

THE RICHEST MAN IN HORSERACING

by GIDEON HILL

“Things are seldom what they seem. Skim milk masquerades as cream.” This couplet from *HMS Pinafore* lyrically restates a cardinal lesson of the Canon: The significance of a set of circumstances is discerned by analyzing pertinent evidence and carefully interpreting its meaning. Holmes stated this principle most succinctly when he said: “You see, but you do not observe.” The genius of Sherlock Holmes lay in his ability to see the extraordinary in what others saw as ordinary and in the conclusions drawn from that distinction.

“Silver Blaze” contains several examples of this. Even as a horse of a different color, Silver Blaze was still the fastest in England and won the Wessex Plate though his distinctive markings were hidden from those at the track. In the incident of the dog in the nighttime, Inspector Gregory saw nothing unusual in the dog’s silence, but Holmes found a significant clue identifying the abductor of the horse. These are well-known examples, but there are others. Silver Blaze’s hidden markings are a contextual clue that names his home stable. The etymological derivation of the name “Colonel Ross” reveals Silver Blaze’s owner to be Hugh Lupus Grosvenor, 1st Duke of Westminster. Wayne Swift laid a foundation for our investigation in his analysis of English racing.¹ Swift identified Ormonde, one of Grosvenor’s horses, as the canonical equine. Our analysis corroborates Swift’s secondary conclusion, that Grosvenor was Colonel Ross.

Formally, Grosvenor was “His Grace, the 1st Duke of Westminster, 3rd Marquess of Westminster, 4th Earl Grosvenor, 4th Viscount Belgrave, 4th Baron Grosvenor of Eaton, and 10th Baronet of Eaton.” The owner of Mayfair and other valuable properties in London, he was (correctly) dubbed “the richest man in England” by *Vanity Fair* when it published his caricature in 1870.²

The Grosvenor family began its titled ascent with a baronetcy purchased from James I in 1622. In 1761, the family was ennobled with the Barony of Grosvenor of Eaton. The next hundred years garnered a viscounty, an earldom, and a marquissate for the family’s collection of titles.³ Hugh Grosvenor was born in 1825, eldest son of the 2nd Marquess of Westminster. An alumnus of Eton and Oxford University, Grosvenor married twice and fathered 15 children. He first married Lady Constance Leveson-Gower, daughter of the 2nd Duke of Sutherland. After her death, he married Katherine Cavendish.⁴

Grosvenor fervently practiced *noblesse oblige*—believing that along with position, power, and prestige came civic responsibilities.⁵ He devoted his life to meeting that obligation in a host of public positions. Before ennoblement, while

bearing the courtesy title of Earl Grosvenor, he spent 22 years in the House of Commons. He also served as Lord-Lieutenant of Cheshire, Her Majesty's Lieutenant and County Alderman for Cheshire, Justice of the Peace for the County of Middlesex, and Lord-Lieutenant of the Administrative County of London.⁶ Later in his life, he was appointed Privy Counsellor, aide-de-camp to Queen Victoria, and in 1870, he was created a Knight of the Garter. Of especial note to our inquiry was his appointment as Honorary *Colonel* to the *Cheshire* (Earl of Chester's) Yeomanry.

He became the 3rd Marquess of Westminster upon the death of his father in 1869. In 1874 he was created Duke of Westminster, receiving the last non-royal dukedom created in the United Kingdom.⁷ Prime Minister Gladstone notified him of the honor by writing "My dear Westminster, I have received authority from the Queen to place a dukedom at your disposal and I hope you may accept it."⁸ It was widely, but incorrectly, held that Grosvenor received the dignity of a duke because of his wealth. In truth, the honor stemmed from his tenure as president of the Eastern Question Association, a Liberal Party advocacy group. As a good friend to Gladstone, Grosvenor facilitated Gladstone's deft use of the organization to deflect criticism about his domestic policies. He recommended that Queen Victoria raise Grosvenor to the highest rank of the peerage in return.⁹

As duke, Grosvenor lived the grand lifestyle associated with that rank. He spent lavishly. Most notable was the demolition of Eaton Hall, the family seat in Cheshire, and the reconstruction of a fabulous palace with hundreds of rooms in the law court Gothic style by Arthur Waterhouse. He greatly expanded Eaton Stud, the stables established by Earl Grosvenor in 1762.¹⁰ The Duke was an expert in racing and horse-breeding and was the only owner of two British Triple Crown winners:¹¹ Flying Fox and Ormonde.¹²

Ormonde, the canonical Silver Blaze, was known as "the horse of the century." In a short but brilliant career, he was unbeaten in sixteen outings over three seasons. Eaton Stud bred many great names in racing, notably Sceptre, Peregrine, and Bend Or, the sire of Ormonde. Bend Or is our first link to Silver Blaze. After the 1880 Epsom Derby win, Bend Or was the object of an unprecedented and widely publicized scenario in the history of the turf. A groom from a competing stable contested the race claiming that Tadcaster, another horse from Eaton Stud who was nearly identical in appearance to Bend Or, had won the 1880 Derby while running under Bend Or's name. The claim was ultimately disallowed, but the groom attested to its veracity throughout his life.¹³

Uncertain identity of a horse entered into an important race is familiar to students of the Canon. When we also discover that Bend Or was well known for his distinctive markings—a large white blaze on his face and a white fore fet-

lock—the association becomes undeniable and suggests that Bend Or might have been Silver Blaze. However, Swift’s argument for Ormonde is otherwise so sound that we assume Watson used the famous appearance of the sire and the notorious incident from his racing career to allude to the stable and its owner and not to precisely identify the horse.

With Eaton Stud named as the home stable of Silver Blaze, Watson employed a second tactic to identify the owner. The name “Colonel Ross” was not chosen randomly. It is a clever etymological puzzle—essentially a verbal rebus—describing the first Duke of Westminster. “Ross” is an Irish surname derived from the Irish Gaelic *ros* meaning “from the peninsula.”¹⁴ The Anglo-Saxon homonym *ros* means “horse.”¹⁵ Recall that Grosvenor was Honorary *Colonel* to the *Cheshire* Yeomanry. Finally, consider that Eaton Hall, the Duke’s country seat, is situated in Cheshire on a large peninsula formed by the Rivers Dee and Mersey jutting into the Irish Sea and pointing directly toward Ireland. Putting these various elements together, we have “a Colonel linked to English horses on the ‘Irish peninsula’ of Cheshire.” Surely this describes Hugh Grosvenor as explicitly as did the letters patent from Queen Victoria conferring the dignity of a duke on him.

“Things are seldom what they seem. Skim milk masquerades as cream.” Throughout the Canon, Sherlock Holmes speaks to the imperative of ignoring that which is immediately apparent to discover truth that lies beyond first impressions. In this spirit, “Silver Blaze” reveals indirect, yet persuasive, clues that identify the first Duke of Westminster as the Colonel Ross of the story. The markings of Bend Or, the sire of Ormonde (Silver Blaze); the controversy surrounding Bend Or’s 1880 Epsom Derby win; and the curiously appropriate etymological ancestry of the name “Ross” all confirm that the name Colonel Ross was a canonical pseudonym for the Duke of Westminster.

NOTES

1. Wayne B. Swift, “Silver Blaze—A Corrected Identification,” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Mar. 1991), p. 28.
2. Junior Jehu, *pseudonym* (Thomas Gibson Bowles), “Statesmen No. 55: The Marquis of Westminster,” *Vanity Fair*, 16 July 1870, p. 26.
3. “Duke of Westminster.” <www.biography.ms/Duke_of_Westminster.html>. Cited 30 May 2005.
4. This article focuses on clues found in the text of *Silver Blaze* alluding to the actual identity of the characters. It is of note that “Cavendish,” the maiden name of the Duke’s second wife, was also the name of the tobacco chosen by Straker. Is this a coincidence or yet another clue placed by Watson in the text to suggest the identity of Ross?

5. Robert Lacey, *Aristocrats*, London: British Broadcasting Corp., 1983, p. 139.
6. Michael Harrison, *Lord of London: A Biography of the 2nd Duke of Westminster*, London: W. H. Allen, 1966, p. 21.
7. He was not the last British subject to be offered the honor, however. Upon her accession to the throne, Queen Elizabeth II desired to ennoble Winston Churchill as the "Duke of London." He declined the honor, and accepted instead the Knighthood of the Garter in 1953.
8. Simon Winchester, *Their Noble Lordships: Class and Power in Modern Britain*, London: Faber & Faber, 1981, p. 93.
9. Harrison, p. 21.
10. "The Story of Eaton Stud: Champions Sired in Cheshire," *Cheshire Magazine*, <www.cheshiremagazine.com/articles102000/eaton.html>. Cited 26 March 2005.
11. For colts, the British Triple Crown consists of wins in the Two Thousand Guineas, the Epsom Derby, and the St. Leger. For fillies, it is the One Thousand or Two Thousand Guineas, the Oaks or Epsom Derby, and the St. Leger.
12. The National Horseracing Museum, "Westminster (1st Duke of) (1825-1899)," *Horseracing History Online*, <www.horseracinghistory.co.uk/hrho/action/viewDocument?id=1007>. Cited 26 Mar. 2005.
13. "Bend Or," *Thoroughbred Heritage*, <www.tbheritage.com/Portraits/BendOr.html>. Cited 26 March 2005.
14. "Search results for: Ross." *Last name meanings*, <www.lastnames.net/surname.asp?surname=Ross>. Cited 26 March 2005.
15. C. T. Onions, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.