

# When Watson Learned the Trick: 4 June 1902

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ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE PLACED two very short Holmes and Watson stories in very similar settings, but very dissimilar chronological contexts: The date when the action in the first story occurred is clear, but the date for the second story is not. This article is an attempt to clear things up a bit.

Dating the first of the two stories, "The Field Bazaar," is straightforward. Sherlockian chronologist Leslie S. Klinger says, "the conversation recorded in 'The Field Bazaar' almost certainly occurred" in 1896,<sup>1</sup> the year the story was published.<sup>2</sup> This seems unassailably correct, since events described in the story really did occur in that year.<sup>3</sup>

Dating the second, "How Watson Learned the Trick," is not straightforward. It was published in 1924,<sup>4</sup> but the conversation recorded in it probably occurred long before, since it is pretty clear from the story that Holmes and Watson were in their rooms at Baker Street. But when, then? Let's consider the question together. That is easy to do in this case, because "How Watson Learned the Trick" is not under copyright and it is short (about 500 words), so we can read the whole thing right here, and reason through it as we go.

(Why didn't Conan Doyle copyright "How Watson Learned the Trick" or "The Field Bazaar," for that matter? I do not know, but I suspect it had something to do with the fact that they were not commercial products, but gifts he created for worthy causes. He wrote "The Field Bazaar" at the behest of students at his alma mater Edinburgh University for a fundraiser for construction of athletic facilities at the school's new cricket field.<sup>5</sup> He wrote "How Watson Learned the Trick" at the behest of Princess Marie Louise, cousin and close friend of Queen Mary, for the miniature library in the Queen's Dolls' House.<sup>6</sup>)

Now to the story itself, *with the original text italicized* and the commentary in roman.

*How Watson Learned the Trick*

*Watson had been watching his companion intently ever since he*

*had sat down to the breakfast table. Holmes happened to look up and catch his eye.*

*"Well, Watson, what are you thinking about?" he asked.*

Klinger's comments on this opening paragraph establish a fairly clear latest date for the occurrences in "How Watson Learned the Trick": "It seems likely that it predates Holmes's retirement in 1903 and occurs during a period of joint occupancy of Baker Street (note that Watson 'sat down to the breakfast table,' a sign of residence, though hardly conclusive)." Klinger tightens the calendar a bit more: "The latter suggests that the conversation occurred before Watson's second marriage, generally assigned to 1902."<sup>7</sup> Klinger is referring to late 1902. By 3 September of that year, in "The Illustrious Client," Watson "was living in my own rooms in Queen Anne Street," though it is not clear whether he had married by then or did so later in the year or early in 1903, by which time "Watson had . . . deserted [Holmes] for a wife" ("The Blanched Soldier"). But Watson resided at 221B Baker Street until at least "the latter end of June, 1902"—when he and Holmes survived "The Three Garridebs"—a date about which "[t]here is no argument."<sup>8</sup> So "How Watson Learned the Trick" probably occurred before the end of June 1902, and almost certainly before 3 September.

*"About you."*

*"Me?"*

*"Yes, Holmes. I was thinking how superficial are these tricks of yours, and how wonderful it is that the public should continue to show interest in them."*

*"I quite agree," said Holmes. "In fact, I have a recollection that I have myself made a similar remark."*

*"Your methods," said Watson severely, "are really easily acquired."*

*"No doubt," Holmes answered with a smile. "Perhaps you will yourself give an example of this method of reasoning."*

*"With pleasure," said Watson. "I am able to say that you were greatly preoccupied when you got up this morning."*

*"Excellent!" said Holmes. "How could you possibly know that?"*

*"Because you are usually a very tidy man and yet you have forgotten to shave."*

*"Dear me! How very clever!" said Holmes. "I had no idea, Watson, that you were so apt a pupil. Has your eagle eye detected anything more?"*

*"Yes, Holmes. You have a client named Barlow, and you have not been successful with his case."*

*"Dear me, how could you know that?"*

*"I saw the name outside his envelope. When you opened it you gave a groan and thrust it into your pocket with a frown on your face."*

*"Admirable! You are indeed observant. Any other points?"*

*"I fear, Holmes, that you have taken to financial speculation."*

*"How could you tell that, Watson?"*

*"You opened the paper, turned to the financial page, and gave a loud exclamation of interest."*

The paper Holmes opened was probably *The Times*, the significance of which will become obvious near the end of "How Watson Learned the Trick." *The Times* made more appearances in the Canon (seven) than any other newspaper,<sup>9</sup> including a couple in association with Holmes's breakfast.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the ways in which Holmes and Watson talked about *The Times* suggest that reading it was a matter of routine. Consider, for example, "The Engineer's Thumb" ("Sherlock Holmes was, as I expected, lounging about his sitting-room in his dressing-gown, reading the agony column of *The Times*, and smoking his before-breakfast pipe . . .") and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* ("Have you yesterday's *Times*, Watson?' 'It is here in the corner.'").<sup>11</sup>

*"Well, that is very clever of you, Watson. Any more?"*

*"Yes, Holmes, you have put on your black coat, instead of your dressing gown, which proves that you are expecting some important visitor at once."*

*"Anything more?"*

*"I have no doubt that I could find other points, Holmes, but I only give you these few, in order to show you that there are other people in the world who can be as clever as you."*

*"And some not so clever," said Holmes. "I admit that they are few, but I am afraid, my dear Watson, that I must count you among them."*

*"What do you mean, Holmes?"*

*"Well, my dear fellow, I fear your deductions have not been so happy as I should have wished."*

*"You mean that I was mistaken."*

*"Just a little that way, I fear. Let us take the points in their order: I did not shave because I have sent my razor to be sharpened. I put on my coat because I have, worse luck, an early meeting with my dentist. His name is Barlow, and the letter was to confirm the appointment."*

Like Klinger, I have been unable to find a "Barlow" in any list of dentists practicing in London in 1902 or preceding years when

Holmes and Watson lived together.<sup>12</sup> *The Dentists Register* (the official annual directory of qualified, licensed dentists) from the 1880s through the turn of the century lists several Barlows elsewhere in the U.K., but none in London.<sup>13</sup> Thereafter, however, it lists a "Barlow, George William," with accompanying notations indicating that he received his Licence in Dental Surgery in 1902, following successful completion of the final professional examinations conducted in London every May and November by the Royal College of Surgeons of England.<sup>14</sup> (He then settled down to practice in Manchester in 1903.)

Barlow appeared on the College's November 1902 "Pass List,"<sup>15</sup> too late to have been a licensed dentist treating Holmes before 3 September. But it is quite possible that Barlow was in London earlier in the year as well, and available to treat Holmes even without a license. Of the several plausible possibilities, the most promising is that Barlow—who was wrapping up his principal dental studies at the Victoria Dental Hospital in Manchester<sup>16</sup>—was spending some time in the spring and summer of 1902 doing extra exam preparation at one of the London dental hospitals. Exertions of that sort by a diligent student should come as no surprise, given the terrifyingly low (by modern standards) pass rates for the final exams—around 50 percent.<sup>17</sup> Barlow may even have opted to get a better practical (and politic) sense of what the Royal College of Surgeons was likely to test on the exams by studying (and paying tuition) at the Royal Dental Hospital of London. The Hospital, which had a historically close relationship with the College, seems to have capitalized on this kind of interest by offering "[c]oaching classes . . . held by the tutors previous to each examination."<sup>18</sup>

Barlow's studies in London would have included clinical treatment of live patients, many of them needy (teaching hospitals were, after all, charitable institutions), but not all. The Royal Dental Hospital of London, for example, raised funds by granting donors the right to recommend limited numbers of patients for treatment. Some donors may have used this as a way to provide health care for their employees, or their flocks.<sup>19</sup> It is not difficult to imagine Holmes being the beneficiary of such a recommendation, made by a donor who was also a grateful former client (perhaps one who had noticed his need for a left canine<sup>20</sup>) or a helpful current client (perhaps arranging for a dental disguise Holmes needed for an active case<sup>21</sup>). Regardless, there was a dentist, albeit unlicensed, named Barlow in London in 1902. And he was able, and quite possibly available, to care for Holmes's teeth.

*The cricket page is beside the financial one, and I turned to it to find if Surrey was holding its own against Kent.*

Klinger's comments on this sentence establish a fairly clear earliest date for the occurrences in "How Watson Learned the Trick." He says, "It seems clear, then, that the events recounted here occurred after 1896," based on Holmes's protestations of ignorance of cricket in particular in "The Field Bazaar" ("My small experience of cricket clubs") and sports in general in "The Missing Three-Quarter" ("My ramifications stretch out into many sections of society, but never, I am happy to say, into amateur sport") during 1896 (when the events in both stories are commonly understood to have occurred). Klinger sensibly adds: "While an interest in the professional cricket matches does not necessarily imply a similar interest in amateur sports"—Surrey and Kent fielded professional players—"the balance of probability is that Holmes's interest in organized sports did not arise until nearly the end of the century."<sup>22</sup> That cogent analysis dovetails nicely with the presence of Barlow the dentist in London in 1902, but not before then. Holmes's interest in cricket would have had several years after 1896 to emerge and develop before the events in "How Watson Learned the Trick."

Coverage of Surrey vs. Kent matches by *The Times* during 1902 further tightens the earliest (and latest) date for the occurrences in "How Watson Learned the Trick." County championship cricket—the first-class domestic format in which Surrey and Kent competed—was then and still is pretty much a spring and summer business, with every club hosting each of the others (there were 15 clubs in 1902, 18 in 2018) once during the season. *The Times* reported on every day of both matches played between Surrey and Kent in the 1902 season, during which its cricket page appeared beside the financial page only twice. The clubs' first match of the season was played 2–4 June. *The Times* of 4 June included coverage of the second day of play (3 June) on page 14, with coverage of "Stocks and Shares" on page 15. The clubs' second match of the season was played 7–9 August. *The Times* of 8 August included coverage of the first day of play (7 August) on page 10, with coverage of "Stocks and Shares" on page 11.<sup>23</sup>

Even a quick glance at the 4 June and 8 August coverage in *The Times* of Surrey vs. Kent would leave the reader with little doubt about which report would have elicited a "loud exclamation of interest" from Holmes. From the 4 June story: "The splendid bat-

ting of Mr. Burnup and Mr. Mason at the Oval, yesterday, placed Kent almost on terms with Surrey. . . . The position of the score points to an unfinished match to-day [with Surrey leading 238-194 after the first innings].” And from the 8 August story: “Yesterday’s cricket was a great triumph for the Kent eleven, who batted from mid-day until nearly 6 o’clock to complete an innings of 389. . . . Surrey lost a wicket for eight runs in the last few minutes of the afternoon, so that they have a formidable task to face today.” In other words, in the 4 June report Surrey was very much “holding its own against Kent,” and in the August 8 report it was suffering a defensive collapse followed by a dismal offensive start. The 8 August report of that terrible blowout would likely have prompted another groan and a frown of the sort that Holmes gave over the confirmation of his appointment with Barlow, not any sort of exclamation of interest.

There is one more feather to rest on the scale in favor of 4 June 1902. Attention to Surrey cricket runs deeply but subtly in the Canon as well as in the apocrypha, though it is, as Mark Alberstat observed,

fleeting and has often been overlooked. In *The Sign of the Four*, Holmes, Watson, and Toby are tracking Small and Tonga: “We had traversed Streatham, Brixton, Camberwell, and now found ourselves in Kennington Lane, having borne away through the side streets to the east of the Oval.” This Oval is a cricketing ground in South London’s Lambeth borough.<sup>24</sup>

The Oval is home to the Surrey County Cricket Club, as it has been since 1745, and as it was in Holmes’s day, when he was teaching Watson the trick. In June of 1902, Surrey was playing Kent at the Oval.

*But go on, Watson, go on! It’s a very superficial trick, and no doubt you will soon acquire it.”*

So, 4 June 1902 is the date on which it is likely—perhaps even the only date on which it is possible—that Holmes and Watson would have been together for breakfast, and Holmes would have received confirmation of an appointment with a dentist named Barlow, and Holmes would have looked for and found a report of a cricket match between Surrey and Kent on a page in the newspaper beside the financial one that would have prompted “a loud exclamation of interest” (not a groan and a frown).

If the events in “How Watson Learned the Trick” did occur on 4 June 1902, then “How Watson Learned the Trick” fits neatly between canonical events of that time. Holmes was not otherwise occupied when he had his appointment with Barlow. He had recently wrapped up “Shoscombe Old Place” (commonly understood to have occurred in May 1902), and his next reported case was “The Three Garridebs” (universally understood to have occurred in late June 1902). More intriguingly, “The Three Garridebs” opens with a scene in which Watson reports that “Holmes had spent several days in bed” just before starting his investigation. Might Holmes have been recovering from oral surgery or some other debilitating dental treatment recently performed by a novice who was not yet even officially qualified? In a more farfetched and amusing extension of that possibility, was Holmes given access to the Royal Dental Hospital (and thus Barlow) by a grateful former client who would have preferred to give him something fancier? Watson states at the beginning of “The Three Garridebs” that he “remember[s] the date very well, for it was in the same month that Holmes refused a knighthood for services which may perhaps some day be described.” The new King, Edward VII, had recently agreed to also be patron of the Royal Dental Hospital, and so he was well placed to give Holmes a knighthood or a free pass to the hospital.<sup>25</sup> It might have gratified both the practical and the whimsical facets of Holmes’s personality to ask the king for a denture in place of an investiture, much as he had once asked the King of Bohemia for a photograph in place of an emerald ring.

Finally, tangentially, and purely speculatively, there is the thought-provoking position of “How Watson Learned the Trick” in Doylean chronology. It first appeared in print in June 1924, and “The Three Garridebs” was first published in October 1924. No other new Doylean fiction of any sort appeared in print during the intervening months.<sup>26</sup> All of which suggests that the two stories were at least proximate in Conan Doyle’s mind, and perhaps even closer than that. Maybe the roots of “How Watson Learned the Trick” run deeply but subtly in the Canon itself. Maybe “How Watson Learned the Trick” was percolating as a curtain-raising scene for “The Three Garridebs” before being reallocated to the Queen and her Dolls’ House, making “How Watson Learned the Trick”’s external and internal consistency with the Canon—features with which “The Field Bazaar” is not blessed—perfectly unsurprising.

This has been, obviously, a standing on the shoulders of giants exercise. Klinger did the difficult reasoning long ago. He

narrowed the possibilities from the 33-year span of Holmes and Watson's association (1881 to 1914) down to the six post—"Field Bazaar," pre-second-marriage years (1897 to 1902). And he flagged the identity of the dentist as the evidentiary bottleneck. The additional details presented here about a dentist, a newspaper, and a cricket match are merely incremental narrowing steps. Then again, nothing is certain about canonical (or apocryphal) chronology. There is always the possibility—indeed, the likelihood—that more digging will turn up new evidence that will require a new theory that is broader or narrower, and aimed in a different direction. I look forward to the next adjustment. But until then, I say Watson learned the trick, sort of, on 4 June 1902.

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#### NOTES

1. Leslie S. Klinger, ed., *The Apocrypha of Sherlock Holmes*, Indianapolis: Gasogene Books, 2009, p. 39, note 85; p. 1, note 1.
2. Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes: The Field Bazaar," *The Student: The Edinburgh University Magazine*, Vol. 11, Bazaar Number (20 Nov. 1896), pp. 35–36.
3. "Craiglockhart," *University of Edinburgh Journal*, Vol. 29 (Dec. 1979), p. 131; Ross E. Davies, "Philanthropical (and Apocryphal, or Canonical?) Cricket in Edinburgh" in *Green Bag Almanac and Reader*, eds. Ross E. Davies and Cattleya M. Concepcion, Washington, DC: Green Bag Press, 2017, map supplement.
4. Arthur Conan Doyle, "How Watson Learned the Trick" in *The Book of the Queen's Dolls' House*, eds. A. C. Benson and Sir Lawrence Weaver, London: Methuen, 1924, pp. 92–94.
5. "University Notes," *The Student: The Edinburgh University Magazine*, Vol. 11 (12 Nov. 1896), p. 55; J[ames] I[an] Macpherson, *Twenty-one Years of Corporate Life at Edinburgh University*, Edinburgh: Students' Representative Council, 1905), pp. 28–30, 44.
6. Richard Lancelyn Green, comp., *The Uncollected Sherlock Holmes*, London: Penguin Books, 1983, pp. 153–155; Flora Gill Jacobs, *A History of Dolls' Houses*, 2nd ed., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965, pp. 258–266.
7. Klinger, *Apocrypha*, p. 39, note 85.
8. Leslie S. Klinger, ed., *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, Indianapolis: Gasogene Books, 2007, p. 109, note 4.

9. Stephen Clarkson, *The Canonical Compendium*, Ashcroft, BC: Calabash Press, 1999, pp. 46–47; Jack Tracy, *The Encyclopædia Sherlockiana*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977, pp. 360–361.
10. “The Engineer’s Thumb”; “The Missing Three-Quarter.” Coincidentally, perhaps, in “The Story of the Lost Special” it is to *The Times* that “an amateur reasoner of some celebrity” writes a letter. A. Conan Doyle, “The Story of the Lost Special,” *The Strand Magazine*, Vol. 16 (Aug. 1898), pp. 153, 157. For a formidable dose of skepticism about the authorship of that letter, see D. Martin Dakin, *A Sherlock Holmes Commentary*, New York: Drake, 1972, p. 288.
11. Brad Keefauver, “A Day in the Life, a Day in *The Times*,” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Autumn 2003), p. 39.
12. Klinger, *Apocrypha*, p. 39, note 84.
13. For example, *The Dentists Register*, London: General Medical Council, 1887, p. 36; *The Dentists Register*, London: General Medical Council, 1893, p. 36; *The Dentists Register*, London: General Medical Council, 1900, p. 35.
14. For example, *The Dentists Register*, London: General Medical Council, 1904, pp. 23, 35; “Royal College of Surgeons of England. Regulations Relating to the Diploma in Dental Surgery,” *The Dental Record*, Vol. 22, No. 9 (1 Sept. 1902), pp. 413–415. Dr. Barlow, whose name appears in professional listings well into the middle of the twentieth century, seems to have enjoyed a long and active life in practice. His obituary is in Vol. 66 (1946 ed.) of *The Dental Record*.
15. “Royal College of Surgeons of England. Pass List,” *The Dental Record*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2 Feb. 1903), p. 94.
16. “Special Correspondence,” *Journal of the British Dental Association*, Vol. 22, No. 10 (15 Oct. 1901), p. 576 (academic prizes awarded to G. W. Barlow); “Special Correspondence,” *Journal of the British Dental Association*, Vol. 23, No. 10 (15 Oct. 1902), pp. 636–637 (same).
17. For example, “Royal College of Surgeons of England. Ordinary Council, 12th June, 1902,” *The Dental Record*, Vol. 22, No. 7 (1 July 1902), p. 336 (only 49 of more than 100 candidates passed all parts of the exams and qualified as dental surgeons); “Royal College of Surgeons of England. Pass List,” *The Dental Record*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2 Feb. 1903), p. 94 (52 out of more than 100).
18. “Educational Supplement,” *Journal of the British Dental Association*, Vol. 23 (1902), p. xix.
19. H. L. Ambler, “Dental Schools Abroad,” *The Dental Register*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Jan. 1899), pp. 11, 14–15; “Care of the Teeth of the Poor,” *The Dental Cosmos*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Mar. 1905), pp. 362–363; Ernest G. Smith and Beryl D. Cottell, *A History of The Royal Dental Hospital of Lon-*

- don and School of Dental Surgery, 1858–1985*, London: Athlone Press, 1997, pp. 11–12.
20. “The Empty House”; Jay Weiss, “Holmes as a Patient: With Special Emphasis on His Dental Status,” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June 1963), p. 96; Ira Brad Matetsky, “The Adventure of the Dislodged Tooth,” *The Serpentine Muse*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Fall 2018), pp. 11, 12.
  21. Curtis Armstrong, “An Actor and a Rare One,” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (Summer 2007), pp. 26, 28.
  22. Klinger, *Apocrypha*, p. 39, note 85.
  23. Yes, the last day of the August match was a Saturday, and no, neither the 10 August edition of *The Sunday Times* nor the 11 August *The Times* printed a cricket page beside a financial page.
  24. Mark Alberstat, “Cricketing and Conan Doyle: The Perfect Pitch,” *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (Summer 2018), pp. 6, 12.
  25. Smith and Cottell, p. 61.
  26. Richard Lancelyn Green and John Michael Gibson, *A Bibliography of A. Conan Doyle*, New York: Hudson House, 2000, pp. 201, 368, 413.