

FOR THE ANNUAL DINNER AT THE HOUSE OF COMMONS,

17th JANUARY 2015

Mr President, Mr Chairman, Professor Merritt, Honoured Guests, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen –

Have I missed anyone? No? Good.

Sherlock Holmes was not, of course, William Gillette's only successful play. Another of his smash hits has the memorable title:

TOO MUCH JOHNSON.

You have been warned...

Other hits include *Held By The Enemy*, *The Private Secretary* and *Secret Service* – a drama of the Civil War

On 16 December 1897 a famous and greatly admired actor was stabbed to death by a madman at the stage door of the Adelphi Theatre. The actor was William Terriss, and he had just arrived at the theatre to play the lead in Gillette's play *Secret Service*.

The killer was Richard Archer, who called himself Richard *Prince*. It's possible that that name inspired Gillette to call his safe-cracker *Sidney Prince*, but not very likely – and I think we can dismiss the idea that Conan Doyle had Richard Prince in mind when he named the Prince of Colonna, Prince's Skating Club and Shoscombe Prince.

Archers? There are none in the Canon – and no Terrisses either, unless you count Torquay Terrace, Carlton House Terrace and Whitehall Terrace.

Canonical Williams – well, we'll come to them.

Let's look at some more names.

I mentioned *Too Much Johnson*.

There are four Johnsons mentioned in the Canon. Three of them aren't particularly important, but I have a soft spot for the fourth – the reformed criminal who, with the glamour of his two convictions upon him, had the entree of every night-club, doss house, and gambling-den in the town, and whose quick observation and active brain made him an ideal agent for gaining information.

When I became – as I think I still am – the only British-based *male* Adventuress of Sherlock Holmes, I chose as my invested title “Shinwell Johnson”.

But what about the author? Watson doesn't mention anyone called Conan or Doyle, but there are no fewer than eight Arthurs in the Canon, including a forger, a Scowrer and a robber, who adopted it as an alias.

But the most important Arthurs, I think, are Arthur Charpentier, Arthur Holder and Arthur Cadogan West –

Each one an honourable man accused of a crime he didn't commit. And you could throw in two others, a man and a boy, each seriously wronged – I mean Captain Arthur Morstan and Arthur, Lord Saltire.

Was Conan Doyle trying to tell us something, I wonder – something about himself?

There may be material for a monograph there, but someone else will have to write it.

Oh, and another topic that may deserve deeper investigation. In September 1901, when William Gillette was wowing audiences at the Shakespeare Theatre in Liverpool, the British correspondent of the *New York Dramatic Mirror* wrote: “Have you noticed that all the villains in Sherlock Holmes plays are of Hibernian extraction? Is not this another injustice to Ireland?”

Plays in the plural, please note. *Sherlock Holmes, or The Strange Case of Miss Faulkner* wasn't the only one, though it was the only one authorised by, um, the author. It's true that Gillette gave us Larrabee, Craigin, Leary, McTague and the unseen O'Hagan – but Professor Moriarty was created by Arthur Conan Doyle, along with Colonel Moran, Captain James Calhoun, and Black Jack McGinty.

Let's get back to that great actor who, as Conan Doyle said, "changed a creature of thin air into an absolutely convincing human being."

You won't be surprised to know that there are no Gillettes in the Canon – even razors are mentioned only a couple of times, and they'd be of the cut-throat variety.

Williams – well, yes, there are several Williams, and variations of the name, but only two of real interest. There's Wilhelm Gottsreich Sigismund von Ormstein, Grand Duke of Cassel-Felstein, and hereditary King of Bohemia –

And there's Billy the page.

A page boy at 221B first appears in "A Case of Identity". Watson just calls him "the boy in buttons". He turns up again in "The Noble Bachelor", "The Yellow Face", and "The Naval Treaty" – all cases that can be dated to the late 1880s, and all published between 1891 and 1893.

And then, in 1899, *Sherlock Holmes* by A Conan Doyle and Billy Gillette – sorry, William Gillette – opened at the Garrick Theatre in New York. Two years later the actor was comfortably settled at the Royal Lyceum Theatre in London, with John Watson, James Larrabee, Alice Faulkner, old Uncle Alf Bassick and all.

"All" including *Robert Moriarty* – because Conan Doyle hadn't yet come up with a Christian name – if Christian is the right word – and Gillette could never have imagined that the Professor and his brother the Colonel would both be called James.

"Robert Moriarty" didn't catch on with Conan Doyle, but Billy the page did, and he used the name after he brought Holmes back from the dead.

In his own Sherlock Holmes plays – *The Speckled Band* and *The Crown Diamond* – he gave Billy a prominent role, and when *The Crown Diamond* was a flop, and he rewrote it as "The Mazarin Stone", Billy was still an important character .

That case is usually dated to 1903. So it's not surprising to find Billy cropping up in another from the same period, "The Problem of Thor Bridge" – and I'm sure that Billy is the unnamed page who appears briefly in "Shoscombe Old Place" – the last of Dr Watson's accounts to be published.

Have we missed anything? Yes, apart from the apocryphal play *The Speckled Band*, Conan Doyle's first use of the name Billy for the page boy at 221B was in that underrated masterpiece *The Valley of Fear*.

But *The Valley of Fear* isn't a late case – unless you go along with Gavin Brend's theory that the Moriarty concerned isn't the late Professor, but his identically named brother, Colonel James Moriarty. I think that if we could put our hands on the police records in Sussex or in Vermissa Valley, we'd find irrefutable proof that the Tragedy of Birlstone took place in the late 1880s.

And yet – *there* is Billy the page.

Obviously he's not Billy, the young but very wise and tactful page, whom we read about in "The Mazarin Stone". In the late 1880s *that* Billy would have been no more than five years old.

The calculation is a simple one. Over the years Sherlock Holmes – or rather, Mrs Hudson – employed two *different* page boys called Billy. At *least* two.

What are the chances, eh?

Unless... Well, it wasn't unknown for a *lady* to call all her successive personal maids "Jane" or "Mary". A plain, simple, convenient name. I'm certainly not the first to suggest that *all* the successive boys in buttons at 221B were known as Billy, whether or not it was their real name.

Conan Doyle started writing *The Valley of Fear* early in 1914 – when his daughter Jean was not far past her first birthday. Why mention her? Because Dame Jean's childhood nickname – would you believe – was *Billy*!

When did *that* come about? We don't know. It *may* have been as early as 1914, when she was still mewling and puking in the nurse's arms. But we can be pretty confident that it *wasn't* as early as June the 4th 1910, when *The Speckled Band* opened at the Adelphi Theatre – with Billy the page among the *dramatis personae*.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle gave the name Billy his seal of approval, but we owe the name itself to William Gillette. He was, I like to think, the page boy's godfather.

Now, my brief is to propose the toast to Dr Watson, which I'm always happy to do, but I'd like to couple with the good Doctor the man who gave the boy in buttons a character and a name – his *own* name.

To John H Watson and William H Gillette!

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