



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*.

According to the majority of our chronologists, the case

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 volcanic 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

<i>The Problem of Thor Bridge</i>	
<i>Chronologist</i>	<i>Date of the Adventure</i>
<i>Canon</i>	<i>October 4</i>
<i>Baring-Gould</i>	<i>Thursday, October 4, 1900</i>
<i>Bell</i>	<i>Thursday, October 4, 1900</i>
<i>Blakeney</i>	<i>October 4, 1896-1902</i>
<i>Brend</i>	<i>October 1900</i>
<i>Christ</i>	<i>Friday, October 4, 1901</i>
<i>Dakin</i>	<i>Friday, October 4, 1901</i>
<i>Folsom</i>	<i>Friday, October 4, 1901</i>
<i>Hall</i>	<i>October 4, 1901</i>
<i>Keefauver</i>	<i>Thursday October 4, 1900</i>
<i>Klinger</i>	<i>1901</i>
<i>Zeisler</i>	<i>Friday, October 4, 1890</i>
<small>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.</small>	

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.”

### *A Heartbreaking Beginning*



This is the first time that Doctor Watson mentions his now-legendary “travel-worn and battered tin dispatch-box with my name,” buried within the entrails of the bank of Cox and Co., at Charing Cross, packed with the unpublished cases of Sherlock Holmes, bombed out of existence during the Blitz, an indescribable loss for all students of the Sacred Writings. Oh, well...

### *Sinister Cheerfulness*

At the story's opening, Watson tells us that as he descended to breakfast, there was Holmes full of, as he puts it, “that somewhat sinister cheerfulness which was characteristic of his lighter moments.”

Exactly what did he mean by this peculiar adjective? According to my Oxford, “sinister” as an adjective can have the following definitions:

“Evil or criminal, threatening or foreshadowing evil or tragic developments, stemming from evil characteristics or forces; wicked or dishonorable, giving the impression that something harmful or evil is happening or will happen.”

The King's English has not changed that much since Watson's time and, considering him to be a man of letters, it has to be supposed that he used the word purposefully and in full knowledge of its meaning.

Unquestionably, it is a peculiar way in which to describe the Great Detective's lighter moments. Assuming Watson was not exaggerating for effect, what might this say to us about Holmes' character and personality?

Perhaps the Good Doctor miswrote when he used the adjective "sinister," possibly out of a sense of relief that Holmes had a case sure to distract him from needles and such.

### *The Expatriate Millionaire*

I am perennially puzzled by Gibson's decision to abandon the United States and uproot his various enterprises to move to England. Although today, someone of his fortune who did that wouldn't even raise an eyebrow, back then things were very different

Traveling took time—even if you were rich. Rapid communications (important for a man running a financial empire) were pretty much restricted to the telegraph; news to the daily newspapers. Surely Wall Street would have offered him any business resource that he might have needed as well as infrastructure (telegraph and telephone); plus, he would have been closer to Washington and his former Congressional colleagues.

Undeniably, in 1901 London was the world hub of the great wheel of industry and business. However, the fact remains that Britons—especially



those with whom Gibson would have dealt—were not exactly fond of their American cousins. This was amply reciprocated by a strong anti-British feeling in America.

Americans—particularly in the western states—held very strong feelings for their country. Coupled to England's endemic dislike of America makes one wonder why a man as successful as Gibson, a multimillionaire, would have moved to England. Unquestionably, a wealthy man who is a former senator would have had better connections and more latitude in his own country to engage in any sort of business he desired, than in one where he'd always be regarded as a stranger.

Perhaps he had done some things that made it advisable for him to leave the United States; a situation similar to that of Colonel Sebastian Moran, of whom Holmes commented to Watson, "Without any open scandal he still made India too hot to hold him."

Gibson is another of those interesting Canonical characters about whom one wishes Watson had been more explicit. What were his origins? How came he to look for gold in Brazil? How did he manage to parlay his fortune and position to such an apex of riches and power? What made him decide to run for the Senate? Why did he move to England?

Although Watson describes him to us as ruthless and violent, he obviously was capable of tender feelings and affection. He married for love and remained married for two decades. Then there were his feelings for Grace Dunbar. While at first he cynically offered her the dubious status of mistress, when it seemed that he might lose her he curbed (very likely with considerable difficulty) his more carnal inclinations towards the lady.

He also came to accept her guidance and moderate his ruthlessness in his business dealings. One cannot but be reminded of Ebenezer Scrooge on his path to reformation.

### *The Remarkable Grace Dunbar*

Miss Grace Dunbar must have quite an extraordinary creature. We witness her equally affecting three men who could not have been more different from each other. Gibson was shaken to the core of his being by her. Not too unexpectedly so, so was Watson who predictably describes her feminine pulchritude in his most enthusiastic manner.



Sherlock Holmes, however, is another matter.

Remarkably, he declares, “After seeing you I am prepared to accept Mr. Gibson’s statement both as to the influence which you had over him and as to the innocence of your relations with him,” he tells her shortly after having met her for the first time. What led him so rapidly arrive at that conclusion? We all admit that Holmes was nothing short of a deductive genius, but this pronouncement, given with such certainty appears to sit on somewhat shaky ground.

Whatever happened to the hard-headed logician and theoretician who warned his friend that “Women are never to be entirely trusted—not the best of them” Perhaps although our sleuth was made of sterner stuff, he was not after all cold, lifeless marble.

Grace Dunbar, however, tends to have somewhat the nature of an Ice Goddess. She seems to have no desire in romantically knowing someone of the opposite sex, preferring, instead, to devote herself to redemption, although her future as a governess promises to be solitary and bleak. Holmes put it best in SOLI: “It is part of the settled order of Nature that such a girl should have followers,” yet she has nary a one, except for a man becoming aware of his middle age.

### *Holmes, a Product of His Time*

One of the things that most attracts me to the study of the Sacred Writings are the occasional glimpses that it offers into that long-gone era, during which paradoxically poverty and brutality comfortably coexisted along a cultural and personal urge to overcome one’s baser self and attain an ideal of con-

duct. Holmes provides a good example when he admonishes Gibson: “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.”

Quite the Victorian gentleman, *sans peur et sans reproche!*

Imagine saying anything like that to any of today’s entitled billionaires!

### *A Well-Off Holmes*

It seems quite clear that by this time in his career, Holmes was in an enviable economic and professional position.

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

The when Gibson indicated that if he was indifferent to the fee money that could have been his that a successful end to the case would enhance the Great Detective’s reputation in England and America His reply, “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 proceeds to put the multimillionaire in his place by berating him for his advances towards Grace Dunbar.

### *Simmering Tropical Blood*

Everybody—Bates, Gibson, and Dunbar—describe the deceased Mrs. Gibson as having been “Tropical by birth and tropical by nature. A child of the sun and of passion.” Dunbar goes even further telling



Holmes that “she loved so vividly in a physical sense that she could hardly 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.”

This raises the rhetorical question, what woman would? Is there any middle-aged married man amongst us who is certain that his wife would nod understandingly at such a daily close relationship with such a pretty—younger—creature? “But dearest, we only talk about benefiting mankind!” The soundest advice to that man would be “Brace for impact!”

This brings up to a different facet of the same matter. If one were one only go by what the Canon reveals, it would seem that Englishwomen functioned at low temperatures. Going by what Watson has written, passionate aggressive women belong to the “excitable races,” whether Welsh or Latin.

Any woman who reacts passionately to a situation, be it a matter of love or hate, might—might—on extremely rare occasions and under extreme provocation, act in an un-British manner. I can only think of two exceptions: Kitty Winter in *ILLU* and Miss Burnett in *WIST*. The latter's case is excusable because the poor woman not only lived in a fiery Latin country for years, surrounded by members of one of those "excitable races," but was also married to a Latin man. For years she had been encircled by bad examples; almost like getting a loathsome infection.

### *The Brilliant Deduction and the Murder Weapon*

The fact that Holmes found a revolver of the same caliber as the weapon that killed Gibson's wife with a discharged chamber on the floor of Grace Dunbar's closet, would have been considered damning evidence at the time. Although the first successful case of forensic firearm examination occurred in London, in 1835, at the time the present case took place there was no such thing as a well-developed science of ballistics. The science of forensic ballistics did not really take off until later in the 20th century, stimulated by the invention of the comparison microscope which allowed the simultaneous comparison of two different bullets and the close examination of striations for matches



The Saint Valentine's Day Massacre in 1929 led to one

of the first true tests of this new technology. The investigation had stalled until officers searching a minor criminal's home found an arsenal of weapons including two Thompson submachine guns. The weapons were compared with the evidence recovered at the killing, proving that those were the firearms used to kill the members of the North Side Gang. This absolved the corrupt Chicago police department of all suspicion originating from the fact that the killers had dressed up like policemen.



Whatever the reasoning was that led Holmes to imagine what might have happened with the missing deadly weapon on Thor Bridge was absolutely dazzling. The way that Watson writes about how Holmes arrived at his conclusion is an excellent description of the workings of the subconscious mind. It seems obvious that from the time the Great Detective accepted the case, his brain began spinning facts nonstop into theory and soon afterwards proof.

Holmes brilliantly proceeded to use 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!

## *Unfair*

THOR is an original story as well as a showcase for Sherlock Holmes' powers and insights—he is at his best. It shows even the casual reader why it is that he has continually attracted a wide readership over almost six generations. Strangely enough, it did not make it to the list of what are considered as the 12 best stories, ran in *The Baker Street Journal* in 1999.

Proof, perhaps, that these matters heavily depend upon the eye of the beholder.



## *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.

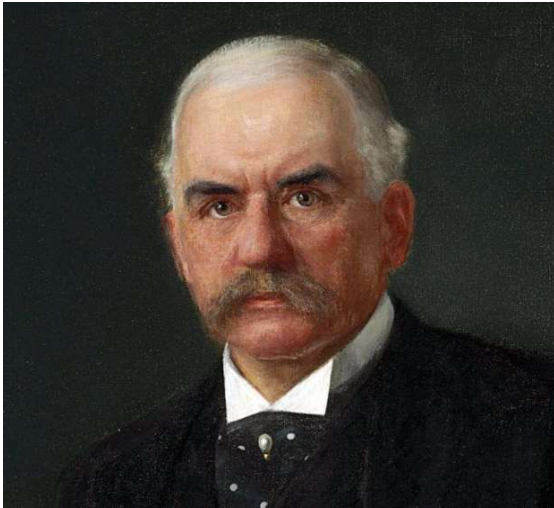
Taff Vale case: Trade unions in Britain liable for actions of tort, stimulates Trade Union Congress to create the Labour Party.

## *World*

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

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.



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.

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

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.

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 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](mailto:CourageousMurray@aol.com).**

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