



**Special points of interest:**

- Holmes the shikari
- A Letter from the senior Trevor
- The Crime Doctor
- Common sense missing in Upper Norwood
- What's all this Sumatra stuff?

## Some Thoughts Regarding The Speckled Band (SPEC)

### **What was Holmes Doing?**

*The Speckled Band* is often cited as a favorite Holmes case. However, it also appears to be one of the most poorly handled as well. There are several questionable aspects that leave one to wonder at Holmes' actions:

#### Sending Helen Stoner Home

– Helen Stoner is worried that her stepfather will be angry with her when they are both back home after their separate visits to Baker Street. Holmes tells her that Roylott must “guard himself” or he may find that someone is on his track. Roylott already knows that Helen has been to visit Holmes: the cat is out of the bag. It is unclear why Holmes is not concerned for her safety. He even says that if Roylott gets violent with her, he will take her to her aunt's home. That's a bit reactive. Holmes does not seem to be properly safeguarding her welfare.

Examining the Safe – How did a snake live in a sealed safe? How much air could it get? Wouldn't there have been ventilation holes? If so, why didn't Holmes mention them?

#### Communicating in the Bedroom

– Holmes waits until the two men have hidden themselves in Helen Stoner's temporary bedroom to tell Watson that “the least sound would be fatal” to their plans. Watson silently nods his understanding. Why didn't Holmes convey this to Watson when they were waiting at the Crown Inn or on the walk to Stoke Moran? This is an inexcusable and wholly preventable risk.

#### Sitting on the Bed

– Holmes sat on the edge of the bed and waited for the snake to hiss before lighting the match. Wasn't this putting himself in grave danger? He was sitting near the place the snake was headed, in darkness and apparently did not hear it until it prepared to strike. Based on Watson's narrative, the snake was released into the ventilator about a half hour earlier. Could it not have struck before Holmes heard it and lit the match?

#### Lighting the Match

– The room is in darkness for over three hours before Holmes lights a match and strikes at the snake. The flash of the match should have been nearly blinding to eyes accustomed only to deep dark. It's unlikely that Holmes would

immediately recognize the snake and accurately lash it.

Snake Handling – Didn't Holmes take a huge risk in reaching out and grabbing the dog-whip from Roylott's lap? Watson has just stated that the adder had reared up in Roylott's hair. What made Holmes think it wouldn't strike out and kill him? And was Holmes trained in snake handling, so that he could safely collar the snake and throw it in the safe?

#### Not His Best Work?

As a result of Holmes' actions, it's quite possible that Helen Stoner could have been physically abused by Roylott; Roylott could have heard Holmes and Watson talking in the next room; Holmes could have been

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## Some Thoughts Regarding *The Illustrious Client (ILLU)*

### Holmes the Hunter

Kitty Winter says to Holmes, “Let me see this man in the mud, and I’ve got all I worked for – in the mud with my foot on his cursed face. That’s my price. I’m with you tomorrow or any other day so long as you are on his track.”

Clearly, Winter is willing to help Holmes bring down Baron Gruner. She certainly seems dedicated to the task. When it is time to sneak into Gruner’s house and steal a book that will expose his vile ways, Holmes brings Winter with him. Presumably, this was so she could show him where it was. He tells Watson that couldn’t know “what the little packet was that she carried so carefully under her cloak.”

His wording indicates that he was aware of the packet before she attacked Gruner. If not, he would likely have said something along the lines of “I was not aware at that time that she was carrying the vitriol” or the like. We will give Holmes the benefit of the doubt and believe that he

knew Kitty Winter had something with her, but he did not know what.

Winter’s hatred of Baron Gruner rivals the strong emotions of any other person in the Canon. Any secret object that she brings into Gruner’s presence is certainly not for his benefit. Assuming Holmes did need her to quickly find the hidden book, was he willing to overlook any seemingly minor item regarding her? He had a plan and either needed her to execute it, or did not want her disrupting it by acting on her own. Or can we instead assume that Holmes knew what Kitty Winter was bringing? Or was Holmes just acting in accord to something he said in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, “Women are naturally secretive, and they like to do their own secreting.”

From here on, actions seem to eerily resemble the tiger trapping method that Holmes referred to when capturing Colonel Sebastian Moran in *The Adventure of the Empty House*. Holmes explains that a hunter would tie a young

kid (lamb) under a tree and then climbed up into the tree. He would wait there until the tiger came for the bait, at which point he would shoot the tiger. In that instance, Holmes was the hunter, Moran the tiger, the empty house the tree and the wax bust in Baker Street the bait.

Holmes finds the hidden book. We have no evidence that Kitty Winter entered the house at all, though according to Holmes’ story, it seems that she would have, to help him locate the book. If she did go inside, she crawled back outside via a window to the garden while Holmes was still inside.

Baron Gruner, about to rough up Watson, hears a noise and rushes into the next room, followed by Watson. The previously mentioned window is opened and standing next to it is Sherlock Holmes. He jumped out the window into the garden and Gruner rushed after him to the open window. At that moment, Kitty Winter, hidden amongst the shrubbery, throws

## Some Thoughts Regarding *The Speckled Band (SPEC)* cont.

bitten by the snake coming down the bell pull; Holmes could have been blinded by the light of his match and not seen the snake; and he could have been bitten by the snake when he grabbed the dog-whip and/or when he collared the snake. It seems extremely fortunate that matters turned out well.

But let us consider: Holmes was

clearly upset by Roylott’s physical abuse of his stepdaughter. Perhaps Roylott’s threatening of Holmes in Baker Street was received as a challenge. Holmes certainly had a prodigious ego. With the combination of circumstances present in this matter, did Holmes decide that he would end the contest with Roylott by claiming the ultimate victory?

Regarding the points highlighted

above, did Holmes show poor judgment, or did he take every action in such a cunning way that it was highly probable that Roylott would be dead when the affair was ended?

I leave it to those with a more romantic turn of heart to speculate on Holmes’ actions being prompted by any designs he may have had on the engaged Helen Stoner.



## Some Thoughts Regarding The Illustrious Client (ILLU) cont.

acid into Gruner's face. Later, Holmes expresses surprise at Winter's actions. But let us recall the hunter's tiger trap.

Holmes (the planner of the affair) is the bait, making a noise and standing by the open window, which is the tree. Kitty Winter is the hunter, and Gruner is the tiger. He comes for the bait at the tree and the hunter nails him, though her weapon is acid, not a gun.

Surely this is more plausible than Holmes' professed ignorance regarding the contents of Winter's hidden packet. I prefer my Holmes to be cunning, not clueless. Holmes has arranged this trap for Gruner, just as he once did so for Moran. Not only has Holmes obtained the evidence needed to break the spell on Violet de Merville, but he arranges for Gruner to pay for his past sins.

I would suggest that an examination of this issue can hinge on one key question: Did Holmes intentionally or accidentally make the noise that drew Baron Gruner into the next room? If it was intentional, then I assert that the evidence supports the theory that Holmes and Winter conspired together to disfigure Gruner.

If it was an accidental noise and Holmes was attempting to quietly escape with the book, then the tiger trap analogy is still appropriate, except that it is Kitty Winter who is the planner. Holmes is unknowing bait in this case, instead of a co-conspirator with Winter. It is rather disturbing to think that

Holmes was making his escape through the garden, leaving Watson to fend for himself against an enraged villain capable of nearly anything. This does not seem characteristic of their friendship and I prefer to believe that Holmes intentionally drew Gruner to the window.

### Sympathy for Violet de Merville?

Holmes and Kitty Winter, the last woman wronged by Baron Gruner, visit Violet de Merville to try and talk some sense into her. De Merville comes across as quite condescending and does not engender sympathy.

She says that she has listened to Holmes "with patience," implying she is doing him a favor in letting him speak to her. She then observes that he is merely a hired gun who would work on behalf of Baron Gruner if he were paid to do so. All the warnings she receives regarding Bruner are mere babble that have no more meaning than the chirping of birds. She adds that perhaps she has been specially sent (presumably by Providence, God, what have you) to help Gruner rise above whatever failings he may have had in the past.

She is haughty to both of her visitors and asks the detective to remove Winter from her presence. Holmes has to pull a struggling Winter out of the house. De Merville's sole

appearance in the story does not leave the reader with a flattering image. In fact, it is difficult to come up with one complimentary thing to say about her.

It may be speculated that had Holmes come with Watson, instead of Kitty Winter, the two men would have had opposing attitudes regarding Violet de Merville. Watson would have been the staunch defender of the weaker sex, angered that such a fine flower of femininity had fallen under the evil influence of the nefarious Baron Gruner. One can hear the outraged doctor: "Holmes, this man is a scoundrel. This poor woman is completely under his spell. You must free her before it is too late!"

Holmes would have been less sympathetic and somewhat annoyed by the woman's aloof and superior attitude. He would have been more intent on thwarting Gruner and winning the contest with him. Perhaps even more so because Gruner had threatened him (Grimseby Roylott and Professor Moriarty threatened Holmes to their fatal detriment). There appears to be nothing in de Merville's snobbish attitude that would inspire Holmes to identify with her predicament.

**"...then I assert that the evidence supports the theory that Holmes and Winter conspired together to disfigure Gruner."**



## Some Thoughts Regarding The Gloria Scott (GLOR)

### A Letter to Baker Street

Mister Sherlock Holmes  
221B Baker Street  
London

Mister Holmes,

Things were not exactly as they seemed when you visited Donni-thorpe so many years ago. You are aware that my son, Victor, became a wealthy man in India, overseeing the largest tea plantation north of the Ganges. But he died a few years ago of the fever, so he is beyond suffering and my own time grows short. The consumption is about to take me. I am pleased to see that you turned those fine talents of yours to professional detectin'. I would like to think I played a small part in that, if you remember my words to you that first time you came to stay with us.

The papers I left for Victor to read after my supposed death told a made-up story, Mister Holmes. You might ask what event from my past could be so bad that I would prefer people, even my own son, to believe that I was a mutineer, rather than know the truth? Let me tell you and maybe you'll understand.

I'll wager there's not a man alive who hasn't done somethin' he's ashamed of. If there is, I'd like to look him in the eye. It was many a year ago that I was a young man in Liverpool, full of fire and life. I was a rough sort without too much schooling. I wrote that I was a clerk in a banking firm in that letter. Hardly! I worked at the docks,

loadin' and unloadin' cargo ships at the harbor. I cussed and fought and drank with the best of them and I shared a room at a lodgin' house with Harry Beddoes. Harry had a year of medical trainin' but his like of drink hurt his studyin'. He gave it up, to his parent's unhappiness and ended up a dock hand like me.

Well, we were havin' a fine time, without a care in the world. Then I met Jenny and everythin' changed. Mister Holmes, this old man will swear that a more precious angel never walked this earth than Jenny Abbot. Her father owned The Rusty Anchor, an inn at the edge of the docks. It wasn't a tavern where a man could get his throat slit, though I knew plenty of those dives. It was a respectable place where ship's officers and fancy merchants stayed. As you can guess, it wasn't my sort of place, but Harry liked to go there once in a great while. I think it reminded him of days before he gave up studyin' to be a doctor.

Well, sir, Jenny worked around the place, cleanin' up and servin' when needs be. She was no bar wench, that I'll vow to my grave, though that isn't far off. Well, she saw somethin' in me that nobody else could. First with a smile, then later, a few kind words. There seemed to be a bond growin' between us. Finally, she agreed to meet me. Her father wouldn't let her see any customers. Especially not the likes of a dock worker. So we kept it secret.

Never have I been so happy, Mister Holmes. Every time I saw her, somethin' came alive inside me. She made me a better

man. Harry knew about us and kept our secret. He knew what she meant to me. Though we could tell no one about our love, I had to do somethin', so I had her initials tattooed on the inside of my arm. I kept it covered whenever I went near the Anchor. Well, sir, you are a man of the world, and you can imagine the passion we had, more so because we couldn't go about openly. We got careless and she was with child. We were between a rock and a hard place, I tell you. If her father found out, things would be over between us. He would never let us be together again. She was certain of it.

We were young and scared and couldn't see any way out. Harry knew a man who used to be a medical student. He had quit school but would do certain things if the money was right. Oh, how I curse myself for my weakness! I wake up each and every mornin' and wish I had been stronger.

This fellow, Hudson, agreed to take care of our problem. He performed his operations in a small room down at the waterfront. Jenny was brave, Mister Holmes. She said there was no other way and she wouldn't give me up. I was sick with it, but I couldn't see any other choice. We went to Hudson's place at the agreed-upon time.

The place was run-down and dirty. I asked Jenny to change her mind at the last, but she refused. Harry came with me and waited in the next room. I stayed with Jenny. I couldn't leave her alone at a time like that. She was terrified, but tried

## Some Thoughts Regarding The Gloria Scott (GLOR) cont.

to smile. I held her hand while Hudson began his despicable act. Somethin' went wrong and he called out to Harry. Harry rushed in and tried to help. There was so much blood, Mister Holmes, so much! Jenny was cryin' out from the pain, then mercifully, she passed out. She never woke again. She lost too much blood and died.

I must have been in shock. I just stood there holdin' her hand, callin' out her name and cryin'. Harry stayed calm and took charge of things. I tell you that the rest of that night was a blur, Mister Holmes. Harry knew all was lost unless we made it look like she had been attacked. Hudson was ruined if she was found there, so he and Harry carried her body out of there while I just sat on the floor, numb. They came back and Harry took me to our room. We drank until both of us passed out. The next day, he told me that they had left her behind some crates and barrels in an alley. Harry had made the body look like she had been attacked. God forgive me Mister Holmes, when the police found her, it looked like the attack of a sex crazed maniac!

No one had known about her and me, so I was in the clear. No one but Hudson. He came by one day, droppin' hints that Harry and I were lucky men, having an associate so good at keeping' quiet. When I pointed out that he was surely in the same soup as us, he just laughed. Apparently this wasn't the first problem he'd encountered and he had ways to protect himself.

Well, when he left, he had such a look on his face that I knew

Harry and I were in danger as long as Hudson was around. In for a penny, in for a pound, Mister Holmes. Harry and I knew lots of ship captains on the foreign routes. They were always lookin' for crew, volunteers or not. We arranged a meetin' with Hudson, lettin' him think that we were goin' to pay him to keep quiet. Instead, we press ganged him and by the next morning' he was out to sea. I didn't give him much chance to keep alive among the crew of cutthroats we put him with. Harry and I decided we would be safe far away from Liverpool and made our way to Australia.

Like I said in the letter, we struck our fortunes there. I tried to remove the tattoo since it tied me to Jenny's death, but couldn't completely erase it. We came back to England and set ourselves up in the country, bound together by our secret and years of adventure and friendship. I married. Though I never forgot Jenny, a man has to leave a legacy or his life served no purpose, right Mister Holmes? We had Victor and you met him at university years later.

You saw my shock when who should show up at my door but Hudson? I did not have a moment's peace from then on. Hudson had served a life at sea, gettin' by with his medical skills. But he never forgot what we had done to him. He was determined to make us pay with more than money.



*Oh wait, that's "Elizabeth Scott" from Humphrey Bogart's 'Dead Reckoning'*

Well, as Victor told you, Hudson was a devil in our house.

He ran the place as if it was his own and I could do nothin' but try to please him. Victor, of course, was insulted and more than once I had to beg him to be patient. Finally, he could stand no more and all but kicked Hudson out of our house. Hudson went to Harry's place. Harry secretly came to see me one day and we agreed that we had to do away with Hudson. There was no other way to ensure our safety. I would not let this scoundrel ruin Victor's future.

Harry convinced Hudson that we were scared of him and would give him all that he wanted if he would just leave us alone. Harry sent me the message which you read. It set our plan in motion. I pretended to be shocked and ill, causing Victor to send for the doctor. Closed with the man, I cajoled him to help me. Being a JP, I was a man with influence. I appealed to him with money and reminded him of our friendship, as well as his fondness for his godson, Victor. Reluctantly, he fell in with our plan. Though I was believed dead, it was Hudson who we buried. I left behind the papers for Trevor with the false account of a mutiny to prevent any questionin' of my death or the disappearance of Hudson and Harry. Harry and I went our own separate ways and never spoke again. The risk was too great with two deaths on our hands. I know he died last year.

Harry and I had nothin' to do with the Gloria Scott. I don't know what happened to that ship, but I doubt what I said in

## Some Thoughts Regarding The Gloria Scott (GLOR) cont.

the letter was true. Lookin' back, I wonder that you didn't see through me sayin' that my tattoo stood for my supposedly real name, Joseph Armitage. I've seen a lot of men with tattoos in my life, but I've never known one who put his own initials on himself. But I guess that slipped your attention with all of the other fantastic parts of my letter.

I don't regret what we did to Hudson. He was a miserable human bein' and he killed my lovely Jenny. He deserved whatever misfortune life gave him. I curse myself for not standin' up to Jenny's parents and takin' her to that horrid room. And I am sorry that I did not share my final years with Victor. I thought

about lettin' him know I was still alive, but it couldn't be as simple as that and I put it off for awhile. I didn't expect him to die before me.

Well, Mister Sherlock Holmes, we get Dr. Watson's accounts even here and I am most impressed with your accomplishments. Truly, the detectives of fiction were just nothin' compared to you. You had no reason to doubt the story I told to Victor, and I imagine you knew that further diggin' into the matter would probably cause him even more pain and sorrow.

I thank you for not doin' that. I am told I only have a few weeks

left before my health finally gives out. I am ready to stand before the Creator and pay for my sins. I don't know what you'll make of this letter, but it's the truth and I think you deserved to know it.

If you think poorly of me, at least remember that I raised a good man in Victor.

Sincerely yours,

Andrew Trevor



## John H. Watson: The Crime Doctor

### Dr. Watson – Detective

There are a few instances in the Canon when Sherlock Holmes assigns Watson to investigate matters on his behalf. There can be no questioning that Watson does his earnest best each time; his character would allow nothing less. Lack of effort or intent cannot be assigned to Watson's endeavors. Any shortcomings must be blamed on his actual performance or the circumstances. So, how does Watson fare as a detective, and how does Holmes assess his only friend's performance? Below are three cases where Watson was assigned by Holmes to detect in his stead for a time. Watson's role in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* will be dealt with separately in a future essay.

### The Solitary Cyclist

Holmes refers to Violet Smith's situation as possibly being "some trifling intrigue" and declines to personally look into the matter, refusing to neglect his "other important research." Instead, he sends the good doctor. His instructions to Watson are to "observe the facts for yourself and act as your own judgment advises. Then, having inquired as to the occupants of the Hall," to come back and report to him.

So off goes Watson, arriving early so that he can conceal himself in a spot giving him a view of the road in both directions and also of the gate to Hampstead Hall. Watson becomes the spectator to a scene in which Violet Hunter is followed by the bearded stranger; both on their bicycles. She turns the tables and chases after her pursuer, but he escapes. She continues her ride

to Chiltern Grange, with the stranger once again following her. He then disappears up the drive to Hampstead Hall and Watson does not see him again.

Watson then visits two different businesses and discovers that an elderly gentleman named Williamson rented Charlington Hall only the month before. Feeling satisfied, Watson returns to Baker Street, having done a reasonable job of fulfilling Holmes' instructions.

Holmes, however, is not impressed. He criticizes Watson's choice of a hiding place and says, "You really have done remarkably badly." Watson is not happy with Holmes' less-than-enthusiastic response to the day's activity, upon which Holmes enumerates what Watson has brought to the table and considers none of it to have value. Clearly, Watson's performance is deemed a failure by the detective.

The next day, Holmes himself travels to the area and verifies that Williamson is the tenant of Charlington Hall, along with the fact that the man may be a disreputable clergyman. Holmes also gets into a fight with Woodley and beats him up.

One might question this unusual approach, since Woodley is definitely associated with Violet Smith's employer and may be germane to the case. There can be no possibility of Holmes maintaining a low profile in the area, since the entire pub surely watched the brawl. Commenting on the results of his efforts, Holmes says, "...it must be con-

fessed that...my day on the Surrey border has not been much more profitable than your own."

So, after roundly criticizing Watson's efforts, Holmes tells the doctor what he should have done. The next day, Holmes acts on one of his own suggestions with the result that he admits he did little better than Watson. What is happening here? Does Holmes feel the need to denigrate Watson's efforts? Perhaps ensuring that in his own chosen field, Holmes maintains a significant gap between the two men? Regardless of how Watson performs, is he doomed to be criticized by Holmes? Let us look at another case featuring the Doctor Detective.

### The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax

In this case, Sherlock Holmes sends Watson off to the continent to look for the missing Lady Frances Carfax. Holmes' reasoning for not going himself, which includes an explanation that his absence excites the criminal class, is rather weak. Watson, as usual, drops everything to assist Holmes. He finds the trail of Lady Carfax, discovers the name of the couple she was last seen with and locates her former maid. This is not a bad job at all! His reward: he is nearly choked unconscious by Holmes' confederate and then admonished by the detective. I imagine a simple pat on the back would have been preferable.

Holmes first says, "Well Watson, a very pretty hash of it you have made!" This is followed shortly thereafter by, "And a singularly consistent investigation you have made, my dear

"Regardless of how Watson performs, is he doomed to be criticized by Holmes?"

## John H. Watson: The Crime Doctor cont.



Watson. I cannot at the moment recall any possible blunder which you have omitted. The total effect of your proceedings has been to give the alarm everywhere and yet to discover nothing.”

When the bitter Watson implies that Holmes himself might not have done any better, he receives a rather snippy reply: “There is no ‘perhaps’ about it. I *have* done better.”

What alarm did Watson give? When he and Holmes finally catch up to the villain, Holy Peters, there is no sign that Watson’s actions had tipped the man off. In fact, Holmes himself was the one who nearly gave away the game by warning Peters (see below).

Holmes’ disparaging assessment of Watson’s efforts can be contrasted with his approval of Philip Green’s actions when the latter sights Holy Peters’ accom-

plice, Miss Fraser. Holmes tells Green “You did excellently well” and “You have done excellent work.”

Let us suppose that it had been Watson staking out Bevington’s, instead of Green. Watson follows Fraser to an undertaker’s. He goes inside, so inconspicuous that both Fraser and the employee stop talking and look at him. Talk about blundering in! Unless it was supposed to be an open tail, that’s not exemplary work. When Fraser comes out, she looks around suspiciously, obviously alerted.

Then, after Watson follows Fraser to her residence, he hides himself so poorly that Fraser apparently sees him, starts and rushes back inside, closing the door. Is there any reason to expect that Holmes would congratulate Watson for his “excellent work?” I do not think so! Holmes would harshly criticize Watson for so obviously tipping off Fraser that he was following them. He would likely add some snippy comment implying that Watson’s efforts have now put Lady Carfax’s life in imminent danger.

And surely Holmes made a mistake that dwarfs any that Watson conceivably made in this case. When Holmes forced his way into Holy Peters’ residence, he put the man on his guard. Peters was warned that Holmes was after him.

Holmes and Watson could not find the body of Lady Carfax and were ordered out of the

house by the police. Peters chose to stick to his plan, which Holmes upset at the last moment, but had he reacted to Holmes’ invasion and found another way to dispose of Lady Carfax, he would have beaten Holmes and Lady Carfax likely would have died. Holmes should have been more critical of himself than Watson in this case. But to imply he did no better, or even worse than Watson, would not fit his carefully constructed view of the professional relationship between the two men.

### **The Retired Colourman**

Holmes is busy wrapping up the case of the two Coptic Patriarchs and sends Watson to Lewisham to scout out events surrounding Josiah Amberley’s problem. The good doctor leaves in the morning and returns that same evening, reporting his activities. As he gives his impression of The Havens, Amberley’s house, Holmes cuts him off. “Cut out the poetry, Watson,” said Holmes severely. “I note that it was a high brick wall.” Things are off to a bad start.

Holmes tells Watson that Amberley’s shoes are different, which Watson admits that he did not observe. Holmes responds, “No, you wouldn’t.” The Canon is replete with short, snide remarks from Holmes to Watson.

Holmes does compliment Watson for noting the number of the unused theater ticket Amberley had for his wife, commenting, “Excellent, Watson!” and “That is most satisfactory.” Perhaps Holmes will be pleased with



## John H. Watson: The Crime Doctor cont.

Watson's work this time. However, once Watson finishes summarizing his day, Holmes bursts his bubble.

"It is true that in your mission you have missed everything of importance, yet even those things which have obtruded themselves upon your notice..." This is a double insult, implying that what Watson did notice was obvious and the doctor couldn't help but notice them.

Watson asks what he has missed. Holmes does attempt to soothe his friend's feelings, adding, "Don't be hurt, my dear fellow. You know that I am quite impersonal. No one else could have done better. Some possibly not so well. But clearly you have missed some vital points." Holmes rattles off several items Watson missed and then tells him, with the assistance of the telephone, that the detective has already looked into them. Holmes takes an active part in the investigation; Watson's only other part in the case to be accompanying Amberley out of town on a wild goose chase.

Holmes does credit Watson later, saying "You can thank Dr. Watson's observations for that," with a slight zinger following, "though he failed to draw the inference."

And with these events, Watson's detecting days are over. Holmes says something in *The Blanched Soldier* (which he himself narrates) that is worth noting:

*"A confederate who foresees your conclusions and course of action is always dangerous, 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."*

Holmes clearly has a conception of Watson's deductive abilities. Praise of Watson's efforts when acting on Holmes' behalf would not be consistent with this conception and would reduce the gap existing between their ability levels. Thus, Holmes, while certainly a genius, could not see through the image he had constructed regarding Watson's capabilities as a detective. This blinded Holmes to not only Watson's successes in these matters, but also to his own mistakes.

We cannot look at this issue without calling to mind Holmes' comment to Watson in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*:

*"It may be that you are not yourself luminous, but you are a conductor of light. Some people without possessing genius have a remarkable power of stimulating it."*

This is, quite simply, an insult. Holmes is telling Watson that the man isn't that bright, but he makes those around him brighter. Who doesn't feel smarter when they're around someone clearly less intelligent?

Holmes' own sense of supremacy would be diminished if he acknowledged Watson as being capable of competent feats of deduction and detection. As the three cases above show, he was quick to snuff out any spark of light from Watson in those areas.

Sadly, Watson comes to believe in the image Holmes created of him, as evidenced by his narrative in *The Creeping Man*:

*"I stimulated him...If I irritated him by a certain methodical slowness in my mentality, that irritation served to only to make his own flame-like intuitions and impressions flash up the more vividly and swiftly."*

Holmes perceives Watson to be inadequate when acting on his behalf, but the evidence shows this was not always the case. This essay has striven to provide one explanation for this variance between perception and reality.

**"Holmes' own sense of supremacy would be diminished if he acknowledged Watson as being capable of competent feats of deduction and detection."**

## Some Thoughts Regarding The Norwood Builder (NORW)

### How About a Little Skepticism?

One of life's many trite truisms is "If something looks too good to be true, it probably is." Fortunately for Sherlock Holmes, he encounters a few individuals who apparently have never heard of that phrase. Hall Pycroft and Jabez Wilson certainly failed to heed its advice. *The Norwood Builder* brings us another naïve individual who prefers to heed the advice to "never look a gift horse in the mouth."

The most unfortunate John Hector McFarlane was hired to draft the will of Jonas Oldacre. To McFarlane's great surprise, he finds that he is the primary beneficiary, even though he has never met the man before. Oldacre explains that he knew the young man's parents years ago, and with no close relatives of his own, has chosen McFarlane his heir. Oldacre urges McFarlane not to tell his parents of the matter until it is all finalized. That way, it will be "a little surprise for them."

We later learn that Oldacre was spurned by McFarlane's mother for another man and the whole thing is a plot to frame McFarlane, after which Oldacre will disappear with some money he has already squirreled away. Hindsight being 20/20, we can easily know that McFarlane should have been suspicious.

But putting aside what we know and just following the story as it occurs, wasn't McFarlane awfully gullible? A complete stranger shows up and names McFarlane his heir. Surely that

doesn't happen every day? And then Oldacre explains to McFarlane that the man knew his parents, urging him not to tell them about the will. I mean, really. Who doesn't get a bit suspicious at this point? It's not too long before McFarlane is wanted for murder. To paraphrase a lesson learned from the Trojan War, beware of builders bearing gifts.

### Why the Thumbprint?

Oldacre seemed to have committed as perfect a crime as possible. Holmes is completely stumped and cannot find any clue that would prove Inspector Lestrade wrong and establish McFarlane's innocence. After a fruitless day of investigation, Holmes says to Watson, "...but unless some lucky chance comes our way I fear that the Norwood Disappearance Case will not figure in that chronicle of our successes which I foresee that a patient public will sooner or later have to endure."

Holmes has all but given up. Lestrade has goaded him and is thoroughly enjoying an extremely rare victory over the famous detective. Holmes is now resorting to Lady Luck to bail him out. That's how frustrated he is with his own efforts. So why does Oldacre plant the bloody thumb mark (not the entire hand, as the *Collier's* cover by Frederic Dorr Steele would have us believe) on the wall?

Yes, it was extra evidence that would point to McFarlane's guilt. But Oldacre clearly had planned his actions long be-

fore, as evidenced by the money he had secretly funneled to dummy accounts. Having carried everything out properly, did he suddenly feel more was needed? Did he lack patience and begin doubting himself? If he was receiving copies of the newspapers in his hidden room, he must have been pleased with events. If not, then he should have just trusted in his plan. If he had originally intended to include the thumbprint on the wall, surely he would have done so in the beginning. Unless he simply forgot? If so, then truly, the devil is in the details.

The thumbprint is the break Holmes needs and leads to Oldacre's exposure. It seems, by Holmes' own admission, Oldacre would have gotten away with his plan and that McFarlane would have been convicted of



"To paraphrase a lesson learned from the Trojan War, beware of builders bearing gifts."

## Some Thoughts Regarding *The Norwood Builder* (NORW) cont.

killing him. If only Jonas Oldacre had left well enough alone and stayed in his room, he might have made his escape from debt and had his revenge upon McFarlane's mother.

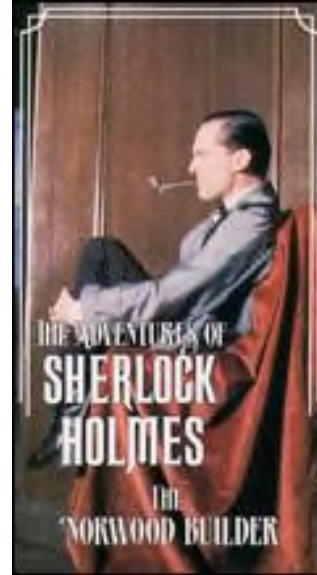


**Ashes in the Fire**

*The Norwood Builder* is one of the stories adapted for the Granada series starring Jeremy Brett. One change from the original story adds another layer of evil to

Jonas Oldacre. In the television show, Oldacre lures a tramp into his house and kills the man. The tramp's body is then consumed in the fire out in the lumber yard. The police find the tramp's remains and believe that they are Oldacre's. This is actually an improvement from the original story. It bolsters the belief that he is really dead, and it also makes him more of a villain.

Granada's Oldacre will find himself facing murder charges at the end of the story, increasing the importance of Holmes' successful solving of the case.



## Some Thoughts Regarding *The Blanced Soldier* (BLAN)

### **The Invisible Detective?**

Holmes doesn't really do a lot in this case. James Dodd has already found his missing friend, Godfrey Emsworth, and also located his domicile. All Dodd really needs is a way to get inside Emsworth's little house. Holmes does provide the key to that locked door by giving Colonel Emsworth a piece of paper with the word "leprosy" written on it. But does Holmes really do much detecting in this case? It is his knowledge of skin-related diseases that makes him successful. It is strange that Holmes picked this case to write up on his own. Perhaps Watson had seen Holmes' notes for the case and deemed it not worthy of inclu-

sion in his collection. Had Holmes been the one to track Emsworth to his hiding place, the case would have been more impressive for Holmes. But it is Dodd who does the detective work to find his former army buddy.



### **A Happy Ending For All**

There is another curious aspect to this case in that it has a fairy tale ending. Emsworth does not have leprosy. His case of ichthyosis is certainly a much less life-impacting disease than leprosy. Nobody dies and no crime is committed. In fact, this is not too dissimilar from Holmes being called in to find out that someone was hiding because of a bad case of acne. Among the cases of the Canon, this must surely rank near the bottom.

## Some Thoughts Regarding *The Devil's Foot* (DEVI)

### Stand up for Yourself, Man!

“Come at once if convenient – if inconvenient come all the same.”

Thus does Sherlock Holmes summon Watson in *The Adventure of the Creeping Man*. And Watson obeys. We get a sample of Holmes' imperious attitude from this quote. But Watson's response is also rather telling.

When Grimesby Roylott of Stoke Moran confronted Holmes, he referred to the detective as a meddler, a busybody and a Scotland Yard jack-in-office. One has to wonder if some villain or policeman in the Canon didn't refer to Watson as Holmes' lapdog, lackey or errand boy?

There are multiple examples throughout the Canon of Watson abandoning his wife and his practice to rush off with Holmes: often at a moment's notice. And when Watson does some detecting in Holmes' stead, the detective usually speaks disparagingly of Holmes' efforts. If Holmes gives Watson a compliment, it is with the back of his hand, as when the detective points out that Watson wasn't very bright himself, but he stimulates Holmes' own luminous intelligence. Gee, thanks!

Taking matters a step further in the *Devil's Foot*, Holmes nearly gets Watson (and himself) killed through a reckless experiment. A woman has died and two men driven insane through exposure to the devil's foot root. So naturally, Holmes decides to test the drug on himself and Watson.



They are almost immediately overcome and had Watson not fought through its effects, the two men would have at the least been driven insane; possibly killed.

Having barely escaped, Holmes apologizes and thanks Watson. Is the doctor indignant? With abuse of various kinds heaped upon him year after year in his association with Holmes, does he finally criticize Holmes? Nearly debilitated, does he voice his protest at Holmes? Heck no. He is overcome with emotion and replies, “You know, that it is my greatest joy and privilege to help you.”

Good lord, man. Holmes has nearly killed you. At least raise your voice! Yes, Watson was a faithful companion. But to the outsider, who either sees Watson in person during an investigation or only knows the good doctor through the stories he publishes, Watson must appear as a bit of a toady. He is a wounded war veteran and a doctor. He has proven his intelligence and valor. But as Holmes' assistant and chronicler, he is insulted, belittled, recklessly endangered and deceived by Holmes. Watson may well have been a man of strong character, but in his role of Sherlock Holmes' number two, he is treated more like an acquiescent sycophant.

### Another Killer Goes Free

*The Devil's Foot* provides Holmes with another case in which he decides the fate of the wrongdoer himself, rather than turning the criminal over to the police and the courts system. More than once through his actions, Holmes declares himself an arbiter of justice.

Dr. Leon Sterndale joins John Turner, James Ryder, Silas Brown, James Wilder, the woman who shot Charles Augustus Milverton, Jack Croker and Lady Trelawney Hope before him as Canonical wrongdoers whom Holmes lets go without having to pay any penalty. The offenses committed vary in severity, but none the less, Holmes is deciding between guilt and justifiable guilt.

In this case, Sterndale calculatingly kills Mortimer Tregennis. He gives him the choice of either death by poisoning (the same fate Tregennis doomed his sister to) or being shot if he tried to escape the poison. This is an undeniable revenge murder. Morally justifiable or not, mitigating circumstances considered or not, Sterndale is a cold blooded killer. Yet Sherlock Holmes allows Sterndale to flee to Africa and does not tell the police that he has solved the mystery of Tregennis' death, or that the killer has confessed.

Though Holmes once said that “*My business is that of every other good citizen - to uphold the law;*” in this instance he believed more strongly in something he said about the case of Charles Augustus Milverton: “*..I had rather play tricks with the law of England than with my own conscience.*”

## Some Thoughts Regarding The Creeping Man

### Age Doth Bitter the Sweetest Spirit

In my essay *Some Thoughts Regarding The Devil's Foot* (Baker Street Essays, Issue 2), I included *Stand up for Yourself, Man!*, which discussed how Holmes criticized Watson's efforts and capabilities. We finally see a trace of his resentment about Holmes' attitude towards him in *The Creeping Man*.

Holmes commands Watson's presence with a telegram that reads, "Come at once if convenient – if inconvenient, come all the same."

Most would not dream of asking a favor of someone in such peremptory tones. At least, most who are not jerks. Watson then follows up with a description of how he has become one of Holmes' habits, comparable to the detective's pipe and index books. This sounds like a man who has grown tired of being Holmes' assistant.

Watson arrives and is greeted with a rather condescending wave of the hand and then sits for thirty minutes, unacknowledged by Holmes. Presumably he found something to amuse himself with, as opposed to just sitting there, bored. So, to summarize, Holmes orders Watson to immediately come to Baker Street, which the good doctor does. Once there, Holmes ignores him for a half hour. What an ass.

Finally, Holmes greets his visitor, managing to work in a snide remark about Watson's account of *The Copper Beeches*. A bit of conversation results in a question posed by Holmes: Why did

Professor Presbury's dog bite him?" We see a spark ignite in Watson's mind that has been absent for fifty-five previous cases.

*"Was it for so trivial a question as this that I had been summoned from my work?"*

Finally, Watson is more than a docile follower of Holmes. Umpteen times he has put aside his practice, his wife, or both, to rush off on some adventure with Holmes. But now, his first instinct is that Holmes has bothered him with something less important than the doctor's medical practice. Hooray for Watson!

### Misdiagnosed Again

*The Crooked Man* is one of several cases in the Canon in which Watson misdiagnoses a situation. When Holmes asks the doctor what he thinks is wrong with Professor Presbury, Watson blames it on the man's brain being "disturbed by the love affair." He then speculates on the Professor's recent trip, which Holmes immediately (and correctly) pooh-poohs.

### Remade by the X-Files

Season 8 of the X-Files was the second-to-last year for the show. Episode 19 that season was titled "Alone." It contained elements very similar to Doyle's *The Creeping Man*.

## Illustrating The Creeping Man

The noted Frederic Dorr Steele illustrated *The Creeping Man* for its American debut in *Hearst's International Magazine*, while Howard Elcock provided illustrations for *The Strand Magazine*.

While Dorr Steele's justly praised *Collier's* covers come to mind, his interior illustrations were much darker, like this one.



Elcock's drawings also involve a great deal of shading and come across as a bit "dark," but the details are much easier to discern. Elcock illustrated seven stories from *The Case Book*, providing a total of thirty-seven drawings. He depicted an older, leaner Holmes, and his use of shading is reminiscent of Sidney Paget. Elcock is not generally considered to be one of the more memorable illustrators of the Canon, but he deserves a better legacy.



"Most would not dream of asking a favor of someone in such peremptory tones. At least, most who are not jerks"

## Some Thoughts Regarding The Sussex Vampire (SUSS)

The island of Sumatra, where several of my in-laws live



### What's All This Business About Sumatra?

It seems somewhat curious that we find three references to Sumatra in the Canon. Two of those are unrecorded cases, which makes matters even more intriguing. Sumatra is the sixth largest island in the world and a part of Indonesia. Indonesia was ruled by the Dutch for over three hundred years, including the entirety of Sherlock Holmes' career (Japan occupied Indonesia during World War II and the country gained autonomy after that).

In *The Sussex Vampire*, Holmes mentions the Matilda Briggs, "a ship associated with the giant rat of Sumatra, a story for which the world is not yet prepared."

In *The Dying Detective*, Culverton Smith was a planter who lived in Sumatra. We are also told at the beginning of *The Reigate Squires* that Holmes was on the verge of collapse after foiling the colossal schemes of Baron Maupertuis, which involved the Netherland-Sumatra company.

Three references to people or things with Sumatran ties. Could tea somehow be related? Indonesia was one of the world's leading tea producers until World War II. The region of Sumatra was the second-largest tea producing region in Indonesia. Was the death of Culverton Smith's nephew somehow associated with the activities of Baron Maupertuis, for whom Culverton Smith worked or was otherwise associated?

Here is one speculative theory regarding Sumatran elements in the Canon: Culverton Smith was a prosperous tea plantation owner in Sumatra. The Netherland-Sumatra Company used tea-importation as a front for the Baron Maupertuis' nefarious activities. Maupertuis was a villain suitable to oppose James Bond in another time.

The Baron was going to use a giant rat which would spread a great plague in London via the sewer system.

Smith had perfected the plague culture, using his own nephew as a guinea pig. Holmes had worked tirelessly to stop the Baron's schemes, which would be brought to fruition when the Matilda Briggs, a tea trader owned by the Netherland-Sumatra Company, conveyed the giant rat of Sumatra to London. But Holmes prevented the Baron's plan from succeeding, though Smith's nephew died and Holmes was unable to bring Smith to justice.

### The Ungrateful Detective

Early in *The Sussex Vampire*, Watson explains the regional Sussex custom of naming houses after the owners who built them. Holmes, who clearly did not know this, responds to the new information by coldly saying "Precisely."

Watson types something very telling about Holmes next. "It was one of the peculiarities of his proud, self-contained nature that,

## Some Thoughts Regarding The Sussex Vampire (SUSS) cont.

though he pocketed any fresh information very quietly and accurately in his brain, he seldom made any acknowledgement to the giver.”

Watson’s observation regarding Holmes’ attitude towards someone providing him new knowledge is similar to his denigration of Watson’s efforts as a detective. Holmes is not a gracious man. This is not surprising, considering the arrogance that he displays in various parts of the Canon.

I commented in *John H. Watson: The Crime Doctor (Baker Street Essays, Volume 1, Issue 2)* that Holmes refused to credit Watson’s efforts as a detective acting in Holmes’s stead. I asserted that he did this because he considered himself far superior to Watson in the consulting detective field and refused to consider that Watson might be competent in it. So, Holmes disparages Watson’s efforts in *The Solitary Cyclist*, *The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax* and *The Retired Colourman*, even though the good doctor more often than not does an adequate job.

Just as Holmes did not like to acknowledge the giver of new knowledge, he did not like to acknowledge Watson’s capabilities in the detective’s own chosen profession. The tangled skein of Holmes’ attitude towards Watson’s capabilities can be unraveled through careful examination of comments and incidents in the Canon such as this one from *The Sussex Vam-*

*pire*.

### Jack is in For it Now

One might wonder at Holmes’ proposed solution to the problem of domestic friction within the Ferguson household. He suggests that Master Jacky should spend a year at sea. There is no further discussion of this idea.

Removing Jack from the Ferguson home seems necessary. But what in the heck is one year at sea going to do for him? The boy is repeatedly referred to as a cripple and he is most certainly emotionally stunted by his extreme devotion to his father. Crippling your dog and attempting to poison your stepbrother are not the actions of a well-adjusted child. It’s hard to picture any scenario where Jack can survive a year at sea on his own.

Assuming he somehow does get through a year aboard a ship, what then? What happens when he returns to his home? Is there even the remotest chance that he will happily blend into the family life and feel affection towards his stepmother and stepbrother? I can’t imagine it.

Was Holmes merely suggesting a way to get rid of him until a more permanent solution could be found? Was Jack bound to be institutionalized in some manner? Other than to ensure the immediate safety of the baby, there does not seem to be much else to commend Holmes’ suggestion.

### Holmes Among the Vampires?

As events prove, there are no vampires involved in *The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire*. However, a few pastiche writers have fond the lure of the nocturnal creatures irresistible. Loren D. Estelman (author of the Amos Walker mysteries) pitted Sherlock Holmes against the most famous vampire of them all in *Sherlock Holmes vs. Dracula* (or, *The Adventure of the Sanguinary Count*). Prolific Holmes author David Stuart Davies had Holmes and Dracula facing off in Baskerville Hall in *The Tangled Skein*. And noted science fiction writer Fred Saberhagen had perhaps the strangest pairing of them all in *The Holmes – Dracula File*.



Jeremy Brett squared off with a possible vampire in Granada’s full-length adaptation of Doyle’s story in *The Last Vampyre*. Repeated viewings of this installment have left me puzzled with exactly what the heck was going on.

# Baker Street Essays

## The Canon Examined

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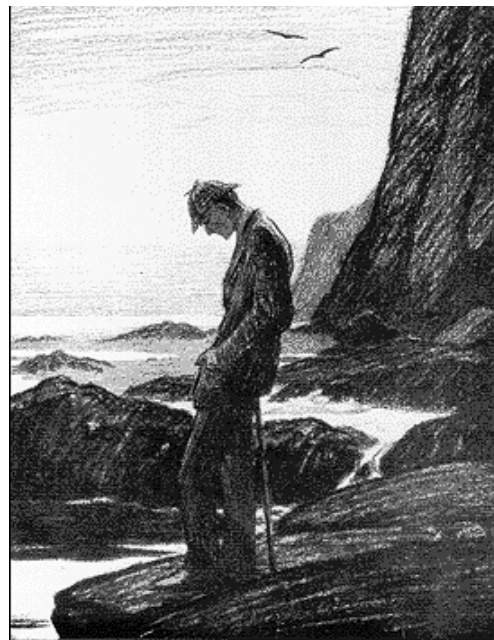
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### Illustrators of the Canon: Barry Moser



In September of 1992, Harper & Collins published a new edition of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. This version was illustrated by Barry Moser, best known for his wood engravings. He won a National Book Award in 1983 for his design and illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland*.

Heavily influenced by William Gillette's portrayal, Moser provided some of my favorite Canonical drawings. Moser's drawings look like water colors and jump off the page. He also included a drawing of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Used copies can be found cheap and are worth the purchase price.

