner’s secret.” He adds that, “To his patients there was something reassuring in the mere bulk and dignity of the man. A high and easy bearing in medicine, as in war, bears with it a hint of victories in the past, and a promise of others to come. Dr. Horace Selby’s face was a consolation.”

Dr. Selby is entertaining guests when he is paid a visit late in the evening by Sir Francis Norton, of Deane Park. Sir Frances arrives in a near-panic because something visibly wrong has appeared on both his legs, and he seems to know what it is. As Dr. Selby takes him into a consulting room and begins examining him, we get a beautiful line that, in just a few words, invokes both empathy and fear … saying of Sir Francis, “He was a pitiful, half-tragic, half-grotesque figure, as he stood with one trouser leg rolled to the knee, and that ever present horror still lurking in his eyes.”

And moments later, as Dr. Selby examines those eyes, Doyle again delivers a line that takes us right to the heart of Selby’s character as a doctor:

“He lit a lamp at the patient’s elbow, and holding a small crystal lens to concentrate the light, he threw it obliquely upon the patient’s eye. As he did so a glow of pleasure came over his large expressive face, a flush of such enthusiasm as the botanist feels when he packs the rare plant into his tin knapsack, or the astronomer when the long-sought comet first swims into the field of his telescope.”

And now we’ll switch gears for a moment and, for the Sherlockians in the room today, pay a visit to a more familiar character. I’d like to turn our attention to Mr. Jabez Wilson.

Victorian England was an extremely class-conscious society. Conan Doyle had a real talent for being portraying characters from all levels of society, be it the Upper Class (here Lord Robert St.
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Simon from “The Noble Bachelor,” with his wounded dignity and financially strained title comes to mind), or the middle class, or the “Working Class.”

The Victorian middle-class included businessmen, manufacturers, small entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, and merchants. In “The Red Headed League,” we meet pawnbroker Jabez Wilson, who, as Doyle describes him, “bore every mark of being an average commonplace British tradesman, obese, pompous, and slow. He wore rather baggy gray shepherd’s check trousers, a not over-clean black frock-coat, unbuttoned in the front, and a drab waistcoat with a heavy brassy Albert chain, and a square pierced bit of metal dangling down as an ornament. A frayed top-hat and a faded brown overcoat with a wrinkled velvet collar lay upon a chair beside him. Altogether, look as I would, there was nothing remarkable about the man save his blazing red head, and the expression of extreme chagrin and discontent upon his features.” Mr. Wilson is very proud of that head of blazing red hair:

“Now, it is a fact, gentlemen, as you may see for yourselves, that my hair is of a very full and rich tint, so that it seemed to me that if there was to be any competition in the matter I stood as good a chance as any man that I had ever met.”

Of course, this slow-witted businessman is lured into applying for an opening in “The Red-Headed League” by his criminally minded assistant, who wants to tunnel into the neighboring bank vault while his employer is away.

Now, I know this is a conference about Doyle’s ability to create characters, but we shouldn’t forget his ability as a writer of comedy. One of the Sherlockian Canon’s best comic figures is the red-headed pawn-broker. “I never hope to see such a sight as that again, Mr. Holmes,” Wilson tells the Great Detective. “From north, south, east, and west every man who had a shade of red in his hair had tramped into the city to answer the advertisement. Fleet Street was choked with red-headed folk, and Pope’s Court looked like a coster’s orange barrow. I should not have thought there were so many in the whole country as were brought together by that single advertisement. Every shade of color they were — straw, lemon, orange, brick, Irish-setter, liver, clay; but,” he reminds us pridefully, “there were not many who had the real vivid flame-colored tint.”

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