

## An Observance Of Trifles

You know my method. It is founded upon the observance of trifles.

(Arthur Conan Doyle)

*snell's interminable ramblings about the canon*

# His Last Bow

## Adventure XLIII -- The Adventure of the Devil's Foot

### The Adventure Of The Devil's Foot--Holmes And Watson Totally Get Wasted!!

For forty-some stories I've managed to preface my trivial detail-obsessed wallow in each **Sherlock Holmes** story with a longer essay, focusing on some aspect of the mystery I felt particularly fascinating.

Which brings us to **The Adventure of The Devil's Foot**.

Because I got *nothing*.

Not that there isn't a lot of interesting things going on in Devil's Foot. There certainly are. It's a great story.

But most of most fascinating ideas in the tale are *reprises* of issues I've already talked about in earlier essays, as this story returns to a lot of themes from earlier Holmes stories. And I don't want to repeat myself too much. Yet what's left, as curious and informative as it may be, doesn't justify a longer piece.

So forgive me, dear reader, for no huge and overlong analysis this time. Let's just get straight to the...



### OTHERS TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

\*\*We have discussed, most extensively in **Abbey Grange**, how problematic it is when Sherlock Holmes takes it into his own hands to determine if criminals--even killers--deserve punishment.

So while I won't belabor my conclusions again (spoiler alert: it's *very* problematic), Devil's Foot provides a couple of unique aspects we should acknowledge.

First of all, **Dr. Leon Sterndale**, unlike the others Holmes allowed to go unpunished, committed *deliberate, premeditated murder*. This was not arguably self-defense, or the unfortunate result of a

fight, or a crime committed "in the heat of passion." Sterndale, like the big game hunter he is, stalked and killer Mortimer Tregennis, and executed him in cold blood. And in a particularly heinous way: "*Then you passed out and closed the window, standing on the lawn outside smoking a cigar and watching what occurred.*"

You can argue whether he was justified (Holmes: "*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. Who knows?*"). You can argue that the case might have proven impossible to prove before a jury--that was Sterndale's excuse for executing Tregennis in the first place! But given Sterndale's propensity for violence and attitude towards civilized justice--"*I have lived so long among savages and beyond the law,' said he, 'that I have got into the way of being a law to myself,'"* and "*I have come at last to be a law to myself.*"--we cannot have any confidence in Holmes' standby of "he is unlikely to commit another crime, so..." No, even an "exile" in Africa, it seems not unlikely that Sterndale will take justice into his own hands again.

Let us also remember that Sterndale had absolutely no proof--*none whatsoever*--that **Mortimer Tregennis** murdered **Brenda**. Holmes wouldn't share any of the investigation's facts with the great hunter. So Sterndale merely presumed that Mortimer had stolen some Devil's Foot--even though he had no idea when or how. He assumed Mortimer had sufficient motive. He threatened and tortured Mortimer, yet Tregennis did *not* confess--Sterndale only says, "**The wretch sank into a chair, paralyzed at the sight of my revolver.**" Surely, in his self-justifying confession, he would have told Holmes if Tregennis had admitted to the deed. [The **1965 BBC** adaptation *does* have Tregennis confess, albeit at gunpoint].

I think that a case--admittedly shaky--can be made that Holmes *overreached* on some of his conclusions, and perhaps Mortimer Tregennis was not guilty. With none of the facts at his disposal, there is no way the Leon Sterndale could have been certain of Tregennis' guilt. It's certainly possible that he tortured and killed an innocent man, which is the danger of taking the law into your own hands.

But most \*\*\*\*ing of all--*why was Dr. Sterndale still carrying the poison with him when he came in response to Holmes' summons at the end?* It was two days after Mortimer's death...surely carrying that packet on his person could only lead to his conviction if was somehow searched, giving the police the only clue they might need to convict him. Why the \*\*\*\* risk it--unless he planned to use it to kill again?

Remember, Holmes had summoned Sterndale after the murder of Mortimer, and Sterndale had to be suspicious as to why. Did the detective suspect him? Twice Watson has the hunter look surprised, if not annoyed, at having to meet with them outside, and not in their dwelling: "*He turned in some surprise towards the rustic arbour in which we sat....'You will excuse this informal reception in the open air...'*"

And Sterndale *was* carrying the Devil's Foot with him, when that would be foolishly reckless--unless he intended to use it again.

It is all implication (or an overly eager misreading on my part). But I believe that when Holmes summoned Sterndale, he feared that the detective had sussed him out. And he brought some *radix pedis diaboli* with him to the cottage, planning to kill Holmes (or drive him insane)--with **Watson** as collateral damage. Just another victim of the "**Cornish horror**," which the pedestrian local police would never solve. But his plan was thwarted when Holmes insisted on taking the meeting outside.

And *that* is why Leon Sterndale should not have been allowed to escape untouched by the law.

\*\*Devil's Foot also reprises a theme I cover at great length in my essay on **The Hound Of The Baskervilles**: a rejection of the supernatural in favor of reason and intellect.

Holmes strength--his mind, his deductions--are *worthless* in the milieu of ghost and demons. And, as in Hound, he declares as much several times:

*"It is not of this world. Something has come into that room which has dashed the light of reason from their minds. What human contrivance could do that?"*

*"I fear," said Holmes, "that if the matter is beyond humanity it is certainly beyond me. Yet we must exhaust all natural explanations before we fall back upon such a theory as this.*

And

*I take it, in the first place, that neither of us is prepared to admit diabolical intrusions into the affairs of men. Let us begin by ruling that entirely out of our minds.*

I won't go on to much about this, as I covered it pretty well back in Hound. But I will reiterate that Holmes and Watson should treat the supernatural like a **Scooby-Doo** episode: something to be debunked, not embraced. And if you're doing a pastiche where Sherlock is interacting with actual supernatural forces, I don't think I agree with your understanding of the character.

\*\*This is the *second* time that Holmes' nervous exhaustion has led to an enforced exile from London: *"Holmes's iron constitution showed some symptoms of giving way in the face of constant hard work of a most exacting kind...but he was induced at last, on the threat of being permanently disqualified from work, to give himself a complete change of scene and air."*

Of course, *both* times a case dropped into his lap, and Sherlock certainly showed *no* signs of the stress of working threatening his health. To the contrary, getting his mind engaged on singular problems seems to have been the best medicine, not an enforced rest that would let his mind go unused and sink into the depths of depression again...

\*\*Of course, Watson says that Holmes' condition was "*aggravated, perhaps, by occasional indiscretions of his own.*"

A cocaine use reference? Or some *other* "indiscretions?" Stop being so \*\*\*\*ed discreet, Watson!!

\*\*Watson claiming that Holmes' "*aversion to publicity*" made it difficult to get the detective to allow his cases to be published:

*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.*

Of course, that's quite a contrast with Holmes' penchant for sometimes *ridiculous dramatic flourishes* in the resolution of his cases. Stolen documents under food trays, fires to smoke out hiding killers when Holmes knew where they were the whole time, dramatic revelations--the detective loved to show off.

Perhaps that was only for his peers (and clients), and it was the applause of the general public which Holmes disdained...

\*\*Watson on why so few of Holmes' cases were published: "*My participation in some of his adventures was always a privilege which entailed discretion and reticence upon me.*"

Well, sure. But by your own admission, you had records of hundreds of cases--*hundreds!!* Quit holding out on us!! Discretion be \*\*\*\*ed!

\*\*Apocryphal case : "*Dr. Moore Agar, of Harley Street, whose dramatic introduction to Holmes I may some day recount...*"

It was *never* recounted. Boo!

\*\*Watson is once again a *poor* travel agent, painting a fairly bleak portrait of Cornwall:

*We looked down upon the whole sinister semicircle of Mounts Bay, that old death trap of sailing vessels, with its fringe of black cliffs and surge-swept reefs on which innumerable seamen have met their end. With a northerly breeze it lies placid and sheltered, inviting the storm-tossed craft to tack into it for rest and protection. Then come the sudden swirl round of the wind, the blistering gale from the south-west, the dragging anchor, the lee shore, and the last battle in the creaming breakers. The wise mariner stands far out from that evil place...It was a country of rolling moors, lonely and dun-colored...*

Obviously their vacation was not endorsed by the Cornish Tourism Bureau...

\*\*Man, sometimes you just don't get to enjoy your time off:

*We found ourselves, even in that land of dreams, plunged into a problem at our very doors which was more intense, more engrossing, and infinitely more mysterious than any of those which had driven us from London. Our simple life and peaceful, healthy routine were violently interrupted, and we were precipitated into*

*the midst of a series of events which caused the utmost excitement not only in Cornwall but throughout the whole west of England.*

Yeah, sometime work bothers me on my attempted day off, too. Nothing as exciting as the Cornish Horror, though!

**\*\***Watson, angry at the attempt to interrupt Holmes' rest, gets *as close to rude* as a Victorian gentleman can get with guests: "*I glared at the intrusive vicar with no very friendly eyes...*" Dude, where are your manners?

The **Granada** adaptation has Watson trying much harder, and with much less discretion, to keep Holmes out of the case. With just as much success.

**\*\***Wonderful, well also terrible and terrifying, tableau:

*His two brothers and his sister were seated round the table exactly as he had left them, the cards still spread in front of them and the candles burned down to their sockets. The sister lay back stone-dead in her chair, while the two brothers sat on each side of her laughing, shouting, and singing, the senses stricken clean out of them. All three of them, the dead woman and the two demented men, retained upon their faces an expression of the utmost horror--a convulsion of terror which was dreadful to look upon.*

Horrifying stuff. And to their credit, *both* BBC 1965 and Granada do a wonderful job of portraying this scene.

**\*\***"*Mrs. Porter, the old cook and housekeeper, who declared that she had slept deeply and heard no sound during the night.*"

OK, hold one just one minute--if our victims were "*laughing, shouting and singing,*" wouldn't she have heard *something*?!? Shouting?!?

Holmes doesn't see anything wrong with this, and declares, "*Mrs. Porter may be eliminated. She is evidently harmless.*" But really, this is too dismissive by far. She claims not to have heard any of the ruckus the insane gentlemen were making. She would have been just as able to put the devil's foot into the fireplace as Mortimer, if not more so--who notices servants? And her insistence on leaving immediately might be another red flag.

Granted, she has *no* motive that we know of, and *no* access to Doctor Sterndale's African mementos. But it seems unwise to eliminate her as a suspect, especially if we consider the possibility that she might have been acting as an accomplice to someone else...

**\*\***"*We were a family of tin-miners at Redruth, but we sold our venture to a company, and so retired with enough to keep us. I won't deny that there was some feeling about the division of the money...*"

Is there some reason that it wasn't *merely* a 3-way split? Or 4-way? Why was Mortimer so aggrieved? Did he actually receive less, or did he feel that he deserved more?

Did he think that Brenda should not have been included in the division of funds, which would have reduced his share? Had he not wanted to sell in the first place?

Without any details on the dispute, it's hard to evaluate how credible it was as a motive for Mortimer to go so far as to eliminate his entire family.

**\*\*Mortimer Tregennis claims that he and his brother saw...*something* outside the window the night of the tragedy:**

*I could just make out the bushes on the lawn, and it seemed to me for a moment that I saw something moving among them. I couldn't even say if it was man or animal, but I just thought there was something there...*

*"Did you not investigate?"*

*"No; the matter passed as unimportant."*

Now, Holmes concludes that no one could have been seen through the window, and therefore the story must be untrue, and therefore Mortimer must be lying, trying to distract Holmes.

Yet Sherlock *overanalyzes* this, I think, claiming that Tregennis' vague tale said several things that he *didn't actually say*.

Even though Mortimer never said with any certainty that they saw a person--"*something moving, I couldn't say if it was man or animal*"--Holmes goes on to claim that Tregennis had said they saw an actual person: "*Anyone who had the design to alarm these people would be compelled to place his very face against the glass before he could be seen.*" Well, sure, but that's not what Tregennis said that he saw!

Holmes always says that Tregennis claimed the family was terrified by what they saw: "*It is difficult to imagine, then, how an outsider could have made so terrible an impression upon the company.*" Of course, Tregennis said no such thing--"*the matter passed as unimportant.*"

Holmes establishes that there was likely no one there. But anyone who has caught a shadow moving out of the corner of their eye at night can tell you that nothing can look like something. In all likelihood Tregennis was making his story up--but it is not beyond the pale that there was a bird or animal or some of debris blown by the wind that created the "*movement.*" Holmes, meanwhile, has to vastly inflate what Tregennis told him in order to be able to "disprove" it. **Poor** deduction/argumentation, Sherlock!

**\*\*Oh, Sherlock...you and your methods!**

*So absorbed was he in his thoughts, I remember, that he stumbled over the watering-pot, upset its contents, and deluged both our feet and the garden path.*

Both Granada and BBC 1965 have Holmes physically bump Tregennis into the dirt of a garden in order to get his footprints...

*\*\*Sterndale: "This villain had thought that I would be at sea before the news could reach me, and that I should be lost for years in Africa."*

Some have questioned why Mortimer didn't wait until he was certain Sterndale was gone to enact his plan. Well, perhaps this explains it:

Holmes: *"Why a fire?" he asked once. "Had they always a fire in this small room on a spring evening?" Mortimer Tregennis explained that the night was cold and damp.*

Perhaps this explains why Mortimer had to act so quickly--he felt that he *had* to use the fireplace, and as the spring weather warmed, there might not be any more cold and damp nights until fall. If he were to use the fireplace, it had to be now, which justified the remote risk of Sterndale being notified and returning. As it was, word only reached the hunter just before he departed the country...

*\*\*At the beginning of the tale, Watson tell us:*

*Shortly after our breakfast hour, as we were smoking together, preparatory to our daily excursion upon the moors.*

But later, Sherlock says:

*I think, Watson, that I shall resume that course of tobacco-poisoning which you have so often and so justly condemned...*

So wait--*which* is it Watson? If you condemned Holmes tobacco use, why the \*\*\*\* were you smoking with him in the morning? Perhaps you were only referring to Holmes' excessive use of tobacco. But even if that were true, your smoking with him sure isn't helping him cut down any! Physician, heal thyself!!

*\*\*Holmes: "To let the brain work without sufficient material is like racing an engine. It racks itself to pieces."*

That's sort of a condemnation of the enforced vacation as cure for nervous exhaustion, isn't it? Sherlock's mind needs something to occupy it...enforced rest with no mental challenges may be the exact opposite of what he needs to recover--as both this story and the **Reigate Squires** seems to establish!

*\*\*Watson's description of the great white hunter:*

*The huge body, the craggy and deeply seamed face with the fierce eyes and hawk-like nose, the grizzled hair which nearly brushed our cottage ceiling, the beard--golden at the fringes and white near the lips, save for the nicotine stain from his perpetual cigar--all these were as well known in London as in Africa, and could only be associated with the tremendous personality of Dr. Leon Sterndale, the great lion-hunter and explorer.*

*\*\*Sterndale "lived an absolutely lonely life, attending to his own simple wants and paying little apparent heed to the affairs of his neighbors."*

Well, obviously that wasn't true, as we learn that he was courting Brenda and hanging out with various members of the Tregennis family. Given the intense gossip in little villages like that, how was this relationship kept a secret?

*\*\*Another great "Holmes suddenly on the hunt" moment:*

*One realized the red-hot energy which underlay Holmes's phlegmatic exterior when one saw the sudden change which came over him from the moment that he entered the fatal apartment. In an instant he was tense and alert, his eyes shining, his face set, his limbs quivering with eager activity.*

*\*\*Holmes: "I cannot remain to discuss the matter with the police..."*

Why ever not?

Sherlock doesn't make *any* effort to inform the police of his investigation, except to send cryptic messages through the vicar. Heavens, people are being murdered in the most horrible fashion--this is no time for your silly games, Sherlock. At least in the Granada version, the police explicitly tell Sherlock not get involved, so there is a reason for him not to share with them.

Watson tells us later, *"It may be that the police resented the intrusion of an amateur, or that they imagined themselves to be upon some hopeful line of investigation; but it is certain that we heard nothing from them for the next two days."* Idiots.

*\*\*Whatever the state of Holmes' mental health, he's still pretty sharp, deducing the existence of a heat-activated mind-altering drug when something like that had been completely unknown before:*

*In each case there is evidence of a poisonous atmosphere. In each case, also, there is combustion going on in the room--in the one case a fire, in the other a lamp. The fire was needed, but the lamp was lit--as a comparison of the oil consumed will show--long after it was broad daylight. Why? Surely because there is some connection between three things--the burning, the stuffy atmosphere, and, finally, the madness or death of those unfortunate people. That is clear, is it not?*

*\*\*Ah, Victorian sexism, even in the autopsy phase?*

*...so, since in the first case only the woman, who had presumably the more sensitive organism, was killed, the others exhibiting that temporary or permanent lunacy which is evidently the first effect of the drug.*

Of course, it's possible that for some reason woman are more susceptible to the devil's foot. Or perhaps Brenda had a more tenuous hold on her sanity to begin with? But nope, woman are more vulnerable because they are *"more sensitive."* Which is not far from **Spock's** *"woman are more easily and more deeply terrified."* So it's not just the Victorian era.

The Granada adaptation does away with this, asserting that Brenda died merely because she was sitting closest to the fireplace, and thus received a bigger dose than her brothers...

\*\*Let's just acknowledge this: *Stupidest. Experiment. Ever.* And of course, after it is over, Holmes himself acknowledges it.

Especially given that he is, theoretically, under treatment for extreme mental stress, exposing himself to mind-altering substances might not be the brightest idea.

Of course, we do have to understand Holmes' dilemma here. All he had was speculation that this substance behaved like no other substance known to man did, and that someone could deliberately use this powder to literally frighten people to death.

Certainly the local authorities weren't interested in Holmes conclusions, nor would they be able to get there themselves.

So if Holmes were to prove *anything*, if he were to know that he was right, there had to be an experiment. And, let's be honest--for the reader to accept the premise, she had to see it in action, and see someone as grounded as the good Doctor Watson brought to edge of madness by the devil's foot.

And, in fairness, Holmes was properly chastened and apologetic afterwards.

\*\*TV adaptations wish they could be this effectively frightening:

*I had hardly settled in my chair before I was conscious of a thick, musky odour, subtle and nauseous. At the very first whiff of it my brain and my imagination were beyond all control. A thick, black cloud swirled before my eyes, and 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...The turmoil within my brain was such that something must surely snap. I tried to scream and was vaguely aware of some hoarse croak which was my own voice, but distant and detached from myself...*

Well done, **Sir Arthur**.

The question, of course, is how the \*\*\*\* do you portray this on screen!

Wisely, the 1965 BBC adaptation really doesn't try to show us exactly what Holmes and Watson we experiencing. They just gave us tracking close-up shots of our actors' faces, and everything is done merely with facial movements. It's is terrifyingly effective, and given the level of TV technology at the BBC in those days, a wise decision to leave it all in the actors' hands.

Granada is less successful, although I certainly don't blame them for trying. Sadly, though, Holmes' nightmares are merely flashback clips of previous episodes, particularly **Moriarty** and the **Reichenbach Falls**, glossed over what looks like very amateurish and crude paint box effects.

We also don't get to see any of what Watson experiences, which robs him of a bit of his agency and heroism in his ability to rouse himself in the need to save his friend.

No, the better approach is to leave the actors to suggest what's going on, and let the audience fill in the rest themselves.

**\*\*As foolish as the experiment was, it does provide us with perhaps our purest glimpse of the friendship between Watson and Holmes.**

*Watson: "It was that vision (of Holmes in torment "which gave me an instant of sanity and of strength..."*

*Holmes: "Upon my word, Watson!" said Holmes at last with an unsteady voice, "I owe you both my thanks and an apology. It was an unjustifiable experiment even for one's self, and doubly so for a friend. I am really very sorry."*

*"You know," I answered with some emotion, for I have never seen so much of Holmes's heart before, "that it is my greatest joy and privilege to help you."*

Oh, you two....

**\*\*Holmes: "When I think of Mortimer Tregennis, with the foxy face and the small shrewd, beady eyes behind the spectacles, he is not a man whom I should judge to be of a particularly forgiving disposition."**

Another example of Doyle equating moral weakness with physical appearance.

For what it's worth, in the 1965 BBC adaptation, Mortimer Tregennis is played by a pre-**Doctor**

**Who Patrick Troughton.**

**\*\*Watson raises an interesting possibility:**

*"Then his own death was suicide!"*

*"Well, Watson, it is on the face of it a not impossible supposition. The man who had the guilt upon his soul of having brought such a fate upon his own family might well be driven by remorse to inflict it upon himself."*

Of course, we know that Mortimer was murdered. Still, we are never given any glimpse into his psyche after the tragedy befall his family. How guilty does he feel? Does he regret it? What would he have done if Holmes had caught him? Or would he have come forward on his own, plagued by shame and horror? We'll never know, thanks to Leon Sterndale.

For what it's worth, the 1965 BBC adaptation has Tregennis telling Sterndale that he never meant for Brenda to die, only for her to be driven insane. Well, that was not exactly going to calm Sterndale down, was it?

**\*\*Classic:**

*"I followed you."*

*"I saw no one."*

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

**\*\*Sterndale:** *"I could not marry her, for I have a wife who has left me for years and yet whom, by the deplorable laws of England, I could not divorce."*

Gee, I wonder why she left him?

As we've mentioned before, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a great advocate for reforming England's *draconian* divorce laws. Usually, though, they were portrayed as victimizing woman...

**\*\****"It has not yet found its way either into the pharmacopoeia or into the literature of toxicology."*

At the time of publication, the effects of *radix pedis diaboli* surely seemed fanciful at best. Of course, Once **LSD** and other hallucinogens were discovered, the possibility of a drug causing visions so extreme they melt your brain seemed less far-fetched.

Of course, there were *always* hallucinatory plants and fungus out there. And this "devil's foot" has the sound of some rumor or legend that Doyle had heard about somewhere. Old wives' tale? Something that perhaps actually existed, but is lost to history?

And a drug that acts only on the fear centers of the human brain? Surely **Jonathan Crane**, a.k.a. the **Batman** villain **Scarecrow**, read this story as a youth...

**\*\*Sterndale's** thought on Tregennis' motives: *"for the sake of money, and with the idea, perhaps, that if the other members of his family were all insane he would be the sole guardian of their joint property..."*

That begs a couple of questions. Were the effects of the devil's foot *permanent*? Were his brothers insane forever?

And now, with Mortimer deceased...*who gets the estate??*

**\*\*Terrible** theory, and I apologize for making it: Brenda and Leon were in love. What if she had willed her portion of the money to Sterndale? There's a possible motive for *him* to be the murderer (perhaps with the maid **Porter** as the accomplice?).

Or...perhaps the brothers feared that, should Brenda actually end up being able to marry Sterndale, they would lose the use of her portion of the funds. So one (or both) planned to drive her mad with the powder--surely, if Sterndale had told Mortimer, whom he disliked, about it, he told others--but something went terribly wrong...

This is why they don't let me write mysteries...

*\*\*Holmes lit his pipe and handed me his pouch. "Some fumes which are not poisonous would be a welcome change..."*

Oh, the years before the Surgeon General's report...

\*\*So, given that Holmes kept the whole affair quiet, what were the ultimate conclusions of the police? Did they even call it a murder spree, or just write it off as some unexplained natural (or supernatural) event? What about the press? What did they report? What were the conclusions that a fearful public was left with for over a decade?!?

**Brian Keith Snell**

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