



Arthur Conan Doyle

*The Adventures
of Sherlock Holmes*



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THE YELLOW FACE

[In publishing these short sketches based upon the numerous cases in which my companion's singular gifts have made us the listeners to, and eventually the actors in, some strange drama, it is only natural that I should dwell rather upon his successes than upon his failures. And this not so much for the sake of his reputation — for, indeed, it was when he was at his wits' end that his energy and his versatility were most admirable — but because where he failed it happened too often that no one else succeeded, and that the tale was left forever without a conclusion. Now and again, however, it chanced that even when he erred, the truth was still discovered. I have noted of some half-dozen cases of the kind; the Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual and that which I am about to recount are the two which present the strongest features of interest.]

Sherlock Holmes was a man who seldom took exercise for exercise's sake. Few men were capable of greater muscular effort, and he was undoubtedly one of the finest oxers of his weight that I have ever seen; but he looked upon aimless bodily exertion as a waste of energy, and he seldom bestirred himself save when there was some professional object to be served. Then he was absolutely untiring and indefatigable. That he should have kept himself in training under such circumstances

is remarkable, but his diet was usually of the sparest, and his habits were simple to the verge of austerity. Save for the occasional use of cocaine, he had no vices, and he only turned to the drug as a protest against the monotony of existence when cases were scanty and the papers uninteresting.

One day in early spring he had so far relaxed as to go for a walk with me in the Park, where the first faint shoots of green were breaking out upon the elms, and the sticky spear-heads of the chestnuts were just beginning to burst into their five-fold leaves. For two hours we rambled about together, in silence for the most part, as befits two men who know each other intimately. It was nearly five before we were back in Baker Street once more.

“Beg pardon, sir,” said our page-boy, as he opened the door. “There’s been a gentleman here asking for you, sir.”

Holmes glanced reproachfully at me. “So much for afternoon walks!” said he. “Has this gentleman gone, then?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Didn’t you ask him in?”

“Yes, sir; he came in.”

“How long did he wait?”

“Half an hour, sir. He was a very restless gentleman, sir, a-walkin’ and a-stampin’ all the time he was here. I was waitin’ outside the door, sir, and I could hear him. At last he outs into the passage, and he cries, ‘Is that man never goin’ to come?’ Those were his very words, sir. ‘You’ll only need to wait a little longer,’ says I. ‘Then I’ll wait in the open air, for I feel half choked,’ says he. ‘I’ll be back before long.’ And with that he ups and he outs, and all I could say wouldn’t hold him back.”

“Well, well, you did your best,” said Holmes, as we walked into our room. “It’s very annoying, though, Watson. I was badly in need of a case, and this looks, from the man’s impatience, as if it were of importance. Hullo! That’s not your pipe on the table. He must have left his behind him. a nice old brier with a good long

stem of what the tobacconists call amber. I wonder how many real amber mouthpieces there are in London? Some people think that a fly in it is a sign. Well, he must have been disturbed in his mind to leave a pipe behind him which he evidently values highly."

"How do you know that he values it highly?" I asked.

"Well, I should put the original cost of the pipe at seven and sixpence. Now it has, you see, been twice mended, once in the wooden stem and once in the amber. Each of these mends, done, as you observe, with silver bands, must have cost more than the pipe did originally. The man must value the pipe highly when he prefers to patch it up rather than buy a new one with the same money."

"Anything else?" I asked, for Holmes was turning the pipe about in his hand, and staring at it in his peculiar pensive way.

He held it up and tapped on it with his long, thin forefinger, as a professor might who was lecturing on a bone.

"Pipes are occasionally of extraordinary interest," said he. "Nothing has more individuality, save perhaps watches and bootlaces. The indications here, however, are neither very marked nor very important. The owner is obviously a muscular man, left-handed, with an excellent set of teeth, careless in his habits, and with no need to practise economy."

My friend threw out the information in a very offhand way, but I saw that he cocked his eye at me to see if I had followed his reasoning.

"You think a man must be well-to-do if he smokes a seven-shilling pipe," said I.

"This is Grosvenor mixture at eightpence an ounce," Holmes answered, knocking a little out on his palm. "As he might get an excellent smoke for half the price, he has no need to practise economy."

"And the other points?"

"He has been in the habit of lighting his pipe at lamps and gas-jets. You can see that it is quite charred all down one

side. Of course a match could not have done that. Why should a man hold a match to the side of his pipe? But you cannot light it at a lamp without getting the bowl charred. And it is all on the right side of the pipe. From that I gather that he is a left-handed man. You hold your own pipe to the lamp, and see how naturally you, being right-handed, hold the left side to the flame. You might do it once the other way, but not as a constancy. This has always been held so. Then he has bitten through his amber. It takes a muscular, energetic fellow, and one with a good set of teeth, to do that. But if I am not mistaken I hear him upon the stair, so we shall have something more interesting than his pipe to study.”

An instant later our door opened, and a tall young man entered the room. He was well but quietly dressed in a dark gray suit, and carried a brown wide-awake in his hand. I should have put him at about thirty, though he was really some years older.

“I beg your pardon,” said he, with some embarrassment; “I suppose I should have knocked. Yes, of course I should have knocked. The fact is that I am a little upset, and you must put it all down to that.” He passed his hand over his forehead like a man who is half dazed, and then fell rather than sat down upon a chair.

“I can see that you have not slept for a night or two,” said Holmes, in his easy, genial way. “That tries a man’s nerves more than work, and more even than pleasure. May I ask how I can help you?”

“I wanted your advice, sir. I don’t know what to do and my whole life seems to have gone to pieces.”

“You wish to employ me as a consulting detective?”

“Not that only. I want your opinion as a judicious man — as a man of the world. I want to know what I ought to do next. I hope to God you’ll be able to tell me.”

He spoke in little, sharp, jerky outbursts, and it seemed to me that to speak at all was very painful to him, and that his will all through was overriding his inclinations.

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