



The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXIII – The Adventure of the Resident Patient

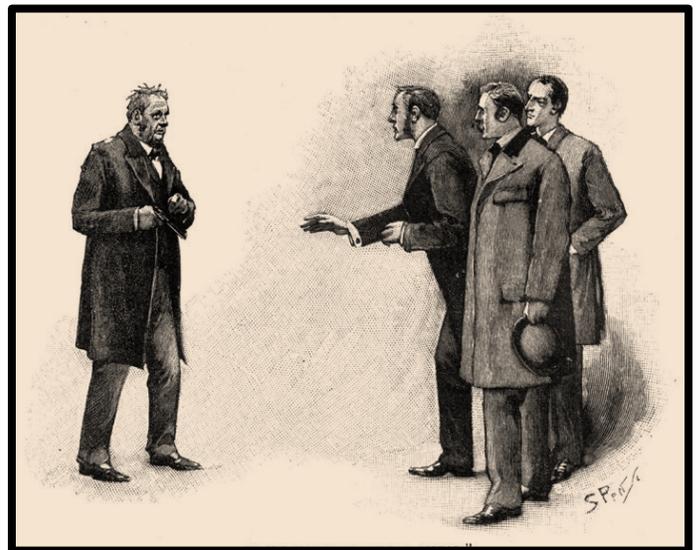
Things weren't much different for newly-minted physicians in Victorian times than they are today. Capable, talented, even brilliant doctors emerged from the medical schools, diplomas in hand, to face the prospect of starting a career in medicine. For many if not most of them, this was a daunting challenge — the expenses of a medical education had drained their financial resources, and yet they had to set themselves up in the “doctor business” with a respectable address, servants, the latest in medical equipment... everything it took to start a successful practice.

It was no different for young Percy Trevelyan, a prize-winning medical student who had recently graduated. One day, out of the blue, a man walked into his low-rent office and made him an offer he couldn't refuse: “Let me set you up in practice,” the man said, “I'll pay for the fancy address, the servants...everything you need to succeed in your practice. In return, you give me seventy-five percent of your earnings, and keep the rest for yourself.” And so it was done.

Dr. Trevelyan “wore out his chair” consulting in medicine over the next few years, and prospered. His benefactor, who took up lodging in the same building, not only prospered but became rich.

Then two individuals, an old man and his son, came to see Dr. Trevelyan. They said they were Russian noblemen, and that the old man suffered from catalepsy, a rare form of trance-like seizures. Dr.

Trevelyan examined the old man, and except for a small bit of confusion when the patient went into one of his trances and had to be revived with nitrite of amyl, he made his diagnosis, prescribed medication, and



pocketed his share of the fee. But something in his benefactor's behavior, which had always been very retiring and avoided public contact, caused Dr. Trevelyan to seek out Sherlock Holmes. Holmes said he'd look into the matter, and there things rested for a short time. The next day Holmes got an urgent message to come to Dr. Trevelyan's office at once — his benefactor, Mr. Blessington, had hanged himself during the night.

When Holmes went to the scene, he found that a terrible crime had been committed, involving multiple footprints on the carpeted stairs, an apparent conference resembling a trial that took place in Blessington's bedroom, and a page-boy who had vanished. In a few minutes, the Maître de Chasse will send the Hounds off on a tangled trail which will reveal the true identity of Blessington...and of his murderers.

There's no doubt about how the Resident Patient met his inglorious end, but the logistics of it have me wondering. In order for him to be suspended between a ceiling fixture and the floor by the neck, the ceiling would almost have to be higher than the eight feet which is standard today. This is no problem; we've had a number of excellent posts describing the height of ceilings in Victorian edifices, and ten or twelve feet seems to have been the norm. But two questions do come to mind: How did the "executioners" reach the light standard to remove the heavy lamp and affix the rope without a ladder; and how did they know that the hook for the fixture would support the flabby Blessington's weight?

One for the medicos among us: Amyl nitrite is a volatile solvent which produces temporary stimulation before depression of the central nervous system occurs. It certainly should not be used in the same way ammonia is employed to raise people from an unconscious state. Since amyl nitrite affects the central nervous system, would it be effective in treating a cataleptic state?

A question which has always stumped me is how the rest of the gang found Blessington once they had served their time in gaol. Blessington had a head start of "a few years," during which Dr. Trevelyan made him a rich man, to make a clean getaway and cover his tracks. According to Trevelyan he shunned company and seldom went outside the premises in Brook Street. How, then, did his former colleagues in crime locate him? Blessington could have holed up anywhere, and it seems to me that rooming with a respected physician in one of the best locations for a medical practice in London would have been ideal "cover." With the whole world to search in, is it within the realm of possibility that one of his pursuers would have spotted Blessington during one of his infrequent forays into the crowded London streets? And a corollary question: Why did Blessington settle in London instead of skipping the country under an assumed name?

Blessington told Holmes, "...what little I have is in that box..." Yet it seems that no one checked to see whether the contents of the box had been disturbed or removed, which might have made burglary the motive for Blessington's killing. And if Blessington had hanged himself by affixing the rope (how would he have reached the hook?) and jumping off the box, wouldn't the box have been moved from its original place at the

end of his bed so that there was no possibility of him being able to save himself by supporting himself on box or bed? (Remember that this is the scenario originally postulated, in which Blessington had committed suicide.)

Lastly, why did the “patient” and his “son” pretend to be Russians? Was it thought in those days that Russians had a greater tendency to have cataleptic fits than other nationalities?

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