



"A singular set of people, Watson."

An Inquiry into: "The Yellow Face"

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"The Yellow Face" was first published in *The Strand Magazine* in February 1893. It is part of *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*.

As shown by the table, the chronology for this case is quite mixed.

Because no date is in the majority, it is problematical to accept the dates posted by most of our chronologists. I

therefore rely on D. Martin Dakin's estimate in *A Sherlock Holmes Commentary*:

It was early spring when the elm-tree shoots and chestnut buds were just coming out, so this must mean some time in April. There is no indication of the year, except that it is before the Watson marriage; but in April 1883 Holmes and Watson were busy with Helen Stoner and Dr. Roylott, and in April 1887 with the Reigate squires; and as they are said to have known each other intimately, 1885 or 1886 seems more suitable than 1882 or even 1884. On the other hand, if the yellow fever epidemic of 1878 was that in which Hebron, Effie's first husband, died, then, as the Munros had been married three years, the case would have to be in 1882.

Thus, if the case took place in 1882, as Mr. Dakin posits, Sherlock Holmes would have been 28 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 30.

Main Characters:

Grant "Jack" Munro, a successful hop merchant residing in Norbury, current husband of Effie. Effie Munro, Grant's wife, who was previously married in Atlanta, to John Hebron. John Hebron, Effie's now deceased first husband, a successful American lawyer. Lucy Hebron, Effie and John Hebron's daughter.

Notable Quotes:

In publishing these short sketches based upon the numerous cases in which my companion's singular gifts have made us the listeners to, and eventually the actors in, some strange drama, it is only natural that I should dwell rather upon his successes than upon his failures. And this not so much for the sake of his reputation—for, indeed, it was when he was at his wit's end that his energy and his versatili-

<i>The Yellow Face</i>	
<i>Chronologist</i>	<i>Date of the Adventure</i>
<i>Canon</i>	<i>A Thursday in early Spring</i>
<i>Baring-Gould</i>	<i>Saturday, April 7, 1888</i>
<i>Bell</i>	<i>Saturday, April 8, 1882</i>
<i>Blakeney</i>	<i>1881 or 1887</i>
<i>Brend</i>	<i>March 1882</i>
<i>Christ</i>	<i>Saturday, April 7, 1883</i>
<i>Dakin</i>	<i>Possibly April 1886</i>
<i>Folsom</i>	<i>Saturday in April 1888</i>
<i>Hall</i>	<i>Early Spring 1886</i>
<i>Keefauver</i>	<i>Saturday, March 29, 1884</i>
<i>Klinger</i>	<i>1888</i>
<i>Zeisler</i>	<i>Saturday, early April 1885 or 1886</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.

ty were most admirable—but because where he failed it happened too often that no one else succeeded, and that the tale was left forever without a conclusion. Now and again, however, it chanced that even when he erred the truth was still discovered.

Sherlock Holmes was a man who seldom took exercise for exercise's sake. Few men were capable of greater muscular effort, and he was undoubtedly one of the finest boxers of his weight that I have ever seen; but he looked upon aimless bodily exertion as a waste of energy, and he seldom bestirred himself save where there was some professional object to be served. Then he was absolutely untiring and indefatigable. That he should have kept himself in training under such circumstances is remarkable, but his diet was usually of the sparest, and his habits were simple to the verge of austerity. Save for the occasional use of cocaine, he had no vices, and he only turned to the drug as a protest against the monotony of existence when cases were scanty and the papers uninteresting.

For two hours we rambled about together, in silence for the most part, as befits two men who know each other intimately.

Feline and Canine

Watson tells us that Holmes seldom stirred and considered exercise for its own sake as a waste; yet in the same breath he says that our sleuth not only kept himself in training but was one of the finest boxers he had ever seen.



While it is true that the Canon does not provide a day-to-day description of our friends' lives it would appear that, for the most part, their routine was fairly sedentary. The question immediately arises, of course, how could they—especially Holmes—have kept themselves in such fine fettle. Considering that back then there were no gyms, as we would understand these to be today, and that there were no exercise machines for the home, this seems extremely puzzling. On top of all this, in the Great Detective's case, added to the fact

that he was averse to exercise just for exercise's sake, he was a heavy smoker, sometimes indulged in opioids, and much to the long-suffering Mrs. Hudson's justified despair, rarely had his meals at a set time. In no way did Holmes run his life in a regular, orderly fashion. Our biographer's description in HOUN of his friend in the moors adds to the puzzle's depth:

He was thin and worn, but clear and alert, his keen face bronzed by the sun and roughened by the wind. In his tweed suit and cloth cap he looked like any other tourist upon the moor, and he had contrived, with that cat-like love of personal cleanliness which was one of his characteristics, that his chin should be as smooth and his linen as perfect as if he were in Baker Street.



In terms of animal analogues, I have always tended to think of Holmes as a cat and of Watson as a sturdy, dependable bulldog.

Why a cat? Having a lifelong experience with these wonderful, utterly undomesticated creatures I have often seen cats in spring awaken from their winter deep hibernation, stretch, and from a sitting position effortlessly leap to the window. For any of us this would be the equivalent of jumping on to the roof of the house.

All those push-ups for nothing...

A Peculiar Remark

When Holmes commiserates with Munro's emotional state, he makes a curious remark when he states that lack of sleep "tries a man's nerves more than work, and even more than pleasure." Although this is not a strange offhand comment—considering his absorption with work when in a complex investigation—the "pleasure" part is intriguing.

This turn of phrase does not seem to refer to abstract, intellectual pleasures. What might our sleuth be referring to?

Deep waters indeed.

Deductions on a Pipe



It is always a pleasure to witness Holmes at his best, deriving complex deductions from simple objects, in this case Munro's forgotten pipe. All his observations ring crystal clear and are so very obvious—once he has explained them to us.

Interestingly enough, the price of a good pipe has not varied by much. A pipe comparable to Munro's at 7s 6d (\approx \$130 today) is priced in the \$100 range. A 12-ounce tin of good pipe tobacco sells for about \$40. An equivalent amount of that 8d super-excellent tobacco which Holmes mentioned would cost about \$140 today. Holmes' remark that Munro ". . . might get an excellent smoke for half the price," indicates that, truly, the man "has no need to practise economy."

The Munros' Economic Situation

According to Munro, Hebron, Effie's first husband, left her comfortably off with a capital of about £4,500 (\approx \$1,700,000) so well-invested that it returned an annual average of 7%, or £315 (\approx \$120,000). This being the case, Hebron must indeed have been successful. To have invested it in such a way as to get a 7% annual return would have been nothing short of extraordinary, proving the accuracy of Watson's observation that the man had an "intelligent-looking" face.

As for Munro himself, he had a yearly income of £1,100 (\approx \$410,000), which added to Effie's put them at £1,415 (\approx \$530,000). Thus, paying £80 (\approx \$30,000) a year for their villa at Norbury would not have involved much of an effort; especially when considering the minuscule income tax of the time the two must have truly have had an extremely comfortable existence.



Regardless of the above, however, a £100 (\approx \$40,000) check would not have been so easily given without a somewhat more complete explanation on Effie's part.

Effie Munro's Incomplete Story

It is difficult not to think that Mrs. Munro—or perhaps Watson—did not give us all the facts.



If one considers the times in which the events alluded to took place, much of what Watson tells us does not make much sense.

To begin with, the late Mr. Hebron himself is a puzzle. According to Effie, he had been a black attorney successfully practicing law in Atlanta, where she met and married him. This seems highly improbable, when one considers the way things were back in those days, especially in the Deep South, where Hebron had his law practice. It must be recalled that the catastrophic Civil War and the detested period of Reconstruction that followed (a time during which many whites were disenfranchised because they had fought on the Confederacy's side), were well-within living memory.

Overall, there would have been few—if any—places in the United States where such an interracial couple could have publicly settled down to live in peace. Even in the American North their life together would not have been untouched by prejudice.

There were countries where interracial marriage would not have raised too much of an eyebrow, such as France, possibly Canada, Morocco, and some of the British colonies.

Then, with respect to little Lucy, there is a matter of biology that seems to have been left unanswered, leading to

many an interesting discussion. It is a fact that by that time, no American Black could have claimed pure African ancestry, therefore making a “coal black” child unlikely.

In his invaluable *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, Leslie S. Klinger, one of our scholarly Hounds, addresses this matter.

Generations of Sherlockian and Holmesians have argued over Watson's description of Lucy as being “coal black.” Some have stated that genetics would dictate that the offspring of John and Effie's marriage would have to have been lighter skinned than her father, dominant/recessive possibilities aside.

However, some of the scholars cited in *TNASH*, put forth two very interesting theories. One is that Effie herself might have been the product of a similar mixed marriage, and therefore carried the genes for dark skin, which might have made the results genetically possible.



Yet another intriguing posited possibility is that Lucy may have been the offspring of an earlier marriage on Hebron's part, which would have then made Lucy Effie's stepdaughter, bypassing the problematical genetics of the matter.

Either of these presents an elegant solution to the problem.

Baseless Deductions

Like some of the ten canonical cases in which a crime has not been committed, this case presents a somewhat unsatisfactory ending, considering the Great Detective's investigative results. Sherlock Holmes most definitely did not solve the actual mystery behind the goings-on.

There are a few cases in the Canon that cause one to wonder why Watson would have bothered to set them down; however, this is not one of them.

It seems clear why our Biographer chose to preserve and write this one down for us. Although one can say that Holmes not only missed the target—there was not even a target to begin with—it still shows the Great Detective at his deductive best. It could be argued that in this instance, the Good Doctor's intention was not to show us the "reasoning machine" of Baker Street, but a very human side of his companion. He shows us that there have been times when even the great Sherlock Holmes could be utterly wrong about something, that unlike his elder brother, omniscience was not his specialism, and that he made no pretense to it.

Also (and perhaps even more important), his request to Watson to whisper "Norbury" in his ear whenever he needed a reminder of his humanity shows that our sleuth was no stranger to humility.

What else happened in 1882:

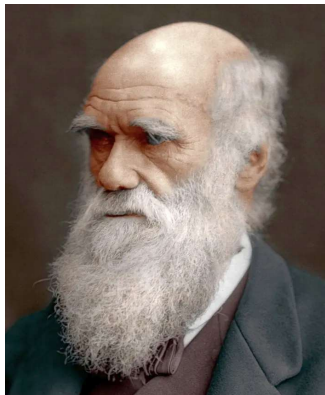
Empire

Occupation of Egypt—British bombard Alexandria and capture Cairo.

Queen Victoria gives Epping Forest to the nation.

London Chamber of Commerce established.

Britain



Phoenix Park murders.

Fenians murder British Secretary Cavendish.

Women receive the right of separate property ownership after marriage.

◀ Charles Darwin dies.

Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand open.

Alhambra Theatre in Leicester Square burns down.

Tottenham Hotspur football team formed.

World

Italy, Germany, and Austria-Hungary form the Triple Alliance.

The first Labor Day in the U.S.A., later becomes a national holiday.

Knights of Columbus is founded in New Haven.

Three-mile limit for territorial waters agreed upon at Hague Convention.

Art



English novelist, Anthony Trollope dies.

Dante Rossetti of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood dies.

◀ Ignatius Donnelly publishes *Atlantis* claiming the lost continent actually existed.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow dies.

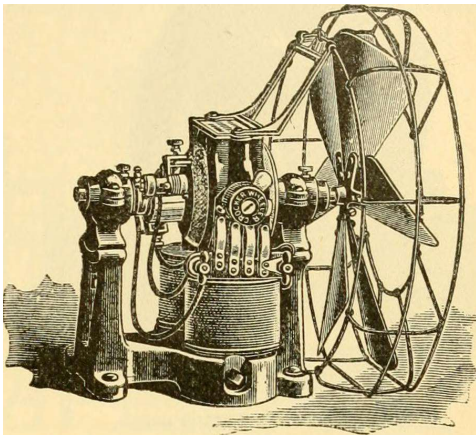
Ralph Waldo Emerson dies.

Cézanne paints *Self-portrait*.

Ibsen publishes *An Enemy of the People*.

Wagner completes his final work, *The Parsifal*.

Science and Technology



Edison designs first hydroelectric station in U.S.

Hiram Maxim patents recoil-operated machine gun.

Nicholas Tesla develops theory of alternating current (AC).

Thomas Edison patents the three-wire electrical system still in use.

◀ Schuyler S. Wheeler invents the electric fan.

Joseph Breuer begins hypnosis treatments and begins psychoanalysis.

Koch isolates the bacterium responsible for tuberculosis.

First motion picture used in France.

Next week's case: STOC.

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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