



The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure VI – The Boscombe Valley Mystery

A young man stands in the dock before a coroner's jury, accused of patricide. He claims he's innocent, but circumstantial evidence and his own words when he was arrested are damning evidence against him. This is complicated by his stubborn refusal to reveal what he and his father were arguing about just before the murder occurred. But there are two rays of hope: Inspector Lestrade, who has been hired by a young lady friend of the accused, states confidently that the young fellow is guilty beyond a doubt; and Sherlock Holmes has entered the case on behalf of the lad.

The Boscombe Valley Mystery contains a classic demonstration of Holmes' axiom that circumstantial evidence cuts two ways, in that it can be seen as an alibi as well as proof of guilt.

John Turner said that he had "led the life of a martyr" to atone for his misdeeds in Victoria Province, Australia. I see this as a blatant claim for the sympathies of Holmes and Watson, without any justification therefor. Turner killed, or participated in the killing of, six men from ambush, took his share of the ill-gotten gains back to the Old Country, bought parcels of valuable land, and made other investments which put him on Easy Street for the rest of his life. Was the alleged blackmailing by Charles McCarthy sufficient to justify his claim to "martyrdom?"

Holmes, with incorrect attribution, paraphrases a saying as "There, but for the grace of God, goes Sherlock Holmes." The words were spoken originally by a cleric who was in fear of his own life (due to heresy) every time he saw a criminal pass by in chains. Did Holmes himself have some guilty secret which caused him to fear retribution from the law?



Was James McCarthy the fine young man he is made out to be by Watson? Was he really that head-over-heels in love with Alice Turner when he went to Bristol and married a barmaid? One for the barristers: was either young McCarthy or the barmaid, or both, at risk of prosecution for an illegal marriage? And why would the barmaid marry McCarthy? There is at least one explanation for why **he** married **her** — youthful ardor — but what benefit did she expect to derive from the illicit and illegal union?

In young McCarthy's testimony before the coroner's jury, he stated that he heard a "horrible outcry" which took him running back to the spot where he had argued with his father. Evidence showed that the elder McCarthy had suffered crushed parietal and occipital bones from a sneak attack by John Turner. By the nature of the injuries, would a person so struck be capable of making a "horrible outcry," or would he have been rendered unconscious before he could make much noise?

Some odds and ends: Was it customary for barometers to be available in the private sitting-rooms of hotels in those days? Could a shotgun butt, which is flat rather than concave like a rifle's, make the type of injuries described in the newspaper account? Was young McCarthy also left-handed and, if not, could not the discrepancy between the location of the fatal wound and his right-handedness be one of the objections drawn up by Holmes? What other objections might Holmes have concocted?

And what were the chances that James McCarthy and Alice Turner would eventually marry, even if they never saw Watson's account of the solution to the mystery?

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