



The Hounds of the Internet

"A singular set of people, Watson."

An Inquiry into:
"The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place"

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"The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place" was first published in *Liberty Magazine* on March 5, 1927. It first appeared in *The Strand Magazine*, on April 1927. It is part of *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*. It also was the last Sherlock Holmes story to appear in *The Strand Magazine*.

Unsurprisingly, our chronologists are not in full agreement to the year in which this adventure took place; how-

ever, as seen on the table, a majority leans towards 1902.

If 1902 was the year in which this case took place, then at the time Sherlock Holmes was 48 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 50.

Main Characters:

Sir Robert Norberton, the excitable resident of Shoscombe Old Place. Lady Beatrice Falder, Sir Robert's invalid sister. John Mason, Sir Robert's head trainer. Mrs. Norlett, Lady Beatrice's maid. Mr. Norlett, Mrs. Norlett's husband, an actor. Stephens: Sir Robert's butler. Josiah Barnes, landlord of the Green Dragon Inn. Sandy Bain, Sir Robert's jockey.

<i>The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place</i>	
<i>Chronologist</i>	<i>Date of the Adventure</i>
<i>Canon</i>	<i>May, no year</i>
<i>Baring-Gould</i>	<i>Tuesday, May 6, 1902</i>
<i>Bell</i>	<i>May 1897</i>
<i>Blakeney</i>	<i>May 1896-1902</i>
<i>Brend</i>	<i>May 1894</i>
<i>Christ</i>	<i>Wednesday, May 9, 1883</i>
<i>Dakin</i>	<i>Tuesday, May 6, 1902</i>
<i>Folsom</i>	<i>Tuesday, May 6, 1902</i>
<i>Hall</i>	<i>End of May, 1888</i>
<i>Keefauver</i>	<i>Tuesday, May 26, 1903</i>
<i>Klinger</i>	<i>1902</i>
<i>Zeisler</i>	<i>Tuesday, May 6, 1902</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.

Notable Quotes:

- "By the way, Watson, you know something of racing?"
- "I ought to. I pay for it with about half my wound pension."
- "It is only the colourless, uneventful case which is hopeless."
- "You do occasionally find a carrion crow among the eagles."



The Forensic Detective



Our case opens with Holmes, peering through his microscope, studying the “scattered objects in the field” to determine innocence or guilt in a crime. His carrying out this study at the request of Merivale of the Yard shows that he has attained success in making the official police realize the importance not only of the microscope, but of other scientific methods (such as the vaunted Holmes Test for hæmoglobin).

Although it came rather late, it is not surprising that in 2002 our sleuth was distinguished with an Honorary Fellowship from the Royal Society of Chemistry, for his application of forensic science.

Watson's Finances

When Watson admits to Holmes that he knows “something of racing” because he pays for it with about half of his wound pension, he unwittingly reveals to us much about his financial condition. We know that when he was invalidated after Afghanistan, the government provided a pension of 11s 6d *per diem*, which, in modern terms, came to a total of about \$79,000 per year.

That amount was as insufficient to maintain a gentleman's lifestyle in a megalopolis like 1881 London, as it would be today were one to reside in, say, Manhattan or Washington DC. We know from his own pen, that Watson found himself in what very quickly threatened to become a penurious situation—hence 221B.

The fact that he now considered at least half of his pension (\approx \$39,500) as mere disposable income, would seem to argue for a much-improved financial situation.

An aside: One of the things that always puzzle me when we consider this case is why Holmes consults Watson regarding racing world information. In *SILV*, our sleuth appears to have been very well informed about the goings-on of the turf.

The Horsy Doctor

Too much has been made about Watson's supposedly excessive gambling. His admission of paying for his supposed equine addiction with half of his wound pension was very likely a humorous exaggeration. Were he in reality habitually spend—and lose—almost \$40,000 per year on the noses of various nags, he would have most certainly been a gambler with a serious addiction problem. And, had that addiction dominated him to such an extent, he would not have spent only half of his pension, but probably all of it and more.

Some Canon scholars have argued that Watson's remark proves that he was an inveterate gambler. To further support this somewhat outrageous contention, they point to *DANC*, where it seems as if

Holmes was the custodian of Watson's checkbook, keeping it locked in his desk. The implication, of course, is that this shows that Watson could not control his gambling and our sleuth kept him from financial ruin by keeping the checkbook under lock and key.

However, this is open to a different interpretation. Holmes deduces that his friend has decided not to invest in South Africa securities because "Your cheque-book is locked in my drawer, and you have not asked for the key." From this it may be inferred, with no possibility of error, that Watson had access to his checks any time he wanted to, by simply asking Holmes to open up his desk.

Can anyone imagine this exchange between our two friends:

"Holmes, I need my cheque-book."

"What do you want it for, Doctor? Surely not the horses again, after all you asked me to keep it safely beyond your reach. You are spending far too much for your own good."

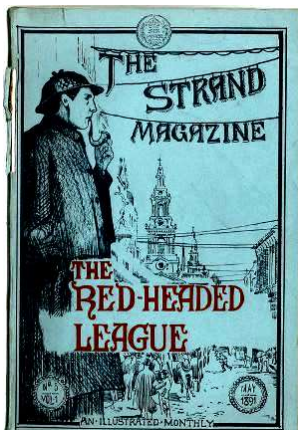
After a few episodes like this, it is doubtful that the Great Friendship would have been as great. Although the inference some have drawn about Watson being an inveterate gambler appear logical, it leads to the wrong conclusion.

No one denies that even an intelligent man of science and orderly habits, acquainted with military discipline can become a gambling addict. However, an addict ends by harming himself through the abuse of his addiction. With Watson now, it is patently obvious



that by this time in his career the wound pension had become discretionary disposable income.

As is the case with mostly everything, the perceived good or bad of a situation can be just a matter of degree. Obviously, by this time in his life, Watson led a very comfortable existence. Medicine and his undoubted ability as a writer would have been more than sufficient to meet his needs. Although our medico would not be described as a man of Spartan habits, he certainly was no wastrel inclined to excess.



Also, it is highly unlikely that the Good Doctor's literary output would have been confined to solely chronicling the adventures of Sherlock Holmes. Even a cursory look at *The Strand Magazine* shows that during this unexcelled time of growth for popular literature, magazine publishers kept a good stable of writers. It was also the case, particularly during the Golden Age of science-fiction of the 1930s and 1940s that the various s-f magazines were most willing to buy the often exceedingly abundant output of the too few good authors. Competition between publications was keen and many writers tended to write almost exclusively for one or the other. Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, and others often wrote under pseudonyms—generally at the request of some of the editors—so it would not appear that their contents came from only a few authors. Frequently,

some magazines would publish in the same issue two stories under different pen names written by the same person.

Because Watson's byline came to be associated with Holmes' cases, it is not farfetched to posit that there would be occasions when he would write under a different name or names whenever he did not have a fresh Holmes case. It was well-worth it; is good to remember that, by this time, the Literary Agent himself commanded £790 (≈\$300,000) per story.

Unfortunately, we have no idea of what our medico's pseudonym (or pseudonyms!) might have been. Thus, his remark that just on the turf he paid "about half my wound pension" is more than likely a joking exaggeration.

Why the Interest?

If one views this case's happenings from the context of the times, John Mason's tale would have been considered no more than kitchen gossip, a possibly disgruntled servant spreading unfounded rumors about his betters. At worse, his revelations of the actions of Sir Robert Norberton although making him appear eccentric can by no extent of the imagination be considered criminal. There certainly was nothing that might indicate that Lady Beatrice might have been in any kind of danger—least of all dead.



So one must wonder what prompted Holmes to investigate the matter; perhaps he had no cases at the moment and was bored. As already mentioned, while Mason's tale and concerns were mildly interesting, in no way could they have been considered as rising to a dangerous, criminal level. Watson's disbelief in the interpretation of Sir Robert's behavior, led to Holmes' famous consideration about carrion crows and eagles.

Mason's claim that there had been a bitter quarrel, and his revelation that Sir Robert was mucking about in the allegedly haunted old family crypt while considered peculiar by no extent of the imagination could it be interpreted as being life-threatening to anyone. Even digging up a 1000-year-old skeleton from that self-same family vault, which was on personal property, would have been very far from rising to the level of a crime.

Conversely, the unusual behavior could have been attributed as a reaction from a man burdened by intolerable debt who seems to be hurtling to what promises to be an irrecoverable financial catastrophe, the outcome of this horrid situation to be solely recued by a horse's speed.

Holmes, of all people, should have realized that stress can make people act peculiarly.

Why, some have even resorted to narcotics!

If Sir Robert was disturbing thousand-year-old ancestral bones, then by that same measure James Mortimer, in HOUN, and so many others should also have been considered criminal suspects.

The apparent change and ostensibly abusive behavior towards his sister could have had many explanations. She was of delicate health and perhaps she was not taking good care of herself and he wanted to limit activities he considered dangerous including, for example, her going out with an overly energetic dog. Also, regardless of her frail health, she seemed to have developed a sudden and unhealthy attachment to the bottle.



Everyone who knew them, were aware of their great love and esteem for one another; his grief at his sister's death proves this.

So why would Holmes been so interested? Had he been true to form, he probably would have waited to see if something truly sinister occurred, as he did in COPP, FIVE, or SOLI. Could it have been—as Dr. Roylott, of Stoke Moran once put it—a case of “Holmes, the busby, the Scotland Yard Jack-in-office”?

Regardless, however, it was a good thing that he got involved. Things might have taken a different turn for Sir Robert, had our sleuth not been able to bring things to a successful conclusion.

A Consideration of the Legalities

According to Watson, “Shoscombe Prince did win the Derby, the sporting owner did net eighty thousand pounds in bets, and the creditors did hold their hand until the race was over, when they were paid in full, and enough was left to reestablish Sir Robert in a fair position in life. Both police and coroner took a lenient view of the transaction, and beyond a mild censure for the delay in registering the lady's decease, the lucky owner got away scatheless from this strange incident in a career which has now outlived its shadows and promises to end in an honoured old age.”

When one considers what should have been a massive avalanche of charges and lawsuits that could—should—have buried Sir Robert, it is surprising that he was able to get away with his plan.

True, he was of a noble family, important in the region, so perhaps it should not be surprising that the local authorities—in this case the police and the coroner—only mildly censured him for not reporting his sister's death and ignored that he kept an unembalmed four-week-old corpse above ground.

Even granting that the local authorities were that accommodating, his relations and debtors would have had several causes of action against him.

Although it is made clear that the only profit that Sir Robert derived from Shoscombe Prince winning the race came from personal bets, the law might not be so forgiving. Intent to defraud might be argued, because at the moment of Lady Beatrice's death, the horse legally became the property of her husband's brother.



When he did not immediately turn over the horse to its lawful owner, Sir Robert became guilty of Conversion. This is defined as “a distinct act of dominion wrongfully exerted over another’s personal property in denial of or inconsistent with his title or rights therein, or in derogation, exclusion, or defiance of such title or rights, without the owner’s consent and without lawful justification.”

However, according to Watson, Sir Robert paid off all his debts. Also, the (non-legal) argument could be made that Shoscombe Prince became an even more valuable horse after winning such an important race, making it logical to assume that none of those affected by his actions might have preferred not to invoke the machinery of the law and grind him under.

In the end, Sir Robert received £80,000 in bets won; roughly about \$30,000,000. No question he could have paid all his debts and retired well for the rest of his life!

An Interesting, Different Case

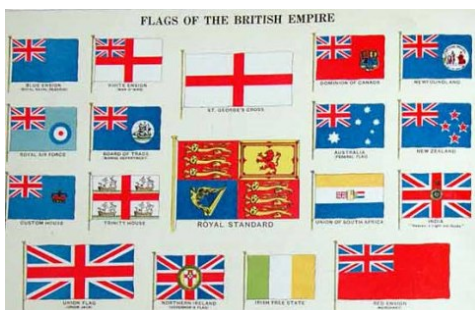
Although this story easily qualifies as a mystery, no actual crime is committed. However, it bears the distinction of being one in which all the main players come out as being good, caring, and honorable people.

It also gives us the opportunity to mine another shiny little diamond to show how well the relationship between Holmes and Watson had developed by this time. Clearly, they have come to fully and comfortably depend upon each other during an investigation. We see the Master Sleuth soliciting information from his friend regarding the goings-on in the world of the turf, and he also provides him with important information about Sir Robert Norberton’s background and situation.



What else happened in 1902:

Empire



Joseph Chamberlain advocates return to Protection and Imperial Preference.

◀ First celebration of Empire Day (renamed “Commonwealth Day” in 1959).

Anglo-German fleet seizes Venezuelan fleet to recover debts and reparations.

Peace of Vereeniging, ends Boer War.

Britain

Anglo-Japanese Treaty for mutual defense and to maintain status quo in Far East.

Sir Giles Gilbert Scott designs Liverpool Cathedral.

Institution of the Order of Merit for distinguished service to the state; limited to 24 holders at one time.

Salisbury resigns, succeeded as PM by Arthur Balfour.



British Academy granted Royal Charter.

Education Act abolishes School Board system. Local control goes to town and county councils.

Secondary Education authorized out of rates.

◀ Arthur Conan Doyle is knighted.

Esperanto introduced to England.

Establishment of Metropolitan Water Board, supplying

London.

World

Franco-Italian secret treaty; Italy to remain neutral if France were attacked by a third power.

Failure of second Belgian General Strike.

Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria, and Italy) renewed to 1914.

Italian designs on Tripoli conditionally approved by France and Austria.

F.A. Krupp takes over Germania shipbuilding yard at Kiel; great armaments firm develops.

Russo-Japanese Convention, Russia agrees to evacuate Manchuria in 18 months.

French work day reduced to 9½ hours.

Public Health Act in France improves artisan living conditions.

White settlement of Kenya begins.

St. Pierre, Martinique, destroyed by earthquake.

Abdul Hamid gives Germany concessions to build railway to Baghdad; rail system to stretch from Hamburg to the Persian Gulf.

Tientsin Sanitary Police established; first Chinese public health measure.

Art



Conan Doyle publishes *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Kipling publishes *Just So Stories*.

Arthur Edward Woodley Mason publishes *The Four Feathers*.

Beatrix Potter publishes *Peter Rabbit*.

Enrico Caruso makes his first gramophone record—154 recordings in all.

◀ Gauguin paints *The Call*.

Debussy composes *Pelléas et Mélisandé*.

Picasso paints *Nude, Back View*.

Elgar composes *Coronation Ode*.

Science and Technology

Wireless telegraphy applied to ships.

Trans-Pacific Cable laid.

Completion of Aswan Dam in Egypt.

Next week's case: STUD

Respectfully submitted,

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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