

## *An Observance Of Trifles*

You know my method. It is founded upon the observance of trifles.

(Arthur Conan Doyle)

*snell's interminable ramblings about the canon*

# Adventure I -- A Study in Scarlet

## A Study In Scarlet--The Problem Of The 50 Page Flashback!

This is 100% true:

My first experience with written **Sherlock Holmes** came when I was in 4th or 5th grade, and found a book in the elementary school library titled something like "**Sherlock Holmes for Young Readers.**" (Cut my hazy memory a little slack here---this was 40+ years ago, after all)

Appropriately enough, the book lead off with **A Study In Scarlet**. But after the end of **Part I**, where **Part II (The Country Of The Saints)** should have followed, there was instead an editor's note explaining that this next portion of the book was thought to be "*too tedious for children.*" So they presented a 1-page synopsis of The Country Of Saints, and then leaped forward to Chapter VI of that section, back to the present day and the confession of the murderer, **Jefferson Hope**.



Now, precocious 9 year old that I was, I figured the only reason they would have to hide that section from children was because of *salacious or naughty* material. So I just assumed tedious meant "*dirty.*" No, I never bothered to look the word up in the dictionary--I was too certain I already knew what it meant. So imagine my surprise when I finally read an unexpurgated version of the novel, and found out that it wasn't dirty at all! (Also, imagine my *embarrassment* to discover that I had been using tedious incorrectly for several years...)

Which merely goes to show that I encountered the same difficulty as many readers/adapters over the years--what the *heck* to make of The Country Of The Saints? What the heck, *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*?

A Study In Scarlet (**A STUDY IN SCARLET** from here on...I'm lazy), aside from presenting the first meeting of Holmes and **Doctor John H. Watson**, establishes the *template* for most future stories. Holmes

impresses Watson with some feat of deduction, a baffling case comes their way, Holmes claims to have solved it from the very beginning, and after some running around and some exasperation from the mere mortals in his sphere, they arrest the culprit. A Study in Scarlet introduces us to both **Lestrade** and **Gregson**, and the **Baker Street Irregulars** (not yet named that).

Yet immediately after that arrest, in one of the biggest *non-sequiturs* in literary history, the book suddenly and without any warning or transition, *changes narrators and continents, while jumping back 3 decades, in a 50+ page flashback* ! And we don't even meet the murderer of his victims until nearly halfway through this portion of the tale!

It's fairly disconcerting, especially if you're not prepared for it. Every word in A STUDY IN SCARLET had been from Watson's view up until that point. We were eager to find out who Jefferson Hope is, and how Holmes seemingly magically produced him out of thin air to arrest him. To then be plunged into what initially seems to be something from an entirely different novel is rather *disorienting*, to say the least.

But is it "*too tedious for children*"? I hardly think so. The Country Of The Saints is well written and engaging, once you get past the confusion of A STUDY IN SCARLET's shifting gears so unexpectedly. The tale of **John** and **Lucy Ferrier** is well told and engaging, and becomes gripping and suspenseful once the forces of evil begin to move against them. Tedious? No, I wouldn't say that.

But perhaps there might be another reason to be concerned about the youngsters reading it, because, well...let's be blunt: the book comes pretty close to *religious hate speech* at times. To suggest The Country Of The Saints is harshly anti-Mormon is an understatement. The Mormons--and **Brigham Young**, specifically--refused to rescue dying travelers unless they converted? They kidnapped woman from outside communities to fill their polygamous harems? They had (essentially) a ninja death army to fulfill their leaders' whims and kill any dissenters??

At the time A STUDY IN SCARLET was published, anti-Mormon feeling ran pretty high, and there was plenty of misinformation out there, probably doubly so in far-away countries like England. And yes, some of what is depicted in The Country Of The Saints may have been based in some small way on true incidents. But extrapolating that to an entire religion makes for uncomfortable reading at times.

Yes, it is a product of its time, and should be read as such. "New" religions are often demonized by existing culture (I would imagine if Doyle were writing today, Part II of A STUDY IN SCARLET would be about people fleeing the evil of Scientology...).

But maybe this section does render A STUDY IN SCARLET less suitable for young readers--indeed, *some U.S. schools have removed the book from the curriculum for 6th graders*, while leaving the book available for older students who are better equipped to understand the issues involved.

Perhaps these difficulties presented by The Country Of The Saints explains why there is such a *surprising dearth* of adaptations of A Study In Scarlet. How, exactly, do you present this story on film? As is? Substantially restructure it somehow? Tone down or ignore the anti-Mormonism?

So for the introductory Sherlock Holmes story, there's not a lot of video to watch. There were two silent films, both of which have sadly been lost to the ravages of time. The 1933 film is not an adaptation at all--the producers merely bought the right to the title, not the actual story, so the movie has zero to actually do with A Study In Scarlet. There has been a Russian TV adaptation. Even **Granada** passed on the story.

Which leaves us the **1968 BBC** TV series, starring **Peter Cushing**, and a 1983 Australian animated version, with **Peter O'Toole** voicing Holmes. Both version, it turns out, ***completely eliminate any reference to Mormonism whatsoever***. **Enoch Drebber** was just a rich jerk who kidnapped Lucy Ferrier and forced her to marry him, and she promptly died of a broken heart. The animated version does give us the flashback, but broken into segments interspersed with contemporary scenes. Interestingly enough, they change the location from Utah to Colorado...just to be doubly sure of not offending anyone, it seems. The BBC version has *no* flashbacks, and reduces the entire back story to two lines of dialogue after Jefferson Hope is arrested. Neither is terribly satisfying, with the BBC solution in particular leaving the audience emotionally uninvested in the story and completely unsympathetic to Hope's quest.

The quandary comes down, I think, to Doyle's inexperience as a mystery writer. The genre was still new, and we can't really expect him to abide by "*play fair*" standards that hadn't been developed yet. Add to that the difficulty of having your hero be far more intelligent than everyone else, yet his exploits narrated by someone who doesn't know half of what Holmes knows. The net effect is rather like watching an episode of **Murder, She Wrote** where at the very end, **Jessica Fletcher** pulls onto the screen a character the audience *has never seen and no one has even named aloud*, and declared "He's the murderer." Dramatically unsatisfying, at the very least.

Holmes earlier declared, "You know a conjuror gets no credit when once he has explained his trick, and if I show you too much of my method of working, you will come to the conclusion that I am a very ordinary individual after all." But because Holmes holds all of the information to himself, it does come off as magic, not detection and deduction.

I remain confident that, had he taken up this story later in his career, a more experienced Doyle would have been far better at structuring it so that Watson (and the audience) shared in at least some of the information he was collecting, so the resolution would seem less from left field.

Ditto for the flashbacks--I'm sure Sir Arthur would have found a way to integrate the information more organically into the story, instead of stopping the novel for a 6-chapter info dump.

As for the calumny against the Mormons? Recognize it for what it is, hold your nose, and explain to young readers that Mormons aren't an organized crime outfit with ninja death cults at their beck and call (probably).

#### **OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVANCES:**

\*\* Watson refers to London as "*that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained.*" Kind of harsh, but it seem to be shared by some of the newspapers of the day. After the case concludes, the **Echo** opines, "*If the case has had no other effect, it, at least, brings out in the most striking manner the efficiency of our detective police force, and will serve as a lesson to all foreigners that they will do wisely to settle their feuds at home, and not to carry them on to British soil.*"

Of course it served as no such lesson. London and Britain would continue to be a magnet for foreign intrigues, as countless foreign groups (**The Ku Klux Klan! The Reavers! The Mafia! etc!**) would use England as the field to settle their grudges.

\*\* Lots of book covers like to play up the "*Scarlet*" in **A Study In Scarlet**:

Quite lurid, of course. But those covers never seem to mention that all of that blood is *just from a nosebleed*. Not quite as *grand guignol*, eh? And as **Stangerson's** death occurred offstage, as it were, this was about as clean a double homicide as you can have.

\*\* Who was the person who posed as the old woman coming to reclaim the lost wedding ring? That's one heck of a loose end. Doyle deliberately left it so, having Hope refuse to give up his confidante. The 1968 BBC episode actually spends some time on this, and Holmes tracks down the actor whom Hope hired:

About as convincing as a **Monty Python** character... which does make Holmes seem rather the dunderhead for falling for it.

Others have speculated the accomplice was any famous name you can think of – **Irene Adler, Moriarty**, you name it. Too cute by half, of course. Let's just leave it as mystery cross-dresser: unknown.

\*\* I should mention that I thought Peter Cushing was *quite* a good Holmes.

Peter O'Toole's voice work in the cartoon, however, felt very lackluster, almost phoned it in.

\*\* "*I keep a bull pup,*" Watson tells Holmes, when they discuss lodging together. The pup is never seen, and never mentioned again in the canon.

\*\* Soon after moving in together, Watson says of Holmes: "On these occasions, I have noticed such a dreamy vacant expression in his eyes, that I might have suspected him of being addicted to the use of some narcotic, had not the temperance and cleanliness of his whole life forbidden such a notion."

Poor naïve Watson clearly had some learning to do here. When next we meet the Baker Street duo, Holmes is openly injecting drugs, and Watson chiding him for it.

\*\* For someone who was too broke to afford his own lodgings, Holmes is fairly *profligate* with his money. He gives Constable Rance a half sovereign for his version of events, pays the Baker Street Irregulars more than once, sends transcontinental telegrams (obviously long ones, from the amount of information it had to contain), attends well-to-do recitals, takes out advertisements in all the newspapers, pays several cab fares...

\*\* Speaking of the newspapers, it is interesting to see both their stature and the role they play in society in 1880s England. All of the newspapers have multiple editions; one can place classified ads and not only know that they will be seen, but responded to within the day. When you lose an item of importance, your first instinct is to check the lost and found columns, confident someone would take out an ad here. Readership is already at such a level of sophistication papers have staked out political editorial positions to attract audiences. We'll see much more of this in future stories...

\*\* Holmes tells Watson, "There's the scarlet thread of murder running through the colourless skein of life, and our duty is to unravel it, and isolate it, and expose every inch of it."

That's a pretty good mission statement.

**Brian Keith Snell**

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