

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

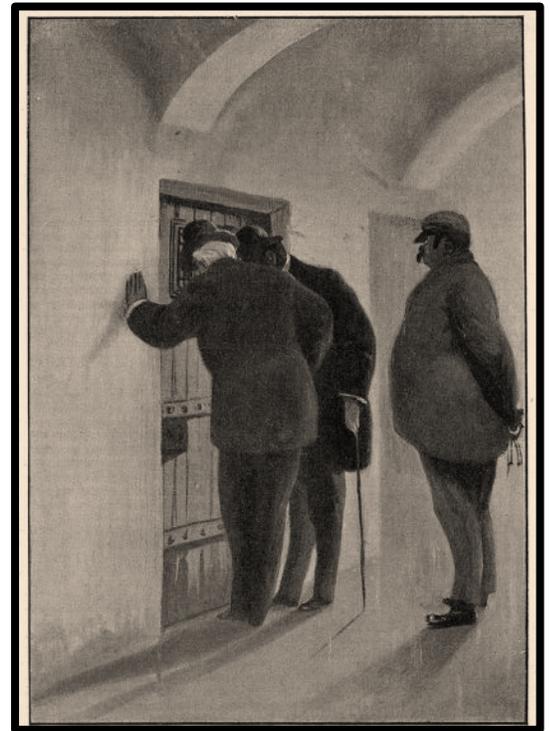
Adventure VIII -- The Man with the Twisted Lip

The Adventure of Beggars Can't Be Choosers!

The Man With The Twisted Lip is one of the more popular of the **Holmes** stories, for some very good reasons. Yes, part of it is the seemingly fantastical set-up that turns out to actually happen in the real world now and then:

Another reason is **The Man with the Twisted Lip** is a true "*fair play*" mystery, with all of the clues laid out for us and for Holmes, and not dependent on some esoteric bit of knowledge Holmes possesses but the readers do not. He solves it by "*by sitting upon five pillows and consuming an ounce of shag*" and thinking, rather than, say, recognizing a particular bit of dirt (that was never described to the readers) can only come from Surrey-on-Puddlethwaite, so therefore etc. As a result, Holmes' revelation of **Neville St. Clair** at the end seems less like a magic trick (as in **A Study In Scarlet**) and more like something we could have figured out, too.

But perhaps the biggest reason **The Man with the Twisted Lip** works as well as it does is its central issue resonates so well, even with a modern audience: *shame*. I'm sure many of us know someone who has had to turn to means they're not particularly proud of in order to make ends meet, something they're very anxious friends and family not find out about. This embarrassment is more universal than merely violating some Victorian class system. Hard times or bad luck or youthful foolishness have forced many of us to take jobs we felt beneath us, or to make a living in ways that skirt moral or legal or social boundaries.



Everyone has secrets they don't wish to share, secrets so embarrassing to them they would "*rather die*" than have them become public knowledge. So many of us have a natural sympathy for St. Clair and his plight.

Of course, Doyle gives us a very complex characterization of St. Clair. He's not just some luckless chap who was forced into this life; he chose it because he could make more money this way. Despite being the son of a school master, Neville has a lot of natural arrogance that makes him a bit prickly.

St. Clair took up begging rather than the "*arduous work*" of being a newspaper reporter. Not to diss on reporters, because everyone works hard at their jobs--but come on, Neville, it's not as if you were digging ditches or mining coal. And even though he thought being outed as a beggar was so shameful that he "*would have endured imprisonment, ay, even execution,*" rather than have his secret revealed, he displays a feisty arrogance about what a good beggar he was.

"I do not mean that any beggar in the streets of London could earn 700 pounds a year--which is less than my average takings--but I had exceptional advantages in my power of making up, and also in a facility of repartee..."

He's ashamed by the begging, but he's simultaneously pompous about how good he is at it! What a splendidly human reaction.

One problem I do have with this story is that, like several of Doyle's tales, the story ends fairly abruptly, without some of the resolution and follow-up that we crave. We're left desiring to know how things ended up with the St. Clair family. How did **Mrs. St. Clair** react upon Neville's return? Did he confess the secrets of his lifestyle to her? (The **Granada** adaptation makes clear that he did, as they burn his begging clothes and accessories together). Did he keep his solemn oaths, and never take up begging again? Then how did he maintain his £700+ per year lifestyle? He could have gone back to being a reporter, but certainly he couldn't have maintained the **Cedars** and a family on £2 per week. Would they have to sell their estate? Could he take up a career on the stage? If not for his great shame and fear of "*blotting his family's name,*" I suppose he could write a best-selling memoir (and how-to manual?). It seems certain that the St. Clair family was about to experience some *significant* changes, and the audience is left wanting for even the smallest scrap of what was in store for them. (I like to think that Mrs. St. Clair understood and forgave Neville, and not wanting to give up their lifestyle or uproot their family, approved and aided him in setting up a new beggar identity in a new location. And perhaps even took up begging herself, as well as their children. But that's just me...)

Still, the fact that we do want to know more demonstrates how well **Doyle** has sketched the characters and the situation. And it demonstrates how universal the terror of having a secret shame exposed can be, even if it is a fairly harmless one.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

** This story always prompts discussion of how realistic the idea of making a substantial living from begging is. The 2013 example above aside, the problem is that most of the cases people talk about are anecdotal or hearsay, without a lot firm evidence to back them up. Which isn't surprising, as we're dealing with what is largely a transient population that isn't filling out tax forms.

In **The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes**, editor **Leslie Klinger** mentions (with no citation) a census which showed that in 1838, London had 8,000 professional beggars, who raked in over £365,000 that year--an average of £45 each.

There's obviously a ton of wiggle room in such numbers, but certainly there was a at least *some* basis for Doyle believing that St. Clair's earnings were possible, if *well* above the average.

** In the Granada adaptation, Mr. St. Clair only saw Neville because she stopped to give some money...*to children begging*. Nice added dramatic irony.

** Once again, we get a look at what a thoroughly solid and splendid chap **Watson** is. In the middle of the night, he will go to rescue a friend from a two day bender in an opium den, *and even pay the guy's (no doubt sizable) tab!!*

So of course, the **1964 BBC** version completely *eliminates* the entire subplot--no Watson rescuing **Isa Whitney**, no Watson accidentally encountering Holmes in the opium den, leading to him accidentally joining the St. Clair investigation. Probably because making Watson look like anything but a helpless and perpetually befuddled buffoon was not on their agenda (and probably beyond **Nigel Stick's** abilities).

Many have commented that **Mrs. Watson** must have been furious with Watson going off on an adventure with Sherlock with no notice, perhaps even leading to divorce.

Poppycock! It wasn't so long ago, in **The Boscombe Valley Mystery**, she was not only giving her blessing, but *encouraging* him to go on multi-day mystery-solving road trips with Holmes. Mary knew the role Holmes played in Watson's life, and in their getting together, and there's little reason to think her attitude had changed.

** As in **The Sign of The Four**, Doyle has Watson present a strong anti-drug message, no doubt reflecting the author's own beliefs. Reading his description of a besotted Whitney ("*yellow, pasty face, drooping lids, and pin-point pupils, all huddled in a chair, the wreck and ruin of a noble man*"), and the way he makes the opium den seem like the most wretched hive of scum and villainy, surely scared many a reader away from the evils of poppy derivatives. Opium was legal in England at the time these were written, so Doyle was being a bit of a crusader here.

** For the second time, we have a woman who has no clear idea what her husband does for a living, *or even where he works* (see also **A Case of Identity**). Even for a male-dominated chauvinistic period such as Victorian England, that is simply amazing to me. Especially as, in both cases, the lack of information was because the husband was hiding something. Ladies, for heaven's sake, at least get a work address for your spouse!!

** Many commentators have taken the following passage...

As we approached, the door flew open, and a little blonde woman stood in the opening, clad in some sort of light mousseline de soie, with a touch of fluffy pink chiffon at her neck and wrists.

She stood with her figure outlined against the flood of light, one hand upon the door, one half-raised in her eagerness, her body slightly bent, her head and face protruded, with eager eyes and parted lips, a standing question.

"Well?" she cried, "well?" And then, seeing that there were two of us, she gave a cry of hope which sank into a groan as she saw that my companion shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

...as an indication that Mrs. St. Clair had *romantic designs* on Sherlock.

Needless to say, this is a fairly serious misreading. Very clearly, she gave a cry of hope at seeing two, which meant she was eager to see her husband again. And she's quite happy to bruise Holmes' ego when she shows him the letter she received from Neville.

If anything, the scene perhaps shows *Watson's* interest *in her*, given that he wrote about her in (what some find) such alluring terms.

** Watson tells us quite clearly that **a)** the story takes place in "June of '89" and **b)** that his part in the tale starts on "Friday, June 19th." Of course, June 19th was a **Wednesday** in 1889.

This is the kind of thing that drives players of **The Great Game** nuts.

** Good heavens, after Mrs. St. Clair spots Neville, and after she heads off to find some police, why go to all the trouble of getting back into make-up and costume while trying to throw all your clothes into the river? Why not just *leave the premises quickly*, so you won't be found there in either guise? Or, why not just pick up an opium pipe and pretend to be a customer? Surely that's less shameful to him than being exposed as a beggar, right? Instead, Neville chooses the action that takes the longest, and guarantees that he'll be caught. Silly man...

** Mrs. St. Clair declares, "*I am not hysterical, nor given to fainting.*" Of course, at least as related by Holmes, she *DID* faint earlier, at the sight of blood in the **Golden Bar**. Holmes wasn't there at the time, so was he misinformed? Or was this just Mrs. St. Clair's somewhat elliptical way of promising not to faint *this* time?

** For those who wish to paint Sherlock as a misogynist, this quote from Holmes cuts both ways: "*I have seen too much not to know that the impression of a woman may be more valuable than the conclusion of an analytical reasoner.*"

You can read this in a couple of ways. On the one hand Sherlock could be seen as saying that women are not analytical reasoners. On the other hand, he's acknowledging women's impression may be more valuable than reasoning, and in fact, in this case she is very much right.

As always, Holmes' character and opinions are more complex than many want to admit...

Brian Keith Snell

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