

# Good and Faithful Servant: Hindoo [sic] Meets Sikh

by Chris Redmond

Lal Chowdar is one of the most minor of minor characters in the Canon, and yet, as Holmes was wont to say, not without interest. He figures in *The Sign of the Four* as the former servant (“who is now dead”) of Thaddeus Sholto — a servant who was “faithful” but who refused to believe that his master had not killed Arthur Morstan. He is probably best known to Sherlockians as the correct but neglected answer to one of Fannie Gross’ “Sherlockwizz” puzzles in the *Baker Street Journal* more than fifty years ago. That particular quiz (published in October 1959) is memorable chiefly because of the way Gahan Wilson answered it, in a scribble and cartoon that editor Edgar W. Smith then published in April 1960:

He walked over from the station and was admitted by my faithful old *bull terrier* (?), who is now dead.

Perhaps Lal Chowdar is best suited to be a source of canonical humour. Someone, probably the late Sherlockian jokester Bob Burr, has speculated that he had a brother by the name of Clem. Even about so minor a character, however, there are things that may be discovered.

We may begin with Lal Chowdar’s successor in the employ of Thaddeus Sholto, the manservant whom Sholto addresses as *khitmutgar*. Watson’s description of “a Hindoo servant, clad in a yellow turban, white loose-fitting clothes, and a yellow sash” suggests that he may not have been so familiar with Indian matters as one might expect from a veteran of the Indian Army (or whatever force it was in which he fought at Maiwand and elsewhere). For the wearer of a yellow turban is more likely a Sikh than a Hindu, a distinction no doubt meaningless to a Briton of the 1890s, but of some significance in a multicultural society today, and obviously of crucial importance to the members of the two sects themselves.

India was in Victorian times (and is today) also a multicultural society, in which Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Jains and members of other groups encountered one another, not always peacefully, and in which castes and ethnicities were many and complicated. There is evidence from his non-Sherlockian writings that Arthur Conan Doyle knew and cared little about such matters. In *The Mystery of Cloomber* he presents a trio of Buddhist priests with names that are more or less Muslim or Sikh, as T. S. Blakeney pointed out in the *Sherlock Holmes Journal* many years ago.<sup>1</sup>

And sure enough, the Indian names in *The Sign of the Four* are likewise improbable in the highest degree. Scholarly attention has concentrated on the names of the Four themselves: Mahomet Singh, Abdullah Khan and Dost Akbar, all of whom are definitely presented as Sikhs (“Punjaubees”, natives of the chiefly Sikh province of the Punjab). Says Blakeney: “These three Sikhs have names that Sikhs would not own.” T. F. Foss, writing in 1968 without reference to

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Thoughts on The Sign of Four’, *SHJ* 3 no. 4, summer 1958, pp. 6-8.

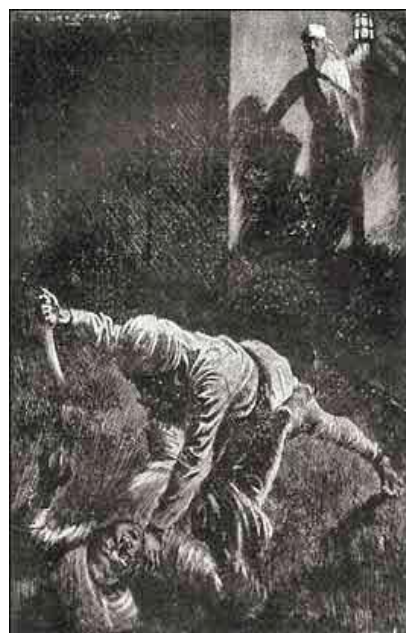
Blakeney, makes the same observation,<sup>2</sup> and is particularly hard on “Mahomet Singh”, though he manages to misspell it: “‘Mohamet’ is the name of a Mussulman, while ‘Singh’ is a Sikh one, and to a lesser degree, also a Hindu one.” By “Mussulman” Foss, who is affecting Victorian chauvinism, means Muslim. “Mahomet” is the old-time spelling of the name of the Prophet, more commonly “Mohammed” and more recently “Muhammad”. And “Singh”, or “lion”, is the universal adopted name of Sikh males, though it is also used by some Hindus. Dost Akbar and Abdullah Khan, Foss plausibly says, are “Mussulman, and no nonsense about it”.

John Linsenmeyer in 1975 similarly declares that no Sikh would be named “Mahomet” or “Abdulla” or “Khan” or “Akbar”, these all being Muslim words or names.<sup>3</sup> Exaggerating a little, he compares the three Sikhs with their improbable names to “three Jewish convicts named Gamel Abdul Nasser, Francis Xavier O’Herlihy and Baron Frits van Poot”. In the same vein, Andrew Boyd in 1961 had suggested that “Watson might as well have claimed a knowledge of Scotland and then set down a tale about three simple Highland soldiers named Venizelos, Vasco de Gama, and Voroshilov.”<sup>4</sup>

Otis Hearn in 1972 suggests that Watson unconsciously replaced authentic Indian names with the sort of name he would have heard during his own experiences in Afghanistan, where there are indeed Muslims rather than Hindus or many Sikhs.<sup>5</sup> An editor’s footnote to his article refers to a real-life malefactor who went by the name of Mahomed Singh Azad, but it seems to have been a pseudonym, and not a particularly convincing one.

Solid ground is needed somewhere. Hearn states firmly that “Watson does not err in naming the Sholto family’s Hindu servants,” i.e. Lal Chowdar and Lal Rao, of Bartholomew Sholto’s household, although he does not say why he is so confident. “Lal” is a common first name in India, indeed so common that it is often coupled with a second given name, and is also a term of endearment, meaning something like “son”. It may be significant that Sholto gives his servant the double name, “Lal Chowdar”, every time he mentions him.

“Rao”, meanwhile, is a well-known surname, particularly in the Andhra Pradesh region. Indeed, it occurs elsewhere in the Canon, though most readers will not be aware of it. The Indian young man in ‘The Three Students’ is, in all published editions, named “Daulat Ras”, but Arthur Conan Doyle’s manuscript reads “Daulat Rao”, as my own inspection some years ago verified. (I reported the finding



Ere he could stagger to his feet  
the Sikh was upon him and  
buried his knife twice in his side

2 ‘Regina v. Holmes and Another’, *Baker Street Journal* 18 no. 1, March 1968, pp. 22-31.

3 ‘Further Thoughts on The Sign of the Four’, *Baker Street Journal* 25 no. 3, September 1975, pp. 133-139.

4 ‘Dr. Watson’s Dupe’, *SHJ* 5 no. 2, spring 1961, pp. 42-44.

5 ‘Marginalia to The Sign of Four’, *Baker Street Journal* 22 no. 1, March 1972, pp. 24-25.

in a 1984 article written jointly with Ursula Moran.<sup>6</sup>) The editors of the Oxford Sherlock Holmes, for once eschewing their readiness to make changes in the text, have maintained “Ras”, and allege in a note that in the manuscript — where the name was inserted later — there is one reading of “Ras” and one of “Rao”. Lal Rao in *The Sign of the Four* is, like Lal Chowdar, a *khitmutgar*, a butler-manservant; the word was clearly known to Doyle.

While “Khan” and “Abdullah” and “Mahomet” and the rest are improbable names for Sikhs, they are perfectly legitimate names for members of other sects, allowing for variations in spelling. But “Chowdar” does not seem to be a real name at all; no evidence for its existence is cited by Donald A. Redmond in *A Study in Sources*,<sup>7</sup> nor can it be found in any available directories. The problem may, once again, be spelling; “Chaudhuri”, with variants such as “Chowdry”, is a recognized Hindu (but not Sikh) surname, notably in the Bengal region, and is kin to the word for “chieftain”.<sup>8</sup> However, there is another and more intriguing possibility.

Both Thaddeus and Bartholomew Sholto, it is important to note, had other male servants besides their butlers or *khitmutgars*. For Thaddeus it was Williams, who drove the cab that fetched Holmes, Watson and Miss Morstan to his “oasis in the howling desert”. For Bartholomew it was McMurdo the prize-fighter, whose role the newspaper described at the time of his arrest as “a porter, or gatekeeper”. Presumably because he was English, there is no reference to him by the word that would have been used had he been an Indian: *chowkidar*.

Chowkidar? Not Chowdar, but “chowkidar”: a word that did not appear in the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but which the second edition adds, offering variant spellings, and defines simply as “watchman”. The earliest reference (spelt “chocadar”) is dated to 1696, and there are quotations from Kipling and other authors who must have been familiar to Doyle and perhaps even to Watson. Linsenmeyer uses the word in passing in that 1975 article, but I had not really noticed it until I happened to read one or two of H. R. F. Keating’s Inspector Ghote novels set in modern Bombay — hilarious reading and not bad detection, as well as rich repositories of cultural trivia and Anglo-Indian vocabulary.

A *chowkidar*, I have now learned, is rather more than a watchman. Linsenmeyer in that 1975 article noted that Sikhs are frequently employed as *chowkidars*, and defined the role as “a species of bodyguard-doorman-watchman-factotum peculiar to India”. A search of the World Wide Web twenty years ago, when this study began, turned up but a single use of the word among some billions,



One of them snatched my firelock up and levelled it at my head, while the other held a great knife to my throat

6 Chris Redmond and Ursula Moran, ‘Second Thoughts on The Three Students’, *SHJ* vol. 16 no. 4, summer 1984, pp. 106-109.

7 *Sherlock Holmes: A Study in Sources*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1982.

8 For some insights into Indian names I am much indebted to a former university colleague, Anil K. Goel.

in an enthusiastic text about Himalayan trekking: “The D. I. Fund Bumgalow are fairly well furnished and have crockerys, cutlerys, Bed linen, blankets etc. are also supplied. Trekkers are however advised to take sleeping bags with them. Firewood for use in the fireplace would be available from the chowkidar on payment.” (Orthography has not been altered.) Today the Web has several hundred thousand instances of the word, including references to a 1974 Bollywood film titled “Chowkidar”, and of course the text of *The Sign of the Four*. “Send me to Delhi as your chowkidar and I will protect your wealth,” a political candidate apparently told voters in the fall of 2014.

Were Major Murphy of ‘The Crooked Man’ to return to India, and were his wife to require a gatekeeper there, and were she to dress him in dungarees, the student of popular literature would at last know who put the overalls on Mrs. Murphy’s chowkidar. But we digress.

Is it reasonable to conclude that Watson (or Doyle) dashed down the name “Lal Chowdar” out of some vague confusion with the word “chowkidar”, which he probably interpreted indifferently as meaning butler, batman, or even (shades of ‘The Blue Carbuncle’) commissionaire or (‘The Three Students’) college porter? Should it seem to require a stretch of the imagination, the reader must remember that many of the names in the Canon were clearly derived in the same way. For those who hold to the Watsonian faith, they can be explained as pseudonyms to protect the privacy of Holmes’ clients; for those who accept that Doyle wrote the story, the subconscious mechanism is even clearer. We are in the same text as a banker-turned-pawnbroker named Holder, an Angel who was no such thing, Rose Spender who died indigent, John Clay who dug in the soil, and many another such figures with an ironically apt name.<sup>9</sup>




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<sup>9</sup> “Chowdar”, for “chowkidar”, may in fact be a legitimate surname created from an occupational title, as Donald A. Redmond suggested in correspondence to me when I consulted him about such matters. England is rich in names of that kind — Butler, Draper, Waterman — and, to the occasional amusement of outsiders, so is India, populated by many Engineers and even Sodawaterwallahs. He added: “As the only aspect of Lal Chowdar which actually appears in SIGN is his proposal that Major Sholto should connive at concealing Morstan’s death, which would itself be a crime, there may be a reminder of the other word with the same root, “chokey”, from choki, a shed, meaning specifically a prison.”



Answers can be found in items in this edition of the *Log*.

1. What was the name of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s aunt who lived in Brisbane?
2. Which restaurant is referred to in both ‘The Dying Detective’ and ‘The Illustrious Client’?
3. Which actor plays Conan Doyle in a forthcoming mini-series about the Edalji case?
4. Who was the composer of the music for the Granada Holmes series starring Jeremy Brett?
5. In which story did Culverton Smith try to outwit Holmes?

*Answers on page 34*