

A Case of Identity



This is one Adventure where sufficient advance information is given to enable the reader who is so inclined to form a correct solution without waiting for Holmes to provide essential details.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that it is a case in which, legally speaking, no crime was committed or at least none that Holmes knew of.

The subject of Holmes' investigation is a sneaky stepfather, James Windibank, whose head deserves more credit than his heart.

Whatever else one might say about him, it can surely be stated that Windibank was no Angel.

The imagery in the beginning of this story likens Miss Mary Sutherland, the bereft stepdaughter, to a "full-sailed merchantman" when contrasted with the "tiny pilot boat" figure of the boy in buttons who ushered her into 221B.

This is but one of many seafaring connections Watson injects in his chronicles; the mention of Clark Russell's sea stories in "The Adventure of the Five Orange Pips", and the depiction of convict life aboard a "China coaster" brig in "The Adventure of the Gloria Scott" are just two more.

It is apparent that Watson is knowledgeable about life aboard ship, and indeed many Englishmen were so at the time because England was the greatest seafaring power on earth.

A number of her citizens had traveled aboard ship in one capacity or another.

The Literary Agent, for instance, was a third-year medical student when he signed on for a year's voyage aboard a whaling vessel.

But what we know of Watson's seafaring experience would lead us to believe that he might have formed a more jaundiced view of life at sea than was the case.

If his voyage to India as an Army doctor was not unpleasant, we can say with some degree of certitude that his return voyage to the Mother Country was not an excursion trip.

What was it that might have inspired Watson's apparent love for things nautical?



On another tack (since we're in a nautical context right now), Holmes remarked to Watson that he had ten or twelve cases at hand when "A Case of Identity" begins and that they were important but uninteresting.

How could Holmes juggle so many cases at one time and do full service to all of them?

Were they "important" because they carried large fees with them, but "uninteresting" because they were, in Holmes' estimation, devoid of fascinating twists and turns, of *outrè* circumstances that took the "one step from the bizarre to the grotesque?"

"Hosmer Angel" attributed his whisper-like method of speech to quinsy, which was the then-current term for a peritonsillar abscess.

Quinsy today is treated with antibiotics and tonsillectomy.

Since antibiotics were unknown in Victorian times, the condition would have been treated by tonsillectomy alone.

Could this condition, untreated, have left the sufferer hoarse with impaired speech?

Could a botched tonsillectomy have left such an impairment?

A “boy in buttons” is evidently another term for a page.

Your Maître de Chasse surmises that this is a reference to a row, or double row, of buttons on the lad’s uniform.

Was it customary for pages to wear uniforms?

Could Mrs. Hudson have afforded to pay for a page?

Or, could Holmes and Watson have afforded such a luxury at this stage in their respective careers?

Were there other lodgers at 221B Baker Street who could have “chipped in” for this service?

Miss Mary Sutherland said that she augmented the income from her Uncle Ned’s gift of stock by typing, at the rate of threepence a page, often doing six pages a day.

Figuring a six-day workweek for fifty weeks a year, this would have amounted to an additional £90 per year.

For a single lady living at home, coupled with her stock income, this was a handsome annual income of slightly more than £200.

Surely, could she not have aspired to more elegant social affairs than a Gasfitters’ Ball?