

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

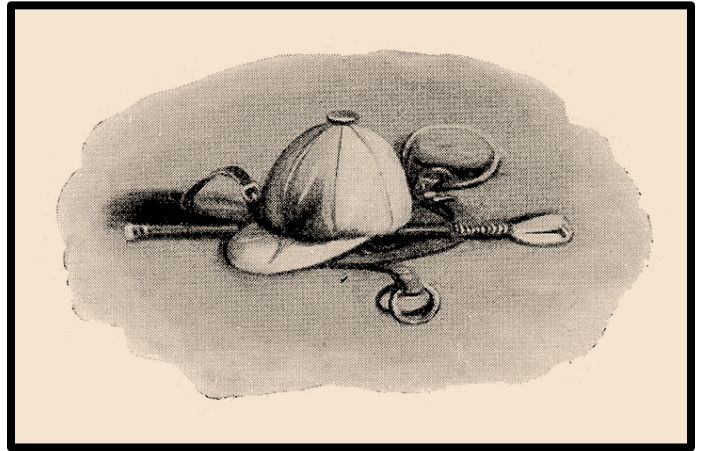
The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XV -- The Adventure of Silver Blaze

Silver Blaze--A Man Of Degenerate Principles?!?

It had to happen, of course.

We (as a culture) often end up tearing down and demystifying our heroes, after decades spent building them up. It's as if we can't stand to have role models purer than ourselves, so we have to *interpret* and *deconstruct* and *twist* until our humans have feet of clay, and then go further still to make them actual villains.

Hey, *I'm* as guilty as anyone; I once wrote an essay declaring that the true villain of **The Wizard of Oz** (movie version) was **Glinda The Good Witch**, who manipulated people and events until everyone that stood between her and ultimate power in Oz was removed.



Hey, we were all young once, and we all liked to flout authority figures by proving that our parents' heroes were really corrupt.

Which brings us to **Silver Blaze**.

It is one of the greatest of the **Holmes** mysteries, clever and fun, with all the clues laid out for the reader, so he can follow along and nod as Sherlock solves it..

Yet, for some unfathomable reason, a large contingent of commentators have decided that Holmes *wagered* on Silver Blaze in the race, an act which, depending on the writer, ranged from **unethical** to *illegal*.

Somehow, when Holmes says, "as I stand to win a little on this next race, I shall defer a lengthy explanation until a more fitting time," that supposedly indicates that he must have *also* wagered on the previous race, as well, having manipulated events so that the odds were high against Silver Blaze.

Where does this amazing inference come from? There is *nothing* in the text to support it.

Yet others have gone on to accuse Holmes of not only *unfairly profiting* from his knowledge that Silver Blaze would race, but also that he somehow was responsible for *fixing the race*, acting in collusion with the owner and trainer of Silver Blaze's biggest rival, **Desborough** to throw the race to the favorite.

Famous American sports columnist **Red Smith** even wrote an essay for the **New York Herald Tribune**, declaring that Sherlock "*exhibited an ethical blind spot of shocking dimensions*" regarding sports, and that it was "*common knowledge that he was the architect of an extraordinary piece of skullduggery in connection with a horse race,*" and that "*it has been established that Mr. Sherlock Holmes was a horse player of degenerate principles who thought nothing of fixing a race.*" He even accuses the detective of using his cocaine needle to inject horses to hinder their performance!!

All of this because Sherlock said that he had a bet on the *following* race!!

Of course, **Doyle's** story does show the thoroughness of corruption that sports betting can bring upon people. *Everywhere* in this story there is money, and lots of it. Start with Silver Blaze's owner: it cost **Colonel Ross** £50 to enter Silver Blaze in the race (half of which would be forfeited if Silver Blaze was scratched from the **Wessex Cup**), and he stood to win £1,000 if his horse won, in addition to any additional wagers he would have made. This was, as he have seen in the stories, ridiculously high finance for the era, when a single woman could live quite nicely on £60 per year. People--even parents--have been willing to imprison and even kill their children for much smaller amounts!

The *corrosive* effect of this much money floating around touches almost everyone in the story. Young **Fitzroy Simpson**, who had "*squandered a fortune on the turf,*" and as a bookie had bet £5,000 against the favorite. Facing huge potential losses, he made lengthy road trip--and was willing to bribe servants--just to get some more information on the horses. The trainer of Desborough, **Silas Brown**, was "known to have large bets on the event," which is doubtless what caused him to conceal Silver Blaze after his initial reaction to simply return him. And of course, there is **John Straker**, whose massive debts led him to the conclusion that the only way to right his finances was by fixing the horse race.

So, perhaps it was *inevitable* that some might suspect that, as everyone else is corrupted, than Sherlock Holmes himself must become tainted by the temptation of large sums of money. Sure, nothing else in the **Canon** might suggest that, and the story itself provides *zero* evidence. But some can't let that stop them from baselessly asserting that the great detective would suddenly abandon his anti-crime stance for a chance at some small amount of lucre.

Part of the problem is the way in which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle presents the story. Doyle admitted in his autobiography that his knowledge of "the laws of training and racing" was lacking, and that his "*ignorance*"

hurt the realism of the story; had events occurred as he described, "*Half (the characters) would have been in jail, and the other half warned off the turf forever.*"

Yes, Holmes kept Silver Blaze's identity concealed (at least from Colonel Ross, as a bit of *puckish* revenge for Ross' disdain towards Holmes)--but surely the racing stewards would never have allowed some other horse to race in Silver Blaze's slot, and they would have pulled his name from the race. They would have required absolute proof that this was the same horse, and thus everyone would know prior to the running that this was indeed the correct horse. This is likely the part of the story where Doyle was bemoaning his ignorance.

And it wasn't a terribly well-kept secret: in the 24 hours before the race, the odds against Silver Blaze dropped from **15-1** to **3-1**--the same as they originally were--and at race time the odds were **5-4**, strongly suggesting that word had gotten out, and large amounts of money were being bet on the allegedly missing horse. It's unlikely that any one person's bets could move the odds that much--especially the man Red Smith described as "practically always broke," allegedly because of his drug habits.

It seems clear that the situation with Silver Blaze was fairly widely known--*except* by Colonel Ross. Surely Fitzroy Simpson wasn't the only tout lurking about Dartmoor; and Silas Brown, who now stood to lose a substantial amount of money on the race, would likely look to cut his losses by discreetly selling information.

Furthermore, word had surely gotten about that Sherlock Holmes himself had *guaranteed* that the horse would appear, and would be attending the race in person. Holmes had certainly attained enough notoriety by this point that the press would have picked up on his involvement in the case, and someone would have reported on his pronouncement. It would seem that only Colonel Ross was still pessimistic about the horse showing up. With all this information out there, and the odds dropping outrageously, it seems unfair in the extreme to accuse Holmes of fixing the race, let alone profiting unfairly from his knowledge.

Also, Holmes doubtless claimed the "*large reward*" that Ross had posted for the return of the horse--certainly he would have no need to jigger the race to make money.

And even if Sherlock *had* wagered, would it have even been unethical? Simmons was trying to buy access to knowledge that others didn't have about the horses. That's *neither* illegal or unethical--that's why touts exist. In what way would Sherlock's wagering based upon knowledge he had obtained be any different? Trainers and groomsman and touts and bookies and high society were *all* wagering on the race, and all hoping they had special knowledge and insight to give them an edge on other bettors--and given the precipitous drop in the odds, many of these gamblers had (or at least suspected) *precisely the same information* that Sherlock had--that Silver Blaze would race. If you accept the legitimacy of wagering on horse races, I can see no reason to proclaim a (hypothetical) bet by the detective as any *less* ethical than any other.

But parsing the ethics is unnecessary, anyway. If you believe that Holmes had a duty not to bet on Silver Blaze, well, there's not a scintilla of indication in the story that he *actually* did. Why, in heaven's name, would we assume otherwise?

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

The **Granada adaptation of Silver Blaze takes away both the doubt and the ethical questions over Sherlock's betting. They correct Doyle's mistake by having Holmes reveal that the mystery horse is Silver Blaze *well before the race*--publicly, so everyone can see--eliminating any chance or serious charges of race-fixing. They also show Holmes placing a (small) wager on the race, but *after* the odds had already dropped to a meager 5-4...and while he wins the bet, it is merely for a small amount of cash, certainly not some life-changing amount of wealth.

A picky meta-point: this collection is entitled **The Memoirs Of Sherlock Holmes? Holmes wrote or narrated *none* of these stories! If anything, it should be titled **The Memoirs Of John Watson, M.D.** Or, perhaps something along the line of **My Memoirs Of My Cases With Sherlock Holmes by John Watson**. Yeah, I know I'm being unreasonably pedantic...

The forgotten victim in all this: poor **Mrs. Straker. She's clearly quite distraught over the death of her husband, and anxious for the capture and punishment of the killer. We don't stick around to see, but in short order she discovers that a) her husband *wasn't* the victim who heroically died protecting the horse, he was *the crook*, and b) he had a *second wife* who had driven him into bankruptcy and crime. That's a rough day of revelations, especially when she finds that her "*comfortably off*" husband left her nothing but debts.

The question of **William Derbyshire is an interesting one. As with any case of bigamy, you wonder how Straker found enough time to maintain two lives. Was **Mrs. Derbyshire** content to have her husband away most of the time? After all, being a horse trainer is a full time position, and one imagines he couldn't sneak away from Dartmoor to London too often.

Of course, given the kind of deception that bigamy involves, we also have to wonder how *honest* a jockey and trainer Straker had been over the past dozen years. Someone so fundamentally dishonest as to pull off the two wives business surely was willing to take *other* liberties over the years. perhaps subtly throwing a race or two over the years? As Holmes notes, it is not an uncommon practice.

I am a bit skeptical and unbelieving, though, when Sherlock declares that the expensive dress-loving Mrs. Derbyshire "*had plunged him over head and ears in debt, and so led him into this miserable plot.*" It

seems unfair to blame her, especially since she is as likely just as much a victim of Straker's duplicity as his "real" wife. No, let's leave the culpability with the culprit, please--let's not blame the wife for the husband's sins.

**Another question--was Straker planning to bet against Silver Blaze himself, or was he acting on someone else's behest? Given his dire financial situation, he might not have had a lot of money available to wager. Plus, if he were caught wagering against his own horse, the plot would be pretty immediately revealed.

No, for a man in Straker's position, the safer and surer payday would be to take a large payment from *someone else* to fix the race. And honestly, this would be one of the few times in the early cases where I think it might be appropriate to invoke **Moriarty** as the secret crime-master. That kind of low-risk, high-payoff enterprise would be right up his bailiwick, and if we were to get *cheeky* we could suggest he was using his *mathematical prowess* to figure the best way to massage the gambling odds.

Unfortunately, Straker's death means we'll likely never know...

This is the third case involving bigamy (Boscombe Valley**, **Noble Bachelor**). Was bigamy really that common a problem in Victorian England?

**This is the second case in which the "*murderer*" is revealed to be an animal. It won't be the last...

**One of the greatest exchanges in the history of detection:

"Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"

"To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

"The dog did nothing in the night-time."

"That was the curious incident," remarked Sherlock Holmes.

Wonderful use of negative inference. And a great bit of dialogue, wisdom delivered as what sounds like wise-*** repartee.

But is it necessarily *true*? Sure, the dog didn't bark. But he could have been drugged *even more easily* than Hunter was...just toss him an opium-laced piece of meat or cheese. Trust me, dogs are *not* so picky as to need to disguise the taste with curry. So conceivably, it still *could* have been someone unknown to the dog (and the household) who took the horse.

**If you like, I can show you dozens and dozens of articles arguing whether or not Holmes could have accurately judged the train's speed by counting telegraph posts. Really, there are no nerds like Holmes nerds.

**Doyle has Holmes unknowingly make a commentary on what trying to ferret out actual news in the age of instant social media:

The tragedy has been so uncommon, so complete and of such personal importance to so many people, that we are suffering from a plethora of surmise, conjecture, and hypothesis. The difficulty is to detach the framework of fact--of absolute undeniable fact--from the embellishments of theorists and reporters.

Yeah, that's about right, as anyone who has followed **Twitter** too closely during a "news event" can testify.

** There are some *surprisingly* large differences in the texts between the British and Americans texts in this story. The original British publication says that Silver Blaze is "**from the *Isomony* stock;**" the American says that he was from "***Somony* stock.**" As *Isomony* was an *actual* thoroughbred, that's a pretty big difference.

Similarly, **Lord Blackwater's** stables are called "**Capleton**" in the British, and "**Mapleton**" in the American.

There are many such differences between the editions in this story--and indeed all the stories in *Memoirs*. Sometimes whole sentences are added or dropped, sometimes seemingly changing the meaning completely.

Whether this was a symptom of the rush to get new Holmes stories into print across the pond, or just sloppy editing somewhere along the line, I can't say. But next week, we'll see the biggest example of the differences across the ocean.

**Once again, Doyle uses *gypsies* as a red herring, and once again we never meet them. We are being deprived of the joy of seeing Sherlock Holmes vs Gypsies!!

****Inspector Gregory** is presented in the most favorable light of *any* police officer Holmes ever encounters. He is "excellently competent," and seems to anticipate every one of Holmes questions and needs, even if he himself isn't (yet) capable of making the deductive leaps that Sherlock is. It's a shame that we never get to see him again, to see how he has advanced...

**Gregory and Holmes have a very nice discussion of circumstantial evidence, and how likely it might be to stand up in a courtroom. Gregory insists, "*I really think we have enough to go before a jury,*" while Holmes demurs: "*A clever counsel would tear it all to rags.*"

The back and forth is rather like watching the district attorneys on **Law & Order** argue over whether they're ready for trial. And the discussion is an enlightening examination of why having enough evidence to arrest someone *isn't* the same as having enough to convict them.

**When Holmes first confronts Silas Brown with what he knows: "*Holmes leaned forward and whispered something in the trainer's ear. He started violently and flushed to the temples.*"

I think we know ****well what Holmes whispered to him, right?

Hail Hydra!

Sorry.

He may be a few decades early, but Holmes pretty much nails the creed of the noir private eye: "*I follow my own methods, and tell as much or as little as I choose. That is the advantage of being unofficial.*" You and **Jim Rockford, Sherlock.

Of course, such a code will get you accused of fixing horse races and being unethical, so watch yourself!

Brian Keith Snell

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