

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 XXI -- The Adventure of the Reigate Squire (Puzzle)

The Reigate Squires--You Have To Stick The Dismount!!

If you'll allow me the briefest of sports digressions...

In gymnastics, there is something called "*sticking the dismount.*" In layman's terms, it simply means not blowing the end of your routine by making a careless, messy landing. After your tumble, or vault, or parallel bars routine, or whatever, you have to make a firm, controlled landing, without (substantially) moving your feet. If you can't stick the dismount, not only do you lose points, but frankly, it makes the judges reexamine your entire routine, calling attention to other flaws you may have had.

Which brings us to **The Reigate Squires**. Because, man, does this story ever *not* stick its dismount!

I'll confess, I had very little memory of this story as I began re-reading it. And as we go along, I found myself sucked in: *The physical and emotional aftermath of Holmes' greatest untold case! The forced convalescence! The first mysterious burglary! The second tragic burglary!! Watson's doomed attempts to keep Sherlock from getting involved!! The obvious culprits—but was it both of them, or just the younger, unlikeable one? Some great physical shenanigans from Sherlock to divert attention—twice!! Holmes sheepishly makes 'a mistake'!! The killers try to murder Holmes!! A desperate last attempt with a pistol!!!*



Oh, what **grand** stuff!! A fine showcase for **Holmes** many skills!! A fine mystery!! This may be one of the *greatest* Holmes mysteries!! All that's left are the explanations...*what could possibly go wrong?*

And then we finally get the complete contents of the note itself:

If you will only come around at quarter twelve to the east gate you will learn about will very much surprise you and maybe be of the greatest service to you and also Annie Morrison. But say nothing to anyone upon the matter.

Wait a minute...who the **** is **Annie Morrison**?

This person hasn't been mention before, her existence never even hinted at. Who the **** is she? What does she have to do with the case? Surely **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** wouldn't leave us hanging on this point, right?

Of course, we do not yet know what the relations may have been between Alec Cunningham, William Kirwan, and Annie Morrison.

What the ****, Doyle?!?!?! (Cue the sound of screeching tires and cars crashing in the background).

You wrote the bloody story, Sir Arthur...why introduce a name—the motive for the coachman to attend the secret rendezvous—and then tell us that you have no idea who she is?!? The rest of the story had been put together with fair precision...to have the resolution of the story *depend* upon such a discordant, seemingly tacked on at the last second **MacGuffin** that ties in to nothing else—that's the definition of not sticking the dismount! *ARRRRGGGHHHH!!*

The most frustrating part is that this was an entirely *avoidable* aggravation. A couple of sentences, and maybe one earlier in the tale, and we can get a perfectly acceptable explanation for who Annie Morrison might be, and why information concerning her might be enough to draw **Kirwan** out late at night for a clandestine meeting. Is she another servant he's been dating? A relative, perhaps a sister, who's in some trouble? Is it the name old Kirwan's "*old and feeble*" mother? A ward of the **Cunninghams** that he is trying to woo—and thus, perhaps, the *goal* of the blackmail scheme (she marries me or I turn you in)? Was Kirwan a cross-dresser, and Annie his female identity? *Any* explanation, no matter how lame, would have been better than the shoulder shrug Doyle gives us here. Why invent this name as a motivation, and then completely refuse to explain it?

This is *especially* annoying because Holmes tells us that the older Cunningham "*made a clean breast of everything.*" Everything except Annie Morrison, apparently, as less than 1 page later, Holmes is saying that he has no idea of who this woman is.

A further problem is that, as our frustration makes us try to come up with our own explanations for Annie Morrison, our attempts expose some of the loose joints in the story—things we might have happily ignored, had our curiosity about Annie Morrison been satiated.

For example, if you speculate that the reason we get no explanation is that Doyle ran out of room, you start to look for places where a snip or two might have made to fit Annie in. Do we really, for example, need five long paragraphs—*five!*—of handwriting analysis?

We also start to notice where the device of Holmes' hearing Cunningham's confession "*off-screen*"—and therefore **Watson** being unable to pass the details on to the audience—leaves us with some unanswered

questions. William the coachman—who supposedly was in bed by 10 each night—just *happened* to “secretly follow” the Cunninghams the night they broke into **Acton’s** house? What, exactly, was he blackmailing them *for*—just money, or something else (involving Annie?)? If he was blackmailing them, why did he agree to a secret rendezvous so late—did he *know* whom he was going to meet? If so, than the whole rigamarole of disguising/alternating the handwritings made no sense! Was he really so foolish as to meet his victims alone at midnight? If he didn’t know it was the Cunninghams, *whom* did he think he was meeting?

All of these are questions our brains might well have glossed over, had not Doyle so cavalierly brought up—and dismissed—Annie Morrison. A good story with a solid ending can get away with a few untied threads or unanswered questions, on *goodwill* alone. But a good story that deliberately introduces an unexplained element—in the penultimate paragraph—as a vital part of the solution, loses that goodwill, and makes the audience look more harshly at elements it might have otherwise not even noticed. Reigate Squires is really good Holmes story, but that slapdash Annie Morrison element at the end lets the side down.

I’m sounding overly negative...I *love* the heck out of this story, until the last two paragraphs. That doesn’t make it a bad story, just not the enduring classic it should have been. And that’s why you have to stick the dismount.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

More name problems, more American edition problems. When first published in **The Strand, the title was **The Reigate Squire**; when collected in **Memoirs**, the title was changed to the more accurate **The Reigate Squires**. But when first published in America, the title was changed to **The Reigate Puzzle**...apparently, Americans would be befuddled or resentful over the concept of squires. To this day, many American collections have the story as The Reigate Puzzle...

As for my part, every single time I come upon the title, my brain reads it as **The Reigate Squares...which immediately makes me think very odd thoughts of a British Sherlock Holmes-based game show.

Yes, I'm weird.

**Doyle obviously didn't have any problems with the Annie Morrison conundrum, as he picked this story as his twelfth favorite.

Of course, this story contains an extended reference to perhaps the *greatest untold Holmes case*: "The Netherland-Sumatra Company** and the colossal schemes of **Baron Maupertuis**." A two-month investigation, sometimes going without sleep for five days at a time! "*Europe was ringing with his name*"!! He

"succeeded where the police of three countries had failed, and he had outmanoeuvred at every point the most accomplished swindler in Europe!" His hotel room "ankle-deep with congratulatory telegrams!"

So, yeah, pretty big case.

Watson explains that he didn't write that case up because it was "*too recent*" in the minds of the public, and...too intimately concerned with politics and finance to be fitting subjects for this series of sketches."

My good Doctor, that's silly--it sounds like the best episode of **Leverage** ever!! Sadly, we will never know...

**Of course, given how well Holmes was able to fake a "*nervous fit*" later in the story, I have to ponder the possibility that Holmes' "*nervous prostration*" in a French hotel room was just a way of avoiding the public spotlight after so significant a case...

There are an awful lot of very good "physical" routines for Sherlock in this story: he fakes a "nervous collapse" in order to change the subject of conversation, he knocks over the water and oranges (*and blames Watson!*) in order to slip away unnoticed. There's a number of good bits for an actor, which makes it odd that there's never been a modern screen adaptation of the tale. It was made into an episode of a **1951 BBC series, but no tapes exist of that series. It seemed like a natural for **Granada** and **Jeremy Brett**, but they never did it...

Holmes only agrees to vacation at **Colonel Hayter's after being assured that "*the establishment was a bachelor one.*"

Aside from various jibes about what this means regarding Holmes' attitude towards women, or about his and Watson's lifestyle, I must speculate whether a woman--or women--played a substantial part in the Netherland-Sumatra case that had so depleted him, as he's never had a problem staying in a female-run household before (see **The Man With The Twisted Lip**, for example). Maybe one woman in particular--**Irene Adler**--was involved?!?

Speculate away...

Whenever I read the list of items burgled from the Acton estate--"an odd volume of Pope's 'Homer,' two plated candlesticks, an ivory letter-weight, a small oak barometer, and a ball of twine**"--I must confess I'm picturing some **McGyver** mystery, where all these items are necessary to locate/open some vast treasure that even the owner didn't know about--a mini-**Musgrave Ritual**, perhaps, or somehow assembled to make a device that opens a hidden door, or...Sadly, they were just random trifles taken to cover the robbery.

Also, what happened to the stuff? Given that the Cunninghams weren't too clever about disposing of evidence (they kept the freaking "*come and get killed*" note!), you'd expect to find these trinkets somewhere on their estate...Maybe they did dump them somewhere, but William found them, reinforcing his blackmail...

**Acton's estate was burgled on a Monday night, and it certainly seems as if the Cunninghams were none to quiet or subtle about it: "*The whole place was turned upside down, drawers burst open, and presses ransacked...*" Were there no servants awakened? Perhaps the library is in a remote area of the manor...?

The images of two country squires futilely trying to burgle a manor can be quite a comic one, especially when one is old and the other a young arrogant idiot. Another reason to wish we had an adaptation of this story...

**The sight of Watson trying to play *mother hen* to an exhausted Holmes, keeping anything resembling a mystery away from him, is one of the great comic bits in the Canon, if played right. Watson "*holding up a warning finger,*" Holmes "*shrugging his shoulders with comic resignation.*" This is good stuff, not just because it shows us the depth of Watson's concern for his friend.

**Of course, Holmes is perfectly willing to use his "*illness*" as a cover to direct the investigation in whatever direction it needs to go, and isn't worried in the least about being personally mocked and humiliated. Dedication!

**A misprint in one of my editions has Holmes saying, "I make a *pint* of never having any prejudices..." That's as good a reason to drink as any, I reckon. *Cheers!*

Holmes must not be himself...he tells **Inspector Forrester "it is a pleasure to work with [him]." Quick, call a doctor! Oh, wait...

**One of the problems with the short story format for mysteries is that there's not room for a lot of suspects. That's doubly true in Reigate Squares, because unless the villain is someone brand new introduced at them end (ahem), there is literally no one who can be guilty except the elder Cunningham and/or his son Alec. Plus, the title is a bit of a giveaway. So the story loses a point or two for lack of suspense...we know who the killer has to be--the only question is one or both.

And once we meet **Alec**, well, we know it has to be him. What a smug, obnoxious *****, eh? "I thought you Londoners were never at fault. You don't seem to be so very quick, after all." Oh, you murdering jack***, shut up. You a shit burglar, and a shit killer, and I want to smack you in your face.

Ahem.

**The elder Cunningham is never given a first name. C'mon, Sir Arthur, if you're going to make him a murderer, at least give him a first name!

**The whole bit with the killers writing alternate words on the note enticing William to the meeting was, well, *kind of stupid*. It ended up doing more to confirm (to Holmes, at least) that there were two killers, and did nothing to conceal anyone's identity.

And, as Holmes' information about family resemblances in handwriting tells us, it serves as a nail in their coffin.

Why go to the elaborate and unnecessary ruse, unless you were sure Kirwan would recognize the solo handwriting of either gentleman? And if the stunt was meant, as Holmes surmised, to enforce the point "*that, whatever was done, each should have an equal hand in it*"?

Well, that certainly failed, as the elder Cunningham confessed easily enough--the "joint guilt" of the note didn't stop him from serving up his son.

And in heaven's name, ***why not burn the note immediately?!?*** Leaving it in your dressing gown pocket until the day?!? That's simply a death wish from someone who wants to go to the gallows. Or maybe Alec was so twisted that he wanted a souvenir of his "*cleverness*" to admire in future days, a trophy of his perfect murder.

****Forrester is reluctant to arrest the Cunninghams--until he sees the looks on their faces?!?**

He doesn't want to arrest them, but..."*Tut, man, look at their faces!*" cried Holmes, curtly. And Watson declares, "*Never certainly have I seen a plainer confession of guilt upon human countenances.*" That is hardly admissible in court, but it was enough to convince the Inspector to summon the constables...

Brian Keith Snell

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