

An Observance Of Trifles

You know my method. It is founded upon the observance of trifles.

(Arthur Conan Doyle)

snell's interminable ramblings about the canon

The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes Adventure LVII – The Adventure of the Lion’s Mane

The Adventure Of The Lion's Mane--The Jellyfish Did It?

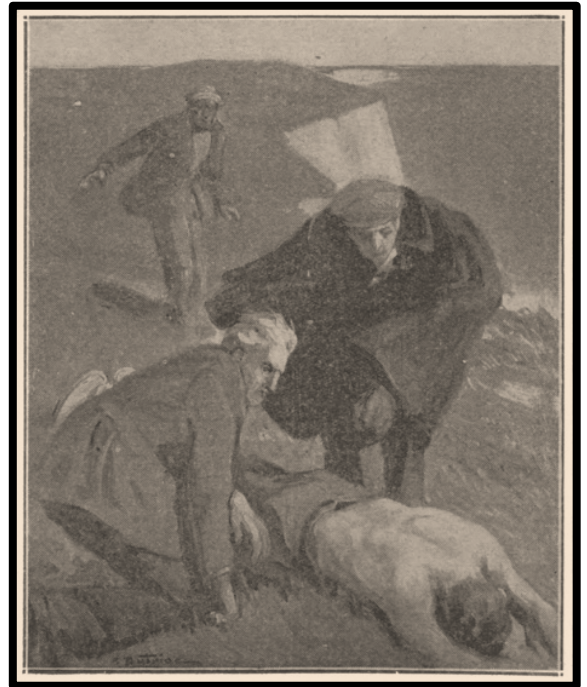
If you recall from my last post (too long ago--*sorry!*), I was not a big fan of the **Sherlock Holmes**-penned tale, **The Adventure Of The Blanched Soldier**. While I applauded **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's** attempt to do something new, I thought the approach a failure. The tale was poorly told, essentially a series of *LONG* expositional narrations. Holmes was nowhere near a good a writer as **Watson**, and we sorely missed the doctor's descriptive detail. Holmes kept too much from the reader, so his solution seemed to be *plucked out of thin air*.

Well, **The Adventure Of The Lion's Mane** corrected much of that, and even though it, too, was "*written*" by Holmes, it is superior to *Blanched Soldier* in almost every way. Holmes' writing style is much more relaxed, and far more engaging. The characters are much more interesting. Holmes shares his thinking with the readers along the way, so we are viewing the mystery with him, and not watching a magician pull a rabbit out of a hat. There are a plethora of clues and suspects, making *Lion's Mane* really a pretty good read.

And then we find out the jellyfish did it.

It is interesting that, for both of the stories Doyle chose to feature Sherlock as narrator, *no crime* had been committed, and there was *no villain*. That, I might suspect, is part of the reason *Lion's Mane* gets lumped in with *Blanched Soldier* and dismissed as a failed experiment.

It's not as if *every* Sherlock Holmes mystery requires a crime...many haven't. And you don't always need an actual villain--but someone needs to have some *agency* in the tale, there must be some *human reason* for the events we have followed.



In **Twisted Lip**, for example, there was no crime committed (putting aside any vagrancy or begging laws). And there was no villain--**Neville St. Claire** was just engaged in a fairly embarrassing occupation, and wished to hide it from his family. But there was still human activity to uncover, an examination of motives and behaviors, and someone trying to frustrate Holmes' investigations

But in *Blanched Soldier*, the "*mystery*" was that **Godfrey Emsworth** had contracted a socially ostracizing disease. Shocking, perhaps. But Godfrey had not done anything to *deserve* getting sick, and was not behind any kind of master plot aside from staying hidden. There was no human agency to uncover, except for a slight social lie. Heavens, who among us hasn't said "*Tell them I'm not home!*"? That's hardly a mystery requiring Sherlock Holmes!

Of course, such a story can work--*Blanched Soldier* is very similar to **Yellow Face**, if you think about it--but *Soldier* was not *well-written* enough to grip us with a situation, so the lack of crime and villain is more noticeable and *frustrating*.

Despite many suspects and motives, *Lion's Mane* pulls the rug out from the reader, too, by revealing the killer was an animal--just *a dumb act of nature*, as it were. And by way of comparison, we should note that the other times the Canon provided us with animal killers, they were either *trained beasts* used by vile villains, *or they were lashing out at villains* trying to harm them. In *Lion's Mane*, the jellyfish may have well as been a *bolt of lightning*, or a *falling boulder*. It wasn't part of any criminal or shameful actions--it was just a random, fatal accident. Holmes may as well have been an *insurance claims adjuster*.

That ending--it was just an accident--only serves to highlight some of the story's *strained coincidences*, which a better ending might have kept hidden from us. If it wasn't the day after a big storm; if some students hadn't just happened to be kept from swimming that morning; if **Fitzroy** didn't happen to have a weak heart...remove any link in the unlikely chain, and either **McPherson** doesn't die, or someone else gets stung but survives, or there are witnesses to tell us what happened. So, without such strained *manipulation* of events by Doyle, no mystery.

Sure, arcane coincidences are often involved in explaining how accidents happened--but this is mystery fiction, and we expect a *stronger* resolution to a mystery than a shrug and, "*well, nature is dangerous, I guess.*" It suddenly removes us from a *moral universe*, why people are responsible for theirs (an others') fates, and justice can come into play--even if Holmes did sometimes play a bit fast and loose with the concept. In detective fiction there usually is, whether we agree with it or not, a moral, a viewpoint. *Lion's Mane* robs us of that, a little bit, with a moral of "*well, sometimes shit just happens, even if innocent people are almost arrested for it. Societal rules mean nothing if a giant jellyfish gets blown into your cove.*"

Which may not be a problem for you. But I suspect it is, because, as I said earlier, this is a pretty good story. But a lot of people dismiss it. In part it's because it appears in the little-respect **Case-Book**. In part, it's because it's a Holmes-narrated story, and we've been told they're no good.

But also, I think it's because it's the second tale in a row where there was no human mystery, and no villain to punish. Few have objected to "the snake did it" or "the horse did it," as resolutions to other mysteries. But with "*Cyanea capillata* did it," it's a revelation that bothers us, because it ultimately says, "*Sometimes people just die in stupid ways, and there's nothing you can do about it, and no one to catch punish.*" How McPherson died was a mystery, but it wasn't a mystery story, despite all the trappings.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

******I do think this story was *much* better written than its predecessor, *Blanched Soldier*.

I like to think that Doyle soon saw that *Soldier* was too *cramped*, too non-engaging to work, so he loosened up "Holmes'" writing-style considerably.

Of course, there are perfectly good in-story reasons to explain this. In *Soldier*, we're not sure exactly when in his life Holmes has put pen to paper. In *Lion's Mane*, though, we're quite clear that he's been in *retirement* for some time. Perhaps this has freed his mind a bit, literarily. It's also possible that Watson, having read *Soldier*, passed on some tips to Holmes on how to make a story more interesting for the reader.

But whatever *meta* explanation you'd like to give, *Mane* is not only a clearly better read than *Soldier*, but there are definitely bits which do show us things from Holmes' perspective rather than Watson's, and that makes for some very *interesting* tidbits which I'll try to mention as we skip through the story.

******So the two mysteries that Holmes narrates, with no Watson present, just *happen* to be medical mysteries? What the heck, Sir Arthur?

While the good doctor may not have been an expert on tropical diseases, it's certainly possible that he had encountered leprosy-sufferers during his travels, and perhaps he might have had some *valuable input* into this case (although Holmes had it solved 12 seconds in...)

And in this case, Watson might not have had any knowledge of jellyfish attacks. But since a part of this mystery was "*how did Fitzroy die*," Watson's opinion could hardly have been less valuable than the anonymous idiot doctor who testified at the inquest.

******This is also the second of two stories where people were killed by poisonous animals and left confusing dying words...

They were slurred and indistinct, but to my ear the last of them, which burst in a shriek from his lips, were "the Lion's Mane." It was utterly irrelevant and unintelligible, and yet I could twist the sound into no other sense.

I guess I shouldn't criticize people who are dying in intense agony, especially McPherson, who clearly had no idea what it was that killed him.

Still, if a victim could merely have blurted out "*It was a snake!!*" instead of "*Oh my God! Helen! It was the band! The speckled band!*", that might have made solving the murder a tiny bit easier. Ditto with Fitzroy's "*the Lion's Mane*"...maybe something like "In the lagoon!"?

All I'm saying is, ***practice your dying words***, people. You can save detectives a whole lot of time rounding up your killers if you choose more carefully!

****Holmes:** "*I had given myself up entirely to that soothing life of Nature for which I had so often yearned during the long years spent amid the gloom of London.*"

A lot of people see that as, if not a contradiction of something Holmes said earlier, than at least a seemingly out of character attitude.

But we should remember--this is Sherlock *himself* writing. So any inconsistency comes from Watson's portrayal. It's possible that Holmes never expressed this desire to John, or that John never reported it to us.

And perhaps the years spent without Watson's partnership had taken a toll on the detective, and changed his attitude about London.

Regardless, this is certainly no reason to go about claiming the story "must" be *non-canonical* just because we learned something new about our hero from his own mouth.

****Holmes:** "*My house is lonely. I, my old housekeeper, and my bees have the estate all to ourselves.*"

It should be noted that, pre- or post-retirement, Holmes never took another flatmate besides Watson...

****Again,** a new perspective on Holmes from the detective himself:

It was impossible to work upon so delightful a day, and I strolled out before breakfast to enjoy the exquisite air...Summer and winter he went for his swim, and, as I am a swimmer myself, I have often joined [McPherson].

Sherlock is more social and more outdoorsy than Watson portrayed him, it seems.

****A point where Watson's presence might have helped:**

He was obviously dying. Those glazed sunken eyes and dreadful livid cheeks could mean nothing else...His back was covered with dark red lines as though he had been terribly flogged by a thin wire scourge.

The instrument with which this punishment had been inflicted was clearly flexible, for the long, angry weals curved round his shoulders and ribs. There was blood dripping down his chin, for he had bitten through his lower lip in the paroxysm of his agony. His drawn and distorted face told how terrible that agony had been.

Now, I'm no doctor, obviously, but I have had a jellyfish sting plenty of times as a youth. Nothing as big as this *Cyanea capillata*. But still, *ouch* enough. Yet even given "*dark lines as though he had been flogged*," the flesh likely wouldn't have been actually torn, as almost any type of actual flogging would accomplish.

Perhaps having had a medical companion on hand, someone who might have recognized the symptoms of a poisoning by venom, might have made short work of this mystery. At the very least, he could have put paid to the notion of some type of "scourging" that didn't even rip the flesh.

****Our first suspect:**

Murdoch was the mathematical coach at the establishment, a tall, dark, thin man, so taciturn and aloof that none can be said to have been his friend. He seemed to live in some high abstract region of surds and conic sections, with little to connect him with ordinary life.

Interesting, isn't it, that Sherlock describes the dour teacher in terms that Watson often used to describe *him*?

Given that **Murdoch** was a math teacher and a murder suspect, I'm surprised that no one has floated a theory that he was really **Moriarty** in disguise, and had trained a jellyfish to commit a diabolical murder...

****Dog abuse:**

On one occasion, being plagued by a little dog belonging to McPherson, he had caught the creature up and hurled it through the plate-glass window, an action for which Stackhurst would certainly have given him his dismissal had he not been a very valuable teacher.

You know, he could have been the most valuable teacher in the world, and 99.99% of all institutions still would have sacked Murdoch instantly for that.

Even if the dog were "*plaguing*" him, that hardly justifies tossing the pooch through a window. And it's pretty hard for me to see most pet owners getting over that enough to actually become friends with the canine tosser:

But for a year or more Murdoch has been as near to McPherson as he ever could be to anyone. He is not of a very sympathetic disposition by nature."

"So I understand. I seem to remember your telling me once about a quarrel over the ill-usage of a dog."

"That blew over all right."

"But left some vindictive feeling, perhaps."

"No, no, I am sure they were real friends."

"Real friends" after trying to kill my dog? Inconceivable!

**Wait just one minute! McPherson wades into the pool, and is stung all over by the hidden jellyfish. He is dying, in unendurable agony.

But he takes the time to put his on his coat, trousers and shoes before climbing the path?!?!

That may be taking the modesty of the era too far. If he hadn't taken to time to half-dress, he might have reached Holmes with time enough to actually explain, instead of blurting out a cryptic phrase...

**One of the bigger hiccups in the mystery is: why did Holmes assume Fitzroy *hadn't bathed*? Simply because he was (partly) dressed and his towel was dry? *"Had the body been found in the water I could hardly have missed it. It was the towel which misled me."*

As many have observed, given that he had never used his towel, McPherson would almost certainly have been at least still *damp*, and it's difficult to conceive of the great detective missing this, dry towel or no.

Still, we're told that Fitzroy *"had not been on the beach more than a quarter of an hour at the most."* Allowing a little flexibility in that time, it's possible that he had mostly dried in the sun and morning air as he struggled up the cliff. And given the hideousness of his death, and trace remaining water could have been dismissed as sweat produced in the "infernally agony."

**But even if you assume McPherson *hadn't* swam, Holmes still should have searched the "lagoon," right? If you're committed to the theory that some "flexible scourge" had been used to flail Fitzroy, isn't it possible that the killer might have hidden it in the water? Just because you think that Fitzroy hadn't gone in the water, doesn't mean the alleged killer hadn't.

**Holmes has become much better at describing characters: *"Anderson, the village constable, a big, ginger-moustached man of the slow, solid Sussex breed -- a breed which covers much good sense under a heavy, silent exterior."*

**When your teacher is a dick: *"Ian Murdoch held them back," said he. "He would insist upon some algebraic demonstration before breakfast."*

Algebra before breakfast? Human rights violation!!

Perhaps Sherlock wasn't as familiar with the community as he thought, as he is completely *unaware* of the existence of **Maud Bellamy, despite her apparent local fame: *"Everyone knows her. She is the beauty of the neighbourhood -- a real beauty, Holmes, who would draw attention everywhere."*

Yet it seems that she was more observant, and recognized Holmes even though *he* had never seen her before: *"It seems that she already knew me by sight, for she turned to me at the end..."*

Tempers are really on edge at **The Gables:

"What were you doing there?" he asked.

Murdoch's face flushed with anger. "I am your subordinate, sir, under your roof. I am not aware that I owe you any account of my private actions."

Stackhurst's nerves were near the surface after all he had endured. Otherwise, perhaps, he would have waited. Now he lost his temper completely. "In the circumstances your answer is pure impertinence, Mr. Murdoch."

"Your own question might perhaps come under the same heading."

"This is not the first time that I have had to overlook your insubordinate ways. It will certainly be the last. You will kindly make fresh arrangements for your future as speedily as you can."

Well, that got out of hand quickly, didn't it?

Still, a colleague has just been (apparently) murdered, so perhaps it's not surprising that raw emotions quickly broke through into what should have been a civilized conversation...

****So much for Holmes' not forming theories before all the facts are in:**

The one thing that impressed itself forcibly upon my mind was that Mr. Ian Murdoch was taking the first chance to open a path of escape from the scene of the crime. Suspicion, vague and nebulous, was now beginning to take outline in my mind. AND Again the shadow round this strange man seemed to me to be taking more definite shape. His record must be examined. His rooms must be privately searched.

Still, such theorizing is preferable to Holmes keeping the reader in the dark until the bitter end.

Still, searching a man's rooms on "*vague and nebulous*" suspicions? I guess that, as the rooms belonged to The Gables institution, and it wasn't the police doing the searching, no violation of Murdoch's rights occurred...

****More Victorian/Edwardian morality on the role of young women in society from Tom Bellamy:**

My son here...is of one mind with me that Mr. McPherson's attentions to Maud were insulting. Yes, sir, the word 'marriage' was never mentioned, and yet there were letters and meetings, and a great deal more of which neither of us could approve.

Heavens--letters AND meetings?!?! How *scandalous!* Women must be protected from any attention from men unless marriage is discussed? I would have loved to see him try to raise a daughter in the era of email and Twitter and being with boys in school and...

And later, Bellamy declares, "*I object to my girl picking up with men outside her own station.*" So sexist and classist. King jerk, is all I'm saying.

****And it wasn't just Tom Bellamy who was a bit retrograde in his feelings towards unapproved couplings, as Maud tells us. "We were engaged to be married, and we only kept it secret because Fitzroy's uncle, who is very old and said to be dying, might have disinherited him if he had married against his wish."**

This isn't the first time we have seen people hide relationships to avoid rich relatives finding out and disinheriting them. For me, it would have to be one *hell* of a potential bequest to get me to hide my love life like then. Then again, you do see people hide their relationships for all sorts of reasons, even today, including a fear of upsetting relatives.

One interesting question: *why* would the uncle have objected to this match? Bellamy clearly feels that Maud was above Fitzroy's station--so wouldn't he have been *marrying up*? Why would the uncle have resisted that?

Then again, we're told that Bellamy "*was a fisherman to start with.*" Perhaps Uncle Bob objected because he felt that money didn't grant social status, and *nouveau riche* or not, he didn't want his heir to marry the child of a mere fisherman.

****, class and social strata are funny things...

**Holmes describing Maud:

Who could have imagined that so rare a flower would grow from such a root and in such an atmosphere? Women have seldom been an attraction to me, for my brain has always governed my heart, but I could not look upon her perfect clear-cut face, with all the soft freshness of the downlands in her delicate colouring, without realizing that no young man would cross her path unscathed....Maud Bellamy will always remain in my memory as a most complete and remarkable woman.

Again, many have thought this completely uncharacteristic of Sherlock. But this is the first time that we have Holmes *himself* describing a beautiful woman to us.

This is another case of Watson not filtering things through his perspective for us. Good on Doyle for not making everything a carbon copy of how Watson would have described Holmes' reaction.

**Holmes: *I turned over the paper. "This never came by post. How did you get it?"*

How did he know that? It's never explained, and I not sure how he knows. Had the paper never been folded, and was too big to have fit into any envelope? But the note was "crumpled" when she pulled it out...?

**Holmes:

You have known what it was to be in a nightmare in which you feel that there is some all-important thing for which you search and which you know is there, though it remains forever just beyond your reach.

As someone who is finding my memory deteriorating (seemingly by the day), I sympathize with this, and admire Holmes' self-honesty.

**How badly is Holmes losing his sharpness?

You will know, or Watson has written in vain, that I hold a vast store of out-of-the-way knowledge without scientific system, but very available for the needs of my work. My mind is like a crowded box-room

with packets of all sorts stowed away therein -- so many that I may well have but a vague perception of what was there.

I had known that there was something which might bear upon this matter. It was still vague, but at least I knew how I could make it clear.

This does seem to contradict Holmes' earlier descriptions of how he preserved his mental sharpness.

But then again, that was Holmes when he first met Watson, and now Holmes is much older, in retirement, and the discipline he alluded to in **Study In Scarlet** may be fading, either through relaxation--or deteriorating faculties.

And once again, this is Holmes himself telling us, and not something being filtered through his **Boswell**. Perhaps Watson misunderstood/misreported earlier...

***The joys of policing a small town, as put forth by **Inspector Bardle**: "Yes, sir. There is really no one else when you come to think of it. That's the advantage of this solitude. We narrow it down to a very small compass. If he did not do it, then who did?"*

Compare, of course, to Holmes' famous admonition about remote country living in **Copper Beeches**:

"Do you know, Watson," said he, "that it is one of the curses of a mind with a turn like mine that I must look at everything with reference to my own special subject. You look at these scattered houses, and you are impressed by their beauty. I look at them, and the only thought which comes to me is a feeling of their isolation and of the impunity with which crime may be committed there."

"Good heavens!" I cried. "Who would associate crime with these dear old homesteads?"

"They always fill me with a certain horror. It is my belief, Watson, founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside."

"You horrify me!"

"But the reason is very obvious. The pressure of public opinion can do in the town what the law cannot accomplish. There is no lane so vile that the scream of a tortured child, or the thud of a drunkard's blow, does not beget sympathy and indignation among the neighbours, and then the whole machinery of justice is ever so close that a word of complaint can set it going, and there is but a step between the crime and the dock. But look at these lonely houses, each in its own fields, filled for the most part with poor ignorant folk who know little of the law. Think of the deeds of hellish cruelty, the hidden wickedness which may go on, year in, year out, in such places, and none the wiser. Had this lady who appeals to us for help gone to live in Winchester, I should never have had a fear for her. It is the five miles of country which makes the danger.

Not to mention, of course, the inspector completely overlooks the possibility of someone from outside the community coming to commit a crime...

****Unacceptable inquest:**

"Have you examined the marks?" I asked. "I have seen them. So has the doctor." "But I have examined them very carefully with a lens. They have peculiarities."

Good gosh, I don't expect a 1907 **Surrey** doctor to necessarily have the capability to run a "tox screen" and discover jellyfish venom.

But to *not* have "examined the marks very carefully with a lens"??? What did this quack do, just shrug his shoulders and say, *"Well, he's dead, I guess!"*???

****Alcohol was apparently *the most potent cure* against jellyfish toxin:**

"Brandy! Brandy!" he gasped, and fell groaning upon the sofa..."Yes, yes, brandy!" he cried. "The man is at his last gasp. It was all I could do to bring him here. He fainted twice upon the way." Half a tumbler of the raw spirit brought about a wondrous change...More and more brandy was poured down his throat, each fresh dose bringing him back to life.

Also, the account from Holmes' book said a victim *"gulped down brandy, a whole bottleful, and it seems to have saved his life."*

Of course, it was common in the day to see liquor as a restorative, and especially brandy. And it's not the first time we've seen it used in these stories.

****The reveal:**

"Cyanea!" I cried. "Cyanea! Behold the Lion's Mane!"

The strange object at which I pointed did indeed look like a tangled mass torn from the mane of a lion. It lay upon a rocky shelf some three feet under the water, a curious waving, vibrating, hairy creature with streaks of silver among its yellow tresses. It pulsed with a slow, heavy dilation and contraction.

The jellyfish did it...

****That was actually a *real* book, a *real* author, and an *actual* passage that Holmes read to us:**

It is Out of Doors, by the famous observer, J. G. Wood. Wood himself very nearly perished from contact with this vile creature, so he wrote with a very full knowledge. Cyanea capillata is the miscreant's full name, and he can be as dangerous to life as, and far more painful than, the bite of the cobra.

Wood also wrote about jellyfish attacks in other books, so they obviously made a huge impression on him.

****Holmes: *"I am an omnivorous reader with a strangely retentive memory for trifles."***

A retentive memory that failed to remember for over a week...

****Holmes:** *"That phrase 'the Lion's Mane' haunted my mind. I knew that I had seen it somewhere in an unexpected context."*

So, then, it's remarkably convenient for solving this mystery that those were Fitzroy's last words...

****Stackhurst** and Murdoch make up:

Stackhurst held out his hand. "Our nerves have all been at concert-pitch," said he. "Forgive what is past, Murdoch. We shall understand each other better in the future."

Awww...

Brian Keith Snell
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