
SHERLOCK HOLMES SOLVES A LITERARY CASE

On the mantelpiece at 221B Baker Street, between the skull in which he keeps his cocaine syringe and the Persian slipper in which he keeps his tobacco, stands a slim volume, signed by the author, entitled *The Turn of the Screw Part 2*, a memento of one of the stranger cases of my friend Sherlock Holmes.

I had been honoured to be present when my friend had assisted some of the most illustrious personages in Europe. He had recently advised the King of Bohemia in a delicate matter, had been consulted by the French government over the theft of the Mona Lisa, and had prevented a scandal which could have brought about the downfall of Her Majesty's government. Now, one morning in the year 1898, he was expecting a world-famous author. We heard footsteps on the stairs, and Mrs Hudson showed in Mr Henry James. Holmes remarked, in the cool tone which he had honed over years to impress his clients:

"I think you have come to consult me about your recently published story *The Turn of the Screw*."

"How can you possibly know that?", said the author.

"Elementary! Several reviewers have complained that your tale ends inconclusively. The book reports several deaths. It is unclear which, if any, are the result of foul play, and as I recall, the last line reports the death of a child, whereupon the book simply stops."

"You are right – I am also being inundated by letters from readers who all ask *What happened? When will Part 2 appear?* I don't know what happened. I urgently need your help, sir, to conclude my story."

"Perhaps you could summarize the plot, briefly, but omitting nothing of importance. Dr Watson has not read it – he goes in more for gung-ho adventure stories set in colonial Afghanistan."

"Well, the plot is subtle, but the main facts are these. A rich London gentleman employs an inexperienced young woman ..."

"Their names?", interrupted Holmes sharply.

"They are anonymous."

"But you are the author: you must know what they are called!"

“Er ... no ... I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Very well! This was already clear to me, but I wished to confirm a point of literary theory – to which we will return. Pray continue.”

“The young woman travels to a large country house in Essex, in order to look after two orphans, the nephew and niece of the London gentleman. (Their parents had died in India, where the father was a military man.) At first, she is delighted by the children, Miles and his sister Flora, aged ten and eight. But she starts to see apparitions. She questions her own sanity, but believes that they are the ghosts of the children’s previous governess (Miss Jessel) and the London gentleman’s valet (Mr Quint), who have both died under mysterious circumstances, and have now come back to earth to claim the children. She tries to save the children from this evil influence, but Flora becomes ill and Miles dies. ... Then the story stops ...”

“Admirably precise!”, exclaimed Holmes, and Mr James looked absurdly pleased at this praise for his own summary of his own book.

“So”, continued Holmes, “we have a large gothic house, a governess of questionable sanity, five mysterious deaths – for which you provide no clear account. In chronological sequence: the children’s parents, a governess, a valet, and a ten-year old boy. Some of the rustics believe in the supernatural, but I think we may safely ignore child-abducting ghosts. As I say frequently to my friend Watson – though I am not sure that he has grasped the principle – when we have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

“We will proceed as follows. Dr Watson and I will go down to the country house tomorrow and interview all the characters ...”

“But you can’t do that!”, expostulated Mr James. “They don’t exist. I made it all up. It’s all in my mind. It’s all mere fiction.”

“You could have put that more tactfully”, said Holmes, rather coldly. “You forget that I am myself ‘mere fiction’. More importantly, you ignore two logical consequences of this point. First, since I am myself ‘mere fiction’ – as you put it – I can do what I like. Only last week, Auguste Dupin and I compared notes on some of our cases. Second, you confuse what is in your mind with what is in the text. The author is dead, as the French post-structuralists put it – also rather tactlessly, I admit – but their theoretical point is valid. Your intentions are irrelevant. The text is there. The rest is up to the reader.”

Mr James looked rather downcast at the thought that he was dead.

So this is what we did. *Who’s Who?* identified for us the anonymous London gentleman and his family tree. And *The Times of India* revealed details pertaining

to the death of the orphans' parents. These deaths were also unexplained in Mr James' book, but the newspaper hinted at the unsavoury background of the children's uncle.

On the following morning, we travelled from Paddington with the 8:15 to the nearest village, and called first at the police station. After Miles' death, the local policeman had interviewed the governess, and we were able to read the transcript. Mr Plod may appear slow, but was more subtle, in his rustic way, than Inspector Lestrade.

Mr Plod. So, Miss, Mr Quint had appeared at the window, although he had died some time previously, you say? (Please remain calm, Madam: I'm just trying to establish the facts. Yes, I remember the case: we suspected a jealous husband, but could never prove it.) And the young gentleman just dropped dead in your arms. You were 'pressing him to you'. But not enough to suffocate him? And no previous history of fainting? epileptic fits? heart problems? anything of that kind? ... And then the young lady: what was she called? Blossom? Ah, Flora, I beg your pardon, Miss. She became ill and you sent her away, you say? When was this exactly?

The Governess. How can I retrace, even today, so shortly after these unnatural events, the strange steps of my obsession? At such junctures as these, one felt, steeped in the preternatural vision, and with deepened but uncertain sensibility, the restless presence of a beast ready to spring.

Mr Plod. I must warn you that anything you say will be taken down and may be used in evidence – if we can understand it.

Having collated all such written information, including school reports on young Miles (which Mr James had been unable to obtain), we proceeded to the house, and talked with the gardeners and the grooms. There is a wonderful sympathy and freemasonry among horticultural and horsey men. As they potter about in the grounds and drive people here and there, they see and hear everything. Discussions with these menials confirmed the suspicions of the police concerning relations between Quint and Jessel, and Quint's sudden death. But much time had passed, there was nothing precise to be learned, it was all hearsay and both were dead, so we let those matters drop.

Consistent reports from all the staff in the house, downstairs and upstairs, further confirmed what Mr Plod had implied in his report: that the young governess was as daft as a brush and was not fit to give reliable evidence in court, much less to stand trial herself. We therefore eliminated her from our enquiries and concentrated on the uncle. There was a general view that he was partly responsible for her sad mental state, but also for much more, as we discovered.

When Mr James called at Baker Street on the following day, Holmes gave him an account of our findings. We agreed not to publicize the full details. However, now that the second part of his book has appeared, I am at liberty to say that the deceased brother's will revealed rather clearly the reasons for the machinations of the children's uncle. Readers can study for themselves the full details – in Mr James' inimitable style – in *The Turn of the Screw Part 2*.

Mr James admitted that he had not thought to consult the will. Holmes passed over in silence the fact that this admission alone refuted the strange notion that the meaning of a text is in the author's mind.