



The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure LVI – The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier

Danger and the threat of death forge strong bonds of friendship. So it was with James Dodd and Godfrey Emsworth, who faced the rifles of the Boers as comrades-in-arms. Godfrey was seriously wounded in battle and sent to a hospital, whence he returned to his father's home in England for further convalescence. It was only natural for James to wish to visit his friend after his own return home. But there was a problem: communications from Godfrey had abruptly stopped after he left the hospital, and efforts to contact him at his father's home were frustrated by Godfrey's father — the curmudgeonly Colonel Emsworth, who brusquely informed James by letter that Godfrey was traveling for his health and could not be contacted.

James prevailed upon Godfrey's mother to invite him to Tuxbury Old Hall, where he was once more informed by Godfrey's father that his son was traveling for his health and could not be reached. Imagine James' surprise, then, when he saw Godfrey peering in at him through the bedroom window one night. Godfrey's physical appearance was strange, and it was as though his skin had been bleached to a ghostly white. James tried to find where Godfrey was staying, or being confined, only to be ordered off the property by Colonel Emsworth. Puzzled and disturbed, James sought the help of Sherlock Holmes.



This story is rather different in a couple of respects: it doesn't involve any crime, and it is one of the few written by Holmes. Holmes seems to have used the opportunity to chastise Watson rather severely, saying, "A confederate who foresees your conclusions and course of action is always dangerous..." (Dangerous? To whom, and how?) He continues, "...but one to whom each development comes as a perpetual

surprise, and to whom the future is always a closed book, is indeed an ideal helpmate.” (A helpmate? Or a foil?) A little farther on, Holmes criticizes Watson for being “selfish” in taking a wife. Now, really!

BLAN strikes me as Doyle’s effort to present a case in clinical terms; as the instructional “classroom” exercise Holmes so often advocated. The problem, as Doyle quickly discovered, is that a lecture isn’t necessarily interesting. Pedantic classroom presentations can result in the students falling asleep. Hence, there comes a time in this story when Doyle, through Holmes, laments, “And here it is that I miss my Watson.” So do we all.

Holmes did well to let Watson write most of the stories. Either Holmes is referring to an unchronicled case, that of the “Abbey School” which involved the “Duke of Greyminster,” or he had forgotten that it was the **Priory** School and the Duke of **Holderness**. Could it be that Holmes’ vaunted memory was wont to slip a little over such trifles? One would think that he would tend to remember PRIO, if only because he received his largest recorded monetary fee in that case.

Holmes writes, “It was by concealing such links in the chain that Watson was enabled to produce his meretricious results.” In the first place, Watson didn’t conceal the so-called links, he just didn’t understand their significance until after they were explained to him. And “meretricious” is a word derived from the Latin word for “prostitute,” and means to attract attention in a vulgar way. Is Holmes mistaking Watson’s wonder and admiration for vulgar showmanship?

James Dodd says, “...I knew that [Godfrey Emsworth] was heir to a lot of money, and also that his father and he did not always hit it off too well.” What is the relationship between these two disparate facts? Had Godfrey already come into his inheritance, or was this a reference to what he could expect to inherit from his father’s estate?

If Godfrey’s mother was a co-conspirator in the sequestration of her son, why did she take the risk of bringing Dodd down to Tuxbury Old Hall? She is described as “a gentle little white mouse of a woman,” and I marvel that she took so bold a step without consulting her domineering husband first. (If she had consulted him, I very much doubt that he would have given his approval.)

And a couple of bits and pieces: what is “the cut of a riding-man,” and what kind of disinfectant has a tarry odor? And why did old Ralph have to wear gloves just to fetch Godfrey’s meals, while apparently, Mr. Kent wore none?

Steve Clarkson

April 23, 1999