

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

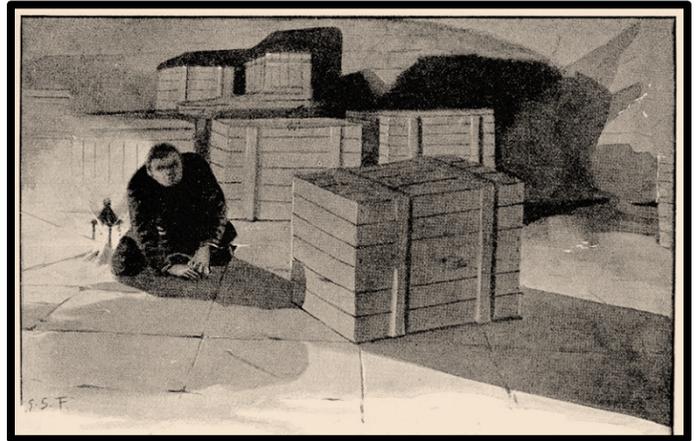
The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes Adventure IV -- The Red-Headed League

The Problem of "Again With The Moriarty?"

There is, in much genre movie writing, an obsession with **The Big Bad**.

Whoever is known as the hero's greatest foe will invariably be trotted out early and often as the villain of the piece, even to the extent of seriously altering the origins of both hero and villain. It's as if there is an ingrained fear that the public will reject the version if, somehow, they're not immediately facing their most famous foe.

But that's still not enough; the creators then feel the need to make the villain not only the hero's greatest foe, but also responsible for every adventure the hero has. Which is why, for example, you get the **Kingpin** as the gangster who killed **Daredevil's** father.



Or **Doctor Doom** has to receive his powers from the same accident which mutated the **Fantastic Four**. Or why the Joker turned out to be the one who murdered **Bruce Wayne's** parents. Or why every villain in the **Spider-verse** is a result of **Norman Osborn's** work.

Which brings us to **Moriarty**.

There is, apparently, some massive, literary gravitational field that *irresistibly* requires modern creators to use Moriarty in *every* **Sherlock Holmes** story they try to tell. Even worse, so great is the compulsion that authors seem to need to go back and retcon every single Holmes story so that, ultimately, Moriarty is the true villain. The **Napoleon of Crime**, it seems, is responsible for *every* bit of illegal activity in Victorian England.

Such speculation can be fun, of course. **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** created Moriarty out of whole cloth, as a way to kill of Sherlock Holmes with a bang. The back story he gave the man meant that he had to have been active in crime for many years. So, yes, it can be fun, if albeit ultimately silly, to try and go backwards and figure out which crimes Moriarty was really the true instigator in. In virtually every Holmes story, some

theorist can stretch to find a way Moriarty is involved. The never identified "*friend*" who posed as a woman to recover the ring in **A Study In Scarlet**? Moriarty, some say (in fairness, some also suggest it must be Irene Adler...). How could **Jonathan Small** afford to finance his activities before he stole the treasure in **The Sign Of The Four**? Moriarty fronted him the money!

Well, that's all harmless fun. But when you begin to *actually* retell the stories so that Moriarty is explicitly involved, you go past whimsical into, perhaps, doing damage to the story.

Which brings us to **The Red-Headed League**, and more specifically, the **Granada** adaptation of it.

In the original story as told by Doyle, **John Clay** is "*the fourth smartest man in London,*" a "*murderer, thief, smasher and forger*" who is the grandson of a royal duke. He's attended Oxford and Eton, and Holmes describes him as "the head of his profession." He's running a real long game con and robbery, an **Ocean's Eleven** of the **1880s**. It's a clever plan, just fantastical enough to work, without drawing attention from the authorities. Clay buries himself in his role, proving himself an adept actor, as well. Truly, he is a formidable opponent.

And yet the Granada series decided that Moriarty was behind the *whole scheme*. They wanted a Big Bad for the series, which they planned to end with their adaptation of **The Final Problem**. And to that end, they portrayed Moriarty as the true mastermind behind several of this and other cases, so they could have the thread of his villainy throughout the season.

However, this does have the effect of *robbing John Clay* of his agency. He goes from being a great villain to a mere *lucky*. It wasn't even Clay's plan anymore! The Granada Holmes describes Clay as just "*just a pawn,*" a pretty large comedown from how the character was described earlier. Furthermore, because of some of the plan's flaws, this has the unintentional effect of making Moriarty himself look less intelligent. Some mistakes we could accept from an arrogant con man and thief working on his own; the same mistakes, if they're made by Moriarty, make him look rather less like the near-invincible mastermind. The tale works much better, and Clay is a better character, if he is a *free agent*, rather than if he's just doing his master's bidding.

So, by insisting on making Moriarty a part of more stories, we diminish the villain, we diminish the story, and we diminish Moriarty himself. I suppose it doesn't make a huge difference in the end; it's just *me being me*, obsessing on trifles. Still, I think there should be a lesson here for future creators: every story doesn't *have* to be about The Big Bad. It's all right to have Holmes stories without Moriarty looming in the background. **Superman** doesn't have to fight Luthor every time, right?

FURTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

** It must be said aloud--the Granada DVDs (at least the editions I own) have *the worst subtitling in the history of the universe*. No, that is *not* hyperbole.

Clearly, whoever did the actual subtitling did *not* consult a script, or the original stories. They just wrote down what they (*thought* they) heard. And perhaps it's the British accents, or they just weren't terribly perceptive, but man, it creates some *astonishingly* inept results.

For example, when discussing the bequest of mysterious millionaire **Ezekiah Hopkins**:

We could give them a pass...after all, "*Ezekiah*" is hardly an everyday name. Although surely someone in charge should have done the *tiniest* bit of proofreading and questioned, "Hey, does the story really have a **Mr. Ethic Guya Hopkins** in it?"

But when meeting the client, **Jabez Wilson**, for the first time:

Seriously. "**Jay Beards Wilson**." *Every. Single. Time.* Which is quite a number of times. Even though his name is spelled out on the outside of his shoppe several times.

Simply amateurish and embarrassing and unforgivable.

** Speaking of the name Jabez...If we are to believe this website, there are 341 men named Jabez in the United States right now. And Vermont has the most Jabezes per capita. And there are apparently 3 men in New York state named **Jabez Fu**, which is possibly *the coolest thing ever*. The things you learn in this job...

** **Watson** defaming an entire class of people: "*Our visitor bore every mark of being an average commonplace British tradesman, obese, pompous, and slow.*" Given that many versions of Watson have portrayed him as obese, pompous and slow, that's fairly ironic. Just sayin.'

** So *how*, exactly, did Clay know about the French Napoleons being stored in the bank vault? Or was it just going to be a standard bank robbery, and the presence of the gold a happy coincidence for the thieves?

The **1965 BBC** version had Clay, during one of his burglaries, steal from the home safe of bank director, **Mr. Merryweather**, where he found papers that revealed the gold's presence. (He also left a calling card, a clay pipe with a clown face, at every crime he committed!!) The Granada edition had a corrupt bank guard leave a message for a shady character, who ran the information straight to Moriarty.

** One question to contemplate is this: what if Jabez Wilson *weren't* a red head? What scheme would Clay had to have come up with then? The Obese Pompous And Slow league? Was there a whole plethora of League options he had come up with that might work? Would they have just had to find another business to infiltrate?

And one *serious* question--what if Jabez Wilson *hadn't advertised for a clerk*? Then how would Clay have been able to infiltrate the establishment? Did he (or Moriarty) do something to make sure the previous clerk was out of the way?

** "*You must find your own ink, pens, and blotting-paper...*" Seriously? You can't go *cheap* on a long grift like this one. If Wilson had been a tiny bit sharper, he might have questioned why a millionaire can afford to pay 4 pounds a week for busy-work, but can't provide the basic necessities for that job. That's what we detectives call a clue...

** The most damaging, *fatal* mistake Clay made was closing the Red-Headed League office prematurely. If you don't close it, if you show up just one more time to pay Jabez, he has no reason to go to Sherlock Holmes, and you get away with the gold unscathed.

Why such a clumsy, careless error? Impatience, because they were so close to their goal? Trying to avoid paying an extra week's or month's rent on the office? Underestimating Jabez Wilson, by assuming he was so hopeless he would never investigate, or seek help?

This is a very good reason to assume that this was *NOT* Moriarty's plan. Certainly he would not have overlooked such a *crucial*, all-important detail.

** No past apocryphal cases brought up this time. You're set-up to believe that "the very simple problem presented by **Miss Mary Sutherland**" is an untold story, but it is actually the next published case. Foreshadowing by Doyle? Or Was **A Case Of Identity** written first, but published later for unknown reasons, and the reference intended to refer to a story we had already read?

** Make sure you explain to your children the concept of copying something my hand, and hard-bound multi-volume encyclopedias, or they may not understand this story. "*You must cut and paste the entirety of Wikipedia...oh, what, done already?*"

** What is the state of Watson's practice? Why, he can take the entire day off, as "*I have nothing to do to-day. My practice is never very absorbing.*" Doesn't sound like you're making a very good living there, John. Thanks, Obamacare. Then again, it was a Saturday...

** One of the businesses around the corner from Wilson's shoppe was "*the Vegetarian restaurant.*" Another reason to love the Canon. Silly me kind of assumed that vegetarian restaurants were a more modern invention. Reading Doyle reminds us of how wrong some of our preconceptions about our own era are, with his looks at his era.

However, I'm fairly sure that we won't see an **In-N-Out Burger** in Victorian London...

**** Inspector Peter Jones?** Many commentators declare that he must really be **Altheny Jones** returned.

Based on his references to **The Sign Of The Four** and Holmes' "*theorizing*," they argue it's the same character and Doyle (or Watson) just erred. There's really not much to go on, and Jones is hardly an uncommon surname. And he seems much more affable and friendly here. But Granada bought the theory, and just renamed him Altheny. He is played by a different actor than the one who played Athelny Jones in their TSOTF production 2 years later...

**** Holmes tells the bank director, "*I have been at some small expense over this matter, which I shall expect the bank to refund...*"**

As far as I can tell, Holmes didn't spend a single bloody penny on the entire case, aside from attending a violin performance in his spare time. Was this just a subtle, "*polite*" way of asking for a reward?

**** As written, the entire case has *no closure at all* for poor Mr. Jabez Wilson. After his initial meeting with Holmes, we never see or hear from him again. We never even know for sure if anyone told him that his shoppe was being used for bank robbery. Or that his wonderful half-wages clerk had completely used him.**

The TV adaptations correct this oversight. The 1965 version has Wilson join them Holmes and the police in the wait in vault; Granada has his shoppe wrecked in **Artie's** struggles to get away, but Holmes sends part of his reward to recompense the man.

Brian Keith Snell

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