

HOLMES IN LONDON, 1988

by John C. Tibbetts

The long shadow of Sherlock Holmes made a three-point landing in London in late September 1988. It touched down in Cadogan Square at the residence of Dame Jean Conan Doyle, the last surviving heir of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; at Wyndham's Theatre in the West End where actor Jeremy Brett had just opened a new play, *The Secret of Sherlock Holmes*; and at Grosvenor House in Mayfair where Michael Caine met American journalists to talk about his Sherlock Holmes film *Without a Clue*.

Caine had recently returned to London after a long sojourn in America. He found temporary lodgings, by coincidence, in the same Chelsea building wherein resides Dame Jean. "I was there for a time before finding a permanent residence," he told me, "and every day on the lift I used to see this old lady and I used to say — Hello, hello. Very polite. But I didn't really know her. And one day she said to me — you've played Sherlock Holmes, haven't you? And I said, Yes, I have. She said, American



Michael Caine as Sherlock Holmes
(Photo courtesy of Orion Pictures)

newspapermen are going to come over here and interview you, aren't they? So I said, Yes. She said, One of them is going to interview *me*! And I thought, She's a bit dotty, you know. So I said, looking down at her — And why would they be interviewing *you*? She said: I am Conan Doyle's daughter!"

Caine chuckled, the sound rolling around in his mouth like a pebble. Then I told him I was the journalist she had alluded to. His eyes lit up. "*You're* the one!" he exclaimed. "You know, when you think what this movie's like, which is a spoof of Sherlock Holmes — I'm glad I moved out of that apartment already — before she sees the film!" He laughed again. "If she sees it, I don't know how she'd take it!"

True enough. Dame Jean had not yet seen the film, and she had had to decide whether to permit its use of the Holmes characters on the basis of a ten page treatment. "In 1980 my father's works came into public domain in England," she explained. We were sitting in her quiet living room, the soft, early September afternoon light drifting through the tall windows overlooking Cadogan Square. "This doesn't apply in America, I'm glad to say, where, thank goodness, your laws have been changed fairly recently and quite a number of my father's works are still in copyright." At her back behind the couch is an imposing portrait of her late husband, former Air Vice Marshal Sir Geoffrey Bromet, RAF. It is flanked by two swords, a naval dirk he owned during earlier service in the Royal Navy, and a replica



of the Sword of State of the Isle of Man that he possessed during his tenure there as Governor after World War II. On the opposite wall behind me is a portrait of Dame Jean while she was Air Commandant of the Women's Royal Air Force during the 1960s. Occupying one entire wall opposite the windows is a portion of Conan Doyle's library, surmounted by the famous Gates portrait. "The artist went down and saw my father quite a lot at the Psychic Bookshop," she explained. "My father had this bookshop which he ran as a hobby in Victoria Street in London. Once I had this and another, smaller portrait that was done as a preliminary study. That one was more informal, more the way I really remember him."



Dame Jean is a trim, slender woman with sharp eyes and an almost childlike smile. Although she had professed some reservations about an interview, I found her not in the least self-conscious or reserved. She is a thoroughly modern woman with contemporary interests and duties in service organizations such as the "Not Forgotten Association" and the Royal Star Garter (a charity for disabled veterans); but she also zealously guards and preserves the traditions of her father's most famous literary character.

"I am a protector of Sherlock Holmes's reputation and, therefore, my father's literary reputation. It's a funny thing, because I'm not a Sherlockian. Holmes is not necessarily my favorite character. I would fight just as strongly, if not more strongly, for Brigadier Gerard and Professor Challenger! Like my father, although I have an affection for Holmes, I find him sometimes a terrible nuisance. He takes up far too much of my time. I can well understand my father wanting to pushing him over Reichenbach Falls! I quite feel that way myself at times! But I hate to see other people putting him in their books, which are not nearly so well written and are really denigrating. It's a pity that people will

try and write these pastiches, because I always feel that a writer who's worth anything should create his own characters. What an admission, that you must use another man's characters in order to get a book published!"

Her guidelines in projects subject to her approval are simple. "Many works have been published here first and then in America afterwards — but I won't give permission for that unless the characters are shown *in character* and in period and only if they are very well written. As far as pastiches are concerned, for a time I did allow pastiches to be published, but always against my inner judgment; and I don't allow it any longer. I do allow a certain amount of films and television if they follow the rules I've just described."

We paused for some coffee and sandwiches that she had prepared on the sideboard. She spoke of the many photographs and mementos at every hand. On the mantle near the kitchen were a number of photographs of her father informal moments with the children. The little girl in glasses is young Jean. "No, I've never wanted those published," she replied to my inquiry; "those are too personal, too much just for the family." She talked further about other things — about her 28 years in the Air Force, at a time when some senior officers still refused to allow women in the Officers' Mess; of the nickname "Sleuthies" given her by some of her fellow officers ("Although most of the men I worked with in the War hadn't the slightest idea who my father was," she hastily added); and of the house at Crowborough, in Sussex, where she grew up.

"We called him 'Pop,' you know," she announced suddenly, putting down the cup. "But I don't think we called him that until we went to the United States on one of the lecture tours. Then we always did. My father loved slang, and he liked American slang very much and encouraged us to learn as much as we could. My brothers both spoke the most beautiful English, but I'm afraid I did pick up the slang, and then later a lot of RAF slang during the War."

I asked her to describe her father, something only her child's eyes could have seen.

"From the time I was a schoolgirl, he used to bring whatever he was writing down at lunchtime. I can still hear slow, heavy footsteps descending the stairs, and then this large, wonderfully genial figure coming into the dining room. We were all there already and it would be as if the sunshine had come into the room. He was such a personality and everything was so interesting. He'd read to us and always say, 'Now, if there's anything you don't like in this, anything you object to, say so.' It was a deep voice.

When one hears it nowadays in that film (that was my dog, Paddy, you know, there with him in that film), it sounds so much squeakier than it was because I think faulty technicalities in those days distorted it. But that was because of his teeth, too. He had a great theory about his teeth. Everyone should have their teeth out very young; and then nobody would have a toothache, he said. And he'd had all his out very young. By the time he was in his late sixties, these weren't fitting quite properly and his voice blurred a bit. At lunchtimes, he would rather talk to us than eat, really. It might have been his teeth, or that he wasn't particularly interested in food. He had very, very simple tastes. Apple dumpling was his favorite pudding, and roast beef and Yorkshire pudding he'd love — or steak and kidney pudding."

She was just seventeen when he died. She remembered how unselfish he was at the time, and how solicitous he was about the time the family members spent with him in those last days. "He was upset," she recalled. "He would sit in the room waiting for the oxygen for his heart, and my brothers would go off to get more oxygen, and he would say, 'Get a book and read. It's so boring for you and I'm so sorry for you there.' His death was a terrible blow because I was particularly close to him. He would let me come into his room, even when he was writing, you know. He would always have a special chair and I was allowed to go and sit there. And I didn't talk at all. I just sat there and got on with my business, or looked after the library and dusted the books. Or we would sit together in the evenings with the early radio sets and listen for messages from the BBC." She paused, her sharp, precise features set for a moment, her eyes focussed somewhere behind me. "He talked to me about Spiritualism when I was about six. 'You mustn't worry about death,' he would say, 'and what death is; there is not the end of everything. There is another life, afterwards.'" She was silent.

After a moment we talked about a new Sherlockian project that had been submitted for her approval, Jeremy Brett's play at Wyndham's Theatre, *The Secret of Sherlock Holmes*. "I was consulted very early on that, and went to a private view last Sunday. I had been sent the script, and had heard it on tape and kept in very close touch with the author, Jeremy Paul, and the actor, Jeremy Brett. I thought it was very elegantly written, fascinating in its way, something that would have amused my father greatly. He didn't mind if liberties were taken on the stage, providing the play was in good hands. You know, my father once took all of us to a stage performance of *The Speckled Band* in 1921. It was terribly exciting and he was very pleased with it. They used a prop for a snake. I think it had been in 1910 when the

play was first put on and they used a real snake — only audiences complained, thinking it was a false snake. So they had to withdraw the real one and use a fake. Too silly for words.”

She laughed there in the deepening afternoon shadows while I sat back, stuffed with salmon sandwiches.



(Photo by Jean Upton)

“Anyway, Jeremy Brett’s been appearing as Holmes in films for television for a long time now, but his performance has changed beyond measure. I didn’t really like him in the early series. He was far too arrogant, too mannered, too highly strung altogether, whereas Holmes was a very cool character. But it’s been wonderful to see the change in him in the last series. Instead of being a rather unpleasant man, he became an endearing man. He holds you. We had a lovely backstage party last week. And it was such a privilege to meet Watson. Edward Hardwicke is a splendid Watson, just the sort of Watson my father would have envisaged — unlike Nigel Bruce, who really was *the most* appalling Watson so far. I mean, Holmes would *never* have shared digs with a fool!”

Of course, I duly conveyed Dame Jean’s greetings to Jeremy Brett backstage in his dressing room at Wyndham’s just prior to the next evening’s curtain. Wyndham’s Theatre is a charming picture-book frame for

The Secret of Sherlock Holmes. Established almost a hundred years ago, the theater has seen productions as diverse as *David Garrick* and *Entertaining Mr. Sloan*. The new Holmes play is impeccably mounted on a black and silver stage. Brett and Hardwicke blend perfectly into a set that is detailed but light as thistle down, capable of dissolving in a twinkling into other locations pertinent to the stories.

But down below stairs in Jeremy Brett's dressing room, I had to look twice before recognizing the actor before me. He was tall and bulky, his hair dishevelled. He had on a preposterous T-shirt with the names of all the Shakespeare plays emblazoned on it. Recovering, I introduced myself.

"Have you seen the play yet?" he inquired immediately. When I answered in the affirmative, he seemed relieved.

"Good," he said, settling into an armchair. Someone had just come in with a tea service. "I was just talking with a reporter earlier who had not even seen it! Can you imagine?" I told him about Dame Jean's confession that his Holmes had changed for the better, in her opinion. What did he think of that?

"Oh, yes, she had told me that and, I must be honest, I had a bottle of champagne on that! Holmes by now belongs to everybody, and all I can do now, rather like taking a brass rubbing in a church, is to indicate it and not upset the image anyone might have of him."

We talked quickly. His rapid fire delivery, his abrupt transitions in topics left me breathless. But time was short and he had yet to get into makeup.

"I'm about to go into my 'penguin transformation,'" he said. "In a way, it's a black and white production, like an old steel engraving; so I get into a black and white face — you know?" He shrugged, momentarily at a loss to describe the slim, paperknife image he presents, gliding across the stage. "I've been playing him for five years and we've done twenty-six stories for Granada Television; but he is always frightening, in a way — that *isolation* you see in his face. But now... now it's just a quick dash into him. And before I have time to think, or let myself think, I leap onto the stage. Rather as if the audience will *heal* me if I trust it..."

I remarked on the dancelike movements he and co-star Hardwicke bring to their actions. They are both quick and light on their feet. On stage, Brett seems to shed twenty pounds, and his movements are like a kind of lyric clockwork.

"It's trying to look as though Holmes is an athlete. I mean, Doyle's given any actor this impossible task — to be a brilliant fencer, a brilliant

boxer, and at the same time a brilliant mind, a genius. So what I do is to use movements to indicate not only the speed of his mind, but of his body, too."

"But it's such a quick and unexpected kind of movement," I ventured.

"Yes, well, I think that's a way to indicate what I might call his 'double-hearing.' I mean, he hears ahead of time, like he thinks. Very often, he knows what Watson's going to say before he says it. And perhaps, then, his body moves before he consciously tells it to. I do this sort of thing at least three times in the play."

He leaned suddenly forward, aggressively confidential.

"You know, Holmes's brain is of such a proportion and speed — that's why I paint my forehead white out there, to make it look as though there's something in it." He sat back, satisfied at last that he had said what he wanted to say.

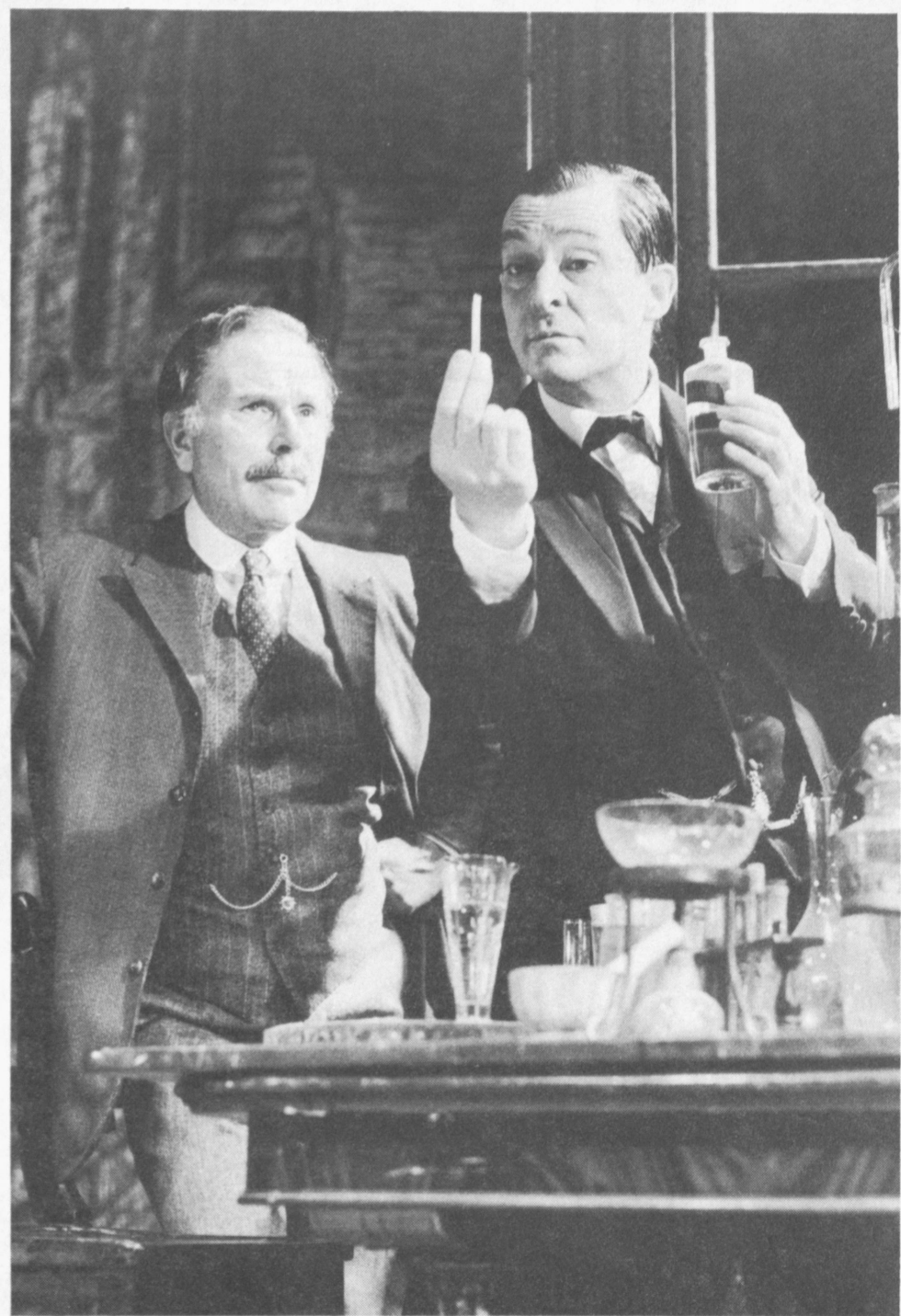
He reminded me then that he had played Watson before he had played Holmes. That had been opposite Charlton Heston in the Los Angeles production of *The Crucifer of Blood*. "And I really loved playing Watson. Playing Watson was very useful because it taught me so much when I came to play Holmes, because they're really two halves of the same parent's imagination. And here, onstage, I'm allowed to do something which I'm not allowed to do in the Canon — to say how *grateful* I am to Watson."

I suggested that a similar scene occurs at the very end of Michael Caine's new film; unfortunately, Brett had not yet seen it. He had commissioned his own play in 1987, and while the writing was progressing had prepared what he calls his "internal actor's notes" on tape — Holmes's own thoughts about his childhood, his feelings about Watson, about Moriarty — indeed, who Moriarty might be.

"Jeremy Paul then got the play together in just a few months; and we did it for one night last year, I bought a theater for Sunday night and we did it in front of friends. And we were trying to decide whether it was a recital or if it was a play. Then Duncan Weldon, our wonderful producer, said 'It's a play! It's a play! It's a play!' And so here we are!"

He gulped down the remaining contents of his teacup. He, too, was full of questions. Did I see the play? Good! (Oh, you already told me that!) How *is* Dame Jean? Wonderful! He talks to the shoulder of the dresser, who has just arrived. Ready? Almost? Good!

"You know what my favorite moment is in this play?" He leaned forward again, like an eager racehorse straining at the gate. "We have this domestic scene. Holmes is talking to Watson about the trip to the Alps. He



Jeremy Brett and Edward Hardwicke in *The Secret of Sherlock Holmes*
(Photo courtesy of Town House Publicity)

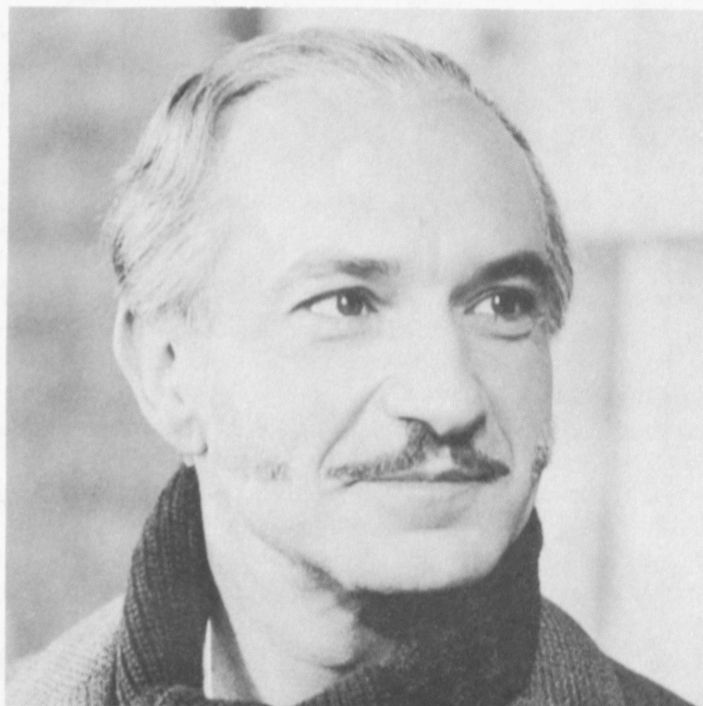
says, 'It makes it easier for me to propose that you come away with me on the Continent to Switzerland —' and then the Reichenbach Falls suddenly smashes the entire theater down! I love that! The entire 221B set disappears — just like that! It's amazing!"

He's not exaggerating. I can still see that great force of pearl grey mist churning downwards, a fountain of light spanning the entire height of the proscenium. Against the spray of light is Holmes's figure, suddenly outlines, starkly black.

In the conjunction of the play and the movie, coming as they both do in this London of the year 1988, there are numerous significant affinities. Perhaps some peculiar osmosis occurred, some magical transferral and intermingling of elements, owing to the very proximity of the two productions. Wyndham's Theatre in London's West End, for example, is not so far from the two well preserved playhouses, the Cambridge Theatre and the Empire, Hackney, that doubled as the theater where *Without a Clue's* Reginald Kincaid (Michael Caine) would finish his duel with Moriarty.

The authors of both projects would doubtless enjoy a pipe together. Jeremy Paul's dramatizations of some of the Granada Television projects bear more refined fruit in the stage play. References from the earlier stories abound, especially from "The Final Problem" and "The Naval Treaty" (from which an extensive portion of the 'Rose Speech' is quoted). The screenwriters of *Without a Clue*, Gary Murphy and Larry Strawther, also draw upon a lifelong affection for the original stories. It was a remembered reference from *The Sign of the Four* that inspired the film. Murphy recalls Holmes's rebuke of Watson in front of the minions of Scotland Yard. "What if they were putting us on?" Murphy said in an interview. "What if Holmes were the twit and Watson the genius?" Thus, to varying degrees, both play and film strive valiantly to give long suffering Watson his due. "How grateful I am to have the chance to pay tribute to Watson," Brett told me; "because you don't find that sort of thing in the Canon, inasmuch as it is Watson telling the stories." Similarly, at the climax of *Without a Clue*, Holmes/Kincaid pays a touching public tribute to Watson.

But both projects find their deepest commonality in their meditations upon Holmes as an actor. Michael Caine is an actor playing Reginald, who, of course, is an actor playing at being a detective. Kincaid's experience as a trouping player in groaners like "Shadow of Death" imparts a certain brittle, if seedy, swagger to his Holmes. Jeremy Brett is an actor playing a detective who himself enjoys playing at being an actor. His Holmes employs a choreography of movement, a relish of diction, and an insolent touch of



Ben Kingsley as Watson in *Without a Clue*
(Photo courtesy of Orion Pictures)

brimstone that bespeak both Brett's interpretation and, we suspect, Holmes's deepest nature. Thus, references abound in the play to Holmes's playacting and love of disguise. In fact, virtually the first thing he says to Watson in Act One is: "It's no joke, taking a foot off one's height for hours at a time." This famous statement acquires a profound significance when we first see Moriarty — for the first and last time — glowering covertly at stage right, alone in his gloom. Is the resemblance, the manner, the similarity to Holmes himself (albeit a foot shorter in height) just a trick of the light — or is it a clue to the very title of the play? "Watson," Holmes says later in Act Two, "I fear, maybe, I really want to be found out."

Brett intends to take the play to America in 1989. He is as proud of its elegant simplicity as he is of the awesome technical detail brought to bear upon the Canon in the Granada Television series. Both the stage and screen are bringing Holmes to new generations. Brett is convinced of that. "In a

sense, this has reopened the books themselves," he said. "I gauge this from the children who are coming to see the show and waiting for me at the stage door. And they're going back to the reading. And that is maybe the best thing of all!"

But now the dresser had reappeared, and sternly eyed the back of Brett's head. As if touched by an invisible hand, Brett abruptly turned around. Time to prepare —

But first, I begged a photograph. Fine he responds — but wait! He whirled about to the door, whisked a florid paisley scarf off the hook, and a coat from the top of a nearby trunk. Another whirl and the coat magically enveloped his shoulders and the scarf twisted about his neck. In a twinkling he was back in his chair. Holmes can look smashing even in just a kerchief and coat. Click!

The starlight was cold and clear overhead as I walked back through the twilight along Charing Cross Road. Many of the bookstores were closing. Somewhere, I thought, Michael Caine is still

chuckling about his narrow escape with Dame Jean; the good lady herself is doubtless bracing for her first view of the movie; and behind me Jeremy Brett's elegantly shod feet click across the silver mirror of Wyndham's stage. "I think it's so refreshing to see this back on stage, this friendship, this bond between two great friends," his words came back to me. "And I think that's really what the Holmes stories are all about. If there's a poem in this, and I think there is, it's about friendship. And I hope we can insure that our darling friends remain intact into the next century!"



(Photo by John Tibbetts)