

explicitly, became a lowgrade prostitute in London's Whitechapel area. Those close to the Duke realized that he had committed a grave indiscretion, and two men in particular (one a court physician, the other destined to become known as Jack the Ripper) decided to protect the Duke and the right of accession to the throne, by incarcerating Annie Crook in an asylum and killing off any of her prostitute friends in whom she might have confided.

Thus the string of Whitechapel murders begins, and Sherlock Holmes enters the case. No one explains why Annie Crook is not murdered herself (if you want to stop a story from spreading, surely you begin with the source). No one explains how one can possibly contain a rumour that is spreading so fast in any case. No one explains why the child — who turns out to be female and far removed from any possibility of claiming the throne — causes the Duke's friends such consternation. Eventually one concludes that **Murder by Decree** is a dark mystery only because its storytellers are resolved not to cast light on it. No one explains why the psychic Robert Lees (Donald Sutherland) who is so perceptive in his hallucinations that he can accurately predict a murder 24 hours before it actually happens, is dropped from the movie early on, having warned Holmes that he "senses grave danger all about him." (You don't have to be psychic to come up with that line.) Why does the camera twice zoom up to Lee's face? (Does Clark think he's telling us something?) Why does he keep cutting away (four times!) to a horse and coach racing through the narrow London streets, while Holmes and Mary Kelly, (Susan Clark) one of the other prostitutes sought by the killers, try to get to safety before being overtaken. The film is visually clumsy and inconsistent in viewpoint; sometimes the film is related through the killer's eye as he stalks with a lumbering gait through the fog and sounds like an asthmatic about to collapse; at other points the movie is related from an omniscient viewpoint. At the film's end, things are in such a muddle that there is a long scene in which Holmes confronts Lord Salisbury (John Gielgud) the

prime minister of England, and Sir Charles Warren (Anthony Quayle) the Commissioner of Police from Scotland Yard, and explains (complete with flashbacks) the entire movie as best he understands it. He claims to have proof that the Ripper murders are linked to the Duke of Clarence, but all he has, in fact, is a marriage certificate, a medical certificate showing that Annie Crook was incarcerated and a birth certificate showing there was a child. He has nothing that would stand up in court concerning the murders. He nevertheless agrees to keep his accusations to himself, providing that the prime minister and his men promise never to harm Crook's daughter (who turns out to be a chubby little six year old safely ensconced at the same convent where Annie Crook once stayed). The film is outrageously illogical — as no Conan Doyle story ever was. As to the acting, most of the talent is wasted, with the exception of James Mason who manages to impart a dignity to the lines that is not inherent in them. There's an amusing moment where he is trying to stab a pea on his plate while Holmes tries to engage his attention in conversation. Finally Holmes reaches over and crushes the pea with Watson's fork, putting an end to the pick-and-miss struggle that has been going on for several minutes. Watson, however, is anything but grateful; a crushed pea is a destroyed pea. The look of distaste on his face is probably the highlight of the film.

Murder by Decree is a bad movie that is currently making a lot of money and has drawn favorable reviews based on mental laxity. There is no creative progress from **Black Christmas** to this — except for the talent that \$5 million buys — and as Sherlock Holmes' movies go, **Murder by Decree** is a careless betrayal of all that is good in the legend. Sherlock Holmes once said (in **The Red Headed League**) "My life is spent in one long effort to escape the commonplaces of existence." In **Murder by Decree** he does not escape from the commonplaces of bad scriptwriting and clumsy filmmaking, but he will survive it — he always has.

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