SHERLOCK HOLMES
The Adventure of the Deadly Illusion

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Introduction

The opening paragraph of the thirty-sixth chapter of *Around the World in Eighty Days* is the only mention by Jules Verne of the mysterious James Strand:

> It is time to relate what a change took place in English public opinion, when it transpired that the real bank-robber, a certain James Strand, had been arrested, on the 17th of December, at Edinburgh. Three days before, Phileas Fogg had been a criminal, who was being desperately followed up by the police; now he was an honourable gentleman, mathematically pursuing his eccentric journey around the world.

Who was he, I wondered?

How had he been captured, since we are told in the third chapter by "Gauthier Ralph, one of the Directors of the Bank of England," that a robber made off with £55,000 from that august and heretofore impregnable institution and that "Skillful detectives have been sent to all the principal ports of America and the Continent, and he'll be a clever fellow if he slips through their fingers."

James Strand appears indeed to have slipped through their fingers for quite some time.

Which, then, of Scotland Yard's finest had finally captured him? And how?

Unwisely, I allowed these questions to become a bit of

an obsession. I say unwisely because their answers lay silent among the revered bones of Mssr. Verne.

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Would this, like Dickens' unfinished *Mystery of Edwin Drood,* remain forever an enigma?

It would indeed—had it not been for a curious and unexpected meeting in perhaps the least place on earth likely to reveal such a secret.

Preface

I met Mrs. Alice Bedinfield at what I expected to be another rubber-chicken-and-boiled-potato affair on Capitol Hill, where politicians break bread with community leaders and toss off platitudes until the cash bar closes.

The issue *du jour* was homelessness, the unsolvable problem that Washington is certain it could solve if it could just appropriate another hundred billion or so.

As the evening progressed, the guests smiled and nodded, shook congressional hands, and promised their support as together they continued to fight the good fight for the disenfranchised.

All the guests, that is, except Mrs. Bedinfield.

She wasn't rude or stand-offish. On the contrary, she was gracious and sociable. She just looked too savvy to be there.

A smartly dressed, diminutive woman with interested blue eyes, she appeared decades younger than her 82 years.

I introduced myself, and as everyone else was discussing "the issue," we did too. It didn't take long before I discovered a kindred spirit.

The only sensible approach to homelessness and poverty, Mrs. Bedinfield suggested, is that demonstrated by the Victorian Ladies Benevolent Societies. We would also do well, she said, to re-examine the successes of people like Charles Brace and Josephine Lowell.

She spoke of long-forgotten concepts like the "worthy

poor, people willing and able to work and who just need a hand up, as opposed to those bred to the dole.

Warming to her topic, she quoted Robert Ellis Thompson who called state relief of the poor "indiscriminate and degrading" and held that "The sooner [state-run charity] goes out of business, the better. Its almshouses and workhouses and poor-houses are nothing but a rough contrivance to lift from the social conscience a burden that should not be either lifted or lightened in that way."

Suddenly, she paused and began to laugh.

"I'm afraid I hold strong opinions in this area, Mr. Brackin. I'm terribly sorry for going on so. Please forgive me."

She explained that hers is a family of social reformers. Her husband, Roger Bedinfield, made his fortune in foreign securities, brought his young bride to the United States in 1937 and, until his death in 1981, served on the boards of a dozen major philanthropic organizations.

"I suppose I'm like Mrs. Hilton Cubitt in *The Adventure of the Dancing Men*. Are you familiar with Sherlock Holmes, Mr. Brackin? At the end of that classic tale, Dr. Watson explains that Mrs. Cubitt 'remains a widow, devoting her whole life to the care of the poor and to the administration of her husband's estate.'

"He is my great uncle, you know."

"Who is?"

"John H. Watson, the chronicler of Mr. Sherlock Holmes."

I was stunned, and the reception held no further interest. Mrs. Bedinfield and I withdrew to a corner where we talked about Holmes and Watson until the doors closed, then went to Denny's and continued our conversation over a pot of coffee.

The following week, I received an invitation to her home for tea and listened for many more delightful hours to stories about her family and life in England.

Her father, she explained, was Robert H. Watson, nephew of Dr. John Watson. Her grandfather, the doctor's elder brother, died a drunkard in 1888. His demise is recorded in *The Sign of Four*, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

"Like his uncle John, my father was a physician and a bit of an adventurer, too, I'm afraid. He was sixteen when his father died. To clarify his thoughts and decide what to do with his life, he signed aboard a ship of the great Peninsular and Oriental Line bound for India.

"Two years later, he used his earnings along with a modest inheritance to study medicine and establish a small practice. But Daddy must have heard too many of Uncle's tales and visited too many exotic places, because he was fascinated by aberrant human behavior, drifted irresistibly toward forensic pathology, and until his death in 1955, served as a consultant to New Scotland Yard.

"It didn't pay much and left little time to properly develop his own practice, but he loved the work and was very happy."

On another visit, Mrs. Bedinfield brought out a leather document case containing a typed manuscript, a gift from her father the year he died.

She asked that I take it home, read it, and bring it back the following day.

Included was a letter from her father, February 12, 1955, which read:

Mrs. Roger Bedinfield
227 Grace Manor Lane
Baltimore, Maryland

Dearest Alice,

> How delightful to hear that you and Roger are coming to visit. I only wish you were able to stay longer and that Roger had less business to attend to across the Channel.
>
> I am thoroughly enjoying playing the host in what you persist in referring to as my retirement. Yet, I have never been busier and, between visitors, I am occupied with occasional calls from the Yard requesting an opinion on this or that. Of course, modern criminology has expanded well beyond my ability to keep pace, but there still seems to be a place for common sense amongst the clever gadgets and gauges used to analyze crime-scene evidence today.

That said, do you remember my mentioning Dr. John Newell, the Australian entomologist who provided such valuable assistance in the Gerrish murder investigation several years ago? Well Newell and his wife were my houseguests last week. Marjorie is a bibliophile and was anxious to browse the Charing Cross bookstalls, so John and I toured Barts.[1] I showed him the plaque that commemorates my uncle's introduction to Holmes in the chem lab, and would you believe it, John's an absolutely rabid fan and was amazed to learn of our kinship to the master detective, or to his Boswell, at least.

At any rate, that evening I took John and Marjorie to the S.H. Pub & Restaurant for a bit of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. As we sat looking into the full-size replica of the Baker Street sitting room, I found myself thinking about some of the pre-Watsonian adventures that took place when Holmes was in his first year at Christ Church.

[1] St. Bartholomew's Hospital, founded in 1123, where Watson was introduced to Holmes, who was developing "an infallible test for blood stains." A bronze plaque commemorates the 1878 meeting.

Uncle John told me those stories just as Holmes told them to him. I suppose they stand out in my mind because most took place the year I was born and involve the Rev. Charles L. Dodgson, a mathematics lecturer at Christ Church, Oxford, who wrote the delightful wonderland books under the pen name of Lewis Carroll.

Dodgson, you may recall, was Holmes's don.[2] As we all know, he cared little for undergraduates nor they for him. In fact, he had a general aversion to boys, preferring the cheery company of young girls—all, of course, totally aboveboard and beyond any hint of impropriety.

Holmes, however, was unique. And the two shared diverse interests, including crime, the theatre and science. Both were raised in Yorkshire, you know—Dodgson at the Croft Rectory and Holmes at the farmstead in the North Riding. But I suspect it was Holmes's mastery of logic and observation that most intrigued Dodgson.

[2] Oxford students do not attend daily classes, but rather are set by their don, or tutor, upon a course of independent study.

Try as he might, he was never able to devise a mathematical code, game or puzzle that Holmes was unable to decipher, win, or unravel.

You have heard many of the early stories about Holmes and Dodgson, but there is one I've never told you.

Therefore, I began this weekend to write down for you, hopefully with uncle's precision and attention to detail, the facts surrounding one of the first and most incredible cases Sherlock Holmes would encounter.

And now, dearest Alice, I shall end my letter and continue this project in the hope that it will conclude by the time you and Roger arrive in the spring.

With all my love,

Robert Watson
Highams Park, England

The next morning, Mrs. Bedinfield asked if I would consider grooming her father's manuscript into a short book or novella. It was a very special story to him, she said, and had a significance to her as well, although one
which she never shared.

I agreed enthusiastically. And what you are about to read is the account of the incredible case that virtually set the stage for the amazing career of the world's first consulting detective.

Ron Brackin
Washington, D.C