



His Last Bow

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

It's 1897, Holmes is exhausted again and goes off to Cornwall for a rest, but, coincidentally, a double murder ends up occurring in the vicinity, writes Charlotte Anne Walters.

People of Victorian England beware – if Sherlock Holmes comes to stay in your area, trouble won't be far behind him. Holmes must be the unluckiest person in history when it comes to holidays as yet again a break is interrupted by tragedy. But this is certainly a queer one.

With the help of an early start I was able to read the story and make some notes before starting work and intended to type things up on the train traveling home, as I had other commitments this evening. Well, the train was absolutely packed, people jammed into every corner and no chance of even a seat, let alone a table. I ended up having to sit on the dirty floor with people standing all around me and type with the laptop balanced precariously on my knee. Someone trod on my foot and another thrust their bag in my face – suffice to say I was pretty grumpy but did manage to type this up and load it onto my site at the usual time. Holmes and Watson didn't have to contend with all this on the steam trains of Victorian London did they? And I bet the trains were never late either...



Anyway, back to the story. A local man is apparently devastated and mystified when his sister dies and his two brothers are driven insane by a sudden, unknown horror. Then we have a distant relative from overseas (Yes, I know, yet another culprit from distant shores) who turns up acting very suspiciously.

The local man is also murdered mid-investigation prompting Holmes to test out his theory on both himself and poor, loyal Watson.

Holmes suspects that an air-born poison is responsible for what has happened after finding traces of it around a lamp which had been used as a combustion device. Things then take on an unexpected turn when he sits with Watson in a room, lights the lamp and lays the powder upon it. Watson is given the option to back out of this risky experiment but stands fast and Holmes affectionately sates – ‘I thought I knew my Watson’. Dangerous mental terror grips them both as poison fills the room and it is Watson, sitting furthest from the lamp, who grabs Holmes, drags him free and out into the fresh air before it is too late.

Whilst lying on the grass, Holmes makes a very heartfelt apology to Watson for what he has just put him through causing Watson to remark that he had never seen so much of Holmes’ heart before. What a lovely line, and a reminder that a great heart really does beat within the reasoned and clinical exterior. In response to this apology, Watson replies – ‘It is my greatest joy and privilege to help you.’ Gosh, not sure if I could be quite that forgiving myself.

The story contains one of my favourite exchanges:

“I followed you,”

“I saw no one,”

“That is what you may expect to see when I follow you.”

There is also a less-famous but very significant line in this tale which I think explains so much about Holmes mental processes – ‘To let the brain work without sufficient material is like racing an engine. It racks itself to pieces’.

This is it; this is the truth about Sherlock Holmes to me. He uses work not to stimulate his great brain, but to channel it, control it. Without work his mind races away full of compulsions and overwhelming ideas, a torrent of mental processes. He uses drugs and music not to stimulate but to subdue. And when he has nothing professional to focus on, he has to have something to distract and control this flood of mental activity so conducts intense studies into things like music of the middle-ages or chemical experiments. It’s not that he wants to keep his brain active, more that it overwhelms him without an outlet, a pressure-valve.

Holmes admits he has never loved in this story. I have always found this somewhat unrealistic – a man of that age who has never experienced love. But I suppose we have to take it as true considering that he tells us so himself. Or does he have secrets which he wants to keep hidden?

Yet again, Holmes lets the culprit escape justice even though a murder has been committed. He listens to the man's story and decides that his actions were justified.

I'm not terribly taken with the story itself but it certainly is a revealing one, packed full of insight into the character of Sherlock Holmes – therefore I have to give it 8 out of 10.

Charlotte Anne Walters

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