

The Undying Detective*

BY

R. ELLIS ROBERTS



Sherlock Holmes, by Frederick Dorr Steele.

DR. WATSON, to whom we owe the record of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, was a man of no little vanity; and he must be pleased at the attention paid by scholars to his friend and to himself. Unfortunately the good doctor suffered from a very infectious disease—inaccuracy; and he contrives still, from whatever limbo he limps in, to inoculate even some of the contributors to “221B” with the virus of his disease. I have no doubt that I myself, in writing of the book, will perpetrate some frightful chronological or historical howler. There are not many mistakes in these studies which Vincent Starrett has collected; and I will hasten to get them out of the way first, before considering the major problems discussed in the volume.

Mr. Christopher Morley argues that Sherlock Holmes was a Cambridge man, and puts in as evidence an illustration of Sidney Paget’s showing Holmes “wearing a straw hat with a light blue ribbon. (He was of course a boxing blue.)” But in the seventies there was no Blue for boxing. If Holmes was at either of the major Universities—I believe myself he was a Durham man—he was probably, as were Calverley and Flecker, at both: what other explanation can there be for his never saying outright “when I was at Oxford,” instead of using the vulgarism “I was at college”? In the essay on Sherlock Holmes’s fees Mr. R. K. Leavitt gives us the bill presented by the detective to Miss Mary Morstan for his work in “The Sign of Four.” Mr. Leavitt accepts Bell’s date for this episode; and the bill is dated October 1, 1887. It includes “Advertisement, 74 words, in agony columns of *Globe*, *St. James’s*, *Westminster Gazette*, *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Standard News*, *Star*.” This is impossible:

*221B: *STUDIES IN SHERLOCK HOLMES*. Edited by Vincent Starrett. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1940. 247 pp. \$2.50.

the *Star* was founded in 1888, and the *Westminster Gazette* in 1893. Mr. Altick in his very suggestive parallel of Sherlock Holmes and Samuel Johnson writes of “the Criterion Bar in London” as the site of “the first meeting of Holmes and Watson.” It was not, however, Sherlock Holmes whom Watson met in that famous resort, situated in what he so bitterly calls “the great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained”: here Watson met “young Stamford, who had been a dresser under me at Barts.” (Was it snobbery towards a junior which made Watson take Stamford to the Holborn to luncheon “in a hansom”? The Café Royal, Gatti’s, or Verrey’s were all nearer and better.) Watson met Holmes in the laboratory at Barts—“‘Dr. Watson, Mr. Sherlock Holmes,’ said Stamford, introducing us.” Holmes’s character was already so formidable that Stamford presents the older man to the younger. Some day I think there should be an investigation into “young Stamford’s” subsequent career; for his introduction has been responsible for a very large movement in the annals of literature, as Watson has gravely noted in his unpublished monograph “The New Doyle: a federated inquiry into the realities of the Holmes reserve.”

“221B”—need I remind any reader that this mystic figure was the number of that house in Baker Street where Watson and Holmes lived together?—is a worthy successor to “Baker Street Studies,” and will be welcomed as eagerly by all students of Sherlockiana, by all who have delighted in S. C. Roberts’s essay on Dr. Watson. The contributors would be the last to declare that they have solved all the problems they raise: I believe, as I hope to show presently, that Mr. Christopher Morley, who pro-

vides the most exciting essay, is wrong in his contention that Holmes may have been an American. There are papers by R. K. Leavitt, Elmer Davis, Jane Nightwork, Earle F. Walbridge, H. W. Bell, James Keddie, F. D. Steele (on Holmes’s illustrators and on William Gillette); some admirable *pastiche* by Vincent Starrett and P. M. Stone; and a list of characters in the canon by Edgar W. Smith, from which I miss only Sarasate. Some of these contributors are new to me; but as I read Leavitt’s “The Fiscal Holmes” and Jane Nightwork’s “Dr. Watson’s Secret,” I seemed to hear Holmes chuckle—he chuckles over his bees in Sussex—“Don’t bother about that problem now, Watson, you can leave it to nightwork.”

Christopher Morley is so modest in his contention that Sherlock Holmes had an American father or mother that I regret being forced to dispute his hypothesis. Some of his arguments are light enough—that Holmes, for instance, acquired his taste for oysters in Baltimore. An American usually has to go into training before he can see, let alone enjoy, the “natives” which Holmes devoured. Still his essay is plausible, if certain glaring facts are overlooked. The main one also, to my sorrow, proves that in his youth Sherlock Holmes could blunder very badly; but the truth must be told. The first corpse on which Watson and Holmes gazed together was that of an American, Enoch J. Drebber. Before they saw that uncomfortable sight, Holmes had received a letter from Gregson to say that at 3 Lauriston Gardens, off the Brixton Road, had been found the “body of

a gentleman, well-dressed, and having cards in his pocket-book bearing the name of 'Enoch J. Drebber, Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A.' If Sherlock Holmes, in that year 1881, had been the great detective he afterwards became, it would have seemed almost a certainty to him that there was something phoney about that card. What man ever had the name of his country engraved on his visiting-card? And if Holmes had been an American, he would certainly have argued (a) this man is not a gentleman; (b) he is not an American but an ignorant foreigner; (c) he is probably an international crook. It is possible—I have never seen the visiting cards of Herr von Ribbentrop—that international "drummers" have their country engraved on their cards; that a Frenchman selling champagne here has France after the great name Rheims. If that is so—as surely Holmes would have known—he would have assumed that the iniquitous Drebber was that most beneficent of salesmen, a publisher's agent, who had gone to England with advance copies, or prospectuses, of that American classic, "From Log-Cabin to White House," the story of President Garfield who, as Mr. Morley reminds us, was inaugurated in March, 1881.

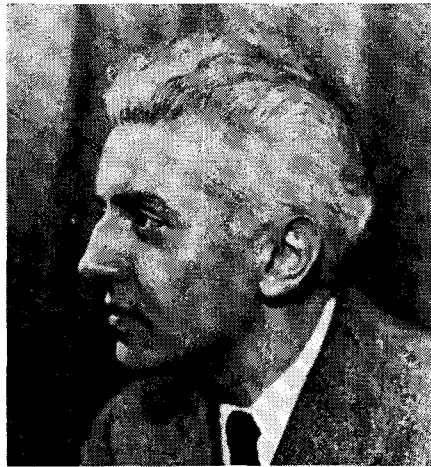
There is, however, further decisive testimony against Holmes's American origin; that is, unless we stoop to the disgusting alternative that the great man lied. In "The Resident Patient," where Holmes gives his exhibition of reading Watson's thoughts, he refers to the way in which Beecher, when touring England during the Civil War, "was received by the more turbulent of our people." "Our people"—so Sherlock Holmes refers to the English. And I take that phrase as conclusive. Yet I believe Christopher Morley is quite right in suspecting Americanism in the Sherlock Holmes canon. It seems to me evident in the narrative style—though this is partly due, no doubt, to Watson's contemporary Dr. A. C. Doyle—and in certain locutions both of Holmes and Watson. And I have my own explanation. Dr. John H. Watson was an American.

As I look through the stories, it is amazing to me that the fact has never been noticed earlier. When, and in what circumstances, he was expatriated is uncertain; probably after the death or disgrace of his parents (the alcoholism which Holmes found traced in the family watch may have been a disease of Watson père as well as Watson frère), he was sent over to Edinburgh by a maternal uncle or cousin who came from the Pennsylvania Scotch stock. I contend that he betrays his non-British origin in the very opening pages of "A Study in

Scarlet." It is partly a question of words:

Murray, my orderly, who threw me across a pack-horse, and succeeded in bringing me safely to the *British* lines. . . . A medical board determined that not a day should be lost in sending me back to *England*.

Is not that use of "British" unnatural? Why did not Watson write "our" lines? Because he was an American, and probably suspicious of British rule in India. "Back to England." Why not "home"? Because Watson was an American and he did not yet think of England as "home." Then the third paragraph begins, "I



Vincent Starrett

had neither kith nor kin in England"—why not? Why this most unusual lack, in the prolific Victorian days, of any relatives in his own country? Simply because his native country was not England but America. Then there is another very curious circumstance on which few scholars have commented—that is the possession by Watson of a portrait of Henry Ward Beecher. It is true that some American scholiasts—Mr. Morley himself is not free from this—have insinuated that some Watson anti-American bias can be deduced from the fact that Beecher's portrait is unframed. This will not do. Its unframed condition is due to Watson's anxiety to get a worthy setting for the trans-Atlantic preacher at whose feet he may have sat as a child. I should think that this portrait of Beecher was probably unique in England except in clerical households. An Englishman might have had Mrs. Beecher Stowe's but not Henry Ward B.'s Mr. Morley's argument that "not less than fifteen of the published cases (including three of the four chosen for full-length treatment) involve American characters or scenes" is surely an argument for *my* contention, as it was Watson and not Holmes who chose and wrote about the cases.

I think too—though I would not

press the point too hard—that Watson's extreme horror at his new friend's determination to ignore "the Copernican theory and the composition of the Solar System" would be unlikely in an Englishman of the period. Americans have always been known in England—rightly or wrongly—to have a very great respect for the Universe; Margaret Fuller, it will be remembered, went so far as to accept it. Holmes's refusal even to recognize it, when he was presented to it, must have wounded profoundly the more reverent temperament of his worshipper.

Christopher Morley, rather boldly, suggests that, if Sherlock Holmes has American forebears, he was probably related to the distinguished family of which Oliver Wendell Holmes and Chief Justice Holmes are the best-known. If any similar affiliation is sought for John H. Watson, I would venture to suggest that inquiry would be more fruitful if its student investigated the records of American psychology. (There is, by the way, a pleasant little problem at present, as far as I know, untouched—had Dr. Watson any children?)

Not a few of the contributors notice—what has been too often neglected—Sherlock Holmes's playful humor. He laughed, we know, but seldom. "I have not heard him laugh often, and it has always boded ill to somebody," wrote Watson; but he could smile, he could be sardonic, and he could chuckle. He must often have chuckled over the harmless deceptions he practised on Dr. Watson. The most famous, I suppose, is his pretence to almost complete ignorance and indifference to all culture, except the art of music. Yet he quotes Goethe, Flaubert (in his letters), Hafiz, Horace, Thoreau; and recommends Watson to read Winwood Reade's "The Martyrdom of Man." Living as constantly as he did in a world of deception, occasionally no doubt slightly affected by his drugs, he must, I think, have sometimes, when cases were few or dull, have invented thrilling episode for his own sake and Watson's. I have always believed that boredom made him invent Professor Moriarty—for in "The Last Adventure" we have no record of that master-criminal's existence except Holmes's word; the tall man "pushing his way furiously through the crowd" at Victoria Station, and trying to stop the Continental Express, may have been only a belated passenger. These, however, are deep waters. I had better stop such speculation, or else I may tempt Sherlock out of that bee-loud garden in Sussex, and his chuckle might pass into that rare laughter "which has always boded ill to somebody."

Southeast Passage

INDIA INK. By Philip Steegman.
New York: William Morrow & Co.
1940. 246 pp. \$3.

SANDA MALA. By Maurice Collis.
New York: Carrick & Evans. 1940.
328 pp. \$2.50.

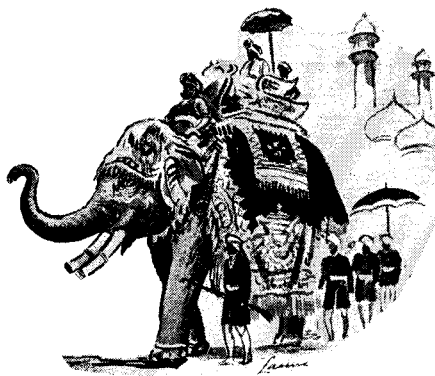
Reviewed by I. A. R. WYLIE

THESE two books, very different in style and form, have two factors in common; they concern India and are written by Englishmen. "India Ink" is directly autobiographical, in the Peter Fleming manner, and like all such travel books runs the risk of making the reader thankful he was not a fellow-traveler. But after wandering with Philip Steegman, who is primarily a portrait painter, through the length and breadth of India in search of princely "sitters," one decides, with an amused twinkle, that he is a likable young man, spirited, at times painstakingly cynical and often honestly emotional, reckless of convention but able to admire convention, when it falls, as it so often does in official India, into a noble pattern. Occasionally he is outrageous, *pour épater les bourgeois*, but it is rather a self-conscious effort and doesn't quite come off. When he is writing spontaneously he is charming, sympathetic, and amusing as his numerous and very various hosts seem to have found him. At least he was accepted freely in places closed to the average European and his two months within the sacred and closely guarded quarters of Nepal—from his account a sort of Paradise Regained—form the most vivid and valuable section of his book.

Mr. Steegman was obviously moved by India, not only by its native peoples but by their British administrators. He can scarify, but he can also admire and pity both. There is a sensitive and touching portrait of the Viceroy; "walking slowly with a slight stoop and a little wearily . . . casting



Drawings on this page from the jacket of "India Ink"



wan smiles at the crowd as he passed." And Mr. Steegman's mysterious and mystic relations with one of India's Holy Men, which he accepts but does not attempt to explain, illustrates the Englishman's unique capacity to identify himself with the people he governs. Lawrence of Arabia and Brian Haughton Hodgson, who single-handed won Nepal's allegiance to the British Empire so that in 1914-1918 its people fought freely in its defense, are perhaps the British Empire's most lucid explanation. Such men and their sensitivity and almost religious sense of duty which Philip Steegman recognized with respect, but no special wonder, have at least made it possible for a handful of his countrymen to maintain themselves with dignity and, considering the mountainous difficulties, amazing success among alien millions, and even on occasion and in spite of political hostility, win their uttermost devotion.

Mr. Collis was at one time one of India's administrators and, though he has written several books on the East, I should judge from internal evidence that "Sanda Mala" is a first novel. It has a certain stiffness of style like that of a good athlete taking up an unfamiliar form of sport, and once at least the writer falls prone over the novelist's booby-trap, the first person singular. The reader feels, too, the poet who lurks shamefacedly in the average English soul, struggling in the meshes of official red-tape. In his efforts to free himself and to express his love for a country he helped to govern, Mr. Collis has written, in fact, a rather awkward but charming grown-up fairy story with a princess and an almost but not quite defeated prince, and a fairy god-mother in the form of a remarkable Burmese mother-in-law, who waves a wand in the nick of time. But in spite of technical defects and its conventional pattern, the story has charm and distinction. When the administrator in the author has succumbed finally to the artist, we may look for more original stories, more freely told.

I. A. R. Wylie is the author of numerous novels, some of them with an East Indian background.

Three Sisters

THESE WERE THE BRONTËS. By Dorothy H. Cornish. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1940. 491 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM C. DE VANE

DURING the last few years the story of the Brontë family has been used as material for many forms of literature, notably biography, fiction, and drama; and sometimes these forms have been mingled, rather to the detriment of the Brontës, the authors, and the products. It only remains now for a poet to apostrophize one of the sisters, naturally Emily, and to weave her high and passionate thoughts into modern verse. This production, I have no doubt, is even now preparing.

All this is ample evidence that the delight in the Brontës has grown beyond the cult, and has become a public possession. And more than this, it seems that the story of the Brontës is a tale of challenging possibilities, and offers scope for the imagination, for invention and speculation, for tragic, pathetic, and even comic incident, and for partiality and special pleading. Emily, most naturally, since by common consent she is given the greatest degree of genius and least is known about her, has generally been the central figure in these imaginative ventures; but sometimes Branwell has been given the position of honor, or has shared it with Emily. Eighty years ago the major role would have been given to Charlotte, as Mrs. Gaskell's biography testifies. Perhaps the biographer must make Charlotte his major figure because she was more of this world than the others, held the family to its course, and lived longest of the children. Miss Cornish in the present novel has chosen Charlotte as her central character, not because she does not believe in Emily's greater genius, but rather because Charlotte's life is fuller of actual experiences in the real world. It is true that Charlotte desired fame, if she were allowed to define its terms; but neither Emily nor Anne seemed to yearn for it. How the proud shy women would have disliked their present notoriety!

Occasionally, for the purpose of getting on in her narrative, Miss Cornish's novel utilizes pure biography. But Charlotte Brontë, more than most novelists of her order, drew upon reminiscence for the materials of her work, and we are not surprised that those who write about the Brontës are compelled to draw upon "Jane Eyre," "Villette," and "Shirley." Miss Cornish makes skillful use of these novels. For example, the heroine of "Jane Eyre" is, in the eyes of the world, a plain