



*An Inquiry into:  
"The Yellow Face"*

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"The Yellow Face" was first published in *The Strand Magazine* in February 1893. It is part of *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*.

As the table shows, the chronology for this case is quite mixed. Because no date is in the majority, I find it prob-

lematical to accept the dates posted by most of our chronologists. I therefore rely on D. Martin Dakin's estimate in *A Sherlock Holmes Commentary*:

*It was early spring when the elm-tree shoots and chestnut buds were just coming out, so this must mean some time in April. There is no indication of the year, except that it is before the Watson marriage; but in April 1883 Holmes and Watson were busy with Helen Stoner and Dr. Roylott, and in April 1887 with the Reigate squires; and as they are said to have known each other intimately, 1885 or 1886 seems more suitable than 1882 or even 1884. On the other hand, if the yellow fever epidemic of 1878 was that in which Hebron, Effie's first husband, died, then, as the Munros had been married three years, the case would have to be in 1882.*

<i>The Yellow Face</i>	
<i>Chronologist</i>	<i>Date of the Adventure</i>
<i>Canon</i>	<i>A Thursday in early Spring</i>
<i>Baring-Gould</i>	<i>Saturday, April 7, 1888</i>
<i>Bell</i>	<i>Saturday, April 8, 1882</i>
<i>Blakeney</i>	<i>1881 or 1887</i>
<i>Brend</i>	<i>March 1882</i>
<i>Christ</i>	<i>Saturday, April 7, 1883</i>
<i>Dakin</i>	<i>Possibly April 1886</i>
<i>Folsom</i>	<i>Saturday in April 1888</i>
<i>Hall</i>	<i>Early Spring 1886</i>
<i>Keefauver</i>	<i>Saturday, March 29, 1884</i>
<i>Klinger</i>	<i>1888</i>
<i>Zeisler</i>	<i>Saturday, early April 1885 or 1886</i>

*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.*

Thus, if the case took place in 1882, as Mr. Dakin posits, Sherlock Holmes would have been 28 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 30.

## *Main Characters:*

Grant “Jack” Munro, a successful hop merchant residing in Norbury, current husband of Effie. Effie Munro, Grant’s wife, who was previously married in Atlanta, to John Hebron. John Hebron, Effie’s now deceased first husband, a successful American lawyer. Lucy Hebron, Effie and John Hebron’s daughter.

## *Notable Quotes:*

In publishing these short sketches based upon the numerous cases in which my companion’s singular gifts have made us the listeners to, and eventually the actors in, some strange drama, it is only natural that I should dwell rather upon his successes than upon his failures. And this not so much for the sake of his reputation—for, indeed, it was when he was at his wit’s end that his energy and his versatility were most admirable—but because where he failed it happened too often that no one else succeeded, and that the tale was left forever without a conclusion. Now and again, however, it chanced that even when he erred the truth was still discovered.



Sherlock Holmes was a man who seldom took exercise for exercise’s sake. Few men were capable of greater muscular effort, and he was undoubtedly one of the finest boxers of his weight that I have ever seen; but he looked upon aimless bodily exertion as a waste of energy, and he seldom bestirred himself save where there was some professional object to be served. Then he was absolutely untiring and indefatigable. That he should have kept himself in training under such circumstances is remarkable,

but his diet was usually of the sparest, and his habits were simple to the verge of austerity. Save for the occasional use of cocaine, he had no vices, and he only turned to the drug as a protest against the monotony of existence when cases were scanty and the papers uninteresting.

For two hours we rambled about together, in silence for the most part, as befits two men who know each other intimately.

## *An Interesting Observation*

Because at this time in his career Holmes could not have been short in funds, his remark that he “was badly in need of a case,” added to his irritation when he learns that Grant Munro left before their arrival, shows that he was being attacked by his old Nemesis, Boredom.

Holmes makes an interesting remark to Munro, when he states that lack of sleep “tries a man’s nerves more than work, and even more than pleasure.” Pleasure? It seems obvious to Canon students that our sleuth’s work was the most important thing in his life; it is not farfetched to slightly stretch a point and consider that his work was his source of pleasure. Tobacco was necessary to get the brain gear turning, while the occasional use of drugs was a result of a lack of work,

Still, he clearly separates both—work and pleasure. It gives one pause to think. What could have been considered pleasurable for the Great Detective? Certainly not food, company, or love of nature.

Truly a three-pipe problem...

## *The Munros' Financial Circumstances*

This is another case in which we derive the great pleasure of seeing Holmes at his best. A simple, everyday object is sufficient for him to formulate a complex set of deductions about the owner. I refer, of course, to Munro's forgotten pipe. Of course, he has to clear up our puzzlement by explaining how he arrived at his conclusions.



A little research shows that, peculiarly enough, the price of a good pipe has not altered much. Today, a pipe of the quality of Munro's, for which he paid 7s 6d ( $\approx$ \$130 today), is available for about \$100. A 12-ounce tin of good pipe tobacco sells for about \$30 now. The 8d extra excellent mentioned by Holmes would average about \$140 today. Holmes' remark that Munro ". . . might get an excellent smoke for half the price," indicates that, truly, the man "has no need to practise economy."

A quick survey of the Munros' finances underscores this. Effie's first husband, we are told, left her comfortably off with a capital of about £4,500 ( $\approx$ \$1,700,000). It was so well-invested that it returned an annual average of 7%, or £315 ( $\approx$ \$120,000).

Munro himself had an average yearly income of £1,100 ( $\approx$ \$410,000). Added to his wife's returns, it puts their returns at £1,415 ( $\approx$ \$530,000). Paying £80 ( $\approx$ \$30,000) a year for their Norbury villa required no effort on their part.

However well-off they were, though I think that a check for £100 ( $\approx$ \$40,000) would not have been so obtained without Effie providing a more complete explanation.

## *Effie Munro's Tale*

Whenever we discuss this case, I get the feeling that either Mrs. Munro or Watson chose not to tell the complete story.

Considering the times, there would have been few—if any—places in the United States where an interracial couple could have peacefully and publicly settled down. Certainly, none of the southern states, still rankling over the results of the catastrophic Civil War well within living memory would have been welcoming. The sad truth is that this would have also applied to the northern states as well.



To live as husband and wife and raise a family, they probably would have had to consider moving to another country. France, possibly Canada, Morocco, or some of the British colonies would have been more (although not completely) welcoming.

The biology of the matter has been discussed to distraction by generations of Canon scholar. Unless John Hebron came to the United States from Africa or a place like Haiti, he could not have claimed pure African ancestry; no American black could. It seems likely, that Hebron's descent was not quite pure. Watson himself seems to recognize this when he tells us that Effie touched a spring in her locket, ". . . and the front hinged back. There was a portrait within of a man strikingly handsome and intelligent-looking, but bearing unmistakable signs upon his features of his African descent."

The key here is "bearing unmistakable signs upon his features of his African descent." This does not sound as if he were describing someone of pure African descent.

Therefore, genetically it seems highly unlikely that if Lucy had been Effie's daughter she could have turned out "coal-black." This leads one to wonder, what was the real story?

### *Satisfying and Yet Not*

Some might consider this an unsatisfactory case: there was no crime or criminals involved, and although Holmes was at his deductive best, he most definitely did not solve the actual mystery.

Watson's decision to write it down for us was the correct one—regardless of results, Holmes was brilliant. I think that the intent of our biographer was not to show us the "reasoning machine," but a very human side of his companion. Like the rest of us, Sherlock Holmes was a mortal—that there were times when he could be utterly wrong about something. Unlike his elder brother, omniscience was not his specialism, and he made no pretense to it.

The Good Doctor also reveals to us that our sleuth was no stranger to humility.

### *What else happened in 1882:*

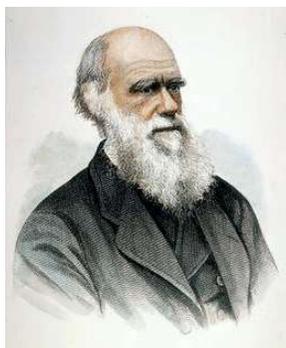
#### *Empire*

Occupation of Egypt—British bombard Alexandria and capture Cairo.

Queen Victoria gives Epping Forest to the nation.

London Chamber of Commerce established.

#### *Britain*



Phoenix Park murders.

Fenians murder British Secretary Cavendish.

Women receive the right of separate property ownership after marriage.

◀ Charles Darwin dies.

Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand open.

Alhambra Theatre in Leicester Square burns down.

Tottenham Hotspur football team formed.

#### *World*

Italy, Germany, and Austria-Hungary form the Triple Alliance.

The first Labor Day in the U.S.A., later becomes a national holiday.

Knights of Columbus is founded in New Haven.

Three-mile limit for territorial waters agreed upon at Hague Convention.

## *Art*



English novelist, Anthony Trollope dies.

Dante Rossetti of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood dies.

Ignatius Donnelly publishes *Allantis* claiming the lost continent actually existed.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow dies.

◀ Ralph Waldo Emerson dies.

Cézanne paints *Self-portrait*.

Ibsen publishes *An Enemy of the People*.

Wagner completes his final work, *The Parsifal*.

## *Science and Technology*

Edison designs first hydroelectric station in U.S.

Hiram Maxim patents recoil-operated machine gun.

Nicholas Tesla develops theory of alternating current (AC).

Thomas Edison patents the three-wire electrical system still in use.

Schuyler S. Wheeler invents the electric fan.

Joseph Breuer begins hypnosis treatments and begins psychoanalysis.

Koch isolates the bacterium responsible for tuberculosis.

First motion picture used in France.

## *Next week's case: STOC*

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..."

**If you would like to join the Hounds of the Internet, email us at [CourageousMurray@aol.com](mailto:CourageousMurray@aol.com).**

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