



The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XIV -- The Adventure of the Copper Beeches

It isn't a mystery of the sort that Sherlock Holmes usually solves, nor did he "solve" the case in the traditional sense at all. But Violet Hunter could not have done better than to consult Holmes, a man who fully understood the dangers that might be concealed behind the walls of a country house, especially from people willing to pay an exorbitant salary for that perfect short-haired governess. And sure enough, it's the old "what's in the unused wing of the house?" scare story, with the twist being that the creature in the locked room isn't nearly so scary as the creepy guy who put her there. In a moment, the Hounds brave a sulking six-year-old, a snarling mastiff, and those dreaded five miles of country to see what's afoot at the Copper Beeches. Along the way, we'll learn an important lesson about the Rucastles and their fads: They are hair today and gown tomorrow.

No sister of mine: "The Copper Beeches" opens with one of the most appealing of all the sitting room scenes. Outside, there is a thick fog, while inside, we see a cheery fire, the gleaming breakfast table, and an eloquently irritable Holmes with his cherry-wood pipe, expounding upon art and detection just long enough to bring us up to the arrival of his attractive and interesting young client. We are in Canonical paradise!

This is a story that provides an opportunity for Watson to give us a great many fascinating glimpses into Holmes's mind and personality, and the fact that the glimpses are fleeting only makes them the more precious. What makes his cherry-wood the favored pipe for disputatious moods? Beyond his logical explanation, did Holmes have some special reason from his own experience that made him suspicious of the smiling and beautiful countryside?



And of course the big question: Was Holmes attracted to Violet Hunter, as Watson supposed and hoped? The detective “looked her over in his searching fashion,” but then made none of his trademark “impress the client” deductions. Was he smitten into silence by Miss Hunter’s attractions? And what was the real meaning of his repeated remark that “no sister of mine” would have gone to the Rucastles?

Although she was determined to accept the job, Violet Hunter obviously knew that the situation at the Rucastle’s was going to be difficult at best. She needed money, of course, but was curiosity also a large factor in her decision to go to the Copper Beeches? Was there something in her nature that made her unable to resist the challenge of finding out what was really going on? Do other Hounds feel as I do: that her spunk and her relentless curiosity would indeed have made her an intriguing match for Holmes? In the end, did Holmes lose interest in Violet Hunter because the case was over, or because it did not turn out to be a case where his talents were put to their best use? Or was it because his client didn’t look so appealing without her lovely hair?!

Those crazy Rucastles: There are so many things wrong with this family that it’s hard to know how to list them all, but I suppose that keeping a daughter in a locked room will do for starters. Did Rucastle think he could get away with this scheme? What did he think Alice was going to say or do if she signed away her rights and he released her? Or did he mean to release her at all, no matter what she did? Was he hoping that she would simply pine away and die? What term would we now use for the “brain fever” that left Alice at death’s door for six weeks? Was she having some sort of anxiety reaction to all her father’s badgering and worrying? Or was daddy dearest putting a little something extra in her food? And by the way, what do the Hounds think may have happened to the first Mrs. Rucastle? Is “brain fever” hereditary, or is it likely to occur mainly where the environment is conducive to it: say, in the general vicinity of Jephro Rucastle?

Do you think that the current Mrs. Rucastle was an equal partner in her husband’s guilt? Or was their married relationship such that she might almost be considered a victim too?

Why did Mr. Fowler wait so long to rescue Alice?

Was Violet Hunter the first woman hired to impersonate Alice, or were there others before her?

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