



Adventure XLVIII -- The Valley of Fear

Whew! Now that I'm stuffed with Thanksgiving dinner, I'm looking for my dumbbells to start working off some of that meal. Trouble is, I can only find one of them...Turning now to the first half of *The Valley of Fear*, here are this week's Q's and Comments:

Marriage is a motif in this story, but Moriarty is pointedly identified in VALL as unmarried. Were he the marrying kind, what sort of woman would Moriarty look for? Is there a woman anywhere in the canon who would make a good wife for the professor?

Nowadays all parties associated with a sensational criminal case sign their own lucrative book deals. In VALL, White Mason merely hoped for a kind mention in one of Watson's forthcoming accounts. Was he serious, or joking, or what? If White Mason were to write his own book about this particular case, what would the title be?

A tattoo isn't a body's only identifying characteristic. Neither is a face. How is it possible that Ames and others — who knew Douglas so well — concluded without question that the dead man was the master of Birlstone?

"Man, it's witchcraft," Inspector MacDonald exclaimed when he saw Porlock's message. His reference was to Holmes having the words "Douglas" and "Birlstone" already before him, but the Scotland Yard man could just as easily have been commenting on Porlock's coded numbers. MacDonald was an Aberdonian, and Aberdeen is to Great Britain what Salem, Massachusetts is to Americans — the site of infamous witchcraft trials and the place where many supposed witches were put to death. To protect themselves against witches, even as late as our own century, many Aberdonians carried numerical charms. Some of those charms were very simple, like this example, a magic square in which the lines all equal 18:



5 10 3

4 6 8

9 2 7

The more complex charms look an awful lot like the number groupings in Porlock's note. And a MacDonald from Aberdeen would know that "Douglas" and "Birl" are, of course, Scottish words.

All aboard! The train for Vermissa Valley is about to leave the station. Take that seat over there, next to the fresh-complexioned man with the firm jaw. This weekend's questions and comments as we read *The Valley of Fear (Part 2 – The Scowrers)*:

What is there to like about the Freeman? Does the group have any redeeming social value?

McMurdo was "glib enough" when questioned by the Freeman. But how come McGinty doesn't verify McMurdo's background, or check him out a lot more thoroughly before giving the newcomer some jobs to do?

I just appointed you to be Granada's casting director, and we're finally going to film VALL. Who will you cast to play the roles of McGinty, McMurdo, and Baldwin?

That "Dear me, Mr. Holmes" note...we can pretty much guess who wrote it, but **why** did he write it?

McMurdo used the endearment "acushla" when speaking to his beloved Ettie. It's a term that frustrates Gaelic translators, who, as footnoted so well by the Oxford editors, variously define the word as "diarrhea" or "artery." I have another theory. Ettie was German (her nationality changed to Swedish in British editions for political reasons), and the ardent Irishman was actually trying to impress her by speaking a few words in her own language. Watson and the literary agent, not surprisingly, garbled it up. Anyhow, I propose that the prefix "acu" is in reality the German "Ach, du," meaning "Oh, you," just like the playground song, "Ach, du lieber Augustin." If we accept "ach, du" then all that's left is determining the balance of the word, "shla." There are several possibilities. "Ach, du schlank!" roughly translates as "Oh, you svelte creature!" which is certainly an endearment many women would be thrilled to hear. "Ach, du schlau!" means something like "Oh, you sneak!" a strange appellation from one lover to another, unless Ettie was herself a Pinkerton collaborator...a highly intriguing plot twist, nicht wahr? My own choice, however, is "Ach, du Schlag!" or "Oh, you little dollop of whipped cream!" It's a term of endearment — don't you agree? — that's eminently suited to such a sweet young girl.

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