

A toast to our founder, Mycroft Holmes

by Ross E. Davies

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Please consider, briefly, our first and last moments with Mycroft Holmes — his entry, stage right, and his exit, stage left.

The first time we hear from Mycroft it is 1888, near the start of “The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter.” Sherlock Holmes and John Watson are visiting Mycroft at The Diogenes Club. Watson recalls:

Mycroft Holmes was a much larger and stouter man than Sherlock. His body was absolutely corpulent, but his face, though massive, had preserved something of the sharpness of expression which was so remarkable in that of his brother. His eyes, which were of a peculiarly light watery grey, seemed to always retain that far-away, introspective look which I had only observed in Sherlock’s when he was exerting his full powers.

“I am glad to meet you, sir,” said he, putting out a broad, flat hand, like the flipper of a seal. “I hear of Sherlock everywhere since you became his chronicler.”

At the first moment of that first meeting, Mycroft is expressing his appreciation for Watson’s work. It is not hard to imagine a slight swelling of Watson’s heart, a slight elevation of his spirits, at Mycroft’s kind — and unprompted and yet also well-targeted — compliment.

The last time we hear from Mycroft it is seven years later — 1895 — near the end of “The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans.” Colonel Valentine Walter, the “younger brother of the late Sir James Walter,” has been captured by the Holmeses and Watson and Inspector Lestrade, but the secret, precious plans are already gone — in the hands of the nefarious Hugo Oberstein. Gloom prevails all around. Watson recalls:

There was silence in the room. It was broken by Mycroft Holmes.

‘Can you not make reparation? It would ease your conscience, and possibly your punishment.’

‘What reparation can I make?’

Here Mycroft is attuned to, and acknowledging, Colonel Walter’s sense of guilt, of despair. It is not hard to imagine a slight swelling of the Colonel’s heart, a slight elevation of his spirits, at Mycroft’s kind — and timely, and well-targeted — invitation to penance. And the conversation continues from there until Sherlock can pick up the scent and proceed as a man of action to recover the plans with Colonel Walters’s cooperation.

I would suggest that what we have here — from beginning and ending — is the best evidence in support of Sherlock’s famous remarks when he first describes Mycroft to Watson:

“My dear Watson,” said he. “I cannot agree with those who rank modesty among the virtues. To the logician all things should be seen exactly as they are, and to under-estimate oneself is as much a departure from truth as to exaggerate one’s own powers. When I say, therefore, that Mycroft has better powers of observation than I, you may take it that I am speaking the exact and literal truth.”

Could it be that the art in Mycroft’s superior blood is less about processing power and more about empathy? Could it be that the great capacity that strikes Sherlock as so extraordinary in his brother is simply good old-fashioned human fellow-feeling? That Mycroft can read as many words as Sherlock can in the Book of Life — recall that great scene in “Greek Interpreter” in which they jointly, and surely slightly competitively, analyze the widowed artilleryman — but can also read between the lines . . . into the hearts as well as the minds and motivations of those around him?

I suspect the answers are all Yes.

And so the toast I offer today is a toast to our founder, to Mycroft Holmes — not only a reader of the Book of Life and a master of the Science of Deduction and Analysis, but also a sensitive and sympathetic perceiver of the spirits of his fellow-beings. To Mycroft Holmes, a master spiritualist!