

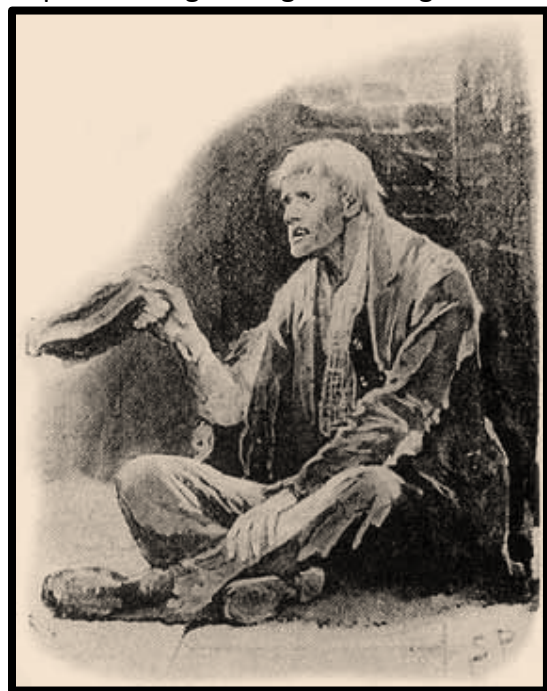


The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

The Man with the Twisted Lip

An opium den! That sordid yet oddly romantic atmosphere of smoke, dreams and danger! Our beloved Watson leaves the bright comfort of his home to descend, like Orpheus, into the dark underworld of the Lascar's lair. But unlike Orpheus, Watson finds that good things happen when he looks behind him. Whom should he discover but Sherlock Holmes in disguise, hot on a case, and with a fast horse and trap waiting down the street! Which of us wouldn't jot a quick note of explanation to the spouse and go along with the great detective?! In a moment: A trio of wandering husbands, a Rascally Lascar, and a vision of mousseline de soie, as we discuss "The Man with the Twisted Lip!"

A Trusty Comrade: This story begins with a very special sitting room scene: the room is not in 221B Baker Street, and the two people are not Holmes and Watson, but rather Watson and his wife (presumably Mary, in between visits to her mother.) The doorbell rings – is it a client? And why not? Watson tells us that "Folk who were in grief came to my wife like birds to a lighthouse." It reminds me of Holmes, whom Watson described as the "unofficial adviser and helper to everybody." It's fascinating to think that Watson found some of the same qualities in his wife that he admired in his best friend. Do you think Mary Watson and Sherlock Holmes were similar in any other respects besides their inclination to help people in trouble? (I suspect Holmes never called his friend "James," at any rate. . . .)



While Mary stayed with Kate Whitney, Watson went alone to the Bar of Gold, and by pure coincidence, this was the very place where Sherlock Holmes happened to be working on his latest case. But was it a coincidence that Watson should have come to the very same opium den?

Can any of the Hounds construct a scenario in which Holmes somehow arranged for Kate Whitney to visit the Watsons?

One of the facts I recently discovered when reading the book *Opium: A Portrait of the Heavenly Demon*, is that the “proper” position for smoking opium – the one that gives the best results – is recumbent, with the head on a small pillow. For Holmes to sit upright to do his smoking would have been noticeable at the least, and a dead giveaway at the worst. Did the Lascar see through Holmes’s disguise? If so, why didn’t Holmes end up as one of the bodies who left the den by way of that notorious trap door to the river?

A Standing Question: Mrs. St. Clair’s doorway appearance in her sheer nightie is a standing joke as well as a standing question among Sherlockians. But are there aspects of this lady which even her mousseline de soie does not reveal? Consider the following facts: Mrs. St. Clair was not afraid to go to London by herself to pick up a parcel from the Aberdeen Shipping Company, even though its office was obviously in a bad part of town. She did not hesitate to open the door of her home to Sherlock Holmes, a man she hardly knew. Nor did she bat an eye when he brought a friend along with him. When she saw her husband’s face at the Lascar’s window, she never hesitated to rush right down into the opium den to come to his rescue. When Holmes asked her if her husband showed any signs of taking opium, she apparently did not need to ask what those signs might be.

Given these facts, how about a few questions: Had Mrs. St. Clair figured out that her husband did not have any regular business contacts in the city, and was she determined to find out where he went and what he did? Was there really a package waiting for her at the shipping company, or did she have some other reason to be in that neighborhood of London? If there was a package for her, what was in it? Did Holmes in fact suspect Mrs. St. Clair of some complicity in her husband’s disappearance? Did he bring Watson back with him to her house in part to see what her reaction would be when he showed up with a second man whom she would at first imagine to be her missing husband? Would Holmes have brought “John” the driver along with him to the Cedars for “protection” if he hadn’t bumped into Watson?

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