

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 XXVI -- The Adventure of the Final Problem

The Final Problem--WHAT THE #\$%^&?!?!?

I sometimes wish I could read this story again for the first time, with no outside knowledge of what was about to happen, or of what would come later.

The fact that **Sherlock Holmes'** arch enemy is **Professor Moriarty** has so permeated our culture that it is basically as well known as the Superman/Luthor feud. Even people who aren't Holmes fans probably know about their feud. It's also well enough known that Holmes survives his experience at **Reichenbach Falls**. And even if one was somehow free of all our knowledge, well, many of us read our Sherlock Holmes in "*complete*" collections...so when our hero "*dies*" when only half the stories are done, modern readers might suspect that something is up. So it is very difficult for someone to come into this story "*unspoiled*."

But what must it have been like to read **The Final Problem** when it was originally published? Because back in 1893, this must have seemed tremendously *insane*.

By modern standards, of course, the **Big Bad** is old hat to us, the secret villain who turns out to be behind everything. But you don't introduce him or her (or it) in the *very last episode*!! There is a gradual build, clues subtly introduced in the background that take on more meaning when we realize that something is up--"**BAD WOLF**" scrawled in graffiti, for example. There are figures seen only in shadow, distorted voices heard over speaker-phones, and other tropes. Then we get the "*stunning revelation*" at the "*mid-season finale*," we get to spend the next several episodes groping in shock, and the last 4 stories are about confronting and beating the master villain.

But **The Final Problem** doesn't play by *any* of those rules, because of course those rules hadn't been established yet. There was no prior warning of Moriarty: no clues, no hints, no warnings. Out of nowhere,



this **Napoleon Of Crime** just appears, behind half of the evil in London. Holmes says that he's known about him for years (*but never bothered to tell Watson?*), and now has "*seized the thread*" and tracked him down--all "off-screen," as it were.

Let's leave aside all of the pastiches and adaptations and speculations that like to make Moriarty responsible for everything, the secret force behind every case and every event that Watson has relayed to us (such as **Granada's** version of **The Red-Headed League**). There was none of that boot-strapping when this story was first published. This must have struck the Victorian reader like an atom-bomb! All of a sudden, there's a mastermind behind all crime in England, and he's (almost) as smart as Holmes, and Holmes has been carrying on a campaign against him for months, and Sherlock almost succeeded, but now Moriarty is trying to kill him so we have to flee to the continent!

All out of whole cloth! *All in the first 8 pages!!* The entire status quo of what we expect from a Sherlock Holmes story is up-ended, and tossed out the window.

And if that weren't disorienting enough for the Victorian reader, well, they must have gotten whiplash when it turns out that [**SPOILER ALERT**] Sherlock Holmes dies at the end of the story. Again, no foreshadowing in previous stories, no vague prophecies that suddenly make sense, *nada*. [Although Holmes' declaration that "his career had reached its crisis" does tread perilously close to the "*he has two weeks until retirement*" cliché...although that probably wasn't a cliché back then!]

But to kill off the hero of your continuing series of stories?!? Unheard of!! (At least, I assume it was unheard of--were there any other *long-running* lead protagonists killed off in this manner before The Final Problem?)

How disorienting this must have been for readers in the day! Everything they thought they knew about Holmes was put *askew* by the Moriarty revelation--and then Holmes himself was killed!! Sherlock Holmes, who had been a monthly fixture in their lives for two and a half years, was gone!! No less an authority than **John Watson** told us there would be no more stories!!

We can never quite experience this story the way they did back in December of **1893**. We already know too many of the particulars of the story, which have seeped into popular culture. Heroes dying is no longer a big deal to us, the shock value eroded by *clones* and *resurrection spells* and *time travel twists* and other cop-outs for us to truly experience the shock of Victorian readers. We're too jaded by the reliance on Big Bads and season-long conspiracies to be stunned by the emergence of a master villain from behind the scenes.

Not to mention, of course, the apparent need of media in modern culture to immediately release *every bit* of casting/plotting news they come upon, to flood us with "*previews*," and the propensity for scripts and/or entire episodes to be stolen (*ahem* "leaked") ahead of broadcast.

And of course, there are all the well meaning people who immediately vent their views on social media. No, today is a very different world.

It's not often that I can say *sincerely* that I wished I lived back then. But I would love to know what it felt like to read *this* story for the first time, unencumbered by modern knowledge and expectations, and to experience it as readers then did.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

******So great was the public's upset at the "death" of Sherlock Holmes, it is said, that *20,000* people canceled their Strand subscriptions. And apparently, thousands of people wore black mourning armbands in public.

Obviously, some of these account might be exaggerated, or even apocryphal. But I can't help but think of what would happen if fans would have such a reaction today.

Surely today such people would be derided for "*taking their fiction too seriously*," for needing to "*get a life*." The media--not realizing what a boon it is to have that many people actually care about media--would lump them all into the "*nerd*" and "*weird-o*" category, and run mocking footage and commentary just before the final weather update.

Just another difference between then and now, I suppose...

******One of the more famous Holmes pastiches is **The Seven-Per-Cent Solution**, wherein author **Nicholas Meyer** posits that the whole business of this story is merely Sherlock having a bit of *a psychotic break*, due to cocaine abuse and suppressed childhood trauma.

And it's not hard to see how one could come to that conclusion. Sherlock shows up at Watson's, not having seen him for weeks, and goes skulking about shuttering the windows for fear of "*air-guns*" (which never are seen or mentioned again in the story). He breaks out the story of a math professor turned **Blofeld** from out of nowhere. Watson never even *sees* Moriarty in this story, except as a vague figure in the distance! Holmes insists they take a vacation on the continent--*it matters not where!* His accounts of "*murder attempts*" sound like paranoid descriptions of everyday accidents--surely every day in London someone was almost run down by a horse-drawn vehicle! He sneaks out over Watson's back garden wall, after arranging an incredibly Byzantine rendezvous the next day.

Given the odd behavior, and the fact that Watson remarked more than once how *odd* Sherlock seems to be, it is easy to see how easy it would be to conclude that Holmes was *a little bit nuts*. Fortunately, the good doctor knows his friend better than most...

**The Final Problem really isn't much of a *mystery* story, as there is literally *no* mystery whatsoever. Holmes has already solved all of the crimes, and given all of his information to the police, before the story even starts.

We get precious little deduction from Holmes, either. The entire story, really, is just exposition and flight. Still pretty thrilling stuff, though.

**Moriarty, as portrayed here, has always seemed to come up a little bit short to me. Holmes' final note to Watson says how impressed he was with how Moriarty managed to find them...without bothering to share with us those impressive "*methods*." Really, aside from Holmes descriptions, we get *no actual evidence* of the professor's genius. It is a classic case of "*tell, don't show*." I suppose was compelled by the nature of the story, and never having Watson meet the character...but still, it does leave the professor a tad bit less compelling as a character than I would have liked.

**Through it all, however, Sherlock is *frustratingly vague* about exactly what it is that Moriarty and gang are being arrested for. In the Final Problem, *not one specific crime or misdeed* is mentioned, not one particular offense which the Napoleon Of Crime could be convicted of.

Oh, sure, Sherlock throws out "*forgeries, robberies, murders*." "*Half of all that is evil, and nearly all that is undetected in this great city*." But what crimes? In what matter did Moriarty make his "*little, little trip*?"

Others speculate much more specifically. The Granada adaptations, for example, have him behind the events of The Red-Headed League, not to mention **The Devil's Foot** and **The Eligible Bachelor** (aka **The Noble Bachelor**). And Granada's Final Problem tells us that Sherlock's trip to France was to recover the **Mona Lisa**, which was stolen by Moriarty's organization (he had planned to use the publicity of it's being missing to sell off several forgeries for millions each, which may have been part of the motive when the masterpiece was actually stolen in 1911, and was also the plot of a 1979 Doctor Who episode, when a time-traveling alien forced **Leonardo** to paint 6 copies that could be sold in the present when his people stole the "*real*" painting. I guess there are no original ideas in crime...)

**Why the need to wait 3 days to arrest the professor and his minions? Why could nothing happen until Monday? "*Matters have gone so far now that they can move without my help*"??

When Watson pleased to have Moriarty arrested immediately, Holmes replies, "*We should get the big fish, but the smaller would dart right and left out of the net*." Of course, the exact opposite is what happened--doing it Holmes' way, they caught all the small fish, but Moriarty (and we soon will learn, his #2 man) escaped. It's questionable whether that was a *superior* outcome.

So why the three day wait? What possibly legal reason could there be? Try as I might, it is difficult for me to come up with anything that doesn't sound like "*transparent plot device*."

****During the trial of Moriarty's gang, Watson tells us "of their terrible chief, few details came out during the proceedings."**

Why, then, is the professor's brother, "**Colonel James Moriarty**," writing letters (to the newspapers, presumably) to defend the memory of his brother? Were those "few details" enough to tarnish the family honor? Perhaps a little bit more was being said, if not publicly than in "*whispers*" throughout polite society.

****If, that is, the "Colonel" really is the professor's brother.**

Moriarty is given no Christian name in this story. Only in **The Empty House** is his first named mentioned..."**James**." Apparently the *same* first name as the brother!!

Well, it's not impossible--there have certainly been cases of brothers being given the same name, and being differentiated at home by middle names or nicknames.

Or...perhaps the professor had a little *bolt-hole* designed, a place to hide in plain sight should his schemes fail--posing as his own "*brother*"?!?

Which, of course, would mean that Moriarty also survived Reichenbach...

Or maybe it just means that **Doyle** goofed up on the name...

****Holmes mentioned how, in his career as a university professor, "dark rumours gathered round [Moriarty] in the university town, and eventually he was compelled to resign his chair..."**

Well, that doesn't sound very much like the nearly-invisible, Holmes-level criminal mastermind, does it? Or perhaps that small town is where he learned his lesson--to be the brains *behind* everything, but to do nothing himself, to insulate himself from the rest of the organization, to become *the spider in the centre of the web*.

Still, Holmes should have started his investigation there. If there was enough to start rumours amongst university folks, perhaps there would be some actual evidence that a mind such as Holmes could have detected, and used to bring down Moriarty...

****Much has been made of the Swiss lad and the forged note.**

But what if **Peter Steiler**, the innkeeper, were in on it? After all, his English was excellent, so the note and the story about the tubercular woman certainly wouldn't have been beyond him. And he *is* the one who gave Holmes and Watson their route, and "*strict instructions*" to make a detour to see the falls.

So did he help set the trap for Holmes? Or was he working *for* Holmes, making sure that Watson would be away for the final confrontation!?

****A death-duel with your arch-nemesis on a narrow cliff above a raging waterfall? As these things go, that's a pretty classic way to go.**

But it is telling, I think, that no matter how "*tired*" Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was of his most famous creation, he gave him a death with no body being found, and therefore a death which could, if need be, be easily explained away if he ever changed his mind and wanted to go back to Holmes. Which is, of course, what happened.

It would have been easy enough to give Holmes a final, inarguable end...but Doyle was, perhaps subconsciously, *hedging his bets*.

It is interesting that it was **Inspector Patterson who was working with Holmes on the biggest case in the history of English crime.

Patterson's name never comes up again in the **Canon**, and more familiar **Scotland Yard** names such as **Lestrade** and Gregson are apparently left on the side.

Did Holmes not trust them on a case of this magnitude? Or perhaps he was protecting them, knowing that they were not capable of evading Moriarty's machinations?

Presumably this case was a **** of a feather in the cap for Patterson, whoever he was...But Moriarty himself got away, so perhaps not so much?

**Holmes declares that he has had "*over a thousand cases*." Get writing, Watson!!

**"*Danger is part of my trade*." Oh, Sherlock...

**Apparently, you actually *could* hire a "*special*" train in those days, exclusively for your own use, for only 5 shillings per mile. Basically you get a small engine, a passenger car, and the railway telegraphing ahead to clear the line of slower traffic. Although surely it must have played havoc with the railway's schedule, and almost surely you needed some amount of advance notice?

Say what you will about Moriarty, he is willing to dip into his crooked fortune.

Brian Keith Snell

October 19, 2014