



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXIII -- The Adventure of Black Peter

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Time frame of story (known/surmised):

January 7, 1903, given.

Holmes & Watson living arrangements:

Holmes was alone. Watson had at that time deserted him for a wife, which Holmes characterized as “a selfish action”.

Opening scene:

This story was written by Holmes himself, not by Watson, as was *The Adventure of the Lion's Mane* (LION). Client called upon Holmes, who then demonstrated his powers of observation and deduction, noting that he felt it wise to impress clients with a sense of power.



Client:

Mr. James M. Dodd, a big, fresh, upstanding Briton, and a gentleman of virile appearance with such tan upon his face as an English sun could never give. Dodd said he had been awake all night puzzling his brain.

Crime or concern:

Client's army chum was Godfrey Emsworth, son of the V.C. Colonel Emsworth. Godfrey was wounded in action in the Boer War and after one letter, Dodd never heard from him again. After the war, back in England, Dodd tried to contact his old mate, but the father and family would give only a short and gruff reply, stating Godfrey was travelling and would be gone for a year. Dodd was skeptical and went to visit to find out first-hand where his friend had gone. The Colonel expressed his view: "Many people, Mr. Dodd, would take offence at your infernal pertinacity and would think that this insistence had reached the point of damned impertinence." Then the Colonel asked to be left alone.

Later that night, the butler, who loved Godfrey, but spoke of him in the past tense, expressed the idea that Godfrey would be better off dead. Dodd concluded it was a piteous business. Then he looked up and saw Godfrey through the window, looking deadly pale; then Godfrey ran off and disappeared into the night. Dodd looked for him, was later caught "spying" and was sent away by the angry host.

Villain: Probably no villain, depending on your point of view. Just a major misunderstanding of a medical condition.

Motive:

Godfrey and his family believed he had contracted leprosy, so he withdrew from society and was hidden away at the family estate, lest he be sent to a leper colony and confined.

Logic used to solve:

There were few difficulties in its solution, for a very limited choice of alternatives was available to get to the root of the matter. Holmes reached the solution as an armchair detective, employing the process that starts upon the supposition that when you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Criminality, lunacy, or disease were the possibilities, and the first two did not make sense. Leprosy was the least improbable.

Policemen:

The colonel threatened to call the county police to kick Holmes and Dodd out of his house, but Holmes pointed out that any police interference would bring about the very catastrophe which he wished to avoid. Holmes' fees: No mention.

Transport:

Holmes and Dodd picked up the elderly Dr. Saunders, the noted dermatologist, on their way to Euston Station, then took train down to Bedfordshire. Saunders was an old friend of Holmes, and a grave and taciturn gentleman of iron-gray aspect.

Food:

The butler, Ralph, carried a basket of food down from the main house to the lodge where the client suspected Godfrey was held.

Drink:

None mentioned

Vices:

During his initial interview with the client, Holmes lit his pipe and leaned back in the chair.

Other cases mentioned:

A case which Watson had described as that of the Abbey School, in which the Duke of Greyminster was so deeply involved. (Some find this to be a puzzling reference. It sounds like the Priory School and the Duke of Holderness. Was Holmes mixed up, or did he have two cases with similar descriptions?)

A commission from the Sultan of Turkey which called for immediate action, as political consequences of the gravest kind might have risen from its neglect.

Notable Quotables:

“Watson has some remarkable characteristics of his own to which in his modesty he has given small attention amid his exaggerated estimates of my own performances.” – Holmes

“It is my business to know things. That is my trade.” – Holmes

Other interesting:

Both of the stories written by Holmes himself (BLAN & LION) turn on medical points which Watson might have understood before Holmes would have figured them out.

Col. Emmsworth was a gaunt, fierce old giant, with a red-veined nose which jutted out like a vulture’s beak, and two fierce gray eyes. Not only that, but he had tufted brows.

When all was said and done:

Holmes brought with him the great dermatologist, Sir James Saunders, an austere figure. Sir James determined that the disease was not really leprosy, but was a well-marked case of pseudo-leprosy or ichthyosis, a scalelike affection of the skin, unsightly, obstinate, but possibly curable, and certainly non-infective. This was such good news that Godfrey's mother fainted upon hearing it.

McMurdo's Camp