



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXIII – The Adventure of Black Peter

There had been a murder at Woodman’s Lee. Peter Carey, a retired sea captain, was found in the cabin that served as his home, transfixed by a harpoon that had been driven through his chest with such force that he was pinned to the cabin wall “like a beetle on a card.” Inspector Stanley Hopkins, a young Scotland Yard detective for whom Sherlock Holmes had high hopes, was called upon to investigate the case.

Clues were few...there were no visible footprints or other traces of the murderer. True, a notebook with the initials “J.H.N.” on the cover was found on the floor near the door, and a sealskin tobacco-pouch with the initials “P.C.” inside it was on the table, which was unremarkable except for the fact that Peter Carey, or “Black Peter” as he was known for his beard and his humours, didn’t smoke. A witness who had spent the preceding two hours in a local pub said that he saw the silhouette of a man on a blind in the window of the cabin but stated that it wasn’t that of Captain Carey.

Stanley Hopkins enlisted the assistance of Sherlock Holmes in the case, and Hopkins, Holmes, and Watson contrived to capture a nocturnal visitor who came to the cabin in search of something. The prisoner’s name was John Hopley Neligan, son of an absconding West Country banker and embezzler of the same name. But Neligan was a slim, almost frail youth who didn’t seem to match the evidence to hand other than the notebook with his initials on it.



Stanley Hopkins describes the late Peter Carey as being pinned to the wall by a harpoon driven through his chest, with “his great brindled beard stuck upward in his agony.” Now, I’ve always been under the impression that in most situations gravity does its work after death, and unless Carey had been standing on his head when

so pinioned, how could his beard be sticking upward when it should have been draped down his chest, upon which his chin would repose in death?

There are a number of floor plans which could match the description of the interior of Black Peter's "cabin," and one question which arises is which wall he was pinned to. In any case, we'll assume that the door to the cabin was not less than ten feet from that wall, since if he had been skewered to the wall which contained the door it would have been difficult for the timorous servants to peep in and see his body. Yet we learn that Neligan Jr.'s notebook was found "near the door" and that one side of it was discolored by blood. How did Carey's blood manage to travel all the way to the door?

A few simple questions: Why did Neligan Sr. decide to flee to Norway, in specific? Was there no extradition treaty between the two countries at the time? Who tore the pages from Black Peter's logbook, and why? What room did James Lancaster and Hugh Pattins "step into" at Holmes' request? Why didn't Hopkins give Patrick Cairns the customary warning about statements being used in evidence when Cairns started to tell his side of the story? Was Neligan Jr. entitled to the remainder of the securities, and if so, could he have recovered those which were sold since they were stolen property?

The method Holmes used to put the handcuffs on Cairns sounds awkward if not downright impossible. Cairns was bending over to sign a document when "Holmes leaned over his shoulder and passed both hands over his neck." Can anyone explain how this would be a safe and effective way to handcuff a dangerous man of gigantic strength?

Holmes says that if Carey's killer was a seaman, "...it could only be a seaman who had been with [Carey] on the Sea Unicorn." Wasn't that a leap of faith? Could it not have been someone Carey met in his travels before settling in Woodman's Lee, for example?

Lastly, form a mental picture: Carey is sitting at one side of a table. Cairns is sitting opposite him. Carey, "spitting and cursing," pulls a clasp knife but is unable to take it from its sheath before he is transfixed by a harpoon and pinned to the wall. The wall must have been at least a couple of feet behind him when the harpoon was thrown, yet the sheathed knife was found "at his feet." But in any case, is it humanly possible to throw a harpoon hard enough not only to transfix a human being but to drive him back against a wall with such force that the point of the harpoon is embedded in the wall deeply enough to support the weight of a dead man's body? Did Cairns sell Holmes and the police a bill of goods with his story? Was Carey backed up against the wall in retreat instead of lunging at Cairns when the harpoon was thrown?

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