

“THE LION’S MANE”: A TOPICAL REVIEW

by DONALD E. CURTIS

“The Lion’s Mane” takes place four years after Holmes’s retirement near his bee farm on the Sussex Downs. The internal dating of the case is late July 1907, and Holmes narrates the account of the case himself. It first appeared in print in “Liberty Magazine” on 27 November 1926 and was subsequently collected with the last twelve Sherlock Holmes cases and published as *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* in 1927.

This adventure is sometimes compared with “The Speckled Band” as it too is solved by identifying the creature that caused the death of the victim. However, in “The Lion’s Mane,” the creature is in a purely natural state rather than under the controlling machinations and manipulations of a diabolical human villain. The killer this time is found to be *Cyanea capillata*, one of the largest of the many varieties of *Medusae* or so-called jellyfish, and of all the sub-species, the one with the most venomous stingers. W. T. Williams cast doubt on the resolution of this case by writing that, “*Cyanea capillata*, it appears, is neither large nor deadly enough to do the damage attributed to it.”¹ He suggests that another species, *Cyanea arctica*, corresponds more closely to J. G. Wood’s description of the murderous sea nettle.

Another investigator, Joel W. Hedgpeth, seems to agree. He alludes to “careless confusion between the species encountered by Sherlock Holmes and the giant *Cyanea* of the Arctic”² and suggests that *Cyanea capillata* are usually one to two feet across their disk. Neither of these reference Alfred G. Mayer’s *Medusae of the World* wherein the names of the two *Medusae* are united for the scientific community as *C. capillata*, with *C. arctica* regarded as a variant.³ Marine scientist Alexander Agassiz wrote of an encounter with *C. capillata*, “This species attains an enormous size. I measured myself a specimen at Nahant [near Boston], the dish of which had attained a diameter of seven and a half feet, the tentacles extending to a length of more than one hundred twenty feet.”⁴

Northwest Dive News Magazine in 2003 reported a specimen found in Puget Sound on Whidbey Island that measured five feet across the bell.⁵ These sightings of extremely large *Medusae* would seem to vindicate J. G. Wood’s report of his own injuries suffered by the stings of *C. capillata* off the coast of Kent. The sandy-colored giant jelly that stung him so severely was reported to be 40–50 feet away when his limbs became entangled with the tentacles.⁶

It is evident from reports all round the northern waters of the world that the largest specimens of *Cyanea capillata* are to be found in arctic waters, but as

jellyfish are not swimmers, currents and storms can cause them to show up in unexpected locales. Thus, Inspector Bardle of the Sussex Constabulary was absolutely correct when he said, “I never saw such a thing. It don’t belong to Sussex.”

Fitzroy McPherson suffered an agonizing death after being brutally scourged with a most vicious lashing weapon. Or so Holmes initially thought. But what of the dying-man’s last words, “the lion’s mane?” And who could have perpetrated this heinous whipping? No one was about.

The phrase uttered by McPherson nagged at Sherlock Holmes. It suggested something vaguely familiar; but what was it? Finally as he ascended the path up from the beach after spending some pensive moments contemplating the dead man’s dead dog, it came in a flash! Holmes hurried to his little villa and rummaged in the garret for an hour until he located the “little chocolate and silver volume” that held the answer to this baffling mystery.

The bibliographic details of this little book are worthy of further investigation. It is a collection of articles and stories that the author, Rev. J. G. Wood, had previously published in several magazines. The story that identifies and describes “the lion’s mane” (*Cyanea capillata*) is “Medusa and Her Locks.” It was originally published in *Once a Week*, an illustrated tabloid that published serials and complete stories from 1859 to 1879. The article was collected with others⁷ and reprinted in Holmes’s chocolate and silver volume titled *Out of Doors*, first published by Longman’s and Green of London in 1874. Another edition was published in 1881, and a so-called New Edition was published in 1882. The New Edition was reprinted in 1890, 1891, 1895, and 1898. This writer has observed only two bindings, and both were the 1895 printing. My own 1895 copy is bound in green cloth with gold decoration and gilding of the text block. The other is described as “burgundy cloth with silver decoration.” I suggest that this binding after a bit of sun-fading, handling, and storage in an attic for several years could be described by Sherlock Holmes as “chocolate and silver.”

After our thorough consideration of the bibliography of *Out of Doors*, it would be prudent to examine the reliability of the source, that is the author J. G. Wood, in whom Holmes placed such confidence and authority. At first blush, we might be tempted to suspicion, for John George Wood was educated at Oxford for the clergy and was ordained a priest in 1854. Clergy have not traditionally been regarded as oracles of scientific knowledge, but further examination of Wood’s career is quite reassuring.

From early childhood Wood loved and studied all natural history pursuits. Even before accepting his first parish, he worked in the Oxford anatomical museum under Sir Henry Acland, the famed physician and physiologist, who introduced natural history studies to the University. In the same year that he

received his MA, Wood published his first book, *The Illustrated Natural History*. Early in his clerical career, Wood occasionally delivered illustrated lectures on natural history subjects, and by 1879 he resolved to take up lecturing as a second profession. During his life, Wood published sixty books on natural history. One, his *Common Objects of the Country*, sold 100,000 copies in a single week.⁸ (Incidentally, for a time, Wood was an editor of *The Boy's Own Magazine*, owned by Ward, Lock & Company, who published *A Study in Scarlet* by Arthur Conan Doyle in 1888.)

Wood's writing was in no sense scientific and did not comply with accepted standards of scientific research. His goal was rather to popularize natural history and make it intelligible and interesting to common people. He succeeded wonderfully and in the process inspired many future generations of naturalists. We may therefore accept Wood's accurate portrayal of *Cyanea capillata* both from his scientific knowledge and from his painful personal experiences.

In "The Lion's Mane," we are offered by Holmes's own hand the only somewhat detailed account of his retirement to the Sussex Downs. In this beginning passage of the tale, Holmes says, "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." This is said, of course, despite Watson's several declarations that Holmes was happiest in the bustling clamor and criminal activities of the city. If we believe Watson, Holmes eschewed the quiet serenity of the country, yet here the retiree himself states plainly of his enjoyment of "the life of a hermit among [my] bees and [my] books in a small farm upon the South Downs."

Where exactly is Holmes living these days? Many writers claim to have located Holmes's bee farm on the channel coast west of Eastbourne. Even Christopher Morley claims to have found it in 1953 near the town of Birling Gap, but his claim is unconvincing as the locale has no clear view of the sea, but is a mile-and-a-half inland. I would opt rather for a spot atop the chalk cliffs east of Beachy Head, where the paths down to the beach are more negotiable, the view of the Channel is correctly southeast, and appropriate shelter for the beehives is available. The principal objection to such a spot would be Watson's comment in the preface to *His Last Bow* that Holmes "lived in a small farm upon the Downs five miles from Eastbourne." Holmes's farm is undoubtedly much nearer the town. Recalling Watson's propensity for inaccurate factual data, his estimate of this distance cannot be trusted. After all, one can examine a detailed map of Sussex with Sherlock's lens and never find the village of Fulworth. If we cannot rely upon Holmes to recall certain facts accurately, how much less so should we depend on Watson's memory?

The authorship of “The Lion’s Mane” is claimed by Sherlock Holmes, as is that of “The Blanched Soldier.” He tells us that during his retirement “the good Watson had passed almost beyond my ken.” He saw Watson only on occasional weekend visits. Thus, we must conclude that writing up this case himself was necessary as he no longer had constant access to “his Boswell,” or it may have been simply an activity to fill his now abundant leisure hours. After criticizing Watson’s accounts so often of being melodramatic and sensational, possibly Holmes thought he could do better.

Sherlockian critics disagree. W. W. Robson, in his introduction to *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, observes “how much is lost by the absence of Watson: tension, mystery, the enhancement of interest by the contrast of excitement with pedestrian sobriety.” Robson is, however, complimentary about Holmes’s “solid and believable” descriptions of Ian Murdoch and Maud Bellamy, and concludes that we have no “reason to question the story’s authenticity.”⁹

M. Martin Dakin is less understanding. In *A Sherlock Holmes Commentary* (1972), he flatly denies that Holmes could have penned the two tales “The Lion’s Mane” and “The Blanched Soldier.” Based on his assessment of Holmes’s story-telling skills as used in narrating “The *Gloria Scott*” and “The Musgrave Ritual” and shorter narratives given to Watson in “The Final Problem” and “The Empty House,” Dakin posits that Holmes would have produced a more workmanlike product if he were indeed the author. Dakin concludes that in “The Blanched Soldier” and “The Lion’s Mane,” Holmes must have furnished the facts to a ghostwriter!¹⁰

We might prefer to take Holmes at his word, and simply conclude that, at his best, Holmes was able to emulate Watson’s familiar style, but at worst, he fell far short of the mark. Even though the reading public has never lauded “The Lion’s Mane” as a top-tier account of a Holmes investigation, the Holmes-told tale does have at least one exuberant fan. The Literary Agent (presumably acting for Holmes as he did for Watson) considered “The Lion’s Mane” among the six best stories.

Though “The Lion’s Mane” is not generally regarded as among the best-told tales in the Canon, close scrutiny proves it does have its points of interest. Rather than Holmes deducing data from discovered clues, his slow and somewhat vague memory provides the dramatic solution from his eclectic and omnivorous reading experience. Certainly we miss the camaraderie between Holmes and Watson; we’ve grown used to Watson’s more fully descriptive and entertaining writing style. But we must make allowances for Holmes; after all, he does have a more cold, calculating, and scientific mind.

Finally, we have a most unusual and fascinating villain, a natural creature most of us would never encounter or wish to encounter. For a few pages, we

were tempted to suspect Ian Murdoch, but *Cyanea capillata* is far more thrilling than a jealous suitor!

NOTES

1. W. T. Williams, "Some Scientific Problems," *Sherlock Holmes: Catalogue of an Exhibition*, London: Public Libraries Committee of the Borough of St. Marylebone, 1951, pp. 23–24.
2. Joel W. Hedgpeth, "Re-Examination of the Adventure of the Lion's Mane," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 3, No. 3 [O. S.] (July 1948), pp. 285–286.
3. Alfred G. Mayer, *Medusae of the World*, Amsterdam: A. Asher, 1910, p. 735.
4. Alexander Agassiz, "North American *Acalephae*," *Illustrated Catalog of the Museum of Comparative Zoology*, Vol. 2, Cambridge, MA: Welch, Bigelow & Co., 1865, p. 44.
5. Scott Boyd, "The Lion's Mane," *Northwest Dive News Magazine*, Vol. 7, No. 10 (Oct. 2003), p. 23.
6. John G. Wood, "Medusa and Her Locks," *Out of Doors*, Longman's, Green & Co., London, 1874, p. 141.
7. Wood, Preface.
8. Biographical data on J. G. Wood, The Whipple Library, Dept. of History and Philosophy of Science, Cambridge University. <www.hps.cam.ac.uk/library/wood.html>.
9. W. W. Robson, Introduction, *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, The Oxford Sherlock Holmes, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. xxviii–xxix.
10. M. Martin Dakin, *A Sherlock Holmes Commentary*, New York: Drake Publishers, 1972, pp. 249–250.