

HOLMES'S BUSY DAY

by WILLIAM HYDER

Sherlock Holmes brought the case of “Beryl Coronet” to a conclusion in what he called “a really hard day’s work.”

His task was to recover a piece of gold, set with three beryls, which had been broken off the coronet in a robbery. In less than eighteen hours he conducted his investigation, deduced who had stolen the gems, and learned that the thief had sold them to a fence. Finally he retrieved them by paying £3,000.

Or so he told his client.

Several writers have commented on the financial aspects of this case. Martin J. King placed the action in 1882 and exclaimed, “Suddenly Holmes is able to write his own cheque for £3,000! After only five years of practice!”¹

Ian McQueen, who put the events in 1886 or shortly before, wrote, “‘Beryl Coronet’ is of great interest, not only in showing what huge figures Holmes was able to command when at the height of his fame but also in demonstrating that within a few short years of settling down in Baker Street in rooms which he had to share for reasons of expense he was able to produce £3,000 of his own money to buy back the gems from the receiver. Other adventures had already made him a rich man.”²

We cannot agree with either of these scholars. Although most chronologists do in fact place “Beryl Coronet” in 1886 or earlier,³ it cannot be claimed that Holmes was “at the height of his fame” at that time. He did not become known to the general public until 1887, when Dr. Watson published *A Study in Scarlet*, and his greatest fame was not achieved until the middle of the 1890s.

It is doubtful whether Holmes was even close to being a rich man in 1886, much less in 1882. The only published cases that took place before 1886, according to a majority of the chronologies, were *A Study in Scarlet*, “Speckled Band,” “Yellow Face,” and “Resident Patient.”⁴ None of those would have paid a lavish fee; in *A Study in Scarlet*, in fact, there was no fee at all. Of course Holmes must have handled many cases that Dr. Watson did not record, but the above-mentioned adventures are probably representative.

There is not much reason, if we think about it, to suppose that a little-known investigator operating out of furnished lodgings in a middle-class neighborhood would have attracted wealthy clients. It is significant that Alexander Holder, senior partner in the private banking firm of Holder & Stevenson, went to Holmes only because the police inspector investigating the crime suggested it. “Beryl Coronet” may well have been Holmes’s first big-money case.

Admittedly there is strong support for the belief shared by the two scholars we have quoted that Holmes used his own funds to buy back the missing fragment from the receiver. At the end of the adventure Dr. Watson shows Holder reimbursing Holmes for what the detective said he paid to the fence—£1,000 per gem—and adding a reward of £1,000.

But we must consider what a huge sum £3,000 was in 1886. The English pound was worth about US\$5, and \$15,000 would have had the buying power of \$150,000 or even more in today's money. It is hard to suppose that Holmes could have saved such an amount so early in his career. Even if he had somehow been worth that much—owing to an inheritance, let us say—we may doubt that his funds would have been liquid enough to allow him to withdraw the equivalent of \$150,000 on demand.

There are further reasons for doubting that Holmes used his own money, which we shall discuss later. The money matters in “Beryl Coronet,” in fact, are more complex than Dr. Watson's narrative would have us believe. To sort them out them we must take a hard look at the “hard day's work” that Holmes put in.

Morning (no time specified): Holmes received the visit from Holder, who reported the theft of the coronet and said his son Arthur had been arrested. Traveled with Holder and Dr. Watson to Holder's house at Streatham. (“A short railway journey, and a shorter walk,” Watson reported. The train ride would have taken thirty minutes or so.) Examined grounds and house; interviewed Holder's niece Mary. (No mention of lunch, incidentally, but there might have been time to get some on the way home.)

Mid-afternoon (“It was not yet three,” Watson wrote, which presumably means some time between 2:30 and 3 p.m.): Holmes and Watson arrived back at Baker Street. Holmes disguised himself as “a common loafer” and made a sandwich to carry along for dinner.

For what happened next we must rely on what Holmes later told Watson: He went alone to Sir George Burnwell's house on “the other side of the West End,” struck up an acquaintance with the man's valet, and bought a pair of Sir George's cast-off shoes for six shillings. Traveled back to Streatham; matched shoes to footprints in the snow. Was seen but not recognized by Holder. (Holder said the sighting occurred in the evening, but this should not confuse us. He probably meant only that it had gone dark. The case occurred in the winter, and in England the winter sun sets at 4 p.m. or even earlier.)

Late afternoon (“I had just finished my tea,” Watson wrote. This could mean any time between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m.—probably closer to the latter, considering all the ground Holmes had covered): Holmes arrived at 221B carrying an old boot. He “chucked it down into a corner and helped himself to a cup of tea,” then changed back to his “highly respectable self” and went out again.

Now again we must rely on Holmes's statement, as given to Holder the next morning. He visited Sir George Burnwell and offered (at pistol point) to buy back the missing piece of the coronet with its three gems. Sir George declared ruefully that he had sold the piece to a receiver for £600. Holmes went to the receiver and "after much chaffering" bought the piece for £3,000. He then visited Holder's son Arthur in jail (not a bad trick, by the way—going to a prison in the middle of the night and convincing the police to let him talk to a prisoner), told him that he had been cleared of stealing the coronet, and arrived back at 221B around 2 a.m.

A hard day's work indeed, but Holmes did even more than Dr. Watson's text describes. Somewhere, somehow in the crowded hours of that day he raised £3,000—which of course we must think of as \$150,000 or more.

What is more, despite King's belief that he wrote a check, he must have raised it *in cash*. Neither the thief, Sir George Burnwell, nor the fence with whom Holmes ultimately dealt would have permitted any record of the transaction. Holmes's silence about when and from whom he got all that money is curious, and possibly significant.

Before we can look into these matters, a bit more background is necessary. There seems to be little doubt as to the identity of Holder's client, the man he described as "a name which is a household word all over the earth—one of the highest, noblest, most exalted names in England." Several scholars have identified him as HRH Albert Edward, Prince of Wales—Queen Victoria's eldest son, who later ascended the throne as King Edward VII.⁵

It was this royal playboy who had left the coronet with Holder as security for a loan. "I should not dream of doing so," he had assured the banker, "were it not absolutely certain that I should be able in four days to reclaim it." And later he had said, "I shall call for it in person on Monday morning." Therefore he visited Holder on a Thursday, the coronet was stolen from Holder's house that night, Holder consulted with Holmes on the Friday morning, and Holmes conducted his investigation on the same day, finishing around 2 a.m. Saturday.

Now let us return to the assertion that Holmes used his own money. Supposing this to be correct, when would Holmes have had time to get it from the bank? When he went out around 3 p.m.? Probably not. Although he was suspicious of Sir George Burnwell, he had not yet confirmed his suspicions by matching the man's shoes to the footprints outside Holder's house.

We might add that "dressed as a common loafer" he would have had a difficult time gaining entry to a bank in Victorian London, let alone drawing money from it. But perhaps the staff and manager of the Capital and Counties Bank, Oxford Street branch, where he kept his account,⁶ were accustomed to dealing with Holmes in his various disguises.

Could he have gone to his bank directly on leaving Baker Street after his tea-time stopover, when he had resumed his “highly respectable self”? Here we find ourselves up against an uncompromising fact: in the London of 1886, banks closed at 5 p.m. on weekdays.⁷ As we have noted, the day we are discussing was a Friday, and Holmes could not have returned from his excursion in the guise of a loafer much before 6 p.m. Even if we were to suppose that he somehow got home earlier than 5, the narrative shows that he was in no hurry to dash out to the bank; after changing his clothes he actually took time to have a cup of tea before going off to call on Sir George Burnwell.

Could Holmes, then, after confirming his suspicions about Sir George Burnwell and before returning to Baker Street, have found a few minutes to present the problem to his brother? Mycroft would have seen that the case was of enormous potential benefit to Sherlock’s career. Recovering the missing gems could win Holmes the favor of a member of the Royal Family, and with it that of other powerful people. Perhaps Mycroft confided the story discreetly to a few people in high places (the exalted scamp who had pawned the coronet had many wealthy friends), extracted checks from them, then scurried from bank to bank collecting the money.

Here again we must remember the 5:00 closing time. There would not seem to have been enough time for Mycroft to accomplish this elaborate program. Moreover, the prince specifically told Holder that he wanted to avoid borrowing from his friends, and Holder recounted that statement to Holmes. (We never learn why the prince needed the money so quickly and so quietly. If he felt it necessary to keep the reason secret even from his loyal—and tolerant—supporters, the potential for scandal must have been overwhelming.) Finally, such a course of action would have meant betraying Holder’s confidence, something we hope Holmes would never have done to a client.

There is a further objection to both scenarios (Sherlock using his own money; Mycroft raising the cash for him): Until Holmes had spoken to the thief—and, as it turned out, to the fence—he would have had no idea how much money he would need to buy back the loot.

Almost certainly, then, Holmes got the cash from Holder, outside banking hours. “I would give my fortune to have them [the beryls] back,” the banker had declared during his initial visit to Baker Street. And Holmes had said, “I understand that you give me *carte blanche* to act for you, provided only that I get back the gems, and that you place no limit on the sum I may draw.”

Draw from where? From a contingency fund maintained by the bank? That seems unlikely. Holder’s partner, Mr. Stevenson, would have wondered what had happened to the £3,000 or £4,000 that had suddenly disappeared from the books. The incredible story behind the withdrawal—that Holder, not trusting

the vault in his own bank, had taken the coronet home and put it in a bureau drawer for safekeeping—was not something a respected banker would have been eager to reveal, even to a partner. We can probably assume that the money came from Holder’s personal funds.

Getting hold of a huge amount of cash after hours was well within Holder’s power; he would naturally have had access to his business premises around the clock. We can imagine that Holmes, before going to see Sir George Burnwell, sent Holder one of those peremptory telegrams that he loved to dispatch, telling him to go to his bank in Threadneedle Street and await developments.

So we must revise Holmes’s narration of the evening hours as follows: He left Baker Street, *called at a telegraph office and wired to Holder*. Visited Sir George. Got the fence’s address, saw the man, and came to an agreement about the price. *Hurried to the bank, got the money from Holder, returned to the fence’s house*. Paid over the money, took possession of the missing piece with its three gems, called on Arthur Holder in jail (still a good trick), and went home to bed.

According to this version of the events, Holder learned as early as Friday evening that he was going to get his missing fragment back and what it was going to cost him. What are we to make, then, of the following scene, which Watson tells us occurred at 221B on the Saturday morning?

“I trust, Mr. Holder, that you are nearing the end of your troubles.”

“Ha! You say so! You have heard something, Mr. Holmes; you have learned something! Where are the gems?”

“You would not think a thousand pounds apiece an excessive sum for them?”

“I would pay ten.”

“That would be unnecessary. Three thousand will cover the matter. And there is a little reward, I fancy. Have you your cheque-book? Here is a pen. Better make it out for four thousand pounds.”

With a dazed face the banker made out the required cheque. Holmes walked over to his desk, took out a little triangular piece of gold with three gems in it, and threw it down upon the table.

With a shriek of joy our client clutched it up.

“You have it!” he gasped. “I am saved! I am saved!”

An effective scene—and perhaps too good to be true. We must look at the case from the point of view of Watson, the literary artist: For maximum dramatic impact, Holder’s joy at recovering the gems belongs at the climax of the narrative. And ideally it should occur in the familiar surroundings of 221B.

Therefore Watson chose to delay it from Holder's meeting with Holmes on the Friday night until the final consultation on Saturday morning.

The striking picture of Holmes casually tossing the fragment of gold onto the table might have been an inspired invention. Or perhaps it really happened; a writer as savvy as Watson would naturally seize on such a colorful detail and weave it into his narrative.

But if Watson wanted his readers to think that the reappearance of the gems came as a surprise to Holder on Saturday, he could not reveal that the banker had ponied up £3,000 for them the night before. Where, then, was Holmes supposed to have gotten the money? Simple: He paid the fence out of his own pocket and Holder reimbursed him.

Most readers, given a choice, would probably prefer Watson's charming dénouement to the scenario we suggested earlier. But we submit that our version is the more likely one.

Whichever is true, however, an unpleasant possibility must be faced. As we have pointed out, Alexander Holder, lamenting the lost jewels, declared, "I would give my fortune to have them back." Perhaps Holmes saw an opportunity here. If the fence paid Sir George Burnwell only £600 for the missing fragment of the coronet, Holmes might have bought it back for much less than the £3,000 he quoted. By threatening the man with arrest unless he cooperated, he might even have got it at cost.

Did Holmes, having agreed to pay the fence only £600 for the fragment, hurry back to the dark, deserted bank on that Friday night and quote the price to Holder at a whopping £1,000 *per stone* because he knew the banker was good for it and desperate enough to pay it? And then, having cleared £2,400 on the deal, did he come back on the Saturday morning and hit poor Holder for "a little reward, I fancy"—another £1,000? Did he, in short, commit a genteel version of bank robbery? Admittedly he had worked hard and well for his money, but £3,400—\$170,000 or more in today's terms—is quite a haul for a one-day investigation. This colossal fee might well have been the foundation of his later fortune.

We would prefer not to think this of Holmes, but the suspicion is there.

NOTES

1. Martin J. King, "The Capitalistic Holmes," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (June 1970), p. 93.
2. Ian McQueen, *Sherlock Holmes Detected* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1974), p. 52.
3. Andrew J. Peck and Leslie S. Klinger, *The Date Being—?* (New York: Magico Magazine, 1996), p. 7. Of fifteen full chronologies, eight (Brend, Folsom II, Da-

kin, Butters, Bradley-Sarjeant, Hall, Thomson, Zeisler) settle on 1886 and two more (Blakeney, Folsom I) consider that year a possibility. Four (Bell, Christ, Baring-Gould I, Cummings) date the case earlier, and only one (Baring-Gould II) makes it later. Edgar W. Smith opts for 1882, Kelvin Jones for 1886 (see note 5).

4. Peck and Klinger. Other cases that may have occurred before 1886, as suggested by a minority of the chronologists, are “Noble Bachelor,” “Copper Beeches,” “Silver Blaze,” “Greek Interpreter,” “Charles Augustus Milverton,” “Cardboard Box,” “Red Circle,” and “Shoscombe Old Place.” In only the first and third of these did Holmes have a client who might have been able to pay a healthy fee.

5. Edgar W. Smith, “A Scandal in Identity,” in his anthology *Profile by Gaslight* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), pp. 262–273. A. Carson Simpson, “Whose Was It? Conjectures on a Coronet,” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL CHRISTMAS ANNUAL* No. 2 (1957), pp. 9–17. Kelvin I. Jones, “The Prince and the Coronet,” *Wheelwrightings*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (January 1988), pp. 21–24.

6. “Priory School.”

7. Eric Monahan, *Banking and Finance in the Canon* (Paignton: Parallel Publications, 1997), p. 5. Banking hours were 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays and 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturdays. Sometime in 1886 Saturday closing time changed to 2 p.m.

We were seated at breakfast one morning, my wife and I, when the maid brought in a telegram. It was from Sherlock Holmes and ran in this way: Have you a couple of days to spare? Have just been wired for from the west of England in connection with Boscombe Valley tragedy. Shall be glad if you will come with me. Air and scenery perfect. Leave Paddington by the 11:15. "What do you say, dear?" said my wife, looking across at me. "Will you go?".