



His Last Bow

Adventure XLIII – The Adventure of the Devil’s Foot

As happened from time to time, Holmes had spent so freely of his mental and physical energy in solving cases that he was on the verge of nervous collapse. At the insistence of a physician, who told him that further exertions threatened to cut short his career as a consulting detective, Holmes grudgingly betook himself to Cornwall for some much-needed rest and relaxation, accompanied by his trusty Watson.

But Holmes’ recuperative time was destined to be cut short. A visit from the local vicar and a parishioner brought the news that three members of a local family, two brothers and a sister, had suddenly fallen victim to a bizarre fate. The evening before the three of them, in company with another brother, had enjoyed dinner and a pleasant game of whist. The third brother, who had taken his leave early, was the parishioner who accompanied the vicar. Of the other three siblings, two brothers, George and Owen Tregennis, had been found that very morning with their senses stricken clean out of them, raving and singing in complete lunacy, in the room where the whist game had taken place. Their sister Brenda was still in the room also — stone dead in her chair, with a look of indescribable horror and revulsion indelibly stamped on her features. And if this were not bad enough, the next day the third brother, Mortimer, was found dead in the sitting-room of the vicarage where he resided. His face, too, had that look of total dread and horror which had marked his sister’s dying emotions. The vicar was convinced that the Forces of Evil had invaded his little parish.



Death by asphyxiation is not unusual in the Canon. We have Brunton, the butler of Hurlstone in MUSG, Paul Kratides in GREE, and Dr. Ray Ernest and Mrs. Amberley in RETI as examples. But, to use American drug vernacular, DEVI is the only adventure that features death attributable to a “bad trip.”

In his initial interview with Mortimer Tregennis, Holmes says, "I am not clear how you came to hear the news so early this morning." Yet only a few minutes earlier he had heard a clear statement from Vicar Roundhay which contained that information, subsequently corroborated by Tregennis. Was this evidence of a mental lapse on Holmes' part, a symptom of the mental exhaustion for which Dr. Moore Agar had packed him off to Cornwall for recuperation? Or did he suspect Tregennis from the very beginning, and request a repetition of that part of his story in hopes of catching Tregennis in a slip?

It's apparent that Helston was the name and/or location of a mental asylum. Did such a place, or a counterpart, actually exist in Cornwall in 1897?

After investigating Mortimer Tregennis' death, Holmes asked Mr. Roundhay to direct the police inspector's attention to the bedroom window and the sitting-room lamp. What could anyone have expected the inspector to learn from those "clues?" Holmes had knowledge of key elements the inspector had no way of knowing: The source of the reddish gravel found on the sill of or underneath Tregennis' window; the stuffiness of the room. Is this an example of what we were just discussing about Holmes playing mind tricks with others?

Three years ago, the Hounds discussed the matter of Sterndale's inability to obtain a divorce. In that discussion, it was revealed that the laws of the time permitted a husband to get a divorce after a minimum two years of separation. There was also some expense involved. Yet Sterndale told Holmes, "...I have a wife who has left me for years and yet whom, by the deplorable laws of England, I could not divorce. For years Brenda waited. For years I waited." That certainly sounds like more than two years, ostensibly spent waiting for Sterndale's spouse to die. And given Sterndale's fame as a hunter and explorer, it seems reasonable to expect that he could have raised the sum — approximately seven hundred pounds — necessary to underwrite the costs of a divorce.

It seems to me that there could be at least one alternate scenario which would account for the lunacy of George and Owen Tregennis and the deaths of Brenda and Mortimer Tregennis. The only incontrovertible fact about the fate of these people is that they were exposed to a powerful hallucinogen. Might Leon Sterndale have been the malefactor? Could he have plotted to kill all of the Tregennis and been obliged to deal separately with Mortimer Tregennis, who unexpectedly left before he could suffer the fate of his siblings? Why would Sterndale do such a thing? Inheritance of the family fortune, through his distant kinship to the Tregennis line, might supply the motive.

Steve Clarkson

April 02, 1999