

Introduction – The Return of Solar Pons

Edgar W. Smith, April 7, 1958

There is no Sherlockian worthy of his salt who has not, at least once in his life, taken Dr. Watson's pen in hand and given himself to the production of a veritable Adventure. I wrote my own first pastiche at the age of fourteen, about a stolen gem that turned up, by some unaccountable coincidence, in the innards of a fish which Sherlock Holmes was serving to his client in the privacy of his rooms; and I wrote my second when I was fifty-odd, about the definitive and never-more-to-be-seen-in-this-world disappearance of Mr. James Phillimore in a matrix of newly poured cement. It would be difficult to say which conception was the cornier of the two; but the point does not concern me too greatly, after all, because Mark Twain wrote a pastiche once, when he was somewhere between the ages of fourteen and fifty-odd, which was considerably cornier than either of them. The point that does concern me – and it is a point that all of us who are tempted to emulation should bear in mind is that the writing of a pastiche is compulsive and inevitable: it is, the psychologists would say, a wholesome manifestation of the urge that is in us all to return again to the times and places we have loved and lost; an evidence, specifically, of our happily unrepressed desire to make ourselves at one with the Master of Baker Street and all his works – and to do this not only receptively, but creatively as well.

Besides Mark Twain and myself, the roster of those who have felt the impulse to produce a coin in counterfeit of the pure Watsonian gold includes such diverse seekers after the truth as Bret Harte, Agatha Christie, O. Henry, Anthony Berkeley, John Kendrick Bangs, Dr. A. Conan Doyle, Maurice Leblanc, J.M. Barrie, and practically every normal fourteen-year-old boy who has had the proper upbringing and an adequate supply of vitamins. Some of the product of this labor of love is good, and some of it is very bad indeed. It is the writers of high literary repute, by some quirk of fate, and those among them in particular who have turned to outright parody, whose product ranks in lowest esteem. Dr. Doyle, for example – one of the great historical novelists of his time, and a giant in many realms – did no more than scratch feebly at the surface with the two short passages in a lighter vein which he attempted. (*The Field Bazaar* in *The Student*, of Edinburgh University, in 1896; and *How Watson Learned the Trick*, in *The Book of the Queen's Doll's House*, in 1924), and his shortcoming is all the more notable because of the opportunity he had, in his capacity as Dr. Watson's literary agent for more than forty years, to learn how Watson actually *did* the trick. Doyle's work falls below the standards attained by many who wrote from a longer perspective, and without their tongues too obtrusively in their cheeks; it is not to be compared – to cite one instance among few – with that of Vincent Starrett, whose *The Unique Hamlet* stands as a classic in the true genre of the pastiche.

The fact remains, in any event, that not many of the essays made at simulation of the Saga have brought satisfaction to any but the essayers themselves. The writing of pastiches is its own, and usually its only, reward; and this, for the true amateur and dilettante, is altogether as it should be. But there have been occasions when a more ambitious writer has taken it upon himself, in grim and feckless bravado, to launch a

highly organized attack upon the whole front of the Sacred Writings, with the acknowledged intent of invading them, planting his banner in their very midst, and pushing his way to stand boldly at Watson's sainted side. This, I think, is carrying good, clean fun too far.

Just such an effort as this to enlarge the Saga was made, a few years ago, by Adrian Conan Doyle, the agent's son. What he did was to produce twelve stories, some of them deriving putatively from the manuscripts in the tin dispatch-box in the vaults of the bank of Cox & Co., at Charing Cross, which he proceeded to offer to the public, straight-faced, as Canonical and heaven-sent. He worked at first with John Dickson Carr, that excellent exponent of the locked room and the unlocked solution, but disagreements arose between them, and the last six of the stories were by the Scion alone. The book containing the stories, when it was published, was called *The Exploits of Sherlock Holmes*, but to the cognoscenti it is known as *Sherlock Holmes Exploited*; the stories, in the vernacular of the Baker Street Irregulars, are not denominated as pastiches, but rather (shunning the crude term "forgeries"), as simulacra. It is evidence of the appraisal given them, to put it in its mildest terms, that they have not been subsumed into the Canon.

That honor of subsumption came closest to being conferred in the instance of one pastiche which attained to such rarefied heights that it was published, in a national magazine, under the by-line of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle himself. The history of this episode – certainly one of the great biblio-bobbles of the century, if not of all time – is worth detailing.

The rumor had spread during the years of the Second World War that the manuscript of a new Sherlock Holmes story had been discovered among the papers left by Dr. Doyle at the time of his death in 1930. Hesketh Pearson quoted excerpts from it in his *Conan Doyle: His Life and Art*, in 1943, and the Irregulars clamored for its publication in full. The Doyle estate pleaded reluctance on the score of "unworthiness," but when the war was over, and the market for literary merchandise showed promise of a better financial return, the manuscript was sold to Hearst's *Cosmopolitan* magazine (although no British magazine would touch it) for what must have been a very tidy sum.

If you will open the issue of *Cosmopolitan* for August, 1948, and turn to page 48, you will see it there in all its textual glory, with beautiful illustrations by Robert Fawcett. THE CASE OF THE MAN WHO WAS WANTED, the headline screamed, BY SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE. and at the foot of the rector page, "Printed by arrangement with the Estate of the late Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Copyright, 1948, by Denis P. S. Conan Doyle, Executor of the Estate of the late Sir Arthur Conan Doyle." The blurb at the front of the issue said this: "We wish we could tell you the dramatic story about how the previously unpublished Sherlock Holmes story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle on page 48 was discovered after all these years. But the facts of the matter are simply that Doyle stuck the manuscript into a hatbox which he put in a safe-deposit box back in 1922 without telling anybody about it. The bank finally decided to open the safe-deposit box last year and there it was."

That, in all conscience, is a dramatic enough story for anybody's wish – but the best is yet to come. The story, it turned out, was a fairly good one, but only fairly good: it contained anachronisms and un-Sherlockian doings and un-Watsonian sayings that led many a B.S.I. to question its authenticity, and disputation waxed on every hand. The circumstance seemed incredible that the one fixed point in a changing age had given way, and that the Canon now comprised not sixty tales, but sixty-one. But there the record stood: “by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle,” which was to say, under the agential arrangements that existed between them, by Dr. Watson.

And there, to all intents and purposes, the record stands today, despite the fact that neither Doyle nor Watson had anything whatsoever to do with the story's authorship. It was Vincent Starrett, praise be, who brought proof to confirm the suspicions still prevailing. Putting his sleuths in Britain on the trail, he uncovered the facts and published them in his column in the Chicago Tribune; and they were later reprinted and extended in the pages of The Baker Street Journal. And the facts were simply these: that an English gentleman by the name of Arthur Whitaker, now deceased, had written this pastiche, had sent it to Sir Arthur, and had received from him, in return a small but generously-minded solatium; that Sir Arthur had tossed the manuscript on his shelf (there is no evidence that it ever got into a hat-box), and that it had lain there, forgotten, until his heirs and assigns discovered it several years after his death and ingenuously assumed it to be his. Fortunately, Mr. Whitaker had kept a carbon copy, and was able to prove his authorship beyond dispute. What settlement was ever made with him for the fee received from Mr. Hearst I do not know; but I do know that I have never seen any statement in print by either the Estate or Cosmopolitan retracting the egregious misrepresentations made and setting the record straight; nor have I seen mention of this horrendous example of mistaken identity in any publication other than the two mentioned above. It is terrifying to think that, in the lack of more widespread testimony to the contrary, the world might come, in its innocence, to believe that this *Case of the Man Who Was Wanted* was a true Canonical tale.

Here, typically, was a serious pastiche, calling Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, by their own names, bearing persuasively upon the Baker Street scene, and attributed, in the accustomed manner, to the man who was closer to the Master and his companion than any other ever was. And yet, as with so many similar efforts made by the hardest-boiled professional or the rankest amateur, the counterfeit clanked with a muffled sound when it was thrown upon the hard surface of the Irregular mind.

It has remained for one whose love of the Canon is as respectful as it is profound to abandon this pretense and to write a series of tales which are not, ostensibly, about Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson at all. The pastiches he has produced (for they are, to any but the utterly benighted, about Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson) come to the closest of any that have been written, consistently, to capturing the true flavor of the Saga, and to making its people and its places and its happenings entirely credible. August Derleth, a prodigious man in many arenas, gave us, in 1945, after their publication in part in national magazines, his magnificent “*In Re: Sherlock Holmes*”: *The Adventures of Solar Pons*. There were twelve stories in all, and they were followed by eleven more when *The Memoirs of Solar Pons* appeared in 1951, and by another trilogy in *Three*

Problems for Solar Pons, published in a limited edition in 1952. Now, after too long a lapse, ten new stories – to which the trilogy of 1952 have been added – about this “tall, thin gentleman wearing an Inverness cape and a rakish cap with a visor on it,” with “the thin, almost feral face; the sharp, keen dark eyes with their heavy, but not bush brows; the thin lips and the leanness of the face in general,” are brought together, happily in this present volume, *The Return of Solar Pons*.

The flavor is still there: Dr. Watson still walks and talks in the guise of Dr. Parker; the image of Sherlock Holmes is incarnate in the likeness of this man called Pons; and, though we are led by the hand to Mrs. Johnson’s house on Praed Street, we know it is Mrs. Hudson who waits to receive us in hallowed Baker Street itself.

In his introduction to *Three Problems for Solar Pons*, Mr. Derleth wrote: “These are quite possibly the last Solar Pons pastiches I shall write...I (am persuaded to) believe that filling the “abhorrent vacuum” as Anthony Boucher put it...is now in more capable hands than my own...” Mr. Derleth’s mistaken deduction related to the forthcoming publication of the Exploits, to which I have made reference above. I am glad he has changed his mind since reading them, and that he has once again taken his own – or Dr. Watson’s – pen in hand. We are left with the impression that, just as it was Dr. Doyle (in collaboration with ex-Professor Moriarty) who tried to kill Sherlock Holmes at the Reichenbach Falls, so it was the agent’s son who almost brought about the death of Solar Pons. But both attempts resulted in failure, and we rejoice in the fact now as we rejoiced in it then. Sherlock Holmes returned; and here, for our delectation, is *The Return of Solar Pons*.