



The Master's Trestleboard

Welcome to the first issue of
The Master's Trestleboard,
The Official Publication of
The Master's Masons,
A Scion Society of the Baker Street Irregulars

JANUARY 2005

VOLUME I NUMBER I

The Game is Afoot!

This first issue of The Master's Trestleboard features an article by Yasha Beresiner, an internationally respected Masonic researcher and Past Master of Quator Coronati #2076 Lodge of Research. I welcome submissions for publication in our upcoming issues.

A hearty "well done!" to our newest Master Mason, W. Scott Monty, BSI, who was Raised on November 4th in Columbian Lodge (GL MA).

Fraternally,



Ron Fish, Founder/Editor

Arthur Conan Doyle's name is synonymous with Sherlock Holmes. Yet during his long and distinguished life his interests, his work and writings extended far beyond the stories published in the *Canon*, the collective term for the 52 Holmes short stories and three novels. From the beginning of his career there was an element of spiritualism that always intrigued Doyle and influenced his work. It may well have been this particular interest that aroused Doyle's somewhat erratic interest in Freemasonry.

Arthur Doyle – he only added the middle name *Conan* later in his life - was born into an Irish Catholic family at Picardy Place, Edinburgh, Scotland on 22 May 1859. One of ten children, he was sent to Hodder Preparatory School in 1868 and from there to Stonyhurst College as a boarder, a Jesuit school where he spent five unhappy and lonely years. He consoled himself by frequent letters to his mother and playing cricket at which he excelled. By the time he left Stonyhurst, at the age of seventeen, Arthur had rejected his religion and embraced spiritualism, which was not to leave him even after his death in 1930. He did not come from a wealthy or happy family. His father Charles Altamont Doyle, a civil servant in the Edinburgh Office of Works, suffered from epilepsy and was an alcoholic. His mother, Mary Foley, a vivacious book lover and story teller, who had openly taken a lover, Dr. Bryan Charles Waller, as a lodger, had to keep a boarding house in order to survive financially. His father died in an asylum in 1893.

The same Dr. Bryan Charles Waller influenced Doyle to pursue a medical career, rather than follow in the family tradition of artists and painters. He did, however, begin his active pursuit of spiritualism soon after qualifying as a *Bachelor of Medicine and Master of Surgery* from Edinburgh University in 1885. Arthur's father's passing was to become an event of significance. That of his son Kingsley, who died of pneumonia during the first world war, combined with that of his brother, his two brothers-in-law and two nephews, led many of Doyle's friends to comment that his fascination and commitment to *life beyond the veil* had elements of consolation rather than genuine beliefs. Doyle always denied such criticism.

He first set up a practice with a fellow student Dr Budd, but soon parted company having been accused of not pulling his weight, and moved, with his newly wedded wife Louise Hawkins, to Southsea near Portsmouth in Hampshire where he established himself as an eye specialist. It was here that between 1885 and

1888 he attended a number of *table turning* sittings at the home of General Drayson a teacher at Greenwich Naval College, who was one of his patients. These sessions were experimental and Doyle was critical both of the procedures and the ritual involved, which he called a *farce*. He also questioned the intellect of the sitters. But he was hooked. In 1887, the year he became a freemason, he joined the *Society for Psychical Research*, this was a public declaration, as it were, of his interest and belief in the occult.

It was in this state of mind, exceedingly curious and now seriously delving into the world of spiritualism, that on the 26th of January 1887 Arthur Conan Doyle was initiated into Freemasonry at the Phoenix Lodge No 257 in Southsea, Hampshire. He was 27 years old. Among the members of the Phoenix Lodge present at Doyle's initiation was Dr James Watson with whom Doyle became very friendly and whose name has been immortalised in the Holmes stories. The true Watson, unlike his fictitious counterpart, was a graduate of Edinburgh University in 1865 and served 19 years as medical officer in the British Consulate in China.

It would be logical to presume that Doyle came into Freemasonry expecting, maybe hoping, to discover elements of the spiritualism that now occupied his mind. He was certainly well recommended. His proposer was W. D. King, later Sir William David King, Deputy-Lieutenant for Hampshire, a most prominent public man in Portsmouth who was elected Mayor of the borough on four separate occasions. His seconder was Sir John Brickwood an equally respected and successful Brewer in the city. Doyle rose rapidly through the degrees. On 23 February 1887 he was passed to the second degree and a month later, on 23 March he was made a full-fledged Master Mason. He took no further active part in Lodge affairs and in 1889 he resigned from the Lodge.

By this time he had already been writing adventure stories and was on the verge of dedicating himself to authorship. His story, *Study In Scarlet*, when Sherlock Holmes is introduced for the first time, was published in 1887 in Beeton's *Christmas Annual*. A year later his third novel *The Mystery Of Cloomber* was totally out of character. Here was a brilliant and exceedingly logical author writing about the paranormal, in a strange and confusing story about the afterlife of three vindictive Buddhist monks. It was the first novel with spiritualist elements. Was Doyle, in writing this book, seeking a spiritual source and inspiration in Masonic ritual? If so he will have found little in the ceremonies of the three degrees that would have been of practical interest to him. It may explain his resignation in 1889.

This, however, was not the end of his Masonic career. He attended Lodges as an unattached mason and rejoined his Lodge in 1902. He also received various honours before his final withdrawal from Freemasonry in 1911. It was the circumstances of a full and exciting life and the nature of the man that were manifest in this haphazard involvement with the Craft.

Adventurous as ever, in February 1900 Conan Doyle volunteered to serve in the Boer War and sailed to South Africa. He must have been dismayed to be refused enlistment because of his age. He was 40 years old. Persistent, he gained a position as Secretary and Medical Registrar of the Langman Field Hospital. Through observation and the reports of his patients, he was able to write one of the most readable of the books on the war. *The Great Boer War* was published in London in 1902. His presence in South Africa has been the cause of considerable debate as to his Masonic activities whilst abroad.

In October 1901 the *Masonic Illustrated* magazine reported as follows:

Whilst at the seat of war he (Bro Conan Doyle) attended the never-to-be-forgotten- scratch lodge at Bloemfontein in company with Bro Rudyard Kipling

The Lodge concerned was the *Rising Star Lodge No 1022 English Constitution*. At a meeting on the 7 of November in the same year the Brethren of the lodge expressed their disconcertment at being referred to as *a scratch lodge* and denied the statement made in the magazine. Bro Haarbarger, the IPM, instructed the secretary of the Lodge to write to the magazine expressing these sentiments. A *scratch lodge* is one set up on an ad hoc basis, under emergency circumstances as a temporary measure for a one off meeting.

Nearly thirty years later, the day after the death of Arthur Conan Doyle on 8 July 1930, in a tribute to him by a member of the *Author's Lodge 3456* the original statement was repeated and later published in the transactions stating that Doyle *was one of the brethren who formed the never-to-be-forgotten-Emergency Lodge held at Bloemfontein in company with Bro Rudyard Kipling and other notable masons.*

What has since emerged is that Doyle did indeed visit the *Rising Star Lodge* but the date and circumstances remain a mystery. The first meeting of the Lodge during the war took place on the 5th of April 1900 following on the British occupation of the town two days earlier. The *Cape Argus* reported the meeting in their

18th April issue stating that

a communication was received from R W Bro Lord Kitchener . . . expressing his regret at not being able to attend the meeting . . . and a similar letter was read from Bro A Conan Doyle, both Brethren intimating that it was their intention to visit the lodge in the near future.

Lord Kitchener did attend a meeting of the Lodge on 23rd April 1900 and signed a document, still in possession of the Lodge, proposing that a *Royal resolution* be sent to the Prince of Wales. Lord Roberts and Conan Doyle are also signatories to this document. There is no evidence, however, that either of these two brethren was present on that occasion and the signatures appear to have been legitimately added to the document on a subsequent occasion. That occasion may well have been the emergency *Mourning* meeting held on 31 January 1901, 10 days after the death of Queen Victoria, in her memory. Thirty-nine members of the lodge and sixty-one visitors, many high ranking and important personalities, were present. It is possible, even likely, that both Conan Doyle and Rudyard Kipling were present at this meeting. It would have been an opportunity for Doyle to sign the document initiated by Lord Kitchener in April of the previous year.

The interesting circumstance arising from these various incidents is the attitude taken by Doyle toward Freemasonry. Clearly he practiced the old adage *once a mason always a mason*. His attendance at a lodge would have been perfectly legitimate as the Constitutions in effect at the time stated:

a brother who is not a subscribing member to a lodge shall not be permitted to visit any lodge in the town or place where he resides more than once during his secession from the craft

On his return to England early in 1901, in a series of lectures given in Scotland, Doyle praised the activities of the freemasons during the Boer war. On 23 March 1901, he was invited to propose the main toast to the *Immortal Memory of Queen Victoria* and *The Lodge of Edinburgh (Mary's Chapel) No 1* Scottish Constitution made him an honorary member following his speech, in which he spoke on Masonry in South Africa. In 1902 he was knighted by Edward VII and this may have induced him to run for parliament for a second time in 1906 and it may also have induced him to rejoin his Lodge in 1909, although he lost all interest and resigned for good in 1911.

Freemasonry features in various forms in his writings, not all of them related to Sherlock Holmes.

The Valley Of Fear published in 1915 has references in America to the *Ancient Order of Freeman* (some editions state *Imminent Order* instead of *Ancient*) who are locally referred to as *The Scowers Lodge No 341* in Vermissa Valley USA. Furthermore the statement is made that there is no town in the State without a lodge and that grips and passwords are useful.

Another story unrelated to Sherlock Holmes is *The Lost World* of 1912 where mention is made of Mr Hungerton's *bouncing off* to a Masonic meeting and later Lord John Roxton says to Malone *between you and me close tided*. The most overt reference to Freemasonry appears in *The Land Of Mist* published in 1926. In *The Professor Challenger* series the character Weatherby is described as follows:

... that is a pompous ass named Weatherby. He is one of those who wander about on the obscure edges of Masonry, talking with whispers and reverence on mysteries where no mystery is. Spiritualism, with its very real and awful mysteries, is, to him, a vulgar thing because it brought consolation to common folk, but he loves to read papers on the Palladian Cultus, ancient & accepted Scottish rites and baphometric figures. Eliphas Levi is his prophet.

Eliphas Levi is the pseudonym for the Abbe Alphonse Louis Constant the occultist, who was considered by some to be *the last of the Magi*.

As to Sherlock Holmes - who is not a Mason - he has sufficient knowledge about Freemasonry to make several relevant observations. In his very first adventure, *A Study In Scarlet* published in 1887 in the *Beeton Christmas Annual*, there is a reference to a ring with a square and compass design which identifies the owner as a freemason. In *a Scandal In Bohemia* in 1891 Holmes says to Watson *there is a wonderful Freemasonry among Horsey men. Join and find out*. And in *Adventure Of The Red Headed League* published in the same year, he refers to Wilson as a freemason. A more extensive example appears in *The Adventure Of The Musgrave Ritual* published in 1893, the story revolves around the eldest son of the Musgrave family who has to learn the following catechism not knowing why:

Q Who was it?

A He who is gone

Who shall have it?

He who will com

What was the month?

The sixth from the first

Where was the sun ?

Over the oak

Where was the shadow?

Under the Elm

How was it stepped ?

North by ten and by ten, west by five

What shall we give for it?

All that is ours

What should we give it ?

For the sake of the trust

There are several more incidental references to Freemasonry in various adventures. One Holmes story, however, remains outstanding although it is not attributable to Conan Doyle. It is the film *Murder By Decree* written by John Hopkins first shown in March 1980. It is a Jack the Ripper story where Sir Charles Warren commissioner of Police (who was an active mason and the first Master of Quatuor Coronati Lodge) is confronted by Sherlock Holmes who claims special knowledge of *The Royal Order of Freemasons* giving him some strange and curious signs and identifying Sir Charles as a 33rd degree Mason by the insignia on his ring. (Sir Charles, in fact, only reached the 30th degree in this particular order within Freemasonry.) Holmes and Watson are the prime characters in the story.

In his autobiography published in 1926 there is no mention of Freemasonry. It would appear that he had placed his interest in masonry within a spiritual context and within that context our Craft was simply of not sufficient consequence to him, in spite of his repeated participation and membership. He died on 7th July 1930. On July 13 a large memorial reunion was held in the Albert Hall, London. A chair was left empty in his honour. Estelle Roberts, England's respected and well known clairvoyant stated publicly that she made contact with Conan Doyle and offered a personal message from him to his family which they gladly accepted as evidence of his eternal well being.

Sherlock Holmes is now immortalised and Conan Doyle is not doing too badly either . . . every month a spiritualist or medium somewhere in the world claims to have had a messages from Sir Arthur. . . . he has passed beyond and is well and happy!

JANUARY 2005

VOLUME I NUMBER I

BIBLIOGRAPHY & SOURCES

- Boniface, A *On Conan Doyle* AQC 105 19XX
- Booth, Martin *The Doctor and the Detective: A Biography of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* The Journal of the Arthur Conan Doyle Society, 2000
- Carr, J D *Life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* 1949
- Doyle, A C *Memories And Adventures* (autobiography) London 1924; Oxford University Press 1989
- Pearson, Hesketh *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* 1943
- Pearson, Hesketh *Conan Doyle: His Life and Art* 1961
- Potter Barrett, G *Sherlock Holmes And The Masonic Connection* Baker Street Miscellanea Vol 45 1986
- Runciman, Robert T. *Sir A. Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes & Freemasonry* AQC 104 19XX
- Ryder, Cecil A *Study In Masonry* Sherlock Holmes Journal vol 11 19
- Stashower, Daniel *Teller of Tales: The Life of Arthur Conan Doyle* 1999

Copyright 2004 Yasha M. Beresiner.