



An Inquiry into: "Silver Blaze"

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"Silver Blaze" was first published in *The Strand Magazine* in December 1892. It is part of *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*.

The table shows our chronologists' estimates of when the case took place. If the majority is correct, then in 1888

Sherlock Holmes was 34 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 36.

Main Characters:

Colonel Ross, owner of the champion racehorse Silver Blaze. John Straker, racehorse trainer and retired jockey. Fitzroy Simpson, a wealthy London bookmaker and profligate gambler. Inspector Gregory, member of the official police. Silas Brown, Mapleton stables trainer. Ned Hunter, stable boy at King's Pyland stables. Silver Blaze, the stolen racehorse. The dog in the night-time.

Notable Quotes:

"I made a blunder, my dear Watson—which is, I am afraid, a more common occurrence than anyone would think who only knew me through your memoirs."

"[N]othing clears up a case so much as stating it to another person."

"The difficulty is to detach the framework of fact—of absolute, undeniable fact—from the embellishments of theorists and reporters."

"I follow my own methods and tell as much or as little as I choose. That is the advantage of being unofficial."

"Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

"To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

"The dog did nothing in the night-time."

<i>Silver Blaze</i>	
<i>Chronologist</i>	<i>Date of the Adventure</i>
<i>Canon</i>	<i>A Thursday</i>
<i>Baring-Gould</i>	<i>Thursday, September 25, 1890</i>
<i>Bell</i>	<i>Early Autumn 1881</i>
<i>Blakeney</i>	<i>1881 to 1887</i>
<i>Brend</i>	<i>September 1887</i>
<i>Christ</i>	<i>Thursday, September 3, 1891</i>
<i>Dakin</i>	<i>October 1888</i>
<i>Folsom</i>	<i>Tuesday, September 18, 1888</i>
<i>Hall</i>	<i>End of September 1888</i>
<i>Keefauver</i>	<i>Thursday, October 25, 1888</i>
<i>Klinger</i>	<i>1888</i>
<i>Zeisler</i>	<i>Thursday, July 12, 1888</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.

“That was the curious incident.”

Holmes' Peculiar Reaction

Holmes told Watson that he had blundered because he had ignored the telegrams from Colonel Ross and Inspector Gregory, sent two days before he decided to take a hand in the case, because he could not conceive that a horse such as Silver Blaze could have remained concealed for so long.



Upon what did he base this conclusion? It seems clear that such a famous horse could not have been raced under a different name or sold. The obvious conclusion should have been that the animal was kept in hiding so it would not participate in the race. On top of which, was the supposed murder of the trainer, John Straker. This last happening was not going to just turn up solved!

I may be wrong, but I believe that in all the recorded cases in the Canon, this is the only one in which the Great Detective delays going after a game that is so obviously afoot.

John Straker, Poor Example of Criminality

Nobody can question that in all of this, the one and only pitiful loser was John Straker, who turned out to be the very worst possible excuse for a criminal.

The reason that impelled Straker to attempt his crime must have already been old in the days of the Stone Age: an older man who deceives himself into believing that a much younger, attractive, woman is going to fall head-over-heel in love with him, with no ulterior interest.

The result of his foolishness led him not only to catastrophic economic ruin, but in the end it also cost him his life.

The matter is made even more lamentable by the fact that he was a long-time highly regarded employee, with 12 years of impeccable, honest work behind him; he was considered a valuable and loyal member of the staff—a trainer of the next racing champion, no less!

It is obvious that Colonel Ross was not miserly towards his people. Going by what wages were in 1888, I



Courtesy of ITV Granada

estimate that after 12 years of faithfully and efficiently working for Colonel Ross, Straker very likely received an annual salary comparable to that of the time's top skilled workers; for example, a cabinet maker or skilled carpenter. This would have amounted to some £200 (≈\$75,000). Considering that

he and his wife lived in the training stables' premises, it could also be that he might not have had to pay for his food, either. That would have considerably augmented his wages' purchasing power.

Nonetheless, with that level of income, Straker would not have been able to keep up the double life that Holmes discovered he led. It is not unlikely, as was usually the case, that he paid for the lady's upkeep as well—perhaps some nice little house or apartment, as well as entertainment for surely their relationship would not have been limited to the occasional gown; eating out and the occasional theater tickets must not have been unusual occasions.

Of all the participants in this adventure, the only one who emerges as the true victim is poor Mrs. Straker—she was widowed, left penniless and, laden with humiliation, over her husband's idiotic behavior probably had to leave her home of many years. It is not difficult to imagine, that like all good wives, she must have had him save a goodly portion of his wages. Over time this must have amounted to a considerable sum in the bank. While this would have enabled him to satisfy his paramour's whims for a while. Unfortunately for all concerned, it did not provide him with sufficient disposable income to afford too many £37 15s (≈\$14,000) gowns designed by Madame Lesurier, of Bond Street. The fact that just one of such gowns would have required almost



80% of the yearly salary earned by a governess like Violet Hunter—"Mrs. Derbyshire" had to have been a very high-maintenance creature indeed!

Courtesy of ITV Granada

But, what to do when the money runs out and the lady's favors vanish with the shillings? Where to get quick cash? Enter Silver Blaze.

As it turned out, Straker was as deficient as a criminal as he was as a husband and loyal employee. To being with, his scheme to cripple Silver Blaze was carried out very clumsily. Ned Hunter was heavily drugged, which meant he could have carried his dastardly intentions in an environment more convivial to the deed—the horse stable. It would have been considerably less risky than leading the horse into the moors in the depth of night to do his dirty work by the light of a single tallow candle. Even if everything had gone his way, he still would have again risked exposure once more when he returned the horse back to the stables.

Even if Straker's cut had caused Silver Blaze to react noisily, and had awakened the sleepers (doubtful), being the trainer, Straker could have explained away his presence at that hour. Let us not forget that, after all, he ran the training operation.

Silas Brown—Another Dimwit

Whenever he set his mind to it, Holmes could be formidable and masterful. That being said, how could he have been so certain that Brown would follow to the letter his instructions regarding the

return of Silver Blaze? What could have prevented him, once Holmes left, to release the animal? Silver Blaze would then have followed its horsey inclinations and meandered back to its stable to a warm welcome. Not only would that have taken the wind out of the investigation's sails, but it would have been impossible for anyone to track the horse back to him.

Even if Brown were convinced that the Great Detective witnessed him taking possession of the horse in the moor, it would have been Holmes' word against his; there would have been no tangible proof of his deed with which to charge him.

Holmes must truly have put the fear of Providence into him! Another triumph of the masterful sleuth!



Courtesy of ITV Granada

The Greatest Detective

Without a doubt, Sherlock Holmes is the premier exemplar of his profession. I do not believe that in any other case does he display the extent of his genius or gives more solid proof of his remarkable skills.

We witness how the Great Detective's attention is focused on the reality of what had really happened by the 22-guinea bill for a gown. He later explains that because "men do not carry other people's bills



Courtesy of ITV Granada

about in their pockets," he was led to hypothesize that Straker and "Derbyshire" were one and the same, and that therefore Straker was leading a double existence with a woman of extravagant tastes.

This was rapidly confirmed by his discreet (and one might add "compassionate") questioning of the dead man's widow about the gown, and his visit to the milliner afterwards,

to confirm Straker's double identity by showing his photo to Madame Lesurier.

Holmes' deduction of where the horse must have gone enabled him to find its tracks beyond the 100-yard area examined by Inspector Gregson. Our sleuth's comment, "See the value of imagination. It is

the one quality which Gregory lacks. We imagined what might have happened, acted upon the supposition, and find ourselves justified," was quite warranted. It is interesting to note that the search that Holmes engaged in to find Silver Blaze's tracks was not only imaginative, but thorough as well. One must consider that in football, the length of the playing field is 100 yards.

His query after the health of the sheep in the paddock was, again, inspired and brilliant, confirming his theory as to why Straker would have had in his possession as delicate an instrument as a cataracts knife.

Holmes' belief in Simpson's innocence, based upon the fact that a good strong curry would be ideal to cover the taste of the powdered opium and Simpson had no control over what would have been served to the stable boy, or any means of knowing about it in advance was another inspired insight.

Then there is the matter of "the curious incident of the dog in the night-time." Few writers are so blessed by the muses as to be able to coin such a phrase. After almost a century-and-a-half of being used and abused it has become hackneyed as "To be or not to be." It is daily quoted somewhere on the planet, whether orally or in writing, and runs a close race with the mythical "Elementary, my Dear Watson."

What else happened in 1888:

Empire

Mashonaland and Matabeleland declared British sphere of influence.



Sarawak and Brunei placed under British protection.

A 7.0-7.3-magnitude earthquake strikes North Canterbury, New Zealand.

◀ Suez Canal Convention signed: Suez Canal declared open to ships of all nations and free from blockade.

Great Britain annexes Christmas Island.

Queen Victoria grants a charter to the Imperial British East Africa Company,

and it is incorporated in London, England.

Canadian Pacific Railway opens Hotel Vancouver, Vancouver, British Columbia.

Hailstones kill about 250 in Moradabad district of Delhi, India.

Britain

County Councils' Act establishes representative county-based authorities.

Jack the Ripper has murder spree in Whitechapel, kills his last victim.

Annie Besant leads the London match factory girls on strike.

Commission to examine charges against Parnell.

General Buller founds RASC (Royal Army Service Corps).

County Councils Act: elects councils to take over administrative duties of JPs.

Foundation of London General Omnibus Company.

Miners Federation of Great Britain formed; demands minimum wage.

Foundation of Scottish Labour Party.

Final report on Commission on Elementary Education Acts in England.

English Priory of Knights Hospitalers authorized by Royal Charter.

World

French Indochina formed.

Princess Isabel of Brazil signs *Lei Auréa* abolishing slavery.

Emperor Wilhelm I of Germany dies; Frederick III becomes Emperor from March to June, dies, and is succeeded by Wilhelm II.



Benjamin Harrison elected President of United States. Even though Cleveland received more popular votes, the Electoral College gives Harrison the election.

◀ The Washington Monument officially opens to the general public.

Unemployment demonstration in Rome suppressed by the military.

Louisville, Kentucky, becomes first government in U.S. to adopt Australian ballot.

Marshal Bazaine, officer in charge of the French Foreign Legion in Mexico during Emperor Maximilian's rule, dies.

Agricultural depression causes Sweden to abandon free trade.

British Honduras adopts decimal currency.

Great Blizzard of 1888 strikes northeast U.S., 400 die.

Phil Sheridan, who fought as a Union General against the South during the American Civil War dies.

Clashes in Paris between Radicals and Monarchists. Anarchists riot in favor of weavers of Lille and glass blowers of Lion. Paris stone masons and waiters strike for higher wages and shorter work schedules.

More liberal constitution granted to Serbia by Milan.

Pennsylvania's Monongehela River rises 32 feet after 24-hour rainfall.

Bandai volcano in Japan erupts for first time in 1,000 years.

Use of Danish language forbidden in schools in German N. Schleswig.

Founding of the Dutch shipping line Koninklijke Paketvaart-Maatschappij (KPM). It supports the unification and development of the colonial economy.

Reconstructed free port of Hamburg opens.

Italy and Spain sign military treaty.

King Leopold II of Belgium introduces the Order of the African Star.

Revolution in Haiti culminates in the destruction of public buildings and the flight of President Salomon.

Ferdinand de Lesseps attempts to issue a fresh series of 1,000,000 bonds “to finish the Panama Canal.” Proposal is withdrawn, de Lesseps resigns his directorship, and the project collapses.

Italians near Alite relieved by the withdrawal of the Abyssinians.

The first beauty contest is held, the Concours de Beauté, at Spa in Belgium. Winner is 18-year-old Bertha Soucaret of Guadeloupe.

First organized rodeo competition held, Prescott, Arizona.

New York State establishes electric chair for method of death penalty.

Boulangier supported by Monarchists in France; his popularity threatens Third Republic.

Main portion of Bremen incorporated into German Customs Union; parts of Wesser estuary remain free port.

Art

Van Gogh in Arles, Holland, paints *Sunflowers*, *Portrait of Armand Roulin*, *La Mousme*, and *Drawbridge at Arles*. Cuts off his left earlobe and gives it to a prostitute in Arles.

Oscar Wilde publishes *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*.

Casey at the Bat is published in *The San Francisco Examiner*, and recited publicly for the first time.

John Phillip Sousa composes the military march *Semper Fidelis* for the U.S. Marine Corp.

Tchaikovsky performs *Symphony No. 5 in E Minor* at St. Petersburg.



George Moore publishes *Confessions of a Young Man*.

Cézanne paints *Peasant in a Blue Smock*.

Gilbert and Sullivan debut *The Yeomen of the Guard*.

◀ Rimsky-Korsakov composes *Scheherazade*.

Iannis Psichari, one of the creators of modern Greek literary language, publishes *My Journey* in demotic Greek.

Morris publishes *Dream of John Bull*, on a socialist commonwealth.

Matthew Arnold, critic, essayist, and poet dies.

Fontane publishes *Irrungen, Wirrungen*.

Monet paints *Cap d'Antibes*.

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch publishes *Troy Town*, a novel about Cornwall.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec paints *Trace Horse of the Bus Line, Place Clichy*.

Stevenson publishes *The Black Arrow*, a novel about the War of the Roses.

Charles Doughty publishes *Travels in Arabia Deserta*.

Seurat paints *Fishing Fleet at Port-en-Bessin*.

Thomas Hardy publishes *Wessex Tales*.

Kipling publishes *Soldiers Three*, and *Plain Tales from the Hills*; short stories of India.

Science and Technology

Dunlop's pneumatic tire developed, principle still unproven.

First wax drinking straw patented, by Marvin C Stone in Washington DC.

George Eastman registers the trademark "Kodak" and receives a patent for his box camera, which uses photographic paper roll-film.

Emile Berliner improves the gramophone.

Dr. Fitz, Boston surgeon, advocates the removal of the vermiform appendix in certain intestinal disorders, after several post-mortem operations. His advice is followed.



William Bundy patents the timecard clock.

First ballpoint pen patented.

◀ The first known recording of classical music, Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, is made on wax cylinder.

Fridtjof Nansen, Norwegian explorer, crosses the Greenland icefield.

Clinton Merriam founds the National Geographical Society in Washington, D.C., for "the increase and diffusion of geographical knowledge," and the first issue of its magazine is published.

Thomas Edison files a patent for the Optical Phonograph (the first movie).

Bertha Benz, wife of inventor Karl Benz, drives from Mannheim to Pforzheim, Germany in the first long distance automobile trip.

Lick Observatory, Mount Hamilton, California, formally inaugurates the Ewing duplex-pendulum seismometer, Ewing horizontal-pendulum seismometers, and Gray-Ewing vertical seismometers.

Hudson and Sclater publish *Argentine Ornithology*.

Mercerizing process introduced into cotton manufacture; facilitates later development of the artificial silk industry.

Spanish navy launches first submarine, designed by Isaac Peral. It features accumulator batteries, three dynamos, two 30-hp engines, electric propulsion, a torpedo tube, and periscope. Displacement is 80 tonnes, length 48 feet, and 6 feet beam.

Nikola Tesla makes first AC motor.

In the U.S., Leroy Buffington patents a system to build skyscrapers.

Incubators are first used for premature infants.

Pasteur Institute for the treatment of hydrophobia founded.

Theophilus Van Kannel of Philadelphia patents revolving door.

Sir J. Dewar and Sir F. Abel invent cordite.

William Seward Burroughs patents the first successful adding machine.

Louis Le Prince films the Roundhay Garden Scene, the earliest surviving film.

Heinrich Hertz produces electromagnetic waves, proves light and heat are both forms of electromagnetic radiation. Sir Oliver Lodge makes same discovery independently. Hertz used an induction coil; Lodge Leyden jars.

Next week's case: CARD.

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..."

If you would like to join the Hounds of the Internet, email us at CourageousMurray@aol.com.

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