

“HOME, JAMES”—A CASE OF DOMESTIC IDENTITY

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Every Sherlockian knows that, in “The Man with the Twisted Lip,” Watson’s wife called him James. It is one of the most curious incidents in the Canon. The Master has taught us, however, that there is nothing more deceptive than the obvious. We know his methods. We must apply them, approaching the matter with an absolutely blank mind, and following docilely wherever fact may lead us. When we do so, we find that Mrs. Watson did *not* call her husband James. That was the curious incident.

“The Man with the Twisted Lip” was first published in *The Strand* magazine in December 1891. It is difficult to assign a date of death to someone who is, in a sense, immortal, but, as a matter of canonical record, we know that Watson lived at least until August 1914, when he stood upon the terrace with Sherlock Holmes on the eve of the World War. Even if Holmes himself, who rarely passed up an opportunity to criticize Watson’s writings, somehow overlooked the reference to James, surely some friend of Watson’s (perhaps Thurston, teasing him across the billiard table; Lomax the sublibrarian; or even Percy “Tadpole” Phelps, getting back some of his own for the piquant cheyving about on the playground to which Watson had subjected him at school) would have brought it to his attention.

Watson’s works were widely read during the lifetime of his literary agent, Conan Doyle, who died in 1930, nearly 40 years after initial publication of “The Man with the Twisted Lip.” As the intermediary between Watson and his public, in all his years of receiving feedback on the Sherlock Holmes stories, Conan Doyle also apparently never saw a reason to change the reference. Because “James” was never changed to “John” in any edition published during Watson’s and Conan Doyle’s lifetimes (or since), it is impossible to believe that “James” was a mistake, or that it reflected adversely on the Watsons or their marriage, or that it was confusing or controversial in any way to readers of the time. Following the classic method, we have eliminated the impossible, and must now examine what remains.

Re-examining the text, we note that it was nighttime, about the hour when a man gives his first yawn and glances at the clock. The Watsons were in their “cheery sitting room.” There was a ring at the bell. Watson sat up in his chair and his wife laid her needlework in her lap. Neither got up to see who was at the front door. Because they were in the sitting room with the door closed, they heard, but could not see, the front door open. A few hurried words, then quick

steps on the linoleum, and the door to the sitting room flew open. A woman in a black veil, soon revealed to be Kate Whitney, entered the room.

Though only three people are mentioned in Watson's account, there was a fourth person present. Before Kate Whitney barged into the sitting room, she first had to be admitted to the house itself. As neither of the Watsons got up, a servant must have opened the front door.

This conclusion is corroborated by the "few hurried words" Watson and his wife heard. Agitated and upset as she was, Kate Whitney was not talking to herself. She was speaking with the servant who answered the door.

The quickness of the steps heard on the linoleum and the abrupt opening of the sitting room door bespeak the actions of Kate Whitney, not the servant. While a servant might step quickly if persuaded of the urgency of the matter, no servant would make so bold as to cause the door to the master's inner sanctum to fly open so rudely. As Kate alone entered the sitting room after the door flew open, it is plain that she did not wait for the servant to announce her to the Watsons, but in her agitation rushed past and burst in on them.

The servant's only conceivable reaction in these circumstances would be to follow Kate Whitney across the linoleum to the open doorway of the sitting room. From that vantage point, it was immediately apparent that the Watsons knew Kate and were not upset by her intrusion on their tranquillity. The excuses and apologies that the servant had no doubt prepared while crossing the linoleum proved unnecessary, so focused were the Watsons on calming their visitor. Recognizing that there was no advantage in interjecting, the servant stood by silently, awaiting instructions.

It is commonly believed that, in the succeeding conversation, Mrs. Watson called her husband James. In the sense of addressing her husband directly, using that name, this is absolutely incorrect. According to the text, Mrs. Watson was speaking to Kate Whitney, not to her husband: "Now, you must have some wine and water, and sit here comfortably and tell us all about it. Or should you rather that I sent James to bed?" Kate replied: "Oh, no, no. I want the Doctor's advice and help too."

At most, therefore, Mrs. Watson referred to her husband as James, in speaking about him to a third person. In fact she did not. James was the servant standing in the doorway.

Fetching wine and water for a visitor would have been the servant's task. It was not so late that servants would necessarily already be in bed, and we know that the Watsons' servant was still up, having opened the front door to Kate Whitney in the first place. Mrs. Watson urged Kate both to have some wine and water and to sit there comfortably and tell "us" about it. The "us" plainly means

Dr. and Mrs. Watson. Both could not sit with Kate and hear her problem if one was busy getting wine and water. Even as she offered a soothing beverage and a sympathetic ear, Mrs. Watson realized that Kate might well prefer to talk privately and without interruption by the returning servant. She therefore asked if Kate would rather that she send James to bed, and thus do without the wine and water. Her turn of phrase is revealing. Children and servants may be “sent off to bed.” It is difficult to imagine a Victorian wife speaking of her husband, in his presence and in front of both a visitor and a servant, in such dismissive terms.

Kate Whitney rejected the suggestion that James be sent off to bed, indicating that she did want the offered wine and water. In addition to the wine and water and the opportunity to sit comfortably and tell both Watsons all about it, Kate then announced she wanted something else, not yet offered: “the Doctor’s advice and help too.” These she soon obtained, and the good doctor ventured forth, by chance becoming engaged in another of Holmes’s cases.

Though James is a common given name for boys, as a given name for girls it is unknown. Doubters may therefore object to the identification of James as the Watsons’ servant because there is no specific record of any male servants in the Watson household. Indeed, there is little data in the Canon regarding servants in the Watson household, but there is perhaps enough clay for a few well-formed deductive bricks.

Although Watson several times in the Canon mentioned employing a maid, and once referred to servants in the plural, it is quite true that there is no evidence of his ever employing a butler, footman, page, or male servant of any description. We need not, however, prove the existence of a male servant in order to confirm the identity of James. James was the Watsons’ maid.

It may then be objected that James is no name for a maid. Just as we do not posit the existence of a male servant in the absence of any evidence, so the identification of James does not depend on the extraordinarily improbable existence of a maid with the given name James. James is, however, a common surname. The Canon, for example, has two: Billy James, a victim of the Scowlers, and Jack James, an American spying for Germany.

Doubters may also object that female servants of the period would customarily be addressed by their given names or, if married, with the title of respect, Mrs., preceding their surnames. The only servant of the Watsons we know by name was Mary Jane, a maid, who was obviously called by her given names. There is, however, evidence of a maid in another proper English household who was called by her surname only. In “The Dancing Men,” the maid at Ridling Thorpe Manor, home of the unfortunate Hilton Cubitt, was called Saunders. Saunders was twice mentioned by name, without Mrs. preceding it. Saunders as

a feminine given name among the servant classes of Victorian England is unthinkable, so it could only have been her surname. We can therefore conclude that the maid who answered the door when Kate Whitney rang the bell, and later brought her wine and water, was James, given name unrecorded.

One can almost hear the Master's exhortation: "Have we reached the limits of what reason can supply? . . . One more coruscation. . . yet another brain-wave!" (*The Valley of Fear*). Having come this far, we ought to be able to explain why the Watsons, who called one maid (Mary Jane) by her given name, called another (James) by her surname. There should be "no combination of events for which the wit of man cannot conceive an explanation" (*The Valley of Fear*). Two possibilities suggest themselves. Perhaps James was older than the typical maid, and using her given name seemed inappropriate in view of her more advanced age. Or James was new to the household, and a greater degree of formality was being observed until she was more fully assimilated. There is clear evidence to support both propositions.

In *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, Baring-Gould dated "The Man with the Twisted Lip" as 18-19 June 1887. A month earlier, in mid-May according to Baring-Gould, during "A Scandal in Bohemia," Holmes deduced that Watson had "a most clumsy and careless servant girl." Watson admitted it was so, adding, "As to Mary Jane, she is incorrigible and my wife has given her notice." There are several features of interest, even of illumination, in this.

Perhaps influenced by the type of little girls' shoes of the same name, we unavoidably associate the name Mary Jane with a young girl, seconding Holmes's deduction of a servant "girl." Because Mary Jane was a notably clumsy, careless, and incorrigible girl, it is likely that the Watsons tried a different approach, engaging a more mature woman as her replacement.

Watson did not say how much notice Mary Jane had been given. The negotiations between Brunton, the butler at Hurlstone in "The Musgrave Ritual," and his employer may offer some clues. It appears that a servant leaving voluntarily would give four weeks' notice, and one week's notice by the employer might be considered lenient where the servant was dismissed for breach of trust. Mary Jane was dismissed by the Watsons for cause, though not under such egregious circumstances as Brunton, so the balance of probabilities favors two weeks, the same amount Brunton sought in an effort to save face and preserve his chances of future employment. Two weeks would be enough to allow James to be hired as Mary Jane's replacement and enter upon her new duties in time to answer the door when Kate Whitney rang the bell, and to fetch the wine and water offered by Mrs. Watson.

Once the reference to James is properly understood, it is no wonder that during their lifetimes neither Watson nor Conan Doyle saw any reason to change it to John in subsequent editions of the story. The readers of their time, familiar with the household social conventions of the late Victorian period, knew who James was, and understood her role in this little domestic tableau. By the time Sherlockian studies began in earnest several decades later, the Great War and its aftermath had substantially transformed English society. The true explanation was already obscure, and soon became unfathomable.

Now that the matter is once again clear, we can sympathize with poor James newly hired, probably aware that her employers had given her predecessor the sack for incompetence, caught off-guard by the bizarre behavior of an unexpected night-time visitor, fearful of reproaches for having let a stranger burst in unannounced on her master and mistress, worried about having to find another job so soon, and at her age. Under these circumstances, it would be nice to think that James helped herself to some restorative wine and water at the end what must have been, for her, a difficult evening.