

The Wolfe Pack

The Nero Wolfe Literary Society

Watson was a Woman? by Rex Stout

[GASOGENE](#): Tantalus: Buttons: Irregulars:

You will forgive me for refusing to join in 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 minutia 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 was 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, and 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 female, but wife for mistress? 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 plate 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 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 the mortals.
-- "The Tragedy of the Birlstone," [The Valley of Fear] page1

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 the 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 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 immortal tales, therefore if she left a record of her name anywhere it must have been in the tales themselves. But what we are looking for is not her characteristics or the facts of her life, but her name, that is to say, her title; so obviously the place to look is in the titles of the tales.

There are sixty of the tales all told. The first step is to set them down in chronological order, and to number them from 1 to 60. Now, which shall we take first? Evidently the reason why Watson was at such pains to conceal her name in this clutter of titles was to mystify us, so the number to start with should be the most mystical number, namely seven. And to make it doubly sure, we shall make it seven times seven, which is 49. Very well. The 49th tale is "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client." We of course discard the first four words, "The Adventure of the," which are repeated in most of the titles. Result: "ILLUSTRIOUS CLIENT."

The next most significant thing about Watson is her (his) constant effort to convince us that those things happened exactly as she (he) tells them; that they are on the square. Good. The first square of an integer is the integer 4. We take the title of the 4th tale and get RED-HEADED LEAGUE."

We proceed to elimination. Of all the factors that contribute to an ordinary man's success, which one did Holmes invariably exclude, or eliminate? Luck. In crap-shooting, what are the lucky numbers? Seven and eleven. But we have already used 7, which eliminates it, so there is nothing left but 11. The 11th tale is about the "ENGINEER'S THUMB."

Next, what was Holmes's age at the time he moved to Baker Street? Twenty-seven. The 27th tale is the adventure of the "NORWOOD BUILDER." And what was Watson's age? Twenty-six. The 26th tale is the adventure of the "EMPTY HOUSE." But there is no need to belabor the obvious. Just as it is a simple matter to decipher the code of the Dancing Men when Holmes has once put you on the right track, so can you, for yourself, make the additional required selections now that I have explained the method. And you will inevitably get what I got:

Illustrious Client
Red-headed League
Engineer's Thumb
Norwood Builder
Empty House

Wisteria Lodge
Abbey Grange
Twisted Lip
Study in Scarlet
Orange Pips
Noble Bachelor

And, acrostically simple, the initial letters read down, the carefully hidden secret is ours. Her name was Irene Watson.

But not so fast. Is there any way of checking that? Of discovering her name by any other method, say a priori? We can try and see. A woman wrote the stories about Sherlock Holmes that has been demonstrated; and that woman was his wife. Does there appear, anywhere in the stories, a woman whom Holmes fell for? Whom he really cottoned to? Indeed there does. "A Scandal in Bohemia" opens like this:

"To Sherlock Holmes she is always the woman. . . . In his eyes she eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex."

And what was the name of the woman? Irene!

But, you say, not Irene Watson, but Irene Adler. Certainly, Watson's whole purpose, from beginning to end, was to confuse and bewilder us regarding her identity. So note that name well. Adler. What is an adler, or, as it is, commonly spelled, addler? An addler is one who, or that which, addles. Befuddles. Confuses. I admit I admire that stroke; it is worthy of Holmes himself. In the very act of deceiving and confusing us, she has the audacity to employ a name that brazenly announces her purpose.

An amusing corroborative detail about this Irene of "Scandal in Bohemia"--the woman to Holmes according to the narrator of the tales--is that Holmes was present at her wedding at the Church of St. Monica in the Edgeware Road. It is related that he was there as a witness, but that is pure poppycock. Holmes himself says "I was half-dragged up to the altar, and before I knew where I was I found myself mumbling responses. . . ." Those are not the words of an indifferent witness, but of a reluctant, ensnared, bulldozed man--in short, a bridegroom. And in all the 1323 pages of the Sacred Writings, that is the only wedding we ever see--the only one, so far as we are told, that Holmes ever graced with his presence.

All this is very sketchy. I admit it. I am now collecting material for a fuller treatment of the subject, a complete demonstration of the evidence and the inevitable conclusion. It will fill two volumes, the second of which will consist of certain speculations regarding various concrete results of that long-continued and--I fear, alas--none-too-happy union. For instance, what of the parentage of [Lord Peter Wimsey](#), who was born, I believe, around the turn of the century--about the time of the publication of "The Adventure of the Second Stain"? That will bear looking into.

Notes

GASOGENE

The titles of Gasogene, Tantalus, and Buttons were given to officers of the Baker Street Irregulars, a society which at this early date could be thought of as a sort of gentleman's club that met irregularly for dinner, drinking, and reciting mock-scholarly papers on the canon. Stout is addressing the various members after their traditional toast to women of the canon, such as Irene Adler and the second Mrs. Watson.

the dog in the night

In the SILV case, Holmes points out the "curious incident of the dog in the night-time" to Inspector Gregory as an important clue to solving the mystery.

Mendelssohn's Lieder

Felix Mendelssohn is the German composer of Lieder ohne Worte, or Songs Without Words.

Lord Peter Wimsey

For those who don't know him, Lord Peter is the noble amateur sleuth whom Dorothy L. Sayers wrote about in the 1920s and '30s. It is highly unlikely that Stout could successfully graft Holmes into the Wimsey family or vice versa.