

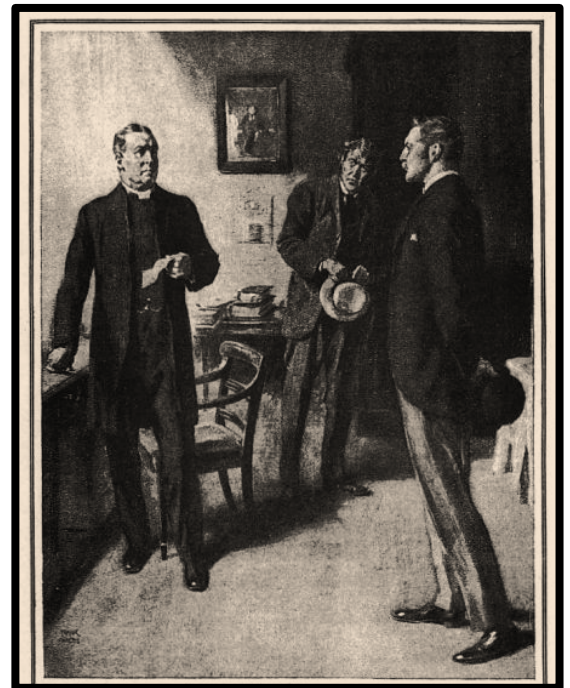
The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure LVIII – The Adventure of the Retired Colourman

Josiah Amberley cut a pathetic figure. He had worked hard all his life, saved enough to allow him to retire with a comfortable income, bought a house, and taken a pretty younger wife to share his retirement years. Yet in one stroke of misfortune he lost all this; his wife had run off with a young doctor, taking his hard-earned savings with her. The police were unable to locate the wife and her lover, so Amberley turned to Sherlock Holmes for help. Little did he know what form that “help” would take.

This case is one of at least three that involves death by suffocation: MUSG and GREE are two others. (There is a possibility that the deadly fumes of *radix pedis diaboli* in DEVI would cause that case to fall into this category as well.) In any event, I was struck by the invocation of “the old Italian spirit” as exemplary of the mindset of Josiah Amberley. I recall that Isadora Klein referred to the writings of the hapless Douglas Maberley in those terms as well. Could this be a reference to cruel machinations of the sort practiced by Niccolo Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia?

Josiah Amberley is one of the five one-legged men to appear (there are six mentioned, but only five appear) in the Canon. One wonders why Doyle chose to make him an amputee; perhaps it was an effort to make him appear even more pathetic than Watson perceived him to be upon their first encounter. Evidently, the leg was inflexible (“Left shoe wrinkled, right one smooth”) and little better than the “timber-toe” worn by Jonathan Small in SIGN. Amberley must have experienced considerable difficulty in negotiating the 17 steps at 221 Baker Street, and the journey to Moosmoor (“Moosmoor” in Doubleday) cum Little Purlington must have been a



peculiarly trying exercise for him. It is odd that his intact leg was “spindly” since, as Holmes remarked in TWIS, “weakness in one limb is often compensated by exceptional strength in another.” In any case, his prosthesis must have given him an awkward gait which somehow went unnoticed by Watson’s medical eye. And, considering his handicap, how was he able to “spring to his feet” when confronted by Holmes and Barker?

Did the gas laid in for illumination at the time of this story have a distinctive odour? If it had, would it not have dissipated in a short time had the doors and windows been opened? But there are other questions: How did Amberley rid the sealed “strong-room” of the fumes before entering to dispose of the bodies of his victims? Wasn’t there a chance that his nosey neighbours would notice the smell of gas when the room was ventilated? And was there not a considerable risk of explosion in using this highly combustible gas?

How did the management of the Haymarket Theatre know that neither seat B30 nor 32 of the upper circle had been occupied on the night in question? Was it customary for theatres to perform such a census, and if so, for what purpose? Of course, the theatre operators may well have saved the ticket stubs to verify them against the “gate” for that evening, but once that was done, would they not have discarded the stubs? Would they have been able to tell a week later whether or not a certain seat had been occupied?

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