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WATSON'S APOLOGY

Beryl Bainbridge

MUM & MR. ARMITAGE

AND OTHER STORIES

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WATSON'S APOLOGY

For JSW, Miss White and CBH

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Author's Note

This novel is based on a true story. The documents presented have been edited here and there to fit the needs of the narrative, but are otherwise authentic. Almost all the characters are drawn from life, as are the details of the plot. Even the house in St Martin's Road, Stockwell is still standing (though the number has been changed). What has defeated historical inquiry has been the motives of the characters, their conversations and their feelings. These it has been the task of the novelist to supply.

12, New Park Road,
Stockwell,
Surrey.
Wed. December 4th, 1844.

Madam,

I must entreat you to pardon the liberty which I take in addressing you this note. You have known me only from seeing me some years ago at Mrs Curran's in Marlborough Street, when I was attending the College. You may, perhaps, have forgotten me, but I still recollect you. I am now in orders, and head master of the Proprietary School here. When I know that you have received this I should wish to say something more, if you will allow me to write to you a second time. I need not beg of you to favour me with an immediate reply, for I am sure that you will have the kindness and politeness to do so.

I have the honour to be, Madam, with the highest esteem and respect, your very obedient servant, J.S. Watson.

12, New Park Road,
Stockwell.
December 9th.

Madam,

I have to thank you for your obliging letter, which I received this morning. I knew nothing of you when I saw you at Mrs Curran's, but that you were a lady who had lost her fortune. That you have since been doing what you mention I was aware. You were always regarded by me as a lady of great excellence. Had I been able soon after leaving college to establish myself as I wished, I had it in mind to make you a proposal of marriage. It may now be too late. Nor should I, however you may receive this intimation, wish you to consider that I have done so until we have again met. In the meantime, I may give you some little notion how I am situated here. Though I have the title of head master, I cannot say that I have all the emolument which I could desire attendant on it. My income is something more than 300L. a year, but without a house. I may perhaps in time find means of increasing it a little. Boarders, by the condition of my appointment, I am not allowed at present to take; but that is a restriction which I may possibly get

removed at length. The neighbourhood of London I like, and there are greater facilities for adding to income near town than in the country. I am of very humble birth, and have been obliged to make my way in the world by my own efforts. I have a few relatives living in an humble station, but none that would interfere with my domestic affairs. This is sufficient for me to say at present. I have to beg your indulgence for having said so much. Whatever you think of this, you will, I am sure, oblige me at once with the straightforward answer of a woman of sense. Believe me to be, Madam, with the most perfect esteem, your very obedient servant, J.S. Watson.

12, New Park Road,
Stockwell.
Dec. 13th.

Madam,

I had the pleasure of receiving your very sensible letter just now. I have only time to write a few lines in reply. As you do not discourage me, I will say that I think it possible that I may cross over to Dublin about Christmas for a few days. I shall have but a fortnight at my disposal, and should not be able to leave this place before tomorrow week. Will you have the kindness to reply on the receipt of this, and say whether, in the event of my coming, I might be allowed to see you where you are now residing? I am certain that I can have but little personal attraction in your eyes, and perhaps you will think that any alteration that may have taken place in my appearance since you last saw me has not been for the better. You do not appear displeased with my prospects, but when I reflect that there is nothing – or very little – but prospect (for I have not been settled here long enough to lay by anything, having received my appointment only last July) I am almost afraid to venture. I am living in apartments, because I cannot afford to take a house, but I cannot but think that, with a person of your (as I judge) staid, quiet and domestic habits, there would be no fear. Believe me to be, Madam, very faithfully and obediently yours, J.S. Watson.

Stockwell.
Saturday.

Madam,

I have just received your second (that is, third) letter. Pray write to me as often as you please, without entreating my pardon for doing so. To what I said yesterday I would just add that I write to you as if you were pretty much your own mistress, as at your age and with the travels which you have experienced through the world, it may be expected that you are. I believe that you are residing with a relation, but whether you have any relations in England, especially in London, with whom it would be to any purpose for me to communicate, I have not the least notion. I think it well to say that my mother is alive, and (with a sister) will probably for some time look to me for a little assistance. I have also two brothers in the 'valleys of life', but, having been early separated from my parents and brought up by a grandfather, and put into quite a different track in the world, I maintain but little connection with my relatives except by occasional letters. All that I should deduct from my own income would not be more than 50L. a year, which would still leave, if the school continues to flourish, more than 300L. for a consort and myself. It is a very populous and increasing neighbourhood, and a school of this kind is much needed in it, so that I trust all will go well. They are all at present day boys. My hours of work are from nine till twelve, and from two till five, with one or two half-holidays in the week, and a month of freedom at Midsummer. This Christmas I hoped to get three weeks, but I can get only a fortnight. I do not know whether you have any conception what a proprietary school is, but the management of the funds and so on is in the hands of a committee of proprietors, who have a control over me so far as to see that I do not break the rules. I should conceive that your parents are both dead and that you have no brothers and sisters, or that, if you have any, they are at a distance from you. I have not forgotten the game of draughts, in which you did me the honour of beating me. Believe me to be, very faithfully and obediently yours, John Selby Watson.

Stockwell.
Wednesday.

Dear Madam,

I have just had the pleasure of receiving your letter of Monday. I have written so much in the last note which I sent, but which you had probably not received when you wrote, that I need only, I think, be brief at present. I do not know Dr Connor, nor would it, perhaps, be of any use for me to say anything to him until we have met, after which I may be happy to make his acquaintance. Do not think that you need say much about your family to me, who am of no family. I hope to be in Dublin by Sunday or Monday next, but a fortnight's absence from home is the utmost that I can command. What you say concerning your lodgings makes me believe that you must have much of that independence of spirit which I always supposed you to possess. You have told me that your hand shook, but not why. Trusting that I shall find you well when I have the pleasure of seeing you, I remain most sincerely yours, John Selby Watson.

Friday.

Dear Madam,

As to being angry with you, as your humour is to express it, that, I trust, can never happen. I am very glad that you have written so often. I do not see what purpose it would serve to write to your Aunt, as I said before, with respect to your cousins, until we have seen each other. You say that you have something to communicate to me, personally, more fully than you think proper to write, and it had struck me that in your last letter – to say nothing of what you have expressed before – you speak with much emphasis of having had much to annoy you, and of being of great anxiety of mind. Now I earnestly beg of you, that if you have had anything more particularly than mere labour for a subsistence to trouble you – if anything has happened to you to lie heavy on your mind – if anything has been either done by yourself, or said or done by others, to cause you vexation or throw you into despondency, you will when we meet tell me honestly and fully what it is. It is long since I saw you, certainly more than seven years, and I know not, at least know but imperfectly, how, during that period, your

time has been passed. It will be difficult to make me believe that it has been spent other than honourably to yourself, and I should have hoped that the result would have been self-satisfaction and cheerfulness of mind. Forgive me, dear Miss Armstrong, that I write this: you have only to burn it, and give me an answer when I have the happiness of meeting you, for it will be a happiness to me, whatever you say to me, to see once more that dear face which I once so much admired, and which I thought – and think now – far above anything I had or have any personal pretensions to aspire. I have no right, in the present stage of our acquaintance, to write thus freely to you, but you must pardon me. I know something of the world, and I know what unpleasant things you, as you have been living, may have been exposed to, but I again say to you that I entreat you not to conceal anything from me, but to tell me anything which you have to tell as freely and as fully as you would tell the friend in whom you most trust either of your own sex or the opposite. Of anything which you may have to tell you will find me a most lenient judge, for I have too many faults of my own not to be an easy censor of those of others. I said that I admired you, yet I have been unfaithful to your image in my memory. I will tell you when we see each other. This will be another thing which you will have to forgive. 'From the sublime to the ridiculous there is but one step.' A fool of a hairdresser has cut my hair too short. You must guess why I care about this. Believe me that all the liberties which I have taken in writing thus to you have been taken with the warmest regard to yourself, a regard which, I hope, will never be diminished, but that I shall still be always yours sincerely, J.S.W. Will you accept my second offer, dearest? With love. This riband in exchange for the other. J.

Fraser produced them, although what he hoped to gain by it was difficult to understand. The letters had been posted almost thirty years before, and the sentiments expressed in them were couched in such stilted prose, that, if the circumstances had been different they would surely have provoked laughter. When they were handed up, a length of threadbare ribbon, no thicker than a bootlace, dropped unnoticed to the floor and was trodden underfoot. Fraser said the letters had been found wrapped in a satin gown much attacked by the mildew.

PART 1

Mrs Cronin was about to enter the area door of Mrs Gallagher's boarding house in Great Britain Street when she stepped back, alarmed at the smell of smoke. Recently widowed and the absentee mother of a twelve-month-old boy, she had a nose for disaster. 'Is the house on fire?' she asked.

Mrs Gallagher assured her that it was in her imagination and coaxed her into the kitchen.

'Don't you sniff it?' persisted Mrs Cronin.

Mrs Gallagher held a candle in a jam pot. Before the arrival of her visitor she had been about to go upstairs with another letter for Miss Armstrong. 'It's probably the wax,' she said, 'or the lamp. Maybe it's the chimney. It needs sweeping but I'm not up to the bother.' She hesitated, holding the candle in one hand and the letter in the other. It was no use asking her friend to sit down. Mrs Cronin's state of mind kept her perambulating round and round the room like a dog who had lost his place at the hearth. 'I'm away to the first floor,' she said. 'I won't be a moment.'

'Don't leave me,' cried Mrs Cronin.

Death had snatched her husband from her so abruptly that it was not surprising she still quivered from the shock. Mr Cronin had been sitting in his chair by the door, pulling on his boots. Only minutes before he had taken his watch from his vest pocket to place to the ear of his infant son. The ticking of the watch had sent the baby into a peaceful sleep. Between Mrs Cronin's turning round to stab the coals into a blaze and young Henry's drawing his next breath, the life had gone out of the man. She had thought at first he was codding her – because of his stooping position, thighs pressed against his corpulent stomach, he had not toppled forward on to the floor but had remained stuck in his chair, forever pulling on an old boot. His watch was still ticking but his heart was not. Mrs Cronin had sent the child to lodge with his maternal grandmother in Connemara. She missed him sorely but she wouldn't have known a second's peace if he had stayed in the city.

Death could have returned at a change in the wind and lifted him while her back was turned.

'You'd best come upstairs with me,' said Mrs Gallagher. Even now, Mrs Cronin's eyelids were fluttering to stop the tears from falling.

In the hallway the smell of smoke was more pronounced than ever.

'Am I going out of my mind?' appealed Mrs Cronin. 'There's something charred in the house.'

Reluctantly Mrs Gallagher told her that it was probably on account of her new turkey runner, or her new blinds in the dining-room. 'Well, almost new,' she conceded. 'I've Mr O'Connell to thank for them.'

All over Dublin there were windows open to let out the smell of salvaged goods. The delight of O'Connell's supporters on hearing of his release from prison had led to an excess of zeal in the lighting of bonfires. Mrs Gallagher's blinds and her carpet runner, greatly reduced in cost, had come from a house in Fermoy inadvertently burnt down during the celebrations. 'The blinds is only scorched in the creases,' she said. 'And the carpet hardly singed.'

She took her visitor into the dining-room to see for herself. Being the third Saturday in the month it was the servant girl's afternoon off and the fire was not laid. The room, lit by that solitary candle, was as mysterious as a cathedral.

'Mrs McElroy from further down the street,' said Mrs Gallagher, 'purchased a sofa from the very same house. It came on a barge to the Quays. Don't you admire my blinds?'

Mrs Cronin held the edge of her black shawl to her nose and nodded. She was distracted by other voices, other murmurings. Time will heal me, she thought, pressing herself against the sideboard and staring fixedly at the open door.

'Her man trundled it home on a cart,' Mrs Gallagher said. 'When he fetched it inside, its back was snapped from the unloading.' She was disconcerted by her friend's expression and by the dilapidated tilt of her bonnet. The brim was buckled, as if Mrs Cronin had sat on it before wearing it.

Mrs Cronin was studying a spot midway between the floor and the table. Someone or something engaged her attention. Mrs Gallagher was not an imaginative woman but she too looked at that black shadow in the angle of the dining-room door, half

expecting to see the departed Mr Cronin in his chair, his head bent down and his foot perked up, his two hands pulling, pulling.

'Don't you hear it?' whispered Mrs Cronin, for now she listened to the unmistakable sound of sobbing. She started forward in terror, convinced it was her child far away in Connemara. That instant there came a muffled thud from overhead. The lamp above the table leapt on its chain.

'It's only Miss Olivia,' said Mrs Gallagher. 'She's always pitching over the poor furniture.'

'Is it a fight?' asked Mrs Cronin, as a second bump followed the first and the lamp swung back and forth.

'She's not a married woman,' Mrs Gallagher said. 'She lives with her sister.' She stared upward and murmured, 'They've both come down in the world.'

Mrs Cronin thought it might not be long, judging from the commotion, before they came down even further. It was too dark to tell whether the plaster was flaking off the ceiling.

'They were born into wealth,' said Mrs Gallagher. 'Then they were reduced. A butcher in Dawson Street told me as much. They continue to dwindle. Only last month they gave up the back room which they had for sleeping in. While they had the use of it Miss Olivia did nothing but complain. She said the window frames were rotten and the walls was damp. Life, she told me, was nothing but chilblains and bronchitis and the room would be the death of her.'

'I have to get out,' Mrs Cronin admitted. 'Left indoors I'd go mad.' Mrs Gallagher agreed, though for days on end she never felt the need of stepping further than the back yard. She confided that last Sunday Miss Anne hadn't gone to church and that Miss Olivia had made out it was because of her health.

'Is she delicate then?' asked Mrs Cronin.

'Her boots is worn through,' said Mrs Gallagher. From the same butcher in Dawson Street she had learnt that Miss Olivia, some years previously, had been dismissed from a situation in Blackrock, but her informant hadn't been able to get his mind to the details. She herself knew only that Miss Anne was the more forthcoming of the two and that the older woman had a stingey disposition. When the boy carried the coals up of a morning didn't she make him stand there while she counted the lumps in the scuttle?

'That'll be Miss Anne crying,' she told her visitor. 'She's the sensitive one.' She had once had an extraordinary conversation

with the younger Miss Armstrong. They had met in the hall when Miss Anne was coming out of the dining-room after her tea. 'Mrs Gallagher,' Miss Anne had asked, 'did you know that in winter in Upper Sackville Street, in the extreme depths of winter, the trees appear to be in leaf?' 'Well now, I did not,' Mrs Gallagher replied. 'The trees appear to be in bloom,' Miss Anne had explained, 'because the wag tails perch so thickly on the branches.' Just then Miss Olivia had come out of the dining-room and Miss Anne had hurried off up the stairs.

'Is the other one blind?' Mrs Cronin demanded, wondering at the continuing thuds and bumps.

'She's a clumsy woman,' said Mrs Gallagher. 'Miss Anne has all the lightness. Once she wrote to a solicitor on my behalf, on account of some monies that my brother was holding back from me.'

'I have two brothers surviving,' Mrs Cronin told her. 'They are both good to me. But for them I'd be taking in washing.'

'I didn't receive any reply,' Mrs Gallagher said. 'But it was civil of her to go to the trouble.' Remembering the letter she still held, she went out into the hall.

'It might be best not to disturb them,' said Mrs Cronin anxiously, climbing the narrow stairs in pursuit. 'Could it not wait?'

Mrs Gallagher was inclined to agree, but she was in a quandary. If she left the letter on the landing table it could be stolen. She suspected the Customs clerk of being light-fingered, yet she couldn't prove it. Things had gone missing before now. Equally it would be unpleasant if Miss Olivia answered the door, especially if she was in the middle of a tantrum. She'd be bound to ask why the letter hadn't been delivered earlier.

'You take it,' she said, turning round to give the letter to Mrs Cronin.

But her visitor, distressed by that muffled weeping, had fled back to the head of the stairs and now crouched there in the dark, her hand trembling as she clutched the banister rail. Somebody's heart was breaking. It's not my heart, she thought, for that is already broke.

Mrs Gallagher was forced to knock half a dozen times before the door opened. Mrs Cronin heard a voice ask 'Who is it?', and then, as though the speaker had been expecting someone else, 'Oh, it's only Mrs Gallagher.' Mrs Cronin pushed back her ruined bonnet