

Watson, too, had "art in the blood"—the rare ability to conjure lasting images for his devoted readers. . . .

JOHN H. WATSON—WORD-PAINTER

by H. C. POTTER

JOHN H. WATSON, M.D., has been the subject of countless dissertations in *The Writings about the Writings*. We know him well, from the tip of his badly-brushed bowler to the soles of his mud-marred boots, *The Good Companion*; the loyal friend; the oft-times obtuse but good-natured bulldog; the perfect alter ego for *The Master*.

To my knowledge, however—and yet I cannot help hearing Holmes's cynical whisper, "It has all been done before"—there is a facet to *The Compleat Watson* which has never been given its just due. I refer to his great skill as "a word-painter" (to borrow Mr. D. Martin Dakin's happy phrase¹).

Let me exclude—without gainsaying—his depiction of gripping action, his deft characterisations (always excepting Americans, white or black), his ability to create turn-of-the-screw suspense and mounting tension. I limit this study to his considerable skill as a pictorialist and scenic designer; his ability to word-paint the vivid and memorable *mise en scène* for each Adventure.

Watson understood the imperative of the master scenic designer; it is not enough to mount the story in an acceptable setting. When the curtain rises the set must instantly evoke the *mood* of the play—before a word is said. What Jo Mielziner achieves time after time in the theatre, so does Watson in the Saga.

Every devotee of the Canon has in his memory a gallery of Watson's word-paintings. Unlike the collector of conventional art, the owner of an authentic Watson is all the more pleased to know that vast numbers of his *confrères* have the very same picture hanging in their own galleries. Stroll with me through

mine, and let me point out some of my favourites. Some of them—indeed, I hope, all of them—will be yours also.

To begin with, here are three of Watson's quick sketches. Time was short and the tempo of the action permitted no prolonged interruption. The effect must be immediate. The label under the first reads:

A STUDY IN SCARLET

"Number 3, Lauriston Gardens wore an ill-omened and minatory look. . . . [It] looked out with three tiers of vacant melancholy windows, which were blank and dreary, save that here and there a 'To Let' sign had developed like a cataract upon the bleared panes."

Succinct and deft, is it not? Hanging next to it:

THE SPECKLED BAND

"The old mansion . . . was of grey, lichen-blotched stone, with a high central portion, and two curving wings like the jaws of a crab. . . ."

An artful simile, reflecting the house's evil, tenacious proprietor. The third sketch is from:

A SCANDAL IN BOHEMIA

Irene Adler's villa in St. John's Wood is evoked in *one word*: ". . . a bijou of a villa."

As Watson sets it down the word is Holmes's, not his own. But I believe the truth of the matter to be that Holmes's original estimate of the villa was a blunt "small," revised by Watson to "bijou" when he had seen it for himself later that day.

We move on to the larger canvases. Much frustration has been experienced by scholars in trying to run down the actual locales of the Adventures. The usual reason for failure is accepted as Watson's desire to "protect his sources." I believe that it is also Watson's irresistible urge to enhance the mood of his setting, rather than just photograph it. If he felt he must forgo verisimilitude, like any good painter he never hesitated. No Andy Warhol's 1000%-accurate Tomato Soup Can for him.

Watson would have painted us a soup can with "the wrong look," a can to set us to brooding, puzzled and suspicious.

The first full-size canvas in my collection is:

THE MAN WITH THE TWISTED LIP

" . . . a long, low room, thick and heavy with the brown opium smoke, and terraced with wooden berths, like the forecabin of an emigrant ship.

"Through the gloom one could dimly catch a glimpse of bodies lying in strange fantastic poses, bowed shoulders, bent knees, heads thrown back and chins pointing upwards, with here and there a dark, lack-lustre eye turned upon the newcomer. Out of the black shadows there glimmered little red circles of light, now bright, now faint, as the burning poison waxed and waned in the bowls of the metal pipes."

Scholars, it is no matter that there was no opium den in Upper Swandam Lane—no Upper Swandam Lane, either. London's East End is all the better for Watson's enhancement: is now, and ever more shall be.

THE GREEK INTERPRETER

The interior of The Myrtles, Beckenham, calls for ominous mystery. Watson obliges, enhancing Mr. Melas' original account, I am sure:

" . . . a coloured gas-lamp . . . turned so low that I could see little save that the hall was of some size and hung with pictures. [The room] appeared to be very richly furnished, but again the only light was afforded by a single lamp, half-way turned down. The chamber was certainly large . . . my feet sank into the carpet. . . . I caught glimpses of velvet chairs, a high white marble mantelpiece, what seemed to be a suit of Japanese armour at one side of it. There was a chair just under the lamp. . . ."

THE SIGN OF THE FOUR

Two paintings. The first: Thaddeus Sholto's sybaritic living room:

"In that sorry house it looked as out of place as a diamond of

the first water in a setting of tarnished brass. The richest and glossiest of curtains and tapestries draped the walls, looped back here and there to expose some richly mounted painting or Oriental vase. The carpet was amber and black, so soft and so thick that the foot sank pleasantly into it, like a bed of moss. Two great tiger skins thrown athwart it increased the suggestion of Eastern luxury as did a huge hookah on a mat in the corner. A lamp in the fashion of a silver dove was hung from an almost invisible wire in the centre of the room. As it burned it filled the air with a subtle and aromatic odour."

The second is a Whistleresque Thames-side landscape, as seen from the police boat:

"As we passed the City, the last rays of the sun were gilding the cross upon the dome of St. Paul's."

Watson's word-painting must surely have been the inspiration for Mr. G. F. Allen's magnificent photograph, reproduced in *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*.²

THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES

I have two. In a sense they are both "motion pictures." In the first the camera is mounted on the wagonette as it "leaves the fertile country behind and beneath us" and gives Watson and young Baskerville their first view of "that forbidding moor."

". . . in front of us rose the huge expanse of the moor, mottled with gnarled and craggy cairns and tors. A cold wind swept down from it and set us shivering. . . . the grim suggestiveness of the barren waste, the chilling wind, and the darkling sky. . . .

". . . The road . . . grew bleaker and wilder over huge russet and olive slopes, sprinkled with giant boulders. . . . Suddenly we looked down into a cup-like depression, patched with stunted oaks and firs which had been twisted and bent by the fury of years of storm. Two high, narrow towers rose over the trees. The driver pointed with his whip.

"'Baskerville Hall,' said he.

"Its master had risen and was staring with flushed cheek and shining eyes. A few minutes later we had reached the lodge-gates, a maze of fantastic tracery in wrought iron, with weather-bitten pillars on either side, blotched with lichens. . . . The lodge was a ruin of black granite and bared ribs of rafters. . . .

“ . . . we passed into the avenue, where the wheels were hushed amid the leaves, and the old trees shot their branches in a sombre tunnel over our heads. Baskerville shuddered as he looked up the long drive to where the house glimmered like a ghost at the farther end.”

The other is a landscape by moonlight. The camera is fixed. The only movement is that of the heavy fog as it advances on Stapleton's cottage from Grimpen Mire.

“It was drifting slowly in our direction, and banked itself up like a wall on that side of us, low, but thick and well defined. The moon shone on it, and it looked like a great shimmering ice-field, with the heads of the distant tors as rocks borne upon its surface. . . . Every minute that white wooly plain which covered one-half of the moor was drifting closer and closer to the house. Already the first thin wisps of it were curling across the golden square of the lighted window. The farther wall of the orchard was already invisible, and the trees were standing out of a swirl of white vapour. As we watched it the fog-wreaths came crawling around both corners of the house and rolled slowly into one dense bank, on which the upper floor and the roof floated like a strange ship upon a shadowy sea.”

Move on with me now to what I consider Watson's best single setting:

THE REICHENBACH FALLS

Although he had, of course, the actual falls for a model, the many photographs and the reams of reports from faithful pilgrims attest the fact that Watson indeed transcended the impressive-enough reality.

“It is indeed a fearsome place. The torrent . . . plunges into a tremendous abyss, from which the spray rolls up like the smoke from a burning house. The shaft into which the river hurls itself is an immense cavern, lined with glistening, coal-black rock and narrowing into a creaming, boiling pit of incalculable depth. . . . The long sweep of green water roaring forever down, and the thick flickering curtain of spray hissing forever upwards, turn a man giddy.”

Very possibly “the Reichenbach Falls” occupies the pre-eminent position in the galleries of all Holmesian enthusiasts.

A rash statement perhaps, but I believe it will resist serious challenge.

There are others in my collection—notably “The Manor House at Birlstone,”³ “Poldhu Bay and the Cornish Moors,”⁴ and “The Crypt at Shoscombe Old Place.” Good as these are, to me they have lesser impact. Actually, after *The Final Problem* the word-paintings begin to dwindle until in *The Case Book* there is none worth memorialising. I find this most interesting in the light of serious doubts that have been raised by revered Canonical scholars who question the Canonicity of *The Case Book* in its entirety. Might not the lack, in this collection, of *any* of Watson’s word-paintings be another spoke in that wheel?

Another oddity: We have no complete word-painting for the setting we all know and love the best, 221B Baker Street! Watson is content to give us the (sometimes contradictory) details of the suite in driblets scattered throughout the Saga. But exactly what it looked like as a whole—indeed, exactly where it was!—is still somewhat theoretical. Baring-Gould’s charming chapter in *The Annotated* is in fact only a compendium of Canonical controversy, hedged with many “we thinks,” “might-have-beens,” and “may-have-beens,” and “assumings.” The only comfortable attitude to take would seem to be Pirandello’s: Right You Are if You Think You Are. To each his own picture, let that suffice.

At the far end of my gallery hangs my favourite, a perfect example of what I choose to call Instant Mood. Although this word-painting has really nothing to do with the Adventure⁵ it introduces, I will wager that when the name of Sherlock Holmes is mentioned something of this particular picture will come to mind—even if only subconsciously. Of all the beginnings of all the Adventures, this is the perfect overture:

“It was a wild, tempestuous night towards the close of November. Holmes and I sat together in silence all evening, he engaged with a powerful lens deciphering the remains of the original inscription upon a palimpsest, I deep in a recent treatise upon surgery. Outside the wind howled down Baker Street, while the rain beat fiercely against the windows. It was strange there, in the very depths of town, with ten miles of man’s handiwork on every side of us, to feel the iron grip of Nature, and to be conscious that to the huge elemental forces all London was

no more than the molehills that dot the fields. I walked to the window and looked out on the deserted street. The occasional lamps gleamed on the expanse of muddy road and shining pavement. A single cab was splashing its way from the Oxford Street end."

—June 1976

NOTES

1. *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, ed. W. S. Baring-Gould, II, 690 n.
2. I, 665.
3. *The Valley of Fear*.
4. *The Devil's Foot*.
5. *The Golden Pince-Nez*.

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