



An Inquiry into: “The Adventure of the Dying Detective”

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“The Adventure of the Dying Detective” was first published in *Collier’s Weekly Magazine* on November 22, 1913, and in *The Strand Magazine* in December 1904. It is part of *His Last Bow*.

not too far from agreeing on the year in which the case took place. If, indeed, the case took place in 1890, as agreed by most Canon chronologists, then at the time Holmes was 36 years old and Watson 38.

Main Characters:

Mrs. Martha Hudson, Sherlock Holmes’ landlady. Culverton Smith, the murderer of his nephew, who also attempted to kill Holmes. Victor Savage, Smith’s nephew, murdered over a reversion. Inspector Morton, Scotland Yarder assigned to solve Smith’s murder.

Notable Quotes:

Mrs. Hudson, the landlady of Sherlock Holmes, was a long-suffering woman. Not only was her first-floor flat invaded at all hours by throngs of singular and often unde-



sirable characters but her remarkable lodger showed an eccentricity and irregularity in his life which must have sorely tried her patience. His incredible untidiness, his addiction to music at strange hours, his occasional revolver practice within doors, his weird and often malodorous scientific experiments, and the atmosphere of violence and danger which hung around him made him the very worst tenant in London. On the other hand, his payments were princely. I have no doubt that the house might have been purchased at the price which Holmes paid for his rooms during the

The Adventure of the Dying Detective

Chronologist	Date of the Adventure
Canon	<i>A Saturday in November</i>
Baring-Gould	<i>Saturday, November 19, 1887</i>
Bell	<i>November 1888</i>
Blakeney	<i>November 1890</i>
Brend	<i>November 1889</i>
Christ	<i>Sunday, November 30, 1890</i>
Dakin	<i>Saturday, November 29, 1890</i>
Folsom	<i>Wednesday, November 5, 1890</i>
Hall	<i>November 1889</i>
Keefauver	<i>Sunday, November 8, 1903</i>
Klinger	<i>1890</i>
Zeisler	<i>Saturday, November 29, 1890</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.

years that I was with him.

The landlady stood in the deepest awe of him and never dared to interfere with him, however outrageous his proceedings might seem. She was fond of him, too, for he had a remarkable gentleness and courtesy in his dealings with women. He disliked and distrusted the sex, but he was always a chivalrous opponent.

“If I am to have a doctor whether I will or not, let me at least have someone in whom I have confidence,” said he.

“Then you have none in me?”

“In your friendship, certainly. But facts are facts, Watson, and, after all, you are only a general practitioner with very limited experience and mediocre qualifications. It is painful to have to say these things, but you leave me no choice.”

I was bitterly hurt.

Of all ruins, that of a noble mind is the most deplorable.

“But why would you not let me near you, since there was in truth no infection?”

“Can you ask, my dear Watson? Do you imagine that I have no respect for your medical talents? Could I fancy that your astute judgment would pass a dying man who, however weak, had no rise of pulse or temperature? At four yards, I could deceive you.”

The Mediocre Medico

In this case, we see Holmes seemingly adding to his seemingly lack of empathy. On more than one instance we have witnessed the Great Detective accusing his long-suffering friend of being a mediocre writer. Now, however, his acerbic knife of contempt cuts deeper than even when he accuses a genuinely concerned Watson of being “a



general practitioner with very limited experience and mediocre qualifications.”

Harsher words could not have been used! Of course, everything is made clear and set aright, when our sleuth confides to Watson he did not think of him as an inferior doctor—quite the contrary! He did not want his friend to come too close because he was convinced that his biographer’s superior medical acumen would have promptly detected the deception.

I am fully convinced that Holmes’ explanation for his offensive refusal of

Watson’s services was absolutely genuine. It was not an apology, but a sincere clarification of his reasons to deceive his friend to the point of having to offend him. Our medico’s bitterness over the his friend’s remarks must have been instantly transmuted into warm satisfaction by his friend’s explanation that he knew that he would have been unable to deceive him had even a cursory examination have taken place.

Although we will never truly know what Sherlock Holmes thought of Doctor John H. Watson’s medical abilities, of one thing we can be certain: he had the highest regard for Watson, something perfectly illustrated by no hesitation whatsoever to call upon him whenever a dependable, courageous companion was needed. Later on, he certainly must have realized that he was still alive and mentally gifted because of the latter’s successful efforts in weaning him from opioids.

As to Holmes' supposed opinion of the Good Doctor's literary output is concerned, I think that the Bard put it best: "the detective doth protest too much, methinks." Unquestionably, Watson's relationship with *The Strand* furthered Holmes' career by making him famous sooner than it would have otherwise have happened. He does concede this fact in a not too indirect manner in MUSG, when he comments to his friend about cases he worked on before the Great Meeting, "Yes, my boy, these were all done prematurely before my biographer had come to glorify me."

We are most fortunate to have Watson's body of work, chronicling Sherlock Holmes' investigations. We, of course, wish that he would have been allowed by our sleuth to publish the almost one hundred cases he mentioned in passing on those that he *did* publish. Holmes certainly must have realized early on in the relationship that despite of how good and scholarly his monographs may have been his attempts to emulate Watson's storytelling fell considerably short of the mark.

Personally, I tend to believe that Watson was a very competent physician. He had education and experience as an Army surgeon which put him at a completely different—advantageous—level than



that of his civilian colleagues. This is shown by the fact that he managed to establish more than one successful practice and not only did live well, but was able to support at least two wives; not simultaneously, of course!

All of this speaks volumes against an alleged professional mediocrity.

Fortunately for us, there was a flaw in this perfection: he seemed to have little difficulty in regularly dumping his patients on a colleague's lap to go gallivanting after Holmes.

It must be pointed, however, that for all his professionalism, there is a troubling aspect in all this. Watson's docility in following Holmes' (supposedly) delirious orders was completely unmedical. Regardless of how "masterful" Holmes may have been, in this instance he gave every impression of being moribund and rapidly declining towards a horrid end.

As a reasonable person, Watson had to believe that his friend had very little time left, making it essential that without any further delay he procure one of the specialists he mentioned. Also seemingly contradictory was his comment that Holmes had become so delirious that it seemed dangerous to leave him alone. He had already accepted that as a doctor there was nothing he could do for his "dying" friend. This would have made his continued presence unnecessary.

Being unable to examine Holmes or even come close to him, there is no doubt that Watson was fully convinced that his friend was in *articulo mortis*. The faithful manner in which he bent to our sleuth's "fevered" instructions made little sense. One must attribute such an atypical medical behavior to his deep affection and friendship towards the man.

The Hideous Black Formosa Corruption

Horrible diseases such as plague (caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*) were very much in Imperial Britain's consciousness. Such diseases would regularly make a deadly appearance not only in some of the unhealthier of the Empire's outposts, but London and other major cities in England.



Unquestionably, Holmes reproach to Watson, “What do you know, pray, of Tapanuli fever? What do you know of the black Formosa corruption?” would surely have stirred a morbid fascination in the readers of the time, many of whom were personally aware that such diseases existed. Seeing Watson forced to concede his ignorance about that particular hideous disease rendered it even more fear-worthy.

For the more geographically inclined Hounds, Tapanuli is on the north Sumatra, Indonesia. On the other hand, at the time Formosa (Taiwan today), seems to have been a recognized unhealthy place with a formidable reputation for mortality. Undoubtedly, this was a literary marriage of convenience for the purpose of creating a terrifying and deadly disease.

Canon scholars of an epidemiological bent have suggested that the condition faked by Holmes might have been tsutsugamushi fever or

scrub typhus, which involve a sizeable ulcer crowned by a striking black crust. It seemed best to leave it un-illustrated.

A Study in Inconsistency

Like all great minds, at times Sherlock Holmes is not very consistent. In this case he decided to deceive Watson about his true condition because he did not think that his friend would be able to muster the necessary acting ability that would make him appear truly disturbed and alarmed to deceive Culverton Smith into believing that he was dying and thus lure him to 221B. Then, unexplainably, he unnecessarily continues the deception after Watson's return and in his urging the Good Doctor to hide behind the bed.

In *ILLU*, however, Holmes shows no such concern when after a hurried study of ancient porcelain, he sent him off to deceive a dangerous, violent, murderous man like Gruner to pose as a collector of fine ancient porcelain with certain unique pieces to offer. There are other similar examples throughout the Canon.

Sometimes, Holmes puts me in mind of Walt Whitman:

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

Schadenfreude?

Unless I am misinterpreting what Watson wrote, it appears that both Inspector Morton and Smith displayed signs of glee over Holmes' deadly illness. In Smith's case, it is understandable. However, in Morton's case, if there was any elation, it probably originated from the anticipation of being close to capturing a murderer, and not from our Holmes' supposed imminent demise. Does this mean that Morton knew that Holmes was faking?

It is entertaining to speculate on what might have been Scotland Yard's reaction to Holmes' death. In *SIXN*, Lestrade tells Holmes that all the Scotland Yarders down to lowly constable level are proud of him.

So, would the passing of Sherlock Holmes have been celebrated or lamented by the Yard? I always think back to one of the Rathbone Holmes movies—loosely based on *The Final Problem*—in which Lestrade, profoundly saddened by Holmes' supposed demise begs Watson to let him have one of the sleuth's pipes.

It is interesting to speculate which of these two reactions would have been closer to the truth.

What else happened in 1890:

Empire

Helgoland ceded to Germans.

Work of Rhodes Pioneers begun in Southern Rhodesia.

Britain annexes Uganda.

Britain recognizes French Protectorate over Madagascar.

Treaty of Busah: improved Franco-British relations in West Africa.

Zanzibar Settlement: Tanganyika becomes Imperial Germany Colony; Germany excluded from Upper Nile; British Protectorate over Zanzibar.

Britain

Parnell vindicated of Phoenix Park murder charges; ruined by O'Shea divorce petition; rejected as leader of Irish Nationalists in Commons, resigns.

Omnibus strike in London settled on basis of 12-hour day.



Cardinal John Henry Newman dies. He was one of the founders of the Oxford movement, leading the propaganda effort for High Church doctrines.

January 4, *Daily Graphic* launched, first daily illustrated paper. Merged with *Daily Sketch* in 1926.

◀ Horniman Museum opens.

First part of Rosebery Avenue opened.

Dulwich Park, gifted by Dulwich College, opens.

Vauxhall Park opens.

City and South London Railway from Stockwell to William Street, first deep level tube railway.

London-Paris telephone line opened.

Financial panic in London and in Paris.

Lunacy Act gives management of asylums to visiting committees.

Housing of Working Classes Act.

Sir B. Baker and Sir J. Fowler complete cantilever Forth Bridge (for railway) at Queensferry, near Edinburgh; length 1.3 miles.

Charles Booth writes, *In Darkest England*.

Sir Richard Burton dies at Trieste. Famous for his visits to Mecca and Medina disguised as a Muslim pilgrim, the explorer served in the Crimean War and, with Captain Speke, discovered Lake Tanganyika. Renowned also for his books of travel and magnificent *History of the Sword*. He is best remembered as the translator of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Caine writes, *Bondman*, a novel.

Sir James George Frazer writes, *The Golden Bough*.

Morris writes *News from Nowhere*.

Sir William Watson writes, *Wordsworth's Grave*.

World

Africa is repartitioned among the European powers. England receives the sultanate of Zanzibar and an extensive strip of territory to the north of the German West Africa possessions. France is placated by dominion over all the oases of the Sahara and the northwest portion of the Sudan extending as far as Lake Tschad. In return for German concessions, Heligoland is ceded to that country.

Wounded Knee Massacre in South Dakota. Last battle in the American Indian Wars. This event represents the end of the American Old West.

German Dowager Empress Augusta dies at the Royal Palace at Berlin. The Queen, later Empress, devoted her time and energies to the reorganization of guilds of women under the Red Cross. Under her guidance, 677 general hospitals, 286 private lazarettos were established.



North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana and Washington are admitted into the Union.

Fall of Bismarck; the Prussian Prime Minister is made to resign. General von Caprivi de Caprera de Montecuculi is appointed as successor to Prince Bismarck. This event marks the beginning of William II's disastrous personal rule.

◀ Numerous arrests made at Paris in anticipation of expected Socialist demonstrations. Among them, the Marquis de Mores, a French Royalist of American cowboy fame on charge of inciting soldiers to revolt and of furnishing funds to Socialist organs. In May several labor riots occur.

The five republics of Central America unite under one president with a five-member cabinet and diet of 15.

Workmen in France allowed compensation for contracts broken by employers.

William III of Holland dies; Luxembourg passes to Duke of Nassau.

Zemstva Law in Russia; limited franchise in local government; excluded intellectual professions.

Revolution in Argentina, President Celman ousted.

Russia attempts to limit Finnish Control over customs and money.

First meeting of Japanese Legislature under new Constitution. First great national election to the new Parliament in Japan and the provincial assemblies are held. Nearly 85% of eligible voters cast ballots. Results show that almost all the candidates that received some sort of government employment had been repudiated by the people.

Italy annexes Eritrea.

French miners to elect delegates to supervise safety while working.

Workers' agitation in London, as result of the goings-on in Paris. More than 20,000 workmen attend a mass meeting in Hyde Park.

In Chicago, the first entirely steel-framed building erected. The city is chosen as the site of the 1892 World's Fair.

U.S. signs extradition treaty with Great Britain.



Cholera again strikes pilgrims at Mecca.

French Explorer Monteil's journey Niger-Kano-Tchad-Tripoli; completed 1892.

First Chinese cotton mill constructed.

◀ Students of the University of St. Petersburg and the Academy of Agriculture demand the reestablishment of the more liberal regulations of 1863. Five hundred are imprisoned. This results in the police closing of the University and Technological Institute of St. Petersburg.

The Tsar issues imperial edicts against the Jews. They are forbidden to hold land, are directed to reside in towns, and are excluded

from certain cities where until then they had been unmolested.

Olderbank Clubs in Italy suppressed.

Political revolts in Switzerland over the government's refusal to submit to the people the question of a revision of the constitution.

Turkish outrages reported from Armenia. Atrocities committed by the Kurd against the Armenians, half of Salonica burned down.

Heinrich Schliemann German archaeologist, discoverer of Troy, died at Naples.

Art

Franck, Belgian organ composer dies.

Cézanne paints *Mme. Cézanne in the Conservatory*.

Degas paints *Dancers in Blue*.

Gilbert writes, *Original Comic Operas*.

Barry writes, *My Lady Nicotine*.

Pietro Mascagni writes *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

Van Gogh paints *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, *Street in Anvers*, dies.

Prince Igor, commenced by Borodin (dies 1887), completed by Glazunov and Rimsky-Korsakov.

Tschaikovsky composes *Queen of Spades*.

Whistler writes, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*.

Paul Claudel presents *Tête d'Or*.

Stefan George writes, *Hymnen*.

Arno Holtz writes, *Die Familie Selicke*.

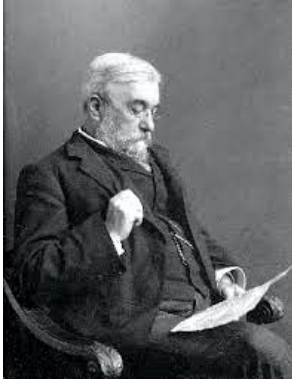
Ibsen writes, *Hedda Gabler*.

Zola writes, *La Bête humaine*.

Science and Technology

Bertillon publishes *La photographie judiciaire*, in which he explains his anthropometry.

Emil von Behring, German bacteriologist, discovers immunity to tetanus can be given by use of serum; introduces name “antitoxin.”



Halstead, at John Hopkins Hospital, first to use rubber gloves in surgery.

Moving-picture films, precursor of cinematography shown in New York.

Cyanide process of preparation of gold from crude ore developed in South Africa.

◀ Lockyer’s theory of stellar evolution.

Application of pneumatic tires to bicycles makes popular craze of that sport.

P. Rudolph’s anastigmatic camera lens.

Discovery of Cleopatra’s tomb.

First use of the electric chair as a method of execution.

The cardboard box is invented.

Next week’s case: VALL.

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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