



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXVII – The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez

Professor Sergius Coram (not his real name) was a semi-invalid scholar and researcher devoting his time to study of manuscripts from ancient monasteries. His objective was to develop a thesis which would “strike at the very heart of revealed religion.” In pursuing his studies he found it necessary to engage the services of a male secretary, and the third one he hired proved to be ideal: young Willoughby Smith was a serious scholar who had recently graduated from Cambridge University; he adapted himself well to the Professor’s requirements and labored from morning to night providing the research, organizational, and support services the Professor needed.

And so life went on for the quiet little household, which consisted of a gardener, a maid, and a housekeeper in addition to Coram and Smith. But one day tragedy suddenly arrived at this peaceful menage in the form of the violent death of Willoughby Smith by stabbing.

Inspector Stanley Hopkins of Scotland Yard was swiftly summoned, and he found many clues at the scene of the crime, the Professor’s study. Among these clues was a golden pince-nez clutched in the dead man’s hand. But even with these clues, Hopkins was at a loss to understand how they all fit together, and so on a wet, windy January night he traveled to 221B Baker Street in search of the one man who could make sense of it all.

This Adventure is interesting from several standpoints, not the least of which is the fact that it contains specific mention of no fewer than six unpublished adventures, all of which took place in 1894. It also contains a deductive tour de force by Holmes that ranks alongside the most notable examples of the Master’s reasoning in the Canon.



Stanley Hopkins told Holmes that the Professor was fond of being wheeled about in a bath-chair [“Bath chair” in Doubleday]. What sort of conveyance was this, and was it used primarily by semi-invalids?

Hopkins says of the little Coram household, ““Whole weeks would pass and not one of them go past the garden gate.” In 1894 it was more customary to go grocery-shopping nearly every day. What did they eat, and how did they obtain it?

For the medicos: Certainly, a “divided” carotid artery would result in a rapid loss of both blood and consciousness. But would such a wound cause young Willoughby Smith to fall the instant it was inflicted? And what is the likelihood of Smith recovering consciousness long enough to utter his cryptic message, “The Professor — it was she”?

Since Willoughby Smith was wounded in the right side of his neck, would we be justified in suspecting that his killer was left-handed? Also, the wound was “from behind and forward,” so Smith must have been bent forward when he was stabbed. How else could the location and nature of the wound be accounted for? Was he stabbed from behind? Further, according to the chart of Yoxley Old Place drawn by Hopkins, there were three possible ways by which Smith could have entered the Professor’s study. Based on the chart, the marked location of Smith’s body, and the scratch upon the bureau, by which way did he most likely enter?

Hopkins says, “I was wired for at 3:15 [and] reached Yoxley Old Place at 5...” Allowing fifteen minutes for Hopkins to reach the train station in London, it could not have taken more than an hour and a half to complete his journey. Yet later Hopkins says, “There is a train from Charing Cross to Chatham at six in the morning, and we should be at Yoxley Old Place between eight and nine.” That is a span of from two to three hours. What would account for the longer journey?

Anna “Coram’s” remark to her husband, “...I have your life in my hands, and I let you go” is curious. She says that she “could give him to the Brotherhood,” but how? She had no chance to communicate with the Brotherhood from the moment she entered Yoxley Old Place, and as she spoke those words she knew she was dying.

Finally, we encountered Stanley Hopkins a month ago, in BLAC. I seem to recall that the Hounds were quite disparaging of his qualifications as a detective in that Adventure. In your estimation, did he fare better in GOLD?

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