

Of all the Scotland Yard detectives associated with Sherlock Holmes, it is Lestrade who is most widely known. But who is the man behind the well-known name?

INSPECTOR G. LESTRADE

by L. S. HOLSTEIN

PROBABLY EVERY ADDICT of Sherlockian lore has, at one time or another, bemoaned the dearth of information concerning the characters who move through the tales as recounted by Dr. Watson—some to reappear; some to disappear forever. There are gentlemen, and there are scoundrels; worried wives and maidens in distress; high-born aristocrats; middle classers, and scum from the streets of London.

Search as you will, it is impossible to find biographies or even minor references to those personages with whom Holmes lived and worked, or tracked down; although some later-day research has identified a character or two who, it is evident, were deliberately disguised in the text. True, there are a few thumbnail sketches that throw a glimmer, as in the case of Lord Robert St. Simon, Colonel Sebastian Moran, Dr. James Mortimer, Dr. Huxtable of the unique given name, and Miss Irene Adler—but they are incomplete and unsatisfying.

If one made an accounting of the personalities, aside from Watson and Holmes, who intrigue the student, we would find Mrs. Hudson, Mycroft Holmes, Lestrade, Mary Morstan, young Stamford, the Moriartys, various Violets, John Clay, and a parade of others. Really, there is little choice; every one raises our curiosity, that we may know them more intimately and determine their influences on the life and actions of Holmes himself.

Of all the characters, excepting perhaps Watson and Mrs. Hudson, none seems to have had a more intimate or longer-lasting contact with Holmes than Inspector G. Lestrade of Scotland Yard. He was associated with Holmes in more of the recorded cases than any other member of the Metropolitan Police. That association extended from the early days of Holmes's

practice, when he was located on Montague Street, to shortly before his retirement to the Sussex Downs. But even in Lestrade's case, the external records of the man are non-existent, or are at best a few meagre newspaper references. The Yard files, which should be revealing, are not available for public scrutiny.

The non-discriminating reading public generally regard Lestrade with a certain amount of scorn, as inept and bungling; is this a true and faithful picture?

To learn what manner of man this G. Lestrade was, we must, then, in the absence of other data, turn to the saga itself. Therein is found a considerable fund of revealing information, not completely adequate but sufficient to form some fair measure of the man.

We find him active in twelve of Dr. Watson's writings as well as a reference to him in the text of *The Three Garridebs*. He was one of the early callers at 221B, presumably in connection with a forgery case which got him into a fog. We may infer that he had, on occasion, visited Holmes at the rooms in Montague Street. From *A Study in Scarlet* to *The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax*, a span of twenty years, we have some record of Lestrade.

Of his forebears, we find no inkling, although to this writer there is some suspicion of a touch of the Gallic in his name and in his oft-times quick actions; but the better likenesses of him do not confirm this suspicion. His Christian name is unknown to us, but the only letter extant, written to Holmes after the arrest of Jim Browner, the seafarer with a penchant for severing ears, is signed "G. Lestrade." One can speculate on the denotation of that tantalizing "G" from George to Gouverneur without success. There is no clue, and without a shred of evidence I lean toward Gustave as a name that fits the subject.

On his early education there are no definite data. That one letter is fairly well composed, and a rather complete schooling without advanced study can be inferred. We know he was able to take Jefferson Hope's recital of his story in shorthand, probably following the Pitman method since the Gregg system did not come into vogue until about 1888.

As to Lestrade's age there is some measure, for in 1881 he says the Drebber murder beats anything he had seen and "I am

no chicken." Later he admits that in spite of twenty years' experience, the sight he first witnessed at Halliday's Private Hotel made him feel "sickish." If we make the generous assumption that he joined the Metropolitan Police at the age of twenty-one, he would have been on the high side of forty at the time of the Drebber affair, and we know he was still active in 1903, for in September of that year he appears with a warrant for the arrest of Holy Peters. We may draw the conclusion from all this that Lestrade was Holmes's senior by some ten or twelve years, and served on the force more than forty years.

At the outset, he may have pounded a beat as did John Rance and Harry Murcher, but because of his lack of stature, it is more likely that he came up through the records bureau, and not as a constable. By the time of the *Study*, he already had earned a reputation, for when Holmes discloses his profession to Watson, he refers to Lestrade as a "well known detective," and Watson's account of the pending affair calls him "inspector" (small i). The newspapers at that time designate him as a well-known officer and Scotland Yard official. In 1889 (*The Second Stain*), we find him an Inspector with a capital I—possibly an indication of first rank, but more likely merely a typographical digression. In *The Cardboard Box* (1891), Holmes tells Watson that Lestrade's "tenacity has brought him to the top at Scotland Yard," which surely means that when the Yard was expanded and took up its new quarters on the Thames Embankment, Lestrade came into his own, the change in status having been consummated while Holmes was on his hegira to Tibet and points East.

Now, what of G. Lestrade's appearance? In the *Study*, Watson describes him as "little, rat-faced, sallow, dark-eyed," and later as "lean and ferret-like" with beady eyes—not a very enticing description—but we are told he had an assurance and jauntiness that "marked his demeanor and dress." Still lean and ferret-like, furtive and sly-looking, he appears in 1889 (*The Boscombe Valley Mystery*) dressed in light-brown dust coat and leather leggings, "retained" by Miss Alice Turner. Some have pounced on that word "retained" as used by Holmes to conclude that Lestrade had gone into private practice for a period, but that judgment is not necessarily warranted, for it was not uncom-

mon for Scotland Yarders to aid the provincial police, and Holmes's use of the word was purely conversational. We learn too, in the Boscombe Valley tragedy, that Lestrade's left foot turns in; an insignificant fact, but it does give a clue to his gait. A few years later—in *The Second Stain* and *The Cardboard Box*—Watson is using the terms "bulldog features" as well as wiry, dapper, and ferret-like to describe him, and in 1897 (*The Hound of the Baskervilles*) it is "a small, wiry, bulldog of a man." I am of the belief that this last phrase, along with dapper and cocky, best fit our subject.

Of course, we find no photographs to confirm our ideas of Lestrade's appearance, but sketches by D. H. Friston and George Hutchinson depict him as small, so along with Watson's repeated use of the word, it must be accepted as a fact that he was not tall, and we will settle for a height of about five feet six or seven. It is this lack of stature that leads one to believe he entered the service in the records bureau, rather than in the foot patrol. It is my personal view that the drawings of Robert Fawcett, which illustrate some of the fables published in a national magazine¹ in which Holmes and Lestrade appear, are the best portrayals of Lestrade in his later years when he had put on a bit of weight—short, somewhat paunchy, and with a mustache and bushy eyebrows, a bowler on the back of his head, rather loud suit and spats, and a generally cocky appearance: truly British. Any thought of the Gallic must be erased.

What of Lestrade as a detective; as a man; and what of his attitude towards Holmes—what qualities did he possess? As a detective, we could not expect even "one of the smartest of our detective officers," as the *Daily Chronicle* referred to him, to be in a class with Holmes, and it is apparent almost from the start that Lestrade considered Holmes his superior—although loath to admit it even to himself.

From the contempt and resentment which he showed in *A Study in Scarlet*; from the derision of Holmes's methods, "the deductions and the inferences," we find him gradually assuming a more deferential attitude. As early as 1894 (*The Norwood Builder*), he openly acknowledges Holmes's help to the Yard, and in 1902 (*The Six Napoleons*) he pays homage in as magnanimous a statement as one could hope to hear. It is worth quoting in full, since

it reveals one facet of our subject's character: "I've seen you handle a good many cases, Mr. Holmes, but I don't know that I ever knew a more workmanlike one than that. We're not jealous of you at Scotland Yard. No, sir, we are very proud of you, and if you come down tomorrow, there's not a man, from the oldest inspector to the youngest constable, who wouldn't be glad to shake you by the hand." That is not the utterance of a narrow, jealous person!

Lestrade's respect may be revealed in part by the fact that, in the early days, Holmes and he generally addressed each other by their bare surnames, except in occasional outbursts of sarcasm, which you can almost hear in Lestrade's "Mr. Sherlock Holmes" after his discovery of "RACHE"; and on his leave-taking of 221B after the display of Miss Doran's articles found in the Serpentine. As time progressed, Lestrade usually used the term "Mr. Holmes," with an exception now and then, as when he rebukes Holmes for what he believes to be false hopes raised in Holmes's conversation with Miss Alice Turner in *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*.

No one would be rash enough to claim that Lestrade was a brilliant theorist, but he was practical, energetic, and courageous. These qualities were frequently of help to Holmes as, for example, when Lestrade turned up the note from "F.H.M." in Hattie Doran's wedding gown, fished out of the Serpentine. Without that note Holmes would have been without a starting point, and the case might have been prolonged for days. And again, the discovery of the thumb-print of John Hector McFarlane gave Holmes the clincher he needed to smoke out Jonas Oldacre. These are examples of the legwork that was characteristic of Lestrade, even though his deductions from the evidence were not always of the finest.

His physical courage was never lacking, as typified in his arrests of such substantial prisoners as Jefferson Hope, Colonel Moran, and Beppo. He also stood up to Holmes, and did not hesitate to point out that there was a practical side to an investigation; that hard-headed British juries had to be convinced, and that he believed in hard work—a remark that Holmes later on privately admitted had merit. Holmes himself paid unspoken tribute to Lestrade's courage when, on the return to



Inspector G. Lestrade as depicted by George Hutchinson in *A Study in Scarlet* (London: Ward, Lock, Bowden & Company, 1891).

London, he chose Lestrade as the one to help capture the notorious colonel in the Empty House.

There seems to have been a softening of feeling on both sides as the years went by. Holmes even compliments the Scotland Yarder in 1895 for his theorizing as to the lack of a ticket in Cadogan West's pocket in *The Bruce-Partington Plans*: "Good, Lestrade, very good"—one of the few times Holmes acknowledged that Lestrade was worth listening to. We learn, too, that Lestrade would drop in on Holmes and Watson of an evening to smoke a cigar and swap information in a friendly chat.

Summarizing, we picture Inspector G. Lestrade as an asset to the solution of crime in London and thereabouts; as a brave officer, an energetic if not brilliant detective; a man ready to fight for his opinions and equally ready to concede defeat; one who was able to give praise when due; a good leg-man; a friendly, human sort of person; dapper and a bit cocky in manner but a solid official always ready to perform his duty. In short, G. Lestrade was an important and influential adjunct in the life and career of Sherlock Holmes, and he deserves the respect of every student of the lore.

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NOTE

1. Not to be confused with Dr. Watson's true accounts.

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