



The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure LIV – The Adventure of the Illustrious Client

Colonel Sir James Damery was well-known for his tact and discretion, but even so, it was difficult for him to persuade Sherlock Holmes to enter a delicate matter because Sir James was sworn not to reveal the identity of the client on whose behalf he was working. When Holmes learned that a beautiful young woman of high social position was at risk at the hands of a predatory wife-killer, however, he agreed to take the case...even though it cost him a severe beating and put him at risk of being charged with burglary.

This is a sordid story with a sordid ending, and every time I read it I want to hurry through and get on to something a bit brighter. But one character in particular strikes me as interesting: Miss Kitty Winter. Her diction and choice of words seem to vary between the gutter and something higher. I find myself wondering, “Could she have been a person of breeding — not of noble birth, perhaps, but of middle-class stock?” Then there is the imagery of the sponge: In *ILLU* Watson likens the transformation of the handsome and refined Gruner’s face to the effects of a foul sponge which left him hideous almost beyond words. In *TWIS*, a sponge also effected a transformation, from the hideous Hugh Boone to the sad-faced and refined Mr. Neville St. Clair.



In describing Miss Violet de Merville, Holmes said she was “as inflexible and remote as a snow image on a mountain.” Mount Rushmore aside, a “snow image on a mountain?” What could Holmes have had in mind? In any case, could hypnosis instill a fixation such as Miss de Merville had for Baron Gruner?

“By the Lord Harry, he won’t!” cried Holmes. Who was “Lord Harry?” A euphemism, perhaps? In his subsequent instructions to Watson, Holmes told him to tell Shinwell Johnson to get Miss Winter out of harm’s way and to study up on Chinese pottery. How did Watson know to get in touch with Johnson? And why didn’t it occur to either Holmes or Watson that the best way to study for an interview with Gruner was to read

Gruner's book on Chinese pottery? And that failing, why didn't Lomax think to offer it to Watson as the latest and one of the more authoritative books on the subject?

Kitty Winter wanted to drag Gruner down into the mire where she resided, into "Hell, London," but did she really attain her objective? Without a doubt she exacted a terrible revenge with her vitriol, but is it likely that she lowered his social position to the degree desired? IMHO, she did not. After the attack, Gruner still had two things going for him: wealth and gender. Given what we have seen of the man's psyche, it is likely that once he had recovered to the extent possible from his maiming, he would have redoubled his efforts to locate her and punish her for her actions. And Holmes would not have been safe, either. After all, Gruner was able to accomplish what no other enemy of Holmes could do — he physically injured Holmes, rather severely at that. Even Professor James Moriarty was unable to attain that objective.

Poor Dr. Watson must have had some uneasy moments over his part in the debacle in Gruner's house. If Holmes had been called into the dock, he would have been the only witness, and would have faced a true Hobson's choice: To lie under oath; or to identify the burglar as his intimate friend Sherlock Holmes. And why wasn't Holmes prosecuted for burglary? Why was he not charged as an accomplice in the vitriol-throwing, since he brought Kitty Winter to the scene? We must conclude that it was the prestige and wealth of the Illustrious Client which intervened on his behalf and rendered the British law more elastic.

As I said at the beginning, this is a sordid tale indeed.

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