



An Inquiry into: “The Problem of Thor Bridge”

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“The Problem of Thor Bridge” was first published in *The Strand Magazine* in February-March 1922 and in *Collier’s Weekly* in November 1904. It is part of *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*.

took place in 1901, which is reflected on the table. If the case took place in 1901, as the majority of our chronologists indicate, then Sherlock Holmes was 47 years old and Dr. John H. Watson 49.

Main Characters:

Neil Gibson, American gold magnate, millionaire, and former senator of a Western state. Mrs. Gibson, Neil’s Brazilian jealous wife. Miss Grace Dunbar, Governess to the Gibson’s children and the object of Neil’s affections. Marlow Bates, manager of Gibson’s estate. Sergeant Coventry, the local policeman.

Notable Quotes:

Somewhere in the vaults of the bank of Cox and Co., at Charing Cross,

there is a travel-worn and battered tin dispatch-box with my name, John H. Watson, M.D., Late Indian Army, painted upon the lid. It is crammed with papers, nearly all of which are records of cases to illustrate the curious problems which Mr. Sherlock Holmes had at various times to examine. Some, and not the least interesting, were complete failures, and as such will hardly bear narrating, since no final explanation is forthcoming. A problem without a solution may interest the student, but can hardly fail to annoy the casual reader. Among these unfinished tales is that of Mr. James Phillimore, who, stepping back into his own house to get his umbrella, was never more seen in this world. No less remarkable is that of the cutter Alicia, which sailed one spring morning into a small patch of mist from where she never again emerged, nor was anything further ever heard of herself and her crew. A third case worthy of note is that of Isadora Persano, the well-known journalist and duellist, who

The Problem of Thor Bridge

Chronologist	Date of the Adventure
Canon	October 4
Baring-Gould	Thursday, October 4, 1900
Bell	Thursday, October 4, 1900
Blakeney	October 4, 1896-1902
Brend	October 1900
Christ	Friday, October 4, 1901
Dakin	Friday, October 4, 1901
Folsom	Friday, October 4, 1901
Hall	October 4, 1901
Keefauver	Thursday October 4, 1900
Klinger	1901
Zeisler	Friday, October 4, 1890

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.

was found stark staring mad with a match box in front of him which contained a remarkable worm said to be unknown to science.

“The faculty of deduction is certainly contagious.”

“I can discover facts, Watson, but I cannot change them.”

“I am getting into your involved habit, Watson, of telling a story backwards.”

“My professional charges are upon a fixed scale. I do not vary them, save when I remit them altogether.”

“I guess most men have a little private reserve of their own in some corner of their souls where they don't welcome intruders.”

“Now, I make no pretence to be more moral than my neighbours, and I will admit to you that I could not live under the same roof with such a woman and in daily contact with her without feeling a passionate regard for her. Do you blame me, Mr. Holmes?”

“I do not blame you for feeling it. I should blame you if you expressed it, since this young lady was in a sense under your protection.”

“It is only for the young lady's sake that I touch your case at all. I don't know that anything she is accused of is really worse than what you have yourself admitted, that you have tried to ruin a defenceless girl who was under your roof. Some of you rich men have to be taught that all the world cannot be bribed into condoning your offences.”

“We must look for consistency. Where there is a want of it we must suspect deception.”

“When once your point of view is changed, the very thing which was so damning becomes a clue to the truth.”

“I have been sluggish in mind and wanting in that mixture of imagination and reality which is the basis of my art.”

Strangely Enough



THOR does not only boast an original plot, but is a showcase for the Sherlock Holmes' powers and insights—it is the Great Detective at his best. Even a casual reader can understand why our sleuth's exploits have continued attracting a wide readership for some six generations. Strangely enough, “The Problem of Thor Bridge” was not included on the list of what are considered as the 12 best canonical stories, published by *The Baker Street Journal* in 1999.

Proof, perhaps, that like so many other things, these matters heavily depend upon the eye of the beholder.

Beyond Reach

Although this is not the first time that Watson tantalizes us with his description of the unpublished cases of Sherlock Holmes, this is the first time that Watson mentions the “travel-worn and battered tin dispatch-box with my name,” buried within the entrails of the bank of Cox and Co., at Charing Cross. Some Canon scholars have hypothesized that the bank, tin dispatch-box and the lost cases that it contained were bombed into oblivion during the Blitz.

One cannot begin to even attempt to factor the magnitude of this indescribable loss. This literary disaster has left us with so many unanswered questions!

For instance, what was that most “remarkable worm”?

Alas and alas...

The Sinister Cheerfulness

Every time I return to this case, I am mystified by Watson’s reference to finding Holmes at breakfast full of “that somewhat sinister cheerfulness which was characteristic of his lighter moments.” Although some might argue that the word did not have the well, sinister, connotation then as it does today, like its more modern descendants, my 1890 *Oxford* defines “sinister” as “singularly evil or productive of evil; of ill omen; presaging ill fortune or trouble; accompanied by or leading to disaster.”

It is difficult to capture Watson’s meaning in his peculiar description of the Great Detective’s lighter moments. If Watson was not applying poetic license and exaggerating for effect, what is left for one to think about our sleuth’s seemingly ominous lighter moments?

Breakfast and the Family Herald

Very often, a casual remark by someone can open up new vistas, or dust off old memories: “There is little to share, but we may discuss it when you have consumed the two hard-boiled eggs with which

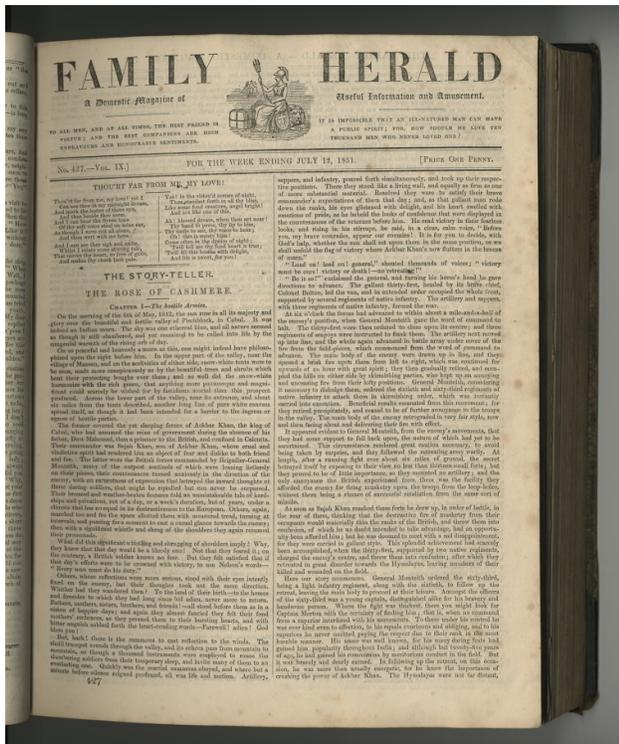
our new cook has favoured us. Their condition may not be unconnected with the copy of the *Family Herald* which I observed yesterday upon the hall-table. Even so trivial a matter as cooking an egg demands an attention which is conscious of the passage of time and incompatible with the love romance in that excellent periodical.”

When I was a boy, one of my housemasters had a large collection of old periodicals some of which he would sometimes bring to class. The *Family Herald: A Domestic Magazine of Useful Information & Amusement* was part of this assortment. It was the first English story paper and featured several story supplements such as *The Monthly Magazine of Fiction*, *The Family Story-Teller*, *The Boys’ Story-Teller* and the *Complete Story-Teller*.

Initially a weekly magazine, by 1855 its circulation was in the 240,000 range. Each weekly issue included part of at least two serialized novels, a short story or two, some poetry, a science column, a statistics column, generally a domestic/recipe column, and a number of anecdotes odd facts and jokes listed under *Varieties and Random Readings*.

Still today, after more decades than I care to tally, I remember *The Deadly Idol*—a thriller in one of the issues. I read it with great eagerness only to discover that it continued in the next issue, which my teacher did not have. I never did find out how it ended...

I suppose that everyone’s little mind-attic contains old spider webs of this kind.



The Ruthless Multimillionaire

Gibson is another of those interesting Canonical characters that one wished Watson had told us much more than he did. Where did he come from and how was it that he decided to seek his fortune hunting for gold in Brazil? Once he had enough of the much-sought-after metal, how did he parlay this into a fortune that allowed him to occupy a position of power? What made him decide to run for the Senate instead of purchasing those solons that best suited his plans? And, finally, why did he leave the United States for England?

Uprooting himself (and his business interests) from the United States to Great Britain could not have been a simple decision and certainly not one easy to carry out. Wall Street would have offered him whatever business resources he required as well as infrastructure (telegraph and telephone) second to none. He would also have been closer to the seat of national power and his former Congressional colleagues.

Another factor to consider is that relations between England and the United States did not really become cordial until the end of the Second World War. By that time there were many interests in common—particularly with the coming down of the Iron Curtain and the start of the Cold War.

For the most part, the English looked down upon Americans as uncouth upstarts. For example, the moneyed American young ladies who harvested the insolvent scions of some of the oldest British aristocracy, luring them with outrageous dowries were both envied and detested. A further source of loathing arose from the fact that America was giving British industry a run for its money and markets; the coming of refrigeration, for instance, made American (as well as Australian) beef, lamb, and pork strongly price competitive. The decline in demand for the national product in turn caused financial problems for the great houses and holdings in which these food items were raised.

This antipathy was reciprocated on the other side of the Atlantic. For example, the Civil War was still well-within living memory generating considerable resentment against the Brits for their show of sympathy and support towards the Confederacy. Had Prince Albert not intervened, England might have gone to war against the Union as a result of the *Trent* Incident. Had that happened, the Union would have collapsed, the South would have emerged victorious, and today we might have two or three separate countries within what is today the Continental United States.



So why would such a fabulously wealthy man, former senator with important connections abandon his country where, he would have had more latitude to carry out his business activities, to move to a land in which he would always be regarded as a stranger?

While today billionaires like Gibson give no allegiance to any country—including their own—unlike Gibson, if necessary they can literally travel to the other side of the world within a space of 12 hours. Varied means of communication undreamt of in 1901 make it increasingly unnecessary to have an actual physical presence with those with whom one does business. In Gibson's time, traveling not only time-consuming, but could also be dangerous. The fastest possible way to communicate (vital to a financial empire) was



the telegraph, and news could only be had from newspapers, which also depended upon the telegraph and sometimes even homing pigeons!

A mystery indeed!

Regardless of all the ruthlessness attributed to him, there was a completely different side to Gibson's personality. If we go by what Watson tells us, the man was quite capable of tender feelings and love. As a young man he married for love and remained married for two decades. Although he first made his feelings known to her by offering her the dubious status of mistress, when she refused and it appeared as if he might lose her he restrained (doubtless with considerable difficulty) his more libidinous inclinations towards the lady.

The fact that he was also inclined to accept her guidance and moderate his ruthlessness in business would indicate that, much like Scrooge, he was not beyond redemption.

A True Victorian Gentleman

The portal to the Victorian Era and to what over the years would become a lifetime avocation and focus of study was opened for me by Sherlock Holmes and Doctor John H. Watson. The occasional glimpses the Canon offers provide a contemporary insight into that long-gone time during which, paradoxically, poverty and brutality comfortably coexisted with a cultural, spiritual, and personal urge to triumph over the baser self and aspire to attain an ideal of conduct. We get an illustration of this in Holmes' indignant reaction towards Gibson's behavior with Grace Dunbar: "I do not blame you for feeling it. I should blame you if you expressed it, since this young lady was in a sense under your protection." And, "It is only for the young lady's sake that I touch your case at all. I don't know that anything she is accused of is really worse than what you have yourself admitted, that you tried to

ruin a defenceless girl who was under your roof. Some of you rich men have to be taught that all the world cannot be bribed into condoning your offences.”

Simmering Passionate Blood

Three different people, Bates, Gibson, and Dunbar essentially have the same description of Gibson’s deceased wife: “Tropical by birth and tropical by nature. A child of the sun and of passion.” Furthermore, she was so ruled by her physical passions that, as Grace Dunbar explained, she was unable to “understand the mental, and even spiritual tie which held her husband to me, or imagine that it was only my desire to influence his power to good ends which kept me under his roof.”

One might deduce from all this that Englishwomen only functioned at icebox temperatures. Watson has set down that passionate aggressive women belong to the “excitable races,” whether Welsh or Latin. In all of the Sacred Writings I can only think of two Anglo-Saxon exceptions to this rule: Kitty Winter in *ILLU* and Miss Burnett in *WIST*; however, one might excuse the latter in the belief that she was infected with these tropical passions during her long sojourn at those latitudes. Some might think of including Miss Violet de Merville in *ILLU*, but I do not think she ought to count. The lady not only proved to be a twit, but had also been hypnotized by Baron Gruner.

Regarding the late Mrs. Gibson’s lack of understanding, in an experience of women which certainly does not extend over many nations and three separate continents, I have never met a loving wife who would exhibit this kind of understanding. Is there any middle-aged married man amongst us who thinks that his wife would nod understandingly at such a close daily relationship with a pretty—younger—creature?

“But dearest, all we do is natter about how to best benefit mankind!” Such an explanation should not be offered without up-to-date comprehensive medical insurance.

The Saintly Miss Grace Dunbar



It is beyond question that Miss Dunbar must have bordered on the extraordinary. It makes for a fascinating study to consider how she equally affected three men who could not have been more different from one another. Certainly she affected Gibson to his very core. Unsurprisingly, Watson also fell under her feminine spell, as shown by his more than usual enthusiastic description of her pulchritude.

Holmes, however, is entirely another matter.

Shortly after meeting her for the first time, the Great Detective most uncharacteristically tells her “After seeing you I am prepared to accept Mr. Gibson’s state-

ment both as to the influence which you had over him and as to the innocence of your relations with him.” Despite his unimaginable deductive powers one must question exactly what could have led Holmes to so rapidly arrive at that conclusion? Regardless of his deductive genius this pronouncement, given with such certainty would appear to rest on sandy foundations.

Of all possible explanations the one which would appear to fit best is that although the great Sherlock Holmes was made of sterner stuff, he was far from being cold, lifeless marble. But what about his famous (some might say notorious) dictum that, “Women are never to be entirely trusted—not the best of them.”

One can only conclude that there were times when he most definitely felt that at least *some* women were to be entirely trusted.

A Well-Off Holmes

This case shows us that by that time in his career Holmes found himself in an enviable economic and professional position.

Watson describes J. Neil Gibson to us as “the greatest gold-mining magnate in the world.” Instead of interest, this clearly produces a feeling of instant antipathy in Holmes. This is understandable, as he clearly found it distasteful to deal with someone whose *modus operandi* was predicated upon his conviction—not entirely erroneous—that everybody and everything has its price and therefore all that is needed is to meet that price and, if necessary even resort to violence.



When Gibson clumsily approached the matter of his fee, our sleuth response dripped with contempt for the American multimillionaire: “My professional charges are upon a fixed scale. I do not vary them, save when I remit them altogether.”

Gibson argument that if he did not care about the money that he was willing to pay him putting a successful end to the case would enhance Holmes’ reputation in England and America was met equally as coldly: “Thank you, Mr. Gibson, I do not think that I am in need of booming. It may surprise you to know that I prefer to work anonymously, and that it is the problem itself which attracts me.”

Then he put the multimillionaire in his place, berating him for his advances towards Grace Dunbar.

The Murder Weapon

Holmes tells Watson that a revolver of the same caliber as the weapon that killed Gibson’s wife, with a discharged chamber, was found on the floor of Grace Dunbar’s closet, which was considered as damning evidence. The problem is, of course, that back then there was no such thing as a reliable science of ballistics. Forensic ballistics as a science did not really come into its own until the 20th century with the introduction of the comparison microscope, which allowed the simultaneous comparison of two different bullets and the close examination of striations for matches.

One of the first true tests of this new crime fighting tool came in the aftermath of the Saint Valentine’s Day Massacre in 1929 Chicago. The investigation had stalled until officers searching a minor criminal’s home found a number of weapons including two Thompson submachine guns (so-called “Chicago typewriters”). The guns were compared with the ballistic evidence recovered at the killing, proving that those were the weapons used to kill members of the North Side Gang. This took the Chicago police department off the hook because they had been under suspicion because the killers were dressed up like policemen.



In our case, whatever the reasoning was that caused Holmes to imagine what might have taken place on Thor Bridge with the missing revolver, it was pure genius. Watson's description how Holmes arrived at his conclusion is an excellent description of the workings of the subconscious mind. It seems obvious that from the moment our sleuth took up the case, his brain began spinning facts nonstop into theory and soon afterwards proof.

Holmes brilliantly used Watson's gun to prove Miss Dunbar's innocence. I may have mentioned this before, but in the Granada production Watson's expression

as he sees his revolver disappear over the parapet into the water is priceless! I have attached a short video of it.

What else happened in 1901:

Empire



◀ Queen Victoria dies at 6:30 a.m. on January 22, aged 82. She lived through many changes and died well-loved by her people. She presided over her vast empire for nearly 64 years—the longest reign in British history until Elizabeth II. Born in 1819, the only child of George III's fourth son, Victoria was crowned queen in 1838. In 1840, she married Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. Although the match was a political one, the two were devoted to each other, having nine children before Albert's death in 1861. Through dynastic marriages, Victoria's descendants are connected to almost all 20th-century Europe's royal houses. During her long reign the monarchy lost much of its political power to Parliament, but she was the beloved symbol of the Victorian Era—a golden age of British history. By the

end of her reign London's population had reached 6.6 million. Upon her death, she was succeeded by her son, Edward VII, who was crowned King-Emperor.

Northern Nigeria becomes British protectorate.

Creation of the North Western Frontier Province in India.

Britain and Germany agree on boundary between German East Africa (later Tanganyika, Rwanda and Burundi) and Nyasaland (later Malawi).

Uganda railway reaches Lake Victoria.

Cook Islands were annexed and proclaimed a part of New Zealand.

Robert Falcon Scott commands the Discovery on Antarctic expedition.

The Commonwealth of Australia was proclaimed. Although independent it still recognized Britain's royalty as its head of state. The governor-general, the representative of the Sovereign, is nominated by the prime minister and appointed by the British monarch.

Britain

Wigmore Hall opens.

First electric trams from Shepherds Bush to Acton and Kew Bridge.

First British submarine launched at Barrow-in-Furness.

Boxing is recognized as a legal sport in England.

Taff Vale case: Trade unions in Britain liable for actions of tort, stimulates Trade Union Congress to create the Labour Party.

World



U.S. President McKinley assassinated; succeeded by Theodore Roosevelt.

Law of Associations: gives French Roman Catholics the right to form associations if neither secret nor illegal.

◀ Peace Protocol with China after Boxer Rebellion. Boxer Rebellion leaders Chi-Hsin (Chi-hsui) and Hsu-Cheng-Yu are publicly executed in Peking.

Labor Councils in France to settle disputes between masters and men.

Franco-Italian agreement defines spheres of interest in the Mediterranean.

Anti-Semitic riot in Budapest.

Compulsory military service established in Sweden and Norway.

New constitution in Serbia issued by Alexander.

Japan proclaims that it is determined to keep Russia from encroaching on Korea.

First female intern was accepted at a Paris hospital.

U.S. Steel Corporation organized under J.P. Morgan and Company, bankers.

Opening of Trans-Siberian railway.

Hay-Pauncefort Treaty gives U.S. power to build and police the Panama Canal if it remains open to shipping in peace or war.

Art

Kipling writes *Kim*.

Richard D'Oyly Carte, promoter (Gilbert and Sullivan operas), dies.

Chekhov's *Three Sisters* opens at Moscow Art Theater.

Frank Norris, U.S., writes *The Octopus*.

Matisse paints *The Japanese Woman*.

Picasso paints *Woman with a Cap*, *Casagemas in His Coffin*, and *The Absinthe Drinker*.

Van Gogh's painting *Sunflowers* is presented by art teacher Claude-Emile Schuffenecker at a Paris exhibition.

Walt Disney is born in Chicago.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, French painter, dies at 36.

Science and Technology



Marconi transmits Morse wireless signals from Poldhu, Cornwall to St. John's, Newfoundland.

Becquerel discovers dangerous effects of radioactivity on humans.

◀ Walter Reed leads Yellow Fever Commission, a four-man team, to Cuba to search for the cause of the disease. More than 200 American soldiers died from the disease over the previous 18 months. Aristides Agramonte, pathologist, James Carroll, bacteriologist, and Jesse W. Lazear, entomologist, were team members. Cuban Dr. Carlos Finlay theorized that yellow fever was spread by mosquitoes.

U.S. Congress creates the National Bureau of Standards as part of the Department of Commerce.

Alberto Santos-Dumont successfully circles Eiffel Tower in his Santos-Dumont No. 6 dirigible within a half hour and won a 100,000-franc prize. An initial ruling stated he failed by 40 seconds because the race wasn't finished until he touched ground. A second vote granted him the win. This proved the airship maneuverable.

Rene Dubos, French-American microbiologist who developed the first commercial antibiotic, was born in France.

Freud publishes *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.

First isolation of the hormone adrenalin.

Peter Cooper-Hewitt produces mercury vapor lamp; invented by Arons in 1892.

Next week's case: CREE.

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.

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