



The Hounds of the Internet

"A singular set of people, Watson."

An Inquiry into:

"The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton"

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"The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton" was first published in *Collier's Weekly Magazine* on March 26, 1904, and in *The Strand Magazine* in April 1904. It is part of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*.

As shown on the table, once more there is no complete agreement among our Canon experts regarding this adventure's chronology. If one assumes that the case did indeed take place in 1899, as a majority of our Canon scholars state, then at the time Sherlock Holmes was 45 years old and Dr. James H. Watson 47.

<i>The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton</i>	
<i>Chronologist</i>	<i>Date of the Adventure</i>
<i>Canon</i>	<i>Winter</i>
<i>Baring-Gould</i>	<i>Thursday, January 5, 1899</i>
<i>Bell</i>	<i>Monday, February 4, 1884</i>
<i>Blakeney</i>	<i>1895 or after</i>
<i>Brend</i>	<i>December 1882</i>
<i>Christ</i>	<i>Monday, February 4, 1889</i>
<i>Dakin</i>	<i>Friday, January 13, 1899</i>
<i>Folsom</i>	<i>Thursday, January 5, 1899</i>
<i>Hall</i>	<i>January 5, 1899</i>
<i>Keefauver</i>	<i>Monday, January 12, 1891</i>
<i>Klinger</i>	<i>1899</i>
<i>Zeisler</i>	<i>Wednesday, January 6, 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.

Main Characters:

Charles Augustus Milverton, probably the most successful professional society black-mailer of his age, "the worst man in London," according to Holmes. Lady Eva Blackwell, a young, beautiful former débutante being black-mailed by Milverton. The Earl of Dovercourt, the Lady Eva's very proper fiancé. Agatha, Milverton's house-

maid, who is seduced by Holmes. An unidentified very grand lady, a widow who is a victim of Milverton. Inspector Giles Lestrade, Scotland Yard Detective.

Notable Quotes:

"Do you feel a creeping, shrinking sensation, Watson, when you stand before the serpents in the Zoo and see the slithery, gliding, venomous creatures, with their deadly eyes and wicked, flattened faces? Well, that's how Milverton impresses me. I've had to do with fifty murderers in my career, but the worst of them never gave me the repulsion which I have for this fellow."

"Heaven help the man, and still more the woman, whose secret and reputation come into the power of Milverton. With a smiling face and a heart of marble he will squeeze and squeeze until he has drained them dry."

“Since it is morally justifiable I have only to consider the question of personal risk. Surely a gentleman should not lay much stress upon this when a lady is in most desperate need of his help?”

“I have always had an idea that I would have made a highly efficient criminal.”

“I think there are certain crimes which the law cannot touch, and which therefore, to some extent, justify private revenge.”



Blackmail Penalties

When we discussed this case some years ago, I took issue with Holmes’ statement to Watson that it would not profit a blackmail victim to send his or her torturer to jail for “a few months’ imprisonment” if this led to ruin. Knowing that back then the blade of Lady Justice’s sword was considerably sharper than it is today I commented that the penalty for blackmailing could not have been as light as Holmes made it out to be. One of our Legal Beagles, The Neighbourly Scotch Fir, offered a legal perspective that I think is well-worth revisiting:

During the canonical era, the relevant law in force in England era was the Libel Act 1843, §3 which stated:

“And be it enacted, That if any Person shall publish or threaten to publish any Libel upon any other Person, or shall directly or indirectly threaten to print or publish, or shall directly or indirectly propose to abstain from printing or publishing, or shall directly or indirectly offer to prevent the printing or publishing, of any Matter or Thing touching any other Person, with Intent to extort any Money or Security for Money, or any valuable Thing from such or any other Person, or with Intent to induce any Person to confer or procure for any Person any Appointment or Office of Profit or Trust, every such Offender, on being convicted thereof, shall be liable to be imprisoned, with or without hard Labour, in the Common Gaol or House of Correction, for any Term not exceeding Three Years.”

Thus, the Act offered a suitable punishment for the professional blackmailer (the vision of Milverton turning rocks into sand in Dartmoor is extremely attractive). However, to place it in motion, the affected person would have had to prove his or her case beyond reasonable doubt in a public court of law—as uncertain and bruising a process then as it is now.

Considering how ruinous the results of Milverton’s activities could be, this seems ridiculously inadequate. Especially when one considers that his activities might have not only destroyed whole families, but have also led to suicides.



Milverton was no fool and seems to have been careful to avoid anything that might have furnished proof beyond reasonable doubt of his crimes, such as an overly explicit, written, or witnessed extortion threat. With a good counsel, he was probably safe from prosecution or, in the very unlikely event of a conviction, from a long sentence.

It should be pointed out that the Libel Act was aimed at the very common problem of blackmail by servants; these individuals would rarely have had lawyers, leaving them exposed to the heavy mallet of the law. A lady's maid convicted of such a felony, for example, would probably not only serve the maximum time in jail, but upon her release she would never find another position. Eventually, she was apt to end on the streets with the prospect of a much reduced lifespan.

The professional upper-class blackmailer *à la* Milverton, with his own expensive legal counsel, did not exist in the England of the time in sufficient numbers to merit special provisions in criminal jurisprudence. In this period, the ruling classes still had enough influence to deal with such a scoundrel in more direct ways, just as Milverton was.

The Declining Occupation

What follows is, on my part, purely a personal impression completely lacking in any scientific proof.

It occurs to me that blackmail is no longer as profitable a business as it once was; certainly, not as lucrative and commonplace as it was during Holmes'—and even my parents'—time. Simply put, this is



because there are fewer targetable activities for the standard blackmailer.

Adultery, consorting with prostitutes, unmarried sexual antics, homosexuality and such are, for the most part, no longer activities that in years past would have had someone socially ostracized, ruining both life and career. There is the pathetic example of what happened to Oscar Wilde—contrast that to the popularity of, say, Truman Capote or the respected performer Sir Ian McKellen. Until the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, those suspected by the government to be gay would

have been denied security clearances and been rejected for service in the diplomatic corps and the military, because they were considered to be a soft target for blackmailers.

Today, few are upset by these proclivities (even if they occasionally they *do* frighten the horses). Lady Eva's "sprightly" correspondence would have had little or no blackmail value. By today's standards, a large portion of Milverton's once-potential clientele has vanished.

The Blackmailer's Clients

Watson tells us that Holmes considered Milverton to be smart, an intellectual. He seems to have been ideally suited for his choice of occupations; besides brains, he displayed the patience of a saint. This is demonstrated by the fact that he prepared to wait for the proper time—even if it took years—to pounce on one of his victims. Also, there was nothing niggardly about the man; he paid extremely well for the sought-after information. We are told that he gave a footman £700 (almost \$300,000 today) for a note two lines in length which provided him with the means to "ruin a noble family."

All of this leads to the conclusion that the only reason Milverton was blackmailing Lady Eva was to make a scandalous example of her for the benefit of more profitable prospects. Although it seems very likely that had the young woman paid him the demanded £5,000 (≈\$1,900,000) he would have upheld his end of the bargain, he admitted to Holmes that he was aware that her limited resources

made it impossible for her to raise the sum he demanded to redeem the incriminating letters. His suggestion that that she beg relatives to raise the extra £3,000 (\approx \$1,130,000) she would have needed to meet the price, and his insinuation that she request that the wedding guests gift her money instead of the usual knick-knacks was cruelly cynical and, of course, absolutely impossible. This would have been deemed outrageous to the point of scandal in the social strata in which she moved, very likely leading to the very result that she wanted to avoid: the calling off of the wedding.

It would therefore appear that Milverton considered her what today one would describe as a “business expense.” The results of her inability to redeem her letters would have provided him with a terrifying object lesson to all his other (richer) victims of the kind of instant ruin that would befall them if they do not pay. As Milverton himself put it, “An exposure would profit me indirectly to a considerable extent. I have eight or ten similar cases maturing. If it was circulated among them that I had made a severe example of the Lady Eva I should find all of them much more open to reason.” It seems obvious that those similar cases were for him more valuable than the mere £7,000 that under the best of circumstances he would have been able to extract from the Lady Eva.



Also, it seems obvious as well, that he was not a supporter of the installment plan. Although this might have made it somewhat easier for his victims to pay him, it would also have involved added risk on his part. There would have been more opportunities of obtaining the proof that would have been necessary in the very unlikely case that one of those he parasitized would decide to prosecute him.

The Hapless Agatha



It is well-nigh impossible not to feel sorry for Milverton’s maid. Nobody can doubt that Holmes ill-used poor Agatha shamelessly and coldly. For someone acquainted with the foibles and miseries of the human condition he displayed absolutely no regard for her feelings, using his profound knowledge and experience of human nature, Holmes coldly and indifferently proceeded to play her like his Stradivarius, without any regard for her feelings. With his education and background, he would have had no problem in showing himself to her as a far better man than any suitor who might have been wooing her, and then further seduce her by offer-

ing marriage. Subsequently, once he had wheedled out of her the information that he wanted he dropped her, apparently without explanation. Holmes, with a profound experience encompassing

from every stratum of society knew better than any contemporaries of his class that pain hurts the low as much as it does the high.

It is nearly impossible not to slip into the morass of presentism when considering Holmes completely atypical shabby treatment of the woman. One cannot but deeply pity her, as well as be surprised and dismayed over Holmes' shameless and completely insensitive treatment of the girl. Watson himself, the paragon of the Victorian gentleman had to remonstrate, "But the girl, Holmes?"

Holmes rationalizes his intentions to burgle Milverton's safe remarking that, "Since it is morally justifiable I have only to consider the question of personal risk. Surely a gentleman should not lay much stress upon this when a lady is in most desperate need of his help?"

No thought whatsoever for poor Agatha. At this point it appears that the Great Detective's concern over gentlemanly behavior has the crystal-clear ring of a lead bell. His squalid excuse is that there is a rival who will take over when he abandons the woman.

Although by the standards of the time a lady's reputation was far more valuable and of greater importance than the feelings of a mere, lowly maid, even back then this very much smacked of caddish, ungentlemanly behavior.

After harshly judging our sleuth, it behooves us to view matters from his perspective. We must remember that he is very logically and properly functioning by the standards his society orbited about 125 years ago. Back then (and even today sometimes) it was genuinely believed that some people and classes were superior to others, and therefore more valued and privileged. What could the feelings of a simple housemaid matter if they are abused to preserve the reputation of a lady? Silly question!



We see an echo of this in how Holmes viewed the Baker Street irregulars—as enterprising young street Arabs who served admirably well as the Great Detective's espionage corps. No sorrow or concern over the fact they lived in and were of, the streets.

The fact that in the end he destroyed all of Milverton's blackmail material, benefitting an untold number of victims, cannot be considered as fully redeeming. This had not been his original plan and objective, but simply taking advantage of an unexpected opportunity that presented itself, provided to him by the mysterious lady who revenged the wrong done to her by sending the blackmailer to his just reward.

None of this makes Holmes particularly unfeeling; it just reveals him as a creature of his time, proving again that the Victorians were not just like us, only lacking in electricity and cellphones.

The Curious Visit

One must wonder whether our old friend Inspector Lestrade was really that interested in solving Milverton's murder. Although partly incorrect, his deduction that the crime was committed by probably "men of good position, whose sole object was to prevent social exposure," showed that Lestrade knew Milverton to be a high-society blackmailer.



Would he really have been that interested in solving the murder of a disreputable individual, and by doing so risk shaming and angering his betters?

Some Comedic Advice

During the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, times graced by comedians who had not yet substituted wit with profanity, one of these was Jimmy Durante or, as he was better known, “The Schnoz” a well-assigned sobriquet referring to a proboscis of truly Homeric proportions. In 1933, he introduced a nonsense song titled *Inka Dinka Doo*, which became his theme song.

He would vary the lyrics, depending on the circumstances. One of these variations seems particularly apropos:

*Say it with diamonds,
Say it ermine or
Say it with pearls,
But never, ever, say it with
ink-a-dink-a-dink-a-do*

Considering the goings-on in this case, wise counsel.



What else happened in 1899:

Empire

Boer War (1899 - 1902). Boers invade Natal; British defeated at Magersfontein, Stormberg, Colenso. Siege of Ladysmith.

Anglo-Egyptian condominium over Sudan established.

Anglo-French Convention settles spheres of influence in West Africa.

Further famine in India.

Britain

Last fishing fleet sails from Barking.

First public motor bus (Kensington to Victoria).

London County Council established; lasts until 1965.

General Federation of Trade Unions formed.

First Royal Navy turbine ships, destroyers *Cobra* and *Viper* built.

SS *Oceanic*, White Star Line, launched. First large luxury liner of line culminating with RMS *Titanic* in 1912.

Establishment of Board of Education

World

Boxer Rebellion begins, culminating in the May 1900 siege of foreign legations.

Permanent Court of Arbitration set up at the Hague.

Nicholas II ends independence of Finland.

Russian persecution of Armenians in Caucasus.

Migration of Russian peasants made easier by State Council.

Organization of Board of Labor in France.

Russian universities closed due to student disorders.

Art

Ernest W. Hornung writes *The Amateur Cracksman*, adventures of Raffles.

Kipling writes *Stalky and Co.*

Yeats writes *The Wind Among the Reeds*.

Sir William Elgar composes the *Enigma Variations*.

Coleridge-Taylor writes *The Death of Minnehaha*.

Gauguin paints *Two Tahitian Women*.

Jean Sibelius composes *Finlandia*.

Toulouse-Lautrec draws *At the Circus*, a series of 39 drawings, mainly in crayon.

Science and Technology

A.L. Debierne discovers actinium.

Zeppelin invents his airship.

Parson's turbo-alternator developed.

Lummer and Pringsheim study blackbody radiation.

Wireless telegraphy from England to France.

Next week's case: SIXN.

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.

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