

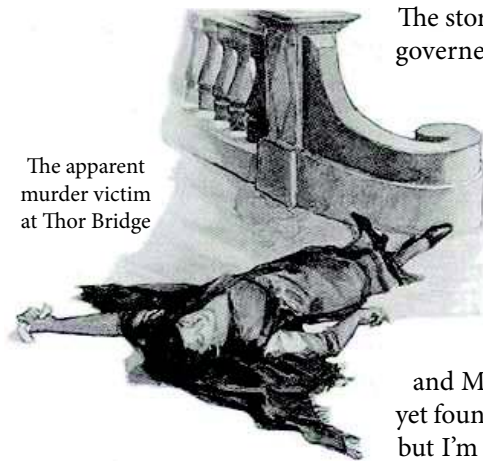
Another look at Thor Bridge

by Doug Elliott

“I fear, Watson,” said he, “that you will not improve any reputation which I may have acquired by adding the Case of the Thor Bridge Mystery to your annals.”

If we search for Sherlock Holmes stories published a century ago this year, we will find only one: ‘The Problem of Thor Bridge’.¹ For this reason alone it is worth taking another look at this tale. Close examination reveals a number of singular points.

The story is particularly remarkable for its striking opening - “Somewhere in the vaults of the bank of Cox & Co...” - probably the most memorable and tantalising hint in the Canon of a trove of untold Holmes cases just waiting for Watson’s attention.



The apparent murder victim at Thor Bridge

The story also features an ingenious crime. A young and comely governess, Grace Dunbar, is charged with the murder of her mistress, Maria Gibson, only to be saved by Sherlock Holmes, who reveals that the murder is actually a suicide. Though it is usually listed as a minor Holmes tale, it has nonetheless received its fair share of attention from Sherlockian scholars. There may be a thread of misogyny running through the Sherlockian world, for there seems to be a general reluctance to find Miss Dunbar innocent. Various writers have accused her, Neil Gibson (Maria’s odious husband), and Marlow Bates (Gibson’s manager) of the murder. I haven’t yet found a paper that suggests Sergeant Coventry murdered her but I’m sure there’s one out there somewhere. I prefer to accept

Holmes’ version of events, even though the perpetrator is no longer around to confirm or deny it.

By 1922 the Canon was winding down. Only ten more stories would be published in the remaining years before Arthur Conan Doyle’s death in July 1930. One Holmes story that year was a woeful production rate when we recall that in the 1890s Conan Doyle was capable of churning out ten a year. But there are some perfectly good reasons for this lack of activity. The author had long before tired of his detective hero, judging the stories as less than quality literature. He wrote to his mother as early as 1891, “I think of slaying Holmes in the sixth [story of the second series] & winding him up for good & all. He takes my mind from better things.”²

Starting in about 1916, “better things” meant Conan Doyle’s campaign on behalf of Spiritualism. By the early 1920s he was writing and lecturing far and wide - including speaking tours in Australia

¹ The story first appeared in February–March 1922 in *The Strand Magazine* in the UK and *Hearst’s International* in the US. It was later included, with the eleven other final stories, in *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (London: John Murray, 1927 and New York: George H. Doran Co., 1927).

² Lellenberg, Jon, Daniel Stashower and Charles Foley (eds.) *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2007), p. 300.

(1920-21) and *America* (1922) - in a dedicated, costly, and exhausting effort to spread the word that the human spirit survives after death and can communicate with the living. Examples of his literary output in this period include *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist* (1921), *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922), *Spiritualism - Some Straight Questions and Direct Answers* (1922), *The Case for Spirit Photography* (1922) and *Our American Adventure* (1923). Small wonder he had little time for Holmes.

On the other hand, though his spiritualist efforts were time consuming, they were not money making. Conan Doyle knew he needed to produce something commercial to offset the considerable expenses of his cause. And the public still wanted Holmes. From 1921, the Stoll Film Company had released a series of films in Britain starring Eille Norwood as Sherlock Holmes. The popularity of these films may have prompted him to write a play, *The Crown Diamond, or An Evening with Sherlock Holmes*, which opened in Bristol in May 1921 for two weeks before moving to the London Coliseum.³

During this period he also continued writing non-Sherlockian material for *The Strand Magazine*. The magazine and its editor, Herbert Greenhough Smith, had published the first untried Sherlock Holmes stories in 1891. It had been the making of Conan Doyle's reputation and he was forever grateful.

Smith was constantly urging Conan Doyle to submit more Holmes stories but the author's heart wasn't in it: inspiration had failed him. He wrote to Smith, "I would do something at once for the *Strand* if I knew what to do."⁴ And again, "I can write stories if I have good initial ideas, but have rather exhausted my own stock."⁵

Conan Doyle had received numerous letters from readers over the years suggesting plot lines but none had met his standards.⁶ Now, Smith offered a new idea, a case that he found in, of all places, a textbook. *Handbuch für Untersuchungsrichter als System der Kriminalistik* (literally *Manual for Examining Magistrates as a System of Criminalistics*)⁷ was, by 1921, a well-respected manual for the criminal investigator. Its author was an Austrian professor of criminology, a former judge and prosecutor, Hans Gross. Among the many examples of actual cases recounted in the book was the following:

Early one morning the authorities were informed that the corpse of a murdered man had been found. At the spot indicated, in the middle of a bridge crossing a rather deep stream, the body was found of a grain merchant, A.M., supposed to be a well-to-do man, face downwards with a gunshot wound behind the ear. The bullet after passing through the brain had lodged in the frontal bone above the left eye. His pocket-book was missing and the seam of the inside pocket in which it was usually carried was ripped up, as if the pocket-book had been rapidly and violently snatched out. His watch and chain were also missing, of the latter the ring attaching it to the waistcoat button was alone left. A policeman stated that A.M. had been seen the evening before in a spirit shop where

³ See my 'The Jewel and the Crown - Thoughts on Writing "The Mazarin Stone" and "The Crown Diamond"' (Passengers' Log Vol. 10 No. 4) for a discussion of the creation of this work.

⁴ Veld, Robert *The Strand Magazine and Sherlock Holmes* (Indianapolis: Gasogene Books, 2012), p.69.

⁵ Smith, Herbert Greenough 'Some Letters of Conan Doyle' (*The Strand Magazine*, October 1930). A selection of the correspondence between the editor and the author.

⁶ The only exception was *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901), whose subject was based on the legends of ghostly hounds suggested to him by his friend Bertram Fletcher Robinson.

⁷ The manual was first published in 1883 when Gross was still a practicing investigator, and was regularly expanded and updated by the author. The English edition used here is *Criminal Investigation: A Practical Handbook For Magistrates, Police Officers, and Lawyers*, translated from the 1906 edition by John Adam and J. Collyer Adam, no publisher listed.

he drank with moderation and left around 10:30PM, stating that he was about to return home. To reach his home he had to pass over the bridge where he was found dead. In the spirit shop there was at the same time as A.M. an unknown, wretched-looking man who throughout the evening drank but a single glass of spirits and left shortly after A.M. The latter had several times taken out his pocket-book, which appeared well filled, though no one could say whether he had any money or how much. The supposition was therefore natural that the unknown had followed A.M., murdered him on the bridge, and robbed him; he was accordingly searched for, arrested and brought to the spot. He denied all knowledge of the crime and said he had passed the night in a barn which, however, he could not point out to the police. Just when the inquiry was concluding and the corpse was about to be removed after the post-mortem, the Investigating Officer observed quite by chance that on the decayed wooden parapet of the bridge, almost opposite where the corpse lay, there was a small but perfectly fresh injury which appeared to have been caused by the violent blow on the upper edge of the parapet of a hard and angular body. He immediately suspected that this injury had some connection with the murder; examination with a magnifying glass showed nothing important, but it was impossible to avoid the impression that here the murderer had thrown something into the water and thus damaged the parapet. Accordingly the investigating officer determined to drag the bed of the stream below the bridge, when almost immediately there was picked up a strong cord about 14 feet long with a large stone at one end and at the other a discharged pistol, the barrel of which fitted exactly the bullet extracted from the head of A.M. The case was thus evidently one of suicide; A.M. had hung the stone over the parapet of the bridge and discharged the pistol behind his ear. The moment he fired he let go of the pistol, which the weight of the stone dragged over the parapet into the water, but the pistol had struck violently against the parapet in passing over and so caused the injury observed. Experiment showed the trick to be quite easy and that the parapet was damaged every time. Subsequent inquiries disclosed that the pistol actually belonged to A.M., that his affairs were hopelessly involved, and that he had just effected an insurance on his life for the benefit of his family for a large sum. As the company did not pay in the case of suicide, A.M. had adopted this means to conceal the suicide and lead to the belief that he had been murdered.

Conan Doyle thought the plot was perfect and set about adapting it for Holmes.⁸ On 24 September 1921, he reported to Smith that he had ‘partly done the “two chips on the ledge” story.’⁹

Before we conclude that Conan Doyle had little to do except copy Gross’ tale and translate the setting to England, let’s look a bit closer. Recast simply as fiction, the original has some strong features: the clues at the scene pointing away from the truth, an obvious suspect, an opportunity for the investigator to shine. But, as a Sherlock Holmes story, it lacks human interest and suspense. Robbery is a mundane motive for murder and insurance fraud is a well-worn reason to disguise a suicide.

Conan Doyle’s fictional version is much improved over reality. Here the motives are jealousy, revenge, despair and hatred. (And if that seems a bit unrealistic, we can always blame it on Mrs



Sherlock Holmes investigates a telling clue at Thor Bridge

⁸ Smith, *Op. Cit.*

⁹ Letter reproduced in *Baker Street Miscellanea*, Vol 44, Winter 1985. Thanks to Randall Stock.

Gibson's "tropical nature".) The story presents us with a plausible villain - the odious Neil Gibson - and an unlikely suspect, Grace Dunbar.¹⁰ Marlow Bates, Gibson's property manager, points further suspicion at Gibson. Add a soupçon of forbidden love and you have a sterling tale.¹¹

One might observe that Holmes is not his usual self in this story, not the Sherlock Holmes of *The Adventures* and the other earlier tales. His attitude towards women, for example, has undergone a radical change. Upon meeting Grace Dunbar, he instantly trusts her and believes her to be innocent. It's a surprising reaction, a polar shift from the Holmes of *The Sign of Four*, who observed, "Women are never to be entirely trusted - not the best of them."



Sherlock Holmes (Jeremy Brett) and Dr Watson (Edward Hardwicke) investigate at Thor Bridge

The detective also exhibits a more metaphysical outlook than usual. He talks of "that schoolroom of Sorrow where our earthly lessons are taught." Why "earthly"? Are there unearthly lessons? This is Conan Doyle's spiritualist obsession speaking. The phrase could recall Elizabeth Ayton Godwin's Christian poem 'School of Sorrow' (c1860s) which teaches that a Christian life is the antidote to life's burden of sadness. Or it possibly echoes *The School*

of Sorrow, an 1895 painting by Luigi Rossi showing a stunned group of children staring at a woman struck down by unbearable sadness. Of course there is a vast difference between an impressionable child and a cynical middle-aged robber baron, so the lessons of sorrow in each case would be quite different. Besides, Gibson's teacher was not really sorrow but rather love.

In the same spiritual vein, Holmes invokes "the help of the God of justice." The capital G suggests he is referring to the Christian God, rather than a generic deity.¹² It is the first time, except for the occasional exclamation, that he has made the slightest reference to a higher power. Watson, too, seems touched with a sense of the spiritual. His encounter with Grace Dunbar impresses him: "It was no wonder that even the masterful millionaire had found in her something more powerful than himself - something which could control and guide him." It hints at the "spirit controls", those ancient, long-dead souls who supposedly guide the minds of mediums during spiritualist séances.

It is significant that the relationship between Gibson and Dunbar is cast as a spiritual one. References to a "mental, and even spiritual, tie" between them and Mrs Gibson's "soul-jealousy" may come from Conan Doyle's obsession with matters of the spirit. All this supernormal allusion is a big step from the Sherlock Holmes who once stood "flat-footed upon the ground". Conan Doyle, of course, was very much concerned with God and the soul at this time. To his credit, the solution of 'Thor Bridge' is, like the other *Case-Book* stories, firmly rooted in reality.

¹⁰ Frame-up is a hoary icon of crime writing but this is one of only four stories in the Canon where someone is framed for a crime. The other three are 'The Blue Carbuncle' (Ryder and the Countess' maid frame John Horner), 'The Norwood Builder' (John Hector McFarlane is the victim here) and 'The Bruce-Partington Plans' (poor Arthur Cadogan West is framed for the theft of the plans.)

¹¹ Although the love interest seems to be one-sided: Grace Dunbar exhibits not a hint of affection for Gibson. He seems to be more of a local improvement project for her than a potential partner.

¹² The Greek personification of justice was Themis, often seen these days hanging around in front of court-houses with blindfold and scales.

We can blame these changes in Holmes' personality on his advancing years - assuming the story occurred not long before its publication in 1922 - or on Conan Doyle's own age (he was 62) and the distractions of Spiritualism.

It's worth mentioning that in this story Watson himself observes a new character trait in Holmes that is not subsequently borne out by the story itself. On the wild October morning of the story's opening, Watson declares Holmes to be "easily impressed by his surroundings". If this is true, it is a significant turnabout for Holmes. In earlier stories he seldom responded to changes in atmosphere: his mental state was generally driven by the state of the case alone. In 'The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist', for example, Watson observed that he "resented anything which distracted his attention from the matter in hand", which would no doubt include the weather and the setting. Notwithstanding Watson's declaration, Holmes' behaviour in 'Thor Bridge' is consistent with his usual character. He begins the day in a cheery frame of mind ("particularly bright and joyous") but minutes later falls into pessimism as the facts emerge. ("I fear it is a thankless business... Unless some entirely new and unexpected [facts] come to light I do not see what my client can hope for.") We can only speculate how Watson could have failed to read this important aspect of his old friend's usual behaviour.

The story features a number of other trifling details that make it unique in the Canon. Holmes carries a cane for the first time, perhaps a reflection of his advancing years. Readers may object that Holmes used a cane in 'The Speckled Band' to dispatch the swamp adder but it is explained in that story that he had acquired it earlier for the evening's vigil. It was not something he carried routinely.

Watson believes that Holmes will eventually "separate and destroy" many of the case records. But these were penned by Watson and stored in Watson's dispatch box, presumably in Watson's bank. Why and how does Holmes have access to them? Watson has sought Holmes' permission to publish his cases and Holmes has often expressed his disapproval of the results but it has never been suggested that he was prepared to cull them, or that Watson would allow it. Watson's reluctance to "give the public a surfeit" of Holmes tales demonstrates his pride and ownership in the work, but allowing Holmes to have his way with the contents of the tin dispatch box perhaps suggests that Watson no longer cares so much about Holmes' legacy.

Conan Doyle's writing, too, has changed with the years. His sentences have become more complicated, a few showing signs of awkwardness, a contrast to the clean, crisp style of the early stories. Witness "the curious problems which Sherlock Holmes had at various times to examine." There are echoes of 'A Scandal in Bohemia's' "This account of you we have from all quarters received." Notwithstanding this tendency to more complex syntax, the story still moves right along and Holmes exhibits his characteristic flashes of brilliance.

Though "Thor Bridge" is rarely listed as anyone's favourite Holmes story, it is surely one of the best of the *Case-Book* tales. Often neglected, it has a number of strong features and certainly deserves a second reading.¹³



¹³ The Sydney Passengers recreated the crime at their annual picnic on Sunday 7th January 2007 in scenic Cooper Park in the Sydney suburb of Bellevue Hill. Finding a suitable historic stone bridge, Passenger Rosane McNamara bravely played the part of Maria Gibson, simulating a self-inflicted pistol shot to the head, thereby dropping the weapon which rapidly followed the rock and string over the parapet of the bridge. The experiment was repeated successfully by Holmes and Watson (Bill Barnes and Philip Cornell). (The record of the event in *The Passengers Log* Vol. 10 Nos. 2-3, pp8-9 does not mention any damage to the bridge.)