



The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure LVII – The Adventure of the Lion’s Mane

Setting forth from his retirement villa on a crystal-clear morning in July 1907, Sherlock Holmes was strolling along the cliffs overlooking the beaches along the Channel coast in company with his friend Harold Stackhurst, the operator of a local tutoring academy. Suddenly, they were confronted by the spectacle of the academy’s science tutor, Fitzroy McPherson, staggering up the steep hill from the beach and collapsing in obvious agony almost at their feet. He had been mortally injured by an unknown assailant, and his back was marked with weals resembling those left by a scourge or cat-o’-nine-tails. Holmes investigated the scene but found no evidence of a second person’s presence on the beach where McPherson had been swimming in a tidal pool.

A few days later, McPherson’s dog was found dead by the same tidal pool, its little body contorted in agony. Then came a sudden, similar assault on the academy’s mathematics tutor, Ian Murdoch, who was a prime suspect in McPherson’s death since they had been rivals for the hand of a beautiful local woman.

The Adventure of the Lion’s Mane is further proof to me that Holmes without Watson is like wine made without grapes. It just ain’t the same. The difference appears to lie in the relative absence of “color,” of the small nuances in Watson’s writings that are diminished or absent when Holmes takes up the pen. I note with inward amusement that Holmes resorts to some of Watson’s techniques in an effort to bring life to his narrative, such as withholding the identity and nature of the miscreant from his readers for several pages. Without faulting Holmes’ ability to recall minutiae stored in his “brain-attic.” it would seem to me that his promise of straightforward, step-by-step analysis of a problem is



abrogated when he reveals that his memory had finally led him to the solution. He doesn't write, "Then it came to me. I thought, 'Aha! It's **cyanea capillata!**'" Rather, he keeps the local gendarmerie and his readers in suspense before dramatically disclosing the identity of the miscreant while exclaiming, "Behold the Lion's Mane!" And what was his purpose in telling Inspector Bardle that he wouldn't be ready to make that revelation until midday? Obviously, that was an unnecessary delay in removing a threat which might have affected other bathers.

Ian Murdoch is an interesting character. He's tall, lean, introverted, and a mathematician of repute. What other character in the Canon does he resemble? (Hint: the other character's surname also begins with "M.") He also is guilty of an act that Doyle accords only to his worst villains: the abuse of a dog. (See: Stapleton in HOUN; Rucastle in COPP; and Brackenstall in ABBE.) But unlike those meanies, Murdoch marches off arm-in-arm with Stackhurst at the end of the story, a vindicated and falsely-suspected "good guy." What was Doyle's point in painting Murdoch as a malefactor when he intended to exculpate him at the end?

Ostensibly, Murdoch avoided sharing McPherson's fate only because he insisted on holding students back from the joys of bathing in order to give them an algebraic workout before breakfast(!). I can see it now: the young lads chafing and fretting in a classroom, looking out the window at the glorious morn while silently cursing the saturnine tutor who was preventing them from a refreshing dip in the tidal pools. Yet, when Murdoch appears on the scene and tut-tuts over McPherson's demise, he is alone. There is no mention of those students. Where were they? Did he assign them before-breakfast homework to keep them busy while he headed for the beach?

The male Bellamys are also worthy of closer examination. Consider that the elder Bellamy began as a simple fisherman but rose to become a prosperous landowner and entrepreneur. One does not come from such humble roots to achieve worldly success without intelligence, ambition, determination, and a certain amount of ruthlessness. There is more to Bellamy père than first meets the eye. Obviously, neither he nor his loutish son had any use for McPherson, and they were outspoken in their opposition to any match between Maudie and Fitzroy McPherson. They were both familiar with the sea and its creatures.

What would have prevented them from seeking out a large specimen of **cyanea capillata**, towing it in a fishing net to some sequestered place, and thence to the tidal pool during high tide, in the predawn hours before McPherson would arrive for his morning swim? Could they have been the occupants of one of the small boats Holmes spied during his initial investigation of the crime scene?

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