



An Inquiry into: "The Adventure of the Dancing Men"

Vol. XII No. 69 • December 30, 2021

"The Adventure of the Dancing Men" was first published in *The Strand Magazine* and *Collier's Weekly Magazine*, in December 1903. It is part of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

Untypically, as may be seen on the table, our chronol-

ogists are in agreement as to the year in which this adventure took place.

The year being 1898, then at the time Sherlock Holmes was 44 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 46.

Main Characters:

Hilton Cubitt, the squire of Ridling Thorpe Manor, Norfolk. Elsie Cubitt, wife of Hilton, *née* Elsie Patrick. Inspector Martin, detective from the Norfolk Constabulary. Abe Slaney, a notorious Chicago gangster who was once a pretender to Elise's hand; Wilson Hargreave, member of the New York Police Bureau.

Notable Quotes:

"Every problem becomes very childish when once it is explained to you."

"I am fairly familiar with all forms of secret writings, and am myself the author of a trifling monograph upon the subject, in which I analyze one hundred and sixty separate ciphers."

"I should be proud to feel that we were acting together, Mr. Holmes."

"What one man can invent another can discover."

"It is a privilege to be associated with you in the handling of a case,"

"Mr. Sherlock Holmes, I only hope that if ever again I have an important case I shall have the good fortune to have you by my side."

<i>The Adventure of the Dancing Men</i>	
<i>Chronologist</i>	<i>Date of the Adventure</i>
<i>Canon</i>	<i>1889 or 1899</i>
<i>Baring-Gould</i>	<i>Wednesday, July 27, 1898</i>
<i>Bell</i>	<i>July 1898</i>
<i>Blakeney</i>	<i>August 1898</i>
<i>Brend</i>	<i>July 1898</i>
<i>Christ</i>	<i>Wednesday, July 27, 1898</i>
<i>Dakin</i>	<i>July 1898</i>
<i>Folsom</i>	<i>Thursday, July 28, 1898</i>
<i>Hall</i>	<i>End of July 1898</i>
<i>Keefauver</i>	<i>Monday, July 25, 1898</i>
<i>Klinger</i>	<i>1898</i>
<i>Zeisler</i>	<i>Wednesday, July 27, 1898</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.

But First a Touch of Nostalgia...



Watson's Investment



If the word “perennial” has any meaning, surely it applies to our enduring delight over the Great Detective’s abilities and methods. Regardless of how many times one has climbed up those seventeen steps, Sherlock Holmes’ deductions and conclusions are truly an evergreen.

Our sleuth’s solid chain of deductions leading to the correct conclusion that Watson was not going to invest in South African securities as Thurston suggested rings clear and pure in each link. One can find little blame in Holmes suggesting to the Good Doctor that he should first get a written affidavit testifying to his

original complete astonishment over his conclusion, promising that he would not shrug it off as simple once it is explained to him.

There can be little question that, exercising all the delicacy of a surgeon, Watson enjoyed slyly sticking his scalpel into Holmes' ego and slightly twisting it with his exclamation of "How absurdly simple!" Is there anyone among us who has not had a similar reaction? Holmes' deductions are so straightforward, logical, and simple when he tells us how he arrived at the conclusion, that we all should be able to as easily arrive at such conclusions; after all, the process (once explained) is uncomplicated and effortless.

Yet, like Watson, we fail to arrive at the facts, hopelessly derailed by our lack of ability to think things out the way our sleuth does. We are, all of us, Watson.

In the final instance, this is not such a bad thing to be.

The Lady without Shame

According to what Hilton Cubitt told Holmes regarding how he met Elsie and fell in love with her to the point of marriage, when he proposed she stated that although she had never done anything to be personally ashamed of, she "had some very disagreeable associations" in her life which she wished to forget. Then she extracted from him the promise that if they were to marry, he would never ask about her past. Even in our own considerably more informal times such a request would be unusual and give one pause to think. Back then, especially in the case of a Victorian gentleman who could trace his family tree as having resided in the same county for five centuries, this should have created an unbreachable wall.

Hilton himself recognizes the union's oddness: "You'll think it very mad, Mr. Holmes, that a man of a good old family should marry a wife in this fashion, knowing nothing of her past or of her people."

Then, as if realizing the imprudence of his situation he emphasizes, "I am only a simple Norfolk squire, but there is not a man in England who ranks his family honour more highly than I do. She knows it well, and she knew it well before she married me. She would never bring any stain upon it—of that I am sure." How could he ever be sure of what he states? Surely, Elsie's refusal to reveal any aspect of her past life would have offered him slim proof.

The fact that Cubitt went ahead and married her anyway, regardless of her dubious antecedents, clearly indicated that he had fallen head over heels in love with her, feeling that he could not be happy without her.

Regardless of the undeniable reality that Cubitt was an honorable gentleman from head to toe, he acted most peculiarly. Aside from the issue that he married someone who barely was more than just a casual acquaintance without knowing anything about her, his reaction after Elsie—now his beloved

wife—receives the first letter is strange to say the least. He observes that she turns white, and never again knows an easy hour. Then the dancing men messages begin to proliferate, making everything



worse. He repeatedly tells us how deeply in love he was with his wife—did not seeing her like that raise deep concern and alarm?

Some might justifiably view his behavior as a result of the code of honor which made him keep his promise of not asking his wife about her past. However, it is unnatural in such a caring husband. Who among us, under similar circumstances, would not have exerted great efforts to determine what the source of her horror was? Especially after she fainted and lived in terror because of the sundial letter. Instead, he brings in a total stranger to intrude in his family affairs, not even trying to directly take a hand in the matter, especially later, when she stops him from going after the mysterious stranger in the garden!

The Cipher Expert

Our sleuth boasts that, “I am fairly familiar with all forms of secret writings and am myself the author of a trifling monograph upon the subject, in which I analyze one hundred and sixty separate ciphers,



but I confess that this is entirely new to me.” One is tempted to say, “For shame, Mr. Holmes!”

How is it possible that the man who demonstrated such talent in GLOR and MUSG, for example, have been capsized by a simple substitution code? If we are to believe Watson, he spent some two hours “in intricate and elaborate calculations.”

Intricate and elaborate? During the era of high volume publishing and hot type spewed from countless linotype machines it seems impossible to believe that Holmes would have unacquainted with the magical invocation, ETAOIN SHRDLU, (the secret weapon of every successful “Hangman” contestant), which provides the 12 most common letters in the English language from most to least used.

Before computerized publishing, linotype machines had a keyboard different to the familiar QWERTY scheme. Typing down the first and then second left-hand vertical banks of six keys produced the words etaoin shrldu; linotype machines were often tested this way. Sometimes a careless operator would not discard these test lines, and ETAOIN SHRDLU would mysteriously crop up in published material, giving rise to sundry conspiracy theories. The full sequence is ETAOIN SHRDLU CMFGYP WBVKXJ QZ.

QUEENSDAL ETAOIN SHRDLU
QUEENSLAND SEPARATION.
Mr. J. F. Hogan, M.P., secretary of the Colonial Party, has decided to ask the Secretary of State for the Colonies (Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain) to re-consider during the recess the question of Central Queensland separation. Mr. Chamberlain refused to move in the matter.

Mr. J. F. Hogan, M.P., secretary of the Colonial Party, has decided to ask the Secretary of State for the Colonies (Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain) to re-consider during the recess the question of Central Queensland separation. Mr. Chamberlain refused to move in the matter.



I can only conclude that in reality the cipher was far more complex than Watson let on. He may not have wanted to burden us by going into its true nature and provide a long (and most likely dull) description of how Holmes broke it.

Perhaps Holmes' perennial complaint was not too off the mark: "You have degraded what should have been a course of lectures into a series of tales."

Not a Shining Example

Regardless of the brilliance of Holmes' deductions, in this case he is not at his best. Sadly, we are reminded of FIVE, in which his decision not to act on what were obviously perilous circumstances with



which he was acquainted, resulted in his client being murdered by the KKK. As he lamented to Watson in that instance, about his murdered client, "That he should come to me for help, and that I should send him away to his death!"

In the present case again a solid argument can be made that if Holmes had not delayed taking action on facts he already knew, Hilton Cubitt would not have been killed. It is well to remember that by the time Cubitt visited 221B for the second time Holmes had already broken the code. By then, Holmes already knew that there was an American called Abe Slaney, a known dangerous criminal, involved in the matter. It is astonishing that our sleuth did not cau-

tion his client about the existence of a clear and present danger—if not personally, certainly for his wife. Forewarned, Cubitt might have taken at least minimal precautions, resulting in a completely different outcome.

Instead, Holmes very leisurely wasted two crucial days waiting for a telegram from the New York Police Bureau. Then he decides that enough time has passed ("We have let this affair go far enough"), but by then the last train for North Walsham had departed.

Holmes acted more like his brother Mycroft than his usual energetic self. Although he obviously understood the danger, he seemed in no hurry to intervene: "Then we shall breakfast early and take the very first in the morning. Our presence is most urgently needed." When Hargreave's telegram arrives, he tells Watson that he expected it, adding that, "This message makes it even more essential that we should not lose an hour in letting Hilton Cubitt know how matters stand, for it is a singular and a dangerous web in which our simple Norfolk squire is entangled."

If the situation was so serious, why not telegraph a warning to Cubitt?

Then, when he arrives in North Walsham and he is told about Cubitt's death he almost dismissively states, "I anticipated it."



While it is true that Slaney was captured, this still looks like a major defeat for Sherlock Holmes. His conscience must have tormented with the thought that his inaction was partly responsible for Hilton Cubitt's death.

The Criminal's Conviction

What could Watson have meant when he wrote that “mitigating” circumstances had been presented during Slaney’s trial? Mitigating enough to cause his death conviction to be changed to penal servitude?

The fact that Hilton Cubitt fired the first shot should have had nothing to do with this. English law at the time was unforgiving towards trespassers. While it might have been argued that Slaney was not a trespasser because Elsie had invited him to talk, the moment he tried to force her, his position before the law would have fundamentally changed.



It is implied that Slaney may have claimed self-defense as his reason to shoot Hilton. This plea should have been checkmated by the fact that even if Hilton had shot at Slaney first, it was done in defense of a member of his household—his wife in this case. Under such circumstances, when a member of one’s immediate family—a child, wife, brother, parent, etc.—is being

attacked, under Common Law such an attack can be construed as an attack on oneself. This would have placed Cubitt in the position of defending instead of attacking, regardless of the fact he fired first.

What else happened in 1898:

Empire

Battle of Omdurman in Sudan. Kitchner defeats Mahdi and Dervishes, avenges General Gordon’s death. Fully establishes British rule over Sudan.

Britain secures lease of the Wei-hei-wei territory from China.

Yukon Territory of Canada established, Dawson chosen as capital



Franco-British tension following Fashoda Incident, the climax of imperial territorial disputes between Britain and France in Eastern Africa. A French expedition to Fashoda on the White Nile river seeks to gain control of the Upper Nile river basin and thereby exclude Britain from the Sudan.

Introduction of Imperial Penny Postage.

◀ Curzon becomes Viceroy of India.

China leases Hong Kong’s new territories to the United Kingdom for 99 years

British goods given preferential tariff in Canada.

Congo railway completed to Stanley Pools.

Britain

Electrification of underground railway from Mansion House to Waterloo.

First escalator at Harrods.

University of London Act reorganizes it as a teaching university.

Agitation against growth of ritualistic practices in the Church of England.

World

Powers appoint Prince George of Greece as High Commissioner in Crete, under Turkish suzerainty.

Workmen's Social Democratic Party formed in Russia.

Caleb Bradham renames his carbonated soft drink "Pepsi-Cola".



"Hundred Days of Reform" in China. Deposition of Kuang-Hsu and reinstatement of Dowager Empress, suppression of reform.

U.S. annexes Hawaii.

◀ Tsar Nikolay II expels Jews from major Russian cities.

First Navy Law is passed by the German Reichstag

End of state of debtor nation for U.S.A., existing since 1783, \$500 million foreign investments.

Work begins on Aswan Dam.

Germany's Tirpitz plan.

Military draft introduced in Holland.

Émile Zola's *J'Accuse*—an open letter addressed to President Félix Faure of France, published in the newspaper *L'Aurore* by the influential writer, in which he accused the government of anti-Semitism

in the unlawful jailing of Alfred Dreyfus, an Army General Staff officer sentenced to lifelong penal servitude for espionage. Zola was prosecuted for, and found guilty of, libel and fled to England, returning home the following year.

USS *Maine* blows up in Havana Harbor, Spanish-American War begins, Spain defeated at Santiago and Manila. Treaty of Paris ends war, Cuba independent, U.S.A. acquires Philippines. A year later, Rudyard Kipling dedicates his poem, *Take Up the White Man's Burden* to the United States.

German fleet seizes Kiachow, secures 99-year lease from China.

U.S. Congress passes the Private Mailing Card Act, allowing private publishers and printers to produce postcards, had to be labelled "Private Mailing Cards" until 1901, known as "souvenir cards."



Foundation of *Flottverein* (Navy League) in Germany, Reichstag passes first Navy Act.

Swiss railways nationalized.

◀ Will Kellogg invents Corn Flakes

U.S. Congress passes a fifty-million-dollar bill to strengthen the military.

The International Conference of Rome for the Social Defense against Anarchists opens.

Empress Elizabeth of Austria is assassinated by Luigi Lucheni

First auto insurance policy in the U.S. issued by Travelers Insurance Co.

Severe food riots in Italy.

Russia secures 25-year lease of Port Arthur from China.

Art

Wells' *War of the Worlds*.

Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

Science and Technology

Pickering, using photography, discovers nine of Saturn's moons.



First telephone message from a submerged submarine.

◀ Curies discover radium and polonium.

Winton Motor Carriage Company publishes the first known automobile ad in *Scientific American* using the headline “dis-pense with a horse.”

First record of myxmatosis—a rabbit disease.

Ramsay discovers xenon, krypton, and neon, inert atmospheric gases.

Rudolf Diesel demonstrates his engine, which requires no sparkplugs.

French quick-firing “75” gun produced.

M.J. Owens, U.S.A., designs automatic bottle-making machine.

Marconi establishes wireless communication between Bournemouth and the Isle of Wight.

K. Shiga, Japan, discovers bacillus of dysentery.

Konstantin Tsiolkovski states principles of rocket propulsion.

Next week's case: SOLI.

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 illustrations 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.

© 2021 Alexander E. Braun