Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

opening extract from

Young Sherlock Holmes: Death Cloud

written by

Andrew Lane

published by

Macmillan Children's Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

PROLOGUE

The first time Matthew Arnatt saw the cloud of death, it was floating out of the first-floor window of a house near where he was living.

He was scurrying along the High Street in the market town of Farnham, looking for any fruit or crusts of bread that a careless passer-by might have dropped. His eyes should have been scanning the ground, but he kept looking up at the houses and the shops and at the thronging people all around him. He was only fourteen, and as far as he could remember he'd never been in a town this large before. In this, the prosperous part of Farnham, the older wood-beamed buildings leaned over into the street, with their upper rooms looming like solid clouds above anybody underneath.

The road was cobbled with smooth, fist-sized stones for part of its length, but some distance ahead the cobbles gave way to packed earth from which clouds of dust rose up as the horses and the carts clattered past. Every few yards sat a pile of horse manure: some fresh and steaming, surrounded by flies; some dry and old, like strands of hay or grass that had been clumped together and somehow stuck.

Matthew could smell the steamy, putrid dung, but

he could also smell baking bread and what might have been a pig that had been roasted on a spit above a roaring fire. He could almost see the fat dripping off and sizzling in the flames. Hunger made his stomach clench, and he nearly doubled over with the sudden pain. It had been a few days since he'd had any proper food. He wasn't sure how much longer he could go on.

One of the passers-by, a fat man in a brown bowler hat and a dark suit that was showing its age, stopped and extended a hand to Matthew as if to help him. Matthew backed away. He didn't want charity. Charity led to the workhouse or the church for a child with no family, and he didn't want to start out on the path towards either of those destinations. He was doing fine by himself. All he had to do was to find some food. Once he had some food inside him he would be fine.

He slipped away down an alley before the man could take his shoulder, then doubled back round a corner into a street that was so narrow that the upper storeys of the houses were almost touching. A person could climb straight from one bedroom to another on the other side of the street, if they had a mind to.

That was when he saw the cloud of death. Not that he knew what it was, then. That would come later. No, all he saw was a dark stain the size of a large dog that seemed to drift from an open window like smoke, but smoke that moved with a mind of its own, pausing for a moment and then flowing sideways to a drainpipe where

it turned and slid up towards the roof. Hunger forgotten, Matthew watched open-mouthed as the cloud drifted over the sharp edge of the roof tiles and vanished out of sight.

A scream split the silence – a scream from the open window – and Matthew turned and pelted back down the street as quickly as his malnourished legs would carry him. People didn't scream like that when they'd had a surprise. They didn't even scream like that if they'd had a shock. No, in Matthew's experience people only screamed like that if they were in mortal fear of their life, and whatever had provoked that scream was not something he wanted to see.

CHAPTER ONE

'You there! Come here!'

Sherlock Holmes turned to see who was being called and who was doing the calling. There were hundreds of pupils standing in the bright sunlight outside Deepdene School for Boys that morning, each dressed in immaculate school uniform and each with a leather-strapped wooden chest or an over-stuffed pile of luggage sitting in front of him like a loyal dog. Any one of them might have been the target. The Masters at Deepdene made a habit of never referring to the pupils by name – it was always 'You!' or 'Boy!' or 'Child!' It made life difficult and kept the boys on their toes, which was probably the reason why they did it. Either that or the Masters had given up trying to remember the names of their pupils long ago; Sherlock wasn't sure which explanation was the most likely. Perhaps both.

None of the other pupils were paying attention. They were either gossiping with the family members who had turned up to collect them or they were eagerly watching the school gates for first sight of the carriage that was going to take them home. Reluctantly, Sherlock swung round to see if the malign finger of fate was pointing his way.

It was. The finger in question belonged in this instance to Mr Tulley, the Latin Master. He had just come round the corner of the school, where Sherlock was standing apart from the other boys. His suit, which was usually covered in chalk dust, had been specially cleaned for the end of term and the inevitable meetings with the fathers who were paying for their boys to be educated, and his mortar board sat straight on his head as if glued there by the Headmaster.

'Me, sir?'

'Yes, sir. You, sir,' Mr Tulley snapped. 'Get yourself to the Headmaster's study *quam celerrime*. Do you remember enough of your Latin to know what that means?'

'It means 'straight away', sir.'

'Then move yourself.'

Sherlock cast a glance at the school gate. 'But sir – I'm waiting for my father to pick me up.'

'I'm sure he won't leave without you, boy.'

Sherlock made one last, defiant attempt. 'My luggage . . .'

Mr Tulley glanced disparagingly at Sherlock's battered wooden trunk – a hand-me-down from his father's military travels, stained with old dirt and scuffed by the passing years. 'I can't see anyone wanting to steal it,' he said, 'except perhaps for its historical value. I'll get a prefect to watch it for you. Now cut along.'

Reluctantly, Sherlock abandoned his belongings – the spare shirts and underclothes, the books of poetry and

the notebooks in which he had taken to jotting down ideas, thoughts, speculations and the occasional tune that came into his head – and walked off towards the columned portico at the front of the school building, pushing through the crowd of pupils, parents and siblings while still keeping an eye on the gateway, where a scrum of horses and carriages were all trying to get in and out of the narrow gate at the same time.

The main entrance hall was lined with oak panelling and encircled by marble busts of previous headmasters and patrons, each on its own separate plinth. Shafts of sunlight crossed diagonally from the high windows to the black and white tiled floor, picked out by swirling motes of chalk dust. It smelt of the carbolic that the maids used to clean the tiles every morning. The press of bodies in the hall made it likely that at least one of the busts would be toppled over before long. Some of them already had large cracks marring their pure marble, suggesting that every term saw at least one of them smashed on the floor and subsequently repaired.

He wove in and out of the people, ignored by everyone, and eventually found himself exiting the throng and entering a corridor that led off the entrance hall. The Headmaster's study was a few yards down. He paused on the threshold, drew a breath, dusted down his lapels and knocked on the door.

'Enter!' boomed a theatrically loud voice.

Sherlock twisted the doorknob and pushed the door

open, trying to quell the spasm of nervousness that shot through his body like lightning. He had only been in the Headmaster's study twice before – once with his father, when he first arrived at Deepdene, and once again a year later with a group of other pupils who had been accused of cheating in an examination. The three ringleaders had been caned and expelled; the four or five followers had been caned until their buttocks bled and allowed to stay. Sherlock – whose essays had been the ones copied by the group – had escaped a caning by claiming that he knew nothing about it. In fact, he had known all along, but he had always been something of an outsider at the school, and if letting the other pupils copy his work got him tolerated, if not accepted, then he wasn't going to raise any ethical objections. On the other hand, he wasn't going to tell on the copiers either – that would have got him beaten and, perhaps, held in front of one of the roaring fires that dominated the dormitories until his skin began to blister and his clothes to smoke. School life was like that – a perpetual balancing act between the masters and the other pupils. And he hated it.

The Headmaster's study was just the way he remembered – vast, dim, and smelling of a combination of leather and pipe tobacco. Mr Tomblinson was sitting behind a desk large enough to play bowls on. He was a portly man in a suit that was slightly too small for him, chosen presumably on the basis that it helped him believe he wasn't quite as large as he obviously was.

'Ah, Holmes is it? In, lad, in. Close the door behind you.'

Sherlock did as he was told, but as he pushed the door shut he caught sight of another figure in the room: a man standing in front of the window with a glass of sherry in his hand. The sunlight refracted in rainbow shards from the cut glass of the schooner.

'Mycroft?' Sherlock said, amazed.

His elder brother turned towards him, and a smile flickered across his face so rapidly that if Sherlock had blinked at the wrong moment then he might have missed it. 'Sherlock. You've grown.'

'So have you,' Sherlock said. Indeed, his brother *had* put on weight. He was nearly as plump as the Headmaster, but his suit was tailored to hide it rather than accentuate it. 'You came in Father's carriage.'

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. 'How on earth did you deduce that, young man?'

Sherlock shrugged. 'I noticed the parallel creases in your trousers where the upholstery pressed them, and I remember that Father's carriage has a tear in the upholstery that was repaired rather clumsily a few years ago. The impression of that repair is pressed into your trousers, next to the creases.' He paused. 'Mycroft, where's Father?'

The Headmaster *harrumphed* to attract attention back to him. 'Your father is—'

'Father won't be coming,' Mycroft interrupted smoothly. 'His Regiment was sent out to India to strengthen the existing military force. There has been some unrest in the North West Frontier region. You know where that is?'

'Yes. We've studied India in Geography lessons and in History.'

'Good boy.'

'I didn't realize the natives there were causing problems again,' the Headmaster rumbled. 'Not been in *The Times*, that's for sure.'

'It's not the Indians,' Mycroft confided. 'When we took the country back from the East India Company the soldiers out there transferred back under Army control. They've found the new regime to be a lot . . . stricter . . . than the one they were used to. There's been a great deal of bad feeling, and the government has decided to drastically increase the size of the force in India to give them an example of what *real* soldiers are like. It's bad enough to have the Indians rebelling; a mutiny inside the British Army is unthinkable.'

'And *will* there be a mutiny?' Sherlock asked, feeling his heart sinking like a stone dropped into a pond. 'Will Father be safe?'

Mycroft shrugged his massive shoulders. 'I don't know,' he said simply. That was one of the things that Sherlock respected about his brother. He always gave a straight response to a straight question. No honeying the pill. 'Sadly, I don't know everything. Not yet, anyway.'

'But you work for the government,' Sherlock pressed. 'You must have some idea of what might happen. Can't you send a different Regiment? Keep Father here in England?'

'I've only been with the Foreign Office for a few months,' Mycroft replied, 'and although I am flattered that you think I have the power to alter such important things, I'm afraid I don't. I'm an advisor. Just a clerk, really.'

'How long will Father be gone?' Sherlock asked, remembering the large man dressed in a scarlet serge jacket with white belts crossing his chest, who laughed easily and lost his temper rarely. He could feel a pressure in his chest but he held his feelings in check. If there was one lesson he had learned from his time at Deepdene School it was that you never showed any emotion. If you did, it would be used against you.

'Six weeks for the ship to reach port, six months in the country, I would estimate, and then another six weeks returning. Nine months in all.'

'Nearly a year.' He bowed his head for a moment, composing himself, then nodded. 'Can we go home now?'

'You're not going home,' Mycroft said.

Sherlock just stood there, letting the words sink into him, not saying anything.

'He can't stay here,' the Headmaster muttered. 'The place is being cleaned.'

Mycroft moved his calm gaze away from Sherlock and

on to the Headmaster. 'Our mother is . . . unwell,' he said. 'Her constitution is delicate at the best of times, and this business with our father has distressed her greatly. She needs peace and quiet, and Sherlock needs someone older to look after him.'

'But I've got *you*!' Sherlock protested.

Mycroft shook his large head sadly. 'I live in London now, and my job requires me to work many hours each day. I would not, I'm afraid, be a fit guardian for a boy, especially an inquisitive one such as you.' He turned towards the Headmaster, almost as if it was easier to give him the next piece of information than to tell Sherlock. 'Although the family house is in Horsham we have relatives in Farnham, not too far from here. An uncle and aunt. Sherlock will be staying with them over the school holidays.'

'No!' Sherlock exploded.

'Yes,' Mycroft said gently. 'It is arranged. Uncle Sherrinford and Aunt Anna have agreed to take you in for the summer.'

'But I've never even *met* them!'

'Nevertheless, they are family.'

Mycroft bade farewell to the Headmaster while Sherlock stood there blankly, trying to take in the enormity of what had just happened. No going home. No seeing his father and his mother. No exploring in the fields and woods around the manor house that had been home to him for fourteen years. No sleeping in his old bed in the

room under the eaves of the house where he kept all of his books. No sneaking into the kitchens where Cook would give him a slice of bread and jam if he smiled at her. Instead, weeks of staying with people he didn't know, being on his best behaviour in a town, in a *county* which he didn't know anything about. Alone, until he returned to school.

How was he going to manage?

Sherlock followed Mycroft out of the Headmaster's study and along the corridor to the entrance hall. An enclosed brougham carriage sat outside the doors, its wheels muddy and its sides dusty from the journey that Mycroft had already undertaken to the school. The crest of the Holmes family had been painted on the door. Sherlock's trunk had already been loaded on the back. A gaunt driver who Sherlock did not recognize sat in the dicky box at the front, the reins that linked him to the two horses resting limply in his hands.

'How did he know that was my trunk?'

Mycroft gestured with his hand to indicate that it was nothing special. 'I could see it from the window of the Headmaster's study. The trunk was the only one sitting unattended. And besides, it was the one Father used to have. The Headmaster was kind enough to send a boy out to tell him to load the trunk on to the carriage.' He opened the door of the carriage and gestured to Sherlock to enter. Instead, Sherlock glanced around at his school and at his fellow pupils.

'You look as if you think you'll never see them again,' Mycroft said.

'It's not that,' Sherlock replied. 'It's just that I thought I was leaving here for something better. Now I know I'm leaving here for something worse. As bad as this place is, this is as good as it gets.'

'It won't be like that. Uncle Sherrinford and Aunt Anna are good people. Sherrinford is Father's brother.'

'Then why have I never heard about them?' Sherlock asked. 'Why has Father never mentioned having a brother?'

Mycroft winced almost imperceptibly. 'I fear that there was a falling-out in the family. Relations were strained for a while. Mother reinitiated contact via letter some months ago. I'm not even sure Father knows.'

'And that's where you're sending me?'

Mycroft patted Sherlock on the shoulder. 'If there was an alternative I would take it, believe me. Now, do you need to say goodbye to any friends?'

Sherlock looked around. There were boys he knew, but were any of them really friends?

'No,' he said. 'Let's go.'

The journey to Farnham took several hours. After passing through the town of Dorking, which was the closest group of houses to Deepdene School, the carriage clattered along country lanes, beneath spreading trees, past the occasional thatched cottage or larger house and alongside fields that were ripe with barley. The sun shone

from a cloudless sky, turning the carriage into an oven despite the breeze blowing in. Insects buzzed lazily at the windows. Sherlock watched for a while as the world went past. They stopped for lunch at an inn, where Mycroft bought some ham and cheese and half a loaf of bread. At some stage Sherlock fell asleep. When he woke up, minutes or hours later, the brougham was still moving through the same landscape. For a while he chatted with Mycroft about what was happening at home, about their sister, about Mother's fragile health. Mycroft asked after Sherlock's studies, and Sherlock told him something about the various lessons that he had sat through and more about the teachers who had taught them. He imitated their voices and their mannerisms, and reduced Mycroft to helpless laughter by the cruelty and humour of his impersonations.

After a while there were more houses lining the road and soon they were heading through a large town, the horses' hoofs clattering on cobbles. Leaning out of the carriage window, Sherlock saw what looked like a guildhall – a three-storey building, all white plaster and black beams, with a large clock hanging from a bracket outside the double doors.

'Farnham?' he guessed.

'Guildford,' Mycroft answered. 'Farnham is not too far away now.'

The road out of Guildford led along a ridge from which the land fell away on both sides, fields and woods

scattered about like toys, with patches of yellow flowers spreading across them.

'This ridge is called the Hog's Back,' Mycroft remarked. 'There's a semaphore station along here, on Pewley Hill, part of a chain that stretches from the Admiralty Building in London all the way to Portsmouth Harbour. Have they taught you about semaphores at school?'

Sherlock shook his head.

'Typical,' Mycroft murmured. 'All the Latin a boy can cram into his skull, but nothing of any practical use.' He sighed heavily. 'A semaphore is a method for passing messages quickly and over long distance that would take days by horse. Semaphore stations have boards on their roofs which can be seen from a distance, and which have six large holes in them which can be opened or closed by shutters. Depending on which holes are open or closed the board spells out different letters. A man at each semaphore station keeps watch on both the previous one in the chain and the next one with a telescope. If he sees a message being spelled out he writes it down and then repeats it via his own semaphore board, and so the message travels. This particular chain starts at the Admiralty, then goes via Chelsea and Kingston upon Thames to here, then all the way to Portsmouth Dockyard. There's another chain leading down to Chatham Dockyards, and others to Deal, Sheerness, Great Yarmouth and Plymouth. They were constructed so that the Admiralty could pass

messages quickly to the Navy in the event of a French invasion of the country. Now, tell me, if there are six holes, and each hole can be either open or closed, how many different combinations are there which could signify letters, numbers or other symbols?'

Fighting the urge to tell his brother that school was over, Sherlock closed his eyes and calculated for a moment. One hole could take two states: open or closed. Two holes could take four states: open-open; open-closed; closed-open; closed-closed. Three holes . . . He quickly worked through the calculation in his mind, and then saw a pattern emerging. 'Sixty-four,' he said eventually.

'Well done.' Mycroft nodded. 'I'm glad to see that your mathematics, at least, is up to scratch.' He glanced out of the window to his right. 'Ah, Aldershot. Interesting place. Fourteen years ago it was named by Queen Victoria as the home of the British Army. Before that it was a small hamlet with a population of less than a thousand. Now it is sixteen thousand and still growing.'

Sherlock craned his neck to look over his brother at what lay outside the other window, but from this angle he could only see a scattering of houses and what might have been a railway line running parallel to the road at the bottom of the slope. He settled back into his seat and closed his eyes, trying not to think about what lay ahead.

After a while he felt the brougham heading downhill, and shortly after that they made a series of turns, and the sound of the ground beneath the horses' hoofs changed

from stone to hard-packed earth. He screwed his eyes more tightly shut, trying to put off the moment when he would have to accept what was happening.

The carriage stopped on gravel. The sound of birdsong and the wind blowing through trees filled the carriage. Sherlock could hear footsteps crunching towards them.

'Sherlock,' Mycroft said gently. 'Time for reality.'

He opened his eyes.

The brougham had stopped outside the entrance to a large house. Constructed from red brick, it towered above them: three storeys plus what looked like a set of rooms in the attic judging by the small windows set into the grey tiles. A footman was just about to open Mycroft's door. Sherlock slid across and followed his brother out.

A woman was standing in the deep shadows at the top of three wide stone steps that led up to the portico in front of the main entrance. She was dressed entirely in black. Her face was thin and pinched, her lips pursed and her eyes narrowed, as if someone had substituted vinegar for her cup of tea that morning. 'Welcome to Holmes Manor; I am Mrs Eglantine,' she said in a dry, papery voice. 'I am the housekeeper here.' She glanced at Mycroft. 'Mr Holmes will see you in the library, whenever you are ready.' Her gaze slid to Sherlock. 'And the footman will transfer your . . . luggage . . . to your room, Master Holmes. Afternoon tea will be served at three o'clock. Please be so good as to stay in your room until then.'

'I will not be staying for tea,' Mycroft said smoothly. 'Sadly, I need to return to London.' He turned towards Sherlock, and there was a look in his eyes that was part sympathy, part brotherly love and part warning. 'Take care, Sherlock,' he said. 'I will certainly be back to return you to school at the end of the holidays, and if I can I will visit in the meantime. Be good, and take the opportunity to explore the local area. I believe that Uncle Sherrinford has an exceptional library. Ask him if you can take advantage of the accumulated wisdom it contains. I will leave my contact details with Mrs Eglantine – if you need me, send me a telegram or write a letter.' He reached out and put a comforting hand on Sherlock's shoulder. 'These are good people,' he said, quietly enough that Mrs Eglantine couldn't hear him, 'but, like everyone in the Holmes family, they have their eccentricities. Be aware, and take care not to upset them. Write to me when you get a moment. And remember – this is not the rest of your life. This is just for a couple of months. Be brave.' He squeezed Sherlock's shoulder.

Sherlock felt a bubble of anger and frustration forcing its way up his throat and choked it back. He didn't want Mycroft to see him react, and he didn't want to start his time at Holmes Manor badly. Whatever he did over the next few minutes would set the tone for the rest of his stay.

He stuck out his hand. Mycroft moved his own hand off Sherlock's shoulder and took it, smiling warmly.

'Goodbye,' Sherlock said in as level a tone as he could manage. 'Give my love to Mother, and to Charlotte. And if you hear anything of Father, let me know.'

Mycroft turned and started up the stairs towards the entrance. Mrs Eglantine met Sherlock's gaze for a moment, expressionless, then turned and led Mycroft into the house.

Looking back, Sherlock saw the footman struggling to hoist the trunk on to his shoulders. When it was safely balanced he staggered up the stairs, past Sherlock, who followed disconsolately.

The hall was tiled in black and white, lined with mahogany, with an ornate marble staircase flowing down from the upper floors like a frozen waterfall with several paintings of religious scenes, landscapes and animals on the walls. Mycroft was just passing through a doorway to the left of the staircase into a room that, from the brief glance Sherlock caught, was lined with sets of books bound in green leather. A thin, elderly man in an old-fashioned black suit was rising from a chair that had been upholstered in a shade of leather that perfectly matched the colour of the books behind it. His face was bearded, lined and pale, his scalp mottled with liver spots.

The door closed on them as they were shaking hands. The footman headed across the tiles to the bottom of the stairs, still balancing the trunk on his shoulders. Sherlock followed.

Mrs Eglantine was standing at the bottom of the stairs, outside the library. She was staring over the top of Sherlock's head, towards the door.

'Child, be aware that you are *not* welcome here,' she hissed as he passed.