



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

Vol. XII No. 97 • July 28, 2022

"The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place" was first published in *Liberty Magazine* on March 5, 1927. It was published 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*.

As seen on the table, not unusually so, our chronologists are not in full agreement to the year in which this adventure

took place; however, 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.

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 Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place

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

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.

The Forensic Pioneer



At the beginning of the case, Watson shows us Holmes, eye to the microscope, studying the “scattered objects in the field” to determine innocence or guilt in a crime. The fact that he is doing this at the behest of Merivale of the Yard clearly tells us that his example has finally made the official police realize the importance not only of the microscope, but of other scientific methods, such as the Holmes Test for hæmoglobin.

Although somewhat late, it is unsurprising that in 2002 our sleuth was distinguished by being awarded an Honorary Fellowship from the Royal Society of Chemistry, for

his pioneering use of forensic science.

The Gambling Physician

In response to Holmes’ query about the turf, Watson admits that he knows “something of racing,” adding that he pays for it with about half of his wound pension. This is an interesting remark, because it reveals much about the Good Doctor’s financial situation.

Starting from the premise that when our medico was invalidated after Afghanistan, the government munificently provided him with a pension of 11s 6d *per diem* at the time when he first met the Great Detective, he was receiving what, in modern times, would come to about \$79,000 per year.

Such a relatively measly sum would have been insufficient to maintain a gentleman’s lifestyle in a megalopolis like 1902 London. Someone earning that today would be unable to survive for long in a city like New York or Washington DC. In *STUD*, Watson himself tells us that he found himself in what very quickly threatened to become a penurious situation, which led him to consider sharing digs and to the momentous meeting at Bart’s.

The fact that he now considered half of that pension—almost £110 or approximately \$39,000—as being disposable income available for betting on the ponies argues much towards for a much-improved financial situation.



Some reputable Canon scholars have interpreted Watson’s remark as proof that he was an inveterate gambler. To further support this contention, they

point to *DANC*, where it appears 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 the Great Detective kept him from financial ruin by keeping the checkbook under lock and key.

However, this can also be interpreted differently. 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 little possibility of error, that Watson had access to his checks any time he wanted to, by simply asking Holmes to open up his desk.

None of us, surely, can imagine this kind of an 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 exchanges like this, it is doubtful that the Great Friendship would have been as great. Although not denying the logic of the inference about Watson’s excessive gambling habits I firmly believe this not to have been the case.

Undeniably, even an intelligent man of science and orderly habits acquainted unacquainted with military discipline can turn into a gambling addict. However, it is patently obvious that by this time in his career the wound pension had become disposable discretionary income. I base this premise on the fact that he not only was a highly competent physician but by this time he had experienced a very successful writing career.

Although we do not exactly know how much Watson was earning as a writer, we can get an indication of this by considering the Literary Agent’s experience with *The Strand Magazine*. This would mean that by this time our biographer earned on average £790 (≈\$300,000) per story. This does not take into consideration the extra income derived from reprints in publications such as *Liberty Magazine* and others around the globe, plus the collection of the cases in book form.

Thus, his remark that just on the turf he paid “about half my wound pension” is more than likely a joking exaggeration.

A puzzler: Why did Holmes come to Watson for racing world information? In SILV, he appeared to have been very well informed about the goings-on of the horsey community.

No Cases?

Based on the preliminary facts of the case, it would not be illogical to think that Holmes was not involved in any other cases and was therefore bored. An examination of John Mason’s tale and concerns (particularly considering it from the perspective of the time) would not have sufficiently intrigued our sleuth to take action in the matter.



To begin with, Mason’s account of Sir Robert’s behavior sounds like little more than servants’ quarters’ gossip questioning the actions of his betters; it does not point to anything criminal. Acting in what might be described as an eccentric fashion is far from making someone a felon; after all it was not unusual (even today) for some of the titled (and even Royal!) families to have members who act in—shall we say—unconventional ways.

Besides, Sir Robert was under enormous stress induced by a delicate and very serious financial state that, on top of everything else, appears to have been common knowledge. Holmes, of all people, should have realized that people under stress may act in peculiar ways.

Why, some have even been known to resort to narcotics!

So Sir Robert is observed to spend time in the old family crypt and proceeds to dig up the millenary bones of some distant ancestor? Not knowing his reasons for doing so, his behavior might perhaps be considered peculiar, but it does not rise to the level of a crime. Considering that in those times when a baby died the family would often have a picture taken with him or her, his behavior might only be considered mildly atypical.

As far as Lady Beatrice was concerned, everyone knew that she and her brother held each other in the highest esteem. Absolutely nothing indicated that she was in any sort of danger, much less dead.

The fact that Sir Robert gave away her dog could very easily have been due to many un-sinister reasons, not the least of which that Lady Beatrice's health was seriously impaired; she might have developed an allergy to the animal. Looking from the outside in, one might even think that her seemingly sudden attraction to the bottle might have upset him toward her, knowing that her very precarious health could not have tolerated alcohol abuse.



There have been other cases which although appearing much more serious, in his consideration did not merit Sherlock Holmes' intervention. Had he been true to form, most likely he would probably have waited for something truly sinister to develop. He did so on other occasions, notably COPP, FIVE, or SOLI.

It had to have been boredom...

For the Legal Beagles



Watson tells us that, "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."

Really? While it is true that a special circle of Hell has been established for the surfeit of lawyers that has given rise to the hideously litigious society we live in, even back in 1902 Sir Robert would have been buried by a veritable avalanche of charges and lawsuits making it unlikely for him to have successfully carried out his plan.

Considering that he was the scion of a noble family important in the region, it would not be surprising that the local authorities—in this case the police and the coroner—would have merely mildly censured him for not reporting his sister's death and not even address the violations involved in keeping an unembalmed four-week-old corpse above ground.

However, his relations and debtors might have had various causes of action against him. It is not farfetched to argue that he intended to defraud. Even though it is made clear that the only profit that Sir Robert derived from Shoscombe Prince winning the race originated from his personal bets, the law might not be so forgiving, especially considering that at the moment of Lady Beatrice's death, the horse became the property of the brother of Lady Beatrice's husband.

By not immediately turning over the horse to its lawful owner, Sir Robert became guilty of Conversion, which 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."

Watson tells us that Sir Robert paid off all his debts. The implication is that a non-legal argument might be made that after winning such an important race Shoscombe Prince became an even more valuable horse. It would then be logical to assume that none of those affected by his actions would have been interested in pressing the machinery of the law to ground him under.

Sir Robert received £80,000 in bets won; roughly about \$30,000,000. It is not surprising therefore that he paid all his debts and retired well for the rest of his life!

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

Salisbury resigns, succeeded as PM by Arthur Balfour.

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.

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

Secondary Education authorized out of rates.

British Academy granted Royal Charter.

Esperanto introduced to England.

Establishment of Metropolitan Water Board, supplying London.

Arthur Conan Doyle is knighted.

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*.

Debussy composes *Pelléas et Mélisandé*.

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

Gauguin paints *The Call*.

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.

Hollerith's punched-card system widely used in industry.

Next week's case: STUD

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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