



**The Hounds of the Internet**

"A singular set of people, Watson."

**An Inquiry into:  
"A Case of Identity"**

Vol. XIV No. 5 • October 26, 2023

"A Case of Identity" was first published in *The Strand Magazine* in September 1891. It is part of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

The chronology for this case varies, depending on which

Canon expert one consults. Their estimates appear in the table.

If the case indeed took place in 1889, as most of our chronologists think, then at the time Sherlock Holmes was 36 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 38.

**Main Characters:**

Mary Sutherland, young woman seeking her missing fiancé. James Windibank, a wine merchant, Mary's young stepfather, who deceived her as the fictitious Hosmer Angel. Mrs. Windibank, Mary's mother, who is 15 years younger than her second husband and is in on the deceit.

**Notable Quotes:**

"Life is infinitely stranger than the mind of man could invent."

"Depend upon it, there is nothing so unnatural as the commonplace."

"[I]n your position of unofficial adviser and helper to everybody who is absolutely puzzled, throughout three continents, you are brought in contact with all that is strange and bizarre."

"Indeed, I have found that it is usually in unimportant matters that there is a field for the observation, and for the quick analysis of cause and effect which gives the charm to an investigation. The larger crimes are apt to be the simpler, for the bigger the crime the more obvious, as a rule, is the motive."

<i>A Case of Identity</i>	
<i>Chronologist</i>	<i>Date of the Adventure</i>
<i>Canon</i>	<i>No date given</i>
<i>Baring-Gould</i>	<i>Tuesday, October 18, 1887</i>
<i>Bell</i>	<i>Mid-September 1888</i>
<i>Blakeney</i>	<i>April or May 1889</i>
<i>Brend</i>	<i>April 1889</i>
<i>Christ</i>	<i>Wednesday, June 26, 1889</i>
<i>Dakin</i>	<i>September 1889</i>
<i>Folsom</i>	<i>Monday, October 7, 1889</i>
<i>Hall</i>	<i>September 17, 1888</i>
<i>Keefauver</i>	<i>Keefauver, April 16, 1888</i>
<i>Klinger</i>	<i>No date given</i>
<i>Zeisler</i>	<i>Wednesday, October 9, 1889</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.

“Oscillation upon the pavement always means an *affaire de coeur*. She would like advice, but is not sure that the matter is not too delicate for communication. And yet even here we may discriminate. When a woman has been seriously wronged by a man she no longer oscillates, and the usual symptom is a broken bell wire. Here we may take it that there is a love matter, but that the maiden is not so much angry as perplexed, or grieved.”

“It is my business to know things. Perhaps I have trained myself to see what others overlook.”

“It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important.”

“You did not know where to look, and so you missed all that was important. I can never bring you to realise the importance of sleeves, the suggestiveness of thumb-nails, or the great issues that may hang from a boot-lace.”



### *The Successful Detective*

Going by Watson tells us, it seems that shortly after marriage took him away from Baker Street, Sherlock Holmes rapidly become eminently successful and widely recognized as a—if not *the*—leading authority in the science of detection. According to the Good Doctor our sleuth had reached a point in his career at which he was considered the “unofficial adviser and helper to anyone who is absolutely puzzled, throughout three continents.”



He is now someone who is sufficiently successful to be consulted by royalty—witness the magnificent golden snuff box given him by the King of Bohemia and the ring he received from “the reigning family of Holland” for solving for them a matter of the utmost delicacy. His passing remark regarding the Dundas separation case in which he cleared some points having to do with it reveals that his clientele had become diverse and that, most significantly, not every case that he was asked to investigate was of the criminal kind. He also casually remarks to Watson that he is working on “some ten or twelve” cases at the moment that do not present “any feature

of interest.” Mary Sutherland herself confirms his growing reputation when she says that she was led to consult him because of how he solved the disappearance of Mrs. Etherege’s husband.

Although it is true that if Holmes had solved a couple of sensational cases of interest to the newspapers and the public, this would have indisputably led a string of important clients to his door, this does not appear to have been what happened. Surely, had this been so, Watson would have remarked upon it.

We are then left with what seems to have been a meteoric rise to prominence in what appears to have been a relatively short time. This is one of the reasons why generations of Canon chronologists have had and continue to have spirited discussions on the matter of whether this case did not in reality take place much later in Holmes' career.

### *An Additional Reward?*

The "snuff-box of old gold, with a great amethyst in the centre of the lid," has always intrigued me. We know that Holmes probably came to detest the King of Bohemia; after all, he left His Highness with his hand outstretched and unshaken. Also, that he considered his intervention in the case a failure (he again mentions this in IDEN), and that when it came to his fee, his admiration for Irene Adler prompted him to only ask for her picture. So, what could have compelled him to accept what seems as an additional recompense?



Some find a clue in the interesting mention of "the Irene Adler papers." In SCAN, it seemed quite clear that the investigation's sole objective was the recovery of a compromising photograph. We must recollect that Holmes had immediately dismissed the possible blackmail value of the letters that the king had written to Irene.

Did something else take place afterwards, which required the king to again ask Holmes to intervene? That might explain the additional reward.

### *The Unjustified Deduction*

It has always puzzled me how Holmes arrived at the deduction that Mary Sutherland was coming to consult him specifically on an affair of the heart. How did he even conclude such a thing? Her hesitation and other behavior observed by our detective could have easily been the result of any number of other reasons; for example, concern over a potential scandal caused by the misbehavior of a member of her family, or fear of forcing the hand of someone threatening her, etc.

### *The Pathetic Miss Sutherland*

Although many have described Mary Sutherland as someone in the possession of limited brain functions, she is truly deserving of compassion, not ridicule. If she was guilty of anything in this whole sorry affair it was of being too trusting and, like so many others, in need of affection.



Probably that is the reason why she did not heed what were warning signs that something was not on the up and up. For example, according to her, Hosmer Angel romantically urged her not to type her love letters, because it seemed to him that the machine came between them. While this is a very tender sentiment, how can it be that it did not occur to her that this should have been a two-way street? After all, the man would not handwrite even his signature! In my parents' time (considerably after 1889) there was no opprobrium to using a typewriter for personal letters, but good manners demanded that the signature

*had* to be handwritten. She should have found this to at least be peculiar.

Then there is her serene acceptance that Angel not only lacked an address of his own, but was reticent to reveal his workplace. At this point, it is inevitable to think that her indifference here crosses from the realm of trust into the blank territory of folly.

## *A Question of Filthy Lucre*

Unsurprisingly so, the reason for this abominable treatment of Mary Sutherland by those she ought to have been able to trust the most was money.

According to Mary, her stepfather, Windibank, convinced her mother to sell her deceased husband's plumbing business for £4,700, about \$1,800,000 in today's dollars. Mary's uncle in New Zealand bequeathed her a small fortune of £2,500 (about \$940,000) in a trust which, although it did not allow her to touch the principal, provided her with a 4.5% yearly interest or some £114 (≈\$43,000). This, added to her small typing business which possibly brought in £40 (\$15,000) a year, provided her with a yearly income of some £154 (\$58,000). In the context of the times, Holmes was correct in stating that "a single lady can get on very nicely upon an income of about £60 (\$23,000)." Thus, Mary Sutherland was indeed well off, which made her a veritable money-making machine, particularly considering that she turned over much of that income to her relatives. Small wonder they did not want her to get married!



Although it seemingly does not have much to do with the actual case a very troublesome marginal, although very troubling, consideration is what happened to the profit from the sale of Mary's father's plumbing business? According to her, it fetched £4,700, a portion of which should have been hers. Leaving that aside, what happened to it?

Had Windibank invested that sum at a similar return to that of Mary's New Zealand trust, each year they would have received slightly over £200 (\$80,000). This absence of foresight might very well indicate that, besides being devious to an almost criminal level, the Windibanks were also spendthrifts, which explains their detestable plan to keep Mary from meeting a potential beau.

Although the two must have coveted the £2,500 (≈\$940,000) of Mary's inheritance to sustain their spending, it fortunately was beyond their reach. Thus, the yearly £113 (≈\$42,000), which she dutifully turned over to them, had to have become crucial to the upkeep of their lifestyle. It is astonishing that she was able to keep the £52 (≈\$20,000) a year that she earned from her typing to meet her personal needs.

## *A Matter of Disguise*



Having seen the results in various movies, I think it might be possible with the assistance of a Hollywood make-up expert using resources unavailable in Holmes' time that I could deceive members of my family regarding my identity, particularly if the light was not very good and there was no conversation; as at separate neighboring tables at a restaurant. However, if they did not unmask during the first meeting, they most certainly would have done so during the second. We must remember that although Holmes was a master of disguise, he not deceive Watson. True, the Good Doctor perhaps had to look hard twice or thrice, but the Great Detective's disguise was eventually penetrated by his biographer.

Because Mary was nearsighted, not blind, it is impossible not to wonder how it could have been that—with the very limited resources of the era—Windibank could have her swallow his deceit, hook, line, and sinker, particularly during what was a close relationship.

## *Ungentlemanly Behavior*

Paradoxically, although in this case we witness Sherlock Holmes at his detecting best the result is exceptionally disappointing; even worse, our knight-errant emerges from it with tarnished armor.

Even if, as Watson described her, the poor creature was “vacuous,” Holmes’ justification to Watson that he would not to reveal to Mary Sutherland the sordid result of his investigation because, “If I tell her she will not believe me,” is nothing short of disgraceful. Even if she had indeed completely disbelieved him, as a matter of conscience Holmes was ethically and morally duty-bound to tell her the truth. Mary’s belief or disbelief would not have mattered—he would have honorably discharged his obligation towards her, both as a professional and as an English gentleman.



Had he told her, regardless of her disbelief, perhaps over the months that followed she might have noticed something peculiar in Windibank’s behavior—a gesture or turn of phrase—that could have confirmed for her what Holmes had discovered; at least to the level of arousing her suspicion. Left ignorant about what the Great Detective knew his rather cold-blooded estimate that she would likely spend the next ten years pining away, waiting for Angel’s return (while being taken advantage of), would probably prove true.

So what did Holmes tell her? She must have asked him what the result of his investigation was. By not telling her that he had discovered who Angel really was our sleuth placed himself in the unenviable position of protecting Windibank’s deplorable deceit. Although Watson does not touch upon this, the Great Detective would have had to say *something* to Mary. There had to have been a final meeting between private investigator and client. What did he tell her? “Sorry, but as hard as I tried, I could not find your fiancé”?

However one looks at this, Holmes does not fare well in this investigation. His

chasing Windibank whip in hand and predicting that, “That fellow will rise from crime to crime until he does something very bad, and ends on a gallows,” did nothing to remedy the situation in which he left poor Mary.

Holmes was exceptionally ineffective. While he accomplished Mary Sutherland’s request by actually finding “Hosmer Angel,” his puzzling final decision to withhold crucial information are sufficient to consider this case an abject failure. He abandoned a desperate client who heavily relied upon him for help. He left her in the dark ignorant of the truth of the repulsive trick played upon her.

It is obvious that even before Mary had had a chance to finish telling her story Holmes had deduced most of the truth. There were the typed letters without a return address, the typed signature, the

muted appearance of Mr. Hosmer Angel, and the fact that for her family our sleuth's client was a steady source of much-coveted income.

Regardless of whether Mary Sutherland was trusting to the point of foolishness the fact remains that she was terribly wronged. Windibank took advantage of her shortcomings and preyed upon her like a vulture, showing complete disregard for the poor girl's feelings and emotions.

Although Holmes' initial reaction towards Windibank was honorable and justified—at the very least he should have received a thorough thrashing—why would he decide to leave his client in the dark? In this case, Watson seriously erred by not being a little clearer with the facts and happenings; as it is, from the facts given it makes no sense that the Great Detective decided not to reveal to his client the results of his investigation because he did not think that she would believe him.

The overhanging problem is that even if she had not believed a single word of what he had discovered, his conscience could have then rested easy over having done the honorable thing; surely he could not have thought that this was for the best of all involved!

As it is, she seems to have been completely abandoned to the not-so-tender mercies of her relations. Worse of all, the two evildoers were left untouched and unpunished, free to continue their abuse of poor naïve Mary.

It is to be hoped that he was tactful enough not to send her a bill.



### *What else happened in 1889:*

#### *Empire*

Transvaal claimed to be “encircled” by Rhodes' concessions in East Africa. Rhodesia established.



◀ Great Seal of the United Kingdom is affixed to the charter of the British South Africa Company. Company is assigned trading and other rights over a vast territory, with the express reservation to the Crown to take over at any time the works and buildings of the Company.

At Cairo, Henry Stanley ends his three-year African expedition. He is knighted upon his return to England. Writes *In Darkest Africa*.

Colonel Woodehouse defeats Dervish horde in Sudan. General Grenfell, commanding British troops on the Nile attacks and defeats Dervish troops, with 500 killed and wounded, and as many taken prisoner.

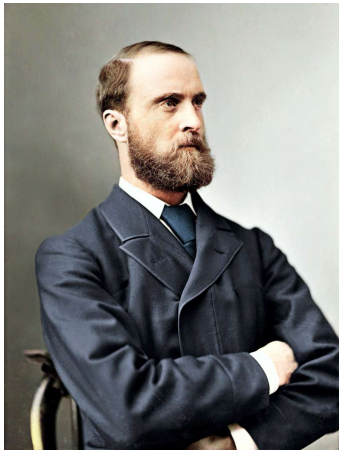
The Canadian Pacific Railway is completed from coast to coast.

#### *Britain*

Great London Dockers' Strike; the “Dockers' Tanner”; growth of unskilled workers' unions; New Unionism; Gasworkers' Union formed. Strike is finally arbitrated in the workers' favor by the popular Catholic Cardinal Henry Manning.

Clissold Park, Stoke Newington, opens.

Technical Education Act: County Councils to levy 1d for technical and manual education.



Establishment of the telephone company.

John Bright, orator and politician, leading spirit in the Anti-Corn Law League, dies.

Board of Agriculture becomes government department with minister.

◀ Parnell vindicated as all charges are revealed as false. *The London Times* apologizes.

Metropolitan Board of Works replaced by London County Council.

Clissold Park, Stoke Newington, opens.

General Booth publishes *Survey of London Life and Labour*.

Early used of photographs in newspaper: *Illustrated London News* runs Cambridge and Oxford boat crews competition.

Woolwich Ferry starts.

White Hart Inn, Borough High Street, one of the last coaching inns, demolished.

Act to prevent cruelty to children.

Board of Agriculture becomes government department with minister.

## *World*

Japan's Meiji constitution. Arinori Mori, minister of education assassinated by Shinto fanatic.

*Wall Street Journal* begins publishing.

Italy takes Somalia and Ethiopia. Yohannes IV (Kasa) Emperor of Ethiopia dies in battle.

North and South Dakota, Montana and Washington admitted as U.S.A. states.

U.S.A. Senate, in secret session, passes resolution declaring against European control of the Panama Canal.

Congress of French Revolutionary Labor Party at Bordeaux.

◀ Moulin Rouge opens in Paris.

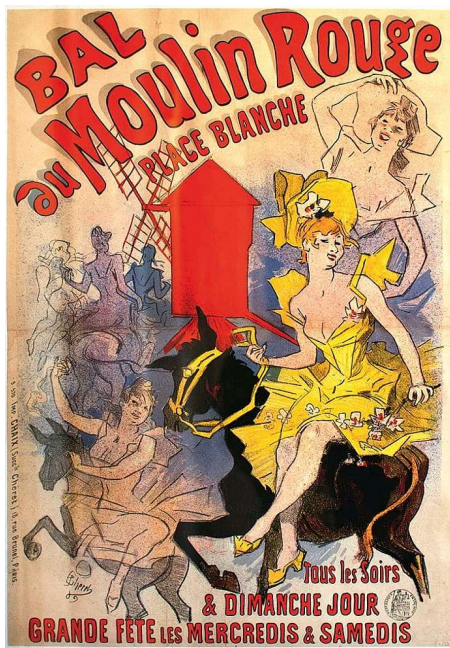
President Harrison, of the U.S.A., closes Bering Sea to all nations; issues proclamation prohibiting the killing of fur animals within Alaska without a special government permit.

Crown Prince Archduke Rudolph of Austria-Hungary and Baroness Maria Vetsera are found dead at the hunting lodge of Mayerling, outside Vienna, allegedly a murder-suicide. (In 1983, former Austrian empress Zita claimed it was an assassination by two conspirators when Rudolf refused to take part in a plot to oust his father Emperor Franz Josef.)

Treaty of Acciali: Ethiopia made Italian protectorate.

Ivory Coast is declared a protectorate of France.

Part of Oklahoma Indian lands open to homesteading.



Portuguese under Pinto try to extend influence in Zambesi Valley; Anglo-Portuguese dispute.

End of Portuguese Empire in Brazil; republic proclaimed and Dom Pedro, the emperor, exiled.

Abdication of King Milan of Serbia; accession of Alexander.

Uprising in the island of Crete. Turkish authorities expelled and public archives destroyed. Turkey calls up 80,000 reservists, but promises to inquire into legitimate grievances.

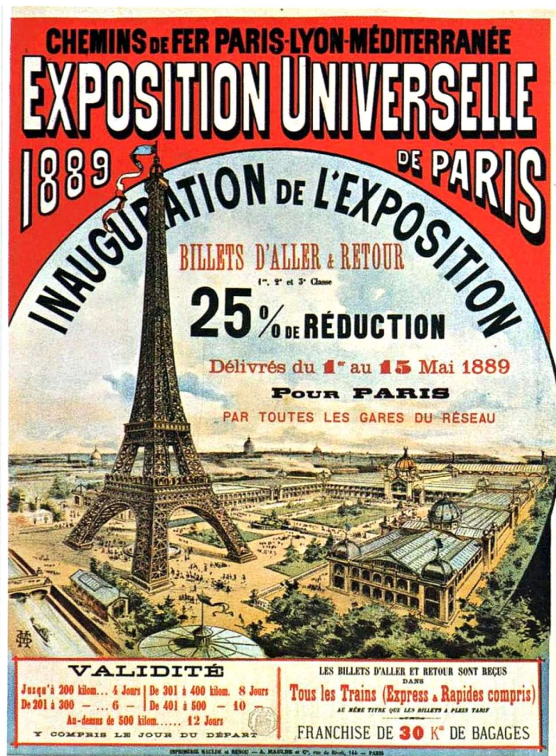
Russian jurors to be nominated by government.

King Ferdinand II of Portugal dies at age 73.

Stanley's expedition reaches Bagamoyo in Indian Ocean.

Aristocratic "Land Captains" replace elected JPs in Russia.

Father Damien, worker among lepers in Molokai, Hawaii, dies of the disease.



Influenza reaches Europe and America from Siberia.

General Boulanger, former French War Minister leaves country, addresses manifesto to his party that he left the country to avoid arrest, French Chambers authorize the Senate to try Boulanger and others in absentia, for high treason. The general and his staff are found guilty and condemned to life imprisonment.

Jefferson Davis dies in Mississippi.

◀ Paris Exhibition: proof of industrial development in France. Continental monarchies abstain from all official representation. English and American ambassadors attend. Eiffel Tower built for the event is dedicated in a ceremony presided over by Gustave Eiffel, the designer, and attended by French Prime Minister Pierre Tirard. At 985 feet high, taller than the Great Pyramid, the Eiffel Tower becomes highest structure on Earth.

Lectures at Dorpat University to be in Russian; German forbidden in schools.

Brunner-Mond Salt Union formed; combine of 64 firms.

Private tolls abolished on French Canals.

New York World's Nellie Bly (Liz Cochrane) begins world trip to beat Jules Verne's Phileas Fogg (*Around the World in 80 Days*). Takes 72 days.

The Pemberton Medicine Company (later the Coca-Cola Company), is incorporated in Atlanta, Georgia.

Work on Panama Canal stopped; French company bankrupt, U.S.A. takes over, finishes canal.

Johnstown flood kills more than 6,000, losses climb to \$40,000,000.

Civil war in Haiti ends. General Légitime defeated by General Hippolyte, who becomes president.

Bismarck introduces Old Age Insurance in Germany.

Erection of Tacoma Building in Chicago. First skyscraper, 13 storeys high.

Mirza Ghulam Ahmad establishes the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, a reform sect of Islam.



Conference at Berlin guarantees an autonomous government to the Samoan Islands under the joint control of the United States, Great Britain, and Germany.

## **Art**

Sir James Barrie's *A Window in Thrums*, sketches of Scottish village life.

Robert Browning publishes *Asolando*, a poem. Dies later in the year.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle publishes *A Sign of Four*.

Jerome K. Jerome publishes stories, *Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow*, *Three Men in a Boat*.

Mark Twain publishes *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

Robert Louis Stevenson publishes *Master of Ballantrae*.



William Butler Yeats publishes *The Wanderings of Oisín*.

Paul Bourget publishes *Le Disciple*, a psychological novel.

Gerhart J. Hauptmann publishes *Vor Sonnenaufgang*, German realistic play.

Sudermann publishes *Die Ehre*, a German play.

Dvorak presents *Symphony No. 4 in G Major*.

◀ Gilbert and Sullivan present *The Gondoliers*.

Renoir paints *Girls Picking Flowers*.

Seurat paints *The Side Show*.

Van Gogh paints *Man with a Pipe* (self-portrait), *The Olive Grove*, and *Starry Night*.

Cézanne paints *Harlequin*.

Tchaikovsky introduces *The Sleeping Princess* ballet.

Richard Strauss introduces *Tod und Verklärung*, tone poem.

## **Science and Technology**

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

First ship-to-shore wireless message is received in the U.S., at San Francisco.

The first General Conference on Weights and Measures (CGPM) defines the length of a meter as the distance between two lines on a standard bar of an alloy of platinum with ten percent iridium, measured at the melting point of ice.

Eastman's Kodak camera comes into production, using photographic film.

Astronomical Society of Pacific holds first meeting in San Francisco, California.

Ferdinand von Zeppelin patents his "Navigable Balloon."

The first jukebox makes its debut at the Palais Royale Saloon in San Francisco, California. For a nickel, one can listen to a few minutes of music through a tube of an Edison tinfoil phonograph.

In Potsdam, Germany, Ernst von Rebeur-Paschwitz makes the first known recordings of a distant earthquake, taken place in Tokyo, Japan, an hour earlier.

The brassiere is invented.

First dishwashing machine marketed in Chicago.

Mering and Minkowski show that the pancreas prevents diabetes.

Daniel Stover and William Hance patent bicycle with back pedal brake.

William Gray patents coin-operated telephone.

First linotype machine in use.

Thomas Edison shows his first motion picture.

Aspirin patented in Germany by Bayer Laboratories, first introduced in powder form.

Panhard and Levassor begin using Daimler's engines in French cars, using modern layout.

*Next week's case: BOSC.*

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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