

Examining the Chronology of The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge

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Based on a Presentation at the 20th Fall Gathering
of the Pleasant Places of Florida
Saturday, November 18, 1995
Ybor City Brewery
Tampa Florida

No opening statement has puzzled the Sherlockian world more than the first lines of The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge. In Dr. Watson's own words, we read: "I find it recorded in my notebook that it was a bleak and windy day towards the end of March in the year 1892 (my emphasis)." (1) How can this possibly be? It is utterly preposterous! Everyone in the civilized world knows full well that this is right smack in the middle of THE GREAT HIATUS! It is virtually holy writ that Mr. Sherlock Holmes disappeared towards the end of the Spring of the year 1891 and was thought to be dead, due to an encounter with Professor Moriarty at the falls of Reichenbach, and did not resurface until the beginning of April 1894. (2,3) To believe otherwise would be considered heresy.

Apparently, I am not alone in this belief. I regard "The Oxford Sherlock Holmes" as representing the very highest level of pure Doylean scholarship, not easily lured into the "make believe" world that so entrances Sherlockians and Holmesians. Yet, this dating was so outrageous that even the chief editor of this otherwise staid and conservative series of books was impelled to change the date in the narrative itself to 1895, with the following explanatory note: "1895: erroneously '1892' in all texts." (4) Holmes's disappearance after Professor Moriarty's death is given in the appropriate stories ('The Final Problem' (Memoirs), 'The Empty House' (Return) as from Apr. 1891 to Apr. 1894)."

Many other highly regarded researchers have struggled to determine the chronology of this adventure. As shown in the appended table, there is a vast difference of opinion amongst these scholars. (5) With the exception of my recent observations, which I will further develop in later sections of this treatise, dates for this narrative have ranged from March 1890 through 1902. An examination of all of these would be beyond the scope of this writing, and would be essentially irrelevant anyway, as we shall see. However, it may be instructive to understand the types of arguments that have been utilized by earlier chronologists.

For example, "The Oxford Sherlock Holmes" contends that its date of 1895 is appropriate based on one fact, and one fact alone. (4) In the account of The Norwood Builder, which took place several months after Sherlock Holmes' return, mention was made of "The case of the papers of ex-president Murillo" and one of the main actors in the drama under current discussion is, coincidentally, a deposed Latin American despot known as Don Murillo, the Tiger of San Pedro. This hypothesis must be regarded as very tenuous indeed. There is no real evidence that ex-president Murillo is identical to Don Murillo, the Tiger of San Pedro. In fact, the excellent

analysis of Latin American Rulers, presented very recently by David McCallister, demonstrated that no such ruler as Don Murillo ever existed in Latin America, and no actual rulers who could possibly have fit his description were deposed or fled in the appropriate time frame.(6)

Another eminent scholar, William S. Baring-Gould, claimed a date of Monday, March 24, to Saturday, March 29, 1890 for this adventure.(7) He used weather reports as the main source of evidence to justify his contentions. A careful review of weather reports searching for a year, before the disappearance of Sherlock Holmes, in which in the year 1890 there was a "bleak and windy day towards the end of March." That seems to be as reasonable an hypothesis as any. However, if Dr. Watson was mistaken about the date, what assurance do we have that he was not in error regarding the month or weather or anything else? No, that will not do!

Finally, T. S. Blakeney based his broad dating of this adventure, either in 1896 or between 1898-1902, on several seemingly legitimate arguments: (1) It must be later than 1890 since mention is made of The Red-Headed League (he confidently placed that tale on Saturday, October 11, 1890), (2) it could not be 1895 because there were already too many cases to fit it in, (3) it could not have been between 1891 and 1894 due to the absence of Sherlock Holmes the Hiatus), and (4) it could not be 1897 due to the fact that in March of that year, Sherlock Holmes was sick in Cornwall.(8) However, Baring-Gould contends that The Red-Headed League took place in 1887, which would support an earlier date such as the one that I will suggest below.(5)

Lacking agreement among all of the many astute chronologists to provide us with a consistent argument for dating The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge, we must strike out on our own to find the true answer to this very important puzzle. Let us begin with questioning Dr. Watson's opening statement, which is clear as a bell. What are we to believe? There are several possible options to explore. Was the Great Hiatus itself only a mere subterfuge that Dr. Watson finally set straight when he reported The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge in 1908? Or, did Dr. Watson merely make a mistake in the date when he wrote this story, as was claimed by Michael Hardwick?(9) Or, was he lying about the actual date of this adventure to hide something else that went on at the time? Or, finally, did Sir Arthur Conan Doyle screw up when he arranged for publication this account.(4) As a scientist, I am not qualified to seek such answers by attempting to define Dr. Watson's motivations, and must instead freshly, and with an open mind, and strict compliance with the "scientific method" review the evidence in the narrative itself. Only a careful reading of the adventure, with a fresh mind wiped clean of all prior perceptions will allow the answer to percolate through.

After reading and rereading the narrative, avoiding all reference to annotations, I was struck by an obvious clue to the solution of this mystery. Dr. Watson had used the word grotesque on five separate occasions in the introduction of the narrative. For someone with his literary depth and extensive vocabulary, Dr. Watson must have had a very good reason for repeating this one word so many times. On Page 869-70 in the "Doubleday" edition, appear the following statements:

1. "I suppose, Watson, that I must look upon you as a man of letters," said he. How do you define the word grotesque?
2. "If you cast your mind back.....you will recognize how

often the grotesque has deepened into the criminal."

3. "That was grotesque enough in the outset...."
4. "Or again, there was that most grotesque affair of the five orange pips...."
5. "Have just had most grotesque experience. May I consult you?"

"Scott Eccles,
"Post Office, Charing Cross."

The word grotesque is repeated two more times at the summation of the narrative, and in the very same sentence, so that we are reminded of the five-fold replication at the opening of the story. On Page 887-888 in the "Doubleday" edition we read: "It is grotesque, Watson," Holmes added, as he slowly fastened his notebook, "but, as I have had occasion to remark, there is but one step from the grotesque to the horrible."

Can anyone believe that Dr. Watson did not intend for us to understand that there was something very significant about his use of the same word over and over in this story? No, he is telling us something. It is up to us to squeeze out its meaning.

Another point of evidence is the issue that Dr. Watson makes of time in this case. By subterfuge, Mr. Scott Eccles is made to believe that he was awakened at one AM to supply an alibi for the activities of Mr. Garcia. Clearly, the use of this device calls out to us, urging us to explore the temporal anomalies found in this chronicle.

Thus, an hypothesis emerges. The date of this account is hidden from view, and must be deduced from the data provided for us in this story. After all, the given date of this case is not very likely. And, just in case we missed that not so subtle hint, another point is made regarding the illusory nature of time. Now, having decided that the year must be deduced from the other clues, let us turn our attention to the word grotesque, which, as I indicated, occurs five times at the beginning of the story. What event of a grotesque nature occurred five times during the late 19th century? The activities of Jack the Ripper, the best known serial killer of his age, spring to mind. The year was 1888, and five prostitutes were killed in a most grotesque manner, and their bodies were then mutilated in a most grotesque way.⁽¹⁰⁾ Thus, it seems to me that 1888 must be the year that the events described in *The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge* actually took place. Whether there is any relationship between this case and the Jack the Ripper slayings is unknown at this time, and remains a matter for further investigation. However, I do believe that they did take place during the same time period.

SUMMATION:

1. In the most puzzling sentence in Sherlockian literature: Dr. Watson clearly wrote: "I find it recorded in my notebook that it was a bleak and windy day towards the end of March in the year 1892."
2. During that time, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, thought to have perished in the Reichenbach Falls, was traveling the world, as Sigerson, during the three-year hiatus from April 1891 through April

1894.

3. Much importance is given to the difference between the time that Mr. Scott Eccles went to bed and the time that he was convinced that he went to bed. This is a major but subtle clew regarding the importance of the timing of this adventure to the author. It is up to us to squeeze out its meaning.
4. The word grotesque is used five times at the very beginning of the narrative. Grotesque is reiterated twice in the conclusion to remind us of its central importance in dating this adventure.
5. The most grotesque series of events involving the number five in the nineteenth century were the serial murders perpetrated by the killer known as "Jack the Ripper."
6. These slayings all occurred in 1888.
7. Thus, through the use sound deductive reasoning and the application of the scientific method, we must support the hypothesis that The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge had to have taken place in 1888.

References:

- (1) Doyle, A. C. "The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge" in The Complete Sherlock Holmes, Dorset Press, Garden City, New York, 1988, pp 869-88.
- (2) Ibid. "The Final Problem," pp 469-80.
- (3) Ibid. "The Adventure of the Empty House," pp 483-96.
- (4) Doyle, A. C. His Last Bow in The Oxford Sherlock Holmes, Edited by Edwards, O.D., Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, p 174.
- (5) Weller, W. Elementary Holmes, Sherlock Publications, Hampshire, 1994, pp 56-73.
- (6) McCallister, D. R. The Face of the Tiger A Rogue's Gallery of Latin American Rulers, Presented at the 20th Gathering of the Pleasant Places of Florida, Tampa, Florida, November 18, 1995.
- (7) Doyle, A. C. "The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge" In The Annotated Sherlock Holmes edited by Baring-Gould, W. S. Volume II, Clarkson S. Potter, New York, 1967, p238.
- (8) Blakeney, T. S. Sherlock Holmes: Fact or Fiction? Otto Penzler Books, New York, 1993, pp 100-1.
- (9) Hardwick, M. The Complete Guide to Sherlock Holmes. St. Martin's Press, New York, 1986, p 156.
- (10) Redmond, C. A Sherlock Holmes Handbook. Simon & Pierre, Toronto, Canada, p 142.

Acknowledgments: I must acknowledge, with sincere gratitude, the fortitude and patient assistance of my wife Sandie, who corrected the poor grammar and punctuation in the original manuscript, in spite of the fact that she has absolutely no interest in Sherlock Holmes.

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Chronologist	Date
John H. Watson	End of March, 1892
William S. Baring-Gould	Monday, March 24, 1890
H. W. Bell	Late March, 1895

T. S. Blakeney	1896 or 1898-1902
Gavin Brend	March, 1894
Jay Finley Christ	Monday, March 21, 1892
D. Martin Dakin	Late March, 1894
Henry T. Folsom	Late March, 1890
John Hall	End of March, 1895
Ernest B. Zeisler	Monday, March 24, 1902
"Oxford Sherlock Holmes"	1892
Carl L. Heifetz	1888

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