

We know that Dr. Watson had an experience of women that spanned three continents. That he appreciated the ladies' infinite sartorial variety as well becomes apparent in this little *tour de force* by Christopher Morley writing in the persona of Jane Nightwork. . . .

## WATSON À LA MODE

by JANE NIGHTWORK

WATSON WAS COUTURIER at heart. I don't need to remind you that he was first attracted to Mary Morstan because she was "dainty, well gloved, and dressed in the most perfect taste." What he admired about her neat *tailleur* of grayish beige was that it was "untrimmed and unbraided." He so approved the small turban "relieved by a suspicion of white feather in the side" that he watched it from the window as Miss Morstan went down Baker Street. It was not until a later occasion, when Mary sat under the lamplight in the basket chair, dressed in what the Rev. Herrick would have called her "tiffany," that Watson learned she did the dressmaking in Mrs. Forrester's household. Shyly he praised the "white diaphanous material, with a little touch of scarlet at the neck and waist." She replied "I made it myself," and what more surely enlists a prudent man's enthusiasm?

Watson's detailed description of Miss Mary Sutherland, in the *Case of Identity*, was of course because he was so horrified by her *mauvaise tenue*. The hat was "preposterous," slate-colored straw with a huge red feather; the black jacket was beaded and fringed and had purple plush at the neck and sleeves; the fur boa and muff<sup>1</sup> were undoubtedly scraggly. The gray gloves were worn through. The dress (above the unmated shoes) was a "brown darker than coffee." Darker than Mrs. Hudson's coffee, does that mean, implying that it was not brewed strong enough for Watson's taste? Anyhow, poor Miss Sutherland's costume horrified Watson's taste in millinery and mode. It was a taste keenly trained at that time, for he had not long been married.

As far back as *Silver Blaze* (1881) Watson became aware of the financial possibilities of the dressmaking business. He made no special comment at the time on Mme. Lesurier's bill, which included an item of 22 guineas for a single costume, the "dove-colored silk with ostrich feather trimming" for Straker's fancy

lady, but we may be sure he made a mental note. In the early cases we hear little of falbalas and fanfreluches; even poor Helen Stoner's frill of black lace was not mentioned as glamour, but because it hid the five livid bruises on her wrist. But see, after the meeting with Mary Morstan, how much more technical, realistic (even carnal) the Doctor's female observations become. Just for the fun of parallel columns, let us compare a few of Watson's comments with Holmes's more delicate and spiritual remarks about the same clients:

HOLMES	WATSON
	<i>(Irene Adler)</i>
The daintiest thing under a bonnet. A lovely woman, with a face that a man might die for.	Her superb figure outlined against the lights.
	<i>(Mrs. Neville St. Clair)</i>
This dear little woman.	A little blonde woman . . . clad in light mousseline de soie, with a touch of fluffy pink chiffon at her neck and wrists . . . her figure out- lined against the flood of light.
	<i>(Violet Smith)</i>
There is a spirituality about the face.	Young and beautiful, tall, graceful, and queenly.
	<i>(Anna Coram)</i>
Attired like a lady.	At the best she could have never been handsome.
	<i>(Lady Hilda Trelawney Hope)</i>
The fair sex is your department.	The most lovely woman in Lon- don . . . subtle delicate charm, beautiful coloring of that exquisite head . . . white gloves . . . framed for an instant in the open door . . . dwindling frou-frou of skirts.

Characteristic of Holmes's comments is his description of Violet de Merville: "a snow image on a mountain; beautiful with ethereal other-world beauty." Typical of Watson is his note on Grace Dunbar: "a brunette, tall, with a noble figure." He liked them framed in doorways, and preferably lit from behind. Certainly Watson would not so often have said "I have seldom seen," or "One of the most lovely I have ever seen," unless it was feminine contour that preoccupied him. At the Abbey Grange, Lady Brackenstall elicited his double instinct for both form and garb:—

I have seldom seen so graceful a figure, so womanly a presence, and so beautiful a face—blonde, golden-haired, blue-eyed . . . a loose dressing gown of blue and silver . . . a black sequin-covered dinner dress.

These boudoir details filled Watson's mind so that he apparently gave no medical attention to the hideous plum-colored swelling over one blue eye.

Watson's cotquean regard for galloons and trimmings was more discreet in his own home. Of his wife's friend Mrs. Isa Whitney he only remarks that she was "clad in some dark-coloured stuff." How much livelier when off on the road with Holmes! See Miss Turner of Boscombe Valley: "One of the most lovely young women that I have ever seen in my life . . . violet eyes shining, pink flush, her natural reserve lost." There were moments perhaps when Watson thought that loss of natural female reserve an excellent thing. And was not his special sympathy for bright freckle-faced Violet Hunter because of the unpleasant electric-blue dress (again "a sort of beige") she had to wear?

Watson's silences are sometimes as revealing as anything he says. He was too shrewd to argue against Holmes's frequent foolish complaints that women's motives are inscrutable. The behavior of the woman at Margate who had no powder on her nose (v. *The Second Stain*) would have been no surprise to Watson. If the Doctor had written the story of the Lion's Mane we would surely have seen beautiful Maud Bellamy in clearer circumstance. She had "the soft freshness of the Downlands in her delicate coloring," writes Holmes (in the new vein of sentiment that bees and Sussex inspired), but if only Watson had been there we might at least have seen "a touch of white at the neck and wrists."

Am I too fanciful to think that good old John Hamish Watson was the first Victorian to do justice to the earliest white-collar girls? Do you remember Laura Lyons of Coombe Tracy whose fingers "played nervously over the stops of her Remington typewriter"?<sup>2</sup> Her cheeks were "flushed with the exquisite bloom of the brunette, the dainty pink which lurks at the heart of the sulphur rose." Watson never made more candid confession than then: "I was simply conscious that I was in the presence of a very handsome woman." It was a consciousness warmly and widely diffused, and always double, for the creature herself and

for her covering. He spoke with equal enthusiasm, at the same time, of Beryl Stapleton "with her perfect figure and elegant dress."

There are other passages, but I have said enough to remind students of Watson's specific interest in miladiana, "over many nations and three separate continents," a theme which few but Mr. Elmer Davis<sup>3</sup> have ever examined candidly, and which is so murky that it has even led to the gruesome suggestion of Mr. Rex Stout in his atrocious venture "Watson Was a Woman."<sup>4</sup> It has glowwormed others into the uxorious theory that Watson was thrice married. My own notion is offered only as a speculation into the unknowable.

Mary Morstan, a clever dressmaker, found time on her hands after she and Watson moved into the house in Paddington. The medical practice was not lucrative (we know that their slavey Mary Jane was of a very humble order), there were no children, and John Hamish ("James") kept up his frequent sorties with Holmes. Watson, with his special interest in dressmaking, encouraged Mary in her ambition to start a little business of her own. The Agra pearls were sufficient capital. Mrs. Cecil Forrester and friends were sure customers, and the business spread. What else was the needlework which Mrs. Watson laid down that evening when her husband, giving his first yawn, heard Kate Whitney at the bell? Begun at home, by '89 or '90 the business needed seamstress help and an atelier. Watson would not wish his friends to know that his wife had gone into trade, so for her business style she adopted some name of fantasy which has not yet been identified. A business directory of London in the early '90s would undoubtedly shew some Mme. Agra, or Mme. Boulangère, or Mme. Medico, or Morstan Styles, *confections de dames*, doing business a little west of the haute couture. The bills were not as steep perhaps as those of Lesurier on Bond Street, but it was a sound middle-class connection. And Watson, though he had countenanced this, was horribly ashamed.

What else would account for the Doctor's contradictory and baffling references? Mary was properly fond of him, but she had her own life to live, without benefit of Sherlock. The "sad bereavement" to which Watson referred when Holmes came back in '94 was not bereavement by death, but the fact that

Mary and he had separated. Divorce, even if desired, was socially impossible in the holy deadlock of those days. Watson, I have pointed out before ("Dr. Watson's Secret," in 221B), had a sly ("pawky") camouflage of his own. As time and success went on, Mary wearied of giving her whole time to dressmaking; and Watson, at the age of 50, even grew a little fatigued with Holmes. Watson's so-called second marriage was when he and Mary decided to resume mutual bed and board. So Watson's second wife was actually his first wife; and there never was a third.

Holmes was too genuine a philosopher to have called Watson's first marriage "selfish." He knew it was part of the destiny of average mankind. He did think it selfish when, after ten years of separation, Watson and his wife decided to make a second try. So when John and Mary set up housekeeping afresh in Queen Anne Street about the autumn of 1902, Holmes began looking for property on the Sussex Downs. Mary farmed out the dressmaking business and said she had always wanted to write. Her first (and last) attempt was *The Mazarin Stone*.

Mary Morstan's influence on women's wear was not lost. Morstan Styles (or whatever the trade name was) became a limited company and she and John still drew dividends. In 1914 the Doctor, long relieved of money anxieties, was "still the same blithe boy."<sup>5</sup> The business spread to the U.S. after the First War. How else do you account for *Morstyle Frocks, Inc.*, in the Manhattan telephone book; or *Morston Textiles* (Morstan & Watson), *ibid.*

—January 1946

#### NOTES

1. Is not H. W. Bell in error (*Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson*, p. 63) in calling them feather boa and feather muff?
2. *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.
3. "The Emotional Geology of Baker Street," in 221B.
4. In *Profile by Gaslight*.
5. *His Last Bow*.

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