

MRS. HUDSON: A LEGEND IN HER OWN LODGING-HOUSE

by CATHERINE COOKE

Mrs. Hudson is without a doubt *the* woman in the Canon. She is, of course, Holmes's landlady: a nice, motherly individual getting on in years, perhaps a little on the plump side. She's Scottish and a widow, or just possibly separated from her husband, who was possibly Morse Hudson. On the other hand, he may still live with her, but just be absent from Watson's accounts of life in Baker Street. Her first name is Martha. She is devoted to her employer Holmes, even giving up her life in London to accompany him to Sussex in retirement and to continue looking after him there.

At least, this is how she is usually conceived. It is a portrait perpetuated in numerous films and television adaptations: Minnie Rayner in the Arthur Wontner films, Mary Gordon in the Basil Rathbone films, Irene Handl in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, and Rosalie Williams in the Jeremy Brett series. It is, however, a portrait built from bricks with precious little straw.

Much of what has been written about Mrs. Hudson is pure speculation and often presented in her own words or those of people who know her. Marvin Aronson was one who felt Mr. Hudson should have a more tangible presence.¹ Isaac Hudson complains that he had not been mentioned despite his many long years of patient service to Holmes and Watson. Other speculation bordering on pastiche about Mrs. Hudson came from Lee Wright, who let Mrs. Hudson tell how she let rooms to Holmes and Watson.² Herbert Eaton went so far as to postulate that Billy the page was Mrs. Hudson's son and that she had a 29-year lease on the house at 221B Baker Street.³

Perhaps the most influential piece of writing on Mrs. Hudson is Vincent Starrett's "The Singular Adventures of Martha Hudson." Originally published in 1934 in *Baker Street Studies*,⁴ the article was reprinted in Starrett's own *Bookman's Holiday* in 1942.⁵ The article was also included in *Profile by Gaslight* in 1944⁶ and again republished in Starrett's 1960 revised and enlarged edition of *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, which had originally appeared in 1934, without, among others, the chapter on Mrs. Hudson.⁷

Starrett painted a picture of a young widow, whom he calls the "house-keeper." He writes of her wondering about her new lodger's profession, perhaps even listening at the keyhole as he met with clients. He described the routines in the household—when she rose and when she retired to bed, how she made coffee for clients and provided food. Starrett wrote of the staff, the maid, the pages, and possibly the cooks. He speculated about how Mrs. Hudson spent her

spare time, regaling her “cronies” over coffee and tea with tales of Holmes’s cases, playing patience and knitting, often listening to the strains of Holmes’s violin from upstairs. Starrett even envisaged her visiting the Chamber of Horrors at nearby Madame Tussaud’s to see the waxworks of those murderers apprehended by her lodger.

Starrett outlined his belief that, when Holmes retired to Sussex, Mrs. Hudson gave up her premises—rented or owned—in London and moved with him as housekeeper: “[A]lthough it is nowhere explicitly stated—there can be no reasonable doubt that she retired with Holmes to Sussex, if not at once, then later.” He then assumes that Mrs. Hudson is the Martha sent by Holmes into von Bork’s house as a spy, “a dear old ruddy-faced woman in a country cap.” It is this woman who knitted, hence his assertion that Mrs. Hudson knitted, and this woman whose name is given as Martha, hence the assumption throughout the article that Mrs. Hudson’s name was Martha.

To be fair to Starrett, his article is peppered with phrases such as “one fancies,” “one imagines her to have been,” “we may suppose,” and “one thinks.” But he also twists facts to suit theories. Introducing Martha in “His Last Bow,” Starrett states, “It was Martha Hudson’s last adventure, as far as it is possible for research to discover.” There is no *supposition* of Martha as Mrs. Hudson; the identification is presented as fact.

Starrett shows us his conception of Mrs. Hudson—a “loyal and devoted servant of an indubitably higher type” and “the detective and the doctor and, below stairs, the humble and loyal housekeeper whose happiness it was to serve them.” While we can perhaps forgive his fond imaginings, this is his worst mistake—a major failure to understand the social world of Holmes’s day. We must be clear about the terms “landlady” and “housekeeper.” A landlady may be defined as the hostess of an inn, the mistress of a lodging- or boarding-house. A housekeeper, on the other hand, is a woman engaged in housekeeping or domestic occupations, a woman who manages or superintends the affairs of a household, especially the woman in control of the female servants of a household. Throughout the Canon, Mrs. Hudson is referred to as the landlady. It is she who lets rooms to Holmes and Watson as her tenants. She is most definitely not a servant, employed by Holmes, but a businesswoman in her own right. She owned 221B Baker Street, owned in the sense of holding a probably long lease on the building from the landowners, the Portman Estate.

William Hyder’s points are worthy of particular attention when considering Starrett.⁸ He shows how influential Starrett was in originating the general conception of Mrs. Hudson. Yet, he asks:

If the housekeeper was Mrs. Hudson, why did Holmes not say so? *Why* was it “nowhere explicitly asserted”? There was no reason for concealment, and we can be certain that Holmes did not omit the name absent-mindedly. He could not have supposed that Mrs. Hudson’s name would be meaningless to his readers; Dr. Watson’s writings had made her almost as well known as Holmes himself. Can we imagine him, then, suppressing her name out of jealousy? We know Sherlock Holmes better than that. No, if he did not identify his Sussex housekeeper as Mrs. Hudson, it is because she was not Mrs. Hudson.

Hyder correctly grasps the difference between a landlady and a housekeeper, demolishing the Sussex housekeeper and Martha as Mrs. Hudson theories by asking, “Would she, moreover, have been willing to descend in the social scale from businesswoman to servant?” Further, Holmes addresses Martha as “Martha.” Hyder remarks:

Under the social rules he lived by, Sherlock Holmes would never have called Mrs. Hudson by her first name. Certain classes of servant were properly addressed that way, but Mrs. Hudson, as we have seen, was never a servant. She would have considered it a liberty, perhaps an insult, even after years of close association with Holmes.

Martha, free from any role-playing to von Bork, curtsies to Holmes. Only a servant would do that. Mrs. Hudson, a woman of independent means, would never have done so. Hyder’s article is well worth quoting further, as he traces the influence of Starrett’s writing:

“Appointment in Baker Street,” a directory of Canonical personages compiled by Edgar W. Smith, was issued as a pamphlet in 1938 and anthologized in Starrett’s *221B* in 1940. The entry for Mrs. Hudson does not place her in “The Lion’s Mane” or “His Last Bow”, and the entry for Martha makes no claim that she was Mrs. Hudson. (By 1944, Smith had become a believer. Introducing Starrett’s “The Singular Adventures of Martha Hudson” in his anthology *Profile by Gaslight*, he agrees that Mrs. Hudson “served the master not only in the heyday of his fame, but also in the later and less eventful years of his retirement on the Sussex Downs.” And in 1949, writing under the name of Helene Yuhasova, he published a sonnet in which Mrs. Hudson is apostrophized as “Martha.”

Starrett's theories received their first formal recognition in 1947, with the publication of Jay Finley Christ's concordance keyed to the one-volume Garden City edition of the Canon, then standard in the United States. The entries under "Hudson, Mrs." include "referred to as Martha (?) LAST 1151; with Holmes in retirement LION 1277." And in a list of canonical personages arranged by first name we find "Martha Hudson (inferred) LAST 1147."⁹

While most American Sherlockians until relatively recently seem to have accepted Starrett's fancies, British Sherlockians were less likely to be led astray. Most would, for instance, even now not confuse a landlady and a housekeeper. Michael and Mollie Hardwick, in their *Sherlock Holmes Companion*, did not include Martha in their selective *Who's Who* section.¹⁰ They did, however, claim that Mrs. Hudson took part in both "The Lion's Mane" and "His Last Bow." Michael Hardwick later changed his mind, not only not claiming that Mrs. Hudson took part in these stories, but also stating of Martha, "She is *not* Mrs. Hudson."¹¹

D. Martin Dakin stated, "the attempt to endow her with the name of Martha, on the supposition that she was the same as Holmes's old housekeeper in 'His Last Bow', has nothing to recommend it."¹² Dakin makes a further very interesting point, which does not seem to have been remarked upon elsewhere. Why, when the pages of the *Strand Magazine* were so full of pictures of Holmes, Watson, and even Mycroft and Moriarty, is there not one picture of Mrs. Hudson?

Another appraisal of Mrs. Hudson was undertaken by Bill Mitchell.¹³ Rightly pointing out how the fact that Mrs. Hudson let highly desirable rooms somewhat beyond Holmes's means alone brought Holmes and Watson together in the first place, Mitchell showed her importance to the Canon. Yet Watson rarely mentioned her, and what is said is not always complimentary. Mitchell felt that perhaps, having moved in, Watson tried to get the cost reduced, thus putting a strain on his relationship with Mrs. Hudson. Citing Watson's later writing that Holmes's payments for his rooms were "princely," Mitchell feels that Mrs. Hudson was perhaps even "avaricious by nature." Against this, to be fair, he does balance how bad a tenant Holmes was: unusual callers at all hours, chemical experiments, often malodorous, and indoor revolver practice. No wonder the rent was increased over the years and the payments "princely."

Another reason for coolness might be Watson's bull-pup, kept by him before his move to Baker Street, but never mentioned again. Had Mrs. Hudson imposed a "no pets" rule, despite keeping a terrier herself, the one Holmes puts out of its misery in *A Study in Scarlet*? Watson usually refers to Mrs. Hudson not by her name, but as "the landlady," while she often addresses him as "Sir." Mitchell wrote, surely if the relationship were completely happy, Watson would

mention Mrs. Hudson more. This is an interesting point, but we must remember that Watson is writing about Holmes and his cases. The domestic scenes are merely setting the scene, against which the circumstances of the case can be highlighted—a normal life to highlight the horror faced by the client.

Mitchell found Mrs. Hudson rather “aloof,” a view he found by Watson’s reference to her “stately” tread as she passed his room on her way to bed. He adds that Holmes may have also wished to reduce contact with her, hence his employment of a page to show up callers. His use of the word “cronies” when referring to Mrs. Hudson’s friends may have meant that he feared she was something of a gossip. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, however, makes no mention of any pejorative sense of the word.

Others have argued that Mrs. Hudson showed up the most important clients, while the page showed up those of lesser status. It could also be argued that the employment of a page would add to Holmes’s stature in the eyes of prospective clients, who might feel being shown up merely by the landlady was a bit amateur.

The view of Mrs. Hudson as a rather gossipy lady with an eye on her income was also one put forward by James Edward Holroyd:

One would wish to feel that Mrs. Hudson was not moved mainly by money. She was doubtless secretly proud of her remarkable tenants and one can imagine that her discreet gossip made her to be a figure of consequence in those shadowy regions where landladies foregather. O. Henry would have given her a sinister cast. He would have told more; but I doubt whether he would have revealed more. The latest headlines would be the natural diet of such a company and we may be sure that the glint in Mrs. Hudson’s eye would mean that she could add a thing or two if she were so minded. Her loyalty to Holmes was of course beyond question.¹⁴

Whatever Holmes’s view of Mrs. Hudson in the early years of their relationship, she certainly showed her ability to support him when needed by crawling around the floor moving his wax bust while he kept watch from opposite in “The Empty House.”

There are a couple of other standard views of Mrs. Hudson that we need to address. The first is that she is Scottish. The case for this rests on Holmes’s comment in “The Naval Treaty,” “Mrs. Hudson has risen to the occasion. Her cuisine is a little limited, but she has as good an idea of breakfast as a Scotchwoman.” Mitchell infers that the term “Scotchwoman” was meant in a derogatory way—referring to the traditional meanness of the Scottish. He feels that the ham and eggs provided indicated a Yorkshire woman’s idea of breakfast. In

“Black Peter,” however, Watson refers to “the excellent breakfast which Mrs. Hudson had prepared.” It seems unlikely, therefore, that Holmes is being derogatory about Mrs. Hudson’s breakfasts. It seems he just means that breakfast is lavish. Breakfast in Scotland might be assumed to consist of porridge, a cooked dish such as white pudding, bacon and so forth, toast and Dundee marmalade. Holmes says, “she has as good an idea of breakfast as a Scotchwoman” not “a Scotchwoman’s idea of breakfast.” He is not saying Mrs. Hudson is Scottish, just that she puts on a lavish spread. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, the word “Scotch” was the usual term.

The other point is that of Mrs. Hudson’s marital status. The fact that she is addressed as “Mrs.” is taken to mean she is or has been married. This gives rise to the options that she is widowed or separated, or that the husband just never appears. But this, again, could be a misunderstanding of Victorian social conventions. Addressing a woman as “Mrs.” was a term of respect—the same difference between “Miss” and “Mrs.” as “Master” and “Mister.”

While lower-status servants, for example maids, were addressed by their first name (or a first name the mistress of the house liked, even if it wasn’t actually the servant’s name), higher-status servants such as the housekeeper or the cook would be addressed as Mrs. and their surname. The same mark of respect would have been shown to an older, independent woman, such as Mrs. Hudson.

We cannot blithely assume that Mrs. Hudson was ever married, though we can perhaps assume a certain age, one at which she was now unlikely to marry. She *may* have been married, but we cannot be certain either way. She may have inherited enough money to purchase the lease on 221B, or inherited the lease. In any event, she was more fortunate than those women Holmes met who had to make their way alone in the world as a governess or typist.

Which brings us to the matter of 221B Baker Street. This is not the place to go into the possible locations of the house. Suffice it to say that the general consensus is that it lay in Baker Street proper that portion of the modern Baker Street that lay between Portman Square and Paddington Street. This puts it in the Portman Estate, which principally consists of the property within Marylebone. The area covered is broadly bounded by Oxford Street from Marble Arch to Orchard Street, Edgware Road east beyond Baker Street and stretches north almost to Crawford Street. The Estate includes Portman Square, Manchester Square, and the residential Bryanston and Montagu Squares.

Sir William Portman of Somerset, Lord Chief Justice to Henry VIII, in 1533 acquired some 270 acres stretching from Oxford Street to the Regents Canal. The land remained relatively undeveloped until 1745 when the main occupation in the area was pig farming and the depositing of “night soil.” (I do

not propose to elaborate on this subject here, except to remark that Watson was closer to the mark than he intended when he referred to London as “that great cesspool.”) By 1820 the road system had developed more or less in the form it is today, and the original building development was largely completed. Edward Berkeley Portman drove this rapid development. After the 1763 Peace of Paris, new blocks sprang up to the west of Cavendish Square, gradually filling the space defined by the Marylebone Road. This road has the distinction of being the world’s first city bypass, built to ease “traffic congestion” on Oxford Street. A principal feature of the Portman Estate is the redevelopment of the sites of many of the original grand houses as mansion blocks let on long leases. This secondary development started in the south of the Estate and spread along both the Edgware Road and Baker Street. Baker Street itself was laid out from 1755 by William Baker on land leased from Portman.

Mrs. Hudson would, therefore, have the lease rather than the freehold of one (or perhaps more—we do not know) of these buildings. Left alone in the world by the death of her father (or husband), she may not have been left enough money to live a comfortable life with no ongoing means of support. Purchasing the lease of a property in a good residential area would have provided her with both a roof over her own head and a respectable source of income from which to live.

A little research in *The Times* provides some useful contemporary advertisements:

24 September 1795: Baker-Street, Portman Square. A Truly Valuable and Desirable Leasehold Modern BRICK-HOUSE, with Coach-house and Stabling, situated in Baker-street, No 27. The premises are substantially built, and contain 6 bed-chambers, 2 drawing-rooms, 2 parlours, a China closet, house keeper’s-room, butler’s pantry, kitchen, scullery, and larder, with coach-house and stabling in Dorset Mews. The premises are fitted up in a style of neatness and elegance, and the rooms of good dimensions, in the occupation and on a lease to M. Fagmani, at a rent of 130l. [£130] per annum, held for a term of 83 1/2 years, at the low ground rent of 13l. 5s. [£13 5s] per annum.

Eighty-three and a half years from September 1795—that lease would have been up for renewal in 1879. It is a supposition, but a fair one, that many of the leases on that block would have been for similar terms from similar dates. 27 Baker Street lay on the east side, about a third of the way from Dorset Street to Blandford Street.

14 April 1870: GENTEEL RESIDENCE, near Dorset-Square and the Regent's-park. Messrs. Kemp are instructed to SELL the LEASE of an excellent 12-roomed HOUSE, three minutes' walk from the Baker-street Station. Rent 70 guineas per annum. The house has been recently repaired and expensively decorated, and the furniture is new and in good taste. The house is well adapted for a newly married couple, and early possession can be had.

Sadly, the actual sale price of the property is not given. Nor can we say for certain that the house is in Baker Street, but it is certainly in the general area.

In *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson gives a description of the rooms he and Holmes take on:

We met next day as he had arranged, and inspected the rooms at No. 221B, Baker Street, of which he had spoken at our meeting. They consisted of a couple of comfortable bedrooms and a single large airy sitting-room, cheerfully furnished, and illuminated by two broad windows. So desirable in every way were the apartments, and so moderate did the terms seem when divided between us, that the bargain was concluded upon the spot, and we at once entered into possession.

Michael Harrison put forward some theories about what these “moderate” terms might have been:

I have calculated elsewhere that Mrs. Hudson, the landlady who provided cooking and cleaning within the rent, probably charged the two men £4, or perhaps four guineas, between them; but further researches have let me consider a lower sum than this, and it is not unlikely that, for a “permanency”, Mrs. Hudson need have charged not more than £3 “all in”.¹⁵

221B was a substantial house. We know that both Mrs. Hudson and the maid lived in. Mrs. Hudson was roused from her slumbers by at least one early caller: “Very sorry to knock you up, Watson,” said he, “but it’s the common lot this morning. Mrs. Hudson has been knocked up, she retorted upon me, and I on you” (“The Speckled Band”). Watson also talks of hearing her pass his door: “Ten o’clock passed, and I heard the footsteps of the maid as she pattered off to bed. Eleven, and the more stately tread of the landlady passed my door, bound for the same destination” (*A Study in Scarlet*). The normal arrangement at the time would be for the servants and presumably Mrs. Hudson to work in the basement, but have their sleeping accommodation in the top floor. A house

such as that described above—with six bedrooms, two parlors, and two drawing rooms—would have had ample space for Mrs. Hudson to live comfortably, her servants (the maid, the cook, and the page, perhaps) to live in, and Holmes and Watson to have had a bedroom each and a sitting room. Or the cook and page may have lived out, and rooms let to other lodgers. There may well have been a business premises on the ground floor. We simply do not know.

We are left with the little problem of when Mrs. Hudson was not Mrs. Hudson, but Mrs. Turner. In “A Scandal in Bohemia” we read of Holmes’s words, “‘When Mrs. Turner has brought in the tray I will make it clear to you. Now,’ he said, as he turned hungrily on the simple fare that our landlady had provided, ‘I must discuss it while I eat, for I have not much time.’”

Again, there have been innumerable theories. Lenore Glen Offord postulated that Mrs. Hudson was briefly married to a Mr. Turner.¹⁶ He turned out to be a bigamist, and Mrs. Hudson quickly returned to her former name. Bruce Kennedy argued that Mrs. Turner was the landlady’s real name and that after the single mention in “A Scandal in Bohemia” Watson remembered to use the fictional name he had invented to hide her true identity.¹⁷

Robert Pattrick¹⁸ and James De Stefano¹⁹ separately put forward a different theory: that Mrs. Hudson and Mrs. Turner were not the same person, but that Mrs. Turner was the maid, who served food provided by Mrs. Hudson. The objection to this is that a maid, as we have seen, would have been called by her first name. It might be said, however, that the maid had ideas above her station and Holmes, by referring to her as Mrs. Turner, rather than as, say, Betty, was being ironic.

Michael Clark, on the other hand, felt that Mrs. Turner was a friend of Mrs. Hudson’s, who filled in for her while she was on holiday.²⁰ Had this been the case, Holmes and Watson would hardly have referred to Mrs. Turner as “our landlady,” and, unless Mrs. Hudson had only just left, it seems unlikely in the days before the proliferation of refrigerators that food left by Mrs. Hudson would have been served.

Robert Katz put forward a more radical theory.²¹ Mrs. Hudson sold her home to a Mrs. Turner, whom Holmes found unsuitable as a landlady. He therefore purchased 221B Baker Street from her and brought Mrs. Hudson back to serve him. We have already seen how unlikely a business woman would have been to become a servant in this way. A further objection is that Holmes, always “precise as to details,” would not have referred to Mrs. Hudson as his landlady after this.

The most likely reason for the sudden and brief appearance of Mrs. Turner is simply that it was a slip of the pen from Watson, misreporting Holmes’s words. Perhaps he had been working on his notes of the events in the Bos-

combe Valley, where the name Turner is prominent. This was Martin Dakin's view: "Of course, if he got the name wrong, he ought to have corrected it on re-reading, but it is to be feared from other mistakes that Watson was a shockingly careless proof-reader."

We are left with a sketchier portrait of Mrs. Hudson than we had at the start of this article: a business woman of a certain age who owned the lease on a house in Baker Street and let rooms to two gentlemen, one of them for some twenty-odd years. She seems to have been particularly loyal to this gentlemen, willing to put up with some very odd behavior and visitors, to take risks for him and to maintain his rooms at the request of his brother, even when she believed him to be dead. Watson was correct when he called her "our worthy landlady" (*The Sign of the Four*).

NOTES

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2. Lee Wright, "Mrs. Hudson Speaks," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL* [OS], Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan. 1946), pp. 45-50.
3. Herbert Eaton, "Some Facts Concerning the Early Life of Mrs. Hudson," *Vermisa Herald*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan. 1967), pp. 2-3.
4. H. W. Bell, ed. *Baker Street Studies*. London: Constable and Co., 1934.
5. Vincent Starrett, *Bookman's Holiday*. New York: Random House, 1942.
6. Edgar W. Smith, ed. *Profile by Gaslight*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944.
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13. R. C. Mitchell, "The Mystery of Mrs. Hudson," *Sherlock Holmes Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Spring 1978), pp. 73-74.

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16. Lenore Glen Offord, "The Brief Adventure of Mr. Turner," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL* [OS], Vol. 1, No. 3 (July 1946), pp. 253-259.
17. Bruce Kennedy, "Mrs. Turner of Baker Street," *Baker Street Pages*, No. 21 (Mar. 1967), p. 2.
18. Robert R. Patrick, "The Case of the Superfluous Landlady," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL* [NS], Vol. 3, No. 4 (Oct. 1953), pp. 241-243.
19. James J. De Stefano, "On the Defence of Dr. Watson Regarding Mrs. Turner," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (June 1979), pp. 90-91.
20. Michael Clark, "Who Was Mrs. Turner?" *Devon County Chronicle*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Mar. 1976), p. 6.
21. Robert S. Katz, "A Study in Landladies," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (June 1988), pp. 92-93.