

HOW OLD IS SHERLOCK HOLMES?

BY BEVERLY STARK

IT was many years ago that Conan Doyle, for the moment grown weary of his most widely known creation, sent Sherlock Holmes to apparent death in an Alpine pass, only to bring him back for a series of new adventures. In many cases the exact period of these adventures was indefinite, but "His Last Bow" established the fact that Holmes was alive and in the full vigor of his powers as late as August, 1914. It is to be assumed that he is still of the earth today, and that, as the brains and energy of the British secret service, he was a conspicuous factor in bringing the Great War to a victorious conclusion. It is to be hoped that eventually the story of these exploits will be told. In the meantime an obvious question is: "How old is Sherlock Holmes?"

Here and there in the course of the forty-odd tales involving the eminent practitioner of the science of deduction there is a vast amount of personal information, but on the point of his exact age there is a certain latitude for conjecture. The first story written introducing him was "A Study in Scarlet". 1880 was the approximate date of the adventures of that tale, for Dr. Watson, falling in with Holmes and sharing the apartment with him in upper Baker Street, was recovering from the wound received in the Abyssinian campaign of

1878-79. But in the course of confidences when the association became more intimate, Holmes told the story of several achievements that had antedated by some years "A Study in Scarlet": for example, the "Musgrave Ritual" affair, and "The Adventure of the Gloria Scott", the latter the first case in which Holmes exercised professionally his unusual powers. Assuming, as it is reasonable to assume, that the year of the "Gloria Scott" episode was 1875, and that Holmes, then completing his course in the university, was in his twenty-first year, the date of his birth may be placed as about 1855—making him four years older than his creator (who was himself still in his twenties when he invented the vehicle by which he was to express his entertaining theories)—and his present age as five and sixty. No longer in the flush of youth, but still in prime vigor, provided he has shaken off the deplorable habits that in the early days so irritated the obtuse but conscientious Watson.

Whether or not Sir Arthur Conan Doyle sees fit to chronicle the activities of Sherlock Holmes during the Great War is a matter for him to decide. But his is a definite responsibility in the matter of certain tales to which he made tantalizing allusion in former stories. Of one of the titles mentioned he made subsequent use,

telling the story of "The Adventure of the Second Stain", though not living quite up to the promise at which he hinted. But readers have almost the right to insist that some day he clear away the mystery obscuring the alluring suggestion of "The Affair of the Netherland Sumatra Company", "The Loss of the Sophy Anderson", "The Arnsworth Castle Affair", "The Darlington Substitution Scandal", "The Case of Vamberry, the Wine Merchant", "The Adventure of the Paradol Chamber", "Ricoletti of the Club Foot and his Abominable Wife", "The Tankerville Club Scandal", "The Affair of the Amateur Mendicant Society", "The Adventure of the Grice Patersons in Uffa", "The Camberwell Poisoning Case", "The Dundas Separation Case", "The Affair of the King of Scandinavia", "The Trepoff Murder", "The Affair of the Reigning Family of Holland", "The Tragedy of the Atkinson Brothers at Trincomalee", "The Manor House Case", "The Adventure of the Old Russian Woman", "The Tarleton Murder", "The Case of Mrs. Etheredge", "The Affair of the Aluminium Crutch", and "The Adventure of the Tired Captain". Probably it was in a spirit of lightness that Conan Doyle flung out these titles. But in thus whetting expectation he assumed an obligation that he can no more dismiss than Frankenstein could rid himself of the monster that he created.

Upon one occasion Sherlock Holmes alluded to a strain of French ancestry, which may account for a popularity in France as great as his popularity in England and the United States. But for a full realization of the hold which the name has taken upon the imagination of the world, to understand that never since the beginning of time has a character of fiction had

such instant significance to millions of people, it is necessary to turn to Spain and the Spanish-American countries. Barcelona is the birthplace of an Iberian Sherlock Holmes, the surname being pronounced in two syllables. The fabrication of his adventures is an industry of the city, employing the imaginations of a score of hack writers. The paper books, with gaudily colored covers, are printed by the millions, distributed to news-stands throughout the peninsula, and sent overseas to Cuba, and Central and South America. In the crude portraits of Holmes that appear at the top of the cover-pages there are the features familiar to English readers, but somehow the artists have twisted them, subconsciously probably, until the face is the face of a Spaniard. The nature of these lurid tales of Spanish fabrication may be indicated by a translation of some of the titles: for example, "Blackwell, the Pirate of the Thames", "The Seller of Corpses", "Jack the Ripper", "The Bloody Hammer", "The Red Widow of Paris", "In the Pittsburgh School of Crime", and "Sherlock Holmes and the Opium Smugglers".

Russia, as well as Spain and the lands of Spanish influence and tradition, has had its transplanted, adopted, and adapted Sherlock Holmes. One year before the war the empire of the Czar saw the publication of more than a thousand sensational novels, classed as "Nat Pinkerton and Sherlock Holmes Literature". Among the titles of the tales of the Doyle hero told with a Slavonic twist were "The Stranglers", "The Hanged", "The Expropriators", and "The Disinterred Corpse". A Russian critic at the time found in this taste the expression of a national sentiment. Sub-

sequent events have invested his words with all the dignity of a prophecy. The taste, he held, was significant of a revolt against three great ideas that had at different times dominated Russian literature: the quiet pessimism of Turgenev, the Christian non-resistance religion of Tolstoi, and the familiar Russian type of will-less philosophy. The then new craze for Sherlock Holmes stories, the critic thought, foreshadowed a complete change in the Russian reader, the

decay of the literature of passivity, and the rise of a new literature of action and revolt. It was thirty-odd years ago that Conan Doyle, a medical practitioner without any practice to speak of, and a struggling author without an audience or a market, succeeded, after much peddling, in disposing of the manuscript of "A Study in Scarlet" for the sum of twenty-five pounds. How little did he dream that he was building for the downfall of an empire!

THE WONDERFUL AGAIN

BY H. W. BOYNTON

AFTER all, a good yarn is as far as ever from being disqualified by allusions to the tired business man or the silly season. Unmeaning "realism" is, we know quite well, much sillier than well-reasoned romance. Fact may be stranger than fiction; but it is also, left to itself, infinitely duller. The big realism which arranges and interprets fact thereby embodies a deeper and richer kind of truth (perhaps) than the best of romantic inventions. But that doesn't stultify our delight in the kind of truth we find (like a quarter on the doorstep) in the "Monte Cristos" and the "Treasure Islands" of all ages. It is one thing to chaffer for our money's worth at the counter where the staples are dispensed, and another to step gaily up to the booth where we are promised a prize in every package.

That is a lively spot just now, with some very good people taking in the

money. Mr. Henry Milner Rideout was once a Harvard instructor, but when he gave up daily-theming for story-telling and even when, a little later, he signed up on the bark Romance, it does not seem to have occurred to him to throw all his literary breeding overboard. The ditty of Autolycus beckons us to our present journey along the "foot-path way" of adventure:

A merry heart goes all the day,
Your sad tires in a mile-a.

However, literary allusion is far more rare with him than with the star Saturday Evening Posters, whose quaint usage it is to lug in bookish locutions and recondite names, especially names from classical mythology, to flatter if not enlighten the million. Mr. Rideout's merit is elusive. I lay down "Tin Cowrie Dass" or "The Foot-Path Way",—not so different in matter from the usual modern kind of thing: