

SHERLOCK HOLMES: NOTES FOR A BIOGRAPHY

by Vincent Starrett

THE day will come, one fancies, when Sherlock Holmes will be assumed to have left this mortal life behind. It will be a presumption based on probability, since man—we have been told—may not live forever in the flesh. And when that day shall have arrived, and the sad word have been spoken, there will be records and biographies in number, do not doubt, to prove the facts of his existence. In time he will have lived as surely in our world as ever he appeared to live in that span that might have marked his living. There will be little placards on the doors that once he entered, and tall memorials in the pantheons of Christendom. There will be . . . But already, for the elect, there is that page of reminiscence by Opal, Lady Porstock:—

I need only mention one other of my public activities, which remains a legitimate boast [she asserts, writing of her days in Parliament]. It was a Private Member's Bill, brought forward by myself, that procured the erection of the great statue of Sherlock Holmes in Baker Street. I pointed out that London was now the only European capital which had no statue of the kind, and the plaque on No. 221-B Baker Street was a quite inadequate recognition of the famous detective's services. The question whether he ever existed did not affect, or ought not to affect, the feelings of veneration with which we regarded him. When the Bill passed, I was elected a member of the Committee which was to decide between the various designs sent in. . . . I am glad to say that it was at my instigation the Committee chose the design sent in by Wrightman, then quite unknown, but destined to become famous as one of the leaders of the

neo-classical school of the sixties. The conception is a noble one, and if some have found fault with the pipe as out of keeping with the classical draperies in which the figure is represented, it is not for us to complain.

It is, to be sure, a little early as yet for admirers of Mr. Sherlock Holmes to look up the statue. Lady Porstock would appear to have been writing in the year 1988 of events that transpired between the years 1953 and 1959; and as her valuable reminiscences were edited by Father Ronald Knox in the year 1923 in his volume *Memoirs of the Future*, it is fairly obvious that somebody is being spoofed. But one looks forward to the birth of Wrightman and the coming of the great Baker Street memorial. Already there is a railway engine wearing the famous name. It runs in and out of the Baker Street Station, and is a sufficiently admirable memorial of its kind.

As Lady Porstock has suggested, the question whether Sherlock ever existed has really nothing to do with the case. Existence is a word that has no very precise definition. It means whatever the prevailing fashion in philosophy wishes it to mean. If it means anything at all, it would appear to mean that which is perceived of the imagination quite as much as that which is real to the primary senses. Certainly it is a commonplace that many things exist which nobody has seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched.

The existence of Sherlock Holmes is, however, something more than a matter of mere

faith. That he emerged from the pages of a book may be a concern of scholarly regard, but it can hardly be denied that he has taken his place in the living world. You may go out into the street, as Mr. Edward Shanks has suggested, if you are in any doubt about it, and ask the first bus conductor that you meet. By Holmes's own methods, indeed, it could be demonstrated that he lived—nay, that he still lives; and one likes to imagine that, for *auld lang syne*, he still occasionally revisits the glimpses, in old Baker Street. It was the famous General Humbert, no less, who demanded tidings of the detective, only fifteen years ago. His dinner guest at the moment happened to be Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, then visiting the Argonne.

“À propos”, suddenly snapped the General, his hard eyes fixed upon the author's face, “Sherlock Holmes, est-ce qu'il est un soldat dans l'armée anglaise?”

There was an embarrassed moment as Sir Arthur paused. Then, “Mais, mon général”, stammered the English novelist, “il est trop vieux pour service.”

How much too old, Sir Arthur did not say; but Mr. Arthur Bartlett Maurice, excited by the anecdote, determined to find out. On the strength of his researches—and perhaps deductions—he places the detective's birthday in the early fifties; in which event Holmes must today be close upon his eightieth anniversary.

Is his mail still heavy, one wonders, there upon the Downs? Innumerable letters have been addressed to him at one time and another; and by some admirable citizens, too. For the most part, these were sent in care of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, in the belief that he would forward them; but even when they were not so directed the Post Office Department of England—an intelligent institution—had no difficulty in making the

proper delivery. A number of letters were received by Sir Arthur after it had been announced that Holmes was retiring to his bee farm in Sussex. There were several worthy persons in the world, it appeared, who would be happy to assist him in his project. “Will Mr. Sherlock Holmes require a housekeeper for his country cottage at Xmas?” asked an “old-fashioned, quiet woman” hopefully; and another spread her qualifications on the record: she was an adept, it seemed, at keeping bees and was able to “segregate the queen”.

A professional lecturer who was also an apiarian specialist addressed himself to Sherlock Holmes direct, offering his services in a letter that is singularly charming in its spontaneity and gratitude:—

DEAR SIR:—

I see by some of the morning papers that you are about to retire and take up bee-keeping. I know not if this be correct or otherwise, but if correct I shall be pleased to render you service by giving any advice you may require. I make this offer in return for the pleasure your writings gave me as a youngster; they enabled me to spend many and many a happy hour. Therefore I trust you will read this letter in the same spirit in which it is written.

Autograph-hunters, too, were pestilential throughout the detective's long career, and doubtless are still bothersome. The more cunning of the tribe, hesitating to approach the celebrity directly, used to address their unctuous requests to Watson, urging his intercession. But the good doctor's most upsetting communication must have been that dictated by a well-known press-cutting agency, suggesting that his brilliant *confrère* might care to take advantage of its service. That letter, at least, it may be guessed, remained unanswered. There were already too many scraps and scrapbooks littering the place to suit the taste of Watson.

But most devout perhaps of all devout believers were those natives of Samoa whose incredible luck it was to have for master a certain Robert Louis Stevenson. Stevenson, telling his own inventions to his servants in the fragrant Pacific dusk, varied the evening programme with some tales of Sherlock Holmes. In a comical letter to Sir Arthur (not then a knight, however), he complained of the difficulty of telling stories which every moment required a halt for explanations. What, asked the literal Samoans, was a railway? What was an engineer? Somehow, in spite of difficulties, he got the tales across. "If you could have seen the bright feverish eyes of Simite", wrote the Scottish novelist, "you would have tasted glory."

To his own *Bottle Imp* they had listened with bated breath, only to burst forth, at conclusion, with an awkward question. "Where", they demanded eagerly, "is the bottle?"

O ye of little faith! Surely he lived—our Sherlock—and breathed the fog and dust of Baker Street, even as now, one hopes, he breathes the purer air that blows across the Sussex Downs. And Watson, too—has he not sold his latest practice, and gone to join his comrade? How often one likes to think that it is so!

But there is still considerable research to be done before those records for the future may be called complete—before the High History of Mr. Sherlock Holmes shall have been set down for posterity. When and where, precisely, was he born? What was the college which for two years he attended? Who and what were his extraordinary parents? That they were extraordinary is as certain as that they were unknown to public fame. His brother Mycroft, that colossal genius, that all but fabulous monster, we have casually met on more than one occasion, in the pages of Watson; but about the

other members of his family circle Sherlock has been as close-lipped as the dourest Scottish tradesman. Even to Watson he revealed so little of his early life that the doctor was at one time upon the point of believing him an orphan with no kinsfolk in the world. But with the first mention of his brother Mycroft a few stray facts emerged.

"My ancestors", said Sherlock Holmes on this unusual occasion, "were country squires, who appear to have led much the same life as is natural to their class. But, none the less, my turn that way [*i.e.*, his ability to observe and make deductions] is in my veins, and may have come from my grandmother, who was the sister of Vernet, the French artist. Art in the blood is liable to take the strangest forms."

His grandmother—but on which side? The mother's, one suspects, since in general his ancestors were English country squires; and is there not perhaps a further clue to family history in Mycroft's name? One offers the suggestion in humility, and yet it may have merit. Mycroft, the elder of two brothers (had there been others, Sherlock, at this time, should have mentioned them), might well receive his mother's family name—a common practice. Indeed it is even possible that Sherlock was the mother's surname, but indications point rather to a certain bowler of that name, admired no doubt by Sherlock's unknown father. Young Dr. Verner might resolve the tangle—if he still lives; but if he does, one fears he is no longer young. He it was who purchased Watson's practice, in 1894, after the return of Holmes from Switzerland. He paid, it seemed to Watson, a ridiculously high price for so demure a practice; and it was not till some years afterward that he found out the truth—that Verner was, in fact, a distant relative of Holmes, and Holmes it was who had turned

up the money. The connection here between the younger doctor and that grandmother who was the sister of Vernet is obvious. Verner would be the English form of Vernet, or a corruption of the French name after a year or so in England. And Dr. Verner would be a cousin of the detective, twice or thrice removed.

However that may be, Holmes for two years, we know, attended college, where the only friend he made was Victor Trevor—young Trevor whose father was a J.P. at Donnithorpe in Norfolk. Old Trevor is, of course, quite dead; but it may be that Victor still survives, in which case there is another source of inquiry. He was last heard of in the Terai, a successful tea-planter. The early friendship came about in curious fashion, when Holmes—upon his way to chapel—was seized by Trevor's bull-terrier and laid up for ten days. It was this acquaintance, it will be remembered, which gave the youthful Sherlock his first case, celebrated in the *Memoirs* as *The Gloria Scott*, and which really turned his attention to the possibilities of the profession he was so long to grace.

Again, in *The Musgrave Ritual*, there is just a glimpse of Holmes's younger days. He speaks here, easily enough, of his "last years at the university", but presumably it is just a figure of speech. The earlier record seems quite explicit, and it limits Holmes's formal college training to a scant two years. There is also considerable mention of one Reginald Musgrave, with whom at school Holmes had had some acquaintance. Apparently it was nothing intimate, for Musgrave was "not generally popular". Nevertheless, in Musgrave, if he still survives—at Hurlstone Manor, which is in Western Sussex—there is another clue to Holmes's early exploits. Certain it is that his methods had occasioned talk even at the University. It was, indeed,

through the good offices of former classmates that several early cases came to him, after he had established himself in London.

His first lodgings were apparently those in Montague Street (mentioned in *The Musgrave Ritual*), just around the corner from the British Museum. "There I waited," Watson tells us the detective told him, "filling in my too abundant leisure time by studying all those branches of science which might make me more efficient." There it was his early clients came to him, among them Reginald Musgrave, whose puzzling problem was chronologically third upon the list. Of the two earlier cases we have no word at all, unless we think of the Trevor business as one of them. This seems unlikely as it occurred before young Sherlock came to London.

Shortly thereafter, at any rate, it would appear that business picked up, and Sherlock Holmes cast round for larger quarters. He had been for some time, we must suppose, pursuing his curious studies in the chemical laboratory at St. Bartholomew's, where he had become known to young Stamford. All unwitting, and young as he still was, he was now at the turning-point of his career. Almost around the corner—certainly no farther away than the Criterion bar—was Watson. And it can scarcely be denied that it was with Watson's wondering advent that the real career of Sherlock Holmes began.

Thereafter, the materials for a biography are numerous. It is of Holmes's younger days that we need further information. Is there no anecdote of the precocious youth's first startling piece of observation? His first recorded literary venture set forth by Watson is a magazine article called *The Book of Life*; but it is certain that his famous monograph *Upon the Distinction between the Ashes of the Various Tobaccos* was already

written, as were probably also some of his other and less celebrated papers. Those long hours in the rooms in Montague Street would have been admirable for literary enterprise, and it seems highly likely that many of them were thus employed.

Some day, no doubt, there will be a Collected Edition of the famous writings. In the meantime, a bibliography may prove useful, and this immediately follows. The order in which the several items are here set down is not of necessity the order in which they made their original appearance, although an effort has been made to make the muster chronological.

THE WRITINGS OF MR. SHERLOCK HOLMES

UPON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE ASHES OF THE VARIOUS TOBACCOS. "In it", says Holmes, "I enumerate one hundred and forty forms of cigar, cigarette, and pipe tobacco, with coloured plates illustrating the difference in the ash." (*A Study in Scarlet, The Sign of Four, The Boscombe Valley Mystery*)

UPON THE TRACING OF FOOTSTEPS. "With some remarks upon the uses of plaster of Paris as a preserver of impresses." (*The Sign of Four*)

UPON THE INFLUENCE OF A TRADE UPON THE FORM OF THE HAND. "With lithotypes of the hands of slaters, sailors, cork-cutters, compositors, weavers, and diamond-polishers." (*The Sign of Four*)

THE BOOK OF LIFE. This was a magazine article on the science of deduction and analysis, based on the author's theories of systematic observation. It probably appeared some time early in 1881. (*A Study in Scarlet*)

ON THE TYPEWRITER AND ITS RELATION TO CRIME. As early as the late eighties Holmes contemplated the writing of this monograph, and there is no reason to suppose that it was not ultimately accomplished. (*A Case of Identity*)

UPON THE DATING OF OLD DOCUMENTS. "The *terminus a quo* of this monograph is uncer-

tain," says Mr. S. C. Roberts. "It probably dealt in the main with the problem of hand-writings from the sixteenth century onwards. It was completed before the year 1889, and at a later date Holmes was engaged in the study of the mediaeval aspect of the subject." (*The Hound of the Baskervilles and The Golden Pince-Nez*)

OF TATTOO MARKS. "I have made a small study of tattoo marks", says Holmes, "and have even contributed to the literature of the subject." His paper included an examination of the curious pink pigment used by Chinese artists. (*The Red-Headed League*)

ON SECRET WRITINGS. "I am fairly familiar with all forms of secret writings", Holmes asserts, "and am myself the author of a trifling monograph upon the subject, in which I analyse one hundred and sixty separate ciphers." (*Dancing Men*)

ON THE SURFACE ANATOMY OF THE HUMAN EAR. There were two short monographs on this subject, in the *Anthropological Journal*, apparently some time in the early eighties. Both papers appeared during the one year, and one may well have been an amplification of the other. (*The Cardboard Box*)

EARLY ENGLISH CHARTERS. It is not certain that this work ever was completed. Holmes conducted laborious researches in the subject, however, in the year 1895, which led to such striking results that Watson half promised to make them the subject of one of his own narratives—a promise which has not as yet been fulfilled. (*Three Students*)

ON THE POLYPHONIC MOTETS OF LASSUS. Printed for private circulation, possibly some time in 1896; certainly later than 1895. This work is said by experts to be the last word upon the subject. (*The Bruce-Partington Plans*)

CHALDEAN ROOTS IN THE ANCIENT CORNISH LANGUAGE. Holmes began his study of this subject in the spring of 1897, if Watson is correct, and although the adventure of *The Devil's Foot* occurred to interrupt him, it is certain that he returned to it. There is no record of publication, unhappily, but

Holmes's interest in the subject would argue that it did ultimately in some form achieve the permanence of print. (*The Devil's Foot*)

MALINGERING. A monograph upon a subject which interested Holmes at the time of the adventure of *The Dying Detective*. While it is not certain that it ever was written, it may very well have been; at least, one fancies, it has become a chapter in his comprehensive textbook, *The Whole Art of Detection*, hereinafter listed. (*The Dying Detective*)

UPON THE USES OF DOGS IN THE WORK OF THE DETECTIVE. It was in 1903 that Holmes first mentioned his intention to write this monograph, but there is no report in Watson of its publication. Possibly it, too, has become merely a chapter in the great textbook of detection. On the other hand, diligent research may turn up a copy of the work as originally planned. (*The Creeping Man*)

PRACTICAL HANDBOOK OF BEE CULTURE, WITH SOME OBSERVATIONS UPON THE SEGREGATION OF THE QUEEN. This *magnum opus* of the detective's later years was written after his retirement, and was published some time prior to August, 1912. Presumably it is a small duodecimo. It was issued in blue cloth, lettered in gold. (*His Last Bow*)

SIGERSON. It was during the year 1893 that the English newspapers carried accounts of the "remarkable explorations of a Norwegian named Sigerson", who had travelled for two years in Thibet and spent some days with the head Lama at Lhasa. Sigerson is now known to have been Holmes himself, then believed to be dead; and while the newspaper reports are no doubt interviews rather than first-hand accounts, they will be of the highest interest to all Holmes collectors, and are mentioned here to complete the record. (*The Empty House*)

THE BLANCHED SOLDIER. The first of the famous detective's criminal reminiscences to be set forth by himself. The adventure occurred in January, 1903, but this account of it was

written many years later. It was first published in the *Strand Magazine* during 1926. Available in all editions of *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*. (*Blanched Soldier*)

THE LION'S MANE. Second and last of Holmes's adventures related by himself. The episode is dated in July of 1907, but the reminiscence was probably penned at about the same time as that of *The Blanched Soldier*. Published in the *Strand Magazine* during 1926. Available in all editions of *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*. (*The Lion's Mane*)

THE WHOLE ART OF DETECTION. Sherlock Holmes proposed to devote his declining years to the composition of this textbook, which was to "focus the whole art of detection into one volume". He mentioned it to Watson on a cold morning in the winter of 1897, and there is no reason to suppose that he ever gave over the fascinating idea. As the volume has not yet been announced, it may be assumed that it is still in preparation. (*Abbey Grange*)

TRANSLATIONS. The number of Holmes's works that have been translated into foreign languages is probably large, and no attempt has been made to run them all to earth. Certain it is that as early as 1888 François le Villard was engaged in translating into French the writings then published; and where the French were adventuring, it is certain the Germans were not far behind. The two criminal reminiscences (see above) have appeared in practically *all* languages, including the Scandinavian.

Look well, then, for all these rare and difficult titles, Bookmen, for your own shelves and for the records of the future. In them are the exercises of a great and vigorous mind unhampered by the interruptions and the cries of Watson. Good fellow, he has spoiled some admirable monologues, at one time and another, by his appalling muddle-headedness.

ROSAMOND LEHMANN

AND THE PERILOUS ENCHANTMENT OF THINGS PAST

by *George Dangerfield*

"Cum sic orsa loqui vates: 'Sate sanguine divum,
Tros Anchisiade, facilis descensus Averno:
noctes atque dies patet atri janua Ditis;
sed revocare gradum, superasque evadere ad auras,
hoc opus, hic labor est . . .'"—*Aeneid. Bk. VI.*

IT is impossible to mention Rosamond Lehmann without praise and without gratitude: it is equally impossible to write about her without some stirrings of fear. The praise and the gratitude may be taken for granted, since everybody knows how rare her gift is and how delightful; the fear, perhaps, remains to be defined.

It was a fear which scarcely troubled us in our reading of her first book, and after reading her second it was only vague and impalpable: but with the publication of *Invitation to the Waltz*, perhaps the most enchanting novel of 1932, it took on shape and substance. For then, taking all three books together, one could see for the first time a curious fact: as Miss Lehmann advanced in technique, in delicacy, in assurance, so she retired from life in all its larger manifestations. Indeed, her progress has been from the universal to the local, from the wide arena to the narrow; a Persephone among her contemporaries, she has now descended into Avernus—the half-world of fiction, the place that is thronged with the nearly dead, and bright with the images of those who are yet to be born.

To talk of Miss Lehmann in terms of a descent is an exaggerated figure of speech, of course; it excludes most of her admitted virtues, or at any rate relegates them to a minor place. It is true that this descent has been marked by a delicate and lyrical prose, and illuminated by certain portraits of children and adolescents which are almost unequalled in our time. It is true that, in one sense, Miss Lehmann has accomplished more than her contemporaries and has as great promise as any of them. But precisely for that reason, one must now write about her in the light of her weakness and not of her strength: for if one dares prophesy a great future for her, one is obliged to recognize her chances of not realizing that future. Otherwise prophecy becomes an idle thing.

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DAY and night the gate of the half-world is open for those novelists who are gifted enough to demand an entrance there. With each writer its colours and its geography are different, but for all of them it is the place where the minor predicament, the unimportant event, the lesser character are celebrated. It can be smart, or sociable, or gloomy, or horrible: in Miss Lehmann's case it has become magical and enchanted, and those are words which, with reference to major fiction, have a deal of menace in them. What led her steps there? Nothing, it seems, more sinister than memory.