

UPON THE DATING OF BLOOD STAINS

by ROBERT S. SCHULTZ

In dating the Sherlock Holmes adventures there are two approaches. In one, followed by Baring-Gould and other Sherlockian chronologists, each story is given a specific calendar date. In the other, perhaps “the Vincent Starrett approach,” dates are irrelevant; “it is always 1895.”

For most adventures the “Starrett approach” is wholly adequate. Sometimes details suggest dates. “Charles Augustus Milverton,” for example, could not have happened before Hampstead had electric lighting; “The Three Garridebs,” before London had a telephone directory. Such points, however, are not basic to the stories. With minor changes in details, most exploits could have occurred at any time during Holmes’s years of practice.

But in “The Second Stain” there is no such flexibility. While Watson dates it “in a year, and even in a decade, that shall be nameless,” the facts of history date “The Second Stain” more precisely.

HIGH INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

In Lord Bellinger’s words, “There is a double league which makes a fair balance of military power.” This “balance” is essential to the adventure. Without a “balance” there would have been no bloc eager to antagonize the British public to the point of demanding war against a nation in the other *bloc*, thus no reason for Lucas to blackmail Lady Hilda—and thus no adventure.

But a balance of power was not a constant factor in European politics. There was no such “balance” between 1871 and 1892. Following victory in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, Bismarck, the German chancellor, concluded a series of treaties designed to isolate France. The Three Emperors’ League with Austria-Hungary and Russia in 1873 and the Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy in 1882 were the major instruments of Bismarckian diplomacy. He also avoided colonial and naval policies that would have provoked Great Britain.¹

Gradually, under internal and external pressures, the Bismarckian structure began to come apart. The Triple Alliance survived, but the Three Emperors’ League lapsed.² “In 1892, the event against which the whole policy of Bismarck had been directed came to pass. The Dual Alliance was signed between Russia and France. . . There was [now] a balance of power. Two vast combinations, each disposing of enormous military resources, dwelt together.”³ Before the Dual Alliance there was no “double league,” so “The Second Stain” could not

have occurred before 1892. The facts of history not only show the earliest possible date for “The Second Stain”; they also identify both the author and the recipient of the scurrilous letter, and indicate a date after which “The Second Stain” probably could not have taken place.

A CERTAIN EUROPEAN POTENTATE

Lord Bellinger identified the writer of the insulting letter only as “a certain european potentate.” In view of Watsonian “vagueness” the word “potentate” might have meant either a royal leader—the emperor of Austria, Germany, or Russia—or an elected one—the premier of France or of Italy. Whether power came from inheritance or election, the letter-writer must have been the very highest leader of his nation. A message from any lesser one could easily have been disavowed, and only a letter from the very highest leader could have roused the British public to frenzy.

Michael Harrison unequivocally identifies the writer as Wilhelm II, kaiser of the German empire.⁴ So do “Messrs. Bell, Blakeney, and Grazebrook But Anthony Boucher [warns against] taking this identification too seriously.”⁵ And William S. Baring-Gould cites a crouching lion as a curious seal for the kaiser to use.⁶ Study of each of the five possible “potentates” provides a definite basis for identifying the letter-writer.

FRANCESCO CRISPI, PREMIER OF ITALY

By an ingenious analysis of publication dates and diplomatic history, Robert Madison combines “The Second Stain” and “The Naval Treaty” into one adventure, with “The Tired Captain” and a hint of the Great Hiatus thrown in.

Early in February 1891, the great Italian statesman, Francesco Crispi . . . fell from power. . . and the government was turned over to his rival Rudini. [There were several treaties with Great Britain that, if known, might have threatened renewal of the Triple Alliance.] The rash letter of “Second Stain” most likely came from the frustrated Francesco Crispi, who hardly took his forced resignation at this time quietly, but who belatedly recognized that his letter might threaten the delicate negotiations with the Germans and the Austrians.⁷

There are several problems with this identification. It is unlikely that a defeated politician, accustomed to the limits of parliamentary government, would write such a letter on his own. It is difficult to see why ex-Premier Crispi, frustrated at home, would write such a letter in anger about any British activity: So

far as “delicate negotiations” were concerned, both Germany and Austria knew of Italy’s attitude toward Britain; knew that “Italy would never willingly commit herself to anything that would bring her to war with Great Britain, and had . . . required this fact to be specifically stated in the original and secret text of the Triple Alliance.”⁸ It is difficult to see why a message from a defeated Italian politician should have any impact on British public opinion.

Most importantly, Crispi’s defeat, as Madison reports, took place in 1891, and renewal of the Triple Alliance also took place in 1891,⁹ while “The Second Stain” could not have occurred before 1892.

SADI CARNOT, PRESIDENT OF FRANCE

“[Britain and France] were traditional rivals; and [there were] serious territorial questions in Africa and in Indo-China.”¹⁰ Any one of these “questions” might have prompted President Carnot or, after his assassination in 1894,¹¹ his successor Casimir-Perier, to write the offensive message. But again there is the unlikelihood of an elected official writing such a letter on his own responsibility. Even more importantly, with France’s 20-year isolation just ended by the alliance with Russia, no French leader, however impulsive, and whatever the provocation, would have risked pushing Great Britain toward Germany.

FRANZ JOSEF, EMPEROR OF AUSTRIA AND APOSTOLIC KING OF HUNGARY

Austria-Hungary (the Dual Monarchy) was seriously troubled by nationalist unrest in its polyglot empire¹² and was extremely apprehensive about growing Russian influence in the Balkans, a concern shared by Great Britain.¹³ Franz Josef (62 years old in 1892) was “untiringly conscientious. . .[and] chiefly responsible for major policies, domestic and foreign.”¹⁴ An elderly man, conscientious, with no particular problems with Great Britain but with a shared anxiety about Russia—Franz Josef could have had no reason to write the impulsive, scurrilous message.

ALEXANDER III, CZAR OF ALL THE RUSSIAS

The Russian empire, extending from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean, aimed to increase its influence in the Balkans and to extend its control in Asia.¹⁵ In central Asia, east of the Caspian Sea, the Russians were moving toward Afghanistan with the ultimate aim of conquering India from the British.¹⁶ Alexander III believed in autocracy—“the voice of God”—and in imperialism.¹⁷

In late 1891, to forestall a Russian move toward Afghanistan, the British occupied Hunza and Nagar, “slamming the door in our face,” according to the Russian foreign minister.¹⁸ This move might have prompted Alexander to write

the insulting letter, but at that time Russia was negotiating the Dual Alliance with France. Alexander would have been as hesitant as the French premier about driving Britain toward the Triple Alliance.

Alexander III died in 1894. His son Nicholas II, aged 26, succeeded him. Autocratic and imperialistic as his father, Nicholas was charming but weak and irresolute, with a neurotic wife, a granddaughter of Queen Victoria.¹⁹ In 1895, again to stop a Russian advance, the British moved into Chitral.²⁰ Shortly afterwards Britain and Russia began negotiations about the boundaries of Afghanistan. The Russians had no intention of abiding by any agreement but thought such an agreement would give them more leeway in the region.²¹

Young Nicholas, however irresolute, might have written an insulting letter protesting British incursion into that remote khanate. He was, however, unlikely to make such a protest and thus risk upsetting negotiations by which the Russians hoped to strengthen their position in Central Asia.

WILHELM II, KAISER OF THE GERMAN EMPIRE AND KING OF PRUSSIA

Wilhelm II was only 33 years old in 1892. He believed strongly in divine right and militarism, and was vain, voluble, and impulsive.²² The German people had a paranoid fear of encirclement, which was shared “by their paranoid kaiser who felt [on the eve of World War I] that the coming war was all a plot against him by the uncle who had never liked him.”²³

Wilhelm was a grandson of Queen Victoria; the uncle who “had never liked him” was Albert Edward Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, eldest son of Queen Victoria and thus Prince of Wales, “Uncle Bertie” to nephew “Willy.” He became King Edward VII on Victoria’s death in 1901, but died only four years later, in 1910.²⁴ In 1914 Wilhelm believed the oncoming war was yet a plot against him by his long-dead uncle—an incredible belief in posthumous avuncular power!

One incident must have rankled deeply. In 1887, Wilhelm, then only crown prince, represented Germany at Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee. In the Jubilee Parade schedule, to his anger, a black nation’s black king (“buck nigger,” in Wilhelm’s phrase) took precedence over the crown prince of the German empire. Told of this protest, the Prince of Wales (“Uncle Bertie”), in charge of protocol, responded, “if he’s a king, he takes precedence over Willy.”²⁵

Under Bismarck, German policies were not inimical to Britain, more concerned about French and Russian aggressiveness. In 1890 an Anglo-German *entente* settled colonial differences in Africa.²⁶ Germany remained “master of the continent while England was mistress of the seas.”²⁷

With limited differences between England and Germany, the kaiser should have had no reason to write the scurrilous letter. But in view of his paranoid

hostility toward his English uncle, diplomatic niceties need not have restrained him. He could easily have been “ruffled” by some minor or even imaginary British “Colonial developments.” Further, Wilhelm was not awed by Bismarck and his policies; he forced Bismarck to resign in 1890,²⁸ and probably was not disturbed by the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1892.

Of all the “potentates” considered, each of the first four had excellent reasons for not writing the explosive letter. Wilhelm II is the only one left, and it is entirely consistent with his personality and family hostility that he should have written the offensive message.

To paraphrase Sherlock Holmes: “When you have eliminated the improbable (the almost impossible) whatever remains (particularly if highly probable) must be the truth.” One for you, Michael Harrison, and also for “Messrs. Bell, Blakeney, and Grazebrook.”

AND TO WHOM?

“It is addressed in a large, bold handwriting to. . . .” Holmes interrupted Lord Bellinger at this point, and never asked the name of the recipient. A message, however intemperate, from a premier, an elected leader, would have been addressed to the British prime minister (premier), Lord Bellinger. But a message from Wilhelm II, a *royal* leader, must have been addressed to royalty.

It is unthinkable that “Willy” would have written an abusive letter to his venerable grandmother, but he must have enjoyed writing such a letter to his hated uncle. “Willy” was now an emperor; “Uncle Bertie,” still only a prince. Hence Lord Bellinger’s great anxiety. Public indignation about an abusive letter to the elected head of the government might have been limited and controllable, but such a letter to the prince would have been an insult to the entire nation, to be washed out only in blood. Fortunately, Holmes recovered the letter.

THE JAMESON RAID

“The Second Stain” could not have occurred before the signing of the Dual Alliance, and probably not after the “Jameson Raid,” which produced a mild form of the public indignation Lord Bellinger had feared. Jameson was an agent of Cecil Rhodes, the South African gold king. The “Raid” was an attempt to “conquer” the gold-rich Boer republic of Transvaal and add it to the British empire. Four hundred Rhodesian Mounted Police were among the 500 “invaders.” It was a complete fiasco, easily defeated by Boer commandos. On 2 January 1896, five days after the start, the raiders surrendered and the Boers turned Jameson over to the British, who sent him to prison in London. From the start, the British public was indignant at this botched brigandage.²⁹

Then Kaiser Wilhelm II sent a cablegram to Paul Kruger, president of the Transvaal, congratulating him on defeating the “raid.” Immediately the British attitude changed. The kaiser was meddling in “their” sphere of influence. Jameson became a hero. “Queen Victoria wagged her finger at her impetuous grandson. The fleet was mobilized. . . .”³⁰

This occurrence was a mild version of the reaction Bellinger feared if the “Second Stain” letter came to light. But there was a significant difference between the two messages. The “Second Stain” letter was an impulsive personal message from a petulant nephew to the uncle he detested. The cablegram to Kruger was “no personal act, but a decision of the German government.”³¹

Having sent one message as an act of official policy, the kaiser would not have been likely to send a letter out of personal pique at a later date. So it is probable that the explosive message of “The Second Stain” must have antedated the kaiser’s cable to Kruger on 3 January 1896. An indication of how the kaiser had accepted the dictates of policy came a few years later. At the end of the Boer War, in 1902, he sent a message *en clair* to the detested Edward, “congratulating him on offering most generous terms [to the defeated Boers].”³²

The facts of history clear up much that Watson left vague in recounting “The Second Stain.” The scurrilous letter was written by Kaiser Wilhelm II, and addressed to the Prince of Wales. The adventure could not have occurred before 1892, and probably not after January 1896. “‘May all our difficulties vanish as easily,’ said Sherlock Holmes” in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

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NOTES

1. Carlton J. H. Hayes, *A Political and Cultural History of Modern Europe*, Vol. 2, New York: Macmillan Company, 1936, pp. 753-757.
2. Hayes, p. 759.
3. Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1923 (one-volume edition, 1931), pp. 8-9. Note that this work was written shortly after the *First* World War, not the Second. Jon L. Lellenberg has mentioned the role of Russia’s Okhrana in bringing about this alliance. See “The Sherlock Holmes of the Revolution,” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (Autumn 2000), pp. 6-12.
4. Michael Harrison, *In the Footsteps of Sherlock Holmes*, New York: Frederick Fell, 1960, p. 143.

5. William S. Baring-Gould, *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, Vol. 1, New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1967, p. 304.
6. Baring-Gould, p. 305.
7. Robert Madison, "Then, Sir, Prepare for War," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Summer 2001), pp. 30-32.
8. Churchill, p. 8.
9. Hayes, p. 757, note.
10. Hayes, p. 761.
11. Hayes, p. 562.
12. Hayes, p. 641.
13. Hayes, p. 756.
14. Hayes, p. 631.
15. Hayes, p. 641.
16. Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game*, New York: Kodansha America, Inc., 1994, pp. 117, 341.
17. Hugh Seton-Thompson, *The Russian Empire*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967, p. 463.
18. Hopkirk, pp. 472-480.
19. Seton-Thompson, p. 547.
20. Hopkirk, p. 481.
21. Hopkirk, pp. 483-485.
22. Hayes, p. 611.
23. Otto Friedrich, *Blood and Iron*, New York: Harper Collins, 1995, p. 250.
24. Hayes, p. 471.
25. I cannot document this story, but am sure it came from a reputable if now-forgotten source. It appears consistent with the personalities involved.
26. Hayes, p. 761.
27. Hayes, p. 754.
28. Hayes, p. 612.
29. Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War*, New York: Random House, 1979, pp. xxv-xxix.
30. Pakenham, p. 23.
31. Churchill, p. 10.
32. Pakenham, p. 598.