



An Inquiry into: “A Case of Identity”

Vol. XII No. 44 • July 8, 2021

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

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.”

“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 symp-

A Case of Identity

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

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.

tom 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 Pathetic Client

If one looks at this entire matter with just a modicum of compassion, the sole conclusion one can arrive at is that poor, deceived Mary Sutherland is one of (if not *the*) most pathetic persons in the Canon. Although, with some reason, she might be considered extremely foolish, the truth is that in spite of no longer being a girl, as a young woman the only sin she was guilty of was being more innocent and trusting than most. This makes what Windibank and her mother did to her beyond cruel, particularly because it was solely motivated by their lowly desire to continue profiting from her earnings.

It is useful to examine the part of the equation that led to the plot that compounded her misery.

She was the possessor of a small fortune of £2,500 (≈\$940,000) bequeathed to her by an uncle in New Zealand. Although under the terms of the will (providential for her)

she was not allowed access to the principal, at a 4.5% yearly interest this inheritance provided her with some £114 (≈\$43,000)—considerably more than the earnings of a governess at the time. Added to this was her small typing business, which I estimate may have brought her an additional £40 (\$15,000) a year. Factoring all this, she had a yearly income of about £154 (≈\$58,000). Considering Holmes’ comment that “a single lady can get on very nicely upon an income of about £60 (≈\$23,000),” she was rather well off financially—a veritable money-making machine for her ruthless relatives, from which they wanted to continue profiting, uninterrupted by marriage.

It seems clear that the yearly £113 (≈\$42,000), which she dutifully turned over to her mother and stepfather, had become crucial to their lifestyle. In view of their cupidity, it is quite astonishing that she was able to keep the £40 a year that she earned from her typing to meet her personal needs.



"...and a large curling red feather in a broad-brimmed hat which was tilted in a coquettish Duchess of Devonshire fashion over her ear."

Then there is another, even darker, aspect to the situation. Mary told the Great Detective that her mother and stepfather sold her deceased father's plumbing business for £4,700 (≈\$1,800,000 today). Leaving aside the fact that it was very likely that she would have claim to one third of that sum, what happened to all that money? If Windibank had invested it at a similar return to that of his step-daughter's New Zealand inheritance, it would have provided slightly over £200 (≈\$80,000) every year. Although it is not stated, this might appear to show that aside from all their other shortcomings, Mary's family were spendthrifts living beyond their means with delusions of belonging to a societal class well above them. It is hardly surprising that reptiles such as these would have come with such an abominable plan to keep Mary from meeting a potential husband and leading a normal life.

That poor Mary was anxious to find someone and leave the nest would do much to explain her lack of curiosity and doubt regarding the mythical Hosmer Angel's peculiar requests and behavior.

The bogus beau very romantically asked her not to type the love letters that she sent him, because he said it was as if the typewriter had come between them. A little cloying, but one can understand the sentiment and it found a tender spot in her heart. However, why did she not question the fact that he did not seem to think that the same thing would apply to *his* letters as well? He would even typewrite his signature!

And what about his peculiar lack of an address and his reticence to tell her where he worked? One would think that this should have triggered some sort of an alarm in the unfortunate victim. The regrettable reality is that the poor woman was too much in love to be even slightly discriminating.

An Unexplained (and Unkind) Decision

Watson indicated that our sleuth had become the “unofficial adviser and helper to anyone who is absolutely puzzled, throughout three continents.” This is another way of saying that Holmes was at the top of his game and that the results brought by his powers and accomplishments garnered him well-deserved recognition. Our biographer mentions some of his considerable rewards such a golden snuff box with “a great amethyst in the centre of the lid” and a valuable ring. We are also informed that at that time he was simultaneously attending to “some ten or twelve cases.”



It is sad to consider, however, that although in this case we witness Sherlock Holmes at his detecting best, he does not shine; in fact, his actions are not only disappointing, but somewhat beneath him.

Holmes correctly deduced what was being done to poor Mary Sutherland but, as he told Watson, he was not going to tell her any of his discoveries and results because “If I tell her she will not believe me.” This is nothing less than disgraceful. I will not pretend to understand Mary's personality better than Holmes had, because what few facts I know about her come to me second-hand from Watson. However, one cannot help but think that even if Holmes were 100% correct and she completely disbelieved what he revealed, he—more than anyone else—was ethically and morally obligated to tell her the truth. If she, indeed, had not believed a single syllable he uttered, he still would have honorably discharged his obligation towards her, not only as a professional but as an English gentleman as well.



Such a revelation would have been so shocking to her that she would have had trouble keeping it out of her mind. Over the months that followed, Mary might have been sufficiently aware to notice something odd about Windibank's demeanor—perhaps a gesture or turn of phrase—that might eventually have confirmed for her the truth of what Holmes told her. By remaining ignorant about what the Great Detective had discovered, his estimate that she would likely spend the next ten years pining for Angel's return (and continue being taken advantage of), was most likely fulfilled.

This brings us to the unpleasant conclusion that Holmes must have lied to Mary. Although Watson does not go into it, one must assume that the Great Detective had to have said *something* to Mary during the final meeting between investigator and client. He could not have pretended to be a mute during that last interview. So what did he say to her? "Sorry, I gave it my best effort but I was unable to find your fiancé"? It is impossible to escape the conclusion that by not telling her the truth Holmes, whether he wanted or not, protected Windibank's unpardonable deceit.

Chasing Windibank whip in hand and predicting, "That fellow will rise from crime to crime until he does something very bad, and ends on a gallows" did nothing to protect poor Mary from the situation she found herself in, and left the two deceivers free to continue profiting from their abuse. Holmes completely abandoned her, uninformed, to the tender mercies of the two monsters she lived with, and whom she should have been able to implicitly trust.

A thought that always comes up whenever we consider this case is why did Holmes not hide Mary in a nearby room at 221B, well within earshot, when he unmasked her stepfather? It would have been close to impossible for her not to have realized the truth of everything that went on.

Whatever crossed you mind, Mr. Holmes?

What else happened in 1889:

Empire

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

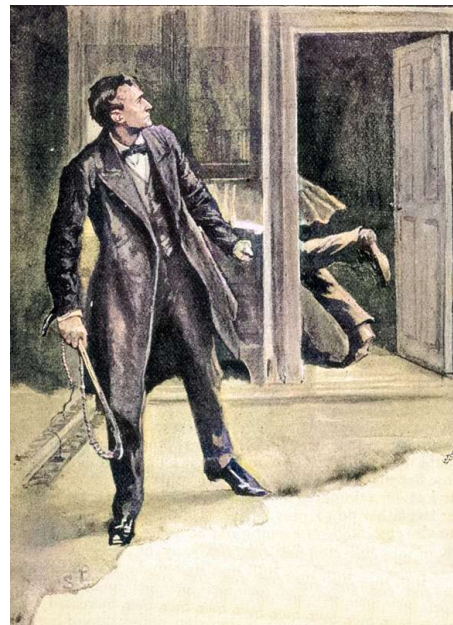


◀ Great Seal of the United Kingdom is affixed to the charter of the British South Africa Company. Company is assigned trading and other rights over a vast territory, with the express reservation to the Crown to take over at any time the works and buildings of the Company.

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

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

Clissold Park, Stoke Newington, opens.

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



Establishment of the telephone company.

◀ 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.

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

Board of Agriculture becomes government department with minister.

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

Wall Street Journal begins publishing.



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

Moulin Rouge opens in Paris.

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

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.

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 Austri-

an 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.



◀ Ferdinand von Zeppelin patents his "Navigable Balloon."

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

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

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..."

If you would like to join the Hounds of the Internet, email us at CourageousMurray@aol.com.

© 2021 Alexander E. Braun