



## The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

### Adventure LVI – The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier

For the first time, Holmes takes up Watson's challenge and writes the story himself, writes Charlotte Anne Walters.

The story is written in the first person and is Holmes' attempt to write up the details of a case himself, rather than have his exploits trumpeted by Watson's words. He does admit to criticising Watson's accounts for being too superficial and sensational rather than just sticking to the facts. Trying to do it himself however, does force Holmes to confess that it is more difficult than he thought and that a degree of superficial information is needed in order to interest the reader.

How pleasant it is to hear him make this u-turn and give Watson a little credit for the works which did so much to bring details of his career to a wide audience.

But this pleasing observation is then somewhat ruined by what I have always found to be a rather upsetting and disappointing statement. Holmes sets out to explain his association with Watson and basically tells us that the union is devoid of sentiment on his part and more practical than emotional – 'I would take this opportunity to remark that if I burden myself with a companion in my various little inquiries it is not done out of sentiment or caprice, but it is that Watson has some remarkable characteristics of his own to which in his modesty he has given small attention amid his exaggerated estimates of my own performances'. So, in summary, he didn't really care much for Watson but let him tag along because he was useful – or at least that's how he makes it sound.



I have never really known what to make of this statement. All the evidence contained within the

other stories contradicts it and suggests that Holmes cared greatly for Watson in spite of his general disinclination for friendships. So why say it? I can't really answer that myself but welcome suggestions – it's almost as if he is ashamed of spending time with someone out of sentiment and feels the need to justify it with a practical reason.

Also of interest is that Holmes tells us Watson has 'deserted' him for a wife. The year is 1903 so this must be the doctor's second wife, and yet we know absolutely nothing about her. This is one of the many unanswered questions I try to tackle in my own novel and I'd love nothing more than to talk about the how-and-why of it but don't want to spoil the surprise for those yet to read it.

As to the rest of the story of the blanched soldier, it is certainly an imaginative one. A fit and healthy young soldier gets wounded in the Boer war and accidentally spends the night in an unmade bed at a leper hospital. He returns home to England and starts to develop white patches on his face. Presuming them to be the mark of leprosy and in fear of him being forever segregated, his parents hide him in an outhouse. A fellow soldier is concerned that he has not heard from his friend and visits his family home to seek him out. The cover story that the young man has gone on a round-the-world voyage is dismissed and he goes to Holmes for help.

All ends well when Holmes uncovers the truth and, very kindly, takes along a specialist who declares that whatever afflicts the boy, it is not leprosy after all.

I do really like the narrative but it is interesting to note that for all his criticism of Watson's writing, Holmes' account runs along in the same sort of formula with all the usual Watson-esque embellishments. And that cold declaration about his lack of sentiment or caprice for Watson does rather spoil things for me.

**Only a 7 out of 10 for this one from me I'm afraid.**

**Charlotte Anne Walters**

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