

## The Matter Is a Perfectly Trivial One . . .

by Peter E. Blau

*It has been more than thirty years since I presented a bit of Sherlockian scholarship at a meeting of The Sons of the Copper Beeches; the paper was published in "More Leaves from the Copper Beeches" (1976), and posted to the Hounds in 1998 and 2008. I hope that it might be of interest to consider as one reads "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle" in the Christmas season.*

Certainly, there has been a great deal of argument about "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle"—perhaps as much or more than about any other of the Sacred Writing. Discussion of the case dates as far back as the early meetings of the Sherlock Holmes Society in pre-War London, and topics covered in the continuing debate include such points as the possibility of commuting a felony, whether it does any good to solder a grate, the apparent non-existence of white barred-tailed geese, the likelihood of finding geese for sale at the vegetable and flower market in Covent Garden, the alleged fact that geese do not have crops, the matter of Holmes' hearty noiseless laughter, and numerous attempts to identify the Blue Carbuncle as an actual gem.

It is the last of these questions which I wish to address, in hopes that a geologist may be able to shed a little light in the darkness. Holmesian humor is also worthy of comment, as an adjunct to his hearty noiseless laughter, and it might not be amiss to make an attempt to clear up the problem of the goose's crop, in which Peterson's wife is supposed to have found the Blue Carbuncle.

The first statement known to have been published on this subject came in 1946, from Mildred Sammons: "Let me remind you that a goose has no crop."<sup>1</sup> In practically instant comment the eminent Sherlockian scholar J. A. Finch retorted that: "Consultation of one ornithologist, two zoologists, and three poultry dressers, together with ocular demonstration, has made it abundantly clear that the lady is correct. Holmes made an alimentary [sic] error, which the Baker Street Irregulars should have noted long ago."<sup>2</sup>

Debate raged for many years, and notable authorities on both sides of the Atlantic were quoted in support of each side of the argument. Ernest Bloomfield Zeisler, an ardent believer in the presence of crops in geese, even went so far as to conduct an investigation of Mildred Sammons--an investigation, I should add, surpassed in thoroughness only by those conducted in recent years in our Nation's capital.

Zeisler discovered, based on correspondence with Vincent Starrett, that Mildred Sammons had aged forty years and died, all in the space of four months. And, adding more fuel to the fires of suspicion, the address for the lady, relayed by Starrett, was fraudulent.

Persevering, Zeisler came tantalizingly close to uncovering and examining the correspondence of the late Miss Sammons, but his efforts failed in the end, leaving him exceedingly wary of the

possibility of a hoax. His report on his investigation concludes: "Of only two things can I be certain: the goose's crop and Vincent Starrett's inscrutability."<sup>3</sup>

It is unfortunate that so much time and effort has been devoted, by so many experts, to investigating ornithological anatomy. Until now, the question has never received a definitive answer. The reason, I submit, is that scholars have taken the wrong approach, and that the matter of geese's crops is really beside the point. The problem, after all, is easily solved if only we assume that the Blue Carbuncle was not found in the goose's crop at all, and that the long debate has actually centered on a printer's error, which substituted an "o" for Watson's "a".

Returning from the scatological to the geological, let us examine the Canonical references to the Blue Carbuncle:

*Watson:* "A brilliantly scintillating blue stone, rather smaller than a beam in size, but of such purity and radiance that it twinkled like an electric point in the dark hollow of his hand."

*Peterson:* "A diamond, sir! A precious stone. It cures into glass as though it were putty."

*Holmes:* "It's more than a precious stone. Is it *the* precious stone."

*Watson:* "Not the Countess of Morcar's blue carbuncle?"

*Holmes:* "I ought to know its size and shape, seeing that I have read the advertisement about it in *The Times* every day lately. It is absolutely unique, and its value can only be conjectured, but the reward offered of £1,000 is certainly not within a twentieth part of the market price."

*Holmes:* "That is the reward, and I have reason to know that there are sentimental considerations in the background which would induce the Countess to part with half her fortune if she could but recover the gem."

*Holmes:* "It's a bonny thing. Just see how it glints and sparkles. Of course it is a nucleus and focus of crime. Every good stone is. They are the devil's pet baits. In the larger and older jewels every facet may stand for a bloody deed. This stone is not yet twenty years old. It was found in the banks of the Amoy River in southern China and is remarkable in having every characteristic of the carbuncle, save that it is blue in shade instead of ruby red. In spite of its youth, it has already a sinister history. There have been two murders, a vitriol-throwing, a suicide, and several robberies brought about for the sake of this forty-grain weight of crystallized charcoal. Who would think that so pretty a toy would be a purveyor to the gallows and the prison?"

*Holmes* (of the goose): "It laid an egg after it was dead—the bonniest, brightest little blue egg that ever was seen."

*Watson:* "Holmes unlocked his strong-box, and held up the blue carbuncle, which shone out like a star, with a cold, brilliant, many-pointed radiance."

And, finally, *Holmes*: "You had heard, Ryder, of this blue stone of the Countess of Morcar's?"

Thus sayeth the Canon. Plenty of evidence—enough, in fact, to have thoroughly confused the legions of Sherlockian scholars who have pursued the Blue Carbuncle.

For example: Jason Rouby has suggested that the Blue Carbuncle was not blue, but red--a red ruby, in fact--and that "Holmes was a congenital dichromatic deuteranope!"<sup>4</sup> This rather obscene-sounding description of someone who is color-blind is hardly supported by the evidence, and both Nathan L. Bengis<sup>5</sup> and Thomas H. Dorwart<sup>6</sup> have refuted the hypothesis. Not only does Watson describe the gem as blue, but there many instances elsewhere in the Canon that amply demonstrate that Holmes is not color- blind. We can, I think dispose of Rouby's ruby.

Ralph Judson<sup>7</sup> has written that the Blue Carbuncle was a garnet, basing his suggestion on current usage, which defines a carbuncle as a red garnet, cut *en cabochon* (with a domed unfaceted top). Garnet is a silicate, and occurs in colors other than red. The coloration of garnet, in fact covers a wide range, which unfortunately does not include blue. A blue garnet would indeed be, in Holmes' words, absolutely unique, and it is hardly likely that such a famous gem would not be recorded anywhere in the archives of gemology. Garnet, I fear, will not fill the bill.

In the judicious opinion of S. Tupper Bigelow,<sup>8</sup> the Blue Carbuncle was a blue diamond. Others, including Philip Kasson<sup>9</sup> and D. A. Redmond<sup>10</sup>, make a specific identification with the Hope Diamond. and it would be pleasant indeed if this were true, as the gem has one other connection with Sherlock Holmes.

One of the many unlucky owners of the famous, or infamous, diamond was Abdul-Hamid II, Sultan of Turkey, usually referred to as Abdul the Damned. Abdul-Hamid called himself "Lord of Two Continents and Two Oceans", and Gladstone called him "The Great Assassin", but history's title is the most apt. After purchasing the Hope Diamond in 1908, Abdul-Hamid owned the gem for only a few months before he was ousted by a revolt of young military officers--the Young Turks.

But Abdul-Hamid amply demonstrated his admiration for Sherlock Holmes when he spent his last night as Sultan listening to his Chamberlain read aloud a translation of the latest story about the Great Detective, from a copy of *The Strand Magazine* which had just arrived in Constantinople.

The Hope Diamond's long history has now brought it into the ownership of the people of the United States, and it is presently on display at the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History in Washington. Even a hasty inspection demonstrates that the gem cannot be the Blue Carbuncle. It is much too large to pass through any goose's digestive tract. Further, with a history dating back to 1669, it certainly does not match Holmes' description of the Blue Carbuncle being not yet twenty years old. Indeed, there is no known blue diamond which meets the criteria of the history of the Blue Carbuncle.

Let us return to the definition of the carbuncle. In modern usage, the term refers to a red garnet. In older times, however, the name was applied to any red gem, including the spinel and the ruby.

Spinel is a magnesium aluminum oxide, but, like the garnet, it does not occur in the color blue. The ruby, however, does, and in that form is known as sapphire.

Both ruby and sapphire are gem varieties of the mineral corundum, and aluminum oxide perhaps best known for its extreme hardness, second only to that of diamond. As a gem, corundum occurs both clear and in a wide range of colors; by today's usage, red corundum is called ruby, and all others are called sapphire. Gem-quality corundum is also famous for the phenomenon known as asterism, resulting from inclusions of needle-like crystals of such minerals as rutile, and Doyle W. Beckemeyer<sup>11</sup> has suggested that the Blue Carbuncle was indeed a blue star sapphire.

Now--does a blue sapphire match the Canonical specifications? Certainly, as far as color goes. According to Peterson, the Blue Carbuncle cut into glass as though it were putty, and sapphire, with its extreme hardness, will do just that. A fine sapphire will glint and sparkle, twinkle like an electric point, and even shine out like a star, with a cold, brilliant, many-pointed radiance.

How big would a forty-grain sapphire be? Forty grains equal 2.592 grams, and at a specific gravity of 4.00 a sapphire of this weight would be a sphere with a diameter of 1.074 centimeters--just over four tenths of an inch. This might be considered as rather smaller than a bean in size, but when Watson gave that description of the gem it was held in the dark hollow of Holmes' hand--not the best conditions for accurate observation.

Holmes tells us that the Blue Carbuncle was found in the banks of the Amoy River in southern China, and many scholars have remarked that neither garnets nor diamonds nor sapphires are found in China. It is true that the most famous sources of gem corundum are Burma, Thailand, and Ceylon, but it is also found in Australia, Borneo, the United States (in Montana, Idaho, Colorado, and North Carolina), Colombia, Brazil, Rhodesia, Madagascar, Malawi, Tanzania, Norway, Finland, the U.S.S.R., Czechoslovakia, Romania, Afghanistan, India, and--near Canton, in China.

It has been claimed that there is no Amoy River in China, but the problem is one of linguistics, rather than geography. The city of Amoy, designated as one of the five original treaty ports by the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, lies somewhat to the northeast of Canton, and is now known as Hsia-men. And the river which flows by the city may be found on today's maps under the name of Chiu-lung Chiang.

The Chinese obviously discovered a placer deposit of rubies somewhere upstream from Amoy, and it is hardly surprising that one blue gem would receive special attention. Nor is it surprising that an Englishman who purchased the stone in Amoy would call it, and the others, carbuncles. The name of the Blue Carbuncle might well be retained by later owners, even though mineralogists and gemologists were by that time well aware that rubies and sapphires were the same mineral; a name that is established for a specific gem is often retained, and the best example of this is perhaps the Black Prince's Ruby, now on display in the British Imperial State Crown in the Tower of London. The Black Prince's ruby is not a ruby but a spinel.

The uniqueness and the high value of the Blue Carbuncle, as described by Holmes, lie not in its characteristics as a sapphire alone, but also in its history and its sentimental considerations, also

noted by Holmes. The exact nature of those sentimental considerations, like the true value of the gem, can indeed only be conjectured.

There is one final point to be considered in our examination of a blue sapphire's qualifications to be the Blue Carbuncle--the one contradictory statement in the Canon. Holmes refers to the gem as crystallized charcoal.

Corundum is aluminum oxide, and charcoal is essentially pure carbon. The list of scholars who have used Holmes' statement to cast aspersions on his abilities as a chemist or mineralogist is long indeed, and it can only be regarded as unfortunate that these scholars have not considered the humorous aspects of their research.

It is to Remsen Ten Eyck Schenck<sup>12</sup> we are indebted for the discovery of an almost totally neglected point of humor in "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle"—not Holmes' hearty noiseless laughter, but a different kind of humor.

Let us examine the etymology of the word *carbuncle*: stemming from the Latin *carbunculus*, a little coal. Holmes' reference to the Blue Carbuncle as crystallized charcoal was nothing less than an example of a kind of humor seldom found in the Canon—a pun, and a scholarly one at that.

And, for those who like footnotes, here they are:

1. Mildred Sammons, in "A Line o' Type or Two", Chicago Tribune, Dec. 26, 1946, p. 10.
2. J. A. Finch [pseud. of Jay Finley Christ], "Mystery of the Goose's Crop", Chicago Tribune, Dec. 27, 1946, p. 14.
3. Ernest Bloomfield Zeisler, "A Pigment of the Imagination", SHJ, 5 (1961), 50-52.
4. Jason Rouby, "The Adventure of the Bluish Carbuncle", BSJ, NS 16 (1966), 70-73.
5. Nathan Bengis, [letter], BSJ NS 16 (1966), 176
6. Thomas H. Dorwart, "Thoughts Concerning Certain Infamous Conclusions, Being a Reply to Mr. Jason Rouby", BSJ, NS 16 (1966), 216-218.
7. Ralph Judson, "The Chemistry of 'The Blue Carbuncle'", BSJ, NS 9 (1959), 243-244.
8. S. Tupper Bigelow, "The Blue Enigma", BSJ, NS 11 (1961), 203-214.
9. Philip Kasson, "The True Blue: A Case of Identification", BSJ, NS 11 (1961), 200-202.
10. D. A. Redmond, "Some Chemical Problems in the Canon", BSJ, NS 14 (1964), 150-151.
11. Doyle W. Beckemeyer, "Valuable Sherlockian Hunting-Ground", in J. N. Williamson and H. B. Williams, eds., "Illustrious Client's Third Case-Book" (Indianapolis: The Illustrious Clients, 1953), pp. 135-140.
12. Remsen Ten Eyck Schenck, "Baker Street Fables", BSJ, NS 2 (1952), 88-89.