



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXVI -- The Adventure of The Three Students

As if to give us a chance to recover from the blood and busts of “The Six Napoleons,” Watson offers up a course of academic scandal, where the participants’ knives are used only for the purpose of whittling down pencil points. It’s no wonder Holmes was reluctant at first to get involved – a case like this hovers dangerously near to the “zero-point” he mentioned in “The Copper Beeches,” of “recovering lost lead pencils and giving advice to young ladies from boarding schools.” Still, Holmes never could resist a mystery, no matter how trivial – and neither can we. Once the client begins to state the evidence, it’s hard not to be caught up in the chase. Please join in the scholarly baying as the Hounds travel to “one of our great university towns” and select the cheating heart from among “The Three Students.”

Cozy, tricky, and oddly familiar: This case has one feature that I admire: its “trick confession” scene is one of the more plausible in mystery fiction. Notice how Holmes’s flair for the dramatic inspires him to arrange an imposing tribunal that would be almost certain to rattle both the honest Bannister and the impulse-cheater Gilchrist. But supposing the scene had not come off, is there any other way that Holmes could have settled the matter?

One thing has always troubled me about this case, and that’s the trips to the stationers’ shops for clues as to the origin of the pencil. Holmes called it “the best and only final clue,” but isn’t it true that he had already drawn his conclusions based on the height of the three students? And what would it have told him if he could have found the right kind of pencil at one of the shops? Even if he could have shown that Gilchrist



purchased a pencil of that sort, couldn't he have claimed to have lost it or lent it to someone else? Weren't the clay pellets a better clue than a pencil?

Baring-Gould's Annotated mentions various theories that "The Three Students" was a hoax, possibly arranged by Watson. What evidence is there that this case, small as it was, may not have been the genuine article, but instead a bit of theatre itself?

"Come if you want to:" Does this story tell us of a certain fraying in the relationship between Holmes and Watson? Note Holmes's thinly veiled insults: "Not one of your cases, Watson – mental, not physical," and "There are others." There are many times when Holmes gives Watson a zing, but he does it with wit or a certain amount of gentleness – or at the very least he waits until Watson does or says something wrong, which is not the case for these two remarks. Of course there must have always been limits to how much Watson reported back to his readers. Was Holmes getting nastier, or was Watson just editing less of it out of the published versions? Could it be that Holmes was going through some difficult experience? Had he quit smoking, for instance? If this story takes place in 1895, does it help to explain why Watson wasn't living with him in 1896?

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