

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 XXIII -- The Adventure of the Resident Patient

The Resident Patient--Howdunnit?

Watson warns us right up front.

...it has frequently happened that [Holmes] has been concerned in some research where the facts have been of the most remarkable and dramatic character, but where the share which he has himself taken in determining their causes has been less pronounced than I, as his biographer, could wish.

So there's going to be some lack of closure in **The Resident Patient**.

And there is, mainly because the killers get away.

But we're left with a really *interesting* set of facts, many of which offer themselves to various interpretations. And despite a fairly wonderful set of deductions from Holmes, we're left with an unusual question--*how* the bad guys did it?

The first question is, how did the **Worthingdon Bank Gang** find **Blessington/Sutton**? He was under an assumed identity, presumably in a life unlike the one he had lead before. London is a pretty big city to find one hiding person in, and that's even assuming that you somehow know for a fact that he's actually in London.

Yet even though they just got out "*the other day*," they seem to find him right away, with a fairly canny plan to get to him. [**Trevelyan** said that Blessington had become upset about some burglary "*some weeks ago*," but that just could have been a newspaper account that they had been granted an early release, to take effect later.] How?

Sutton "*turned informer*" on the rest of the gang, so presumably he either received immunity or a much shorter sentence. But I doubt that **Scotland Yard** had anything resembling a "witness protection program" in those days. Therefore, Sutton's new identity was likely his own creation, and therefore the police weren't the source of the information.

So the temptation is there for us to write it off as *unlikely dramatic coincidence*. How else could a gang of bank-robbers stumble upon him in a city of millions, living in an area exclusively settled by high-paid doctors?

Well, we have one slim clue that might it less unlikely: we're told that Blessington "*generally chose this hour of the day for his exercise*." Now, I'm reaching here, but why the *same* hour each day? Simple habit? Or was he, perhaps, making contact with someone from his former life--relative? Lover? Crony?

Remember, he gave up his constitutionals when he read that the gang was getting out. Why? It would still be bloody unlikely for them to find him on a daily walk in a nice part of town, unless he was going to one of his old haunts. So, after a few weeks, when the threat materialized, he relaxed enough to resume his old hobby of visiting his sister (or whatever)...and that's when his cover was blown.

That's my theory, at least. Better than an unlikely chance sighting.

The second question is, was the page involved?

He is arrested, but is later released for lack of evidence. This has lead a number of commentators to suggest that **Holmes** erred in suspecting the "*young imp*" of collaborating with the killers.

I have to side with Holmes on this one. There are just too many little coincidences regarding the page (the **Granada** adaptation names him **Billy**, so let's go with that, shall we?), that taken together start my *spider-sense* tingling.

Billy has only recently come into Trevelyan's service (tingle one--people newly hired at the site of a crime should always be looked at). Even though his job was to show patients in and out, taking their coats and hat, somehow Billy never noticed the "*Russian aristocrat*" and his "*son*" leaving after their first visit--a shocking dereliction of duty, at the least. And the morning of the murder, the page vanishes--pretty *damning* stuff.

But perhaps most telling, we are told *twice* that the door was found barred in the morning--not just locked, but *barred* (recall Blessington's paranoid need to improve the locks on the doors and windows). Picking a bedroom lock is one thing--but opening a barred door, and then making sure that it is re-barred behind them? That screams of a confederate. And a new employ who had been derelict in his duties regarding these men and who was missing immediately after the killing? I have to concur with Holmes: "*[H]e has played a not unimportant part in this drama*." Perhaps Billy didn't know the plan was a murder plot, but on the face of it he is as guilty as sin.

Finally, we come to an area where I *disagree* with Holmes. He suggests that the two visits by the Russian and his son were failed attempts to kill Blessington. I cannot concur.

For the actual murder, *all three* surviving members of the gang came, and gave Sutton an *ersatz trial and execution*, going so far as to bring supplies for a *makeshift gallows*.

But **none** of that could have happened at the first two visits! The third man didn't come with them either time. And each if those first times, it would have been the "son" alone with Sutton had he been home--the "father" was occupying Trevelyan, and the third man wasn't there. Could the son, alone, have executed Sutton, without being discovered? There's no sign he had brought equipment with him for the "gallows," no sign he was prepared to conduct a lengthy trial (especially without his confederates)--and risk of being caught, with everyone in the house awake, would have been ridiculously high.

Ah, but this is where one of the story's alleged *weaknesses* turns into one of its *strengths*! Many have complained that Billy the page couldn't have been working with the killers, or else they would have known Blessington's schedule, so they wouldn't have failed on the first two tries to kill him. Well, the explanation is that they **did** know his schedule--they *wanted* to him to be away those first two times, so the "son" could snoop around while Blessington was out and the doctor was occupied. He wasn't there for the execution at that point--he didn't have all the people or the tools there. No, those first two forays were merely *scouting missions*, to get the lay of the house, figure out where Blessington slept, to make their deal with the page. Other explanations simply don't make sense, given what we've been told.

So even though Holmes doesn't nab the culprits here, **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** gives us a nicely constructed mystery. We just had to *work for it* a little bit to be clear on some of the details--but it's all there.

FURTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

If you read [my post on The Cardboard Box](#), you know that the first portion of the story here in many American editions--where Watson goes into a brown study, and Sherlock shocks him by pulling a *Dupin* and guessing his train of thought--doesn't belong in this story. That's all *cut and pasted* from Cardboard Box, which was not deemed appropriate for collection. But someone didn't want to discard that opening bit, so they stuffed it into the beginning of Resident Patient, and cut out a couple of paragraphs to stuff it into. With careless editing, the result is "*a close, rainy day in October*" in which the temperature reached **90.

So, please mentally remove that whole "preposterous way to settle a dispute" section, and insert *this* as the 3rd and 4th paragraphs:

I cannot be sure of the exact date, for some of my memoranda upon the matter have been mislaid, but it must have been towards the end of the first year during which Holmes and I shared chambers in Baker Street. It was boisterous October weather, and we had both remained indoors all day, I because I feared with

my shaken health to face the keen autumn wind, while he was deep in some of those abstruse chemical investigations which absorbed him utterly as long as he was engaged upon them. Towards evening, however, the breaking of a test-tube brought his research to a premature ending, and he sprang up from his chair with an exclamation of impatience and a clouded brow.

'A day's work ruined, Watson,' said he, striding across to the window. 'Ha! the stars are out and the wind has fallen. What do you say to a ramble through London?'

Resume with "I was weary," and you're all set.

Those are those, like Watson, fell that Sherlock didn't have much to do this story. **Leslie Klinger, editor of **The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes**, says in his introduction to this story, "Holmes does little 'deducing' in the case."

Au contraire!! Please look at the story again!! With just a few wet footprints and some cigar butts from the fireplace, Sherlock is able to *completely reconstruct the events* from the night before, down to the exact order that the perpetrators climbed the staircase!! It's as if we were in the room, watching the drumhead trial of Sutton!!

Of course, with the killers never caught, we'll never know for *sure* how correct Holmes scenario actually was. But this is no Engineer's Thumb, where Holmes does nothing to solve the case.

Percy Trevelyan?!? Oh, dear let's hope that he's not related to the vile and traitorous **Alec Trevelyan, the evil **006** from **Goldeneye**!!

**More seriously, Watson's description of Trevelyan on the first meeting is...*odd*: "His age may not have been more than three or four and thirty, but his haggard expression and unhealthy hue told of a life which has sapped his strength and robbed him of his youth."

There's really nothing in Trevelyan's story or life to support the *haggardness* and *unhealthy hue*, let alone being *sapped of strength* and *robbed of youth*. And really, the stress of the "mystery" had only been going on for less than a day, so it could hardly be that.

Was Trevelyan *ill*, and Watson's trained eye unconsciously picking up on something wrong with his "brother medico"?

See, Sir Arthur, *this* is how you get Watson in on the act!! After having Watson be a totally useless observer in **Crooked Man, here the good doctor more than holds his own. He makes some of his own deductions, and he's able to follow along with Holmes on some of his flights of logic. His status as a doctor is put to good use--he gives us an approximate time of death!! He is even able to make an imaginative, "*grotesquely improbable*" stab at a counter-intuitive theory of the case. And even though Holmes said he had already considered and dismissed that idea, when you take that along with Watson's description of Trevelyan,

you have to wonder if, on some *instinctual* level, Watson was responding to something in the doctor that we should be aware of...

****Inspector Lanner** tells Holmes that, "It's about five in the morning, you know, that suicides are most common."

Really? I'm not doubting that. But is there a reason why? If it was true then, is it still true now?

Of course, adherence to "*common knowledge*" like this can make the police not look as closely as they should at a death. Maybe the killers planned on that little piece lore, counting on the killing being ruled a suicide, giving them more time to get away...

****So** where did Sutton/Blessington get the money to invest in Trevelyan's practice? He bought the house on **Brook Street** (perhaps he just leased it?), furnished it, paid the servants, ran the household, and even gave the doctor pocket money.

Even though the investment paid well, that is an awful lot of money to put out up front, when you're apparently unemployed. In informing on his mates, did he claim some reward? We don't know if the loot from the bank job was ever recovered--if not, did Sutton somehow go and get it without the authorities being wise to him? (That would surely increase the gang's desire to murder him...) Was there money from other job that had pulled but never been arrested for?

Or was he involved in other nefarious dealing, and this just a particularly clever way to "launder" the money?!

****Part** of Sutton's plan was to be a "*resident patient*," a pretty wise move--living in an apparent place of business is probably a good way to stay out of sight.

But the pretext he gave--a weak heart?

Trevelyan's comments on it are hardly *convincing* for one's attending physician: "His heart was weak, it appears..." *It appears?!? You* gave him "constant medical supervision"!! You're not certain that he actually had a bad heart?!?

Given that Trevelyan was so *easily duped* by someone faking catalepsy, it's not beyond the pale that Sutton/Blessington was faking, as well. Perhaps we should begin to wonder just how good a doctor Trevelyan actually was...

****Blessington** was fat, according to Watson, and had been fatter. He may have had a bad heart. He was so "*morbidly afraid*" of fire that he kept an escape rope under his bed. He was a terrible nervous wreck, exploding at the thought of strangers, and threatening to shoot guests.

Yet, according to Holmes, Sutton/Blessington was "*the worst of the gang*."

Really? He's *not* the one who shot care-taker (or perhaps he was, and lied?!?). His nervous agitation hardly makes him seem like the hardest man in a group of hard men, does it? And if he was the worst, why would the Crown make a deal with him, and not one of the other crooks?

Perhaps 15 years of guilt over betraying his mates (and getting one hung) changed him. But from what we're shown, Sutton hardly seemed to have the nerve or strength to be the "worst" of a gang of Wall Street brokers, let alone a group of hardened bank robbers.

**Of course, the most questionable piece of the whole story is: would Blessinger really have refused to reveal his secret, even when he was certain that his life was in danger?

Certainly, one of the themes that Doyle has strung through his stories is that *shame* is a powerful motivator, and sufficient motive to hide the truth, no matter what the consequences.

In both *The Man With The Twisted Lip* and *The Yellow Face*, we've seen people go to ridiculous lengths to deny and hide an embarrassing truth. Even though there were no crimes involved, these people would rather die than reveal something that might cause social stigma.

How much stronger the stigma, then, for an ex-criminal? I'm not sufficiently educated to say how English society at the time would have treated a confessed bank robber (who may have served time), who was associated with a murder. But if the thought of admitting that you were a beggar, or had a biracial child, was sufficient to provoke panic and paralysis, think of the terror at admitting you were a criminal and murderer. Add in the fear that revealing the truth would lead his pursuers to him more quickly, and Blessington's obstinacy is at least *somewhat* understandable, albeit stupid, and ultimately fatal.

**Hey, criminals--*wipe your damn feet off before killing someone*. Geez...

**Of course, that begs the question, should Holmes have done something anyway?

It's difficult to say what. At this point in the story, he had literally nothing to go on. Certainly with the evidence on hand, it's doubtful that they could have gotten the police to provide protection--especially if Blessington refused to divulge why someone would want to kill him.

Maybe they could have relocated him for awhile. Or perhaps Holmes and Watson could have stood guard with their pistols. But without knowledge of who or what they were guarding against, it's questionable how effective this might have been. And given Blessington's increasing paranoia and uncooperativeness, it seem unlikely that he would have agreed to such measures.

How much should they be willing to do to help a man who refused to take even the most *basic* step to protect himself? If you hire Sherlock Holmes and refuse to give him any information, well, you're a fool, and the responsibility falls upon you.

**So, assuming Blessington obtained the house legitimately...who gets it now? Did he have relatives? Did he leave a will?

If not, has Trevelyan saved up enough to buy it for himself, and keep his practice? Or did he have to relocate? Was his practice harmed when it became known that he was fooled like an amateur in a field that he is supposedly a specialist in?

Obviously, the indeterminate ending--criminals exacting vengeance, and getting away, only to die on a boat sinking in international waters, so we have no real confirmation of their guilt--is completely lifted from **The Five Orange Pips. To better effect this time, though.

But how dangerous was sea travel then? What were the odds of getting on a steamer having all hands lost? Because given how often it happens to escaped killers in the **Canon**, maybe crooks should wait until the Chunnel is constructed to make their getaways...

**Wonderful metaphoric declaration from Sherlock:

However, wretch as he was, he was still living under the shield of British law, and I have no doubt, Inspector, that you will see that, though that shield may fail to guard, the sword of justice is still there to avenge.

Everyone should be protected by the law, and every murder avenged. Too bad that proved to be an unachievable goal in this case...

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