

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 XXII -- The Adventure of the Crooked Man

The Crooked Man--What Is John Watson, Chopped Liver?

We all know why we come to this rodeo--it's to watch **Sherlock** in action, *not John Watson*.

That's the lot of the second banana.

But still, there are times when **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** seemingly went far out of his way exclude Watson from stories that *should* have featured him a little bit more prominently, cases where the doctor's own experience and expertise could prove almost as important as Holmes'.

Which brings us to **The Crooked Man**.

In this story, Watson gets perhaps the *ultimate* backhand: *Holmes has completely solved the mystery before he even contacts Watson!*

To recap: Sherlock shows up at Watson's house at midnight, insults Watson's writing, invites himself in for a smoke and a sleepover, keeps the good doctor up all night, and entices him to play hooky the next day. *Worst friend ever?*

But the worst part of it is, the case is virtually over already--Sherlock has done *all* the detective work, he knows who the culprit(/)/instigator(?)/witness(?) is, and has him under observation. The only reason he has come to Watson is that Holmes wants a "witness" when he interviews **Henry Wood!!** I suppose, in a way, that's a compliment--he trusts John above anyone as an observer to the confession/story. (If you want to look at it *less* charitably, he wanted to be sure that his biographer was along to chronicle this macabre case, to help bolster his reputation).

But on a storytelling level, having Watson be the narrator but *not* having him along for the bulk of the investigation means that *95%* of our story is flashback, as told to him by another person.



We don't actually see Holmes during any of his investigation, we just have hearsay passed along by Holmes. And when we get to our meeting with Woods, we once again get a lengthy flashback.

We're used to Watson as a passive observer...but in this case, he's not even an observer--he is just passing along things that others have told him. As a result, we miss a lot of his *keen observations* about Holmes and the others involved in the investigation. By putting Watson one further step back than usual, he's reduced to a *stenographer*, as opposed to a reporter of events that he has personally experienced.

Perhaps an even worse crime of the way this story is structured, though, is that this is a case where Watson could have--*should have*--been of much more use in resolving the mysteries.

Obviously, this is a case deeply involving military officers, at a military base. This is clearly is a situation that John Watson has some experience with! Certainly, he could have been of great help in helping Sherlock navigate the waters of Army life, protocol and culture. Indeed, the **Granada** adaptation has **Major Murphy** reaching out to Watson the retired military man *first*, and then John invites Holmes to help *him*! Yet for some reason, Doyle (and Holmes) choose to sideline Watson, keeping him less involved than usual, even though this case clearly seems to be much more the good doctor's milieu. What a wasted opportunity!

Doyle also seems to forget that Doctor Watson is...*a doctor*!! A huge part of this case is the cause of death of **Colonel Barclay**--was he murdered, was it an accident, was it natural causes? You would think that having your best friend--a medical doctor--examining the death scene might have been of tremendous use in pushing along the investigation. Surely Watson could have examined the wound as well as any off-screen military doctor. Surely Watson could have seen the signs of apoplexy, and perhaps would have been able to look at some of the other evidence--tales of Barclay's sudden mood swings and the like--to give us a diagnosis without having to wait for the inquest.

But none of that happens. Instead, Sherlock casually tosses off the "*equally possible*" actual solution early on, and we settle in for pages and pages of people sitting around talking until his hypothesis is confirmed.

But hey, at least Watson identified the mongoose before Holmes did--that's something, right?

I'm almost certainly making too much of this. The world has long survived with John Watson getting short shrift, and doubtless will continue to do so in the future.

Still, because of the structural problems of the way Doyle presents this story, and because of the areas of expertise that the good doctor could have shed some light upon, *The Crooked Man* would have been a *much better and more interesting story* had Sir Arthur gotten Watson involved from the first. Even second bananas need a little spotlight once in awhile.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

**Everything said above being true, there are still some really good pieces of a story here. The "murder" mystery is pretty good--although I can't agree with those who describe it as a locked room mystery, as open French windows are a loophole that shouldn't be ignored.

Unfortunately, *all* of the investigation and solving of that mystery takes place before the story even starts.

Meanwhile, the tale of love and murder in India is also fairly engaging, and echoes the themes of the derangement of love from **Cardboard Box**. And at least Sir Arthur is quite up front about the story's biblical inspiration, inoculating the tale from charges of being derivative.

Of course, one might wonder how likely it is Nancy would be able to quickly come up with the "David" reference, and throw it in her husband's face as an accusation. But the story establishes that she is a Roman Catholic and involved in charitable works. It's a fair assumption to suggest that she knew her Bible. And she didn't immediately come up with the analogy off the top of her head--a fair amount of time passed between her encountering Wood and her return home, time during which her troubled mind (soon to be racked with brain fever!) could certainly see the similarities.

**If there is one unassailable moral of the Canon, it is: *STAY AWAY FROM INDIA*, and if you do go there, for heaven's sake *DON'T COME BACK TO ENGLAND!!* Nothing but revenge, terror, and deadly exotic creatures await you as a result of entanglement in that colony's affairs...

**Doyle gets a bit meta, by having Holmes critique Watson's writing, which is of course Doyle's own: *The same may be said, my dear fellow, for the effect of some of these little sketches of yours, which is entirely meretricious, depending as it does upon your retaining in your own hands some factors in the problem which are never imparted to the reader.*

"My stories' success depends upon my withholding information from the reader" is quite the heavy literary accusation to lay against oneself. Given the number of times that Doyle has Sherlock attack his own writing, you have to wonder how much of it is actually Doyle's own opinion of the Holmes stories, given his increasing disenchantment with the "franchise."

**In the Grenada version, Watson speculates that perhaps *Mrs. Barclay* had an affair, and the colonel found out. He follows that with this amazing quote: *"You know, mild adultery has always been commonplace among officers and their wives serving in hot climates."*

Holy moly, Watson!?! "*Mild*" adultery--as opposed to what? "*Commonplace?!?*" Really? No wonder the good doctor has "*an experience of women which extends over many nations and three separate continents*"--the British Army sounds like quite the swinging place!

Holmes dashes that particular theory with a sigh and a sarcastic "Thank you, Watson, for educating me in military morality.

**"Sorry to see that you've had the British workman in the house. He's a token of evil." So Holmes is a Tory, then?

Of course, Holmes just meant to say that if you've had workmen in, something must be broken. Still, I'm surprised no one has ever used this as a campaign quote...

Another American difference. Colonel Barclay commanded the **Royal Mallows. For unbeknownst reasons, in American printings it was changed to the **Royal Munsters**.

Which is insane, because nowadays, to modern American ears, it sounds as though the colonel was leading a regiment from **1313 Mockingbird Lane**. The idea of a Sherlock Holmes/**Herman Munster** team-up is now stuck in my head...

**The Granada version does a fine job of making Major Murphy himself a viable suspect--he expresses jealousy over Barclay's quick rise to command (over Murphy's head), and shows himself to be overly familiar with Mrs. Barclay, indiscreetly referring to her as Nancy more than once.

Of course, Watson's absence in the print story means that we never observed an actual conversation with the major, until the very end, and thus there was no opportunity to use him as a red herring. Another reason for Watson to have gotten involved earlier in the story...

****BRAIN FEVER!!!** Seriously, this is going beyond cliché to *hoary cliché*. Please find another device to make Holmes unable to communicate with a female witness, Sir Arthur.

**Speaking of hoary clichés: ah, the face contorted horribly before death. His servants described the Colonel's face in death: "*It had set, according to their account, into the most dreadful expression of fear and horror which a human countenance is capable of assuming. More than one person fainted at the mere sight of him, so terrible was the effect.*"

I've had the good fortune never to encounter a corpse (except at funerals), but I do have to doubt whether any have ever been found with their face in such an indescribable rictus of fear that it made others pass out at the sight. And surely any such facial contortions are more the result of stroke and other death seizures than the result of terror or guilty conscience.

If only we had a *medical man* as a character in our story, to examine that body. Oh, wait...

**A number of commentators complain that Barclay's "send his love's boyfriend to his death" plan was *terrible*, because in this case, it left he and Nancy (and everyone else) at the mercy of the mutineers.

Well, surely Barclay was smarter than that. Remember, he sent a "*native servant*" to warn the sapoys that Wood was coming. It seems pretty clear that the servant then went on, via an alternate route, to reach **General Neill's** column and bring them back, whilst the mutineers were distracted with their new prisoner. Or perhaps he sent a second servant to find Neill. Barclay surely had his bases covered. It makes little sense to assume that he was suicidal or an idiot.

**So, after Nancy wakes up from "brain fever"--would she and Wood have met again? Perhaps even gotten together?

A **BBC** radio adaptation (with **Brian Blessed** playing Wood!) had Watson advise Wood to go to her, as his "crooked" status would not matter as much as their prior love. The adaptation never revealed what Wood chose to do...

This story feature the third, and final, appearance of the **Baker Street Irregulars. Still, despite appearing so little in the **Canon**, the "*street Arabs*" are a fixture in many of the adaptations and pastiches. Curious that a device used so little had so strong an impact on the public's perception.

**Holmes: "*It's every man's business to see justice done.*" With Holmes himself defining "justice," of course.

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