



Adventure XLVIII -- The Valley of Fear

It was frustrating. Sherlock Holmes had received a coded message from a person who was highly placed in the criminal organization of Professor James Moriarty. He knew that this person, Fred Porlock, only wrote to him when something major was about to happen. But Porlock had been surprised by Moriarty in the act of sending the key to the code in a separate message, and so Holmes was left with a cryptic message and seemingly no way to decipher it.

Using his well-known deductive methods, Holmes managed to “crack” the code and learned that danger was impending for someone named “Douglas” who lived at Birlstone Manor, not too far from Tunbridge Wells. Sure enough, just as he had finished decoding the message, Inspector Alex MacDonald of Scotland Yard arrived with some disturbing news: Mr. Jack Douglas of Birlstone Manor had been horribly murdered during the preceding night.

Well, novels seem to be the order of the day. As with HOUN, I am allowing only one week for VALL. I am particularly fond of this Adventure because, among other reasons, the repartee between Holmes and Watson at the beginning of the story represents, to my mind, the best “Gotcha!” Watson ever perpetrated upon Holmes.

Another reason is that, like STUD, this Adventure has roots in American history: The “Scowrers” are the literary counterparts of the “Molly Maguires” who terrorized the Pennsylvania coal fields in the 1870s; and “Birdy Edwards” had a real-life origin in the form of one James McParlan, a Pinkerton operative who infiltrated the Molly Maguires and brought many of their leaders before the bar of justice.

As with STUD, this story is divided by a long flashback narrative which explains the background leading up to Ted Baldwin’s attempt on “Jack Douglas’s” life in the moated manor of Birlstone.



I do not propose to raise questions about the flashback portion since it does not contain any appearance by Holmes. But I do have a couple of questions about the opening segment:

- Fred Porlock decided not to send Holmes the key to his cipher message after being surprised by Moriarty. Yet he sent an explanatory note to Holmes anyway. Why didn't he simply enclose the cipher key with it, since his risk in sending the note was equal to that of sending the key?
- Speaking of the cipher message, wouldn't it be evident to Holmes that given the cipher's provenance, something bad was in store for a "Douglas" in or near "Birlstone?" Did Holmes necessarily need to go to the trouble of reasoning out the key to the cipher? And how did Holmes manage to count the words in column two of page 534 of Whitaker's Almanac with such celerity? For that matter, how long must it have taken Porlock to locate a single column of print which contained the desired words? Could this means of sending cipher messages have been prearranged between Holmes and Porlock, with Holmes's logical tour de force being a pretense for Watson's benefit, as a way of poking more fun at Watson for the wisecrack about "unknown to the public?" ("One more coruscation, my dear Watson!") I wonder who, what, or where was Portalis?
- Cecil Barker said that Douglas was never without his revolver but had left it in his bedroom the night of the attack upon him. Wouldn't "making the rounds" of Birlstone have been a time when he was most likely to have his gun close at hand, particularly since (as we learn later) he had recently seen his nemesis in the neighborhood?
- As a part of his scheme to induce Barker to reveal his complicity, Holmes dictated a note to Barker indicating an intent to drain the moat. Why would Holmes address the note to Barker, who had no sway over Birlstone, and not to Ivy Douglas, who did? Might not Barker have rightly become suspicious that something was afoot when the note was addressed to him?
- Lastly, wasn't it unusual for Ivy Douglas, an Englishwoman bred and born, to address Barker as "Cecil?"

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