

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

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes Adventure III -- A Scandal in Bohemia

A Scandal In Bohemia--The Case Of You Call THAT A Scandal?!?

To me, one of the most enjoyable parts of the canon is the look into the social mores of a long-passed era. Even when, sometimes, those mores seemed plenty nuts.

But first, let's note one very important thing about the first of the **Sherlock Holmes** short stories: it doesn't involve a murder!

A century-plus of crime fiction, detective novels, and television shows have conditioned us to expect there to be at least one murder at the core of any genre story. We've come to expect corpses in our mysteries!!

But it wasn't always thus. Even though the first two Holmes novels involved murders, Holmes was mostly concerned with other matters. Of the 60 canonical stories, only **8** involved Holmes investigating murders! Heck, **15** of them had Holmes using his deductions in cases where there was no crime whatsoever! (Depending upon your interpretation of the relevant laws of the period, of course. Were these episodes of **Law & Order**, I have little doubt that **Jack McCoy** could stretch the law enough to find someone to charge with something after an argument in front of a judge with lots of motions and whatnot)

So we have the murder-less **A Scandal In Bohemia**...which by our lights doesn't seem all that *scandalous*. Oh, the **King of Bohemia** is mightily worried, claiming that it is with matter "of an importance which can hardly be exaggerated," and that it could permanently alter European politics.

And that terrifying earthquake of a scandal? When he was 25, the King had a girlfriend.

Yawn. I thought you said there was a scandal in this story.

Really, *that's it?* I mean, seriously?



As I noted in my James Bond blog, to modern audiences "the idea that it would somehow be being amazingly damaging for a British agent to be found having sex is rather...*quaint*, let us say." Multiply that umpteen times for the quaintness of a young man who became involved with an exotic and beautiful foreign woman for a brief period (the Granada adaptation changes his age at the time to 20, an age even more appropriate for an excusable bit of youthful indiscretion).

To cause such fear, to threaten such dire consequences, well, that must have been some photograph **Irene Adler** had of them.

Oh. Yawn.

What, did you expect, *sexting*?

Of course, many people forget that true problem the picture presented was that it corroborated Adler's story that the "**compromising**" letters from King Wilhelm were real. Remember, Holmes tries to provide the king with four different ways to dispute the letters' authenticity, until the King reveals the existence of the picture. That was why they needed the photograph--it wasn't salacious in and of itself, but it proved that she did indeed know the king, and lent authenticity to the letters.

So *how* indiscreet and scandalous could those letters have been, for heaven's sake? Of course, here in modern times we are jaded. We're used to crown princes and their spouses both having affairs and soldiering on; we've seen that the president of the U.S. can have *sordid peccadilloes* and leave office with a higher approval rating than before the revelation of the affair, we've lived through a governor sneaking away to another continent for a tryst and yet still manage to get himself elected to federal office in a socially conservative state; and we've also seen how another governor can dally with prostitutes and somehow be considered an acceptable mainstream political pundit.

Scandals, at least personal scandals (as opposed to criminal wrongdoing or abuse of office), are no longer a big deal to us, it seems. Are we more tolerant? Forgiving? Understanding? Far more corrupt ourselves? Better at understanding the personal/political divide? Has technology made the revelation of "indiscretions" so much easier and more commonplace that we're inured to any shock?

Whatever the reason(s), from a modern perspective, it is a bit *baffling* to see a powerful monarch reduced to quivering jelly by something so seemingly tame as the threat of his betrothed finding out that he once dated (*bedded*?) a commoner. **Princess Clotilde** and her Scandinavian family must indeed have been the "*very souls of delicacy*" to expect her future husband to be a virgin.

Then again, maybe you'd just assume that *this* guy wasn't experienced with the ladies...

That being said, there are some things about King Wilhelm's story that don't seem to add up. Irene Adler doesn't seem like the type to spitefully jeopardize the King's future marriage--she especially doesn't

seem the type to be pining away for a long-past affair with, well, *a swaggering buffoon*. And when we meet her, she's marrying someone else--hardly the act of a woman obsessed with regaining an old lover.

But remember, *we only have the King's version of events here*--we never hear anything from Adler herself on the matter, except that the King "cruelly wronged" her. Given the ego and pomposity of Wilhelm, it's certainly possible that his version events is highly *distorted*, even if he sees it as "the truth." So what *is* the truth? Did Adler ever actually threaten to send the photograph? Did she just say something like that in heated moment, and the King took it as a serious threat? What was the "*cruel wrong*" he committed against her--breaking off the relationship, or the repeated attempts to rob and detain her?

Another question is the o'erhasty marriage. Why, exactly, was there a *sudden rush* for **Irene** and **Godfrey Norton** to marry? It wasn't a matter of the law saying there could be no weddings after noon--that edict had been changed years earlier. And even if that were still the law, why not wait until the next day? Why the last-minute rush, when they hadn't even obtained the license yet? Why take separate carts to the church? Why no honeymoon? Why keep the wedding a secret (as Holmes observed, the wedding likely meant the King would be safe, and would thus remove the reason for his harassment--so why hide it?)?

It remains a puzzlement, although the **Granada** version invents a few lines of dialogue to smooth over these points (the King and Irene had "*spoken of marriage*," which apparently made her feel extra spurned; she and Norton married secretly so "*they could leave the country swiftly*" if need be. No, I still don't get it).

Still, it might be odder if we *did* understand everything. The social and cultural customs from 125 years ago probably shouldn't immediately make sense to us. Times change, *mores* change, the center does not hold. And that's one reason the canon is so valuable--it gives us a clear, unjaundiced look at another time, another era.

Sherlock Holmes mingled with *all* classes, from the impoverished to royalty. He was involved with all facets of his culture, even though he didn't necessarily approve or understand all of them. And **Doyle's** works bring us into contact with everyone from the Victorian era--foreign kings and soldiers and servants and the gentry and street urchins and groomsmen and adventuresses...and yes, criminals. It's an extended, 60-unit study of a time we never lived in, customs and a social code alien to us, but which we can experience vicariously through the works of the detective and the doctor.

MORE TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

** The most pressing issue from this story--can we please come to an agreement on the **pronunciation** of "*Irene*"?

She's from America, so the pronunciation most Americans use--"eye-reen"--would seem to be preferable (to me, at least).

More than one adaptation--Granada, to name one--chooses to go with "eh-ray-neh," turning it into a three syllable, more European sounding pronunciation (interestingly, the closed captioning on the Granada version identifies the name as "Irena," despite the credits clearly saying "Irene").

Of course, they *both* could be right. Adler would not be the first performer to adopt an unusual pronunciation/spelling of a name for notoriety/coolness/pretentiousness.

** Forgotten in all the hubbub and ballyhoo? There are *still* compromising letters to Irene from Wilhelm.

Remember, the photo was only important to confirm the letters' authenticity. Even if the photo is out of play (in the Granada version, she tosses it overboard while at sea), the letters still exist somewhere, right...?

** I have one word for you, King Wilhelm: **Snapchat**.

More seriously, this is one of those stories where the technology has so changed, that there 100 ways you could spin the tale off if you wanted a topical update. Mail the photo? How about posting it on **Pinterest** or **Tumblr**? Can Holmes hack the server before the texts goes live and the Scandinavian royal family see it? (OK, I didn't say it would be a better story!)

** So, this is one of the Holmes cases where what he was investigating wasn't even a crime, right?

That depends on your interpretation, I guess. Since *we're* not privy to exactly what Irene said to the King (if, indeed, she did say anything at all), it's difficult to judge whether any particular threat she made might have reached the level of extortion.

Again, **Jack McCoy** would have pulled down a law book, and found a creative way to interpret a statute so that threatening to break up a betrothal would fit under definition...

** For the *third consecutive time*, a dispute that started in a foreign land has come to England to be settled. Great Britain obviously needed greater border control. A standard customs question should be, "Are you coming to our fair nation to settle a quarrel that started elsewhere?"

** Afraid of the **NSA's** data-gathering? What about Holmes'?

Upon first hearing **Irene Adler's** name, he has **Watson** look her up in his "index." It turns out that "(f)or many years he had adopted a system of docketing all paragraphs concerning men and things, so that it was difficult to name a subject or a person on which he could not at once furnish information." That's *all* paragraphs. He's keeping files on everyone in England, whether they've committed a crime or not!?! I mean, he has information on "a Hebrew rabbi and...a staff-commander who had written a monograph upon the deep-sea fishes." And we're still in the A's!!

Sherlock Holmes was maintaining files on everyone. It makes one look at his work in a bit of a darker light, if you dwell upon it...

** We've had mentions of "*off-screen*" cases before (for example, how he had helped **Mrs. Cecil Forrester** years before, as mentioned in **The Sign Of The Four**). But with the advent of the short stories, Doyle started placing specific references into almost every adventure--cases with specific names, that Watson had knowledge of.

I suppose we should start keeping track of them.

- **The Case Of The Trepoff Murder (in Odessa)**
- **The Tragedy Of The Atkinson Brothers (at Trincomalee)**
- **The Case Of The Darlington Substitution Scandal**
- **The Arnsworth Castle Business**

Of course, many a writer would use these "*apocryphal*" cases as the basis for their own Holmes stories. How could you resist?

But it is interesting that Sir Arthur essentially invented a technique that genre writers would still be using a century later--putting little Easter eggs into the story, making Holmes' universe seem more "*lived in*" by intimating that that was plenty of intrigue going on even when we weren't there to see. Holmes and Watson weren't just "there" only when we were watching--and we only got to see some fraction of their careers.

** Watson sure lays on the "*Sherlock Holmes is a Vulcan*" riff pretty thick here. Cold, precise, perfect reasoning machine, *etc.* Obviously, Doyle wanted to set this up as an effective contrast for what Holmes' reaction to Adler would be.

Doyle is effective in his attempt to make Sherlock into Spock. Sorry. So, yes, I'm weird.

** At the beginning of the story, Watson refers to her as "The *late* Irene Adler." Wait, *what?* She's dead?

Probably not. Later Watson writes, "*Irene Adler, as I will still call her...*," which is obviously a reference to her now being married. This reluctance to use her married name probably explains the "*late*" reference, as Watson was just clumsily saying her name was changed, but he would still call her Adler.

I'm not sure why he had such an aversion to using "*née*," or calling her **Irene Norton**--Irene uses those for herself, so why shouldn't the good doctor?

Perhaps it's because **Godfrey Norton** is such a blank, a non-entity, that Watson has difficulty believing that Irene would marry him. After building up Adler so well, after making her THE woman, it must be said that Doyle does a poor job of presenting her groom as a man worthy of her. I understand Watson's cognitive dissonance.

** Sherlock Holmes is great at disguises...but he sure is terrible at *recognizing* them. Twice so far in the canon he has been completely taken in people in disguise--both of them cross-dressing, even!

** **Granada** continues to elide and finesse and ignore Watson's marriage(s). In the story, Watson hasn't seem Holmes for awhile because, well, he has a life now--a wife and a job. But in the television adaptation, there still is no Mrs. Watson. The good doctor has been gone for awhile because "*his practice took him to the country for a week.*" Maybe he's a veterinarian? **All Creatures Great And Small** starring Watson?!?

**Just to reemphasize--the King of Bohemia was not a nice person !!

Brian Keith Snell

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