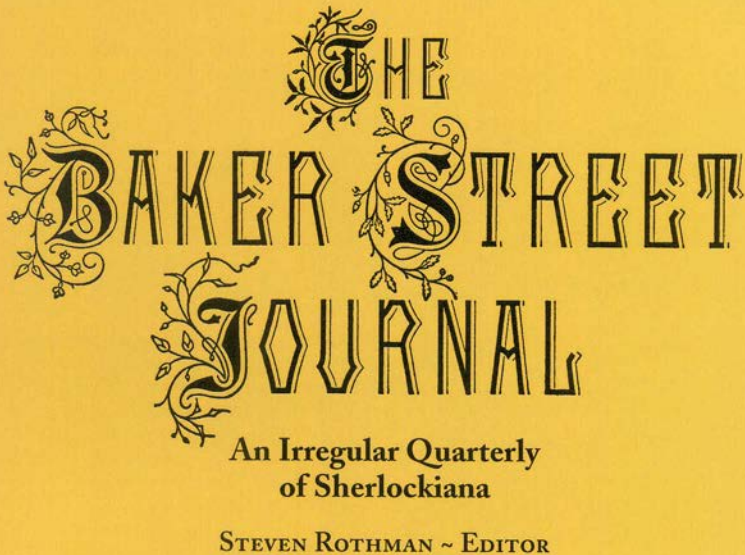


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by Marshall S. Berdan

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THE ADVENTURE OF THE DEAD DETECTIVE

by MARSHALL S. BERDAN

The year 2004 marked the sesquicentennial of the birth of the world's first—and still finest—consulting detective. At the annual Baker Street Irregulars' birthday celebrations in New York, even more so than usual, the absent—but very much presumed-still-with-us—guest of honor was both toasted and serenaded with numerous rounds.

Preoccupied as they were with their own protracted jollifications, it was not surprising, therefore, that Sherlockian celebrants collectively overlooked a piece of inconvenient news that appeared in early March: the death of Joan Riudavets Moll on the Spanish island of Menorca. A cobbler by trade, Señor Moll breathed his last on 5 March 2004—which made him, at the age of 114, the oldest person in the world, at least according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

Sherlockians believe otherwise. And they continued to believe otherwise when eight months later, on 18 November 2004, Moll's "successor," a former American railroad postal worker by the name of Frank Hale, Sr., died at his home in Syracuse, New York, twelve days short of his 114th birthday.¹

Die-hard purists (pun intended) will no doubt point out that Messrs. Moll and Hale were merely the oldest "documented" living people, and that claims regularly arise about even older individuals whose date of birth cannot be authenticated. To support their contention that Sherlock Holmes, whose own birth conveniently falls into the undocumented category, is still alive—if not actually kicking—on his small farm on the South Downs, they point to the "fact" that no obituary of the great detective has ever appeared in any British newspaper. Surely an individual as well known and as well loved as the great Sherlock Holmes could not have taken his leave of this world without copious public notice, comment, and general lamentation, they reason.²

Not necessarily. In fact, it was precisely because of Holmes's extraordinarily high public profile that no obituary or other such public notice ever appeared. And how could that be? Because Holmes died shortly before the Great War, when news of his death would have given aid and comfort to the soon-to-be enemy. More importantly, it would have demoralized the British at a time when they were in desperate need of some encouraging news. The British government therefore—either in or out of the person of Mycroft—decided that Holmes's death was truly a story for which their world was not yet prepared.

Before hypothesizing on what happened, let me first elaborate on what most certainly didn't: the two-year accounting of events presented to a gullible public

by the unknown, omniscient narrator of “His Last Bow.” Sherlockians take as an article of faith that the Master was also a master of disguise. This is certainly true, but like everything else about the great man, it has its inherent limits. The success of Holmes’s many disguises is based upon two factors: the relative unfamiliarity of his audience with the assumed role, and the relatively limited duration of the deception.

For example, we know that Holmes was able to disguise himself as a decrepit Italian priest in “The Final Problem” and even as an old woman in “The Mazarin Stone.” But that doesn’t mean that he would have been able to successfully infiltrate the College of Cardinals in Rome for a week—or the women’s water closet at Covent Garden for even a minute!

And therein lies the fatal rub. There is a significant difference between Holmes’s convincing Von Bork, a German for whom English was a second—or possibly even third—language, that he was a rebellious Irish-American, and convincing real Irish-Americans in Buffalo and Chicago—and especially Irish natives in Skibboreen—that he was indeed one of them. It would be even harder to do so without causing any suspicion over a period of two full years. One has only to imagine one of his newfound comrades in crime asking—casually or otherwise—“So, what part of Ireland do your people come from?” and then subjecting Altamont to the same “Do you know so-and-so?” type of questions that Holmes himself used to expose James Winter, alias Morecroft, alias Killer Evans, alias John Garrideb, in “The Three Garridebs.” One false answer—and how could there not have been many?—and Holmes would have been exposed to the wrath of a very vengeful mob with virtually no chance of being rescued by his government “handlers,” assuming that he even had any.

Even if Holmes had been willing to assume such a risk himself, it is doubtful that the British government would as well. Holmes’s in-depth, even if slightly out of date, knowledge of both the criminal and espionage networks of London would have been put to much better and more constant use by his being kept in England throughout the crucial, pre-war period. Moreover, one has to wonder why it would even have been deemed necessary to send Holmes upon such a protracted and complicated mission in the first place. Surely Holmes would have been perfectly capable of outwitting the pompous and self-inflating Von Bork without having to go to such elaborate and potentially dangerous lengths. The most obvious methodology would have been “feeding” one of the other named anti-English activists (i.e., Jack James, Hollis, and Steiner) the same false information. Not only did Von Bork already trust them—thus obviating the need for another go-between—but also, as authentic spies, they would not have been at

risk of either betraying themselves or—as is more likely—being inadvertently exposed by a third party, such as the “planted” housekeeper Martha.

Last—but certainly not least—is the fact that Holmes’s entire two-year charade depended upon one of Von Bork’s *subordinate agents*—i.e., not even a primary one—noticing him in Skibbareen. What if this person had overlooked him? Or what if he—or even the primary agent for whom he worked—had discovered some other likely candidate first, one whose criminal credentials, at least in terms of longevity, were equal or superior to Altamont’s? In either of these very plausible eventualities, Holmes’s two-continent subterfuge would have come to naught, and two precious years of his invaluable time would have been effectively wasted.

Then there is the curious nature of the adventure’s title. After having been seriously embarrassed in 1893 when “The Final Problem” turned out to be not quite so final after all, neither Watson nor the editors of *The Strand Magazine* would have been eager to have another such public relations fiasco on their hands. This time, therefore, they must have known that the adventure they were about to make public really would be Holmes’s last bow.

The finality of the title is even more curious in light of the celebrated dialogue with which the narrative concludes. Before they stand famously upon Von Bork’s terrace overlooking the lights of Harwich, Holmes remarks to Watson that he “understands” that Watson will be “joining us with your old service.” Clearly, Holmes’s use of the plural pronoun “us” here implies that he will continue to assist in the British war effort, most probably for the duration. Indeed, how could he be expected to do otherwise? If the premier—accompanied by the foreign minister—could persuade him to interrupt his peacetime retirement for the sake of capturing a single German spy, imagine how much more persuasive their importuning would be once war had actually broken out.

If the account of the past two years that he synthesizes is true, Holmes, at age sixty, is an extremely active man, one capable of protracted periods of onerous undercover work, and whose mind has shown no signs of any age-related deterioration. In short, the Holmes that we see at the end of “His Last Bow” effectively tells us that he will not be returning to his bees on the South Downs anytime soon, and gives us no mental or physical reason to doubt him.

Nor is there any reason to doubt that Watson, whatever his own wartime service, wouldn’t have jumped at the opportunity to chronicle any of Holmes’s post-Von Bork adventures. The entire *Case-Book*, after all, was published after “His Last Bow,” with the very last Holmes narrative ever, “Shoscombe Old Place,” not seeing the light of published day until the spring of 1927. So how then could Watson have known that the adventure that he was “chronicling” in

the summer of 1917 (when the story would have been sent to the printers)—nearly ten years earlier—would absolutely, positively be Holmes’s last bow?

The answer to that morbid query is, alas, elementary. By the summer of 1917, Watson knew conclusively that Holmes would be playing no more leading or even supporting roles upon the British criminal stage. And he knew that because he knew that Holmes was either dying or already dead.

Why would Watson have perpetrated such a ruse upon the British and American reading public? The answer to that lies in the date of the adventure’s publication and its original subtitle, “The War Service of Sherlock Holmes.”

The story, however, begins exactly three years earlier. On 2 September 1914, Charles Masterman, a Liberal MP from West Ham who had been appointed to be the head of the War Propaganda Bureau by then Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, convened a secret meeting of prominent British authors. Among those who attended were H. G. Wells, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, G. K. Chesterton, Ford Madox Ford, John Masefield, and Arthur Conan Doyle. Though several of the literary luminaries would end up doing little or nothing, Masterman had certainly found his man in the arch-patriot Conan Doyle, who quickly penned the penny recruitment pamphlet *To Arms*, and would go on to give frequent public lectures promoting the war and putting the best face possible on the less-than-stellar British war effort.

So pleased was the War Office with Conan Doyle’s own answering of their call that they soon arranged for him to become the “official” public chronicler of the British war effort. At first this consisted of sending high-ranking military officers down to Windlesham to provide him with knowledgeable eyewitness accounts. By the spring of 1916, he finagled permission to see for himself, first in Flanders with the British troops, then in northern Italy with the Italians, and finally in the Ardennes with the French. While Conan Doyle was overseas, his on-site reports appeared in *The Daily Chronicle*. Safely back in England in July, he quickly churned out a second promotional pamphlet, *A Visit to Three Fronts*. The rest of his front-line experiences would come in handy in completing (1927) his comprehensive, six-volume history of the war, *The British Campaign in France and Flanders*.

In December 1916, Lloyd George, the man behind Masterman and the War Propaganda Bureau, became premier. Sometime in April 1917 (Conan Doyle does not specify the date in his 1924 autobiography, *Memories and Adventures*), the Welshman invited the Scotsman to 10 Downing Street for a private breakfast. An unidentified third party—perhaps the Foreign Minister, Sir Arthur Balfour?—was to join them, but did not show.

According to *Memories and Adventures*, they talked of many things, e.g., the heroic death of Lord Kitchener, the “splendid work of the Welsh Division at the front,” Conan Doyle’s own visit to the fronts, his long-standing promotion of the use of body armor, and the nascent revolution in Russia. Conspicuous by its absence, however, is any mention of why the prime minister had invited Conan Doyle to breakfast in the first place.

Conan Doyle’s reticence is hardly surprising in light of the fact that the War Propaganda Bureau remained an official state secret until the late 1940s. Any attempt to penetrate the shroud of secrecy must, perforce, take into account the timing of their casual repast—in April 1917, the prime minister was indeed a very busy man. On the sixth of that month, the heretofore isolationist Americans had finally declared war on Germany. On the eighth, the British offensive for the new year would begin with an assault on Arras.

Clearly, it was neither whimsy nor the need for a good chinwag that induced the prime minister to invite the celebrated popular writer—arguably Britain’s most celebrated popular writer—to breakfast that morning. In light of Lloyd George’s previous oversight of the War Propaganda Bureau, Conan Doyle’s exemplary service thereon, and the story that appeared in the popular press five months later, it is not difficult to guess what the prime minister eventually asked, after first impressing upon Conan Doyle the obvious propaganda value of having the great Sherlock Holmes in active service. (As Holmes himself “recounted” in “His Last Bow,” “Strong pressure was brought upon me to look into the matter.”)

Whether Conan Doyle then impressed the same upon Watson, or whether Watson was subsequently summoned to Downing Street himself, is unknowable. But the result was the same: Watson was prevailed upon to contribute not his stethoscope, but his pen, to his country’s service in what we would now call a disinformation campaign.

Whatever his own moral compunctions about fictionalizing for the sake of his country might have been, Watson clearly saw the practical necessity of doing so. The Allies had received a significant shot in the arm with America’s official entrance into the war, but it wouldn’t be until October that the first doughboys would actually make it “over there.” In the meantime, the long-suffering British Tommies and French *poilus* would be on their own again along the Western Front, a thousand-mile maze of trenches and fortifications that had proven to be little more than a muddy slaughter ground during the first three summer offensives, first along the River Marne (1914), then in the fields of Flanders (1915), and finally outside Verdun and along the River Somme (1916). By the time the fighting that year finally petered out in November, the Allies had sustained

some 1.2 million additional casualties. In December, they would sustain one more—the resignation of Prime Minister Asquith in what amounted to a “no confidence” vote from his cabinet.

The situation on the battlefield was mirrored by the situation on the home front. The British public had wholeheartedly supported the war effort in August 1914, but as it entered its fourth year, enthusiasm was ebbing as was the reservoir of troops. To address that shortage, the first of three Military Service Acts (conscription) had been passed in February 1916; by June, all able-bodied, single men between the ages of eighteen and forty-one would be considered fair game.

Even then, however, there was still destined to be a shortfall; hence the founding—in February 1917—of the all-volunteer Labour Corps, a non-combat group that able-bodied men of Holmes’s and Watson’s age might have been expected to join, and that therefore might have been the primary target audience of Lloyd George’s “request” of Conan Doyle. A secondary target audience might well have been all able-bodied women, as the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps had been launched only a month later in March 1917.

Whatever its potential recruitment value for would-be non-combatants, a war story featuring Sherlock Holmes would undoubtedly boost the morale of all those already in uniform. What British Tommy would not have swelled at the prospect of having the legendary detective fighting on his side? And what German Boche would not have groaned—just as Von Bork did when he finally deduced the name of his adversary—at knowing that he was fighting against him?

Apparently Watson was free to fashion his own fable, and it is therefore hardly surprising that the one he came up with greatly resembled *The Valley of Fear*, the most recently published Sherlockian narrative, which had begun its nine-month serial run in *The Strand Magazine* in September 1914. As has been painstakingly pointed out by writer Anthony Boucher, the plotlines of those two narratives are remarkably similar: Each involves the protracted infiltration of an American criminal organization, one that requires the hero’s assumption of an elaborate alias and then proving himself worthy by participating—or seeming to—in various criminal enterprises.³

Indeed, the role of a spy would have been a logical one for Watson to come up with in that—as a man of sixty—Holmes could hardly be expected to be serving on the front lines.⁴ In addition, there was a juicy, high-profile spy case maturing at that very moment, one that would have naturally suggested itself to the otherwise unimaginative Watson. That, of course, was the case of Margaretha Geertruida Zelle, better known as Mata Hari. Accused by the French military authorities of being a double agent (and thus having fooled them), the renowned former exotic dancer was arrested secretly in Paris in February 1917.

After several months of private interrogation, she was brought to public trial on 24 July and convicted shortly thereafter by a military tribunal operating *in camera*. On 15 October, she would be executed by a firing squad.

As to why Watson made Altamont an Irishman, consider the equally high-profile hanging of Sir Roger Casement in August 1916. Casement, an Irish idealist who had received his knighthood by decrying European treatment of the natives in the Congo and Peru, had taken part in an abortive attempt by the Germans to supply arms to rebellious Irish nationalists. (Conan Doyle himself had pleaded against Casement's execution on the grounds that Casement had done much good in his life and was obviously now mentally unbalanced.)

Borrowed and fictionalized as the events of "His Last Bow" patently are, they still allow us to make a couple of deductions regarding Holmes's last days, though first, it bears noting that it is not absolutely essential that Holmes had died—at least not at that exact moment in time. Any number of debilitating diseases, especially those of the mind, would have had the same effective consequences and thus prompted the same literary "solution."

Holmes must have died (or become permanently disabled) at some point in time when the British government—be it Mycroft or others—believed that withholding that information could possibly have national security benefits. Holmes's death (or permanent disability) would have occurred in such a way that the public would not already have learned of it. This argues in favor of a quiet death (or permanent disability), and probably even an anticipated one so as to allow Holmes to have been removed from his retirement cottage while still in good enough health so as not to engender any suspicion among his South Downs neighbors. The most logical timing of that removal would naturally be 1912, the year that Holmes would have sailed for Chicago had the events recited in "His Last Bow" actually taken place.

Having perpetrated its hoax for practical military reasons, the British government saw no reason to belatedly enlighten the public at the conclusion of the war and thus admit to its own manipulation of the truth. Neither did Watson, as doing so would have potentially compromised the marketability of any additional Holmes adventures that he may have already been contemplating. As we know now, an even dozen would eventually be forthcoming, beginning in 1924 with "The Illustrious Client" and concluding—this time for good—in 1927 with "Shoscombe Old Place," which—it bears noting—is the only story in the Canon that features a delay in the reporting of an actual death, for which the authorities "took a lenient view of the transaction."

From 1927, it would be only seven more years until the founding of the Baker Street Irregulars, at which point it was still possible—however improbable,

actuarially speaking—that Holmes was in fact still alive. Christopher Morley and the Baker Street Irregulars therefore simply believed or pretended to believe what they wanted to believe, and the lack of countervailing evidence in the form of any public obituaries was all the proof they didn't need.

More than seventy years further on, the case for Holmes being with us is simply no longer credible. Indeed, not only would Holmes have substantially exceeded the longest documented human lifespan ever of 122 years, but he would now be in serious danger of becoming truly immortal, an apotheosis that should give all devoted Sherlockians serious pause. It suggests that we are no longer merely members of a society devoted to keeping green the memory of one of the best and wisest men who ever lived but an irregularly organized religion!

In these blasphemous waters Sherlockians would do well to reread Holmes's peroration at the end of "His Last Bow"—an elaboration of then Foreign Minister Sir Edward Grey's own dire pronouncement on 4 August 1914: "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime"—and note the unmistakable intimations of his own mortality:

There's an east wind coming all the same, such a wind as never blew on England yet. It will be cold and bitter, Watson, and a good many of us may wither before its blast. But it's God's own wind none the less, and a cleaner, better, stronger land will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared.

They should also take note of the judicious use of the adverb "before." As has been the premise of this trifling monograph, Holmes did in fact wither some time before "the most terrible August in the history of the world." Even so, his work on this earth was still not done, thanks in equal measure to the ever-vigilant contingency planning of the British government and the patriotism of his trusted friend and biographer, Dr. John H. Watson.

As it would turn out, Holmes's posthumous "war service" was not only desirable, but might well have been critical. By the time "His Last Bow" was published in September, the British offensive of 1917—which had gotten off to such a promising start with the capture of Messines Ridge in early June—had bogged down in the third Battle of Ypres, another bloody stalemate rendered even more noxious by Germany's introduction of mustard gas.⁵ By year's end, the British had suffered another 400,000 casualties.

The ongoing conscription would fill the ranks, but volunteers would still be needed to support the men on the front lines. And they came out in droves, perhaps in part owing to the two-year example of sacrifice and self-denial set by

that sagacious sexagenarian, Sherlock Holmes himself. By the fall of 1918, over 389,000 men would be serving in the Labour Corps, and another 57,000 women in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps—renamed Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps in April 1918.

That November, the four-year storm wrought by that bitterly cold east wind would finally clear, thanks primarily to the infusion of two million American doughboys and a new weapon called the tank. Dr. John H. Watson and the late—but still great—Sherlock Holmes played a definite, albeit unquantifiable, supporting role. That is something that Sherlockians everywhere can truly believe in for years to come!

NOTES

1. At press time the current title-holder, Hryhory Nestor, of western Ukraine, is only a sprightly 115 years old. He'll turn 116 on 15 March 2007.
2. Over the years, of course, numerous Sherlockian scholars have proposed that Holmes has indeed passed beyond the Reichenbach. Though he cannot swear that it had happened by the time of his writing (1933), Vincent Starrett, in the essay "*Ave Sherlock Morituri et Cetera*" in his seminal *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, concedes that "the day will come. . .when Sherlock Holmes will be assumed to have left this mortal life behind." One of the first to fix an actual date and cause was E. V. Knox in "The Passing of Sherlock Holmes" (reprinted in *Seventeen Steps to 221B*, edited by James Edward Holroyd, London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1967) who, in 1948, posited that Holmes, at the age of ninety-three, had just succumbed to a bee sting, possibly from an Italian queen. In *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street* (New York: Bramhall House, 1962), William S. Baring-Gould records that Holmes died of old age (retarded in great measure by his discovery of the benefits of royal jelly) on 6 January 1957 at the exceedingly ripe old age of 103. David Stuart Davies's dramatic presentation, *Fixed Point: The Life and Death of Sherlock Holmes* (1991), has Holmes dying peacefully in his sleep in 1939 at the Montague Nursing Home. June Thompson, in *Holmes and Watson: A Study in Friendship* (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1995), contends that Holmes died sometime shortly after the publication of his own last narrative, "The Lion's Mane," in 1926, but that he "preferred his death to pass unnoticed out of his hatred of publicity."
3. Anthony Boucher, "Introduction" to *The Final Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, New York: Limited Editions Club, 1952, reprinted in *Introducing Mr. Sherlock Holmes* (Edgar W. Smith, ed.), Morristown, NJ: The Baker Street Irregulars, 1959.

4. At a dinner held in his honor in the town of St. Menehould on 1 June 1916, Conan Doyle was asked by French Divisional-General Humbert if Monsieur Holmes were a soldier in the British Army. Conan Doyle's reply: "*Mais non, General; il est trop vieux pour service*" (*A Visit to Three Fronts*, p. 19).
5. By an amazing coincidence, Von Bork's prediction that "The Heavens, too, may not be quite so peaceful . . ." came to pass within days of the publication of "His Last Bow" when, on the night of 3 September 1917, a Zeppelin raid over the Thames River Estuary near Harwich killed 108.

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