



An Inquiry into:  
*“The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place”*

Vol. XII No. 40 • June 3, 2021

“The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place” was first published in *Liberty Magazine* on March 5, 1927. It was published in *The Strand Magazine* on April 1927. It is part of *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*. It also was the last Sher-

lock Holmes story to appear in *The Strand Magazine*.

Not unusually so, our chronologists are not in full agreement to the year in which this adventure took place; however, as the table shows, a majority leans towards 1902.

If 1902 was the year in which this case took place, then at the time Sherlock Holmes was 48 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 50.

**Main Characters:**

Sir Robert Norberton, the excitable resident of Shoscombe Old Place. Lady Beatrice Falder, Sir Robert’s invalid sister. John Mason, Sir Robert’s head trainer. Mrs. Norlett, Lady Beatrice’s maid. Mr. Norlett, Mrs. Norlett’s husband, an actor. Stephens: Sir Robert’s butler. Josiah Barnes, landlord of the Green Dragon Inn. Sandy Bain, Sir Robert’s jockey.

**Notable Quotes:**

“By the way, Watson, you know something of racing?”

“I ought to. I pay for it with about half my wound pension.”

“It is only the colourless, uneventful case which is hopeless.”

“You do occasionally find a carrion crow among the eagles.”

*The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place*

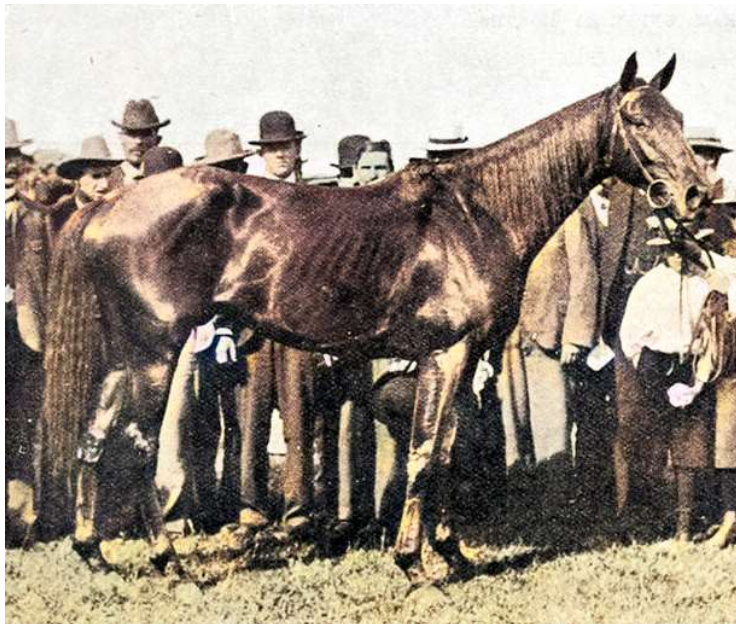
<i>Chronologist</i>	<i>Date of the Adventure</i>
<i>Canon</i>	<i>May, no year</i>
<i>Baring-Gould</i>	<i>Tuesday, May 6, 1902</i>
<i>Bell</i>	<i>May 1897</i>
<i>Blakeney</i>	<i>May 1896-1902</i>
<i>Brend</i>	<i>May 1894</i>
<i>Christ</i>	<i>Wednesday, May 9, 1883</i>
<i>Dakin</i>	<i>Tuesday, May 6, 1902</i>
<i>Folsom</i>	<i>Tuesday, May 6, 1902</i>
<i>Hall</i>	<i>End of May, 1888</i>
<i>Keefauver</i>	<i>Tuesday, May 26, 1903</i>
<i>Klinger</i>	<i>1902</i>
<i>Zeisler</i>	<i>Tuesday, May 6, 1902</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.

## *Watson as a Gambler*

Doctor John H. Watson's gambling habits have always been a fertile field of controversy.

In truth, the supposition that our medico was an inveterate gambler, a victim of the turf seems to have originated from passing remarks and unfounded suppositions. For example, in DANC Holmes



deduces to his friend that he has decided not to take a fling on Africa Securities because, "Your cheque-book is locked in my drawer, and you have not asked for the key."

The inference drawn from this is that Holmes was keeping his friend from committing financial suicide by keeping his checkbook away from his reach. However, we have to note the last part of Holmes's remark: "...and you have not asked for the key." Clearly, then, all our biographer had to do to access his bank account was to ask for the desk key.

Then, in the current case—which for some provides inarguable proof of Watson's weakness—when Holmes turns to his

friend for information on the turf, the Good Doctor remarks that he knows "something of racing," because he pays for it with about half of his wound pension. At first glance, this would seem to unerringly point to a gambling addiction. However, a closer look quickly dispels these slanderous mists.

Let us first begin with the wound pension itself. It probably is unlikely that it remained at the same amount, without some slight increase, since 1888, but for the sake of discussion let us assume that it did not. In *STUD*, Watson himself tells us that it amounted to 11s 6d *per diem*, which today would total roughly \$79,000 per year.

The only reason back then that Watson found himself short of funds was that living in Imperial London back then was as inexpensive as would be living in Washington DC, its surrounding areas, or New York City. It was not due to the horses. In fact, other than for his drifting for a while, doing nothing but live from day to day (not an unknown behavior in some returning veterans), he led a pretty conventional life.

Inveterate gamblers often have a favorite game or activity. It is not unusual for a turf addict to indulge in card games. We know of no such behavior in Watson's case.

Which brings us to the final argument which generally goes along the lines of, "If he wasn't addicted to gambling, how is it that, by his own admission, he squandered half his pension on the ponies? After all, he was wasting almost \$40,000 on racing!"

Here one must engage in conjecture. Considering that Watson, when engaging in his profession, was a successful physician, and that as an author he very likely made far more than he otherwise would



have as a doctor, it is not farfetched to conclude that, by 1902, the pension which 14 year before was crucial to his continued existence, had become disposable income. That being the case, if he was not exaggerating, then the expense he mentioned would not have endangered his economic survival.



Courtesy of ITV Granada

I once noted that because Watson's name became linked to Holmes' cases, he may very likely have written other offerings under various bylines. It is useful to recall that he had to have been making as much per story as did the Literary Agent, £790 ( $\approx$ \$300,000) per story. Then there were the residuals every time one of her writings was republished in England, or translated into another language for publication in other countries.

In passing, it is interesting to note that, in *SILV* at least, it was Holmes who was more conversant with the goings-on in the racing world.

### *Why Take Up the Case?*

Considering the preliminary facts of the case, it is puzzling why Holmes would have been even remotely interested in taking this case.

We have John Mason's indignant account of the happenings at his employee's estate; however, looking at things from the context of the times, John Mason's tale is little more than kitchen gossip, a possibly peeved servant gossiping about his employer. Did it seem that Sir Robert Norberton was conducting himself in an eccentric manner? So what? He certainly was not engaging in any obvious kind of behavior that might even come close to being criminal. In any case, it is not unusual for noble families to have a member or two who qualifies as a bit of a nutter.

Anyone who has been exposed to *Monty Python's Flying Circus* knows exactly what I am referring to.

So what then interested Holmes from the very beginning? Aside from Sir Robert's seemingly unusual behavior, there was nothing to indicate that Lady Beatrice, his sister, might have been in any kind of danger—certainly not dead.



Courtesy of ITV Granada

Mason's sinister claims of a bitter quarrel, and Sir Robert's activities in the old family crypt might have been viewed as peculiar, perhaps, but in no way life-threatening to anyone. Even his digging up the 1000-year-old skeleton of an ancestor from the family vault, which was on personal property, did not rise to the level of a crime. Let us recall that this was a time when it was not unusual for relatives to prop up a dead kinfolk to take a family photo with him.

So why our sleuth's interest? In past cases of this sort—*COPP*, *FIVE*, and *SOLI* immediately come to mind—Holmes would have waited for something sinister to develop.

Perhaps Holmes was just bored or Dr. Roylott, of Stoke Moran was correct in calling him, "Holmes, the busybody, the Scotland Yard Jack-in-office."

## *Looking over Lady Justice's Shoulder*

According to Watson, “Shoscombe Prince did win the Derby, the sporting owner did net eighty thousand pounds in bets, and the creditors did hold their hand until the race was over, when they were paid in full, and enough was left to reestablish Sir Robert in a fair position in life. Both police and



coroner took a lenient view of the transaction, and beyond a mild censure for the delay in registering the lady's decease, the lucky owner got away scatheless from this strange incident in a career which has now outlived its shadows and promises to end in an honoured old age.”

I cannot help but think that the legal beagles amongst us tend to doubt Watson's cheery account.

Sir Robert would probably have needed an armored umbrella to survive the veritable storm of charges and lawsuits that would have avalanched upon him.

His rank as member of a noble family and his importance in the region would certainly have earned him considerable leniency from the local authorities, principally the police and coroner, on the matter of an unreported death and his keeping an unembalmed four-week-old corpse above ground, albeit in a private crypt.

It is highly doubtful, however, that his relations and debtors would not have resorted to a variety of nasty causes of action against him. Even though the only profit that Sir Robert derived from winning the race was a result of his personal bets, it could be reasonably argued that there was intent to defraud. It is well to remember that, as Watson set down, Shoscombe Prince became the property of the brother of Lady Beatrice's husband at the moment of her death—well before the race took place.

By not turning the horse to the rightful owner, instead using it for his own profit, Sir Robert became guilty of conversion. My old *Black's Law Dictionary* defines this as “a distinct act of dominion wrongfully exerted over another's personal property in denial of or inconsistent with his title or rights therein, or in derogation, exclusion, or defiance of such title or rights, without the owner's consent and without lawful justification.” Fraud might also attach.

At the end, Watson tells us that winning the race benefitted Sir Robert, allowing him to pay off all his debts. Leaving the law aside, it could be argued that Shoscombe Prince became an even more valuable horse after winning such an important race, which might have satisfied the actual owner; certainly there would have been a fortune to be made in stud fees alone. It is logical to assume that none of those affected by his actions (i.e., the debtors) would have been interested in grinding him under the law.

Having earned £80,000 in bets won ( $\approx$  \$30,000,000), it is not surprising that, even after paying all his debts, Sir Robert was able to retire well for the rest of his life.

## *What else happened in 1902:*

### *Empire*



Joseph Chamberlain advocates return to Protection and Imperial Preference.

◀ First celebration of Empire Day (renamed “Commonwealth Day” in 1959).

Anglo-German fleet seizes Venezuelan fleet to recover debts and reparations.

Peace of Vereeniging, ends Boer War.

### *Britain*

Anglo-Japanese Treaty for mutual defense and to maintain status quo in Far East.



Sir Giles Gilbert Scott designs Liverpool Cathedral.

Institution of the Order of Merit for distinguished service to the state; limited to 24 holders at one time.

◀ Arthur Conan Doyle is knighted.

Salisbury resigns, succeeded as PM by Arthur Balfour.

British Academy granted Royal Charter.

Education Act abolishes School Board system. Local control goes to town and county councils.

Secondary Education authorized out of rates.

Esperanto introduced to England.

Establishment of Metropolitan Water Board, supplying London.

### *World*

Franco-Italian secret treaty; Italy to remain neutral if France were attacked by a third power.

Failure of second Belgian General Strike.

Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria, and Italy) renewed to 1914.

Italian designs on Tripoli conditionally approved by France and Austria.

F.A. Krupp takes over Germania shipbuilding yard at Kiel; great armaments firm develops.

Russo-Japanese Convention, Russia agrees to evacuate Manchuria in 18 months.

French work day reduced to 9½ hours.

Public Health Act in France improves artisan living conditions.

White settlement of Kenya begins.

St. Pierre, Martinique, destroyed by earthquake.

Abdul Hamid gives Germany concessions to build railway to Baghdad; rail system to stretch from Hamburg to the Persian Gulf.

Tientsin Sanitary Police established; first Chinese public health measure.

### *Art*



Conan Doyle publishes *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Kipling publishes *Just So Stories*.

Arthur Edward Woodley Mason publishes *The Four Feathers*.

Beatrix Potter publishes *Peter Rabbit*.

Enrico Caruso makes his first gramophone record—154 recordings in all.

◀ Gauguin paints *The Call*.

Debussy composes *Pelléas et Mélisandé*.

Picasso paints *Nude, Back View*.

Elgar composes *Coronation Ode*.

### *Science and Technology*

Wireless telegraphy applied to ships.

Trans-Pacific Cable laid.

Completion of Aswan Dam in Egypt.

### *Next week's case: STUD*

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

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