



Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia

His Last Bow Adventure XLIII -- The Adventure of the Devil's Foot

SUMMARY (Diogenes Club)

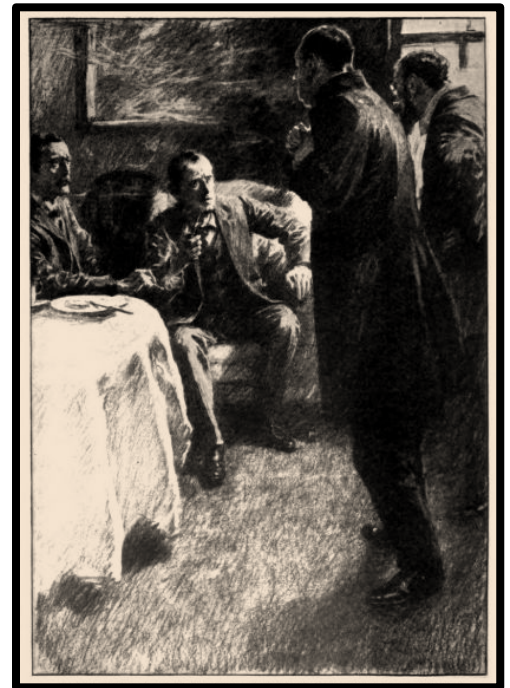
Holmes has been working too hard. He and Watson take a cottage in Cornwall for a complete rest. They become friends with the local vicar who comes rushing in one morning to tell Holmes that the three Tregennises who lived together (Owen, George and Brenda) had been found under extraordinary circumstances. Brenda was dead and the two brothers were raving lunatics. Holmes investigates but reaches no conclusions.

Leon was at Plymouth, getting ready to leave for Africa when he heard the news. He returned immediately to Cornwall.

A couple days later, Mortimer is found dead in his room under the same conditions as those of his siblings.

Holmes examines Mortimer's room and scrapes some red powder from the smoke guard of the lamp. In their cottage, the dynamic duo attempt to reconstruct the experiment and they would have succumbed to the fumes if Watson had not pulled them to safety.

Leon was a secret lover of Brenda. He was married and estranged but could not obtain a divorce. Mortimer stole some devil's foot powder from Leon and used it, hoping to kill his siblings and inherit their estates. Mortimer felt that Leon would be on his way to Africa and would not hear of the affair for years. Roundhay knew of Leon and Brenda's love and telegraphed him at Plymouth. Leon returned and forced Mortimer to sit beside a lamp into which he poured devil's foot powder while he, Leon, watched from outside the window with a pistol in his hand.



Holmes lets Leon return to Africa and tells Watson that if he had ever loved a woman and seen her treated in such a fashion, he might have acted as Leon did.

SUMMARY (ACD Encyclopedia)

In 1897, under Dr. Moore Agar warning of a complete breakdown from exhaustion, Holmes is persuaded to take a holiday. The detective and Watson take a trip to Poldhu Bay in Cornwall. One morning, the parish priest and his tenant, Mortimer Tregennis, interrupt Holmes's rest to consult Holmes about a tragedy. Tregennis had just found his sister, Brenda, dead and his two brothers, Owen and George, in a state close to madness. All three were still around the table where Mortimer had left them the previous evening, after they had played cards together. Nobody seems to have entered the room and no traces of violence are visible. The housekeeper and Mortimer believe all this is the Devil's work, which Holmes refutes.

Later, Leon Sterndale, a famous lion hunter who stays in his Cornish home between expeditions, visits Holmes and Watson and asks eagerly about the case. Holmes tells him that he has no theory thus far. The next morning, the priest runs to Holmes again, announcing that Mortimer Tregennis had died in the same circumstances as the rest of his family. Holmes rushes to the scene of the crime to collect clues. Noting that the first people to enter each room after the murders had fainted, and that there had been a flame in both rooms (from the grate in the first and a lamp in the second), he deduces that a toxic substance was added to the fire, causing intoxication to those who were exposed to the fumes. Using the dust from Mortimer's lamp Holmes attempts to repeat the experience in the cottage and nearly kills both himself and Watson, but fortunately the latter manages to gather his strength and pull them both outside.

Holmes concludes that Mortimer Tregennis killed his family because he was the only person able to leave the poison in the fireplace. Then Holmes summons Leon Sterndale and accuses him of the second murder. After a brief resistance, the hunter confesses that he killed Mortimer to avenge Brenda, who he had loved for years. He had known about Mortimer's guilt because he had recently shown him some African curiosities, including a poison called "Devil's-foot root", and had recognized its effects at the scene of the first murder.

Convinced that the police would fail to condemn the guilty, he carried out a sentence himself, using the same poison on Mortimer as he had used on his siblings, before returning to Africa forever. Holmes, moved by his story, let him go without handing him over to the police.

SUMMARY (Wikipedia)

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson find themselves at Poldhu in Cornwall one spring for the former's health, but the holiday ends with a bizarre event. Mr. Mortimer Tregennis, a local gentleman, and Mr. Roundhay, the local vicar, come to Holmes to report that Tregennis's two brothers have gone insane, and his sister has died. Tregennis had gone to visit them in their village ('Tredannick Wollas'), played whist with them, and then left. When he came back in the morning, he found them still sitting in their places at the table, the brothers, George and Owen, laughing and singing, and the sister, Brenda, dead. The housekeeper had discovered them in this state, and fainted. The vicar has not been to see them yet. Tregennis says that he remembers one brother looking through the window, and then he himself turned to see some "movement" outside. He declares that the horrific event is the work of the devil. Mortimer Tregennis was once estranged from his siblings by the matter of dividing the proceeds from the sale of the family business, but he insists that all was forgiven, although he still lives apart from them. The doctor who was summoned, reckoned that she had been dead for six hours. He also collapsed into a chair for a while after arriving.

Holmes goes to the house in question and, apparently carelessly, kicks over a watering pot, soaking everyone's feet. The housekeeper tells Holmes that she heard nothing in the night, and that the family had been particularly happy and prosperous lately. Holmes observes the remains of a fire in the fireplace. Tregennis explains that it was a cold, damp night.

Afterwards, Holmes lays the case out to Watson thus:

- Quite obviously, there is no point in attributing the tragedy to the Devil; therefore, what took place can only be the work of a human.
- Whatever happened to those people happened right after Tregennis left, for they had not moved and everything was in the same place;
- Mortimer Tregennis went swiftly back to the vicarage where he lives (a footprint sample was obtained in the watering pot "accident");
- The only suggestion of an explanation—the "movement"—comes from Mortimer Tregennis;
- Given the weather, anyone appearing at the window and doing something horrifying enough to instantly kill someone would have had to come right up to the window thus trampling the flowerbed, which is still intact;
- What on earth could this person at the window have done to cause such horror?

None of this seems to make for an elementary case, but soon, new questions are raised.

Dr. Leon Sterndale, the famous hunter and explorer, aborts his sailing from Plymouth after the vicar wires him (as the Tregennises and Sterndale are cousins) with the tragic news. He asks Holmes what his suspicions are, and is displeased when Holmes will not voice them. After Sterndale leaves, Holmes follows him discreetly.

The morning after Holmes comes back to his room, apparently none the wiser for following Sterndale, the vicar arrives in a panic with the news that Mortimer Tregennis has now died in the same way as his sister. The two men, along with Watson, rush to Mortimer's room, and find it foul and stuffy, even though the window has been opened. A lamp is burning on the table beside the dead man. Holmes rushes about, examining many things. The upstairs window seems especially interesting. He also scrapes some ashes out of the lamp, and puts them in an envelope.

Holmes deduces how the victims died or went mad and why people present when the death rooms were first opened fainted or felt unwell in each case. He tests his hypothesis by buying a lamp like the one in Tregennis's room, lighting it, and putting some of the collected "ashes" on the smoke guard. The smoke from this powder is so potent a poison that Holmes is immediately struck down. Watson is able to resist and drags Holmes out of the room just in time.

It is clear to Holmes that Mortimer Tregennis poisoned his siblings, but who killed Mortimer?

It is Dr. Sterndale, who left physical evidence at the vicarage clearly implicating himself. Holmes confronts Sterndale, who explains that he loved Brenda for years (but had been unable to marry her because of the current marriage laws which prevented him from divorcing his wife even though she abandoned him years ago) and killed Mortimer in revenge for the cruel murder.

The poison is called *Radix pedis diaboli* ("Devil's-foot root" in Latin),^[2] which Sterndale collected from Africa as a curiosity. The toxic contents of the plant root are vaporized by heat and diffuse into the local atmosphere. He once explained to Mortimer what it was and what it was capable of, and Mortimer later stole some to murder his siblings by throwing it on the fire just before he left. Mortimer thought Sterndale would be at sea before news reached Plymouth, but Sterndale recognized the poison's effects from the vicar's description of the tragedy and deduced right away what had happened.

Holmes's sympathies in this matter lie with Sterndale, and he tells him to go back to his work in Africa.