



The Hounds of the Internet

"A singular set of people, Watson."

as is shown on the table.

In 1897, year in which this case took place, Sherlock Holmes was 43 years old and Doctor John H. Watson 45.

Main Characters:

Dr. Leon Sterndale, noted lion hunter and African explorer. Mortimer Tregennis, bachelor lodging at the local vicarage. Owen and George Tregennis, Mortimer's brothers. Brenda Tregennis, Mortimer's sister. Mr. Roundhay, the local vicar, in whose house Mortimer Tregennis lives. Dr. Richards, the local physician. Mrs. Porter, housekeeper at Tredannick Wartha.

Notable Quotes:

To his sombre and cynical spirit all popular applause was always abhorrent, and nothing amused him more at the end of a successful case than to hand over the actual exposure to some orthodox official, and to listen with a mocking smile to the general chorus of misplaced congratulation.

I received a telegram from Holmes last Tuesday—he has never been known to write where a telegram would serve.

"I thought I knew my Watson."

"How do you know that?"

"I followed you."

"I saw no one."

"That is what you may expect to see when I follow you."

An Inquiry into:

"The Adventure of the Devil's Foot"

Vol. XIV No. 42 • July 18, 2024

"The Adventure of The Devil's Foot" was first published in *The Strand Magazine* in December 1910. It is part of *His Last Bow*.

For a change, Watson was very clear in his dating; the chronology for this adventure is unanimous as to the year,

The Adventure of the Devil's Foot

<i>Chronologist</i>	<i>Date of the Adventure</i>
<i>Canon</i>	<i>Tuesday, March 16, 1897</i>
<i>Baring-Gould</i>	<i>Tuesday, March 16, 1897</i>
<i>Bell</i>	<i>Tuesday, March 16, 1897</i>
<i>Blakeney</i>	<i>Spring 1897</i>
<i>Brend</i>	<i>March 1897</i>
<i>Christ</i>	<i>Tuesday, March 16, 1897</i>
<i>Dakin</i>	<i>Tuesday, March 16, 1897</i>
<i>Folsom</i>	<i>Tuesday, March 16, 1897</i>
<i>Hall</i>	<i>Tuesday, March 16, 1897</i>
<i>Keefauver</i>	<i>Tuesday, March 16, 1897</i>
<i>Klinger</i>	<i>1897</i>
<i>Zeisler</i>	<i>Saturday, April 17, 1897</i>

Please note that Canon chronologists may differ on pivotal dates and comparative periods between cases, thus a simple majority is not necessarily correct. Most Canon scholars settle on a single chronologist's results for their research framework.

“I have never loved, Watson, but if I did and if the woman I loved had met such an end, I might act even as our lawless lion-hunter has done.”



The Unfortunate Reticence

Scattered across the Canon are (far too many for my taste) irritating references by Watson usually at the beginning of cases in which, in effect, he tells us that we might have had far more than a mere sixty cases to enjoy had it not been for Sherlock Holmes' reticence. According to our medico, an aversion at being the center of attention, led the sleuth to forbidding him from publishing more cases without his approval.

Obviously, Watson was subject to this promise of silence when he received the telegram suggesting he write about the “Cornish horror.” He then tells us that he quickly retrieved his notes of the case to write it before the Great Detective had a chance to change his mind. Unwittingly perhaps, the Good Doctor taunts us by hinting that he has records of probably several dozen cases that remain unpublished because Holmes will not permit him to write them.



Early in their relationship Watson observed that our sleuth “was as sensitive to flattery on the score of his art as any girl could be of her beauty.” This is why it has always struck me as rather *outré* that Holmes, proud of his powers, and not averse to adulation (witness his reaction to Lestrade's praise in SIXN) would extract such an iron-clad pledge from his friend and colleague not to reveal most of his triumphs to the world.

Time and time again Watson has told us that Holmes, overall, viewed the performance of his work as being *ars gratia artis* and not so much for personal interest; witness, for instance, Lestrade's continuously improving reputation, which was greatly based on our sleuth's detection skills and his reticence to claim credit for them.

The argument has been presented that by this time Holmes had reached a point in his career at which he shunned the publicity that he welcomed before, having devoted himself to other pursuits.

However, if he was so set upon this unusual anonymity, why would he occasionally and out of the blue, suddenly allow Watson to publish the facts of some particular case knowing that it would inevitably shine an unwelcome spotlight upon him?

Sherlock Holmes' Indiscretions

According to Watson, "Holmes' iron constitution showed some symptoms of giving way in the face of constant hard work of a most exacting kind, aggravated, perhaps, by occasional indiscretions of his own."

At this point, of course, we would all have liked to know exactly what was the "exacting work" referred to by our Biographer. My count of unrecorded cases hovers about the 140 mark. These represent those unrecorded investigations so casually mentioned in passing by Watson. A more accurate count would have had to include the balance of cases to which he made no mention whatsoever.

Of all the canonical cases, excluding DEVI (which would not count in this instance) only ABBE took place in 1897; it is highly unlikely that the solving of Sir Eustace Brackenstall's murder posed any great stress on the Great Detective.

One can only hypothesize then that during that year Holmes' condition had to have resulted from mighty exertions in the solving of major (alas, unrecorded!) cases, very possibly government-connected ones. After all, he solved conundrums for the French government as well as the Pope!

This brings us to the "occasional indiscretions" mentioned by Watson. We of course know of the Great Detective's occasional use of cocaine and even possibly heroin.

The "indiscretions" mentioned by Watson may have had a completely different origin and still concern Holmes' friend and physician. Unquestionably, the possibility of a revisit to seven-percent-solution-land would have been ever-present in

Watson's mind. He himself writes in MISS that, *For years I had gradually weaned him from that drug mania which had threatened once to check his remarkable career. Now I knew that under ordinary conditions he no longer craved for this artificial stimulus, but I was well aware that the fiend was not dead, but sleeping; and I have known that the sleep was a light one and the waking near when in periods of idleness I have seen the drawn look upon Holmes's ascetic face, and the brooding of his deep-set and inscrutable eyes.*

The possibility of the Great Detective resorting to drugs again seems to be out of the question here. Consider, Holmes is being forced to take a rest from his many activities. He has been so busy that at least one doctor has feared a breakdown. Thus, I think that this would leave drugs out of it.

In any case, whatever the Great Detective's other indiscretions may have been, Watson was right in not mentioning them.

After all, it's Holmes' business, not ours.

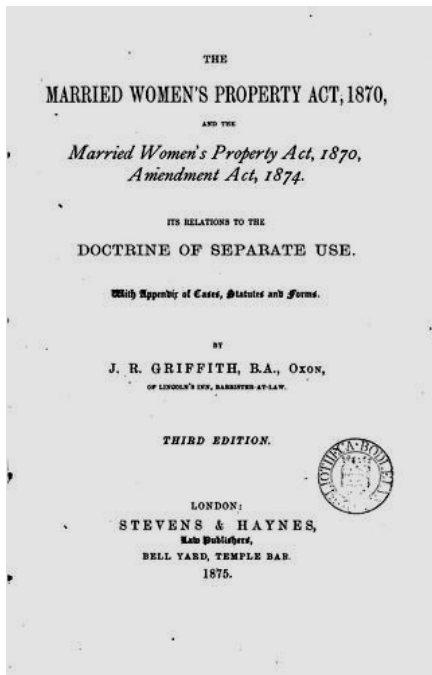
The Deplorable Laws

Sterndale's lamentation that he and Brenda Tregennis could do nothing about their love for one another, because the "deplorable laws of England" did not allow him to divorce a wife who had abandoned him years before is not fully justifiable.

In 1857, the Matrimonial Causes Act allowed divorce for females in extreme cases. This was followed by the Married Woman's Property Act in 1870, which extended some rights to women to own property after marriage. While it is true that these laws were primarily aimed at giving women more con-



trol over their lives and had their greatest impact upon the aristocracy and upper middle class, they were also applicable to men, enabling them to sue for divorce as well.



In view of all this, it would appear that the only obstacle to Leon and Brenda's wedded bliss would have been the powerful societal stigma of divorce imposed by the mores of the time. And before one dismisses these from one's comfortable 21st-century perspective, this disapproval was still powerful past the first half for the 20th century, as foolish Edward VIII (a.k.a. the Duke of Windsor) found out much to his regret for the rest of his life.

In Sterdale's case, the fact that his wife abandoned him years ago would have provided him with a very powerful case to put forth to obtain his freedom. Aside from the possible disapproval of English society, it seems highly unlikely that he would have been refused a divorce.

Even if this were not to have been the case, and he had been denied a divorce, he could have obtained one in a country with laxer outlooks and laws that took a more broadminded attitude towards these matters—France, for example. A French divorce, (as well as a subsequent wedding) regardless of social disapproval—would have been recognized by English law.

As to the possible resulting stigma, what possible difference could it have made if he and she left everything and everyone behind to go live in Africa?

So what if invitations to have the Sterndales over for tea had stopped altogether? It seems highly unlikely the newlyweds would have settled down in merrie olde England anyway, so what could have been the problem?

Radix pedis diaboli

For generations Canon scholars and students have wondered exactly what kind of botanical drug it was that Leon Sterndale brought back with him from Africa. We only have the information that Watson gave us. According to him, the devil's foot is a West African plant with a root shaped like a foot—half human, half goat-like. If one inhales the reddish-brown snuff-like powder from it as it is being burned, the result is madness and death.

No such thing as the devil's-foot root has yet been found; at least it is yet to make its way either into the pharmacopeia or the literature of toxicology. Nevertheless, in a fascinating short article published in 1990 in *The New York Times*, Victoria John, associate director of information services at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and Dr. Lothian Lynas, a researcher at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, were queried about *radix pedis diaboli*.

Although neither could find any published reference to such a plant in either the botanical or pharmacological literature, Dr. Lynas revealed an interesting parallel: "The closest name in the literature would be the 'devil's shoestrings,' a plant used to ex-



pel intestinal worms, but nothing that would cause madness and death.” Asked whether poison ivy might work as a substitute, she pointed out that breathing the smoke of burning poison ivy could burn the lungs.

Probably the closest thing to come to the devil’s foot’s effects would be lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD). However, its results are not necessarily fatal, unless the user decides to spread his or her wings and fly off a 38th-storey window.

There are some things that are best left alone.

An Intriguing Individual and a Controversial Decision

After his brief appearance we never again hear of Dr. Leon Sterndale. Undeniably, he is one of the Canon’s more interesting and compelling characters, possibly due to the tragic undercurrent that seemingly perpetually haunted him.

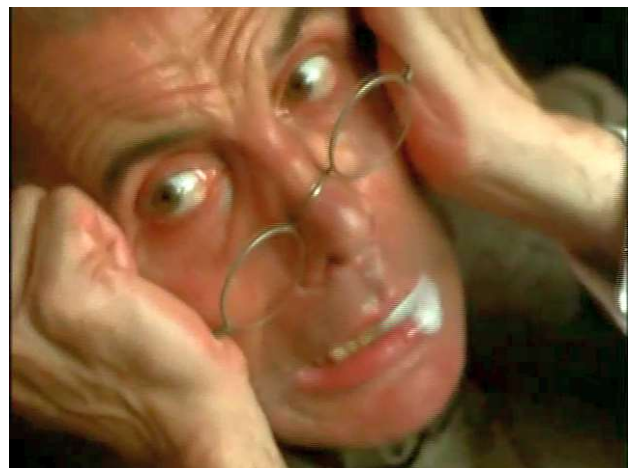
Sterndale’s revenge and Holmes’ reaction to it is a subject that has fueled heated discussion among scholars of the Sacred Writings. While admitting to the validity of his motive, some still think that re-



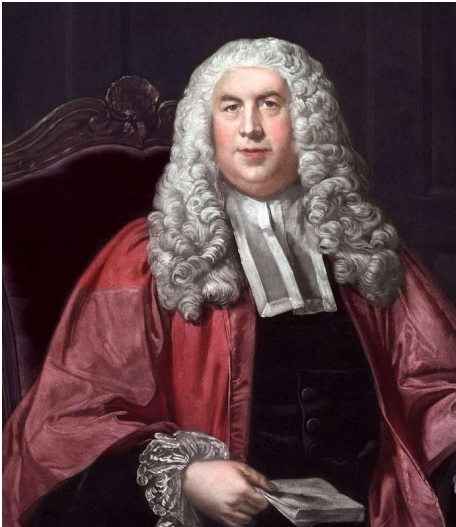
gardless of how foul Tregennis’ actions were Sterndale (as well as Holmes, later) had no right to take the law into his own hands and assume the rôle of judge and jury. They argue that he should have instead left retribution to the workings of the law; it is his use of such a ghastly means of vengeance that in these scholars’ consideration puts him so far beyond the pale. This leads one to wonder whether if he had stuck to tradition and used a more traditional instrument, such an axe, instead of *radix pedis diaboli* it would have made a difference in their conclusions.

how one views the nature of Tregennis’ monstrous crime—particularly his malicious and well-thought-out choice of the appalling weapon that he used to accomplish his ends—by no extent of the imagination can such act be justified. His actions make it easier to apply, with a clear conscience, the philosophy of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Mikado*: “Let the punishment fit the crime.”

This leaves us with a complicated legal matter to be considered. One final thorny question needs to be considered: what would have been accomplished by bringing Sterndale before the assizes? Of what possible good would it have been to throw the aging lion hunter upon the unforgiving gears of the law there to be crushed? He lamented, correctly, that the law itself failed him: “Should I appeal to the law? Where were my proofs? I knew that the facts were true, but could I help to make a jury of countrymen believe so fantastic a story? I might or I might not. But I could not afford to fail. My soul cried out for revenge.”



Another extralegal consideration is that, unlike Tregennis, he did not harm an innocent person. On top of all this can be added the fact that Sterndale still might have been able to do some good in the Dark Continent.



Even Mr. Justice Blackstone, that genius of British Common Law, remarked in 1765 in his seminal, four-volume *Commentaries on the Laws of England* upon the wisdom of blindly applying to its fullest the massive letter of the law as demanded by the legal maxim, *Fiat jūstitia ruat cælum* (“Let justice be done though the heavens fall”). His reasoned thinking was that when the heavens do begin to shake, one should extend a sensible, steadying hand and keep them from collapsing.

Those who disagree with Holmes disapprovingly put him at Sterndale’s level, in that he makes a judgment that was not his to make when he acted as judge and jury and exonerated the explorer. He has

also been brought to task for sympathizing with the lion hunter’s actions when as Sterndale walked away and he poignantly says to his friend, “I have never loved, Watson, but if I did and if the woman I loved had met such an end, I might act even as our lawless lion-hunter has done.”

In all fairness, it is difficult to fault the Great Detective for following the dictates of his conscience. Such a decision often requires considerably more courage than choosing the traveled road leading to the authorities. We have all witnessed him at times when he correctly chose to rely upon his own assessment of what is guilt and place Justice above the Law. He stated his reasons most clearly in *ABBE*, when he remarked that “Once or twice in my career I feel that I have done more real harm by my discovery of the criminal than ever he had done by his crime. I have learned caution now, and I had rather play tricks with the law of England than with my own conscience.”

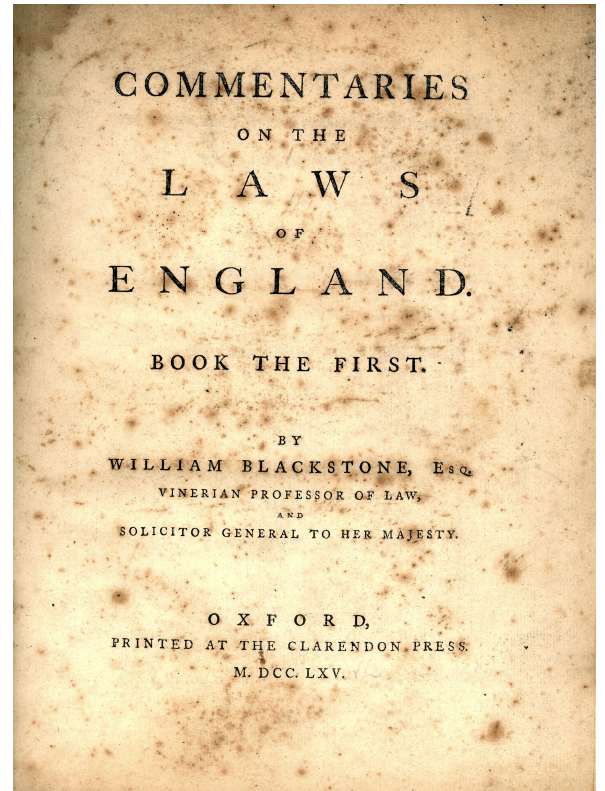
It is called, “balancing the equities.”

A Remarkable Turn of Phrase



When he described his sensations under the effects of the devil’s foot, Watson wrote the following: “...my mind told me that in this cloud, unseen as yet, but about to spring out upon my appalled senses, lurked all that was vaguely horrible, all that was monstrous and inconceivably wicked in the universe. Vague shapes swirled and swam amid the dark cloud-bank, each a menace and a warning of something coming, the advent of some unspeakable dweller upon the threshold, whose very shadow would blast my soul.”

Being an *aficionado* of H.P Lovecraft and August Delreth and their Cthulhu mythos, the phrase,



“...the advent of some unspeakable dweller upon the threshold” perked my interest. As a veteran traveler of the dangerous path to Dunwich I recalled: “Yog-Sothoth knows the gate. Yog-Sothoth is the gate. Yog-Sothoth is the key and guardian of the gate.”

The concept of the Dweller upon the Threshold is an ancient reference to a supposed invisible and oftentimes malevolent entity that may attach itself to a human being. The theosophist Helena Blavatsky wrote that she believed it to be “the discarded astral double of an individual in a previous incarnation that may have not fully disintegrated yet when that individual is reborn.” Thus the dweller will be drawn to a new incarnated personality due to their affinity.

Sometimes called the Guardian of the Threshold, this is a theosophical concept that had to have been well known by the Literary Agent who doubtless must have mentioned it to Doctor Watson.



What else happened in 1897:

Empire

Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.



Benin Expedition, a punitive expedition with a force of 1,200 under Admiral Sir Harry Rawson captures, burns, and loots Benin City, bringing to an end the West African Kingdom of Benin. Much of the country's art, including the Benin Bronzes, was destroyed, looted or dispersed.

◀ Eighty-two British soldiers hold off attacks by 4,000 Zulu warriors at the Battle of Rorke's Drift in South Africa.

Uprising on India's Northwest Frontier.

General Kitchener occupies Berber, North of Khartoum.

First Women's Institute in the world; established at Stoney Creek, Canada.

Britain

Sir Henry Tate presents the Tate Gallery to the nation.

Northern Polytechnic, Holloway Road, opens.

Blackwall Tunnel opens.

Report of Royal Commission (Eversley) on agricultural depression.

Employers' Liability Act: responsibility for injuries to and compensation of employees injured at work.

Royal Automobile Club, London.

Trunk telephone lines transferred to control of the GPO.

Trained nurses only to be employed in hospitals.

World

Mathieu Dreyfus discovers that the document on which his brother, Alfred, was convicted was actually written by Major M.C. Esterhazy.

Visit of French President Faure to St. Petersburg cements Franco-Russian Alliance.

“Stars and Stripes Forever” by John Phillip Sousa is performed for the first time in Philadelphia.

Possibly the most severe quake in history strikes Assam, India. Shock waves are felt over an area size of Europe.

Dr. Karl Wolfert and his mechanic are killed in Germany when their dirigible, powered by a Daimler car engine, crashes on its fourth flight.

In Austria a giant Ferris wheel, designed by Walter Bassett of England, opens in Vienna. It was built in the Wurstelprater amusement park to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the accession of Emperor Franz Joseph to the Habsburg throne.

Swede Saloman Andrée and two companions, Knute Fraenkle and Nils Strindberg, in the Ornen balloon are forced down after 64 hours in the first expedition to fly by balloon across the North Pole.



Their attempt to return ended on White Island. Their fate was later discovered in 1930, by Norwegian whalers.

◀ Amelia Earhart is born in Kansas. First woman to fly solo across the Atlantic, she disappears in the South Pacific while trying to fly around the world.

William McKinley inaugurated as U.S. president.

King of Korea proclaims himself emperor.

Adolph Ochs of the *New York Times* publishes for the first time his slogan “All the News That’s Fit to Print.”

The Vienna Secession is founded by artists Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), Koloman Moser, Josef Hoffmann, Joseph Maria Olbrich, Max Kurzweil, and others. The movement rebelled against the sentimental academic painting of the 19th century.

Grant’s Tomb is dedicated.

Russia occupies Port Arthur.

Two German missionaries murdered in Shantung; Germany occupies Kiao-chow, in north China.

Universal suffrage introduced in Austria.

Crete proclaims union with Greece; Turkey declares war on Greece and is defeated in Thessaly. Austro-Russian treaty on Balkans relaxes tensions created by this 30-day war between Greece and Turkey in Macedonia.

Gojong, or Emperor Gwangmu, proclaims the short-lived Korean Empire; lasts until 1910.

Art

Conrad publishes *Nigger of the Narcissus*.

H.G. Wells publishes *The Invisible Man*.



Kipling, *Captains Courageous*.

◀ Rostand publishes *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

Paul Dukas debuts *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.

Gauguin paints *Girls Bathing in Tahiti*.

Toulouse-Lautrec paints *Marcelle*.

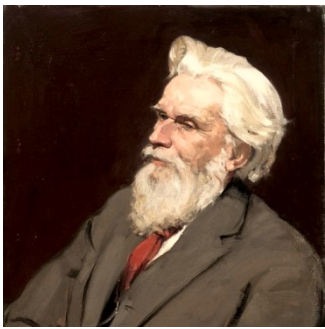
Brams Stoker writes *Dracula*.

Science and Technology

Physicist Sir Joseph John Thomson describes the electron as a particle of negative charge whose motion constitutes electricity at a meeting of the Royal Institution in London. He worked on cathode rays and identified electrons, charged particles smaller than the hydrogen atom.

Ramsay discovers the inert atmospheric gases xenon, krypton, and neon.

Felix Hoffmann, a German worker for Bayer, rediscovered aspirin (acetyl salicylic acid), the active ingredient of the willow plant's (salicin). In 1832 a French chemist named Charles Gergardt had experiments with salicin and created salicylic acid. On March 6, 1899, Bayer registered "Aspirin" as a trademark. J. McCreary patents an air-washer intended to purify air in a building; beginning of air-conditioning.



◀ Henry Havelock Ellis publishes *Studies in Psychology of Sex*.

Diesel engine invented.

Photographs first taken using artificial light.

Paris Métro opens.

Sir Ronald Ross, bacteriologist, identifies the causes of malaria and studies the disease.

Barthelot publishes *Thermochemie*, extending his *Mécanique chimique* (1878).

Beginning of Monotype system of typesetting.

S.A. Andrée is killed attempting to explore the Polar regions in a free-flying balloon.

Next week's case: REDC.

Respectfully submitted,

Murray, the Courageous Orderly

(a.k.a. Alexander E. Braun)

"I should have fallen into the hands of the murderous Ghazis had it not been for the devotion and courage shown by Murray, my orderly..."

All Sherlock Holmes photos have been published by courtesy of ITV Granada.

If you would like to join the Hounds of the Internet, email us at CourageousMurray@aol.com.

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