



His Last Bow

Adventure XLVI -- The Adventure of the Dying Detective

I never read this story without thinking of the Play-Within-a-Play from Hamlet. With his own little drama, Holmes demonstrated what had happened to Victor Savage, how it happened, who was responsible – and how monstrously cruel a death it was that the young man had suffered. Holmes may have shown little sympathy for Mrs. Hudson’s and Dr. Watson’s feelings in the course of this case, but his portrayal of the dead man’s sufferings reveals a great deal of compassion towards the victim of this horrible crime. Through Holmes’s oddly transparent performance, I think we get a glimpse into the depths of his passion to see justice done. Please join the Hounds as we discuss this week’s story: the bit of theatrical business known as “The Dying Detective.”

The Player King: Holmes’s play-acting apparently fooled Mrs. Hudson, Dr. Watson, and Culverton Smith, but I doubt that it fooled many readers. Can anyone recall their first reading of this story, and whether or not it gave them even the briefest of worries about Holmes’s health or his sanity?

Did Holmes see Victor Savage during Savage’s illness? Would he have dared to mimic the symptoms without having seen them at first-hand?

Holmes apparently confided in Inspector Morton. Wasn’t it unusual for Holmes to trust the police before his case was complete? Why did he choose to involve one of them in this particular case?

Doctor Watson could have chosen many alternative ways to present this tale. For instance, he could have told us first of the death of Victor Savage and Holmes’s investigation into the affairs of Culverton Smith. Would the “dying detective” scenes have been more convincing and frightening to the reader if we first knew of Savage’s death and then saw Holmes apparently become ill?

Or is the story more effective because we see and learn everything on the same time line along which



Dr. Watson experienced it, even though perhaps we do so with a little more understanding of what was really going on?

Would you have liked the story better if Holmes had somehow tricked Smith into being infected with his own microbes?

Random questions: Why did Holmes have pictures of criminals pasted up all around him where he slept? Didn't their faces trouble him? Did Holmes ever truly relax?

Why did Watson have to help Holmes with his coat at the story's end?

Would the combined testimony of Holmes and Watson, along with the tangible ivory box, have been sufficient evidence to produce a conviction if the case came up for trial?

Questions by request: Mr. Culverton Smith is described as being "a planter" (Doubleday 935). What was he growing on his plantation?

Since Watson had to hide behind the head of the bed, we can assume that there was no closet and no other large piece of furniture in the room. Was this common in Victorian England in what we think of as a middle-class residence? How small was this bedroom likely to have been?

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