



THE BIMETALLIC QUESTION

P.O. Box 232, Westmount Station
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Minutes of the Meeting of The Bimetallic Question August 2, 2018

Date of our next meeting: Thursday, October 4, 2018 at 6:30pm at the Westmount Public Library, Westmount Room, 4574 Sherbrooke Street West, Westmount, QC H3Z 1G1

The quiz at the next meeting will be: "The Creeping Man," prepared and presented by the unfortunate Anne Millar

Next meeting's toast presenters: The Master: Chris Herten-Greaven; Dr Watson: Paul A. Billette; The Woman: Carol Abramson; Mrs Hudson: David Dowse; The Society: Kathryn Radford.

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A Note of Some Importance: The position of scribe, however temporarily acquired, is a weighty responsibility and pile of typing, and so I beg forgiveness for any errors, omissions, or gratuitous cryptography.

Members In Attendance: Raf Jans, Miyako Matsuda-Pelletier, Carol Abramson, Anne Millar, Chris Herten-Greaven, David Dowse, Louise Corda, Vivianne Lewis, Bruno Paul Stenson, Paul Billette, James Turner, Kathryn Radford, Rachel Alkallay, Frances Fister-Stoga

Regrets: Maureen & Jack Anderson, Wilfrid de Freitas

Call to order: The meeting was called to order by our Sovereign, Raf Jans, at 6:32pm.

Items of Business and Gentle Transaction

1. Beats stealing yet another coronet

Following the good results of her first go-round with a split-the-pot raffle, Rachel was keen to give it another whirl, if only to avoid the Society falling to that chief road to crime in the Holmesian canon: Micawberian money issues.

2. Sympathy for a friend

Carol informed the Society of the recent passing of Maureen's brother, and passed a card of sympathy around the table.

3. Send up your card

Confirmations of attendance were being sought for the upcoming tea at Carol's house in the West Island, an event of edible Victorianesque splendour to which we were all graciously invited.

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4. Toast to the Master - David Dowse

There were several ways to get in touch with Sherlock Holmes. Everyone knew his address of 221B Baker Street, London from the writings of Dr. John H. Watson.

One could go to the telegraph office and for a few shillings send off a short, cryptic note requesting an interview pertaining to an urgent problem. Holmes used the telegraph himself extensively to contact clients, the police or trick unsuspecting villains.

If you wanted to take the chance that he was in and would see you, you could take a hansom cab, the tube, a carriage or just walk to Baker Street. Meeting Mrs. Hudson at the door and giving her your card, you hoped to be announced into the sitting room.

But the vast majority of guests to meet Sherlock Holmes first sent him a letter.

As satisfied clients and the popularity of his adventures in the Strand magazine began to climb, I would think that Holmes's mail would have increased staggeringly. Could Holmes have read each and every letter? Would he have had time to respond to them all, even if it was just to give a polite decline to take up the case and a simple referral to the local police? My guess is that he had a secretary. Someone who would open all the post, screen all the applicants and pass on the most interesting. This secretary would also have filtered out all the Spam mail requesting that Holmes promote this moustache wax, or that pipe tobacco or this boot polish. The secretary would have also taken care of Holmes's finances, paying the Irregulars, the Hansom cabs and carriages, arranging the restaurant and theatre reservations and train tickets as well as the collection and banking of fees from the clients.

It is only natural that such a successful professional such as Holmes employed a secretary to take care of the mundane correspondence and household issues. Certainly these tasks were not handled by Watson. Why have we not heard of this most valuable member?

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you-- Sherlock Holmes and his invisible secretary.

5. The Invisible Secretary - Discussion

The idea of an unmentioned secretary prompted a great deal of interest and discussion amongst the members.

Mrs. Hudson's literacy was questioned, as a housekeeper--but also as a product of the Scottish public education system, which for centuries had emphasized the necessity of every child being able to read their Bible--with the side effect of the Scottish Enlightenment etc. The idea of not so much a business secretary, but Holmes as a rock star in need of a PA in charge of the mundanities of life was also brought forward. The employment roster of 221B itself was brought into question-- is there a hidden butler? What is 'the boots' anyway? Is the secretary unmentioned through Watson's jealousy?

The transition in value of technical positions also became a major talking point--as secretaries became less a masculine-dominated position, they became less powerful/respectable/well paid. Rachel and Kathryn particularly brought up how the first requirement for any job they applied for was their typing capability, with Carol confirming that it was a chorus of "so you have a psychology degree, but how fast can you type?" Bruno, Paul and others recalled the ubiquity of typing classes in high school, and your temporary scribe could already hear the clatter of hours facing a keyboard.

6. You see but you do not word

Rachel had some speculation on the observational capacities of mystery enthusiasts, and the translation of subtle indicators of identity as they have changed from Victorian times (Holmes on cuffs, lecturing off-the-cuff shall we say), with Paul noting motivation and Bruno the variation of information acquisition-- not everything is visible, and not everyone is a visual interpreter.

7. A Hollow Crown indeed

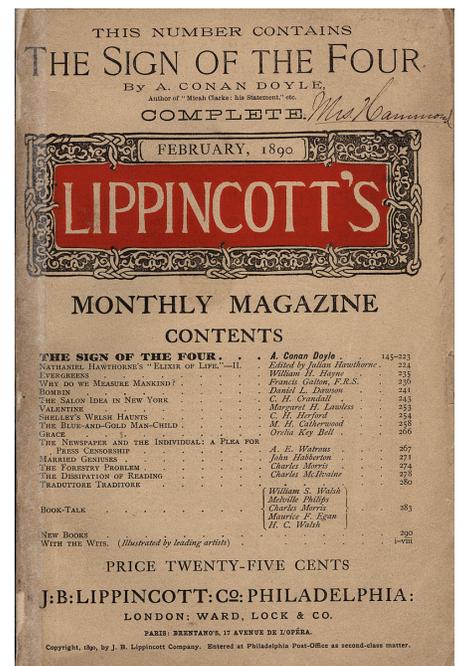
James, noting the group's enthusiasm for conspiracy theories, brought out a new and entirely fictitious sandbox for our speculation and flights of wordery-- the recent Royal YouKnow of Meaghan & Harry as a Hollywood production, to explain its visual appeal and smoothness.

8. Show and Tell (aka make all your creative lit profs cry)

- a) **Mrs Hudson's Diary:** Fear not, Paul has not violated the privacy of that heroic landlady, but rather found a most entertaining book, full of Victorian ephemera. Among these was a raunchy ditty whose accompanying gestures are beyond the capacity of paper, an advertisement for the London Electric Cab Company (app coming soon), and another ad for free farmland in Canada, with its healthy climate and continent-wide railway.

Your humble scribe did not catch names for the following 2 items:

- b) An article clipping concerning the **Babchenko** assassination being partly inspired by Holmesian ideas, and--
- c) **From Holmes to Sherlock**, a book by Matthias Boström tracing the connection between Conan Doyle's fiction and his inspirational teacher, Dr Joseph Bell.
- d) David brought two fascinating entertainments, a **whodunnit mystery puzzle book** and an **escape room minigame**,
- e) As well as an assortment of **things to be found on Watson's desk**: multiple inkwells, and two varieties of pen, a dip pen as well as a glass nib pen. David was able to give us a brief technical rundown of how these vary in form and use, and explained how the canon era was one of transition when it came to writing tools--quills were even still in use alongside these!
- f) James, in an effort to refresh his shelves, offered two volumes for members of the Society to build their own collections: Graham Moore's **The Sherlockian**, and Julian Barnes's **Arthur & George**.
- g) The **Reynolds Holmes** DVD collection, in their quirky glory, were once more offered for borrowing, but it seems for the nonce they are to remain in Bruno's care.
- h) Bruno also brought a printout of the cover of the original Lippincott's magazine in which SIGN was originally published--not as a serial either, but the entire novel, and sundry other entertainments, for 25 cents!



9. Keep the tension on

Bruno noted that there is a peculiar idiosyncrasy in one of Holmes's descriptors in *The Sign of Four*: Holmes's knowledge of pop culture is usually described as pertaining only to scandal and crime, and yet he name-drops among the most famous entertainers of his age, Blondin the tight-rope artist! Who is Charles Blondin, born Jean-François Gravelet (1824-1897) doing in a tale of murder and revenge, introduced by a man ostensibly only interested in the relevant facts? Bruno gave a quick biography of this giant of the 19th century entertainment world, who began training as an acrobat at age 5, and among his crossings numbered the Crystal Palace central transept and Niagara Falls--the latter with such variations as per Wikipedia of "blindfolded, in a sack, trundling a wheelbarrow, on stilts, carrying his manager on his back, sitting down midway while he cooked and ate an omelette, or standing on a chair with only one of its legs balanced on the rope." Blondin was a person entirely unrelated to criminal proceedings, as even the one lethal incident of his career, where two men died and he escaped injury, was firmly and criminally blamed on the rope manufacturer--his involvement in Holmesiana seems needless set dressing. Paul however remarked that Holmes would certainly acknowledge his admiration of the superior professional, the pinnacle of his field, and Blondin was so universally admired his name was synonymous with his death-defying art.

10. Notices

Rachel brought sad news as a former member, Dorothy Ormsby, has recently died.

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11. Toast To Dr. Watson - Rachel Alkallay, conqueror of Printers

Brief and to-the-point was not necessarily Dr. Watson's forte. He speculated, came up with sometimes outlandish ideas, was at times long-winded. Yet his humour, his kindness, and his ever-faithful presence by The Master's side proved to be exactly what the doctor ordered-- please excuse the intended pun-- to create an eternal friendship which gave us the stories that are so treasured even a century after they have ceased to be recorded.

As this toastmaster has often been rightly accused of being rather long-winded and outlandish, I will not bore you with a toast of that nature.

I give you Dr. John H. Watson.

To Dr. Watson!

12. An East Wind Blowing

Paul reports on additional research and inquiry, the price structure of the Willow Inn leaves him to recommend that we cherish the memories of past times, and move onward.

13. Cherchez l'argent

Chris, noting the layered motives and loyalties of the novel, brought up some of his recent learnings as part of his continuing education, notably the activities of noted aviation pioneers/ British spies for Japan, Frederick Rutland and William Forbes-Sempill, 19th Lord Sempill. Miyako brought some observations about Micronesia into the ensuing discussion.

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14. Toast to the Woman - Frances Fister-Stoga

Growing up in Trenton New Jersey, I was always aware of the large sign on the bridge spanning the Delaware River: "Trenton Makes, The World Takes."

Indeed, one famous gift to the world was Irene Adler of Trenton, New Jersey. As her surname suggests, Irene was indeed "noble" in all her actions (German adel=nobility) even when dealing with the uncouth.

While her powers of ratiocination equalled The Master, and her theatrical skills in the art of disguise matched the skills of Holmes----it is perhaps music---the most abstract of arts----that sets them as twin flames. As a famous contralto, Irene graced La Scala and the Warsaw opera-- among other famous sites. One may imagine Irene doing a cadenza with The Master at the violin.

I raise a toast to Irene Adler, who was not just a woman, but for Sherlock Holmes, the woman.

Musical accompaniment: Joyce DiDonato, "Lascia ch'io pianga" from Handel's *Rinaldo*.

15. Three Students And Quiz Results

After some frenetic scribbling and desperate staring at the window leads, the gruelling and challenging-in-a-fun-way-not-pistols-at-dawn-way quiz prepared by Raf Jans to cover the entirety of the novel *The Sign of Four* left 3 persons triumphant, carrying off book prizes:

- 1) Anne Millar, 40.5 of 51
- 2) Carol Abramson, 40
- 3) Kathryn Radford, 37

As they were sitting all in a row, we are hesitant to suggest conspiracy, if only because the collective speed and strength of their writing wrists behooves caution.

16. Mental Equivalent of a Tar Barrel

David brought forward an anecdote of a trivia show being utterly stumped by Toby, the truly reliable scent tracker, which if anything is asking to be a blatant metaphor for human knowledge and memory, these contestants handed us a Sherlockian flavoured treat.

17. Reflections: "The Sign of Four" ...The Problem of the Sholtos! Miyako Mitsuda-Pelletier

This long novel was originally published in 1890 and it was not successful commercially, but for Conan Doyle, he was creating his characters gradually to continue through the Strand magazine from 1891, and the rest is history, and Sherlock Holmes became a household name with enormous success! And as a history buff, there are several matters which I'd like to mention.

First, in this story, the only clue Mary Morstan could give Holmes was a map of a fortress, found in her father's desk with 4 names: Jonathan Small, Mahomet Singh, Abdullah Khan, and Dost Akbar. The sign of the four, right? And the character Jonathan Small says they're his "Sikh" friends. But are they really Sikh men with such names? Names like Mahomet, Abdullah, Akbar sound like Islamic men's names to me. Who are Sikh people? They're members of a reformed Hindu sect, founded around the 16th century, teaching monotheism and that has the Granth as its chief religious document, rejecting the authority of the Vedas. The word Sikh is from Hindi, literally meaning "disciple," from Indian Sanskrit "Siskati"-- "he studies." And most Sikh people live in Punjab (near Pakistan) with Punjabi culture and language.

As we know, many Sikh-Canadians here, and the names I hear are like Ujjal, Parkash, Sandeep, etc, etc, and certainly not Abdullah etc at all. The name Mahomet Singh really sounds strange to me! Singh is all right-- it's the most common Sikh name, but the name of the Islamic religious founder Mahomet?? I hear Sikh people use the names of their ancestral villages, therefore I don't think Akbar is a family name ("Allah Akbar" means "God is great" in Arabic-- NOT Punjabi!) My hubby says Conan Doyle didn't have time for research, and for many British readers in the 1890's, they probably had no idea what was what-- the difference between Islam and Sikh religion, or even Hindu religion! (It was all Greek to them anyway!) But my concern is... "What if some Sikh Sherlock Holmes fans read this book...?" I hope they're not offended!

Second, it's about the Langham Hotel. I'm certain that many Sherlock Holmes fans from around the world are flocking & visiting this hotel, since this hotel's name was mentioned in the Canon, in both "A Scandal in Bohemia" & "The Sign of the Four." Have our members visited there to have the famous afternoon tea etc?? Located at: 1c Portland Place, Regent Street, Marylebone, London, England, this hotel was designed by John Giles and built from 1863-65 at the cost of £300,000 (roughly \$25-30 million Canadian today). In the 1860s, it was the largest and most modern hotel in London, having 100 water closets (wow! Flushing toilets!). And the Prince of Wales performed the opening ceremony on the 16th of June 1865. Now, the story takes place in the 1880s, and according to Mary, in December 1878, her father had telegraphed her to come and meet him at the Langham Hotel. Conan Doyle wrote the name of the hotel, probably because it was at this hotel that he attended a dinner party, hosted by Lippincott's Monthly Magazine's publisher, and along with the famous British writer Oscar Wilde, (who wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for the magazine) he was commissioned to write. As a beginner as a professional writer, the Americans gave him a big opportunity, so no wonder why he was always fond of the USA. This hotel was also patronised by many famous (and rich) people like Antonín Dvořák, Arturo Toscanini, Mark Twain, Napoleon III, the multi-millionairess Hetty Green, just to name a few.

Although it's one of the largest and best known British traditional style grand hotels in London, the Great Depression and World War II hit this hotel very hard. Until it was reopened as the Langham Hilton in 1991, this majestic place was a such a sorry sight, owned by the government (such as the BBC and the Army because no private investor would touch such a huge place!). In 1995, this hotel was bought by the Hong Kong based Great Eagle Holdings, and the new owners wanted to bring back the grand past and quintessential British feel of its early Victorian-style years. By doing such renovations with sophistication, they thought more foreigners would visit the hotel to see "Victorian England" through this hotel (as a tourism resource!), and it's been working for them, and even Hollywood moviemakers keep coming to film, in such films as "GoldenEye" (1995 James Bond film), "Winnin London," "Wonderland," "Burnt," etc etc, the list goes on! Even ghosts... because many guests including English cricketers Stuart Broad and Joe Root claimed that they saw ghosts (or mysterious phenomena??) during their stay. Yikes! (Maybe someone paid them to tell the ghost stories etc for advertising the Langham hotel? One thing which was really big in Victorian times was the ghost story etc.).

Incidentally, on 19th March 2010, former British MP & writer Gyles Brandreth had installed a City of Westminster Green Plaque to commemorate the August 18889 meeting at the Langham Hotel which made Sherlock Holmes part of history, between Conan Doyle and Joseph Marshall Stoddart (American publisher from Philadelphia, "Lippincott's"). Also, during the 1990s, they say it was Lady Diana (Princess of Wales') who came to this Hotel often and was her favoured spot. This hotel offered a celebration of its 146th Anniversary in June 2011, and people enjoyed the afternoon tea for 7 pence! (1865 original price!) Well, even today, if you want to see famous rich people, you should visit this hotel, sipping the afternoon tea, and eating scones!

:) Miyako xxx

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18. Toast to Mrs Hudson - Raf Jans

The story of today, The Sign of the Four, reveals a lot about Mrs. Hudson's character. Holmes has been pacing up and down the whole time, and Mrs. Hudson is very concerned about him and is afraid for his health. She tries to suggest some medicine, but she only gets a nasty look from him.

It is the same situation as in 'The Dying Detective', where she goes to Watson to tell him that Holmes is very sick and dying.

Mrs. Hudson has to work hard. She prepares his meals, cleans up after him, takes care of him when he is sick, has to allow some of Holmes's strange visitors in the house at all hours, and has to frequently put up with his bad temper. In short, she looks after Holmes as if he were her own son. Mrs. Hudson is certainly the mother figure in the stories. And Holmes is very lucky.

To Mrs. Hudson.

19. When the powers of darkness are exalted

Having scanned the list, Anne seized upon "The Creeping Man" as our next quiz subject, simply because she was moved to consistency by her handmade classic monsters skirt. Your temporary scribe would like to emphasize she only remembered the meeting was in October about a month later. Is it too much to have spooky scary scifi during the pumpkin month? Complaints to be forwarded to Jocko.

20. Desk Drawer Savings Plans

As we were swiftly approaching the end of the meeting, Rachel drew the half-and-half prize--in both senses, as hers was the winning ticket. Proceeds were modest but the intention is to continue with the split-the-pot experiment.

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21. Society Toast - Anne Millar

Delivered entirely extemporaneously, but boiling down to the sense of: The strength of such a society as this is that we all bring something different to the table, and expand from different areas of interest into the one we share.

Please note that Bruno has already volunteered for the December toast, citing important research developments.

22. You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here

Kathryn quickly brought to our attention some photographs of a street performer she had recently seen in Russia, who was a 'living statue' artist--dressed as Sherlock Holmes.

And, as the library staff would prefer that we were not statues and left before closing, the meeting was ended by our Sovereign within a very narrow margin of 9pm.

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Addenda

I. Despatch received from the Sherlock Holmes Society of London, in view of our approaching 40th anniversary:

To the SOVEREIGN, Officers and Members of The Bimetallic Question of Montreal
from the Sherlock Holmes Society of London, Greetings

and Hearty Congratulations on Forty Years of Celebrating The Best and Wisest Man Whom We Have
Ever Known

per Roger Johnson, BSI, ASH Editor: The Sherlock Holmes Journal

II. Those Rosy Hours of Tea-Time chez Carol Abramson, August 11th 2018

