

## THE ADVENTURE OF THE YELLOW FACE

A Consideration by David Hayes

A part of *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, published in *The Strand* as additional episodes of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* between December 1892 and November 1893. Sequentially, it is number fifteen in the canon.

This presentation was made to the Nashville Scholars of the Three Pipe Problem at their meeting on January 15, 2022. The format is designed to review the story, adding extra-canonical information and quiz-style questions in context. The questions have been changed to appear in context. I left the extra-canonical notes and made them in bold type.

In his preamble to the story, Watson sets forth an interesting premise which he uses to bracket his narrative. He says that in some of Holmes's adventures, "where he failed, it happened too often that no one else succeeded, and that the tale was left forever without a conclusion." Really? Holmes failed?

What makes "The Yellow Face" distinct is that "now and again, however, it chanced that even when he erred the truth was still discovered." Watson notes that including this story there are "some half-dozen cases of which 'The Musgrave Ritual' and 'The Yellow Face' present the strongest features of interest." In preparing his notes for "Yellow Face," Baring-Gould replaces "The Musgrave Ritual" with "The Second Stain," arguing that Musgrave was not a failure. **[Discussion: What do you think? Note: In addition, Chris Redmond states that "the author is successful in using boredom and the commonplace as a background." "The Second Stain" is a bit cavalier, but that doesn't make it a failure. Why do these people read mysteries—to see the lead person do stuff or to see a crime solved?]**

My Sherlockian friends know that I consider "The Musgrave Ritual" a kind of fulcrum around which the canon pivots and finds its place in history. I feel that the story of British history's turning point between Charles I and Charles II is more important than the people in the story. So, I feel that the historical background is the main character, and that Holmes is the narrator.

Watson begins his narrative by saying that Sherlock Holmes was a man who seldom "took exercise for exercise's sake." Nevertheless, they went for a long walk, and when they returned, they had missed a visitor. The visitor had left something behind: "A nice old brier with a good stem of what the tobacconists call amber." Holmes launches into what may be the longest analysis of an object in the Canon. For example, he said that some people think that the presence of a fly on it is a good omen.

The man returned to see Holmes. His name was Grant Munro, actually Jack Grant Munro as you see later in the story. Holmes knew his name, because he saw it written inside his hat. He told Holmes that he has been married for three years to a woman named Effie with whom he is very much in love and she with him. She was a widow when they met; her married name had been Hebron. They lived in Atlanta (we assume Georgia) and had one child. Both the husband and the child died of Yellow Fever. **[Note: Baring-Gould sites sources which show that Atlanta never had a Yellow Fever epidemic. Its altitude of 1,000 feet would have reduced the risk.]** She

returned to England, living with an aunt in Middlesex, which is considered a part of Greater London. They met there and were married. Her husband left her comfortably off [**Note: According to financial reporting, the 4,500 pounds she inherited, adjusted for inflation, would have had the purchasing power of \$839,291.20 today. Other methods yield other results. The investments earned 7%.**], and she turned her wealth over to her husband for management, although he said he did not want her to. They moved to Norbury, in the southwest area of Greater London. Their property included a cottage which was empty.

What first got Munro's attention was his wife's request for money, 100 pounds (about 1/3 of a year's income at 7%). She declined to tell her husband the purpose, and he did not press it. Then, while out for a walk, Munro saw that people were moving into the cottage, and then he "became aware that a face was watching me out of one of the upper windows." He went to the cottage, knocked on the door, and was greeted by a woman he did not recognize. Upon his offer of help, the woman told him she would let him know if she needed anything and shut the door in his face.

That night, his wife arose at 3:00 a.m. from her sleep. She returned after 20 minutes. When asked by her husband, she told him that she had gone out for as breath of fresh air. The next day, Munro journeyed to the Crystal Palace [**Note: We assume it is the marketplace some 2.5 miles from his home.**] and stopped by the cottage on the way home. To his amazement, his wife was exiting from the house. What follows is an argument where she implores him to leave the matter alone for the time being and he does not want to but does for the moment.

Munro returned early from a trip to town two days later and caught the maid off guard. She immediately ran to the cottage to warn Effie. Munro ran to the cottage, passing Effie and the other woman who were leaving. He did not knock but entered the cottage unannounced. He found no one there, but there were some things of interest: a kettle on the fire, a large black cat coiled up in a basket, and a full-length picture of Effie, taken three months earlier at Munro's request.

The narrative returns to a discussion with Holmes, beginning with his asking Munro if he had ever been shown a death certificate. Munro said she showed him a duplicate. [**Note: In the story, Effie told her husband that a great fire had burned all of her papers. Baring-Gould points out that Atlanta did not begin issuing death certificates until 1914. Munro would not have questioned this because England had been taking a census since 1837.**]

Holmes sends Munro home with instructions to wire them if he finds that the cottage is inhabited. If they do not hear from him, they will come there tomorrow anyway. Holmes thinks there's a crime of blackmail afoot. He also assumes the blackmailer is male, the woman's first husband, perhaps with the aid of "an unscrupulous woman." [**Note: when Holmes finishes telling Watson his theory and asks what Watson thinks (an unusual event in its own right), Watson replies, "It is all surmise." This observation sent me to *A Study in Surmise: The Making of Sherlock Holmes* by Michael Harrison. "The Yellow Face" is mentioned two places in that book, not referring to Watson's comment, but suggesting ways in which the character of Holmes as mentioned in "Yellow Face" may have had origins in two events.**]

Munro finds the cottage inhabited and wires Holmes. He tells Holmes he intends to force his way in, despite his wife's pleas. Holmes and Watson take the train and are greeted by Munro. When the three men reach the cottage, they are greeted by Effie, who once again pleads for them to leave them alone. The men rush past Effie and the old woman who is staying there and go upstairs. When they enter the bedroom, they see what appears to be a little girl, fully dressed and wearing white gloves and a mask. When the mask is removed, the men see: "a little coal black negress, with all her white teeth flashing in amusement."

Now, the true story was told. Effie's husband died in Atlanta. Around her neck Effie wore a large silver locket and inside there was a portrait of her husband, handsome and intelligent-looking and bearing unmistakable signs upon his features of his African descent. When explaining what happened to the men, she said, "It was our misfortune that our only child took after his people rather than mine." [Note: Does this remind you of a situation in contemporary news? Megan Markle & Prince Harry.] The child became sick, and Effie left her behind in the care of a Scottish nurse (hence the earlier reference to a brutish woman with a Northern-British, not American-accent). As time went on, Effie missed the child so much that she decided to take a chance and have her brought to England. The 100 pounds was sent to the nurse as travel money to bring the child to Norbury.

When she finished her explanation, there was "a long ten minutes [Note: British editions of the story say "two minutes.]" before Grant Munro broke the silence." Then Munro accepted the child as his own and carried her to the main house. Holmes and Watson left for London. When they arrived at 221B, Holmes told Watson, "If it should ever strike you that I am getting a little over-confident in my powers or giving less pains to a case than it deserves, kindly whisper 'Norbury' in my ear, and I shall be infinitely obliged to you."

### ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

When Munro first explained his situation to Holmes, what did you think was the problem? Adultery? At what point would you have thought blackmail if Holmes had not raised it? None of us would have guessed the real answer until it was given to us. That makes us like Holmes.

Leslie Klinger feels that the similarity between "The Yellow Face" and "The Musgrave Ritual" is that Holmes just winged it as he walked through both stories. Note: "Musgrave" left many options unresolved.

Leslie Klinger, quoting H.W. Bell, wondered if Effie's first husband was indeed white but that the father of her child was not. After her husband's death, she fled for safety to start over. When confronted by her new husband, she made up a story.