



The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XVII -- The Adventure of the Yellow Face

For most of us, this is one of the least satisfying tales in the Sherlockian Canon. There isn't much detecting for Holmes to do, and that's lucky because the little bit of detecting that he does is totally off base. And to confuse us further, the Doubleday editors have done some damage to the text of this one, changing the "dead yellow" face of the Strand into a "livid, chalky white," among other things. Thank heavens the story has a happy ending, at least! Why did Watson publish this one? Well, that's a discussion question itself.

"It is all surmise": Holmes had such a bad-brain day during "The Yellow Face" that I think it's a shame he didn't leave the case to Watson. Consider Watson's assessment of Grant Munro: "From every gesture and expression I could see he was a reserved, self-contained man, with a dash of pride in his nature, more likely to hide his wounds than to expose them." That observation may not be as showy as Holmes's deductions regarding Munro's pipe, but it has more to do with the case than anything Holmes came up with. Given Watson's obvious empathy with the client, did you ever wonder if Watson's own private theory as to the case might not have been more on the mark than Holmes's blackmail story? Did Watson actually mention



an alternative theory to Holmes, though he chose not to reveal it in the published account? Did Holmes have a few unkind words to say about his friend's opinions? Of course Watson was not the kind of man to blow his own horn, nor was he likely to put himself in a good light at the expense of his friend's reputation, but is it just possible that the publication of this story was as close as Watson would ever come to directing a big "I told you so!" at his friend Sherlock Holmes?

But here is an opposing point of view. During a discussion a few weeks ago, one of the Hounds mentioned that the case of "The Five Orange Pips" might make more sense if we thought that Holmes was not

around for that one, and that Watson tried his own inadequate hand at detection. Could “The Yellow Face” be another instance of a case that Watson tried to handle in Holmes’s absence?

Could the dating of this case help explain why Holmes was off his game? (Or why he was not around.) Scholars have cited the season of the year, the dearth of other cases, the presence of a page boy, the degree of Holmes’s drug use, the state of the friendship between Holmes and Watson, and many other clues to support their theories as to one date or another. What say the Hounds?

I suspect that a lot of our disappointment with this story comes because we, like Holmes, find ourselves imagining so much more exciting explanations to the mystery. Was the face at the window Norman Bates’s mother? How about a yellow-faced alien? Would the surly woman at the cottage door burn the place down like the first Mrs. Rochester? Would any Hounds care to confess their own wild surmises as to the ending of this story?

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