



The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure LVIII – The Adventure of the Retired Colourman

Well, that's it, I've made it to the end, writes Charlotte Anne Walters.

This is the 56th story and signals the end of my epic blog-a-thon. What an adventure it has been! Re-visiting the stories has been very enjoyable and being able to share my thoughts on them with people all around the world has remained an exhilarating experience. For all those of you who have stuck with me since the start, a massive “thank you” from me. In a strange way, I shall miss doing this every day. On the other hand, I won't miss getting up at 5.30 am to start reading and writing before setting off for work.

Anyway, my journey ends with this fun little story about a miserly old man who murders his attractive young wife and her lover then tries to make it look like they have robbed him and run away. He traps them in an air-tight room and gasses them to death, then starts painting the house to disguise the smell and ditches the bodies down a well. Okay, doesn't exactly sound like a ‘fun’ story I admit, but Doyle has a way of telling things like this which make them seem more like a dark comedy than a disturbing thriller. Things are played to extremes and this stops the story from being too real, too serious. As I have said before, there is much humour in the short stories for which I don't think Doyle gets enough credit.



Am I the only one who thought a colourman was someone military? For those of you who might have made the same mistake, a colourman is someone who manufactures artistic materials such as paint-boxes.

The story begins with Holmes in a melancholy mood; “But is not all life pathetic and futile? Is not his story a microcosm of the whole? We reach, we grasp. And what is left in our hands at the end? A shadow. Or worse than a shadow-misery.” Blimey, someone got out of bed the wrong side.

The colourman is so confident that he will get away with his crimes that he enlists Holmes to track down his wife and lover, even though he took their lives himself. Holmes is too busy to investigate at first and sends Watson in his place. As with Watson’s efforts in the search for Lady Carfax, Holmes is very dismissive of his findings – “It is true that in your mission you have missed everything of importance,” but this time he does throw in lots of positive comments too. However, Watson’s rather poetic and detailed description of the wall around the colourman’s house is cut short with a bad tempered remark – “Cut out the poetry Watson,” followed by, “I note that it was a high brick wall.” Poor Watson, he really is the most patient of men.

My modern-day mind couldn’t help but laugh (out loud on the train – rather embarrassing) when Holmes suggests that Watson could have used his natural charms to entice information from local women and adds – “I can picture you whispering soft nothings with the young lady at the Blue Anchor, and receiving hard somethings in exchange.” Brilliant, priceless dialogue – possibly even funnier than the classic, “I’ll just go and put my slippers on”, line in the Blue Carbuncle.

The police inspector working on the case, Mackinnon, does make the point to Holmes that he is able to get results in part because he can get away with doing things which the officials can’t. The point has been made before and is very true, even though Holmes is undeniably brilliant and his fantastic mind is what ultimately brings about the resolutions, being able to break into people’s houses, wearing disguises, duping people into leaving their homes unattended, getting engaged to the villain’s maid etc are certainly a massive part of his armoury.

In this story, Holmes yet again breaks into a house in order to solve the case. We forgive him, of course, because the ends always justify the means but these tactics are beyond the reach of the official police. But then, they cannot complain as Holmes is always happy to step aside and let them take all the credit which is confirmed at the end of this story when Watson reads out a newspaper article praising MacKinnon for his ‘Bold deduction’ and lists points which Holmes actually hit on, not the inspector. Mackinnon takes the praise and glory but Holmes has the satisfaction of knowing that, as always, he has succeeded where others failed, bringing light into the darkness.

What a fine example to end on, a story that contains all I love about Holmes. The brilliant observation and deduction, the interplay with Watson, the humour and darkness skilfully blended together by a writer who I have always felt has not achieved the credit deserved in the history of English literature.

Commercial success yes, one of the best loved characters ever written yes, but recognition as a literary great akin to Dickens at all – no. Even Doyle’s home, Undershaw, is under threat because the powers -that-be don’t see fit to preserve it.

There is a campaign to save Undershaw which you can follow on Facebook, just search for The Undershaw Preservation Trust.

Incidentally, another worthy cause which I’d like to mention is the campaign to award Jeremy Brett a posthumous BAFTA – he really brought Holmes alive on screen for me, better than anyone else in my opinion and his highly successful career has not received the recognition it deserved.

Well, this little mission of mine has reminded me of not only what a great character Holmes was but also taught me to appreciate the stories as a whole and how beautifully crafted they were. I certainly will miss talking about them every day.

I give the Retired Colourman 9 out of 10.

That’s a positive score to be ending on, and so my friends, goodbye for now but I will be back summarising my scores and some other stats regarding which stories attracted the most views etc. So not really “goodbye”, more of a “until next time...” And, of course, if you miss reading my words on a daily basis, there is always my novel to purchase!

Charlotte Anne Walters

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