

TRACKING WITH ANISEED AND ITS OTHER USES

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Discussion of Sherlock Holmes Mystery - *The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter*

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Imagine if you will, the chaos that would result if a star football player such as Warren Sapp, defensive star of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, were missing just before he was scheduled to play in the Superbowl [sic]. Well, it doesn't hurt to dream, does it? Anyway, the fans would go nuts; the gamblers would have a field day if they found out. In despair, Warren's teammates would seek out the best Private Consulting Detective available.

This hypothetical situation is not without precedence. Consider the story that we are analyzing today. Documented by Dr. John H. Watson, such a similar event occurred in Victorian London. Godfrey Staunton, star three-quarter of the Cambridge Varsity rugby team was missing under mysterious circumstances the day before their big rugby game with Oxford. To whom should the distraught teammate Cyril Overton turn? Sherlock Holmes, of course. Where is Mr. Staunton? What happened to him? Things appear very dark for the young man. The obvious impression is that Mr. Staunton has either been kidnapped [sic] or has otherwise met with foul play. The case takes Holmes and Watson to the city of Cambridge in search of the missing athlete. Staunton's location appears to be associated with the mysterious comings and goings of the wily Dr. Leslie Armstrong. What is the doctor's hold over Godfrey Staunton? Why does he not permit Sherlock Holmes to see him? Try as he might, Mr. Holmes is stymied in his efforts until he tries one last tactic. Using his hypodermic syringe, he sprays the wheels of Dr. Armstrong's carriage with aniseed, and later, with the assistance of the olfactory apparatus of the draghound Pompey, is able to locate the hideout of the two gentlemen in question. The mystery is cleared up as we find Mr. Staunton mourning his just-deceased secret wife, and Sherlock Holmes and his erstwhile antagonist shake hands as they reach a friendly understanding.

LEGENDARY CANINE OLFACTORY SKILLS: In Sherlockian lore, we have several instances in which the scenting ability of a dog had a major impact on the outcome of Sherlock Holmes' cases. In *The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place*, the Shoscombe spaniel recognized the fact that the "old woman" in the carriage was not his mistress, who was already deceased. Previously, the dog had accurately detected his mistress's scent among the bones in the family crypt.

There is also the mysterious attack by the wolfhound Roy on his master Professor Presbury in *The Adventure of the Creeping Man*. The dog did not make a mistake. According to his lights, and his great olfactory sense, the creature he attacked was not the professor; he attacked the simian

scent that resulted when Professor Presbury utilized the “serum of anthropoid” supplied by H. Lowenstein.

We must also take cognizance of the “dog who did nothing in the night time,” in *Silver Blaze*. This non-event led Sherlock Holmes to understand that the culprit who spirited away the prize horse was scented as the dog’s master himself.

And finally, and most relevantly, who can forget the great dog Toby in *The Sign of Four*? This dog led Holmes and Watson on a merry chase throughout London following a trail of creosote that had been laid down by the Andaman Islander, who had accidentally stepped in this material in Mr. Sholto’s attic.

WHY DID SHERLOCK HOLMES CHOOSE ANISEED?: In *The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter*, Sherlock Holmes had many more options available than he did in the *Sign of Four*. Instead of being limited to creosote, he could choose whatever scent he wanted. From the shelf, he chose aniseed over all of the many other lures as his scent of choice, and a draghound as his tracking tool. This combination of *apparati* would probably seem obvious to Mr. Holmes’ contemporaries, but was a mystery to me. Why did Mr. Holmes choose aniseed over all other available spices, and why did he select a draghound? What is a draghound? As we shall see by the following discussion, such a strategy was the most obvious and effective one available at the time, and would have required no explanation for his contemporary readers. We will also discover why aniseed was very available to Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

WHAT IS ANISEED?: Let us first consider the various definitions of the term “aniseed”:

(1) According to one Internet website, “ANISEED is a 4 piece band from Melbourne, Australia. Blending an eastern influence with soaring guitars, Aniseed is renowned for passionate scintillating live shows. The critically praised debut CD CARNIVAL is out now!”

(2) A more likely definition comes from the *Grolier Encyclopedia* which states that, “Anise, *Pimpinella anisum*, is an annual herb of the carrot family, cultivated for aniseed, its small, fragrant fruits. Aniseed is used as a flavoring in baked goods. Its essential oil is used to flavor licorice candies, cough drops, liqueurs such as absinthe and anisette, and some tobacco blends. Anise is native to the eastern Mediterranean but is cultivated today in southern Europe and North and South America.”

(3) According to Jack Tracy’s good old book *The Encyclopedia Sherlockiana*, aniseed is “the aromatic seed of the Mediterranean anise plant, or a derivative of this seed that Holmes sprayed upon the hind wheel of Leslie Armstrong’s brougham, so that Pompey might follow it (MISS).” Also, his definition reveals that the derivatives of aniseed may also be referred to by that name. Since it is unlikely that the seeds themselves could be sprayed on to the wheel and adhere thereon, one might consider that in this case the alternate definition would apply. Thus, the material squirted through the syringe was most likely anise oil, a substance prepared by the compression of aniseed.

So now we know what aniseed is and are reminded of how Sherlock Holmes utilized this substance to locate Dr. Armstrong's hideout, and thus, Mr. Staunton as well.

But the second question still remains. Of all available scents to guide his canine associate, why did Mr. Holmes choose aniseed? There are certainly many other, more pungent spices from which to choose. Why not creosote? After all, it worked with Toby.

ANISEED DRIVES DOGS NUTS!: I am immensely indebted to Ms. Mary Vivit, who provided the first major clue, in response to my query over the Hounds of the Internet regarding this topic. She supplied very important information that she had derived from *Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs*, a book that was not available in any of my local libraries. To quote directly from page 16: "What catnip is to cats, anise is to dogs; they love the scent of this herb. For drag hunting, a sack saturated with oil and dragged across the countryside provides a scent for foxhounds to follow. In greyhound racing, the artificial hare is scented with anise." Probably everyone in England at that time was familiar with anise and drag racing. What would have been more obvious at the time for Mr. Holmes than to use this pleasantly scented herb?

Jack Tracy's definition of draghound supports this explanation. To quote: "Draghound, a hound trained to follow an artificial scent, usually that of a bag of aniseed dragged along the ground, which is substituted for a fox in riding to hounds. Holmes called Pompey "the pride of the local draghounds." (MISS)

IS DRAG HUNTING STILL PRACTICED?: How civilized of the British! Having the dogs trail an herbal scent through the woods seems much more humane than having them chase a poor fox to death. That is true, from the rider's perspective and that of the fox. However, the dogs and horses probably would probably not note this difference. Do you wonder if this still counts as a real hunt? I did. Do some of the guys still wear red jackets and blow their horns? Can you still "ken John Peel with his horse and his hounds in the morning?"

Well, it turns out that you can! In response to my query over the Baker Street E-Regulars List and the News Group alt.fan.holmes, I received several replies in the affirmative, indicating that drag hunting is popular throughout the English-speaking world.

Alex Parker wrote, in one reply: "Yes people do still drag hunt - I've done it myself in the last 6 months. Everyone wears the "proper" clothes and follow all the traditions and in my opinion it is better than a proper hunt (I've done both). It is more structured, and less cruel to animals (e.g. foxes) involved. As to the specific breed of dog, I can't remember I'm afraid!"

Someone identified only as Josh responded with: " Well, I can give you a little information, for I am slightly familiar with the practice of drag hunting. People indeed do still "drag hunt," but as far as I know they no longer call it "drag hunting." If the updated practice has a new name I can't tell you what it is. However, while growing up in central Pennsylvania I witnessed a neighbor

who would regularly train hound dogs or beagles through the use of various bags containing scents. No one associated with my neighbor in PA would take part in anything remotely like the traditional drag hunt, e.g. red jackets, horns, etc. But, I believe the great majority of the dogs he used were beagles, simply trained by him through the use of scented bags. He would drag the bags along the ground and through a wooded area and then hide them somewhere...like in a hole, or on a tree, or under brush, etc., and then the dogs would be released. He would put barbed wire inside the bags so the dog would learn not to bite down too hard when bringing the prey back to him.”

Spurred by these replies, my own Internet search revealed that drag hunting is even practiced in Northern Florida at “Misty Morning Hounds.” For those wishing to try this activity, their address, phone number, and E-mail address are: 9243 SE CR 2082, Gainesville, FL 32641; (352) 375-0800; <info@mistymorninghounds.com>. For more detailed information, their beautiful website may be found at “<http://mistymorninghounds.com/>.” According to their home page: “Misty Morning Hounds is a private drag pack in the Ocala-Gainesville / North-Central Florida area. The Hunt was organized in 1995 by Alexis and Walter Macaulay, MFHs, with the drafting of 7-1/2 couple of Foxhounds from the Middlebury Hunt in Connecticut. The Hunt became registered in 1997 by the Masters of Foxhounds Association and then Recognized in 1999. Hunt country encompasses roughly 40,000 acres of mostly public land owned or managed by the St. Johns River Water Management District, the Florida Game & Freshwater Fish Commission, and Georgia Pacific, as well as several private farms. Hunting is twice a week from October through March. Jumping is not required and typically there is a tally-ho wagon for non-riding spectators. A limited number of field hunters are available for hire.”

Other sites for information and photos on Britain's current drag hunts are: <http://www.necdh.co.uk/> (North East Cheshire Drag Hunt), drag-hunting in South Africa at <http://www.capehunt.atfreeweb.com/> (Cape Hunt & Polo Club); and the USA <http://www.horse-country.com/hunt/woodbrook.html> (Woodbrook Hunt Club) and <http://www.smithtownhunt.org/> (The Smithtown Hunt).

WHERE DID SHERLOCK HOLMES GET THE ANISE?: But I digress. Now that we have established that anise is the perfect olfactory tool to encourage Pompey to track down the brougham, where did the anise come from? I have searched my spice racks, accumulated over 41 years of marriage, without finding one trace of aniseed or anise oil. My wife assures me that she has never, ever used this substance, even when we were in a gourmet club in effete Ann Arbor, Michigan. As a retired pharmacist (active from 1957 to 1964), I do not recall one instance of a prescription requiring the use of anise, and this was back in the old days when we actually made medicines. I also never encountered it while studying pharmacognosy, even though we were required to learn about many obsolete herbal and botanical remedies that hadn't been used for over 30 years.

USES OF ANISE: A review of the literature reveals that anise has a long and storied past as a useful substance. In addition to tracing missing rugby players, aniseed has had many applications

in the household and in industry. These include foods, medicines, alcoholic beverages (such as absinthe, pernod, ouzo, raki, arak, anisette), tobacco blends, bait in mouse traps, greyhound racing, and potpourri. Thus, it is very likely that aniseed was easily available to Sherlock Holmes in the kitchen, at a bakery, the local chemist, or pet shop.

USES OF ANISEED AND ANISE OIL IN FOOD PREPARATION: Even today, aniseed is widely used to flavor pastries; it is the characteristic ingredient of a German bread called Anisbrod. Aniseed and anise oil are often used alone or with other herbs to flavor many foods and beverages. Foods include roast pork, duck, fish and vegetable dishes, cookies, marinades, candies, dried figs, game, soup, sweet spices, desserts, salads, vegetables (carrots, spinach), and stewed fruit. The website “Women.com” states that: “among the cafe set, anise is the herb most likely to be invited to cocktails. From Greek ouzo to French pastis [sic] to Italian sambuca, anise lends its distinctive flavor to some of the world's most sophisticated libations -- but the herbally hip know that this plant has as important a place in the medicine chest as it does in the liquor cabinet.”

According to “MotherNature.com,” 1 fl.oz of Anise Mature Seed, is available from Herb Pharm in 2 - 3 days for only \$6.15.

MEDICINAL USES OF ANISEED: Aniseed and anise oil have several medicinal uses. It makes a soothing herbal tea and has been used medicinally from prehistoric times. The essential oil content is about 2.5 percent, and its principal component is anethole. According to the most authoritative source, Youngken's *Textbook of Pharmacognosy*, the dried ripe fruit of *Pimpinella anisum* can be used medicinally as a stimulant, carminative, and flavoring agent. The average dose is 0.5 Gm. or 8 grains. Other published applications are as a laxative and in mouthwash. More extensive claims include its use in coughs, flatulence, respiratory infections, asthma, indigestion, and insufficient lactation. It is used externally for lice, scabies, and as a chest rub for bronchial complaints. Romans used aniseed to make a [sic] early version of a wedding cake called *mustaceum*. After a heavy meal, such as that eaten at a wedding, it was eaten as digestive aid.

There are even scientific support[s] for the medicinal use of anise. A popular ingredient in cough drops, anise contains the chemicals creosol and alpha-pinene, which have been shown to loosen mucus in the bronchial tubes and make it easier to cough up. The after-dinner ingestion of anise-flavored cordials, containing the chemical anethole, help relieve gas and settle a queasy stomach. Anise contains the compounds dianethole and photoanethole, which are chemically similar to the female hormone estrogen. Thus, drinking anise tea appears to help lactation and relieve menopausal distress.

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