

VISITING THE BRITISH. A Walk with Conan Doyle

Alexey Tostoy, Russkiye Vedomosti, 22 March 1916

At a banquet, a tall broad-shouldered man, with a large mouth full of strong teeth, with his moustache twisted as spears and with a good-humored look of his clear eyes, was sitting near me. Bending closely to me, he promised, in incredible French, to drop by the hotel at ten minutes past ten on the following day in order to make an hour-long tour around London with me and Chukovsky. It was Conan Doyle, once an obscure physician writing stories a little, who had by then become Sir Arthur for his history of the Boer war.

The morning was hardly suitable for walking. Some improbable grunge in the form of snow was pouring from the sky like hell; shadows of barges and steamers were sliding along Thames in the yellowish fog. Bluish arcs and lines of bridges disappeared in the mist where Gothic tops of buildings were scarcely distinguishable on the opposite bank; snow was everywhere: on trees along the broad embankment where my window looked to, on tops of cars and trams, on umbrellas and hats of passers-by – it had plastered Cleopatra's spire on one side and, a landscape little known to the British had resulted.

Exactly at the hour stated, Conan Doyle phoned from the lobby, and the three of us, after going outdoors, turned to the river. There, in a narrow lane, he pointed at a brick house black with age, where Peter the Great had lived some time ago, and back then his small boat had laid in the embankment, where a stone pavilion is currently located. During flood, water sometimes had approached the balustrade; Peter had boarded his small boat then and gone yachting. I and Chukovsky believed that on Sir Arthur's bare word.

After that, we were shown a huge heavy-smoked building of the War Office the windows of whose cellar and ground floor were protected with iron grids against air fighting. We entered the guard barracks which opened to the spacious fields of the St. James Park; a tall soldier with a naked sword, wearing a helmet and a red cloak, was standing in the gate. Near other barracks, in a deep niche, another guard was sitting on a horse wearing a suit of armor, like a monument, immovably and solemnly.

On our way, Conan Doyle told us about the war, explained the dress of the oncoming officers, took out of his pockets some notelets. According to him, Britain had only 600 thousand troops in 1914. Currently, in all fronts, in march squadrons and reserve battalions, they had millions, and as many recruits. He himself wore a recruit badge and his son fought in France as a soldier.

Squelching through the snow, hiding behind our collars against the rain, we were going to Westminster Abbey. It was incredible to imagine that this good-humored man wearing a blue coat, with his bovine neck muffled into a brown scarf, wearing a bowler and an umbrella, knew how to detect a mysterious crime by the color of cigar smoke. When he heard the name of Sherlock Holmes he turned round and, having showed all his strongest teeth, uttered: "Some time ago, I went to Baker Street to see who dwells in number thirty-seven (the flat of Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson). It turned out that a photographic studio was there". This was the only literary conversation during the entire walk.

We entered Westminster Abbey. A service was under way; women and soldiers were praying, touching the Gospels with their foreheads, some of them veiling their faces with their hands. To the left, white figures of priests were sitting motionless in cube-shaped niches. Children's voices were singing. High, under the Gothic brownish gray vaults resting upon formidable pillars, dim light of the day was pouring through silhouettes and stained glass of the rose window – a round window. The pipe organ started playing, its slow sounds filled all arcs, niches and bows of the temple, and I saw that the colonnades were going infinitely far to the right and to the left and that the temple was full of people. It seemed that this beauty had been formed from stone and mortar not by human effort only, but a too human and a too small effort (a turn of the hand to drop a bomb from a Zeppelin) was necessary to make all that crashing down in the blink of an eye.

"The British are religious but not too much; we have no fanatics," said Conan Doyle when exiting to the square through a little door, "and this place is very momentous and lucky for me," he pointed at a little chapel, "here I and my now-wife got married eighteen years ago." And it appeared to me that just as rigid and strong his teeth were, so firm and strong his thoughts were, and in the same firm way he had fallen in love for life and that it was good and comfortable to have such man as a friend. Like a real Briton, he is both simple hearted and firm, he believes that Peter's small boat laid exactly in the end of that lane and he knows that if Britain has decided to field that many millions of soldiers then it is this amount of soldiers, no less, will be sitting in the trenches.

In passing, he showed a simple brick house where Lord Byron had lived in a two-window flat and took us to Fleet Street, the street of newspapers and journalists. There he suddenly dived into a small narrow door. We went after him through a dilapidated courtyard into a scantily lit and yet more dilapidated pub, went up along wooden stairs strewn with fresh sawdust, to low-ceiling rooms of the first floor, where everything – tables, armchairs, utensils, engravings on brick walls – was left since the 18th century. Here Doctor Johnson and Boswell had used to sit at friendly conversation. In another room, a grease stain from back of Doctor Johnson's head remained on a wall. In the third, his dictionary was kept under a glass bell.

And nearby, in the kitchen, meat was frizzling on roasting jacks, a girl was serving ale in pewters, and the guests were eating the same soup, the cheese and the beefsteak and pudding that Doctor Johnson himself was fond of once.

In Fleet Street we parted. Conan Doyle jumped sideways, like a bear, into an omnibus passing by and from its top waved his glove, then his bowler at us for long time afterwards.

Count Alexey N. Tolstoy

Korney Chukovsky, Chukokkala (a hand-written almanach)

On 21 February 1916, an association of British journalists held a reception in our honor, in the premises of the reform club. The banquet was as like as two peas with other such banquets. We were greeted by Duke of Devonshire, Lord Cecil and others. All in all, some four hundred persons were there. Present were Edmund Gosse, Herbert Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, Nobel laureate in physiology Ronald Ross, several Lords, newspaper tycoons and others.

On the following day – or was it earlier? – we were commemorated by the British Parliament. There, Chukokkala was enriched by an autograph of Edward Grey, Foreign Secretary.

Since childhood, I have a crazy habit of preferring writers to persons of other professions. Just when we were to visit a minister of no small importance, I had a phone call to my hotel room saying that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was waiting for me in the lobby. I came downstairs to know that the author of Sherlock Holmes wished to prowl around London with the whole lot and to show us the city's places of interest. However, save for me and Alexey Tolstoy, the prospect did not capture anyone. Everyone preferred the meeting with the minister. Appearance of Conan Doyle struck me by the fact that there was nothing striking in it. He was a broad-shouldered man, very tall, with very narrow eyes and with flabby moustache which gave him gentle yet ferocious look. He had something rustic, naïve, commonplace and very cozy in him.

I started telling him how Russian children loved his Sherlock Holmes.

“Sir Arthur has not written Sherlock Holmes only,” said someone reproachfully.

“Yes,” I said, “we know both Brigadier Gerard and Micah Clarke and Professor Challenger but Sherlock Holmes is dearer to us for some reason ...”

Professor Challenger was the character in his latest two novels: *The Lost World* and *The Poison Belt*. Those novels seemed to me far more artistic than some Sherlock Holmes stories.

I told Conan Doyle about that and he nodded his massive head.

“I also think so,” he said. “If you only knew how I am tired to be regarded as the author of Sherlock Holmes only.”

We came out into the street.

“What would you like to see, my friends?” he asked.

“Baker Street, of course!” we said. “The street where Sherlock Holmes lives.”

While making our way to Baker Street, we had an opportunity to become aware of the colossal popularity of Conan Doyle. Cabbies, shoe-shine boys, passers-by, street traders, newsboys, schoolchildren recognized him over and over again and greeted him with an unceremonious nod.

“Hullo, Sherlock Holmes!” a teenager told him.

Conan Doyle explained to us that that happened to him frequently: he is being confused with Sherlock Holmes.

“Apparently, I cannot leave Sherlock no way. Nothing doing!” he said with a smile.

In Baker Street where we came with him, in the same house where, according to him, Sherlock Holmes dwelled, we found a photographic studio of one Frey. At the suggestion of Conan Doyle, we made our photo there. Subsequently he sent me the photograph which was stolen from me by the already mentioned fan of somebody else's archive documents. Chukokkala keeps the writer's autograph only.