

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

The Stock-Broker's Clerk--The Sincerest Form Of Self-Flattery!

Most people regard **The Stock-Broker's Clerk** as fairly minor **Holmes**. It hasn't been adapted to the screen in modern times (there was a 1922 silent film version), it's rarely talked about, and when it is, it's usually dismissed as a pale imitation of **The Red-Headed League**.

And I can't say that appraisal is wrong.

The basic premise--man conned away from his place of business by false set-up so that crooks can take advantage of his absence--is one **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** already used, in one of the more famous Holmes stories. And in almost every point of comparison, the earlier-published version is more interesting and exciting and adaptation worthy.

Let's do a point-by-point comparison.

THE VICTIMS--Jabez Wilson vs. Hall Pycroft. The middle-aged, somewhat comical pawnbroker with his fiery red hair, to me, is somewhat more interesting than the "*smart young City man*" in his dapper suit. Certainly Wilson is a better role for an actor, and a better written character. Jabez, if nothing else, makes a more sympathetic victim, as a pathetic figure whose fading business leaves him vulnerable to the scheme. Pycroft, on the other hand, just isn't written with all that much personality, aside from his *quickly-vanishing* Cockney slang.

THE VILLAIN--John Clay vs. Beddington (we never learn the full true name of "**Arthur Pinner**"...let's just agree to call him Arthur from here on). Clay is the "*fourth smartest man in London*," a "*murderer, thief, smasher, and forger*." He's willing to play a very long con, taking a job as a pawnbroker's assistant for months in order to achieve his goal. Pinner and his brother are forgers and "cracksmen."



Certainly Clay comes across as somewhat smarter. Arthur's decision to play both himself *and* his "brother" led to the mark seeing through the con job, something that John Clay never allowed to happen (although, in part, that might be due to Pycroft being a bit more intelligent than Jabez Wilson...). And the way Arthur falls apart upon news of his real brother's capture makes me suspect he *wasn't* the bold villain of the family. Then again, we spend *much* more time with Arthur than we do with John Clay, and the fact that he was able to pull off the double act for as long as he did suggests he's a pretty good actor.

It's probably a draw, or maybe a slight edge to Arthur Pinner...he may not be as good a villain as Clay, but he just *might* be a more interesting character.

THE SCAM--The odd will of a nutty American millionaire vs. a fake business to export crockery to France??

It's an unfair comparison, obviously. For sheer audaciousness, the idea of a bequest that will pay red haired gentleman £4 per week as long as they copy out the **Encyclopedia Britannica** by hand just can't be beat. It's *so* crazy an idea that it just could be true. And Clay goes *big* to assure the verisimilitude of the con: the newspaper ad, the audition with hundreds of redheads attending...if only Nigerian prince email scams could be so convincing!

Sadly, Arthur Pinner's plan is much more *prosaic*, and therefore much less interesting. And on it's face, it is therefore a touch less credible. An eccentric rich man with an odd will is one thing; a successful businessman with a company no one has heard of, with dingy offices, with a very unprofessional manner of poaching employees (and wagering on them with competitors), who hires people with no apparent qualifications for the job? By making the cover story *less* outlandish, you actually make it's real world flaws more visible. Not to mention, you also make it less interesting dramatically.

And while it's a virtually identical time-killer, copying the encyclopedia is a much more attention-getting detail than copying names out of a Paris directory. It's almost a paradox, but the unbelievability of the former actually makes it *more* believable than the latter.

Still I will say the Pinner plan was better in one respect. As I pointed out in my post on Red-Headed League, Clay completely *blew* the game by ending the con early. If they had merely continued the scam, and paid Wilson for one more week, Jabez wouldn't have gone to Holmes for help, and the thieves would have gotten away with the gold. That impatience lead to Clay's capture. Pinner, however, showed the proper *stick-to-it-iveness*, arranging to meet Pycroft even after his brother was supposed to have robbed the brokerage.

THE SCHEME--Perhaps it is not more realistic, but *tunneling into a bank vault* is a lot more interesting dramatically (and visually, if you're thinking of adaptations) than working at a bank for a week and then *cracking a safe*.

Granted, the **Beddingtons'** plan does result of the murder of a guard, and the body "doubled up and thrust into" the safe. Better suited for American television, then?

But seriously, the tunneling appeals more to our romantic imaginings of Victorian crime than the more prosaic "hanging around until almost everyone is gone and opening a safe."

THE BOOTY--You'd *think* Stock-Broker's Clerk might win on this count. The Beddingtons are after "*securities which amount in the aggregate to a sum of considerably over a million sterling,*" and actually (almost) get away with "*[n]early a hundred thousand pounds' worth of American railway bonds, with a large amount of scrip in mines and other companies.*" On it's face, that surely trumps Clay's scheme to get away with some portion of a mere £30,000.

Ah, but it's 30,000 "*gold napoleons!*" It's *treasure* (and the tunneling plan plays up this aspect)! It's gold!! Even if it is a far, far smaller amount than the Beddington haul, it's also far more *romantic*! Boxes full of bullion engage the imagination in a way that a satchel full of paperwork just doesn't, and make the booty far more memorable to us. "*Look, I have a bunch of stock certificates!*" just doesn't fire imagination the way crates full gold do.

Add to that the fact that we never *see* the loot in Stock-Broker's Clerk, whereas in Red-Headed our heroes are actually *sitting on the gold* (and in some adaptations of the story, you actually see the napoleons)!

So while it makes no sense financially, Red-Headed wins for the more interesting goal.

THE RESOLUTION--Obviously, no contest here.

In Red-Headed League, Holmes' deductions lead *directly* to the capture of the criminals. He (and we) *are there* for the apprehension. They never get the gold, and are captured and no one is hurt, thanks to Sherlock's work.

In Stock-Broker's Clerk, Holmes does *nothing* to thwart the robbery. He correctly deduces the plot, but doesn't bother to tell anyone until *after* the robbery has taken place. Beddington is captured by a police sergeant and constable who became suspicious--not even a Scotland Yard inspector, just *beat cops!* No deductions necessary! Of course, Beddington has already killed someone. And Holmes isn't even in the same city when he's captured--he's *halfway across the country*, and reads about the capture in the newspaper!! And yes, they do capture the brother/accomplice--but he would have committed suicide, so its not as if he would have gotten away.

So we can see why Stock-Broker's Clerk was ignored for adaptations. Since almost everyone adapted Red-Headed, going on to adapt Clerk would have seemed redundant. And in virtually every way, Red-Headed is just a *better* story--more interesting characters, more fascinating plot, and much better detective work from our hero.

So why the pale imitation? Well, most (but not all) chronologists of the **Canon** would say that this story--which Watson explicitly places very soon after **The Sign Of Four**--occurs *before* Red-Headed League. So maybe, if we are to be charitable to Doyle, we can say that he did this intentionally, to show how a younger and less experienced Holmes dealt with a similar case.

Indeed, some argue that it was Holmes' experience in Stock-Broker's that enabled him to deal so successfully with the scheme in Red-Headed League.

That's *balderdash*, of course, as everything we know says Doyle paid little attention to the accuracy/consistency of his dates. And such bootstrapping doesn't make any dramatic sense, at least without **Watson** somehow telling us how this case showed how Holmes would grow later, or some such puffery.

No, I think we simply have to accept that in this case, Doyle recycled an earlier plot device, disguising it with a different looking exterior. Yet it wasn't terribly well disguised. And while Stock-Broker's Clerk certainly *isn't* a bad story, in almost every respect it pales compared to Red-Headed League.

They can't all be winners, I guess.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

****The question must be asked--is Holmes *responsible* for the death of the watchman?**

Pycroft meets with Pinner Friday evening. He catches the night train to London to tell his story to Holmes Saturday morning. Holmes gathers Watson, and they all take the train back to Birmingham. In the meantime, after noon on Saturday, Beddington kills the guard, loots the safes, and is captured about 1:20pm.

Well, if Holmes had *already* heard Pycroft's story, and already figured out the general outline of the scheme, why didn't he notify the police, or at least **Mawson & Williams**? Granted, they weren't his clients, but if Holmes had already deduced what was going on, didn't he have some moral duty to at least alert the authorities that a robbery was going to happen? And if he had done so Saturday morning, mightn't the robbery--and thus the murder--have been *prevented*?

Well, as a tepid defense, we should note that Holmes had no way of knowing that **Saturday** was going to be the day of the crime. He might have thought there was time.

Secondly, and more persuasively, he *may not had it deduced yet*. He has Pycroft repeat his story during the train ride, but is it just for Watson's (and our) benefit? Holmes asks Pycroft to retell his tale "*with more detail if possible*," and he notes that "*[i]t will be of use to me to hear the succession of events again*." It seems, from the way he asks, that Holmes hadn't put everything together yet upon first hearing, and hadn't *yet* deduced that there was an imposter at the firm.

Perhaps he doesn't have his epiphanies until after the retelling of this tale...and thus he couldn't have prevented the crime.

****Another niggling detail--was there *another* culprit, an *inside man* at Mawson & Williams?**

Arthur Pinner approached Pycroft "*the very evening*" that Pycroft had received his employment offer from M & W.

How did the Beddingtons know that Pycroft had been hired? How did they know that he knew no one else at the firm (or else the scam would be a non-starter)?

That they were able to find out about Pycroft and put their plans into motion *within a few hours* suggests that they had to have some inside source of information at the firm, right? Maybe someone who didn't know they were planning a robbery, but someone who was slipping them information in exchange for a few pound notes?

Or perhaps this hypothetical but necessary accomplice was *more* involved--maybe someone who went through the firms applications, looking for a suitable candidate to spoof, and who was able to put that application on top of the pile for the managers? And perhaps this insider was in on the scheme, and was expecting a cut of the proceeds...*and was never caught*...

****This is a pretty naive question, but exactly *how negotiable* is a bag full American railway bonds and the like?**

It's not like I can take those down to the local **Target** in exchange for goods and services, right?

And I know that we're talking about the **1880s**, but isn't there a master list somewhere of the true owners of such bonds and scrip? It's not like I could just show up at the next board of the **Reading Railroad** board of directors and say, "*Look, I have all this stock, I own your company now!*" Again, my knowledge of the financial world is truly lacking, but it seems as if there would have to be *some* form of verification in order to use or cash in these papers, right?

And once word got out, wouldn't the authorities be on the lookout for *anyone* trying to trade/sell these things? Yes, the Beddingtons had counted on not being detected until Monday; but by the same token, the markets where they could sell such things would *also not be open until Monday*. And it's not like gold or jewels, where you can disguise the origins of the loot and which have huge secondary markets.

So where could they get rid of them? Find some millionaire on the weekend looking to buy a bunch of bonds without paying stockbroker commissions? Some black market for securities?

Or...perhaps this was a deliberate plan aimed at certain *particular* companies--to destabilize them, to manipulate markets? Maybe there was a secret mastermind behind this scheme...**Moriarty**, perhaps?

Still, if I were a crook, I'd stick with the gold napoleons...

******Good lord, *why not* an hire an extra confederate? As Holmes says, "*But for the happy chance of the gold stuffing, your suspicions would probably never have been aroused.*" When you're stealing millions, surely you could hire one person, perhaps to take Arthur's role for the relatively brief initial meeting with Hall Pycroft? Surely they must have had some criminal acquaintance who could fill that easy role for a few quid?

For the want of a nail...

******Since the crux of this story involves impersonations, you have to wonder--how *hard* was it to impersonate someone back in the late nineteenth century?

It's not as if most people would have photo IDs, right? Especially civilians. And fingerprints weren't widely known of.

So really, what was to stop me from showing up one day and saying, "*Oi! I'm Hall Pycroft, and I'm here for a bloody job!*"? (Sorry about that). Of course, that's a good reason for not hiring folks without meeting them first. But that begs the question, because if I showed up for a job interview claiming to be Pycroft, we're right back where we started--how do I prove who I say I am?

So the handwriting sample, which seems odd by modern standards, might have been one of the few means of identification for firms like Mawson & Williams, beyond bringing so type of (easily forged, no doubt) documents such as birth certificates.

Of course, if the thieves had sent in an application in Pycroft's name to begin with they wouldn't have had to worry about matching hand-writing...

******What about Hall Pylon's *future*?

Sure, he'll be proven to be innocent. But it certainly isn't going to look *good* on his resume, is it? He was completely duped by a con man, he was willing to rudely blow off a great opportunity from the richest firm in London, and his name is going to receive a lot of (bad) notoriety. Not to mention, there will no doubt be *lingering suspicions* among many in the industry that maybe he was indeed involved in the scheme, no matter what Holmes says.

It just seems difficult to imagine a reputable financial firm giving him a job with this stain on his perceived character. I suspect there's a career change in the offing for Hall.

I hear he can make a fair living begging...

**It doesn't say much for the reforming capabilities of the English penal system that, within months of serving a 5-year stretch, the Beddingtons are immediately planning huge crimes...

**We get a lot of interesting information about Watson's practice, and his neighbors. But Holmes deductions that Watson's had originally been the busier is curious.

If the steps on Watson side are "*worn three inches deeper*," what the heck are the steps made of? How much traffic would it take to wear down steps that much?

And perhaps his neighbor's had been worn so much more deeply that he had had to install new ones...

**Holmes: "*I am afraid that I rather give myself away when I explain*," said he. "*Results without causes are much more impressive*." But less satisfying, so fortunately for the readers, Holmes' ego would never let him stop giving explanations.

**Many are impressed by Watson's (and Doyle's) "*ear for Cockney*," given the many instances of slang Pycroft uses in telling his story.

But if look carefully, after an initial barrage of "*crib*" and "*Soft johnny*" and "*screw*" and "*diggings*," etc., the cockneyisms largely *disappear* from his speech after he reaches the point in his tale where Arthur Pinner shows up. Did Doyle/Watson forget? Did he decide that, after establishing the dialectic *bona fides*, there was no need to keep it up? Had he exhausted his repertoire of slang?

Or, for an in-story explanation: Was Pycroft overly excited as he began narrating his tale to Watson, and slipped into his native *patois*; but as he continued his tale, he relaxed enough to talk more formally, as he must have had to at work?

**I think an ability to quote the day's stock prices might be a poor test of qualifications for the business manager of a huge hardware company.

And for that matter, having a business manager whom you're paying **£500** per year spend his first weeks copying names and addresses by hand out of a directory should have seemed a criminal waste of resources. Yet Pycroft doesn't question it. It certainly calls into question the lad's *business acumen*, and throws further question on his future job prospects.

**There are so many hardware sellers in Paris that it took almost a full week to copy them down?

Beddington was captured sometime after 1:20 PM Saturday. It certainly took some time to sort some things out, get the firm's managers in to assess the losses, find the body, determine Beddington's true identity...but by **7 PM the same day, *Birmingham* has a copy of the early edition of a *London* evening paper, and they have the full story!!

That's some pretty *fast* reporting, and very fast *delivery* of a paper 120 miles away...

****Reflecting on Pinner's attempted suicide, Holmes observes, "*Human nature is a strange mixture, Watson. You see that even a villain and murderer can inspire such affection that his brother turns to suicide when he learns that his neck is forfeited.*"**

Well, let's be honest--Pinner's grief may be just as much for *himself*. I'm no expert on Victorian law, but at the very least Pinner himself faces another lengthy prison stretch. And, in many jurisdictions (including England until 1957), he would be guilty of *felony murder*, which could have him in the gallows along with his brother. His brother's recklessness and violence had doomed *him*, as well. And perhaps he just wanted to take that last step himself, rather than waiting on at trial and death row.

So Holmes and Watson may have saved him, just so the crown can kill him...

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October 12, 2014**