

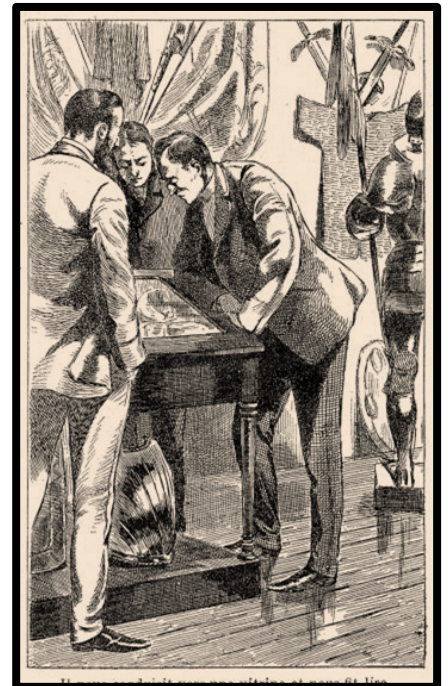
The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXII -- The Adventure of the Priory School

Ok, perhaps Reginald Musgrave wasn't the best client name after all, now that Thorneycroft Huxtable has stepped into the frame, writes Charlotte Anne Walters.

The big man turns up at 221B and promptly faints with the stress of the situation he is bringing to Holmes. This is followed by a great line from Watson – 'We stared in silent amazement at this ponderous piece of wreckage, which told of some sudden and fatal storm far out on the ocean of life'. This is then followed by another clever line as Watson takes the man's pulse – 'With my finger on the thready pulse, where the stream of life trickled thin and small'. Once again, Conan Doyle reminds us what a skilful wordsmith he was and how such lines elevate the stories to a more literary level, beyond that of simple crime drama.

Mr Huxtable regains his senses and asks not for a brandy or a smoke to calm his nerves, but a glass of milk and a biscuit. What a great choice, clearly a man after my own heart. There's not much in life that can't be made a little better with the enjoyment of a nice biscuit. Preferably a custard cream in my opinion. I had an assistant one Christmas at the office who realised that the best way to get me back on track after a staffing calamity, usually a temp not turning up for work and an angry client calling to demand a replacement, was to push a tray of biscuits under my nose and let me munch my way through. She brought in a selection every morning for that very purpose.



Unusually in this story, Holmes is prompted into action by the promise of a reward of six thousand pounds if he can find the missing only son of the Duke of Holderness, the ten year old Lord Saltire who has disappeared from the Priory prep school where Mr Huxtable is the principal. He is reluctant to act until a reward is mentioned.

Taking Watson with him, Holmes travels to Mackleton to try and unravel the mystery. This mainly involves some clever analysis of bicycle tracks and a revelation that Holmes is an expert on tire treads (42 different impressions to be exact) as well as the tobacco and footprints which we already know about. Holmes energetically bounces around the local countryside following tracks and clues and eventually finds the boy concealed at a local inn.

It is no surprise to me that the somewhat shady private secretary of the Duke's is behind the matter and this is another of those rare occasions when I could guess 'whodunit' ahead of Holmes. What I didn't work out was why and that is where the story does become a bit unbelievable for me. The private secretary is actually the Duke's illegitimate son and he has arranged for the boy to be taken so that he can blackmail the Duke into making him the sole heir instead. All well and good except for the fact that the Duke has already discovered this three days prior to Holmes' arrival and agrees to leave his young son with the captors for reasons I don't fully understand and to save the skin of his illegitimate boy.

Holmes makes sure the Duke writes out the cheque for the reward money before revealing that he knows the truth and is clearly very happy to have taken such a sum. This is unusual behaviour from Holmes, but then as the client is such a rich man, who can blame him for taking the spoils? And that really was a massive amount of money back then, considering that a good yearly wage was a hundred pounds. As Watson isn't working at this time, Holmes is the only bread-winner and I'm sure this 'bread' will easily settle their rent for many years to come.

It's always enjoyable to read of Holmes being so on form and the story does not disappoint in this sense at all, though I do have some issues with the plot regarding the actions of the father towards his vulnerable ten-year-old son and the cruelty of the elder son towards his little half-brother – surely he didn't think he could get away with that in the end?

7 out of 10

Charlotte Anne Walters

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