

Watson Was A Woman

REX STOUT

GASOGENE: Tantalus: Buttons: Irregulars:
You will forgive me for refusing to join your commemorative toast, "The Second Mrs. Watson," when you learn it was a matter of conscience. I could not bring myself to connive at the perpetuation of a hoax. Not only was there never a second Mrs. Watson; there was not even a first Mrs. Watson. Furthermore, there was no Doctor Watson.

Please keep your chairs.

Like all true disciples, I have always recurrently dipped into the Sacred Writings (called by the vulgar the Sherlock Holmes stories) for refreshment; but not long ago I reread them from beginning to end, and I was struck by a singular fact that reminded me of the dog in the night. The singular fact about the dog in the night, as we all know, was that it didn't bark; and the singular fact about Holmes in the night is that he is never seen going to bed. The writer of the tales, the Watson person, describes over and over again, in detail, all the other minutiae of that famous household—suppers, breakfasts, arrangement of furniture, rainy evenings at home—but not once are we shown either Holmes or Watson going to bed. I wondered, why not? Why such unnatural and obdurate restraint, nay, concealment, regarding one of the pleasantest episodes of the daily routine?

I got suspicious.

The uglier possibilities that occurred to me, as that Holmes had false teeth or that Watson wore a toupee, I rejected as preposterous. They were much too obvious, and shall I say sinister. But the game was afoot, and I sought the trail, in the only field available to me, the Sacred Writings themselves. And right at the very start, on page 9 of "A Study in Scarlet," I found this:

... It was rare for him to be up after ten at night, and he had invariably breakfasted and gone out before I rose in the morning.

I was indescribably shocked. How had so patent a clue escaped so many

millions of readers through the years? That was, that could only be, a woman speaking of a man. Read it over. The true authentic speech of a wife telling of her husband's—but wait. I was not indulging in idle speculation, but seeking evidence to establish a fact. It was unquestionably a woman speaking of a man, yes, but whether a wife of a husband, or a mistress of a lover, ... I admit I blushed. I blushed for Sherlock Holmes, and I closed the book. But the fire of curiosity was raging in me, and soon I opened again to the same page, and there in the second paragraph I saw:

The reader may set me down as a hopeless busybody, when I confess how much this man stimulated my curiosity, and how often I endeavored to break through the reticence which he showed on all that concerned himself.

You bet she did. She would. Poor Holmes! She doesn't even bother to employ one of the stock euphemisms, such as, "I wanted to understand him better," or, "I wanted to share things with him." She proclaims it with brutal directness, "I endeavored to break through the reticence." I shuddered, and for the first time in my life felt that Sherlock Holmes was not a god, but human—human by his suffering. Also, from that one page I regarded the question of the Watson person's sex as settled for good. Indubitably she was a female, but wife or mis-

trous? I went on. Two pages later I found:

... his powers upon the violin ... at my request he has played me some of Mendelssohn's *Lieder* ..."

Imagine a man asking another man to play him some of Mendelssohn's *Lieder* on a violin!

And on the next page:

... I rose somewhat earlier than usual, and found that Sherlock Holmes had not yet finished his breakfast ... my place had not been laid nor my coffee prepared. With ... petulance ... I rang the bell and gave a curt intimation that I was ready. Then I picked up a magazine from the table and attempted to while away the time with it, while my companion munched silently at his toast.

THAT is a terrible picture, and you know and I know how bitterly realistic it is. Change the diction, and it is practically a love story by Ring Lardner. That Sherlock Holmes, like other men, had breakfasts like that is a hard pill for a true disciple to swallow, but we must face the facts. The chief thing to note of this excerpt is that it not only reinforces the conviction that Watson was a lady—that is to say, a woman—but also it bolsters our hope that Holmes did not through all those years live in sin. A man does not munch silently at his toast when breakfasting with his mistress; or, if he does, it won't be long until he gets a new one. But Holmes stuck to her—or she to him—for over a quarter of a century. Here are a few quotations from the later years:

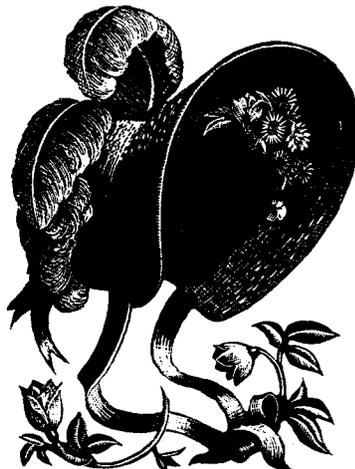
... Sherlock Holmes was standing smiling at me. ... I rose to my feet, stared at him for some seconds in utter amazement, and then it appears that I must have fainted. ..."

—"The Adventure of the Empty House," page 4.

I believe that I am one of the most long-suffering of mortals.

—"The Tragedy of Birlstone," Page 1.

The relations between us in those latter days were peculiar. He was a man of habits, narrow and concentrated habits, and I had become one of them. As an institution I was



like the violin, the shag tobacco, the old black pipe, the index books, and others perhaps less excusable.

—"The Adventure of the Creeping Man," page 1.

And we have been expected to believe that a man wrote those things! The frank and unconcerned admission that she fainted at sight of Holmes after an absence! "I am one of the most long-suffering of mortals"—the oldest uxorial cliché in the world; Aeschylus used it; no doubt cave-men gnashed their teeth at it! And the familiar pathetic plaint, "As an institution I was like the old black pipe!"

Yes, uxorial, for surely she was wife. And the old black pipe itself provides us with a clincher on that point. This comes from page 16 of "The Hound of the Baskervilles":

... did not return to Baker Street until evening. It was nearly nine o'clock when I found myself in the sitting-room once more.

My first impression as I opened the door was that a fire had broken out, for the room was so filled with smoke that the light of the lamp upon the table was blurred by it. As I entered, however, my fears were set at rest, for it was the acrid fumes of strong coarse tobacco which took me by the throat and set me coughing. Through the haze I had a vague vision of Holmes in his dressing-gown coiled up in an arm-chair with his black clay pipe between his lips. Several rolls of paper lay around him.

"Caught cold, Watson?" said he. "No, it's this poisonous atmosphere."

"I suppose it is pretty thick, now that you mention it."

"Thick! It is intolerable!"
"Open the window, then!"

I say husband and wife. Could anyone alive doubt it after reading that painful banal scene? Is there any need to pile on the evidence?

For a last-ditch skeptic there is more evidence, much more. The efforts to break Holmes of the cocaine habit, mentioned in various places in the Sacred Writings, display a typical reformist wife in action, especially the final gloating over her success. A more complicated, but no less conclusive, piece of evidence is the strange, the astounding recital of Holmes's famous disappearance, in "The Final Problem," and the reasons given therefor in a later tale, "The Adventure of the Empty House." It is incredible that this monstrous deception was not long ago exposed.

Holmes and Watson had together wandered up the valley of the Rhone, branched off at Leuk, made their way over the Gemmi Pass, and gone on, by way of Interlaken, to Meiringen. Near that village, as they were walking along a narrow trail high above a tremendous abyss, Watson was maneuvered back to the hotel by a

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fake message. Learning that the message was a fake, she (he) flew back to their trail, and found that Holmes was gone. No Holmes. All that was left of him was a polite and regretful note of farewell, there on a rock with his cigarette case for a paperweight, saying that Professor Moriarty had arrived and was about to push him into the abyss.

That in itself was rather corny. But go on to "The Adventure of the Empty House." Three years have passed. Sherlock Holmes has suddenly and unexpectedly reappeared in London, causing the Watson person to collapse in a faint. His explanation of his long absence is fantastic. He says that he had grappled with Professor Moriarty on the narrow trail and tossed him into the chasm; that, in order to deal at better advantage with the dangerous Sebastian Moran, he had decided to make it appear that he too had toppled over the cliff; that, so as to leave no returning footprints on the narrow trail, he had attempted to scale the upper cliff, and, while he was doing so, Sebastian Moran himself had appeared up above and thrown rocks at him; that by herculean efforts he had eluded Moran and escaped over the mountains; that for three years he had wandered around Persia and Tibet and France, communicating with no one but his brother Mycroft, so that Sebastian Moran would think he was dead. *Though by his own account Moran knew, must have known, that he had got away!*

That is what Watson says that Holmes told her (him). It is simply gibberish, below the level even of a village half-wit. It is impossible to suppose that Sherlock Holmes ever dreamed of imposing on any sane person with an explanation like that; it is impossible to believe that he would insult his own intelligence by offering such an explanation even to an idiot. I deny that he ever did. I believe that all he said, after Watson recovered from the faint, was this, "My dear, I am willing to try it again," for he was a courteous man. And it was Watson, who, attempting to cook up an explanation, made such a terrible hash of it.

THEN who was this person whose nom de plume was "Doctor Watson?" Where did she come from? What was she like? What was her name before she snared Holmes?

Let us see what we can do about the name, by methods that Holmes himself might have used. It was Watson who wrote the immortal tales, therefore if she left a record of her name anywhere it must have been in the tales themselves. But what we

(Continued on page 16)

The Inner Drama of China

THE BATTLE FOR ASIA. By Edgar Snow. New York: Random House. 1941. 431 pp., with index. \$3.75.

Reviewed by MILES VAUGHN

EDGAR SNOW is probably the best informed of any American on the Chinese Communist Party and in his latest book he sets forth in detail the relationship between the Red movement, headed by Mao Tse-tung and Chu Teh, and the dominant Kuomintang party in Generalissimo Chiang-Kai-shek's all-China anti-Japanese front.

Snow has spent much of the last fifteen years with the Communists, repeatedly has visited their capital in Yen-an, Shensi Province, and is closer to Mao, Chu, and other Red leaders, who did much to bring on the Chinese-Japanese conflict, than any other writer in English.

Hence it is not without intimate personal knowledge, and an admittedly broad sympathy for Chinese Communist objectives, that he relates the basic causes for the present friction between Chiang and the Yen-an "Border Government" which recently resulted in expulsion of the new Communist Fourth Army from its base south of the Yangtse River to poverty-stricken areas of the north. The commanders of the Fourth Army, presumably, still are held for court-martial in Chungking.

The picture Snow draws is not reassuring for those who envision a "united China" calmly confident of fighting through the war with Japan to a victorious conclusion. It is a picture, indeed, which would furnish a vast amount of ammunition for critics who question some of the moves of the United States Government in the present confused situation in the Far East.

As Snow sees the picture, if a final break between the Communists and the Kuomintang (the Chinese Nationalist Party in which Generalissimo Chiang is the strongest single figure) is avoided it will be due largely to Communist forbearance and a relationship between Yen-an and Moscow which makes China an outer battle-ground for the defense of the Soviet Union.

Snow does not go so far as to say that Yen-an takes orders from Moscow but he points out that the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party and those who are moulding the destinies of Russia have a common revolutionary viewpoint and practice, a common revolutionary technique.

"Chinese publicists, missionaries and other pro-China people did their best to convince the world that the Chinese Communists were not real Commu-

nists," he says, "and Chiang Kai-shek himself recently told a German correspondent that there were 'no Communists in China. . . .'"

"But if I understood Mao Tse-tung correctly he would not be bothered about these aspersions cast upon his Marxism. . . . My personal feeling in the matter is that liberals who build up hopes that the Communists of China are 'different' and 'only reformers,' and have abandoned revolutionary methods to achieve their program, are doomed to ultimate disillusionment."

Snow pictures the Red armies led by Chu Teh and others as the strongest defenders China has in the "war of resistance" against Japan, but he makes it clear that the Communists do not submit in principle to Generalissimo Chiang's dictatorship. He says that during the war all Communist troops, such as the Kuomintang soldiers, recognize Chiang Kai-shek as the supreme military leader. They do not, however, make a fetish of their loyalty, nor do they, for example, rise and come to attention every time Chiang's name is mentioned as do other troops.

Contrasting Mao Tse-tung and Chiang, Snow says that the former is essentially a social revolutionary, while Chiang is essentially a "social conservative."

The author long has considered the Communist movement, because of its able leadership, its unity, its ability to unite the masses and its unselfishness, as China's greatest hope, and he pictures the Reds as willing to accept continued injustices from Chungking so long as their primary objective—united Chinese resistance to Japan—can be assured. He finds that Nationalist sentiment seems more pronounced in Mao Tse-tung and his followers than among Communists in the Western democracies, but points out that according to Communist theory, China is a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country struggling not for immediate socialism but toward national emancipation on the one hand, and to achieve social democracy by liquidating "remnants of feudalism" on the other. Adhering to this doctrine for over a decade, and building up an army on the basis of it, have naturally developed quite a degree of self-reliance.

Mr. Snow implies that the Chinese Communists form an important link in Soviet Russian plans for defense of their homeland against eventual capitalist aggression.

In his chapter on "The Generalissimo," Snow views Chiang Kai-shek with an almost brutal objectivity and



Chiang Kai-shek

does much to dispel the "saint and super-man" myth which has been so widely circulated in this country since the beginning of the Chinese-Japanese conflict. Many of the men surrounding the Generalissimo are "dubious," Snow believes—and he should know—and he attributes much of Chiang's international stature to the "astute and devoted vice-minister of war publicity, Hollington K. Tong, who has made the most of his contacts with the foreign press." He believes that Chiang's leadership is due to his "tenacity, decision, ruthlessness, energy, ambition, initiative and a deep love of power." The Generalissimo asserts that "wherever I go there is the Government, the Cabinet and the center of resistance." But Chiang, according to Snow, is not a dictator in the Western sense. He does not even have as much enforcement power on decisions as President Roosevelt, for example. Snow finds much of the greatness attributed to Chiang symbolic.

The organization of the book might be improved, and its earlier chapters, in which Snow describes his departure from Peking shortly after the war started and subsequent experiences in Shanghai and Chungking, throw little new light on the China scene. As for the rest of the work, however, the material dealing with the Communist movement is probably the most authoritative ever penned and is to be commended to all who seek a realistic understanding of the forces at work in China and the outlook for that country after the conflict with Japan ends. In the latter chapters Snow sets forth his ideas for a new world which are provocative whether one agrees with them or not.

Miles Vaughn, cable editor of the United Press, was formerly Far Eastern correspondent for that service.