

SHERLOCK HOLMES

by Gas-Lamp

Highlights from the
First Four Decades of

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Edited by Philip A. Shreffler

Baker Street Irregular Rex Stout was the creator of detective Nero Wolfe, and Mr. Stout never fully denied the following theory about Wolfe's father that was bandied among the Irregulars.

SOME NOTES RELATING TO A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION INTO THE PATERNITY OF NERO WOLFE

by JOHN D. CLARK

IN A RECENT SCHOLARLY ARTICLE,¹ a noted historian has demolished the always dubious hypothesis that Nero Wolfe is the son of Mycroft Holmes, and has at the same time demonstrated that he must have been born in the United States at some time between 1 January 1892 and 1 January 1896. Unfortunately, while the author of this article has pointed out the noticeable lack of candor exhibited by Wolfe upon the occasions when he referred to his early life, he has been able to cast no light whatsoever upon the question as to the actual identity of the subject's parents. It is the purpose of this paper to furnish the answer, with a high degree of probability, to this interesting question, and to indicate the most profitable direction of future research into this important matter.

Part of Wolfe's lack of frankness as to his history and parentage may be attributed to his natural bent toward contrariness; but it may well be that he wishes, for reasons of his own, to conceal the identity of his parents. It is of course inconceivable that a detective of Wolfe's perspicacity could be ignorant of the facts himself.

In order to penetrate a bit more deeply into the mystery it is necessary to go back to the last years of the nineteenth century. Although De Voto has proved that Wolfe was born in the United States some time between the years 1892 and 1895, he has demonstrated nothing whatsoever regarding the geographical location of his conception, but *has* located it in time somewhere between March 1891 and March 1895. These dates should be noted with some care, since in them lies the key to the question under examination.

In the 1890s Montenegro was an isolated and almost inaccessible principality. No railroads passed through, the border was crossed by little except goat trails in the mountain passes, and the little port of Antivari was practically the only entrance to the country. The port could be reached by one of the ships of the "Puglia" steamship line, sailing, infrequently, from Bari on the Italian coast, and a precipitous carriage road connected the port with Rieka and the capital, Cettigne. Cettigne had perhaps three thousand inhabitants, and was the site of the governmental offices, such as they were, of the new palace housing the somewhat Ruritanian court of Prince Nicholas, and of a theatre-cum-opera house.²

Cettigne was a city where a man who had reason to believe that he was hunted might find a reasonable degree of security. With a few tribesmen as allies (which would not be expensive) he could rest assured that no enemy could approach unseen, and could easily ensure that none would arrive. (All male Montenegrins carried arms at that time, and the ambush was a highly developed art-form in the mountainous terrain.)

When Sherlock Holmes had his final discussion with Professor Moriarty at the Reichenbach Fall at the beginning of May 1891,³ we know that he escaped through Italy. We are ignorant of the course of his travels beyond Florence, but it appears not improbable that he traveled by railway to Bari (he had plenty of money, of course, since he was in touch with Mycroft, presumably by cable), and he may well have boarded a "Puglia" steamer there and proceeded to Antivari and thence to Cettigne. He must have remained there for several months. He could easily keep in touch with Mycroft by the telegraph line to Belgrade and Vienna, and by a little discreet bribery, could ensure that no news of his presence would reach the outside world.

Irene Adler was married to a young lawyer, Godfrey Norton, in 1888.⁴ As to the course of the marriage, the primary authorities say nothing. It contained within itself, however, the seeds of instability. Norton was a conventional member of a respectable profession in a conformist age. Furthermore, he was of an excitable disposition. It is not unlikely that he was possessed of the high blood pressure that so frequently accompanies such a temperament, and the shock of learning, as he must eventually have done, of his wife's previous career may easily have had

fatal results. Whether the marriage ended in his death, in divorce, or in desertion, it can hardly have lasted longer than two or three years.

Irene must then have been left a widow, *de jure* or *de facto*, with very scant means. She was, however, an operatic contralto, apparently of considerable merit, and a return to the stage would not seem too difficult. La Scala would be impossible, as would the Warsaw opera, since she had been retired for some time, but one of the smaller companies that toured through Eastern Europe would give her security as well as a chance to return eventually to the big time, or if not, to capture an affluent and noble (if provincial) protector.

In the course of its travels the company must have come to the opera house in Cettigne. Holmes was a devotee of the opera, and it is inevitable that he must have met Irene Adler again. Her admiration for him compared with his for her,⁵ and, although Watson has stated that Holmes was completely devoid of the softer emotions, Holmes was not always completely candid with his friend, and was enough of an actor to be able to dissemble his emotions. Whether Irene was still a member of the company, or whether she had, by that time, come under the protection of one of the local nobility, cannot be determined, but the latter, for reasons which will appear later, seems to be more likely. Whatever the case, Holmes and Miss Adler must have seen much of each other, and when to their mutual admiration was added the fact that they were the only people in the town speaking anything but Montenegrin, Slovene, Servian, Croatian, Turkish, or bad German, an affair was inevitable.

When Irene became pregnant it must have taken really royal bribery plus all of Holmes's ingenuity to get her aboard one of the Italian steamers at Antivari, whence she sailed for Bari and on to the United States, presumably to join her parents in New Jersey. She may well have been disguised as a peasant boy when she boarded the Bari steamer, since the sackcloth costume worn by the peasantry could conceal not only her identity but her condition. Holmes could not accompany her for some reason—presumably because he remained behind to draw off the pursuit by the retainers of her outraged protector.

Nero Wolfe was born in New Jersey (the exact location can unfortunately not be traced) in late 1892 or early 1893, some

six months after his mother had left Montenegro. It is clear that she did not long remain with her parents, having outworn her welcome as a returned and widowed daughter, but returned with her son to Central Europe, either in order to resume her career or to visit relatives living in Budapest. She must have married again, and settled in Buda, where she had at least one other child, which accounts for the niece or nephew mentioned by Wolfe at one time. She did *not* return to Montenegro, where the institution of the blood feud was still very much alive, and never came closer than Zagreb, which is some 240 miles from the border of the principality.

The route by which Holmes left Montenegro is uncertain, but it appears from an examination of the terrain that he must have struck east across the mountains into Albania (he was an excellent mountaineer⁶) through the passes into Serbia, and found himself on the railroad at Skoplye. On the railroad he traveled north to Nish, then east to Constantinople, and then south by way of Turkey into the Hedjaz, where he "looked in" at Mecca. From that point on his travels during his exile are as he detailed them to Watson in April of 1894.

Holmes's account of his travels in Tibet and through Persia are the purest invention on his part, produced to account for the time without shocking his good friend Watson. The mention of the "Norwegian traveller Sigerson" is cleverly designed to lead to a degree of confusion in Watson's mind between the mythical Norwegian and the very real Sven Hedin who was at that time starting his Central Asian researches. The visit to the

to lead to a degree of confusion in Watson's mind between the mythical Norwegian and the very real Sven Hedin who was at that time starting his Central Asian researches. The visit to the Khalifa at Khartoum is, of course, quite real, since the results are a matter of record in the archives of the Foreign Office. The researches in Montpellier upon the coal-tar derivatives, too, can be confirmed through reference to the contemporary chemical journals.

Whether Holmes ever again communicated with Irene Adler, or with his son, is so far unknown. If he did not, his reasons must remain in the realm of conjecture, since it has never been easy to read the mind of that remarkable man.

Wolfe must have grown up in Budapest, with occasional visits to Zagreb, in the protectorate of Bosnia and Herzegovina. There he must have met his first and oldest friend Marco Vucic. But there is no evidence, not even hearsay, that he ever stepped

HIGH MEADOW
BREWSTER
NEW YORK
June 14 1955

Editor of the Baker Street Journal
221B Baker Street
RFD 1
Morristown New Jersey


Dear Sir:

I return herewith the ms. by John D. Clark of some notes regarding the paternity of Nero Wolfe.

I am obliged to you for sending me the ms. for perusal, and I admire the finesse of your suggestion that "censorship" by me might be desirable and acceptable. As the literary agent of Archie Goodwin I am of course privy to many details of Nero Wolfe's past which to the general public, and even to scholars of Clark's standing, must remain moot for some time. If and when it becomes permissible for me to disclose any of those details, your distinguished journal would be a most appropriate medium for the disclosure. The constraint of my loyalty to my client makes it impossible for me to say more now.

With my best respects,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rex Stout". The signature is written in dark ink and includes a long horizontal stroke extending to the right from the end of the name.

Rex Stout

within the actual boundaries of Montenegro. Vucic may have been a Montenegrin—Wolfe, with his talent for confusion, may have claimed to be one—but nationality has not yet been defined on the basis of the geographical location of conception!

It is probable that Wolfe's stepfather secured for him the original position in the Austro-Hungarian civil service which led to his eventual enrolment in the intelligence service of the old Empire. His career in that service is difficult to trace—not only because it is one of the functions of intelligence operatives to make their careers difficult to trace, but because Wolfe himself has added deliberately to the confusion. When he states that he joined the Montenegrin army in 1916, the statement is patently ridiculous, since that army was completely destroyed during the previous autumn. Nor can he have been an Austrian agent when he was (he says) jailed in Bulgaria in 1916, since at that moment Bulgaria had already joined Austria against Serbia. It appears more likely, from the historical background, that Wolfe switched loyalty from Austria to Montenegro at least as early as 1914 or 1915, when he was in Albania; was jailed in Sofia early in 1915, and escaped or was released soon enough to join the Serbian-Montenegrin army before the battles of October and November which destroyed them.⁷ How he escaped from the debacle is doubtful, but it seems likely that he was with the refugee remnant of an army that struggled down the Adriatic coast from San Giovanni de Medua and was eventually evacuated to Corfu and then transferred to Saloniki.

The reasons for Wolfe's desertion of Austria can only be speculated upon. It may have been the result of an emotional shock (Wolfe was 22 in 1915) conceivably the result of an insulting remark by an irritated officer about his Montenegrin origin. Or he may have been involved in one of the many minority independence movements that harassed the Empire. The name he carries—obviously a conspiratorial pseudonym—suggests this explanation. But until Wolfe feels impelled to tell the facts, any suggested explanation is pure guesswork.

But whether Wolfe ever condescends to admit it, or whether he remains forever silent, his parentage can no longer be a matter of conjecture, nor can there be any doubt as to the source from which he inherited his remarkable talents.

—January 1956

NOTES

1. B. DeVoto, in *Harper's* 204 No. 1250 (July 1954), p. 8.
2. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th Ed., XVII, 766
3. *The Final Problem*.
4. *A Scandal in Bohemia*.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *The Empty House*.
7. Winston S. Churchill, *The Unknown War* (New York: Scribner's, 1932), pp. 331 ff.

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