

Counting Watson's Wives

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The ladies love Dr. Watson.

He has that “shy but rugged” thing going for him. He was war service and suffering in his past, yet he still stumbles over his words when left alone with a dainty young governess like Mary Morstan. He is a trusting, caring, and often unappreciated friend to Sherlock Holmes for at least three decades. He is very verbal, as is evidenced in his writings, and he has a keen eye for fashion, as also evidenced in his writings.

The ladies have many reasons to love Dr. Watson, and Watson, like all men, has many reasons to love the ladies. And despite the occasional rumor to the contrary, he does love them, as he testifies in his report of “an experience of women which extends over many nations and three separate continents.” Just how much he was “experiencing” this multinational group is anyone’s guess, but that statement alone shows that Watson at least appreciated them and remembered them.

The ladies love Dr. Watson. Watson loves the ladies.

So why don't the two get along?

There are those naïve fans of Dr. Watson among us who will try to tell you that Watson got along fine with women. They'll tell you that he was only married once, to Miss Mary Morstan, and that was it. Another good monogamous role model for our children, and another satisfied customer at the trough of marital bliss.

But as much as we wish happiness for the good doctor, the evidence points in an entirely different direction. In one tale, his fiancée is an orphan. In another tale, his wife is visiting her mother. One month, Watson is off living the married life, the next month, he's back living with Holmes on Baker Street, over and over again. Can you imagine what would happen if a celebrity like Watson tried to slip such things past today's gossip newspapers like *The National Enquirer*? Dr. Watson's picture would be plastered across the cover of every paper in the supermarket checkout lane.

Once one begins to truly dig into Watson's role as a husband, one inevitably has to wonder, “Just how many times has this guy been married?” Not quite as proud of this aspect of his relationships with women as he was the number of continents he'd been with them on, Dr. Watson kept the exact

figure well hidden. A vague reference to a date here, the odd marital mention there . . . and the lack of names! If you search the entire Canon, you will never find a mention of any wife by name in any story. Sure, he announces his engagement to Mary Morstan, but do we ever hear the name “Mary” again during any period in which he is married? Not at all.

And Watson wasn't the only one covering up his love life. The doctor's Literary Agent kept certain documents suppressed that not only reveal a previously unknown first wife for Watson, but also give us the key to the entire Watsonian matrimonial phenomenon. Those documents, recently brought to light by the Baker Street Irregulars, hint at Watsonian secrets that Sherlockians are only now beginning to explore.

But before we proceed with our look at the wives of Watson, beginning with that newly revealed first wife, there's a small disclaimer I have to make.

There are two components to any serious effort to track Watson's married life.

The first component is the chronological study of the good doctor's writings — a detailed analysis of when each of his tales of Sherlock Holmes actually took place.

The second component of tracking Watson's wives is, quite obviously, the identification of those wives.

Many Sherlockian chronologists like to cheat a bit when it comes to these two components, and pretend they know the answer to part two before even approaching part one. Mary Morstan was Watson's only wife, they say, and then they use the idea of a single Watsonian marriage to figure out the sequence of the stories. But our friend Sherlock Holmes had a phrase to describe such faulty logic — he called it “theorizing before the facts.” And you know what happens when you do that: Instead of forming theories to fit the facts, you inevitably start twisting facts to fit the theories.

To determine the true story behind Watson's marriages, a researcher has to place dates on the stories without using Watson's marital comments. This isn't an easy process. In fact, it's long, tedious, and would make a rather dull talk. It took me over a year to put that list of sixty dates together, the results of which could be seen on the Hounds of the Internet for sixty consecutive weeks in 2000 and 2001, so we're going to skip that part today. Today we're just going to concentrate on component two, the wives themselves. By looking at the periods of married life and bachelorhood in Watson's life when the stories are objectively laid end-to-end one can not only find the true number of Watson's wives, but some clues to their identities as well.

So . . . how many wives did Watson have, when all is said and done?

Six.

Yes, when William S. Baring-Gould once wrote that there were Sherlockians who seemed to want to give Watson as many wives as Henry the Eighth, he wasn't stretching the truth at all. Watson really had six wives. Don't believe me? Well, let's stroll down the aisle with Dr. Watson and see just who the six wives of Watson the first really were.

Wife number one . . .

As I mentioned earlier, Watson's first wife was a secret that the doctor and his Literary Agent kept from the reading public for well over a century. Why were both of them keeping the secret, you ask? Well, Conan Doyle actually went so far as to try writing the tale of Watson's courtship of his first wife as a play, a play called *The Angels of Darkness*. As Doyle's knowledge of America and its denizens was very limited at that time, most of the characters in that play were broad caricatures based on ethnic stereotypes. It's almost a cartoon, except when you come to Dr. Watson. Doyle knew Watson, and how he spoke, and one quickly sees that the Watson of *The Angels of Darkness* is one of the few real people in the play.

The basic story of the play is the same one we'll come to know as the Mormon segment of *A Study in Scarlet*, with many differences, the most important of those being that Lucy Ferrier lives at the end. Not only does she live, but Jefferson Hope winds letting her go to the man she truly loves . . . and guess who that is: John Watson, M.D.

At the play's end, a ceremony of sorts takes place.

Lucy Ferrier is given Watson's hand and asked that he be hers and she be his until "death do you part." Lucy both promises to this, then swears to it, on top of that. The ceremony is a joining of two people, and the only difference between it and what is considered a "proper" wedding ceremony is the fact that the questioning is conducted not by a minister or other religious figure, but by mountain man Jefferson Hope.

Over the years Sherlockians have wondered just how it was that Dr. Watson could be married one minute and single the next, then married again, then single. Divorce laws of the day were not easy to deal with, and, as we've often seen in the Sherlock Holmes stories, married people tended to stay married even when they'd rather not be. But with the new revelation of this simple ceremony conducted by Jefferson Hope, we suddenly find just how it was that Watson got away with having one wife after another . . . he never officially married any of them.

While it may not have been a common practice in upper class Victorian Britain, the casual bestowing of the title of "Mrs." to a live-in lover or even a prostitute who attached herself to one man was not

unusual in America's Wild West of that time, or even among the lower classes of London itself. In "His Last Bow," Sherlock Holmes said that his vocabulary seemed to be "permanently defiled" by his years in America, but in Watson's case, more than his vocabulary was defiled . . . the doctor's views of marriage seem to be defiled as well.

Small personal ceremonies without any official status could set Watson up with one wife after another . . . and give him an exit route when things weren't working out.

As they eventually didn't work out with Lucy Ferrier Watson.

The troubles in the Watson-Ferrier marriage probably started not long after they came to England. A change from the soil where the flower of love originally grew can affect the health of the blossom, to put it poetically. The difference between wild western America and structured London, England would put stresses on any marriage, and in Watson's case, those stresses seem to have damaged John and Lucy's relationship to the point where Watson signed up as an army surgeon to try to put some distance between himself and his bride. His return, sickly and wounded, actually wound up causing him to spend more time with her, however, until, at last, we find him standing in the Criterion Bar before lunchtime on a day when young Stamford is about to wander through.

Didn't you ever wonder why a supposedly single man who had a hotel room all to himself would get up and head to a bar before noon, instead of lounging lazily around his room? He wouldn't . . . unless he was trying to get away from something or somebody. Like his wife.

Further evidence can be found in the subject of Watson's thoughts while standing at the bar that morning, which were, in his own words, "that I must make a complete alteration in my style of living."

A complete alteration of his style of living. Instead of living like a tourist in London, he must live like a resident. Instead of living like a married man, he must live, as he later says he and Holmes do in "The Speckled Band," "sharing rooms as bachelors." Note that in "Speckled Band," Watson doesn't say he and Holmes were bachelors — he just says they were living as bachelors

Perhaps John and Lucy had finally had a horrible fight the night before. Perhaps Lucy brought up her former lover Jefferson Hope, and the fact that she always liked him better than Watson. Whatever the case, Watson's troubles with Lucy are enough that when Stamford shows up at the Criterion Bar, the doctor decides then and there to make that "complete alteration" in his style of living. Would he have gone through with it, had Stamford not shown up with a convenient prospect for new lodgings? We'll never know. The very next day Watson left wife number one and moved into 221B Baker Street.

Wife number two . . .

Dr. Watson met his second wife during late 1886. How do we know this? From Sherlock Holmes's reaction in early 1887. Watson was apparently one of those lovers whose annoying public displays of affection start to drive their friends crazy. Why else would Sherlock Holmes suddenly throw himself headlong into a European case on February 14, 1887, if not to get away from Watson's Valentine's Day celebrations?

The case is that of Baron Maupertuis and the Netherland-Sumatra Company, and Sherlock Holmes works madly at it for two solid months, fifteen hours a day, going so far as to work five days straight at one point. If that weren't proof enough, when loverboy Watson finally tracks him down again, Holmes is overcome with "the blackest depression." Watson drags Holmes back to Baker Street, then decides a vacation would be good for him, at which point Sherlock Holmes has only one question: "Is the establishment a bachelor one?"

Why would Holmes so desperately care about a "bachelor establishment" if not to pry Watson away from his newfound love? It is a short-lived relief for Holmes, but at least he gets some rest before Watson leaves Baker Street to move in with his new bride at the beginning of summer 1887. By July, however, Holmes has resolved himself to Watson's new wife enough to spend the night at their house, and even acknowledges Watson's amorous ways enough to say, "I should consider myself a criminal if I kept you out of bed any longer."

So who was this second Mrs. Watson, whom Dr. Watson met in late 1886, only to annoy Holmes with her in early 1887 and wed her before July of that year?

Well, Watson is a writer, and writers do tend to refer their great loves somewhere in their work. And even though Watson's chronicles are somewhat devoid of female presences in the 1885 and 1886, a Sherlockian scholar named Richard W. Clarke came up with a great idea some years ago. Clarke thought that Watson may have substituted names of his lady friends for the names of ships that appeared in the Canon.

Looking to the only case Watson recorded from autumn of 1886, "The Resident Patient," the answer appears. Watson's second wife was a hot one, both in the amorous nature that so irritated Holmes and the temper that finally drove Watson away. Who else could she have been but "the ill-fated steamer *Norah Creina*"?

But it's not Sherlock Holmes who will make or break Watson's relationships. By September of 1887, this explosive Mrs. Watson is seeking solace at her mother's house and Watson is back in Baker Street. Why?

Plainly, wife number three was coming into the picture.

Wife number three . . .

When Watson's marriage is showing signs of trouble in September of 1887, it is not so far a stretch to say another woman may have entered the picture in the summer of that year. And Watson did meet some pretty remarkable women that summer.

The "intensely womanly" Lady Hilda Trelawney for one. "Intensely womanly?" That sounds like the sort of inoffensive statement one can get away with saying in front of one's bad-tempered wife, while admiring a fine female form. Watson is obviously checking out the ladies, but restraining his reactions so he doesn't have to sleep on the sidewalk.

A little later in the same month, Watson is also checking out his friend Percy Phelps's fiancée, Annie Harrison. Luckily for Percy, she's "a little short and thick for symmetry" — just not Watson's type.

Who is Watson's type? Well, a little romantic profiling and a quick look at *The Sign of Four* will give the answer to that: Watson likes the dainty blondes, which brings us to the next of Watson's wives: Miss Morrison from "The Crooked Man." She is "a little ethereal slip of a girl" whom Sherlock Holmes finds "by no means wanting in shrewdness or common sense." She's a virtual clone of Mary Morstan, a woman we know Watson will eventually fall in love with, and much more the good doctor's type than Annie Harrison.

Of course, Watson never really meets Miss Morrison at any time during the events he wrote up in "The Crooked Man." We must remember, however, that he did write up "The Crooked Man," and to do so, Watson surely had to do a little background research on those parts of the tale in which he was not involved. Interviewing Miss Morrison would not have been that far out of Watson's line.

Miss Morrison was not only Watson's type — she was also almost the exact polar opposite of the steamy Norah Creina. Holmes seems to like Morrison, just like he seemed to dislike Creina. Might he have even encouraged Watson to look up Miss Morrison when the case was done, in early September 1887? Could Sherlock Holmes have been that manipulative of his friend Watson?

Any day of the week.

By mid-September, the current Mrs. Watson is at her mother's.

And by October of 1887, Watson is suddenly writing that it's "a few weeks before my own marriage." At this point, we can pretty well predict that Watson's next informal wedding is going to involve the ethereal Miss Morrison.

The third Mrs. Watson, however, was going to be quite the change of pace from her predecessor, who annoyed Holmes with public displays of affection and had him concerned about keeping Watson out of the marital bed. Less than two months after his third wife moves in, we find Watson back in Baker Street once more, complaining that “a long series of sterile weeks lay behind us.” When *The Valley of Fear* begins in January of 1888, one can safely assume that Holmes isn’t the only one who’s grumpy because he hasn’t been using his “remarkable powers.”

Wife number four . . .

The year 1887 had not been a good one for Dr. Watson.

But he wasn’t the only one.

The year 1887 had also not been a good one for Flora Millar. Her career as a dancer at the Allegro was behind her. The support of Lord Robert St. Simon had come to an end as well, when he had decided to marry that American girl. And by the end of the year, Scotland Yard was after her for murder, which didn’t do her reputation any good even after she was cleared of the charge. By the beginning of 1888, things were looking pretty desperate for Flora, and an offer came her way.

It seemed that a mathematics professor, of both means and influence, was being spoken badly of by a private investigator whose fame was on the rise. The reason for this investigator’s rise in popularity was his room-mate, a writer who had just published an account of one of the detective’s early adventures in *Beeton’s Christmas Annual*. Like most writers, however, this one had a vice that could be exploited, and the mathematics professor saw a chance to rob the detective of his popularity and his voice.

So it was that dear little Flora Millar came to Baker Street in late January to thank Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson for their help in clearing her name the previous autumn. Holmes, of course, cared little for her thanks, but Dr. Watson, at that point, was happy to bask in any female attentions he could get. Watson was so happy, in fact, that by March of 1888 we find him writing the words: “I had seen little of Holmes lately. My marriage had drifted us away from each other.”

And somewhere in the shadows, Professor Moriarty was very happy for Watson. Said happiness would not last long, however, as by June, Holmes not only has Watson at his side against Moriarty once more, but brother Mycroft as well, one step behind the professor (who was using the pseudonym “Wilson Kemp” at the time). Having failed to keep Watson distracted, Flora is soon back on the danseuse unemployment line, leaving the doctor open for . . .

Wife number five . . .

In September of 1888, John H. Watson was to meet the one wife whom Sherlockians all agree upon, Mary Morstan. After an appropriate courtship lasting long enough to satisfy Mary Morstan's employer, Mrs. Cecil Forrester, the pair "married" in late spring of 1889. Was this the closest Watson came to a real marriage up to this point? As he appears to have stayed with her until her death in 1894 (the "recent bereavement" Holmes speaks of in "Empty House"), it may well have been.

But as Mary Morstan Watson is the most widely known of all Watson's wives, we won't dwell upon her today. Instead, let us move on to the woman I think might have been Watson's best wife of all, a woman who has never been given enough credit for her "intensely womanly" qualities.

Wife number six . . .

The death of Mary Morstan in 1894 was not something Watson would quickly recover from. He remained single from that time until the turn of the century — a sure sign of his affection for Mary. The sixth, and last, woman that Watson would take as a wife would have to take a lot of time helping Watson find his heart again, but this woman had time. She also had a lot more going for her, as you'll soon see. For just like it goes in that old Vanessa Williams song, Watson saved the best for last.

"The good Watson had deserted me for a wife, the only selfish action which I can recall in our association," Holmes reports firsthand in "The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier."

But why, after all Watson's wives prior to 1903, was Sherlock Holmes suddenly calling Watson's marrying a "selfish action"? Watson has moved out before. Watson has even stolen a girl that Holmes showed some small interest in before, as Holmes admitted to hoping Mary Morstan could join them in the detective business. So what made taking the 1903 wife so much more selfish than any of Watson's other wives?

Well, this time, Watson stole the one woman from Holmes who made it possible for the detective to continue his life at 221B Baker Street. Five other Mrs. Watsons had come and gone without affecting Sherlock Holmes or his vocation in the slightest. This time, however, things were going to be different. This time, Watson would marry, and, very soon after, Sherlock Holmes would retire to Sussex.

Why? Well, you've probably guessed by now, but let's take a minute to recap Watson's marital existence.

First came Lucy Ferrier, Watson's young love that was a product of a different time and a place, a love that could not survive a move across an ocean.

Second came Norah Creina, probably the most passionate of the Mrs. Watsons, whose candle burned too hot, too fast.

Third was Miss Morrison, the ethereal foreshadowing of Mary Morstan, who both stole Watson from Norah and could not live in her shadow, passion-wise.

Fourth was the seductress Flora Millar, who was everything Watson wanted her to be . . . as long as he behaved the way Professor Moriarty liked.

Fifth time was the charm, and it looked like Watson might have really found his match in Mary Morstan. Only the fates had other ideas.

And in the sixth position was a woman who had known the loss of a spouse, just as Watson had. A woman as loyal and true as a man could want, and a woman who shared Watson's regard for Sherlock Holmes. And last but not least, a woman who once and for all proved what Holmes always said about John H. Watson: "You see, but you do not observe."

We don't know if Watson finally learned to observe, or if Holmes had to once again point things out to him, but the last Mrs. Watson could be no one else but the former Mrs. Hudson.

Dr. Watson and Mrs. Hudson are the match truly made in Sherlockian heaven . . . also known as 221B Baker Street. Moviemakers have always like portraying Mrs. Hudson as an older woman, but think about it — those same moviemakers also like portraying Watson as an older man. Mrs. Hudson is thought to be of Scottish descent, and so is Dr. Watson. In fact, these two have so much in common, you have to wonder why they didn't get together earlier.

Well, starting off in a landlady/tenant relationship set their original view of each other in a very strict mode. Even if Mrs. Hudson had been the most attractive woman on Earth, Watson couldn't show interest in her without jeopardizing both he and Holmes's living arrangements. But as the years passed, and Sherlock Holmes made both of them wealthy beyond the need for rent or renting, that worry disappeared. Watson could have lived anywhere, and Mrs. Hudson could have rented to anyone — or no one, once Holmes's "princely payments" stacked up high enough.

But Watson kept coming back to Baker Street . . . do we honestly think that was only because he liked living with Sherlock Holmes? Watson could have been Holmes's friend and partner while living elsewhere. He did it enough times when a wife was in the picture. He certainly could have done it without a wife, and he's showed us what a horrible room-mate Holmes could be. So why keep coming back to Baker Street?

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The answer has been in front of our faces all along. Watson came back to Baker Street for Mrs. Hudson. And Mrs. Hudson probably had a lot more patience with Holmes because of the other man who came as a part of the Holmes/Watson package. Did the two eventually leave Baker Street together, to establish a life without their fellow lodger?

“The good Watson had deserted me for a wife, only selfish action which I can recall in our association,” Holmes said.

And on his sixth try, it looks like Watson finally got it right.