

Ambrose, Gardner, and Doyle

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SCENE I - The year is 2050 A.D.

Professor Ambrose: Have you ever read the book *Science: Good, Bad, and Bogus*, by Martin Gardner?

Professor Byrd: No; I've heard of it, and of course I've heard of Martin Gardner. He was a very famous science writer of the last century. Why do you ask?

Ambrose: Because the book contains one weird chapter – It is totally unlike anything else that Gardner ever wrote.

Byrd: Oh?

Ambrose: The chapter is titled “The Irrelevance of Conan Doyle”. He actually advances the thesis that Conan Doyle never wrote the Sherlock Holmes stories—that these stories are forgeries.

Byrd: That *is* weird! Especially from Gardner! On what does he base it?

Ambrose: On absolutely nothing! His whole argument is that no one with the brilliant, rational, scientific mind to write the Sherlock Holmes stories could possibly have spent his last twelve years in a tireless crusade against all rationality—I'm talking about his crazy involvement with spiritualism.

Byrd: To tell you the truth, this fact has often puzzled me! How could anyone with the brilliance to write the Sherlock Holmes stories ever get involved with spiritualism—and in such a crazy way?

Ambrose: You mean that *you* have doubts that Doyle wrote the Holmes stories?

Byrd: Of course not! That thought has never crossed my mind! All I said was that I find the situation *puzzling*. I guess the answer is that Doyle went senile in his last years?

Ambrose: No, no! Gardner correctly pointed out that all the available evidence shows that Doyle remained quite keen and active to the end. He also pointed out that Doyle's interest in spiritualism started much earlier in life than is generally realized. So senility is not the explanation.

Byrd: I just thought of another idea! Perhaps Doyle was planning all along to foist his spiritualism on the public and started out writing his rational Holmes stories to gain everybody's confidence. Then, when the public was convinced of his rationality, whamo!

Ambrose (*After a pause*): That's quite a cute idea! But frankly, it's just as implausible as Gardner's idea that Doyle never wrote the Holmes stories at all.

Byrd: All right, then; how do *you* explain the mystery?

Ambrose: The explanation is so obvious that I'm amazed that anyone can fail to see it!

Byrd: Well?

Ambrose: Haven't you heard of multiple personalities? Doyle obviously had a dual personality—moreover of a serious psychotic nature! The clue to the whole thing is not *senility* but *psychosis*! Surely you know that some psychotics are absolutely brilliant in certain areas and completely deluded in others. What better explanation could there be?

Byrd: You really believe that Doyle was psychotic?

Ambrose: Of course he was!

Byrd: Just because he believed in spiritualism?

Ambrose: No, his disturbance went much deeper. Don't you know that he believed that the famous Harry Houdini escaped from locked trunks by dematerializing and going out through the keyhole? What's even worse, he absolutely refused to believe Houdini when he said that there was a perfectly naturalistic explanation for the escapes. *Doyle insisted that Houdini was lying!* If that's not psychotic paranoia, what is?

Byrd: I guess you're right. As I said, I never had the slightest doubt that Doyle wrote the Holmes stories, but now your explanation of the apparent contradiction between Doyle the rationalist and Doyle the crank makes some sense.

Ambrose: I'm glad you realize that.

Byrd: But now something else puzzles me: Martin Gardner was no fool; he was surely one of the most interesting writers of the last century. Now, how could someone of Gardner's caliber ever entertain the silly notion that Doyle never wrote the Holmes stories?

Ambrose: To me the solution is obvious: *Martin Gardner never wrote that chapter!* The chapter is a complete forgery. I have no idea *who* wrote it, but it was certainly not Martin Gardner. A person of Gardner's caliber could never have written anything like that!

Byrd: Now just a minute; are you talking about the whole book or just that one chapter?

Ambrose: Just that one chapter. All the other chapters are obviously genuine; they are perfectly consistent in spirit with all the sensible things that Gardner ever wrote. But that one chapter sticks out like a sore thumb—not just with respect to the other chapters, but in relation to all of Gardner’s writings. I don’t see how there can be the slightest doubt that this chapter is a complete forgery!

Byrd: But that raises serious problems! All right, I can see how an entire book by an alleged author might be a forgery, but an *isolated* chapter of a book? How could the chapter have ever gotten there? Could Gardner have hired someone to write it? That seems ridiculous! Why would he have done a thing like that? On the other hand, why would Gardner have ever allowed the chapter to be included? Or could it possibly have gotten there without his knowledge? That also seems implausible. Will you please explain one thing: *How did the chapter ever get there?* No, your theory strikes me as most improbable!

Ambrose: I agree with you wholeheartedly; the theory *is* most improbable. But the alternative that Gardner actually wrote that chapter is not just improbable, but completely out of the question; he couldn’t *possibly* have written such a chapter. And as Holmes wisely said: Whenever we have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable* must be the truth. And so I am forced to the conclusion that Martin Gardner never wrote that chapter. Now, I don’t go as far as some historians who believe that Martin Gardner never existed. No, I believe that he did exist, but he certainly never wrote that chapter. We can only hope that future research will answer the question of how that strange chapter ever got into the book. But surely, nobody in his right mind could believe that Gardner actually wrote that chapter.

Byrd (*After a long pause*): I guess you’re right. In fact, the more I think about it, you *must* be right! It is certainly not conceivable that anyone as rational as Gardner could entertain such a stange notion. But now I think you’ve made a very important historical discovery! Why don’t you publish it?

Ambrose: I am publishing it. It will appear in the June issue of the *Journal of the History of Science and Literature*. The title is “Gardner and Doyle”. I’ll send you a copy.

SCENE II - ONE HUNDRED YEARS LATER

Professor Broad: Did you get my paper, "Ambrose, Gardner, and Doyle"?

Professor Cranby: No; where did you send it?

Broad: To your Connecticut address.

Cranby: Oh; then I won't get it for a couple of days. What is it about?

Broad: Well, are you familiar with the Ambrose paper, "Gardner and Doyle"?

Cranby: No; I'm familiar with much of Ambrose's excellent work, but not this one. What is it about?

Broad: You know the twentieth century writer, Martin Gardner?

Cranby: Of course! I'm quite a fan of his. I think I have just about everything he ever wrote. Why do you ask?

Broad: Well, you remember his book, *Science: Good, Bad, and Bogus*?

Cranby: Oh, certainly.

Broad: And do you recall the chapter, "The Irrelevance of Conan Doyle"?

Cranby: Oh yes! As a matter of fact that is the strangest chapter of the book and is quite unlike anything else Gardner ever wrote. He seriously maintained that Conan Doyle never wrote the Sherlock Holmes stories.

Broad: Do *you* believe that Doyle wrote the Holmes stories?

Cranby: Of course! Why should I doubt it for one minute?

Broad: Then how do you answer Gardner's objection that no one with a mind so rational as to write the Holmes stories could possibly be so irrational as to get involved with spiritualism in the peculiarly anti-rational way that he did?

Cranby: Oh, come on now! That's no objection! It's obvious that Doyle, with all his brilliance, had an insane streak that simply got worse through the years. Of course, Doyle wrote the Sherlock Holmes stories!

Broad: I heartily agree!

Cranby: The one thing that puzzles me—and I remember that it puzzled me at the time—is how someone like Martin Gardner could ever have believed such an odd-ball thing!

Broad: Ah; that's the whole point of Ambrose's paper! His answer is simply that Gardner never wrote that chapter—the chapter is just a forgery.

Cranby: Good God! That's ridiculous! That's just as crazy as Gardner's idea that Doyle didn't write Holmes. Of course Gardner wrote that chapter!

Broad: Of course he did!

Cranby: But what puzzles me is how such a sober and reliable historian as Ambrose could ever believe that Gardner didn't write that chapter. How could he ever believe anything that bizarre?

Broad: Ah; that's where *my* paper comes in! I maintain that Ambrose never wrote that paper—it must be a complete forgery!

SCENE III - A Hundred Years Later

(To be supplied by the reader)

Discussion: How come this same Martin Gardner, so well known and highly respected for the mathematical games column he wrote for years for *Scientific American*, his numerous puzzle books, his annotated editions of *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Hunting of the Snark*, *The Ancient Mariner*, and *Casey at the Bat*—not to mention his religious novel, *The Flight of Peter Fromm*, and his *Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener*—how come he wrote such a crazy chapter as “The Irrelevance of Conan Doyle”?

This troubled me for a long time, until Martin kindly informed me that the whole thing was simply a hoax!

Martin is really great on hoaxes—for example, in his April 1975 column in *Scientific American*, he reported the discovery of a map that required five colors, an opening move in chess (pawn to Queen's rook four) that guaranteed a certain win for white, a discovery of a fatal flaw in the theory of relativity, and a lost manuscript proving that Leonardo da Vinci was the inventor of the flush toilet.

In Martin's book, *Whys and Wherefores* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), is reprinted a scathing review of his *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener* by a writer named George Groth. The review ends with the sentence “George Groth, by the way, is one of Gardner's pseudonyms.”