

The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

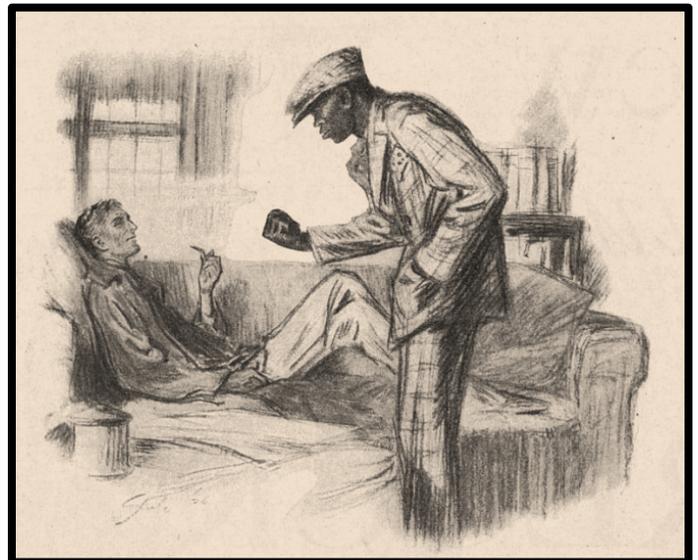
Adventure LV – The Adventure of the Three Gables

Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Adventure of the Three Gables" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

1. Let's Diagram This Play . . .

Watson writes that Holmes "had just settled me into the well-worn low armchair on one side of the fire, while he had curled down with his pipe in his mouth upon the opposite chair, when our visitor arrived." Steve Dixie then bursts in, looks the two men over, identifies Holmes, then starts "coming with an unpleasant, stealthy step round the angle of the table."

Has this table been between visitors and the fireplace chairs in any previous adventures? With all the entrances Watson has recorded at the 221B sitting room, why haven't more people had to walk around that table?



2. The Etymology Of An Offensive Portrayal

One of the hot buttons surrounding Steve Dixie's offensive caricature is his constant use of the title "Masser" in referring to Holmes. The reader's immediate reaction seems to be that it's a sloppy version of "Master," and that Dixie is an ex-slave from America whose life has been spent referring to white people with that title. Is there any hope for a different interpretation of "Masser Holmes"? Wouldn't an immigrant bruiser like Dixie choose to threaten people with a less subservient title, having given up that life? Or was Dixie actually referring to Holmes with a title that couldn't be printed in Strand Magazine, and Watson was cleaning up Dixie's language with his own prejudicial version?

(Try reading Dixie's lines substituting "m*f*" for "masser," if you're indelicate enough to try it, and you'll find him much more the "terrific" Dixie, as Watson describes him.) Why could Dixie say "Mr. Holmes" perfectly well when quoting Barney Stockdale?

3. Seven Degrees To Steve Dixie

If this tale didn't have enough hot buttons in it already, certain lines have been interpreted in ways that may not have been aligned with the original intention. Watson writes that Dixie "swung a huge knotted lump of a fist under my friend's nose" and that "Holmes examined it closely with an air of great interest."

When Holmes then coolly asks, "Were you born so? Or did it come by degrees?" many modern readers take this to be a racial slur. Sure, Holmes says it while looking at the fist under his nose. But while Watson writes that the fist is "huge" and the fist is "knotted," but never that the fist is "black." The fact the fist is under Holmes's nose also implies one more condition not directly mentioned: Dixie is a violent jerk.

So what was it that Holmes thinks Steve Dixie came to by degrees? Size? Knottiness? Or being a rude, door-busting jerk?

4. Just Another Murder In The Backlog

"I've wanted to meet you for some time," Holmes tells Dixie, and after an exchange of threats and insults, continues with, "But it was the killing of young Perkins outside the Holborn Bar--"

Later, Holmes states, "He is one of the Spencer John gang and has taken part in some dirty work of late which I may clear up when I have time."

Couldn't Holmes put Lestrade or someone on the trails he couldn't get to immediately, especially the ones involving murder? Where was Holmes hearing of these non-client crimes and did he only bother with them, regardless of their severity, when he didn't have a paying client?

5. Making A Career Of Being Fabulous

How much do we know about Douglas Maberly?

All London knew him, including Sherlock Holmes. He was a "magnificent creature," "vitaly alive," and "lived intensely--every fibre of him!" In fact, Holmes speaks about him with such out-of-character passion that we start to wonder about the detective's heterosexuality. We know Maberly was a junior member of the embassy staff in Rome, as well as a writer, when he died, but what was he in London that he impressed Sherlock Holmes so much with his vitality?

6. Calling Dr. Henry Higgins! Calling Dr. Henry Higgins!

Here's a pretty little puzzle -- listen to Susan's accent for a moment:

"Leave me alone! What are you a-doin' of?"

"I was comin' in to ask if the visitors was stayin' for lunch . . ."

"Who be you, anyhow, and what right have you a-pullin' me about like this?"

Where does this wheezy woman hail from, based upon this goofy accent of hers? Ireland? America? Australia? Or somewhere else entirely?

7. Victorian Consumer Confidence: Down, Seriously Down

"Now, Mrs. Maberley, has any object just arrived?" Holmes asks his client.

"No, I have bought nothing new this year," Mrs. Maberly replies.

In today's consumer culture, the thought that Mrs. Maberly has bought nothing in a year is a feat that belongs in the record books, especially as she has not been in her house all that long. Is Mrs. Maberly referring to a certain level of purchase, or has she not even had a new dress in this year?

8. That Amazing Victorian Postal Service Once More

"Your letter to me had the 10 P. M. postmark," Holmes tells Mrs. Maberly, and the modern reader gapes in wonder. Just how much information did the Victorian postmark carry? Was said info rubber stamped or marked by hand? Did postmarking go on around the clock?

9. The Ever-Busy Holmes Fails To Act, Again

First we learn of Holmes failing to look into the young Perkins murder, then he makes the pronouncement, "But you said--why, surely this might be the missing link," as he sees Douglas Maberly's trunks. He then tells his client to examine them, and he will call tomorrow to find out if she's found anything.

Has Holmes gone the route of self-serve gas stations, letting clients do his observation for him? How could Holmes *not* be curious enough to help Mrs. Maberly look through her son's things in pursuit of hidden treasure?

10. Holmes Veers Off Toward The Pike

"Now, Watson, this is a case for Langdale Pike," Holmes announces.

Watson explains to us that "Langdale Pike was his human book of reference upon all matters of social scandal.

This strange, languid creature spent his waking hours in the bow window of a St. James's Street club and was the receiving-station as well as the transmitter for all the gossip of the metropolis.”

What made Holmes so quick to turn to Langdale Pike in this matter? The detective knows that he’s looking for an object that makes the Maberly house more valuable than it really is. Why would he think that object had something to do with social scandal?

11. And The Times *Didn’t* Get Thrown Out?

Of Langdale Pike, Watson says, “He made, it was said, a four-figure income by the paragraphs which he contributed every week to the garbage papers which cater to an inquisitive public.”

What were the “garbage” papers of Victorian London and what garbage filled their pages? Might Watson have had his own celebrity mishap with such scandal sheets, explaining why he seems down on them?

12. Mary Maberly Versus The Burglars

“Before he could get away I sprang up and seized him,” the elderly Mary Maberly explains. “I clung to him, but he shook me off, and the other may have struck me, for I can remember no more.”

Not that this feisty old lady needs it, but would a Victorian woman living alone with two maids have a weapon in her house for just such occasions as this?

13. The End Of A Queer Novel

“... face bled considerably from the cuts and blows, but it was nothing to the bleeding of his heart as he saw that lovely face, the face for which he had been prepared to sacrifice his very life, looking out at his agony and humiliation. She smiled--yes, by Heaven! she smiled, like the heartless fiend she was, as he looked up at her. It was at that moment that love died and hate was born. Man must live for something. If it is not for your embrace, my lady, then it shall surely be for your undoing and my complete revenge.”

This passage, we are told, looks like the end of a 245 page novel. From what we are later told, we know this is Douglas Maberly’s fictionalized account of his romance with Isadora Klein. What must those first 244 pages have been, considering that Maberly expected to get it published? What kind of plot might it have had, ending as it did? Was it a simple tragic romance, or something smuttier, to be published under the name “Anonymous”? Couldn’t he have come up with a better ending, or was it unfinished?

14. The Chances Of Isadora's Marriage Happening

"I hear that she is about to marry the young Duke of Lomond, who might almost be her son. His Grace's ma might overlook the age, but a big scandal would be a different matter . . ."

A big scandal, eh? What about "Then there was an interval of adventure when she pleased her own tastes. She had several lovers . . ."

Would the Duke of Lomond hear about Isadora's many lovers, or were their circles different enough that such rumors didn't reach her? Wouldn't Klein's "adventuress" reputation alone kill the wedding?

15. Send The Children Out Of The Room For A Moment

Isadora Klein explains, "He wanted marriage--marriage, Mr. Holmes-- with a penniless commoner. Nothing less would serve him. Then he became pertinacious. Because I had given he seemed to think that I still must give, and to him only."

Wow, could Ms. Klein actually be talking about sex here? If so, is this the only real reference to that biological act in the Canon? (No puns, double entendres, or other Shavian humor allowed in the answering of this question.)

16. Not A Nice Neighborhood After All

Isadora Klein lived in "one of the finest corner-houses of the West End," a prominent house in a prominent neighborhood. And Ms. Klein hired a gang of thugs to beat the most popular man in London in front of this same house.

How is it that Maberly's beating wasn't the talk of all London? Couldn't the police pull in hired louts like Stockdale and Dixie? Why would it take a novel to bring this to the fore?

17. The Future Of The Widow In Question

"What else could I do with my whole future at stake?" Isadora protests.

If Isadora is the richest, best-looking widow on Earth, how could her whole future be ruined by a book that may or may not have been about her, as far as readers were concerned? What would marriage to the Duke of Lomond have gained her that her life would be ruined without?

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