



His Last Bow

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

("The Cornish Horror")

First published in:

The Strand Magazine, December 1910; then in its American edition in January and February 1911, in two episodes.

Time frame of story (known/surmised):

Began on March 16, 1897, stated by Watson.

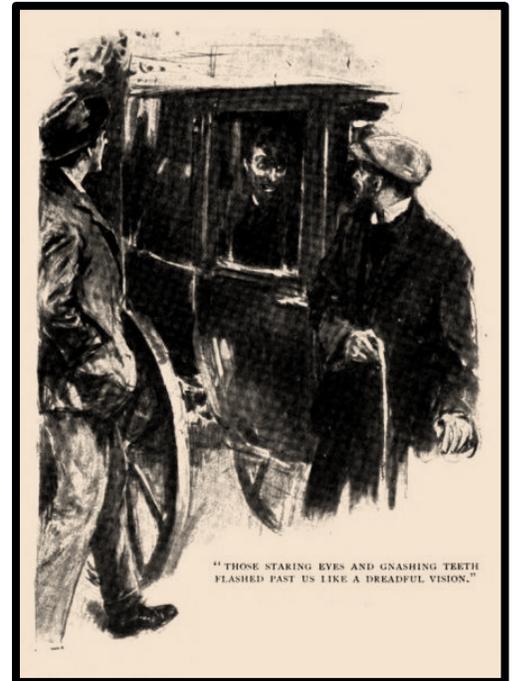
Holmes & Watson living arrangements:

London arrangements not stated. Probably not together at 221B.
(Holmes telegraphed Watson)

Opening scene:

Watson received a telegram from Holmes "last Tuesday" stating "Why not tell them of the Cornish horror — strangest case I have handled."

Watson then related the tale, 13 years after the events. Holmes had been overworked and on the verge of a breakdown, and was advised by his physician, Dr. Moore Agar, to surrender himself to complete rest and accept a change of scene and air. As a result, Holmes & Watson found themselves together in a little whitewashed house near the hamlet of Tredannick Wollas, high upon a grassy headland near Poldhu Bay at the further extremity of the Cornish peninsula.



Client(s):

The garrulous and palpitating vicar of the local parish, Mr. Roundhay, and the agitated Mortimer Tregennis, a strangely reticent, a sad-faced, and introspective man, who brooded upon his own affairs. Mortimer was a resident lodger in the Vicar's household.

Crime or concern:

Holmes & Watson were at their vacation site, but were then faced with a problem at their very doors which was more intense, more engrossing, and infinitely more mysterious than any of those which had driven them from London. A most unheard-of business. Mortimer Tregennis's Sister Brenda was dead, and two of her brothers had 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. The dead woman, Brenda, just lay across the arm of her chair with that look on her face. The two brothers, George and Owen, were laughing, shouting, and singing snatches of songs and gibbering like two great apes. The four siblings had dined together and played whist the evening before. The two brothers were taken the next day to the lunatic asylum at Helston. Then the following day, Mortimer was found dead too, with exactly the same symptoms, twisted into the same distortion of terror which had marked the features of his dead sister. His limbs were convulsed and his fingers contorted as though he had died in a very paroxysm of fear.

Villain:

There were two separate acts of villainy. Mortimer Tregennis killed his sister Brenda and caused his brothers to go insane. Dr. Leon Sterndale, the great lion-hunter and explorer, then killed Mortimer.

Motives:

Mortimer killed his siblings for money, a share of the family estate. Sterndale killed Mortimer for revenge, for killing Brenda, his lover.

Logic used to solve:

A single common point of resemblance in the varying crime scene reports, concerning the effect of the atmosphere of the room in each case upon those who had first entered it. The first people to enter fainted or became weak. Also, there was 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 showed — long after it was broad daylight. Why? Surely there was some connection — the burning, the stuffy atmosphere, and, finally,

the madness or death of the unfortunate victims. These facts, therefore, seemed to bear out the theory of a vapourous poison which worked by combustion.

Holmes & Watson tested the theory by burning the lamp scrapings and almost did themselves in. Watson got them both into fresh air in the nick of time, as the chemical was more potent than they expected. They never imagined that the effect could be so sudden and so severe.

Holmes used his practical geological knowledge to identify the non-resident gravel upon Mortimer's window-sill, which implicated Sterndale.

Policemen:

Not named. They were slow to consult Holmes after Mortimer died, and they did not have the wit to find the poison remaining upon the talc.

Holmes' fees:

No mention, but probably none. The only person left that could have paid was Sterndale, and such a proposition would have been unthinkable.

Transport:

The two Tregennis brothers were driven to Helston in a closed black carriage.

The vicar arrived in a dog-cart, having come at a gallop down the road, to inform Holmes & Watson of Mortimer's death, and the three of them returned right off to the vicarage, crowded into the same cart.

Food:

Holmes & Watson postponed their breakfast upon learning of the death of Mortimer Tregennis.

Drink:

No mention.

Vices:

Upon first hearing of the mystery, Holmes took his pipe from his lips and sat up in his chair like an old hound who hears the view-halloa. Later, after viewing the crime scene, Holmes told Watson, "I think that I shall resume that course of tobacco-poisoning which you have so often and so justly condemned."

Dr. Sterndale smoked a cigar while looking through the window, watching Mortimer Tregennis die.

At the end, after Sterndale departed, Holmes lit his pipe and handed Watson his pouch. "Some fumes which are not poisonous would be a welcome change," said he.

Notable Quotables:

"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."

"Let us walk along the cliffs together and search for flint arrows. We are more likely to find them than clues to this problem. To let the brain work without sufficient material is like racing an engine. It racks itself to pieces. The sea air, sunshine, and patience, Watson — all else will come." — Holmes

Exchange between Holmes and Dr. Leon Sterndale: "You are very inquisitive, Mr. Holmes." "It is my business."

Another classic exchange between Holmes and the suspect: "How do you know that?" "I followed you." "I saw no one." "That is what you may expect to see when I follow you."

Other interesting:

Dr. Moore Agar, the famous Harley St. physician, sent Holmes on vacation. Sounds like a microbiologist requesting additional medium.

Holmes' hypothetical lover: "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?"

The rolling moors of Cornwall were dun-coloured, like Bart's doors.

When all was said and done:

The weapon was vapors from burning *Radix pedis diaboli*, or Devil's foot root, which was brought to England by Dr. Sterndale and shown to Mortimer in a conversation about African curiosities. It was known to medicine-men in certain districts of West Africa and kept as a secret among them. Dr. Sterndale obtained it under very extraordinary circumstances in the Ubangi country, and Mortimer Tregennis stole it from Sterndale and put it to use, before Sterndale turned it upon him. Holmes figured it all out, confronted Sterndale, and let him go back to Africa.

McMurdo's Camp