

W. S. Gilbert (1836-1911)

4 *General John*

The bravest names for fire and flames,
And all that mortal durst,
Were GENERAL JOHN and PRIVATE JAMES,
Of the Sixty-seventy-first.

GENERAL JOHN was a soldier tried, 5
A chief of warlike dons;
A haughty stride and a withering pride
Were MAJOR-GENERAL JOHN's.

A sneer would play on his martial phiz,
Superior birth to show; 10
"Pish!" was a favourite word of his,
And he often said "Ho! ho!"

FULL-PRIVATE JAMES described might be,
As a man of a mournful mind;
No characteristic trait had he 15
Of any distinctive kind.

From the ranks, one day, cried PRIVATE JAMES,
"OH! MAJOR-GENERAL JOHN,
I've doubts of our respective names,
My mournful mind upon. 20

"A glimmering thought occurs to me,
(Its source I can't unearth)
But I've a kind of notion we
Were cruelly changed at birth.

"I've a strange idea that each other's names 25
We've each of us here got on.
Such things have been," said PRIVATE JAMES.
"They have!" sneered GENERAL JOHN.

“My GENERAL JOHN, I swear upon
My oath I think ’tis so ——” 30

“Pish!” proudly sneered his GENERAL JOHN,
And he also said “Ho! ho!”

“My GENERAL JOHN! my GENERAL JOHN!
My GENERAL JOHN!” quoth he,
“This aristocratical sneer upon 35
Your face I blush to see!

“No truly great or generous cove
Deserving of them names,
Would sneer at a fixed idea that’s drove
In the mind of a PRIVATE JAMES!” 40

Said GENERAL JOHN, “Upon your claims
No need your breath to waste;
If this is a joke, FULL-PRIVATE JAMES,
It’s a joke of doubtful taste.

“But, being a private of doubtless worth, 45
If you feel certain quite
That we were probably changed at birth,
I’ll venture to say you’re right.”

So GENERAL JOHN as PRIVATE JAMES
Fell in, parade upon; 50
And PRIVATE JAMES, by change of names,
Was MAJOR GENERAL JOHN.

1867

(From *The “Bab” Ballads*. With Illustrations by the Author.
London: George Routledge & Sons, 1870)