

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 XVII -- The Adventure of the Yellow Face

The Yellow Face--A Better Story Than You Have Given It Credit For!

There are a lot of reasons to dismiss **The Yellow Face** as minor, forgettable *Holmes*.

The story shares properties with many of what I consider to be lesser Holmes stories. Like **Orange Pips**, it is a story where Holmes fails. Like **Copper Beeches**, it is a story where the outcome would have been *exactly* the same had Sherlock never been involved, robbing our hero of any agency in the story. He makes no noteworthy deductions in the case, aside from the characteristics of the pipe's owner. It's a very short story, and really, not much happens.

And then there is the very *delicate* subject of the story's position on race relations.

Small wonder, then, that Yellow Face has been adapted to the screen only *once*--in a 1921 silent film.

And yet...*and yet*...while Yellow Face certainly isn't a particularly good *Sherlock Holmes*, story, it is a *very good* story nonetheless. And it is a story I very much like.

Yellow Face is a surprisingly sensitive look at the need for honesty and communication in a marriage, and a surprisingly touching call for racial tolerance. And ultimately, it is about forgiveness and redemption.

The crux of the story--the reason we have any "*mystery*" at all--is **Effie's** absolute terror at the possibility of anyone discovering that she had a child with a black man. If she could simply tell her husband about her past, the story would be over before it began.



But she can't bring herself to trust her husband's reaction. "*Nothing but misery can come of it if you enter that cottage.*" "*Our whole lives are at stake in this...If you force your way into that cottage, all is over between us.*" "*For God's sake, don't Jack!*" Her absolute certainty of rejection rises to the level of sheer terror.

Of course, it's hard to blame her. Few of us will ever know the hardships and ostracization she experienced by marrying a black man in post-Civil War Georgia, and having a child with him. "Cut[ing] myself off from my own race" is surely typical English stiff-upper-lip understatement of what she endured.

She was *so* traumatized that she chose to return to Britain rather than remain with her sick child!! And when **Lucy** was brought over--"only for a few weeks"--Effie *insisted* on Lucy's wearing a ridiculous mask and gloves, lest even the slightest glance of her skin set the neighbors to gossiping.

These are hardly ennobling acts--and Effie certainly won't win any Mother Of The Year awards--but are understandable in the context of her life. The awful prejudice she experienced in America, followed by a return to 3 years of "normalcy," and the sudden fear that she could have to live through all that again--even if she did expose herself to that threat by bringing Lucy to England--makes her somewhat irrational, unable to trust even the man she loves. The poor woman was suffering from racism PTSD, and was unable to perceive anything but fear.

But despite Effie's fears, **Grant Munro** proves the power of love and tolerance (eventually). Throughout much of the story, he comes off as a bit of a jack***. "A man can tell easily enough when a woman loves him"?!?! Sure, you and every other dude, Grant. Breaking into others' houses, leaving his wife and home at the drop of a hat? Munro certainly does not come across as a man capable of rational thought and calm decision-making in the face of a crisis. And certainly his reaction to Effie's having some secret *isn't* a model of trust and forbearance.

Yet when the truth is revealed, and push comes to shove, Grant Munro stands tall, in a scene that makes me tear up every time I read it:

It was a long two minutes before Grant Munro broke the silence, and when his answer came it was one of which I love to think. He lifted the little child, kissed her, and then, still carrying her, he held his other hand out to his wife and turned towards the door.

"We can talk it over more comfortably at home," said he. "I am not a very good man, Effie, but I think that I am a better one than you have given me credit for being."

And there it is. Gently upbraiding her for not trusting him, while at the same time forgiving her and implicitly pledging to make this family whole, Munro proves himself to be one hell of a husband, and a pretty good man indeed.

There are many commentators who want to pick holes in this story: "*Watson's description of Lucy's skin color means Effie's story cannot be true!*" "*They can't have been legally married in Georgia!*" Her whole story must be a lie!

Well, more power to those who think that way, I suppose; but I would suggest that they're missing the forest for the trees. This is a piece of fiction, not a documentary, and **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** was a writer who often made mistakes. This is a wonderful tale with a point to make, and to focus on whether some fairly trivial aspects match up with real life is akin to criticizing **To Kill A Mockingbird** for not being 100% accurate in its portrayal of contemporary courtroom procedure. Even if you're right, it sort of misses the point, and doesn't invalidate the moral of the story. So kudos to Doyle for writing this, and embracing what was very likely not a very popular position in his day.

And special kudos for using a story starring his wildly popular character to make that statement, ensuring that it would be widely read.

This isn't necessarily a very good Sherlock Holmes story; but I think that it is a better story than many have given it credit for being.

OTHERS TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

**Once again, there are some fairly *remarkable* differences between the original British editions of this story and the American versions.

Most are trivial. When Holmes is discussing the amber stem of the pipe, and whether the presence of an insect proves that it is real amber, he says, "*Why, it is quite a branch of trade, the putting of sham flies into the sham amber.*" That line is omitted from most American editions, for reasons unknown.

When **Watson** is discussing cases where Holmes has failed, the original mentions "*the affair of the second stain*"--not capitalized. Was it referring to the story *The Adventure Of The Second Stain*, not to be written for a decade yet? Again, for reasons unknown, American editions change that to "*the adventure of the **Musgrave Ritual**.*" Well, that *is* a story included in **Memoirs**, but it's also *not* an example where Holmes failed! Curious.

However, some of the changes go far beyond trivial, to actually altering the meaning of the story. Grant Munro describes his first glimpse of the face in the window as "*a livid dead yellow.*" American publications changed that to "*chalky white.*" I have no idea why (some have suggested that it was to avoid offending a growing Asian population?)--but it does seem *silly* as the story entitled *The Yellow Face* now has no yellow face in it.

Most egregiously, American versions changed "*It was a long **two** minutes before Grant Munro broke the silence*" to "*It was a long **ten** minutes before Grant Munro broke the silence.*" Why? **Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Illustrated Collection from Mobile Reference** tells us, "It is hypothesized by some readers that interracial marriage was even more taboo in the U.S. than in England and so it was felt that Mr. Munro would take longer to overcome his mixed feelings about the child." Seriously.

Man, that really makes me want to smack someone. Hey, 19th century American editors--***just print the **** story as is!!***

**Watson provides a good literary/dramatic reason for not generally providing us with cases that Sherlock failed to solve: "*[B]ecause where he failed it happened too often that no one else succeeded, and that the tale was left forever without a conclusion.*"

Fair enough. Too bad you didn't figure that out before presenting us with *The Five Orange Pips*, though.

**The Sherlock Holmes diet and fitness plan, according to Watson:

Sherlock Holmes was a man who seldom took exercise for exercise's sake. Few men were capable of greater muscular effort, and he was undoubtedly one of the finest boxers of his weight that I have ever seen; but he looked upon aimless bodily exertion as a waste of energy, and he seldom bestirred himself save when there was some professional object to be served. Then he was absolutely untiring and indefatigable. That he should have kept himself in training under such circumstances is remarkable, but his diet was usually of the sparest, and his habits were simple to the verge of austerity.

So: don't eat a lot, and exercise only when you have to. Perhaps **Dr. Oz** can push **The Sherlock Holmes Diet** next week...

**Even though the client's name is Grant Munro--it's even written on his hat--every time Effie speaks she calls him "*Jack.*" *Every* single time. She never *once* calls him Grant.

Is Jack his middle name, and he only uses Grant for official business? Or vice versa--he is a Jack, but uses his middle name for business because it sounds more formal? Is it some personal pet name she has for him, perhaps a private joke between them?

Some have suggested that this makes the time John Watson's wife called him "**James**" more understandable. Apparently, Victorian women called their husbands whatever **** thing they wanted to!

**Munro tells us that Effie sign over all her income and property to him when they married.

If so, *what* did the faithful Scotch servant and a recovering Lucy live on for 3 years, if they didn't have access to Effie's money?!?

Perhaps **John Hebron** had left a separate trust for Lucy? Or maybe they stayed with some of Hebron's relatives? Or perhaps Effie just lied to Munro about how much her income was.

Still, she did have to "*borrow*" £100 from her husband to rent the cottage and bring Effie and the servant over, so it's unlikely she was hiding some large sum of money from him.

**Munro thinks that "*trees are always a neighbourly kind of thing.*" Uh, OK.

**As I've said, this *isn't* a great tale for Sherlock. His deductions about the pipe aside, he is fairly much *worthless* during the entire case. He advises Munro to do what he would have done anyway. He makes no statement whatsoever regarding the issues of race and family, leaving all that to Watson. He is essentially a *bystander* to the entire drama.

And as for his "*provisional*" theory of the case, which he would be surprised if does not turn out to be correct? Well, given the prominence of the practice in recent cases, perhaps it's not too shocking that Holmes first guess went straight to *bigamy* (and blackmail). Still, the theory requires quite a number of wild assumptions for which there is *no* factual basis, something Holmes would chide any **Scotland Yard** inspector for. He asserts that Effie's first husband "*contracted some loathsome disease, and became a leper or an imbecile*" without a shred of factual basis. He explains that Effie knew "*in some way*" that the new residents of the cottage are her blackmailers. Really, Sherlock? "In some way"?!? Telepathy? Woman's intuition? He assumes the blackmailers demanded a photo of her--*why?!?* And he says he can think of no other possible explanation for Effie's "frenzied anxiety" that Munro should not enter the cottage.

It's a theory filled with loopholes and shoddy reasoning. Even Watson sounds shocked: "*It is all surmise.*"

Small wonder that Sherlock wanted Watson to remind him of this case whenever he became too arrogant. It is surely his worst performance as a detective.

**When Sherlock opines, "*Any truth is better than indefinite doubt,*" he is making a pretty fair rebuke of the way Effie has handled her secret. And it's a good prescription for any relationship--it's often *the doubt*, as opposed to the actual facts, that does the damage.

**Holmes knows that by breaking onto the cottage, they are "*hopelessly in the wrong,*" legally, but "*it is worth it.*" A safe bet to make, given Effie's terror at anyone discovering the secret there.

But it is also a fair statement of Sherlock's ethos, and his understanding of justice. Sometimes you have to risk violating the letter of the law to protect people. Remember, Sherlock assumed that the residents of the cottage were blackmailing the Munros, and doing their marriage harm. So in Holmes' mind, stopping that was more important than trespass laws. This is part of his "*advantage of being unofficial.*"

On the other hand, Sherlock was *100% wrong* in his interpretation of events. And even though everything worked out well in the end, perhaps there is something to be said for being a little less *cavalier* with legal niceties and not allowing "unofficial agents" to run amok in their personal quests for their version of justice.

Had the situation been different, Holmes and company could have been in jail, or even legally shot as intruders. And honestly, would you want a private detective operating under a false set of assumptions breaking down your door in the middle of the night?

Those "*legal niceties*" are there for a reason, and perhaps in our privacy-challenged era, we might want to more careful about whole-heartedly endorsing private parties violating them without any constraints or consequences.

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