



The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XIV – The Adventure of the Copper Beeches

Sherlock Holmes felt that his career had hit its zero point when young Miss Violet Hunter asked to consult the Great Detective as to whether she should accept a position as governess. But when Miss Hunter's tale unfolded, Holmes admitted that the position was not one he would like to see his sister, should he have one, take. He advised Miss Hunter to accept the job, assuring her that a call for help will bring him to her assistance, day or night.

Sure enough, within a couple of weeks, a telegram came from Violet Hunter. "Do come!" she pleaded, 'I am at my wits' end.'" Upon arriving in the old English capital of Winchester, near where she was staying, Holmes and Watson learned of a household with a drunken groom; his dour and silent wife; a jolly master but a sad, taciturn mistress; and a young son with an overlarge head who delighted in smacking cockroaches with a slipper or trapping mice, small birds, and insects. Upstairs in a locked corridor, behind a door barred with iron, there lives someone — or something — that Violet Hunter is forbidden to learn about. And outside the house at night, a huge, savage, half-starved dog roams free to discourage nocturnal visitors.

As the story opens, Holmes is giving up finding anything in the agony columns of a variety of newspapers, and with a smile, ventures to give Watson a small verbal pat on the back for the latter's written treatment of some of Holmes' cases. Watson returns the smile and admits that sometimes his chronicles border on the sensational. When Holmes agrees and expands on that topic, Watson's tone turns cold.



Why was he offended? And why does Holmes equate "sensationalism" only with crime? Surely, if some

football stands collapsed or a husband habitually threw his false teeth at his wife after meals, would that not be sensational as well?

Violet Hunter says of the dress her employers gave her to wear, “It was an excellent material, a sort of beige.” My dictionary defines “beige” (as a first definition) as “A soft fabric of undyed and unbleached wool.” “Beige” is also subsequently defined as “A sort of grayish brown.” If the fabric was not dyed, how did it come to be a “peculiar shade of blue?” Conversely, if it was dyed could it still be called “beige?”

What is the likelihood of the hair of two unrelated women being exactly the same shade of chestnut and, apparently, about the same length? And why did the Rucastles store it in the very room Miss Hunter was to use and then supply her with a “bunch of keys,” one of which would open the locked drawer in which Alice’s hair was kept?

The center door in the suite of “vacant” rooms was locked from the outside and further reinforced with a curious contrivance: “...one of the broad bars of an iron bed, padlocked at one end to a ring in the wall, and fastened at the other with a stout cord.” Why was one end fastened with cord or rope? Did Jephro Rucastle have to untie the cord each time he visited Alice? Why did Holmes cut the cord rather than use the keys acquired from the sodden Toller to open the lock at the other end of the iron bar? Above all, how could a bar across the **outside** of an inward-opening door (have you ever seen a bedroom door that opened out into the hallway?) but not attached to the door itself be a means of containing someone imprisoned inside the room?

A final flurry of scents for the Hounds to follow: There is no indication of a fence enclosing the Copper Beeches. How did Toller manage to restrict the savage dog to the property during its nighttime prowls? How did Holmes know that Mr. Fowler was a seaman? How did Watson learn what finally became of Mr. and Mrs. Rucastle or, for that matter, Miss Violet Hunter? What became of the Rucastles’ hydrocephalic son? Did it require a special license for Alice and Mr. Fowler to marry the next day at Southampton?

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