

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 XX -- The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual

The Musgrave Ritual--The Real Treasure is In The Framing Sequence!

Now *this* is more like it!!

After my kvetching last week that **The Gloria Scott** was a wee bit of a disappointment as a first "case" for Sherlock Holmes, along comes **The Musgrave Ritual** to answer all of my complaints.

A grand, Gothic mystery! One of Britain's oldest family's in one of the oldest houses (whose walls are adorned with weapons!); A mysterious ritual!! A treasure map!! A Don Juan of a butler! A shattered romance turned deadly!! A grotesque corpse! The recovery of one of the realm's missing treasures!!! *The butler did it!!!!*

But, even more impressive than the flashback to **Holmes'** early case--which is indeed superior to Gloria Scott on almost every level--is the attention to the detail in Sherlock's *present-day* life.

The "*framing sequence*" in Gloria Scott was barely there--Holmes just went up to **Watson** and said. "You wanna hear about my first case?"

But in the Musgrave Ritual, not only do we get a ripping good older case, we also get a *ton* of information about Holmes in the present day. Obviously, it's been far too long since my trips through the **Canon**, because I had forgotten just *how much* of what we know about Holmes at **Baker Street** comes from the "framing sequence":

...when I find a man who keeps his cigars in the coal-scuttle, his tobacco in the toe end of a Persian slipper, and his unanswered correspondence transfixed by a jack-knife into the very centre of his wooden mantelpiece, then I begin to give myself virtuous airs.



I have always held, too, that pistol practice should be distinctly an open-air pastime; and when Holmes, in one of his queer humours, would sit in an arm-chair with his hair-trigger and a hundred Boxer cartridges, and proceed to adorn the opposite wall with a patriotic V. R. done in bullet-pocks, I felt strongly that neither the atmosphere nor the appearance of our room was improved by it.

Our chambers were always full of chemicals and of criminal relics which had a way of wandering into unlikely positions, and of turning up in the butter-dish or in even less desirable places. But his papers were my great crux. He had a horror of destroying documents, especially those which were connected with his past cases, and yet it was only once in every year or two that he would muster energy to docket and arrange them; for, as I have mentioned somewhere in these incoherent memoirs, the outbursts of passionate energy when he performed the remarkable feats with which his name is associated were followed by reactions of lethargy during which he would lie about with his violin and his books, hardly moving save from the sofa to the table.

Thus month after month his papers accumulated, until every corner of the room was stacked with bundles of manuscript which were on no account to be burned, and which could not be put away save by their owner.

How many depictions of the interior of 221B have been based *almost entirely* on these two paragraphs? How many recreations, museums, adaptations, modern pastiches, even 24th century holodeck versions, are based nearly exclusively on these two paragraphs?

Of course, our framing sequence is also good for a glance at Dr. Watson's personality, as well. References to his own "*Bohemian disputation*" and "*lax*" standards of neatness put Sherlock's hoarding behaviors into perspective. Watson's dry, puckish wit almost borders on passive-aggressiveness towards Holmes' antics. And of course, the way in which, despite his declarations, Watson is so easily distracted from his annoyance by the offering of a glimpse at Holmes' earliest cases.

But the focus is on Sherlock, and we learn a *lot* in a little space, aside from his lack of tidiness. His aversion to destroying any document suggests a tendency to hoarding--someone call a reality show!! His "*mischievous*" and coy tempting of Watson with tales of the past, and the "*Your tidiness won't bear much strain after all, Watson*" show that Sherlock can give as well as he gets in the pointed needling department.

But Holmes' ego is also on display here. While Holmes may insincerely dismiss his "*trifling achievements*," it's clear that he wants Watson to write up and publish this case. And why not? It shows Sherlock helping the realm's elite, and surely serves as a wonderful advertisement for his services!!

And as for his opinion of his own reputation? Holmes declares that when he met Watson, he "*had already established a considerable, though not a very lucrative, connection.*" And by the present day? "*[His] name has become known far and wide, and when I am generally recognised both by the public and by the*

official force as being a final court of appeal in doubtful cases." No lack of self-regard, there. "*I am sure that if you mentioned my name they would be happy to show it to you*"?

Sherlock is coming perilously close to putting on airs here. And while I don't support this reading, one could argue that Sherlock is sending a message to Watson: "I hobnob with political and royal power--get off my back about a few unfiled papers!!"

We also get a few more tantalizing glimpses into Holmes' college days, his early cases (what were the two before Musgrave came to him?), his early lodgings at **Montague Street** (with its proximity to the **British Museum**, and all the time studying there)...but really, there is not a ton there. And we shouldn't let ourselves be distracted from the wealth of information we learned about "present day" Holmes.

I don't want to give short shrift to the *wonderful* mystery. But it can speak for itself. It is the "present day" interplay of Holmes and Watson here, though, that most fascinates me. Sometimes, a framing sequence is much more than a just a mere framing sequence!

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

**Holmes may not have been as famous in the field as he wasted yet, but surely this case got him a *lot* of attention. Helping one of England's oldest aristocratic families, and a member of Parliament, while recovering a long-lost national treasure?!? Certainly this did not go unnoticed in the halls of power, and just as certainly this resulted in an awful lot of cases eventually being steered his way.

We don't know much about that date of the "present-day" framing sequence...but one can speculate that Holmes business was at a slow point, and that enticing Watson to publish this tale would remind a great many people of means that Sherlock Holmes was available...

**I'm probably the *least* neat person in the world, so Watson's descriptions of Holmes' eccentricities doesn't bother me very much...I can top that mess, and raise Holmes some squalor!!

And while I've never had criminal experiments turn up in the butter dish, well, I've had some things in my refrigerator that looked worse...

Watson has been very remiss of late in giving us hints of untold cases. So Sherlock himself dumps a boatload on us: **The Tarleton Murders, The Case Of Vamberry The Wine Merchant, The Adventure of The Old Russian Woman, The Singular Affair Of The Aluminium Crutch, and Ricotti of The Club-Foot and His Abominable Wife. Get writing, pastichers!

Of particular interest might be the *aluminium crutch*. In those days, they hadn't yet developed a cheap and efficient process of extracting aluminium from ore, and as a result, the metal was prohibitively expensive--

more so than even gold or platinum, at times. So to make something like a crutch from aluminium would be unusual and extravagant beyond belief. So why do it? Perhaps to make a lightweight crutch that could conceal something within...perhaps a weapon...?

[British readers--please make sure to give me credit for writing "*aluminium*" each time, instead of the *correct* "aluminum." Why can't the English teach the English how to speak? Or spell elements...?]

****Holmes defends Reginald Musgrave--**"what was set down as pride was really an attempt to cover extreme natural diffidence"--but he really does come across as something of an upper-class twit. Perhaps it's just my natural dislike of aristocracy, but a lot of the ways Holmes describes him--"something of a dandy," "something of his place of birth seems to cling to the man," the description of the large staff he "has" to keep up ("Altogether there are eight maids, the cook, the butler, two footmen, and a boy. The garden and the stables of course have a separate staff")--does indeed come across as pride and a feeling of superiority. Probably just me...

****Some have questioned whether Holmes was *paid* for this case--**there's never any discussion of remuneration. Still, when Holmes says "*I have taken to living by my wits,*" and Musgrave says "*your advice would be exceedingly valuable to me,*" I think we can here a subtle negotiation going on, disguised by the upper class feeling that it is gauche to discuss money matters.

****Brain fever!!!!**

****Much has been made of how the "*ritual*" could still work after so long.** After all, the trees would have *grown* some in the two hundred years since the "treasure map" was written. Plus, the ritual gives no mention of time of year, which of course would make a huge difference of when (and if) the sun "comes over the oak" and the direction of any shadows.

The **Granada** adaption allays some of that--the "*oak*" in question is not the actual tree, but the *representation of an oak tree that is on the huge weather vane above Hurlstone*. Clever.

They also interpret the map part a bit differently, so "North by ten and by ten" is "north ten by ten," or *one hundred paces* (and so on)! That makes for a much more energetic treasure hunt.

Of course, that still leaves the difficulty of whether or not *the elm* had grown in two centuries, or the proper time of year for the shadows to line up. Shhhh...

****Trigonometry!!**

****Remember, if you're an out of work teacher, a lucrative career as a butler is available to you!!**

****I have to wonder, when the story was first published, did a lot of aristocratic families go and take a hard look at any silly rituals they had, trying to see if they could lead to treasure?!?**

**Although the print Holmes avers that the "probability is that [Rachel] got away out of England and carried herself and the memory of her crime to some land beyond the seas," the Granada version very clearly shows that she threw herself into the mere with the bundle, and shows her body being recovered later. Brain fever, indeed.

**Of course, that's one of the delicious aspects of the mystery--was the entombing of Brunton accidental? Or did spurned Rachel, in a fit of pique, do it purposefully?

Print Holmes, talking of her "*memory of her crime*," seems to believe it was purposeful. Granada Holmes, where the woman is clearly not in her right mind, doesn't show us, but implies that it was an accident. But she didn't go for help, and so left him to die. Hence her immediately drowning herself, in grief and derangement and guilt.

It's one of those problems the reader will have to decide for herself.

**I love the fact that they had *already* recovered the treasure, but didn't recognize it in its filthy, tarnished state. (BTW, great job hiding and preserving the priceless treasure, unnamed ancient Musgrave--*damp and worms and dust and fungi!!*)

**Given the state of the treasure, one has to wonder how Brunton planned to dispose of it.

You could polish up the stones and clean up the coins, I suppose. But given it's condition, it seems unlikely that any fence would recognize it as a valuable relic, as opposed to a dirty hunk of gold. Brunton would be lucky to get pennies on the dollar.

And Brunton could hardly try to sell it to a collector or a museum (or to the royal family) without revealing its provenance, which of course would reveal that he had stolen the booty. At best, that would likely mean he wouldn't get any money; at worst it would mean jail time.

Perhaps he planned to hide it, and then reveal to Musgrave what the ritual meant, and sell it back to him...

I'm starting to think that maybe Brunton wasn't so smart, after all (Of course, if he were smart, he wouldn't have been caught going through family documents in the library like that...)

Brian Keith Snell

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