

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 XII -- The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor

A Comedy of Manners

There are a few different ways in which you could look at The Adventure Of The Noble Bachelor.

On the surface, it's not a particularly involving mystery. The "*man/woman who is approached by a supposedly dead spouse*" has become something of a cliché by modern standards. Is there an American soap opera that *hasn't* played that card? The mystery is not that mysterious, and for once the audience is pretty much following right along with Holmes' deductions, and the story holds few real surprises.

Yet the story can have surprising depth if you decide to read it as a *Wildean comedy of manners*, with the redemptive ending of a late-Shakespearean romance.

First, can we agree that there is much in this story that is funny? Seriously, *laugh-out loud* funny?

Take when **Watson** is explaining the whole case to **Holmes**, who hasn't been keeping up on the gossips. Holmes is bored: "*Anything else?*" asked Holmes, yawning." Yet when Watson continues, and gives Holmes the twist, watch his reaction:

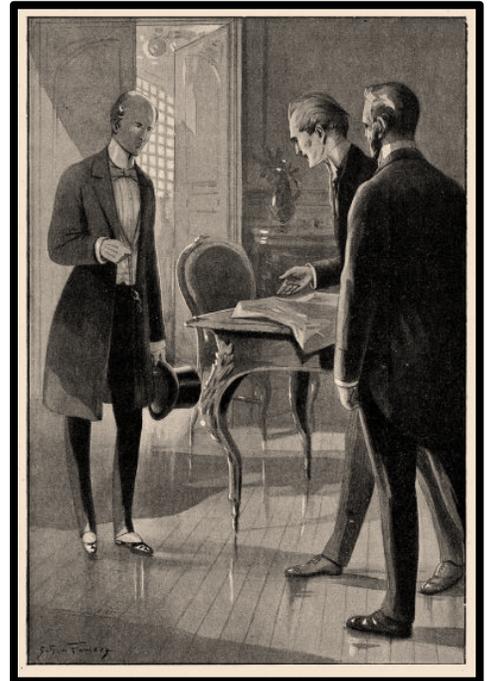
Those are all the notices which appeared before the disappearance of the bride."

"Before the what?" asked Holmes with a start.

If you can't imagine Holmes doing a spit take there, we probably can't be friends.

And when **Lestrade**, looking ridiculous in his nautical garb, is so proud of a clue he found, the way Holmes deflates him is fairly hilarious:

He took up the paper in a listless way, but his attention instantly became riveted, and he gave a little cry of satisfaction. "This is indeed important," said he.



"Ha! you find it so?"

"Extremely so. I congratulate you warmly."

Lestrade rose in his triumph and bent his head to look. "Why," he shrieked, "you're looking at the wrong side!"

Shrieked? Really? The thought of Sherlock complimenting Lestrade, and then it being revealed that he wasn't even looking at the "*right*" side of the clue, while the pea-coat-garbed inspector shrieks, is freaking *hilarious*. Throw in some other touches--such as Holmes finding his "*suspects*" based on the outrageous amount a hotel charged for sherry--have me convinced that **Arthur Conan Doyle** was aiming for comedy when he wrote this.

And you can't have a Wildean comedy without at least *some* mocking of the upper classes and nobility, can you? Much has been made of Holmes (and Watson, through his narration), taking the piss out of **Lord Robert**. Holmes declares that cases from "*humbler*" clients are much more interesting, and declaring upper class social functions as "*unwelcome*" and "*boring*." Watson describes St. Simon as "*verging on foppishness*," and having the "*petulance...of a man whose pleasant lot it had ever been to command and to be obeyed*." Sherlock immediately tries to cut off his new client's snobbery, telling him this case was actually a step down in class for him, as he had aided the King of Scandinavia. Lord Robert discusses describing someone as a gentleman, even though he was "*quite a common-looking person*," and distressing over the "*liberties*" between **Hatty** and her maid--an American affectation, he declares.

The reverse-snobbery of the **Baker Street** detectives even seems to border on cruelty at points, though. Holmes questions Hatty's dowry at one point, and whether Lord Robert gets to keep it even though she disappeared--surely implying that he believes he might not be so anxious to find her, or even that he was involved in her vanishing! (See my discussion of the **Granada** version below...)

Well, there's even more of this, until the end, when St. Simon is faced with a particularly *embarrassing* public humiliation, and is unable fully forgive his erstwhile bride. Watson declares that the nobleman was "*certainly not very gracious!*" And it is at this point that Holmes rebukes Watson for not being able to put himself in Lord Robert's shoes.

And of course, we *should* be sympathetic to Lord Robert at this point, because while we have been gently distracted by all the wry ripostes directed at British nobles, it's clear that *everyone* else involved in this case has behaved far *more* abominably! Start with Hatty's father, who, when he struck it rich, forbade his daughter from marrying someone economically beneath them--until he saw a chance to barter his daughter and dowry for access to nobility, that is! That by itself pretty much undercuts any "*American commoners are better than snooty English upper class*" theme you might think the story had.

Then we learn that Hatty and **Frank** didn't trust each other to remain pure during Frank's hunt for riches, to the extent that they had to be secretly married! That was the only way Frank could "*feel sure of her.*" Some romance!

Of course, Frank Moulton followed Hatty to England, and apparently had made his fortune, as he was staying at a hotel whose prices were so exorbitant that it was easy to track him down. He claims that he couldn't find her before the ceremony, because the newspaper announcement didn't give her address! Oh, *come now*. You're staying at one of London's swankier hotels--you can't pay the concierge to find out where a wealthy American wedding party might be staying? You can't place ads in the papers, like Holmes does every other story? Your *only* course of action is confront her *at the actual wedding ceremony*, advise her to keep quiet and go through with it, slip her a note, and then help her steal away during the wedding breakfast?!? That's lazy and entitled at best, and shows a selfish callowness towards the feelings of everyone else involved at worst. The story may mock uppercrust manners, but surely this American was *just* as superior and self-centered as Lord Robert!

And then there is Hatty herself. There was no shame in a "business transaction" marriage like this in that era, and she was willing to go through with it. Lord Robert defends her when he hires Holmes, saying he "thought her to be at bottom a noble woman...capable of heroic self-sacrifice and that anything dishonourable would be repugnant to her." Well, that pretty much proves completely *untrue*.

Yes, it was a difficult situation, with *no* good way to handle it. Yet at every stage, she expressly chose the *worst* way. The secret marriage already showed she wasn't a terribly strong character, a woman who was afraid of confrontation and openness. So when she saw Frank--*before* the vows were taken!--of course she remained silent, and continued with the ceremony. Why, we can't cause a scene in church, even if going through with the service is bigamy! And running off during the breakfast? Well, telling St. Simon the truth would have been "*dreadful hard*," so *of course* she just "made up her mind to run away and explain afterwards." Of course, "*afterwards*" was forestalled because she felt "*ashamed*," so she resolved to just "vanish away and never see any of them again," while "perhaps"--**PERHAPS?!?!?**--sending a note to her pa. At every step she chooses the path to cause *maximum pain* to everyone involved except herself and Frank. And only Holmes himself patiently explaining could make her see how vast her mistakes were.

So we see, as in a true comedy of manners, *everyone* is behaving abominably! Doyle is critiquing everyone's manners and foibles. But perhaps because of the title of the piece draws our attention, or because of our era's greater skepticism about nobility, or because Watson goes out of his way to paint a negative picture of St. Simon, over the years the critique of the foppish lord gets much more attention than the terrible manners of the Americans! At the end, I actually feel *sorry* for St. Simon--he may be a jerk, but he behaved

correctly in every way, and everyone else showed no consideration *whatsoever* for him or his feelings. (I will grant you that we do not know the truth of what happened betwixt him and **Flora Miller**, and why she is so aggrieved--were there promises of marriage made?

A pregnancy?--so it's certainly possible that this could be viewed by some as Lord Robert's *karmic* payback. Discuss amongst yourselves.)

And at the end, Holmes brings everyone together for a friendly supper, a peace-making attempt, trying to find truth and forgiveness for everyone. It's an attempt at a redemption, the feast at the end of comedy where "*all's well that ends well*," and all of the much ado is forgiven and the wedded couple is sent on to a new life. And it works, mostly--yes, Lord Robert is not as gracious as Watson would like, but he does forgive Hatty, and shakes her hand--and at least he gets the closure that would have been denied, albeit with a terrible public humiliation.

Of course, that's just my view...there are other ways to deal with the story...

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

** Which brings us to Granada.

For some reason, they decided to make this a "*feature-length*" adaptation. Which means that, stretching out a short story for an hour and 45 minutes, they needed *lots* of extra material to fill the time.

They also changed the title to "**The Eligible Bachelor**," which I guess made sense, as they was nothing noble about this version of Lord Robert.

For instead of a low-intensity missing person case as a comedy of manners, they chose to go complete *grand guignol Gothic terror*, a bloodbath and symbolism-fest that has to be seen to be believed.

They start out with Holmes sleepless because of recurring nightmares (which turn out to be prophetic dreams of the case to come. Why? How? *DON'T ASK!*) Then Lord Robert hires Sherlock, and the case is much as it was...except:

A mysterious veiled woman keeps sending Holmes notes and clues trying to steer the investigation. And it turns out Hatty was St. Simon's *third* wife!! The first died abroad in a robbery in Paris. The second marriage was *annulled*, for reasons Lord Robert refuses to reveal. Then we learn that St. Simon is in extreme financial distress. And that the man who murdered his first wife, **Thomas Floutier**, is now employed by St. Simon at his mysteriously decrepit estate (which used to have a zoo, and now has a wild leopard and baboon running around--just *because*), because of course Lord Robert hired him to kill wife #1. And that inherited fortune wasn't enough, as it turns out that the second marriage was annulled because the wife, **Helena**, had

gone insane. Except Lord Robert had his girlfriend Flora Miller (here an *actress* instead of a ballet dancer) *pose* as an insane Helen so the doctors would agree to have her declared nuts and her could get her fortune, and then he proceeded *to lock Helena is one of the animal cages of the former zoo for 8 years*. And the veiled woman was Helena's sister **Agnes**, whose face had been mauled by Floutier when she came around looking for Helena. And now feeling spurned, Flora had gone to Hatty and told her the whole tale, which is part of the reason Hatty chose to vanish (yes, her supposedly-dead first husband showed up, too). Then St. Simon *kills* Flora to keep her silent; when Floutier tries to kill Hatty, Watson shoots him and *leaves him for the leopard to eat*; and when St. Simon goes to the bear pit to kill Helena, she springs a trap she had set and brings the walls tumbling down on him, *so he dies*. And somehow Hatty and Frank end up with the estate and live there happily ever after.

No, I'm not making a word of that up. And really, I've only scratched the surface of how weird the story is.

Granada is by far the best series of Holmes adaptations, but man, they sometimes go off on these *insane tangents* that make you wonder what the heck they were thinking.

** The picture Watson paints of himself on a lazy, lazy day is priceless:

With my body in one easy-chair and my legs upon another, I had surrounded myself with a cloud of newspapers until at last, saturated with the news of the day, I tossed them all aside and lay listless ..

You and me both, John. Except in my case it's usually comic books...

** The Adventure Of The Noble Bachelor is, of course, the story which contains Holmes' wonderful opinion of Americans:

It is always a joy to meet an American, Mr. Moulton, for I am one of those who believe that the folly of a monarch and the blundering of a minister in far-gone years will not prevent our children from being some day citizens of the same world-wide country under a flag which shall be a quartering of the Union Jack with the Stars and Stripes.

I'm not sure upon what Holmes is basing this...most of the Americans he's encountered that we've seen have been murderers (**A Study In Scarlet**) and racist murderers (**The Five Orange Pips**). I guess **Irene Adler** was even more influential than we knew.

Yet despite Sherlock's prediction, there is still no "*united in one world-wide country*," though. Maybe the debut of **Doctor Who** tonight (last night by the time you read this) will be enough to finally join the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes...

** Not *everyone* in England shared Holmes' opinion of Americans. The "*society page*" in an unnamed paper opined (no doubt with tongue slightly in cheek):

There will soon be a call for protection in the marriage market, for the present free-trade principle appears to tell heavily against our home product. One by one the management of the noble houses of Great Britain is passing into the hands of our fair cousins from across the Atlantic.

American women are stealing our noble men!!

Of course, such an attitude (assuming it really existed) was no doubt part of fear and or envy of the growing economic clout of Americans without the benefits/restrictions of the British class system. "Those uncouth cousins of ours are just buying everything without earning it the way we have!!" Such is always the dispute between old money and the *nouveau riche*...

** Along with the unnamed service Holmes did for the King of Scandinavia, Watson tantalizes us with "the little problem of the **Grosvenor Square furniture van.**"

** Homes pulls out "*a red-covered volume*" from his reference books to look up Lord Robert. That there is actually a guidebook to all the English royalty, like a bird-watcher's guide to nobles, always amazes me.

** With Lestrade once again arresting the wrong person when he seizes Flora Miller, his wearing a fairly ridiculous get-up, and his ignoring the crucial clue Holmes interpreted for him, it's difficult to see how much more pathetic Doyle could make him look. Lestrade needs to have *some* base level of competence, or he becomes a cartoon character. Yes, we need a foil who only exists to make Holmes look brilliant by comparison--but wouldn't it be more impressive if Holmes were superior to a *good* but limited police officer, rather than an idiot who is never, ever even close to right?

**Holmes: "American slang is very expressive sometimes."

** Moulton took Hatty's wedding dress and veil and shoes and wedding ring and "dropped them away somewhere where no one could find them."

Except, of course, they were fairly promptly, floating--floating--in the lake. They weren't even weighted down!!

I suppose it's a good sign that he makes such a poor criminal?

** I still love that the story's resolution turned on a hotel charging eightpence for a glass of sherry.

Save your receipts, kids!!

Brian Keith Snell

August 24, 2014