



The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XX -- The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual

"I was already firmly convinced, Watson, that there were not three separate mysteries here, but only one, and that if I could read the Musgrave Ritual aright I should hold in my hand the clue which would lead me to the truth concerning both the butler Brunton and the maid Howells." So said Sherlock Holmes in a brilliantly clear and concise summary of this week's story. And what a fascinating story! This is as clear a demonstration as you will ever see of just how riveting a mystery can be even when the detective never has to throw a punch, dodge a bullet, or romance a woman. So journey with us now to Hurlstone, as the Hounds pace off the steps that will take us to the secret of the ancient and perhaps slightly dotty Musgrave family.

Holmes the Storyteller: I find it interesting that "The 'Gloria Scott'" and "The Musgrave Ritual" should appear side-by-side in the Canon. They are both tales of Holmes's early career, and they are both told by Holmes himself. And unlike the later stories of "The Blanced Soldier" and "The Lion's Mane," these Holmes-told tales are very satisfying, particularly "The Musgrave Ritual," which finds a place on almost everyone's list of the "top ten" Sherlock Holmes stories. Why is that "The Gloria Scott" and "The Musgrave Ritual," the tales which Holmes told aloud to Watson, turn out so much better than the stories that Holmes transcribed himself? Was Holmes better at telling a story aloud than he was at writing? Or did Watson do a bit of editing when he wrote the cases down, thereby organizing Holmes's thoughts into more pleasing literary form?



If this is the case, may we conclude then that some of the improbabilities of "The Musgrave Ritual" are due to Watson's manipulation or his faulty memory?

Speaking of faults, there are three facets of this case that I would like to bring up for discussion. First, what was the cause of Brunton's death? The butler's body was discovered about a week after he disappeared

– too short a time span for him to have died from lack of food or even from lack of water. Holmes seems to have believed that Brunton suffocated, but did a postmortem confirm this? Was the chamber airtight when the stone was in place? And since there were fungi there, perhaps a biologist among the Hounds could confirm this point: can fungi live and grow without oxygen?

Second, why did “some months” elapse between Brunton’s question about the elm tree and his descent into the treasure chamber? Did it take him that long to figure out the rest of the Ritual? Did it take him that long to patch things up with Rachel Howells?

Third, if Musgrave made no effort to conceal the Ritual, did it take the supposedly first-rate intellect of Brunton fully twenty years to figure it out? Or was snooping among the family papers a hobby that Brunton only took up later in his career? If the latter, what might have happened to change Brunton from a trustworthy employee into a sneaky treasure-seeker? A mid-life crisis? The demands of his new girlfriend?

Reginald Musgrave: Holmes says that at school, Musgrave “more than once... expressed a keen interest in my methods.” Does that strike you as odd for a man of Musgrave’s station in life? Musgrave shows flashes of intelligence during the adventure, including his decision to seek out Holmes to solve the mystery. But what was Musgrave really like? Was he a basically decent man? Was his behavior towards Brunton and Howells typical of “the ruling class,” or do you think he was a cut above – or below – the standard of his day?

Holmes was the one who suggested that the local constables be present for the opening of the treasure-hole. This was very sound procedure for the amateur detective, of course, but do you think it might indicate that Holmes had at least some suspicions that Musgrave himself might have been involved in Brunton’s disappearance? After all, Holmes said that he expected to find all the answers to the mystery once the stone was lifted and the body discovered, and he was disappointed when that did not prove to be the case. Did Holmes suspect Musgrave at any time? Was Holmes completely satisfied with his logically deduced solution to the case?

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