

Conan Doyle's Two Wives: The Resident Patient and The Final Problem

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My journey with Sherlock Holmes began in September of 1979 on my 35th birthday. It was on that day that my wife, Margaret Louise Yearout Hawkins, presented me with the set of books that would change my life, Baring-Gould's *Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, published in 1972.

Let's be clear. Arthur Conan Doyle loved three women. His two wives and his mother. And from 1897 until his first wife's death to tuberculosis, he loved all three at the same time. Both wives had to pass muster with the mother, or the Ma'am, as she was called, before either could become the next Mrs. Doyle. (On a personal note, I was married before, and my present wife, after 25 years of marital bliss, still calls herself "the current Mrs. Hawkins".) As I read through the annotations in the Baring-Gould, I was shocked to learn that Conan Doyle's first wife was named **Louise Hawkins!**

I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me begin the story immediately after Doyle's graduation from the University of Edinburgh in 1881. As a young professional, Doyle made a couple of blunders in establishing his own practice.

Right out of University, he signed on as ship's surgeon for the freighter Mayumba, working between England and Africa. Following that harrowing experience, and upon arriving back into Liverpool, he wrote his mother, Mary Doyle, "I have turned up all safe, after having had the African fever, nearly being eaten by a shark, and as a finale the Mayumba going on fire between Madeira and England."

Doyle's next misstep he would recount in *The Stark Munro Letters*, 1895). This was the brief and unsuccessful partnership in Plymouth with fellow University of Edinburgh graduate George Budd. Conan Doyle had moved to the southwest coast of England to join Dr. Budd's thriving practice, but to his surprise Budd conducted his business with shoddy, even shady professional standards. Soon Doyle and his mother decided to break off the partnership so he could establish his own practice elsewhere.

Arthur and his Ma'am settled on a location 300 miles east of Plymouth, and 80 miles south of London: the coastal city of Portsmouth, the suburb of Southsea, with lodgings at Bush Villas apartments. There twenty-three year old Conan Doyle proudly hung his shingle out for business. In a letter to his Ma'am (June, 1882) he says, "My plate is up **Doctor Conan Doyle--Surgeon** and very well it looks." Initially he made just enough income to get by, but with an alarming lack of patients, he had to time

pursue his other love: *writing stories*. Doyle counted on cash from his gifts with “the pen” when medicine wasn’t making him a living. He was elated to receive 10 guineas from the Temple Bar magazine for his story *The Captain of the Pole-Star*. He also welcomed an occasional resupply of funds from his Ma’am.

In 1885, a momentous year for Conan Doyle, he was awarded his M.D. from the University of Edinburgh. Returning to Southsea with his parchment in hand, a fully certified Doctor of Medicine, he soon faced his first serious case. The patient was twenty-five year old Jack Hawkins, with seizures so energetic that he was required to be isolated from the public. Dr. Doyle diagnosed the malady as cerebral meningitis. He invited the family to stay in rooms at his Bush Villas apartment. The Hawkins family, Jack, his sister Louisa, and their mother Emily, became Doyle’s “resident patients” Unfortunately, nothing could be done for the young man, and he died within days. Doyle had some concerns that *“a sharp lawyer might have made much of the case. ...the first breath of suspicion would have blown my little rising practice to the wind. What awful things lurk at the corners of Life’s highway, ready to pounce upon us as we pass.”* Those “awful things” turned out much better than Conan Doyle had any reason to believe. His colleague and professional friend Dr. Pike, had concurred with the diagnosis, thus protecting Doyle from any legal backlash. He need not have worried, however, because Louisa and Emily had nothing but praise for the care shown to their brother and son, and had no plans to sue or condemn the young doctor.

During this emotional time Conan Doyle’s heart went out to Louisa, feeling some responsibility toward her under the circumstances. From the beginning he called her “Touie”. Surely Doyle was thinking of “Touie” when he wrote these words in ***The Sign of Four*** (1890).

“Miss Morstan and I stood together, and her hand was in mine. A wondrous subtle thing is love, for here were two who had never seen each other before that day, between whom no word or even look of affection had ever passed, and yet now in an hour of trouble our hands instinctively sought for each other. I have marveled at it since, but at the time it seemed the most natural thing that I should go out to her so, and, as she has often told me, there was in her also the instinct to turn to me for comfort and protection. So we stood hand in hand, like two children, and there was peace in our hearts for all the dark things that surrounded us.”

They married in August of 1885, and honeymooned in Ireland, where Conan Doyle, ever the athlete, played in a cricket match. Louisa was sweet natured, a seamstress and an accomplished pianist, the daughter of a farmer, one of 13 children,

and two years older than Conan Doyle. Content to be the wife of a family doctor, she encouraged her husband in his literary career, in athletic pursuits. In time, two children were born: Mary Louise in 1889, and Alleyne “Kingsley” Conan Doyle in 1892. Of “Touie” Conan Doyle said, *“no man could have had a more gentle and amiable life’s companion.”* Describing their relationship, he wrote, *“there was no single occasion when our affection was disturbed by any serious breach or division, the credit of which lies entirely with her own quiet philosophy.”* Martin Booth, author of *The Doctor and the Detective* (1997) finds that “they were close, but there was little passion.”

Doyle himself found marriage beneficial for his writing, *“After my marriage my brain seems to have quickened, and both my imagination and my range of expression were greatly improved.”* In his autobiography, Doyle writes, *“It was about a year after my marriage that I realised that I could go on doing short stories forever and never make headway. What is necessary is that your name be on the spine of a volume. Only so do you assert your individuality, and get the full credit or discredit of your achievement.”*

In 1886 he finished ***A Study in Scarlet***, but could not find a publisher until the end of October when it was bought by Ward, Lock and Co. for £25.00. Unfortunately it was not published until the following year in Beeton’s Christmas Annual, December 1887. More publications followed: ***Micah Clarke*** in 1889; *The Sign of Four* (in Lippincott’s magazine, 1890; and ***The Firm of Girdlestone*** that same year.

In 1891, publishing successes, and increasing numbers of fans clamoring for his work, (especially for Sherlock Holmes) Conan Doyle felt confident enough in his “skills with the pen” to end his medical practice and devote all his time to writing. The support and love of “Touie” made his domestic life the perfect setting for his imagination and creativity. He soon published ***The White Company*** to much critical acclaim. It was serialized in *Cornhill magazine* throughout the year. The popularity of ***Micah Clarke*** and ***The White Company*** set Doyle to thinking how he might rid himself of the “shilling shocker” Sherlock Holmes stories.

Into this tranquility came unanticipated problems, and things began to unravel. Louise’s health began to falter; and soon she was diagnosed with consumption, modern tuberculosis. There was no cure for patients diagnosed with the disease in the 1800’s. Physicians prescribed bed rest and occasional trips to healthier climates. To help improve her health, the Doyle’s visited Switzerland early in 1893, and were taken on a tour of the Reichenbach Falls. Conan Doyle’s imaginative mind began to work out the tragic end of Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

The Doyle's desired to be closer to family in England and find a place where "Touie" could continue to recuperate from tuberculosis. A family friend and fellow consumptive suggested the region of Surrey, particularly the area of Hindhead. Conan Doyle bought acreage there and in 1895 his builders completed Undershaw, the last home he and Touie would enjoy.

Fast forward to 1897, London in the spring. Enter the period of "the final problem" as I see it. Doyle meets, and apparently falls immediately in love with Jean Leckie, a dark-eyed, slim beauty in her twenties, well-read, talented in musical arts, an intellectual match for the doctor and author.

Jean obviously was a young lady possessing great passion and patience. I don't mean to imply that Jean was his final problem, but the problems that beset the Doyle family began at this critical juncture of Conan Doyle's life. Doyle used to tell the story of a Cornish boatman who told him, "When Mr. Holmes had that fall he may not have been killed, but he was never the same man afterwards." (*The Strand*, Dec. 1917). This was to be true of Conan Doyle himself.

Years later as Doyle looked back in his *Memoirs and Adventures* (1924), he writes, *"On September 18, 1907, I married Miss Jean Leckie, the younger daughter of a Blackheath family whom I had known for years, and who was a dear friend of my mother and sister. There are some things which one feels too intimately to be able to express, and I can only say that the years have passed without one shadow coming to mar even for a moment the sunshine of my Indian summer which now deepens to a golden autumn. She and my three younger children with the kindly sympathy of my two elder ones have made my home an ideally happy one. My wife's people had a house at Crowborough, and there they had gone to reside. As they were very attached I thought it would be a happy arrangement not to separate them, so I bought a house close by, named 'Windlesham.'"*

We can only speculate what a trying time it was for Conan Doyle and Jean Leckie during those years from 1897 to 1906, before they were married. Jean was often a guest at parties at Undershaw, presented to the public as a friend of the family, and that she was, closer to some than others. Doyle's mother often supported Jean in her frustrations, giving her hope that one day Arthur would be hers alone. As Touie's health continued to decline until her death on July 4 1906, Conan Doyle virtually buried himself in his work, turning more to English causes and politics.

In 1901 he wrote ***The Great Boer War***, followed in 1902 by ***The War in South Africa, Its Cause and Conflict***. This strong message defending the Crown against false accusations of wrongs against the Boers earned him a knighthood in 1902. From

this time forward he was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Already well known to the public, he was a famous author of historical novels, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, wildly popular in England and the United States, and now knighted for his service to the Crown. Those ten long years in the press and public eye must have been tedious for the couple. Sir Arthur, always a gentleman, was trying to do the right thing, trying not to offend or hurt his poor Louisa, his “Touie”, and yet harbored a passionate and unfulfilled love for another woman. The strain and stress began to show.

One of his literary successes during this time was ***The Lost World*** (1912), a story of two professors and two scientists who discover a world of dinosaurs and ape-like men on a plateau in South America. **In 1916** Conan Doyle announced his conversion to Spiritualism, and the rest of his life was given to that cause, even to the point of enduring embarrassing episodes of public ridicule such as his announcement to the world that fairies had been photographed by two young girls in the village of Cottingley, England (1923). This is where Jean’s encouragement led Sir Arthur into unfamiliar territory. She became a spiritualist medium, active in that role from 1920 to 1930, the year of Sir Arthur’s death.

Without going into the history of Spiritualism, suffice it to say that the movement began in 1848 near Rochester, NY. Blogger Anna J. Roberts states, “Up to this point in history, dead people had behaved very much like dead people – they were dead and didn’t generally tend to say much, or anything at all. Strangely, after 1848, they became extremely communicative, not only knocking on tables but levitating them.”

World War I had been devastating for Conan Doyle: he lost two brothers in the conflict, and his son Kingsley succumbed to Spanish flu after a long bout with a war wound.. In 1920 the love of his life, his Ma’am, Mary Doyle died. In 1921 Lady Jean Doyle discovers she has the gift of inspired writing and Sir Arthur is completely convinced. The complete story of this phenomenon is fully recorded in the 1926 pamphlet ***Pheneas Speaks - Direct Spirit Communications in the Family Circle***.

In the Preface, Conan Doyle writes, *“It is now five years since the great gift of inspired writing first came to my wife. In her intense honesty and deep modesty, she somewhat retarded it at first by holding back her impulses in the fear lest they should come from her own subconscious self. Gradually, however, the unexpected nature of the messages, and the allusions to be found in them showed both her and me that there were forces at work which were outside herself. Sentiments were expressed. quite*

foreign to our own. Information was given which was sometimes mistaken, but in many cases, as will be shown in the text, was absolutely correct, including many prophecies as, to world events, which were later fulfilled. As to the mistakes, it is well that the reader should realise, if he does not already do so, that even a high spirit is not omniscient, and that the knowledge which he has is conveyed to him, and so to us, in particular ways which may lead to misunderstanding. It is for this reason that the recipients, of such messages should always test each assertion with their own God-given reason, and apply to them all the usual safeguards of common sense.”

Spiritualism had its skeptics, one of those being the magician and performer, Houdini. But he was willing to listen to Doyle to learn more about it. Houdini had his own skeptics, and was interested in how Conan Doyle dealt with the problem. Houdini took his show to England in 1920 where Doyle attended one of his performances at the London Palladium. Two years later the Doyle family toured the U.S. and Canada promoting Spiritualism. The two families met in New York City. During a seance conducted by Lady Jean Doyle, she wrote words on paper supposedly from Houdini's mother. The words were in English, a language that Houdini's mother did not speak, and at the top of the page the Lady Doyle as medium drew the sign of the cross, something that was unexpected as Houdini's mother was the wife of a Rabbi. Things did not go well between Doyle and Houdini after this meeting.

The paths Conan Doyle chose to follow after his marriage to Jean Leckie left the tranquility and simplicity of his earlier life far behind. Complications come with fame, of course, and there was World War I and English foes to deal with in other parts of the world. Each year it seems Sir Arthur faced a more complex and daunting life. I'm not sure he had the solace and reassuring home life to return to that might have given him support and peace of mind.

Lady Doyle, whom Conan Doyle loved emphatically and unequivocally, may have influenced her husband to make poor decisions. She was, according to contemporary accounts of family, friends and historians, more exacting of him, and had little love or regard for his two children from his first marriage, Mary and Kingsley.

In ***Out of the Shadows: The Untold Story of Arthur Conan Doyle's First Family***, Georgina Doyle (2004), contends that Conan Doyle was unkind to Mary, his first daughter, in leaving her only £2,000.00 and no rights to royalties from his writings. He did this, according to the author, because Lady Doyle wanted all of the estate to go to her and her three children. It is common knowledge that the sons, Adrian and Denis, were spendthrifts, buying and wrecking motorcars, taking fabulous trips to the

Continent, and squandering their father's money on financial schemes that went awry. After Sir Arthur's death, Jean used her spiritualist medium gifts to attempt to run the household, telling her children that she had been in touch with their father and that he had given her specific instructions on what they were to do in all situations. It often conflicted with their own ideas.

There is so much more to the story, but time does not permit it to be told at this meeting. I simply want to point out that Doyle's life during the period of "the resident patient" (1885-1906), changed dramatically during the years of "the final problem" (1907-1930).

I'm not assigning blame, but I find that Doyle's domestic surroundings and the influence of those closest to him set him into paths he could not veer from. His wives held the key to his heart, his mind, and his decisions for good or ill.