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Disguising a Suicide as  
a Homicide  
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle,  
Hans Gross, and  
"The Problem of Thor Bridge"

## To the Editor:

While reviewing the scientific literature concerning the *Materia Medica* contained in Sherlock Holmes' adventures, I have fallen upon 2 articles published 2 decades ago in *The American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology*. Both articles reported a case of suicide disguised as a homicide, one in Poland<sup>1</sup> and the other in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Correctly, authors pointed out that the modality of the 2 suicides was patterned on that described by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) in *The Problem of Thor Bridge*, a story published in *The Strand Magazine* in 1922.<sup>3</sup>

However, authors of both articles apparently missed the point, which still remains unfamiliar in the scientific literature, that Conan Doyle did not conceive the storyline of the tale, which instead was modeled on a real case described in 1893 by the Austrian criminal jurist Hans Gross<sup>4</sup> (1847–1925), in his famous compendium of criminal cases collected for the use of magistrates, police officers, and lawyers. A grain merchant, whose business was hopelessly ruined, shot himself on a bridge with a gun tied to a stone with a rope. The moment he fired, he let go off the pistol,

which was dragged over the parapet of the bridge into a rather deep stream by the weight of the stone. By killing himself, the merchant hoped to gain a life insurance for his family. Conan Doyle might have read the case in the English translation published in 1906.<sup>5</sup> However, it cannot be excluded that Conan Doyle read the original German edition of Gross' treatise, because he had, in his own words, "a fair knowledge of conversational German."<sup>6</sup>

It has been suggested<sup>7</sup> that Gross might have been inspired by the stories of Sherlock Holmes in the writing of his book. Although there is no evidence whatsoever to support this argument, it is pretty sure that Gross' work influenced authors of detective stories. As a matter of fact, the entire case was quoted in the German original in a footnote in *The Greene Murder Case* (1928), one of the best-ever mystery novel of Philo Vance, the character of amateur detective created of S.S. Van Dine,<sup>8</sup> pseudonym of Willard Huntington Wright (1888–1939). Vance uses quotations from Gross' *Handbuch* to demonstrate that the culprit of the story, the mad Ada Greene, took her ideas for plotting the murders from Gross' book, exactly like Conan Doyle did.

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