An Inquiry into: "A Scandal in Bohemia"

Vol. XV No. 3 • December 5, 2024

"A Scandal in Bohemia" was first published in *The Strand Magazine* in July 1891. It is part of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

As the table shows, most of our chronologists are in agreement regarding the year in which this case took place. If indeed the year in which this case took place was 1889, as the majority of our experts think, then at the time Sherlock Holmes was 35 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 37.

A Scandal in Bohemia	
Chronologist	**Date of the Adventure**
Canon	Tuesday, March 20, 1888
Baring-Gould	Tuesday, May 20, 1887
Bell	Tuesday, March 22, 1888
Blakeney	Wednesday, March 20, 1889
Brend	March 1889
Christ	Wednesday, March 20, 1889
Dakin	March 1889
Folsom	Thursday, March 21, 1889
Hall	March 20, 1888
Keefauver	Tuesday March 20, 1888
Klinger	1889
Zeisler	Friday, March 22, 1889

Please note that Canon chronologists may differ on pivotal dates and comparative periods between cases, thus a simple majority is not necessarily correct. Most Canon scholars settle on a single chronologist's results for their research framework.

Main Characters:

Wilhelm Gottsreich Sigismond von Ormstein, king of Bohemia. Irene Adler, American opera singer, noted adventuress and King Wilhelm's former mistress. Godfrey Norton, English barrister who weds Irene.

Notable Quotes:

To Sherlock Holmes she is always the woman. I have seldom heard him mention her under any other name. In his eyes she eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex. It was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler. All emotions, and that one particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise but admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen, but as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position. He never spoke of the softer passions, save with a gibe and a sneer. They were admirable things for the observer—excellent for drawing the veil from men's motives and actions. But for the trained reasoner to admit such intrusions into his own delicate and finely adjusted temperament was to introduce a distracting factor which might throw a doubt upon all his mental results. Grit in a sensitive instrument, or a crack in one of his own high-power lenses, would not be more disturbing than a strong

emotion in a nature such as his. And yet there was but one woman to him, and that woman was the late Irene Adler, of dubious and questionable memory.

Holmes, who loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul, remained in our lodgings in Baker Street, buried among his old books, and alternating from week to week between cocaine and ambition, the drowsiness of the drug, and the fierce energy of his own keen nature.

"You see, but do not observe."

"It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts."

"She was a lovely woman, with a face that a man might die for."

It was not merely that Holmes changed his costume. His expression, his manner, his very soul seemed to vary with every fresh part that he assumed. The stage lost a fine actor, even as science lost an acute reasoner, when he became a specialist in crime.

Into Chronology's Quicksand

Regardless of the agreement amongst our chronologists, there are problems with this adventure's dating. Although Watson informs us that it took place in 1888, the learned Holmesian scholar D. Martin Dakin comments as follows:

> *Watson says it was in March 1888; but this must be changed to 1889. It was after Watson's marriage, which took place towards the end of 1888 or early in 1889—long enough after for him to have returned to practice and put on seven and a half pounds, but not too long for this to have been his first visit to his old friend. . . . March 1889 would be just about the right lapse of time. Any later date would not only mean too large a gap, but would mean that Watson's publication in July 1891 would have violated his promise of two years' secrecy given to the king—a period which would extend very conveniently from 1889 to 1891.*

The Perfect Machine?

Watson tells us that to Holmes "All emotions . . . were abhorrent to his cold, precise, but admirably balanced mind." To this he adds that our sleuth was "the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen."

Assuming he was not exaggerating it has always seemed to me that to a certain extent Watson missed the truth of the matter, which is peculiar, considering that he witnessed the opposite on more than one occasion. As we have seen in some of the other cases the Good Doctor has set down for us (3GAR immediately comes to mind), Holmes' soul was not permanently frozen in

some perpetual emotional Antarctic winter.

Undeniably, although an emotional Holmes would have been an entirely different sort of being, that would not have necessarily meant that his observational, deductive, and detecting abilities would have been compromised.

I often wonder whether Holmes might not have been dreadfully hurt—traumatized, even—by some kind of profound past emotional experience. This would go very far in explaining much about this defensive attitude and phobia towards becoming deeply involved with someone. This might also explain his occasional drug use.

The Remarkable Adventuress

One can state—without risk of equivocation—that Irene Adler is the most fascinating and rightfully celebrated woman in the entire Canon.

It is well to remember that this was a time when for the most part women—aside from their reproductive value—were viewed as being little more than a decoration, brittle creatures unworthy of the ballot, requiring the protection of the obviously more intelligent and capable males.

Lillie Langtry

Miss Adler displayed ample proof of her ability to make her own way, in her own terms, in a world that did not take her gender very seriously.

Regrettably for her reputation, the only few other women able to tackle a male-dominated world on their own with more than just a modicum of success were, well, adventuresses. Actresses like Lillie Langtry—one of King Edward VII's many mistresses—or Sarah Berhardt who never attempted to hide her many liaisons. There were also the high-level courtesans whom the French, with typical Gallic vitriol referred to as the *grandes horizontals*.

Apollonie Sabatier

They were rightfully considered the celebrities of their time. These pampered *demimondaines*, including Marie Duplessis, *La Présidente* (Apollonie Sabatier), *La Païva*, and Cora Pearl, led extravagant and influential lives. They amassed fortunes while entertaining royalty and the elite, and were known for their lavish lifestyles. Their influence extended beyond just their romantic entanglements; they were trendsetters in fashion, art, and society, often immortalized in paintings, literature, and music. Despite the societal constraints of the time, they wielded significant power and freedom, choosing their lovers and living lives that were the scandal—and envy—of their contemporaries.

These ladies did not solely inhabit 19th-century Paris, but London and other major capitals as well, becoming almost indistinguishable from the *haut monde,* with legendary reputations growing up around the most alluring and favored celebrities, perpetually pursued by gaggles of newspaper reporters who today we would call *paparazzi.*

Had there been an Internet back then, these ladies' fame and fawning following would have far surpassed that of any of today's so-called influencers who are famous for simply being famous, whose renown is often proportional to their talentless display of as many square inches of epidermis as is currently acceptable.

In Miss Adler's case, opera, like ballet, existed in a limbo of flexible degrees of respectability. Society granted prima donnas and prima ballerinas the benefit of the doubt, because they moved in higher, artistic spheres. However, the girls in the operatic chorus as well as the anonymous "ballet rats" who pranced around the likes of a Pavlova as her swan—much to the audience's relief—finally expired, were not considered exactly respectable and were therefore considered open game, with stage-door johnnies panting for them after each performance.

Although one only has scant details about the lady's life, if one only goes by what Watson wrote, it seems patently unfair for Irene Adler to have been referred to as an "adventuress," and described as having been "of dubious and questionable memory."

It is well to consider that everything that we know about her mostly comes from her antagonists' perspective.

We learn that she was a contralto of great talent because she sang at La Scala and was prima donna at the Imperial Opera of Warsaw before she retired from the operatic stage. She must have had a beautiful, crystalline voice. Having been fortunate enough to have known opera singers and well as ballet dancers, I know the steel-edged discipline that is necessary to succeed in such endeavors—this alone says much about Miss Adler's character.

La Scala

Regarding the extramarital relationship that is this case's centerpiece, if indeed she formed such an alliance, it is very likely that the first steps were taken by the King, just as the disgraceful way in which he dropped and later harassed her no doubt triggered what seemed a vengeful response.

He subjected her to the additional abuse of being waylaid and having her home burgled five times. It does not require a fertile imagination to understand why she would not have felt safe; especially knowing that sooner or later she would have to face the formidable Sherlock Holmes.

Obviously Holmes did not feel particularly proud at the end of the case. Not because she bested him, but because he realized what sort of a man the King was and to what extent he wronged Irene Adler; his refusal to shake the proffered noble hand gives ample proof of this. The King, for all his professed admiration towards his former mistress, comes across as a thirty-year-old spoiled brat; probably a revengeful one as well. It would not have been unexpected of him to later try to persecute her for having had the effrontery to love and marry someone else.

Holmes obviously came to respect Miss Adler for the extremely capable person that she was. This is proven by the fact that from then on, as Watson put it, she eclipsed and predominated the whole of her sex, which moved Holmes to refer to her "always under the honourable title of *the* woman."

But what about the lady herself? Did she find happiness with Godfrey Norton, her husband? Although she certainly deserved it there are indications that if she did it may have been short-lived.

It is very telling that she retired although she was the prima donna of a prestigious world-class opera house. I find this highly unusual because she was still young—only thirty-one at the time.

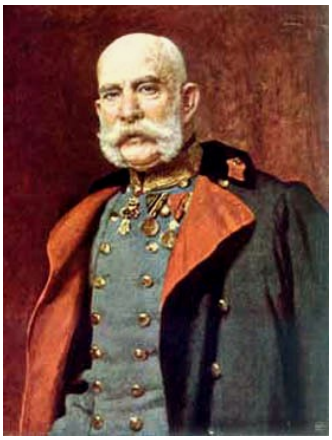
Why then would she have given up all that while she was at what had to have been the height of her powers? A likely explanation is that she was the victim of a terminal disease, most likely tuberculosis, which back then was rampant and incurable. This would have forced her to abandon a profession that requires well above average breath control and lung exertion.

Possibly this was a main reason behind her taking up with the King—a distraction from the painful realization that the great effort and strict discipline that she subjected herself to attain her operatic goal had been for nothing. It is not unlikely the Norton may have loved her from afar for quite some time and was happy to have her as his wife for whatever time she may have had left.

This would also explain Watson's reference to her as "the late Irene Adler."

The Highly Improbable "Great" Royal Scandal

Although Royals back then were expected to set an example and maintain appearances to an extent that would be completely foreign to their descendants today, the fact still remains that back in Good Queen Victoria's time there was considerable "Nod-nod-wink-wink" going on. It is possible that I may be missing some minor exalted noble husband, but if one considers the royal houses of the time, it is possible that Albert, the Prince-Consort was probably the only faithful husband of the lot.



Franz Joseph

The lives of Emperor Franz-Joseph and Crown Prince Rudolf, the Bonapartes (both Napoleon and Napoleon III) and others, show marital fidelity on the part of royalty was a hothouse rarity. Philandering husbands made several princesses and queens unwelcomed presents of STDs. And when it came to bachelor royalty, well, boys will be boys.

Napoleon III

When Wilhelm ostentatiously claims that what he is about to reveal to Holmes and Watson might influence European history, his main concern appears to center on the possibility that his little escapade with Irene could become known to the princess, who "is renowned by her delicacy," thus derailing the coming marriage. This naturally leads us to speculate that the life so far led by the would-be bride, Princess Clotilde, daughter of the King of Scandinavia would have made a cloistered nun seem like the worse of strumpets by comparison.

Just as farm boys and girls learn early in life that there is no such thing as the stork, princesses (and queens) back then were well-aware that almost without exception it wasn't only eyes that did the roving when it came to their male counterparts. One might wonder why a princess (or any woman as far

as that goes) then or now would be shocked almost to insensibility over the fact that bachelor males in good health are not averse to intimate female companionship.

Although the time was discreet, the realities—and abuses—of life were understood. Bertie's escapades (before and after his marriage) did not amuse Victoria, who was painfully aware of them. The Heir Apparent's (and later King's) amusements were shrugged off by his peers and the press. By the standards of the time, the unmarried King of Bohemia's activities with Irene Adler would have fallen far short from being classified a true scandal.

So the mystery remains regarding what would happen two years later that would have made the delicate by then Queen of Bohemia feel any less appalled.

The Unkingly King

Since the very beginning when Canons students and scholars began studying this case, much of the speculation has centered on the true identity of the so-called King of Bohemia.

The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 established the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary and both regions remained under the rule of Emperor Franz Joseph I; he was not only Emperor of Austria but also King of Bohemia, as well as King of Hungary.

Prince Rudolf of Austria

Some have suggested that the "king" was in reality the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, but his age and marital status pose a problem—at the time of the case in question, the heir to the British throne was 48, married, and not particularly attractive. It is unlikely that Irene, as I picture her, would have been inclined to engage in such a relationship with the heir to the British Empire.

Some view the Bohemian connection as pointing to Crown Prince Rudolf of Austria, a not very stable personality, who like so many of the nobility of the time was a carrier of syphilis. He would have been of the right age, but he was besotted with the foolish young Baroness Vetsera, whom he later shot dead, blowing off his own brains afterwards in the royal hunting lodge at Mayerling—on January 30, 1889, months before the dates postulated by our chronologists for our case.

Archduke Franz Ferdinand

This shifts the focus to a more likely candidate, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir presumptive to Emperor Franz Joseph's throne. In 1889 he was of the right age—25—and unmarried. It is not difficult to imagine his falling head-over-heels for Irene. He might have even loved her deeply enough to want to make her his wife; after all he was not the heir, only the spare, and the Emperor disliked and ignored him, considering him unfit for his position, much less the throne itself.

Rudolf's suicide would have turned everything upside down. Franz suddenly, unexpectedly (and very likely unwillingly), became Heir Apparent. He must have immediately come under pitiless scrutiny, with the powers-that-be deciding that he had to be respectably married and assume his new duties. Crushed by the enormous change in status and mercilessly pressured by what probably was the stuffiest court in Europe, he would have been forced to end his relationship with Irene and carry out his new duties.

Surely the whole matter could have been handled orders of magnitude better and far more discreetly and satisfactorily than it was, sparing Irene much grief and justifiable anger.

Sadly, the Archduke was performing those imposed duties a few years later, when he carried out an official visit to Sarajevo in 1914 and both he and his wife were assassinated, triggering what would become the First World War.

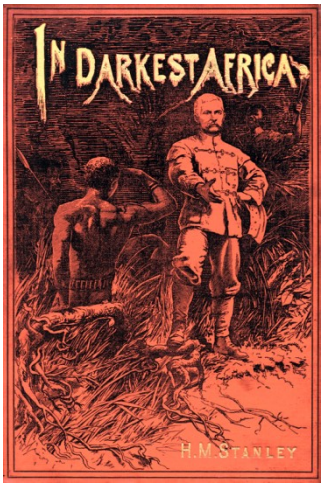
The Matter of the Fee

Although Holmes' charges limited themselves to Irene Adler's photograph (Irene's gold sovereign does not count because it was given to him by her in gratitude for serving as witness at her wedding: "I mean to wear it on my watch-chain in memory of the occasion") he may not have come up as dry as it seems.

Our sleuth already had in hand the £1,000 (≈$380,000) that the king provided for expenses, later to be augmented by the gift of a "small snuff-box of old gold, with a great amethyst in the centre of the lid."

What else happened in 1889:

Empire



Great Seal of the United Kingdom is affixed to the charter of the British South Africa Company. Company is assigned trading and other rights over a vast territory, with the express reservation to the Crown to take over at any time the works and buildings of the Company.

Transvaal claimed to be "encircled" by Rhodes' concessions in East Africa. Rhodesia established.

◄ At Cairo, Henry Stanley ends his three-year African expedition. He is knighted upon his return to England. Writes *In Darkest Africa*.

Colonel Woodehouse defeats Dervish horde in Sudan. General Grenfell, commanding British troops on the Nile attacks and defeats Dervish troops, with 500 killed and wounded, and as many taken prisoner.

The Canadian Pacific Railway is completed from coast to coast.

Britain

Great London Dockers' Strike; the "Dockers' Tanner"; growth of unskilled workers' unions; New Unionism; Gasworkers' Union formed. Strike is finally arbitrated in the workers' favor by the popular Catholic Cardinal Henry Manning.

Parnell vindicated as all charges are revealed as false. *The London Times* apologizes.

Clissold Park, Stoke Newington, opens.

Technical Education Act: County Councils to levy 1d for technical and manual education.

Establishment of the telephone company.

John Bright, orator and politician, leading spirit in the Anti-Corn Law League, dies.

Board of Agriculture becomes government department with minister.

Metropolitan Board of Works replaced by London County Council.

Clissold Park, Stoke Newington, opens.

◄ General Booth publishes *Survey of London Life and Labour*.

Early used of photographs in newspaper: *Illustrated London News* runs Cambridge and Oxford boat crews competition.

Woolwich Ferry starts.

White Hart Inn, Borough High Street, one of the last coaching inns, demolished.

Act to prevent cruelty to children.

Board of Agriculture becomes government department with minister.

World

Japan's Meiji constitution. Arinori Mori, minister of education assassinated by Shinto fanatic.

Wall Street Journal begins publishing.

Italy takes Somalia and Ethiopia. Yohannes IV (Kasa) Emperor of Ethiopia dies in battle.

Moulin Rouge opens in Paris.

North and South Dakota, Montana and Washington admitted as U.S.A. states.

U.S.A. Senate, in secret session, passes resolution declaring against European control of the Panama Canal.

Congress of French Revolutionary Labor Party at Bordeaux.

President Harrison, of the U.S.A., closes Bering Sea to all nations; issues proclamation prohibiting the killing of fur animals within Alaska without a special government permit.

◄ Crown Prince Archduke Rudolph of Austria-Hungary and Baroness Maria Vetsera are found dead at the hunting lodge of Mayerling, outside Vienna, allegedly a murder-suicide. (In 1983, former Austrian empress Zita claimed it was an assassination by two conspirators when Rudolf refused to take part in a plot to oust his father Emperor Franz Josef.)

Treaty of Acciali: Ethiopia made Italian protectorate.

Ivory Coast is declared a protectorate of France.

Part of Oklahoma Indian lands open to homesteading.

Portuguese under Pinto try to extend influence in Zambesi Valley; Anglo-Portuguese dispute.

End of Portuguese Empire in Brazil; republic proclaimed and Dom Pedro, the emperor, exiled.

Abdication of King Milan of Serbia; accession of Alexander.

Uprising in the island of Crete. Turkish authorities expelled and public archives destroyed. Turkey calls up 80,000 reservists, but promises to inquire into legitimate grievances.

Russian jurors to be nominated by government.

King Ferdinand II of Portugal dies at age 73.

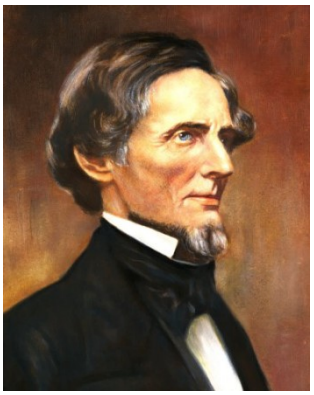
Stanley's expedition reaches Bagamoyo in Indian Ocean.

Aristocratic "Land Captains" replace elected JPs in Russia.

Father Damien, worker among lepers in Molokai, Hawaii, dies of the disease.

Influenza reaches Europe and America from Siberia.

General Boulanger, former French War Minister leaves country, addresses manifesto to his party that he left the country to avoid arrest, French Chambers authorize the Senate to try Boulanger and others in absentia, for high treason. The general and his staff are found guilty and condemned to life imprisonment.



◄ Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy dies in Mississippi.

Paris Exhibition: proof of industrial development in France. Continental monarchies abstain from all official representation. English and American ambassadors attend. Eiffel Tower built for the event is dedicated in a ceremony presided over by Gustave Eiffel, the designer, and attended by French Prime Minister Pierre Tirard. At 985 feet high, taller than the Great Pyramid, the Eiffel Tower becomes highest structure on Earth.

Lectures at Dorpat University to be in Russian; German forbidden in schools.

Brunner-Mond Salt Union formed; combine of 64 firms.

Private tolls abolished on French Canals.

New York World's Nellie Bly (Liz Cochrane) begins world trip to beat Jules Verne's Phileas Fogg (*Around the World in 80 Days*). Takes 72 days.

The Pemberton Medicine Company (later the Coca-Cola Company), is incorporated in Atlanta, Georgia.

Work on Panama Canal stopped; French company bankrupt, U.S.A. takes over, finishes canal.

Johnstown flood kills more than 6,000, losses climb to $40,000,000.

◄ Civil war in Haiti ends. General Légitime defeated by General Hippolyte, who becomes president.

Bismarck introduces Old Age Insurance in Germany.

Erection of Tacoma Building in Chicago. First skyscraper, 13 storeys high.

Mirza Ghulam Ahmad establishes the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, a reform sect of Islam.

Conference at Berlin guarantees an autonomous government to the Samoan Islands under the joint control of the United States, Great Britain, and Germany.

Art

Sir James Barrie's *A Window in Thrums,* sketches of Scottish village life.

Robert Browning publishes *Asolando,* a poem. Dies later in the year.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle publishes *A Sign of Four.*

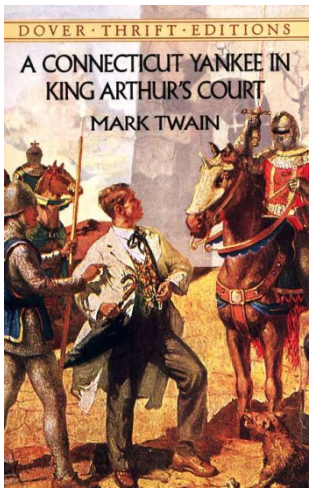
Jerome K. Jerome publishes stories, *Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow, Three Men in a Boat.*

Robert Louis Stevenson publishes *Master of Ballantrae.*

William Butler Yeats publishes *The Wanderings of Oisin.*

Paul Bourget publishes *Le Disciple,* a psychological novel.

Gerhart J. Hauptmann publishes *Vor Sonnenaufgang,* German realistic play.



Sudermann publishes *Die Ehre,* a German play.

Dvorak presents *Symphony No. 4 in G Major.*

◄ Mark Twain publishes *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.*

Gilbert and Sullivan present *The Gondoliers.*

Renoir paints *Girls Picking Flowers.*

Seurat paints *The Side Show.*

Van Gogh paints *Man with a Pipe* (self-portrait), *The Olive Grove,* and *Starry Night.*

Cézanne paints *Harlequin.*

Tchaikovsky introduces *The Sleeping Princess* ballet.

Richard Strauss introduces *Tod und Verklärung,* tone poem.

Science and Technology

Hollerith's punched-card system widely used in industry.

First ship-to-shore wireless message is received in the U.S., at San Francisco.

The first General Conference on Weights and Measures (CGPM) defines the length of a meter as the distance between two lines on a standard bar of an alloy of platinum with ten percent iridium, measured at the melting point of ice.

Eastman's Kodak camera comes into production, using photographic film.

◄ The brassiere is invented.

Astronomical Society of Pacific holds first meeting in San Francisco, California.

Ferdinand von Zeppelin patents his "Navigable Balloon."

The first jukebox makes its debut at the Palais Royale Saloon in San Francisco, California. For a nickel, one can listen to a few minutes of music through a tube of an Edison tinfoil phonograph.

First dishwashing machine marketed in Chicago.

Mering and Minkowski show that the pancreas prevents diabetes.

In Potsdam, Germany, Ernst von Rebeur-Paschwitz makes the first known recordings of a distant earthquake, taken place in Tokyo, Japan, an hour earlier.

Daniel Stover and William Hance patent bicycle with back pedal brake.

William Gray patents coin-operated telephone.

First linotype machine in use.

Thomas Edison shows his first motion picture.

Aspirin patented in Germany by Bayer Laboratories, first introduced in powder form.

Panhard and Levassor begin using Daimler's engines in French cars, using modern layout.

Next week's case: REDH.

Respectfully submitted,

Murray, the Courageous Orderly

(a.k.a. Alexander E. Braun, Master of Hounds)
"I should have fallen into the hands of the
murderous Ghazis had it not been for the
devotion and courage shown by Murray,
my orderly..."

All Sherlock Holmes photos have been published by courtesy of ITV Granada.

If you would like to join the Hounds of the Internet, email us at CourageousMurray@aol.com.

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