

ILLUSTRIOUS CLIENT PRESENTATION

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Summary:

Part I: Who Really Was “The Worst Man” in the Canon?

The discussion begins by referencing January’s story, “Charles Augustus Milverton,” a blackmailer without a conscience, whom Holmes famously and memorably described as “the worst man in London.” Milverton was motivated by greed, but he was all business. Baron Gruner’s motive, on the other hand, was not primarily greed. It was something much more evil. He was a sadistic, cruel, abusive, totally heartless predator.

Kitty Winter said he “collects women and takes pride in their collection same as some men collect moths or butterflies.” This collection of ruined women was even documented and gloated over. We are told he kept a trophy book about those women—“photographs, names, details, everything about them.” The text of “The Illustrious Client” calls it, in pretty stark language for a Sherlock Holmes story, his “lust diary.”

This is the most adult-themed of all the recorded adventures of Sherlock Holmes. The fate of Kitty Winter is described in dark terms. She had been “tempted and used and thrown into the refuse heap.”

No wonder, then, that Sir James Damery, the “illustrious client” who sent him, the broken and morose General de Merville, and Sherlock Holmes himself were all so desperate to rescue Violet from what he called “the clutches of a fiend.” As Gruner’s wife, her ruin, her utter debasement and ultimately her murder were certain. He had done it before, and he would do it again.

So, who was the worst man in the Sherlock Holmes Canon? Was it really the smarmy blackmailer Milverton? Was it the Napoleon of Crime, Professor Moriarty? Or was it the truly detestable Baron Gruner? Baron Gruner wins the title, and it’s not even close.

Part II: Finding a Plot

Many of the plot elements of “The Illustrious Client,” which appeared in 1924, were already used by Conan Doyle in “Charles Augustus Milverton,” first published 20 years earlier, in 1904. The smug and oily criminal, preying on women, with Holmes recruited by an “illustrious client” to rescue one of his victims, the shockingly violent attack on the criminal in his own home by another woman who had suffered at his hands. All these elements are in both stories.

And it would be tempting to think, from these parallels, that “The Illustrious Client” is just a reworking of “Milverton.” But I think Conan Doyle found another inspiration for this story. Listen to this summary of “The Illustrious Client” and tell me where you have heard this story before:

- A murderous aristocrat from Central Europe, with a history of violence and death, moves to England in search of fresh victims.
- He leases a large house, which serves as his base of operations. He has unusual power and influence over women—a power he uses for evil.

- While in England, he destroys one woman and sets his sights upon another—a woman of exceptional qualities.
- His threat to this woman is recognized by her friends and protectors, who are determined to save her.
- They call on the most knowledgeable and accomplished expert they can find to help; and he is assisted in his efforts by his trusted friend, a medical doctor.
- Despite being a brilliant and totally ruthless foe who has anticipated almost every obstacle in his path, the villain is defeated and his intended victim is rescued.

This, of course, is not only the plot of “The Illustrious Client,” it is also the plot of *Dracula*, Bram Stoker’s most famous novel, published in 1897. The parallels are too numerous to be coincidental. The characters in both stories are mirror images:

- The villains, Baron Gruner and Count Dracula.
- The expert foes, Sherlock Holmes and Professor Van Helsing.
- The faithful assistants, Dr. John Watson and Dr. John Seward.
- The ruined women, Kitty Winter and Lucy Westenra.
- The intended victim/brides: Violet de Merville and Mina Harker.
- The almost helpless kinsmen, General de Merville and Jonathan Harker.
- The aristocratic friends, Sir James Damery and Arthur Holmwood (Lord Godalming).
- The tough characters, Shinwell Johnson and Quincy P. Morris.

So the conclusion is almost inescapable. *Dracula* must have inspired “The Illustrious Client.” That takes nothing away from the unique abilities of either author. Both works are masterpieces of storytelling and stand on their own merits.

(This idea—that *ILLU* was simply a retelling of *Dracula*—was explored at great length in Bill’s expansive essay “A Tale from the Crypt,” first published in 2003 *The Holmes and Watson Report*, then presented in Norwalk, Connecticut, at the Autumn in Baker Street conference in 2007, and finally published in his book *Pursuing Sherlock Holmes*.)

Part III: Shinwell Johnson and the Holmes Organization

Shinwell (Porky) Johnson is an underappreciated and thoroughly fascinating personality. What do we know about him?

- A valuable assistant from “the latter phases” of Holmes’ career.
- Was a “very dangerous villain” who served two sentences in prison.
- Holmes’ “agent” (or spy) in “the huge criminal underworld of London.”
- His criminal past gave him access to “every night-club, doss-house and gambling-den.”
- Possessed quick observation and an active brain.
- Had a cunning mind.

What I find interesting about Shinwell Johnson is that he gives us a glimpse into Sherlock Holmes’ own operations in a way that is usually given very little attention.

Sherlock Holmes did not have as large and intricate an organization as did Moriarty, but he did have one. He tells us in “The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax” that he employed “a small, but very efficient organization” to assist him in his detective practice.

And he specifically referred to his “agency” twice, first in “The Copper Beeches” and again in “The Sussex Vampire,” where he insisted that *his* agency “stands flatfooted upon the ground.” But who was a part of that “agency?”

Well, there was Dr. Watson, of course, but there is no record in all of the Canon suggesting that Watson received any kind of payment for the huge amounts of time, effort, or personal danger he invested in Holmes’ cases.

Otherwise, only a few members of Holmes’ organization are mentioned by name. One was Mercer, whom Holmes described in “The Creeping Man” as “my general utility man, who looks up routine business.” Another was Shinwell Johnson of “The Illustrious Client,” a former criminal who nevertheless became an associate of Sherlock Holmes and provided him with information about the underworld. Finally, there was Langdale Pike of “The Three Gables,” the “human book of reference...the receiving-station as well as the transmitter for all the gossip of the metropolis.” Pike sold his gossip to the scandal rags, and he traded information with Holmes on a regular basis.

Other individuals could be called on when needed. For instance, an unnamed agent of Sherlock Holmes—perhaps Mercer, perhaps someone else—sent a wire to Josiah Amberley in “The Retired Colourman.”

By far the most famous are Wiggins and the rest of the members of the Baker Street Irregulars. These boys apparently were on call and ready for any job Holmes might send their way.

In *The Sign of Four*, Holmes didn’t rely solely on the Baker Street Irregulars to help him track down Jonathan Small and the *Aurora*. “I have set other agencies at work, and used every means at my disposal,” he said. The whole river has been searched on either side.”

Apparently, when circumstances warranted, Holmes was able to mobilize a pretty large force to help him in his work. He did so again in “A Scandal in Bohemia,” when Holmes employed “a gang, and a rough one, too” to create a diversion in front of Irene Adler’s house.

So Shinwell Johnson was simply a cog in the Holmes machine.

(A more thorough examination of the Holmes organization and his operations in the Victorian underworld can be found in “The Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective Agency: How Moriarty was Brought to Ruin” by Bill Mason, in *Canadian Holmes*, Spring 2022.)

Part IV: The Illustrious Client

So that brings us back to the title character of this story, the “illustrious client,” a character who makes no direct appearance, who is only alluded to, and who remains discreetly unnamed. But we all know who it is. Obviously, it is King Edward VII, who succeeded his mother Queen Victoria in 1901. This story is universally accepted as having taken place in 1902, just as Watson records it.

You can certainly see why the King would want to remain anonymous in the matter, and I see no reason not to accept Sir James Damery’s explanation that he was an old friend of the general who had a “paternal interest” in Violent since her childhood. After all, in 1902, King

Edward was 62 years old, and had just taken the throne. Had he been a younger man, his interest in Violet might have been different.

Albert Edward, known as Bertie, was Prince of Wales and heir apparent to the throne for almost 60 years, a duration only surpassed by the current King Charles III. He was something of a playboy prince who regularly overspent his allowance, liked women (as many as 55 affairs have been alleged, including actress Lillie Langtry and Lady Randolph Churchill), and gambling.

Nevertheless, he was very popular, both as prince and king. He was charming and sociable and tactful. He pioneered the idea of royal public appearances, taken for granted today, traveled throughout the empire, and was considered an arbiter of fashion.

Where else in the Sherlock Holmes Canon did he appear, not as King but as Prince of Wales?

In “The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet,” which took place in about 1890, Alexander Holder was visited by “one of the highest, noblest, most exalted names in England,” and was left with the coronet, “one of the most precious public possessions of the Empire,” as security for a £50,000 short-term loan. Again, the exact term “illustrious client” was used. No one else could have had access to what amounted to a portion of the crown jewels. The prince almost certainly needed it to satisfy a gambling debt. So that was the first time he figured in the Canon.

In “Charles Augustus Milverton,” the problem of Lady Eva’s indiscreet letters had been referred to Holmes, again, by “an illustrious client.” Which begs the question, to whom were those letters addressed? In the September 1988 *Baker Street Journal*, Charles Meyer theorized that they were not addressed to the “impecunious” young squire who sold them, but instead to the Prince of Wales. That Bertie could not just supply the additional £5,000 needed to satisfy Milverton’s demands is attributed to the fact that he was “noted for his ability to overspend the allowance he received from the Government.”