

Were it not for the subtle inconsistencies and errors in the Sherlockian Canon, there never would have been Baker Street Irregulars outside of the pages of the Holmes stories. Were such errors the merest accident—or could they have been deliberate?

DON'T BLAME WATSON

by W. S. HALL

HAVING FINISHED, last night, all that was left of a bottle of Oude Geneva, I found myself in a good mood for brooding. And having at the same time finished reading for, I believe, the twelfth time *A Study in Scarlet*, I started brooding about that and the succeeding stories authored by John H. Watson, M.D. I was wondering how really to account for the long succession of inconsistencies, anachronisms, and contradictions in the stories on the part of an author as clear-thinking, as sane, stolid, and orderly as Dr. Watson. And then it came to me. All this confusion was not accident, but well-considered design. And of this confusion, Dr. Watson was *not* the author.

The first edition of *A Study in Scarlet* proclaims it to be “a reprint from the reminiscences of John H. Watson, M.D., late of the Army Medical Department.” No copy of the original appearance of these reminiscences is known to exist, and it is safe to assume that they never saw print. No publisher would have them, apparently, for, in the first place, the author was young and unknown—too young, in fact, to have accumulated any reminiscences worth while—and on top of that the entire opus was altogether too long and wordy. It is well known that about this time, fortunately for him, Watson made the acquaintance of another struggling medico named Arthur Conan Doyle, who added to his meagre income by playing around the fringes of the publishing world as a literary agent. Watson spoke to Doyle about his lack of success with his initial effort in the written word, and Doyle, in true literary-agent fashion, demanded to see the “reminiscences” at once. Watson accordingly turned over his dog-eared manuscript to Doyle, who lost no time in abstracting from it the only portion that failed to put him to sleep—namely, the short story entitled *A Study in Scarlet*.

The appearance of this fragment in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* for 1887 hardly shook the literary marketplace to its foundations, and seemed to prove that perhaps the world was not yet prepared for anything further from the same author. Nevertheless, the one pound sterling, representing his 20% commission, whetted Dr. Doyle's appetite for more. More came, and then more and more still, and the audience and the down-payments and the royalties and the commissions all grew beyond the wildest dreams of the two collaborators.

I use the term collaborators advisedly, but I think it is plain enough now what happened to each succeeding manuscript. As he wrote the final word of each story, Watson, with lessening zeal and exhausted by his effort, took a deep breath, and, posting the pages to Doyle, returned briefly to his neglected practice of medicine. Doyle himself set about reading each new Sherlock Holmes adventure, and we may suppose that he took the liberty of touching it up with a bit of editing.

By this time Doyle had become a well-established author in his own right, and in the field of his own choosing, and his earnings, plus his fees as Watson's agent, made the future look bright indeed. But what about this future? Watson had no children, and seemed unable to take money matters very seriously. But there were three little Doyles, a girl and two physically vigorous lads who as yet gave no evidence of being able to make ends meet later on in life. How to make assurance doubly sure, not only with respect to his own books and short stories, but also with regard to these Sherlock Holmes trifles which Watson was being difficult about? How perpetuate them; how keep them going year after year when he and Watson would no longer be around to worry about them or about anything else?

It occurred to Dr. Doyle—and one must admire the man's shrewdness and uncanny ability to peer into the future—that if certain changes could be made in Watson's stories—slight, hardly noticeable changes—they would pass muster with the proof-readers, but, if properly done, they would puzzle certain avid readers of the future. Thence would follow letters to the press, acrimonious expressions of opinion, and, inevitably, the formation of one or more societies, say like the Browning groups, who would meet and spread, and, in spreading, nourish the demand for the stories. The sales would increase and

double, and the royalties—ah, the royalties would go on and on, gloriously!

And so it came about that a wound moved about in Watson's anatomy, that his name changed from John to James and back again, that two brothers of Moriarty of evil fame had the same Christian name, and that Watson got all tangled up in his dates, his places, and his wives. Yes, thought Dr. Doyle, with his pencil poised over his friend's latest effort, I can see these little groups springing up all over the world—in London, in New York, in Chicago, Sydney, and Copenhagen—in fact wherever Holmes is selling. Verily "I hear of Sherlock everywhere." They won't have any trouble finding names for themselves—"The Baker Street Irregulars," or something like that—or maybe they will take their names from the titles of the stories themselves.

Years later, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle began to look even more seriously than ever into the future; in fact for the closing years of his long life nothing else seemed to concern him. He had not seen Holmes or Watson for years, and the stories of the adventures, with which he had so much to do, concerned him even less. He convinced himself, and he convinced others, that he would still be with us after, as it is called, death.

If that is so, then—remembering the part he played in the Irregulars' coming into being—let us bid him welcome!

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