

# Genesis of a Detective

by Rex Stout

At a French headquarters in the Argonne during the first World War, General Humbert turned to the man next to him at the dinner table, a visiting Englishman, and demanded, "A propos, ce Sherlock Holmes, est-ce qu'il est un soldat dans l'armée anglaise?"

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the visitor, hesitated a moment, then stammered, "Mais, mon général, il est trop vieux pour service."

That incident from real life is reported

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*The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*

by Vincent Starrett

(Chicago; \$4.75)

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In Vincent Starrett's book. Here is a bit of dialogue from a work of fiction, Forster's *A Passage to India*: "Yes, Rafi's the great man," said Hamidullah, rubbing it in. "Rafi is the Sherlock Holmes of Chandrapore. Speak up, Rafi."

Rafi was a Moslem schoolboy. Hamidullah was a Moslem lawyer. The three others present in the shabby little bungalow in Chandrapore were also Moslems - a doctor, an engineer, and a police inspector. Far away from 221B Baker Street both in space and in culture, but Forster knew that they all knew Sherlock Holmes.

There have been various attempts to answer the question, why is Sherlock Holmes the most widely known character in world literature, but no answer has been generally accepted. Why was he a living man to General Humbert? Why are more people in all corners of the globe familiar with that fantastic bloodhound than with Achilles or Cinderella or Hamlet or Tarzan?

His creator, if he were still around, certainly couldn't tell us. Mr. Starrett quotes a passage by Conan Doyle in his memoirs, explaining why he had decided to write *The Final Problem*, in which Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty tumble over the precipice to their death in the chasm of Reichenbach Falls: "I saw that I was in danger of having my hand forced, and of being entirely identified with what I regarded as a lower stratum of literary achievement. Therefore . . . I determined to end

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the life of my hero." And his later decision to resurrect his hero was caused not by any change in his regard for Sherlock Holmes as a man who deserved to live, but by the pressure of public demand and the lure of extravagant offers from publishers.

So why? The best place to seek your answer is of course the stories themselves, but the next best is this book by Vincent Starrett. Though it quotes here and there a few brief passages from the stories, it is not a book about a writer or what he wrote, but a book about a man named Sherlock Holmes who lived and worked in 19th-Century London. The

longest single quotation is not from the stories at all, but from Conan Doyle's pamphlet, *The Case of Oscar Slater*, a brilliant analysis of the facts and the trial in an actual murder case, demonstrating that the convicted Slater was innocent — as was officially acknowledged 19 years later, when he was released. Mr. Starrett quotes from it to show that it is "the veritable accent of Holmes, talking to the faithful Watson."

The book is not what the jacket calls it, a "biography of Holmes." Its longest chapter is devoted to the landlady, Mrs. Hudson, with various surmises and speculations — did she own or rent the house at 221B? How did she cook ham and eggs? Why did she let the King of Bohemia climb the seventeen steps and enter unescorted? There is a chapter on the cases handled by Holmes and mentioned by Watson but never reported by him — 55 of them are listed, including of course *The Giant Rat of Sumatra* and *The Affair of the Politician*, the *Lighthouse*, and the *Trained Cormorant*; a chapter on the portrayals of Holmes on stage and screen in many countries, and the parodists who have caricatured him, including Mark Twain, Bret Harte, O. Henry, James M. Barrie, and Stephen Leacock; a chapter on the Baker Street Irregulars, with accounts of the founding of that scholarly organization by Christopher Morley and of its first state dinner, among those present being Elmer Davis, Alexander Woolcott, William Gillette and Frederic Dorr Steele, and

with a list of its "scion societies" in 35 cities, including Paris, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, and Tokyo; and the last chapter is a Holmesian pastiche by Vincent Starrett himself entitled *The Adventurer of the Unique "Hamlet"*. Un-canonical and un-Conanical, as Mr. Starrett says; it has the true Watsonian flavor, but brows may lift at the weather. — "It was a glorious morning in the spring, with a fresh breeze and inviting sunlight. . ." What, no fog? No dun-colored veil over