An Inquiry into: "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle"

Vol. XIV No. 12 • December 21, 2023

"The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle" first appeared in *Collier's Weekly Magazine* on January 1892 and in *The Strand Magazine* on the same date. It is part of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

The table below reflects that this adventure's chronology varies, depending on the Canon expert. If the case indeed took place in 1889, as most of our chronologists state, then Holmes would have been 35 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 37.

Main Characters:

Henry Baker, former academic, British Museum frequenter, partial to spirits. Peterson, a commissionaire known to Holmes. The Countess of Morcar, the wealthy owner of the fabled blue carbuncle. Catherine Cussack, lady-in-waiting to Countess Morcar. Breckinridge, a poultry merchant at the Covent Garden market. John Horner, plumber framed with the robbery of the blue carbuncle. James Ryder, felonious head-attendant at the Hotel Cosmopolitan, and the jeweled goose.

The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle

Chronologist	Date of the Adventure
Canon	December 27
Baring-Gould	Tuesday, December 27, 1887
Bell	Friday, December 27, 1889
Blakeney	Christmas 1889
Brend	December 1889
Christ	Saturday, December 27, 1890
Dakin	Friday, December 27, 1889
Folsom	Friday, December 27, 1889
Hall	December 27, 1889
Keefauver	Friday, December 27, 1889
Klinger	1889
Zeisler	Friday, December 27, 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.

Notable Quotes:

"Only one of those whimsical little incidents which will happen when you have four million human beings all jostling each other within the space of a few square miles."

"You know my methods."

"On the contrary, Watson, you can see everything. You fail, however, to reason from what you see. You are too timid in drawing your inferences."

"My name is Sherlock Holmes. It is my business to know what other people don't know."

"After all, Watson, I am not retained by the police to supply their deficiencies."

"I suppose that I am commuting a felony, but it is just possible that I am saving a soul."

"Besides, it is the season of forgiveness."

Quote for the Season:

"Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers. All other things, our powers, our desires, our food, are all really necessary for our existence in the first instance. But this rose is an extra. Its smell and its colour are an embellishment of life, not a condition of it. It is only goodness which gives extras, and so I say again that we have much to hope from the flowers."

The Missing Crime

Unquestionably, Watson was disappointed when Holmes told him that Henry Baker's battered hat was unconnected to any kind of crime. This led the Good Doctor to observe (perhaps with a sigh) that, "of the last six cases which I have added to my notes, three have been entirely free of any legal crime."

It is interesting to consider that in fifteen of the Great Detective's recorded cases—fully one quarter of the total—no crime took place. In nine of these, there was no legal crime; in six, Holmes prevented the crime from taking place. There are also four cases of with acts which fell within the purview of the law, although not of a criminal nature: three cases of justifiable homicide and one of death by mischance. The unrecorded case of the "Irene Adler Papers" would seem to fall within the lot that, unfortunately, Watson chose not to write about.

At the beginning of the present case it appears as if it is going to fall into the crimeless category. It starts off as a curiosity which, as Holmes put it, "will happen when you have four million human beings all jostling each other within the space of a few square miles." Commissionaire Peterson, "knowing that even the smallest problems are of interest to me," had brought the goose and the hat to the Great Detective; however, neither of them had the slightest inkling that this seemingly minor incident would have had a connection with a major felony.

Still, I must wonder which aspect of the original incident could have led Peterson to think that an altercation involving some ruffians who forced an elderly man to defend himself and inadvertently break a shop window could be of any interest to Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street. Fortunately, as it turned out, it led to one of our sleuth's most intriguing cases, which became a showcase for his brilliant detecting.

Holmes' very offhand deductions about Baker from his simple examination of the man's hat surely must stand as one of the paramount examples of his deductive abilities, comparable to the correct and painful conclusions that he derived from the elder Watson's watch in SIGN.

This more than explains why we all wish we were like him.

Determining the Price of Priceless

Although the written scholarship spent in determining the true nature of the jewel known as the Blue Carbuncle would not fill a library, it would certainly bulge the shelves of a fairly large room. Canon scholars who are acquainted with the field of gemology—which is unique in that it's interwoven with the world of jewelry, giving it the quality of being an art as well as a science— disagree that the jewel could have been a carbuncle arguing that a carbuncle is a garnet and no such thing as a blue garnet exists.

Holmes refers to the jewel as a piece of crystallized charcoal which would undoubtedly have made it a diamond. Peterson's statement that it could cut into glass is not definitive because there are other hard stones that can also easily cut glass; for example, sapphires and rubies are a close second to the diamond in hardness, and emeralds come in third place.

Regardless of what sort of crystallized bauble it really was, we know that it was a 40-grain gem, which would be roughly equivalent to 13 carats, and about 15 mm (bean-sized). The question of its true value is far more difficult to unravel, because most famous stones (and this one definitely was one of them) often exceed their true value simply because of their provenance and history. For example, a ruby known to have been a favorite of Queen Elizabeth I would command a price far in excess of its intrinsic value.

From what Holmes tells us, ("It is absolutely unique, and its value can only be conjectured, but we are further informed that regardless of its value the owner, the Countess of Morcar, would willingly "part with half of her fortune" to recover it and she has offered a very large reward of £1000 [≈$380,000] for its return). Holmes then adds that "the reward offered is certainly not within a twentieth part of the market price"). This gives us at least a starting point to determine value: £20,000 would be the equivalent of almost $8,000,000 today.: £1,000 or approximately $400,000 in today's currency.

To compare the Blue Carbuncle's worth to that of a diamond of similar size, it is necessary to start from the premise that the cost per carat for a Gemological Institute of America (GIA) certified diamond today can range from $16,800 to $224,500 (£45 to £600 back in Holmes' time). The average wholesale price for a high quality 10-carat diamond falls between $167,200 and $2,245,100. In

Queen Victoria's time this would have been the equivalent of £450 and £6,000. Compared to the stated value of the Blue Carbuncle, this almost seems like loose change.

Thus, the value assigned to the jewel in question would appear to make it worth about ten times more than its apparent intrinsic value.

Hiding the Carbuncle

The Canon seems plagued by an unusually large number of people who prefer dresser drawers (e.g., BERY) and other as equally fragile and unsafe places to a steel safe whenever they wish to store something of great value. Even so, one must perennially wonder what the countess was thinking when she left an item of such priceless worth--both sentimental and actual—in a hotel room's bureau drawer instead of the hotel safe. Another unanswered question is why, it being a loose jewel--i.e., no setting that would make it possible to wear, therefore making it necessary to be carried in a pocket or purse.

Leaving aside the question of why someone would carry such a treasure everywhere he or she went, instead of keeping it in a safe—whether personal, a bank's, or even the hotel safe—would leave it instead in jewel box on top of a dresser in a hotel room. Perhaps the Countess of Morcar was well into her dotage.

This, of course, brings us to James Ryder, one of the Canon's dumbest crooks.

Like the Countess, Ryder was also afflicted by an acute inability to find a safe place where to stash his loot. It beggars the imagination that someone who was sharp enough to figure how to steal the gem while procuring a fall guy for his crime, did not come up with a better hiding place than a goose's innards. And, speaking of innards, his own, personal insides would have been a better place with a far better outcome (apologies for the pun) than what he got.

The hotel that the Countess resided in was a grand one—comparable to the Waldorf-Astoria in New York, or the St. Francis in San Francisco. Ryder had to know the hotel like the palm of his hand and should have realized that the safe places in which he could have hidden a bean-sized object were factually countless. As head attendant he had access to areas and places where the police would never have thought of looking, even if they have had the manpower to institute a thorough search of every last corner of the establishment.

Why not just drop it down a washbasin where it would have lain safe within the elbow joint?

Instead, he chose to shove it down the throat of a poor, defenseless *Anser anser domesticus*.

Henry Baker's Destitute Circumstances

Of all the unfortunates who we have met on the pages of the Canon, the one most tragic and most to be pitied seems to be Henry Baker.

Perhaps correctly, Watson's surmised that he had to be "a man of learning and letters who had ill usage at the hands of fortune."Added to Holmes' deductions about the miserable, candle-lit hovel where the elderly former scholar lived, enduring a bleak marital life with someone who had ceased to love him (but whom he was still trying to please), make him a very pathetic creature.

On top of all these misfortunes is the added burden that such a man would have been particularly sensitive to the foundering of his life. This is partly confirmed by his feeble attempts to maintain a modicum of respectability through a weak attempt to disguise with ink his hat's worn and discolored spots.

It is not farfetched to imagine that before whatever befell him, derailing his life, he might have been a respected headmaster, or even a professor in one of the universities. Instead, he suffered through a three-year steep collapse in his fortunes, which limited him to only a single battered hat and buying a Christmas goose on the installment plan.

And what might he have done to obtain those "not so plentiful shillings"? Canon scholar D. Martin Dakin speculates that he might have ended as a hack writer doing research for others; perhaps even a bit of ghostwriting for students. This would explain the time he spent at the Museum. Conceivably, however, much of that time spent there might have been to share—albeit vicariously—in an atmosphere of books and learning reminiscent of his past life.

Henry Baker lived with the pain of knowing who he had been and no longer was.

Advertising for Mr. Henry Baker

Even if one were to concede that the loss of his only hat and the goose weighed economically heavy upon Baker's shoulders, how likely is it that he would have responded to Holmes' advertisement?

Our sleuth advertised because he assumed that Baker "is sure to keep his eyes on the papers, since, to a poor man, the loss was a heavy one." While it is true that this brought Baker to Baker Street, is it logical? After all, he found himself hatless and gooseless because he abandoned his property propelled by a fear of being arrested for breaking a shop window.

In all probability, he could have thought that the advertisement might be a ruse by the shop owner or even the police to lure the perpetrator of that crime.

The Matter of the Reward

Nobody can deny that Sherlock Holmes is a careful and thorough man. One has only to consider his efforts to ensure that there could be no argument regarding his rightful possession of the sixth Napoleon bust and its content in SIXN. To be paid, the unsuspecting owner of the loaded bust had to sign a bill of sale that transferred all of his possible rights to the Great Detective.

In the present case, however, because the question of possession is not as clear leads one to speculate who got the £1,000 reward. Although it could be argued that Peterson (or more accurately, Mrs. Pe-

terson) as the discoverer of the jewel ought to be entitled to the reward, he surrendered control of the gem to Holmes, who then took possession and placed it in his personal safe; in fact, he informed the countess (and not the police) that her bauble had been found. This clearly would have put him as the reward's leading claimant.

Some maintain that this is why was so willing to drop a sovereign (≈$400) to get Breckinridge, the contrary poultry wholesaler to give him the information he needed about the bird's origin.

I suspect, nevertheless, that everything that Holmes did was done with the final intention of having the reward go to Peterson.

I would also like to think that perhaps the Spirit of Christmas Present whispered Henry Baker's name in his ear, and that some portion of that reward, however small, went to supplement his meager supply of shillings.

It is unsettling to consider how things would have turned out today, in our overly litigious society. I see a hapless Henry Baker, like the blind soothsayer Phineus, surrounded by an army of three-piece-suit Harpies insisting in representing him for 30% of the amount recovered, plus expenses.

The Rescued Soul

Interestingly enough, this is the first instance in the canonically recorded cases, in which Holmes proceeded to compound a felony by exercising his own sense of justice tempered by compassion, when he allowed Ryder to go unpunished. By rights, he should have turned him over to the authorities as the true robber of the gem. His excuse was "I am not retained by the police to supply their deficiencies."

However, he gave himself away: "I suppose that I am commuting a felony, but it is just possible that I am saving a soul."

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

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

Clissold Park, Stoke Newington, opens.

◄ 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.

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 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.*

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

◄ Gilbert and Sullivan present *The Gondoliers.*

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.*

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.

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.

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

The brassiere is invented.

First dishwashing machine marketed in Chicago.

Mering and Minkowski show that the pancreas prevents diabetes.

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: COPP.

Respectfully submitted,

Murray, the Courageous Orderly

(a.k.a. Alexander E. Braun)

"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.